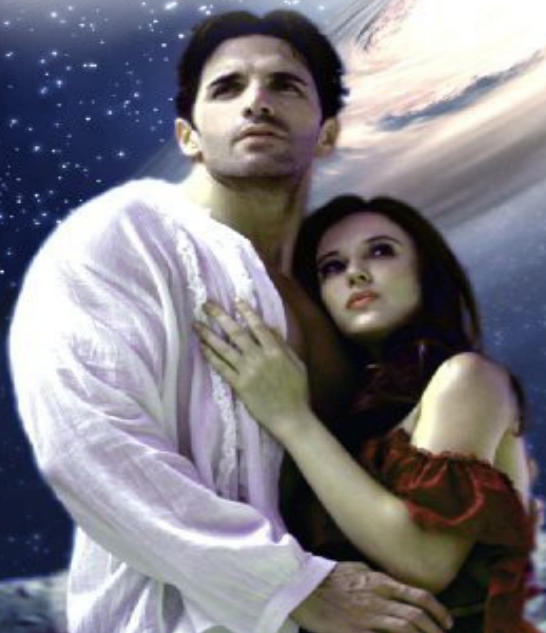


V. J. CHAMBERS
release



Release

by V. J. Chambers

After seven years searching the galaxy, Keirth Transman has caught up to the Duke of Risciter, the man who raped and murdered his mother. Nothing's stopping his revenge, so when the duke's fiancé, Miss Ariana Gilit, allows the duke to escape, he's got no choice but take her ship and blast off in hot pursuit—even if she's still on board.

Wanting rid of the prissy noblewoman, Keirth plans to dump her at the first port he can. Then he can focus his attention on what's important. Killing the duke. But things get complicated when Keith realizes that the duke has

focused his malevolent interest on Ariana. She is in mortal danger.

Keirth's no angel, but he's not a man who'll let an innocent woman be terrorized. He'll do whatever he can to keep Ariana safe from the duke. No matter how annoying she is.

RELEASE

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Punk Rawk Books

Kindle Edition

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I don't know quite where I'd be without the vibrant and supportive community of the Kindle Boards Writer's Café. This book's blurb and cover are products of people taking the time to offer me opinions and advice out of the goodness of their heart. I wouldn't make it without you guys!

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Chapter One

When Miss Ariana Gilit, daughter of the duke of the Planet Wendo, heard the news that her suitor the Duke of Risciter was leaving the Planet Hallon, she wasn't pleased. For one thing, Risciter had promised he would call on her later that afternoon. For another, she'd been absolutely certain that he would ask her father for her hand in marriage by the end of the week. For Risciter to be leaving so abruptly made no sense whatsoever. Furthermore, she

was furious that he was leaving without saying goodbye to her.

The news, however, was all over the public nets. Risciter was her dream man. She, like nearly every other girl her age in the Evon Sector, had grown up with quite a crush on him, collecting pictures of him on the nets and following everything reported on him on the vids. When he'd begun courting her, nearly two months ago, she'd been out of her mind with joy. It was at his suggestion she'd even come to Hallon for the summer season. This season, it was in fashion to spend the summer on her homeworld, Wendo. And she would have been there with her family if it hadn't been for Risciter.

His leaving her without so much as a word was completely unacceptable. She'd followed him to the ends of the universe—well, to Hallon, anyway, which was so unfashionable this season as to be synonymous with the ends of the universe—and he'd ditched her. Or at least, he was going to ditch her. In approximately one hour, according to the nets.

Ariana buzzed for her lady's maid on her comm.

“Miss?” came the maid's voice from the square communicator.

“Is Miss Vintro awake yet?” Ariana asked. Miss Vintro was her Aunt Tildy. She and Aunt Tildy were staying in her family home on Hallon. Her father had a

house on every planet in the Evon Sector and four on their homeworld of Wendo. But her family hadn't accompanied her to Hallon, considering how out of fashion it was these days. Ariana was hardly permitted to travel alone, however, and so Aunt Tildy had been sent along as her chaperone and companion. Unfortunately, Aunt Tildy, who'd never married and showed very little interest in ever getting married, showed a great deal of interest in alcohol. Which meant that she slept off a hangover nearly every morning. By the time Aunt Tildy deigned to get out of bed, it was generally after one in the afternoon.

“No, miss,” came the reply. “Shall

I have her maid wake her?”

That was probably a terrible idea. Aunt Tildy was generally in an awful mood when she woke up, owing to her hangovers. But Ariana wasn't supposed to leave the house without a companion, and she had to get to Risciter before he left the planet. What was she going to do? Ariana chewed on her lip. “No. Just come up here and braid my hair and help me dress.”

Ariana was formulating a plan. It was a plan that flew in the face of decorum and propriety, but this was a desperate situation. Her fiancé was leaving. Technically, of course, he wasn't her fiancé, but he *would* be. She had to confront him, give him a chance to

explain it all away. And if she didn't see him before he left, then her life would be ruined. Possibly forever, but definitely for the rest of the week.

Her maid appeared in the doorway to her chamber. "Miss," she said, "you aren't planning on leaving the house without Miss Vintro, are you?"

Ariana tossed her hair. "Braid." She gave the maid a sharp look. "It's not your business what I'm planning, is it?"

"No, miss." She began braiding.

Going to rendezvous with a man without a chaperon was indeed scandalous. But once she arrived, it wouldn't be as though Risciter didn't have his own entourage with him. They wouldn't be alone then. So, really, she

would only be unsupervised for a very short speeder ride to the spacedock. And that wasn't that scandalous, was it?

After her hair was braided and her maid had helped her into a no-nonsense jumpsuit suitable for the spacedock, Ariana told her, "Have the driver get the speeder ready for me."

The maid's jaw dropped. "Miss, you *are* going to go out alone, aren't you?"

"Just do it," said Ariana. Of course, she didn't need the maids' gossiping about her either. That would get around society quicker than if she posted her intentions on the nets. "And don't go spreading it about either. This is an urgent situation, and there simply is no

way around it.”

“It’s about His Lordship, isn’t it? Duke Risciter? I saw that he was leaving today.”

“Get the speeder,” said Ariana.

The maid hurried out of the room.

And so, within fifteen minutes, Ariana was in the backseat of a speeder, rushing towards the spacedock. For good measure, she kept the divider between her and the driver up and opaque, so that he couldn’t see her. Surely, that was enough to protect her privacy.

Once at the space dock, she leapt out of the speeder and began rushing towards the bay where Risciter kept his ship. The driver got out of the speeder

and yelled after her, “Miss, you need to be careful out here all alone! Why don’t you let me park the speeder, and I’ll come with you?”

“I’ll be fine,” she threw over her shoulder. “I’ll be with Duke Risciter in a few moments.” And she ran on. The docking bay was crowded in the public area, where people could catch commercial ships to other planets, but relatively empty once she got away from the common area.

Ariana had to swipe her access card to get into the docking bay where Risciter was leaving from. Luckily, her own ship was docked in the same bay, so she had no trouble entering at all. She inserted her card, pulled it out quickly,

and the doors in front of her slid open diagonally. She stepped inside.

And was greeted by the sound of blaster fire.

Blasters? What was going on in here? She turned back to the door she'd just come through, but it was an entrance door only. The exit door was all the way on the opposite side of the massive room. And between her and the door was a man with a blaster.

Ariana surveyed the scene. She could see Risciter, standing outside the loading ramp to his ship, his arms in the air. Beside him were his valet and his pilot, also with their arms up. On the ground, Ariana could see a body. It wasn't moving. The man with the blaster

must have shot him. Who was it? Another of Risciter's servants, perhaps? She put a hand to her mouth.

The man with the blaster turned his head in her direction.

Ariana dove behind another ship in the docking bay, out of sight. The man with the blaster was wearing a speeder driver's uniform. She could almost swear she'd seen him before. He might work for the Duke of Hallon, in fact. Why was he shooting people? Why was he threatening Risciter? She peered around the ship and could see her love there, his cherubic face obscured by his blond curls. But even though she couldn't see him clearly, she could see he was alarmed. Her heart went out to

him.

It didn't matter why this madman was threatening Risciter. She was here, by luck, and she had to save her fiancé. Well, her almost fiancé. After she saved Risciter's life, he'd have to propose.

Ariana found her comm in the pocket of her jumpsuit. She switched it on, but in the upper corner of the screen a red light blinked at her. That was right, damn it, there was no comm service in the spacedock. It interfered with the tower's ability to communicate with ships or something. She couldn't call the police, then. What could she do?

She couldn't get all the way across the bay to the other door and run for help.

The man with the blaster was talking. "I don't have anything against your men. I only want you, Risciter." Ariana watched as he gestured with the blaster to the valet and the pilot. "I won't shoot either of you unless you get in my way, like he did." He pointed to the body on the ground. "You understand?"

"Now, look here," said Risciter. "I don't know who you are, but if it's money you want—"

"Don't know who I am?" interrupted the man with the blaster. "Well, perhaps it *has* been seven years. Perhaps you wouldn't recognize me."

Recognize him? Maybe he did work for the duke of Hallon. But why

should Risciter recognize him? He was clearly lower class. He wasn't important to someone like Risciter. The man with a blaster had obviously lost his mind. Ariana had to do something. She looked around frantically, trying to get some kind of idea.

There was nothing in the bay except ships. Risciter's ship. Her ship. Two other ships. What could she...?

Her ship!

Ariana was nearly positive that it was outfitted with a few ion canons, in the case of running into skirmishes in deep space. If she could figure out how to use them, maybe she could injure the man with the blaster, or at least frighten him.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t recognize you,” Risciter was saying.

Ariana dashed behind the ship closest to her towards her own.

“We met in Rilla Alley,” said the man with the blaster.

Rilla Alley? That was ridiculous. That was the place prostitutes and drug dealers were always found. Risciter wouldn’t ever go there.

“There’s no one of consequence on Rilla Alley,” said Risciter.

“I suppose you wouldn’t think so,” said the man with the blaster.

Ariana had made it to her ship. But now she was faced with another problem. She couldn’t get on board unless she lowered the ramp. Lowering

itself wasn't a problem. She had the keys in her pocket. But if she did that, it would be noisy, and that would let everyone know she was here. But she didn't have any other options, did she? That man was going to shoot Risciter if she didn't do something. She got out her key and pushed a button on it.

The ramp lowered to the ground slowly, making a low whirring noise.

The man with the blaster looked around the room, startled. "What was that?"

Risciter didn't hesitate. He took his chance and made a break for it, running up the ramp of his own ship.

The man with the blaster opened fire, squeezing off loud, bright shots at

Risciter.

But they went wide, hitting the hull of his ship, and Risciter was safely on board.

The man with a blaster ran after Risciter, heading for the ramp.

But the ramp was being raised.

The man jumped and grabbed onto it, his feet dangling off the ground. He must be trying to stop it from closing.

He couldn't. He was no match for the machinery. He let go, landing on the ground, surveying the pilot and valet. "Can he fly the ship without you?" asked the man with the blaster.

"I believe so," said the pilot. "Please, if it's not about us—"

"Damn it!" roared the man with the

blaster.

Sure enough, Ariana could hear the ignition sequence on Risciter's ship beginning. He was going to take off. He was going to escape! Ariana felt relief wash over her. But it was short lived. She was still stuck in the docking bay with the man with the blaster. Terrified, she scrambled up the ramp to her own ship.

"Hey!" yelled the man with the blaster. "Who is that?"

He'd seen her. Ariana dove into her ship, struggling with her key to close the ramp after herself.

She wasn't quick enough. The man with the blaster appeared inside. He slapped the light switch on the wall so

that he could see her face. And she saw him too, for the first time. He was young. His eyes were huge, fringed with long, brown lashes. But his face was hard. “Miss Gilit,” he said. “Here to save your beau, I suppose.” He pointed the blaster at her head. “Get off the ship.”

Ariana had never had a gun pointed at her head before. She froze. She couldn't make any noises except a sort of strangled moan in the back of her throat.

In the distance, she could hear the ignition sequence of Risciter's ship shift into high gear. He was moments from taking off.

“The bastard's going to get away,” said the man with the blaster. “Now get

off the damned ship.”

“It’s my ship,” said Ariana in a tiny voice. “I think you should get off.”

The sound of Risciter’s ship was a high-pitched whir. Ariana could also hear the roof of the docking bay lifting up to let the ship out.

The blaster was in her face. “Off!”

Ariana started down the ramp. She could see that the exit door was closing after the pilot and valet. She looked up and saw the stars of space above her through the open doors of the docking bay. The only thing that was protecting her from the cold vaccum at this moment was a force field, and that would be lifted at any second to let Risciter’s ship out. She darted back up the ramp. “The

docking bay's open to space," she said. "You kick me off this ship, you'll kill me."

"Damn it all to hell," said the man with the blaster. He hit a switch on the wall, next to the lights. It closed the ramp. "Well, I guess you're coming with me, Your Ladyship."

"Coming with you where?"

"After Risciter, of course. He's not getting away that easily." The man with a blaster yanked her to her feet and dragged her to the small bridge of her ship.

* * *

Nigel Richter, the Duke of Tramet, cursed as he watched the two ships burst into the sky above the spacedock.

Tramet had finally found Keirth Transman, after a search that had taken decades on and off, and he was fairly sure the boy had just blasted off into space, out of his reach. He'd been so sure he had him, when he discovered the boy was working for the duke of Hallon. Tramet had left his own planet in pursuit immediately.

But he'd been too late. Perhaps he'd spooked the boy. He'd asked the butler at Hallon's estate to get a message to Keirth, but Keirth hadn't returned to his place of employment. Tramet had tracked the speeder Keirth was using to the spacedock. Now the boy was gone. How he was going to find him again, Tramet didn't know. But he seemed to

be following the Duke of Risciter, and Risciter could be tracked. At least Tramet hoped so.

Chapter Two

Keirth Transman punched in numbers on the ship's console. He was putting in some override codes he'd picked up that should allow him to hack into Risciter's ship and figure out his destination coordinates. Right now, he still had a visual on the vessel, but Risciter would make the jump to hyperspace within seconds, and if Keirth couldn't figure out where he was going, he'd lose Risciter. "Come on, come on," he whispered at the console.

The screen blinked, "Searching for target..."

"Come on," Keirth snapped.

The screen blinked, "Target

locked.” And then it spit out Risciter’s coordinates. Keirth sat back in his seat, shaking his head. “He’s going out of the Evon Sector. To Kush. That weasely little...”

“What?” said a panicked voice next to him.

Oh right. The Duke’s daughter. He’d nearly forgotten about her. She was staring at him with wide eyes. “Risciter wouldn’t leave the sector. He knows it’s far too dangerous out there in deep space. The colonies are barbaric and backward and violent.”

Keirth had to laugh. “You honestly think Risciter’s never been out of the sector before, sweetheart?”

“Don’t call me that.”

Keirth rolled his eyes. He had the coordinates. And Risciter, as much of a devil as he was, was too much of an idiot pretty boy to know the quickest ways to get there. You had to travel in darker circles for that kind of information. Keirth could beat him to Kush. And he'd even have time for a pit stop. "Don't worry, *sweetheart*, I'll drop you off first. We'll make a quick stop in Ossile."

"Oh," said the girl.

Keirth quickly programmed in the coordinates for Ossile on the console. He turned to the girl. "Better strap in. We're jumping to hyperspace."

Ahead of him, Keirth noted that Risciter's ship had just disappeared,

winking out with a flash of light. He'd already made the jump.

Miss Gilit strapped her seat belts over her body. "This isn't going to work, you know."

Keirth strapped himself in. He palmed the light speed accelerator and squeezed. "Oh no? Why not?"

"You'll get caught," she said.

The ship lurched hard, and on the visual, the stars streamed out like bright ribbons, going green, red, and blue at the edges. They were pushed back into their seats and for a few seconds, they couldn't breathe from the pressure. Then everything snapped, like rubber, and they were traveling through a tunnel of brightly colored lights—hyperspace.

Keirth switched off the visual. Hyperspace always gave him a headache if he stared at it too long.

“You’re in a stolen space ship,” continued Miss Gilit. “The minute they figure out I’m gone, they’ll track it. It’s fitted with a tracking monitor, you know, and—”

“Is it?” said Keirth. “Thanks for telling me that, sweetheart. They keep it in the usual place?”

Her face had gone white as she realized her mistake.

Keirth unstrapped himself and headed for the back of the bridge. He reached above the doorway and yanked the material covering the wall away. Inside, just where they always were,

was a hunk of plastic, wires, and blinking lights. Tracking monitor. Keirth ripped it down, dropped it on the floor, and ground it under his foot. It made a crunching noise.

“It doesn’t matter!” said Miss Gilit. “They’ll find you anyway. You’ve kidnapped the daughter of a duke, and you killed a man in the docking bay. You’re a kidnapper and murderer. They’re going to find you, and they’re going to sentence you to death.”

“I had my blaster set to stun,” he muttered. “Besides, I saw the other servants drag him out of the docking bay. I’m sure he’s fine. I don’t want to kill anyone except Risciter.” Miss Gilit was starting to get on his nerves. Maybe he

should tie her up and gag her. That should keep her quiet.

“And why would you want to do that?” said Miss Gilit. “The Duke of Risciter is a good man.”

Keirth sat back down in the pilot's seat next to her. “He's the furthest thing from a good man there is, sweetheart. But considering the kind of people you come from, I wouldn't expect you to understand that.” He cradled his head with his hands. “Now, we'll be in Ossile before you know it. So why don't you just shut your pretty little mouth and stop worrying about whether or not I get caught? You and I will be parting ways very soon. And then you can tell all your little high society friends about the time

you were kidnapped by a murderer. Imagine how impressed they'll be."

She folded her arms over her chest. "You won't get away with it."

"Shut. Your. Mouth." He smiled nastily at her. "Or I'll stuff something inside it."

She paled again. She didn't speak.

* * *

Ariana's heart was thudding in her chest as she sat next to the man. She wasn't sure what he'd been doing on the console when they'd taken off. She'd seen Risciter's ship disappear into hyperspace, but the man who'd captured her didn't seem too upset about that, so she had to believe that Risciter wasn't safe yet. This man planned to drop her

off on the planet Ossile, but then he would probably go after Risciter. And he'd said that he planned to kill him. Risciter was her future husband. She couldn't let this man hurt Risciter. She had to do something.

She knew what their destination was, and that could prove to be a valuable tool against her kidnapper. If she could get word to the authorities in Ossile, they could stop him from pursuing Risciter. And she could get her ship back as well. The tracking device on the ship was destroyed, but she did have her comm. Communication in hyperspace wasn't optimal, of course. Her comm had a limited hypercomm capacity, but it was only good for

sending text, not voice or video, and one message out was going to kill her battery.

She was going to have to think very carefully about who the best person to alert might be. The first person she thought of was Aunt Tildy. If she'd awoken by now and found Ariana missing, she was probably worried. But Ariana vetoed the idea, because Aunt Tildy might not actually be awake yet. She had no idea how hung over Aunt Tildy actually was. Aunt Tildy might be too slow to react. It would probably be best, instead, to contact someone on the planet Ossile, perhaps the authorities directly. Yes, that was definitely the best idea. Once she was safe, the man in jail,

and her ship safely docked, she'd have plenty of time to contact her family and assure them she was okay.

Now the only problem was trying to figure out how she was going to send this message without the man seeing her. He'd stop her if he knew what she was up to. But she couldn't simply march off and demand privacy. Well. She could, but he'd follow her, and she wouldn't put it past this man to use force against her. She eyed him. He was very strong. She could see that he had wide shoulders, and when he moved his arms, she could see his muscles swell and contract under his clothes. He could hurt her very badly if he wanted. She didn't want to take that chance.

So how was she going to get to be alone?

She stood up. "I have to visit the facilities on the ship."

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"The bathroom," she said.

He shook his head. "Hold it. We'll be in Ossile in twenty minutes."

Oh. Wonderful. She summoned her best pitiful voice. The man might not be made completely of stone, after all. Perhaps he would pity her. "I can't."

He laughed. "Well, I guess you're going to have an embarrassing arrival in Ossile, then."

He *was* made of stone. How dare he be so horrible? He was forcing her to

soil herself. She was aghast. Of course, there was the matter that she didn't actually have to go to the bathroom, but that was beside the point. "Why are you so completely cruel? Do you enjoy making me suffer?"

The man looked at her. He sighed. "All right, all right. But I'm following you and waiting outside the door so you don't try anything."

"What could I possibly try?" she said. "You're an ogre of a man. I wouldn't stand a chance against you."

He escorted her to the restroom off the bridge. She took great pleasure in slamming the door in his face.

Once inside, she whipped out her comm and switched it to hypercomm

mode. Emergency numbers for every planet in the Evon Sector were programmed into her comm, so she selected the emergency number for Ossile and carefully composed her message. "I, Miss Ariana Gilit, daughter of the Duke of Wendo, have been captured. A man has stolen my ship and plans to arrive at Ossile in less than twenty minutes. Please save me!" She hit send.

Sure enough, the minute the message went through, the battery on her comm completely drained, and the comm switched off. She shoved it back in her pocket, flushed the toilet for good measure, and exited the bathroom.

The man was leaning against the

wall outside. "Took you long enough."

"I have a shy bladder," she retorted. "It's not easy when I know you're outside listening."

He laughed. "Well, I hope you feel relieved."

She'd feel relieved when they got to Ossile, and the man was locked up.

The rest of the trip to Ossile was uneventful. Since the man didn't want her to speak, and since she had nothing to say to scum like him anyway, she simply sat still and stared forward, hoping her message had gone through and that the authorities on Ossile would be waiting for them.

She was gratified when they emerged out of hyperspace to the sound

of a message over the ship's comm system. "This is the Ossile Department of Police. We're responding to a distress signal indicating a stolen ship will be entering this system with a kidnapped member of the nobility on board. Please identify yourself and prepare for scanning."

The man turned away from the console, glowering. "You couldn't hold it, could you?" He shook his head. "How could I be so stupid? What did you do, send them a message on your comm?"

So, he'd figured it out. It didn't matter. They'd have him in custody in no time. Ariana tilted her chin up. "I can't let you hurt Risciter."

"Give me the comm," said the man.

“It’s completely out of batteries. I had to use it in hypercomm mode.”

“Then you won’t mind giving it to me.”

“What does it matter? They’ve found you. Now they’re going to arrest you.”

He smirked. “Oh, we’ll see about that, sweetheart. Now are you going to give it to me, or am I going to have to take it from you by force?”

Well, it didn’t have any batteries, so she couldn’t use it anymore. She handed it over, shrinking from him. He couldn’t really get away from the Ossile Police, could he?

The ship’s comm system blared again. “Identify yourself.”

The man snatched her comm from her and stuffed it in his pocket. He didn't respond to the police, but instead began punching something into the console.

“Unidentified ship,” said the comm system, “we are detecting you are preparing to jump to hyperspace. We are activating a tractor beam until we have successfully determined your identity and business in the Ossile system.”

Immediately, the ship began to tremble. Ariana looked around. She'd never been in a tractor beam before. Now, they were tethered to the Ossile Police, right? They couldn't leave?

“Damn, damn, damn.” The man began punching at the console furiously. “A tractor beam?” He glared at her. “I

was going to let you go. I stopped here only to make sure that you would be comfortable. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Risciter is practically my fiancé,” she said. “If you’re trying to kill him, then it has something to do with me.” The ship was still shaking.

He shot her a withering look. “You want to marry that asshole? You’re not too bright, are you?” He hit several buttons on the console. The shaking grew more intense.

“Shut up,” she said.

“That ought to do it.” He put in a few more numbers. The shaking stopped.

“What did you do?” Ariana was horrified, and a little scared. She was

safe, right? He couldn't get away from the police, could he?

"I disengaged the tractor beam," he said. "I'm not getting captured on Ossile."

No!

"Disengaging the tractor beam has been taken as failure to cooperate," said the ship's comm. "You are now classified as evading arrest and measures will be taken—"

"Oh, shut up," said the man, flipping off the ship's comm. He hit some keys on the console, and Ariana recognized the familiar whir of the hyperdrive warming up.

"No," she said out loud. "You can't just get away."

“Watch me, sweetheart.”

Ariana got up out of her seat and flung her body onto the man's back. She began scratching at his face as hard as she could.

The man yelled and tried to shake her off.

Ariana clung harder, digging her nails in.

The man reached back and ripped one of her arms away from his face. He yanked her off his back as easily as if she were an annoying child. Putting her in front of him, he seized her by the shoulders and propelled her back into her seat. She was pleased to see that his face was bleeding.

She was less pleased to see that he

was really mad.

He let go of her for a second, and she cowered, cringing against the blow she was sure was coming.

But instead he wrapped the seat belt around her shoulders. It was tight. He wound the belt around her seat two more times, binding her torso to the seat and her arms against her sides. Then he fastened the belt on the back of the seat, out of her reach.

Swearing, he returned to the console.

The ship started to shake again. Good! They must have them back in the tractor beam.

The man made two strokes on the console and the shaking stopped. He *was*

going to get away.

The man kept typing on the console and the hyperdrive whirred to life. He was going to jump to hyperspace and get away from the police. And he was taking her with him!

Chapter Three

Ariana was crying. She didn't mean to cry, not exactly, but everything was pretty much horrible now. She hadn't been able to get the man arrested. She hadn't been able to save Risciter. And to make matters worse, now she was tied up and on the ship with this murderer and thief. She had no idea where they were going. She was terrified. She had no idea what to do now.

They were in hyperspace again. The man was hunched over the console. Blood was streaming down his face from the places she'd gouged him with her fingernails. And she was trying to cry as quietly as she could.

“Stop crying,” said the man, annoyed.

She couldn't. She didn't say anything.

“This is all your fault, anyway. I was trying to get rid of you. I was trying to drop you off someplace nice, where you'd be well taken care of. You had to screw it up by trying to call the police. Trust me, I don't want you here any more than you want to be here.”

That wasn't exactly comforting.

“Seriously, sweetheart. Can you stop the waterworks, already?”

“Don't call me sweetheart.” Ariana hiccupped, but being angry at the man made it a little easier to stop her tears.

“What do you want me to call

you?”

“You can call me Miss Gilit. That’s my name.”

The man sneered at her. “That’s right. Miss Ariana Gilit, daughter of the Duke of Wendo. I’ve seen pictures of you on the nets. I knew Risciter was courting you. Why a woman who could have any man in the galaxy would be wasting your time on Risciter is beyond me.”

Ariana sat up primly in her seat as best she could through the belts that bound her. “It’s a very good match. My father thinks so.”

The man rolled his eyes. “Right. A good match.”

“It is,” said Ariana. “And anyway, I

don't see how it's any of your business.” She sniffled. She was still frightened, but telling this man off made her feel a bit more in control of herself. “What are you going to do with me?” She hoped he wasn't going to kill her. She was probably in the way of his plans now, and maybe he'd simply point a blaster at her and... She shuddered.

The man stroked his chin. “Well, I have no idea. The ship's headed out of the Evon Sector to the planet Risciter was heading to. It's a colony planet. It's not like the places you're used to, but there will be a town, and they'll have a public comm you can use to contact your family. I guess I'll just let you go there.”

Ariana swallowed. A colony

planet? She'd grown up hearing horror stories about the barbarians outside the Evon Sector. But she guessed it was better than being held prisoner by this man, and she was glad he wasn't going to kill her.

The terror must have shown on her face, because the man said, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to do. Maybe you should be glad I didn't kick your ass out of the ship before I took off on Hallon. You'd be dead now, sucked into space."

Dead. She shrank into her seat. "Don't kill me. Please. Mr.... I don't know your name, but please don't kill me."

The man looked even more

annoyed. “My name’s Keirth. Keirth Transman. And I’m not going to kill you. I’m not a killer.”

“You’re going to kill Risciter aren’t you?”

“That’s different. Risciter...” Keirth sighed. “It’s not the same. He deserves it.”

“He doesn’t deserve it. He’s done nothing wrong. He’s a good man. I know him.”

Keirth shook his head. “No, see that’s the thing. You don’t know him. You don’t know a thing about him.” He got up and knelt behind her chair, unfastening the belts. “Now, if I untie you, are you going to start scratching my face up again?”

“No,” she said quietly.

He began unwinding the belts. “I’m sorry about all of this, okay? I thought I had a good plan. Apparently, I didn’t. It’s too late to back out now, so...” He pulled the belt completely off her body, freeing her. “I don’t make a practice of running around kidnapping women in the nobility. This isn’t... I’m not going to hurt you.”

Ariana massaged her arms, glad to have them free.

Keirth looked around the bridge. “Well, we’re going to be in hyperspace for about six hours. You got anything to eat on this boat?”

* * *

Though Miss Ariana Gilit knew

where the kitchen was on the ship, she was a complete idiot about preparing any kind of food, so Keirth searched through the packets of dehydrated provisions and found some soup. He added water to it and put it in the heating unit to boil.

Ariana sat at the table in the kitchen, fidgeting. “When we travel in the ship, usually the servants eat in the kitchen. I’ve always eaten in the dining room.”

“Guess you’ll get the chance to see what it’s like to be a servant, then,” Keirth said. He didn’t know what to think of this woman. One second, she was standing up to him, the next, she was sobbing. In between all that, she

seemed like a spoiled, sheltered little girl. Which, Keirth supposed, she was. He'd spent a bit of his life working for the nobility in various capacities. When he'd discovered Risciter was planning to go back to Hallon for the summer season, Keirth had gotten a job driving the duke of Hallon's speeder in an attempt to get close to Risciter.

The night before last, he'd been able to finagle his way into driving Risciter home from a party. He'd tried to shoot Risciter then, but he'd been interrupted by some message from the butler where he was employed, telling him that someone was looking for him. Who would be looking for Keirth Transman? He was a nobody. He was a

drifter. For seven years, he'd been driven by only one mission. To find the Duke of Risciter and kill him.

Anyway, the whole thing had been botched at that moment. While he was distracted, Risciter had managed to get away.

When Keirth found out Risciter was planning to leave the planet the next day, he'd pursued him immediately, intending to do it then. But that hadn't gone very well either.

It wasn't enough to simply shoot Risciter. Keirth needed Risciter to understand why Keirth was doing it. He needed to look into Risciter's eyes and have Risciter understand how vile he was. If he didn't accomplish that, killing

Risciter was meaningless.

But once it was done, it would be the most meaningful thing that Keirth had done with his life. Risciter was untouchable, due to his noble status. He was a man who thought he could do whatever he wanted. The law might let Risciter get away with it, but Keirth wouldn't.

Of course, with the way things were going, it was probably going to be the only meaningful thing that Keirth had done with his life. This girl had seen him. She knew who he was. When he got rid of her, she'd undoubtedly have the authorities hunting him down right away. And they'd know where he was too. He'd have to take care of Risciter as

quickly as he possibly could. Then, if they caught him, it wouldn't matter anymore. Because Keirth would have done what he needed to do.

The heating unit beeped, and Keirth took the containers of soup out. He handed one to Ariana and kept the other for himself. After scrounging up a few spoons from a drawer, he sat down with her to eat the soup. It was hot. He saw her burn her lip on it and jump, startled.

After that, they sat together silently, blowing on spoonfuls of the soup. When Keirth got a chance to taste it, he was pleasantly surprised. For rehydrated food, it was actually quite tasty. Nicely seasoned. He guessed the nobility got the best of everything, even space food.

“Well,” said Ariana, “if you aren’t usually a kidnapper and a thief, what do you do with yourself normally?”

“Why?” he asked, suspicious. “You want to make sure you’ve got a nice profile of me to share with the police when you get free and turn me in?”

“No. I’m only trying to make polite dinner conversation. I happen to be a civilized daughter of the peerage. It’s what I’m good at.”

Keirth laughed. “Being polite is what you’re good at?”

She looked flustered. “I do happen to be more pleasant generally when I’m not being forced to do things at gunpoint or tied up.”

Keirth slurped some of his soup.

“I’ll take your word for it, sweetheart.”

“I have repeatedly asked you not to call me that, and you repeatedly ignore me.”

Keirth shrugged.

“You really are awful.” Ariana looked into her soup, and Keirth got the impression she might start crying again.

He didn’t like making her cry. Sure, she was annoying as hell, bossy, and full of herself, but she hadn’t asked to be in this situation. He had sort of kidnapped her. Overall, making women cry was not something Keirth aspired to. He hadn’t had a lot of time for women in his life. Spending his life bent on revenge was sort of an all-consuming passion. And he wasn’t the kind of man who’d take his

pleasure with a woman and abandon her. He'd seen too much of that growing up, and it made him physically ill. Overall, though, it meant that he really hadn't spent much time with women at all. Not since he'd lived with his mother, anyway. He peered at Ariana and tried to imagine she was his mother. It was pretty hard to do, considering the two women had precisely nothing in common. Still, if his mother had been accidentally kidnapped, he'd want the kidnapper to treat her with respect. So Keirth would try. She'd wanted polite dinner conversation, had she? He'd do his best. "I, um, don't really have a set profession. I've done a lot of things. I've flown space ships. I've worked in

factories. I've loaded product. Most recently, I was a driver for the duke of Hallon."

Ariana pointed at him with her spoon. "I *knew* I'd seen you before." She turned back to her soup, running her spoon through the liquid as if she was searching for something to say inside her bowl. "So you most recently lived on Hallon, then?"

"Yes," he said.

"Where did you grow up?"

"All over," he said. "My mother traveled to different planets in the sector, looking for work. We'd settle wherever she could find something steady."

She nodded. "And what did she do

for work?”

Keirth shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about that.” He was fairly sure that announcing his mother’s occupation as a prostitute didn’t qualify as good dinner conversation. He should change the subject. Certainly Ariana would want to talk about herself. “What about you? Where did you grow up?”

“On Wendo, of course,” said Ariana. “We did some traveling when I was a girl, but we’ve traveled more now that my sister and I are both of age and actively looking for husbands. One must go where society dictates, after all.”

Keirth nodded. He knew that some people followed the nobility on the nets like hawks, wanting to know where they

were and what planet was fashionable that season. To him, it all seemed absolutely ridiculous. They had too much time on their hands and too much money to play with. But he didn't suppose saying that aloud was good dinner conversation either. He was beginning to appreciate why people in the nobility had to practice this kind of thing. "Do you like Wendo? Were you happy there?" That was safe, wasn't it?

"Oh, absolutely," she said. "It's a small planet though, and the seasons are short. It's nice getting back to spring quicker than everyone else, I guess, but there's nothing like a long, extended summer on Risciter."

And then they were both quiet,

because she'd said the name of the duke, even though she'd meant the planet. Risciter was a big planet, and the duke was a sorry excuse for a human being. So, there they were again.

Ariana put down her spoon. "What do you have against him, anyway?"

"He's a murderer," said Keirth.

Ariana made a face. "He is *not*."

Keirth rolled his eyes. "Maybe this conversation idea wasn't a great one. Let's just eat, okay?"

* * *

Ariana opened one eye. Her arms were flung over her head. All she could see was Keirth, standing over her in the bridge of the ship.

"We're safe on the ground," he

said, glaring at her in disgust.

She lowered her arms and looked around, taking in the fact that they were indeed safe. Nothing inside the bridge seemed to be damaged. The visual was on, and outside, she could see the trunks of trees. They'd come down right in the middle of a forest, crashing and smashing down branches everywhere. It had been terrifying. "Don't they have spacedocks in the colonies?"

"Sure, they do," said Keirth. "And if you want your ship stolen or raided for parts, you absolutely land it there and leave it."

Ariana was shocked. There was this much lawlessness out here? Ships weren't safe?

“Maybe,” said Keirth, “if you came with a cadre of armed men to guard your ship, it might be safe in a docking bay, but I don’t have that luxury. So, we’ve landed in the woods. I don’t see why you were so upset anyway. I put the ship down in a nice clearing.”

Ariana still remembered the sounds of scraping branches and splintering wood. It hadn’t seemed like a clearing to her.

“Get up,” said Keirth.

She didn’t move from her seat.

Keirth reached down and pulled her to her feet. “Come on. We don’t have much time.” He dragged her out of the bridge and out to the loading ramp, which he’d lowered. Pushing her first,

they exited the ship. Outside, they stood on the forest floor. The trees looked the same as they did on most planets, but the leaves were an odd shade of green—nearly blue. Now that she was outside, Ariana could see that, in fact, the ship had landed in a clearing of sorts, but it was surrounded on all sides by tall trees with blue-green leaves.

Keirth took several steps away from the ship and pulled a compass out of his pocket. Consulting it, he pointed deep into the forest. “Walk that way.”

He meant to set her loose in the woods? “What?”

Keirth gave her a dark look. He took her by the arm and dragged her to the spot he’d been standing in. He

pointed again. “You see this path?”

“No.” As near as Ariana could tell, there wasn’t a path. Of course, she hadn’t spent much time in the woods—not in the wild woods, anyway. She’d gone on nice nature walks on Wendo occasionally, but they were always on cleared, paved walkways through the trees, with benches set up every ten feet or so for resting and talking. It was possible she didn’t know what a forest path was, she guessed.

“There’s a walking trail,” said Keirth. “I guarantee it leads to town. We’re on the planet Kush, all right? And according to the coordinates I’ve got, the closest town to here should be called Madua. I’ve never been there, but it

should have an inn and a tavern at the very least. And I'm sure they'll be a public comm in the tavern. You can use it to contact someone to pick you up."

"But..." Wandering alone through a forest? Going into a strange town all by herself? For one thing, it was scandalous and improper. For another, it was downright terrifying.

"You can't stay here with me," said Keirth.

Of course not. And she didn't want to. He was freeing her. She had to leave. She didn't want to be near Keirth anyway. He was terrifying as well. More terrifying than the woods. She nodded. "Well, all right, then." She took a tentative step in the direction Keirth

had pointed. She hesitated. “Are there...very fierce wild animals in these woods?”

Keirth pulled aside the jacket he was wearing so that she could see the blaster strapped in his holster. “I have no idea. But you can’t stay here with me.”

“Well, you did promise not to kill me.”

“I didn’t promise,” Keirth said. “I don’t want to kill you, but keep pushing me and maybe I’ll change my mind.”

She bit her lip. Okay. Okay. Woods it was. She took one last look at Keirth and her ship, and then she scampered off down the very tiny path Keirth had pointed out. It didn’t look like a path to

her at all, really. It was just a tiny trampled space between the trees.

She forced herself to walk with her head held high. She was a member of the nobility, after all, and she couldn't be kept down by something as ridiculous as this. If there were large animals in the woods, she'd simply be quiet and still. They'd leave her alone. And it couldn't be that far to the town that Keirth had spoken about. She'd just keep walking.

What had she been thinking, anyway? She'd almost wanted to stay with Keirth. And he was a thief and murderer. He wasn't safe. The experience must have turned her head. She'd heard that trauma could do that occasionally. Make it so that you

couldn't assess danger properly. Keirth was certainly dangerous, and she was glad to be away from him. The sooner she made it to town, the sooner she could contact someone to save her and to stop Keirth from killing Risciter. She couldn't let him do that. She'd contact the authorities. She knew where the ship was. They'd follow her instructions, sail in, and arrest Keirth.

Everything would be okay. She simply had to keep walking.

* * *

Keirth was glad to see her go. He wouldn't have killed her, of course. He was sure that he didn't have it in him to shoot a defenseless woman in cold blood. She didn't know that, though, and

he was glad. It had been useful.

Keirth began gathering branches and foliage and draping them over the ship. He needed to camouflage it from any raiders that might find it if he had to leave it, but he also didn't want Risciter to know he was there when Risciter arrived. Keirth had intercepted Risciter's exact coordinates, and that meant he'd be landing here, within yards of Keirth's ship, within the next half an hour. Risciter would have taken a direct route. Keirth was certain he didn't know the ins and outs of traveling in hyperspace. Keirth had only learned them himself while working with smugglers several years ago. The shortcuts weren't common knowledge.

When Risciter arrived, Keirth would hear his ship and probably see it. He wanted to be hidden so that he could observe Risciter and then take him by surprise. This time, he wouldn't fail.

Once Risciter was dead, he'd need to get off world as soon as he could. He'd probably trade Ariana's ship for something a little less conspicuous. But Keirth didn't think he'd be able to run forever. They'd track him down. But as long as Risciter was dead, it wouldn't matter.

He busied himself by wandering around the forest, gathering whatever camouflage he could find and coming back to do his best to hide the space ship.

Ahead, he spied a large vine-covered rock. The vines would be good to cover his ship. He went over to gather as many as he could.

He pulled at one of the vines, expecting it to be tightly attached, but it came off easily. As the vine came away from the rock, he realized it wasn't a rock underneath the vines at all. It was a ship.

A familiar ship. Hastily, he tore the vines away until he was sure. Damn. Risciter's ship. Already here. Clearly Risciter knew more hyperspace secrets than Keirth gave him credit for. He was already on the planet. Risciter'd had time to cover his space ship entirely. And he was gone.

Keirth surveyed the ship for several minutes, shaking his head. He couldn't catch a break, could he? All of his plans had gone wrong. It should have been simple. But then every attempt he'd made should have been simple. Things just kept getting more and more complicated.

But a colony planet was as good a place as any. A better place, in fact, considering the law was much laxer.

Risciter had probably gone into town already. If Keirth hurried, maybe he could catch up to him in the woods, do it then. But if not, he'd simply have to find Risciter in town.

He rushed to cover what was left of his spaceship and started down the path

he'd sent Ariana on earlier.

Chapter Four

Ariana emerged from the forest sweaty and a little out of breath. She felt like she'd been walking for an eternity, but she had no way of measuring the time, so she wasn't sure how long it had been. Outside the woods was what Keirth had called a town. To Ariana, it looked like four ugly pre-fab buildings made of concrete. The buildings were styled like the kinds of things she'd seen on documentaries about the colony worlds. Apparently, whenever colonists had gone out to the new planets originally, they'd been given a certain amount of building kits. And so all of the buildings looked alike. Ariana always

had found their off-white walls, blank of any windows, very depressing.

She was happy to be out of the forest however, no matter how pitiful the sight was that greeted her. She scurried away from the treeline and down to what passed as a street between the four buildings. No one was standing outside, and Ariana was momentarily frightened that the town was actually abandoned. Perhaps all the colonists had been killed by a disease or a wild animal or each other. She'd seen a documentary once about a group of people who'd gone out to a colony world. Only one man had gotten away. He'd said that once out there, they'd all gone mad and started killing each other.

But then she heard the sounds of conversation from inside one of the buildings. Not abandoned then. And if she'd been paying attention, she would have noticed the rows of speeders parked along the outskirts of the buildings. She gazed at the signs on the doors of the buildings. One was a farming store. She supposed it must sell seeds and fertilizers and other things. Another was a trading post. Another was an inn, just as Keirth had said. And, as Keirth had also predicted, there was a tavern. That was the building that Ariana heard conversation coming from. It was also probably the place that would have a public comm. But Ariana held back before entering it. It wasn't proper for

women of her station to go into taverns alone. She'd be in considerable danger. And what would everyone say if they knew she'd...

They'd say she was brave. This was more trauma thinking. Of course she had to go into the tavern. This was a desperate situation. She couldn't be bothered with the proprieties of society right now. She had to save herself and get someone here to save Risciter. It was the most important thing.

Taking a deep breath, Ariana pushed open the door to the tavern. Inside, it was dimly lit and so smoky she could only see a few feet ahead of her. The roar of conversation and laughter was louder here. Inside the door was the

corner of a rough-hewn wooden bar top, with a few empty stools in front of it. She could also see a booth in the corner, filled with colonists. They wore the kind of homespun clothing she'd seen on documentaries. She peered through the smoke, trying to find the public comm, which she figured would be up against a wall or something.

After frantic seconds of seeing nothing but smoke and booths of colonists, she finally spied it and darted to it. The thing was ancient—a screen built into the wall with a keyboard in front of it. The screen was blank and dark. She struck a few keys hoping the screen was just in power-down mode and would spring to life. Nothing

happened. She gulped and then hit a few more keys, this time harder. The screen still didn't respond. Was something wrong with it? Did it need to be turned on? She searched the comm for a power switch and found it along the the underside of the keyboard. She switched it on. Nothing. She switched it back. Nothing. In a fury, she switched it back and forth at least ten times. Nothing.

“Hey!” yelled a voice. “You. Woman in the jumpsuit.”

Slowly, Ariana turned around.

There was a heavy woman behind the bar. She was wearing a stained beige tunic, and her hair was pulled into a sloppy bun on the top of her head. She had a fine fringe of dark hair above her

upper lip. “Comm’s been broke for months.”

No. No. Ariana stumbled closer to the bar and the woman. “Broken? It doesn’t work at all?”

“That’s what broke means, doesn’t it?” The woman put her meaty hands on her hips. “You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“I’m Miss Ariana Gilit, the daughter of the Duke of Wendo. I was kidnapped by a man who stole my ship and left me out here to fend for myself. I need to contact my family.” Ariana felt like she might start crying again. How could she possibly deal with this?

The woman squinted at her. “I do think I’ve seen some pictures of you on

the nets.” She raised her eyebrows. “Well, imagine that. A duke’s daughter. Here.” She gestured at an empty stool in front of the bar. “Let me get you a drink, My Lady.”

Ariana sat down on the stool. “A drink would be nice.” Ariana was still on the verge of tears. She sniffled a little.

“Well, we got two options here. There’s ale and there’s whiskey. Which do you want?”

Ariana’s drink of choice was spiced wine or champagne. Whiskey and ale were things that men drank. But she couldn’t very well refuse the bartender, who was trying to be nice to her, could she? “Ale, I suppose.”

The bartender nodded. She filled a large mug up with frothy liquid and deposited in front of Ariana.

Ariana took a small sip. It was bitter and yeasty, but it wasn't actually that awful. Still, she wasn't sure she could put away this huge glass of it. "If the comm's broken, then how do you communicate with other planets?"

"We don't if we can help it," said the bartender. "Part of the allure of the colonies is being away from the Evon Sector."

Ariana's face crumpled. This was too horrible to be believed. Was she going to be stuck out here, living her life on a colony planet? Would she have to wear the dreadful sort of clothes they

wore?

The bartender patted her hand. “Now, now. Don’t worry. This isn’t the only comm on the planet, you know. There’s other towns. You can probably commission someone to drive you to Geirido. It’s only a two-day speeder drive from here, and with you being the daughter of the duke, I’m sure money isn’t a problem.”

