

## Chapter 49

*Brett ~*

Sandee was voluptuous, a perfect fulfillment to my female companion request. Full everything on her. Huge brown eyes that just melt me. *Melt* me. Or melted... Great caramel satin skin that some people manage, skin that embarrasses me and my whiter than ghost paleness. My skin tone was one thing I'd considered changing more than once, that and my sweating. When Sandee sweated, it was like little pearls beading up on her. Me, I'm just greasy pools.

Not Sandee. I'm telling you, I could watch those eyes and stroke that skin for hours.

Hitting it off, we agreed to a formal shipboard monogamous romance, monogamy managing to keep things cleaner. We'd keep our own suites, though. We both felt that way, just as our profiles predicted. Sweet.

We were humping when the Castle Hercules collapse started. I'm still uncertain what happened. I've tried accessing those records but couldn't find anything. Don't know if it's been covered, forgotten or something else. Of course, my access had been screwed up... Again, the Backhand...

Anyway, I was with Sandee when it all went topsy. The trip to our next transfer was supposed to take twenty-seven days. Sandee was going to Castle Pacifico, another fourth wave opportunity, earning my jealousy. I really didn't want to go to Earth. Earth, for a fourth waver, offered nothing. People also didn't believe I was being sent to Earth. Most expressed confusion and asked the same questions I'd asked about the company's reasoning. Grover urged me to talk to HR about it so I visited Natasha two more times but she insisted Earth was my destination.

Daily business briefings didn't alleviate my worries. Seemed like the briefing team thought I was someone else being sent to Earth. I'd confirmed my name, position and assignment three times with them and talked to Grover about it. Grover wasn't going to Earth. Grover was going to Castle Pacifico, too, where all the other Verde fourth wavers were heading. Earth was where I was supposed to go, HR and the briefing team all said. By name request. By name by whom? No one could answer. It sickened me every time I thought about it.

So there we were, her urging me on with moans, groans and sighs, her dark eyes closed as she bit her lips, beautiful skin glowing with sweat, me on top enjoying it all, when the ship shook with a sharp *bang*.

Freezing in mid motion, I stared down at her. Her eyes were open. "What was that?" she asked.

"Felt the ship move, did you?" I joked, a male sort of thing to do, but whatever we felt was serious. Castle Herc is a significant starship. Something shakes it, it's automatically a serious matter. I didn't want to but understood I had to stop and get off her. Not wanting to, though, I took my time.

Then the ship *shook*.

Leaping off Sandee, I stood up beside her bed. She scrambled up. We both looked around the room for signs of what was happening. She moved toward her Galex monitor while I consulted my Backhand. "Carl, what's going on with the ship?"

Just as I asked that and glanced toward Sandee to admire her sweaty naked backside, the ship groaned and shuddered. High pitched evacuation alarms screamed. Yellow evacuation lights followed a second later.

Still I hesitated. I've done a lot of space travel. I've been in these situations before. Hitting the evac button seems to be a first reaction. Then the crew and ship discovers that what they considered a major disaster really isn't that bad and cancel the evac. I was more than half-expecting that to happen now, say fifty-two to forty-eight percent chances. Close.

Instead, an announcement came over the PA, comm, Backhand systems, *everything*. "We are abandoning ship. Evacuate to your nearest escape pod immediately. This is not a drill. We are abandoning ship."

It kept on like that. This was serious. Sandee and I jumped into a frenzy of dressing. We were in deep space. There would be no teleporting out, even if I was willing to use a teleporter. Pods were destined for us. I don't know about Sandee but I didn't want to be naked in space even if I'm in an escape pod. I knew I could dress in the pod but I wanted to be clothed before jumping in there. Honestly, the thought of going into a pod naked just disturbed me. I know it's not logical. There you are, that's me.

Stopping at the escape pod doors, we looked at each other for about three beats. I think we both pondered the same. I asked the question. "Should we take separate pods?"

Grinning with what I construed as relief, Sandee nodded. "That's the deal we made, this is a shipboard romance, over when we leave the ship. We're abandoning ship...so...." Fluttering fingers finished her thought.

"Right." I was pretty disappointed, truthfully. Sandee was a good match. Sorry to be separating from her. I did my utmost to keep that out of my face and voice. "That makes sense. We're evacuating. We have no idea what's going to happen next or where we'll be. We'd better go our own ways."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," she replied.

Disappointment stabbed me hard. I was hoping she'd protest, offer a little hesitation, perhaps a suggestion, like, "Unless you want to stay together..." I'd jump on that suggestion post haste. She seemed willing to just end our relationship. I wondered if maybe our time together hadn't been as great for her as it was for me. Such insecurities often ambush me like that.

Coming forward, she kissed my cheek. "See you later."

You never tell a fourth waver good-bye or good luck. That's bad luck. You just tell them, "See you later."

"See you later," I replied, kissing and hugging her.

She entered her pod. The door closed. Hisses announced it was sealed, along with the green 'Occupied' light on the door.

That's the last time I saw Sandee. Man, I miss her. I might try to find her when this is over, I remembered thinking. Then the ship shook again.

I remembered my diamonds.

