

Chapter Nine

To call the planet where Cola's daughter was incarcerated backwater would've been extremely generous. There were heavy duty automated ships and mining robots trafficking through the area, but actual people seemed to be scarce, which meant this was a corporate town, one with significant financial backing, despite how rural it looked.

While lots of mining planets relied on manual labor, or at least some layer of human oversight regarding the powerful automated tools extracting precious resources from beneath the surface, some companies had cut out the middlemen and women entirely, and just let the machines do all the work, with a skeleton crew of people occupying a nearby town to perform repairs and maintenance, as well as provide a little bit of security.

That was both good and bad for Sketch. It was good, in that it meant the security team would likely be fat, lazy and undisciplined. It was bad in that they wouldn't have much else to do other than harass people who'd stopped by for whatever reason.

Sketch preferred it when they'd gotten complacent *and* they were too lazy to put up much of a fight, but it was certain that wasn't going to happen here. The planet was called Kenset. The town was called Kenset One. And when Sketch brought *The Praeteritus* to land at Kenset One, the sheriff was there to meet them at the port.

"Two hundred and eighty thousand ectash," the squat, almost dwarflike man said to him as soon as he stepped foot off the ship and onto Kenset soil. "That's how much it'll cost for you to get those two out of my prison cell. And not a single credit less."

In looking at the sheriff, Sketch immediately knew this was going to end up getting done the hard way, but he was still going to do his best to try and negotiate his way out of it. The man was built like a powerlifter, squat and square, the shape of an old earth fireplug, and he was dressed in a long black drover trench coat with a black silk vest, black silk slacks and a white linen shirt on, with a giant silver star that read 'Sheriff' on it.

"C'mon, Sheriff," Sketch sighed. "You know that between what the average fine should be and the estimated damages, you shouldn't be asking for more than a hundred grand in ectash, and even that's being generous. Hell, the water tower's even rebuilt already, so it couldn't have been that bad," he said, pointing over the sheriff's shoulder towards the newly erected structure.

"We had a new water tower that was supposed to be going up in a few weeks, but now we had to speed all that up, and that's always a pain in my ass when something goes off schedule, so you've got to pay what I call processing fees," the sheriff said to them.

"I got a hundred grand in ectash here that could be yours nice and easy if you just hand the two of them over to me, sheriff, otherwise we're gonna end up doing this the hard way," Sketch said. "And believe me, you don't wanna do the hard way. Shit, *I* don't wanna do the hard way. It's more work for me, and while I do get to *keep* the hundred grand I'm supposed to give to you, I'd rather you just take the money, I take the two troublemakers and nobody gets their panties in a twist over any of this."

"You make it sound like you got some other option than payin' what I'm askin', boy," the sheriff sneered at him.

"And *you* know that I do, sheriff," Sketch sighed, leaning against a nearby wall. "This here's a corpo town, which means corpo laws apply to it, but they end the minute we leave your atmosphere, and nobody's gonna take 'em seriously anywhere else. That means while you *think* you got loads of power here, it ends the minute I get off this planet. So all I have to do is get those two women out of your jail, onto my ship and get my ship off this hunk of dirt, and you are no longer of *any* consequence to me. I mention to any *actual* authorities how you were attempting to grift graft off the top of what was a reasonable settlement of fines, and, well, then you're just another hillbilly that nobody's got time for, and your argument is over."

"You really think you can break into my jail, steal two prisoners out from under me, make it back to your ship and then take off without any form of consequences?" the man said, stabbing a finger

in Sketch's direction the entire time.

"I can and I will, sheriff," Sketch said to him. "You can get all pissed off all you like, and you can even tell other people in your tiny little mining collective about my ship and how I caused you all sorts of trouble, but then of course I'm going to have to counter with a recording of you attempting to extort me for more than is reasonable, as well as me releasing recordings showing just how easy it'll be for me and my people to take down you and yours."

"You wouldn't..."

"Oh, sheriff, you have *no* idea the extent to which I would go about embarrassing your country bumpkin ass given the opportunity," Sketch said, leaning his back against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. "I could humiliate you six ways from Sunday before you could even get up in the morning, and there isn't a damn thing you could do about it."

The sheriff pulled aside his long coat, grabbed the handle of his sidearm and lifted it up to point it at Sketch, who only sighed a little bit more. "What about now, smartass? What say I just shoot you right here and then impound your ship and the money on it?"

"Tell you what, Sheriff." He unfolded his arms slowly, gesturing with a single fingertip in the man's direction. "If I can get that gun off you before you can fire a shot, you accept my kind offer to take the money and release the two women without further incident or hassle. You get the shot off before I can disarm you, well, then I'll just *give* you the hundred grand ectash *now*, as long as you agree that *when* I get the two women broken free and off the planet, you and me let this whole squabble die right then and there."

