



JAN IRVING

Loving
KINDNESS

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Jan Irving



www.loose-id.com

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Dedication

To Marian, Kathryn, and Shelly, my teachers in yoga practices.

Knowing you has enhanced my life. Thank you.

*Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair,
but manifestations of strength and resolution.*

—Kahlil Gilbran

Chapter One

The rumors are true: Kealton James works out in the nude.

Gwendolyn Thompson shifted deeper into a discreet pocket created by the ship's bulkhead. Fortunately, a large tropical plant also served to screen her generous curves from view.

And quite a view it was. Despite the late hour—the designated sleep time—Kealton was running through katas, whirling and striking as if he faced a deadly opponent, his naked body oiled with fresh sweat. It was nothing like the easygoing martial-arts instruction he typically offered passengers aboard the *Loving Kindness* cruise ship as it navigated a leisurely path between planets.

Kealton was mesmerizing, his shoulder-length blond hair caught back in a silver clip that snapped against his body as he kicked out one muscled leg. He whirled, leaping high, his indigo blue eyes seeming to hold hers for a heart-stopping moment. But it couldn't be. If he knew she was here spying on him, surely he would stop, demand that she leave. It wasn't like they were friends—not exactly. She wasn't sure what they were. It was like whenever she was around him, she lost her balance, her sea legs. She wanted to get closer to him as much as she wanted to avoid him.

He swung, sinewy back to her, each muscle articulated like a lean tiger about to spring. He moved as gracefully as the kelp on Seta III, undulating in the seabed. His hips, the backs of his thighs, his tight ass.

Gwen rubbed her palms against her own plumper thighs, perspiration breaking out on her upper lip. Just that morning they'd been sniping at each other

in the cafeteria, but now she wanted to be underneath him, wanted all that sweaty ferocity inside her, pleasing her.

It made her feel helpless to be so...out of control, but he had the power to make her feel that way.

She'd watched Kealton covertly for months, long enough now to recognize some of the stances of his martial-arts routine. Grasshopper, shifting into leopard, legs spread, then up to one side for snake. Feel the rise of dragon. Strike like tiger, at last coming at rest with *xiau hung*.

He hung his head, big chest moving rapidly as he reached up and yanked the clip from his hair so it tangled around his damp skin in ringlets. His nipples were beaded, surrounded by a chest so slick it looked like it had been oiled by an appreciative hand. He ran fingers over his pectorals and down his abdomen, stopping only when he'd also touched his cock.

Gwen couldn't keep a small sound from escaping. Shock? Want? She wasn't sure. The man had absolutely no shame. He obviously liked to touch himself freely, and even though she knew he believed he was alone, it was almost as if he was performing for her, showing her where he wanted her to touch him.

When Kealton gave a mocking bow in her direction, Gwen's heart leaped into her throat. *Caught!*

But as her tight shoulders fell, she knew that of course he had seen her. In the time she'd known this reserved man, he'd been like one of his ancient *katana* swords in the midst of their easygoing crew: sharp and lethal. He stood apart, and because of her past, Gwen had her suspicions about his personal history. So far she'd made little headway in confirming them, despite using some of her mother's old contacts in the Alliance military.

According to his personnel file, before he'd come aboard the *Loving Kindness*, Kealton had worked on two other cruise ships. But it didn't jibe with the man who had been so aloof and watchful when he first came aboard.

Gwen stepped from her hiding place, trying to keep her eyes on his face and not on his toned lower body and heavy cock. He was still stroking it, and it hardened, so she flushed, but she didn't look away.

Damn him, he was *trying* to provoke her.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"You weren't intruding," he said, his voice whisper soft as a blade cutting through air. As always it made a strange sensation curl low in her spine, as if he'd grazed a finger over her backbone.

She stared into his dark eyes. He said nothing, waiting, so she was aware of her pulse beating a nervous tattoo in her ears. It occurred to her that when they'd argued, she'd been as much at fault as he was. She knew it was because she was afraid that if she gave herself a moment to simply look at the man, she'd invite him back to her cabin, break her own rules about getting involved with fellow crew members.

Kealton was deep waters. A smart woman kept her distance or risked being pulled under.

She cleared her throat. "I came to discuss the next rotation of duties, but when I opened the door to your, uh—"

"Dojo. I call this my dojo."

She blinked. Kealton was nothing like Mr. Wallington, their previous martial-arts instructor. That former employee had never bothered to give a name to the small studio covered with woven mats—but neither had he haunted her thoughts the way enigmatic Kealton did. "Right. You were"—she held his look with an effort—"busy, and I didn't want to interrupt you."

"More like when you walked in and found me doing katas in the nude, it was too late to politely retreat to safer waters," he said, and his lips quirked. He moved closer, put one lean arm against the wall so that she could smell the hot musk from his workout, see a line of sweat running down his chest. "Isn't this the time you

usually start clawing at me? Let's see, at breakfast rotation it was over my lack of support for the finger-painting contest running on D Deck this week."

"Come on. You know it wasn't finger painting." Her lips quirked as well. "It was painting murals with acrylics."

"Right."

"It's always good when the crew participate."

"I wasn't interested. But I think we both know the real reason you like to give me a hard time."

"You scare me."

"I scare you."

Gwen rubbed her forehead. "You're an unusual man," she said. "You don't fit in with the rest of the crew."

"And as our perky cruise director, it's your job to make sure everyone is having a good time," Kealton said. "Fitting in."

"Shouldn't you...? Okay, I give up. Can I get you a towel or something?" Gwen asked. The only way she could stop sneaking a look at his heavy erection was if it was covered up. Maybe.

"Distracted?"

"Yes." Gwen wanted to touch him, to feel that coat of moisture on hard, smooth skin. The man didn't look like he'd done a bout of martial arts, but more like a bout of sweaty sex. Sex done the right way, so it was hard, long, clawing-someone's-back, coming-more-than-once sex.

Not that she'd know about that, since she'd never had it. But she had a feeling Kealton knew all about how to give it to a woman.

Kealton smiled, and a dimple appeared in his left cheek. "Good. I was hoping you'd notice."

Gwen felt her eyes widen as he reached over and picked up what looked like a black rectangle of fabric. It turned out to be a loincloth.

“Well, that’s just worse,” Gwen said wryly. “It makes you look even more, um...” He was still beautifully erect, like a secret, erotic statue she might look at alone in her room, his cock outlined by the silk. Now she couldn’t take her eyes off him. What would he do if she dropped to her knees and put her lips against him, mouthing him through the cloth? Would his taste come through the material? Would his hands grip her head as he gasped while she pleased him? Would he order her to take all of him, to suck him until he came deep in her mouth?

It looked like she’d have another sleepless night, wondering about him, wondering what it would be like to lie with him. *Terrific*.

“Gwen, come back to my cabin. *Now*,” Kealton ordered. He had somehow managed to corner her into her former hiding place, both arms raised so she was surrounded by him. His position put his entire body on full display, including his armpit hair.

He was not androgynous, like most of the men she knew. She was used to smooth skin, gentle muscles generated by body sculpting. Kealton didn’t body sculpt. He sweated—completely, barbarically male. “I’m not one of the females you connect with. I didn’t come here for sex.” Gwen strove for her usual coolly dismissive tone when handling Kealton—which was like handling something that might explode before she got to a safe distance.

His response to her tone was a lowered brow and a tightened jaw; she also got under his skin.

Satisfaction jabbed her. She could move him. She could touch him as he touched her. “I need to know if you can do an extra rotation of pottery since you volunteered to teach it. Mr. Jansen’s taking some time off, so we’re short activities for our passengers. Remember, participation?”

“Participation,” he scoffed. “That’s really why you’re here late in the evening rotation, all alone with me?”

An unexpected laugh bubbled up. “I did hear stories from the crew that you do your routines in the nude late at night,” she confessed.

He raised a brow, folding his arms, even more appealing with amusement lighting his expression.

Careful, she told herself. The longer they were alone, the harder it was to shove away awareness of the uneasy cocktail brewing between them. Even on a purely physical level, they did not mesh. He was sleek, hard-bodied. She was soft, frankly a little chubby because of her love of moonbeam pastries every morning with her coffee. She could body sculpt, but she was usually so busy with her job she found the fussy treatments at the ship's spa annoying.

In her suit she looked professional and, all right, *perky*, as he'd called her more than once, but she knew she projected the reassuring and bright presence that passengers could relate to on a romantic cruise through the stars. It didn't matter that it was a facade. At least it hadn't until she'd met Kealton. He took swipes at her, as if trying to get to the real woman under the calm mask. It was damned annoying because he could have other women instead of digging at her, and she wished he'd leave her alone.

Besides, she was nothing like the lean and dangerous-looking women he sometimes dragged to his cabin with all the finesse of a caveman. Gwen had taken note that these women didn't leave his rooms for at least two days, and when they emerged, they walked around with a dazed expression on their face.

Just what was it like lying under this man for *two days*? What did he do to a woman? Gwen's stomach muscles tightened, and her body felt slick, as if she were about to take Kealton's thick erection

"You're not my type," she said, taking up his gauntlet.

"You mean like that boring stockbroker six rotations ago?" Kealton was staring at her through heavy-lidded eyes. "Did he stop talking about himself long enough to make you come? I've wondered."

"Spying on me?" Gwen put her fists on her hips. "Nice."

"No more than you do with me. You're aware of everyone I've slept with since I came aboard this ship, aren't you, kitten?" Kealton reached out and put gentle

fingers on the side of Gwen's neck where her pulse was thundering, making his point. "Because of what's between us. Because we need to fuck each other."

"You could learn something from the men I date. They're gentlemen. They're not crude." Kealton's touch seared her skin. She shoved aside his hand, aware that even the color of their skin contrasted, hers a warm cocoa while his was fair.

"You're Aurellian, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes." Her colony was made up of darker-skinned people.

"I'm from Old Terra," he said.

"I know. I read your record," she said. "Old Terra, very different from the rest of the galaxy. All that stuff about celebrating differences."

He looked amused again. "I got a black eye when I explored differences in cultures for the first time back home," he admitted. "But it's not so bad. Some of the colonies are a little too...cloistered for my taste. Don't you know opposites attract?"

She rolled her eyes at him, and he laughed, but then his voice deepened. "Come on. You and me? Just picture us in your canopy bed together, my paler body covering yours, your legs wrapped around me..."

"How did you know I have a canopied bed?" She was blushing, but she lifted her brows.

"I asked Jasmine, of course," Kealton said, referring to Gwen's best friend. "I'm a retired soldier, so I'm a little rough around the edges." He ran a calloused palm down her bare arm, making her shiver. "I guess none of your gentlemen would tell you they look at you in your tidy suit and imagine making a mess of your hair while they sink balls-deep into you."

And that was her cue to leave. "Sorry I disturbed you." She pushed him aside, but as she did, one of her bangles got caught in his long hair, and she made the mistake of looking up.

His gaze was hot on her face but with a trace of pain that made her belly knot.

“Gwen, just once take what you really want,” he whispered. His mouth brushed hers delicately, like one of the humming flyers on Midas IV as it sipped nectar.

Damn it. Of course she wanted more. She moaned as she dragged him closer, so his body crushed hers, crumpling the outfit he’d ridiculed.

He kept up the teasing kisses, treating her like one of the porcelain tea bowls he made in the pottery studio. But she didn’t want him to treat her like something delicate.

Gwen tugged at his hair until he gave a little laugh before he took her mouth in a rough kiss, his whiskers burning her tender skin. Her nails dug into his bare shoulders. He freed her mouth to stare at her before he hefted her against the wall. She slid up, her hair falling around them in a curtain.

“Right now, Gwen. I need to put it in you, and you know you want it.”

Crude. He was so crude, but... His hand slid under her skirt and brushed against her satin underwear. She was hot and creamy, wet against him. She lifted her legs up against his hips so she could feel him deeper.

“I can make you come.” His fingers slid into her folds. She watched him as he touched her, heart pounding in her ears. God, she hadn’t had an orgasm except at her own hand in so long... He was right—she was aching for it.

She shut her eyes, losing herself in the feel of him touching her, invading her. He didn’t ask her permission. He just took as if her body belonged to him, as if it was his to play with.

It shouldn’t turn her on so much, not when she knew he was keeping secrets.

“Wait. We can’t... If you’ve spent the past few years tamely working on cruise ships, I’ll eat one of my elegant outfits.” She swallowed. “More like you’re a member of the special forces, one of the Alliance’s elite.”

He said nothing, and that said everything. So she had been right. He was just like her father.

“Why are you here?”

“If I’m who you think I am, do you think I can tell you that?” he asked.

Her breath stalled in her chest at his response. “I don’t want to get involved with someone...dangerous.” She liked her life safe. He was not safe.

He smacked a fist against the wall.

“Don’t do that. Don’t use what you suspect about me to shut out what’s important. Look at me. Look at us.”

He pulled his loincloth down and then took his cock in his hand, moving it so the tip of his penis brushed against her damp curls.

“No!” Instinctively, she jerked away from the hot, primal feel of him. Too fast. She would come in another moment. He would thrust up into her, and she would shatter for him. She wanted it, needed it, but whom was she letting touch her? She scrabbled against the wall.

“Goddammit!”

They collapsed in an inelegant tangle on the floor, his larger body underneath hers, as if he’d worked to cushion her at the last moment.

Panting, she sat up, and his naked cock prodded between her legs, where she was slick, her panties damp against her body. She moaned at the thick feel of him against her, her body clenching with the need for satisfaction.

“Gwen.” He gripped her rounded hips, his attention focused on her. He felt... Oh! She couldn’t stop herself from grinding down on him.

“Oh fuck!” he groaned.

Somehow she fell off him, lying beside him in a ball, hurting.

Finally she managed to use her arms to push herself to her feet, where she swayed. She blinked, feeling drugged. One of her shoes was missing. In the mirror across the room, she saw her coronet hairstyle was a wild tangle around her face. Her dark eyes were huge and scared.

She was so close to release that the movement of standing up was almost enough to make her come.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kealton growled. He looked grumpy.

Well, she was grumpy too!

“I told you; you’re not my type.” It sounded weak and stupid.

“That’s bullshit! We nearly fucked.”

You could hurt me, she thought. You could hurt me.

She found her shoe, the shape of the ordinary accessory feeling alien in her hand, as if she’d never seen one. She dragged her tongue over dry lips, lips that still felt crushed from Kealton’s mouth. She managed to replace the shoe on her fourth try.

She couldn’t help looking at Kealton sprawled naked and hard on a woven mat, his long hair in his blue eyes, his legs open, his cock curved toward his stomach from a thick thatch of lusty blond hair. His hands were fisted against the floor, as if he was forcing himself to keep them off her.

“This isn’t over,” he warned her.

Chapter Two

“Well, you look like you had a long night,” Jasmine Green said, catching up with Gwen’s strides as she walked purposefully down the ship’s corridor toward the agridome. The *Loving Kindness* was built along curves rather than sleek lines, a little like Gwen herself. Pods branched out from the central hub, one for the lavish dining rooms, the baths, the children’s play area, another for the gardens where fresh vegetables and fruits were produced.

“Dare I hope you finally had an evening rotation filled with hot, raw sex with the delicious Kealton?” Jasmine cocked her head.

Gwen made an irritated sound. “Just didn’t sleep well,” she said, not wanting Jasmine to guess she’d been sleepless because she’d needed Kealton in her bed, covering her.

“Wait. You wanted to sleep with him. I can feel it,” Jasmine said.

“Yes, who wouldn’t?” Gwen sighed. Her friend was always trying to set her up with more exciting sexual partners, despite Gwen’s preference for tamer men.

“Aha, I knew it—a sleepless night that had everything to do with Kealton.” Jasmine raised one dark brow, her gray slanted eyes intent on her best friend’s face. She was a commanding-looking woman, tall and slender. The way she carried herself, Gwen could easily picture her balancing a Synovian water jar on her head, like the men and women of Drabaria.

Jasmine’s Aurellian cinnamon-colored skin also set off the light eyes that Gwen envied a little since they were so striking. Her own were a plainer shade of warm sherry she’d inherited from her mother.

Gwen struggled to keep her expression smooth now because her best friend was also the ship's counselor, an expert at reading people since she was an empath as well.

"Kealton's certainly virile enough to make a woman lose sleep," Jasmine continued. "And rumor has it that late at night he does that martial-arts stuff in the nude, not that you'd ever go take a peek."

"I suppose you have?" Gwen wanted to roll her eyes.

"Of course I have! What woman could resist? Not that he's ever paid the slightest bit of attention to anyone who's watched him."

So no one but she had experienced what happened last night? Just her luck.

Gwen rubbed her forehead, wishing she weren't so tired. It was always better to be on the offensive with her friend. "Why are you always asking me about him?" They passed the archway into the gardens, and Gwen took a second to absorb the exposed view of stars and mist and streams of color beyond the trapped man-made air and fluff-topped palm trees.

"I ask because it's obvious to me you've got a thing for him."

"He's not what he seems," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Gwen bit her lip. "I mean, he reminds me of my father."

Jasmine's expression darkened. She reached out and touched Gwen's arm.

Gwen strode toward the benches that ringed a faux Italian fountain. This part of the grounds had been modeled after the Renaissance gardens of the Villa d'Este on Old Terra, the stone aged so the cherubs looked like they'd been frolicking in the water for at least five hundred years, mischievous and slightly evil faces blotched with moss.

"I don't trust Kealton."

"You don't trust men period," Jasmine said. "Which is why you have such a boring sex life."

“Not everything is about sex.” Even as she said it, she knew it was stupid. Everyone had affairs on the cruise ships. In fact, the light attachments were part of why Gwen felt comfortable. She couldn’t be sucked into a relationship with someone when it would only last a few days.

“Hey, a cruise ship is all about sex! Or romance, if you like,” Jasmine said. “One of the perks of being a crew member is all the hot men.”

Gwen rubbed her eyebrow. For her, living on board the *Loving Kindness* was less about meeting someone and more about a controlled science experiment where she was able to meet her most basic needs while keeping her distance from emotional entanglements. But if she tried to explain, her friend would probably find her reasoning bizarre, so she settled for partial honesty. “I guess that’s not why I’m here.”

Jasmine reached out and squeezed her arm. “You need to live a little, not be so sure that any involvement is going to hurt you like your mother was hurt.”

Gwen’s lips tightened. “Mama was married to an elite agent in the Alliance. He was barely ever home. Sometimes...” She didn’t want to relive it, but she remembered when finding simple peanut spread in the autocook had been a victory. “We went hungry, Jas.”

“It’s a disgrace how military families go without,” Jasmine said. “All the cutbacks when everyone knows the Alliance worlds are making credits hand over fist.”

“Yeah.” Gwen shrugged. She’d grown up on an agriworld. Sapheonix specialized in wheat. It hadn’t been an exciting place—just prairie and big sky, so that Gwen had spent a lot of time under that sky dreaming of escaping off world, of having adventures on her own terms.

Her home hadn’t exactly been stable. Her mother broke windows sometimes. Other times she didn’t speak for days, and Gwen’s father just hadn’t been there. Gwen had been too young to take care of Isadora Thompson for a long time, had been too young to even understand her depression.

Isadora had been the kind of woman who just wanted her partner there day after day. As much as Gwen had tried to fill her father's role when she was old enough, taking care of her mother and her younger sister, Belinda, it hadn't been enough. Nothing she'd done had been enough. She'd spent her early life trying to chase away the shadow that loomed over her mother.

Gwen never wanted to get lost in that shadow herself, and to her, that shadow was love. Love made a sensible woman weak.

Taking a deep breath and shoving aside the memories, Gwen looked around, absorbing with satisfaction the scented artificial breeze calculated to be perfect, the lights that provided the plants with all the stimulus they needed to grow to their best potential, the droids busily harvesting vegetables or trimming withered blooms, keeping the space immaculate. "This place—it's all about controlling my environment. I know that. But it means I'm not helpless anymore."

"I know, honey. And you're great at your job, but a lot of people work the cruise lines to avoid real attachments. Maybe you aren't as different from your father as you think you are."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't spoken to him since Mama's funeral." Gwen fiddled with the interactive clipboard she carried. She needed to arrange some flowers for an anniversary party an older couple were giving each other on C Deck during evening rotation. "Kealton reminds me of my father, Jas. I don't think he's a mere mild-mannered martial-arts instructor. I confronted him about it last night, and he didn't deny it. He's definitely up to something."

"All right, I'll grant you that I've always sensed depths to Kealton, but I thought it would be good for you. Someone you couldn't skip over like a shallow lake."

"Jas..."

"Well, what could he be up to on a cruise ship?" Jasmine's brows rose.

"I don't know, but don't think I won't find out."

Jasmine shook her head. “The only problems we have on board are finding enough activities for finicky passengers and sticking to safe Alliance shipping lanes. Okay, so some ships have disappeared lately, but according to news reports, they went off course in the Bynarian Triangle. Probably navigation problems that close to the wormhole.”

“I guess.” Gwen chewed her lip, but before Jasmine could continue her argument, a little blonde girl ran in their direction. She was wearing shimmer cloth, and Gwen gave her friend an amused look. The expensive jade-colored fabric was sold by the metro-inch in the cruise ship’s gift store, and no way could an eight-year-old afford it without someone intervening and giving her a major discount.

Jasmine shrugged, smiling back before she sobered. “I like the kid. It’s rough losing your parents, Gwen.”

“Hi, Gwen,” Mandi Dempsy greeted her shyly as Jasmine stood up and took the girl’s arm. Gwen didn’t miss the slight flinch as they made contact; Jasmine’s empathic powers meant she could tap into Mandi’s emotions.

“Hi. Did you write that letter to your grandmother?” Gwen asked. She’d shifted down the bench so she was too far from Mandi for the child to also reach for her before she thought about it. Damn, why did she keep doing that?

Mandi was traveling alone to live with her grandmother in the Sigma System, and so far Gwen had been conflicted dealing with the little girl. She wanted to help her, as she helped all the passengers, but Mandi would be on board a long time.

Gwen rubbed her forehead, hating that she was holding herself apart from a child, but she didn’t need to be an empath to sense Mandi’s raw emotions.

Mandi grimaced. “Yeah. All she ever writes about is the spinning she does with the wool from her sheep. Bor-ring.”

“I don’t know. I think it would be interesting to be a back-to-nature colonist,” Jasmine said, but Mandi’s face clouded.

Gwen intervened. “Are you going to painting class this afternoon?”

“Yeah. I’m going to paint butterflies on a scarf for Jas,” Mandi said, looking up at the woman who towered over her.

“Sounds nice!” Gwen was happy to see Mandi looking a lot more relaxed than she had when she first came on board. Gwen knew what it was to feel helpless, like a bruise on the spirit.

“Hm, will you look who’s headed in our direction?” Jasmine said.

Gwen didn’t need her friend telling her Kealton had entered the agridome. She could feel him, as if the energy surrounding him were a force field, colliding with her own.

“We’ll leave you two alone. Try not to spend the whole time arguing with him, hm? It’s a supreme waste of manpower.” Jasmine was tugged away by Mandi while Gwen braced herself.

* * *

“Kealton,” Gwen said, nodding as he loomed over her, his hands on his lean hips. Her fingers clenched on her writing pad.

She knew what he wanted from her. She could picture him the way he had been last night, hard and prodding between her legs, on the verge of giving her what her body ached for.