## Chapter 50

*Kimi ~*

I had an epiphany. I'd never asked Cashmere Lace who hired her to spy. I'd managed to think of multiple organizations who would spy on a think tank like us and didn't really consider it germane to her betrayal. I never considered that it could have been my employer, the Noble Corporation.

"I'm being targeted?" I asked my system. "Can you identify the bee models?"

The system did as I told Winston, "Bye," stepped into the teleporter and fed it my ship destination through my system.

"The bees are Grumman BlackICE Defenders," my system said.

I knew of Grumman BIDs. BIDs are paralyzing weapons. Grinning and waving, Winston turned away as the teleporter walls went glacier green and pinged its readiness to port me out.

"The bees are with you," my system said, just as I was beginning to tell myself that I was safe in the teleporter. "They are disabling your shields."

I'm a gamer and that pissed me off. My gaming instincts were triggered. Grumman BIDs were old and known technology. "Counter attack now. Disable them but don't destroy them. Disable and capture them. I want to use them."

A double bong announced I was being ported. Wondering what was happening with the war with the bees, I awaited an update as the swirl of porting embraced me, rose, and slowed. I figured the attacking BIDs were probably sophisticated. My gaming software, though old, was from another level, though. I was part of a Geek Society. Gearing up to defeat one another took us to highly advanced levels. I hoped the BIDs were still old technology and less than my own.

Another double bong announced the end of my journey. The swirling ceased. Green walls evolved. "Welcome to the Red Dwarf," a tenor said. "Please depart the stall."

I did. The Red Dwarf is an older, grand and comfortable ship. Built before internal ship teleporters debuted, they'd never upgraded and forced you to manually move around the ship. I suspect that's to keep passengers vulnerable to spending money. Marketing and guide bees jumped my systems, which duly notified me, processing for me the many food, drink and activities offered as a ship bee verified my ticket and directed me to my quarters.

"The attacking BIDs were disabled," my system said. "We could not capture them. They self-destructed. Sorry."

"No worries." That told me a lot. Destroying your bee when an attack failed is not a surprising tactic and one I used to employ to keep others from collecting information. Information is precious.

I stepped into the skimming lane and let the ship take me to my quarters. Whoever had attacked me had discovered I was with Winston. Although my systems had concluded they were from Noble Corporation, there was a chance that was a ruse. As valuable as information can be, disinformation can be equally valuable. It's a lesson learned by ancient armies and passed down to politicians, gamers and advertisers. Convincing someone that something is not what they believed is an honored and successful move.

Short of my quarters, I left the skimming lane. "Am I being scanned?" I asked my systems.

"Yes."

"Are any of them covert?"

"No."

That was a little disappointing. If I were the one going after me and I attacked at a teleporting station, then I would have someone at the other end to collect me. It was possible

they'd planned to hijack my porting and aborted that plan when I discovered their BIDs. It was also possible they'd lost me. More likely and just as possible, they knew they'd alerted me to their presence. Maybe that was all they wanted to do.

Walking through the Red Dwarf and nodding to others as I surveyed shops and restaurants, I thought through what my attackers may have been after. I decided I should assume that if they were from Noble Corporation, and Noble Corporation was Cashmere Lace's employers, they knew all about what had happened with me.

That line of thinking was wrong. Even were it not Noble Corporation, whoever hired Cashmere Lace knew what happened to me. They'd permitted her and her team to zap me into immobility and put me into stasis.

My initial reaction had been shock and outrage. Cashmere Lace had stolen fifteen years of life from me. But now I wondered and asked my system, "Is it legal for corporations to put people into stasis without their permission or knowledge?"

"The law varies between systems," my system replied, "but the Universal Corporate Mandate accepted by over eighty-one percent of the civilized systems permits a corporation to put people into stasis to protect itself."

Okay, that was basically as I suspected. So the corporation had legally put me into stasis to protect itself when I ported into her home and interrupted her meeting. But....

I had no memory of arriving in her place. I'd not witnessed anyone. They didn't need to put me into stasis to stop me from telling others. They could have done something to my memory instead.

No, that would have been illegal. Corporations are curiously circumspect about bothering memories.

After thinking about that, I asked my system to tell me about how legal that would have been and clarified that Noble Corporation would not have interfered with my memory. Per my terms of our contract, my brain and knowledge were valuable assets and protected from their manipulation. Noble had to agree to those terms to attract the intelligence and creativity they desired to push the envelope of human knowledge. They would put me into stasis to protect themselves but they would not have interfered with my brain while I was their employee because if that got around, they would have had trouble attracting the talent they needed.

I didn't see how that could get around. If people's memories were being wiped or manipulated, they wouldn't be able to tell others.

I was very dissatisfied with where my thinking had arrived. Another aspect occurred to me. Noble Corporation had not employed Cashmere Lace. Perhaps her employers had manipulated her memory of what had happened. If they manipulated her, they could have manipulated me but they would not have because I was another company's employee. It would make sense that they would manipulate her memory because she was a spy.

I remembered my Eureka moment.

I remembered porting to ChaWhana's place.

I didn't remember arriving there. I only know what ChaWhana was telling me. What if, I asked myself, I'd been jacked and didn't arrive at ChaWhana's at all?

What if this wasn't about what happened at ChaWhana's place but what happened before ChaWhana's place? They were bold what-ifs.

I needed to investigate them.