“I don’t have any money,” said Ariana. “I was kidnapped.” Even her comm, which could have gotten her access to credits from her spending account, was gone. Keirth had it, and besides, the battery was dead. She really was going to start crying. She felt the lump growing in her throat, tears

pricking her eyes. She rested her arms on the bar and buried her face in them, waiting for the sobs to come.

“Okay, okay,” said the bartender. “But everyone knows who you are. Someone will take you. And when you contact your father, he’ll pay the driver. Right?”

Ariana lifted her head. Yes. Yes, that could work. Of course, by the time she got in contact with her family, Keirth would already have killed Risciter. She couldn’t get the authorities here on time. “Is there a police force on this planet?”

“Police?”

“The man who kidnapped me is dangerous. He’s planning on killing someone—someone important. I know

where he is, and if I could tell the police, they could—”

“There’s a volunteer militia, but you’d have to pay them too. They don’t work for free when their farms need tending.”

This place *was* barbaric. It was like being dumped into some kind of pit where civilization didn’t exist. Ariana was horrified. She didn’t know what to do. If she found someone to drive her to the next town, she’d be saved, but Risciter would be gone. Did she want to return to her life without Risciter, knowing that he’d died and she’d done nothing to protect him? He was practically her fiancé. She had to do what she could for him.

She'd have to go back to where she'd left Keirth. Maybe she could get a large stick and bash him over the head with it. Then she could tie him up and wait for Risciter to arrive. When he did, he'd know what to do.

It was her best plan. She started to thank the bartender for her help, but to say she'd have to try something else, when the door to the tavern opened, and Keirth walked in.

Why was he here? Had he already killed Risciter?

But from here, she could see that he'd taken a holophoto of Risciter out of his pocket, and that he'd approached the first booth inside the door. Keirth was asking if the people there had seen the

man in the photo.

That meant he hadn't killed him yet. He was looking for him. Risciter must have given Keirth the slip! Ariana's heart soared. There was a chance. She'd have to follow Keirth without his seeing her. Once he found Risciter, she'd do something to save her fiancé—her almost-fiancé—and together they'd stop Keirth.

She got off the stool and stepped backwards into the smoky, dark recesses of the tavern. Keirth wouldn't be able to see her from here. From a distance, she watched as Keirth moved to the next booth, showing the holo picture. She could barely make out the conversation from here.

“Sure, I’ve saw him here before. He’s some kind of rich guy, ain’t he?” said a man in the booth.

“Have you seen him today?” Keirth asked.

The man shook his head. “Not today, no. But he usually stays in the inn next door when he’s in town. I played him at cards once a while back. He won, but I swear he cheated. ‘Course, you can’t argue against rich folk like that.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Keirth. “The inn, you say?”

“Yeah. I reckon if he’s in town, that’s where he’s staying.”

Keirth thanked the man. He surveyed the bar, his gaze dragging over Ariana once, but he didn’t seem to see

her. He didn't seem to see anything of interest, because he turned and left the tavern.

He was going to the inn, then.

Ariana waited a few seconds, and then she followed Keirth out of the tavern. She was cautious at the door, afraid that Keirth would see her leaving. But once she got back out on the street, Keirth was already opening the door to the inn.

He went inside, but Ariana didn't dare follow him through the door. He'd see her for sure. Instead, she scurried over to the building and put her ear against the door. She could hear the conversation, but it was muffled.

“Oh, yeah, he checked in an hour or

two ago,” said a voice, probably the innkeeper. “You want me to ring up to him, tell him you’re here?”

“That’s okay.” Keirth’s voice. “Just give me the room number. I’d like to surprise him. We’re old friends, and he’ll be so excited to see me here. Both of us on a colony planet. What a coincidence.”

Could the innkeeper be so stupid as to give out the information? Certainly, he had to protect Risciter’s privacy. Why, in the sector if someone tried something like that—

“Only five rooms in the whole place,” said the innkeeper. “He’s in the first one. Top of the steps. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks,” said Keirth.

He was going to go to Risciter now! She'd planned to knock him out with a huge stick, but that plan hadn't worked. She had to stop him. How...?

She didn't have much time.

She opened the door to the inn. There was a desk there. The innkeeper was behind it. He looked startled to see her enter. Keirth had already started up the steps. His back was to her. Next to the steps was a decorative statue, about three feet high, of a strange animal of some kind. Maybe it was native to this planet.

It would have to work.

She ran for the statue, heaving it above her head.

Keirth turned at the sound of her footsteps.

And she brought the statue crashing down on his forehead.

Keirth made a strangled noise and fell down on the steps, his limbs tangled.

“What the hell is going on?” said the innkeeper, coming out from behind his desk.

Ariana didn't wait to talk to him. She hurried up the steps, taking two at a time, yelling, “Risciter!” At the top of the stairwell, just as the innkeeper had said, was a room marked with a number one. She pressed the open switch on the wall outside. It opened. “Risciter!” she yelled.

The room was small, containing

only a bed. But the bed was crowded. Risciter sat straight up to face the open door, and the three naked women who were in bed with him sat up too.

Ariana's jaw dropped. Three...?

She stood agape in the doorway, staring at the man who was nearly her fiancé, who was clearly engaging in inappropriate activity with three women at once. She could see his bare chest, and that was scandalous in and of itself.

"Miss Gilit?" said Risciter, astonished. "What are you doing here?"

"I was saving your life," said Ariana. And then she slammed the door, too horrified to look at him anymore.

Chapter Five

While it was true that noblemen were held to less strict standards of morality than noblewomen, something like this was beyond the bounds of decency. The women with Risciter were clearly whores—and colony whores at that. And *three* of them. What did a man even do with three women? No, it was clear that Ariana would never be able to face a marriage bed with a man who engaged in this kind of behavior.

The women were gone now, Risciter was dressed, and Keirth was gagged and tied to a chair in Risciter's room. He hadn't awoken yet. There was a fire going in the fireplace in the room.

Risciter paced in front of it, his hands clasped behind his back. It had gotten remarkably chilly when the sun went down, and apparently this colony world didn't have any kind of normal heating units, so Ariana was glad for the warmth. She sat in a ratty upholstered chair, letting the heat from the fire radiate over her.

“You're awfully quiet, Miss Gilit,” said Risciter. His voice was calm and composed, and it still had the silky lilt that Ariana used to find so irresistible.

But after finding Risciter in the state she'd found him, she was horrified. He didn't evoke the same kind of response in her anymore.

“Is there something I should say?”

“Perhaps you’re in shock,” said Risciter. “You’ve been through quite an ordeal with this hoodlum here, I warrant.” He gestured to the tied-up Keirth. “Would you like to tell me about it?”

“What I’d like,” said Ariana, “is for this nightmare to be over. I suppose you’ve contacted someone from the sector to arrest him? I suppose they can give me passage back home? Of course, our courtship is quite over. I can hardly bear the sight of you.” Maybe that was rude, but she was having a hard time being polite to Risciter. When she looked at him, she couldn’t help but think of him shirtless and brazen with his hussies.

Risciter stopped pacing and fixed her with his gaze. “You haven’t really thought this through, have you, Miss Gilit?”

“Thought what through?” What was he talking about?

“I haven’t contacted any authorities. I don’t suppose it would be very prudent to do so.”

Not contacted... But that made no sense at all. “What do you mean?”

Risciter began pacing again. “I can easily pay the local militia to dispose of him.” He waved a dismissive hand at Keirth. “And I think it would be best if we never mentioned him at all.”

“You’re going to have him killed?” Ariana wasn’t sure why, but she wasn’t

keen on that idea. “He should be brought to trial. Punished by the state. It’s not your place to mete out his punishment.”

“That’s the last thing you should want,” said Risciter. “Think about it. Imagine what it will be like when you arrive back in the sector. You were kidnapped by a man, taken against your will. No doubt he sullied your honor. The two of you were alone on a ship for hours. He must have done dreadful things to you.”

Ariana drew herself up. “He most certainly did not.”

“It won’t matter, though, will it?” asked Risciter. “Once the nets get hold of the story, they’ll have it so that he raped you repeatedly, don’t you think?”

Ariana gulped. He might be right. This sort of scandal was bigger than anything she'd ever heard of. Why hadn't she thought about this before? Well, she supposed she'd been focused on saving Risciter's life. And she and Risciter were as good as engaged back then, though now she hated the sight of him, so she hadn't worried about the repercussions. Risciter would be grateful for her actions, she'd thought.

"You'll be tainted goods," said Risciter, turning to face her. "It's unfair, I know. It wasn't your fault. But there's not a man of the nobility who will want to marry a woman whose virginity has been called into question, even if it wasn't her own fault."

He was right. She was ruined.

“You say our courtship is over,” said Risciter, “and I’m sorry for it. I’ll also be sorry to see what your prospects are once the scandal from this incident dies down.”

Ariana bowed her head. She wouldn’t cry, not in front of a man who committed abominations with three whores at a time. He didn’t deserve to see her vulnerability. She wished now she’d never tried to save Risciter. If she’d hid in the docking bay, he’d be dead now—

Well. She didn’t really wish him dead. He wasn’t a good man, like she’d thought, but he wasn’t a bad man either. Not exactly.

“However,” said Risciter, “maybe you’d want to reconsider ending our relationship.”

She looked up at him.

“I hardly want you spreading a story all over the sector about my...” He took a deep breath. “Indiscretions. It wouldn’t go quite as badly for me as it did for you, but it would be damaging to my reputation. I think it would be better for both of us if we never mentioned a kidnapper. Instead, we’ve eloped.”

“Eloped?” She couldn’t keep the horror out of her voice.

Risciter rested an arm on the mantel of the fireplace. “Still scandalous, I know, but much less scandalous than your virginity lost and my tastes for

multiple women. I'm a duke. You're the daughter of a duke. We know your father wouldn't object to our union. It would be the talk of the sector for a few months, certainly, but it would blow over, leaving us both in a better standing."

Ariana pursed her lips. What he said made sense. It was a much better option than going back to the sector a ruined woman. She'd be married to the duke, which was what she'd used to want. "How will we explain eloping? It's something people usually do when there's resistance to the match."

"We'll say we did it on a whim," said Risciter. "We'll say we were carried away by romantic feelings for

each other, and it caught our fancy to get married.”

She supposed that worked. But she really didn't want to marry Risciter now. Even though she'd thought him the best catch possible mere hours before, she couldn't help but see him as thoroughly disgusting now. “I don't know if I could ever love you now.”

“That doesn't matter,” said Risciter. “We needn't spend too much time together in our married life. There are many planets in the Evon Sector, and I have several estates on each. There's the business of an heir, of course, but once you've given birth to a son, we really wouldn't have to see each other very often.”

It sounded awful. Hating her husband? Spending all her time away from him?

Risciter sat down next to her in another threadbare chair. “After the child was born, if you were discreet and careful, you could always take a lover.”

Ariana’s jaw dropped. She was appalled. “You’re hideous.”

Risciter smirked. “I’m realistic. I’m trying to make a potentially disastrous situation for both of us into something that won’t damage us.”

She really didn’t have much of a choice, did she? She had to agree. She and Risciter would lie, and no one would ever know that she’d actually been kidnapped or that she’d saved

Risciter from a murderer and kidnapper

Wait. She shook her head slowly.

“It won’t work.”

“Why not?” asked Risciter.

“I contacted the authorities in Ossile before we came here. They know I’ve been kidnapped. They tried to apprehend our ship, but Keirth got away from them.”

“Keirth?” repeated Risciter. “You call him by his first name? That’s quite intimate.”

She tilted her chin up. “I refuse to give him the respect of calling him ‘mister.’ There’s a difference.”

Risciter got back up out of the chair. “That does complicate things. It

does.” He began to pace again. “I do wish you hadn’t done that.”

“Well, I didn’t know what was going to happen. I thought they’d capture him, and you’d be safe.” She didn’t want to marry Risciter, not exactly. But she didn’t like the alternative either. Was the alternative the only option now?

Risciter paced silently for several minutes, looking deep in thought. Then he stopped and turned to her, smiling. “We’ll figure something out. Just need to think on it a bit. Let’s ring for some champagne to celebrate our nuptials, shall we?”

Ariana wasn’t sure whether she felt relieved or apprehensive. “Champagne sounds nice.”

Risciter sent a message to the innkeeper, and within a few minutes, a maid delivered champagne to the door, along with two glasses. She left it inside the door on a small wheeled table. Ariana watched while Risciter popped the cork and then turned his back to fill the glasses. He whirled with flourish and brought Ariana a long-stemmed glass filled with sparkling liquid.

Gesturing with his own glass, Risciter said, “A toast. To the two of us together.”

Ariana raised her glass and took a sip. It wasn't the best champagne she'd ever had, but she supposed it was the best to be found on the colonies. After the stress of the recent past, she found

the champagne a welcome luxury. She continued to sip at it.

Risciter set his glass on the mantel. “Perhaps we could say your message to the police in Ossile was a practical joke.”

Ariana wrinkled her nose. “How would that work?” She took another drink of champagne.

Risciter opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a muffled roar of rage from Keirth, who’d regained consciousness and was now struggling against his bonds in his chair.

“Ah,” said Risciter. “You’re awake.” He picked up his glass of champagne, strode over to Keirth, and ripped the gag out of Keirth’s mouth.

“Miss Gilit and I are to be married. Care to drink to our health?”

Why was he giving Keirth champagne? He'd tried to kill Risciter. He didn't deserve hospitality. The fire was very, very warm. Ariana slumped in her chair a little.

Risciter tipped the glass into Keirth's mouth.

Ariana was feeling a bit drowsy. It had been quite an eventful day, after all. Maybe she could nap in this chair. The fire was so warm and pleasant.

Keirth spit the champagne in Risciter's face. “You're never getting married. I'll kill you before you have the chance.”

Risciter laughed. “Making threats

while tied to a chair? You're either very brave or very stupid." He pinched Keirth's nose. "Now have some champagne, won't you?" He poured the liquid into Keirth's mouth and tilted Keirth's head back. Keirth was forced to swallow.

Ariana's limbs felt like they were made of lead. Her eyelids were drooping. Why was Risciter making Keirth drink champagne? And why did she feel so very sleepy? A sluggish thought of panic rose in her brain. Had Risciter drunk any of the champagne? She didn't think he had. Was there something in it? Had she been drugged?

She tried to move, but her body wouldn't cooperate. Things were

growing hazy now, and her eyelids were so, so heavy. Her chin drooped against her chest.

And everything went pleasantly dark.

* * *

Keirth struggled to open his eyes. He was cold, and he was still tied up. The last time he'd come to, he'd been in the inn in town, tied to a chair. But now, he didn't know where he was. He forced his eyes open, his head pounding from whatever had been in the champagne Risciter had poured down his throat. He was inside a ship, in the cargo bay. The interior lights were lit, casting a blue-ish tint over a few trunks and boxes. Judging from the size of the bay, he was inside

Risciter's ship. This was a small storage space, suitable for personal belongings, not something big enough for commercial use. And judging from the heft of the gravity in the room, they were still planetside. The synthgrav in space felt a little different. Whatever Risciter planned to do, he must think it was better done in the anonymity of a colony planet. Ariana was lying a few feet from him. She was also tied up, and from the looks of things, she was still unconscious. He'd seen her nod off right when Risciter drugged him in the inn. Keirth tried to scoot across the floor to her, to make sure she was breathing. He wouldn't put anything past Risciter. Women meant nothing to a man like that.

The sound of a throat clearing behind him.

Keirth twisted.

Risciter was sitting on a trunk behind him. He was smiling. In the scant light, he looked like a grinning demon. “She won’t wake up for a while. She had a good deal more of the champagne than you did.”

“Why drug her?” Keirth asked. “Isn’t she your girlfriend?”

Risciter just kept smiling.

“What are you going to do with her?”

Risciter stood up. He walked around Keirth’s body to stare down at Ariana. He nudged her with his toe. “Oh, you’ll see. I haven’t done it yet, because

I want you to watch.” Risciter clasped his hands behind his back and strode over to another trunk. “I had a long time to think while I was traveling in hyperspace to Kush. Seven years, you said. Rilla Alley, you said.” Risciter traced the outline of the trunk with a forefinger. “Now, I can’t tell you how much time I’ve spent in Rilla Alley, so you’ll have to excuse me if I didn’t remember you right away. But then...” He turned his grinning face on Keirth. “How old were you then?”

Keirth gritted his teeth. “Fifteen.”

“Ah. I remember you were scrawny. I remember the look you had in your eyes. I thought that knock I gave you on the head finished you off.”

Keirth shook his head. “I’ve been looking for you. Waiting for you.”

“That’s adorable,” said Risciter. He smirked. “It’s really very cute. I have to congratulate you on being alive at all, of course. Good job.” He raised his hands and brought them together four times. Four sardonic claps. “I guess you wanted revenge, then, didn’t you?”

“I’m going to kill you,” said Keirth, even though he had to admit he wasn’t sure how.

Risciter threw his head back and laughed. “No, you’re not. *I’m* going to kill *you*. Properly, this time.” He heaved a huge sigh. “I’m really quite disappointed that I did such a shoddy job the first go.”

Keirth tested the ropes that held his wrists together. They were tight. Strong. He was trapped here. After all of this, Risciter was going to get the best of him. He couldn't believe it.

Risciter crouched down next to Keirth. "I want it to be perfect this time. So, we'll start at the beginning. We'll each play out our roles like we did that night seven years ago." He pointed at himself. "I'll be me." He pointed at Keirth. "You'll be you." He pointed at Ariana. "She'll be...who was that woman anyway?"

"My mother," Keirth growled.

Risciter put a hand over his mouth. "Oh. Really?" He laughed. "How terrible. How pathetically and horribly

terrible.” He pointed at Keirth. “You’ve been trying to avenge your mother for all these years only to fail miserably now.” Risciter rose to his feet. “You were nothing but a street rat then, boy, and you might be bigger and older now, but you’re still a street rat.”

Keirth wanted to rip his face off. He struggled against the ropes.

Risciter laughed at him. “You can’t do a thing to stop me. You’re so angry at me, but you’re helpless.”

He *was* helpless. His attempts to get revenge on Risciter had all turned out badly. And when Risciter called him pathetic, he couldn’t help but agree with him. To make matters worse, he’d brought an innocent girl into it. He

hadn't meant to involve Ariana, of course, but it had happened. And now she was in danger. "You don't have to hurt the girl. I'm the problem. Why is she part of this at all?"

"So gallant," said Risciter. "Also pathetically adorable." He wandered over to Ariana again. He knelt next to her and brushed her hair away from her face. "But you don't understand. Before you interfered, I wasn't allowed to hurt her."

What was he talking about?

Risciter was still smiling down on Ariana's body. "You see, there are people who are actually people, like her, and there are people who aren't really anything." He looked at Keirth.

“Like you. Like your mother.” He turned back to Ariana. “But then you took her away. You compromised her honor—”

“I never touched her,” Keirth said. Was that what this was about? Did Risciter assume his girlfriend was ruined? Was he punishing Ariana for some kind of perceived affair? It was twisted, but Risciter wasn’t a good person.

“But you could have,” said Risciter. “You could have touched her all kinds of places. You could have done zillions of nasty things to her pretty skin. No one knows any differently. And so now...she’s not a person anymore either. So I can hurt her if I want.” He surveyed Ariana eagerly. “And I want to. I want to

very much.”

Keirth was horrified. He knew Risciter was a terrible person. But this naked expression of delight in causing pain was more disturbing than anything he'd ever seen or heard of. Risciter liked it? He *wanted* to? Keirth's stomach churned. He'd underestimated the duke, thought he was a pretty rich boy who didn't care about his actions. Thought he was careless. But the duke was calculating and cold. He was some kind of monster. And Keirth didn't know if he would be able to stop the duke, but he knew that someone had to do it, because evil like this shouldn't exist.

It wasn't just about revenge anymore. It wasn't just about his mother.

It was about removing Risciter from the earth, before he could inflict anymore damage.

“My mother wasn’t the only one, was she?” Keirth asked, his voice hoarse.

“Only one?” Risciter laughed again. “I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve done it.” He stood up, kicking Ariana carelessly. “Give me a yell when she wakes up, okay?”

Chapter Six

“Wake up,” said a voice urgently.

Ariana’s eyes fluttered open.

Risciter had drugged her. Why had he done that? “Where am I?”

“We’re in the bottom of Risciter’s ship.” Keirth was lying next to her. He was tied up. Ariana tried to move and realized she was tied up as well. “He’s going to kill us both.”

“Risciter?” Kill them?

“He drugged you and tied you up. What’s it going to take for you to realize he’s not a very nice person?” Keirth sounded frustrated.

“I...” Ariana didn’t know. Everything was too confusing. She’d

been kidnapped. She'd rescued Risciter. He'd turned out to be a pervert. She'd consented to marry him anyway to save herself from scandal. And now she was tied up with the man who'd kidnapped her. She couldn't take this. She was going to lose her mind. "Why would he drug me? Why would he tie me up? He said he wanted to tell everyone we'd eloped to save us both from scandal."

"And then he drugged you and tied you up," said Keirth. "He obviously didn't mean it."

"But why?" It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense, of course, but this little thing. This tidbit of senseless action. If she could unravel it, make it clear to herself, maybe then she

wouldn't go completely insane.

"It's not important," said Keirth. "We have to get out of here, before he kills us both. I thought that maybe if we lie back to back, we could untie each other's hands?"

"Why would Risciter want to kill me?"

"Risciter's insane," said Keirth. "Will you try this?" He was already scooting around on the floor, positioning himself with his back to hers.

She did want to be untied, she supposed. And it had to be Risciter that had tied her up. Keirth wouldn't have done it and then tied himself up too. Ariana didn't think people actually could tie themselves up. But she knew

Risciter. She and Risciter had been on countless strolls through the gardens of three planets. They'd spoken of politics and society and of their own desires for the future. She knew what kind of duke he wanted to be. She knew what kind of father he wanted to be. He didn't kill people.

Of course, before today, she would have said that he didn't sleep with three women at once or drug champagne or tie people up either.

She felt Keirth's hands on hers.

"I can feel the knot on your wrists," he said. "Can you find mine?"

She felt blindly a little bit until she did. "Yes, I've got it." Her fingers dug into the rope, trying to untie it. The knot

was impossibly tight. “I don’t think I can untie this.”

“Keep trying,” Keirth said.

She could feel Keirth’s hands on the knot at her own wrist, and she did her best to work at the knot on Keirth’s hands.

“I think I’ve got it,” said Keirth, sounding triumphant. “Stop trying to get my knot for a minute.”

She relaxed her hands. In a few seconds, her hands were free.

“Untie your feet,” said Keirth.

Ariana sat up. She felt for the knots at her feet. They were so tight. But if she calmed down, she could...yes! She managed to loosen the knot a little. And then a little more. She was free! She

turned back to Keirth. “Let me try to get at your knot again.”

But Keirth was shaking his head. “No, don’t worry about me. He’s going to kill me quickly. What he’s going to do to you...” Keirth rolled over so that he could see the door to the bay they were in. “Get out of here.”

What was Risciter going to do to her? Ariana didn’t understand. She was so confused. She looked at Keirth, still tied up, and then at the door.

“Go!” he said.

She got to her feet and went to the door. She hit the button to open it. It blinked red at her. “It’s locked.”

“I know a universal override code,” said Keirth. “Pull the control

panel protector down. There should be a key pad there.”

“There are universal override codes?”

“How do you think repairmen fix stuck doors?” Keirth asked.

She’d never thought about it before. She felt a little uncomfortable, though, knowing that locks didn’t really mean much of anything to anyone who had an override code. She removed the control panel protector. Sure enough, there was a key pad underneath. Number keys stacked in rows. “Okay, I see the key pad.”

Keirth told her the sequence of numbers.

She tried to keep up, but he was

going too fast. She turned away from the door. “Let me try to untie you.”

“What? You can’t type in numbers?” Keirth sounded disgusted.

She hurried back over to Keirth and started on his knot. “I’d rather you do it. Once I get out there, I don’t know how to get out of the ship. What if I run into Risciter?”

“Haven’t you been on his ship before? How do you not know the way out?”

“I’ve never seen this part!” She wasn’t having any luck with the ropes at his wrist. The knot was too tight. She couldn’t get her fingers into it to loosen it.

“Try untying my feet,” said Keirth.

“If I can walk, we can get out, and we’ll find something to cut the rope with.”

“Okay.” She nodded. She’d never been so confused and so frightened before. Her heart was pounding. She turned her attention to the knot at Keirth’s feet. It was much less tight. It took her a few tries, but, like the knot on her own ankles, she was able to untie it.

Ariana helped him to his feet. His hands were still tied behind his back. The two of them went back over to the door. Keirth told her the override code, more slowly this time. She punched it in, and the two halves of the door slid open diagonally.

“Okay,” Keirth whispered. “Now, be quiet.”

They crept through the door into a dark passageway. Keirth nudged her forward. She really had no idea where they were. She'd never spent time on the lower level of the ship. As they kept walking, though, she recognized the engine room on her left. It was silent. The ship wasn't moving.

From above them, there was a noise. Footfalls above their head on the upper level of the ship. And whistling. Risciter was whistling.

Keirth nudged her forward. "Keep going."

Within a few more feet, Ariana realized they were near the loading ramp. There was an incline that led up to the upper levels of the ship—the bridge

and living quarters. And the loading ramp was right next to it. She hit the button that lowered it, holding her breath in case Risciter heard.

But he didn't appear, so she and Keirth ran down the ramp.

They were back out in the strange forest. Still on the planet Kush, then.

"He hasn't moved the ship," said Keirth. "Your ship is close." Keirth backed into a tree, hooking his tied-up hands over a branch. "It's just on the other side of this group of trees. It's covered by some vines, so look for something that looks like a vine-covered rock, okay? Go inside and lock up."

"What are you going to do?"

Keirth snapped his bonds and

flexed his newly-freed hands. "I'm going back in after Risciter."

Ariana shook her head. "No. You can't. Let's just go."

Keirth clenched his teeth. "Go to the ship."

"I don't want to go to the ship. I'll be trapped in there. I'll have nowhere to run."

"Then hide in the woods somewhere," said Keirth. "Just get out of here!"

Okay. Okay, she'd hide in the woods. She took one last look at Keirth, and then took off into the woods, running as fast as she could.

It was dark. She could hardly see where she was going. This planet had

one tiny moon high in the sky. It filtered down blue-green light over everything. Branches slapped into her face, tearing at her skin.

She was so confused. Why would Risciter drug her? Why would he tie her up?

Her breath came in gasps. She took daily exercise like everyone else in the nobility, but that mostly amounted to easy strolls in gardens. She wasn't used to running like this.

Her feet pounded against the forest floor. Why had Keirth said Risciter wanted to kill her? Risciter wouldn't do that. She didn't think—

But she had no idea, really. Everything was so horrible. She couldn't

understand how the entire world had been turned inside out so quickly.

She ran, crashing through the foliage, tripping over roots, pushing thorny vines out of her face. She ran until her side ached and sweat was pouring out of her pounding forehead.

Then she slowed to a walk, sure she'd gotten far enough away. She tried to steady her breathing as she continued forward, glancing about at the woods around her. Shouldn't she have come out in the town again by now? But she didn't know what direction she'd run in. Maybe she'd run in the opposite direction of the town.

And then, with a growing sense of horror, she saw Risciter's ship between

the trunks of the trees in front of her. The loading dock was down. It was haphazardly covered in branches and vines. But it was definitely his ship, just from the opposite angle she'd seen it when she'd started running.

She'd run in a circle.

She'd thought she was getting far, far away, but her traitorous legs had taken her right back where she'd started. Should she try to find her ship, as Keirth had told her to?

"Miss Gilit," said a silky voice.

She turned. Coming at her through the woods was Risciter. He was smiling a horrible smile, and it twisted his boyish good looks into something monstrous. His blonde curls glinted in

the scant blue-green light. He looked so unlike the man she'd been nearly engaged to that Ariana screamed.

Even though she'd barely had a chance to catch her breath, she started running again, away from Risciter, away from his ship. She crashed back into the undergrowth of the forest.

And she could hear Risciter behind her, his footsteps close.

She didn't get far before Risciter tackled her.

They both fell onto the ground, branches from trees tearing into her skin as she fell, tangling in her hair.

Risciter was on top of her, his face at the back of her neck. He was laughing.

He sounded like an imp from hell.

“Let me go,” she sobbed, because tears were streaming down her face now. She forced an elbow back into Risciter’s rib cage as hard as she could.

He grunted and moved some of his weight off of her.

Ariana scrabbled forward on her hands and knees.

Risciter’s hand came down on her neck, pinning her to the ground. “Shh, Miss Gilit. Where do you think you’re going?”

Ariana whimpered. “What’s going on, Risciter? Why are you doing this?”

His grip on her neck softened into a caress. His hand traveled down to her shoulder, and he turned her over. Now she lay on her back, gazing up at

Risciter, who straddled her. Risciter ran a finger over her jaw. “Well, we can’t get married now. Not if you told the authorities in Ossile about being captured. It ruins that whole plan.”

“But why tie me up? Why drug me? Why chase me?”

“Oh.” Risiciter made a sympathetic face. “Everyone always wants to know why, Ariana. I can call you that now, can’t I? You’d want your last moments to be intimate, wouldn’t you?”

Her heart stopped. Her last moments? He *was* going to kill her. She thrashed, clawing at him.

Risciter calmly grasped her wrists and pinned them above her head. “Shh. There’s no real point in struggling.” He

leaned close to her. “I don’t know why, Ariana. But I have to do it. Usually I have to use prostitutes and beggars so that no one will notice they’re gone. I’ve always wanted a real woman. Someone like you. I wonder if it will be different.” And then his lips were covering hers and his tongue was sweeping into her mouth.

She bit down hard on it. He was insane, just like Keirth had said.

And another horrible thought occurred to her. Where was Keirth? Had Risciter gotten to him too?

Risciter drew back, snarling. “You bitch.” He slapped her.

Ariana sobbed again. She was shaking all over.

“If you hurt me,” Risciter was saying, his fingers trailing over her face, over the place he’d just struck her, “I will make it much worse for you, do you understand?” His hand moved lower, to the place where her jumpsuit was fastened.

Oh. Ariana thought she was going to be violently ill.

Risciter unclasped the jumpsuit fastener and the smartclasp parted in the middle, opening up all the way down her torso. He grinned. “I do like these jumpsuits. Easy in. Easy out.”

The night air felt cold against her bare skin. Dread and fear knotted themselves inside Ariana. Her worst nightmares weren’t nearly as awful as

this. He was Risciter. She'd loved him once. And now...

Risciter's hand crept underneath the fabric of her jumpsuit, his hand closing over her breast.

No.

And then another feeling burst through Ariana's body. Pure rage. She was the daughter of a duke. No man had the right to do this to her. And if Risciter was going to kill her anyway, she didn't see what she had to lose.

With a shriek of anger, she tore one of her arms out of Risciter's grasp. He'd been so interested in touching her, he seemed to have forgotten he was holding her arms over her head and had loosened his hold. Making a fist, she slammed it

into Risciter's crotch as hard as she could.

His expression froze in a grimace.

She punched him between his legs again.

Risciter's grip loosened on her other arm. He howled.

Ariana rolled back over onto her stomach. She slithered out from under Risciter and staggered to her feet.

Risciter's arm shot out and grabbed her wrist. "I'll make you pay for that."

Ariana reached for the first thing she could find with her free hand. Her fingers closed over a thick branch. She heaved it around, expecting to need to wrench it free from a tree. But it was a fallen tree branch. She swung it in a

wide arc, and it crunched into Risciter's forehead.

Risciter's grip on her arm loosened. He looked dazed.

Screaming, Ariana raised the branch—really a log—over her head and brought it down on Risciter's head again and again. When she pulled it back, it was bloody. And Risciter's body was crumpled on the ground. He wasn't moving.

She'd killed him.

Ariana dropped the branch and ran back in the direction of the ship.

* * *

Keirth was furiously trying to find Risciter when he saw Ariana. He'd nearly had Risciter when he'd gone back

into the ship, but Risciter had gotten away from him, run off into the woods, and Keirth had been searching for him ever since. He was frustrated, because his revenge scheme had, yet again, gone wrong.

Then he saw Ariana. Her jumpsuit gaped open, her hair was messy and full of twigs. Her face was red from crying. She half-stumbled, half-ran out of the woods.

What had happened to her?

He rushed to her, his first instinct to gather her in his arms, she looked so pitiful, but when he got to her, he suddenly realized it wasn't really appropriate for him to touch the daughter of a duke, especially when her clothes

weren't exactly fastened and he could see—

He yanked the jumpsuit together instead, fastening the smartclasp so that it closed over her skin, leaving behind a seamless swath of fabric. “Sweetheart? Are you...?”

She gave him a dazed look. “I killed him.”

What? No. She couldn't have killed Risciter. Keirth was supposed to kill Risciter. He'd been planning to kill Risciter for seven years.

Keirth checked himself. It wasn't revenge he should be thinking about right now. It was this woman. Something had happened to her, and Risciter had done it. “What happened? What did he do to

you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing really. He tried to... but I hit him. I hit him with a big, big stick.” She sucked in a breath. “He started...” She touched her forehead. “Blood. He’s dead.”

“Show me,” said Keirth. “Show me where Risciter is.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want to look at it again. We should go.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll find him.” He pointed into the woods. “This way?”

“Don’t leave me alone!” she said, terror making her voice shrill.

“Then come with me,” he said. He tried to keep his voice calm, reassuring. “Show me where you left him.”

She shuddered again, sniffled, but

turned and walked back into the woods. He followed her. They walked for some time, no sound except an occasional hitching breath from Ariana and the crunch of their feet on the forest undergrowth.

Finally, she stopped. "I thought he was here."

"Well, he's not here now," said Keirth. There was nothing there but trees.

"But my stick. The thing I hit him with. It isn't here either. So maybe..."

"You hit him over the head, and he started bleeding," said Keirth, "but maybe you just knocked him out. Maybe he got up."

She shook her head. "I killed him."

“Maybe you didn’t.” And as sick as it might be, Keirth was excited to think Risciter was still alive, that he could still take his revenge.

Ariana was hugging herself. “I thought it was here, but everything looks the same.”

She was in a great deal of shock. It was cruel keeping her out here, trying to make her look for a body. Keirth saw that. He had to get her home. He had to get her to people who could take care of her. “Let’s go back to the ship.”

“Can we leave?” she asked.

He nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Good,” she said.

* * *

They were in hyperspace, and the

girl was sleeping. She'd fallen asleep almost immediately once they'd gotten on board. Keirth stood in the doorway to her darkened bedroom, feeling guilty for getting her involved in all of this. He hadn't had much choice, of course, but she wasn't part of his revenge scheme, and if she'd never come along, nothing like this would have ever happened to her.

No woman deserved to be terrorized by Risciter. And apparently, he did it as a matter of course. As some kind of macabre hobby. The girl would never be the same, Keirth knew. She looked peaceful now, but these horrors were inside her brain now. She'd never quite be able to be free of them.

And she wasn't built for this. She was rich and pampered. She'd probably never had to deal with anything so terrifying in her sheltered life. It made Keirth sick. Sad.

He'd programmed the ship to take them to her homeworld of Wendo. He thought that the authorities were probably watching for his ship, prepared to arrest him for capturing the daughter of a duke, and because he wanted to save his own skin, he couldn't land in any of the proper docks. He knew about some docks on the planet that wouldn't ask questions, however, places where he'd be able to set the ship down in relative safety. He could get the girl back to her family, and then he'd be back

on his own.

Risciter had taken his blaster, so he needed another of those. And he'd want another ship. The underground would have to help him out with both of those things. Once he'd procured supplies, he'd head back to Kush. If Risciter's ship was gone when he arrived, he'd know that Risciter was alive. If not, he'd try to find Risciter's body, make sure he knew the truth himself. If Risciter was alive, Keirth would hunt him down again, and he'd make sure he got it right this time.

Either way, he needed to make sure the girl was okay before he did anything else. Leaving her on a colony planet someplace wasn't an option anymore.

After what Keirth had exposed her to, he owed her more than that.

He closed the door to her bedroom, leaving her to her rest and went to the kitchen to rehydrate some kind of food.

He was sitting down a meal of noodles and some kind of powdered, spicy sauce that had turned out to be quite nice, when Ariana appeared in the doorway. She wasn't wearing the jumpsuit anymore. He guessed that since it was her ship, she had her clothes on board. She'd changed into an outfit that wasn't nearly as form fitting. Instead, she was clothed in something that obscured her shape and covered her from neck to wrist.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“You should rest,” he said.

“I’m not tired.”

He gestured at the noodles.

“Hungry?”

She nodded.

Keirth dipped some into a bowl for her.

She sat down opposite him at the kitchen table and took a bite. After chewing and swallowing, she said, “Where are we?”

“We’re in hyperspace,” said Keirth. “I’m taking you home.”

She dropped her fork onto the table with a clatter. “What?”

She wasn’t pleased? “You need to be back with your family. You’ve been through an ordeal, and they can—”

“I can’t go back there.” She looked furious. “I’m a murderer.”

Keirth sighed. “Risciter might not be dead.”

“He’s dead,” she said. “I killed him.”

Keirth took a bite of his noodles. “Even if you did, you had to. It was self-defense. He was trying to hurt you.”

“No one will believe that,” she said. She picked up her fork again. She twirled noodles around it. “People won’t believe what Risciter was. I didn’t believe it until I witnessed it myself.”

“Well, if he is dead, his body’s on Kush,” said Keirth. “No one needs to know.”

She brought her fork to her mouth. She chewed.

Good. Maybe she was calming down. She'd seen reason. He ate another bite himself. It was really quite tasty. He'd never had dehydrated food this good.

“Even if I could lie about it,” she said, “and I’m not sure I could, I can’t go back. I’m ruined. I’ve been unchaperoned for nearly two days. I’ll never get an offer of marriage. I’ll turn into my Aunt Tildy, drinking myself into a stupor at parties every night.” She shook her head. “No, I’m not going back.”

Oh, this was ridiculous. Keirth got up to get himself a glass of water.

“Where else are you going to go?”

“I...” She shook her head.

Hadn’t thought of that, had she?

“Do you want some water?”

“Please.”

He set a glass in front of her and took a drink from his own glass. “I’m sorry about what happened. I’m sorry if this has really made a mess of your life. I wish you’d never been on the ship with me. I wish none of this had happened. But you have your family—”

“You don’t know anything about my family.” She sipped at the water. “They’ll be horrified. They’ll tell me I brought this on myself. I did go after Risciter without a chaperone. I’ve destroyed all my prospects, you see.

And now I'll be a burden on the family. Without a husband, I'll be the spinster everyone has to pass around for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry," said Keirth. He supposed he'd never really thought about how binding the rules were over the nobility.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him.

Keirth's jaw dropped. "Don't get any ideas, sweetheart. I may not want to cause you any more harm, but I'm not taking responsibility for you."

"Of course," she said, looking down at her noodles.

"After I drop you off, I'm going back to make sure Risciter is actually

dead. If he's not, I'm going to find him and kill him."

"What did he do to you, anyway? Why do you want to kill him?"

Keirth pushed his noodles around in his bowl. "It was my mother. He...killed her. I was fifteen. I saw it happen. I tried to stop him, but I failed."

"Oh," said Ariana. "I'm so sorry. That must have been... He's really very horrible." Her voice trembled. "Do you really think he could be alive?"

"I don't know," said Keirth. But he hoped so. He'd dreamed of snuffing out Risciter's life so many times. He didn't want that taken away from him.

She ate some more of her noodles. "I really am sorry about your mother.

And I hope he *is* dead. Because he was...he was evil.” She shut her eyes tight.

Keirth felt for her again. She’d been through so much. He knew that when she’d come out of the woods, her clothes had been askew. He didn’t want to push for information, though. He figured it wasn’t his business. But he knew that for a man like Risciter, raping and killing women were all caught up in his twisted ideas of pleasure. His own mother... Keirth didn’t like to think about that. It had been his mother’s profession. Keirth hadn’t liked it. He’d tried, so hard, adolescent that he was to find some way to get together enough money that she could stop, but he’d never been

able to find enough work. He knew Risciter was capable of. And if he'd...violated this girl, maybe that was why she didn't want to see her family. Keirth couldn't imagine what an experience like that would do to someone like her.

“You're right, though,” she said. “If I don't go back, I don't have anywhere else to go.”

Should he ask her? How would he put it? What would he say?

“But if I don't tell them what happened to Risciter, what will I say? What will I say I did? Where will I say I was? Will I tell them you captured me and then you just let me go?” She looked at him. “And what will happen to you?”

They'll think you hurt me. They'll be after you. And you haven't done anything wrong. Of course you'd want to kill Risciter. Anyone would. He's..." She grimaced.

"Don't worry about me," said Keirth. "I'll be fine. I can take care of myself, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that," she said.

Keirth had to admit he was glad to see a little of her fire come back. He smiled.

She stood up. "No, there are too many things rolling around in my head. What if Risciter is dead, and they find out I'm a murderer, and they put me in jail? What if Risciter isn't dead, and he comes back into society like nothing

happened? I can't let him get away with that. And no one would believe..." She gripped the back of her chair. "I need to know. I need to be sure that he's dead."

Keirth rubbed a hand over his face. "That's not going to work."

"Why not? Turn the ship around. Let's go back."

"When we left, you wanted to leave." Despite feeling sorry for her, she was starting to annoy him again.

"I know that," she said. "But I was in shock then, and I hadn't had a chance to think. We need to go back and make sure, like you said."

"No," said Keirth. "He took my blaster, and I'm in a stolen ship. This is the last trip I'm taking in it. I'll put this

boat down, and I'll find another one."

"Okay," she said. "So, then we get another ship. And I want a blaster too."

She really wasn't getting this, was she? "No, you're not coming with me."

She folded her arms over her chest. "Why not?"

Keirth's mouth worked for a second, but no sound came out. She couldn't seriously be asking that question, could she? "Because you're Miss Ariana Gilit, and I'm a criminal, and you'd... It just doesn't make any sense."

"But I have to know."

"So give me your comm number. I'll send you a message when I'm sure he's dead."

“No,” she said. “Let me help.”

“You can’t help,” he said. “You’d just get in the way. Now, I’m sorry for everything. I really am. But I’m taking you home, and that’s all there is to it.”

Ariana surveyed him for several minutes, tilting her chin and looking down her nose. Then she turned and stalked out of the kitchen.

Kerith slumped in his chair. She was angry, but she had to see that it didn’t make any sense for him to drag her across the galaxy. She was a member of the nobility. It wasn’t his problem if she didn’t want to go home. He shoveled more of his noodles into his mouth. She might not like it, but it would be better for her. She’d see.

Suddenly, the ship started to shudder. There was a screeching noise radiating from the walls.

Oh no. Keirth leapt out of his chair and bolted for the bridge.

She was standing over the console.

“What did you do?” he said, even though that sound meant only one thing. He knew exactly what she’d done.

“I disengaged the hyperdrive and put us back in real space,” she said, looking triumphant.

He pushed her out of the way, hitting buttons on the console. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Did you hear that screeching noise when you did that?”

“I guess so.”

He glared at her. “You guess so?”

You know what that sound was? That was the hyperdrive dying. You burned it out. It'll have to be replaced.”

“Okay,” she said. “Is that really bad or something?”

“Kind of,” he said sarcastically. “We can’t go faster than light now.” He typed furiously on the console. “Where the hell are we anyway? Are we even back in the sector?” The console blinked the location at him. Damn it. He sat back in his chair. He could strangle Miss Ariana Gilit. He really could.

Chapter Seven

Ariana had her arms wrapped around herself. She stood back from Keirth as he scrambled around the bridge, checking various consoles and muttering to himself. “I’m sorry.”

Keirth glowered at her. “Well, you should be. You wanna know where we are, sweetheart? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

She chewed on her lip. “That’s bad?”

“Of course it’s bad.” Keirth pointed at the console’s screen. “Do you see how many light years we are from the sector?”

She peered at the screen. That was

a lot. Oops. She hadn't meant to screw everything up. "So, um, it would take us hundreds of years to get back to the sector?"

"Yep," said Keirth. "If we even had enough fuel, which we don't. Without a hyperdrive, we're crippled. We can only go to planets close in this system."

"Are there any close planets?"

Keirth sighed. He threw himself into the captain's chair. "One. Trioth."

"I've never heard of that planet," said Ariana. "Is it a colony planet?"

"Not exactly. The people on Trioth have been there long before we ever settled the sector. They've got their own ways of doing things. And I swore

to myself I would never go back there.”

“You’ve been there?” asked Ariana.

“Yeah,” said Keirth. “I had a false lead that Risciter was on the planet, maybe a year ago. Let’s just say I didn’t make the greatest impression on the residents of Trioth.”

“Oh,” said Ariana. That wasn’t so good. “So what are we going to do?”

“We don’t have any choices. We have to go to Trioth,” said Keirth.

“But if they don’t like you...”

Keirth threw up his hands. “It’s either float around in space until we run out of fuel and life support and suffocate to death from lack of oxygen or go to Trioth. I pick option B.”

“Okay,” she said. She sat down next to him. “I really am sorry. I didn’t know it would mess up the hyperdrive.”

He glared at her.

All right, then. It was pretty clear that Keirth was not going to be forgiving her anytime soon. Ariana studied her hands, feeling ashamed. She shouldn’t have done what she’d done. Now they were in trouble. But Keirth hadn’t understood that she couldn’t face going back to the sector now. Things were different now that she’d confronted Risciter. She didn’t have any idea what she wanted to do instead, but it was a big universe. Certainly, she had to have some kind of option besides being a spinster for the rest of her life.

Keirth began to pound the keys of the console. “It’s going to take us a day and a half, maybe two days to get to Trioth. I’m setting the course now. There’s no reason for you to hang around in the bridge and screw anything else up.”

“I won’t screw anything up,” said Ariana. “Hey, it’s not like I haven’t ever flown a ship before. I had lessons.”

“And in these lessons they never taught you not to disengage the hyperdrive using a manual override?”

“No,” said Ariana. “I never wanted to switch course in the middle of traveling. What should I have done?”

“Readjust the coordinates, of course,” said Keirth as if she were an

idiot. “You can change course in hyperspace, but coming out of it abruptly is bad.”

“Well, I didn’t know where I wanted to go.”

“You should be going back to your family, where you belong. And as soon as I can find some way to ship you back there, I most assuredly will.”

