



Worthless Crew

Annoying Officers

Broke-Down
Equipment

Evil Aliens

Interplanetary War

None of that compares to the confusion one soldier suffers when his delusions of heterosexuality run headlong into a man that redefines attraction.

Jacqs must either give up on love or find a way to change.

The Only Way Out Is In

By Lyn Gala for the Love Has No Boundaries Anthology

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS IN

By Lyn Gala

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE ONLY WAY OUT IS IN

By Lyn Gala

Photo Description

The original request included a promotional shot of Jayne Cobb, a character from *Firefly*. He is gruff with a face shadowed by stubble, and he is crouched and holding a gun. The request wanted “a man deep in the closet, striving to be hyper-masculine, and completely misogynistic, simply to hide his attraction to men.”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Jayne Cobb, of Firefly fame, struck me as a man deep in the closet, striving to be hyper masculine, and completely misogynistic, simply to hide his attraction to men. I'm thinking Kinsey three or four. This would also explain his extreme dislike of the shy Dr Simon (who we now know was played by a gay man).

I'd love to see a post Serenity, space opera treatment of someone like Jayne's self-realization. Now what would be his type... hmmm... what man would finally drive him wild enough to face up to his repressed desires. It should include all of the attendant emotional turmoil (inside monologue) of someone with his low IQ and high survival instincts, and yet include the outside language of someone who was trained to say as much with as few words as possible. This man has depth, but the waters are pretty murky.

Anyone take the challenge?

Sincerely,

Mateo

Story Info

Genre: sci-fi

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Word count: 32,604

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS IN

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CHAPTER ONE

“Anything?”

Jacqs scratched his crotch before answering. “Nope.” The front had been too damn quiet. It made him twitchy, and when he got twitchy he tended to get himself in trouble by taking shots at random asteroids. It was better than sitting in a flying tin can waiting for the other side to blow him up.

“Keep sharp,” the lieutenant ordered.

“Hell, I planned to fall asleep and let them blast us out of existence.”

“Glebov.” The lieutenant drew his name out until it sounded like another word altogether. He wanted an apology, but Jacqs just snorted. Anyone stupid enough to tell him to not end up dead was real dumb. Jacqs Glebov didn’t have many talents in this world, but shooting people dead while not ending up with a flaming round through his own chest was one of his best qualities.

The lieutenant took a step closer, his boots loud against the metal decking. “This is why you keep getting dropped in rank two days after getting promoted.”

“As long as I have enough money in my pocket to hire a good whore when we dock, I don’t much care.”

Lieutenant Taylor sat in the gunner seat next to Jacqs. It meant that Jacqs had to lean back so he could see around the divider between them. Taylor just sat there, looking at Jacqs real hard.

“If’n you’re looking for a fuck, you’d better try one of the other men.”

Taylor sighed, and Jacqs returned to his task of scanning their bit of the asteroid patch that divided human space from the batfaces. “Why is it that

every time I try to talk to you the conversation ends with you accusing me of wanting sex?”

“Cuz you’re one of them hypersexualized types. Queer-turned and all.”

“Homosexual does not mean hypersexual,” Taylor pointed out.

Jacqs snorted again. He didn’t believe that for a cheap second. He’d grown up young and spent most of his adult life on mercenary and then military ships. If there was one thing he’d learned early it was that queer-turned men and pansexuals were always bothering him by looking at him, all admiring him, even after he had made it perfectly clear that he was interested in women.

“I want to talk about your career. You should be a sergeant by now, Glebov.”

“Yep, I should be,” Jacqs agreed. It was a point of contention with him, but as long as he got paid and as long as men who tried jumping ship from the military side to the private side got shot in the back, he wasn’t going to make much of a fuss.

“The fight with Greinbeck—”

“If he wants to go bullying people half his size, then he can live with the fucking consequences,” Jacqs interrupted. If Taylor wanted an apology, Jacqs didn’t plan to oblige. Greinbeck was a menace that command dumped on them because he couldn’t be trusted with a gun in his hand. Jacqs felt no need to play nice with a psychopath. As far as he was concerned, they should have congratulated him for that fight.

“But it’s hard to promote a man who constantly insults other crew. You proposition the women with such regularity they don’t even bother filing sexual harassment claims anymore, and you can’t exchange two words with me before you bring up my sexuality. Allie Grah is about ready to choke you to death with your own gun if you don’t get the message that her hypersexuality does not imply that she wants to be sexual with you.”

Jacqs pushed his chair back. It slid along the rail until it hit the stop, and now Jacqs could glare at Taylor real good. “There ain’t nothing wrong with

me. You may be all into book learning, but most crew ain't got enough schooling to fit in a teaspoon, so don't talk down to me like I ain't good enough to knock boots with any of them." Jacqs could feel hot anger crawl up his belly. He wanted a fight. 'Course on the ship, a fight meant time in the brig, and he did have a mighty dislike of being locked in a little place— but if Taylor were going to insult his masculinity, it might be worth the punishment.

"I'm not. I never meant to imply you're not attractive." Jacqs knew that Taylor was being honest about that. Fact was, Jacqs could turn a few heads. Dark hair and vivid blue eyes made a striking combination, and Jacqs' wide shoulders helped a good deal. It made up for any deficiencies in the rest of his face, what with the scar down one cheek and an ear mangled in a fight with the batfaces. A blaster had nearly taken off his face, so he counted himself lucky to just lose part of an ear.

"Meaning what, exactly?" Jacqs demanded. "If you're looking to exchange a promotion for sexual favors, I'm not queer-turned." Crossing his arms, Jacqs waited to see what sort of stupid would fall out of Nimor Taylor's head next.

Instead of saying anything, Taylor stood up and straightened his jacket while looking down at Jacqs in the gunner chair. It left Jacqs uncomfortably close to Taylor's dick, and Jacqs worked real hard to not glance that way. He didn't much care to find out whether or not Nimor Taylor got wood while looking at him. Pervert.

"If you decide that you're ready to take promotions seriously and/or join the human race, let me know, Jacqs." With that, Taylor turned and started walking away.

"Hey, I ain't no Ba t'l," he called after the officer.

"Get back to work," Taylor called back.

"Rat-bred queer-turned officers," Jacqs muttered as he slid the gunner chair forward again.

CHAPTER TWO

Jacqs didn't have much time to ponder the strange conversation, because two days later, the *Candiru* reached dock. SenFifty-three was a dirty and dangerous little station where the whores took antibiotics and the whiskey was mostly home-brewed out of shuttle fuel, but Jacqs didn't care. He'd sell a kidney to get off ship, and that weren't even hyperbole. The *Candiru* was a retrofit, so sixteen crew and four officers were shoved into a tin can built for twelve. Some days Jacqs didn't know which he hated more, his crew or the damn batfaces.

He hadn't gotten more than a dozen steps before his ship comm gave a little jolt. Cursing, Jacqs pulled it out. Just as soon as he figured which joker had turned his comm into a damn shock-jolt, he was going to shove their head out an airlock and maybe not let them back in again. Jacqs read the short message before dropping it back in his pocket.

They had a new second-in-command coming in. Didn't make no nevermind to him. As a gunner he worked below decks and as a corporal, at least this month, he worked under the lieutenants. Jacqs figured he'd never even meet the commander. He'd seen the current commander once, and that'd been during a disciplinary hearing in the loading bay. Never once had he laid eyes on the captain.

Ignoring the message, Jacqs headed for his favorite bar on the more seedy side of the station. Let the others overpay for their whiskey and women, Jacqs preferred them both with less pretention. Or was that pretense? He liked honest.

It took almost an hour to cross over to the section he wanted, what with the two lifts being out of commission and the walks crowded with refugees camping up against the inner station walls, but Jacqs finally reached the ladder that led up to the more adult section tucked behind engineering. Other folk tried to avoid the engine hoping to survive any explosion. Personally, if Jacqs was going to die in space, he'd rather do it fast than linger with all the other

idiots scrambling after the last air packs. Of course, even better would be avoiding death altogether.

“If it isn’t my favorite space tramp!” Aral cried out when Jacqs pushed his way into the cramped bar. Overhead struts forced him to duck down to reach the middle floor, where rough men and women sat at tables and gambled, and again to reach the bar proper. Dropping onto a seat, Jacqs reached out an arm for her. Aral slid into his embrace, her piles of blonde hair tickling the side of his face as she wiggled her whole body.

“Are you here to spend some time?”

“And money?” Jacqs asked.

“Oh babe, the money is just to pay the rent. Trust me, I’d give you a tumble for free if the boss let me.” Aral winked at the bartender, but Jacqs believed that about as much as he believed the army was like to promote him to captain. The other whores and tenders came and left, but Aral was a fixture in this place. If she didn’t own the place, he’d eat his britches.

“Can’t go ruining your reputation by giving it away for free,” he teased.

“And I know you wouldn’t go doing that to me.” Reaching down, Aral ran her hand over Jacqs’ chest and down toward his dick. This is what Jacqs wanted— simple, direct, and female.

A man chose the seat on the other side of Aral and loudly ordered a drink, but Jacqs ignored him. He had his prize. Unfortunately, his prize was interested in greeting every new soul that showed up.

“Well, you’re a new one. Let me guess, fighter pilot?”

The other man laughed. “If I got this in a fighter, I’d be dead. Nope, I’m a ground pounder. Well, I was. It’s hard to pound the ground with one leg.”

Aral seemed to twitch in Jacqs’ arms, and then she was gone, her back to him while she greeted this new fellow.

“Get lost,” Jacqs suggested. Aral’s smile turned a little thin, but he planned to pay her enough to make up for any perceived inconsiderateness.

“Now is that any way to speak to a lady?” the stranger asked.

“She was speaking to me before you got here, and we was doing just fine.”

The stranger turned his chair and Aral moved enough for Jacqs to get a good look. The guy had the roughness of a soldier who had lost his shine. He had a uniform top, but the insignia were gone and the front wrinkled like he'd slept in it. Only one pant leg hung down to the foot. The other one ended about halfway up the calf, and a fully articulated mechanical leg had taken the place of the owner's original foot. The toes were longer than human toes, each bent slightly toward the ground to help with balance.

“I hear them is handy in a battle,” Jacqs said. Aral reached out and punched Jacqs in the arm.

“You be nice.”

“That were me being nice. If you want to see me not nice, you're welcome to hit me again.” Jacqs wouldn't hit someone who wasn't big enough to hit back, but he didn't mind making the threat. Aral blinked at him for a second, and then she rolled her eyes.

“One of these days, someone's going to see through all that gruff, Jacqs Glebov.”

“I doubt that.”

Reaching up, Aral patted him on the cheek before swaying off to greet some new guests.

“Well, hell. I'd wanted to get her in one of them back rooms before she got distracted, and you went and ruined it,” Jacqs accused the stranger. *That were just aggravating.*

“All I did was sit down.” He stuck his hand out. “Zeke Waters.”

Jacqs took the hand grudgingly. There wasn't actually a good reason for being rude, even if he wanted to take his frustrations out on someone. “Jacqs Glebov.”

“That's what she said.” Zeke nodded toward Aral.

“So, can you really kick the shit out of even batfaces with that thing?”

“If they have their armor off, sure. All I have to do is ask them pretty please to disarm themselves before we commence to fighting.”

Jacqs snorted. He wasn't exactly sure if Zeke was laughing with him or at him, but Jacqs did tend to assume the worst of folk.

“Mostly it's a pain in the stump. I don't care how good medicine gets, a prosthetic leg does not take a pounding the way human bone does. The knee starts to hurt after a while.” Zeke patted the knee above the metal limb.

“It's better than gimping around legless.”

“Okay, I'll give you that. So,” Zeke studied him, “you're disreputable, so you have to have some serious skills for officers to let you get away with looking like you slept in those clothes. Muscled, so you have time to work out. I would say you do manual labor, but manual labor never gets away with looking that rumped. You'd be written up and spending the first night of leave cleaning the planking.”

Jacqs pushed himself off his chair and crowded in Zeke's space. Most folk were downright intimidated by Jacqs when he got close. He was muscled, and at six foot five, he towered over most people. It made it easy to get them to stop annoying him, and if his size didn't do it, his gun generally did. “How do you know I just got in? Maybe my ship's been docked a while.”

Zeke grinned. Slowly he stood, and he was almost as tall as Jacqs. His dark eyes stared straight into Jacqs and they pressed together, neither willing to yield, but Zeke had an expression almost like this amused him. It made Jacqs cranky. “No one has docked except the *Candiru* in at least two weeks. They had a skirmish near here, and the flight paths were littered with debris, including unexploded ordinances. Now you don't look like a man to sit on a ship and twiddle his thumbs for two weeks, so I made an educated guess. Are we going to fight about it?”

Jacqs grunted, not sure what to think of the logic. Zeke might still be one of them spies trying to gather intelligence on the ships, but his story made sense. “If you go asking after crew and armaments, I'm like to shoot you in the

guts,” Jacqs warned. Then he sat down again. The bartender had brought a whiskey, and Jacqs dropped his pay card on the counter for the man to charge.

“Good answer.” Zeke sat next to him. “And taking all those clues, I’m guessing you’re either a munitions handler or a gunner, so that threat has some teeth.”

“It sounds like you’re asking about crew.”

“You are a bastard with a one-track mind.”

“Yep,” Jacqs agreed, “and I came in here with the one thought of hiring a nice woman.” Once Jacqs reclaimed his card, he turned his back to the bar and started checking on possibilities. He ruled out the crew women immediately. Uppity bitches rarely gave him the time of day, always filing complaints or threatening to shove a microbomb up his nose and detonate it. Unfortunately, the whores all seemed busy. Jacqs was going to have to wait. Well, if that was the case, Zeke was at least interesting.

“How’d it happen?” he asked, using his whiskey glass to gesture toward the leg.

“I was sent in to blow a building. My cover team went down, and I didn’t think I was making it out, so I detonated.”

“You weren’t clear?”

“Hell, I’m surprised I’m not dead. Doctors picked about a ton of shrapnel out of my back, but the leg caught the worst of it.”

Jacqs grunted. “Nearly lost my arm once. Doctors managed to grow a new nerve or something in time to save it.” Jacqs still had the plastic netting in his arm. At one point that’s all that held the two halves of it together.

“Before the war turned ugly?”

“Yep,” Jacqs agreed, although it wasn’t strictly true. His family had been unfortunate enough to be at ground zero, so he didn’t know anything except war. The difference was that kids could get medics to look after their wounds even while adults were left to suffer.

“Doctors had time to fix things back then. Now they just slap the body together best they can.”

“Fuck, yes,” Jacqs agreed. “We ain’t even got a doctor on board.” He stopped. Wait. He weren’t supposed to be discussing crew.

Zeke scratched his chest. “I thought the captain or the second were supposed to be trained medics.”

He’d spilled the nuts and bolts now and there weren’t much Jacqs could do to change the fact he’d talked. So he just shrugged. “I suppose there are lots of regulations people don’t pay much mind to.” Jacqs looked at Zeke. “You seem to know a lot about flying rules for a ground pounder.”

Zeke smiled. “Yep.”

“I’m thinking on gut-shooting you,” Jacqs warned. The man was acting a little suspicious, and in the middle of a war, that seemed cause enough.

“Are you?” Zeke laughed. “That would be ironic, to survive the Ba ṭ’l on Siros Two only to get shot in a bar fight.”

Jacqs slammed his drink down on the bar top. “You’re shitting me.” Jacqs looked at the man again. No fucking way was one of the rare survivors of Siros Two sitting in a shit bar on the shit side of the universe.

Zeke pulled the neck of his shirt down to show the official tattoo.

“Hell.”

“That was the word for it,” Zeke agreed.

“That where you lost your leg?” Jacqs figured there were so many human parts on that planet, the doctors wouldn’t have been able to find one random leg in the mess.

“No. I came through that without a scratch.” Zeke seemed to lose his focus for a second, but Jacqs understood that. He’d lost crewmates. Real crewmates, not the ragtag losers on the *Candiru*. He’d lost crew he’d fought next to in space and on the ground. Megal had held her guts in with one hand and still

kept firing with the other as he dragged her away from one fight, and it hadn't helped a bit.

"Ain't one of us to come out of a fight without a scratch," Jacqs said, real quiet-like.

Zeke sighed and ran his hands through his short curls. "I suppose not. Still, the body was in one piece. I lost the leg later. So, you have any replacement parts?"

"Nope. Haven't seen much action lately."

"*Candiru's* a watcher class," Zeke said with a slow nod.

Jacqs gave him another look to make it clear that gut-shooting was still a distinct possibility. Instead of taking offense, Zeke laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "That's no secret. That tin can wouldn't stand up to a fight, so she's a watcher or a transport, and she's not big enough for transport. Besides, no one names a transport after a fish that likes to crawl up a man's dick and eat his bladder."

That was true. Both parts. The *Candiru* had been a small smuggling ship, and she didn't have the space for a military transport. Captain and commander got private quarters and the two lieutenants shared quarters, but the rest of the crew were all shoved down into what had once been a loading bay. The lower bays all carried munitions and heavy shielding for the belly guns, but Jacqs figured if he didn't take any enemy out first, one good shot and the *Candiru* would go up like a flea in a candle flame.

"I still ain't talking on it."

"Right. We aren't talking about it at all." Zeke nodded, but the corners of his lips kept on a'twitching.

"Asshole," Jacqs said. About a half second later, it occurred to him that most men took offense at that. But instead of starting a bar fight that would have gotten Jacqs written up for sure, Zeke just grinned.

"Fuck, yes. Nice guys don't do well in our world. Being an asshole's safer."

Jacqs grunted his agreement. That was true enough, not that the *Candiru* crew understood it. Pansy-assed worthless grunts and queer-turned officers, that's what he had to deal with. He didn't have no real soldiers on that ship, not like him. Of course, most folks on the *Candiru* were working up in their careers, and Jacqs had gotten busted back down to a watcher ship after a small incident that had not been his fault. Sometimes when soldiers didn't get to fight enemy often enough, fights just broke out on their own.

The two of them leaned against the bar and watched the crowd. The poker game in the corner seemed a little heated, but then Aral left the lap of a mercenary-looking fellow and sashayed her way over.

"I coulda had that if you hadn't interrupted," Jacqs complained as he watched her. He'd really wanted her tonight. He liked a strong partner, some woman who would wrap her legs around him and bite his lip hard enough to make it bleed as he left finger-sized bruises on her hips. He didn't want to get stuck with some frail whore.

"Tough shit," Zeke answered.

Jacqs laughed. He could appreciate a man who didn't take no crap. After that, they fell silent again. Jacqs was working on his third drink when a ruckus started off to the side where the ladies had their private rooms.

"Get your ass back here!" a man bellowed about a half second before a woman came busting out into the main room. Her shirt hung from one arm, and a man twice her size came charging after her. The room seemed caught in the moment. The girl screamed as the man reached for her, and Jacqs dropped his whiskey as he surged forward.

Fist cocked back, Jacqs crashed into both of them before slamming his hand into the man's face. Something gave with a crack and the woman screamed even louder. Rolling to one side, Jacqs tried to get offa her, but the asshole assaulting her had redirected his attention toward Jacqs. He held onto Jacqs' shirt with one hand and tried punching around the whore with the other.

