

Shane: Marshal of Tallav

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PO Box 170549

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Chapter One

Adrianna sat, the picture of training excellence: spine straight, hands folded neatly in her lap, knees clasped together, feet flat on the floor. A slight whiff of musk and leather overlaid with a hint of something metallic stung her nose. The Frau's personal fragrance was a scent memory that triggered a desire to scrunch into a tight ball and scream herself hoarse. It was a reaction Adrianna had not succumbed to since the first of many lessons with the Frau. The sweat inching its way down Adrianna's back was the only outward expression of her struggle to stay unruffled, poised, and confident. She hoped even that wasn't obvious to Frau Heinrich, who along with Adrianna's mentor, Master Trey, was conducting her exit interview.

Although the woman seemed to live on the scent of fear, Adrianna was damned if she'd let her visceral response oblige Frau Heinrich. No. Adrianna managed to breathe, projecting calm. She mentally checked the time on her Electronic Biological CoServer again. *Please make this brief.* This interview with the intimidating, polished blonde was the last item on Adrianna's required checklist before leaving the Opio Institute to meet her new employer.

"I don't know whether Master Trey" – the Frau made a tiny moue after spitting out the name – "has told you, but one of the offers you spurned was resubmitted. The terms would repay your Opio loans completely. If you like, I'd be happy to assist you in breaking your current contract and accepting this offer."

Master Trey bristled. He wasn't required to come to this meeting, but he'd insisted. He filled any room he entered with his presence, a phenomenon for which his bulk wasn't the sole cause. Frau Heinrich's last statement had elicited his heated stare and intensified his air of dominance.

"That is not appropriate." He shot a glance at Adrianna. "We eliminated that offer for reasons other than money."

Adrianna's eyes had widened despite her efforts to remain expressionless. The infighting between Master Trey and the Frau was often grist for the gossip mill at the Opio. Rumor had it Master Trey had pushed the board to rescind Heinrich's right to mentor students. With no desire to get between the two, Adrianna nodded, keeping her eyes on Master Trey, waiting for the icy viciousness that was Frau Heinrich's trademark to respond.

"Trying to be helpful, Trey – dear. Nothing sinister."

Frozen crystals filled Adrianna's veins when Frau Heinrich's attention turned to her. Everything about the Frau was sinister, especially offers of help.

Adrianna responded to Heinrich's offer with as neutral a tone as she could. "I have a signed contract. It would be unethical to break it." If the woman already hated Adrianna for being Master Trey's mentee, why worry about offending her now? The Frau couldn't stop her from graduating. Adrianna's paperwork and accounts were all in order. The supposed point of this interview was to confirm that fact. Why couldn't Heinrich just do her job?

The Frau's eyes narrowed. "You seem so very tense, my dear."

"Get on with it." Trey's voice was a guttural rumble.

The Frau's teeth clicked shut. She bared them and hissed her response through them. "Don't push me."

Her civilized veneer settled back into place. "Adrianna, you doubtless understand that the premium paid for your special service will not apply to future contracts. Therefore, it would be to your advantage to learn as much as you can from your new employer and return to test with the Masters for additional sexual certification."

"Yes, Mistress."

Frau Heinrich continued, her voice a steady acidic drip. "Since you are a true submissive with mild masochistic tendencies, you are fortunate a Tallavan marshal holds your contract. We are always pleased to place our students with a marshal from Tallav. They're such an exclusive club of men."

Not a club, but exclusive? Yes. Only a man from Tallav could be a marshal. Wasn't there a historical reason? If she was going to be contracted to a marshal, she should probably find out. And what was with the Frau's sarcasm? Another mind fuck?

The Frau's voice drew Adrianna back. "They take excellent care of all those under their control. You can expect him to be a forceful dominant but always mindful of your well-being. A marshal's calling is to serve and protect; he states he is not a...sadist."

The muscles in Adrianna's torso clamped down on a shudder. Despite the information she had been given about her future employer, he was still an unknown. Her potential Master had started as a dream with all the accompanying fancies of perfection. The closer he came to her reality, the more dark possibilities impinged on her fantasy. Today she would meet him. The Frau, true to her sadistic nature, was picking at Adrianna's aversion to sadists, hoping for a painful reaction.

Trey reached out and took Adrianna's hand, squeezing it. Adrianna squeezed back and then released it. It was time to stand on her own two feet again. Master Trey was protective, but he wouldn't always be available to fight her battles. She'd allowed him to coddle her because it made him happy. That respite had come to an end, and he needed to realize it as much as she did. She braced herself to turn her focus on Frau Heinrich, who pinned her with glacial eyes before continuing with a smirk.

"He will expect you to function as his assistant as well as his companion. Such a lot of responsibilities. The possibility for failure..." Heinrich waved a hand in the air, allowing Adrianna to finish the statement in her mind.

With effort, Adrianna kept from narrowing her eyes. "Yes, Mistress. I also completed studies in ship administration and supply, and basic maintenance and

housekeeping for small space vehicles. Before coming to Beta Tau, I was already a certified low-orbit shuttle pilot and emergency med tech."

Frau Heinrich's voice scraped across Adrianna's nerves like the slender fillet knife she liked to drag along the skin of her bound students. "Yes, I'm sure all these extra abilities helped secure you the position. Nevertheless, you understand that you will be meeting his sexual needs also, and do not doubt that if you fail in that arena, you can expect to be released from your contract and dropped at the closest station. In that eventuality, please come see me. I'm certain I could help you find your...true calling."

Master Trey gave a soft growl.