Ariana recognized that she’d screwed up, and that Keirth was less than happy about the situation they were in. But he was wrong to send her back to her family. He didn’t understand. “You don’t know a thing about where I belong. You have no idea how much shame I’d bring on myself if I went back. How embarrassing—”

“Who cares if you’re embarrassed or not when we could die out here in space?”

He had a point. She sighed. “I didn’t think I’d be putting us in danger.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious. Look, I know you’ve just been through hell with Risciter. And that’s awful. But sweetheart, you don’t know the first thing about flying a ship out here in deep space. And as sympathetic as I am, I can’t let the way you’re processing your trauma kill us both.”

Ariana folded her arms over her chest. “I’m sorry,” she said again. He really wasn’t going to let this go, was he?

“I think,” said Keirth, “that it would

be better if you'd just leave me alone up here. I don't really want to talk right now."

"Fine," Ariana said, getting up out of her chair. "But you don't have to be so rude about all of it. It was an accident, you know. I wasn't purposefully trying to mess things up for you."

"Maybe not," said Keirth, "but ever since you walked into my life, it seems like things have been messed up."

That hurt, for some reason. Keirth was being all high and mighty about her mistake, but his life wasn't destroyed. He could go back to being whatever lowlife he'd been before he met her. She was ruined. "Well, things are not exactly

perfect for me either. I wish I'd never seen your face." She went to the door of the bridge.

"Right back at you, sweetheart," said Keirth.

She punched the button to close the door as hard as she could.

* * *

Time passed slowly on the ship. Ariana wanted to try to get some vids on the nets to watch to pass the time, but Keirth informed her that they couldn't afford anything to divert any fuel from traveling to power the vids. Since they were so far out, it would take a lot of power to communicate with the entertainment feeds in the sector. She had nothing to do, then, except watch old

vids that were already stored on the ship. That left with her exactly four episodes of some soap opera she'd watched last year. She watched every episode over and over. By the time a day had passed, she was sick of it.

Keirth wouldn't talk to her, which was fine with Ariana, because she didn't want to talk to him anyway. She couldn't believe he was such a jerk. She hadn't meant to screw up. He didn't have any right to carry a grudge for so long.

She tried to make dinner for herself at the end of the first day. It should have been easy. All she had to do was add water and heat up the food. However, she burned it when she left in the heating unit for too long and had to start over.

She felt like an idiot. She wasn't about to ask Keirth for help, even though he'd managed to make perfectly edible food every time he'd tried. She didn't need his help.

Since she had nothing to do, she contemplated what she was going to do with her life. She couldn't go back to the sector. She thought, instead, that maybe she'd go out to one of the colony planets. She remembered a story about the Viscountess of Adalon, who'd left the sector after the death of her husband for a planet out in the far reaches of space. The Viscountess hadn't had any children, and so the viscountship was passing to her husband's nephew. She'd known she would be in the way. Anyway, the

Viscountess had erected a school on the colony planet and lived out her days doing good for the children there.

Ariana didn't see herself as a charity worker, not really, but certainly there must be some useful activity out here for her. Of course, her one brush with a colony planet hadn't made her feel at home there, exactly.

She wondered if Keirth was right. Perhaps her only option was to go back to her family and spend the rest of her life dealing with the aftermath of this particularly misguided attempt to save Risciter.

The truth was that she hadn't realized until now how rigid the sector was. She'd spent her whole life thinking

that if she followed all the rules, everything would end up fine. But she was beginning to see now that the sector wasn't so cut and dry. Sure, she shouldn't have gone out unchaperoned. But to be ruined because she was kidnapped? That wasn't her fault. More and more, she didn't want anything to do with a society that could treat her so poorly simply because bad things had happened to her. She thought of the sector with darker and darker thoughts. She wanted something else for herself, something better.

When the day was over, Ariana did her best to sleep, but she tossed and turned thinking about her future. When she finally did drift off, she dreamed of

Risciter's sneering face over her as he fondled her breast. Only, in the dream, she was frozen, and she couldn't do anything to stop him. She simply had to lie there as he sneered at her, laughing in her face, and telling her how much he was going to enjoy killing her.

She woke up screaming.

Keirth appeared in the doorway to her bedroom. He was out of breath, like he'd run there. "Are you all right?"

Ariana sat up in bed, pulling her covers tight around her body. "Just a dream," she said. "Risciter."

"Oh," said Keirth. He hovered in the doorway, seeming unsure if he should leave or not.

"I'm fine," she said. "I wouldn't

want to ruin your sleep and make things even worse for you.”

Keirth hung his head. “It’s not like that.” He shifted on his feet. “Look, I’m sorry I said you were messing everything up. I know you didn’t mean to strand us here.”

He was sincere, and Ariana felt a pang of guilt for her actions. “I shouldn’t have messed with the hyperdrive.”

Keirth took a step into the room. “You really don’t want to go back, do you?”

She loosened her grip on the covers. “Everything’s different now.”

“Because of what Risciter did to you? Because he...forced himself on you?”

Ariana was glad it was dark. It somehow made it less horrible to be talking about things like this. “He didn’t.”

“You said you’d never get an offer of marriage. I thought...”

“No,” she said. She laughed bitterly. “I’m still intact.” She flopped back on the bed. “Not that it matters. It’s the way things seem amongst the nobility in the sector, not the way things actually are.”

“Even so,” said Keirth, “I’m glad he didn’t actually... You didn’t deserve that. I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“*You* dragged *me*? I don’t think so. This is all my own fault.” She smiled in the darkness. “But I am glad, you know.

If this hadn't happened, I might have married him. And I wouldn't have wanted that. So thank you for showing me what he really was."

Keirth didn't say anything. He took another step forward. She thought he was about to speak, but then a warning beep blared throughout the ship. It repeated over and over at a loud volume.

She climbed out of bed and followed Keirth to the bridge.

Once there, he sat down in the chair and hit a few buttons on the console. The beeping stopped.

"Well, what do you know?" Keirth said.

He switched on the visual, and the

view outside of the ship leapt to life in front of them. Outside the ship, there was an old ship floating in front of them. Ariana hadn't seen a style like that since she was a little girl. It was at least ten years old.

“We were about to run into that,” said Keirth.

“Is it abandoned?” she asked. It looked like it had been floating around in space aimlessly for quite some time.

“I’m scanning it for life forms right now,” said Keirth. He paused. “Definitely nothing human on board. It *is* abandoned.”

Ariana sat down next to him. “Who leaves their ship floating around in space?”

“I don’t know,” said Keirth. “But this is good. The scan I just ran says the ship has a working hyperdrive. We can use it to repair our ship.”

“We don’t have to go to Trioth?”

Keirth grinned. “Nope. Which is a relief, let me tell you.” He sat back in his chair. “I am going to need your help, however. How are you with a screwdriver?”

* * *

The hyperdrive was too big for one person to get out on his own, Keirth explained. Two people needed to detach it at the same time or it would become unbalanced and unusable. The weight of the thing wouldn’t be that big of a deal, however, because as far as Keirth could

tell the synthgrav on the ship wasn't working. They'd be able to float it right back onto Ariana's ship.

They had to dock against the other ship and attach the Ariana's ship so that they could board it. Then they had to dig out the space suits so that they could breathe inside the other ship, since its life support systems weren't working. The suits were bulky and awkward, and once they had them on, it was pretty hot inside. They had big helmets that fastened over their heads and oxygen tanks attached to their backs so that they could breathe. There was a comm system hooked up inside the suits so that they could communicate. Once they were suited up, Keirth tested it.

“Can you hear me?”

His voice echoed inside the suit. It was loud. “Very well. Is there a volume control?”

“Afraid not, sweetheart.”

They exited Ariana’s ship through her docking bay, which was connected to the other ship’s docking bay. Keirth went first, opening the door so that they could get inside.

The docking bay of the other ship was dark and cold. Even through her suit, Ariana could tell the life support systems weren’t up and running. There wasn’t any gravity, so there were pieces of luggage floating around inside the bay. Keirth switched on his headlamp on his space suit and Ariana did the same.

“What do you think happened to this ship?” she asked.

“No idea,” said Keirth, pushing aside floating debris to move through the docking bay.

“It’s not damaged? Did they run out of fuel? If their hyperdrive works, why didn’t they leave?”

“Does it matter?” Keirth asked. “We just need to get the drive and get off.”

Okay. She guessed he was right. She followed the small ball of light that emanated from Keirth through the docking bay. The door out was open, so they floated through into a hallway.

“On this model ship,” said Keirth, “the hyperdrive is above the bridge, so

we'll need to go up a level.” He swung his headlamp up so that she could see an opening to the upper decks of the ship. There was a ladder that could be climbed when the gravity was on. Keirth grabbed a rung and pulled himself up.

Ariana shivered, looking around. Everything was so dark and creepy in here. She followed Keirth, pushing off the ladder so that she floated up to the next level.

When she got up to the next deck, she collided with something floating in the air. She pushed it away. She floated backwards and the thing floated in the opposite direction. As it drifted away, she realized what it was.

It was a person. A man in a uniform

of some kind. His face was cold and frozen. His eyes were deep black sockets in his head. She yelped.

“What?” said Keirth, who was ahead of her. He spun around to see. “Oh. Crap. Dead guy.”

“You said there wasn’t anything human on the ship,” said Ariana. She closed her eyes, trying to rid herself of the image of the dead man.

“Well,” said Keirth, “the scan doesn’t pick up on dead bodies, you know. It only looks for heat signals and stuff.”

“What happened to his eyes?” If the rest of him had frozen, why were his eyes missing?

“I don’t know,” said Keirth. He

floated over to the body, halting it in the air.

“What are you doing?”

Keirth held something up. “He’s got a blaster. I’m taking it.”

Oh. Gross. On the other hand, Ariana guessed the man wasn’t using it.

“You see anyone else floating around, feel free to take one for yourself,” said Keirth. “You did say you wanted a blaster.”

She couldn’t see his face, but she could tell he was grinning. If they hadn’t been in null grav, she would have shoved him. “Let’s just get the hyperdrive,” she said.

“Sure,” said Keirth, attaching the blaster to his waist.

To distract herself from the cold creepiness of this floating tomb, Ariana decided to change the subject. “So, why don’t you want to go to Trioth, anyway?”

Keirth laughed. “Oh, that. That’s a mess.” He pulled himself along the wall of the ship, heading in the direction of the bridge, Ariana guessed. “See, on Trioth, they have this custom. I didn’t know about it, and I got myself in a heap of trouble.”

“Custom?” She pulled herself along the wall as well, focusing on Keirth. She didn’t want to see any other dead people.

“Yeah, the chief of the planet seemed like a really nice guy. I showed up, looking for Risciter, like I said, but

he wasn't there. I was greeted by this entourage of people wearing loincloths and carrying spears, and they took me back to their chief. He was so hospitable, he threw a banquet in my honor, and in the middle of it, his daughter came up to me and served me some wine or something in this fancy glass. She took a drink of it, and then she handed it to me. And, since I was an idiot, I drank out of it too."

"Doesn't sound very sanitary." Something else floated into Ariana. She cringed away from it, but she could tell from the way it glanced into her shoulder that it wasn't a body, so she looked it at.

"Well, it's a backwoods planet. I was trying to be polite," said Keirth. "I

didn't know what was going on."

"Hey," said Ariana, picking up what had bumped into her. "A blaster! A blaster just floated into me." Ha! She didn't have to pick one off of a dead guy after all.

"Score," said Keirth. He turned back to look at her. Through his helmet, she could see he was smiling. He had a nice smile, didn't he? Keirth was a little rough around the edges, but he was a good guy, wasn't he?

Triumphantly, she attached it to her suit. "So, what happened? Why was it bad to drink the wine?"

Keirth had reached the end of a passageway. He pulled himself around a corner. "Well, it turned out that I had

inadvertently agreed to marry her, which I found out when she appeared in my bedchamber later that night.”

“Oh,” said Ariana. She giggled. “How embarrassing.”

“Yeah,” said Keirth. “I tore out of there right away. Ran to my ship and took off with a bunch of men with spears chasing me and swearing at me. I’m really glad we don’t have to go back there.” He halted for a second. “Watch out. Another guy with no eyes is coming at you.”

Ariana flattened herself against the wall of the ship. She wanted to look away, but she couldn’t help herself. The man floated right in front of her, giving her a perfect view of his face. He, too,

was missing his eyes. The rest of his skin was frozen, and she could see where chunks of it were broken away at his eye sockets, revealing bone that gleamed in her headlamp. The skin looked jagged, almost as if it had been chewed away... Ugh. She didn't want to think about this. "Why didn't you want to marry her? Was she ugly or something?"

"She was very pretty," Keirth said. "But, you know, I've been consumed with this revenge gig. I'm not really into settling down."

Ariana pulled herself around the corner and collided with Keirth, who hadn't moved yet.

"There are a lot of them here," he said. "I don't know what happened to

their eyes.”

She saw at least seven bodies floating in the air. She grimaced. And then she saw something strange. A flash of orange. It was crawling over the face of one of the dead men. “Keirth?” she whispered. “I just saw—”

“Back up!” Keirth yelled. “Go back, Ariana.”

She scrambled to turn around, but it was tough to move fast in the null gravity, and she ended up spinning around uselessly. She grabbed for the wall to pull herself back the way they’d come.

Keirth was pushing her from behind. “Gelloccoccus!” he screamed.

What? Ariana yanked herself

around the corner as quickly as she could. Gellococcus was a sort of bacteria that could survive in deep space. Swarms of it could infest a space ship and kill everyone on it. The thing about it that made it different from regular bacteria was that it was a lot bigger. Why, when she'd seen the hollow eyes, hadn't she thought...?

She used her feet to push off the wall and went hurtling back down the corridor they'd just come through. Bodies and debris were in her path, but she pushed past it all. Frenzied, she went as fast as she could. She reached the opening down to the docking bay and shot a look over her shoulder for Keirth. "Keirth?"

She couldn't see him.

"It's trying to chew through the suit," echoed Keirth's voice over the comm. "I can't get to my blaster."

If the gellococcus got through Keirth's suit, he was done for. He wouldn't be able to breathe. And the little beasts would be free to feast on Keirth, sucking him dry.

* * *

The Duke of Risciter scanned the newsfeeds from the bridge of his spaceship. Who knew what that little bitch, Ariana Gilit, was saying about him? Had she accused him of trying to kill her? If she had, he didn't know if his reputation would recover.

He couldn't believe the minx had

hit him on the head so hard. He gingerly felt the bump on his forehead. He might even have a concussion, that whore.

Risciter didn't like it. Women did not get away from him. Now that he'd marked Ariana to be one of his special girls, he had to finish what he started. But how to do it?

If she was back home, spreading nasty rumors about him, it would be difficult. Possibly impossible. He scanned through the nets, searching for any mention of him. But there was nothing. He looked for Ariana's name. Several stories there, all talking about the fact she'd been abducted and the attempt of the Ossile police to save her. But she hadn't been found yet.

Why not?

She'd had more than enough time to get back to the sector. Then it dawned on him. Her pride. She knew that if she went back, she'd be ruined. She was a worthless woman now, her value in marriage completely gone. Ariana was far too arrogant to face that. Risciter smiled. He could still find her. He could still finish what he'd started with her.

His special girls had to be dealt with in a proper way. He'd find Ariana and take a knife to that pretty neck of hers before she could squeal.

But first, he'd have to make sure she was sufficiently motivated to stay away, wouldn't he?

Risciter pulled up his comm and

began composing his message. He'd flood it to the authorities, to every corner of the nets. He knew his story, now. He'd chased his dear love, Miss Gilit, across the galaxy, trying to save her from a madman. He'd been too late. His poor girl had been viciously raped. Risciter had been forced to watch. Left for dead by the crazed criminal responsible, Risciter didn't know if Miss Gilit were still alive.

He smiled as he sent it off. The scandal would be far too much for her. Viciously raped. She was absolutely ruined now. Completely. She wouldn't go back to the sector. And that would give Risciter time to hunt her down and complete his work of art.

When sent his message, he noticed he'd received something from the Duke of Tramet. He pulled it up. Keirth Transman? The name seemed familiar, but Risciter couldn't place it. Risciter trashed the message. Probably, Tramet had a runaway servant who'd stolen some silver or some such nonsense. It wasn't anything to be concerned about, and it certainly had nothing to do with Risciter.

Chapter Eight

Ariana pushed off, back in the direction of Keirth. She rounded the corner to see that the gellococcus were crawling all over his spacesuit. They were skittering along the walls as well.

The gellococcus were round, cylindrical orange things, maybe half a foot long. They had spiny legs that they used to move themselves and to burrow into flesh. Ariana could see that three or four of them were worrying at Keirth's spacesuit. One was wrapped around his arm, stopping him from being able to get to his blaster.

She used the wall to pull herself over to him. Hooking her arms under his

shoulders, she tried to yank him back down the corridor, around the corner, and away from the gellococcus.

There wasn't any gravity. She only managed to make them roll over in the air. She and Keirth somersaulted, the gellococcus clinging to him.

"Get your blaster," Keirth's voice boomed inside her helmet.

Right. Her blaster. The one she'd pulled out of the air and strapped to her space suit.

She fumbled with her gloves to unfasten the blaster.

It came loose from the suit and floated away from her. She reached for it, brushed the edge of the barrel, and it too began to spin in the air, each spin

taking it farther and farther from her reach.

“I lost it,” she said, panic rising in her chest. She shot a look at the gellococcus. There were more attached to Keirth now, and hundreds of them seemed to be crawling out of the bridge, using their spindly legs to hurry closer and closer. “I have to let go of you.”

She disentangled herself from Keirth and pushed off from the wall, after the blaster. She noticed that one of the gellococcus was on her leg now. Through the spacesuit, she could feel the pressure of its tiny legs. She fought the urge to scream. They were not going to die on this ship. She just had to get the blaster.

She spied it, slowly spinning in the air ahead of her. It was close. All she had to do was reach out and—

She had it. “I’ve got the blaster.” Her voice was shaking.

“Well, shoot them!”

Right. Except she’d never shot a blaster before. She held it out in front of her and pressed the trigger button. Nothing happened.

“You have to turn it on,” Keirth said through clenched teeth. “Bottom of the handle. There’s a button.”

She felt for it. Pressed it. The blaster lit up.

“Turn the knob on the side down,” said Keirth. “You can hit the ones on me without searing through to my skin.”

Okay. Okay, she could do that. She turned the knob. Then she aimed at one of the gellococcus on Keirth. She cringed and pulled the trigger at the same time.

A bolt of green light filled the corridor.

But her shot had hit the gellococcus, which curled up and disengaged from Keirth.

“Good,” said Keirth, a little breathless. “Good job.” He held up the arm that was wrapped in gellococcus. “Get this one.”

She pulled the trigger again. More green light.

And then Keirth had his blaster out. He was quicker than she’d been. He shot

with one arm and grabbed Ariana with the other. With his feet he propelled them back down the corridor to the opening and shoved her down into it.

“Go!” said Keirth.

She pushed off with her feet, flying through the corridor. Keirth was at her heels. She could see flashes of light from his blaster out of the corner of her eyes.

And finally, they were back in the docking bay of her own ship, the door to the abandoned vessel sealed tightly behind them.

Keirth ripped off his helmet. “You okay?”

She took her helmet off too. “Yeah.” And she was. She was a little shaky. “That was kind of close.”

Keirth unfastened his space suit and started to shrug out of it. “I’m sorry. I had no idea that there were gellococcus on the ship.”

Ariana also started to remove the space suit. It was hot and heavy inside her own ship. “They didn’t show up on the scan?”

“They can survive in the vacuum of space,” Keirth said. “They don’t register as life forms.” He tossed the suit in a heap, wiping his sweaty forehead with the edge of his t-shirt. “I’m sorry. It’s seems obvious now. Why else would the ship be abandoned? I’m an idiot.”

“At least we’re okay,” she said, stepping out of the last of her suit.

Keirth nodded. “Yeah, we’re fine.”

He grinned at her. “You did all right back there. I wouldn’t have made it out of there without you.”

Ariana smiled shyly and looked away. “I was terrified. I never shot a blaster before.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I got that.” He picked up his space suit, heading for the storage closet. “But you’re a natural. You hit everything you aimed at. Couple lessons and you’d be excellent.”

“Really?” She’d never thought she’d be good at shooting things. She felt good.

“Really,” he said, opening the storage closet. “Of course, this does mean that we do have to go to Trioth. Unfortunately.”

Keirth stood outside of Ariana's closed bedroom door. They'd just docked the ship on Trioth, and he was feeling apprehensive rumbles in his stomach. "What are you doing in there?"

Ever since he'd told her they were going to Trioth, she'd been asking him tons of annoying questions. If the people of Trioth carried spears and wore loincloths, why did he think they'd be able to fix their hyperdrive?

He'd explained that the Trioth people, while not much for technology themselves, collected spaceships that crashed on their planet. They had huge junkyards full of stuff. And he wasn't intending on fixing their hyperdrive

anyway. He was intending to trade their worthless ship for another ship that actually flew. Keirth guessed he could understand why she was curious about that.

But that didn't stop her unending flow of questions. She wanted to know what kind of society the people of Trioth had. Did they ever wear anything besides loincloths? What were their marriages like? They had a chief, right? What were their governing bodies like? Was there a hierarchy? What did the women do? Were there servants? She went on and on.

Keirth didn't know the answers to half of these questions, so finally, he'd pointed her to the onboard encyclopedia

of planets and told her to get reading. She'd been busily reading away ever since. And then, right before they arrived, she'd disappeared into her room for hours.

She still wasn't out.

"We're here," he said to the door. "We need to go find the chief and see if he's going to force me to marry his daughter."

The door to Ariana's room slid open. She stepped out. She was wearing a long maroon dress which shimmered when she walked. Her hair was pulled up on top of her head in some kind of elaborate weave of braids. She had dangling earrings that winked and glittered. She looked stunning, but...

“I had an idea about the chief’s daughter thing,” she said.

“And it involves dressing up like you’re going to a ball?” he asked.

She nodded. “Aren’t you going to offer me your arm?”

“What are you playing at?”

But at that moment, there was a loud banging on the hull of the ship. The Triothians had discovered the ship. Keirth didn’t have time to deal with Ariana. “You should change,” he threw over his shoulder and ran outside the ship.

A group of ten men greeted him. Just like last time, they were all carrying spears and wearing loincloths. The chief was with them. Outside the ship, it was

quite balmy. The air was warm. The sky shone a purplish color, shrouded with gleaming clouds. A few of Trioth's moons peeked through. They were visible during the day.

The chief recognized him. He was a tall man with glistening muscles and a long, graying beard. He pointed his spear at Keirth. "You. Keirth Transman. You have returned, dishonorable man."

Would they stick him with spears right away? "Listen, Mr. Chief," said Keirth, "I'm really sorry about what happened the last time I was here. It was all a big misunderstanding."

"You have come to make it right?" asked the chief.

"Actually..." said Keirth. "I was

sort of hoping that we could kind of forget the whole thing.”

Suddenly, the men all gasped. They were looking behind Keirth at the loading ramp. Keirth turned. Ariana was gliding out of the ship. In the sunlight, her outfit was even more glittery.

“Who is this?” asked the chief.

Ariana made her way over to Keirth. She wrapped her arm around his. “I’m Keirth’s wife.”

Keirth gave her a startled glance. She was *what*?

Ariana smiled at the chief. She patted Keirth’s arm with her free hand. “Keirth told me all about what happened the last time he was here. He felt just horrid about it. My husband is a good

man, but he's sometimes a little bewildered about local customs. He had no idea that taking that glass of wine would be taken as betrothal to your daughter. And, as you can see, he's already married."

The chief leaned on his spear. "Married?" He touched his beard. "But he is clean-shaven, like an unmarried man."

"On our planet," said Ariana, "married men don't always have beards. But once Keirth told me about all of this, I did some reading on your culture, and I realized what a blunder he'd made. So we're here to offer our apologies. Both to you and to your daughter. And, of course, we're prepared to make

remonstrations to her, and to free her immediately from any prior bond she may have been held to.”

“What?” said Keirth. He had no idea what she was up to here.

She smiled at him. “Keirth forgets, I suppose, even though I told him, that here on Trioth, once a woman is betrothed, no man is allowed to look upon her until she is married. And the only way to break the betrothal and free her is to compensate her for her lost time.”

“Exactly right,” said the chief. “My daughter has been wearing the robes of waiting for over a year now. She hopes daily for your return. If you are already married, I am not sure if the betrothal is

valid.” He looked confused.

“Sir,” said Ariana, going to the chief, “what happened was entirely Keirth’s fault. We are deeply, deeply sorry. Please take us to your daughter right away.” She gave the men with spears a smile. “Oh, and there’s a trunk right inside the ship. If you could be so good as to bring that along as well?”

The chief nodded at the men. Soon, he, Ariana, and the chief were in the back of a horse-drawn cart, heading for the chief’s home. Ariana’s trunk was in the back of the cart. The men had lugged it after them without a single complaint. Keirth eyed Ariana, who was easily engaged in small talk with the chief about his crops and the growing season.

She seemed to know everything about the planet. Had she found all this out in the encyclopedia? And why was the chief so easily placated by her? Sure, Ariana was pretty. In that dress, she was...well, she was absolutely beautiful. And Keirth could see how the chief might feel honored just to have a woman like that talking to him. Maybe. But...

Keirth didn't like not having any idea what was going on. Ariana's story seemed to have worked. He guessed he'd just go along with it. All of the men who'd lugged the trunk were openly gaping at Ariana. Keirth gave them a sharp look. She was supposed to be his wife, after all. He guessed looking as if he were married to a woman like Ariana

gave him a certain amount of stature. He squared his shoulders.

The chief's home was a large building made of marbled stone. It gleamed purple, reflecting the sky. Once they were inside, the chief instructed some servants—women clad in white garments that went over one shoulder, clenched at the waist, and hung to their knees—to go and fetch his daughter. Ariana, Keirth, and the chief stood inside a room decorated with woven tapestries and animal furs. Ariana's trunk had been set inside as well.

Within a few minutes, the servants reappeared with the chief's daughter. Keirth couldn't say he recognized her because she was covered in black

fabric. It was draped over her head and covered her from head to toe. The only thing he could see was her eyes, and that was because the fabric had holes cut out in it for them. But when she saw Keirth, her eyes narrowed behind her black shift.

Oops. Keirth hadn't realized this girl was going to have to run around covered in black just because he'd run off. He felt guilty. But there wasn't any way he could have married her. He was a victim of circumstance.

"This is my daughter Freetha," said the chief.

"Freetha," said Ariana, going to her. "I wish to give you our sincere apologies for this horrible

misunderstanding. You are hereby released from the bonds of betrothal. As compensation for your troubles, we have brought you this.” Ariana went to her trunk, and removed a long, shimmering green gown. She presented it to the chief’s daughter. “It’s made of smartfabric, which is all the rage in the sector, so it should fit the minute you put it on. It will adjust itself to the proportions of your body.”

Freetha took the dress from Ariana silently, but Keirth could see in her eyes that she was awed by it.

Ariana took some jewelry out of her trunk. “And we also offer this gift of precious jewels to you and your father.” She handed the jewelry to the chief.

He smiled at her. “Your apologies are accepted, and we will release Freetha from her betrothal bond.”

Freetha pulled the black veil over her head. Underneath, she was a pretty girl with long blonde hair. She was smiling too. “I’m free?” she whispered.

“Yes,” said her father.

Freetha threw her arms around Ariana. “Oh thank you. It’s been so long since I’ve been allowed to speak to anyone.”

She hadn’t been able to talk? What kind of crazy place was this planet anyway?

“You’re quite welcome,” said Ariana.

“This dress is...” Freetha looked at

it, her eyes wide. “Can you show me how to put it on? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Ariana went off with Freetha, their arms linked. But before she did, she whispered to Keirth. “You’re welcome.”

The chief eyed Keirth.

Keirth shifted on his feet.

“I have to admit,” said the chief, “after what you did to my daughter, I had intended to have you executed the minute I laid eyes on you. But your wife is quite a winsome creature.”

Sure. Now she was. When she wasn’t destroying hyperdrives. Keirth simply nodded. “She is indeed.”

“But I’m not such a fool as to think

you came back to our planet only to apologize and make redress for your wrong. There is something else, isn't there?"

Keirth nodded. "I need a ship. The one we arrived in is badly damaged. I'd hoped to trade it for something in your collections."

The chief surveyed the jewelry in his hands. He looked at Keirth. "All right. We can deal." He clapped Keirth on the back. "But let's save talk of this for tomorrow. Today my daughter is free again, and we have much to celebrate. You will stay here for a feast."

Okay. Feasts sounded good. Keirth had to admit that Ariana had done a good job here. She'd saved his life,

apparently. They would have killed him otherwise. And she did look really nice in that dress.

* * *

“I can’t believe you did this,” Keirth was saying. He and Ariana were sitting on cushions in the feasting hall. The table in front of them was loaded with fruits and meats native to Trioth. There were tables set up in a sort of horseshoe shape, leaving a gaping space in the middle of the vast room. There was music from a band of Triothians playing stringed instruments in the corner. The air was filled with the buzz of conversation as around them the people of Trioth all enjoyed the feast that had been prepared. A few seats

away from them, Freetha sat in her new dress, looking excited and happy. The atmosphere was joyous.

Ariana shrugged. "I'm good at this stuff. Like I told you, they trained me to be polite." She reached across him and dipped her fingers into a bowl of shiny black fruits. "You should try those. They're a delicacy on this planet."

"But you know all this stuff," said Keirth. "You know everything."

"You're the one who showed me the encyclopedia," said Ariana. "And I've figured things like this out before. There are different customs on every planet in the sector, even if we're centrally ruled. Aunt Tildy always used to tell me that the best thing to do when

you're dealing with hostile people is not offend them. You have to know what will offend them to make sure you don't do that."

"Well, you're kind of amazing," said Keirth. "I'm impressed."

She smiled at him. "I owed you. It's my fault we're in this mess in the first place."

"But you gave them your own things. That dress. The jewelry. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course not," she said. "I didn't have my best things on the ship. Everything I really wanted I'd taken with me planetside. But..." She looked around. "Don't tell them that, okay?"

He laughed and ate one of the fruits

she'd told him to try. It was delicious, sweet nectar bursting into his mouth.

There was a sound of metal striking glass. Everyone quieted. The chief had stood up. He was hitting a knife against a goblet. "Our honored guests," he told the room, "must lead us in the first dance of the evening."

Keirth shook his head. "I don't dance," he said to Ariana.

She raised her voice. "We don't know the steps of your dances." Her voice managed to sound apologetic and pleasant all at the same time. She really *was* good at this stuff.

"Show us a dance from your planet then," said the chief. The room erupted into applause, apparently agreeing with

sentiment.

“I don’t know any of your dances either,” Keirth said through clenched teeth. This was disastrous.

But Ariana was standing up. “They don’t know either. Just make it up.”

There didn’t seem to be a way out of it. Inwardly groaning, Keirth stood up as well. Ariana took his hand, and they walked out into the space in front of the tables. Ariana faced him.

Keirth had next to no idea how he was supposed to dance to this music. He was going to look like an idiot. He gingerly placed a hand on Ariana’s waist.

“We’re supposed to be married,” she hissed at him. “Act like you’re used

to doing that.”

He gripped her a little tighter, feeling the curve of her body under his fingers. She was soft and smooth. Keirth swallowed.

Ariana grasped his hand and put one of her hands on the arm that held her waist.

The music began.

He didn't know what to do, so he took a step forward. As if she was reading his mind, Ariana stepped backwards at the same time so that they moved as one.

She smiled encouragingly at him. “Step sideways.”

They stepped together. Then backwards. Then sideways again, until

they were gliding together in a circle. The steps were simple, but it felt as if Ariana floated with him in his arms. Before he knew it, the music was surging through him, and moving this way, with her, seemed natural and perfect. He'd never been this close to her, he realized. He gazed into her eyes, and she looked back at him, a small smile playing at her lips.

“You’re actually very good at this, Keirth,” she said.

And without being sure why he did it, he tightened his grip on her waist, pulling her closer to him, so that their bodies were inches apart.

It seemed like the song was over too soon.

The Triothians flooded the dance floor. Freetha patted him on the arm. “Married for over a year and still looking at each other like that, eh?” she teased.

Like what? Keirth looked away from Ariana. “I’ll go sit down now.”

“No,” said Freetha. “Stay and learn our dance.”

Keirth looked longingly at the safety of the table.

“One more,” Ariana told him.

Somehow, the dancing seemed easier than he’d thought. Keirth relaxed into the sounds of the music, and it seemed to direct his body, tell it how to move and when. He and Ariana danced for another song. And then another. And

another. The Trioth dances were boisterous with a lot of foot stomping and swinging of one's partner. Before Keirth knew it, they'd been dancing for hours, and it was late.

The musicians packed up, the feast was left to be cleaned by the servants, and Keirth and Ariana were led down a hallway to their sleeping quarters.

Ariana's face was flushed from the movement and activity. Her eyes were bright as she walked next to him. "Admit it," she said. "You had fun. You liked dancing."

"It was okay," said Keirth. He'd actually enjoyed himself more than he'd care to admit. And he realized that he was enjoying pretending that Ariana was

his wife, as well, and not just because of the way it made him look better to have someone like her on his arm. Being close to her was...

The servant opened a door. "This will be your room."

Ariana and Keirth stepped inside. The room was large, with a fireplace on one wall and a table next to it. A large bed sat against the other wall, covered with animal furs and tapestries.

The servant closed the door after them.

Ariana and Keirth both looked at the bed and then looked at each other.

Ariana bit her lip. "I guess I didn't think this us-being-married thing the whole way through."

Keirth knew the gallant thing to do would be to offer to sleep on the floor. But the floor was made of marbled stone, and it looked very uncomfortable. And besides, she hadn't exactly checked with him before telling everyone they were married. Why should he have to suffer? But he couldn't very well make her sleep on the floor, could he? "I'll sleep on the floor," he said.

"But it was my idea for us to pretend to be married," said Ariana. "I can't let you do that." She went over to the bed and began pulling off pillows and cushions. She lined them up in the middle of the bed, dividing it in half. "There," she said. "We'll each have a side."

“If you’re sure that makes you comfortable,” said Keirth. She was a member of the nobility. She couldn’t offer to share a bed with him without disgrace.

She looked down at the cushions, shrugging. “It’s the best we can do, isn’t it?”

Maybe so. But as Keirth stared down at the divided bed, he wondered if he shouldn’t also be taking how comfortable he was into account. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t finding himself attracted to her. He didn’t know if it was that damned dress or seeing her be so gracious and poised with the Triothians. Before, in the ship, she’d seemed alternately terrified and angry.

When she hadn't been yelling at him, she'd been screwing things up. He'd seen her as an annoyance, something to be dealt with. Now he was seeing her differently.

Another man might have been thrilled with the fact he was trapped in a bed with an attractive woman. Another man might have wanted to take advantage of the situation.

Ariana was riffling through her trunk. She pulled out a white nightgown and threw it on the bed. "They didn't even give us a room to change into bedclothes."

"I, um, don't think that the people on this planet wear different clothes to bed usually," Keirth said. She was going

to change her clothes?

“Well, you’ll just have to turn around,” said Ariana, reaching behind her neck on the gown. “Do you think you could help me unfasten the dress?”

Keirth lurched forward. His hands fumbled to unfasten the smartcloth. Once he did, it parted immediately, revealing Ariana’s white skin underneath. He gazed down at the curve of her back, sucking in his breath. So, he was like other men in that regard. He did have some desire to take advantage of the situation.

He turned away from her.

“Turn around,” Ariana said, turning to face him. But his back was already turned. “Oh.”

He could hear the whisper of fabrics as she changed her clothes, and he struggled not to think about what she was doing, not to picture her nude body. He'd fought a long time to keep this part of his nature in check. He didn't intend to let that change. Maybe he *should* sleep on the floor. He rubbed his toe against it. It was really hard.

“Okay,” said Ariana.

He turned back around. She was wearing the nightgown, which thankfully covered her entire body. But the fabric was a little flimsy, and he could see the barest hint of the outline of her curves beneath it. He immediately looked away.

“Do you, um, need to change?”

“I didn't bring anything to change

into,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. She took a deep breath. “Well, I guess we should...”

There was still time to do the right thing. There was still time to sleep on the floor. But Keirth sat down on his side of the bed instead and removed his shoes.

Ariana pulled the covers down on her side and slipped under them. She pulled them all the way up to her chin. “Can you turn off the lamps?”

There were clusters of oil lamps beside the bed. Keirth reached over and dutifully turned the knobs on them until they went out. The room was plunged into darkness. Unsure if the darkness made him feel relieved or more anxious,

Keirth got under the covers of the bed as well.

With the cushions on the bed, there was less room than there might be on a single bed. It was better than the floor, though. Keirth lay rigidly on his back, his eyes wide in the darkness. He wasn't sure whether to close them or not.

"I'm sorry if this part of my idea wasn't so great." Ariana's voice was soft, possibly because it was dark.

"It's fine," Keirth said gruffly. He was doing his best to pretend she wasn't over there. He was doing his best not to think about the sliver of her bare back, of the outline of her body in her nightgown. But...to his horror, his body wasn't doing *its* best. He could feel

himself thickening, lengthening between his legs. He was going to have to sleep on the floor after all. He struggled to think of something else—anything else.

Ariana giggled. “You know, this is the first time I’ve ever shared a bed with a man. I guess it’s not unusual for you.”

It was unusual. “No,” he muttered. “I’ve never shared a bed with a woman either.”

A rustling on the other side of the bed, and then the shadowy features of Ariana appeared over the cushions. She’d propped herself up to look down at him. “You mean, I guess, that you usually just take what you want and run.”

“No!” said Keirth. It came out a little stronger than he meant it to.

“Absolutely not.” He wished he hadn’t spoken in the first place. He was nervous. This whole situation made him nervous, and he couldn’t control his tongue.

“You don’t mean that you’ve never...”

If it weren’t dark, maybe she’d see that he was glaring at her. She might be pretty, but that never stopped her from being annoying, did it? “Is this your business?”

She flopped back off the cushions onto her side of the bed. “Really? I thought all men started lying with women when they were seventeen or something.”

Keirth didn’t say anything. For

some reason, this discussion was not helping him stop being hard. If anything, it was making it worse.

“Why not? It can’t be because you’re ugly or something, because you’re quite nice looking. I mean, for a criminal.”

“Let’s go to sleep,” said Keirth. She couldn’t stop from insulting him, could she?

“I didn’t mean that,” she said. “You’re not a criminal. Well, maybe you are, but you’re in it for the right reasons, so that’s just as good as not being a criminal. I mean, if I killed Risciter, then technically I’m a criminal. A real criminal.”

Her voice started to shake on that

last part. Keirth didn't want her to have to think about Risciter, so he changed the subject back, even if it did make him uncomfortable. "Maybe all the noblemen can run around having whatever woman they want," he said. "You might find that in other classes, it's far less easy to take advantage of people."

"So, you just never found anybody to lie with?" she asked in a small voice.

Keirth groaned. He didn't want to talk about this. "Not exactly. There have been times when..." Things weakened him occasionally. They pushed at his resolve. "I choose not to." At least his head chose not to. From the way his cock was pulsing at him at the moment, it chose completely differently. But he

wasn't that kind of man. If he were to take advantage of Ariana right now—and he could, cushions be damned—he'd be no better than Risciter.

“Why?”

“I don't want to talk about this,” he said to her. He wanted to distract himself with something to make his raging hard on go away, and he wanted to go to sleep. Now.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

It was quiet. Good. Keirth filled his head with images of ships. Tomorrow, he'd find the chief, and they'd bargain. He wanted something fast but stealthy. A small ship would do just fine. He seemed to remember that the chief had a few of the T-6000 class in his junkyard

somewhere.

“It’s only,” said Ariana, “that I don’t understand. I thought that men had...needs. My Aunt Tildy always said that women had to hold themselves to a higher standard, because men couldn’t help themselves and—”

“We aren’t all animals,” Keirth growled. “I’m not a beast. I don’t—” This was hard to explain. It was hard to think about. Images swirled back at him, from his youth. He remembered the way men leered at his mother. He remembered how much he’d wanted to protect her. “I decided a long time ago that I wouldn’t be that kind of man. That’s all there is to it.”

Ariana was quiet.

But for some reason, Keirth found himself plowing on. “Do you think someone like Risciter gets a pass? He obviously has needs. Twisted needs. He and half the noblemen in the sector do whatever they like to women, and it doesn’t matter how she feels or if he hurts her. She doesn’t matter at all. My mother didn’t matter. She didn’t matter to any of them.”

“Is that why?” Ariana whispered. “You said you saw Risciter kill your mother. Did you see...? Did he...?”

“Rape her?” Keirth laughed bitterly. “I don’t know what you’d call it. That was her job. My mother was a prostitute.”

“He said that to me,” Ariana said

from the other side of the cushions. “He said he usually did what he did to prostitutes and beggars, but he was excited because I was a ‘real woman.’ But you know, I don’t think that. I don’t think some people are more ‘real’ than others. And it doesn’t matter what your mother did, she didn’t deserve Risciter.”

“I wanted her to stop,” Keirth told the darkness. “I did everything I could to make her stop, but I couldn’t ever make enough money. It was awful. It was always awful. And the way they treated her...”

“I guess seeing it all from that angle must have made it not seem very... I can see why you wouldn’t lie with anyone.”

“But you see,” said Keirth, “that’s

just it. Even if it's not a business transaction, it's the same. Maybe it's worse. If I seduced some woman on my travels, shared her bed for a night, and then disappeared the next day, I'd be showing her the same contempt those men showed my mother. And I wouldn't even be compensating her for it."

"But if people get married, it's not like that."

"I guess not," said Keirth. "But that's not something I'm going to be doing. I live my life for revenge. And once that's done, I'll be arrested and hung, undoubtedly."

Neither of them said anything for quite some time. After a while, listening to the even sound of Ariana's breath, he

was certain she'd fallen asleep. Maybe he'd shocked her. Or frightened her. This wasn't an appropriate conversation to have with a woman like her. She'd pushed him, kept asking questions, but that didn't mean he should have answered.

But then she spoke. "You really are a good man, Keirth," she murmured. "A much better man than the ones who live inside the law. The ones I've known my whole life. I've never known anyone like you."

He wasn't sure how to respond. "You're pretty unique yourself, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that."

He snickered.

She propped herself up on the cushions again, so that she was looking down at him. His eyes had further adjusted to the darkness, and he could see her features clearly. “What if Risciter’s dead, Keirth? What then?”

He didn’t really want that to be true. He wanted to kill Risciter himself. It was his reason for living. But if Risciter were really gone, then... “I guess I’d still be in trouble for kidnapping you wouldn’t I?”

“If you weren’t in trouble with the law,” she said. “Would you want to be with a woman then?”

He laughed. “Not in trouble with the law? That’s never going to happen.”

* * *

Ariana lay in the darkness, listening to Keirth's even breaths beside her. He was asleep now. And she was probably going insane.

Back in the sector, Ariana had spent time amongst circles of women. Sometimes, she'd listened to her maids giggling as they dressed her and her sister for an event. Sometimes, she and the other women at a dinner party spoke of things in giggling whispers while the men had rejoined to the study for brandy and cigars. So she knew things about falling in love or lusting after a man. And throughout her courtship with Risciter, she'd sometimes recalled those conversations and wondered if something was wrong.

While she admired Risciter and found him very pleasant to look at (everyone in the sector thought he was gorgeous for that matter), she'd never experienced the sort of draw the women had spoken about, whether they were maids or noblewomen. She'd never felt as if she wanted to spend every second in his company or as if she were interested in every facet of his being. She'd liked him. Sometimes, before seeing him she got a nervous feeling in her stomach. And yes, occasionally, the sight of Risciter made her heart patter.

But she'd sometimes wondered if she was missing something.

She'd told herself not to worry about it back then. Now she realized that

there was something very wrong with Risciter, and perhaps she'd noticed an emptiness about him that she'd dismissed. Back then, however, she thought that Risciter was a good match and that marrying him was wise. Since he was so very pretty, she thought that was a bonus. For a man to be good looking, of high social standing, and quite polite was really extraordinary. She was grateful to have found him, even if there was no undercurrent pulling her to him.

But now she'd felt it. The thing that the women were always talking about. The draw.

To Keirth Transman.

Which was insane. He'd kidnapped

her. He'd dragged her across the galaxy. He was rude to her constantly. What was more, he didn't even like being around her. He wanted to take her back home and wash his hands of her.

She should hate him. She should want to be free of him. But something about him made that impossible, and she wasn't sure what it was. Maybe it was only that he was so noble. He had high standards that he held himself to. Maybe it was because her heart broke for him when he spoke about his mother. Or maybe she simply shared his anger against the monster Risciter for every horrible thing he'd done.

But there was no denying the signs. There couldn't be any mistake that she

must have had ulterior motives when she decided to style herself as Keirth's wife. And now she was lying next to him in a bed. He was so close, she could reach out and touch him.

She couldn't be developing feelings for this man. It was madness. It was utterly inappropriate.

She shook her head against the pillow. No. Perhaps this was more trauma thinking. After everything she'd been through in the past few days, certainly she couldn't be feeling normal emotions. She and Keirth had been in two near-death situations—one with Risciter and one with the gellococcus. Maybe some kind of adrenaline had surged through her and made her lose her

head. Maybe if she waited, the strange feelings would pass.

Or maybe, said a darker part of her brain, she was developing these feelings because she saw Keirth as an escape. Now that she was socially ruined, her prospects for marriage gone, with nowhere to go except back to her life as a spinster, the idea of being with Keirth Transman seemed appealing. Wouldn't it solve all her problems if he would fall in love with her and whisk her about through space having adventures? Wouldn't that make everything easier?

She wasn't a woman falling for a man, but a calculating mercenary, trying to worm her way into his life.

And hadn't he made it clear he had

no interest in forming bonds with a woman?

She corrected herself. He hadn't said he wasn't interested. But he'd said he wouldn't do it.

Still...

Oh. No. She couldn't keep thinking about this. It was ludicrous and offensive. She was Miss Ariana Gilit. She was not some common woman who could throw away everything to travel around the galaxy.

Why not? whispered a voice in her head. Why couldn't she leave behind the rules and strictures of the sector? Why couldn't she be free? Because, with the exception of being nearly raped and killed by Risciter, these had been the

best days of her life. She felt like life actually meant something, suddenly, having come so close to losing it. She didn't want to waste it away at balls and dinner parties. She wanted to live, really live. Like this. Going from one breathless encounter to the next.

