



Silver Bound  
ELLA DRAKE





Silver Bound  
By Ella Drake

### **A dangerous journey across the galaxy**

Sheriff Guy Trident doesn't have much to do with off-worlders; he has his hands full keeping his own planet safe. But he'll do anything, go anywhere to save Jewel Quinn. She broke his heart years ago when she left to marry a Terraloft aristocrat. Now she's run away from her husband, only to fall into the clutches of slavers.

Posing as a wealthy playboy, Guy arrives at Zuthuru Station to learn he's too late: Jewel's memories have been erased. She's been tipped in silver, a process that leaves nothing behind except her body, sexually bound to pleasuring her master. Unwilling to give up hope, Guy buys her.

Jewel fights to reclaim herself, recalling a different connection to the handsome sheriff, remembering the frightened eyes of a young boy and the events that made her run. Together she and Guy search for her cure, plan her son's rescue from her ruthless ex, and test if they have any kind of future...before the past catches up to them.

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~Angela James

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## **Dedication**

To the mudpuddlers for keeping me grounded and helping this story fly.  
And to my own hero, always.

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I'd like to thank Angela James, for tweeting that she wanted a space western.

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## Chapter One

Her only hope was escape. The chill of the shuttle and the loud pounding in her ears made her body quake, but Jewel squelched the shivers.

She ran a hand through her son's soft blond hair as he stood beside her, bouncing and eager for the hatch to open. They waited in the small docking area of the Geanus shuttlecraft. The same craft she'd stolen from her husband, Kalon, days before. To steady her shaking hand, she gripped Jared's shoulder in a light squeeze.

"Will there be pirates?" Eyes twinkling up at her, Jared grinned, full of adventure.

"No, sweet one. Remember, we're on holiday. Everything's perfectly safe."

The door swung open with a *shlurp* and all hope of safety fled. Tears stung her eyes as she hitched up her chin and stared at her husband's two goons filling the doorway and blocking their escape. They'd almost made it. Almost.

Behind the beefy men who glared at her, phasers in hand—no doubt the choice of weapon to avoid hurting Jared—the station docks filled with people going about their business. None of them would stop, or even hesitate, if she screamed for help. She swallowed the urge and forced her trembling lips into a pasted-on smile at the tallest one, who wore leather and a menacing smile. She'd forgotten his name, if she ever knew it.

"Why, boys, are you here to accompany us to the circus? Jared's excited. He's never been to the circus before."

The guard's scowl turned to confusion. "Circus?"

Spinning on her heel, she scooped Jared into her arms and sprinted through the cabin of the shuttle.

"Hey." One of the guards sputtered. Clamoring and cursing erupted behind them.

The two goons right behind them, she stumbled into the cockpit, turning to take the brunt of the fall. A sharp pain throbbled in her hip. Still on the



floor beneath Jared, she stretched her leg and hit the door pad with her foot.  
*Swish.*

The hatch slid closed on the curses of the tall one.

Her speech caught as she sucked in air, too winded to reassure Jared who clutched at her, ruining the expensive weave of her shirt—picked and paid for by Kalon. She'd never liked the thing anyway.

The pounding on the door was muffled from the reinforced airtight seal. Good. The guards were locked out. Or she and Jared were locked in this tiny cockpit. Jared scrambled off her, and she pulled herself up using the foldout table where she'd spent the journey teaching Jared how to play cards. Their game had scattered on the floor.

Jared stared at the closed portal. "Why'd we close the door on Ben? He'd like the circus, too."

Leave it to Kalon to send Jared's favorite guard. Her husband might not make the effort to understand his wife, but he apparently got full reports of Jared's likes and dislikes. "I'm sure he'd enjoy the circus, baby."

"I'm four. Not a baby."

"No. You're a big boy. Brave." What was she going to do? All of this was for Jared. All of it.

A light blinked on the console. A message waited, probably from Kalon. She wouldn't check it. There was nothing he could say that would make anything right.

"Strap in, moonbeam. I'll show you the docking controls before we go."

"Really?" His eyes widened and all his teeth showed in his big grin.

After he sat, legs dangling, she checked his harness and slammed her body into the pilot seat, her hip protesting. She missed the buckle twice. Finally, she clicked in and punched the controls with shaking fingers.

Backed into the dock, the shuttle cockpit faced out. A constellation twinkled peacefully ahead. Below, her home planet of Grassland loomed. On the dark side of the sun, it lay in shadow, the green lushness asleep. Somewhere down there was the man she'd dared not think of for years. A man she'd betrayed.

She thumbed on the comms. "Shuttle requesting launch from bay one-four-oh."

In the small delay, she willed away the panic over where she and Jared could go.

“Negative. The registered owner of this shuttle has reported the craft stolen. Your docking clamps are secured.” The woman at station control spoke in a bored monotone, as if she hadn’t just ruined Jared’s life and given Jewel what was tantamount to a death sentence.

The stars blurred as Jared spoke, his words lost to the pounding in her ears.

She shook her head. “What did you say, moonbeam?”

“Why did the woman say we stole Daddy’s shuttle?”

“Must be a misunderstanding.” She tried and failed to smile to ease his troubled frown.

The clamoring at the door had quieted. The men wouldn’t have left, and she didn’t have much time until they were joined by station security, who Kalon would’ve given an override code of some sort.

All the cards were dealt, and she didn’t have a hand to play. Unless she had a wildcard up her sleeve. She scanned the controls in front of her and stilled the desperate tapping of her foot.

She opened the comms again to send a message to her father. If she got lucky, he’d already be on station.

*All channels are locked.* Blinked over and over with an annoying beep on the console.

“Damn,” she whispered and slapped the screen.

“Momma.”

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I owe you a chip for bad language.”

“That’s okay.” Jared swung his legs and stared at the cards and chips scattered on the floor. She’d been teaching Jared her favorite game, something they’d kept as their secret since Kalon didn’t want his wife playing cards. “We’re going to the circus anyway. We can play again when we go home. I have lots of chips at home.”

Although Kalon’s space station was the only home Jared had ever known, it’d never felt that way to her. Home was and always would be that planet below them, impossibly far away. And they couldn’t waltz off the shuttle and play tourist on this gaudy and bawdy entertainment barge. The paid muscle outside those doors wouldn’t allow it.

She turned back to the pilot console. If she timed it right, she could cut the oxygen in the outer cabin until the guards passed out.

She made the adjustment and overrode the safety alert. Good thing the station hadn’t changed the internal security override. Probably because it’d

never been set with security codes. Kalon's arrogance didn't leave room to consider that someone would steal from him, especially his wife.

Well, as soon as they were away from here, he could have the shuttle back.

Jared chattered beside her as she waited, sweat trickling along her hairline, for the system timer to go off.

"See that green planet?"

"It's like a marble."

She coughed, her laugh caught in her tight chest. "Your grandfather lives there."

"But not your momma. She died."

Her tightened chest hollowed. The guilt left her mouth sour and reminded her of the betrayal that had ripped out her heart.

*Beep, beep, beep.*

"Let's go." She threw off their straps and hoped the station security was in no hurry to follow up. They stood at the door. She put a hand on the pad to open it, but she jerked her hand back and shivered. Rubbing the bumps on her skin, she crossed her arms but one hand crept up to caress the line of raised flesh on her neck. Smooth. Soft and warm. Still there, after all these years.

Jared grabbed her hand and bounced on his heels. "Come on. This ship is boring."

She slapped her hand on the panel.

In the outer cabin, the two guards splayed on the floor amid the luxurious appointments of the finest loungers and all that money could afford for a small transport craft.

"What's wrong with Ben?" Jared asked softly with a slight quiver. The past few days had taken a toll. She could only hope he'd move past it with the resilience he'd shown already.

"Here. I'll make sure he's comfortable." She moved to the smaller one and pulled his arm out from under him and positioned his head on it as a pillow. "He won't mind us going without him."

She subdued the grin that had always given her away with her father when she'd snuck out to go skinny-dipping in their private lake. She'd always been careful that nobody could see her, but he hadn't thought proper young ladies should behave so. She couldn't wait to teach Jared how to swim there. He'd never seen a lake, or river, or any organic body of water.

“Come on.” She nearly bounced on her toes as much as Jared, who gripped her hand, the only thing grounding her.

The outer hatch opened. The same busy dock greeted them. She’d gotten them out of this mess. A small laugh escaped.

“Momma.”

The worry in his voice registered a second late. A movement to the side came too fast. Four men in security uniforms rushed them.

A pinch in her arm hit her like a hammer.

A tranq.

Thoughts crashed together even as her knees weakened. She needed to get Jared away. Sidestepping, her foot slipped. Jared’s fingers wrenched away. The floor came at her. She landed with a *whoof*.

Arm pinned beneath her, she reached with the other toward a sobbing Jared.

One of the security men patted his head. “We’ll take good care of her. You’re going home to your father.”

Jared hiccupped through his tears and lunged for her. His captors let him, but she couldn’t move her arms to hug him. Her mouth wouldn’t cooperate to soothe him.

She fell asleep with his small hand running through her hair.

\*\*\*

Fighting through the fog in her brain, Jewel wished she’d sink back to oblivion.

The hard clinic chair and the constrictive padded cuffs brought back the rush of events like a stampede. She tried to roll away, but couldn’t move. Straps bit into her flesh. She was naked. Exposed. Trapped. Kalon’s guards stared at her, making her want to sink into the chair as much as tell them to slog off. She clenched her teeth together in a snap. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. She’d already harangued and begged for them to tell her what the hell was going on. Nothing.

Yanking, keeping her discomfort from spilling out and pulling her into panic, she strained and tugged to no avail. She couldn’t get free.

An efficient nurse leaned over her to place electrodes on her immobile head and temples. Mouth dry and stomach churning, she struggled, but

couldn't loosen the tight restraints. The cold pinpoints of the electrodes swept her strength away.

She was a prisoner. She didn't understand why, but Kalon had something to do with this, whatever this was. Begging had gotten her nowhere. Bribery might've worked, but what did she have to offer?

Nothing.

Her ears buzzed, but the nurse's platitudes clamored over the noise of confusion. "Don't worry. It'll be over soon. You'll be brand new." And more hollow words. "I'll give back your virginity. Your owner will like that."

She was no virgin. She cringed. Memories ran through her mind like flashes of the comets scattering the dust around *Geanus Station*. The life she'd gotten didn't come close to the one she'd planned and wished for.

Nothing made sense. "I don't belong here. This is a mistake."

"They all say that." Her expression remote, disinterested, the nurse patted Jewel's arm, barely missing the throbbing bruise there.

The guards stood behind her, but their stares marked her naked flesh as surely as if their fingers wandered. Her head pounded with the aftereffects of the tranq. She hoped theirs did, too, from oxygen deprivation.

"Leave." The nurse waved away the guards. A soft click followed and much of the tense heat left the room.

The erratic pulse at her restraints pounded as she searched for an escape that didn't exist. The sterile cream-colored room held a console with drawers full of strange implements, the white-haired nurse in a long silver coat, and her own chair, reclined like a hospital bed. Unlike a bed for healing, this one had straps to hold her feet tight and immobile.

"I'll remove the scar on your neck as well," the nurse added.

Her flinch jerked against the bindings. The slight bump at the crease of her neck and shoulder grounded her, reminded her of a better time, of a better Jewel, and of wishes and dreams. Of a boy, long ago. One she'd betrayed. And the guilt.

Fingers splayed out from beneath the tight strap, she ached to stroke the comforting raised line of flesh. "No, I'll keep the scar."

The nurse shook her head and tutted. "I'll make you the perfect slave. You won't miss whatever depraved existence you had before."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not a slave. I want to see my son."

Jewel received no response to her plea, only another pat on the arm.

“Don’t worry. You have no son now.”

“You can’t take him away.” Her body felt hot, agitated, like she might burst from the restraints, but her captor didn’t bother to answer her.

“I always explain the process, though you won’t remember. It’s some idea our office manager got in her head.” The nurse rolled her eyes and slapped a probe on Jewel’s forehead.

Process? The blood seemed to freeze in her veins.

“You’re being silver-tipped. Your memories will be wiped. Your body will be repaired of any impurities and implanted with a programming to tie you to your master. The nanobots are applied to your erogenous zones and will foster your enjoyment and compliance. You will have no thoughts or needs other than your master. When he wants your services, he’ll wear a bracelet to control you, but not to worry, you’ll want to do his every bidding.”

“I will not.” She ground her teeth. “Who is this depraved man who thinks he can own me? Tell him to slog off.” Having a so-called master would be too much like what she had now, with a stifling tyrant of a husband.

The nurse didn’t answer but continued her briefing. “When he’s not in want of your services, the bracelet will rest in a home base called a Broker. The Broker is the only thing that’ll prevent you from feeling every one of your master’s sexual urges. If your master removes his bracelet without inserting it in the Broker, you’ll die. You’ll pine away for your master.”

“Not likely.”

“You won’t have such a smart mouth when I’m done with you.” The nurse smiled. She obviously enjoyed her job.

“You’ll never get away with this.”

“And why not? You are nothing now. Nothing to anyone but your new owner.”

“No.” She couldn’t shake her head, couldn’t even lift a finger to vent her outrage.

The nurse turned away.

This was Kalon’s doing. Had to be. He’d ordered this barbaric punishment for her running away with Jared.

“No,” she said again, as uselessly as before.

The word came as a whisper at odds with the upheaval, the scorching grief that wanted to screech, climb the walls and yell at the man who'd done this to her, but he wasn't here. She'd never forgive Kalon. Never forget the perpetual smirk on his face. She hated her husband. But, oh, hate wasn't a strong enough word to encompass the loathing. Outrage boosted her strength again while her hands fisted and pushed against her restraints. The seething, a physical force of her anger, wouldn't let her body relax against the fierce need to vent her pure animosity toward the man who'd stolen her innocence in more ways than one. If she got out of this mess, she'd be sure he paid for the pain and suffering he'd caused.

And the murder.

She didn't mind forgetting her husband, but her son... Impossible. She had only love for Kalon's son. Her son. The one person she'd cared for since making the biggest mistake of her life. Instead of running from her mother's wishes, she'd acquiesced to an arranged marriage with Kalon because her too-grand status prohibited her marriage to a Grassland rancher. What a mistake that was, then and now, to give up a decent man for a wealthy one. If only she hadn't let her guilt drive her to make such a bad decision, she wouldn't be in this chair.

She couldn't face her own culpability in her destruction.

But she wouldn't forget her son.

"Jared." The whisper breathed through her and became her mantra as the zip at her hairline signaled the end. Ice crept along her limbs, and shivers quaked her body, strong enough to jolt against her restraints.

Jared. How could she forget him, no matter what they did to her body, to her mind? Jared lived in her every cell. Was written into her being.

Jared. Jared. She latched onto the name. Forgot all else, grappled with it and hung on as if her life depended on it, because it surely did.

"Jared." The sound escaped her dry lips on a sigh as a bright silver flash exploded inside her.

## Chapter Two

The rope left his fingers and flew with precision to its target. With a practiced yank, Guy tightened the lasso around his robo-shepherd's legs. Max tumbled to the dry ground with a woof.

Guy strode forward to stroke Max's soft, synthetically furred head and removed the lasso. "Good boy. You put up a good chase this time, but I took you down."

The mottled-brown Max appeared to grin, tongue slurping along the cuts on his hands—the dog's saliva carried first-aid anesthetic. Its tail thumped on the ground and sent dust flying in a cloud. Guy chuckled and signaled to Max with a wave and a low-key whistle. The knee-height robo-dog took off, leaving a rolling wave of air-thrown dirt in its wake as it circled Trident Ranch's smallest corral.

Keeping track of the robot's circular sprinting, Guy coiled the lasso and paused. The next lap around, once Max passed the gate, he'd be in optimal position. He tensed, ready to strike. A hum at his waist distracted him from the game. With a sigh he gripped the comm unit and whistled for Max to return.

"Hancock?" He dusted off his black plethor vest, adorned with the silver sheriff star, as he waited for his foreman's explanation for ping-ponging him after work time. All the ranch hands had gone home to their families at least a dozen lasso robo-takedowns ago.

"The mayor's here to see you."

"The mayor. Sure you got the right man? The mayor's got no business with me." No, not even personal business. Especially not personal.

With a cursory survey, he took it all in—his ranch that he'd owned and managed for a dozen years, and how a man like the mayor might view it.

Lush fields of rich, verdant grass stretched endlessly, interrupted by long lines of fencing. Cattle grazed in pastoral peace. The sprawling three-story ranch house painted white and black sat on top of the hill, reaching toward the clear blue sky. The fifty-man enterprise produced quality beef to



feed those who could afford it and some who couldn't—he made sure of that. His business spanned three worlds and two space stations, but he didn't do business with *Zuthuru*, the station that hung in the sky outside his lonely bedroom window every night. A bedroom that was lonely in part because of the mayor now waiting on him.

“You still stick to the old ways, Sheriff Trident, using a lasso to take down an errant beast?”

He barely contained a flinch. “Shouldn't sneak up on a man with a gun, Mayor.”

“No sneaking. Your mind was elsewhere. Same as mine's been.”

With a shake of his head, Guy strode toward the barn without pausing for the mayor to keep stride. “I was raised on the old ways, since my father never spent a credit to improve this place, but no, I use all the latest, including that robo-shepherd. It manages the cattle without my having to lift a lasso. Just like to keep in practice. So does the dog.”

Cool humidity-controlled air washed out of his office as he opened the barn's side entrance. With a motion, he indicated the vacant chair in front of his desk. “What can I do for you, Mayor?”

“I need your help, Sheriff.”

“That's what they all say. Have a seat, Quinn.” He adjusted the six-shot phaser on his belt, sat behind his desk and leaned back to prop dusty boots on the scratched surface.

This ought to be good.

Quinn hadn't spoken a word to him in five years, not since the day he announced Guy wasn't good enough to touch the dainty slipper on his daughter's foot. Guy'd already known that. He didn't need to be told. He still couldn't help himself. Still had to touch that foot. That ankle. That thigh. Those breasts that rose above the rich gowns, flaunted for all the rich, high-powered spacers who'd come calling. The shiny blond hair piled high to show her elegant, sweet neck, and the smart mouth at odds with that elegance.

He sighed. Dreams. Nothing but. He'd never laid a finger on Jewel in a sexual way except in his dreams, but damn, those dreams were good, even if he'd forced himself to let those dreams go when she'd walked out of his life without giving them a fighting chance. He'd kissed her soft pink lips once, though. The chaste kiss goodbye burned into his mind like a brand.

The silver-haired Quinn shifted in the chair and didn't meet his eye. "I like what you've done with the place. Your father never took pride in this ranch. Looks like you've got more cattle than anyone on this speck of a world."

He raised a brow and didn't answer. When Quinn complimented, he needed something. Bad. Hands crossed over his stomach, Guy waited out Rangetown's mayor. The lone sound in the room was the creak of his chair. The only person Quinn ever cared about enough to be put in this uncomfortable situation, to act this humbly, was his daughter—the woman he couldn't think about without a knot fisting in his middle.

His chair thunked to all four feet, and he leaned over his desk toward Quinn. He fixed his stare on the sweating man in his embroidered vest, tails and pleated slacks. A lone trickle of moisture tracked along Quinn's gray sideburns, belying the accepted truth that Quinn never sweat. The day warmed by the minute but didn't compare to the dog days of summer.

The knot in his stomach solidified into a fist of stone. "Tell me what you need, Quinn. Now." He was right proud of the steel underlying his voice of command. The one that never failed.

"Jewel was coming home."

The silence stretched thin.

Guy cleared his throat and forced himself into the role of sheriff, his since he'd caught the former sheriff smuggling cattle steroids on planet. From the age of eighteen, he'd striven to deserve the silver star on his vest, resolved to be a better man than his father. He didn't have to try too hard. "Jewel was coming to Grassland?"

"She sent me a communiqué she was leaving her husband and bringing her son here." Quinn wiped a hand over his brow.

"Son." He hadn't known she had a child. The boy couldn't be more than four. Would he have blond hair like hers? Bright blue eyes that stared through a man?

Quinn tapped his foot on the floor in a nervous patter. "She was due yesterday. I bought her two tickets, and I'd gotten word she'd stopped on *Zuthuru* for a shuttle, but she didn't land on the planet. Neither did her son."

"Jewel was on *Zuthuru*?" He couldn't keep the scowl from contorting his face.

Quinn paled, as he should. A fragile woman shouldn't set foot on that depraved cesspit. "I know what you're thinking. I thought the same, but she

made all the arrangements before she let me know a thing. All she asked was for me to pay for the tickets. She probably has no idea of the illegal trading that keeps that barge floating in the sky.”

An anxious flutter joined the knot in his belly. He was tighter than a bowstring on a Taphgan fiddle. It didn't matter what Quinn said from this point. He knew what he'd be doing within the next ten minutes. He mentally calculated how much fuel remained in his hopper. Surely enough to get to *Zuthuru* and bring back two passengers.

“I need to borrow your hopper. It's the only one in this quadrant. I could go borrow Hingham's, but it would take me a day to get there by zip-train.” Quinn frowned with the request.

He'd never heard of the mayor asking a favor. He shook his head. “I'll go.”

Quinn licked his lips, straightened in his seat and wiped his brow again.

“I have the cover and the means to move on *Zuthuru*,” Guy said. “You don't. But you knew that, didn't you? Why didn't you save the hogwash and get to the point?”

The taste in his mouth turned acidic, as bitter as the sourgrass that spread like weed in the pasture. Quinn hadn't thought him good enough to touch his daughter before, and now he'd come to him for help?

Before he'd proven his worth, made more money than anyone on this backwater world, he'd been the son of a failed rancher. Now he was the man relied upon to uphold the law and, for the past year or so, his path had been littered with their lovely highborn daughters, who didn't know the difference between a heifer and a bull. None of them held a candle to Jewel, who'd helped him at the ranch, dirtying her gloves and dresses so that she and her mother had to go behind Quinn's back for new ones. He hadn't approved of her helping out on Trident Ranch.

“I'm the best there is, and you know it. I'll bring her and your grandson back. You have my word on that. Just like all the other women I've gotten out of that pit.”

“Thank you.” Quinn rose to shake his hand.

“No thanks are necessary. It's a job. That's what I do.”

It was more than a job. Quinn's quirked brow said it all. Jewel was more than that to both of them. The older man insisted, “I'm coming with you.”

Not bothering to reply, he slid open his desk and flicked on his intercom. “Hancock, open up the barn and roll out the hopper. I'm going

off-world.”

“Sure thing, boss. Got another job? Need me to come along on this one?”

Guy split the bounty with Hancock when they retrieved women lost to the slavers. The extra help was more than enough to compensate for the money he didn't need.

“Not this time.” He didn't add that this time it wasn't a job. This time, it was personal.

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## Chapter Three

After four excruciatingly slow standard hours and several well-placed bribes, Guy found Jewel.

Too late.

He maintained a cover on *Station Zuthuru*. He portrayed a rich, spoiled Terraloft spacer who drank, gambled and bought female slaves sold to the highest bidder—which he'd always managed to be before passing the cost back to whoever paid for their rescue. The slaves he released back to their families, untouched by him and in as good a shape as possible after they'd been kidnapped and sold.

None of them had been silver-tipped.

*Hell and damnation.*

He never took a job to retrieve a silver-tipped slave. For good reason. They couldn't be separated from their owners without killing them, and it wouldn't matter if they were returned to their families since a silver-tip's memories were erased. Their self-will, their past and future, and even their souls belonged to the owner.

A shadow bidder had signed a pre-sale for her, but he wasn't there yet. Guy still had time. He'd arrived three hours ahead of the debauched man who wanted more than a slave's body. The shadow bidder wouldn't like his slave disappearing on him. It took quite a bit of maneuvering to find and schedule a silver-tip purchase. Guy didn't care. Whoever intended to buy her would never treat her gently nor give back as much of her life as possible.

Hunched over, elbows on knees, Guy pressed the pads of his fingers tight against his skull. Owning a person's body, desires and her entire existence was not something he was prepared to do. He should walk away and tell Quinn his daughter was dead. In all truth, she was.

Jewel hadn't chosen him five years ago, marrying an iron-ore tycoon's son instead, but he was her only choice now, to protect her shell of a body.

After a quick check, he deemed the small room secure. He couldn't delay longer. With a deep breath, he started the vid-call.

From aboard Guy's hopper, where he'd commanded the man to wait for the all clear, Quinn's face filled the screen. Usually appearing young for his age despite his silver hair, the mayor still had the same chiseled features but they were strained, and dark circles formed under his eyes. "Have you found them?"

"Yes. Well, I found Jewel but not her son." He ran a hand through his short hair and fought to keep his features bland. "There's no good way to say this, so I'll just come right out with it. She's in line to be silver-tipped. Already been wiped. I don't have enough time to mount a rescue. She has a buyer. He's due for the procedure in two hours so she's in the clinic under strict guard. The only recourse I can see is to buy her myself."

"You have the funds for that?" The mayor's face paled further, but he kept it together despite his visible shaking.

"You'd let me buy her?"

"I don't think I'm in a position to give my permission." Quinn's face contorted as if he held back tears.

"I could leave her to whoever her buyer is."

"No. You're a good man. A decent man. If she could speak for herself, I'm sure she'd want you to take the place of whatever immoral piece of spacewaste buys human souls for his pleasure."

"Well, if you put it that way, I'm sure she would." He blew out a long sigh.

"I'll transfer the funds to you."

"No. In a few hours I'll own your daughter. *Own* her. You know this is irreversible. This isn't like all the others I've rescued. I won't take your money for disgracing your daughter that way."

"As I said. You're an honorable man. Anything I can do to help?"

Honor? He failed to disillusion the mayor, but he took his offer of help because he didn't have time to explain to Hancock. "Get in touch with my foreman. Tell him to help you find the boy. Let him know I've had to deplete all my liquid funds for one of my projects. Have him put the south pasture up for sale. That damn Christoff has been after that land for years."

"I'll buy it and hold it. You can get it back when you're able."

"No—" He bit back the denial. "Wait, damn my pride to hell anyway. I appreciate the gesture."

He was about to take the woman he'd wanted to marry and make her his slave. He had no pride because deep down, whether or not he could admit it, he fully craved possessing her. He didn't deserve her father's help after all the lurid images he'd been experiencing, but he took it.

"I may never make it home. Slavery is illegal on Grassland, and everyone will know she belongs to me with one glance." Fighting a frown, he worked hard to keep his face immobile. He'd see his ranch again because he'd simply gone through too much for that chunk of pasture.

"We'll figure it out. Just save her. Where's my grandson?"

"She won't remember. You'll have to track him while I get Jewel away. Get in touch with Brice Levski. He'll help. He's a mounty on Taphgan now. At least, since she won't remember her son, even to tell us where he is, she won't remember enough to worry."

Small consolation, but he promised himself he'd reunite Jewel with her son if it was the last thing he did.

The pain in Quinn's face was unlike the staid politician. There was no love lost between them, but they would both miss the vivacious Jewel. They'd both do their best to find Jewel's son. The mayor shook his head as his throat visibly worked. "I may have a way to rectify her memory wipe. I've heard of a man who's said to have a cure. I'll contact him to find out if he can do anything for her."

"I'll be in touch." He ended the vid-call and, before he could change his mind, walked back to the clinic's office.

The manager smiled at him, her welcome expression no doubt due to his already handsome bribe to get the information he'd needed from her earlier. "Are you ready to pick out your new concubine? I have a dossier of measurements and pictures here." She waved in the air, her dark hair piled on her head above a space-pale face. "Her personality is yours to mold."

He bit back the urge to wipe that plastered smile off her face and tell her what he thought of slavers, but he needed her cooperation. "I'm interested in the one brought here today."

The office manager frowned, showing fine lines around her mouth and a cold stare. "She's no longer for sale." She rose. Her silver lab coat rustled as she moved to the slider. "If you would like to come back another day, we can look through the dossiers. Until then..."

The door slid open. The empty hall outside seemed bleak and stale. He wasn't doing this right. "I'll pay more. You said yourself, one is as good as

another.”

He gave her his most charming grin, but she shook her head and he froze his face to keep the scowl at bay.

She tutted. “I’ve already started her procedure, as you know. She’s already bought.”

The momentary inclination to throttle her and make her tell him where Jewel was hidden away nearly took his breath, but a sly glance from the manager couldn’t be mistaken. She could be bought, as surely as Jewel had been.

“I’ll pay you double,” he blurted. “She took my fancy.”

The manager turned, the plastic smile brightening a little, and shut the door. “I’ll take your money. Though one is as good as another.”

Her cheerfulness went up in direct contrast to his plummeting mood. Yes, to this shadow-bidder who already waited on her, one slave would be as good as another. But not to him. Not to Jewel.

The manager walked him to a payment booth and left him there to complete the arrangements. He didn’t hesitate. Jewel meant more to him than these funds, even if he’d nearly cleaned out all his accounts. He swiped his thumb over the pad on the panel to complete the money transfer.

The light clicked from yellow to green. Everything was all set.

In a small but plush waiting area, he waited as the technician prepared Jewel for his inspection before the procedure.

The procedure.

The coming process both repulsed and, he was ashamed to admit, excited him. His cock filled, heavy in his lush Terraloft garb, all silk and clinging, brushing against his heated flesh. He preferred the twill slacks and cotton button-down shirt of his real life to this material made to flaunt his body. But it fit the part. He blended with the dissolute elite who had nothing better to do than relieve their boredom. As that kind of man, he wouldn’t care if his erection was so hard and long it peeked above the waistband of clothing that most people wore to bed.

In this guise, he didn’t have his boots. A man couldn’t be a proper sheriff without his boots. He sighed. He’d never quite been proper.

He should walk away rather than submit Jewel to enslavement, but he couldn’t, even though she’d broken her promises and walked away from him five years ago.

A yellow light over the door signaled that Jewel had been prepared.



For a second, he considered taking the easy way—a small DNA swab and Jewel would be programmed. But if he didn't go through with the full procedure, the technician would know something was wrong. Everyone did it. Nobody opted to forgo imprinting their silver-tipped slave with their own bodies.

Lust trembled through his body as the door slid open.

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She was born as a woman at 0600 ship time. That she knew the time made her curious, a state-of-mind she seemed to well understand. The numbers on the wall display slowly progressed.

She had no name, but she accepted her surroundings and the tick of the seconds passing by. She'd been alive for an hour. Secured in a strange chair for her own protection, she'd yet to walk or move. But she could walk, had done so many times before. She'd led a life and understood the world and what it held.

Although she was certain many thousands of people inhabited this space station and billions more roamed the galaxy, she only knew one person, the female nurse who'd bid her welcome and explained that, as a newly created woman, she had one reason for living. Her master. After the impending procedure that'd been thoroughly explained, he would take her away.

"Be patient." The nurse's tone was bland. Neutral. The woman in a lab coat leaned over her and painted liquid on certain parts of her anatomy. Though told this was accepted, wanted, by her master, she futilely tugged at her arms to cover herself as a small tool touched her lips, her nipples and between her thighs with external wipes of a frigid, slick utensil. A gust of liquid from another device penetrated between her vaginal lips.

No longer floating in a numb state, she grew hot and wiggled against the cold padding beneath her. She prickled with a blush. The seconds stagnated, lingered, stretched to an unbearable length. The lone sound in the room came from her own agitated breathing.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"Be patient. You will be fulfilled, given purpose, in a matter of moments." The nurse finished the ministrations by placing a snug band around her neck.

Before she could loosen her tense muscles, the door in the room slid open. A man walked in.

She sucked in a breath. Her master was beautiful. Gold-highlighted black hair curled at the edges. Stubble thick on his lean, defined face, he had the appearance of an elegant aristocrat. A dangerous curve angled his brow over dark brown eyes. He ignored the nurse and came to her. His languid stroll showed the masculine perfection under the silky blue suit, loose and clinging to a muscular torso and strong legs.

Cognizant for barely an hour, she understood his sexual predation and her role to serve his craving. His expression, hard and sensual, left no doubt.

Her stomach tugged. A sense of familiarity and longing assaulted her, and a luscious burn started from her lips and ended, fevered, between her thighs. Moisture pooled there, and her body tingled everywhere his gaze rested. Standing at her feet, close enough for the soft fabric of his breeches to tickle her toes, he evaluated her. Quiet, but with seeming motion, he vibrated as if he never stood still. From head to foot, he lingered, touching her with his dark expression and a slight upturn at the corner of his full red lips. High on his sharp cheekbones, a light blush grew to give him a wild, savage look to match his slightly glazed eyes.

A deep, husky command to the technician broke a strange spell between them. "Let's get started. She pleases me."

A little thrill shot through her, and she twisted her wrists against the restraints. She pleased him. For the first time, she smiled, the motion stretching muscles that seemed little used.

Looking him up and down, the nurse stood next to her master and handed him a small round container. The formally stoic tech smiled.

"Her memory and body have been wiped clean. The procedure is easy. The white paste on her hands and erogenous zones needs to be programmed with your DNA and linked to her collar. If anyone besides you touches those zones, her collar will react."

The nurse rattled on. "This lubricant is a nanobot program for you to insert in her vaginal canal with your penis. Your sperm will carry the bots further into her reproductive organs to complete the programming. Then she'll do whatever you want, when her necklace is tied to the command bracelet."

The nurse cleared her throat and stared pointedly at his groin. “Most ask me to apply it. If you’d like...”

“No thank you, ma’am. You explained everything before. I’ll handle it from here.” His answer laced with steel cut the nurse’s smile from her face. The nurse withdrew to her console.

The next few moments would imprint her master onto her body through her collar. She’d be linked to him in every way, unable to stand the touch of another without her collar incapacitating her with illness. The programming would make her body cringe from others, only want him, and prepare her for him when he craved—sex. She was ready to fulfill her purpose.

Though she’d anticipated fear, now that the moment had arrived, a strange peace settled over her. Without doubt, she was made for this man. An instinct, as if her body remembered him, clicked in place. She accepted her fate and welcomed it.

He hesitated, and a fluttering pulsed in her belly. He wouldn’t back out, would he?

She forced her lips into a smile, and he moved again, silencing the flutters. He stepped between her bound, outstretched legs and bent over her. The rest of the room, everything, faded away, and all she saw, all she felt, all she breathed, came from him.

“Jewel,” he whispered, his mouth against hers before he licked her shivering lips.

She moaned with the exquisite pleasure. His soft, luxurious clothes rubbed against her instantly aroused body, sensitive and aware of his every movement. Her master lingered over her burning mouth, lapping at her as if he consumed her. Lips parted with her panting, she strained against her bindings. His tongue dipped inside to tantalize. Sweet torture. She needed to press against him, the urge rocking her into a senseless haze, but she couldn’t move enough. The restraints rubbed against her wrists, ankles, her throat and across her belly.

“Shh. I’ll take care of you, Jewel. That’s your name, my love. Jewel.”

Her chest swelled until it grew tight and hot. He eased back and stared down at her lips as she licked them, hungry for his taste. The once-white paste painted on her mouth had imbedded in her skin, sealing and activating the nanobots that would give a bright sheen to her skin. Did he like how she looked?

“Silver.” He shuddered and pressed his erection, hard and long, against her, but despite the instinct she couldn’t wrap her legs around him and bring him into her. Guttural and harsh, he rasped against her cheek before he fed her more kisses. “No one will touch your lips again but me.”

Had anyone touched her lips before? A dark shadow flickered, no longer than the blink of an eye, before she banished it. When he left her mouth to kiss her on the forehead, she blinked. He’d kissed an area without the comp-paste. Paying attention to her, not just the areas for silver-tipping, he showed signs of sensitivity and affection. She answered as she’d been instructed by the technician. “Yes, master. No one but you.”

Hot open-mouthed kisses trailed her hairline and around to her ear where he whispered an intimate order only she could hear, a command she would obey as if her life depended upon it. “Do not call me that. You may call me lover.”

He moved his lush mouth, wet and evocative, to her other ear and kissed her lobe before biting it gently. She shivered as her toes curled.

“You may call me by my name, Guy.” More kisses, soft and fluttering, swept across her chin. Fathomless eyes stared into hers. “You may call me with a crook of your finger.”

Her head spun, and the shadows circled. She served him. Not the other way around.

“Shh. No more speaking,” he murmured when she opened her mouth to protest.

A soft caress along her wrist freed her fingers, which itched to tunnel in his hair. She stretched toward him, and he grasped her hand, turning the palm to his mouth and licking the sensitive skin. In fascination she watched her hand change. Before, it had been covered in a milky substance, carefully applied to give the appearance of a glove. It shifted. Little spots, nearly invisible, tingled as they burrowed in. It wasn’t painful, but it burned pleasantly. In seconds, her hand appeared to be lacquered in a silver sheen. Her other hand came free, and he started to do the same to it, but in her desperation, she couldn’t keep her fingers still. She couldn’t touch him enough. She grasped at his clothes, trying to unbutton the offending material that slipped free of her eager movements.

“Not here. I’ll let you touch me when we’re away from here.” His expression softened, and he guided her hands to her side. “I won’t bind you

again, but you must be still. Leave them there. If you touch me, it'll be over before it's started."

Beneath her, the chair remained cool where she gripped it. She yearned to brush fingers through his hair, rasp his stubble and bring him down hard and strong on top of her. He'd silver-tipped her lips and hands. Anticipation built, coiling in her middle, for him to turn the remaining areas—her nipples, her vagina and the rosette of her bottom. His gaze moved from her eyes to her breasts. His breathing hitched, and the air in her own lungs seized. Time seemed to stand still until he lowered, his mouth parted, and he took her nipple into his mouth.

She moaned. It felt so good. Her whole body reacted with a tingling rush. A crazed longing to pull him into her fought with the command he'd given her. She'd rather die than disobey. Heat seared through her. He suckled, pulling and tugging around his groan, filling her ears like music.

His breath warming and tickling, he spoke against her skin. "You're so soft and sweet, more than I could ever have imagined. I've waited so long for you."

Waiting. He'd waited for her. He didn't need to wait any longer. He had her. All of her. She wiggled, pressing back into the platform beneath her.

Sweet endearments pouring from him, he whispered against her chest and trailed molten lava across her skin. He nipped her other breast, teasing, making her eyes cross as he engulfed her and plucked at her abandoned nipple. His tongue danced, fluttering back and forth across the excited nub so hard that it ached.

Intense burning embedded inside her, and the emptiness between her thighs throbbed. She whimpered. Her fingers dug into the chair, as useless as if her hands were still bound. "Please."

"I'll make it better. Hush, sweetheart."

She'd failed already, hadn't obeyed his first command for quiet. No more words would pass her lips. Anything to please him, make him want her, make him give her the release she needed before she melted in a puddle. She spun. Her world narrowed on him, her master, her life. His sexual desire resounded in her with a primal need that would make her burn, drive her into madness if she didn't give him release.

Brows drawn together in a slight crease, he stilled. She recognized that look. Deep within her, she'd never forgotten it, and the recognition

unsettled her enough to ease her suffering a small degree. He was concerned for her.

“I’m sorry.”

He had no reason to be sorry.

He knelt between her legs—no longer in her line of sight—and kissed the inside of her thigh. Her hips bucked against the ties binding her. Blood filled her mouth as she bit her tongue to keep her cry inside. Unable to tilt her head to see him, she stared at the blank white ceiling reflecting them in such a dim smudge she couldn’t make out his movements, only feel. She closed her eyes and gave herself to the moment.

A soft pressure on both ankles moved the stirrups wider, wider, as far as her legs comfortably opened. A brush of his hair tickled the side of her knee as he moved closer to her apex. Breath fanned low on the underside of her bottom, and gentle hands opened her to his perusal. Chills tumbled up and down her spine.

The hot, wet pressure of her master’s tongue pressed hard against the rosette of her bottom. As she jerked against the restraints, her breath came in heavy gusts at the intense burn. He trailed a slick lap up the outside of her smooth, hairless vagina from bottom to top. He paid the same treatment to her other outer lip, ending at the top to press against the pinpoint of fire. A conflagration erupted in the small spot of her erect clitoris. Cool fingers gently probed her open farther. He paused and the embedded nanobots settled while she craved more. The rapid succession of intense arousal brought her to a pant.

Another long, languid lick curled and dipped briefly inside her before zeroing in on her clit to stroke and throw fuel to the bonfire burning out of control. Her jaw ground together, and her fingers ached with the pressure against the seat. Her muscles tensed as a climax shocked through her. Her vision went black for a moment, and a smile curved her lips. Waves ricocheting through her at his lightest touch, the sweetest contentment relaxed her. She’d pleased him.

“You’re sweeter than honeysuckle.” His voice was so rough, she barely understood him. In a quick maneuver, he leaned over her while his hand rustled beneath his clothing. He sucked in a breath and laughed in a pained short exhale. “Damn, this lube is cold. That bit a little of the frenzy back, sweetheart.”