"Fucking bastard." Jacqs got up on one knee and tried to yank himself free of the tangled mess of limbs, but now the girl was clinging onto him too. Near

him weren't never a safe place to hide in a fight, and Jacqs shoved her to one side before the fool got her head bashed in.

“Do you know who I am?” the asshole who'd attacked her in the first place bellowed like a stuck ox. “Do you know who I am?” He threw a wide punch, but it hit Jacqs on the arm where it didn't do much harm. He tried winding up to punch again, but there was movement behind, and Jacqs turned to face any potential threat. This idiot wasn't much danger, but someone at his back might be.

Sure enough, two bruisers were coming at him. Jacqs shifted to get a wall at his back and started calculating on angles, but then Zeke lifted a chair and slammed it into Bruiser Number One's back. The man went down like a log, leaving the sides a mite more even. Unfortunately, even sides didn't make a bar fight one bit less messy. Men and women leaped up from the tables, some rushing to leave and others looking to jump into the fray, a wild-eyed expression of joy already blossoming. Well, fuck. One of these days he had to learn how to schedule trouble for the last day of leave instead of the first.

CHAPTER THREE

Jacqs touched his swollen eye again. Damn chair had nearly split it open, and the long bruise that ran across the eye was puffing up for fair. “Fuck.” Jacqs kicked the bars of his cell. In the next cell, Zeke laughed.

“Hard to with the bars between.”

That made Jacqs laugh. He needed a good laugh about now. “It ain’t like you’re some girly queer.”

Zeke gave him an odd look. “I’m definitely not the girly sort. If you tried calling me girly, I’d give you a table-sized bruise to match the chair sized one you’ve already got.”

“Yeah? Well it ain’t like you made out any better.”

Zeke touched his temple where the head wound had finally stopped bleeding. His sandy blond hair was crusted reddish brown with blood. “If the other side took more hits than us, it’s worth it.”

“I think that’s a safe bet.” Jacqs grinned at the thought of that fat bastard howling like a pig going to butcher. While Jacqs might not know him in particular, he knew the type. That’s the sort that sat on stations or bribed some ship clear of military service and then made a sweet profit offa running food to starving people and robbing them blind. Jacqs had seen the sort too often to mistake it.

“Next time maybe you could avoid taking the girl down with you, huh?” Zeke suggested.

Jacqs grunted. “She didn’t mind the bruises, not when that bastard ended up with broken bones.”

That made Zeke grin again. “I don’t usually get to take a swing at civilians. This wasn’t a half bad night.”

“Yeah? You must have a nicer captain than mine.” Jacqs scratched his arm where another nasty bruise was starting to form. He could feel the heat of it

under his fingers. “I’m going to end up on shit duty for the rest of leave, and I never even got to fuck me a whore.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Fuck, no. I’m going to be scrubbing the underside of deck plates.” Jacqs made a face at the very thought of all the shit work he was about to get assigned.

Zeke leaned forward, his elbows rested on his knees. “It wasn’t like you started it.”

“Yeah, but I ‘don’t start’ fights on a regular basis. There’s one rule for crew and another for me. For them, the rule is to not start shit. For me, I’m supposed to not even be adjacent to it.” Jacqs pronounced the word adjacent carefully. It was a mighty stupid word, but first commander on the *Candiru* had made Jacqs sign a paper that said exactly that.

“I don’t approve of two sets of rules on a ship. It makes people mean to know that others get a different sort of treatment.” Zeke’s voice turned all serious.

“Can’t say I disagree.” Jacqs kept scratching his arm. “Course my agreement ain’t exactly required. The worst part is that I didn’t even get a woman. It’s a long haul between dock stays and I’m getting mighty tired of my hand.”

“You can’t tell me there isn’t one person on that ship that’s worthy of bedding. Hell, that’d have to be a pretty disgusting lot if that’s true.”

Jacqs shrugged. There were plenty of women he’d love to bed, but they weren’t exactly running to his door. When Grah had joined up, all womanly curves and hypersexual twitches and winks, he thought he’d finally ended his dry spell. Instead she was as stuck up as the rest of them.

“That’s not a good thought.” Zeke leaned back and rested against the cool metal.

Jacqs figured the worst part was that Grah would let Zeke fuck her. He had that grin, that crooked grin that made women wet between the legs. And he

didn't have no scarring on his face where a woman would have to look at it, and he didn't say all the wrong shit at the wrong time. Jacqs figured that last part was about his worst flaw, but he was who he was. If Jacqs Glebov weren't good enough, then he weren't. There wasn't no use making out to be someone he wasn't, just to get in some woman's pants.

"I wish I could say I was surprised." Lieutenant Taylor came around the corner, his uniform all crisp and his expression cold.

Jacqs rolled his eyes. He could do without the pointless attempts to inspire a guilt that wasn't likely to appear. The bastard had mauled someone half his size, Jacqs mauled him. Seemed fair to him.

"You didn't make it one day, Glebov. Not one day. The captain is talking about busting you back to private."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Jacqs said with a shrug. If he tried defending himself, he'd just make it worse. Best to take his lumps and move on.

"You attacked a local businessman, a powerful one at that. Are you even going to explain yourself?" Taylor crossed his arms, but Jacqs really didn't feel the need to explain or defend anything. He'd done what he'd done, and the captain would do what he'd do.

"If he won't defend himself, I will," Zeke said. "That businessman had attacked a girl and was chasing her when Jacqs stepped in."

"Really?" Taylor didn't sound overly impressed.

"Now, I'm not saying his way of handling the situation was particularly good," Zeke said, and Jacqs flipped him off. "Diplomacy and de-escalation are not in your skill set," Zeke said with a laugh, "but he acted with provocation and at risk to himself. He didn't do anything to deserve demotion, although I wouldn't say it reflects well on him that he led with a fist instead of something a little less likely to cause a general melee."

"I'll be sure and communicate that to the captain," Taylor said in the nastiest tone of voice Jacqs had heard out of him yet. Maybe Zeke's charm didn't work with queer-turned men.

“I’ll tell him myself as soon as you get me signed out of here,” Zeke offered.

Jacqs turned and stared at Zeke. Maybe the man had gotten hit too hard on the head, because he wasn’t making any sense. Zeke pulled an order sheet out of his jacket and handed it through the bars. With suspicion etched on his face, Taylor slowly took the order and opened it.

“Commander Zeke Waters, reporting to the *Candiru*, or the *Candiru*’s lieutenant, anyway.” At that, Zeke got a real shit-eating grin on his face.

“No fucking way. Commander? You ain’t got enough stupid in you to be an officer,” Jacqs blurted.

Taylor looked up from the orders to glare at Jacqs, but Zeke just grinned wider. “Sometimes they promote a man over his own objections.”

“And you were in a whorehouse?” Taylor sounded downright scandalized, but Zeke... the commander... just shrugged.

“I figured any men who showed up there on the first night of leave were the men I probably needed to get to know. Are you questioning my strategy or my morals with that tone of voice, lieutenant?”

Jacqs could practically see Taylor’s need to snap to attention. His heels came together and his fingers tightened on the orders in his hands. Yep, he was twitchy as a rat in the piston chamber.

“I’ll get you both signed out.” Taylor held the orders through the bars for Zeke to take back, and he did, tucking them away as Taylor practically fled the room.

Jacqs chuckled. “He about pissed his pants.”

“He’s never been on the front, has he?”

“Nope,” Jacqs agreed. “Most crew haven’t. Captain has and the other lieutenant has, but you’ll meet them soon enough. I don’t suppose it’s too hard to tell the captain is straight off the front.”

“Meaning?” Zeke asked. Zeke. He was Commander Waters, and Jacqs better get used to thinking of him that way or he was going to end up pissing someone off.

“Don’t know,” Jacqs said. “I’ve never met the man.”

Zeke looked real concerned at that. “Never?”

Jacqs shook his head.

“But you’ve heard scuttlebutt you think I should know.”

“I think you’ll figure out what you need to figure out,” Jacqs said. “I ain’t one for telling stories out of school.”

“And I didn’t figure you for one to play games and try to poison the well, but now I’m starting to question that initial impression that you might be someone to speak the truth.”

Jacqs pressed his lips together in anger. He didn’t want to be fighting with his new officer before the man even stepped foot on the ship, but calling Jacqs dishonest was a low blow.

The commander stood and leaned against the bars that separated their cells. “You tell me what you’re hinting about and I’ll decide if I believe it.”

Jacqs considered Zeke. So far he’d been a straight shooter, but spreading rumors about a captain could get Jacqs into more trouble than he rightly wanted to deal with.

“I’ll even keep it in confidence,” Zeke added.

That put Jacqs in an awkward position. If he didn’t say anything, it made it seem like he didn’t trust Zeke. Shifting around on his narrow cot, Jacqs looked the man in the eye. “I don’t really hold with people who give their word and don’t keep it.”

“Funny, I fucking hate those sorts.”

Jacqs gave a quick laugh as he reached his decision. “Fine. Rumor is that he drinks most days and all nights. The commanders have to do most of the captaining, and most times we get commanders straight out of school, men so

green they don't know which end of a gun to run from. So, them sending you out here... it's a little odd, if you know what I mean."

Zeke slowly sank back down onto the bunk. He didn't seem too quick to deny anything, but Jacqs found that sometimes officers were like that— they came back on you later. "They're sending me out here to keep me out of the way," Zeke said.

Jacqs snorted. He believed that about as much as he believed that the war would end tomorrow. The military didn't care about getting anyone out of the way. It cared about its own ends. "Is the front shifting this way?" he came out and asked.

Zeke rubbed a hand over his face. "You're assuming I know anything."

"Yep, I am."

The door clicked right before Taylor came in again, this time with a station guard.

"Dumb assumption, Jacqs," Zeke said. Maybe Jacqs would have pressed his luck, but not with company. He could practically see Zeke put on that invisible cloak of officerness. He stood, and his back was a little straighter; his gaze found Taylor and locked on a little longer. Yep, this was an officer, and Jacqs didn't know how the hell the man had fooled him so well.

Taylor glanced over at Jacqs, clearly wondering what sort of dumb assumption he'd made, but Commander Waters didn't enlighten him, and Taylor didn't ask. It was time to head back to the *Candiru*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jacqs stood at the edge of the command office and watched as Zeke—Commander Waters— bent over reports with Lieutenant Haslet. “Commander?”

Zeke looked up. “Jacqs? What can I do for you?”

Jacqs looked over at Haslet. The woman was going to make sure whatever Jacqs said or did, it landed in the middle of ship scuttlebutt. He didn’t quite know how to neutralize a threat that he couldn’t shoot. But on the other hand, he wasn’t too comfortable with the thought that maybe he’d avoided getting written up for fighting because some pansexual man was interested in him sexually.

“Lieutenant, give me a second with the corporal.” Zeke dismissed her.

“Yes, sir.” Haslet nodded at Zeke and then headed past Jacqs and out the door.

Zeke watched him for a second, sinking back down into his chair before gesturing toward the door. “Why don’t you close that?”

Jacqs reached over with a foot and kicked the door closed. Not sure how to start this conversation, Jacqs crossed his arms and tried figuring it out. He shoulda planned this better. Words weren’t his strong suit.

“Is this about me not telling you I was the new officer?” Zeke asked.

“You’re a pansexual.”

Zeke leaned back in his chair and took a second to just stare at Jacqs. “Okay. That’s not where I thought we were going, but yes. I registered as pan.”

“Fuck. You really are? You’ll sleep with people no matter how they identify?”

For a second, Zeke just frowned at him. Usually it was Jacqs who couldn't really get his head around a conversation, but maybe Zeke was equally bad with words. "Is this your way of propositioning me?" he finally asked.

"What?" Jacqs felt his stomach drop. "I'm heterosexual. I'm not interested in any man."

Zeke nodded. "Okay. I thought you came off pretty hetero yesterday, but that doesn't explain why you're here now. Why does my sexuality matter to you if we don't match?" Zeke had an honestly curious expression on his face, and Jacqs found himself at a loss for words. Why did it matter? It did matter. It mattered if the commander thought that Jacqs was going to pay for any favors.

"I ain't repaying you for not writing me up."

"What? What the fuck are you talking about, Jacqs?"

Jacqs took a step forward and jabbed his finger in Zeke's direction. "If you do me favors, I don't plan on returning them."

Zeke blinked several times and then slowly stood before coming around the desk. Jacqs braced himself. He didn't know what Zeke wanted, but Jacqs wasn't the sort to lie down and take any sort of abuse. Still not speaking, Zeke leaned back against his desk, sitting on the edge. "I am not understanding this conversation, so why don't you explain what you're thinking," Zeke suggested.

"I'm thinking I don't plan on sucking anything."

"And if you're a het, that makes sense," Zeke said slowly. "Why do you think you have to tell me that?"

Jacqs felt like he was off balance and falling farther by the second. He came in to stand up for himself, so he couldn't figure why he suddenly felt like he was in the wrong. He wasn't. Everyone had the basic right to choose his or her own sexual partners, and he wasn't less than anyone else. "Because you did me that favor don't mean I'm going to repay it."

Running a hand over his face, Zeke blew out a long breath. Jacqs figured that Zeke wouldn't need to force someone into his bunk. He had wide brown

eyes and dark blonde hair and the heroic history that would make men and women fall into his bed. But sometimes the men who didn't need to go forcing others got the most perverse pleasure out of it. Jacqs could feel a shiver of disgust run through him.

“Okay, let's slow this down.” Zeke held a hand up in a surrender gesture. “First, I didn't do you any favors. You didn't deserve to get busted back a rank, so you didn't.”

“Captain woulda busted me down,” Jacqs pointed out, and he knew he was right.

“Maybe,” Zeke conceded. “He does have a certain concept of you that doesn't quite match reality. Oh, he respects you as a soldier, but he does seem to think you start trouble where I just think you end it.”

Jacqs snorted.

“You're a hothead, and I'm not saying otherwise,” Zeke said, “but you're not out looking for trouble. You're just one who doesn't have the good sense to know when to walk away when it sticks its head up.”

“So, you would have walked away from that girl?” Jacqs demanded. If the commander said “yes”, then Jacqs was reconsidering his first impression of the man. No one should walk away from someone being bullied.

“No, but I might have tried to avoid the full-out bar fight.”

Jacqs shrugged. He never did have much luck at stopping fights, so it didn't seem worth the effort to try. “I'm still not thanking you for saving me from another bust in rank.”

That comment earned him a real cold glare from Zeke. “You've said that entirely too many times. I don't expect thanks. I also don't expect the ship's best gunner to show signs of paranoia.”

“I ain't paranoid!” Jacqs could feel anger crawling up his belly.

“Then why would you think I'm going to demand some sort of favor?” Zeke shouted back. “I haven't even done anything that you need to thank me for, except pull some local yahoo off your back before you could get two

bruisers jumping you at once. It'd be nice if you thanked me for backing your play in that bar."

"And now you're calling me paranoid, and that would remove me from duty." Jacqs could feel the fear crawl up into his belly. If he wasn't fit for duty, they'd dump him off on whichever station was nearest, and Jacqs didn't have a whole lot of illusions about how well his life would go from there. He'd either take work for some ass like the one he'd attacked in the bar, or he'd starve. Frankly, Jacqs figured he'd be happier starving.

Closing his eyes, Zeke seemed to mutter something under his breath for an uncomfortably long time. "You're not the easiest sort to have a conversation with," he finally said.

Jacqs crossed his arms.

"Why do you think I would try and force you into sex?"

"You're pansexual," Jacqs pointed out. "It ain't like it's a real long leap from one to the other."

Zeke returned to his muttering before turning and walking back behind his desk and sitting. "That's an enormous fucking leap, Jacqs. The fact that I'm attracted to a personality and not a body type or set of genitalia does not imply that I would ever force anyone. If you even suggest that I would force someone, I'm going to kick your ass. You know," he said, the tone suddenly shifting to something more thoughtful, and Jacqs' nerves tightened up more than ever. When officers started getting thoughtful, men like Jacqs had to worry. "Your record doesn't go back more than four years. You were conscripted off a suspected smuggling ship."

"I weren't never convicted of anything."

"No, you weren't. But looking at how you're reacting, I'm guessing you grew up in refugee camps."

Jacqs didn't answer. This wasn't none of Zeke's business.

"Which would explain why you assume the worst of pansexuals."

“And homosexuals. You lot are hypersexualized by nature. I ain’t,” Jacqs said firmly. “I ain’t the sort to go having sex any time I see movement. They don’t have any control. None of them.” Most of the time, once Jacqs got going, someone shut him up. Unfortunately, Zeke didn’t seem to have gotten that message because he sat back, and the words spilled out of Jacqs faster than he could really track them, faster than he could stop them.

“There’s something wrong with men who let their dicks lead the way. I wouldn’t be like that. I wouldn’t ever be one of them hypersexualized sorts, always looking for someone desperate enough for a bit of bread that they’ll do most anything, and if I do go for a whore, I always make sure to pay them fair, even if they aren’t charging full price. A person is worth more than a bit of food.” Jacqs practically had to choke down the rest of the words that wanted to come spilling out. He knew what people were capable of. People might like to cover up all that moral rot with a veneer of politeness, they registered their sexualities to avoid misunderstandings, but none of that changed the fact that the rot was there.

“Jacqs, I don’t think you had homosexuals or pansexuals in those camps. I think you saw a whole lot of dyssexual people. I figure the camps breed them. But I am not going to ask anything sexual from a heterosexual man. You looked me in the eye and judged me yesterday, and I’m not any different today.”

Jacqs narrowed his eyes and tried to judge the honesty of that statement.

“No tricks,” Zeke said, holding both hands up in surrender.

“And all that crap about having a drink with me? I mean, you were my officer. Were you trying to trick me into doing something you could write me up for?”

Zeke gave a shrug. “Nope. I was tired of all these assholes who haven’t actually fought all feeling sorry for themselves because they can’t get supplies or because they have to work long shifts. Until you’ve seen friends bleed to death on your hands, you have no cause to go complaining. I was in there

looking for a drink, and hoping to see crew interact when there wasn't an officer around, but mostly, I really needed a drink."

"Unless you're the one who's gone and bled out, you ain't got no room for complaining," Jacqs realized a half second too late that he probably shouldn't go implying that Zeke didn't have room for complaints, not after giving up his leg and suffering through the hell of Siros Two. "Of course, you came close enough, I might make an exception for you."

"Don't," Zeke said firmly. "If I ever turn into one of these people who spends their time complaining, I want someone like you around to tell me to shut the fuck up. I'm sick of people complaining because they don't get leave as often as they want."

Jacqs had heard that complaint about a million times. "If you're alive to get leave at the end of a run, you don't have room to claim the universe is treating you unfair."

"Exactly." Zeke threw up his hands. "If you don't have anything better to complain about, then get out of my face and complain to someone else, only I'm supposed to be an officer and somehow fix morale. So it's my job to nod and make sympathetic noises."

Jacqs grunted. He hadn't ever thought of an officer's job quite like that. If that's what officers did with their time, Jacqs would rather cut off his own foot. Jacqs cringed as he realized he needed to stop even thinking that particular comparison before he went and said it in front of the man with no foot. "I'd be more likely to offer to hit 'em hard enough that they had something worth complaining about," Jacqs said.

