



MEGAN HART

SEEING STARS


SAMHAIN

Her new toy has something extra she hadn't counted on. A soul—and an attitude.

Only one week, and Milla Sulay will start her lonely new life on the Homestead planet Selcka. In anticipation, she's booked passage aboard the *Pleasure Princess*, where she intends to make use of every amenity—including the Pleasurebots. Mandroids specially designed to give her whatever she wants. For as long as she wants it.

Except there's something decidedly unbot-like about the mouth-watering unit sent to her cabin.

Jarden's surgical enhancements give him advantages over standard-issue human men, with one exception: he's tired. Weary of servicing an endless parade of horny, arrogant women. Except his beautiful client can't quite hide her vulnerability behind the disdainful diva act.

Before he can figure it out, the cruiser makes an unscheduled stop in Newcity airspace. Not good. In Newcity-speak, he's a "mecho"...and not exactly legal. After years of working aboard the *Princess* to earn his freedom, the only place he's headed is prison.

Then Milla unexpectedly makes him an offer he should refuse. Within minutes of having his dream snatched away, Jarden must decide if life as her field husband on Selcka is a way out—or simply trading one form of servitude for another.

This title has been previously published under the title Anything You Want.

Warning: Contains space-bending sex, turbulent language, and artificial everything...except the one thing that's guaranteed to arouse all your senses. Hang on, it's gonna be a bump-and-grind ride!

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It was the biggest cock Milla Sulay had ever seen. A full ten inches long, three inches wide and made of clear, bendable plaz-foam, it hung next to a neighbor of similar width and girth. That one had an attached, realistically detailed scrotum designed to hold the battery powered motor that provided the unit's patented *thrust-n-grind* motion.

"Take them away," she said to the SRV-S 327 that had shown her to the stateroom. Milla tried to sound bored instead of appalled—or worse, intimidated—by the immense "amenities".

The servbot couldn't have cared less. Programmed to obey simple commands to the letter and with an extremely limited intuitive function, the SRV-S 327 would turn down her bed, hang up her clothes or draw her a bath, but it would perform all of those functions because that was its purpose, and not from desire. It certainly wouldn't make judgments about her bedroom habits, no matter what they were. Or weren't.

"As you please, miss," said the servbot in an accent straight out of Olden England. It bobbed its squat metallic body in a parody of a curtsy. "Will there be anything else, miss? Warm bath? Vibro-masturbatory massage? Shall I ring for a Pleasurebot to service you?"

The warm bath sounded good, but Milla wasn't interested in being vibrated to orgasm by a faceless, rolling torso made of metal and plaz-glass. The Pleasurebot, on the other hand, was a possibility. "Nothing right now. Thank you."

The servbot didn't require thanks any more than it had required an explanation. Its internal circuits whirred faintly and it bobbed again on hidden springs, then turned on the gear wheel it had in place of feet and left the room. Milla closed the door and leaned against it with a sigh before looking around the cabin with a grin so wide it tickled her earlobes.

Her first night in her very own cabin, with an entire week ahead of her. A full seven Old Earth-measured days to do whatever she wanted. Milla caught sight of the empty hooks where the gigantic phalluses had hung. Nothing she had planned included self-pleasure. She'd have time enough for that when she got to Selkca and her homesteader's plot. Years of time, in fact, to make herself come. It would probably be her only choice.

This week, Milla was going to spend every minute she wasn't eating expensive pastries being seduced, caressed and aroused as often as possible. She intended to make enough memories to last her for the rest of her long, possibly lonely life.

Jarden could ignore the flashing red light indicating a cabin in need of service, but there was no way to ignore the whoop-whoop of the bell. With a groan, he rolled onto his back, the hard bunk protesting with every movement. He stabbed at the button on the wall.

“Your turn, buddy,” he said with a jerk of his thumb toward Peter. “C’mon, you go and let me get some sleep.”

Peter, a fully equipped COK-275, looked up from the holo-bloid he was watching. “Huh?”

Jarden sat, hunching so as not to hit his head on the bottom of the bunk. “Your turn.”

Peter shook his blond head. “Oh, no. I am on break.”

Jarden sighed. “Fella, you don’t need a break. Right? You can go all night, isn’t that the slogan?”

“COKs never quit!” Peter beamed, proud, but didn’t trigger off the holo-bloid.

Jarden reached over to do it for him. The high-pitched voice of the chanteuse currently embroiled in some sort of chastity scandal cut off in mid-croon. Peter blinked, but made no move to turn the holo-bloid back on. That was one good thing about that unit’s lack of brain power. Peter didn’t usually resist suggestion, whether subtly worded or strongly enforced.

Of course, there was always a first time.

“Cabin 378 needs service, Pete. Go on and get it.”

Again, frustratingly, Peter shook his head. At six-two, with a fused-alloy frame and muscles built from the highest quality components, he wasn’t easily pushed physically, even if his mental status made him easily influenced. Jarden couldn’t make the ’bot get up and go by force. He had to find a way to convince Peter he wanted to go.

“Think of that hot, wet pussy waiting for you, Peter.” Jarden watched the front of Peter’s thin briefs tent, just a little. “Yeah, see? Think about fucking some sweet, hot piece of snatch, right?”

Peter’s hand went to his crotch and massaged. “I like to fuck.”

“I know you do, fella.” Jarden himself liked to fuck, quite a bit. The problem was, unlike Peter, Jarden wasn’t a COK, a DIK or a STUD of any model year. He was as human as any man could be, aside from the sixty-seven percent of him that had been recreated from artificial materials. The artificial systems regulating his circulation meant he could keep an erection more than twice as long as a so-called normal man, and climax more than once during a fuck-session, but damn it, he still needed to sleep once in a while. With the Pleasure Princess at full capacity and several of the Pleasurebots who’d normally be providing the sexual services the passengers required out of operation for repairs, Jarden had been pulling double shifts.

“I’m tired, Peter,” Jarden explained simply, because Peter couldn’t understand anything much more complex. “I need a few hours of shut-eye. Okay?”

Peter’s hand had, by this time, stroked himself to full erection. Jarden had seen it before. Impressive and aesthetically pleasing, Peter’s prick was top-of-the line. Now it nudged its way from Peter’s stick-seam fly, and Peter shuddered a little.

“Peter.” Jarden pointed at the flashing light on the wall. “Cabin 378. Hot pussy.”

Peter stopped stroking his cock and blinked. “I’m on break. I’m on break.”

Fuck. “Peter.”

Peter’s big blue eyes, fringed with thick black lashes, didn’t blink this time. “I’m on break.”

Shit. “Okay, hold on, fella. We’ll get you to the servshop. Okay?”

Peter’s erection wilted in his hand and he stared at it, the mouth that had been built for kissing opening in feeble surprise. “I’m on break?”

“You’re broken, fella,” said Jarden. “No question about that.”

Which meant that Jarden wasn’t going to get that nap after all.

Milla had bathed and slipped into a sleek toss-away of sheer pink. She’d fastened the stickseam all the way to her throat, where the high collar tickled her chin. The gown itself, meant to be worn but once, swung around the tops of her thighs. Bare beneath, her skin tingled from the application of Arous-All lotion she’d slicked onto her bath-damp flesh after getting out of the tub. She’d paid extra for real water.

God-of-Choice only knew how long she’d have to go without real water to drink, much less bathe in. Selkca was a desert planet. Its native population had the ability to produce H₂O via some internal synthesis, but the Homesteading Council’s information had informed Milla all ’steads on Selkca had to rely on monthly deliveries of imported, artificial water.

When the knock came at her cabin door, she’d just put down the bottle of Arous-All lotion. The cabin had been fully stocked with the entire line of Arous-All products, guaranteed to “Get you ready!” As if she needed help. She’d been ready practically from the moment she’d signed the travel contract.

She opened the door, already tilting her head in anticipation. She’d ordered a COK-275 from the extensive room service menu, and those ’bots were always tall. The one standing in front of her, however, was taller even than she’d expected.

“Miss Sulay?”

She nodded and stepped back to let him into the cabin. “I was beginning to think I’d have to call again.”

“Sorry for the delay. I’ve been authorized to give you an hour’s credit for the time you had to wait.” The man flashed perfect white teeth unblemished by jewels or etchings.

Correction—not a man, Milla reminded herself. The perfect abs and biceps, the sultry smile and eyes the color of the space outside her cabin window belonged to a mandroid. A Pleasurebot. A creature built for the sole purpose of providing sexual pleasure. She looked him up and down, admiring him, and he put his hands on his hips with another grin as the front of his thin toss-away briefs bulged.

“You’re wearing Arous-All,” he said.

Milla nodded. He had dark hair cut short in the back and falling long over one dark eye. Tawny skin. Nipples like arti-chocolate discs. “Turn around.”

He did. The view from the back was as impressive as from the front. He had a tight, rounded ass and long legs. Milla moved closer and cupped his rear with both her hands. He didn’t move, not an inch, as she rubbed her fingertips along the line of his spine and stepped back.

She moved in front of him to study his face, noting the brightness of his eyes, the moistness of his lips...and something else. The faint lines of weariness around his bright eyes and moist lips. He hid it well, but he was tired. Pleasurebots didn’t tire.

“You’re not a COK,” she said.

He shook his head. “No, miss. I’m sorry, but all of the COKs were in use. I can provide all the same functions, though. And give you an additional hour of credit to your account for the inconvenience.”

“Two credit hours?” Milla crossed her arms, still staring at him. “What’s your name?”

“Jarden.”

His voice, low and sexy, peaked her nipples beneath the sheer toss-away. Did it matter he wasn’t exactly what she’d ordered? Milla shifted her weight from foot to foot. Her thighs rubbed together. The Arous-All lotion had seeped into her pores and gone straight to the pleasure center of her brain. She was ready to fuck and come. Did it matter if he wasn’t a COK?

“You’re not a ’bot,” she said in a low voice.