Face etched with fine lines, he nudged against her. A dull pressure at her wet entrance made her moan despite her best intention. Fear shot through her and she sought his eyes, looked for reassurance even while her body grew hot and languid, receptive to the only man she'd ever know in such a carnal fashion.

“Talk to me now. Me. Guy. Not your master. Something sweet from your tongue,” he said against her lips, and everything paused. His breathing. Hers. The touch between her thighs. His mouth hovered over hers.

“Guy.” She said the sweetest word she could imagine. His tongue delved to take her in a rough kiss.

His hips moved forward and he pushed inside. Large and filling, his cock pressed into her. He halted, tense and unmoving over her. Her inner walls stretched, pulsing around the tip of him.

“Jewel.” Face contorted, he groaned.

“Guy,” she managed through her seizing throat, wanting to soothe him, stroke and lick the moisture collecting on his brow.

“Damn, you're tight.” He chuckled with a rasp and settled his weight on her. The welcome pressure of him on top of her, his heat seeping through his clothing while her nipples brushed against the soft material, excited her further. He kissed her throat. “I'm not going to last at all, sweetheart. I'm sorry, but I have to do this fast. Relax, it'll be over in a moment.”

Guy surged hard inside her, tearing the hymen of her refurbished body. A sharp sting momentarily shocked her. She whimpered, but the pain had already fled. He pushed back in, farther, deeper, and she didn't care about the small pinch. He'd claimed her from head to toe. He filled her completely. Her reason for being, he nearly overwhelmed her as she memorized the feel of him inside her. His groin dug into her, hard and brutal. He spent with a soft curse and shook in fine tremors.

The moments spun out, dangling as everything righted, at peace. The band around her throat vibrated softly and grew quiet. A voice intruded. After a moment the nurse's words finally registered. “The last program is in place.”

His weight didn't move, but her awareness of him burst in her mind as if she'd only now fully awakened. His longing for her, his need to have her, his primitive pleasure in claiming her, his undying devotion and impulse to protect her. Above all, his bone-deep love for her, and since it was now part

of her makeup, a large part of her essence, she sought and found his longing for her and only her.

It was done. She was his, inside and out, ready for him at a moment's notice.

She smiled so widely her mouth stung at the corners.

Guy stirred and lifted his head, his brown eyes soft and slightly dazed. "I'll always take care of you. No matter what happens. Understand that, if nothing else."

Subduing a strange instinctive urge to tell him she could take care of herself, she swallowed hard as he adjusted himself, righting his clothing, covering what she yearned to see beneath the fine material. More so, she wanted him inside her again, in that moment when she could sense his emotions and understand how to fulfill him. Without that connection, she floated, strangely adrift.

The nurse moved forward, but Guy snarled, "Back away. Don't touch her." His fingers brushed her ankles, her midriff and her head. Released from her bindings, she couldn't move her languid body. He glanced over his shoulder toward the nurse. "Give me the clothing."

The nurse handed him a tube, which Guy used to apply a glossy protectant to Jewel's lips. As he rustled through a pile of clothes and made his choices, she missed his gentle, warm touch on her mouth.

DNA-safe gloves fit her perfectly. He helped her to sit up and get dressed. She swayed, and he caught her. "Take it easy. Let me put this wrap on you and we'll get out of here."

A long, flowing silver robe decorated with small patterns of pink birds and blue flowers snapped around her. She managed to put her languor-weighted arms into the sleeves. With careful, tender care, he wrapped the soft dress around her and tied the belt at her waist. The tight weave would not allow stray DNA through the fabric to her nipples or between her thighs, but she still had to be careful nothing intruded beneath or slipped inside. If one strand of the wrong DNA touched her silver-tipping, her collar would punish her unless Guy's matching wrist band overrode the command.

At her station, the nurse touched the screen of the U-panel in deft, practiced motions. "You'll need to pick up her Broker from the office before you leave."



“Yes.” As if that one word were an aberration and they the only two still in the room, Guy didn’t look away but continued to stare at her, his newly claimed silver-tip.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. He hooked her beneath the arms and lifted her against him before he slid away for her to stand. His heat soaked through her wrap. “Let’s go. I want to see this station in our wake before the hour is done.”

Missing his strength, she wobbled, trying to steady her legs. Guy stepped back to her side and put his arm around her waist. Leaning against his side, she welcomed his help. He was so much broader than she, so comforting and protecting.

“Like a newborn kitten you are, my Jewel.”

“My name?” she asked, another shadow flickering in her vision.

“Yes, my love. Say it. Say your name.”

As if a punch hit her chest and left a hole, she reeled until she gripped Guy and struggled to allow his presence to fill the emptiness. She straightened on her unsteady legs and clung to him.

“My name is Jewel.”

## Chapter Four

Guy would never be the same again.

A range sheriff keeping his town safe from the occasional rustler, going off-world several times a season to collect a few kidnap victims from a lawless space station, he'd thought his life would contain no more surprises. A steady diet of bland existence and hard work on his ranch had been enough. He'd never thought to leave the gravitational pull of Grassland or her sister planet, Taphgan. He'd even begun to get over his fruitless crush on the mayor's daughter and started to turn his mind toward finding a wife. But need knew no boundaries, legal or spatial.

The long and short of it was that, even with her memory wiped, his love for Jewel had no limits and left him with no protection around his guarded heart. He'd made love to her, but at what cost? Had she been herself, she wouldn't have called it making love. She'd call it slavery, prostitution, or maybe something worse. He'd had to save her, but he'd made her a slave, and he'd enjoyed every second of it. Despite the circumstances, it was more than sex to him, an act that came from his soul and stamped her into his very being until he took his last breath. The circumstances were laughably atrocious. It made him worse than a scrungy cattle poacher.

He'd claim her again in a heartbeat, though she hadn't chosen him five years ago. If he could give her back her life, he would, without hesitation, even if she'd never care for a man like him. His father's son, no doubt about it. When the going got tough, his morality flew the coop.

His aero-comm, in an adhesive fabric holster at his hip, vibrated with a message as the silver-tip clinic door closed behind him. With Jewel on his arm, the excitement of a new case—a new criminal to take down—caught him unaware. His gut burned with instinct. Something was about to go down.

Jewel's stride faltered as he checked the message. He stroked her arm and spoke in the soothing tone he used on spooked cattle. "Quinn sent coordinates to a medship in a nearby quadrant. The ship's research doctor

had some success with reviving memories of silver-tips. We need to get your Broker right away and get off this station, but let's talk to Quinn real quick. Ease his mind."

They entered the clinic. Before his comm connected, a guttural shout boomed from the office.

He reached for the phaser on his gun belt. The phaser that wasn't there. Instead, his hand skimmed over his silky trousers. Before he'd had a rational thought, he opened a small closet to the side of the entrance and stuffed them inside, where lab coats and soft slippers had already been pulled from the shelves and trampled. A man's displeasure poured through the closing door.

"She's mine," the man yelled. "Who has her? I'll kill the bastard, right after I beat you to a bloody pulp, you greedy little whore."

A pleading whine was cut off abruptly as the man stormed again. "I don't want another one. She's mine. Now give me what I want, bitch."

A small sound brought Guy's head around to check on Jewel, her breathing loud in the tight space.

Jewel whimpered and brought a hand to her throat. The yelling grew louder and more vulgar. Her shaking hands cupped the patch of once-scarred skin. A scar he'd never forget even if it was gone now.

"Damn." He made soothing noises while he ran a hand through her hair. She'd never cried in front of him before. Even after her mother died, she'd been strong, unshakable, no tears.

"Love, forget what's happening there. You're safe with me." He pulled Jewel into his side and itched to plow into the room and accost the man who'd tried to claim her. But he'd never put Jewel in that kind of danger. They had to stay out of sight until the man left. If only he had his six-shot. They'd already searched this closet. They wouldn't look in here again.

A loud crack heralded an ominous quiet. It didn't take much for him to decipher what had happened. Jewel buried her face into the side of his chest. Under any other circumstance, he'd have rushed inside to save the woman who'd received the brunt of a backhand, but instead, he quieted Jewel with soft strokes along her back, mumbling soft, barely-above-a-whisper inanities as if he held a child afraid of a thunderstorm.

Today's activities weren't in line with the man who wore a silver star, but he'd think on it later. As he'd done the other time he'd skated outside the law, he'd put the shame aside for a tomorrow he never embraced.

Through the closet door, it sounded as if a bull got loose in the county fair, trampling everything in its path. Amid the angry belligerence and the pleas from a woman, at least two other men spoke in calm tones, too low to be heard above the crashing, breaking and loud screeches.

“Where is she?” the man yelled again as more sounds of destruction battered against the door.

He could call station security, but then clinics like this paid half the cost of running the station just so they could be ignored, even when one of the workers was getting roughed up—or worse. Still. As Jewel huddled against him, he gripped the outside of his aero-comm, itching to get help for the woman. The search seemed to broaden out, as noises of shattering and tearing grew farther away, to the other clinic rooms.

It quieted.

The hair on the back of his neck rose. The silence could not be good.

He ran a hand down Jewel’s hair and she looked up, tears pooling in the blue depths. Even in the dim light, she looked different. No only from the passing of a few years, but the innocence in her eyes, the guilelessness was unfamiliar. This wasn’t the woman who’d promised to wait on him, then left in a skimmer cloud of dust as she followed her husband to the rich, indulgent spacer life. The Jewel he’d known had that smile, that look in her eye that said she knew a secret, and he’d always wanted to find out what it was. He never had.

And he’d never seen fear on her face before.

With a frown, he gripped her hand and led her to the door. The shadow bidder and his men had to be gone. It’d been quiet for too long.

Before, the clinic office had been neat, sterile.

The room was a disaster.

“Oh,” Jewel exclaimed softly.

Helping her step through the mess, he picked his way over to the desk.

The office manager lay there, crumpled beneath the desk. Her wide, empty eyes stared at nothing. The bruises at her neck showed the rage of her killer. For a moment, he gave in to the sadness and the wish that her plastic smile still sneered at him. He stepped in front of her body, blocking Jewel’s view.

Then he wiped the pity away. He couldn’t help this woman any longer. She sold women for a living, and he only had time to worry about Jewel

now. The men who'd done this would stop at nothing. A chill swept over him, and he made himself look around to find a way out of this mess.

The chairs broken on the floor, ripped paintings, overturned plants spilling dirt didn't faze him. The splintered pieces of tech, silver-tip collars and owner bracelets spilling from a cabinet did.

Not a single intact Broker was anywhere to be seen. Guy struck out, scattering the already destroyed tech everywhere.

"Oh."

Jewel's polite little exclamation pissed him off even more. Even her emotional outbursts weren't the same. "Try something like 'We're in deep shit now.'"

"I...I couldn't say that. Unless it's a command. Do you want me to?"

"Never mind." Careful to keep blocking the view of the manager's body, he sat behind the desk to find the panic button. There had to be one.

The glass-like surface was scratched and cracked. The comp panel smashed. His fingers slid beneath the lip. Where was it?

He barely kept his rage in check as he tried to focus on finding the switch. They needed that Broker.

A bump beneath his finger made him hesitate. He didn't want to deal with the people behind this clinic, but he couldn't leave without the Broker. Jewel would have no safety at all without it.

He snorted. Yes, she needed protection from him. Without that failsafe, she'd be open to his sexual urges for the rest of her life and would never be able to be out of range of his physical body.

He pushed the button.

If he handled security for this place, it wouldn't have taken several moments for a response that stretched awkwardly while Jewel, head bent, sat on the floor next to him. He also would have hired real guards.

The door slid open to a phaser. The nurse's hand shook as she held it, the aim precarious. "What did you do?"

"Take it easy." He put a hand on Jewel's head. "Stay down, sweetheart."

"Where's Donna?" The nurse let the door shut behind her but kept the phaser aimed in the vicinity of his head.

"If Donna's the manager, I don't know." Shifting in the seat which hid the crumpled body, he swallowed the guilt of that lie, but he couldn't work with the nurse if she panicked. "Someone else came in here and made this mess. You have to call security, but first I need our Broker."

“It was here.”

“Where is it?” he snarled.

Both women flinched.

The nurse hustled to the desk, and he moved to block her view beneath the desk as she stared at the destruction. She frowned. “It’s broken.”

“You have to have others. Another comp.”

Glancing at him with a nod, the nurse put the gun in the waistband of her pants and led them back to the room where he’d claimed Jewel. The empty platform where she’d been strapped down sent a pang of guilt through him. Her face placid and content, she smiled at him, unaware of the hell they’d be in if they didn’t find the Broker.

From her position at the command console, the nurse made a small sound of distress.

“What?” He couldn’t shake the feeling of doom sinking into him.

“Her data has been erased.”

He turned cold. “Her data. Is gone?”

The nurse nodded. “I can’t make her a replacement Broker.”

Hot, undiluted rage shot through him. An urge to throttle the woman surged through his arms to the tips of his rigid fingers. “Who did this? Who destroyed her data?”

“I don’t know.” The nurse’s face was nearly as white as her uniform.

“You don’t know his name?” He took a menacing step forward, unable to stop the unfettered temper he’d never before had trouble subduing.

“How should I? I didn’t see who ransacked the office. I saw you. And her.” She fairly squeaked.

“I need the name of the man who wanted to buy Jewel.”

“Her?” She pointed at Jewel, still quiet and meek as a field mouse.

“Yes. Who wanted to buy her?”

The nurse’s face turned rigid. A curl to her lip showed a hidden cruelty beneath. “He had that data erased, too. But I remember. Kalon Geanus. Her husband.”

With her first show of emotion unrelated to their silver-tip procedure, Jewel’s brows drew down as she stared at the nurse.

He reeled back. “Not anymore, he’s not.” What kind of human would do such a thing to his wife?

“There’s no way for me to replace the Broker. I’m sorry.”

He didn't respond—outrage had taken his speech away. The man had killed one woman and enslaved his own wife. What else was Kalon capable of? Mechanically, he gripped Jewel's hand and pulled her up. It was as if she didn't understand anything that'd happened. Or that they'd talked of her. Maybe she didn't.

The nurse couldn't reverse the procedure even if she had the data. She couldn't remove the collar either, so Jewel was truly bound to him. She'd feel every single sexual thought he had, and her programming would prompt her to satisfy him or suffer pain for her failure.

Without the Broker, that programming could never be paused. It was designed to be a failsafe, so the silver-tip's owner wasn't constantly sending signals. Without the Broker, he could never be far from her or remove the control bracelet, or else her programming would eventually kill her. Without that Broker, if he had sex with someone else, she'd feel his thoughts and be punished. There was no way to set her free. No way for her to live without him. Every single day, for the rest of her life, she was bound to him.

He owned a human—body and soul—a woman who'd been another man's wife hours before.

The hell of it was, he didn't regret it as much as he should.

There was no more help for them here. "Come on. Let's go. I have to get us to those coordinates Quinn sent. To see that doctor."

"You're upset?" Her question quavered low. He almost missed it.

Upset that now she was stuck with him?

Upset didn't cover it.

He'd shelve the anger toward Kalon until he could get to a comp station and run his name. Until then, he wouldn't bother Jewel with it. It wasn't as if she remembered Kalon. Or him, for that matter. Nor the long-ago connection between them, the desire he had. Still had.

"Without that Broker, I can't remove this control bracelet," he muttered as evenly as possible. Jewel didn't deserve his anger.

"You want to take it off?" Jewel's voice trembled, so unlike the woman he'd known before.

He'd had a vague plan of giving her the Broker and letting her go. In essence, the home base for his slave command unit acted as his proxy and kept Jewel in a neutral state unless he was wearing the bracelet, which he never would have done again once he had the Broker.

But with him constantly wearing the bracelet, he'd send her all his desire and lust. Passions he couldn't control around her. With Jewel receptive to his every fleeting thought, she'd be in constant arousal and need to fulfill his desires.

"Damn." He needed his boots.

"Guy?" Jewel slanted her face up to him, complete trust in her soft expression. With a slight upturn of the corner of her mouth, the hesitant smile sent a rush of bittersweet memories of her laughing, teasing, driving him mad when, as a love-struck youth, he'd longed to be her future.

"No time for us to stand around here and mope, sugar."

Her brow wrinkled as she looked up at him.

They weren't heading to Trident Ranch. Maybe they never would. "Never mind. I'd planned on taking you straight home, but now that's impossible." Now they had to find a way to have her memories returned and hope against hope they could replace the Broker.

A complicated rescue had just become impossible.

He squared his shoulders and changed direction. Instead of heading to the bay where he'd parked his hopper, he turned the opposite direction in the smoothly tooled corridor. He led them toward the bazaars and shops to make preparations.

They stepped into the harsh lighting amidst garish stalls of the Blue Quad Bazaar. Leering, cold, disdainful gazes flickered from him to size up his companion. He pulled her closer, unconcerned with any looks except those of cruelty. Silver-tipping was illegal on every known planet, not only because it was slavery, but also because of the danger to the victim.

A minority of owners tired of their slaves and sold the doomed creatures, knowing full well the agony they'd end with. That practice was the one he abhorred the most, and if he could rid his planet of *Zuthuru* for those one or two callous owners, he would.

The furtive, darting stares eased away as the milling shoppers went back to their own concerns. Jewel shivered beside him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Curiosity appeased, the common populace ignored them.

"We'll need to get you better slippers and more dresses," he murmured into the top of Jewel's golden hair before he pressed a kiss into the silken strands.



“What would you like?” Her voice shook in a way he didn’t recognize. The Jewel of his youth had been confident despite the appearance that a strong wind could blow her over.

“It’s your choice. I don’t know anything about shoes.” Or the dress that covered her silver-tipped nudity. He tried to keep the image of her nakedness from making him giddy. Didn’t work. With a quick sidestep, he avoided walking into the man in front of him who’d stopped to haggle with a fruit merchant.

Jewel of five years ago had been his constant dream. More times than he could count, he’d woken in a bed of longing and want. He’d never even seen her skin other than her arms, face and devastating cleavage. When she’d lived in Rangetown, she’d been skinny, frail and delicate with a glowing face, pert nose, rosy cheeks and huge blue eyes that bore right through him. But her uniqueness, her freedom of nature that ignored the uptight social structures of wealthy Grasslanders, had been what he’d loved. Miss Jewel rode a horse astride, beside him, instead of sitting in the shade and watching from the sidelines.

Today, when he’d seen her spread and ready for him, her curves had extra flesh, with breasts more rounded than he remembered—and what he’d remembered was good. Shorter than his six-three by nearly a foot, she’d appealed to his protective instincts then, but that didn’t compare at all to the primal urge keeping his senses fully alert, boiling beneath the surface, ready to explode at the hint of a move toward her. Danger lurked everywhere for her as they walked among the stalls of food, clothes, jewelry and other sundries. The circlet at his wrist made of weightless titanium, the comp that controlled the band about her neck, grew cold and weighty.

Jewel crushed herself against Guy while she took equal turns staring up at him and taking in her surroundings. The open area of the station resembled a spring festival in its activity and temporary stalls full of sundries, but the colored tents weren’t as bright as those of the annual Rangetown exhibitions. These were grimy from the fuel exhaust that seemed to cover the station and the apathy that overcame the inhabitants at midday when the carousing began.

At a stall of women’s clothing, Jewel’s hands slid among the expensive garments and accessories. Would that her white hand could slide along his cock with the same reverence. A quick shake of his head ruthlessly shoved

the thought away before Jewel could sense his wayward inclination to bend her over the piles of soft cloth.

Jewel snatched her hand away. Her blue eyes opened wide and she stared at him, frozen in place, waiting. Her lips formed an eager smile. “Now?”

Too late.

“Not here.” He ran a hand over his face.

*Get a grip on yourself, man.* They were here to clothe his woman, his illegal woman, not dawdle about in the wares. Just knowing she’d respond to what he wanted made it nearly impossible to think of anything else.

A short, rotund shopmistress approached and gave him the once-over, not in any way sexual, but in visible appreciation of his expensive garments. Within her pale wrinkled face she smiled. The glint in her eye reflected pure avarice.

After rescuing Jewel, he’d sunk from the most well-to-do rancher on Grassland to being land-rich and cash-poor. With his father’s inability to stop money from running straight out of his hands, Guy understood how to scrape and survive.

*And steal.*

This was not a good time to run out of funds, but he’d find a way to get her out of this mess. Until he had the time to move some of his property, he had a barely existent budget to outfit Jewel and keep her safe.

“Honorable shopkeep, my concubine is in need of three changes of clothing for a short jaunt to *Gerra Station*. Robes, gloves and slippers.” He lied easily. After years playing this part, he didn’t bother with guilt, though the use of the common term to describe Jewel twinged.

The trader visually measured Jewel. “Honorable sir, does your female need undergarments as well? I have a special weave that protects from unintentional contamination.”

Beside him, Jewel pressed her face into his ribs as if to crawl into his skin. Her hand gripped the neckline of her wrap closer around the silver circlet at her throat.

“Yes, those as well. An ensemble in blue, pink and...” he paused. Jewel had worn so many gowns, vibrant colors and rich fabrics before she’d crushed his world and left Grassland with one heart-rending sentence and a good-bye kiss. As lowborn as they came, he’d been a fool to dream of having her as wife. “Black.”

The wraps were nothing like the dresses she'd worn before she betrayed him and left to marry another. It was painfully obvious that, given how he'd barely made it inside her before he'd spilled, he should've found a woman to replace her memory long ago.

The shopkeep chose the same style of silken wrap Jewel now wore, the differences being in the small embroidered scenes ranging from the pink with paradise flowers to the black dress adorned with angels and demons in various embraces. The selected slippers and undergarments wouldn't do, though. They didn't fit his dwindling budget.

"No, my concubine is lovely without further adornment. I'd prefer something simple and elegant to cover her treasures." His face heated. He'd said such drivel before while on mission, but he'd never had Jewel as witness.

The transaction closed quickly.

With the new purchases bundled, he tucked them under his arm. The nearly weightless package had greatly reduced the heft of his bank purse. Thankfully, the next stop wouldn't dent his finances as much since the merchants that catered to the Terraloft took credit. He guided her through the crowded bazaar.

Jewel slumped against him and stumbled.

"Do you need to stop at a way-room for a few moments?"

She should rest a moment without prying eyes. They'd be alone. In a small room. Together. His cock filled and lengthened.

Jewel stopped mid-stride to cup his erection. Through the fabric of her gloves and his pants, her touch burned him. A man brushed by, jostling them apart.

"Not here," Guy gritted out and brushed her hold aside.

As if scalded, she gripped the hand that had caressed him and paled. Eyes watering, she ducked her head and muttered, "I'm sorry."

A passing Terraloft laughed, his arm around a luscious woman who stared adoringly at her owner.

"No touching in public." He winced when she whimpered.

"Yes, master." She pressed into his side again, but no longer peered around her, keeping her gaze on the crowded walk.

He sighed. "Use my name."

"Yes, Guy," she whispered to her feet. She managed to make his name sound like *master* anyway.

After wending their way through the marketplace, passing through the western bridge and taking the lift to the fourth level, they paused outside the frosted plexy window of one of the permanent businesses on the commerce level. Herman Troshky was a financial conduit who, though he pressed for outrageous cuts, was as honest a trader as you could find on *Station Zuthuru*.

Guy pressed his thumb to the pad next to the door and waited for the announcement of his visit. The sparkling white panel slid open.

“Trident, haven’t seen you in many rotations. Come in, come in.” The tall, elegant man ushered him to a plush settee and didn’t acknowledge Jewel, as the polite stricture of upper-echelon Terraloft society demanded. “Would you like a dram of your favorite whiskey? I received a shipment yesterday.”

“Yes, I’ve yet to taste as fine a blend as your Taphgan whiskey.”

Troshky bowed slightly and strode to a sidebar to prepare drinks for the two of them, but Guy expected none for Jewel.

The arrogant rich no longer lived on planet. The new elite, the Terraloft, dodged earthly legal strictures and lived for pleasure alone but held to their own honor codes. They kept their ranks free of lowly born, using their wealth to further their own collective lifestyle while adhering to old customs of aristocracy.

Troshky clung to the bottom rung of the structure that fed the cravings of the rich. Following the unwritten Terraloft code, Troshky would only acknowledge a silver-tip if the owner wished it so. Until introduction, Jewel didn’t exist to the man who filled two glasses. Best to keep it that way since Jewel was above men like Troshky.

Troshky handed him a glass with a slight nod, sat across a highly glossed low table and crossed his legs with affected boredom.

Jewel perched beside Guy on the small couch with her thigh pressed against his. She folded her hands in her lap and held herself immobile with head bent low.

Even under these circumstances, her light touch sizzled through him. To clamp down on his desire before she responded and sought to ease him, he glanced around the room. The apparent ill-gotten wealth brought his desires to a screeching halt. He’d used Troshky’s skills to help others to freedom, to get back home to Grassland, but he didn’t forgive the man for his other clients.

Troshky wore the same type of rich-textured suit, though his shone in emerald green to match his coloring and eyes. A handsome man, Troshky supported his own concubine as well as a wife stashed somewhere in the upper levels of the station. Yet his features were nearly bland and decidedly pale from never seeing the sun, and his body was lean and soft from seeking no hard labor. This man had never tilled the earth with his hands. Like Guy in his hated role as a spoiled brat, Troshky wore soft slippers, a sign he had no need to work. Since Troshky was a climber, somewhere in his past he'd not possessed wealth. He'd not been born to it any more than Guy had. That thin connection seemed to make them almost friends, and the gleam in Troshky's eyes, one he'd not had before, spoke plainly. He thought Guy had finally taken the last step in irresponsible dissolution by taking a concubine, making them, in Troshky's eyes, more alike.

Nope. Not alike at all.

*Can't respect a man who doesn't own a decent pair of boots.* He sighed and took a long sip of the smoky liquor.

Let the games begin. "Your hospitality is fine, as always." Guy started with the usual flattery.

Troshky nodded with a slight tilting to his lips. "I am pleased you visit again."

They never mentioned business for what it was. The exchange of money for service was a favor, not a lowly exchange from merchant to customer.

"I would ask a favor, and if you deem it within your indulgence to grant me this, I would be delighted if you would accept a valuable gift." Guy looked into the shrewd green eyes across from him before he moved his disinterested gaze to the furnishings of the room.

A large vidscreen cycled through lush scenes of tropical paradises, bright sunny beaches and luxuriously appointed pleasure ships with scantily clad men and women lounging around to beautify their surroundings. The full bar held a sampler of liquors, ales and synthetic mood adjustors. Two doors flanked the vidscreen. He'd been through those doors before. One held a long corridor to a closetlike hallway filled with sample garments for custom order. The other door led to pleasure chambers. The last door to the last bedroom was Troshky's. His concubine lived in these quarters, but Guy'd never seen her. He flicked a glance at Troshky's wrist. No bracelet. His concubine's Broker must be in perfect working order, unlike Jewel's, wherever it was. His hand tightened on his glass.

“How can I help my friend?” Troshky’s cultured voice held no accent, his origins effectively disguised.

Getting some of Jewel’s life back, her memory, was his first priority, but after arranging transportation, he’d try one last-ditch effort to find her Broker—if it still existed. He held no hope that it did.

“A pleasure cruise. But I need to make a stop on a certain medship along the way. I can give you coordinates, but I’d like to travel anonymously. Papa’s been after me to wed, and I’d like to avoid the noose for a few months or so.” His father might turn in his grave at that, but he couldn’t care less. The man had been a cruel, lazy wastrel. Guy’s thigh pressed against Jewel on the settee while he covered her gloved hand with his own and squeezed gently.

“A common enough request, my friend. Come.” Troshky rose elegantly and motioned him to a console near the vidscreen.

After exchanging more pleasantries, more foppish inanities before he could be brash enough to offer the coordinates, Guy found a cruise that would work and arranged to “gift” Troshky to complete the reservations.

“Would you like to visit the backroom for any further needs?” The insinuation was there with barely constrained amusement. Troshky meant sex toys, bindings, enhancers, but though it might help Guy’s cover, this would be his last mission. His cover was thin at best, and he no longer had an urge to keep it. Besides, once he got Jewel to a safe place, helped her recover her life, his life would be over. He couldn’t return to his ranch and remain sheriff with Jewel as his slave.

“Not today. I have other plans, but I would ask another favor, for the appropriate reciprocation, of course.”

“Whatever I can do for a friend.” Troshky smiled, his deep dimples showing why he’d never fully smiled at Guy before. The Terraloft did not dimple.

“I need to track a certain fund transfer.”

“Such a simple thing to do for a friend.” If possible, Troshky’s dimples deepened.

Troshky hit pay dirt.

With all the illegal data at his fingertips, Troshky made the outrageous payoff worthwhile, and Guy had the berth number for Kalon, not far from his own on *Zuthuru*. He’d stash Jewel safely in his and confront the man. He’d sell all of Trident Ranch to buy the Broker if the man had it.

He took his leave with the usual promises to return, helped Jewel rise from her seat and guided her to the door. Troshky still hadn't acknowledged her presence, but he chuckled knowingly.

"My friend, you will enjoy being caught in silver."

The tip of Guy's ears burned, but he didn't reply. The door closed behind them.

Hustling through the corridors, he held Jewel's hand and directed her toward his berth. They took a lift to the correct level. The car beside theirs pinged, and the doors clacked.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled. Trusting never-fail instincts, he yanked Jewel behind a café cart and pretended interest with the vendor.

"Two cafeteens." He nodded at the server pouring the beverages and peered at the three men who stepped off the lift.

The sour expression of the man in the middle didn't concern him at first. The tall bruiser's deep rumble of displeasure did. He'd heard that growl before.

It was Kalon Geanus. The bulky, fist-sized Broker couldn't be easily hidden in the Terraloft guise of the man. He didn't have it.

Guy halted his lunge before it started and shuffled his slippered feet. His hands fisted against the urge to choke Kalon until the degenerate pilferer revealed the location of the unit, but if it wasn't one of the broken pieces of tech in the silver-tip office, he'd probably jettisoned it at the nearest waste chute. Why would he keep it?

He paid for the cafeteens and handed one to Jewel. "No help for it." He looked hard into Jewel's clear blue eyes. "I hate to bring you into harm's way, but if we don't get a Broker for you, you'll be tied to me the rest of your life."

"I am," she whispered.

She was. But not the way he'd wanted her tied to him, with an old-fashioned wedding band.

"Don't drink that. I need it."

She didn't give him the are-you-crazy look he expected, she just nodded in compliance. A small pang of remorse soured his mood further.

They followed the men, but they didn't stop at the hatch for their ship. Damn Troshky. He'd given him the wrong berth number for Kalon.

They kept going, never once looking behind them. Kalon was in the middle, a brawny, wide-shouldered man around his own height in a silly

Terraloft pantsuit similar to the one he wore now.

That was where any similarity to the man ended, as far as he was concerned. Kalon moved heavily, like he'd never walked on planet before. Kalon and his men had no instincts.

They slowed in a part of the corridor that made Guy really regret not sneaking his six-shot aboard. He backed up, Jewel behind him, and leaned into an open berth door. The bay beyond was dark and empty.

"Shh," he breathed low, barely above thought. Plastered against him, she nodded against his back.

Kalon and his men stopped at the berth for Guy's hopper.

The tall one drew a weapon as the other popped the console and pulled out a mess of wires. Leave it to *Zuthuru* to have centuries-old tech, making his hopper vulnerable.

*Hell and damnation.*

At least the matter of breaking and entering caused enough noise to make good cover. He pulled his aero-comm and opened a channel to Quinn.

"The hopper is about to be breeched. Get your ass in the hidey hole."

"Right away." Good thing Quinn didn't question.

"At my signal, pop the cover and get the hell out." He closed and holstered the comm.

"Who was that?" Jewel's expression was curious, no sign of recognition of her own father.

"Later, sweetheart. Stay here. Don't move a muscle until I yell, then run to me." He ached to kiss her silver lips, to memorize her taste in case everything went straight to hell, but instead he peered into the corridor. The door to his shuttle stuttered open.

"Here. You hold the clothes. I'll take those." He popped the lids off the sterityne cafeteen cups and slid against the wall toward the open door of his hopper.

He was a little surprised Jewel didn't follow. She never used to stay put. She'd always stayed right with him when, as kids, they went trail riding. His stomach pitched and not just from the danger that he could be heading to a severe beating or, more likely, death.

Hands steady, he barreled into the entry, aiming the hot liquid into the faces of the two guards spinning toward him. Amid their screams, he lunged at Kalon, fist aimed straight for his nose. A nice crunch took the edge off.



He yelled, “Now.”

The fake flooring above the hidey-hole popped up, slamming into the shorter guard who toppled over, clutching his red face.

Alarms blared in the hallway.

Quinn stood, Guy’s six-shot in his hand, gesturing the two guards out. Glaring at him, they stilled and wiped brown liquid off their puffy faces. They waited for orders from a bleeding Kalon as they each pulled weapons from beneath jackets.

“Better get out before security gets here.” Guy wished that six-shot was in his hands. He didn’t know if Quinn knew how to turn off the safety, much less use it.

Already, the scuffing of boots echoed down the hall.

Jewel slipped in the door of the now-crowded hopper. Everyone froze, the weapons drawn in the goons’ hands pointed up, away from Jewel, their boss’s ex-wife. A chill as cold as space snuck up his spine.

Brows lowered and mouth in a tight line, Kalon stared at Jewel’s neck, the silver collar gleaming as she sidled behind Guy, where none of the other men could see her.

“What did you do to her?” Quinn demanded, his face as gray as the hopper’s hull.

Warring with the urge to go against all he’d upheld as sheriff and pummel Kalon’s face to a pulp, Guy clenched his fists. Several punches might slake the need.

Kalon growled and leaped at him, sailing through the air several feet to wrap his meaty hands around Guy’s neck. Guy brought his leg up and kneed Kalon in the stomach, hard, and they fell to the floor with a crash. Kalon’s heavy, dense body smothered him. Guy’s ears rang. His face filled, thick, swollen, as if it’d explode from lack of air.

Pummeling for all he was worth, he punched the asshole in the side, again and again. The *thunk* against solid flesh satisfied a vicious blood lust and hatred that shocked him, even as he struggled to get out from beneath the man before he got the shit kicked out of him.

The man could take pain. His face contorted but he leaned down, steadfast, putting all his weight into his hands, pressing down on Guy’s windpipe—the same way he’d killed the office manager.

With a surge, Guy thrust his arms between them and pushed up, knocking away Kalon’s hold. The snarling thug lunged at him again.

Guy kicked out, tripping Kalon. They clashed together again amid shouts. Several hands grabbed him from behind and hoisted him away. Kalon spit on the floor in a blood-tinged streak. His nose swollen and still bleeding, Kalon shrugged off the hands of several guards who grabbed him again.

“Stop. That’s enough from the two of you.” A well-armed ranking officer strode between them, slapping a crowd-control bar in his hand. Kalon stepped back and moved around the officer, his guards following.

Guy wiped the sweat from his forehead and glared, wanting the security men out of his way so he could continue beating Kalon. He clenched his bruised fist.

At the door, none of the security personnel trying to stop or question him, Kalon sneered. “Too bad about the Broker. I’ll be seeing you.”

Kalon held all the cards and knew he’d doomed Jewel by stealing her Broker—or breaking it into pieces.

“Bastard,” Guy hissed. His vision blurred red. He tensed to lunge, but bodies pressed around him, keeping him in the hopper and pushing Kalon out. Unable to think past the rage, he flexed his hands and took deep breaths.

The Geanus flunkies spoke with station security in hushed tones.

Like Terraloft did as a matter of course, they’d bribe their way out of breaking into his ship. As long as they left the area with no more trouble, they’d walk straight to their own berth and leave. He couldn’t touch Kalon. Not now. He unclenched his fists.

Jewel wouldn’t be safe until they were away from here.

Quinn stood in the hatch door, arguing their case, pointing accusatory fingers at his former son-in-law. And it was *former*. No matter what, Kalon had no control over Jewel, except through her son. Guy couldn’t let Kalon hurt either of them.

Guy turned to Jewel and hugged her shaking form. She spoke into his chest. “Who were they?”

“Nobody to concern yourself with.”

The door swished shut, cutting off the continued arguments and insults.

“I estimate we have two minutes to get out of here. They have Jared and will be leaving now. If we don’t put some space between us...” Guy shrugged.

“You think he has illegal weapons? That he’d hurt Jewel? Blow us out of the space lanes?” Quinn scowled at the closed hatch.

“I’m sure of it. Strap in. We don’t have much time.”

Quinn peered at Jewel with a sad, heartbroken expression and reached out to her. She flinched away. “You don’t remember me?”

“No.” Her eyes were huge and round. She couldn’t take much more of this without going into shock.

Unable to take the pain evident in the older man, Guy cut the discussion short. “Why did you arrange her marriage to that psychopath?” He went through the motions on the console, getting it ready to disembark.

“I had no idea he’d do something like this.”

“You better get secure. Jewel and I are sneaking off the hopper. Have arrangements on a cruise liner that’ll get us to that doctor you found. If we take the hopper, it’ll take us twice as long and we might run into trouble with Kalon again. You take the ship home. That’s all we can do to fix this mess.”

He didn’t know how else he could help Jewel. He couldn’t get on with his life without trying to get her life back. If she recovered her memories, she’d be more useful, giving him information about her ex, helping them find a way to get the Broker.

Whether Kalon had destroyed the Broker or not, it was out of reach for now. But only for now. He’d track that two-bit, good-for-nothing spacewaste to the ends of the universe. Kalon had to pay for making Jewel a shell of herself, for making her a sex slave. He’d make him pay if it was the last thing he did.

He worked his aching jaw back and forth.

But not today.

## Chapter Five

Jewel couldn't help but be more aware of her partner than the promise of her next breath, but Guy didn't suffer the same. Other than a few disinterested directions, he didn't speak as he guided her from his ship through the crowded halls with his hand on the small of her back.

The everyday workers, the dockers, the slaves, all glanced at her with varying degrees of hostility or leering laughter, but she didn't care what they thought. Her master wouldn't look at her. She couldn't think of anything she might have done to offend him, but perhaps she didn't remember all the things she ought. Maybe it had to do with those men he'd fought. She hadn't understood why they argued over her, and she hadn't been able to breathe while Guy was in danger. Why didn't she remember the man who'd been her husband?

It didn't matter now.

She was Guy's.

She wiped the angry-faced man from her thoughts and vowed to never think of him again.

"We're going straight to the cruise liner to await departure. I need to take care of a few loose ends from our stateroom." He still didn't look at her.

She squeezed her folded hands together. He'd acted as if he enjoyed her appearance during the claiming. If he'd tired of her already, she'd have to do better next time. Her lips trembled. She just had to.

They entered a tall, expansive waiting area with several lines of terminals. Expensive floral arrangements decorated metal tables with scrollwork leggings placed at even intervals throughout the vast concourse decorated with intricate hangings. Art in a soft watercolor style depicted exotic scenes on the pleasure stops of the NeauFleet. The billboards proclaimed it a company of innumerable space liners and vacation spots known for creating ecosystems to cater to every taste. A large clear window showed the space liner they'd board. A long oval with rows and rows of

portals, the ship greatly resembled an egg. She didn't think she'd been aboard a ship like it, but she couldn't really know that.

The seats were filled with the aristocracy awaiting departure. No one noticed her. The cruise workers in their fine uniforms of black trousers and velvet double-breasted gold-buttoned suits didn't acknowledge her in the least.

The enormity of the great hall reminded her of a vast asteroid belt of mining ships, barges and scattered debris. Everywhere, life teemed in busy eddies. She moved closer to Guy, her anchor.

At a podium before the on-ramp, a thin man took Guy's papers and scanned them for verification. She had no identification beyond the circlet about her neck.

"I require a no-disturb chamber seal for the duration of the trip." Guy still hadn't looked at her, but his voice soothed over her tremors. He fiddled with the silver bracelet, turning it around his wrist.

"Very good, sir. Proof of ownership of the silver-tip is required for boarding." Without looking up, the man touched buttons on the slim panel in front of him.

Guy lifted his wrist to her neck and the hum of the communication between devices ran hot tingles all over. Her nipples pebbled and her stomach tightened. Toes curling in her slippers, she shuddered.

A sharp breath beside her preceded a rich furling desire that stirred deep in her core. Her master desired her. Smiling, she eagerly anticipated her duty. Before she could reach over to stroke the bulge in his pants, he gripped her arm. After retrieving his boarding documents and guiding her up the plank beneath the wide entry, he bent to whisper in her ear, his hot words blowing shivers down her nerve endings. "Wait for the room, love."

Dropping his fingers to tangle in hers, he pulled her after him.