And Keirth...

She sighed. Maybe he only intrigued her, with his relentless search for revenge and the pain in his voice when he talked about his dead mother. Maybe he was nothing more than a distraction, something new and different.

Or maybe she was losing her mind.

Slowly, careful not to disturb him, she propped herself up on the cushions again so that she could look down at his

sleeping face. His long lashes were closed against his cheeks. Sleeping, he looked peaceful. He looked...

Beautiful?

How could this be happening to her? And what was she going to do?

Chapter Nine

Freetha had a needle in her hand, her head bent over a tapestry she was embroidering. “He’s certainly something,” she said.

Ariana nodded. She had nothing to do except watch Freetha sew. It was mid afternoon, and Keirth had been off with the chief bargaining over a new ship all day. She’d thought they’d be leaving Trioth soon, but apparently bargaining took time. “Keirth isn’t like other men.”

Freetha laughed. “I’ve been angry at him for a year, but there was a reason I wanted to marry him when I saw him before. I have to admit I’m a little disappointed that he’s taken. You’re

lucky.”

She wasn't lucky at all. The whole thing was a ruse. And she found herself wishing it weren't. Which she hated. “I've never met anyone like him,” she said. “He's so honorable, you know.”

Freetha mused over her needlework. “He is. When I came to him in his chamber last year, he could have taken me anyway, you know. I offered myself to him as his wife. He could have had me and then run away in his spaceship the next day. But he didn't. And I believed that he felt awful about it. That it had all been a misunderstanding. Of course, that made me sort of want him more.” She laughed a little. “Overall, I'm glad to be released

from my betrothal. Those black robes were really getting to me.”

“That seems like Keirth,” said Ariana. “He wouldn’t have wanted to hurt you or destroy your honor. He would have done the noble thing.”

“And he wouldn’t have been unfaithful to you, I don’t suppose,” said Freetha. “A woman like you... A man wouldn’t stray from that.”

“I’m nothing special,” said Ariana.

“That’s not what Father says,” said Freetha. “He almost seemed suspicious of it. Said a man like Keirth could never marry someone like you. I didn’t agree, of course. Father can’t see Keirth’s virtues.” She set the tapestry down in her lap. “Once I saw the two of you dancing

together, gazing into each other's eyes like that, I knew it was real. I told Father myself."

Ariana blushed. She had enjoyed dancing with Keirth, clumsy as he might have been. There was something about the way he'd held her. There was strength in his arms, and when they'd been whirling around on the floor, so close, she'd felt like she belonged in his arms, like he was claiming her. But that had all been in her head, of course. And the whole thing was stupid. Certainly, all Freetha had seen was the way she'd been looking at Keirth, her adoration. Something she needed to squelch. Keirth absolutely did not feel the same way. "He has beautiful eyes, you know? I feel

like I could get lost in them.”

Freetha giggled. “You’re so in love. It’s really adorable.”

No. It was really tragic. But Ariana only smiled at Freetha, trying to play along.

* * *

They had dinner with the chief again that night. Not another elaborate feast, but still a substantial meal. Keirth told her that he was having a little bit of trouble getting the chief to agree to a trade. He was haggling him to death, Keirth said. The chief apparently wanted a night to sleep on it, so Keirth and Ariana would be on Trioth one more night. Keirth was confident that they’d be able to leave in the morning,

however. He said that he'd found a ship that would work just fine.

Ariana wasn't sure she wanted him to find a ship. Once they were in space, Keirth was going to take her back to the sector, wasn't he? She didn't want to go.

The thought cast a pall over the rest of the meal. She did her best to be polite and winsome with the Triothians, but retired early to the bedchamber she was sharing with Keirth.

Keirth stayed to talk to the chief for a while, so when he came back to the room, she was already in bed. She'd put up the cushion wall again, but she hadn't been able to sleep. Keirth seemed to assume she was sleeping, though, as he pulled off his shoes and climbed into the

other side of the bed. She felt his weight settle next to her.

She had a mad thought. What if she pulled all the cushions off the bed and slid close to him? What would he do? Would he want her? Would his honor stop him from taking her? If he did, would his honor keep him from abandoning her?

She scolded herself. She couldn't trap Keirth and force him to let her come along with him. She'd only make him resent her in the end. Still, it was infuriating, lying next to him, knowing she felt something for him, and knowing that he was planning on getting rid of her as soon as he could.

“So, we'll leave tomorrow?” she

said.

“You’re awake,” said Keirth.

“I can’t sleep.”

“I was afraid you’d left for bed because I’d done something that made you angry. I seem to do that a lot,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I suppose I was realizing that once we had a ship, you were going to send me back to the sector. And I don’t want to go.”

“I did make you angry,” said Keirth. “I knew it.”

“Not you, exactly. The situation,” she said.

“I can’t take you with me back to Kush,” said Keirth. “I can’t let you help me find Risciter. It’s too dangerous. It

wouldn't be right."

She sighed heavily. Was there no way he'd change his mind?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't like thinking about you getting hurt. I really don't like it."

"I haven't been hurt so far," she said.

"Drugged, tied up, nearly raped, almost eaten by gellococcus... Yeah, it's been a very safe little expedition."

"Well, what do you care anyway? You can't take me back there. You just can't."

"We'll talk about this in the morning," he said.

"Are you going to change your mind in the morning?"

“I doubt it.”

“Then what’s the point?”

There was a muffled sort of banging noise. She was pretty sure that Keirth had just punched a cushion. His head appeared over the cushion barrier, staring down at her. “Before we came here, I had no idea that you were so...” He looked away, searching for words. “So beautiful and poised. More than ever, I can’t let Risciter get his hands on you. So I will make sure you’re safe. I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you. Do you understand?”

He thought she was beautiful? Really?

There was a knock at the door.

Ariana sat up. Who could be

knocking? Why would they knock?

“It’s Freetha,” said a voice from outside the door. “Let me in. It’s important.”

Both Ariana and Keirth got out of bed. Keirth lit a lamp. Ariana hurled the cushions onto the floor. She couldn’t let Freetha see they were sleeping with a barrier between them. Ariana ran to the door and opened it. “Freetha?”

Freetha looked anxiously up and down the hallway, checking to see if anyone was watching before scurrying inside the room. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Keirth was sitting on the edge of the bed. He’d removed his shirt to sleep, apparently. His chest was bare. Ariana

gaped at him. He was so...strong. His shoulders were wide, and his muscles seemed to bulge conspicuously. She swallowed and tore her eyes away from him.

“What’s wrong, Freetha?” she asked.

Freetha looked from Keirth to Ariana and back again. “You two are married, aren’t you?”

Keirth looked at the floor.

“Of course,” said Ariana. What was this about?

“But you haven’t been married for a year,” said Freetha. She looked sad.

“What are you talking about?” said Ariana.

Freetha took a net tablet out of one

of her pockets. She switched it on and handed it to Ariana. “My Father saw it. We don’t spend much time here concerning ourselves with what goes on in the sector or even on the colony planets, but we do try to stay informed. So, when my Father checked the nets, he saw this. And he said he knew that someone like Keirth couldn’t actually be married to someone like you.”

Ariana sat down on the bed next to Keirth, staring at the tablet. It was a news item. The headline read, “Daughter of Duke Captured and Terrorized.” There was a huge picture of her. She scanned the article and then handed it to Keirth, her heart racing. Risciter was alive. She’d thought she killed him, but

he was alive. She was both relieved and horrified at the same time.

“I don’t believe it,” said Freetha. “Keirth isn’t the kind of person they describe there. He doesn’t have you here against your will. He isn’t—”

“‘Viciously raped’?!” Keirth read from the article. He stood up. “How dare Risciter accuse me of that?”

“They’ve got his story now,” said Ariana. “They won’t believe mine.”

“He didn’t really kidnap you, did he?” said Freetha. “You two eloped, right? You were so in love, and they wouldn’t let you get married that you took matters into your own hands.”

Ariana tried to catch Keirth’s eye, but he was still seething over the news

article.

“Freetha...” How should she explain?

“But you are in love,” said Freetha. “I can tell you are.”

Ariana nodded, looking into Freetha’s eyes.

But Keirth said, “I’m sorry we lied to you. What’s your father planning on doing with this information?”

Freetha looked crushed. She shook her head slowly. “I was sure from the way you looked at each other...”

“You kidding?” said Keirth. “Was there any man on this planet that didn’t look at her like that when we got off our ship? Now, what’s your father planning on doing with this information?”

“He wants to keep you here,” said Freetha. “He’s going to try to turn you into the sector and claim a reward. He’s haggling over the price right now.”

“Damn it,” said Keirth. “That’s why he’s been dragging his feet on this trade with me.”

Freetha nodded. “My father’s asleep now. I came to you to tell you that you should leave now, before he wakes up. I don’t want...anything to happen to you.” She looked at Keirth. “Ariana says you’re a good man, and I believe her. I don’t believe you hurt her. If you’d done what the article said, I don’t think she’d be happy with you.”

Risciter was alive. He was alive and telling lies to the press.

Keirth looked back at the article. “‘Above all,’” he read, “‘the Duke of Risciter wants to see Miss Gilit again.’” He looked at Ariana. “I’m sure that’s true. I’m sure he does want to see you again. I guess you got your wish. It’s not really safe now to send you back there. You’re coming with me.”

Ariana’s heart leapt. At least something was going right.

Keirth turned to Freetha. “You’re not going to mind if I steal one of your father’s ships?”

“I want to help,” said Freetha.

“Thank you,” said Keirth. “You didn’t have to tell us this.”

A thought occurred to Ariana. “Will this get you in trouble? With your

father?"

Freetha shrugged. "What could be worse than being in a black veil for a year, not able to speak to anyone?"

Suddenly, Ariana wished they could take Freetha away as well. Maybe this planet was simply too backward. But she knew that was out of the question. She went to Freetha and hugged her. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Keirth was yanking on his shirt. "We can't waste a lot of time," he said, heading for the door.

Ariana looked down at her nightgown. "Well, can I get dressed?"

"Hurry up," said Keirth.

* * *

Freetha watched the ship until it disappeared into the clouds of the night sky, then she hurried back to her room. She sat down on her bed and got out her net tablet. A few key strokes tethered it to her comm, and then she keyed in a few more numbers.

A man's face filled the screen. "It's done?"

She nodded. "The ship just took off, and I put the tracking device inside that you told me about."

He smiled. "Good job. Thank you for contacting me. I might never have found them otherwise."

"I recognized them immediately when I saw the news on the net," she said. And to think they'd believed that

her father could possibly be plotting against them. Her father was a ridiculous old fool, ignoring the universe around them in favor of their tiny planet. He paid no attention to what happened elsewhere, but Freetha did. There was a reason she'd tried to marry a man on a ship. She wanted to leave Trioth. "I'd like the rest of my credits, please. That was the deal. Half before, half after it's done."

"But of course," said the man. "I believe if you check your account, you'll see that it's all there."

Freetha tapped her screen and looked at her account. He was right. She smiled. This would be quite useful. She had nearly the amount of money that she

needed. She'd be off Trioth in no time. "Mr. Risciter," she said.

"It's Lord Risciter," said the man on the screen.

"Lord Risciter, can I ask you one question?"

"What's that?"

"What are you going to do with them when you find them?"

The man's lips curled. "Feeling guilty about selling them out, are you?"

Freetha snorted. "Quite the opposite. I hope they suffer." Ariana had stolen Keirth from her, and she'd wanted him badly. She'd lied and said they were married when they weren't. By all rights, Keirth should still be hers. Of course, Keirth had abandoned her in

robes of waiting for a year, and, if he hadn't needed something, never would have come back. No, she had no sympathy for either of them.

Laughter came from her tablet. "Well, then, I don't think you'll be disappointed."

Chapter Ten

Four hours in the cramped ship and Ariana was questioning why she'd ever thought she was falling for Keirth Transman. Once they were cooped up together, he was incomprehensibly rude. The ship they'd taken from Trioth was much smaller than her own ship. It didn't have a dining room, just a small kitchen—which wasn't stocked with any food, of course, meaning Ariana was starving—and the bedchambers were hardly big enough to contain single beds. The ship rattled and made strange noises in hyperspace, which Keirth said were nothing to worry about. Ariana had managed to bring along her blaster, but

she'd had to leave her trunk on Trioth, so she was stuck in a jumpsuit again.

Keirth had spent the entire trip pacing around the bridge, muttering to himself. When she tried to ask him questions, he ignored her for half of the trip, but then finally snapped at her to shut up and let him think. Then he went on a tirade about everything being harder with her around and really wishing he could send her back home.

During all this, Ariana was dealing with the fact that at random moments, she'd realize again that Risciter was still alive. He'd given his embellished story to the sector. They thought she'd been ravaged by a kidnapper, and Risciter looked like a hero who'd tried to save

her. He'd made everything horrible.

And he was *still alive*.

Which meant she wasn't safe. She couldn't stop thinking about the maniacal way he'd smiled at her, how his face had been twisted like an insane man. And she couldn't help but remember how much he'd seemed excited at the prospect of killing her. Would he give up now?

The news story had plainly said that Risciter was looking for leads on their whereabouts.

And that was another thing Keirth had yelled at her. He said that the galaxy was on high alert looking for the both of them. Her picture was everywhere. She was conspicuous. Everyone would

recognize her already, given that she was a duke's daughter. But now, with the news story flying around, they'd be looking even more closely for her. If it weren't for Risciter, Keirth told her, he'd pack her up and send her on the first transport back to Wendo.

To which Ariana had retorted that she didn't have anything to pack, since she hadn't been able to take her trunk.

After that, they hadn't done much talking. Ariana had been too angry to speak to him, and he hadn't seemed interested in talking to her either. So now that the ship had landed, she had no idea where they were.

As she followed Keirth off the landing ramp, she surveyed their

surroundings. They'd landed in a spacedock, but not one of the big public ones like they had in major cities in the sector. Instead, it was little more than an open space with the capability to tether one's ship to ports. There was no shelter from the elements for the ships. Around the flat slab of concrete that constituting the dock was a field of scraggly, overgrown grass. And in the distance, Ariana could see a group of makeshift buildings, constructed of stone and wood. There was a dirt walkway leading from the spacedock to the buildings.

A woman was coming up it. She waved one hand at the two of them.

"Come on," said Keirth, heading to

meet the woman. Ariana didn't have any choice. She followed.

As they got closer, Ariana could see that the woman was middle-aged, probably near the same age as Ariana's mother. She was somewhat plump, but she wore a form-fitting tunic that gaped low, showing off her ample cleavage, and a skirt that hit her around mid-thigh.

"We welcome walk-ins," called the woman, "but you'd get much prompter service if you had an appointment."

"Lilla, it's me," said Keirth, doubling his speed to cross the distance between them and the woman.

When they were a few feet from each other, the woman burst into a huge smile. "Keirth Transman?" She opened

her arms wide.

Keirth grinned back and trundled over to her, embracing her warmly.

She held him at arms' length. "Well, I don't believe it. I haven't seen you in nearly five years. I do believe you grew." She squeezed his upper arm. "Your muscles sure did."

Keirth laughed. "You look exactly the same. Haven't aged a day."

She winked at him. "Charming little liar, aren't you?" She peered around Keirth at Ariana. "Well, I'll be. You do have the Duke of Wendo's daughter, don't you?"

Ariana stepped forward, offering her hand. "Miss Ariana Gilit."

The woman shook Ariana's hand.

“Call me Lilla.” She peered at Ariana. “Well, you don’t look viciously raped and practically dead. Of course, we know better than to trust the Duke of Risciter’s word about anything.”

“Lilla,” said Keirth, “you can’t tell me you believed a word of that story on the nets.”

She looked up at him, her face serious. “Sure didn’t want to. You were always a good boy, Keirth, but seeing the things you saw...well, I’ve seen some good boys turn into not-so-great men.”

“I would never—”

“Of course, you wouldn’t,” said Lilla. “Sometimes this business hardens you against men. Can’t be helped. I’m sorry for thinking it.” She smiled again.

“Well, let’s not stand her jibber-jabbering any longer. Come back to the house with me.” She turned and started walking back the way she’d come.

“Keirth?” said Ariana. “Where are we? Who’s that woman?”

“Lilla,” said Keirth, starting after her. “She was a friend of my mother’s. And we’re on the planet Scranth.”

“Another colony planet?” she asked.

Keirth nodded. “Come on.”

Still confused, she followed him.

There was one of the houses that was bigger than the others, and it was this one that Lilla led them into. As they entered, the strong smell of perfume and incense invaded Ariana’s senses. They

walked into a large room. Couches and lounges flanked the walls, and women in less clothing than even Lilla was wearing sprawled on them. Most looked bored, but a few were snuggled close to men, who were openly gaping at the women close to them.

Lilla strode over to one of these men. He was reaching out to one of the women. Lilla smacked his hand. “You know better. You want to touch, you pay extra.”

And suddenly, it all clicked for Ariana. Lilla had said something about reservations. She’d said her business hardened her against men. And Keirth had said that Lilla was a friend of his mother’s. Keirth had also told her that

his mother was a prostitute. Which meant...

She gulped. Keirth had taken her to a whore house. If he'd told her this on the ship, she would have murdered him. She couldn't believe this. She couldn't be here. It was beyond the bounds of propriety, it was absolutely unacceptable.

Keirth turned his head and whispered in her ear. "Now, remember, sweetheart, your big talent is being polite to people, right?"

She glared at him. She really, really wished he'd stop calling her that.

Lilla beckoned, and Keirth took off in the same direction she had. Ariana trailed behind them, looking at her

surroundings. The room was opulent, covered in silks, with ornate chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. But it was also overdone. There was too much on display, giving it the appearance of trying too hard to look...classy, she guessed. The overall effect was of something chintzy and empty. Cheap. She shuddered.

They emerged out of the large room into a small kitchen, complete with a wooden table and chairs in the middle. Keirth settled into a chair immediately, and Ariana, unsure of what she should do, followed suit.

Lilla, on the other hand, took a few containers out of the cooling unit. “You two hungry?”

Ariana was starved, but she didn't say anything. She glanced sidelong at Keirth.

"Don't fuss over us," said Keirth.

"Heating up leftovers is not fuss," said Lilla. "Besides, it's not often I get actual visitors these days."

"Fine," said Keirth.

Good. Ariana really could use some food.

Lilla popped the leftovers in the heating unit and sat down at the table with them. "So, I guess there's a story about why you're travelling with the daughter of a duke."

Keirth shrugged. "I was stealing her ship to go after Risciter, and she got stuck on board. I haven't been able to get

rid of her since.”

Ariana folded her arms over her chest. He wanted to “get rid” of her. Yeah, she was deeply regretting thinking anything complimentary about this man.

“Risciter’s looking for her,” said Keirth, “and I don’t think he’s got her best interests at heart. She can’t go back to the sector. Not yet. I was hoping she could stay here.”

Lilla raised her eyebrows.

Ariana glared at him in shock. “What?”

Keirth glanced back and forth between the two women. “Well, not forever. Just long enough for me to find Risciter and kill him.”

The heating unit beeped. Lilla got

up. She began to portion out food from the containers onto ceramic plates, which she set down in front of Keirth and Ariana. “Revenge,” she muttered. She got some silverware to hand to them as well. She sat back down at the table. “Listen, Keirth, I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but maybe it’s time you let this go.”

Ariana took a bite of the food. It was rice and vegetables with some kind of sauce. It was very good. She took another bite.

Keirth hadn’t touched his food. “Let it go?”

“You must know,” said Lilla, “that killing Risciter will not bring your mother back. And since there are people

in the sector already looking for you—they may not have your face plastered everywhere, but they had your name in the last update—you'd be better off finding some place out of the way and laying low. Your mother wouldn't want you to get yourself hung.”

This seemed like the first sensible thing anyone had said in a long time. Ariana found herself warming to Lilla, prostitute or not.

Keirth shoveled some rice into his mouth. “You don't understand. I have to do this. It's the only way...” He set down his fork. “It's the only way anything will ever seem finished.”

“But now you've dragged the daughter of a duke into it.” Lilla gestured

to Ariana.

“She dragged herself into it,” said Keirth.

Ariana glared at him. “Well, you helped. You did have a blaster pointed at my head, after all.”

“Really?” said Lilla.

“I wasn’t going to shoot her,” said Keirth. He looked at Ariana. “I wasn’t.”

“Well, I know that now,” said Ariana. “But I didn’t then.” She ate another bite of rice. “This is very good, Lilla.”

“Thanks,” said Lilla.

“I was practically engaged to Risciter,” said Ariana. “I got involved in this because I had a misguided idea that I need to save Risciter from Keirth. But

then we found Risciter, and he tried to...hurt me. But Keirth got me away from him. And now, I can't go back to the sector, because my reputation is ruined, and—”

“She's not safe,” interrupted Keirth. “Your reputation is less important than your life.”

Ariana rolled her eyes. She wasn't sure if that was exactly true.

Lilla's eyebrows were raised again. “I think I understand the situation a bit better.” She smiled. “So, Keirth, you aren't taking her home because you want to keep her safe.”

“Exactly,” said Keirth.

Lilla nodded. “I see.” She turned to Ariana. “But you don't want to Keirth to

leave you?”

“I...” Ariana floundered. She looked at Keirth, then back at her rice. “I can’t go back. And no disrespect to you, Lilla, but I don’t know if I feel comfortable in a place like this.”

“It’s fine with me for her to stay,” said Lilla. “But Keirth, I won’t have you rushing back off after Risciter either. You’ve both had a harrowing experience. You need to rest and get your strength up. And Ariana, since your reputation is already ruined, I don’t see why it should be so horrible to spend a bit of time here.”

Maybe Lilla had a point there. Ariana had slept in the same bed with Keirth and pretended to be his wife for

goodness sake. Maybe she was overreacting. She had to admit, she felt a little better knowing that Keirth wasn't going to be allowed to simply dump her here and run. "I'm sorry if I offended you. I really didn't mean to."

Lilla waved it off. "I'm used to much worse. Don't trouble yourself with that." She made a tent with her fingers. "Actually, you're in luck, because one of our girls decided to leave us last week for the city, and that means her house is empty. I had it cleaned out yesterday. You two can stay there, and I'm sure you'll be comfortable."

"No," said Keirth, his face going a little red. "That's not... She and I aren't... We need separate lodgings."

Lilla threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, no wonder this is complicated.” She winked at Ariana. “So, you can’t convince him to actually ‘ruin your reputation,’ huh?”

Ariana became immediately interested in her rice. So, there had been a very brief period of time when she’d lost her head and thought she might have feelings for Keirth. This woman couldn’t know that. And she didn’t want Keirth to...lie with her. Although, if she thought about it, it might be nice to do that with someone who was as inexperienced as she was in the whole business. Maybe that would make it easier. And he was very nice to look at.

“Don’t tease her,” Keirth was

saying to Lilla. “She’s not like that. She’s a member of the nobility, for goodness sake.” He looked at Ariana. “I’m sorry.”

Lilla laughed harder. She leaned back in her chair, clutching her stomach. When she finally stopped, tears were coming out of her eyes. Ariana was pretty sure she was blushing. Very hard. Which wasn’t so bad, because Keirth was too. Lilla put a hand on her chest, catching her breath. “Oh, the two of you are really very cute.” She stood up, patting Keirth on the shoulder. “You run off this planet, you make sure you kiss her first.” She started for the doorway. “You can just dump those plates in the cleaner when you’re done.” She left the

kitchen, still chuckling.

Keirth had buried his face in his hands. He pulled them away slowly. “I forgot what she’s like. That was completely out of line. I really am sorry.”

“It’s really okay.” Ariana ate some more rice. Oddly, now that Keirth was embarrassed, she was finding herself feeling attracted to him again.

Keirth was studying the table. “I would never do something like that to you, you know that right?”

“Something like what?” Ariana had to admit she was a little confused. She’d been fairly sure that Lilla was implying the two of them were attracted to each other. She knew Keirth actually wasn’t,

but Lilla had pegged Ariana's feelings pretty well.

““Ruin your reputation.””

“Well, it is sort of already ruined,” said Ariana.

“No,” he said. “I mean I would never take advantage of you.”

“I’ve never thought that,” she said.

Keirth took a bite of his rice.

“But I don’t think that’s what she meant,” Ariana said. “I don’t think she thinks you’d hurt me or do anything against my will.”

Keirth chewed, making a face. When he finally swallowed, he said, “But that’s completely crazy. You’d never want me to...” He glared at his rice. “I’m not going to kiss you. Don’t

worry about anything like that.”

Right. Of course not. She didn't want him to kiss her anyway. But she couldn't help stealing glances at his lips as they ate. They were nice lips. Full. She wondered what it would be like to kiss them.

* * *

Ariana stood in the doorway to the small house, looking inside at the contents. There was only one room, except for a small bathroom in the corner. It contained a bed, which took up most of the room. It was large and topped with a shimmering red comforter. There was a wardrobe along one wall, empty, and an empty vanity, complete with a mirror and bench. The room was

vacant, but Ariana felt as if it had the essence of all the activities that had gone on in it oozing out of the walls. She felt uncomfortable. She turned to Keirth. “I don’t know if I can sleep here.”

“You’ll be fine here,” he said, striding into the room. “You have privacy. You’ll be comfortable.” He sat down on the bench in front of the vanity table.

Ariana went to the bed and gingerly poked it. “Do you think there have been a lot of people who’ve, you know... on this bed?”

Keirth shrugged. “Lilla said she put clean sheets on it.”

“It’s just the thought of it,” said Ariana. She looked around the room.

“So all the women here have their own little houses to...entertain in?”

“Not all,” said Keirth. “It’s a privilege. Some of the women use rooms in the main house. The more successful you are, the more likely you get to have your own little house. My mother had one, when she and I lived here, but I almost never spent any time in it.”

Ariana sat down on the bed. Gingerly. “You spent time here with your mother?”

He nodded. “Yeah, we came back here off and on. Once we stayed here for nearly five years.” He got up walked to the window of the cottage, staring outside. “The money was always spotty out here. It’s a colony world, and most

of the customers are men who spend all their time on a ship. Sometimes, there'd be too many, sometimes we practically starved." He turned to look at her. "Not just my mom and me. All of the women here. My mom wanted to stay, because it was stable. She thought it was better for me. But we never could stay for too long. Still, I always liked it here. Some of the other women had kids. I had people to play with."

Ariana considered Keirth's childhood in a brothel. It sounded extremely inappropriate for a child. But she wasn't going to say that. To say that would insult Keirth's mother, and she knew Keirth loved her very much.

"Lilla's a good person," said

Keirth. “I know this place makes you feel uncomfortable.”

“Not because of Lilla,” said Ariana. She sighed. “I guess the whole profession leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I’m not saying I’m particularly fond of it either.”

“I think there are certain things that shouldn’t be sold.” For the first time in her life, she tried to put herself in the position of the women here. Letting men do what they wanted to her body for money? She shivered. Ugh. No, it would be like Risciter’s hand on her breast in the forests of Kush. Every night. But she’d have to pretend she liked it.

Keirth returned to the bench.

“Growing up around prostitutes, you start noticing things. It’s all this kind of twisted power play. Women who are prostitutes enjoy the fact that they can use men’s weaknesses against them for money. They tell themselves they’ve got the power, since they’re the ones who are profiting. And men who come here enjoy the fact that they don’t have to think of these women as anything other than servants. They think because they can tell the women to do whatever they want that they’ve got the power. It’s all about power.” He studied his hands. “It sickens me.”

“But you brought me here?”

“This place is safe,” he said. “I wish there weren’t prostitutes, but there

are. I wish people weren't power hungry, but they are. And it gets muddled anyway. When you're starving, you'll do things you wouldn't do otherwise. It can be worse, too, you know? There are places where women who work there are treated really badly. Lilla runs a tight shop. And she protects these women. If my mother had stayed here, she'd still be alive."

"Safe," she mused, unsure if she believed him.

"No one would look for you here," said Keirth. "You'll be okay."

"So you're still planning on going? On leaving me here all alone?"

"I promised Lilla that I'd stick around for a bit, and I will," he said.

“But eventually, I do have to go after Risciter. Once he’s out of the picture, everything gets easier.”

Ariana did not want to be left alone in a brothel. At all. But she guessed it was better than being sent back to the sector. Maybe it wasn’t. She wasn’t sure.

Keirth stood up. “Look, I’ll show you around. I’ll take you for a walk down in that valley.” He pointed out the window. “There’s a stream down there, with a little footbridge. When I was a kid, I used to play down there for hours, making little boats out of leaves and floating them under the bridge. Then I’d drop stuff on them from on top of the bridge and try to sink them.”

She had to smile at that. “You made boats just to destroy them?”

“Absolutely,” said Keirth. “Is there another reason to make things?”

“I guess not if you’re a little boy,” she grinned.

“I suppose you never had to make your own toys, seeing that you were so rich and spoiled. You probably got new ones every week, the minute you got sick of the old ones.”

“We weren’t encouraged to play a lot, in fact,” she informed him. “We were mostly meant to be quiet and look pretty so that people could speculate on whom we’d marry when we were old enough.”

“Sounds boring,” said Keirth.

“A lot of the time,” she said.
“Show me your bridge.”

They trooped out of the cottage together.

Upon arriving at the bridge, Keirth stripped off his socks and shoes, sat on the bridge, and dangled his bare feet in the water.

“Is it cold?” Ariana sat down with him.

“It feels divine.”

Ariana took off her own shoes and tentatively dipped a toe in the water. Not *too* cold. She eased both feet in.

“So, no playing when you were a kid, huh?” Keirth asked.

“Well, not *no* playing,” said Ariana. “My sister Maga and I had a

nanny once that used to take us out to the park and let us run wild. She'd devise all these interesting games for us, have us pretend to be pirate princesses or wild horses or...all kinds of things. She was a lot of fun." Ariana paused. "Of course, I suppose my mother had her dismissed because she was always making Maga and I look sweaty and untidy."

"Nannies," said Keirth. "I guess you didn't spend much time with your mother, then."

"Well, my mother wasn't much for playing, that was for sure. She always seemed beautiful and poised and untouchable to me when I was young," said Ariana.

“I get that. My mother didn’t seem untouchable to me, exactly, but I remember being somewhat awed by her as a little boy. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I guess you spent a lot of time with your mother,” said Ariana.

“When I was very small, I did. Back then, it was like me and my mother against the world, and she protected me with this kind of fierce intensity. Back then, she seemed so strong.” Keirth looked at his fingers. “But I don’t know if she changed when I got older, or if I just realized that she was actually very fragile. In the years before she died, I felt more and more as if I was the one who was protecting her. She seemed

desperate and sad most of the time. I always feel like I failed her. If I'd been quicker. If I'd realized something was wrong earlier."

She put a hand on his arm. "Keirth, you can't blame yourself. You were only a boy."

"I was fifteen," said Keirth. He stared out over the small stream, not facing her. "We were on Hallon. I stayed away when she had...company. At least I tried. But if I did come back when she was busy, I had this little hiding place I used to crawl into, someplace where she couldn't see me, but I could see her."

Ariana sucked in her breath. He was going to tell her about the murder, wasn't he? Did she want to hear?

Keirth seemed to misunderstand her reaction. “Not because I wanted to watch her.” He turned to face her. “I didn’t watch. I mean, maybe I... maybe I sometimes sort of kept watch, just to make sure she was okay. But that was all.”

No wonder he didn’t want to lie with women. No wonder Keirth saw the relationship between men and women the way he did.

Keirth turned back to the stream. “But that night, by the time I realized something was wrong, it was too late. He had a knife. He was so quick. She never even had a chance to scream.” His fists clenched. “I wanted to kill him then. I tried. But he knocked me out. He was

too strong for me. I...”

Ariana grabbed one of his hands, prying his clenched fingers apart to put her own into them. She squeezed his hand, and they were quiet for a long time.

“She hated the nobility, you know,” Keirth said. “Sometimes other women she worked with would be reading the nets, looking at the gossip over who was marrying who or what matches were good ones, and all of that. And she wouldn’t listen to it. She’d get up and leave. She said it was all chintz and lies. She said the whole lot of them cared about nothing except the way things looked, but that underneath, everything was rotten.”

Ariana bit her lip. Maybe that was an accurate assessment of the nobility.

“Once,” Keirth said, “she got very upset when she found out the prince was on planet. She made us catch the first ship off world we could. Said she didn’t want to be anywhere near Gulien.”

“She called him by his first name?” Ariana said. That was a little odd, wasn’t it?

“I think so,” said Keirth. He shook his head. “That’s what I mean, though. She was unbalanced in some ways. I loved her. I never wanted her to die. I would have done anything to protect her, but sometimes I think the life she lead, nearly starving, giving herself to all those men... It damaged her. And then it

killed her.”

Ariana gripped Keirth’s hand tight. “I’m sorry.” Even though she knew the measly phrase was hopelessly inadequate.

* * *

Night had fallen on Scranth. Risciter moved quietly in the shadows, tiptoeing up to the makeshift cottage he’d seen Miss Gilit enter an hour or so ago. The darkness felt like a comforting blanket. Risciter liked the darkness. He liked to move easily, without being noticed. He felt safe in the shadows.

It was actually sort of laughable, the fact that they’d gone to a brothel. Risciter wasn’t sure what he’d expected. He’d feared that he’d overestimated

Miss Gilit's pride, and that his leaks to the nets wouldn't keep her from home. He'd worried that he'd follow the tracking signal on the ship right back to the planet Wendo. He wasn't sure what would have happened if she had gone back, and if she'd told the universe what she knew about him. Most likely, she wouldn't have been believed. But she might have been. And, in any case, if stories like that were floating around about him, it would be damaging. And it would make what he did harder.

Risciter had learned a long time ago that it wasn't what he actually did that mattered. It only mattered what it appeared that he did. He'd become quite good at appearing to be the model duke.

He knew that his reputation was his best defense against anyone discovering what he really was. People were quite easily duped. They believed what was in front of them. The right attitude, the right dinner conversation, a smile and a wink, and they thought him charming and harmless. They were like pawns in a game of chess. He moved them where he liked, used them to distract from what his real moves were.

The darkness and the remote setting reminded Risciter of his home planet. His family had an estate in the country. It was where he'd perfected his real moves. He'd started small, he remembered. His younger sister Ritra was in possession of a little dog. The

dog yapped a lot, and the servants thought it was annoying, but Risciter hadn't had emotions towards the dog one way or another. It was perhaps the fact that he once heard the butler muttering something to himself about drowning it that gave him the idea. But perhaps the idea had simply bloomed in his mind of its own accord. Risciter wasn't sure. He was young then, couldn't have been more than seven or eight. Once the idea occurred to him, he couldn't get it out of his head.

He didn't want to capture the dog and have it make a lot of noise, because his yaps were so piercing it would likely bring people running. So his first step was to make friends with the dog. That

had been easy. Dogs and people were very much the same in that regard. They were eager to believe you were friendly. They wanted to trust you. He brought the dog scraps of food. He learned where to scratch behind its ears to make its tongue hang out of its mouth and make it grin stupidly.

And then one day, he and the dog simply strolled out of the mansion and into the woods surrounding it. The dog had been so confused when he'd slit its throat. He remembered the betrayed look in its eyes, the last whimper it had let out. It had been Risciter's first triumph.

Dogs got boring pretty quickly, though.

He was thirteen by the time he was

dreaming of cutting the throats of people. Of women. He was fourteen when he did it the first time. She was the lady's maid of a visiting guest to the Risciter household. Risciter had plied her with wine, and been as charming as a fourteen-year-old boy could manage. Which wasn't very, at the time. The maid, utterly unsophisticated, had fallen for it completely.

She'd been his first, and he had bumbled it a bit. He wasn't nearly as strong back then, and didn't know how to drug his victims to make them pliable. He was eager too, in his childish desire for her body. He'd been so overwhelmed at how pleasurable it had been to sink his cock into her that he'd

lost his grip on her. She'd fought him off, nearly gotten away. He'd had to club her over the head to stop her from running. And that had killed her.

He hid her body well. No one ever found it. But the loss of a lady's maid wasn't the same as the loss of a dog. People had been concerned over her. They hadn't stopped talking about the missing maid for weeks. Risciter, even then, knew he had to try it again. He had to get it right.

But he did have his first trophy from the woman. He'd never taken things from the animals, but to mark the occasion of his first person, he'd taken something, and ever since, he'd been doing the same thing. It was a tuft of

pubic hair. He kept them tied with little pieces of string in a cloth bag he always kept in his breast pocket, close to his heart. Sometimes, these newfangled whores wanted to remove all their pubic hair. Risciter didn't care for it, but he often didn't find out until he was so committed to the act that he had to finish what he'd started. He'd been known to cut other things off when he saw it, furious at the woman for denying him his trophy, wanting to punish her for ruining it all. He didn't keep the flaps of skin he removed, though. Skin didn't store nearly as easily as hair.

Gazing at the group of houses here, Risciter wondered how many of these whores had removed all their hair. He

smiled to himself again at the fact he'd been led here. To a brothel, when they were on the run from him. So many women, all kept out here away far away from everyone else? The things he could do...

But he mainly wanted Miss Gilit. That was why he was here. And that annoying brat who'd escaped from him on Kush. That boy needed to be taught a lesson once and for all.

Risciter tugged a pair of gloves over his hands. They were thin enough that he could feel through them, but they should keep him from leaving evidence behind. No matter how ruined Miss Gilit was, her death would raise questions, and he needed to be careful. He tried the

door of the cottage. It was unlocked. Like an open invitation. He smiled.

It was so quiet inside the cottage that he could hear Miss Gilit breathing. Ariana. He'd call her by her first name when he fucked her. And he didn't want her too drugged when it happened either. He'd been careless last time, leaving her tied and waiting for her to wake up. He'd been too excited thinking about the way she'd struggle against him, wondering what she'd look like if she screamed. He should have made sure she was secure. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

He crept to the bed, peered down at her face, relaxed in sleep. Ariana Gilit. He remembered the first time he'd seen

her. She'd been young then, only a girl, at some dinner party on Wendo he'd attended right after his father had died and he'd received his title. But he remembered how pretty she'd been then, even in that funny stage that girls went through as they changed into women. He thought of her budding breasts, and her high-pitched voice. The arrogant way she'd tossed her head.

Truthfully, he'd never thought he'd be so lucky as to add her to his special girls back then. She'd been untouchable. But her status made her a possible wife. And Risciter had waited. He'd waited for her to come of age. For a brief span of a year or two, it had seemed her family was set on marrying her to the

Earl of Girici, an obviously inferior match, but he supposed they'd wanted to keep her on planet.

He'd heard rumors that Ariana had refused the offer of marriage in the end. It was to be expected, he supposed. The Earl of Girici was practically the age of her father. Though Risciter himself was nearly thirteen years older than Ariana, he was young enough to entice her.

Risciter carefully pulled the covers back from Ariana's sleeping form. Would it have been enough to marry her? Would it have satisfied him? She was wearing an obviously borrowed shift from one of the whores. It was lacy and see-through. If it hadn't been so dark, Risciter might have been able to better

see round curve of her breasts. As it was, he could only make out a hint of her nipples. He was struck by the urge of turning on a light to see her better.

But he needed to be patient. He'd see all of her soon enough. He'd have her soon enough. And when he sliced his knife through her soft, white skin and felt the hot rush of her blood on his hands... Risciter shivered in anticipation.

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and a small bottle that contained the drug he'd slipped in her champagne before. It was a versatile substance. It worked when ingested or inhaled, if it were inhaled in great enough quantities. He began to douse the handkerchief with the drug.

A scream rent the air.

Ariana stirred.

Risciter froze.

Another scream.

Ariana's eyes fluttered.

Risciter backed away from the bed, melting into the shadows. He wanted it to be perfect. He didn't want to fight her again. He wanted to make sure that he got it right.

Ariana sat up in bed, looking around, fear in her eyes.

Had she seen him? She couldn't have.

"Hello?" she whispered.

Risciter didn't move.

Ariana got out of the bed. She pulled a cloak that was hanging in the

wardrobe over her skimpy shift and hurried out of the cottage.

Risciter waited until he was sure she wouldn't see him, and then he followed.

* * *

Keirth was sleeping in the narrow bunk bed he'd slept in as a child when he heard the scream. Because his mother had often used her quarters to entertain men, he hadn't stayed there with her often, only in the case of her not having a client, when they'd snuggle together on her large bed. And as he grew older, he didn't even do that anymore, but always slept in this small room off the kitchen of the main house. It was lined with bunks, and there was still a battered toy box in

one corner. There was even one small little girl who'd been asleep in one of the other bunks when Kieran came in. Lilla had clucked at him for sleeping there and made more offensive inuendos about him and Ariana. Keirth ignored her.

By the time there was another scream, Keirth was out of the bed and rushing up to the next level of the main house, where the scream had come from. He fingered his blaster as he ran, turning it on for easy access.

The sound of the scream had alerted everyone. Doors opened on the main hall as he came through, and women's heads poked out, some accompanied by men, some not.

There was only one closed door. Keirth opened it. None of the doors in the main hall locked. It wasn't considered safe. The women should always have a way out, that was what Lilla claimed.

Inside the room, Keirth took in the scene. The woman was naked, curled up in the corner with her hands in front of her face for protection. The man stood over her. He was dressed, at least partly. He was wearing his trousers.

"Back away from the girl," said Keirth.

The man turned to look at him. He had a grizzled beard and crooked teeth. "Who the hell are you?"

Lilla appeared behind Keirth in the

doorway, holding her rifle. It was one of the old-fashioned kinds, the kinds that used bullets. People on colony planets often found them more useful than blasters for hunting, since the blasters tended to cook the meat when they killed. Lilla had always had one for protection. Keirth had never considered asking her if she wanted him to get her a blaster. "I warned you, Rilf," she said. "I had complaints about you the last time you were here. You can't play nice with my girls, then you can't come back here."

Rilf sneered. "Uppity whores is a thing I really can't stand." He started for Lilla, his hand on his holster, going for a blaster.

Keirth was quicker. He had his out and pointed before Rilf could draw. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

Rilf slowly took his hand off his blaster, giving Keirth a look of pure hate.

Lilla had her rifle aimed at Rilf now. “You get out of here now.”

Rilf glared at her. But he shrugged into his shirt and left the room.

“I’ll make sure he gets on his ship and leaves,” Keirth told Lilla, following Rilf with his blaster drawn.

Rilf didn’t cause him any more trouble besides spitting out a bunch of curses and nasty names for the women in the brothel. He boarded his ship and took off, still swearing.

Keirth went back to the main house, where Lilla was sitting outside on the porch in a rocking chair, still holding her rifle.

“Thanks,” said Lilla.

“Not a problem,” said Keirth. “You know I can’t stand men like that.” He sat down opposite Lilla on another wooden chair on the porch. His didn’t rock. “You know, Lilla, I don’t understand why you and these women put up with this. There’s got to be safer ways to make a living.”

“I think we had this conversation last time you visited, didn’t we, Keirth?” said Lilla. “If I remember correctly, this conversation is the reason you stormed off the planet.”

Keirth sighed.

“I know your mother got a raw deal,” said Lilla. “But that never would have happened here. I protect my girls. You know that.”

It was exactly the thing he'd said to Ariana that afternoon. He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “What happened tonight could have gone wrong. Rilf was a pretty stupid man, but they're not all that stupid.”

“This isn't really about safety, though,” said Lilla. “This is about you not approving of what we do here, isn't it? Keirth's the high and mighty one. Claims he's not bothered by the same urges as the rest of humanity.”

Keirth shook his head. “That's not

what I said. I only think that people don't have to give in to their urges. They could fight them."

"Why fight them? There's nothing wrong with sex. You wouldn't exist without it. It's natural."

"What you do for a living is not natural," he muttered.

"It's the most natural thing there is. They don't call it the oldest profession for nothing."

He leaned back in his chair. The porch was nothing but dark outlines against the blue-black of the night sky. He gazed out at the hulking shapes of the ships in the docking bay. Everything was quiet and still.

"That girl you brought here is in

love with you.” Lilla didn’t sound like she was teasing anymore.

“She’s not,” said Keirth. “She couldn’t be.”

“You might feel like you’re so damaged inside that there’s no way anyone could find it in themselves to care about you, but that isn’t so. And you don’t seem damaged. You seem strong and confident. It’s not as if you don’t have anything to offer her, you know, even if you have been so stubborn about ‘fighting your urges’ that you wouldn’t know the first thing about pleasing her.”

Keirth stood up and went to the railing of the porch. He gripped it with both hands. “She’s from the nobility, Lilla. A woman like that doesn’t see

someone like me as an equal. You can't love someone you don't respect."

"You saved her from a man trying to kill her, didn't you? She'd respect you for that."

"She kind of saved herself, actually. She hit him over the head and knocked him out." But actually, referring to what happened to Risciter made him think of something else. He turned to face Lilla. "If she did feel anything, it would only be because she's confused. She's been through a lot in the past few days. She might have some silly ideas in her head, but given time, she'll get over them."

Lilla got out of her rocking chair, leaving the rifle propped up against it.

She put a hand on Keirth's cheek. "You're determined never to let anyone in again, aren't you?"

He pulled his face away.

Lilla crossed her arms over her chest. "We could use you here, you know? I told you that the last time you were here too. You made things a heck of a lot easier with Rilf. Men respond better to men for some reason. They've always got to test me, and that means I shoot more of them than I'd like. Give up on chasing this mad man through the stars. Let your mother have peace. You and the girl you brought could stay. You could give her the time you think she needs to get over her feelings, see if they actually do go away."

“I can’t, Lilla. You know I can’t. I have to find Risciter.” Keirth looked out into the night again, at his ship. Once he was sure Ariana was settled in, he’d go.

What Keirth didn’t know was that Risciter was standing in the shadows just beyond the edge of the porch, listening to every word he said.

Chapter Eleven

Keirth walked back into the main house. He strode through the kitchen and into the great room to make sure that everyone had calmed down after what had happened. To his surprise, he found Ariana, huddled inside a robe, perched on a couch, her hair mussed from sleeping.

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“Someone got fresh with one of the girls,” Keirth explained. “It’s okay. Nothing to worry about. I took care of it.”

The other girls in the room made sounds of relief.

“You can go back to bed,” Keirth said.

Ariana stood up, shaking her head. “I don’t want to go back there alone. I think there was someone in the cottage.”

Keirth narrowed his eyes. “Did you see someone?”

