

Rocket Man

By

Kracken

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Chapter One

Breaking All the Rules

Location was everything. Buying a cheap scrap yard, in a section of a space station that was filled with them, was, in of itself, a bad move. Beggars couldn't be choosers, though, and I had definitely been a beggar. After having fought, killed, and given up my youth for the government during its wars, they had given me, with grudging generosity, just enough credits for the down payment on a dirt lot full of rusting metal parts on a space station.

Sefus had once been a refueling station for combat transports, but those days were over. Its inhabitants were now mostly scavengers. First they had picked over the bones of the dead and dying machinery left behind on the battlefields. After that supply was exhausted, they had turned to buying and refurbishing parts. It was a poor business at best. Lately, it had become cut throat as the government began regulating and banning the parts that were being used to bring scrapped war machines back to life.

When the revenue from those scrap lots turned from a gusher to a trickle, Sefus's government abandoned them as fast as rats running from a sinking ship. With dreams of reclaiming their status as a transportation hub, they invested in green areas and built shiny towers to cater to their new customers. Those customers didn't appear, unfortunately, and all the advertising and renovation couldn't save them from their reputation as a backwater station full of disreputable scrap men.

Corruption became rampant as politicians turned to illegal trade and imposed crushing taxes on the citizens to fill their pockets and fuel their extravagant lifestyles. Those who could afford the transport fee left the station. The ones left behind suffered. The scrap men suffered most of all. As if in retaliation for no longer being lucrative, the government had proclaimed the lots *'toxic'*. Sectioning them off from the rest of the station, and supplied air, water, and filtration by outdated machinery, they were abandoned to their slow decay and impending financial ruin. The haves and have-nots were clearly defined by a rust covered emergency airlock that filled the sky and hadn't been opened in years.

It's not as if I'd ever had it better. I had grown up poor with an absent father and a drug addicted mother. After a youth of borderline subsistence and abuse, being drafted into the military at eighteen had seemed like a good thing. I gained new perspective, however, after a few bloody battles. I remember longing for the old days of starvation and living with a strung out mother. Ending up alone in a shack surrounded by scrap parts didn't seem bad after all of that.

Why was I alone? My fellow soldiers from the war, those men and women I had been, well, not real friends with, but had shared day to day life and death with hadn't wanted peace after the war. Almost all of them had either stayed in the military or had taken law enforcement jobs in the private sector. Since we didn't walk in the same circles any longer it was too hard to keep in touch. The only one to share my desire for peace became my sidekick in the business for a while. He eventually found true love at the corner bar and decided that living with a pile of scrap metal wasn't the kind of life he wanted to lead. He's happy, and I don't blame him, but it gets lonely. My only companions now are my trio of employees. They like to drink, though, and don't see much point in being buddies with a guy who doesn't share their passion for the bottle.

Sometimes, I feel like drinking, too. The urge is especially keen on days that are hotter than hell and when depression and loneliness gang up on me. On those days I long to exorcise that feeling of being a complete loser. What stops me from uncapping a bottle of numb forgetfulness? That would be the familiar sight of one of my employees staggering from their rusted metal and plasti-wood shack and vomiting. Seeing them looking like a fresh corpse someone had just dug up, always reminds me, rather graphically, that it could get worse, much worse.

When a truck pulled into my yard on a day like that, when food had not been affordable and I'd just about tried my luck begging my employees for a bite to eat, I was more than eager to take whatever was coming my way. To sell junk you had to have what people wanted. Unfortunately, everyone knew I was broke and not many people wanted to accept a percentage on the resale. That made customers a cause for celebration. I didn't lose any time running out of my shack to meet whoever was driving that truck.

The man who stepped down from the cab looked nervous. Dressed in black combat boots and olive overalls, he kept taking a cap on and off and smoothing a hand over the top of his crew cut. I hadn't lived this long by being stupid. Something was up and that something was probably illegal. Since I led a life where I seldom shook hands with the law, my only concern was; how illegal and could I get away with it?

The man sized me up first and then gave me a meaningful look. I nodded and he relaxed, not completely, but he knew that we understood each other before we exchanged one word.

"Any paper work?" I asked point blank. The man shrugged and I bit my lip. My next question was, "Hot?" He shook his head, no, lifting his cap and running that hand over his hair one more time. It was a definite lie. "Traceable?" He shook his head again and I wasn't sure. "How much?" was my last question and the most important.

"Eighty percent," the man replied, looking out over my scrap lot as if it was foreign to

him. A newbie, I guessed, and felt better about my chances of getting a good deal.

“I’m poor, not stupid,” I retorted. “I’ll give you sixty percent, but only if you have some really good shit. You won’t get that from anyone else.”

The man frowned and took long minutes to think about it. It was a war of nerves. He only had to look around, though, to see my lack of customers and my large stacks of unsold, useless scrap to know that I was desperate. He was waiting for me to crack and promise him whatever he wanted. I waited him out, my sweat trickling down my back, until he finally looked down at me. I was filthy from the yard and a bandana was tied over my dust filled, blonde hair. I was used to seeing that slight sneer and the barely concealed disgust. Scrap men weren’t known for their brains or their morals.

The man started to leave. I didn’t panic. I let him. It was part of the game. “Have a nice day!” I called after him.

He stopped. I could feel him simmering. I didn’t have to see it to know. Finally, he turned around again, scowling. He was just as desperate as I was, I thought, but kept any smugness off my face as he held out a computer pad. I looked it over; basic consignment sale that noted the contents as reworked tools. Bullshit, I thought, as I put my thumb print to it after adding the amount that I would give him on the resale. If he was handing me shit he wouldn’t get a dime.

The man waved me towards the truck as he tucked the pad under his arm. He was looking sour, not pleased by the sale, but making the best of it. Yeah, it was damned hot stuff, if he wasn’t willing to shop around, or, maybe, he had shopped around and he’d been turned down already? That made me cautious. I didn’t think the man would be stupid enough to give me contraband or something I clearly didn’t have the contacts to resell, but you’d be surprised at how stupid some people can be when they think the law can come down on them at any moment. Since they’d been breathing down my neck since my earliest memories, I didn’t share the same fear.

I opened the back of the truck and clambered up into it. I was wearing a gray tank top and a pair of jeans. I knew I’d have to lose them as soon as I got down from the truck again. Everything was caked with dirt, as if the cargo had been buried for some time, and oil and fuel slicked the bed of the truck. Opening a crate, I was confronted by gleaming metal that looked brand new. I recognized the gyros for what they were instantly and the hair stood on the back of my neck. They were military grade gyros for gun ships. Shit!

My hands trembled as I replaced the lid of the crate. I almost couldn’t walk as I turned to look down at the man standing outside of the truck. “Where in holy hell did you get those?”

The man looked annoyed. “What does it matter? I need them sold.”

I wiped my dirty hands on my pants and licked nervous lips. If I managed to sell them, I could put my feet up for ten years on a pleasure station, “All right!” just an exclamation of excitement as my brain worked on the details feverishly and tried to recall who I knew who had enough money to buy the beauties.

Like I said, I hadn’t lived that long by being stupid. Survival instincts finally kicked my greedy self in the butt and pointed out just what was being offered to a poor scrap dealer like me. It didn’t add up. I felt the kick of adrenaline as cold fear stabbed me in the gut.

“Uh, wait a minute,” I stammered, starting to get down out of the truck. “Maybe I should reconsider—”

A gun was suddenly in my face and I found my old war time comrade, Kyle Carter, standing beside my customer. His gun was as black as his Special Forces uniform and his unruly black hair. That black metal gleamed in the sun, deadly and unwavering. His blue eyes glared at me and he said, in a voice like an undertaker, “Too late.”

I slumped against the window in the back seat of the sleek, police transport. Kyle sat beside me, his gun still out and resting on his knee. The barrel was pointed at my heart. I didn’t look at him. I kept my eyes on the window, looking at the scenery as we traveled along the curve of the space station. We passed from the dirt lots of the scrap dealers, through a warehouse district, and then through the air lock into the better parts of a sprawling metropolis. The air was so much cleaner and there was greenery. I couldn’t help looking longingly at cool shade trees and green grass in park squares between office buildings and shops.

I tried to ease my wrists. The manacles clinked. My hands had been cuffed behind my back so tightly I felt my shoulders joints might pop out. I was covered in sweat, dust, and things from the truck that I had climbed into earlier. I stunk like fuel, grease, and dirt. My clothes were grimy and one of the men, that had come boiling into my lot at a call from Kyle, had torn my tank top pulling me out of the truck. It hung raggedly off of one of my shoulders, revealing an old scar, jagged and pink, against the darker tan of my skin.

I felt like a bum sitting in that ultra clean transport and seated next to a spit and polish Kyle Carter. Because of this man, I was now a criminal bum and being taken to Special Forces lock up to have my ass interrogated and booked. I suppose I should have been more upset about that, but all I could do was work up a black depression. Maybe it was the hunger. I couldn’t remember my last meal. If I could get a sandwich, I thought, I would at least manage some outrage at being framed.

My own mind pointed out I that had been going to sell those illegal parts. I growled at it to shut the hell up. I didn't want the truth just then, or blame. Being in denial was far more appealing, thank you very much. Instead, I used up the time from the scrap yards to the tall, gleaming building of Special Forces headquarters, to wonder why they had wanted to net a fish as small as I was. I might have done a few under the table deals, but they'd been more along the lines of stolen metal plating and general equipment.

Staying legally that clean was a moral accomplishment when you consider my skills and my past with special military operations. I could have done some real damage if I had chosen too. I could have made myself rich enough for a king by hacking into systems and bank accounts. Maybe that's what this was all about? Maybe they couldn't believe that Max Masters, one time darling of the military elite, could refrain from dipping into trouble that big? But, if that was true, then how did they explain my hand to mouth existence? It didn't add up.

It was tempting to ask what was going on, to try and breach that stone wall that was the man sitting next to me. A gun waiting for the twitch of a finger to fire, though, doesn't make you want to disturb the man who owns the finger. Explanations would have to wait.

When the transport pulled into a special area and I was dragged out of it by an agent half again my size, I heard another agent tell Kyle, "We used a search warrant. He didn't have much. I had the stuff sent to your partner. He's waiting for you."

Kyle gave one firm nod of acknowledgement as he came around and checked my manacles. When he pulled on them sharply, I hissed in pain, but didn't do anything else except bow my head and scowl. What was there to say? He damn well knew they hurt. He knew how tight my arms were locked backwards. He wanted to incapacitate me that much on purpose. I didn't really blame him, I was a trained soldier, but it didn't stop me from being pissed about it.

Kyle finally tucked his gun back into its holster under his arm and let his black uniform coat fall down to hide it. He was among friends now. Everyone was armed and ready to take me out if I so much as blinked the wrong way.

"What's the matter, Carter?" an agent joked as he passed by us. "Only way you could get a date?"

Kyle didn't reply, but the man seemed used to that. We threaded our way through a maze of hallways and entered the secure side of the building. Kyle took me into a featureless room with a table and a few chairs. Yeah, it was just like in the old movies, *'Just the facts, ma'am'*.

Zian Huang, another old war time comrade, was waiting for us along with a large box.

It was tipped over on the table with my belongings spilling out of it. My anger turned to embarrassment in an instant. As Kyle kicked a chair away from the table and made me sit in it with a hand pressing down on my shoulder, Huang grimaced and nodded to my things as he said, “Nothing of interest.”

Huang was dressed in grays and blacks. It was a normal three piece suit, but he managed to make it look very oriental. He wore his hair pulled back tight into a braid that hung to his ass and I wondered if it was tight enough to hurt. Those dark eyes, with those long dark brows, were as disdainful as ever. He had that exact expression I remembered from the war, the glare down the nose that managed to convey an impression he considered everyone in range of it a bug.

I had a phenomenal memory, by the way, one of the things that had made the military sign me up very young. I kept a lot of things in my head, including my slightly illegal sales. It was much safer that way. They weren't going to find anything they could arrest me for, unless my contacts hadn't been as circumspect as I had. If one of them had ratted on me, or put down something incriminating—but that still didn't add up. The truth of the matter was, that petty theft and laundering minor items, wasn't that big of a deal on Sefus. It certainly didn't warrant a sting operation and the intense way Kyle and the arresting agents had acted. It led me back to the fear I was being suspected of something a hell of a lot bigger.

Huang pushed a few porn magazines to one side distastefully. Nude guys posed on the covers. I felt my face catch fire, but I just sat and glared. Why an agent had felt it necessary to include them in an evidence box was beyond me.

Huang flipped idly through a few notebooks filled with the kind of thing that you do when you're doodling while talking on the phone. He had my desk calendar too, filled with the same kind of cryptic scrawls, phone numbers, and random expletives I couldn't say to whoever had been on the other end of the line at the time. He also had some photographs and a few news clippings I had laminated. It was war time stuff; Travers, my ex-business partner, a couple of photos of me and my unit getting our medals at the end of the wars, and one photo of Kyle. I had taken that one on the sly and I'm not sure if I blushed hotter about that than about the porn magazines. They, at least, could be explained. Kyle was hotter than a space ship on reentry. I couldn't leave that damned '*after the war*' party without getting a picture to remember him by.

Kyle finally spoke while I looked down at the table, tracing the scratches and dents with my eyes. “You are being charged with intent to buy and sell contraband military grade gyros. That carries a minimum ten year jail sentence.”

“You get less for murdering someone,” I said under my breath sourly.

Huang's cool voice replied, "Is that supposed to help your defense?"

"If I'm on trial, then maybe I should ask for a lawyer?" I snapped back.

"You haven't been officially charged yet," Kyle told me and I looked up in surprise. "If you cooperate..."

I snorted and sank down into my chair, trying to ease my shoulders. I was pretty sure I knew what their game was now. "If you want information, I don't know anything."

Huang was playing bad cop. He frowned darkly and said, "There is a bunk in a jail cell with your name on it, Masters. If you don't want a lot of hard up men appreciating your ass tattoo, you had best tell us what we wish to know." I winced. Yeah, I had one. It was a black scorpion. Huang had seen it plenty of times in those military shit for shower rooms.

I laughed. I told him, "You need to practice that line more. Try, *Unless you want to bend over for a guy named Bubba, you'd better play ball.*"

Kyle was more direct. Yeah, he was the good cop, though he didn't seem much different from the bad cop as he warned, "Cooperate, or we will book you, right now."

I had an itch on the end of my nose. I struggled to scratch it on my shoulder as I said, "Like I said, I don't know anything—unless you're interested in two bit fences and borderline scrap dealers?"

Kyle exchanged a look with Huang. Huang blinked and that seemed to communicate something to Kyle. Kyle then asked point blank, "Do you know a man named Dieter?"

"No, should I?" I was genuinely mystified. I frowned, puzzled, "Look, I don't do contraband gyros. Yeah, I had a moment of weakness, but, honestly? I don't deal with that shit or know anyone who does. I would have had to contact contacts of contacts to find someone to take them off my hands. Ah!" I exclaimed suddenly. "You're looking for a stoolie, an undercover operative, a snitch in the business. Am I right?"

Huang looked annoyed as he put the box level with the table and swept my stuff into it with a rake of his arm.

"Bingo!" I was amused, but I didn't show it as I shook my head and said, "No can do. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a—"

Kyle suddenly twisted a hand into what was left of my tank top. His eyes were like molten blue lava as he said, with that deadly tone of voice that I remembered from the war, "All I have to do is make one call and you will be spending life in prison, not just ten years. Do I make myself clear? We need your contacts and your expertise. You will cooperate. No is not an option."

"I may be wrong," I told him calmly, "But I think you just broke about half a dozen laws. I want a lawyer, now."

Was I scared? Hell, yeah! They had me dead to rights and, lawyer, or no lawyer; I was looking at serious time in the slammer. There's something you learn, though, when you've lived like I have. You play poker well and never let them see you sweat. I had to deal, I knew it, but I needed some serious *hand* right then and there.

Kyle gave me a very long and steady look and then he straightened. That silent, whatever it was, passed between Huang and him again, and then it was Huang who grunted, crossed his arms, and said, "There would be some compensation for your cooperation." I could tell the very idea of paying me off was sticking in his throat.

I grinned. "Okay, but I want to know one thing, this isn't an operation geared towards raking up the little fish, is it? You're going after some big and dangerous dude, right? I'm not turning in anybody who's just trying to do a little deal to feed himself and his family, okay?"

"The man that we are after is a very big and very dangerous fish," Kyle replied.

"Okay." I quickly went over everything in my mind, checking and double checking that I had zero options, before I said, "Done deal."

Huang inclined his head in acknowledgement. Kyle continued to glare.

I rattled my manacles. "Can you take these off now, before you have to amputate my arms?"

Kyle moved to comply. When my arms were free, I bent over them and tried to work some circulation back into them. While I did this, Kyle went to the box on the table and began to pick it up. He paused and fished out the photo of himself instead. He studied it and frowned.

"I was trying to get photos of everyone," I explained nervously. Okay, that was a lame lie. There weren't any pictures of anyone else by themselves. It was also obvious that I had cut someone else out of the picture to have Kyle by himself. I sure as hell hadn't wanted him standing by General Tsao Mio, or *Sour Face*, as we liked to call him. I could tell that Kyle didn't buy my explanation. Beyond that, I didn't know for sure just what he was thinking. His expression was muted; like a stone wall—damned hard to read, is what I'm saying.

Kyle finally put the photo back and brought the box to me. I stood up, intending to take it, but the fact that I hadn't eaten in a very long time caught up with me. I passed out cold.

Chapter Two

Hand

I woke with a pounding headache and a crawling sense of disorientation. Keeping still, my elite soldier training still very much a part of me, I listened to my surroundings before opening my eyes. There was breathing very near; heavy male breathing. Paper rustled; the pages of something being turned. A chair scuffled to my right and someone sighed irritably. I played that sigh over in my head twice before my brain kicked into gear and recognized it as belonging to Huang. That recognition supplied me with place and circumstances. I was in a Special Forces interrogation room with Kyle and Huang. I had been set up and I had made a deal to save my skin. Oh, yeah, and I had passed out.

I opened my eyes, blinked against a bright, overhead light, and turned my head to see who was closest to me. A man in a white medic coat sat with one butt cheek on the table that I was lying on. The man was crew cut and young, his whole attention on one of my porn magazines. Swiveling my head a bit, I could see Kyle leaning back in his chair and staring at nothing in a bored fashion, his long, dark hair a bit messy and hanging in his blue eyes. Huang was seated next to him in an attitude of someone who was about to explode with frustration. He always did have a nuclear temper.

“Guess I took a little nap,” I said hoarsely.

Everyone looked at me. I tried to sit up, but the doctor reached out and put a hand on my chest. “Not so fast, boy, you could pass out again,” he warned and checked my pulse against his watch, the magazine forgotten in his lap. He wasn’t much older than I was.

I ignored him and sat up anyway, shoving his hand off.

“You should do as he says,” Kyle said as he stood, looking concerned.

“I’m okay,” I grumbled as I pulled the ragged remnants of my tank top into some sort of order. I pushed back my spiky bangs from my face and noticed that my hand was trembling. I turned it into a fist to hide it and snapped at the doctor, “That’s my stuff!”

“Sorry,” the man said as he finished taking his reading. He tossed my magazine back into the box as he stood up. “That’s one of my favorite issues.”

That put me off balance and embarrassed me. I wasn’t sure whether he was making fun of me or not.

“Is he all right?” Kyle asked the doctor.

The doctor frowned. He took out his stethoscope and listened to my heart, despite my stiffening at the invasion of my personal space. “Hm,” he said after listening for a moment. “Sounds good, but Mr. Masters is displaying several symptoms that make treatment imperative.”

“What kind of treatment?” I asked in alarm.

The man reached inside a side pocket of his coat, pulled out several candies and a wrapped sandwich, and tossed them into my startled hands. “You need to eat regularly and repeatedly, Mr. Masters. That’s my prescription.” He nodded to the food. ”You can start with those. Follow them up with some vitamin supplements and a few protein drinks.”

I blinked stupidly and didn’t know what to say as the doctor stood up, nodded to Kyle and Huang, and said to me as he left the room, “If you experience any more dizziness, see the clinic.”

There was a long silence after his departure. I un-wrapped the sandwich and started eating, ignoring Kyle and Huang. I heard one of them leave and then come back. A protein drink was placed on the table by my leg. The hand holding it belonged to Kyle

“Why haven’t you been eating?” Kyle wanted to know. I shrugged and said nothing. My financial difficulties were none of his business.

I swallowed a bite of my sandwich and said, “Let’s get back to business. Before I took a header on the floor, we were talking about how you framed me and how you wanted to force me to be your stoolie. I think compensation was talked about, too. You’ll get a lot more out of me handing out credits instead of threats.”

Huang made a noise of disgust.

I eyed him as I uncapped the protein drink and took a long swallow. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I said, “What’s wrong with wondering if getting paid is part of my employment package?”

Kyle frowned as he took a folded coat from the table behind me. It belonged to Huang. It had been my pillow. He tossed it to Huang and Huang caught it and shook it to get out the wrinkles.

“I told you that you can expect a very long prison sentence,” Kyle reminded me. “We are giving you the chance to avoid that. I don’t understand why you are expecting payment.”

“I know your game now and I know you need me badly,” I replied with a smirk.

Kyle was genuinely puzzled by my logic. “Why do you believe that?”

I held up a finger. “One, you set up a nice big sting operation just to catch a two bit scrap dealer. Two, you aren’t hauling my ass to jail. Three, I bet I can bring charges against you. You aren’t a sloppy person, Carter, so you know it and you don’t care. Charges against me are the last thing on your mind. In fact, it never entered your head, am I right?”

Huang threw a look at Kyle and snorted angrily. “You have been unprofessional from

the start and now we don't have anything to make sure of his loyalty. If you had waited, instead of blowing cover so soon back at the scrap yard, we could have filed firm charges against him. He would have accepted the shipment on record and we could have tapped his communications to follow his search for a buyer."

"Wrong," I told him. "I wasn't going to take the shipment. I was about to refuse when Kyle stuck his gun up my nose." I shrugged. "Not that it matters. Cops make up the story and people go to jail anyway." I pointed to a video camera high on one wall. "What went on here is on tape, though, so I have some ammunition for getting out of this mess. You threatened me, kept me here instead of sending me to an infirmary, and tried to cut a deal with me. I think I have enough to walk out of here."

"Leave us alone," Kyle suddenly requested.

"Kyle." It was impressive how much of his displeasure Huang could impart simply by saying his name.

"I know; another rule broken," Kyle snorted, as if amused.

Huang looked exasperated. "He has no honor," he pointed out. "How can we trust him?"

Kyle's face took on that patented stubborn expression that I remembered from the war. "I want to talk to him."

Like me, Huang knew better than to argue any further. His anger, though, was hot enough to scorch the air around him as he left the room.

I crossed my arms and glared at Kyle suspiciously. "Okay. What's up? Do you need alone time to commit some police brutality?"

Kyle brushed a stray lock of hair from his eyes and slowly paced the room. He replied, "Huang is right. I could have waited. We could have brought firm charges against you. I didn't want that, though, so I broke cover."

"Why?"

Kyle's hand played with his gun as if it helped him to think. I wondered if his gun was like a security blanket. I remembered, during the war, how he had never been without it. "I didn't want you to be arrested," he told me. "I didn't want Max Master's record to include the attempted resale of contraband weapon parts. The penalties for that crime are very serious. Even if you do help us, I could never convince a jury to be lenient with you. You would have served time and you would have been under watch for the rest of your life. I had hoped to threaten you, to make you believe you were going to serve time."

I replied angrily, "You can try and spin this any way you want, Kyle, but it doesn't change the fact that what we have here is a pissing contest. I want out of here in one piece and you need me for something. Let's work this out and both of us get what we want."

You don't have to tell me how none of it was legal. No shit."

"It was legal," Kyle argued, "Until I lost my nerve."

I retorted sarcastically, "So, being in the same unit during the war did amount to something after all? Did it make you feel guilty for trying to screw me over?"

It would have been nice to believe that, but it would have been nice to believe in tooth fairies too. We had all been too young when we joined the military. They had raised us on blood and guns. I didn't expect feelings to sway Kyle.

Imagine my surprise when Kyle admitted, "As important as this case is, I couldn't ruin you."

Was he still playing good cop? Kyle had been a stone cold killer during the war. This Kyle, who was acting as if he cared what happened to my life, was confusing me. I wanted to get back to safe ground. I wanted to be where I was familiar with the lay of the land.

I said, "Okay, so let's cut out the strong arm bullshit and get down to bare metal. What the hell do you really want from me? Why don't you think I'll go along with whatever you have planned without a big stick over my head?"

"Huang thinks you'll cut and run, or alert your contacts, at the first opportunity," Kyle explained. "It was his plan to initiate the sting operation."

I rolled my eyes and rubbed my aching head. "Of course," I said. "I spent a war sacrificing for the government." I jabbed at the thick scar on my shoulder. "I'm covered with these, Kyle. They're mementos from taking hits, giving my all, and thinking my life was worth giving to make a bunch of ungrateful assholes free. What have I done since the war to make you think I've changed that much?"

"People do change Masters," Kyle replied bitterly, as if he had learned that lesson the hard way. "Your hacking skills were phenomenal during the war and your contacts were far and wide. Your past and reputation made it hard—still makes it hard for us to believe that you're actually running a poor scrap yard. We have been searching for hidden bank accounts and watching your every move."

I flushed, angry and embarrassed. "Yeah? What did I do that made you think I was actually rich and running contraband?"

"Nothing," Kyle admitted.

I arched eyebrows. "Nothing?"

"Huang thought you were aware of us, that you were purposefully staying undercover."

"As a poor assed scrap dealer?" I wasn't sure how to handle that. I ended up laughing. Kyle stopped his pacing and looked at me. Suddenly, he laughed as well. Even though

it was more serious and short, it still sounded good.

When I could stop laughing, I said, “Thanks for not stringing me up, Kyle. I’m mad about getting roughed up, but I can see you have some serious bad guy stuff going down.”

I shoved fingers through my dirty hair and looked down at my filthy self.

“Tell you what,” I said, “Let me go the hell home and clean up. Let’s try this again in the morning with me on the right side of the law.” I gave him a hard look, daring him to question the integrity of my words. “I’ve been running on the edge a few times, Kyle, but I have been missing meals trying to stay honest. Max Masters isn’t the kind of guy to cut and run, god damn it, so you can tell Huang to fuck himself for thinking I would!”

Kyle nodded and asked, “Are you sure you are all right?” His face made a little *‘I’m worried about you’* frown that had me staring back in confusion. What the hell?

“Like the doc said, I just need a few meals,” I replied.

Kyle’s frown of concern deepened. I tried to square that expression with the man I’d known during the war. I couldn’t. I had gone from being arrested by two goons, who didn’t give a shit about me, to being confronted by a Kyle who seemed capable of caring about me. I couldn’t make the mental switch in gears. My suspicious nature wasn’t ready to believe appearances yet.

I slid off of the table and onto my feet. I felt shaky. I must have looked it as well, because Kyle put a strong hand under my arm and suggested, “Let me take you to the commissary.” There wasn’t any good way to offer charity, but as hungry as I was, I felt willing to stomp on my pride and accept when he added, “I can buy your lunch.”

I pulled at my clothes, showing him the filth all over them with a grimace. “I don’t think they would appreciate it if I went in looking like this. If you can float me a few credits, I’ll grab something on the way home. I’ll pay you back when I’m able.”

Kyle dug into his wallet for his credit chip and tried to deposit eighty credits into my bank account. I quickly stopped him. My pride wasn’t *that* much down for the count. “I don’t eat a lot,” I said and leaned forward to punch in twenty credits. He stared at me as if I had suddenly grown a third eye.

“What?” I wondered.

Kyle put his credit chip away and said, as if he were ashamed, “I shouldn’t have listened to Huang. I want to apologize.”

“For setting me up and making my fellow scrap dealers think I’m a damned criminal? Or for roughing me up, booking me with false charges, and dragging my ass downtown?” I picked up my box. “Are you apologizing for *all* of that shit?”

Kyle looked almost ashamed. It was really freaking me out now. “Yes, I apologize.”

I could have run down the hall and had his ass strung up, right then and there, and he knew it. Huang didn't trust me, but for some reason Kyle did. "Accepted," I told him firmly and grinned as he looked up, startled. "I don't hold grudges," I told him, frowned, and added, "Well, not most of the time."

We went to the door and Kyle opened it. Huang came in instantly. "What's going on?" he demanded when he saw me with my box in my hands.

"I'm going bye, bye until tomorrow," I told him, "then I'm coming back and you are going to cut the bullshit and level with me."

"Kyle!" Huang barked, "He'll run for it. You can't trust—"

"You'll have to," I told him with a grin. "You screwed this up big time and I get to go home, or else. Out of my way, Huang, I'm coming through."

"Commander Pollock is not going to like this," Huang snarled at Kyle.

I felt kind of bad for the man. Because of me, Kyle was going to catch hell.

"He didn't deserve to be treated that way," Kyle replied.

Huang sounded close to going into critical overload as he shouted, "We spent months setting this up and you sabotaged our case by allowing your emotions to dictate your actions!"

I snorted. "In or out of the law, Huang, you're no match for me. Don't be too hard on Kyle." I waved cheerily. "See you later!"

I left them arguing hotly and sighed, feeling exhausted. What had just happened had been worse than a circus. It had happened because Kyle felt something for me. What that something was, I wasn't sure, but I wanted to know very badly. As for whatever they thought they wanted from me, I was pretty damned confused about that too. I was excited and curious about it as well. I had spent a couple of years in a dust bowl of small triumphs and loneliness. That world had been sliding into something else, though, something I hadn't really wanted to face. The word '*failure*' didn't want to come to mind, but I *had* been failing at something as simple as selling scrap. Maybe I wanted something else, something bigger to take me away before I did have to face reality and attach that word to my name.

"Kyle, you may lose your badge over this!" I heard Huang's voice shout behind me. I thought I heard Kyle laugh in response, but I wasn't sure. I couldn't imagine him laughing about a threat to his career.

Chapter Three

Working Man

Great! I was stuck on the wrong side of the station with twenty credits in my account and no freakin' desire to spend it on a taxi home. First things first, I thought, and that first thing was a stop at a fast food restaurant. I carefully ordered as much protein and fat as I could in the form of meaty burgers and greasy, fried vegetables. I washed them down with two protein shakes and felt a lot steadier afterward.

Stuffed and happy, I ignored the disgusted looks everyone was giving me. I gave them a loud burp as a way of flipping them off and began my search for a hub transit station.

I couldn't blame them for being disgusted. I was wearing ripped, dirt covered clothes, and reeking more than any grease pit mechanic on his worst day. Even I wouldn't have wanted a lunch companion like me. Not blaming them wasn't keeping me from hating them, though. Okay, maybe not hate, but I did envy them in an angry, bitter sort of way. That made me pissy as a matter of course.

I've always struggled to get from one day to the next, even during the war. I've always had to be smart, fast, and willing to do what it took to survive. I crawled along the underbelly of society even now, struggling with the rest of the have-nots and unlucky bastards. Yeah, I guess I was in the unlucky bastard category. Anyway, seeing people who were clean, well fed, and employed in nice, air conditioned buildings judging me, had a tendency to make me feel like a mangy, stray dog. I felt as if I wasn't worthy to walk the same street as they did and I couldn't help playing the part that their imaginations were painting of me. Yeah, look at the street trash and be glad you aren't like this poor bastard.

The transit was free, but it was far from luxury. It had hard metal seats and bare metal walls scrawled with colorful sayings. Everyone hated the bare-bones transit system, but it was the quickest way to get from point A to point B on station.

I took a seat and put my box down beside me as three young men, looking even less reputable than myself, stepped on as well. They didn't sit and that made me nervous. They paced as the transit pulled from the station and kept looking surreptitiously my way when they thought I wasn't looking. I guessed that they were about to commit a crime or they already had. I looked at my feet and let my dirty bangs fall into my face. The last thing I wanted was for them to wonder if I was trying to I.D. them.

I could have wiped the floor with every one of them even though I was stuffed full of burgers and fried food, had gone days without eating before that, and had passed out in lock up. Why do it unless I have to, though? I sure as hell didn't look like someone worth

robbing, so keeping quiet and minding my own business seemed like the best course of action.

The floor was rusted. Near my feet, there was a hole large enough to allow me to see the ground passing underneath the transport. I let that absorb my attention for a while. I idly wondered if anyone had accidentally stepped into it and what might have happened to the unfortunate person.

I felt the men relaxing. One of them sat down. Another leaned against the wall of the transit, snorting something that looked like a drug. A third man must have had a death wish. He made his way towards me slowly while trying to be inconspicuous. I played dumb and didn't look up.

"You stink like shit!" the man coming toward me suddenly snarled when he was close enough to tell.

"Byproduct of hard work," my cheerful, smart assed mouth replied. I kicked myself mentally less than one second after the words left my mouth. I winced, but still didn't look up as I tried to make amends for my reply and appear meek and apologetic. "I'll get off at the next stop."

You know, that '*try to keep the peace*' business never got me shit and I wonder why anyone, including myself, even tries it. Maybe it's just so that we don't feel so guilty when we do kick their asses? We can say, '*hey, we tried to be nice.*'

"You'll get the hell off now!" the man I'll now call '*Dead Meat*' grabbed me by my shirt and hauled me towards the door of the transit.

The transit doors were made to remain closed while the transport was moving, but like all good government projects, they were never maintained. Someone had jumped the system and bare wires hung from the overhead. Yes, there were some people who actually wanted to get off of a moving transit shuttle, probably people who had just killed or robbed someone on it. There were spots where the transport had to slow down. They were good jumping off points. What Dead Meat intended wasn't that charitable. We were at top speed as he slapped the wires and made the door open.

I expected it and I was prepared. Dead Meat wasn't as I sucker punched him, yanked my shirt out of his suddenly lax hands, and kicked him out first. There wasn't a scream and I didn't watch what happened to him. I had his buddies to face.

I slapped the wires and the door shut as I turned, all in one, smooth motion.

The guy snorting drugs was watching me with hazy eyes.

His *friend*, who was lounging in one of the seats, scowled and said in disgust, "Said before he was nothing but a dumb shit."

The drug guy nodded, giggled, and went back to his drugs. I guess they hadn't been

very tight friends with Dead Meat.

I kept a dangerous glare on my face as I went back to my seat. They didn't give me any trouble, but I was glad to get to my stop. I jumped out and stalked away, feeling reaction starting to set in. I tried to calm myself by telling myself some nice lies about how Dead Meat might not actually be dead. Sure, I'd killed lots of people during the war, but your head is in a different place when you're in battle. You can tell yourself that you're doing something right and you are following orders that will make the lives of people better, safer, and freer. Yeah, it's true, but you really need to wrap yourself in that tight when some guy in a weapon array cries out for his mama as you're cutting it in half with a laser. I didn't have that mental cotton batting any longer. Saving my own skin didn't seem to have the same protection.

Too much food in a stomach that had grown used to starving combined with an adrenalin rush made me feel ready to throw up. I sat down abruptly in the red dirt road that led between the rusted metal fences that separated the scrap yards. It wasn't real dirt, more like industrial waste cleaned and processed into fine, round grains and put down for an ascetic, cushioning effect. At least that's what the government records probably said, right before the big warning not to breathe it for long periods of time. If you are ever on Sefus, you'll notice in a fly over that only the worst parts of the station were given the special cushioning, ascetically pleasing, recycled waste. The cities have nice, honest to goodness dirt and bonded plant matting over the metal frame of the station.

When my heart rate finally slowed down from its jack rabbit impersonation and my stomach stopped trying to turn inside out, I struggled to my feet on shaky legs and went through the gate that led into my scrap yard.

My intention was to go into my sagging, rusted metal shack, collapse onto the bed, and try to work out how I was going to respond to whatever Kyle and Huang had planned for me. I wasn't prepared to go in and find everything opened, spilled out onto the floor, and violently sifted through. Either the Special Forces agents had gotten overzealous or my employees had robbed me and cut their losses after witnessing the law drag my ass away. My only consolation was that there hadn't been any credits to steal.

I tossed my box of personal things onto my work desk. The computer wasn't on it, of course, and was probably sitting on the counter of a pawn shop by now. I felt depressed, at a loss, and with only one thing clear to mind. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to crawl into bed and just forget the whole damned day.

I went to lock the door and found the lock broken. Thinking that it was better than nothing, I jammed a chair under the knob and went into the small room that constituted my entire living space.

My bed was set up next to a small refrigerator. There was a bathroom the size of a coat closet, an empty space where my video screen had once been, and a futon by the bed that had been overturned and ripped open. It looked as if my mattress had received the same treatment, but someone had dumped it back onto the frame. I fell face first onto it and pulled the forgetfulness of sleep over me. For now, the world could go to hell.

I awoke some time later with light coming through the skewed curtain of a window. It was aimed like a laser beam directly into my eyes. I groaned and tried to move. Every inch of my skin felt grungy, my mouth was as dry as a desert, and, joy of joys, my head was pounding with a headache. I had a vague thought that road-kill couldn't have felt worse than me at that moment.

I levered myself up, dutiful muscles responding despite the part of my brain that just wanted to curl up and continue to ignore life. I almost crawled on all fours to the bathroom, my back refusing to straighten, and then used the bathroom wall to hold me up as I peed into a metal toilet ringed with rust. That done, I stripped out of what was left of my clothes and turned on the shower.

The shower head was only half functioning, clogged up with whatever silt and grime was in the pipes. The water came out in every direction but down. By hanging onto the shower head and propping myself one handed against the cracked tile of the stall, I turned it this way and that to soak my hair and body thoroughly. The pipes groaned and chugged, but the water heater was working. Slowly, my body steamed and I woke up completely.

What the hell now? I thought about it as I soaped my body and shampooed my hair. I took a big mouthful of water, gargled, and spat it out loudly. I was beginning to feel like part of the human race again. The anger I'd been too tired to generate before was heating up full force now. So much for not holding grudges. Kyle and Huang had done me wrong. Help them? Fuck them! I had a business to run. I was running it into the ground at the moment, but I was still the one who had to do it.

An inner voice sounding suspiciously like my conscience, reminded me I had been going to sell those gyros. It reminded me that if it hadn't been for Kyle having a twinge of conscience, and my own street sense, I would now be fighting off guys wanting to get to know me better in a maximum security prison. I had stepped over that line between small time and big fish. I had only myself to blame if Special Forces took

advantage of it.

I rinsed off and left the shower, toweling off and trying to dry my spiky hair. I bent over to sort through some clothes on the floor for something to wear and my small cross, hanging on its silver chain around my neck, clunked me in the face. I winced. It was like getting my hand hit by a ruler for being bad. The priest, who had taken care of me after the death of my parents, had managed to instill in me a firm moral compass even though my stay with the church, before my transport to an orphanage, had been short. You didn't sell gyros that could be put into machines that could kill people, you didn't throw even bad men off of trains, and you didn't avoid your punishment when it was firmly handed to you. I had screwed up. Kyle Carter and Huang were giving me my punishment. Helping them would not only get them off my back, legally, but I could unload some bad boy baggage as well.

My next thought was, who the hell was I kidding?

I smelled a shirt and decided that it was clean enough. I pulled it on; a dark blue thing, that hung on me loosely and had the logo of some machine parts store on it. A pair of heavy duty jeans went on after that and a pair of steel toed boots.

I stared out at the day through a grimy window. Yeah, I *was* kidding myself. I wanted to join Huang and Kyle. I wanted to get back out there and feel that damned adrenalin rush of doing something that mattered. I didn't want to be a failure. I didn't want to end my life as it had pretty much started, poor and on the streets. There was nothing wrong with dealing scrap. There was a certain charge I got out of owning the business and making the deals, but it was nothing compared to the charge I felt when I realized that Kyle and Huang needed me, needed my skill, and needed me to do what I did best; fight the good fight.

I sat on the bed, combing out my wet hair with my fingers. Kyle and Huang needed me to be a criminal and contact criminals. Hell, they had thought that I *was* a criminal. Maybe Kyle didn't now, but Huang still did. Sure, there was a bit of truth in it, but not to the extent that they imagined. That tainted their offer and made me even angrier. I was confused. I could feel my strong need to accept their offer while I was also determined not to let them get away with screwing me over in thought and deed.

"I need more time to think about this shit!" I grumbled as I tied a ragged, red bandana around my neck and trudged to the front door. I pulled the chair out from under the knob and opened it.

Hot hair slapped me in the face. "Fuck you, asshole!" I shouted to the *sky* and the nameless bastard in control of the station weather, who didn't give a damn about the people outside of the city.

It was then that I saw him. Kyle was leaning against the support to my little porch, arms crossed and head bowed under the wide brim of his hat. I blinked and had a chill shoot through me, the kind of thing that you get when you see a snake almost under your feet.

Kyle was covered in red dust. His arms were a bit sunburned and already beading with sweat. He wore a white tank top, or it must have been white before the dust had decided to mate with it. He wore loose, dark green, cargo pants and worn brown work boots, the kind with reinforced soles necessary in that world of rusted metal. A tan scarf hung from his. His hat—I blinked at it. It was a scrap man's hat, wide brimmed and made out of woven strips of cloth and thin bits of aluminum. He looked every inch a scrap man.

I leaned against the door jam and glared at him. "No," I said firmly.

The brim of his hat lifted. Kyle's blue eyes crinkled at the edges and his lips curved in a handsome, uncertain smile. *No* was suddenly eradicated from my vocabulary.

"It was a compromise," Kyle explained softly. "I didn't want you to blow your position here by being taken to Special Forces lock up a second time, and Huang didn't trust you to do this operation alone. He thinks you'll flee at the first opportunity and warn everyone about the sting."

"Huang makes sense, but I'm still here," I retorted. "As for you, you can dress the part, but this kind of work is hard. Scrap men are damned suspicious, too. They'll wonder why you suddenly took over my business."

"I'm not taking it over," Kyle corrected me.

"No, you're sure as hell not!" I snapped back.

He didn't lose his cool. He said, in a tone that implied he was being reasonable, "As of now, I'm working for you. We'll spend a month running the business together and then, when your contacts are used to seeing me working alongside you, we'll put the sting into motion."

"I don't have room and I'm not sure I want to go through with this," I growled.

"Where did Travers stay?" Kyle asked.

I felt my gut tighten. "So, you sifted through my files as well as my personal possessions?"

"Of course, we had to get background information," Kyle apologized and he did manage to look troubled by it.

"Travers lived where my employees are staying now," I replied, trying not to add an assortment of choice epithets.

"Your employees are gone, now," Kyle informed me.

"That's good, because otherwise I'd have to go over there and beat the crap out of

them for robbing me!” I snarled back.

Kyle looked alarmed. “They robbed you? I could make a report and have agents—”

“That would blow your cover,” I pointed out. “I’d rather have some compensation instead.”

Kyle nodded firmly. “I’ll see to it personally.”

“Good!” I straightened and took a step towards him. “Now, getting back to your plans, I—”

There was the sound of a loud crash and a part of my corrugated, metal panel fence came down under the force of a small earth mover. Red dust blew towards us and then settled in a way that real dust doesn’t.

“God damn it!” I shouted and forgot everything as I jumped off the porch and ran towards the machine. I jumped on it and clawed my way up to the cab. My surprised neighbor looked back at me in shock.

“I’m not gone yet, Stubburt!” I snarled at him. “Get the hell out of my yard! You better freakin’ fix my fence too!”

The man leaned out of his cab cautiously as he cut the engine. It spluttered to a stop. “Eh, sorry about that, Masters. I do get first stake, ya know? You did look like you were going to prison, permanent like.”

“Well, I’m not!” I shouted at him and slammed a fist on the windshield of his cab. It was heavy duty plastic and it thrummed like a drum head. “I’m too damned smart to let them get anything on me. They had to let me go. I’m still in business!”

“You got nobody to help you,” the man pointed out. “Your help is gone. You can’t run the place by your lonesome, kid. You might as well pack it up and let professionals like me run your scrap yard.”

“Fuck you!” I swore and pointed at where Kyle had come to stand cautiously by the big wheel of the earth mover. “That’s my damned help! Now screw you and get the hell out of my yard!”

The man glared and swore back at me. The engine roared to life. I barely had enough time to jump off before it jerked into motion and pulled back. I landed hard and stumbled. Then I remembered Kyle and felt a moment of panic before I saw him backing up and glaring at my retreating neighbor. I joined him and we stared at the broken fence.

“Finders’ keepers, is rule number one here,” I told him. “You leave it long enough, someone will find it and take it, even your scrap yard.”

Kyle gave me a little smile. “I heard what you said to him. I’m hired, then?”

I glared and whipped off my scarf to mop at my now sweaty and dirty face. “Yeah, you’re hired, but I expect you to work your ass off Carter. I don’t pay slackers. In fact, I

don't pay at all. You get a place to stay, but you're on your own for meals. I make a scrap deal, you get five percent."

"Ten percent," Kyle argued, that damned amused glint in his eyes again.

"I barely get ten percent!" I retorted. I rolled my eyes as if he were breaking me and said, "How about seven percent?"

Kyle held up his hand and I automatically slapped it with my own, clasped it, and then let go as if we had just exchanged some skin. It was a scrap man's way of closing a deal.

"Deal," Kyle agreed. He laughed, but dipped his brim as if he was embarrassed for me to see his amusement. He walked back towards my shack, leaving me with the realization that I had just hired him as if he had been someone scrounging the yards for employment. Kyle was good. He was damned good.

Chapter Four

Aspirations

“Do you want the three credit tour of my place, or did you get a good look when you were here last?” I asked sarcastically as I followed Kyle up the steps of my porch.

Kyle didn't rise to my bait. He said simply, as he stood aside and waited for me to open the door, “I didn't go inside last time.”

There was a loud noise and the sound of machinery. I turned with narrowed eyes and watched my neighbor bulldoze a pile of scrap metal into the breach in my wall. It was better than nothing.

I turned back around and opened the door as I said with sarcasm still firmly in the pilot's chair, “Sorry about the mess.”

I led the way inside, my hands going deep into my pockets as I hunched in on myself and felt self-conscious. I couldn't say why I felt that way. It was Kyle's fault that my place looked the way that it did.

I expected Kyle to give the place a cold, critical evaluation. Instead, he looked pained. “They took everything,” he said sympathetically.

“You're assuming that I had much to begin with,” I retorted sourly. I righted a plastic chair, shoved it behind my desk, and sat down heavily. “I live kind of spare.”

Kyle walked over to the peg board on the wall behind me. He narrowed eyes at it as if he was trying to make sense out of my scrawls, my calendar, and a few pictures I had tacked up for.... *ascetic* reasons.

“How do you—” he began, but I cut him off, certain how he was going to finish his sentence.

“Yeah, pictures of guys; gay porn right here on my wall. If it makes you squirm, then get the hell out!” I was surprised by how hot my face felt and how I couldn't look at him even while I was standing my ground.

Kyle said softly, looking annoyed, “I wasn't going to say anything about the pictures. I was going to ask about your schedule. I don't understand what you've written here.”

If you thought my face was hot before, you could have melted lead on it now. I gritted my teeth and said, trying to be apologetic, “Sorry. I was expecting...” I felt too stupid to finish the sentence.

I tried to get myself back together, tried to push aside all the baggage from yesterday, and yeah, from that morning, too, damn it. I needed to deal with Kyle with a better attitude.

I tapped my forehead. “That's not where I keep my schedule or my information. It's

all up here. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot to put here at the moment." This is when I had to admit to him my impending failure and it wasn't easy, not by a long shot. "The business hasn't been doing very well."

He didn't ask why. I felt stupidly grateful even while I wondered why he didn't. The Kyle I remembered would have gone after information with the single mindedness of a bloodhound; a lethal, cold blooded, killer bloodhound. He said instead, changing the subject entirely, "I haven't eaten. I'll buy breakfast, if you show me where I can buy supplies."