"Fine, you got a deal," the Sheriff said, right before he pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened.

With practiced accuracy, Sketch dropped down to his knees and then jumped forward, tackling the man, knocking the firearm from the man's hands with the sort of precision finesse he'd been known for back in his mercenary days. Once it was free, Sketch sprung back onto his feet and casually moseyed over to pick up the gun. "So, I'll meet you at the jail in half an hour with the money so you can give me my two people then, yes?"

The sheriff looked like he was about to explode, then made the wiser decision and cooled down, letting all the anger drain from him. "Fine. With two additional caveats."

"You're not much in the place for negotiating extras here, Sheriff," Sketch said with a wry smirk, "but I'm a reasonable man, so I'm willing to hear them out before I say yay or nay."

"First, you keep those two the hell off my planet for good. I don't want them coming back here, and if you personally have to bring you ship back to Kenset, you don't let them set foot off the ship the entire time you're here."

Sketch chuckled, surprised at how reasonable the sheriff was being, but also respecting the man for choosing the wiser of the two paths. "Yeah, that's a thing I can readily agree to. And the second?"

The sheriff rubbed his sore wrist, but then pointed over to his gun in Sketch's hands. "Tell me why the gun didn't work."

He smirked a little bit, as the sheriff was asking to know one of the tricks of the trade that Sketch had just employed to solve the situation. It would remove a little bit of the mystery of what he'd just done but if it made it so he could just get the two people and get them off this planet, he'd consider it progress. "Tell you what. I'll tell you after you release them, on my honor."

The sheriff reluctantly nodded. "Half an hour. I'll go start the paperwork." He turned and walked away from Sketch, who let out a light sigh of relief. He was, of course, capable of dealing with this Podunk bunch of amateur hour rent-a-thugs without so much as breaking a sweat, but there was always a risk in doing so, one that might come back to bite him in the ass later.

Sketched turned around and walked back onto the ship to fetch the money that Cola had given him to pay for bail. The sheriff's asking for more might've been fair, but then again, it might not have, and it wasn't really his concern to figure out either way. His job was simply get the people and get the

hell off the rock.

He was only a couple of minutes from the hull of his ship, so he was back there in a flash, finding Aliara and Serena there sparring with bo staves.

“We fighting or paying?” Aliara asked him as he ignored them and moved over to one of his various hidden compartments.

“Paying.”

“Bah, that’s no fun,” she scoffed, returning to take a swing at Serena, who was already moving out of the way.

“He took the money first offer?” Serena asked, jumping up as Aliara took a swipe at her legs.

“Second.”

“What was wrong with the first offer?” Aliara asked.

“I wasn’t being persuasive enough, I guess.” Sketch pulled the small satchel of ectash from the place he stowed it. There weren’t a lot of currencies that were accepted basically anywhere, but ectash was the credit of the Starless Dominion, so to *not* accept it would be basically admitting to treasonous behavior, something nobody wanted to do, regardless of how they might actually feel about the overlords that had seized control of humanity’s fate like so much errant cattle.

“What was the difference between the first offer and the second offer?” Serena asked.

“I explained what would happen to him if he *didn’t* just take the money.”

“He didn’t care for what you had to tell him?”

“He seemed none too pleased with it all, no, but he also tried to draw down on me, hoping he could shoot his way out of the problem.”

“Take it that didn’t work either?”

Sketch smirked. “It did not.” He headed back towards the door. “Either of you want to tag along, or you happy just to remain here?”

“I don’t think there’s going to be anything interesting going on, so you go and run your little errand and have your bit of fun without us,” Serena told him.

He shrugged and headed back off the ship.

The town of Kenset One was like a lot of barely inhabited planets he’d been on, so while the names of the establishments scattered around the place might’ve changed here and there, they were all basically the same things in the same places. A pub here, a company store there, a warehouse over in the corner, a movie house near the center of town. But at the center of it was the town hall, and just off to the side of that, where it usually was in such layouts, was the sheriff’s office and jail.

Like most of the buildings in most mining towns scattered through the galaxy, they were both relatively new but also looked like they’d been around for centuries, weathered and sandblasted to hell and back, the backwash from the mining machines tending to blow through the town in waves during the nights, stripping any paint or detailing that was done on the exteriors, which was why most of the identifying signs were riveted steel, designed to endure just about anything.

