
Chapter 1

The reactor core needed thirty-six hours to be functional again, so he ordered an engine overhaul.

"It's old," warned the tech. "No one here knows exactly how it's put together."

"We'll all learn something," said Rhys. He called everyone in over the comm, Sydell included. God knows where she'd been the last twenty-four hours since he'd taken his paddle to her, after she'd nearly gotten herself killed crawling around in one of the ship's vents. She hadn't been pleased about it at all, but it was time for her to suck it up.

Except for Sydell, who had not shown up yet, he led the team to the engine room. With the ionic generator running, the ship had grown uncomfortably hot, and this room was the worst. It would be a tough job. All the same, he put everyone to work, cleaning parts, cataloging the serial numbers of each piece, figuring out what would need to be replaced and when.

Then the doors hissed open, and at last she wandered in. She wore a fitted tank top with thin straps that bared most of her shoulders, and shorts rolled up snugly to the tops of her thighs. She'd not even bothered to tie up her mass of dark, wild hair.

He'd wanted to ignore her today, but this, on top of her lateness, would not allow for it. He stopped her as she walked in the door.

When she saw him, she blushed deeply but did not avert her face. Instead, she looked up at him directly, her brown-eyed gaze broken only by a series of her anxious blinks.

"You need to be in your jumpsuit," he said sternly, then clarified, "for safety. A lot of parts in here get hot, as I'm sure you're aware."

She started to turn, but he put a hand on her elbow. She jumped as he did, like he'd touched her with a spark. "Don't worry about it now. You're late already and you need to get to work. Just be careful. And the next time you're called over the comm, you show up immediately. Understood?"

She nodded, and he stared at her another moment until she said, "Yes."

He put her to work wiping down all the parts, before they ran them through the nanoscrubbers. She kept her distance from him. Afraid of him, probably. More afraid than when he'd punished her the first time. He intended it that way when he'd told her about his time working for Parsons in human traffic. Better she be afraid than dead, cooked to a crisp in a vent or some other stupidity.

And it wasn't a lie. Yes, he'd worked for the most notorious crime-lord in the system, just omitted the fact that he'd been only fifteen at the time, shipped out to his father on Mars after his mother had died. He'd never met his father before that, never known that he'd been working with Parsons as a slaver.

What a rude awakening *that* had been. He'd left them at eighteen and joined the army, just before the Mutiny, damnable luck. He hadn't left Parsons because he hated it, though. Playing master to people had come terribly naturally to him, and he'd left because he'd been getting a taste for it.

He threw himself now into the work of getting the engine

apart. Being adrift in the belts like this annoyed him. He needed to be back on Europa, needed to get back to work. The Io City government breathed too close to his company for comfort, and Parsons' people were everywhere. Even on the ship, it seemed.

But that wasn't something anyone needed to know, not yet. So, he could only divert himself, occupy his mind with pieces, and try to lose himself in the tedium of it in order to pass the time.

"Should we take apart the cooling system?" asked the tech.

"We have the time to do it. I'll do it," said Rhys, because if he wanted a thing done right, he usually had to do it himself.

As he started in on the tubing connecting the cooling hub to the reactor, he glanced at Sydell, where she sat near a corner. Her eyes were on him, but she jerked her head away. Something about her crouching over a bundle of parts kept his attention on her for a moment. The sulky turn of her arched pink mouth. The cleft of her breasts peeping out of the top of her tight little shirt. Without willing it, his mind returned to an image of her bent over his desk as he spanked her, her ample bottom quivering, her downed panties stretched tight around her hips, just barely covering her pussy.

Nope. He turned back to the cooling hub. He'd already decided how it would be with Sydell, from the beginning. *Not like that.* He'd been busy of late, and it had been some months since he'd spent any time with a woman. He'd fix that when he got to Io City. But Sydell was his recruit, even if she had been compelled to it, and he wasn't about to lose his head over her.

He caught her two or three more times, gazing at him, and looking away when caught. He couldn't keep away; he stepped over to where she sat, towering over her. She jumped and stared up at him, startled. The piece she'd been holding clattered into the tub beneath her.

"What are you doing with that connector?" he demanded.

"You can't clean it like that, it needs to be opened. Look, I'll show you."

She rearranged herself, slamming into the tub of parts with one knee, which overturned. He sighed. She stammered something incomprehensible. What was wrong now? "Go take an hour," he ordered. "Have something to eat." He tried to voice it in his lightest tone, while still sounding as though he was not to be argued with. She slinked off.

He became immersed again in the cooling system; he'd no clue how much time had passed when the pilot approached him.

"I think everyone called it a day," Walt said. "I need to go check the Nav specs. We good?"

Rhys rubbed at his aching temples. "Uh, yes. I didn't realize it was so late."