Jarden’s expression didn’t change. He didn’t blink, didn’t lick his mouth, didn’t even let out a sigh. “No, ma’am. I’m not.”

Milla had expected him to lie, and it impressed her that he didn’t. She studied him. “Isn’t that...illegal?”

Jarden shook his head. “The Pleasure Princess qualifies for entertainment exemptions under the Interstellar Transport Act.”

“Oh.” Milla had an idea of what that meant. Something to do with slaves. She felt suddenly ridiculous in her flimsy toss-away in front of a real man. “I was expecting a ’bot.”

Jarden took her in his arms before she had time to squeak. “I promise you, I can make you just as happy as any ’bot can.”

Pressed up against him that way, Milla had to tip her head back extra far to see his face. He was still smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Not the way it would have on a COK or a DIK, whose emotional triggers were genuine and unfakeable. The fullness in his cheeks, however, felt real and substantial. She ran her hands up his bulging biceps to rest on his shoulders.

“I have to be honest with you,” she said. “I really wanted a ’bot.”

She waited for his answer. Jarden pulled her slowly closer, his big hands resting on her rear. “I promise you, I can do anything you want.”

He bent to nuzzle her neck, and Milla closed her eyes as she let him. His mouth and tongue felt no different on her skin than a 'bot's would have. His hands were rougher, but that wasn't a bad thing. In fact, those rough hands excited her. Maybe it was because of the Arous-All, but the more he kissed and sucked and nibbled at her neck, the hotter Milla got.

"All right," she breathed, voice hoarse, when he slid a hand beneath the hem of her toss-away. "But I'm warning, you, I expect to be completely satisfied, and I'm not interested in working too hard for it."

Jarden pulled away to look at her face, and something in his gaze made Milla wish she'd been a little kinder. "It's what I'm here for, miss."

A 'bot wouldn't have said even that. A 'bot wouldn't have looked at her like that, as if she were not the first horny, arrogant woman to demand service with nothing in return. It was the reason she wanted a Pleasurebot and not a man, so she didn't have to feel guilty about being selfish. Pleasurebots got off as a matter of course and didn't need emotional connection.

Both of Jarden's big hands had slipped beneath the toss-away now. His fingertips skimmed the curve of her waist and dipped low in the back to cover her bare flesh with his palms. His fingers curved around her buttocks to stroke the ticklish crease, and Milla parted her legs. Jarden teased her ready pussy from behind, with just a whisper of a touch.

Her nipples poked the sheer fabric of her gown. When Jarden bent to take first one and then the other into his mouth, her lips parted in a silent gasp. He mouthed her breasts, wetting her toss-away, while his hands kept up their tour of her body.

He murmured against her breasts, "I'm here for your pleasure, miss. Anything you want."

God-of-choice, his simple statement weakened her knees so much she had to clutch his shoulder to keep from sagging. That was what she wanted. Someone to give her pleasure, whatever she wanted. However she wanted it.

"Get on your knees for me," she whispered. She'd never said such a thing before, though she'd thought it many times.

Jarden did at once. His mouth traveled her body as he lowered himself to the floor in front of her. Even on his knees he was tall. His face was level now with her belly, but she wanted it lower.

"Push up my gown." The words came with effort, from a mouth so dry she had to swallow hard to speak.

Slowly, slowly, Jarden put a hand on each of Milla's thighs and slid them upward, pushing the toss-away up as he did. The cabin's climate was automatically regulated based on the body temperature, and now a cool gust of air breezed across her bared, heated skin.

Milla had fully depilated in the bath, every hair on her body from the neck down. The smoothness of her skin without hair had made it even easier for the aphrodisiac lotion to infiltrate her blood and turn her on, but even if she hadn't rubbed herself with it, she'd have been aroused.

“Lick me,” she said, then louder. “Lick my pussy, Jarden.”

Jarden put his mouth on her immediately. His tongue slipped along the seam of her cunt and lapped the bead of her clit. He circled it gently before using the flat of his tongue to stroke. His hands held her steady. Milla put her hand on top of his head, her fingers twining in the silk of his hair.

She muttered something incoherent. Her crotch pushed forward, seeking the further heat of Jarden’s lips and tongue. He held tight to her ass and kept her still while he licked and sucked gently on her clit.

It felt so good she wanted to come right then. Hard. She wanted him to keep fucking her with his tongue until she exploded. Instead, she tightened her fingers in his hair and tugged, not terribly gently, until Jarden left off feasting on her pussy and looked up at her.

His eyes gleamed and he swiped his tongue along glistening lips. “Tell me what you want.”

The hitch in his voice and the rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed hard made her want to believe that eating her cunt had turned him on. Without question it would have aroused a COK or a DIK, but despite Jarden’s expert prowess between her legs, she couldn’t manage to forget he was a man who might not even find her attractive. One who might be faking because it was his job.

She licked her own mouth, her knees weak and stomach knotted with arousal. Her body had no problems with the man on his knees before her. If only her stupid brain would cease its endless musings.

She stepped away from him. His prick had filled the front of his briefs, at least she could see that. His cheeks had flushed, too, as well as the smooth column of his throat.

“Take off your briefs.” She’d tried to sound confident, but it came out sounding like a plea.

Jarden stood, up and up, and thumbed his toss-aways down muscular thighs. He stepped out of them and stood in front of her, his hips pushed slightly forward. His penis thickened, getting straighter as she watched, but he didn’t touch himself.

He was waiting for her to tell him what to do.

“What do you think about to get yourself hard?” The question slipped out before she knew it, and, once spoken, it was too late to take it back.

If he’d smiled, she would have sent him from the room at once, but Jarden only licked his mouth again. “Tasting you got me hard, miss.”

“Do I...taste good?” Oh, the question was difficult to say, but impossible not to ask.

Jarden nodded. His fingers flexed, as though he meant to touch his cock, but he kept his hands at his sides. Waiting for permission, she realized, and the thought sent bolts of pleasure straight to her clit.

Her fingers went to the stick-seam at her throat. She eased it apart, micron by micron, and folded open the flimsy material. The cool air drifted across her breasts, peaking her nipples into tighter, throbbing points. Between her legs, she was a furnace. Each time she shifted, Milla could feel the slickness coating her there. Could feel the swollen folds of her pussy and the hard bump of her clitoris under which her heartbeat pulsed.

Jarden's gaze took her in from face to feet. His eyes lingered on her breasts and between her legs, but when he looked up again, he looked into her eyes. His mouth parted and his tongue crept out again to touch the middle of his bottom lip.

"Do you like what you do?" Her voice rasped, but Jarden didn't seem to have trouble understanding her. He nodded. His hips pushed forward just a bit more.

"I love it," he said, and she believed him.

For that moment, anyway, she allowed herself to believe him. She took a step back, toward the bed. She shrugged off her toss-away and left it on the floor without a second glance. She lay on the bed and motioned to Jared, who moved toward her with swift grace.

He covered her body with his and sought the sensitive skin of her throat again. Her legs were already opening for him, her hands reaching between them to guide his prick inside her. When Jarden pushed his cock into her, Milla groaned and lifted her hips to ease the angle. He slid in all the way to his balls in one, smooth thrust.

"Fuck me," Milla said. "Hard."

Jarden shuddered against her neck. His mouth worked. "Anything you want."

Her hands found his muscled ass and held tight. "I want it. Right now. Fuck me until I scream, Jarden."

She should have felt silly saying it, but the words tasted right. They fit. She did want to scream, she wanted to come, she wanted him to fuck her so hard she saw stars.

Jarden moved. His hips pumped. The first few thrusts were ragged, but smoothed quickly. Another thrust, and he reached beneath Milla's ass to lift and shift her so their bodies aligned in a slightly different position. Now his pelvis hit her clit with every thrust.

"Perfect," Milla gasped.

"Fuck," Jared muttered against her ear. "You're so wet."

He sounded a little surprised, but she couldn't focus on that. Milla could only concentrate on the way his cock filled her, the way his body pressed her clit with each movement. The pressure of his teeth on her shoulder. She tensed, waiting for the bite, but it didn't come, until she whispered hoarsely, "Yes. Do it."

The pain when he bit her was slight and only made the pleasure greater. Jared licked the spot he'd bitten the moment before. Then he fastened his mouth to the side of her neck and his tongue swept her skin the same way he'd used it to lick her clit.

Milla cried out. She closed her eyes, waiting for the stars, but saw only blackness. Her nails raked down Jarden's back as she hooked her heels around the backs of his upper thighs and pushed against his ass, harder. Faster.

"Harder," she demanded, and he obliged.

Milla tensed as her climax built but didn't crash over her. She strained for it, reaching for the elusive pleasure with every muscle. She moaned, arching.

"Anything," Jarden breathed, a reminder.

She didn't know what to ask for, how to articulate what her body needed. She hovered on the edge of coming, but couldn't quite get there. She let out a small, sobbing breath of frustration. Flames of desire licked her every nerve, but it wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

Even here with a man she paid to do whatever she wanted, she couldn't come.

Jarden's thrusts slowed, ragged again. He paused, finally, resting on his forearms and lifting his head to look at her. Milla looked away, refusing to give him her eyes. Jarden moved inside her, but not even the Arous-All could keep her from going cold.

"Miss?"

"Finish." She forced the sound of disdain. "I'm getting bored."

Jarden stopped moving inside her. She looked at him then. "I said, finish. I want to be done."

He gave a minute shake of his head. "You're not finished, miss."

Shame sent bile lurching to her throat. She was a failure. Again. Always. She pushed at his chest. "Get off me."

He didn't. So much for giving her anything she wanted. Jarden pushed inside her a little deeper and stayed there, but Milla unhooked her heels from behind his thighs and gave him no encouragement to move.

"You didn't come," Jarden told her. He licked his mouth again. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to get off me," Milla said putting as much chill in her voice as she could. "Now."

Jarden withdrew. The air in the cabin had been refreshingly cool earlier, but now felt too cold. Naked, Milla shivered. She drew herself up to sit against the headboard as soon as Jarden withdrew. She curled her arms around her knees.