“I saw something. I don’t know. It was dark. But I’m not going back there alone.”

She must have been awakened by the scream. Keirth remembered her bad dreams on the ship. The poor girl had probably been confused. He didn’t think there was actually anyone in her room. But after what had happened with Risciter, he figured it was normal for her to be frightened. “I’ll walk you back,

then.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes were full of gratitude.

Once back in the cottage, Keirth turned on all the lights and, with Ariana watching, searched every nook and cranny of the small house. He looked in the wardrobe. He looked in the bathroom. He looked under the bed. “There’s no one else here.”

Ariana was hugging herself. “There was, though. Maybe they’ll come back.”

“I don’t think so.” Keirth patted her shoulder. “It’s understandable that you’d be a little jumpy after everything that’s happened. But you’re safe here.”

She turned to face him. “Couldn’t you stay here with me?”

What? Why was she asking him that? He took a step away from her.

She stepped closer. "Please, Keirth, it isn't as if we didn't sleep in a bed together before. I'd feel so much better if you were here."

Could what Lilla said be true? Was this some kind of ploy to try to get him to lie with her? Perhaps she thought if she seduced him, his honor would keep him bound to her. But whatever she was thinking, she obviously wasn't thinking clearly. He could see that she definitely was frightened. It was this fear that motivated her to want him, Keirth knew it. "It wouldn't be right. I can't."

"All right, fine," she said. "Then I want to sleep somewhere else."

“You’d be the most comfortable here,” said Keirth. “There aren’t any other open beds where you’d have any privacy.”

“I don’t care about privacy. I don’t want to be alone,” she said. “Why won’t you stay here with me?” She grabbed onto his shirt, turning her pitiful expression up at him.

He wrenched her off of him. Her robe slipped off her shoulder, exposing her white skin and a hint of the lacey shift she wore underneath. Involuntarily, Keirth found himself stiffening inside his pants. He turned away. This was precisely why he didn’t want to sleep in the same bed with her. He hadn’t forgotten how uncomfortable he’d been

that night on Trioth, lying next to her with his body excited. He didn't want to go through that kind of torture again. She didn't understand that. He shut his eyes and took several deep breaths, willing himself to relax and hoping he could stop his arousal. But his cock only perked up further. Keirth shifted on his feet, trying to disguise it as he turned back around.

She hadn't fixed her robe, so he did it for her, yanking it back up.

"I can't stay with you," Keirth said.

"Why not?"

"I've told you. It's indecent."

"Just because we sleep in the same bed doesn't mean anything will happen between us," said Ariana.

“And who’s going to keep it from happening? You?” He glared at her, because he wanted her, and because she had no idea how much her body taunted him.

“Both of us,” she said.

“It’s not exactly the easiest thing in the universe to sleep next to you.” Keirth started for the door. “I’m leaving. Go to bed.”

“No.” She was behind him, tugging on his arm. “I’ve been thinking, Keirth. We stole the chief’s ship. He wanted to turn us in for money. We got away, but how do we know he didn’t track the ship. It was his, surely he’d know how.”

“Triothians don’t know anything about ships.” She was being ridiculous.

“You didn’t think they’d be in contact with the rest of the universe either, but the chief found out we were on the run. If he could give someone our location, wouldn’t they pay for that as well?”

Maybe she was right to be concerned. He considered. “So, you think someone tracked us to Scranth and was stalking around your bedroom?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I don’t feel safe.”

This was about her feeling safe, was it? “Well, let’s go look at the ship, then.”

“The ship?”

“Let’s go look for a tracking device,” said Keirth. “If there’s no

tracking device, I want you to calm down and go to sleep in your cottage. By yourself. That a deal?"

"I don't know..."

"Is this about your safety or not, Ariana? Because if there's some other reason you're trying to get me to sleep in your bed—"

"No, I'm only frightened," she protested.

"All right then. Is it a deal?"

She nodded.

* * *

Risciter eased into the darkened room upstairs in the main house. From the bed, he could hear gasps and grunts. He could see the shadowy forms locked together as he approached, his drugged

handkerchief at the ready.

They saw him at the moment he struck, but it was too late.

The man was on top of the whore, and Risciter thrust his knife into the man's neck at the same moment he covered the woman's mouth with his handkerchief. She struggled, blood pouring out of the dying man onto body, but the drug worked quickly.

She was senseless in moments. Risciter drew his knife across her throat.

This whore was tainted by the attentions of the other man. He left the room in disgust.

In the next room, the woman was alone and asleep. Risciter crept close to her. There were so many of them here, it

was like a buffet table of delights. He pulled the covers back from the whore's body.

But he needed to keep his strength for Ariana, didn't he? He couldn't let himself be distracted by every pretty face in the brothel, could he?

Risciter put his knife to the woman's throat. She stirred and murmured in her sleep.

If only he had time, the things he could do here. The way he could indulge... But he mustn't. He had to remember why he was here. Ariana.

In a quick motion, he slit the whore's throat.

She woke up at once, trying to scream, but it was too late.

Her hot blood spilled onto the pillows of her bed, onto Risciter's hands. He gasped at the feel of it.

* * *

“See,” said Keirth, gesturing at the area above the doorway to the bridge, “there's nothing there.” Keirth had ripped away the covering the minute they'd gotten on the ship.

Ariana chewed on her lip. There wasn't a tracking device, then. She should feel relieved. But for some reason, she couldn't explain it, she was sure she'd seen something in her room. And she had this feeling, this overwhelming feeling of dread.

“I don't even think a ship this old can support one,” said Keirth. “There's

no place for it to connect to the ship's infrastructure up here." He fiddled with some wires.

Right. So they hadn't been followed. So, then, who had been in her room? "I know we made a deal, but couldn't you stay with me anyway?"

He turned to face her. "What's going on, Ariana?"

"I'm scared," she said. And she was. She didn't know why, exactly, and probably in the light of morning, this would all seem stupid, but right now, she was absolutely positive that she didn't want to be alone.

"So, this is about you being scared? It's not about something else?"

"What else could it be about?"

Keirth began to put the casing back above the doorway and screw it in. “You’ve been through an absolutely horrible experience these past few days. I’ve been there. Sometimes, when people have dangerous experiences together, they begin to become closer. A bond forms.” He glanced at her. “I’m afraid you’re confusing that bond with something else.”

She just looked at him. She wasn’t really sure what he was talking about.

“You realize, don’t you,” Keirth continued, “that the most important thing for me is getting revenge on Risciter? I’m not exactly the kind of person who you can count on. Revenge comes first. Maybe you’re seeing me in the wrong

light.”

“You’re a good man, Keirth,” she said. And she had to admit that she was enjoying the way his muscles were moving underneath his shirt as he replaced the casing. “I see you in completely the right light.”

“So, you aren’t angling for something else with trying to get me to sleep in the bed?”

That was what he thought? “No, of course not. I meant it to be exactly like it was on Trioth. We’d sleep there, but nothing more.”

He was finished putting up the casing. He looked at her. “And what makes you think that it was so easy for me to only sleep next to you, anyway?”

She wasn't sure what he meant. But suddenly, he seemed very close. She could smell his scent. It was pleasant, a sort of musky, earthy smell. She had a funny urge to put her hand on his bicep and run her fingers over the muscle there. Gulping, she took a step back. "You said that you chose not to lie with women, so I thought..."

Keirth stepped closer to her. "I'm not a monk, you know? It's not as if I don't have any desire to be with a woman. You understand that?"

She took another step back. She felt overwhelmed by his presence, suddenly, as if it triggered the very feelings she wanted to deny that she felt for him. He was so very close now, and she was still

fighting back that funny urge to touch him. She took another step away, and collided with the wall of the ship. “You desire me?” The thought made her heart thump.

Keirth closed the distance between them. “Who wouldn’t desire you?”

Her breath was shallow. “Keirth, when I think about you sometimes—”

“No, that’s what I mean. You’re confused. You don’t really have any feelings for me, and I don’t have any for you.”

He was so close, it was driving her crazy. To keep herself from touching him, she put her hands flat against the wall of the ship. “But you just said—”

“I said I desired you. That’s not the

same thing. It's lust, only lust, and if you don't protect yourself, I'll..."

"You'll what?" She searched his eyes with her own. He was gazing down at her, and there were only inches between them.

"I won't be able to stop myself."

"Maybe I don't want you to stop yourself." That was bold. What was she thinking? She was a member of the nobility. This was highly inappropriate. But maybe she didn't want to stop herself either.

"Ariana..."

And then he was kissing her. Keirth's lips were hungry, his hands urgent, and Ariana found herself engulfed by his presence and the

sensations that were ripping through her body. Keirth pressed against her, the wall of the ship behind her. Her hands fluttered against the ship's wall for a moment, and then she gave into her urges and touched him. As his lips assaulted hers, she ran her hands over his shoulders and arms. He was firm and unyielding beneath his skin. He was strong and brawny.

Keirth's hands were on her hips. He was holding her against him, and he was kissing her thoroughly, nudging her lips open so that his tongue could dart into her mouth. Ariana had never kissed with her mouth open. Her kisses had always been under the watchful eye of a chaperone, and they'd been chaste and

perfunctory. When Keirth's tongue touched hers, she felt as if a waterfall had crashed somewhere inside her, and that she was now being flooded with sweet heat, rushing out to the edges of her limbs. She felt weak, and she was glad to be supported by both the wall and Keirth. She wasn't sure she could stand on her own.

Her fingers explored Keirth's back, moving more frantically now, and Keirth's hands were moving too. He sighed into her mouth, as his hands skimmed up her body, brushing the outside walls of her breasts, sending shivers rippling through her. She gasped, throwing her hands back against the wall of the ship as if she needed to steady

herself, to find some kind of place to ground herself, as if she might tumble off into space if she didn't.

But her hand hit something, and a piece of the ship's wall sprung open on hinges.

The sound startled them both.

Keirth tore himself away from her, paling.

Ariana was finding it hard to catch her breath. She wished Keirth was still kissing her. She wanted to reach for him, but he was looking everywhere but at her.

Suddenly, he strode toward her again. Her heart leapt.

But he was examining the piece of the wall that had come undone. It opened

on clusters of wires, all blinking and confusing. Keirth reached in, sorted through them, and then yanked something out. “Damn it,” he muttered.

“What?” she said.

He thrust a round metal ball in her face. Disconnected wires were trailing from the bottom of it. “Tracking device. On ships this old, they plug in differently. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Ariana felt cold all over. The heat and excitement of kissing was draining from her as she looked at the tracking device. “So, we were followed?”

Keirth shoved the device in his pocket. “Maybe. Maybe not. We could have been followed.”

She chewed on her lip, unsure of

what to do.

Keirth took her by the elbow and led her out of the ship. “I’m going to scout the area around this place, see if a ship’s landed anywhere out of sight.”

“Let me come with you.” They were outside the ship, and Keirth was already dragging her down the path back to the brothel.

“You’ll slow me down,” said Keirth.

“But—”

“No.” His voice was cold and firm.

Ariana didn’t say anything. She shook off his grip on her arm. “I’m not going to run away if you let go of me.”

Keirth sighed. He took long strides as he walked.

Ariana struggled to keep up, glancing around in the darkness, wondering if a ship that had followed them was close by. “Do you think whoever followed us was in my bedroom?”

“Doesn’t make sense. We’d most likely be followed by bounty hunters. If someone was in your room, he would have taken you immediately. You got spooked is all.”

Ariana wasn’t convinced, but she didn’t argue with him. She could see the logic in what he’d said.

“To be safe, though, you shouldn’t stay in the cottage. It’s too remote. No one would hear you if something happened.”

At least that relieved her a little bit. She half-jogged to keep up with Keirth, who was walking really fast.

“I’m sorry I kissed you.”

“I’m not,” she found herself saying. She wasn’t either. It had been amazing. She’d never felt anything like it. And she liked touching Keirth too.

Keirth stopped abruptly. He turned round, and she nearly collided with him as she tried to stop walking too. “That’s exactly the problem. You think it meant something. It didn’t.”

She surveyed him for a second. His face was stone, and he’d clenched his hands into fists. What had he really thought about the kiss? Before he’d done it, he said all he felt for her was lust.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you, Ariana, but you’re not making it easy,” he said.

Take advantage? Oh. She shrugged. “I thought you said that men weren’t animals. I thought you said you could control yourself.” She stepped around him and started back down the path.

He caught up to her easily, matching her stride. “Usually, I can. But you’re...” There was no sound for several seconds except the crunch of their feet on the path. “I need to see if there are any ships that followed us. I can’t think about this right now.”

They were quiet for the rest of the walk back to the brothel.

Ariana wasn’t sure if she felt

flattered or frightened that she seemed to be the thing that broke Keirth's resolve not to touch women. Either way, it was something she couldn't deny that she wanted to pursue further. She liked the way Keirth had touched her. She loved the way his lips had felt on hers. She wasn't sure if it mattered if Keirth was taking advantage of her or not. She craved the feel of him.

Once back inside the main house, Keirth led her through the kitchen and into the pantry. "You can sleep back here," he told her.

"In the pantry?"

He pushed aside a part of the wall, which turned out to be a sliding door. "No, there's a room back here." And

they emerged into a small room, lined with bunks. “This is where I stayed when I was a kid. It’s hidden so that we’d stay both out of the way and safe. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

* * *

Risciter looked up from the girl in the main room whose throat he’d just slashed. Voices. His gaze darted around the rest of the room. Had he gotten all of them? He’d drugged them all quietly first, and then made his rounds, cutting all of their pretty white necks in turn. He could see scarlet blood glinting in the scant light on each of their throats. He moved soundlessly through the room, in the direction of the voices.

“...there’s a room back here,” said

a male voice. Ah, the meddling boy. He was here. Good. Risciter had big plans for him. One might, in fact, say that this was all being done for his benefit. The brothel of dead whores was Risciter's finest work of art, and his lips curled into a smile as he thought of how the boy would react when he saw all of it. It would weaken him. He'd be too horrified to fight. This would destroy him.

The voices were still talking. "Once I see if there's a ship here, see if someone followed the tracking devices, I'll come back. If we're safe, you can move back to the cottage."

"I don't like being alone," said a female voice. Miss Gilit. So, she wasn't

in her little cottage anymore, was she? That was okay with Risciter. He knew where she was now. But the boy was going to look for a ship. Apparently, Risciter hadn't quite been as stealthy as he thought, and they'd realized they'd been followed. Risciter considered. Should he stop the boy?

“You'll be fine. You're hidden back here.”

“Keirth, what if someone's here?”

“They'd have shown themselves by now.” Keirth? Where had he heard that name before?

Ah, yes. He remembered now. The Duke of Tramet was looking for this boy. Strange. But it didn't matter. Risciter would as soon never have

known his name or wondered what Tramet could want with him. All that mattered was that Keirth had put a serious wrench in Risciter's plans. He would pay for the inconvenience he'd caused. And he would definitely pay for taking Ariana away from Risciter before Risciter'd had a chance to make her special.

Risciter listened as Keirth tromped through the kitchen out of the house. He thought about following, springing on the boy from behind and drugging him again. But then he thought about Keirth stumbling on his ship, realizing Risciter was here, and the panic that would shoot through him. He imagined Keirth rushing back to the brothel in terror and agony.

He'd feel guilt, too, wouldn't he, realizing he'd left them unprotected? Oh, yes, Keirth would definitely suffer more if Risciter let him go.

Ariana, on the other hand...

But she thought she was hidden in that room. Risciter stepped into the kitchen quietly. He crept forward, just in time to see a door sliding closed in the pantry. Aha! So that's where she was. He didn't think she'd move from there, since she thought it was a safe hiding place. And Risciter had other things to finish before he got to her.

Risciter backed out of the kitchen and tiptoed through the main room, double checking to make sure he'd killed every whore in the room and the one

man who'd been with them as well. He softly opened the front door and went outside. He'd been to each of the cottages as well, silencing the women inside, leaving them with gaping red smiles beneath their chins. There was only one cottage he had left.

He'd listened to Keirth talking to the madam. He believed she was called Lilla. Judging from their conversation, Risciter could tell Keirth saw this woman in a motherly light. He thought it would be fitting then, to destroy her as well, and to leave her as a message to Keirth. Finding the body of this woman would cause Keirth so much pain. And it would show Keirth that Risciter could take everything away from him. Risciter

had the upper hand. It was a message the boy had failed to learn before. Risciter would make sure he learned it now.

Lilla's cottage sat on the edge of the group of buildings that made up the brothel. It was a bit bigger than the others, but not nearly as big as the main house. Risciter let himself in without making noise. The cottage was set up like the others, except that it had a few more rooms. A tiny kitchen was tucked in the back, and instead of entering a bedroom, he entered a small living room with couches and a modest vid screen. The door to the bedroom was open.

The floor creaked a little as Risciter crossed to the bedroom. He paused, trying to step more carefully.

Would this noise wake up Lilla? When there was no reaction from the bedroom, no sound at all, Risciter moved again.

Another creak.

He stepped more softly. Silence.

The bedroom was quite dark, since it didn't have windows the way the living room did, letting in the light of the stars and moon. Risciter stood in the doorway for a few moments, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Eventually, he could see Lilla's sleeping form on her bed. She lay on her back. Risciter watched the slight movement of her breathing as her chest rose and fell.

Lilla was not a small lady. Risciter didn't fancy the idea of dragging her to

the main house, and that was where he wanted her. But he also didn't want her to make a lot of noise, struggle, or alert Ariana to his presence before he was ready for Ariana to know he was there. If he drugged her here in her bed while she was asleep, she wouldn't make any noise. But he'd have to move her. No, he'd have to get her to move herself. That was the best option.

Decided, he put the cold blade of his knife against Lilla's throat and pressed until the pain woke her.

Her eyes popped open, and she scrabbled with one hand for a rifle that was lying next to her.

Damn it. Risciter hadn't been expecting that. "Drop the gun."

Her hand had just closed over it. “You’re the Duke of Risciter, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” he said. “Make one more noise, and I’ll jab this knife into your throat.”

She gave him a look of vicious hatred.

“Let go of the rifle.” He pushed with the knife to make himself clear.

Slowly, she let go of it, shooting daggers at him with her gaze.

“Good,” said Risciter. “Now you’re going to get out of bed nice and easy.”

For a second, he thought she’d refuse. But then she sat up. Risciter kept the knife at her throat and used his other

arm to steady her as she got off the bed.

“We’re going to walk to the main house,” he told her. “You’re going to be quiet or you’ll be dead.”

They started walking. Lilla kept her head high, her teeth clenched. They walked out of her cottage and into the night air.

They took three more steps towards the main house and then Lilla stopped. “It occurs to me,” she said, “that you’re going to kill me no matter what I do. Why should I cooperate with you?”

Risciter seethed. “I told you to keep your mouth shut.”

“Why should I?”

Risciter whispered in her ear. “Because if you don’t, before I kill you,

I'm going to fuck you with this knife.” He was improvising. Truthfully, Lilla didn't excite him in the least. She was too old and too fat for much fun. She had a world-weary jadedness about her that turned him off. But if he could frighten her enough, maybe she'd cooperate.

Lilla stiffened next to him. Then she turned her head and spat in his face.

Risciter wiped her saliva off his cheek, anger boiling inside him. “You bitch.”

“You waste of air,” she retorted. “If you're going to kill me, I'm going to warn my girls first.” She sucked in a breath and started to yell, “He—”

But that was as far as she got, because Risciter punched his knife into

her neck, cutting much deeper than he had with any of the other girls. This wasn't slitting or slashing, this was sawing. He ripped his knife through her flesh, her blood gushing over the front of her nightgown, her eyes going blank. She toppled to the ground.

Risciter kicked her body. Fuck. Now he was going to have to drag her after all.

Swearing under his breath, he stalked back into her cottage and stripped a sheet off the bed. He returned to her body and rolled it onto the sheet. Grabbing the four ends of the sheet, he began to tug. By the time he'd passed three of the cottages, he was out of breath. Three more and he was sweating.

This stupid cunt had made everything worse. He'd kill her again if she weren't already dead.

When he finally got her back to the main house and pulled her body into the center of the main room, he couldn't help but take out his frustrations further. As he yanked her clothes off her body, he stabbed her again. And again. And again. It was a good thing she was so damned big, or she'd be nothing but stab wounds. Idiot whore.

After he'd managed to calm down, he set about arranging her body the way he wanted it. When Keirth saw this, it should shake him. Around Lilla, all the other girls lay dead on their couches. In the center, he propped Lilla up against a

bench. She was naked, decorated only with her own blood. He spread her legs, displaying her vagina to whoever might see her. He hadn't fucked her, but he wanted Keirth to think he had.

Risciter hadn't fucked anyone tonight. When he'd been a younger man, perhaps he could have managed a few warm-ups before the main event. But he was older now. He didn't quite have the stamina. He wanted to save it all for Ariana. Speaking of Ariana, it was almost time to go and get her, to put his last piece of this perfect achievement in place.

First, he stepped back to survey the room, to make sure everything was exactly the way he wanted it. He smiled.

Yes. Perfect. Absolutely perfect. Humming softly to himself, Risciter made his way to the kitchen and into the pantry. After feeling around in the darkness for a little bit, he found the sliding door he'd seen earlier. He opened it.

“Hello?” said a voice.

But it wasn't Ariana's. No. It was a bit too high pitched. Too small.

As he stepped into the room, he saw a little girl, no more than five or six years old, sitting up on her bed. Damn it. Risciter didn't like this one bit. He'd never thought there would be children here. He supposed these whores sometimes birthed brats, though, didn't they? He shot a glance around the room,

making sure there were no more. There was only Ariana, and she was stirring a little on her bunk.

“Who are you?” asked the little girl. “Where’s my mommy?”

Ariana made a noise in her sleep, rolling over.

Risciter really didn’t relish the idea of killing children. There was something about how small they were that made it feel vaguely disgusting. But this child was a loose end. She’d seen him. He had a story to spin about the events that had taken place here tonight. She could ruin everything. And right then, she was going to keep talking and wake Ariana up. He grimaced, but stepped over to the little girl and seized her pillow.

“Who are you?” she said again.

Risciter shoved the pillow in her face. Her tiny body struggled for a very, very long time, during which Risciter found himself retching a few times. He really didn't like killing children.

But eventually, it was done.

Risciter felt the little girl's pulse to make sure she was dead. Her small lips had a bluish-purplish cast to them that made Risciter feel sick again. He quickly turned away from her to Ariana. Ariana was small enough to be moved easily. He crossed to her bunk, shoved his drugged handkerchief over her mouth and nose. She wouldn't wake until he was ready for her to wake.

Chapter Twelve

Keirth had been wandering around in the area around the brothel for quite some time when he finally found it. Risciter's ship. His heart sank immediately. Risciter was here? Okay, so he'd known he was alive, but he hadn't expected Risciter to follow him. He guessed he shouldn't have been such an idiot. He and Ariana had obviously angered Risciter by getting away. Now Risciter knew who he was and knew that Keirth was seeking revenge. Of course Risciter would want to find them and finish what he'd started.

The worst of it was that he'd left Ariana alone.

Keirth ran all the way back to the brothel, scolding himself the entire time. How could he have been so stupid? She'd said there was someone in the cabin with her. It must have been Risciter. Ariana had barely escaped death tonight, and he'd had the gall to give her attitude about wanting him to stay in the same room with her. If he'd known her life was in danger, he never would have let it become an issue. But his conversation with Lilla had gotten under his skin. He'd been so focused on whether or not he had feelings for Ariana that he hadn't he hadn't bothered to worry about her safety.

Now, as he rushed back to the brothel, he knew he'd never forgive

himself if something happened to her. She could be annoying as hell, but he didn't want her hurt. He... Damn it, he *liked* having her around. And he could still remember the way her small body had felt pressed up against him, the way her breath caught in her throat when he touched her.

He shouldn't have been doing that, of course. He should have controlled himself, but—

None of it mattered if she was dead. Risciter was already at the brothel, and he'd left Ariana there alone with no one to protect her. Keirth didn't even want to think about what might have happened to her while he was gone.

He crashed into the kitchen of the brothel the minute he arrived, not worrying about noise. He tore into the pantry, threw the door open, and stepped into the room.

He was greeted with the sight of a dead little girl. The child who'd been sleeping in the room with him earlier. She hung off the bed, her eyes dull, her hand dangling over the bunk.

What had happened?

He spun, taking in the rest of the room. Ariana *wasn't there*.

Risciter had found her. This hidden room hadn't offered her a bit of refuge. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he kept her with him?

Keirth didn't want to think about

what it meant that the little girl was dead. He pushed it from his mind, only focused on Ariana. Where would Risciter have taken her? Had he taken her back to his ship? If so, he must have missed Risciter and Ariana outside the brothel.

Keirth walked out of the kitchen and into the main room.

The first thing he saw was Lilla.

He made a strangled noise in the back of his throat and stumbled out of the room.

No. Not Lilla.

Keirth leaned against the wall in the kitchen, barely breathing, trying to process what he'd seen. Risciter had killed Lilla. Why? What did Risciter

want with her when he had Ariana? Of course, the little girl had been dead in the room too, hadn't she?

Feeling cold all over, Keirth stepped back into the main room. The sight of Lilla held his gaze for a long time at first. She'd been brutally stabbed over and over. There were slashes and cuts all over her body. Her head flopped back and Keirth could see the incision that had nearly severed her head from her body. Her bloody neck was open in front of him, glistening. The way she was arranged wasn't an accident either. It was sickly provocative, something only a monster like Risciter could think up.

When he could finally tear his gaze

away from Lilla, he noticed the other girls. They were dead. All of them. Most were still dressed, but some had their clothes pushed out of the way or removed, as if Risciter had enjoyed leering at them. But each had their throats cut.

That was what Risciter had done to his mother. Cut her throat. Keirth remembered seeing the movement, the flash of the knife. He'd run forward out of his hiding place, screaming. Risciter had stood up, picking up a nearby chair and clubbing Keirth over the head.

Keirth ran for the steps. Were they all dead? He pushed open doors on the top floor. Here, some of the women had been with clients. But everyone was

dead. The men had been stabbed to death, the women's throats slashed. There was blood everywhere, dripping off of satin sheets, running in rivulets down naked flesh. He checked every single room. There was no one alive.

But where was Risciter? And where was Ariana? Was she dead already too? God, how long had he been gone? How had Risciter managed to kill all of them?

He didn't want to check in the cottages, but he did. Everyone dead there too. The same way.

Finally, he got to Ariana's cottage. He didn't want her to be in there, dead. He hesitated at the doorway, not wanting to open it. If she was gone...

The things he would do to Risciter if he'd killed Ariana.

But it would be all his fault. If Ariana was dead, he'd stay alive only long enough to cut the man to shreds. Then he'd kill himself too. Because he deserved it. Ariana would be dead because he'd left her. He turned back to look at the rest of the brothel. All these women were dead because he'd lured Risciter here. He'd as good as killed them.

The force of the thought made him stagger. He grasped at the door of the cottage to keep himself from falling.

And there were strong arms behind him, wrapping around his body.

Keirth tried to turn, to struggle, to

see his attacker, but there was something on his face, a cloth over his nose, over his mouth. He smelled a sickly sweet aroma, like flowers, and his vision started to go dark around the edges. Keirth's arms flailed out, one last attempt to free himself. And then everything went black.

* * *

Keirth woke up inside the cottage. He was tied to chair, facing the bed. All the lights were on. Ariana was lying on the bed, nude. She was spread eagle, her arms and legs tied in place. She was crying, and he could hear the sounds of her sobs echoing through the room. Risciter was standing in the corner, toying with a knife. When he saw Keirth,

he grinned widely.

“You’re awake,” said Risciter. “I’ve been waiting.” He gestured with his head to Ariana. “So has she.”

Keirth strained against the ropes that held him, but they didn’t budge. The chair he sat on was wooden with a plush cushion. It must have gone with the vanity in the room. He rocked on it, testing its strength. The wood creaked a little under his weight but didn’t give way.

Risciter strode across the room. He put his hands on either side of the chair and his face inches from Keirth’s. “When we last saw each other, I told you that we were going to reenact the scene from when I killed your mother.

But you decided to muck up that plan, didn't you? That really made me angry. I guess you've seen what happens when I get angry."

Keirth felt sick. All those women.

"I hope you've learned your lesson," said Risciter.

Keirth forced himself to nod. "I get it. But why don't you let Ariana go? She's got nothing to do with this. This is between you and me."

Risciter laughed. "On the contrary. This is most certainly about Ariana. Or perhaps you're forgetting that she beat me over the head with a fallen log." He glared at Ariana on the bed. "She needs to pay for that, little slut." Risciter pulled a comm out of his pocket. He hit a

few buttons, then spoke into it. His voice sounded shaky, like he was afraid. "I'm on Scranth. Please come. It's horrible. Keirth Transman has murdered Miss Gilit and a whole brothel full of whores. I managed to fight him off. He wanted to kill me as well, but I got the upper hand and killed him. I wish I could have saved Miss Gilit. Please hurry." Then he snapped off the comm and grinned at Keirth.

Keirth was shocked. What was Risciter playing at? He planned to kill them both, then, but that had always been obvious. But he wanted to pin all these murders on Keirth? Why? What made the man so twisted?

"The deaths of a few beggars and

whores don't matter much," Risciter said to him. "But the death of the daughter of a duke? Someone would ask questions. You're a lucky find, boy. A scapegoat." He laughed.

Keirth couldn't let this happen. He would not watch while Risciter raped Ariana and killed her. He'd failed his mother. He'd failed all the women in the brothel. He'd failed that poor little girl on the bunk. But he had to do something now. He rocked on the chair again, trying to force all his weight back onto one leg. The chair wobbled, groaned.

Risciter snapped his head back to him.

Keirth returned all the legs of the chair to the floor. He strained against the

ropes again.

Risciter went to Ariana. He ran his knife over the planes and curves of her body, tracing the outlines of her nipples with his blade.

Ariana whimpered.

“Don’t touch her!” Keirth growled, pitching forward on the chair. It fell over with him on it and his knees crashed painfully against the floor.

Risciter chuckled. He came over to Keirth and righted the chair. “You’re pathetic, boy. You can’t save her.” He went back to the bed.

But Keirth had felt it when the chair went back on its legs. The wood had splintered in the fall. One of the legs was weak now. He could break it, if he

just put enough pressure on it...

Keirth leaned onto the weakened leg.

Risciter's hands were all over Ariana's body. "So beautiful," he murmured. He turned to Keirth. "Should I make her suck my cock? Would you like that? Or should we just skip right to the main event?" His hands trailed between Ariana's legs, one finger probing her.

Keirth looked away. He shouldn't be seeing this.

"Fuck you, Risciter." Ariana's voice was shaky, but still full of fight.

Keirth had to get free. He leaned against the chair leg again, hearing the wood splinter a little further. Frightened

Risciter had heard the noise, he glanced at him.

But Risciter still had his fingers inside Ariana. He was watching her face, smiling as she struggled and glared at him.

Keirth pushed on the chair harder. Another splintering sound.

Risciter moved his hands to his trousers, leering at Ariana as he undid his clothes.

Keirth felt dread and fear surge through him. This couldn't happen. He had to try harder. He had to stop Risciter. He pushed on the chair leg harder.

But Risciter was climbing onto the bed with Ariana.

“Risciter, don’t,” Ariana was pleading. She was crying again.

Keirth dragged all his attention away from the bed and focused on the chair. He rocked on it, throwing his full weight onto the damaged leg. There was a resounding crack as the leg splintered completely, pitching Keirth onto the ground. His leg was free.

Risciter turned at the noise. “You’re always trouble, boy.”

Keirth struggled with the rest of the chair on the floor. One of his legs was free. The rope tying it to the broken leg had slipped off. But he was still bound to the arms and leg of rest of the chair, which was intact.

Risciter surveyed him. He thrust

into Ariana.

Keirth screamed in rage. Not again. He would not watch this monster do this again. With his free leg, he kicked at the chair. He yanked against the ropes with all the strength he had, throwing the force of his anger behind it.

The chair snapped into pieces. Keirth stumbled to his feet, pieces of wood still tied to his limbs.

And then he was pulling Risciter off the bed, and the two were wrestling on the floor. Keirth punched Risciter in the nose, and he started bleeding.

But Risciter had his knife still. He stabbed at Keirth, sinking the blade into Keirth's shoulder.

Keirth yelped, searing pain

flooding his body. But he wasn't going to let Risciter stop him. Not this time. He reached up and yanked the knife out of his shoulder. Now he was armed and Risciter wasn't.

Risciter backed away from Keirth, fear in his eyes.

Keirth leapt on him. He plunged the knife into Risciter's stomach.

Risciter grunted.

Keirth pulled the knife out. There was blood all over his hand. He didn't care. He stabbed Risciter again, this time in the chest. More blood.

Risciter shrieked.

Frenzied, Keirth raised the knife over his head and began bringing it down over and over again, sinking it into

Risciter's skin one time after another. Blood sprayed over Risciter's clothes, over Keirth's hands. It splattered in his face.

After some time, Keirth realized Risciter wasn't screaming anymore. He stopped. He stood up. He backed away from Risciter, who hardly looked like Risciter anymore. He was a twisted piece of meat and blood, mangled by the knife.

Keirth looked down at the knife in his hand. He dropped it, letting it clatter on the floor.

This wasn't how he'd pictured it. He'd thought that he'd say something scathing and witty to Risciter. He'd thought he'd wrench an apology from the

man, make him plead for his life. Instead...

Ariana made a little gasp behind him.

Ariana!

Keirth found a blanket on the ground and threw it over her body, covering her nakedness. He fished the knife up off the floor and cut her ropes.

She was shaking. She pulled the blanket tight against her body. “Thank you,” she said.

He looked at Risciter’s remains on the floor, at the blood all over his hands and arms. He wasn’t sure “thank you” was the thing he would have said to him right now.

Ariana sucked in a shuddering

breath. "I want to take a shower," she said. "You should take one too."

He should wash away this blood, shouldn't he? He probably looked like a monster to her, not a rescuer or a hero.

"But we have to be quick," Ariana said. "Risciter called someone on the comm. They think you did this."

* * *

Hyperspace streamed by on the visual in the bridge. Ariana sat on a chair, hugging her knees to her chest. She and Keirth had left Scranth behind only an hour ago. They hadn't spent much time talking. They were both in shock. That was what she thought, anyway.

Ariana didn't know how she should be feeling right now. She felt like she

couldn't quite remember what had happened to her. She'd woken up tied to the bed in the cottage. There were flashes of Risciter talking to her. Flashes of his hands on her, which made her shudder. Flashes of his knife, glinting wickedly in the light. Flashes of him inside her. Ugh.

But it had only been for a second. She'd felt him push his way inside her, smelled him, felt like vomiting...

And then he wasn't there anymore. There were just noises and grunts and screams and...

Keirth had killed him. Keirth had saved her.

But Keirth wasn't talking to her. He was sitting in the pilot's seat, punching

things in on the console.

Abruptly, the visual of hyperspace switched off.

“Gives me a headache,” said Keirth.

Ariana had thought it was pretty. But she didn't protest. She hugged her knees closer to her chest. What would happen now? “Where are we going?” she asked.

Keirth didn't look up from the console. “I picked random coordinates. I don't know. When get there, we can pick another destination if you want.”

They were on a ship to nowhere. She wasn't a virgin anymore. Was she? Did it count, what Risciter did? It had only been a moment. And Keirth was a

wanted criminal, because they'd think... What would they think? Risciter had told the comm that both of them were dead. When they found the bodies on Scranth, would they know that Risciter had been lying?

Somehow, she didn't think they would.

She looked at Keirth. She'd started this whole mess trying to save Risciter. But she'd ended up cheering Keirth on inside her head as he'd killed Risciter. She was glad he was dead. Everything was different now. Everything.

* * *

Sergeant Nol Praxider of the Intergalactic Police stepped out of the brothel on Scranth. He took in a long

breath of clean, fresh air. Praxider wasn't a stranger to scenes of slaughter, but this was perhaps one of the worst he'd ever seen. So many bodies. So many dead.

They wouldn't even have found them if it hadn't been for the distress call from the Duke of Risciter. The brothel was so remote, and its clientele probably not men on the right side of the law, that even if one of them had discovered it, they probably wouldn't have reported it. Praxider thought of all these dead bodies rotting as the elements reclaimed the group of cottages. He shuddered.

But even with the tip off, things were not cut and dry. The Duke had

claimed that Keirth Transman, the man he said had committed these murders, was dead. But there was no sign of Transman, and the duke himself had been killed viciously. Praxider had yet to count the number of stab wounds in the duke's body. The only other body in the place that had been dealt with similarly was that of the madam's, who also sported numerous stab wounds. That hadn't been what killed her, though. She'd been killed by the cut to the throat, like all the other women's bodies. Only the men lacked the trademark throat slash of this killer, including the duke, who seemed to have stabbed in a fury. Perhaps Transman only cut the throats of women.

It was obvious, though, given that the duke was dead, that Transman hadn't been nearly as dead as the duke had thought.

The case bothered Praxider. He knew, of course, that there had been a distress call from Miss Ariana Gilit, claiming to have been captured by a man they now knew to be Keirth Transman. The Duke claimed that Transman had also killed Miss Gilit, but her body wasn't here. Was she alive as well? Had the duke been mistaken about that?

Or had Transman taken her body with him? A man who slit the throats of this many prostitutes clearly was a sick man. Maybe he wanted to do disgusting things to Miss Gilit's body.

But one thing bothered Praxider more than anything. If Transman had wanted to kill Miss Gilit, why had it taken him so long? Why not kill her right when he captured her?

He looked back at the brothel. Would he find his answers inside? He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He didn't want to look at all the dead girls again.

* * *

The Duke of Tramet read the story on the nets with a heavy heart. So, Keirth was a murderer, was he? He shouldn't have hoped for better, he realized. If only he'd gotten to the boy sooner. His mother had made it damned difficult, though, hadn't she, traipsing all over the

galaxy the way she had? It was a miracle Tramet had even known about Keirth in the first place, let alone tracked him down and followed him.

He supposed it should have been expected. The boy'd had a terrible life. His mother had seen to that. She'd raised him amongst lowlives. She'd exposed him to all kinds of horrific things. The boy probably couldn't help but absorb all that and come out mean.

Ah, but Tramet was making excuses, wasn't he? Did it really matter why Keirth had killed people? He'd killed people. Tramet didn't do himself any favors by harboring any more sympathy for the boy. He'd have to let it go.

It wasn't worth it anymore. Keirth was a monster. Tramet wanted nothing more to do with him. Besides, since Risciter had been his only lead, and Risciter was now dead, the trail had gone cold. It was time to give up.

Chapter Thirteen

Keirth crawled into the tiny bed on the ship, pulling the thin blanket over his body. He and Ariana hadn't gotten much sleep, and though he didn't feel tired exactly, he noted that Ariana had dark circles under her eyes and suggested they try to nap. The ship would be in hyperspace for several more hours. He'd programmed the ship to wake him by alarm before they reached their destination, wherever that might be. He really should look up the coordinates and find out where he'd sent them.

He started to get out of bed but then stopped. It didn't matter. He didn't care where they ended up. Not really.

He lay on his back, staring up into the darkness of the room. He had thought it would feel different. He'd been focusing on this for so long. He'd lived for killing Risciter. Now that Risciter was dead, he'd expected to feel vindicated and triumphant. He'd expected to have a feeling of accomplishment. But he didn't feel anything, not really.

It hadn't gone the way he'd planned it. In his dreams, he'd snuck up on Risciter, taken him unawares, tied him up and gloated over him while Risciter cringed from him in fear. He'd dreamed of wrenching apologies from Risciter's lips, of hearing Risciter say over and over again that he regretted what he'd

done.

In reality, it had been chaotic. Risciter had outsmarted him more than once. He'd had no control over the situation. He'd killed Risciter, not out of revenge, not really, but to protect Ariana, to save himself. It wasn't quite the same thing.

But it wasn't as if he could bring Risciter back to life and try again. It shouldn't matter how he'd done it. It was done. He'd achieved the thing he'd worked for his whole life. So why did everything seem so empty now? Why could he only think of the blood all over his body, of the sickening sound of the knife thumping into Risciter's body over and over again? And why did those

thoughts only make him cold inside, not proud?

Keirth rolled over onto his side. Now what?

He'd never thought beyond killing Risciter, not since he was fifteen years old. Afterwards, he'd assumed he'd be caught and killed, and he hadn't cared about that. He'd assumed that once he killed Risciter, he would feel finished. He could go to his death knowing he'd done what he set out to do. But he didn't feel any of that. And he didn't think he was ready to die.

But what else could he do? He'd killed Risciter with no thought of the consequences, and Risciter had sent a message that pinned the crimes on him.

He certainly couldn't go gallivanting all over the galaxy, wherever he pleased, not if the authorities were looking for him, which they would be. If he chose to live, he'd be on the run for the rest of his life, hiding, an outlaw.

Keirth rolled back onto his back. That was the way it would have to be, then. He wouldn't give up. He wasn't ready to die. If he was going to have to spend the rest of his life running, so be it.

Then his thoughts shifted to Ariana. What was he going to do with her? She was determined not to go back home to the sector. He'd wanted to leave her on Scranth before. Thank goodness he hadn't. Scranth hadn't been safe. And if

he hadn't been there, Risciter would have killed her. But now Risciter was out of the way. Ariana's safety wasn't in question. He wouldn't force her to go home, not if she didn't want, but he needed to find a place for her somewhere.

* * *

Ariana woke up gasping from a dream. In it, Risciter was chasing her through the rooms of the brothel, which were becoming narrower the more she ran. He was laughing, brandishing his knife, and calling her horrible names.

She sat up in her bed. It took a moment to remember where she was. On the ship. In hyperspace. Safe. Keirth had saved her.

She tried to steady her breathing. She was okay now. She was safe here. With Keirth. As long as Keirth was around, she didn't have to be afraid. But would Keirth keep her around? He'd been trying to get rid of her ever since she'd met him. Doubtless, he still wanted her gone.

Although maybe not. She thought of the kiss they'd shared on the ship, before Keirth had found the tracking device, before Risciter had... She shuddered. Everything regarding Risciter was a little blurry. She wanted to keep it that way. No, it was better to think of Keirth. Keirth covering her nakedness in the cottage, freeing her from the ropes that bound her to the bed. Better yet, Keirth

kissing her, his hands roaming over her body. His urgent lips. He'd wanted her. She'd known that he wanted her in that moment.

She wanted to be around Keirth. He kept her safe. But he might send her home, to the shame and rigidity that awaited her with her family. She couldn't face that. She lay back on her bed, remembering a conversation she'd had with Keirth on Trioth. He'd spoken to her about his resolve never to lie with a woman. He'd said that lying with a woman and then leaving her showed her contempt. He'd said that he couldn't commit to a woman because he was focused on revenge. But Risciter was dead now, so Keirth didn't need to

worry about that. And he wanted her.

So if she and Keirth were to be together, completely and totally, he'd keep her with him. She knew he would. And she needed to be near him. Needed to feel protected. So...

She pushed aside the blanket on her bed and padded out of her room to the door to Keirth's. It wasn't locked. She pushed it open. "Keirth?" He was probably sleeping and wouldn't hear her. Should she wake him up?

But to her surprise, she heard his gruff voice from his bed. "What?"

"I had a nightmare," she said. "I'm afraid. Can I...can I sleep in here with you?"

"These beds are narrow."

Well, that wasn't a refusal. "I know that." She went to his bed, sat down on it next to him.

He sighed, but scooted over on the bed, making room for her. She slid into the bed next to him, the heat of his body washing over her and making her feel warm and safe immediately. She curled up next to him, pillowing her head on shoulder.

Keirth went awkwardly rigid. He tried to scoot further away, but the beds were narrow, and he had no place to go. "Was your nightmare about Risciter?"

"Yes."

"He can't hurt you anymore."

"I know that. Thanks to you."

Keirth made a dismissive noise. "I

was going to kill him anyway, you know. You don't have to be grateful."

"You saved me," she said. "Of course I'm grateful." She placed the palm of her hand flat against his chest. He was firm under her touch, his body hard and lean. She ran her hand over his chest, grazing his belly with her fingertips. She took a deep breath. If she convinced him to do this, he'd stay with her. Keep her safe. So, she had to do it.

She let her hand drift lower on his body. A brief flash of Risciter over her crashed through her mind, but she shoved it away. She was doing this. She was going to get Keirth to stay with her. She inched her fingers even lower, reaching for his—

He snatched her wrist. “What are you doing?”

“Touching you,” she said. This was the way. She could do this.

“Don’t,” he said, moving her hand away from his body.

She put her hand back on his stomach. “Why not?”

Keirth disengaged his shoulder from where she was resting her head on it. He propped himself up to gaze down at her. She could see the shadows of his handsome features in the light that filtered in from the hallway. “What are you playing at?”

“What do you mean?” She put her hand back where it had been, tried again.

He pushed her away. “Keep your

hands off of me. Have you lost your mind?”

He wasn't the least bit interested. Perhaps that kiss in the ship all those—had it really only been hours ago? Perhaps it hadn't meant anything. “I only thought that we could...comfort each other.”

Keirth shifted again, sitting up. He winced. She could see his other shoulder, bandaged from where Risciter had stabbed him. “After what happened to you? After what Risciter did? You're confused.”

He'd said the name out loud. Involuntary shudders went through her. “No,” she said. “If you lie with me, I'll be safe. You'll make it go away. It will

be like it didn't happen." She trusted Keirth. She wanted to keep him too. This was the way. She grasped one of his hands and put it on her breast. "You want me. I know you do. When you kissed me, you touched me here."

Keirth jerked his hand away. "Stop it, Ariana."

She pressed her lips against his. "Please," she murmured against them.

For half a second, he kissed her back. But then he pulled away. "You don't know what you're asking." He got out of the bed.

"Keirth—"

"How can you think of anything like this right now?" he said. "When I close my eyes, all I see is blood."

She didn't know what to say. She saw it too, for a second, saw Risciter's body crumpled against the floor, slashed and stabbed and mangled. She grimaced, pushing the images to the back of her mind. She didn't want to think about it. She couldn't think about it.

Keirth's voice was a tattered whisper. "How could possibly think that I could do anything like that to you after I saw him on you? After I...after what I did to him?"

"I don't really remember—"

"Well, I do." He went to the door. "Get out of my bed."

"I'm frightened." She didn't want to be alone. She didn't know if she could bear being alone.