That sounded less like charity. My stomach was making joyful noises already. "Deal," I agreed and stood up. "We have to walk, though. There aren't any transports out here."

"Acceptable," he replied, as if it was a mission.

It gave me a flashback to the war that was unpleasant and I felt an immediate need to get back out into the heat and sunshine and escape those mental images. The heat was brutal, but there was a cleansing property to it. It had the power to make a lot of bad shit go away by making a person think about something else; being baked alive for instance.

Kyle followed me outside and I led the way to a well-worn path. It took us to the back of my yard, through the rickety metal gate, and ended at a narrow lane between lots. I began to tell Kyle what he could expect from a scrap man's market, when I was interrupted by a loud groaning noise all around us.

Kyle started and looked up at the *sky*, blinking rapidly at the strong light. That light was coming from the sun reflected into the station by large collectors. I didn't bother looking. I knew he was seeing great slabs of metal slowly extending out of the walls of the station. He was also seeing the whirl of turbines and hearing the rush of air being sucked up into them. The red dust devils would be swirling and rising, chasing the dwindling oxygen. I counted to twenty before the air was released, scrubbed and breathable again. The machines stopped their loud groans and the slabs retracted. Red dust began a lazy fall back to the ground.

"Four times a day," I said offhandedly as I began to walk while tying my bandana around my head. The edges drooped down over my face to shade my eyes from the strong light. "They didn't bother updating the systems on this side of the airlock," I explained. "The government motto is, *if it works, don't replace it.*"

Kyle, when I glanced at him, was looking disturbed as he followed me.

"You haven't been here long, have you?" I asked.

"No," he replied, confirming my suspicions. "They don't have these systems in the city."

I grinned. "No, their systems are newer. They vent, filter, and cool down their section

without any noise or air disturbance. Whoever runs environmental controls doesn't dare mess with the weather there, either. It's always a perfect 74 degrees. The scrapyards aren't so lucky. Whoever runs our system is a damned sadist. I think he gets off making us miserable."

"That's despicable!" Kyle pointed out unnecessarily. "These systems must be over fifty years old. To abuse the citizens like this—"

"They're one hundred and six years old, actually," I corrected, cutting him off. "They break down periodically, but they're always promptly fixed. Even the bureaucrats don't want the lives of scrap men on their hands. Not too many people in this section have died because of bad air."

"Not *too* many?" Kyle's outrage went up another notch. "That's—"

"Criminal, I know," I interrupted again, chuckling darkly. "Get used to it."

Kyle fell silent as we rounded a corner and went in another direction. The red path seemed endless as a heat haze obscured the distance. "You've changed," Kyle finally said, as if he had been chewing hard on that for some time.

I shrugged. "Not really. I've always been this way. I just put on a good show when I was in the war."

"Why?" Kyle wondered.

"They wanted a gung ho killer, not a smart assed, depressed, bad tempered, street punk." I laughed, though I wasn't finding much that was really funny about it. It was better to pass it off that way. It hurt a bit less and made the memory of those dark days, that loneliness, that need to be accepted and taken in as a friend by the people around me, not as sharp.

"I wanted people to leave me alone," Kyle admitted. "I wanted to focus entirely on winning the war."

"You mean, your '*stone cold killer*' attitude had been an act too?" I gaped at him and his lips quirked in a smile as he gave one nod. I laughed again, imagining it. I sobered when I saw the hint of pain in his blue eyes. It hadn't been easy for him either. Our acts hadn't been bullet proof.

"I guess we're starting over, then, and we need to get to know one another," I said as I wiped sweat from my face. "No more acts, okay?"

"Agreed," Kyle replied and it was as if we were making a pact, right then and there.

As we made our way into Market Rowe, Kyle trudging and sweating beside me, it was really hard to remember that he was an undercover Special Forces agent. When I examined that a little closer, I snorted to myself and called myself an idiot. Sure, it would have been nice to have Kyle really working for me and sharing my space, but sharing my

life as well? I had entertained thoughts like that during the war, and a bit afterward, but it had been clear to me that he had only cared about his career.

I remembered him growling at me, angry with me, confused by me, and punching me once, too, during the war. Maybe there had been something between us that hadn't just gone one way back then? I mentally crushed those thoughts in the next instant. Realistically, I had a better chance of having a relationship with a super nova than with Kyle Carter, then or now.

"Max!" a woman drawled and waved energetically from a stall on the side of the dirt road. That road was lined with similar stalls filled with everything imaginable for sale. The sellers themselves had connections, of one kind or another, with the scrap trade. If you played things right, they weren't above giving discounts to scrap men. So, I put on my widest grin and sauntered to the stall of the woman who had called out to me.

Theresa was a pretty thing. Dressed in a skirt and top that were made out of heavy duty denim, her hair was a riot of gold curls under the wide brim of a scrap man's hat. Her big, blue eyes, made her seem angelic, but Theresa was a long way from heaven. She winked at me as she turned griddle cakes on a burner with expert ease.

"I'm starving, Theresa," I said plaintively as I rubbed my stomach and let my hand trail down to my crotch. She could wonder what kind of hunger I was talking about.

"You poor boy!" Theresa cooed sympathetically. "I could take care of that hunger for you." She suddenly turned to flip her cakes onto a plate. Her skirt did a flirtatious flip as well as she turned, revealing, for a bare instant, a pink g-string. She turned back around, everything proper again. She said sexily, as she motioned to her little shack with her spatula, "I've got some privacy, if you're interested?"

I gave her the patented Master's hang dog eyes. "I want to, really I do, but I have this new hired hand and I have to show him around." I jerked a thumb at Kyle, who was frowning darkly, and rolled my eyes. "He needs supplies, I need breakfast. Maybe later, gorgeous."

She smirked and flipped a stack of hot cakes onto a piece of sheet plastic. She sprinkled sugar on them and tossed them to me. "Pay me a quarter credit now and the rest later, sweet talker."

When I looked at Kyle, he grudgingly came forward and paid Theresa. I gingerly juggled the hot cakes back and forth in my hands to keep my fingers from getting burned. I said aside to Kyle as we moved down the road, "Loosen up, Kyle, it's not serious. The ladies just want some attention. If I really turned it up and actually tried getting past her g-string, that pretty little woman would probably get her big ugly husband to knife me."

Kyle's eyes went wide. "She's married?"

“People work hard here, Kyle,” I explained with a shrug. “They often don’t have much energy left over for romancing their significant others. That’s why some of them like flirting with me. I say something nice, they get to dream a raunchy dream of us getting together, and I go on my way with some stuff with reduced prices.”

Kyle grunted, whether in understanding or disapproval, I couldn’t tell. Well, fuck him, I thought. If he was going to judge, he was in the wrong damned place.

I leaned into another booth and a frowning woman, with a severe bun, wagged a finger at me. “I’m not Theresa, Masters, and I know the score, remember? I deliver your mail.”

I blushed uncomfortably. “Yeah, yeah!” I said, but didn’t walk away. I motioned to Kyle to look her merchandise over. “She sells good quality stuff. You can’t go wrong buying from Kay.”

I stood back while Kyle made his choices carefully. He bought clothing, a long windbreaker, and some household items. Kay watched him as if she was puzzled. I remembered that Kay was ex-military. I felt trepidation tighten my gut, wondering if Kyle’s cover was about to be blown sky high. Kay reduced her prices for Kyle, though, and gave him a serious nod. Kyle nodded back, as if they perfectly understood each other, and paid her.

Kyle tucked his purchases under one arm and we walked further down the market.

“So, what was that?” I asked, curious.

“Something that isn’t a game,” Kyle replied coolly. “It’s called respect.”

“Isn’t that risky?” I wondered, not liking his condescending tone. “What about your cover?”

“No, it’s not risky,” Kyle replied. “There are so many people who were in the war it’s not a cause for suspicion.”

“Oh.” I mulled that over a minute. I felt his judgment heavy in the air between us and said defensively, “That wouldn’t have worked with Theresa.”

Kyle grimaced. “No, it wouldn’t have.”

It was, once again, a meeting of the minds. It was hard to keep myself from looking like a stunned moron. I remember how we had worked together during the war. Kyle had been closed off and abrasive, but we still managed to complete our missions together smoothly. We had known, almost instinctively, each other’s moves. It had disturbed me then. This new understanding that we were developing didn’t feel any different. Kyle and I were getting along. We were—I cut that off, clamping down on it as if it were a sudden wound. He was Special Forces and I was a scrap man he had suspected of being a thief. He needed me. Street sense kicked in. Like I said before, I haven’t lived this long by

being stupid. That goes for being gullible, too. Maybe we were becoming friendly, but that didn't warrant me dropping my guard on the off chance he was being honest with me.

"Does it ever rain?" Kyle wondered, looking uncomfortable in the rising heat of the day. A person could put up with heat like that when it was an act of nature. When a man didn't have a say in it, when he just had to endure it knowing someone's finger was on the control, then it got a hell of a lot more personal.

"Not often. It rusts the junk and the scrubbers anyway," I told him and sneered, adding, "The higher ups like to keep most of the water for their parks and play pools. There's only so much water, after all."

"And that's why we have coolies, ice packs, and personal tundra jackets!" a voice shouted from a stall. A tall, burly man grinned at me and waved to his wares. "If the big guys don't want to give us water and decent temperatures, we have to cool ourselves off."

"Ignore him," I warned under my breath as I began eating some of my hot cakes now that they had cooled enough. I offered one to Kyle and he took it as he looked almost longingly at the gear in the stall.

"Don't," I warned again, "Get used to the weather and don't fight it with that crap."

Kyle walked to the stall anyway and I sighed. He pointed out a hat like his, but made out of straw and cloth strips. The straw made it much more expensive. The man handed it to him and then looked at me appraisingly. I pointedly looked away.

"How ya doin', Masters?" the man asked in a suggestive manner. "You get tired of being alone yet? It may be hot, but a man gets a cold bed when he's the only one in it."

I kept looking down the long line of stalls. "Cold can be good, considering the alternative," I replied.

"How much?" Kyle asked abruptly. The shopkeeper answered. I winced at the cost. Kyle dickered convincingly and then walked away after paying only a little less than outrageous. He surprised me by putting the hat on my head as we walked. "That scarf isn't good enough," he told me.

I couldn't sort out how I felt about that. One part of me was mad about the charity, while another part was even angrier that he thought he could *mother* me. Still another part was hard to explain, even to myself. That part was almost overwhelmed with emotions that I wasn't used to feeling. It was like seeing a rich, juicy steak, or the sweetest piece of pie you have ever seen, and knowing you can't have it, because it isn't yours to take.

"Why didn't you flirt with him?" Kyle asked and there was an edge to his voice I couldn't read.

"He's not my type and he wasn't playing a game," I replied shortly, wondering what

Kyle thought of me to even ask that sort of question.

Kyle finished his shopping and then bought us both bottles of ice cold soda. We drank them as we walked the long, dusty road back to my scrap yard. You know, you don't realize how alone you are until you leave a crowd of people. As we passed through my gate, it ate at me a little, but then I looked aside at Kyle and felt better. I guess I really wasn't alone anymore. It was a very good feeling, right up until I saw the tax man standing on my porch in his three piece suit.

Chapter Five

By the Numbers

“Is that a friend of yours?” Kyle asked me in a tone of voice that let me know he knew exactly what was going on.

“I don’t think he’s anyone’s friend. Well, maybe the rats,” I growled.

“Mr. Masters,” the man greeted me as we stepped onto the porch. “Harold Kimmins, agent for the station Internal Revenue Service.”

Kyle went past me to open the door and go inside. I watched him put his supplies on my empty desk. That drove home the helplessness of my situation. My laptop was gone. Along with it were my accounts. Travers’ careful inventory was no more. I’d never flinched, even when faced with a troop of gun ships, but this scrawny, little man, with his undertaker’s smile, had me shaking in my boots. Forget about me taking down the business, this man could kill it with one key stroke of his computer pad.

Kyle came back outside. Hands in pockets, he took up a position beside me, as if he really were my right hand worker. It was comforting. I wasn’t sure why. There wasn’t anything he could do to get me out of the mess.

The scrubbers lowered. Kimmins and I stood, poised, used to the distraction and knowing we had to wait until it was over to continue. Kyle fidgeted. The dust made him cough. Kimmins and I had already raised scarves to block our noses and mouths. The metallic sounds of old machinery in motion ceased. The moving air fell dead and the dirt began its slow drift back to earth.

Kimmins said, as if there hadn’t been any interruption, “We, at the Service, have some questions to ask you after looking at your last tax payment, Mr. Masters.” He patted the leather case that he was holding. “If you could clear up some discrepancies, we would appreciate it.”

“Discrepancies?” I was stalling. I knew exactly what he was talking about. My mind was going around in circles though, trying to find my way out of the closing jaws of a trap made out of my own creative accounting.

The man nodded to the yard. “You have some equipment that wasn’t described in your list of assets. Also, several of your employees have filed for unemployment compensation. There wasn’t any mention of employees on your latest return.”

The man smiled. Sharks must smile like that, right before they tear into their prey and eat them whole. He knew he had me. He wasn’t asking questions because he was confused, he was asking me because he wanted me to break down and admit that my errors were on purpose. Max Masters didn’t break under torture and I certainly wasn’t

going to go down blubbing in front of this guy. I started to reply, but Kyle's hand suddenly closed on my arm. It hurt. It told me how much he wanted me to shut the hell up. I glared at him, but he was ignoring me now and motioning Kimmins inside the shack.

"Let's go inside and sit down, sir," Kyle suggested.

It was obvious that Kimmins didn't think much of my shack. He looked uncomfortable and ready to balk. Kyle didn't give him the chance. He put out a strong arm and all but herded Kimmins inside. After pulling out the chair behind my desk, Kyle sat him down in it with a hand on his shoulder that didn't allow argument.

Kimmins had his briefcase clutched close to his chest. "I am limited on time," he said nervously.

"This won't take long," Kyle assured him. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his dark hair as he explained, "Max Masters recently lost his accountant and was forced to do the returns himself to make the deadline. He was completely unaware of the equipment that his accountant mistakenly hadn't included in his report. As for the employees, those men didn't work for Mr. Masters. They were squatting on his property. Since they were indigents, Mr. Masters didn't have the heart to evict them. If we may have an extension form, and a form to correct the return, I'm certain Mr. Masters can have it completed in a timely fashion. He will, of course, pay any amount due in monthly installments."

Kimmins frowned. "Installments?"

I felt like a third wheel—a spectator—a fly on the wall, but I wasn't about to break in while Kyle was obviously saving my ass. I backed up into a corner and kept my mouth shut.

"Mr. Masters was robbed. Many of his assets and records were stolen," Kyle explained. "It will take time for him to reconstruct those records and recover from the monetary loss. I believe there is a program for hard luck cases, that allows them to make payments until their tax bill is paid?"

Kimmins looked very unhappy. "There is, but there are penalties."

"Of course," Kyle replied.

Kimmins frowned. He didn't want to help me. He wanted the kill, the taste of taxpayer blood, but he couldn't refute what Kyle was saying. With an exasperated sound, he began pulling forms from his case. Kyle took them, checked them over to make certain that they were the proper ones, and then thanked Kimmins.

Kimmins looked Kyle over and it was obvious that he was thinking derisively; *scrap man*. He asked doubtfully, "Will you be doing Mr. Masters' accounts in the future?"

“No,” Kyle replied. “Mr. Masters will be retaining an accountant from now on.”

“Good,” Kimmins replied. I didn’t think the *good* had to do with anything pertaining to my well being. It was probably *good* that he wouldn’t have to make a return trip to my yard.

Kimmins closed his case with a snap and stood up. He dusted at his impeccably tailored suit with flicking fingers as he made his way to the door. “I warn you, Mr. Masters, that you won’t get another chance to correct your return.”

“Understood,” Kyle replied as if I was incapable of speech.

Kimmins left and I closed the door behind him. I watched him leave the lot through a murky window before turning to Kyle. I was extremely embarrassed. “Travers used to do all the paperwork,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck nervously. “I don’t have much talent for it.”

I expected Kyle to ride me over it, to demand explanations, but, instead, he picked up his supplies. I noticed that he left one bag behind. I began picking it up, thinking he wanted me to help him, but he shook his head.

“That’s for you,” Kyle told me and, knowing that I needed to hear it, he added, “You can pay me back later.”

That helped like someone taking a few grains of sand from off of the Sahara. Embarrassment and helplessness were heavy weights on my psyche. I couldn’t look at Kyle as I opened the door and allowed him to proceed me outside.

As we walked to the back of my scrap yard, the silence between us was pregnant with the things I imagined he was thinking. I couldn’t help but try to explain, even though his silence was an obvious offer to let the subject drop.

I said, “I can fix the scrap, and I can get someone to buy it, but I’m not any good at paperwork. I let Travers handle that.”

Kyle replied reluctantly, as unwilling as I was to admit that we had faults, “When I was fresh out of the war, I had a few problems of my own.”

My eyes went wide. “You did?” I put two and two together. “You knew about all of that tax shit, because you had trouble too?”

Kyle nodded. For once, I kept my big mouth shut and gave him the same courtesy that he had given me. He offered, “I learned not to do it myself. There are experts that deal with taxes and legal issues.”

I replied sourly, “In case you hadn’t noticed, Kyle, I’m kind of short on credits.”

“Not for long,” he told me confidently. “Working together, we should be able to fix more of your scrap machinery to double your saleable inventory.”

Travers could fly and operate a gun ship, but actually fixing them, or anything else for

that matter, had not been one of his skills. It had seemed like a good partnership: I was the mechanic and salesman and he did the paperwork. Unfortunately, as Kyle was quick to ascertain, one mechanic could fix and prepare scrap for sale only so quickly. You couldn't get credits if you didn't have anything for sale.

We reached the shack at the back of the lot, Kyle silent and me with possibilities whirling in my head. That stopped when we opened the door and a smell wafted out that was indescribable. There were three cots lined up along the walls. The floor between them was littered with filth. Pee and vomit mingled with rotten food. I backed up from the door and put my scarf over my nose.

"Shit!" I exclaimed.

"Probably," Kyle choked in reply, looking as disgusted as I was.

I plucked at his tank top. "Come on. You are *not* staying here."

Kyle frowned at my presumptuous fingers and ignored my attempt to make him leave. "It has to be cleaned, regardless of whether I stay here or not."

"I could just burn it," I protested.

"Too many fines." It sounded like humor from Kyle, but I wouldn't bet on it.

"You can't seriously be considering staying here?" I exclaimed in disbelief.

The set, stubborn look on his face was the one he wore when he was determined to accomplish a mission even if he died doing it.

"I'll need to stay with you until I clean it," Kyle conceded.

I mentally wrestled under control the part of me that jumped like a freakin over excited kid. I even refrained from shouting, *Yahoo!* It wasn't a date. It wasn't an offer of anything other than a platonic sleep over. Get real, Masters, I told myself sternly. Kyle was going to be uncomfortable enough sleeping close quarters with a man, let alone a gay man who was drooling all over him—well, not drooling—more like longing—strike that wanting and hoping. Okay, there wasn't a good way to say that I had just kissed heaven. I couldn't help peeking at a very big dream, one that I had tucked away since the war. It had been ready and waiting for just this incredibly impossible moment.

He's not interested in me, I reminded myself. I said it at least five times to myself, before I was able to grin at Kyle and say with some control, "Okay, you bunk on my futon, but I'm helping you hose this place out. It is mine, after all."

Kyle replied, "Help would be appreciated."

"Good." I plucked at his tank top again, "Now, let's get the hell away from here before I add to the decor."

Kyle chuckled and nodded in agreement as we walked back towards my shack. I looked sideways at him and said, "I don't remember you ever laughing, well, except in

that really evil way you had during the war.”

“Evil?” Kyle smirked. “I think that I was attempting to sound mature.”

I laughed. “Mature? It was pretty damned psychotic sounding, Kyle, especially when you were on the front line and firing a laser rifle.”

The ground suddenly started to shake. I crouched, hands braced flat on the ground. Kyle looked at a loss. I jerked on his pants as he swayed. He followed my lead, crouching as well. The shaking grew stronger and a low groan of stressed machinery echoed everywhere. Some of my scrap tumbled from their piles, metallic clangs adding to the noise. When the shaking ceased, I slowly straightened along with Kyle and continued walking as if nothing had happened.

“What was that?” Kyle asked in trepidation. He was slow to follow me, his eyes raking the station walls all around us. Maybe he was imaging a breach?

“Nobody knows what causes that,” I told him. “It happens once in a while, but not too often. Maybe it has to do with the rotation of the station, or the moisture collectors, or the scrubbers, or the pipes underground? Since it only happens on this end of the station, of course, no one’s been out to fix it.”

Kyle looked grim. “Meaning, no one has died yet, so it’s okay?”

“Right,” I replied brightly. “You have to have faith that it all holds together, Kyle, or you’ll go crazy very quickly.”

We reached my shack and went inside. It was barely air conditioned. The *shaker* unit in one corner of my bedroom was living up to its nickname. It was old, noisy, and only managed to make the shack a few degrees cooler than outside. It was better to turn on the overhead fans and open the venting traps in the floor. Those traps led to cooler temperatures far below us. It saved on the cost of energy as well. Kyle watched me open up a few traps and frowned when I leaned over one to catch the updraft of cool air.

“Doesn’t that vent waste gases from below as well?” Kyle wondered.

I lifted a finger and wagged it at him, “Try not to think about stuff like that, Kyle. The average lifespan of a citizen on this side of the station is seventy-five. Breathing the *dirt* and the vented gases might be bad for you, but it won’t kill you right away.”

Cooler at last, I straightened, tossed my hat into a corner on a pile of dirty clothes, and then went to retrieve the bag that Kyle had left on my office desk. Taking the bag to my bedroom, we both sorted through its contents. Meal packs were self-heating, so we stacked them in a low cupboard. Drinks were sealed and had cold tabs or heat tabs, depending on how you wanted it. They went into the cupboard as well. It was the real food that needed the small refrigerator. Screwed to the floor, because of the infrequent shakes, my three thieves hadn’t been able to steal it. We shoved in some vegetables, soy

protein blocks, and, wonder of wonder, junk food that included a six pack of soda. I grinned at Kyle.

“I took you for someone who eats healthy,” I told him.

Kyle shrugged, but his blush belied his casual tone. “My trainers didn’t allow junk food and I was afraid that it would impair my efficiency during the war. I don’t have to worry about that now.”

“Trying to capture some of that lost youth, right?” I asked knowingly.

Kyle’s blue eyes looked pained and apologetic. He actually felt guilty for wanting to turn back the wheels of time that had run roughshod over our lives. My humor evaporated and I felt angry at the people who had used us—had used him—in their wars. A medal was cold comfort after being abandoned afterward and left to flounder in a society that we were ill equipped to deal with. I had wanted a mission statement, intelligence, and specs. I’m sure Kyle had felt the same way.

I pulled out a soda and tossed it to him. Getting one for myself, I popped off the top and took a swig as I sat cross legged on the bed. “Look, Kyle, there’s nothing wrong with that,” I told him. “We’re still young. Maybe we have to make our way in the big universe, but we can still have some fun and act like kids once in a while. We can drink soda and eat…” I looked at the cookies and chips appreciatively, “stuff that is absolutely no good for us.”

Kyle fiddled with his soda as he sat next to me. “My training has been very hard to forget. It’s made me what I am. It’s made me—”

I cut that off, “Made you what you *were*,” I corrected him. “Now you’re just Kyle Carter, Special Forces, and a man with one hell of a sweet tooth. Kyle, the soldier, is long gone.”

He blushed again and took a drink of his soda to cover the uncomfortable moment. I felt that I really needed to break through that embarrassment. I could see that he was blowing his dietary lapse way out of proportion. It gave me a window into the man sitting next to me. He was still a soldier, deep down, and still worried about staying in top condition. It seemed that he was still thinking he was just a weapon for peace, as well, and didn’t deserve the new lease on a normal life he had been handed. Yeah, that was reading a lot into a few bags of chips and some sugary junk food, but I had never blushed in shame over a chocolate cookie.

“I think that’s a lot better than the alternatives,” I told him, leaning back so that I was supported by the wall. “I did some drinking and smoking. I took some hard drugs, that I thought would make me forget a lot of things.” I was the one who was blushing and looking ashamed now, but I had more of a damned reason. “It wasn’t for long, though. I

ran myself through a rehab center after a bad binge and had some sessions with a psychologist. Travers came to my rescue after that and we set up business. I've been clean since then. I was just damned stupid and overwhelmed. So, you see, I'd rather be addicted to some potato chips than the harder stuff."

"I'm sorry," Kyle said and he sounded very sympathetic, almost sad. "You made a life and we came crashing in and turned it upside down."

Oh, yeah, I had forgotten that I'd been going out of business when that had happened. My new life hadn't been going that well. Kyle and Huang's sting had actually been a nice distraction from my problems, despite the way they had treated me. I'd been talking as if my life had been a success story; *'screwed up Masters gets shit together and has a perfect life.'* That had been true in the beginning. It wasn't true now.

A general told me once, that life is full of opportunities. A person just had to stick his hand out and grab them. I had unintentionally grabbed a handful of thorns and I wasn't eager to grab again. I had to, though. You didn't survive by hesitating, by being afraid. I had to take this *train* as far as it would go, I thought, and jump off when it crashed. Hopefully, there would be another *train* afterward and I would be ready to take it.

"Honey stick?" Kyle offered and held out a slim tube of amber, sugary honey.

I looked at him, unable at that moment to hide my emotions as I took the tube. He smiled softly and I was convinced he knew what I was thinking. I was thoroughly convinced he knew all of my troubles and he was not only sympathetic, but *'there'* for me. I know I'm reading a lot into a simple offer of junk food. I wanted to make fun of myself, and call myself some choice names; sucker and dreamer, for instance. I didn't, though, because I didn't really want to just then. It felt too good believing Kyle cared about me.

"Thanks," I said, meaning a lot with that one word. He nodded and we both sat back, reverting back to childhood as we sucked on our honey sticks.

Chapter Six

Sweat and Tears

I'd grown up on the battlefield and stayed in some strange places. I could sleep anywhere and at any time. That night, though, as the reflectors overhead tilted away from the sun and darkness crept across the station, I was wide awake and snatching glimpses of Kyle where he lay on the futon.

The agents hadn't damaged the cushion too badly and Kyle claimed it was better than the mattresses in the Special Forces barracks. He had undressed down to a gray pair of cotton boxers with buttons on the front and his tank top. I had watched his gorgeous muscled body as he had stretched out and got comfortable. I had stared when he had run a hand through his long hair, sighed, and simply gone to sleep. I was still staring with the help of security lights out on the scrap lot coming through the window and making him, well, glow.

When I had asked about clothing, Kyle had pulled a duffel bag from beneath the stairs of the porch. He had shrugged and said something to the effect that he hadn't wanted to presume his welcome and make me angry unnecessarily.

When he had gone to take a shower, I had searched through his things as a matter of course. Socks, underwear, t shirts, tank tops, and a few pairs of jeans were all he had packed. His gun was conspicuously missing. Since there wasn't any way he could hide it in those shorts he was wearing, I had to assume he had left it at Special Forces headquarters. An unarmed Kyle Carter was like a zebra without stripes. I couldn't imagine him willingly leaving it behind.

It made me think about Kyle in a different way, one that didn't involve my long neglected libido. It was possible he had Special Forces agents using the station security grid to keep tabs on us. His state of disarmament was understandable if he had armed men ready to back him up at a moment's notice.

My paranoia made me twitch the curtains closed. That let in some light still, but not enough to actually see anything. My libido wanted to strangle me, but my survival instinct, developed the hard way on the streets and during the war, was nodding sagely and agreeing with my caution. I listened to Kyle breathe and felt that I could hate that instinct that would never allow me to completely drop my guard. It had kept me alive, but it had made me lonely, too. How could anyone get close to me, when I couldn't bring myself to trust anyone?

I tried to get comfortable. I had on an oversized, white shirt that fell to my knees and a second hand pair of cotton shorts with a green camo pattern. Kyle had given me a brief

look devoid of any sexual interest. I had stupidly hoped for a lot more. I had to remind myself I was sleeping next to Kyle Carter and he was the business end of a sting operation. Sure, we had shared confidences, but the man was one hundred percent duty. I mentally shot a rubber band at *hope* and it ran away yelping.

I finally drifted off to sleep, but I had a nightmare about the war. Someone spoke soothingly and brought me out of it before it reached the level where I felt like I was actually back in the war. Deeper sleep claimed me after that and I don't remember anything else until I finally woke up.

Kyle's futon was empty, just the impression of his body left behind.

I took my morning shower, shaved, and then pulled on jeans and a white t shirt. Leaving the bedroom, I found the little office empty as well. Kyle's duffel was still there, though, and the remains of a meal pack in the garbage. He was still around and I hoped he was simply looking over the yard. I didn't want to think he had gone to the other shack to begin cleaning. That was not something I wanted to deal with before drinking some strong coffee and taking time to wrap my head around the day.

After the last of my uneasy night faded away and my coffee was gone, I finally shoved my feet into my boots and opened the front door.

When the heat blasted me, I was furious in a heartbeat. I ran off the porch, picked up a chunk of scrap, and threw it at the sky, screaming, "FUUUUCK YOUUUUU!!!" The scrap landed with a clatter just as Kyle came out from behind a pile of machine parts to see what was wrong.

Kyle peered up at the sky briefly, wide brimmed hat shading his eyes, and then he looked at me in amusement. "I hope you're not suggesting that the weather control technician is God?"

I scowled and shoved hands deep into my jean pockets. "Who else am I going to get mad at? The weather equipment is attached to the hull of the station, so I toss shit at the sky."

Kyle laughed as he went into the shack, came back with my hat, and handed it to me. "I was doing an inventory," he told me. "We should finish it together and then send off the amended report to your new accountant."

"Credits," I reminded him sourly. "I have zero to pay for an accountant."

Kyle had a plan. I could see it on his face. He appeared excited about it. My paranoia suddenly floundered before Kyle's eagerness to help me and his enthusiasm for the challenge. Could he look like that if he was only using me? Was it a scam? Was he that good of an actor?

All bushy tailed and bright eyed, Hope was poking its grinning head up again. My

paranoid instinct wanted a mallet to smash it back down, but it didn't have one handy. Hope begged me to believe in Kyle Carter. Instinct told me I was a sucker.

"If we work together," Kyle said, "we can take inventory, quickly sort out the most profitable parts in your scrap yard, fix them, and put them on the market."

I snorted. "What do we put inventory on, our fingers and toes? My computer was stolen, in case you forgot."

Kyle pulled out a hand held computer from his pocket. The thing was as small and as thin as a credit card.

"Do you use that to keep in touch with the agents watching us?" I snarled.

I couldn't help feeling angry. He'd hidden that from Max Masters, elite soldier. It made me wonder what else he had managed to keep from me. I'm not good at keeping my emotions inside. I was never good at subtle or holding the cards until the right moment. If I had them, I played them, and then waited to see how the chips fell.

Kyle's face looked puzzled at first and then his expression went hard as he figured out what I was talking about. "We are not being monitored."

"No?" I arched a blonde eyebrow at him, the one that told him that I wasn't eating that shit up. "You aren't armed. You aren't the kind of man to do that, unless you know you have backup."

"Do scrap men have weapons?" Kyle wanted to know, but I could tell that he already knew the answer.

"Not usually," I replied with a growl.

"Do they often work with a semi-automatic stuck in the back of their jeans?" Kyle persisted almost coldly. When I looked away, scowling and flushing, he replied for me, "No, they don't. I'm undercover. I can't have a weapon. That's taking a chance, I know, but this is a sting operation that will take time to develop. I can't afford to have someone question me. As for being monitored. That's out of the question. The people we are trying to arrest might question our interest in the scrap yards."

My eyes widened and I looked at him sharply. "You mean this sting goes up that high?" When he nodded, I whistled. "Nobody's dared go after the station government before, Kyle. That's damned dangerous."

"It is," Kyle agreed and looked troubled, "Which is why I wish I had protested more, when it was suggested we tap you for the sting. I thought..."

I grimaced. "You thought I wasn't too far down the food chain from them."

Kyle had just exonerated himself and I was the dick head with the overactive paranoia. That deserved an apology. "I'm sorry, okay?" I rubbed at the back of my neck nervously. "I've had a rough life. Trust isn't something I indulge in often." Okay, not at all, but he

didn't have to be told that.

Kyle relaxed and gave me a small smile. "I shouldn't expect anything else," he said, "not after I arrested you."

"You can sure as shit say that again!" I grumbled and nodded at the piles of scrap. "Should we get started?"

"Max?" His tentative tone made me think that Kyle might be about to apologize for our rough beginning, but I cut him off.

"Forget about it, Kyle," I told him as I began walking to a pile of scrap, "Done is done. If you stop and dwell on stuff, it drags you down. A guy has to keep looking forward. I'm sorry and you're sorry, so everything is okay."

And it was. No, I didn't trust him completely, but, as we scrambled and sweated over my inventory, I knew I was as close to it as I could get.

Kyle was meticulous and focused. I was all over the place, getting distracted by every little thing and, basically, just getting overwhelmed by it all. He kept me on track, kept me from wandering from pile to pile, and mapped out a system. I looked at everything and judged it *endless*. He looked at it and judged it *doable* in short order. Kyle showed me very quickly he was right.

We didn't count every scrap as I feared. Instead, we estimated and concentrated on getting the larger, more expensive, items on the lot counted. Machinery was easy. I had one crane with a bucket claw and an interchangeable grappler. It did the work of the machines I had never been able to afford. What it didn't do, though, had to be made up in backbreaking hand labor. I saw Kyle look over the rusted, on its last legs, monstrosity, and then look at me sympathetically, before he entered a low ball value.

I really hate pity, always have and always will. It was like a spike in my coffin. You're already dead, now let's desecrate the corpse. It made my temper flare instantaneously. I wanted to yell at Kyle and say anything to make myself feel better, but I didn't. What the hell was there to say? I had to have a redeeming quality somewhere in order to have a comeback. I couldn't think of anything.

We finished just after the mid-day cycle. I stood wearily, wiping sweat and dirt off my face with my bandana, as Kyle tallied everything up. When he looked up finally, I expected the worst. I wasn't ready for him to look pleased.

"You have some very profitable machine parts here," he told me. "They're just in pieces. If we gather all of those pieces together, we can rebuild them and have a tidy sum to recharge your credits."

I blinked at him. "Pieces?"

Kyle nodded to the scrap heaps as he finished his entries. "You have them scattered

everywhere. I took notes on each machine part that I spotted and added them to a running tally as we worked.”

“I.. I guess I’m a lot more unorganized than I thought.” I’d been sitting on money and hadn’t known it. That Kyle had to point it out to me, when I was supposed to be the damned scrap man, was harder to swallow than pity. I said a bit defensive, “Maybe they were unworkable parts and that’s why I never bothered?”

Kyle looked up and finally saw how tightly wound I was. “That could be.” He paused and then chose his next words carefully, not wanting me to get even more upset. “This isn’t a one man operation. You deserve a lot of credit for taking the business as far as you did, considering the level of competition.”

I let out a little breath, my anger escaping like steam out of a pressure cooker. I hid under the brim of my hat. “Yeah, thanks.” My pride wasn’t going to be picky about what bones it was thrown.

“Look, Max,” Kyle began, acting unsure. “Is it all right if we wait another day to clean the other shack? I think we should get these parts together and in working order as soon as possible.”

“Why should I mind?” I wondered.

“You didn’t sleep very well,” Kyle pointed out. “My presence must be bothering you.”

I was in love with the brim of my hat. It hid a lot, including the scalding blush across my face. The ground had suddenly become very interesting. Oh, look, fine particles of metal. I wonder what that did to a person’s lungs. Okay; think, think, think. I couldn’t say, *you’re so damned everything I have ever wanted in a man, I couldn’t stop ogling you*. It had to be more reasonable and less threatening. I didn’t want Kyle to suddenly find the porch, or my office desk, more comfortable than being in the same room with me. Ah, I think I had it and it was almost the truth. I explained, “Seeing you again made me remember the war. I had a nightmare. I don’t expect that to keep happening, so, yeah, you can hang in my place a few extra days. If we don’t start making credits, neither of us is going to have to worry about which shack we’re in. We won’t have a scrap lot anymore.”

“Agreed,” Kyle said and he made me feel like I was a genius with that one word, like I had just calculated Pi to the nth degree while standing on my head whistling. Jeez! I had it bad! I used to hate people who hung on someone like this. I used to call them stupid, gullible...

Kyle pocketed his computer and began climbing up a pile of scrap to reach whatever he had spotted there earlier. All thoughts went out of my head. Kyle was wearing blue jeans, faded and dirty, but they were tight across his rounded ass and I had a good view of

that as he climbed to a point above me. I also had a good view of —.

“Help me get this out?” Kyle called down.

I had to shake myself out of my glazed, horn dog coma. “Coming, uh, I mean, I’ll be right there.” I was really getting used to blushing now, but that blush combined with a sudden attack of ‘*what the hell?*’ when Kyle looked down at me and smirked. He had caught my slip, my inner raunchy thoughts revealed in one stupid word. He wasn’t angry.

The smirk went away as he returned to his work and frowned down at a hundred pound hunk of machine half buried in rusted junk. “It won’t move,” he told me, all business now. “If we pull together we might get it out. We’ll have to be careful, though. This pile isn’t stable.”

I eyed the pile that went up another six feet, some of it was heavy. “Get down and I’ll get the claw. I’ll shift some of this to another pile,” I suggested.

He nodded as he wiped sweat from his brow. His hair hung in strands over those dark, blue eyes and a slight burn was starting to pink his cheeks. I blurted it, the question that I just couldn’t keep inside. It was a question I had never thought to ask Kyle Carter, supposed worshiper of only his career. “Are you interested in me, Kyle?”

Kyle laughed, his eyes twinkling at me. He said, “I always envied that about you, how you are always so fearless and uncaring of consequences.”

I smiled at him daringly. “Well?”

Kyle paused, adjusted the brim of his hat, and said, looking out across my scrap lot, “Do you remember back at lock up, when the doctor was looking at your magazines?”

I grunted. “Yes.”

Kyle paused again and then the pink on his cheeks grew brighter as he blurted out, “That was my favorite issue too.” It wasn’t a definite answer about us, but it was about his sexuality.

I gaped, I laughed, and then we got back to work with a new understanding.

Chapter Seven

Topping It Off

The work was back breaking and long. When we had everything stacked and ready to sort through the next day, I was almost thankful that I was too exhausted to think about other things. Things like, how I was going to deal with Kyle in a cramped room now that I knew for certain he was gay.

Was there potential for anything happening? I winced inwardly. Not potential, in that something might develop between me and Kyle, but potential that one, Max Masters, could end up doing something very stupid. Kyle might misunderstand me, or not misunderstand me, but reject me outright by putting a fist into my eye.

He probably had someone, anyway, I thought. Kyle was strong, confident, handsome, and a top Special Forces agent. Of course there was someone waiting at home for him—maybe two—maybe three? Maybe, I could be number four?

Standing at the top of a scrap pile, I shook my head sharply to clear it. I tossed the last part on the list down to where Kyle was waiting at the foot of it. Get it done, I told myself. Eat, take a shower, and go to bed. Keep your libido in your pants. It was just too easy to buy into what I suspected was a con, to forget that Kyle was only with me because he wanted to nail some bad guys. Okay, bad choice of words. Sure, Kyle was being nice to me, but that didn't mean he was going to toss the entire operation, change jobs to become a junk man, and live forever after with me in my little shack. I had to face that reality, because I really didn't want a punch in the eye.

There was a groan far above me and the light changed subtly. I blinked and looked upward from my precarious perch. The reflectors, that were keeping us boiling hot by catching the rays of the sun and reflecting them into the station, were turning. I watched them in trepidation. Someone high up on the food chain had decided he'd had enough warm summer days on this side of the station. That could be good, or bad, depending on what he was in the mood for now. I hoped that it wasn't snow.

The reflectors stopped and I heard a collective cheer from the other yards, hooting and hollering as the reflectors stopped and the air cooled about twenty degrees. There was even a light breeze. I laughed, whipped off my hat, and stretched out my arms to catch it. The air chilled the sweat on my body, but I grinned for all I was worth as even my spiky hair fluttered in that breeze. I felt a moment of pure bliss.

Looking down at last, I caught Kyle watching me. I couldn't read that look. He was smiling, but his gaze was very intense, as if he were looking at me and seeing something very interesting. Did I look ridiculous? Embarrassing? I just couldn't figure it out. I shrugged as I half slid, half climbed down to the ground.

“Sorry, it just felt good,” I mumbled and stared at my feet as I jammed my hat back on.

“You looked...” Kyle stopped talking. I dared to look at him, then, from under the brim of my hat, but he wasn’t meeting my eyes. Great! He was probably thinking I was a lunatic.

I sighed and tapped the machine part he was holding. “Put that with the rest and we’ll call it a day.”

Kyle swallowed hard, shifted the part from hand to hand, and then nodded as he walked over to the pile and put it with the right collection of junk.

The metal all around us made noises. The temperature had changed quickly and heated junk was cooling off and contracting. I eyed the sky. Sometimes, that kind of temperature change made rain, but I didn’t see any. Maybe the god of the weather controls had compensated for that? It was hard to generate the usual hate, though, when I was enjoying cool weather at last.

Kyle joined me again and we made our way back to the shack. “I call the shower first,” Kyle said as we climbed the steps of the porch.

“This is my place, Carter!” I retorted, but then shoved my dirty hands into my pockets and growled sullenly, “Okay, okay!” I’ve always respected dibs.

“While you shower,” Kyle offered, “I’ll heat up dinner and put it out on the porch. We should enjoy the weather while it lasts.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, easing up on my irritation. “You’re right about enjoying it. We might get weather like this once in a blue moon.” Yeah, ‘*once in a blue moon*’ was a saying left over from Earth. We didn’t have a moon.

Kyle was frowning now as we went into the shack. He said, “I just don’t understand why they keep it so damned hot.”

“The guy either gets off on making us suffer,” I suggested sourly as I sat on the edge of the futon and took off my work boots, “or the damn reflectors could be too old to work properly. Either way it sucks!”

Kyle kicked off his shoes, scattering red dust on my floor, unzipped his jeans, and dropped them. Yes, he was wearing those gray shorts, but they were wet with sweat and clinging to him like a second skin. My eyes were probably as huge as saucers. I hadn’t expected a strip show and I was just too exhausted to hide my reaction. Kyle was oblivious to it as he walked over to the bathroom and began pulling off his shirt.

Kyle was still a soldier and his body reflected that. His skin was scarred, like mine, but it still seemed wonderful to me. I could have called him slim and wiry, but that made you think of a weak person. Kyle had strong shoulders and muscled legs that could run miles

or kick a hole through a metal door. He was a weapon, from head to toe, but he was also a man in every aspect. I couldn't help notice that he also had the most perfectly rounded little ass.

My hands covered and pushed down the sudden rise in my jeans. I swallowed hard and forced myself, and I mean really forced myself, to turn away. The door closed firmly and the water in the shower went on. I had, maybe, five minutes, and no, I'm not ashamed of my actions. A guy's gotta do, what a guy's gotta do. I said hello to Mr. Hand in the office, made myself into an exhausted post coital Max Masters, cleaned myself up, and was back on the edge of the futon as if nothing had happened by the time Kyle left the shower.

Rubbing his dark hair dry with a towel, Kyle said unnecessarily, "Your turn."

No, your turn, I thought irritably as I began undressing in front of him. Well, he had started this first! He must have known what the hell he was doing to me, right? You call people like that teases. I tried not to think that I might be so low on his scale of interest, he hadn't even thought about it. I do have a bit of an ego, thank you very much. Kyle just didn't seem the kind of guy to dangle himself like that. I mean, why tease me if he wasn't if he didn't want—if I wasn't someone who...

Finish work, I told myself, firmly, but then realized that we were way past that. Eat, I tried again. No, I was supposed to take a shower, then eat, and then go to bed. I needed to forget about teasing Kyle. I kicked off my jeans and stomped into the bathroom.

Looking at myself in the cracked mirror, I tapped my reflection on the forehead. "Stop it!" I whispered very low to myself. Hope peeked up over my shoulder and giggled at me. It wasn't giving up, no matter what the odds against Kyle and me becoming a couple were. You have to admit those odds were pretty high against a man in a position like Kyle's, and a lowly scrap guy like me, getting together. They were even higher when I considered he had shown zero interest in me during the war and had run after yet another career afterward. He was Special Forces and on a mission. I was someone who was one step from jail.

Hope grinned, undaunted, ignoring plain logic and reality as I imagined what it would be like being with Kyle, rolling around in sheets naked, crying out in passion, and saying, well, whatever the hell people say when they really care about each other.

What I really needed, I thought bitterly, was a damned hope exorcist! I turned the water on cold and gave us both a freezing shower.

When I dressed and left the shower, I was convinced I could now face the man without embarrassing myself too much. I found Kyle sprawled out asleep on his futon. The food was steaming hot and it looked as if he had fallen asleep waiting for the heat tabs to do

their job.

“Damn,” I muttered, feeling somehow cheated.

I gingerly swung Kyle’s legs up onto the futon and covered him with a blanket. The heat generators turned on at night to keep the temperatures at their settings, but working all day in the heat, and then showering, could chill a person just by dropping their body temperature that fast. Okay, so I was making excuses to touch him and tuck him in. Let’s get over it.

I took my food and an ice cold soda out onto the porch. I sat with my back supported against a porch post and stared off into the darkness, at the blobs that were my inventory, as I ate dinner.

My neighbors were shouting at each other, something about engines and rusted fuel cells. There was the sound of metal settling, pinging, and, once in a while, falling with clatters and clinks down from their perches. This was peaceful, as quiet and as calm as it ever got. Against that backdrop, I found my mind trying to sort out what had happened to my life in such a short time. It had turned into a runaway train, jumping the tracks of the *‘nose to the grindstone and barely eking out a living’* course that it had been on. Yeah, I was still going to the same destination full throttle, but there was a drastic, new dimension to it.

To tell you the truth, I had been damned lonely. Travers had filled my evenings with chatter and optimism. It had hurt like hell when that optimism had died and I had seen that *‘I pity you, you sorry bastard’* look on his face. It was then that he told me that he needed new digs, a woman in his life, and a future. That last had really hurt. There wasn’t any future for Max Masters, those words had implied. I didn’t have anything someone could hitch their star to and ride to success. Masters’ ship was sinking and the rats had already jumped off.

No, that wasn’t fair. I shoved aside my food and took a long swig of cold soda. It felt wonderful going down; icy and stinging. You couldn’t blame a guy for wanting a regular life, for getting tired of scrap splinters and dust down his throat. The city life suited Travers.

I sat with my arms supported by my knees, head hanging, as I stared at nothing. For the millionth time, I thought of selling my business to my nemesis next door, scrubbing myself clean, changing my job title, and never getting sand up my underwear on a regular basis again. I thought about cool office buildings, an important name badge, and... What? Where would I go? Security Forces? The military again?

I thought about starched uniforms and a loaded gun at my side. I rode the edge of an adrenalin rush, just thinking about danger, missions, and gunfire. I stopped that in its

tracks and shifted gears with an effort and another swig of soda. I didn't have to go back to that. I could vend hotdogs on a street corner if I wanted to. There was nothing wrong with that.

I reached down, took a fistful of dirt and rusted metal particles, and let it sift through my fingers. It was gritty, hard, and some of it tried to embed itself into my flesh. I know that the thrill of battle, of being on missions, was like a drug I could never see myself really getting over. The thought of returning to that life, of letting that son of a bitch next door have my business, was a price that I felt unwilling to pay. Seeing him in my mind's eye, laughing as he bulldozed down my wall and claimed my stuff, the scrap I had sweated blood over, was too painful.