She'd wait for the room, and then she'd ease his needs. She licked her dry lips and ached to press them to his flesh, but she followed in his wake and kept the deeply seated compulsion in a low simmer. The unavoidable instinct to give him release made her stomach pitch and eyes water, but he'd ordered her. She'd obey.

In her focus on Guy, the search for their chambers was a blur. Other than boldly colorful tapestries, intricate chandeliers and elegantly dressed men and women moving along the wide corridors, she noted the passing of

the doors, anxiously awaiting the one that'd give her the permission to please her master.

They entered a large stateroom with a flick of his thumb over the lock. She reached for his britches with her shaking grasp. Dodging her caress, he plopped her into an armchair.

“Stay.” A scowl on his sharp features, he grumbled and backed away.

He sat across from her in a small seating area at the side of the lavish room, which held a large bed, a stocked bar and an armoire open to reveal the latest vid-screen and other tech consoles. Before he got settled, Guy jumped up and strode to the bar, his long strides determined. The clinging material of his outfit showed his strong legs and tight behind. Her mouth watered, and she imagined running her hand through the dark hair brushing the top of his collar.

Ice clinked as he, still silent, made his drink. She wrenched her attention away from his tense wide shoulders because, if she stared at his indifference any longer, the stirring in her stomach would sour. The room was grand, a wonderful place to spend alone with her master for the next few days for their new bond to take hold. Though she didn't need time. She was thoroughly bound.

Tapestries covered every surface in splendor, no amount of the metallic hull visible, even around the large picture window that showed the dock and the people scurrying to board. The wealthy in their fine adornments walked up the ramp, all smiles and relaxed. Below, barely visible on the loading deck filled with mech-barges carrying baggage and supplies, the workaday boarded the lower levels with harried expressions as they crowded into the limited space.

A familiarity of that scene, and a sense Guy'd be comfortable in such a crowd, brushed against a wall inside her. An almost tangible force that she quickly understood to be her former life. She didn't resent the wall but accepted its presence.

With a crystal glass, its amber liquid sloshing in the ice, Guy crossed to the armoire, threw open the doors and accessed a console that he worked on for long moments. He shot her a glance, all business—closed off from her. “Getting updates on an investigation and making arrangements for our travel.”

Whatever he'd done, his expression didn't change as he sat across from her again. Everything else fell away. The room, the people outside, the wall

in her mind, all forgotten with a blink to be replaced with a curling excitement to be with the handsome man who was her life.

“We need to talk.” Guy blew out a long breath and leaned forward. The glass held loosely in one hand propped on a knee, the other ran through his hair and stayed there, clutching at the thick healthy strands with their sun-kissed streaks. He dropped his hand to dangle off his knee and stared at the plush woven rug.

Time stretched as she waited. The lull built into an aching pressure on her chest. She gasped. He finally looked up from the floor to give her a pitying once-over before his face hardened into a scowl again. She didn’t please him. Her cheeks grew hot.

“You don’t remember me, but I’ve known you for most of your life.”

She blinked rapidly, her thoughts whirling. The wall in her mind seemed more real, a tangible block, when scant moments ago it’d been a whisper, a nonentity with no emotion attached to it. The heat in her cheeks cooled so fast, she shivered with the chill.

“Don’t be frightened,” Guy insisted. “I’ll always take care of you. Always.”

His complexion, full of life and deeply bronzed from time spent planet-side, paled considerably. He put his drink down on a side table, crossed his arms and slouched back in his chair with legs spread wide.

“This will take a few minutes to explain. You need to stay over there while I do it and don’t look so vulnerable while you’re at it. Don’t cry or touch me, or I’ll never make it through this.” He sounded angry, but his words steadied her.

“Your name is Jewel Quinn. Or it was. You have a married name now, Geanus. You left our home world five years ago, and I hadn’t heard a word about you since. Your father expected you home yesterday. Said you left your husband and were bringing your young son home.”

“Son.” Jewel blinked again, hard.

A dark premonition, like a gray fog, reached across the room, but when Guy didn’t react, she shivered, dreaded the truth that she saw things that weren’t there. No question it existed only in her mind, along with the pounding that reverberated inside her skull.

The nonentity, a whispery mental block, solidified. The partition in her memories vibrated like a drum’s skin.

His lips moving, Guy watched her closely with slanted brows, but she didn't hear his words over the buzzing in her ears. She gripped her head and closed her eyes.

A loud pop joined the drum for one heart-stopping moment, and then a fleeting vision, like a pinprick in a parchment paper, let the sun through.

The drum in her head stopped abruptly. She jolted in the chair.

"Jared," she whispered. "My son's name."

"You can't know that." He sounded harsh, and his features drew tight in lines around a frown. He softened his voice. "Your memories are wiped. Maybe I've rushed you. You must be tired."

"I don't know my son, what he looks like, nothing but his name." She couldn't stop sounding like a child seeking comfort. Arms wrapped around her belly, she fought the ache to join Guy, to crawl into his lap and feel his arms around her, but he'd commanded her to stay.

"Perhaps the mind-wipe isn't as complete as I'd thought," Guy replied, distant, as his gaze lost focus.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes. Not only didn't he want her to ease his passionate needs, perhaps because she didn't please him sexually, but she'd somehow become flawed as well. Broken. Maybe because she'd been married.

All she could do was sit and wait for him to tell her what to do, how to act. Along with the small pinprick in the dam of her memories—she sensed that was what it was—a fraction of identity crept into her. Without a doubt, as short a time ago as yesterday, she'd disallowed a man from owning her. Yet today, she ached to be owned, held and told what to feel.

Guy's attention snapped back to her. "I'm waiting on a report about your husband. Well, your ex-husband. Legally you became unmarried when they wiped your mind." He was still speaking to her in a remote fashion, as if he were a news hologram reporter.

"Unmarried." She tried the word on her tongue but didn't have a response. Nothing. No twinge of remorse, no hint of connection, no drum beating her senseless.

"Your father sent communiqués to pave the way for us. We have an appointment with a Dr. Wells. He'll check you out and try to remove your memory block."

Another chill swept through her, and she wished she could go to bed, forget the torment that tugged in every direction, but she couldn't sleep



anyway, not with the unappeased lust she'd sensed in Guy. That lack in her duty started as a dull ache in her belly, but it throbbed in a slowly gathering tempest. Soon, according to the instruction given her by the silver-tipping technician, her compulsion would cause her real mental and physical agony. Sleep would be impossible.

"Why?" she croaked, not really asking why he planned to have her memory returned, but why he wasn't at this moment allowing her to fulfill his sexual fantasies.

He was her reason for being.

"For one, I'm not sure we'll be able to get your son back unless you can tell me what happened to you over the last few days." A crack in his demeanor showed, and his stare caught her, searched her for reaction.

She licked her lips. "A mother should want her son."

She should, but somehow she was flawed. Wouldn't a mother feel for her child, no matter what had happened to her mind?

Beyond the pain of the leaked memory moments ago, she couldn't find anything inside her except the yearning to hold Guy. She clenched the silk of her wrap. She needed to get through this discussion quickly and move on. Get in that lush bed that drew her attention almost as much as the man in front of her. "And?"

"Secondly..." He paused, a clear look of pity on his face. "You're not you. Without your memories, you're not the woman I've known. You can't make decisions for yourself. It's a crime what they did to you, and I'm a sheriff in our world. It's my duty to see that you get the help you need. You'll never have your whole life back, but I'll be damned if I can't free you to a degree. At least, everything that's in my power to do, to give you something back. Without the Broker, you'll never be able to live without me, but maybe the doctor can help with that, too."

All she heard in that speech, all she could understand, absolutely floored her.

A tiny spark of rebellion leaked out before she could stop it. "If you don't want me, why did you claim me?"

She wished the question back. She didn't want the answer. She couldn't face his rejection.

Guy jerked his chin and shot to his feet to pace, but not before she glimpsed his frown as he glanced down her body to her cleavage and licked his lips.

His short strides to the bar and back, over and over, accentuated the truth. The erection in his clinging pants proved he lusted for her body, and the flow of desire from her collar didn't lie. That was enough for her. Their bodies spoke to each other. Unaware she'd sat with a rigid, straight posture, she relaxed back in the chair and let the tension ease away. Though the ache in her middle grew stronger, his reaction assured her she'd be allowed to wrap him in sexual release. Soon.

"When you disappeared on your way home, your father asked me to find you. I did. You were to be sold to a shadow bidder. I bought you instead. Because..." He flushed and his chin dipped. He'd told her they'd known each other. She didn't doubt it because she recognized his reaction. The next words from his mouth would be a lie. "But I won't use you like that."

After clearing his throat, he continued. His steady gaze held hers. He was about to speak the truth. "Because I wouldn't hurt you, and I will do everything, give everything, to help you."

The ache rode her hard.

He wanted to use her, but he didn't want to hurt her.

"Please." That's all she could manage over the desire throbbing, bringing heat to her cheeks to spread down her torso and pulse in her sex.

He couldn't have understood her plea. She wanted him to fill her with that erection or let her put her mouth on him, lick him, nuzzle him and take him down her throat.

Guy groaned, stood in the middle of the floor and ran a hand over the bulge tenting the front of his pants.

"I'm going out for a while." He gave a long sigh, and her stomach clenched. If she didn't serve his needs, the collar would punish her until she did. The ache in her middle would only continue to get worse.

He didn't look back as he whisked from the room.

\*\*\*

*Damn.*

Guy squeezed his eyes shut and thumped his head on the wall outside their quarters. Once. Twice.

He couldn't be near Jewel without the silver tint of her lips reminding him he owned her. Completely.

She was vulnerable, needy and so eager to do anything he wanted. That was a problem.

He could do anything at all to her, and she'd beg for more. He could be gentle, please both of them in an emotional exchange the likes of which he'd dreamed for years. He could hurt her, give her pain and pleasure enough to make her scream. Make her bleed. The thought of another man being minutes away from that power washed cold over him. His cock finally behaved at the reminder of the near miss, but to his shame, his erection didn't fully subside. With her accessible, he'd probably stay perpetually half-hard. His willpower had abandoned him—it remained in Rangetown with all his sense. The missing Broker made it worse. Her collar would punish her for his erections because while she was nothing more than a slave, he couldn't touch her.

The whimper of pain she'd given the second before the portal slid closed echoed in his ears. His lust tortured her, and he couldn't take off the control bracelet. He thumped his head again.

The only answer was to have sex with her, and that couldn't happen while she was nothing more than a slave with no will. What he wouldn't do to hear her tell him to slog off.

He'd thought the upheaval and hurt he'd suffered when she'd left him to marry a stranger had been bad, but this was hell. He snorted and thumped his head again.

A gasp sounded behind him before a group of women hurried past him in the corridor.

*Stop it, Sheriff. Don't scare the ladies.*

No, he hadn't had it bad then. The long-ago turmoil had been nothing.

This was untenable.

He wanted her so much his teeth hurt. And, hell and damnation, she'd give it to him. She'd spread her legs wide and welcome him to heaven. She'd bend over, fall to her hands and knees, and let him ride her to Valhalla. She'd wrap her silver lips around his cock and blow him to the stars.

With a hard swallow, he tried to block the taunting visuals of her claiming, her ripe curves, the silver nipples that belonged more to him than her, and the damned slave collar that made her cream at his mere thought or touch. He needed to forget the velvet slickness of her because he couldn't take her again until she could make her own decisions. He'd keep his hands

off the sweet breasts that filled his hands perfectly. But, come hell or high water, he'd never forget her taste. Like honeysuckle.

He groaned again, threw his head back and thought of the south pasture. He should mend the fence there. The ranch needed another robo-shepherd. Max was still serviceable, but he'd had to replace his power packs once already, and he wanted Max to retire. After his faithful service, he deserved to live out his days as a regular house dog. He'd never had a pet before.

His train of thought got him under control, but he needed a real downer to be able to walk straight. Ah, at the last country fair the tenacious Miss Quartermain had created a night that'd douse the ardor of the most randy cowpoke. It'd been a hot, muggy night when the arrogant and petty Queen of the Carnival had dogged his every step.

He sighed and relived every rustle of purple tulle as Miss Quartermain followed him from the main pavilion, through the booths, all the way to his solarcell carriage. She'd asked for a dance, hadn't accepted his refusal—nor his veiled censure that she'd asked a man to dance—and had overstepped herself by flirting without a chaperone to hand. He didn't really care at all about the high society's ridiculous mores, but they came in handy when he needed to ditch overeager misses. Though he'd thought he should marry someday, he'd not had a flicker of interest in a woman since Jewel. Especially not Miss Quartermain. Let someone else keep her in purple tulle.

Now Jewel was his.

He halted the direction of his thoughts, went to go in her direction. He'd spent years keeping those thoughts only in his dreams. She might be real, in the flesh—soft and inviting flesh at that—but he had to get them out of this mess before they both lost. She could lose herself inside him. He could lose all his self-respect for taking advantage.

The signal between his bracelet and her collar would cover the entire cruise liner, so he walked. The chatter of the excited cruise passengers lifted him out of his musing. Children weaved around their caretakers, couples held hands, and groups of retirees smiled and shuffled together into a large reception area. Streamers hung from the steel crossbeams and a large banner exclaimed Bon Voyage.

Lines of buffets filled with treats, savory and sweet, tempted him to stroll farther into the mayhem. Jewel'd always enjoyed cocoa cakes. Though the dessert couldn't compensate for her pain, he hoped the offering would put a smile on her luscious lips. Silver lips.

“Don’t think of her lips,” he muttered.

He lingered, let the conversations surround him and blank his mind. With so much to hear, all the distraction, he’d always been able to empty his thoughts and float in a crowd. Smiles and eager expressions soothed him, and his tight muscles relaxed.

Everyone celebrated the beginning of a pleasure cruise with simple, open joy. That was why the intent, malevolent pale eyes brought him up short.

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## Chapter Six

Guy played it as cool as the ice on Luthor's Comet.

In the next few moments, he intended to accomplish three goals before he high-tailed it back to his room. To see Jewel...

He ignored the quickened thump of his heart and started the ball rolling.

First step, an idea launched fully formed into his mind, and he turned his back on his target with the murderous scowl and strolled with a long, leisurely gait to the oiled-to-a-polish concierge desk at the entrance. The entire walk spanned perhaps ten feet while the glare on his back brought up his hackles. His hands twitched toward a nonexistent holster, which currently resided in his luggage. The smuggled-aboard six-shot would be welcome right about now. Only the room full of witnesses kept them from each other's throats. This wasn't a Terraloft barge. A scene here would land them in a cell, and Jewel would never survive his absence for long.

He had to keep himself alive and un-incarcerated.

Stopping at the expansive chest-high counter, he made his request and ignored the fine hair twitching on his nape, a sure indication his prey stalked him. "I need a holo-castle game delivered to my suite."

Following the nod to the side by the dour-faced man at the counter, he ran his thumb over the ident-pad, put an elbow on the desk and leaned against it with practiced indolence. Waiting the few moments for the arrangements to be made, he softly whistled a range tune. Inside, his gut churned as if a Taphgan dust-storm had taken residence inside him. Since he'd taken the silver star, he'd upheld the law, but he was sure he'd be breaking several soon.

"The set will be delivered right away." The concierge studied his U-panel. The sallow attendant pursed his lips to create a pinched hollow in his cheeks. "You have a no-disturb. Shall we deliver the game set to your suite or the level anteroom?"

"The anteroom." He pushed away from the desk and ignored his natural inclination to thank the man. In his Terraloft guise, he didn't acknowledge

the hired help.

Next step, sharpen his spurs on the varmint who still glowered at him. Kalon didn't wait patiently. Guy's prey slowly clenched and unclenched the hands at his side. If the bastard didn't watch out, he'd wrinkle all that fine silk he wore over his toned, overly muscled self. Guy didn't have the luxury of an autogym. His more slender frame boasted wiry muscles from working the cattle, riding the range, and the occasional wrestling match with drunks in the Star and Spurs pub.

He wanted to re-break Kalon's nose, which had obviously been to the med-booth.

Passing a colorful spread of food, he picked up a green-and-blue puff and popped it in his mouth. Sweet and a little too rich. He strolled past another table and, in a smooth motion, grabbed a glass of bright yellow punch and knocked back several gulps. Cold and a little tart.

Shoulders loose, he ambled into a somewhat quiet area, propped himself against the wall and smiled at the two rosy-cheeked women who passed between him and the pale-eyed menace hot on his trail. The man in question strove for nonchalance but couldn't erase the dangerous glint in his eyes. The two men at his back stood out like thugs, their not-so-concealed weapons bumping out the leather jackets. That type of overstated clothing was preferred by a certain set of fast-running gamblers, thieves and bruisers out to make a quick buck. Moving to within a foot of Guy, Kalon flicked his fingers at his backup, who melted into the mingling crowd.

The hairs on the back of Guy's neck still zinged like livewires. His body tensed, but he forced himself to sip the sparkling punch and keep his expression neutral. "Greetings." He nodded nonchalantly into a relentless stare.

The Terraloft's lips curved into an empty smile, but he didn't respond.

No question. The man didn't appreciate him stepping in and taking Jewel from his plan to enslave her. Kalon didn't bank the hostility in his stance as his hands continued to open and close in fists. He stared without speaking for a few moments, sizing up him in obvious competition, and for the time being Guy shelved the urge to plant his knuckles in the sneering face, over and over.

Letting his years as sheriff guide him, he took the moment to study this adversary. Rich clothing, smooth pale skin and thin, angry lips proved the Terraloft aristocrat had gleaned Guy's secret. Hol Trident's son was no

Terraloft. Guy shrugged mentally. He might not be highborn enough to court a woman like Jewel, but he was head and shoulders above men like this. Kalon wore a necklace of exquisite, highly prized Terusk ivory. The rare status symbol meant the death of a beautiful rare creature from the deserts of Taphgan. Not only that, but he sported boots of illegal yakka hide, the leather made from the brutal practice of killing breeding yakkas from the high cliffs of Grassland. The man cared little for life.

No surprise since this Terraloft had erased the mind of a woman he should've protected.

"Not many silver-tips on this cruise," Kalon finally said.

In a calculated maneuver, Guy dropped his gaze to the man's wrist. No slave control bracelet.

"I only need one," he replied in a purr and turned his bracelet around his wrist as if unaware he'd done so. Though an insult to Jewel, he let his body slouch against the wall while he eyed a pretty young blonde who giggled with her friends at the nearest beverage station. His smile descended into a leer, while his stomach curdled. He turned back to the man standing next to him. Somehow the crime boss had tracked them. Kalon had to have bribed Troshky. He knew he had Jewel. But he didn't know their history. But since he'd seen them with Quinn, he should know that Guy knew exactly who he was. Coy was the name of the game, then.

A hard glint leaped through the man's eyes before he blanked his expression, stood straight and gave a head bow. "The name is Kalon Geanus."

Though Guy didn't blink, didn't move, he ran scenario after scenario through his mind in a flash. Kalon had followed them and had to know his name. He either hoped to learn something, or he was playing games. To lie, when the man had the truth, might be more a red flag than if he gave the truth. The problem was, which truth? If the man had trailed them, he might know his name from the silver-tip clinic. If Kalon had learned his name from Troshky, he could've learned his real name or the name on the travel papers.

All this zipped through his logical mind in heartbeats with no outward appearance.

Truth. He'd go with his real name. False. He'd still play the indolent Terraloft.



Guy dipped his chin in greeting and hoped this game held the Broker as its prize. He'd do whatever it took to get his hands on it. "The name's Guy Trident."

No flicker from his opponent. He hadn't surprised Kalon, who answered in a low conversational tone. "I'm curious. Most men with silver-tips keep their women in safe havens. Locked away from the world. They are such fragile creatures." Kalon fisted his hands again. "Why did you bring yours here?"

Ah. Even if the man had gotten Guy's travel arrangements from Troshky, the merchant hadn't revealed the final destination, but of course, Troshky didn't know Guy's plans. The last move in this verbal duel was a pure fishing expedition. Kalon didn't hide his blatant interest. It remained to be seen if he'd reveal his motives. He also played his hand as if he didn't think Guy had him pegged for the thief and coldhearted bastard he was.

Guy played the game better than anyone. He shrugged. "I like to keep her with me at all times."

Gaily dressed in large, floral printed togas, a couple passed within hearing distance.

Kalon pressed his lips together tightly. His mouth drew a straight, harsh slash. "She's mine."

"Not anymore." His smile tight, Guy tensed. The bastard didn't deserve to live, purposely silver-tipping his wife. "Never yours again."

He pretended not to notice the clawed hands that jerked when Kalon took a step forward. The Terraloft's breath came in gusts like he couldn't control the anger pumping through him, but he stopped. He shook out his hands, pushed his shoulders back and smiled, a genuine expression since he seemed immediately calmer.

"Indeed. One way or another, she'll keep her mouth shut." Kalon dropped a piece of broken equipment in Guy's punch glass, turned on his heel and strode away. His lackeys flowed out of the crowd to follow in his wake.

The message was as clear as the water in Lake Blueparis. The piece of broken circuit board meant one thing.

The Broker'd been torn apart by that bastard walking out the door a free man.

Kalon had revealed much in the short exchange. He wanted Jewel tied up and out of the way. Or dead.

Guy's hand gripped the glass. He put it down on a side table before he broke the damn thing.

Jewel's Broker was in so many pieces, and he had a name for the man who'd pay for that. His fists tightened, but before he gave in to the sour tumult in his gut, he banked his anger to focus on the job. He shook with the effort. He rolled his shoulders, but the tension remained.

No help for it. He'd had a small hope he'd recover the Broker somehow. That hope was shattered. Jewel was tied to him for eternity.

He swallowed hard.

On to step three. He made his way to the itinerary office on the same level as the reception hall and spoke to the attendant. "I need to make arrangements for a side jaunt."

After the necessary reservations and credit payment, he wandered the ship to shake any ghosts following him to the suite. As he stopped to wait on a lift to take him to the gambling level, the prickling on his neck returned.

He'd made a mistake. A big one.

A hard fist caught him in the side. Before he could sidestep, a bear hug from behind took his breath away. A bag slipped over his head. Darkness descended, but he fought back the panic. Kicking wildly, he struggled against the steel-banded arms tightening around his arms and torso. He couldn't take a deep breath or manage a yell for help.

His heel connected with the sturdy legs of his captor. The man didn't even grunt.

"Let go, land-grubber." Guy snarled the Terraloft insult to all lowborn who lived planet-side.

Unable to follow the urgent whispers and hissing over the rushing in his ears, he fought back with all his strength while hurling wild threats of retribution. No matter his squirming, he was dragged along like a useless rag, blind and panting, skin rubbed raw and bruises stinging.

*Slow it down. Think, dammit.*

He stopped struggling. Before he could process his predicament, the constricting arms thrust him away. He tripped to the floor. Scrambling to regain his feet, he was shoved back down.

"Where is she?" hissed someone at his ear. He didn't recognize the voice, but the hoarse and low edge of threat he didn't mistake. It had to be Kalon, voice disguised or not. Guy didn't think Kalon would kill him—yet.

If he did, Jewel would die before Kalon could get his hands on her. That didn't mean the bastard wouldn't bring him to the edge of death and dangle him there, painfully.

He clamped his mouth shut and clawed at the bag loosely closed at his neck. A punishing kick landed in his ribs. Stars exploded in the pitch black surrounding him. Unable to pull off the hood, he gulped in hot, humid air and fought to remove the abrading fabric.

"Don't take it off," the same man whispered fiercely. "You get one chance to do this the easy way because nothing would please me more than to choke the life out of you."

Another blow to his ribs punctuated the threat. He gasped but didn't yell. It hurt, but not as much as it should. The way the man pulled his punches—or kicks—he probably didn't want to scuff his shoes. Or boots. Expensive boots, like he'd seen on Kalon. Why did that Terraloft have boots while he didn't have his own? His gut burned.

"Tell me where she is, and you won't get hurt."

"Who?" He curled on the cold floor to protect as much as he could from the strikes he couldn't see coming. No carpet beneath him to take the chill away. Where was he? Which way did he jump to get away from them? He stilled, to listen, plan.

"Don't play dumb. I keep what's mine. Tell me where she is, now, and you'll be able to walk away."

"Walking's overrated."

This time the kick came at his back. His vision blazed in white, hot and searing shards. Seconds passed while the world stood still in that hell of nothing but jaw clenching against the screams, and more pain. He sucked greedily at the air, fabric filled his mouth, and he blinked back stinging behind his eyes. Keeping the enemy emotional, off-balance was the plan, but that hurt like a bitch.

"You sealed her fate when you stole her from me, but you still have a slim chance out of this. I give you that chance because you don't know who you crossed. You have five seconds to tell me where she is before I break every bone in your legs."

"Just my legs?" He forced out between wheezes.

"One." This from a sneering, gleeful brute behind him.

A hard boot came down on his unprotected elbow and ground down. Not hard enough to break anything, but with enough force to keep his mind

from grasping at a plan. He couldn't think worth a damn.

*Hell, I should've kept my mouth shut.*

"Two."

He shut it off. Just stopped listening to the pain receptors. If he didn't get out of here, Jewel would be defenseless. If he died, so would she, and while nobody would give two thoughts about his leaving this galaxy, he'd do anything to keep Jewel in it. Blinking back the water in his eyes, he squinted into the darkness, listened for the rustling of cloth—and placed the swoosh behind him and the shifting of a body in front of him.

The next kick registered, but he didn't allow the spasms to break his concentration.

Sneers and flagrant baiting flew from the men while the goon continued to count down.

In a split second he mapped his predicament. One stood near his face. Another stood kicking distance to his curved back. Now that his vision had adjusted, a small slit of light leaked through the bag, flickering with shadows of movement. The third paced near the exit.

A scratching sound heralded the next sharp attack to his kidney area.

Unable to keep it in, he grunted. Then he bit his lip and coiled to move.

Guy leaped toward the narrow slit of light.

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Jewel's stomach ached. Food wouldn't help, and though a fresh tray of fruits, cheeses and pastries had arrived in the levitating dumbwaiter, she couldn't eat more than a few bites. On the pristine antique couch, she sat with her hands in her lap and stared out the view portal at the station receding in the distance. Her life uncurled before her as her occluded past disappeared into the scattered wake trailing the ship.

Over the past hour, she'd reasoned with herself and come to a few conclusions. She had a history, and since Guy knew that history and it seemed important to him, then it was important to her. She'd apparently known Guy all her life. She trusted him. She didn't trust the man who'd been her husband. She hadn't felt anything for the man they'd said was her father.

She allowed herself to trust her instincts, a well of reserves she hadn't tapped into in the hours after her awakening. After the tiny explosion in her

head and Guy's explanation, those reserves had opened to her, and she clung for all she was worth.

Her hand gleamed silver in the soft light of the one lamp she'd left on. Rolling and unrolling her fingers, she saw her exact worth in the palm of her silver hand. She belonged to Guy. Details of him, his history and their previous conversations had disappeared and been replaced with the band around her neck. She lifted hesitant fingers to touch it, so light she could forget it circled her in quiet promise.

Alone in this room, able to think on her own, feel on her own, she remembered him, at least in a way. Without a single memory of him before today, she believed in his decency without doubt. As she understood her programming, she responded to his sexual needs and would always be compelled to give him comfort in any way, but she was not compelled to understand him, all the way down to the crinkles at the corner of his eyes that appeared before he smiled.

She could not be forced to love him.

And she did.

Some part of her unassociated with memories...remembered him.

The sureness and rightness of that love stole over her, not in a wave of excitement or sexual desire, but in a warm comfort. In addition to all she'd uncovered of her past—the name of her son, a growing need to see her child, and the short explanations from Guy—she discovered a life raft.

She didn't hesitate to grasp her conclusions.

Guy'd been a kernel in her heart who'd carried her through darkness in her past. Her slate was clean, and she wanted to bring out her love and let it shine, like silver twinkling in the sun.

She left the couch and crossed to a gilded full-length mirror near the head of the bed. The mirror boasted carved detail work of floral patterns from the rounded top to the feet clamped to the floor in case of turbulence.

Unable to look into the reflective surface, she stared at the floor for long moments until she forced her gaze from her slippered feet.

There she was. This person she didn't recognize named Jewel stood in the dim light with her limp hands at her side. Pale skin, blue eyes, silver lips and blond hair hanging in soft waves to barely past her shoulders reflected back at her.

She removed her silky wrap to puddle at her feet. Shaking, with need continually pitching in her middle, she removed the protective

undergarments.

Nude, she memorized the body re-created for her love's pleasure. Would the tint in her lips look sexy with lipstick? Would Guy like that? Her brows slanted back at her reflection, and she shook her head. Guy liked her natural, unadorned.

No, not quite.

He liked her hair up and her cleavage held tight and high in a ball gown. A wistful vision winked through her of twirling around a dance hall, Guy's sneaking a peek down her dress and smiling, simple joy, as they laughed together.

Her nipples puckered, giving them a darker cast like pewter against the rosy blush rising on her chest. She bent toward her wrap but stopped, stood straight and propelled her inspection onward. Her mound was bare, hair permanently removed during her preparation, and the outer lips of her folds glinted with the nanobots buried into her flesh. Despite her current privacy, she blushed hotter and couldn't make herself spread her legs to get a closer look at the rest of the silver-tipping.

Guy had enjoyed the imprinting. The way he'd touched her bore proof of his excitement to take her. Did he like the way she looked now?

Staring at her pubic area, silver, as if branded by him, she grew warm. Her breath hitched, and she licked her dry lips. Even without his presence and the hum of the collar, the kisses Guy'd given her during the claiming stirred her anew. She cupped her mound and gasped. Desire for Guy made her hot between her legs. She didn't know when he'd return, but she craved his touch, his hardness, his kindness.

Shaking, she shrugged on her wrap. Before she'd secured the ties, the door to the suite slid open. Guy staggered into the room holding a case and with a wince collapsed into the nearest chair.

She stumbled forward. The door shut and the light above it turned red.

His beloved face, tired and haggard, lifted toward her. His gaze swept over her, head to foot, before she knelt in front of him. He breathed heavily, in short gasps as if he'd run a great distance, and wrapped his arms around his ribcage before he spoke.

"We have a problem."

## Chapter Seven

Jewel swallowed hard. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing a quick stop in the med-booth didn’t fix. But I guess I’m still a little rough around the edges. Should’ve stayed a little longer but wanted to get back to you.”

She needed to touch him, but where was he hurt? She didn’t want to inflame a bruise or worsen an injury.

Slouched back in the chair in his usual elegant sprawl, he no longer seemed to be in pain. She swept a frantic visual search over his body, head to foot, but didn’t see any wounds. Only his face, so hard and angry, appeared different. She’d never seen such a ruthlessness on him before. But he’d been hurt enough for a med-booth. What had they done? Who had done it?

His hand dangled with his long, strong fingers unblemished. She leaned over the arm of the chair and gripped that connection to him. His rough calluses brushed against her and sent electric ripples down her arms. With the swirling in her mind, the unanswered questions, she could only manage, “Med-booth?”

“I’m fine. Really. I had a disagreement with Kalon. Seems he followed us aboard. He and his thugs pulled me aside and thought they could have a little three-on-one, but I got the jump on the guard at the door and ran for it. I gave them the slip and here I am.”

He didn’t seem himself at all. His jaw set, he stared over her head with a narrow, angry slant to his brows.

“But they hurt you.” The room canted to a dangerous angle.

Guy’s face softened, and he removed the hand she held to run it through her hair. He was the one who’d been beat up by three men. His lips curved slightly and he cupped her cheek. The warmth radiated from her face down her neck and across her chest. She put her hand over his to hold it there and rubbed against him.

“It wasn’t a picnic, but I’ve had worse. It doesn’t matter. I don’t even have a bruise, and no more cracked ribs. The soreness is almost gone.”

She jolted away from Guy’s tender caress but kept hold of his hand. Icy tendrils played along her spine, then heat pooled in a burn across her limbs. The quickly turning onslaught left her reeling. All the crazy events running helter-skelter left her dizzy and faintly nauseated. She fairly screeched, “Cracked ribs?”

“Let go of my hand, sweetheart, before I have to go back and get broken fingers mended.”

She fell to her knees between his outstretched legs. Her fingers throbbed.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Nothing to apologize for, sweetheart. I like that you care.” He didn’t move but stayed frozen in place, staring at her with his tempting lips turned down at the corners.

Awareness prickled over her and edged out the confusion. Her desire and love for him started softly, flickering along her fingertips as she longed to stroke his stubbled face. Her nipples tightened and a warm tingle between her legs caused her to shift. She recognized the difference between her own arousal and the desire which came from her programming. Before she could process that development in her new life, her collar hummed and sent a current of lava through her, blazing hot and undeniable, to settle in her stomach and flow out to ruck her nipples. She gasped with the near pain. She wiggled, trying to relieve the rising need between her legs. Her lips seared hot and aching.

“Oh.” She trembled. Before her senses settled, she blurted out, “I want you.”

Her forwardness surprised her, but she wouldn’t take it back.

Guy swore, long and colorfully. He sat up and stole the warmth of his surrounding legs. The crinkle at the corner of his eyes disappeared to be replaced by a slight downturn of his enticing, full lips. “That’s my damned libido talking.”

She froze in place. She had to make him understand that no matter how they came to be together on this ship, or how she came to have the collar, she did want him. Right now. She was sure she’d always wanted him.

“No, I...” she started.



He held up a hand to quiet her plea. “You can’t control it. It’s the programming responding to me. Hell, I want you every second of the day, but I’m weak. Horny. I’m sorry you’re stuck with me, but I promise I won’t touch you again. I won’t shame you that way.”

She stroked his thigh. A compulsion to soothe his feelings vibrated along her nerve endings and prompted her to touch, assure. She was only too happy to comply with the simulated order coming from his wrist band to the slave circlet about her neck. She had to give him release, emotionally and sexually. Now. Her hands trembled.

In abrupt, clumsy movements, Guy stumbled from the chair and crossed the room to the refreshment cabinet. His broad shoulders hunched slightly as he filled a glass with ice. The chink of the cubes clanking together broke through the sound of her harsh breathing. He kept his back to her while he sloshed two dashes of liquor into the glass.

“We need to stay in the room until we reach our destination. I don’t know what Kalon would do if he got his hands on you. And I’m at a disadvantage against three of them. There’s no way they can follow us from the ship, and we’ll lose them then. Nothing to concern yourself with. Except...” His shoulders shrugged before he continued in a tight voice. “We’ll be here in close quarters ’til then. I promise I won’t take advantage of your position.”

“You’re not taking advantage of me.” His avowal broke her mind free of the quagmire it’d been trapped in since he walked in the door. “You’d never take advantage of anyone.”

“I wouldn’t? After a few hours, you think you know me?” The question echoed harshly in the room. Jaw set, he faced her. He lifted his glass, wrapped in his long fingers, and pointed at her with one finger uncurled from around his drink. “I’d double-cross the devil to keep you safe. I’d take advantage of anyone who crossed my path.”

His accent thickened in a way that almost caught a memory before it faded in the onslaught of his declaration. Guy dropped his hand and strode toward her in determined strides. She didn’t even blink and gripped the chair back when her legs weakened.

“I’d cheat, lie and steal. No question about it,” he growled. “And if you were you, free and clear, no collar on your neck, no ring on your finger, I’d hoodwink you into bed and ride ’til morning.”

“Oh,” she breathed. Fire spread in her veins and the ache in her core pulsed in surging waves. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t make her legs respond while her entire body shook.

He stopped inches away. Dark brown eyes glinted at her before a feathery touch skimmed across her lips. Her breathing synched to his, a rough cacophony that heated the space between their bodies. The moment stretched as he caressed her lower lip with the softest of touches. She leaned toward him, desperate for firm contact, but he didn’t press forward.

Guy whispered, as if speaking aloud would break into the space between them. “But you made a choice, didn’t you sweetheart? You didn’t choose me five years ago, and I respect that decision. We’ll find a way to set you free of this mess.”

“I didn’t choose you?” Her voice sounded raspy, laden with desire. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“You’ll remember, soon enough.” He took a step back.

She clutched at her stomach when the heat radiating from his body went with him. He watched her movement, and his brows lowered. With a groan, he turned from her and moved to the couch. He threw himself down and ran his hands through his hair, a gesture that tugged at her already pitching stomach.

“I’m hurting you. I don’t mean to put you through this. I’ll control myself so that damn collar won’t activate.”

As soon as he said it, the humming at her neck gained her attention again. With the tornado twisting through her, she hadn’t noticed. “It’s not just the collar. I do want you.”

“No. You don’t.” Adamant, he shook his head.

She took a deep breath, ready to beg. Not a moment longer could she stand to be so far away from him. The ache was constant now. She needed to fulfill and please him because she couldn’t spend another few hours as she’d done today, empty without him.

He blew out a long sigh and gestured toward the door. “Could you bring that case over here? It’s a holo-castle set. I thought we could play a game or two. I’ve never had one romantic thought while immersed in a match. Should keep me in line.”

Helpless not to do what he asked immediately, she obeyed, but she stumbled on weak legs.

*Get a grip on yourself. He doesn't want a sniveling coward. Show him a woman he'll want. I can do it. I have to.*

The sleek black box sat next to the door. "I don't know how to play."

He startled and sloshed his drink on his knee. The odor of whisky teased her senses. His mouth would taste of the smoky liquor. She licked her lips.

Beneath the dark stubble and the grim set of his starkly beautiful features, he paled. "We used to play together."

"We did?"

He cleared his throat and looked at the table between them. "If you don't pick it up after you see it, I'll teach you. It'll give us something to do."

She imagined all sorts of things they could do, all of which involved his lips and the bed behind him. He didn't want that, though. She sighed. "Was I any good?"

Head snapping back up, he smiled darkly and raised a brow. "You were exquisite. You beat me every time we played. The only person who could. I never figured out your strategies, either."

He chuckled and the tightness in her chest eased. He beckoned her over and placed the case on the low table between the sofa and twin chairs. "I think the only reason your father let me in the door on visiting day was to see you thrash me and send me packing with my tail between my legs."

"My father didn't like you?"

"Sit down and—" he averted his gaze, "—fix the ties on your dress."

She fumbled to adjust her gaping wrap, which exposed more than a fair share of cleavage. Blushing hotly, she sank into the sofa across from Guy. Though she exhibited this inconvenient modesty, she still yearned to run her hands all over him. Everywhere. She crossed her legs and faced him again.

"Better." He passed a hand over his face again and shook his head. "Just sit still for a minute. Don't move."

Guy dropped his head against the back of the chair, one hand turning his bracelet before he flicked his fingers away as if annoyed with himself. Long moments of silence accompanied his slow fall into relaxation. The tight lines of his jaw softened, his fingers relaxed and his shoulders eased their rigidity. His dark hair, black in this light, curled at the edges and fell softly over his thick brows. A shadow covered his lower face. He needed a scraping, but what would it feel like to rub against the incoming whiskers? Would it leave a rash on her cheeks, on her chest, between her thighs? She

shifted in her seat and drank in the sight of his lean, relaxed body, barely concealed in the revealing, clinging pantsuit that draped softly against his muscular physique.

“Right. Remember to update the software in the cattle-branding iron,” he murmured.

She hiccupped a slight laugh.

Her collar stopped sending pulses of erotic command. Empty without the onrush, she sagged into the couch and braced against the cold sinking into her chest, no longer prickling with passionate blushes. Lethargy crept over her. She was exhausted. Though the collar no longer compelled, the burn in her core pulsed, deep and hard, a painful reminder she’d failed her duty.

Guy lifted his head but didn’t face her as he set up the game with efficient movements.

“This is the lower board. The pieces align on the black squares. King. Queen. Knight. Castle. When they’re all set up, push this button here, and the four other levels are displayed in hologram. Run your fingers through it,” he prompted before he did so himself.

Causing ripples in the nearly solid visual, his fingers cut through the image of three-dimensional checkered boards and corresponding pieces. “Gives a little zap like static electricity.”

She mimicked his move, and the hairs on her arms stood up with sensation. She snatched her hand back.

“I think you’ll still have the instincts to play, so I’ll run through the basics.” He instructed her with patience in a detached manner. “The king can move one space a turn. The queen does as she pleases. There are only one king and queen. The other pieces are duplicated on the other levels. Since knights and bishops can jump between castle floors, every move on one board impacts every level, so you have to view the entire war in one swoop.”

Like Guy promised, she picked up the game quickly. Once she’d seen the board and hologram, the rules and strategies came to her naturally. Holo-castle required focus. Her worries fell away as she stepped through her turns using short instructions or manual moves on the lower board.

With gestures and incomplete sentences, they played an intricate game of maneuvers. She recognized the scene as if she’d played it thousands of

times. An ease streamed between them, sure and strong, like a long acquaintance.

The holo flickered again, the not-quite solid presence blinked in and out as it had periodically through the game. She decided her last move and slid her queen to his king.