Sketch made his way to the front of the building and headed inside, finding it wasn’t much more than he’d expected it to be. The sheriff had made the right call to let him simply pay for the two and take them on his way, because the security of the place would’ve taken him all of four minutes to circumnavigate, and half of that was because he needed people alive.

“See you didn’t have any trouble finding the place,” the sheriff said to him. There were a couple of deputies milling around, and for half a second, Sketch wondered if the sheriff had changed his mind and was going to try and make a play for more money again. That passed a moment or so later as the deputies headed out the front. Sketch could hear them hopping onto a skiff, which then zipped off to go and solve some problem or other.

“Sign’s pretty clear what’s what. Your boys seemed to light off in a bit of a hurry. Anything you need to worry about?”

“Nah, Ol’ Erika’s causing a ruckus over at the warehouse, ‘cause her favorite boytoy’s away

on vacation and apparently he forgot to tell her. Nothing they can't handle." He glanced over at Sketch, and Sketch couldn't tell if it was admiration or annoyance on the sheriff's face. "You bring the coin?"

Sketch tossed him the small bag about the size of two fists next to each other across the room, which the sheriff caught easily. "You can count it if you want."

"Nah, if you're going to try and short me, I can just run you down before your ship gets off the planet," the sheriff said. "Besides, I thought about it some on the way back, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought I should be paying *you* to get those two shitheels out of my prison. They've been obnoxious as hell, and the longer they're here, the more miserable I am. C'mon, let's go get them so you can take them the fuck off my planet."

The two of them walked down a flight of stairs and over towards a series of jail cells, only a few of which looked occupied. There were a pair of oversized ruffians in the first occupied cell, but the second one had two women in it who could not have look more bored.

Sitting on the bench was Cola's daughter, Jezebel. Much like her mother, she had the same silver colored hair, and a similarly refined and pedigreed face. She was dressed, however, like she had been working on the frontlines of the mining area, brown slacks and a brown shirt, her silver hair done up in a tightly wound-up bun. She looked incredibly bored and held in her hand a leather ball that she'd been bouncing around the cell when they approached.

Laying on the ground was Jezebel's wife, Lara, sprawled out like she was trying to cover as much of the floor as she could, and she was a tall but slender woman, with brown hair to match her wife's attire but not her own, dressed in a jumpsuit that looked like a technicolor death pattern, colors running in every possible path without any shapes or even organization to the madness. If Jez was short and compact, Lara was tall and lanky. The two made an odd mismatched pair, but something about the duo just seemed to fit together naturally, as if they each complimented the other's ragged edges.

"Ladies, you're getting out of here," the sheriff told them. "Somebody's willing to pay more to get you out of here than I want to keep you here." He turned and looked at Sketch. "Although you do owe me one piece of information first," the man said to him, as he opened the gate.

Sketch chuckled and then pointed his chin over towards the weapon on the man's hip. "You're using Defron pistols, but you've clearly never been under real stress when you've had to use them before, otherwise you'd have calibrated it for a variety of biofeedback profiles. Your heartrate was elevated, which affected your body temperature, which meant your gun didn't recognize you, so for your own protection, it went into safety mode."

"My own gun wouldn't let me shoot it... for my own protection?"

Sketch shrugged with a little smile. "I've never much cared for Defron firearms," he said to the sheriff. "They think they know better than their operator, and that's never a place you want to be, arguing with your gun to have its permission to fire it. Safety features are one thing but refusing to operate under pressure's something else entirely."

"You're the person my mom sent to get me?" Jezebel asked him. "You don't much look like her normal type of flunky."

"That's because I'm not," Sketch said. "I'm an independent contractor."

"So, a *competent* flunky," Lara added.

The three of them walked out of the jail and back onto the dusty street as a heavy ore transport blazed down the street, kicking up loose dust around them, and Sketch suddenly understood the appeal of all brown attire, as dirt and mud caked on his legs to his annoyance. "Your last captain must've *really* hated you to just ditch you here. I mean, booting a medic is one thing, but losing your pilot is something much worse, and usually isn't a decision made lightly."

"What do you mean 'lightly?'" Jez said.

"He means pilots are usually only lost if they quit or if they die, Jez," Lara told her. "But it doesn't hurt if the captain's a capable pilot himself, or at least knows how to fake it well enough." Lara craned her neck to one side. "You're recruiting us for your ship."

“I’m *considering* it.”

“Wow, mom must either *really* like you or *really, really* hate you to try and pawn me off onto your crew,” Jez sighed. “I don’t think I caught your name, or the name of your ship.”

“I’m Sketch, and my ship is *The Praeteritus*. She’s a former Tropage vessel.”

Lara let out a sharp whistle of appreciation. “Don’t see too many of those around these days.”