“Not like this, Ariana,” he rasped.
“Not like this.”

She got out of the bed and padded past him. She managed to keep her sobs inside until she was safe in her own room, and then she soundlessly cried into her pillow until she was so exhausted, she fell asleep.

* * *

Keirth couldn't go back to sleep. He went to the bridge and looked up the coordinates of where they would come out of hyperspace. He was surprised. Randomly, out of every place in the universe the coordinates could have chosen, the ship was taking them to the Pyrneath System. Keirth had never been there, but he knew someone who called

it home these days.

Keirth considered. Pryneth was pretty far out on the edges of deep space, far from the iron hold of the sector. Most of the planets in the system were inhospitable to human life and the ones that were only had small stretches that actually got warm enough for people to eke out an existence—generally around the equators. Pryneth had a reputation for being populated mostly by conspiracy theorist gun nuts. People who really wanted to be left alone.

But that was good, Keirth thought. If he was headed anywhere, somewhere remote like the Pryneth System was a good place to be. However, if he was thinking of looking in on his old friend

Gordic, he would be putting Gordic in danger from the authorities, who were very probably hunting Keirth. And Gordic had never been a particularly law-abiding citizen. Bringing the authorities to Gordic could ruin him.

Still, if he was going to be in Pryneth, it wouldn't hurt to at least say hello.

If Gordic didn't want him around, though, Keirth figured he'd made a quick jump in hyperspace to the Yeth System. That would only take fifteen minutes or so. And the ship still didn't have any food. Keirth hadn't eaten since Lilla had fed them on Scranth. His stomach had begun rumbling at him after Ariana had woken him up.

Ariana.

Why had she done that?

Keirth felt half-sick to his stomach thinking about it, but maybe that was only because he was hungry. He wasn't sure what was the worst about it, that she was behaving in a completely irrational way after being terrorized by a madman, or that when she'd been close to him in the bed, some part of him had wanted her. And the wanting her had been all tangled up in the disgust he felt for Risciter, and the horror at the way it had felt to kill him, and the fact that he'd nearly watched her be killed the same way his mother had.

The fact remained, nothing about the situation should have made her want

to lie with him, and he should have been stronger. He should have never have allowed his baser instincts to take hold, even in the slightest way. He never wanted to hurt Ariana. And the thought of her being killed, of his not being able to stop it...it ripped him apart. How was there room for feelings like that along with feelings of lust?

Because Keirth was certain there was nothing more inappropriate, and nothing more obscene, than wanting Ariana just then when she'd been touching him. But he had. And that was the kind of disgusting man he'd never wanted to be.

* * *

When Ariana woke up later, she

found Keirth on the bridge. He had the visual up on screen, and a man was talking to Keirth.

“You’re in system?” said the man.

“Just popped out of hyperspace right in your back yard, Gordic,” said Keirth. “Thought I’d say hello.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t believe it. I was just thinking of you this morning.”

“Oh?”

“Actually, it was because your face is plastered all over the nets with a big ‘Wanted’ sign hanging over it.”

Keirth nodded. “I figured that.”

“You finally got your man, did you? The reports all say the Duke of Risciter is dead.” Gordic stroked his chin.

“I did.”

“The rest of it’s bullshit, though, isn’t it? The Keirth Transman I know doesn’t slit the throats of women—especially not prostitutes.”

“So they *are* trying to pin that on me,” said Keirth. He leaned back in his chair. “No, Risciter’s the one who killed the women. I wasn’t in time to stop him.” His face fell.

“Sounds like you’ve had a rough time of it, mate. I’m guessing you’re angling for an invite to my little hideaway here, then?” Gordic was grinning.

“Not angling,” said Keirth. “I don’t want to put you in any danger if the authorities come searching for me out

here by some chance. I wouldn't want to endanger your illegal arms operation."

Gordic chuckled. "Oh, my gun business? No, I don't do that anymore. The little misses put a right stop to that. She makes quilts, in fact. I ship them all over the galaxy. We're as legit as it comes these days."

Keirth looked stunned. "You got married?"

"Oh, yeah," said Gordic. "Would have invited you to the wedding, but I never could keep track of your sorry ass. Anyway, mate, it's fine. We'd be happy to put you up for a bit. Pull your ship on up to the station."

"You could still get in trouble," said Keirth, "for harboring me when you

know I'm a fugitive."

"We'll claim you were disguised, mate," said Gordic, grinning. "Seriously, I'd love to catch up."

Keirth grinned back. "Well, thank you, Gordic. Your hospitality astounds."

"Not a problem, mate. See you in a few, then."

Keirth reached forward to switch off the visual, but then stopped. "Oh, Gordic. One other thing. I'm not alone."

Gordic raised his eyebrows. "Transman, you're always alone."

"There's a girl with me."

Gordic laughed. "You dog, Transman."

"Not like that," said Keirth. "I saved her from Risciter."

Gordic's face grew serious. "Well, of course, she's welcome as well. I'll let Winda know. My wife."

Keirth did switch off the visual this time. Ariana stepped into the bridge. "He a friend of yours?"

Keirth glanced up at her. "One of my oldest friends. Good man. He can feed us at the very least. You hungry?"

She realized her stomach was quite empty. "He lives on a planet here?"

"Nope. A space station. It's one of the old sector-built probes that they sent out during colonization. It's been floating around in the system for ages, so Gordic commandeered it a few years back." He smiled at her. "It should give you some time to relax. Recuperate.

Everything's been crazy for a while."

It had been. She smiled back at Keirth. He wasn't sending her away, anyway. Not yet. She had time. She had to convince him that he wanted her around.

* * *

Gordic reached across the table to refill Ariana's wine glass. "So we've been boarded by the Intergalactic Police at this point, right?"

Ariana was sitting at a table with Keirth, Gordic, and Gordic's wife Winda. They'd just eaten a large meal, the remnants of which were scattered over the table. Gordic had begun telling stories about Keirth, who he regarded as insanely daring. The dining room on the

space station was warmly lit and cozy. Ariana relaxed in the glow of a full stomach and the fuzzy head of a few glasses of wine.

“No,” said Keirth, laughing, “we decided all this before they boarded us. Because you wanted to dump the guns.”

“Damned straight I wanted to dump the guns.” Gordic refilled Keirth’s wine glass and then his own. “When you’re smuggling illegal weapons and the authorities show up, you don’t play games. No evidence, no arrest, mate.”

“But this was after we’d gone through hell to get the guns in the first place. I wasn’t dumping those guns. No way.” Keirth took a sip of wine, stretching out in his chair.

Ariana had never seen him like this, relaxed and laughing. She liked it.

“Well, anyway,” said Gordic to Ariana and Winda, who hadn’t heard this story yet, “Keirth decides we can snow the Intergalactic Police. So he goes to meet them when they board the ship, and he starts doing this voice...” Gordic collapsed in laughter at the memory. “Show them the voice.”

Keirth was laughing too. He sat up in his chair, struggling to get his features to relax. In a high-pitched drawling voice he said, “Oh, Mr. Policeman, welcome to our ship. Are you all so strong and handsome?”

Ariana guffawed. “You did *not*.”

Gordic was nearly falling out of his

chair from laughing so hard. “He was so damned good at it, too, that was the thing. And you should have seen the police officers after that. They’re all backing away from him, completely freaked out.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” said Keirth. “I wasn’t dumping those guns.”

“Yeah, it worked,” said Gordic. “He tells the police that our cargo is sex toys, and they let us go. They don’t even check our cargo bay. They can’t get out of there fast enough.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Ariana, smiling at Keirth.

Keirth spread his hands. “Believe it, sweetheart.”

She glared at him. “I thought you’d

stopped calling me that.”

“Never,” said Keirth.

Winda got up from her chair and began to gather up some of the dishes from the table. She bent down and kissed Gordic on the top of his head. “Well, I’m just glad you’re not smuggling guns anymore. I’d be out of my mind with worry.”

Gordic wrapped an arm around her waist and squeezed her quickly. “Me too. I can’t say I miss being in danger all the time.”

Ariana wasn’t used to seeing such casual displays of closeness at the dinner table. Husbands and wives were usually quite formal with each other back in the sector. She liked it. It was as

warm and cozy as the dining room.

Gordic got up too, picking up a few more dishes. Keirth started to move as well, but Gordic put a finger in his face. “You stay put. You’re our guests. You don’t help clear the table.”

Another thing Ariana wasn’t used to. Servants served food and cleared the table in her world. But as she watched Gordic and Winda together, their devotion to each other clear on their faces, it made her feel a strange hunger for that shared intimacy. Actually seeing to one’s own primary needs together. Cleaning up after oneself, it suddenly seemed to her, was a symbol of being in touch with reality, being real. Everything about the culture at the sector was

removed from reality. It was caught up in stupid rules and customs, but none of those things really mattered. The people of the sector pretended they mattered—maybe they even believed it. But without those rules, they would survive. Real work meant survival, and it was almost as if her family and the others on the sector had created false urgency to fill the need of doing something that ensured survival.

The table clear, Gordic and Winda sat back down at the table. Gordic had brought another bottle of wine, which he was opening.

“So, how did you two meet?” asked Keirth.

Winda and Gordic exchanged a

look, smiling.

“Winda tells this story better than me,” said Gordic. He’d opened the wine, and he topped off his own glass and offered the bottle to everyone else. Keirth took some more, but Ariana’s glass was still quite full.

“There’s no story,” said Winda, sipping at her wine.

“Sure there’s a story,” said Keirth. “There’s got to be a story.”

“We met at a bar on Trill,” said Winda. She turned to Ariana. “That’s the biggest planet in the Pryneth Sector.” She shrugged. “He was really arrogant, and I hated him, but he kept buying me drinks every time I saw him and telling me about the amazing space station he

lived on. Eventually, he wore me down, and I came home with him. I pretty much never left.”

“I’m not arrogant,” said Gordic.

Winda sipped some wine, giggling.

“You *are* arrogant.”

“No,” said Gordic. “I’m confident.” He slung his arm over the back of Winda’s chair.

“So,” said Keirth, “you gave up the smuggling business, then? Just like that?”

Winda and Gordic looked at each other again, as if they were deciding how to answer the question. They seemed to be able to communicate just by looking into each other’s eyes. Ariana had never seen anything like it before.

“You know, when I got into dealing

illegal weapons, I had this idea that it would be a big adventure all the time.” Gordic ran a finger around the edge of his glass. “After I almost got myself killed the fifth time, I started feeling like the adventure aspect wasn’t exactly worth it, you know? It wasn’t what I’d expected it to be in the end.”

Keirth looked into his wine.

Ariana wondered what he was thinking.

“What are you going to do now?” Gordic asked. “Ever since I met you, Transman, you’ve been focused on your revenge. Now it’s done. So now what?”

Keirth laughed, but it was a kind of hollow sound. “I never thought beyond it, you know. I always figured they’d

capture me, and I'd get killed. Oddly, I find I'm not quite ready to die."

"Who is ready to die, mate?" Gordic took a drink of wine. "Well, you'll have to stay off the radar for a bit, that's no question. They certainly are looking for you."

* * *

After the women had gone to bed, Keirth and Gordic sat in Gordic's den smoking cigars. Keirth stared up at guns that Gordic had hanging on the wall, and the two reminisced for hours. Keirth had to admit that Gordic was the last man he would have expected to find in domestic bliss. When he'd known Gordic, he'd been a confirmed bachelor who seemed to live for danger. Keirth had never

expected Gordic to settle down, but he couldn't deny that Gordic seemed happier than he'd ever been. And he and Winda were comfortable in a way that he wasn't really used to. Keirth supposed he hadn't had much occasion in his life to witness happily married couples.

Still, it was strange. Keirth had spent enough time planetside with Gordic, watching him seduce random women on a host of planets. In the morning, Gordic had always been ready to leave. On to the next adventure. He'd always seemed content to leave women out of it. What had changed? Why had Gordic completely shifted his life to be with Winda?

Finally, as the conversation about their shared hijinks began to wane, Keirth had to ask about it. “You met Winda in a bar, then?”

Gordic’s face transformed into a relaxed smile at the mention of Winda. “You should have seen her, mate. She had the sharpest tongue of any woman I’d ever met. She simply wouldn’t be charmed by me. And, as you know, I’ve charmed quite a few women in my time.”

“So that was what made her special? The fact that she didn’t want you?”

Gordic chuckled. “Trust Transman to cut to the heart of the matter.” He leaned back in his easy chair, puffing on his cigar. “Maybe you’re right. I didn’t

go to that bar looking for a wife, that's for sure. But once I saw her... I don't know. I couldn't get her out of my head, mate. The more she refused me, the more determined I became to get her."

Keirth wasn't sure he understood. "But you've changed, Gordic. Your whole life is different. And wanting this woman made you do that?"

"Transman the Monk wouldn't get it, of course," said Gordic. "You've never looked at a women twice the whole time I've known you. Sometimes I wondered if that act you put on for the police that time didn't have a kernel of truth."

Alarmed, Keirth shifted in his chair. "Absolutely not."

Gordic shrugged. “It’s really okay, Transman. You’ve never made me feel uncomfortable. If your taste runs that way—”

“I’m not attracted to men,” Keirth cut him off.

“Sorry,” said Gordic.

Keirth shook his head. “No, it’s fine.” He puffed on his own cigar. “But you chased women all over the galaxy. And none of them convinced you to stop smuggling guns until Winda.”

“Right,” said Gordic. He was quiet for a minute. “I don’t really know why that is, mate. Maybe it was her. Maybe I was just waiting for the right woman. Or maybe I’d gotten sick of it, you know? Chased all the time, dumping cargo,

being on the run from the authorities. It got old. Maybe I was looking for someone or something to change it. I don't know. But I wouldn't go back to smuggling, that's for sure." He cocked his head to the side. "Why are you asking me this, mate? This have something to do with the girl you brought along?"

Did it? Keirth had to admit that if he wasn't chasing Risciter across the galaxy, being transitory lost some of its appeal. And if he weren't planning on dying, there was less of a reason not to get involved with a woman. He remembered Ariana in his bed the night before... "She's been through a lot. She's not ready for anything like that."

Gordic raised his eyebrows. “I don’t believe it. Transman the Monk has a crush on a girl.”

Keirth shot him a dirty look. “Please, Gordic.”

But then Gordic got serious. “What do you mean, she’s been through a lot?”

Keirth studied his knuckles. “My revenge plan didn’t exactly work with Risciter. It wasn’t like I wanted. I didn’t tie him up and torture him. It was more like I pulled him off Ariana, got his knife, and stabbed him to death.”

Gordic grimaced. “It’s a good thing you killed that bastard.”

Keirth nodded. “But to pursue her now, after what happened, it would be obscene.”

Gordic puffed at his cigar. “That’s a touchy situation all right. I guess she’s pretty distant.”

“No, that’s the thing,” said Keirth. “She’s not distant. She’s... she keeps trying to get close to me, she—But how could she possibly know what she wants after what Risciter did to her?”

Gordic didn’t answer.

Keirth got up out of his chair. “Not to mention the fact that I’m wanted for murder. I can’t promise her anything. I could be captured at any time.”

Gordic got out of his chair too. He put a hand on Keirth’s shoulder. “These things tend to work out, mate. Come on, I’ll show you your room. It’s late.”

Keirth let his friend lead him to his

bedroom and got some clean bandages for his shoulder wound. He cleaned it and redressed it before he lay down. But long after he'd curled up in bed, he thought about Winda and Gordic. Could it really be like that between a man and woman? Could it just be easy and comfortable, no party taking advantage of the other?

He'd never given women much thought. What was the point? He'd always assumed he'd be living a short life during which he'd accomplish nothing but killing Risciter. Since Risciter was dead, and Keirth found himself with a strong desire to keep surviving, he realized he was going to have to give some thought to the idea of

women in general.

He'd always told himself that he didn't bed women because he was too honorable to use them and hurt them. It was true that he'd seen enough of that kind of behavior from men when he was growing up to find it cowardly and reprehensible. But if he were truly honest with himself, he found himself slightly disgusted by the act of sex in and of itself. It seemed so bestial, designed in some elemental way to force a woman into submission. He didn't want to hurt women. He didn't want to hurt Ariana. And the thought of taking her like that...it seemed...

He remembered a conversation with Lilla, years ago, when she'd tried

to thank him for some service he'd provided for her by suggesting he sleep with one of the women. Of course he'd refused. He remembered railing about how he wouldn't make one woman miserable to take his pleasure on her and various other noble sentiments. And Lilla had gotten angry. She'd said that there might be a reason women would choose a profession pleasuring men besides desperation. "Have you never considered a woman might not enjoy it?" she'd spat at him.

He couldn't believe that any did, and he'd told her so.

"Perhaps some women aren't built for one man," Lilla had said to him. "Perhaps some women enjoy a variety.

Perhaps some women choose not to be tied down, to treat the world as an adventure and to sample every cock in it.” She’d been angry.

The truth was that Keirth had spent his life viewing sex as a disgusting thing that men forced women to endure. But maybe he was being narrow minded to think that sex was really so horrible. After all, as Lilla had pointed out, it was a necessary part of reproduction. And so many people did it, seemingly enjoying it, so...

He gulped, thinking of the soft springy give of Ariana’s breast when he’d touched it. He liked the way she felt. If she really did desire it, perhaps he wouldn’t be hurting her if he bedded

her.

But that would complicate things, wouldn't it? What would he do with Ariana afterwards? Surely, she wouldn't want to jaunt about the galaxy, running from the authorities for the rest of her days, would she? And would he want her around him forever? The girl annoyed him beyond belief occasionally. There was also the matter of her being a duke's daughter. Her family would never stop looking for her.

Of course, Risciter had told his comm that Ariana was dead. Perhaps they wouldn't be looking for her anymore.

Keirth shook himself. What was he thinking? He'd been right at first. He'd

been right all along. Ariana had been traumatized. She was clinging to him because he was the only thing that hadn't hurt her. She'd get over her infatuation with him soon enough. He oughtn't plan their life out just because he'd been tempted by her body.

* * *

Now that it was quiet, and Ariana was alone in the dark again, she couldn't handle it. She couldn't sleep, but she couldn't move either. There was a sort of oppressive feeling of fear keeping her glued to her bed, lying on her back. But lying like this made her think of lying on the bed in the cottage, Risciter sneering at her as they waited for Keirth to wake up. She thought that part had been the

worst. The dread, knowing that it was going to happen, knowing there was nothing she could do about it.

Disturbingly, more and more of it kept coming back to her. Right afterwards, it had all been a blur, nothing but bright lights and the sound of Risciter's laughter. But now, she was remembering more and more of it. And as she lay in the bed alone here in this strange space station, she couldn't think of anything else. She kept replaying it over and over in her head. Risciter taunting her. Risciter touching her. Risciter over her.

And she couldn't move. She was trapped here, stuck with the memory of it. This was why she'd wanted to lie

with Keirth. She had no choice with Risciter. He'd tied her down. He'd laughed when she'd struggled. To Risciter, she hadn't been anything more than a thing to use. If she could have convinced Keirth to have sex with her, it would have meant she'd controlled it. It would have been an act that balanced, that erased what had happened to her. She thought.

But now, with the events of the previous night—or maybe it was two nights ago, she didn't know—drilling themselves through her brain, replaying themselves in full color and sound like a vid, she was trapped by them again. And she didn't think anything would erase them. Not even Keirth, who didn't want

to anyway.

Though she'd embarrassed herself with him before, if she could have moved, she would have. She would have gotten out of her bed and gone searching for his room. She didn't want to be alone like this.

She tried to move. She nudged one of her legs out over the side of the bed. A jolt of terror shot through her. It was easier to lie here, not moving. And maybe she'd go to sleep soon, if she tried. But that was how Risciter had gotten her. In her sleep. She'd gone to sleep alone and woken up tied to a bed with Risciter's hands on her body. Maybe she never wanted to sleep again. Or maybe she didn't want to sleep alone.

If she'd been with Keirth, would it have happened?

* * *

Winda woke up when Gordic crawled into bed with her. She rolled over to snuggle up to him. He wrapped her in his arms.

"You awake?" he asked.

"No," she said. She was sure she'd fall asleep in another minute.

"Transman's got it bad for that girl he brought along with him."

Did this matter? "I thought you said you thought he liked men."

"Well, he doesn't."

"Okay," she said, burrowing deeper into his warmth. "Well, that's lovely then." She yawned.

“Apparently, she was raped by Risciter. He said he doesn’t know how to pursue her now. I didn’t know what to say to him.”

Winda sat up in bed. “Raped?”

“Yeah, I guess I should have figured. He said he saved her from the duke.”

“You didn’t tell me that.” He was an idiot, her husband. Sometimes, he was a complete idiot.

“Yeah, I did,” he said. “Anyway, do you have any advice? I mean, after the thing with your sister, maybe?”

But Winda was already getting out of bed and throwing on her dressing gown.

“Where are you going?” Gordic

asked.

“My sister couldn’t sleep alone for weeks afterwards,” said Winda. “And we left Ariana alone in that room hours ago. I’ve got to go check on her.” She rushed through the space station to the guest rooms.

* * *

When the door to her bedroom slowly opened, Ariana let out a little yelp.

“Sorry,” said a female voice. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I only wanted to come by and make sure you were all right.”

It was Winda, Gordic’s husband. Ariana didn’t move from the bed. “I’m fine,” she managed.

“Were you sleeping? Did I wake you?”

Ariana wasn't sure what she should say. “No, I was awake.” She didn't want to explain that she'd been paralyzed by fear, unable to do anything but replay what had happened to her in her brain.

“Do you want some company? Should I turn on the light?”

“Um, sure.” Actually, that would be nice. Maybe she wouldn't feel so trapped by all of this.

As light bathed the room, Ariana found she could move. She sat up in bed. The light made her feel a little foolish. Everything seemed better already.

Winda sat down on the bed next to her. “Listen, Keirth told Gordic what

Risciter did to you, and Gordic told me.”

“What?!” How dare Keirth do something like that? She didn’t even know these people? Ariana felt hot embarrassment creep up her body and over her face.

“I know,” said Winda. “That’s terribly embarrassing. You don’t want everyone to know. But Gordic and I are friends, and we don’t judge you for it and think less of you at all. It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

Ariana did know. She’d been robbed of having a fault by Risciter. She’d had no choice. She refused to look at Winda.

“When I was sixteen,” Winda said,

“my older sister Emeil went to a bar one night. She and I grew up on Trill with our father. Anyway, she came home late, and my father was livid until he saw her. She wouldn’t talk about it for hours, and when we finally got her to tell us what happened, my father was so angry, he left the house with his blaster rifle to try to hunt down the man that did it to her. He found him. He killed him.”

Ariana looked at Winda with horrified eyes.

Winda nodded. “It was terrible. They arrested him, and so I was left at home with my sister, who’d been raped and was completely traumatized by it. My father didn’t end up serving much time after his trial, but I couldn’t get him

out of the jail myself, not before the trial. So I did my best to comfort Emeil. She hated the dark. And she hated being alone. And when Gordic told me what happened, and I thought that I'd left you alone in this room, in the dark, I just couldn't—"

Ariana put her hand on Winda's. "Thank you. I was...I was scared."

Winda wiped tears out of her eyes. "You don't have to talk about it."

"It seems like it's getting worse," Ariana said. "Right afterwards, I thought I was fine. I couldn't remember it very well. And Risciter was only... He only did it for a few seconds before Keirth stopped him. But now, more and more of it keeps coming back to me, and I feel

like I can't think about anything else."

"Of course, you can't," said Winda. "You don't have to sleep in here if you don't want. You and I could sleep in the living room. Or if you want me to get Keirth—"

"I don't want you to go to any trouble for me," said Ariana. "I'll be fine. Risciter's dead." She thought of his dead, mangled body. "He can't hurt me again." If she could keep the light on, maybe she could chase it all away. She couldn't spend the rest of her life afraid, could she? "It wasn't as bad for me as it was for your sister. It was only a minute. It was less than..." But Ariana found herself suddenly dissolving into tears.

Winda was hugging her, wiping

tears away from her own eyes, and Ariana sobbed against her. She hadn't cried since it happened, had she? It was good to let it all out, to let it go.

Keirth appeared in the doorway to her bedroom. "Is everything okay?"

Ariana looked up from Winda's shoulder, trying to get her sobs under control.

"Did we wake you?" Winda asked.

"No," said Keirth. He was across the room in a second, kneeling next to Ariana. "What's wrong?"

Winda rolled her eyes. "What do you think is wrong?"

Keirth looked at the blanket on Ariana's bed dully. "I wasn't quick enough," he muttered. "He killed them

all, and he almost killed you.”

Ariana touched Keirth’s cheek. He couldn’t blame himself. “Keirth, you saved me. I needed you to save me. Without you...”

He gazed up into her eyes. His voice was soft. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ariana. You fought him off before. You saved me from the gellococcus. It was your brilliant ideas that made things work out on Trioth. You’ve never needed me.”

Maybe he was right. Sort of right, anyway. She hadn’t done too badly. “But I messed up the hyperdrive. And I wasn’t going to fight him off that time. I couldn’t. He had me tied down. I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t do

anything. I had to let him do whatever he wanted. I did need you then.”

“If only I’d been quicker.” He shook his head.

“If only I’d hit him harder on Kush,” Ariana said, her voice growing fierce.

Keirth smiled a little. He was still staring into her eyes.

Ariana felt Winda’s weight leave the bed. “Maybe I’ll leave you two alone,” she said, sliding out of the room.

“He’s dead now, though,” said Ariana. “That’s what matters, right? Not how long it took or what we could have done better. And we survived.” And, she thought in wonder, it wasn’t all down to Keirth that they’d survived. She’d

helped too. “We survived together.”

He nodded. “We did.”

And their lips came together like magnets. There was none of the desperation of the kiss back on Scranth. It was sweet and comforting. Keirth’s lips were soft and yielding against hers. They broke away from each other slowly, their faces lingering close.

Keirth’s voice was in her ear. “Ariana, you don’t belong with someone like me. After everything you’ve been through—”

She cut him off. “After everything I’ve been through, who else could I belong with?”

He kissed her again.

And they slept, only slept, together

in her bed, Keirth's burly arms wrapped tightly around her. Encircled by him, she felt safe and protected. She fell asleep easily, no thoughts of Risciter troubling her. And she didn't dream.

Chapter Fourteen

None of them got out of bed until late the next day, when Gordic announced that because they were all hung over, they should spend the day watching vids and eating leftovers. This was fine with Keirth, who still felt slightly bewildered at the way things had turned out the night before. He certainly hadn't gone into Ariana's room with the intention of kissing her. Her crying had simply ignited his danger reflex. He'd gone to make sure she was safe. Which was important to him, he realized. Her safety.

Then, somehow, he'd spent the night holding her. That had been nice,

actually. Quite nice. He liked the way her small body fit against his. He liked being close to her. Keirth didn't think he'd spent such a long time being that close to another human being since he was a kid. But he wasn't sure what he'd done, exactly. He hadn't compromised her virtue or anything, but he felt like there had been some kind of promise in what he'd done, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to make that promise.

Now that he wasn't pursuing revenge, he didn't know what he wanted to do. However, even though Gordic and Winda seemed very happy together, he didn't know if he could live the way they lived. Keirth had spent most of his life on the move, never staying in one place

for too long. He didn't know if he wanted to give that up. And he worried that whatever he'd done with Ariana meant that he had somehow promised her he would.

Keirth wanted to get Gordic alone, to ask him more questions, like he had the night before, but the opportunity never presented itself. They really did spend the whole day watching vids—all sprawled out on couches in Gordic's and Winda's living room. Gordic and Winda went to bed earlier than Keirth and Ariana, leaving the two of them to sort out their sleeping arrangements.

When the vid they'd been watching ended, Keirth and Ariana sat awkwardly on the couch, staring at the blank screen.

Neither said anything for a long time.

Finally, Keirth just blurted it out. “I don’t know if I want to live in one place like this.”

Ariana seemed startled and confused by his words. “Like Gordic and Winda do?”

“Yes,” said Keirth. “I’ve always been on the move. I like that.” He found himself glaring at her, as if daring her to contradict him or force him to do something different.

But Ariana shrugged. “Well, I agree with you. My family had different estates on different planets, and staying in one place, when you’ve got the whole galaxy at your fingertips, seems kind of silly.”

He let out a breath. She didn’t want

to tie him to one place, did she? Well... Keirth felt himself deflating. All his worry was for nothing, in other words. He stood up from the couch. "Would you like me to stay with you again tonight?"

She nodded.

And soon they were tucked under the covers together again. She was in his arms, and she felt impossibly soft and impossibly fragile. He wasn't sure if he'd ever wanted to keep someone safe quite so much, if he'd ever enjoyed being close to someone so much. "We'd need to make money somehow," he whispered into her hair.

"When?" she asked.

"While we're traveling the galaxy," he said.

She wriggled in his arms to face him. “You want me with you?”

“Would I be sleeping in your bed and kissing you if I didn’t want you with me?”

“Possibly,” said Ariana quietly.

And he squeezed her tighter. “I am not one of those men.”

“How did you make money before?”

“Different things,” said Keirth. “Smuggling. Odd jobs.”

“I think we should be smugglers,” pronounced Ariana. “The stories you and Gordic were telling sounded exciting.”

“Exciting, but dangerous,” said Keirth.

“That seems to be the way things work for us,” she said.

He laughed and kissed her again. “Let’s think about some other options before we become criminals.”

“We already are criminals. Aren’t we?”

She was right, of course. They were quiet for several minutes.

Then Ariana spoke up. “If we’re going to be together, do you want to make love now?”

And Keirth felt himself pulling away.

“It’s just that you’re sort of...poking me, and I thought...”

Yes, being close to her aroused him. But... “Not yet.”

“Because you’re worried about me being confused?”

“Because...” he floundered. The thought of having intercourse with any woman, even Ariana, terrified him. He wasn’t sure what to do, for one thing, and he felt that his brush with Risciter was recent in his memory. He flashed on the man with Ariana, and his erection immediately disappeared. He squeezed his eyes shut, banishing the image. He pulled Ariana close and kissed her forehead. “When it’s time for us to make love,” he said, “we’ll know.”

* * *

They spent nearly three weeks with Gordic and Winda, and Ariana found the time relaxing and recuperative, just as

Keirth had told her she would. She helped Winda around the space station and Winda taught her a little about cooking, which Ariana had no experience with. She found that she actually quite liked it. It was like creating a painting or a work of art, picking spices instead of colors. The best part was that when you were done, you got to eat it. She watched Winda quilt as well, but found she had little desire to learn to do it. It seemed so difficult. But she assisted by cutting out pieces of fabric and doing some pinning. While she and Winda worked, they talked. Sometimes, they had long conversations about the things that Risciter had done to her and Winda's

sister's experience that left them both in tears. Sometimes, they had giggling conversations about men. With each passing day, Ariana felt more whole. She gained confidence about her ability to handle life away from the sector and to fulfill her plans with Keirth.

She and Keirth spent every night in the same bed, staying awake in the darkness and talking about what they would do. Keirth felt they would need to get rid of the ship they were currently using in case it had been identified. He seemed optimistic that with a different ship and a steady stream of various kinds of work, they could spend their time evading the authorities and roaming around the galaxy. To Ariana, it sounded

like every day would be an adventure. And she wanted to be with Keirth as well.

They still hadn't gone much farther than kissing, and sometimes it filled Ariana with an ache for something more as she lay in the circle of his arms. But sometimes she was grateful. While she rarely thought of Risciter when she was with Keirth, one night, as they'd been furiously kissing, his hands had roamed over her body, and the way he'd caressed her breast had reminded her of Risciter's running a knife over it. She'd felt completely frozen with fear and pushed Keirth away. He'd been sweet about it but seemed to take it as further evidence that they should take things

even slower, which both relieved Ariana and frustrated her.

Sometimes, when they were talking, he'd tell her about his mother or his childhood, and she realized that Keirth was almost as disturbed over the things Risciter had done as she was. They were quite a pair, weren't they? Both virgins. Both traumatized about sex. Both completely clueless about how to proceed. But that too was comforting as well as frustrating.

One night, over dinner, Keirth was sharing some of their ideas for making money with Gordic, not all of which were legal. Winda had gotten a little upset, saying she didn't think they should be making plans to do things that were

against the law. “You’re asking for trouble doing that,” Winda said.

Keirth had pointed out that he was already a wanted criminal, although he wasn’t featured as prominently on the nets as he’d been when they arrived. Risciter’s death was quickly becoming old news.

“About that,” said Winda. “You acted in self-defense, Keirth. And Ariana’s a witness to that. Maybe you should turn yourself in. You’d be acquitted.”

Ariana was shocked. “He would not.” This was the first time she remembered actively disagreeing with Winda.

“Why wouldn’t he?” said Winda.

“You’re an eyewitness. You’d tell them what happened.”

“They wouldn’t believe me.” Ariana was shaking.

“Of course they would,” said Winda. “They’d have to. When you testify in court, you’re under oath.”

“You’ve never been to the sector,” Ariana said. “You don’t understand the way it is. No one would believe that Risciter did the things he did. No one. And I...I couldn’t talk about it in front of a whole courtroom of people.” She imagined her parents and sister and Aunt Tildy staring at her while she explained what Risciter had done to her. In detail. No. No way.

“But if you didn’t talk about it,”

said Winda, “then Keirth would be convicted of a crime that isn’t his fault.”

Keirth had ended the entire conversation by quietly stating he wasn’t going to turn himself in. He’d squeezed Ariana’s hand under the table and later he’d promised she’d never have to go through something like that, not for him.

But it was clear that Winda didn’t approve of doing illegal things. A few days later, she proposed something completely different. She offered for Keirth and Ariana to work shipping her quilts. Currently, she said that they used independent contractors. Gordic would load up a ship full of quilts and take them to a rendezvous point where the shippers would pick them up and

distribute them. She thought Keirth and Ariana could do a better job. Plus she liked the idea of seeing them. They would come back periodically to visit.

Ariana liked the idea, but later when she and Keirth talked about it, he said that there were two big problems with it. One was that they still needed another ship, and the other was that, as legitimate shippers, they'd have to register their ship and their names with the authorities. But when he saw how disappointed Ariana seemed, he said he'd try to work something out. He went to Gordic the next day, and that night, he told Ariana what the plan was.

Gordic still had some contacts from his days as a smuggler, although he

didn't advertise this to Winda. He had set something up with a man who could get them new identities, untraceable by the authorities. They'd do a job for this man, smuggling some weapons in the old ship. He'd pay them and give them the new identities. Then they'd use the money to buy a new ship and register it under their new names. They could then start shipping quilts for Winda and Gordic. Keirth wanted to do the smuggling alone. He was worried about Ariana's safety. But she wouldn't let him. She was excited about the prospect of doing something as crazy as smuggling weapons anyway, and she wanted in.

So the two of them prepared for the

job. Before Ariana knew it, they were waving goodbye to Winda and Gordic and boarding their ship again. They'd be back soon, and Ariana would be glad to see them, but she felt a strong pull to get back out into space, and she was glad to be travelling again.

* * *

Keirth was checking over the crates of guns in the cargo bay. They'd been in hyperspace for about a half hour, headed for the planet Eron. Ariana watched him. "There anything wrong with the guns?"

Keirth shrugged, looking up from the crate. "Everything seems to be in order. I don't know. Monthow seemed nervous to me. I got a kind of funny feeling, like something's off."

Itrick Monthow was a short, fat man who was going a little bald. He'd paced and spit out instructions to them rapid-fire. "Here's how it works. You take the guns to Eron. You get the money for the guns. You come back here. You take your percentage out of the take, and you give me the rest of the money. If everything seems square, I give you the papers with your new names then. Clear?"

Keirth had tried to negotiate for Monthow to give them the papers before they left, but Monthow wouldn't budge. He didn't know them, hadn't worked with them before, and despite the fact that Gordic vouched for them, he wanted insurance that they wouldn't take his

money and run. Or so he said. So they had to play it his way.

“What could be off?” Ariana asked, coming over to peer into the crate of guns over Keirth’s shoulder.

Keirth shook his head. “I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.” He shut the crate and turned to Ariana. “Maybe I’m the one who’s nervous. I mean, here I am, planning out the rest of my life with the daughter of a duke. This is not exactly what I thought my life would turn into.”

“I make you nervous, Keirth?” Ariana teased.

“Always, sweetheart.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and picked her up, settling her on the gun crate. Then

he leaned down and kissed her.

Ariana ran her hands over Keirth's shoulders, thinking of the time they kissed in the ship, when touching him had been such a new experience. He was still so solid and firm under her fingertips. She ran her hands up and down his chest, comfortable touching him now.

Keirth pulled back, gazing down at her, one hand on her cheek. "We're really doing this, aren't we?"

"You don't want to back out now, do you?" She grinned up at him. "Maybe I make you too nervous."

"Of course I don't want to back out," said Keirth. "Are you sure you don't want to? You sure you want

someone like me? Someone rough around the edges?”

“Keirth, don’t be ridiculous. I’m in love with you, rough edges and all.”

He rubbed his thumb gently against her jaw. “Yeah.” His voice was husky. “I’m in love with you too.” He pulled her to her feet. “Maybe it’s time to stop being nervous.” His eyes searched her own.

She was right up against him, her hands in his. “Do you mean...?”

He raised an eyebrow. “What do you think? You wanna make love in hyperspace?”

Ariana felt a kind of giddy thrill go through her. Underneath, panic stabbed at her stomach. “Yes,” she said, but she

couldn't deny that the thought was scary in all kinds of big ways.

They kissed again, but their kissing seemed a little sloppy, a little hurried, a little frightened.

Ariana looked around the cargo bay. Did he mean to do it here? "Should we, um, go somewhere else?"

"You mean like a bedroom or something?" he said. He wasn't looking at her either. He was studying the gun crate.

She looked at it. "Unless you want to do it on the crate?"

His gaze snapped back to hers. "Uh, no. Let's..." He tugged on her hand and led her out of the cargo bay.

Ariana's heart thumped in her chest

as they walked. She wasn't sure why everything suddenly seemed so awkward. There hadn't been any awkwardness all those nights they'd slept in each other's arms. This was a natural progression, so why did it frighten her? She'd wanted this, so why was she feeling so unsure of herself?

The beds on the ship were narrow. They both sat down on it and looked at each other.

Well. Someone should do something, right? Ariana started to reach over to touch Keirth's shoulder again.

At the same moment, he leaned over to kiss her.

They stopped short of colliding with each other.

They both laughed.

“Uh, yeah,” said Keirth. “Guess it’s one thing to say you won’t be nervous. It’s another thing entirely to stop being nervous.”

She giggled. “Yeah.” She scooted closer to him on the bed and lay her head on his shoulder. “I guess I’m not sure what to do. Are we supposed to start ripping each other’s clothes off or something?”

He put his arm around her. “I doubt there are rules, exactly. There’s no way we’re ‘supposed’ to do it.”

She turned her face up to his. “Yeah, and neither of us really has any experience, so I guess we should just...”

He put his lips against hers. They

fell back on the bed.

Ariana hit her head against the headboard. "Ouch." She sat up, rubbing the bump.

"Sorry," said Keirth.

"No, it wasn't your fault." She lay back down more carefully, so that she and Keirth faced each other, both lying on their sides. She put a hand on his chest and kissed him again.

This time, they both seemed to relax a little more. The kiss deepened. Keirth's tongue eased its way into her mouth. She loved that, the way it made her feel consumed by sensation. Her hand traveled over Kierth's arm, feeling his taut muscle, his chest, and his back.

And Keirth was touching her as

well, his hand traveling over her waist, half-tickling her, sending goosebumps up her torso. His hand moved higher until he was cupping her breast.

She let out a tiny gasp.

Keirth stopped kissing her. “Okay?” he murmured, and she knew he was worried about the last time he’d touched her here.

“Definitely okay.” His hand was just resting there, but even so, it sent little tendrils of pleasure through her.

His fingers began to move over her breast, caressing and slightly squeezing it, and that felt even nicer.

Her breathing quickened, and she sought his lips again.

While they kissed, his hand roamed

over her other breast. She shifted a little to make sure he could get to it. His fingers danced back and forth between them, rubbing over her hardening nipples, which were pressing against the jumpsuit she was wearing. Ariana was transfixed by the feel of it. It was sweetness and delight. It felt so good. She felt even more relaxed, like she wanted to open herself to him entirely, just come undone under his fingers. For quite some time, she only kissed him and enjoyed his touch.

Then a thought occurred to her. Maybe she was being greedy. Maybe there were things she should be doing to him to make him feel good too. Her hand was currently flat against stomach. She'd

been so distracted by his hands on her breasts that she had stopped moving it a while ago. She dragged her hand lower, searching for the part of Keirth that she'd felt rigid against her in the night so many times.

When her hand closed over it, it was hot and stiff. She could feel it through Keirth's trousers, like it was trying to burst out on its own. She wrapped her fingers around it.

Keirth choked.

She released it. "Was that bad?"

He laughed, his hand on hers, urging it back to where she'd been. "Surprising. But very good."

With his hand over hers, he guided her to stroke him—up and down over the

hard length of him. She enjoyed the sound of Keirth's ragged breath as she did so, the way he sighed with each touch.

Ariana thought that she might have been able to do that for a very, very long time. There was something very intriguing about having it in her hand like that. It pulsed against her, like it was alive in and of itself, some subservient being attached to Keirth. And she very much enjoyed affecting him the way she was, knowing that she was bringing him pleasure. But he stopped her, mumbling something about waiting, which she didn't entirely understand. Were they going to stop then? Didn't he want to do it after all?

But Keirth's hands were back on her breasts then, and he was fumbling with the clasp on her jumpsuit. She had a horrible flash suddenly. She was back on Kush, and Risciter was glaring down at her, jeering, "Easy access."

She shuddered.

Keirth must have felt her body stiffen. He pulled away from her. "What?"

But she didn't want to give it words. Saying it out loud would make the whole thing have more power. She shoved the thought away. She was with Keirth. Keirth was sweet and good, and he wouldn't hurt her. She shook her head. Then she unclasped her jumpsuit herself, and it opened all the way to her

navel. She could feel cool air against the skin between her breasts, on her belly.

Keirth gazed into her open jumpsuit with wondering eyes.

Feeling a little shy, she peeled it over her shoulders, exposing her breasts to him.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. He lowered his mouth to her nipple, and then he was sucking on it. Tremors shot through her, thrilling jolts. She writhed under his mouth, arching her back to let him have more of her. His other hand teased her other nipple. Both of them being stimulated at once seemed to be too much goodness for words. She found herself moaning, and when Keirth switched and put his mouth on her other

nipple, she moaned even louder. She hadn't realized how much that one had been begging for his attention. This too could have gone on for a very long time without making Ariana upset one bit.

But soon Keirth was kissing up from her breasts, planting kisses on her neck and jaw, making her shudder from pleasure this time, and then his mouth was on hers again, and her sensitive nipples were rubbing against his shirt.

Keirth was pushing her jumpsuit over her arms, trying to free her of it entirely. She sat up to help him, stripping it completely away from her torso.

Keirth yanked his shirt over his head.

And she had to put her hands on his

bare chest. His skin was silky, but just underneath, he was all hardness and angles. She wanted to brush her fingers over every bit of it. She wanted to press her skin against his...

And so she did. She kissed him, pushing her breasts against his chest. His bare arms came around her. She was encased in soft, silky warmth. Skin on skin. She panted against his mouth, still touching him, gliding her fingers over the muscles in his back, over his rib cage. He was glorious.

Keirth was tugging on her jumpsuit, trying to push it the rest of the way off. She put her hands on the place where his trousers fastened and undid the clasp.

Keirth peeled the jumpsuit further

over her hips.

She eased his trousers down a little.

Keirth tried to help her by lifting his hips up, but it didn't really work. They both started laughing.

Keirth kissed her again, sliding his hands over her.

It made her gasp. She kissed him again, and that was distracting for a little bit. But then Keirth pulled away. "I want to take this jumpsuit off you. Can we do that?"

She laughed. "Okay." She lay on her back, and Keirth knelt over her, pulling it over her legs. His trousers were sliding down, but his erection was holding them up. She reached up and

tugged them out of the way.

Keirth looked down at himself. He was in the middle of pulling one of legs of her jumpsuit off. She was one leg in and one leg out. He looked back up at her.

“I wanted to see it,” she said. And now that she had, she was completely mesmerized. She’d gotten a general idea of it when she was stroking it earlier, but it was much more detailed than she’d thought. She sat up to explore it further, rubbing her forefinger over its ridges and planes before wrapping her hand around it again to stroke it the way she’d been doing before.

Keirth groaned and seized her wrist. “Ariana, you are going to make

me come before I even get inside you.”

She let go. “Is that a bad thing?”

He yanked the leg of her jumpsuit off. “There are things I want to see too, you know?” And he eased her legs apart, one hand inching its way up her thigh.

She gulped. That felt nice. His fingers brushed her between her legs, and it was intense and sweet, too good. She lay under his exploring fingers for a little bit, her legs opening wider and wider for him. But eventually, she was guiding his hand the way he’d guided hers, moving his fingers higher, so that he was rubbing her in exactly the right spot. And she lay there, squirming under his touch, crying out at the sheer joy of it.

That especially could have gone on for eternities. Ariana knew that if that particular spot was handled for long enough, she'd experience this kind of amazing burst all through her body. It was a sort of shameful thing she'd discovered that she'd never really shared with anyone. And she figured that if Keirth did it, it would feel even more amazing than if she did it herself. But Keirth stopped before it happened.

He lay the length of his body over hers, propping himself up on his elbows, and he kissed her. She lost herself in his kisses, feeling him press against her between her legs, urgently. Of course. It was going to be that. That was what Risciter had done after all. But only for

a second—only a second. And she hadn't felt like she did right now, bursting with pleasure, relaxed and open, ready for it.

Still, when she felt Keirth push into her, she bit her lip hard, a little frightened.

Risciter had ripped into her.

Keirth slid.

And once he was there, all the way in, he kissed her again. He murmured her name against her lips. She forgot all about Risciter. Keirth was all she could think about. Keirth was over her and in her, touching her, and she was lost in it. She clutched him to her, and outside their ship hurtled through hyperspace, colors streaming past it madly.

Keirth wrapped his arms around Ariana, feeling warm and drowsy. He wasn't sure why he'd held back for so long. It wasn't exploitive. He hadn't hurt her. He wasn't a bad man. It had been about the two of them together, not simply about him. The way she was gazing adoringly at him was proof enough of that. He kissed her forehead.

