



Anna
Ritter

Wild Space

Wild Space: The Complete Novel
Anna Ritter

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Wild Space

KBBL Broadcast/Live Stream

May 15, 2091

“Welcome and thank you for sticking around. That was a word from our sponsor, Glow Right, breakfast bars. Now, the main event. On your screens, you see some beautiful shots of Ranger 3, one of the most advanced ships ever built.”

“That’s right, Tom,” said his partner with a smile. While Tom exuded the standard gravitas of a journalist and anchorman, his partner smiled to reveal her white teeth. Golden blonde hair streamed down the top of her head to her shoulders. Although her white blouse and black, knit vest seemed professional enough, the girl from wardrobe had received a memo from upper management, which meant showing off more cleavage.

If Kelly objected, she didn’t say anything. Then again, she understood her role on the program. With another bright, vibrant smile, she continued, “The Ranger Initiative has cost trillions of dollars, but these are the most advanced starships ever built.”

“That’s right, Kelly,” he agreed. The camera focused on him. “For anyone interested, we have several links with prominent scientists and engineers. In the meantime, we are going to go live to talk to Aric Donovan and his associate, Cara. These are two of the crew members aboard Ranger 3.”

“Even though they’re very busy, they will take some time before their pre-flight checks to speak with us...” she paused, “from orbit!” If Kelly objected to having to smile and inject that bubbly excitement into her voice while Tom could remain impassive, unemotional, and utterly professional, she didn’t let it show.

There was already so much competition for women in the news industry; she understood what their audience wanted, and she intended to give it to them. Yes, there were other news streams which might have allowed more flexibility or authority where women were concerned, but she hadn’t gotten one of those jobs.

Worse, the fact that she now had a fandom of guys who liked to see her in low-cut tops as she read the headlines, the chances of her getting hired at a more legitimate program had dropped exponentially. Still, she

smiled, and she batted her eyes, and she sounded like a vapid cheerleader, “It’s so exciting that we get to talk to these real-life astronauts!”

For a long time, space travel had seemed utterly irrelevant.

But with the invention of cryo-stasis pods, that all changed. Humans could actually venture out to distant stars. As someone who studied the news streams, Kelly understood this wouldn’t last.

Some new digital outrage would percolate online, and people would wander away. Still, she enjoyed a few minutes free from the usual public shaming, political scandals, water shortages, and border skirmishes. For the moment, humanity seemed really interested in discovering what would be out among the stars, even if it did take decades or even centuries for any of the Ranger starships to reach their destinations.

The cameras focused on Tom once again. “Commander Donovan, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us,” said the anchorman. “What’s the mood like on Ranger 3?”

For the viewers at home or on their mobile devices, the view shifted. Tom’s professional and reassuring demeanor only took up half the screen now as the new scrawl continued to run beneath him and advertisements flashed over his shoulder.

His guest swallowed and looked a little bit nervous. Originally, they were supposed to speak with the captain of the Ranger 3, only some last-minute change made that impossible. Tom and Kelly both suspected he just didn’t want to do it.

“Please,” said the commander, “Call me Aric.”

“Sure thing, Aric,” Tom said in that friendly yet professionally confident tone of his.

“Hi!” Kelly chirped as she swung her hand through the air, “It’s great to meet you!” One of the producers whispered through her earpiece, “Blow him a kiss!” *No. No way*, she thought. Perhaps a few of the viewers recognized how brittle her smile became at that moment, but most of the ones the producers really cared about would still be busy looking down her blouse.

It was funny; online, those guys could find as much pornography as they could ever want. Even so, there was something special about looking down the blouse of a theoretically powerful and professional woman.

Kelly resisted the urge to shake her head or even just get up and snarl something about how this entire thing was ludicrous. The producers

weren't interested in gathering news or genuine journalism. This was a commercial venture, one devoid of any journalistic merit.

But it was a job—her job, so she smiled like a sexy set piece and resisted the temptation to glare at the camera.

“It's great to see you, Aric!”

“So, what is the mood like up there?” Tom asked as he started the interview.

“Is everyone having fun?” Kelly chimed in.

On his side of the screen, Aric glanced over his shoulder, “Everything is good. Of course, we are all a little bit nervous, but we are confident in Simon Industries. The technology is solid, it's been tested, and there are always risks, but we are willing to take them.”

“Has it been decided who will be the first man to step outside of the ship and onto this alien world?”

“Me,” Aric said. “I'm going to be the one who has that honor.”

“That's incredible,” Tom said with an appropriate note of professional awe and appreciation. But then he leaned forward, edging his shoulder toward the camera just a little bit. “Is it true that there was some debate among the crew? There has been chatter online that you nearly lost one of your crewmates when she wasn't chosen.”

“Actually, we have an excellent working relationship,” Aric said. Lots of the viewers laughed at that and even typed in comments about how he looked nervous. Others tried to defend the commander, but everyone had read through the rumors and made up their minds before watching the stream.

Corporal Cara Dare was supposed to be one of the most talented recruits in the entire Ranger Initiative program. Not only that, she was beautiful, which garnered even more attention for her online. As such, some of the promoters decided she should be the first one to get off of the ship and set foot on alien soil.

Then something happened.

The details had been sketchy.

Of course, tons of rumors and theories floated around Earth's digital networks, but no one had any clear answers. Perhaps there had been some kind of outburst on her part. Maybe she had lost control during a training simulation, which only proved women weren't *really* as capable as men. Others suggested there had been some sort of power play. The unverified

possibilities continued to play out, each one designed to appeal to a specific group.

Aric continued, “We work really well together, and I can’t wait to face this adventure with my teammates. We are going to explore a new planet. We will go somewhere no human has ever gone before.”

“That’s so great,” Kelly said. “And from what I understand, we are going to get to talk to Corporal Cara Dare. Is that right?”

“I don’t think—” Aric said, only then a young woman floated into the camera’s line of sight.

Tom suppressed a grin; yeah, he could see why this little hottie was on the crew. Having a bunch of guys to go out into space sounded exciting, especially for the patriots and venture capitalists. Heck, even some of the religious folk had decided it was time to spread the Word of God to other planets. Even if this was a purely governmental and secular mission, lots of churches dreamed about sending their people off to other worlds. Whatever.

But Corporal Cara Dare? Tom didn’t even care if this woman knew what she was doing. She was probably just a set piece to make sure the Ranger Initiative got funding. But damn! She had that incredible body, those great cheeks and cute nose.

Better yet, she tried so hard to look professional. There was something adorable about that, Tom thought. Yeah, she could try to be a real astronaut or whatever, but she was the kind of woman who just needed to be held down.

She could probably kick and fight, but that would just make the whole game that much more fun! At a glance, he could tell Corporal Dare was the kind of girl who could look tough, but she probably just yearned for a strong hand.

Tom enjoyed training horses as a hobby; he figured he could train a girl like her.

Aric glanced over at Corporal Dare, and a flashing irritation streaked across his features. *Yeah*, thought the journalist, *something definitely happened between those two*. Tom immediately wondered if maybe Dare had slept with the Commander to get on the mission. Obviously, things had gone sideways, and she probably went whining to the Ranger Initiative’s HR Department. That’s what usually happened with these female pilots and astronauts.

“Hi, Kelly, Tom,” Cara said with a friendly wave.

“Corporal Dare,” Tom said, “It’s great to see you. How is it going to feel being the only woman on this mission? Are you grateful to the Gender Inclusion Program?”

“To be honest, I like to think that I would be here even without the assistance of the Gender Inclusion Program.”

“I’m sure you would,” Tom wanted to mutter under his breath, but he was too much of a professional for something like that, so he flashed her a condescending smile instead. “I think my cohost has a couple of questions for you.”

“I’m sure you’re completely qualified to be up there,” Kelly said. The words were probably intended to sound genuinely reassuring, but everyone watching or listening to this stream might hear something else: some patronizing note of congratulation.

Another comment buzzed in Kelly’s ear, “You didn’t blow a kiss, so you are going to ask her how she stays so cute and fit in space.” Like so many other journalists, Kelly and Tom both held onto papers. They did have a few notes there, but both of these TV personalities used the paper to distract themselves and keep their hands busy for those moments when they needed to look like they had something to do.

Kelly now tensed her fingers around those pieces of paper. She was lucky she didn’t crumple them up.

Since she didn’t wish to get fired, she had to play along. She knew she had pushed her producer as far as she could. If she tried anymore, she really would get kicked off the stream, “Cara, how do you stay so cute and fit up there in space? I bet you can’t just run out and go buy some makeup when you run out of lipstick!”

Corporal Dare glared at the camera. Unlike these journalists, she didn’t have lots of practice schooling her features, not in front of hundreds of thousands of viewers.

“Aesthetics really isn’t the priority up here,” she said. “We really need to focus on safety and survival. This isn’t like working in the media.”

Kelly narrowed her eyes just slightly. Some of her fans may have picked up on the gesture. Most probably didn’t, but now she leaned forward, “Yes, we all respect what you have been able to do with the help of the Gender Inclusion Program, but don’t you feel that you are the female face of this mission? You are the only woman on board, after all.”

“That’s a lot of responsibility,” Thomas said. He probably didn’t intend to sound like a paternalistic, patronizing asshole, but his intentions didn’t really matter.

“I’m the only woman on board because I was the only one who could make it through the program,” Corporal Dare said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some tasks to take care of before we initiate our initial burn.”

“Thank you so much for coming,” Kelly said. “You are adorable!”

“Commander Donovan, how will you get along with your crewmates after you wake up from cryo-sleep?” Tom asked as he worked to shift attention away from the catfight. Both girls had been polite enough, but Tom was sure the viewers would be talking about this for a day or two at least.

“It’s going to be a challenge,” Aric acknowledged, “But I think we are up to it.” He glanced at one of his offscreen panels and quickly said, “I’m sorry, but I need to get going. We are going to be launching soon. Thank you so much. And thank you to everyone on Earth for all of your support. We won’t let you down!”

He pulled himself up and out of the camera’s line of sight; with just a tug, he seemed to leap up, which looked cool but was easy enough in a zero-G environment. Someone at Ground Control cut the feed, so the viewers could focus on Tom Clay and Kelly Snow’s deep cleavage.

The Ranger 3 Cryo Bay
May 15, 2091

“Not bad, Donovan,” Lionel Pike said as he strode past the different cryo-tubes. Each semi-circular chamber was open with soft, clean padding and a transparent hatch. In a few minutes, the crew of Ranger 3 would be inside and sleeping.

“Thank you, sir,” Aric replied as he double-checked the status of his pod. Once he finished, he turned back to Specialist Jones’ tube. That was the protocol; everyone checked their own cryo-tube, then a crewmate’s. This way, everything got double-checked twice.

Aric and the others had obviously tested the tubes. In fact, Aric had lost six months asleep, not that he aged during this time. Still, it had been so strange to go to sleep, only to wake up half a year later. During that time, he

missed a couple of special elections, new TV streams, not to mention one of his favorite singers had died in a drone crash.

This time, the sleep would last much, much longer.

"I'm serious," Lionel told him with a pat on the shoulder. "Dealing with streamers is never fun, especially when you have someone like Dare with you."

"She was fine," Aric said.

Their only female crew member was on the other side of the bay. Could she overhear this conversation? Probably.

Lionel lowered his voice, "Look, I wouldn't even have that girl on this ship if it wasn't for the Gender Inclusion Program." He used those last three words like they were an insult. "Seriously, if a woman can't compete fairly, then she shouldn't be on my ship at all. But this was a choice that was made by people who make a lot more than me."

"She passed all the tests," Aric said. As he spoke, he didn't know exactly why he chose that moment to defend her, especially after everything that had happened.

"Yeah, right. The tests. I don't trust those algorithms."

Aric pressed his lips together as he glanced back at Corporal Dare. He tried not to study the contours of her body, the shine of her hair, or the curve of her cheek even as she turned away. Still, there was something exciting and intoxicating about her.

"Technically, they're supposed to treat everyone fairly," Aric said.

"*Technically*," Lionel repeated. "That is exactly my point. Those algorithms were designed by people, people who wanted to make sure a girl could get on my boat."

Aric didn't say anything this time. In all honesty, he felt a degree of ambivalence. In past decades, he knew that various women's movements had pushed forward and asserted themselves. In some ways, they had succeeded. He knew of specific points in history when women were treated as literal property. Fathers and potential husbands might barter a daughter the way they would buy or sell cattle or any other livestock. Obviously, those dynamics no longer existed.

Women were free to go to college (if they could get in), get jobs (if they could get hired), and make their own decisions. Lots of men argued that females were equal under the law, but they never explained why so few women succeeded at the highest echelons of society.

Legally, women and men were considered equals. And yet, so many data points seemed to imply something else was going on.

Aric, over the course of his fairly voracious reading, had come across an old concept. It was called “systemic sexism,” and the notion had largely fallen out of favor. The male economists and sociologists who examined the world had largely dismissed the idea, yet it had continued to intrigue Aric.

Women could be legally equal; they could have the exact same rights as far as legal codes went, but if their obstacles were different or if they never got the chance to succeed, then the game could still be stacked against them. And obviously, there didn’t have to be any official policies or legal mandates for this to happen.

Aric recalled one example from an old textbook he had stumbled across online. For the most part, he had only opened it since it looked amusing. Reading about social dynamics from previous generations could be pretty hilarious, only now he studied a feminist scholar who talked about how people tended to hire those who were like themselves. This meant that male hiring managers generally chose other young men.

There didn’t have to be an official policy; there didn’t even have to be an explicit bias or clearly stated choice as far as the managers went. It could just be a personal preference, especially when it came to something as objective is trying to figure out who the “best” candidate would be.

Later, Aric came across other books about the push against feminism. Apparently, the concept had been somewhat popular, only then a corrosive shove by more reactionary forces across the planet had insured women returned to their generally subordinate roles throughout society. Yes, a few exceptions could be spotted, which ironically proved that sexism no longer existed. Corporal Dare was a great example. If anyone complained about how there weren’t more women in the Ranger Initiative, then the various men who ran this program could just talk about her. Corporal Dare had been able to join. If other women hadn’t made the cut, then they obviously hadn’t tried hard enough.

Those same men never pointed to the thousands of potentially qualified women who had been stopped at the interview process. It wasn’t like those few who made it through had been whittled down even more by the male psychologists who talked about subjective qualities like “resilience” and “grit”.

“If you ask me, she would be a much better asset on the ground, waving a flag and telling all of her fans how hard this will be.”

“Couldn’t you have her kicked off?” Aric asked.

The Captain smirked. “Yeah, but it wouldn’t be worth the paperwork. Besides, maybe it is nice to have a tight piece of ass on board.”

Corporal Dare didn’t react even as the Captain’s voice ricocheted down the corridor. Still, Aric made eye contact with her for just a moment, and he knew. He knew what she was thinking, just as he understood she had learned to keep her mouth shut.

“It’s time to take a nap,” Lionel said as he slapped Aric on the shoulder.

The Cygnus Command Deck Conference Chamber
April 22, 2292

The five women examined the holo-projector and watched as the probe’s camera angle shifted to provide fresh views of the blocky starship.

“What are we looking at?” asked the woman at the head of the table: Captain Dianne Mariesdaughter. She leaned forward and steepled her fingers as she studied the images playing across the air. White light glowed beneath the image of a boxy starship. Made from ugly lines and slabs of iron, it bulldozed its way across the distance with nothing but traditional thrust.

No gravity-driven FTL. Getting from one start to another would take...Captain Mariesdaughter decided not to think about it.

Science Officer Portia Rheaineduther cleared her throat and addressed their ship’s other senior crewmembers. “Compatriots, we appear to have stumbled across an old Exploration-Class starship.”

“Exploration-Class?” asked Carrie Sarasdaughter, the Navigation Officer.

The Information and History Officer began to speak; Beatrice Alanastocher had short, dark brown hair and angular features. Some of the menial crewmembers—males who did little more than cook, clean the halls, and scrub the engine parts—thought she was quite beautiful. Then again, that proved to be more of an irritant.

Beatrice said, “The Exploration-Class starships were developed just after the invention of the first cryo-stasis tubes. They were sent out to a

variety of star systems.”

“And we found one?” asked Astrogation and Navigation Officer Carrie Sarasdaughter. She glanced around the table, “The odds of something like this happening are literally astronomically small.”

“Do we know their destination?” asked the first officer.

“Tau Ceti,” said Navigation Officer Sarasdaughter. “We’ll outpace them in a matter of hours, but we’re headed for the same destination.”

“Ah, those boys,” said the first officer with an amused shake of her head. “If they had just waited a few more years, they could have traveled with an FTL-drive. Instead, they took the long way.”

“Amusing, yes,” agreed Captain Mariesdaughter. “But this raises an interesting question.”

“What do we do with them?” asked the science officer. Portia Rheainesduther was a beautiful woman with sleek cheeks, a prominent chin, vivid blue eyes, and naturally wavy blonde hair. She straightened up and said simply, “We could leave them, but we’d be skipping an invaluable anthropological opportunity.”

The Captain kept her fingertips pressed together, “What will happen if we leave the ship alone?”

“It’ll maintain it’s current course and speed,” said Carrie Sarasdaughter. The navigation officer glanced around, “Presumably, they’ll arrive in the Tau Ceti system, wake up, and find us there.”

“Us, plus a colony.”

“I bet those boys didn’t expect anything like this,” Portia said with a little smile. The science officer shook her head, “Captain, I recommend we take the ship.”

“Do we know anything about the crew?”

“We do,” said the information officer. “It took some digging in our data-stores, plus I had to burn a lot of Terran bandwidth, but I was able to find some fairly complete records. According to the transponder, this is Ranger 3. We also have the complete crew manifest.”

“How many?”

Beatrice checked the small screen in front of her; her fingers danced along the holographic keys as she entered the commands and pulled up the requisite data. “Seven,” she said. “Captain Lionel Pike; Commander Aric Donovan; plus Specialists Hamilton Tynes, Venier Jones, Chris Portman,

and Gary Axel. Sorry. There's an addendum here. They also added one Corporal—a woman. Cara Dare."

Everyone at the table glanced back and forth. "I didn't think women were given many options for opportunities," Portia said. "Are we sure they had a female with them?"

"I'm double checking the records now, but the data looks clean," Beatrice replied. "As near as I can tell, they definitely had a woman."

"Before the Water Wars, I assumed most women were kept as subordinates and second-class citizens," Captain Mariesdaughter said to her senior officers.

"That's correct," Beatrice replied, "While men did their best to hold onto power, there were a couple of counter political movements dedicated to female empowerment. I'm guessing Corporal Dare managed to get onto this crew due to one of those." Even as Beatrice offered her theory, her eyes scanned across her holographic readout. "Here it is. I guess they called it the Gender Inclusive Program."

"How kind of them," growled the Astrogation Officer. Their Captain wasn't surprised when Carrie spoke like that. Of her crewmembers, she was one of the most aggressive. Then again, so many pilots savored the excitement and rush of maneuvering ships between planets, asteroids, or even down in actual atmospheres.

"This is all very interesting," Jessica said, "But we need to figure out precisely what we want to do. The ship will clearly need to be salvaged. Can we take it with us?"

"The additional mass will slow us down somewhat," Carrie replied, "but I think we should be able to handle it without falling behind schedule, especially if I can get permission to burn some extra fuel."

"Do it," Dianne said. The Captain turned to the others, "But Jessica is right. We need to determine what to do with the men on board."

"There are some potential dangers," Portia pointed out. The Science Officer glanced around the table. Like the other women, she had imagined a few possibilities right away. Six men could be quite entertaining, especially if they were wild and feral, born in another age.

And yet, Portia and the others would all be professional. There was a reason why females had been able to so easily take over after the Water Wars devastated most of Terra. Men could throw their tantrums, battle, and

lose control of their emotions. Women, meanwhile, could think clearly through any crisis.

“Dangers?” Dianne asked.

“That’s right,” Portia replied, “Beatrice will need to verify this for me, but I’m guessing there are going to be some big holes in their medical records. Even under the best of circumstances, we don’t understand a lot of what happened around the time of the Ranger Initiative.”

Beatrice nodded. “That’s correct, Captain. Frankly, we got lucky with these records. Under most circumstances, we wouldn’t know anything about these men. Most of the Ranger Initiative starships were lost.”

“Exactly,” Portia said. “If we don’t know much about these men, we don’t know exactly what kinds of vaccinations they have received or what kind of viral or bacterial pathogens they might be carrying with them.”

“Can’t we let them out one at a time?” Jessica asked. As the first officer, Jessica Lianasdottir understood the importance of keeping her crew happy.

Yes, they could rely on one another, and they would continue to act professionally. Still, traveling between stars took several years, and discovering Ranger 3 offered the crew some potential for...diversion.

Portia began to nibble on her bottom lip as her head bobbed from side to side. She was running through the calculations. “Captain, I think it could be done, but we need to be extraordinarily careful.”

“Can’t we just scan for pathogens or whatever?” Carrie asked. As the youngest member of the senior crew, it made sense she would yearn to take the biggest risks, especially if it meant getting some time alone with a feral boy.

Captain Mariesdaughter looked around the table, “What do we know about each of the boys?”

“Again,” Beatrice said, “We got lucky. There are a few gaps here, but I have been able to retrieve most of the personnel records.”

“What do we know about them? What do we know about the Captain?”

Beatrice typed in additional information, and the holographic projection shifted. The image of a man with dark hair, broad shoulders, and a strong jaw appeared. The women glanced back and forth at one another.

“This is Captain Lionel Pike,” Beatrice said. “According to his psychological evaluation, he is hostile and aggressive.”

Jessica glanced over at Beatrice, “But they still let him lead a mission?”

“The psychologists and scientists didn’t get very much political capital,” Beatrice explained. “I’m sure there were other candidates who were even worse. Much of the Ranger Initiative project apparently was funded by the military, which meant they gave preferential treatment to their pilots.”

“Explorers who just happened to double as soldiers,” Dianne said with a shake of her head. Yes, she believed in self-defense and understood how dangerous interstellar travel could be.

“It was a time where men ruled,” Beatrice said with a shrug.

“What about the others?” Jessica asked.

The holographic image shifted, rippling before shifting to a different boy. The women at the table saw him, the contours of his cheeks, the tone of his lips, and the color of his eyes.

Dianne studied him for several long seconds. There was something about this one that intrigued her. “What’s his name?”

“Aric Donovan,” Beatrice said. Before any of the others could ask, she went ahead with the psychological profile. “He was rated artistic and fairly introverted. He’s adept at leadership, though his ambitions seemed to focus on exploration rather than the pursuit of authority.”

“Interesting,” Dianne said as she studied the rotating image.

“Huh,” Beatrice said.

Portia raised an eyebrow, “What did you find?”

“He was a photographer. A good one, it seemed.”

“Do we have any of his work?”

Beatrice blinked, apparently surprised by her superior’s question. After a few seconds, she found the files and brought them up.

Different landscapes shimmered and shifted in front of the assembled women. It was Jessica who remarked, “These boys may not have been very smart, but at least this one could take some pictures.”

“He did a good job of documenting the natural world, at least before these boys ruined everything,” Portia said. As a science Officer, she had the best understanding of just how badly males had wrecked the environment.

Wide blue skies, clean, snowcapped mountains, and wild plains dominated the images.

“That’s all we have,” Beatrice said after the seventh picture.

“A shame,” Dianne said. “What about these other boys?”

“Next, we have Hamilton Tynes,” Beatrice said. “His file is more limited. Apparently, he was the primary mechanic for the mission. He specialized in engines, especially rockets and maneuvering thrusters.”

“Any psychological characteristics we should be aware of?” Jessica asked. “If we decide to let any of these boys out, we need to make sure that they are stable and that they won’t cause any trouble.”

“Like what? Insurrection?” Carrie asked. Before anyone could answer, the navigator said, “I would love to see those boys try. I mean, let’s face it. The journey would be a lot more interesting if a few of them rebelled.”

“It’s a possibility,” Dianne said. “The boys always appear to be servile, especially when they are busy with their menial tasks, but we should never underestimate biology or evolution.”

Portia spoke up to agree with her captain, “I agree. Male psychology is inherently unstable, tending toward aggressive. Do I think they could take over the ship? Absolutely not. Do I think they could cause some trouble and maybe damage key systems, thereby make your life much, much more difficult? Absolutely.”

“Yeah,” Carrie allowed. “I had to lock one of the boys in the stocks the other day.”

“What did he do wrong?” Dianne asked.

“I didn’t like the way he groveled,” Carrie said.

The other officers glanced back and forth at one another before they all burst into laughter. Dianne, as the Captain, needed to maintain her veneer of serious contemplation, but even the corners of her mouth twitched upward.

When the laughter died down, Beatrice explained, “From what I can tell, Specialist Tynes was known for speed.” Kerry nodded approvingly.

“What about the others?”

“Specialist Jones doesn’t look very interesting. Apparently, he was the agricultural specialist. It was his job to maintain the botanical bays before and after they went into cryo sleep.”

“Were there any plans we could use?”

“Actually, quite a few,” Portia said quickly. “Remember, these plants come from before the Water Wars, so they are free from any kind of biological contamination. This will be a pretty incredible find.”

“I’m sure the people back home are going to be interested in this,” Dianne said.

Jessica glanced up at her commanding officer, “Really? You think so?”

“These boys are a historical oddity. If we decide to let any of them out, then yes, they are going to get a lot of attention. I have already sent word back to Stellar Command, but you know how these things go. They will have a press conference within a couple of hours, and a lot of people are going to be talking about this on their feeds.”

It was true, they all realized.

Because she wanted her crew focused on the task at hand, Captain Mariesdaughter asked, “And the others?”

“Chris Portman is an expert in robotics.” Portia grinned and shook her head, “Well, he is an expert in robotics by male standards. I doubt his skills would be good enough for him to pass a high school robotics course.”

“A boy taking high school robotics?” Carrie asked. “He wouldn’t be able to make it through the front door!”

The women chuckled; yes, that was true. Although a few men, especially those from wealthy families, could go to fancy finishing schools, they didn’t study robotics. No, they learned the logistics of cooking, cleaning, and perhaps some household management. Those were the boys who would be the dutiful husbands for their wives, women who took command of the world in everything from business and politics to art and entertainment.

“According to his psychological profile, Portman is supposed to be incredibly analytical.”

“He sounds boring,” said the navigator.

“That may not be a factor we will consider,” Dianne said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Carrie replied.

“That brings us to our last male: Axle. His skills are focused primarily on survival and exploration.”

“I assume they were headed toward the same planet as us?” Jessica asked. “Does that mean he was going to be the first one to step off of their ship?”

Beatrice checked, smirked, and quickly shook her head, “No, ma’am.” She was wise enough to follow Carrie’s lead, especially because

the rules could be dynamic on board this ship. They maintained discipline, obviously, yet the rules could shift.

Spending so many years out in the void meant there had to be some flexibility. That was why the Ranger 3 discovery was so important; not only did it represent a monumental historical and anthropological discovery, but it could help the crew burn through some of their tedium.

Dianne was sure every member of the crew, probably even the boys, were talking about this.

“So we have some interesting possibilities,” Dianne said as she pondered the different possibilities. “Obviously, we will wake up Corporal Dare. She is a woman, and she deserves nothing less. The boys, however, represent both interesting possibilities and potential threats.”

“Agreed,” Jessica spoke for the rest of the crew.

All of the women knew exactly what they wanted to do, but that didn’t mean it would be a wise decision. As such, they studied their captain and waited for Dianne to make her decision.

Disorientation swept through his mind and body. For a long time, he seemed to be aware of the cool air moving along his mostly naked body, only he couldn’t move. More importantly, Aric couldn’t decide whether or not he had always been like this. Maybe he had never had any sort of life or identity. He was just some entity floating along in a chilled atmosphere.

Only then, he recognized the shifting light, and he remembered his eyelids. He started to lift them, only to feel the blazing illumination cut down into his retinas. He clenched his eyes shut and started to remember the rest of his body.

“Take your time,” came a familiar voice.

“Cara?” Aric tried to ask.

A different voice, unfamiliar, said, “Please refrain from speaking. You have been in stasis for a long time, so you need to just relax. I’ve given you a couple of stimulants, and they will speed up the recovery process, but you still don’t want to push yourself too hard too soon.”

“What happened? Where are we? Who is that?”

“Just be quiet for now,” said the second voice. It definitely belonged to a woman, and she sounded confident. There was also something rich in her voice. She sounded well-educated and assertive, like she knew how it felt to usually be the smartest person in the room.

Despite her order, Aric tried to flex his fingers and lift his arms. Her voice shifted, becoming strict and stern, "If you don't relax right now, I will have my assistants strap you down."

"Can I at least talk?" Aric asked.

Although he didn't open his eyes, and he remained still, he imagined some woman standing above him next to Corporal Dare, and she would probably be wobbling her head from side to side as she considered what to tell him.

"Okay," she said grudgingly, "You are wild, and you don't understand how things work now."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm not quite sure," Cara confessed.

"Who is that? Who else is here?" Every second brought the temptation to try to open his eyes and look around, especially because his thoughts scrabbled as he tried to come up with some explanation.

Nothing seemed likely. If the mission had failed, they would all be dead; it wasn't like Earth could deploy other ships to go rescue the Ranger 3 if something went wrong. This was deep space, and any number of issues could kill every member of the crew. Rogue asteroids or meteorites. Radiation surges. Mechanical failures.

"My name is Doctor Miranda Gaia."

"How did you get out here?"

"I appreciate your questions, but it's best if you relax and settle down. Give yourself a few minutes. You have been through a lot, young man, and need to settle down. Give your body time to adjust."

"It took me a while," Cara said.

Aric didn't like it. Frankly, he thought of himself as an explorer and an adventurer, so he needed to speak up, look around, and do something.

Perhaps his muscles twitched because the doctor said, "If necessary, I will restrain you."

He exhaled through his nostrils and slowly forced the tension out of his body. "Okay," the doctor said several long seconds later, "You can probably try to open your eyes now."

Aric obliged. Even then, he was careful, took his time, and raised his eyelids slowly. The glaring illumination still seemed sharp, but his eyes adjusted, and he found himself looking at Corporal Dare.

The moment he saw her, he experienced that pang once again. He suppressed it, just as he had over the last few months. But then he started to smile, and the muscles in his cheeks hurt. He wanted to smile because it hadn't been a few moments; even if time had seemed to stop for him, the years could have rolled by.

"We didn't make it out of the solar system, did we?" Aric finally asked as the horrifying revelation hit him.

"Apparently, it's more complicated than that."

"Don't tell him anything," Miranda said. The doctor smiled at him and addressed Aric, "I understand how fragile the male psyche can be. It's important for you to relax and take some time to rest. If you like, I can have one of the service boys bring you some male-appropriate entertainment."

"Male-appropriate?" Cara asked.

"That's right," Miranda replied. "It's important for our boys to receive the proper kind of stimulation. If they get too excited, there can be problems."

"Right," she said, although neither she nor Aric had any idea what Doctor Gaia really meant by that.

"Can you rest?" Miranda asked Aric.

"I don't think so," he said. "I'm going to need some information. I want to know what's going on, how far we got, and what is going to happen next. I'm really okay. I don't need to rest. I feel fine, just a little bit stiff."

"Classic male arrogance," said the doctor with an amused shake of her head.

"Look, I'm serious," he said.

"And I'm the woman, the doctor, and I'm telling you exactly what is going to happen. You are going to rest, Aric."

"I'm telling you that's not necessary," he said. "Please, Doctor, you can tell me what's going on." Then he realized something as he looked back at Corporal Dare. You told her, didn't you? We are on the same crew. Hell, I outrank her! I could order her to tell me what is going on right now!"

His voice rose with a rush of frustration and a hint of shame, but he had every right to understand what had happened. He was going to be the first person to set foot on an alien world; if the mission had failed, he had every right to understand why. They would be some of the first humans to travel between stars.

They'd visit Tau Ceti—if this worked.

“No, you don’t,” the doctor said.

Aric inhaled again. He tried to concentrate on his breathing as he worked to get his thoughts under control. Part of him really wanted to say, “Can I talk to someone else? A man, maybe?” While the rest of his crew wouldn’t have minded uttering words along those lines, Aric did his best to remain politic and polite.

He looked around the room and realized something. He wasn’t on board the Ranger 3. He couldn’t be. The dark and gritty metals of his ship had been replaced by smooth, white lines. Not only that, his ship didn’t even have gravity. Why bother trying to worry about creating some illusion of gravity with something like centrifugal force when most of the crew would be asleep for the vast majority of the journey anyway?

The doctor waved her hand in front of some kind of storage cabinet, and a drawer opened automatically.

Aric didn’t know exactly what he expected to see, but it wasn’t this: some sort of handheld spray. It looked like the end of a garden hose, only she started to walk toward him.

Aric tried again because he knew it wasn’t fair to judge Doctor Gaia based on her sex. Even if he wanted to kick her out and demand a different physician, he forced himself to say, “Let’s just talk about this, okay?” He didn’t realize what he was doing, that he was the man in the room, so he thought that entitled him to some extra respect.

“Just relax, boy. You’ll feel a lot better when you wake up and you won’t have to worry about making any decisions.”

His reflexes must’ve been dulled by the time in stasis because it took him longer than it should have to realize what was about to happen. Her hand shot out, she pressed the tip of her instrument against the side of his neck, and suddenly he got sleepy all over again.

“I, I have a right to know what’s going...” Aric couldn’t finish the statement.

So much of their starship was automated, which meant that senior staff had little to do. Women like Carrier Sarasdaughter could only check the astrogation charts so many times before it felt like she had memorized the long, complicated strings of equations. Some of the crew were better off.

As a science officer, Portia could conduct her experiments. Her resources may have been somewhat limited, but there were always new questions to consider and ponder. Even from a purely theoretical perspective, she could evaluate other experiments.

The incoming data may have been limited to a trickle by interstellar distances, but it was better than nothing.

First Officer Jessica Lianasdottir and Captain Dianne Mariesdaughter had a much harder time. For Jessica, it was probably the worst. These women were in command, but their orders had been given.

The Ranger 3, however, presented some interesting choices.

A new woman had joined the senior staff for this meeting. Technically, she wasn't a member of the command deck crew, but Doctor Maranda Gaia had useful information.

"I read your report, but I would like to hear your insights aloud," the Captain said. Dianne did her best not to sound too interested, especially because she knew she couldn't lay claim to this boy herself. She already had a service male in her quarters.

In fact, she suppressed a smile as she thought of what she could do with him after this meeting.

The doctor may have spent most of her time down in the infirmary where she attended to the minor injuries that plagued the service boys, she had no problem addressing the women before her, "He is definitely an interesting specimen. He is aggressive and assertive."

"And you felt it necessary to sedate him?"

"For his own good. Besides, I had Corporal Dare with me."

"And where is she now?"

"We assigned her quarters," Jessica interjected. "Currently, she has free run of the nonsecure portions of the ship, but she seems to be focused primarily on reading through the histories."

"Smart woman," Dianne said.

"My thoughts exactly," said Miranda. "She may feel a woman out of time, but I think she will adapt. That said, she has some rather—" The doctor hesitated as she tried to come up with the right word, "old-fashioned ideas about women and men."

"A lot has happened," Jessica said sympathetically.

"Agreed," Dianne said. "We need to give her time. Still, I'm curious, did she have any objections for how you sedated Donovan?" His

last name sounded so ancient. She may as well have been referring to one of the British queens.

“She raised a few objections,” Miranda said, “But she understands how things are different. At the same time, I think she may have secretly enjoyed seeing him silenced like that.”

“A tour will do him some good, and I’m sure you will want to inspect him for any potential pathogens. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely,” said the doctor. “I will begin when he wakes up.”

“Ladies,” Dianne said as she touched her fingertips together once again, “I have been thinking about the possibilities this young man presents.”

At this point, the women leaned forward as they all waited to hear the Captain’s decision. Their starship was more advanced than the Ranger 3 by several orders of magnitude. More than ten times larger and equipped with the kinds of technology those men could barely conceive of, their ship was astonishing, yet none of these women had been allowed a pleasure boy. That was a privilege reserved for the captain.

“Before I announce any decisions, I want you to know that I understand how you all feel. He could make an incredible service boy, not for personal service since his abilities would be wildly out of date, but other skills which he could be taught fairly easily. That said, I am still reluctant to use a wild male as a pleasure boy.”

“That makes sense,” Jessica said. “As we discussed, there is a good possibility he would try to incite problems among the other males.”

“That’s true,” Portia said, “But what about the possibility of training him? He’s cute. He has a lot of potential.”

“He is also from an entirely patriarchal society, one where sexism was the norm,” Dianne said. “Look, for us, it is an anathema. More importantly, it’s almost impossible to imagine. And yet, that is the society in which he was born, was educated, and learned how to see the world.”

“It wasn’t long after the Ranger Initiative that the males were subdued,” Beatrice pointed out. As the Information and History Officer, she understood the exact transition from patriarchy to the far superior gynarchy. “He could pose a threat; we can’t forget this fact.”

These women were in one of the most advanced starships ever built, yet they still had several more years of their journey ahead of them. As such, they would need entertainment.

They would need a challenge. Someone like Aric.

The Captain considered the possibilities, but she wasn't ready to make a decision. "Doctor, I want you to continue to observe this boy. Examine him, as you intended and maybe give him a taste of what has transpired, but be careful. If necessary, we can put him back into stasis along with the others, but I would rather not."

If her crew members experienced any pangs of disappointment, they didn't let it show on their faces. "Dismissed," said the Captain.

One way or another, these women had to find work to do or something to keep themselves occupied as they wondered what Aric's fate might be.

More time went by. He relaxed in the warm darkness. Warmth. It seemed to permeate his body, soaking into his muscles as he settled into that comfortable sedation. For a long time, Aric didn't think or worry. But eventually, he needed to get up.

He had to rise out of that bed and say something to someone. He needed to...

Aric tried to finish the thought, only his ideas felt slippery and impossible to hold onto. Instead, he just wanted to relax into the dark of sleep. But eventually, he got better and better at pulling himself out. Then he remembered his mission, his crew, and that insufferably condescending tone from the doctor.

He would speak to her commanding officer and tell him what she had done. To sedate a commander in the Ranger Initiative without his consent? Ridiculous!

A few seconds later, Aric knew he had every right to be angry, but he also realized it wasn't fair to destroy this woman's career over his frustration. He would give her the chance to explain herself; better yet, he would offer her the opportunity to apologize.

Hearing that haughty doctor beg for forgiveness might make him feel a lot better.

Eventually, he could blink his eyes open again, only Aric realized something.

He couldn't move his arms.

He was on his back and spread out. He had his arms at his sides, and his toes pointed toward the ceiling, but he couldn't do something as simple

as scratch the tip of his nose.

“Please open your mouth,” Miranda said to him.

“Why? What you going to do?” Even as he spoke, she lifted another one of those instruments. It had to be some kind of new, experimental syringe. That was how she had drugged him the first time.

Instinctively, he tried to bring his arms up, like he thought he might be able to block his throat, thereby keeping her from administering another dose of whatever she had in mind.

But his hands were shackled to the bed. Not only that, there were matching restraints around his ankles, making sure this boy couldn’t move. After another second, he realized something else. He was almost entirely naked except for a pair of snug, white briefs made from some sleek material which he couldn’t even identify.

The doctor wasn’t going to inject him, not this time. When his mouth was open, she sprayed something along the roof of his mouth in the back of his throat.

“There we go,” she said. “It’s important for you to listen, not speak. This will help with that. It’s called a devox spray. Don’t worry. It’s only temporary, but it will make speech impossible for you.”

Aric heard the words, but he didn’t understand how something like this could happen. Besides, he had always been able to speak quite well. Throughout his academic and professional careers, Aric always excelled at negotiating and presenting his point of view. That was the best explanation for what happened between him and Cara...

Because he didn’t believe her, he tried to speak. For as long as he could remember, it was always so easy. He didn’t need to think about how to make his vocal cords vibrate. Word choice, tone and tempo might have been strategic decisions, but actually generating sound? No, that came effortlessly.

Until now.

He pulled on the restraints as he wanted to touch his throat. He couldn’t lift either arm, and the doctor watched him with a smug look of satisfaction on her face.

“Now, we have a couple of different possibilities,” she said. “If you are really upset and continue struggling to the point where you might harm yourself, I will have to sedate you again. If you can be trusted, I can let you

out, and I can tell you about where you are, or you can keep wiggling adorably. It's up to you."

His eyes narrowed, and he revealed his teeth.

Aric's normally sweet nature reasserted itself, so he pressed the back of his skull down against the soft pad beneath him, he breathed out, got his temper under control, and he waited.

"Can you cooperate? Can you be a good male?"

A good male? Who talked like that? Since Aric wasn't a linguist, he didn't know exactly how to explain her slight accent either. She spoke English, only some of the vowels or consonants seemed to be shaped differently. Perhaps they were a little faster and rounder than he had expected.

When he looked up, he saw Doctor Gaia waiting for a decision. She seemed impatient, as though she wouldn't just stand there forever. If he wanted to get off of that bed, he would need to give her something.

He nodded.

"Good," she said. "Now, I have already scanned your blood, and I don't believe there are any pathogens which we need to be worried about, which is excellent. Considering I got the same results from Corporal Dare, I'm not terribly surprised, but you can never be too careful."

Aric wished he could have said something, if only to agree with her, yet his vocal cords still stubbornly refused to work. He had so many questions, but this woman had decided that this boy would listen, not talk, so he stayed silent.

"This is very important. I don't want you to get into trouble. We just found you, and it would be terrible if you ended up in the stocks or brig, so will you cooperate and behave yourself?"

Behave? The question made him sound like a child. Worse, she was looking down at him like he couldn't be trusted as an equal. Technically, he probably outranked her!

Still, Aric forced himself to nod once again. More importantly, he didn't grimace or even frown at her.

"Good," she said. She waved her hands through the air, and the gesture reminded him of something he might have seen in a fantasy vid filled with sorcerers and witches. The haptic command registered with whichever sensors monitored both of them. The restraints slid back into the bed, disappearing completely.