"You can go," she said. "I'll use my extra cred-time with someone else."

She didn't miss Jarden's blink or the way his mouth thinned, but he turned from her in a moment, so all she could see was the line of his back and shoulders.

"I'm sorry you weren't satisfied," he said, but didn't sound sorry. He sounded annoyed.

She hadn't been able to forget he was a man, a person, not a 'bot, but the tone of his voice reminded her even more why she'd wanted to fuck a thing made of plastic and metal instead of flesh and bone.

"Just get out," she told him.

Jarden nodded and stood. He bent to retrieve his toss-away briefs, but the simple fabric had already begun to disintegrate. He tossed them down the disposal chute.

He lifted a hand to open the cabin door, giving her time to realize, with some surprise, he intended to leave without even dialing for a new toss-away, when the cabin shuddered. The lights flickered and went black for a micron, then came back on. The cabin shuddered again, so hard the small plaz-glass ornamental dildo on the nightstand fell over.

Jarden put a hand on the wall. It wasn't the cabin rocking, but the entire ship. Milla cried out as the room shook again. When it stopped, even the infinitesimal shiver she felt in the pit of her belly when the cruiser was in motion had ceased.

"What was that?" she asked, hating the thin waver in her voice.

"I don't know." Jarden passed his palm over the hand panel, but the door didn't open.

"Attention, all passengers," said a pleasant female voice over the intercom system. "Attention. Pleasure Princess Cruises apologizes for the inconvenience, but we've run into some complications. For the safety of our passengers, we've docked in Newcity airspace until we can assess the situation. This is for your safety and convenience. All passengers are required to stay inside their cabins while the investigative procedures take place. Again, this is for your own safety. I repeat, all passengers are required to stay inside their cabins while the crew of the Pleasure Princess assesses the situation."

Milla got out of bed and pulled on a robe more substantial than a toss-away. "What does that mean?"

Jarden turned, his mouth set in a thin, grim line. "I'm sure it's just a minor repair job, miss. Pleasure Princess Cruises values the safety and comfort of its passengers."

The words came out as though by rote. He passed his palm over the hand panel again, but the door remained locked. Jarden punched a series of numbers on the keypad beneath the hand panel. Still nothing.

Milla watched him. "You know something you're not telling me."

Jarden didn't look at her. "Miss, I'm sure this will all be resolved shortly. Why not choose a holo-vid from the extensive complimentary library—"

"Stop," she told him. "I know you're lying to me. I'm not stupid, and you're not a very good liar."

Jarden turned, still naked, and Milla snatched up a pair of unisex sleep pants. She threw them to him and he put them on without looking at her. It was easier to face him when he was dressed.

"I can be anything you want me to be. Do you want me to be a good liar?"

Milla frowned. "No. I want you to tell me what's going on."

Jarden crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know. There could be something wrong with the engine. These cruisers are old, and the captain of this boat would rather stretch everything on it until it breaks than spring for new. They don't tell you that in the brochure, I'm sure."

She shook her head, eyeing him. "But that's not why you're nervous."

Jarden flashed her a grin she didn't believe for a second. "I'm not nervous, miss."

"Don't call me that."

"Anything you want."

Milla frowned again and turned, pulling her robe tighter around her throat. “Damn it, I wanted a ‘bot.”

“Complain to the captain,” Jarden said. “Maybe if he kept his fuck-crew in better repair, I wouldn’t have to work constant double shifts, and you’d have been able to come.”

Milla’s mouth dropped and she closed it with an audible snap as she turned to him. “You’re not supposed to give me attitude!”

Jarden tried the hand panel again. “Pardon me, miss, but I’ve got other things to worry about than being your bitch-boy.”

“I told you not to call me that!” She glared. “And I knew you were nervous about something!”

Jarden made a fist and punched the wall softly. “If we docked in Newcity airspace for repairs, that means we’ll be boarded for inspection. Since they rebuilt the dome, Newcity has the strictest regs in this part of the system. That’s why all the passengers have to stay in their cabins. They’ll try to pass it off as a quality control inspection or a satisfaction interview or something, but that’s not what it is. It’s not what they’re looking for.”

“What are they looking for?”

“Anything that doesn’t conform to the Newcity Standards.”

She’d heard of them, a list of requirements for citizenship in Newcity. “But the *Pleasure Princess* isn’t required to conform to Newcity Standards. I mean, I’m not a Newcitizen. I don’t have to obey their rules.”

Jarden punched one fist into the other. “No, but any Newcitizen on this boat does. Any Newcitizen not conforming to the Newcity Standards can—and will—be arrested and removed from this ship. R.I.O. will be checking the Pleasurebots too. Making sure they’re up to code.”

Recreational Intercourse Operatives. Milla had heard of them. “But Pleasurebots aren’t illegal, not even in Newcity.”

“No,” said Jared. “Pleasurebots aren’t illegal. But I am.”

The woman stared at him, but Jarden couldn’t care about saying too much. Even if she complained, it didn’t matter. When R.I.O. rapped on the cabin door, he’d be arrested. End of story, and not happily ever after either.

“I don’t understand,” she said slowly. “You said the *Pleasure Princess* had exemptions about slaves.”

Fuck, he wanted a drink. It wasn’t allowed, but he helped himself to the jug of arti-wine from the table anyway. Might as well be screwed for everything as much as one thing.

“It’s not because of that. There’s no problem with my papers of indenture. Ninety percent of the crew on this ship are indentured anyway.”

“So...why you?” Milla was her name, and she didn’t want to be called “miss”. She moved closer and he caught a whiff of the remnant of the *Arous-All* lotion.

"I'm a mecho." The words came out without inflection, though each was a barb in his throat. He waited for her to recoil, but Milla only stared at him curiously. "I'm sixty-seven percent artificial components."

She shrugged, her face apologetic. "And?"

"In Newcity I was declared a mecho. Not human."

Her lip curled, but not, he realized, with disgust about him. "They still do that?"

He nodded and finished the glass of arti-wine. It wasn't very good. It wouldn't have made him drunk even if his enhanced circulatory and filtration systems had allowed him to become intoxicated.

"That's barbaric." Milla shook her head. "And stupid."

Jarden refused to feel grateful for her "enlightened" attitude, even though he'd been expecting derision. "Yeah. But stupid and barbaric is going to land me in a work camp servicing the border patrols or something like that."

"I can imagine it wouldn't be as glamorous," she said thoughtfully. "But really, isn't that what you do now?"

"No." Jarden had to fight to keep the growl from his voice. "I'm indentured. I work for my passage. When I earn my way and save some capital, I'm off this tub for good. I'm going to get a little place somewhere, a Homestead maybe. I do what I do because I chose it, not because someone decided I'm not fit to live in polite society."

She flinched, and he realized he was shouting. She didn't back away from him, though. Instead, she poured herself a glass of arti-wine and filled his glass again.

"I'm sorry," Milla said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

He could get into a lot of trouble for talking so roughly to a passenger, but somehow Jarden doubted that would matter once R.I.O. boarded the *Pleasure Princess*. It didn't stop him from feeling a little bad, though. She hadn't been nasty on purpose.

"I have another year of service," he told her. "I've been on here for five."

A faint look of surprise crossed her face. When her eyes widened, he could see the bluish-green he'd noticed earlier had darkened.

"That long?"

He nodded and took another long drink. "Four years Earthside before that, just to get my passage to the cruiser."

Four years of looking over his shoulder, waiting to be arrested. Four years watching the Newcity Ruling Council write and rewrite the Newcity Standards, tightening the stranglehold on anyone who didn't meet their rigid view of who deserved to be called a Newcitizen.

"Attention, passengers," came the voice over the intercom again. "Dinner may be ordered from your servbot. Please remain in your cabins. Complimentary holo-vids are available, as well as a full array of

self-stim and virtual orgy products. Headsets and visors may be found in your love cabinet. Simply log on to enjoy.”

Milla made a face. “Virtual sex. No, thank you.”

“Is it any different than fucking a ’bot?” Jarden asked and waited for her to flinch again.

Milla only looked thoughtful. “Oh, much different. ’Bots are real.”

“They’re not real,” Jarden said. “They’re fake. They don’t care about anything but fucking and being fucked.”

“They don’t make judgments,” Milla said, and looked away from him. “And you don’t have to make them happy.”

Jarden sat in the plush vibro-chair and finished his second glass of arti-wine. “What makes you happy?”

She wouldn’t look at him. He watched her sip her wine in silence. He studied the tension in her shoulders and smelled the aphrodisiac lotion she’d used. He smelled her heat, unabated though he’d done everything she asked.

He’d blamed lack of sleep for his inability to give her an orgasm. His concentration had been divided. But now, watching her fingers curl tighter on the glass, Jarden thought maybe the problem wasn’t that he hadn’t tried hard enough.

“I wanted a Pleasurebot.” Milla finished her wine and put the empty glass on the table. “’Bots don’t care what you look like. They get hard anyway. Pleasurebots don’t need anything but a warm place to sink their dicks. It doesn’t matter if you have scars.”

Jarden knew about scars. His had once crisscrossed most of his body. Some from the accident that had damaged his spleen and liver. Most from the multitude of operations he’d sustained to repair the damage left behind by the unskilled surgeons who’d performed the first surgery and left infection and disease behind.

“Do you have scars?” he asked her.

She looked at him. “Not anymore.”

He stood and tugged the waist of the pants she’d given him lower on his hips. He pointed to the place where an eight-foot plaz-glass spike had pierced him. “I was an engineer. I worked on the new dome. After the old one collapsed, they wanted something not prone to zips and tears. I was one of the designers who figured out how to manufacture a new one. There was an accident during the construction. I lost my liver and spleen. That was the first operation.”

She looked at him, then shook her head. “I don’t see anything.”

“I paid for expensive surgeries after the first one. I used my entire savings to make sure they didn’t leave marks. I couldn’t afford to have anyone know I’d been fixed. After a while, I couldn’t afford anything.”