“Checkmate.” Unbidden, her joyous laugh cut through the quiet she’d enjoyed. The break in concentration brought her surroundings back into focus. A heavenly aroma filled the suite.

“Dinner’s here?” she asked. “How long have we played?”

Guy scowled at the board before hitting the Off button and slanting his head toward the comp station on the other side of the room. “Four hours.”

“You must be starving.” She leaped off the couch toward the dumbwaiter beside the beverage cabinet. She flipped up the sliding door and pulled out the covered tray. Careful to keep the tray level, she brought it to the table as Guy closed the game and cleared the table.

“Good,” he drawled. “More blue-and-green puffs.”

“What are they?” She smiled. His grin returned with the crinkles at the corner of his eyes.

“I have no idea.” He laughed and picked one up, offering it to her.

She took it into her mouth, and the sweetness made her mouth water. Her lips brushed his fingers, and just like that, the collar hummed and came to life. Need blazed through her sensitive flesh, and she licked her tingling lips.

Guy groaned, long and guttural. “Can I kiss you, sweetheart?” he asked in a choked rush. In a swift, graceful move, he sat next to her on the couch.

“Please.” Nowhere inside her did she find any hesitation. He needn’t have bothered to ask.

“I’m stopping with the kiss. You’ve allowed me that privilege before.” A bleakness in his faraway expression, he stopped inches away. “I’m not taking anything from you. I’m just returning it now, like I borrowed it.”

“You noble, noble man,” she whispered and did as she’d longed to do. Pushing her fingers into his thick shiny hair, she shivered with the sensation like heavy silk stroking her palms. “Take what you want from me. I’m yours.”

A pained grunt came from deep within his chest, and strong arms enveloped her, wrapped around her waist and pulled her tight against his solid strength. At last, in his arms, she gripped his head, bringing him to

her, never wanting to let go. Soft petals flickered across her lips, brushed back and forth, before making firmer contact. Like home, secure, surrounded in peace and strength. And blazing passion.

He teased her, nipping at her, licking the seam of her mouth and sucking on her bottom lip. She whimpered and fisted her hands in his hair as she struggled to get nearer. She couldn't get close enough.

Slanting his head to a better angle, he slipped his tongue into her mouth to taste, to linger, to drive her wild with desire. His wet caress deepened, became forceful, hungry. This kiss was new, more urgent, more determined. Just, more.

Jewel hung there, swaying between heaven and desperation.

Then he pulled back.

"My Jewel," he panted. He was no longer kissing her, had put inches between them, but he still held her. Long strokes down her back settled her but couldn't draw back the programming that had ratcheted to a grind in her pelvis. He stared at her lips. His were wet, swollen and red, a shade that beckoned her.

"Won't you take me to bed? Let me be with you?" She held her breath, waiting, hoping her forwardness didn't offend him.

He shook his head, but his hesitant expression gave her hope. "I shouldn't do more than kiss you."

Shouldn't.

With a push at the chink in his armor, she urged him, "But it's your right. I'm yours. You can do what you want."

It was the wrong thing to say because he drew away from her. She bit her lip and castigated herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"How about another game of holo-castle while we eat?" He asked, but it was no question. He left her side to go back to his chair. The emptiness chilled her head to toe.

"Yes, of course." Movements stilted, she pulled several delicacies off the platter and put it on one of the included plates for him.

After she'd filled two plates, he removed the tray and set up the board again. While he concentrated on placing the pieces in their correct positions, she had to speak, had to rid herself of the heavy weight on her chest. "How long before we get to the medship?"

"Three days," he answered gruffly.

“And after I have my memories back, you’ll let me give you sexual release?”

His attention snapped to her, and the white king—hers—fell to the rug. Mouth open, he didn’t speak but winced before he bent to retrieve the errant king. With an unrepentant urge to poke at him, give back some of the unsettled feelings she’d dealt with since her awakening, she continued. “You’ll let me ease your desire, my desire? I need you deep inside, to stop the burn. My hands ache to stroke you. Touch you.”

Heat prickled up her neck, over her cheeks and across her chest. She probably looked like she’d been rubbed in red talzicberry juice.

“If you get your memories back and still want to bed me, I’ll be more than happy to oblige.” Guy grinned, a crooked slant of lips that made him appear rakish, desirable and more appealing than ever.

“I’ll hold you to it,” she answered, though the breath had left her body.

“No, sweetheart. *I’ll hold you to it.*”

\*\*\*

*I’d cheat, lie and steal. No question about it.*

Guy’d told Jewel that, but she didn’t know how much he meant it. In the dark, he sat in the chair and ignored her tossing and turning on the bed. Well, he didn’t rightly ignore her as much as he pretended he did. He was good at pretending, like he pretended Kalon Geanus wasn’t her ex-husband and hoped like hell she’d continue to forget the man she’d chosen over a poor rancher.

*Cheat, lie and steal.*

Pathetic. Where Jewel was concerned, he couldn’t make himself walk the right line of the law. He was a thief. Like her new silky wrap that he’d nabbed from the chute before it could be sent to the sanitizer. He gripped the dress in his hands and brought it to his face. With a deep breath he pulled in her scent, the scent he’d never forget even if they silver-tipped his ass.

It was the black. He couldn’t stop himself from taking it. Once he’d seen it on her, it’d stood out with stark clarity. The day she’d left to marry Kalon, she’d worn black. He couldn’t bear for her to wear it again. He’d intended to send it to the incinerator, but once he touched it, he gave in to his craving and clutched it to his heart.

The wrap had touched her skin. He couldn't throw it away. But the heady effect of the softness, the honeysuckle aroma, edged him toward the lust he had to avoid. He gripped the fabric so tightly, the rip of the weave broke the silence of the bedchamber.

He knew what would take the edge off his desires, and for the first time in years, he let his mind wander there, to the day he died as a boy and became a man who understood his exact worth in the world.

Jewel as a teenager had been vivacious, always willing to go valley hopping on air skates. Defying her father's wishes for her to marry well, she'd always said they'd marry, but he'd never quite believed she meant it, that she'd take the rebellion that far. So he'd respected her chastity and never pushed for what he wanted, even as he ignored what would happen if he didn't take the opportunity.

He'd regretted that noble instinct in the dark of night when he dreamed of her.

She'd told him of her engagement to a Terraloft, one her father made and she insisted she had no intention of honoring. He'd walked away with his gut roiling, his chest pinching so tight he couldn't breathe, and he'd come home to the ramshackle ranch he'd inherited.

He'd dreamed of her again and awoke with resolve. He'd make her want him.

Days spent courting her. Nights and early morning hours spent working the ranch to make a profit. He had to be somebody. Be as rich as a Terraloft.

Then came that fateful decision, when she was reeling after her mother's death, he was desperate to hold her, and he showed his true worth—about as much value as the dirt beneath Jewel's heels.

"Brice, I have a plan." After a long day roping his last bull and corralling the meager numbers of cattle, he'd pulled his best friend, then his foreman and only employee, into the barn office and started that downward spiral.

"I have a plan, too. I'm on my way to the Star and Spurs." Brice ran a hand through his dark hair with a grimace. Dust flew everywhere. "After a good scrubbing. You ready to go into town and forget this crush you have? Let me tell you, Molly has her eye on you. She'll make you a man. I should know." Brice grinned, his teeth white in his grimy, tanned face.

For the space of a breath, Guy was tempted. But he wanted Jewel, no other, and he'd find a way to win her hand. It'd always been Jewel.



Technically, he'd already become a man, but the few times with those lightskirts, he'd closed his eyes and pictured Jewel, and later dealt with the guilt for including her in his sordid mess.

"That good-for-nothing Kirkson, you know he has a whole new passel of steer. Where'd he get them?" Guy swallowed the grit in his mouth. He crossed to the almost empty pantry shoved against the wooden wall, or what passed as a wall, with too many spaces between boards to count. Hands shaking, he poured two shots from the precious low bottle of Taphgan whiskey. He steadied himself and handed one to Brice.

"Probably the same way the ranch came to this." Brice waved his hand around to encompass the sparse office—a table and two chairs where they planned how to get the ranch back on its feet, a pallet where Guy slept and the pantry with his few supplies and possessions. Without the funds to keep the ranch house running, he'd boarded it up and slept in the small room in the barn.

Brice knocked back the shot and wiped a hand across his mouth. "He probably won them in a card game or swindled somebody out of them."

"Right. Just how he took all the money from Trident Ranch when the old man was in his cups." He slammed the shot glass down on the table without a sip. The sudden urge not to be his old man making his mouth go sour. "I don't think he came by them honestly."

"Don't matter none, my man. We'll get this place up and running in no time."

"It won't be in no time, and by the time we make a profit, we'll be worn-out old men. You want to waste your life on my ranch, working with this little meager herd?"

"It's all we got." Brice glared at him.

He swallowed the apology on his tongue for Brice's own meager background. But he stopped himself. "We can have more."

"What do you mean, Guy? Spit it out. It's not like you to hold back."

"I want to borrow those steer. Tonight. Before they're Kirkson branded."

"Borrow?" Brice wiped a hand over his mouth again. "You mean steal."

The blood drained from his face, his throat grew even drier and he croaked when he answered. "Yes."

Brice paced the room. "The sheriff may be as crooked as a Taphgan hound's back leg but he'll nail us to the wall. I don't want to be shipped to

the Sibrea Prison Colony. Not even for you.”

“What could go wrong? Kirkson’ll play cards tonight. His men get drunk as old coots before the Starsday rest. And I’ve got something on the sheriff. He can’t take us in. Matter of fact, I’m going after his job. Elections are coming and he’s got to go. It’s the only job in town I could get. Nobody wants to hire a Trident, but they don’t mind one corralling drunks and kicking gypsies out of town. Sorry, Brice, no offense to your gypsy ass.”

“You’re planning on rustling and then running for sheriff?” Ignoring the remarks about gypsies, Brice roared with laughter, the deep lines etched with the dust of the trail. Covered in dirt, they probably looked like twins. “Now I know you’re messing with me.”

“No. I’m not.”

Whatever Brice saw in his face brought his laugh to a halt.

“Kirkson won’t make a fuss because I have it on good authority he swindled this herd from another failing ranch, not just won it in a card game.” He shook his head. “I’m not a thief. I’m just borrowing them. I’ll pay the man back when we’re in the clear, and I’ll never do anything like this again, not after I have Jewel. I couldn’t risk it.

Brice groaned. “I knew it had to be about her.”

Guy nodded. It always was. “I’ve been laying the groundwork. The Kirkson hands talk a lot when they’re drinking. The sheriff is in the pocket of Kirkson, so I got all the lowdown on him. Trust me, he won’t be a problem. I have proof he’s smuggling steroids. We round up the herd tonight, while nobody’s sober. Tomorrow we take the evidence against the sheriff to the mayor. In all the fuss, our little adventure will go unnoticed.”

“What happens when Kirkson notices his cattle missing?”

“He won’t. We’ll be setting it up to look like the cattle stampeded and got loose. By the time they regroup, we’ll have sold off that herd. Next spring, we’ll buy us some new heifers, another bull.”

“You’ve got it all planned out.” Brice sank into the chair and slumped, staring at his boots. “All right, I’ll help you, man. But I can’t stay after that. I can’t watch you turn into your old man.”

He reached for the whiskey and gulped it back. Through his burning throat, he insisted, “I’m not my old man.”

Later, in the dead of night as they sat their horses staring at the Kirkson herd, Guy doubted. He turned to Brice, unable to see his best friend in the dark. “I won’t be my old man.”

“I hope to hell not, but I can’t be around to watch you self-destruct over a girl. They’re all the same under their skirts, man.”

“Just take the ax and break the fence. Try to make it look natural.” He whistled to Max, the robo-shepherd he’d bought with his first piddling profit. The dog panted anxiously next to his horse.

Jewel was no lightskirt. Brice didn’t understand.

When the fence came down, he ordered Max, “Round ’em up, boy.”

With the soft sounds of hooves on grass and the low mooing and shuffling, the familiar sounds of the cattle drive moved him on instinct. He was good at this, if nothing else.

It all went easily, with Max keeping them in a tight mass, Guy on one side, Brice on the other. As they rounded the beasts into a makeshift pen halfway to the Grassland Cattle Market, the sun rose on the dark brown hides of the animals that would save his ranch. Soon, he’d have the funds to be worthy of Jewel. He’d never let her find out about tonight, what he’d done for her. His legs tightened on the saddle. His horse snorted and swished his head in response. He forced himself to relax.

“Brice, I’ve got to get to the mayor’s and turn in this evidence. That’ll get the sheriff off our trail before the cattle are reported missing.”

“It’s under control here.” Brice rolled out his saddle blanket and sank onto it without another word.

Another apology tried to make it past his dry throat, but Guy stifled it and directed his horse back toward Rangetown. As if he felt his owner’s urgency, his horse flew across the range.

He pulled up on the reins at the mayor’s stables, grabbed the pack with the surveillance shots, bank records he’d managed to sweet-talk from one of his old classmates, and a recording of some of the drunk Kirkson hands talking about how the steroids had added meat bulk to their cattle.

Dirty and smelling of horse and cow, he knocked on the door and hoped like hell Jewel wouldn’t see him like this.

The mayor opened the door stared at him with his nose lifted slightly in the air. “You want to clean up before you come here, boy.”

“Yes, sir. Didn’t have time. Needed to get you this soon as I could. This is evidence the sheriff is on the take and smuggling steroids on planet.”

The mayor scowled. “I’d started to suspect. Just a minute.” He took the bag and pushed a button on the housewide intercom. “Jenkins, I have a

situation for you. Call in the sheriff. And send notices to the town counsel for an emergency meeting.”

The mayor nodded at him, the only time he'd ever looked at Guy with near approval. He kept tight control on the grin that wanted to escape.

Then the mayor frowned again and, for the first time, a flash of concern and sympathy crossed his face. “Since you're here, you can tell Jewel goodbye. She leaves today.”

“Today?” he whispered. He stumbled a bit. To keep himself upright, he gripped the doorframe. Time seemed to stop and sit on his chest like a half-ton bull.

“Guy?” She stood there—in a black dress. Her cleavage pushed high, her pale skin revealed above the full skirt. Her face, nearly white, accented the dark circles under her eyes.

They were alone, in the doorway to her father's home, where anyone could see them. When had Mayor Quinn left? How long had he stood here like an idiot? It didn't matter. Jewel was leaving.

“You're leaving?”

“Today. I'm to be married.”

“In black?” He couldn't help it. He laughed, a hysterical and harsh cough.

“He arrived last night. No warning. Wants to leave today.”

“But you can't marry him. Not after all I've done for you. You said you wouldn't. That you'd—” he choked on the words, “—marry me.”

Tears slipped down her face but she remained rigid, as still as a porcelain doll.

His voice cracked on his whisper. “Please, Jewel.”

She ran to him and threw her arms around him. “I have no choice. This is what my mother wanted. Please don't make this any harder.”

With a moan, she lifted her head up and slammed her mouth against his. Before his spinning world cleared, before he could wrap his arms around her and hold tight, she'd fled down the hall.

And took his heart with her.

## Chapter Eight

Dr. Montgomery Wells slid to a halt. The light glinted off his wife's silver-toned lips, and the constriction in his chest struck him anew. The gut-wrenching unfairness of life sucker-punched him, a feeling he'd never quite prepared for, had almost grown to expect but had never become inured to after two long years.

Two long, bloody, heart-wrenching, soul-sucking years. The gods could have come up with no worse torture than taking a man's wife and binding her passions to another man, but they had, of course. That scenario was bad enough, but fate had made it unbearable. Lady Aissa Wells never desired him, while he ached for her night and day. Instead, she was struck almost nightly, and frequently at odd intervals of the day, with the blinding sexual drive that emanated from the man she was enslaved to.

Fate was a cold-hearted bitch. The man in question was his own brother, who'd unknowingly been the dupe. The three of them lived in a bizarre triangle that threatened to rip them all apart, into tiny pieces small enough that the cleaning bots would never find them.

When Montgomery'd gotten his hands on the person responsible—his enemy and lifelong competition for research funds, Paulus Keen—he'd choked the life from the man, spent his fury kicking the lifeless carcass into a pulp, and spaced his lifeless form. Not a day he'd been proud of, and a day that tormented his dreams, but he'd not take back the retribution. Dr. Wells hadn't existed that day. Only Montgomery.

Nobody trespassed on his family, on his wife, without the debt being paid tenfold.

Except for his own brother.

"Lady Wells." In the middle of the Taphgan rug, he stopped pacing and nodded to her in his usual aloof manner. He'd become cold, hard and difficult to be around, but he couldn't stop himself. Of course, his wife blamed him, but there was no cure for that injustice. "How is Thomas today?"

“Your brother is fine. Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Damn the woman. She might accuse in words, but her soft entreaty nearly soothed his beast. Clutching the back of the antique settee in their classically elegant receiving area, he stared at the ornate chandelier above her slight body and piled-high ebony hair. With the same weakness he’d failed to conquer since the uneasy truce, he couldn’t look at her, but he couldn’t let her go.

Why not ask his brother, ask after his welfare? Because they hadn’t exchanged words in two years, and the only reason his younger brother was still alive was that his life ensured hers. But he didn’t say that. And most days he acknowledged Thomas as a victim as well, but it was always harder on the days his gut wrapped itself in knots the moment he sensed her presence.

“If either of you is in need of anything, let my assistant know.” Montgomery didn’t allow himself the self-pity any longer. He turned his back on his wife and left their quarters, left the aristocratic trappings that didn’t mesh with the utilitarian medship all three of them hid on, in complete denial of circumstances.

Not for the first time, he wished to never set foot back inside.

The early morning hour meant the peaceful hallways rang with his footsteps on the metallic plating. Without passing another person, he made his way from the rear section of the ship down two levels of grated stairwell, near the clamoring engine room. The research wing of the hospital smelled of exhaust and chemical cleaners. Outside the reception office to his laboratory, he gathered his morose thoughts and caught his breath around the constriction in his chest that had grown tighter with every step away from the only woman he’d ever loved. He’d failed her miserably.

He swiped his thumb over the ident-pad, and the hatch swooshed open.

“Uletia, how is my favorite assistant this morning?” The reception desk sat in an expansive room of glass and steel, the plush chairs around the walls all empty. He greedily inhaled the aroma of cafeteen. The routine of his work life kept him from utter collapse, and this motherly, rotund woman had helped him through the worst of it.

“Your only, underpaid, highly skilled assistant is well, Doctor.” She held out the mug of the life-saving elixir and waited for him to take his first sip.

Glorious. The pleasure was visceral, and practically the only bodily pleasure he allowed himself since he’d last touched his wife.

*Stop it.*

“What do you have me doing this week, assistant? I’m thinking of clearing my docket and taking a shuttle down to Taphgan to get some fresh air for a few days.” With desperation, he clung to the idea of getting away from the torture and willed himself to stop thinking of his wife. His damned *wife*, and he couldn’t touch her.

*Stop it, this instant. You have work to do.*

While Uletia checked the U-panel for his schedule, he sipped the hot beverage and planned the latest tweak in his experimental collar inhibitor.

“Ah, a mayor from that terraformed planet, Grassland, made an appointment for one of their sheriffs. Guy Trident. He’s due this week. He needs information on silver-tip memory retrieval.”

His mood plummeted further.

Perhaps he needed more than to move out of his quarters, never to return. He should turn his back on this job, his research, this ship, his family. Instead of threats to take a vacation that he’d never follow through, he should walk away and try to find peace. If he left, perhaps his wife and his brother could find peace as well.

“I’ll be in my office. Send me his communiqués. I’ll take a look.”

He straightened his slumped shoulders and walked through the sterile lab.

Undeniably bound, Montgomery was as enslaved as his wife.

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Guy couldn’t stop wanting Jewel. No matter how many games of halo-castle, and after two days it had to be hundreds, his body itched from the tumult of running hot and cold. On fire for her one minute, the next he ruthlessly banked the lust in a stranglehold. No matter how much he agonized over their close quarters, she was nearing her breaking point. He was helpless.

Angry.

Horny.

He hated himself for his inability to act like a man instead of a rutting beast. Every time her collar activated, her pain increased. Today he had to find her relief. Moments ago, he’d caught a glimpse of her freaking *shadow*

and he got hard. In return, she broke into a sweat, her lips pinched in a tight line, and curled into a ball on the sofa.

For heaven's sake, all because he saw her outline stretched across the floor, the silhouette of her full breasts tapering to her small waist as her hand went up to brush her hair back, pushing her chest out in a leisurely stretch.

He wanted to kiss and hold her, but it'd make it worse. His fists had left a dent in the bathroom wall, where he'd hidden for a few moments to catch his breath and instead decided to release some steam. Didn't help.

Releasing steam, yeah, what a joke. He needed to get off. That's what he really needed. That's what she needed, too. He couldn't even jack off because she'd feel it and be worse off than before.

He had to face the truth. Jewel'd convinced herself she was biding time. That when she had her memory back, they'd fall into bed, like the lovers they weren't, and she'd be relieved of the collar's backlash. He knew something she didn't. She wouldn't fall into his bed when—and dammit, *if*, because there were no damn guarantees—she got her memories back. She'd taken a man with higher status before, had left Guy behind for greener pastures. Hell, he didn't even have status. He was the same man, a poor rancher's son. She was still high society, meant for a better man.

Besides, the moment she was herself again, she'd want to find her son. Maybe she still loved her husband, though he didn't know how she could love a psychopath. Guy wouldn't be in the equation at that point.

He froze in place, and his torso seized as if he'd been sucker-punched. *She might still love her husband.*

Same as he'd done for five years, he refused to acknowledge the idea she loved another man. The insidious worm of doubt ate at the back corner of his mind and fueled the frustration higher. Maybe he should let it out to fester. At least the black mood would quell his lust. He slammed his eyes shut and turned his musings to rational and less torturous thoughts.

This puzzle, this intrigue he and Jewel were caught in, hadn't gotten his full attention while he'd been wrapped up, running here and there. This mess had to be uncovered, for everyone's sake, especially the little boy he hadn't let himself dwell on. Jewel had a son.

Arms crossed, he paced the small room.

He'd managed a transmission to Quinn this morning. Jewel's father hadn't gotten word on Jared, but he'd teamed with Brice, and they were



trying to get through to *Geanus Station*. If they could get verification the boy was all right, they could concentrate on what to do about Jewel. He didn't know Jared, but it didn't matter. Every moment spent with Jewel added one more strand to the web she'd been winding around him for his entire life.

He stopped midpace. The Jewel of four days ago might've chosen her son over her memory, her freedom, but this Jewel didn't have an awareness of Jared. He'd be aware for her. He'd make sure she got her son back. If he suffered along the way, so be it, but he'd had enough of *her* suffering.

His fist hit the pad at the door and the panel swished open.

He couldn't wipe this all away. He had no wand to wave to bring her son onto this pleasure liner in a poof of gypsy magic. While they were holed up here, the boy had his grandfather on his trail, and as soon as Guy could find a way, he'd be on the case until he got it done.

He squared his shoulders when the frail figure on the couch shifted in the dim light.

For now, he'd give Jewel some relief, and if that meant he'd get some too, that was just incidental. His cock surged, hard and long. The groan from the couch called to him like a siren song he couldn't resist a moment longer. The collar responded to his lust and prompted her to fulfill his wishes.

There'd been no other choice than to go through the claiming, but if he'd known the compulsion would build, never easing even when he'd battled down his interminable erections, he might've found another way. Too late now for regrets.

The Sheriff of Rangetown picked up the love of his life and cradled her against his chest. Her arms locked around his neck, and her heavy lids parted enough for the pain to radiate out to grip him around the heart. The glittering in her eyes sparkled like sapphires, so precious that he trembled and crushed her head to his shoulder.

Unable to bear how haggard and pale her face had become in the past two days, his lungs stuttered. He took a gulp of air. Her scent teased him, honeysuckle, musky, aroused. She whimpered and pressed her nose against the tight, hot skin of his neck.

No more. No more pain.

He carried her to bed and shut off his conscience.

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## Chapter Nine

Guy ripped back the covers of the bed. The satiny sheets gleamed pale yellow. Alone, tossing and turning, Jewel'd slept there for the past two nights. He'd taken the couch. The damn thing was too short and his feet hung off the end. He hadn't had a good night's sleep since the night before Mayor Quinn's plea for help.

With care, he tried to ease Jewel onto her back, but she clung to him, opening her mouth on his throat and leaving a trail with her tongue. His fingers contracted, gripping her leg with one hand, and without his volition, the heady temptation of her breast with the other.

He groaned. He couldn't control his hands, which sought her delicious curves like a wasp missile to the plasma exhaust of a battle cruiser.

"Here's what we're going to do, sweetheart. We're going to get off, but the way I want it. The way I tell you to do it," he rasped. "Understand?"

"Oh, yes, I'll do whatever you want," she whispered in a throaty plea.

She didn't let him go but pulled him tighter. He collapsed on top of her in a heap. They slid on the slick sheets. He sprawled to keep them from shooting off the other side. Limbs entangled, lungs gusting with exertion, and the slide of their bodies hit him broadsided. A well of emotion rose in his chest so thick and fast, he nearly gasped in overload. Control in serious danger, he nearly gave in, but he gritted his teeth against the urge to lift the hem of her dress.

Honor shredded to tatters when she grasped his heavy cock and squeezed. The weave of his britches chafed his sensitive flesh. His balls drew up, ready to spill, and he shut his eyes against the white rush of heat shooting up from his toes. He grasped his mangled convictions before he tore off their clothes and plunged inside her with abandon.

"Damn, woman." He might self-combust right on top of her. "Give me a second."

Her fingers fell away and she paused like the wind in the dusty planes of Grassland before the sandstorm marauded everything in its path. Not a

good direction of thought, that. Marauding.

“Guy?” Her concerned face, so dear and eager to please, froze, on the verge of collapsing into pain.

“This morning when I had that work to do, made those calls, I did a little checking.” His cock surged against her side before he contained the urge to rock into her, but now that she lay under him, he didn’t want to leave. There was no way they’d make it off this bed without making love if he didn’t get his mind on his plan. A plan that’d satisfy them both, as well as his promise to keep her safe. Un-marauded.

By sheer will, he contained the urge to dry hump her hip. His lip quirked in self-derision. It’d be a miracle if he wasn’t a slobbering idiot before he got Jewel some portion of her life back.

She brought her hands to his shoulders and kneaded him, stroking and massaging the stiffness away. She had great hands.

*Don’t think about her hands and where you want them until you finish speaking your piece.*

“What did you check into?” She placed light butterfly kisses along his jaw as she continued to rub his back while the soft fabric of his tunic kept her skin from his. Small protection when he wanted to chew her clothes off.

That might have been a whimper escaping him, but he was coming apart, little by little every day. He had to knock some sense into himself. He shook his head and managed to speak without garbling every word. He even sounded like he was in possession of his wits and knew what he was doing. “As long as we go about this my way, then the compulsion on your collar will go back to level zero.”

Eyes widened and her panting grew faster. “Okay. What are your orders?”

“I don’t like the sound of that. I don’t want to order you, but I am, tonight. It’s the only way to get that programming to back off. There are ten levels of punishment for not answering the call from my wrist unit to your collar. I think you’re probably on level eight. I don’t think either one of us wants you to be on anything but level zero.”

“I understand. Tell me what you desire.”

He kissed the tip of her nose and put his forehead to hers. Unable to shift without their bodies rubbing together in all the right ways, in all the wrong circumstances, he slowly lifted off her to give them breathing room.

As much to convince her as to put some distance between them, he put on an air of authority, haughty and slightly cool. The programming must sense a real sexual encounter and Jewel herself needed to believe she'd fulfilled his wishes. That last was crucial. Otherwise the punishment level wouldn't throttle back all the way. If he saw that crease between her eyes again, the outward show of her discomfort, he'd be between her thighs the rest of the night and unable to look at himself in the mirror for the rest of his life.

Time to play the role. He, master. Her, slave. Silly though it was since he was absolutely slave to her slightest concern. More than anything, he wanted to take her to bed and learn her. Find all her ticklish places, all the spots that made her moan, all the little shivers of delight when she responded to him. But not tonight. Not like this, with her unable to defend herself even with her own thoughts. Probably not ever. But he could dream. Dammit, he would *dream*.

He intended to remember this night, hoard it away and take it out on the lonely nights in his future. In that split second, he gave up. He'd never marry, never find a woman like Jewel, and it wasn't fair to anyone to have a man more in love with a memory than reality. His heart would forever be faithful to her, no matter if she lived far away from Grassland with her ex-husband and child. His skin constricted across his trembling muscles.

"Here goes." Guy hoped to hell he could keep his hands off her. He couldn't make promises about his mouth, though. He shuddered and crouched over her.

"Take off your clothes for me. Nice and slow." Then he lied, to give her more assurance that this was exactly what he wanted. As her master. Yes, quite the lie because he hadn't dared to dream of her for five years. That was a lie, too. He'd dreamed, but he didn't dare acknowledge it in light of day. "I've imagined you like this, and you're going to do it just like I say, so I can enjoy every minute of it."

*Hands off her.*

He clenched his jaw against the urge to lick his way down her body. Better not let his mouth in on the action either. With a light brush that shivered through him and set his hair on edge, he gave her one last chaste kiss on those delectable silver lips and crawled backward off the bed. The wispy aroma of honeysuckle flirted across his senses, and he nearly leaped away from her, as eager to get started as to flee from the deepening mire.

After disengaging the deck locks on the carved wood legs, he pulled one of the chairs over next to the bed. Erection taut and obvious, he sprawled back and gripped the padded arms of the chair. “Go ahead, sweetheart, strip for me.”

“If that is your desire.” Trembling fingers plucked at the tie of the pink wrap. Though her nerves had taken over and she shook visibly, she finally managed to part the belt.

One delicate shoulder shrugged the dress aside to bare her breast. The fabric clung to her erect nipple and held it in precarious enticement. Mouth watering, he gripped the arms of the chair until the sturdy wood creaked. Then she rolled her other shoulder and the dress fell to pool about her waist. Silver points tightened on her flushed chest. Those erect nipples begged to be suckled, nipped, swallowed in his ravenous mouth, but he stayed put, afraid to even allow his chest to rise and fall lest he stumble out of the chair to get closer. To touch. To grab tight and never let go.

“I’m going insane,” he muttered.

Jewel’s soft lips parted. Eyes glistening even in the low light, she stared at him with a hint of sadness, a look she shouldn’t wear, one he’d rarely seen on her face that until five years ago had twinkled at him as if she knew a secret he didn’t. “This is what you want?”

“Yes,” he croaked. He wanted much more, but he also wanted this. He wanted everything. Could he take much more before he trampled down his noble intentions in his rush to consume? Nobody but himself quite understood that loneliness he’d tried to squelch and leave behind, but that avarice, that animal that hungered for Jewel clawed to get free.

Damn, but he throbbed everywhere.

“Lay back and spread your legs.” He slammed his eyes closed, gripped the chair tighter and strove to keep his ass on the chair. He’d be hard-pressed to go through with this as planned if he touched her, wet and willing.

*That’s not Jewel. It’s not the miss you’ve always loved. This is just pretend. It’s not her. You never let yourself think of her this way before, did you? For real and in the flesh. You can’t without losing yourself, can you?*

He shifted in the chair. His cock really wanted to get this show on the road, and though the man usually ruled it, his lust knew he’d get relief soon, and it wanted it *now*.

“Watch me. Look at the man who owns you.” Planned words that skated on the edge of a truth he harbored. This was an act, but she needed to believe it was real as much as he needed to believe he was pretending.

Lids cracked open, he checked to ensure she obeyed. Of course she would. She had no choice. *Choice*. He latched onto that word and managed to retrieve some of his sanity. In some way it was his fantasy but, in truth, he wanted to initiate their connection with tenderness and love. He wanted her forever, as wife, as lover, as mother to his children. For now, this was what he'd take, and maybe it'd be all he could get.

Supine, Jewel lifted her head, her gaze searching for him beyond the foot of the bed. For now, he managed to keep his perusal on her face and didn't dare to take in her body.

“Prop yourself up on the pillows,” he ordered.

Slender arms reached for the fluffy pillows. She shoved them behind her head and positioned herself. “Like this?”

“Push the dress all the way off.”

Her shapely legs fell together in modesty. She was by far the most beautiful sight he'd ever beheld, but she was different, more a caricature of the real, living, smart-mouthed Jewel. Already, the etched lines in her face relaxed. She believed they were fulfilling his sexual fantasies. A relieved shudder moved through him and strengthened him, allowed him to sit back and enjoy. Body finally relaxed, his mind clear, his muscles released their tension even while his cock tightened in anticipation of finally finding relief.

“Move your hips a little to the left. That's a good girl. Now spread your legs again.” She parted her thighs and a hint of silver winked at him.

“Wider, let me see your beauty.”

“Wide enough?” she asked and bit her lip.

“Perfect.”

He did his best to view her dispassionately though her blush nearly covered her body. The metallic sheen of her outer lips heightened the effect of the pink petals they guarded. Even there, though the nanobots weren't as dense and didn't alter the delicate color of her, the heightened shine heralded his ownership. The collection of wet and slick sensitive folds grew redder and plumped with swollen desire as he watched. That pussy, readied and eager, belonged to him.

Now.

He couldn't wait a second longer.

"Let your knees fall open and look at me," he demanded. Possessive lust coursed through him.

His shirt hit the floor in a flat second. His hips lifted, and he shoved his pants to his shins before toeing them off, erection bobbing free to slap against his taut lower belly. When he leaned back, the heat of his cock stretched toward his navel. He'd never been so stiff and long and aching in his life.

Jewel's eyes widened and, blushing scarlet, she said with a hint of wonder, "I haven't seen you this way before. When we, you know, I didn't get a chance to really see. You're..." she hesitated and licked her lips, pulling a groan from him. "You're beautiful."

"No one's ever said that before," he replied, garbled and throaty. He gripped his cock and shuddered when her gaze stayed there, drinking him in to the point where he might spend just from her perusal.

"Touch yourself, Jewel. I'm going to watch you get off with your own hand."

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A rush of heat and dizziness washed over Jewel. The thick and sensual words from Guy brought pleasure as well as so much nervousness. She wasn't sure how she'd survive the night. "I...I don't know how."

"Run your fingers over yourself. Learn what you like. Tell me how it feels. Tell me." His voice tickled along her skin and heated her more, like a blanket of heat covered her body.

"Like this?" Her fingers slipped along her flesh. Relief and pleasure tore at her.

"Just like that. Keep talking."

"I'm wet." Her fingers trembled across the point that ached the most. With increasingly confident and firmer strokes, she lost her inhibitions and let her hand imitate what she'd longed for Guy to do. In her mind, she pictured her hand as his hand. Her needs as his needs.

"That's it." His groaned response reminded her to speak, to describe to him her ecstasy.

"Right there. That's...oh." She whimpered, and the words caught in her throat.



“Rub it. Soft. Soft and slow. Easy, like that.” His voice broke, but she understood.

Something inside her splintered, never to be the same again.

“I want more.” She wanted more, but she couldn’t take more. It all rushed at her in a wave. Already she tensed and reached for bliss.

“Harder, sweetheart.”

“I’m almost there.” She gasped. Her core muscles tightened. She arched off the bed to strain, thighs trembling, toward the light building in her mind. She closed her eyes. The sight of Guy stroking himself, face contorted in passion, made it more difficult to breathe. Behind her lids, the image of him remained etched, scored into her mind.

A dark flutter brushed over the image. She edged back from the point of no return. A hint of violence and misery flickered through her closed memories. With a mental push, she backed away from whatever lurked there and opened her eyes again, to Guy and his needs.

Cheeks flushed, he jerked his arm in such a way she feared he might hurt himself, but he groaned, his gaze on her fingers rubbing her clit, bringing her close again. More than anything, she wanted to give him his desires. When his hips surged up from the chair, her inner muscles clamped, and she ground her behind against the bed for more pressure.

Guy’s lids closed halfway, but he still watched her touch herself. He rasped, “I’m gonna lose it. Faster.”

White light sparkled in her vision, and she grasped for the pleasure, increasing the pace and pressure. She couldn’t keep her vision clear, couldn’t control her reactions. Her core pulsed, rhythmically contracting in a breathtaking climax. She groaned. “I’m coming.”

As her body shuddered in aftershocks, she squinted through the tears gathered in her eyes. His hips bucked up and his cock surged into his fist, tight and moving with forceful friction. Guy shook all over when he reached his peak.

“Jewel,” he nearly shouted.

His release lifted him off the chair, and he clamped his hand around his tip, catching the semen that made her mouth water for a taste. Before, when they’d been physically connected, she’d caught the edges of his emotions. This time, she sensed nothing from him, and though the agony she’d lived in for days dissipated, she missed the connection.

Guy slouched down in the chair and reached for a towel she hadn't seen him put there. The harsh breathing in the room lulled her. She sagged against the bed while tremors coursed through her. The drying moisture on her hands and between her legs reminded her of what she'd just done. Her lips lifted in a contented smile that relieved the tense muscles in her face. Before she could revisit those moments and store away what she'd learned about pleasing her master, a piercing thud shook her, seemed to rattle through her skull.

She gripped her head to hold it together. The inner workings of her mind became a tangible force so real she could sense the crumbling within.

With a pop, the pinprick hole in the dam of her memories widened to a thin fissure. As if the programming were a physical barrier she could reach out and touch, she envisioned the tiny crack widening with a small tear. Reverberations throbbed through her and left her shaking, watching a memory play on a blank wall in her mind.

*"It's like watching you with another man," her husband growled, his features hidden from her view as he rolled from on top of her, leaving behind the sticky residue of his semen. "Touch yourself. I want to watch you think of him while you masturbate. Go ahead."*

"Jewel?" The soft call bounced around like the word was trapped in a tunnel.

She gasped and sucked in air as if plopped up on the bank of the River Thantes, half-drowned.

"Are you all right? The punishment should have backed off. Why are you still in pain?"

"Guy," she breathed in relief.

When her swimming vision cleared, she caught sight of him hovering over the bed, concern tightening his mouth.

"No. It's not that." She swallowed the bitterness invading her mouth. "I had a memory. My husband."

"Ex-husband," Guy insisted, his face blanking as he backed away. "As soon as we get your memory back, you can get in touch with him. But I'm sorry, sweetheart. I don't know if it'd be a kindness to even talk to him since his wife is now an ex and is sexually bound to another man."

Jewel had a strong suspicion her ex-husband had no more than a passing acquaintance with the concept of kindness.

“However you want to handle it, we’ll do it. I can’t really think of a way to let you go back to him, though. But if you want to, I’ll find a way if it kills me.” Guy’s expression remained bland, as if they’d never been intimate.

“No. I want to stay with you.” She didn’t dare move, even to clean away the evidence of what they’d just shared. The way he spoke chilled her.

“You say that now, but what do you think will happen when you get back your memories?”

“Let’s not find out. Take me home,” she pleaded. The word “home” curled around her tongue and softened the panic inside her. She’d been in Guy’s home. She knew that, quite utterly.

“I can’t take you home until you’re whole again.” Guy turned his back to her and strode toward the bathroom where he’d spent an inordinate amount of time the past few days.

She had no response and fought the sting of threatening tears when the door closed. Without him, the man she craved as much as she loved—a love she absolutely knew she’d always felt—she’d never be whole again.

The question was, did she deserve him? The memory that had surfaced, unbidden, had hinted that she’d cheated on her husband. She’d been an adulteress.

She didn’t want to remember herself. Not at all.

## Chapter Ten

Per his adamant instruction, Jewel stayed close to Guy when they left their suite midcruise, walked through the sleepy liner in the early ship-hours and boarded a sleek little skimmer. The pilot released the clamps and, with a soft purr, the small shuttlelike craft floated away. Surrounded by dark, cold space in a small tin can, she didn't want to go to the medship but couldn't help the increase in her pulse, the excitement of an adventure overshadowing her worry.

"She's a beauty," Guy said to the blue-jumpsuited pilot who hadn't looked at her even once. Since the man at the controls was the only other person on the skimmer, it looked to be a quiet trip.

The Spaceport pilot patted the top of his console and grinned over his shoulder at Guy, who filled the seat next to her with his legs jammed between the rows of bucket seats.

"This little hotrod will do sixty dextra-machs a second." With a nod of his gray-streaked brown head, the pilot stroked the highly polished acrylic display. "She's never let me down. She's never jealous. And she gives me all the freedom to roam. Better than a woman."

He winked and turned forward, flipping a switch that caused an immediate change in the hum of the engines. A small whine built. At first barely a whisper, it grew until it resembled the loud purr of a mountain lion.

How did she know how a mountain lion sounded?