"Don't tempt me." Zeke rolled his eyes. "So maybe I wanted to have a drink with a man who has stood at the front and who isn't trying to con me out of extra leave with some sad story about his grandmother."

"Hell, I don't even know who my grandmother is," Jacqs admitted.

"Then you won't regale me with stories about how you need a three month leave to go sit at the side of her bed."

“In the middle of a war? Hell no,” Jacqs agreed. “Do people really...” Jacqs stopped as he saw the look on Zeke’s face. The man was serious. That was enough to make Jacqs want to buy the man a few beers and spot him to a real good whore. He needed the break worse than Jacqs did, and serving on a ship with these losers made Jacqs need it mighty bad.

Jacqs cleared his throat. “So, you really don’t expect me to go repaying?”

“Hell, no. Maybe we can get a beer together and swap war stories, but this isn’t about expecting anything out of you.” Zeke sighed. “What made you even start to think that?”

Jacqs moved to one of the chairs across from Zeke and hesitated a second. Sitting around a superior officer was one of those things they got unreasonably cranky about, but Zeke just nodded his head toward the seat. After sitting, Jacqs shrugged. “Allie Grah went saying how people think we’re dating because you did me the favor of not busting me down to private.”

“Why is it that the ships that see the least action like to talk the most?” Zeke shook his head. “I can call her out for gossiping if you want, but it will probably go away faster if we just ignore it.”

“Makes sense,” Jacqs agreed. On ship, denying something worked about as well as tossing fuel cells into a fire. “I should probably get to my station and check out the targeting sights. They’ve been acting up lately.”

“Anything serious?”

Jacqs had the odd impression that he had Zeke’s full and undivided attention in a way Jacqs wasn’t used to. Officers in particular seemed to ignore him, and even shipmates only paid attention to the bits they wanted. Zeke, however, leaned forward, his dark eyes right on Jacqs.

“Probably not. The seals ain’t exactly perfect, so they tend to wiggle. It just takes readjusting them every once in a while.” Jacqs found himself uncomfortably aware of his hands. He suddenly didn’t know what to do with them, and after thirty-some years of having them, it was odd not knowing whether to rest them on his knees or on the arms of the chair or what. He ended up crossing his arms over his chest.

“Keep on top of it,” Zeke said. “If there’s anything else…” Letting his words trail off, Zeke pinned Jacqs with an intense expression.

“Um. No.” Jacqs stood. “I should just go. So the thing where I accused you of—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But it was a real shitty thing to assume.”

“Yep,” Zeke quickly agreed. “It was all kinds of shitty. But you came and asked instead of making assumptions, so I give you some credit for that.”

That was a real strange reaction for an officer, but rather than looking a gift ship in the thrusters, Jacqs turned and headed for the door. Lieutenant Haslet still stood in the hall, and Jacqs headed past her. Most people on the ship got out of his way, but Haslet was a big woman, former infantry, who still had shoulders like she carried fifty pounds of gun everywhere she went.

“Problem, Corporal?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Haslet stepped to the side, putting herself in the middle of the hallway and right in Jacqs’ path. “Then why are you interrupting command meetings, Glebov?”

Jacqs opened his mouth to tell the lieutenant to fuck off, but that didn’t seem right. Zeke would have to send him to the brig for that one, and Jacqs had already put the man in an awkward position once today. Instead, Jacqs shrugged. “I did something stupid, and I needed to talk to the commander. If’n he has a problem with that, I suppose he’ll tell me. Either that or he’ll call to have you escort me to the brig, and he didn’t do that, now did he?” Jacqs stepped forward, pressing close to the lieutenant. He could see Haslet shiver, her body stiff as she tried to not back away. Jacqs was a powerfully built man, and he did know how to use that size to his advantage.

“Get to your shift, then,” Haslet ordered. Her body was stiff enough to crack at the first breeze. Jacqs gave her a wolfish grin.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered in a slow drawl, and then he detoured around her, deliberately bumping shoulders. Today was shaping up to be a mighty fine day.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leaning against the rail that overlooked the main deck, Jacqs took a drink of his illegal whiskey and watched three of the baby soldiers train. It was a nice enough way to end the day, watching others be idiots. They were using throws straight out of hand-to-hand school, which was like to get all three killed if they ever saw a batface. The aliens were squat with four legs, two arms, and a set between that could function like awkward arms or weak legs. They didn't fight like humans, and these three idiots were training to fight humans.

Zeke came out of a corridor and stood at the edge of the training mat, watching the exercise. The three were training two on one, but the two attackers politely waited their turn to go at Schreiber. Considering that Petrov Bolson and Karney Tells were maybe two hundred fifty pounds if you put them together, that didn't make a lick of sense. They needed to attack together, but they weren't even trying.

Circling the mats, Zeke studied all three, and Jacqs watched as the three stopped watching each other and started tracking Zeke.

"Sir, would you care to spar?" Schreiber finally asked. Even from the second-floor walk, Jacqs could see the man's eyes go to Zeke's metal leg. If he was smart, he'd be worrying about how much damage a titanium and scandium reinforced leg might do. Knowing Schreiber, the man was more likely to worry about whether a fight with a one-legged man was fair.

"I don't think you can handle me," Zeke said. Jacqs could see the confusion and alarm in the others. Officers weren't supposed to say shit like that. "How about all three of you take me on?"

Bolson looked absolutely terrified. "I need to get to shift, sir," he blurted out. He even managed to do it without stuttering.

"I'll write you a hall pass," Zeke said. Grinning, Jacqs watched as Bolson squirmed. The arrogant little shit was about to get his ass handed to him.

“Sir, we don’t know each other’s fighting styles, which could be dangerous in sparring,” Schreiber offered. Jacqs gave the man credit for having balls. He had no sense, but he had balls.

Zeke toed off his one shoe and stepped onto the mat. “Is that what you plan to tell the batfaces if we’re ever in direct contact?” Zeke’s voice had a dangerous calm that made the hairs on the back of Jacqs’ neck stand up.

“No, sir.” Schreiber came to attention right there in the middle of the mat. Bolson and Tells were both fading back toward the edge of the training area, clearly about as uncomfortable as a human could get without having a gun pointed at his guts.

“Good. The next thing you should know is that bats tended to attack in groups, three to six at a time. So, you three will be playing the part of batfaces. Come at me.”

Schreiber, Tells and Bolson all traded alarmed looks as Zeke moved toward the center of the mat. Schreiber dropped back into a standard defensive pose, but he didn’t seem interested in attacking anyone. Mostly he just sweated and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

After a second, Zeke took a step back and considered them all. “What? Are you afraid the fight’s unfair? We can invite Jacqs down here.”

“You look like you’re doing fine without any help,” Jacqs said.

“I was going to invite you to help these guys.” Zeke poked his thumb towards the others.

“Sir,” Schreiber started in again. He didn’t get a chance to finish because Zeke looked for a second like he was falling forward, but instead he landed on his hands, thrust himself forward with his arms, leaving his leg free to sweep Schreiber’s feet out from under him. Schreiber fell with a cry, but Zeke sprang back to his feet before the man even hit the mat. Karney Tells took a quick backhand that sent her flying sideways, and that left Zeke facing off against Bolson. He backed up right off the mat rather than engage.

“Fuck. This is going to take a while.” Zeke walked over to the opposite end of the mat, stripped off his shirt and tossed it to the ground. While Jacqs had gotten a vague impression of Zeke’s power during the bar fight, he could see it all on display now. The man had the long, lanky muscles of someone who used his body and used it well. “Okay, you three, you have two minutes to decide on a strategy to take me down, so I suggest you start talking now.” Zeke crossed his arms and waited. For a good thirty seconds, the three of them stared. Schreiber moved first, catching Tells by the arm and pulling her over to Bolson for a quick planning session. The three of them still had their heads together discussing the matter when Zeke started back onto the mat.

He stalked them. There wasn’t a better word in the universe for it. Hands held out from his sides, each foot placed carefully as he judged angles— he closed in on his prey with the grace of a predator. It took the three idiots a little too long to figure out their time was up, and then Bolson and Tells skittered away to the sides, leaving Schreiber to take the brunt of the attack again.

Schreiber crouched low, his own hands held out for balance as his stance practically screamed out that he expected another attack aimed at his legs. Idiot. Jacqs took another drink of his whiskey and watched as Zeke shifted his weight in preparation for an attack from any side. His back was a topographical map of scars with white lines and circles of burn scar all intersecting with such regularity that Jacqs was surprised the man had survived the injury that’d caused it. But under all that flawed skin, his muscles moved fluidly. Those three were about to get a beat down.

Just about the time Jacqs was getting bored, Tells launched an attack from Zeke’s left, aiming a kick for the artificial leg. Zeke shifted closer, and Tell’s shin hit the metal before she collapsed, clutching her injured limb, but she was clearly the distraction because Schreiber was already in motion, looking to do a bulldog throw. While Jacqs didn’t have a problem grabbing an opponent’s head and throwing him to the ground with it, it did seem like that there was the exact maneuver that had gotten Jacqs in trouble. Clearly other people got to break the precious rules.

Jacqs might have been tempted to point out the unfairness of life, but Zeke taught Schreiber a quick lesson, side-stepping his move and catching the man across the throat with his forearm. Schreiber went down hard. That left Bolson, who froze less than a foot away from Zeke. Not hesitating for a moment, Zeke caught Bolson's arm, twisted it, and tossed the man to the side.

Standing in the middle of all his fallen opponents, Zeke looked like a god who'd just taught some lowly mortals a few lessons in life. When Zeke glanced up, Jacqs raised his bottle in salute.

"Scared to take me on yourself, are you?" Zeke challenged him.

Jacqs stood up. "I ain't scared of anyone."

"Even though I can kick your ass?"

"You can try," Jacqs said, a hungry glee gathering in the pit of his stomach, but then Schreiber climbed back to his feet.

"Glebov is banned from the sparring room, sir." Schreiber's voice had a raspy edge to it, and he rubbed his throat, but even that wasn't enough to soothe the resentment that washed through Jacqs. He leaned forward again, resting his forearms against the rail.

"Seems like I don't need to be down there for you to get your ass kicked," Jacqs pointed out, and Schreiber glared up at him.

Zeke looked from one to the other with a bewildered expression. "Why is a soldier banned from training?"

"Because he doesn't respect the rules of training." Schreiber sounded bitter about that, but then the training room was his domain. As the training sergeant, he liked making up rules about what happened in his world, and Jacqs wasn't particularly good at living by stupid rules.

"The rules?" Again, Zeke's voice had that deadly calm that made a shiver go through Jacqs. That voice carried real danger.

Schreiber stood a little taller. "We don't take risks that could lead to real injury. It's a small crew, and we can't afford to have men and women in the infirmary."

Jacqs snorted. They didn't have an infirmary... they had a single bunk near the first aid kit. And if a few days in that bunk made someone watch their blind spot more carefully, Jacqs wasn't feeling too guilty about it.

"Glebov, get your ass down here so I can officially kick it," Zeke ordered.

"Unless you're planning to order me to throw the fight, that ain't gonna happen," Jacqs warned as he headed for the stairs.

"How long's it been since you trained?" Zeke turned and gave Schreiber an unhappy look.

"Going on seven months," Jacqs answered. At one time, this room had been the only refuge he had. He shared a bunk room with every male soldier on the damn ship, he worked in a public area, and he had no interest in sitting in a tiny cubicle and having one of them virtual experiences. So the training room had been about the only place he could come and really let loose. Well, until Schreiber went crying that Jacqs was too mean to folks on the mats. Now he was limited to lifting weights and working out on the wall.

"Oh, I'm going to kick your ass," Zeke said with confidence.

"I ain't been sitting on my ass for all that time." Jacqs stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the bench. Clicking his bottle closed, he set it next to the shirt and then pulled his shoes off, dropping them to the ground.

"Without active training, everyone gets rusty."

Jacqs gave the man a wolfish grin. "You, maybe. Maybe you're soft after all that officer training, sitting on your ass and learning rules about how to write shit." Jacqs was guessing about that. Zeke moved more like a soldier than an officer, but if his leg made him less than useful in the field, it made sense to put him into officer training.

All expression gone from his face, Zeke dropped into a defensive pose. "I'm going to find out where that infirmary is when I put you in it," he warned.

"If all four of you came at me at once, that still wouldn't happen."

"Talk's cheap, Corporal."

“Your talk included, Commander.”

Stepping onto the mat, Jacqs felt that old warmth, that rush of anticipation. He studied his opponent’s body—the way Zeke shifted his weight constantly, the curve of his hip and the straight line of his artificial leg. His fingers curled into claws and his shoulders stayed low, ready for any sort of attack, in that half-relaxed state that would allow him to spar without wearing out his arms.

“Like what you see?”

“Too much shifting in your feet. You’ll wear yourself down before I have a chance to kick your ass,” Jacqs pointed out.

Zeke dropped his natural leg back to give him more stability. “The new leg throws the balance a little. It won’t keep me from taking you down as easy as I took them.”

“Seems to me that Tells took herself down. She ran her leg into yours—you didn’t do nothing, and Bolson...” Jacqs snorted.

“Yeah, we’ll work on him,” Zeke agreed. “So, are you done talking? Maybe you’re nervous to actually spar again after all these months, you know, afraid to get shown up as incompetent?”

The jibes were as obvious as the sudden opening low on Zeke’s left side. “Maybe you think you have to talk me into doing something stupid because you can’t fight fair. I ain’t never seen a batface open with verbal taunts.” Jacqs felt the warm rush of victory when Zeke’s eyes narrowed. Yep, the man had thought he could play Jacqs. Well, Jacqs weren’t that stupid. Well, okay, he was about some things, but not about fighting. There wasn’t a man on the ship who could best Jacqs in a fight, and that included Zeke.

“I think you’re doing a lot of talking and not a lot of attacking. In that bar you threw your fists quick enough. What’s wrong? Scared to take on someone who can fight back?”

“Just smart enough to be wary.”

Schreiber laughed. The nastiness of it distracted Jacqs for a half second, and that was enough for Zeke to attack. Dropping into a crouch, he tried to

sweep Jacqs' legs with that titanium limb of his. Jacqs jumped over the attack, but he had barely landed, and he hadn't caught his balance back, before Zeke slammed a foot into his stomach.

Jacqs flew back onto the mat, his shoulders hitting hard enough to take his breath, but Jacqs rolled before Zeke could get a disabling blow in. Rather than rolling away in search of safety, Jacqs rolled toward Zeke, catching his flesh leg and yanking it out from under him. The artificial leg couldn't compensate, and Zeke fell back away from Jacqs.

When Jacqs landed a punch in Zeke's groin, Schreiber shouted for the match to end. Before Jacqs could decide whether or not to obey that particular order, Zeke had grabbed Jacqs' short curls. The hold was more of an annoyance than a danger, and Jacqs shoved at the man's hand. A half second too late, he figured out it was a distraction. But before he could shift his weight to protect his vulnerable underside, Zeke had driven a knee up into Jacqs' diaphragm. The force of the kick drove the air out of Jacqs' body. Every cell felt like it was dying as his lungs failed to deliver oxygen.

Jacqs pulled off to the side, his right arm still up defensively as he used his left arm and his legs to scoot away, but Zeke grabbed one of Jacqs' ankles. Aiming his free leg, Jacqs hit Zeke's face hard enough that his head snapped back, but he didn't let go of Jacqs' ankle. Instead, he jerked Jacqs closer with enough force that Jacqs' skin dragged across the surface of the mat. Friction burns immediately heated his skin. Despite the pain, Jacqs brought his free leg up to kick again, but Zeke caught it, and used his greater leverage as the man on top to flip Jacqs over onto his stomach.

Still struggling to breathe, Jacqs didn't have the strength to hold Zeke off, and the man caught him in a chokehold that pinned Jacqs to the mat, ending the match.

Jacqs slapped the mat in surrender, and Zeke immediately rolled to the side where he lay panting.

"Sir, are you okay?" Schreiber asked.

Zeke waved a hand as he tried to catch his breath. Jacqs was proud that he didn't go down without a fight, without inflicting a little damage on the opponent, unlike those three idiots.

"You okay?" Zeke asked.

Rolling to his back, Jacqs stared up at the support beams as his body sorted through the post battle injuries. He had some hellacious friction burns and his stomach was going to bruise like a bitch, but nothing life threatening. "I'll live. You?"

Jacqs turned his head to see Zeke touching a badly split lip. "I think I need to find that infirmary, but if you think some weak-ass attack like that can keep me down, you don't know me very well."

Jacqs started to laugh, but it turned to coughing as his abused lungs protested vehemently. After pushing himself up enough that he was sitting, Jacqs caught sight of Schreiber staring at them like they were both all shades of crazy.

Zeke got to his feet and offered Jacqs a hand, which Jacqs was more than happy to take. His legs were a little unstable. "That is sparring, ladies and gentlemen," Zeke announced. "Sparring is preparation for battle. It is unpredictable. It requires fighting despite the pain, and it looks nothing like choreographed exercises. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Schreiber offered with this parade ground sharpness to his voice as he went to attention.

"Glebov, show me this infamous infirmary of yours. I need to seal this lip together or I'll be as ugly as you."

"You already are," Jacqs shot right back. Fact was, Zeke was more than attractive, but Jacqs wasn't one to let a little thing like reality get between him and a good insult.

"Fuck that. I'm gorgeous. They put me on recruitment holos back home."

"Really? Damn, they must be desperate."

Zeke laughed. The sound burst out like he hadn't expected or prepared for it. "Yeah, Jacqs, they are," Zeke agreed. "Come on before I get blood all over this level and frighten all the kiddies."

Jacqs agreed with that. This crew wasn't prepared for the sight of blood, much less battle. "This way," he offered. Limping over to the bench, he sat and started putting his shoes back on.

Zeke walked over, and grabbed Jacqs' bottle before he could retrieve it. Upending it, Zeke took a big gulp, and for a half second, he seemed to utterly freeze. All the pleasure drained out of Jacqs as he realized he was about to land in the brig for bootlegging whiskey in his water bottle.

Bracing himself for the order to report below decks, Jacqs found himself surprised again when Zeke slowly lowered the bottle and handed it back to Jacqs before clearing his throat. "I think I need to requisition my own water bottle. Yours is tasting a little musky, Glebov."

"Yes, sir," Jacqs answered as he took the bottle back. Well, hell. Jacqs truly never had expected that sort of reaction out of an officer.

"Schreiber, you have two days to design a new training regime and get everyone's name on the roster, clear?"

"Everyone sir? The navs and techs—"

"Need training more than anyone," Zeke said before heading for the exit. "Glebov, I have no idea where I'm going, so get your ass in gear."

"Yes, sir." Grabbing his shirt off the bench, Jacqs hurried after the commander.

CHAPTER SIX

Jacqs watched as Zeke applied the skin seal to himself using the mirror above the chest where they kept medical supplies. “That was a good hit. So, why don’t you train these guys?”

“It ain’t like they want to fight, not really.”

“We’re in a war. I don’t think fighting is an optional activity.”