For the morning rotation, he was dressed in his white *karategi* uniform, the traditional white cotton with a black belt around his slender waist. His hair was a silken ponytail, pulled back from his sober face. “Did you come last night?”

Gwen locked gazes with him, her breath stalling.

“I can’t believe you asked me that!” *Blunt and crude as usual.*

“I did. I couldn’t wait to get to my ion shower last night. I took myself in hand right over the mat where I’d been working out. I tried to go slow, but I could still smell you on my fingers.”

“I suppose you’re going to accuse me of unbalancing your *chi* or something,” Gwen said drily.

Kealton's lips curved. "So you *have* been paying attention to my lessons when you come to class. You're very acerbic. I like it."

Gwen sobered. "I don't care if you like it. I don't want to get involved with you."

"No, you're *frightened* of becoming involved with me. Very different thing," Kealton said. His voice softened to a whisper as he reached out, caressing her skin at the edge of her hairline. It felt so good, so soothing to her tension that she wanted to lean against his touch.

"It doesn't matter why."

He shook his head slowly. "Of course it does. The root is what makes the leaves."

"I knew you were going to get some philosophy in there somehow."

"Well, you're into participation, and I'm into philosophy." Kealton took out a three-dimensional memo pad of his own. "Speaking of which, I see you need twenty-five vases by tonight's rotation."

"Anniversary party. Is it possible on such short notice? I know you have classes later this morning." She told herself she was glad to be back to business, ignoring a spike of disappointment.

"Gwen, come to the studio and show me what you want me to create." Kealton's voice was extra-gentle as he stood up and offered her his hand, as if he didn't want to keep sniping at her as they had in the past. But if they didn't, then something like last night could very easily happen again.

She stared up at him for a moment.

She didn't take his offered hand, but she did climb to her feet and follow him.

* * *

"Something short and kind of oblong in shape. I saw some red bromeliads in the agrigardens that should work," Gwen suggested as they entered the pottery studio. "Are you sure you have time for this? If not, I can use the standard replicate form."

Kealton made a face. “One of the things that makes you a great cruise director is you try to give our passengers something unique, not mass-produced.” He looked at her under his long eyelashes. “You definitely embody *Loving Kindness*.”

Gwen tensed, unsure whether Kealton was mocking her again. But as she held his sober look, she relaxed. “I want to give my best.”

“Under your defenses you’re definitely a people pleaser,” he agreed. He pulled out an old-fashioned pottery wheel and placed it on the canvas-covered table in the center of the room. Although he used zap-cooking to finish pieces off quickly for the kiln work, she admired that with the glaze and firing, he still seemed to like to throw pots the old-fashioned way.

“Which is not a bad quality as long as it doesn’t turn back on you.”

Gwen swallowed. “I’m not sure I want to ask what you mean.”

Kealton reached out and tugged her so she was standing in front of the hand wheel. She was all too conscious of his warmth and height behind her. It was hard not to be affected by him, not to just lean back and let him reach up, let him cup her breasts and pull her back into him. She blinked at the vision she had of the two of them playing that out. It felt so real she had to bring her awareness back to their conversation. “Why am I in front of a pottery wheel? I can’t use it.”

“I want to teach you”—his expression said he wanted to teach her more than mere pottery—“about how to make a short, oblong flower vase.”

“Hm.” She narrowed her eyes, but she felt a smile tugging at her lips. Although she’d been curious and intrigued by his pottery the same way she had been by his martial arts and yoga instruction—and wound up in his classes—she wasn’t sure she entirely bought his helpful act.

“Come on. It’s all about participation, right? First some red clay.”

She looked at the lump of orangey brown material, unimpressed.

“It’s not that bad,” he said, smiling as if he read her skepticism. That dimple appeared, distracting her. His beard was heavy enough that she could see it as a

shadow under his fair skin. "I'm going to cover most of it with white crackle glaze so the rougher clay will provide texture." He paused and lowered his voice, and she knew he was going to tease her. "You like texture, don't you, Gwen?"

"Aren't you ever serious?"

"As infrequently as possible."

He put the clay on the wheel and spun it. She opened her mouth to tell him she had to get back to her job, but as usual she couldn't seem to work up the protest. Somehow he caught her in his orbit, which was why she'd learned so much about martial arts since he'd begun instructing it.

He put her hands on the wheel so together they cupped the blob of damp clay. She jumped at the feel of his wet, slick palms covering hers.

"Why is it a bad thing to be a people pleaser?" she found herself asking. The clay went around and around, and he guided their hands so they dipped into the center, creating a dimple that he pulled into a hollow shape.

He looked at her, and the amusement that had lit his expression faded. "Because if you put others above your own heart, you lose touch with yourself, don't get what you need."

"Meaning *you're* what I need?"

"I'm part of it," he said quietly. "Tell me, who was it in your past that you tried to help, sacrificed yourself for?"

Gwen only shook her head. She knew she had some issues stemming from living with her mother, wanting to fill the void for her, but she wasn't going to share that with Kealton. "I don't have time to do this." As sexy as he was, drawing her out, she also felt threatened by him. She just wanted to make up her mind what slot to put him in.

"You're an intriguing contradiction, Gwen. You're out here in space, which is a dangerous and adventurous environment, yet you're afraid to let any man close to you."

“You’ve been talking to Jasmine, analyzing me,” Gwen said wryly. “Despite the rash of pirate attacks on cruise ships lately, I don’t think it’s very dangerous out here.”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “Not for you, kitten.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, but his body was large and comforting, and abruptly she was tired of lying to herself. What did it get her? Another night of lying alone in tangled bedclothes, unsatisfied and cranky, while she ached for him to cover her?

She wanted him. She wanted to be close to him, to smell his skin, to be crushed against him.

“Gwen?” He cupped her face. His hand was clammy from the clay, and she imagined she was now wearing some, but she didn’t care. Why was she denying herself Kealton? Why all these months had she come close enough to be tempted but never allowed herself the pleasure?

It didn’t have to mean anything more. Here on the ship, it wasn’t as if he could force her to spend time with him if he got too close. She would still have control.

She covered his hand. “I’m hurting. I need you.”

Chapter Three

Kealton knew damn well he should stay at least a quadrant's worth of distance away from Gwendolyn Thompson. He'd known that all along, ever since he'd taken this assignment.

She had been right to keep him at a distance; they had nothing in common. She was even older than he was, by five years, thirty-two to his twenty-seven. Not that she seemed very experienced. He had sensed right away that he could give her what she needed, if she'd only lie down for him.

She had a streak of red clay on one perfectly smooth mocha cheek. He'd put it there, like a primitive marking. When she made to wipe it away, as if feeling the drying material on her skin, he grabbed her hand, imprisoning it gently.

He couldn't tell her he wanted his handprint on her. She already thought he was a barbarian.

He bent and kissed her, grazing her lips with his while his blood pounded the need to claim, to mate. He was trembling so he said a mantra over and over in his head, striving for control.

I'm hurting. I need you.

At last she'd told him what he'd always felt like a ribbon tight between them, so it had cut into his gut when she kept turning away from him. Under his neat white uniform pants his cock was heavy and aching for relief. He saw her sherry gaze fall to the front of his body and then widen. She tried to take a step back, but he held on to her firmly.

No. No, he couldn't go back to denial, to not having her warm satin skin under his palms. She was his woman, whether it was wise or not, whether she acknowledged it or not—his to protect, to cover, to make scream with pleasure.

He had a sudden vision of Gwen on his simple platform bed, him between her legs, her hair wild and tangled instead of in some neat and elaborate twist. Her face was shiny with sweat as she clawed his back, took his desperate thrusts.

That was the real woman under the subdued clothing she wore in her role as cool and aloof cruise director. Something about that aloofness had gotten under his skin when they'd met, as if she were challenging him. He'd wanted her as soon as he'd come aboard the *Loving Kindness*, but she'd kept her distance as if she were afraid of him. It had killed him, and he'd tried to soften his approach around her, tried to channel his lust so he didn't threaten her. But even dragging the other women he'd hooked up with to his bed and hammering into them hadn't fully sated him. He didn't need sex with a stranger. He needed Gwen.

He gripped her hand now as he held her look. "See me," he murmured.

The wariness was back in her eyes. Oh, she saw him, all right, the warrior who would take what he wanted and not the harmless facade of teacher.

"This is a mistake."

Hot words rose to his lips, but he saw her expression darken with desire...and fear. She would fight him every step of the way, deny them both if he gave her time to regroup. "Touch me," he said and took her hand in his. He brought it to his lips, making a soft, fervent sound as he kissed the back of it.

She sighed, eyes heavy as they held his. He could feel her pulse thundering at her wrist, smell her excitement, just like the night before, tormenting him with what she'd offer if he could only get close enough.

He kissed her hand again and then guided it to his imprisoned cock, letting her feel how she moved him.

"Oh my." She looked taken aback at his size even though just the night before she had practically devoured him with her eyes, measuring his cock as if imagining

how he'd feel inside her, fucking her. And he'd had to hold back, to be good, while she tempted him.

Fuck that.

"I hurt too. I need it inside you," he told her, uncaring anymore if his bluntness marked him as a barbarian in her eyes, someone other than one of the slick businessmen who holidayed on their cruise ship.

"Kealton." The way she said his name, soft and needy...

He trapped her attention, desperate for her to focus on him, to see him. "Watch me." He lifted up her prim skirt, marking her rounded thigh with more of the cool clay. She'd definitely need an ion shower and a change of clothes after letting him touch her, but he liked that. He didn't want her to be able to just go back to her work, unruffled, forgetting him.

He palmed the hot silken material that blocked him from delving further. She pulsed into his touch, her body clenching on itself, hungry for whatever she could get.

"You're ready to come right now, aren't you? You could do it all on your own, just from being close to me."

Her eyes widened at his words, but then she nodded, looking surprised. "Yes...I could."

And one day he'd make her do it, just to show her how much power he had over her body. He didn't just want to fuck her; he needed to enslave her. He'd been hurt by how she'd pushed him away as if he were too rough, too crude for her.

He lifted her onto the end of the table. He pushed up her skirt and yanked her underwear down to her calves, where it hung over her high-heeled trendy boots.

"Now I can see you, see all of you."

She resisted when he tried to push her onto her back, but then he ran a light finger over her swollen sex, and she groaned, falling obediently onto her arms. Her

lips were parted, her face flushed as she panted, trembling as he circled her opening with that same teasing finger.

She chewed her lip, then ordered, "Harder! Need..."

"You need something?" He read her avidly, staring into her blown pupils, where he saw himself reflected, looming over her.

"I need it harder." She glared at him, and he laughed.

"You're quite the demanding kitten."

"So you've called me." His thumb penetrated deeper, and her head fell back, her eyes closing tightly.

Stung, Kealton removed his touch.

"What's wrong?" She was looking at him now, confusion clouding her expression.

"I'm not who you think I am."

She blinked. "You're not an undercover agent for the Alliance masquerading as a martial-arts instructor?"

Kealton swallowed. "I'm not a barbarian. I have two older sisters. I grew up the son of a single mother who took a job in Tokyo on Old Terra. The first time I walked the streets alone, I was beaten by a gang. They took all my credits. They threw me in a garbage intake and broke my arm."

"Kealton."

"I never wanted to be vulnerable again, Gwen."

She sat up, pushing her mussed hair off her forehead. "So you found a dojo, became an expert in martial arts."

He threaded his fingers through hers as he breathed in the scent of her arousal. "We're more alike than you think. Neither of us wants to be hurt. Look at me when I touch you. See me."

"I don't want it to be you making me feel this way. I don't want it to be anyone." Her expression was stark.

“I know.” Now that she wasn’t shutting him out, he touched her again, grazing her open body until she pressed up, demanding more. He could read her every feeling in her eyes, and he reveled in it. “I’m not sexually hard up. If I want a woman, I can hunt one down.”

“So?” She raised one dark, winged brow. Her skin was glistening with perspiration, her lush breasts rising and falling rapidly.

He couldn’t give his reasons for wanting only her, couldn’t say it. He was younger than she was, so she probably wouldn’t take him seriously—but he could give her something that she would be forced to respect. He dropped to his knees and put his mouth against her.

Gwen screamed, delighting him with how noisy and unfettered she was when he caught her off guard. She pulled his hair free of its clip, and it fell around his face.

His cock was hard, throbbing, heavy with the need to spill as he put his lips ardently against her, laving her open body. She shuddered, her legs stretching farther, only held in place by the straps of her panties. He ran one hand down her calf, liking that she was bound in some fashion.

“You’ve got an eager cunt, don’t you, darling?” he asked her absently.

She writhed as he licked her, savoring her taste, opening like an origami flower for his experienced attentions. He pressed against her with more force, eating her, hungry for her as she groaned, twisting ringlets out of his long hair.

“Come now.” He needed to see it, to feel it against his mouth. He needed her helpless, vulnerable. For him. Only for him.

“I can’t—” Her eyes reflected frustration. Fighting him, fighting herself.

He spread her wider so she could hide nothing from him and then took her nub ruthlessly, sucking hard.

“*Kealton!*” She came against his mouth with a raw female sound. He licked until all he could hear were her panting breaths as she gradually relaxed, eased down, as her hands fell away from his shoulders to lie limply on the table.

He stared at her, and she stared up at the ceiling.

When he stood up she wouldn’t meet his look, and his jaw tightened.

“What was that to you, kitten?”

She scrabbled for her panties, and he caught her wrist. “Answer the question.”

Tears welled in her eyes, so he dropped her arm. He couldn’t hurt her. God.

“Don’t you understand? I don’t want to be this woman,” she said.

“My woman.”

“Anyone’s woman, Kealton.” She shoved her skirt down, hiding her body from him.

He stood there, throat tight but angry, angry so he wanted to demand she stay, talk to him, meet him as she had his passion, so perfectly, a heavy flower ready to shatter, to fall for him alone.

“You think we won’t need to fuck each other again?”

“I got it out of my system.” She dashed the moisture from her eyes.

“Is that right?” He took her hand and cupped it over his cock, over the damp heat at the front of his body. Her eyes saucered.

“You—”

“Came, yeah.”

She tugged her limb free, stepping back.

“I came from pleasuring you,” he said. “From sucking you.”

She pushed a lock of hair from her forehead. “I won’t be the kind of woman who surrenders to you.”

He laughed, but then he read the genuine upset in her expression. “Gwen—”

“My mother killed herself,” Gwen said. Her voice was tiny, cracked like a broken piece of pottery.

He stared at her. “No. I read your record. It’s not in there.”

She shoved past him, striding toward the sliding entrance for the pottery studio. He saw the moment she stiffened as she realized the door had been unlocked, that anyone could have come in and seen her lying on the table, her legs open and wanton, crying out for him to give it to her, to make her come because she needed it, needed him.

Chapter Four

The bridge of the *Loving Kindness* was shadowy at this late hour, only the night rotation crew bent over their instruments, faces lit from the panels in washes of gold and red. There was a hushed quality to the air, as if the barren view of stars, distant planets, and colored mist sobered the people working. Kealton felt its effect as he slipped into Captain Morburu's private office, keying the code that allowed him entry.

Tugging at his hair, he sat behind the private communications desk, laying his palm flat as the computer read him, down to his unique cell structure.

The Alliance crossed-swords-and-planets symbol flashed, and then he was looking at the craggy face of his immediate superior, Bran Thompson.

"Yes?"

"You never told me your wife killed herself."

The moment weighed as heavy as the gravity on Amoras Five while hard brown eyes the same shape as Gwen's studied him, cool while Kealton knew his own were probably hot. He swallowed, grappling for control. He'd been an agent for six years. He had seen things, done things, that he'd considered having permanently removed from his memory on nights he couldn't sleep, but he usually tempered his passionate nature with control. It was part of why he'd been drawn to study martial arts, tempering himself.

Until now, he had never let himself speak to Bran Thompson in that tone.

"I don't see the relevance," Thompson finally said in a voice like chilled steel.

"The relevance is your daughter knows what I am."

Thompson blinked, and his expression darkened as he leaned closer to the screen. "You told her you're an agent?"

Kealton struggled to tamp down his emotions. "Of course not! She guessed what I was when I first came on board."

Thompson shrugged. "Gwen knows to keep her mouth shut."

Kealton stared at the other man. "You didn't even tell me you had a daughter on the *Loving Kindness*."

"It wasn't relevant. I need you on that ship to see if any of the crew are sabotaging the navigation system or somehow signaling the pirates to let them know when to attack a cruise ship."

"I know my assignment," Kealton said, sitting on his temper. Thompson's face was as revealing as stone. Didn't he care about Gwen at all? If Kealton had been her father, he would have found a way to get her far from this quadrant a long time ago, as soon as he'd suspected that ships might run into trouble.

Suddenly, he knew what he wanted to do. "I'm getting Gwen off this ship."

"Out of the question!"

No, it felt right, Kealton thought as he reviewed his impulsive words. He knew what made him such a good agent were his flashes of intuition and where they led him. He did things that sometimes the brass back at the Alliance didn't approve of, but he got results, which they did care about.

"One question before I cut this transmission. Why did your wife kill herself?"

Bran glared at him. "She was not a strong woman."

Kealton stroked his ponytail a final time, contemplative, working like hell to read Bran, filtering through his own feelings in response to their conversation. "You weren't there for her. You dumped her on a kid, on Gwen," he said. Bran had probably been caught up in the life of an Alliance agent. And now Gwen was gun-shy, only dating men that she could drop without regret.

But that was going to change.

“Kealton, I won’t put up with your reckless actions! You’re on assignment. We need to know the pirates’ entire operation when they take our freighters and cruise ships. That means you stay with the *Loving Kindness*.”

A hard fist slammed into Kealton’s gut, like taking an unexpected blow in his martial-arts studio. “You know something. What is it?”

Bran’s eyes were like dead pebbles. “This communication is over.”

Kealton sat in the cabin long after the screen had gone blank.

The Alliance he’d spent years serving offered education, medicine, a space-going navy, and a central government to many diverse worlds. After the wars of the Second Settlements, many worlds had fallen into decay, some even reverting into primitive incarnations. The Alliance helped its member worlds to achieve peace, strength, and the fruits of thousands of years of technology...but the giant could also sometimes be indifferent to the problems of one sector, one planet, or one ship in its quest for the greater good.

Since he’d come aboard the *Loving Kindness*, Kealton had discovered to his surprise he had an attachment to shipboard life. He’d thought this would be too tame an assignment, but he liked the crew, liked running the pottery studio and the dojo.

And there was Gwen.

He tugged his hair free of its clip so it tangled around his face. If things went wrong, somehow he had to keep her safe, keep this ship safe, but he didn’t know how the hell he would do it.

* * *

Gwen couldn’t sleep.

She studied the roof of her canopy bed, remembering how Kealton had known she slept under one. He’d actually pumped Jasmine for the information.

Why had he done that, gone to that much trouble?

She reached for the little hologram that sat at her bedside.

Her mother and her sister beamed at her. Her mother looked happy, one of her good days, though there were dark circles under her eyes. Gwen grazed a fingertip over her mother's face in the holo, seeing the small house where she had grown up in the background.

She replaced the cube, watching as Belinda blew her a saucy kiss, just as she had that long ago afternoon.

What she needed was white noise. Jasmine once said their life on board was comfortable to the point of being like old-fashioned white noise, a sound that deadened the senses. While sometimes she thought Jasmine might be getting a little bored with their routine, Gwen wryly acknowledged she *liked* white noise.

She shoved off her blankets and sat up. Time to try to bring back the white noise in her life.

* * *

Gwen hesitated outside the Love Mist spa on the promenade deck. She couldn't believe she was here, that she was going to do this. She'd never visited this spa before, just walked by it.

The sanctuary's facade was designed on the lines of a Greek temple. What always struck her were the vibrant cobalt Doric pillars at each corner of the portico. The roof was decorated with spears of upright gold scalloped leaves while a frieze of gods and goddesses cavorted high above the entrance.

Gwen climbed the marble steps, pausing to brush a touch over one column. She swallowed and then gave her crew card to the droid minding the door.

"Are you meeting a companion this evening?" the droid asked her in a pleasant voice. He was designed to be very attractive, probably much like the models that would be featured inside the spa.

Gwen shook her head.

“Then you’ll want to join the area for singles,” the droid said. “The dressing rooms are the first door as you enter the lobby, the entertainment rooms beyond. Enjoy your visit, Ms. Thompson.”

Gwen nodded and walked inside, feeling a wash of hot-cold nerves igniting through her body, like tiny uncontrolled firecrackers under her skin. Surely here, she would find a way to center herself again.

She took off her clothes in the dressing room and wasn’t sure if the offered tunic dress hanging on a peg in her size was much of a covering. She held it up at the mirror, seeing how one breast would be left bare, reminding her of a statue of the goddess Diana in the lobby. The pale aqua skirt came to her upper thighs, rippling in accordion folds.

She bit her lip. She was certainly going to look lush in this kind of getup. She was not a young girl like the statue, but someone with a solid woman’s body.

But however odd putting on the outfit felt, it didn’t stop her. The spa was a place of dreams, of spinning fantasy, and she knew Jasmine and other crew members had made use of it frequently. It was something of a joke among the crew as the place to go when you went through a painful breakup.

When she had the dress on, another droid appeared at the counter. “May I assist you with your hair or personal grooming, mistress?” she asked. She looked like the twin sister of the droid that guarded the entranceway to the Love Mist spa, her dark hair and makeup glossy and immaculate.

“Ah... Yes.” Why not? Fantasy. She had to remember this was fantasy, and she might as well feel good about herself, even though she was being a dork, the way she kept wanting to cover that bared breast.

Gwen sat down on a padded bench in front of the dressing mirror and let the droid run through a basic enhancement program, shading her eyes, tweaking her brows, adding a sparkling powder to her skin that was supposed to taste like chocolate and Terran apples. Her lips were painted and her hair brushed out down

her back. She touched it, bemused to see that it had gotten so much longer. She wore it up so often in her professional guise that she hadn't kept track.

The woman who met her gaze in the mirror was nothing like dutiful Gwen. She looked mysterious, ripe for adventure, like a courtesan. She didn't look like someone vulnerable and confused. Tonight this was who she wanted to be.

"Thank you," she told the droid.

"Enjoy yourself, mistress."

Gwen wiped her palms nervously down her ghost of a dress before leaving the refuge of the dressing area for the playrooms beyond.

The colorful mist that gave the spa its name writhed around her as soon as she entered the singles area. She could make out distinct bands of color that floated under revolving lights—amethyst for the crown chakra, blood red to stimulate the first chakra of pleasure, celebrating living in the body, feeling sensual in the body... She knew enough now from her lessons with Kealton to pick up the significance.

Through the pinks and greens, she made out a woman surrounded by both men and women, her lips stretched in a smile as she was caressed.

All right. That was why she'd come. She was going to be that woman, Gwen told herself.

Still, she jumped when a man touched her, brushing her naked shoulder with a delicate kiss. She focused on his mustache since she didn't think she'd ever been kissed by a man wearing one when other hands came around her waist, pulling her closer to a body as soft as her own. A woman, blond hair, and arresting crystalline green eyes.

A third woman, an Aurellian like Gwen, with darker skin and light eyes, joined them while Gwen's muscles did a nervous dance. She watched as her belly was stroked, then her sides. Even if women weren't really her thing, it was still pleasant to be touched.