Adrianna couldn't stop from checking the time again. She steeled herself by looking at the picture behind and to the right of the Frau. It was a painting of smiling children. How very odd. Silence stilled the room. *Did I miss a question?* When she looked, the Frau's sneer had faded, and she was businesslike once again.

"The paperwork for your debt repayment appears to be in order. I see you've opted to make quarterly payments. Hmm." She smiled. Adrianna didn't trust that smile. "You've also made a substantial prepayment. If more girls came to us as unsullied" – her smile became a smirk, showing a glimmer of white teeth – "as you, my dear, they would benefit from paying down their loan by almost a full year. How lovely for you."

"Yes, Mistress." Adrianna was ready to leave and never see Frau Heinrich again.

"Will you be meeting the marshal on the space station?"

The question confused Adrianna. It was the kind of thing a friend might ask. Frau Heinrich was no friend. "No, I'm –"

"Don't answer that, Adrianna." Master Trey's interruption was accompanied by a heated glare at the Frau.

With pinched lips, the Frau ignored his comment, focusing on Adrianna. "Do you have any questions?"

"No, Mistress." Adrianna kept her face blank. *Please finish.* To her surprise, the Frau did. Perhaps because Master Trey was there. If he hadn't been, the Frau would have drawn out the interview for the pleasure of tormenting Adrianna.

Once outside the Frau's office, Master Trey asked her to come with him. He shut the door to his own office behind him and motioned her to sit. The room was a reflection of the man. Most of it was taken up by an arrangement of two oversize plush armchairs and a side table. The desk, standard in other instructors' offices, was missing. A vidscreen on one soft green wall was the only accommodation to the need for record keeping. Emotionally charged images of Masters and submissives hung in rows in the remaining space. In the corner stood a spanking bench.

Rather than sitting, he balanced on the edge of the table, looming large above her, arms crossed over his chest.

"Adrianna, you are probably the most trusting individual I know. You're submissive to the bone. It's something I like about you, but it also scares the hell out of me."

Adrianna attempted to digest that statement. The point of her studies at the Opio was to train her to become a professional submissive, able to adapt to any Master who held her contract. Part of that had been learning how to create a relationship of trust between Master and submissive. Wasn't that the ideal they were all supposed to achieve? Her confusion must have shown on her face.

"Let me give you an example from today's interview. You don't always keep personal information to yourself. You need to be better about not telling people things that don't concern them. Frau Heinrich had no valid reason to know your travel itinerary today. What the hell business was it of hers where you were meeting the marshal?"

He sighed and dropped his hands to his hips. "Trust needs to be earned. You offer it up to anyone you think is nice and some you hope will be nice."

Her lips pressed together, she struggled to figure out what Master Trey wanted from her. Wasn't it trusting him that had brought her to the Opio in the first place? Where would she be if she hadn't trusted him? "But..."

"You would have told the Frau where you were meeting the marshal. And although she has access to the record of the classes you took at the Opio, she didn't know you are a shuttle pilot and med tech. She's exactly someone you shouldn't trust. She may work for the Opio, but she has connections to some unsavory people."

Adrianna wrinkled her forehead.

"Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. You trusted her because she works for the Opio even though you're aware she's deeply twisted. Assume the worst until proven otherwise. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir." She bit her lip, worrying it while her mind chewed on Master Trey's advice. Trust the Frau? No, it wasn't trust that made her respond to the woman's questions. It was the combination of Heinrich's position at the Institute and her shrewd display of dominance.

Trey sighed and scooped her hand into his. "I'm going to worry about you no matter what. I want you to be careful. I fully expect your contract with the marshal to work out. But things happen. I'm here if you ever need me. Message me. Okay?"

"Yes. Thank you, Sir." Adrianna tightened her fingers around his.

"We haven't discussed how you'll use your empathic senses once you leave the Institute." He moved to squat in front of her. "Don't tell anyone about your abilities or that you were born on Preatiens. People will use you for their own ends. Even nice people." Trey placed a finger under her chin and stared intently into her eyes. "That means the marshal too. Don't tell him. You've lived here at the Opio, blocking your empathic gift. It's in your best interest to continue doing so. Promise me."

Adrianna felt the full force of his personality behind the concern of his words. "I understand what you've said, and for the most part I agree with you."

Master Trey's chin dipped, and his eyes narrowed.

She continued. "I appreciate you want to keep me safe, but it's time for me to make my own decisions. So far I think I've done pretty well."

After a moment of hesitation, Trey nodded. "You have —"

Adrianna held up a hand. "I'm making only one modification to your advice. I'm not going to block my empathic senses. At least not routinely. I won't disclose I have them and I will be careful how I use them, but they're a tool. They'll help me protect myself."

Trey sighed. "I can live with that change."

Adrianna smiled. "I'll comm you regularly."

"Good." He stood and pulled her up into a hug. "Be safe." He kissed her forehead, turned her, and with a hand on her bottom, pushed her toward the door.

When she opened it, Adrianna looked over her shoulder, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall. "Good-bye, Sir."

* * * *

Shane gritted his teeth in lieu of snapping at the clerk to hurry up. Filing his request to have his leave reinstated was supposed to be quicker in person, but the man's methodical attention to detail was edging close to burning through the time advantage. *Fuck*. The muscles in his neck were tightening; he needed to relax before he got a throbbing headache.

The air in the Beta Tau Marshals Service Office was tinged with the odors of burned café, sweat, and noxious food choices. Nevertheless, eyelids clamped shut and head tipped back, he filled his lungs to the brim. After a moment, he dropped his chin to his chest, releasing the deep breath with a whoosh.