Jacqs nodded. He tended to agree, but there weren’t many who thought like that. Once again Jacqs found himself wondering why they’d inherited a real soldier instead of one of the fresh faces who needed a little time in uniform before moving on to another assignment. Maybe Zeke was like him and Greinbeck, hotheads who had too many discipline reports to keep them on regular duty.

That didn’t seem right, though. And he wasn’t like the captain, too drunk to do his job.

Zeke turned around. “You have some question written all over your face. Go on, ask it.”

“Is there some reason you’re on this ship?”

“Because the last commander got transferred out.”

Jacqs shook his head. “We ain’t never had a battle-trained officer, not in all the time I’ve been floating around in this tin can.” Jacqs didn’t point out that he’d been here longer than anyone excepting the captain.

“I was a ground pounder, an explosives man. I don’t have any formal training in leading men other than the crew I take with me when I’m blowing shit up. I’m here for the same reason all the officers are here— to get training in being a leader someplace where I can’t get soldiers killed.”

“Nothing else?”

Zeke sat on the edge of the infirmary bunk and put the tube of skin seal on the edge of the trunk. “If there’s another agenda, they haven’t told me.”

Strangely, Jacqs believed him.

Zeke studied him for a second before asking a question of his own. “You’re good. Too good to waste on a ship like this. Why aren’t you on a combat team?”

Jacqs shrugged. “I was. Front gunner.” It was the most dangerous position, sitting up front in the big gun as he targeted batface armaments to open a hole for the ground pounders. Every enemy targeted those big artilleries, but Jacqs had always kept his head and focused on getting the job done and his guys home safe.

“Now you’re a belly gunner on a monitor ship. Explain that.”

“Seems like you’ve seen my records.”

“They are clearly full of more bullshit than my father’s farm back home. You’re less battle fatigued than I am.”

“Is that what they said?” Jacqs found himself irrationally cranky. “I ain’t weak in the head.”

“Fatigue implies tired, not weak, but you don’t seem to be either. So, what happened?”

Jacqs weighed his words out. He could tell the truth, but there was something disquieting about giving people facts about his life. Leaning back against the wall, Zeke watched him. He didn’t demand or order, he just watched. Even though Jacqs’ gut said he could trust the man, he still couldn’t get over that irrational fear of letting anyone have a piece of him.

But Zeke deserved some truth, especially after Jacqs had gone and implied he was the sort of man who would resort to rape. That was unkind, even for Jacqs, and Jacqs had a high tolerance for unkindness.

“Some of the others treated the refugees like some sort of personal slaves, offering them table scraps if they’d do their laundry or kiss their fucking feet.”

“And that offended you.” Zeke said the words without emotion, which made it hard for Jacqs to figure out if he was digging himself in some sort of hole or not.

“If’n you want to help someone, you help them, you hire them to do your laundry for credits or for enough food to feed themselves. You don’t go treating them like pigs who root around after scraps.”

“But people took the jobs.”

“Because they were fucking starving,” Jacqs growled. “Either feed ’em or let ’em starve in dignity, but don’t go acting like you’re a saint for treating human beings like animals. They weren’t even giving them enough to actually survive. They were handing over rotted bits of high-cal rations and the boiled down bones of whatever we threw in the stew pot.”

Zeke nodded and seemed to think about that for some time before he asked, “How big was the fight?”

“Big enough,” Jacqs said. He’d made his point, and now he could feel that restless need to defend himself, but he couldn’t. It wouldn’t change nothing, and words weren’t his best battleground. He’d just get tangled up in his own story. But the fact remained that Jacqs couldn’t let the men and women whose lives he’d saved act like monsters, like fucking batfaces who killed without ever acknowledging that they were destroying sentient life. “You got something to say about it?”

Again, Zeke seemed to think on that. “I never liked the games people got up to on the front. Never. But human beings need to take their frustration out somewhere, and I guess I never got involved because I couldn’t change anything.” Zeke touched his split lip carefully. “Honestly, I don’t know which of us is in the right on that issue. Sometimes I wish I’d have taken a few swings at the assholes in my own unit. Other times, I tell myself that even if I had stopped one or two of them, the rest of the front would have been full of abuses twice as bad. So I made sure that people knew how I felt and I left it there. So no, I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“You’re a shitty officer,” Jacqs offered.

Zeke smiled and the skin seal stretched as blood gathered under the clear plastic. “Oh? Why? Because I just called Schreiber a moron in front of lower-ranked crew?”

“What? When’d you do that?”

Zeke opened his mouth, looked at Jacqs, and then closed it again before seeming to reconsider his answer. The man spent an irrational amount of time thinking things through, that’s for sure. “I just ordered him to rip up his entire training schedule and redo it.”

“Because it stank,” Jacqs said with a shrug. “Which isn’t the same as calling him a moron.”

“Actually, for most people, I think it would be the same. If I call what he does stupid, he’s very likely to assume I’m calling him stupid.”

That required a bit of thinking on Jacqs’ part. “That ain’t a bit logical. A smart person can still do something stupid, like putting together a sparring schedule that looks more like a grandmother’s exercise routine than training.”

Zeke chuckled. “Well, I guess that’s true. So, if that’s not the reason, tell me, why am I a shitty officer?”

“You aren’t out there telling everyone that you have all the answers and pushing people around. Like that bottle. I thought you’d write me up for sure.”

“I don’t like you drinking alcohol,” Zeke said, suddenly more serious. “You’re the best gunner we have, and I’ve seen our shields. We need someone to keep the bats off us if we run into trouble. The thought that you might have slow reflexes does not make me happy. However, I don’t think writing you up is going to solve things, especially given that you might have one or two reasons to drink on this ship. Consider yourself officially allowed back on the training mats, and if I find you holding alcohol again, I will find a more creative way of making you pay than writing you up. Clear?”

“Yep,” Jacqs answered. It was closer to what he expected from an officer, anyway. “Which still don’t mean you’re acting like a real officer.”

Leaning forward, Zeke studied Jacqs close enough that it got uncomfortable. “I’m pretty sure I told Schreiber that I have the answers and I pushed him around on his own training floor. I know I’ve told Lieutenants

Taylor and Haslet I have better answers than they do, and those two other idiots who tried sparring with me—”

“Petrov Bolson and Karney Tells,” Jacqs offered.

“Yes, well those two definitely got the feeling that I’m one more know-it-all officer. So tell me, Corporal Glebov, exactly how am I being a shitty officer?”

Strangely, Jacqs got the feeling that Zeke was teasing him rather than using rank to make Jacqs feel less important, not that Jacqs actually cared about rank. “You sure haven’t come off as a know-it-all to me. Telling me how the fight that got me exiled out here... telling me that I might have been in the right... that ain’t the sort of thing an officer would do.”

Zeke shrugged. “Maybe I trust you to be a man and handle the gray reality of truth better than all these kids who still think in black-and-white.”

“Schreiber’s older than me.”

“Has he been to the front?” Zeke asked.

“Nope.” Jacqs wasn’t sure how that happened, but from the few stories Schreiber had told of home, Jacqs got the feeling his family had money—enough to keep him clear of the fighting.

“Then my point stands. Now, I feel like I got my ass kicked, so I’m going to go take some cellular regenerate and lay on my bunk and feel sorry for myself,” Zeke said with a grin. “I suggest you do the same since your ass got kicked even worse.”

“Wait until I get more practice in,” Jacqs warned.

Zeke stood slowly, stretching his bad leg several times before putting weight on it. “Wait until I have at you first, instead of taking on three other opponents before you.”

Jacqs would have been happy to return the insult, but he couldn’t think up anything fast enough, and Zeke passed him with a pat on the shoulder as he left. Fingering the growing bruises on his stomach, Jacqs figured some regenerate would probably do him good. The chemicals left him feeling shaky

and headachy, but they sped up healing enough to miss the worst of the soft tissue damage.

After a quick trip to the distributor to request regenerate, Jacqs headed for the men's bunk room. Twelve bunks were jammed in the space, but only eight were being used right now, and Jacqs had the best of them in the rear corner. Ship seniority had its advantages.

"You okay?" Burtrell asked as Jacqs passed him.

"Fucking perfect," Jacqs answered. He stripped his shirt off in the aisle and threw it onto the empty bunk above his.

Burtrell whistled. "Holy shit. What happened to you? Were you fighting with Greinbeck again?"

"Did I look like this after the last time?" Jacqs demanded. "The day a shit-for-brains like Greinbeck can bruise me up like this, someone needs to take a gun to my head." With that, the conversation was over as far as Jacqs was concerned. He climbed into his bunk and pulled the curtain closed. Putting the regenerate tabs in his mouth, he lay back and let the drugs work. His sense of balance wobbled first, and he fisted his sheets to convince himself he wasn't going to fall off the bunk. Then a general sense of weakness set in, the larger muscles first as the drugs stole resources from one part of his body to feed another. In this case, his stomach and side heated up as the drugs tried to fix the bruising and the friction burns.

While Jacqs might hurt, the fact was that Jacqs was having some trouble stopping himself from thinking about Zeke. When he'd stripped off his shirt, the power in his shoulders and the ease with which he moved had been a work of fucking art. Zeke lived in his skin. He owned his power, and that made him sexy.

Jacqs didn't normally think on men being sexy, but he'd lived in barracks long enough to know that even the het men sometimes talked about some other male as being fucking gorgeous. Of course, Jacqs always thought that seemed a little suspicious. Het men shouldn't go around noticing other men's bodies.

But it was hard to avoid looking when it was Zeke stalking those three idiots in the training room. And his back made a person want to stare. The scars were like some holovid makeup for a war movie, only this time it was real. Zeke was an actual hero, strong enough to survive the injuries that left him that marked up. Jacqs had seen men with far fewer injuries just give up on life and die.

Reaching down, Jacqs scratched his thigh and tried figuring what would have made Bolson go telling people that Zeke was interested in him. Zeke had even said he wasn't interested in no het man. And Jacqs had never sexed a male. He was pure het. Always had been, always would be. Jacqs shifted around, uncomfortable in his bunk.

Since Zeke was pansexual, he'd bed about anyone if he found 'em interesting and their sexual orientations matched. Jacqs truly hoped that he didn't find Lieutenant Taylor interesting. Taylor was always trying to talk about everything— like explaining your motives for punching a crewmate in detail would somehow change the reality of things. If Zeke had been on the ship back when Jacqs had been busted down a rank for fighting with Greinbeck, things might have turned out different. Or not. Jacqs knew he'd gone a little too far with that fight, even if the ass had it coming. Fucking bully.

Still, Jacqs imagined how Zeke might have handled it. They would have sat on that bench after sparring, and Zeke wouldn't have made a big deal out of it as he asked for Jacqs' side. The fantasy sort of fell apart there because Jacqs couldn't quite imagine telling anyone how he felt sick inside watching people get bullied. He hated even being around weak folk, because people who went around showing their vulnerabilities were the ones who went and got bullied. Constantly. If Jacqs had his first choice, he'd be off this ship with all these weak people and back on a frontline unit. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. So Jacqs took his second choice— he showed Greinbeck that bullying had a consequence on the *Candiru*.

“If you're going to masturbate, do you mind closing the curtain,” a snotty voice called out.

“I was scratching an itch, asshole,” Jacqs cursed back. However, he did reach down and tug his curtain to close the gap between the two halves. Some days, the people on this ship were enough to drive him to drink. Actually, up to this point, that would be all days. However, Jacqs wasn’t going to risk seeing whether Zeke would be as strict about shipboard punishments as he was with training. It was time for Jacqs to get rid of the bootleg whiskey. Damn. He sure hoped Zeke planned to make it worth his while.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ship comm chimed in Jacqs' pocket as he got on the lift. Cursing, he pulled it out. The message read, "*Want to talk, don't want to start rumors. My quarters programmed to admit you between 15:30 and 19:30. Don't be seen. Zeke.*" Not only did the message give him a sour stomach, but he still hadn't gotten around to taking out the damn shock mechanism someone had added to the comm. Well, a shock this low never killed anyone, not until Jacqs figured out who had rigged his comm, anyway. Then someone was dying.

"Trouble?" Jacqs commed back.

The answer took a long time to come back, and Jacqs could feel a creeping sense of discomfort. Maybe he'd read things wrong yesterday. Maybe Zeke was going to bust him for the whiskey after all. It wouldn't be the first time Jacqs had horribly misread someone.

"No. I've just pissed off most of the crew. I'm trying to avoid pissing off the rest. No trouble with you unless you're pissed I kicked your ass."

Jacqs grinned.

"Beginner's luck. I'll win next round," he texted back. Each incoming message gave Jacqs a new jolt, but it wasn't enough to do more than annoy him.

"Dream on, ship sitter."

Jacqs was working on a comeback when the comm flashed a <<disconnect>> message. Ass. He needed to give Jacqs time to come up with a proper insult. He'd have time to come up with something during shift, though. Shoving the comm back in his pocket, Jacqs stepped off the lift and walked down the narrow corridor to his workstation. A long shift of searching for bats that didn't exist let him think on how Zeke seemed to have tied him in knots, but he hadn't come to any conclusions. As soon as shift ended, he headed down toward officers quarters without really considering how potentially wrong it might go.

Jacqs pressed his thumb to the access, surprised when the door yielded with a small click. Despite Zeke's message, Jacqs hadn't really expected to be allowed into officer's quarters unescorted, or allowed in at all. Instead the door slid back into the wall, allowing Jacqs to enter. A wide desk with a screen-in-wall display took up one side of the room, and when Jacqs bent down, he could see a good-sized bunk tucked away underneath. So the desk must lift up somehow. A chair sat in front of the desk, and another was pushed off to the corner near a cabinet.

Jacqs pulled on the cabinet handle, but it was locked. In the other corner was a full-sized door, and he pulled on that to find a private head. The toilet and sink were together under a showerhead that seemed designed to hit the entire room, not that it'd be hard. Jacqs could barely even turn around without hitting something.

The others might complain about communal showers and heads, but Jacqs preferred them to these claustrophobic spaces. Jacqs quickly headed back out to the main room, closing the door behind him.

Wandering over to the desk, Jacqs spotted a personal reader. Picking it up, he thumbed it on. If Zeke were a normal soldier and not some officer, he'd have his porn in this thing. Officers always made a big shit about it, but a soldier needed something pretty to look at after a long and ugly day. Curiosity made Jacqs open the saved files.

The porn never went at the top of the saved list, and it never went at the bottom. Officers checked those files. And a smart man programmed the reader to lie about which files got accessed most often. Either that or they threatened someone smarter into reprogramming it for them. Jacqs flipped through the list of titles, mostly of military texts. The best files for hiding the personal porn were required manuals or training documents.

After searching a dozen files, Jacqs finally found what he wanted listed under "Multi-planet treaty law."

The first image was of a woman with a crooked smile giving a little finger wave to the camera. She had one leg angled so that Jacqs could almost see her

pussy, but not quite. He'd be disappointed, only she definitely wasn't his type. She had pixie features and a coy little smile that made him wonder what she planned to con some man out of. He'd gotten out of the refugee camps by fighting, but others had gotten through with expressions just like this one.

Jacqs flipped a few images to one he liked. A woman with thighs like trees crouched on the edge of a broken wall, one hand resting easily on the end of a gun. Her dark skin contrasted against a white smile, and Jacqs liked her on the instant. She looked like the sort of woman who could kick some ass and hold her own on the battlefield or in the bedroom. He spent some time on that picture before going on to another. Jacqs' cock was warming to this idea by now. His own porn stash had grown stale from overuse, and his prick definitely liked the idea of new material.

He stopped when he hit the first naked male. The man's arms rested against a bar raised up over his head, and his cock was half-full. Jacqs studied it, discomfort crawling through his guts. If he'd caught Taylor with porn like this, he would have made fun of the man for envying someone who was clearly more man than Taylor ever would be. To be honest, Jacqs had always thought of homo men as envious of those they bedded and homo women as avoiding all the pain that came with trusting men.

But Zeke didn't need to envy anyone. He was a hero. He was a hero who got hard looking at this picture in his bunk. The guy in the picture had a large uncut prick hanging between his widely spread legs. His stomach muscles were well-defined and he had a loose-limbed posture that suggested he was comfortable in his own skin. Jacqs could imagine respecting a man like that. He also fucking hated the idea of someone like Taylor landing in bed with this anonymous man. Taylor wasn't good enough for a man like this who had confidence in himself, but the idea of Zeke with this man made Jacqs just as discomforted.

Flipping through a few more pictures provided a strange collection of battlefield candid shots and porn images and a couple of pics that looked like they were from back home. There was one of a man a lot older than Zeke who had the same nose.

Jacqs stopped at another picture, this time of two men. One stood behind the other, embracing his friend from behind. Both wore sleeveless shirts with tight pants and calabeads threaded into their hair. Not more than eighteen or nineteen years old, the one in back still had an easy smile and confidence that Jacqs recognized. Young Zeke had a striking resemblance to adult Zeke. Now he was more worn, more rugged and more attractive, but he had the same core.

Some people got torn up and rearranged by war. Jacqs expected he was one of them sort, although he didn't know if he'd been changed for the better or worse. Zeke seemed to be one of them that just got harder and stronger.

“Find anything interesting?”

Jacqs started at the interruption. Normally he wasn't one to get surprised. Quickly indexing back to the dark-skinned woman with the smile, he held the reader up so Zeke could see the image.

“Damn interesting. Is she still alive for me to harass?”

Zeke grinned as the door closed behind him. “I wouldn't know. It's a shot from a porn vid.”

Jacqs held the reader out. “Damn. I was hoping for a date.”

“Me, too. I like to think we could have had something beautiful. Unfortunately, most of my unit had the same fantasy. I'm glad you came.” Zeke powered the reader down and tossed it onto the desk.

“Trouble?”

“Only of my own making.” Making a disgusted noise, Zeke dropped into the chair in the corner. “I need a little honesty.”

“No problem on that front. Most times I get accused of sharing too much honesty.” Jacqs pulled out the other chair and sat down.

For a second, Zeke studied him. “I can believe that. This morning, I planned to ask if I had pushed too hard last night. Sometimes I get a little intense.”

Jacqs snorted. “If you think that a little sparring is going to slow me down, you’re not half as bright as you think you are.”

“The sparring?” Zeke sounded almost confused, which didn’t make even a little bit of sense, so Jacqs ignored it and waited for him to say something more sane. “Oh, shit. You didn’t know I was... interested.” Zeke threw his head back and then cringed as the back of his head impacted the storage cabinet.

“Interested?” Jacqs waited for the horror, the disgust, the overwhelming need to make fun of someone’s manhood, but mostly he just felt confused.

“Of course, if you didn’t even notice, I’m not sure it counts as too far.”

“You mean you think I’m worked up over you thinking I’m, I don’t know, interested back?” Truth was, Jacqs wasn’t exactly sure what they were talking about.

“I’ll still kick your ass on the sparring mats, ship sitter.” Zeke gave him that playful grin. Then he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

Jacqs had come up with a real good retort for that in all his shift-hours, but right now he couldn’t put two brain cells together, much less remember what it had been. “Why the fuck would you be interested in me?” Jacqs exploded up out of his chair, but once he’d done that, there wasn’t really room to move around much. He just stood there trapped between the chair and the wall.

“What are you talking about?”