“See?” she whispered. “Nothing to be nervous about after all.”

He had to chuckle. His eyes felt heavy. He closed them, pulling her against his body. It made sense, he supposed, why men would pay for this. But he didn't think it could possibly be this nice if he thought the woman was

only in it for money. The way they felt together, the fact that they'd been joined completely, it was like they'd been melded together for a period of time. And Keirth thought *that*, instead of the pleasure of orgasm, was what made it so powerful. Being part of someone else, someone else being part of him. His thoughts began to fray at the edges as sleep claimed him. He didn't resist it. Everything was perfect.

Ariana was shaking him gently. "Are you asleep?"

"Not anymore," he muttered. He opened his eyes.

"I think we're going to come out of hyperspace in a little bit," she said.

"No way," he said. "I only closed

my eyes for a second.”

“No, you didn’t,” she said. “Because I’ve been lying here next to you for at least an hour. I might have fallen asleep too.”

Keirth rubbed his face. Great. So he’d slept for a while. And sure enough, the ship started beeping to let him know that they’d be exiting hyperspace in a half hour. Keirth jumped out of bed and pulled his trousers on. “Stay here,” he told Ariana. He ran to the bridge, turned off the alarm, and checked to make sure everything was in order. Then he climbed back into bed with Ariana, who was propped up on the only pillow in the bed.

“You gonna share that?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Not sure.”

He put his head on her shoulder instead. She wrapped her arm around him. Now he was pillowed on her breast. Nice. He couldn't resist lifting his head to put his mouth on her nipple again for a second.

She squealed.

He rested his head on her breast again. “We should get married.”

Ariana laughed. “Is this a proposal, Keirth, because I feel like they usually involve asking questions.”

“Do you want to get married?”

“Keirth...”

He repositioned himself so that he was facing her, propped up with one arm. He kissed her. “Seriously. We'll

have new names, and we'll be legitimate, and we're going to travel the galaxy together. Doesn't it make sense to get married?"

She was grinning. "I guess so."

"Is that a yes?" he asked. "Because usually they sound more certain."

"It's just backwards is all. I think people usually meet, fall in love, get married, have sex, and then maybe they save each other's lives. But we've got it all jumbled."

"Would it make you feel better if I got down on one knee?"

She laughed again. "No." She kissed him. "Yes."

He raised an eyebrow. "Feeling confused?"

“I mean, yes, I’ll marry you, you idiot.”

“Good.” And they were kissing again, and she was naked against him, and Keirth let his hands sweep searchingly over her glorious skin. If they weren’t going to be out of hyperspace soon, he’d... He forced himself to pull away.

“I would like a ring, though, I think,” said Ariana. “I mean, I guess it doesn’t matter—”

“Of course it matters,” said Keirth. “After all, I have to make sure other men know you’re spoken for.”

She smiled at him, running her hands over his chest. “We couldn’t have that, now could we?”

For a man who'd been pretty sure his life would be over after he completed his revenge, things were certainly looking up. He thought that with Ariana with him, he couldn't possibly be happier. "You and me," he whispered. "Together, traveling wherever we want, seeing the universe."

"It sounds perfect," she said.

And it was perfect. There was nothing more perfect than the two of them together in their narrow bed on the ship as it streamed through space. Nothing. But eventually, they had to get up and get dressed. There were guns to be sold.

* * *

"Sorry about the visual," said a

voice filtering through the ship's comm in the bridge. "We've got a bit of a malfunction here. Hasn't worked in a week."

"That's fine," Keirth said. They'd just come out of hyperspace near the planet Eron. Once in regular space, Keirth had made contact with the people they were smuggling the guns to. "Just send me some coordinates and we'll touch down and get this show on the road." The people he was working with were touchy, apparently. They hadn't wanted to give their exact location to Itrick Monthow because they were paranoid. Instead, they'd indicated that Keirth would need to contact them once he was in system. Keirth wasn't sure if

this was standard practice or not.

“Transmitting now,” said the voice.

Keirth checked his console. “Yep. Got it. See you planetside.” He plugged the coordinates into the ship and told Ariana to strap in. Going back into an atmosphere was usually a little bit bumpy.

He didn’t have trouble landing the ship. There was a nice big field to set her down in. Once they’d landed and powered down, he and Ariana went to the cargo bay. “They’ll probably meet us down here,” he told her, opening the hatch so it would be easier to unload the gun crates. He wanted to reach over and grab her hand, or pull her close, but he didn’t think it was a great idea for them

to look like lovestruck idiots in front of the men who were buying guns, so he squelched the desire.

The hatch opened. Keirth peered out to see if anyone was there. He didn't see—

A man appeared from around the side of the ship. He was dressed in a black jumpsuit. He had a blaster trained on Keirth.

Keirth backed away from him, hands up. They were going to get robbed? This was great. They'd never get the money or their identities now. That is, if these guys even left them alive. They might decide to kill Keirth and Ariana, so as not to leave loose ends.

There was another man behind the first, similarly dressed, also holding a blaster. As Keirth watched, more poured in. He kept backing up, glancing for Ariana. He wanted to tell her to run. He wanted to do anything to save her.

And that was when he noticed the lettering on the black jumpsuits. Intergalactic Police. Keirth's heart sank.

"Keirth Transman," said the first man with a blaster, "you are under arrest."

The visual. No wonder they hadn't used a visual. If he hadn't been distracted by the fact he'd just been with Ariana, maybe he would have realized something was off about it. The whole thing had felt off, hadn't it? Itrick

Monthow must have sold them out. Probably he could make more money turning Keirth in than he could from selling guns.

There were so many blasters trained on him, Keirth didn't have a chance to make a move. Someone was behind him, fastening cuffs on his wrists.

Ariana charged forward in a blur. Keirth only caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye. She lunged at the man cuffing Keirth, knocking him to the ground. She was screaming, "No, no, no!"

"Ariana," he yelled. "Stop it."

But another man was pulling her off the first man. "You hold still, or we'll cuff you too, little lady."

Keirth caught her gaze with his own. “Don’t,” he said.

She stared at him, agony all over her face. She was crying.

Chapter Fifteen

Ariana had struggled and cursed and fought so hard that they'd stuck her with a needle at some point, and she'd lost consciousness. She didn't know where they'd taken Keirth. One of the men had recognized her during the arrest and made sure she wasn't cuffed or arrested. She heard words like "victim" being thrown around. No matter how hard she'd screamed or what she'd tried to tell these men, it hadn't mattered.

Now, she opened her eyes to find herself in her bedroom at her parents' estate on the planet Risciter. She'd been undressed, put into her sleeping garments, her hair braided, and tucked

under the covers. It was as if she'd never left. She sprang out of bed and started for the door. She had to find out where Keirth was, and then...

Well, she didn't know what she'd do then, but there had to be something she could do. They thought he was a murderer, and he wasn't.

The door was locked. She pressed the button for it to open over and over, but it just kept flashing at her. They'd locked her in her room? How dare they?

Ariana began to pace in front of her bed. What was she going to do? It had been so long since she'd been in this world, she'd practically forgotten how things worked. She'd never been locked in her room before, of course, but she'd

always practically been a prisoner. She couldn't go places because it wasn't proper, and she'd never had access to anything she actually owned without the help of a servant.

Servant!

Yes, if she wanted to be let out of this room, she needed to contact a servant. Usually, she'd use her comm. Of course, she didn't have one anymore, but most rooms had a comm that connected to the kitchens, at least. She found it next to the door. She pressed the speak button. "I need assistance."

"Miss Gilit?" came a voice from the comm. "I'll send Sadie up right away."

Good. Okay. Ariana sat back down

on the bed, trying to calm herself down. When Sadie got there...

When Sadie got there, what? She was a lady's maid. There was no reason to think that Sadie could help her get to Keirth. She didn't even know where Keirth was. She'd only been back in the sector for a few minutes, and she was already imprisoned by it. She couldn't handle this.

The door opened, and Sadie entered. She curtsied. "Well, miss, we sure haven't seen you in a while. Was it as terrible as it says it was on the nets?"

"No," said Ariana. She considered. "Well, some of it was terrible. What does it say on the nets?"

"Well, you was captured by that

crazy man, wasn't you? Transman. He's a rapist and serial killer, he is. Did he hurt you, miss?"

"He's not a rapist or a serial killer," said Ariana. "They've got it all wrong. He never hurt me." And tears were filling her eyes. How could she have been so happy just a few hours ago, snug in Keirth's arms, thinking about marrying him, and now have it all completely torn away from her?

"Well, I guess it was all pretty bad, then," said Sadie. "They told me not to ask you about it too much. I'm sorry, miss." She curtsied again. "What did you need me for, then?"

Ariana stood up. "I want to leave."

Sadie's face fell. "Oh. Well, you

can't do that, you know? They said to make you comfortable as best we could, but to keep a close eye on you."

Ariana sagged against her bed post.

"I'm very sorry, miss. Your parents will be coming in from Wendo tonight. There's going to be a dinner party to welcome you back. If you look in the wardrobe, there's a very pretty dress that I'm to help you into later—"

"A dinner party?" Ariana was completely flummoxed. Her parents, who assumed she'd been held captive by a rapist and serial killer, were going to throw her a dinner party? Were they completely out of their minds?

"I'm sure it will be very nice." Sadie's voice was tiny. She was

cowering away from Ariana in a way that Ariana had never seen the girl behave. Apparently, Ariana was scary now. Well, good.

Ariana took a deep breath and began to pace again. “So, they’re going to pretend like none of it happened, I suppose. They’ll have a nice dinner, shove it all under the rug, and go on. Meanwhile, they’re keeping me prisoner here.”

“I’m so sorry, miss,” said Sadie.

Ariana waved her away. “Go away, Sadie.”

Sadie started for the door.

“Wait,” said Ariana. “Bring me a net tablet.” If she couldn’t leave the house, at least she could find out what

was going on in the sector. Maybe if she sent out a few blasts over the the net, she could try to get people to see that what they thought of Keirth wasn't true.

Sadie stared at the floor. "Well, they thought that access to the net might just upset you, miss, so they've ordered us to keep it from you."

Ariana let out a roar of frustration. "Get out of my sight."

When Sadie left the room, Ariana felt guilty. It wasn't the girl's fault, after all. She was only doing what she was told. It seemed her only recourse was the dinner party. She'd be sure to have a lot to say that evening.

* * *

Keirth hadn't offered any resistance

to his arrest, but they'd beaten him anyway. Once they'd hauled Ariana away the police had taken turns kicking him and ramming the butts of their blaster rifles into his face. He was bloody and bruised when they brought him into the courtroom on Risciter.

He'd never been in such a room before. It was all gilded arches, high ceilings, and glittering pillars. The judge sat on a high bench, at least twenty feet in the air, glaring down at him as they dragged him forward. Why was he in a courtroom already?

Keirth knew a bit about arrests, mostly things he'd learned from the people he'd met who'd been through the sector's legal system. He knew things

worked a bit differently here than they did on the colony worlds, but most people claimed the sector was a bit more civilized. There were more comfortable jail cells, court-appointed counsels, and other sorts of things that made being arrested on the sector seem more appealing. Of course, it wasn't likely you'd get arrested on a colony world. Mostly, on the colonies, you just got shot. Some places were more civilized than others, of course. Here, in the sector, things were supposed to be the most civilized of all.

“Ah,” said the judge, “he’s here.”

The police shoved Keirth into a seat at a table in front of the judge’s bench. Across from him, Keirth could

see a man in a suit seated with a few other police officers, all in their dress uniforms. A camera was buzzing around the room. It fluttered down in front of his face. Keirth batted it away, and it tumbled through the air a few feet before righting itself.

The judge banged a gavel down. "The state vs. Keirth Transman," he said. "Prosecution may begin."

Wait a second. This was his *trial*? He'd barely been arrested. He certainly hadn't been processed or given counsel or anything. He stood up. "Your Honor?"

The judge glared at him. "I have not recognized you, have I, scum?"

"Aren't I supposed to get a court-

appointed counsel or a comm message or something?" Keirth asked.

"Sit down," thundered the judge.

Keirth didn't. "I'm fairly sure you're violating my rights."

"This," said the judge, "is the King's Bench and Star Chamber, where we hear only the most heinous crimes against the nobility. I decide what rights you have, and I've decided, due to the nature of your crimes, you deserve none."

A policeman pushed Keirth back into his seat.

"Prosecution, proceed," said the judge.

The man in a suit opposite Keirth stood up. "The state calls Sergeant Nol

Praxider.”

One of the uniformed policemen got up and took the stand. He swore his oath and sat down.

The prosecuting attorney stood behind his table. “Sergeant Praxider, you were the investigating officer on the scene on Scranth, were you not?”

Sergeant Praxider nodded. “That’s true.”

“And can you briefly describe the nature of the crimes perpetrated at the brothel there?”

“There were thirty-three bodies,” said Praxider. “Twenty-nine of them were prostitutes who worked at the brothel, two were customers of the prostitutes, one was a small girl of about

eight, and the final body belonged to the Duke of Risciter. All had their throats slashed except the girl, the men, and the duke, who was killed by multiple stab wounds, which is actually something I find rather strange, and I wonder—” Praxider turned to the judge— “perhaps if the department could be given leave to question the suspect now that we have him in custody, we could determine if there wasn’t more to this crime than meets the eye?”

Keirth held his breath. The sergeant had seen something strange had happened. Maybe they’d listen to him. Maybe he could still prove his innocence.

The judge grimaced. “You will

answer the questions as they are given to you, Sergeant.”

Keirth let his breath out. Not a chance.

The prosecuting attorney straightened his lapel. “With the exception of the small girl, does it appear that all of these bodies were killed with the same weapon?”

“Yes,” said Praxider.

The attorney picked up a clear bag, with Risciter’s knife encased in it.

Keirth stared. Why hadn’t he thought to take the knife? Why had he left it there?

“Is this the weapon?” asked the attorney.

“It appears so,” said Praxider.

“Were there any fingerprints found on the weapon?”

“Actually, yes,” said Praxider. “Some of them belonged to the duke, and some belonged to someone we couldn’t identify. Given that we haven’t actually had the chance to fingerprint Keirth Transman, we can’t be sure that they belong to him.”

The prosecuting attorney pursed his lips. “Might there have been a reason that the duke’s fingerprints were on the knife?”

“I’m sure it means that he was holding it at some point,” said Praxider. “Although, oddly enough, the duke’s body was found wearing gloves, which I think is quite strange—”

“I’m referring, of course,” said the prosecutor, “to a distress call that you received from the duke himself. Didn’t you get a message from him indicating that he had attempted to fight Transman off, and wouldn’t that account for his fingerprints on the knife?”

“Well, we did receive a message,” said Praxider, “and the duke also claimed he’d killed Transman, which, as you can see, wasn’t true. Further, the duke claimed that Miss Ariana Gilit had also been murdered, but we took her into custody earlier today, and she appeared in fine health. I really must indicate again that my department has not had sufficient time to make heads or tails of this case and—”

The judge banged his gavel. "I've heard enough," he said. "I find the defendant, Keirth Transman, guilty of the willful and horrific murder of Terence Yon, the Duke of Risciter, and hereby sentence him to death by hanging."

Keirth was on his feet again. "Don't I get the chance to defend myself? To call witnesses?" What kind of trial was this?

"The sentence will be carried out in the morning," said the judge, banging his gavel again. He stood up and turned with a swirl of his robes.

Policemen grabbed Keirth and yanked him out of his chair.

Praxider was standing up in the witness box. "Your Honor, this is highly

irregular, even for the Star Chamber.”

The judge didn't respond.

Keirth was tugged out of the room. His struggling didn't make any difference.

* * *

Ariana strode into the parlor, dressed in the “very pretty” dress that Sadie had told her about earlier. She'd had Sadie redo her hair three times, claiming she didn't like the effect, when in actuality it was fine. She wanted to be a little late. She wanted to make an entrance.

The guests for the dinner party had already arrived, which was the way she wanted it. She could see that her parents were there, as well as Aunt Tildy, and

her sister Maga. There were also about seven or eight other members of the nobility. No one particularly well-placed, of course, because she and her family were on the planet Risciter, and most people in the sector were on Wendo, since it was fashionable this season. Ariana wondered why they'd brought her to Risciter anyway. Wouldn't it have been easier to ship her to Wendo, where her family was?

It hardly mattered. Ariana let one of the servants fetch her a drink, and then she waited until everyone had seen that she'd entered the room. Maga ran to her immediately, and her parents followed, no doubt ready to give a very public and very emotional welcome to her, but

Ariana held up her hand to stop them.

Clutching her drink, she addressed everyone in a loud voice. “As this dinner is given in my honor since I have returned, I thought I’d give a small speech to thank you all for welcoming me.”

That sounded good, didn’t it? All around her, everyone was smiling and nodding in approval.

Excellent. Ariana cleared her throat. “Except for the fact, of course, that I’d rather not be welcomed at all. While I was away, I discovered that the man who’d been courting me, the Duke of Risciter, was actually a violent pervert who attempted to violate and kill me. I was present when he slaughtered

an entire brothel full of women, and if it hadn't been for the actions of one very brave man, I might have died. That man is Keirth Transman, and he's been wrongly arrested for a crime he didn't commit. His only crime was to protect me."

At this point, Ariana's mother was trying to shush her. "Ariana, please." She turned to the other people in the room. "She's been through quite an ordeal. I'm sure she doesn't know what she's saying."

But Ariana only spoke louder, doing her best to drown out her mother. "He does not deserve the treatment given him, and I do not wish to stay here. Keirth and I are in love, you see, and

before he was arrested, we were to be married—”

But she didn't get any more of it out, because her mother, her father, and a cadre of servants propelled her from the parlor and away from the guests.

* * *

Ariana sat in a chair in one of her family's studies. Her father had a drink, which he rested on the mantle of the fireplace. Her mother was sitting in a chair opposite Ariana. She'd been crying, but Ariana didn't care.

“You've upset your mother terribly,” said her father.

“It was completely inappropriate, Ariana,” said her mother. “How could you say things like that in front of our

guests?" She twisted her hands in her lap. "They'll all be talking about it, that's for sure. The scandal. You won't be able to show your face for months, and your family will be just as tarred with your broad strokes of disaster. What were you thinking?"

She'd been thinking exactly that, of course. If she could get the word out on Keirth's innocence, maybe it would help. It was the only thing she could think of to do. Now that it was done, she didn't much care what her family thought or what society thought either. Ariana sat rigidly, refusing to answer.

"We didn't have to travel all the way from Wendo to welcome you back, you know," said her father. "When we

learned you were here, we came to you, we organized this dinner in your honor —”

“On short notice, too,” added her mother, “and you know how difficult such things can be.”

“—and this is how you repay us,” her father finished. “We didn’t raise you to be so ungrateful.”

Ariana could barely get her head around this. Her parents could not seriously be so concerned with appearances that they scolded her now, did they? She narrowed her eyes. “What could possibly have made you think that the appropriate way to greet me after what had happened would be a dinner party?”

Her parents both looked bewildered.

Her mother fluttered a hand at her chest. “Well, there wasn’t time to organize anything more elaborate. It was the best we could do.” She looked up at her husband. “She *is* ungrateful.”

Ariana squeezed her eyes shut. “Not something more elaborate. Something less elaborate. I’m sure you scoured the nets while I was gone. You read what they said was happening to me.”

“Well, we thought you were dead, darling,” said her father. “Your mother sobbed for days. She was inconsolable. Having you back alive, whole and unharmed, was the best news we’d ever

received.”

“So, you decided to throw a dinner party?” Ariana realized she was furious. Her parents didn’t seem to care about her well-being one bit. If the nets were to be believed, she’d been through a horrific experience. And while the news stories didn’t have all the details right, Ariana had been through hell. The last thing she needed was for everyone to pretend it hadn’t happened and keep on as though things were normal.

Her mother’s lip trembled. “Oh, Ariana, they were saying horrible things about you. And then you were dead, and I thought...” She reached for her. “Of course, I’m glad to have you back, but how we’ll salvage any of it, I don’t

know. When this all started, you were practically engaged to Risciter, the most eligible bachelor in the sector, and now, after everything, well, I simply don't know what kind of life you'll have. It's not the life I would have wanted for you. I don't want you dead, of course. I want you alive, but..."

Ariana's jaw dropped, and she shook her head in disbelief. Her mother had actually been relieved to think she was dead. Her mother was so short-sighted, so entrenched in the society of the sector, that part of her thought dead was better than socially ruined. Ariana was appalled.

Her mother was still babbling. "So, I thought, a dinner party. I thought that

I'd show everyone that you were all right, and they'd see that you were strong, and perhaps they'd forget about all the nonsense. Perhaps, if you could be charming enough, they'd find it all exciting, and it would actually help your chances. I see I was wrong. You've been warped by everything that's happened. My poor little girl." And then she got out of her chair and tried to put her arms around Ariana.

Ariana recoiled. "Don't touch me."

"Ariana!" scolded her father.

Her mother straightened. "No, it's not her fault, dear. She's been scarred by all this. I see it now. We can't blame her for the way she's acting."

"The way *I'm* acting?" Ariana

stood up. “Marrying Risciter would have been the most disastrous thing that ever happened to me. He was a horrible man. You have no idea how absolutely disturbed he was. And you have no idea what he did to me. Everything about this place is upside down. You only look at the surface. How things look to the outside world. Not how things really are.”

“You’re confused, darling,” said her mother. “It wasn’t Risciter who did those terrible things. It was that awful man Transman that they arrested. And he’s going to pay for what he did, don’t worry about that.”

“Keirth never hurt me,” said Ariana. “Keirth protected me.”

Her father put a hand on her mother's shoulder. "I've heard about this before, actually. Sometimes victims begin to sympathize with their kidnappers. You're right. She has been warped."

"I'm not warped," said Ariana. "Not because I want to show the truth instead of covering it all up in pretty lies."

"Perhaps she needs some time to relax. She needs a little spell away," her mother said to her father.

Ariana's heart sank. Whenever people in the sector talked about having a "little spell away," they almost always meant Winfield.

"Winfield *is* on Risciter," said her

father. "It's quite convenient."

Ariana swallowed. She sat back down in her chair. "I don't need to go Winfield. I'm fine, really. I'm a little excited, but I'm sure that if you give me some time, I'll be fine." Winfield was a mental health hospital. It was worse than a jail. She'd never be able to help Keirth from inside there.

"It will only be for your own good," said her mother. "I'll call and make the arrangements immediately."

They were going to do it. They were going to send her away. She couldn't let this happen. Ariana leapt to her feet, gathering her skirts in one hand, and dashed for the door. She was out of the study and into the next room in

seconds, paying no heed to her parents' shouts from behind her.

She careened into the parlor and made a beeline through it for the foyer, dodging furniture as she ran. The front door was just beyond the foyer.

She skidded into the room, the front door in sight. Only a few feet left to go. She doubled her pace, clutching her skirts and pumping as hard as she could.

And a valet stepped into her path. "I'm afraid we can't let you do this, miss," he said.

She swerved to go around him, but another valet appeared.

Ariana screamed in frustration, determined to barrel through them anyway.

But they grabbed her arms and pulled her back, and she simply wasn't as strong as they were.

Chapter Sixteen

Keirth didn't sleep that night. He was exhausted, bone-weary, and every part of his body hurt, from the ache of his muscles to the sting of the cuts and wounds the police had inflicted on him. But a man doesn't sleep when he knows that this is his last night on earth. That he's going to die in the morning.

Keirth wanted the night to stretch out long. He wanted it to drag by. But anticipation of bad things never works that way, and he felt each moment slipping away from him, going too quickly, gone.

He wished he could see Ariana. He didn't know where they'd taken her.

She'd been fighting the last time he saw her, and they'd been threatening to arrest her. If she were in custody somewhere, holed up in a cell like his, he wouldn't be able to bear it. He had to hope that, given her station, she'd been taken back to her family. He knew that was the last thing she'd wanted, but it was better than jail. He wanted her to be free, to be unharmed. He couldn't bear it if he brought her trouble.

Sitting up on his flimsy cot in the tiny room, resting his head against the stone wall, he decided he was glad he wasn't dying a virgin. That was one thing to be grateful for, he supposed. Forcing himself to think along those lines, he decided he was glad that

Risciter was gone as well. And he was glad that he'd been in love, and that he'd had a moment, only hours ago, really, when he thought that life was damned near perfect with Ariana in his arms, their bright future laid out in front of them.

But that was all he could manage in gratitude. He wasn't glad. He wasn't pleased. He'd been captured, forced through a sham trial, and they were going to execute him for crimes he hadn't committed. To think that the rest of the galaxy would think he'd killed Lilla, the closest thing he'd had to a mother after his own mother had died. It was cruel. Twisted. Keirth found he hated the idea of his name being sullied in that way.

Deeply, most of all, he realized just how fiercely he wanted to live. His life could have been about so much more than revenge. But now...this was all he had. He bitterly considered that his plans, made when he was fifteen years old, had worked out exactly the way he'd imagined them. He'd killed Risciter, and now he would hang for it. Why had he ever dared to dream of anything more?

And when he thought about it, he wasn't actually grateful that he'd loved Ariana. If he hadn't, this would be easier. There'd be no ache for what he was giving up, and he wouldn't have to worry about her. No, it had all been a brutal joke, experiencing any of it. He'd

had hope for a life only to have it snatched away from him as soon as he got close to having it.

Keirth glared at the walls of his prison cell, and the night raced past him much too quickly.

* * *

Ariana groggily opened her eyes. Everything was dim in the room she was in. Where was she? The walls were gray. There was no furniture except the bed she lay on. The room was so small...

That was right. Winfield. She'd woken up in this room before. How many times? Two? Three? How long had she been here? And was it too late to save Keirth?

The last thing she remembered was

being inside a doctor's office. He'd had a kind voice, and he'd asked her to tell him what had happened to her. They had her so drugged. They were always forcing her to swallow pills, and the pills made everything so fuzzy. The doctor had seemed like a nice man. She'd hoped he might be able to help her. She wanted help, so she'd told him everything, the whole story. He'd been quiet, and when she was finished, she'd held her breath, hoping he'd tell her that there was some way to fix everything.

But instead, he'd told her she had delusions, asked her why she was clinging to this version of her memory. Told her he wanted to help her uncover reality.

She'd been angry. She remembered yelling. She remembered getting up out of her chair—

Now she was back in the gray room. She hardly had the energy to try to get out of bed. They must have sedated her again. How long had she been here? She remembered waking up a few times, but she hadn't been awake for whole days, had she? And how long had she slept? She had no news of the rest of the world. No news of Keirth.

If the situations were reversed, Keirth would fight for her. He would rescue her from jail. He'd do it. She knew he would. She had to save him. She had to force herself to move. To think.

She lifted one of her arms. It was as heavy as lead. She let it drop back against the bed. What was she going to do?

The door to the gray room opened, and bright light streamed in. Ariana squinted, covering her eyes. Were they coming to give her more pills? She couldn't take them, not this time. But they always looked inside her mouth, under her tongue. They always stroked her throat and forced her to swallow. What was she going to do?

But instead a voice said, "You have a visitor."

And Ariana recognized the silhouette in the doorway as Aunt Tildy.

Ariana did her best to sit up in bed.

She managed to prop herself into a half-reclining, half-lying-down pose with some effort.

The door closed behind Aunt Tildy and the two of them were alone. Aunt Tildy pulled up a gray chair and set it next to the bed. The she settled down in it. She rummaged through her purse for a flask. Unscrewing it, she offered it to Ariana. “Nip?”

Ariana shook her head. What was Aunt Tildy doing here?

Aunt Tildy shrugged. She took a long swig from her flask, considered it, took another swig, and then capped it and put it away. “You know that my maid Tira was having a fling with Risciter’s valet earlier this season, don’t

you?”

Ariana furrowed her brow. Aunt Tildy had come to gossip about the maids' love lives? She felt muddled and confused. “No.”

“Well, she was. She was really put out when you and Risciter disappeared, because we all had to leave Hallon, and she couldn't see the valet again, and I think she fancied him quite a bit.”

Ariana managed to roll her eyes. “I'm sorry that I put such a crimp in your maid's lifestyle.”

“No,” said Aunt Tildy. “That's not important.”

Wonderful. So what was the important part, then? It wasn't that Ariana wasn't grateful that Aunt Tildy

was visiting. After all, no one else in her family had stopped by. But this was classic Aunt Tildy. She was half-drunk and talking about things that really had no bearing on the situation.

“I didn’t say anything about it when you and Risciter were courting,” said Aunt Tildy. “You seemed quite taken with him, and you can’t really put stock in what the servants say anyway, you know? But Tira did tell me all kinds of things when she was doing my hair or helping me get dressed. Tira is quite a talker, let me tell you. I know that girl’s entire life story, from the moment she was born, I could swear it.”

“Say anything about what?” Ariana sat up a little further on the bed.

“Well, Tira said that Risciter’s valet... I can’t be sure of his name. I think it might be Herry or Henric or something. It’s definitely an ‘H’ name. I’m sure of that. Maybe Harild?”

“Does it matter?” Ariana sat up completely.

“We’ll call him Henric. I think that’s right. Henric told Tira about all of the strange things that Risciter did. He reported all kinds of sordid activity in Rilla Alley. Risciter apparently liked to visit prostitutes a good deal. Naturally, dear, you can see why I wouldn’t have wanted to bring that up to you. You seemed so happy, and your father thought it was such a good match, and no one listens to me anyway, because they think

I'm bitter about not having a husband when the truth is that I simply never wanted one. Men are always hiding things, that's what I say. And a good, honest man of noble birth in the sector? Why, you'll never find one."

Ariana had to smile. She'd missed Aunt Tildy, she realized. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"I'm not finished."

"Sorry." Ariana tried to force her smile into a more serious expression.

"Henric also told Tira that on more than one occasion, Risciter had come back from these trips to prostitutes with blood on his clothing. Not a lot, mind you, but some. Risciter would have Henric take the bloody clothes and

incinerate them.” Aunt Tildy bit her lip. “I really should have told you about that. But honestly, Ariana, how would I have known that she wasn’t making it up for a little spot of entertainment? And it wasn’t as if Henric had seen him actually hurt anybody, you know? Tira can stretch the truth sometimes, and she babbles on about all kinds of nonsense.” Aunt Tildy put her hand on Ariana’s. “I’m sorry I never said anything. Maybe if I had you would have questioned him about it or broken it off with him. Maybe you wouldn’t have ended up following that bastard across the galaxy.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Tildy. You couldn’t have known.” Ariana’s head was still full of drugs, so she realized

that she was grasping the full meaning of this little confession a bit slowly, but it was coming to her. “You believe me. You don’t think Keirth did those things. You think it was Risciter.”

Aunt Tildy nodded. “It all fits, doesn’t it? Going to see prostitutes, coming back covered in blood? And then a whole brothel dead? It’s a buzz amongst the servants, Ariana. All of them believe you too. And the whole sector’s been talking about what you said. It’s all over the nets. People are asking questions.”

She’d managed to do something right then. “Good.”

“Not that it’ll be any help to your boy, of course.” Aunt Tildy shook her

head.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he went into trial the night they caught him,” she said. “He was sentenced for hanging the following morning.”

Ariana felt as if an iron band had suddenly gripped her insides. “He’s dead?” she choked. No. It couldn’t be. While she’d been drugged and imprisoned, they’d already killed her Keirth?

“No,” said Aunt Tildy. “The prince wants to see the execution himself, so they’ve issued a stay until the prince arrives tomorrow.”

Ariana felt at once elated that Keirth was still alive and flooded with

dread because he was still sentenced to die in a day. “I can’t let them kill him.”

“You’re in Winfield,” said Aunt Tildy. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I have to get out,” said Ariana. “If you believe me, can’t you tell my parents that—”

“They don’t listen to anything I say, and you know it.”

The door to the gray room opened again, and a dour nurse in a gray uniform trundled inside, holding the paper cup containing Ariana’s pills.

Aunt Tildy was on her feet in a second. “Oh, is that my niece’s medication?”

The nurse looked a little confused.

“Yes.”

Aunt Tildy strode over to the nurse and put her hand over the top of the paper cup. “Could I give it to her, just this once? I do so want to do anything I can to make sure she starts feeling better soon.”

The nurse looked even more confused. “Er...I suppose so. But I will need to witness it. Sometimes patients here don’t want to take their meds, even though that’s what’s good for them.”

“Of course,” said Aunt Tildy, tugging the paper cup out of the nurse’s hands.

Both the nurse and Aunt Tildy came over to her bed. Ariana watched as Aunt Tildy tipped the cup of pills into her

hand. Aunt Tildy held her closed fist, containing the pills, up to Ariana's mouth, but she only mimed releasing her fingers. None of the pills actually went into Ariana's mouth.

Aunt Tildy was a genius!

The nurse handed Ariana a glass of water and made sure Ariana swallowed.

Ariana noticed Aunt Tildy's hand duck into her purse, where she was no doubt depositing the pills.

"Open," said the nurse.

Obediently, Ariana opened her mouth and allowed the nurse to look under her tongue to make sure she'd actually swallowed the pills.

Satisfied, the nurse thanked Aunt Tildy for helping and then left the room.

After the door closed behind him, Ariana said, “Thank you so much. The pills make me foggy and confused.”

Aunt Tildy shrugged. “Well, it’s the least I could do, since they’re treating you like you’re crazy when you’re not. I’ve been in Winfield before, you know. When I refused every suitor that tried to marry me because I didn’t want to get married, they sent me here. They said it was abnormal for a woman not to want to get married.” She squared her shoulders. “Abnormal it might be, but that doesn’t mean I’m mentally ill.”

Ariana reached over and hugged her aunt. “No, it does not.”

“I wish there was more I could do,” said Aunt Tildy, squeezing her. “I’d help

you any way I could.”

“You mean that?” Ariana asked, pulling away from the embrace.

* * *

The Duke of Tramet had arrived on the planet Risciter that morning, spurred to action by the strange things he was reading on the nets. There was hope after all. It might not be true that Keirth was really a crazed murderer. Apparently, the woman he'd been with, Miss Gilit, had made a scene at a dinner party, claiming that Risciter, not Keirth, had killed all those women, and that Keirth had protected her from the monster.

Tramet knew he shouldn't get false hope. The accepted public opinion was

that the girl had been through some terrible trauma and couldn't possibly be trusted to know what had happened. There were experts weighing in on the likelihood of victims beginning to sympathize with their kidnappers, citing cases throughout history where this very thing had happened. According to anyone who mattered, Miss Gilit needed the therapy she was getting at Winfield, and Keirth Transman needed his neck snapped, which was scheduled to happen as soon as the prince could get there to watch it.

But Tramet wanted to believe in Keirth's goodness so badly. He didn't want to think that this boy he'd been searching for was really a bad man.

Deep inside, Tramet always hoped to find a man of courage and bravery who'd lived through the tragedy of his life and come out stronger. The story Miss Gilit told about him echoed Tramet's deepest desires. Even though he cautioned himself that it was probably unfounded, he had to know for himself.

He'd decided that he'd go to speak to Miss Gilit himself. He'd listen to her story, and if he thought that she wasn't crazy, then he'd take action. Because it might not be too late to save Keirth Transman's life.

Chapter Seventeen

Ariana was feeling quite alert. The drugs had worn off. She was, however, afflicted with an acute case of boredom. She'd positioned herself on the far wall, several feet down from the door to the gray room, and she'd dragged the chair that Aunt Tildy had been sitting on over with her. At first she'd stood behind the chair, but as hours began to drag by, she'd sat in it. She'd sat in this chair for what seemed like a few millennia, going over and over her plan, looking for weaknesses.

She was beginning to think that no one might ever come back into her room ever again.

It was at that point that the door finally opened, and a nurse entered, carrying another paper cup with pills.

Ariana scrambled to her feet, seizing the chair by its legs. She leapt on the nurse and brought the chair crashing down on the woman's head.

The nurse made a strangled cry of surprise.

Ariana lifted the chair and slammed it into the nurse again.

The woman stopped making noise. She was unconscious. She lay flat faced on the floor, the pills rolling around from the spilled paper cup.

Ariana didn't waste any time. She hurriedly stripped the nurse out of her uniform and pulled off her own gown.

She dressed herself in the nurse's uniform and draped the gown over the woman's unclothed body.

The nurse's uniform was too big for Ariana. She did her best to cinch it at the waist. She didn't have a mirror in her room, so she couldn't look at herself to see what the effect was. It would have to do.

Ariana picked up the paper cup and scooped the pills off the floor and back inside it. She used the key in the nurse's pocket to open the door to her room. Then she strode into the hallway, her head high.

Her heart thudded against her ribs as she walked. *Stare forward*, she told herself. *Act like you're supposed to be*

here.

She didn't catch the eyes of anyone else in the hallway, but she didn't hide her head either. She moved as if she belonged in the baggy nurse's uniform, as if she was hurrying to complete important business. Near as she could tell, no one gave her a second glance.

The hallway outside her room was nondescript. Gray, with a few benches outside of rooms with locked doors. Ariana walked by all of them as if she'd seen them hundreds of times and pushed through a swinging door at the end of the hallway.

She paused for a second as she emerged into an open area. There was a nurse's station to her right, and she could

see a woman huddling over the screens, not paying attention to her. Ahead of her, another hallway, making a T with the one she'd just exited. Which way to go? She couldn't stand here thinking about it for too long. So, she picked the left hand one, away from the nurse's station, and she started to walk again.

“Hey,” called a woman's voice from behind her.

Ariana ignored it. She kept walking.

“You with the pills,” said the voice. “Are you deaf?”

There was no one else in the hallway. Ariana quickly debated. If she didn't respond, that would be suspicious. If she spoke, the woman

might figure out what was going on. Biting her lip, she turned. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Do you see anyone else around?" The woman who spoke was another nurse, tall, with broad shoulders and dark hair. The nurse was holding up a syringe, flicking the tip of the needle. She was alone in the nursing station except for a hospital guard who stood boredly at the corner.

"Do you need something?" Ariana's eyes darted from the syringe to the blaster on the hip of the guard.

"Dr. Trint asked for this in Exam Room Seven." The nurse held up the syringe. "Since you're headed that way anyhow, can you take it?"

Ariana strode back to the nursing

station with quick steps. “Sure.”

The nurse was eyeing her uniform. “Do you usually work on this floor?”

Ariana yanked the syringe out of the woman’s hand and plunged into the neck of the guard.

The nurse gasped. “What are you —”

The guard gurgled and fell to the ground. Ariana knelt to get his blaster, switched it on and pointed it at the nurse. “Shut up.” Her hands were shaking.

The nurse had gone pale. “You’re a patient, aren’t you? I recognize you. That duke’s daughter, the one who was kidnapped.”

“Shut *up*,” said Ariana, gesturing with the blaster. The shaking in her

hands lessened a little bit as if she drew strength from the way she ordered the woman around.

The nurse bobbed her head.

Ariana looked around. There was no one else close by, but someone could round a corner or come through a door at any second. She shoved the blaster in the nurse's face. "What's the quickest way out of here?"

"I..." The nurse was shaking now.

Ariana didn't have time for this. She pulled the woman out from behind the nurse's station and jammed the blaster into her back. "You can show me then. Lead me out of here, avoid any places where I might see someone who'll stop me, and if we run into

guards or anything like that, I shoot you. Got it?”

The nurse whimpered, but she started walking.

It turned out to be easy. There was a set of stair at the end of the hallway. They took them all the way to the basement. The nurse led her to a back door, apparently used by the staff. Once outside on a back street, Ariana set the blaster to stun and shot the nurse. She shoved her inside and darted down the street.

She ran in the alleys until she found a public comm. Then she sent her Aunt Tildy a message. “Remember how you said you’d do anything to help me?”

* * *

Tramet arrived at Winfield to find it in a panic. It seemed that Miss Gilit had knocked out one nurse, put a needle in a guard's neck, stolen his blaster, and stunned another nurse. She'd gotten out of the hospital, and no one knew where she was.

He left the place almost immediately. He couldn't find out anything here. And if he were honest with himself, he didn't know what he could discover from Miss Gilit. Obviously she believed that Keirth was innocent. Whether she was crazy or not was a matter to be left up to doctors, not dukes. He was probably wasting his time. If he wanted to do something about Keirth's execution, he needed to act fast.

Wavering by trying to interview a girl who was possibly mentally ill was only treading water.

Still. What if he were wrong? What if he were only projecting Keirth's character onto him because he so desperately wanted it to be true?

Tramet sat outside Winfield in the backseat of his speeder, unsure of what to do next. He pulled out a tablet and skimmed through the news stories on the nets that he'd read a million times before. But something jumped out at him this time. It was a quote from a police sergeant who'd testified at Transman's trial. Nol Praxider, when questioned if he was glad justice had been so swiftly carried out had said, "Well, it certainly

was swift, wasn't it?"

That was all. Praxider certainly wouldn't speak out against the decisions of the Star Chamber, but Tramet suddenly wondered if he wasn't convinced by the case either. He checked on his tablet for Praxider's office address, and then gave it to his driver.

If he spoke to Praxider, perhaps he'd have a little more of an idea whether he would be doing the right thing to interfere or not.

* * *

Aunt Tildy's speeder pulled up on the street where Ariana had told her to pick her up. The door slid open and Ariana scrambled inside.

Aunt Tildy was waiting, her face shining. “This is so exciting, Ariana. A prison break.”

Ariana didn’t feel excited, only grimly determined. “You’re announcing that loudly enough. Does the driver know what we’re doing?”

“Oh yes, miss,” came the answer from the front. “Bloody well time, if you ask me.”

“I told you that the servants were all on your side,” said Aunt Tildy.

Okay. Well, there wasn’t much Ariana could do about that. She hoped Aunt Tildy’s driver was trustworthy, that was all. “Did you bring the things I asked you to?”

“I did,” said Aunt Tildy, “but I

can't see what you're going to want a dress for."

"I can't wear this, can I?" Ariana gestured at the baggy nurse's uniform. "Give me the dress."

Aunt Tildy handed the parcel over.

Ariana set the blaster down on the seat next to her.

Aunt Tildy gasped.

"What?" said Ariana. "We'll probably have to use these, so get used to it. You ever shot one before?"

Aunt Tildy shook her head wordlessly.

Ariana bounced over next to her. "It's pretty easy. You turn them on down here." She demonstrated and the blaster came to life. "Then you've got a dial

over here.” She pointed. “That adjusts the intensity, so you can simply stun someone or you can turn it all the way up and incinerate them.”

“And you just aim it at someone and then pull the trigger?”

“That’s the general idea, Aunt Tildy.”

“Oh, I’m not going to be able to do that,” said Aunt Tildy. “I’ll mess it up.”

“You will not,” said Ariana. “You’ll be fine. But you *are* going to have to do most of the talking, because people will recognize me from the nets.”

“They might recognize me too and know I’m your aunt.”

Ariana shook her head. “People in our social circle might, but I don’t think

the prison guards will. Did you wear that dress I told you to wear?"

"Yes, I had my maid dig it out for me, and help me put it on, but the damned thing is impossibly tight."

"That's the idea."

"What's the idea? Tell me what we're planning, would you?"

"Okay," said Ariana. "Now listen closely, because we won't have time to go over it more than twice."

* * *

"Listen, my lord," Sergeant Praxider was saying, "whatever you might have thought I implied with that comment in the news article, I assure you I did not." He was standing just outside the door to his office, looking

annoyed.

Tramet was feeling a bit annoyed himself. "I'm not here to try to get you in any trouble, Praxider," he said, worried that the sergeant was backpedaling because he thought that Tramet was here as a representative of the nobility in general or the Star Chamber specifically. "I'd just like to know, honestly, what you think of the girl's story."

"The girl's story?" said Praxider. "We didn't get a chance to question the girl. She was sent back to her family. So I'm afraid she officially doesn't have a story."

Tramet sighed. "Surely, you've seen the nets. You know what people are

saying. About the Duke of Risciter. Do you have any opinion about that, or are you convinced of Keirth Transman's guilt?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," said Praxider, "because Transman's already been tried and sentenced."

"It matters to me," said Tramet. "Please, can you spare a few moments to sit down with me?"

Praxider narrowed his eyes. "Why is this so important to you?"

"If an innocent man is about to be killed, it's pretty damned important, don't you think?"

Praxider considered. "All right." He opened the door to his office, then paused. "You swear you're not out to get

me? Are you a reporter in disguise, trying to get dirt? They'll sack me, you know."

"I'm the Duke of Tramet. I'm here because I'm trying to decide whether or not to interfere and beg the prince not to execute Keirth Transman. But first I need to be sure he's not guilty."

Praxider ushered Tramet inside the office and gestured for him to sit down. "You want to save Transman?"

Tramet sat in a chair facing Praxider's desk. "I may want to save Transman. If he's guilty, then I won't. He'll deserve to die."

Praxider settled in his desk chair and leaned forward. "Well, I'll tell you this, Tramet. That boy had a joke of a

trial. And there very well may be evidence against Risciter, considering the Star Chamber is known to protect its own. They let the nobility get away with atrocities.”

Tramet had to admit this was occasionally true. But Praxider had mentioned evidence against Risciter. “So you *have* seen the stories on the net? Seen that Miss Gilit claims that Risciter did the killing and that Transman saved her?”

“I’ve been doing my best not to pay attention to be honest,” said Praxider. “I’d rather not know that I helped the sector kill an innocent man.”

“Do you think he’s innocent?”

Praxider sighed. “Well, look. The

knife wounds on the prostitutes are precise. Whoever killed them knew what he was doing. We also found traces of a drug in many of their systems. Something that would put them to sleep and make them pliable. It definitely wasn't the act of someone who snapped and suddenly killed a bunch of women. It was the work of someone who's done this kind of thing before, a methodical killer." He leaned back in his desk chair. "Of course, there are a few things that don't fit with that theory. Most of the bodies were killed with a single slash to the throat. It's precise and even, yes. But the bodies of the madam and Risciter both have multiple stab wounds. We believe the wounds on the madam were issued

postmortem, as if the killer was so angry with her that he stabbed her over and over after she was dead. The stab wounds on Risciter, however, were what killed him. The men, too, are the only ones whose throats weren't slashed."

Tramet did his best to sort through this information. "So, the alternate method of killing Risciter could point to the fact that a different killer killed him."

Praxider nodded. "Perhaps. But the stab wounds mean that if there was another killer, perhaps he killed the madam as well."

"You said the madam's stab wounds were postmortem."