The thrusters of the skimmer kicked in and the g-force pressed her body into the seat, bringing her to the present and away from a memory that skittered back into the shadows.

It seemed only moments before a station filled the screen. While the cruise liner was a rounded shape of modern design, the gangly construction outside the viewer hovered in space like a rectangle with boxy wings on its side and a thin tailfin off the back. Lines connected to solar sails shot off haphazardly. They glinted light from the distant star. The rest of the ship shone with a cloudy wash. Even the portals were muted a sickly yellow.

“We’re here,” the pilot pronounced with undue cheer.

“What’s her call sign?” Guy gazed out the viewer while he held his body away from her. He hadn’t touched her in hours, not since their encounter, had barely spoken and had clearly kept his passions in check. Not a glimmer of compulsion had come from her collar.

She should’ve been relieved. She wasn’t.

“That’s the *Sir Alec Jeffreys*, the only medship in the quadrant,” the pilot answered. “It’s a neutral station, Spaceport-maintained. No Terraloft craziness here.”

“Who’s it named after?” Guy did all the talking. Mute, she sat in her seat and stared at the boxy ship where she’d get her memories back.

“Some scientist. I don’t know.” The pilot clicked an overhead switch. “This is the *Haley* requesting berth on the *Jeffreys*.”

Over the crackling speaker, a comp droned, “Permission granted to bay twelve.”

“Here we go.” The pilot yanked on his flight stick and the skimmer rolled to the side, banking hard as the man yelped in glee.

Careful to keep her head tight against the seat, Jewel gripped the armrests and gritted her teeth. The force of the roll nearly had her bending double over her lap.

Guy chuckled. With the force of the turn pressing her tight into the bucket seat, she struggled to cant her head to see his wide grin. The smile rid his face of the deep-creased frown he’d carried in the past few days.

“Makes me miss taking my hopper over the mountain passes.” His grin vanished. In profile, his cheeks seemed more pronounced, as if he’d lost weight.

A whisper cascaded through her, almost within grasp, before it echoed in retreat. A soft remnant flashed. *Hold on, Jewel. This ravine is a wild ride.*

She blinked away the dark speckles dancing in front of her.

Guy cleared his throat. “Maybe one day...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but she desperately needed to hear it. “One day?”

“Never mind. Wishful thinking.”

A puzzle piece slid home somewhere in the vicinity of her chest. Young and carefree, she’d snuck to his ranch, and they’d ridden his hopper in the hills and valleys near his home. Perhaps that was how she knew the sound of a mountain lion. Before, these leaks of memories had given her hope

she'd remember her past with Guy. That he'd want her after she saw this doctor and he reversed the block. But now she feared the memories would bring more pain and rip away her only anchor. She reached across the seat and gripped his strong, callused hand.

Guy flinched but didn't pull away. That was something, at least.

"The hookup shouldn't take but a minute." The pilot flipped switches here and there on the console. She hadn't noticed the easing of the pressure holding her to her chair. "All set. Exit's to port. I have to get on back for another fare. I'm a popular man today."

The pilot arranged their disembarkment on the comm, pulled up a lever and threw a parting over his shoulder with a small wave. "Good docking to you."

The harnesses retracted, and she rose with loose limbs to grip the seatback in front of her. With a steadying grasp on her arm, Guy led her off the skimmer and into a crowded landing bay.

"No point in delay." He stepped into the din of passengers.

Freight barges pattered in the air between platforms in a cavernous dock open to all five levels. Sounds echoed before being muffled in the heavy metal of the decking. The medship had a functional look, all plain utilitarian sheeting. No softer touches, displayed artwork or plush seating. Arrows of different colors painted on the grated floor led the crowds to their destinations. With a few inquiries, Guy found a check-in station and a ship schematic display then hauled her behind him.

Along the walk to the lift, she couldn't help but notice the difference in how strangers reacted to her. Guy'd sent for a few items from the cruise-liner gift shop. Special pink lipstick to cover the burnished cast of her lips. And a luxurious black scarf with a delicate weave to cover the circlet at her neck. With her lips and collar covered and her hands in matching ebony gloves, passerby didn't recognize her as a silver-tip. They treated her as any woman. A skinny man in a dapper blue suit whistled and smiled at her as he passed.

Guy pulled her closer. "Damn rascals don't know their manners 'round here."

After traversing a few levels on the lift, they exited into an echoing hallway. At a T-intersection, Guy popped his head around the corner and back.

“Hold this,” he whispered and slung his satchel off to shove it in her hands. A reverent look on his face, he lifted out a belt lined with re-fill slugs. With a practiced maneuver, he had it around his waist and adjusted the fit until a phaser rode along his left hip.

She swallowed hard. “Are those allowed on station?”

“I entered a permit request.” At best, this was a non-answer, but she didn’t ask if he’d attained the permit. Besides, he kept talking in his low, serious tone while he frowned, scanning the hallway behind them. The voices in front of them had disappeared. “For a second I thought I heard Kalon.”

Her heart sped, thundering in her ears. “I’m glad you have protection. I don’t want him near you again.”

She sounded a bit fierce and nearly giggled because she couldn’t imagine being fierce, but their situation was too strange, too surreal for even hysterical laughter. She still didn’t feel a connection to the man they told her had been her husband. He’d done horrible things. Who was she to have married a man like that? She didn’t want to remember herself, a rebellious adulteress who married a thug.

“Could you wait a minute?” She wiped her hands down her dress again.

“What’s wrong, Jewel?”

No “sweetheart” today.

“Even if the memory block is removed, it’s not as if the collar will be. Wouldn’t it be better, since I’ll still be tied to you, wouldn’t it be better if I don’t remember?”

“I don’t think so.” Guy shook his head adamantly and pulled her near with a gentleness he hadn’t used since they left their room. Still, he didn’t close the distance between them completely. “Even if I agreed with you, we still need to talk with this doctor. He’s the sole researcher in the galaxy who’s interested in silver-tipping reversal. Only the rich own silver-tips, and where do you think research funding comes from? Maybe he’s got ideas on how to remove the collar, too.”

Her mouth was so parched, she couldn’t respond, only coughed into her hand as her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. What would she do, what would she be, if she weren’t Guy’s?

“Sweetheart, no matter what happens, I’ll take care of you. Don’t look so scared. It tears me up inside.”

The words soothed her a bit, but the “sweetheart” made up her mind. She’d do as he wished. Though, really, she didn’t have a choice if he ordered her.

With a reassuring smile, Guy accessed the ident-pad and the slider hummed open.

She took a deep breath, rotated her shoulders and stepped through the door.

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Stomach twisted in knots, Guy resisted the urge to bundle Jewel into his arms and bolt, but the quiet waiting room held no surprises and was, in fact, empty. If for no other reason than to have a few moments when he wasn’t looking over his shoulder, he led Jewel to the nearest seat before prowling the deserted reception area. He didn’t have to wait long.

A sharp-featured man came through the door behind the desk and gave them a thorough inspection. About the same coloring and height as Guy, he was thinner to the point of appearing unhealthy. Despite the leanness, he exuded strength of will and confidence. The man had to be older, with a dusting of gray-white at his temples in his dark brown hair, but otherwise his age was indeterminate in the way of many affluent spacers. He walked into the waiting area with a slight limp nearly disguised by the elegance of a Terraloft and a unique, old-world flair. Beneath the ubiquitous white lab coat, he boasted an immaculate ensemble of gray tweed slacks, a black vest with gleaming buttons, and a fine white lawn shirt with ruffled cuffs extending beneath his coat sleeves to his knuckles.

Looking steadfastly into the man’s assessing blue eyes, which framed a hawkish nose and sharp features, he gave a perfunctory nod of greeting. “Sheriff of Rangetown, Guy Trident.”

“A long way from Grassland, aren’t you Sheriff?” The doctor’s deep question resonated with authority. This was a man who expected to be heeded.

“I go as far as it takes to get the job done,” he replied, used to the evasiveness of the Terraloft. He’d expected more directness from a man who’d sized him up with such efficiency and who didn’t dress with the same carelessness of the other space elite. Still, if the man played the usual games, this would be a long and frustrating meeting.



The aristocrat bowed, a deep bend at the waist, and Guy worked to hide his shock. The effortless way the doctor showed his respect was a nearly antiquated notion. A notion Guy happened to agree with. After all, respect had to be shown to others as well as earned. The tightness in his gut eased a bit.

“My name is Dr. Montgomery Wells. You’re here to discuss silver-tipping. For a case, is it?”

He slanted his body to the side, unaware until that moment that he’d positioned himself between Jewel and the doctor. “I’d like you to remove a memory block.”

Dr. Wells didn’t flinch. He didn’t move a muscle, kept his gaze steady and didn’t acknowledge Jewel, though he had to know she sat in the chair, waiting quietly.

“I’m sorry. *Jeffreys* guidelines deny treatment to any silver-tips for any reason, life-threatening conditions included.”

The doctor started to turn, but Guy couldn’t let the matter end here. His hand jerked toward his phaser, but he quelled the movement. Careful to keep his tone even, he tried again. “I have it on good authority that you can remove a memory block.”

“I don’t know where you heard that rumor. Removing a block would be a risky venture, against *Jeffreys* policy, and most likely would leave the slave in a worse condition. If I even knew the procedure, I’d advise you with the utmost concern not to take such a course. There are more repercussions than you could possibly imagine.”

With a quick departure that bordered on rudeness, Wells retreated and nearly shut the door before he stopped and glanced in Jewel’s direction. His expressionless face dipped into a momentary frown. “I’m sorry.”

A desperate, instinctive plea came from Guy. He didn’t know how he knew the significance, but he did. He blurted at the closing portal, “What do I do about her memory leaks?”

He held his breath. Not a sound rose above the faint hum of the medship’s vibrating lifelines coursing through every level. Seconds ticked by, his lungs burning from the absolute stillness. Slowly, the door opened again, but the doctor didn’t move from the archway. His frown deepened, and his eyes, bordered with dark smudges beneath, squinted at Jewel.

“She’s having leaks?”

“Yes. She’s remembered she had a husband.”

“Damn.” The doctor paled. “I’ll talk to her. You can’t influence her in any way when I give her the pros and cons.”

A giddy sense of relief flowed over him, and he nearly whooped to the ceiling. “You’ll help us.”

“No. I’ll help her. If she wants it.”

His smile died as quickly as it came. Jewel had been scared, hesitant. She might balk, not go through with it. He hoped to hell she’d see reason. “I’d never influence her with the collar, but I need to talk to her.”

“No.” Dr. Wells shook his head with force. “No. My way, or not at all. I have an indicator that lets me know if your wrist unit is sending to her collar. You will in no way exert pressure on her. Got that?”

“Of course.” He didn’t like the implication that he’d be so underhanded, but Dr. Wells didn’t know he was an anomaly among the spacefaring.

“Fortunately, I had a feeling I’d need it, so I brought the sensor with me.” After pulling out a bracelet similar in size to the one on Guy’s wrist, Dr. Wells clamped it over Guy’s control unit. A soft glowing red light blinked rapidly before it settled into a constant unrelenting scarlet. The doctor studied the light on the small display and instructed, “Let’s test it. Send her a mild sexual overture.”

“I can’t do that. I don’t use her that way.”

The doctor’s mouth opened slightly before he cleared his throat. “All right. I’m sure there’s a story there. Later.” He shook his head, as if to clear it. “Tell her to take off her gloves and mentally embellish it as an order she can’t refuse.”

“Jewel, take off your gloves.” He thought with force, demanding, putting a little threat behind it that he might use with a delinquent on his way to Juvea Farms. A green light flashed from his wrist, blinking wildly before going back to unrelenting red.

Jewel’s eyes opened wide and her hand flew to her collar before she winced. With a frantic haste, she removed her gloves as if they burned her flesh.

His gut contracted as if sucker-punched. He’d caused pain where he’d promised to protect. He’d rather face the business end of a phaser than hurt her, but using the command element of the collar must’ve caused some painful compulsion.

“What the hell?” He reacted on instinct and punched Wells. Right on the chin with a bruising uppercut.

The doctor fell on his ass, sprawled on the decking, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Damn.” Guy shook out his fist and ran to Jewel.

“I’m fine.” She panted as sweat rolled down her temples.

“You’ll stay fine, too. Let’s go, sweetheart. I’ll find us a room before I come back and have a heart-to-heart with the good doctor.” He helped her from her chair and supported her when her legs buckled. The weight of her against him, soft and warm, sent a pulse of desire through him. She gave a throaty moan, and he tensed, cursing himself as a damn fool. He had to keep his randy hands off her.

“I’ll make sure he helps you, and without the pain. Come on, almost to the door.”

From behind, a low groan and rustle of cloth reassured him he hadn’t put the doctor in a coma. He was relieved, really he was, because they needed the help, but his jaw set against the urge to punch the man again.

The door slid open. Before he could take another step, the doctor called from behind him.

“If you leave, she will die. Memory leaks cause severe and irreparable brain damage.”

He froze but couldn’t speak. Icy fingers cascaded over his chest.

The doctor continued speaking as if he hadn’t delivered Jewel’s death sentence. “Come, sit down. We have much to discuss.”

## Chapter Eleven

Jewel's heart raced and a blinding wash of black covered her vision. For long moments she couldn't breathe, couldn't think. The few precious memories she'd gathered, almost all of them related to Guy, flashed before her like a scattershot vid ad, but the hated peek at her ex-husband overrode them all. Repeating, over and over.

*It's like watching you with another man.*

A foreign weight compressed the wall in her head. The bulging dam threatened to crack from the pinpoint, while shock and primal urges to protect radiated out from Guy through her collar.

Guy feared for her.

She opened her eyes and stepped out of herself, out of her self-indulgent concern for her memories, and ached to hold and soothe him. With a hard grip that'd leave marks, he held her arm as if anchored to her, as if she'd walk through the door and never come back. The emotions rolling off him were not passionate in the least, but she needed to kiss him, to draw him back to her. His eyes shone stark and empty. Face creased in worried lines, and his beautiful lips turned down, he halted in the doorway, ignoring the doctor's instructions to go into to the examination room.

A gentle yank didn't dislodge his hold. She turned into him and tucked their arms between them. On tiptoes, she pressed her mouth to his, a gentle reassurance. When she pulled back, they both breathed heavily. Gold flicked through the light brown striations of his irises. Long ebony lashes swept down, trembled on his pale cheek and opened wide. He licked his lips. The panic screaming from her collar receded to a dull whisper.

"You'll be okay." His voice shook. "I promised I'd take care of you."

"I know you'll take care of me." She gripped his silky shirt. "There's no choice now. The block has to go, one way or another."

From within, her deep well of confidence in Guy stretched to include herself. If he cared this much for her, and she understood his morality and protectiveness as incorruptible, then she would live up to him. Whatever

she remembered of herself, she'd have to face it since all other options had fled. She laid her head against Guy's chest, cradling their arms between them, and softened against his sinewy chest, his heart beating time with her own.

From the doorway leading into the research area, Dr. Wells spoke over the rhythm of Guy's heartbeat. He gestured them into the exam room. "You must listen to me. I'm sure you've suffered no permanent damage, but any memory pulled beyond the barrier can be the one that creates an unmendable rift. The next memory could rip open your mind, or it could be a memory you gain three years from now. There's no way to predict."

"I'm right behind you." She followed Dr. Wells through the door. For the first time, she led Guy, tugging him behind her.

A short hallway gleamed white and clean. Six doors, three on each side, lined the way, with ident-pads and display panels beside each one. At the end, a double door with small windows remained closed, a table stacked with comp parts visible on the other side.

Wells tapped on the U-panel of the first door and it clicked open. He motioned her to an exam table that filled half the room, then sat on a stool in front of a small desk. "I'll need her Broker."

A grim expression and tone came from Guy. "It's been destroyed."

The doctor sagged in his chair before he pulled himself straight again. "Sit. Both of you."

She sat on the edge of the surprisingly warm table, but Guy paced.

Dr. Wells spoke to her as if a teacher to a student while he ignored the class troublemaker in the back of the room. With one last flick of his brow and a glance at Guy over his shoulder, he lectured for a few long minutes. Though he could have talked over her head, he explained in layman's terms. "The memory dam is an electrical construction that blocks certain long-term memories from a specific portion of the brain."

She nodded. So far, she was with him.

Wells leaned toward her enough to reassure, but far enough away she could still see Guy pacing.

"Something the Terraloft keep within their ranks—silver-tips with memory blocks degrade. The barrier is hit with electrical zaps when neurons try to access memories that should be there. There's no way to know exactly which little zap will break the barrier, but eventually it will. While most of us have a life expectancy of one hundred and fifty or so,

from the time of programming, a silver-tip usually has only, at the utmost, ten or twenty years. There are some who live such a small, sheltered life, well guarded and protected, they may live in such a way their memories aren't accessed as frequently. They can have the same expectancy as anyone. Since you're already trying to reach inside yourself, you won't have even ten years. It's difficult to say, since it's like a game of chance, but you might have five, at the outside."

Guy swore, long and harsh.

The strong emotions from Guy resonated in her, but the fear had been outweighed by an anger that matched her own. Now able to process the difference, she felt his as waves radiating along her skin, prodding her emotional centers with aggression. Her responses, tinged with emotion from within, weren't just the stimulated reactions of her body. The distinction was tangible. The collar emulated, vibrated along her surface and a little deeper at her silver-tipped areas. Her own emotions resonated, thrummed inside.

While she paused to process it all, the doctor waited, expressionless. When she brought her attention back to him, he gave her a reassuring smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"The extreme electrical activity when the barrier collapses causes what is colloquially known as a stroke. A severe one. The silver-tip industry basically creates a nonentity of the humans they change. There's no regulation over them or civil tracking as on planet. There's been no publicizing of the short life expectancy. The entire injustice is unspoken, unacknowledged."

"I had no idea." She scoffed at herself. How could she have known? Her life began a few days ago, but an intuition spoke to her. She didn't think she'd even known of silver-tips before. At that moment she realized she'd always been sheltered.

"Most folk on Grassland don't know about silver-tips." Guy verified her suspicions without a pause in his pacing. "Governmental officials do, of course. There are regs forbidding them, but the laws are written in obfuscation. Unless a commoner went off-world, or had dealings with a Terraloft who spoke of it, there'd be no exposure. No reason to know of the practice, much less how slaves are treated."

"Understood." Wells had shown a few signs of surprise at her predicament, but he hadn't revealed much sympathy, and yet she sensed it

in the way he treated her so gently. “Since your barrier is breaking down, it’s best we go ahead and get rid of it in a controlled environment. It’s not such a difficult procedure. I just happen to be the only doctor who’s ever done it. You have to be willing to take the risk. I can negate much of the electrical storm, but enough could leak to cause you damage or death. You must weigh the twenty percent chance of ill fate today versus a hundred percent chance of death, but that death could be in years. You could have days, weeks, months of good health if you leave now, none the worse for your memories.”

“I’ll take the chance,” she blurted out when Guy opened his mouth.

He snapped it shut with a click and started pacing again.

“Your memories could cause you emotional damage and grief.” The doctor’s earnest expression, as if he needed to convince her of those dire circumstances, told her all she needed to know.

“You’ve helped someone before, and the memories she retrieved hurt her, didn’t they?”

His eyebrows rose, then he sat back on the stool and looked at the floor. “Something like that.”

“I’ll take the chance.” She angled her brows and stared meaningfully at Guy, willing him to understand. She’d take the chance her memories might hurt them, both of them, but she’d also take the chance to hold onto him with all her heart.

Guy didn’t say a word, didn’t look at her, and the stillness from her collar astounded her. He’d blocked his emotions so effectively he didn’t seem to be feeling anything at the moment. Strangely, though she understood he was trying to protect her, she was adrift, hurt he didn’t share his responses with her.

The doctor didn’t turn to Guy or ask his opinion before he continued. “We have to do this without your Broker, which would’ve made it easier on the sheriff over there.” Dr. Wells nodded behind him where Guy prowled with a fierce expression that threatened he might hit the doctor again. “Lie back on the table and relax.”

“Easy for you to say,” Guy muttered, his exasperation written on every tight line of his body. Small pulses of the turbulence inside him spoke through her collar again. Though he was clearly agitated, relief that he still cared made her slouch, grip the edge of the table on either side of her thighs, but she didn’t lie down yet.

Just thinking of the strength of his desires only a day ago, the collar vibrating with his urgency, she held the edge of the table tighter, itching to hold him. Even now, with Guy too angry to feel the passion that usually zinged between them, she blushed hot. Angry and lethal, he was more handsome, more desirable than any man she'd ever met.

The doctor ignored the impatient man pacing the small examination area and kept an assessing stare on her.

She shifted to alleviate the heat building beneath, around, inside her.

"After an hour in your company I can see that your connection to him is strong, and not because of the silver-tipping. That will help, I think. During recovery. As I explained, the procedure will take much longer to remove than it did to plant, and it will hurt as much as the initial process. To give you warning, it'll give you a killer headache. In the initial placement, they removed the memory of the pain from you, but I'm sure you can understand that I cannot."

A pained hiss from Guy filled the room for a brief second. He jerked to a halt and leaned face first against the wall. After thunking his head twice, the hollow reverb echoing, he kept himself pressed to the paneled divider between the research lab's patient rooms. His question was muffled. "You said it'd take hours?"

"I can give you a tranq." Dr. Wells glared at Guy.

"No. I don't use enhancers."

The doctor ignored the response and turned back to her. She reached up and cupped her neck, her fingers seeking below the silver collar and finding nothing but smooth skin. Without volition, her legs shifted on the table, a nervous tap from her foot on the floor nearly silent beneath her slipper.

"Jewel, you have specific programming to respond to the sheriff's sexual urges."

A prickling blush ran up her neck and heated her hand, still pressed there. She gulped, unable to speak.

The doctor continued in a soothing low monotone. "Other than that, you only feel his strong emotions, or when you're connected, you can sense even the subtle ones."

"Yes." Despite her embarrassment, she steeled her spine and faced the doctor head on, even if this trail of thought didn't seem pertinent.

"Are you feeling his tenseness and worry?"



Guy pushed away from the wall and folded his hands across his chest, speaking in exasperation to the ceiling. "Fine. Give me the damn tranq. Just be sure I can respond if there's any danger to her."

Dr. Wells scowled at Guy over his shoulder. "There will be no danger, other than through the procedure. Nothing your pacing and fretting can help."

The two men eyed each other, clearly bristling like two range dogs vying for territory.

She took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders. "Do you need to put me under, or do I stay awake?"

"I'll put you under, otherwise the memories will stream in all at once. Coming out of anesthesia slowly will ameliorate the effects."

"Let's get this done." She put all the confidence she could muster into her voice.

Inside, she wasn't sure at all.

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With an effort not to compare his wife to the woman under anesthesia on the table, Montgomery helped the sheriff sit in a corner. The man's face paled as he collapsed from his visibly shaken legs.

Then Montgomery shelved any concern for the man. He focused on the screen with the patient's cranial imaging displayed. He'd created a program to seek the block. There it was, her silver-tip memory code highlighted in bright blue. Hers had degraded past the point of Lady Wells's. Jewel had been brought to him none too soon. The net surrounding her brain had chinks in the chain. The medial temporal lobe, which should've had a more concentrated meshing to block memories, had holes in the net.

"She retains her semantic memory, for the most part, her knowledge of the world and how to live in it."

The sheriff didn't respond, most likely because the tranq had relaxed him into a near doze. Montgomery continued his lecture, both to keep himself grounded in the procedure and to let the sheriff understand what he was doing to the woman he so clearly adored.

"The memory that's been tampered with is called episodic. The net you can see on the screen blocks these older memories. What I'm going to do now is remove the net."

Montgomery kept his attention away from his patient's face, brushed away the images of his wife, his love, pale on the table, and the fear that'd made his fingers tremble. His hand rock steady today, he double-checked the probes attached to the patient. With everything set, he lowered a hood over her upper body. The hood contained precision lasers which would perform the operation he'd programmed, already run on Lady Wells, and in all likelihood would perform without flaw again.

Despite the earlier success, Montgomery held his breath when he started the program. The procedure took seconds. A neutralizing net, colored yellow in the display, covered the bright blue. He scanned the data, a more accurate test than the display watched with his naked eye.

The blue netting disappeared in a wink. No flare-ups.

Montgomery released his breath as the yellow faded without so much as a flicker or spark.

It looked good. Textbook.

Now all they had to do was wait and see.

## Chapter Twelve

“I’m not going to the festival, Momma.” Jewel crossed her arms and stood, feet apart. “I have no need of an engagement dress. I told you. I’m not marrying some rich off-worlder.”

“Yes, you are. The gypsy dressmaker is the best. She’s only here this week and you are not marrying some ranch hand.” Momma bustled about, going through Jewel’s closet to find the perfect dress for the festival. The woman who’d always dusted her off when she fell, who always listened to her bemoaning her father’s edict to stay away from ranchers’ sons, no longer listened. She wanted Jewel married to some rich aristocrat.

“He’s not a ranch hand, Momma. Guy owns the ranch. He’ll turn a profit soon. Maybe next year.”

“His father drank that ranch into the ground before his liver failed. The doctors wouldn’t even give him a simulate. No son of his will marry my only daughter.”

Her mother’s admonishment shocked her into anger. She’d never been so furious with Lady Quinn. Her mother had never spoken of Guy that way before. She usually treated him with a dichotomy of welcome and distance. Had she always felt this disdain for him?

“He’s not for you, Jewel. Your father and I have made the arrangements for your future. I’ve met Kalon. He’s a nice man. You’ll thank me for this one day.” The softness of Lady Quinn disappeared in a blink. Her eyes had bags under them. Her mouth turned down, a rare event in the amiable, motherly woman.

Jewel hardened her resolve. Her mother had doubts. She just knew it. How could she not? The only person close to Jewel, who understood her so well, was her mother—and Guy. Couldn’t her mother, her best friend, see that?

Her father, mayor of Rangetown, one of the most revered men on Grassland, had signed her engagement note while negotiating a treaty with the Terralofts to get them to abide planet-wide laws while on Grassland.

She was the payment, it seemed. It was wrong, a horrific injustice that he'd force her future this way. Her mother couldn't force her. Could she? No.

She was marrying Guy. Nothing would stop her.

"I'm not going," Jewel insisted.

Her mother turned a pained, disappointed frown toward Jewel. "I'll go without you, then. But you are marrying Kalon."

The tired, bedraggled woman faded in a mist.

Jewel cried out, reaching for her mother, wanting her warm hug one last time. Wanting to go back and make it right. She had to make it right.

Her fingers faded in the mist.

The clouds dispersed, blew away to reveal Hector Quinn's contorted face. Tears he'd never had before streamed down his cheeks. With one look at him, a sharp bleakness dumped her on the floor in their sitting room, where the deputy had left before she'd run down the stairs.

"She's gone. Your sweet mother is gone." Her father sobbed a broken sound.

Her chest felt so large, tight, as if it would explode out from the inside. She couldn't take a breath, and her eyes stung. The pain beneath her lids was unbearable. So big and consuming. Gulps of air made it through her tight chest, but she couldn't hear her father over the tumult in her head.

Spurts of his rambling pierced into her heart.

"She ate at the festival. Damn fish contaminated something she ate."

Fish. Her mother was deathly allergic.

His voice hitched. "Nobody was with her with the antidote."

Jewel crumpled to the floor in sobs. She always carried the air syringe. She always went with her mother. Until today. She'd locked herself in her room until her mother went for the dress without her. Her satchel with the meds, useless now, in her room where she'd sulked over Guy.

"I should have been there," she whispered. "We'd planned for me to go."

From her father, a near shout, convoluted with recrimination and pain. "Yes. You should've."

She'd make it better. She had to. She'd do what her mother wanted.

No matter what, she'd do what her mother wanted.

The mists took her away. Floating, the tears hot on her cheeks were her only reality. Her chest still burned with the effort to breathe.

She cried out and reached, grasping air. She turned about, searching, thrashing her hand sightlessly in the fog. She wanted Jared, her mother, Guy. She wanted to go home. Where was the woman who'd always dressed her in clean girly clothes, then gently scolded every afternoon when she came home dirty with torn lace?

The gray clouds clung to her before parting to reveal another scene. She'd lost time, gone back. She'd see her mother. Where was she?

She ran and giggled, her small pink ruffled gown catching between her legs. A blond ringlet fell in her eye before a dirty hand, larger than hers, darted out and twisted it around a finger before sweeping it aside.

"My Jewel, how about a ride on my air skate?" Guy's sing-song voice delighted her. Older by a few years, he usually hung out with one of the boys from town, but when he visited with her instead, the joy nearly jumped out of her chest.

"Papa won't give me an air skate." She pouted, crushed, afraid Guy would go off without her, probably find Brice, that friend of his who teased her for following them around.

"Come on. We'll ride mine together. I want to see the new calf out in the east pasture. You said you did, too."

"The new calf," she crooned. Yes, to be with her friend. On an air skate. To see the new baby. The sun was shining. Her mother would cover for her. "Let's go."

At thirteen, she was dwarfed when Guy, fifteen, stood behind her on the small board and put an arm around her waist. In the past year, he'd shot up like the sourgrass weeds that lined the river. Gangly, in tattered denim most days, he habitually tugged and pushed back his dark hair, which always stood on end in need of a shearing. He kicked the back fin, and the air lifted them up from the ground.

"Yee-hah!"

With one hand on the direction stick, Guy guided them away from her manicured lawn. They took the dirt path he'd worn into the hill over years of visiting and teaching her to play cards away from the disapproving eye of her father. She couldn't see Guy, but pictured the wide grin, the sparkling brown eyes and the tanned face alight with mischief.

They passed the Trident ranch house, in need of maintenance, the old barn with the caving roof, the crowd of hands who sat beneath a tree drinking instead of working a dead pasture bereft of cattle. The thirteen-

year-old darling in pink mostly ignored them. The adult, hidden behind the mist, understood the signs of the sadness of Guy's youth. In her innocence at the time, she'd seen these things and not understood.

Now, as consciousness called to her, she yearned to stay with a young boy's arm at her waist, whooping as the ground slipped beneath the small board platform. Even though she knew injury awaited her at the end of this ride, she longed to stay with him and help him through the next painful years. This day, this memory, ended his innocence forever.

Trees rushed by and when the herd, small and too thin, came into view at the bottom of the valley, she smiled in anticipation. The baby would be cute, adorable. Would it be brown with white spots?

They dipped.

The board kicked and a tree didn't swoosh by. It came right at them.

*Crack.*

Hot pain sizzled along her neck and the world blacked out.

Her hand slid to her neck to cup the scar. It wasn't there. Her eyes snapped open to peer into a pair of brown eyes she knew better than her own.

Older, the crinkles in the corners carrying more worry than those years when they'd clung to a forbidden friendship as he worked to rescue the ranch he inherited.

"Guy," she whispered. "I remember."

His lips crushed down on hers and she clung for all she was worth.

\*\*\*

After watching a soul-searing kiss between two people who obviously belonged together, Montgomery stepped out of the exam room with a soft warning he'd return.

He longed to have the luxury of his own love, but did these two have a chance to live their lives together, unfettered? If Jewel's memories held no surprises, no landmines, they still had nowhere to go. Terraloft didn't want a partially healed silver-tip out on the stations, in the cruise liners, in their world at all. As a slave, his patient was forbidden on all worlds in the galaxy. And what of her previous husband?

Perhaps he'd make the desperate suggestion he'd not had the strength to do for himself. Yes, he'd gather his courage and do what should've been

done years ago. Two years, in fact.

He went to his brother's apartments and announced himself.

The younger man, his opposite in looks as well as temperament, stood in the receiving room as the door slid open. Not stopping to catch his breath, Montgomery strangled the jealousy and hatred enough to actually feel a longing for his younger brother. He'd missed the bastard. And Thomas *was* a bastard. Born ten years after Montgomery when his mother went gallivanting on her own private orgy spacebarge. She'd sent home the babe, whose father must've been gypsy to leave Thomas such dark features. Montgomery hadn't seen their mother in decades. No loss.

Black hair with cosmetic blond streaks hanging to his chin and facial bristles kept perpetually short, Thomas was as unkempt as his brother was polished. Montgomery stood taller by several inches, wearing the straitlaced suits of a bygone era. Thomas didn't go with the norm either, forgoing the satiny Terraloft clothes for the denim of dockworkers. While Montgomery tried to remain impassive, his emotions never shown on his face, Thomas had sharply defined brows that wore a perpetual scowl.

Although he hadn't spoken to his brother for two years, he'd had reports of his conduct—surveillance vids, security shots brought to him as head of the family, it being his responsibility to punish and keep his brother in line. He'd always done so. Always protected his younger brother, even while he hated him. And loved him.

"Thomas."

"Monty."

Montgomery ground his teeth together but didn't take the bait, didn't insist on use of his full name. Pale green eyes stared at him, not giving an inch, not acknowledging the distance between them, the irrevocable rift. The green eyes of a gypsy. No other beings in the galaxy had that clear color.

"Is my wife here?" Montgomery didn't want the damn words to slip out, but they did. He schooled his features, wishing like hell he'd kept his mouth shut, but that wouldn't get him where they all needed to be.

"You know she's not. Have you talked to her yet?" Thomas's scowl deepened. Twin creases between his brows accented the deep furrows outlining his mouth.

That's all Thomas had said in the half dozen messages they'd exchanged in text, the old technology the only way they'd communicated

across the great divide. Thomas never responded to a question—about his bar fights, his suicidal penchant for rim diving on the space walk. Montgomery’s queries were always answered, no matter their content, with the repeated demand that Montgomery speak to his own wife.

He spoke to the woman every damn morning before he went to work, but he knew that wasn’t what Thomas meant. He refused to deal with history right now. There was only one thing to say.

“Pack your bags. We’re taking Lady Wells to the surface. It’s time to take the chance. Hell or high water, whether it kills her, or me, that collar is coming off.”

\*\*\*

Of all the words Guy had wanted to hear from Jewel, of all the scenarios he’d envisioned when he finally had her in his arms, memories intact, he’d not expected to be kissed senseless, a kiss so carnal and filled with desperation, he wondered who he held in his arms. Not an innocent kiss, this.

Her tongue explored his mouth, quite thoroughly, and he couldn’t deny his response, his pulsing and eager erection, which spiraled into an undeniable hard-on like none before. Clutching at each other, pulling at their garments while perched precariously on the exam table, they melted into one single entity of *want* until he pulled back to suck in much-needed air.

Damn his lungs for needing oxygen.

While he breathed in her honeysuckle scent, Jewel, with a remorse he couldn’t fathom, let fall from those moist, delicious lips, what he hadn’t expected.

“I don’t have the scar anymore.” Her fingers traced along the bend of her neck. Adorned with a thin silver circlet, the spectacular ivory column begged for his mouth, but the tears filling her eyes banked his lust. Though since he’d now fallen to his base desires, she’d be in pain again until he relieved them both of the sexual frustration mounting with uncanny swiftness.

“The scar from our air skate accident?” Limbs heavy, he put space between them. Finding the doctor’s vacated stool, he sat clumsily and tried to get a grip on himself.



Minutes ago, he'd been in hell, sitting and watching helplessly as Jewel slept off the anesthesia. Hours had passed as her eyes had moved beneath her lids. She'd moaned and spoken incoherently. During one fit of thrashing, she'd nearly fallen from the narrow cot. Straightening her, he kept her from hitting the floor, but tried not to touch her too much though her warmth pulled at his control.

For days he'd dreaded this moment. Had nearly balked when the time had come, but even if her life hadn't been in danger, she needed herself back. He shivered. He'd been close to losing her every second they'd spent together. His presence had to have caused her to try to find her memories more so than if he hadn't been there. His need to claim her had put her in more danger. His lust and loneliness, his need for her balm, could have killed her.

"I used that scar as a reminder."

"A reminder of what a scrungy range mutt I am?" He couldn't believe she'd left the scar for so long. Most women would have had it removed to begin with, much less when they hit the marriage market. He'd looked at it, when they'd talked, or when she'd been dancing with him or with another man, and he'd not seen a scar, he'd seen his failing. He hadn't protected her then, and he'd done a poor job of it since.

"No. It was an accident. It was also the day my father insisted I was too old to be friends with a boy like you."

"You mean a poor, low-class boy like me."

"My father's words. Not mine."

"No, your father's words to me weren't nearly so kind."

"He was upset."

"Rightly so." If his daughter'd been bleeding like a stuck pig because some poor-trash boy had been showing off on his air skate, he'd have had a few choice words himself.

Then it hit him, square in the middle of his dizzy, whirling thoughts. He closed his eyes, leaned forward, elbows on knees, head hanging. His fingers tunneled through his hair in agitation. He couldn't make himself look at her, but studied his slippers and vowed to get his luggage. He needed a respectable pair of boots to deal with this thicket of briars.

"You have your memories back. Do you feel all right?" He spoke to the floor.

“My head feels as if it’ll split wide open, but the doctor said the meds should help after a few hours. Did he say anything after? Did it all go well?”

He pictured her as she’d looked seconds ago, when her mouth had taken him short of paradise, rosy cheeked, breathing hard, eyes glistening. She’d wanted him, but that was his libido. The reminder that she was still his for the taking kept him on edge, a sharp knife. One step off that thin line and he’d fall either on the side of lust, no remorse, no-holds-barred sex. On the other, bottomless guilt, dark as night.

“The monitors didn’t record a single spike. Your biofeedback was in a good range the entire time. No electrical storms or a cascading fault. He said that if you woke, you’d be good as new. Well, except for—”

“I’m fine with that, Guy.”

“Your husband won’t think so.” He made himself face her, to force her to see his sincerity, his badly damaged honor. He’d stolen her from her legal husband—even if the man had given up that right with his ill use of her. He deserved to be lassoed behind a stampeding herd of cattle.

“My ex-husband,” she spat. A frown marred her countenance and her fingers reached to rub her temples. She winced. “I have so much to tell you. Especially about him and my son. We need to rescue Jared, but he’s safe for now. Yes, for now he’s safe. I think I need to be quiet for a while.” She closed her eyes, lines etched deep in her forehead and bracketing her mouth as she threw an arm over her face. “Take me somewhere dark, Guy, and hold me. Please.”

How could he say no to that? “Give me a minute, sweetheart.” Reluctantly, he left her alone while he sought the reception area.

A depressingly cheerful woman smiled at him from her desk where she left a game of solitaire on her U-panel.

“The doctor said to send you to his guest quarters when the darling girl woke up. There’s an assist chair for her to use, and she must use it.” The cherubic smile disappeared, and she pointed at him accusingly. “She’ll use the chair. Got it?”

“Yes, of course, ma’am. Wouldn’t think to do otherwise.”

Her smile returned, all white teeth and dimples. “Good, good. I’ll help you move her and get you on your way.”

When they returned to the exam room, Jewel slept, her features drawn and pale.

The assistant clucked in the back of her throat. “Poor thing. Looks like the Lady Wells did. After.”

“Lady Wells.” He couldn’t keep his shock inside but regretted the outburst immediately. It wasn’t his business. He didn’t need to know these people. He would pay enough creds for the good doctor’s expertise, not his life story.

“All in good time, my boy.”

Silent, moving to Jewel, he didn’t bother explaining they wouldn’t be here any length of time. They wouldn’t get to know the Wells contingent and their messes.

Loath to disturb Jewel, he hesitated. She groaned in her sleep. She needed somewhere comfortable, somewhere he could take care of her. He slid his arms beneath her knees and back to place her on the seat. The assistant helped arrange her in the chair comfortably and adjusted the recline function and tucked the blanket around her legs. Last, she took a pair of dark lenses and fit them over Jewel’s eyes to block the light.

“All right, Sheriff. Take the lift to level four. Follow the green line to the residential section. Doctor and Lady Wells live in one twenty-three Shrewsbury Court.”

Jewel rode the chair the entire way without a word or movement. The air assist floated above the floor in front of him and barely needed guidance, a nudge here or there in direction.

The numbered addresses easy to follow, he found the appropriate ornate entry system. Dr. Wells had a swank security system. Not only did the U-panel and ident-pad line the door, but an intercom and vid-scanners added to the security. Guy’s respect for the doctor ratcheted up a notch. He swiped his thumb and a woman answered.

“You must be the sheriff.”

“That’s me, ma’am.”

“Enter.” The door was opened by a beautiful woman, piles of hair elegantly fixed in some sort of up-do, expensive flowing gown and silver lips. And a silver collar twinkling at her neck. He clutched the back of Jewel’s chair. “I’m Lady Wells.”

He shoved his shock deep inside and reminded himself he didn’t care about Doctor and Lady Wells. Who cared if the man had a very personal reason to understand the entire process of silver-tipping? Guy only needed Jewel to be safe and whole. He eased his grip on the assist chair.

With a short bend of his head, he introduced himself. The lady nodded politely and turned her attention to Jewel.