Again, dozens of different questions percolated behind his eyes. Were they back on Earth? What happened to the Ranger 3? Heck, he wanted to know which government she was with.

“Come along,” she said.

Miranda strolled off, and Aric took a step. He almost expected to fall down, especially because he had been warned about the effects of stasis. Some of the physiologists explained that his muscles might not return to their normal strength for days or even weeks.

And yet, his feet touched the cool, tiled floor, and his legs bore his weight without any problem. After another moment, he glanced over at the doctor as she headed through the automatically sliding doors.

Aric still hesitated. He looked down beneath him. What were these panels made of? Plastic? Glass? He didn’t know, but he was certain that they were far more beautiful than the metal plates which served as flooring on board the Ranger 3.

Practically jumping forward, Aric rushed after Doctor Gaia. They went through some sort of entry chamber and out into a curved corridor.

Aric froze even as the doctor continued to walk ahead, but he couldn’t help himself. As a photographer, he had an eye for beauty, but he tended to gravitate toward the natural world. This, however, was incredible. The walls seemed to glow. They seemed to be made out of some smooth, perfect glass.

This didn’t feel like a ship or any kind of military or even scientific installation. It felt like a work of art...

Miranda stopped at the next doorway. Before she waved her hand to make the portal open, she waited for her patient.

He opened his mouth, glanced down at his mostly naked body, and shivered, but not from any kind of cold. Yes, it was slightly cooler than he would have liked, but it remained comfortable.

Couldn’t they give him some real clothing?

At the very least, they could return his jumpsuit. He had been unconscious for a while, which meant they probably washed it.

And yet, simple words and requests were completely beyond this boy. “Come along,” Miranda said. “I don’t have all day. If you’re feeling really shy, I can take you back to the exam room. Or would you like to see what we have to offer?”

Aric nibbled on the inside of his mouth. Realistically, he knew that going back into the infirmary wasn't an option. Under her watchful gaze, he bowed his head down, scurried forward, and that's when she gave him a pat on the bottom.

It was a quick, casual motion, one she hardly seemed to notice. "Good boy," she said. With a wave of her hand, the door opened. She stepped into a large atrium, but Aric was curious about something.

He tried to mimic her gesture, and he expected the door to close. It didn't.

His brows creased with confusion; he knew about haptic technologies. There were some very old game systems that had tried to integrate the option, but they had never really taken off. Most players preferred keyboards, mice, joysticks, or something else to hold. Simply standing in front of a camera and hoping the AI would correctly read the movements had never really taken off.

"Come along," Miranda called out, this time without stopping or turning around.

Obediently, Aric scurried after her. To his right, he saw a small dining area. There were five women seated at different tables. At first, he thought they had laptops or tablet computers in front of them. Instead, he realized that the numbers, images, and words appearing in front of them simply glowed on the air.

Holograms?

No way.

Okay, he decided. They weren't on a ship. This had to be some kind of experimental facility, maybe a place where scientists could experiment. If so, then how did he, a commander on board a Ranger starship, end up here? It didn't make any sense.

When he saw the women, he slowed down for a moment. One of them glanced in his direction. Almost immediately, she started whispering to someone else, and she turned to him as well. Before long, all of the crew members had abandoned their lunches and holograms. Instead, they picked up small rectangular devices and pointed them in his direction.

Miranda came back, reached up, placed her hand on the back of Aric's neck, and tugged him along. "If you're going to make a scene, I will have to take you back to the infirmary," she said.

If he made a scene? Indignant, he tried to open his mouth and speak. Yes, his lips and tongue worked just fine, but he couldn't push any air out in the shape of real words.

She pulled him along, and he turned back to the atrium.

Aric's deposition about this not being a ship was proved correct a moment later. He turned back and saw the enormous oak and pine trees. While the floor remained smooth and clean, the trees had small rings of dirt. And yet, they were enormous. The roots must have stretched for dozens of meters in every direction.

Not only that, he saw birds dart from one branch to another.

Did they have an entire ecosystem in here?

Was this some sort of biosphere?

Aric couldn't come to any conclusions, but Miranda pinched on the back of his neck and pulled him forward. He really, really wanted to shrug her off, but he already knew that wouldn't be tolerated here.

A moment later, he saw a man in some kind of gray jumpsuit walk by them. At first, the young man had his head held up, and he seemed to be thinking through some problem or idea. Then he saw Miranda, dipped his head down low and said, "Excuse me, ma'am."

"You're fine," she said dismissively.

The man in gray disappeared into another doorway.

Miranda, with her patient following behind, headed toward one of the outer corridors. Along the way, she explained, "You are on board the *Cygnus*."

The *Cygnus*? She made this sound like a ship, especially when she told him he was "on board". His mind jumped to the only possible conclusion: were they on some sort of boat or cruise ship? Was it possible the Ranger 3 Returned to Earth, only to crash through the atmosphere and end up in one of the oceans?

"Before I tell you about her mission, I want you to understand that it's very important for you to do as you're told. Corporal Dare obviously has a lot more freedom, but because of your limitations, you will have to do as you're told. Do you think you can handle that?"

Aric didn't say anything because he couldn't.

That's why she reached up, gently cupped the back of his skull, and forced his head down and up again as though he had willingly nodded.

How could she touch him like this?

Then she pushed him closer to one of the panels. With another wave of her hand and a couple of easy gestures of her fingertips, she activated the window.

The white, glassy wall disappeared, becoming instantly transparent. That's when Aric looked out, and he saw the view of the stars.

Of course, the distant stars didn't look like they were moving. Still, he realized right away that they were actually on a starship.

"I know this is going to be hard for a boy to understand, but you were in stasis for a very long time. You are now aboard the *Cygnus*, a starship. I'm sure you have a lot of questions, and I will answer them over time. But right now, we haven't decided exactly what we are going to do with you. You don't want to go back into stasis, do you?"

Aric frowned back at her, only he expected her to start laughing. More questions streamed between his ears, but he couldn't utter a single one of them.

"Are you ready to go back to the infirmary?"

He inhaled and got ready to argue. Since that wasn't a viable possibility, he let his shoulders slump, he exhaled, and he allowed the doctor to take him by the hand and guide him back.

"You know, Aric, you are a rather interesting specimen. All of the men of my generation have been thoroughly trained and domesticated. But you? You still try to think for yourself, don't you?" She made it sound like such a novel concept.

This time, she didn't wait for him to nod. Instead, Miranda assumed she already knew the answer.

"Now, are you ready for your medical exam? I have already scanned for pathogens, but I would like to test your physiological and start working on a psychological profile."

Once they went back into the exam room, he pointed to his throat. Obviously, he was gesturing for the chance to start speaking again, but she didn't say anything right away, not until she told him, "Maybe later. Right now, I want you to do some push-ups."

Push-ups? Really?

"I want to see exactly how your muscles have fared over the course of your stasis."

Aric didn't move right away.

“Again,” she said, “It’s either this or I take you back to your tube.”

He bit down, clenching his jaw as he lowered himself to his knees. Then he pushed his weight down against the palms of his hands, straightened his back, and started to do push-ups under the doctor’s watchful gaze.

As a trained physician, Miranda understood some of the Solar Medical Foundation’s moral gray areas. Obviously, women were entitled to privacy. Medical information about males, however, could get a little bit more complicated. If a boy’s wife or guardian decided to keep his information private, then it obviously needed to be protected with the same seriousness as any woman’s medical records.

Only this boy didn’t have a wife or guardian...

Doctor Gaia was sure a bunch of lawyers somewhere were busy dealing with these questions. The old statutes about independent boys probably applied, but the judges and adjudicators probably wouldn’t like that answer, so they might find some loophole or exception to prove the state needed to take custody of these males and find them appropriately loving homes where they could be reintegrated into society.

“Keep going,” Doctor Gaia commanded.

Aric hesitated as his muscles started to burn through the exertion.

He let gravity guide his torso down, breathed out, pushed back as he straightened his arms and experienced the burn of working out. With each motion, he could feel Miranda’s eyes on him as the doctor watched him.

“You can do more,” she said.

By this point, heat coursed along his cheeks as they began to redden. The warmth spread across his shoulders and down his legs. With every second, he could feel her watchful gaze as the doctor watched and studied this male specimen.

“Keep going,” she instructed again as he slowed.

“I—I can’t,” he gasped. By now, he’d lost track of how many push-ups he’d done, but she wasn’t satisfied.

When Aric dropped onto his side, Doctor Gaia tsked and asked, “Do all boys from your century give up so easily?”

Panting, he said, “I...I didn’t give up.”

Honestly, he knew that he seldom completed so many push-ups, but he had wanted to impress her. Still, she walked over to him. Doctor Miranda Gaia, unlike so many of the other crew members, didn’t just wear

her jumpsuit. With the white, sleek fabric and blue trim, it looked fairly comfortable, but the white lab coat, an ancient tradition among those in her profession, added to her authority and gravitas.

“You did,” she said. “But it’s important for me to understand your condition.”

“I did more than sixty push-ups!” Aric protested between frenzied gasps.

“True,” she allowed, “But you didn’t wait for permission to stop.”

“I didn’t need permission,” he said.

At that moment, she took a small cube out of her pocket, set it down on a table, and began to move her fingers through the air. Another haptic interface, he thought.

Despite his fatigue, Aric studied her movements. He tried to comprehend what she was doing, yet it felt like working to understand what someone typed by the sounds the keyboard made.

He gave up after a few seconds.

“I’m concerned about your obedience,” she said.

Still silenced, he couldn’t respond. Still, the doctor seemed to guess exactly what he was thinking.

“That’s right,” she told him. “From what I understand, males from your age were quite independent.”

Independent. That was supposed to be a good word. It demonstrated initiative and a man’s ability to think for himself. But when Miranda said it, the word almost sounded dirty.

“Discipline is very important, especially on this ship, especially for someone in your position, Aric. It’s important that you learn how to fit in with the rest of the crew.”

This boy gulped and glanced off to the side. He couldn’t see any Windows, but his thoughts returned to the Ranger 3.

“Are you thinking about your ship? That adorable museum piece?” Miranda asked, only to start chuckling. She didn’t wait for him to answer; then again, she was a doctor, and she had no problem reading male facial cues. Fresh heat rose along his cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the workout. “No,” she continued. “You definitely won’t be allowed to go out in that interstellar dinghy.”

Aric may not have been one of the engineers who built the Ranger ships, but he remembered just how impressed he had been, especially when

he saw the first designs, the first images of its super structure as it was built in space dock, and finally taking a tour. It had been cutting edge technology, incredibly powerful and fast, faster than anything another human had built. This would be a vessel capable of taking humanity to the stars.

And yet, Aric and the rest of the men who ran the Ranger Initiative never wondered if they should simply wait for technology to catch up with their ambitions.

“Oh, don’t feel bad,” she said. “I’m sure you boys did the best with what you had. Now, please stand up, hold your hands behind your back, and don’t move.”

Miranda began to slide her fingers through the air once again. He vaguely got the impression that she was planning some kind of invisible instrument. The air rippled in front of her; she was looking at a hologram, although the data became hopelessly jumbled and useless from his angle. This is probably some sort of privacy feature, but it also made him wonder exactly what she was writing about him.

Because he didn’t know the protocols for this ship from this time period, Aric obeyed once again. He felt ridiculous, especially as he stood there in his white briefs. The material was tight along his buttocks in between his legs. Every few seconds, Miranda glanced in his direction, and she seemed to smirk, like she was pleased by what she found.

She was looking at him like he was a piece of meat. Or maybe worse, she saw him as little more than a lab experiment.

Or it could have all been in his imagination. He couldn’t really know one way or the other, but he refused to get upset.

“Very good,” she said once she saw this boy was in the requisite position with his back straight. She continued to type, a set of panels above him opened, and a pair of drones dropped out. They hovered around him as they began to initiate various scans.

“Those are incredible,” Aric wanted to say, only he still couldn’t speak.

They seemed to genuinely hover. In his time, drones routinely flew through the skies and even in more advanced offices and shops, yet they had to be held aloft by propellers. These devices seemed to hover on their own as they used some kind of anti-grav technology.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now don’t move.”

The drones scanned him and recorded him. They studied the contours of his body, the curves of his arms and legs, and his features. Aric really, really wanted to ask exactly what kind of data she was collecting.

He started to turn his head, she snapped out, “Don’t move. I really don’t want to have to strap you down for this.”

Aric opened his mouth, and he wanted to say something about how she couldn’t do that. He had to have rights, didn’t he?

He had no idea.

The drones continued to scan as they buzzed up and down the length of his body. Then she smiled, stepped in front of him, and said, “It definitely seems like you haven’t had someone to watch over you.”

What did that mean? He was about to find out.

“Generally speaking, a man’s guardian is responsible for making sure he eats properly and works out regularly. I’m not entirely sure whether or not the vitamin deficiencies I’m seeing here were caused by stasis or your previous lifestyle, but it’s not acceptable. Nod if you understand.”

He didn’t, not truly, but Aric didn’t want to drag this out any more than necessary.

“Good boy. I’m actually fairly impressed by your attitude overall. Would you like the chance to speak again? It is a privilege, so you’re going to have to earn it.”

Speaking wasn’t supposed to be a privilege! He was a commander!

But then, he reminded himself that his vaunted titles meant nothing here, especially with the woman in front of him. No, it was better to behave himself, get along with her as best he could, figure out what was going on, and maybe find Corporal Dare.

Aric and Cara may have had problems in the past, but they were both in the same situation, which meant they could work together.

Obviously, Aric didn’t say anything.

“Would you like to earn the privilege to speak again?”

He nodded.

“Okay,” she said. She stepped back, put her hands on her hips, and looked at him. “Consider this another test, and you already know what the reward will be if you succeed.”

Yeah, he definitely felt like a lab animal. Still, there was nothing he could do about it.

“Get down on your knees, hold your hands together, and beg.”

His brows tightened with confusion. He stared at her for several long seconds as though he expected Doctor Gaia to burst out laughing at any moment because this had to be some kind of inappropriate joke. She couldn't be serious. There was just no way!

And yet, she waited and watched. Her vibrant green eyes played along his body, and she didn't turn away, blink, or laugh.

If Aric wanted to speak again, that he had to do this.

He didn't understand how the culture had changed. Or more likely, this woman was just very, very strange. Yeah, that had to be it. She and the rest of her crew had been out in deep space without the benefits of stasis for a long time, which meant she was just looking to mess with him. Or maybe one of her commanders had been rude to her. Perhaps he had insulted her, so now she wanted to take some petty revenge out on Aric.

Whatever.

He could handle this.

Aric had never been one of those aggressive, alpha males who would get upset over some perceived slight. He didn't worry so much about his dignity. Instead, he did his job, enjoyed his hobbies, and asserted himself when necessary.

This wasn't the time, especially if he wanted the "privilege" of speaking again, so he lowered himself down onto his knees. He tried not to sigh with exasperation, but he did kneel with his hands up. He pressed his elbows to his sides, placed one palm over his knuckles, and looked up at her.

"Good boy," she said. She even patted him on the head.

This had to be how dogs felt when a beautiful woman looked down at them.

"Since you begged to so nicely, I will give you the devox antidote. But first, there is one last test I need to perform on you."

He cocked his head to the side, wondering what it might be.

"The drones are going to continue to scan you and record all of this, but it's very important for me to know how your body functions when excited."

Excited? Aric itched to ask, but he didn't bother trying to open his mouth because he already knew what the effects would be.

So, okay, she would probably try to scare him or something. More annoyingly, she might want him on a treadmill.

With the spherical drones continuing to buzz around him, she looked down and said, "Remove your briefs."

He looked at her again with that mix of confusion and uncertainty. Before he could quite stop himself, Aric reached up and looped his thumbs under the elastic of his underwear. But this was all he was wearing.

A nervous gulp ran down his throat, but she just smiled and asked, "Did you not understand? Were those instructions too complicated for you?" Rather than sounding mocking or derisive, she seemed to genuinely curious, like she wanted to understand what this boy was capable of.

His nostrils flared, and he glowered at her.

"Do it," she said. There was so much confidence and authority in her voice that Aric acted without thinking. He pulled off the briefs, and now he was naked in front of this woman once again.

"This exam is fairly simple, and you should enjoy it quite a bit. You will remain on your knees and pleasure yourself. You will follow my instructions, and if you deviate, you will be disciplined."

Disciplined? What was she going to do? Spank him?

A snide smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, but she seemed to read his mind once again, "Would you like a demonstration?"

Since the devox chemicals stole away his voice, Aric obviously couldn't respond, but she wasn't actually interested in an answer from this boy. He was just a male, after all.

She waved her hand through the air, her fingers flickered, and her Data Cube recognized the gestures. At once, one of the drones buzzed down, and it touched his flank. When the cool, smooth glass touched his skin, an electrical jolt ran through his body, catching him off guard. It felt like a hornet's bite!

He hissed through his teeth and almost smacked the drone away.

At the last moment, he stopped himself.

Breaking her toys wouldn't make this any easier, but had he heard her correctly? Did she really want him to masturbate right there in front of her?

He looked up at her with big, confused eyes. Then, because he was a boy reduced to pantomiming, he pointed to his throat.

"No," she said, "You don't get the antidote until you behave yourself. And right now, I want to finish your examination. But do you want

that?” There was something so patronizing about the way she talked down to him!

He recognized the tone of voice, only Aric hadn't heard it since early childhood. In fact, he remembered a couple of babysitters using that mocking note with him.

“And of course, if you don't cooperate, then the drones will have to get more aggressive. You don't want that, do you?”

He stared at her for a few seconds, his will broke, and he dipped his head down. He shook his head, and she chuckled, “That's what I thought.”

Aric hated hesitating like this. Normally, he considered himself to be a fairly adventurous man. He was supposed to be the first one to step foot on an alien world! And yet, that bravery seemed to wilt in the face of this beautiful Doctor who talked down to him and seemed to manipulate him so effortlessly.

“Besides,” she persisted, “Look at that. You are already excited.”

He didn't want to believe it, only then he looked down, and yes, his shaft was erect. Worse, he sifted through the embarrassment clouding his head, and he could feel it, the drumming desire deep within his center. He was turned on. He couldn't help it.

As he shoulders stiffened, he started to stand, only Doctor Gaia placed her hand on his head and pushed him back down.

“Start with your right hand at the base of your member,” she instructed.

For one last moment, Aric glanced over at the doorway. He wanted to run through, but he already knew the white glass wouldn't separate for him. Instead, he would run into it, maybe slam his hands against the material, and fail to get out. In the meantime, this woman would probably have her arms crossed over her chest as she watched him and chuckled at his incompetence.

Because he wanted to speak and had no choice but to obey this woman, he reached down. He didn't truly think about it. If anything, his conscious thoughts seemed to dissipate while he followed her orders.

He started to stroke the base of his member, just as she wished.

“Press down a little harder,” she said.

Somehow, he found himself following her instructions.

He had been with women before who told him what to do, only that generally meant going down on them, speeding up or slowing down as he

licked diligently. Here, this was his body, yet she seemed to have effortless command over him.

“With your other hand, begin to stroke the tip of your shaft. Gently pinch, relax, and then rub your palm in a circular motion.”

His body tensed up as he struggled to obey, yet it felt as though he had no choice. Aric surrendered to this woman, giving her exactly what she wanted.

He glanced up at her, and he tried to read her expression, her tone, something.

As best he could tell, she was just amused. For Doctor Gaia, he was an entertaining specimen, a little puppy running around at her feet, or maybe a childish boy who functioned at his best when he obeyed.

As he stroked himself in front of her, she said, “Pull your left hand away. With your right hand, begin to stroke the center of your member. That’s right. Good boy. Keep it up. You can do it. Now, use the pad of your thumb to stroke the top of your shaft. Gentle movements. No. Not so fast. Slow down.”

It took all of his self-control, yet he obeyed.

The dynamic was strange.

Aric was probably the most emotionally intelligent man on the Ranger 3 mission, so he understood the conflicting impulses running through his body. He listened to this woman, which meant giving up control. At the same time, he wasn’t restrained, nor did he technically have to obey. He actively chose to listen to her voice, only her voice dictated his actions...

He clenched his eyes shut and focused only on her words, “Good boy. Now wrap the fingers of your right hand around your shaft. Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax. Move your palm up and down. Slower. Slower. Good. That’s right. You see, you can be very obedient. Just think about how good it feels when you do as you’re told.”

It took everything he had, yet he consistently obeyed this woman.

Aric moved his hand up and down in that rhythmic motion because she told him to. Obviously, he had pleased himself many times before, but never like this. The desires simmered through his body, becoming stronger and stronger. He didn’t know how much longer he could hold out.

“Pull your hand away,” she said. “Lock your wrists together behind your back.”

He looked up at her.
He had been so close!

And yet, he only held out for another second or two before he jerked his hands away from his crotch.

By this point, he had forgotten about the scans, the drones, everything except for this woman, his need, and the sound of her voice.

“Good,” she said. Then she tortured him very simply, “One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.” Was she counting? How high would she go? Aric shifted his weight from one knee to the other as she slowly worked her way up, “Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.”

She started to smile, and he worried she would keep going. “Use your left hand to caress the underside of your balls,” she ordered.

With the desperation pumping through him, he reached down, gently tickled the underside of his scrotum, and shivered with desperation. He kept his other hand behind his back. His knuckles pushed down against his skin.

At the same time, his breathing quickened, and he really, really wanted to finish. He needed to get off so badly!

“Good boy,” she said. “Would you like an orgasm?”

He jerked his head down and up rapidly. The desperation was so profound. He didn’t even care if he would have to climax in front of this woman, a female who may have been a doctor, but remained a stranger nonetheless.

“Then you know what you have to do,” she said to the silenced boy.

Aric scrambled so hard to think through the different possibilities, but he didn’t understand. He already nodded. Worse, he had touched himself in front of her, letting this woman watch as he surrendered his privacy and sexual autonomy.

The moisture drained away from his mouth as he looked up at her, but the confusion remained etched into his handsome face.

Doctor Gaia had already given him the can’t; she wouldn’t make it any easier for this boy.

“If you don’t finish soon, I’m going to have to end our examination,” she said.

Because he didn’t know when he might be able to get off, Aric realized this might be his only chance for quite some time. Panic surged through him, and he glanced around. He remained on his knees.

On his knees...that was the key...he was on his knees like he needed to beg.

At once, Aric pulled his hands away from his shaft and balls. Instead, he cupped his knuckles together again, begging for permission.

This was his body, and it should have been his choice, but the doctor was in charge. As the drones hovered around him, they could punish him with another blast of electricity.

Breathing fast, he looked up at her and waited for her decision; he needed to know if he had done this correctly!

"Okay," she said. "Finish." She made this sound like such a minor thing. The desperation pumped through his body, but it meant little to her. These were just a couple of words uttered to a boy down on his knees.

Finish.

The command burned through his body as relief, pleasure, desperation, primal need, and obedience mixed together. He had never felt obedience before. He had never experienced this moment of complete surrender. Then again, a woman had never seized control like this before.

With his right hand squeezing at the center of his shaft, he kept his left down beneath his balls. He gently stroked that soft skin even as his right hand moved up. He yielded to the rhythm of his pulse as he gave in. In the next moment, he felt it.

The pleasure exploded through him. Every moment brought another throbbing pulse. Every moment made him gasp even as he clenched his eyes shut.

When he finished, he looked down.

"Don't worry," Doctor Gaia said. "One of the surface boys will take care of that."

Aric didn't really hear her. Instead, he had fallen back. He had his weight on his palms as he tried to catch his breath and waited for his pulse to slow.

"Please get back up on the bed," she said. "I need you to lay down for me."

He gulped and wished he could speak. Realizing it was futile to resist the doctor's orders, he climbed onto the bed.

"I assume you'd like to explore more of the ship?"

He nodded.

“Then you are going to need this,” she said as she pulled something from a hidden drawer. After Aric nodded his head, she waved her hand in front of the wall. He watched, both marveling and mesmerized as the white, opaque material seemed to liquefy before shaping itself into some kind of compartment. She reached in, and that’s when she lifted the band for him to see.

“Do you know what this is?” Doctor Gaia asked, which was technically a silly question. Of course, he didn’t know. He was just a boy from another century, so he didn’t have any chance of understanding the kinds of technology this woman wielded.

“It’s a collar,” she said.

Miranda allowed those words to sink in.

Aric Donovan swallowed. He was down on his back, exposed and vulnerable.

She read the pout on his face and chuckled, “Oh, I know. Lots of boys don’t like wearing collars, but they are very helpful. You see, this collar includes a few disciplinary functions, but I’m sure we won’t have to use any of those, will we?” Miranda looked right down at him, smiled, and waited for another nod of agreement.

This time, her patient didn’t give it to her.

“Assessment disciplinary functions, the collar can also be used to track you. You see, this is a very big ship, and we wouldn’t want you to get lost.”

Before he could remember the absurdity of this, he opened his mouth and tried to speak. “You see? This is what happens to boys all the time. You forget your limitations, and you try to act independently. Even when that’s a bad idea.” She shook her head and looked down into his eyes.

There was something so confident and powerful about this woman’s expression.

“Lift your head for me,” she said as she opened the collar. The device appeared to be made from the same, smooth, white glass as so much of the ship. It reminded him of alabaster or ivory.

She pulled it apart, and the collar separated. He didn’t see a hinge, yet that didn’t matter.

Aric wasn’t sure he could really do this. Yes, he could understand why this woman might talk down to him, but a collar? He wasn’t a pet!

Then again, he didn't understand how the ship worked, so he pushed back his ego once again. He had to cooperate and to go along with what this woman said because she was the doctor. More importantly, she was a native of this century and understood the rules better than he did.

Reluctantly, Aric lifted his head.

A smirk touched her lips.

She slid the collar around his neck. An instant later, it started to tighten against his neck. For a moment, panic shot down his spine and deep into his center. It felt like the collar might choke him! It formed around his neck, only to stop once it was sufficiently snug.

He could breathe easily enough. He could swallow, and he would be able to speak once she gave him the antidote.

"Wait here," she said as she stepped toward the doorway. With another haptic gesture, the wall spread apart for her, and she stepped out into the infirmary.

"Oh, hello," Miranda said.

"Can I talk to him?"

"You certainly can," Miranda said as Aric eavesdropped from his spot on the infirmary bed.

A moment later, Corporal Cara Dare sauntered into the room. The portal disappeared behind her, and she looked at him. Her eyes moved along his feet, up his legs, all the way to his torso before settling on his face.

First, he noticed her uniform. She actually wore one of the ship's form-fitting jump suits. He didn't know the exact code, but her white outfit had a red trim.

"Hello, Aric," she said. Her eyes shifted away from his as she seemed to study the ivory band around his neck. "I see you found yourself some jewelry. It looks like it fits nicely."

His eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth to speak, only to stop himself.

"It's okay," Cara said. "The doctor was nice enough to send me a few updates while she examined you. I guess we are both healthy and came through stasis just fine."

The corporal paused and seemed to wait for him to answer. Then she chuckled, "Oh, that's right. She devoxed you, right? I guess that's what it's called. To be honest, I have been learning so much about the ship." She

turned away, smiled, and stretched her arms like she wanted to embrace the entire vessel all at once.

Spinning back toward her crewmate, she grinned and said, “You won’t believe it. I have been reading through the history files. First, some really bad stuff happened, but it’s okay.”

What? What happened?

Although he looked confused, Cara decided not to tell him about it. Instead, the boy could only listen as she shared whichever details *she* decided were important.

“After some of the catastrophes, the people of the world decided they wanted a new structure for society. It’s amazing. Women are asserting themselves in ways we could only dream about before.”

Really? How?

Again, she seemed to stop and simply bask in the new information. She kept it to herself. If Aric had asked, then she probably would have felt obliged to answer his questions, only he remained silent like an appropriately deferential boy.

Granted, Cara Dare didn’t think in those terms. She was still a product of her own century, just like Aric.

“Anyway, you will love the ship when they finally show it to you. It is an enormous, Aric. I mean, the Ranger 3 was leading edge tech for our time, but this place is incredible. Frankly, it feels more like a cruise ship!”

He needed to understand precisely what that meant, but she still didn’t tell him what he wished to know.

“And I met the captain,” she said next. “This woman is brilliant. I swear, I do my best not to look like a Neanderthal, but it’s difficult. These women really know what they are doing.”

The captain was a woman?

Aric considered himself to be a fairly progressive individual, but a female commander seemed so strange enough, let alone a woman being responsible for the entire ship...

“I started looking through some of the schematics. The engines are incredible. We are actually going faster than the speed of light right now!”

He wanted to ask about relativity, about how something like that might be possible, but she just grinned and shook her head. “Anyway, I’m sure you’ll get to find out what you need to know as soon as the doctor decides you are ready.”

Aric didn't understand. Clearly, Doctor Gaia had given Cara permission to wander the ship as she pleased. In the meantime, he had gone through one of the most humiliating exams he could imagine.

That's when the door opened again. He didn't bother turning his head to see who entered. Instead, he kept his eyes on Cara, almost as though he thought he could communicate with only his stare. In the next moment, however, Doctor Gaia pressed her instrument to his neck.

He felt the injection. There wasn't any pain; if anything, it only felt like a brush of air against his skin.

He jerked his head up toward the doctor and looked at this woman as the confusion played across his face.

"It's only a mild sedative," she promised.

Right away, he wanted to shout something like, "That wasn't fair!"

"Oh, Cara, it looks like he is going to give us some trouble. Can you do me a favor and hold his hands above his head while I finish the procedure?"

Procedure? What kind of procedure?"

He expected his crewmate to ask those questions, but she instead stepped around to the back of his bed. Aric started to turn around, to shift his weight so he could look up at her, but Cara did something else. She stretched down, wrapped her fingers around his wrists, and pulled his arms above his head.

This was ridiculous, he thought. There was no way she could actually hold him down.

Because he had behaved himself and played along these women up until this point, he decided to show them that he wouldn't just do whatever they said. Cooperation was one thing, but he wasn't about to surrender.

That's why he tried to pull his hands away from Cara's grip. His muscles flexed; he tensed up, and he tried to pull himself from her grip.

It didn't work.

At first, he didn't understand. He tried again.

She was a woman, but he was bigger, taller, and definitely a lot stronger.

Still, it didn't seem to make any difference.

"Let's get him into chastity," Doctor Gaia announced.

Again, Aric expected some kind of question from Cara, only then he figured out what was going on. Corporal Dare already knew. This doctor had decided to share her prognosis and decisions with his crewmate, not with Aric himself!

How could this be happening? He didn't understand, but the frustration mounted, giving him extra strength. He tried to twist and pull away before he heard Miranda speak again, "You might as well settle down. That sedative I gave you will make sure you are nice and docile. Sure, you might get upset, but every woman on the ship can manhandle you pretty easily now."

He turned back to the doctor and stared up at her, horrified. She was beautiful, yet that hardly mattered now, especially when she pulled something from her lab coat. He couldn't see the device, not even when she placed it there on top of his shaft.

Suddenly, he felt the same cool touch of that strange, futuristic material.

It began to expand, encircling his shaft and encasing his member. Another band stretched around the underside of his scrotum, locking in place. The band continued to grow, however. It reached up along his pelvis and looped around his waist.

"There we go," said the doctor. "I know that can be a little bit frustrating for you boys, but at least you had one orgasm today, right? You don't know when you'll get another one!" She chuckled and patted him on the head. "And Corporal Dare, thank you for helping me with your colleague."

"It's okay," she said. Then Cara glanced down at Aric, "These people are kind. You shouldn't be so distrustful."

Then again, she didn't feel the futuristic technology between her legs or around her neck. It was easier for her to trust them.

That's why he glared at her, but Cara didn't seem to notice.

"Open your mouth," Miranda ordered.

He gulped, glared at her, and finally cooperated, if only because he expected the antidote for the devox. Sure enough, she sprayed something against the back of his throat. A moment later, she touched her instrument to his neck.

He heard his own voice, with what should have been a relief, only he called out, "No more sedatives."

But it was too late because his doctor had already made up her mind. She knew what this boy needed, and she made sure he got it.

“Are you sure that was necessary?” Cara asked as they walked along one of the gorgeous corridors. To their right, fantastic works of art shimmered through different colors and patterns.

When Cara went into stasis, she knew that humanity would explore the stars and discover incredible marvels and wildly beautiful scenes. She recognized the limits of the human imagination, which was one reason why they had to venture among the stars in the first place.

They just had so much to learn...

And now, she started to see some of what humanity had discovered. Part of her was disappointed; she thought the Ranger 3 crew could do something incredible. And yet, over the last couple of centuries, humanity had grown so much more powerful than she had ever envisioned.

“What part?” Miranda asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“Sedating him,” Cara said. “Drugging him.”

“He’s a boy,” she said. The doctor made it sound like this was the only relevant or pertinent detail.

“I get that,” Cara said, “But he seemed to be in some distress.”

“You think we should have strapped him down?”

Cara paused and realized she needed to change the subject because she wasn’t really worried about that exact exam or any of those procedures. If she decided to be really honest with herself, then maybe she even enjoyed seeing that look of worry on his face.

Aric and the other boys from their century didn’t understand what it was like to be nervous all the time, to wonder if a manager or program director might try to get them alone. Every day, she had to wonder whether or not they would cut her from the Ranger Initiative. It wouldn’t matter if she had some of the best scores. Someone could just claim that she was emotional or erratic (codenames for “female”), and that’d be enough to have her booted out. All of her hard work could be wiped away in a matter of seconds.

The males on her crew didn’t have to worry about that. They could mess up, get drunk, receive censures or citations, and still enjoy three or four second chances.

“Can I ask you something?” Cara paused and looked out at the window to her left. She studied the dark without really seeing any of it. The lights in the distance were stars, only she couldn’t recognize any of these constellations.

“Absolutely,” Doctor Gaia said patiently.

“That band...”

“His collar?”

Somehow, she could call it that. Dogs and pets wore collars, yet Aric was supposed to be her colleague and crewmate.

With a little tremble of nervous energy, Cara licked her lips. Yes, the idea made her uncomfortable, only she experienced something else as well, perhaps a small thrill of excitement. Pushing those feelings aside, she continued, “Yeah. His collar. None of the women in the crew seem to wear them.”

Miranda held her hands behind her back and glanced at Cara. The doctor understood how she would need to be careful with this kind of information. “That’s a very astute observation, Corporal Dare.”

“Thank you?”

“Why do you think that is?”

“You said the collars are for tracking the crew?”

“Yes.”

“But the women don’t need to be tracked?”

“Another astute observation,” answered Doctor Gaia.

“And I know you didn’t give me the full roster for the senior command staff, but the captain is female, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Along with the first officer and science officer?” Cara nodded and watched as the doctor gave a quick nod. This sounded absurd, but Corporal Dare had to ask, “Does that mean the entire command staff is female?”

“Absolutely.”

“What? Is this some kind of experiment?”

“You have been reading through the historical files, correct?”

“I have.”

Miranda made a decision, reached out, and touched this woman on the shoulder, “You need to understand. During your time, men were in charge. Historians are very clear on this point. Women were always relegated to a subservient role.”

“I wouldn’t call myself subservient.”

“Were you their equal?”

“Sexism has always been a problem,” Corporal Dare started to say.

The doctor interrupted her, “Women are the dominant sex.” She uttered these words as a simple fact.

Cara blinked, looked at the doctor, and waited for the punchline. Because yes, this had to be some kind of joke.

“How?”

“Males ruled until they stumbled into the inevitability of male incompetence. Please, don’t misunderstand me. Women are flawed, and we have had our own issues. Strife hasn’t gone away, not completely, but I think it’s fair to say that human society is objectively better.”

“How?” Cara seemed to squint at the doctor like she expected Miranda to be nothing more than a mirage.

“We have solved the problems of hunger, pollution, and cured most diseases.”

“It’s a utopia?”

“There are still some conflicts,” Doctor Gaia said. “Like I said, there are diseases. Occasional border skirmishes break out, and there are definitely questions about wealth and the fairness of our education system. That said, we don’t run on testosterone. You don’t get political leaders who go online and threaten other countries as a matter of diplomacy.”

“And the men are okay with this?”

“They led us into a series of catastrophes. Women had to step forward. We had to take control. Are there boys out there who resist? Absolutely. Are they allowed to succeed or take control? Never.”

Cara reached out and touched the glass. Her fingers moved along the smooth, warm material. “This sounds impossible.”

“It isn’t. Just look around.”

Cara didn’t need to; she had already witnessed so much. She had walked through the corridors and watched as men offered to serve and assist women. But the boys didn’t carry themselves with the chauvinistic bluster of men who expected something in return. Instead, they were entirely deferential. They kept their voices down, seemed to avoid any kind of confrontation, and recognized the authority of every woman on the ship.

“Women really rule here?”

“They do,” Miranda said. “Now, I hate to be rude, but I have a meeting with the captain and some of the senior crew members. Will you be okay find your way back to your quarters? Or if you’re hungry, you can always have one of the boys prepare you some food.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” Cara said as the doctor started to walk away.

“Oh,” Miranda stopped herself, glanced back, and said, “Tyson is one of my favorite service boys. Technically, he isn’t a pleasure slave, but he is always eager to please. I told him to wait for you at your quarters. If you’re not interested, you can simply dismiss him.”

Cara stared after the doctor for several long seconds, but the woman disappeared into one of the portals. Theoretically, Corporal Dare could have followed, especially because she had learned the basic haptic maneuvers to open various doors and navigate the ship.

But something compelled her to head back to her quarters, not just the desire to rest, but a different sort of instinct.

She was aroused.

It was a strangely exotic, almost alien sensation. Yes, she could get turned on like any other woman, but sex had always felt different somehow. Her desires had often existed as something that specifically related back to men.

When it came to sex, she needed to be defensive and aware of how a man might use her. Since she had woken up, that unspoken, low-grade dread had started to dissipate.

Not only that, she had watched as Doctor Gaia manipulated and controlled Aric Donovan. Perhaps Cara should have felt some sympathy for her crewmate. Instinctively, she had known she should probably step in and try to help him somehow. And yet, he cooperated, and he hadn’t been in any obvious distress. Besides, this wasn’t Cara’s century any more than it was Commander Donovan’s, so what could she do?

These thoughts flashed through her head as she made her way back to her quarters. Another portal opened in front of her when she made the appropriate gesture, and she found a boy on his knees beside her doorway.

Cara had only spent a couple of hours in here so far, but her quarters were incredible.

Back on the Ranger 3, Captain Pike enjoyed a small alcove with enough room for a tiny desk. Those were his “captain’s quarters.” In

actuality, the Ranger 3 crew each got a bunk and nothing else. Heck, Chris and Gary had to share a bunk as they alternated duty cycles.

But now Cara thought of her quarters once again. When she saw the open space, the small dining room, the living room, and the huge bedroom, she had walked around in small circles as she tried to take in the enormous space.

Her quarters had been larger than her condominium back on Earth.

“Hello,” Cara said as she approached.

The boy was handsome with short, reddish brown hair, fine features, and big, servile eyes. He only glanced up for a moment before replying,

“ Good evening, ma’am. Doctor Gaia instructed me to serve you.”

Cara glanced down at her uniform and compared it to his. She had white with red trim. His uniform matched hers, at least in terms of the cut and design, but his was gray and lacked any of the colored trim.

Her first instinct was simple: dismiss this boy and send him on his way. He probably had real obligations and chores waiting for him. She didn’t want to be rude or cruel by distracting him, yet that little itch of desire continued to pulse through her body.

How is that possible?

Cara, like so many other women from her century, assumed that sex was a masculine pleasure. Yeah, there were magazines, websites, streams and shows all about how women could discover themselves (whatever that meant). Still, those messages never quite clicked.

Men, it seemed, were driven by this primal, nearly unstoppable urge. At the same time, women could certainly enjoy themselves, and Cara had explored her own body and even climaxed from time to time, but had never been as addictive. She had never really understood how power and desire could mixed together.

But she saw what happened to Donovan, and now she looked at this young man poised on his knees.

“I’m sure you have something better to do,” Cara said diplomatically.

“No, ma’am. If it would please you, I will serve you to the best of my ability.”

She heard those words, studied his expression, and came to a conclusion. He really would to anything she wished. At once, Cara started thinking of her last boyfriend, a selfish jerk who loved receiving oral. Did

he reciprocate? Never. She had asked a couple of times, but he always answered with a flash of disgust and something about how maybe he could try it “next time”.

Only now, she looked down at him.

Cara nibbled on the inside of her mouth. She started to wonder if she should take advantage of the situation. How would he feel? Yes, he looked subservient and eager to please, but that could just be an act.

She raised her hand and was about to make the haptic gesture to open her door. Her fingers froze in the air, and she glanced down at the kneeling boy. “If you could do anything right now, what would it be?” Cara asked.

“I don’t understand.”

“If you were free to do anything you want,” she explained, “Anything at all. What would it be?”

The boy gulped and looked around.

“This isn’t a test,” she said. “I genuinely want know. Tell me.” She issued the order, and he seemed to relax, almost as though he would always be more comfortable obeying a woman.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said, “And I would like to serve you.”

“How?”

“Oral service is what most of the women here appreciate most,” he said. “But I’m happy to obey you however you see fit.” His lips parted, and it was obvious he wanted to say something else.

This time, she commanded him much more easily. Cara never would have imagined this, yet she started to fall into the rhythm of authority. As a crew member on the Ranger 3, she had been part of a hierarchy, one where she had to defer to Captain Pike and Commander Donovan. Even then, she always knew she had to move carefully around the other men. Even when her expertise meant she outranked one of the males, she still had to phrase everything as a request, almost like doing their jobs qualified as a favor to her.

As such, she had to be grateful.

Now she listened to this service boy and experienced the same tingling urges. The desires swam through her, and she finally swept her hand in front of the door. She walked in, glanced over her shoulder and called out, “Come along.”

The service boy rose to his feet and followed after her.

It was time for Cara Dare to understand what it meant to be a woman on board this mighty vessel.

Miranda rode one of the lifts up to the command deck. The ship's artificial intelligence recognized her facial features and vocal patterns as she issued her command. Moments later, she could feel the soft thrum of gravity as she was pulled higher and higher into their ship.