More men and women crowded around her, and she tensed. She was almost virginal when it came to visiting this kind of establishment. The last time had been on a pleasure world celebrating a fellow crew member's upcoming nuptials.

She jerked her head back when a man with almond-shaped eyes and a dark ponytail that reminded her vaguely of Kealton's would have kissed her.

"Gwen!"

It couldn't be.

Kealton.

She held his challenging look as he strode toward her. Unlike her, he hadn't bothered with the sexy Greek-inspired costume. He wore absolutely nothing, and with a body like his, he didn't need clothing.

His hair was loose, soft around his muscled shoulders. She wanted to reach out and tangle through it, twist it in her fist.

She stared at him, aching, and when he touched her, when he put his hands on her cheeks and pulled her up into a kiss, all the balled-up feeling came out in a sob.

She kissed him like he was her soul mate, tears rolling down her face.

"Are you real?" Love mist was supposed to bring you what you most wanted. He had to be a fantasy.

"I was about to ask you the same question. What the hell are you doing in here? It's not your thing."

His cranky voice made her smile. Definitely Kealton.

Her breath hitched as his palm covered her bare breast.

She stood very still, conscious of the way her breath made her breast rise and fall in his grip. "I don't think I've got the hang of using a place like this."

He kissed her again, hard, possessive, and she lost herself in the way his tongue brushed against hers, the way his hand caressed her spine and slid down to her ass. "Let me show you."

Chapter Five

He flipped up her skirt and crushed them together so she could feel them bare skin to bare skin, his sex prodding her belly, could feel his thigh against her own tingling body. All the time he did that, his hands slid up and down her back, making her arch into his touch like a stretching cat.

She wanted to say something, but everything that would have come out would have sounded primal. *Want. Need. You.*

Her nervousness at this new location evaporated under the surety of his touch. She was aware of hands still touching her, touching them both, of mouths and hair, of the warmth of other bodies surrounding them until Kealton pulled her away from the circle of their admirers so they stood in their own circle. “We should go to the couples area,” he said in an abstracted voice. He was now gripping her shoulders lightly, stroking back and forth, and it felt so good, his hands on her skin, that she again was fighting tears.

“*Couples?*” She shook her head. No. She couldn’t. She wasn’t ready for something like that, and she was surprised he’d suggested it.

Annoyance flashed over his face. “All right.” He looked down at her dress. “Not much of an outfit.”

She flushed. “No.”

“Take this off.” He gripped her dress by the single narrow strap and tore it, and the sound was raw and primitive.

Panting, she held his look, his pupils huge and focused on her.

“This is what you want.”

“Yes.” He pulled her closer so he loomed over her, so their breath mingled. She wanted to lean against him and just feel and smell him. They might still be technically in the singles area, but she noticed that other people had stopped approaching them.

His touch delved into her pussy, and a choked sound emerged from her throat.

She gripped his arms. He stroked her, studying her, and his fingers were warm and slick, her body unsubtle in wanting him. His light stroking didn’t answer the pulsing raw need, but he only kept up his light teasing.

“Touch me,” he demanded.

Gwen reached out and grazed Kealton’s stiff penis. He inhaled sharply, closing his eyes as if to savor the experience, making no effort to hide how much he was moved. His reaction gave her fresh confidence, so she tightened the ring of her fingers, feeling a prominent vein, feeling the velvet skin over something firm and hot in her grip, seeing how his heavy balls were tight against his body, seeing the contrast of her darker hand on his paler skin.

“That feels so...good...” He drew the word out in such a way that she laughed.

“Spoken like a true male.”

His eyes snapped open and focused on her face.

“Mine.” He lifted her, and her legs went around his hips, and he was nudging against her the way he had at the dojo. The bodies around them, the pulsating music and mist and lights all faded into a primal heat.

“Ah!” He pushed up and in, sliding easily at first because her body was so aroused.

She flinched.

“Tight.” He leaned his forehead against her neck, his breath making warm patterns against her skin as his hands tightened on her ass. “So tight. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Wow, he was... She winced as he pulled free with a grunt.

“Hold on to me.” He gripped her protectively, claspings her back and her ass as he strode through the playroom. He paced along the wall, making an impatient sound as he was obviously searching for something.

Gwen was feeling impatient as well. She punished him by running her fingers down his back, her nails marking him like claws.

“Jesus, Gwen,” he gasped. “You’ll make me come!”

At last he seemed to find what he was looking for. He knelt slowly on the floor, still holding her, his strong, flexible body keeping her safe. She wilted against him, and he held her so tight for a moment it was like he was loath to be apart from her, even so they could mate.

He pulled away and looked at her, his expression strained, his cheeks hollowed.

“Turn around.”

She hesitated, uncertain what he would do.

“Please. I need... Please.” *Trust me.* She could read it in his eyes.

She obeyed him, frowning as he reached in front of her and snapped delicate chains on her wrists. The cuffs were soft, padded, but when she tugged, they didn’t give.

“Bound. I need you bound.”

He was behind her. She felt the graze of his wet-tipped penis against her ass, and then he pushed her forward onto a bench before sliding into her in one swift motion, impaling her.

“*Oh!*”

“Christ, Gwen, what is it about you?” he panted. He skimmed down her shoulders to her upper arms and elbows, as if he was savoring the way he’d imprisoned her.

“You’re the most...” Her breath suspended as he pulled out slowly and then just as slowly slid back inside, her hips higher now so she could feel his body rub

against hers, making it hard to think. “Annoying man. I don’t know why I need to do this with you.”

A smile in his voice. “That’s what I think about you. Except you’re not a man.”

One of his hands cupped her breast as it jiggled from their movements, rubbing her nipple against his calloused palm. She couldn’t believe she had come here for anonymous relief, and now she was bound, on her knees, with him behind her, fucking her.

“This is the kind of participation I’m into, Gwen,” Kealton said. When Gwen met his gaze in the mirrored wall, she saw how strained his expression was. Holding back—he was holding back for her. She wondered if his excitement felt like hers—edgy and prickly and just what she needed at the same time.

“So this is...better than finger painting?” She couldn’t help but tease him, and he pinched her nipple in response.

“Better than anything, anyone...” His voice was sincere, so she felt tears prick her eyes again.

“Kealton.” Just his name, and then his fingers were on her, stroking in time with his movements, his face twisting, his breath harsh against her neck.

“Gwen.”

She tugged at her bonds, wanting to feel their resistance for some reason as he slid into her, thick and hard and perfect, and her body tightened on him, milking him as he cried out, “Oh, my God!”

His head rested against her upper back as she felt a hot surge of liquid fill her, as her own body contracted again, so she could feel all of him, every inch, and what had begun as fantasy, as forgetfulness, was smashed into something real.

* * *

Gwen woke hours later in a small alcove that was decorated by a single vase with a flower in it. Blinking, she recognized it was one of the vases she’d

commissioned from Kealton with a red bromeliad inside it. For some reason seeing it made her throat tighten.

She pushed aside the single cool satin sheet and climbed up awkwardly from the futon, which was harder than she was used to sleeping on.

The crackle of the woven rug under her feet gave away her location. This little room had to be attached to Kealton's dojo. She picked up a black karategi Kealton had obviously left for her the night before and tugged it on, grateful that he had thought of fresh clothing.

Pushing aside a linen curtain, she saw that Kealton was already up doing an early-morning rotation workout. His hair was damp around his face, which was stern with concentration. He had a naked blade gripped in two hands, the silver edge gleaming in the soft ship's light.

When he spotted Gwen, the soberness vanished from his expression. He paused, and for a moment some emotion lit his expression. He walked over and paused before hesitantly giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Gwen stood stiffly, a little taken aback but...pleased.

"Um. Would you like to know how to use a katana?" he asked.

Gwen blinked. "At this time in the morning? I haven't had my coffee yet, so sharp objects are not a good idea."

But Kealton only shook his head. "I think you'd be good at it. You've come really far with your yoga and basic martial arts."

"I have?" But she had to admit she was able to stretch farther than she'd expected at yoga. She hadn't thought that simply practicing it daily would make much difference since she wasn't naturally athletic.

Kealton nodded, looking pleased for her. He pointed to the wall where he kept some of his swords. "The longer blade is the katana, the middle one is a *wakizashi*, and the dagger is called a *tanto*. I have bamboo practice blades we could start you on."

“You’re trying to make a warrior woman of me now?” she teased, and he shrugged, taking down a bamboo piece, which he placed carefully in her hands, showing her how to grip it.

“The way you take care of people, I think you’re already on your way to being one.”

She liked that he thought so, but she couldn’t think of what to say. After last night, she felt self-conscious.

He spent more time showing her just how to hold the bamboo sword, but she noticed he also seemed lost in thought. There was a fine tension running through him that even his workout hadn’t removed.

“Kealton, is something wrong?”

Kealton blinked, and then he began to fuss with his ponytail. “Wrong?”

“The ponytail thing is quite a tell for a big, bad, dangerous Alliance agent,” she said.

Kealton sighed and swung away from her. She could see the tension in his back muscles. “There’s a courier ship bringing mail in two rotations.”

Gwen raised her eyebrows. “Why, yes, Kealton, every month that happens. Why are you bringing it up?”

“I want you to go on board when it leaves. Take a vacation. We’re near the Grendarian system. You can spend some time on the jungle world since you seem to like the agrigardens so much.”

Gwen crossed her arms. “Did you lose your mind when we had sex last night?” She narrowed her gaze when he turned and faced her, and a grin touched his lips. “What?”

“We had sex last night.”

She swallowed. “Yes. But it’s not a thing, like a relationship thing. I didn’t even know you were both going to be at the Love Mist spa last night.”

“I’ve been going there a while. I programmed a droid to look like you.”

“That’s...”

“What?”

“Against regs!”

He shrugged. “So what? I wanted you, Gwen, and I couldn’t exactly drag you to my bed.” He sounded regretful he couldn’t.

“You really are a barbarian.”

“And you’re trying to derail this conversation.” He tossed his bamboo sword aside and took hers, giving it the same treatment before he crowded her against the dojo wall. “Take some time off. You could use it.”

“Thanks so much, but I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, I need to work for a living—”

“I’ll pay for your vacation—”

“For another, I don’t want to. I like my life on the *Loving Kindness*.” She studied him, but he wouldn’t meet her look. “I repeat—what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing.”

“But you’re worried about something.” She tapped her bottom lip, thinking. “You were sent here for some reason. I know this is a bad quadrant for cruise ships—”

“All the more reason for you to take a damned vacation!” He actually took hold of her arm as if he wanted to shake her, which fired her mood.

“You think I could leave my friends, my crewmates behind and just...take off? That I’d actually be able to enjoy myself without worrying that something might happen to Jasmine or Mandi?”

He shoved his hair off his forehead. “Something might not happen. I don’t know! But I would take care of them, Gwen.”

“No.”

Standoff.

His eyes deadened. "I can't tell you more."

Her lips pulled into a bitter smile. "Of course not. Just what I'd expect of an agent." She backed away. "Unfortunately for you, I'm not my mother."

"Gwen—"

"Last night was a mistake."

His jaw tightened. "You're not your mother, Gwen," he said very quietly. "And I'm not your father."

"Whatever!" She was walking to the door of the dojo. "I have to get back to my quarters, get on with my schedule. I'm already late for a meeting."

"So that's it? You have sex with me and that's it, over?" He strode after her. She saw sweat drying above his upper lip from his workout. He smelled musky, like he'd smelled the night before, and she was still tender inside from taking him.

"I have appointments, I need coffee, and whatever it was we shared last night..." She threw her arms up. "I don't know."

Chapter Six

The ship's klaxon going off was the perfect end to a crappy day's rotation.

Gwen sat up, blinking at the diffuse lighting that made it through the filmy white curtains of her bed. She'd finally managed to drop off into a restless sleep, tormented by dreams featuring Kealton touching her, licking her, holding her down so she had no choice but to let him do what they both wanted...and now the alarm was ringing.

It had to be another drill, like the last two this week, so she'd have to get up, get dressed, and pacify the naturally annoyed passengers who'd be wandering the corridors. *Oh joy.*

She groaned and fell back against a pillow that seemed so soft and enticing. So much for her intention to spend the morning at the spa, actually give herself time to enjoy a pedicure. Jasmine always said it was the perfect way to show self-love, and Gwen needed something as a tonic for her confusion over Kealton.

A fist hammering against her door had her muttering under her breath. She tossed aside the covers and shoved her way free of the bed curtains, striding toward her door. She could release it by voice command, but she wanted to know who was making that racket first.

The door panel revealed Kealton, wearing a charcoal linen tunic and pants, blond hair loose as if he also had been roused from a deep sleep. His eyes looked black under the harsh corridor light.

"Let me in, Gwen." He glared at the door, as if sensing she was watching him, hesitant to permit him entrance into her bedchamber. "It's not a drill. The *Loving Kindness* is under attack by pirates, so let me in, woman!"

“It’s really happening? We’re really under attack?” Gwen demanded as soon as the door slid open. “I thought... It has to be another drill.”

“It’s not. I tried to get the captain to steer back to the Spiros Quadrant, but...” Kealton strode into her room and made for her dresser.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing for you. You’ll need a few things since we’re going off ship.”

“I am not—”

He ignored her, rifling through her underwear, grabbing black cotton over the purple satins she usually favored. His face was grim, and for once he wasn’t teasing her.

“Kealton.”

“Do you have some strongly made clothes in dull colors? Not your signature red, princess. You need something that won’t attract too much attention.”

Her pulse was thudding in her throat. Through her door, left ajar, she could hear shrieks from people running in the hallway. It wasn’t a drill. This was really happening.

“What?” Kealton snapped, grabbing her overnight sack and tossing in the undergarments he’d gathered.

Gwen took a deep breath and then keyed open her closet, pulling out some bronze pants and a matching tunic. She’d used them for a trip camping on a nature reserve, so she figured they would do. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said.

Kealton looked surprised at her words, but he didn’t stop packing.

Gwen was shaking as she added hardy boots to the contents of the bag.

Kealton took them from her, an expression of concern and pride illuminating his face before he pressed his mouth against hers. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“I know,” she whispered.

* * *

In the hallway, chaos reigned like a mad god. Gwen saw couples running, families looking for shelter in alcoves. One little boy was howling as his mechanical dog cuddled against him next to a tall potted tree.

Gwen's heart hurt. "I have to help!"

Kealton's arm around her was a band of new-steel, preventing her escape from him. "You can't."

"But—"

"Gwen, you *know* you can't. Most of the passengers will be ransomed by their families. The pirates won't risk outright atrocities since they know the Alliance would come down hard on them. The rest..." He shook his head and kept hauling her down the corridor.

"The rest will be ditched on smaller colony worlds," Gwen said, finishing what he didn't say. "They might never be able to make their way back to the Alliance. Kealton, I can't just do nothing. I have to—"

Kealton slammed her into a curving wall, gripping her shoulders. She'd never seen him look so cold, so focused. Belatedly, she realized he was frightened. "You'll do exactly what I say. Do you hear me? Exactly."

Perspiration coated her upper lip. She felt hollow, floating, while sounds seemed louder than normal.

Kealton shook her again, and she realized it was *she* for whom he was frightened.

"Gwen."

Numb, she nodded, closing her eyes when she heard the sound of screams coming from the dining area. *God, oh, God.*

She was limp as Kealton tugged her down more hallways, so that even as familiar as she was with the cruise ship, she lost track, like a tired rodent in a maze. Her stupor didn't shatter until her gaze collided with Jasmine's gray eyes.

"Jas!"

Jasmine had one arm wrapped securely around Mandi much the way Kealton was supporting Gwen. She and the girl were being herded with other young women by a tall young man with green eyes and long black hair down his back.

“Gwen!”

Holding Jasmine’s look, Gwen read the fear and the self-control.

Gwen jerked away from Kealton, abandoning him and running to her best friend. Jasmine enveloped her in a tight hug. Her body felt ice-cold. She was trembling.

“Are you all right?” Gwen asked.

“Yes.” Jasmine gave a jerky nod, her grip tightening on Mandi, who had her face buried against her waist.

“Kealton!” The black-haired man gestured, and Kealton moved toward Gwen and Jasmine. “Is she yours? Then you better take her.”

“No!” She fought Kealton’s strong arms pulling her back.

“Yes, she’s mine.”

“You better keep her out of trouble.” The man gestured for his charges to continue walking, and Jasmine’s face tightened, but she took Mandi’s arm, her face calm.

Kealton dragged Gwen away. She fought him, and he lifted her right off her feet, carrying her.

“No!” Gwen rasped. Jasmine and her captor disappeared down a bend in the hallway. “No.”

* * *

Gwen felt like a stiff mask was over her face in place of her skin. She felt chilled, barely aware of her surroundings as Kealton strapped her efficiently into a sting ship, a small passenger transport used for excursions from the cruise ship.

“Is that too tight?”

She looked at him.

“Gwen, answer me. Are the straps too tight?”

She looked away, swallowing.

The man who had taken custody of Jasmine appeared, passing Kealton a clipboard. Gwen wanted to demand to know where her friend was. One look from Kealton told her asking right then would be a bad idea. “All accounted for. It’s fortunate you were on this ship since you’ve been so useful to us in the past, Kealton.”

Kealton nodded. “I’m efficient.”

“You are. You’ll see credits to the amount Captain Reno agreed on are now in your account on Old Terra.” The black-haired man held out a hand, and Kealton took it, shaking it firmly. “Nice doing business with you. Um. The counselor... I may not bring her back right away.”

Kealton’s look sharpened. “Luka...”

“Kealton, you never said there was an empath on board. You know I need her.” The stranger’s voice was low and full of feeling. “She might be the only chance I have.”

Somehow Gwen kept her mouth shut. She needed to learn all she could if she was going to help Jasmine.

“We’ll talk about it. Don’t take action before we do. In the meantime, Captain Reno should be satisfied; the *Loving Kindness* will be a very nice prize ship, completely intact.” Kealton’s voice had no inflection in it. He climbed into the pilot’s seat. “I’ll see you back at the base on Shelora.”

* * *

When they pulled away from the giant cruise ship, Gwen rubbed her forehead and then looked at Kealton’s impassive face. He didn’t speak as they passed the massive curves of the cruise ship, the finest example of Alliance shipbuilding.

“I’m supposed to believe you’re in with the pirates, that you somehow helped them?”

Kealton blinked and then finally looked at her. It was such a cautious look that she felt some faint spark of satisfaction. “Well, yes.”

“Well, I don’t.”

Kealton got very busy with the ship’s controls, working to steer the small vessel past the sleek pirate craft that hung close to the cruise ship. Below, a blue planet with hazy white clouds turned serenely, and beyond, a moon was lit in silhouette by a brilliant sun.

“I don’t believe that the man who talked to me about...vulnerability would be working with pirates.”

“What better way to exploit weakness than to understand it?” he asked in a mild tone.

Gwen swallowed thickly, controlling her anger and the residue of fright. She shook her head. “I still stick to my theory that you’re some kind of agent like my father was.”

Kealton looked at her, and she knew she’d guessed right.

“You’re going to be a problem, aren’t you, darling?” he asked.

Chapter Seven

Whatever Gwen was expecting when their sting ship touched down at the pirate space port on Shelora, it was not the sheer luxury of their surroundings, clear even through the shimmering heat waves that rippled through the hot azure sky. She blinked and lifted a palm to shield her view from the bright, uncompromising glare of real sunlight, which was hard to take after months on board the *Loving Kindness*.

“This way and stay close,” Kealton ordered in a clipped voice. Despite how she’d tried to pry information out of him during the flight to the planet, he’d been stubbornly silent. She was frustrated and scared.

“Gwen?” He paused with her bag dangling in one hand. His hair stirred in the wind, and she had the thought that eventually they’d have shared an off-world vacation together if things had continued to progress between them. She wanted to ask him where his luggage was when it occurred to her that, of course, this couldn’t be his first trip to this base. He must have quarters somewhere in the vast complex that loomed above them.

She immediately recognized that it had been modeled after the Taj Mahal on Old Terra. It was a common replica in outlying worlds. A lot of people would never have the chance to see the original. In her travels she’d seen four versions of Buckingham Palace, complete with droids that mimicked ancient royalty, and two Parthenons as well as many other assorted tourist attractions. Among some vacationers, these replicas were almost as popular as the real thing.

“Very nice,” she said.

“Don’t be sarcastic. Not here, Gwen,” Kealton warned her, putting a palm on the small of her back as if he didn’t trust her not to try to make a run for it. She could have told him she wouldn’t do that. Where would she go? Even if she managed to steal the sting ship they’d just left, it had limited range.

“I’m facing the wind,” she said.

He looked at her, so Gwen continued, “In the old days of storms on worlds with oceans, a mariner had two choices, run or face a storm. Facing it usually meant getting *through* it faster.”

He nodded, respect gleaming in his eyes. “You’re intelligent, one of the reasons you’re so sexy to me.”

“I don’t really care at this moment if you find me sexy,” she muttered.

“You are free to sink barbs into me, but don’t try it with the pirates. Some of them are singularly lacking a sense of humor.”

Her jaw tightened, but she gave a stiff nod. She’d do what Kealton told her to do, because she planned to get out of this, find her way back to free Alliance space. She also planned to locate Jasmine and set her friend free. To do that, she was prepared to give the appearance of compliance.

Kealton examined her face, no fool. “What are you thinking, princess?”

“But I’m not a princess here, am I?” she asked him in a light tone. “Just what is my status?”

They were walking under the great white marble archway, fretwork above in shimmering orange mosaic tiles. She felt immediately cooler out of the sun’s glaring rays. Whatever this world was, it was obviously on the hot side, something to remember if she planned an escape to the land beyond the base.

“My woman.”

Hearing it from him, in a deep and husky voice, tightened muscles in her belly like strings on a guitar. “No, I know it’s not that simple.”

Kealton grabbed her arm, and she saw the struggle on his face. "I didn't want it this way with you. I wanted... I was being patient, damn it."

She swallowed. "That doesn't answer my question."

"On this world, you're my submissive. Being your master is the only way I can offer you my protection."

Submissive.

Instantly she had a picture of the two of them back on her bed on the *Loving Kindness*, surrounded by the haven of her bed curtains. She was lying on her back, and he was covering her. She saw her face, twisted and sweaty, her body pushing up to meet his thrusts while above her head her bound hands tightened into fists.

She held his gaze as long as she could, and then she looked away.

* * *

Gwen was aware she was not the only submissive as soon as they delved deeper into the pirate base. Both men and women strode through the corridors, faces with the familiar set expression of experienced spacers. Many also carried leashes for their pets, some of the animal variety and some human. None of the submissives wore any clothing, save for elaborate jeweled collars. Gwen suspected the devices weren't merely attractive to look at, but probably possessed correctional capabilities.

Her stomach tightened at the idea of wearing one. Would Kealton force her to do that? She glanced at him, but he didn't look at her, his expression closed since she'd forced him to admit her new status.

Oh, yes, he would force her to wear one. The Kealton she'd always sensed under his facade was capable of that and more. Whatever mission had brought him to this world obviously came first, though he was trying to keep her safe.

But if Gwen refused to play the role of his submissive, how could she follow through with her plan to help Jasmine?

Kealton and Gwen entered a pink-tinted elevator. Gwen touched the surface and realized that the entire car was made up of rose quartz. “This will take us to our stateroom,” Kealton said, pointing to where directions to the complex were given in Interlac.