“You. You’re some sort of hero. You’re a beautiful man with the sort of a face I expect to find on a recruitment flyer. Why the fuck would you be interested in me, what with me being het and this.” Jacqs gestured toward the side of his face that a blaster had nearly taken off. Most of the ear was gone and heat burns scarred his cheek and neck. He’d had plenty of offers back before the war, but it took a special sort to focus on his blue eyes and not his chewed up face.

“Do you really think you’re that unattractive?” Now Zeke stood up, and this room was getting smaller by the second.

“Yes.” Crossing his arms, Jacqs dared Zeke to try and contradict him.

“Have you even seen my back, or the scarred stump of a leg I walk on?”

“It ain’t like it’s your face. And you got some heroic tale outta yours. I was just too dumb to duck.”

Zeke took a half step backwards, which was all the room he had, and leaned back against the wall right next to the door. “Mother of God, but you are a mess, Jacqs Glebov.”

“Never said I weren’t,” Jacqs pointed out.

“Do you want to know what I see when I look at that scar?” Zeke asked all quiet. Jacqs didn’t rightly trust people when they got quiet, so he refused to even answer. Zeke must have taken that silence as permission because he said, “The spread pattern is front to back with every single v-shape pointing forward. That means whatever trouble you ran into, you stood your ground. You weren’t running when that happened. And that’s a blaster mark. Those aren’t long-range weapons, so you were staring trouble right in the eye, and you weren’t flinching. Trouble was close enough to take your head off, and given a couple of inches, it would have. I’m guessing quick reflexes saved the rest of your head from going the way of the ear.”

Jacqs lifted his chin. Zeke wasn’t all that far off.

“I see a man who’s pretty uncompromising, and maybe that isn’t the easiest way to go through life. But you’re strong enough to stand up for what you believe in.”

“Maybe I was just too fucking slow.”

“I doubt that,” Zeke said with a laugh. “So yes, I do find that sort of strength attractive, but I am not going to press in where I’m not welcome. Do you have any of that whiskey left?”

“Dumped every drop of it,” Jacqs said. He was real grateful he had because he did not want to lie to Zeke.

“Well, shit. Maybe I’ll break into the captain’s considerable stash.”

Jacqs didn't like that tone of voice at all. "Zeke?"

"Nevermind. I'm just having a weird day. Anyway, consider this my official apology." Zeke gave a sharp nod, and Jacqs had the definite impression he'd just been dismissed. That was fine with him because he was having trouble understanding his own feelings. A little distance would be good. He'd opened the door before Zeke called after him.

"Oh, I'm ordering mandatory training that actually trains people to fight a war. I need you and your brand of dirty fighting, so keep an eye on the comm for the next few days, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Jacqs agreed. Strangely, Zeke flinched when Jacqs called him "sir." Most days, people didn't make a lick of sense, that's about all Jacqs could think about that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A few days later Jacqs answered the comm request for training. After too many nights filled with his own thoughts, Jacqs was ready to get physical with someone, even if the someone involved was only an incompetent crewmate and the activity was fighting. If there were one woman on the ship that looked at him twice, Jacqs would have gone looking to reinforce his heterosexual orientation, because his thoughts did keep drifting back in the masculine direction.

Grah, Lacroix, Schreiber and Dary were all waiting. Dary had an expression like she was walking into an enemy stronghold, but he gave her credit for having the balls to show up at all.

One look at Grah and Lacroix, and Jacqs figured those two were knocking boots again. They had that sort of stupid look people got when they were all wrapped up in each other. Lacroix said something, and Grah reached out and pulled on one of his long braids.

Jacqs didn't want to get trapped in any conversation with Dary, so he headed toward them. "That hair's likely to get you into trouble," Jacqs warned as he gestured toward Lacroix's braids.

"Seriously, could you be more offensive?" Grah immediately demanded, sticking herself in the middle of the conversation. "It's part of his cultural heritage, Glebov."

Lacroix caught Grah around the waist and pulled her close. "Hey, it's not like I think my hair is magical," Lacroix said with a laugh. "And trust me, if some bat catches me by the braid, I'll take a blaster to it. However, cutting my hair would feel wrong. In my family, cutting our hair means that we're grieving someone, and I refuse to let these sons of bitches make me grieve. On the other hand, cutting our hair can also mean our little brother is getting revenge for an incident involving marbles and a freezer, but that's a different story."

Jacqs rolled his eyes. That sounded real stupid, but then he wasn't going to get in a discussion of logic with people who didn't have any.

“Are you ready for training?” Schreiber asked as he checked the edges of the mats to make sure they were attached firmly to the decks. “Grah, this might be a little rough for you. This session is designed for the gunners.”

“Right, and there's zero chance that I'll have to fight, so I should just go back to my nav station and paint my nails,” Grah said, sarcasm dripping off every word. Damn, Jacqs got hard looking at that woman. Lacroix seemed to feel the same because he tightened his arm around her.

Schreiber scowled at her. “We're having more training for the navs.”

“Good, then it won't matter if I train with the gunners, too,” Grah said happily as if the matter were closed, and clearly it was because Schreiber retreated.

A thunder of footsteps interrupted them as Zeke charged down the stairs to the main floor. “Good morning, good morning, good morning,” he sang out like one of those idiots who doesn't have the good sense to avoid annoying others. “Grah, I like seeing you volunteer. We're focusing on gunner skills, but a good officer knows all the tricks. So, who has next shift in the gunner seat?”

“I do.” Lacroix raised his hand.

“Okay then, know your limits and don't push so hard that you can't do your shift.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have shift after him,” Dary said.

“Good, that means that no matter how badly you get your ass kicked, you have a good six hours to take some regenerate tabs and sleep off the damage.”

Dary practically wilted. Jacqs had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

“So, let's partner up and find someone to spar with,” Zeke said. Lacroix and Grah were always standing near each other and Dary near broke her leg

moving to the other side of the room to stand near Schreiber. Zeke looked at Jacqs. "I guess we're sparring partners."

Jacqs grinned. He'd been wanting a chance for revenge because there weren't many men who could make him yield in a fight. "Fine with me."

"I'll try to not kick your ass too hard since you just came off shift." Zeke raised an eyebrow in an unmistakable challenge.

"You can try."

"I can do more than try." Zeke was grinning like a loon now. He stopped and looked around at the others and cleared his throat before continuing. "One of the best ways to learn is to watch someone and steal their moves. So, as we spar, keep an eye on which moves seem most effective."

"Is there going to be a test after?" Grah asked in that sharp tone of voice she often had.

"Hell, yes," Zeke said enthusiastically. "It's called not getting your ass kicked when you try to use the move yourself. So, you ready?" Zeke turned to Jacqs.

"To take you down? I don't need to be ready to do that. I can do that in my sleep."

"Big talk for a man who had to yield last time."

"Last time, I thought you were another pansy-assed officer who didn't know how to fight," Jacqs said in defense of his own performance.

"Really? And here I thought you'd been watching me kick Schreiber's ass. Maybe you're just slow." Zeke stepped onto the mat, leading with his good leg. He kept his prosthetic to the rear, but Jacqs had seen the damage that metal had done to an unprepared opponent. He circled warily.

"In some matters, I reckon I am, but when it comes to fighting, I'm about as quick as they come."

"We'll see," Zeke said, and then he moved fast, thrusting with his back leg in an off-balance leap that most people wouldn't be able to make. Clearly the

mechanical leg had a trick or two. Jacqs fended off a flurry of punches, high and low. At one point, he allowed Zeke to get in a glancing blow off Jacqs' side and in return, Jacqs delivered a right to Zeke's chin that made his head snap back. It also made the skin over one of Jacqs' knuckles split so that drops of blood splattered across the mat. Each drop hit the plastic cover and exploded into a splotch of reddish brown against the tan mat.

"First blood to me," Zeke crowed.

"Considering I split it open on your face, I'm calling that in my favor."

"You can call it however you want, you're still bl—" He didn't finish. Mid-word, he spun around and swept that metal leg right at Jacqs' shins. Jacqs leapt backwards to avoid getting hit, and Zeke followed up with a punch aimed right at Jacqs' undefended sternum. Blocking the punch, Jacqs shoved Zeke to the side and planted an elbow deep into his back. The power behind it forced Zeke to stumble forward, but he spun around, his hands up and ready for another attack.

Jacqs shifted his stance for better balance. Truth was, he'd been sitting in that chair for four hours while Zeke had a shift worth of sleep, and Jacqs was starting to get the feeling that might cause a mess of trouble.

Shaking his hands out, Zeke moved forward, and Jacqs watched the way he moved. Even being the target, Jacqs had to appreciate the sheer power in Zeke's every step. The man had a way of shifting his weight like an oversized cat walking along the top of a fence, and Jacqs wasn't about to underestimate the man's skill. He retreated.

"Someone seems to be running away," Zeke mused.

"Not even if you cloned yourself."

"Since I don't have a cloning machine, I'll have to kick your ass the old-fashioned way."

"Not fucking likely," Jacqs growled, but he shifted cautiously as Zeke circled closer. Jacqs needed something to give him an edge... something to put Zeke off his game. When Zeke's smirk grew a little wider, an evil thought

sprouted. Necessity was the mother of sexually inappropriate innuendo. Before he could change his mind, Jacqs stripped off his shirt and tossed it to the side. If Zeke was a pan, this should give him pause.

Lacroix started laughing, and Zeke completely fell out of his battle pose. His arms dropped to his side, and for a moment, he stared at Jacqs open-mouthed. The last time they'd fought, Jacqs had been wearing his standard uniform, but today he'd put on space protocol pants with fabric so tight it followed every line of his body. The theory was that the cloth was less likely to get caught on some bit of debris during a space battle. The result was a pant so obscene that most people not in the military called them "whore britches." What the tunic top had covered was now gloriously on display, and Jacqs was not a small man by any definition of the word.

"What are you doing?" Zeke demanded.

Jacqs grinned and gave a little shrug. "I'm just warm."

"I think you're hot," Lacroix offered, and Jacqs made an obscene gesture. Lacroix just started laughing again. The man was lucky he was so het that he never even gave guys like Taylor a second glance, or Jacqs just might take offense to his bullshit.

"You fucking asshole. You're trying to distract me." Zeke narrowed his eyes, and for a second, Jacqs felt a stone form in his chest. But that moment's fear, that brief second of thinking he'd really fucked up, ended when Zeke dropped back into a battle stance, his face twice as determined as before.

"If'n you can't keep your mind on the task at hand, that's your fault."

"Fuck you," Zeke shot right back, and he sent another flurry of punches right at Jacqs' head. This time, the punches weren't as focused, and Jacqs blocked the first few before planting a fist in Zeke's stomach and forcing him to stagger back in order to catch his breath.

"You're all about fucking and assholes... I think you're distracted," Jacqs pointed out. It wasn't often he got the upper hand on someone, at least not without a big old gun in his hand, and this was kinda fun.

“Put your shirt on,” Zeke growled. His eyes travelled down to where Jacqs’ dick made a large bulge in the fabric.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were the one who said that soldiers had to fight on through distractions.”

“I’ve never had a bat distract me by stripping off his shirt.” Zeke sounded borderline homicidal at this point.

Jacqs truly was enjoying himself. It was a good thing he didn’t have any illusions about being a fair or kind man because his glee at torturing Zeke would have destroyed that image. “Are you giving up now?”

“No chance in hell. Go on, strip all the way down. I’ll still kick your ass.”

“Talk, talk, talk.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.”

Jacqs lunged forward, and caught Zeke with a punch aimed for his throat. Zeke blocked, but he did it a second too late and the punch hit his shoulder, spinning him around and leaving a long smear of blood on his uniform. Zeke had to hop several times to keep from falling, and Jacqs pressed forward relentlessly. With Zeke’s skill in a fight, Jacqs couldn’t afford to let him regroup.

Zeke hit the edge of the mat, stepped off, and braced his good leg on the firm decking before kicking out with that metal limb. Jacqs took a hit hard enough to jar his whole skeleton. His hip was going to be a mass of bruise, but he ignored the pain and grabbed the foot, twisting it viciously.

After Zeke dropped to his stomach to avoid having his leg ripped off, Jacqs landed on his back, pressing his shoulders to the hard metal deck. “Yield?” Jacqs asked. Under him, Zeke struggled and writhed. Arching his back, Zeke tried to get some leverage, but Jacqs widened his legs, and braced his toes against the floor to keep Zeke pinned. “You ain’t winning this, so you might as well give up,” Jacqs said.

Zeke went still, but Jacqs weren’t a real trusting sort, so he kept his weight on those broad shoulders. Sure enough, Zeke gave it one more go, thrashing

wildly with elbows and flinging his head back to try to butt Jacqs in the face. Jacqs kept clear of all those dangers, but the position left his crotch uncomfortable close, and with the tight pants, friction was making the situation a mite bit uncomfortable.

“Fine, I yield,” Zeke said with absolutely no grace.

“Who’s on top now?” Jacqs asked as he stood. Without facing the others, he went to grab his shirt. He definitely questioned the wisdom of wrestling someone while wearing space uniform pants. It’d been a long time since he’d gotten sexing, and his parts were definitely confused.

“Yeah, you cheated,” Zeke yelled after him, but it was hard to hear him over Grah and Lacroix whooping and clapping.

“Traitors,” Zeke complained as he stood.

“I’m just admiring a fine job of dirty cheating,” Lacroix said. After pulling on his shirt, Jacqs turned around to see him grinning like a mad thing.

“Speak for yourself,” Grah said. “I’m applauding Jacqs for his ability to lay off the homophobic bullshit he usually spouts.”

Jacqs raised a middle finger salute her way, but his pants got a little tighter anyway. He did appreciate a woman who said her mind, even if her mind was somewhat uncharitable toward him.

“Other than amusing you jackals, what did you get out of the sparring match?” Zeke asked.

Schreiber spoke up first. “Leg sweeps are effective in driving the opponent back, even if they don’t connect.”

“Until I grabbed his leg and made him squeal like a girl,” Jacqs added. Zeke flipped him off.

“Hitting for the throat... that’s... Okay, that’s scary,” Grah said. “Which is not to say I won’t use the move, but what if someone actually lands a good hit on a windpipe?”

“The person you hit won’t make the mistake of failing to duck a second time.” Zeke cringed and rubbed his throat as though remembering something. “We have medicine onboard and I’m a medic, so you can’t do harm I can’t fix unless you break someone’s neck.” Zeke seemed a little flustered, and he kept pulling on his shirt. “So, you guys, show me what you have.”

Jacqs sat down on the bench and grabbed his water bottle, which actually had water in it this time. Jacqs missed the whiskey. It took the sharp edges off the world, but at least this time around Jacqs didn’t feel like he was dying of a million paper cuts. When he’d come on the *Candiru*, that was about the best description of his mood. Every time he turned around, someone was shoving some rule that didn’t make any sense in his face. As a conscript, Jacqs only had a passing acquaintance with the rules, and some of the things officers did seemed a little counterproductive if they were preparing soldiers for the front.

But since Zeke had come, Jacqs could almost get through the day without missing his drink.

Zeke sat on the far end of the bench, still huffing and puffing from the fight.

“You’re out of shape, old man.”

“You’re an asshole,” Zeke countered.

“Yep.”

“It would help if you would at least take offense when I’m insulting you.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were. I pretty much figured that for a statement of fact.” Jacqs looked over, and Zeke was rolling his eyes.

With that, Jacqs turned his attention to the pairs. Lacroix was holding back. The man was going to get Grah hurt bad if he went and gave her an unrealistic sense of her own skills. She needed someone to really beat on her until she could take out a batface in hand-to-hand, and Lacroix was not stepping up to the plate. Grah was doing good, though. She aimed some nasty kicks right at Lacroix’s crotch. Good for her.

“That woman...” Zeke whistled.

“Fuck, yeah,” Jacqs agreed. She was a fine piece of vicious femininity. “She ain’t real fond of compliments, though.”

Zeke gave him an odd look. “Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.” For a second, he looked at Jacqs, and Jacqs could only look back and wonder what he was missing.

A thump on the mat made both of them redirect their attention that way. Schreiber knelt down next to Dary and seemed to be feeling up her leg. That was definitely not a move Jacqs had ever seen, although he’d seen one or two men try it on those they wanted to knock boots with.

“Schreiber, what are you doing?” Zeke called.

He didn’t look up. “Dary has hurt her ankle.”

“Serious?” Zeke stood up.

Now Schreiber looked around at him. “No, sir. It’s a mild sprain.”

“And?” Zeke asked in a dangerous tone of voice. The hair on Jacqs’ arm stood up.

“And she needs to sit out,” Schreiber said.

For a second, Zeke rubbed a hand over his face, and Jacqs could almost smell the impending explosion. “Schreiber, have you ever been to the front?” Zeke asked, his voice carefully calm.

“No, sir.”

“Are you under the impression that the enemy stops the second someone feels pain?”

“No, sir.”

“Well that’s a good start,” Zeke said sarcastically. Grah had to clear her throat to stop a laugh, and it still didn’t much stop it because Jacqs could tell what she was up to easy enough. “Dary, fight through it. If all else fails, fight from the floor using your good leg,” Zeke said.

“You want me to keep fighting?” Dary looked up from the mat with her face a riot of misery and tragedy. Jacqs had an ungodly desire to set the woman straight on a few facts of life.

“I want you to know how to fight through pain. I want you to know how to take a hit and keep on firing your gunner rig. I want you to leap from a falling rig, land wrong so you twist that ankle, and still come up fighting. I want you to learn how to kick serious ass, Dary. So yes, I do want you to keep fighting. And Lacroix,” Zeke said, turning to him, “if you can’t show Grah the respect of trying to honestly kick her ass, move aside and let me do it for you. She had the balls to come down here and train, and I know I don’t appreciate you pulling your punches, so I don’t even want to think how frustrated she is right now.”

“Very,” Grah muttered.

Lacroix ducked his head. “Yes, sir. Het man’s disease and all,” he said with an apologetic tone.

“Which you’d better get over or I’ll be banning you from each other’s beds until you can see her as a soldier first.”

“Yes, sir,” Lacroix said with a whole lot more enthusiasm. Someone definitely didn’t want to lose certain privileges. Zeke sank back down onto the seat, and the two pairs started sparring again. Dary and Schreiber were a lost cause, but at least Dary was trying. She was pathetic, but she was trying. The woman could target the shit out of anything that moved, so Jacqs seriously hoped she stayed a belly gunner. At least then she wouldn’t never have to fight the enemy. She’d either run her rig or her dead body would be floating in space after the bats sent missiles through the ship hull, no middle ground. That middle ground of having to fight free of a fallen rig would be the end of Dary for sure.

Grah and Lacroix were getting interesting, though. They traded a flurry of hits, each grunting with pain as they tested each other’s defenses. Grah got in a nasty kick to Lacroix’s thigh. That was going to bruise like a bastard. Lacroix retaliated with a punch low on Grah’s right side. The force of it about knocked

Grah off her feet. She recovered, spun around and tried to sweep his legs. That made him back the hell off.

Lacroix was still passing up chances to hit Grah's breasts, but other than that, he was putting in an admirable job of doing serious harm. For her part, Grah had no reservations. Lacroix's longer reach and greater mass were all that were saving him from a serious ass kicking.