"He'll get my lot over my fucking dead body!" I snarled and tossed the rest of the dirt down.

I rubbed my hand on my clean jeans and thought about war paint. It was like a war, except for the part where I couldn't kill my enemies. I had staked out my battle ground and it was an acre of dirt and scrap metal. Losing the scrap war didn't seem to be a real choice. It was too much like hanging by my fingernails over a huge, bottomless chasm, and then letting go. I was that sure I wouldn't hit bottom and would never be able to climb up again.

When it came down to it, I suppose, this was my Max Masters proving ground, the place where I proved I could be something other than, well, a killer. I know it was a bit messed up—okay, maybe a lot messed up--- to put all my hopes on this, as if it was my only shot. I'd seen a lot of guys take the easy way out after the war, a permanent way that had been their alternative to living in a peaceful world they didn't know how to handle. I felt like I could be one of them all too easily. Maybe, deep down, I probably knew I wouldn't end my life that way, but just the potential scared me enough not to give up until this life was pried forcefully from my fingers.

"Screw you and go to hell," I told my neighbor and toasted him with the last of my soda. I didn't go back inside. Kyle was there, after all. Even though he was asleep, I was still finding it hard to face him.

Kyle was Special Forces. He was with me because he wanted to use me. He wanted to put me in danger and endanger my business by dangling me and using my business as a front. I thought about what would happen when he arrested his suspected target. Kyle Carter would get his man, I didn't doubt it. He was that good. It was all about when and not if.

Kyle could ruin me, whether I helped him or not. He could put me in jail, maybe not on the original charges, but on a shit load of other things. Laws on station were

numerous, complicated, petty, and just plain stupid. Walking and chewing gum could probably get you a life sentence if you had a bad lawyer. Using those laws, Kyle could kill me by slow degrees as well, fining me for everything from scrap piles too big to my toothbrush not being regulation size.

Kyle could also just make me disappear.

There were so many ways that I was boxed, locked, and gift-wrapped. I mentally practiced facing my fellow junk men, imagining myself telling them I hadn't known anything about the sting. I could pull it off, maybe, if the guy going to jail was high enough up the food chain. All scrap men, deep in their hearts, wanted revenge on every one of those government bastards that ran our station. That was taking a chance, though, gambling that it wasn't a fellow scrap man. If it was, the others would take me out, either by cutting off my suppliers, my customers, or my legs out from under me, literally.

Logic told me I should go and beat the crap out of Kyle. I should be really pissed. I wasn't. In my mind's eye, I could see his blue eyes sparkling at me and his mouth in a gentle smile. My body was a traitor; a part of me rising to attention at the mental image of Kyle sprawled out on the futon in those gray shorts. Another part was harder to acknowledge. My heart had never fallen before, at least not for something that was alive. A person shouldn't really count a modified military rifle as the love of his life.

Forays into sex were natural, but far between for me lately. I had been too preoccupied with my impending business failure to do more than flirt with the market girls. My feelings for Kyle were far different from simple sexual attraction and it was damned frightening for a messed up, self-sufficient, piece of work like me.

My bad ass attitude had gotten me through a war, but it had been the reason for my hard fall afterward into drugs and drinking. People didn't employ bad asses and a lot of people still had grudges against soldiers. Being able to kill hadn't been a useful skill outside of the military.

My wake up call, after a year of being high on drugs and surviving drinking binges, had been when I found myself on my knees ready to give some '*personal service*' to pay a drug dealer for some hard stuff. Cold tile and the sound of my own voice crying out, '*What the fuck am I doing!*' had echoed off of the public restroom walls. Getting cleaned up afterward had been a long, hard journey, but there was nothing like feeling like sewer trash to get a person motivated.

So, here I was, bad ass, but reformed, Max Masters, contemplating a romance. I tossed my empty soda can at a pile of scrap and listened to it rattle and roll. Most guys wouldn't have thought twice about what they considered their conquests. I didn't want a quick bump and roll to brag over, though. Imagining treating Kyle like made me want to throw

up. When it came right down to it, I suppose I wanted more than just having to find my clothes in the morning and making an excuse to get away afterward. Was I ready, finally, to settle down? Was I ready to have a home life with someone who meant something in my life?

I fisted my hair and yanked until it hurt. I dropped my hands and scowled at nothing. Travers had done what I had only dreamed about. He was happy. That was really the root of my anger; green envy. I wanted that kind of life for myself.

My neighbors finally ended their argument. My thoughts turned to sleep, but my mind wouldn't stop thinking about Kyle. What did I expect? Maybe I was after him, because I was feeling sorry for myself and desperate? Instead of being an enemy, he was proving to be a best friend—or seemed to be proving it. I wasn't going to abandon my suspicious nature any time soon.

When I looked at Kyle, I saw what could be—well, if I squinted very hard and ignored all the obstacles to that fantasy. I had the feeling it was clouding my better judgment, maybe making me see things in Kyle that weren't really there. I wanted to paint a picture of a Kyle Carter who had secretly wanted me all of this time. My paranoid instinct told me he'd be leaving me cold as soon as his mission was over.

Maybe we shared a past, but it had not been a good one. Being top notch, elite soldiers, who hadn't traded much conversation outside of what was necessary to a mission, screwed with the fantasy and made his interest in me even more unlikely.

Look at the facts, I told myself. You are two worlds apart. Maybe he thinks you're cute—no, hot— but even if it was more than that, I was struggling to see us living a life together. We were too damn different, from two different rungs of the ladder of life, and expecting different things out of our lives.

I pulled on my hair again. “Shut up and go to bed, Masters,” I ordered myself in a miserable whisper. “Keep your hands and your wet dreams to yourself. Forget about Kyle. He's trouble, out of your class, and he's just using you anyway.”

It was a nice hard slap of reality. Good for you, Masters, I told myself. I cracked my knuckles. In the morning, I was going to be professional, aloof, and even pissy. I was not going to drool over Kyle. I was going to let him see just how much I didn't trust him, how his obvious manipulation hadn't worked, and how I wasn't falling for his nice guy act.

Shit! Who was *I* kidding?

I scowled at the point where I imagined Kyle sleeping, as if I could glare through walls. Deliberately, I sat down and propped myself up on the post supporting the porch. Curling up and wrapping my arms around my legs, I slept like I had spent my youth

sleeping; where I could manage. Maybe a night of being miserable would convince my traitor parts to fall in line with my bitter, '*doesn't fall for anyone and their crap*', street instinct. I couldn't help thinking, though, as I drifted off to sleep, that if Kyle had just shown up on my porch, without all the baggage, there wouldn't have been any reason not to fall for him.

Chapter Eight

Mudding

The change in the air alerted me. It was thick. That's the only way to describe it. That feeling was so different from how it usually felt, it woke me up. I started and sat straight, feeling as if I was peeling my body away from my plasti-wood support. My mouth felt like the bottom of a rusted radiator and my mind was whirling and going, '*what the hell?*'

My brain engaged. Oh, yeah, I had decided to stop mooning over Kyle and treat him like what he was, a Special Forces agent sent to make sure I did my part of the sting. To celebrate my new resolve, I had treated myself to torture by sleeping outside. That had a two prong purpose, to make me pissy enough to carry out my new resolve and to remind me of my past. It gave some back bone to my pride. It's easy to let someone feed you when you're starving, but when you aren't any longer you cut the cord and stand on your own again.

I needed to move Kyle out of my shack, so I could get rid of the damned tension that was turning me into knots. I needed to sell some scrap to pay him back what I owed him. Once I was independent again, and not owing him anything, I felt I could then take back control of where my life was headed. I didn't want to be steered. I didn't want to be forced. I really didn't want to do it because my wanting Kyle was making me do whatever *he* wanted me to do. Max Masters was his own man and always would be.

"Clean the other shack and get the parts together to sell," I muttered as I forced my aching body to stand. But not today, I amended as I looked up at the sky and grinned. Today was all mine.

I limped into the shack and heard Kyle talking. He yawned around some words and sounded as if he had just woken up, his voice soft and not entirely focused. I stopped just outside the bedroom door and listened.

"Okay, Zian," Kyle groused irritably, "but we are not going to rush this operation. We need to integrate the new material in slowly, build up the business, and then put out feelers when we get ready to sell the contraband. We can't look like we know what we're doing. We are supposed to be poor scrap dealers who've had something big land in their lap. That will bring our target in like a shark to blood in the water. He'll want to take advantage of us." A pause, and then he said, "What? Oh, he's been cooperating. You were completely wrong about him, Zian... No, I don't expect any trouble at all. I'll check in with you tomorrow."

I walked in and said, as I bent to take breakfast packs and coffee containers out of a cabinet, "Was that *Mr. Stick Up the Butt?*"

“If you mean, Huang, yes,” Kyle replied neutrally. “I’ve been working long hours. I’m sorry that I fell asleep last night.”

I brought the coffee and the meal packs over to him, plopped down cross legged on the futon, and then snapped the heat tabs. The food sat between us as they heated up. I tried not to look at how handsome he was with his *bed hair* all on end and his expression open and relaxed.

I asked, “Do you have your palm computer on you?”

Kyle stiffened perceptively and I could almost sense him deciding whether I could be trusted with it or not.

“You don’t have to give me the password,” I reassured him, “Just log in and hand it to me.”

Kyle reached down to his bag and took it out. One finger tapped the control pad and put in his password before he handed it to me. I took it and looked it over. It was much more sophisticated than I was used to, but I wasn’t doing anything that complicated. I made a simple spreadsheet with a calculator, added some items, and then handed the computer back to Kyle. He looked down at the screen curiously.

“That’s my tab,” I told him firmly. “When we sell the scrap, I’m paying you back every credit.”

He could have argued and said it was all right, and that I didn’t owe him, but he didn’t. He knew I was going to be stubborn. He couldn’t help a small, exasperated sigh though, as he put his computer away again. He said, as our meal packs beeped to announce that they were hot now, “Good morning.”

I grinned and replied with a chuckle, appreciating his attempt to start the morning over again, “Good morning to you, too.”

I remembered a second too late that I was supposed to be hard edged and pissy. Well, I guess there was nothing wrong with a truce before breakfast.

We ate and drank our coffee in silence. Kyle hadn’t eaten the night before, so he was doubly hungry. I watched him almost vacuum his breakfast up and drink two containers of coffee. I wondered where the slim man put it all. I ate my meal more slowly. When he moved to get more food, I chuckled. I said, “I’m the one that was starving, Kyle.”

Kyle didn’t look bothered by my dig as he stood up and began gathering up the empties, but I noticed that he didn’t get any more food.

“I have a high metabolism,” Kyle explained. He looked me up and down critically as he put the trash into a bin by the refrigerator and said, “Maybe *you* should eat more? I’ll heat up another meal pack for you.”

I grimaced distastefully. “I’ve never been keen on breakfast. I’ll make it up later, don’t

worry.”

Kyle found his meal pack from the night before and shelved it. As long as it wasn't opened, it could be reheated. You gotta love efficient technology, especially when you're in a hand to mouth existence. It stopped a lot of waste.

“We should get an early start on those parts,” Kyle suggested as he began pulling on jeans.

I kept my eyes on my coffee container, watching the steam lazily float out of it. The weather had definitely changed. “Was Huang riding you?” I wondered and saw him tense.

After a long silence, Kyle recovered and said, “You have a filthy way of asking a personal question.”

I went over my words and almost choked on my coffee. “God damn, you have a filthy mind, Kyle! I meant; did Huang want you to go ahead with the sting?”

Kyle did a pretty good imitation of a fish. It was really nice having him flounder for once. He replied, slowly, “Yes, he wanted to know if you were giving me any trouble.”

That was honest. So was I. “This is my day off, so I suppose that I *am* going to be trouble.”

Kyle frowned. “What do you mean by day off?”

I didn't reply as I finished my coffee. God! It felt good to have my stomach full and my body not screaming at me that it was starving to death. It made me smile as I reached under the bed and pulled out the plastic box that had my clothes in it. I rummaged around inside it and found a very large shirt with a black skull done crudely on the back. Okay, so I wasn't an artist. I put it on and then pulled out a pair of jeans without knees and some dark brown stains splattered across it. I took out a spare shirt with the same design as mine and wadded it up in my hand.

“Kyle, the weather is pretty damned constant here,” I explained to him. “It's hot, hotter, hottest, and, once in a while, freezing freakin' cold. That's usually only on Christmas, though. When the devil in control of the weather decides to let it rain, we all call a truce and take the day off for some fun.”

Kyle moved the curtain aside and looked dubiously outside. “I don't see any rain.”

“You can feel it,” I told him. “It takes time for moisture to collect enough to rain. By the time I get out to the field, it'll start.”

Kyle was really frowning now. “But, what are you going to do? It's very important that we make a sale soon, Max. Taking time off is irresponsible.”

“Irresponsible?” I laughed outright. “Once in a while, Kyle, you have to say, *what the hell*, and go have some fun! I'll see you tonight.”

Kyle wasn't giving up that easy. After putting on his boots, he followed me out of the shack. I went to a little shed and opened the door. Inside was Mud Hopper, my pride and joy. Okay, so it looked like a glorified lawn mower, but that baby could plow through anything. It needed to for what I had in mind.

"Masters!" My neighbor was perched on top of the scrap part of the wall and pointing a finger at me. "Get your ass down to the field, so I can plow it ten feet under!"

"You and what fucking army?!" I shot back and then ignored him as I caressed the nicked and battered body of my Mud Hopper. My hand paused and then it trembled a bit, pride hurting as I had to ask Kyle, "Can you add two cases of beer to my tab, Kyle, old friend?"

I was lanky and Kyle was wiry, but I had the bigger shoulders, the ones he had to look around to see my Mud Hopper. He replied, "Maybe if you explained what this is?"

"We have a game that's played in the mud," I told him as I popped the clutch and began dragging Mud Hopper out of its shed. Kyle lent a hand and we soon had my baby out in the sunshine. God, it was ugly, but I loved every nut and bolt of him. Squat, chunky tires on struts and reinforced shocks, a padded front and back bumper, a black paint job that was flaking from dents and scratches; battle scars. "The game is dangerous, intense, probably illegal in every way, but fun as hell."

I had my spare shirt draped across the handlebars. Kyle picked it up and fingered it. "Who is this for?"

I couldn't read his mood. All of his attention was on that shirt. "Well," I told him, rubbing the back of my neck. "That's where the beer comes in. One case is the entrance fee and the other case is to bribe someone to be my second. Last year, my second sure as hell didn't work out. I need to find a new one."

"Why didn't he work out?" Kyle asked.

I cleared my throat as I bent to check the engine. "Well, he had his hands on my ass more than on keeping the engine running."

"Was this person the man from the market?" Kyle was perceptive and I was surprised at how angry he sounded.

"Yeah, him," I muttered in embarrassment and dropped the subject. I didn't need Kyle defending my dubious honor.

"So, Kyle," I suggested, wanting his serious expression gone, "Why don't you go be Mr. Responsible and start on the parts while I go and have some fun playing in the mud?" I gave Kyle a dismissive wave as I opened a panel and checked a filter. "Have a nice day."

Kyle asked worriedly, "Will this activity have an element of danger?"

I frowned. “Well, it is a bunch of drunken guys on a collection of slapped together vehicles racing in mud.”

A tank top landed near my feet. I looked up and saw Kyle shrugging into my spare team shirt. He looked down at me intently. “This sting hinges on your part in it,” he reminded me. “I can’t allow you to be compromised with an injury. Since I don’t have a weapon to forcefully detain you, I’ll have to go along and keep you safe.”

“Can’t resist, can you?” I snickered at him. “It’s the call of testosterone and machinery!”

I waited for the anger, a scathing retort, but Kyle smirked and didn’t reply. He wasn’t going to admit to anything, but he did ask, “Have you ever won this contest?”

It was hard to reply, “No, never, but I’ve come close.”

Kyle looked incredulous. “You’re an elite soldier…”

I scowled. “Most of it doesn’t have anything to do with skill, Kyle. It’s mostly dumb luck. I’ve never had much of that.”

I was doing it again, forgetting that this man next to me, looking so friendly and willing to help, was only doing a job. I almost told him to forget it and to stay and work, but what was one more day to let loose and be just two people having fun? It was my day off, after all. Tomorrow, I could be a pissy, hard-nosed Max Masters.

“Get ready to get absolutely filthy, Kyle!” I crowed and cranked the engine on Mud Hopper as the rain began falling.

It doesn’t flood on station. There are drains to collect the precious water, filter it, and send it back into tanks. Sure, the dirt got sloppy and hard to navigate, but nothing bigger than a puddle ever formed. That was where some of the *illegality* came in. To prepare the field for the contest, the drains were blocked and the water was mixed with the mud.

As I jumped on the padded seat of Mud Hopper and Kyle straddled the engine casing on the back, I said, “Now, I know you’re a Special Forces agent, Kyle, but the fun aspect of this is going to end quickly if you start arresting people!”

I had to shout over the roar of the engine. Kyle frowned, but then he answered, “I’m not a patrol officer. I’m Special Forces, brought in for a special assignment. I’ll consider it out of my jurisdiction!”

I knew what that meant. If he saw it get real ugly he was going to do his duty, but a little dirty fun wasn’t going to be illegal today in his book. I grinned in relief and threw Mud Hopper into high gear. The wheels slung mud and the little machine rocketed forward. Time in the storage shed hadn’t messed with its performance.

Once out of the yard, I turned us towards a break in the lots and a place where it was so rough and uneven that not even the most tenacious scrap man had been able to use it.

That's saying a lot. Scrap men are tough and stubborn. They didn't admit defeat easily.

I took Mud Hopper along the outskirts, the big wheels taking the uneven ground easily. I could see men raking in the water as the rain poured down and mixing it with the dirt on the field. I felt the adrenalin pumping in my veins already in anticipation as I pulled over to a vendor that was just setting up his booth.

Kyle paid for my two cases of beer and I glared at him until he entered it into his computer. While I waited, I gave myself a mental once over.

Times had been rough and meals few and far between. I had managed to get by, but now I knew my reserves were pretty damned depleted. In a physical contest like this, I had to wonder if I had enough energy to get through it.

I plopped down my entrance fee on the table where the judges were already arguing with each other, popping open beer containers to guzzle, and well on their way to being drunk. They nodded and gave me an irritated wave of recognition that was also a *get lost* gesture as they went back to their arguing and drinking. It was too late to back out now. I was as tough and as stubborn as most scrap men, and I didn't admit defeat easily. I would find out whether I had what it took to win during the contest and not before.

Maybe Kyle was remembering my swan dive not too long ago at Special Forces Headquarters, because he was giving me concerned looks. I ignored those looks as we climbed back onto Mud Hopper and I drove us to my bench. I hadn't exactly been honest with him. I hadn't described the competition as a contact sport on dicey machines racing over an inclined field of mud *and* buried rusted garbage.

My plasti-wood bench was in a long line of them bordering the field. Serious racers had one personalized and they used it year after year. It was a safe zone where the *'finders keepers'* rule of salvage didn't apply. A racer could leave tools, beer, computers, etc. with a confident expectation that they would still be there when he returned. My own bench was personalized. I had carved my name crudely on the top of it.

I unloaded my tools and a spare power rod from the side compartment on Mud Hopper and added it to the beer on the bench. Mud Hopper continued to roar until I cranked it down and then turned it off completely. I flipped open its *skirt* and began making sure all the seals were tight and mud from our trip there hadn't found a way inside.

Kyle watched for long minutes and then he crouched by my side. He didn't ask if I had made Mud Hopper. It was obvious it had been made out of every spare part under the sun. Instead, he asked, "What's the second case of beer for, if you don't need to bribe a second?"

"That's *pay*, not bribe," I snorted as I adjusted a seal and wiped out the dirt with my scarf. "I need the second case for the celebration. I don't drink, but it's nice to hand them

around to people who do.” I grimaced. “Any other day those guys over there,” I motioned to the line of people tweaking their machines, “would cut my business legs out from under me. Today we’re best pals.”

I felt my hair gathered up and put into a bandana. I looked sideways at Kyle. It made me shiver. Nobody touches me like that. It was so far into my personal space, I couldn’t help a nervous twitch away from him. His hands pulled back.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said quickly and I felt like a dumb ass, especially when he pointed to his hair neatly tucked in its bandana, “Don’t you cover it up when you’re going into the mud?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, remembering how I had learned the hard way to do just that. Nothing makes you religious about that sort of thing than having your hair half bleached by whatever was mixed in with that muck. I’d been lucky my hair hadn’t fallen out. I tapped Mud Hopper with my wrench. “Nothing’s moving, so no mud is getting tossed around yet. I was waiting for the race.”

It was Kyle’s turn to look stupid. He nodded and looked away, as if checking out our competition. I’m a god damn ex elite soldier. Did he think I’d lost all of my brains after the war? Thinking about my business, I winced inwardly. Maybe he did have reason to doubt me.

The rain was soaking us. No one cared. Once or twice, I leaned back and just let it splatter over my upturned face. God, I loved it! It was a temptation to chuck the entire contest and go somewhere to enjoy it while it lasted. My addiction to adrenalin and competition, the need to beat my competition, was too strong, though.

When the rain turned into a light drizzle, the signal to go to the start line was given with a loud siren blast.

I looked at Kyle as I made sure my bandana was on tight and my hair was safe from harm. I wish I could say the same for any bare skin. “Rule number one,” I told him, “This machine can flip over. It’s damned heavy and nothing can stop it from crushing you if it lands on top of you. Shove off if there’s trouble. Number two, this is not soft mud. It’s full of scrap and runoff from all the yards. There’s probably stuff buried down there that nobody knows about. Toxic might be the last thing you have to worry about. What I’m saying is, don’t fall into it unless you have to. It’s better to ride out a bad moment and get banged hard, then to bail into the mud, okay?”

I closed up Mud Hopper and tossed my wrench onto the pile of tools on the bench.

“Ready?” I asked. “It gets real rough out there, Kyle. You have to be my defense while I steer and get us to the finish line.”

“Count on me,” Kyle said firmly and gave me a fierce smile. He was feeling the rush

of adrenaline too. God, we were so nuts! Being soldiers most of your life will do that to you, though.

“Hey, Masters,” a familiar voice purred in my ear as a hand squeezed my ass and gave it a broad palmed knead. “Aren’t you going to give me a chance this year?” It was shit face from the market. I remembered last year acutely and it gave power to my swing as I turned and cold cocked him. He landed and slid in the mud before I realized that Kyle had punched him not a second after me. The man was out for the count. Nobody had a free ticket to feel me up.

A medic ran up covered in mud already from the knees down. He didn’t ask why it had happened. Fights were as numerous as the raindrops during mudding day. Instead, he checked the man’s pupils, grunted, and then jammed a plastic blow up cushion under the man’s head. “He’ll be okay.”

“Pity,” Kyle growled.

I was rubbing my sore knuckles. I slid a look at Kyle. Seeing his angry made me wonder at its source. My temper flared to cover my uncertainty. “I can handle a guy who cops a feel, Kyle! You didn’t have to—”

Kyle scowled. “Yes, I did. He deserved it,” he retorted, but then he was all business as he said, “Let’s get to the start line.”

“Yes, sir!” my mouth replied sarcastically, while my brain was flailing and unsure of what the score was between Kyle and me. It wasn’t something I needed right then. I needed to focus on the race.

I fired up Mud Hopper’s engine again. It purred loudly. I loved that machine. We climbed on and I drove it through the mud and up to the top of the field. Everyone else was already there. I endured the ribbing.

“Piece of crap not running, Masters?”

“Want us to tow you behind us?”

“Scared of the big hill, Masters?”

“Is this your new ass grabber? You’re supposed to have a second *mechanic*, you know?”

“Why don’t you retire that load of crap and get a real machine, Masters?”

I ignored them and concentrated on positioning my wheels for the start. Kyle was finding the best way to hold on and was trying several moves to test Mud Hopper’s stability. “He’ll stay upright,” I reassured him, “As long as nobody slams him from underneath.”

Was that unlikely? Not really. There were a lot of opportunities for someone to come up while we were going down.

Kyle asked a question an agent would ask or a man on a mission. “Has anyone died in these races?”

I grinned. “Of course they have! Now hold on, damn it!” I shouted back and opened Mud Hopper up as the start siren sounded.

Chapter Nine

Falling Under

The finish line was a good distance away. That distance doubled when you considered all the big machines, cursing and shoving men, and the dangerous terrain. Of course the newbies went down in the mud fast, almost as if they'd dumped themselves over. I was treated to a view of one of their machines; a spinning, deadly, hunk of metal, sailing past my bumper and plowing into two other machines. They went down and my left side was free to maneuver in.

You didn't just run for the finish. Nobody would let you do it for one thing. That was *asking for it*. Instead, you had to turn to your opponents and make sure that they didn't make it either. There have been a few contests where no one actually finished the race.

We kicked, we shoved, and we rammed each other. Bone and muscle took a harsh beating as we churned the mud under our wheels. That mud tossed up its secrets in weird, mud coated chunks that had a tendency to fly every which way. I avoided them, weaving and ducking as I steered, while Kyle gave our opponents as good as we got.

I have to give it to him; Kyle did damned good for a first timer. He stayed on, which was most of the battle, and he was a match for anyone that came for us. I was actually getting cocky, thinking that we might have a chance. I'd never had one before. It takes a certain amount of ruthlessness to win the race. I didn't have it and didn't really want to have it either. I was in it for the fun. It would have been nice to win, but, oh, well.

A kick to the jaw made my head almost spin ninety degrees to the left. I saw lights and sagged over the handlebars as Kyle made a sound that alerted me that someone was about to get turned into paste. I groped backwards, even as I dodged another booted kick, and clutched at Kyle's shirt. "Okay!" I assured him as I forced myself to straighten and swerve my machine away from my attacker. My head throbbed and one eye seemed covered in a haze. I blinked rapidly and felt that eye swelling. God, it hurt!

"Max, what's your status?" Kyle demanded loudly in my ear.

"Okay!" I repeated and went back to the business of steering.

I heard an engine rev on our left. A machine was pulling ahead of us. I saw Kyle execute an incredible stunt. Grabbing onto the back of my seat, he balanced on his hands and kicked out with one strong leg. It rocked my lot neighbor in his seat. I crowed in delight, just before Stubbert's machine rocketed forward. He lost his battle with gravity and fell almost under my wheels.

I'm not a bastard and I don't kill people just because they piss me off and try to run me out of business. I had one option to avoid him in those close quarters. I popped a

wheelie and jerked Mud Hopper sideways. It was all reflex, but that reflex didn't take into account that Kyle was just sitting back down and that Stubbert's mud-covered machine was veering into the path of my maneuver.

We came down hard, mud and metal twisting and heaving, and then we suddenly popped up again like a spring from the force of our landing. We started going over backwards. I didn't have time for shouting, '*Oh, shit!*', but I did have time for '*Fuck!*', as Mud hopper fell on top of us.

Arms went around my waist and yanked me backwards off of Mud Hopper. As we hit the mud, I was dimly aware of Kyle holding me against his chest as he kicked upwards. It was both stupid and useless. No one was strong enough to stop that kind of weight and force. It hit us hard and we were both driven under.

I felt a numb pain. Sounds weird, but that's what it was. I guess I was knocked out before it could really sink in that I was hurt, that all of that metal had slammed into soft tissue and Max Masters was probably crushed beyond what a medic could patch back together. At least dying didn't suck as much as I thought it would.

Waking up did suck royally, though. I came to with the medic, Kyle, and Stubbert dragging me out of the mud. Between them, they carried me to the sidelines. My skin felt like I had been attacked by cut glass and rusty nails, my mouth was full of caustic tasting mud, and breathing was a collection of wheezes as I forced my abused diaphragm to give me air. I think the handlebars had tried to make shish kabob out of it.

"You'd better not die on me, Masters!" Stubbert snarled. "I still have to run you out of business!"

"F-f-f-fuck y-you!" I wheezed and spat out mud in his general direction.

The man laughed. I don't remember ever hearing that sound coming out of that jackass before. I had to wonder why he had bothered saving me. Maybe he just didn't want the guilt on his mind; Max Masters, hated competition, saving his damned life at the cost of his. Our fellow scrap men would never have let him forget it.

I reached out and gripped Kyle's mud-coated arm. I pulled him in close. He dabbed at my face with the rags Stubbert was handing him, while the medic doused my wounds with a burning super antiseptic.

Kyle cleared my injured eye of a clot of mud. I blinked at him, still dazed. "Y-You all right?" I asked.

"Left leg," he admitted, as if it didn't matter. He sounded like a soldier reporting as he continued to clean me up. "A deep cut in my calf, bruises, and a contusion on my left shoulder." That flat tone turned to one of concern as he asked me anxiously, "Are you all right?"

I snorted as I managed to regain my ability to breathe. “What makes you think I should be?” I puzzled over his pale, pinched expression. It made me suddenly afraid. I mentally checked myself out. I didn’t feel any random pieces of metal sticking in me or anything crushed or too badly damaged, so what the hell was wrong with him?

“I’m all right, aren’t I?” I couldn’t keep the fear out of my voice.

The medic made an exasperated sound and said, “You go out there and try and kill yourself, and now you’re worried about your health?” He relented in the next moment. I must have looked ready to panic. “You’re okay,” he assured me gruffly. “You’re going to feel it for a few days, though. Keep those damned wounds soaking in antiseptic and, first sign of infection, get your ass down to the hospital before something has to be amputated for gangrene.”

“I bet you get awards for your wonderful bed side manner,” I sneered, right before he jabbed a pressure needle against my neck and injected something that burned. “Crap! What the hell was that?” I demanded.

The medic waved towards the field and the men still battling it out. “You don’t want to know what’s out there that you need a shot for, okay?” and then he said to Kyle, as he stood up, “Get him home and cleaned up. The race is over for him.”

That’s the part that really hurt.

Stubbert stood as well. He glared at Kyle. “Need a hand?” He asked it in the same tone of voice that someone used when they asked, *‘Need me to kick your ass?’*

“Fuck off, Stubbert!” I growled.

Stubbert glared and his muddy boot almost gave me a kick. It turned into a nudge, but only because Kyle put a hand out and stopped him. “Be a smart ass all you want, Masters,” Stubbert warned, “You earned the right, today. Tomorrow, though, we’ll see.”

He left. It was just Kyle and me, now, and I felt whipped down to my soul. I sighed. I tried to shove muddy bangs out of my face, but I was shaking too badly. “Lost again,” I said, pretending to joke. “I didn’t want to break my losing streak.”

Kyle shook mud from a rag in his hands and then tossed it over his shoulder. It was then that I saw that he was covered in mud too. He had been underneath me after all. I thought about that, thought about how he could have left me and saved himself. Instead, he had deliberately tested his strength against that machine for me.

“Sorry,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

Kyle looked down at me, puzzled. “Why?”

“I put you in danger by not being fast enough. I guess...” I paused, feeling ashamed, and then finished lamely, “Guess I’m getting rusty. I’m not the soldier I used to be.”

Kyle chuckled, as if I had said something funny, as he gathered up our things and

picked me up bodily. When he slung me into a fireman's carry, I really had to wonder at the man's strength as he ignored his injuries and easily began walking away from the field and towards my lot.

Kyle said at last, as the rain began to slow, "You aren't a soldier any longer."

That said a lot of things and I knew that he was right. It was an excuse that I wanted to take and hold close. I didn't want to feel as if I didn't measure up. Losing on the mud field was bad enough.

I remembered my pride and told him, "You can put me down. I can walk."

Kyle was slogging through mud, bowed under my weight. He said with effort, "You have a head injury."

"Which gives me one hell of a headache, but it doesn't affect my legs, Kyle. Put me down!" I tried pushing off from his shoulder, but it was hard to do that in my position. I ended up just flopping uselessly.

I don't like to be embarrassed. I didn't want everyone seeing me carried from the field. It was a knife in my ego and it stabbed in deep where my temper was coiled up.

You know, sometimes you're angry and you don't even know it. It hides and gets wound up, tighter and tighter, until something, or someone, triggers it. Kyle, unfortunately, turned out to be that trigger. I guess I was still mad about the sting operation and about being stripped mentally naked and hung out where everyone could gawk at me. Losing the race had been just the tip of a very big ice burg.

One moment, I was hanging over Kyle's shoulder as he obstinately refused to put me down, and the next moment, I was pulling us both over and aiming a punch at him. We went down like a sack of bad parts with Kyle on the bottom. Mud splashed upwards and then came down to cover us both as he blocked me and twisted to get out from under me.

I was cussing in a long tirade, not even really aware of what the hell I was saying. I couldn't get it stopped. My temper was like an erupting volcano. I was blind with it, numb to everything else around us and just reacting. I was grabbing at Kyle's shirt and twisting a fist into it so that he couldn't get away from me.

I came back to myself when I felt my already injured body protest. That pain registered very slowly. The next thing I noticed was Kyle, trained killer, not trying to hit back. He was deftly deflecting the blows I was still throwing at him, despite my grip on him. I came back completely when I realized I was shouting myself hoarse.

"You fucker! Do you think you can just waltz into my life and ruin it? Or did you just want to see how bad Max Master's was doing, so that you could tell everyone else back home? Did you want to see me running my god damn business into the ground? Did you want to see how I can't even fucking eat? I'm a bad ass elite soldier who can't even win a

fucking mud contest! Did you get enough laughs yet? I bet you're glad you didn't hook up with me after the war. I bet you're glad that you hooked your god damn life to your career, rather than me! Who the hell wants to stick around me? You'll be fucking glad to get the hell away from me when this is all over, won't you? Then you won't have to pretend that you give a fuck about me any more for the sake of the mission!"

It was like a vocal purge. I heard my own voice as if it belonged to someone else, some loser who needed a mud foot stuck up his butt for being such a god damn whiner. What was all this crap? I hadn't realized just how good I was at bottling things up and putting on a happy face. I had totally convinced myself that everything was okay with my life. Surprise, surprise.

I stopped when I ran out of breath. I was panting with exhaustion, my one hand still fisted into the front of his t-shirt. There was blood, I noticed in a daze, blood on my knuckles and smeared on Kyle's shirt. Kyle had a definite black eye. Great! Add beating up partners to my list of fuck ups.

Our eyes met. Mine were as blank as my mind just then, but Kyle's were worried and full of concern for me. When his hand tangled at the back of my neck and grabbed a fist full of hair, I thought for sure I'd read that look wrong and he was going to deck me. Instead, Kyle forcefully pulled me down by my hair and locked fierce lips with mine. It was a hard, deep kiss, full of mud, some blood from our fall on Mud Hopper, and the taste of something wild and primal. I wanted more; a lot more. I jammed my tongue in and searched his mouth, not caring about what had just happened between us, not caring where we were, not... caring... about... anything...

Have you ever done something and had a feeling that it was right—perfectly right? Well, I've never had that feeling before. Tangled with Kyle in the mud, trying to swallow his tongue whole and feeling his strong hands gripping me to him as if we were going to wrestle, I had that feeling. It was so strong it was blinding, painful, all encompassing, mind blowing, and absolutely terrifying. I wanted to grab him and pull him right into me. I wanted to shove a hand into him and pull out that other half of my damned soul, because, along with that feeling of right, I had the strongest feeling that Kyle had been keeping that part of me all of this time.

No, I'm not about to wax eloquent and poetic, or whatever they call it. I had gut feelings. I was scared and needy. I wanted to lock lips with that damned man forever. And, at my basest, I really wanted to screw his lights out, right then and there, like I'd never wanted to screw anyone else in my life.

The kiss had to end. Really it did. We pulled away with the sound of suction breaking and just looked at each other. We didn't say anything. We both had the same expression.

It was expectant. We both knew what came next. We helped each other up, ignored the dripping mud, ignored our hurts, and ignored people gawking at us. Very slowly, I put an arm over Kyle's shoulder and he slipped one around my waist. We did a mutual support and limp back to my lot.

We were reduced to hushed whispers and I don't know why.

"Get the door."

"Okay."

"All right?"

"Yes."

"We need to get cleaned up."

"Okay."

We locked the door of my shack by jamming a chair under the knob. We limped to the bedroom and into the bathroom. I turned on the shower while Kyle put out towels, shampoo, soap, and a hair brush as if we were about to do some sort of important ceremony.

We faced each other again and we both smiled. Hands began to pull at clothes and we undressed each other. Kyle caressed my sides and my bare back, looking at scrapes and cuts and checking large bruises. I did the same for him and whispered, "Sorry", about his black eye.

He snickered at all the mud on me and used the edge of his thumb to scrape some away from my eyes. We shared a long look and then I reached out and stroked his hard erection. Wrapping my hand around it tightly, I boldly pulled him into the spray of the shower by it. We locked lips and I searched for that feeling and that wild taste in his mouth again. He cupped my ass with both hands and just held on.

We soaped, we sluiced, and we soaped again. Kyle ran a hand down the crack of my ass and cleaned off my balls with gentle, calloused fingers. That faint scratching made my damned toes curl. I kept stroking him, too, loving the feel of his thick, heavy cock. I wanted him, wanted to taste that part of him. I knelt, the water pounding down on top of us both. He moaned as my tongue and lips teased his sex.

After a few minutes of that, Kyle caught at me and brought me up again, cupping my face and kissing me all over. He shampooed my hair, slinging off the dirty, wet bandana and patiently getting all the mud out. At one point, he pulled me to him and fisted our cocks together. I spread my legs, braced myself against the shower wall, and enjoyed it while he discovered just how hard and large I could get.

His hand finally released us and he began tugging at my arm. I turned off the water. We weren't reluctant to leave the shower. Promises were made with smiles and eyes

glowing with rising passion. We toweled dry and then we were on our way to the bed.

We didn't get there all at once. I was pressed against a wall and ravaged by a man who wasn't shy and knew what he wanted. We were still injured. Kyle still limped. It faded to the back of our minds, though, and we weren't feeling pain. Endorphins are wonderful for that. Maybe we'd pay for it later, but we didn't care about it just now as we finally crawled onto my narrow bed and sixty-nined. I groaned and felt my eyes roll back into my head as Kyle sucked me into moist heat, his tongue swirling and his hand stroking my cock with a tight grip. I returned the favor, my mouth and tongue making his flesh my playground. A big part of me wanted more than a blow job. It was saying, '*Oh, God, this is what I want! Fuck him!*' It was hard to deny it, to keep myself from taking it to that level.

I gripped Kyle's ass instead and got serious, playing with that hard cock of his for all I was worth, determined to get my gold star at least for this. From the noises that he was making, I knew that I was doing something right.

"God!" Kyle exclaimed in a strangled voice and came so strongly that I could feel it with my tongue. I pulled my mouth away and pumped his cock hard as he shot his load.

Kyle didn't leave me hanging. Still panting from his release, he jerked me off, milking me with hard strokes with a hand as tight as a vise around my erection. When he swallowed me down to my root, I shouted in shock at the sensation of reaching his tonsils. I came with a powerful orgasm and a shout. My hips bucked, but he didn't release me until he had sucked down every drop.

Neither of us had the strength for anything after that. I pulled the blanket up over us and we sprawled together. Kyle was completely limp and breathing evenly in sleep as I curled against his back and draped an arm over him.

I nuzzled his shoulder and then took a sleepy bite. It might have been some weird sort of revenge or leftover spite from our fight in the mud, or, maybe, it was punishment for all my confusion. I was *still* confused. My mind wanted to figure out what was going to happen when we woke up, so sure that this act that had seemed so natural and so wonderfully perfect wouldn't seem so perfect when we were rested and in our right minds again.

I touched Kyle's tousled hair and brushed it back from his handsome face. My heart ached. My libido smelled sex and wanted more. My brain did mental gyrations. Bitter, jaded, and hard, it wanted to look for the con, the scam, the reason why this was all going to blow up in my face later.

Kyle sighed and murmured some part of him still aware of me, "Max." It sounded like lust and love.

Hope peeked out and tried to convince me to believe in it.

I bit Kyle again, harder. He grunted and frowned in his sleep. Screw hope. Screw tomorrow. Screw thinking this was anything other than sex and temporary madness. It was safer that way. I couldn't be disappointed if I thought of it like that.

I kissed the bite and leaned my cheek against it, all of my thinking collapsing at once into a big mental heap. I couldn't do it. I could not pretend that what we had done together meant nothing. It had been something; an earth moving, life changing something. All I could hope for was that Kyle felt the same way and I hadn't just lost my mind.

Chapter Ten

Scrap Man

Get the number of the gun ship that ran over my ass. Every muscle and bone hurt. My head was pounding. I could feel deep cuts, some abrasions, and definitely things sticking in me. My stomach was trying to gnaw itself out of my gut to get itself something to eat, and... I opened my eyes and confirmed what my nose was telling me. My face was buried in someone's armpit; Kyle's armpit to be exact. We may have taken a shower earlier, but we had done a lot since then. We could both stand another.

I sat up, stifling a groan, and eyed my bed partner. He looked on the verge of waking up as well. His face was creasing in a slight frown and his body, sprawled out half underneath me, was beginning to shift. I had seconds to figure out what attitude I was going to adopt, but, when Kyle opened his eyes, it became more about getting to safe ground.

I was off the bed like a scalded cat and busying myself getting some pants on, before those blue eyes could register anything. By the time Kyle was sitting up and making noises of pain, I was handing him hot coffee and pulling heat tabs on some meals.

Keep moving, I thought, wanting to avoid that moment when two people try to figure out whether things were all right or it was time to get the hell out of there. Since I'd always been the person thinking the latter, it was hard waiting for someone else to choose which one it was going to be.

Kyle sipped his coffee and I felt him looking at me. I opened my meal and started eating. I burned my tongue a little, but I was too hungry to stop and too chicken shit to give Kyle an opening.

Kyle started eating as well, but he was eating slowly. It would keep him busy, I thought as I threw my empty tray away and went into the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and used a wet rag to get the last of the mud from where we had missed it earlier. I was busily scrubbing a spot hard just under my ear, when arms slid around me from behind and held me gently.

Kyle's presence was warm and solid as he breathed against my neck, "Are you all right?"

I shivered. I didn't want to turn around. I put down the rag and blinked down at the sink as I turned on the water and washed away a few spots of toothpaste and spit. The pipes groaned as if they were echoing my own feelings. "I... I don't know what to think," I admitted. "It was all kind of sudden."

Yeah, so, there it is Carter, I thought bitterly, all laid out in the light of day. I'm scared, damn it, now go ahead and fucking laugh at me.

Kyle's arms gave me a brief hug and then he was backing off, giving me just what I needed right then; space. He said as I sneaked a look at his serious face in the medicine cabinet mirror, "I never thought about anything but the missions during the war. Afterward, I had a lot of time to think about you. I've always felt that I missed something important. When I saw you again in that truck full of contraband gyros, I felt... Well, it wasn't friendship I was feeling. It wasn't sexual, either." Kyle looked away and shrugged and I realized he was as on edge and as unsure as I was. He hadn't planned this, but, like me, he had wanted it.

We both didn't know where to go from here, or how this *new thing* was going to fit into our lives. It was like an elephant trying to squeeze into a little box. That was how we were both feeling, I think. It was too big and too confusing. The elephant either needed to lose some weight or become a contortionist, because, just then, he *wasn't* fitting.

"I guess that I didn't think about much during the war either," I replied, when he didn't come up with anything else to say.

Liar, I called myself and, you know, he was probably saying the same thing to himself. Come on! Young and in close quarters? Sure as shit we were thinking about each other! Though, to be clear, a relationship wouldn't have been a blip on the radar screen back then. We'd been too young and too dedicated to dying for the cause.

I did a typical guy thing. If something bugs you, side step it until it grabs you and throws you down. Emotions, touchy feely moments, declarations of... whatever... I just wasn't ready for that. I knew what I was feeling. I knew how much I wanted that man with the messed up hair and the saggy shorts.

Saggy shorts... I eyed them. They were mine. There's something about a man wearing your shorts, and having them in the same space with that wonderful part of him, and all of that warm skin, that is a complete turn on. It made my male psyche whimper.

"We have some daylight left," I said. It sounded like someone else. My voice was edgy and weird. "Let's see if we can't find some more parts and put them together."

Kyle didn't look hurt, he looked relieved. We both wanted to do our own brand of pretending that nothing happened.

"Sounds good," he replied with the same false, weird voice, the neutral, '*No comment.*' one. "I'll finish eating and get dressed."

Kyle suddenly frowned and I tensed as he touched my shoulder. There was a sharp sting and then he was looking at a sliver of metal covered in my blood. It was small and I wasn't bothered by it, but he was already reaching for my tweezers.

“We should take care of this first,” Kyle suggested.

Kyle pulled more scrap metal out of me and patched up the larger wounds. When he was done, I did the same for him.

“Are you going to be okay with working?” Kyle asked, worried.

I replied with a shrug, “Doesn’t matter if I’m all right, or not. The business has to make some money. We have to work, even if we’re banged up.” Okay, bad choice of words. I heard Kyle snort in amusement, but I didn’t wait for his reply as I grabbed my boots and made my escape. My face felt so hot, I could have warmed up my coffee on it.

I spent some time outside putting everything onto a piece of dirt that wasn’t so muddy. The pumps were already droning, drawing the water back into the cisterns for filtering and cleaning. There were still puddles, low spots, and dips in scrap that kept the water back, though, and I had to pick my way around them as I searched for parts that would, hopefully, make a whole machine that I could sell. Everything was damned unstable, scrap tumbling and sliding down from their piles. Some of it weighed more than me.

“Is someone going to bring your machine back here?” Kyle asked as he finally joined me. He was dressed in jeans and a white tank top. I looked away when I saw the bites on the back of his shoulder as he bent to pick through the things I had organized on the ground. Nope, still not ready to cope with *us*.

“Once the water is pumped away from the field,” I told him, “I’ll take the claw and go drag Mud Hopper out. I’m pretty sure he’s not going anywhere on his power.”

“Too bad,” Kyle said absently, “I think your machine was superior to anything out there. Together, we could have won.”

I snarled, hating that he had managed to stab me when I least expected it, “Well, I rate a man’s god damn life ahead of winning a stupid mud contest!”

“Ahead of your own, too,” Kyle replied, unruffled by my temper. “You could have been crushed.”

“Yeah, well...” I shrugged, deflated. “I didn’t have time to think about that.” I also hadn’t thought about the fact that he could have been crushed as well. The realization chilled me.

Kyle gave me a keen look and then said as he headed for a particular scrap heap, “I think you did.”

I stared after him as he began to climb scrap to reach a part. I then pulled my head out of my ass and shouted, “Watch out! That stack is full of water and it’s unstable!”

I saw him nod and continue to climb, undaunted by danger, as usual. He looked so strong and confident, his beautiful face frowning in concentration. It made me think about earlier, but not about sex.

I *should* have been thinking about sex, about how good Kyle had tasted, felt, and smelled. We had come together and *done it* as if we'd been doing it forever. Yeah, it had been that easy and familiar. Instead, I was thinking, '*If you're right, Kyle, then I was ready to kill you, too, to save that son of a bitch next door. What did that say, Kyle Carter?*' It disturbed me and I found myself going over the event in my mind, again and again, as I tried to remember it perfectly, as I tried to remember if I really had thought it through.

We gathered our parts and I examined them when we managed to get enough together to make something out of them. Unfortunately, the reject pile grew faster than the profitable pile. I felt a knot growing in my stomach, getting bigger and bigger every time I heard the clatter and clunk of yet another part landing in the scrap pile. Every reject, after all, was another nail in the coffin of my business.

We found bad fuel rods, mostly, that had too much rust and deposits gumming them up. We also found burned out transport engines, bad points, gyros, and internal generators. They had all been waiting for replacement parts I had never been able to afford to buy. I guess that was why I'd never bothered putting them together in the first place. That phenomenal memory of mine had already figured out what Kyle was just now realizing. It was all junk, plain and simple.