"Yep." Walt stood there, awkwardly, rocking a bit on his heels with his hands behind his back, as though he wanted to say something.

"What is it?" Rhys asked, trying to hide his impatience.

"Oh. Well. I never did get to thank you. For helping Sydel." Rhys could only nod. Walt's eyes were bright, too large behind his glasses, and his words ran slow and somber. It had meant a lot to him, it seemed.

"I still can't believe she stole that jammer," Walt said in a breath, shaking his head.

"Really?" Here, Rhys' surprise was genuine. "I'd have thought you'd come to expect that kind of thing from her."

"She's usually smarter than that. I don't know what the hell she was thinking."

"Yeah, it was pretty damned stupid." He turned back to the cooling hub, went on with what he'd been dismantling. "But I think she had a mind to get caught."

Walt considered this, his head cocked to one side, in a small, almost robotic motion. "I guess it's possible. Sometimes she does seem a bit... self-sabotaging." This came out as reluctant as a

pulled tooth, along with a grieved sigh. "But she's always been terrified of field prisons."

"She needed to be caught," said Rhys simply. "And it was quite the gamble on her part, but here she is. Things could be a great deal worse for her."

"Oh, I know. But are you saying she wanted to end up here? She could have just stayed on when you offered her a job."

"She would never have boarded this ship willingly. She had to have her arm twisted." Rhys paused, pulled out a long section of tubing. "Anyway, when she stole that jammer, it was her instinct running her."

"It usually does." Walt gave a small smile, accepting and affectionate at the thought. From the corner of his eye, Rhys spotted much in the smile, devotion, possibly even love. *Hopeless*, he thought. Sydell had been a handful for Walt as a friend. Anything more than that, and she'd wreck him. Any mate of hers would have to be strong, know how to keep a handle on her.

"I didn't plan to recruit her, to be honest. Not until..." And Rhys stopped there. When had it been? When she'd sobbed into his shoulder, after he'd punished her the first time, and told him all those things? He'd seen it then, seen exactly what she needed and knew that he could give it to her. Then those cops had carried her off, and he wasn't letting them have her. "Well, it was a last minute decision," he finished with a shrug.

"Your instinct running you, too?" asked Walt with a sheepish grin. Or was it a sly grin? Rhys frowned. What the hell did he mean by that? Walt went on quickly, "But, seriously, thanks for helping her. It's good for her, working on the ship like this. You're good for her."

Rhys shrugged. What did Walt want here? After a moment, Rhys said, "She thanked me for helping you out, too."

"Really?" And here, Walt sounded sincerely shocked. "That doesn't sound like her at all." He frowned to himself, pensive. "You really have been good for her," he said finally.

"Maybe someday she'll think that, too," said Rhys. Then he launched into something about the Pilot Academy, because he didn't want to talk about Sydell anymore, not like this and not with Walt.

When he entered the mess later to get something to eat, he found her sitting at the bar. He thought she'd gone skulking off to her room. Why was she still here? "I told you to take an hour. Do you know how long an hour is?" he asked.

She shrugged and fidgeted with her cup, peeling back the lid. "I thought we were all done for the day."

"That's not what break means. Head back and clean up everything that's laid out on the floor. I'll be over in a bit to start putting things back together, and you're going to help me."

She nodded and then moved toward the door, where he stood. He remained in place for a moment, watching her closely, making her wait to pass. She twitched under his gaze, tucking her face beneath her messy hair, the silly green streak in it swinging across her forehead.

He stepped back and let her pass, lowering his head with a smile. He watched her leave, his eyes on her bare, shapely legs. He'd had no intention of going back to it tonight, until he had seen her. He would have forgotten her if she'd not still been in the mess. Why hadn't she just gone to her room?

He made some noodles in the agitation module and ate quickly, hungrily, not noticing the taste. Impatience to get back to the engine room distracted him. Something about her had changed, since he'd taken her to task in his loft, he was sure of it. Or rather, had to be sure of it. He thought briefly about his earlier rule, as to Sydell. *Off limits*. And then he'd had that talk with Walt, and come to find her here, alone, in her little shorts, like she'd been waiting for him.

Perhaps Walter was right, and he was running on instinct after all.

When Rhys came back into the engine room, his presence greeted her like heat, like a pressure on the back of her head. She did not turn but remained hunched over the tubs of pieces she'd collected, utterly still and pretending to be enthralled with them. He came to settle near her without a word, taking up some of the parts she'd cleaned and getting them put back into place. He'd taken down the top of his jumpsuit and tied it at his waist, wearing beneath it a sleeveless undershirt. After telling her she had to wear her thermal. Hypocrite. But she wasn't about to say it aloud.