Milla blinked, then cleared her throat. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Jarden shrugged. "I'll design again. They need engineers on the Homestead planets. If I ever get there."

"I'm going to Selkca."

He hadn't pegged her for a Homesteader. "Yeah?"

Milla smiled, the first she'd given him. Jarden would never cease to be amazed at the power of a woman's smile. He wouldn't have minded hearing her laugh either.

"Yes. This cruise is my passage there. I figured...I've got a long time to be alone. I might as well have some fun on the way."

"But you didn't." Jarden watched her carefully. He'd been trained to find the signs of arousal. Bright eyes, flushed skin. Just like he'd been trained in a hundred ways to bring a woman to orgasm.

If there was power in a woman's smile, her frown had strength too. A Pleasurebot wouldn't want to take a woman in its arms and take away whatever was troubling her. Jarden, on the other hand, couldn't stop himself from wanting to.

When he got up and pulled her against him, Milla looked startled. "What are you doing?"

Jarden rubbed her upper arms gently. "I owe you two cred-hours."

She shook her head. "No. I told you, I don't want them."

He didn't let her go. He slipped a hand inside her robe to cup her breast. The nipple perked at once against his palm. He rolled a thumb over it and watched her mouth part.

"I think you do, Milla."

She closed her eyes, and the glimmer of tears on her lashes punched him in the gut. "I can't. Didn't you figure that out yet?"

Jarden moved his hand lower, over her belly. Tiny muscles leapt under his fingertips. Lower he moved, over the smooth mound of her pubis to the delicate pearl of her clit. He pressed it and it throbbed. She was turned on, no question of that, and not just from the Arous-All.

"I think you can."

She shook her head again, harder. "No. I can't. Maybe with a Pleasurebot—"

"You think a 'bot could do what I can't?" He really wanted to know. His fingertip pressed against her gently, and her legs parted a bit more. "Why?"

She looked at him then, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright. "Being with a 'bot wouldn't be much different from being with myself, would it? A 'bot's just like a big vibrator, only I don't have to operate it."

He slid his finger lower, along her folds. She was still slick. Hot. His cock thickened at the sensation of the wet heat on his finger. He parted her gently and found her entrance, but didn't push inside.

"A real...man..." She paused to take a breath and her eyelashes fluttered. "...expects...things."

"What sort of things?" he murmured, watching her.

Her eyes opened and she pushed out of his arms. “Things in return.” Her voice shook. “Payback. A ’bot’s reward is his orgasm, and he’ll have one no matter what.”

“Even if you have scars?” Jarden asked.

Milla turned from him. “Yes. Even then.”

Someone must have hurt her, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out how. “Who was he?”

Her shoulders straightened. “My union partner. His name was Derek. It was an arranged union.”

The term, union partner, told him a lot about her. “You’re from Nidar?”

She nodded. “Yes. Where women are only as good as the men who unite with them.”

A few moments earlier Jarden had wanted to hear her laugh, but hearing it now wasn’t what he’d imagined. “So you left. Lots of Nidar women do, I’ve heard.”

She threw him a wry look. “I didn’t want to leave. I loved him, even though I hadn’t chosen him. He was so handsome. He was so smart. It hurt, how much I loved him, Jarden. I was foolish. I was just a girl. But Derek was all I’d ever believed I wanted.”

She didn’t look like much more than a girl now. “So what happened?”

She held out her wrist. “This.”

Jarden took her arm and studied the faint, barely discernable line at the base of her wrist. “What is it?”

“I was shopping for union gifts for Derek’s family. I needed to find something special. His family had much higher status than mine, you see. While I was at the market, there was an attack.”

She pulled her wrist gently back. “I understand the ideals of the group that did it. They call themselves Imperfectionists. They cut a lot of the women in the market. Marking them. I was lucky. They only managed a slice before they were gassed. I had the wound repaired, of course, right away. The best surgeons. But that white line remained. And on my union night, Derek couldn’t stop looking at it. Every time we made love, he made me hide it. He said it disgusted him. After three weeks, he said he could no longer bear to make love to me. We had a barren union.”

As a Nidarian woman, she’d have been a virgin when she united, that much Jarden knew. But what she said next surprised him.

“I had an affair with Derek’s business partner. His name was Stephal. He came to our house often while Derek was away. I had many affairs.”

Jarden had heard stories of Nidar’s unequal treatment of genders. “And what happened?”

“None of those men could make me climax,” she told him bluntly. “I’d discovered I could have orgasms very well on my own. Masturbation for women is forbidden, of course, but every woman I knew did it. Pleasurebots are illegal for women too, though men can use them. I knew I could come by myself. I knew I could come with a woman too.”

The image of Milla, legs spread beneath a woman’s tongue, two soft and curved bodies writhing in pleasure, filled Jarden’s cock a bit more. “You slept with women?”

Milla waved a derisive hand. “In Nidar, all women fuck each other. It’s often the only way we have to get any pleasure. And I like women, Jarden, but they can be hard work. Women fall in love too easily. It can be...awkward.”

Her eyes flashed. The folds of her robe had stayed open after he’d parted them with his hand. He glimpsed her breasts and sweet pink nipples. She’d tasted good.

“One of my lovers didn’t understand the need for discretion. She fell in love with me.” Milla paused, voice low. “But I didn’t love her. She went to my union partner.”

“What happened?” His voice was a little hoarse from the memory of her flavor.

“Derek dissolved our union. I was lucky he didn’t have me put in prison for defiling our union, but when I told him about all the men—his friends and business partners—who’d also violated the union with me, he relented. The laws are more lenient for men, but the scandal would have been very bad for Derek and his family. I took the dissolution settlement and used it for a deposit on a plot on Selkca and this trip. I wanted to fuck,” Milla said with a lift of her chin. “I wanted to come with a cock inside me and hands on me that weren’t my own. I wanted to just take care of my own pleasure without worrying about what my partner wanted.”

“You wanted a ‘bot.”

She nodded. “Yes. And I got you, instead. And you see? I couldn’t come, even with you.”

Jarden thought of how confident she’d sounded when she’d told him to get on his knees for her. How her pussy had slicked beneath his mouth and hands, and how she’d responded. There was no problem with her being able to reach arousal.

“Because I’m not a robot?” he asked, amused despite himself. “Milla, I’m more metal and plaz than I am anything else.”

“But your mind’s not a hard drive,” she told him with a small smile. “You’re still a man.”

“You don’t like men?” He wouldn’t have blamed her after hearing her experience.

“I love men,” Milla said. “I love everything about them. I love hard, thick erections and long legs and tight bellies. I love hairy legs and arms and chests. I love the way a man feels on top of me.” Her breath hitched.

“But you can’t come with one.” Jarden thought of how she’d arched beneath him as if by instinct. How good she’d felt. “You’re beautiful, you know.”

Milla frowned. “Stop. You don’t have to.”

Jarden made a show of looking around. “What else do we have to do?” It was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it at once. “I’m sorry, Milla. I didn’t mean it that way.”

She’d drawn the robe closed, tight at her neck. “No matter what you say, I know it’s because you’re paid to say it. So don’t bother. We tried. It didn’t work.”

“You really think a Pleasurebot could get you off better than a man can?”

She nodded, rougher this time. “Why not?”

Good question. Pleasurebots were built to provide orgasms with no strings. She might be right about a COK or a DIK being able to bring her off, if only because she thought so.

“I’d like to watch you come.” Jarden smiled.

Milla eyed him warily. “I told you—”

“No. Let me watch you. I won’t do anything but watch.”

She laughed, tipping her head back. This time the genuine humor in it was just how he’d thought it would be. “Why? And why would I want you to watch? I can make myself come anytime I want.”

“Do you want to now?” He moved close enough to feel a flush of heat from her, but he didn’t touch her. “I know you must want to. I could tell how turned on you were.”

She shivered minutely, but he saw it. “It was the Arous-All. It’ll wear off.”

“Why let it?” he murmured. “Touch yourself. You know what you like and what you want.”

She looked at him. “What’s in it for you?”

He shrugged and held out his hands, open-palmed. “Nothing.”

“Right.”

He much preferred her smile.

“You’ll just watch. You won’t expect a blowjob or anything after?”

Jarden grinned. “I can’t say I would turn one down, sweetheart, but I’m not paid to get what I want. I’m paid to give you what you want. Anything you want. And I think you really, really want to finish yourself.”

He was sure he’d lost her. That she’d turn away again or yell. At the very least, ignore him. But Milla sighed, her eyes closing briefly for a moment before she looked at him.

“Oh, I do,” she whispered. “I really do.”

“So do it,” Jarden murmured.

With one smooth, graceful motion, Milla dropped the robe from her shoulders. Naked, she went to the bed and settled herself against the pillows. Her pale hair fanned over the deep blue of the sheets. Her legs parted, giving him a glimpse of pink.

When she licked her finger and centered it directly on her clit, it was as if she’d licked him from balls to tip. His cock jerked, growing, but Jarden made no move toward her. He sat, instead, in the plush chair and watched her on the bed.

He’d seen women pleasure themselves before. Most of them did it with single-minded focus of the sort that left no doubt how necessary men really weren’t. Milla, though, didn’t touch herself like she was challenging him. She slipped a finger down inside herself and arched with a sigh, then drew it up to circle her clit.

With her other hand, she pulled gently on her nipples. When they were erect, she used two fingers of that hand to push inside herself as she continued rubbing her clitoris. Jarden watched, his cock getting harder by the second, as her fingers fucked in and out. They glistened now from her juices. Her pussy bloomed with color as her arousal grew. The dusky pink darkened the same way his erection was changing color as the blood rushed in.

Her moan shot straight to the base of his cock and pushed his hips forward, though his hands stayed gripped on the arms of the chair. Sweat gathered in his hairline as he watched her rock her cunt against her hands.