"Hard day?"

Shane opened his eyes to find the man peering at him. "Something like that. We done here?"

The clerk gave a nod. "Yes, your leave status is reinstated. If there's anything else I can do for you, let me know."

"Thanks." When Shane turned to depart, he heard his name called.

"Tiernan. What the hell are you doing here?"

To Shane's right stood an old friend. "Riordan. I knew you were back with the service. I didn't realize you were stationed on Beta Tau."

Riordan shrugged. "Yeah... Not my first choice. You have time to talk?"

"Sure." Shane nodded, noticing how much weight his friend had lost since last seeing him.

"My office is at the end here."

Shane followed. If only he could say something that would make things better. Paul Riordan's wife had died six months ago, and the toll the loss was taking on him showed in his slumped shoulders.

Riordan's office was an orderly arrangement of leftovers from previous inhabitants. Shane sat, elbows on his knees, in a worn-out chair, twining his fingers together and gazing straight at Riordan. His friend slouched, dark smudges under his flat-brown eyes.

Shane asked, "How're you doing?"

Riordan didn't respond immediately, instead rubbing the heel of his palm across his chest, staring vacantly at a sector map on the wall.

Finally, he spoke. "Better, I guess. At least that's what the docs tell me. Told me I had to go on meds to get reinstated. Still can't sleep."

"I'm sorry." That simple statement was the best Shane could do. Well-intentioned people had nearly choked him with their platitudes when his brother died. He wouldn't do that to Riordan.

"Thanks. They say time heals all wounds. They must be idiots." Riordan huffed and shrugged a shoulder. "Enough about me. What are you doing on Beta Tau?"

"I was on my way here on vacation. I got waylaid to run courier duty since I was coming to Beta Tau anyway. But I'm officially back on leave. I'm actually..." Riordan was the first person Shane had considered telling, beyond his best friend, Maon, about hiring an assistant. *Fuck it... Tell him. It will be undeniable once the woman is with you.* "I'm picking up my new assistant." He ducked his head, waiting for what he'd said to register fully.

When it did, the sound of Riordan's low chuckle was followed by the obvious question. "A Beta Tau assistant?"

Shane sat back, lifted his chin, and glared at Riordan. "Not my idea. Maon's." The words *I am not a lecher* hung on his lips. But fuck if he felt he had to prove anything.

"That sounds like Maon, but are you sure he was serious? You know Maon."

"We've been friends a long time. So yeah, I do know Maon. And he was serious. He thinks I need someone a little more..." Shane grunted while *he* now focused on the sector map hanging on the wall. "Permanent...for my..." Shane's lips twitched when he returned his gaze to Riordan and held up his hand. "His words, not mine—'romantic needs.' She's a graduate of the Opio Institute."

"Hmmpf. Rumor has you with Ceana Kendrith. I knew that couldn't be right. No one in their right mind would go anywhere near that Tallavan she-devil."

Shane scratched the back of his neck and looked away. The gossipmongers on Tallav must be having a heyday. "Actually, I've contracted with her for a child."

"That evil witch?" Riordan's question made Shane wince. "I appreciate that your mother needs a female heir, but isn't there someone else that could carry a baby for you?"

Shane returned his gaze to Riordan and shrugged. "We're a founding family. My mother expects me to marry a Tallavan aristocrat. This is my alternative. My dad would raise the baby." Marrying and raising a Tallavan aristocrat's babies was supposed to be the ideal all Tallavan men longed for. Shane didn't and never had, but Riordan was one of those husbands who'd found happiness in a Tallavan marriage. Shane's own dream

of happiness involved collaring the right submissive. Any Tallavan woman he collared would be ostracized. No woman dared admit to being dominated, even in the bedroom. He'd never made a point of hiding his predilections, so the gossips would assume the worst of any lady he was connected to. The Tallavan worst, allowing a man control over her. Not his. For now, he endured Ceana.

Riordan looked like he'd swallowed something nasty. "But Ceana Kendrith?"

Memories of interminable hours spent attending society functions, courting, even bedding the cream of Tallavan—aristocratic, unmarried women—only to be spurned by all flashed through Shane's mind. "I got no other takers. Ceana needs the money. So yeah, that evil witch. She's working it for maximum torture."

"Talking to that bitch would be agony, but you don't have to live with her while she carries the child." Riordan shook his head while he fidgeted with a loose thread on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Oh, you don't know the half of her wickedness. She insisted on natural conception."

"Shite, that is evil." Riordan flicked his gaze up to Shane and rubbed his fingers over his chin.

"A fucking nightmare." Shane's fists clenched. Pounding something wouldn't be productive, but it would feel fucking good. He forced himself to relax, unclenching his hands.

"Okay. I officially pity you." A weak smile played along Riordan's lips.

"Four months, and even considering a fifth makes me sick to my stomach." The chair squeaked when Shane shifted his weight.

Riordan's head jerked back. "She isn't pregnant yet? You tested her, right?"

Shane glared despite his resolve to keep his turmoil below the surface. "Of course. I wouldn't go near that woman if she wasn't fertile."

"Fate sure screwed with us. Bollocks! I'd give anything to be back on Tallav, raising kids with my wife. And fate's forced you to have a child when all you want is to be a marshal."

The two men sat quietly for a while, absorbing that thought. Finally Riordan snorted. "So tell me about your new assistant. I can see why Maon suggested one."

* * * *

Adrianna restrained her desire to pirouette. She was free. Free to live her life. And, damn it, free to twirl if she wanted to twirl. No one and nothing but her own sense of propriety was stopping her. So she twirled and then looked around her, a little light-headed at her own audacity. She'd probably not be able to twirl in public once she was with the marshal, but right now she could.