I crouched, hands lax between my knees and head bowed. I didn't even care that I was standing in a puddle of mud. It just didn't matter. I could still hear Kyle scrambling for parts, not willing to give up yet. Thanks, I thought, for giving me a nice afternoon, anyway.

Then I heard it, a familiar engine chugging and back firing. It was almost covered up by the air scrubbers as they descended and began sucking the thick humidity out of the air as they cleaned. I was up and running, ignoring Kyle's shout of surprise, ignoring aches and pains and pulled muscles, ignoring the shooting, and the fierce pain in my head, as I thrust my way through the back gate of the lot and charged full tilt down the muddy alley.

The driver of the panel truck slammed on his brakes as I jumped onto the hood, scrambled over to the driver's window, and then hung on like a leach while I shouted over the sound of the scrubbers at him, "Mickey! Mickey! Mickey! I am soooo glad to see you! How ya been? How's the kids? How's the ball and chain? Well, enough catching up. You can pull right into my lot and we'll get down to business."

"Get off, Masters," the man shouted back in a bored, irritated voice. He didn't even look at me. "Everyone knows that you got nothing."

"And everyone knows that you don't either," I shot back angrily. When Mickey tried to put the truck into gear and shove me off, I reached in and took his keys. The truck

rumbled to a stop, but not before one last backfire.

"I'm calling the cops," Mickey warned, still not looking at me and his jaw tight and stubborn.

"So they can arrest you?" I wondered. "You do still owe Wilks for a pile of rusted, water logged engines, don't you?"

"You don't have any cash," Mickey sneered, finally glaring at me. He looked like a ferret, his mouth sporting a prodigious over-bite, his face centered by a long nose, and his beady eyes glaring at me over it from under a thatch of hair. He had the disposition of one, too. He'd eat his own for a few credits.

"I have a new partner with some better business savvy than me," I told him, not having to shout now as the scrubbers finished their job and retracted. "If you sell to me on consignment, you have a good chance of making some credits."

"Look, Masters," Mickey said derisively. "Your telling me that your new *fuck* is running things, isn't going to make me trust you enough to unload my stuff."

I reached in and grabbed a handful of his dirty shirt. "Who told you that?"

"What?" he retorted.

"That he's—"

"Didn't, I just guessed," Mickey sneered as he shoved off my hands.

I looked around and saw my competition hanging near their gates. They weren't coming towards us and they weren't going to try and make Mickey better offers. That told me all I needed to know. I had him. I grinned. "I'm all you got, Mickey. In fact, I bet you were driving to my lot already, am I right?"

Mickey turned a shade of purple that made me worry about his blood pressure. A vein actually throbbed in his forehead. He looked down at his steering wheel, ran his hands over the cracked plastic, and then glared at me again. "Sixty five percent or you get nothing."

"Forty percent," I countered instantly.

"Sixty," Mickey snarled.

"Forty five," I countered again.

Mickey snatched his keys from me and started his engine. He put his truck into reverse, as if he intended to back up.

"Fifty percent," I conceded.

Mickey paused. His jaw tightened and then he grunted as he looked through his windshield at Kyle, "That really your new partner?"

I glanced to where he was looking and saw Kyle standing by the front of the truck in a way that made me think he was ready to jump in and make hash out of Mickey.

“Yeah, that’s him,” I replied with a grin.

Mickey studied Kyle and said, “He looks like he has more brains than you. Okay, done deal.”

I jumped off and motioned Kyle to follow me as we led the truck back to the lot. Swinging open the big gate, Mickey drove the truck inside. Once he was parked, I climbed into the back and had an uncomfortable flashback. It smelled like gasoline, oil, and dirt. I had this image of Kyle, all in black, aiming a gun in my face. It was such a different image from the man who climbed into the truck with me now and eyed the crates, waiting for me to give directions.

I picked the closest crates and we opened them up. They were filled with junk, some of it doctored, so it wouldn’t look like junk to the untrained eye. I picked through it all, catching slivers and cuts from the metal. Finally, I angrily shoved the crates aside with my foot and started on the crates further back in the truck. More junk.

I ran a hand covered in grime and some of my own blood through my bangs and wiped at the sweat. Damn, it was hot in the truck. That knot in my stomach returned and tightened up enough to make me feel nauseated.

“Max?” Kyle asked, worried. “I can finish here.”

I rolled eyes at him. “You had Mud Hopper land on you too, so stop trying to be Super Man, dumb shit.”

He ginned at me and helped me with the next crate. Yeah, he could grin, but I was looking as sick as I felt. He could go back to his cushy Special Forces job whenever he wanted. I was the one who was going to be left with the ashes and wondering what came next.

Finally! I felt relief so profoundly I had to sit on a crate. I had found some fuel rods with charges, some good parts with only minimal damage, and two engines. For once, Mickey had actually been on the up and up and not trying to completely scam someone.

“Looks like we’re still in business,” I told Kyle and surprised him with a hug.

We grinned at each other and went to work.

Chapter Eleven

Swing of Things

Kyle inventoried the scrap, while I insulted and continued dickering with Mickey. When we finally finished unloading, I sent him out of my yard and had the urge to hose the place down. The man was a real piece of work.

“I think we have enough parts for twenty-six machines, eleven of them very marketable,” Kyle said as he squinted at his mini computer screen. I didn’t have to look to know that he was doing some price calculations. I reached out and closed the computer.

I said around a yawn, “That’s it for today.”

Kyle looked ready to argue, but he suddenly looked tired too. Like me, I’m sure his reserves of adrenalin were on empty. He nodded and pocketed his computer. I shook my head as we headed back to the shack. Kyle asked, “What?”

“You love numbers, don’t you?” It was a dig. I’d always thought of him as *Mr. Anal Retentive* during the war. It just followed he would be a number geek, too.

“Yes,” Kyle admitted, but didn’t offer anything else. I finally looked back at him and caught him staring at nothing and looking pensive.

Good going, Masters, I thought. I must have hurt Kyle’s feelings.

We went into the shack and I secured the door by jamming the chair underneath the knob again. I made a mental note to fix that. I was too damned exhausted to worry about it tonight, though, or about Kyle. Besides, I seemed to have killed his mood anyway.

When we went into the bedroom, we didn’t have to be awkward or self-conscious. There wasn’t any pressure about what came next. We were exhausted, filthy, and starving. The bed was calling to both of us. Sex, I was sure, was the last thing on either of our minds.

I washed first and almost fell asleep in the shower. When I gave up the bathroom to Kyle he looked as dead on his feet as I did. While he showered, I sat on the floor and heated up our dinner. I almost pulled the same number he had, falling asleep. When he shook at my shoulder, I blinked blearily at him. Kyle was dressed in his loose, cargo pants and no shirt. His crotch was close to my eye level. I had time for only a flash of desire before Kyle was putting a meal pack in my lap and a fork in my hand.

“Eat and then sleep,” Kyle said simply as he sat on the futon and began eating as well.

I ate numbly. We were both silent. The station’s water pumps still droned on, collecting the rainwater. The open vents in the floor were making a slight whooshing

sound as air came up out of them from far below ground. That filled the silence between us. It didn't cover up the tension in that human silence.

I suppose being forced to be an adult so young, I'd learned to be careful of an adult's moods. Smaller and weaker individuals had to become very good at picking up even faint body clues as a form of survival. Some soldiers could be damned mean, murderous even, if you walked across their path at the wrong time. So, picking up Kyle's pissed off mood was easy. It was as obvious as a red, flashing light.

"What?" I finally wondered out loud after I swallowed my last mouthful of food and tossed the meal pack in a perfect arc into the garbage can.

Kyle didn't say anything as I crawled up off of the floor and onto the bed. I was a bundle of aches, pains, and weariness as I stretched out on my side and fumbled with a blanket that I didn't really need.

I was sinking into a definite, '*don't give a damn.*' mood that was just as bad as Kyle's pissy one, because I felt that exhausted. I had to force myself to demand, "Out with it."

"I'm not a machine," Kyle replied angrily.

"Huh?" I tried to process that while my eyes fell shut. "I never said you were."

"You said..." Kyle paused and then explained, "People used to say that I was... inhuman because of the way I was trained. When you said—when you asked about the numbers—I thought..."

I snorted and yawned hugely. "You are not a machine," I managed around it. "You're just a geek."

"Oh."

The anger left the room. My soldier senses *stood down*. Everything inside of me was in agreement now. We wanted to go into a coma.

"Night, number geek," I mumbled and began falling over the edge into unconsciousness.

There was a small laugh and then a warm body was settling next to mine. "Good night," his voice whispered and then I was lost to sleep.

A cell phone was playing its ring tone. I winced and put my pillow over my head. A warm body, I guessed Kyle's, stirred beside me. I had time to realize he was wrapped around me and that it felt nice before he was retrieving his cell phone from somewhere close by and answering it blearily.

"Carter."

My cheek was pressed against Kyle's chest. Kyle's voice vibrated against my ear along with the beat of his heart.

"Yes, we've made progress," Kyle was saying. "We took in a shipment. That's being taken care of. He was robbed, he doesn't have any records. You'll have to take my word for it. You think this is personal?" His hand gently caressed my side. "I know how important this case is, Huang. Have some confidence in me. All right. Tomorrow."

The cell was discarded. I heard it bounce on the mattress of the futon. I couldn't pretend to be asleep any longer. Kyle's caress had made my toes curl. I didn't have any choice except to face him and figure out what to do and what to say, now.

I rolled onto my back. It was awkward. We didn't have a lot of room. Kyle was on his side, propped up on an elbow. His blue eyes were looking down at me. He was still half asleep and his expression was distant, as if he was still dreaming.

"Hey," I said and then felt stupid.

"Good morning," Kyle returned and yawned. His elbow folded under him and he let himself drop back onto the mattress.

I had expected some conversation, maybe flirting with the imminent and dreaded relationship discussion. I didn't expect Kyle to turn over and give me his back, intending to go to sleep again.

"Too early," Kyle muttered.

I strangled a sigh of relief and then smiled as I slid an arm around his waist, pulled him back against me, and head butted his shoulder lightly. Kyle, for his part, grunted and clasped my hand. He let go of consciousness, then, and went back to sleep.

Yeah, we were being intimate. It was another step closer to being an, *us* but not a big scary step. It was a little, comfortable, baby step.

The second time we woke up I gave Kyle a squeeze and then let him go. I still wanted to avoid the inevitable staring into each other's eyes and sharing feelings, so I rolled off the bed and pulled on my jeans. As I stamped into my work boots, Kyle was up and going into the bathroom. I heard him pee and wash his hands, then he was out, dressed, and heating up breakfast for us. After I finished my turn in the bathroom, we sat shoulder to shoulder on the futon and ate.

"Is Huang getting impatient?" I wondered around a mouthful.

Kyle was quiet, glaring at his food, and then he replied, "Yes."

I snickered. "That's saying a lot without saying anything. Can I translate that into, '*Get on the stick, Carter, or we'll come down there and help you get the job done?*' Am I close?"

"Locked on target," Kyle grunted sourly. He changed the subject. "We need to get

your records in order as well as rebuilding those parts. Do you have copies filed anywhere?"

I tapped my forehead. "Right here."

Kyle didn't look pleased by that. "I'm not questioning your skill at recall," he assured me, "but everything is so unorganized. I think we need to make bins and separate all the scrap. We need to find the parts that are never going to be rebuilt and sell the metal."

I shook my head, "There isn't any market for that, Kyle. There's too much of it."

"Then we need to get rid of it in the incinerators," Kyle reasoned. "You shouldn't have any scrap in your yard that is useless. Space equals money. We have to use it for scrap that has value."

I had this image of neatly categorized scrap in orderly bins. It just didn't seem natural. I was a pack rat for good reason and throwing things away, even useless scrap metal, went against everything that I'd been taught, before and after the war. I wanted to protest, but I didn't. He was right and I wasn't going to be an idiot and stand in his way.

We finished eating and I tossed on a shirt. I caught Kyle looking at me appreciatively. All thoughts of scrap went out the window as I tied my bandana around my neck and picked up my hat. We were going to have sex, again, without a doubt. We were two people, with the *hots* for each other and normal libidos. It was all a matter of when and not if.

With our new understanding, sex didn't seem the scary thing that it had been. We were going to do it without all of that soul searching, love talk, and burden of worrying about our romantic future. I found myself hopeful and looking forward to it, though the thought of doing the sixty-nine with Kyle again had its own case of awkwardness. It was easy when we were responding to lust and that overwhelming sense of '*we belong together forever.*' In the light of day, it was hard to think of an opening sentence that wasn't embarrassing and awkward, that would lead to getting Kyle's pants down and my mouth on him... well, if I thought about it, now, we weren't going to get anything done.

Kyle dressed as well and joined me on the porch. He ran his fingers through his messy dark hair and put on his hat. It was hot again. It wasn't furnace heat, but it was still uncomfortable. The pumps had ceased and it was as quiet as it ever got on station, which wasn't saying much.

"You don't have to do all of this for me," I heard someone say abruptly and realized, with a start, that it had been me. My distrust never took a vacation.

Kyle reached out and lightly ran fingers down my bare arm. I shivered as he said, "It's not just a case anymore. You know that." Then he was going down the steps and out into the lot, that bit of honesty uncomfortable for both of us.

I felt my heart do something funny. I swore it did a back flip and a triple somersault as it whooped for joy. Shut up! I told it irritably, but I was grinning as I joined Kyle and began working side by side with him.

It was hard, sweaty work. We were quickly covered in dust, rust, and sporting skinned knuckles, as we hunkered over machinery and slowly began to assemble parts. We worked like a well-oiled team. More than once during that long day, I found myself marveling at it and feeling a sense of wellbeing. The box of tools turned into the instruments of mechanical surgeons. We were experts in our field, knowing exactly what had to be done and doing it as if we had four hands and one mind. It really was a beautiful thing, a piece of perfect that I hadn't achieved in a long time.

Kyle turned out to be right. We ended up with the exact number of working machines that he predicted. I saw him smiling, realizing it as well. Yeah, he *was* a complete number geek. I couldn't help laughing as I wiped the grime from my face with my bandana.

"What?" Kyle glanced at me as he punched numbers into his computer. He had been inventorying the stack of parts closest to us while we took a break. He was finishing that up now, but I knew that the bigger piles wouldn't be that easy.

"I'm just thinking about how different we are," I admitted as I sat on the fender of my claw machine. It smelled like old gas and bad oil.

Kyle smiled and nodded. "I was thinking about that as well."

My eyebrows climbed to my hairline. "You were?"

"We work so well together, though," he replied as he finished his entries. "We've always been able to. I was wondering how that could be when our personalities and approach to things are so different?"

"Maybe, it's because we have common goals?" I hazarded and he smiled at me. I ducked my head and hid behind the rim of my hat.

I knew what he was thinking. We worked together so well, because of that *L* word, the one I was thinking deep down, but not letting anywhere near my tongue. He wasn't saying it either and dropped the subject rather than test the waters. I know it's stupid, but it was just too soon. We hardly knew each other. Common sense said that it couldn't happen like that. Not all in an instant. For now, we were both willing to think it was sexual attraction and friendship—well, at least I was. I wasn't a mind reader, after all. I couldn't know what Kyle was thinking with absolute certainty.

Kyle was looking out over the yard, maybe making a plan for the next day. The reflectors were dimming towards late afternoon. We still had some time to work, but my mind was already jumping ahead to night time and having Kyle alone. I didn't have the same trepidation as before, especially since I'd been watching his upper body, barely

concealed by his tank top, all day. I had a definite thing for well-defined arms and broad chests. Kyle was wiry, but he had both in spades.

I think that I'd been half hard for most of the day, my libido at full steam. It brought to mind my total unpreparedness if we should take things a bit further than last time. I'd been living as celibate as a monk for some time and not buying things like condoms. I needed to ask Kyle about his health card, too, and wasn't that just the most awkward thing to have to do? Quick hand jobs in toilets, and behind buildings, might get you some STDs, but a full blown encounter could still get you dead. It was hard to start off a conversation with, *'can I see your health card, because I intend to fuck you.'* That opened up another can of worms. I found myself staring at Kyle and wondered how he liked things. What if he was into kink?

Kyle looked up from his work and stared back. He blinked and then he asked in concern, "Have I done something wrong?"

I shook myself out of my cloud of testosterone and said, before I could think it through, "I need to borrow some more credit. We need supplies."

Kyle opened his mouth to say exactly what I knew he would. I cut him off.

"I don't take handouts, Carter," I retorted to his unspoken offer. "I want you to tally every credit, and I mean every damned last one."

Kyle looked amused and then nodded. He made a notation. "Thirty credits enough?"

I fiddled with my bandana as if it were choking me as I replied, "More than enough."

"I could go get the supplies, myself, while you finish up here," Kyle offered. "You'll need to call your contacts."

"That's okay," I replied quickly. The last thing I needed was to have to ask Kyle to buy sex supplies for us. No guy likes to admit that he hasn't done it regularly. It's a macho thing that would probably never get stamped out of the male psyche.

"It's all right," Kyle replied. "I don't mind."

"There are people that I need to talk to," I countered. "I also need to check on Mud Hopper."

"All the more reason for me to go along and help get the supplies," Kyle parried. "You can talk and check the machine easier that way."

"But..." I stopped and we faced off. I snickered. I couldn't help it. Kyle looked puzzled and then embarrassed when I asked, "Do you want to buy condoms, too?"

I'd never seen someone turn that deep a red. It went all the way to the tip of Kyle's ears. He looked down at his booted toes and replied, "I'm sorry. I..." Then he looked up, startled, as my words finally made sense to him. "You were going to buy them?"

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my neck and tried to sound reasonable, "Look, I'm not

saying that we're going to need them, but it's something that I want on hand."

I couldn't bring up the health card now. I really didn't want Kyle to think I was intending to have full-blown sex, because I wasn't. I just wanted to be ready, just in case I wanted to later on. That made sense, right?

Kyle put away his computer and squared his hat. "Now that what we want isn't a secret any longer, we should both go together. I'll buy them, while you attend to business."

"Uh, I'd really rather buy everything, Kyle. Why don't you stay here and keep doing inventory?" I tried to sound casual, but I was already thinking about what the shop people would think about Kyle buying those things. They weren't going to conclude that he was getting ready for someone else. It's one thing for everyone to know that you're knocking boots, but it's another for them to see someone actually getting ready to do it with you. It messed with a whole bunch of masculinity and privacy issues that I couldn't even explain myself. All I knew was that I would feel a lot better having them see me buying the stuff. As ridiculous as it sounded, I wanted them to think that I was the one calling the shots. No, there isn't any reasoning with male pride, sometimes.

Kyle gave up and nodded. "Okay. It's very important that we get this inventory done. It makes sense that we both don't take the rest of the day off."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking," I lied. "I'll take care of everything and come back as soon as I can." I started to walk away, but then stopped and looked back at Kyle. I suddenly felt he needed more from me. He was looking pensive.

"Kyle?" I rubbed the back of my neck again, that nervous habit carrying me through the awkwardness. "I just want you to know I'm not sure how all of this happened," meaning us, "but, it's good, okay? I just have to go slow. It doesn't mean I don't like it, or that I don't want it. Just..."

I couldn't go on, not with those blue eyes of his looking at me so intensely.

"It's all right to go slowly," Kyle replied softly, "After the sting, we'll have all the time in the world to explore our—"

I was sure he was about to say relationship and I wasn't ready to hear that word yet. I talked over him, putting up a verbal blockade. "Yeah, you're right. After the sting we can sit down and talk about... us... being together... you know? We shouldn't rush into anything."

I mentally kicked myself hard. That had sounded too damned much like retreating under enemy fire. Fuck you, my paranoid, stunted nature, I thought angrily. I wasn't going to lose Kyle because I couldn't deal with my feelings.

It was hard, but I forced out, "Maybe we should put the brakes on the sex as well? I

don't want you to think that's all I want from you, especially if we're putting off everything else between us. I'll forget about buying those *supplies*, for now. Why waste credits when we won't be... you know?" I turned away. That's as far as I could go with the verbal *opening myself up*. I gave him a wave and said gruffly, "I'll be back. Careful on those scrap piles."

"Roger," Kyle replied.

That single word gave me a lot to think about as I went to the market area. Had he sounded sad, disappointed, or angry? Maybe I was wrong about the sex and he wanted it even if a relationship wasn't attached?

"God, Masters!" I groaned at myself. "It meant *Okay*. Stop the fucking over analyzing bull shit!"

I talked to some contacts about buying my new scrap and then checked on Mud Hopper. I was pretty certain I could pull the machine out the next morning. I stopped myself from climbing over the drying mud to see what sort of shape he was in. I already knew what I was going to find and it wasn't going to be pretty.

Returning to the lot, I saw that Kyle had begun sorting things. Our completed machines were now under a tarp and gleaming with new oil. I could see credits when I looked at them and I couldn't help grinning as I entered my shack. Kyle was seated on the futon, fingers flying over his little keyboard.

"Did everything go all right?" he asked me, without looking up.

"I was talking to people, not in a fire fight," I retorted.

Kyle was wearing my soft shorts again. He must like them, I concluded. I wasn't going to argue about that. He looked better in them than I did. Sitting down beside him, I could smell he had showered and used something with an enticing scent. That scent tickled my nose and my libido. It hit an inner button, the one that turned off inhibitions and said, '*we want you so damned bad, we will not think of anything else, especially consequences.*' It was doing the thinking all of a sudden, my brain certainly wasn't.

I think it was the pulse on the side of his throat that did it, or maybe the way his skin seemed to say, '*I taste wonderful.*' All I know is that I was suddenly wrapping a hand into the hair at the back of Kyle's neck and pulling him to me.

My free arm snaked around Kyle's slim waist. He wasn't soft. He was hard from constant work outs. That hard muscle was covered with silken skin, though, and his lips were even softer. I teased them open, stabbed in deep with my tongue, and pushed him onto his back on the futon at the same time.

Maybe I was aggressive, maybe even a little rough, because part of me was resisting? Maybe I blamed him for losing control? Either way, he didn't seem to mind. He opened

his legs to me and wrapped them around me like a vise as I pressed him down with the length of my body.

Our sex was almost frantic, both of us confused, out of control, and wanting it too badly. Holding back the final act was the ultimate in frustration, but we both weren't ready, mentally. Telling that to our bodies was another thing, though. It escalated our frantic motions and made sex seem almost an act of anger. We *were* angry, after all. We did want to go all the way, but we were too stubborn, too hard headed, and too damned afraid of what came next to go through with it.

Disengaging slightly, I snagged Kyle's waist band and dragged the shorts off of him. His hands unsnapped my jeans and scratched skin as he jerked them down to my knees. When he reached in with a strong hand and grabbed my erection out of my underwear, I almost came right then and there, especially when he gave it a hard stroke. When I turned to face his straining, needy erection, I didn't hesitate to go to work sucking him.

Kyle tasted like *mine*. That sounds weird, I know, but it was the only way I could describe it. He tasted like he belonged to me and I couldn't get enough of that taste.

We sixty-nined for the second time, but Kyle didn't go for my erection right away. Instead, he licked and kissed me all over. He bit my knee, sucked on it, and I faintly thought about the fact that I was sweaty, if not dirty, there. That seemed to be an aphrodisiac to Kyle, though. When he buried his face into my crotch and began worshipping it by licking and mouthing everything there, I went wild. Clutching at him, I gave him as good as he was giving me. He fucked my mouth and came with a shout, dumping hot seed down my throat. He fisted me and jerked me off to completion while he mouthed and tongued my balls.

We stayed stuck together like that for a long while and then we stirred and sat up. Moving shakily and groaning at strained muscles, bites, and aching bodies, we showered and then spent the evening eating, sitting close, and going over Kyle's inventory. We collectively said nothing about the act, but our shoulders were touching and we sat on the futon in a way that was intimate and comforting.

Okay, so we'd taken another baby step, maybe more than a baby step, but I really didn't mind. We'd come at it on our own terms, after all, and that made all the difference.

Chapter Twelve

Gray

Getting an elbow to the face, and a knee to the gut, isn't a good way to wake up. I shouted, well, gasped actually, around a pulverized diaphragm as Kyle rolled over me. The pounding on the door registered next, and then my goal wasn't to get air in, but to save my early bird customer from Kyle.

Kyle was crouched and grappling for a weapon that he didn't have as I sat up and untangled myself from the blankets. Kyle was still half asleep, eyes blinking myopically and hair a tangle over his face. Dressed only in his underwear, arms waving in large arcs as he tried to orient himself, he finally fell backward and sat his ass on the floor. Good, he was awake now and remembering we weren't in a war any longer.

I skipped the sigh of relief I couldn't manage anyway as the door pounding continued and someone I recognized shouted, "Masters?"

Holding a hand to my stinging, bleeding nose, I dragged on a pair of shorts with my free hand and staggered to the front door.

Snagging the chair out from under the doorknob, I opened the door quickly. I was just in time to see my customer walking away and looking annoyed. "Polk!" I shouted after him. He turned at my voice and his annoyance turned to shock.

"What the hell happened to you, Masters?"

"Fell out of bed and then ran into a door," I lied effortlessly. "Give me a minute to get dressed and then we'll talk."

Polk was a heavy set, elderly man, in overalls who looked tough enough to eat metal scrap for breakfast. He had a reputation as a bad tempered bad ass and he always insisted on calling the shots. I expected him to leave. I was surprised when he only grunted and crossed his arms in an attitude of waiting.

I went back inside and straight into the bathroom. I picked up a rag and cleaned my face. Kyle appeared in the doorway holding my jeans. He still looked half asleep, but as guilty as hell, too. "Max, I'm—"

"Later," I growled as I took my pants, discarded the shorts, and began putting them on. "Polk isn't in the habit of dropping by unless he's buying something. Let me handle him. You..." I looked him up and down, "Go the hell back to bed. I remember you as an early riser, but without the hair trigger. What happened?"

Kyle rubbed a hand through his hair and couldn't help a yawn, "I took lots of stimulants back then and a hell of a lot has happened between the war and now. Being in

Special Forces isn't a walk in the park, you realize?"

I understood. I remembered taking some heavy drugs as well to get through some of the tougher days. I didn't want to think about it. I left the bathroom and fished a shirt off the floor. Dragging it on over my head, I shrugged into it as I looked for my boots. Kyle watched me, seated on the edge of the futon and pulling the heated tab on some coffee. He cupped it in both hands and sipped cautiously, watching as I found my footwear under his discarded clothes and sat on the floor to put them on.

My nose felt two sizes too big and it was still leaking blood. My stomach throbbed. I was also tired and that didn't help me put a lid on my temper. I finally sat with my booted feet sticking out in front of me and my eyes closed. Get it together, I told myself, I had to be sharp and I couldn't afford to let my temper have free range.

Kyle moved. I opened my eyes and saw him getting dressed. As I stood up, he said. "I'll go with you."

He was feeling guilty and it was his way of apologizing. I could see he was still struggling to wake up. I put a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed. He sat back down with his pants half on.

"You clocked me. It was an accident and we both know that, so forget it," I told him as I headed for the door. "I used to be a soldier, too, remember? I've had my share of flashbacks."

Kyle leaned back on the bed, half propped on his elbows in defeat. Even gummed up with sleep, he looked like a damned pinup in a magazine. Anger left me. Instead, my brain tormented me with the memory of how he tasted and the feel of his skin under my hands as I went outside and rejoined my customer. Anger was a bad thing when it came to making scrap deals. I wasn't sure lust was an improvement.

I had announced to the buyers the day before that I had reworked machine parts to sell. There were hundreds of other scrap men I'd rather have seen than Polk. When we hammered out a sale, the man made me feel flayed to an inch of my life and I always ended up on the short end of the deal.

"That's all quality merchandise, Polk!" I called to the man.

Polk had found the parts and was picking through them already, his face a study in concentration.

"They come with a warranty," I told him as I tied my bandana around my neck and stood at his elbow.

"They'd better have one," Polk grumbled.

The game began. We haggled. It took time. He found every flaw and exploited every one of my weaknesses to get the price down. For my part, I pointed out the good points of

every part and his weakness. He had one; a big, glaring one. It was my weapon and I used it to get the price I wanted. He agreed to the deal at last and we shook hands on it.

I was walking a foot above the ground, with a bank account that finally had some credits in it, as I watched my customer load up half the parts with the help of an assistant, and drive off in a cloud of dust.

Go me.

I was having sex with Kyle Carter, my business wasn't getting ready to collapse at any moment, I could pay Kyle back every credit that I owed him, and I was having sex with Kyle Carter. Hey, it felt good to repeat it. I was still having trouble believing it.

It went a long way to restore my self-worth that I had sold those parts all on my own. I hadn't needed Kyle, or the stinking Special Forces, to come in and save me. I didn't need anyone, but Max Masters to run things. I'd scored the replacement parts on my own and had sold them on my own. Okay, so Kyle had helped me rebuild the machines, but I could have done that too, in time. Well, when it came to restoring an ego, I could skimp on details like that.

I had a feeling, Kyle had been watching through the window. He wasn't when I returned, but he exuded *pleased* even though he was stretched out in bed and eating breakfast.

Kyle's computer was open and next to him, waiting, I guess, for me to come in with the sale. I snagged it and started entering accounts as I sat on the edge of the bed. I made sure that the money had transferred, first thing, and then made sure that some of it was transferred to Kyle's account to pay off my tab. When I saw the zero balance on that tab, I had an emotional moment. I felt stupid, but it was that important to me.

I turned away to pull myself together and said, roughly, to cover it up, "Polk knows a contact that might pick up the rest of the parts."

Kyle took the computer after I had put it down and went through Polk's record, as he chewed and swallowed. I knew what was coming next. I heated up my own breakfast and sat with my back to Kyle as I ate, shoulders tensed, waiting for his reaction. I wasn't disappointed.

"Max, he's not licensed."

"Yeah, I know."

"Selling to him is illegal."

"Not hugely illegal, just a misdemeanor," I replied without turning. "He sells legitimate, rebuilt parts and he pays his bills on time."

"Max, I'm law enforcement. I can't—"

I did turn to him, then, glaring. "Do you remember what I said when I was hauled off

to Special Forces lock up? I won't do this sting of yours if you're after little guys. Polk's very little. He did some bad things when he was young, like we all did, but now he's married, with six kids, a mortgage, and bills to pay. The government won't give him a second chance, though. They won't license him. We were given pardons, special treatment, even hero status. Polk, and people like him, didn't get anything, Kyle. They have to live under the paper radar."

Kyle looked troubled. The Kyle from the past wouldn't listen to my reasoning, wouldn't back down, and wouldn't sacrifice what was legally right for an individual who needed some social right. I had this feeling that, what we'd built in our short time together, was suddenly as slick as oil and slipping from me. I wanted to grab at it, to stop it from getting away, but I knew there were some things I wasn't willing to compromise on for my own sake. I wasn't going to rat on Polk, even though he could be a bastard, and I wasn't going to let Kyle do it either. If I had to kill the sale, I was prepared to do just that to save him.

"I wasn't present for the sale," Kyle said at last as he continued to eat. "No witnesses, no bill of sale, and no paper trail. A transfer of accounts isn't enough to prosecute. If you can give me a valid reason why parts should disappear and why a man should suddenly give you that many credits, I won't investigate."

"Damn thieves took the parts last night," I said, grinning even though it made my nose hurt even more. "I can't afford to invest in security equipment. It happens a lot. As for the credits, Polk's giving me a business loan."

"He gave you an unsecured loan without a signed contract?" Kyle wondered, as if he really believed it. "That isn't very wise."

I snorted. "We're friends. He knows I'm good for it."

Kyle went through his bag and pulled out a small medical kit. He found an ice pack inside of it, hit the tab, and handed it to me. "Is your nose all right?"

I touched it and pressed the cold pack to it. I didn't like the sensation, but I knew it was good for the swelling. "No, but it doesn't feel broken. The people who sleep with you must really love your round house wake up calls." I was starting to get angry again and I couldn't help the sarcasm. You might forgive someone for hurting you when it was an accident, but you could still be pissed about it. Kyle's next words killed that anger dead.

"I've never slept with anyone else before," Kyle admitted softly.

I blinked at him in shock around the bulk of the ice pack. My brain floundered. I didn't know what to say to that. My image of handsome, assured, Kyle, with a string of willing lovers, popped like a balloon and nothing but a big, 'huh?' was left in its place.

I tried to recover and said lamely, “Uh, well, with reflexes like that, it’s no shit you don’t sleep with anyone else. Killed any previous boyfriends?”

Okay, *boyfriend* was the last word I had wanted to say. I did a dumb fish impersonation. I wasn’t ready to admit to that level of a relationship. I certainly wasn’t ready for Kyle to look so damned happy about my slip. He broke into a smile that made my toes curl. A smile like that should be packaged and made into a weapon. It could disable anyone with an ounce of feeling. It kept me from backtracking, from turning it into a crass joke, from *wanting* to take the word back.

Kyle didn’t push it. I could see him trying to control that smile as he stood up, discarded his meal, and dressed. “We should get to work,” he said in a way that was just as bad as the smile.

I stood up and felt overwhelmed as I watched him leave the bedroom, picking up his hat on the way out. I now, officially, had a boyfriend. “Damn,” I breathed and followed him out into the burning hot morning.

“This stack has a lot of large pieces of scrap,” Kyle commented.

I came to stand next to him and we both looked up at the tallest stack in my yard. Some pieces were as large as tanks and some as small as refrigerators. The sun gleamed on rust, oil, and water that had been captured in nooks and crannies.

Kyle pointed to a relatively free space in the yard. I didn’t have many. “We should move the usable parts there, catalog them, and have the rest hauled away.”

“Now?” I sounded reluctant, hell, I *was* reluctant. I’d let it go for a long time. Moving scrap that big was dangerous and most of it I had inherited when I had bought the yard years ago. My brain had decided that it was a *Pandora’s box* full of evil I didn’t want to open. It was damned difficult to sell anything that big, anyway.

Kyle gave me a very serious sideways look. My boyfriend was gone and replaced with someone I’ll call, *Mr. Mission*. There wasn’t anything soft or conceding about him. This man didn’t give a damn about anything except the numbers and the bottom line. This was the man I had fought a war with. This was the Kyle Carter I remembered. It hadn’t been the bottom line he’d wanted back then, but body bags and winning a war.

Kyle didn’t need to say anything. Just his stance told me everything he was thinking. If I wanted the business to be a success, I had to deal with my inventory. It was up to me, though, his eyes told me. I had to make the decision.

“Let’s get to it,” I said with false enthusiasm.

Kyle nodded, pleased, and I went to get the claw. Sitting in the ratty cab of the big machine, I turned the key and tried to get the old engine to turn over. I wasn’t surprised when it grumbled, spluttered, and then died a choking death. It had been due for a

breakdown. It happened almost like clockwork.

I leaned my forehead against the filthy controls and accidentally hit my aching nose. I winced and sat up again. Kyle was opening the engine compartment and looking inside. I already knew the problems and said them silently as Kyle said them out loud.

“Fuel rod, compressor pump, and a line clog,” Kyle said as he worked.

He closed the compartment and I looked over the hood of the machine at him. He must have read my expression of defeat, because he sounded like a tough army sergeant trying to rally troops as he said, “Let’s go ahead and inventory the stack as much as we can. We’ll identify the good parts, first, and then try and fix the claw to move them later. That way, we’ll be able to start work right away after the claw is fixed.”

That made sense, and it calmed me even though it was just a different way of saying, *‘we’re pissed off about this, so let’s leave it until we stop wanting to blow up the engine with some nitro.’*

As much as I didn’t want to, I knew we had to climb the stack of scrap. We couldn’t see everything from the ground. With the claw, we could have picked it apart and saved ourselves a lot of danger.

“Let me go up,” I suggested to Kyle, “I’m experienced at this. I’ll call down what I find.”

“No,” Kyle replied firmly. “We’ll get done faster if we do it together. We’ll also be able to help each other if there’s trouble.”

I doubted either of us could do much to help, if a ton of scrap decided to collapse on us, but I could see he wasn’t going to back down from this.

“Okay,” I replied and I began a cautious climb up the scrap.

It was a mountain of very heavy materials. By all rights, it shouldn’t move, but rusted spots giving way, greasy surfaces sliding against greasy surfaces, and precariously tilted parts deciding to stop defying the laws of gravity, were all real possibilities. It just rubbed in my lack of organization. Not having sorted it sooner was endangering us both.

Everything was going all right, at first, but I didn’t let that lull me into a false sense of security. I stayed sharp, stayed cautious, and tested each surface before I trusted my full weight on it. I saw Kyle doing the same. Together, we poked, prodded, reached inside to tug pieces into the light where we could see them, and inventoried each piece we could identify on Kyle’s computer.

We both sweated and we were quickly covered in dirt and grease. As we bent over a stubborn piece, our heads together, and tried to move it so we could see identification numbers, Kyle suddenly nuzzled the side of my face. When I looked at him in surprise he took that opportunity to seize a kiss.

Okay, so we're crazy. I ended up almost on my side with Kyle leaning into me and kissing me for all he was worth. We forgot about how high we were and how very dangerous it was. I didn't care, didn't think, and didn't register anything in the whole wide world except how very hot that kiss was.

Someone swore in Chinese.

Kyle and I broke apart abruptly and turned as one to see Huang standing close to us. In jeans, a white t-shirt, and brown work boots, he was balanced precariously on our mountain of scrap. He was glaring, of course. You understand the phrase, '*kill someone with a look*', when you are given that particular glare by Huang. He had it down to an art form. It was contemptuous, cold, arrogant, and so full of anger he could strip titanium from a gun ship hull. Two people, who were doing something he totally disapproved of, didn't stand a chance. I could almost feel the skin stripping off my bones.

"Carter!" Huang exclaimed. "This is completely unprofessional! I knew you couldn't be trusted to execute this sting as soon as I knew that Masters was going to be a part of it. You have compromised everything by letting this become personal!"

I took a deep breath, ready to give Huang some choice words in response, when Kyle replied, "I'm sorry. I... I didn't know I would become involved."

Huang's arrogance went up by a hundred notches and he managed to look down his nose at us from two levels of scrap down. "You have compromised your career by indulging in this..." He motioned harshly at me, "This ill-conceived attraction. You have endangered—"

"Hey!" I finally broke in. "What the hell do you mean by ill-conceived?"

Huang's contemptuous glare, aimed at me personally, made me flounder. "You are a criminal, by your own admission. You sell scrap on a station known for being a den of the corrupt. You wheel and deal in contraband for a quick credit in the lawlessness of—"

"Huang!" Kyle snapped and I looked at his angry face. Kyle's eyes almost seem to glow hotly under his dark brows. I could see his muscles tensing and his jaw working, before he said, "I didn't plan this, but it's happened. If you want, I can take myself off the mission, but I've established myself as Max's assistant and his..."

He couldn't finish and I was forced to come to his rescue. I explained, with a dangerous edge to my voice that let Huang know I wasn't apologizing, or regretting what happened between Kyle and me, "We didn't plan it this way, but people don't have much to do, except gossip. Everyone in Market Row thinks Kyle's my guy. If you pull him out now, everyone's going to ask questions."

My temper was carrying me through, but underneath it, I was feeling overwhelmed. I was unexpectedly being forced to come to terms with my relationship with Kyle and

defend it. I wasn't ready for that.

Huang looked at Kyle and raised a superior black eyebrow. "It seems we have a problem," he said coldly.

We had more than that when the station suddenly shuddered and machinery groaned. I knew Kyle had fast reflexes and that his footing was secure. I knew for a fact that Huang wasn't secure and that he was going to fall. He swayed backward toward a very long drop to the floor of my dirt lot.

I reacted with reflexes imbedded into my body and psyche during the war and with a speed and agility some people used to think almost inhuman. Exceptional aptitude and physical abilities had been why some of us had been chosen for elite forces so very young. That ability now carried me swiftly down the mountain of scrap, balancing effortlessly on heaving chunks of metal, so that I could reach Huang in time and grab his hands.

I braced my feet on what I hoped was a secure mound of scrap and pulled Huang back to safety. Our momentum landed me on my back with Huang on top of me between my legs. He luckily avoided any delicate parts of my anatomy, but the sharp, painful dig of scrap metal through my clothes and into my back made it a mixed blessing.

We rode out the shaking. I endured a long, embarrassed minute where I felt Huang's crotch pressing intimately against my own, his chest plastered against mine, and his cheek pressing into my collarbone. He smelled like incense and station dust.

Something in the scrap pile came loose and there was a very loud crash. Dust rose up in clouds. We blinked against it as we wondered if our pile was going to be next. I thought about a prayer, or a long overdue confession, but in the end considered it hypocritical and just settled on loud cursing.

The shaking stopped.

"Kyle!" I shouted anxiously. "Status?"

"Secure!" Kyle shouted back, almost in my ear. I wasn't sure how he could be that close, but I felt sick with relief that he was as the dust drifted away and I could see that the top of the scrap pile had fallen off. I was now on top and not on the side of it any longer. The chill of that realization made me numb to the fact that Kyle had his fingers dug into my shoulders so hard, that it felt as if he were pushing into bone.

Huang began to shove up off me, uttering a string of what I suspected were Chinese curses. The feeling was mutual, but I was forced to wrap my legs around him and hold him down. That was going to make some nightmares later.

"Don't move, stupid fuck!" I shouted in his ear. "Do you want the rest of this pile to go over?"

Huang froze, but his entire body was stiff, as if my touch was polluting him and he could hardly stand it. He should have changed his opinion of me, considering that I had just saved his life, but we were still rubbing crotches. I could forgive him if he didn't join the Max Master's fan club just yet.

"We should go down, one at a time," Kyle suggested. "It's the safest way."

I agreed. "Uh, you're amputating my arms, Kyle, do you mind letting go?" Kyle eased off and I couldn't help groaning in relief. When I could catch my breath again, I told him. "You go down first."

Screw Huang. The first person down probably had the best chance of making it. The more disturbances there were to the pile, the more likely it would go over. The last person down was going to be in the most danger. Kyle didn't need a manual on scrap piles to know that. He wasn't stupid.

"Max—" Kyle began to protest, but I cut him off.

"This is my yard, damn it, and I give the freakin' orders!" I shouted. "Get the hell down from this pile, now!"

"I'll go next door and get their earth mover," Kyle suggested.

I shook my head, giving him a hard look. "We're too high up. It's my own damned fault, Kyle, so let me take the fall. Go down, now." I measured out each word of that last sentence.

Kyle reached out, glanced nervously at Huang, and then touched my face. Kyle put his heart into his eyes as he looked at me and then he was turning and following my orders, slowly climbing down the teetering pile of metal parts.

"Don't move, or I will twist your head off," I warned Huang. He growled angrily, but he complied.

We both listened to Kyle moving very slowly down the pile of metal. Come on, I chanted silently. You can do it. You have to get down safe. My entire being was focused on the sound of his progress.

"Clear!" Kyle shouted up at last and my heart clenched in my chest.

I had signed and sealed the sale of my soul to hear that, promising every deity and demon a piece of me if Kyle made it to safety. Yeah, I had it that bad. He meant that much to me and I wondered at how well I had hidden that fact even from myself. It wasn't a new development and I knew it. It was something that I'd kept down deep and locked tight, thinking I'd never have to use it, that I would never have the chance to air it out and actually feel it.

"Your turn," I told Huang. "Make sure that your footing is secure before you put weight down. Look for scrap that's jammed in tight. Don't trust large slabs." He was

looking at me as I talked, neck craned at a painful angle and body even tenser than before. He looked pissed and confused. “Go!” I exclaimed, furious, and he twitched and blinked when I accidentally spit the word.

Huang’s jaw worked and he gave one nod. I had this sense that it was more than a confirmation of my order. I was giving his life precedence over my own. I’m sure he thought I wasn’t as good as him and that he deserved to live more, but having me voice it out loud was probably worth at least a tiny bit of respect from him.

Huang lifted his weight off of me, slow and cautious. He shifted sideways and it was a relief to get his damn crotch off of mine and his scent out of my nose. When metal groaned and shifted under us, he froze. We both sweated bullets until the pile fell silent and went still again.

Huang began climbing down. I didn’t move. I stared up at the *sky*, at the roof of the station almost lost in a haze above me. When the scrubbers descended, I moaned. They wouldn’t affect the pile of scrap, but it was just one more stress listening to the sound and watching the dust rise up in whirling, drifting forms as the air was cleansed.

“Clear!” Huang shouted and I closed my eyes and let out a breath of relief.

“Get the hell away from the pile!” I shouted for all I was worth when the scrubbers ended their cycle and lifted up again. “You can’t help me get down and the pile might fall over again!”

I don’t know if they listened. I slowly sat up and began my own climb down, all my attention on my hands and feet as I tried not to pull the stack over on me, or have it slide out from under me, as I climbed down. At one point, I felt something give under my hand. A piece of scrap the size of a transport engine, slid towards my face. It stopped a bare inch from my swollen nose and I stared at it, frozen, mind calculating size and weight, and how close I had come to being a grease spot. Very slowly, I shifted away from it and continued down. My heart was pounding madly.

“Carter!” I heard Huang shout warningly as I touched ground.

Strong hands grabbed my clothes and hauled me away from the mountain of scrap.

For a moment, I was enjoying being alive too much to process anything else. Then I focused on Kyle’s face close to my own. I realized he was the one twisting the front of my shirt and looking me anxiously in the face. I grinned at him and hugged him. He fiercely hugged me back.

“You are both complete fools!” Huang announced.

We turned to look at him and then looked at each other. I laughed first. Kyle’s guilty look turned into humor and he began laughing as well. We had nearly died, but we had conquered death, once again, just as we had throughout the war. It gave us both instant

adrenalin highs; a strong sense of having poked fate in the eye and given it the finger. Maybe Kyle's career was over? Maybe Huang would have me arrested, feeling I was useless to him now? It didn't matter just then. We were going to enjoy our victory and to hell with everyone and everything, including Zian Huang.

Chapter Thirteen

Two's Company

“All right?” Kyle asked, as I sat down in the chair behind my office desk and gingerly touched my aching shoulders. Kyle was standing by me anxiously, but Huang was by the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest, giving me his best *ice man* glare.

I glared back and grumbled, “You can at least look happy to be alive, Ice Man. We were pretty damned close to getting our ticket punched out there.”

Huang grunted. He'd never liked my nicknames during the war and he sure as hell wasn't going to like them now.

Kyle began pulling at my shirt. I irritably resisted. I didn't want to be half naked and feeling vulnerable in front of Huang. Kyle persisted and we battled over the shirt. I only stopped the tug of war when I suddenly realized it looked far more ridiculous than having Kyle simply check me for serious wounds. I let him lift the shirt and he hissed in shock at the marks caused by the scrap, but most of all from the revealed red and darkly bruising prints his hands had made on my skin.

“I didn't know—” Kyle began, but I cut him off.

“You kept me and Huang from going over with the rest of the scrap, didn't you?” I guessed. When he nodded, I snorted, “Well then, what's to apologize for?” I had enough scars to attest to the fact that I had suffered a lot worse than bruises in the past. So did Kyle, for that matter. I didn't need him to make a big deal out of it.

I jerked my shirt down, wincing at the pain, and ignored Kyle's embarrassing hovering as I confronted Huang. “Okay, now that we're all cozy and safe, what are you doing here? Did you think it was professional barging in on an operation, or screaming at the operatives a scraps throw from people who would just love to carry that bit of news all over station?”

“The operation is already compromised,” Huang replied in that irritating, arrogant voice of his. “I guessed as much when I called Carter and informed him I would be coming to check the progress of the operation myself.”

I look in consternation at Kyle, who asked Huang, in confusion, “When did you call?”

Huang raised a black eyebrow. His pissed off look was almost ruined by the grease smudges on his face. “You don't remember my call?”

I snorted and asked Kyle, “You were asleep when you took the call, weren't you?”