Any other time he'd have been on her by now, feasting on her clit and lapping up her sweetness. Sinking into her. Instead he stayed perfectly still. He could smell the musky odor of her arousal and he wanted to bury his face between her legs and drink in her essence.

There was no more powerful aphrodisiac to Jarden than a woman's flavor as she neared orgasm, and the sound of her breathing when she came. He wanted to hear Milla moan. Fuck, he wanted to hear her scream. He wanted to be the one to give her that, but he forced himself not to move. Not even to fist his prick and pump, though he was so turned on even fucking into the air was getting him close.

"Come closer," she said suddenly, her voice raw with need. "Watch me come, Jarden. I want you to see me."

He moved fast, in two steps reaching the bed where he knelt between her parted legs. Her pussy had opened, beckoning him. Her fingers slid in and out of the slick channel. She pushed upward, giving him a glimpse of the rosebud of her anus. Her clit had grown, her rubbing fingers obscuring and revealing the engorged button beneath its hood of flesh.

Jarden's cock strained, aching, his balls heavy with the need for release. Still, he did nothing but watch. The blanket bunched between his thighs teased his balls, and he fought to keep from fucking against the material.

"I see you're so close," he told her.

She moaned, her fingers slowing. She withdrew her hand from her entrance and used her slick fingers to glide over her clitoris. She paused, rubbed, paused again. She stopped touching herself and put her hands on her thighs, giving him a clear view. She rocked slightly, and Jarden could see the small clutch and release of her inner muscles.

He imagined being inside her, how it would feel to have her milk him with those muscles. How she'd pull and tighten on his prick when she came. He groaned. Her eyes opened, and she looked at him.

"You want to fuck me," she whispered.

"God-of-choice, yes, I do." Jarden didn't move.

She closed her eyes again, tilting her pelvis upward, just a little. Her bare cunt had nothing to hide it. Her clit peeked out from beneath its hood, begging for his tongue to stroke it.

“Go ahead, then,” she said.

He shook his head. “No. I want to watch you come first. Make yourself come.”

She let out a small, sobbing cry. “I can’t!”

“You can. I’m only watching.”

Her hand shifted on her thighs, but she didn’t resume touching herself. “I’m so close, Jarden...”

“I know you are, sweetheart,” he breathed. “I can see how close you are. Tip over the edge. You know how good it will feel.”

“You want me to come for you.” She moaned the words.

“No,” Jared told her. He took her hand and put it on her clit. He moved it gently, in the rhythm she’d set for herself. “I want you to come for yourself.”

Milla shuddered on the verge of orgasm, but didn’t go over. Jarden’s hand covered hers, and he moved it slowly. Every shift was a pure pleasure-pain she recognized. She was so close, and yet so far.

“I want you to come for yourself,” he said.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. His gaze burned into her. His fingers moved hers. Slow, slow, barely moving. Her thighs trembled.

He smiled, encouraging her. Milla arched, her eyes closing, and lost herself in the waves of desire sweeping over her. She let her body move the way it wanted to. She gave in to the familiar feeling of her hand on her clit, the way it had been so many times before. She swam closer and closer to climax and gasped with it.

The sheets bunched under her fingers as she clutched them. With both hands. Both of her hands fisted in the blankets, twisting, as the pressure on her clit continued, just the way she liked it. Just the way she needed it.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes opening. She looked down her body, to Jarden’s hand on her. To her body, responding to his touch. “Oh!”

At last, the stars came. One by one they exploded in her vision as her orgasm filled her. She’d teased her body so long not even fear could stop it. Jarden’s touch tipped her over the edge, at last. His touch the same as hers had been. She came and came, gasping, until the stars faded from behind her eyes and she opened them.

She looked at him, still kneeling next to her. He cupped her cunt against his palm, holding her. She throbbed, each spasm lessening. He smiled without looking smug, and Milla laughed, suddenly euphoric.

Jarden stroked her pussy and withdrew, sitting back on his heels. His cock rose from between his thighs, thick and hard. Milla waited for him to nudge it toward her, or to look at her mouth in the way that

meant he wanted her to use it, or even to take himself in his hand and spurt his pleasure all over her. Jarden did none of those things. He just smiled.

“Beautiful,” he said, and she believed him.

“Jarden, make love to me.”

He shook his head a little. “I told you, Milla. That was for you. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” She sat, then knelt and put her hand on his shoulder, while other sought his erection. “I was wrong.”

He drew in a quick, ragged breath when she gripped him. “Milla—”

She shook her head. “I was wrong. Fucking a Pleasurebot might have been good. I might have come. But you’re not a ’bot. And I want you to feel good too.”

He groaned as she stroked him. His hands came up to take her by the shoulders, holding her still. “I don’t want you to think you have to.”

“You said you’d do anything I want,” she said. “I want you inside me again.”

She didn’t wait for him to move. Instead, she pushed and shifted until he sat on the bed and she was astride him. His prick filled her in a second. Their bodies pressed together as she wrapped her legs around his waist and his hands shifted to grab her butt. She put her arms around his neck. Face to face, she moved on him. They rocked. He was so hard inside her it almost hurt...but not quite.

She didn’t expect to have another orgasm. Her body had not yet come down from the first. Her cunt and clit throbbed, still sensitive, as she moved on Jarden’s cock. She looked into his eyes. She’d long known how giving another person pleasure could enhance her own. This time, however, Jarden had given her pleasure. She hoped it would increase his.

They moved together for only a few moments before his face twisted and his hands clutched her. His cock throbbed inside her. He thrust, hard, and let out a low, final groan. He gathered her close and buried his face in her neck as he pulsed with climax.

Silent, she let him hold her. Her body felt stretched. A little sore. And yet there was a promise in that feeling, a hint of possibility of further pleasure.

Jarden kissed her throat and looked up at her. He had not yet softened inside her. He moved her, just a little, to slide a hand between them. His thumb pressed her clit.

“What are you doing?” Milla asked, biting her lower lip at the pressure.

Without taking his eyes from hers, he moved inside her. Small, subtle thrusts, barely rocking. “Clench down on me.”

When she did, they both groaned. She tightened her internal muscles in time to the small press-press of his thumb and the barely discernable thrust of his cock inside her. Neither of them moved even enough for anyone watching to see, but it didn’t matter. It was more than enough.

She murmured his name. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. It was impossible that this should build up ecstasy inside her again, but there was no denying that's what was happening. Each tiny motion sent desire curling through her. Soon, Milla was moving faster against Jarden, who stayed still. She rode him, hoping he wouldn't move, wouldn't shift, wouldn't make her lose the tenuous thread of climax beginning to unspool inside her.

He didn't. He gave her total control, and when she came with a cry, her body shaking and shuddering, he closed his eyes and echoed the sound of her pleasure.

Breathless and boneless and utterly astounded, Milla relaxed in Jarden's arms. She blinked. She tasted sweat on her upper lip. They breathed together, in time, and she started to speak, to say something, she wasn't sure what, but the pounding on the door stopped her.

Jarden gave her a smile, but his eyes looked bleak. "You'd better answer."

Milla nodded and untangled herself from him. On weak legs, she found her robe and pulled it on and went to the door. Her mind reeled from what had happened, at last, with a stranger. Not with a Pleasurebot, but with a man.

She opened the door. Two uniformed men stood outside. She didn't step aside to let them in.

"Ma'am, pardon us, but we're conducting a routine inspection." The taller officer flashed a wrist tattoo Milla assumed was a badge, and then held up a holo-tablet with a scrolling list of numbered sentences.

She didn't have to read them to know they were the Newcity Standards. Milla let her robe gape open, just a bit, and tossed her hair over her shoulders.

"Can't you come back later?" She asked, sounding bored. "I'm in the middle of a hot fuck-and-suck. I mean, really, what sort of pleasure cruise is this?"

The officers gave each other a glance. "If you don't mind, ma'am, we need to inspect everyone here, even the fuck-crew."

These were the men who would take Jarden away, if they could, simply because he didn't conform to their standards. Milla stared them down. She'd faced scarier sights. She'd undergone a union dissolution on Nidar, after all, where women had next to no rights, except for the one to run away.

The shorter officer didn't wait for her to step aside, but pushed into the cabin. Milla turned. Jarden had already gotten out of bed and pulled on the sleep pants. He stood, resigned. His eyes met hers. She couldn't forget how it had felt to look into those dark eyes as pleasure burst through her. It was better even than seeing stars.

"Identification?" The shorter officer was asking Jarden, but Milla did her own pushing to get between them.

"Excuse me," she said, "but take your hands off my field-husband."

The officers exchanged glances again. The taller one spoke. "Field-husband?"

Milla nodded, her heart pounding. What would the punishment be for lying to a R.I. Op? Behind her, Jarden put his hand on the small of her back. She faced the officers.

“That’s what I said.” She lifted her chin, affecting the haughtiest attitude she could with her knees shaking and her throat dry.

“Do you have identification?”

“I do.” She sniffed and took the folder of paper documents from their place in the nightstand drawer. “As you can see, I’m an official Homesteader, protected under the Homestead Council. This man is my field-husband.”

She pulled out the sheaf of papers she’d honestly never expected to use. “And he’s also protected under the council. So unless you have a reason to suspect—”

“No, ma’am,” said the taller and presumably smarter officer. Apparently even R.I.O. respected the Homestead Council. “We’re sorry for the inconvenience. It’s a routine check. Sorry to bother you.”

“I’ll be filing a complaint,” Milla said to their backs as they headed out. “You’d better believe it.”

When the door closed behind them, she let out the breath she’d been holding and sank onto the bed, clutching her stomach. “Oh, God-of-choice.”

Jarden sat next to her. “Thank you.”

She looked at him. “You’re welcome.”

He smiled at her and reached to brush a strand of hair from her face. “You shouldn’t have done that, Milla. They can check the records. They’ll know I’m not your field-husband.”

“Will it be worse for you if they find out?” The scent of their lovemaking still tantalized her nostrils. The Arous-All lotion should’ve worn off by now, but sitting this close to Jarden, feeling the heat of his thigh nearly touching hers, Milla couldn’t stop from feeling the tingle of pleasure between her legs.