"I should not say this, but I am starting to understand why you got in so much trouble chasing her," Zeke said. Jacqs turned to see Zeke sitting a whole lot closer than he'd been sitting earlier.

He nodded. "She's an incredible little demon."

"I'm going to agree with that. Lacroix is a lucky man."

"Fuck, yes," Jacqs agreed. He cleared his throat, and fought an urge to slide away. He was about out of bench on his side, and he wasn't going to squinch himself up into a tiny little piece of the bench just because he'd become uncomfortably aware of the heat radiating out from Zeke's body. The silence pressed down on them despite the sounds of grunts and curses and flesh slapping flesh. Dary even got in a kick straight to Schreiber's crotch, and seeing as how she had her back to the mat for real good leverage, she floored the man. Of course, she then ruined the moment by apologizing about a million times.

"Okay, that's good," Zeke said after nearly an hour. "Grah, you need to spend more time looking for openings. You're going to wear yourself out attacking, but those are some very fine moves you have. If you can concentrate on getting half those attacks through your opponent's defenses, you're going to be a problem for anyone who crosses you."

"I am now, sir," Grah said with a huge smile. Zeke's comments had practically made her glow, and that wasn't something Jacqs saw real often. "Thank you, sir. I'll work on that."

"Lacroix, you have good moves, but you telegraph them. If Grah had watched your body language at all, she could have flattened you. Move quicker. Don't spend so much time thinking about it."

One of Lacroix's braids had come undone so he had hair hanging loose on one side and a braid on the other. He ducked his head and all that black hair bobbed. "Yes, sir. I'll work on that."

Zeke continued, "Dary, you did an excellent job once you focused. You do not have to apologize for getting in a hit. Schreiber dropped his guard, and you did your job, and you did it damn well. Congratulate yourself for that."

"Thank you, sir," Dary nearly whispered. Jacqs rolled his eyes. She couldn't even take a compliment without sounding all weepy. Schreiber helped her to her feet and supported her weight as Zeke spoke to him.

"Your moves are stiff, overly rehearsed. You need to work on flexibility and speed. Lay off the weights and get on some speed drills to limber you up, and Dary won't get in another hit like that. You have the right stuff, but it's looking a little rusty."

"Yes, sir. I'll alter my workout schedule." Schreiber didn't sound happy, but he didn't sound likely to mutiny in the near future. "Permission to help Dary to infirmary for some regenerate?"

"Of course. Go," Zeke said with a shooing motion. Schreiber helped Dary hop off, her sprained foot not looking all that bad to Jacqs.

"So, what about me, seeing as how I kicked your ass?" Jacqs asked.

Zeke spun around to look at Jacqs as if startled to find him still there. "I think... you're just fine." Zeke closed his eyes a second. "You know how to survive, Jacqs, I don't think that's an issue." Without another word, Zeke suddenly fled. Now normally Jacqs would hesitate to come to that conclusion, but the way Zeke darted off with a wild look in his eye, fleeing did come to mind.

Lacroix laughed. "Do not bite my head off, but damn that man has it bad," he said as he came over and sat on the other end of the bench from Jacqs.

"What?" Jacqs looked over.

"The commander." Lacroix used this tone of voice like he thought that explained everything. When Jacqs didn't answer, he and Grah traded

concerned looks. “The commander wants you. Actually, the commander is tied up in knots because of his case of Jacqs lust,” Lacroix said. “And while I may be het, for that man, I might consider changing my orientation.”

“You would not, because I am a jealous bitch,” Grah pointed out. Coming over, she stood next to Lacroix and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“That you are,” he agreed. “But you have to admit that the commander has a certain magnetism, a charm that’s pretty hard to ignore.”

“He also has horrible taste in men, so he wouldn’t even be interested in you,” Grah argued.

“Your claws are showing.”

“All the better to claw you with.”

Lacroix caught her hands, and Jacqs watched with a sort of detached horror. He knew Zeke had said something about having some interest, but Jacqs had put it down to the way Jacqs had a passing interest in all sorts of folk. He could lust after someone in general ways without seriously wanting to put his boots under anyone’s bunk. But Lacroix was suggesting that Zeke was well beyond the generic sort of interest where you noticed that someone was attractive and well into the crazy end of the lust pool. That... that didn’t make sense.

“You stink,” Grah said, and Jacqs realized he’d missed some bits of conversation while he was nursing his shock and confusion.

Lacroix laughed. “That I do, but you stink worse, so we’re even.”

“Then let’s get cleaned up together,” Grah suggested with a salacious wiggle.

Jacqs’ cock gave a good twitch over that, but his brain was still stuck on thoughts of Zeke, and this was all kinds of confusing. Lacroix and Grah got up to leave, and Jacqs was left in the empty deck staring at training mats and wondering what it meant that he felt this little spark of pride at having caught Zeke’s eye. There was something seriously wrong with him, that’s for sure. He didn’t like it when men lusted over him.

Jacqs thought on that. He truly did not want Taylor lusting over him. He'd likely bust the man in the mouth if he said one thing to Jacqs' face. But the feeling he had when he considered Zeke's lust... that was not revulsion. That wasn't even on the same ship with revulsion. In fact, Jacqs didn't rightly appreciate how certain parts of him were reacting. Damn. Considering that Jacqs hated change, he was having entirely too much of it in his life recently. It was all Zeke's fault, and still... still, Jacqs couldn't bring himself to want things back the way they were.

That left Jacqs trying to figure out how to move forward. Unfortunately, that wasn't a skill he really excelled at.

CHAPTER NINE

Jacqs nearly knocked Taylor down as he got off the lift. “Need to talk to the commander,” Jacqs said, cutting off Taylor before he could reach the door to Zeke’s office.

“I have an appointment,” Taylor complained loudly.

Jacqs stopped and gave Taylor a real unfriendly look. For a second, Jacqs thought that Taylor was going to make an issue out of it, but finally he threw up his hands. “This had better be good, and if you’re not done in ten minutes, I’m coming in anyway. I have eight months of performance reviews to get caught up on.”

Jacqs snorted. He didn’t much care about that, so he’d take as long as he took. He just didn’t feel any need to point that out to Taylor. Without knocking, he pushed the door to Zeke’s office open. The man stood with his back to the door, stripped to the waist.

“Give me a second, Taylor,” Zeke said without turning. He was doing something on his chest, and unless Jacqs missed his guess, the something in question was using soothe gel on some bruised muscle. Jacqs felt a weird sort of satisfaction— a certain warmth in the pit of his stomach. Yesterday he would have attributed that to pride in having given a worthy opponent a real beat down. After Lacroix’s little announcement, Jacqs was starting to wonder if he wasn’t having another kind of reaction.

Jacqs gave Zeke’s back a real good looking over. He had strong shoulders, and the sort of strong muscle Jacqs had always admired. A roadmap of white scars led a merry trail across his back, disappearing under the waist of his pants, and Jacqs’ brain just sort of stopped at that point. While Jacqs was starting to think he might be attracted to Zeke above the waist, he wasn’t particularly comfortable thinking about what he might have below the waist.

Zeke turned and the expression on his face froze as he spotted Jacqs. Fingers still tracing the edge of a red mark on his bruise, Zeke stood staring. His chest had patches of skin slick with gel, but Jacqs found himself more

interested in the well-defined muscles of his chest and stomach. Zeke opened his mouth a couple of times without actually saying anything. Eventually, he grabbed a shirt off the back of his chair and pulled it on, or tried to anyway. He got one arm caught up in the neck hole and ended up cursing as he got himself righted again.

“I need to talk some things through,” Jacqs said. It wasn’t the most honest line he’d ever managed, but this was hard on him. Worse, he wasn’t entirely convinced that he hadn’t lost his mind. Maybe he was having some irrational reaction to not having sex with anyone except his right hand for too fucking long. But then, that warm feel in his gut told him that he was suffering more than frustration.

“I understand that I went too far,” Zeke said, “and in my defense, you do make it very difficult. That said, you have every right to complain and you are excused from any combat training with me since I’m clearly an idiot with a dick I can’t control.”

“You can’t control your dick around me?” Jacqs blinked in surprise. Hell, he’d never had that sort of effect on anyone. That was... that was real complimentary.

“Clearly not.” Zeke sank into his seat. “Taylor’s coming, so you should—”

“I told him to wait.” Jacqs sat down across from Zeke. Again, Zeke’s mouth did that silent moving thing he seemed to have going today. It was like watching a vid with the speaker disconnected. “We should talk about...” Jacqs stopped, not sure how to grab this tiger by the tail. He didn’t even know where the tail was.

“My inappropriate and incompatible sexual urges,” Zeke offered dryly.

“I ain’t so sure they’re incompatible,” Jacqs blurted out. This time Zeke’s mouth just fell open. “I’m just not sure on much, which is an uncomfortable place. Fact is, I still have a good deal of revulsion going at the thought of Taylor and sex, and I ain’t exactly sure I’m okay thinking on topics like your dick, but I’m starting to think I’m attracted to you.” Jacqs stopped, and Zeke

stared at him. The silence grew increasingly awkward, and Jacqs shifted around in the chair.

Finally Jacqs crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you plan on saying something here, or are you going to let me talk myself into some fool’s corner?”

“I...” Zeke closed his eyes tightly and then opened them. “You never stop surprising and amazing me, Jacqs Glebov.”

“What? Why? I swear, sometimes you don’t make an ounce of sense.”

“Why? Because most people run away from any sexual identity crisis. They ignore and repress and try to get through life without having to question a reality they decided when they were sixteen years old... or twenty-two. I was a late bloomer and changed my orientation at twenty-two, but even then, that was late in life. You’re thirty-seven, Jacqs.”

“Thirty-eight,” Jacqs corrected him. “And if’n others are too stupid to go at a problem straight on, that’s not something I’m worried about. I don’t leave an enemy at my back to trip me up later, even if the enemy is my own traitorous cock.” And right now, Jacqs felt like his cock was about as much of an enemy as any backstabbing camp rat who ever stole rations from him growing up.

“You don’t think like any human I know, and that’s a compliment. Human beings tend to lie to themselves. And most men, if they found themselves having a sexual crisis this late in life, they’d lie to themselves and make excuses and generally hide from reality.”

Jacqs snorted as he realized that Zeke was just insulting the human race in general, not him. “People ain’t like to do the sane thing three times out of four.”

“And I’m not even debating that with you, but Jacqs.” Zeke stopped again. Ducking his head, he scratched and seemed to struggle with something. When he looked up again, he seemed weary, somehow. “The safest thing here is for me to say that we have to stay away from each other. I mean, it’s not fair to leave me hanging while you try to figure out what you’re feeling.”

“You think...” Jacqs let his words trail off because he didn’t actually understand what Zeke was thinking.

With a sigh, Zeke leaned back in his chair. “Giving people advice is a game for idiots. I mean, if I tell you something, then you can blame me for anything that goes wrong. You’re not responsible for your choices then.”

“Fuck that,” Jacqs snapped. “If you say something, I still have a choice to agree or disagree, and it ain’t like I’m incapable of telling you to fuck off. I’ve proved that more than once.”

“And I don’t doubt that.” Zeke sighed again as he seemed to struggle with something.

“You’re annoying me,” Jacqs warned.

Zeke laughed gently. “You are a very unusual individual, Jacqs Glebov. Fine, I’ll say my bit, and if you tell me to fuck off, I will stay out of your way and get my own recalcitrant cock under control.”

Jacqs leaned forward, eager to hear what Zeke might have to say. The man tended to cut through the shit that Jacqs didn’t much understand and get right to the point.

“You say you’re attracted to me.”

“Seems like,” Jacqs agreed. “I ain’t as opposed to touching you, but my imagination is a little empty when it comes to exactly what more might be involved.”

“Mine isn’t,” Zeke muttered, but before Jacqs could go asking about that comment, he rushed on. “You are definitely attracted to Grah, and at that bar you wanted to catch the owner’s eye, right?”

Jacqs shrugged. “I like her better than most of her girls.”

“I’m not surprised. Most of those women were pretty young.”

“Too young for whoring,” Jacqs agreed. He understood that people had to make a living any way they could, but he hated seeing young men and women make that choice. Whoring wore a person down.

Zeke nodded. “So, what about Chankoowashtay Lacroix?”

“If’n you want to call him by his first name, it’s Shank. He don’t use that long-ass name,” Jacqs said.

“Answer the question, Jacqs.”

Jacqs tried focusing on it, but the feeling of unease grew. “I ain’t lusting after no het man,” Jacqs finally said.

“Clearly, you have better morals than I do,” Zeke said in that same dry tone. After clearing his throat, Zeke tried again. “Okay, imagine that Lacroix reclassified as pan. If he were pansexual... if he were a hypersexual pan, would you be interested in him then?”

Frowning, Jacqs tried thinking on the matter. He wasn’t one for contemplating his own feelings, but under the conditions Zeke had given him, Jacqs could imagine himself fighting with the man, pulling on those long braids and feeling Lacroix’s body bucking under him. “Might be I’d have some interest,” Jacqs said carefully. He didn’t much care for the observation because Lacroix was het, and Jacqs didn’t want to go lusting after someone who didn’t match him sexually. That was the definition of a dyssexual, and Jacqs wasn’t one of them perverts.

“It might be that you’re a stenosexual.”

Jacqs blinked as that bit of stupidity filtered into the various parts of his brain. “Clearly you ain’t all that bright,” Jacqs said. “You aren’t nothing like Allie Grah, and Lacroix don’t look like either of you, so how could I be steno?”

Zeke tilted his head to the side. “Jacqs, how would you define stenosexual?” He asked with that extra caution that usually meant someone was about to make fun of Jacqs.

“Steno— it means narrow. It’s someone who gets a hard-on from one particular trait, like red hair. It seems like a mighty stupid way to decide how to pick a partner. I mean, liking someone with a certain trait means you’re ignoring most of the person you’re looking at. Pansexuals make more sense

than that, and I don't think you lot make a whole lot of sense at all," Jacqs said, referencing Zeke's own sexuality.

"Well, a person can't help what they're attracted to, but you might have the wrong idea about stenosexuals. My mother was steno. For her it was about hands."

"Hands?" Jacqs couldn't quite keep the horror out of his voice. Lusting after some trait like red hair seemed plenty stupid, but taking it to the ridiculous lengths of lusting after hands? Jacqs didn't even have words for that. He might have pointed out all the ways that was stupid, only insulting a man's mother seemed uncharitable.

"She always said there was something beautiful about the hands of someone who truly worked," Zeke said, his voice taking on fond intonation. "My father was a farmer, and she loved how strong his hands were. I remember sometimes she would hold his hand and trace the white scar where he'd ripped himself on a bit of barbed wire. She loved anything he made with his hands. She'd spend hours in the rocking chair he made, and lots of times she'd go out at sunset and watch the sun go down behind the fence we built together—the three of us, back before my sisters came along."

"Hands?" Jacqs still wasn't real sure how this made any sense.

Zeke rolled his eyes. "Yes, hands. We can't control what we're attracted to, Jacqs. I can't help having wider tastes any more than you can help having a very specific type. My mother loved seeing someone work to create something. For her, the act of creation was intensely desirable."

"So, it really wasn't about the hands?" Jacqs clarified. He was getting more confused by the second.

"It wasn't. Stenosexuals can be attracted to personality traits, to talents, to skills, to a body shape or a hair color. They may fall for someone with a certain tone of voice or someone who can play the piano until they get shivers up their spine. Stenosexuals have as many different tastes as there are people who identify as steno."

“And you think I’m steno?” Jacqs still wasn’t sure, but when Zeke explained it like that, it did sound almost reasonable.

“You got yourself in all sorts of trouble going after Grah... a woman who has the balls to face me down in my own office. You tell me that you’re interested in me, and I know I’m a cagey old bastard who has proven himself on all sorts of battlefields.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’ve never seen you even glance twice in Honshi Quin’s direction,” Zeke said in a sudden verbal turn into new territory.

Jacqs frowned. “I ain’t avoiding Quin.” Of course, he also wasn’t going out of his way to go anywhere near her. She was one of the techs, and that meant she spent most of her time with Daygik and Bolson—two people who annoyed Jacqs to no end. And she had some ancestor from one of them Asian countries—she had to. She was about the smallest woman Jacqs had ever set eyes on.

“You aren’t paying her any attention, either,” Zeke said gently.

“Why should I?”

“Because she thinks you’re gorgeous. She clearly has a thing for bad boys.”

Jacqs felt an odd twinge of dislike for the woman. “She... what?”

“She spends a large amount of time staring at you, Jacqs. Either she’s interested in sex or the woman has some eye disease that I’m not aware of, because she can’t seem to keep her eyes off your backside.”

Jacqs blinked, unable to even come up with a proper response for that. Jacqs couldn’t even remember a time he’d exchanged a dozen words with the tech.

“Yeah, well, she stutters every time she tries to talk to me, too, so her taste in men is a little questionable,” Zeke pointed out. “but she does watch you every time you walk through the room.”

“No, she don’t.” Jacqs felt like if he just ignored the comment long enough he could make it go away. As a het man, he should have noticed a woman giving him signals about being willing to share a bunk.

Zeke took a second to study the ceiling. “Okay, which of us is better at reading people?”

“You, no question.”

“Exactly. I’m telling you that Quin would have landed in your bed in two hot seconds if you’d given her a chance.”

The thought of Honshi Quin in his bunk made Jacqs a little queasy. She weren’t his type— not even close.

Zeke laughed. “That face you’re making is great. So, I assume you aren’t the least bit attracted to Quin.”

“I’d feel like I was bedding a child. No, no I ain’t interested.”

“She’s north of twenty-five, Jacqs. So if you’re that turned off, you’re more stenosexual than heterosexual. It’s not just any woman who does it for you.”

“All het have preferences.”

“Most aren’t physically disgusted at the thought of sex with someone with a compatible sexuality. They might not be interested, but disgust is not a usual reaction. No offense to het men, or pansexuals either, but we’re all a little whorish. If someone with the right sexual orientation is dangled in front of us, we go thinking with our dicks every time.”

Jacqs scratched his chest. “Not arguing that.”

“No, I didn’t think you would.”

“But... If I’m stenosexual, what would I be attracted to?” Jacqs asked.

Zeke swallowed several times and then stood. “That you need to figure out for yourself, Jacqs. And maybe if I’m your type we can talk, but this is... this is something you need to work out.” Zeke took a big breath and let it out. “Now, I have a meeting, and you have work.”

“I’m short-shifting for the next two days,” Jacqs said. He wanted to talk about this, to talk this through until he didn’t have all these jagged-edged thoughts rolling around in his brain.

“Unfortunately, I am working. However, maybe you should spend that extra time thinking this through,” Zeke said, and his voice had turned all cold and businesslike. Jacqs knew when he’d been invited to go the fuck away, at least he did when Zeke did the inviting.

More confused than ever, Jacqs stood up and moved to the door. Damn. This is not how Jacqs had pictured this conversation.

CHAPTER TEN

Jacqs didn't rightly like introspection. It never led to good things. It didn't even lead to mediocre things, not in his estimation. But at the same time, he'd never run away from a fight in his life— not when it came to bullies in the camps, not when he'd faced off against the batfaces for the first time, and not when he had demons rolling around in his own head. He faced them and he either won or lost the fight, but he didn't go hiding.