Kyle blinked and looked embarrassed. “I think I must have been.”

Huang took a step towards us, getting even angrier. “You have been completely unprofessional since meeting Masters,” he told Kyle, “Your dedication to this mission is

in serious question. Your fraternization with a man, who is also an operative and under suspicion himself, is a serious breach of protocol. It is an indication that you have let your personal interests take precedence over the operation. I'm going to request that this mission be scrubbed immediately."

I saw Kyle nod meekly. As much as I felt like smashing Huang's face in for saying those things to Kyle, well, he was right. I would have scrubbed a mission with Kyle, too, if we had been lip locking during the war. I thought about what the sting was all about, though, and how much it would mean to the lives of my fellow station citizens to get rid of at least one corrupt official. I also thought about the chances of Huang, or anyone else, finding another scrap man to agree to help them. Scrap men are tight when it comes to the trade and the people on station were incredibly suspicious. It was for good reason. They wouldn't trust any assurance that they wouldn't get arrested along with the corrupt official. Hell, I wasn't even sure if *I* wasn't going to be arrested after it was all over.

I scratched at the worn finish of my desk with a fingernail, thinking hard. Kyle wasn't cornering the market on guilt right then. I had it in spades. I really hadn't been looking at the larger picture, just reacting and seriously wanting to get closer to Kyle. I had a fear in my gut, a fear of taking a break from our budding relationship, of putting it aside to get down to business. I had a feeling that what we had was as fragile as a candle flame; anything could blow it out, including putting it on hold.

At the end of the war, when I'd said something to Travers about everyone going their own way and, maybe, not having that comrade in arms friendship any longer, he'd said, *'if it's real, it will survive the test of separation.'* Having been seriously drunk and not thinking about anyone in particular, it hadn't made that much sense. Now it played back to me as if Travers was saying it in my ear. If Kyle was serious, if it *was* more than wanting in each other's pants, then it could wait.

I heard Kyle starting to speak, starting to say something about calling headquarters, offering an explanation, and asking for a reassignment. I was glad that he wasn't talking about leaving just yet. I interrupted. "Fuck that, Kyle. We can still do this."

Huang grunted and began turning away as he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. "I don't think so."

I was out of my chair and ignoring my aches and pains, as I came around the desk and dared clamp a hard hand on Huang's arm. "You came here to assess the operation, so do that, asshole! Actually take some time and see if we have it together or not."

Huang switched to that bored, irritating drawl I'd always hated from the war, the one that said he was calling all the shots and he didn't give a damned about what anyone else thought. "This is a dangerous operation. Getting distracted by personal attachments and

fraternization will cause you to lose your focus. It might also cause you to make errors in judgment at critical times.”

The translation of that was, if I turned out to be one of the bad guys, then Kyle might not pick up on that, or want to rat on me because we were involved.

I wanted to choke the life out of Huang, but I didn't think it would make me feel any better. He'd still die thinking I might be a criminal. I discovered changing his mind about that was pretty damned important to me. I might have done some terrible things in my short life, but double crossing someone and working with the head crooks on station, hadn't been part of it.

“Don't give up on this yet,” I told Huang angrily. “We can change things. This is too damned important to trash now and you know it. I have a shack out back. We'll clean it out and Kyle can stay there. We'll keep things professional between us until our target is in jail, all right?”

“Unacceptable,” Huang said simply and began pulling out of my grasp.

“Then team up with Kyle!” I shouted at him. “That way, you can make sure things don't get screwed up.”

That appealed to Huang's sense that he had to do everything himself. He stopped and considered it. “What would you tell them to account for my presence here?”

My mind scrambled, but came up empty. I grinned and replied with confidence, “Leave that to me. I know exactly what to tell them.”

Huang scowled, sensing my bull shit. “You do not inspire confidence.”

I retorted angrily, “What do you have to lose? If the mission is scrubbed already in your mind, it can't get any worse. Wait and see, all right?”

Huang still hesitated.

“Come on!” I shouted. “You know how important this operation is for the people living here!”

Huang looked very sour and gave a curt nod. “It is important.” His dark eyes skewered me, “Important enough to salvage, if possible.”

I let out a breath of relief and turned to Kyle. He was looking thoughtful. I faced him, uncomfortable and not sure what he was thinking. “Sorry about this,” I told him roughly. “I wasn't thinking about what this sting means to everyone here. I was too caught up in *us* and making my business a success.” I found the dirt on the floor interesting, as I tried to put into words what I was feeling. “I guess I'm still just a self-sacrificing, dumb ass, soldier.”

Kyle was quiet. I finally dared to look up at him. He was nodding without looking at me. What that gesture meant, I wasn't sure. Was he agreeing with me? Does he think I'm

a shit for agreeing with Huang that we're screw ups? It was possible he hated me for shelving *us* and insisting on going ahead with the sting. I couldn't read him, as much as I wanted to. If we stood there for much longer without saying anything, we were going to confirm Huang's opinion that he should scrub the mission.

"Okay," I said to cover up the awkwardness. "I want to avoid scrap until I'm convinced it's done falling over, so let's use the time to go and get parts for the claw. It'll give me a chance to introduce everyone to Huang and see if they buy my story about him."

Huang liked that idea. He wanted results and he didn't want to have to wait for a conclusion. He knew, as well as I did, that I was too broke to explain having two hired hands. Kyle and Huang didn't have the seedy, alcohol ruined faces of my last crew, so saying that he was working for a roof over his head wasn't going to cut it. Kyle had the excuse of sexual fringe benefits, but no one was going to believe I had two of them on a string. I had a reputation for being picky and almost celibate, after all. A plan was already percolating in my head, though, as I put on my hat and led the way out of the shack. I was damned sure Huang and Kyle weren't going to like it, but it was the only plausible explanation I could think of.

I'd once told Kyle that being seen and outrageous was a better cover than being plain and secretive. Well, I was about to test that theory in a major way.

"Just follow my lead," I told them.

I lead the way out of my lot and towards the market. The dirt was drying and beginning to cover everything again. It tickled my nose and coated my skin. I scratched at it irritably and inched my bandana up to my nose. Kyle, one step behind me, did the same. Huang trailed behind us with his hands in his pockets and his back straight. He ignored any discomfort. He was giving everything a disdainful look. Perfect. He was making it very easy for me.

When we reached the line of market stalls, I stopped them both. "You two go check out Mud Hopper and let me get the parts." I paused and then decided that I needed to reveal at least some of my plan to Huang. "Huang, in case anyone asks, you are Kyle's unemployed cousin who's just arrived from Titus station. Got that?" Huang narrowed eyes at me. I grinned. "Just keep up that attitude, too."

Huang glared at Kyle, who was looking puzzled, but supportive of me. I left them to their own devices and found the stall that sold the parts for the claw.

I pounded on the counter to get the owner's attention. A man came out of the back of the stall, wiping grease from his hands onto a leather apron. Bald and built like a bull, he sported about a dozen silver earrings in one ear and had a circular tattoo on his cheek.

He didn't say his usual spiel of, *'I don't give credit'*. If there was something to know, he usually knew it. The man heard about everything that went on around the scrap yards. I'm sure he was well aware that loser Masters had made a sale.

"I need some parts for my claw, Skake," I told him and made my voice irritated, as if I was on the edge of losing it. I ran a distracted hand through my bangs and slumped on the counter as I slid the parts list at him. I knew he couldn't resist asking and I wasn't disappointed.

"I thought that you'd be happy," Skake drawled as he took the list and eyed it. "You made that sale..."

"Business is good. Life isn't," I ground out.

"Oh?" He sounded bored, like he didn't give a damn, as he pulled out a spec book that was filthy with dirt and grease and began flipping through it for my model of claw. Most people didn't use computers. The station dust and machine grease was too hard on them.

I crossed my arms and rested my chin on them, leaning on the counter as if I was sinking into massive depression. "You don't want to know."

Skake put a bill of sale next to the book and began scribbling with his grease stained, calloused, pudgy fingers. "Having trouble with that new guy?"

I grunted in answer. Skake was good. He made it seem like he was just making senseless small talk; non-offensive and non-evasive.

"That's what you get when you take people from outside the lots," Skake lectured. "You got kind of personal with this one, though. That must suck."

I snickered to myself. He wanted the dirt so bad he was willing to prod to get it. It was just too strange that this big burly guy was the biggest gossip on the station, that he indulged in something that I'd always imagined was the territory of fine ladies having tea parties.

I straightened and burst out, as if I couldn't keep it in any longer, "His freakin' asshole cousin showed up and he told him he could stay, just like that, without asking me first! His cousin is a waste of space. He's never worked a day in his life!"

Skake grunted and said, "I heard there was shouting on your lot. Guess that was why?"

I couldn't help blinking at him, thinking about what little time had passed. I settled on pissed off as I responded with, "You heard that? I had a pile of scrap go over and almost kill us. Anybody hear that?"

That wasn't really fair. Scrap piles fell all of the time, especially during the quakes, and it was pretty much every man for himself. If we had died, someone might have come to investigate when the smell got too bad, but otherwise... hey, it was a tough place and I didn't have any illusions.

Skake was shrugging as he finished his paper and put away the book. “Looks like you’ll have to jettison both of them,” he said, ignoring my comment on scrap piles. He didn’t want to know about that, after all. “That’s too bad. You can’t run that lot by yourself. Any new prospects, or are you going to sell?”

I saw red. There wasn’t any other way to put it. My act suddenly turned real as I leaned over the counter and jabbed a finger into Skake’s leather clad chest. “Fuck that!” I shouted. “Nobody gets my lot! As long as my help works, his asshole cousin can stay in my bum shack and starve to death, for all I care. He’s not getting any handouts from me!”

Skake grunted, expressive and satisfied. “Eh, calm down, Masters. No offense.”

I pulled myself back until my feet were on the ground again. I looked almost apologetic as I pulled my shirt back into place. “Sorry, man,” I said, but didn’t sound it. “My problems are mine, okay? I just need those parts.”

“Sure thing,” Skake replied and went to look through his inventory shed. Soon he would spread his new gossip all over station. Max Master’s employee, slash lover, was still working, but he’d foisted off a good for nothing cousin on stupid Max. Stay tuned for further developments.

Skake handed me the parts in several boxes and I carried the heavy things back to where Kyle and Huang were staring out at the competition field of dried dirt where my half submerged Mud Hopper was imbedded. I handed some of my burden to Kyle and said proudly, “Mission accomplished. I have the parts and everyone now knows that Huang is my new freeloader.”

Chapter Fourteen

Pride

“Masters,” Huang began with a frown, but the sound of a large machine trundling our way interrupted him.

Emitting black smoke and smelling like leaking gasoline, a claw machine was coming right at us. Kyle and Huang were backing up, Kyle plucking at my sleeve, anxiously. I scowled at the machine and held my ground.

My lot neighbor, Stubbert, was glaring at me as he half leaned out of the cab, a stubby cigar hanging out of his mouth. Without a word and at the last possible moment, he swerved to miss me and plowed into the dried mud. Big wheels churned up the red dirt and threw it on us as the machine made its way to Mud Hopper. It didn't pause as it lowered its claw and latched onto my little machine. Pulling it up with contemptuous ease, it freed Mud Hopper from its mud tomb and then shifted gears to carry it back to me.

Stubbert leaned further out of the cab, the engine of his claw chugging and its gears grinding as he shouted, “I owed you.” Just that and nothing more as he pivoted his machine and trundled away towards my lot with Mud Hopper.

I frowned as Kyle looked from me to the retreating machine. He said, “You don't look happy about that.”

I shrugged irritably. “He owed me a favor. I could have used it better. Our claw could have pulled Mud Hopper out.” I ignored Kyle's skeptical look at the deep, churned up dirt. Okay, maybe not, but he didn't have to point that out.

“Masters,” Huang growled impatiently. “Explain.”

“I saved his life, kind of,” I told him, using my bandana to wipe sweat and dried mud off of my face. “He decided that he didn't want to wait for me to collect on the debt. He salvaged my machine for me.”

Huang should really patent that glare of his. I could almost feel my skin grilling from the heat from it. “You know what I meant,” he said.

Okay, now I had to fess up. “Come on,” I grunted and led the way back towards my lot, following the large tire tracks of Stubbert's machine.

I mulled over what to say, chewing over words with a wince frozen on my face. I knew Huang's pride just as well as I knew his temper. Finally, turning so my back wasn't to him and vulnerable, because I really wasn't sure how he was going to take it, I explained, “Well, seeing as how you wanted to stay, I told my parts supplier you were Kyle's cousin. I also told him that Kyle talked me into letting you stay with us and giving

you work. I told Skake I didn't like that, because..."

"Because, why?" Huang prompted.

I looked around at the empty alley and the worn, dirty, plasti-wood fencing on either side of us. The stench of rusting metal was everywhere. It was always more noticeable after it rained. I felt really tired, just then, and I didn't want to deal with Kyle and our tentative relationship, Huang's pissed off attitude, and the other scrap men, who were willing to take me out to make their businesses a success. Even the steadily growing heat seemed against me. I'd always felt like *'Max Masters against the world,'* but I didn't usually notice it so much. I also rarely had it sit on my shoulders like a three-ton claw machine.

"Because, you're good for nothing and you won't, or can't, get work," I said quickly, just to get it over with. I was proud of myself that I'd left off the asshole part. Well, he didn't need that part of the story, because he didn't need to pretend to be one.

The muscles on Huang's jaw bunched and I knew his teeth were grinding together. I also knew what he was thinking. He didn't get it.

"Look!" I exploded under my breath, getting dangerously close to him, so that no one could overhear us. "When you tell a damned story, you have to make people believe it. A story goes over better if there's some soap opera to it, okay? If I just say, *'Oh, by the way, Kyle's cousin moved in with us.'* that makes people ask questions. If I say, *'Kyle's bum cousin moved in, without my say so. Now I'm mad as hell and things are shit between me and Kyle right now.'* it answers a lot of questions. It keeps people satisfied and they end up just watching the drama, instead of asking more questions."

I backed off and waited for his reaction.

Those black eyes skewered me. Huang's jaw continued to grind for about a minute and then he nodded, hard, once. "Acceptable. For now."

The tail end of that sentence wasn't lost on me. I couldn't help pushing my luck, though. "You're going to trust me?"

Huang lifted his chin, his demeanor going cold and arrogant as he said, in a very seething, but quiet voice, "You saved my life. I owe you. I will allow this, but I intend to coordinate the sting personally from now on."

That weight on my shoulders grew another hump and I ached with it. I rubbed at my eyes, trying to keep my temper, trying to hold it all together. I didn't want to bottle it up. I knew where that led. I didn't want to haul off and beat up Huang, the way I had tried to with Kyle. For one thing, Huang would haul my ass off to jail and he would cancel the entire operation. He was on the verge of doing that already. Only his pride, in not wanting the mission to fail, and his honor, were keeping the sting alive.

“We have a lot of work to do,” I sighed as I began walking again. “I expect you and Kyle to clean out the back shack today, though, while I fix the claw. You’ll both be living there from now on.”

It was a reasonable arrangement in light of what Huang wanted. It didn’t make the decision hurt less. I wanted to get used to waking up with Kyle’s warm body pressed to mine. I didn’t want to stop things and go back to being alone. My neediness was a two edged sword, though. On the one hand, I yearned for Kyle, on the other hand, I hated my loss of independence, my reliance on myself.

When we reached the gate to my lot, I found Mud Hopper sprawled on its side just outside, caked in dried mud. I touched the twisted handlebars and saw the smashed gas tank. I didn’t look further than that. I didn’t have time to fix him and probably wouldn’t have time for a long while. Putting down my box of parts on top of Mud Hopper and grabbing onto the damaged machine, I gave my comrades a look that told them they were helping and to not bother voicing whatever they were thinking.

Kyle moved first, finding a good handhold at the front. We both looked at Huang. He glared back, made an exasperated sound, and took up a position at the rear to push.

“On three,” I told them.

I did the count and we all began rocking the damaged piece of metal to get it out of the depression that had been caused by it being dumped from the height of Stubbert’s claw. He hadn’t been gentle and probably considered the machine useless scrap.

We heaved and pushed for what seemed like a frustratingly long time. Huang did most of the work. He was a lot stronger than he looked. Kyle wasn’t a slouch, either, and that surprised me. He was broad in the shoulder, but it was hard to see where all of his strength was coming from as he pulled harder than I did.

I told them to stop after we had managed to get Mud Hopper just inside my fence, safe from other scrap men making a claim. I silently promised the machine that later, when we had the claw working, I would treat him properly.

“Now, if we could get on with it?” Huang said disdainfully as he brushed his hands together to get off the dirt.

I couldn’t help smirking, but I turned my shoulder to Huang to hide it and said to Kyle, as I picked up my boxes again, “Show him where the cleaning supplies are. There’s a power hose out there too. Just make sure you open the drain to reclaim the water, or we’ll be going without water until our next allotment period. On station, that could take a year.” That wasn’t an exaggeration.

Was Kyle angry? Was he sad? Was he confused as to why I was turning him out to live with Huang? As Kyle bent to pick up his boxes and began following me to the claw,

I snuck a look and found him sneaking one at me. Our eyes locked. Okay, it sounds stupid, and it seems impossible, but we exchanged a whole hell of a lot in that look. I felt as if we had just spent all night talking. He understood the situation. He understood I wasn't rejecting him. He agreed with me. He reassured me everything was still okay between us and told me how much our separation was going to make him unhappy. We both told each other how much we wanted it to all be over, so we could be together again, alone, without the Special Forces messing things up for us. All of that in a few seconds of staring at each other. We finally looked away, not wanting to give Huang a show. It would have been nice if we could have had sex with a look too, but I firmly cut that thought off as I dumped my boxes on the fender of the claw.

As I repositioned my hat, to keep the reflected sun from giving me heatstroke, Huang said, "Once we are done with these *duties*, I will look over your accounts and we will make a solid, reasonable, plan for making contact with our target."

"I think we had a reasonable plan already," I grated as I flipped open the engine casing. It made a creaking, rusted-metal protest. "Build up the business, get some contraband material in, act like complete amateurs, and get Mr. Big to snap at the bait."

Huang narrowed dark eyes and gave Kyle a glare. Kyle met that glare with one of his. "We can't afford to spend the time necessary to bring this business back from its financial troubles," Huang informed me. That told me what he thought of my business. *Hopeless*, probably summed it up.

"If we—" Kyle began to protest, but Huang cut him off.

"Selling out of desperation to save a failing business, is a more valid reason than jeopardizing one that is doing well," Huang explained. "Don't you agree?" His tone said, '*Of course you will agree, because I'm a genius.*'

I was really finding it hard not to punch his arrogant lights out, especially since he was making sense. I was starting to understand, as well, that Kyle had agreed with Huang's plan all along and hadn't gone through with it because of me. He had actually given a shit, unlike Huang, that my business was going under. I could see someone falling for the scam, someone rushing in to take advantage of a credit strapped Max Masters. It happened all the time.

Kyle looked as if he was going to make one more protest on my behalf, but I was the one who cut him off, now. I said, pissed as hell, but keeping my voice tight and reasonable, "Okay, that makes sense. So, when do you want to do it?"

Huang blinked. It was so obvious he hadn't expected me to agree with him. He said, "After I review your situation, we will discuss likely contacts and ways to ship the contraband into your lot in a believable manner. I will defer to your expertise."

A person could take that two ways, either he was complimenting me on being intelligent and knowledgeable about human behavior, or he was saying I was a good liar. There was a difference.

“You had better get cleaning,” I told Huang with a tight smile. “That shack is pretty dirty and I only have one bed in mine. I don’t think you want to share it with me and Kyle?”

Huang’s nostrils flared. I could tell the very thought of cuddling with me, in one bed, was disgusting to him. Kyle was smart enough to get Huang away from me before he could give me a choice reply.

I carted my tools over to the claw and started working. At some point, I heard loud cursing in Chinese. I grinned evilly. I felt bad for Kyle, though. I had promised to help him. I couldn’t work up the guilt, though, to make me stop and go over there. A part of me blamed Kyle for my situation right along with Huang. He’d gone a long way to making it up, but there was really no way he could salvage everything. He had set a train of events in motion. It was a train that was going to run my ass over, no matter what anyone said or didn’t say. Because of that, I couldn’t help the part of me that was happy about Kyle cleaning crap out of a shed that was frying in the sun.

Thinking of frying made me wipe sweat from my dripping forehead, take off my hat, and tie my bandana around my forehead. Putting my hat back on over it, I continued to work as the temperature rose. The god of the weather controls was hell bent on drying the last ounce of water from the scrap yards, it seemed, and everyone else in them.

Someone put an ice cold container of water by my hand. I blinked dazedly at it as I bent over the claw’s engine with a wrench in my lax hand. I’m not sure how long I’d been standing like that, and wasn’t really sure just how long it had been since I had actually done something to the engine.

“You look dehydrated,” Kyle told me worriedly.

“You stink,” I said hoarsely as I snagged the water from him, opened it up, and took small, cautious sips. I warmed the water in my mouth before swallowing, knowing what a sudden shock of cold could do to a heat exhausted body.

Kyle plucked at his filthy shirt. “I hope you’re talking about the smell?”

I could only nod as I rolled the cold drink across my forehead and closed my eyes in pleasure.

“The shack was bad, but using the hose saved us a lot of work,” Kyle explained. He paused and then said more seriously, “Max, I’m sorry.”

I swallowed some more water and squinted at him. “You tried to bend things in my favor. I can’t help but feel good about that, but the rest...”

Kyle picked up a tool and bent over the engine. He began tightening a part as he replied, "Huang's taking complete control of the operation. I'm to follow orders or he will pull me completely from the field."

"He's right, Kyle, and you know it," I said as I put my wrench in and helped him with the part. As we struggled together, I continued sourly, "It makes my situation that much more shitty, unfortunately."

We were quiet; grunting, sweating, getting covered in grease, and both of us draining the water container as we finished putting in the new pump. I climbed into the cab, then, and cranked the engine. It complained, spluttered, chugged, and then roared to life emitting a plume of black smoke. I whooped loudly in relief, pumping the air in victory with my fist. Kyle grinned up at me, the heat from the engine rolling over him. God! He looked handsome, just then, and I couldn't help jumping down from the claw, grabbing him, and devouring his lips with my own. I shoved him away in the next instant, laughing at his hungry, glazed, and confused look.

"You stink even more, now!" I told him with disgust that wasn't completely faked.

"You don't exactly smell like flowers, either," Kyle retorted.

I looked over his shoulder at the shack and wondered how long Huang would stay busy. The stiffness in my pants was telling me to do one thing. That involved a hot shower and two naked bodies getting clean. My brain reminded me that this was exactly the kind of fraternization Huang had been talking about.

Kyle was suddenly very close to me. His blue eyes looked dangerous and I was almost ready to fight him, when he pushed me behind the claw and out of anyone's line of sight. Our cover was a shadow cast by the claw against a spot between it and a wall. When Kyle's hand kneaded my erection, I felt as if I was getting jolted with electricity. When he squeezed and palmed me, my knees shook.

"Fuck Huang," Kyle said in my ear and then bit me there, sucking and nibbling my lobe as he popped open my jeans. He shoved them down off of my hips.

The combination of the foul word and Kyle's aggressive actions, almost made me shoot my load. My nervousness kept me primed, though, and kept me from going over completely, as I thought about discovery and being half naked out in my lot. I'm not a damned exhibitionist, but wanting hard enough can make a man do a lot of things he would have never considered before.

Kyle took my hand and pressed my palm on his cloth covered erection. I knew what he had in mind, some mutual getting off. We could both pop our loads quickly. As I palmed his cock, I wondered about the odds of a customer showing up before we finished, or, more likely, Huang. Those odds were against us and it was enough to keep

me from going to my knees and saying ‘hello!’ to Kyle’s needy half. It was also enough to keep me from letting him stroke my problem child as well.

“Kyle... Stop... I... can’t... I’m...” I give him points for breaking off and looking at me in concern, even though his hands were still on the job. “Not here.” I gave a nervous nod at the yard outside of our shadow. “It’s just too...”

Kyle looked frustrated as he took a reluctant step back, but his hands were pulling at his jeans, most likely suffering from blue balls. “I-I shouldn’t have,” he stammered, “but I just wanted... I wasn’t sure....” Kyle left the sentence unfinished, but I knew what he meant. He had wanted to make sure of me, make sure of *us*, all romantic gazing into each other’s eyes aside. What we can fuck, we can claim as ours. Almost nothing else rises to that level of assured possessiveness for most psyches.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told him fiercely, “We’re still going to be together after the sting.”

I could see the doubt in Kyle’s eyes, the fear that something would happen to tear us apart and destroy what we were building between us.

I reached out, grabbed him by the neck, and pulled him in to kiss him hard. He returned the fierceness of the kiss and let me lead him to the outside shower I kept for emergency purposes. Pulling us both under the spigot, I pulled the chain. A powerful jet of cold water soaked us both. I let it continue to soak us until both of us cooled off, in more ways than one. When Kyle pushed my hand off of the chain, and the water stopped, his bangs were hanging in his blue eyes. Water dripped off of his nose as he blinked at me.

“Love you,” Kyle said abruptly and I knew what he wanted, what would cement us together with a bond even stronger than sex until this was all over.

I didn’t know if I could meet that declaration with one of my own, though. It wasn’t the kind of *love you* that you said offhandedly to everyone in general. It wasn’t a *love you* that you said to keep someone occupied while you found your shoes to leave. It was the *I love you* that meant commitment.

I watched the water droplets fall from Kyle’s face and glitter on their way down to the muddied dirt under our soaked boots. I thought about losing him, of having him go away and never come back. Do you want to know how you really know when you’re in love? When the thought of not having them any longer makes your life seem pointless.

I grabbed Kyle by the hair at the nape of his neck, tangled my fingers into the wet strands there, and pulled him in towards me sharply until our foreheads were resting together. We blinked at each other, our water droplets mingling. I said it, and it was like pulling my soul out of my chest and giving it to him, “Love you, too.”

The world stopped. We forgot to breathe. Kyle slowly smiled and blinked rapidly. I had the feeling some salty drops had suddenly joined the fresh water ones on his face as he jerked out of my grasp and looked down at his wet clothes. I found myself looking away as well, unable to endure the emotional aftermath of our mutual confessions. I don't think we'll ever be good at having these emotional moments. They just seem to embarrass the hell out of us.

I tried to recover first. I rubbed the back of my neck and said awkwardly, "Well, I'm guessing Huang is probably pissed as hell that you aren't helping him. You should get back and I should start dismantling that big pile of scrap."

"Yes," Kyle said in quick agreement. He glanced at me and then away. He swallowed hard, but he was smiling again. "I don't think I can last long away from you."

Screw Huang and what he thought about Kyle and me. Things had changed. "If I catch you being anything except completely devoted to this operation, I'll cut you off." I saw Kyle wince at my choice of words, "But if you can keep your eye on the prize, I think we can manage some private time later where Agent Huang can't find us."

"I will be completely dedicated," Kyle promised and his double meaning was clear by the glint in his eyes.

"I won't expect anything less," I retorted over my shoulder as I went back to work.

Chapter Fifteen

Sow's Ear

I had a lot of time to think as I separated scrap with the claw. Uppermost on my mind, was the fact I was wasting my time. Kyle's plans to separate, sort, and inventory everything to put me in the black, and to straighten out my troubles with station Internal Revenue, were now defunct. The only thing I was doing now was keeping up appearances.

There is nothing like chewing on anger and bitterness in high heat to make a man rise to a new level of being pissed off and as depressed as hell. Sure I could be happy Kyle wasn't going to dump me, along with everything else, that he actually wanted some promises of commitment from me, but what was he getting? What was going to be left of Max Masters when it was all over? Possibilities ranged from a homeless loser to a lock up inmate. Any way I looked at it, I wasn't a prize to begin with, and I definitely wasn't going to end up being one after it was all over.

Thinking like that, brought me back to my original, insurmountable worries about where we were going with our relationship. Special Forces agent and Scrap man; the two were as opposed to each other as a person could get. Even if I did end up losing everything and starting a new life, it was still hard to imagine the two of us together. Kyle was all about commitment, dedication, and self-sacrifice, in a position honored by everyone. I was all about surviving on the edge of society. I couldn't see myself moving to a place in the pristine city and becoming one of those citizens who looked down on scrap men, never wondering if the weather, and the water supply, was different for the have-nots.

I tossed a large chunk of something onto the pile, the last of it, and backed the claw into its space. The engine died with a splutter, warning me it intended not to start the next time I tried it. Climbing down and burning my hands on the hot metal, I swore and landed awkwardly. I flinched in surprise when Kyle's hand went under my elbow to steady me.

I took off my hat and bandana, using it to wipe the sweat and dirt off of my face. I coughed up grit and asked, "Get done?"

My voice must have reflected what I'd been stewing over for the last few hours, because Kyle asked worriedly, "You're angry?"

No shit, I thought. I put my hat back on and dipped my head, so that the brim hid my eyes, as I replied, "I'm a smart man. I don't need anyone to add up the score for me."

He blinked, thinking about that, and then he leaned in close, understanding. "It is very important that we finish this sting," he told me, "but I intend to do all of the things that

we planned.”

I sneered, I couldn't help it. “And *Ice Man* is going to let you do that?”

Kyle became intense. “Huang isn't my superior, only my partner. There are regulations, but helping you and your business doesn't conflict with those. We are scrap men. We are supposed to be interested in making this business a success. If we sit and do nothing, until we are contacted by our targets, that's suspicious and out of the ordinary.”

“And when it's all over and it's time to leave?” Okay, I was a blunt son of a bitch. I always have needed it all spelled out and on the table.

Kyle scowled. He leaned in even closer, his blue eyes boring into mine. “What I'm feeling for you isn't going to go away after the operation. I've told you that. I meant what we said earlier to each other.”

My anger deflated, but my bitterness wouldn't. I'd been on the toe end of the kick too many times. Kyle might have the best intentions and he might really love me, but life had a habit of tearing that out of my hands in ways he couldn't begin to know. Talk was just that, talk. I needed to see it happening to actually believe in it.

Kyle looked frustrated when he saw I was going to continue to be pessimistic. His grip on my arm was hard. “Huang may seem like a—”

“An asshole,” I interjected, frowning.

Kyle grimaced and went on, “There is a man under that and he is honorable. He won't stand in the way of my helping you as long as it doesn't conflict with the sting.”

I shook my head sharply and he stopped talking as I looked down at my dirty boots. “Honor doesn't have anything to do with it.”

I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Kyle didn't seem to understand that Huang thought I was a criminal and therefore beneath contempt. He couldn't see that Huang's attitude towards me was caused by the fact I was a low life scrap man and that he considered me way beneath Kyle's class. Huang was disappointed in Kyle. He was upset by Kyle's lapses in judgment where it concerned me. I could tell he was more than half afraid I was going to fall and take Kyle down with me. I couldn't blame him for that last bit. I was worried about that myself.

“So, you didn't answer my question,” I sidestepped. “Are you done with the shack?”

“Yes,” Kyle replied in a subdued voice. I could tell he didn't like to be doubted, especially by me, and that he still wanted to reassure me about his intentions.

“Let's go see,” I prompted, not wanting to give him the chance to talk more about us or about my business. I was done twisting myself into a knot over it for the day. When it came right down to it, a lot of things were out of my control. Kyle could say all he wanted, but he couldn't, in the end, tell the world how to treat Max Masters. Huang

would happily see me in jail. My lot mate would happily see me dead and my yard free for him to claim. Station Revenue would happily like to tax me out of business; one less scrap man to clutter the station. It almost felt good to get back on familiar ground and back to me against the world... almost.

When I began leading the way to the shack, Kyle leaned into my shoulder and gave me a small shove. It made me stumble. I put my hands into my pockets, hunched my shoulders, and couldn't help smiling as I shoved back. He stumbled, laughed, and we walked together with me in a slightly better mood.

Life had some major shit potential, but having Kyle there felt comforting in a way that I'd never anticipated. Hard, bitter me, would have plowed through whatever came my way, alone and fighting until the end. It was different going into the battle with someone fighting by my side.

The doors and windows of the shack were wide open. I smelled caustic, industrial cleaners as I mounted the steps and cautiously went inside. Huang was opening up one of two cots. Aside from a refrigerator, a sink, and a small cube stove, the place had been completely emptied. The old, metal walls, floors, and the one narrow counter that divided the room from the *kitchen*, were spotless. I had an image of Huang going along the baseboards with a fine toothbrush. I'd never seen the place so clean, even when Travers had been living there.

"Nice," was all that I could think to say.

Huang straightened and I felt the burn of his dark glare. He didn't reply and I knew it was only because he couldn't express his absolute anger at the circumstances in mere words.

I rubbed at the back of my neck as I looked anywhere but at Huang. "Sorry," I told him. He really deserved an apology, whatever I felt about him.

"The circumstances were described to me by Kyle," Huang told me in a voice that was strung so tight, I could tell he wanted to shout and was denying himself the pleasure.

I shot a quick look at him and then started in amazement. Jeez! Didn't the man even sweat? It just didn't seem natural, the way he still looked so neat, cool, and collected after cleaning out a complete dive. You know, I could still give the man points for that, even if I hated him.

"The composite floor laminate will take time to dry," Kyle said as he came out from behind me.

I noticed that the laminate planks were gleaming wet from the power hose. I hadn't realized that they were white. They'd never been that clean before. It gave me something to look at as I said, "Uh, I'll compensate you two for cleaning this, okay? I'll up your

credits on the next sale.”

Huang raised a slender eyebrow. “Unnecessary. We are using it for a base of operations.”

He wasn't going to give me a chance to get back a little *face*. All I could do was look like an idiot as I found myself going out again into the fading sunlight of evening. I glared at nothing in particular. I heard Kyle snarl something and Huang's cool reply, but I couldn't make out the words. Somehow, my revenge on Huang had failed and I had come out looking like a vindictive moron. I wondered if Kyle saw it that way? After all, I'd made him a part of that revenge.

“I'm such a fuck up,” I hissed at myself and thought about going to Market Row and getting completely shit faced drunk. I wanted to stop my suffering for at least awhile.

An arm hooked around my waist and began pulling me towards my shack. I looked at Kyle, startled. “Huang wants to meditate,” Kyle told me, “and I want dinner, with you.”

“Isn't that fraternization?” I wondered sourly.

“My cover story is that I'm going to be inputting the scrap inventory that you took today into my computer and getting my things from your shack,” Kyle told me with a pleased smirk. “Both are legitimate excuses.”

“Kyle,” I began, feeling a pleased thrill, but still feeling bad enough to drown that out.

“He took a shower and changed his clothes,” Kyle told me.

I blinked, confused. “What?”

“Before we came to the shack,” Kyle explained, amused, “He does sweat, stink, and get filthy just like everyone else, Max, and he does have a heart under that asshole exterior. He didn't argue when I told him I was going with you.”

“Asshole exterior?” I snickered, feeling relieved suddenly. So, my nemesis wasn't superhuman. I started feeling less inferior and that naturally put me in a better mood. “If he has a heart, it's made out of rusted scrap.”

We went into my shack. I stretched sore muscles and yawned as I went into the bedroom. When I noticed that Kyle hadn't followed me, I turned and looked back into the office. He was standing near the desk, taking off his hat, and rubbing at the grit on his face as his eyes took in the nearly empty room.

“What? Heatstroke?” I wondered.

Kyle quirked a smile at me, but it didn't reach his eyes. He motioned to the room. “How much did those men steal? You don't even have pictures on the walls.”

I frowned, not really having noticed that myself. I looked at the empty walls. Well, empty except for my calendar and schedule board. I felt suddenly embarrassed, because it hit me, all at once, why it was that bare. I fiddled with my shirt hem and cleared my

throat when it unaccountably became dry and tight.

How do you explain that you've lived your entire life moving from place to place? That being able to do it quickly and quietly was as ingrained as peeing standing up? I shrugged as if the question irritated me. I made a dismissive motion at the room. "I don't have time for nick knacks and hanging pictures. Besides, the dirt gets into everything here. It's better keeping it all in boxes."

Kyle frowned. "What did they take?" I knew he meant my employees and Special Forces.

"My computer," I replied and went into the bedroom, making him follow me to get the rest of his answer, "a video screen, music player, magazines, and some video disks."

Yeah, not much to show for that many years struggling in my scrap lot, but things weigh you down and make you slow. That went right back to my days in the war again. I sighed and sprawled on the futon, sitting back on my elbows and my legs hanging off of the side.

Kyle was looking around my bare bedroom now. "Do you keep things put away?"

I replied, annoyed by his damned persistence, "Yeah, in the storage closet." I gestured with my chin at the narrow door. I wasn't going to open it and show him my neatly stacked and taped boxes. There were only three and they held the mementos from my life: photos, an award given to me for some war time heroics, some odds and ends from my life before the war, and a stuffed cat that one of the market girls had given to me for my birthday.

My scrap yard was the longest I had lived anywhere. How do you explain to someone that you have never learned to believe that your life wasn't going to change in the blink of an eye? That you still jerk awake and imagine that enemy troops are destroying everything around you? It hurt too damned much to put it into words.

Kyle picked up two drinks, hit the cold tabs, and leaned to hand me one. I sipped slowly, murmuring my thanks and glad I had something to look at instead of his sympathetic expression. He was probably wondering about my sanity.

"Everything I own is in that bag," Kyle confessed suddenly, pointing to his duffel.

I looked up then in shock, almost crushing my drink. "What?"

Kyle shrugged and looked away, his voice small and uncertain as he replied, "I stay in Special Forces barracks, when I'm not on an assignment. I've found that it's best not to own too many things. I travel a great deal."

"Oh," I stared and then came back to myself. I slapped a spot on the futon beside me. "Sit the hell down, Kyle."

He grimaced and managed a very small smile. "I stink. I think I'll shower and change

first.”

“Okay.” I watched him go, understanding how uncomfortable our confessions had made us both. It’s not easy letting someone you care about know that you aren’t quite normal. On some level, we already did know that. Who could live our lives and not end up hanging from the rafters and howling at the full moon? It was just hard to actually confess it.

It suddenly occurred to me that I was wasting a perfectly good opportunity to relieve some of our confession awkwardness. So what if it was fraternization and probably a bad idea? So what if it wrapped me and Kyle tighter together during a crucial operation? The way things were going, it might be our last time together. I couldn’t add ‘*until after the operation*’ and I knew that it was another aspect of the ‘*it’s all going to go to shit sooner or later.*’ syndrome me and Kyle seemed to both suffer from. That kind of misery doesn’t love company, but we were stuck being pessimists. Hope could wiggle its cute nose all it wanted to, but it wasn’t going to win, completely, against the lessons learned from harsh experience.

I stumbled as I pulled off my shoes and socks. The pop of the snap on my jeans was loud as I hurried to get out of them. Tossing off my shirt, I walked to the bathroom already sporting the evidence of my strong desire. I knocked once on the metal door.

I could almost hear Kyle’s smile as he said, “Come in.”

What happened next was a jumble of images, almost like still frames, as I stepped through the door and into the hot water of the shower. Wet, soapy bodies, hot, slippery, mutual hand exploration, devouring kisses, and dancing tongues, mingled with pounding hot water, the tortured sound of rusted pipes, and our pants and moans.

I came so hard that I cried out and almost fell to my knees. Kyle’s hand on me was tight and almost brutal in its motions as he pumped every drop out of my cock while he sucked on my mouth. He wasn’t far behind, my fingers tight and jerking him to orgasm as he moaned my name.

Afterward, leaning against Kyle and panting, I reached behind him and turned off the water. I squeezed his shoulder as I gave his still sensitive cock a few last strokes with my calloused fingers. Since I was staring down, it was almost comical watching him twitch and shiver. I found myself comparing us, his wiry strength and well-built legs and my still eager erection bobbing between us.

I reached out for Kyle, his desire swelling again, but he protested, even though he sounded reluctant to stop as well. He was right. We were both exhausted. We had to eat. Kyle had to at least keep up appearances and have something to show Huang when he returned to their shack.

We ended up in shorts and t-shirts, curled up together on the futon and eating dinner. Kyle was punching numbers into his computer with one hand while I detailed inventory from memory. Maybe it wasn't romantic, but we were together and doing important things for my business as well as the sting. There was something that was very appealing about that.

When we finished eating and the leftovers were in the garbage, we ended up sitting and looking at each other. "You should go back now," I told him half-heartedly.

"I don't want to go," Kyle replied.

I stood up, trying to tame my libido and stay strong. I turned my back on him and jammed my hands into the pockets of my shorts. I could hear him sigh. I hoped he understood. It hurt to push him away and it hurt to keep him close. I didn't really know how to deal with that kind of pain, the pain that twisted me up inside right at the level of my heart. Turning away from him was my way of telling Kyle I needed space to deal with my emotions.

After a long while, Kyle said quietly, "I'm afraid, too. I've never felt this way before. I've never had anyone this close to me. I have a lot of defenses against that. I think I would have become closer to you, during the war, if that hadn't been true."

"That's changed?" I wondered in a husky voice.

"I still have defenses," Kyle admitted, "but I did get some therapy. I also let others show me how to be something other than a soldier. It wasn't easy to change."

I was flustered at that revelation. Therapy? If he had been living out of a duffel bag, and had never slept a whole night with anyone before me, then therapy hadn't been completely successful. Kyle was more open, though. I couldn't imagine the old Kyle caring about me, or touching me with such feeling. I remembered cold looks, harsh, short sentences, death threats, and a punch, once or twice, during the war.

I told myself I was trying to lighten the mood, but I was really trying to stop the freight train of revelations, and the emotional baggage that went with them, when I said, "You know, I thought you were a stone cold killer during the war, with a crush on your gun. It's hard to imagine you taking normal lessons from anyone."

"Don't talk about it that way," Kyle seethed and I started. Turning around, I could see that he was glaring at me. Shit. I had poked an ant nest without knowing it. I suppose no one wanted still open wounds seasoned with salt.

My mouth hung open and I said quickly, "Kyle, I'm sorry! I didn't mean... I was just being stupid. I'm not saying I thought you weren't capable of feeling anything." But that had been just what I had meant and he heard my dishonesty as much as I tried to cover it up.

Kyle was visibly struggling to get a grip on his emotions. He bit out at last, “It isn’t true, what you thought. I felt everything.”

“All right,” I replied quickly, completely at a loss now. My hands came out of my pockets and I hugged myself, feeling weirdly chilled as I turned away again. “If you want to go, I understand. It was a dumb ass thing to say.”

My earlier fear of it all going to crap wasn’t anything compared to actually seeing it go to crap that quickly. When a hand closed on my arm, I twitched. Hand on arm usually meant that someone was about to spin me around for a punch. It was hard to stop my immediate reaction. It was Kyle’s hand, after all. I didn’t know if he was mad enough to hurt me, but I wasn’t going to hurt him first, not until he did something to deserve it.

Kyle was looking at me so intensely, that his blue eyes seemed to glow. Very slowly, he pulled me in close. I let him, amazed at my own restraint. I found myself being brought back onto the futon and then Kyle’s hands were on me and pulling me closer to his body. We wrapped around each other convulsively. I tried to deal with the pain in my chest that had suddenly become unbearable.

It hurt too much. Expecting the worst, waiting for it to happen, yet loving this steely strength, this supple, smooth skinned, warm bundle of possibilities that was Kyle Carter, was almost more than I could handle... yet... I couldn’t help grasping for every wisp of reason to endure, to make it happen, to make Kyle mine, somehow, despite everything.

“Don’t doubt me,” Kyle begged, whispering it fiercely into my ear. “I won’t leave you. I won’t stop loving you, even when you’re an asshole.”

I thumped his collarbone with my forehead and gritted out, “I’m too old for fairy stories, Kyle. I’ve always been too old.”

He surprised me by holding me tighter and chuckling, though it sounded very strained. “I’ll make you believe in them again. I’ll make you believe how much I want this.”

“All right,” I muttered, “Let’s just make it a given, that we’re both going to unload the mental baggage once in a while. Let’s just try not to do it both together, okay?”

He kissed me on the cheek, rough with emotion, as if he needed to stamp some sort of official seal on the promise. “Okay.”

We rested together, but Kyle did go back to Huang eventually. The hurt and the worry was less, though, as we said goodbye on the porch of my shack. It was strange, but, as I watched him walk away under the stark light of the lot overhead lights, it was as if he wasn’t actually leaving me. It felt as if there was a cord attached to him, stretching between us. When I turned to go back into my shack, I didn’t feel abandoned or alone.

Chapter Sixteen

Pulling

I opened my eyes, blinked blearily, and found Kyle beside me in the bed, fully clothed and hair hanging in a messy tangle in his sleeping face. I wanted to frown, but I smiled instead. How could I be mad at a man who went against his very nature to sleep like the dead until late morning, to come and be with me when I woke up?

I put my hands behind my head and watched him, thinking about how he had been able to get into bed with me without my killer soldier instincts making hash out of him. I had become used to him in such a short time. The part of me that trusted no one was pissed as hell about that.

“Hey, Kyle,” I called, finally. We had a lot of work to do and I knew Huang wasn’t sleeping in. Kyle’s excuse had been to come and get me, I was sure, and I wondered how long he had been gone on that particular mission.

Kyle frowned and burrowed into my blankets, muttering something about gun ship mechanics. That made me freeze. If he was back in the war, a wrong twitch might get me dead. I had to remember that Kyle could kill a hundred ways with his bare hands.

“Kyle, we have a lot of scrap to move today,” I tried again. “Huang’s probably getting very angry right about now.”

That registered and his eyes opened. “Zian,” he grumbled and I knew he was back with me and the scrap yard. “He made me get up before there was light and go over your inventory.” His tone told me how well that had gone over.

“Did he find out that you’re not a morning person?” I snickered.

Kyle rolled an eye at me. “Something like that.”

That made me curious. “Haven’t you two ever stayed together on assignments?”

Kyle shook his head and slowly pried himself up from the comfort of the bed. I realized that the shake was to make himself more alert rather than a negative motion. He replied, “We do stay together, but...” He looked embarrassed as he ran his fingers through his hair and pushed it back from his eyes. “I either stay awake or go out while he sleeps.”

“Why?” I was smiling and not sure I should. It was hard to tell where Kyle was going with this.

Kyle frowned. “I’ve never liked sleeping with other people in the same room. I feel...”

“Vulnerable?” I supplied and he nodded. “So, you have never...”

“No.”

“Even when we were on a carrier, you went off to find your own place to sleep,” I

remembered. He nodded again. I looked at his impression on my bed. “But, you don’t have any trouble sleeping with me?”

Kyle’s slow smile made my insides go weak. It was warmth and love in the simple curve of his lips. “No trouble at all,” he replied. The smile banked a little, though when he added thoughtfully, “You have nightmares, sometimes.”

I thought about that as I sat up and padded over to get coffee. I handed him a container, after hitting the heat tabs and said, “I don’t usually remember them. They give me headaches sometimes.”

“You don’t move very much,” Kyle told me, “but you sound as if you’re in pain. I shook at your shoulder and called to you the few times that it happened. You went into deeper sleep.”

“Oh,” I didn’t have much to say to that. I sipped at my coffee, feeling like I’d been caught acting like a five year old. Having nightmares seemed kind of childish.

“I wonder…” Kyle was going to delve into the past and try to psychoanalyze my head. I put a stop to that.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said and shrugged as I took a long drink of my coffee. I tossed the empty into the garbage, ignoring my burnt tongue. “Let’s get to work.”

Kyle wasn’t stupid. He was getting used to my avoidance behavior. He knew when to stop poking into the mental cavities in my head. I’m sure he didn’t like his poked at either.

I hunted for my boots, crouching and feeling under the bed. I found one and pulled it out with a grunt. I saw a problem right away and fingered the parting seam along the instep. I remembered getting stuck on a shard of metal the other day. I hadn’t realized how close it had come to taking off my foot.