She emerged onto the main bridge and saw the other women.

"Am I early?" Miranda asked.

"A minute or two," Captain Mariesdaughter replied. "We just received data from one of our probes, and I was going over it with Officer Rheainesduther last night."

Unlike the Ranger 3 which had been sent out to explore a single planet, the *Cygnus* came equipped with hundreds of probes, all of which were equipped with smaller gravity-driven FTL drives. Not only would they bring their crew to Tau Ceti, they would also dispatch probes along the way to dozens of stellar phenomena.

"Anything I can help with?"

"Unfortunately, we are just looking at a gas giant, so no chance of organic material as far as we can tell. If you want to take a look at the scans and readouts of the samples, I would be happy to transfer the information to the infirmary."

"I wouldn't want to intrude on Portia's territory," Miranda said.

"I'm sure she would appreciate a second set of eyes."

"Then yes, please."

"Are you sure?" the captain asked as a smile curved along her mouth. "I saw some of the footage you transmitted. I'm sure the ladies of Earth are going to be intrigued. From what I understand, the ratings and click-through rate on some of Aric's vids have been quite impressive."

"He's definitely an intriguing specimen," Miranda said.

"You know, I must say that I am incredibly tempted to ask for your report right now. But I don't think that would be fair to the other officers."

"As you say, ma'am," Miranda replied. Still, their thoughts were obvious. The doctor glanced over at the navigator on the con. Miranda didn't know her name, but she was smiling. Apparently, she had watched some of the footage as well.

Yes, the women of Terra loved their boys. These young men learned to serve from an early age, which meant they were docile and domesticated. They seldom stepped out of line or caused any problems. Sure, there were some males who regressed to earlier states. They demonstrated hostile, aggressive, sometimes even sexist tendencies.

They were disciplined, taught to behave, and properly reformed.

Aric and his comrades represented something different, something new. Academic psychologists were interested to see him. Historians paid just as much attention. Then there were the random women, like accountants and engineers, who simply wanted to see him behave.

They were fascinated by the flashes of defiance, the way he questioned Miranda, and how he even seemed reluctant to accept the collar. Lots of women probably saw him as a potential threat, so they were curious about how he would be neutralized and properly trained. Other women saw him as adorable, like a wild dog which just needed some love and discipline.

Miranda hadn't made up her mind, but she was glad she signed on for this mission. The first couple of years had been pretty boring, but the discovery of the Ranger 3 might make her career. In fact, she could start writing a book or record vids detailing her private thoughts...

"I'll see you in the officers conference room," said the captain. "I'll be joining you shortly."

"Yes, ma'am," Miranda replied before heading through the portal into their meeting space.

She took a seat at the conference table, but Portia was already there.

The science officer grinned and asked, "What is he like?"

Before Miranda could answer, the door opened again, and Jessica sauntered in. Before she even took a seat, she said, "Ladies, we need to wait until everyone arrives. Besides, I'm sure the Captain wouldn't be happy to miss out."

"Yes, ma'am," Miranda replied. She tried to sound sheepish and chastised, but she couldn't keep the smile off of her face.

Beatrice, the Information and History Officer, came in a few seconds later, followed by Carrie, the Navigation Officer. Now they were just waiting for Captain Mariesdaughter.

Back on the bridge, Dianne contemplated how she would do this. At the moment, she didn't intend to release any of the other males, not while

they posed a potential threat. She doubted any of them carried an unknown pathogen, although she trusted Doctor Gaia to keep her crew safe.

Rather, these males represented political instability and potential strife.

This meeting with her senior officers would tell her a lot.

Although Dianne trusted each member of her crew, she also comprehended just how difficult a trip like this could be. Yes, their ship was beautiful, but their journey would take years. Granted, they didn't need stasis tubes, they had entertainment, and there were plenty of service boys on board, but humans still had trouble with this kind of confinement.

Dianne had Matt, a sweet and obedient service boy who worked as her pleasure slave.

As she thought of Matt, she wondered how much more difficult this trip would be. She reached down, felt her pocket, and detected the outline of his key.

Dianne spent a few delicious moments trying to remember exactly when her boy had been allowed an orgasm of his own. Like so many other males, he recognized that the female climax was the most important component of any sexual relationship. Still, he yearned for his own release.

Even if it meant he had to be tied down, teased, and used, he would still beg for it.

How long would it take to turn Aric into such an obedient and dedicated creature?

Dianne didn't know, but she suspected they would find out soon enough. With this in mind, she rose from her chair and walked into the conference room.

Her senior staff members, plus Doctor Gaia, had their Data Cubes out. This surprised her. "Did we get a new data burst?" Doctor Mariesdaughter asked.

Beatrice, the Information and History Officer glanced up. With a swipe of her fingers in front of the Data Cube, she turned off the holographic projection. "No, Captain. The good doctor here spliced together some video of our newest companion."

"Aric?" Dianne knew it couldn't be anyone else, but she still glanced over at the doctor.

"Yes, ma'am," Doctor Gaia said. "I thought the women of Terra deserved to see exactly what we had found."

“And I assume you sent it through the Information Bureau back home?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Show me,” said the Captain.

She sat down, only now the information was directed through the holographic projector at the center of the table. Realizing the meeting had started, the crew members put their Data Cubes away as they watched the images resolve themselves in front of them.

There he was, only now he didn’t have on that ridiculous Ranger 3 uniform. When Captain Mariesdaughter first saw it, she had smirked, thinking it was ridiculous. Those ancient boys certainly loved their military garb. Then again, so much technology had been pushed forward by war and conflict.

This fact alone, as far as Dianne was concerned, proved that men didn’t deserve to wield any sort of political power. They advanced the most when they were trying to kill one another? No. During times of crisis, people needed to work together, not think of the best way to blow one another apart. Then, during peace, the community could come together and allocate fresh resources to improving the lives of everyone involved. Hoping that a new bomb might also lead to peacetime applications seemed utterly ridiculous.

Then again, Dianne and women were in charge while the males had been relegated to the status of service boys. She smirked, only then those thoughts disappeared as she started to watch Aric as his image was projected onto the air.

She saw him on his knees. She watched as he started to touch himself.

Dianne had her own boy back in her quarters, although at this hour he was probably working in the ship’s communal gardens. He’d be down on his knees, working in the dirt or maybe attending to some of the hydroponic units. Somehow, thinking of her boy pulling out carrots or washing lettuce leaves always made her smile.

As the recording played, Dianne focused on the handsome young man. She watched as he stroked his shaft. More importantly, he listened to the doctor’s commands.

“What, exactly, are we watching?” Dianne asked.

“A physical and psychological evaluation,” Miranda replied. Although she had been there for this moment, she nonetheless kept her eyes on the hologram. “Physically, Aric is in excellent condition, especially for a male who has been in cryo-stasis for so long. But I think you’ll all agree that his psychological reactions are the most intriguing.”

Dianne continued to listen as the doctor issued one order after another. It wasn’t the movements of his hand or his obvious arousal that held her attention. No, she focused and fixated on the expressions playing across his face.

“How do you read him?”

“A challenge,” Miranda replied smoothly. “This boy is an independent male, something we haven’t seen in a very long time.”

“That’s because they’re dangerous,” Jessica insisted. “Captain, I know this may sound disappointing to everyone else, but I strongly recommend you consider putting him back into stasis.”

“Why? You don’t think we can handle him?”

“I think he’s an unknown entity on board our ship. Can he master technologies? Almost assuredly not, but why take the risk?”

Miranda spoke up, “Because it could be fun.” She grinned and continued, “Captain, I do believe any one of us could handle him. He does seem to recognize his position on board this ship, namely that of guest. For the time being anyway, I don’t think he will intentionally misbehave.”

“What happens when he throws a tantrum?” Jessica asked. She turned back to the doctor. “Our vessel is impressive, but we aren’t a prison ship, and sabotage is always a possibility. Then there is also the question of what happens if he starts to spread malignant ideas to the rest of the service boys.”

“They’re well-trained,” Portia said.

“And they know how to behave,” Carrie added.

“These are all good points, but I do thank you for your concerns, Jessica.” The Captain said, “While I recognize the potential security issue, I think it’s important for us to recognize the opportunity here. A few scholars have been whispering about the possibility that it is only a question of socialization which keeps our boys in check. I think we need to see whether or not he can be fully trained and reformed to suit our needs and desires.”

“Who gets to do it?” Carrie asked. She was probably being rude, but the Navigation Officer couldn’t quite help herself.

The Captain wasn't offended, especially as she watched all of her officers' backs stiffen. They probably didn't even realize they were doing it, but each woman here ached for the entertainment of getting to take Aric and turning him into an ideal boy for this century.

It was Jessica who pointed out, "Ma'am, if you decide that he should remain awake and be trained, then you have the first right to claim him. You are the senior officer, after all."

The other officers seemed to have forgotten this point, so they glanced at one another with obvious disappointment.

Still, Dianne had good news for them, "Thank you for that, Officer Lianasdottir." Her First Officer nodded. "But I must be honest. I am happy with Matt. He is an amazing slave, and he works hard to serve me. I don't need anyone else, and so I will allocate Aric to one of the senior officers."

Yes, all of these women were quite accomplished. Each had worked hard to attain this rank and position on board one of the most prestigious interstellar vessels humanity had ever constructed. Still, they all looked so adorable and eager. Even Jessica, although she tried to conceal it, clearly wished for the chance to work with Aric.

Back on Terra, training a boy could be a relatively simple matter. In fact, there were entire dealerships and brokers who specialized in the sale of male guardianship. If a woman decided she yearned for some companionship or wanted help around the house, she could go to one of these brokers.

In most of Terra's jurisdictions, these boys weren't technically called slaves. Instead, they had other euphemistic titles like "indentured servant" or "contracted assistant". The effects, however, were the same. If a woman decided to sign the paperwork and make the payments, she would be legally recognized as his guardian—effectively his owner.

On Terra, very few males were allowed the privilege of owning property. They couldn't drive, pilot sky-cars, make financial transactions over a certain amount, or be out after dark without a female chaperone. There were, obviously, thousands of other regulations, many of which varied depending on the community, but the point was this: boys were raised in a world where they would always be second-class citizens. Their forefathers had nearly wrecked the planet and wiped out humanity, thus males had proven they weren't capable of leadership or even independence.

Little boys were raised with the knowledge that they would always need to be handled in one way or another. Yes, they could still contribute. Women needed their feet massaged, they often craved companionship, and males could still cook and clean. Automated services obviously existed, but there was something nice about having a boy who really wanted to please cook a meal instead.

All of these considerations flashed through Dianne's thoughts as she considered her crew members. "I want this to be fair, so I will organize a game of Dynamic Chess."

Immediately, the women began to glance back and forth at one another as they contemplated the implications. Dynamic Chess was a modified version of the ancient game, although one key detail remained: the Queen was, by far, the most powerful and important fighter on the board.

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The main difference from the ancient game was how it had been enlarged to accommodate female skill. While men played it, it remained a static, one-on-one player game. The modern version of this game existed as a holographic program. It required even more strategy because the board could change, shifting with fresh modifications. Some types of terrain would be harder for different pieces. At the same time, the game could also accommodate dozens or even hundreds of players, which meant the women of the command staff could play all at once.

“When?” Carrie asked, brash as always.

“Right now,” Dianne replied. At the last meeting, they had gone over the various requirements for their vessel, which meant each woman was free. More importantly, Dianne liked the idea of keeping these players for researching one another.

“Yes, ma’am!” Portia said. She clapped her hands together as she got ready.

The women took out their Data Cubes, interfaced with the ship, and got ready to begin the game.

As the women prepared themselves, Beatrice glanced down at her Data Cube. She held the device up to her ear as she checked to the audio of a message.

Dianne watched and finally asked, “What is it, Officer Alanastochter?”

“Ma’am,” Beatrice said, “You have an instant contact from Terra.”

Instant contact? Yes, Dianne could enjoy real-time conversations with the leaders of Terra from time to time, but the energy requirements were enormous, which meant of these women rarely utilized the option.

“Status?”

“Nonemergency,” Beatrice replied.

An instant contact generally meant something had gone terribly wrong, hence the expenditure of resources.

“Should I put them through?”

It was a nonemergency, which meant it hadn’t been coded for the captain’s eyes only. And yet, someone back on Terra certainly wanted Dianne’s attention, so the captain nodded. “Put them through.”

Admiral Janeschild resolved in the holographic display. “Good morning, Captain. I see you have the rest of your command staff with you. I apologize for the interruption.”

“It’s not a problem,” Captain Mariesdaughter replied. “What can we do for you?”

“Considering how many power stations are working at more than a hundred percent so that we can have this conversation, I will be brief. On Terra, we love Doctor Gaia’s footage. This boy, Aric, has been a sensation. All across the grid, women are clamoring for more.”

“Including the investors and politicians?” Dianne did her best to keep some of the exasperation out of her voice. Women may have ruled, but that didn’t alter the fact that certain segments of society had differing goals and objectives.

Their starship, after all, was still an incredibly expensive venture, which meant it required a lot of support from many different factions.

“That’s right,” replied Admiral Janeschild. “As such, I’m asking you to hold off on any decision about his guardianship.”

“Do you have any idea for how you would like me to decide who will take custody of him?”

“Also,” Beatrice said, interrupting, “I don’t mean to be rude, but do we have a legal right to assign him a Guardian?”

“Our legal experts have been checking and double checking,” said the admiral. “At this point, it looks like we have every right to salvage his vessel and consider him to be a Wild Male.”

“Is that actually a legal designation?” Dianne asked.

“Apparently, it is. It’s from a very old set of legal codes, but they were adopted as one of the key foundations just after the Water Wars, so the lawyers tell me the designation still exists. Obviously, we don’t have any boys like that back on Terra, but it seems you found one of the last ones.”

“There could be others out there,” Portia said in a carefully quiet tone. A hint of excitement rippled through the Science Officer’s voice.

It seemed Admiral Janeschild had excellent hearing because she replied, “That’s correct. There is currently a debate going on about the rest of the Ranger Initiative. Some of the women in the Senate are arguing we should track down the remaining vessels.”

“Wouldn’t that be monumentally expensive?”

“It would,” acknowledged the admiral. “But I don’t think you understand just how popular this boy has become. We are getting literally billions of hits and views for Doctor Gaia’s vids. The women of Terra want to see what happens to him.”

“And they want to see what will happen to the other males?”

“That’s correct,” said the admiral. “If we need to hunt down every ship, we can. There’s also the consideration of colonies.”

Dianne nodded. “You’re worried they are restarting patriarchal societies on other planets?”

“It is a concern. I don’t believe their technology would be able to leapfrog us, but we don’t want to take any risks either. These boys might wish to assert themselves, which would obviously be a problem. If they are unwilling to accept their inferior status, they could get angry.”

Each officer in the conference room nodded. Yeah, they could see how something like that might happen.

If the women of Terra could track down these rogue colonies before they could build any kind of supply chain, then those males would be neutralized easily. If, however, they started to build their own weapons and fleets, Terra might have a problem. A big problem.

“For now,” Admiral Janeschild concluded, “I want you to continue working with him. Continue to record his sessions. Janeschild, out.”

Just like that, the image vanished from the center of the table.

Captain Marieschild experienced a moment of aggravation, especially because she considered herself to be a commander and an explorer, not an entertainer. Even so, she also recognized the simple fact that no one could get away from performance. Before the launch of her vessel, she had spoken to plenty of journalists and reporters, bloggers and other content creators. Their opinions mattered; their perceptions of her mattered.

As such, she always had to smile politely and create the appropriate blend of competent and friendly. If she didn’t, then the voters wouldn’t want to support this program. They would want to see the resources sent elsewhere.

The aggravation disappeared after another instant, however.

She looked out at her command staff, and she said, “Okay, ladies. We’re going to have a competition, but I don’t think the women of Terra would be interested in a game of Dynamic chess.”

Beatrice and Portia looked disappointed. Carrie, who probably preferred full races down on the Holo-Platforms, tried to suppress her grin and pretty much failed entirely.

“Miranda, what is your opinion of Aric?”

“Psychologically, I believe he has the potential for appropriate subjugation, but he is a determined young man. He is the kind boy who sees himself as capable and competent. He won’t rely on a female opinion.”

“Does he realize how much the world has changed?”

“Not yet.”

“So he needs to be educated?” Dianne asked.

“Very much so,” Miranda replied.

“Ladies, this is the challenge: each of you will be given the opportunity to take this boy and mold him.”

“Captain?” Beatrice asked with her hand raised tentatively.

“Yes?”

Beatrice glanced back at the other officers. She breathed out and said, “Will that be a fair game? I mean, whoever gets him first will have the most difficult time. Whoever works with him last will obviously have an enormous advantage since he will have already been trained by several other women.”

“This was just be a question of control,” Dianne said. “Let’s face it. He’s a boy, and he will be owned one way or another.”

That sort of language may not have been legally “accurate,” yet it was the fate that awaited him one way or another, and each woman in that conference room understood this perfectly.

“This challenge isn’t based on her control over even his obedience.”

“It’s going to be based on popularity, isn’t it?” Miranda asked.

Captain Mariesdaughter glanced over at her chief physician and nodded, “That’s correct. Remember, we are doing this for the public back home. Yes, you want to train him. Yes, you want to impress the viewers, but that only happens if you teach him what he needs to know.”

“Metrics?” Portia asked. As she nibbled on the inside of her mouth, it was obvious the Science Officer was already making plans and considering the different possibilities.

“I’m assuming we are going to be watching the clicks and views for each video. That said, I will let you all decide how you want to edit the materials. Just make sure you record your time with Aric. From there, it will be up to you to see how you want to show yourself and this boy to Terra.”

The women considered this for several long seconds.

“Will we need an adjudicator?” Miranda asked.

The Captain glanced over toward the doctor. “That would be helpful. Anyone volunteering?”

“I am,” Miranda said. “I have already worked with this boy. But more to the point, I’m not actually interested in taking a pet with me back to my quarters. I would be happy to withdraw from the competition and adjudicate for you, Captain.”

“Any objections?”

No one said anything.

“Congratulations, Miranda. You are now the adjudicator. With luck, we won’t need your services.”

Cara Dare knew she shouldn’t be bored. Another crew member told her about the Holo Platforms. More importantly, she had years of pop culture to absorb. Still, her head hurt, so she sat at a table near one of the duplicators.

When Cara Dare first saw the technology, she assumed it had to be some sort of trick. But no. One crew member after another walked up to the machine, tapped the touchscreen, and made her request.

Food and drinks materialized in front of them. It all seemed so boring and average.

Then again, Corporal Dare understood that hoses and drinking water on demand probably seemed magical to ancient cultures.

Still, she marveled at the development. Again and again, she watched as women ordered food from the duplicators. Some of the meals seemed strange and alien. She had no idea what S-Bread was supposed to be, but it smelled good, especially as the trail of steam drifted behind the woman who ordered it.

When she wasn’t watching the other women, Cara simply looked out at the stars. They seemed to move, which was strange to her. Even if she had remained awake on the Ranger 3 and decided to suit up for a spacewalk to go look outside, she would have only seen pinpricks of light. Nothing would have seemed to move because of their relatively slow speed.

But this vessel traveled faster than light.

Cara lifted her hand and looked down at her fingers. She flexed them almost as though she expected to see some strange effect. No. Everything seemed normal, from the gravity to the air and the light.

“You look like you’re having fun,” someone said from behind her.

“Just daydreaming,” Cara replied as she turned around. The corporal wasn’t surprised that she didn’t recognize the woman behind her.

She wore the same white jumpsuit as the other crew members, only hers came with blue trim.

“May I sit with you?”

“Sure,” Cara said. The woman had her tray and placed it on the table. “You’re not hungry?”

“No.”

“Contemplative?”

“Something like that,” Cara said. Actually, she had never felt this way before. When she joined the Ranger Initiative, nervous energy and anxiety had dominated almost every decision she made. Yes, she stayed focused and excelled, but she always had to wonder when she might get kicked out of the program.

She knew about the digital trolls who harassed her commanders. They blared their opinions online to anyone who would click on their links or even accidentally read some of their comments. The idea was simple: this was space travel, and women weren’t capable of handling the rigors of interstellar travel. Instead of putting Captain Pike and his men at risk for the sake of “political correctness,” they needed to put Corporal Dare in a cute little outfit and let her watch from Mission Control where it would be safe.

But time swept away those elements of society.

“And what are you contemplating?”

“This ship, my place in the universe, and maybe the structure of society,” Cara replied. “So you know, just some thinking.”

“I think we all have those moments,” said the woman before she held out her hand. “By the way. My name is Portia, Portia Rheainesduther.”

“Science Officer,” Cara said.

“You have been studying the crew manifest,” Portia replied with a smile. “Very impressive.”

“Only the public records,” Cara told her.

“Still, I think it’s smart,” Portia said. “So what have you decided about us?”

“What do you mean?” Cara asked.

“Well, I think most people are always worried about what their parents think of them.”

“I’m not your parent,” Corporal Dare pointed out.

“No, but you are from a different time, so your perspective is pretty invaluable, especially since you were the only woman on their ship.”

“I wish there had been more,” Cara said quietly. Then she stopped herself.

Portia cocked her head to the side before she started to spin her fork in her pasta. Apparently, some foods remained popular. “Really? Why is that?”

“Is it that obvious?” Cara asked.

Portia smiled, “I don’t know. I’m sure there are a lot of women on the ship who would love to be stuck with a bunch of boys.”

“You all really are in charge, aren’t you? You can have whatever you want, can’t you?”

“No,” Portia said. “There are limitations. I think there are always limitations.”

“But that boy over there,” Cara said, picking out one young man, a service boy who was busy mopping the floors beyond the tables. “What would happen if you ordered him to come over here right now?”

“He would do it,” Portia said with a note of confusion in her voice, probably because the idea was so blatantly obvious.

“Exactly,” Cara said. “You are in charge. The boys here really are completely subjugated, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Portia said. She could answer these types of questions since the scientific method routinely required researchers to consider every possible variable, even if they seemed obvious.

“What’s it like?”

“What?”

“Growing up in a world like this,” Portia said. “I mean, you are in charge. You get respect.”

“And you didn’t?” Portia asked. As a matter of theory, she understood that men once ruled, but this was an academic truth, something she had never really been able to contemplate.

“No!” Cara said before she burst out laughing. A couple of the other diners glanced in her direction.

“I can’t imagine what that would be like,” Portia said as she took a bite from her noodles. “What I can assure you is that you will get all of the respect you deserve here. These boys understand their place. They recognize their inferiority.”

“Their inferiority?” Cara said, almost like she needed to test the words.

“That’s right. They understand that women are better leaders. We are more patient, more intuitive, and less emotional. We don’t get erratic. Ever since women took over and asserted themselves throughout society, the number of military conflicts have gone down dramatically.” Portia shrugged, “I’m sorry. I don’t know the exact statistics, but I’m sure Beatrice could tell you.”

“No, it’s okay,” Cara replied. “I believe you.”

“So what you think of our ship?”

“It’s beautiful.” Cara looked out at the grand spaces. On board the Ranger 3, everything had been dark mental, cramped and confined. She was sure the ship designers tried to make the vessel as cheaply as possible, especially since the crew would be in stasis for the vast majority of the journey anyway.

But this vessel? “You all are traveling on a work of art.”

Portia smiled. “I do like this ship, but it’s not the most beautiful in the fleet.”

“Really?”

“We are in an interstellar vessel. Some of the system ships back home are even bigger and more beautiful. They aren’t really just space vessels. They’re works of art. Some of our most talented designers compete for decades before their work is chosen.”

“That’s amazing,” Cara said.

The two women fell into an amiable silence. Finally, Portia asked, “Have you started to think about what you’re going to do?”

“No. Not really,” Cara said. “I have talked to the Captain, and she said I don’t have to make any decisions right away. It’s just strange. Literally all of my skills are out of date.”

“We have some excellent training programs,” Portia said.

“Obviously, your rank doesn’t really apply, but if you’d like to join the crew, you could definitely train up.”

“What would I be? An ensign?”

“Maybe. If you want to join a different department, yeah. If you wanted to work with our Information and History Officer, you would probably be promoted pretty fast considering your area of expertise.”

“History?”

“Exactly,” Portia said. “Look, I can’t imagine how hard this must be. I’m sure you considered how much time would go by, but the universe is a very different place. Besides, hearing that you will be gone for centuries isn’t quite the same as actually experiencing it.”

“No,” Cara agreed. “It’s not. It’s really not.”

“Don’t worry,” Portia said. “I’m sure you will get used to this.”

“Maybe,” Cara said as a smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“Did you see a part of your future that you like?”

“One of the service boys,” Cara replied.

“Oh. Yes. They can be fun. It’s a shame we aren’t allowed to have personal slaves on board, but if you start to develop a relationship with one of them, you can certainly see if you can secure his status when we eventually return to Terra.”

“Terra,” Corporal Dare repeated the word and shook her head. “Even the basic word is different. I’m still used to calling it Earth.”

“Languages change,” Portia replied. “I’m sure you will get used to that as well.”

“Probably,” Cara replied. “But I have to ask you something. I saw some rumors online. They are about Aric.”

“The competition,” Portia said.

“Is that what you’re calling it?”

“It’s pretty much a game,” said the Science Officer.

“But he’s a person.”

“He’s a boy. He’s also a boy who really needs to be trained.”

Cara opened her mouth. At this point, she could have argued for Aric. She could have defended him and insisted that he had rights, especially as an explorer. As those thoughts flashed behind her eyes, Cara remembered what had happened. And this time, she decided to be quiet.

Instead, she let the conversation drift. They started talking about music, movies, and some of their favorite novels. Before long, Cara stopped thinking about the boy down in the infirmary.

Beatrice enjoyed different elements of gaming, specifically the variables that offered one player or another some meaningful advantage. As of the Information and History Officer, Beatrice saw so much of what happened as a series of different games.

For her, a game was any instance where individuals made choices as they pursued some specific outcome. She realized her definition was incredibly broad, so it included things like an individual's career, dating, boy training, and more.

This competition to see who would get to keep Aric as a pleasure slave certainly qualified.

When the Captain announced that Beatrice would go first, she immediately started thinking through the strengths and weaknesses of her position.

Weaknesses: Beatrice had never trained a male herself, so she didn't know what the others might do. Obviously, each of the officers had taken courses in male psychology back in college or high school, but those classes were fairly superficial and rudimentary. Really, they served to prove to the female population that males needed to be controlled for their own good.

Other weaknesses: Beatrice would have to train this boy, and she might weaken his defenses, thereby making it easier to tame him for her competitors.

Strengths: Beatrice got to go first, which meant he would be fresh and energetic. If she succeeded and utterly broke his defenses, then the other women might not have much to work with. Besides, this wasn't just a question of his subjugation. It was entertainment.

Under normal circumstances, Beatrice might have considered this to be a waste of time, especially considering the kinds of experience and expertise possessed by this crew. And yet, they still had several years before they reached their destination.

The officers needed entertainment and diversion. Their personal projects and experiments took time, but a Wild Male?

Just the phrase was enough to excite her.

Out of professional curiosity, Beatrice decided to hunt down the phrase, especially because she didn't think there had been any female-controlled societies before the Water Wars.

After some skilled research and well-articulated search queries, she discovered a small country: Matria. Although it survived the Water Wars with deft planning by its Queen and her Counselors, the country remained a tiny sliver of the human population. Besides, they became "normal" when the rest of humanity decided women needed to take the reins of power.

After Beatrice spent some time reading up about that tiny nation, she moved on to her own plan. Her resources weren't terribly limited, especially since she could use the Holo Platforms, but she instead sent a request to the ship's engineer. Modifications to one small exam room would be easy enough, so she gave herself a couple of hours to prepare as she planned out Aric's subjugation.

She worked at one of the small tables where Cara and Portia had talked earlier. Beatrice kept her eyes down on her Data Cube as she watched the various progressions, considered her options, and came up with her plan.

She ran the tip of her tongue along her teeth as she lost herself in different ideas. She wasn't sure if this would work, especially because subjugation had never been her strongest skill.

Back on Terra, Beatrice could have negotiated for the chance to take a boy. Even then, there weren't many wild or rebellious young men out there. So many of them learned from a young age that they needed to cooperate and do as they were told.

When boys went to school, they didn't face the same rigorous academic subjects as the girls. For the most part, boys learned about proper comportment, cooking, cleaning, and household management. For each boy, his skill sets needed to match one goal: helping his wife. He would support her and learn exactly what it took to be a good husband.

That would always be the phrase, "A good husband."

Some boys tried to rebel against the system. They earned terrible grades, argued or talked back, and consequently needed to be punished.

Beatrice wondered how Aric would have turned out if he had gone through those programs.

She studied his records, and she could quickly discern the truth: unlike so many of his colleagues, he wasn't a complete sexist or chauvinist. Apparently, he hadn't even protested when a female crewmember had been assigned to his vessel.

And yet, she saw the redacted section of his file.

Beatrice cocked her head to the side as she looked down at the holographic projections. She stared at the two-dimensional text, especially those black lines. She squinted, almost as though Beatrice thought she might see the words underneath if she tried hard enough.

Hour by hour, she made her plans.

Aric had to wait.

He didn't have much to do, especially because he couldn't make the door work.

It was ridiculous and silly and embarrassing, but he tried several times. He would walk up to the spot where Cara and Doctor Gaia had exited the room. He waved his hand as he tried to find some sort of sensor. At the same time, he worked to recall precisely what motions those women used to get out.

He just wanted to make it through a door, only he couldn't do it on his own.

Aric was an astronaut, the kind of man who had worked hard. He had gone through grueling physical exams, psychological evaluations, and countless academic tests.

But there he was, standing in front of a wall, waving his arm, and waiting for a door to appear.

It didn't.

At several points, Aric thought about shouting out. Maybe they had forgotten him?

No, that couldn't be.

Realizing this wouldn't work, Aric decided to be patient. He wasn't going to throw a tantrum, nor would he allow his emotions to overwhelm him. He had to be patient. He could do this.

He was a photographer, so he knew how to wait patiently. Other artists had it easy; they could set down whatever they wanted, scribble out a poem, sketch out a fantasy, or start sculpting clay. Photographers, on the other hand, had to wait for that exact moment. When would this bird flutter from its branch? When would she laugh? When with this baby giggle? Photographers had to capture moments, but moments flashed across brief instants, and they couldn't be forced.

He often had to spread out his equipment and wait for the perfect shot. While other photographers could rely on computer-generated imagery and modifications, Aric took a more traditional approach. Yes, he knew how to edit images, and he did occasionally, but he still needed that starting point.

As Aric sat down on the table, he looked down at his white boxers, closed his eyes, straightened his back, and placed his hands on his knees.

He inhaled slowly, exhaled, and thought of his last trip to Mars.

At the time, Mars mostly remained a red, dusty globe, although there had been numerous plans for terraforming. Aric started to wonder if maybe any of them had succeeded.

He kept his back straight, and he meditated, losing himself in one memory after another. At the same time, he told himself that he just had to wait. It wasn't like women on this starship would just forget about him.

Then another possibility occurred to him. Could there be some kind of computer interface?

Aric tried to think back to what Doctor Gaia had done in his presence. Then again, there was every possibility that she had some sort of implant or unseen device which allowed her to interface with the ship.

It was a frustrating, especially because he didn't have anyone to ask.

Again and again, he tried hard not to think of himself as a prisoner.

Breathing out slowly, he glanced around the light, featureless room. "Computer?" That would have worked in lots of old, sci-fi vids. For some reason, it didn't work here.

Then he smirked and thought back to the voice assistant programs put out by various conglomerates. They all used cute names for their products: Lexa, Georgia, Kortana, and more.

If Aric didn't know the activating name for this ship's AI, she might hear everything he said, only she wouldn't recognize any of the commands.

Aric shoved himself off of the edge of the small table, and he paced back and forth like a wild animal. Then the door opened, and he found himself facing a young woman.

She had high cheekbones, straight, dark brown hair, and a lithe physique. At once, a smile curved along her lips, and she placed her hands on her hips. She wore the same white uniform as the other women, only hers had a yellow-gold trim.

"Who are you?" Aric asked. "More importantly, how do I get out of here?"

"My name is Beatrice Alanastochter, and I'm the Information and History Officer," the woman said without mentioning the competition. "I'm here to help bring you up to date."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've been asleep for a very long time, Aric. Don't you want to know what has happened?"

He gulped, glanced around, and suddenly felt very nervous.

He was taller than this woman. She only looked five-seven or so, but there was still something intimidating about her. It had to be her confidence and the fact that she understood this century. She knew what was going on, while he didn't.

"Right..." He pushed through the frustration and aggravation of having waited for so long without anything to do. A different question popped into his head. "How do I access the ship's AI?"

"There's an interface for boys," she said simply. "Place your hand on the glass, and tell the system that you are a boy who needs help."

"It can't be that easy," he said.

"It is. The AI has been programmed to help males who are lost or confused. You shouldn't have any trouble."

Beatrice still had her hands on her hips. "Go on. Try it."

He inhaled slowly, walked over to the wall, and tentatively reached out. At the same time, he knew that this woman was watching him. She was studying the contours of his shoulders, his waist, and his legs.

Feeling ridiculous, Aric nonetheless reached out and touched the smooth surface. "Will here work?"

A patronizing smile touched her lips, "That will be fine." Her eyes seemed to sparkle beneath her dark brows.

"I'm a man who needs help," Aric said.

He waited for something to happen, yet the wall remained inert.

Like some teacher trying to help the student, Beatrice asked, "You know what you did wrong?"

He did.

Instinctively, Aric had hoped he wouldn't have to use that exact phrase. And yet, he recognized that language had changed, so maybe a word like "man" had simply become less popular over the decades.

All at once, he flashed back to several conversations he'd gone through with various women. The argument was always the same. "If you're talking about a grown woman, you shouldn't call her a girl." Each time, Aric had shrugged. Sure, he had played along like it mattered, but he didn't understand why women got so upset over the small details. Women? Girl? What was the difference? Sure, *girl* sounded younger and maybe a little childish, but wasn't that a complement anyway? Besides, it just didn't seem like this warranted any kind of discussion or debate.

Only now, the woman standing in front of Aric expected him to use a different phrase.

“Go on,” she said, coaxing him like he needed the encouragement. “You can do it.”

Because he needed access to these systems and didn’t want to get stuck in here again, he puffed out the words, “I’m a boy, and I need help.”

The entire wall started to glow around him as the light matched a female voice, “What kind of help do you need, Aric?”

The commander pulled his hand away from the wall, and the illumination dissipated. “I can do that on any wall?”

“That’s correct,” she said. “And the system has been especially programmed to help you and the other boys on the ship.”

“But you use a different system?” That seemed incredibly inefficient.

“Would you like to know what I use?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m really curious.”

“Take off your boxers for me.”

A nervous swallow ran down his throat because this woman wasn’t a doctor performing any kind of exam or evaluation. Instead, she was someone who came here to educate him, so he had to ask, “Why is that necessary?”

Beatrice smiled, “I did a favor for you. You should do a favor for me. You don’t want to be an uncooperative boy, do you?”

Again, he wanted to tell her not to address him as a boy. He was a man. Not only that, he was a commander. Again, he had to imagine he outranked this woman. Only his organization no longer existed; it had been swept away by the jagged sands of time.

“Look,” she said, “Male nudity isn’t a big deal. Go on. Take off your boxers.”

He looked down at the snug fabric clinging to his thighs and protecting the last of his modesty. He could believe what this woman had said, but he wasn’t really sure. Finally, in a timid voice, he asked, “Do I have to?” Aric tried to sound strong and powerful, he failed utterly, and the young woman in front of him knew it.

When Beatrice didn’t bother answering, Aric made his decision. He grabbed onto the sides of his underwear and pulled it down, exposing himself in front of her.

“Good boy,” she said. “Oh, and look at that. Doctor Gaia already put you in a chastity cage.”

Chastity *cage*. That second word sent a shiver running down his spine.

“Please stand up, hold your hands behind your back, and let me inspect you.”

“I thought you were an information officer,” he protested.

Beatrice didn’t respond. Instead, she just watched him with her knowing gaze, so he exhaled again. He was already naked in front of her. Not only that, he had a collar around his neck. A collar. He wondered if the women here might come up with some other euphemism for it.

He stood there with his shoulders down, his back straight, and his wrists crossed behind his back. Suddenly, he had this young woman circling him, watching him, and then she reached out to stroke him, “Don’t move.”

He had to wonder if this might be some kind of procedure, only her fingers brushed along his skin. Her nails grazed his flesh without really scratching him, and fresh quivers ran through his body.

“You’re a very handsome specimen, Aric.”

“Whatever you say,” he replied.

“And that’s an excellent attitude,” she told him.

She continued to stroke him until her hand reached down for his right buttock, and she pinched. He jumped forward, which only made her chuckle. “It’s cute when you’re shy,” she said. “No please, lay down on the table. I have gathered some materials for you.”

“What kind of materials?”

“I thought it would be helpful for you to learn more about the advances society has made since you went into stasis.”

“Okay,” he said because that made sense.

“On the table,” she said, pointing.

When he swallowed, he could feel the band around his throat. It wasn’t metal, not exactly, nor was it plastic or any kind of fabric he might have otherwise been familiar with. Most importantly, every time he gulped, he could feel the tension right there as a reminder of what these women expected him to wear.

The last time he saw Corporal Dare, she didn’t have a band around her neck. It was only the boys who seemed to wear these things.

Aric filled his lungs and was about to ask, only her expression hardened, and something inside of him bent. He got back up on the table, and she told him to lie down. Again, he did as she said.

Beatrice waved her hand through the air, and he tried to study her movements. She noticed and asked, "What're you doing?"

"Your system uses a haptic interface, right?" He was proud of himself for using the correct phrase.

"Yes," she said.

"Well, I wanted to learn how it works."

"It doesn't work for boys," she said. "I already told you how to access our systems."

I'm a boy who needs help, he thought. At the same time, he had to wonder who designed something like that.

"Right," he muttered.

"Don't be upset. You can play with the AI when we are done with our conversation."

This time, Aric didn't say anything, so Beatrice took that as her cue to begin. "We're going to start with some relaxation techniques."

"I thought you were going to tell me about history and the latest developments," he said.

"Oh, I will," she said. "But I've worked with males before. Sometimes, you need some extra help focusing."

Aric really, really itched to tell this woman that he didn't need any extra help, and she could begin whenever she wanted. Only then she placed her hand on his shoulder and nudged him down onto the table. Overhead, the lights began to dim. Fresh illumination came from the crevices of each wall. Red, blue, green, and orange flashed along the table.

"This is going to be good for you, Aric, but I need you to relax first. Can you do that for me, Aric?"

"Maybe you should call me Commander Donovan," he said.

"Aric," she said casually, "I know this is difficult for you. You are trying to learn so much, and it must be very stressful for a boy like you. But I'm sure you can do it. Just relax and look up."

"This isn't going to help me learn about history," he growled back. His temper was starting to flare, only she crouched down and pointed toward the ceiling. "Watch the lights, Aric."

They flashed, going through one sequence after another.

Aric didn't intend to study them, only the different patterns entranced him.

He started trying to predict exactly which color might flash next. Red or green? Blue or orange? He didn't know, and that's when he started to hear the music. A violin, flute, and piano played together, creating different sounds and rhythms. The melodies were soft and playful. If anything, they reminded him of spring.

"That's right," she said. "Watch the lights and listen to the music. Listen to the music and the sound of my voice. You can relax, Aric."

Again, he wanted her to call him Commander Donovan.

His lips started to move, but he couldn't find his voice. As hard as he tried, he couldn't push the words from between his lips. Instead, his gaze continued to drift toward the ceiling as she spoke.

"Relax, Aric. Just relax and let your thoughts drift. Listen to the sound of my voice. You don't need to think. Just listen to the sound of my voice. Listen to my words, Aric. I'm here to help you. I'm here to make sure you learn everything you need to know."

His fingers pushed down into the palms of his hands, only he couldn't muster any kind of genuine resistance.

What's happening to me? The thought popped into his head, but it remained sluggish, like he had to push each word through his mind.

The lights continued to flash with their soft, entrancing rhythm. Her voice continued to play along his eardrums as she manipulated him.

"Let your thoughts drift, Aric. It's important for you to be in the proper state of mind. You want to relax. You want to understand how things have changed. Just relax, Aric. You don't need to fight this."

Only then, he lifted his hand and focused on his fingers. He managed to pull his eyes away from the light, and that's when she reached up and brushed her fingers along his wrist. She nudged his hand back down toward the table.

"Just relax. You don't need to move. You don't need to fight this. Just relax, Aric." He loved the sound of her voice. He loved the inflection of every word. Not only that, the music played, and it was easy to lose himself in those notes and rhythms. They were so soft and enticing, like every sound flirted with him.

"It's easy for you to be a boy," she continued. Her voice was a soft, playful purr. "It's easy for you to relax and let go. You don't have to think.

Just put yourself in the proper state of mind. Allow this to happen.”

The words jumped from his lips. He didn’t think about them consciously, but some part of his brain continued to fight, “You’re trying to hypnotize me.”

He brought both of his hands up, and he placed his palms over his ears.

The instant he dulled those sounds, Aric could start to think for himself. Sure, the music continued to play, only now she wrapped her fingers around his wrists and nudged them away.

On some level, Aric knew he should have fought harder.

She pulled his hands back down toward his sides. Then she said, “Initiate restraint protocols.”

He didn’t understand what that meant, not until his fingers touched the soft material of the bed. White, automated straps instantly materialized around his wrists. He didn’t see it happen, so he didn’t know what it looked like, only now he tried to raise his head to look down toward his arms.

He saw the white bands.

Aric tried to pull on them, only Beatrice pushed her fingers down against his forehead, forcing this boy to look up once again.

At the last moment, Aric tried so hard to close his eyes, only she coaxed him, “Keep watching. Keep watching, Aric.”

Her voice was so gentle and serene. She sounded like she was having fun with him.