No more of the Institute's regimentation. She would miss Master Trey. He'd been so good to her after rescuing her from Furzine and the Benefactor's attempt to coerce her into marriage. Master Trey's help with her postgraduate contract negotiations had been immense.

She'd chosen a Tallavan marshal. His payment would cover half her debt, and if he extended for additional years, she'd be debt-free in three. She did a happy dance and giggled. Her EBC verified that she was still on the mapped path to the spaceport bar where she was meeting him. Marshal Shane Tiernan. She turned the corner of the pedestrian corridor onto the main access way that led to the shuttle concourses and ran smack into a man coming the opposite direction. The reek of body odor hit her nose when her face mashed against the dark shipsuit that covered his lean chest. With a startled sound, she began to apologize but found herself drawn backward into the corridor, the man's rough hands gouging into her upper arms.

"Please excuse me, miss. Allow me to make certain I haven't harmed you." His tone was unctuous, but his grip was brutal.

"I'm fine. Really quite fine," Adrianna bleated, struggling against his hold while he steered her toward a long, dim service alley. She really didn't want him touching her, and she needed to free herself before the encounter grew ugly.

"There's a bench down that hallway. Let me take you to it so you can rest and recover."

Ahead there was no bench, but neither was the service alley empty. Another larger man waited at the end. Broad as he was tall, solid but not fat, he looked like he'd spent a lot of time in a heavy-gravity gym. He had more muscle in one of his arms than in her entire body. Worse, he was looking at her as though she were the last piece of homemade apple pie. *Not good.*

Her shoes found no purchase on the polished floor. With a twist, she attempted to free herself. Pain lanced through her shoulder when her wiry captor yanked her back. Her heart was thudding a mantra of danger. *Escape.* She had to get away before they reached the bigger thug. *Think. You've had defense training. What are you supposed to do?* The man had given up politely propelling her and was outright pushing. With a flash of insight, she let her whole body go limp and cried, "Oh, maybe you're right. I am a little overwhelmed."

The man's fingers slipped while he struggled to keep her from sliding out of his grip. Adrianna smashed her palm into his chin, pain exploding in her wrist and down her arm. The blow staggered him, allowing her to wrench herself from his hold. He bellowed curses harmlessly after her while she scrambled away.

An adrenaline boost sped her on her way. The goal—head as quickly as possible to the bar and grill where she was meeting the marshal. The thudding footsteps of the second man sprinting to catch her sounded closer. *How can a guy that size run so fast?* While she ran along the concourse, people browsing in shops turned to stare. Six shop lengths had never seemed so long. At last, eyes focused on the interior of the bar and the patrons seated there, she barreled into it, narrowly avoiding the waist-high railing

that separated the tables and chairs from the open concourse. *Please let the marshal be early!*

She frantically scanned the bar. None of the faces of the customers turning to her resembled the marshal even a little.

Oh gods. Her pursuer was nearly here. She grabbed hold of the edge of the polished wooden bar top. A quick flip and she was over, landing on her feet on the other side. A frantic search for a weapon amid the barware and liquor bottles led her to an ice chipper. The bartender charged toward her, demanding in loud, angry tones that he get out from behind his bar. When she snatched up the chipper, bolstered by the solid handle in her grip and sharp tines pointing up, he pulled to a stop and raised his hands in capitulation. His reaction surprised her. For an instant, she paused, blinked and shook her head then turned in time to see the man chasing her slide into the entrance. With the commotion and everyone staring at her, it didn't take long for him to move in her direction.

Adrianna settled into a stance, prepared to defend herself. Her focus rigidly set on her pursuer, she resisted the urge to lower her defensive posture when a voice rumbled, "What is going on in here?"

Every head but the assailant's turned to look while Adrianna continued to stare at her attacker, frozen in a motionless tableau. "Marshal Tiernan?" Adrianna blurted, her voice squeaky.

A change washed over the thug's body. He relaxed his stance and wheedled, "Miss, I think you dropped this, and I wanted to return it to you." He pulled a credit chip from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Thank you. Put it on the bar," she responded, watching him closely.

As he did, he gave the marshal a smarmy smile, then slid out the exit and was gone.

Adrianna slumped. The breath she didn't know she'd been holding whooshed from her lungs. "Here's your chipper." She stretched what she hoped was a disarming smile across her face when she handed the tool back to the bartender.

Mouth hanging open, the bartender took the chipper. "Thanks." He rotated, staring at her while she scooted past him and made her way through the swing-top entrance at the other end of the bar.

Oh shit. A darted glance informed her the marshal was standing, arms folded over his chest, waiting for her. The desire to run washed through her. She filled her lungs with a deep breath and resisted the impulse, resolutely walking toward him, opting to keep her eyes lowered. When his boots came in sight, she slowly lifted her gaze, soaking in the details of the man planted like a mountain in front of her. Her initial impression of well-muscled male was confirmed. More than confirmed. What she saw below his belt... Mmm, some things just couldn't be tucked away and hidden. She felt her cheeks heating and continued her upward perusal. When her inspection reached his face, she met the brightest pair of blue eyes she had ever seen. Unable to put one rational thought behind another, she blinked and succumbed to drowning in fathomless azure pools until they filled her entire vision.

"I asked, are you all right?"

She blinked. *The blue eyes have a voice?* "Y-yes. Just a bit shaken. My wrist is a little sore." She wiggled it, puzzled.

"You must be Adrianna Pacquin."