“Do you have another pair?” Kyle wondered as he finished his coffee and stood up. “You’ll get dirt in your boot with a rip like that.”

“Yeah,” I replied, and then said nothing as I found the mate and then fished out a clean pair of socks.

“Max?” Kyle said, sounding odd. “If you have another pair, why don’t you—”

“It’s okay,” I grunted as I sat on the floor to put on my socks.

“But, if you have another pair—” Kyle continued to try and argue.

“I said it’s all right!” I snarled as I jammed the boot on. The seam parted a good four inches, leaving me looking at my sock through the leather. I froze and just stared.

“Max?”

“They’re in the closet,” I told him, “Could you… could you get them for me?”

Kyle was very quiet, trying to figure my mood out. Yeah, he could scream about

therapy and getting his head straight and I could scream about looking in my closet. I wondered if we could get a psychologist at half price for the both of us?

I turned my back and scooted around so I was looking at the bed. I didn't take my ripped boot off. I kind of had a hunch that I might still need it.

Kyle took his time, thinking it all through, and then... I'm not sure if it was a sound or a movement on his part. I suddenly knew that he knew. Slowly, his steps went to the closet. I cringed. Talk about acting like a five year old.

"The lock," he said, and sounded relieved. "You have a lock on it." I wasn't going to hope it wasn't opened.

"That's my stuff," I choked out and rubbed at my eyes. "Course I have a damned lock on it."

"A good one," Kyle commented. "I doubt anyone less than a professional agent could get past it."

"Just... Just get my boots!" I tried to cover my emotions with snarling anger as I gave him the pass code. I doubt if he was fooled.

"It's all right," he said with a sigh of relief after he opened the lock and the door. "The boxes are cut, but I can tell they were looked through carefully. There are some credits here in a jar. They would have taken that." Meaning that whoever had looked through my things hadn't been my ex squatters.

I bowed my head to my knees as I heard Kyle lift out something and then close the door. The lock clicked closed. He walked to my side, knelt down, and put my boots within my reach. He asked softly, "All this time... You couldn't look, could you?"

"No," I growled. "It was bad enough knowing your guys pawed through everything. They didn't actually steal my stuff, just confiscated it. I knew if those bums had been in there, it would all be gone. It's stupid and I can't really explain how I feel. A person shouldn't get that attached to stuff. Nothing's permanent. Nothing's forever, you know?"

"Max, I'm sorry," Kyle told me and reached out to grip my hand hard. "I know the agents embarrassed you and that they invaded your privacy. They did only take what they thought might be useful."

"Porn magazines?" I couldn't help the viciousness of my response. "My personal photos?"

"We were trying to link you to suspected criminals," Kyle explained. "Photos might identify you with those people. The magazines... one of the agents suspected that some of the subjects were underage. He thought we might be able to use them as further leverage to get you to cooperate."

I'll give Kyle points for reflexes. My punch didn't land. He deflected it and I ended up

almost nose to nose with him, seething. Maybe I'm not good with mornings either. "Don't you ever...!" I couldn't get the rest out, my outrage making everything turn into white noise as I tried to pant my way through my overwhelming anger and disgust.

"I didn't think that!" Kyle argued.

I was too angry to hear him. "Go find Huang," I told him, biting out each word. "I don't like you or your job right now."

"Max..."

Didn't he get it? Didn't he see what his self-righteous agents had done to me? I guess not, since he was defending their actions and taking their side against me.

We both had grown up biting the bullet, losing our things, losing people close to us, and doing what was necessary without consideration for ourselves. Maybe Kyle was still carrying that around. Maybe he couldn't understand that people shouldn't be expected to sacrifice like that, that we weren't all soldiers fighting for the cause of the law. Maybe he couldn't understand how the actions of a few agents, doing something as simple as going through my personal things, could be as painful to me as... I just didn't want to think about it. Maybe I was overreacting, but I also knew when I was right and he was just damned wrong.

Procedure number one; when you arrest a suspect you go through his shit. I didn't need to be an agent to know that. I could get mad at Kyle and feel sorry for myself as much as I wanted, but he wasn't going to be able to change that, not for me, and not for anyone. I didn't think it was too much to expect him to understand what he and his fellow agents had put me through, or for him to understand that guys like me tended to get smashed under foot while they pursued the bad guys.

"When..." Kyle, stopped, cleared his throat, and tried again, "When that particular agent told me what he suspected about your magazines, I was angry. I wanted to hurt him. When I looked through your box of things and I found that photo of me... I felt amazed, at first, and then hopeful. I also felt very sick, knowing how we had embarrassed you. It was the first time I felt that I could have turned in my badge."

Kyle's blue eyes were soft and hurting, afraid that he had royally screwed up. I wanted to stay pissed, wanted to throw every defense up that I had, because he had just seen how weak and worthless I could be; too chicken shit to open up a closet door. Those eyes killed any thought of more verbal or physical attacks, though, and made me realize continuing to lose my temper was only going to hurt me as well as him.

"Shit!" I growled. I hung my head and glared down at the small space between us, my jaw clenching. When Kyle leaned in and gently kissed my forehead, daring another punch, I half turned away, arms wrapping around my knees and hugging them to my

chest hard.

What did I want? I didn't want to be pissed. I didn't want to hurt. I didn't want to lose Kyle. The scar on my shoulder itched and I rubbed it briskly, remembering that Kyle had seen me at my finest during the war. Now he'd seen me at my worst. It was up to me to decide what to do now.

"Let's go," I said, still feeling angry and embarrassed, but knowing what I had to do to keep what was more important than my pride and self-righteousness. "We have a lot of work to do." I reached for my spare boots.

I didn't want to give Kyle time to argue, or to ask to talk it out. I wasn't even sure that he wanted to. When I was ready, he followed me without an objection. I hoped he understood a truce when he saw one. Maybe I was too bitter about the whole thing to forgive, but I could leave it behind us, and maybe eventually leave it in the past.

Rubbing my eyes against heat and light as I walked out onto the porch, I heard Huang before I saw him. "Things will go smoother if you cooperate, Masters."

I focused on him and blinked. Huang, dressed in simple t-shirt and jeans, was something I wasn't used to seeing. It was too much to hope that he was only wearing a disguise and wasn't planning on working with me.

"I am cooperating," I growled. "I haven't kicked your asses out yet, have I?"

"It's been almost two hours since Agent Carter went to collect you." Huang hadn't lost his cool, arrogant, attitude along with his regular clothes.

"My fault," Kyle said as he stepped away from me. "I allowed him to keep on sleeping while I had coffee."

A headache was starting right between my eyes. I didn't need Kyle telling Huang something like that. I snorted as I moved down the steps and started walking towards my next scrap project. "I have my own timetable, get used to it."

Huang followed me and Kyle followed behind him. "I've gone over your inventory thus far," Huang was telling me. "It would be wise to submit your taxes. It will be easier to convince our target that you are desperate enough to break the law, if he can check and see how badly your business is doing."

I stopped and turned. My fist clenched. Why was it easier to keep my fist from caving in his face when I was too willing to let it fly at Kyle? I guess I didn't need a psychologist to give me the answer to that one. I cared more about Kyle and about what he thought. It was Kyle who could hurt me the most. Still, Huang was very close to the line.

"I don't have the money for an accountant," I had to tell him, reinforcing his opinion that my business was going down the drain.

"I can do your accounts," Huang told me with a dismissive motion of one hand. "I

only require a proper inventory.”

“You could just lie,” I suggested angrily.

Huang’s eyebrow lifted disdainfully. Kyle came to his rescue before he could cross that line, the one with a really pissed off Max Masters on the other side. “Everything needs to be legal,” Kyle told me. “Otherwise, our target could get off on technicalities.”

“Like what?” I wondered sarcastically, only half caring as I turned back to my scrap and my day’s project.

Kyle explained. “Even a man like our target is allowed access to the courts. His council will take advantage of any slip up on our part to set him free. He has to come here to buy contraband without the help of falsified documents or misleading activity on our part.”

I frowned. “So, it’s up to me? A real scrap man has to offer contraband for sale and the target has to come here to buy it without any shady help from you two?”

Kyle nodded.

I scoffed. “You know, the people running this station have been in power for years. They aren’t stupid.”

“No, they are not,” Huang said. “That is why this operation has to be completely believable. That is why we need your help and your contacts.”

“Max Masters suddenly goes bad after having been dragged off by Special Forces agents,” I shook my head. “I think we already have problems.”

My two new employees were very quiet.

I glared at them. “What?”

Kyle looked sick, like a man about to dig his grave. “We filed a report to cover that arrest.”

I suddenly wondered if I could punch them both out at the same time. My hands balled tightly into fists. “What did you put in your report?”

“That you were let go after two arresting agents filed reports saying that you had refused the contraband. It says in the report that it was suspected that you had bribed them both.”

“Bribery? That’s standard procedure, here.” I said. When they both looked confused, probably wondering why I wasn’t more upset, I gave them a fierce grin and explained, “If anyone bothers reading that report, they’ll think I was a complete bad ass for being able to buy off two agents. It’ll give me some reputation.”

I shoved my bangs out of my eyes and added thoughtfully, “If they believe it, that is. I guess we’ll find out. Best case scenario, they buy the stuff. Worst case scenario, they kill me. Do you guys give nice funerals to informants?”

Complete silence came from Huang's corner, but Kyle dared to reach out and gently squeeze my elbow. He said, despite the fact I wouldn't even look at him, "I won't let anyone hurt you."

I blushed to the roots of my hair, knowing that Huang was watching that bit of intense intimacy. I pulled away, but not rudely as I said, "I'll hold you to that."

Chapter Seventeen

Sweat

Huang is a god damn slave driver. I work hard, and I do what has to be done, but my schedule is usually a lot looser and with a lot more stops to rest. Every time I hesitated during that long grueling day of sorting and inventorying scrap, Huang would give me a burning glare that was as good as a cattle prod for getting my ass back to work. To say I was exhausted was an understatement. Was I ready to pass out? Hell, yeah! But I wasn't going to fall over before that pole up the ass man.

Kyle was a constant by my side, lending me his strength and his advice, as we shifted large loads and raked through smaller ones for anything of value. I stopped being angry with him near noon and saved it all for Huang. I couldn't hold anything against Kyle as he sweated, cut, and scraped himself on scrap, right alongside me. Huang did too, but I wasn't going to be that charitable.

My home made Huang nervous, I discovered, when I had a whole day to watch my nemesis. His jaw was clenched and his eyes unreadable for the most part, but when the constant mechanisms of the station started and stopped, he twitched, flinched, and looked around. If it had been someone else besides Huang, I would have called it fear, but... well, it was Huang! I had to stick him into the, *concern about sudden decompression* category and leave off the, *scared as shit about it* part. Huang might be worrying about it, but I had the feeling that he would meet it unflinchingly if it ever happened. He'd probably say something sarcastic and cutting, too.

Did we finish? Hell, no, but we had tackled a good chunk of the yard by the time the reflected sun was toned down towards evening. The neater piles of scrap looked very out of place next to the loose piles we still had to sort through.

My hands were aching and stinging from cuts and grappling with metal. My back was on fire from bending over and lifting heavy loads and my skin was caked with dirt flakes of rust. Even with my hat on, I felt scorched to the bone.

"Enough," Kyle announced, maybe finally realizing that neither of the two stubborn men with him were going to call a halt first. "We'll pick up again, tomorrow."

Huang gave a tight nod.

"Well, if you're tired..." I said with false energy as I chucked a last bit of scrap into an inventoried pile.

"Yes, I am," Kyle replied sourly and gave me a sideways look that let me know I wasn't fooling him one bit.

Huang was probably just as wise to the situation, but he said, "We're losing light. It's

too dangerous on these piles to try and use the lot lights to work.”

Maybe he was just trying to save face, but he was saving mine too. “Makes sense,” I grunted, giving him that much. I was given a cold eye for my trouble. I decided that I needed some alone time right then and there. Fuck Huang. I wanted to go back to my shack, kick back in nothing but my skin, open all the vents, have something cold to drink, and sleep for a week.

“I will need you to come to our shack and discuss our findings,” Huang told me in a tone of voice not to be argued with. I really wonder how he can put so much threat into plain words. He just so much as said, *‘Cooperate, or I will bring the full force of the law down on your head.’*

Kyle, God love him, tried to save me. “We’re all exhausted,” he told Huang. “We should rest. Let Max go to his home for a few hours and then we can meet—”

“Unacceptable,” Huang retorted, eyes flashing. “We have our own report to finish before we can rest. There will not be time, tomorrow, to do this work.”

He was right, and I knew it, but that didn’t stop me from getting pissed about it. My fists clenched as I stalked, walked, and then gave up and limped wearily to their shack.

Once inside, I ended up sitting on Kyle’s cot with my chin on my fist, looking at nothing very hard. Kyle sat beside me and then stood again. I grunted when he asked, “Should I get drinks?” He took that as a yes and I was soon popping the cold tab on a little bit of heaven and drinking a cold energy drink.

Huang was taking out his computer and sitting on the cot opposite us. He didn’t take a drink and I suspected that he was trying to show me that he was tougher than me, one more time. I was too exhausted for any more of our pissing contest, though, and pretended not to notice.

After twenty minutes of talking numbers, my eyes were trying to close. I kept starting and blinking, losing Huang’s side of the conversation more than once. Kyle prompted me when that happened, but it really wasn’t helping that they were both talking softly. Even Huang’s arrogant tone wasn’t keeping me alert. At some point, I was given dinner, but I don’t remember what it was. I disengaged from the conversation after that and a soft pillow appeared under my head. A tart exchange between Kyle and Huang passed over me, something about stress, working too hard, and heat. Someone, Kyle I hope, told me to sleep in a way that made warm breath tickle my ear. The world just went away after that.

Morning found me spooning with Kyle on his cot, his nose against my neck and his body draped around me. His soft snore told me he was still deeply in la la land and I was tempted to go back there myself. The sunlight trying to stab my eyes through the ratty

curtain, told me that it was still very early. It was the realization that I had dropped off to sleep and been tucked in like a child, that had my face burning and my body forcing muscles to make me sit up. I looked automatically for Huang and saw him sleeping not two arms lengths away.

Huang looked less like an asshole when he was asleep. Huang's features were soft and relaxed. He was wearing a loose pair of cotton, drawstring pants, and his blanket was wrapped around him as if he were giving it a hug. His hair was undone and it was a disarray of very long, loose, black strands that made him look even younger. It kind of tapped me on the shoulder, then, the thought that we were all still so young despite our experiences. Though we were never really children, we could still have moments like this, where we were tumbled together in one room like sleeping puppies, or kids having some sort of sleep over, and all enmity could be gone, just like that.

I felt suddenly nostalgic, remembering my days on the streets and in the orphanage with other children my age. We had huddled together, depended on each other, and had shared common misery together. You can't sugar coat being a child fending for himself in a war torn city, but there had been moments in the battle for survival, moments a lot like this one, that hadn't been too bad.

I looked back at Kyle and saw him frown and shift, still very deeply asleep. I almost wanted that moment to last, to keep still and quiet and not break it, but I knew better. Huang would wake up and those dark eyes would burn me alive again. Kyle would wake up and want things from me, emotionally and physically, while inserting himself between Huang and me. Just like last night, I suddenly wanted my space, my alone time, even though, not very far down deep, I only wanted to stay in Kyle's arms. The mind can be a fucked up thing.

We're all soldiers, but I was still able to sneak away from my comrades without waking them. I crept out of the shack and made my way, under the light of the reflectors, to my own shack. I was stopped almost on the front step by the sound of my back gate creaking open.

I squinted that way and saw a man come in tentatively, not sure of his welcome and obviously not comfortable around the scrap lot. I smiled and forgot about being tired, hungry, and wanting alone time. I smelled an easy mark a mile away. I didn't let on, though, as I scratched at my dirty scalp, mopped at my face with my bandana, and took my time walking to meet the man.

"Morning," I said, putting a bit of belligerence in my tone. "It's early to be out."

The man was tall and thin. He had a scruff of red hair on his head and dark eyes he kept blinking myopically. His nose was a beak and he had a scar running under his

bottom lip. Shrapnel, I identified.

“Benjamin Burns,” the man introduced himself and didn’t reach out for a handshake. I didn’t insist on one, just scrubbed my hands absently with my bandana as if I was making sure that I was ready in case he offered one later.

“Max Masters,” I replied. “This is my lot.”

My instincts were making alarm siren sounds. Things were not right and I wasn’t sure that I liked what my first impression of this man was adding up to. I nixed the easy mark impression and settled for a snake that might, or might not, have fangs. He was a flunky and I smelled bureaucrat and government on him. His kind didn’t come to scrap lots looking for engine parts.

The man was wearing a casual outfit, but it was creased just right and pristine. I smelled an expensive after shave on him and his hair was stylish, not a haphazard buzz cut as I had at first thought.

“My client wished me to contact you and to give you his card,” Burns announced, as if it were a great honor. He handed me a card with a penthouse address in the finest section of the station. I looked suitably confused. Hell, I was confused.

“Is he interested in a particular part?” I wondered. “I’m a small operation, but I can get almost anything he wants.”

The man eyed me as if I were stupid. “Your reputation and your record in that regard are already known. My client is always ready to tap talent when he sees it. Your handling of your arrest by Special Forces agents impressed him.”

My eyebrows went up to my hairline. I looked down at the card again. I recognized the name, but continued to look clueless. “How’s he know about that?”

The man gave me a superior smile. “We have friends in high places that keep us informed.”

If I had been his boss, I would have drilled him between the eyes for giving away that kind of information. I grunted and changed my expression to pissed off. “My file is supposed to be classified.”

“Not for my client,” Burns retorted almost primly. He gave my lot a severe look and a sniff. “If you want to improve your position in life, I suggest you take advantage of his offer.”

I stuffed the card into my hip pocket with a shrug. “I don’t know what he’s offering. This is my business. I’m not looking for anything else.”

The man chuckled as he turned to leave my lot. He said, “Ah, yes, but it’s your business that he wants to discuss.”

“Sorry,” I told him strongly. “Tell him not to hold his breath.”

The man left and I closed the gate behind him. Slowly, I walked to my shack, thinking. Being an ex-soldier, I've had my share of offers, legal and otherwise. There wasn't any way to tell if this client was someone Huang and Kyle wanted to arrest. He hadn't specified what he wanted. It was always best to never look interested or eager until you knew where you stood.

Once in my own home, I found myself going through my boxes of belongings. I took a long time reassuring myself that my few possessions were still all there. It was a relief to sort through them, some tension I hadn't realized I was feeling, letting go at last as I reached the bottom and found the faded pictures of my former life.

I closed up my boxes and locked the closet door. I was going to get a better lock, one that was even proof against Special Forces. The thought of them pawing through my things still set my teeth on edge. Strange hands touching the meager mementos of my life, was a violation that I didn't want to experience again.

I took a shower and washed my hair, watching dirt, rust, and bits of the previous day go down the drain as the pipes chugged in my ears. Finished, I took my time drying, shaving, brushing my teeth, and basically indulging the hell out of myself. I needed it. I felt too stressed, too ready to lash out in an ugly way.

Sifting through the clothes on the floor, I discovered that nothing smelled clean except a shirt of Kyle's tossed over the top of the fridge. It was sky blue with a white collar and it smelled like him. I put it on and it was a little tight. I took a deep breath to smell him and that made me smile as I made coffee. When it was done, I stretched out on my bed and kicked back in a pair of ragged shorts with no underwear.

When Kyle knocked politely and came in to my shouted, "Okay!" I'd had enough time to myself to not think of it as an invasion. Kyle smiled at me, but I could see a faint look of worry as he stood in the doorway of my bedroom, hands in the back pockets of his jeans and hair all messy from sleep.

"Huang force you to get up?" I wondered with a smirk.

Kyle grunted. "The man is a sadist in the morning."

"I think he's called normal," I joked. "You *are* supposed to get up before noon."

"He exercises," Kyle complained, "and jogs."

"The horror." I laughed. I patted the bed and he looked pleased that he was welcome to sit with me. I guessed at what he must have thought when he had woken up and found me gone. He must have worried about my mood.

Kyle served himself some coffee, first, and then settled next to me. I reached out and briskly straightened his hair with my fingers like a rake. It didn't do much good, but it stopped his hair from sticking up in places. He grimaced and sipped at his coffee.

I didn't tell him about my visitor. I was still unsure about him. Maybe his boss wasn't buying scrap, but he had made me a business offer. That made him one of mine by default. Was he was someone who truly deserved to be handed over to Huang and Kyle's tender mercies? That was something I wanted to find out for myself.

"Shower?" I wondered.

"Last night," Kyle replied between sips. He pulled at his shirt, the one that I was wearing. "That was my last semi clean one."

"I know. Thanks." I grinned at him, unapologetic. "We'll have to send Huang to the cleaners today while we work."

Kyle frowned, probably trying to bring up the image of Huang doing laundry in a public setting. "Why Huang?"

"We work better together," I told him. "Less fighting. Besides, he's supposed to be the lazy relative, remember? He needs to wander around and look lazy."

"Doing laundry is lazy?" Kyle wondered.

"It is when a machine does it for you and all that you have to do is kick back at the nearest watering hole until it's done," I told him. "We'll tell him he's doing surveillance, or something. He does need to listen to what the locals are saying about our set up, whether they're buying it, or not."

Kyle finished his coffee, set aside the container, and shifted to look at me. "Did you eat?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I was about to."

"Good," Kyle grunted and reached out to get the meals himself.

"Should I start your tab now?" I wondered, a bit annoyed by his mothering. "You keep eating my food."

He gave me a sideways look, "I don't have the pride that you do. I don't mind freeloading."

It was a joke and I could tell that he wasn't sure how well it was going to play. There was a question in it, too. If I insisted he pay me back, it was going to say a whole hell of a lot about our relationship. It was another damned step. Next we would be buying freakin' wedding rings. That though made me scowl as I said gruffly, "Go ahead! Why not eat me out of house and home?"

Sure I sounded like a shit, but Kyle got it. His face glowed as he handed me my meal. I pretended not to notice as I concentrated on eating. Size 8 1/2 ring size and no freakin' diamonds, okay?

Chapter Eighteen

Dancing

I bagged all of our clothes into my old military duffel and slung it over my shoulder as Kyle and I went to the back shack to find Huang. I thought Huang type of exercise would include katas, or some equally highbrow oriental regimen. I was surprised to find him outside kick boxing with a shadow partner in just a loose pair of drawstring, black pants. He was making some moves I didn't think could be called anything other than low down and dirty.

"Street fighting," I said appreciatively. "Now that's something I'm good at."

"You've kept up with your training?" Huang replied in a doubtful tone as he stopped and faced us. He was sweating. It was beading and making small tracks down his skin. His hair was drawn back, but it was winning the battle against his hair tie and tight braid, coming out in dark strands that hung in his face.

"I don't have to train," I said with a grin. "I'm a natural."

Huang suddenly got that look, the one of a teacher who thought a student needed an object lesson. "If you would care to show me some of your moves, I would appreciate having a live partner to practice with."

That sounded so nice, but I could feel the trap. I grinned wider as I tossed my duffel at his feet. "No time, Ice Man! We have to work and you need to go out and do laundry." I got the scowl I was expecting and added, "It will give you a chance to cement your cover and scope out the locals. We need to know whether they're buying our acting job or we're wasting our time."

Huang snorted and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He didn't deign to look disappointed or annoyed to be told to do laundry. He silently exchanged a look with Kyle and bent and picked up the duffel. "I will add my things to this," he said. "Expect me back in one hour."

In your dreams. I laughed silently to myself. I knew what kind of mess the laundry was and how it could be a time consuming chore. That was why I avoided it until I couldn't any longer. I motioned to Kyle and he followed me to the scrap piles.

"He spent most of the night doing your taxes and inventory," Kyle said suddenly at my shoulder. "He is arrogant, and insufferable at the best of times, but he isn't as bad as you think he is. If he was, he wouldn't be my partner."

"He wanted to kick my ass back there and you know it," I growled as I started sorting a pile by hand. I hissed as I cut my finger, the first wound of the day.

"You were asking for it," Kyle shot back and repeated mockingly, "*I'm a natural.*"

“That’s what the generals called me during the war,” I told him. “And I am.”

I looked back in time to see the light in his eyes and his small smile. I swore. Men didn’t have the corner on rising to challenges. Kyle was itching to see if I was telling the truth. I was less eager to prove myself with a man who I cared about. He could make me hurt in more ways than one.

I grabbed Kyle by the back of the neck and pressed my forehead against his. “Stop it! We have a lot of work to do.” I met his blue eyes and let him go as I turned to go back to work. After a moment’s hesitation, he joined me.

We worked under the hot glare of the reflected lights. Huang didn’t return after an hour. Kyle stopped several times and looked towards the back gate. I reassured him, without straightening from a part I was trying to dislodge, “It takes a long time. Washing clothes around here is an all-day event.”

Kyle grunted in reply and then he was suddenly bending over me, chest against my back, He had obvious intentions as he pressed his hard on against me. He kissed the sweaty nape of my neck and made a suggestive motion.

“Dream on,” I grunted irritably.

He froze and then whispered in my ear. “Are you sure you don’t want a ride?”

I craned my neck to look at him. I’d tasted his most intimate places and licked him all over, but his innuendo was saying he was ready for more than that. Was I ready for it, though? I mean, more than physically? It was my last bastion against complete commitment. The independent part of me, my street kid soul, wasn’t willing to let go of it so easily.

I was saved from making a decision by Huang suddenly saying beside us, “You would get more leverage on that part if you attempted to lift it from the opposite side, Kyle.”

Kyle straightened abruptly and the motion sent me head first into the scrap. I banged my head and cut my cheek. Kyle pulled me out of the scrap and shouted, “Damn it, Huang!”

“I could have been an enemy,” Huang replied coolly, arms crossed over his chest. “You are both being foolish.”

“Are you all right, Max?” Kyle demanded anxiously.

I shook him off and straightened, glaring at Huang. “Where the hell is the laundry?”

“I spoke to several people at the laundromat and they were kind enough to offer their assistance in doing the wash for me,” Huang replied with a lifted, arrogant eyebrow.

“Idiot!” I shouted at him. “They’re stealing it!”

I heard Kyle say to Huang as I scrambled down the scrap pile, “I suppose this will cement your reputation as my lazy relative.”

I began running toward the back gate, already sure who the culprits were.

Running on station was easy because gravity was less than it was on Earth. Unfortunately, the heat was a killer and the dust quickly coated lungs and made you want to cough them up. I started coughing as I thundered into the market and headed for a group of ramshackle huts. I had started sweating as soon as I left my lot. I looked wild, red faced, and dangerous as I kicked open the door of one hut and discovered the two men hunched over my laundry. It was spilled over a plastic table and they were picking through it and making sounds of disgust at the dirt and smell.

“Hey, Max!” one called, as if we were old friends, “Look at what that no good freeloader of yours left at the laundry. We were just about to bring it back to you, but we decided to make sure it was all right, first.”

I felt insulted. Did he really think I was that stupid?

“More like looking for loose credits in my god damn pockets!” I snarled at them.

The taller of the two was as tense as a cornered rat. I knew he would fight if he felt threatened. The little, fat guy was smarter. He was already backing towards another exit and trying to hide behind his companion.

Did I want to wipe the floor with them? Hell, yes! They had twisted the knife in a day that was already starting badly. I was nothing if not fair, though. There were rules on station, just not legal ones. One of the rules was, *always take advantage of suckers*. Huang had qualified for that one easily. It wasn't as if they had rolled him in an alley for his clothes. They had just taken what he'd left behind and hoped for some beer money. I might even have gotten the clothes back, eventually. Okay, so that was wishful thinking, but I really didn't want to fight over clothes. I decided on relaxing my fighting stance and sighing.

“Just give me back my damn clothes.”

The tall guy had never committed anything more serious than a string of petty thefts. He was a small fish and pretty harmless. He was willing to fight if he had to, but if he didn't, it was all good. He was quick to paste on a grin.

“Suuure! Sure, thing, Max!” He grabbed my clothes and shoved them quickly back into the duffel. I saw underwear that weren't mine and had a stray thought that wondered if they were Huang's. It made me shudder. I really didn't want his underwear mixing with mine.

“Toss it here,” I commanded.

Tall guy lobbed the duffel. I caught it and slung the strap over one shoulder to keep my hands free. Short and fat blinked at me, hopeful that they were going to get away without a beating. I skewered them with my eyes.

I asked, "Do you actually know who I am, or do you just know my name?"

They exchanged looks. "Uh..." Tall guy swallowed hard and then managed, "Elite soldier, right?"

"I know you discounted that, because I seem like such a nice guy," I told them, "But nobody messes with my stuff. Touch my stuff, or the stuff belonging to my people, again, and I'll show you what an elite soldier is like when he gets really pissed. Got that?"

They nodded in unison. I glared hard and then turned on my heel and stalked out. I almost fell through a warped plasti-wood board on their porch. I staggered and recovered, ruining my dramatic exit. Once out of sight, I stopped and dropped the duffel at my feet, sighing in disgust.

"Orders?" Kyle said at my elbow.

I jerked and turned, shouting, "Stop sneaking up on me!"

He smiled. "Why don't you do the laundry and let Huang and I do the hard work today? You can consider it his punishment."

"Nobody does my work," I grumbled.

"It's not, it's *his* work," Kyle corrected me. "He is your hired hand, just as I am." He looked around and saw only a few people not in hearing distance. He looked as if he wanted to reach out to the cut on my face. He winced and apologized, "I'm sorry that happened."

"Well, it probably helped me get our laundry back. It made me look a little crazy," I said as I touched the cut gingerly.

"You needed help doing that?" Kyle asked with a chuckle.

I growled in reply, "Okay, for that, you can work alongside Huang."

"I will as long as I get to see you later?" His tone wasn't begging, just hopeful.

I decided to be a hard ass. "Maybe."

"I can make it worth your while," Kyle suggested, giving me a very hungry look. His blue eyes sparkled. "We can finish what we started earlier."

"You can hope," I told him flippantly as I shouldered the duffel and turned away.

"I will," he promised.

I looked over my shoulder at him. Screw everyone. I turned, grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pulled him in, and gave him a harsh kiss. Shoving him back just as quickly, I nodded once, winked to show him that he was forgiven, and headed for the laundry. I heard him laugh behind me.

It was nice kicking back in the laundromat, watching the red light pulse on my washing machine as it churned my clothes and gave them a sonic bath. It was one machine in a long line of them and the place was full of customers. It had taken me an

hour of standing in line to get my turn at a machine. By that time, I was ready to get out of there. I had protection against theft, though, so I didn't mind leaving my clothes behind. I was smart enough to spend an extra credit to get the magnetic lock, so that no one could open the washing machine without it.

Think stealing a scrap man's clothes is worth the bother? Some people would steal the gum off the bottom of your shoe and sell it back to you at fifty percent markup. Everything was fair game. I think some people just took things for the hell of it, or for beer change, like those two losers that I had scared the shit out of.

I decided on the nearest bar. It used to be a favorite of mine, back in the day, well, when I'd been less caring about what happened to me. It was small and had that corner bar atmosphere that was both cheap and slightly personalized. The bald guy behind the counter was doing that classic wiping up with a rag and the waitress was the stereotypical blowsy girl with her hair in a bun; the one who was usually only doing it to get enough money to blow town. A sweet talking drunk would come in one day, sweep her off of her feet, and stick her with three babies and a debt, before leaving her for greener pastures... Okay, so, to sum up, it was a basic bar. At night, they had music, dim lights, and dark corners where people could drink away their misery. During the day, it had brighter lights and the hardcore drunks who didn't mind an early drink.

The bartender knew me. I felt slightly embarrassed, wondering if he knew some of the things I'd done behind his place where it was nice, dark, and private. He probably did. I doubt I was the first, or the last, to think of it. He did know I didn't drink the hard stuff any longer, but I doubted he knew social toasts and victory celebrations were the exception. I couldn't blame him. I hadn't had a chance for either of those occasions.

He cleaned a glass and looked over it at me. He couldn't stop me from drinking, he'd lose his job, but he was a good guy and let me know, pretty clearly by his expression, that he didn't approve of my presence there.

"Non-alcoholic beer," I ordered as I slid onto a stool at the bar. It creaked under even my light weight.

"I have soda," the man offered with a grimace. "It's out back and it's cold."

I smiled as I leaned on my hand and toyed with a water droplet on the plastic bar with a finger. "Nope! I'm in the mood for a green tasting synthetic chemical in a frosty glass."

The man grunted disapprovingly, "It'll warp your genes."

I smirked. "Like I have to worry about children? Who the hell would marry me?"

That got me a smile as the man pulled out a cold mug and put a long neck of something green beside it. It was loosely called beer, but it could let you pretend to knock one back. Sometimes, it was just the atmosphere and the ritual that was important, not the

actual beer buzz and the taste.

I poured the drink myself and then took a slow, appreciative sip. The man stared at me. I wiped my mouth and made a satisfied sound. “Yep, this is pure crap!”

He laughed and went away to do some other business. That left me with two customers and the bar girl. I knew one man for the town drunk. He was always in that same corner, nursing something strong and looking like death warmed over. It was good to have a reminder like that to keep a man clean.

The other man was no one I knew. He glanced at me and then glanced away. I didn't remember seeing him when I had come in. He must have come in afterward. He was nondescript in a simple button down shirt and casual pants. I could tell he was from the city, though it was more of a crazy sixth sense instinct than anything he was outwardly showing. He had that aura of nervousness to him I always associated with well-off people walking through a slum. The man who had wanted me to meet his boss had felt the same way. You don't survive being a street child, and a soldier, by not staying alert. My street sense raised its hackles.

I didn't let my suspicion show. I kept relaxed, leaning an elbow back on the bar while I sipped at my mug and finished my survey of the room. The bar girl caught my eye and approached. She gave me a sympathetic smile. I fished mentally for her name. Candy.

“Hey, Candy,” I greeted.

“Max,” she replied as she fiddled with her hand sized order pad and stuck a few credits tip into her pocket. I boldly reached out and put a few of my own there as well. She smiled, a bit flustered, but was pleased. That move can go either way, but I knew that, if she liked it, just what kind of questions I could ask her.

Candy leaned towards me to look at my cut face and her breasts were clear to my view as her blouse dipped. It was obvious and contrived. I think she liked me a lot more than I was hoping for.

“Did *he* do this?” she asked in outrage.

She meant Kyle. I knew her next step would be to insinuate herself between me and my abusive lover. I was, sadly, not disappointed.

“You should get rid of that man and that arrogant S.O.B. relative of his,” she growled as she took a bar rag, with god's knew what on it, and dabbed at my cut. “You need someone who will treat you right. You're a good man. You're nice. Nobody should hurt you like that.” Next she would say, ‘*I would never hurt you*’, followed by, ‘*Why don't you give me a call and we'll talk some more? Hiere's my number.*’ I could see her hand beginning to write her phone number on her pad, so I cut that off as quickly as I could.

“So, you know all about what's going on with me?” I asked.

“Who doesn’t!” she exclaimed and then put a hand to her mouth, looking ashamed. “Oh! I’m so sorry! You probably didn’t want to hear that!” She patted my shoulder. “It’s all right. People have nothing better to do than talk and you *are* one of us. We care about you.”

Like hell, I thought with a silent snort. Maybe a few, but most people were looking for weaknesses to bring me and my business down, or to exploit me into getting a better deal on scrap. Golden hearts were in short supply in the dirty, hard scrabble world on station. I looked down into my *beer* and sat up straighter, trying to look young and forlorn. I quietly asked, “What are they saying?”

She looked sorry for me. She told me, reluctantly, “Oh, just that you aren’t doing so well, that the only help you could get was taking on a man in your yard and paying for it in your bed, and that you can’t stand up and kick that man and his relative to the curb, because you can’t do without him.”

She looked at me anxiously. I hoped that I didn’t look as angry as I felt. I hadn’t been expecting the, ‘*paying for my help in bed*’, part. “Nice,” was all I allowed myself to say.

“Don’t mind them!” She told me and sidled up close to me. She said breathily, as she slipped her phone number into my hand, “I need to get back to work, but if you need to talk, or just have a friend listen, call me, okay?”

Damn! I’d let her get that one out. She was good. I pushed the scrap of paper into my pocket and looked grateful. “Thank you, I appreciate that a lot.”

She smiled, satisfied that she had scored, and went away to check on the drunk. I saw the other man looking at me out of the corner of my eye as I finished my drink, paid my tab, and took a slow walk out of the place.

I didn’t turn to look to see if I was followed. I kept walking back to the laundromat. I waited until I passed a food vendor. I smiled at the blonde, young man tending the counter. He was one of a half dozen kids of the owner and, if he wasn’t my friend, he was at least not my enemy. I thought that I could trust him enough to ask, as he handed me a soda and a piece of wrapped fried protein, “Is there a man behind me; medium height, late middle age, dark hair, glasses, button down shirt, light blue pants—”

“With leather dress shoes, a designer watch, and a gun?” the kid asked, not looking.

“Gun?” I wondered with a start.

“He has a holster under one arm. You can see the outline,” he replied with an innocent smile. “His eyes are on you and I can tell he’s a killer. Better run, scrap man.”

I snorted as I motioned at myself with my food. “This scrap man doesn’t run from anybody, got that?”

“Your funeral,” the boy replied, looking at me as if I were a nut.

I grunted and turned away. I walked even slower; looking in the stalls lining the row and talking to a few people that I knew. The girls called out to me. I smiled and only played the game briefly. One told me I was no fun since I had landed a boyfriend. How true that was, I thought, though I wasn't going to get into some of the better aspects of the relationship with her.

I finished my food and collected my clean clothes from the laundromat. Shoving them in my duffel without folding them, I slung the duffel over one shoulder and trudged back to my lot. There was a stretch of road that was usually empty of people and would leave me vulnerable just before I reached my gate. When I looked back at last, right before I reached that point, I found my tail gone. I blinked, formed a few theories that I didn't like, and then swore, realizing that my relaxing time had been ruined by my mystery man.

I made a decision right then and there. I backtracked to the market, made some purchases, and then returned to my lot.

Huang and Kyle were working side by side, almost done with a pile of scrap. I put away my laundry and supplies, put on my hat, and joined them. Huang said something about my lateness, but I was too lost in thought to get into it.

At the end of the day, I went to my shack without a word. If Huang wanted another late night session with the books, I didn't give him the chance to suggest it. I left while they were still stacking the last of the scrap. Sitting on my bed, the vents wide open and my supplies next to me, I sipped on a cold drink and waited.

I didn't have to wait long. Kyle knocked, I called for him to come in, and he came to sit beside me on the bed. "Did something happen?" he asked. "You were so quiet."

"Kyle," I asked, almost angrily. "Are there Special Forces agents in the market?"

Kyle looked guilty and he had trouble meeting my eyes. "Yes," he admitted quietly.

"Why?" I demanded. "One of them was tailing me today."

"They wanted us to have backup," Kyle told me. "This situation is unconventional. It's making headquarters nervous. They want to make certain that there are no mistakes."

"I wasn't the only one who noticed," I growled angrily. "They can blow our cover just by being here!"

Kyle nodded. "I told them that, but I was over ruled."

"By Huang?" I sneered.

"He was convincing when he suggested the surveillance," Kyle admitted.

I was quiet, wondering if one of these mistakes, one of these overzealous idiot Special Forces agents, was going to get me killed. I searched Kyle's face, wanting to blame him, wanting to chew the hell out of someone's ass, but I knew that it wasn't Kyle's fault. He didn't deserve that kind of treatment from me. I was just damned tired of it all and I

wanted something good to come out of the day. Being angry, and playing the blame game, could wait for when I faced Huang in the morning.

I dumped the contents of my bag on the bed between us. Candy, small cakes, and soda containers filled the bed. Kyle's eyes lit up, just as I knew they would.

"I bet that Huang isn't letting you indulge yourself, am I right?" I asked him. "You're probably eating tofu and rice balls."

"Close," he replied with a grimace and then smiled.

Kyle's dark eyes asked a question. I answered by tilting my chin, just a hair's breath, to the right. He kissed me. After everything that had happened that day, I suppose it sounds stupid to say such a simple contact could make it all better, but it did.

Kyle leaned into the kiss and I found myself flat on my back. Among pixie sticks and cream cakes, we made slow, but satisfying love to one another. It was hot, but loving at the same time. We didn't go all the way, but that didn't matter. His mouth was a warm sheath on my cock and his hands were sure and arousing as they explored and made me moan. I gave as good as I got and the feel of him coming on my tongue, the sound of him groaning in climax, and the feel of him trembling in my arms, washed away stress and worry. How easily that man had become my world. What else could you call it when nothing else mattered when we were together, when I felt so whole? It didn't even sound sappy when I nuzzled his neck and said, "Love you."

His sigh was relieved and happy. I rose above him and poured some of the snacks onto his chest. "You squished them, you eat them."

"That is your butt mark, I'm sure of it," he told me with fake seriousness as he held up a squished cake.

I looked put out and took it from him. "I guess we'll share."

As I opened the wrapper, I caught him looking at me with a depth of feeling that was almost overwhelming. He said, with passion, "I love you, too."

I stared back. We both blushed in the next instant. It was something we wanted to say, yeah, but what the hell do you do after you say something like that? We'd already had the sex. "If you love me," my flippant side was suddenly in control and saying, "you'll eat this butt squished cake and give me the good one."

Kyle's mouth opened and I shoved it in. Seeing Kyle with a mouth stuffed with cake made me nearly die laughing, but he took it good-naturedly and managed to chew and swallow the thing without choking to death. The awkward moment passed and we regained safe ground again. One day, we were going to figure out how to do the romantic stuff, but today wasn't it.

Chapter Nineteen

Belling the Dragon

“Zian Huang, I need to talk to you,” I said as I approached the man.

Dressed only in a loose pair of white pants, and his long hair tightly braided, Huang finished a martial arts move and then stood and regarded me with an arrogant eye as he said, “Awake before eight? It must be important.”

He didn’t respect me. I suddenly knew that nothing I could say was going to carry any weight with him as long as that was true. I went almost toe to toe with him and demanded, “Okay, give me your list.” It was early, too damned early, and the god of the weather controls had decided on a blistering hot morning. My temper had been simmering as soon as I had left the coolness of my shack and Kyle sleeping in my bed.

“List?” Huang sized me up; my messed up hair, wrinkled blue t-shirt, and blue jeans. “I suppose you are speaking of my assessment of you as a person, or would you like my assessment of your ability to perform as an agent on this assignment?”

He was so cool, standing there half dressed, every hair in place, and posture perfect. He wasn’t taller than I was, at least not by much, but the way he held himself made him seem much larger and intimidating. When you’ve live on the streets like I have, you get used to that look, the one that says you aren’t as good as everyone else. Maybe I wasn’t immune to it, but I could shrug it off.

“Both,” I dared.

He raised a dark eyebrow and crossed arms over his bare chest. “All right,” he said, “It is clear that you think very little of the law. You chose to live in an area that is filled with like-minded individuals. You were caught on the verge of selling military contraband. Your past record shows that you lived on the street with people known for their criminal activities. I will credit you, that you deviated from that path to become an elite soldier, but that credit is small considering that, afterward, you returned to your previous life of living among criminal elements.”

He had a lot more to say, more than I really wanted to hear, as he continued, “My lack of confidence in your ability to perform as an agent stems from that decision. It is clear that you haven’t kept up your training and that you don’t honor the laws that we are trying to enforce. You made it clear that you are joining us, not to save lives by taking a known weapons contraband dealer off of the street, but because you have a dislike for the leaders of this station. This lack of morality leads me to conclude that, when things become dangerous, you will either give away our operation or run. There is also the matter of your fraternization with Kyle. Normal procedures dictate that I should take him

out of the field at once. Unfortunately, the circumstances make that impossible. I require Kyle's expertise and I require your position here as a scrap dealer. I have confidence that Kyle will perform when called upon to do his duty as it pertains to this operation. I am not as certain that he will do his duty where it concerns you. Because of this, I have asked for undercover backup. They will be close by to deal with you if you should decide to betray us."

Maybe he expected me to blow up, throw a fist at him, or at least shout a cuss word. Instead, I grunted. After all, though it was blunt, stark, and not very pretty, Huang hadn't said a damned thing that wasn't right, well, except for one thing. I wanted to give myself an award for keeping my temper as I replied evenly, "I would never betray you. I might decide against finishing this mission if it looks like my skin is on the line, but I've never sold anyone out and I never will."

Huang regarded me coldly, as if his dark eyes could bore a hole straight to my soul. I felt flayed and opened up, laid bare by that appraisal. I met it square on, though, and never flinched.

Huang suddenly took up a fighting stance. "I need to know your level of skill."

I blinked stupidly. I felt like I'd passed a test with an A plus, when I thought I was getting a D minus. I looked at him, my eyes automatically sizing him up and putting him in the master category. I didn't think anything was wrong with a little fight. I wasn't angry like the last time. I didn't have to be afraid of it turning into something ugly. Just a short round.... "Okay."

I was a natural. I had this sense of things. It's hard to explain. I instinctively knew just how things, and people, balanced. Weaknesses and strengths were obvious to me. Looking at Huang, I noticed that he was favoring his left foot very, very slightly. I also noticed that his left shoulder was slower to move than his right, probably from working on the scrap piles the previous day. It was easy to step forward and counter Huang's rapid moves. When I stepped back again, he was looking surprised.

"Told you," I said flippantly. "I don't need to practice."

I expected him to ask for another round. I expected him to get annoyed. That damned man never did what I expected him to. He relaxed and made a little bow.

"I will meditate now," Huang informed me. "When I am done, meet me by the last scrap pile and we will finish it. Then I will be able to accurately complete your accounts and judge how to proceed."

I made a face. "That's about an hour, I suppose. Waking Kyle up this early isn't easy."

Huang actually relaxed enough to grimace. "Yes, I am aware of that. Sometimes, I think it was a mistake to insist that he stop taking medication for that."

I started. “You told him to stop taking drugs?”

“Those types of drugs can have long term effects,” Huang explained. As he turned away and began to leave, he threw over his shoulder, “Now that you are in a relationship, I will expect you to take their place.”

He was giving me something and I wasn't sure why. I couldn't help being greedy. I asked, “Are you pissed that Kyle wants to be with me?”

Huang snorted. “It was inevitable,” he told me, “The man keeps a picture of you at the Special Forces barracks. When I saw that you also had a photo of him, I concluded that only your mutual stubbornness, lack of self-esteem, and independence, have been keeping you apart. Being suddenly confronted with each other, and forced to join in a mission together, it was inevitable that you would both discover your mutual attraction.”

I bristled, “Lack of self-esteem?”

Huang turned back to give me an impatient look as he said, “It was obvious during the war, that you were dedicated to the cause and that you were properly aware that Kyle Carter was as well, and that he was...”

“Out of my class?” I offered with a glare.

Huang gave a short nod and then looked puzzled. “For some strange reason, Kyle was of the same mind about himself concerning his unworthiness to be with you. That attitude persisted after the war.”

Well, well, Huang dabbled in psychology. “Sounds like you thought about this for a long time,” I said.

Huang raised an eyebrow. “Kyle and I are partners. We are also friends. His well-being is a concern of mine.”

“Friends.” I grunted, thinking about that, trying to imagine them kicking back with a beer and confiding in one another. The image just wouldn't come.

Huang became suddenly intense. “As his friend, I must insist that you don't interfere with his execution of this mission. Your relationship endangers him.”

“You aren't going to insist that we stay separated?” I wondered, “That we stop—”

“I don't ask the wind to stop blowing,” Huang told me acidly. “You've proven that you have some honor, now prove to me you have sense and that you understand how Kyle's feeling for you can cause him to make mistakes.”

“I do understand that!” I retorted, “I'm not stupid, Huang.” And then as his words sunk in, “I proved that I have honor? When was that?”