The music played, and he listened to the music. More and more, he started to drift. “You’re a boy, and you know the boys were never meant to rule. Think back to your own time, Aric. Weren’t you angry? Weren’t you scared and insecure? Didn’t you worry about staying safe and succeeding? You don’t have to worry about that here. We are in charge now. Women are better than you. Women are stronger than you and smarter than you. But it’s okay, Aric. Just relax and let this happen. Enjoy the lights and listen to the sound of my voice.”

“No...” Aric said.

“Don’t worry. You’ll remember this, but you won’t want to think about it. Instead, you will think about why women are smarter than you. You’ll think back to how men used to rule and nearly drove our species extinct. But now, you are controlled, all for your own good.”

She reached up and tugged on his collar. Distantly, he recognized the sensations, but he couldn't comprehend what it meant. "We will track you and take care of you. We will protect you from yourself. That's what we do for all boys. We protect you from yourselves."

"You protect us from ourselves," Aric started to mouth the words without thinking.

He didn't understand how those hypnotic patterns of light had been specially calibrated for the male psyche. He didn't understand how much money and how many resources went into developing this technology.

Beatrice watched him. She enjoyed seeing some of the panic and frustration drain away from his features. More and more, he seemed to relax as he accepted her voice and the programming.

Better yet, she knew there would be lots and lots of women back on Terra watching this, listening to the sound of her voice, commenting and reacting.

And to think, this was only the beginning of his subjugation.

With his eyes aimed up at the ceiling, she allowed herself a precocious grin. Beatrice was one of the younger members of the command staff, but she started to believe this would do it. She would win!

And this boy would belong to her.

Sure, the other males of the crew could be a lot of fun, but she wanted to have this one. It wasn't just what his hands and mouth might be able to make her feel. Oh no, she wanted him as a status symbol. She could put him on a leash, walk him around the ship, and show him off.

This boy could be an amazing status symbol.

Beatrice ran her teeth along her lower lip as she contemplated the possibilities. Then she continued, "Just look around, Aric. You can see it in this technology. We have developed so much. You boys could barely get out of the solar system, but we have faster than light travel. We have starships made of glass."

He heard those words. Deep down, he knew she was right.

Humanity had failed again and again while men ruled. From the destruction of the Library at Alexandria to one global war after another, men tried to prove themselves with bloodshed and destruction.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel good," he said. But that word wasn't quite right. Another idea occurred to him, and he spoke it without thinking, "I feel obedient."

Beatrice allowed herself the privilege of reaching out and stroking his cheek with the back of her hand.

“Good boy,” she said. “Now, I’m going to tell you about the world. I’m going to tell you about our history. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” he said blankly, “I’m ready.”

“And what you think you’re going to learn?”

“History.”

“History proves that women deserve to rule,” she said.

Despite the hypnotic programming, he tried to shake his head. She saw that tiny flicker of movement, his brief flash of resistance, and she decided to play with him, to make sure he surrendered.

Nearly feral arousal pulsed through her body as she studied the bound boy beneath her. Her hand stretched down between his legs. She started to stroke his legs and inner thighs. Her fingers glided along his sensitive flesh.

With the music thrumming and lights dancing, Aric couldn’t pull his thoughts back together. He should’ve been angry at the restraints and snarling at the Information Officer. Instead, he remained utterly relaxed and content as the programming continued.

“History shows us the truth, Aric. For centuries, men clung to power. Through one man-made disaster after another, they insisted they were stronger and smarter. But then the Water Wars came, a perfect culmination of male hubris and incompetence.”

“Water—Water Wars?” he needed to speak, yet his chest barely vibrated with those words.

“Yes. And they’re exactly what they sound like,” Beatrice told him. “For more than a century, you boys were warned. You knew exactly what was coming. Water tables were drained, rivers polluted, lakes defiled. Water became a precious commodity,” she said. That’s when she laughed.

Despite the music and the sonorous notes of her lovely voice, Aric still managed to wonder why she would laugh. Deep within the confines of his psyche, he tried to understand, but he couldn’t figure it out.

Beatrice had to explain it for him.

Piano played, one soft note after another. A flute trilled, and the music washed over him.

“You boys managed to turn water into a precious commodity despite the fact that the planet was covered in it. More than two thirds of Terra is

covered in water, but that wasn't enough for you. Somehow, you messed it up."

Aric came up with a counterargument, but Beatrice batted it aside with another little giggle, "Sure, it was salt water, but who cares? You had the technology. Desalination plants existed. You even had solar panels, so it wasn't like electricity had to be an issue. But you couldn't get organized. Even with scientists banging on your doors and insisting this was a problem, boys kept chugging along."

"Not my fault," Aric wanted to say.

His lips started to move, and she gently pressed one finger to his lips, silencing him. "Conflicts broke out. We don't even have the exact records, Aric, but that's okay. We know that men dominated almost every national government. There may have been exceptions, but they weren't good enough. Women didn't have enough of a voice, so we couldn't stop you boys from making one mistake after another. Inevitably, you drove the world off a cliff."

Aric tried to say something else, but Beatrice cut him off again.

"No," she said softly. She didn't need to raise her voice, yet that single syllable stopped him completely. He didn't understand how the patterns of light and music influenced his psyche or how this woman was working to enthrall him so completely that he no longer needed to think for himself. "No," she repeated. "Don't try to think for yourself. You're a boy, and boys need to do as they're told. Boys are happier when they serve."

He tried to shake his head, only Aric couldn't find the muscle control. Instead, he continued to look up.

He was relaxed, so relaxed, so content and serene. His body felt like it was floating.

This boy forgot about his arms and legs, his torso and neck. Instead, he just relaxed into the flashes of illumination, the soft music, and the beautiful sounds of Beatrice's voice.

"But don't worry, Aric. Our story has a happy ending," she said. "The Water Wars raged for a long time, and guess what? No one won. There was no triumphant victor. I'm sure you boys hoped someone would step forward, take command, and craft a new world order, one built on fairness. But that didn't happen. The factions continued to pound on one another until they had nothing left."

She clicked her tongue and shook her head, “There were no winners, only losers. I’m sure the boys who wanted to keep fighting couldn’t see it. I’m sure they thought they could push just a little bit harder and make it all worth something.”

Aric heard the words and understood. He was a boy, and so he was at least partly responsible. More importantly, he knew that if he had been there, he wouldn’t have been able to stop it. In fact, he may have signed up to fight. There would have been justifications, and he would have believed them because he was a boy. He could feel it deep within his psyche, an urge for combat. He may not have been as aggressive as some of his contemporaries, but he could be tricked. He could be deceived. He could yearn for war and combat just like anyone else.

Intellectually, he might have recognized how foolish it would be. If water supplies had grown short, people needed to learn to share and better allocate resources. From a purely calculated perspective, he recognized all of this, but he was still male. He still envisioned himself holding a gun, running between blown outbuildings, taking head shots, and proving himself on the field of battle. That’s where he would get honor and glory.

“You boys fought so hard. You fought so hard and destroyed so much.”

It was foolish. He was foolish. Somewhere deep down, Aric had to wonder if those ideas came from his own mind or the hypnotic programming. He couldn’t tell. He couldn’t be sure which thoughts were his and which were injected by her voice or the combination of light and melody.

“By then the boys were exhausted, so women came forward. We asserted ourselves with one simple message. Boys had their chance. They had hundreds and thousands of chances, only to mess it up again and again. Humanity had been an experiment, Aric, one where boys decided they should be the center of everything. Along the way, you nearly destroyed all of us.”

Aric couldn’t turn his head away from the lights. Even so, he still saw this girl shake her head in his peripheral vision.

“One faction after another fell to female control. I’m sure lots of the boys assumed that you would be equals now. But now, women wouldn’t make that mistake. Males love to whine and complain. They love to throw tantrums. Sure, they talk about how bold and brave they were after the fact,

but how many historical moments were determined by men who refused to compromise, men who couldn't work together?"

She allowed those questions to hang on the air.

Aric started to consider different military conflicts. Many had been justified, he was sure. And yet, he had to go to that old adage, history would always be written by the victors. The winners would always need to justify what they had done.

She brushed her fingers along his chest. He felt so sensitive.

Even if she was trying to brainwash him, Aric still felt that flicker of arousal running between his legs. His shaft started to harden, only to feel the boundaries of his chastity cage.

"Boys need to be controlled," she said. "You proved it. You proved it again and again, but now we are in charge, and you get to help. Aren't you lucky?" As she asked this demeaning, patronizing question, she slid her fingers along his body. She stroked his thigh before reaching up between his legs. His shaft may have been covered by the chastity lock, but she gently caressed his balls. Her fingers teased that spot beneath his scrotum, and he wanted to get excited. Yes, pleasure flashed through him, but Aric couldn't tear himself away from the enthralling vision above him.

Beatrice grinned, "Don't worry. We know exactly how to control you. We know how to make a better society now. Our world isn't perfect, but we have learned from your mistakes. There is so much less poverty, conflict, and war. We worked together to improve everyone's lives, and all it cost us was freedom."

She giggled, "You boys need to be owned. That's why we put collars around your necks. That's why we make sure you will do anything for the chance to get out of this." She grabbed his shaft and squeezed. He couldn't really feel it even as she just barely tugged on his shaft. She had his manhood in her hand while his arms remained locked at his sides.

"When it comes to art, we excel. When it comes to science and exploration, we have achieved so much more than you boys ever did."

Overhead, fresh images started to resolve themselves. Aric saw space stations, orbital rings, rockets, engine designs, and so much more which he could barely comprehend. Chemical formulae flashed along the ceiling with equations which were far beyond him.

"That's what girls learn about in school," she said. "It comes easily to them, especially when they don't have to worry about boys getting upset

or throwing tantrums. We keep the sexes separated for most education. It makes things easier that way. Boys can learn about service, and girls can learn about leadership.”

If he had been allowed to think clearly, Aric probably would have gotten angry. He would have snarled something about equality and fairness.

She seemed to read his mind, “This isn’t about justice,” she said. “It’s about doing what is best for everyone. If the world were fair, men would get the same chances as women, and a few of you might be able to handle real responsibility, only then others would demand the same treatment. And guess what? They would mess it up. We can’t take that chance, not again, Aric. Now relax. Relax and listen to the sound of my voice. Relax and embrace your own inferiority. Accept your status. You are a boy, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Lots of boys here are very happy. You want to be happy, don’t you? You want to be happy as you do as you’re told. You want to be happy as you obey. You want to be happy as you respect the women around you.”

He tried to fight it, but he couldn’t. He surrendered to those sensations. She continued to stroke him, to tease him. And yet, he couldn’t feel the full rush of arousal, not while his manhood remained trapped.

“We are almost done. Last, I just want you to see some of those images. This is what people like to watch now. It’s what they like to see.” Above him, a montage of different streams flashed.

He saw a woman in a silver uniform fight some kind of monster. Behind her, a boy was naked and chained to a wall. He looked helpless even as he stared at her with big, adoring eyes.

Yes, he understood that he could never be as strong as this superheroine. But he didn’t mind because he needed her to protect him. He would always be grateful.

In the next image, a woman in a dark suit walked back and forth. The judge sat above the court as she considered the different ideas. It was some kind of legal drama. There were boys on the screen back in the audience. Clearly, their opinions weren’t welcome here because complicated legal matters needed a female perspective.

In the next image, coarse rope bound a boy as he struggled on a set of train tracks. Up ahead, two women got ready to duel as a locomotive blasted its horn in the distance. Within moments, the trapped boy’s fate would be determined...

Aric watched the examples of women taking control and defending powerless boys.

The message was clear: males needed to be protected, both from the world and from themselves. They weren't capable of making their own decisions. They weren't capable of thinking for themselves.

Commander Donovan needed to clench his eyes shut and hide from the onslaught, but he couldn't block out those images.

Again and again, he saw handsome young actors surrender to women. These boys were princes chained in dark, foreboding dungeons. They were young men who tried to do science, only to be overwhelmed by their creations—and saved by even smarter women.

Aric wasn't a fool, so he discerned the pattern right away.

It made him think of his own era when women complained about the media and portrayals of women. They argued that females were, too often, fragile creatures who needed to be rescued. Even when they were allowed some kind of competence, the men still had to be even stronger and smarter.

The same thing happened here.

Aric watched a cat burglar boy get caught as a net fell over him.

He saw a cowboy get bound by a lasso.

In the next clip, a boy ran down a hallway as he tried to evade some kind of Huntress, only she'd already outsmarted him. He just didn't know it. The truth only became obvious when she stuck her foot out, tripped him, and made him fall into a tumbling roll. The next thing he knew, she had her boot pressing down on his sternum.

"This is the truth," Beatrice said. "This is art reflecting life."

Aric tried so hard to shake his head. Again, he told himself to clamp his eyes shut and block the sounds from his eardrums, only she spoke with this beautiful voice, and the softly seductive music made him *want* to succumb.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't push those desires away.

The music continued to play, the lights kept flashing, and Beatrice taught him so much.

"You're a boy, and you want to obey. You're a boy, and you need to do as you're told. It's easier when you just relax. You don't need to speak or think for yourself. All of the other men here know their place. They understand what it means to surrender."

By this point, Beatrice smiled down at him.

Then she decided he was ready.

Perhaps she would have liked to work with him longer, but she knew the viewers would only enjoy his programming for so long before they got curious. The Information Officer didn't need to see a data feed to imagine the thousands of women commenting on her stream as they demanded to see the results.

The technologies may have changed, but in some ways, impatient audiences would always remain the same.

With another gesture, she brought the program to an end.

"It's time for you to relax and think about what you've learned, Aric," she said.

That's when she made another set of gestures. Disoriented, confused, and deeply relaxed all at the same time, Aric watched her hands dance on the air.

Panels slid away to reveal robotic, segmented limbs.

Aric tried to open his mouth, to simply speak and express himself. If he couldn't make any statements, then ask her a few questions. He wanted to know what this girl was thinking, what she had in mind, and what he needed to do.

Uncertainty and disorientation flooded through his mind, leaving him unable to move. At this point, he hardly noticed the restraints around his wrists.

He should have marveled at the mechanical arms. They moved with deft grace as they pulled the eye-mask over his face. Something like soft silk covered his eyes. Next, he felt the protective gear cover his ears.

Then Beatrice touched something to his forehead, and all of his senses abandoned him.

At first, he thought this had to be some kind of psychological glitch. Perhaps his mind had retreated into itself. She had confronted him with too much, so now he had to hide.

But no. He tried to flex his fingers, and maybe he succeeded. He tried to inhale and catch some random aroma, but he couldn't detect anything. He blinked his eyes open, but there was just warm, welcoming darkness.

Moment by moment, Aric expected something to change. Then he started to understand what Beatrice had done.

She tied him down and restricted his senses. She made him utterly helpless by removing his touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. With each second, he expected his senses to come flooding back, but she didn't give him that reward, not right away anyway.

His breathing quickened, and he expected to feel the cool air along his lips or a chill deep within his teeth.

There was nothing. Just soft, neutral warmth.

He wasn't uncomfortable, but he couldn't feel anything either.

It wasn't numbness, not exactly. It was more like floating or being held aloft by invisible forces. Aric almost felt like a puppet hanging from his strings, unaware of the rest of the world.

"Sensory deprivation?" the doctor asked.

Miranda had decided to stop by to see how Beatrice was doing with this boy. As the referee, it was her job to make sure none of the women damaged the perspective prize. She didn't think this would happen, but accidents were possible, so she needed to be sure everyone played fairly.

When she saw the deprivation crystal pressed to his forehead, Miranda nodded. "This is a good way to make sure he thinks about what he has done," said the doctor. "Or rather, it's a good way to make sure he thinks about what you have done to him."

"Thank you," Beatrice replied.

Miranda smirked.

"What is it?"

"Oh," the doctor said, "I was just wondering what he's thinking about right now."

"Hopefully, he's contemplating his future. He's probably thinking about what it means to be a subjugated boy."

"The program you put together was beautiful," Miranda said. "I've never crafted a hypnotic script before, but from what I saw, you have a very good chance of turning this boy into an obedient plaything. There's a good chance the other women won't even have a shot at taming him because he will already be perfectly malleable."

"I hope so," Beatrice replied. She had her arms crossed over her chest as she looked down at Aric. Miranda had seen this expression before; she remembered hanging out with a service boy once while he tried to make a soufflé. He had stared at his oven so intently, when he thought he might

be able to force the correct chemical reactions with nothing but his force of will. At that moment, he had done his best, but he had to wait and wonder what the future would bring. Now Beatrice wore that same expression.

“He did an excellent job. And even if this doesn’t work, you have some pretty incredible numbers. The women back on Terra are having a wonderful time.”

“Have you been reading the comments?”

“I have,” Miranda replied. “They are pretty productive.”

“It’s funny,” Beatrice replied as she looked down at this boy from another era. “Back during his century, they had a primitive form of the grid. Only back then, everyone knew to avoid the comments section on any article or vid.”

“Why?” Miranda asked. She often spent hours wandering different comments as she explored other individuals’ perspectives and ideas. It was almost always illuminating.

“Apparently, they were pretty toxic. The system put into place encouraged bad behavior and shocking ideas. Or maybe his culture was just so immature that they couldn’t handle the idea of communicating with one another anonymously. If you stop and think about it, it was pretty pathetic.”

“That should give you hope then,” Miranda replied.

“Oh?”

“It sounds like those boys could be pretty easily manipulated.”

“Hypnosis has a fairly high success rate, but I might not get lucky. Aric here might be smarter than those other males. We chose him because he was more sophisticated and interesting than his crewmates.”

“True,” Miranda allowed. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do if you win him?”

“I have.” Beatrice didn’t say anything else, yet the grin on her face communicated so much.

Aric didn’t know about the technology. He didn’t understand how the deprivation crystal could block his senses while simultaneously slowing his perception of time. Out in the real world, the women could chat for a few minutes, but it might feel like hours or even longer for a bound boy.

His mind started to drift, and he thought of Beatrice. He didn’t know why.

He pictured himself down on his knees, bowing his head and pleading for the chance to serve her. "Please, may I be your slave?"

When those words first flashed through his head, he thought he might smirk or smile. Only then he felt the emotional resonance, those echoes of feeling, and he knew the truth.

He wanted to belong to her.

Then, without meaning to, he thought back to his secondary school. As a teenager, he had been really good friends with one boy: Alec. Then Alec started flirting with an older girl, a senior. Yes, that girl, Tiffany, was gorgeous. She had bright blue eyes, wavy blonde hair, and she strode down the corridors with perfect confidence. And for some reason, she started flirting with Alec.

Yes, lots of the girls on campus liked to talk about feminism and resisting sexism. No one really understood how these ideas could be sold, yet the gender pay gap persisted. Not only that, the numbers of women who had worked in government and business had actually started falling.

Aric didn't pay much attention to that stuff. He recognized the problem, and he wasn't like any of the jackass football or basketball players who insisted girls needed to wear short skirts to be worth their time. Aric spent most of his time playing video games and occasionally studying.

But Alec and Tiffany started spending time together. They flirted in the halls. During lunch, Alec wanted to hang out with this girl. She started holding his hand. She started teasing him, calling him, "Her boy."

Aric rolled his eyes and barely concealed his contempt. It seemed so ridiculous. How could Alec, a young man, put up with that? Worse, she sometimes petted Alec as she called him her pony boy. It seemed crazy to Aric, but only because he felt that twinge deep down. He tried not to think about it, and he certainly wouldn't let it show, but he wished a beautiful girl might grab *his* hand, pet *him*, and tease *him*.

It wasn't fair.

But that was secondary school, so Aric met some other guys and started hanging out with them. Alec and Tiffany continued dating. They wandered apart from one another. Even so, Aric could still recall that twinge of jealousy and the yearning to have some girl play with him and tease him.

Now he thought of Beatrice.

He couldn't help it.

He imagined himself brushing her hair, massaging her back, or rubbing lotion onto her body. Even in his fantasies, he still had that tracking collar around his neck and the chastity cage between his legs.

This wasn't some misogynistic fantasy where he could own her or turn her into a harem girl. She wouldn't be dressed like a schoolgirl or some sexy genie.

Rather, he would work hard to please and pleasure her. He would move his hands along her body to make her feel good. He would be her boy, owned like a pet or a servant. He imagined himself like one of the other males, collared and obedient, ready to serve because her pleasure had become his only priority.

What about the planet?

What about being the first person to step foot on an alien planet—on a planet orbiting Tau Ceti?

That had been his dream for so long.

Aric didn't know how to negotiate between those conflicting desires. Part of him couldn't have cared less about exploration or astronomy. Another part remembered the rigorous training, the difficult studies, and the fierce competition.

Cara.

He remembered what happened between the two of them.

He recalled exactly what he had given up to be assigned the first person to step off of the Ranger 3 insertion shuttle...

Images of Beatrice continued to flash behind his eyes. Actively working to push aside those memories of Cara, he instead focused on this beautiful girl. He thought of the contours of her cheeks, the fullness of her lips, and the sharp gaze she could aim at him.

He could kneel at her feet, massage her toes, serve her in his mouth, and make her feel so good. In fact, he could almost taste her sex...

Then he felt something, her fingers brushing along his cheek. She pulled something away from his forehead, and his senses began to return. He could feel the soft pads beneath his back, the shackles around his wrists, and the confinement of his manhood as his shaft tried to push against the boundaries of the chastity cage.

He blinked his eyes open as she pulled away the eye-mask.

When he saw her again, he thought he was looking up at an angel.

"Are you ready?" Beatrice asked.

For several seconds, Aric couldn't tell whether or not he had remained in his fantasy. Perhaps this wasn't actually happening. For all he knew, this was still some sort of dream...

"Ready?" Aric asked, stumbling. "Ready for what?"

"I think the women of the ship would like to see you, Aric."

She started to get him ready. She pulled down the boxers, exposing this boy and his chastity cage. Next, she reached over and took a long strip of black leather from a hidden compartment. She held it up in front of him and let it dangle from side to side.

"I've taught you a lot about everything you missed," she said.

"Now, I think it's time for you to get a real tour."

Aric opened his mouth when he realized exactly what she held. The tip of the leash continued to swing gently until she grabbed the hook and attached it to his tracking collar.

"Tell me what you're thinking right now," she instructed.

"I will be a good and obedient boy," he said automatically. Those words should have felt alien and strange on his lips and tongue. Obedient? He almost never used that word. Even then, it would have applied it to a dog or a pet, not a person.

And yet, she smiled, and this wonderful warmth blossomed in his chest. Pleasing this woman seemed like the most important thing he could imagine.

With a wave of her fingertips, she entered the command, and the ship responded. His shackles withdrew back into their hidden alcoves. He could rise again.

"Get up," she said. She tugged on his leash.

His leash.

She was about to take him for a walk, like he was nothing but an animal. Livestock. Chattel. Aric didn't know where those words came from, but they seemed to materialize behind his eyes.

"Hold your hands behind your back like a good boy," Beatrice said.

She took a step toward the door, and she was about to leave with this boy in tow, only then she paused, flashed a mischievous smile, and said, "And I have you on a leash. I think a pair of binders might be good for you too."

"That's not necessary," Aric said as he tried hard to push through the disorientation. "Look, I don't know what you want to do here, but I can

cooperate.”

“If you can cooperate, then you’re going to be quiet unless I speak to you. Understand?”

Aric didn’t know whether or not he should make another sound, so he just nodded his head.

Apparently, that was the correct decision because she flashed him a wild, eager grin. She motioned toward one of the walls, and another panel opened up. She pulled out the white, glass shackles. When he saw the material, he couldn’t help but think of the rest of the ship.

He didn’t understand how this technology worked, but his comprehension wasn’t relevant. He crossed his arms behind his back, and then felt the smooth material tighten around his wrists.

Just like that, he was bound, leashed, and almost entirely naked.

Content now, Beatrice tugged on his leash and guided him out into the hallway.

Aric didn’t know what to expect. Before, he had worn a gray uniform like so many of the other males. But now, he was escorted out into the hallway, and female crewmembers started to look at him. There were males around as well, only they studiously kept their gazes aimed in other directions. Perhaps they were worried about what Beatrice might inspire in her female crewmates.

“What should we see first?” Beatrice asked. “Back on Terra, it was my job to organize most of the tours. I think we should start with the engineering chamber.”

Having made up her mind, she tugged on his leash and guided him to one of the lifts. They rode it down in silence, and Aric kept thinking of the many things he wanted to say. And yet, this woman had instructed him to remain silent, so he may as well have been muzzled.

This wasn’t like him, he thought.

He may not have been as brash or as arrogant as some of the other men on their ship, but he should have been able to speak up for himself. He should have been able to assert himself.

And yet, he looked down at his body, tugged on his arms, and knew this girl was in charge.

The doors slid open silently, so he followed her out.

He saw the complicated stations as women worked the different elements of the power supply and engines. Their fingers seemed to dance

and play along the air. He couldn't recognize any specific components, but this wasn't what he had expected.

It was almost silent.

And when Beatrice and Aric stepped off of the lift, several of the women turned. They smirked. They grinned. They start whispering back and forth.

Beatrice pretended they didn't have an audience. She started to explain the different components of the engine and how their FTL drive worked. Obviously, she kept it fairly simple since Aric was just a boy and probably wouldn't be able to understand all of it.

Still, he marveled at the pulsing lights and the quiet hum. He still couldn't believe he was traveling faster than the speed of light at that exact moment. And yet, he knew these women had accomplished so much. They had worked together, channeled their resources, and demonstrated how humanity could excel when it put aside its petty squabbles—when women took command.

Beatrice didn't ask if he had any questions. She did, however, stop in the center of the room. "Everyone, I would like you to meet Aric. If you have enjoyed the show, please be sure to comment and show your support!"

Aric looked back at the Information Officer. He still couldn't quite comprehend what was going on here, but then she tugged on his leash and escorted him back to the left.

Once they were alone again, he said, "Do you, do you think you could take the chastity cage off of me?" The words sounded ridiculous as they left his mouth. He felt so strange. This was his body, and he should have been able to control it easily.

"Why would I do that?" Beatrice asked. She sounded genuinely curious.

"Because this is my body."

"Oh? Is it? Is it really?" Beatrice asked playfully.

She tugged on his leash.

He got the point and decided to stay quiet.

The doors slid open, and she showed him some of the long corridors. They looked out the windows, saw the flashing streaks of starlight, and Aric finally started to recognize just how large this ship really was.

These women had constructed something incredible, something the men of his time never would have been able to imagine as a reality. Sure, vessels like this had flown through men's imaginations for centuries, but they made this ship happen. They allocated the resources, worked together, and built this magnificent starship.

"You know," Beatrice said as she seemed to guess his thoughts, "The *Cygnus* is just one of our ships. The fleet is actually pretty big."

"You mean there's more than one of these ships?"

"Hundreds," she said with a laugh because Aric looked so cute as his mouth fell open. He couldn't really believe it. He couldn't comprehend the scale of unity and cooperation which had developed ships like this.

They continued the tour.

"Would you like to see the command deck?"

"Yes. Yes, please."

"You can meet the Captain," she said.

Moments later, they were riding the lift once again. As they made their way up, Aric tugged on his restraints. Something finally clicked.

Unlike Cara, he wasn't a passenger aboard this vessel. Instead, these women had decided to make him into a prisoner.

He glanced over at Beatrice, and she smiled right back. Yes, he may have been valuable to these women, but he wouldn't get anything close to fair treatment.

He needed to get off of this ship.

The Captain.

Maybe he could talk to her.

Her?

A strange sense of dislocation ripped Aric as he tried to come up with the right explanation.

After a lifetime of living in a patriarchy, he truly expected the Captain to be male. Of course a man would lead a starship like this. A woman, though she might theoretically be capable, didn't really have the courage or grit for something so powerful. And yet, the hypnotic programming also kicked in. He knew that he was just a boy, and males couldn't be trusted with anything this powerful.

Men had once commanded entire armies, battalions of tanks, squadrons of aerial fighters, and even nuclear weapons. What had they done

with those mighty forces? They tried to destroy one another over drops of water.

Men didn't deserve to rule. They weren't capable of combining rationality and empathy, not the way women could.

As he contemplated all of this, Aric still knew he had to make the attempt.

Breathing in and out, he focused, and then the doors slid open.

When he saw the command deck, he was impressed. It was just as beautiful as the engineering chamber.

Women sat at their consoles as they conducted their experiments, parsed through data, and made those numerous decisions which allowed the ship to function.

At the center, a woman watched it all.

Stepping forward, Beatrice tugged on his leash and guided him forward.

"Captain Mariesdaughter," Beatrice said. "I would like you to meet Aric."

Aric? He had expected her to use his title: Commander. Instead, his brows creased with confusion, and Beatrice flashed him an irritated glance.

She wants me to kneel, he realized. Like a well-trained pet, he was supposed to drop down in front of his superior. This was going to be a trick, he thought.

Bizarrely, the desire to obey and satisfy this woman surged through his body, but he managed to fight it back. Instead of dropping to his knees, Aric bowed his head respectfully. He thought this was a fair compromise.

"Captain," he said. "Thank you for helping me and my crewmates, but I was hoping that maybe we could return to our ship."

The Captain studied him for several long seconds. Then she glanced over at Beatrice, so Aric did the same. Her cheeks had turned a bright shade of red.

"Beatrice," she said, "I think you have done some amazing work with this boy, but it might not be quite enough."

Beatrice glanced back at Aric once again. That's when he realized his mistake. He had embarrassed the woman who was working to educate him. He should have just gotten down on his knees. Sure, this would have scraped against his ego, but that sort of bluster wouldn't get him anything. He might have been able to make a friend here.

It may have been too late, but Aric didn't see any alternative. He lowered himself down to his knees. "I apologize for being rude," he said.

As he uttered those words, this strange sense of satisfaction began to flow through his mind and body. It was a warm, delicious tingling. It felt incredible, like he knew he belonged right there, on his knees in front of these women.

"Maybe he just takes a little while longer to train," Dianne said as she looked back at the Information Officer.

Beatrice nodded and said, "Thank you, Ma'am."

"And what about you, Aric? What you think of our ship?"

"It's beautiful, Ma'am."

The Captain seemed to examine him for several long seconds. She seemed so powerful as she sat there, poised above him like some judge or goddess.

"You got some great numbers, Beatrice," she said. "I'm impressed. You should be proud of yourself."

"I hope they are enough to win," she said.

"Maybe they will be," said the Captain. "Maybe they will be."

Aric knew he might not get this close to the Captain again. Different ideas and arguments streamed through his head as he tried to come up with some compelling reasons for why he should be returned to his ship. If these women intended to keep him on a leash or turn him into some kind of slave, then he obviously couldn't stay.

And yet, as hard as he tried, he couldn't get his mouth to open, not while these women were talking. Instinctively, he understood that he was a boy, and he needed to wait. If they addressed him, then perhaps he could bring up his concerns. If not, then it would always be best for him to stay silent.

Males were best seen and not heard, he thought. That idea seemed so obvious, yet he didn't understand where it had come from.

The programming.

Aric didn't want to believe in hypnosis, yet he couldn't shake the idea that this woman had truly been able to sculpt and mold the foundations of his psyche.

"Have you started looking through any of the comments?" Captain Mariesdaughter asked.

“I glanced at a few,” Beatrice said. “But to be honest, I have been very busy with this boy.”

His lips parted, and he wanted to insist that he was a man, not just a man but a commander, so he deserved and demanded respect. At once, he could envision these women glancing down at this kneeling boy and just smirking. Or worse, they might get annoyed and decide that the boy needed a muzzle.

As such, he kept his mouth shut. He stayed quiet and listened.

“If you’re interested, I set aside some of the more interesting comments for you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you!” Beatrice said.

Dianne smiled at her subordinate. Beatrice had so much potential, both as an information specialist, but also potentially as a commander. Then again, Dianne worked hard to see the promise in each of her crew members.

Turning back to her Data Cube, Dianne ran her fingers through the air. Aric watched and once again try to determine how some of this system worked. He was looking for common gestures and movements, but he couldn’t discern any kind of pattern.

Moments later, the three of them could hear the computer’s automated voice. It was female, of course.

“Information Officer Alanastochter is amazing. Starting off with hypnotic programming? Brilliant!”

The Captain smiled again, “I agree wholeheartedly with her.”

A moment later, the next comment started to filter from the unseen speakers, “I love watching this boy get escorted around on a leash. It’s perfect, you know? Like she has him learn about our history, and then she shows him the pinnacle of our successes. I’m sure anything from his era looks like garbage in comparison.”

Down on his knees and quiet, Aric nonetheless inhaled. He wanted to argue with that woman, like he thought he might be able to change her mind. And yet, he wasn’t exactly certain what he believed either.

Part of him wanted to defend his culture and people. Another part of him wanted to recognize the truth of everything she said. These women had built so much more than he and his people had ever dreamed about.

“Would you like some more?” Dianne asked.

Beatrice beamed, “As long as I’m not taking up too much of your valuable time, ma’am.”

Another gesture triggered the next set of comments from the women back on Terra, “This Information Officer knows exactly what she’s doing. History is always the key to success. We have to understand our mistakes in order to learn from them.”

The computer’s voice continued, “Yeah, that’s right.” Aric had to assume this was a response to the last remark. “Boys had their chance. There’s a reason why they need to be leashed.”

“I agree entirely!”

“It goes on like that for a little while,” Dianne said. She slashed her fingers through the air, and the computer’s voice jumped to the next set of comments.

“I loved the look on his face when he was getting programmed. Seriously, he looked so serene and sedate. You can tell that these boys secretly need it. They might try to assert themselves from time to time, but that’s just some kind of biological mistake. It’s an evolutionary throwback. Men need to be trained and tamed.”

“Men need to be sculpted and molded.”

“They are going to be so much happier this way.”

Aric wanted to look up and ask a very simple question, “Are men really slaves?”

Yes, he saw the other males on the ship, and they looked like they all performed menial tasks. But were they owned? Were they property?

Again, he wished he could ask, only Aric couldn’t bring himself to utter the words or raise his voice.

“Thank you, Captain. This has been incredible,” Beatrice said when the recordings came to an end.

“Please take him back to the infirmary. I’m sure he will need some time to rest and recover before Portia spends some time with him.”

Corporal Dare sat at the table, nibbled, and let her eyes roam across the projected images and text. While Aric had received a very abbreviated history, Cara spent her time reading one book after another.

She had so much to learn!

The broader history had been relatively easy, although absorbing so many details made things far more complicated and difficult. After all, she didn’t just want the broad strokes.

Back as a university student, an instructor's lecture had stuck with her. He had talked all about the way human knowledge had evolved over the millennia. Originally, there were scholars, and these individuals studied pretty much everything. For the Greeks and Romans, natural philosophy meant everything. They could think about scientific questions like why the sun rose or how the mountains had been formed. At the same time, they could contemplate the best ways to deliver an idea to an angry audience or why certain works of art seemed to spark the human imagination.

Since then, specialization had become more and more common. Most people mastered one skill, so the world became geometrically more complicated as one century after another rolled by.

Cara could see it here and now.

Storytellers had evolved into poets, novelists, actors, directors, game programmers, and holographic designers.

After several hours of studying, Cara leaned back in her chair and rubbed her fingers against her forehead.

"How're you doing?"

Cara looked up and expected to see one of the crew members. The women aboard this starship had been incredibly friendly to her. Several had offered her invitations to eat, explore the ship, or play on one of the Holo-Platforms.

Up until this point Cara hadn't taken them up on it. Yes, she had been polite and friendly, but she couldn't commit to anything, especially when she still had so much to learn.

Only now, she saw the Captain.

Dianne glanced down at the chair opposite Cara and asked, "You mind if I join you?"

"Absolutely," Cara said. She glanced around, just a little bit nervous now. Yes, she had met and interacted with the Captain, but being near the leader of the entire expedition still made her nervous.

"It's okay," Dianne said. "I'm not here for an inspection. I just wanted to check on you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"How're you doing?"

"I guess I'm confused," Cara said. She blinked, surprised at the honesty of her answer. "This is all overwhelming."

"The technology?"

Glancing down, Cara felt one of her bangs fall forward as she grinned before glancing back at the Captain. Remembering her professional façade, she schooled her features and said, “No. Actually, I’ve been okay with the technology.”

“What then?” asked Dianne.

“The men.”

“The boys?”

Cara couldn’t help but smile sheepishly as she contemplated those words. “Yeah,” she finally conceded. “The boys. For so long, I have had to work twice as hard to get half as much success.” She stopped, nearly flinching.

“What is it?” Dianne asked sympathetically.

“Nothing,” Cara said as she pushed thoughts of Aric away. “I guess I’m just not used to seeing men in positions of service.”

“It’s good for them,” Dianne said emphatically.

“Really? They don’t get angry or upset?”

“Why would they?”

Cara shrugged, especially because it felt so strange to be on this side of the conversation. Throughout her career, she had to defend the competence of women. Only now, it seemed like she might have to do the same thing for the male half of society—but why? Why should she bother?

Cara didn’t have an easy answer, only then she thought of her crewmate. Breathing out slowly, she again tried to push thoughts of Aric away. After everything he did, he didn’t deserve her help. And yet, she couldn’t summon up any storm of genuine bitterness or rage, not at this point, not after everything they had been through.

“I guess,” Cara began, “I expect the boys to get upset. So much of society, during my era, was built on questions of male ego. It’s weird to see them like this.”

“They will train,” Dianne said without a hint of irony.

“That makes them sound like animals or children.”

“Perhaps some infantilization is necessary,” Dianne replied.

Cara lifted an eyebrow, “Really?”

“As little girls and young women, we study the Water Wars. The stories are largely the same, nuclear weapons, armies murdering one another, the horrors of what men ordered.”

“Women weren’t at all responsible?”

“The major military powers were commanded by men,” Dianne replied. “You have to keep in mind that things got even worse after you went into stasis.”

Cara snorted because she didn’t want to think something like that could be possible, yet it was all too easy to imagine. She recalled her grandmother fighting for feminist ideals, only to have those notions crushed as the males in society became more and more insecure. They channeled their frustrations over other social issues into attacking women and making sure they had as few options as possible.

Even when there were exceptions, women like Cara herself, they were used to prove that sexism didn’t actually exist. So what if every government agency was headed by a man? The Education Department had a female executive, so didn’t that prove women could excel if they just worked harder? So what if the entire Ranger Initiative only had one female? Perhaps that demonstrated women’s incompetence. Cara always hated getting dragged into those arguments, but it was the price she paid for the chance to visit an alien world.

“Right,” Cara said.

“It’s okay,” Dianne said. “You will get used to it.”

“Is it just a matter of socialization?”

“That’s probably a better question for Portia,” the Captain replied. “I’m a decent scientist, but she’d be better equipped to talk about the cause and effect elements of why large groups of society behave as they do.”

“Sociology was never really my field,” Cara confessed. “I was always put off by the distinctions between sociology and psychology.” Sure, Cara knew the textbook definitions, but the dichotomy still seemed strange to her.

“Would you like to talk to one of them?”

Cara hesitated as she pressed her lips together.

“It’s okay,” Dianne said.

A few feet away, a young man scrubbed some of the tables. “You,” Dianne said without bothering to try for his name. “Service boy.”

The young man glanced up instantly, only to freeze when he realized that the Captain had addressed him. After another moment of doubt and hesitation, he rushed over. “What can I do for you, Ma’am?”

His tongue was different, Cara realized. You could almost hear the capitalization when he addressed her with the honorific.

“My friend and I were just talking,” Captain Mariesdaughter said. “And we were wondering about your emotional state.”

“My emotional state, Ma’am?”

Cara almost wanted to laugh. She couldn’t help it. Even as she experienced this delicious little tingle down in her core, she studied this boy. And yes, he may have been an adult by every legal and biological definition, but he seemed so utterly subservient, as though he recognized his own inferiority.

“How do you feel?”

“Right now, I’m a little bit nervous. I don’t think I’ve ever served you, Ma’am.”

“Would you like the opportunity?”

At once, he straightened his back, rolled his shoulders down, and held his hand over his heart. Cara didn’t recognize the gesture, yet she had no problem reading his determination. “Yes, Ma’am!”

“You might get the opportunity,” Dianne said. “You sure you don’t mind being a service boy?”

“I’m honored for the opportunity to help and serve,” he replied.

“Do you have any questions for him?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind if I ask?” Cara asked. She probably should have done this while she played with the service boy back in her quarters, yet she had been more interested in what he could accomplish with his hands and mouth...Even now, a little flutter of excitement ran through her body as she contemplated those memories.

When she really thought about the service boy back in her quarters, she marveled at how generous and focused on her pleasure he had been. Before this, Cara hadn’t been a virgin, only every man had been selfish with her in one way or many.

At first, Cara actually experienced this little pulse of nervous energy. As a woman, she didn’t think she was supposed to confront men directly. She always had to be more elliptical in her approach; she needed to ask questions and knowledge. She could never be confrontational or aggressive. That would have made her a “bitch” or “uncooperative”. Those sorts of strategies could have been enough to get her kicked out of the Ranger Initiative.

And yet, this boy kept his gaze aimed down now as he waited for her. He stayed patient.

“What is your rank?” Cara started with something simple.

“Service Boy 1A,” he said.

“Are you proud of that rank?”

“I’m as proud as a boy can be,” he said.

“Would you like to do more?”

He blinked, apparently surprised. “More?”

“That’s right,” she said. “Wouldn’t you rather be a soldier or a commander?”

“I would never want to be a soldier,” the boy told her earnestly.

“Why not?”

His brows creased, and he glanced over at Dianne, like he didn’t understand what sort of test Cara was putting him through. When the Captain told him, “Just do your best,” he seemed to relax a little.

“I guess I wouldn’t want the difficult decisions a soldier has to make,” the service boy told her. “Besides, I’m not sure men were ever really meant to be soldiers in the first place. Yes, I guess we are good at carrying guns or backpacks or whatever, but we get too proud.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Cara said. “So what should you do?”

“Whatever I’m told,” said the service boy. “Right now, I’m taking care of these tables.”

“And are you happy with that?”

“I’m proud to support the explorers aboard this vessel,” he said with that same earnest enthusiasm.