He was staring down at her. *Pull. Yourself. Together.* "Yes, I am." She winced. "I'm so happy to meet you."

"Hmmm. Well, I don't think we should continue this conversation here," he said with a meaningful glance over her shoulder. The bar patrons were still watching them with interest. "Follow me."

The marshal spun toward the exit. "Don't forget your credit chip."

Adrianna scurried back to the bar top, snatched it up, and with a sheepish smile, plunked it into the bartender's tip jar. It was the least she could do. She rushed to catch up with the marshal, who was already heading down the concourse in the direction she'd come.

"Damn." Where was her satchel? She brought a hand to her brow when the realization hit her that it had dropped when the man grabbed her.

"Is there something else?" Shane sent a distracted look back at her.

Adrianna tensed. "I lost my satchel. It must be around the corner. I hope." When they neared the turn, she clenched her hands. Everything she had taken before she fled home was in that bag, including her identity card and the data cube with her official contract. What was she going to do if they were gone?

"Is this it?" He pointed to her dark leather satchel, sitting open and empty next to a messy pile of her extra clothes, toiletries, and keepsakes.

"Yes, that's it." She gave a wobbly laugh, flicking a pair of panties back into the bag. While she sorted through the items, she inventoried her belongings. The only thing missing was her mother's silver locket. It was irreplaceable. Her shoulders hunched, but at least her ID and contract weren't gone. With shaky fingers, she finished cramming everything inside, zipped the satchel closed, pulled the strap over her arm, and stood.

With his intense blue eyes concentrated on her, he scowled with toe-curling force. Composure, composure, composure, she chanted rhythmically to her favorite Bach Invention. Bach always steadied her. Time for her to be still and wait for Marshal Tiernan's direction.

"Come." The command was terse. Adrianna fell into a jog to keep up with him, not wanting to further his apparent frustration.

Chapter Two

Mentally fuming, Shane rearranged his plans, sending a delay notice to the security clinic through his EBC. Ms. Pacquin wasn't coming aboard until he'd settled a few issues with her. First, she'd explain what happened to his satisfaction or else. The life of a marshal was full of twists, turns, and abrupt outbreaks of chaos; an assistant didn't need to add to his problems.

Fuck. He'd gone along with Maon's idea to hire the woman, and now it was blowing up in his face. *Admit it, Tiernan. It was never about her ability to manage your schedule, research, and do the laundry.*

No, the idea was to relieve his sexual frustration. Most of the submissives he'd played with were either too emotionally needy to suit him, couldn't handle the demands of his work, or wanted to play games. He didn't play "make me."

His tally list of the perfect assistant was short but essential. An insistent need for submission that equaled his own to dominate. Able to work independently and accept the risk that came with working with a Tallavan marshal. Most of all, prepared to sever the relationship without a lot of emotional turmoil when he decided it was time.

Ms. Pacquin had seemed to fill the bill. Trained submissive. Well educated, with training in the essential duties he required. And she was under contract with no illusions of permanence. He'd hesitated at hiring someone so young and a virgin to boot. But the idea of a fresh, pure, nubile woman appealed to him. The opposite of Ceana was perfect. That had been the plan.

Shane looked over his shoulder to see if Adrianna was following. She was several yards behind him, trotting to keep up. Mentally reprimanding himself, Shane slowed,

allowing her to catch up, and then pulled her in front and to his left. With a hand placed on her back while he scanned for trouble, Shane steered her toward his hotel.

Calm down. It's not her fault she was attacked. It better not be. Since his brother's death, simmering anger always seemed ready to boil over. He released the tension in the muscles of his shoulders and breathed deeper. Whether she was innocent or not, he did not intend to abandon her if she was in trouble. Only if necessary would he void the contract. Besides, she handled herself pretty well. He'd spotted the girl at the other end of the access way running toward him, and his instinct had been to find out why she was in such a hurry. He'd closed most of the distance between himself and the bar just as she sailed over the bar top. The look on the bartender's face after she grabbed the ice chipper was priceless. The thug had been three times as big, but she'd made him pause when she waved her weapon at him. A lot of warrior spirit in her actions.

At the hotel, Shane ushered her into the lift. While they stood next to each other facing the doors, Shane moved his head slightly to examine Adrianna. *Pretty name.* Despite the images he'd seen and the personal descriptor he'd read, she wasn't as small as he'd imagined. At six foot seven, he dwarfed most women, but she came to right below his nose. Dark slacks snugly caressed her long, lithe legs, showing off fit calves and thighs that culminated in the perfect curvaceous swell of hips and ass. When she'd vaulted over the bar, her athleticism had been on full display. Athletic was good. It was possible to do so many things with an agile woman. A demure cream blouse with a drop yoke and a sweet bow at the keyhole neckline covered her upper torso. It, too, was close fitting enough to reveal the jut of rounded breasts. Her nipples didn't show. What would it be like to pull the string on her shirt and delve inside to discover them? That brown braid snaking down her back would be perfect for winding round his hand to hold her in place while taking that enticing bubble butt. Physically she was everything he could hope for.

His cock hardened, trapped painfully against the tight fabric of his pants. Shane shifted his stance and attempted an unobtrusive effort to reposition himself at the same

time Adrianna turned to glance at him. An appealing red tint flushed her neck and face. He wanted to reach over and nip her neck to see if he could make that blush deepen.

If she'd caused the commotion at the bar, he could brighten her ass to a tempting erotic red with a spanking. Fuck, he could paddle her for the fun of it. No, they had to talk first, and then if satisfied, he could spank her. Perhaps give her a taste of punishment before the fact so she'd be less likely to stray. That was probably better than what his cock was demanding he do – tie her up and fuck her senseless. *Gods*. Why did she have to be so irresistible?