Huang snorted and turned away again. “You defeated my moves earlier, yet you didn't take advantage and harm me.”

I hadn't even considered hurting him and I could have. I rubbed at the back of my

neck sheepishly. By the time I realized I hadn't tore into him about the undercover agents, he was inside his shack and closing the door. Later, I decided. We had managed to find some peaceful ground. I didn't want to piss on it with an argument just then.

I walked back to my shack, yawning, wondering how I was going to wake up Kyle when all I wanted to do was curl up beside him and go to bed again.

I cocked an eye at the bright reflectors overhead and sighed. I pumped myself up with the knowledge that we were on the last pile of scrap, that we had reached the light at the end of the tunnel, and that, maybe, my business was about to get straightened out.

Hope perched on my shoulder, patting me and grinning happily, as it told me how my business was going to be saved. A smaller demon, though, with a sharp, hot pike, was jabbing my pride and reminding me that Huang, and his organization and accounting skills, were going to be mainly responsible for it. I wanted to feel less like a loser, really I did, and it wasn't happening.

I found Kyle still sleeping, stretched out on his stomach and only wearing a pair of shorts. His face was hidden from me, turned away from the light coming through the curtains. I had a nice view of his long, wiry body, his tight, flowing muscles, and his rounded hips where his shorts had slipped down along with the blanket. I noticed a few freckles right where his shoulder rolled into his shoulder blade and the scars that crisscrossed his otherwise smooth, almost hairless skin. He didn't have as many scars as I did, but his looked like they had been far more serious wounds.

I remembered how many times Kyle had put himself in danger during the war and how he had always been in the thick of every mission and battle. It was hard to square that image of the past with the man who was now sleeping in my bed, the one who spoke softly, smiled warmly, ate junk food as a guilty pleasure, and loved me.

I picked up Kyle's discarded jeans, pilfered his wallet from the pocket, and looked inside. There were plastic pass cards to unknown things, a few receipts, cryptic notes on scrap paper, and some loose credit chips. Disappointed, I began putting it back, but then paused and looked closer. I found a small slit tucked under a fold of the wallet. Searching carefully, I slid out a very small picture. It was of me and looked as if it had been cut out of some larger photo. I looked as if I was laughing. It really wasn't very flattering. I blushed hotly and slid it back.

Putting everything back, I let his jeans drop to the floor and climbed onto the bed. I straddled Kyle's hips and bent down. I had it in my mind to say something in his ear to wake him up, but I was still pissed about a lot of things. I didn't have any outlet for it. I couldn't let myself rage like I wanted to. I couldn't even put into words how really crappy I felt. Maybe it sounds crazy, but it seemed wrong to love Kyle when everything

that he stood for, everything that had happened to me lately, had been because of him, his organization, and his mission.

Kyle made me happy. He made my toes curl and he made me want to wrap around him and never let the hell go, but I couldn't square that with how I was feeling. I bit him, hard, right on the shoulder; angry, possessive, punishing, and wanting so many things that I expressed in teeth grinding into his skin. I tasted blood before I realized that I had gone too far. My next clue was when Kyle whipped around and clocked me with his fist. Soldiers reflexes. I had them too. I was jerking backwards instantly, blunting some of the force of that blind swing. It still connected, though, and I still ended up sprawled on the floor.

"Max?! What the—" I heard Kyle sit up, knowing that he was stunned, still half asleep, and trying to figure out what had happened.

I gingerly touched my jaw and felt the growing lump as I tried not to pass out. The room shimmered in and out of focus.

Kyle found the bite. "Max? Why the hell did you do that?" and then, as he finally put everything together, "Gods! Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

Hands were on me, then; gentle and concerned. I really didn't deserve it. I'd asked for that punch. I think I felt better, though, despite the terrible, throbbing, pain in my jaw and on my head where the back of it had connected with the floor. A little release of my pent up frustrations had re-calibrated my mood and put my mind back in the cross hairs. I don't think a psychologist would have recommended it, though, as a therapy, but I'm just guessing here.

I sat up and Kyle supported me, sitting down beside me on the floor. Blood was trickling very slowly down his shoulder. I blinked to clear my eyes and said stupidly, "Jeez, Kyle! I'm so sorry! You're bleeding! I just... I..." Okay, I'll give a hundred credits to anyone who can explain biting someone that badly and make it into a good thing, or at least make it mean something less than what it did. I'd punched him, fought with him, and now I had bit him until he bled. I was in the abusive lover category now and stepping another rung down the loser ladder.

I stood up abruptly and tried to walk away from it all. I didn't know what to say. Kyle grabbed my pants leg and wouldn't let go. He sat silently until I dared look down at him. He was frowning darkly. "Do you know what your problem is?" he asked seriously.

I crossed my arms over my chest and balled my hands into fists, bracing myself for the kick to the curb. I wouldn't put up with my crap, why should he?

"Do you?" Kyle persisted, wanting to know that I was paying attention.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'm an asshole."

Kyle blinked and then he said, “You hold it all inside of you. You hold it in until it builds and builds and then finally explodes.”

“What?” I wondered. “What am I holding inside?”

“Anger, hate, and disappointment.” Kyle gave a tug and I sat down again heavily, still holding myself tight. “We don’t have weapons of war to destroy things and to vent. We have to talk, now. You have to admit what you’re feeling.”

I made a face. “I’m not very good at talking about things like that.”

“Neither am I,” Kyle replied. His hand clasped mine and he looked down at them as he said, “I don’t mean open up and tell me something personal. I mean, shout at me if you want to and tell me how mad you are. Tell me how you hate all of this. Tell me how pissed off you are at me.”

“Are you sure?” My voice sounded shaky. I pulled myself together and managed a rough laugh. “I’ve bottled up a whole lot of crap, Kyle. It could take a lot of shouting to get it all out.”

Kyle touched his shoulder and then looked at his blood covered fingers. “It’s better than being bitten, or getting hit.” He looked at me with worry. “Do you think this needs stitches?”

I snorted. “It’s just a flesh wound. What happened to the guy who used to stitch his own wounds?”

“I’m tougher after I have my coffee,” Kyle smirked.

I fetched us both coffee. We moved to the bed and I sipped at mine one handed while I dabbed at the bite on Kyle’s shoulder with a peroxide soaked rag.

Kyle winced. “You’re cleaning flesh, not getting grease off of an engine part,” he complained.

Guilt stabbed me again. “Sorry.”

I finished and put the rag aside to cradle my coffee in both hands. The bleeding had stopped, but it was still ugly looking.

Kyle rooted around for a shirt. He pulled a red one from the duffel and put it on. It was wrinkled and it was mine. “You’ll get blood on it,” I protested.

Kyle eyed me. “And?”

I chewed on my lip as he dropped his shorts and pulled on his jeans. “You have a truce until after I drink my coffee.” I said sourly. He laughed as he picked up his coffee again and settled to drink it.

“What the hell do you see in me?” I wondered suddenly.

“That’s not much of a truce,” Kyle said in surprise.

“I meant, a truce about the shouting part,” I clarified.

“Oh.” Kyle’s blue eyes turned warm and the look he gave me...If I could have taken it all back and bitten myself, I would have. What the hell makes me do things like that? It was just nuts and I was curious to hear his reply. He complained, “I didn’t make you talk about feelings.”

He had a point. “Doesn’t have to be about feelings,” I told him. “You’re damned handsome, sexy as hell, great in bed, and I just want to be with you.”

Kyle blushed, but his smile grew even warmer. “Same here, but...”

“Yeah?” I wondered suspiciously.

“You’re like a jet fuel fire,” Kyle said and his eyes sparkled. “You always have been, especially in battle. I like that.”

So, he was nuts, too. He liked the screwed up, hotheaded, loud mouthed person that was Max Masters.

“And your ass is perfect,” Kyle suddenly added with a grin.

I shoved at him, laughing, and he rocked under the force, laughing, too. We finished our coffee and I stood up. “Get on your shoes, Kyle. Huang expects us to be at the last scrap pile in a few minutes. I gave you as much time as I could.”

Kyle sighed and put on his work boots. When he was ready, we both left the shack. I paused on the porch and he looked at me curiously.

“Truce is over,” I told him. “Are you sure that you want to do this?”

Kyle nodded, but he pointed toward my scrap yard neighbor. “Remember our cover though.”

“I think I can manage that,” I replied. I thought for a moment and then stepped off the porch and shouted, “You think you can just walk the hell into my scrap yard and tell me what to do?! Let me tell you, nobody does scrap like Max Masters! God damn eat my food, god damn live in my shack, move your damned relative in, and try to run my business for me, will you?!” Kyle raised eyebrows, but he listened dutifully as he followed me to the scrap pile. I was feeling better and better with every stinging word I delivered. I was just getting warmed up, too. I hoped he would still love me afterward.

Chapter Twenty

Springing the Trap

“...and then you guys almost lost my god damn clothes! All the clothes I own were in that damned duffel!” Okay, so I was getting a sore throat by the time we rounded the corner of the scrap pile and found Huang waiting for us in a t-shirt and jeans, arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

“Should I ask?” Huang wondered, looking past me at Kyle.

“He’s... venting,” Kyle replied sheepishly. “He’s making good points.”

“Damn right I am!” I snarled.

“If we could get to work...” Huang sighed and turned away, unmoved by my temper.

It’s too hard to keep shouting when the people you’re talking to treat you like a child having a tantrum. I suddenly didn’t feel so good. I did feel childish. I guess I could have made my points without screaming them at Kyle.

“Kyle, there is blood on your shoulder,” Huang said suddenly with a hint of alarm.

I came out of my self-indulgent wallow and saw Huang begin to reach for Kyle, the darker stain evident on Kyle’s shirt. Kyle shrugged him off. “I cut myself yesterday,” he lied. “I caught the scab putting the shirt on.”

Huang narrowed eyes and then shot a look at me. Kyle really sucked at lying. I didn’t know what to say. I felt like an asshole, mainly because I was one. I swore, right then and there, that no matter how pissed I was—

“Typical,” Huang said almost under his breath.

My fist cocked back and I felt a hot flush cover my entire body. I was going to hit him. His cold eyes waited, appraising me. I forced my hand to relax, opened the fingers, and then lowered it to hang limp at my side. Maybe all that yelling had helped. I felt in control. “It’s not typical, but,” I told him, “after what you and Special Forces did to me, I’m allowed to have... *issues*.”

“Issues?” Huang scowled, but then he suddenly had an odd look on his face. He paused, face going dark and distant as if he were looking inward. He said, “Because of our lives, perhaps we all are allowed to have ...*issues*.” He blinked and then came back from his thoughts. His dark eyes skewered me. “I trust that this issue has been addressed?”

“Yes,” Kyle replied for me, firmly, “It won’t happen again.”

“No, never again,” I promised with feeling.

Huang nodded and the subject seemed closed for now as we began working. After a minute, though, Kyle up sidled next to me and leaned in to butt his head against my

shoulder lightly. He nuzzled my ear as he said, “Love bites are okay, you realize?”

I looked sideways at him and grinned, realizing that Kyle was forgiving me. “You mean hickeys?”

“Hickeys,” Kyle repeated with a leer.

“What would Huang think about that?” I wondered with a snicker.

“That you are both not concentrating on the task at hand,” Huang broke in, closer to us than I realized. I blushed red as he added, “May I remind you both we have a deadline?”

“Yes, General Zian Huang, sir,” I muttered under my breath.

“He has very good hearing,” Kyle warned nervously.

“I hope so,” I replied. “I’d hate for him to miss anything I have to say about him.”

“We have to be partners,” Kyle admonished me and he was suddenly very serious. “We have to all work together, Max, to make this mission a success.”

“I know, I know! I can’t afford to be pissy with Huang,” I sighed. “He makes it freakin’ hard though.”

“He does,” Kyle replied, “but the things that annoy you the most, make him an excellent agent.”

I thought about that. “Maybe, in most cases, but out here his attitude is a liability.”

“You know something?” Kyle wondered sharply.

I thought about the man who had made me the job offer, but I still wasn’t ready to share that information. If a man like that knew so much about me, then how hard was it going to be for him to get information on an arrogant, bad tempered agent and a scowling, oriental agent with hair and eyes that were pretty damned distinctive? Kyle and Huang couldn’t see how they stood out in the scrap yards. It was better if I checked the man out myself to find out how much of a danger he might be to my two undercover employees.

I felt almost like a piece of meat being dangled in front of a hungry lion, only I was doing the dangling. I needed to see just how many teeth this lion had, what his game was, before I let my lover and his partner loose on him. I didn’t turn in customers unless they deserved it and I didn’t let babes into the savage jungle of my station without some idea of the danger they were in.

“I don’t know anything,” I lied and shrugged. “I’ll let you know when I do.”

Kyle looked ready to argue that point, not liking my expression, but I began working and didn’t give him the chance to say anything else. He said, after a minute, maybe trying to divert my mood, “You’re sexy when you sweat.”

I was bent way over and I actually looked between my legs at him as I pried at a piece of scrap, scowling.

“And limber too,” Kyle commented with a smirk.

“Get this pile done today and maybe I’ll show you just how limber,” I told him, letting him distract me from my temper and my worries about the dangers we might all be facing.

“Is that a promise?” Kyle wondered, looking eager.

“No promises, just wishful thinking,” I told him.

Huang grunted sourly, higher up on the pile. The sunlight was beating on us all, and it gave him a weird halo as he glared down at us. “Now that you have your incentive, Carter, perhaps you can apply yourself to your work?”

Kyle blushed, but he was smiling, too. I noticed he did start working harder.

They were asleep. I opened an eye and squinted at Kyle first, curled up against my side, fast asleep, and... Yes, he was drooling. I edged away a bit, and then looked over at Huang in his bed. He was hugging his pillow like a teddy bear and he was relaxed, probably having pleasant dreams. He’d finished my accounts late that night with my help, sent off the revised taxes, and told me he was astounded that I hadn’t gone out of business long ago. It seems I have mostly crap for scrap taking up most of my yard.

Huang had shaken his head and talked about credit per square foot. When he’d seen my deer in headlights look, I was given a terse explanation that space equals credits, something that Kyle had tried to explain to me, too, and that being disorganized costs credits.

Exhausted, and lulled by their long, drawn out talk about station economics and the chances of selling my metal scrap for, well, scrap, I had fallen asleep. I felt stupid that even Special Forces agents, without any stake in how well my business was doing, were better at running it than I was. I had gone to sleep thinking about taking a business course or begging Travers to come back and work for me.

Now that I was awake again, I had other things on my mind, like taking advantage of a perfect opportunity.

Huang had left his small hand held computer out on a side table by his bed. The screen was showing a digital katana lazily flipping around and around from one side of the screen to the other. The little computer was well within my reach and it was almost too easy.

I eyed Huang. His face was smooth and untroubled when he slept. He looked like he was ten years old. I couldn’t imagine him being that relaxed if he were really awake. I

certainly couldn't imagine Huang letting anyone see him nuzzled into a pillow, with his arms hugging it, even to spring a trap on me.

I reached out very slowly and took the computer off of the table. I watched for any frown, any twitch, but Huang continued to sleep. Breathing easier, I relaxed on my side, away from Kyle, and placed the computer on the sheets in front of me. It wasn't logged out. I was like a rat seeing a piece of cheese in a rat trap. I knew it was a set-up, had to be, but I needed that computer.

I am an expert, a child prodigy, when it comes to systems of any kind. Huang and his trap didn't stand a chance. Nor did the trap he had hidden behind that trap. I grinned as I breezed by them and logged on to the net. I spent the next hour researching my supposed *client*. I didn't like what I found, not at all. He was definitely a player in big things and he did have some big names on his payroll, names I knew from the war. It was pretty clear that he wasn't dealing scrap.

I went to a trickier next step. Now that I knew the man was a big fish, I needed to know if he was Huang and Kyle's big fish. I'm pretty sure hacking into Special Forces files was illegal. Especially, when I suddenly felt Kyle's warm breath on my neck. His hand reached over me to log off the computer and close the lid. He whispered in my ear, a mere breath, so as not to wake Huang, "It's a five year sentence for breaching Special Forces security."

I stiffened, swallowed hard, and then whispered back, "I thought I was your partner?"

"Not officially," Kyle replied as he took the computer from me.

"So..." I never could keep from being blunt, wanting to know the cards that were being dealt to me. "Are you going to buy that I was just surfing the net for porn?"

"Since I didn't see what you were looking at," Kyle replied, "and Huang left his computer where you could innocently take it and gain access to a logged on system, yes. Just don't push it again."

"Yes, sir," I promised dutifully, feeling like I'd just missed getting my head chopped off. "Can I go now, Officer Carter?"

"That's agent, and no, you can't go," he grumbled very quietly. He pulled me close against him, rubbing his pelvis against my ass. "Guess what woke me up? I seem to remember a promise you made."

I frowned, reached back, and put a hand on his erection. "That's not getting the kind of attention you want, darling, so put your libido back in its holster and opt for the cold shower. I'm not a freakin' exhibitionist. Your partner doesn't sleep that heavy and it's about time for his sadistic inner clock to start ringing."

Kyle sighed, his breath tickling the hairs at the nape of my neck. "You're cruel. A few

strokes and I'll be done, I promise." He tried to move in my hand. I squeezed his cock very hard, gave it a painful jerk, and then let go as I sat up. It didn't help that I now had a hard on, too. I was wearing my jeans and not a shirt. My erection was swollen and trapped against the denim. A hand reached around and rubbed it.

I glared back at Kyle. He twitched the blanket aside, smiled unrepentantly, and showed me what I was denying myself. God! He was gorgeous! I wanted to lie back down and do anything he wanted. Huang was beginning to stir, though.

I grabbed a shirt off the end of the bed, slipped it on, and motioned with my chin for the door. We snuck out like we were in enemy territory.

When we were a safe distance from the shack, Kyle's hands were on me. He grabbed at me, rubbing me everywhere as I tried to get us to my shack without coming in my pants. There was something about seeing Kyle this way, completely open, completely aroused, and completely wanting me. The light in his eyes was telling me about love, passion, and lust, and it was making me hotter than a thruster on full throttle.

Don't ask me why I suddenly decided that now was the time. It just was. Maybe Kyle had finally proven he had my back when he decided to let me evade Huang's traps and thread the needle of the law for me. He hadn't even asked what I had been looking at. He trusted me and I suddenly trusted him. A wall fell down between us that had been harder than titanium steel. Our mutual trust fueled my heat and fueled my need to have all of him.

We didn't make it to my shack. His hands were already tugging at my zipper, slipping inside, grabbing hold, and then sliding up my body to tweak nipples. His mouth tried to inhale mine, locking us together so tightly that, when I backed over a piece of scrap and fell over, he landed on top of me in the caustic sand. We both took only long enough to see that we were sandwiched between two concealing piles of scrap, before my pants started going down with Kyle's help.

I wanted really badly, but I didn't want to chance hurting Kyle any longer. "Kyle?" I said, trying to talk with his tongue trying to claim mine. He only replied with a, "Hmm?" as he pulled his shorts down and off. "Uh, hm, uh," I stammered, "We kind of... hm... uh.... need, you know..." Condoms and lube, I meant.

Kyle went completely stiff as he searched my eyes in shock and hope. He pulled away from my lips and choked out, "Now?"

If he had paused for one more second, I might have reconsidered having my first time with him out in the open, in my scrap yard, where God and everyone could find us, but he didn't. He pulled a handful of condom and lube packets out of his back pocket. I didn't even get a chance to make a sarcastic comment about loose men, before he was putting

them in my hand. Then I was pretty much reduced to sounds that might have reviled the calls of a horny moose.

He was on his back under the reflectors and the open dome of the station, legs spread, shorts underneath him to keep him out of the sand, and boots off and scattered. I'd done some raunchy things in my life, but this seemed something else entirely, and it took me a moment to understand my absolute need, my absolute disregard for modesty and morality. I loved the man under me, the one who was letting me prepare him carefully with my fingers; the man who was moaning and clutching at me, but allowing me to breach his entrance and sink my cock into him with painstakingly slowness. I loved everything about him and I wanted every inch of me inside of him. Nothing seemed nasty or over the top because of that desire. It was love, pure and simple, and nothing could be wrong when that was true.

"Are you okay?" I asked, forcing myself to stop and wait for him, forcing my body to see if he was really enjoying this.

"Feels like... a torpedo..." he hissed back breathlessly. "You should try it. Like... now."

I wanted to laugh, but he hadn't told me what I wanted to know, yet. A soldier covered up pain and misery. A soldier did what they had to, no matter what. I wasn't about to let Kyle do that to us. I wanted an honest answer. My growing anxiousness was starting to have a negative effect on my libido as well. I felt myself beginning to soften.

Kyle looked tense. It struck me, suddenly, that he had been lying to me. Our first time, going all the way, may really be Kyle's first time. It was hard to believe. He seemed so aggressive, so assured in his erotic moves.

"You're a virgin," I accused.

His eyes went wide, guilty, and alarmed. Did he think I was going to stop and reject him? I suddenly didn't want the answer to that.

"We can stop, Kyle," I assured him. "Your first time shouldn't be in the dirt of my scrap yard."

Kyle clutched at me to keep me from getting up. "It doesn't matter where we are," he told me, "as long as I'm with you. Please, don't stop."

I suddenly had a lot of weight on my shoulders that I hadn't been expecting. I was being trusted, completely. I wasn't going to fail him and I certainly wasn't going to hurt him as I cautiously made a shallow thrust. I couldn't help groaning as his tight body opened to me and I denied myself the opportunity to shove in. He groaned, in an echo of mine.

I made five more shallow thrusts and then I pushed in as deep as his body would

allow. I could see his tight expression soften and a small relieved smile play on his lips.

“God, yes, Max!” he groaned. “I love this!”

Those words were my passport to continue and my cock hardened even more with the encouragement.

“Uhhhhnnn! This... feels... so.... good... keep... going... keep... Uhhhhnnnnn! Max!” He panted in rhythm to my thrusts. “Max!!!!”

I came with a strangled shout in an embarrassingly short amount of time. I looked down into Kyle’s face to apologize and found him smiling warmly up at me. I rolled and moved him on top of my body, holding him close and kissing his face.

“Sorry, Kyle,” I apologized. “I can take care of you. Don’t worry.”

Kyle nuzzled my neck. “It’s all right. We’ll have other chances... lots of them.” He sounded embarrassed too, though he really didn’t have any reason to be. “Was it all right?”

That was supposed to be my line, but it was good to reassure him with, “That was fantastic!”

“It was,” Kyle replied with a satisfied smile, but then he was growling, “There’s sand in my butt, Masters, so let’s get up and go shower.”

I grimaced as he levered off of me and looked for his clothes. “At least you don’t have this crap stuck in your knees!” I complained as I tossed the condom aside. My knees were red and raw and I wondered what sort of metal bits were mixed up with the sand in that part of my lot. I began to feel self-conscious as I pulled my pants back up. I was basking in the afterglow, but my body was a sticky, sweaty mess.

“Next time,” I said as he helped me to my feet and hunted for my boots, “Let’s be raunchy and spontaneous inside, okay?”

Kyle handed me my boots. His mouth opened and closed and he was looking down as if he was fascinated with my boot laces. “I loved it... being with you..... I-I love you, Max.”

I blinked, clutching my boots. I looked down and began balancing on one foot to put one on. I put on the second one before I decided what to say, what to do. I finally gave him a long, hard look and pulled him up against me. I kissed him hard with my arms wrapped around him tight. When I broke the kiss, I said, as I let him go, “Love you, too.”

We shuffled feet, stood awkwardly, and then I grabbed him by the waistband of his shorts and tugged him after me. “Okay, okay! Fun time’s over! Let’s shower before Huang comes looking for us.”

Kyle reached out and took hold of the loop of my jeans and allowed himself to be lead. I glanced back and saw that warm, heart stopping smile on his face directed at me. I

found myself smiling back and I didn't even care that my knees were complaining.
Besides, a very important part of me was very happy, a part that wasn't below my belt,
but somewhere in the center of my chest.

Chapter Twenty-One

Solo

“You’re hurt?” Huang suddenly asked.

I looked sideways at him as I continued to tug Mud Hopper out of its shed. “Huh?”

“You’re limping,” Huang told me with a frown.

I wasn’t going to kiss and tell. “Must have pulled something,” I replied between grunts of effort. In fact, my knees were still killing me, even after antiseptic rubs and bandages.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t aggravate your condition, then, by this project?” Huang suggested in a critical tone.

On the one hand, I was surprised that he cared that much, on the other, I was pissed that he felt the need to lecture me. Before I could snarl back that I knew what I was doing, Kyle was there and offering his help. He grabbed hold of Mud Hopper, took a deep breath, and then pulled backwards. Mud Hopper slid along the ground as if it didn’t weight a thing.

I snorted, feeling like a complete weakling. I joked, “Kyle Carter, human tractor.”

Kyle chuckled. He asked, “Would you like help fixing it?”

I looked at Huang. “Don’t you two have Special Forces work to do now?”

Huang lifted an eyebrow as he replied, “I need to contact some agents and brief them on our progress. We need to run some contraband through your lot and bring it to the attention of our target.”

I frowned. “What if your target thinks that I’m too small time and just has me arrested?”

“There is that possibility, but it’s a slim one,” Huang replied. “Our target is very opportunistic.”

“And smart,” I retorted, not liking his confidence. Both Huang and Kyle looked at me curiously and I realized I was giving myself away. “I mean,” I scrambled, “if he’s a big time guy on station, then he has to be smart. You don’t get there, and stay there, by being stupid and making mistakes.”

“They were safe during the war,” Kyle pointed out. “This station has always been autonomous; almost a dictatorship. It’s time to stop them, to make them serve their time for their corruption.”

I thought about that, trying to imagine my home free and under a real elected government. It was very hard to picture and I couldn’t help feeling cynical. “Sometimes, when you try and step on a snake it bites you in the ass,” I muttered. I was almost sure the snake they were after was the snake who had been interested in me. I knew he wasn’t

going down easily, if at all.

“You will be selling this machine for scrap?” Huang wondered, changing subjects as if it didn’t concern me, or maybe he didn’t think I should be a part of the more covert side of the operation.

“No,” Kyle answered for me. “It can be fixed.”

Looking at the bent frame and a wheel stuck up in the air, I was amazed at his confidence.

“You should be working,” Huang said disapprovingly.

“On what?” I replied acidly as I bent to look at the engine. “I don’t have anything to do until someone shows up to either drop off scrap or buy it.”

Maybe he thought I was more aggressive about selling my scrap? Aside from talking to a few dealers and shooting off some emails to potential interested parties, there wasn’t much to do in a scrap yard except wait.

Huang exchanged a look with Kyle that said volumes about his bad opinion of me and stalked off.

“Are your knees still hurting?” Kyle asked as soon as Huang was out of sight.

“They sting, but it was worth it.” I grinned as I worked a wrench into a tight space and tried to get leverage. The engine would have to come out.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that... that I was a virgin,” Kyle said as he crouched to start work with a warm grin. “I didn’t want you to stop, or to laugh at me.”

I glared at him and found him looking at me lovingly through an open part of the frame. I growled, “Get this straight, Kyle Carter, I wouldn’t laugh about something like that. The last thing I wanted to do was to hurt you not knowing about it.”

“It only hurt at first,” Kyle admitted with a blush, “But then it was wonderful.”

That made me blush too. “I’m glad that it was good.” I struggled not to voice my ego, the part of me that was jumping for joy, strutting with pride, and thinking I was the god of sex.

“So,” I couldn’t help saying, though. “There’s never been anyone else, but me?”

Kyle looked uncomfortable and suddenly sullen.

I narrowed eyes at him. He glared back.

Kyle snapped, “If you want me to help on this piece of crap, then we should get started!”

“Nope, not arguing, not getting distracted, Mr. Pissy,” I told him firmly. I crept close to him and, since he was crouched too, we were eye to eye. I could almost feel the heat of his embarrassment roll off of him. I felt bad for the man, but I didn’t want him to feel inferior in any way. “How did you not go crazy?”

Kyle blinked at me and then he said, knowing he had to confess, "I was confused about what I wanted. No one seemed to care about my career or about what I wanted. I didn't want to give up being who I was for people I really wasn't interested in to begin with. So, I never tried... sleeping with them."

My eyes went wide in understanding. There are not a lot of men who can handle someone like Kyle. I often wondered if I was up to the challenge. I tried to make it better, but it was harder to confess to some cheap sex behind a bar and a few men I didn't really remember.

"Well, I haven't done anything much, either, so I think we can safely say we were each other's first time," I said as I reached out and caressed his face, leaving a smudge of grease behind.

He leaned forward and kissed me hungrily, but I was pushing him back in the next moment and laughing as I turned back to Mud Hopper. "Not now! Mud Hopper needs us. Try to get your mind out of your pants and pick up a wrench."

"Actually, my mind was in your pants," Kyle replied as he dug through the box of tools.

I laughed as we worked side by side. There was a calming quality to it. Of course, Mud Hopper didn't get fixed, but it didn't look as hopeless when we called it quits a few hours later.

"Customer," Kyle said as he looked over my shoulder and nodded towards the front gate.

I turned and saw someone I knew. I grinned and hurried over to him, wiping my hands on my pants before I extended one to shake his. "Ben! Long time no see!"

He smiled back, the smile of a cat sizing up mice. His eyes roved over my lot. "Cleaner than last time."

"I have some new help," I told him.

He was a heavy set man in slouchy jeans and a dirty tank top. He looked like he lifted trucks for a living. His shaggy head of black hair made me think of bears. "Been talk," he said shortly and that said a hell of a lot with so few words.

"Yeah?" I played dumb, of course.

"Maybe we can make a deal and help us both out?" Ben didn't beat around the bush. He scalped people in plain sight, instead of behind a man's back.

I saw Huang suddenly standing behind the man's shoulder. He was looking very serious. He nodded once, meaning, I suppose, that I should look desperate and make the deal. Okay, I could play the truth pretty convincingly, I thought.

"Things have been rough," I told Ben. "The jerk in the next lot keeps stealing my

customers and my deliveries. If you can see your way to buying some scrap, I think I can give you a good deal on it.”

“Good man,” Ben said and laughed. It sounded like a bad engine turning over, deep in his throat. He leaned close. He was like a mountain with bad breath. “We should go inside, do this in private.”

Oookay. I did deals out in the lot. Anyone who wanted differently gave me the urge to draw a gun or call the police. Everything I’ve done hasn’t always been on the up and up. I’ve burned people, but people who deserved it. I know I have enemies. I didn’t know if Ben was one, but I wasn’t giving him the chance to enlighten me one way or the other.

“Well, Ben…” I rubbed at the back of my neck and was about to launch into, *the scrap is out here* when I saw Huang scowl and make a gesture toward my shack. He wanted me to go through with it. I almost gave him away, almost told him to mind his own damn business, but then he pointed to himself and then off to where I guessed Kyle was standing by. I got it. They were my backup. I re-evaluated the situation.

“I guess it *is* damned hot out here. Come on in.” I motioned Ben to follow me as I led the way to my shack. Going inside, I left the door open. Ben didn’t protest. That was a good sign.

I sat at my desk, keeping some space between us. Ben leaned on the desk on his knuckles. I thought about gorillas as he said, “I need twenty five points for extractors.”

I sat up. They were worth good money and I had them, though not in the best shape. “I’ve got them. Some have rust and burns, but they do work,” I replied.

“Acceptable,” he grunted and then leaned in, eyes intense. “Two hundred credits each.”

I blinked and then laughed. I said, “Two? Try six hundred.”

“Rusted? You’re drunk!” Ben growled. “Two fifty.”

“I’m cold sober,” I retorted and glared. “Five fifty.”

“Drunk and crazy!” Ben snarled and leaned so close that he rained spit on me. “Three hundred.”

“Not as crazy as you!” I snarled back, wiping at my face in disgust. “Five hundred.”

He glared, nostrils flaring and his breath going in and out like a bellows. A vein throbbed at his temple. “Three fifty.”

I stared. He stared back. “Four fifty and that’s it.”

“Four fifty?” His dark eyes looked like they could kill. “Four fifty.” he repeated. “Four fifty.” Those eyes suddenly looked me up and down. I knew that *look*.

You didn’t live with soldiers and rebels who were mostly men without seeing that *look* a few times. Nothing wrong with it if you’re into that sort of thing like me, of course, but

this had an added dimension to it. He gave me the impression that he had planned to say what came next all along and that he had wanted privacy for his next offer.

When he said it, I was suddenly on top of the table and throwing my weight behind my fist for all I was worth. It caught him on the point of his chin. His head snapped back and he went flying backwards right through the open door. Maybe I wasn't working out anymore, but I was still a man who could fly a gunship single handed. That took some spectacular physical strength.

I ran after Ben. He was on his back on the porch with a hand on his chin. Kyle was there, standing ready, and so was Huang. Fuck me for thinking I could trust someone else to back me up and for letting myself get talked into a situation that I had known was wrong. I'd always looked after myself. Today wasn't any different. I could handle an asshole like Ben.

I grabbed Ben by the front of his shirt and yelled into his face, "Four fifty or get the hell off my lot!"

Ben turned his head aside and spat blood. He looked at me and grunted as he sat up. I let him go and backed up. "Guess some of the rumors were wrong."

"What the hell does *that* mean?" I demanded.

"They said you were paying for things in bed." He sneered at my help. "Or maybe I'm just not your type?"

My hand balled into a fist again and he winced. "Four fifty," I repeated. "Or get the hell *out*!"

"Four fifty," Ben agreed. "Done." Then he sneered at me. "At least they were right about your being desperate."

I felt as if a volcano was erupting inside of me. I was proud of myself that I didn't beat the shit out of him. He could say crap if he wanted, as long as he transferred the damned credits. I panted and trembled, holding myself back, as Ben stood and keyed in the transfer to the computer pad Huang offered him. When he was done, he looked Huang over and licked his lips. When he looked at Kyle he found the eyes of a killer looking back. He started and said, as he beat a hasty retreat to where ever he had parked his vehicle, "Those aren't damned scrap men!"

I seethed and said tightly, "Get pervert there his twenty-five points."

Kyle demanded, "What did he do?"

"He wanted some extras along with his points," I ground out. "Nice to know I have a reputation as a whore now. Thanks a lot!" I walked into my shack and slammed the door closed. I spent the day feeling sorry for myself.

Kyle was smart. He waited until nightfall when the temperature cooled down along

with my temper. When the knock came on the door, I was ready to at least look at him. I wasn't sure what I was going to say, though.

Kyle was a stark shadow in the overhead lights as I opened the door. The scrubbers went into gear and we waited, staring at each other. It seemed to take forever this time for them to retract and leave the place in silence.

"I'm sorry," Kyle began.

"Yeah?" I wasn't helpful.

"Max," Kyle said, sounding anguished, "We didn't intend for any of this to happen to you."

"Maybe I would have done better locked up," I growled, crossing my arms and glaring. "Then I could have had some sort of reputation once I got out."

"You don't look very well," Kyle replied, as if he were changing the subject.

"Losing everything I worked for does that," I retorted. I left the doorway and went into the bedroom, not caring whether he followed or not. I sat on the bed, looking at nothing very hard with my hands lax between my knees. I wanted something to drink to dull the ache in my psyche. I told myself that I wasn't going to do that, the same way I told myself I wasn't going to punch Kyle in the face.

Kyle sat on the floor. He leaned to get coffee, pulled the tabs, and handed me one. It steamed in the cooling air as I cradled it in my hands. "I was coming anyway," Kyle said, as if he was choosing his words carefully, "but Huang wanted me to ask you something as well."

I watched Kyle fiddle with his coffee cup out of the corner of my eye. I just wanted him to go away. I'd been, mentally, trying to gnaw off the leg caught in the trap Kyle and Huang had set for me. I hadn't come up with any solutions, so I was depressed, now. I wanted to curl up in bed and pull the blankets up over my head. I wanted to forget all about my crappy life, about scrap, about credits, about Ben, and about everyone on station who thought Max Masters would bend over to keep his business running.

I know I needed to say something. I loved Kyle. I could salvage that, keep that at least, but that made me think about how much he didn't need me, how much it was all one sided. Here I was, a complete loser, and there he was, the best and brightest in the Special Forces. He wasn't going to drop all of that and deal scrap and I wasn't going to put a stop to that. I was depressed enough as it was. My relationship with Kyle didn't need more reasons to fail. It had enough of them already.

"So, what did Mr. Zian Huang want to ask?" I growled after I discarded everything else as too crude.

Kyle's hands tightened on his coffee. "He wants to know why our target already

knows you.”

Maybe I wasn't feeling sick before, but I did now. I know the blood drained out of my face. How was I to know that Huang was spying that closely on our target?

“I can explain,” I blurted, looking up at last and feeling the iron cuffs going on my wrists already.

Kyle sounded completely confident in me when he replied, “I know you can.”

I felt like a shit as I told him, “He sent someone to the yard. I turned him down when he offered me a job. Sometimes, people think they can get a desperate ex elite soldier on their payroll. It's happened to me before.”

“Did you suspect he might be our target?” Kyle wondered.

“Yes... maybe... I don't know.” I took a sip of my hot coffee, trying to gather my scattered wits together. “It was possible, I guess, but I've told you, I'm not handing people over to you unless they freakin' deserve it.”

“Is that why you were on Huang's computer?” Kyle asked. “Finding out?”

“Why, Mr. Carter, that would be illegal,” I said, but it wasn't funny and he didn't laugh.

“So, did you draw any conclusions?” Kyle wondered.

“He's probably your guy, but I still don't know for sure. I'm not going to say until I do know.” I scowled and said angrily, “It's not like you've trusted me! You haven't shown me anything on our potential target. I know my part, but I don't know yours.”

Kyle slipped his computer out of his pocket and booted it up. He tapped keys with fine precision and then turned the screen where I could see it. “This is the man we are after.”

It took me only one glance to know that it was nearly the same information that I had hacked. “Okay, so it's the guy. Now what?”

“This is classified,” Kyle impressed on me. “We may only have this opportunity to catch this man, before he perpetrates a much larger crime.”

“Selling contraband weapon parts?” I surmised. Kyle blinked at me, shocked. “I'm right, aren't I? Weapons parts, plus bad ass weapons, equals terrorist candy.”

“So are good soldiers,” Kyle pointed out.

“Elite soldiers, with weapons know how, and connections in the business, you mean,” I added. “He didn't want me to sell him points and a picture of my ass, that's for sure.”

Kyle almost crushed his container of hot coffee, understanding my reference to Ben. “I want to kill that man!” he snarled in a way that made me think of relocating to the asteroid belt, or grabbing onto him for all I was worth for knowing how much he cared. “If I had heard what he said to you...”

I growled back, “I was a soldier, too, remember? I took care of it.”

Kyle closed his computer and put it away, trying to control his emotions. He said, calmer, “Now that Huang knows our target is interested in more than contraband scrap, he wants you to be our undercover man and accept his offer.”

“That’s reasonable.”

“I told him, no,” Kyle continued, as if I hadn’t said anything. “I will contact him and offer my services instead. I’ll be the undercover agent.”

I snorted. “He won’t believe you and I don’t need protecting, Kyle!”

“We’ve ruined your business and disrupted your life,” Kyle told me. He was struggling with strong emotions. “I told Huang that this sting has moved beyond trying to sell scrap to our target. We don’t need you anymore. We have to change the plan.”

“This guy won’t believe you,” I repeated, but then I shrugged and put my coffee aside. Exhaustion was making me stupid. I needed to sleep before I could think about my anger, my depression, and this turn of events that had made everything that had happened to me a waste of time. I couldn’t even describe how I felt. At the very least, I wanted to find a nice strong rope and a place to hang myself, or, maybe, everyone else.

I think I went numb. Maybe I was having a nervous breakdown? All I know is that everything went blank. I didn’t care and didn’t want to think any longer. I managed to say, “I don’t want to do this now. Wait until I wake up again to make any moves. You’re a goldfish. He’s a shark. You’ll be sushi.” I’m surprised I was still thinking of him at all.

“Max.” Kyle wanted to say something, I’m sure, but what the hell was there to say? *‘Sorry, about that whole rest of your life thing. Sorry, we cut your dreams to pieces. Sorry, you’ll have to leave your home and find a place where they don’t know you,’* were all real possibilities.

“I’m fucking going!” I snarled, suddenly finding a last burst of emotion. It erupted from my aching gut and I hardly recognized my hoarse voice as I collapsed onto my bed and turned my face to the wall. I continued to shout, “I’m going to be your informant! I’m going to be your undercover whore! I’ll be freakin’ fucked if all of this is for shit! You tell Huang I’ll get this guy wrapped and sent to him special delivery.”

There was quiet on Kyle’s side of things. I closed my eyes tightly, feeling like my chest was going to implode with the pain of getting completely and thoroughly fucked over. I realized that every other thought contained the word, *fuck* now, but it was just too fucking appropriate.

Kyle didn’t reply. He was very smart. He wasn’t going to argue with someone in my mood. Instead, he continued to sit quietly, maybe thinking we were through and that he had driven the last nail into our relationship coffin. Maybe he had. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to know. I went to sleep like I had passed out and I was glad I hadn’t needed to

resort to anything chemical or alcoholic to get there. At least I still had that dignity.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bait

Warmth was against my back and a soft snore sounded in my ear. I had a violent urge to elbow Kyle off of the bed, but I throttled it and tried to wake up all the way first. I had to admit that it did feel good to have him hold me. I was also remembering my little, okay, my very big meltdown the night before. I wondered what that had looked like. What did Huang and Kyle think about me now? Give me a mission? They were probably going to call a psycho ward instead.

I suppose I've lived as long as I have by completely bottling things up, by being tougher than titanium nails when it came down to swallowing tragedy and going on from there. How many times had I gone on to start over; one, two, three times? My slate had been cleaned, leaving me to reinvent myself enough times to have become a pro at it. It didn't make it hurt any less, or make me feel any better about the circumstances that had left me out in the cold, yet again.

I found myself staring at the wall, my shack, my lot, and my business. Soon, I firmly believed, it was going to be someone else's. I'd already proved that I couldn't run it by myself, that I didn't have the head for organization or book keeping. With my reputation hanging around my ankles and Ben running off to tell everyone I had suspicious employees, all that was left was sizing up the coffin and placing my business papers in it for burial. It may seem strange, but volunteering for a dangerous mission, and risking my life by stepping into the den of one of my home's most corrupt officials, seemed the ultimate in denial, in sticking my head in the sand a bit longer and not dealing. That suited me just fine.

"What are you going to do when this is all over, Kyle?" I whispered and found myself holding Kyle's hands, which were holding me protectively. "Go back to your life, of course. I don't have one anymore and I don't see any place for me in your life." And that hurt more than any of the rest. It took me by surprise that after everything, I felt even more in love with that damned man wrapped around me. Maybe I was a masochist at heart.

"We wasted years," Kyle said suddenly in a tense, pained, whisper, "believing that we weren't meant to be together. Don't keep believing it, Max. I..." His face pressed into my back, hard, and I felt him shiver. "I will never be able to apologize enough. I don't know what to do, Max. I only know I never want to be without you again. If I have to resign from Special Forces and follow you, I will." If I still wanted him, he meant, and the question hung in the air.

Why should he give up his life? The thought was bitter in my gut. Kyle made a difference. He was out there, every day, saving people. He was trying to save my home, now, but like in the war, some people had to die so others could have peace. I was the casualty. I didn't think I was going to be the only one either. I'd made that sacrifice willingly during the war. I wonder why it should bother me now? Oh, yeah, I hadn't volunteered this time.

"Since you're up," I said, not telling Kyle anything at all, "Let's go tell Huang the good news. I'm going to be his bait."

I was almost afraid that Kyle wasn't going to let go, but he did and shifted to sit up. I turned and looked at him as I sat up as well. He looked like hell. I had the feeling my lover hadn't slept at all last night, except right before I had decided to talk to myself. He was still dressed, his clothes wrinkled and his hair messed up. He met my eyes. We sat very still and then I leaned close, hooking a hand behind his neck. I squeezed tight enough to make him wince.

"Not now," I told Kyle. "After this is done, we'll see what's left to talk about."

A shit would tell me that a lot of my own decisions had put nails in my own coffin. Kyle wasn't a shit. He was taking all the blame. He really did love me. He really was suffering and thinking we were through. I could have taken some revenge and exploited that. Well, I wasn't that much of a shit either.

"I love you," I told Kyle fiercely and it almost sounded as angry as, *I hate you*, "but I don't feel good about anything right now. I can't see how any of this is going to end up. I can't see how I fit. My motto has always been, '*keep moving and opportunities will present themselves.*' I can't make any promise, or plans. I just have to keep moving and see what happens next."

I could tell he wanted more from me, but he kept his mouth shut. He decided to be attentive instead. While I showered and put on my city clothes, a pair of jeans without holes and a white t shirt without grease, he made breakfast and had my bed made. We ate in silence and after, when I was sitting and sipping my coffee, he asked a question that was more loaded than he realized.

"Can I help brush your hair while you finish?" Kyle asked it in a very nervous tone of voice.

My hair was a disaster, a tangled ball of knots that I hadn't paid attention to in days. It shouldn't have mattered who the hell brushed it out, but somehow, letting him do it had much more intimate over tones.

I put my coffee aside and shook my head, not ready to give that much. "I can brush my own damned hair," I grumbled. "Make yourself useful, instead, and get the garbage

cleaned up before we go. We're probably not going to see this place again for a couple of days."

Kyle hid his disappointment and did as I asked. I watched him as I worked out the knots in my hair. When I saw him pause at my special closet and watched him check the lock, I almost lost my resolve, but I steeled myself and stayed pissed off. His next words broke through that resolve like a truck through rice paper, "I'll have an agent stay here and keep your neighbor from making a claim while we're gone."

He was still watching my back and keeping my things safe. I loved that he was willing to have someone guard them for my sake. I almost clocked him with the hair brush as I launched myself into his arms. We both hit the ground, but Kyle's arms were around me and he was probably wondering if I was attacking him or forgiving him as he said, over and over again, "Love, love..."

We were both bruised. I was bleeding from a skinned elbow and Kyle was sporting a red spot on his jaw from my arm accidentally connecting. We forgot everything and just clung. I couldn't say anything. I didn't know what was going through my head. All I knew was that I had to have Kyle with me, no matter how much grief was in store for me.

It was hard to recover from that and hard to know how to break the moment, partly because we didn't want to. I had the feeling we were about to cap it off with a heated bout of sex, when there was firm knock on the door.

"Carter? Masters? We have to talk," Huang called.

I let go of Kyle and quickly began finishing my hair, hands shaking. I was a mess. I couldn't be a mess if I wanted to convince Huang to let me take the mission. Kyle waited until I was ready and helped me to my feet before answering the door. He didn't seem much steadier than I was, though. His hand reached out and tightened on mine. I felt his fear and disapproval, but he knew better than to think he could change my mind. I returned his hard squeeze and I pulled loose.

"Time for me to come out of retirement," I told him. Kyle went pale, the mark on his face going livid in contrast, but he nodded stiffly and went to let Huang in.

Huang entered cautiously. We looked like we'd been in a fight and he knew I was angry. I jammed my hands into my pockets and glared at the floor as I made my pitch. "I volunteer for this operation."

I expected a third degree or an argument of some kind. I wasn't prepared for Huang to simply say, "All right. You'll have to activate as a special agent and fill out some forms."

I looked up and saw his thoughtful expression. I couldn't begin to guess what he was thinking. Maybe I had volunteered for a suicide mission and he wasn't going to stand in my way? It was like Huang, though, to let a warrior fight his chosen battles. He'd done

enough of that during the war.

“Don’t you want to ask why?” I still had to know where I stood with Zian Huang.

“I know why,” Huang replied, giving me nothing to go on. He was going to keep his cards close to his chest and I was just going to have to guess his hand.

“Okay.” That sounded lame, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Huang,” Kyle began but I pointed a finger at him without looking at him. He stopped talking.