“But you’re not an explorer?”

“No, Ma’am. I’m a service boy.”

Cara marveled at all of this. “What do you think it takes to be a good service boy?”

“Loyalty, obedience, and enthusiasm,” he said, reciting those words as though they were part of a mantra.

“That’s what they learn in school,” Dianne said.

“How far does that go?” Cara asked. She hadn’t realized the question might come out of her mouth until she heard herself ask it.

“I don’t understand, Ma’am,” replied the service boy. He didn’t sound frustrated or aggravated. On the contrary, his incomprehension seemed normal and acceptable. He was just a boy, after all, so he didn’t need to understand the plans or intentions of the women who will rule his life.

“If I told you to get down on your knees right now and kiss my boots, what would you do?”

Despite everything she had already heard, Cara expected a snort of disgust or maybe some dismissive sneer. This man had to have some dignity, after all. He would never, ever just drop down to his knees and give this woman whatever she demanded.

“I would obey,” the service boy said right away.

Cara glanced over to Dianne, who gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

“Do it,” Cara commanded.

Again, she didn’t truly expect his obedience. She expected him to laugh or look around nervously. He wasn’t really going to cooperate with her, only then he lowered himself down onto his knees. He bowed his head forward, and he kissed her right boot, then her left. After that, he crossed his wrists behind his back, straightened up, and settled his gaze on the floor beneath her feet.

“What is that? What’s he doing?”

“He’s waiting for additional orders,” Dianne said.

“This is crazy,” Cara said. “It’s incredible.”

“Welcome to the *Cygnus*.”

Doctor Gaia paused just outside of the door to his small exam room. She glanced up, waved her fingers through the air like a magician getting ready to perform a trick, and set the data feed.

She saw no reason to inform him of all that was happening, but the women of Terra expected to see this interview.

Before discovering Aric and his compatriots, the *Cygnus* had been a minor diversion for the women back home. Visiting alien worlds sounded exciting, but the journey there would still take several years, and the various academic experiments might have been important to the scientific community, but they didn’t make great viewing. Besides, this ship wasn’t even all that controversial.

Before the Water Wars devastated Terra, pretty much everything had become an argument.

Beatrice gave a lecture to the ship’s crew on the topic. Although it wasn’t her field of study, Doctor Gaia had gone anyway, if only to better

understand male psychology. It seemed so strange to imagine, yet society had largely been created and crafted for men.

Every time women tried to assert themselves, men cried out. They insisted it wasn't fair for one reason or another. As far as they were concerned, a man's world was the only form of fairness and equality they could envision. It was ridiculous to say out loud, yet that was how they proceeded.

This dynamic eventually led to a global data system where most of its users had access to pretty much any kind of information they could ever crave. It was inexpensive and fast, so how did they use it?

They argued.

They argued incessantly.

Everything could become a battlefield. Everything could become a reflection of one aspect of society or another. Even the most basic facts of reality and expertise became battlegrounds for visceral arguments and angry typing matches. Different audiences fractured as they accepted different versions of reality.

At that lecture, Doctor Gaia had shaken her head, unsurprised by the near complete annihilation of humanity.

Men messed up. They couldn't help themselves, which was fine. They had been given too much power and authority, so it needed to be taken away. They needed to be trained and tamed for their own good.

The doors opened, and Doctor Gaia strolled into the exam room. With another wave of her hand, she initiated a different program. The wall began to mold itself, stretching out so she had a place to sit.

Crossing one leg over the other, she held out her data cube and knew there would be many people back on Terra watching this.

"Good morning, Aric," she said to the young man on the table.

He sat up slowly and looked at her. Apparently, getting left alone for a couple of hours had left him disoriented, or perhaps this was the aftereffects of Beatrice's hypnotic session with him.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

"Try," she instructed gently.

"I'm...frustrated."

Doctor Gaia nodded like a therapist, "Go on." As she studied him, the doctor intuitively traced out his potential answers. He might tell her

about his frustration with his old beliefs. Perhaps he had come to recognize the mistakes of his people. He could get on his knees and plead. Or perhaps he was sexually frustrated. Maybe he wished for the chance to spend more time with Beatrice. Or—

Aric glanced down and said, “I’m frustrated with my treatment.”

“Tell me more,” she ordered, her tone sharp and crisp.

“I...” Aric stopped, probably because he was a guest and a passenger on board the *Cygnus*. Finally, he picked his words, “I feel like a prisoner.”

“You’re not a prisoner,” she said, easily contradicting him and speaking over his feelings. “You’re a boy, which means you need to be treated delicately.”

“What about Corporal Dare?”

“She is adjusting. You must as well.”

“I bet it’s easier for her,” he growled.

“The transition will be different for each of you. You are different people. You can’t be expected to be the same,” she pointed out.

When she first walked in, he had been lounging against of the soft padding of the exam table. Now he sat up. With his back straight, he pushed his palms down against the cushions and glared at her. “Let me out of the collar. Let me out of this thing.” He reached down and grabbed the chastity cage.

“Settle down,” she said even as she considered how this wasn’t going well. It wasn’t going well at all.

His breathing quickened. “Look, I don’t know what your Information Officer was trying to do to me, but I didn’t like it, and I don’t want it to happen again.”

“It won’t,” Doctor Gaia said. “But you will need to be trained in order to remain on this ship.”

“Or you could just let me go.”

“What? Send you off in your little ship?”

“Yeah...” When she suggested the possibility, she made it sound ridiculous, like something a child might propose. Now his voice trailed off again because he didn’t see the problem.

Doctor Gaia would need to enlighten him. “That vessel, and I use the term quite generously, was incredibly unsafe. It is worth keeping as an

object of historical curiosity, but that is all. It's barely space worthy. You can tell it was built by males."

His lips tightened and pulled back as he heard those words. He recognized the insults, only there wasn't anything Aric could do about it.

"Aric," she continued, "I can understand why you must be frustrated. So much is different, and you are struggling to adapt. But it's important for you to remember that you need to trust us. We know what is best for you."

"I don't think you do," he said.

"Perhaps an orgasm will help you settle down."

His eyes widened when he heard those words. "What? No!" He spoke automatically and without thinking.

"Are you sure about that?" Doctor Gaia inquired. "I know how important regular stress relief can be to a boy like you. If you want, I can give you another chance. You will have to follow my instructions, but I think it might be good for you."

"Just let me out of the cage," he said as he glanced down at the white material.

"I won't do that," she said. "But I do expect you to raise your hands above your head."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

Doctor Gaia watched him. His attitude obviously hadn't improved. If anything, his behavior had gotten more aggressive and egotistical.

After a few seconds, Aric seemed to remember his precarious position on board this ship, so he leaned back against the soft cushions, raised his hands, and that's when she gestured for the automatic restraint system. Fresh shackles encircled his wrists, locking him down.

"Hey!" He sounded silly as he called out that single word. It was a complaint and a protest at the same time, but Doctor Gaia ignored him. Instead, she motioned again, and the chastity cage opened, releasing his manhood.

"Since you aren't capable of following directions on your own, this is something I will administer myself."

She made it sound so clinical.

"Don't do this," he said.

"Please remain quiet. I don't want to hear a word out of you."

“What? Why not?”

She smirked. This time, Doctor Gaia could tell that he didn't intend it to be defiant or rude. It simply happened automatically. For boys from his era, this must have been common. Their intentions were sweet and pure enough, yet they blundered ahead without truly comprehending the consequences of their actions.

“Because I told you not to speak,” she said at which point she raised her hand, and her fingers darted along the air.

Aric braced himself, only he didn't know what to anticipate.

“There,” she said. “That should help you follow this one order at least.”

Again, he tried to speak without thinking, only this time the words didn't come out of his mouth. He thought he felt his throat vibrating, but it could have been his imagination. His lips moved easily enough, and his tongue raced through his mouth. Even so, he didn't make a sound.

Confusion playing across his face, Doctor Gaia just smiled at him.

“Oh, this must be really frustrating for you,” she said with mock sympathy. “I'm sorry, Aric. When the boys are told be quiet on this ship, obedience is expected.”

His brows furrowed. Anger danced along his pupils and irises as he stared back at her. His body had gone rigid.

At least he didn't flinch when her hands started moving again. Another set of shackles appeared, materializing around his ankles, which kept his legs spread.

The doctor walked over to one of the walls, waved her hand, and retrieved a set of white, shimmering gloves. She snapped them over her skin before strolling back to the boy.

“Males are so easy. Right now, you could try to tell me that you aren't roused. You could try to tell me that subjugation doesn't feel good, but just look at you. You are hard, Aric.”

“I am Commander Donovan!” Aric wanted to shout back at her. He jerked and twisted against his bonds, yet the automated restraints held him down. Worse, the collar somehow nullified every sound coming from his throat, meaning he could pantomime the words and shape them with his mouth, yet he still remained silent.

He tried to say something else, only then the words broke apart as he began to moan. Even then, he remained utterly quiet while her fingers

brushed along his shaft. She started at the base, worked her fingertips up along his length, and started rubbing him. With gentle, teasing, rhythmic movements, she showed this boy just how good it could feel.

“I’m sorry that Officer Alanastochter wasn’t able to fully subjugate you. That will make this more difficult. But don’t worry. The rest of the senior crew are looking forward to working with you. They want to help you adapt to your new circumstances, Aric.”

He jerked as hard as he could against the restraints, but they held him down while this woman manipulated him. With clinical expertise and medical knowledge, she rubbed him and teased him.

Within moments, hot arousal burned through his body.

He wanted this.

He could try to deny it all he liked, but the desires continued to spin and flutter through his body. At his core, reaching need pulsed with every beat of his heart.

“Just think about this the next time a woman gives you a command.”

With one hand, she teased him, stroking his balls and teasing the underside of his scrotum. With her other hand, she rubbed his shaft, gently squeezing and massaging.

Then she pulled her hands away, she walked over to the wall again, and he could only watch.

Bound and silent, Aric didn’t know what was about to happen.

She pulled on another pair of gloves. Then she walked back to her patient, sat down in front of him, and he braced himself.

He understood that an orgasm would be demeaning, especially if he didn’t have control over it, but that hardly seemed to matter. Just as she said, he had been biologically programmed to enjoy this.

Aric could try to fight it. He could try to hate it. And yet, the need would remain. The desires would keep him addicted to the pleasure his body might provide.

Only then, her fingertips came closer and closer to his shaft. Her gloves had become chilled, almost like ice!

The shocking sensation blasted through him, cutting away the arousal and instantly dousing those desires. His heart boomed twice as fast, and he looked at her.

“I’ve decided you shouldn’t get an orgasm,” the doctor told him. “You had your opportunity to accept female authority, but you are

questioning me. You are trying to fight me. You even want to get back on that little interstellar dinghy of yours even if it would mean putting yourself in grave danger. That's not acceptable, Aric. You are a valuable asset and incredible commodity, so you won't be allowed to just run off."

She cupped his balls and squeezed his shaft. The cold soaked into him, turning his member flaccid even as the need continued to pulse through his body. Then she peeled off the gloves, picked up the chastity cage, and applied it once again. The seemingly intelligent glass seemed to shape itself around his member, constricting and tightening until he knew he wouldn't be able to achieve another erection without a woman's help.

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“There we go. Now, I want you to think about this before your time with Science Officer Rheainesduther.”

With those words hanging on the air, she got up and strolled out of the room. The wall allowed her to exit before reforming.

Trapped in chastity and still restrained to his exam table, Aric couldn't move. In fact, he felt like some exotic insect pinned to a board and left out as a display.

Portia looked down at the information displayed by her Data Cube. She ran through her notes, nibbled on the inside of her mouth, and contemplated exactly what might happen next.

She was excited. Very excited. In fact, the idea of having this wild boy as her personal pleasure slave made her tingle every time she considered the possibilities. Yes, there were plenty of other males on board their vessel, but she wanted this one.

Wild.

Untamed.

And of course, Portia couldn't help but smile when she thought of Beatrice's attempts. Hypnosis had been a viable option, Portia recognized as a scientist, but she believed something intimate would be more effective.

Like virtually everyone else on board the ship and back on Terra, not to mention the other starships and colonies, Portia had watched the interview.

Aric had remained stubbornly independent despite the hypnotic programming. Apparently, males from his time period weren't as silly or weak willed as some modern women believed.

Or perhaps Aric Donovan was special.

Portia smirked now because it was so strange to think of a boy with a last name which didn't come from his mother or her familial line. Besides, something about “Donovan” sounded so odd and antiquated. She had looked up the word, realized it had something to do with sea serpents or dragons, and burst out laughing.

As far as Portia was concerned, a good last name should say something about one's mother, one's family, and one's interpersonal connections. Naming a family after a dragon seemed somehow...immature.

Then again, males, especially when left alone, had some pretty ridiculous ideas.

Somehow, these ideas helped Portia relax despite the importance of her performance.

With a wave of her hand, she deactivated her Data Cube and walked into the opening.

Moments later, she saw him: a wild boy.

“Hello, Aric.”

He looked at her, pressed his lips together, and glowered.

“How’re you feeling?”

She studied the contours of his face, the lines of his neck, and the curves of his body. She appreciated his musculature, and she could easily imagine putting this boy on display in the atrium. Generally, that kind of treatment was reserved for punishments, but perhaps she would make an exception for this male.

“Are you upset?” Portia asked. “I can understand why this would be difficult for you.” Doctor Gaia had said something similar to him.

He studied her for several long seconds, only then she recalled what the physician had done with him. “Oh, I’m sorry. You can’t speak, can you?”

Obviously, he didn’t answer.

“Here. Let’s try this,” she said. She waved her fingers through the air, and the starship detected her movements and authority. “There. So long as you behave, you should be able to speak now.”

“That’s not fair,” he said right away.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Because I should have the right to speak for myself!”

“You can, so long as you don’t say anything inappropriate or misbehave,” she replied as though they had actually agreed.

Aric glared at her. Then he decided to try for diplomacy. He inhaled, filled his lungs, took a breath, and centered himself as best he could despite having his legs spread and his naked body on display.

Before he could come up with exactly what he should say, the Science Officer strode forward. Her boots clicked on the smooth surface of the floor before she reached out and touched his shin, his knee, and his thigh.

She leaned forward, and he didn’t want to be attracted to her, but he couldn’t deny that animal desire.

His shaft tried to harden against of the confines of its prison. The chastity device did an excellent job of making sure he couldn't achieve full, sustained arousal. Even so, the biochemical urges remained.

"Please, just get me out of here," he said. No, that wasn't articulate or diplomatic. It wasn't likely to succeed either, especially judging by the smirk tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Would you like me to take you for a walk?"

"I'm not a dog!"

"No. You're a human. You're a human male," she said as though these categories may as well have been identical.

"This isn't fair. I shouldn't have to wear these shackles."

"Tell me something, Aric. If you had the opportunity to jump in your ship right now and fly off, would you take it?"

"No," he said right away. "Of course not."

The Science Officer waved her hands through the air, her fingers danced on invisible keys, and that's when a projection appeared before both of them.

Aric wasn't exactly sure what the different numbers and lines meant, but he thought at least one of the windows represented a pulse: his pulse.

"Do you want to try to say that again?" Portia inquired.

He didn't understand what kind of game she was trying to play with him, but he decided to cooperate for the time being.

"I wouldn't try to just fly off," he said. "That would be crazy."

Even as he spoke, the projection's border turned a bright shade of angry red.

"And that's how I can tell you are lying," she said.

"That's not fair," he complained. Then he realized just how juvenile that sounded, so he shut his mouth.

"It's okay, Aric. Just relax. We can try a few other questions. I want to know more about you."

Tentatively, he asked, "Like what?"

"Tell me something you're passionate about."

This time, he didn't need to try to deceive her, "Photography."

"Really? Do you like taking pictures of beautiful women?"

He stared back at her, "Hardly. I prefer landscapes."

"Fascinating," she said. "And why do you like photography?"

“It’s a difficult art form,” he said. He kept his eyes mostly on Portia, but he glanced over at the projection several times. He watched as the border turned green every time he told the truth. “It’s all about lighting, timing, and luck. I guess I’m just interested in beauty, especially in the natural world.”

“Very fascinating,” she agreed.

“Do you think you could let me out of the restraints?”

“If I did, would you misbehave?”

“No.” The border flashed green again.

“Would you be grateful?”

“Yes,” he tried to say, only to flinch as the border shifted back to the angry red.

Portia placed her hands on her hips and shook her head with obvious disappointment. “I’m sorry. But I don’t think it would be prudent to release you right now.”

He tugged on the restraints, almost as though he hoped he might be able to break free. He couldn’t. This girl had him strapped down like a lab rat, which meant she could do whatever she liked with him.

“Do you find me attractive?” She spoke with the same detached, scientific distance as before, only now she smiled and revealed her white teeth even if her tone didn’t shift.

He didn’t say anything for several elongated seconds. His heart kicked faster, and he wondered what it would be like to feel her pressed down against him.

“I don’t know,” he said, only that wasn’t good enough. Despite his ambivalence, the border shifted to the same frustrating shade of red.

“Try again,” she said.

“No.”

“Are you familiar with classical conditioning?”

Aric opened his mouth and looked at her hard. “I’m not sure,” he said truthfully. At this point, the border turned yellow. Apparently, the system wasn’t perfect, so it couldn’t draw an exact conclusion every time. Somehow, this made Aric feel a little bit better.

“It’s an ancient technique,” Portia explained. “Essentially, if you wish to create a specific behavior in an animal, you provide pleasure when he behaves correctly and pain when he doesn’t.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I don’t like how you are behaving right now.”

“I’m strapped down and collared,” he growled back. “How could I possibly misbehave?”

“You tried to lie to me,” she said. “Dishonesty is a very bad behavior, don’t you think?”

Aric didn’t want to answer since he didn’t intend to dignify that with a response.

“It’s my job to learn as much about you as I can,” she said sincerely. As the Science Officer, this was technically true. Testing his parameters and learning about what it would take to subdue him certainly fell within her purview. “That’s why we are going to employ some classical conditioning.”

“So what? You’re going to electrocute me every time I misbehave?” He tried to sound sarcastic, but she glanced over at the projection.

“You’re nervous,” she said. “That’s good. You should be. This could be very unpleasant for you if you don’t cooperate.”

“What you want me to do? What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Right now, all you need to do is answer my questions.”

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

Her fingers danced across the air again. That’s when he felt this strange, tingling warmth come from the collar.

“What did you just do?” Aric asked.

Portia looked into his eyes and said, “The collar has interfaced with your nervous system.” He inhaled and got ready to say something about how that wouldn’t be possible, especially because he didn’t feel any needles or electrodes. Then again, these women wielded technologies far beyond anything his people had constructed, which meant he had to accept this as a very realistic possibility.

“Specifically, the collar can be used to stimulate your pain or pleasure receptors.”

A shiver ran down his back.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes,” he said.

“That’s good. You should be.” She smiled. She reached out and brushed her fingers down his neck, all the way to his chest. She rested her fingertips above his heart. “Boys have a hard time being brave when they don’t have a blaster in hand.”

“That’s not true,” he said.

“Actually, it is,” she replied.

Before he could glance up at the projection to see what the readout might say, she held up one hand and made a fist. As her fingers pushed down against her palm, the pain glanced through him.

It wasn’t like a burn, a static shock, a stab, or even some blunt force trauma. Instead, this twisting sense of pain raced through his body. It was *wrongness*. It hurt and stung at the same time. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once!

Because he didn’t know how to brace himself for this sort of onslaught, he arched his back, yanked on his restraints, and tried to jump from the exam table. His bonds held him down, making sure this boy couldn’t get away.

“Tell me you would feel better if you had a blaster.”

He hesitated, and she made another fist.

He didn’t cry out. Instead, he grunted through his teeth as the twisted sensation jolted through his body.

“Don’t worry,” Portia said. “This won’t cause any kind of physiological harm to your body. Like I said before, you are a valuable commodity, so we wouldn’t want to risk damaging you.”

This woman could be so logical—so scientific—yet her eyes glimmered with delight as she experimented on this boy, probing his defenses and learning all she could about him.

“How did you feel about the punishment?”

“I hated it!” Obviously, the border glowed a bright, cheerful green hue.

“You see,” she said. “It can hurt when you lie to me. That’s why you should tell the truth,” she told him. Yes, she inflicted pain with her advanced technology, yet Portia still adopted the tone of some kindergarten teacher talking down to a little boy. “And of course, I can make it feel good when you cooperate.”

Her fingers started through the air once again. The haptic commands registered with the ship, which was integrated with his collar.

His eyes widened as bliss and ecstasy surged through him. He panted as he tried to process these fresh impulses, only he didn’t entirely succeed. It felt like getting lost in a storm of joy as he started to smile.

“Of course, there are other ways for me to play with you, Portia said.

She brushed her fingers down along his chastity cage. He blinked, struggled through the confusion, and realized what she wanted to do with him. “I could mount you right here,” she said.

Yes, Portia understood that millions of women and their boys might have been watching back on Terra, but she didn’t care. If anything, this might garner her more attention as she thought of turning this boy into a sexual plaything.

That was the end goal, wasn’t it? Maybe she could just skip ahead a little bit. Besides, having this kind of control and power over a reluctant male certainly triggered something deep within her. Once she calmed down, Portia knew she might decide to write a monogram or maybe even an entire book on the subject.

“Do you need some more punishment?”

“No, please. No, you don’t need to—”

Portia made a fist, the collar around his neck activated, and another burst of pain shot through him. He arched his back and tried to pull away. He remained there, trapped on the exam table as a grin played across her face. She smiled at him and experienced it again: that rush of pleasure and anticipation.

“I’m not much of a boy psychologist,” she said. “Male minds have never really interested me.” Of course, she didn’t say anything about how studying the weaker sex had always seemed like a task for the less ambitious, less skilled, and less successful women from her science Academy. “But you, Aric, are something different. You are wild and untrained. Not only that, you keep fighting me.”

Despite his labored breathing, he glared up at her, “I’m not fighting you!”

She arched an eyebrow and giggled. She sounded so young as those delightful, excited sounds thrummed from her throat. “There. You did it again, boy. You contradicted me. You contradicted me when I told you that you keep fighting.” She shook her head, obviously entertained by his struggles.

Aric bit down because he understood what she meant.

As his nostrils twitched and flared, he looked around the room as he tried to find some way to get out of there.

“Look at me,” she said.

Feeling petulant, he refused.

Holding up her hand, she made a fist. Her fingers squeezed down against her palm, the collar received the signal, and the rush of pleasing agony shot through him.

He groaned and growled like some angry animal as his muscles tightened.

“If you could have anything right now, what would it be?”

“Freedom!” Aric cried out, and he thought he meant those syllables, yet the border around his physiological readout flashed red.

He braced himself for another punishment, but she had something else in mind. As she worked, she didn’t simply absorb information. Instead, she considered how she could modify her experiment, alter the variables, and achieve her desired goal. She craved his capitulation and surrender.

“What do you want?” Portia asked as she simplified the question for this boy.

“Let me go. Please, just let me go!” He looked up at her with big, eager eyes, but her hand wandered down his chest. She loved feeling the thrashing pressure against his rib cage. In some ways, his heart perfectly reflected the rest of his psyche.

Aric didn’t need to look up at the physiological readout to see the border turn red again. He had lied, and on some level, he knew it. Even so, he couldn’t force himself to tell the truth.

“Go on, Aric. You can do it. I know you can. It might be difficult, especially because of who you are and where you come from, but we can manage it. Just surrender. Give in to me right now.”

Her soft touch slid along his naked body. She touched his leg, his flank, his chest and his neck. Her fingertips slid down toward his crotch, and he could feel that desperation pulsate right between his legs.

Aric tried not to think about it. He tried to resist, especially because he had never been one of those ridiculous men who thought they could get away with whatever they liked. He had recognized the boundaries. He didn’t harass women or insult them online. He didn’t make sexist jokes or complain about feminists. Unlike so many of his colleagues, he tried to be respectful. Only then he thought of one woman. Her face flashed behind his eyelids, and he knew what he had to say.

Portia whispered, “What do you want?” Her breath was warm against his ear.

“Sex!” He didn’t raise his voice, yet the primal need pulled every syllable taut.

“Beg for me to let you out of your chastity cage,” she instructed.

“But, but I thought you were going to ask me more questions,” Aric protested.

“Who’s in charge?”

He blinked and looked up at her. All at once, he knew that if he didn’t answer and play her game, then she could make a fist again. She could crush his thoughts with a gesture, so he had to obey. He had to give this science officer the data she craved.

“You,” he sputtered out. “You, you are in charge.”

She rewarded him with a sly smile before she deactivated his chastity cage. She pulled the ivory glass away from his genitals and chuckled as the obvious and inevitable happened. As a boy, he couldn’t control himself. He hardened almost immediately.

“Look at that. This was what you really wanted. And to get it, what did you have to do? Can you tell me? Can you figure it out for yourself?”

He hated the patronizing questions, but he knew better than to try to insult or attack her. It wouldn’t work. As far as this one was concerned, she was his superior, which meant he had to lay there and take this. Besides, she could put him back in chastity at any moment.

“What are you willing to do for the chance to earn an orgasm?”

“Nothing,” he growled back at her. “I shouldn’t have to earn an orgasm!”

“You are a boy,” she said. “If you are allowed to roam free, you will just mess up. You will just make mistakes, and you will get in trouble. You don’t want that, Aric. You want to be a good and obedient boy. You don’t want to be some Wild Male.” That phrase may have started with the Information Officer, but Portia and most of the women on board the *Cygnus* had adopted it as Aric’s new, unofficial designation.

“Tell me you want to be owned.”

He heard those words, he glared up at her, and he tried to hide the confusion. Owned? Something like that wasn’t supposed to be possible.

And yet, he remembered something Cara once told him about the traditional “femme covert” laws.

“Tell me,” she said again, whispering those words down at him. They were enticing. He was tempted.

Somehow, he resisted.

That's why she held up her hand, flexed her fingers, and brought her digits down against her palm. The collar recognized the gesture; it knew exactly what to do.

He arched his back as the pain ripped away his ability to think. Then it faded and dissipated, and he lifted his head in order to see her stroke his shaft. Her fingers brushed along his manhood just once.

"What do you want?"

"I want to be owned," he said.

"Do you want to serve me?"

"Serve you?" Aric repeated the words. His thoughts had been scattered, and he didn't know how to process what she just asked him.

With a chuckle, she said, "That's right. Do you want to be owned?"

She wrapped her fingers around his manhood and gave him a gentle squeeze.

Desperation pulsed through his body.

Yes!

The answer sang out between his ears, yet he managed to hold it back. "Please," he said. "You're going to do whatever you want to do. Just do it."

"Such impressive vocabulary," Portia said sarcastically. "How did you boys ever manage to build spaceships?"

Aric chose not to answer, only she stroked him again. Little bumps appeared along his shoulders and down his back. Tremors of desire and desperation reverberated through his body.

Breathing fast, he closed his eyes, and that's when he heard the zipper. She pulled it down the side of her uniform, exposing her bra and panties underneath as she allowed the jumpsuit to fall away from her perfect frame.

He saw the soft, pale skin of her neck, torso, and legs. She stepped forward, out of her uniform, and he saw her bra and panties.

Aric gulped. The sound seemed to echo against the walls. He knew he sounded pathetic, like some desperate teenager who had never been with a girl before, but this woman knew so much more about the universe. Yes, he felt immature and inexperienced, like he could never compete with any of these women.

Portia cupped his cheeks in the palms of her hands. She leaned forward, showing him her cleavage. He tried to look up into her eyes, only the angle didn't quite work. Instead, he witnessed the soft, tantalizing contours of her breasts.

She seemed to exert some kind of gravitational pull over him. He experienced this wild yearning, this desperate need, and he couldn't push it away, no matter how hard he tried. His attempts were futile, especially when she slid her fingertips along his cheeks, down his neck, and she grabbed onto his collar. She pulled him forward, and she kissed him.

Portia knew this would make her more popular. She could imagine all of the women back home, watching this, wondering how he tasted and what it might be like to kiss a Wild Male.

They would all yearn for her to take control and use him.

Even now, after so much time under female control, many women still felt that twinge of regret. None of the women alive today, except for Corporal Dare, knew what it was like to live in a society where men could do whatever they wanted. None of them had ever experienced any kind of sexism.

And yet, they all read the history texts. They all understood what men were capable of doing. Yes, they seemed docile and obedient now, but they might change. They could evolve and become a danger once again...

That's why they needed to be held down. That's why they needed to be collared, owned, and controlled.

With that in mind, Portia gave in to the temptation. She climbed up onto the table and straddled him.

He felt her weight press down against his chest; her hot thighs against his flanks as she kissed him hard. Her lips pressed down against his, and he knew he couldn't get away.

He didn't want to, not now.

Aric allowed himself to succumb to the wild pleasure as Portia used him.

Somewhere deep down, he had to recognize his status. He wasn't respected as a colleague or even an equal. As far as she was concerned, they were barely members of the same species. Women were smarter and stronger and had demonstrated their capacity to rule. Males had failed virtually every test they had received, which meant they were suited for nothing but service.

Then she sat up, leaned back, and performed another experiment. She stroked his member, gently teasing him with those soft, flickering movements of her fingertips.

She listened as he groaned and growled, only now the tenor of his voice changed. It rippled out onto the air with undisguised yearning.

A boy from his era would have probably balked at the idea of serving her, so she decided to perform a little experiment to determine how well her techniques had worked thus far.

“Tell me about your first crush.”

Crush was an old word, antiquated and generally not used, but she was familiar with the term and assumed he would know exactly what she meant. “If you lie to me, I will make you regret it.”

She flashed an almost sweet smile, like this was supposed to be good news for him.

As she stimulated his body and held him there at the edge of an orgasm, Aric tried to think back. He remembered elementary school; he remembered a girl in a blue sweater and a tartan skirt.

“Her name was Chelsea,” he confessed. “Her name was Chelsea, and I had a crush on her. We used to play tag together. She would chase me, and I would chase her, and I always loved it when she caught me.”

“Did you ever tell her about your feelings?”

He hesitated.

Despite the desires rampaging through his body, Aric paused anyway.

Portia waited to hear more about Chelsea, only he still refused to answer. Silly boy. He thought he was entitled to some boundaries, to some privacy and self-respect. He didn’t understand that he was just a male, and she was a scientist, so she had every right to probe his past and learn all she could.

“Tell me,” she coaxed. Her fingers continued to dance and play along his most sensitive body part. He was a boy, she thought, so he wouldn’t be able to resist.

And yet, something held him back.

“What happened?”

“I, I told her how I felt, and she said she liked me. I bought her this little candy rose, and I gave it to her.”

“But something happened, didn’t it?”

“Her friends didn’t like me. Maybe they were jealous. Maybe something else happened,” he said, repeating thoughts he had explored hundreds of times over the course of his life. “They convinced her to throw it away.”

“What a brat,” Portia said. “But you know, you gave her that rose as a gift, which meant it was hers to do with as she pleased.”

Aric should have glared back at Portia, only she gave him another squeeze. It felt like a reward. Yes, this really was classical conditioning. When he obeyed, he was rewarded with pleasure. When he fought back, she punished him.

This was how a scientist trained a boy. This was how she made sure he surrendered so completely...

As hard as he tried to, Aric still couldn’t force himself to argue with her.

“Good boy.” That’s right. Just relax and listen. Just accept the fact that I know what I’m talking about, but you don’t. You don’t understand how the world really works. This makes it pretty much impossible for you to get a clear vision.” When she said “this” she gave his shaft another gentle squeeze.

It was almost enough to get him off!

Almost.

“I could lock you right back in chastity right now. I can do the same thing Beatrice did with you,” she said.

He blinked, looked up, waited and wondered how she knew what had happened.

It was being recorded, he realized. They could watch this. They could watch this and laugh at him.

Despite this realization, Aric didn’t seem to care. He couldn’t make those ideas feel important, not while he had this beautiful girl poised above him, teasing him and touching him. Hot ecstasy burned through his body. Temptation and need, desire and promise all mixed together within his core.

Then she pulled her hand away.

“Are you ready to serve me?”

“What, what do you mean?”

She reached down and touched her fingertips to his mouth.

“Suck,” she ordered. “Lick.”

He latched onto her fingertips. He wrapped his mouth around her digits, and he started to suck on them, just as she wanted.

On the grid, the spectators were probably going wild as they watched all of this. A Wild Male from a bygone era was getting trained live in front of all of these women!

As she ran the tip of her tongue along her teeth, Portia grinned ferociously, pulled her hand away, and slid her fingers down into her panties. She started to stroke herself, to rub her fingertips along her sex. “That was the first girl you liked,” she said. “Tell me about the last one. Tell me about your last crush.”

Aric gulped and shook his head.

When Portia saw this, she had to make a decision. Her fingers continued to glide along her crevice, yet she had expected him to succumb again. Talking about some embarrassing moment from his childhood had been easy enough. But now he was keeping a secret from her?

Because she could do it, Portia made a fist, yanked down her panties, and positioned herself above him.

The boy grunted as the pain glanced into him. The collar activated perfectly, and she waited for some kind of apology. Perhaps Portia underestimated this male and his defiance. Perhaps she minimized his resilience because she spent most of her time with service boys who couldn’t imagine a scenario where they might disobey or disagree with their superiors.

When women spoke, men listened. Throughout their lives, they had learned that girls were almost always right. There were fallible, obviously, but if it was a choice between listening or opening his mouth, he always had to remain quiet and learn.

Either way, Portia squeezed her fist again, yanked off her panties, and mounted him. She slid her sex down against his mouth. Her calves touched his skin as she straddled his face and leaned down.

“You’re a boy,” she said. “You’re a boy, and you will do as you’re told. You are a boy, and that’s why you’re going to lick me right now. Lick. Suck and lick,” she said, echoing those previous commands.

He obeyed.

Blazing satisfaction roared through her as his tongue moved along her crevice. This wasn’t an orgasm, not yet, but she still lost herself in those opening sensations. One impulse of arousal after another flashed through

her body. They came faster and faster, like a strobe light, as his tongue worked.

“That’s right. This is where you belong, Aric. You should be strapped down on your back. This is what happens to Wild Males.”

She was panting now. She had to pause; she had to work to catch her breath.

“Aric, you can’t hold onto those antiquated ideas. You can’t. You just can’t. I’m sorry,” she said without any real sympathy.” As a part of his training, she expected him to see the truth and understand his own inferiority. He may have been smart and strong for a boy, but that wasn’t good enough, not in this century, not on this starship.

As she rode his face, she knew she should have punished him and extracted every detail. She should have forced this boy to surrender his secrets.

His last crush? Who cared?

She was long dead along with everyone else he knew. It couldn’t possibly matter, which meant this boy still intended to hold onto some kind of independence.

Silly.

She rubbed her sex along his lips. She savored the way his tongue flickered as she took him and used him. The desires pulsed through her body as he went deep. She could feel the soft contours of his tongue against the walls of her opening.

With every moment, she brought herself closer and closer to an orgasm.

Then she cried out, screaming.

Back home, people would watch and envy her.

But then she pulled away, spent. Portia looked down at him, and she tried to think of something to say. After that orgasm, she could barely think. That’s why she brushed her hand along the top of his head and said, “That’s good enough. Just wait until I get my hands on you next time.”

With this boy strapped down and helpless, she got dressed. She zipped up her jumpsuit, patted him on the head, and sauntered away.

Once she was gone, the shackles retracted. He was free to move, and that’s when he reached down for his member.

Aric started to think of one girl in particular, one person who he wished he could touch right then and there. He wanted to move his hands along the top of her head, over her cheeks, and along her amazing body. He wanted to feel her breasts beneath his hands and slide his shaft deep into her. He wanted to be on top, to kiss her and take her all at the same time.

He wanted to—

This boy had only been left alone for a couple of seconds when the door opened again, and Miranda Gaia walked into the room. She saw him, arched an eyebrow, and gestured.

Aric didn't realize just how adaptive the technology could be. Shackles materialized around his wrists and yanked his arms back above his head right before he could climax.

The desperate desire remained; it seemed to burrow into his center as the doctor walked over and sat down beside him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Apparently, you did a very good job with our Science Officer. It seems she forgot to put you back in chastity. Don't worry. I won't make the same mistake." She retrieved her gloves, and he knew exactly what it would mean.

Aric looked at her. At first, he tried to hold out. He fought so hard to maintain some veneer of dignity, like he could negotiate with Doctor Gaia as her equal. Only then, he spoke, and his voice flooded with that eager need, "Please. Don't. Please, just give me a couple of minutes. Please!"

He sounded pathetic, but these women intended to keep his manhood under lock and key.

She snapped on her gloves, and she reached for his genitals.

It wouldn't hurt, but he needed relief. He craved satisfaction like nothing else.

It was ridiculous, but Aric had never been this horny before!

As her fingers began to glide along his flesh, she said, "It's okay. I'm sure Officer Rheinesduth would have given you an orgasm if you just cooperated. But what did you do? You defied her. You embarrassed her in front of a lot of people. I'm sure she would have been very, very upset if you hadn't done such a good job serving."

"This isn't fair! Just let me go!"

"Aric," she said, looking down at him as though he had just proven everything she already believed about boys and their inability to understand

how the universe actually worked, “Where would you go? You are on a starship in the middle of deep space traveling faster than the speed of light.”

Then she squeezed his shaft again, the cold jolted through his body, and his shaft softened. Just as his body relaxed, she placed the chastity cage back over his member. The smooth, curved glass encircled and ensnared his member once more, making it impossible for him to get off.

These women proved just how easily they could control a boy like Aric. He thought he had been an explorer, someone who is brave and could handle anything the universe threw at him. Clearly, he’d been wrong. So wrong.

Doctor Gaia gave him a few more seconds to catch his breath and reorganize his thoughts once the chastity cage had been secured.

Now she leaned forward and asked, “How do you feel?”

This was the same question she asked him after his time with the Information Officer. Locking his teeth together, he looked right at her and said, “I’m not going to do it.”

“Do it?” Doctor Gaia asked. “Do what?” She only sounded mildly curious.

“I’m not going to give you what you want. I don’t know what it is. But I’m not going to give in.”

“Aric,” she said, “That is exactly what we want. We want you to surrender and accept your position in this new world of ours.”

“What position?”

“As a service boy,” she said. She made it sound obvious, like he should have figured this out a long time ago.”

“You mean a slave,” he retorted. Those words were supposed to be biting and defensive, like Doctor Gaia should have contradicted him or offered some kind of counterargument. But she didn’t. Instead, he found himself glancing back at her as she smiled knowingly.

“There are quite a few words for service,” she said.

“I’m going to get out of here,” Aric insisted. “I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but I will make it happen.”

“Maybe you just need to stretch her legs,” she said. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

“You want to leash me,” he said. “I’m not going to cooperate.”

Doctor Gaia held up her hand, and she started to flex her fingers, to bring them down into a fist...

“No!” Aric called out.

She paused. “Does that mean you would like to stretch her legs?”

“Yes. Fine. Whatever,” he said.

“You should know that I’m going to activate your collar. It will be able to detect your movements and actions. If you try to get violent, it will punish you, probably knock you down on your knees. If you misbehave even once, I will make you crawl for the remainder of our time outside of this room.”

“Yeah, I understand,” he answered.

She released him from the shackles, and Aric couldn’t help himself. He reached down for the chastity cage. He squeezed it, but he couldn’t enjoy even a tiny bit of pressure. Even if she left him alone, unbound and free, he wouldn’t be able to get any satisfaction.

She grabbed a leash, attached it to his collar, and tugged on it.

“Come along. There’s something I would like to show you.”

They walked through the infirmary and out into one of the major corridors.

The moment they stepped out into the hall, Aric froze.

There were several women there. They held advanced cubes in the palms of their hands, only now they looked up. Suddenly, they weren’t interested in watching the video feed of him, not when he stood there.

Women in white uniforms with red, blue, and orange trim studied him. A couple of them shook their heads. Others blew him kisses. All of them seemed intent on watching this boy to determine what he would do next.

Doctor Gaia pretended they weren’t there. She gave his leash tug, and she pulled him along.

The women of this starship had paid attention to him before. There had been those apparent glances, but now they didn’t bother hiding their curiosity. Every woman turned her head to watch him walk by. He was naked now, leashed and he didn’t know what to do.

More than anything else, he believed Doctor Gaia. He couldn’t attempt to break away. Even yanking back on his leash and trying to pull it from her grip would probably count as a “violent gesture” and result in his immediate punishment.

“I’m not going to be a service boy,” he said. He turned those words into a promise, almost a vow.

“We’ll see,” she said. “In the meantime, do you mind sharing that secret with me?”

He paused for a moment before she tugged on the leash again, and he had no choice but to continue walking. Women continued to stroll by, glancing in his direction as they enjoyed seeing this Wild Male escorted through their ship.

A few of them held up glass cubes. He didn’t understand what they were supposed to do.

Doctor Gaia guessed what he was thinking and said, “They’re recording personalized pictures of you.”

“What? They can’t do that,” Aric said.

He had been a good guest for long enough. At this point, he wanted to assert himself. He had to!

“Who’s going to stop them? You?” the doctor asked.

Aric opened his mouth, but he didn’t have a good answer. As hard as he tried to come up with some compelling response, he just couldn’t think of anything clever.

One of the women smiled and waved at Aric. For just a moment, he forgot about his captivity and the fact that his ship had been waylaid by this far more advanced group of women. Instead, he enjoyed this little flutter of excitement.

Only then, Doctor Gaia tugged on his leash and escorted him down another hallway. Luckily, this one was empty.

“Please, just tell me what’s going on here,” he said.

“Are you sure you want to know?” Doctor Gaia stopped. She smirked and wondered what it would be like to enjoy some private time with this Wild Male. She ran the tip of her tongue along her teeth and faced him.

“Yes!” He needed more information. When he first woke up, Aric had never been able to envision how much had changed since he and the others went into stasis.

“Get down on your knees and beg.”

Aric hesitated for a moment, only then he lowered himself down onto the smooth floor. Like the rest of the ship, it was made from that incredibly advanced glass. He had no idea what material components went into this starship, but it was beyond even the most advanced theories from his time.