When they reached their floor and the doors opened, Adrianna made a quick exit, as though she were eager to escape his proximity. He chuckled under his breath. The suite might be bigger than the lift, but she'd be just as alone with him there.

ADRIANNA WAS MORTIFIED. She'd blushed when she'd caught him adjusting his cock. The presence of strong male that emanated from him was magnetic when ramped up with potent overtones of arousal. And she wasn't even using her empathic senses. Not that she intended to. Those would stay bottled up. Her secret. Master Trey's advice flashed through her mind. She shouldn't reveal those abilities.

Despite her agreement with Master Trey to give her trust gradually, Shane had an overpowering presence. He was a walking sex dream that had her nipples taut and her clit pulsing. The urge to kneel and offer herself to him suffused her. *Idiot*. She was already his. *Your first*. The thought of him. Over her. Filling her. Would he take her right away? Her insides went quivery. With her body a puddle of desire and her need to submit battering her, she was on the edge of losing herself.

When the lift doors opened, she mentally pulled her shoulders back and dipped into the imaginary icy pool at her core, reinforcing her control. She would take things slow, as they came and not before, placing her confidence in him only when he proved himself trustworthy. That was going to be difficult. Her naturally submissive, trusting

nature screamed at her to fall into his arms and divulge every stray thought running through her mind.

When she darted from the lift, she heard him chuckle. Was that a good sign or a bad one?

Shane opened the door with his key code and ushered her inside. The lounge, kitchenette, and dining area were luxurious, a mixture of leather upholstery, *bastingsue* wood tables and cabinets, bronze fixtures, and floating glass shelves with artisan crafts from Beta Tau displayed. The giant bed in the next room caught her eye, a huge expanse of cream, sienna, and gold coverlet and pillows. Her hands tingled when nerves got the better of her.

Now that she'd met him in real life, Marshal Tiernan was both less and more than expected. Less upright, austere lawman and more long, slow drink of scotch, a whiff letting you know the burn was coming. Would he take her in that bed? He'd seen her pictures, so he knew she wasn't the sultry, sexy type. Oh sure, the Institute photographer had worked to make the most of her skinny legs, bubble butt, and small chest, but the focus had been on creating images of purity and virginity. After her deflowering, would she have what it took to keep a man like the marshal attracted to her? Master Trey had told her she was one of the most captivating submissives he had ever mentored. But would Marshal Tiernan think so? The marshal was the embodiment of Adrianna's dream man—tall and muscular without being muscle-bound. Rugged and handsome, he had a presence that exuded controlled strength. His dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck like an ancient warrior. *Please let him want to keep me.*

SHANE MOVED FROM behind her and settled himself on the center of the couch. "Take your shoes off."

Adrianna complied with the terse command, placing her satchel on the floor near the door, swiftly removing her boots and putting them next to it.

"Sit on my lap. Straddle me, facing me." Watching Adrianna's face while she straddled his knees, Shane took her by the wrists to help her settle. When her weight sank onto him, it was all he could do to resist groaning and pulling her forward to rub against him. *Don't go there. Your cock's not in charge right now.* He placed both her hands on his chest. "Keep them here."

"Yes, Sir."

Her pulse throbbed against his left thumb. With his right hand, he stroked her shoulders. The need to pull off her shirt to let his fingertips glide across the smooth skin beneath whispered at him. Instead, he gradually strengthened his motions, massaging tense muscles around her shoulders to the back of her neck. The drumbeat of her heart slowed while she relaxed under his touch. "Look at me."

Adrianna raised hazy green eyes to him. Shane leisurely trailed his fingers up her neck to behind her ear. With her face cupped in his palm, he ran his thumb across her cheek, relishing the velvet skin. He dropped his thumb to trace her lips, soft, full, and plush as a fresh, ripe apricot. *Would the taste be as sweet and juicy?* The image of her mouth savoring his cock made his groin tighten further. *In due time.* He hadn't had a woman arouse him to this extent in...forever. He brought his hand back down to grasp her other wrist. *Focus.*

"Ms. Pacquin, we are beginning a new relationship without knowing more than the information contained in the paperwork we exchanged. To complicate matters, our connection will be both personal and professional. If we're to make a success of this new arrangement, we'll have to be open with each another. When I ask you a question, I expect the truth. Trust won't happen if lies pile up between us. I will always be honest with you, and I require the same from you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." Her pulse was steady, her eyes clear.

"Excellent. Explain what was happening when I came into the bar today to meet you. Tell me in whatever fashion you prefer, but you must answer several essential questions. Did you know the man chasing you? Has this happened before? Does

someone have reason to abduct you? Who is that person and why? Look at me while you speak." The skin of her arm was smooth under his fingers. He resisted the urge to stroke it. *Concentrate on her words and body language, Tiernan.*

"Yes, Sir." Adrianna paused and, with a deep breath, began. "Today I came straight from the Opio Institute to the spaceport by tram. I guess I've gotten used to being in a safe environment at the Institute because I wasn't paying proper attention to the people around me. I'm from Furzine, and although I wasn't ever allowed out in public without my chaperone and bodyguard, still I know not to get so distracted that I don't see danger coming. My second governess always said, 'It's sensible to be prudent and wise to be cautious.' I wish I'd heeded her advice.