“No. I don’t think it can be worse for me, no matter what you told them.” Jarden stood, taking his heat and scent away from her. “But it will be worse for you.”

He headed for the door, and Milla stood too. “Wait! Jarden, what are you doing?”

He stopped, but didn’t turn. She watched his shoulders tense. He reached for the hand panel, though, of course, he had to know it wouldn’t open. His biceps bulged. He didn’t say anything.

“Are you turning yourself in?” She moved toward him. Her fingertips traced the faint, nearly invisible white line of a scar she’d never have noticed had he not pointed it out to her. “You can’t do that.”

“I can.” Still, he didn’t turn. “There’s no reason for you to—”

“I have a reason,” Milla told him. “Turn around.”

He did, slowly. She took a deep breath. She’d ordered a ’bot and been delivered a man, instead, which was what she really had wanted all along.

“There’s no telling how long they’ll keep us in here,” she told him. “And I have cred-time left with you.”

The smallest, faintest quirk of a smile tugged at his mouth. “Yes, you do.”

Milla lifted her chin and stepped back, letting her robe fall open. “Don’t tell me you’re going to run out on me without honoring them?”

The fact that she’d probably used up almost all but a few minutes of the complimentary time meant nothing. She knew that, and knew he knew it too. But that didn’t stop her. Milla crooked a finger, but Jarden didn’t move.

“Milla—”

“Shh,” she told him sternly. “Does it matter if you turn yourself in now or later? Will they go easier on you for being quick?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

She crooked her finger again, feigning more confidence than she felt. “Then come here.”

His smile quirked a bit higher, and Milla’s stomach twisted with delight. “Anything you want.”

He moved toward her and she envied his confidence. Perhaps it was purely male, that ability to put aside the past and focus on the now. Whatever it was, Milla admired Jarden’s adaptability. That he’d been willing to sacrifice himself to prevent her from coming to harm had moved her too. They barely knew each other, despite having fucked together so well.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly before brushing her hair from her shoulder. His fingers traced the curve of her shoulder, and Milla felt ashamed at how she’d treated him earlier.

“You’re welcome.” She took a backwards step toward the bed and held out her hand. He took it, following. She drew him down with her onto the softness and laughed a little. “I don’t expect a bed this nice on Selkca.”

He stretched out beside her, his hands already sliding beneath her robe. The bed dipped under his weight. The simple sensation thrilled her.

Jarden slid a hand to her knee, then higher, to her thigh. “That’s a hard planet.”

Milla arched, her robe parting for him, and in moments she lay naked. Jarden eased out of the sleep pants just as fast, but didn’t move on top of her. He sat, his hands idly tracing patterns on her skin.

“Yes,” she said, “I know. But the compensation package is three times larger than for one of the other Homestead planets.”

He looked at her, his fingers easing closer and closer to her center. “Is that why you need a field-husband?”

Milla parted her legs for him. “It will make it easier, but...ah.”

She sighed as he found her warm and willing flesh and stroked it. Jarden smiled and moved closer to use his tongue on her thigh. His fingers and mouth moved in tandem as he eased his lips over her skin, moving toward the place she wanted him to lick and kiss.

Jarden asked no more questions, just bent to her waiting cunt and kissed her there. The pleasure wasn't intense, or sudden, or shocking. It was exquisite. She sighed at the warmth of his tongue and lips on her heated folds. As his mouth moved on her skin, Milla reached to run her fingers through the silk of Jarden's hair.

"How could I have thought I wanted a 'bot?" she murmured, looking down to watch him nuzzle and lick between her legs.

He paused to look up at her with a grin. "I told you I could do anything you wanted."

What might have felt awkward became comfortable with their shared laughter. Milla'd had many lovers, but few who'd laughed in bed with her. Derek never had. Derek hadn't laughed much at all...ever. She reached again to smooth her fingers through Jarden's hair.

"Come here," she said, and he did.

He moved up her body with fluid grace and settled himself between her legs. His cock was a thick heat against her thigh, and Milla shifted just a little to move him closer to her. Jarden looked down into her face with a faint smile toying on his lips.

"Thank God-of-Choice Pete broke," he murmured before dipping his head to kiss her throat.

Milla tipped her head to give him more room to get at her skin. "Hmm?"

Jarden laughed. "Never mind."

He had to be thinking about what was going to happen if the R.I. Ops checked her story, but Jarden didn't falter as he used his mouth and hands to urge Milla's body toward pleasure again. He'd been good the first time, when she hadn't been able to allow herself to climax, but now there wasn't any barrier. She moved beneath him, reacting. Giving in.

And Jarden took what she offered. He had to be paying careful attention to what was working for her, and to Milla, it seemed as though he never faltered, not once. She didn't even consider blaming the Arous- All this time. This was all the man before her. His hands, his mouth, his tongue, his body.

She fisted her hand in his hair and brought his mouth to hers, hard. Bruising. Jarden opened to her and their tongues dueled. He was inside her a moment after that and Milla gasped into his open mouth. She wrapped her legs around his thighs and twisted them both. There was no way she could have turned him if he hadn't allowed it. He was too big. But Jarden rolled with her, still connected. He knew what he was doing, too, because Milla ended up straddling him.

She sat up straight, already moving. Her head tipped back, her eyes closed, as she rode him. Jarden's hand slipped between them, his thumb stroking directly on her clit. Milla shuddered, no holding back this time, no hesitation.

She climaxed with a cry, her body shaking. "Jarden, come with me!"

He did, with a final thrust and a groan that sent more shocks of pleasure through her until, exhausted, Milla sank down onto his chest. She sighed. The pounding of his heart echoed in her chest where their bodies aligned. The puff of his breath caressed her hair. He put his arms around her and held her, tight.

“Don’t go,” she whispered. “If they come back...we’ll deal with it then. But don’t invite them to take you away.”

Jarden said nothing, but beneath her, his muscles tensed. He was going to turn himself in anyway. She knew it. And why? To save her? Because if he were discovered, her lie would hang her as neatly as his truth?

Milla pushed herself up to look into his eyes. “It doesn’t have to be untrue, you know.”

He frowned. They parted, their bodies slick with sweat. She reached for her robe and drew it around her, but Jarden seemed as comfortable in his nudity as he did in clothes. He sat up against the headboard.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

She glanced toward the folder of documents on the desk. “Those papers are my future. I’ve been granted a field-husband. I didn’t think I’d actually find one. I wasn’t sure I wanted one...not really.”

Milla shrugged and got up, padding across on bare feet to take up the folder. Jarden’s gaze weighed her as she did, but he still said nothing. That was fine. He didn’t have to speak. Made it easier, in fact, if he didn’t.

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to be tied to someone else again.” She held up the folder. “But I knew that Selkca isn’t an easy planet to homestead. I knew having a partner would make it easier. Someone strong.”

She looked at the firm, strong lines of his body.

“Someone smart.” She smiled, and he smiled too. “An engineer would know how to fix equipment and build new tools.”

“Are you asking me to be your field-husband?” Jarden’s smile didn’t falter, but it hadn’t quite reached his eyes either. “Why? Because I made you come?”

Milla shook her head. “No. Because I realized I need someone strong, and smart...and noble, Jarden.”

Now he laughed and got to his feet. “I heard Nidar was old-fashioned, but I didn’t know you’d be looking for some sort of champion.”

“Not a champion. Not a savior.” She lifted her chin. “I left my family, the only life I’d ever known, the only world I’d ever known, to make my way. I expect it to be hard. I don’t want or need anyone to save me from it. But it would be easier with someone to share it with.”

Jarden paced. “You barely know me.”

“You barely know me,” she pointed out. “But then, most field-husbands don’t know their partners before agreeing to the union. Most don’t know if they’ll really be compatible. We have that advantage.”

He looked at her, that faint smile still tugging the corners of his lips. “I meant to be a Homesteader. Not a field-husband.”

"You'd still have rights," she told him. "It's a contract. Like any other. And you wouldn't have to wait another year."

They stared at each other. Jarden crossed his arms over his chest. "If I wait another year, I'll be my own man. Owing nothing to anyone."

She could understand that, and she nodded. "It's an offer, Jarden. That's all. I like you."

He nodded then, like her words had made sense, but he'd expected them. "Are you sure?"

Before she could say more, the lights flickered again.

"Attention, all passengers. Attention." The modulated female voice was the same as it had been before, but the sound of it sent a bolt of anxiety through Milla. Jarden looked up toward the ceiling speakers. "Attention. *Pleasure Princess Cruises* apologizes for the delay, but we'll be departing Newcity airspace in approximately two ship-hours. Please be prepared for any final inspections. Thank you."

Milla looked at Jarden. "Final inspections?"

He looked grim and bent to pull on his thin sleep pants. "It means they've found something they want to check. Again."

Him? Milla swallowed, hard. "Sign the forms, Jarden. Become my field-husband. I can transfer the credits directly into your account. It'll be a legal transaction. Don't tell me you'd rather be put in prison than work and live on Selkca. Even if it's with me."

"That's not—" The pounding on the door stopped him. Despite his bravado, Jarden's face paled.

Milla handed him the documents. "Mark your name there."

She was already pulling out her cred-account card and sliding it through the wall-reader. She punched in her passcode. "What's your account number for the transfer?"

"You can't do this."

"Miss, we're sorry to disturb you, but you need to open the door or we'll open it for you."

"They're not sorry," Milla told Jarden fiercely. "The number!"

He rattled it off and she punched it in. She forced herself not to think of what that money could've provided for her on Selkca. Jarden's hands flew over the document folder, adding his name to the contract. They both finished as the door rattled again, and she opened it.

"I told you, I'm in the middle of a hot fuck-and-suck!" she complained with a pout.

"We're here for him." The tall R.I. Op gestured at Jarden.

"I told you before," Milla said. "He's my field-husband."