“Now beg,” she instructed.

Aric swallowed and glanced down the left side of the hallway, then the right. Theoretically, he didn’t know why he should have bothered, especially when he only knew a couple of the women on board this ship. He shouldn’t have cared how they saw him or what they thought of him, but still...

“Please, please tell me what’s going on here.”

The doctor stood above him like some sort of goddess as he pleaded for information.

“The senior officers are competing to see who can tame you most effectively.”

“What?”

“Aric, we still have a couple of years on board this ship, so we need to entertain ourselves. You, right now, are the chief entertainment, not just for this ship, but you are quite popular back on Terra too.”

“That can’t be right,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because—” he started, “Because I’m just one man.”

“But you are a novelty, and you are demonstrating your determination. Across colonies and starships, women are betting to see who wins.”

“What do they win?” Aric thought he already suspected the truth. Still, he needed to hear this woman say it.

“You,” she replied.

“Why are you telling me this?” Aric asked.

“Because I think it will make the game more interesting. And frankly, it’s still pretty fair. Beatrice and Portia got to work with you when you didn’t know what was going on. The next woman who spend some time with you will try to tame you as well, but the others have already done some work. With this information, you might be inclined to try to fight harder, but your defenses have already been weakened.”

He opened his mouth and wished he could say that wasn’t true. Then he stopped because he thought back to the hypnosis. In particular, he had to wonder whether or not he chose to get down on his knees and beg or if it had been some lingering aftereffect of his time with the Information Officer.

“Come along,” Doctor Gaia said.

“What about right now? Is all of this being recorded?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

At once, he glanced around as he searched for cameras. Predictably, he didn’t spot any sensors or scanners of any kind. But then, their equipment was so advanced that each instrument could be completely hidden from him, and he would never know.

Aric scurried to follow the doctor for the next couple of minutes as he tried to understand what he could do with this new information.

Not much.

Perhaps that was part of the game, he reflected. Maybe Doctor Gaia wanted him to feel helpless and confined, like it didn’t matter what he did or said because these women would have their way with him no matter what.

He shook his head. As he followed, he reminded himself that he couldn’t just give up.

He was Commander Aric Donovan, and he had worked hard, earning the honor of being the first man to step out on an alien planet.

“Here we are,” she said. “The atrium.”

Aric continued to follow her out. His thoughts of independence and freedom suddenly dissipated as he looked out at the beautiful pine and oak trees. They sprouted from the glass surface and pushed upward, maybe two hundred feet or more.

“This is incredible,” he said.

“This is where we like to go when we want to relax,” she said as she pulled on his leash. He followed her down one path after another. Soon, he found himself getting lost, almost as though this place were as large as an entire park.

Other women were strolling around. When they saw him, they giggled or snickered. Others pulled out of their Data Cubes and took pictures or recorded some video of him.

Aric tried not to look in their direction because he didn’t want to encourage them. Even so, he could tell they would do whatever they wanted. His opinion didn’t count. He didn’t get a vote.

“What do you think?”

When he boarded the Ranger 3, he hoped to see something incredible, yet he never envisioned anything like this. Moments later, he spotted birds flying between the branches.

“This is incredible,” he said. He should have sounded angry or aloof, but he couldn’t manage it, not when he saw all of this. “How do you keep the trees alive?”

“That would be a better question for the Science Officer. Maybe you will be able to ask her after the competition is over.”

He turned back to the doctor, and he wanted to tell her that he was a man, not a prize, so he couldn’t be used this way. One glance at the beautiful doctor made it clear, however, that she wouldn’t agree with him.

He wasn’t a man; he was a boy. The science officer called him a commodity!

Aric didn’t really understand what any of this meant, not until they continued to walk between the trees. Up ahead, he spotted a clearing. There were benches and chairs along with a surprisingly large stage.

Along the back wall, there were several boys, each one spread out and pressed to the surface. Shackles, like the ones Aric had worn, encircled their wrists and ankles. Unlike him, these boys were still allowed to wear clothing, all except for the one male trapped in the stocks at the center of the stage.

Stocks.

The same vibrant, nearly mystical, glass composed these restraints. The boy was forced to bend forward, he had his arms up, and his wrists and neck were all encircled by the unbreakable material.

“I assume he misbehaved,” Aric said, his voice flat.

“That’s right,” Doctor Gaia replied. “Do you want to know what he did?”

“I don’t want to be here,” Aric said.

“Too bad,” she replied.

When he first woke up, Aric had been far more patient. But the more he learned about this ship and its crew, the more he wondered if he could find a way to escape. There had to be something he could do...

A woman stepped up onto the stage. Polite applause rippled through the air as she raised her hands and said, “Ladies, I have some bad news.” She paused for dramatic effect.

Aric had the urge to ask what was about to happen, only he got the impression Doctor Gaia wanted him to wait and find out for himself.

The woman continued, “Darian, here, has been a very disobedient service boy. Apparently, he got his hands on some illicit materials, started to

harbor some rebellious thoughts, and decided he should try to come up with some new ideas.”

The women who surrounded the stage didn’t hiss or boo. Rather, they just shook their heads with something close to sisterly disappointment.

“Obviously, he is going to have to be punished. We have his collar. Should we use that on him?”

Darian looked out at the audience. He made eye contact with Aric, inhaled, and then turned back to the rest of the group.

Women raised their hands. Before they could make their decisions, Darian called out, “Males should rule! Men should be in charge! We took us to the stars! We—”

His audience seemed to listen for a few seconds, only it was obvious they didn’t really believe anything he had to say.

The women closed their fingers against their palms.

As they did this, Darian clenched his eyes shut. For several long seconds, he managed to remain silent, as though this didn’t really affect him. But then, the pain overwhelmed this boy, and he cried out, growling and twisting against of the stocks.

The beautiful glass work may have looked medieval, yet the technology was perfect for keeping him confined. He couldn’t move or escape, and with one of those tracking collars around his neck, Darian was utterly helpless as the pain invaded. The agony must’ve swept from one nerve to another. The technology lit those nerves, making sure he suffered no damage even as he endured that storm of pain.

He held out for as long as he could. Then the pain seemed to overwhelm him, and he cried out. He shouted, grunted, kicked and pulled. He struggled as his hands flexed, but he wasn’t a woman, so those gestures didn’t mean anything. He was just a boy struggling as hard as he could while the women observed.

“I think that’s enough,” said the woman.

“What’s going on here?” Aric asked.

“Oh, this kind of thing happens every few weeks. The boys get rude or defiant. They mess up or make mistakes. They can actually get very interesting, especially when they try to fight back.”

“Fight back? How?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Aric pressed his lips together as he wondered if maybe some kind of rebellion actually existed on this ship. It seemed almost impossible to contemplate, yet the hope burned in his chest.

“Where did you get the materials?”

“I’ll never tell you!”

The women made their fists again. The collar activated. Aric almost imagined the glass band glowing as the agony assaulted his defiance and stubbornness.

Aric wished this male could be stronger, yet he inevitably started to break.

“Would you like to try that again?” his handler wished to know.

Biting down, he didn’t answer again.

The woman leaned forward and chuckled, “Are you sure you want to put yourself in this position? Darian, you have been such a good service boy for us. Just look around. Can’t you see how many of us have come out to support you?”

“This isn’t support! It’s your entertainment. It’s just a game for you!”

“You can be entertaining,” she said, “while we teach you.”

“I don’t have anything for you to teach me!”

“Are you sure about that?” Are you really sure?”

At this point, Darian licked his lips and looked out at the audience.

Aric turned back to the doctor. “Please, you can’t be serious about doing this. You have to stop it.”

“And why would I stop it?” Doctor Gaia asked.

“Because he should have the right to read whatever he wants!”

“No,” she said dismissively. She was careful to keep her voice down, but the note of condescension still rang loud in his ears. “That’s not how this works, Aric. He is a boy, which means he needs to recognize his place in the proper social order. That’s what Portia and Beatrice were trying to teach you.”

Aric glanced around. He tried to find some sympathetic face among the spectators, yet it was pretty obvious that all of the women were enraptured by the show. They loved seeing this boy up there. And yes, a few of them glanced over at Aric himself, but this other male held their focus for now.

“We get to watch boys get trained,” Doctor Gaia said. “It’s good for the boy, and it’s good for our crew. Young men who try to step out of line need special care and attention from the entire community. That’s why they’re here. They’re supporting him.”

Aric opened his mouth, but Doctor Gaia decided to make a few gestures. When the former commander tried to speak, he realized the collar had been reactivated, meaning that he couldn’t get any sounds past his mouth.

“Maybe it’s time for you to be quiet and listen rather than trying to speak, especially when you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Darian endured another blast of pain.

“Where did you get the materials?”

“I found them on the grid!” Apparently, he couldn’t take another dose of targeted agony.

“Good,” she said. “Obviously, we have already tracked your grid usage. Since you haven’t been able to use this privilege wisely, you are losing it from today onward. This will hold true for the rest of the service boys as well.”

Silenced, Aric nonetheless glanced around. He saw a couple of the service crewmembers training the trees and mopping the floors, but those boys only hesitated momentarily. If they resented the loss of this privilege, they wouldn’t let it show, lest they end up on that same stage with Darian.

The boy never seemed to recognize what kind of threat he presented to his compatriots. His eyes widened, and he called out, “What? No! That’s not fair to them!”

“It’s quite fair. Besides, it’s good for them. To be honest, I thought we had done a sufficiently good job of cleaning up the grid for male consumption. I mean, if you want to go to most sites, you need a female passcode or special permission. If we can’t keep harmful materials away from boys, why should we let males on the grid at all?” The woman shook her head as though this really bothered her.

“Please!”

“And I think that should be the last thing we hear from you,” she said.

Just like that, she mimicked Doctor Gaia’s gestures, so the boy kept trying to speak, only now his mouth moved and there weren’t any sounds. He couldn’t speak. He had effectively been muzzled just like Aric.

Unlike that boy, Aric could have tried to run off. In fact, he wondered what would happen if he reached up and detached the leash from his collar.

He couldn't run off.

Maybe he could find some help. Maybe. He thought of Cara and wondered how he might be able to contact her...

"The tracking collar's punishment feature is very effective," said the woman. "But I think we can do better. I think something more intimate might help Darian here, especially because he still seems skeptical about how much we care about him."

Darian glowered at back at the audience. His eyes shined, and it was obvious he wanted to spew more of his vitriol.

Aric could imagine this young man as another digital control, someone dedicated to male supremacy. Women might have argued for pockets on dresses or something else largely irrelevant to his life experience, but he still would have gotten angry, all while accusing women of being too sensitive and overly emotional.

The woman onstage produced a paddle. She held it up, smacked against the palm of her hand, and Aric flinched when the sound skidded through his flesh.

He hated the idea of watching this, yet he couldn't look away either.

The adrenaline burned through his body, and he held his breath. He glanced over at Doctor Gaia, but she wasn't about to spare him from witnessing this.

The paddle cracked down, striking the boy's naked posterior. He twitched and struggled against of the stocks.

Aric gritted his teeth again. He tried to think of some way he could intervene or stop this, but he couldn't even call out.

Perhaps, while he had been able to speak, he might have gotten down on his hands and knees and perform tricks like an animal. Maybe that would have been enough to cause the audience to focus exclusively on him. But without the power of speech, he knew it wouldn't work.

So he had to watch.

He had to see this.

Darian's handler explained, "I don't like punishing him, but I know he needs it. I know it's going to be good for him. He knows it too. Maybe he can't admit it yet," she said as she smacked his backside with the paddle.

Aric could imagine the pain flashing along his nerves. It would be more visceral and electric, more primal and overwhelming than the collar's artificial bursts of distress.

"This is good for him. It's exactly what he needs."

Darian jerked and twisted against his stocks as much as he could, but there was no escape, so his handler continued to discipline him.

Aric watched all of it as it stretched on and on.

He didn't know exactly how many blows Darian had endured, but the woman stepped in front of him. She crouched down and whispered something into the service boy's ear.

Then she stood up, gestured, and asked in a loud, confident voice, "Have you learned your lesson?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Darian called out.

"And what lesson have you learned?"

"I'm a boy, and I shouldn't read those kinds of materials. I'm sorry. I'm so freaking sorry! I messed up. Boys were never meant to rule. We need to serve."

"That's right," she said as she patted him on the head.

To make sure he didn't say anything else, appropriate or otherwise, she gestured, and the collar muzzled him once again.

As they walked back to the infirmary, Doctor Gaia didn't return his speech functions.

But then Aric looked up, and he saw a familiar face. For a moment, he almost didn't recognize her as he walked naked, his hands at his sides and a leash dangling down from the base of his throat.

Corporal Dare!

When he saw her, he tried to call out, only to remember that he had been silenced.

Luck happened to be on his side this time; she glanced up from her Data Cube, and their eyes met.

"Aric?" Despite everything he just witnessed, he experienced a flash of irritation because she should have called him Commander Donovan. Then he stifled those reactions because they didn't really matter.

He opened his mouth, only to point to his throat like this was some kind of game of charades.

"What's wrong with him?" Corporal Dare asked.

Miranda glanced back at the woman, smiled, and said, "I decided that Aric here needed to spend some time listening instead of trying to talk. Strangely enough, that's still a male instinct we haven't been able to completely overcome. Boys just love going on and on. They struggle to recognize when it's better to stay silent." A smirk turned her mouth crooked, "Of course, that's most of the time."

Aric carefully watched her reaction.

Luckily, Corporal Dare didn't smile or laugh at that.

He mouthed something, and he could only hope she might be able to understand him.

"I don't mean to be rude," Miranda said, "But I need to get him back to the infirmary. He's going to need to rest up before the First Officer gets to play with him."

Cara stood in the hallway for several seconds as she watched her naked crewmate get escorted on a leash back to the infirmary. As she watched, she marveled at those strange, conflicting emotions roiling through her chest.

In middle school, she remembered watching one of her friends flirt with the boy. Actually, she still couldn't decide whether or not this actually qualified as "flirting".

Even if Cara hadn't recalled this particular incident for several years, her insides tightened at her own hypocrisy.

Samantha liked Jerrod. Jerrod liked Samantha. But then, they decided to go to a department store, and Cara ended up tagging along with a couple of his friends.

Holding onto Samantha's hand, Jerrod guided her to the pet section. Naïvely, Cara had no idea what they were doing there, not until he pulled a pink dog collar off of one of the display shelves. Then he looped it around her neck and called out, "This girl is mine. She is my pet girlfriend!"

Samantha tried to take it off, only then Jerrod pulled her hands behind his back. He showed her off to his friends, not to mention the other customers who wandered the department store.

Cara had watched all of this.

Instinctively, she had stayed back even as Samantha giggled.

Her friend could argue or complain, but it was obvious she loved the attention from Jerrod and his friends. It was a game. It was flirting.

If Cara had intervened, her friend probably would have gotten upset and accused her of being jealous.

Yes, Cara had been jealous.

It was ridiculous, and the thought ignited a different kind of anger, but she almost wished she had a boyfriend to tease her. Besides, they were girls, and this was what playful banter looked like sometimes.

Later on, Cara tried to convince Samantha that neither of them should put up with this. A dog collar? They weren't animals! The boys already had a hard time taking the girls seriously, and this just reinforced every sexist impulse.

Samantha had looked right back at Cara and just laughed like it didn't really matter one way or the other. It was just a game. It didn't mean anything.

And now, after decades in stasis, Cara stood there in the corridor and watched as Aric got led away on a leash.

Aric. Not Commander Donovan. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. Somehow, seeing this boy subjugated triggered something within her. She didn't understand it. She narrowed her eyes and tried to articulate the words. For so long, she had called herself a feminist, meaning she believed in the egalitarian treatment of both women and men.

Only now, she flexed her fingers and turned off her Data Cube.

Breathing out slowly, she decided to go for a walk and clear her thoughts.

That's when she saw Portia.

The Science Officer had her hands held behind her back as she looked out one of the enormous windows.

"Am I interrupting?" Cara asked.

"Not at all," Portia said with a bright smile. "Actually, I could use a distraction right now."

"A distraction from what?" Corporal Dare asked.

"Uncertainty. I know. I'm a scientist and a researcher, so I should be able to deal with this easily enough, but I hate not knowing what's going to happen sometimes. Like right now."

"Your competition?" Cara asked. Like virtually every other woman onboard, on Terra, and among the colonies, Cara had started to follow the competition as the senior staff competed for the chance to own this recently awakened pleasure slave.

“Exactly,” Portia replied. She turned back to the window. “I think I did pretty well. I think a lot of people really enjoyed seeing me mount him.”

“I watched a couple of commentaries,” Cara said. “They think you did an amazing job with him.”

“Thank you,” she said. “But Jessica and Carrie still get the chance to break him.”

Break him. The words echoed inside of Cara’s head as she contemplated what they really meant.

“Do you think he deserves this?”

“He’s a boy, and he needs to be taught what this world is like. If we let him run off and do his own thing, he would probably get himself killed.”

“He’s—” Cara said as she started to defend him, only she didn’t know why she bothered. But then she thought of his secret, the one he refused to share during Portia’s interrogation.

The Science Officer’s contemplation seemed to drift in the same direction. “I should have waited a little while longer. I should have forced him to tell me the truth.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“He was just trying to maintain a few boundaries,” Portia said with a shrug. “I can understand what he was doing. But really, it’s not like his secrets really matter anymore. I think it would have been anti-climactic. I get him to tell me about his last relationship or lover or whatever. Why would that matter? Why would that change anything?”

Cara stared out the window and worked hard to keep her face neutral.

“Do you enjoy controlling boys?”

“What do you mean? Do I like dating?” Portia asked. Apparently, those concerts were synonymous for her.

“Sorry,” Cara replied.

“No need to apologize,” Portia answered. “I guess I just don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“Aric,” she said uneasily as she used his first name rather than his title, “is a fellow crewmember. I just saw him get led around on a leash. Like a dog or a slave.” As she uttered the words, they still seemed so strange and alien to her.

“It’s better this way,” Portia said.

“What if I wanted to help him?”

“Help him? You mean you want to train him?”

Cara opened her mouth and quickly realized this woman wouldn't understand. Portia may have been a science Officer, yet her perspective was necessarily limited by her cultural assumptions about the world.

Since she had to say something, Cara just glanced out through the window and contemplated the different possibilities. She tried to understand how seeing a boy on a leash could ignite something within her, just as she wondered what those boys back in that pet section thought of Samantha.

“Do I need to strap you down?”

“No,” he said, mouthing the word because she still hadn't returned his power of speech. Then he shook his head obediently. No, she didn't need to strap him down.

Doctor Gaia seemed to consider him for several long seconds. “I won't restrain you,” she finally decided, “But I want you to do something for me.” Apparently, allowing this boy a modicum of freedom counted as a favor, which meant she now expected him to reciprocate.

He flashed a quizzical look.

“Consider your place here, on this ship and in this era,” she said. Then she stepped out of the room.

The door closed and vanished behind her.

Left alone, Aric wondered what he could do. His first instinct? Grab his phone or a camera and document this ship. He yearned to go back into the atrium. He had witnessed enough of the public punishment, but those trees had been gorgeous, especially as the dark brown of their bark, the vibrant green of their leaves, and the white alabaster of the starship mixed together so perfectly.

In so many ways, this vessel wasn't a tool of exploration so much as a work of art.

He tried to imagine the different shots and angles he might be able to employ. He contemplated how he might contrast the trees to the women on board. And what about the men?

Aric photographed people from time to time, but he had always specialized in landscapes. Did the same apply here? He wasn't quite sure, not when so much was happening on board.

For a few minutes, he walked back and forth like a caged animal. After that, he tentatively reached out as he ran his fingers along the glass

walls.

For another moment, he had this fantasy where a sledgehammer might materialize in his hands. He wanted to feel the massive weight, the solid handle in his grip, and the powerful weight at one end.

Like some barbarian, he wanted to slam the end of his sledgehammer against the wall. He needed to see chunks of glass break away as cracks webbed the surface. He yearned for a roar in his throat as he crashed the sledgehammer against the wall again and again.

He would break his way out.

He would fight.

He would win!

But then Aric started thinking of these women and what they told him again and again. He remembered Beatrice and her point about the Water Wars. He had this aggression deep inside of him, centered at his core, and he wondered if this was the force that had nearly driven humanity extinct.

Aric stopped, shook his head, and wished he could break something once again.

But if he couldn't break something, then maybe he could have talked to one of these women.

What then?

He might listen.

And she might convince him that he belonged on his knees along with the rest of the service boys.

"I shouldn't be a slave," he mouthed. But even as he said those words, he couldn't be sure they were entirely true.

These women were messing with his head. They were playing with him, teasing him, and turning his subjugation into a freaking game!

Aric threw himself down onto the exam table, only to flinch because he worried the shackles might reappear.

They didn't.

Forcing himself to relax, he closed his eyes, allowed his breathing to slow, and he tried to think of the most logical way out of this. Getting upset or emotional wouldn't be helpful. He needed to consider his options.

As an officer in the Ranger Initiative, he had been required to get training in game theory. Specifically, he needed to understand his resources,

his objectives, and contemplate the most logical and likely outcomes. If he could manipulate the variables appropriately, then he could win.

That was the essence of strategy.

Only then, his fingers brushed along the collar around his neck, his naked body, and finally the chastity cage between his legs. He pressed his fingers along the thin, metallic belt before touching the white alabaster.

As he considered his limited options, he remembered someone. He thought of her hair, the soft texture and teasing light. He remembered what she looked like when she smiled at him and said, “We shouldn’t be doing this. We can get in so much trouble!” But that had been a Sunday morning when they kissed and rolled beneath the sheets because no one knew where they were or what they were doing.

Aric surprised himself. This time, he didn’t open his eyes. Instead, he relaxed into those memories as his hands moved down along his balls and up along his shaft. The moment he touched the glass, however, he could no longer feel it.

The desires continued to burn and simmer within his chest. His pulse quickened, his breath became ragged, and his shaft tried to harden.

Aric didn’t know what he was doing.

This wasn’t conscious as he thought of that girl. This wasn’t a strategy as he remembered the contours of her thighs, the feel of her breasts, and the strength of her grip when her fingers interlocked with his.

No.

It was over.

That relationship came to an end in another era; it was long dead.

Aric forced his eyes open.

Then he jumped back against of the exam table, shocked when he saw someone in his peripheral vision. He sat up, “You startled me.” He tried to say the words, but Miranda hadn’t given him the ability to speak again.

Corporal Dare stood there off to the side. Apparently, she had strolled in while he had tried to touch himself.

“That must be really frustrating,” she said.

He nodded.

Because he didn’t have any other choice, he pointed to his collar and opened his mouth. He hated playing this game; he hated that he needed to try to mime out his needs and desires, especially because he had been able to speak so clearly throughout his life.

Like so many other males, he had never really appreciated what his voice could do, especially in meetings and conference rooms, classrooms and elsewhere. When he spoke, his voice could cut through a cacophony of female voices. Women might try to assert themselves, but they would never entirely succeed. His voice was deeper. People instinctively listened to him. That gave him a slight advantage, but one he could enjoy without acknowledging it.

With a pang of disappointment, he realized she probably didn't know how to let him speak again.

"Do you want to talk?" Cara asked.

His nerves had started to settle, so he examined her more closely. There was something about her expression, something which sent a little twitch of nervous energy running down his back. He couldn't explain what it was, not precisely. Her gaze? Her stance? She seemed rigid with her arms over her chest as she leaned against the wall.

Because he didn't see any other alternative, he nodded again. Yes, he wanted to talk. It felt like a request, a ridiculous and demeaning request.

Only then she stepped forward, she looked at him, pressed her lips together, and she swiped her hand through the air.

"Let's see if that works," she said. Before he decided to try, she encouraged him, "Go on. Let's see if you can talk." She sounded a little bit like she was talking to a kid or maybe a pet about to perform some trick.

For one petulant instant, Aric thought about just rolling over onto his side, turning his back to her, and pretending this conversation never existed. And yet, he also knew that once she strolled out of this exam room, the wall would re-materialize behind her, leaving him imprisoned.

No, this was his chance. Better yet, it was exactly what he needed, so he couldn't allow himself to get emotional.

Aric made the attempt. He hoped she had succeeded. "It's good to see you again," he said. There. He spoke. Even so, he felt this little note of frustration as he wondered if Cara could just as easily silence him again. He tried not to think about it.

"It's good to see you too," she said, her tone neutral.

"What's it like out there?" Aric asked.

"It's pretty incredible. Have you seen their duplicators?"

"No," he said. He knew he needed to focus, especially because they had to work together, yet the excitement seemed to glow along her eyes and

down her cheeks.

“The technology is amazing. I’ve been trying to read as much as I can. I mean, a lot of the data is missing, but so much has happened. The music. The art. The novels. The photography. All of it. It’s so amazing.”

At this point, she pulled her arms away from her sides. Her hands seemed to slide along the air, and the movements seemed reminiscent of how so many of the other women spoke. It was body language, something intuitive and automatic.

And now she was doing it too, he realized.

“What can they do?”

“The duplicators? As far as I know, pretty much anything. As long as they have mapped the atomic structure, they can actually go back and re-create pretty much anything.”

“Impressive,” he said, his voice flat.

“It really is.”

“What you think of their slaves?”

Cara stopped, turned back to him, and said, “I don’t think that’s fair.”

“What isn’t fair about it?” Aric asked. “They have turned the men of this century into slaves! They call them *service boys*.” He practically spat those last two words.

Aric may have been more involved and respectful than many of his colleagues back on the Ranger 3, but he still enjoyed those privileges of being a man, the intuitive respect, the strength of his voice, and the accepted idea that any door could open to him.

With the second, he expected her to get angry along with him.

Only then, she asked, “Is that any better than what men did with women during our century?” Aric blinked as her question settled onto the air. Cara continued, “We had office girls, sales cuties, cheerleaders, and bimbo servers.”

“That’s completely different,” he snapped back automatically. Aric didn’t even have to think about it.

“How? How is it different?”

“It just is,” he said lamely.

Cara held his gaze. She walked up to him without turning away. “Maybe this was a mistake.” She glanced back toward the unseen doorway because she could leave whenever she liked.

“Don’t go,” he said, reaching out and grabbing her hand. As he touched her fingers, he realized why this could be a mistake, let go, and pushed his palms down against at the edge of the exam table. “Please. We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“We have to get out of here,” he said.

“Why? Everything is pretty amazing here.”

He stared back at her with big, confused eyes.

Just as he started to speak, she talked over him easily and with a confidence he rarely saw in women from his own era, “I mean, just look around. It’s not perfect. They still fight from time to time, but I did a count of the people killed in combat since the Water Wars. Do know how many have actually died?”

She waited for an answer, some kind of guess.

Aric just shook his head.

“Twenty-three,” she said. “That’s including both military personnel and civilians. In almost two-hundred years, they have had twenty-three people killed in combat.”

“That can’t be right,” he said.

“Why not?” Cara asked.

“Because people fight. It’s just what they do. They get into armed conflicts all the time. If they aren’t going to fight over resources, then they will find another reason. It could be politics or religion or whatever, but humans just fight.”

“No,” she said simply. “I don’t think that’s true, not anymore.”

“Human nature doesn’t change,” he spat back.

“Or maybe we only thought that because men were in charge. I don’t think you appreciate what happened with the Water Wars. Just stop and think about it. This was their Dark Ages. This was the moment when humanity was nearly wiped out. Our entire species almost went extinct.”

Aric opened his mouth and tried to say something, but she continued, “They have worked so hard, Aric. They had to go through the Rewilding, the Rebuilding, and so much more. It has been incredible. They spent a century trying to get society back together, but the women took over, and then it worked. Not only that, they have done so much in just the last hundred years. They created this living glass, developed interstellar FTL drives, duplicators, and Holo Platforms.”

“Very impressive,” he said acidly. “But at what cost if the men need to be enslaved?”

“They aren’t slaves,” she said. “And most of them are very happy.”

“I saw a man get paddled.”

“That’s because he broke the law,” Cara said smoothly.

With a nervous gulp, Aric realized there was only way he might be able to win this argument. He inhaled slowly, looked right at her, and said, “Please. You have to help us. Cara, you are the only one who can get us off this ship.”

“What? You think I would want to go back into stasis? What are you even suggesting?”

“On board the Ranger 3, we have data from hundreds of probes. We can figure out a new destination. The chances of another ship catching us are almost infinitesimal. Besides, if this ship is really traveling at faster than light speeds, then—”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” Cara interrupted. She sounded more exasperated than anything else, “That wouldn’t work. You would probably just get yourself killed!”

“But you would come with us...”

Her gaze softened, “Why would I? It’s amazing here. Besides, I can retrain, join the crew, and—”

“Don’t you owe something to your crew?”

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at him, “Do you really want to talk about that, Aric?”

“I am Commander Donovan, and I am your commanding officer. I’m telling you right now that we are going to escape this a vessel.”

She stepped forward, looked down into his eyes, and he knew he should have slipped off of the edge of the exam table to straighten his back. He was taller than her, yet it didn’t feel like it, not here, not on board at the *Cygnus*.

“No, Aric, you are a boy, and these women intend to retrain you.”

“They intend to enslave me and the others,” he said.

Cara started to turn away. She walked toward the door and raised her hand. If he couldn’t come up with some way to stop her, then she could disappear onto this ship, and he might never see her again.

He had to say something!

“Weren’t we good to you?”

Cara spun around, and her cheeks blazed a shade of red as she stomped over to him. “Good to me? Is that what you call it?”

This time, Aric didn’t answer.

“How dare you? How can you stand there and say that to my face?”

“We’re crewmates, friends—”

She slapped him across the face. She struck hard and fast before he could even think about responding.

The sting lingered along his cheek. “Do you have any idea what it was like for me? Just stop and think about it, Aric. Go on. You can do it. Those guys on board our ship? They talked about me behind my back. They said every sexist joke you can think of. They even pinched me and rubbed me whenever they could. Oh, and why was I there in the first place? Because of the Gender Inclusion Program. Otherwise, you boys wouldn’t let a girl into your precious clubhouse.”

“I wasn’t—” Aric started to say, only she made a gesture, reactivating his collar and silencing him.

His eyes widened.

“What’s wrong, Aric? You can’t talk? How does that feel? No, you can’t talk, but you are going to listen. Our society was messed up. It was broken, and guess what? It made a gigantic mess. It’s taken women centuries to clean it up, but this is what humanity can be. So you boys don’t get the right to act like a bunch of conceited, entitled jackasses? Too bad. Like it or not, you are staying here. I guess it’s just a question of which girl is going to own you, slave boy.”

She turned around, walked away, swiped her hand through the air, and made the door appear. It vanished behind her, leaving this boy silent and trapped.

At some point, a service boy entered the exam room and left a tray with some food and water for Aric. He looked down at the strange taste and wondered exactly what this was supposed to be. He figured it was probably nutritious, only he didn’t understand why he couldn’t have something better like a steak, maybe some lobster, or at least a hamburger, especially if the duplicators were as amazing as Cara said.

Because nice food was a privilege, he realized right away.

Service boys probably earned their treats.

Disgust roiled through his chest, and he sincerely thought about throwing the tray at the wall. He could have splashed the water down on the floor to protest, only he knew what the women would make of his actions.

It was a tantrum.

He was a boy, and he couldn't control his emotions. He would only be proving everything they already wanted to believe about him.

It was frustrating, but he had to be rational about this, which meant maintaining his strength.

At some point, they would make a mistake, he would get out of the collar, and he would escape with the rest of his crew. Commander Donovan had an obligation to the men under his command.

That's why he started to eat. He used the spoon, put the tasteless slop in his mouth, and gulped it down. His hunger dissipated almost immediately. In fact, the paste may have been tasteless, but it seemed clean and healthy.

Reluctantly, he acknowledged that this "food" probably helped to end world hunger.

Aggravated, he rested on the exam table again, only now he placed his fingers behind his head and tried to sleep.

He kept thinking of Cara. He kept thinking of the anger as it blazed across her face.

He remembered what he did, but the old justifications didn't seem quite as effective this time.

Later on, more food arrived. Aric looked at the service boy and tried to say something. He wanted this man to stay so that they could communicate and come up with a plan.

Unfortunately, the boy had other duties to complete, so he quickly turned around and headed back into the infirmary.

Aric wondered if he might be able to sneak out with this other man, but it was too late. What if he tried to knock him out?

Aric wondered if maybe he could do something like switching out their collars. He had already tried, during those empty hours, to get his band off, but he couldn't even find a seam, let alone any sort of button or release lever.

Whether he liked it or not, he would remain collared because that's what the women of this starship expected of him.

He could never remember feeling this helpless or trapped.

Still, he could come up with some other solution. He knew it. He had to. He had no choice...

Eventually, he woke up, and the door opened.

A woman stepped into the exam room and placed her hands on her hips.

“Good morning, boy,” she said. “Are you ready to help me put on a show?” She pulled her hand away from her pocket, and that’s when he saw the leash.

Because he didn’t know who he was dealing with, he gave a quick, almost dismissive shake of his head. If they expected him to cooperate again, he would simply refuse. Yes, he recalled how painful the collar’s punishment function could be, but he would hold out for as long as he could.

Perhaps he even secretly hoped that Cara might see the footage of his “training” and change her mind.

Only now, he didn’t know what to make of this woman in front of him.

She had thick red hair tied back into a bun, full lips, and gently rounded cheeks. When she stepped forward, there was an almost playful lilt in her voice as she said, “I’m looking forward to owning you.” Then she snapped her fingers and pointed to a spot right in front of her.

Aric refused to move, so she raised her hand, pressed her fingers down against her palm, and sent a jolt of agony through his body.

He fell forward without making the decision.

“My colleagues were kind to you,” she said. “They were interested in educating you. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a service boy. Not me. I know what you are, Aric. You are a wild animal, which means you need to be trained. You need to be disciplined and turned into a plaything. My plaything.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth, but she grabbed his hair with one hand, jerked his head back, and attached his leash with the other.

“Come on,” she said, giving him a vicious yank.

He scampered forward, crawling before jumping back onto his feet. She strode ahead with quick, efficient movements.

Soon, Aric found himself following her back through the starship.

They moved much faster than before. He had a hard time keeping up. He may have been significantly taller than her and presumably had

much longer legs, but it hardly mattered. Her boots clicked against the alabaster hallways as she rushed ahead, and he soon found himself breathing hard as he worked to keep up.

This time, other women stopped and glanced in their direction, but none of them tried to intervene. None of them did or said anything.

Who was this woman?

Aric couldn't even ask.

They came to a wall, she made a gesture, and the motion triggered the doorway.

They walked into a large room, one which surprised him because it seemed dark.

The doorway disappeared behind them, plunging them into perfect black. Aric reached up and tentatively ran his fingers along the leash. For once, he found that demeaning symbol of subjugation to be comforting because it meant he wasn't alone.

Like every other space error, he feared the void. Nothing could be worse than the cold touch of space, only he continued to breathe warm air.

"Begin Lianasdottir Delta Alpha Three," said the woman.

The light came on all at once, temporarily blinding Aric since his eyes had tried to adjust to the dark. But now he blinked rapidly as he worked to look around.

Aric found himself standing in the center of an old office or study. Books crowded the shelves, a laptop from his era sat on the desk, and he saw several leather chairs.

The woman turned back to him, "I want you to know my name, just as I want you to understand that you aren't allowed to use it. Do you know why?"

She may have been a petite woman, yet her entire frame seemed to blaze with confidence and strength. At once, he recognized the power of command and knew this was the kind of woman who could easily seize control of a ship or fleet. People, women or men, would follow her against any threat.

Still unable to speak, Aric shook his head.

"Good," she said, practically purring the words like some hungry feline. "I am First Officer Jessica Rheainesduthur, and I have every intention of winning you."

The boy previously known as Commander Aric Donovan said nothing. Obediently, he remained quiet and subservient before this woman.

“My colleagues are far too liberal and progressive. As far as they’re concerned, boys are still people and deserve rights. They get nervous around words like ‘chattel’ and ‘slave’. But I don’t. As far as I’m concerned, males had their chance, and you blew it. You made every conceivable mistake, demonstrating your complete and utter inability to make your own decisions. As far as I’m concerned, men are nothing but animals, beasts of burden and maybe the occasional pet. Compared to you, we are goddesses.”

Aric tensed up as he heard all of this.

He tried to maintain eye contact with her, only this woman intimidated him. Something about the vivid green of her eyes made him look back down.

She could scare him. She could make him nervous.

Instinctively, perhaps he recognized her superiority. Perhaps she was right...

No!

Aric refused to contemplate that possibility.

“You will address me as your Goddess. If you try to call me anything else, I will make sure you regret it. Now, you and I are going to have a little conversation. Then you will begin serving.”

She waved her hand through the air. “Tell me you understand,” she instructed.

Aric hesitated, largely because he needed to think of some polite or potentially diplomatic way to get this woman to see that he couldn’t be enslaved. Despite her declarations, he still tried to hold onto some vestige of hope.

When he didn’t answer fast enough, she grabbed him by his leash, shoved him over the edge of the desk, reached down, and spanked him hard.

Her hand flew down, striking against his skin.

He told himself that it might sting, but he could handle it. He didn’t understand what she had done to his collar already or how she had linked the impact of her palm against his backside with the electrical impulses from his collar.

With every blow, she didn’t need to make a fist.

The agony swept through him. Mirrored sensations of pain from the collar and the stinging from her spanking made sure he cried out instantly.

Aric hadn't been able to build any kind of defense against this. The agony shot through him, twice as intense as anything else he had experienced with Beatrice or Portia.

"This is what happens when you disobey," she growled as her hand flew down and struck again.

The contact ignited another blaze of pain. He tensed up, gritted his teeth, and tried to fight through it. He attempted to brace himself, only the sensations seemed to burrow down into his center, ripping through his defenses and making him utterly helpless before this woman.

"I understand!"

"Good boy," she said. She came back up to him, brushed her fingers along his naked backside, and pointed to the floor. "Get on your knees."

"Can I ask a question?" Aric asked while still bent over the edge of the desk.

She answered by smacking his ass.

His eyes widened as he realized his mistake, "Please, Goddess, can I ask a question?"

"Go ahead," she said, whispering her answer into his ear.

Aric gulped and tried to breathe. He worked hard to concentrate as the lingering sensations buzzed along his skin. "Where, where are we, Goddess?"

"This is all a holographic projection supported by force fields and matter projectors," she said. "But really, you don't have to worry your cute little head about it. Instead, I wanted you to feel like a subordinate boy back in your own time. You see, I'm going to go play on that primitive computing device of yours, and you are going to service me underneath that desk."

"Yes, Goddess," he said.

"But first, I want you on your knees. I want you to acknowledge my superiority over you."

His lips parted, and he came close to contradicting her, yet the memory of the punishment made sure he behaved himself.

"You are my superior," he said.

She touched a finger to the corner of her mouth as she considered him.

Under normal circumstances, if they both stood, he might have towered over this beautiful, redheaded woman, but that hardly mattered.

“Very good,” she said. “I knew the others had simply been too soft with you. But now, we can work on your real training.”

“What are you talking about? Goddess?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she pulled on his leash, and she walked over to the desk. That’s where she unzipped her jumpsuit, allowing it to fall from her body. He got to see her perfect cleavage, her flat, toned stomach, and her black panties. She pulled the underwear down, sat at the desk, and spread her legs.

“Underneath,” she said.

“Yes, Goddess,” he replied. He had served Portia, and now he would do the same for this woman.

He crawled beneath the desk and started to lean forward, only Jessica placed her hand on his forehead, stopping him.

“Before you begin,” she said, her tone a mix of chiding and teasing, “I want you to think about where you are and what this means. So many of your contemporaries fantasized about this exact situation. You could have a girl on her knees as she serviced you while you worked. Guess what, boy? I’m working right now, and while I’m typing out these messages for my crew members, you will be pleasing me. You will lick down on your knees because that’s where you belong. Say it.”

Aric told himself that he only obeyed to avoid a punishment, but he still gave in. He still surrendered to First Officer Lianasdottir as though he had already been enslaved.

“I belong on my knees, licking, Goddess.”

His face flushed as the heat of embarrassment and subjugation rushed just beneath the surface of his skin. Aric still wished he could do something else. There had to be some way for him to resist or fight back. His first two potential trainers had avoided extreme usage of the collar. Jessica clearly didn’t suffer from the same inhibition.

Somehow, he suspected she might enjoy smacking his ass again. She probably loved making a fist and watching him flinch.

Pushing those thoughts and worries aside, Aric waited for permission.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Come on,” she said, almost flirtatiously. “Lick your superior.”

“Yes, Goddess,” he said.

He closed his eyes, parted his lips, and leaned forward. This time, she didn’t stop him. Instead, she ran her fingers through his hair and stroked his cheek and neck with one hand.

The next thing he knew, he had his face pressed up against her opening.

Naked and with a collar around his neck, he licked her. He slid his tongue along the length of her orifice. He worshiped her. He pleased her.

The taste of her excitement buzzed along his tongue.

He tried to think of somewhere else; he tried to pretend he was doing something else. It didn’t matter because she had already gotten inside of his head.

Maybe he really did belong on his knees. He tried to think through the countless controversies. Even during his time, women would come forward and accuse their bosses, teachers, and other men in positions of authority of harassing or threatening them.

The reactions were usually the same.

The men blamed these women. The first question? What was she wearing? Had she been too friendly? Maybe she led him on or put out the wrong kinds of signals?

In fact, Aric had wondered if he could ever enjoy that kind of status and power. There had been an intern back at the Ranger Headquarters. She was a cute redhead. In fact, she looked a little bit like Jessica herself, only this girl practically followed him around as she tried to learn as much as she could about the Ranger Initiative.

She wanted to be an astronaut. She wanted to go into space.

At one point, she said she would do anything she could to advance her career. When Aric heard those words, he took them at face value, assuming she was ambitious and dedicated. After all, Aric had said the same thing when he was her age.

Only later on, he started to wonder and perhaps even fantasize. Things had gotten complicated, so he enjoyed the idea of having this little intern on her knees, just licking and sucking.