"I was paying more attention to the map on my EBC and the shops of the spaceport. That's why I didn't take a wider arc around the passage corner. I ran into a man, who grabbed my arms and started hauling me off. I would have noticed him before he could grab me if I hadn't been—"

"Stop a moment. Assume that I understand you were uncharacteristically distracted from keeping an eye out for trouble." Shane's cheek twitched, her dithering amusing him. "How did you manage to escape?"

Adrianna pressed her lips together and gave a tiny nod. "He was dragging me off to a service corridor where the man coming after me was waiting. When I saw that, I knew I needed to get away from him before he got me close enough for that brute to grab me. So I went limp. That almost always throws people. If you've been resisting and suddenly go rubbery. That's what my defense instructor told me, but it's actually the first time I got to try that. It really does work."

"He let go, and you ran?" Shane prodded.

Adrianna's eyes widened. "Oh no, Sir. He did loosen his grip, so I took that as the opportunity to give him a good palm thrust to the chin. Then he let go, and I ran. I was really hoping you'd already be at the bar when I dashed in, but I didn't see you." She shook her head and continued. "The big guy was running after me, so I knew I'd need

something to protect myself." Her voice lowered. "Weapons can be found everywhere. That's what my defense instructor said." She paused and gave him a significant look. While Shane struggled to keep his face blank, she resumed her account. "The best place to find a sharp object seemed to be behind the bar, so I vaulted over it and grabbed an ice chipper. I think that's when you came in. You know the rest of the story."

Shane leaned in, taking up a fraction more of the space between them. "That's the play-by-play, but you haven't answered my questions yet."

"Yes, Sir." Adrianna looked at her wrist in his hand, appearing to collect her thoughts.

"Eyes, Adrianna."

Her gaze snapped back to his. "Yes, Sir. First, I have never seen those two men before. Second, on Furzine it's always possible to get kidnapped, but it hasn't happened to me." Her mouth twisted.

"There is a person on Furzine who might want to abduct me, but I didn't think he would continue to pursue me after I enrolled in the Opio Institute. It really doesn't make sense that he would. Do you know who the Benefactor of Furzine is?" Her eyebrows lifted.

Shane's brow furrowed in response. "Yes, I do. Why would he want you? Not that you're not a lovely girl, but why you in particular?"

Adrianna shifted her legs and rear, which caused his cock to flare. Shane realized her position was becoming uncomfortable for her. "Turn and sit sideways across my lap, Adrianna. Keep your eyes on mine." He helped her adjust, maintaining a thumb on her wrist. Her thigh pressed against his erection. When she glanced down, Shane murmured in her ear, "We'll get to that. Answer my question."

"Yes, Sir." Her voice had grown husky, her eyes shimmering the dark green of freshly cut grass. She cleared her throat before continuing. "Why still seems odd to me, but it's what my father led me to believe. The Benefactor wanted a virtuous wife to marry and bear his children. Not easy to find on Furzine. It was an image thing, I guess.

He desired his family to be above reproach." She shook her head. "My parents were scholars studying deviant sexual behavior. He was sponsoring my parents' research. My bodyguard was one of his men. That's why I was never accosted on the city streets."

Shane's jaw clenched. He couldn't understand how any parent would put a child in such a position.

"When I turned sixteen, the Benefactor requested that I start attending parties with my parents. I had met him many times in private and have always been very well treated by him. He can be kind to children. He proved as considerate in public settings, but he also began dropping hints about marrying me. My mother told him he'd have to wait until I was twenty-one. I think she'd planned to have me off planet before he could try to claim me. However, she died, and my father couldn't take care of himself, much less deal with my needs. In the end, he did stand up to the Benefactor. My father informed the Benefactor he was sending me off Furzine to my grandmother. Two days later, he was killed in an accident at his office. A heavy partition fell and crushed him."

Shane narrowed his eyes. The timing of her father's death was grossly suspicious. Poor girl. Losing both her mother and father at such a young age. He stroked her wrist with his thumb. Adrianna bit her lip but didn't stop.

"I wasn't confident in my father's ability to protect me, so even before his death, I'd already been looking for my own way off planet. I didn't want to go to my grandmother. My parents had pretty much left me to be raised by nannies, chaperones, and instructors." Adrianna flicked her gaze down in a momentary look to where Shane had placed his hand lightly on her hip. "I'd lived a life under constant supervision; I wanted something...more adventurous. I'd previously met Master Trey from the Institute at a dinner party and spent several hours talking with him that night. Unlike the academics who frequented my parents' parties, Master Trey discussed an actual lifestyle rather than population statistics and psychological profiles and such. I really liked him." Adrianna's tongue swiped across her upper lip while her cheeks bloomed with a little more color.

Her chin lifted. "To leave Furzine I would need to show that where I was going, I wouldn't become a burden. I had to have a job waiting, a student slot, or family that could support me. I knew if I went to the Institute, I'd be classified a student, so the Benefactor couldn't stop me from leaving."

Amazing, this girl is rattling away on my lap as though she's talking about her latest shopping trip. She was very lucky her plan to evade the Benefactor had worked.

"I used my father's e-address to send Master Trey a message, hoping the Benefactor's snoops would dismiss it as work related. Master Trey came to Furzine a few days after my father's death. I slipped away to meet him, signed the Institute contract, and immediately went with him to the Furzine spaceport." Adrianna's hands curled into fists. Shane pressed his thumb under her closed fingers and rubbed her palm while Adrianna finished her story. "We'd gotten through customs control when a group of men including my bodyguard ran up and demanded that the Federation officials turn me over to them. Since I was now on Federation territory, Federation law applied. There were no criminal charges against me. I had a contract with and placement at the Institute waiting, so there were no immigration problems. The Feds refused to hand me over. I escaped just in time. I spent a year at the Institute, and I assumed I didn't have to worry about the Benefactor anymore. Although I'm still a virgin"—she paused to swallow—"my studies wouldn't be considered virtuous. I expected the Benefactor to have forgotten me."