Gwen wasn’t even aware they had moved until the doors opened and a striking woman with a single eye patch entered. What made her even more striking was the leash and the well-endowed naked male pet who knelt at her feet. Gwen caught her breath, staring. When the woman stroked the waves of her pet’s long red hair, he pushed his face into her touch as if enjoying this small sign of affection.

Gwen looked away, belly knotted, unable to stop from picturing herself at Kealton’s feet.

“Captain Reno,” Kealton said, nodding politely to the tall and curvaceous woman. He ignored her human pet.

“Kealton.” She smiled in such a way that Gwen was immediately aware that these two had once slept together. The woman’s gray eye studied Gwen.

“A new pet?”

“Very.” Kealton tugged Gwen closer so her plump thighs cupped one muscled leg. “I’m still gentling her.”

“Trust you to want to gentle your pet instead of break her to hand.”

Kealton shrugged. “I was already working on gaining her submission before the ship was taken.” Gwen felt an echo of the padded cuffs around her wrists from the night they’d shared at the Love Mist spa. Bound—he’d wanted her bound before they’d made love.

“Have you got the list of contacts I gave you for the crew and passengers on the *Loving Kindness*?” Kealton continued. “I’m sure most will be ransomed.”

Captain Reno nodded, slouching against the elevator wall with her fingers still caressing the man at her feet. “You are very insistent.”

“I didn’t know you planned to take that ship.”

“We use someone else for our intelligence from time to time,” Reno said. She raised her palm when Kealton frowned. “The cruise ship is a rich prize. You should be happy.”

“The Alliance won’t react well if people are hurt.”

Reno nodded. “Since you are insistent, we will do our best. For now the passengers can stay on the ship, with a couple of exceptions.” She looked at Gwen. “You’ll want time to enjoy her in your rooms. Pity, since I was hoping to see you at the baths.” Captain Reno’s gaze went to Kealton’s lower body, making it clear just what part she was hoping to see again. Gwen chewed her lip. “I was hoping we could discuss your next assignment since your last one was so successful. Alliance space is vast and powerful, and there are many prizes for us outworlders.”

“I’ll be at the baths after dinner rotation,” Kealton promised.

“I will look forward to it,” the captain said. The lift paused, and she and her naked pet exited the elevator.

Gwen concentrated on her breathing as a primitive way to calm her body as they whooshed higher. Through the hazy walls she could see interactive entertainment screens, food stands, drink stations, and loungers strung at strategic locations. The complex oddly reminded her of her cruise ship, obviously set up for the maximum in comfort for its inhabitants.

“So you’re working for Captain Reno?” Gwen asked. “I recognize the name from the intergalactic news channels. She’s a notorious pirate.”

“Don’t talk,” Kealton said, taking her arm and dragging her from the lift when it came to a halt.

Gwen pressed her lips together tightly. Even now, after everything that had happened, she was aware of Kealton as a man, the swish of his linen clothing as he walked beside her, his light fragrance of sandalwood. His long blond hair held back from his face gave it a sober cast, like a marble statue in shadow.

He pressed a palm to a door guard, and in a moment they were admitted to a spacious stateroom. Gwen sagged in the main space, her experiences catching up with her so she sat down, resting her arms on her knees, taking more deep breaths.

“Are you going to be all right, or should I call up a soother?” Kealton asked as he tossed her bag onto a low console that ran along one wall.

The last thing she wanted was to be at a further disadvantage in this dangerous place, so she shook her head.

He disappeared into one of the rooms, but she stayed where she was, needing a moment. Her neck and back felt out of alignment, fear making the muscles stiff and sore. After a long pause, Kealton returned. He was shirtless, wearing only loose black trousers, his body lean and gently defined in the manner of someone who was a real warrior, not merely into exaggerated body sculpting.

“A little yoga would probably be a good thing,” he said. “I know you’ve gotten into practicing it.”

Gwen’s lips stretched into a dry smile. Yoga. Something he’d taught that was very calming on the *Loving Kindness*. Jasmine had pushed her originally to take classes with her, and to her surprise she’d liked spending time under Kealton’s instruction. Even in larger classes it had always felt oddly personal. He’d made adjustments to her postures, touching her frequently but lightly, stroking the back of her neck to remind her to relax or raising her arms in warrior two so her limbs were better aligned.

I was already working on gaining her submission before the ship was taken.

“I’ll have to remember that tip the next time I’m kidnapped and taken to a pirate world,” she said wryly. “Do lots of yoga to ground myself.”

He knelt behind her, his breath stirring her hair, which she’d twisted back into a severe rope. “Gwen.” His voice was low, intimate. She felt it like something running a hand over her belly. “You’ll do better if you can ease down your level of tension, even if it is understandable.”

“You’re right,” she said. She wanted to ask him about the ransoms he’d discussed with Captain Reno, but was it safe, or could there be listening devices in this room?

He massaged her tight shoulders, working the muscles. Her head fell back, and she let out a long groan.

“You sounded like that when you came.” He kissed the side of her neck, and she felt her scalp tighten in response, felt her body heat and moisten, as if she were already programmed to respond this way.

“I’m not going to let you forget what’s between us. It hasn’t changed.”

“Everything’s changed!” she scoffed.

“Not who we are, not the woman you want to be with me.”

“Well, I’m not so sure I know who you are.” He pulled her back so she rested against him. She should resist, but she needed him. Primal comfort. He was larger, warmer, stronger. She would be strong again in a little while. Right now, she took comfort.

“You do know who I am.” He nuzzled the back of her neck. She shivered in response as she saw their reflection in a gold-veined mirror, both watched and felt his hands running down her bare arms to her fingers and back, stroking the backs of her wrists. Mm. How did he know she loved that little gesture, that kind of touch?

She turned around in his arms and looked at him. “This is what you meant when you said I wouldn’t be in any danger if pirates ever attacked our ship, because you planned to take me as *your* captive all along.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Is that also why you suggested I take that holiday off ship this month’s rotation?”

His jaw tightened. “You wouldn’t go, and I couldn’t tell you why I needed you to leave, you stubborn woman.”

She swallowed and then managed a tiny smile. “I had work to do.”

“Well, now it’s a moot issue.” He sighed.

“So what happens next, Kealton?” She tried to keep any tremor out of her voice, was proud when she succeeded.

He held her gaze, his own that beautiful shade of indigo that had captured her attention from the first time she’d seen him.

“Now you do some yoga, loosen up, and get some rest. We’ll eat, and then I’ll go meet with Captain Reno.” He grimaced, so she knew he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“She’s your contact.”

Kealton said nothing, simply going back to stroking Gwen’s arms.

Gwen thought of Jasmine and swallowed thickly. She needed to learn this base if she was going to help her friend, and she couldn’t do that holed up in Kealton’s stateroom. “I want to go with you.”

He blinked. “No, you *really* don’t.”

“Yes.”

“Gwen, when you next make an appearance in the complex outside of our rooms, you’re going to have fit the role of my submissive.” He gave her a stern look, warning her. “You saw Captain Reno’s pet.”

Her face heated, and she dropped her gaze from his. “I know,” she said softly. She’d be naked, collared, kneeling at his feet.

“No, you don’t. You can’t imagine what it’s like. We’ve barely played with submission. You’re not ready, damn it.”

“You told Captain Reno you were preparing me for the role all the time we were aboard the *Loving Kindness*.”

“I was,” he said, and there was no apology in his voice. “But I was doing that for us, because it’s how you want to be with me.”

She felt a tiny echo of the painful tightness she’d experienced with him previously. Even now, despite their circumstances, a part of her wanted his hand on her, wanted to lose herself, lose her fears, and just burn. All her life she’d striven to

have control, to keep control, and he was saying what her body craved was to give it up for him?

She cleared her throat. "Won't Captain Reno find it strange if you don't have your...attendant taking care of you at the baths?"

"Taking care of me at the baths doesn't involve merely soaping my back!" Kealton growled, jaw tight. "You must know that."

Gwen lifted her chin. "I figured."

"Why won't you let me spare you?" His tone was low, threaded with worry. "I'm not sure you're ready for this level of submission."

"Is Jasmine being spared?"

He didn't look away from her accusing glare. "I doubt it. She'll be collared by now."

"Do you think that man Luka will hurt her?" She couldn't bear to think about it, but she had to if she was going to help her friend.

"Your friend is a very sensible woman, and Luka... He needs her cooperation. I imagine the worst he's done is seen she's giving the appearance of submission. He's not the kind of man to force a woman, Gwen."

Gwen let out a long breath. "Thank you," she said. It helped knowing that although Jas was probably madder than hell at having to appear subservient, Luka wouldn't go too far.

"So...a collar. Like I'll be wearing soon."

"Yes." His expression didn't yield at her words. "Jasmine is a smart woman. She'll do all right."

Gwen shifted restlessly despite his comforting touch. "But Luka seemed to want her for something specific."

"Counselors typically have telepathic or empathic gifts," he said. "Very useful when you want to know if someone is telling the truth, apart from the usual

methods, which are out of the tech reach of the outer planets. Remember a lot of these planets are primitive by Alliance standards.”

“Can you locate her and Mandi, make sure they’re safe?”

“Already done. They’re in Luka’s rooms right now.”

“Can you contact him and see if—”

“No, I can’t.”

“But—”

“I can’t, Gwen. I have to be...circumspect.”

Gwen inhaled sharply. Kealton’s touch remained gentle on her arms, but she could feel the tension in him, feel that he was not to be crossed. “I’m going with you to the baths.”

He considered her, and then finally he shrugged. “All right.”

Chapter Eight

“If we’re going to do this, ritual will see us through,” Kealton said. “I’m a great believer in being prepared, mind and body.”

“Ritual...” Gwen watched him, bemused, as he blended tea. He didn’t just order it from the autocook, where their dinner had popped up a few moments before, but used real planet-grown herbs.

The scent of chocolate and rose petals defused into the air like a delicious incense as he ground them in a stone bowl. She watched, mesmerized by his movements, graceful, unhurried at his task, as if he were back on the *Loving Kindness* making tea bowls in the pottery studio. She noticed the ridge of calluses that ran along the sides of his palms from his practice in martial arts and with archaic weapons. He had light blond hairs scattered on the backs of his forearms. What would he do if she pressed her lips against him there? She felt like a cat who was just stretching her claws, powerful, which was very strange given she was about to put herself in such a submissive position.

“Goddess tea,” he said. “It’s an old recipe. It will celebrate all that is female in you.”

Gwen didn’t miss the way he looked at her, running his gaze over her lush hips and generous breasts, still covered in subdued dark clothing. Always before he’d been more discreet, as if reluctant to frighten her. But now he looked at her openly.

Even as her heart thumped with nervousness, some part of her liked it, despite the circumstances.

“I’m not exactly sexually adventurous, as you’ve probably guessed.”

Kealton zinged her a look but didn’t say anything.

“I like it that you haven’t been adventurous—except with me. It makes you more mine.”

She rubbed her damp palms over her pants as she watched him warm a bronze teapot with water before placing the herbs inside and pouring more hot water into it. She’d barely touched her dinner, too tense to eat much.

He hadn’t eaten anything at all.

“Drink your tea,” he finally encouraged her in a mild tone.

She took the bowl he offered her and tried her tea, finding it on the sweet side. The chocolate tasted vaguely erotic. When she finished he cupped the side of her face with a gentle palm, mussing her hair. “I think it’s time you go to your bedroom and prepare to be my submissive tonight.”

Her gaze locked with his, fell away as the tea bowl jumped in her grip. He meant for her to go and remove her clothing, of course. She’d be nude, on display for his pleasure. She took a deep breath before climbing to her feet.

She had to think of Jasmine. This wasn’t about her and Kealton. She couldn’t see how they had a future beyond whatever they might exchange during this time. She had no doubt he would disappear from her life once this adventure was over; hopefully by then she’d be back to her comfortable niche in Alliance space with as many of the passengers and crew of the *Loving Kindness* as they could liberate.

Her heart hurt at the thought of never seeing him again, never watching him moving through his katas or listening to him tease her about her neat suits. She’d always sensed this time would come, which was why she’d tried to keep her distance.

I knew he’d hurt me.

“Gwen, no one but me will ever know what you do on this world,” Kealton said. “If you have trouble submitting, remember that. I just wish—”

“What?”

“That I didn’t have to push you. I worked so hard to bring you to me.”

She reached out and gripped his hand gently. He gave her a surprised look, but she only climbed to her feet, inhaling deeply, trying to center herself.

Despite everything, this adventure might offer her a sense of freedom she hadn't expected. So she was his submissive, his to do with as he pleased. If she were honest with herself, wasn't that exactly how she'd pictured herself all the time she'd known him? She wanted him to take her, to force her to come, to give her the pleasure she had always been afraid of.

* * *

Still, she hesitated when she paused at her bedroom threshold once she'd made her preparations, heart thumping. This was hard, even if some bizarre part of her thought it was right, as if she'd been a plant growing in this direction.

Kealton's back was to her. He didn't turn to look at her or acknowledge her in any way, but she sensed he knew she was there.

"Kneel." Kealton's voice was hard, inflexible. Testing her, seeing if she was ready to be his submissive.

Oddly, his confidence in being her master made it easier. Gwen knelt and waited on him. Kealton continued to move around the great room, working through his routine. He was beautiful to watch, muscles defined as he kicked, brought both palms up in what would be a smashing blow to a real opponent. She remembered how he'd wanted to teach her to use a katana. He really thought she was good enough? She remembered gym classes on her home world and her dismal performances. She'd hated jogging, been so clumsy. Somehow Kealton had slowly built her confidence over the months.

Gwen blinked. Built her confidence in her body—had it been part of patiently making her trust him?

Kealton finished at last, turning and tugging his linen pants down and off, revealing himself to her completely.

Gwen's breath suspended so all she was aware of was the drum of her heart as she looked at him. She was back to that night on the ship when she'd watched him doing katas in the nude. His eyes were almost black under the artificial lighting as he walked to her, his cock hard and unsubtle between his legs.

Kealton loomed over her deliberately, looking at her until she dropped her gaze. Moments passed. She was aware of the rise and fall of her bare breasts with each breath, aware of the moisture slicking her channel and the pain of need at the thought of him touching her there.

"I think some yoga first."

Gwen's gaze shot up to meet Kealton's. His face was flushed, his pupils enlarged, giving his eyes the look of a bird of prey from a menagerie on one of the zoo worlds.

"The cat, let's see it."

More testing and...something else: the reason he'd taken the time to brew her the special tea. He wanted her relaxed, in the mood.

"Yes, Master," she said.

She moved onto all fours and with an indrawn breath began the movements he'd taught her months ago, jutting out her buttocks, dropping her belly and raising her chin like a stretching cat.

He watched her, expressionless, and with the cool air against her skin, touching her between her legs where she was damp with desire for him, she was aware of how sexual the *asana* was. How had she never seen this before? But as she curved her spine, head down, back stretching, she could smell her own excitement. Surely if she caught it, he could smell her too.

She closed her eyes, surrendering to the moment, to the breath. She could feel his attention fixed on her like a touch, and then she felt a real caress as he cupped her bare ass approvingly. "This makes your master want to fuck you."

Had he thought that when he taught her the position? When he grazed her warm cheek, she knew he had. Somehow he was reading her thoughts as he read her body.

“Bound ankle.”

Moving gracefully—was this really her?—she shifted into position, legs bent and soles together, hands cupping her ankles as she bent forward. When she’d first tried this position, she had been stiff, and it had felt unnatural, but now she surrendered, let her body slowly fall forward.

He sat down behind her, and she felt his cock, hot and wet tipped, as it inscribed a half circle against her lower back.

“Kealton...” she breathed.

He reached between her legs and covered her, giving her a gentle squeeze and then leaving his hand there while she continued to stretch and breathe and try to relax. She felt herself naturally enfolding his fingers, making them slick.

“Spread your legs. Lean back against me.” This wasn’t yoga now. This was a place she’d never gone before, a place where Kealton was her lover, her master.

She moved into position. He lifted his hand, damp from her juices, and covered her left breast, where her heart was pounding.

“This is your left side, your *yin* side,” Kealton said.

“Oooh.” Her head lolled back and rested against one muscular shoulder. He had her now. He had her body and mind completely in this present moment, alone with him.

“Are you my female?”

“Yes.”

“Taste yourself.” He raised his fingers and put them to her lips, smearing her essence against her bottom lip. She could smell herself, strong and musky, potent as the tea blend he’d made just for her. “You’ve wasted this on men who can’t make you come, but you know that’s not true of me.”

“Yes.” She was feeling hazy now, as if she’d entered some kind of deep meditation, yet at the same time she could feel her pulse beating in the open lips of her sex. He reached down and began to play with her, spreading her while she trembled against him. When one leg instinctively rose to shield her from the intensity, he slapped it aside.

“You are my pleasure submissive. Do you know what that means?”

“I... Not yet,” she admitted. Her thigh trembled, and he stroked it, as if comforting a pet.

“It means that you pleasure me and I pleasure you—without shame, without restraint.”

She covered his hand on her leg.

“You’re shaking because your body carries a lot of emotions in your hips, between your legs. You haven’t let yourself express it, but you will now, won’t you?”

Again he began to finger her, ruthless, giving her no quarter, touching her as he pleased, so the scent of her arousal rose between them like incense. She couldn’t keep from pressing into his touch, but when she did, he stopped pleasing her, keeping her throbbing, on the edge of climax.

“Please.”

“Please what?”

She licked her dry lips. “Please, Master.”

“Better. You have a very good pussy, all wet for me. I like to look at it, all open and ready for whatever I want to do to it.”

“Yes, Master.” She clasped his arm, and the contrast of their skin color was also strangely erotic to her, as erotic as her softness contrasting with his hardness.

He lifted an object free of a linen bag lying on the floor. She’d seen it while they ate but not paid too much attention to it, lost to her thoughts, nervous about the coming experience of becoming his pet. But now she was interested in its contents.

He held it up so it caught the light. At first she took the pendant with a single emerald drop as an earring.

“You like it?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded groggy with pleasure. She was so conscious of her open body, waiting for him to resume his touch.

He smacked her left nipple briskly with the backs of his fingers, and she jumped.

“Stay still,” he ordered her in an absent tone.

Her nipple prickled, alive as her lower body was alive.

He put the pendant against the stiffened peak.

“Hold your breath...”

“Master, what...?”

A tiny laser beam flashed, penetrating her tender flesh, and then the ring hung from her nipple. He’d pierced it, decorated it.

It didn’t hurt now, because of instaheal, so all she’d experienced was a brief stinging sensation. As she grazed an inquiring touch over it, she was aware that he hadn’t even asked her if she wanted it. Of course, back in Alliance space she could remove it easily herself. But she bit her lip, wondering if she would.

“You like it, kitten?” Where his voice had been removed, now warmth was there, and she found herself resting back against the hard planes of his chest. The nipple ring had been another test, she realized. He’d taken her somewhere unexpected and seen how she dealt with the loss of control.

She turned to look at him. “It’s on my left side, my yin side.”

“Yes,” he said, stroking her long hair. “To remind you that you’re my woman. It also goes with the collar I bought you.”

She held his gaze as he played with the nipple he’d adorned. He obviously liked the tiny jewel, and she liked wearing it for him, even though she scolded herself that she would remove it when she returned to her real life.

“Do you know I bought the collar for you two days after we met?”

She blinked.

“No, I didn’t know you’d wind up like this for me, but I hoped you might, of your own volition.” His voice lowered. “I hoped I’d get to tame my woman.”

He reached into the bag and pulled out a delicate filigree collar. It wasn’t the heavy correctional piece worn by other submissives in the pirate base, but something more like jewelry.

“It has the same built-in abilities as the others, but”—he pushed her long hair out of the way as she bent her head obediently—“I use pleasure as a tool for discipline.”

“Pleasure?”

Knowing amusement moved through his expression. “It’s just as effective as pain in some instances, kitten.”

Once the collar was on, it felt lighter than she had imagined, and she had the strange feeling that she wouldn’t want to remove it even after this escapade.

“Legs wider,” he ordered, and her thighs opened for him automatically.

He gave an approving sound, his cock hard against her lower back, reminding her that her new master was also excited, even if he was far more patient than she was.

His fingers delved into her slick folds, and she moaned her surrender, falling back against him again. She wanted to push up into his touch, but she knew that unless her submission was complete, he would not choose to reward her.

“Your pussy loves this, loves to be petted.”

I love this. I love him doing this to me. I love...him.

She was breathing heavily as he rubbed her, giving her the friction she needed.

“Now come, my submissive,” he ordered calmly.

Her body clenched as hot contractions of pleasure took hold, and all she was in that moment was his pet, his submissive, his eager pussy ready for whatever he wanted to do to her.

Chapter Nine

Gwen smoothed the generous curve of her hip nervously as she stood next to Kealton in the lift traveling down to the baths. She was conscious of how she was nude while he was fully clothed, except for the little sparkling emerald dangling from one nipple and the matching collar he'd given her. Somehow it made her feel even more his pet, wearing things he'd chosen for her.

She reached up and touched the collar, and Kealton's attention riveted to her. She swallowed thickly, reliving what it had felt like, everything they'd done alone in his stateroom. He'd gotten inside her mind, as much as her body. "Is there anything I should know about how the collar works?" she asked, needing to get back to business.

He raised an eyebrow, and she remembered her role.

"Master?" If her skin had been a paler shade, her blush would have been fully apparent, but he seemed to sense it anyway, stroking one warmed cheek gently.

"It won't let you lie. It's hooked into your nervous system, so whatever your body experiences is read and translated by the device, making the gem in the collar glow."

"Be honest. All right." Making a list, gathering information, not so different from her job. She could do this.

A furrow appeared between Kealton's brows. "It's not that simple, Gwen. What if you lie to yourself? The collar will pick up that imbalance and correct you."

"What would I lie to myself about?" She stared into his sober eyes. "Oh." It had been hard for her, very hard, to finally admit what she wanted with Kealton.

“Practice what I taught you in yoga: present awareness. Breathe deeply. Take the time to listen to your body, your emotions.”

Gwen nodded.

“What are you feeling right now?”

She let out a breath. “Nervous.” She closed her eyes, going deeper. “Self-conscious. Hugely embarrassed. And...”

“Yes?”

“Under all that”—she opened her eyes—“I want you. I’m aroused by you.” Her voice softened to a whisper. “Master.”

He was breathing heavily, and the more apparent flush in his skin reminded her again of how different they were. “Come here, little one.” He pulled her close, and she immediately felt safe. On tiptoes she lifted for his kiss, feeling the brush of his lean, muscular body, feeling his cock like a hard knob against her softer lower body. *He wanted her. He wanted to be thrusting in and out while she spread herself wider for him.*

“You’re picking up on my energy now,” he said, closing his eyes as if he were centering himself. When he opened them again he leaned down, kissed her gently as if he’d mastered himself. His tongue entered her mouth, heavy and firm so she felt that tingle of want.

She reached up, moaning, needing his touch, the solid warmth of his body against her own cooler one, the silken rasp of his clothing as it whispered against her nakedness.

He grazed her lips, playing with her. She loved him. She loved the taste of him. She loved his body pressed against hers, male to her female. All these months she’d hidden from him, sensing he could give her what she needed. The intensity tightened her throat, and she struggled with the need to cry. *It hurt.* She loved him.