“She needs a soft bed and a dark room. Follow me.” Lady Wells spun on her bare feet and led him down the hall into a dimmed room. “I’ll leave you to your privacy.”

The door shut behind him, and he realized he hadn’t seen a thing other than Jewel and Lady Wells. An impression in the back of his mind assured him his host lived in expensive quarters, but he could’ve walked through a dirty stable for all the attention he’d paid.

Wherever they were, whatever it looked like, this room was elegant with a strong scent of sandalwood. Wooden posts curved to the ceiling, the large bed looked soft. With a gentle sweep of his trembling fingers, he removed Jewel’s dark eye shades and lifted her soft, welcome weight. She sighed in her sleep and tucked her nose into the crook of his neck. He hugged her closer and climbed onto the bed with care. Stretched beside her, he removed his gun belt and tucked the six-shot under the pillow.

His hand slid beneath the soft pillow. He held the gun in one hand, Jewel in the other.

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Montgomery stared at his brother until the younger man twisted away with a huff.

“Did you hear me? Pack a day bag.”

“You don’t need me there.” Thomas walked to the always fully stocked bar. The slosh of whiskey made Montgomery’s mouth water. They had so many things in common, so many weaknesses, the lure of drowning in drink being one. Shoulders rigid, Thomas leaned on the bar and didn’t offer his brother a drink. Fair enough.

“I don’t need you there.” His hands fisted. “Lady Wells needs you with her until this is resolved.”

“Don’t you think you’re two years too late?” Thomas sipped his whiskey.

“Are you saying you won’t give her up?”

The silence ate at him, picking away at the civility he’d chained to his side. Sheer will kept him from berating Thomas, accusing him of vile corruption and choking the life from a man who coveted his sister-in-law.

Thomas spoke in a low voice, still facing away. “She’s not mine, is she? I have nothing to give up. If you can get that collar off of her, neither of you will ever have to see me again.”

He wanted to reassure his brother he’d always love him, always want him to be at home, here, as a family. But he couldn’t. He’d be happy for Thomas to go away for good, but he’d not say so.

“I think we’ve been through enough. It’s time to take the chance.” He kept a calm demeanor, as if he could soothe the hurts between them that would never heal. “The tech I hired made significant progress before we lost touch. I have a patient on the station who needs that tech as well. We’ll all go to the surface to the lab. I’ll leave it to Lady Wells, if she’s willing to take the risk, then we’ll try to remove the collar.”

“She could die,” his brother hissed in a coarse whisper.

“It’s a good chance she will, but I think she’ll go through with it. We’ve suffered long enough.”

“She’ll do it. For you.” Thomas gulped the last of his whiskey in one long swallow.

Montgomery couldn’t read his brother’s reactions. Did he care for her? He slammed the door to that thought before he went mad.

“Is your patient ready to go?” his brother asked.

He took a deep breath and mentally shook himself. Decision made, he’d been ready to board a craft immediately. He wanted his wife back, now, or he wanted nothing at all. However, Jewel probably couldn’t handle the bright suns of Taphgan today. She’d be in a more optimal condition tomorrow.

“She’ll be ready in the morning. Meet us at our yacht at eight.”

“I’ll be there.” Thomas turned suddenly, accusation and deep shadows written in the sharp lines of his face. “I’ll be sure your wife is there, too.”

Montgomery felt the words like a blow to his chest.

He left before he sank his fist into his brother’s face.

\*\*\*

Gun belt adjusted on his hip, Guy quietly let himself out of the room and followed the drone of conversation into a large, richly furnished sitting room.

“You put them in my room?”

He recognized that voice as Dr. Wells. The lady had led them to the room. Had she erred?

“That is not your room. Why do you insist on staying there?” The lady was clearly put out.

“You know why.”

Without a pinch of guilt or nag of social etiquette, he interrupted the brewing argument. He wouldn't wait like a silly schoolroom girl and eavesdrop. The couple snapped their attention to him and slammed their mouths closed. Both mutinous expressions evened out so quickly, he could almost imagine they'd been discussing the rotation of the ship around the planet.

“Jewel would like some Ulia tea, if you have any.” Between catnaps he'd kept vigil and held her for hours as pain flitted across her face. A deep sense of impending trouble kept him on edge. She'd woken with a slight headache and wanted Ulia, a mild analgesic, sedative herbal tea with an aromatic and rich flavor.

“Of course.” With an enigmatic glance at her husband, Lady Wells swept out of the room and called over her shoulder, “I'll take a tray to her room directly.”

“I assume the tea is compatible with the meds you've given her?” Standing, arms close to his side in a room of fragile furniture on carved spindly legs, he watched the doctor, who didn't move until Lady Wells left the room.

“Certainly.” Wells sat on a settee and crossed his legs. The setting fit his attire perfectly. Not the slightest hint in the old-fashioned room revealed they were on a ship rotating a desert planet. “I need to assess her condition. Perhaps after the tea? We'll be going down to the planet tomorrow. I need to ascertain her ability to travel.”

Guy twitched toward his phaser but didn't draw. “I'll be the one to make that kind of decision. Not you. I have no intention of taking Jewel to Taphgan.” Of course, he had no right to make decisions for her, but he was sure she'd agree they needed to recover her son immediately. The boy wasn't on the gypsy planet.

“Do you want the collar removed? I've hired a hacker who's managed to crack the code of the safeguard programming. He's found the key to removing the collar.”

A nervous energy ran through him, and his hands shook, loose at his sides with nothing to do. Inside, he erupted in chaos, warring between knee-weakening relief Jewel could be restored to her old self and self-damning denial, a possessive urge to take her home, to the Trident Ranch, and never let her go. Never. He wanted to steal her. Hoard her away. Selfish urges that made him no better than the man who turned his wife into a sex slave.

“You’re sure of this?” He couldn’t help hoping the doctor didn’t really have the answer, the key to remove the collar.

“Yes. Quite. Since you don’t have a Broker, you should take this chance to remove the collar. Her life is still null and void if you’re separated. If you die, she dies without your bracelet sending signals to her collar.”

“And it will work? It’s safe?”

The doctor studied his hand, spread his fingers wide and stared at his nails. “Yes.”

He didn’t believe Wells, but he owed Jewel the opportunity. They’d go to the planet, talk to this hacker and decide if they’d take the risk. He ignored the inner voice taunting him. *You don’t want to take the risk. You want to keep her.*

“Jewel and I will go to Taphgan, but I’ll have to see this hacker myself before I allow anyone to tamper with her collar.”

Dr. Wells nodded as his wife swept back into the room.

“Jewel has her tea. She appears to be on the mend.” The woman didn’t look at either of them but continued straight through the room. She disappeared beneath a large archway that led to a small receiving area in rich pale tapestries.

Dr. Wells rose from sofa. “Let’s go see your Jewel.”

His Jewel. He couldn’t help the surge of possession that took his breath away. Mute, and battling primal urges to hide his woman from everyone in the galaxy, he strode after the doctor. Eager to see her again—they’d rarely been apart since he’d claimed her days ago—he gripped his gun belt and dismissed the foreboding lifting the hairs on his neck.

He paused in the hallway, palmed his aero-comm and sent a hurried transmit to his old friend Brice. If they were going to Taphgan, one of that planet’s mounties would have their back.

After the doctor examined Jewel’s eyes, scanned her biorhythms and tested her reflexes, he pronounced her fit to travel.

Guy's stomach twisted. It remained unsaid, but they all understood Jewel could die.

The doctor left them alone. Jewel didn't need any more disturbing, what with the doctor's poking and prodding, so Guy sat on the foot of the bed and, to keep himself in check, looked at her feet instead of her dear face. Her toes, under the covers, would be covered in slippers. He wanted to put her soft feet in his lap, to rub against him, entice him. With a jerk of his head, he stared at the wall and cleared his tight throat.

"You don't have to go through with it. I mean, you probably just felt that little kick of lust I got from looking at your covered feet, of all things, but I'll never hurt you. We don't know what might happen when they try to take off the collar. It could hurt you. Or worse."

"We'll go." Jewel paused and, when he faced her, mouth open to reply, she held up a hand in a stop motion. "I don't want to talk right now. You said you'd hold me, and you're not done." She thrust back the corner of the covers invitingly.

He snapped his mouth shut. "Well, hell." He toed off his damn slippers—the ones that should've been down a waste chute already. "Just a minute, sweetheart."

Near the door he used the ever-present U-panel to order their luggage delivered. If they traveled to Taphgan tomorrow, he damn well wanted his boots. Padding over to the bed and slipping beneath the warm sheets before he could think himself out of it, he pulled her close. Like heat and velvet, her skin had to be the greatest pleasure in the universe. But he had to keep his libido from running like a bull after the scent of a cow in season.

"Sweetheart, we need to talk about what happened. Your ex-husband is probably looking for you, and I need to know more about your Jared. Where is he?"

"Jared. Yes, we need to talk about him, but I know he's safe for now. I'll explain. Later." She relaxed and snuggled closer to him. After her assurance of her son's safety and with the warmth of her, naked and eager, melted against him, the thoughts of all else fled.

Breath sucked in, he strangled the urge to kiss her, but he was too late. A flash of heat radiated out from her collar.

*From Jewel to him.*

His mind fizzled. She groaned and wiggled her softness against his wiry, quickly-turning-hard self. He couldn't speak, and she continued with a



confidence she hadn't shown since before she'd left Grassland to marry a stranger.

"But first I want to make up for the time I've missed. The years I spent not having you. The past few days of not being aware. I want you." She seemed on edge, a bit desperate, a state of mind he'd been in for days. "I understand why you've kept your distance, and we do need to talk, but I'm going to take you, now. For a few minutes, I want to keep the rest at bay."

Roles reversed, she the master, he the slave. She thrust a hand in his hair and gripped him. Hard. The sting of pulled hair added to his growing urgency when she yanked him to her lips and devoured. The collar didn't matter. Her silver lips, nipples and folds didn't matter. The glint of her quicksilver hands as she let him go to cup his face hazed over his vision, and he sank into her care.

Jewel eased the wild, careening kiss and bit at his lower lip before she pushed him away and stared directly through him all the way to his tightening cock. Soft and welcoming, the pool of her gaze brought him home with a hint of sadness.

"I love you. Always have, my cowboy."

He couldn't breathe, couldn't talk at all. He'd become inept and clumsy, unable to be coherent once she'd taken the reins, and the words he'd longed to hear his entire life swept him on a wave of bittersweetness that completely blew him away. He nodded, his throat too tight to speak, but she understood. He felt it deep inside, the same as he understood this would be all he'd ever have. Her life would change tomorrow, and it wouldn't include him anymore. It couldn't. Nothing had changed. He still wasn't high society. She'd still leave him to recover her life and take care of her son.

"You love me, too. I know. I've known since you carried me back from that accident in the ravine, crying and swearing you'd make it better. Every time you looked at me with that hunger. I've always known."

Such a strong woman. Such a good, wonderful woman. He didn't deserve her, not his unworthy thief of a self. He'd steal this moment and hold it tight.

Before her words and kisses ripped out his entire soul and left him incapable of giving her pleasure, he put one finger to her gleaming lips and, with a shaking hand, plucked away the sheet. Her nipples, hard for him, tempted him like burnished berries. He'd feast like never before.

When he bent over and lapped her sweet skin, she groaned and arched, pushing her flesh farther into his mouth. He latched on and suckled her deep, pulling hard while he tweaked her other nipple with rolls and pinches that left her gasping, pleading. They'd exchanged sexual favors. He'd claimed her with his cock and with his will. He'd relieved her, encouraging her to masturbate in front of him on the cruise.

Now he gave her his love, how he needed her, how she completed him, how he wanted to please her. He moved to her other breast, his body aching to be inside her, but he held himself back. With feather-light strokes, he eased her, petting her stomach and whispering between nips at her breast. How much of her lust came from her collar versus what she wanted didn't matter at the moment. She loved him and, this time, this meeting of the bodies was for her, as they all should have been. He worshiped at the temple of her, his Jewel.

Unable to wait and test her response, he fanned his fingers, searching and seeking her slickness.

"Do you want me?"

"Yes," she groaned and bucked her hips, following his retreating hand before he cupped her mound.

His fingers slid along the naked folds of her sex and dipped inside briefly before he teased away. He palmed her thighs and vowed to edge her keening to a fevered pitch.

"Does Jewel want Guy, or does slave want her master?" Damn, he was a bastard to ask, but he needed to hear it.

"Guy. I want you. The man I love," she whispered and caressed his hair, and the rotation of the ship stood still for a blink of an eye before it careened forward again.

With a swift move born of a desperate need to fill her, possess her love and affections, he flipped her on her stomach, lifted her hips toward him, fingered her open to his hungry stare, and kissed her bared pink flesh.

"Oh, yes," she panted into the bed, her face buried in the sheets.

His tongue speared her, his hands kneaded her cheeks and she arched, pressed against his tongue with a rhythmic roll of her hips. Her groans turned to a constant hum, over and over, a litany of "Yes, Guy."

His cock hung thick and heavy between his legs, aching but eager for her climax. At this rate their lovemaking would end all too soon because once he claimed her ultimate pleasure, he'd probably spill on the sheets. He

needed her honeysuckle taste to fill the emptiness in him. With complete ruthless intent, he hardened his tongue to stroke her clit, tickling back and forth.

She bucked, almost dislodging him. He gripped her hips and buried his face so deep he couldn't breathe. He pushed against her clit, flat-tongued, pressing as she erupted, her thighs shaking, her arms collapsing, but he held her up, drawing out the climax as she shouted. She fell forward, limp. Unable to stay separate, he ached to join her, emotionally and physically. He covered her from behind and took her.

His cock buried deep. Her pussy pulsating tight and hot around him, he positioned her hips and gripped as he set himself to a measured, torturous pace. Like the ebb and flow of the wild grasses swaying in the meadow, he rocked home. A wash of warmth flashed, hot as a sun smiling down at him. He rolled forward, back. Forward, back.

Forward.

Back.

The top of his head heated, and each hair stood on end as the white blaze zapped down his spine and erupted into bliss.

“Oh, love.”

He didn't know who said it out loud, but the truth of it washed over his soul, dazzling the doubt and ache hiding behind his tightly closed eyes.

“Love,” he whispered into her soft hair and, wrapping her in his arms, he collapsed beside her. A grin took him, made him lighter than air, and he ignored the buzzing from the U-panel letting him know his luggage—and his boots—were here and ready to travel to Taphgan.

He'd face that tomorrow, after he'd had his fill of Jewel.

He'd never left her, his softened cock still inside her welcome heat. With a nudge of her ass as she wiggled, he hardened, lengthened and pushed farther inside to the sweet serenade of her lusty whimper.

He'd never have his fill, and tomorrow would come too soon.

## Chapter Thirteen

Jewel cracked her lids open to squint against the rising lights in the room. Some sick individual had programmed the room's enviro controls to mimic the sun's rising. With a huff, she gripped her pillow, intent on snatching it from behind her head and smothering her face.

Then three realizations in quick succession brought her upright in bed. The first, her mother instinct brought her panic, wondering why Jared hadn't jumped into her bed to wake her. The second, a deep sadness when she remembered he'd been taken by his father's goons and was on his way back to the only home he'd ever known. At least he'd be well treated as heir apparent of his father's ill-gained empire. Kalon may have treated her with contempt, if never any real violence, but he'd doted on his son.

The third hit her like a smack between the eyes. A man lay beside her. A warm, naked and appealing man. Despite her years of marriage—and thank the heavens that marriage was null and void—she'd never spent the night in a man's arms. This sumptuous room had served as more of her honeymoon suite than the one where she lost her virginity. Grateful for the icy relationship with Kalon, she nearly bounced with elation at having spent her first night with someone. Not just anyone, but Guy, the man she loved. Had always loved. Would always love.

In love with someone else or not, she had to return to Kalon to keep her son safe. Jared needed her. The thought of him tingled through her. Her Jared would love Guy.

Guy.

This would be the last night she spent with her cowboy. His sleeping face, innocent and dear, chiseled with a hint of morning whiskers, tugged at her. Stinging tears rolled down her cheek. She smiled, the salty taste lingering after she licked the moisture from the corner of her mouth.

For the first time in her life, she took a deep breath filled with satisfaction and rightness. She'd had sex before. She'd had a child. Last night, he'd made her a woman. No matter what today brought, she'd always

have that. Today, she understood the fuss everyone made over sex, an act that had always been at worst painful, at best embarrassing and clumsy. Until Guy.

She'd never initiated sex in her ill-fated marriage, but last night—she grinned—she'd woken Guy. Long after the sexy sheriff had fallen asleep while she listened to his breathing, her collar silent, his erection limp and sated against his thigh, she'd taken him into her mouth like a wanton. He'd awakened with a sleepy murmur, a plea for mercy, and a gentle nudge of suggestion. Eager to experience everything with him, she'd straddled his lean hips and ridden him like a cowgirl. She was quite pleased with herself.

He had been, too.

She moved to tickle his toned chest, his body a perfect example of honed, gorgeous male with the covers twisted between his legs. A ping from the U-panel halted her and brought Guy's eyes open and on full alert. When he slipped his sidearm from under his pillow to level at the door, she didn't even blink. She gulped, the morning's languid content seeped away.

"Yes?" he called in a sleep-roughened voice.

Dr. Wells spoke through the comm in the security panel. "My yacht is prepared. We leave in ten minutes. You may breakfast aboard."

"The man is all charm and hospitality." Guy's sarcasm reminded her of their companionable days when they were friends pretending not to love.

Unaccountably shy, she gripped the sheet when it pulled away, clinging to Guy's long legs as he stumbled from the bed. Cheeks heating to a burn, she admired his well-shaped backside and the slight dimples below his waist leading to each taut buttock, white below the tanned line that ended low on his hips. Without an ounce of wasted flesh, all hard muscle and fluid movement, he gathered his clothes from the floor. He didn't bother to dress, nor did he look at her. He couldn't be as discomfited as she at their morning after. Could he?

He spoke into the intercom. "Has our luggage arrived?"

After a short pause while he donned his silky clothes, she forced herself to reclaim her senses. Instead of getting dressed, she'd stared, hot and achy, at his nudity until he'd covered it. She searched the floor, nearby chair, bedside table, and finally found her neatly folded clothes on a trunk at the end of the bed. Guy kept his back to her as she threw on her wrap.

Dr. Wells continued in a harried burst. "I took the liberty of redirecting your possessions to the yacht. You'll have your own quarters and a two-

hour trip to refresh yourselves on board.”

“We’ll be out in a moment,” Guy answered. Then he mumbled as he put on his slippers, “What I wouldn’t give for my damn boots.”

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Waiting in the airlock with Dr. Wells and Guy, who’d been quiet all morning, Jewel studied the sleek ship—long lines, large windows and no debris scarring its hull—docked outside the large view window. The Wells yacht appeared larger than the skimmer they’d arrived on, and much more expensive, but she recognized the model of vessel, nearly identical to the one Kalon used when he left his personal station. After five years living on *Geanus Station*, she’d never called it home. Grassland, Rangetown, the Quinn Mansion were closer to home, but even those held none of the comfort she’d embraced when she’d visited Guy at the Trident Ranch. His barn was more home than *Geanus Station*. She’d never been on Kalon’s yacht, nor did she want to imagine what went on there. She’d had no illusions about her ex-husband’s faithfulness, or lack of—the same ex-husband who’d had her silver-tipped, something he had to answer for.

Jewel was shocked to her toes when Lady Wells arrived. The barefooted lady wore a deep V-wrap that showed her silver collar, with no lipstick to cover her glinting lips. She floated along the floor with her hand on the arm of a handsome man with a silver bracelet.

Dr. Wells visibly tensed and moved to take his wife’s arm.

Jewel blinked, eyes burning with her wide-open stare. Dr. Wells and Lady Wells could not possibly be legally married. Why had she not fully understood that her hostess was a silver-tip, just like herself? Well, she had, but she hadn’t really processed all the facts, repercussions, realities. Neither she nor the lady had any rights, any legal existence beyond the men who claimed them. And who claimed Lady Wells? The woman in question stood between the two men, who were not like bookends, so dissimilar they were. One tall. One average. One dark. One fair. Still, similar in the hard set of their jaws and the angry glint in their eyes.

“This is my brother, Thomas na’ Wells.”

She straightened against Guy’s arm as he grunted a low rumble of understanding. Commiseration and horror softened her toward Lady Wells, who until that moment had seemed distant and cold. Not only did Dr. Wells

admit his wife was owned by his brother, but he used the old aristocratic term, fallen out of favor centuries ago. Na'. Thomas na' Wells was a bastard, accepted into the Wells family, but forbidden the favor and inheritance accorded to legitimate heirs.

“Like you, Sheriff, Thomas has a bracelet.” The doctor reached around Lady Wells and pulled back his half brother’s sleeve. The bracelet glinted, slightly misshapen with a bit of laser scarring the finish, but that wasn’t as horrifying as the long scars on the arm it adorned. “As you can see, the sick bastard who gave Thomas this bit of jewelry damaged the removal function, as well as the boy’s arm. A pity. Though I did consider taking off his hand to get the bracelet off, but then the programming wouldn’t allow for that, would it?”

Dr. Wells dropped the arm of his brother, who didn’t blink, flinch or otherwise react. Thomas na' Wells seemed a bit bored.

She wrenched her stare away from the family. The heartache these people lived could be her own future, and she couldn’t bear to think of it. Not for now. Not for a few minutes, at least. For this small, precious time left to her, she wouldn’t face the hurt, the anger or the heartache. She had to talk to Guy, and in the next two hours, but she needed a few more moments. Just a few.

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Guy’s head spun and he longed for a dash of Taphgan whiskey. Hell, more than a dash. The tenseness of the group of five had him in retreat, tugging Jewel after him as he followed the pilot to the private rooms.

The Wells yacht was a long-haul skimmer with a deep belly for the guest quarters and a large master suite. Wood, a scarce resource, gleamed on the handrails of the short paneled hallway. From the sparkling white entry chamber to the common room’s rows of plush chairs with harnesses to the cockpit, the appointments were of rich satin and covered titanium sheeting. Farther below, the crew quarters would be tight with a long row of cots and few luxuries.

Alone in their small chamber, he slumped against the wall and motioned Jewel to sit. Not much choice. Two chairs, a dresser and a large bed he tried his best not to notice though it loomed large in the small space.

She sat on the foot of the bed.

He sat in the chair.

“You need to tell me what happened now. No more putting it off.” He really wanted that whiskey. Nothing good could come of hearing what had happened to Jewel over the past week, or damn him to hell, over the past five years.

“There’s not much to tell.” Jewel told him her story in a succinct, emotionless narrative, as if she wasn’t describing her life at all, but someone else’s. “When my mother died, I blamed myself. I had to do what she’d wanted, her dying wishes. I married the man my mother had asked me to marry. I had the usual aristocratic marriage. I was left to my own devices for the most part. Hosted parties and produced an heir from a cold marriage bed.”

“You said you wouldn’t marry him. You broke your promise to me.” Guy couldn’t help the accusation, the hurt that still plagued him.

“I made a rash decision.” She paled but raised her chin. “It was the only choice I had. I let my mother die and I had to make it right.”

He’d never known she carried that guilt. Though he wanted to rage, to point and accuse, and to blame her for all those lost years, the anger left him like a sucker punch. “You should’ve talked to me. It wasn’t your fault.”

She shook her head, a glimpse of the hard-headed and determined Jewel coming back as she set her mouth. “I had to make it right, even if I broke my promise to you. I can’t regret it. I have my son.”

Jealousy clouded his vision and his gut clenched. Of course he knew all along Jewel had a husband who’d share her bed, but he’d kept to his fantasies of her innocence until that moment. Complete fool. Did he think she’d produced a son without sex? Of course it was possible, but no man would have access to Jewel and not take it.

He didn’t think he’d made a sound, but Jewel started slightly, and their gazes caught. She gasped and licked her silver lips. Swallowed in her blue stare, he couldn’t look away.

“I was treated well enough. Mostly ignored after becoming pregnant. My son was pampered. It wasn’t so bad, even if it wasn’t home and I had no friends, which, given the selection on the station, was a good thing. I had my son. That was more than enough.”

She looked away then, but not before he caught the tightening in her expression. She lied. She hadn’t had enough, but she’d be all right now. He’d be sure of it, somehow. Someway.



“But things changed.” His scratchy prompt filled the small room. He couldn’t keep the edge, the emotion out of his voice because his throat was so tight, so dry, so eager for that whiskey. His hands twitched.

Jewel nodded. “Two weeks ago, a visitor came to the station. Jared took an interest in the man because he brought a little robot dog he’d experimented with. Jared would sneak away to go play with the dog. I didn’t really see harm in it, but I didn’t want Jared to break the man’s work or intrude. One day when Jared wasn’t in my apartments, I searched for him in our visitor’s quarters. The man’s door was open, which was unusual. I didn’t think. I just wanted to find Jared. I walked right in.”

She paled. He wanted to hug her, comfort her, but he stayed put as she shuddered and continued. “A man was on the floor. Blood everywhere. One of Kalon’s goons stood over the body with a disruptor bar, blood all over it. Kalon’s guard would never have acted without a direct order. They killed that man. I ran.

“When I got back to my quarters, Jared was in my bed, covers over his head, crying.

“I bundled him up, stole a skimmer and made arrangements for transport back home.”

He didn’t say a word. From his time interrogating criminals, listening to witnesses, gathering evidence, he knew to let her talk, but he ached to drag her into his lap and never let go. She must have been so scared.

“I was stupid. Of course Kalon could follow his own money. I used my account, the one he’d given me. I should have contacted you right away. That was my first thought, of course, but I didn’t want to get you in any trouble.”

He snorted.

“Kalon’s men caught up with me on *Station Zuthuru*. I nearly got away, but Kalon had reported the shuttle stolen, and station security nabbed us. Kalon’s guards took Jared with the intention of returning him to his father. I know Jared is safe. Well, physically safe, until I can get him back. His father would never let harm come to his person. I woke in the clinic. I think Kalon wanted my mind wiped. He wanted me more biddable. I guess he was going to claim me, but you got there first.”

He couldn’t keep it in anymore, the pain in his chest as solid as the fist clenched in his lap. “How do you feel about that? Would you rather your husband have taken you?”

His mind worked, putting together in the heartbeats the pieces to determine his fate, his sanity. Jewel held his existence in her answer. Her lips parted, the words hanging there, as he scrounged through the details filed in his head. The name finally clicked, in that moment of clarity he'd missed for days.

Kalon Geanus was a crime lord. His wife had witnessed the violent aftermath of a man's murder on *Geanus Station*. Jewel'd married a thug known for his debauchery, womanizing and gambling. He'd killed the silver-tip office manager with his bare hands, and Jewel had lived with him for five years.

He hadn't known. He'd been too hurt to investigate her life, follow her whereabouts, make sure she was safe. Damn him to hell.

A man like Kalon wouldn't give up his possessions, and he'd certainly consider a wife to be his possession. Kalon had made an error, or two. Silver-tipping took her out of the man's legal purview, not that a Geanus considered the law as any hindrance. *Geanus Station* held to its own laws. What the hell had Mayor Quinn been thinking when he'd given his daughter to such a man? Guy remembered when the treaty had been signed. Quinn had worked to keep Terraloft from spreading their lawlessness from *Zuthuru* down to Grassland. He'd arranged his daughter's marriage in the process. Had the treaty been worth it? Probably for the citizens of Rangetown, but not for Jewel.

Kalon's second mistake was not pursuing and claiming Jewel immediately because now Guy had her, he'd never allow her back into that den of iniquity. Unless...

She couldn't want to be claimed by her ex-husband. Bound to Kalon. Guy shuddered, but she still hadn't answered. Tense, on edge for her answer, he reiterated, "Would you?"

Jewel spoke, nearly too low to understand. "No. I never wanted him. I always wanted you. Always."

He lost track of when he'd thrown away the honorable course of action. When those words left her lips, all he wanted to do was make love to her. Spend the next two hours showing her how much he'd wanted to be her husband. Jewel licked her lips and her hand reached up to trace the bend of her neck, along the scar no longer there.

His cock stiffened, and even though he couldn't hide it beneath the clinging clothes, he wouldn't do so. Even without the collar, she seemed to

read him like a U-panel. With the collar, there was no doubt. He'd make one last attempt at honorability, though she had to see his selfish nature by now.

"I'm sorry. Soon you won't have to deal with my horny self."

"Love me, Guy."

"I do."

She took his hand, flipped it over and licked his wrist on his pulse point, below the bracelet.

He stood between her legs, tilted her head for his kiss and knelt to undress her slowly, tenderly, placing burning kisses where his hungry mouth could reach. And he loved her.

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Entry into Taphgan was uneventful. Buckled into the seat of the yacht, Guy held Jewel's hand and vowed to behave like a sheriff as soon as the craft evened out into Taphgan airspace. As a Grassland lawman, he had limited jurisdiction on this sister planet and a full responsibility.

Sheriff Guy Trident could make arrests, could detain, but he could not call a proxy judgment and give sentencing on the spot. He'd have to wait for a mounty to take over after an arrest. He'd gotten a ping from Brice. He'd join this excursion.

Not that he planned on needing it, but he wore his star. And his boots. Finally.

Did he deserve to wear the star? Truth of the matter was that he was breaking the law taking Jewel on planet. Slavery was illegal. Repercussions were swift and automatic—freedom for the slave and steep fines for the owner. Silver-tipping carried an even stiffer penalty and mandatory deportation of the slave.

He glanced at Jewel, made sure her lipstick, scarf and gloves were in place, and gave her velvet-encased hand a squeeze.

Lady Wells hadn't changed or covered the evidence of her status though the doctor had insisted she do so. Thomas na' Wells hadn't said a word or risen from his sulk throughout the smooth atmospheric entry process. Guy didn't know what had happened in the time he'd been alone with Jewel, but the three didn't seem any happier with each other.

“Lady Wells. I am a sheriff on Grassland and have partial jurisdiction on Taphgan. When we land, I’ll be donning my star. I think it would be best if you covered your silver-tipping.”

“Why, Sheriff? Are you going to arrest me?” She smiled sadly at him, though her question was flippant.

“She’ll do as she’s told.” Thomas grumbled for the first time but didn’t look up from the decanter of whiskey he’d been nursing.

Guy’s mouth watered, wanting a taste, but now wasn’t the time to give in to the penchant to dull his pain, and his stomach soured at the evidence of the convoluted triangle of the Wells family.

With a telltale flick of his wrist, Thomas made his wishes known. Lady Wells gasped with a grimace.

Without a word, the doctor pulled a scarf from his pocket, and the lady wrapped it around her neck with a scowl. By the time they landed with a quiet thump and the lights flickered off then on, both women had covered the signs of slavery. The small ship nosed into a small outdoor bay and a ladder was brought to the door instead of an entry tunnel attachment. The unseen pilot stayed aboard while the party of five descended to the ground.

Taphgan had much in common with Grassland. Both planets stayed within a certain technological age by governmental edict. The colonists of the sister planets wanted assurance of peace from the ravages of technology and protection for the environment. The air cleaners and filters worked non-stop to remove the exhaust and damaging heat and chemicals from the landing. Many modern conveniences still abounded, once they’d proven a benign presence on the living systems of the world. Thus, the myriad of technology mixed with a homesteading mentality made for incongruous sights like the set of six horses hitched to the waiting post on the tarmac outside the landing station where the space-faring yacht moored.

He threaded his fingers through Jewel’s with his free hand. “I wish we had your riding gear.”

“Not to worry,” Dr. Wells said from behind them. “I ordered sidesaddles for the women.”

Jewel snorted. “I haven’t ridden sidesaddle since I was a little girl.”

Guy put a hand to the small of her back. After touching her all he wanted for the past day, being near her, smelling her honeysuckle scent, he hadn’t shut off his emotional and physical responses. But today wasn’t a good day for his bracelet to send signals.

“Here.” He gave his faux leather jacket to Jewel. It’d cover more of that glowing flesh of hers where it wasn’t concealed by her wrap. Nobody else would look at her the way he did, and nobody would be getting ideas, including himself. If he viewed all that creamy flesh, he couldn’t trust himself any more than a scruffy stray dog.

He readjusted his gun belt and silver star.

Time to be the law again, even if he broke it with the bracelet he fiddled with on his wrist. What the hell, he’d always known he couldn’t be sheriff forever.

A dark-haired man in a crisp red uniform reined his mount next to theirs and quirked a smile.

Brice had shown up, still the same after all these years but for a few additional wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Maybe a few extra lines since he’d last been on Taphgan. He’d fill in his old friend on the way. No time for the reunion between Brice and Jewel. He pulled her behind him and out to the horses.

“Let’s go.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Sweat dripping down his whisker-rough chin, lips dry from the arid, sandy air after twenty minutes in the saddle, Guy squinted against the harsh light. He was at ease for the first time in over a week—though his boots rested in the stirrups, his feet were grounded.

The horses clopped across the hard-packed ground while the sun blazed orange in the sky. The large blue moon hung behind their backs, but its shadow wouldn't darken their path for a few hours. Plenty of time to get to their destination, according to Dr. Wells.

After a perfunctory hello between Brice and Jewel, he'd updated his friend, at ease as though they'd only yesterday run the cattle together and drunk whiskey by the campfire. Brice already knew most of it, between being in contact with Quinn and doing his own investigation. He assured Jewel—and Guy—that he'd verified Jared's arrival and safety on his father's station. Brice also understood that Jewel's life would always hang in the balance simply because she could never be far from Guy. Without the Broker, she was tied to him on an invisible leash.

For the past several minutes, they'd ridden in companionable silence, putting off the time to swap their usual arrest stories for a better day. If that better day ever came.

Jewel adjusted herself in the sidesaddle again. Though she'd always ridden as well as he, he doubted she'd seen a horse, much less ridden one, in more than five years. Before he could fall into the fantasy of massaging her aching backside when she dismounted, he cut the direction of his thoughts. With a quick intake of breath and a heating of her cheeks, Jewel's reaction told him he was a little late on squelching the desire. His hands slid along the reins and he gripped the pommel. Later. He had to believe there'd be a later.

He was delusional. The heat must be getting to him 'cause his gut told him there'd be nothing but trouble later.

They passed through a small village whose residents all had the dark skin of gypsy descendents. The coloring and height of this strain of humanity bred true. A quick glance at Thomas na' Wells affirmed his earlier suspicions. Thomas was the son of a gypsy from Taphgan.

While Grassland had been terraformed into a planet rife with pastures, a steady, temperate climate and vast oceans and mountain ranges to complete it, Taphgan had long stretches of desert wasteland. The wealthiest residents lived in the mountains and valleys, where cooler air and lush plant life made for a virtual paradise. Farms bordered the mountains, taking advantage of not only the streams but the likelihood of semi-frequent rains. The bulk of Taphgan peoples were nomads who bartered in the lands between mountains and kept the trade alive between the ranges.

A strange mixture of technological cottage industries abounded in the small desert cities. The dry climate worked to advantage for some of the small tech chip-work. This brought in the foreigners and the black market, something most gypsies supported as a way of life. Only the law seemed to view the illegal market as a bad thing.

The largest city on the planet still seemed quaint compared to Rangetown, itself only a small hamlet in the populace of Grassland. They headed to the city after clearing the small village of bright tents and sunbaked clay houses.

In the distance, amid the waves of heat rising from the tanned earth, larger buildings seemed to soar to the sky. In reality, a collection of about a dozen buildings, of five stories or so, clustered in the main square.

Rayford. The one city on the planet, near the one spaceport for off-worlders, close to a range of mountains that housed the wealthiest families of Taphgan but far enough away to keep the riffraff from the pristine forests and wildlife of the mountain foothills.

One of those tall edifices housed the Taphgan world government. A few corporations resided in others. Condos for the wealthy Terralofts who had business here surrounded the outskirts of town, where a simulated river gave a peacefulness to the oasis.

In his line of work, he'd been here before, mostly returning gypsies who'd gotten into trouble with an off-worlder and ended up in Rangetown. Gypsies, for all their small-world appeal, were nomadic and managed to traverse the galaxy and back. He never minded the trip, usually taking a few hours to share a whiskey with Brice before returning.

“My man lives on this side of Rayford.” Dr. Wells broke the silence that would have reigned supreme if not for the trudging of their horses and the clink of the saddles.

Guy nudged his horse around Jewel’s. Closer to the doctor, he stayed within reaching distance of Jewel. No matter what went down here, she was his sole priority and concern.

“Your man?” Brice spoke up, his voice so changed from the unsure youth Guy had known, now full of deep authority.

The doctor dropped back to speak with Brice. “Yes, I hired a nanobot wizard to break the silver programming. He’s made real progress and sent word last week he was ready for a field trial. As you’d expect, a field trial would be difficult, if not impossible.”

“Huh.” Sarcasm dripped from Guy’s interjection. “No, I don’t know a Terraloft willing to give up his pleasures to see if his money could be made null and void, much less lose control over his slave.”

“And you don’t count yourself in that assessment?”

“No.” He didn’t elaborate. He didn’t intend to tell the doctor the circumstances that had brought them together, and the man hadn’t asked. The doctor hadn’t elucidated his own circumstances either. Perhaps Wells didn’t want to explain to a lawman how his wife had become slave to his brother. Though, of all people, Guy understood how life twisted like a snake in hand. Slippery and determined to go its own path. And at times sneaky and full of venom.

At the edge of town, they stopped at a hitching post where Brice knew and trusted the stable master. After the appropriate exchange of cred, they left their horses behind and walked the busy streets. The bustle of hawkers, shoppers and tourists made him claustrophobic despite the gaily dressed, lighthearted nature of most they encountered.

Advanced technology wasn’t visible here. As if man had never invented the internal combustible engine, this town could’ve jumped off the pages of a history vid-lesson. Besides Brice, who carried two pistols, each on leg holsters on the outside of his desert uniform pants, Guy carried the only visible weapon, allowed by his silver star. There was no doubt, though, that plenty of six-shots were tucked under the plethora of leather vests and laser knives stashed in the ever-present dusty snakeskin boots.

His hand at the small of her back, he stayed at Jewel’s side and, with her status disguised, she got no more than the usual once-overs from randy



cowboys.

They stopped at a large condo in the wealthy section of town. The white stucco covered in sprawling vines appeared well maintained. The cool, shaded entry area, adorned with a stone archway, echoed beneath his boots. The relief was immediate. Without the direct sun, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. During the temporary blindness, he gripped his holstered six-shot and thumbed off the safety.

“You won’t need that in this neighborhood,” Brice muttered from behind him.

“Tazio.” Dr. Wells spoke into the low-tech intercom beside the door. Through a glass pane, the living area remained empty of life. Wells repeated the call several times and received no answer.

“Where is your Tazio?” The hair on the back of Guy’s neck tingled. They shouldn’t stand here, exposed. Eyes adjusted to the dimness, he studied his companions. Jewel glanced about, taking in her surroundings with a serious expression. Lady Wells stood next to Thomas, not touching, but not at a distance he’d expect for in-laws. Neither showed outward concern, but Lady Wells had a tight grip on herself as she crossed her arms. Legs spread in an easy stance, Brice showed no concern, though his hands hovered over his holsters.

“This is my house. We can go in.” Dr. Wells removed an old-fashioned card key and inserted it into the lock. The comp security codes meshed, and the door clicked open.

The still, cold air that washed out told him all he needed to know. The house was empty and had been for some time. His hackles quivered, and he paid attention. His gut had never steered him wrong.

With a smooth motion, he unholstered his gun and held it to the side, Jewel out of his line of fire. They entered the house, dark and quiet, and searched room to room. The sparse decor displayed sleek new contemporary furniture of beige velvet plation fabrics.

For a comp expert, the man was unusually clean and neat.

Nothing in the kitchen. Nothing in the sitting room. He stepped into the office.

“Ah. It makes sense now.” He toed aside a crumpled piece of paper. The office was a disaster. Dirty clothes on the floor. Used takeout cartons from the gypsy stalls in town. “Tazio lived in this one room, didn’t he?”

“Looks that way.” Brice agreed, peering over Guy’s shoulder into the room.

“It’s filthy in here,” Lady Wells said from the door as she retreated, Thomas at her bare heels.

“I’ll check his bedroom,” called Dr. Wells, who hadn’t entered the office beyond a cursory look.

When Jewel pulled to the far wall of the office, he followed. She couldn’t be out of reach, not until he got her settled, safe with her father, before Guy went to retrieve her son. Right after he found this Tazio and got Jewel’s collar removed.

He had a backup plan. If Tazio was such a hacker, then he’d check if the man could replace the Broker with more reliability than removing the collar. The possibility of keeping Jewel safe warred with the guilt of owning her, but he’d give her the choice if the odds of her living were higher. Whatever it took, he’d see to it.