"Yeah, let's let the scanner figure that out," said the shorter one.

But in another minute they were backing out the door, apologizing. The transfer of funds and documentation had gone through, and Milla waved them away without a hint of her relief as she sent up prayers to God-of-Choice that they hadn't waited even a moment longer.

"Thank you." Jarden said the words stiffly. "Should I get my things?"

Milla shook her head. Her heart still pumped faster than normal, from the delicious orgasms he'd given her and the close call with the Newcity officers. "No."

"No?" Jarden frowned.

Milla turned from him. He didn't want to be tied to her. She understood that, and knew it had nothing to do with her scar. Nothing to do with her. She paused, her fingers working the robe's stick-seam closed. She smiled. Jarden's rejection of her had nothing to do with her, and she was still smiling when she turned to face him again.

"No. You go." She eased the field-husband contract from its place in her folder and pressed it into his hand. "You don't want this. When we're far away from Newcity, you can annul this contract. It will revert to me. You won't even lose the money. All the details are in there."

He stared at her. "But..."

Milla shook her head again, her smile faltering. She turned away. "No, Jarden. I mean it. I couldn't have let you sacrifice yourself to protect me, and I can't bind you to me either. I know what it's like to be bound to someone who doesn't love me. I don't want to do that ever again."

The soft sound of his breathing was all she heard. Then the soft pad of his footsteps as he went to the door. The room shuddered. The lights flickered. The automated announcement told them the *Pleasure Princess* was once more engaged in interstellar travel.

And when she looked up, Jarden had done just what she wanted.

He was gone.

"Hot pussy," Pete moaned. "Hot, wet, slick pussy."

"Yeah, man. Whatever." Jarden rolled over in his bunk to face the wall, while Pete watched the jack-off channel. "Take my shift and get all the hot pussy you want."

"You mean it?" Pete sounded happy.

Fuck. Pete always sounded happy. "Yeah, man. I mean it."

"You don't have to work?"

Not with the credits in his account, he didn't. Jarden pulled the covers up higher around his neck. In two more days they'd reach the end of the cruise and he'd be able to get off this ship too. Pick a destination, any one he wanted.

Or he could give her back the money, annul the contract, stay on the *Pleasure Princess* as she turned to make her way back across the universe, and wait another year while he earned his freedom with his cock.

Jarden groaned.

"You all right?" Pete placed a hand on Jarden's shoulder. "Do you need the medbot?"

"No. Just tired."

Pete didn't really understand tired, but he left Jarden alone. Which is what he wanted. Wasn't it? With another groan, Jarden punched the pillow.

He'd been with hundreds of women, and Milla Sulay wasn't the first who'd tasted good, or smelled good, or who'd writhed on his cock like a goddess. She didn't have to be the last either...but she could be.

Muttering, Jarden rolled onto his back to stare up at the top of the bunk above him. Field-husband. A fancy word for indentured fuck-slave, wasn't it? Sure, field-husbands weren't contractually bound to have sex with their partners. They got a share of the land, the profits. Field-husbands had rights.

But they were still bought and paid for, and that was something Jarden had vowed not to be once he got off this ship.

"Can I really have your shift?" Pete asked when the service light started blinking.

"COKs never quit, right?" Jarden didn't look at him.

"Never quit!"

"Go for it, buddy."

Jarden didn't turn to watch him leave the small room they'd shared for five years. Pete didn't bother saying goodbye or anything like that. COKs weren't known for their manners.

Jarden rolled onto his stomach to bury himself in the darkness beneath his blankets, but sleep eluded him. Instead, a fall of sleek, pale hair and bright, twinkling blue eyes formed a vision in his head. Milla.

He'd seen her a few times before voluntarily imprisoning himself in his room. In the dining room and once on the vast star deck. She'd smiled at him and nodded, but made no move to talk to him, and he felt like more of an ass than ever for leaving the way he had.

His stomach growled now, but the thought of ordering another meal in this room defused his hunger. The thought of watching another porn-vid, or reading another holo-bloid turned his stomach too. In fact, Jarden thought, as he tossed off the blankets with a growl, being in this frigging room much longer was going to drive him crazy.

If he couldn't even stand to stay in a cruiser cabin for a few days, how could he ever have imagined he'd be able to make it in prison? And he'd been saved from that certain fate by whom?

Milla. The woman who'd offered him the chance to have everything he'd been working for. And what was keeping him from taking her up on her offer?

"Nothing but my damned pride," Jarden said aloud.

Too bad he didn't have anything else.

Selcka, one year later

Milla had waited until the sun dove behind the mountains before dipping herself a drink from the jug of water on her counter. Real, fresh water, a luxury she needed to carefully parcel out to herself, but one she deserved.

She'd worked hard, supervising the fields that day and making sure her workers had all been paid before they took off for the three-day Selkcan holiday. She planned to use those three days to sleep, eat and read the carton of magazines that had finally arrived in the last shipment of supplies. Real paper magazines, something she hadn't seen in years on Nidar, but which were common enough in Selkca's single city. Out here on the homestead, a good magazine could be read over and over, then recycled into many uses.

Milla was looking forward to the next three days, when she'd be without duties to perform. The Selkcan 'steaders had formed a close-knit community. She had friends. She'd even been courted, sort of, by a few of the single men and by one or two of those with wives too. Her life on Selkca was fulfilling and good...and incredibly hard. Could anyone blame her if she chose to stay at home, relaxing, instead of mingling with the rest of the holiday celebrants?

So, when the knock came at her door, Milla was less than pleased. Assuming it was Heldaig, the Selkcan native she'd hired to assist her, Milla flung open her door with a sigh.

And promptly lost her breath.

"Jarden?"

He nodded. "Milla. Hi."

She stepped aside at once to let him in, her mind already whirling with the thoughts about how he didn't have to wait for her to open the door. He could just push inside. Technically, he owned part of this house. This land. Part of everything she'd worked for, so hard, because though he hadn't come there with her, he'd never had the contract annulled.

"Thanks." Jarden smiled at her, and her heart leaped at the memory of his touch.

She served him sweet Selkcan tea and cookies from a tin that had traveled far and were a welcome treat despite being stale. They sat across from each other in her tiny kitchen. Their knees bumped beneath her table.

"So," she said when she couldn't stop herself from it any more, "why are you here?"

Jarden pulled a small cloth bag from the pocket of his jumpsuit and pushed it across the table to her. "I owe you this."

Milla didn't take it. "You don't."

He smiled. "Yes, I do. And I worked my ass off for a year to get it, so don't turn me down."

She didn't have to open the bag to know it contained Selkcan crystals. Currency. She looked up at him. "You never annulled the contract."

Jarden shook his head. "No."

"Why?"

He sighed and scrubbed at his face. "I didn't want to. But I didn't want to show up with a debt on my hands either."

He got up, paced the floor, looked out her small window to the night beyond. When he finally turned to her, Milla realized she was holding her breath. He moved fast, too fast for her to get away, and took her hands to pull her to her feet.

"You still don't know me," he said.

She shook her head, but didn't pull her hands from his. "No. But you don't know me either."

He stroked her hair away from her face. "It's crazy to make a life with a stranger, isn't it?"

"No more than many others have done," Milla replied. Her mouth parted, waiting for him to kiss her, but Jarden didn't.

"You'll take the money?"

"If you want me to." She smiled, inching closer. "It's not like I couldn't use it."

"You've made a success of this place," Jarden said as the distance between them became nothing.

"I have. Thanks. But there's still more work to do. Always more. And I could really use someone to share it with, Jarden." Milla stretched onto her toes to give him her mouth.

This time, he took it. His hands tightened around her. He tasted of sweet tea and crumbled cookies, and his body was hard, tight and welcome against hers.

"And you're willing for that person to be me?" he asked into her ear. "You're sure?"

Milla laughed gently and pulled away to look into his face. "There are worse things to base a relationship on than sexual compatibility."

Jarden laughed, too, after a minute, then hugged her tight to his chest. "Don't you want to ask me why I came here?"

"No." She sighed, holding him. "But if you want to tell me, please do."

"I couldn't forget you," he told her. "Milla, I don't know if this is going to work, but if it doesn't—"

"It's a contract," she reminded him. "And you'll owe me nothing."

"And if it does work?" he asked.

Milla smiled, already leading him toward the bedroom. "Then you won't ever have to try to forget me again."

He followed her willingly enough. "Just like that? We're going to try this?"

"Jarden," Milla told him as she undid the stick-seam on his jumpsuit, "you're the only man I've ever had an orgasm with. Aside from that, you were willing to sacrifice yourself to keep me from harm, and you barely knew me. I think that, no matter what else might happen, I'm willing to give this a try. Yes."

She bared him and ran her hands down his smooth skin, then looked up to his handsome face. A face she was willing to accept as her field-husband, her partner. A face she was willing to try to love.

"Jarden?"

“Yes, Milla?”

“I haven’t made love in over a year. I’d really like it if we could celebrate our new partnership the old-fashioned way.”

His grin took her breath away, as did the way he dipped her down to kiss her thoroughly. “Anything you want, Milla. Anything you want.”

About the Author

When she was in the third grade, Megan Hart fell in love for the first time. Not with a boy (that would wait until fourth grade), but with a story. “The Homecoming” by Ray Bradbury leaped out at her from the pages of a library book, and she tumbled head over heels. In the dark ages, before the days of photocopiers, the only way for her to keep a copy of this story was to copy it out by hand so she could read it over and over again. Something funny happened, though, as she carefully printed it on lined notebook paper.

She made “improvements.”

At age 12, reading Stephen King’s *The Stand* for the first time one memorable summer, it occurred to her that people really did write books for a living. That’s when she decided to become an author. Megan began writing short fantasy, horror and science fiction before graduating to novel-length romances. In 1998 as a stay-home mom, Megan took up writing in earnest, attending her first writing conference and getting her first request for a full manuscript. In 2002 she saw her first book in print, and she hasn’t stopped since.