“Are you all right?” His gaze was sharp on her face.

She looked away, mastering the ball of feeling trapped inside. What had he told her? She had to be honest or the collar would make itself known. "I'm not all right," she admitted. Then she looked at him, his long blond hair pulled back, wearing a black karategi, his slim hips and wide shoulders, the smooth olive skin and grave blue eyes. "But I'm coping."

After a pause, he nodded. Kealton trusted her to be honest with him, and not just because of the collar.

"You mentioned that I was picking up your feelings through the device?" Would it also reveal how she felt about him? She didn't want him to know, not until she'd processed it. This experience they were sharing was not something that was going to last. She'd always thought her father and mother should have had a short, fiery affair and not married, not had her and her sister. Because Isadora Thompson had gone with her heart, her mother had fallen deeper and deeper into depression, waiting on a man who was ill-suited to a quiet life on an agricultural planet.

When this was over... Gwen rubbed her arms, up and down, trying to warm her skin. When this was over she'd go back to a berth on a cruise ship. She'd work at her job, travel, and enjoy it, damn it; no matter how much she missed him, she would not let her feelings for Kealton drag her down. Looking at him, seeing the concern in his expression, she knew he wouldn't want that either.

"The collar reads me as well as your body, Gwen, because I am your master, and what I want is passed on to you." Kealton cleared his throat, and Gwen experienced again the backwash of emotion coming from him. He seemed so controlled, but what he wanted from her was wild, primal. Her pulse picked up as she held his look. "Passes it on so you can serve me best. And, ah, we have another...problem to deal with."

She picked up tension coming from him now.

"Your antipregnancy meds won't work now that you're wearing it."

“What?” She hadn’t thought of *that*. It was something she took for granted, like her favorite moonbeam pastries every morning, like the translator device implanted in her neck so she could communicate with passengers in a variety of dialects.

“Masters and mistresses like having...fertile pets.” He raised his palms. “I didn’t make the law. Want to go back to the stateroom? I’m more than happy to take you there!”

He could make her pregnant. Gwen felt perspiration coat her upper lip and hairline. She stared out the pink transparent lift, taking in the arched entranceways, the fountains spurting in courtyards as it took them to their destination.

“But I can choose to incubate any fetus.” Women usually chose not to carry children, except Gwen’s mother had carried both her and her sister to term since she was a traditionalist.

“Yes.”

She raised her chin. “Then it’s not a problem.”

“Gwen...if you should... We need to discuss this, damn it! *Fuck!*” She saw the light flashing in their transport, letting them know they were approaching their stop at the baths. “One more thing... I know why you’re doing this—to find some way to help your friend. I’m not stupid, Gwen. But I won’t let my woman put herself at risk. Do you understand me?”

Gwen’s jaw tightened. “Then you’ll have to help me get her out.”

The lift dinged a prolonged ringing note, signaling their arrival. Kealton crowded her, pushing between her legs so she was completely aware of him, his cock prodding her through his loose clothing, emphasizing his potency. “If I make you pregnant, I want you to tell me. If you choose to incubate our child, I want to know.”

She blinked. “What for?”

“Because he or she would be mine.”

Gwen gave him a disbelieving look. “In Alliance worlds, fathers have no rights.”

He put his hand over her belly, squeezing the softness. “If you make me a father, I have every right.”

Chapter Ten

Outrageous! Never mind her feelings for him—the man *was* a barbarian.

“When this is over, *Master*, you’ll be far away, no doubt working some dangerous mission. Don’t deny it, because I’ve always known what kind of man you are.” *A man just like my father.*

With a firm hand on her arm, Kealton tugged her from the lift. Gwen opened her mouth...and Kealton kissed her. It was an authoritative kiss, reminding her of her place as his submissive. She reached up and tugged at his hair, pulling it hard, and he laughed.

“Kealton, you are—”

Again his mouth smothered her until she softened, and then it became a caress. Her lower body throbbed, but she still wanted to knock his head against a wall.

He touched her collar. “We aren’t alone.”

“No.” Focus. He’d told her to stay in the present moment. But how was she to do that when she didn’t know if she wanted to swat him or kiss him? *Damn it!* As if he knew what she needed, Kealton lifted her onto a small ledge beside the elevator and stepped into the open V of her legs, blocking her from view. Time, he was giving her time so she could ground herself again. Slowly, Gwen became aware of her heart beating, of someone hurrying past with an enormous bouquet of flowers, another person using an autovac to comb the floor and walls for any dust. It was strange, how this base was so similar to the *Loving Kindness*. It made her ache all the more to be back there now. Well, here was some honesty: it didn’t matter if he made her

pregnant. If it happened...she wouldn't mind another person in her life. With her mother gone, with Belinda off living her life, Gwen had been alone a long time.

Honesty. The collar was all about honesty. She sighed, rubbing her forehead.

"Gwen, what is it?" He was studying her, a trace of anxiety in his eyes as if she were an incendiary device that could go off at any moment.

She smiled. "I knew you'd complicate my life."

"No matter what happens between us here, I'm not letting you go." He kissed her harder, so his whiskers rasped against her softer skin, and she loved the slight pain of it. How could she ever settle again for the tame feelings she'd allowed herself before, putting her toe into the water? She put her hands in his hair, pulling impatiently again, wanting to demand he give her relief.

He pulled away with a laugh. "Minx," he whispered. "I can smell how wet you are. You just want me to get you off again, don't you?"

He stepped away, and she panted, pulling her knees up to her chest as she struggled again for control, only this time it was because she was hungry for his touch between her legs.

Focus.

"You're here to find out if some of our people have been ransomed?"

He nodded. "I hope to God they have been. Come on, let's get this over with," he said as she jumped down from the ledge. He swatted her ass, leaving a warmed handprint that sent a frisson of fresh desire through her. Her body seemed to like everything he did to her.

"Through here." Kealton had to duck his head to enter the baths since the archway was so low. He had one hand wrapped around Gwen's wrist like a chain, tugging her to follow him.

They entered the cooler part of the baths first where most people were taking off their clothing, in this case men and women attended by their naked pets. Gwen felt eyes on her and Kealton gleaming with curiosity and anticipation. She couldn't

help but look at the men and women exchanging kisses, intimate touches, so that she shifted restlessly before she moved closer to Kealton, and her body brushed against his.

He put a palm flat against her mons as if knowing exactly what she needed, cupping and squeezing her, unsubtle in his sign of ownership. Her gaze jerked to his. "Pay attention," he ordered. "Do you like this?"

She didn't want to admit it, but if she lied, she had no idea how the collar would correct her. She cleared her throat, watching his expression as he continued to knead her, giving her indirect stimulation that kept her edgy. "Yes, I like it."

"You like everyone in this room watching me pet you?"

Oh, he was definitely going to push her. But his fingers slid into her folds at last. *God, at last!* Stroking her, taming her. "Yes," she breathed as he worked her.

He nodded gravely, and she didn't think he was playing a role...any more than she was.

When they arrived at the main baths, there were large rings on the floor next to the couches. Gwen didn't have to question what they were for since all pets were clipped to them with long chains while their masters or mistresses either swam or reclined on the furniture.

She was aware of the intense looks they attracted as she and Kealton walked deeper into the complex. Usually her bathing attire was fairly modest, almost virginal, so that Jasmine and even Kealton had teased her about it on board the ship. Now she was conscious that all she wore was the little emerald pendant, which jiggled with the gentle movement of her breast as she walked.

"You have a graceful walk," Kealton said. "I've liked to watch you walk from the beginning."

Gwen nearly missed a step, and her gaze collided with his.

"I...wasn't very comfortable harvesting wheat or taking part in sheep washing or any of the other activities celebrated on my world," she said.

“Physical things.” He nodded. “They don’t sound like you. Sheep washing?” Amusement touched his lips.

“I... No.” She looked at him. “Not like yoga or the martial-arts stuff I’ve been learning. I...like that.”

“I know.”

She raised her chin, and Kealton gave her an approving look. He liked that she kept her pride now despite her nudity, and she could feel that he shared it through their link. He also took her hand for a moment and squeezed it, as if reminding her silently that she was not alone.

After Kealton chose a couch, he pushed her firmly to her knees, and Gwen forced herself to relax as if this were a new yoga asana he was teaching her. He knelt beside her and used a chain and cuffs to secure her wrists to a sturdy metal ring.

She looked up to see the captain they’d met earlier on the ride to Kealton’s stateroom. The woman was watching them, rubbing her upper lip, again and again, her expression contemplative while her pet knelt at her feet, leaning against her bare thigh, his expression serene. Gwen felt her stomach knot at the look of the man, lying against his mistress as if his own submission pleased him. “Spread your legs wide.”

Gwen jumped when Kealton’s cool hand pushed her thighs open. She forced herself to relax, but he didn’t stop there. He took one of her ankles, rubbing it soothingly until her resistance melted. “We have to put on a show here,” he whispered. “Please try to relax and remember why we are here.”

Gwen gave a tight nod, and he kissed her forehead. “You’re so goddamned brave.”

Brave? But she could see truth in his expression. She swallowed and tried to soften her body.

“Your pet is adapting well to this gentling method you prefer,” Captain Reno said, still studying Kealton and Gwen.

“It is the best way,” Kealton said. “And despite your ruthless reputation, I happen to know you’re gentle with your own pet.”

“When he needs it.” The other woman pushed back her long brown hair, her body ripe, with silvery scars running down her muscular torso. “Sometimes he needs something quite different from me.”

Gwen’s eyes widened as she saw the captain pick up a belt with a large interactive phallus. She’d heard about them: state-of-the-art toys that melded to a woman’s body and passed on the same sensations she might feel if she were a man. Clearly, the captain was going to use it on her pet to fuck him there in the baths. Gwen’s skin heated, and she looked away, but a moment later her gaze crept back in fascination to the pair, seeing the man arranging himself on his back, spreading his legs. *He wanted his mistress to fuck him.*

Reno caught her look and the captain’s expression hardened. “He was a soldier in the Alliance,” she boasted. “But he had no idea he really wanted someone to take care of him, make him submit, until I captured him.” She gripped the man’s long penis so that he whimpered, lifting his hips. “There, pet,” she murmured in a tender voice. “I’ll give you what you need.”

As Gwen and Kealton watched, Captain Reno placed the toy cock against her body, and with a swirl of light, it fused to her flesh. The captain took a deep breath and then stroked oil onto her erection, rubbing it back and forth slowly as if luxuriating in her new appendage. She looked down at her pet, at the man’s contented smile as she splashed more oil onto her fingers before working them into the man underneath her, preparing him.

Her pet gave a hoarse cry and shivered under her touch.

Gwen couldn’t look away. She didn’t know which of the pair she’d rather be—the man lying passive or the woman with her toy.

Kealton stroked her thighs and kissed her as she continued to watch Captain Reno enter her pet with one practiced thrust. The man groaned, legs high now as

the artificial penis moved in and out of his ass. The captain hissed out a breath, as if it felt good to fuck the man beneath her.

Gwen looked away, her chain clinking as she wiped sweat from her upper lip.

“He needs her to do that to him,” Kealton said quietly. “Just the way you need me to give you what you really need.”

He cocked a brow at her, waiting, but she couldn’t speak since the only word her collar would allow would be *yes*.

Swallowing, Gwen let him chain both her legs as she listened to Captain Reno’s pet’s sounds of pleasure. She couldn’t get the picture out of her head of the man, larger and muscled, yet reveling in his subservience to the woman who rode him.

Kealton finished with his adjustments, leaving her body fully open so that in the steamy mirror opposite she could see the slick dark pink folds of her body, succulent and moist as summer fruit. She could smell herself, a natural female scent that she was more used to covering up with perfume.

Kealton began to rub her clit, and Gwen fell back on her arms as shudders moved through her body. She whimpered, the sound not unlike the ones coming from the captain’s pet as the woman fucked him.

A shadow fell on them, and Gwen looked up through heavy-lidded eyes at a familiar man with long black hair and emerald green eyes. It was Luka, who had taken Jasmine captive.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Kealton asked in an absent tone before turning his attention to Gwen as he played with her. “Everyone in this room can see your excitement, pet. They can see how wet you are, how in need you are of someone to touch you.”

“Jasmine...” Gwen said, not about to be sidetracked.

Luka immediately knelt close to her and Kealton. “Your friend is reorganizing my autocook to make a proper dinner for her charge.”

“She and Mandi are all right?”

Luka gave an almost imperceptible nod before he bent close and brushed his lips against hers. Gwen tensed before remembering where they were. An act. This was an act, and obviously Luka and Kealton were working together in some fashion.

“I think your mind is wandering, pet,” Kealton said, and there was a thread of warning in his voice. His touch hesitated over her collar, as if he meant to activate it but couldn’t quite bring himself to do it.

Luka had no such hesitation. “She’s an amateur, Kealton. We can’t risk her.” Green eyes held hers as he brushed a finger over an embedded garnet in her neckpiece. A second later, warmth flooded through her, warmth and relaxation. She was still aware, she didn’t feel drugged, but her body was definitely feeling a powerful lash of desire. It burned through her, through her core and up her chest to her tender, aching breasts, and she wasn’t sure her body was large enough to contain the sudden need.

“Better,” Luka said. He looked at Kealton. “I told you this one is trouble.”

“*My* trouble,” Kealton muttered, grip tightening on her shoulders. “And we didn’t need your goddamned interference. Gwen is strong enough to do what is necessary!”

“Sorry, but I don’t have your confidence in your little warrior. You’ll have to deal with the consequences now.” Luka didn’t seem very sorry.

Kealton cursed but then returned to petting her, as if he could feel how her body was becoming almost unbearably excited now that her inhibitions had been shoved aside. Her eyes widened as she had the sudden thought that she was absorbing what *they* were feeling, Kealton and Luka. Through the collar, she was picking up their sexual arousal as well as experiencing her own.

She wanted to curl in herself as tears burned her eyes. What...? She didn’t know what to do! She had no experience with this kind of intensity. Shatter. She would shatter—

It gripped her, so she arched her back, growling in anger when Kealton deliberately softened his touch. She wasn't getting what she needed. She could only wait, her body open to receive anything he wanted to give her, her limbs straining against the bonds. Need tightened her lower back, and her ass throbbed. She felt nothing like her ordinary self, but rather she felt wanton, a luscious, desirable submissive as people around them coupled and a stranger watched Kealton playing with her.

When Kealton's finger dragged down the divide of her body to her pucker, she jumped again.

"It will feel good," he reassured her, nuzzling his chin against her hair as he lightly stroked up and down over her opening. "I can feel what you're feeling right now. The link is fully open. Don't worry. Luka's a bastard, but I'll give you what you need."

"Promise?" She fought the tears, trying to find herself in the swirl of heat, like being lost in a desert storm. "I've never—"

"It's all right, darling. I'll—" Kealton swallowed. "Listen to me." She held his look, held on to his words. His voice became seductive, taking hold of her imagination. "No one's ever played with your pretty little ass? That's a shame. I plan to fuck it. Soon. And you'll love it, Gwen. You'll offer it up to me whenever I want it." His voice was drowsy as if he too was under the same spell she was. He was shaking. It wasn't just her, she realized. He was in pain too.

Gwen experienced a curling sensation in her lower body at his words about taking her rear end. She'd never done it before. Now these strange new feelings only increased her need to come.

"She's so damn excited," Luka marveled. There were beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, and she could see he was not unmoved by what was being exchanged among the three of them. Somehow the collar moved him too. "You didn't tell me she was so fucking hot."

“Touch her,” Kealton offered, and Gwen gasped, shocked that he would share her...and also so needy. Either of these men could make her come now, she was so close. And she didn’t care, didn’t care, who did it, who made her come...

A calloused finger joined Kealton’s so that she was being stroked now by two men, both of them watching her face as they knelt in front of her chained body, eyes on her rapidly rising and falling breasts, on her wet open cunt.

“Do her harder. Put another one in her and really finger-fuck her,” Kealton suggested in a hoarse tone. Gwen whimpered when Luka obeyed. She clenched herself as much as possible around that penetration because it felt good. She needed it.

“Please, Master.”

Kealton smacked her thigh. “Please, *Masters*,” he prodded her. “You belong to anyone who wants to touch you now, don’t you, slut?”

“Y-yes.” Her upper body fell back as she pushed up to invite the teasing possession of both men. She couldn’t believe what was happening—that this was her, a woman who had lived such a staid love life. Her pussy was stuffed full with the glistening fingers of two men. She was their slut now, riding her urgent need to come.

“You’re going to come now,” Kealton told her.

“*Master, yes!*” A raw voice burned through her throat as her body gratefully rode the hands playing with her.

Chapter Eleven

Gwen was back in the bedroom where she'd grown up. She recognized the cracked cool stone floors, the peach ruffled curtains, which at first she thought were moving in a breeze. She'd worked at an Italian deli in a nearby small town to pay for the colorful rugs that covered her floor as well as the bright pillows and dried flowers that adorned the rest of the space.

She blinked, seeing after a moment that her bedroom was flooded with water, yet it was just the way it had been before their house had been sold at her mother's death. As she swam, a sea horse undulated past her, lit up like a dazzling living jewel, each vertebra glowing in the cool environment, delicate fronds propelling it past her...

"Umm?" Gwen shook her head, opening her eyes and sitting up with the clink of chains. Her body throbbed, sensitive from the touch of the two men who had serviced her.

Two men.

"Easy." *Kealton.* Kealton's voice, his hand on her arm, grounding her. Gwen's thundering pulse slowed a little as she took in deep breaths. "You were really out of it," he said.

"I was..." She looked around and saw they were still at the baths. Captain Reno was now reclining on her couch, stroking the hair of her pet as he leaned against her. They both wore faint smiles, obviously having satisfactorily finished their encounter. Gwen licked her dry lips and in a hushed tone asked, "Drugged?"

He shook his head, and his lips quirked. "You're out of it as a result of an overload of pleasure."

She stared at him, and he laughed.

“You’re saying I had some kind of waking dream because we...I...” She flushed, not ready to put into words what she had experienced.

“When you meditate, don’t you visit some fantastical places?” he asked her, brow raised.

Gwen chewed her lip. It was true that after doing intensive yoga, she sometimes had a kind of vision that she was at the bottom of a pond full of water lilies, looking up at them and seeing them sway gently in the sunlight above her like pink, translucent fruit. It was a peaceful, happy place.

“But I’ve never, um, had a vision after I...”

“You’ve never had an orgasm that intense before, have you, little one?” He cupped her face, looking deep into her eyes. She felt even more naked at that look, still too out of it to protect herself from him. And it hurt, whenever he got closer. She jerked her chin from his grasp.

“Gwen, why do you always have to fight everything between us?” he asked, his gaze bright with curiosity and annoyance.

She wanted to shove him away. He was close, too close. “I just do.”

He sighed. “I took you to a new place. Just try to enjoy the afterglow.”

“And have some water with your afterglow.” A jeweled goblet was offered to her, and she met Luka’s inquisitive green eyes. She took his offering with a shaking hand, absorbing his long waterfall of black hair, much longer than Kealton’s. He was slightly smaller in frame than Kealton but there was an air of readiness in the way he held himself that gave off a warrior vibe.

“We weren’t really introduced properly before. I’m Luka,” he said. “While it was hot to have an encounter with a stranger, I have the feeling you’re the kind of woman who likes to know her men.”

"I..." She shrugged, thinking Jasmine had accused her more than once of needing to *control* her men. That certainly hadn't been the case since she'd met Kealton.

Luka bent close to pour more water in her goblet after she downed the first cupful. He passed Kealton a crystal chip. "I got out another third of your people," he said in a low tone. "Hopefully the rest will be ransomed." He looked at Gwen. "Sorry if I didn't trust you to keep up the act."

"Luka is a smuggler. He sometimes does some business here, and he can be...useful," Kealton told her. He was watching her gulp down the second cup of water. When she finished, he took the goblet from her and then stroked the hair off her forehead. Without thinking, she leaned into his touch.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked. "What you experienced was very...intense. I usually wouldn't push someone new to submission that far." He glared at Luka, who merely cocked a brow, not looking very remorseful.

"Yes, I'm fine." He was asking her if she was okay to continue their...charade? She wasn't sure if that was all it was since it felt so real.

Kealton removed the chains from her wrists and ankles. She watched him, aware of his actions, but her limbs were limp and heavy in his grasp. She felt like she was rooted to the earth, like a broken hourglass with all the sand spilled free. She wasn't ready yet to collect the pieces of herself, to weigh what she might have given away to Kealton.

"I have some things to do," Luka said, holding Kealton's gaze for a moment. "I'll be going off planet soon."

Kealton gave a slight nod, and Luka reached out and touched Gwen's cheek. Her heart stuttered for a moment since she had no idea how to react to a man who had touched her, made her come, before she'd known more about him than his name.

"You are a warrior. I hope to meet you again, maybe without Kealton around."

“That won’t happen.” Kealton immediately growled.

Luka cocked his head at Kealton and then climbed to his feet in one smooth movement. He walked away, looking over his shoulder once to wink at her, his hair a flirtatious cloak down his muscled back.

“Luka, hm.” She studied Kealton. “He’s a bit of a rogue.”

“He’s a pain in my ass. Time to take care of you now the show is over,” Kealton said, obviously unwilling to talk more about Luka.

“Is that was it was?” She actually felt groggy. Had she ever been groggy after sex? But he’d been right, damn him. She’d never come so hard before in her life, swamped by not only her own want, but Kealton’s and Luka’s as well.

Kealton lifted her from the floor, carrying her. “Warm water, baths?” he said, clueing her into his intentions. “Good idea for a woman who nearly fainted.”

She frowned. “I did not.”

“You barely avoided it.”

“Don’t get smug.”

He smiled, teeth gleaming, dimple appearing, dark eyes fixed on her face so she suddenly cupped his head, pulling him down and kissing him. She was hungry for him. *She loved him*. When they parted, the smile was gone, and he was panting. His hands tightened on her skin.

As he set her into the shallow water, she took in more details. Kealton’s shirt was gone. When had he removed it? Now he tugged off his silk pants, his heavy erection falling out and catching her gaze. She stared at him, still too bemused to take any action. She just wanted to look at him, long and thick, curving against his taut stomach.

He jumped into the water and immediately crowded himself against her, his front to her back as the waist-high warm water rippled around them. In the

reflection of the mirrors that rimmed the baths, she saw him close his eyes as he nuzzled her neck.

She caught her breath at the feel of him, solid against her backside. He reached up and cupped the breast with the emerald possessively. Gwen's legs instinctively opened slightly, responding to the prod of his cock against her backside.

She heard Kealton's sudden intake of breath, and then he was pushing her against the edge of the pool. "Stop moving. Stop..." For the first time, she caught something ragged in his control. He was suddenly all needy male. Gwen felt a rush of power, and it felt *good*.

"Stop what?" She didn't mean to rub back against him with her ass. It just happened because of the slight motion from the nearby waterfall.

"If you weren't so untried, do you know what Luka and I would have done to you?" he asked in a silky tone that had revenge written all over it.

Gwen sucked in a breath, suddenly unsure she was ready to hear more. Just his voice in her ear might bring her to the brink again. Her pussy throbbed, and then he was touching her, lightly running a finger over her swollen folds, so she pushed back against him.

"I was tempted to help you emerge out of your pleasure stupor...with a hand on your bottom."