Yet, she kept staring at his rounded shoulders, at the muscles curving into his dark-downed forearms, and at his hands, square and strong, capably putting the engine back together as if they had their own intelligence. This was Rhys, who'd taken her ship away, who'd bought her like chattel on a whim and who thought nothing of whipping her ass red when he felt like it. Rhys, who'd clipped her wings, whom she'd hated since almost the moment they met. But she could not stop staring at him, despite her panic that he would notice, that he would call her out on it.

He had become the most attractive man she'd ever known. *You're still crazy*, she told herself. Stricken with whatever it was that had descended on her the other night after suffering such awful humiliation at his hands... no, it was like a flu, or a fever; it can go on for a bit, but it goes away eventually. It had to.

She leaned in to grab another piece from the tub and dropped the two she was holding; they clattered to the grated floor, and one rolled down into a small trench by the cooling hub. He caught her eyes in his, in a way that made her hold her breath, then his dark brows lowered disapprovingly, and he said, "You're distracted. Pay attention to what you're doing." He reached down into the little gutter and got the part.

An angry heat came up into her chest, and her breaths came

faster. "How the hell am I supposed to do that, with you lurking around like an enforcer bot?" she snapped. The words escaped hot from her mouth, like they'd been trapped there.

He shot her a sharp look, eyes narrowing, and everything heightened; the colors in the room brightened and her ears roared, and she thought her nerves would shatter.

"*Excuse me?*" he asked, stepping in and crouching next to her. His eyes scoured her face, as though he were testing her.

She glowered at him for a moment, then bowed her head back over her work. She moved the pieces about pointlessly; he was so close, she could feel the heat coming off his large body.

"You're just fooling around now," he accused, and she could not speak. The pieces in her hands lost all meaning; she might have been holding two fish, and if she were, she would have known just as much what to do with them.

In a low voice, he asked, "Are you going to help me get some work done, or should I take your little shorts down and spank you again?"

His words liquefied her, and her head went light. The deliberate way he spoke, as though he knew exactly what effect he was having on her, made her unsure of what to say, even if she could have spoken. Did he mean it? Would he? The room sort of spun a little and she dropped one of the pieces, yet again, and then tried to pick it back up.

"Would that help you?" he pressed. "Or would it just make things worse?"

A pause. The silence roared. Her stomach contracted.

"Sydell, you're so horny, I can smell it," he said cruelly. She gasped, a jagged breath torn from her, outraged, and before she could think, she flung her hand out to slap him.

He caught it, and his eyes locked on hers with an aggressive gleam. He reached out with his other hand and touched her waist, and it was like he'd applied an electric charge; her whole body hummed with it like a live wire. Her jaw dropped. He

smiled, triumphant. "That's why you're so distracted," he said, softer now.

Her mouth stayed open, in a kind of dumb gratitude that he'd said it, that he'd made the awful thing too tangible to deny. But why had he? Did he mean to spank her, like he said? Or... and for a brief, insane second, she thought he might lean in and kiss her, right where she knelt.

He did not. Instead, as he held her there, steadying her, he ran his other hand along her waist, in a long, luscious stroke, not yet releasing the hand he had caught. He stopped just beneath her arm, his thumb only just brushing the side of her breast. Then he slid his hand back down and stopped at the button of her shorts.

"What were you trying to tell me, prancing around in these, hmm?" he asked with a soft laugh, tugging at the waistband.

She could only stare at him, knowing her face had to be bright red from the heat tingling beneath her skin.

"What do you want, Sydell? Do you want me to do this?"

His tone demanded an answer. It was too much, she couldn't... but what if he stopped? She would die if he stopped. So, she nodded, quickly.

In a dexterous motion, he undid the top button of her shorts, zipped down the fly and tugged at the loose flap. The next thing she knew, he had slipped his hand down into her shorts, over her panties, so that he held her tender mound, with nothing between his hand and her body but a thin layer of cotton.

A pulse surged up from where he touched, and her body rocked forward; he held her by her wrist still, keeping her in place. He pressed the end of his palm against her most sensitive spot, while his long, firm fingers rested farther back, right on the crease of where she opened.

"Oh my god," she said under her breath; it sounded distant, like someone else had said it.

He ran his fingers along the split of her and she gasped as

her whole body sang and that intimate place contracted, a quick spasm of pleasure. He laughed, delighted, clearly having felt for himself her reaction. He stroked her insistently, making her squirm at the sensation of it, while all her own motions only increased the friction. Bolts of pleasure swam up through her core, and she half-closed her eyes, in his thrall completely.

He kept up his strokes, his hand firm and knowing. He stretched his fingers and rubbed farther back, embarrassingly close to her asshole. She whined and tried to shimmy away, but she was trapped in her own shorts. Her breaths grew short, tight, as arousal tugged at her like a wave; yes, it was like feeling a wave dragging the sand out from under her body, tugging her out to the ocean irresistibly. The irresistible urge to...