Published in almost every genre of romance fiction, Megan also writes fantasy, science fiction, women’s fiction, horrifyingly awful screenplays, and continues to occasionally dabble in horror.

Megan’s goal is to continue writing the kind of books she’d like to read. She spends too much time playing The Sims. Her dream is to have a movie made of every one of her novels, starring herself as the heroine and Keanu Reeves as the hero. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods with her husband and two monsters...er...children.

Learn more about Megan at her website, www.meganhart.com and her blog at www.readinbed.net. Follow her on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/Megan_Hart](https://twitter.com/Megan_Hart) and at Facebook: www.facebook.com/megan.hart.

Look for these titles by Megan Hart

Now Available:

Passion Model
Amidst a Crowd of Stars
Tithed

Coming Soon:

Bachelor Number Four

A love as a rare—and precious—as a desert rain.

Amidst a Crowd of Stars

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Marrin Levy needs a man. Not to have children. Her husband gave her three before he died—along with a failing homestead and crushing debt. What she needs is a strong back to help her wrest a living from the harsh, desert plant of Lujawed.

She's sent away for a field-husband to take over the hard labor, nothing more. She never expected the devastatingly handsome, forever-young Seveeran, Keane Delacore, would fit so easily into her family's life.

Keane's heart is as strong as his back, bringing Marrin more than just help in the fields. He offers her love she never thought she'd feel again...if she has the courage to reach out and take it.

Warning: Contains three-alarm love scenes and a three-hankie love story. Read it and weep—in a good way!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Amidst a Crowd of Stars:

The colony was still small enough to support group celebrations like this one. The tables had been set with flowers and pretty cloths. A band hired to provide music. Food, laid out in a bounty that proved to any who doubted how prosperous they'd all become.

Marrin watched Sarai chattering with her friends. Her other daughters, Aliya and Hadassah, had also abandoned the dull company of their parents to seek their companions. Marrin had a plate of salad and a glass of iced water, but wasn't doing much beyond looking around in amazed pride.

"You're Sarai's mother, aren't you?"

Marrin turned at the question to see a woman of about her own age she faintly recognized. "Yes. I'm Marrin Levy."

"Arlene Simpson. I'm Jack's mom."

Marrin didn't know Jack, but she smiled and nodded anyway. Keane came up beside her and put his arm around her shoulders, squeezing gently before stepping away to take the plate from her hands and begin finishing the salad.

"Hi," he greeted Arlene.

The other woman's eyes widened slightly. "Hello. I'm Jack's mom." Her smile thinned as she looked at Marrin.

Keane smiled and shrugged, more honest in his reply than Marrin had been. "Sorry, I don't know Jack."

“Jack Simpson?” Arlene’s tone clearly said Keane ought to know him. “He might be a year or two behind you.”

Keane paused with the fork halfway to his mouth, an eyebrow raised. “Sorry?”

Marrin tensed, her gut twisting. It wasn’t the first time their apparent age difference had been brought up in casual conversation, but it had been quite a while. Anyone who knew them knew Keane wasn’t as young as his Seveeran genetics made him appear.

“My son,” Arlene said patiently, as though Keane were an idiot. “He graduated today with your girlfriend.”

“My girlfriend?” Keane’s face showed an amusement Marrin envied, but didn’t feel. He looked around the room, clearly biting back a laugh.

“Well, yes...you’re Sarai’s boyfriend, aren’t you? I just guessed you—”

“You guessed because I was here with Marrin and behaving in such a familiar manner that I must somehow be related to her, and you assumed for some reason I was here because of her daughter, who graduated today with your son.” His smile remained pleasant, his voice light, but he’d set down his plate and put an arm around Marrin’s shoulders.

Arlene looked confused, from Keane to Marrin and back again. “Well, yes.”

“Marrin is my wife,” said Keane without changing his tone.

If the woman’s face could have blushed any more crimson, Marrin didn’t see how. Arlene Simpson stammered and stuttered and backed away like Keane had somehow insulted her when really, she was the one who’d put her foot in her mouth.

It made Marrin feel no better to watch the other woman’s distress. Much of the time she could forget her husband was of a different race that didn’t age the same way Earthers did. She aged every day. Keane did not.

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

Breaking Chance

© 2010 Kim Knox

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

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

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt for Breaking Chance:

“I saw *you* looking.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have a kink?"

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

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

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

“Don’t be.”

“Why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She's got him right where he wants her.

Enslaved

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Dominion sentinel Kaela Garrett will go to any lengths to gather evidence against a suspected traitor, even if it means auctioning off her body to the highest bidder. Posing as a slave should have been the perfect cover to gain access to an exclusive gala. Only she hadn't anticipated a sexy treasure salvager with a grudge outbidding everyone—including her mark—to possess her.

Lorcan Hunt can't believe the very sentinel who had him arrested six weeks ago is on the auction block, completely at his mercy. What better way to get even—and pass the time until his next job—than force her to submit to every new and wicked revenge he can imagine? His every demand for her submission, however, comes with a price: a burning need that slides under his skin and grows stronger with every concession she makes.

When Kaela finally gives in to the fierce desire between them, Lorcan finds himself hopelessly caught in an impossible choice. Honor the commitment binding him to his next job—or hold onto the one woman he can never have.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Enslaved:

Kaela scowled at the restraints, jerking their joined wrists up to eye level. "Don't feel obligated to lavish me with gifts so soon, Hunt. Might give a girl expectations." And make it a whole lot harder to maintain a respectable distance between them.

A satisfied smile caught the corner of his mouth. "I wouldn't want to lose my *slave* in the crowd."

"I'll bet."

Without warning, he snaked an arm around her, hauling her closer.

Too close. Breathing now meant drawing him in, letting him overwhelm her senses when she was still reeling from the unexpected turn of events. Events that gave him every legal right to drag her around. For now. She'd taken the mission knowing the risks, agreed to the terms set forth by the bondskeeper and hadn't complained, even when the final step meant accepting the mark of an indentured slave on her hip.

But she sure as hell wanted to complain now. The arm looped around her back felt too tight, the grip too possessive, the man holding her too dangerous, arrogant and out of his ever-lovin' mind. Plastered to his front, the hard planes of his chest made her increasingly aware of how little she wore, and each steady inhale only made the silk bunched between their bodies less noticeable. Seeing as how his gaze dropped to her cleavage, which was perilously close to spilling over his hasty tie job, he knew it too.

"The only expectations you need to worry about," he growled, "are mine. More specifically, how many ways I'll want your legs wrapped around me." His rough voice and the hypnotic sweep of his thumb

along her jaw made for a treacherous combination. Made it impossible not to think about it—his body covering hers, his mouth sliding down her throat and her legs anchored around his hips, locking him against her, inside her.

Which made it pretty damn impressive she could respond at all. “Either they left you in solitary confinement too long, or you’ve always been this deluded.”

The dig had the desired effect. Lorcan’s expression darkened and he spun around, jerking her after him. Left with barely enough time to suck in a relieved breath, she had no choice but to follow. It was either that or be dragged. Taking a stand against her *prime* in the middle of the promenade would land her in the brig faster than being caught on the run.

And that was the best-case scenario. She refused to consider the lengths to which some primes went to teach their slaves a lesson in obedience. Kaela hadn’t forgotten the party she’d attended while tracking a Battalian scientist wanted for testing his biological weapons on innocent settlers in the Astral quadrant.

Lorcan strode away from the promenade, away from Varek’s slave dealer and Caplan. The farther he led her along the spaceport’s winding corridors, the more determined she became to devise a new plan.

Getting him alone could give her the opportunity to incapacitate him, but wouldn’t solve the problem of disengaging the locking mechanism on the bands joining them. She’d need tools for that. Unfortunately, lugging around an unconscious man until she could track down something to do the job would be a bit too conspicuous.

All of which left her back at square one.

He picked up the pace, turning toward the port’s merchant district.

“Hunt,” she began.

“I think Master has a much better ring to it, don’t you?”

“So does fuck y—”

He turned a corner off the main corridor, one she suspected led to a maintenance shaft, and pivoted to face her. “I think you and I need to come to an understanding.”

Kaela snorted. “*I* think you need to let go of me.” She stared at the hand that molded to her upper arm, mentally running down and discarding any maneuver that would involve breaking her own wrist or arm to get him to release her. Being Lorcan’s slave didn’t qualify for that kind of extreme measure. Yet.

“Now that’s the beauty of this arrangement,” he continued. “What you think doesn’t matter.”

An old anger flared to life inside her, his tone a little too reminiscent of superior officers who’d made it their personal mission to remind her, as often as possible, they didn’t believe she’d earned her position on merit alone. More than once she’d been tempted to point out her mother hadn’t involved herself in Kaela’s life since becoming a quadrant chancellor years ago, let alone pulled any strings where her career was concerned.

Overtly disagreeing with those ignorant opinions had always landed her the shit assignments. She didn't doubt that disagreeing with Lorcan now would invite retaliation, one she feared would prove she hadn't been the right sentinel for this assignment. Not taking into account Lorcan's unexpected role.

Stumbling across Hunt outside a trading settlement on the Outer Rim had given her a way to evade the handful of mercenaries looking for her. Escaping them without having obtained her mission objective or positively identifying the Dominion official Varek was suspected of bribing pissed her off more than getting caught. She hadn't expected to find anything on Hunt's ship when he gave her a ride to the closest spaceport, least of all cargo that didn't belong to him. "It wasn't personal."

A cold smile hugged his lips. "It was to me."

"I was doing my job."

"We both know you could have looked the other way."

Not when looking the other way meant ignoring the duties and responsibilities she took seriously. Once any Dominion officer started down that path, letting greed compromise their integrity, a one-way trip to Dadelus penal colony lurked right around the corner.

Lorcan's eyes narrowed. "You cost me a lot of money."

"Here's a tip. Don't steal."

"You made the wrong call."

"Not my problem."

He leaned in, his mouth hovering above her ear. "It is now."



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