"A hand on my—" *Spanking*. The man meant he'd wanted to spank her. Gwen shifted, feeling his erection against the backside in question. She squeezed her buttocks tight, feeling a tingle deep inside.

"I would have spread you out on my lap, kitten, and given your bottom a warming, and all the time I did that..."

Gwen rested against his chest. She looked up at him under heavy lids. She needed him *in* her.

“Not yet,” Kealton drawled. He reached for one of the loosened snakes of chain and then held it out to her. “Hold on to that.”

Hold on to her chains. He didn’t bind her; he demanded she hold on to them of her own volition. Her gaze clashed with his. She felt the lick of the warm water against her body and the pounding of her pulse. He would not give her what her body begged for unless she obeyed him.

Then he nudged her open cleft with his penis, and he was so thick, and when he thrust, he would spear into her, and what would it feel like, all of him, thick and hot and rutting inside her?

She would never know unless she capitulated.

Gwen made a sound caught between a growl and a whimper as she gripped the chains, rattling them.

The moment she submitted, he broached her, and he was...uh...still larger than she’d thought. She panted, her body feeling virgin tight as he eased a little deeper, his brilliant blue eyes holding hers captive.

The chains shook now, clunky music, from her grip, from the way he was destroying her as he pushed inside, invaded her. She had had men before, but she had never been *invaded* until Kealton. He came inside as if her body was something he made his own with every inch he gave her, so one of her fists let go of the chain and gripped the rug, balling a corner of it.

He filled her, past the point she had ever been filled before, and she grunted as he entered her again, sweat plastering her curls to her forehead as he hammered into her, not giving her time to control the experience, to keep herself safe behind walls.

With every thrust the rug in her fist skidded across the stone floor until he was as deep as he could go. He shouted and spilled hot while she yanked the rug into the water. She clawed her way to coming, coming again, gripping him, all along

his thick, satisfying length, squeezing so they both groaned, and the contractions of her body around him stretched out... She collapsed against the pool side.

Head down, shuddering, she felt her eyes burned with unshed tears.

“My cunt,” he whispered, his hand possessively covering her pussy, squeezing gently.

Chapter Twelve

I am only this body. I am this movement.

Running through katas, his body slick with sweat so he paused a moment to tug off his black karategi tunic, Kealton tried to focus, to ground himself. He had to be in command, not only for himself but for Gwen.

They'd returned to his stateroom only an hour's rotation before, his arm supporting her, his legs feeling an embarrassing tendency toward wobbliness after the intensity of mating with her. She'd been quiet, and he knew she needed time, so he'd let her go to her room, but the *snick* of the lock still hurt him.

Locking him out.

All right, so she was embarrassed now, and he hated that. He loved it when she gave herself freely.

He tugged at his ponytail. Maybe it hadn't been the brightest idea to let her experience the ménage with Luka, but once her collar had been set off, their combined desire had overwhelmed all three of them.

But Gwen was new to submission. Did she hate him now? He kicked his meditation pillow, unable to channel the discipline to bring his workout to its natural conclusion. His head was so crowded he was living the Taoist proverb: *No one can see their reflection in running water. It is only in still water that we can see.*

"Kealton."

He huffed out a breath and then turned to face her, feeling his cheeks flush that she'd caught him brooding.

She held his look, her expression calm so that he felt something ball up in his chest. Brave. She was so brave.

“Come here.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Because.” He took two paces and put his arms around her.

She stood stiff under his hands, and he saw she’d removed the collar. He couldn’t say he blamed her even as a part of him missed it. She was dressed in her dark clothing, her lush body concealed, but he could feel her, soft and warm in his arms. His shoulders relaxed slightly.

“I don’t need a hug.”

“I do.”

She blinked. “You?”

“Why not?” He raised a brow. “You’ve made this...adventure ten times more nerve-racking that it has to be.”

A reluctant smile twitched one corner of her mouth, but he could still see the shyness in her eyes. “It can’t be that bad.”

“I also forgot to mention you’ve made it ten times more erotic.” He leaned his forehead against hers, held on even as he felt her tension return. “Let’s not make it the elephant in the room: you wanted me. You let me do things that make you uncomfortable now.”

“I can’t believe...” She tugged away this time.

“I don’t regret it.” Then his voice softened. “Please don’t make me regret it.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, her face full of the same conflict that had kept him from meditating.

“Did it work? Did you convince Captain Reno that you’re...whatever you needed her to believe?”

He picked up his meditation pillow and opened a side pocket, revealing some irregular chunks of amber that he burned for incense. While Gwen watched, lips pursed, he lit one in a small brass brazier.

Gwen immediately coughed, waving a hand in front of her face. “Whoa. Smoky.”

“It deactivates listening devices but not for too long,” Kealton said.

Gwen’s eyes narrowed, and then she nodded her understanding.

“As to your question, fortunately Captain Reno didn’t want to talk about my next assignment—she was a little too relaxed—but I did get her promise of more people being released.” He sighed.

“You really didn’t know they were going to take *Loving Kindness*.”

“No, or I would have done something more.” Frustration moved through him, making him want to do another round of katas to burn it off. “The Alliance cut me out of the picture for this mission.”

“But you’re doing what you can now,” Gwen said. “I’m glad you got what you needed from the captain, although I can see why she was relaxed after what she did to her, um, pet.” Kealton was surprised Gwen would refer to it although he knew it had turned her on, watching Captain Reno dominating her male pet. As he studied Gwen, trying to push aside his own tumbling feelings so he could just get in tune with hers, he realized that the shyness she was showing him now was not her core. Gwen was a take-charge kind of person, always had been. When he thought of her, it was of seeing her striding down the cruise ship’s corridors, in control, confident...sexy as hell.

He swallowed before admitting, “Initiating you as my submissive kept us both safe by giving my cover more credibility. No upright soldier of the Alliance would do such a thing on a barbaric world.” He felt guilt rise like the incense in the room, clouding the air. He rarely let himself feel it since it was a useless emotion, but ever since he’d met Gwen, things had been in a tangle, like wool too knotted to make a tapestry.

Of course, when she knew the full truth, that he worked directly under the father she had cut out of her life... He didn't know. He tried to shove aside the heavy feeling in his gut.

It was fear.

* * *

"Are you hungry?" Kealton's voice was light and courteous, but Gwen sensed there was a lot going on behind his calm facade. She guessed as an agent he had to play many roles. She was exhausted from playing hers, although when she did, she flashed to Kealton and Luka touching her and how much she'd needed it, wanted them both. "Gwen."

"I... No, I'm not hungry now, thanks. I'd like you to tell me what's going on and what I can do to help. I hate being in the dark."

Kealton sighed, his expression weary, almost defeated-looking. So many people already owed him their freedom, but he couldn't save them all. She swallowed, a little sick. She could try to help him, but she might not be able to help her friends.

"Will you sit?" He indicated a second meditation pillow. Gwen always found them a little awkward since she had to sit with her back straight when she preferred slouching in a comfortable armchair, but she was getting a little more accustomed to them from spending time with Kealton.

"All right." She sat down and watched him do the same, watched the muscles in his bare abdomen flex as he settled into place. His skin was smooth, and she knew if she stroked a hand over his chest, she'd feel the slight moisture of his exercise, feel his heart beating, slow and regular. The thought steadied her. She wasn't alone.

"My main mission was to see if anyone was compromising our ships by giving out secret navigation information. My secondary ongoing mission has been to infiltrate the pirate ring, find out more about their infrastructure, where they dispense with ships and passengers," Kealton said.

Gwen chewed her lip. “What I don’t understand was how they were able to get a ship as large and powerful as the *Loving Kindness* in the first place. I always believed if we stayed to the Alliance shipping lanes, we’d never face something like this.”

“We wouldn’t have, except I suspect the captain was somehow working for the pirates. Only he could have put her off course and locked the navigator out of the loop while he did it.”

Gwen stiffened. “Oh, my God. I’ve known Captain Morburu for years, Kealton. I’ve worked on two ships with him, including my first voyage.”

Kealton nodded. “I know. His service record is exemplary. Which makes me suspect he’s a double agent for the Alliance.”

“But—”

Kealton held up his palm. “I don’t know. I don’t know everything yet, Gwen. I haven’t had time to investigate because I’m trying to get people safe.”

“I can’t imagine doing the kind of job you do,” Gwen said. “But I want to help you.”

Kealton sighed and tugged at his hair.

Seeing the familiar gesture, Gwen smiled.

Kealton stared at her, his hand arrested. After a moment he cleared his throat. “Gwen, the pirates from unacknowledged worlds aren’t so bad, but in the far systems, it’s much worse. I’ve been working on this for months. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you when we were on board the *Loving Kindness*. It was hard...knowing you didn’t trust me. Knowing you had reason.”

“I’m not sure anything you could have told me would have made a difference. Not at first.” She looked at him frankly. “I didn’t want to trust you.”

Kealton looked away. “No, you didn’t.”

“What about Jasmine and Mandi?” Gwen pressed. “I can’t help everyone, but I want to help my friends.”

“They are safe for the moment, I promise you. As for Mandi, Luka will protect her, get her free.” Kealton expelled a long breath and took her hand, and she could feel the contrast of how cold she was compared to his warmth.

“He is one of the contacts you work with.”

“He’s a bit of a loose cannon, but yes.”

“What does he want with Jasmine? He mentioned her abilities when he first took her as his captive.”

“Luka needs her help. There are special circumstances.”

“Kealton.”

Kealton nodded to the brazier, where the amber had nearly finished burning. Damn it, time had run out.

“I can help you,” she said, urging him to see it. “Surely tonight I proved myself.”

“Proved yourself—is that how you see it?” He shook his head, but she saw pain darken his eyes. “I shouldn’t have let Luka...”

“You knew I wanted him. The collar...” Gwen made a small sound. “I have no secrets when I wear it.”

“You want a secret to balance the scales, Gwen?” Kealton asked. “I didn’t know how I’d feel when we returned here and you went into your bedroom and locked me out.”

Pain. She found herself reaching out, touching the back of his wrist. “I’ve never done anything like that before. In my fantasies, I might have imagined it, but I never thought it could ever happen.”

“I know.” He nodded, sober gaze fixed on her face. A smile twisted his lips. “I guess this means when I come and find you on a cruise ship somewhere when this is over, you’ll want to stay far away from me.”

She frowned at him. “Kealton...”

“Never mind. We’ll leave that for now. Gwen, let me and Luka handle getting Mandi and Jasmine out of this fortress. It’s too dangerous for you to do too much.”

The amber had stopped smoking.

Gwen looked down at her hands, clasping and unclasping on her lap like they had when she was a younger woman, when she’d just met someone new and she didn’t know how to talk to him. Kealton brought back all that awkwardness. There was so much she wanted to say to him, and she didn’t even know how to begin. And now...they’d run out of time.

“Gwen.”

She looked up just in time to see his face closer to hers, to part her lips as he pressed a kiss against her mouth. He gave a little groan, and her fingers gripped his bare upper arms. His tongue slid inside her mouth, and her body clenched at the delicious feel of his possession. He couldn’t heal her heart—she knew no one but she herself could really do that—but his body was strength, a safe place.

He slanted his mouth over hers, taking her deeply, so she felt swamped already with the beat of her blood, with his muscled arms around her, the musky scent of his workout, his hair that was dark at the ends with moisture, curled against his skin.

She tugged a rope of his hair into her palm and looked at it, seeing and now savoring the contrast of her cocoa skin against his fairness. His blue gaze held hers, sleepy, his lips reddened from kissing her, and then he pushed her back against the floor.

“I never got to do what I fantasized the most,” he said.

“What was that?” He fit perfectly between her thighs. She curled her legs around him, embracing him while she cupped his hard rounded ass through the silk of his pants.

He moaned again, especially seeming to like it when she dug her nails into his skin.

“I never got to make love to you, just us, just me pleasing my woman.”

She looked up at him, feeling him firm against her, remembering what he’d felt like inside and still a little tender because she didn’t take someone very often, and he was large to accommodate easily. “You thought about making love to me?”

“Yes.”

She saw something in his look then. Something vulnerable. Something she felt mirrored in the tight knot in her chest. She had to drop her gaze. “I can’t believe I’m letting you do this.”

“No stage for us to perform on, no late-night fantasy, no collar, no excuses.” Kealton lifted her chin and kissed her again, slowly and deliberately. They were both panting by the time he set her free. Without hurry, he gently pushed up her tunic, revealing her bare breasts and the little twinkling gem she’d chosen not to remove.

He caught his breath when he saw it. “I hoped you wouldn’t take it off.” He bent his neck, and his lips closed over it, encompassing her nipple as if to reward her, suckling her so that her hands banded around his head, making messy peaks of his hair with every strong draw of suction, with every lick of fire against her erect nipple.

“Ah!”

Kealton stroked a hand over the front of her pants so she could feel herself sticking to her clothing, and she wanted to be free of it. “This time let’s do it right. Will you let me make love to you at last, Gwen?”

Holding Kealton’s sober gaze, Gwen felt a pinch of fear under her breastbone. This thing between them already kept her up late into a night’s rotation, twisting in sweaty sheets. Remembering, regretting, aching for Kealton.

What more would come?

She swallowed. “Yes.”

She lifted her hips, and he sat back so he could tug down her pants and underwear, his gaze on her pussy. He cupped her, squeezing gently before running a reverent finger down the line of her opening. "I want to make you come on my cock."

He shoved his own clothing aside and took himself in hand. She had raised herself to watch him, but now he pushed her down to the floor again, and she waited, panting, as he brushed her with his erection, tracing the soft, sensitized wetness of her body.

"It hurts whenever you make me stop. I need this," he said.

"It hurts me too," she admitted.

He spread her thighs, color flushing his skin, his pupils dilated as he watched her face. She lifted up for more of the delicious sensations as he used his cock to pleasure her, stroking up and down, dragging against her skin so her eyes fell shut.

"No, don't do that. I want to see your eyes."

Gwen opened them as he began to fuck her in a way she'd never experienced, sliding up and down her open body, nudging against the bundle of nerves at the top.

"I can't last," he whispered. "I want to shoot all over your pussy."

She bit her lip hard, her body arching up, hearing the slick sound of their mating, feeling something more intimate knitting between them than even during those scorching and forbidden moments in the baths or back on the ship when they'd both visited the Love Mist spa.

The crown of his penis struck her again and again until she grabbed his hips, unsure if she wanted him to continue or to stop or—

"Kealton!"

Her body contracted, shuddering through the long pulls of ecstasy. With a succulent push, he struck her clitoris one last time, shooting hot cum, making her even more wet, so it ran over her open lips and down her thighs.

Kealton buried his face against her neck, panting harshly.

Tears welled, and she couldn't stop them.

He lifted his head, looked at her. “Fuck!”

For some reason it struck her as funny, his look of confusion, so a choked giggle emerged.

“Gwen...” He seemed on the verge of saying something, but she hid her face against his damp skin, working to master her emotions.

Chapter Thirteen

“Kealton?”

“Umm?”

“Is there are a reason you’re sleeping on the floor?”

“Yes.”

In the semidarkness of their stateroom, she’d nearly stepped on his arm while making her way to the autocook for a late-rotation moonbeam pastry.

His grip around her ankle held her in place while he caressed the raised sole lightly before running a finger along the arch of her foot. She gave a shivery sigh, feeling his touch as if it were between her legs. How did he know just how to touch her?

“What is your reason?” She pulled her foot away and looked down at him, putting her fists on her hips. For some reason that made him smile. He closed his eyes tightly, blowing out a breath. Getting an odd vibe from him, Gwen knelt beside him. “Has something happened?”

“Yes.” He reached over toward the autocook she had been planning to raid and pulled out a moonbeam pastry, curls of butter icing in the familiar sickle shape of a half-moon. *Yum*. “Is this what you were after?” He asked her mischievously.

Gwen snatched it from him with a laugh. “You know I can’t live without these things.”

“Yeah, I know.” He watched her bite into it, and after a moment she broke off a piece and offered him some. He seemed to enjoy eating it from her hand as much as

the treat itself. He sucked on her fingers, making heat curl in her lower body again. Kealton and pastry... Mmmm.

She had a sudden picture of him on her canopy bed back home on board the ship, eating pastry before they made love, and it made her throat tighten. Would they have the chance to do that? He didn't talk about it, but she knew he put himself at risk for the chance to get more of their people safe. Every night he returned more worn out than the last.

"Tell me what happened."

"All right." He sighed.

Kealton hadn't taken her to the baths again, or to any of the banquets he was forced to attend at night. In fact, two weeks' rotation after her first time in public as his submissive, he'd locked her in his stateroom. He'd been uncommunicative, barely looking at her.

He reached up and touched the side of her hip, massaging so she knew he could feel the generous amount of flesh there. She was still soft, still rounded, which seemed to please him, but her body was getting stronger, had more endurance from the constant workouts in yoga and martial arts she was doing.

It was good to feel strong, especially here, spending so much time alone. She was grateful she had the exercise and meditation to help ground her, but the other side of all this body work was how sensitized it made her. Right now, Gwen wanted to burn out her fear with Kealton. She bit her lip and stayed focused. *Something's wrong.*

"Kealton?"

"Sit beside me. Just sit," he asked. "Christ, I need to be close to you."

As if to make up for their forced intimacy, Kealton had never shared her bedroom. He obviously wanted to give her the choice of coming to his room. Why hadn't she done it? She saw the loneliness in his eyes, and she cursed herself for missing it before.

“Don’t. I know this is hard for you,” he said, as if he caught the direction of her thoughts. “I’m glad you’re doing so much with the routines I taught you. I know they help bleed out the anxiety.” She caught the rustling of Kealton’s bedding as he pulled her down beside him on a woven mat. In the soft lighting at knee level, she saw the strain on his face. “Kealton?”

“Sit beside me. Just sit,” he asked.

She acquiesced, wanting time with him. She was used to the bright and driven activities in her job. This was the first time she’d spent so much time alone, and in an odd way, when she didn’t let herself think of why she was here, it felt good for her, as if she’d needed for a long time to draw energy into herself, give to herself. But it was also so hard, fearing what might happen to her friends, feeling helpless, waiting for things to take a turn for the worst. When she got really frightened, so the only sound in the rooms was her heart thumping, she did yoga *asanas*, one after another after another until she was so worn out her mind calmed.

He pulled her under his bedding, which consisted of a single satin sheet, holding her tightly. She let herself relax against him, needing to absorb his warmth. The spongy tip of his penis prodded her backside through their night clothing.

“Shhh,” he said, stroking her shoulder, over and over again as if he felt all the turmoil knotted tightly inside her. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She had to try to keep perspective, but damn it, he felt so good, so male, so protective.

“I want to talk about Jasmine and Mandi,” she whispered. “Don’t put me off again, Kealton, please. I need to see them.”

He spoke directly into her ear. “I know.”

“Soon?” She turned to look at him over her shoulder.

“Gwen, I know you’re worried for your friends, but we have to go carefully here.” He took a deep breath. “You know, your mother was lucky to have you.”

Gwen went rigid at his words.

"You were too young to take care of her, but you tried to do it anyway." His voice was very, very gentle.

"You're wrong. I couldn't help Mom."

"I know you tried, but you were just a child." His fingers rubbed hers under the sheet. "Someone should have been taking care of you."

"Says the man who was beaten in the streets of Tokyo."

"It's not the same. When I got hurt, my mom looked after me." He leaned his head against her shoulder, and she felt like a large predatory cat had decided to adopt her as belonging to him. She couldn't forget his excitement, but he was so unself-conscious about it, as if being hard around her was the norm.

"I'm having a really difficult time staying in these rooms." She looked at him. "You can't ask me not to do something for my friends."

He raised his palm. "All right... Just not now." His voice lowered. "Not now."

Again she felt his worry. He still hadn't told her why he'd been sleeping on the floor, near the entrance to their suite.

"I guess you think I can't face playing the role of your submissive again," she said. "But I'll do what I have to."

Kealton studied her; then he reached into the pocket of his meditation pillow for the familiar amber incense. He hadn't used it since the first time—her guess was that he didn't like to take the risk. As he lit it, his face altered subtly, seeming to settle into the real man and not the role he'd adopted. She had the thought that it was like the curls of smoke could make magic, showing her Kealton's true self.

"I can't take you with me when I leave these rooms. Some of the revels going on... You're right; you're not ready." His lips thinned without humor. "You already probably won't forgive me for the submission I introduced you to at the baths."

"For making me like it, you mean?" she asked wryly.

His eyes widened and she grimaced. “What? It’s the truth.” Warmth heated her cheeks at the thought of the baths. God! She’d had too much time to relive it, pacing these rooms alone.

“Gwen, I have to go off planet for a little while and visit the ship. There’s a chance—” He broke off and shook his head.

“You’re going to help more people.”

“Only if you’re comfortable with me going.” He held her gaze, and she knew whatever she felt, she had to be strong. There were people he could help, but not if he stayed here to hold her hand.

Still, her mouth was dry as she asked him, “How long?”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “I don’t know exactly. I want to take you with me, but it could be even more dangerous for you if they find out what I’m up to.”

Swallowing, she nodded.

“Gwen, I... Fuck, you’re so brave.” He reached for her hand but stopped short of taking it. She forced herself to keep her expression calm. She could do this. “While I’m gone, Luka will be checking on you once a day.”

“Will I see Jasmine and Mandi then?” When he didn’t answer immediately, she frowned. “What is it you’re not telling me? Why are you sleeping out here on the floor, damn it?”

“It’s not safe for you to go out, for any of the newer pets right now,” he said.

“That’s not how it seemed when we first arrived. This place... It wasn’t easy to walk around nude, to wear a collar. But it’s so far been more like a submission fantasy, like something in the Love Mist spa.”

Kealton rubbed his eyes. “It’s not a fantasy, Gwen. A pet was executed during evening rotation for being a spy for the Alliance,” he said. “Thrown into the pit and—” He shook his head. “So I’m not taking any chances with you or Jasmine and

Mandi. Luka and I are going to get all of you to a safe place as soon as possible. In fact, while I'm away, you'll technically be under his protection."

"That should be interesting." But it might mean she would see her friends soon. And she could handle Luka. After days of being cooped up, she felt more like a restless tigress than her role as a submissive."

He nodded. They leaned closer together, and he stroked her shoulder again and down her arm, massaging the inside of her elbow and her wrist joint and then tugging on each finger to stretch and relax them.

"Has Jasmine become Luka's pet?"

"I don't know. She could be pretending she likes him." He gave a rueful smile, and his gaze fell from hers.

"I'm not pretending," she said. "I liked you before we wound up here, remember? And I know you'll keep me safe."

He flushed, and she reached out and cupped his face, where the skin was warm and sandpapery with fresh whiskers. His gaze lifted, held hers, and his smile turned shy.

"Okay, we better talk about some logistics," she said, getting down to business.

He raised his brows.

"What happens to me while you're away?" Her throat tightened a little on her words, but she was getting used to the idea now, that she would have to tough it out on her own for a while.

"You'll stay here. Food will be available from the dispenser." He lifted her chin. "Please keep playing it smart."

"Will you be in contact with me?"

He shook his head. "Not possible, but like I said, Luka will be looking after you."

"Six months from now will we be back safe on a cruise ship somewhere? Will I be rushing down the hallways with an itinerary I'm trying to stay on top of?"

“Six months from now I hope all that will be true.”