First time he lost a teammate in battle, he'd faced his own guilt, and figured it out for the arrogance it was. He thought he could save his whole team if only he were fast enough with that gunner rig. If he could get out in front and risk his neck, he could save all the rest. Jacqs snorted at that bit of stupidity. In war, no one was safe, and the sort of heroics where one person saved them all was limited to the holovids and movies they played on the rec screens.

Thinking on his sexuality was different, though. Being het was part of him. It defined who he was as a man, and he liked who he was, even if the rest of the universe seemed to have a problem with him. Jacqs wasn't sure how to get past that hurdle. Food and a good workout might jar a few thoughts loose, so he headed toward the galley.

The universe was playing tricks with him, because Honshi Quin was sitting at one of the tables when Jacqs walked in. Going to the distributor, he grabbed his rations and made a beeline for the farthest table. Quin was nattering on with Dary, the two laughing quietly in a way that made Jacqs wonder if they were laughing at him, not that he cared. Those two were about as soldierly as Jacqs' socks. Hell, that was probably an insult to the socks.

The rations had a slight metallic taste, and Jacqs wrinkled his nose as he shoved the stuff in while trying to avoid tasting it. Despite his best efforts, Jacqs found his gaze returning to Quin over and over. She was a slight thing with dark hair and brown eyes that slanted. Objectively, he could say she was

beautiful. He knew plenty of men who'd cut off a nut to knock boots with her. He just wasn't one.

She glanced over his way, and then the two girls started whispering even more. Dary was probably relating all the ways that Jacqs and the commander had been unfair to the others during that sparring session. That sounded like her. Sure enough, after a second, Dary looked over. Her gaze landed on him longer, and Jacqs stared back. Quin poked Dary in the side with an elbow and the woman turned away.

Zeke said Quin liked him, though. Jacqs didn't see it, but he definitely didn't want her liking on him. He'd snap her in half or smother her in bed or something. He'd feel like he was sharing a bunk with a glass doll. No, she was more the sort of woman he preferred looking at rather than touching.

Jacqs rolled that thought around in his head a bit. Honestly, he didn't get much out of looking at her, either. Her or Dary. Now with Dary that made sense, because he couldn't even look at her without hearing her annoying voice in his head. But Quin was polite enough and he still didn't get much out of looking at her, not like when he watched Zeke stalk across the training mats, his shirt off and his muscles on display. That did make Jacqs feel something in the core of his guts. Okay, if he was honest, he felt it a little lower. Yeah, his het credentials were a little tattered at this point. But if he was steno, that meant he was attracted to one trait, some trait Zeke had that these two women didn't.

Jacqs was still thinking on that when Quin got up and returned her tray to the machine. Dary followed and the two headed for the door that would take them right past Jacqs' table.

"Hi," Quin said with a smile.

After offering a quick grunt, Jacqs looked the other way. Yeah, she liked him. Either that or she was feeling particularly suicidal and thought trying to start a conversation with him was a good way to get that done. Jacqs didn't have a good reputation for socializing.

“God, you’re rude,” Dary complained, before the two women vanished. As far as Jacqs was concerned, he was doing a kindness by not letting Quin get confused about his feelings. Liking someone and not knowing if they liked you back was one of those levels of hell.

Unfortunately, Jacqs figured he’d put Zeke through some level of that hell, even if he hadn’t meant to. He wasn’t toying with the man. He just didn’t know what he was supposed to be feeling. He liked Zeke. He also liked Aral who ran the whorehouse. He had liked Megal before she’d died in his arms. He’d liked her enough that he would have traded places with her at the time, and he hadn’t even gotten a chance to knock boots with her, although she’d hinted that she wouldn’t be adverse to the idea.

The first woman he’d slept with had caught him stealing bread. He must have been fourteen at the time, and she couldn’t have been more than sixteen, but she’d seemed so much older. He thought she was going to call one of the camp guards, who would deliver a good whupping and then deliver him back to his mother. Instead she had made Jacqs put the bread back, haul two loads of flour from the central stores, carry several buckets of water, and after all that, she’d *given* him the bread he tried to steal. After that, he’d landed at her tent a lot until the batfaces had broken through the military line. The camp squatting just behind the front lines had scattered as the battle had raged between their tents, ripping up cobbled-together tent homes and human bodies. Jacqs still didn’t know what had happened to Raynatha, but that was the nature of war.

Up until now, Jacqs would have said that the common denominator was that all his lovers were women. However, Zeke didn’t fit that category, and neither did Lacroix, and that was another man Jacqs wouldn’t mind inviting into his bed if’n Lacroix’s orientation had matched his. Jacqs admired the man, even if Lacroix had, up to this point, avoided Jacqs like the bat flu. Jacqs didn’t fault him none on that front. With every officer on the ship constantly looking for new reasons to blame Jacqs for any little fault he showed, including his bad habit of breathing, Jacqs would have avoided himself if he could.

The only common denominator Jacqs could see was that they were all powerful individuals. But power was all about being dynamic, being one of those who tied people up or who liked getting tied up, and Jacqs knew for a fact that he was non-dynamic. He'd had a woman ask him to tie her up once. It made Jacqs feel like the villain in some vid, and he'd ended up having to do all the work. Neither of those feelings had led to a successful encounter. Jacqs still chalked that one up to foolish experimenting as a young man. And getting tied up was not even a little bit interesting to him.

Still struggling with his thoughts, Jacqs finished his rations and shoved his plate back in the distributor before heading for the training room. When he was on short shifts, he tried to use the extra time to really work out hard. Schreiber mostly lived in the gym and Lacroix and Haslet spent a fair amount of time in the room, but that still meant it was more private than most other spots in the ship, excepting the venting ducts. Jacqs had gotten up there once or twice out of a sheer, raw desperation to get away from other human beings, but they were cramped enough that it wouldn't never be Jacqs' first choice.

This time, when Jacqs reached the training room, he found he had a bit more company. Schreiber seemed to be running the techs through their paces. Bolson and Daygik looked clean wore out but they were still trading punches, and Quin was about near tears, explaining to Schreiber how she'd forgotten about the session.

When Jacqs walked in the room, every person turned to look, and most of them had expressions of horror. The desperation nearly made him do the stupidest thing possible and join the sparring group. Hell, it'd feel good to knock Bolson around a bit. However, Jacqs would bruise one of the tender babies, and then he'd land on discipline again. Besides, with his luck Schreiber would ask him to work out with Quin, and that would not be a good idea. He headed for the machines where he could lift weights and do some solid thinking.

The sparring group slowly got back on track. If Jacqs walking in a room was enough to distract them, Jacqs wasn't giving them good odds on surviving. Maybe they'd land behind the front or get in a unit that respected

their tech skills enough to keep 'em wrapped up all safe behind a few fighters. Jacqs watched as Neira Daygik actually tripped over her own left foot in an attempt to evade the most pathetic punch in the history of the human military. Bolson was worse than useless. Yeah, they'd better find someone to watch their six or they were all dying.

Jacqs settled on one of the machines and lifted his legs up to put his feet on the wide plate so he could do sitting squats. He completed his first set of twenty and the sweat started but his mind still swirled with a million thoughts.

Blocking out the near non-stop whining from that end of the training room, Jacqs threw himself into his workout. Muscles strained and sweat rolled down his spine until the front and back of his shirt were stained dark. His hands ached from pulling the lift bar, and his back sent up little flares of heat that suggested that Jacqs was on the edge of a serious injury.

He wanted to push harder. He wanted to force his body into motion until his brain stopped spinning, but Jacqs knew he couldn't afford to. He had a short shift to sit, and he couldn't do it if he was crippled up. So instead, Jacqs leaned back on one of the machines and watched one sparring class end and another begin.

They'd gone through several exercises when Lacroix spotted Grah's unprotected back and gave her a slap on the ass. After spinning around, she hit him back twice as hard in the chest. Laughing, he retreated from the mats backwards, leaving the four navs to fight under Schreiber's tutelage. Jacqs was mildly surprised when Lacroix wandered over his way, but he was mostly too worn down to care.

"You look more than half dead," Lacroix commented as he dropped down onto a box of sparring supplies near the weight machines.

Jacqs grunted. Usually that was enough to send fools into full retreat. Instead, Lacroix laughed.

"She's getting better," Lacroix commented as he nodded toward Grah.

"Leaves her left side open too much."

“I keep telling her that.”

“You should tell her less and hit her real good in the kidneys once or twice, and that’ll keep her from letting some bat use that same hole in her defenses.”

“Yeah, I wish I could. It’s hard to when I hope to keep my boots under her bunk that night.” Lacroix tilted his head and studied Jacqs for a second. “She already hates you. Would you mind doing it?”

Jacqs felt a distant, soft sort of disappointment that someone he admired hated him, but that was an old wound, and Grah was hardly the first woman to have that opinion of him. More importantly, Jacqs wanted to think of Grah as surviving the war and giving birth to a whole tribe of cantankerous, smart young boys and girls who could verbally eviscerate the next generation. “Yeah, I’ll learn her up. She’ll curse me out nine ways from the word go, but that’s okay.”

“She’ll appreciate it in the end, although you’re right that she’s going to curse you out while you’re doing it.”

Jacqs grunted. He was ready for the conversation to be over. Lacroix did fall silent again, but he didn’t leave. Wondering exactly what was keeping the man around, Jacqs finally turned and faced off against him. “You need something?”

“All sorts of things,” Lacroix agreed amiably. “Universal peace, food that isn’t put together by a computer from nutritional blocks, and a bed big enough to not fall out of when I get energetic with a beautiful woman.”

Jacqs nodded. Those were three things Jacqs wouldn’t mind at all. “You ain’t going to find any of them here.”

“Nope. But I am hoping to keep Allie from exiling me from her bed.”

Seeing as he was feeling uncomfortable with the whole conversation, Jacqs ignored it.

“You see, Allie still hates you, but now she feels guilty because she thinks that you’re in some crisis and I’m supposed to come over here and magically fix it. So this is me standing here, pretending to have a deep conversation with

you, so that my woman won't rip me a new one about how I'm being insensitive to a soul in crisis."

That didn't make a lick of sense. "Wait. So, she won't talk to me because she hates me, but she'll make you miserable if'n you don't come and talk to me?"

Lacroix shrugged. "Women."

"Huh." Jacqs really didn't have much more to say on the subject of Allie Grah. The others were sparring, but Allie wasn't doing as well now. She kept looking over toward them, and the other navs had figured out that was the perfect time to hit her. The woman had a colorful and surprisingly varied pool of profanity from which to choose.

"So, are you and the commander going to start knocking boots?"

Coming out of the blue like that, the question caught Jacqs totally off guard. "Don't seem like that's none of your business," he snapped.

"Nope," Lacroix agreed. "It isn't. But now I can tell her I brought the subject up."

"You're pussy-whipped," Jacqs accused the man. Of course it wasn't the wisest thing to say since those very words had caused a fight with another crew, a tech who had transferred out almost a year ago. Jacqs had spent three weeks in a six by nine cell for that one, but the other guy had spent a week in his bunk recovering from the injuries, so that was fair.

Instead of getting angry, Lacroix laughed. "We are all suckers for the people we love. I'm pussy-whipped enough to come over and start the world's most uncomfortable conversation. She's dick-whipped enough to start listening when I tell her that you're not half the ass you pretend to be. Wow. That sounds really disgusting when I say it out loud, and my dick would not be doing anything if Allie heard me use that expression, so ignore me. However, I still say you're not as much of a bastard as she assumes."

"Don't bet on it." Jacqs gave Lacroix his most unfriendly grin.

“Oh, I would. I grew up on smuggling ships, and I’m guessing that’s where you came from, isn’t it?”

Jacqs shrugged. He’d spent years on them after the crew grabbed him off dockside, but he’d never felt like a smuggler.

“People like Allie and the commander, they grew up on the inner planets, I bet. They have this idea that being good is all about table manners and talking nice.”

“Most folks I know who talk nice are reaching around their back to grab the weapon they plan to gut-shoot you with.”

“That is true,” Lacroix agreed, nodding. “I suppose in a perfect world, the settlement folks and the border folks would all have their territory, and we wouldn’t be living together and confusing the snot out of each other.”

Jacqs eyed Lacroix. “You don’t sound like no smuggler.”

Lacroix laughed. “No, I suppose I don’t. My folks sent me to school for a number of years. They said that part of negotiating a good sale is not aggravating the buyer. So, they wanted me to take lessons in how to be less aggravating.”

While Jacqs didn’t say anything, he figured he would have an easier life if someone had done that for him. His ma was too busy crying and trying to scrounge up food to much care about his manners, and on the ships, if a person tried having good manners, it was mostly taken as a sign of weakness.

“Now, if you want to talk on something, like how you seemed mighty shocked at me sticking my feet in my oversized mouth, I wouldn’t mind.” Lacroix let his words trail off at the end, clearly inviting Jacqs to hold up his end of the conversation. He didn’t bother. Jacqs hoped that would be enough to send Lacroix away, but the man was mighty bad at taking a hint. “Did you really not recognize that the commander admires you?” he finally asked.

Jacqs shrugged. “Didn’t notice Quin neither.”

“No offense, but you’d have to be blind to avoid noticing Honshi checking out your ass.”

“It ain’t something I go looking for.”

Lacroix scrunched up his face.

Feeling his aggravation rising to dangerous levels, Jacqs said, “If you got something to say, you’d best say it. Otherwise, find a new expression or take that one somewheres else.”

“No problem. That’s just me. I make all kinds of faces, so don’t make no nevermind about that. I just think that you were looking for it with Allie. She was about ready to space you, and I’d even offered to tell you to fuck off, only she informed me that if I tried to go fighting her battles for her, that you would not be the only one getting spaced. That conversation did not end well for me. Huh. I lost my train of thought in there somewhere.”

“If you’d tried telling me to fuck off, I would have pointed out that she can speak for herself, and I wouldn’t have cared.”

Lacroix laughed. “I think I’m lucky you’re such an ass.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Lacroix quickly added. “But it does seem like you notice some people.”

“I noticed the commander,” Jacqs admitted. It felt strange, admitting out loud that he’d noticed another man. Jacqs wished he could take the words back, but the stupid was already out of his mouth.

“You’d have to be dead to not notice the commander,” Lacroix said with a laugh. “But it seems like you’re the only one he’s looking back at.”

This time Jacqs was smart enough to keep his mouth closed.

“In the past I know you haven’t reacted well to people like Taylor, but I wasn’t sure if that had to do with him being homo or pan or him just being a weak little pissant who doesn’t know how to get through the day without annoying pretty much everyone with his attempts to be “helpful”. I have to wonder if that man ever gets laid, because I don’t know of many men who want to listen to that much whining.” Lacroix frowned. “Actually, I don’t know any women who want to hear it, either.”

“He is annoying.”

“Yes, he is,” Lacroix agreed. “But you never seemed bothered by Ashwin Little, who’s registered pan.”

Jacqs didn’t really think on the sexual orientations of most people, but he had to admit that Little never made him itchy the way Taylor did. They sometimes crossed shifts as gunners, and the man could handle himself on the guns. Jacqs had even shown him how to cheat the computer targeting when the tracking got all wonky. “He ain’t womanly.”

“Allie is womanly, so you can’t be that adverse to the trait. Hell, I would worry about how much you like her if it weren’t for the fact that she hates you.”

“You can stop pointing that out any time now,” Jacqs warned.

“I could, but I feel a little better every time I say it.”

And here Jacqs had thought Lacroix was the sane one. Clearly not. But at least Jacqs understood his brand of insanity and meanness. Rubbing a man’s nose in the prize he’d lost was a common enough game on the ships and in the camps. The silence fell again, and Jacqs ignored Lacroix. He couldn’t stop thinking on the subject of who he liked and who he didn’t and who annoyed him and who he didn’t really mind all that much.

Fact was that on the smuggling ship, he never knew someone’s orientation. Others seemed to have some sort of magical ability to recognize another het or know that someone was pan or even figure out that their orientations aligned, but Jacqs had kept to whores. It was simpler than trying to figure out a new set of rules that he wasn’t real likely to master anyway. Still, certain people annoyed him. He would have hated Taylor if they’d been on a smuggling ship together. Flat out, no doubt. And he would have done the hating without knowing the man’s orientation.

The more Jacqs thought, the more mixed up he seemed to get.

“So,” Lacroix started again, “are you annoyed by men who leave their boots under some other man’s bunk or are you annoyed by weak men?”

Jacqs didn't have an answer, so he didn't give one. He watched the sparring class end and Grah seemed to hover near the edge of the group, her gaze constantly sliding over to where they stood.

"She's hoping I fixed everything for you."

"Why does she care?" Jacqs asked.

Lacroix sucked air through his front teeth. "Considering that she hates you, I have no idea."

That's when Jacqs punched Lacroix on the shoulder without warning. Lacroix stumbled to the side with wide eyes and a bit of ungracefullike windmilling of the arms before he caught his balance again. The gasps of the others told Jacqs just how much shit he had managed to land in, and he braced himself for the coming recriminations.

Instead, Lacroix started to laugh. "Yeah, I guess you warned me, huh?" He rubbed his arm, and the others all started whispering in their little groups, all except Grah who glared daggers at Jacqs.

"Yep, I sort of did," Jacqs agreed. He had pointed out that he was getting annoyed with all the talk of Grah hating him. He considered that warning enough.

Maybe Lacroix thought it'd been warning enough too, because he walked away chuckling. Now, Grah? She had a good head of steam as she met Lacroix halfway, slipping her arm around his waist like he had just received some great wound and needed her support. Jacqs rolled his eyes. For a strong woman, she did some odd things, but her oddness never bothered him none, not even when she filed complaints against him.

Jacqs thought on that some. Lacroix didn't bother him none, either. Even when he was poking his nose in something that wasn't his business, he wasn't bothersome... much. Jacqs watched those two walk out of the room together, and he truly hoped they survived the war. Those were the sorts of people he would volunteer to spend time with, and mostly Jacqs avoided human interaction. Surprisingly, Jacqs figured he'd knock boots with either of them,

not that he would give up Zeke to give it a shot. With that realization, Jacqs figured he had his answer.

Standing up and stretching his overworked muscles, Jacqs headed for the gunnery office. Most times, Taylor was in there playing his games and pretending to study the gunner systems for his promotions test. If Jacqs could learn every system, every bolt and gear and circuit and override on the whole of a front gunner and a belly gunner, then Jacqs didn't figure the learning required all that much in the way of brains, but Taylor did seem to struggle.

After giving a quick rap on the door, Jacqs waited impatiently for the call to enter. This was one of them rules that Taylor got all red-faced about, so Jacqs had learned to swallow all his complaints about the time that got wasted waiting outside doors.

"Come in," Taylor finally called out. Jacqs pushed open the door, and the gunner manuals were out on Taylor's desk. Jacqs would put credits up against sawdust that the man had used those extra minutes to close down his game.