"You want to come, don't you?" he asked, already sensing it, and her face burned. Heat rushed pulsing down to her groin, so that for a second, she thought she would come in that instant. He stilled his hand, however.

That was too much to bear. "Please," she said, her own voice ringing in her ears as a whine. What the hell was she doing? Was she begging him for *that*?

"Please?" he taunted. "Please what?"

She writhed about in shame and tension.

"Tell me what you want, baby," he said.

When he said that, it put a tremor through her very depths; the word was both affectionate but also how he'd said it back at her apartment when chiding her, 'Don't be a baby.'

Then he'd bent her over her sofa and spanked her, and thinking of it now made her skin flood with heat. "I want to come," she breathed. Then she added, "Please." And she cringed, having been made to say it.

"Come here then," he said. He took his hand away from where she needed him and she cried out at the loss, but then he pulled her in close, so that her body pressed to his deliciously. As he did, he leaned back, until she lay full length on top of him,

straddling his hips, and through the layers of their clothing, his hardness pushed insistently against her pussy. She stifled a moan, to feel his thick rigidity beneath her. He bounced her playfully against it, his hands spread out on her bottom, a half-smile flickering on his face. Then he began to grind himself against her, and the smile vanished.

The girth of him intimidated her; thank God he didn't seem about to put it inside. All the same, the thought of him doing so made her heart race, to feel his cock bearing up against the split of her and think that he could do just that if he wanted. She pushed her face into his shirt, the rib of it rough on her skin, his scent musky and pleasing. She pressed her nose against his shoulder, into the muscle made hard by tension, and reveled in its implacability.

"You want to come all pressed against me?" he said, just next to her ear, and she squirmed.

To her joy, he held her there, his hands gripping her bottom as he kept on grinding her rhythmically. His cock pushed hard on her clit through her shorts, and she felt herself soaking the fabric of them helplessly. She was just at the cusp of it, and yet... and yet she couldn't quite... couldn't...

She whined in frustration and wriggled, trying to take it for herself, pushing her body along his bulge. He slid his hand into the cleft of her buttocks, stroking the sensitive places there through her shorts, prodding even at that tight, intimate ring of muscle with his finger. She yelped at that, and then the shock of it, the pleasure it gave mixed with the... just the wrongness of it, pushed her over the edge. Pressed down on his rocking hips, she came with a loud wail, biting at his shirt as she did, grabbing fistfuls of it as her whole body spasmed in ecstasy.

He ground her all the way through it; he pushed his fingers onto the back end of her through her shorts, teasing at that private spot, crowding her on both sides so there was no escaping him. The pleasure peaked and rang all through her, like nothing

she had ever felt. Her legs stretched long and rigid and then, just as swiftly, relaxed, dropping to the sides of him as she was left sensitive and spent. Her legs collapsed into his, wrapped around them. She felt the intractable hardness of his right leg, the titanium one, and she shivered with bliss.

Now his thrusts against her grew faster, rougher, somehow less aware of her presence. His hard cock smashing up on her just orgasmed, sensitive clit made her shriek and thrash against him, and when he did not stop, she came again, a piercing sharp climax that stiffened her legs until she fell limp once more, barely sensible to what he did. After a moment, he slowed, and his gruntlike panting softened; she felt his cool breath as he brushed his face over the crown of her head. Had he kissed her there, in a rush of tenderness from his own orgasm? The whole of it had dazed her too much to tell.

Her mind and body fell still, as though she'd woken from a deep sleep, a dream, and was no longer certain about reality. Drifting in that space in which reality counts for little, and she held the precious fading dream in her head for as long as possible.

He moved first. He shifted beneath her, and finding her limp, he pulled her up slowly along with him. He scratched her head playfully, making her feel rather like a puppy. "Ready to go to bed?" he asked, and she nodded dazedly. Oh, shit, wait. Did he mean, go to his bed? A panic shot through her. What she wanted, suddenly, was to be alone, in the dark of her own little bunk, where he could not see her.

He stood, helping her up to her feet, and she found herself shaky. They walked that way, with him holding her arm, out into the corridor, where he turned toward the barracks. Thank God. She wanted to hide, couldn't bear to see him after what had just happened, or to have him see her.

At the door of her room, she said curtly, "I can get to bed

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myself, thank you." She kept her head bent, face out of sight, but caught a small jerk of surprise from him when she said it.

"All right. It was fun, kid. Goodnight." He gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder, almost playful, before walking off back up the hall. She was too exhausted to ponder on it, or to even want to. She stepped into her small room, grateful for its compact comfort, and dove into the bed as she ordered the lights off, to be enclosed by the sweetness of the dark.