She nodded. Yes, she could do this. She would get back her life.

“No risks while I’m away.”

“All right.”

“Gwen.”

She raised her brows innocently at him. “What?”

He sighed. “Why don’t I believe you?”

She took shelter while she could, feeling his skin against hers through the thin gown she was wearing. She knew he felt the hard little ring on her nipple against his chest when he clutched her closer.

“Stay out of trouble, or I’ll spank you,” he warned her.

Looking at him, feeling him close, she knew what she wanted. Him. Only him. “I want you,” she said.

A second later his lips covered hers, his grip almost painful as he pulled her under him...

This time it was almost silent except for a gasp as he claimed her breast or a smile after she nipped his neck. He laughed when she put her face against his armpit and breathed him in. Musky, male.

Ah, she liked that.

When she licked his cock, he shuddered under her, gripping her shoulders. “No, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I can’t.” His color deepened. “I’ll...disgrace myself.”

“Coming in my mouth is not disgracing yourself,” she told him.

She showed him he could take her teasing, and while she teased him, she gloried over her control of her male. He was sprawled out, all that taut muscle, quivering and helpless, hers to command. He gave in, allowed himself to come,

groaning her name, cursing, crushing her close, and just holding her, holding her as his heart slowly settled.

And then he smiled before moving down her body.

“You’re in for it now, vixen.”

Chapter Fourteen

But Gwen hadn't been able to stay out of trouble.

Five rotations after Kealton left on his mission, the door chime to his suite trilled, signaling that someone wanted to see her.

Gwen froze, heart banging in her throat.

Luka always knocked first before he hit the chime. Always. So whoever was at the door was not Luka. Gwen lifted a blanket off the floor where she'd been sleeping, looking for her collar. She'd lost track of it again though she'd worn it just that morning for Luka's visit. She found it lying partially under Kealton's meditation cushion and quickly shoved it into place. She was sweaty from yoga, so she took a moment to wipe her face and slick neck.

Kealton thought she was a warrior. Somehow she had to find it in herself. She took a deep yogic breath before opening the door.

Fright balled in her gut when she saw a grim-faced Captain Reno. In her worst imaginings, it was always this woman who came to Kealton's rooms and ordered her to the pit, this woman who told her Kealton was never coming back.

Oh, God, please, don't let anything happen to him. Keep him safe.

"It's Gwendolyn, isn't it?" the captain asked her.

Gwen had to swallow before she could speak. She gave a nod. "Yes...Mistress."

"I have a problem. I'd like to come inside and discuss it with you." The woman was being polite. That had to be a good sign, didn't it? If she knew what Kealton was up to, she'd just haul Gwen away.

"Of course," Gwen said in a voice that sounded calm.

The captain entered the stateroom, and only then did Gwen's gaze fall to her side, see who the woman had by the hand.

"Mandi, are you all right?"

The little girl tugged free and collided with Gwen, gripping her tightly, so Gwen pulled her close. She looked up, meeting Captain Reno's gaze, which seemed to soften slightly.

"Luka and his pet Jasmine have gone off planet," Reno told Gwen flatly. "He wanted to take Mandi, but I reserved the right to use her as a guarantee for his or Kealton's return. They are on a critical assignment for me."

Business. It struck Gwen that this was just business with Captain Reno, not unlike the stockbrokers, the resource sellers who holidayed on her cruise ship.

"I didn't know Luka was also leaving. I saw him this morning," Gwen said. *Stick to the truth.* Stick to it as much as she could.

Luka had been his usual irrepressible self, making jokes, pushing aside her questions. He'd shared a dance he'd learned in a tavern on G'nash Three, though he'd forgotten the rhythm halfway through his steps. Gwen glaring at him probably hadn't helped, but she had smiled after he'd left, reliving his silliness.

Reno continued to study her. "Did Kealton tell you anything of his mission?"

"Just that he was going to revisit the *Loving Kindness*, Mistress," Gwen said, swallowing hard. The collar remained silent around her neck because Kealton *hadn't* told her anything more, and she prayed she wasn't giving him away now. "May I put Mandi in my bedroom so we can talk?"

Reno nodded, and Gwen guided the girl to her room, pushing back blonde braids from her face that looked like lumpy versions of the French braids Jasmine had been teaching to the child. "Did you do these braids yourself?" she asked her.

Mandi shook her head. "Luka did, but he had to leave and the lady with the eye patch came."

Gwen stroked her hair. "I'll help you rebraid them if you like."

“Okay,” Mandi said.

“It’ll be all right, Mandi.” Somehow she would make it be all right. “Watch something on the entertainment crystals. I’ll be in to see you soon.”

“You promise?” Mandi had the bear that Jasmine had given her. She pulled it tight to her chest as she sat on the edge of Gwen’s bed. “Jasmine went away.”

“She didn’t want to.” Gwen cupped Mandi’s cheek. “Do you understand having to do something when you don’t want to?”

“They wouldn’t let me go with her and Luka.” Mandi bent her head, turning her bear over and over again in her hands. “I don’t think Jasmine likes Luka too much, but I did. He was funny.”

“Mandi, I know this is hard.”

In a smaller voice, Mandi added, “She told me to ask Captain Reno to take me to see you. She made me promise.”

Gwen understood. Whatever was going on had happened fast, and Jasmine had done what she could to keep Mandi safe. God, it had to have ripped her friend apart, leaving the child she’d been caring for, but she knew Gwen would be here. “She knew I’d take care of you.”

Mandi’s brow furrowed. “You’re nice, but you always pull away when I want to hug you.”

Gwen swallowed, nodding. “I once loved someone who couldn’t take care of herself very well, and after that I was afraid... Do you understand?”

Mandi nodded. “Like I’m afraid. A girl on the ship—she had really nice French braids with purple ribbons—she said no one ever loves you like your parents, and if you lose them, you’re lost.”

Gwen stared down into that solemn little face. “It hurts. I know it hurts. But you have your grandmother waiting,” she said. “You’re lucky, Mandi.”

“But I don’t know her.”

“We’re working on that, remember?” Then she carefully squeezed Mandi’s hand. “And I’m right here with you now.”

“I’m scared.”

“Me too,” Gwen admitted. “So we’ll just be scared together. Now I have to go talk to Captain Reno, so just try to relax until I come back, all right?”

* * *

Her limbs felt leaden as she returned to the main room where the captain was staring doubtfully at the only seating—meditation cushions on the floor. She raised her brow at Gwen, and Gwen surprised herself by having to suppress a laugh at Reno’s expression. “You could request more comfortable furniture,” Reno noted mildly.

“Kealton and I use this space for yoga and martial arts. Well, it’s mostly him doing the martial arts since I’m still a klutz,” Gwen said. But then she thought about all she’d accomplished and added, “But I’m getting better.” She needed to remember that. Now more than ever.

“I can see him being a good teacher.” Amusement moved in the captain’s expression, as if she were remembering the time Kealton had brought her to the baths. “Kealton is an interesting man. He seems very attached to you.”

“And I’m...attached to him.”

The captain smiled. “You say that like it’s difficult.”

“For me, it is,” Gwen said. “I have some goddess tea he made me left over in the food storage bin.” She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to act alone with Reno. She knelt on one of the cushions and waited until the captain joined her.

“Oooh, that stuff he makes from scratch with herbs from Almalfi Five?” Captain Reno asked. “That stuff is worth its weight in Banarian gold.”

“It is good tea,” Gwen agreed. Part of her marveled at how smoothly she was pulling this off. But she did schmooze with passengers for a living, so maybe this wasn’t so out of her comfort zone, having tea with a notorious pirate queen.

Gwen pulled out the fixings and made some freshly warmed brew, passing the captain some in a translucent tea bowl before she sipped her own. The strong herbs steadied her.

“I couldn’t help but notice you were aroused watching me with my pet,” the captain finally said, helping herself to the carafe of tea. “Do you dream of dominating a man?”

Gwen blinked, thrown. The collar was cool against her throat, reminding her that she had to tell the truth. “I... No. Not a man like Kealton.”

“But a man more inclined to let you?”

“Maybe. I’ve never thought of it...” She shrugged. “I just can’t see Kealton ever playing that role.”

“Your experience with submission is new to you, but you seemed to like it.”

Gwen nodded.

“Gwen.” Captain Reno reached out and touched her arm. “If I don’t hear from either Luka or Kealton by evening rotation, I have to put Mandi in detention. I don’t like to take such a step, but the men who work for us must know there are consequences to disobedience.”

Dread gripped Gwen’s throat, and she put down her teacup. “She’s only a child. Please.”

“I have to follow the rules of our world, just as you have to follow the rules given a submissive.” The captain studied her. “But she doesn’t have to be alone. I can allow you to share her imprisonment if you’re willing. I’m sure you’d reassure her, keep her from being too frightened.” The woman grimaced. “Despite my fearsome reputation, I do draw the line at scaring children if I can avoid it.”

Gwen stared at the other woman, aware that she had a strange code she followed. She was a criminal to the Alliance. She stole, she took people as captives, and had forced her pet to submit to her—although he seemed very content—yet she didn’t want a little girl to be scared if she could help it.

"You're not what I expected," Gwen said. She put aside her tea. "I'll go with her, Mistress. Thank you."

* * *

"Are we going to get rescued soon?" Mandi asked Gwen in a muffled voice, peering up at her. The child was leaning against a dirty wall in the detention area, her toy bear crushed in her arms, her hair damp around her face, probably because she'd been in a deep sleep when Gwen had roused her.

Gwen put her finger to her lips, which stung from the slight pressure and started bleeding again. Damn, she had to be more careful of where she placed her feet in the semidarkness of the cells. She'd taken quite a fall. "You have to be quiet, or they'll turn off the lights again to enforce sleep time. Can you do that?"

"I dreamed if we go to sleep down here, we'll sleep and sleep and never wake up," Mandi said, staring up at Gwen

Gwen's throat tightened. It sounded like a fragment of something Mandi might have overheard, something from a nightmare. "No, Mandi." She took the little girl's hand. "We're going to walk, all right? And then we'll do some of the exercises I showed you. It will be better if we move around and get a little exercise." So far doing yoga with Mandi as well as a little walking hadn't been punished with the lights going off. There was no time during the day for such activities since they were usually assigned some chores, such as scrubbing out the detention area or cooking for the other prisoners, but Gwen felt it was vital to do a little to keep Mandi's spirits up.

"Can I see Jasmine soon? I never got to finish her scarf."

Gwen nodded. "Soon but not right now. She's gone somewhere with Luka, remember? But I'm sure she'll love your scarf when you get the chance to finish it."

Mandi looked around their chilly surroundings, at the fungus on the walls and the rivulets of water that washed stone, and raised her eyebrow at Gwen. Gwen gusted out a sigh, glad the little girl still had her sense of the ridiculous.

"I know it seems like it will never happen, but it will if we keep believing it. We'll be out of here someday, and this will be over, though it may take a while before you get back to painting butterflies on silk," Gwen admitted with some dryness. "But I think I might take up painting along with you. I've earned it, and somehow I don't think I'd be much good at pottery."

"Uh-huh." She looked subdued, so Gwen sank next to her, rubbing her arms to bring some warmth and circulation back. "But I will get to finish it?"

"Yes, you will."

"Okay." Mandi nodded. "Will you show me more yoga, like Kealton taught you?"

"Yes, just like Kealton taught me." Gwen had to clear her throat.

"Will he be back soon?" Mandi asked her, as she had every day they'd been detained together.

"Yes, Mandi, he'll be back."

"And then he'll come for us," Mandi said.

"Yes," Gwen said. "Then he'll come for us."

* * *

"Raise your arms up, up, up!" Cross-legged across from Mandi, Gwen took in a deep exaggerated breath. "Breathe in. Hold it for one, two, three... Good!"

Mandi exhaled with a long-suffering sound, but her face was brighter. She'd done really well with the stretching, and her depression had evaporated as they'd moved through the asanas after warming up by walking around their cells.

"Namaste," Mandi said, putting her hands together and bowing to Gwen.

"Namaste," Gwen repeated. She wanted to tug Mandi close, hug her for being so resilient, but she didn't want to undo the good she'd done. She had to keep up her game face for the child's sake. Had to believe in Kealton.

It was hard some nights, having faith in him, in herself to keep going, but somehow she was managing, one day at a time.

“How’s Bug?” Mandi asked. She shambled closer and put her hand on Gwen’s lower belly. “I don’t feel anything.” She looked disappointed.

“There’s nothing to feel.” Not yet, except for when Gwen was violently ill. “Bug is probably sleeping now that we’ve done our routine for the night.”

“Huh, lucky Bug,” Mandi said.

“You didn’t seem to mind working out with me!” Gwen grabbed the little girl close, see-sawing her over her lap so Mandi laughed. “Did you write your grandmother?” Gwen had begged a writing tablet for Mandi so the child would have that to keep her occupied. The letters helped to keep her focused on the future.

“I told her about the stinky bathroom getting plugged.”

That had been fun. Gwen had had to fix it for both of them since the guards hadn’t been too interested in helping out.

“Will you have to go back to medical so Bug can’t make you sick again?”

A day’s rotation into detention with Mandi, and Gwen had become so ill she couldn’t keep anything down, not food or water. She’d thought she’d been poisoned until the guards had dragged her to medical for an exam.

“No, they gave me an implant in my arm,” Gwen said. “So it shouldn’t be so bad for a while.” Although some foods—and their stinky bathroom—still had the power to make her sick if she wasn’t careful.

“Braid my hair?”

Mandi’s hair wasn’t very clean since they were only permitted sporadic bathing privileges, but Gwen nevertheless took the braid apart. This was part of their nightly ritual. “I think it’s getting longer,” she said.

Mandi grinned. “You always say that.”

Chapter Fifteen

Gwen jumped when something brushed against her skin. She opened her eyes, and there he was, Kealton, kneeling beside her in her cell, wearing dark clothing with his long blond hair clipped back from his face.

She shoved him so his back hit the wall.

He blinked in surprise. "Gwen?"

"Hello," she croaked, examining his face, every detail of his face from the freckles on his cheeks to the starburst of gray in his dark blue eyes.

"Easy..." He was rubbing her back, but she was shaking. Chills worked their way up her spine, so she breathed in and out, in and out, and he kept rubbing her back.

"I had this dream..."

"What?" He'd pulled away, and he was studying her now, pushing a strand of her hair off her forehead. She looked horrible and probably smelled worse, since she hadn't been able to bathe in days.

"I dreamed I was buried alive," she said.

"There was nothing that could keep me away. When Luka contacted me, I returned as soon as I could." His voice actually cracked on the last word. Her shove on first seeing him had loosened some locks of his hair from his neat clip, so it fell around his face like spun sunshine. "It's fucking cold in here, not a place where I'd want to find my elegant cruise director."

“Yes!” She nodded emphatically. “Cold and damp, and there’s fungus on the walls. I didn’t move into a luxurious starship to deal with *fungus*, Kealton.” She made her tone imperious, so he smiled.

But then he touched her bruised mouth, his eyes narrowing. “You better have an explanation for this.”

“Ow,” she complained.

His jaw tensed. “Did someone hit you?”

“No, it was dark in here, and I stumbled into a door when I was visiting the bathroom.” She swallowed and didn’t tell him why she’d been in a particular hurry that morning. “It will heal as soon as I put some instasalve on it,” Gwen reassured him. She was still a little groggy, or she would have picked up on the tension radiating from him sooner. “Have you been in to see Mandi yet?”

“We’re going to get her next. I wanted you to be with me in case she doesn’t remember me and she’s scared.” Kealton continued to study her for a long moment, as if evaluating what she’d told him.

“It’s true; I knocked myself into a door. I’m a klutz sometimes, remember? You are my yoga teacher, so you know this.”

“You’re *my* klutz. No one gets to mark you.” He stood up, and it was embarrassing, but he had to help her stand. The circulation in her legs had shorted out from sleeping on the stone floor, but although her bed made her backbone ache, somehow the floor felt weirdly comforting, like she was connecting to the earth.

“No one except you,” she said. She meant it to be flippant, but it came out sounding like truth.

He swallowed before saying, “Except me.”

Mandi was just as out of it as Gwen had felt, complaining about being woken from a deep sleep. Kealton picked the little girl up in his arms, and she leaned tiredly against his shoulder. “You said your friend Kealton would come,” she said.

“Yes.” Gwen met Kealton’s surprised gaze.

“My bear...”

Gwen knelt and picked it up, handed the toy to Mandi. “Both you and your bear need an ion shower when we’re back in our rooms,” Gwen said.

Mandi made a face. “Some rescue.”

Gwen gripped Kealton’s arm as they walked out of the detention cells and to the familiar elegant rose-quartz lift. As she stepped into it, Gwen’s fingers tightened on his arm.

Kealton gave her a sober look as it began to rise. “You weren’t sure you’d ever get this far.”

“I believed you’d come back for us, but there are no guarantees.” She didn’t tell him that she’d been mulling over how to escape, more and more. The cooking area had shown promise since it had two exits, one only guarded some of the time. But her instincts had cautioned her to be patient, to wait. It had been hard when she’d wanted to take some kind of action.

He shook his head, holding her look. “If I couldn’t come back for you, Luka would have.”

She filtered her feelings, taking stock, the way she’d been learning in her daily meditation. The truth was there, rooted like a tree. “You would have found a way,” she agreed.

They left the lift and walked toward Kealton’s stateroom. When they entered, Gwen sucked in a deep breath. It wasn’t freedom, it wasn’t home, but it was better than a cell.

Kealton handed her Mandi so Gwen could take her to the bathroom. “You put yourself in a cell to watch over a little girl, to keep her from being too afraid,” Kealton said. “That makes you my mate.”

She shook her head, stunned. “No. We’re very different. One gesture that you think is brave—”

“You *are* brave, Gwen.”

“It doesn’t make those differences go away.”

“It makes them unimportant.”

She agreed with him on a gut level, and that unsettled her, but she wouldn’t think about it now.

“Don’t pull away from me.”

“I should take care of Mandi.”

He nodded. “Take care of yourself too. I’ll have some food waiting when you come out. Later tonight, you should do some restorative yoga poses.”

“I, ah, kept up with it in detention. I even taught Mandi a little, so in a way you were there with us.”

“I hate that you were there at all.” He looked away, muscle tight in his jaw. “We have to talk after you’re done getting cleaned up and Mandi’s in bed. Unfortunately, you and I have to put in an appearance in public later.”

She swallowed thickly. “I had a feeling.”

“Captain Reno wants to see us before I take us all off planet.”

Off planet.

She sucked in a breath. “I’ll do what I have to so we can leave,” she promised.

“I know.” He cleared his throat. “I always thought it was a strange coincidence, working on a ship called the *Loving Kindness*. In my studies, that phrase refers to giving love without expectation or control, something not exactly easy for me.”

“I don’t think it’s easy for anyone,” she said wryly.

“No, you’re wrong.” The way he was looking at her, she couldn’t stay a moment longer. She was afraid she would break down.

“Shower. Mandi and me,” she said. “Back soon.”

* * *

He had her favorite stew steaming in a deep clay bowl when she returned to kneel on a meditation cushion. She remembered telling him months ago she loved Abridgarian celery, a hybrid vegetable from the Mendolin Colony.

"It has lots of protein." He nodded to a small plate. "There's some for Mandi."

"I put her in my bed. She's really sleepy."

"Should we save it for later?" He blinked, showing typical confusion when a single person dealt with a child's needs.

Gwen nodded. "I think we should let her sleep until morning rotation. She was pretty cranky in the shower but happier when it was over."

Kealton grinned. "I remember feeling that way when I was a kid."

Gwen savored her food after days of plainer fare. "You're much more domestic than I am. It tastes like heaven." She was forking it in with her elegant glazine chopsticks in a rush. She forced herself to slow down, to drink some of the water he'd thoughtfully put out for her.

He'd also arranged two chunks of amber in the brazier, and as she watched, he lit them.

"It's safe to talk freely now?"

He nodded.

Gwen asked the question that had been burning in her chest for days. "Where did Luka and Jas go, and are they all right?"

"Luka has his own mission in the outer worlds. His mother is an Alliance scientist studying the culture on one of the barbaric worlds. She and his younger sister have gone missing."

"Oh, God, I'm sorry." She remembered how charming a rogue Luka had seemed. She'd figured he was working with Kealton for the excitement or possibly for credits.

"He got a line on them, and Jasmine's abilities could mean the difference in finding them. Jasmine's freely consented to helping him, Gwen, though she only did

that when it was clear I'd get you and Mandi safe." Kealton nodded to the low-slung sideboard where Gwen's collar and jewel lay. "You aren't wearing them."

"Captain Reno said if I left your rooms, I left your protection."

"You're back in my rooms now and back under my protection, so your master wants you to know that you handled yourself well, finding a way to help Mandi, because you're a compassionate person."

"Mandi and I got off lightly."

"I was afraid..." He dropped his head.

Gwen reached out and gripped his hand.

Kealton cleared his throat. "I have something I want you to wear tonight when we have our final audience with Captain Reno."

She blinked. "Wear?"

"She granted my pet the right to wear clothing when we're outside our rooms. She thinks highly of you after what you did for Mandi."

"I can't say that's bad news. Aside from the, uh, fantasy we played out at the Love Mist spa, I usually don't enjoy parading around nude."

"I hope we get to play that way again sometime," he said, his eyes level on hers.

"Me too."

His gaze widened at her admission. "You've...changed your perspective."

"More than you're ready for, probably," she said.

He frowned, and she shook her head, knowing the amber would only last so long. She could only guess that the infirmary people in detention hadn't passed on her condition to him for some reason, and she was grateful. "We have to talk...but later."

"For now, Gwen. But I'll want to know whatever this is as soon as we're back in Alliance space. In the meantime, for tonight you'll still have to submit to me." His voice deepened. "Can you do it?"

She swallowed and then nodded. "I've already put quick heal on my mouth, so I'm good as new, Kealton," she said.

"All right. I picked something up when I was away." He stood up and reached for a cloth bag on the sideboard. She put aside her empty dinner bowl, watching as he revealed a gown that sported a deep neckline. She recognized it immediately as something she'd seen some of their wealthier passengers wearing. Sira silk, washed over rocks on Alembar II, so it was the softest and strongest fabric spun in the Alliance. The color was a vivid dark pink.

"It's the color of your sex just before you climax," Kealton said, looking pleased.

"Uh-huh."

"What's wrong?"

He was so clueless.

"Only you would choose a color for a woman's dress based on..." Her face heated, and she shook her head at him.

He was smiling, but he also looked a little confused, as if he didn't see the humor.

"You're adorable."

He frowned. "No need to be insulting!"

"Sorry." But she couldn't help a grin even as she smoothed a hand appreciatively over the beautiful cloth. It was stunning, far more expensive than anything she'd ever owned. Being this man's pet had its good side, she supposed. "The color is beautiful. Like a sunset on Ballarius II."

He quirked a brow, and she realized that she was having fun teasing and talking to him. If she thought back, even on the *Loving Kindness* when she argued with him, she'd been having fun.

"Put it on for me, Gwen." Now the command was back in his voice, and she felt her body thrum with excitement again, tingling, awakening after the stifled days in the cells.

She stood up, handed the dress to him, and then pulled her serviceable dark tunic over her head. Underneath, her underclothes were equally unremarkable. She removed her camisole, revealing her bare breasts. Under his gaze, her nipples peaked, and he made a soft sound of approval.

