

### CHAPTER THREE

I stared at the mob blocking the crawlway ahead, screaming about what they were going to do to us when our force field failed. What they didn't know, was that they wouldn't be waiting very long. Another quarter hour and it would be over. The force field needed a hefty charge and the trickle of light in this part of the station was hardly enough to keep a tab going.

Hatred poured from the flixed stationers, stinking worse than their unwashed bodies and filthy rags.

*Why do they loathe us?*

Since then, I've seen similar situations. I reckon they were poor and desperate – while we were Other. And that was enough. Which made all the cautious double-checking of crew on shore leave that used to shred my patience seem less dankly paranoid. Because we'd always be Other - we never stayed anywhere long enough to be anything else.

A crazy idea took hold as I watched a pair of dreggers start twining around each other. The rest halted their hate-fest against us to join in or chant encouragement. I took a deep, shaking breath.

*What if – once I started – I couldn't go through with it? I'd have to – they'd charge if I buckled and by then, the force field probably wouldn't hold them back.*

Without taking my eyes off the copulating couple, I asked Wynn, "Do the chems stimming these bods get them revved..." I gestured at the action, "...like that?"

I didn't look at him. I couldn't.

Wynn might have been discussing the air temp, "Yeah. Seems to. Not that I've ever tried it. So I'm not on the inside track on this one."

*Which means if I strummed that vibe, it'd be the bestest diversion I could deliver for my little helpers. I got no choice.*

No point in putting it off any longer.

I turned to Efra, "How is he – really?"

Wynn's mouth was pain-pinched and sweat slicked his face, but his colour looked reasonably good.

"Not tipping into shock, or anything?"

Wynn scowled, his blue eyes snapping, "You could ask me. This knife in the shoulder didn't flix my thinking equipment, any."

*Glad he's frothed. If he was floored by his injury, he wouldn't care.*

I inclined my head, "Perdonarme, senior. I got a doomy decision to make and I needed to know you was airtight before deciding what to do."

Donice started. Again, "Don't you be jabbering 'bout how *hard* it is bossing us all around, *jefe*-"

*Basta!* "If you don't seal that black hole of a mouth - right now - you're gonna find yourself solo with only these dreggers to keep you company, *senorita*."

Her eyes widened, "You wouldn't..."

I locked looks with her, "Why the hell not? That's what you planned to do to me!"

Once she glanced away, I checked the force field monitor. My heart flip-flopped - only another six mins of power left. I'd wasted too much time. Not good enough!

I bit my lip. I *couldn't* flush Wynn out of the airlock – not even if it guaranteed the rest of us would get home safely. He'd done nothing, but help us and I

couldn't strand him. We might be shipmates – but I wasn't from the same fabric as Donice.

“Get down on the floor. And...” I glared at the girls, while tugging at my own ties, “...get your overalls off. He needs to be completely covered. For all our sakes.”

“What!” Alita's yelp bounced around the crawlway, “I'm not stripping in front of those slimers – what're you *thinking?*”

“You're wearing underclothes, aren't you?” I stepped out of my overalls, trying to appear like I was used to undressing in front of a bunch of howling dreggers - and the man of my dreams.

Raising my voice over the yowling catcalls and foot-stomping chorus from the dreggers, I shouted at the wide-eyed chicas, “You want to live to tell this tale to your ninos, then do it. Now!”

They did. But sooo slowly...

*I should've started this biz sooner – we're gonna run out of time. Damn... damn... damn!*

They grumbled about covering Wynn with their overalls, but were more than happy to lie in a heap on top of him, I noticed. Jealousy flared while I watched Efra gingerly arrange herself around his wound and Donice snuggle across his legs.

*Basta! I need to get a grip and focus.*

Gently pulling the flask out of the belt around my waist, I stuck my bum out and pranced to the edge of the force field, trying for the pout the girls wore in Ricardo's porn vids.

*Don't think... Just smile and strut my stuff. I've seen enough of Ricardo's collection to know how it's done.*

I was rewarded by an ear-splitting howl from the dreggers. Milla flung a knife at the force field. As I instinctively flinched, Norby cuffed her around the head and urged me on, all but dribbling.

*Ee-z-ee does it... Keep wriggling – don't forget to keep grinning and – and what else did those null-brained girlies used to do? Oh yeah - lick my lips. They were always licking their lips...*

Smiling, I cracked the flask behind my back, and dropped it while shrugging off the strap of my undershirt so it slid down my arm.

*The Cap would have a coronary if he saw this.*

The thought cheered me up. I hopped and high-kicked around in time to the foot stamping and whistle-blowing applause, willing everyone to wear their eyes out on me.

*Now for it...*

Pasting an extra big grin across my face and pulling my undershirt off, I paraded topless along the edge of the force field, flipping the horde of tiny moving 'bots towards the force field with my boots as I did so.

Blood pounded in my head as, dizzily reckless, I stroked my breasts.