Moving vids covered the wall in electronic frames. The flickering images displayed a young man, grinning, kissing a young woman, hugging her atop a mountain to the north of town. Jewel cocked her head and touched an immobile image of the man, his arms slung around two others, gypsy men from the look of them, and a robo-shepherd at their feet.

“That’s him.” She frowned at the image.

At that moment, his gut twisted, the hair on his arms and neck raised, and a crash rang through the house. Rounding toward the door, he pushed Jewel behind him and drew his pistol. He spoke low, for her ears alone.

“Him, who?”

She took his cue and whispered hurriedly. “The one Kalon’s man killed.”

“Hell.” Really, there was nothing else to say to that.

Brice stood, pistollas at the ready, back against the wall next to the door. He peered out, face still emotionless.

With a firm and determined authority, Guy called out. “Dr. Wells. Where are you? My gun is trained on the door, and I *will* shoot anything that passes.”

“All of us are in the bedroom,” the doctor answered.

“Stay put.”

“Sheriff, how nice to run into you again,” called a third voice from the front of the condo.

“Shit.” This came from Jewel before he could process who was here and what kind of danger this third party would be.

“Jewel?” He walked backward, pushing her behind him until he’d pressed her against the wall of moving pics, his back to her front. All the while, his steady hand aimed the pistol at the door.

“That’s my husband.”

He tensed, body tight and aching.

“I mean, my ex,” Jewel amended.

“If Tazio is dead, we won’t be removing that collar,” he murmured.

“I guess not.” Jewel breathed in his ear, lowering her voice further as the thump of boots moved down the hall.

Slammed with elation, relief and despair all at once, he shook his head. The room spun around him, but he blinked away his confusion as a form filled the doorway.

The click of Brice’s pistollas sounded loud before the low hum signaled they’d been activated with live stun.

Guy’s pistol remained trained toward the door.

“Jewel,” the shadow said.

“How’s Jared?” she asked.

Guy’s thumb caressed the trigger. “Jewel, stay back and let me handle this.”

“Your husband?” Brice took aim on the man in the entry.

“My ex.” Jewel’s reply came steady, strong.

Brice lowered his weapon even as his face finally showed a reaction in a slight frown. He shook his head. “I can’t interfere in a slave custody battle.”

Well, hell. Some friend. He just needed Jewel to stay behind him, out of harm’s way, and he’d find a way out of this mess. She had to be safe.

Appalled at his momentary urge, he caught himself before he added compulsion to an order to stay put. He breathed out and rolled his shoulders. Jewel remained behind him and peeked over his shoulder. Her heat slid along his back.

“Jared is fine, though he’s asking for you.” Kalon hadn’t looked at him or Brice, as if they didn’t exist.

Jewel blew out a frustrated puff of air, low, but he heard. It took all he had to keep the gun steady instead of whipping around to pull her into his arms.

The beefy Terraloft in expensive garb who'd beat him, killed the clinic office manager and destroyed Jewel's Broker walked into the room with his thugs in his wake. The thought of him siring Jewel's son churned low in Guy's gut, a wasted, useless regret he couldn't squelch. Jewel's hand touched the small of his back in a reassuring pat. Because they were near, and his emotions were running rampant, she must be getting his signals loud and clear through her collar.

"Come." Kalon, looking harried, a bit disheveled, motioned Jewel to join him. "I've had quite the time following you here. Wasted time and money bribing shuttle pilots, cruise liner employees, hospital records clerics."

"She's not going anywhere with you. Didn't you notice? Not only is she no longer your wife, but she's been linked to another, and you destroyed her Broker in your fit of anger." The burning in his gut intensified, churning and hot, nearly causing his arm to flicker, but he stayed firm.

"Sheriff, you're wrong. In so many ways." Kalon flicked his hands behind him. One of his men stepped forward. Kalon produced a shiny, unharmed Broker, a device that looked so innocent, just a fat cylindrical stand with a round indentation in the top to hold a bracelet. "I didn't destroy it. I took it into my safekeeping. Though I had different plans, this will suffice to keep my son's mother where she belongs."

A satisfied smirk crossed his face briefly before he reached toward Jewel again. Like a standoff, nobody moved. Guy couldn't breathe, couldn't think of how to get that device from Kalon. The small hope it represented was overshadowed by the power Kalon Geanus had with it in his possession. If he shot a hole in the man's chest, he wouldn't make it to the device before Kalon's goons returned fire. He didn't like the odds of taking them all down before one of them landed a shot, either at him or, of all horrors, Jewel. If he died, would Jewel be safe with the Broker in reach, or would she die, too?

"Sheriff, we both know you aren't allowed to own a slave. We both know you've been boning my wife. I'll forgive you for that instead of gutting you as I wish to do, because it wasn't your fault. You had no understanding of your trespass. You do now. Give me the bracelet so my wife can go home."

"Like hell," he growled, but deep down, he doubted. Jewel didn't belong to him. She wasn't a slave. It was her choice.

A scuffle broke out in the hallway.

“Get your hands off her,” Thomas shouted.

“We want no trouble,” Dr. Wells said in a calm, carrying voice, drowning out the shuffling in the hallway. Wells stepped into view, shrugging aside one of the Geanus goons to speak to Kalon. “If this man has enslaved another man’s wife, then I’ll support you in any way possible.”

“Ah, the famous Dr. Wells. Your hacker had useful technology, but you should know your men. He sold his solution to the highest bidder.”

Wells didn’t react to the taunt, his expression lightening. “He did it, then? He cracked the programming?”

“He did. He sold it to me but tried to back out of the deal. He met with a small accident.”

Wells waved a hand in front of his face. “You have the codes? You’ll be using them on your wife?”

“I bought out the hacker because I wanted his help with my little filly of a wife, but he didn’t have the silver-tip mods I needed and tried to go behind my back to sell what I’d paid for. When he couldn’t make the mods I requested, and she ran, I decided she deserved to be a slave. To me. Not to the sheriff, there, but this works almost as well. She won’t run again, will she?”

“Bastard,” Jewel hissed behind him.

Kalon didn’t even look at her. The pit of Guy’s stomach soured.

“I need those codes,” Wells insisted.

“Nobody’s getting anything, not until this is all straightened out,” insisted Brice, who splayed his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

Kalon stared at Wells while the air in the room grew heavy.

Guy gripped his six-shot. He didn’t stand much chance of shooting his way out, with all those people between Jewel and the door, but he had no choice. He had to try. Once the weapons heated, Brice would have his back. He hoped.

Kalon interrupted the stalemate. “This is how it will work. Jewel will come home to her son, or she’ll never see him again. I’ll let the sheriff live if she does as she’s told. But if I ever see him again, he’ll suffer before he dies.”

“Jewel isn’t going anywhere with you.” A sick feeling ran through him, and his mouth ran dry.

A squeeze on his shoulder accompanied a pained sob. A whisper he'd remember to his dying day, the sound ripping out his heart, blew across the back of his neck.

"I have to go. He means it, Guy. He'll kill you. He'll take Jared from me. If I go, even handicapped like this, I can protect him from his father. Maybe only a little, but maybe that little will help him be a good man."

Kalon knew his ex-wife well. He didn't seem concerned, just held the Broker loosely in his hand and lounged against the doorframe. He stared at Jewel while speaking to his men. "I have a few questions for the good doctor. Load him and his companions onto the transport. Leave the seat next to mine open for my wife."

Another day, Guy might've run the man in for using an illegal off-world transport on an environmentally protected planet, but the only thing he could focus on was the Broker dangling like a neglected prize in Kalon's hand.

"Nobody is going anywhere," Brice growled as he reached for the comm clipped to his chest.

With a move faster than he could follow, Kalon's hand shot out. The spark of a phaser zipped through the air. The smell of ozone ripped through the room. Brice fell to the floor in a lump without a sound.

Wells fell to his knees beside Brice, fingers to his neck's pulse point. As soon as the doctor eased back with a nod, the burning anger throttled back an inch. Brice was knocked out, but he was alive.

Kalon hadn't even looked at the lawman he'd downed. Guy had no delusions. Kalon would use live fire on him.

"Jewel, bring me the bracelet. Hurry with it. You have two minutes to put it in the Broker before the pain hits you. Do it now, before I decide to take it off your lover's dead body."

The icy chill that came with that pronouncement didn't break the circle of blazing heat curling around Guy's intestines. Rage shook him, making his limbs tremble, as light fingers brushed at his wrist.

If this was what she wanted, he wouldn't stop her. He wasn't worth the risk of all these lives. She'd have her husband, who she'd admitted treated her with a distance, but not badly. Kalon wouldn't hurt her. He damn well wouldn't hurt her or Guy would gut him in a slow, painful emboweling. Jewel would have her son. Her home. What was the alternative? Him? A derisive laugh fell from his lips as she removed the weightless band. Now

that it was gone, he felt light enough to float through the ceiling, even as his feet remained leaden, soldered to the floor.

Her alternative would be to give up the aristocracy and live in secret shame, an illegal citizen. Slave to a man she'd never be able to get away from. A man who'd mean the loss of her son. A man who'd debauch her every night, no matter her own will.

He thought hell was watching her hand the master bracelet to Kalon. He was wrong.

Hell was Kalon pulling a pistol and aiming it at her head.

The world stopped. His breath stopped. The blood in his veins stopped.

Kalon didn't pull the trigger. He waited. With a patience that showed the cruelty inside him better than any violence, Kalon watched Jewel with a patently sexual excitement.

Jewel stood, spine straight, her arm fallen to her side, and looked puzzled with a frown pulling her sensual lips down. Long moments passed. Standing with Guy's silver band dangling in his fingers, Kalon didn't put the control bracelet on the Broker. Guy didn't dare move or breathe.

Hands clutching at her stomach, Jewel doubled over with a cry and fell to the floor.

She needed Guy to wear the bracelet, to call off the pain. He reached for her. Kalon flipped off his safety, but didn't bother to aim at him. He put the muzzle to Jewel's temple. Sweat dripped from her as she whimpered, her forehead creased with pain that etched itself into his soul.

Nothing had been as much torture before.

His skin burned, itched with the need to lash out. He fisted his hands. His arms corded, veins pumping fast and hard enough to bust. The room spun with black dots.

"This is her punishment for running. For your hands touching her."

Kalon smiled as Jewel repeated, over and over, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are. This is a taste. You run again, it'll be worse, my dear. If your lover comes near you again, you'll beg to be put down. Don't make me do this to you again. It pains me to see you so." The pleasure on Kalon's face showed that as a lie quite clearly.

Jewel stopped pleading. Guy's jaw ached with the strain of clamping his teeth to keep vitriol from spilling out.

After another long minute of Jewel's silent writhing, Kalon slipped the bracelet onto the Broker and handed it to one of his men. Steps receded

down the hall, the device disappearing from his reach.

Desperation plowed into him. He couldn't gun down three men, carry Jewel from this house and get his hands on the bracelet. He was a good shot, but not that good. Kalon held all the cards.

In the blink of an eye, the dam inside him broke. He launched at Kalon. The man grinned at him and took the brunt of his punch to the stomach. They fell to the floor.

Dust clouded the air and stung his eyes and nose.

His fists pounded into Kalon, who grappled and slugged in return. A hard punch to his kidney stole his breath. Kalon kned him in the groin. While Jewel cried and beat uselessly against Kalon, Guy struggled to move from the ball he'd curled into, trying to catch his breath.

"Slog off," she screeched.

Kalon kicked him in the back, re-injuring the bruises that hadn't fully healed. "I'd kill you now, but I don't want trouble on Taphgan. If I see you again, I will."

Light speared behind his closed eyes. His burning lungs sucked in dusty air. He groaned and peeled his eyes open. Pulling his legs beneath him, he struggled to all fours.

With one powerful motion, Kalon swept Jewel over his shoulder, her head toward the floor, the arms of Guy's jacket coming loose to hang down the back of Kalon's expensive suit.

He crawled after them, forcing himself through the pain and to his feet. Too late. She was gone.

The house was silent, and Guy was alone with the crumpled body of his friend and the stilted panting from his own tight lungs.

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Montgomery dropped the medscanner.

"Need help with that, brother? Your hands are shaking so much you can't—"

"My hands never shake." With a quick bend, Montgomery snatched the scanner off the floor with solid control. Not a flutter in his fingers, nor in his stomach, unlike when he'd walked into his labs and directed Lady Wells to a gurney.



By claiming that he could only work in his own labs, Montgomery had convinced Geanus to let them go. Geanus had taken them back to the *Jeffreys* with an austere command to test the codes on Lady Wells. Montgomery didn't doubt he'd hear from the man again, but he didn't fear any repercussions. That wasn't the style of the Terraloft. They turned a blind eye to most backstabbing and debauchery. Even murder. But they had a curious sense of Terraloft code to let each other be.

Montgomery did test the codes.

Keyed to DNA samples from both Lady Wells and Thomas, simulations had run for days. In that time, he and Aissa had talked. Really talked about what they'd gone through two years ago and since. She told him of being kidnapped by Paulus Keen, who ranted and raved about Montgomery getting the research funding Keen had coveted. How Keen brought in an unconscious Thomas, home on vacation before entering Spaceport pilot training. Keen stole DNA from Thomas and completed the coded imprinting with Aissa while Thomas was still under anesthesia.

Montgomery didn't tell her he'd beaten Keen to death before spacing his body. He still had no remorse. What tore him up inside was hearing how he'd wasted two years avoiding talking to Aissa and Thomas. She'd never had sex with Thomas. They'd spent tortured and pained weeks finding a hole in the programming. They were able to fool it by using Thomas's fantasies. He made himself believe his toying with other women while Aissa stood by appeased the silver-tip programming. Somehow she'd known how much the games pained him, but Thomas never let himself touch her. Aissa had always loved Montgomery and had never broken faith with him emotionally or physically.

If Montgomery had helped them through it, talked to them instead of withdrawing in hurt, they could've found a better solution. One that hadn't torn their family apart.

"I'm sorry." Neither of them responded. One day, maybe he and Thomas could come to terms with one another. He focused back on his work, work he'd double-, triple- and quadruple-checked. No matter how many times he ran the code, the results came out the same. Thirty percent chance of failure.

It would have to do. Thirty percent. He only had a seventy percent chance of living out the day, because no matter what, he couldn't go on

without his wife, his love, anymore. He was coming apart at the seams. His hands shook, for goodness sakes. They'd never done that before.

He leaned over his wife. "Are you ready?"

Her bright eyes stared up at him. She didn't shake. She smiled.

"I've waited for you for years. Do it."

Montgomery entered the command and held his breath.

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## Chapter Fifteen

“You’re an adulteress. I would brand you as such on your faithless forehead, but that collar tells everyone of your sins.” Kalon eyed her with a sneer on his deceptively handsome face.

Jewel’s mouth tasted bitter. She dropped her stare to Kalon’s slippers and didn’t voice the accusations she might have two short months ago. The man who even now shared his bed with two women—both of whom were married to other men—dared to pass judgment on her. She’d been given no choices in her ill-fated marriage. And if she were honest, she’d admit she’d had no choice but to make love with Guy, either.

But their last time together, two long months ago, had been her choice. Not the collar, not her circumstances. She hadn’t been married when she’d slept with Guy. Kalon had ensured the dissolution of their marriage, if not when he committed adultery within the first month of their marriage, then when he’d had her silver-tipped. She cut off all thought of Guy before his memory brought tears to her eyes that Kalon would misinterpret.

She was no adulteress.

Why did she feel so?

She didn’t view herself as married to Kalon. Thinking of living with the man instead of with Guy made her stomach pitch. If she felt like an adulteress, it was because she betrayed her true love.

Now she was simply the nanny who Kalon periodically liked to denigrate in some way for a little emotional torture. Other than those few moments every day or two, she was treated well enough, more like a prized employee than a member of the family, but maybe that was better than before. Other than in her dreams, when she imagined loving Guy or pictured shoving Kalon out an airlock for doing this to her, she kept her emotions buried.

For five years Kalon had hidden his infidelity. She might have remained ignorant if a few of his more spiteful bed partners hadn’t arranged for her to “accidentally” walk in on a tryst, though she’d remained unseen. Or the

colorful vid she was sent from an ex-mistress Kalon dumped for a new blonde bombshell.

To this day, Kalon didn't seem to realize she'd had no delusions about him. If she had to guess, she'd say that Kalon actually thought his ex-wife had believed him to be faithful.

Now he flaunted his mistress and her sometimes partner whenever he could. She felt pity. Kalon did as his father had done, and his father before. The extramarital affairs were standard with Terraloft, raised to this decadence and lifestyle. Kalon would never understand how she believed in a faithful love. For a while he'd protected her, in his own way, but he'd never feel love.

Not quite true. In his own way, Kalon loved Jared, but not enough to let him go, let him grow into an honorable man instead of a crime boss.

"Please allow me to take Jared to meet his grandfather. Quinn has waited for two months on the *Jeffreys*. It's only a short shuttle ride."

"You can't leave. I'm too busy for a trip to the *Jeffreys*." Kalon lounged back on the divan, belying the statement.

"He's willing to come here."

"I suppose I should allow the visit since your sheriff will undoubtedly come along. I have a nice trap set for him."

She stilled. She didn't give away the nervous flutter while she waited for him to continue. The gleam in his eye and smirk on his lips gave away the same self-assurance that usually heralded disappointment for her.

"You've been good, and I've decided to have the collar removed so that you may share my bed again." He paused, as if she might protest, but her mouth had gone too dry to speak. "That Wells bitch proved the code works. I wouldn't have tried it on you first. Jared needs you. We'll be a family again."

She nodded and croaked, "Yes."

That's when it clicked. Kalon wanted a family. He hadn't had one growing up. His father, when not absentee, ignored him. His mother was a superficial, flighty woman who'd finally left when Kalon was turned over to his countless tutors.

He'd never been loved.

He'd never let Jared go. His son was the only person in the universe who'd ever loved him. He'd wanted Jewel to love him, but she couldn't, so he'd had her silver-tipped, his way of making her love him.

She replied with what he wanted to hear, something that would've been true if he weren't incapable of giving love and she hadn't loved another. "Yes. We'll be a family."

Kalon's smirk widened into a full-fledged smile, making him almost pleasant-looking.

What else could she say? She didn't dare think of the alternatives. Not if she wanted to stay sane. She kept herself empty, unthinking, unless she thought of or played with Jared. That was all she was now, Jared's mother. That was what everyone on *Station Geanus* called her. She was no longer Jewel. She was "Jared's mother."

Kalon's pleasure in her response, in her apparent defeat, seemed to ease him. He relaxed back on the bed and smiled in benevolence. "The collar will come off, and you will renew your vows as I see fit."

She didn't twitch. With a force of will she'd learned to control over the past two months, she didn't react. They'd make it out of this mess. She'd come up with a plan. She had to. She just hoped everything didn't explode in her face. Whatever happened, Jared had to be kept safe.

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In answer to the summons, Guy pushed through the double doors of the Slattern Tavern and slid along the wall to let his eyes adjust to the dimness.

The trouble was easy to find.

Lester, the barkeep, lifted his chin as an unruly customer clutched at the front of his apron. "Listen, Hank, I'm cutting you off just for tonight. You hit me, and you'll be cut off permanently."

The drunken cowhand cocked his arm back, slow and jerky, closed his meaty hand and aimed toward Lester.

Guy whipped out his lasso to cinch the drunk about the torso, catching him before his fist moved forward.

Lester smiled dimly before moving to the end of the bar to help the other oblivious customers, halfway to drunk, if he was any judge.

"Listen, Sheriff, I didn't do nothin'." Hank smelled like a moonshine rig gone sour.

A smell he was too familiar with these days. The barkeep had seen him frequently of late. That dim smile from Lester wasn't the big grin, slap on the back and welcome he usually received here.

“Aw, come on. Lemme go.”

Barely hearing the cowpoke, he jerked himself back to the present. His mind had never wandered during an arrest before. “Hank, we’re taking a visit to the drunk cell.”

“My old lady won’t like that.”

“Should have thought of that before you started threatening the staff.”

“You know how a wife gets. Don’t take me in. She’ll cut me off.”

Cold seeped through him. He didn’t know how a wife could get. He never would. “You need to keep it quiet and cooperate.” He whipped toward the door with a tug on the lasso.

“No,” Hank bellowed. “Not goin’.”

Pistol drawn, he spun and zapped Hank with the stun. The big lug crashed to the floor.

“Lucky he didn’t smash his head.” The barkeep frowned.

Guy hadn’t noticed when the wiry little man had sidled up next to him. Carefully loosening his hold on his pistol, he shook out his arms and shoulders. His mouth tasted of tazered air and sour whiskey.

“You never used to stun them like the old sheriff. Hate to see you go that way.” Lester bent to check Hank’s pulse, as Guy should have done himself, then walked back to the bar.

Guy sat heavily in a chair near Hank’s head, bent to cuff the unconscious man to the bolted-down table leg and sent a proxy judgment request over his comm.

“I won’t take you in, Hank,” he muttered, though the loudly snoring drunk couldn’t hear him.

With a glance down, his attention snared on the leather tie he’d taken to wearing where his bracelet used to be. He’d never worn any jewelry before, but now he felt naked without something on his wrist. Eyes slammed closed, he cut off the groan before he added any further to his public downslide.

The past two months had been like this, clouded judgment and rash decisions. He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t eat. He’d lost enough weight that his gun belt hung a little too low on his hips, and that was a problem because he itched to use his pistol so much he grabbed for it several times a day.

The beep of his comm preceded the sealed transmit of judgment against Hank, and though he probably couldn’t make heads or tails out of it, Guy

pronounced the decision. “All right, bub. This is your third offense of drunk and disorderly. Your fine has already been debited from your cred.”

The continued snoring from the floor was the only answer.

He prodded Hank with the tip of his boot. “The next offense will take you to the slammer.”

Hank groaned and blinked his bloodshot eyes. “Got it, Sheriff.”

“Hope you do.” He removed the cuffs. Before he could rise to his full height, shackles in hand and prisoner released, a clap on his back brought him around, gun whipped out and leveled.

“Whoa, Sheriff.” Quinn raised hands in surrender.

He holstered his weapon and gave the older man his back. Without a word, he headed outside into the dark of night. The piercing blue eyes of Quinn, so like his daughter’s, stayed with him. He made himself not follow the instinct to run.

“Judge Norris told me you’d be here.” Quinn huffed from behind.

“That’s unethical, Mayor. You’re lucky I don’t bring you both up on charges to the Supreme Magistrate.”

“Why don’t you take my calls, son?”

“Son?” He shook his head. “We don’t have anything to discuss.”

Ignoring Quinn, he headed toward his air skate leaning against the side of the bar. He’d been riding the valleys when he got the call from the tavern. He hadn’t hesitated to respond. He had, however, ignored the dozen emergency coded messages from the town’s mayor. The same mayor, silver hair glinting in the streetlights, stepped around him and blocked the way to escape. Quinn looked as if he’d had a rough time of it, too—his clothes hung a little loosely and his eyes were bloodshot, with bags beneath.

“I’ve set things in motion, and I got the go-ahead from Jewel this morning. We need you, son.” The mayor fiddled with a vest button.

“The go-ahead?” His chest thumped in one big resonating thud. “What have you done?” Pushing past Quinn, he focused on his air skate and kept his dusty boots heading in that direction.

For a day or maybe a week—the time was fuzzy after Jewel left him on Taphgan—he’d been lost. The only thing that brought him out of his funk was the realization Jewel would be all right. That and Brice, who’d kicked his ass two ways to Starsday and threw out all the booze at the ranch. But Brice had to go back to being a mouny and couldn’t stay to kick him in the ass every day.

Jewel hadn't made it to Grassland as she'd tried to do, but it wasn't as if she'd intended to come live on Trident Ranch. Nothing had changed except that his foolish heart had hoped where it had no right. Nothing was different, except now he'd had a taste of a life he'd never have.

Through Brice, he'd found out Jewel wasn't mistreated on *Station Geanus*. She was, in fact, being mother to her son and left to her own devices. Much more recon he couldn't get since Kalon didn't allow the law onto his station for long. Brice had gotten all he could, then his undercover deputy had been booted off station.

He didn't have her, but she was safe and well. With her son.

"I've found a way to bring her home." Quinn gripped his arm from behind.

The Sheriff of Rangetown figured he'd need to hang up his badge before he found a replacement, 'cause the pistol on his hip would probably run hot before he got out of this mess. He finally faced Quinn.

"What's your plan?"

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After orbiting for hours around *Station Geanus*, Guy had a new appreciation for smugglers. The wait in tight quarters made his heart race and his head pound. The escape pod crowded around him as the ship paused outside the station where both his greatest love and his greatest danger were oblivious. At least he hoped they were.

The lights flickered out in preparation for systems silence. There was no going back now. A loud screech echoed through the closed-in blackness.

The air staled. He sat in a reclined pilot seat. Four harnesses lined the wall for others to evacuate in emergencies. The belts were empty. In the back of the pod, a bundle of equipment strapped to the bulkhead jerked as the gravity cut, but the restraints held the packs in place. Beside him, the simple controls—essentially a dumbed-down U-panel with built-in beacons and navigation—dimmed.

The power cut to avoid detection. Silence.

The small airpocket closed around him like a coffin and the countdown began.

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In the large empty landing bay Jewel blew bubbles, and Jared's towhead bobbed as he jumped to catch them. Despite her fears about Jared's response to witnessing Tazio's death, her son was fine, resilient. Any scare he'd had when she was captured by station security had been soothed by his doting father. Kalon was many things, but he was careful with Jared to the point of spoiling him.

"Momma. More bubbles."

Her son's youth wouldn't last long with his father. His innocence would burst like the clear bubbles she blew with the iridescent liquid. He tilted his head and stared at her through blue eyes like her own, with a knowing beyond his four years. Perhaps more damage had been done than she'd hoped.

"Your grandpapa is coming today." She tousled his fine hair and bit back the urge to tell him of her plans. She smoothed the frown trying to form and smiled, her lips stretching over her teeth in a dry twist. Kalon presented his best to Jared, who loved his father and sought his attention. He couldn't understand he'd be better raised elsewhere. Better off without a Geanus as an example, and one day Kalon would start to slip, let the not-so-ethical side of his nature show. It still amazed Jewel that Kalon had managed to keep all hints of his business dealings, ruthlessness and shady elements of his life from touching his son. Until Tazio. What would have happened if Jared had gone to Tazio's room a few minutes earlier?

She shuddered. Her hand shook against Jared's head, and she crushed him to her.

The klaxon blared in the bay. Jared wiggled from her arms and squealed with a bright smile.

"A ship is landing. Let's watch." He bounced to the small enclosed area behind blast windows to watch the ship coming in. His obsessive little-boy nature already in love with all things flight-worthy, he knew the drill, and most days with a scheduled landing he came to watch.

Despite the smoothed, no-longer-scarred skin, her hand flew to her neck before she stopped herself. She unlocked her feet and joined Jared.

Landing prep signals flashed on the jumbo sign at the maintenance station. Room Cleared. Air Released. Doors Opening.

The bay yawned open. A small hopper nosed into the bay. Tingles raced over her and fluttered in her middle. She recognized that hopper.

The little ship floated to a soft landing. Her father wasn't known for such a smooth docking with his usual ham-fisted control over all things electronic.

As if the thought would jinx her plans, she forced her mind elsewhere. "Jared, see the striping on the tail fin? That's the insignia for Grassland. That's your grandfather. Isn't this exciting?"

Such an understatement.

"Yes, Momma."

Jared couldn't be expected to understand how special it was to meet a grandparent. He'd never done so before, and he'd never meet Lady Quinn, a guilt that still ate at her heart during her worst nightmares. That guilt had influenced her decisions and brought her to this life. She couldn't regret her marriage even now because it had given her Jared, but she'd never forgive Kalon for his complete betrayal by planning her sexual servitude. Maybe she'd needed those memories and the guilt of her mother's death to be erased. Perhaps she deserved what'd she'd gone through for failing her mother and failing Guy's love.

Her foot tapped on the floor to the accompaniment of her son's excited chatter about the scoring on the belly of the craft.

"Do you think they ran into an asteroid belt?" he asked.

The outside signal displayed Air Pressurization.

"Probably not." Before she could elaborate and point out there were no asteroid belts between the two planets, Jared rushed through his rapid-fire questions, without breath or waiting on an answer.

"I like that color blue."

Contaminant Pressure Spray.

"I can't see the pilot through the front shield."

Oxygen Levels Normal.

"Do you think he brought me a present?"

Landing Complete.

"The door's opening. Who's the man with silver hair?"

And there was her father. Her eyes stung, and her lips trembled into a smile. Fireflies danced in her belly, and she was shocked at how much her hands shook. Jared quieted and slipped his hand in hers, his head tucked against her side.

The doors out to the ship corridors flung wide. Kalon swept into the bay, framed by his favorite bodyguards. "Check the ship," he ordered before

he even looked at Quinn.

“Kalon. Good to see you again.” Quinn bowed his head and bent slightly at the waist. For Quinn, this was a huge concession of humility.

Kalon nodded and cast a stony expression at his former father-in-law. “Likewise. I’d like it to remain good to see you. No encouraging Jewel’s little mental problems.”

She stiffened, and Jared peered at her with a questioning look.

“Momma?”

“It’s all right, baby.”

“I’m not a baby.”

“You’re right. You’re a boy.”

“Is that my grandpapa? Why doesn’t Daddy like him?”

She didn’t want to lie and, no matter what she’d planned, she didn’t want to come between father and son, no matter how much she thought it would be best if they never saw each other again. It was best if Jared never knew that his father was capable of murder.

She didn’t answer the question, but Jared had moved on to the next one, anyway.

“What are Ben and Leo doing on that ship? Think they’ll let me go on board, too?”

“I’m sure they will. Come. Your father is waving us out.”

She gave a tug and her son followed, dragging his heels though his small body vibrated like a live wire. If the ship were the only thing in the bay, he’d be running aboard. With Quinn standing there, an expectant expression that bordered on pain, eyes red-rimmed, Jared hung back. No matter her coaxing, he hadn’t moved forward to present himself when the two bodyguards exited the ship.

“All clear,” said one of the bodyguards. Jared might know the difference between the two guards, who didn’t honestly look anything alike, but she’d never kept their names straight.

“Daughter,” Quinn choked. He blinked while his throat visibly worked. A few heart-stopping moments passed before he got himself under control and smiled with misted eyes. “This must be Jared.”

Suffocating with a strange pressure in her chest, she flung herself into his strong arms, crushing a protesting Jared between them. It was so good to see Quinn. She hoped this wouldn’t be the last time. Arms in a chokehold about his neck, she sobbed in his ear, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“Papa.” She hadn’t called him that since she was around sixteen. “I missed you.”

“Where is he?” Kalon loomed over them, casting a shadow on the reunion with her father.

Quinn let her go, and she wanted to crawl into his lap like she did as a child when a nightmare had woken her. His face pale, mouth downturned and lined with fatigue, he looked Kalon in the eye. “There’s no one else aboard.”

Jewel held her breath and stared at her slippers.

“I’d expected the good sheriff.” Kalon frowned at his two guards. “Open the hatches on the hopper and disengage the docking. Once it’s far enough away, blow it.”

*Guy.* The scream filled her head, but she bit her lip to keep it in as her vision grayed.

Her lungs and eyes burned with the effort to show a calm façade for her son’s sake. Before her legs gave way, her father caught her into another hug.

The scent of his familiar pine aftershave kept her from blacking out. She clung to him as he whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Montgomery tried to talk himself out of it, but the idea of another man going through what he'd experienced brought him here. To this moment in time when he'd broken the law. Again.

With codes bought from a bay mechanic, he'd started the quiet ambulance ship and pulled it out of docking. Once clear of the medship, he entered the coordinates sent to him by Jewel. He'd spent the travel time pretending to study his latest findings in the silver-tip programming routines.

The hacked scanner sat on the seat next to him, ready to be keyed to Jewel's Broker. By transmit, she'd convinced him to aid her escape from her crime-lord ex-husband. Against his better judgment, and with Lady Wells's urging, he was now on his way to help track down the Broker and get Jewel and son off the station. He wasn't sure whether he was altruistic or just trying to impress the wife he'd done so poorly by for so many years.

Cover story memorized, he shouldn't worry, but the moment *Geanus Station* responded to his hails, the ambulance's proximity alarms prompted visuals that made him nearly turn and return home to his wife.

Dark, with scorch marks along its side, a small skipper marked with the official seals of the Taphgan Mounties limped off to port. Its view windows flickered before going out completely. The pilot on that craft might need his help.

He flicked his comm to local scan and signaled. "I'm a doctor. Does anyone aboard the Taphgan skimmer need medical assistance?"

The comm crackled with static before a weak voice replied. "Mounty Brice Levski, here. I need..."

The connection popped out as a second small vessel jettisoned from the docking bay farthest from him. This place wasn't welcoming in the least.

His fingers slid across the controls to scan the new ship, but before he could take the vitals, the vessel blew apart in a spray of silent fireworks.

A hard thump resounded in his chest and his mouth dried.

“Hope nobody was on that.” He flicked the comm back over to the mountry’s ship. “I’m coming to help you right now. Hold tight.”

“This is *Geanus Station* control. You’re cleared to land” blared through the cabin. His controls and audio went dead.

His ship lurched forward. He was being towed in, and the man in the skimmer needed medical attention.

Dr. Wells gripped the control handle and tugged, but the ship kept moving forward. Helpless, he watched the dark skimmer list farther to the side before it dropped from view.

His mouth turned to dust. Visions of his Aissa flashed before him. His wife, smiling for the first time in years, caught in sensual bliss beneath him. His thoughts spun until he threw off his safety harness and unlocked his med bag. He had to have something to get him out of this mess.

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The bay chilled through her thin wrap and slippers. Fighting the trembles, Jewel stood immobile, wishing she had Guy’s jacket, but she’d left it in her bed, where she wrapped herself in it every night. Jared had been taken to his room to play with a nanny. Her father was locked into temporary quarters.

She was alone. Her hands wanted to wrap around herself, around her waist to hold herself in, but she didn’t move.

Dr. Wells marched down the ramp of the ambulance ship that had been towed in only moments before. On his usually placid face, he scowled at everyone equally until he saw Jewel. He smoothed his features and nodded at her.

“Bring his equipment down here,” Kalon commanded.

In response, Kalon’s guards conferred with the doctor, and they all went back into the ship.

After moments of unloading comp stations and gurneys, arranging medical bags and making ignored entreaties to check on the incapacitated ship outside, Dr. Wells pronounced himself ready.

All the while, she remained cold and empty. The hustle and conversation dulled to a buzz in her head. She’d never be warm again.

Kalon took her arm in a harsh grip. “I said, let’s get started.”

“On what?” Her voice sounded far away.

“What you didn’t know when I let you make this little escape plan of yours is that I wanted the doctor here, and I’ve already procured a sample of your lover’s DNA. It was easy. He was in his cups at the bar and one of my men delivered a punch to the nose. Plenty of blood for the med swab. That’s all the good doctor needs to take off the collar.”

Guy in his cups? That didn’t sound like him. She wished she’d seen him one last time. How had he been?

“The chances aren’t as good.” Dr. Wells splayed his hands in front of him. “It’d be better to have him here. Without him, she only has a fifty-fifty chance.”

“Good enough for me.” Kalon hauled her forward. “She’s no good to me as she is. Jared needs a sibling. We’re expanding the family.”

Bile rose in the back of Jewel’s throat. Fifty-fifty chance she could escape. Her plan of sneaking the doctor and Guy aboard to remove the collar had gone horribly wrong. Horribly.

“It’s all right, Doctor. Guy...” Her throat closed, and she had to clear it to speak. “Guy won’t be here, and the risk is no matter.” She stepped forward to the comp.

“I’ll need the Broker.” Dr. Wells motioned Jewel onto the gurney.

Once she was settled, Kalon reached for an impenetrable small-weave metallic bag. A tag on the ties had a small thumb scanner, which Kalon activated. Unlocked, the pouch came open and exposed its contents. The Broker.

Kalon put her collar’s home base on the comp, where Dr. Wells studied some sort of swiftly scrolling code.

The doctor didn’t even look, nor seem terribly concerned. “You kept it in a booby-trapped bag.”

“I take no chances with my property.”

“Indeed.”

For all the possibility she’d be free of the collar in moments, she wanted to grip it in her fingers, keep it on her neck and never let it go. This silver collar gave Guy a permanent claim to her, and she didn’t want to lose that connection even if she’d lost him.

It didn’t matter if this killed her. Guy was gone. She’d left him and married someone else, but in her dreams she’d always returned to him. Now she’d never have him.

Her son would be protected. She'd made backup plans with her father in case everything went to sourgrass. Quinn promised to take Jared and disappear. Go somewhere Kalon would never find them. She clung to those meager thoughts of hope.

Wells fiddled with the medscanner in his hand and adjusted the Broker's position on the table.

"Start the sequence, Dr. Wells. That's what you're here for."

"Here we go, Jewel. It'll all be over soon." The doctor patted her arm, his hand hot against her cold skin.

The air around her gave a tug, as if a stream of air wrapped itself around her and pulled, an invisible current charged, dense and real.

"The readings worry me," Dr. Wells said to Kalon.

Her heart beat rapidly, rushing in her ears. It was all going wrong. She'd be meeting Guy soon, after all, in the afterlife. Her body relaxed against the gurney and another chill washed over her.

"Do what you need to do to get rid of the collar. She's no good to me enslaved to a dead man."

"Attenuating the signal between devices." The doctor's attention narrowed fully on the U-panel before him.

She floated and let her arms fall slack off the side of the gurney.

"Signal lock," Dr. Wells announced.

"Sever it. Let's get this over with." Kalon's order echoed in the silent bay.

Her world narrowed as the doctor's hands flew.

"Done."

Nothing happened. Almost a let down.

No. Not quite true. She no longer felt the connection to Guy, and the hum of her collar ceased.

Dr. Wells reached her first, which relieved her immensely. She didn't want Kalon to be the one, especially if it wasn't going to be Guy.

He whispered, "I can get you a few minutes. That's all I can do. Remember. Only minutes."

A cold cylinder slid into her hand before he pressed her fingers around it. She clutched at it blindly. She didn't understand but couldn't manage the words to tell him so. The doctor's cold fingers touched her neck as he worked the necklace around to search out the clasp.



It fell. One bounce on the floor with a ping, and it rolled away to land halfway beneath the comp. Like an inexorable pull, she couldn't look away from the sparkling collar she'd worn for over two months. Around her, everyone spoke at once, bodies pushed past her and a cruel grip on her arm still didn't get through to her dazed mind, which was completely awash with one thought.

She wanted it back.

Her sluggish limbs all seemed to reach for the silver band, and every part of her programmed with nanobots burned. Hot and alive. So alive. Sexual awareness punched through her and put her teeth on edge.

She wanted to fuck.

She pulled her legs together and clamped her thighs shut. Nipples, hard and sensitive, rubbed against her wrap. She managed to move, to wrap her arms high around her chest to cradle her hot and aching breasts. A clamoring in her head resolved into a voice, and she forced open the eyes she'd squeezed shut.

"She'll need a few hours to adjust. The programming has lost its constant stream of instructions. The nanobots embedded in her are actively seeking commands. They'll fall into the failsafes, but until then, she'll be confused."

"I'll take her to her room." The hard voice rasped over her nerves, made her flinch and her skin crawl. Her ex-husband, who she needed to escape.

But, go where?

Guy was gone. Sobs wracked her body and she curled on her side into a ball.

Her mind frantically looked for the connection over the collar, but it wasn't there. Gone. That thread of constant energy, even while dormant, had taken residence in her consciousness for the past two months.

"Guy?" Her voice shattered in a weak thread.

"Let's go. I'll send for the magistrate and get the marriage digisignature renewed. First you need to rest for a while." Kalon gripped harder, the source of the pinch on her arm, and lifted her into his arms, unresisting, her insides crumbling, and strode out of the bay.

A dizzying rush of movement, corridors bright and cold, and then darkness. Her room. Her bed. She slipped into the nightmares of despair. Guy's jacket clutched to her stomach, she let the whirlwind take her and wept.

The doors closed and she sank, her mind caught in a dark storm.

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While inside he pitched and yawed, Montgomery maintained his outer calm. Why he risked himself after he finally got Lady Wells back, he couldn't fathom. Never had he taken such a chance before, but after having his wife for the past few weeks, he couldn't completely turn his back on Jewel. Not sure what it said about his new frame of mind, but he didn't think he'd be able to ignore the need to help silver-tips ever again.

A gargantuan hireling of the crime lord waved him back onto the ambulance ship. "The boss said he'd wire your payment. Your services are no longer needed. You'll have a passenger to take with you."