Only now, his cock twitched while he served the woman poised above him.

“Here is a message for one of the maintenance crews,” she said.

Aric listened intently and tried to detect some note of arousal in her voice, like maybe she was about to lose control. He delved in deep, licking and sliding his tongue along the walls of her crevice. He licked her quickly, then slowly, then fast again. He could feel the swollen curve of her clit even as the taste of her excitement buzzed through his body.

“Maybe if you are a very lucky boy, I will hold you down and mount you. Would you like that, boy?”

Obviously, he couldn’t answer.

Jessica continued her work. Her fingers hovered above the keyboard as she typed against of those simulated pieces of plastic. The keys click-clacked while he continued to work, licking up and down again and again.

“Go faster,” she ordered.

For a moment, he almost pulled back and said, “Yes, Goddess.”

This woman wasn’t any sort of Goddess! He wasn’t supposed to have to do whatever she said!

The fury roared through his chest, but he couldn’t do anything about it. In fact, he slowed down for a moment, so she barked out the command, “Faster or you get punished!”

Aric didn’t really believe he would do this. He thought he was better than this.

Like any other service boy, he continued to worship her body. Despite his aggressive thoughts, Aric couldn’t escape the truth: he made her feel good. She made demands, and he acquiesced.

“Good boy,” she said. “Very good boy. I can see that you were born for this. Maybe you don’t want to admit it. You can’t even see it yet, but you are supposed to be a slave.”

Knowing that women all over the ship, Terra, the colonies and other vessels were watching, Aric probably should have growled something back at her. He could have pulled away, glowered up at her, and reminded this woman that she would never, ever tame him. He was capable of making his own decisions, and he wouldn’t succumb.

Only then, she yanked his face away from the spot between her legs. With her eyes aimed down at his face, she ordered, “Tell me you belong on your knees.”

“Goddess,” he began. Again, Aric searched for the strength to defy her. As hard as he tried, he couldn’t find it. He couldn’t strike back, no matter how much he may have wanted to. “I belong on my knees.”

When he uttered those words, they felt like the worst kind of defeat or betrayal.

“Good boy,” she said. “I’m a woman. What does that mean?”

His brows creased with confusion for just a moment.

Perhaps hidden sensors, scanners, and cameras recorded his reactions. For a moment, he hoped the angles might be too awkward, so the spectators wouldn’t get to enjoy the look of uncertainty as it flashed across his features.

But he understood just how advanced their technology was, which meant he should assume they could see every detail.

Within seconds, he came to the correct answer. “You’re a woman, Goddess, which means you are my superior.”

“Am I smarter than you?”

“Yes, Goddess.”

“Am I stronger than you?”

“Yes, Goddess.”

“Can I punish you whenever I want?”

“Yes, Goddess,” he said again.

It was a litany of surrender, one which made her smile. She flashed her teeth, grinned, and pushed his head back down between her thighs. Perched there on the edge of the office chair, she ordered, “Keep going.”

At once, he started licking. This time, he didn’t even hesitate.

Perhaps he belonged on his knees. Perhaps she was right. With everything women had accomplished, maybe he deserved slavery. Then he thought about that last question Porsche had asked and his refusal to answer it.

The memories flashed behind his eyes, one after another: the question, the answer, the look on her face and the twisting in his gut as the guilt stabbed into him. Despite that regret, he didn’t back down. He never apologized or worked to make things right.

Aric kept licking. He brought her closer and closer to an orgasm.

“Slow down,” she ordered. Then she lifted her chin as he obeyed, “Oh yes. That’s right. That feels so good. You belong on your knees, boy. When I win you, I’m going to have my last name tattooed somewhere on your body. I’m thinking your back. I’m thinking maybe your right butt cheek.” She giggled like this was just a joke or a game. For her, it probably was.

She had this toy, and she intended to keep him. That's what he had become: a toy.

He was a plaything, and he couldn't get his old life back. It was gone, but she had plans for him. In fact, each of the women probably had plans for him.

Aric didn't know how to fight it. He didn't know what he could plausibly do or say to get another chance, especially because Cara wouldn't help him.

Then again, he didn't deserve her help.

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It was just the programming, Aric told himself. These women were trying to tame him, and he couldn't allow them to succeed. Behind his eyes and between his ears, he should have retained control. He should have been able to cling to his identity and the man he had been as Commander Aric Donovan.

It didn't work.

"Speed up," she commanded.

He could tell from that ripple of anticipation in her voice that Jessica intended to climax. She gave those voice commands and expected nothing but obedience, which he provided without fighting back—which meant she was winning...

For just a moment, he thought about stopping.

Perhaps he could ruin her orgasm. He could just draw his head away, look up at her and smirk. In that moment, she would realize something; she might come to understand that he wouldn't be defeated, nor would he be owned.

It was such a bright, clever fantasy. It sounded so good inside of his head, only he kept licking. Moment by moment, he searched for the courage to fight back.

Aric didn't find it.

He kept licking her right until that moment when her legs tensed, and she squeezed her inner thighs against his cheeks.

She cried out, practically screaming.

Then she rolled her chair back. For several long seconds, she worked to catch her breath before finally glancing down and acknowledging him. "Not bad, boy," she said.

His nostrils twitched and flared as he stared back at her. Aric tried his best to pretend he wasn't intimidated. After all, he had ventured out into space, so he should have been strong enough to contradict her or argue with her.

Instead, he remained quiet as she said, "You know exactly how to behave yourself, don't you? You know how to be a good boy. Deep down, you must understand that this is best for you, for all of you. When I first heard about your stasis pods, I thought you might have represented some kind of threat. What if you boys woke up and tried to instigate some kind of rebellion?" She shook her head and smirked, like the idea was ridiculous.

“You might be from a different era, but all you prove is that men have always been weaker. Why were you in charge? Because we women allowed it.”

Aric opened his mouth and inhaled.

Perhaps he would have said something. Maybe he would have remained quiet. Either way, he didn't get the chance to find out because she made a fist. She gripped it right there in front of him, so the collar delivered another jolt of searing pain. He collapsed down onto his stomach.

She grabbed him by the back of his neck. She pulled on his collar and forced him to look up at her.

“Say it again.”

“You're my superior!”

“And what are you?”

Different possibilities flashed through his head. He was a man. He was a commander. He was an officer within the Ranger Initiative.

None of those answers would have satisfied her. He had to do better.

When he didn't answer immediately, she held out her hand, palm flat, and her fingers started to rise. Knowing he had to speak, Aric called out, “I'm a boy, and I'm your inferior!”

His eyes clenched shut as he tried to prepare himself for the next onslaught. He expected a burst of pain.

Only it didn't arrive.

He opened his right eye, then his left. He looked up at her, and Jessica was grinning down at him. She looked at this boy like he was some kind of animal who had just performed a difficult trick.

“Go back to the middle of the room and stand up for me.”

She rose as well, only now she pulled her jumpsuit back on. She zipped it into place, stretched her neck from side to side, and studied him. “You don't believe that you are truly my inferior, do you?”

Aric didn't know what to say. His jaw fell open, and he looked at her hard, but he couldn't pick out the right words, so he remained silent.

Surprisingly, that made her smile. “It's okay. I'm going to give you a chance, Aric. If you could have anything in the world right now, what would it be?”

He instantly thought of his ship, his crew, and those stasis tubes.

She chuckled as though she could read his mind, “I bet you want to get back onto your decrepit little ship and head off into the void. You

probably want to try to find some uninhabited world and build your own colony, one where you boys can make all of the mistakes you want.”

It was true, only he didn't say anything.

She walked over to the simulated door.

“I'm going to give you a minute,” she said. “If you can get past me, by whatever means, I will let you go. In fact, I will talk to our captain.”

His brows creased with confusion. Really?

“You think I might be lying to you,” she said, “But I am a woman of my word. Besides, this is probably the one and only chance you will have to escape. Let's see what you can do.”

At first, he decided he didn't believe her. Only then he knew she was right despite all of his misgivings. Up until now, these women had controlled and manipulated him easily, keeping him collared and literally leashed. They could lock him up and hold him captive for as long as they wanted.

But right now, he had a chance to prove himself.

Besides, if he defeated her, then maybe he could convince these women that the boys on board his ship weren't worth their time. They already had a cadre of well-trained slaves.

He puffed out his cheeks for a moment, braced himself, and looked at her.

She raised a hand, motioned for him to come at her, and said, “The clock is ticking down.”

One minute. That was all the time she was offering him.

Aric tried to tap into that primal, primitive part of his brain. He searched for the arrogant, manly instincts that made it clear males should be in charge because they were bigger and stronger. With his taller frame and stronger biceps, he needed to control this girl and hold her down.

He rushed forward, sprinting at her.

She moved faster than he could have expected.

A little smile tugged at her mouth because he didn't understand what kinds of enhancements had been applied to the human genome over the last couple of decades.

This boy didn't stand a chance.

He really was her inferior in every way, so her hand shot out, and she grabbed him by the wrist. Using his own momentum against him, she spun him around and threw his back down onto the floor.

“Forty-five seconds,” the First Officer said.

Aric got up again, rushed forward, and tried to throw a punch.

She grabbed his wrist, easily catching him. She pulled his arm behind his back, twisting it up. Pain raced down his shoulder, and he growled out.

She kicked him at the back of his knee, forcing him to drop to the carpet.

“Thirty seconds,” she said.

He tried to jerk his head back and slam his skull into her chest, but it didn’t work. She had already released him, so now he just stumbled.

“From what I understood, the men in the Ranger Initiative were supposed to be soldiers. I’d bet you would have been able to fight,” she taunted him.

Aric wasn’t like the rest of his crew; he didn’t believe in wild aggression or rage. He would have rather aimed a camera than a gun, but all of the frustration flared through him. He raced at her and just tried to tackle her. With his shoulder down, he wanted to slam her up against the wall, knock the air from her lungs, and shove her down.

She darted out of the way.

He hit the wall, stars buzzed along the periphery of his vision, and that’s when she called out, “Times up.”

Jessica grabbed this boy by his collar, rushed him forward toward the desk, and bent him over the desk once again.

“No. Please, not this. Not again!”

She smacked his ass hard and fast. Her hand flew down again and again.

Just like before, the collar mirrored her corporal punishment. She delivered one blast of pain after another.

Then she stopped, grabbed him by his hair, and demanded, “What are you hiding? Tell me about the last girl.”

“Cara. It was Cara!”

Jessica considered this for a moment. Finally, the name clicked, and she realized what he meant. She pulled on his collar, forced him back to his feet, and looked right into his eyes. “Tell me what happened.”

“We were dating. We were dating, and I was in love with her.” He licked his lips, and he knew he should stop, but a toxic mix of guilt and fear shattered those last barriers. “We were crewmates, so we weren’t supposed

to be messing around. I thought we were dating. I don't know. We were sleeping together. She was so beautiful." The words just tumbled out. For once, Aric Donovan didn't get to contemplate what they meant or how they might sound. He didn't get to strategize at all, not while the First Officer had her hand on his collar.

"I betrayed her."

"Tell me."

Back on Earth, three days before the launch of Ranger 3 from its orbital platform, Aric confidently strode down the hallway. He figured he would meet with Admiral Adams and accept another interview with some reporter.

Captain Pike hated dealing with the bloggers and other journalists, which meant it usually fell to Aric unless they specifically wanted the "girl angle," in which case Cara handled it.

The moment he walked into the admiral's office, Aric realized something was wrong.

"Have a seat, Commander."

Admiral Adams and Commander Donovan weren't technically friends. An Admiral and a subordinate could never truly be equals, but they had joked around together. Besides, Admiral Adams also had an eye for photography. They had bonded over different shots, especially the best angles of the Himalayas.

Now this gruff man with his close cropped, gray hair, and pressed uniform stared at the commander.

Aric sat down, although he was careful to keep his back straight.

The admiral said nothing at all for several long seconds. Instead, he had his eyes on his computer screen. When he turned back to Commander Donovan, he seemed to watch Aric for several more seconds without saying anything.

Every moment stretched on and on.

"Is there anything you would like to tell me?"

Aric tilted his head to the side just a tiny bit and said, "No, sir. Is there something I should be aware of?"

"Actually, yes," he said. "Your relationship with Corporal Dare."

Aric had known a moment like this might come up, but he still wasn't prepared. His voice failed him, and he tried to keep his expression

utterly neutral, like he had no idea what the admiral meant. Even so, there were those flashes of memory: her breath, hot on his neck, her fingers gliding along his back, the way she smiled on that random Sunday morning as the sunlight splashed across his bed.

“What about my relationship with her? I think she is a fine officer.”

“You’re sleeping with her,” Admiral Adams said. It wasn’t a question.

In spite of himself, Aric gulped and let his shoulders slumped forward. “Yes, Admiral.”

“Thank you for not lying to me,” Adams replied. “What happened?”

Aric didn’t entirely understand, not at first. Only then he remembered Admiral Adams’ objections to the Gender Inclusion Program.

“Just tell me the truth. If you do, this can be salvaged. In fact, things might turn out very well for you.”

Admiral Adams understood what Aric wanted more than anything else: he yearned for the chance to be the first person on an alien world. He wanted his boots to crunch down against to the dirt of another planet, a spot in the universe no one else had ever been. He had dreamed about it from almost his entire life.

But he wasn’t going to get this honor. It had been assigned to someone else: Corporal Dare. Online, trolls complained about how she only got this honor because she was a woman. Maybe they were right.

Aric bobbed his knee up and down. His fingers balled into fists, and he held his breath for several long seconds as he waited for some jagged pang of conscience. Yet at this moment, he could only think of one thing: opening the hatch, climbing out, and being the first one out there.

Back on Earth, everyone would know his name. He wouldn’t just be the second in command of a tiny ship out in a distant solar system. He would be a hero. His name would go down in history, and he would never, ever be forgotten.

“What happened?” Admiral Adams asked after giving this young man enough time to make a decision.

And yes, Aric picked his future—and hers.

“She seduced me, Sir. Look, I know I messed up, but you have seen Corporal Dare. She’s beautiful, and damn, she looks so good in that tight little jumpsuit.” As the words tumbled from his lips, Aric knew exactly how

he sounded. Normally, he was the kind of man who avoided “locker room talk,” but right then and there, it was so easy, especially since Corporal Dare wasn’t around.

“I can understand what happened,” he continued, “There is a lot of stress. I mean, she is a woman, after all. She probably couldn’t take it. I mean, you have been talking about how a woman shouldn’t be on an exploration ship anyway. I think you are right, Sir.”

“She’s not getting kicked off,” Admiral Adams said. “But for this, she won’t be the first one on the planet either. That honor will go to you. That said, I want to thank you, Commander Donovan. You have done a great service for the Ranger Initiative.”

The admiral held out his hand. “Obviously, you need to end your sexual relationship with Corporal Dare. And try to do it somewhere where the cameras won’t see her cry. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, Sir,” he replied before retreating out of the admiral’s office.

And over the next couple of weeks, he heard the dribbled details in rumor and innuendo. From the crew, Chris said there had been “whispers” about Cara and what she had gotten up to. Hamilton mentioned something about how the senior brass didn’t have any proof, so they couldn’t kick her off the mission. But make sure she was the last one off the boat? Oh yeah.

“Tell me,” Jessica demanded as she tightened her grip on his collar.

“I told her superiors that we were having sex,” Aric confessed. “I made it sound like it was all her fault.”

“I think that warrants another spanking, don’t you?” Jessica said, only she didn’t bother waiting for his answer. Instead, she bent him over again, spanked him hard, and the punishment stretched on and on.

Before a minute elapsed, he called out, “Please. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I messed up!”

“You aren’t, not yet,” she said. “But I’m sure every woman on this ship will want to make sure you are.”

“What, what’re you talking about?”

“You look tamed, boy. But guess what? I’m going to test you now. It’s time to see how you perform as a service boy.”

He didn’t understand what she meant, only then she brushed her fingers along his cheeks. “Wait here.”

Then she turned around and walked away. When she opened the door, Aric had his eyes on the floor, only he could hear something: conversations and tittering giggles. He glanced up, but it was too late. The door swung shut.

With the pain still echoing through his body, he contemplated what he had done to her.

Technically, they didn't have any romantic relationship, not exactly, but there had been those moments when they joked around, laughed, and teased one another. He remembered holding her down and tickling her. He loved the way her hair came loose from the ribbon holding the strands back in the shape of a ponytail. Other memories flashed in broken pieces.

Seeing this girl dance in her bra and panties as her favorite song streamed off of her laptop. She held her hairbrush as an imaginary mic.

Sneaking off-base to get tacos at one in the morning.

Sitting on the hood of his truck and staring up at the night sky.

Hiding in a storage unit and making out because a control came by early.

"We're ready for you," Jessica announced.

She walked back into the room, and she had a pair of boys with her now. These young men were also naked, only they set several items down on the simulated desk.

Aric probably should have looked past Jessica and out toward the space beyond, but he didn't move fast enough, so he still didn't see who might be on the other side of the door.

"Here are some hors d'oeuvres," she said. "And here are a couple of bottles of wine. It's going to be your job to serve us tonight."

"Serve you?"

"Me and some of the crew," she said, practically purring the words. "Tonight, you get a taste of what it means to be a service boy."

She patted him on the head, snapped her fingers, and the other males followed after her. Before the door could close after her, she glanced over her shoulder and said, "Aric, you don't want me to have to come back for you. Trust me. You wouldn't like that. You wouldn't like that at all."

Once she was gone, Aric rose to his feet. He looked down at the tray. He saw small crackers covered in cheese and meat on one side. On the other, bite-sized cakes waited to be picked up.

Under other circumstances, Aric would have been severely tempted, only he glanced around the rest of the office, and there was only this one door. Even if he wanted to escape, he would have to go out there.

But what was he going to face?

A party.

The answer seemed obvious, but his insides still bunched up at the prospect. Who would they be? What would they want?

Aric stepped toward the door, hesitated, reached out for the handle, and then stopped himself. Then he sighed with something close to defeat before he picked up the tray and carried it out.

There were dozens of women out here. The room looked gay and spacious with bookshelves off to the side, a large TV mounted to the wall, and several couches arranged neatly. On the other side of the open space, he spotted the kitchen and knew there would be other trays and bottles waiting for him.

“Come here, service boy,” called out one woman.

It seemed like half of the partygoers were dressed in their ship uniforms. The others wore beautiful dresses that highlighted their long legs, trim waists, and gorgeous cleavage.

At first, Aric could hardly tell the different women apart, only then he saw one with dark hair: Cara Dare.

She was staring at him. She wore one of the ship’s uniforms, only she continued to stare at him.

Aric rushed forward. Several feet away, he paused.

“I know what you did,” she said. Then she turned away and started to walk off. Aric stepped forward to chase after her, only a woman stepped in his path. “What have you got there, service boy?”

He couldn’t escape them.

Someone came up behind him and pinched his naked butt. Another woman caressed his chest. Someone else expected him to hold out the tray.

They were going to keep him very, very busy.

He just wanted to rush after Cara, only someone called out, “Don’t go anywhere. I haven’t picked out which one I want.” He glanced in her direction, saw a blonde with vibrant blue eyes watching him, and she held out her hand.

The implication was clear; if he tried to chase after Cara, he would suffer the consequences because she could make a fist oh-so easily.

With the dread pulsing through his body, he didn't see any other choice. Aric started to walk from one cluster of women to another. They would look at him, and he would have to say something like, "Excuse me, ladies, would you like anything?"

Some of them might pick out one of those tiny cakes. Some of them might pick up a cracker to enjoy while she had fun at the party. Others, however would hold a big laugh and say, "More wine." They didn't say please. They saw no reason to, not while this boy was effectively owned.

He had to serve.

He had to obey.

At first, performing like this seemed strange, only then he lost himself to the rhythm as he worked his way around the party. With every step, he searched for Cara, but he couldn't see her, no matter how hard he tried. She could have been avoiding him, or maybe she simply left.

One woman asked, "Are you enjoying your subjugation?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

The women chuckled and patted him on the head.

A few minutes later, someone else asked, "I like seeing you naked. Maybe we should do this for all of the boys. What do you think?"

One of her friends interjected, "Oh, you shouldn't ask him for his opinion. It's going to confuse the poor boy."

"Poor boy?" asked another one of the women. She looked at him hard and said, "I have half a mind to punish him right now. You heard what he did." There. That proved it. Everyone on board this ship understood what he had done. They saw his perfidy and knew he had betrayed someone special.

Cara. Where was Cara? He had to track her down! He needed to talk to her!

And yet, his newfound obedience compelled him to stand there while the women made their selections. Moments later, someone else held up a wine glass, so he rushed back and grabbed a bottle. He poured one drink after another as the women giggled at him, pinched him, and talked about him.

He served because he had no choice. He rushed around the room; he worked so hard to satisfy all of their needs.

Some of the women continued to drink. This was a party, after all, and they could relax. It was only the single service boy who had once been

a commander in the Ranger Initiative who had to work hard. And as they drank, they took fresh liberties with this boy. A few pinched his cheeks. Others stroked his legs or asked him what he could do with that tongue.

Aric had no idea whether or not he could be protected by some kind of law or regulation. What if one of these women decided to grab him? What if she took him into a closet and started kissing him?

“You look cute,” one of them said.

“I’m going to ask Jessica to let me borrow him,” said another.

“I can’t wait to see him on his knees again,” declared a third.

Soon enough, it was time to pour more drinks, fetch more food, and serve these women.

Before long, Aric lost all track of time. He hoped the women might get bored of this sooner rather than later. He didn’t understand precisely what a Holo Platform could do, but he assumed the technology might be able to simulate anything different could re-create an expansive, expensive house from his time.

Wouldn’t these women have rather played with something else? Somewhere else?

Couldn’t they just leave him alone?

Then Aric remembered Cara’s complaints after a fundraiser. While he had worn his dress uniform, the Admiralty had insisted she put on a tight dress, something to show off her legs, buttocks, and cleavage. They even instructed her to visit a local salon to make sure she got “dolled up” for the occasion. She did it. Of course, she did it. She didn’t have a choice. If she refused to cooperate, then the admirals would kick her out of the program for being “difficult”. But at the fundraiser, billionaires and senior commanders enjoyed the eye candy. They loved the makeup on her face, the tight fabrics clinging to her body, and the simple fact that she couldn’t complain when they “accidentally” bumped into her and just happened to grab at her chest or backside.

Women did the exact same thing here with Aric, only they didn’t have to pretend.

Finally, something changed. Aric didn’t know it yet, but his situation was about to get worse.

“Ladies, I hate to be rude, but I must call our service boy up to the front.”

He instantly recalled the stage, the stocks, and the public punishment. Desperate for a reprieve, Aric spun around almost fast enough to make the bite-sized cakes fly from his tray.

Nearly frantic now, he searched for Cara, only he didn't see her.

Wait. There!

She was leaning against one wall with her foot up and her arms crossed over her chest as she watched him. Now a smirk dashed her lips as she saw the panic play along his face.

He opened his mouth, and he tried to shout out. He wanted to yell out his apology and beg for her forgiveness.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't make a sound. He set the tray down, and his fingers flew up to the collar.

"Get up here, boy," Jessica called out from the stage.

He turned around. The women formed a corridor for him. They were smiling and grinning.

With nothing but his eyes, Aric tried so hard to convey his need. He was silently hoping that Cara might intervene. She was a woman; they would listen to her.

If she could forgive him, then everything would be okay.

"Now," Jessica called out.

This boy didn't see any other option. He could try, but he would fail to escape. It didn't matter how fast he could run. These women would catch him. These females would capture him like he was nothing but a wild animal that needed to be hunted, caged, and domesticated.

With a gesture, Jessica made sure he could no longer speak.

The collar nullified his voice.

Several women grabbed him, pulling him along. They brought him up to a set of stairs, so he climbed them onto the stage.

"Ladies, you have all seen this boy beg and plead and confess. But right now, I think it's time for some punishment. We don't need his collar. We just need him to understand what happens when boys disobey and try to think for themselves."

Aric needed to say something, but the collar continued to nullify his voice, rendering him silent while the women decided what should happen to him. They chose his fate. They sculpted his future.

Jessica turned back to him, and she snapped her fingers.

Suddenly, shackles dropped from the ceiling. The restraints encircled his wrists and jerked his hands up into the air. Another set of restraints grabbed at his ankles and spread his legs. Suddenly, he was spread out, naked and powerless before this crowd of females.

They seemed to study him like a flock of predatory birds.

Aric did his best not to look nervous or scared, yet he couldn't keep the anxiety from doubling inside of his chest.

Jessica reached up and brushed her fingers along his chest, right along his sternum. "His heart is beating fast. You all know why. He's scared. So many men want to pretend that they are big and strong, especially from his era. Are they?"

"No!" the women howled back as their voices channeled into a roar.

Almost immediately, others started to call out, "He is just a boy!"

"Boys need to be trained!"

Others picked up a chant, "Train the boy! Train the boy! Train the boy!"

As hard as he tried, Aric couldn't keep his features even or neutral.

Without realizing it, he started to flex his muscles, tensing his limbs as he tried to slip free, but the simulated restraints, whether or not they were real, held him. He could jerk his torso from side to side, but that was all.

Jessica came up behind him, grabbed his ass, pressed her fingertips down until he could feel her nails dig little grooves into his skin, and then she pulled her hand back.

Aric understood exactly what was going to happen.

Even so, he couldn't prepare. There was no way for this boy to mount a defense. He stared straight ahead, did his best to appear impassive and utterly stoic. He tried to channel the patience of a statue as he waited for the inevitable.

All around him, the women called out, "Train the boy! Train the boy! Train the boy!" This could have been a football game with the fans getting riled up as they waited to see their favorite athletes perform down on the field.

Her hand crashed down against his ass. The pain snapped through his body, lighting up his nerves as he twitched against of the bonds. Those restraints held him fast even as the women continued to watch.

She spanked him again. And again!

The stinging spread along his nerves, darting beneath the surface of his skin. His cheeks were red, and his breathing came fast.

Before coming out of stasis, Aric had never experienced this kind of helplessness before. Perhaps the women could sense it. They could see it on his face. Their contemporaries were boys who had been born into servitude. Not Aric. He had been able to work his way toward success. And when that wasn't enough, he had blamed Cara, almost wrecking her career and stealing away one of the most important honors any person could imagine.

Something inside of him cracked, and he tried to call out, "I'm sorry! Cara, if you can hear me, I'm so sorry! I betrayed you! I was a bastard! Please, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" Perhaps those words would have been enough to win him some sympathy from the crowd of women, only there was just one problem.

His lips moved, but he didn't make a sound, not while the collar nullified his voice.

If the women noticed, they didn't say anything about it. None of these females were interested in what he had to say. He was just a boy, and they were used to ignoring males.

So the spanking continued.

Jessica reveled in this power. She savored every moment of it. She had this handsome, Wild Male down in front of her.

Not only that, the women continued to chant. Their cheers reverberated through the air and vibrated along her body.

One orgasm had satisfied her, at least for the moment. Now she simply reveled in her power and authority over him. This kind of control sang to her most primal, primitive instincts. Deep within her core, she knew this was perfect.

She held out her hand, made a gesture, and a simulated riding crop appeared there in her palm.

"Should I?" Jessica called out to the other women.

"Do it!"

Another woman called out, "Do it! Make him pay!"

Jessica flashed a wicked, playful grin. She held the crop in her hand, gripping it tight beneath her fingers. Then she cracked it down against her own forearm as she tested the toy. Then she stepped up to Aric, her breasts squeezing along his back, and her free hand slid from the back of his thigh up to his buttock.

“Get ready,” she whispered to him.

Aric didn't know what was about to happen, but she struck hard. The tip of the crop cracked down against his flesh, leaving a red line. She didn't break the skin, but he still experienced that flash of pain. The texture was different. It seemed to tear down his defenses.

And yet, for these women, it was just a game.

They wanted to play with him; they wanted to tease him.

She struck again and again, leaving crisscrossing patterns of red along his skin.

Every time Aric tried to tear himself free from the restraints, the women hooted, laughed, and cheered. Some of them held up their Data Cubes as they captured pictures or scans of his struggles. Others marveled in the moment, savoring his punishment as he squirmed helplessly.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't break free.

He fought with everything he had, channeling the best of his strength and effort, yet it still didn't change anything. These women had him, and they could keep him right there exactly where they wanted him.

Finally, it stopped. He slumped forward, dipping his head down.

Jessica made a gesture, not that Aric could even see it.

Then she stepped in front of him, pushed her knuckles beneath his chin, and forced him to look up. Then she called out, “Tonight, you are going to be a display. You are going to be a powerless boy. Pretty soon, your designation is going to change, Aric. You won't be a Wild Male lost out in space. You will be claimed.”

Aric should have said something. He should have at least shaken his head, but he hadn't realized she gave him the ability to speak once again.

The First Officer spoke, and this boy listened. That was how it was supposed to be. “Now, I'm going to invite everyone to come up here and play with him. Feel free to touch him, tease him, and make him cry out. Feel free to do whatever you want, as long as you don't damage this boy. After all, the exact property rights haven't been established yet.”

Property rights.

He was property, he could be claimed. He could be owned.

Aric clenched his eyes shut, and that's when Jessica let her fingers start out on the air. Off to his left, just within his peripheral vision, he saw a rack of items appear. Paddles, whips, and crops fit for a pony phased-in to simulated existence. They may not have been real, yet it hardly mattered

when each and every bite against his skin burned with every snap, crack, and slap.

“Come on, ladies. Let’s get started!”

Pain wouldn’t be enough, however.

Jessica stepped in front of his chastity cage, made another gesture, and the device opened. She pulled away, and his member stiffened. Despite the lingering pain, Some part of him ached for release and the promise of surrender, if only in the hopes that they might let him have an orgasm.

Within moments, he heard the high-heeled clicks as women began to climb up onto the stage.

Down as a group, they had been eager and aggressive. But now, they glanced back and forth at one another as they debated what they would do with him.

One woman grabbed a paddle, stepped back behind him, aimed, and swung down.

The solid wood struck, and Jessica observed. She chuckled. Through the cacophony of laughter and good times, Aric could still hear that one woman.

After the paddle, someone else used a crop. Then a whip. Another woman wanted to spank him.

Someone else came up to his front. She realized what she could do and how she could make him squirm helplessly. She started to stroke him, to glide her fingers along his member. She tugged on him, forcing the arousal to pump through his body.

It didn’t matter if he struggled. It didn’t matter what he did.

The sensory onslaught battered at his defenses, all while he thought of Cara and what he had done to her.

Someone gave him the ability to speak once again.

“Tell us you’re a slave!”

“I’m a slave!”

“Tell us you want to be owned.”

“I want to be owned!”

On and on it went. His mouth moved, and he confessed everything. He obeyed each command, but the women didn’t stop. They played with him for minutes, then hours. The time stretched on without relief.

By the time they were done with him, he just slumped forward and passed out without any memory of closing his eyes.

Cara left.

She stepped out of the simulation and back out into the glass hallway. As she inhaled the clean, cool air, she decided she needed some exercise.

Aric.

He betrayed her.

Ever since they went into stasis, she had tried so hard to convince herself that it hadn't been him. Instead, she wanted to believe that they had both screwed up. It had been her fault as well as his because they had become indiscreet.

At some point, she kissed him and the maintenance guy noticed.

Or worse, perhaps she glanced at him with a little bit too much affection, and one of their crewmates picked up on it. Boys could be so jealous, she knew. It was her responsibility to keep them from paying any attention. Maybe Chris or Gary, Hamilton or even Captain Pike spotted something.

Aric had always seemed so cool and professional, which meant it would have been her fault.

But it wasn't.

It was Aric.

"Commander" Donovan had betrayed her. He had an opportunity to get his feet on an alien world first, and he took it. All he had to was risk destroying her career. After all, he didn't know what would happen. He didn't have any sense of whether or not they would pull her off of the mission entirely!

She made it back into the atrium.

Underneath one of the trees, she saw Doctor Gaia leaning back and staring up into the branches. She watched as the birds flew between branches while the leaves fluttered with the artificial breeze.

"Doctor Gaia?"

"You know, you could call me Miranda."

"Sorry. I guess I'm a little bit tense."

"Treachery can do that to you," Miranda said.

"You saw it?"

"I watched on my cube," said the doctor. "At this point, I figure the rest of our colleagues are going to be off having an orgy of punishment."

“He deserves it,” Cara snapped back.

“I agree,” Miranda replied. Of course, that answer made Cara blink and hesitate. After all, she came from a society where a man could screw up and enjoy four or five “second” chances. The doctor continued, “And that raises an interesting question.”

“What?”

“Why are you out here and not back on the Holo Platform with the rest of the crew?”

Cara opened her mouth like this would be an easy question to answer, except she paused again as she searched for a reply and stumbled.

“I guess I’m angry,” she said.

“Just angry?”

“Angry and sad. Disappointed.” After an aggressive sigh, she dropped down onto the bench beside the doctor. Cara leaned back and looked up through the trees as she marveled at the size of this vessel and everything these women had achieved. Sure, the boys helped, but only by cleaning and handling the menial tasks.

“What’s going to happen to him?” Cara finally asked.

“He will be turned into a service boy, a pleasure slave.”

“I see.” Cara had already known this, but she still wanted to hear those words again. Before she really thought about what these words might mean, she whispered, “It doesn’t seem fair.”

“To him? Or to you?” Miranda asked.

Cara pursed her lips together, but she didn’t have a good answer.

“You’re in a very interesting position,” she said. “You were the only woman on board the ship. You should think about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I hate to be rude, but I have to get back to the infirmary. But whatever you decide to do, you should probably move quickly. Pretty soon, the competition will be over, and the captain will offer your boy up to one of the senior officers. The moment that happens, he will officially become her property.”

Cara still didn’t quite understand, but the doctor walked away.

As she ran the tip of her tongue along her teeth, Cara considered exactly what she just heard. One thought popped into her head: the doctor had something in mind, but she didn’t want to share. There could have been political or personal reasons.

Corporal Dare reached into her pocket and felt the unfamiliar weight of the Data Cube.

Placing it on the table, she waved her fingers. It took two tries, but she managed to activate the device. From there, she looked down, and she said, "Show me an overview of property rights."

The projection appeared, and she saw page after page of legal information.

"Show me an overview of property rights as they pertain to service boys," Cara said next. "Specifically, how can they be claimed?"

Within minutes, she found herself studying one line of text after another. She waved her hand as she scanned through the different possibilities.

The party was almost over, but one woman approached him. By this point, he didn't know what to feel. Utterly exhausted by the bite of each crop, whip, paddle, and palm, Aric could barely lift his head.

It had been several minutes several minutes, at least, that had elapsed since the last woman decided to pinch his cheeks, smack his posterior, or fondle him.

His shaft remained stiff despite the exhaustion running through his body.

"Do you know who I am?"

At this point, Aric could barely remember whether or not he had been muzzled; he didn't know if he could speak, so he gave a timid shake of his head. No, he didn't know who she was.

"My name is Carrie Sarasdaughter, and I'm the Navigation Officer. Guess what?"

"What?" Aric asked in a small voice. It turned out he could speak once again.

"I'm going to have so much fun working on you. I can see that Lianasdottir has done a great job here, but I'm going to have fun breaking you completely. I can see it in your eyes, Aric. You still want to believe you're going to get out of this, don't you?"

Aric wished he had the strength to answer, only he just looked up at her. The contours of her golden yellow hair fell around her face, and she smirked. She was probably the youngest of the senior officers, yet that just meant she had something to prove.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Aric. I might accidentally hurt you. But as long as I win, that’s all that matters.” She winked down at him, and a different kind of fear burned through his body for the first time.

The other women made sure he felt the sting of humiliation or even the pain of his collar, only they had all been very careful not to actually damage him. He was a prize, a pet, something to be owned and cherished.

That wasn’t how this woman felt, however.

She patted him on the head, made a gesture, and suddenly he could no longer speak.

“I’ll be seeing you later,” she promised. Then she winked and strolled away.

It took her hours, but she found something, something she might be able to use. Corporal Dare had read and reread the text, tracing over the possibilities in her mind as she tried to shape the argument.

Realizing she couldn’t do this in the middle of the night or exhausted, she headed back to her quarters. She climbed into her comfortable bed, told the computer to adjust the temperature, and soon fell asleep as she contemplated how easily she could adapt to this new century.

The moment she woke up, however, memories of those words flashed right behind her eyes.

Without even leaving her bed, she grabbed her Data Cube, set it down in front of her, crossed her legs, and gestured for the device to activate. Sure enough, the projected pages reappeared on the air, just as they had last night.

“Aric,” she whispered.

She hadn’t actually said his name since the admiralty had decided, “For technical and logistical reasons, Corporal Dare will remain on the Ranger 3 while her colleagues explore the surface.”

For technical and logistical reasons, she thought with an angry shake of her head. They didn’t offer her anything else. Of course, she wasn’t deaf, so she heard the whispers and snickers, especially from her crewmates.

Every other crew member would have stepped onto an alien world. They would have had their pictures taken and beamed back to earth. And what would she be? The girl hanging back on the Ranger 3? Maybe they

would want her to cook and clean like some housewife from a bygone decade.

She held onto her anger, gripping it tight and coaxing it as she got dressed. She put on one of the jumpsuits, marched to a lift, and called out in a clear voice, “Take me to the command deck.”

Half-expecting the computer to tell her that wouldn’t be possible for one reason or another, Cara started to think of different options. But now, the lift began to hum and she felt the momentary shift in gravity as she was sped toward the command center.

Moments later, the doors slid open, and a young woman approached her.

“Excuse me, Corporal, but I don’t believe you are authorized to be here.” Like everyone else connected to the Ranger 3 and the officers’ competition, Cara enjoyed a modicum of fame.

Some of her anger dissipated, especially because she knew these women had it wrong about her. On the contrary, they had saved her from ending up on an alien world with a bunch of men who didn’t respect her and never would.

“I need to speak with the captain,” Cara said. As the words jumped from her mouth, she realized just how crazy this might sound. “Please. It’s important.”

Dianne looked out at the officers before returning her attention to the data projection.

The numbers were nothing less than astonishing.

Comments, views, likes, and shares had blown away every other record set. Across Terra and all of humanity, women watched Dianne’s officers compete for the chance to own this boy.

Back on Terra, the senior brass were trying to work out ways to duplicate the success of this competition, although Dianne didn’t think that would be possible. There was something special and unique about Aric: he was the first one off of the Ranger 3. Not only that, he came from a different timeframe, a world and a universe that no longer existed, one where men were more than just people; they were the default vision of humanity.

Yes, they could wake up the other men, and maybe they could play these games again, but it wouldn’t be the same.

Besides, there was something special about Aric in particular.

Dianne didn't have any special expertise in psychology, sociology, or marketing, but she suspected that he was the accidentally perfect blend. A man, yes. A commander. But not only that, he wasn't some mindless sexist. He wasn't a chauvinist who hated women or thought they automatically deserved to be subordinate.

And yet, he was also willing and capable of taking advantage of a system that privileged him based on nothing more than his sex.

As she and the other officers contemplated the numbers playing across their projections, Dianne finally turned back to her crew. "Jessica, you did an amazing job. But now, Carrie, it's going to be your turn."

"Yes, ma'am," said the Navigation Officer. She held her hands together as the excitement seemed to radiate off of her.

Dianne had a question for her, only then the door to the conference chamber opened, and a young, nervous-looking woman scurried in.

"What is it, Ashley?" Dianne asked.

The young woman leaned down and whispered, "Captain, Corporal Dare is asking to speak with you. She says it's urgent."

"Fascinating," Dianne said. "Send her in."

The young woman nodded and rushed out of the room.

Standing just outside of the lift, Cara kept her feet still as she waited to hear what would happen.

Finally, the young officer returned. "Captain Mariesdaughter is meeting with the senior officers," she began.

I can wait, Cara was ready to say.

"But you can go in."

"What?" Cara asked. The single syllable fell out and hit the air.

"You can go in," said the woman. "Please, come with me."

Cara almost planted her feet since she was tempted to say something like, "No. That's okay. I think I made a mistake." Uncertainty gripped her, especially because she had no idea what she was about to face. What would those women say? What they think of her? To them, she might as well have been a Neanderthal, some relic from another age.

Only then, the young officer looked right back at Cara and said, "I think it will be okay. Everyone on board has a lot of respect for you, Corporal Dare."

"I shouldn't interrupt them," Cara said.

“You can. I think it will be okay. The Captain knows what she’s doing. Besides, you’re Cara Dare! Do you know how famous you are? Do you know how many women admire you for what you managed to accomplish?”

Cara looked at the young woman without really being able to believe those words.

What had she done? She joined a ship filled with men and promptly got demoted when she let her feelings get out of hand.

She never should have trusted Aric. At the same time, she contemplated why he did it. He had been so desperate. He was like some little boy who wanted something special, so he grasped at it without thinking.

As hard as she tried to hate him, she couldn’t.

“Okay,” Cara finally said. She straightened her back and marched forward, stepping ahead of the young woman.

Cara headed for the doorway where this girl first met with the captain. Then she waited until the young officer hit a button, and the door opened.

This time, Cara refused to show any weakness or hesitation. She walked in, glanced around, and settled her gaze on the Captain. “Thank you for seeing me, Ma’am.”

“Have a seat,” Dianne said.

Cara blinked, surprised. At the same time, she couldn’t shake the unsteady feeling of being in a room filled by women. It was so bizarre to think that this entire starship was led by these officers.

Every time Cara confronted authority, back during her era, she inevitably found herself as the only woman in the room. Okay, so there may have been a couple of exceptions, moments where a female scientist appeared, but women were never the loudest voices or controlling forces in the room.

Here and now, a boy’s fate would be determined by a group of women. In fact, these officers made decisions that could affect every member of the crew each day on their voyage.

“What can we do for you?” Dianne asked.

Cara refused to demonstrate the same hesitation even as all eyes turned to her. She kept her back straight, she rested one arm on the table, and she leaned forward just a tiny bit, “I apologize for interrupting.