*Hope no one is watching the floor. Thank the heavens it's so littered. With luck no one will see them till it's too late-*

I nearly froze when Norby dropped his trousers, openly masturbating. I won't repeat what he shouted. I wasn't giving it my entire attention, anyhow. Because I'd just realised that the force field had failed – and my little helpers were busy marching towards the dreggers.

My cheeks ached with all the smiling. And I was outright cold – which might've made my nipples erect, but the rest of me was starting to shiver.

*How much longer? Shouldn't they have gotten there, by now? What'll happen if this fails? We'll be raped within an inch of our sorry lives and probably killed – that's what... Mary, Mother of Jesus - help me.*

She must've been listening. My blood always runs cold when I think of the supermassive risk I took. The deal I made to get my collection of mini-bots was on the lawless side of dodgy – to cheat me would've been easier than breathing. Because I couldn't test them aboard the *Estrella* – and the damn techie must've known it.

Norby was still fondling himself as he marched towards me, “Knew you girlies were looking for some action – could smell it on you. Well I got something for you-” The leer on his face froze as he leapt in the air, squealing and grabbing his buttocks.

*Thank you... thank you... thank you...*

Weak-kneed with relief, I snatched my undershirt off the floor and wrenched it back over my head as the dreggers started thrashing around, clawing at their bodies. The mini-bots had been progged to access human bodies and harvest tissue samples – normally from corpses.

I'd talked to a chica who used them muy effectively against some seriously unwanted attention. So the last time we were at Laboratory Nineteen delivering medical supplies, I'd struck a deal with one of the techies - a batch of these beauties in return for a dozen bottles of the Cap's best brandy.

Well... not the Cap's. I'd have been spaced if I'd pulled a stunt like that – but I managed to wangle a deal with his supplier in return for-

Doesn't matter, does it? Not now. Not when they worked just like I planned. Except... the dreggers were now screaming and rolling around on the floor.

*The mini-bots aren't supposed to be lethal. This lot will recover – surely?*

Running back to the others, I shouted for them to move out at the double, but to keep Wynn draped in our clothing. Because I'd propped the 'bots to ignore Latino genetics – with the techie's help. And Wynn definitely didn't have much in the way of Latino genes. So if he wasn't covered up, the 'bots would attack him. And I couldn't guarantee that being so close, they mightn't start in on us, before realising that we were Latino.

We were able to scurry through the middle of the heaving, struggling dreggers, now busy screaming their throats out.

Normally the 'bots would grab a piece of flesh the size of my small fingernail and retreat. But the techie had managed to override their prog and persuade them to keep on and on cutting pieces out of a windpipe... or tongue... or anus... or nasal passage. After seeing Milla rolling around, purple-faced and retching, with blood pouring from her nose, I tried not to look too closely.

Our group headed towards the crawlway and ladder leading to the lifts and safety, while I stayed behind and as soon as they were far enough away that I reckoned the dreggers wouldn't want to follow, I tabbed for my 'bots to [Retreat]. The small machines clattered through the floor litter towards me, glistening with body fluids. My breakfast surged upwards in a disgusted heave. Swallowing it back down, my gut still churned as bits of skin and flesh continued to pile up at my feet as this revolting weapon plodded back into the container. Watching the dreggers' coughing up blood and roll around in bloody agony while waiting for the last mini-bot to return, I felt dirty.

*Yeah – and a few mins ago they were all set to make my life just as messily miserable. If I could've taken them out cleanly with an air gun, I surely would've. But regs is regs. No guns to be used on space stations or ships. Not even air guns –*

*except in life or death situations. But the Cap wouldn't cut me any free air over that one, will he? He'd argue that we'd no business being down here in the first place.*

*And he'll be right...*

*Damn... damn... damn...*

Blinking hard, I stumbled towards my group as they flung themselves into the crawlway.

“Right. Pick up the pace!” I shouted as I caught up. “Don’t think anyone is minded to follow, but they mightn’t be the only group looking for us.”

No one bothered to argue - a stinging change. Scrambling behind the others along the echoing crawlway on my hands and knees, I realised that Wynn was falling badly behind. It didn’t help that the damned crawlway was sloping upwards.

“Amigas!” The word fell out of my mouth, before I recalled they weren’t friends. Not any more.

For a wonder, they stopped anyhow.

I jerked my head at Wynn, now slumped against the side of the crawlway. “He can’t do this. If we spread our overalls on the floor, he can lie on them. You pull and I’ll push him.”

It wouldn’t have worked if we’d been in the modcrete tunnels or the littered corridors. But in this long metal box, we could do it... just. Alita and Efra took a leg each and hauled, while I pushed his shoulders – trying to avoid his injury. We got into a rhythm, where we pushed him along on a count of three.

Sodding Donice went on ahead of us. So, it made my decade when Wynn told us to make a left turn – and she had to backtrack to catch up.

When we finally got to the top of the ladders, Wynn sat up and handed las ninas back their overalls with smiles and thanks - before thrusting my overalls at me.

“Here. You better cover yourself up. The lifts are just around the next corner at the bottom.”