With employees such as this, it was a miracle Geanus still had a functioning station, much less a thriving black market, smuggling business and flesh trade empire. Another hired gun escorted the silver-haired Quinn, gagged and restrained, from the bay. Of all involved in this mess, Montgomery thought the elder might be in need of his services before this was done. He looked pale and sickly, like he'd keel over any moment with heart failure.

"A moment." He held up a hand then hurriedly searched his med bag for the appropriate device. After programming the common synthesized med into the multi-shot, he administered the meds to the elder before waving all three men onward. "That should help. Your heart rate seemed elevated."

Still gagged, Quinn nodded thanks.

Montgomery could do nothing more. He'd slipped a tranq gun into Jewel's hand, all he had to help her at this point. He was done here.

He'd go back to the *Jeffreys*, back to his wife, and forget all about silver-tipping, even if the silver sheen of his wife's lips was a constant reminder.

Locking the shaking Quinn into the passenger seat, Montgomery left Jewel behind and tried not to care that she was now alone.

## Chapter Seventeen

After an eternity, the pod skimmed into the outer hull of *Station Geanus*. The specially created and still top-secret attachment device clamped onto a sealed, no-longer-used maintenance hatch.

“Right on target,” he spoke into the quiet.

Guy released the grapple. He’d have to buy Brice a case—or ten—of the finest Taphgan whiskey for the intellisense claw the mounties had devised to handle black-market shipments before they ever touched down on planet.

Based on plans of the station obtained from years of undercover work from Brice’s men, Guy had moored outside a maintenance shaft that should be deserted. If it wasn’t, this would be one short rescue mission. He had no illusions Kalon would let him live if the crime boss found him on his own station.

On the basis of their past friendship, and extending a tenuous and newfound trust, Brice had helped him with this crazy scheme, endangering years of his own work, with a promise from Guy he’d bring back Kalon to stand trial. Guy couldn’t gut Kalon but had to get solid evidence, when all he wanted to do was grab Jewel and her son and leave this station behind them in chunks of titanium decking and spacedust.

The remote device on his wrist checked as functional and connected to the pod.

He blew out a breath. “Time to get to work.”

Unbuckling, he floated weightless from the pilot seat. Using handholds along the rounded walls of the craft, he slowly made his way to the pack he’d prepared. As he passed a circular portal, Brice’s ship came into view. Dark, emergency beacon blinking, it looked dead, as was the plan. Still, plan or no, his heart gave a kick. His friend better be all right, or Kalon was a dead man.

*Geanus Station* had played into their setup by delivering a stun-cannon warning shot across Brice’s bow. Brice had programmed the ship to react as

if crippled. That better be the case rather than Kalon changing his tactics to live fire. In the confusion of Brice's ship being spotted and sending stray signals, Guy'd launched the escape pod before he could verify Brice's safety. During the two rotations floating in the pod, he'd left life support on bare minimum and let the gravitational pull of the station direct him where he needed to go.

After sitting for so long, he enjoyed the stretch of hefting himself, weightless, across the pod. He got to his bundle of equipment, donned his re-breather and wrestled into the backpack. At the hatch, he activated his spacewalk boots and settled the breaching torch across his shoulder.

The hatch spun to the side, and he set the suction clamps to attach to the station's hull. Once he had a good seal, he used the wrist remote to kick on pressurization. His lasso slapped against his leg with the return of gravity. Without proper levels, once he cut into the station's atmo, he'd set off alarms with the change in pressure, and this close to the station—actually attached to it—the kick of power from the pod would be undetectable.

More time to wait, to try and ignore the presence of Jewel in the back of his mind and her claim on half his soul.

Once the pressure leveled, he flipped on the laser torch and set to work, careful to keep the cut on the sealed hatch. The hatch had been used for access to antiquated power coils gone out of favor back when he was still cleaning up his father's drunken messes every morning before grade school. The newer systems didn't require this maintenance shaft, so it'd been reportedly put out of commission. The reports better be accurate or he'd never have a shot at getting Jewel out of this place.

"Jewel," he whispered.

For two months he'd wallowed. He hadn't realized it, but he'd waited for her. Waited for some clue that she wanted him to steal her away. Every day he hadn't heard from her was one more step into hell. His life hadn't been on hold, it'd been a veritable black hole, sucking the life from everything around him. Even Max had seemed to wilt a bit, his fur not as shiny, no longer begging to play their lasso game.

Then Quinn had shown up with that lousy plan. In working through how to improve it, how to be sure Jewel and her son escaped with not just their lives, but their future, he'd fallen back into rhythm. He was good at cleaning up messes, from drunks to bankrupt ranches. He was good at

rescuing unwilling women from debauched Terraloft. And he was good at letting Jewel go. He'd done it twice. He wouldn't do it a third time.

The cut completed, the hatch hung on the line he'd wrapped around the handle. He carefully hauled it into the pod and swung through the dark opening.

He landed on the metal floor with a clang and froze. Senses on alert, he listened to each little sound—the groan of the station and clicking of the cooling units housed a level below. No alarms blared. No guards clamored after him.

Making short work of removing his flight suit and space boots, he shoved them back through the hatch and into the pod. Using the wrist unit, he killed the lights in the pod and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit maintenance tunnel, all the while toying with the leather bracelet wrapped below the wrist unit.

With schematics committed to memory, he started up the tunnel and pulled the detection scanner from his pack. En route, he'd stopped off at *Zuthuru* and, wearing his boots and his silver star, he'd paid a visit to the silver-tip clinic nurse. The body of the clinic's office manager had been found, and the nurse was grieving—and mad as hell. Didn't take much convincing—along with a fair bribe—to get a scanner that could detect Jewel's collar and the Broker.

He flipped on the scanner.

Nothing.

He knocked it on the side. Still nothing.

“She's not here,” he croaked.

Tests on the device had assured him the damn thing worked. Every time a Terraloft and his silver-tip had passed him on *Zuthuru*, the device had lit up in all the right ways. Long-range scans had picked up dozens of silver-tips stationwide. Nothing showed here, on the entire station.

He thumped it against his leg. “Where are you, my Jewel?”

She wasn't here. That bastard better not have done anything to her.

He blinked against the stinging in his eyes and fisted his hands around the scanner. The pod's wrist unit weighed on him. With a tug, he removed it and flung it against the wall. Useless piece of tech. He couldn't go back on the pod anyway until he'd checked on Quinn and Jared.

He ground his teeth to keep from yelling in frustration. With a perverse urge to get caught so he could beat on someone, he barely kept himself

from banging on the walls and calling for them to come and get him. Damn everyone on this cesspit.

Throwing the scanner in the same direction as the wrist unit, he sank to the floor, hands fisting in his hair, elbows on his knees.

He shook his aching head and forced the blackness away. A shuttle needed stealing. He ran a hand over his vest, over the silver star. With a frown, he got back to his feet and made his way through the tunnel.

The maps from Brice put Jewel's quarters two levels up, with Jared's right next to hers. If she wasn't here, the odds were that her quarters would be the safest place for him to hole up and break into the comp systems. He needed to find out where everyone was and how to get them to safety—if he didn't get himself caught and strung up by his boot heels.

Maybe that'd be for the best. If Jewel wasn't on this station, she wasn't anywhere. Kalon wouldn't have let her go.

At the end of the tunnel, he crept into the main maintenance area. The station ran on a minimal crew that Brice assured him wouldn't care less about Guy's presence. They were paid not to notice anything that happened here. He had to look like he knew what he was doing and avoid the guards, who should be occupied with the elder Quinn and his decoy ship.

Still, as he passed the few workers bent to their tasks, monitoring, gossiping and one napping, he held his breath.

No guards. The pitch of the workers' conversations never changing, he punched the call button for the lift and kept his back to the clean room. Bright and airy with workstations set up along the middle way and banks of systems built into the walls, it didn't look like the center of life for a crime boss's station.

The lift doors closed behind him and his back tingled. He blew out his breath. So far so good.

After zinging upward, the car stopped with a small dip, and the doors slid open.

Right there, a hulking guard stood waiting to get on the lift. His head quirked to the side with a puzzled expression.

In that space of time, before the slow-witted man could react, Guy flew into motion. With a front kick to the solar plexus, the overpaid muscleman went down heavy. Curled into a ball, the guard protected his stomach as he tried to draw in air with a frantic sucking sound.

Reaching to his belt, beneath his lasso, Guy pulled out his cuffing cords and made short work of immobilizing and gagging the guard. He hefted the bulk of him across his shoulders and hoped like hell no one else would surprise him as he made his way to Jewel's quarters, only a few short steps down.

Without qualms, he dropped the bound guard with a thud at Jewel's door and pulled out a card key with stolen codes. Her door slid open and showed an empty room. His heart thumped as flutters spiked before calming. He'd hoped beyond hope she'd be here.

He pulled the guard into the room and locked the portal behind them.

Jewel's room smelled of honeysuckle. His knees weakened until he locked them and swayed in his boots.

The spacious room had a soothing décor. An immense plush Taphgan rug covered the floor. The utilitarian consoles and furniture along one wall only accented the softness of the large bed right in the middle, the centerpiece of the room. Guy's gut burned, taking away his breath, and he made himself not go there. Not imagine what had happened in that bed.

He jerked to the side wall and the nearest comp. They'd lifted her thumbprint off an old ceramic vase found in Jewel's room at Quinn's house. With a special film—also top-secret—he stuck it on the thumb swipe. On the wall covered with images, a photo of Jared brought him to a halt. Probably taken several months ago, the scene showed Jared laughing as he played ball in the middle of a large playroom. Her son looked so much like her. In one second, he knew he'd love this boy with all his heart.

The urge to go to the side door that led to the boy's room nearly brought him out of the room, but he jerked to the nearest comp. He had to know what had gone on here. Where everyone was.

When he found the order to blow up his little craft, he ground his teeth again. He'd miss his little hot rod. Quinn had departed with Dr. Wells. Guess the doctor hadn't gotten Quinn's message to keep his ass on the *Jeffreys*. No matter, both men were away and safe. He also found the records of Jewel and Jared arriving, but not of their leaving.

She wasn't here, but he didn't know about Jared. He thumped his fist on the console. No clue about what had happened to her. If she wasn't on the station and hadn't left...

She couldn't be dead. He wouldn't allow it.

He lunged from the chair. It screeched and fell over behind him. Ignoring the plush bed, he walked around it and to the side portal that led to Jared's chambers.

Rage burning in his gut, he entered the little boy's room.

Honeysuckle washed over him, and the grief nearly blinded him, but what he saw in that room fused his boots to the floor.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Jewel shot up in bed. Jared squirmed in his sleep but settled back into the covers.

She blinked, sure she'd gone over the deep end. "Guy?"

He swooped her up and into his arms before she could clear the sleep from her fuzzy consciousness. This was no dream. He felt too good, too real, too virile.

Kisses covered her hair, her cheeks, her neck, and stayed there. His hot mouth opened, his tongue tasting her as he explored the area, still tingling from the removal of her collar.

"Jewel." Guy's voice was rough, low and shaky.

"Shhh." She forced herself to remain calm, ignore the slight remnants of tingling in her silver-tipped areas, and ran her fingers into his hair. "We shouldn't wake up Jared. You're a stranger to him. Behind you, into his changing room."

In long strides, he carried her into the side room, quietly closed and locked the door, and settled them both onto the soft mat that covered the floor.

She straddled his lap, and the hardness beneath her left her in no doubt. Heat flooded through her middle. Sensitive, on fire, she needed to be filled.

Hands met and tangled as they worked to open her robe. His mouth latched onto her nipple and his tongue teased until he drew her in and sucked. The pull started in her chest and yanked through her, leaving her throbbing all over, aching.

He pulled his sinful mouth away and whispered against her wet skin, "I thought you were gone."

"I'm here." She smoothed his thick hair away from his face. Though the dark circles under his eyes matched her own, the worry lines around his soft, delicious mouth melted as he stared at her with a deep hunger that reached into her. She kissed him softly then whispered against his lips, "I'm here."

Reaching between her legs, he struggled with his dungarees for a moment then, with one hand, pushed down on her shoulder.

He filled her completely.

They both sighed. Their breaths mingled as they stared into each other's eyes. The tension and grief hovered above her for only moments before she let it go. Eager for him to take her into the bliss only he could give her, she wiggled her hips.

"I don't really know how to do this," she confessed but refused to think about how inexperienced she really was.

"I'll take care of you. I'll show you everything, give you all." He ground up against her, but instead of setting the rhythm she so desperately needed, he hugged her tight, kissing her neck again, tonguing around where her collar used to be. "Where is it?"

The cold of his silver star pressed against her breast. The smoothness of his vest and the roughness of his dungarees beneath her bared bottom excited her. She tightened around his erection and he groaned but didn't move. "Make love to me, please."

"Oh, I will. But I need to know." He slid one hand from around her and tucked it between their bodies. With unerring skill, his thumb found that most aching spot and circled.

"There," she gasped.

"Tell me." He panted against her neck as he held her tight with one arm. The only spot moving was that thumb driving her mindless.

She managed to talk, though she wanted to sink into the sensual bliss calling to her. "Dr. Wells had a program. It worked on his wife. He only needed your DNA. They got blood from you when you were drunk and got into a fight."

"I did drink a bit for a few days. Or a lot. It's a blur. I thought I'd lost you." Then, as if he couldn't keep still, his hips started to rock beneath her, grinding slowly, quickly driving her toward her zenith. "Not so fast, sweetheart. We have more to do here."

"Don't stop."

"Never." Flushed high on his cheekbones, he leaned back away from her neck. "Kiss me."

He continued his slow assault with his thumb, and she leaned down and nibbled on his lower lip before dipping inside. Reflecting the increased pace

of his hips, the kiss turned carnal, desperate, long and deep. His clothes rubbed against her exposed skin and made her feel wicked.

He pulled back and cradled the side of her face. “You want me. Without the collar.”

“I’ve always wanted you.”

Face contorting into lines of effort, he thrust up, hard. Over and over again he pressed ruthlessly against her clit. All points zeroed in on the heat radiating from between her legs, how full she was. The slide of him inside her was delicious. She never wanted it to stop, but she couldn’t hold back. The lure too much to resist, she clenched all around him, tight. A delicious climax rolled through her and sent her legs trembling.

She collapsed against him. His arms came around her again in a fierce hug. With a grunt, he rolled them over, still deeply seated inside her. Poised above her, he drew his arms beneath her legs and pressed her to the floor.

His mouth covered hers and he pumped into her, hard, unlike anything she’d ever experienced. Clutching at him, she moved with the force of him, hungry for more. He pinned her down and thrust harder, faster, faster.

Breaths coming in gusts, face turning red, he broke their kiss and stared into her eyes. The connection between them so intense, she nearly had to close her eyes in self-defense, as if her soul were bared completely. Nothing between them at all. Not his clothes, not her quiet silver-tipping.

The strain of exertion lined his face but he never let up, never broke his stare or his pace as he moaned, deep and guttural, grinding his hips against hers, and he came, his eyes defocusing for a long moment. She shuddered and went over with him.

His brown eyes ensnared her, more so than any programming could ever do. Then the rigidity left him and he collapsed on her chest. Nothing had ever felt so good as his weight covering her languid, well-pleased body.

“I love you,” she said, when she could speak again.

“Sweetheart, you are my life. Love doesn’t even begin to cover how much you mean to me.”

Tears stung and she opened her mouth, but she couldn’t speak.

He kissed the tip of her breast then pulled away. “When I get you home, I’m going to finally make love to you like you deserve. In a bed, all our clothes off, all night long. But we have to get away from here, and we have to find home.”

She struggled up off the floor and adjusted her robe as he tucked himself back into his pants. Her voice cracked. “What do you mean, find home?”

“We can’t go back to Rangetown.” He glanced at her silver lips and quickly ducked his head to adjust his gun belt and lasso.

“No, I can’t take you away from your ranch. Not after all the work you’ve done to make it successful.” She could never do that.

“Why do you think I did it? Why do you think I made that ranch the best spread on Grassland?” He stared at her, lips turned down at the corners, and ran a hand through his hair. She lost herself in the depths of brown, dark and endless. “I did it for you. To prove I could be good enough for you. After I had you and then lost you, I was drinking myself into a grave like my old man. Then Brice made me see how I was following in that good-for-nothing man’s footsteps, but it took seeing your father, seeing the possibility of getting you back, that made me see the full truth. I might not have been born to aristocracy, and I might have cheated a little to get started—well, maybe cheated a lot—but I’d never step on anyone to get to the top. I’ve righted all my wrongs. I’d never swindle the innocent. I’d never murder or silver-tip anyone. I’m a better man than Kalon and his like.”

He bent forward to kiss her gently on the forehead and spoke against her hot skin. “I’m the man for you.”

“Always,” she croaked.

He stepped back and nodded, as if he expected her acquiescence. And why not? She loved him because he was a good man and the perfect man for her. It was about time he saw that truth. It was about time she lived that truth. But she’d live it on his ranch. She’d make him see that.

Door open, he’d already stepped through before she knew what he was doing. Waving to her, he motioned to Jared still sleeping in his mammoth bed. “Introduce me to your son.”

Guy stopped at the side of the bed and stared down with a quirk to his lips. His face soft, he appeared so much more at ease than he had since this all started. She sat on the edge of the mattress and pulled back the covers. “Jared, sweetie, time to wake up.”

Like the boundlessly energetic boy he was, he sprang up in bed, awake immediately. “Who’s this?”

“This is Sheriff Trident. He’s from my hometown, and he’s come to take us home.”

“A real sheriff?” Jared’s eyes widened. “Can I see your gun?”

Guy laughed, that full, rich sound she remembered well from her youth. Something inside her loosened. “I’ll show you, but you can’t touch. One day I’ll teach you how to use it.”

Any hesitation either of her males might have shown dissipated in their immediate bond. Guy sat next to her and showed Jared his six-shot, careful to keep the little boy from touching and explaining the danger of the weapon. Before she knew it, Guy’d put away the weapon and had Jared on his lap, telling him about Max, his dog.

“I can’t wait to meet Max.” Jared bounced to the floor to scramble out of his pajamas.

“He can’t wait to meet you.” Guy’s smile faded and he whispered to her. “I hope we can get Max before we head to wherever it is we land.”

“Guy, we’re going home, to your ranch. Nowhere else.” She patted this thigh and left her hand there, comforted by his warmth.

“Let’s get out of here. Do you need to take anything with you?” Guy stood and looked around the room.

“I don’t want anything from here except Jared.” She’d never meant anything more. Except she did want Guy’s jacket, which she’d hid among her pillows.

A chill snaked over her. She turned her head to the opening slider.

A dark form filled the door. “You’re not taking anything from here, and you’re not taking my son.”

Jared pounced on her, nearly toppling her from the bed, and threw his arms around her. She held him tight.

Guy spread his legs, hands hovering over his gun. “Kalon. Just step aside and let us pass. You don’t want to interfere here.”

“You have no authority at all on my station, Sheriff. You shouldn’t have come. I would’ve let you live.”

Jared whimpered and dug his nose into her chest, as if to get away.

“Don’t. You’re scaring Jared,” she hissed to both men.

They didn’t listen. They circled each other in the middle of the room, sizing up one another. Kalon was tall, broad, beefy. Guy, as tall, moved smoothly. His muscular build came from hard work and sweat. His lithe form prowled with a grace that was deceptive. Years ago, she’d seen him grapple with Brice and win, but could he overpower Kalon?

Kalon seemed to think he couldn't because he stepped forward and swung his fist at Guy's face. Guy stepped back and avoided the hit, kicking out and smashing his boot into Kalon's knee.

Her ex went down, but lunged onto Guy and took him to the floor with him.

She held her breath, unable to move, frozen in place until Jared's whimper brought her up. She couldn't help either man, not with Jared clinging to her.

Kalon punched Guy's stomach. Guy kicked, threw his elbows, and a wild thrashing of limbs, fists and knees flew. She had no idea who would win the fight, but she had no intention of staying with Kalon or leaving Guy behind. She whispered to Jared, "Don't look. Just get dressed fast as you can."

With unerring instinct, Jared obeyed, getting his clothes and throwing them on in record time. Once he was safe, she'd help Guy, somehow.

Kalon used his superior weight to hold a struggling Guy to the floor beneath him. He pounded him mercilessly. Guy couldn't win. He'd never make it out of here alive.

She had to *do* something. Tears running down her face, she lunged at Kalon and threw all her weight against him. He grunted and fell to the side.

Nose bleeding, Guy scrambled up, but didn't pounce on Kalon. He mumbled through swollen lips, "Run. Trust me. Just run to the shuttle bay and board the nearest ship."

"No." Her answer came, determined.

Kalon roared and flung Guy around to meet his fist. Guy fought back with a punch to Kalon's kidneys, but he continued to yell at her. "Run."

"You won't get far." Kalon halted his pummeling fists and held Guy by the arm.

They both paused, lungs heaving, red marks growing livid on their faces.

Jared pulled on her. "Let's go, Momma."

"Go." Guy pulled away from Kalon and stood, hand over his gun. "Get on a shuttle."

"Don't move." Face reddening, Kalon turned his back on Guy and faced her fully. His stare promised retribution if she disobeyed. At that moment, Kalon seemed invincible, terrible, but she trusted Guy. He'd told her to leave.

Jared's hand in hers, she turned on weak knees, moved toward the door and ignored the scuffling behind her.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Guy spread his legs into the familiar stance. Ready. Knowing what Kalon would do next.

Kalon lunged for Jewel's back. Jared cried out and fell against the wall next to the door.

Guy's hand flipped from the handle of his gun and gripped his lasso. Twirling the special rope before he could blink, he eased into a confident swing. He let the lasso slide off the tips of his fingers. It zipped across the room and cinched around Kalon.

Caught.

In a flash, he was on top of Kalon and tying him before the man could finish his bellow of rage. He pulled out a bandanna tucked into a belt loop for this purpose and gagged Kalon mid-curse.

Lungs sucking in much-needed air, though every breath pained his ribs, he climbed off the bound man and dusted the front of his dungarees. "Man just needed to be treated like the side of beef he is."

Jewel threw herself into his arms. "I thought... I thought..."

"Wanted to let the man think he had it under control, but we're not out of this yet."

"What do we do next?" She looked at him with such trust, he wasn't sure if the ache in his chest was from her confidence or from the beating he'd taken.

"We can't just do-si-do out of here. I found a back way that should be deserted, if we go left—"

"No," she interrupted. "Kalon had that corridor wired when he caught one of his employees stealing whiskey from the bar."

"Well, sh—" He slammed his mouth shut and glanced at Jared, who clung to Jewel, both their backs to Kalon still squirming on the floor. "We'll have to go back the way I came. It'll be tight, and we have to hope Brice's ship wasn't crippled."



The rage came back, hot and fast, as his boots shuffled. Kalon stilled, a smirk beneath his gag taking away the distorted expression of moments before. He went around Jewel and nudged Kalon. Barely holding back the instinct to kick with all this power, his leg protested against the restraint. He rested his boot heel on the kidney area, which had to be bruised. Sweat rolled down Kalon's hairline.

"Your life depends on his."

Kalon paled. Whether from the pain of his bruises or from knowing that Brice's ship was put out of commission, Kalon wouldn't tell him.

Guy rolled his shoulders and stood straight, tall, confident. If Kalon had come back here, then Quinn's distraction hadn't kept the guards on alert in the bay area. No help for it.

"This is what we're going to do." He outlined the way back to his pod, told Kalon he'd have his gun on live fire at his back and hefted the man off the floor. He reworked the lasso to allow Kalon to walk but not run.

"Let's go. Don't give me any reason to kill you." He spoke low, for Kalon's ears alone. "I haven't done it yet, for Jared's sake. Don't make me decide it's not worth the effort of restraint."

They walked, a hobbled little group, and went through Jared's room into Jewel's. The guard he'd incapacitated still lay there. Either Kalon hadn't seen him or hadn't cared about his guard's welfare. Probably hadn't cared.

He ignored the bed and the urge to kick Kalon again.

With a determined swirl back into the room, Jewel ran over to the bed and threw pillows aside. Hurt and pain roiled inside him until she walked back to him, wearing his jacket. She'd kept it in her bed. The hurt subsided as he led them out.

He opened the door and peered out. No guards between them and the lift. No one in sight, but the hair at his nape lifted. He could send Jewel and Jared first. They wouldn't be stopped, but his gut instinct flared a warning. "I don't see anyone, but I don't trust it. Move. Fast."

"Hurry, yourself." Jewel lifted Jared into her arms and ran to the lift.

Gripping the back of Kalon's binding, he pointed his gun—actually set to stun—at the small of Kalon's back. "Go."

In the corridor, he slid his back to the wall, putting Kalon between him and anyone who turned the far corner, and shuffled sideways toward the lift.

"Come on," Jewel urged as she held the door open.

From down the hall, back the way they'd come, voices drifted toward him. Kalon jerked, pulling away and muffling curses behind his gag. Guy held tight and towed him toward the lift.

As the welcome brush of Jewel's fingers skimmed his back, two guards turned down the hall. They froze for a blink then drew their weapons. Jewel tugged him backward with his belt loop. Kalon tumbled on top of him as they hit the floor of the lift.

Trampling feet thundered down the corridor. A guard bellowed. "Stop. This weapon is set to kill."

Jewel nudged Guy's boots out of the way of the slider. "Kalon can't pay you if he's dead."

"Stop," the guard yelled again from too far away to do anything.

The door shut.

"They'll follow us." She helped him up but left Kalon wiggling to right himself.

At the lift's panel, Guy keyed in the level for the maintenance shaft, and Jewel's eyebrows winged up. He stood over Kalon, gun aimed, and quirked a glance at Jewel. "If we jam the lift, how long until they find another way?"

Her brows sank and her nose wrinkled in thought. "I'm not sure. The nearest lift doesn't go directly to maintenance. We might have ten minutes."

"Good enough," he said, though he thought ten minutes not nearly long enough.

The door opened and they retraced his earlier steps. When their motley crew walked through the workers in maintenance, none of them blinked an eye, though they did stop their work to stare. All chatting abruptly silenced. If Kalon had been a good man, one or two of them would've questioned them, if not downright tried to stop them. That, more than anything, spoke of the quality of man Guy had bound and struggling in his hold.

His muscles quivering from strain, he lugged the unwilling Kalon, who thrashed with more vigor, into the deserted shaft. The guards would know what level they'd gotten off on, but they wouldn't know what direction they'd headed. It'd take time for them to find the pod. He had to hope it'd be enough time.

"Where are we?" Jared asked. He'd been quiet since Guy'd fought with Kalon. The sound of his little voice relieved him somewhat.

"This is an old closed-off area. I have a ship waiting."

Kalon growled and flung his full weight into him. He fought like a slippery eel, bucking and sliding so that Guy couldn't get a grip on him.

"Jewel. Get Jared aboard. It's at the end of the tunnel."

"Just a second." She poked a code into the lift panel and spoke.

"Security to bay four." Her command echoed in the corridor. "That should confuse them a little. But hurry. It won't take them long to find us." She lifted Jared into her arms and took off as alarms started blaring.

Right. Hurry. Subdue the slippery eel and jump on board before the goons descended. Between Kalon and the exit, he was in good position. The man loomed. On his feet, gagged and tied everywhere but his feet, he still exuded menace.

With a deep breath, Guy tucked his head and dove at Kalon. He managed to get a hand on the lasso. It slid in his hold, cutting into him with a sting. Kalon lunged away, but Guy held on for all he was worth and dragged the resisting bully behind him. The man kicked out, trying to slow them by digging in his heels.

By the time Guy trudged to the end of the tunnel, his hand throbbed, his legs burned and he panted, trying to catch his breath.

"Throw me the spacewalk tether by the door, there," he yelled.

Jewel poked her head through the hatch. In the dark, he could barely make out her frown.

"This?" She held up a hook on a thick fabric line.

"That's it, sweetheart."

Following his thoughts without a word, she wrapped one end around the closest moon-shaped handhold and lowered the other end. Guy hooked the tether to the back of Kalon's bindings. He'd have to let go. He braced himself for the rush of feeling when he pried his clutched hand from the rope.

The burn flared, but he didn't hesitate. He hoisted himself into the pod as Kalon took off. The rope snapped tight. Kalon was caught again, like a fish on a line.

"Let's reel him in."

They'd wasted time here, fighting with the prisoner, but Brice wanted him for trial, and they had to take him away from his power base. Otherwise, he'd hunt down Jewel and Jared no matter where Guy took them. Trident Ranch would be out of the question.

He pulled on his gloves and reeled in Kalon. Bit by bit with Jewel coiling the line behind him.

Once the man's feet left the floor, Guy yanked him up and threw him into one of the seats. Before Kalon could blink, Jewel had strapped him in. For good measure, Guy tightened the lasso around Kalon's feet again, careful to avoid the ineffective kicks.

"Now what?" Jewel panted with exertion.

"Now we get out of here." But he didn't move. He eyed the hatch, his gut urging him to release the clamps and get out, but he couldn't. He had to close that hatch first. The maintenance workers flashed through his mind—just people, trying to make a living. He couldn't risk their lives. "Help me out here. Jared, get back, I have to use a torch."

He tugged the hatch back into place and instructed Jewel to hold it still. Her arms quivered, but she held it firm.

The torch laser melted the sealant efficiently, but not as fast as he'd like. He wanted Jewel and Jared out of here. Jewel's arms shook so hard her body quaked.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Just hold on, almost done here."

"I've got it," she gritted through her teeth.

Shouts and cursing bled into the pod as lights cut through the crack of an opening around the hatch. They'd been found.

"Damnation."

"Watch your language," Jewel corrected him in an offhand way. She bit the corner of her silver lips as the strain mottled red splotches on her chest. She was beautiful. If he had the time, he'd tell her so.

"Let it go now and strap in next to Jared. The hatch'll stay put."

"What about them?" She crooked her head toward the hatch, where lights and sounds came through from whatever the guards were doing. Neither of them looked at the struggling Kalon, who grunted and yelled into his gag.

"It's too late for them..."

The edge of a blade slammed through the small opening just before the path of the laser. The laser cut through the knife as if it weren't even there. The blade dropped to the floor between his boots.

Sweat trickled down his face and he wiped at it with a shrug of his shoulder. "Get in your seat. There's nothing left to do but save their sorry

hides by sealing this hatch. You can only help by getting out of the path to the pilot seat and being ready to detach.”

She squeezed his shoulder and didn't call him on his silent plea to believe in him.

Another drop of moisture tickled his nose, but he didn't move, used both trembling hands to hold the laser steady as it rounded the lower edge. The seal was three quarters of the way there.

He blocked out the buzzing from the other side, the busy guards screaming and pounding.

A flash nearly blinded him. He shook his head, blinked away the burn and finally listened to the cacophony of guards on the other side of the hatch.

“Stop, now, or I'll fire again.”

Those idiots were trying to fire into a sealed pod. Lucky for them that first shot hadn't gotten through the slowly closing crack around the hatch. Jewel unlatched and moved toward Kalon.

“Tell those fools to stop firing. They could hit you. Or your son.” She yanked Kalon's gag down.

Guy looked back at his work, though the urge to check on her and Jared prickled along his heated neck.

“You're a dead man,” Kalon growled, but his cursing didn't sound as strong, as vitriolic as before. He was probably suffering from his injuries and the same adrenalin crash Guy had to look forward to.

“Kalon.” Jewel spoke as if she scolded a spoiled brat. “Tell your men to back off.”

A flash seared by Guy's head. Light and sound erupted in the pod. A sizzling flew by his ear before everything dimmed in ominous quiet.

“Status,” he croaked.

Nothing.

“Jewel! Jared!”

“We're here,” Jewel answered quietly. Too damn quiet. A soft fluttering of fabric, the clicking of seat buckles, and a grunt followed.

“Answer me,” he yelled. “Are you okay?”

“I will be. Jared's fine. Kalon's...”

“Listen to me, you idiots,” Kalon screamed. He barraged the guards with threats of dismemberments if they didn't stop shooting.

Cold swept over Guy. Jared's silent and subdued crying punched him in the chest. Jewel's voice crooned low, weak, as she tried to quiet him. She was okay. She had to be.

He couldn't leave his spot. He had to seal this hatch. Had to release the clamps and close up the pod.

He dropped the laser. He scrambled to pick it up as ringing filled his ears. He didn't know if it was an alarm or inside his head. Jewel had better be fine or he'd come back and dismantle this station with his hands.

The guards were no longer shooting at the pod, but with one last ditch effort, they plunged another knife through the opening and levered it back and forth. It missed the end of the laser by a hair's width. With a pop, the blade dropped to the decking beside the other.

The hatch was sealed.

He popped off the clamps, slammed the portal shut and scrambled backward.

Kalon sat, staring at Jewel with a gleam in his eye. Jared cried, his face white and smudged with tears. Jewel was buckled in to one of the four passenger seats, held Jared's hand and looked okay, if pale.

He ran a hand over each of them and visually scanned Jewel again. A burn mark marred the bottom edge of her wrap. Hands shuddering, the shaking so hard he thought he'd pull apart, he lifted the bottom of her dress.

Her cold hand wrapped around his wrist "Please don't. Trust me. Not now. Get us out of here."

He couldn't swallow and his head spun. On shaking legs, he managed to get to the pilot seat and fell into it. "Let's hope Brice is okay."

"We fired a stun at the mouny ship."

A subdued, emotionless response from Kalon might have reassured him, but he wasn't sure the man wasn't up to something. But since that was *Geanus Station's* MO, he believed him.

The pod pulled away from the station. With Kalon aboard, they wouldn't fire on them, but they might use the tow. The pod was damn small—and damn, didn't it feel small, tight and airless. It was nearly impossible to get a lock on. To stay on the safe side, he flicked on the scramblers.

Drifting in, he'd cut everything but bare minimum support, so he hadn't used the low-powered thrusters. Now he did, kicking them on to get them to the mouny vessel before the tug figured out how to get a lock.

Darkness surrounded them, and the deceptive quiet twinkled with faraway stars. Keeping his attention out the viewer and off the people strapped into the pod with him, he held his breath for what seemed like hours.

Then the pod shuddered. They were caught.

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## Chapter Twenty

Jewel squeezed her son's hand as the pod jerked. Thrown against their safety-belts, he whimpered but kept it together.

He was such a brave boy.

Her leg burned, but for Jared's sake, she didn't cry either. If he could do it, so could she, but the pain had radiated up her leg, and her breathing was labored.

"We're being towed now." Guy's first words in ages were calm but her pulse thundered in her ears.

"They have us?" She squeezed Jared's hand again. No matter what happened to her, he'd be all right.

"Not, *they*. Brice. Looks like he was playing possum." Guy turned in his seat and grinned at her. The relief in his face calmed her racing heartbeat. Then he frowned. "Stay in your seats until he's got us docked." During this speech, he disobeyed his own orders as he unbuckled and rose from the pilot seat.

Guy knelt before her, his face pale, and lifted the bottom of her wrap. This time she let him, now that they were safe.

He blanched and ran a gentle hand down the back of her leg, away from the burn. "Bastards. What were they thinking to shoot into a sealed pod? Looks like much of the power bled away in the ricochet before it hit you, though. It's not deep. It'll heal, but you might be tender for a few weeks after the doc tends you."

"Momma?" Jared started to cry louder than before.

"Jared, stop that at once." Kalon didn't modulate his frustration as he usually did around his heir. "You heard the sheriff. She'll be fine. She saved you from that hurt by covering you."

"Stop it." Heat flooded her face. She glared at Kalon, not wanting him to put that guilt onto Jared's small shoulders. Didn't he understand?

He couldn't. He never would. He'd been raised by a harsh hand and he'd do the same, if he could, with Jared.



Guy remained quiet, stroking the back of her leg. They all fell into silence as they waited for the pod to come to a stop.

The vessel shuddered again. The lights blinked on and then off. Then an incongruous knock sounded on the hatch. Guy opened the portal and a wash of cool air flooded in.

Everything happened in a blur. Brice and another mounty escorted a quiet Kalon away.

Guy put her arm around his shoulder, his arm about her waist, and instructed Jared, "Let's go, little man. Help your momma by holding her hand real tight."

Her vision blacked when she took her first step. She swayed against Guy.

He whispered in her ear, "I can carry you.

"Not in front of Jared. I'll walk." Vision clearing to a fog, she cleared her throat and hobbled along. The burn through her leg stole her breath, and she didn't speak again until he'd gotten her to the medical bay and put her on a cot.

"Jared, stay with the sheriff." Then she relaxed on the bed and let the darkness take her from the searing pain.

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She woke to the sight of a clean, shaved and combed Guy sitting on the side of her bed with Jared in his lap.

"And then Max took off after that squirrel, barking it up a tree until all the walnuts started plopping on his head. He was shaking the tree so much with his ruckus that the nuts just fell right down. We had nuts every day for weeks."

Jared giggled, and Guy tousled his hair. "Your momma's awake."

Jared zipped his head around, bounded to the floor and came to her side. "Hi, Momma. You missed the landing. I've never been on a planet before. It's so big. Are we staying here? I like the rain. It's neat."

Guy murmured to someone outside the door of the small hospital room.

"You like the rain, huh?" Jewel pulled herself up on the pillows. "What else?"

"One of the mounties let me brush his horse. It's big and brown."

Guy put a hand on Jared's shoulder. "That same mounty is back to let you brush his horse again. Jewel, this is Neill."

She nodded at the mounty in his red tunic. His blond hair and pleasantly smiling brown eyes made her trust him immediately. He softly rumbled, "We'll be just outside, Miss Jewel."

When Jared and Neill had left, Guy sat next to her and stroked her hand, still glittery with traces of silver in the soft light of the room.

"Brice had a solid case against Kalon and already had a sealed judgment to send him off to a maximum security penal colony."

She couldn't find any sympathy inside herself for that.

"But in return for a promise as well as signing an order, he got a lighter sentence if he stays away from you and Jared. He's to have permanent planet-grounding here on Taphgan. His funds and property have been confiscated. He's to serve civil time and then community service for the rest of his life. He's been fitted with an anklet. I think he has the resources hidden away to hire a programmer to have that anklet removed, so I still don't think you're safe."

Guy finally looked at her. His eyes took her in, as if he'd starved for her. A small point of heat started in her middle and spread through her limbs.

"If he promised—" her voice was nothing but a rasp, "—he'll probably stick to it. He was usually good for his word."

"That's not good enough."

"Let's go home, Guy. We're done with Kalon. He's done with us. I just know it."

"He'll come after Jared." Guy shook his head.

"What did Brice say?" Somehow, deep inside, she didn't worry for Jared. Everything seemed at peace.

"He said no one's ever cracked these units. There's no one who's come close, and if there were, since Kalon's funds are frozen, he won't have funds to hire an expert of that caliber. Brice thinks Kalon will spend his life here."

"Then let's go home." She smiled at him. Sure. More than sure.

Guy turned from her and spoke to the floor. "Where to?"

"Trident Ranch, of course."

"We can't." He shook his head and his body tensed in his chair.

"Guy. The people of Rangetown won't care about this." She waved her glittery hand before she touched her lips. "Most of them won't even know

what it is. They'll wonder what that daft Jewel had colored herself like that for."

Guy jerked his head toward her, his eyes unfocused before light seemed to dawn on his face. He grinned at her. "You're right. Even if they know, they've always loved you there. They would never turn their back on you."

"They love you, too."

"I don't think so." He shook his head, the brightness of his smile dimming.

"I know so. How do you think you got to be sheriff? Have the job for so long?"

"Whatever you say, Miss Jewel. If you want to go to Trident Ranch, I'll take you there, and we'll make it work." He grinned at her again and started to bend toward her before he stopped, unsure looking.

"Don't treat me like I'll break. Hold me." She reached for him, and he swooped her up into a tight embrace.

Kisses rained down on her head.

"And you'll marry me before the first spring calves," she whispered against his lips before she thrust her tongue inside to seek his taste.

When he came up for air, a blush spreading over his cheeks, he stared into her, his look of love one that set her body trembling and her middle aching.

"Whatever you say, Miss Jewel."

## About the Author

As a child Ella read every book she could get her hands on, which meant most of her dad's science fiction and fantasy collection. There she found a special love of elves, dragons and knights. Now that she's found her own knight in shining armor and happily ever after, she loves to write tales of fantasy that are hot enough to scorch the sheets.

Before she started writing, Ella was a waitress, a cashier, a receptionist to a U.S. Senator, a network admin, a web developer and an all-around card-carrying geek. One day she sat down and wrote that first sentence. She hasn't stopped since. A 2010 PRISM award finalist, she's written gothic romance with cursed families, shape shifters, and science fiction. She'd love to hear from readers and can be found at her website, [www.elladrake.com](http://www.elladrake.com), on Twitter as Lori\_Ella or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/ella.drake>.

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