"Yes," said Praxider, "but if we

theorize that the stab wounds came from the same killer, then I suppose we'd have to assume that..." He paused, thinking it over. "Risciter killed all the women, and then Transman came in and stabbed the already dead madam before stabbing Risciter to death."

Tramet wasn't sure he liked that theory. He didn't want to think of Keirth taking a knife to an already dead woman.

"The truth is," said Praxider, "the stab wounds may not mean anything at all. They happened to the men. This killer, if it is Transman, may have a fetish for killing women that way. He may only have killed Risciter because he was in the way."

When Praxider put it like that,

Tramet could see how it made sense. He nodded slowly. "I suppose it makes sense for Transman to have done this."

"A slaughter like this never makes sense," said Praxider. "But Transman does have some evidence against him. One, he seems to have kidnapped Miss Gilit, and we have a distress call from her indicating this. Two, after the incident with the prostitutes, he ran. Three, Risciter's distress call plainly names him as the killer."

"It seems cut and dry." Tramet knew he shouldn't have allowed himself to hope. He knew it.

"But it's not," said Praxider. He shook his head and leaned forward conspiratorially. "The duke was wearing

gloves when we found him. And he had a small bag on his person. It was full of little bundles of human hair. But both of those pieces of evidence seem to have been destroyed. I can't find photos of the duke with the gloves on, can't find the bag. Nothing."

Now that seemed particularly damning. "What does that mean?"

Praxider looked frustrated. "Well, it means nothing, because it doesn't exist anymore. Let's go with what we do have. Risciter's distress call said that Miss Gilit was dead and also that Transman was dead. He claimed that he'd fought off Transman, killed him, but been too late to save anyone else."

"But that doesn't make any sense."

“It doesn’t,” said Praxider. “We could assume that Risciter saw Miss Gilit injured and was confused and thought she was dead. But that doesn’t seem to fit with the killer’s way of doing things. He drugs his victims or perhaps comes upon them in their sleep and slashes their throats. We could assume that Risciter was confused entirely, and that Miss Gilit was only asleep or something, that perhaps the killer was waiting to kill Miss Gilit. There are a lot of ways that it could have gone, but none of them seem entirely likely to me.” Praxider stroke his chin. “In fact, my lord, the more that I think about this, the more I feel like it hasn’t made one bit of sense from the get-go.”

“Why is that?” asked Tramet.

“Let’s assume Transman is the killer,” said Praxider, “and that he has a history of capturing women and killing them. Why did he wait so long to kill Miss Gilit?”

“It doesn’t fit,” said Tramet, his spirits lifting.

“No,” said Praxider. “It doesn’t fit at all. Why take her to some brothel and kill all the other women but leave her alive?”

“Unless, he hates all other women, but is in love with Miss Gilit?”

“That’s not the way the mind of a killer like this works,” said Praxider. “If you kill that many people that precisely, you’ve moved into a space where you no

longer think of people as anything other than playthings. Killers like this don't love women. They aren't capable of it."

"But we're speculating, aren't we?" asked Tramet. "We can't know without more evidence."

Praxider spread his hands. "Well, you're right there, of course. And I have very little ability to search for more evidence now that the case is officially closed."

This was a dead end. Tramet was no better off than when he started, was he? Could he go to the prince with little more than suspicions?

"Although there was something..." Praxider swiveled on his chair to face the screen on his desk and began typing

on his console. “Before Transman was apprehended, I had a message from the police department on Hallon. They thought maybe they could connect a similar string of murders...” He hit a few more keys. “Ah, yes. Here it is. Dead prostitutes, nearly all killed on Rilla Alley, spanning nearly fifteen years.”

Tramet gulped. This was starting to make sense, suddenly. “There was a string?”

Praxider nodded, still studying his screen. “Yes. Throats slashed in a very similar manner to the way the women were killed on Scranth. A small subset of them with postmortem stab wounds as well. The police there strongly believe it was the work of the same man.”

“Do you see individual files there?” Tramet asked, his hands shaking. “Individual women’s names?”

“Um...” Praxider hit a few more keys. “Yes, they’ve sent me individual files as well.” He gave Tramet a curious look. “Why?”

Tramet’s breath was growing shallow. “Was one of the women killed in this manner a woman named Kara Transman?”

Praxider’s eyes widened at the last name. He hit a few more keys. “Yes, actually. Killed seven years ago, clearly fits the M.O. of the suspected serial killer on Hallon.”

Tramet covered his mouth with one hand. All this time, he’d assumed it was

a random killing. After all, that was what happened to women who chose a profession like that. He'd never realized that it could be part of something larger, and if Risciter were the one responsible, he wished he'd been able to stab him to death himself.

"I suppose that woman is related to Transman," said Praxider.

"His mother," choked Tramet, thinking of her face suddenly.

"If Risciter..." Praxider trailed off. "Well, I think we might have a motive, mightn't we?" He stood up. "I don't know of a way to prove that Risciter had anything to do with those crimes, but I might have an idea of how we could rule him out." He strode over to the door to

his office and opened it. He turned to Tramet. “My secretary Nandi is head over heels about Risciter. You know the type. Reads all about him on the nets.” He turned back to the door. “Nandi,” he called. “And bring your tablet.”

Within a few moments, a woman with frizzy hair appeared at Praxider’s door, holding a net tablet. “Sir?”

Praxider opened the door wide for her to walk through. “Nandi, you keep a pretty detailed record of the Duke of Risciter’s movements in the sector, don’t you?”

“Sir?”

“Oh, come now,” said Praxider, “I’ve seen you working on it at your desk. You’ve got a timeline, going back

years, of all the planets he's been on and when."

Nandi hung her head. "I'm sorry, sir, I know I should have been working, but—"

"You're not in trouble," said Praxider. "Just pull it up on your tablet, please."

Nandi looked surprised, but did as she was told.

"Check these dates, will you?" said Praxider. "Can you tell me if the duke was on Hallon during each of these periods?"

Chapter Eighteen

Ariana leaned into the front of the speeder. “Now you know to where to pick us up, don’t you?” she asked the driver.

He nodded, looking excited. “Driving the getaway car, I am. Never thought I’d get a chance to be doing something like this, miss.”

“Just be there.” Ariana straightened, smoothing her dress and putting her fan in front of her face so that only her eyes were visible. She hid her blaster behind the fan as well. She joined Aunt Tildy who was picking at the bodice of her too-tight dress. “Leave it,” Ariana said.

“It’s quite uncomfortable,” Aunt Tildy said. “I swore after that party earlier this season, I’d never wear it again.”

“But you look stunning,” said Ariana.

Aunt Tildy looked down at her cleavage, which was struggling to get out of the dress. She grinned wickedly. “I do look that, don’t I?”

“Now you remember what the plan is?”

“Of course I remember. I’m not an idiot, am I?”

Ariana certainly hoped not. She’d already taken Aunt Tildy’s flask away from her since the woman couldn’t seem to do anything without drinking.

Fluttering the fan over her face, she followed her aunt into the Risciter Planetary Prison. This wasn't a large prison for long-term inmates, but a relatively small place kept for those just arrested or awaiting trial. In Keirth's case, since he was to be executed so quickly, she supposed they hadn't seen the necessity of moving him. It made things easier all around, though, since there wouldn't be nearly as much security to get through. At least Ariana hoped there wouldn't be.

Aunt Tildy marched ahead of Ariana, head held high, a look of distain on her face as she passed each person. Most people looked away immediately. Good. So far, everything was working

out.

She followed Aunt Tildy through the front door. Just inside, there was a man in uniform sitting next to the blaster detector. He was reading his screen, but looked up as they entered.

Aunt Tildy walked through the blaster detector, and Ariana followed quick on her heels.

The detector began to beep.

The man in uniform stood up.

Keep walking, Ariana thought at Aunt Tildy. Just keep walking.

Aunt Tildy, seeming to remember the plan, did exactly that.

“Excuse me,” said the man in uniform, but he was behind them now as they swept inside in the main room.

Aunt Tildy kept walking. Ariana followed.

The man was running up to them now. "Excuse me," he said, more loudly.

Aunt Tildy ignored him, making her way across the room towards the lifts that would carry them down to the bottom of the prison, where the prisoners were kept.

The man caught up to them and wedged himself in front of Aunt Tildy. "Excuse me," he said pointedly.

Aunt Tildy took a step back, her hand fluttering over her exposed cleavage, and managed to look utterly disgusted by the man. Good. "Yes?"

"You've set off the detector," said the man. "You'll need to walk through it

again.”

“I haven’t set off the detector.” Aunt Tildy’s voice contained the perfect amount of disbelief and scorn.

Excellent. She was performing perfectly. Ariana did her best to stay calm behind her fan. She didn’t want to have to start shooting before it was absolutely necessary.

“It beeped,” said the man.

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know why that happened,” said Aunt Tildy. “I’m in a hurry. Step aside.”

“I’m sorry,” said the man, “but it’s the rules. Everyone has to go through the detector. It’s for safety, you understand.”

Aunt Tildy gave him a withering look. She gestured to her very tight

dress. “And where, pray tell me, would I keep a blaster in this outfit?”

The man eyed her, perhaps lingering a little too long on her breasts. He stuttered. “O-only the rules, m-miss.”

“Don’t ogle me in that manner,” Aunt Tildy said, sounding horrified. “I feel completely harassed. If I were to tell your superior the way in which you treated me—”

The man was totally flustered at that point. He waved them on. “I’m sure you’re fine, miss. My apologies.” He turned to go.

Ariana let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding in.

The man turned back. “But your companion—”

“My sister most certainly is not carrying a weapon either,” Aunt Tildy said. She took Ariana by the arm with a haughty huff and gave the man a reproachful look as they got on the lift.

He gaped at them as the doors to the lift closed.

Aunt Tildy began to laugh. “I can’t believe he bought that. This is the most fun I’ve had in—”

Ariana poked her. “There are cameras,” she hissed.

Aunt Tildy composed herself. She touched the screen inside the lift for the proper floor, and the lift began to descend.

* * *

Armed with evidence that the Duke

of Risciter had been on Hallon during every single murder fitting the description in the past fifteen years, the similarity between the murders on Hallon and the murders on Scranth, Keirth's supposed motive, and the story of Miss Gilit, Tramet felt confident as his speeder raced across town. The nets had just confirmed that the prince had arrived on Risciter and that he was settling into his estate. The execution of Keirth Transman was set to take place tomorrow at dawn.

Leaving nothing to chance, Tramet was going to him directly. It had been quite some time since he'd spoken with the prince, but they were close in age and had been boyhood companions on

occasion, especially when the royal family had come to visit the planet Tramet. Still, while there was a bond, it was a distant bond, stretching back over the years. Tramet hoped the prince would remember their childhood together. He especially hoped that the prince would have fond memories of Cecily. That, indeed, was key.

As it stood, the prince might not be disposed to receive visitors at all. He'd just arrived from his trip. He might want only to be left in peace. Since Tramet had not arranged this meeting, he knew there was a chance he'd be denied an audience with the prince.

He had to try. When his driver stopped at the door to the prince's

estate, Tramet leapt out and went to the door. He was met by a servant, a stiff elderly man, most assuredly the butler of the estate. The butler was a shrewd man, however, since he recognized him immediately. "Your Lordship, the Duke of Tramet," he said, bowing slightly. "The prince was not expecting you, at least not that I'm aware of."

"No," said Tramet, "but I've come to beg an audience with him just the same. Will you find out if he'll see me?"

The butler led him into a parlor and went to deliver the news of his arrival to the prince. Though he'd been told to make himself comfortable, Tramet paced the room instead, his pulse pounding.

* * *

The lift opened onto the bottom floor of the prison and Ariana and Aunt Tildy got out. They emerged into a room with low ceilings and no windows, since it was underground. Above them, the lights were bright and harsh. The room wasn't large. There was a built-in desk along the far wall, and a uniformed man sat there, eyeing screens that displayed the interior of cells.

Aunt Tildy, still displaying the kind of attitude Ariana had coached her on, strode up to the desk as if she owned the place. Ariana stood behind her.

Aunt Tildy tapped her fingers on the desk. "Young man, we're here with the Prisoner's Charity League Women's Auxillary. We've come to visit the

prisoners.”

The man gave her a strange look. “I don’t know a thing about that.”

“We’ve been planning this for over a month,” said Aunt Tildy. “Just open up one of those corridors so we can go down and speak to these lost souls.”

The man stared into Aunt Tildy’s cleavage. “Um, that is the last thing you want to wear if you’re visiting prisoners.”

Aunt Tildy cleared her throat.

Ariana was getting nervous. She knew this was the weaker part of the plan. It didn’t matter too much anyway. Maybe he’d let them in or maybe not. She still had the blaster.

“Look, I’ll have to use the comm to

ask upstairs if they've got any record of whether or not you're supposed to be here," said the man.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Aunt Tildy.

The man was pressing buttons on the wall comm. "Those are the rules."

Screw this, Ariana thought. She dropped her fan and pointed the blaster at the man, checking to make sure it was set for stun. She pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

* * *

The prince appeared in the doorway of the parlor, his eyes bright. "Nigel!"

Tramet bowed. "Your Majesty."

"Oh, please, Nigel," said the

prince, striding across the room to pump Tramet's hand furiously. "Call me Gulien. It's been too long. I had no idea you were on Risciter."

This seemed to be going well. Tramet relaxed a bit. "Just arrived, actually. I came to sort through some things, and I've discovered something I think you'll want to know about."

"Well, all right," said the prince. He settled down on a couch and gestured for Tramet to do the same. "Shall I ring for some tea, then?"

"If you like." Tramet didn't think he had the stomach for anything at the moment, but he waited while the prince used his comm to direct the servants to bring up some refreshment.

Finally, the prince turned back to Tramet. “You seem awfully serious, Nigel. Has someone died?”

“No,” said Tramet. “That is, not yet, if you and I can do something about it.”

The prince raised his eyebrows. “Is this about that Transman person? Nasty business, overall, I think. I was horrified when I heard. I simply had to oversee the execution of a monster like that.”

“That’s the thing, Gulien,” said Tramet, “I’m not sure they’ve got the right man.”

“Oh?” said the prince, looking mildly interested.

Tramet opened his mouth to say more, but they were interrupted by a

maid bringing in tea and cakes. He was prevented from saying anything else by the prince urging him to try a certain pastry the cook at his estate made which the prince declared “absolutely divine.” It was full of caramel. Tramet chewed.

* * *

The blaster wasn't turned on. Ariana cursed, punching the button to activate it.

The man at the desk was pulling out his own blaster.

Ariana pulled the trigger again, and he slumped to the ground.

“Oh my,” said Aunt Tildy.

“He wasn't going for it,” Ariana explained.

The wall comm beeped. “Jones?”

Damn it. Ariana hurried behind the desk, stepping over the body of the man inside. She pushed the talk button on the wall comm. Deepening her voice, she said, “Uh, everything’s fine here. I called by accident.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a cold, Jones.”

“No, no,” said Ariana, trying to keep her voice deep. “Nothing wrong down here.”

“We can send down a few men if you—”

“Everything’s fine.” Ariana hit the end button on the wall. She reached down and got the man’s (Jones’s, she supposed) blaster. She handed it to Aunt Tildy. Then she searched in his pockets

for a key ring to the cells. She found it, a small square with a screen on it, like the keys she used for her ship. “We’ve got to move fast. I think they suspect something.” She took in the wall of screens beside her, looking for Keirth.

There he was. Cell 4-A, down the A hallway.

She wished she could turn off the cameras entirely, but maybe that would be suspicious as well. She really had no idea how to do that anyway. She came out from behind the desk and took Aunt Tildy by the arm. “Come on.”

They darted down the A hallway, using the man’s key to open the wing. Keirth’s cell was number four, but the way things were numbered that meant he

was all the way down the hall. Ariana ran as fast as she could, but Aunt Tildy was bound up in the tight dress and could hardly keep up.

Ariana didn't wait for her. She needed to get Keirth out, and then they'd be coming right back up the hall. She skidded to a stop in front of the door to his cell and punched things on the screen to open the door.

It slid open.

Chapter Nineteen

“My dear boy,” said the prince, “you can’t tell me you believe that girl, Miss Gilit? She’s clearly traumatized, moving the blame from her captor to the Duke of Risciter. Ridiculous.”

“There’s been a similar string of murders on the planet Hallon,” Tramet said, showing the prince the information he’d gotten from Praxider.

The prince took the tablet and read silently to himself.

“The police think it’s quite likely that the same person that killed these women on Hallon killed the women on Scranth.”

The prince handed the tablet back.

“So, Transman had an early start. That proves nothing.”

“I don’t have solid proof, Gulian,” said Tramet. “I have only a few pieces of evidence which I think cast reasonable doubt on Transman’s guilt. One is the fact that Risciter was on Hallon when every single one of these murders was committed.”

“Coincidence?” asked the prince. “That doesn’t make him a murderer, Nigel.”

“No,” Tramet admitted. “It is a bit odd, of course, that Risciter would spend so much time on Hallon, especially during seasons when it isn’t fashionable, and most of the nobility is elsewhere, but in and of itself, it means

very little. I must concede that. However, these murders go back fifteen years, and Keirth Transman is a young man. Unless he was murdering women while he was younger than ten, I think it's unlikely he perpetrated all of them."

The prince raised his eyebrows. "That is troubling."

Tramet sighed. "Do you remember my sister Cecily?"

"Of course I remember her," said the prince. "Don't be ridiculous, Nigel. I was practically engaged to the girl before the tragedy happened to your family."

"I only thought, with it being so long ago, and the rest of my family's deaths overshadowing it all, that it might

have slipped your mind,” said Tramet. Years ago, his entire family had been on a large family cruise ship in deep space when the ship had been attacked by gellococcus. Everyone had been killed. Only he and his sister Cecily had survived and that had been because they hadn’t been on the ship. They’d chosen to stay at school, even over the protests of their mother.

The prince sighed. “You can hardly expect a man to forget the fact that a woman ran away to escape marrying him, can you?”

Tramet looked away from the prince. “I don’t think that’s why she ran away, Gulien.”

“Well, we’ll never know,” said the

prince. “She’s never been found, has she?”

Tramet took a shaky breath. He scrolled through some of the files on his tablet and then handed it to the prince.

The prince looked at the tablet for a moment and then dropped it with a clatter. He was on his feet and across the room, gasping, “Nigel, that can’t be.”

* * *

Keirth looked up as the door to his cell opened. He’d had no word, even though the time had passed since he’d been supposed to die. Every time someone came to his cell to give him food, he prepared himself for this being the moment when they’d take him to his execution. It was the waiting that was

killing him at this point. It was driving him mad.

And when he saw who was standing in the doorway, his first thought was that he really had gone crazy. She was a mirage, obviously. His brain was playing tricks on him, making him see things he wanted.

“Keirth, get up,” said Ariana.

“Ariana...?” It couldn’t be. But there she was in a dress, holding a blaster.

“I’m here to rescue you,” she said.

Keirth’s illusion certainly looked tangible. He wondered if his brain had only made her appear to him, or if he’d be able to hallucinate touching her too. He got up and went to her, gathering her

in his arms. She felt real enough. If this was all in his head, he didn't mind, he supposed. He put his lips on hers, tasted her sweetness. He could die happy now, even if he was crazy.

Ariana pulled away, looking a little dazed by the kiss. "Later," she whispered, gazing into his eyes. She seemed to force herself to look away from him. "We've got to go, now." She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of his cell, leading him up the hallway.

There was a woman standing in the middle of the hallway wearing a very tight dress.

"This is my Aunt Tildy," Ariana said. "She's helping us. Her speeder is

outside waiting for us, and she's going to let us use her ship. We've just got to get to the docking bay."

Hold on. This was beginning to seem less and less the way he'd dream Ariana if she were a figment of his imagination. If he'd made her up in his head, he supposed he'd be kissing her still, possibly figuring out how to get her out of that dress. If she was talking about docking bays and speeders—

Ariana took a blaster from the woman she'd identified as Tildy's hand and gave it to Keirth. "In case we have to shoot our way out," she said.

She was real. This was happening. He shook his head. "How did you get in here?"

“We charmed our way past the guards and shot one,” said Ariana.

“You’re amazing.” He was in awe of her. And he didn’t think she’d ever looked so beautiful.

“Great,” said Ariana, “but we have to get out of here now.” She was running towards the end of the hallway.

Keirth watched as Tildy ripped a big slit in the skirt of her dress. “It’s not easy to move in,” she told him, running after Ariana.

Still stunned, Keirth picked up his feet and followed them.

They emerged out of the hallway, where Keirth could see a man slumped behind a desk. She really had shot someone.

“The lifts!” Ariana pointed and headed that way.

But at moment the lift opened and two men in uniforms came out. The men took in the scene quickly, their gazes resting on the blasters in Keirth’s and Ariana’s hands. Their hands went for their own blasters.

Keirth switched his gun on and pulled the trigger. Shooting their way out, indeed.

* * *

Tramet hadn’t gotten up from the couch. He spoke in a numb voice. “She called herself Kara Transman. She was supporting herself as a prostitute. All those years, she was right under our noses, and I never knew.”

The prince still stood on the other side of the room. He was visibly shaking. "But why would she do that, Nigel? Why would Cecily run away? Why would she live like that?"

Tramet wished he understood. He wished she'd come to him before she disappeared. She was his only family left. She should have realized there was nothing so horrible that he couldn't have forgiven it. He hesitated to say the rest of it to the prince. He worried that it would turn the man against Cecily completely, but he couldn't lie. It was all connected, after all. "I think she was pregnant."

The prince looked at him sharply. "But that hardly makes sense." He

folded his arms over his chest and looked at the floor. "I mean as a reason to run away. She was distraught over the loss of her family, and perhaps there were...indiscretions on both of our parts. Hers and mine. But even so, we were engaged, and I'm the prince. If she had been pregnant, we could have—" He broke off. "Unless it wasn't mine." He turned back to Tramet.

This made things even more confusing. Tramet stood up as well. "I don't know, Gulien. I admit that I thought that the two of you had never..." He took a breath. It was awkward to speak of such things, especially concerning his sister. "I thought she feared your anger because she'd been unfaithful. But if you

two had been...intimate, then it seems even stranger to me.”

“Perhaps not,” said the prince. “She was in mourning, and a hasty wedding would have been irregular. When the child was born too soon, the scandal would have been the talk of the sector.” He sighed. “I can only imagine what my mother might have said about it. She would have hated my involvement in something she would have thought was sordid. Cecily would have known that. After the loss of your family, she might have done something extreme.” He shook his head. Then another thought occurred to him. “Oh. Oh, Nigel, you’re saying that...that Transman, the man who’s supposed to hang tomorrow is...”

Tramet nodded. "If nothing else, Gulien, he's the only living person with blood from my line. My entire family was killed. Cecily is gone. And I've never been able to have children."

"He's your heir," said the prince.

"Even a bastard is something at this point," said Tramet. "I've spent years thinking my title would die with me or that it would be auctioned off upon my death. If there's a good chance that he's not a murderer, then I want him alive."

"Well, if there's a good chance he's my son, *I* want him alive," said the prince. "We'll go to the prison immediately. There are things that need to be sorted out."

Tramet breathed a sigh of relief.

The prince was going to help.

* * *

Keirth managed to get off a shot against the first man. The blaster was set to stun, and the man crumpled to the ground.

But his companion had his blaster out, and even though Ariana had fired at him, she'd missed him completely.

Keirth pushed Ariana and Tildy behind the desk, firing at the man again.

He hadn't been aiming well. His shot drilled right past the man.

The man fired a shot, and his blaster wasn't set to stun. The room lit up.

Keirth dove behind the desk as well. Resting his head against the wall,

he said, “He’s shooting to kill.”

They could hear the man on his comm. “A prisoner’s escaped from cell block A. Looks like Transman.”

Ariana peered over the desk and aimed her blaster.

“Ariana!” Keirth yelled.

She shot anyway.

The man’s voice cut off.

Keirth stood up. The man was down all right. He motioned with his head for Ariana and Tildy to stand. “Get his blaster,” he told Ariana. He nodded at Tildy. “For you.”

Tildy was wide eyed. “This is absolutely thrilling.”

Keirth turned his attention to the screens on the wall. He touched a few

buttons and a console folded out. Good. “Might be thrilling for you, but it’s dangerous as hell, too.” He began to type on the console. “I’m going to try to lock down those lifts so that no one else can get down that way. That man got off information about us to someone. They’re going to be coming for us.”

Ariana returned with the man’s blaster and handed it to Aunt Tildy. “Can you do it?”

Keirth was typing furiously, trying to remember any of the standard override codes he knew. He typed in one. “Denied,” flashed the screen. Another. No dice. A third. “Accepted,” said the screen. “Lifts locked.”

Keirth nodded at Ariana. “I’ve

locked them.”

“Is there another way out?” she asked.

“Let me see if I can pull up a building schematic,” Keirth said, typing again. It took him a few seconds and a few override codes, but then he had it. He pulled it up on one of the big screens so that they could all look at it. “There’s some steps right here.” He pointed at the screen. “But with the lifts not functioning, they’ll come at us that way.”

“This is the lowest level of the building,” said Ariana. “We’re underground. We have to go up to get out.”

She was right. Keirth scanned the screen again. He couldn’t see any other

exits. They'd designed this place well if they were trying to prevent an escape. "Guess I unlock the lifts then."

"But won't they come down them then?" Ariana asked.

Keirth was doing his best to think quickly. "They're probably already heading down the steps. They'll be waiting for us on the main level, because that's the easiest way out. But what if we went all the way up to here?" He pointed.

"But why would we—?"

She was interrupted by the sounds of feet clambering down the steps. "Drop your weapons!" yelled a voice.

Keirth tapped the console, typing in a code to unlock the lift. "No time to

explain, sweetheart. Get in the lift.”

“Repeat. Drop your weapons!” yelled the voice.

Ariana and Tildy sprinted across the room, just as the lift doors opened.

Keirth leapt over the desk and dove into the lift. He jammed his hands on the door close button just as scores of armed policemen ran into the room they’d just been in.

“Fourth floor,” he said. “Fourth floor!”

Tildy touched the screen. The lift moved.

“Keirth?” said Ariana. “What are we doing?”

“There’s a fire escape on those schematics on the fourth floor,” said

Keirth. "It's right across from the lift. We get out, run across the hall, and go down those steps."

Ariana's eyes lit up. She hugged him. "You're brilliant."

"Oh dear," said Tildy. "The driver doesn't know to meet us there, does he?"

"Well, call him on the comm!" said Ariana.

* * *

"You know," said the prince, sitting in the back of his speeder with Tramet, "you really should have told me about this earlier."

"I only found out about the boy myself a few months ago," said Tramet. "I wanted to find him first before I said anything. And as I said before, I hardly

thought Cecily's indiscretions had been with you."

The speeder rounded a corner. They were pulling alongside the side of the prison building. Tramet leaned forward to look out the window. Three people were climbing down a fire escape. And one of them was... "That's Keirth. He's there."

The prince pushed him out of the way. "On the fire escape? He's breaking out of jail?"

Tramet hit a button to roll down the window. "Keirth," he called. "Keirth Transman."

Keirth looked up in alarm. He pushed the two women with them into a waiting speeder, sighting the prince and

Tramet with his blaster as he climbed in after them.

“Don’t shoot,” yelled Tramet. “We only want to talk.”

The speeder took off down the street.

The prince banged on the divider between them and the driver. “Follow that speeder!” he bellowed.

Chapter Twenty

“We’ve got a tail,” Keirth said, leaning up to talk to the driver. “Can you go any faster?”

“Maybe if I got up a little higher,” the driver responded. “I can climb up into the express lane.”

“Do it,” said Keirth.

“It’ll be hard to exit back to the spacedock,” said the driver.

“Hard,” said Keirth, “but not impossible.” He looked at Ariana. “I used to be a speeder driver, remember?”

“They said your name, Keirth,” said Ariana. “Who are they?”

Keirth shook his head. He had no idea.

“He’s switching into the express lane,” said the prince’s driver.

“Follow him then,” said the prince.

The speeder shook underneath them as the driver struggled to switch gears and take the speeder higher.

Tramet felt himself pitched back against the seat. He clutched the armrest to right himself.

The speeder took a hard left turn, throwing both Tramet and the prince against one side.

“He’s going too fast,” said the driver. “I can’t catch up.”

“You *will* catch up to him,” ordered the prince, peeling himself away from the speeder wall.

“I’m losing him,” said the driver.

“Go faster!” roared the prince.

The speeder surged forward, once again pushing Tramet and the prince back into their seats. Tramet tried to look out the window, but all he could see were speeders of various colors blurring together because they were going so fast.

“I don’t see him anywhere,” said the driver.

“What do you mean, you don’t see him?” said the prince.

“He was right in front of me and then he— Oh, no, wait, he’s switched out of express. He’d going to the spacedock.”

Of course. He’d be trying to get off

world, wouldn't he, if he'd just escaped from jail? But how would he have a ship? Tramet did his best to remember the two figures he'd seen with Keirth, getting into the speeder. They'd been women, and one of them must have been Miss Gilit, considering she'd just escaped from Winfield. But the other woman... Had he seen her before? Was she someone related to Miss Gilit? There was another daughter of the Duke of Wendo, wasn't there? But she was much too young. That could only mean... Miss Vintro! The maiden aunt that lived with the family.

“Stop chasing the car,” said Tramet.

“What?” said the prince.

“I know where they’re going,” said Tramet. “Since you’re the prince, you should have no problem getting into her docking area. We’ll beat them to their ship!”

* * *

Ariana hugged Aunt Tildy quickly, as she and Keirth got out of the speeder. “Thank you so much for everything!”

“You’re welcome,” said Aunt Tildy. “This was fun. Anytime you want to do it again, let me know. I’d better get back home, though, before someone wonders where I am. I’m sure your parents know you’ve escaped from Winfield by now.”

“Thank you, Tildy,” said Keirth from behind Ariana.

“You kids have fun,” said Aunt Tildy. She pulled the door to the speeder shut.

Ariana forced herself to move slowly. “We can’t run, Keirth, or we’ll attract attention. Walk quickly but act like you’re supposed to be here. Act like nothing’s wrong.”

Keirth did his best to comply, but she could see worry in his expression. “What if someone recognizes me? My picture’s been all over the nets.”

“So has mine,” said Ariana. “But we’re going to look much more suspicious if we’re running.”

“You shouldn’t have done this,” Keirth said. “It’s too dangerous. If anything happened to you—”

“I wasn’t going to let you die,” she interrupted. “You saved my life before.”

He wrapped his arm around her. “Oh, sweetheart, I was going to kill that guy anyway. I think we’re way beyond even at this point.” He kissed her temple. “Which way is your aunt’s ship?”

Ariana pointed. They set off. As they walked, she did her best not to make eye contact with anyone, and she whispered to Keirth to do the same. They made it through the crowds on the docking bay without incident, and before long, they were at the door to the bay where Aunt Tildy’s ship was. Ariana swiped her aunt’s card, and the doors slid open diagonally. She was reminded

of that day—it seemed so long ago—when she’d gone after Risciter back on Hallon. But this time, she was saving a man’s life who actually deserved it.

They stepped into the docking bay.

Ariana let out a little cry. People were standing in front of her aunt’s ship. They’d found them. After everything, it was over.

“Keirth Transman? Ariana Gilit?” called one of the people.

Keirth took out his blaster, leveling it. “You run,” he said. “I’ll take care of them.”

But then Ariana recognized one of the men. It was Prince Gulien. “Keirth, that’s the prince.”

And a voice rang out across the

docking bay. “Wait. Keirth, I am your uncle!”

Chapter Twenty-one

The cup of tea in Ariana's hand had gone cold. She, Keirth, the Duke of Tramet, and Prince Gulian were all sitting in one of the prince's parlors, and there was a lavish spread of sweets and cakes set out, but not one of them had touched them. Ariana was stunned. She glanced at Keirth, who was sitting next to her, and the prince, who was sitting on an opposite couch. They were both leaning forward, their elbows resting on one knee, their chins propped up by a fist. The expressions on their faces were nearly identical.

It was true. It had to be true. Looking at the two of them together, she

couldn't deny it. She'd been flying around the galaxy with the son of the prince, and all the time, she'd thought of him as a lower class smuggler.

"I guess I don't really know what this means," Keirth said. "My mother couldn't have been..." He gestured around at the elaborate couches and ornate wallpaper. "I don't see why she'd run away from all this. You have no idea the way we lived. Why would she...?"

"We don't really know either," said Tramet.

"I barely remember what she was like right before she left," said the prince. "Afterwards, after she was gone, I tried to think of any sign she might have given, anything she might have said, but I

couldn't think of any reason she would have left either." He leaned back against the couch. "I only found she was pregnant this afternoon. If I'd known, maybe I would have looked harder."

"We did look hard," said Tramet. "We combed the sector for her. She didn't want to be found, Gulien. And when I discovered she was pregnant, I had no idea the prince could possibly be responsible."

"Did she ever give you any indication of who she was?" asked the prince. "Did she ever mention...anything?"

Keirth shook his head. "No. She didn't like to talk about anything that had to do with the nobility. She hated it." He

sighed. “I guess, though, it makes certain things make sense. I was pretty young when we left the sector for the first time, maybe four or five, and before that, I’m not sure if she was, you know, working as a prostitute. I think that may have started after we got to Scranth. But when we left, I remember the sector was celebrating the prince’s—I mean your—marriage.” He gestured to the prince.

The prince covered his mouth with his hand. “Then it’s my fault. It’s my fault she died.”

“It’s Risciter’s fault.” Keirth’s voice was harsh.

“Indeed,” said Tramet. He was sitting next to the prince, and he turned to him. “Gulian, what’s done is done.

Cecily was distraught over the loss of our family. She must have been sure she was ruined when she became pregnant. She ran because she was confused and frightened. She must not have seen any other way out.”

Ariana cleared her throat. “It’s the sector’s fault. The sector made her think she wasn’t worth anything if her virtue was in question. The sector drove her to it.”

No one said anything, but Keirth took Ariana’s hand.

“You told me your mother said that the sector was a pretty cover for something rotten, didn’t you?” Ariana said.

“She said something like that,” said

Keirth.

“Well, it’s true,” said Ariana. “This place treats women like property, something to be traded, something that can get ruined or destroyed, not like people. It’s appalling. It’s why I wanted to leave.” Certainly, they couldn’t go anywhere now, not when Keirth had just found his father. But she didn’t know what would happen anymore. She’d never expected anything like this.

“Well, we will leave,” said Keirth. He stood up. “If we could evade gellococcus, escape from Trioth, get away from Risciter, break out of jail, we can do this.” He tugged her to her feet.

The prince got up as well. “Wait.” He ran a hand through his hair. “You

must realize that I loved your mother. I was forced to marry, to produce heirs. It's my duty. But I've never cared about anyone the way I cared about Cecily. And I've lost her forever, but you're all there is left of her, and I beg you not to walk away from me, please."

"You're the Tramet heir," said Tramet. "I have no children. You're all there is. Please."

Ariana sat back down.

Keirth looked at her. "Ariana?"

"Keirth, he's obviously your father. You look just like him. And the Tramet title is going to die with the duke without anyone to inherit it. We can't simply leave like we thought we could," she said.

“But this isn’t what you want,” he said. “This isn’t what *we* want. And besides, I’m a convicted murderer.”

“Oh,” said the prince, “considering the evidence that Nigel has compiled, I don’t think that will be an issue for much longer.”

“We agreed,” said Keirth, staring into her eyes, “we didn’t want to be tied down. We wanted to be free, to go from place to place.”

“Nothing’s saying you can’t do that if you assume the title,” said Tramet.

“I couldn’t take care of Cecily,” said the prince. “You must let me at least take care of her child.”

Keirth sighed heavily. He sat back down next to Ariana.

She lifted her chin. “The sector destroyed Cecily. If we stay, we’ll want to use our position to help women like her.”

The prince caught Ariana’s gaze with his own. He nodded slowly. “Yes, absolutely. You couldn’t be more right.”

Epilogue

One year later...

Ariana poked her head into the bridge of the ship. “We getting off the ground soon?”

Keirth looked up from the console. “Yeah, as soon as my father stops sending me messages trying to convince us to take servants along. He doesn’t believe that we can rehydrate food ourselves.”

Ariana plopped into the seat next to him. “But we never take servants.”

“And yet,” said Keirth.

Such were the trials of being the next Duke of Tramet and the son of the prince, even if he wasn’t legitimately

recognized by the queen as an heir to the crown of the sector. Being the Tramet heir was responsibility enough.

But the prince had been as good as his word, doing what he could to help the plight of women in the sector. He'd set up a trust for the families of Risciter's victims. It seemed that the dead women on Hallon were the tip of the iceberg. Risciter had traveled far and wide, leaving bodies in his wake. Ariana and Keirth were the executors of the trust, and they across the galaxy, finding families and giving them what help they could.

When they weren't hunting down the victims' families, they spent their time working on ways to keep prostitutes

safer, lobbying for quicker responses by police, helping brothels get the funding to hire guards and install security systems.

And they also traveled to numerous speaking engagements throughout the galaxy, appearing on panels and giving talks about the role of women in the sector and the way that current social rules hurt them. When Keirth told the story of his mother, there was never a dry eye in the place.

With the support of the prince, things were changing. It wasn't happening overnight, but progress was being made. From Ariana's perspective, it was a long time coming.

They were moving most of the time,

which was the important thing. Ariana didn't know if she could handle staying in one place for long.

But she was eager to get moving on this trip, because it wasn't business but instead a much needed social trip to visit Gordic and Winda, who'd just had their first baby. Ariana had an entire room of the ship filled up with baby gifts. She couldn't wait to see them.

"He seems to have gotten the message," said Keirth, grinning over at Ariana. "At least he hasn't sent me anything in the last few minutes."

"Quick," she said. "Get moving before he does."

Keirth began to press keys on his console. "Strap in, sweetheart. We're

taking off.”

“Finally,” she said, glorying in the whirs and moans the ship made as it left the ground. She watched on the visual as the world slipped away, as they burst through the clouds, through the blue sky, as it darkened around them and the stars appeared. This was home. And Keirth was here, so everything was perfect.

Keirth punched at the console again. “We’re making the jump to hyperspace,” he told her.

She held her breath as the ship accelerated and watched as everything stretched out in front of her before it exploded into streaming lights.

Keirth switched off the visual.

“I like hyperspace,” she pouted.

“Gives me a headache,” Keirth muttered. He unstrapped and got out of his chair. “Besides, I have better ideas for how we should spend our time besides staring at the visual the whole trip.”

Ariana unstrapped herself, arching an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

He pulled her against his hard chest, pressing his lips on her neck.

She sighed as he kissed his way up to her ear.

His whisper was ragged. “I am going to make you come so many times, you won’t be able to move by the time we get to the Pryneth system.”

She laughed. “You better, boy. You’ve got a lot to make up for.”

He rolled his eyes. “Are you ever going to let that go, sweetheart? It was one time. One time. You didn’t have an orgasm *one time*. The first time, may I add.”

She grabbed him by his belt and tugged him out of the bridge.”We’ll see, won’t we? Maybe I *will* let it go. It all depends on what you do for me now.”

With a growl, he lifted her in his arms and carried her back through the ship. She giggled as he threw her down on the bed and held her arms up for him. “I love you Keirth Transman.”

“I love you,” he said.

Outside, their ship tunneled through hyperspace, and swirls of bright light surrounded them, cradling them. They

were moving so fast, ripping through the stars. Together.

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V. J. Chambers is... ...dark and gritty...

The Jason and Azazel Trilogy

What if the anti-christ and the messiah fell in love? What if you couldn't tell who was the anti-christ and who was the messiah? And what if they were both just high school seniors who couldn't figure out their sex lives, let alone the fate of the world?

A story that travels from the backwoods of West Virginia to the streets of Rome, that tackles questions about morality, fate, and the nature of good and evil, Jason and Azazel will shake you up.

Breathless
Trembling
Tortured
Omnibus Bundle

**The Jason and Azazel Apocalypse
Trilogy**

They thought they'd escaped their destiny, and that they could live normally. But as the modern world comes crashing down around them, it seems that every horrible thing predicted about them is coming true.

And they're not getting along very well anymore either.

The Stillness in the Air
Between the Heaves of Storm
That Last Onset
Omnibus Bundle

The Toil and Trouble Trilogy
Book One
Book Two

Loyalty. Family. Trust.

Olivia Calabrese has valued nothing more strongly since her mob boss father was arrested and her mother was killed in the cross fire. Even though her family sells illegal magical charms that have the nasty side effect of turning some

wearers into berserkers—rage-filled monsters—she sees betrayal as a far worse offense than harming people. To prove her loyalty, she dreams of succeeding her father as head of the mob family.

When her uncle, the current boss, is shot by a rival gang, she just might get her chance.

But her cousin, her only competition, whispers something to her that throws her off track. He says her mother ratted the family out to the police. He says that her mother's death wasn't an accident, but a hit ordered by her father.

Her entire worldview called into question, Olivia sets about hunting down the truth about her parents. And to complicate matters, she seems to be falling for a boy who's turning into a berserker—from her own family's charms.

As her set of values shatters around her, Olivia must choose between staying loyal to her family or fighting against them.

[Ratcatcher](#)

They are unwanted. Youths that stitch together bits of ragged lace to sell in parking lots and huddle in vans, snorting

away the cold in snowy lines. They follow the rock band The Wrenching from show to show.

No one notices when they disappear into the darkness.

No one except The Wrenching's lead singer, Shane Adams, who just wants his fans to go home. He thinks they're in danger. "I play," he says. "They follow. They die."

This macabre thriller takes its cues from the Pied Piper folk tale, also known as "The Ratcatcher of Hamelin."

[Death Girl](#)

They call Maureen Death Girl because she's obsessed with mass murderers. That is, when anyone in her high school speaks to her at all, which isn't often.

A teenage outcast, Maureen thinks she'll graduate high school before going on a date or being kissed. But in the first month of senior year, she attracts the attention of both enigmatic Jared, whose idea of fun is burning down old shoe factories, and distant Trevor, who dreams of violence and blood.

Jared has a plan. Trevor has a secret. And Maureen is about to be twisted up into a bleak world of desire, destruction,

and sadistic glee.

Brighter

Ramona Brinks is barely surviving her post-college angst, struggling to balance her partying with her job and her love life. She wants to move out and grow up. She doesn't want to worry about the fact she's seen a dead girl walking around in Elston or that she's seen pictures indicating certain people in town haven't aged in 60 years. She doesn't want to be bothered by nagging evidence that something ancient and evil is at work in town. But when someone locks her in a basement because she's asking too many questions, she can't help but begin

searching for answers in earnest.

As Ramona digs deeper, she begins to uncover a world underneath the seemingly quiet small town's veneer. A realm of violent deaths and vengeful creatures, protecting a source of ancient power. Beneath the surface of her twentysomething culture--kids playing at being adults, existing on cigarettes, bars, and caffeine--something far more sinister is at work. And whatever it is, it doesn't seem to want Ramona to leave.

...compelling...

Invoke

Reese and Wyn, two psychic students at a special college, never intended to fall in love with each other. But an exercise in the spirit realm has gone wrong, and now malicious spirits have taken over their bodies, intent on recreating the doomed love of Guinevere and Lancelot.

Wyn and Reese aren't the only students affected. It seems everyone in the school has fallen under the influence of ancient spirits. The headmistress, behaving like Morgan le Fay, makes advances towards Wyn's boyfriend, who's dreaming about pulling a sword out of a stone. Another

student pines over Reese, a la "The Lady of Shallot." But when these spirit games turn deadly, Reese and Wyn realize that unwanted romantic entanglements are the least of their problems.

The full power of the spirits will be unlocked if three people die. One already has. Reese and Wyn have to stop the spirits from killing anyone else, while resisting their growing desire for each other, or Lancelot and Guinevere will take over their bodies forever.

[Faerie Changeling](#)

Things started going wrong for Russ Knight last year. He found out his

girlfriend was cheating on him when she gave birth at the junior prom and left the baby to die in a trashcan. Russ didn't even know she was pregnant. Hell, he thought they were saving themselves for each other.

Now, locked in her padded cell, his girlfriend is screaming that she was just trying to get the faeries to give her baby back. Russ doesn't buy it. But to shut her up, Russ tries a trick the old legends say will work, and the baby starts swearing and begging to be taken back to Faerie. He's got to accept the truth: the kid he's raising is a faerie changeling.

The faeries are going to sacrifice the

real baby at the Equinox if Russ can't get them to switch again. But the only person who can get the baby back is a biological parent, and Russ' girlfriend certainly can't help. To save an innocent life, Russ will face ancient faeries with razor-like teeth, wrestle snarling skeleton dogs, and, maybe worst of all, track down every guy his girlfriend was sleeping with last year in the hopes of finding the baby's real father.

And apparently, the father could be half his senior class.

**...humorous in a twisted
way...**

Little Sister: A Vampire Novella

Ever since Jane Cassidy's big brother was killed in a car accident six months ago, she's been taking solace in watching cheesy vampire movies and yelling at the characters on the screen when they do stupid things. She can't control the tragedy in her own life, but in the movies, the characters can find ways out of the grip of death.

A chance meeting with Bailey Westfield, her brother's best friend and her

childhood crush, catapults her out of her cocoon of grieving. Bailey's kiss makes Jane feel tugged under a rushing waterfall of cold, sweet darkness. She only sees him at night, and she longs to feel his icy fingers trace the outline of her jaw.

Jane doesn't realize that she's been (literally) sucked into the plot of a vampire movie. And she's not so snarky when there are teeth in her own neck.

Mischief

Iris Tanner grew up watching the PSAs. She knew it was a bad idea to take pixie dust. She knew there was a chance she'd

get bad stuff—black pixie dust, the kind of drug that doesn't give nifty, magical hallucinations. The kind of drug that has the nasty side effect of turning people into ghouls. She should have just said no.

Instead, she's raiding morgues for food. Her band abandoned her, and she bitterly has to watch them climb the Billboard charts without her.

No one even talks to her except the tall, dark stalker/stranger that's been following her around. That guy might be hot, but he's mentally unhinged. He thinks the metal band Mischief is actually made of disguised pixies, and

they want to feed their audience to an ancient monster.

On the off chance he's right, Iris decides to help him. After all, saving the world is at least as good as a hit record. Right?

Mischief is a 1980s glam metal urban fantasy. With pixies.

**V. J. Chambers is not for
the faint of heart.**