However, I do feel this is important. Right now, you are playing a game for the right to take ownership of Aric. Is that correct?"

"That's right," Jessica said.

The Captain just watched and listened.

"I have been going through some of your legal statutes. I don't believe this game is legal, especially because there's another person who can lay claim to Aric."

The women glanced back and forth at one another.

It was Beatrice who asked, "Who?"

"Me," Cara replied with crisply definitive confidence. Her façade may have remained placid and certain, yet her heart beat wildly, and it took a lot of work to keep her breathing even. After letting that single answer hang on the air for several more seconds, Cara continued. "Our ship wasn't a derelict. It wasn't damaged or broken. It may have been old, and it may not have been impressive, but it was still our ship. And even if males are no longer allowed property rights, that means the ship should be mine."

Carrie, the Navigation Officer, made a fist like she wished she could punish some nearby boy and shot back, "You would have stayed in stasis if it wasn't for us."

"That's true," Cara replied calmly. "And I'm thankful for your help. The ship is amazing, and I'm so glad I've been able to see it. But that doesn't change the fact that those boys no longer have property rights, the government which once owned our ship is currently defunct, and that leaves me."

Her heart kept pounding. She tried to read the Captain's expression, but Cara still couldn't discern what this woman was thinking.

"There is a certain logic to it," Beatrice said.

"But we have already started the competition. Besides, Captain, how with the rest of Terra feel if the game just stopped right now?"

"Technically," Dianne said as she aimed her eyes right at Cara, "You aren't a Terran citizen."

"I am," Cara replied. "I went through the records. Terran citizenship was granted to every woman over the age of eighteen after the Rebuilding and unification of Earth."

Jessica smirked, "Technically, you are much older than eighteen."

"That still doesn't solve the problem of the competition," Carrie said. "Everyone here wants to see that boy enslaved. Besides, do we even

believe Cara could handle a service boy?”

The hotheaded Navigation Officer glanced around and apparently realized she had pushed too far too fast. The others all watched her with disappointment and disapproval. That’s why she exhaled, “Look, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be cruel, nor do I wish to insult you, Corporal Dare. I’m just saying that you come from another time frame, one where boys routinely ran roughshod over women.”

There. That was it.

None of them had said it, not until Carrie, yet the thought must have occurred to all of them. Could she be trusted with a service boy? Did she have the maturity and intellectual aggression necessary to put a boy in his place and even punish him?

“My Navigation Officer makes a good point,” Dianne said. The captain looked at her like a judge in a courtroom. “You must understand, every male is a potential threat.”

Cara didn’t say anything. Still, her brows must’ve twitched just a tiny bit as she absorbed this information. The boys as a threat? They were all collared and owned! They were all trained from birth to recognize their own inferiority.

Little sisters routinely bossed around their older brothers. Girlfriends teased their boyfriends as they taught those males how to best please them. When a boy stepped into an office, he instinctively understood he would do whatever the females told him. It didn’t matter how much experience he had or even what he might have been able to figure out. When a woman spoke, boys listened.

Cara wouldn’t get this advantage, and Aric didn’t have that sort of training or discipline.

A couple of days could certainly begin his transformation into an appropriately servile male, but he could regress quite easily, everyone knew. He could hold onto his old notions of independence and masculinity. Perhaps, even behind closed doors, he might start to assert himself.

Then his attitude might start to affect the other boys. There was a reason the rest of Aric’s crew remained in stasis, safely frozen as the women in charge back on Terra decided what to do with them.

“I can handle him,” Cara said.

“We can’t take the risk, Captain,” Carrie insisted. Whether she really believed this or simply didn’t want to lose her opportunity to discipline Aric

in front of such an enormous audience, Cara couldn't tell.

"You heard what he did to me. You really think I'm not angry with him?"

Dianne raised a hand, "It's not a matter of anger. It's a matter of certainty and sincerity. I believe you want to punish him, but I have also seen many of the records. Again and again, the novels, blogs, and vids from your era make it quite clear: males were given many chances. It didn't matter how badly they messed up. The default, implied assertion was that male perspectives mattered most of all."

"That wasn't true for all of us," Cara said.

"It didn't need to be. And it didn't need to be explicit either. Many times, I'm sure, women thought they were being strong and assertive, only to secretly surrender to the males in their lives."

Just like that, Cara Dare realized she was about to lose the argument. The captain had listened to her, and perhaps Corporal Dare even had a good legal claim to her ship and this boy.

But it wouldn't matter because the Captain didn't or couldn't trust her. And out here, in the vast emptiness between stars, Captain Mariesdaughter was the one woman who would make this decision.

"Then I have a proposal," Cara said.

"Yes?" the Captain watched the Corporal with an unreadable stare.

Every other woman in the conference chamber leaned forward as they waited to see what would happen to the most popular boy in the Terran Collective.

"I understand that you all don't trust me. How can you? You barely know me. What you know is that I come from a time where men asserted themselves far too aggressively. Well? I'm mad. I'm angry. I'm incensed. No, I'm enraged. I want to put these boys in their place. More than any of you, I want to make sure this boy gets exactly what he deserves."

"It can't only be a function of revenge," Portia said.

"It won't be," Cara promised. "Let's call it a mix of anger and passion."

The captain worked hard to keep her expression neutral, yet there was a little twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Cara saw her opportunity, so she pushed forward, "I propose a challenge. It's an old legal statute, but I found it in your codes. If two women claimed the man and a clear line of ownership couldn't be

established, then the women could challenge one another to any contest of their choice with a neutral observer to determine the winner.”

“Who would be the observer?” Carrie asked. Some of the edge dissipated from her voice now. Perhaps the idea of a competition intrigued her.

“Captain Mariesdaughter,” Cara replied.

“And the exact activity?” inquired the Captain.

“I will leave that up to my challenger,” Cara said. She understood what kind of risk this could be, but she glanced over at the Navigation Officer. According to the feeds, she was the next woman in line to start training Aric, which meant she would probably be Cara’s competitor.

“I see...” Captain Mariesdaughter seemed to consider this for several long seconds, although she was also giving the rest of her crew an opportunity to object or offer any additional advice.

After several more moments of silence, the Captain said, “A competition to settle the question of property rights for this male will create a cleaner, easier chain of ownership. As such, I agree to your offer, Cara Dare.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“What about the challenge and the challenger?” Carrie asked.

The Captain looked back to her navigation officer and said, “Don’t worry, Officer Sarasdaughter. You’re about to get your chance.”

Her head was spinning with different possibilities and answers. As always, when Cara didn’t know something, she rushed back to the Grid, only now that meant finding a quiet spot in her quarters, pulling out her Data Cube, and reviewing the projected text, images, and vids.

The challenge? A race.

Okay, that would be straightforward enough.

Only this wouldn’t be as simple as it sounded.

The Captain called it a “boy cart race”. Obviously, Corporal Dare didn’t know precisely what that meant, but she had held off on asking any questions. She knew she would get enough time to research the possibilities, so now she swiped her fingers through the air as she entered those haptic commands.

A column of text began to stream down the air on one side of the projection. Cara hardly noticed because she couldn’t pull her eyes away

from the images playing along the other side of the projection: boys with their hands tied behind their backs by elaborate, leather braces.

That was just the beginning.

Their faces were partially covered by horse blinders, and their mouths were muzzled by bits with bridles covering their cheeks.

These boys had been turned into human ponies, and each one had been hooked up to a cart.

Mesmerized, Cara stared on as this prerecorded race began. The women climbed up onto the carts, they pulled on reins, held crops or whips, and forced the boys forward.

This was going to be the game. This was going to be the challenge.

Cara threw herself back against the bed and said just two words, “He’s screwed.”

The Captain was generous; she wanted this to be a fair match even if pretty much everyone on board assumed the outcome was predetermined. Carrie Sarasdaughter was an expert boy cart driver. In fact, she had won numerous awards and competitions before entering the Academy.

Since then, she continued to train down on the Holo Platform.

Cara, on the other hand, had some horse-riding experience, but she had never played with these carts before. As such, the Captain allowed Cara about a week to train.

During that time, Aric would be sedated. This way, he wouldn’t have to worry about what his future might be.

The doctor just walked into the infirmary’s exam room where they kept him, she touched a device to his neck, and his eyelids grew heavy.

That meant Cara needed to figure out some kind of strategy. She practiced, obviously. Not only that, she watched recorded vids and holo-shots of Carrie as she rode.

Cara understood she wouldn’t be able to win this through sheer expertise. Instead, she needed something else, another strategy.

As always, she did her research, considered the possibilities, and came up with one viable solution.

“I want to see him,” Cara said. “Privately.”

“What’s going on?” Miranda asked as she looked up from her Data Cube. She had been studying new, synthetic proteins when the door to the

infirmary opened.

Corporal Dare said, "I need to talk to the boy."

"Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," Cara said. "I just have an idea, and I want to make sure it will work."

"I see..." Miranda seemed to consider this for several seconds. Theoretically, she wasn't supposed to wake the prize up until the start of the competition. Apparently, Captain Mariesdaughter had decided that getting the cameras on his reactions would add to the excitement for the women back on Terra.

The doctor got up and escorted her visitor to the exam room.

Sure enough, Aric was there, on his back, asleep. With the drugs running through his system, he could drift and dream as much as he liked. He was nice and safe and helpless, imprisoned by the doctors' expertise.

But now, Doctor Gaia touched the injector to his neck, and his eyes instantly started to flutter open.

Aric looked up and saw her. For just a moment, he forgot about everything that had transpired. He couldn't remember the stasis tubes, their ship, or getting discovered in the far future. Instead, he saw her face, and he wanted to reach up, brush his fingers along her neck, and tug her down so he could kiss her.

Only then the training snapped back through his psyche: the gnosis, the humiliation, the public displays and the collar around his neck.

His confidence evaporated, and he looked down and away from Corporal Dare because she was a woman, and she could do whatever she liked with him...

"Thank you for all of your help," Cara said.

The doctor seemed to consider this for several more seconds before she said, "I will be at my desk if you need anything."

"Thank you."

"What, what's happening? What's going on?" Aric said. Hoping to maybe lighten the situation, he added, "I hope I didn't fall asleep for another ten thousand years or something."

"We don't have much time," she said, "And I have to make a decision."

Before being pulled out of stasis, Aric probably would have asked what she meant. But now, he waited like an obedient boy to hear what this

woman had to say.

“Two boys are going to pull a pair of carts. I’m going to be in one of them, and Officer Sarasdaughter will be in the other,” she explained. “This woman knows what she’s doing, Aric. She understands exactly how to push a boy hard and make him run fast. If she wins, she might get to keep you. At the very least, you will go off to one of the other senior officers.”

This was it, the most important moment. She paused, looked down into his face, and made sure she had every iota of his attention and focus.

“If I win, I get to keep you.”

Cara studied him hard as she considered what to do.

Like an obedient boy, Aric waited for this woman to say something, to ask a question or to make it clear she expected a response. Instead, she turned around and walked away. Moments later, the doctor came back and sedated this boy once again.

As the darkness consumed him, Aric wondered exactly what these women would do with him. If Cara got him, how would she punish him for his mistakes? He had made so many...

If the electronic traffic hadn’t been so predictable, notes all across the Terran Collective would have collapsed under the strain. Luckily, the senior managers knew what they were doing, so they sent technicians out to reinforce each link by increasing capacity. They doubled what the system could take, but they still came within one percentage point of maximum capacity.

Everyone, it seemed, throughout the entire Terran collective wanted to see the race take place on this one Holo Platform. The *Cygnus* already had a lot of attention, but now it seemed the rest of humanity decided to pause to wait and watch this one vessel as it traveled through the wild space between stars to see how one boy’s fate would be determined.

Someone woke Aric, only he didn’t know her name. Instead, she just attached a leash, motioned for him to be silent, and tugged. He followed obediently, making his way back down to the Holo Platform.

When he crossed the threshold, he expected to see the same home from before, something from his era. Instead, they stepped through the doorway, and he saw dozens of women lined up along with several other naked boys. Like him, they wore collars and chastity locks.

The woman holding onto his leash pulled Aric up to the line and pushed him into position.

The other boys seemed utterly content, like they understood precisely what would happen and what would be expected of them.

Aric still had no idea.

In fact, he kept blinking as he tried to get his eyes to adjust to the bright sunshine and the warm light. All around them, this seemed utterly natural, especially when he inhaled the cool, morning air and saw the mist beginning to burn away as the sun stretched into the sky.

He felt the cool ground beneath his bare feet, and that's when the captain stepped forward.

"Ladies, we are here for a competition. Specifically, we will determine the property rights for one boy in particular." The Captain pointed to Aric.

Not only that, many of the women turned their Data Cubes in his direction. He knew he was being recorded. All he could do was stare and look around, suddenly nervous.

Instinctively, he understood how innumerable eyes were looking at him. Unlike Corporal Dare, Aric didn't have a Data Cube, so he couldn't research the state of humanity. He didn't know about the colonies or the other exploratory ships. He didn't understand how many millions, billions, or even more might have been watching him at that exact instant.

"The rules are simple. Officer Sarasdaughter and Corporal Dare will race. There is only one lap, and the woman who crosses the finish line first with her cart will be the winner. Let's see the prize once again."

The woman who brought Aric here grabbed onto his leash and drew him into the middle space, right in front of the carts.

"Ladies, choose your boys."

Carrie stepped forward without waiting for permission. She walked in front of the assembled males and considered each one. At this point, Aric still didn't really understand what was happening. The notion would have seemed so strange, so incredibly alien.

For these women, it was just one more sport among so many. If anything, this one might've seemed generous since it allowed the boys to participate!

"You," Carrie said as she reached out and grabbed the boy. She slipped her hand around the back of his neck, pinched down, and practically

dragged him toward her cart.

“Your turn,” said Captain Mariesdaughter.

Determined to put on a good show, Cara walked back and forth as she considered the different males in front of her. They all stood with their backs straight and shoulders down. They stared straight ahead. Occasionally, she could feel their eyes on her, especially because they were probably wondering what a woman from her era would make of them.

Then Cara turned around without grabbing any of them.

She marched over to Aric, took him by the leash, and called out, “This one.”

Everyone turned back to the Captain.

Dianne smiled, “It’s not against the rules. We picked to these boys because of their experience. If she wants Aric, she can have him.”

All across the feed, millions of women must’ve been wondering why Cara wanted this one.

Corporal Dare didn’t bother to explain her choice. Instead, she nodded toward the officers who had volunteered to help with the race.

“Get him ready,” she said.

Aric didn’t understand what was about to happen, but the girls rushed forward. They had bags of equipment. First, they pulled the boots out. They grabbed his legs and slid them in. They buckled them on. Next, they pulled his arms behind his back, slipped his hands into the sleeves, and suddenly thick, leather bands locked his fingers into place. Not only that, his arms were strapped together. From there, a harness was slipped around his waist and over his shoulders. They cinched it tight.

Cara watched all of this impassively.

For a moment, Aric contemplated the possibility of trying to jerk away from the grip of these women. And yet, he already knew it would be futile.

Still, he didn’t understand what she had in mind.

Then the other racer came up to him. She smirked and watched with her hands on her hips.

Aric felt like he was being studied by a predator. He may have well have been a mouse in front of a hungry kitten.

Finally, the woman leaned in, “She wants one chance to punish you before I get my hands on you, Aric. But you know, if you go slow, I might be kinder to you. Maybe.” Then she pulled away and laughed.

Aric had no idea whether or not Cara heard any of that. Probably not. Instead, she seemed interested in talking to the doctor.

Was she nervous? Was she scared? Did she have a plan?

Aric didn't know, but that woman's promise echoed in his ears. Up until now, Aric hadn't been allowed to make any choices. Perhaps this was a decision he could own.

Moments later, it didn't even matter what he wanted to say because another woman came up to him. She pulled the bridle over his face and shoved a bit into his mouth. Just like that, they took away his ability to speak, only it had nothing to do with the advanced technology of the collar around his neck. Instead, they used a leather strap, and it could have easily come from another millennium.

"Ladies, hook up the boys," Captain Mariesdaughter called out.

They pushed the males into position, attached their harnesses, and pinched their asses for good luck.

"Ladies, mount your carts."

Both Corporal Dare and Officer Sarasdaughter climbed onto the carts.

Cara may have practiced, but the vehicle still felt strange underneath her feet. She looked at the brake, the reins, and she grabbed her crop. This could work perfectly, she thought. Then again, she knew the boy in front of her.

"Go to the starting line," Captain Mariesdaughter commanded, so the two women rolled forward.

With a snap of her whip, Carrie forced her boy to practically sprint ahead before she jerked on the brake lever, drawing the cart to a show we stop. Some mud kicked up before landing in a puddle a few feet away.

More carefully, Cara only used one hand to snap the reins against his shoulders.

Aric felt the quick sting, and he pulled on the cart. It was heavier than he expected. The ground was soft, which made it more difficult, but he got her up to the starting line.

"Are there any last-second questions?" Dianne asked.

"No, ma'am."

"No, ma'am."

Dianne held her hand up in the air. "Ready," she called out.

Around her, the trees wrestled with the breeze.

“Set!”

Both Carrie and Cara braced themselves as they got ready for that first sprint straight ahead. Throughout the race, sensors would track their movements from every conceivable angle. At the same time, both women understood how important this first burst of speed might be.

“Go!”

Carrie and her boy shot ahead first. She snapped her whip down, drawing a red welt along the male’s shoulder. The wheels splashed down through the mud, so Cara aimed her boy along those same grooves to make it just a little easier for him.

As the trees blurred around them, both Sarasdaughter and Dare stayed close. Carrie and her boy may have pulled ahead, but this was just the start of the race.

Cara glanced down at her Data Cube. She saw the 2D map projection along with her glowing green dot and Carrie’s red sigil.

Up ahead, the path narrowed, so Cara had no choice. She pulled on the brake, and Aric felt the tension in the harness behind him. He slowed down even as she called, “Woah, there, boy!”

She was talking to him like he was nothing but an animal, perhaps a well-trained horse or pony...

Aric obeyed nonetheless. He slowed it down, making sure the other woman pulled ahead. Again, Aric wanted to kick his boots down into the mud and race ahead, but his driver wouldn’t let him. Cara knew exactly what she expected from her boy, and he had to provide it.

The path widened, but she kept him behind them for the next leg of the race.

Huge boulders seemed to fly by as he ran as fast as he could. Then the path turned to an incline, and he had to struggle twice as hard to maintain that same speed.

His heart was pounding now, and his skin grew hot.

“Faster,” Cara called out.

He didn’t know whether or not he could take it. He didn’t know whether or not he could obey.

At the same time, he recalled the physical conditioning in the Ranger Initiative when they would run together. Most of the time, one of the trainers would ride along in a golf cart behind them as the potential explorers jogged around the base.

This was faster and harder.

Not only that, Aric understood exactly would happen if he lost.

He could stop.

He could refuse to move.

Even if Corporal Dare compelled him to obey, it wouldn't have mattered. He could give the other woman just a little bit of a head start, enough to ensure her victory...

Aric kept running.

"Faster!" Cara called out.

As women and men all across the galaxy watched, she slapped her crop down against his shoulder. The pain flashed through him, and she snapped the reins a moment later.

Her pony boy raced ahead as he pulled on the cart.

They came to the crest of the hill, and Cara was right next to the other driver now.

"You're not going to get him!" Carrie called out, laughing like this was nothing but a game.

In that next moment, she snapped the reins down once, twice, three times, and her boy started running as fast as he could down the hill.

Eyes wide, Cara watched. She already knew she wouldn't be able to keep her cart upright if she went that fast downhill.

Reluctantly, she pulled on the brake, and the other woman pulled ahead, getting more and more distance between them.

"Were coming to a straightaway, Aric," Cara called out. "You need to run hard. You have to run fast. Show me what you can do, boy!"

Maybe he tried to listen for some hint of compassion or some hidden message. Maybe he wanted to believe that she would win him and free him to make a point about men's rights.

It was such a nice little fantasy, a daydream as he panted and ran harder.

They came down to the straightaway. By this point, the other driver and her boy seemed impossibly far away. Then again, the exhaustion gripped him tight, making it harder for him to think.

Cara raised her crop up high, looked down at him, and struck hard and fast.

Her boy was running, pushing himself as hard as he could. She lifted the reins and brought them down harder. Again and again, she made

sure this boy had to pour out his best.

In that moment, he closed his eyes. She was guiding him and driving him anyway. It didn't matter what he saw because he wasn't making the decisions anyway.

And behind his eyelids, he saw something. He saw *someone*.

Aric wanted to think of himself as a brave and daring explorer, but that wasn't true. He was just a boy who proved his inferiority when he got scared in front of an admiral and betrayed the girl who made him feel so incredible. Somewhere deep down, he knew he was on a starship, running as hard as he could. But between every breath and each frantic pulse of his heart, he lost himself.

Instead, he was down on his knees. In this daydream, he was ready to open his eyes and look up. He was ready to hear her voice and await her commands.

This was the woman. He wanted her to own him. He wanted to bow his head down, kiss her feet, slide his tongue along her flesh, and please her with everything he had. He would cook. He would clean. He would be the ideal slave, an obedient service boy ready to put her needs and desires first because she was in charge.

She owned him.

She deserved to own him.

His owner—Cara Dare.

Corporal Dare felt it, that burst of speed. "You can do it! Run hard! Run fast, boy!" It was her turn to laugh now as she pulled alongside Carrie and her cart. The Navigation Officer turned to her right, saw Cara, and her eyes widened with surprise.

In that next moment, both boys ran as hard as they could, but there was one difference. Carrie's boy ran from a sense of duty. He was a male, and this woman expected him to do his best, so he complied.

Aric owed Cara more than just his obedience. So much more.

He poured the last of his strength into those final strides. Her cart rolled forward, smashing down against the ground as they came closer and closer to the finish line.

He could hear the snap of the reins against the other boy's back. Aric understood what was about to happen, but he didn't know who was in

the lead. The blinders blocked out the other cart; he couldn't tell who was winning even as the finish line came closer and closer!

Then, seemingly from far away, he heard the captain call out, "We have a winner!"

He tried to slump forward, but his harness wouldn't let him. Instead, he simply shut his eyes, panted, and waited for the women to announce his fate.

"Corporal There is the winner!" The Captain grabbed her wrist and pulled her arm up into the air. In the meantime, young officers rushed forward and freed Aric from his gear. Then they shoved him down right in front of her.

Data Cubes recorded all of it. They saw this boy, exhausted and drained, pant and gasp even as he tried to catch his breath while Corporal Dare beamed with excitement.

She had done it. Somehow, she had picked the right boy, the boy who was determined to become her slave.

Carrie strode forward as Corporal Dare seemed to brace herself for a fight.

Online, women speculated about whether or not Officer Saradaughter might throw a punch or accuse the other woman of cheating. Perhaps she would call Cara out on a technicality or demand some sort of rematch.

Instead, the Navigation Officer held out one hand and said, "Good race."

Cara grabbed her hand back and pulled her close. The two women hugged as she gave the ceremonial response, "Great race."

A cheer rolled from the women who had just watched the enslavement of the boy formerly known as Commander Aric Donovan.

They left him in his gear for the next couple of hours. While the women drank and enjoyed some food, he was left out as a display or decoration.

At the start of the party, Cara marched over to Doctor Gaya, and she leaned forward, whispering something to the woman.

Aric could have sworn that his former crewmate said his name. It made sense; she now officially owned him. At that thought, a little quiver

ran through his body. He didn't know how to feel about it, and yet Carrie sauntered over with a wine glass in hand. She brushed her fingers along his chest and scratched at his skin, "You're a lucky boy. I would have broken you in half!" Then she started to laugh before heading off to hang out with her friends.

Obviously, Aric didn't say anything.

The doctor left a few minutes later.

While the women continued to drink and talk, Cara had something she wanted to say to her boy. Unfortunately, she wouldn't get the opportunity, not when people kept coming up to her. One woman after another wanted to congratulate her.

She had demonstrated an incredible amount of control.

Somehow, she had motivated this young man to fight as hard as he could, to run with everything he had.

Yes, the driver mattered a great deal when it came to boy cart races, but the males themselves were still the ones pulling. If they couldn't be properly motivated, then the best driver in the world would be helpless out there on the racetrack.

For most of the congratulations, Cara stood nearby her new acquisition. He could overhear each of those quick conversations.

"Congratulations, Corporal Dare. You showed us all what a woman can do!"

"It was nothing," she answered modestly.

"This boy looks amazing in his bit and bridle. Are you going to let him out?"

"At some point," Cara said.

"You should keep him like this!"

"But then I wouldn't be able to get to use those hands or that mouth," Cara replied.

A few minutes later, another woman said, "I was really worried you wouldn't be able to handle him. You proved me wrong. A great job!"

"Thank you."

Someone else said, "Amazing race. You really showed us what you can get a boy to do!"

"What can I say?" Cara asked. "I wanted to win."

"But you beat Carrie Sarasdaughter! That woman is one of the best riders on the ship!"

Cara didn't know what to say to that, so she simply smiled and nodded respectfully.

As the party stretched on Aric remained as a centerpiece for the women to enjoy, especially during those momentary lulls in the conversation.

Through it all, he snuck little glances over at Cara Dare—his owner. He didn't understand how their legal codes worked or what his new status might technically be called, but it was obvious that he would be her pleasure slave. He was to be owned, a piece of property, chattel for this girl to use as she saw fit.

It could have been the hypnosis, punishments, chastity training, or simply existing in this century. No matter the cause, he felt the urge to surrender to her.

He had run hard like an animal, and now he wondered what would happen to him.

"I think the time is right," Cara finally announced.

"It would be my honor, but you haven't told me what to do."

Cara leaned over and whispered to the doctor. Again, he strained to hear, but Aric couldn't pick out a single syllable. There were just the hushed, murmured whispers back and forth.

Finally, the doctor opened her case, pulled out a cylinder, and walked over to Aric. He looked at her, and he wanted to say something, only the pony bit in his mouth made it impossible for this boy to speak.

The doctor flashed a grin.

"Don't worry," she said. "This isn't going to hurt."

She took him by the bridle, dragged him over to a tree, and pushed his head forward until he was braced up against the thick trunk.

Then she went for a spot between his shoulder blades. She touched something, and he could feel this strange warmth against his flesh. What was she doing to him? What did she have in mind?

The boy tried to figure it out, only he didn't understand. Then something occurred to him. The soft movements of the cylindrical tip against his skin felt like a painters brush or maybe a pen...a tattoo artist's gun...

Right then, he wanted to jerk up, but Cara must have recognized the shift in his body language. "It's okay, boy," she said with a festive grin. The doctor still had her powerful hand braced against the back of his neck,

ensuring he couldn't break away, especially with the boots on his feet and his arms restrained behind his back.

Cara continued, "You belong to me now, so you're getting marked. I want everyone to know, especially when you're naked. Even if you run off, even if you try to fight, you will always be marked as mine."

He couldn't turn his head, but he shifted his head down a little bit further and managed to glance back above the blinders.

"You're being marked with your Male ID Number," she said. "And a declaration of ownership."

He couldn't speak.

"This way, no one will ever mistake you for a Wild Male."

"Are you sure you want that last part on there?" Doctor Gaia asked after she finished the first lines.

"Absolutely certain," she said.

"You will hurt his resale value."

Cara seemed to consider him for several long seconds. "That's fine with me."

The pen moved down his body. She started writing something again, and Aric tried desperately to keep track of the different movements and assemble the letters into words. As hard as he tried, he couldn't make sense of those movements.

"Do you want to know?"

He looked back at her again. Silenced by the bit, he could only plead with his eyes.

"Your ID number," she said again. "Your status as a registered slave. And the name of your owner: Corporal Cara Dare."

The party had to come to an end eventually. By this point, she had her boy on a leash, and she took him right back to her quarters. When they arrived, Aric didn't know what to expect. She freed him from the arm binders, the boots, the harness, the bit and the bridle. She took the pieces off slowly as she seemed to revel in granting him the paradox of freedom, only so that he might begin his life as her slave.

With a gesture, she made sure the collar remained active; he still couldn't speak.

Instead, this would be his opportunity to listen.

“Aric, I want you to understand that I’m not going to change my mind about this. You belong to me. You don’t get to escape. You don’t get to run off, and you have already enjoyed your last taste of freedom.”

He had the collar around his neck and the chastity cage between his legs. Still, he wondered if he should be able to look up and meet her gaze as an equal.

Before they went into the stasis tubes, he had been her superior officer. And now he had become her plaything.

With a wicked grin on her face, she shoved him down onto her bed. She pounced, grabbing him and pinning him. She straddled him and started to kiss him. Her lips pressed down against his mouth, and he groaned through the pleasure and need.

“If I let you talk right now, would you start begging? Would you?”

When she smiled down at her boy, the corners of her eyes crinkled with mischievous delight.

She made another gesture, and suddenly he could try to speak again.

“Answer me,” she commanded.

“I, I can beg...” Aric was surprised by the speed and stuttering uncertainty of his answer.

“Then go on,” she said. As she spoke, she pressed her fingertips down against his shoulders, his biceps, and then his chest. He almost felt like an animal getting inspected before it was put up on the auction block.

Yet Aric was already owned.

“Please, please just do whatever you want with me,” he said, nearly whimpering.

“Should I let you out of this?”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle, and she grinned down at him. The game was over; he had lost. At best, he might be able to convince her to let him out of the cage. Of course, then she would toy with him. His body would be there to satisfy her. She would own his erection, and she would decide what would happen next.

“Please. Please, let me out!”

“How should you address me?”

“Goddess?” Aric asked as he thought of Jessica.

“No,” she said. “I want something else.”

He gulped, thought about it, and tried to come up with the right answer.

The nervous energy playing across his face made her grin, especially when he said, "Mistress?"

She stroked him again, teasing his body. She made sure he stayed excited. Then she leaned in, licked his neck, and kissed him on the mouth. "Not bad. Say it again."

She didn't just want him to utter this one word, he realized. She expected more than that. She expected begging and pleading. "Please, Mistress. Please, let me out of the chastity cage! Please. I can't take it!"

"What do you want? What should you want?"

The correct answer popped into his head. "To please you," he said. Then he gulped and tried again. "Please, Mistress. Please, allow me to please you! Please, what can I do to make you feel good? How can I serve you?"

She answered with one word, and it caught him by surprise.

"Apologize."

Aric would have dipped his head down low, only he couldn't manage it, not while he was on his back and pinned beneath her. "I'm sorry, Mistress. I'm sorry I took you for granted. I'm sorry I betrayed you."

"Oh, don't worry about it," she said as she brushed her hand along his cheek. "You're paying for it now, aren't you? I think a lifetime of subservience will be good for you."

"A lifetime?"

"What? Did you think I was going to release you? Sorry, Aric, but that's not how things work now. You are mine. That's why I put my name on the small of your back: Property of Cara Dare!"

With that same wicked smile, she put her hands on his wrists, leaned down, and kissed him again.

Then she broke it off, smiled, and said, "Should I let you out of that chastity cage?"

"Yes. Please!"

"Tell me about your new life!"

"I, I will dedicate myself to serving you, Mistress! I will be your boy. I will do whatever you want. I belong to you, Mistress! Please, please just let me out of the cage! Please, use me! Please, let me serve you!"

"Unzip me," she ordered.

She lifted her arm to expose the zipper as she waited for him to obey.

She didn't have to wait long.

He sat up quickly, grabbed the zipper tab, and pulled it down. Halfway, she glanced at him and said, "Now use your teeth."

His eyes blazed with a moment of embarrassment, but he quickly answered, "Yes, Mistress."

Like an animal, he leaned forward and bit down on the zipper. He pulled it down the length of her flank, and then she discarded jumpsuit. With another motion, she pointed to the floor. He fell to his knees and waited for her to decide how she intended to use him.

She pulled down her panties, spread her legs, and beckoned him forward. "You used that mouth to get in trouble. You cost me one of the most important honors I could have imagined, Aric. Now use that tongue to make me feel good."

"Yes, Mistress. Whatever you say, Mistress."

His tone remained servile and obedient. It was clear he would do anything she craved, and he proved it when he leaned forward and began to lap at her crevice. His tongue darted along her sex. He worshiped her body, just as she desired.

Hot pleasure burned through her, flickering pulses of ecstasy spiced by the knowledge of the status he used to enjoy.

Before they went into the stasis tubes, he made more money, had a bigger office, and enjoyed dozens of perks. She was a woman, so she practically had to beg for her position every day.

There would be no more begging.

She would learn, catch up, and understand the new technologies. Not only that, she would make sure she could control her boy. The collar and chastity cage would help, but he would bend to her authority. And every time he made a mistake, she would punish him.

She grinned at the prospect. In fact, fingers practically itched for the chance to spank him.

But at the moment, her boy was being good, so she allowed him to stay there on his knees as he slid his tongue up and down her sex. She enjoyed the hot, flickering movements, the pleasure and satisfaction as it roiled through her.

More. She craved more.

She grabbed him by the back of his head and pumped his face against her crevice. With every moment, she came closer and closer to

relief; the tension was there, ready to explode into an orgasm.

But then she grabbed onto his collar and jerked his head back.

He looked up at her with big, confused eyes. Clearly, she hadn't enjoyed an orgasm, so why had she made him stop?

"Not yet," she said.

She looked down at him again, studying this boy as she drank in those details of his relaxed subjugation.

"Say it again."

"I belong to you. I belong to you, and I'm your slave," he said. He had to hope he could guess correctly.

This time, he did.

Placing her hand on the back of his head, she nudged him back between her legs.

He started licking at once, serving her with determined dedication. The pleasure burned through her body until she chose the rush of satisfied bliss. Clenching down, she relaxed into that hedonistic burst of satisfaction. It shot along her nerves, flaring to her extremities. Her toes curled, her muscles flexed, and she threw her head back as the orgasm exploded within her.

But that was just the beginning, she had already decided.

She wanted, expected, and demanded more.

"On your back," she commanded.

Aric didn't know what she had in mind, yet it hardly mattered. He scrambled into position, lowering himself down. "Hands over your head," she said.

He obeyed again, quick and determined, as though pleasing her was his only priority. Perfect.

This time, she took her time as she straddled him. She moved her hands along his mostly naked body. When her fingers brushed along the collar, he knew she wouldn't release him. Still, that possibility lingered like another one of her tantalizing caresses.

Then she reached down, made a movement, and she pulled the chastity cage away from his shaft. He stiffened instantly, and he almost reached for his groin.

"That was a test," she said. Then she kissed him. "You passed."

With her left hand, she reached down for his cock and balls. She gently teased him, dancing her fingers along his member. Every soft,

grazing touch made him shiver with need.

Aric had never been this desperate before. He would have done anything.

And yet, he couldn't think of any terrible mistake, not since she brought him back to her quarters. He had been a good, obedient, and docile boy.

Her lips pressed down against his, the heat of her body seemed to burn deliciously across his flesh, and she continued to stroke, squeeze, and tease his manhood. She made sure he stayed desperately hard.

"Stay right where you are," she said.

"And close your eyes."

In that instant, he desperately hoped she would have sex with him.

She could mount him, sliding her body right into position before taking a hold of his member and sliding it deep between her legs. He would feel the damp, excited heat of her body.

Instead, she straddled his face, pushed her slit down against his mouth, and watched as the flickering surprise played across his face.

"Lick," she ordered.

Aric could have tried to argue or beg once again, but his owner had given him a command, so he's yielded. Without questioning her, he slid his tongue up against her sex. She pressed down, harder now. His tongue impaled her. He moved his tip along her clitoris; he tasted her and savored the pleasure he gave her.

As a slave, this was his priority. This was his one and only goal.

Biology told him he craved an orgasm, yet he worked hard to push those impulses aside.

Satisfying Cara Dare, his owner, had to be his single priority.

He continued to lick her as she rode his face, working her hips just a little bit forward and back as she reveled in his determination.

"Good boy. That's right. Lick. Show me where you belong. Where do you belong? On your back. On your knees. You are mine," she said, practically growling the words.

Cara reached up and fondled her breasts. She moved her fingertips along her nipples as she soaked into those sensations coursing along her skin.

The passion burned bright. It felt so good!

Panting now, she continued to ride his face until she couldn't take it any longer. Another orgasm proved to be too tempting, so she leaned down, and his tongue continued to move. He could feel the heat against the contours of his tongue as he worshiped her and serviced her.

"Faster!" Cara called out.

He didn't hesitate. His tongue may have gotten tired, but Aric knew better than to try to argue.

"Good boy," she said. "Good, good, good boy!"

The pleasure exploded through her like a bolt of lightning, but she still wasn't done. She pulled her sex away from his mouth, stroked his cheek, and then grabbed his shaft.

"Don't you dare climax without permission," she said, nearly breathless, yet it hardly mattered because the possibility of more kept her energized.

Aric nodded almost eagerly.

She lowered herself down, surrounding him and enveloping him. "This is why you're owned," whispered Cara.

The boy couldn't argue. He couldn't disagree.

She started to ride him, working her body up and down as she embraced those fresh bursts of sensation and pleasure. Storms of arousal pulsed through her body as she grinned ferociously. Throwing her head back, she enjoyed everything he had to give her.

She rode his member, turning his body into little more than an appendage there for her pleasure.

With that wicked grin, she leaned forward and put her hands down onto his wrists.

They had sex like this once before, where he was on top and held her down. Now their positions were reversed, only he wasn't some second-class citizen working hard to assert himself in a career dominated by the opposite sex.

He was a slave.

Her slave!

Her hair bounced against her forehead and cheeks as she rode him, pumping her toy harder and faster. Somehow, he managed to keep his orgasm at bay right until that moment when she called out, "Now! Come for me right now, boy!"

In that moment, Aric didn't even get his name.

She rode him harder and faster until he couldn't take it. He lost control by her command, and the roaring pulses of pleasure began to throb between his legs. He arched his back, lifted himself up, and gave her everything he had.

"I hope you enjoyed that," she said as he started to catch his breath. "Who knows how long it's going to be before you earn another one."

Then she kissed him one more time, lowered herself down, and pulled him close. She rested her head on his shoulder and said, "Pet me."

Like an obedient slave, he began as he started his life as her privately owned service boy.

In the meantime, Captain Mariesdaughter and the rest of her senior officers began to debate what to do with the remaining males still locked in cryo-sleep. These boys couldn't know it yet, but the women on board the *Cygnus* were about to have a lot of fun.

The long journey came to an end.

It may have taken years, but women all around the Terran Collective celebrated the arrival of the *Cygnus* at Tau Ceti. Humans had done it! Under the benevolent guidance of brilliant women, humans were about to set foot on an alien world.

"Don't look so blue," Cara said to her boy.

He wore an EV suit, just like her. They had taken the first pod down to the planet, and now they waited for the last scans to verify the viability of stepping out.

"You might not be the first human, but you will definitely be the first boy."

Aric said nothing. Like a good service boy, he listened because he understood that a woman's opinion was far more valuable than his own. The light above the hatch turned green and glowed against her face plate. Cara Dare, recommissioned officer of the Terran Collective, grinned as she entered her security code.

Next, she opened the hatch, stepped outside, and felt her boot grind against the soft dirt. Then she pulled on the leash, and her enslaved boy got to be the second human on this planet.

As she planted the flag for the Terran Collective, he dropped to his knees and stared up with respect and adoration while women from around the galaxy gazed on and marveled at humanity's latest accomplishment.

A woman on an alien world—a woman and her slave.

The End

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Connect with me:

My name is Anna Ritter; thank you for reading my story. I love books about erotic power play, and I'm eager to connect with my readers and talk about our favorite fantasies. You can email me here at ARitter664@gmail.com. Feel free to ask questions or send me ideas for future stories. I'm also available for commissions.

My favorite games:

Female supremacy is my favorite fantasy. I love stories and novels about entire societies where women have seized control. Men are reduced to the status of chattel, slaves, and toys for their female superiors. In these storylines, men can fight, but they're destined to lose. Sometimes women have taken control based on magic or technology. In other stories, women are just smarter and work to outmaneuver the boys who foolishly thought they were in charge.

Dominant women make up many of the characters in my stories. These tales focus on wives, girlfriends, and other female rivals who take power in specific microcosms. Here, the women are still very much in charge, but their control is limited to a single man. He'll still be enslaved, but the rest of the world remains largely the same.

Chastity training is intense. Boys are obsessed with their libidos, so there's something magically enticing about locking a man up and reducing him to a pathetic, kneeling slave ready to obey every command. Sometimes these males need to be tricked. Maybe they need to be blackmailed or even kidnapped and forced into a chastity cage. One way or another, they'll give in. Holding his key is one of the most delectable pleasures I can imagine.

Cuckolding is another incredible fetish. Since I am interested in how men can lose control, I'm fascinated by the idea of a wife or girlfriend who's decided that her man just isn't good enough. Yes, she still cares about him and wants to keep him around, but he will be a slave, forced to watch his

girl with another man—if he's lucky. This kind of the trail is one of those ultimate expressions of power and control.

Bondage can be psychological, but I tend to prefer the literal restraints. The notion of having a man strapped down, his arms and legs spread, his naked body on display is powerfully erotic. I love knowing his girlfriend or wife can touch him and tease him, forcing him to beg and plead. His dignity drains away as he succumbs to that overwhelming desperation.

Spanking is an amazingly simple punishment. Take a man, put him across your lap, and spank him. Make him cry out. Pain might be one of the oldest incentives, but it works beautifully. When a man whimpers, he understands what he's lost.

Humiliation is one of those tools men seldom acknowledge. They want to believe they're capable of dealing with any slight or insult, only this isn't true. So many men are incredibly fragile. They tell themselves that they're powerful, but they still worry about what the women nearby might think. Getting collared, leashed, and crawling before a woman is an incredibly humiliating experience. It strips him of his identity now that the world can see who he really is.

These are just a few of my favorite fetishes. If a game involves taking or losing control, I'll probably love it. So please, if you have any fantasies or ideas you would like to share, feel free to email me:

ARitter664@gmail.com.

Commissions:

Do you have a fantasy you just have to explore? If you're interested in hiring me for a commission, you can get started by sending me an email.

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