Story finished, Adrianna sat, her muscles visibly tense. She latched unblinking eyes on Shane. He studied her. Desire had tightened its hold on him when her lips had spoken the word *virgin* and then pursed as she swallowed. Kissing her now was out of the question. Especially since she was anxious, worried about his response to her involvement with the Benefactor. If she thought Shane would cancel her contract, she didn't realize that dismissal was not an option. Not with what she'd told him about the Benefactor. No, the Benefactor and the criminal society he ran, wrapped in the

camouflage of a federated planet, was one of the biggest problems in this sector of the Federation. As Furzian head of state, he was untouchable.

If the Benefactor wanted Adrianna, Shane would protect her. Would she give him an edge in the ongoing effort to unravel the Benefactor's machinations? He hoped so. Besides, he was beginning to like her. Maon was right. She did solve Shane's craving for a physical relationship on his terms with no strings attached, and she could think on her feet, although she'd need more training.

With gentle fingers, Shane grasped Adrianna's chin. His lips brushed across hers when he bent toward her. "Thank you. I appreciate that it was difficult for you to tell me some of this. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Adrianna gave a quick shake of her head. "No, sir."

Shane pulled back and stared long and hard at her until a blush stole over her cheeks. His cock pulsed. He resisted the urge to satisfy his physical desire.

"Good. We have a lot to do today. You'll be getting an upgrade to your EBC and a new wardrobe." He ran his finger along her shoulder. "First I want to establish the protocol for how we will address each another. When we are in public or working in an official capacity with others, you will call me Marshal or Marshal Tiernan. I will call you Ms. Pacquin or Pacquin. When I wish you to respond as my submissive, I will call you Adrianna. You will call me Master. I do not want a twenty-four-hour submissive relationship with you. It will be clear when I wish you to assume your submissive role. You will obey my commands promptly and fully. All other times you may call me Shane, and I will call you Dria. As Dria, you can freely express yourself to me, but I will expect you to be respectful. We will be spending a great deal of time alone together. The *Adrasteia* is a small ship, too cramped to allow an atmosphere of tension to intrude. I want it to be your home, a place you can be comfortable and relaxed. Can you do that, Dria?"

Shane's whole world narrowed to the woman on his lap. Her warmth and softness soothed him. How perfect it would be to wrap himself around her and soak in her

comfort. With every small shift of her body, arousal lit up a living flame inside him. How had he gotten so needy?

Adrianna gave him a hesitant smile. "Yes, Sir. I mean, Shane. That sounds wonderful to me. I am used to interacting with only one or two people, and stayed home most of the time. I think I will adjust easily to shipboard life" – peering up at him through her lashes, she blushed – "and to you."

"That pleases me immensely." He paused and brushed his lips across hers again. "You please me very much." With his fingers, he grazed the side of her breast, letting them drop to caress the sweet curve that flared out below her waist, a spot designed for a man's hand to rest, to grasp, to control a woman while he pulled her body onto his cock. His erection twitched, urging him to bury himself inside her, but that would have to wait.

When Maon had suggested Shane hire a paid submissive, the notion had rubbed Shane wrong. It had seemed like hiring a glorified long-term prostitute. His friend had reminded him she'd also be his assistant and advised he romance her before indulging in any added benefits. Romancing or not, he didn't pay for sex. And he certainly didn't pay to claim a woman's virginity. He might push at the constraints of his Tallavan upbringing, but the objectification of women was a Tallavan thou-shalt-not he held to. Besides, if he wasn't able to seduce Adrianna into his bed, he was in more trouble than he thought. Her virginity was his to take, but he wouldn't until he knew money wasn't her only reason to consent.

"Your contract stipulates that you engage in sexual activity with me. That won't be happening."

Adrianna's face paled.

Her next breath came with a jerk.

"Shhh. Don't worry. What I mean to say is that I want to give you a choice. I am very much attracted to you." He pulled her lower lip down, his focus riveted on her open mouth. His nostrils flared. "Very attracted. But I'm giving you the option to

decline. Right now, you can tell me no sex and that you just agree to be my assistant. I will honor that for the full term of the contract. Do you wish to alter the terms of our agreement?"

Adrianna's eyes widened. "No," she whispered around his finger on her lip.

Shane's cock greeted the news with a twitch. "Thank you. You may change your mind at any time, and as our relationship develops, I'll try to give you the choice of refusing before taking things further." The serious little furrow on her forehead begged to be kissed. She was wonderfully sweet, a sweetness he longed to taste and explore. First he would do what he'd been wanting to do since he'd caught sight of her sailing over the bar, her incredible ass on full display. "Adrianna?"

Adrianna's spine straightened. "Yes, Master?"

Shane's voice was calm and measured when he spoke. "When I address you as your Master and tell you to go somewhere and wait, I expect you to go there, remove your clothing, fold it neatly, and set it aside. Assume a kneeling position, legs wide, hands clasped behind your back. Do you understand?"

Adrianna's nostrils flared when she responded. "Yes, Master."

"Excellent, Adrianna. Please wait for me in the bedroom. You may take a pillow from the bed to place under your knees."

"Yes, Master." Adrianna climbed off Shane's lap and went. Shane sighed, enjoying the warmth spreading through him and the prospect of finding her kneeling in the bedroom.

* * * *

Want to know what happens next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/shane-marshal-of-tallav.html>