"I need to change my official orientation from het to steno," Jacqs said firmly. Saying it out loud felt strange, but there was a weight off his shoulders. Yep, this was the right choice. Of course, from the look of dumb shock on Taylor's face, it wasn't the choice others were expecting him to make, but Jacqs never had cared much about what others thought. He was steno and there wasn't a soul in the universe who could tell him otherwise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After sitting through a four-hour shift, Jacqs was itching to do something. He had a suspicion that the something he wanted was to track down Zeke and announce his new status as a non-dynamic, stenosexual male. However, he'd checked the schedule and Zeke was on-shift for another few hours. Jacqs hadn't let his heterosexuality interfere with the job, and he wasn't about to let his stenosexuality change him.

Since he couldn't figure out what else to do, Jacqs headed back to the training room. He didn't want to work out a second time, but watching the others spar and heckling them could be good fun. No matter what Zeke said about training them, there was no way Jacqs was fighting with any of them, not excepting Zeke... or maybe Lacroix or Haslet. Haslet was a formidable woman. Funny, but most of the strong women he took a liking to had a perverse habit of disliking him intensely.

Well, that wasn't a problem with Zeke, so hopefully he wouldn't have to worry about it.

Jacqs hadn't even made it to the balcony over the training room when his comm went off, giving him a shock-jolt in a very unfortunate place. Cursing, he pulled the comm out of his pocket and read the message. *Report to commander's office.*

Jacqs smiled. His day was improving already. After reversing direction, he headed back toward the offices. In the lift, he found it impossible to stand still. The way he felt, he could have climbed the ladders faster than this old thing was moving. Jacqs glared at the doors, waiting for them to open so he could head for the commander's office. However, once the lift stopped and the doors slid open, Jacqs found himself eye to eye with the commander. He was right out in the middle of the corridor.

"You changed your status? Already?"

"Yep. Why? Is that a problem?" Jacqs' guts about knotted themselves to death.

Zeke blinked at him, and Jacqs could feel that aggravation crawl up the back of his throat. He crossed his arms and glared at Zeke. “If’n I’m steno and think that people who are strong and competent are sexy, that ain’t your business and you can’t go looking at me like I done something wrong.”

“What?” Zeke took a step back and shook his head a little, and it occurred to Jacqs that he looked confused now. “I didn’t— I wouldn’t tell you that was wrong. I’m shocked at the timetable, not the change.”

“Shocked why?” Jacqs knew he was not the smartest, but it didn’t take that long to figure it out once Zeke had put him onto the understanding of steno.

“Because you’re supposed to deny the truth and kick and—” Zeke stopped right in the middle and then sighed. “You know what, never mind. I am officially resigning myself to be pleasantly surprised by everything you do, Jacqs Glebov.”

Jacqs was just glad Zeke put that “pleasantly” in there so Jacqs knew how he felt about it. He stepped back when Zeke moved into the lift, and Zeke hit the button for the next level down. Officers’ quarters.

“I thought you had a couple more hours on shift.”

“One, no one on this ship keeps regular hours except the navs and gunners. Thank god you guys have a better sense of duty than anyone else. And two, I have put in so much overtime trying to work off my sexual frustration that I could take the next three shifts off and command wouldn’t be able to say anything about it.”

“You’re sexually frustrated over me?” Jacqs felt a flash of wonder at that. Zeke was all bothered over him. He hadn’t ever had someone frustrated for him. Oh, plenty had let him put his boots under their bunk, and once he got in with someone he could generally get back in, because he was a good lover, but he didn’t think anyone had suffered for lack of having him in their bed.

“You are an idiot,” Zeke said.

“Why?”

“Because I have been dying, and you haven’t even had the good sense to notice it.” The words sounded grumpy, but Zeke reached over and brushed a hand over Jacqs’ shoulder right before the lift bumped to a stop, and then the doors opened. Then Zeke was out like a speeder ship. “Coming?” he called over his shoulder.

Not even bothering to answer, Jacqs hurried after him. Zeke opened his door and then stood to the side for Jacqs to go first. The first thing Jacqs noticed was that the desk was up. That meant the big old bed was down and ready. Now if Jacqs just knew what he was doing, they could get started.

He turned to ask, but the intense expression on Zeke’s face stopped him. The man had that predatory look again, and Jacqs’ cock sat up and begged prettily. Hell, yes, he was lusting over a man. At this point, Jacqs wasn’t sure what sort of insanity had kept him from jumping Zeke’s bones the second he’d met him. Then again, maybe it’d been better this way because Jacqs’ attempts at initiating sexual relationships usually involved either money or abject failure.

Zeke hit the door lock and then circled around so that he was near the bed, forcing Jacqs to move toward the door. Wait. Jacqs didn’t want to retreat, but his feet had definitely done some retreating. Taking control of his own damn limbs, Jacqs forced himself to step closer to Zeke. His palms were sweating. Fuck. He wiped them on his pants and tried to figure out what he should be doing. With women, he tried complimenting them first, but telling Zeke that he looked superbly predatory might not be the best move.

Before Jacqs could figure out what he wanted to do, he slammed into the wall as Zeke crashed into him. His first instinct was to fight, to shove back until he made room for himself. But then Zeke caught Jacqs by the shirtfront, fisting it as he pinned Jacqs against the wall. Zeke’s hot mouth pressed against Jacqs’ lips. He caught Jacqs’ lower lip between his teeth and nipped it before sucking the bruised skin.

Jacqs was mostly too shocked to do much. He certainly wasn’t complaining, because despite his lack of imagination, his cock was warming to this attention without any trouble. Then Zeke used his tongue to press into

Jacqs' mouth, and before Jacqs could stop himself, he let out a low groan of need.

Zeke chuckled, his fingers threading through Jacqs' short hair. Finally Jacqs' body seemed to catch up, and he grabbed Zeke's shoulders in a bruising grip. They kissed, hard and hungry, each trying to dominate. This wasn't some whore passing time. Jacqs wasn't near as careful as he was when he kissed a woman with her tender lips. This was the hot need of sexing with the fire of a good fight. This was letting go of all inhibitions, throwing them aside so he could feed the cravings. This was good.

Zeke finally pulled away. He gasped hungrily, and his face was flushed. "Jacqs, are you okay with this?"

"Fuck, yes," Jacqs growled. He reached up and caught Zeke's curls, fisting them. They were soft, and when Jacqs pulled Zeke's head to the side, his neck arched in a beautiful line. Jacqs stared at this strong man, not entirely sure what he wanted. He wanted sex. He wanted to fight. He wanted to touch, and seeing as how this was the first time he'd done this with a man, he didn't know how to make all those thoughts fit into one moment.

Then Zeke rubbed against him, and every thought in Jacqs' brain fled. Zeke reached up and grabbed Jacqs' wrist, slamming it against the wall and pinning it there before going back for another hungry kiss. After a second, Zeke let go of his arm, but then his hands were on Jacqs' hips, pulling at the waist. Jacqs groaned and thrust his hips forward.

Jacqs thought Zeke was going for his pants, but suddenly Zeke pulled off Jacqs' shirt. It caught around his neck, and Jacqs reached up to pull it the rest of the way off. He wasn't prepared for Zeke to suck at his exposed nipple. The heat of it stabbed through him, making his cock so hard that he thought he might come in his pants like a teenager. Jacqs cursed as he pushed himself away from the wall, and Zeke stumbled back onto the bed. Rather than let go as he fell, Zeke held Jacqs by the waist, pulling him onto the bed with him.

Without any chance to catch himself, Jacqs landed on Zeke. Immediately, he rolled to the side to get his weight off his partner, but Jacqs wasn't used to

having a lover as aggressive as he was. Zeke followed and pinned him down to the bed before flicking his tongue over his nipple again. “Fuck,” Jacqs cursed, as the need and the heat all crashed together to create a real storm that rolled under his skin.

“I’m building up to it.”

“Very funny,” Jacqs said. He caught Zeke by those blond curls of his and pulled him so that they were nose to nose. For a second, he stared into dark brown eyes that had all these emotions that Jacqs couldn’t sort the way he could a data set from his gunner station. He did know one thing, though. Zeke liked him. He arched up to kiss Zeke, but he managed to misjudge the distance or maybe Zeke turned his head at the last second, but somehow Jacqs ended up kissing Zeke’s neck. However, from Zeke’s deep moan, the mistake didn’t bother him none. Jacqs kissed him again, lower. The neck of Zeke’s shirt was in the way, and Jacqs yanked at the fabric.

Zeke obliged him by pulling off his shirt, and Jacqs got cloth-burn on the tip of his nose, but he didn’t care. He had more bare skin to work with. He kissed the hollow of Zeke’s neck, tasting the salt from that warm skin of Zeke’s.

“You bastard,” Zeke said as he tipped his head back as an invitation for more.

Jacqs obliged. He scraped his teeth along the curve of his neck. Zeke’s sharp intake of breath made Jacqs think he was doing something right. “Is that you complaining, complimenting me or just making a statement of fact?” Jacqs asked.

“Oh, I’m complimenting you. You’re a fast learner.”

Jacqs laughed. “Don’t often get called that.”

Zeke undid the button of his uniform and stood on his good leg to shimmy out of the pants. “I’m gonna make you scream,” Zeke said, and Jacqs felt a shiver of anticipation he hadn’t felt since the first time he’d paid for a whore. Even the sight of Zeke’s erection wasn’t enough to scare Jacqs off, although Jacqs did feel a little twinge of anxiety. He’d felt that his first time with a

woman, too. Actually, he'd felt a good deal worse that time because he'd had to get himself good and drunk before he had the nerve to go through with it, and drinking was not the wisest thing for a man to do right before sex.

Never one to shy from a challenge, Jacqs reached out and ran a finger along that proud erection. Zeke hissed, and Jacqs took it one step farther by wrapping his fingers around it. It felt the same as his, a shade narrower, maybe, but it wasn't nothing to go worrying about. Jacqs knew what these things liked. Jacqs used this thumb to tease the foreskin, shifting it in tiny increments, and Zeke started a low keening sound.

"Let go," Zeke said.

"What?" Jacqs pulled his hand back as though burned. He hadn't done anything wrong.

"I'm going to come right now if you don't stop, and I haven't even gotten you out of your fucking pants. That's not fucking happening." Zeke was all red in the face, and Jacqs was too shocked to even comment as Zeke leaned in and undid Jacqs' uniform pants, pulling them off with the underwear.

Jacqs allowed himself a bit of pride in driving Zeke to the use of profanity like that, but the fact was he didn't have much energy to feel anything except his own lust and need. His prick was so hard that it bobbed comically and had turned a rather alarming shade. He needed to come.

But Jacqs wasn't getting the quick hand job he expected, and that quite frankly, he fucking needed. His cock was about to fucking fall off. But Zeke just hummed as he ran his fingers up and down the shaft before grabbing it.

"Fuck it. Do something," Jacqs growled.

Zeke got a devilish look in his eye and then leaned down. Sticking his tongue out, he ran it along the tip of Jacqs' cock. Jacqs shivered so hard that it about hurt. Worse, he felt like he couldn't catch his breath. That was Zeke licking on him, and now he opened up and took the tip of Jacqs' cock in his mouth.

Instinct made Jacqs thrust his hips up, but Zeke was a strong man, strong enough to hold Jacqs down as he slowly pulled back, letting the tip of the cock escape.

“Fuck.” That was about the only word still in Jacqs’ head at the moment. His cock was red, and now the end was all shiny with spit.

“You like?” Zeke had a teasing tone of voice. He leaned down again and flicked his tongue across the head.

Jacqs threw his head back and strained with every muscle in his body. He needed more or he needed it to stop, because this hanging on the edge was killing him. His heart was near to beating out of his body, and his cock was going to fucking break. Could a man sprain his cock? If so, Jacqs was in real danger.

Zeke went back to humming as he climbed up on top of Jacqs. Jacqs bucked up again, and now his cock slid against Zeke’s body. The slide, the thrust, that was familiar. But the smell of Zeke, the weight holding him down, the strength— all that was new and exciting. Jacqs’ cock was hot and with each beat of his heart, he could feel the echoing ache in his balls.

“Don’t fucking tease,” Jacqs snarled, and reaching up he grabbed Zeke’s curls. Zeke gave a little startled sound, and then Jacqs forced him to the side, rolling them both. He hit his elbow against the metal wall, but Jacqs couldn’t care less if someone offered to pay him to. He crushed Zeke’s lips with his own. The kiss was hard and demanding, and Jacqs slipped his hand between their bodies. His fingers found Zeke’s cock first, and Jacqs grabbed it.

He could feel the heat, the hard length that felt alive under his hands. This would be easier with slick, but Zeke wasn’t cut, so he’d survive. Besides, he didn’t seem to mind a little rough. Jacqs jacked him and at the same time ground down onto Zeke’s body.

After a second, Zeke’s legs came up around Jacqs, the cold metal of the artificial leg resting against Jacqs’ thigh, a welcome island of cool in what had become a fucking firestorm. Jacqs could feel Zeke’s body jerk and flail as he started to come. This was the wild, out of control moment that Jacqs loved

seeing in his lover's eyes. He watched as Zeke threw his head back, that long neck arching out as he came. Jacqs felt the slick between their bodies.

Rolling to one side, Jacqs took his own cock in hand and started jerking off. Zeke reached for him, his hand resting on Jacqs' wrist while he worked. Slowly, Zeke let his fingers trail up Jacqs' arm and then rest on the inside of Jacqs' thigh.

"Fuck, that's killing me," Zeke whispered. He brushed the back of his knuckle over Jacqs' balls.

Then Jacqs was coming, and he didn't much care what Zeke's words might have meant. His orgasm made his whole body stiffen as he shot his cum across Zeke's hip and stomach. Only then did Jacqs feel like he could breathe again, like a targeting system that had to go offline before it could properly restart.

As he panted, Jacqs checked in with his body. He felt good, except for his elbow that had taken a hit, and one shoulder that was sore from something, and he was hanging off the bed all awkward so that the edge of the frame pressed into his knee.

"Shift over," Jacqs said, pushing Zeke toward the wall. Zeke swung his legs up into the bed and scooted over, and Jacqs stretched out next to him. It was tight, but it was a hell of a lot better than trying to share a regular bunk. Jacqs shifted until he got one arm under the pillow and he draped the other over Zeke. "What do you mean I was killing you?" he asked.

"What?" Zeke sounded like a man woken in the middle of the night.

"You said I was killing you. Why? You'd come."

Zeke chuckled, and he started running his hand over Jacqs' arm. "It was killing me because watching you jerk off make me want to get hard again, only I'm not fifteen anymore."

"Really?" Jacqs didn't remember ever having someone enjoy watching him like that. It was a compliment, but not one Jacqs had been expecting.

“Really,” Zeke said. “For someone who hasn’t done this before, you didn’t need much help finding the ropes. If anything, I felt like I was trying to keep up.”

“It was a hand job. It ain’t like I don’t have a dick of my own. I know what feels good.”

“You know, I like the world the way you see it, Jacqs. It makes a lot more sense.”

Jacqs grunted. He kept telling people that; however, he also knew that sort of patience was likely to have a short shelf life. “Wait until I do something real stupid and Taylor sends me up for discipline. You won’t be liking my logic then.”

“I won’t. I had your file flagged, so two seconds after you changed your orientation to steno, I called the captain and told him that I was removing myself from your direct chain of command. So any discipline Taylor can’t handle goes straight to him.”

“What? Why?” Jacqs lifted up on one elbow to get a good look at Zeke’s face. He was trying to figure if Zeke was upset, but he looked mostly well-fucked.

“Because I informed the captain that I planned to have as much sex with you as humanly possible, and that it might be a conflict of interest for me to assign discipline.”

“Huh.” Jacqs settled back down onto the pillow. He hadn’t expected that, somehow. Telling the captain, that made it more real. They weren’t hiding anything, and Zeke was being all official about it. That was a real nice surprise. “Can we get started on that having more sex thing now?”

Zeke laughed. “You are going to be the death of me.”

“Yeah, but you’re going out happy.”

“I really am,” Zeke agreed. Huh. For once in his life, Jacqs had gotten the post-sex talk part right. It felt pretty damn nice. Actually, lying next to Zeke, a

whole lot of things felt right, and for now, that's all that mattered. The rest would have to take care of itself.

THE END

Glossary of Sexual Terms Used Within the Universe

Adynamic: An individual who does not require any sort of power exchange as part of the sexual experience.

Angendered: Having a perceived identity that excludes any sexual reference. These individuals attempt to avoid any traits that would identify them as male or female.

Asexual: One who does not experience sexual attraction.

Bigendered: Having a perceived sexual identity that encompasses traits of both male and female. These individuals may or may not have physical traits of both genders. Roughly one percent of human births have some ambiguity in their genitalia.

Cisgendered: Having a perceived sexual identity that matches the physical traits (i.e. a woman who sees herself as a woman)

Demisexual: One who appears to be asexual or intrasexual but who can enjoy a sexual relationship if a strong emotional relationship has already been established with the other person.

Dynamic: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from one side of a power exchange, either dominating or submitting.

Dyssexual: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from violating others' sexuality or making others uncomfortable (i.e. a woman who continues to seek a sexual relationship with an asexual individual). In extreme cases, a dyssexual may rape others or seek sexual satisfaction from those incapable of consent, such as animals.

Genderfluid: One whose perceived gender is flexible and may change, not over time as part of maturing, but on a regular basis. One who transitions between gender identities.

Heterosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to someone who identifies as the opposite gender.

Homosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to those who identify as the same gender.

Hypersexual: One who considers sexual interaction a necessary part of a meaningful relationship. One who uses sexuality as a means of getting to know a person or exploring a relationship.

Hyposexual: One who places a low value on sex in a relationship. While an individual may engage in and enjoy sexual intercourse, the act is not seen as central to any relationship.

Intrasexual: One whose sexual satisfaction is not focused on a partner or partners. In some cases, an intrasexual may even prefer self-pleasure over intimacy with another.

Non-dynamic: An individual who is adverse to any power exchange during sex.

Pangendered: An individual whose perceived sexual identity encompasses multiple gender identities

Pansexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to a wide range of individuals, including members of different gender groups.

Polydynamic: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from both holding power over others (dominating) and yielding power to others (submitting), i.e. a “switch.”

Sexualfluid: One whose sexuality is flexible and may change, not over time as part of maturing, but on a regular basis.

Stenosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to those who possess particular traits rather than being sexually attracted to a sexuality or gender.

Transgendered: having a perceived sexual identity that does not match the physical traits (i.e. a genetically-identified woman who sees himself as a man)

Author Bio

Lyn Gala publishes through Dreamspinner Press, Loose Id, and Ellora's Cave. She started writing in the back of her science notebook in third grade and hasn't stopped since. Westerns starring men with shady pasts gave way to science fiction with questionable protagonists, which eventually became any story with a morally ambiguous character. Even the purest heroes have pain and loss and darkness in their hearts, and that's where she likes to find her stories. Her characters seek to better themselves and find the happy (or happier) ending. When she isn't writing, Lyn Gala teaches history in a small town in New Mexico. Her favorite spot to write is a flat rock under a wide tree on the edge of the open desert where her dog can terrorize local wildlife. Writing in a wide range of genres, she often gravitates back to adventure and BDSM, stories about men in search of true love and a way to bring some criminal to justice... unless they happen to be the criminal.

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