“My choice,” I said in warning and he made a frustrated sound.

Huang turned and I followed him out of my shack. “Once you are certified an agent,” he told me, “We’ll brief you on the details.”

I shrugged as I blinked at the reflected light and scowled at the heat that was building already. What a surprise, another hot day. “I already have a cover story. I know all about this guy. I’ll get in, download his operation, and get the hell out so you can arrest him. This would have been a walk in the park in the old days.”

“In the old days, you could set a bomb and kill them all,” Kyle reminded me darkly. “Now they have to be arrested and imprisoned.”

“I am still allowed to defend myself, right? “ I wondered, “or do your agents only have guns to pick their nose with?”

I was nervous and not sure I was making a good decision. My mouth got smart assed when that happened. I always figured, piss the other guy off enough and he might spill something unintentionally. Huang had come a long way from the young boy who had exploded with fury at the drop of a hat. He didn’t respond except to say, “You will be issued a weapon, if you don’t have one.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t needed one since the end of the war. Scrap men don’t have many shootouts. I can’t walk into this guy’s office with one anyway. He’ll have a scanner.”

We went into their shack and I sat on one of the beds while Huang booted up his computer. Kyle fetched drinks and I sat sipping mine as he settled beside me. Finally, Huang turned the computer towards me.

“Paul Harker, Exterior Administrator. Meaning, he not only helps run the station, he does deals off station too,” I said and then read his list of suspected crimes. I only nodded, not surprised at all. “He wouldn’t be where he is if he didn’t murder people, and he wouldn’t be doing it at all if he wasn’t making a lot of credits. It looks like he was just dealing drugs to begin with.” I whistled. “Juke? That’s nasty shit. Kolibar.... Ansens... and some old standbys, too... cocaine... heroine... that stuff never goes out of style. It’s the weapons you’re worried about the most, though, right? I see he’s working with

Walters and Barnard. Everyone knows they're doing weapons. So, he has someone buy the stuff and sell it to the scrap dealers to keep his hands clean. Then he has his contacts buy them from the scrap dealers. He probably has the first born of every one of his scrap men, too, to keep them in line. The question is, what's he want me for, if he doesn't want me to run weapons?" I answered my own question, my mind leaping ahead. "Ah, he wants to really get into the big time, doesn't he? He wants to put some major weapons together, hire a first rate elite soldier, and take over."

"Exactly," Kyle replied, looking troubled and Huang gave a single nod.

I looked at our target and remembered seeing him on video shows, on the news, and in the papers. He was blonde, blue-eyed, and good looking enough to be a model. I didn't know anything more about him other than his face, though, because I was of a like mind with most of the station; uncaring of the higher ups. We didn't vote in elections, because we knew it was corrupt. We didn't argue any new laws, because we knew we would be ignored. We didn't listen to speeches or proclamations, because, not only didn't they concern us, they were most likely lies anyway. We practiced the fine art of, *staying under the radar* and staying far away from the city and its corruption.

"What do you know about his set up?" I asked.

"First," Huang told me as he took back his computer and changed screens, "you must be cleared."

I made a face. I've never liked paperwork or official channels. I wasn't the kind of guy who could work with restrictions and orders. Give me a mission and I figure it out and execute it. I suppose that sounds arrogant, but I am that good. I'm certainly better than pencil pushers who never saw real combat.

Huang was typing furiously. I heard a clicking and then a female voice. My blood froze. Commander Pollock was a formidable woman. She could make a five star general pee his pants with a withering look. I remembered her all too well from the war, ordering me to go on numerous suicide missions.

"What do you want Agent Huang?" Pollock asked coolly.

"Masters has offered to be our undercover operative," Huang told her.

"Concerns?" she asked promptly.

Huang replied, "None."

I blinked. What the hell had I done to deserve his sudden trust? I rapidly went over the last few days and came up empty.

"Status?" Pollock asked, not questioning Huang's judgment any further.

"Competent. He is in very good shape," Huang replied.

"All right, I approve his special agent status, but I expect you to supervise this entire

operation closely,” Pollock told him in a severe tone.

Huang inclined his head in acknowledgment. “We’ll start immediately.”

Huang broke the connection and then turned the computer towards me. I found myself looking at a very long form.

“Read it carefully and then apply your thumbprint,” Huang instructed me. He added, catching my eyes and holding them intently, “If you fail to carry out your part of the mission properly, you will be given a life sentence.”

I scrolled down to the bottom of the form without looking at it and applied my thumbprint. I turned it back towards him. “Anything else or do you want to give me mission specs now?”

Kyle sighed and said, “Max, you should have read it. There are regulations.”

I looked at him and then at Huang, letting them know I considered them a team apart from me. “You follow regulations, I follow what I know. You know what that’s worth.”

They exchanged looks. “We do know,” Huang replied as he began pulling up information on his computer for me.

Hope wriggled its nose at me. I was getting respect and I couldn’t figure out why. I was doing something that was making Kyle crazy with worry and Huang and Pollock trusting. Hope was making a very small part of me wonder if this mission, completed successfully, might pull my ass out of its downward spiral. I couldn’t get any lower and I couldn’t feel any more like a failure. If I could do this and save the world once again, it would go a long way to proving to, at least myself, that I still had it, that I could still go on and jump onto the next train of possibility.

I read through building schematics, looked at guard rotations, regular deliveries, most frequent times of online and phone activity, and personnel time clocks. The target liked to come in late and leave early. His work day was four hours long, on average.

“Looks like he does a hell of a lot of uploading every two days,” I noticed. “Any idea why?”

“We tried deciphering it, but without success,” Kyle told me.

I eyed him. “I know how good you are at that. If you can’t do it, I probably can’t either.”

“The encryption is very odd,” Huang said.

“Let me look,” I said without really thinking that I could do much. Huang booted up the file and I blinked at the odd strings of code and text. I have a gift; to see how things balance and flow, and to anticipate patterns. I saw it suddenly and grinned. I typed in my own string of code and the gibberish settled into known forms. Kyle saw my solution and he looked completely embarrassed.

“Of course,” Kyle exclaimed in exasperation, “Station mineral shorthand. That’s why the computer didn’t know it.”

Huang’s eyebrows lifted. “Explain.”

“Scrap men use shorthand among themselves,” I told him, “to post notices and label scrap. I don’t think it would surprise you that a lot of scrap men can only scrawl their name? This is how they get by.”

Kyle pointed to the screen, “But what are these characters?”

I laughed. I said, “Periodic table and The Iliad,” and then quoted, “*As Dawn spread his saffron mantle over the world, Zeus, who delights in thunder, called the gods to a conference on the highest of Olympus’ many peaks.*” Weird.”

Of course they gaped at me. I shrugged and said, “Well, I did learn something besides blowing shit up during the war.” I pointed to the scrambled passage again. “So, did this guy have a meeting recently?”

Huang frowned and nodded, “Yes.”

“I’m betting it was dealers and not gods, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” Kyle replied. “This is the formula for micro steel,” he said going a little pale as he pointed to the lines on the screen. “That’s material for laser rifles. Here’s mesh titanium, too.”

“For big laser guns,” I said. I pointed to a key set of characters. “This is Titanium Kevlar micro binding; that’s material for gun ships. Can I dare to hope that this is just a wish list and he hasn’t actually had this stuff delivered to him?”

“We don’t know,” Huang replied. “His network is vast and he works through third parties. We need to infiltrate his systems to discover if he has a production base to utilize these materials.”

“And I bet that he wouldn’t be stupid enough to upload information like that?” I asked, but they didn’t have to answer. A guy like that would use couriers, not electronics. Material lists were one thing, but deliveries and production sites would be something else.

I sat back, pushing the computer toward Huang. I already had a plan. It was bold and suicidal, but I was used to that. “Okay, I go in as Max Masters, loser who needs money and a job, and I hack the systems as soon as they look the other way. If I go in between shift changes, things might be confusing enough that no one will know who gave who permission to go into sensitive areas. I might use that to bluff my way out if there’s trouble. I can always use my patented, *‘I just needed to know that I could trust you, so I was checking you out.’* excuse. He might buy that or he might shoot me between the eyes. Hopefully, I won’t get caught and I’ll skinny out of there without a hitch.”

“Kyle is going to be your backup,” Huang told me and I could tell he was unsure about the arrangement. He wasn’t talking about backup, as in save my ass if I get into trouble. He was talking about Kyle finishing the mission if I was turned into a red smear.

I turned to Kyle and grabbed his bicep, squeezing hard enough to make him wince. I leaned in close, meeting his dark blue eyes, and said, “You screw this up, you try and come after me instead of doing your job, and I’ll shoot you myself. Got it, Carter? This is serious shit. This is bigger than us. I won’t go into this unless you tell me you get that.”

“You said once...” Kyle tried to choose his words carefully, “You said that you wouldn’t risk your life.”

I suppose it came out as bitter as hell, but it was the plain truth to me at that moment, as I replied, “In case you hadn’t noticed, my life is over on this station. I’d rather go out like a shooting star than go out like a bad smell.”

Kyle cupped the side of my face, caressed me there gently, and said, “You don’t have to do this. Your life isn’t over. It’s with me, if you want it to be?”

“I want that, really I do,” I told him, returning the caress and ignoring the fact that Huang had scowled and turned away. Screw him anyway. “I have to do this, though. You know why, right?”

I didn’t want to have to explain it. Laying it all out in words might have made me cry. I felt pathetic enough.

“Just be there on the other side, when I’m done, okay?” I demanded, “Don’t storm the building, looking for me, like some damned hero from the war.”

“I was never a hero,” Kyle corrected me and he sounded choked up.

I chuckled, but it was strained. I said, “Don’t be stupid. You were a hero from day one.”

I let him go, knowing I was about to go over the edge and break down. I clapped my hands and rubbed them briskly together as I stood up. I said to Huang with false enthusiasm, “Well, let’s get started!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Red Flag

“Max, stop whistling,” Kyle complained in exasperation.

“Sorry,” I muttered under my breath and then smiled at the old lady in the transport train who was giving me the, ‘*you’re a nutcase.*’ eye. We were alone, so I could forgive her for looking ready to hit the emergency door and jump out.

I turned away and walked down the aisle toward the back as Kyle said in my ear com, “You’ve said sorry every time I’ve told you to stop.”

“Habit,” I replied shortly and stuck my hands into my jeans pockets. I almost started whistling again and bit my lip. I contented myself with scratching behind my ear with my shoulder.

“Stop that, too,” Kyle told me, almost at once.

“Okay, but how did you know I did that?” I wondered.

“Your tracking signal jiggles when you scratch the implanted GPS chip,” Kyle explained and sounded amused.

“Yeah, go ahead and laugh,” I growled in a low whisper. “I’m the one tagged like a damned wild animal.”

“Like a wildebeest?” Huang suggested, sounding just as amused as Kyle, damn him.

“Caribou,” Kyle countered.

“Shut up, you two!” I snarled.

“Grizzly bear,” Kyle suggested and I could almost hear him smirk.

“Apt,” Huang agreed, but then sobered as he said, “Now, if you two would practice mission silence, please. You’re almost at your destination, Masters.”

I’d been too busy being confused by Huang sharing a joke with Kyle to notice. I bent and looked through a cracked and filthy window. I could see the greenery of the city after we passed through the airlock.

The woman left at the first stop and the late shift of grimy construction workers and system mechanics getting off of work, piled on. I found myself being squeezed from all sides. When they left at the next stop for the poorer section of the city, I looked down and saw that my shirt had dirt marks all over it from rubbing against their work clothes. I sighed.

“Max?” Kyle said in a worried tone.

“Go,” I replied, our code word for all right. *Stop*, was trouble. *Yellow*, was discovered. *Red flag*, meant man down.

I sat in a corner for the next few stops, watching people get on and off as the transport

train made its way to the government section of town. It was there that I finally reached my stop. I got off, tired, nauseous from the constant rocking motion of the transport, and dirty. I looked like a scrap man and I found myself adopting the cocky attitude of one as I walked down the sidewalks, especially when people grimaced at me in distaste and said things to each other when they thought I couldn't hear.

It might seem strange, but I had one thing I always did when I visited the city. I didn't miss it now. I entered a large park filled with trees, grass, flowers, and fountains, and sat on a bench to admire it all. A little bit of paradise; a little peace before I went into a situation where I might see blood, guts, and men dying.

My eavesdroppers didn't say anything. They could see by the tracking device where I was. Maybe they understood. I didn't push it, though. I left the park after only a short time and made my way into the heart of the enemy, a row of skyscrapers reaching impossible heights in the light gravity.

I couldn't just walk in. I had called ahead. My appointment had been immediate. They wanted to see me so badly that they were willing to let me have some *hand* in the situation. I didn't fool myself into over confidence. They wouldn't do it without a reason or a plan to exploit it.

Exterior Administrator Paul Harker, I read on the outside of the building in letters larger than I was. I kept my cocky attitude and entered boldly through the front doors, hands still stuck in my pockets and white shirt still filthy with dirt.

At least when you're expected, and people know your past at being very good at killing lots of people, nobody mistakes you for the maintenance man. The guards took one look at me and all of them snapped to alert status.

"Max Masters, you're expected, sir," one very muscular man said as he made a little salute.

I have a sense about people. Looking at the guards, I knew they didn't have a clue what their boss was up to. Their respect was genuine. I really hoped I wouldn't have to hurt them.

They took me up a secure elevator and into a posh office space. Three secretaries ushered me into an oval office with expensive glass, Danish furnishings, and museum quality art I decided was genuine. The man I was supposed to rat on was seated behind a very large desk. Paul Harker was leaning back comfortably, the light from a large picture window making him look larger than life. If a place could have gods, he would be one of them, I thought. He and his fellow bureaucrats ran the lives of everyone on station, from the air that they breathed to the weather that they endured. We were subject to their every whim and their whims weren't usually good ones.

People who had that much power usually couldn't resist using it. I often thought that the man in charge of the weather liked to make everyone miserable, so that he could get off on being magnanimous, once in a while, when he bestowed good weather on the *little people*. I knew I was looking at someone just like that, only he was going after the money end of it as well. Harker was going to make an elite soldier dance to his music and make money off of him, too. So, I was prepared when he said, very simply, "I am your new boss."

Of course Harker had waited until my moment of seemingly greatest desperation, when I had finally come crawling to him with no other option. Of course, he would cement that statement with a threat and I tried not to look bored as he flashed a computer disk at me and then tapped his chin with it idly.

"You've been dealing with unlicensed dealers, Mr. Masters," he told me seriously. "And your taxes seemed to have been doctored most artfully."

Okay, I frowned at that. I couldn't imagine Huang making a mistake. Then, I got it. "You changed them." It wasn't a question.

Harker chuckled. He said, "You're quick, very quick. Are you also able to add up the years in prison for that crime alone?"

I bowed my head, jaw working. He was mean and blunt, but I liked a man who didn't play with his food. "What do you want?" I asked angrily.

"I've told you," Harker said as he put the disk flat on his desk and moved it around idly. "You are now working for me. You like to break the law, so I'll give you the chance to be in on something big," he sneered, "instead of doing scrap deals with station trash."

I stared a mental hole into his carpet, looking very pissed. "I had a bad year," I argued. "I'll pay the court fines, throw myself on the mercy of the court, and do community time."

"As if I'd let you," Harker snorted. He put the gloves back on in the next instant, almost purring. "Masters, surely you can see you're wasting your talents in the scrap heaps? A war hero deserves so much more." He waved to his office. "Surely you have a desire for the finer things in life? I can give you anything you wish; a penthouse apartment, a very generous paycheck, and any *entertainments* that you might desire."

I tried not to shiver, knowing he was talking about something other than a handsome guy on my arm and some good wine. I wanted to punch his lights out, or the lights of whoever had given him the impression that I was in to weird things. "Don't believe everything you hear," I grated, my hands clenched into fists.

"I don't," Harker told me with a new intensity, "Which is why I'm going to have you closely guarded until you prove your loyalty."

He was so sure I was going to accept. I could feel it on my skin, his absolute sense of superiority and strength. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had crossed him, had said, *no*, to him? I doubt they were still alive to tell about it.

“They would have so much fun with you in prison,” Harker said regretfully. “I’ve heard terrible rumors... Do you really want to find out, personally, if they are true?”

Prisons anywhere else were humane rehabilitation and incarceration units. Gone were the days when a prisoner would be thrown into a general population of like criminals to fend for himself. On my home, however, they still had the old model for serious criminals: four metal walls and a survival of the fittest environment. I knew I could hold my own, but I didn’t relish having to go through it. I let that trepidation show on my face as I looked up at the man.

I looked despondent, now, as I paced away from him, stopped, and wrapped my arms around myself tightly. “I guess I don’t have any choice.”

“None,” Harker agreed, pleased. “Welcome aboard, Max Masters. I’ll have someone show you to your new quarters where you can... freshen up.” I heard his distaste at my filthy state. “We’ll have our first strategy meeting later today.”

He wasn’t wasting any time. His stuff had to be red hot for him to be that impatient. I wondered if I hadn’t shown up that day, would he have come after me?

“Dieter!” Harker said into a com. unit.

A big security guard came into the room. He looked like a Dieter; a slab of muscle that had probably been chosen for his skill in taking care of someone like me. I wasn’t going to underestimate him.

I licked nervous lips and made it look like I was putting a good face on things. “Do I get something to eat?”

“I suppose food has been a problem for you with your slim income,” Harker replied with a smile. “You may order anything you like. Dieter will see that it is delivered to your room.” He gave me an intense look. “*Anything* that you desire,” he stressed.

My skin crawled. How could the man put so much meaning into such simple words?

“Anything,” I repeated as if warming to the notion. I nodded and bowed my head as if ashamed at my own eagerness. I could see Harker grinning, thinking he had me firmly on his leash now. I doubt that anyone would have been so sure of themselves with Kyle or Huang. People like them didn’t generally have a price. I could almost feel bitter about that, until I reminded myself that this was a con and that I wasn’t really selling myself out.

I followed Dieter from Harker’s office. The plan was for me to get away and infiltrate. If Harker was going to announce his plans later that day, I needed my backup to tell me

whether it was worth hanging around for. Doing that when there was likely going to be surveillance devices everywhere, was the problem. I hoped Kyle would understand that and tell me what to do without having to ask.

I scratched at the GPS chip behind my ear. It was driving me crazy. My skin was rejecting it, wanting it out. I made myself stop with an effort. If I made the spot raw, they might notice and, if I scratched too hard, it might come out. It was the only thing letting Kyle and Huang know where I was.

“He’ll expect you to wait for the meeting,” Huang said quietly in my ear transmitter. I almost jumped. The connection was very clear. “Don’t. All the information we need is in those files.”

I’m sure Harker knew that, too. I frowned. This was too easy. I’d been given one big guard and a sweet deal. I had to hope that Harker was being over confident.

“Go,” I whispered. I wasn’t making the calls. I had to trust that Kyle and Huang had figured this guy out already.

I caught myself scratching again. I shoved my hands into my pockets and nodded to Dieter as he opened a door and motioned me inside.

“Want anything?” Dieter asked in a tone that let me know he thought I was trash.

I grinned at him. “I want a steak, twice baked potato, cheese soufflé, some fine red wine, chocolate truffles in cherry sauce, and oranges.”

Dieter’s eyebrows went up to his hairline, incredulous. “Oranges? Why not fucking ask me for a stack of gold bars while you’re at it?”

I took my hands out of my pockets and looked ugly. “The boss said I could have anything I want. I want oranges.”

Oranges had to be shipped. For some reason, they hated the station climate controls. Anything that had to be shipped through space was so precious you could use them for money. Dieter scratched at his head and then shrugged. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” My grin widened. “I want a whore.”

“Whore,” the man repeated and then looked even more disgusted, but he asked, “Male, female, other..?”

“Male and young.” I replied.

“How young?”

“Not legal young,” I told him and winked. “Red hair, bill of health, and green eyes.”

“You better be worth it,” Dieter growled as he turned to go. “Or Harker will cut off your perverted balls and make you eat them.”

“I’m worth it, don’t you worry,” I told him arrogantly.

I wasn’t surprised when Dieter locked the door behind him when he left. I heard a bolt

lock slide into place. I didn't make the mistake of thinking that I wasn't under surveillance. That was all right. I had a solution for that.

Taking a small ball out of my pocket, I began nonchalantly tossing it up and down as I looked around the apartment. It was very richly furnished. I was impressed. There was a mini bar as well, but I resisted the urge to take a stiff drink.

"Jeez! It'll probably take that ape all day to find a redhead," I muttered for effect. "I should have asked for a blonde."

I went into the main room and began bouncing the ball off of the walls. I made it an obvious game, grinning and laughing as I successfully caught each, seemingly, wild toss. *Seemingly*, because I was making very sure to keep one side of the ball from hitting the wall until I was absolutely sure where the surveillance node for that room was. When I had pinpointed it, I flipped the ball and tossed it directly at it. The metal plated side of the ball hit it dead on and there was an audible pop.

I didn't want them to panic. I tossed the ball a few more times on the safe side and then yawned. "Maybe I should rest up. Take a nap. I'm going to put that whore through his paces, that's for sure. I need my strength for that." I laughed evilly and made myself feel sick with disgust.

The leather couch made a noise as I sat on it. I yawned again and then went quiet. As quietly as possible, I stood up again and made my way, not to the front door, but to a window. Outside there was a straight drop fifteen stories to the pavement far below. Only a lunatic would try to go out that way, so it wasn't locked or set with alarms. I popped the metal tabs on the frame. This allowed the glass to swing out for servicing. When I opened it, a gust of fresh air ruffled my hair.

Pulling a round puck-like device from my pocket, I pressed it against the outside wall and pushed a button. A gel oozed out and seeped into every pore it could penetrate in the wall. That gel then dried instantly and made a rigid seal that nothing short of a large explosion could dislodge. Pushing another button released a climbing wire from the puck. I pulled, playing the line out as I measured the drop to the next window by sight. Once I thought that I had enough line, I locked the line down and attached one end to my belt.

I had to trust that, if anyone happened to look up, they would think I was a worker. I slid out of the window and defied death, as I made my descent. Dieter would be awhile finding my oranges and my underage, health card carrying, red haired whore, but he wouldn't be forever.

"Max," Kyle whispered anxiously, "Why is my monitor showing you on the *outside* of the building?"

"Because I am on the outside," I told him with a small laugh that was stoked with

adrenaline. "I need to go down a floor."

"It's too dangerous!" Huang snarled. "You were supposed to break out of your room!"

"Couldn't do it," I replied. "They used a bolt lock. I needed a laser cutter to get through that. Don't worry, Ice Man, I have it under control."

"Masters!" Huang snarled.

Kyle was there suddenly; a calming presence. "I trust you," he told me.

"Go," I said simply, but managed to put some warmth into it.

It was a busy building, but I was sure that most of that business happened on the lower levels. These upper levels were reserved for private business and flunkies. The hallway I saw as I peered through a dust covered window was empty. I didn't push my luck that it would stay that way for long. I opened the window and tossed my ball at the surveillance node. After a satisfying pop, I slipped inside the hallway and closed the window.

It was hard not to be cocky as I pulled a pack from under my shirt. Inside was a vacuum sealed uniform with all the appropriate badges that Huang had supplied me. After I opened it, it sprang back to its original size and I put it on. I smoothed my wild hair down as best I could. Harker's employees didn't wear hats.

"Go," I said again and began walking. I tossed my jeans and shirt into the nearest garbage receptacle as I rounded a corner and headed for the more secure parts of the building.

There's a sense of security people get when they think the normal citizenry have been effectively kept out of an area. That sense of security makes people stupid. Since I was past the point where there were guards with strict security measures and I.D. checks, they assumed I was all right.

I was stopped by a door that needed a pass card and tried to look nervous and embarrassed. A man came up, slid his card through the security lock, and looked at me curiously as the door opened. He sighed in a long suffering way, as if he had experienced my plight many times himself, and asked, "Did you leave your card at home?"

"Yeah," I replied with a sheepish grin. "I'm new, too. Harker is going to fire me on my first day if I can't get to my office."

The man was my sympathetic buddy at once. "He does have a short temper. Why don't I let you through this time? You can go get a temporary pass card later. Francine is in charge of that. She's a nice lady. She'll give you one and she won't tell anyone."

I beamed at him. "Thanks! I really appreciate that!"

It was hard not to call him a dumb ass as he helped me get through the security door.

Beyond the door, there was a huge room filled with computer banks, cubicles, and bored looking employees. After losing my new *friend*, I checked worked stations until I

found someone who'd stepped out for coffee or gossip and left themselves logged onto their system.

One minute. That's all it took to figure out that Harker liked his name enough to use it for his correspondence files and that the Iliad was a running theme with the man. What would a man like him use as a password; Agamemnon, of course. I kept from snickering as I downloaded everything to Special Forces headquarters and followed that up by uploading all the main frame core files there as well. Max Masters is nothing, if not thorough.

I had to get myself out now. That's always been last on my list and I don't think I've ever planned an escape. Getting the mission done is priority one. Sure, I'd done the dog and pony show for Kyle and Huang, making them think that I had a solid plan from start to finish. That was because those types of soldiers didn't like fast and loose when it came to strategy.

I considered repelling, window to window, until I was below security levels, but nixed that. As I stood and began to leave, I noticed a full wastebasket. I cheerfully grinned as I picked it up and emptied out the bag. Tying it in a neat knot, I rounded a cubicle and waved it at the irritated man sitting there with a pile of work to do.

"I'm new. Can you tell me where the garbage goes, please?" I asked.

The man snagged his bag from his wastebasket and held it out to me. "It's on the ground level. There's a chute at the end of the hall that goes to the dumpster. Mind taking mine?"

"Sure thing." I grabbed his bag, knotted it up, and added it to mine. I was given four more bags by other employees seeing my errand, before I could get out of the room.

A distraction; taking out the garbage. A dumpster had to be emptied. There had to be an access way to the bin. I had found the Achilles' heel in their security. All I had to do was get down the chute.

"Go," I said cheerfully and Kyle sighed in relief.

"We have the information," he told me. "Pollock was so pleased she said she would have your first child as thanks. I told her you had other plans."

I chuckled and stopped walking. Six armed men, Harker, and a pissed looking Dieter, rounded a corner. Guns were all aimed at my chest. Harker stepped forward, blue eyes snapping with fury. I guess they hadn't been fooled by my surveillance trick.

"Red Flag," I said under my breath and dropped the garbage bags.

"Scan him," Harker barked.

A man nervously stepped forward with a hand held wand. He found my com. unit right away. He dug it out of my inner ear viciously and then crushed it with his boot.

“Son of a bitch!” I howled as I clutched at my bleeding ear.

The man used his wand again. My GPS tracker was cloaked. He passed by it.

“Nothing,” he reported and stepped back

“You had your chance, Masters,” Harker told me coldly. His eyes were those of a killer. “Take him to one of the storage containers and lock him inside. I want him to die slowly.”

Dieter grinned. “It looks like we’re taking out all the garbage today.”

“Make sure our other *garbage* gets incinerated as well,” Harker growled cryptically. “I want to threaten those scrap men with their brats, not actually keep them and start a daycare.”

Sometimes, you don’t have to have things spelled out. This was one of those times. I knew enough about the ugly side of life to believe anything of people. I wished Kyle and Huang were still listening. I wanted the cavalry to ride in, not to save my ass, but to stop what I suspected was about to happen to children.

They hustled me away, two men gripping me by the arms while they held their guns to my head. I guess my reputation had them scared. I really hoped they didn’t have nervous trigger fingers. Dieter followed, smiling in a way that made my skin crawl.

“Ever find that whore for me?” I couldn’t help asking with a smirk, knowing I had probably made him go to the professional quarter to get a boy.

The blow wasn’t unexpected. The man on my right was surprised in a bad way, though. His gun went off as I was shoved forward by the force of the blow. The shot just missed my head and punched a hole into a wall. Metal shrapnel cut my cheek. I wiped at the blood and grimaced, still staggering a little from the double fisted blow Dieter had given me to my back.

“Open your mouth, again, and I’ll make sure he takes off your head next time,” Dieter threatened.

I’d gotten out of the habit of almost dying. I couldn’t help a shiver, even while my mind, always the cynic, wondered if I should make them kill me. What they had in store for me didn’t sound nice.

We started walking again and went down a lift to the first floor. They took me to a section at the back of the building where there was the dumpster, extra parking, and an unloading dock for supplies. There was also a fenced section topped with razor wire that was open to the sun. This was where they had several metal storage units.

The storage units were four sided metal boxes with locks. Two were empty. I knew one was about to be filled with me. I had a very good idea how long I would last in this heat in a metal box like that. Long enough to suffer slowly, just like Harker wanted.

“I want my mama!” a child wailed.

“Shut up,” a male voice snarled. “We’re taking you to them, so be quiet and do what you’re told!”

I turned and saw a group of very small children being led to a truck by a group of armed men. Pigtails, wide, innocent eyes, and pudgy thumbs in mouths; the children were barely out of diapers. When I saw one drop her teddy bear, I was immediately ducking out of the grasp of my captors to retrieve it. I heard angry shouts, but no one stopped me as I crouched by the little girl and handed her the bear. I smiled at her reassuringly. She looked terrified, tears streaming from her blue eyes.

“It’s okay,” I said in a soothing tone. “You heard him. You’re going back to your parents.” I knew it for the lie that it was, but I needed time. I scratched hard at the chip behind my ear and the thing came out. I jammed it into a seam of the teddy bear with my finger, making a hole in the soft material. Handing her the bear, I said, “Hold him tight. He’ll keep you safe.”

“I will,” she replied seriously, as if she perfectly understood that I had just given her my only chance of getting rescued.

“Come on, play time’s over!” Dieter snarled and jerked me up by my hair. He kept dragging me by it and I let him, even though I was contemplating different ways to kill him. I couldn’t make trouble if I wanted those children to leave without anyone getting suspicious.

My neck was bleeding. I managed to keep that side turned away as they tossed me into the storage unit. Metal clanged as I rolled and slammed against the back wall. It was already damned hot. I struggled up to get away from the burning metal.

“I wish I had a camera in here,” Dieter said as he looked at the four walls appraisingly. “Be nice to see your ass squirm.”

And then the doors were being slammed shut and locked. All that was left was for me to do was fry.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Trial by Fire

It wasn't completely dark. I wasn't sure whether that made it better or not. A thin line of light ran along the bottom of the door. There was enough of a gap to let in air as well. I wasn't going to be allowed the mercy of suffocation. I wondered how long it took a man to bake to death and what was involved.

The container stank. I guessed that fuel rods had been stored there at one time and probably some sort of hydraulic unit. I paced my prison and felt grease on the walls and gritty dirt. I touched the seals on the metal plating, felt screw heads flush with the wall, and searched the hinges on the door. The hinges were my best bet. I searched my clothes, but I had traveled light and they had taken everything else. I took off one of my fake ID cards and used the metal clip to try and work something apart. It was like digging a tunnel with a spoon, but I wasn't going to go down without a fight.

The heat grew. I knew better than to hope for rain or a cold snap. I might as well hope for Hell to freeze over. I peeled my uniform down to my waist and used the sleeves to mop the running sweat from my face. My fingers cramped, the edges of the card cut my skin, and blood began to run with the sweat streaming down my arms, but I continued to pry. If a door could swing open, it could be jimmied, I reasoned. I just had to have the time to do it.

My improvised tool snapped. I sat down abruptly on the hot metal of the floor and fingered the two pieces. Neither of them was long enough to use. I squeezed them in my fist and then jammed them into my pocket. When you're short on tools, you don't waste material.

I felt over my body and clothes, trying to find something else to use. I didn't find anything, but I couldn't stop searching. As my hands roamed, I thought of Kyle. I hoped he'd found the children by now and saved them. I thought about *might have beens*, too, and realized that he had managed to make me believe; believe in him, believe in us, believe that something could happen after all of this was over. My pessimistic street instincts had been lying, putting up a rough front of denial, but, there it was, crying over the loss of my future. Kyle had convinced even it.

"Shit," I whispered to the dark.

I thought about writing Kyle a note, maybe in my sweat and blood, to let him know... what? It would have been great? We could have been something? How I felt? I shoved sweaty bangs out of my eyes irritably. He knew all of that already. The only thing left for me to do was to die like a man. I was a man, I was tough, and I was brave. When Kyle

found me, he wasn't going to find me crawling.

The heat grew. I cut back a whimper and sat up when I realized I was banging my head against the hot metal wall. I stopped my hands from tearing off my clothes. Nobody was going to find me nude. I latched onto that resolve. Die like a man, I told myself firmly. It was mind over matter. I didn't have much longer. Pain was pain. I'd suffered worse. Pretty soon, I would pass out and then I would get the relief I wanted.

A slight breeze touched my hand. Ever seen a man dying of thirst find water? I couldn't stop myself from stretching out flat and getting my face as close as possible to the crack under the door. The breeze tickled my skin. I lay there, ignoring the burning floor, and thanked the bastard in charge of the weather controls. He had decided that a breeze would be nice today.

The breeze was a blessed relief, but the heat wasn't going to be denied its victim. It was crushing me, wringing out my life in sweat and melting my brain. While I waited to die, I tried seeing outside, wanting some last look at something besides darkness, even if it was only the concrete slab the container was sitting on. It was then I saw a possibility. I pulled apart my sleeve, slipped the material through the crack, and moved it rapidly.

I remembered the guards at the front door of the government complex. I had been so sure that they were completely ignorant of their bosses' dirty business. If I could find someone else like that, some ignorant dock worker to contact, they might save me. All they had to do was look my way, see the rag of sleeve moving, and come over to investigate. Hope was working overtime.

I felt myself fading. I kept up the movements, but there were blank spaces of time where I felt that I had passed out, briefly, and had to start the motion again.

I thought of Kyle, and it wasn't about his love, his smile, or his warm attentiveness to me. I smirked in a delusional way when I thought of him in bed, underneath me, legs pushed back and face contorted in pleasure, his moans coming again and again as I rode him. I wanted to remember him like that, wanting me. It's as romantic as I could get, really.

I wondered how Kyle would remember me and I winced. I was a screw up and a loser. I'd screwed up even this stupid mission. Well, I had done my part, but getting out was part of being able to label it as a success and I hadn't managed that. Maybe Kyle would remember me in bed, too. I guess it's one of the few things we did together that was good. It was better than being, '*the guy who ate junk food with me*', or, '*the guy I was in the war with.*' Being, '*the guy that I used to have hot sex with*' was infinitely better. I snickered darkly.

I faded again after that. I'm not sure how long. When I came to, I stayed fuzzy,

disoriented. My fingers were tucked under the crack of the door and they were really raw, now. Some time in my delirium, I had tried to crawl through the crack. Damn, so much for dying with dignity. They would see my blood and skin there. Kyle would know.

It made me furious, that betrayal of my body. It had robbed me of my last dignity. I found myself kicking out, pounding with my fists, punishing my body and the walls of my prison with the last of my strength in an episode of grand proportions. When I finally collapsed, bruised, bleeding, and dying, there was a moment of peace, of utter quiet, and then I heard feet scuffing on concrete.

“Hey?!” a voice called out uncertainly. “Is somebody in there?”

I tried to reply. My throat was raw and a croak was all I could manage, until I swallowed and used the last of my spit to wet my tongue enough to say, “Yeah... yeah! I’m trapped! Some asshole didn’t know I was here and locked the door!”

“Mother fucker!” the voice exclaimed. “Hey, Rogers! Get over here! Somebody’s in this storage unit and the damned thing is padlocked!”

I rolled onto my back and panted in relief. Now, if they could only get me out before I died or before Harker’s goons came back and stopped them.

“Here, buddy!” Water squirted through the crack under the door. I jammed my face into it and my fingers, bathing as much as I could. The water seemed freezing, but it was probably only lukewarm. When the stream ended, the voice said, “I need to refill my water bottle. I’ll be right back. We have to pry the lock open. The key is gone.”

“Shit,” I mumbled and closed my eyes as I rested my cheek in what was left of the water.

There were sounds of prying, pounding, and cursing. The lock was a strong one. More water was squirted. I drank some as best I could, but I knew that wasn’t going to stop the heat from frying me alive. I was still feeling disoriented and I didn’t think I could sit up if I had to.

“You, there! Get the hell back to work!” I knew Dieter’s voice and my gut twisted. If he was back, if he wasn’t dead with Kyle’s bullet between his eyes, or cooling in a cell, then those children were still out there and in danger.

“But someone’s trapped in there!” the voice of my rescuer protested.

“We’ll take care of it! We have the key,” Dieter snarled. “You’re garbage men! Take the garbage and get the hell out of here.”

“I’ll call for medical. He’s probably in bad shape,” the man suggested, confused by Dieter’s attitude.

“I told you we’ll take care of it!” Dieter shouted angrily. “Now get the hell out of here!”

“Why aren’t you opening the door?” That garbage man needed a medal, I thought. He was suspicious and he was brave enough to call bullshit on Dieter.

I heard a gun clicking and a curse from my rescuer. “Dan,” Dieter said to his man coldly, “Looks like our garbage men have stuck their noses in our business. Why don’t you put them where they won’t bother us? We’ll take care of them, later.”

“Will do,” a strange voice replied. “Get moving or I’ll shoot you right now!”

Feet moved away from the container. I closed my eyes tightly, knowing my last hope was leaving me.

“Comfortable, Masters?” Dieter asked loudly, sounding amused. “You’d better keep quiet or you’re going to get some more people killed.”

Dieter laughed at his evil. I summoned up enough strength to reply, “When my boyfriend gets hold of you, he’s going to yank off your balls, fry them well done, and make you cut them up and eat them.”

“With hot sauce,” Kyle’s voice suddenly said, as deep and as cold as the space between the stars.

My entire body, my soul, my heart, and my head, jolted in shock as if I’d been given a thousand volt charge. I grinned from ear to ear and laughed in relief.

“Kyle,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Give me the key,” Huang’s voice demanded. “Don’t make me take it from you. That might involve killing you.”

There was silence and then something rattled.

“Take him,” Kyle barked to someone else and then the padlock was being shifted. “Call for evac to the nearest hospital.”

The click of the lock, the rattle of metal on metal, and then the opening of the door, was like seeing the gates of heaven open up in front of me. I couldn’t help rolling out, not caring if I hit the concrete, just wanting out of that hot box. Kyle caught me, eased me down, lips kissing my face while his hands looked for wounds.

“Just the heat, I think,” Kyle finally announced and I heard Huang’s sigh of relief very close by. I rolled my head and saw him crouched by me. I smiled weakly.

“Mission accomplished, boss,” I told him.

Huang looked moved. He said gently, squeezing my arm just a little, “Well done. You can stand down, now.”

I didn’t realize how tense I was, how I had been waiting for something like that. I guess you can’t take the soldier out of Max Masters as easily as I had thought. Kyle was holding me. I had room for a little embarrassment and I tried to turn my head to see who might be there to see me, well, needing to be held, but my senses spun and I really hoped

this was just passing out and not dying.

Special Forces hospitals are nice. I had my own room, a picture window that looked out on the park, and room service. I think I would have enjoyed it more if tubes weren't stuck into my wrists and monitor patches weren't pulling hair out of my skin. Just being able to wake up, though, made me pretty damned forgiving of just about everything.

I fingered the small medal on my hospital gown. I had found it in the first few moments after waking up and, for three days now, I was still marveling at it. Sure I had medals from the war, but those were for being an expert at killing people in large numbers in the name of installing our current government. This was different. It was much more personal. Kyle, who had been hovering by my bed like my damned shadow, had grinned from ear to ear with clear pride and love while the official had pinned it to my gown.

The medal was for saving those children. Dieter hadn't gone with the truck. I hadn't failed. Kyle and Huang had found them just in time and the children were all now back with their parents. The little girl with the teddy bear had been the one to save me, returning the favor as soon as she had worked up her courage enough to tug on the sleeve of the frantic, dark haired, Special Forces agent. She had told Kyle that the nice man, with the funny, spiky hair, had been put in a box by nasty men. She wanted to make sure that I went home to my mommy and daddy, too.

And here I was, with no mommy and daddy. I did have an attentive lover, though, who was eager to get me out of that hospital, so that we could start our new life together. The only problem was, he could see that future really clear and bright, while I was just seeing a fog. I didn't confess it, of course. I was enjoying being alive and seeing him so damned happy. It was only after I'd had time to stew in my hospital bed, and take stock of life, that the fog grew into something dark and impenetrable. Maybe Kyle saw it, too, finally. He had grown concerned and I had verbally pushed him out of my room, wanting to be angry and disgusted with myself without any company.

Kyle was a stubborn man. I knew that he wouldn't go far or stay away long, so I looked up when I heard the door opening, expecting either Kyle or a nurse. Instead, Huang came into the room, dressed in a clean, crisp Special Forces uniform. His expression told me that his errand was business. He came to my bedside and I saw grave respect in his eyes. It made me confused and I found myself not saying anything.

"I misjudged you. I ask for your pardon," Huang said and gave me a stiff bow.

"Yeah, sure," I replied and felt awkward. I fiddled with an IV tube as I said

sarcastically, “I can see how you would think that I was a loser, selfish, street trash, ex-thief.” Huang’s irritated expression stopped me. I sighed and decided not to put off the inevitable any longer. “Okay... so... You just came to apologize?”

That was too much to hope for. Huang shook his head and told me, “I’m here on official business.”

I scowled. “What now? Am I being arrested? Is my business being foreclosed on? Is the tax man prosecuting? Plague? Locusts?”

Huang raised an eyebrow and he actually smiled, amused, “Locusts?”

I shrugged. “I saw it in a movie once.”

Huang snorted and I finally saw the guy Kyle called a friend, but only for a moment before he was composed and all business again. He told me, “I am here to make you an offer.”

I tensed and looked toward the window. We were high up. I could see the dust rising to the station ceiling in the far distance as the filters engaged. I thought about my lot, my business, my life. “I was forced to do this mission,” I said, “I don’t want to do any more.”

“You are not disciplined enough to be an agent in the field,” Huang replied;

I grunted, confused, “Then, what?”

“Pollock wants to offer you a position as a consultant, a field expert,” Huang explained. “You’ll be in charge of outfitting and mission planning.” I scowled, off balance, but then he continued, as if uncomfortable with it, “To sweeten the deal, Pollock has also offered you the position overseeing the Special Forces stockyard... the dump, in other words. It contains all of our damaged vehicles and equipment. With funds being so tight, Pollock is interested in salvaging as much as possible.”

I laughed. I didn’t care that it made my patches yank out hair or the needles in my arms jiggle painfully. Huang watched me, probably wondering if he should call a nurse. I sounded on the edge of hysteria even to myself. I calmed myself with an effort. “So,” I said, getting back my breath, “Pollock takes and then Pollock gives. I bet that she likes that kind of power.” Before Huang could argue, I continued acidly, “ But, you know, it just wouldn’t seem right without people like that in my life.”

Huang looked down at his slim hands and then up at me again. “Masters, you’ve been hiding, here. You know you have. We’re very good at causing destruction and death. It’s normal to want to ignore those skills and forget you have that kind of talent.”

Huang sounded serious and he sounded as if his words came from personal experience. I suddenly knew that he had done his own kind of running, too, and had ended up with Special Forces in the end.

“I wasn’t hiding,” I argued. “I did want my own business, my own scrap lot.”

He gave me a hard look. “Did it ever make you happy?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it. I was that sure that he would know that I was lying if I tried to say that it had. Being alone, thinking of drinking myself to death along with my drunken employees, knowing that I had failed at being normal, I had been sliding towards something dark. Happiness hadn't had anything to do with it.

My train was coming. It was time to jump on and ride it to a new destination. “I'll have to leave the station?” I asked softly.

“Yes,” Huang replied. “We're headquartered on Earth.”

I nodded. I didn't trust my voice. I comforted myself by telling myself that I wasn't giving up. I hadn't really failed as long as I was still moving forward, still taking advantage of options, of life.

“We leave in two days. You'll be released tomorrow morning,” Huang told me.

“Okay,” I mumbled. When I looked up, he was gone, the door sliding slowly shut by itself.

My business was sold. My things were packed, locked, and sent special delivery to my new home; a place I'd never seen before. It was an address handed to me by Kyle and therefore to be trusted. As he sat with me at the spaceport, both of us waiting for a transport to take us to Earth, we were quiet. I guess I looked pissed. Kyle knew that I had agreed to take the position, but he wasn't sure how I was feeling about it, or about us. I guess my anger did include him. When I hurt, I struck out at everything and everyone in sight, even the person that I loved. So, we sat in silence, separated by my anger and his uncertainty.

“When I found those children,” Kyle said suddenly, looking at the crowd in the port and not at me, “instead of you, when I realized what you had done, I thought that I was going to die. Even if this mission ruined whatever we could have had between us, please, don't shut me out of your life completely. I-I don't think that I could stand it.”

I reached out and took hold of his hand tightly. Screw anybody who was looking. “I have every fucking right to be pissed as hell!” I barked at him.

I squeezed Kyle's hand until he winced. He was looking at me, now, with hurt in his eyes.

“I have every right to kick your ass from here to the next planet,” I told him. “I have every right to turn my back and just walk away.”

The pain in Kyle's eyes intensified and he was suddenly squeezing my hand back

harder than I was squeezing his.

I leaned in close, saying through gritted teeth, “I love you, though, and whatever bad happened during this nightmare, you were definitely not part of it. In fact, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” I swallowed uncomfortably and then plowed forward when I saw him begin to smile in relief, “You have to know, though, that I’m not taking that kind of shit again, even from you, got that?”

Kyle nodded quickly, the smile leaving him and his expression going tense at my tone.

“So...” I trailed off, trying to find words and coming up empty. I ended up saying abruptly, “So, let’s move in together, and all that.”

I turned away, arms crossing over my chest as I sank into my seat.

There was a full minute of silence and then Kyle replied carefully, obviously struggling with the joy of my suggestion and the fear that he might be about to piss me off, again, “I... uh... already...” He cleared his throat and tried again. “I picked out an apartment and sent your things there along with mine. That was the address that I gave you.”

I scowled. “You were that sure about *us*?” I snarled.

Kyle leaned so that his shoulder was against mine. It was as if the world, the bustling space port, and everyone around us, suddenly disappeared when he said, “No, I had hoped, but I made sure that my things stayed in my duffel, just in case I wasn’t welcome. Mostly, the apartment is for you, so that you won’t have to worry about a place to stay, and to keep your things safe. I didn’t want them sent to a spaceport locker. Things happen there. Things get stolen.”

Keep your things safe. Kyle couldn’t say anything else that would make me love him as much as those four words. I turned, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and looked deeply into his startled eyes. There were so many things I wanted to say, just then; how I was feeling, my sudden hope that everything was going to be okay now, and that maybe we did have more than a chance in hell of being a couple. It was just too big to squeeze into sentences, though. I struggled, growled in frustration, and then knew exactly what to do. I dug a comb out of my travel bag and I placed it in Kyle’s hand.

“Comb out my hair for me?”

Did he get it? I was ready for him to frown and look confused, to say that I was being weird. I waited for him to ruin my moment of surrender, my moment of letting him completely into my life, my moment of letting go of that part of me that I had always kept off limits. I was ready to trust him, love him, and be with him.

Kyle held the comb gingerly. He didn’t frown and he didn’t look confused. He trembled with emotion, kissed me, and then began the arduous process of combing out

my wild hair.

Okay, throw the rice and play the wedding march, we were married. I grinned. It was goofy, love struck, and didn't have the slightest trace of regret. I had jumped to another train, passing in the opposite direction of where I had thought my destination in life lay, but Kyle had been waiting for me on that train. We would ride where ever it went, together.

The End

Other books by Kracken:

The Ajay Kavanagh Detective Agency: Tapping Darkness, Fortune's
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Taking in Strays

Snow

Catalyst

Put A Bow On It