Wriggling into my overalls, I tried to smooth his ruffled machismo, “Look, I’d have gladly had you at the sharp end. But I’d already progged the ‘bots to attack anyone without Latino genes and there wasn’t time-”

His ice-blue stare froze my explanation as he interrupted, “Where’d you learn to prance around like *that*?”

*Hombres! They’re all the same. That’d be a question burning a hole in the Cap’s brain if he’d seen my performance.*

Flicking the fastenings closed with relief – I had goosebumps on my goosebumps by now – I [Unsealed] my pockets and tried to take his arm. “We need to get going.”

Wynn shrugged off my offer of help, still not moving, “And?”

I rolled my eyes, out of patience with all this cross-questioning. “I grew up alongside a boy - Ricardo. He was a few years older and when he started a business selling porn vids to the local kids, I helped him. So I got to see a lot of chicas wiggle their bods.” I put my hand out. “Now, can we get down to the lifts anytime this decade?”

Leaning against the wall, he flicked me a smile, “Fair enough. You gotta see it through my lens. Ship girls got a scuzzy rep for bedding anyone and anything that can give them a DNA readout.”

My turn to scowl. “And once you saw me distracting the dreggers with my act, you reckoned that we’d come down to Minus Zero for a sesh of truly off-limits sex?”

He reddened, as Donice swore and Alita tutted, before shrugging. As if it was *nada*. “Like I said – ship girls don’t have the best rep. I’m sorry. What more can I say?”

*Nothing. Not after making up your slimy mind that we were out whoring for any twisted kicks we could get...*

Anger surged in suffocating waves. “Not a damn thing. As it happens.”

He had the sense to keep quiet while Donice and Alita started climbing down the ladder. Then it was his turn.

“Don’t think I can do this... You go on. I can cut back and find the other lift on this level...”

“Don’t act even more ape-brained,” I snarled. “After what went down back there, they’ll tear you to pieces if they catch you.”

“Sweet lurve gone stale so soon?” Donice called up, “Didn’t he like the goods you was flaunting, chica?”

As Efra scurried to Wynn’s side, tutting over the state of his wound, I yelled down at Donice, “One of these fine days, someone is gonna fix it so you don’t say another nasty word. And I surely hope I’m around to see it.”

And I swear – as God is my witness – *I never* meant it. I was just fully fedded with her poisonous mouth, is all.

Meantime, I was getting frothed. We needed to stop hanging around as if this was some vacation. The mini-bots had done more damage than I’d expected, but we’d not left any corpses behind us - not that I saw, anyhow. Which meant that sooner or later – probably sooner – someone was coming after us.

I got my knife out and started cutting the legs off my overalls and tying them into strips. Looking up at Efra, I muttered, “You need to do the same.”

She just stared at me. I jerked my head in Wynn's direction, trying to hang onto my fraying patience. "He can't make it down the ladder without us tying him on."

Efra blinked, "But how will he manage the rungs?"

It was an effort to keep my voice quiet. "We tie the strips together into a sling that goes around his upper back, just below his arms and then round the ladder and me. So he won't fall as he moves his one good hand down the rungs."

I let out a relieved breath when she started reluctantly ripping her trousers up.

It took a long light year to construct the damn thing. And then Efra made a major event of checking his wound. Personally, I figure she should've left well alone. It hadn't been bleeding overmuch till then. But this was the moment when it chose to soak through the makeshift bandage.

Distant clattering echoed through the tunnel.

*That's it. We've run outta time. We should've been long gone by now. This time, I've no force field – and the dreggers won't hang around waiting for the mini-bots to march towards them a second time...*

"We can't wait any longer." I looked at him, shocked at Wynn's sudden pallor and the glazed look in his eyes.

"Leave me," he mumbled.

"Slam it shut and save your strength!" I snarled, while Donice and Alita yammered for us to hurry.

I swung onto the ladder with the sling over my shoulders and braced myself to take Wynn's weight as Efra helped him down onto the ladder.

He did his best to hang on and ease the strain on my arms – but they felt like they were being wrenched out of their sockets by the time we were halfway down the

damn thing. Then he lost his footing, slithering down the rest of the way, and dragging me along with him. His breathing was ragged and his hair was sweat-streaked as we thumped onto the floor.

Right in front of us was the lift.

Donice and Alita were already inside, waiting. Efra was treading on my heels in her hurry to join them. Without bothering to take the sling off, I hauled Wynn along with me.

The doors hissing shut behind us was a muy welcome sound. As the lift sped upwards towards safety, Wynn slumped against the wall, pulling me across him.

My head swam with the *nearness* of him. I closed my eyes, enjoying the contact - before remembering that I was still fedded with him. I'd just taken the sling off when the doors swished open.

Efra squeaked, "Papa!"

In the same instant, I heard el Segundo snap, "So. This is how you behave. Sneak off the ship and pick up any mongrel that'll have you. 'Ten-shun! Quick-march to the ship. At the double!"

Flinging myself upright, I faced a phalanx of grim-faced guards in *Estrella* colours.

And all I could think was - *Mary, Mother of Jesus, we are so buggered...*