“Christ, you’re beautiful. But...” His eyes flickered to her breasts, and she wondered if he’d noticed her nipples were larger than before, swollen.

Before he could say anything, she shoved down the rest of her clothing, hoping to distract him.

Kealton’s lips parted. He wanted her. She aroused him.

The spike of power hit her again, even stronger this time, and she realized they were like the yin and yang symbol in his dojo. She wasn’t weaker for wanting to be under him. He wasn’t her weakness. He was her path to...something—maybe a new way to see and appreciate herself.

She reached for the little nipple ring, and he watched avidly as she replaced it. She was breathing faster now, so the jewel winked merrily with every inhalation.

Kealton leaned against her, and her hands dug into his hair as he ducked his head to put his open, worshipping mouth against the dangling emerald. She gave an inelegant grunt of satisfaction.

It seemed as if her need translated through their touch so that he moved up from her nipple to suckle on her neck, leaving a slight mark there in the shape of a half moon. He pulled back, his eyes heavy as he smoothed his touch gently up and down, over her breasts, lifting them, stroking so she arched deeper into his keeping.

“More,” she whispered.

“The kitten’s turning into a wildcat,” he said. His hand delved into her wet curls, stirring her, and the dress slipped from her grip as he guided her to the floor where she sprawled on her back against his meditation cushion.

“I think I’ll prove a point.” He spread her thighs and nodded to the mirror opposite as he lifted the gown he’d bought her and placed it on her skin near her open, glistening body. “See the color?”

She snorted out a laugh even as she blushed. “You.”

“Yes, me.”

He put his mouth on her, sucking strongly where she ached. While he played, he cupped her breast with one palm, tugging lightly on the little ring.

Gwen felt the curl of heat in her backbone, causing chilly whispers of sensation in her thighs and buttocks.

“Not yet.” He pulled away, and she glared up at him, huffing. She shoved her hair out of her eyes in an agitated movement, and he laughed, obviously delighted that she wanted her pleasure, and she wanted it *now*.

“I want you ready to submit to me.”

“Umm.” She wasn’t sure if the way she wanted to tug on his hair and demand her satisfaction was submission exactly.

She took the dress and stood up, pulled it on, shifted around so she could fit it over her lush curves. It was not the latest style but something that made no bones about being designed for a womanly body. “It’s...”

“You look like a goddess,” he said, his gaze holding hers in the mirror. “One more thing.”

He put a pendant around her neck with a heavy green-blue natural stone. She lifted it to take a closer look.

“Turquoise, for protection,” he said. “I got it for you in a marketplace on one of the worlds I visited.”

“It’s too much.” Even though she’d never collected gemstones, she knew this one was very old and rare.

But he only said, “I like how it looks on you. Besides, I owe you for leaving you with Luka.”

She shrugged, sensing something under his casual question. “He wasn’t so bad. I barely saw him.”

Some slight tension left Kealton. “He’s good at stealing my women.”

“Oh? Well, I wasn’t anyone’s to steal.”

“Um, right.” But he smiled.

“You were able to help more people?”

He nodded. “More about that later, but...yes. I did more than shop for a dress and a necklace.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She took a moment to see that looked nothing like the neatly dressed—and repressed—cruise director she’d been when they first met. The contrast of bold colors, the deep pink of the dress, the vivid blue of the gem, set off her cocoa skin. Her hair fell around her face, giving her a sensual look, like a woman with secrets.

She dropped her gaze at that last thought since there was one secret she hadn’t yet shared with him. But that was for later, when they were free of this world. “What about my collar?”

“No collar. On this world, you’ve been promoted to a special companion.” She blinked. “Special companion? It sounds like a step up from a pet.”

“It is. A companion has some unique privileges. She is allowed to carry weapons.” She watched him as he lifted one final thing free of the bed of cloth. When it was revealed, she caught her breath.

The blade seemed to sing in his hand. It was the Japanese sword he practiced with.

“Kealton?”

“Take it.”

She blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m going to show you some more moves,” he said. “If we were back aboard ship, of course I’d continue with proper practice blades, but I don’t have those here, so this will have to do.”

“But I can’t.” Gwen backed away.

His gaze softened on her face. “You’ve changed. You’ve been doing yoga for months now. You have balance and confidence. You can do this.”

“I can?”

“Gwen, you’re a warrior woman. It’s who you’ve always been, taking care of your mother. But if you can’t believe that yet, you proved it when I was away by being smart and waiting out a bad situation.” He lifted his brows, waiting for her to take the blade from him.

Gwen sucked in a deep breath and then tentatively took the katana, holding it and studying the way it gleamed in the soft light. In the mirror she saw herself in a dress she would never have been brave enough to wear in the past, celebrating her curves, holding a sword.

“All right,” she said, lifting her chin. “Show me.”

Chapter Sixteen

Gwen's dress whispered around her legs as she walked beside Kealton. It felt an odd contrast to the way she'd visited the baths just a few weeks before, nude and playing the role of his pet. Maybe it was the perspiration still drying on her skin from the workout he'd given her while demonstrating some basic movements with the katana, but she felt...different.

Like she was living her confidence at last.

He touched a door panel, and they entered Captain Reno's luxurious rooms. Gwen had thought the accommodations rich before—excepting the detention cells, of course—but the space they entered was something she'd never imagined.

At first she almost thought they'd taken a wrong turn and entered the baths again since they were immediately confronted by an arching rainbow bridge that spanned a turquoise lagoon thick with fish sporting gold bodies and charcoal fins. The water was surrounded by spears of green tropical landscaping. She recognized a Buddha tree nestled next to a vivid fire-brush plant from Emelia III. A low-flying parrot landed on the yellowed skeleton of a branch and squawked a challenge as she and Kealton crossed the bridge.

"There's a saying that when you cross this kind of bridge, you're not the same person you were on the other side," he told her.

"I'm not sure I am," Gwen said. Yes, she wanted to go back to her life, but she no longer thought she would just brush aside this experience. It had changed her, in more ways than one.

"All right?" he asked her, taking her hand and pressing it in an oddly courtly gesture as he paused to study her expression.

She nodded, gripping the cloth-wrapped package he'd entrusted to her to carry for their summons. "I'm fine, Kealton."

"Yes, you are." He smiled at her.

* * *

Captain Reno was reclining on a couch, her face softer than Gwen had ever seen it. Her pet was kneeling beside her, working her shoulders and collar bones in a tender massage.

The woman had removed her eye patch, revealing a sunken lid. She stiffened when Kealton and Gwen appeared, but the man on his knees made a scolding sound, and she relaxed.

"I lost track of time," she said.

"I can see why." Kealton nodded to the captain's pet, and the young man flushed, his gaze falling, but he didn't stop his ministrations to his mistress.

Gwen raised a brow, a little taken aback. Previously Kealton had been so careful to avoid acknowledging a lowly pet.

Captain Reno seemed to read her expression. "We're alone now, not at the public baths, and Kealton knows..." She sat up and cleared her throat. "My pet, my Simon, suffers from a rare form of epilepsy. Kealton brought back some medicine for him."

"Oh." Gwen blinked and then looked at Kealton, who had made himself comfortable on the couch facing Captain Reno's. Her gaze returned to the couple, and she saw the way Simon carefully replaced the captain's eye patch.

He loves her. He submits because he loves her. I wonder if she knows.

Kealton cleared his throat, and Gwen came back from her musings to kneel at his feet.

"I brought you a gift from Samona II, Captain," he said.

Gwen unwrapped the new katana and placed it in front of Captain Reno.

The woman sat up, taking the blade with a reluctant kind of admiration. She shook her head. "Only you would practice with such ancient weapons, Kealton."

Kealton shrugged, and Simon poured tea, offering Gwen delicate steaming cups on a plate so she could serve her master as well as herself. So far, she was noticing that being a companion really was only a step up from being a submissive in terms of wearing clothing.

"So you mean to leave us."

"Since the Alliance recaptured the *Loving Kindness* and liberated its passengers and crew, I have to see if I can find us another prize ship."

Gwen tensed. Her ship was free?

"The loss of our redistribution center is a grievous one," Captain Reno said. "It will take some time before we can find another suitable world, but it's best not to push the Alliance too far; it's only business, after all." She tossed the sword to the soft heap of rugs. "You're fortunate that I know you were on Sobrius when the raid went down. There are some who would have suspected you had a part in it otherwise."

"I wouldn't have come back if I did."

"Probably not," the captain agreed. She looked at Gwen. "You didn't know."

"No, Mistress." Gwen glanced over her shoulder at Kealton and saw that he'd wanted to tell her, but he hadn't, maybe because her reaction wouldn't go unnoticed by Captain Reno?

"The less she knows the better," Reno said. "I think we can trust you to keep her under control when you are off planet."

Kealton nodded.

Gwen's pulse jumped at the thought of leaving. It felt almost tangible now, so she dug her nails into the back of her hand, composing herself. After a moment, she reached for a platter of stuffed grape leaves and offered it to Kealton so he could put some on his plate.

Footsteps echoed from the bridge behind them, and more guests began to arrive, nodding to the captain as they sat down on various couches. Soon the room was full, and Gwen guessed this was what the typical banquet was like.

It turned out to be surprisingly anticlimactic. People seemed content to stuff themselves, and there wasn't much conversation. A pair of guests dived into the lagoon, swimming around and then lolling on the sandy beach. She had no way to track time, but it felt as if hours had passed when she suppressed a yawn. She wasn't able to eat that much, her excitement still bubbling a hyper brew in her blood, so she didn't want to test her antinausea implant. Wouldn't it be lovely to announce her pregnancy to Kealton by vomiting in the midst of this party?

She shifted her numb rear end on the floor, trying to stay alert. One of her legs had almost fallen asleep. Kealton cupped her neck possessively, and she arched into his touch without thinking.

"Your pet is fond of you," Captain Reno said in a groggy voice. She had drunk a lot of wine, served to her by her own pet. Gwen thought the pirate queen would probably simply pass out sometime soon. She could easily picture Simon carrying her to bed.

"I told you—she likes the way I treat her," Kealton said.

His hand around Gwen's throat felt like a collar, the light rub of his calloused thumb against her skin making her nipples pebble visibly through her gown. And then his touch moved down, under the silk, capturing her bare breast. "Although I did tell her if she got into trouble while I was away, I'd spank her. Good thing she followed your orders."

Gwen couldn't suppress a small sound at the intense sensation. Her head fell back, making it easier for him to touch her. He pinched the tip of her incredibly sensitive breast, playing with it.

"Trouble?" Captain Reno seemed to need a moment to think about it. "But she did manage to wind up in the detention block."

Around them came the sound of coupling, the scent of sex. This was what he'd meant about these dinners being a bit too much for her. Looking up at him, she recognized they'd have to do something to blend in, this one last time.

"Yes, I did," she said, not making Kealton do this, but taking it as her own. "I think I've earned my spanking." Her mouth was bone-dry, so she had to lick her lips, and she flushed, almost unable to meet Kealton's gaze. Kealton slipped from the couch to the floor beside her, and it felt like they were equals even as he was her master and she was his submissive.

Gwen's throat tightened at the look in his eyes, and then she did drop her gaze, needing a moment to get hold of her feelings.

But Kealton didn't give her that moment. "Over my knees," he ordered.

Something happened as she put aside the tray of foods she'd been offering him and moved toward him. She actually felt a faint tingle up her spine. Was this something she could want?

His hand on her ass encouraged her to move into position, arranging her when her own confidence wavered. She was bent over his knees, her bottom facing up as he shoved her gown high in one movement so cooler air touched her skin. At that moment she became aware of how the slight opening of her legs must expose her to view, and she tried to close them, but his hand was between her thighs, pushing her wider, brushing against damp curls.

Gwen's body clenched. She wanted him to touch her again the way he had at the baths.

Her spine tensed, but before she could do more fretting, his palm came down, smacking her lightly on one cheek. She felt the flesh shake, the warm imprint, but no sting. She wasn't sure what she expected, but this wasn't like a spanking she might have earned as a child. This was—

Again his hand came down, scattering Gwen's thoughts like tumbling leaves. She couldn't shut him out, shut out the sensations, think about them, deal with them, and control them, because now his strikes came too unpredictably, so she was

rooted in this moment, holding stiff at first, but then to her surprise, more than her bottom seemed to warm.

He paused after each smack to rub her skin, to sometimes run a finger along the open lips of her sex so that she pulsed with anticipation for his touch. She wanted those fingers to play with her, to make her come.

“That’s right.” His voice was hoarse.

Her body went limp, surrendering, which heightened the feelings, both emotional and physical. Gwen was bizarrely more aware of her pregnancy now than even when he’d touched her breasts.

He paused and again cupped her neck, deliberately, it seemed to her, as if reminding her of how the collar had felt that other time he’d given her something she’d never have asked for, never believed she’d crave.

When two fingers rubbed deep into her pussy, Gwen gave a hoarse cry. She felt tight as a wire conducting energy.

“Kealton...”

“What do you want?”

When she couldn’t make herself say it, he struck her ass again, and a starburst bloomed in her core. “Your hand on me,” she begged.

“Like this, princess?” He shifted her off his lap and tugged her onto her back so she lay with her dress around her waist, her wet succulent curls exposed to his gaze and the gaze of anyone around the room who cared to watch them. Her pulse was pounding in her sex. She didn’t care if they were observed; she just wanted him to touch her, however he would do it since it would be on his terms.

“Nothing like fresh figs.” He picked one up and began to eat it, and her eyes widened. Oh, he was going to make her wait! With every deep breath, rich with oxygen, she felt her arousal build. Her own body was doing his work for him.

When he put the chilly fruit against her open body, she gave a choked-off scream. It was wet and soft, cool against her heat. He rubbed the fruit against her,

and suddenly it was enough, it was all she needed, even if he was teasing her to climax with an object. She let out a relieved sound as he pulled himself free of his silken trousers and without further delay mounted her, spearing into her fully.

“Let’s try something firmer.” She clutched his arms. Oh. This felt different too. Full. She was so full. “Gwen, I could fuck you forever. You’re wet, lush, made for this.” His face was strained as he hammered into her, overwhelming her with sensation just as he had with her spanking. “You’ll come for me, won’t you, kitten? Come in front of all these people. Show them what an obedient cunt you are.”

“Yes,” she whispered. Her legs came up to grip his hips, and she moved with him. Her freshly spanked ass felt sore and sparking with nerves as it moved over the stone floor.

Soft sounds coming from her...hands flexing over his hips, kneading, and then his mouth covered hers, taking her mouth as he was taking her body. He shifted up so he could touch her lower body, and she pressed herself against the torment of his finger, so focused, so ready to tumble.

“Come,” he ordered against her skin, and it happened, scalding. His seed filled her, and he grunted out his own relief against her neck as she clasped him close. When he was done, he pulled out and placed a hand possessively over her pussy, marked with his spend, battered by his taking.

“My woman,” he said.

“My barbarian,” she answered.

Epilogue

A week's rotation later, Gwen strode down the corridor of the *Loving Kindness*. She had to meet with the ballroom servers on the afternoon rotation, and she especially wanted a word with the chef about an upcoming bridal party celebration.

As she went over her schedule, it struck her again how surreal it was to be back on board. Strangely, the pirates taking the ship hadn't messed up their next voyage. They'd been moored at an Alliance space dock for two days, and then they picked up fresh passengers and simply continued their voyage. A few news people had picked up the story, but all this had happened on the outskirts of important worlds, so it didn't even make the *Alliance Chronicler*.

She made a sharp turn into the agridome...and the walls whirled above her head like a vortex suddenly opening up.

She came back to herself a few minutes later, sitting on a bench in the entrance to the gardens, gripping her knees and breathing deeply. When the dizziness passed, she sat up, her face feeling like a pale, sweaty mask.

All right, so not everything was back the way it was. Her body wasn't very happy with her right now for skipping breakfast.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" a young crew member asked her.

Gwen nodded as if she fainted all the time. "Fine."

She covered her belly, feeling the slight hardness there that was Bug. Some days she didn't know how she felt about carrying a child. She went from cold sweats to earth-mother mode. It made her crazy.

Her link chimed, and she answered it from habit. Jasmine's face frowned at her over a crackling connection, her face framed by the tiny confines of Gwen's wrist piece. "You're sick again."

Gwen cleared her throat. Her head still felt like a hollowed drum, pounding. "Did you use your special empathic gifts to figure that out?"

"No, I just needed one look at you. Have you told Kealton yet, for God's sake?"

Gwen shook her head.

"Why not? Don't you think he has a right to know you're carrying his child?"

"Don't be old-fashioned." But Gwen flushed, looking away. "Kealton's only been back two days. He's told everyone he's here to stay, but..."

Jasmine sighed. "You've been avoiding him. Well, that's one route to happiness, hiding from what you truly want."

Gwen's eyes prickled. *Argh!* She hated that her emotions seemed even closer to the surface lately. No one had warned her, but then she didn't know anyone else who had actually carried a child. She could see why now.

"I'm afraid," she finally said.

Jasmine's face softened. "I know, but he came back. He's not out on some dangerous mission, Gwen. There's only one reason a man like Kealton would be on the *Loving Kindness*, and that's you."

She swallowed, still struggling to believe it even though she'd begun to hope they could have something. What, she didn't know, but something. It might be possible that she could be happy.

She hadn't been ready the first night he'd come back. He had come to her door, and she had refused to see him, horribly nervous about telling him about Bug. She wanted him to want her for *her*, the way she wanted him. Oh, how she wanted him.

Since that night the damned man had resumed his martial-arts and pottery instruction as if nothing had happened.

He hadn't tried to see her again.

“Have you heard from Mandi?” Jasmine asked, as she always did.

Gwen smiled, glad for the change of subject but also glad she could share this with her friend. “Yes. She’s settled in nicely with her grandmother, but she wants to take the Easter cruise with us. I hope you’ll be back for that.”

Pleasure shone in Jasmine’s gray eyes. “Yes, I should. I’ll be glad to be back. Luka is a pain in the ass, and if there is a woman that rogue hasn’t slept with between here and Hydrian III, I haven’t met her.”

Before her friend could get started complaining about her traveling companion, which was odd since Jasmine usually got along with everyone, Gwen asked, “You’re keeping safe?”

Jasmine grinned. “Of course. The man’s a slut, but Luka’s overly protective. Listen, I have to go. There’s this amazing marketplace where Luka thinks we might get a line on his family. Talk to you later?”

Gwen nodded, seeing how her friend’s eyes sparkled. Jas had been bored, working on the ship. Clearly this adventure agreed with her. “See you,” she said.

When the screen went blank, she had to fight off another wave of emotion. She missed her friend. She wanted her here where Gwen could lean on her.

No, she had to be honest with herself. She wanted her here to comfort and distract her from admitting to herself there was someone else she needed more.

After collecting herself, she got up and snagged some ice water from a nearby dispenser. Crew and passengers walked by—the endless carnival that enlivened her ship. Watching them, Gwen felt comfortable. Yes, this was her place, and even after her adventure with Kealton, this was where she wanted to be. She liked her job. She liked the variety and...spontaneity of it.

Wait. Spontaneity? She blinked. She’d always thought she liked it for the control.

She ran the glass over her lips, thinking. She still liked her job, but her reasons for being here had changed, as she had.

Putting aside her glass, Gwen sighed. Kealton wasn't going away. If he'd accepted things were over between them, he would have simply left. So he was waiting on her, like he had in the beginning.

It was time to do something about that. It was time to let herself be happy.

* * *

Kealton's hair was free, and even though only a week had passed, his body seemed thinner to Gwen's critical eye. She walked into his dojo, the gown he had given her whispering around her ankles. It had been designed to embrace her curves, so it was only a little tight over the slight mound of her stomach. She leaned against the alcove where she had once hidden and watched him.

Now she was out here in plain view.

She folded her arms, aching for him as she watched him. He was practicing *iaido*, the art of drawing his katana blade swiftly and cutting through an opponent in one blow. The dance of his body showed off the flex of sleek, powerful muscles in his upper back, which narrowed to a slim and whipcord-strong waist. He was nude, using a wooden mock-up of his sword.

Finally he whirled; his hair tumbled over his forehead. When he looked at her, he shoved that hair out of his eyes, and she saw his hand was trembling.

"Your father was my commander on the mission. His reasons for abandoning your mother... Gwen, I'll never be him. Can you believe me now?" She swallowed. So they'd start with that.

"I know you'll never be him. I know that now."

His jaw flexed. "So why the hell have you been avoiding me? I thought it was because you had found out about my connection to your father, that you were angry with me."

She shook her head and moved into the center of the dojo. The time for hiding from him, hiding from herself, was over.

"I saw his name listed as the man in charge of your mission when the crew was briefed, and I felt nothing, Kealton. Nothing."

"He should have been a better father to you, Gwen. He's a legendary agent, but he's a lousy father."

"Agreed." She could touch him now. It was so easy when she threaded a hand through his hair, felt the damp silk in her fingers. She could imagine her darker fingers bracketing his pale back as he thrust into her on her bed. "What happened to my parents was sad, but it isn't me. It doesn't have to be me."

His eyes widened. "I've been waiting..."

"For me to assimilate that. Thanks for giving me time."

He covered her belly, and his touch, warm, possessive, welcoming, told her all she needed to know about how he felt about becoming a father. "Does this mean you'll let me rub your back when it's sore?"

Her lips turned up. "You *knew*?"

"I've been watching you," he admitted. "And Mandi told me about Bug. Bug because you were so sick at first you told her that's what it was—a flu bug."

"I've been trying to figure out how to tell you!"

"Silly woman." He lifted her up, and next thing she was against the wall, and he was thick and needy, prodding her. "Don't you know it's always been just this simple between us? If you'd stop worrying about stuff..."

"Well, I thought we'd talk more. I didn't really expect..." But as she looked down into Kealton's eyes, his hair untamed around his face, she recognized that none of those things were Kealton. He was spontaneous. He took her from herself, tumbled her down a whole new path. "I thought you'd teach me how to use a katana."

"I can do that now that you're finally ready." The gleam in his eyes said he knew she was ready for far more than mere sword practice. At last. "Are you all right to take me?" he asked.

She nodded, and his fingers touched her, stroking very, very gently.

“I love that I made you pregnant.” He grinned. “I can’t wait to boast about it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Typical.”

“Yes.” Then he flushed, as if he realized he’d missed something. “I love you.” He kissed her. “From the first day.”

“I love you,” she said.

“Finally.”

She giggled at his disgusted response—not what she would have ever expected in her heartfelt scenarios.

“May I?” He was rubbing himself against her. Mmmm. She’d missed this, missed him so much, and now there was the added dimension that they were going to be parents, that somehow they had created something new between them.

“Yes,” she said, closing her eyes as he pushed up inside her at last. She almost didn’t want to breathe, to break this moment.

“My wife,” he said.

“Hey, I didn’t—”

But he grinned, and she knew he’d only wear her down.

She wrapped her legs tight around him, feeling him where she needed him, the thick root of him. “I think we can work something out,” she said, feeling light in his arms, feeling giddy. “But first I’ll need lots of loving kindness.”

THE END

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Jan Irving

Jan Irving has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense—but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together—in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

Visit Jan's blog at <http://jan-revealed.livejournal.com> and her Web site at <http://janirvingwrites.com/>.