“You know how to fly one?”

“Yeah, which is more than I can say for ninety-seven percent of the pilots you’re likely to encounter these days. I have about three months flight time operating one during a cross system mine out over at Dempsy’s Pit, simply because the Tropage ship they had, *The Emeritus*, had the kind of cargo hold that could keep everything total still. When you’re hauling renzium ore, the last thing you want is a rough ride, but *The Emiritus* was one of the smoothest rides I’ve ever had. How many modifications you made to yours?”

“Plenty, just because I’m not as tall as the Tropage are.”

“Were,” Lara said.

“They’re not entirely wiped out yet.”

“Might as well be,” Lara sighed. They reached the docks and the two new recruits caught their first sight of *The Praeteritus*. “That is one *hell* of a ship.”

“You want to take a shot at piloting her for a bit?”

“*You* know we’re a package deal, right?” Lara said, pointing at Jez. “I realize her skillset might not be as immediately obvious as mine, but she goes where I go, for better or worse.”

“Let’s get on board and we can talk about it further.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Jezebel had been remarkably quiet for most of the walk but as soon as they got on board the ship, the doors safely protecting their conversation from nearby ears, Sketch figured out why. “You’re the ex-Storm that my mom employs, aren’t you?”

Sketch turned his eyes to focus on Jezebel, and he was so tempted to give her a shove down one of the paths for the impertinence of asking such a question head on, but he resisted the urge for the time being. “I’m not an *ex*-Storm, no. I’m a Storm in hiding, because my religion’s been hunted to extinction by the Starless Dominion. And that’s what my ship is for – moving things that need to stay hidden. In terms of your mom’s smuggling operations, I’m one of her best.”

“*One of?*”

Sketch clicked his tongue in amusement. “I don’t know all the others, so I can’t say for *certain*, that I’m better than they are, but I’d like to think that I am. Everyone on this ship has a few secrets, so if you think that’s going to be a problem, I can just ferry you back to your mom now. Or, if you think that’s the kind of environment you can thrive in, I can give you both a test run and we can see if you’ll fit in around here.”

“How big’s the existing crew?” Lara said. Sketch was a little surprised they hadn’t run into Serena and Aliara yet, but suspected that maybe they were being watched, the two wanting to stay hidden until they’d determined how much they could trust their new potential shipmates.

“Four or three, depending on how you count. In addition to me, and Helen, the ship’s AI, I’ve got two other members, one for security and muscle, the other for linguistics and culturalism, both of whom are involved with me sexually, so if that’s going to be a problem—”

“It isn’t,” Jez cut him off quickly. “You going to demand to know our secrets?”

“I need to know what I’m protecting you from.”

“Who says you’d be protecting us from anything?”

“According to your mom, I’m probably protecting you from yourselves.”

“Your mom’s not wrong,” Lara said as Jez rolled her eyes. “Jez has PTSD, so she’s been using carabel to manage that, but you know how careful you have to be with that for it to not slip into addiction, I imagine.”

"I've met some carabel addicts in my time," Sketch said.

"Yeah?" Jez sneered. "Well, I ain't one. I'm using it for its given purpose and never more than I need as determined by a licensed physician."

"I thought doctors weren't supposed to self-medicate," Sketch said.

"Well, I thought all the Storms were supposed to be dead, so here we are," Jez grumbled. "I've had a couple of episodes where I overdid it, but mostly I've got it in check, and when I don't, Lara knows how to call me on it and dial it back."

They made their way up to the bridge, Sketch still not finding either of his two crew members there, to his annoyance. "And you, Lara? What have I got to worry about in your background?"

"Nothing you don't already have to worry about, sir," Lara said. "If you're trying to keep your background from getting noticed, doing the same thing for me should be easy enough. I don't want the Starless Dominion looking at me too intently either. I'm certain they wouldn't recognize me on sight, but if they needed to do a bit of digging, they'd probably stumble across a past where they'd much rather I was dead than alive."

"Any reason in particular?" Serena said as she and Aliara walked onto the bridge.

"Your majesty!" Lara said, dropping to one knee, lowering her eyes. "I had no idea you were still alive! Larana Cherinum Pizzicato, at your service. I was one of the transport ship pilots for the House of Sanada, but we were, of course, familiar with all the royal houses."

Serena looked at Lara with caution in her eyes, something he was pleased to see. "And who was your shift captain?"

"Captain Andreesan, ma'am."

Serena looked up at Sketch and nodded. "I say we give'em a shot."

"Very well," Sketch said. "You're now 'auditioning crew members.' That means you technically work for me, so you best treat me as the captain first and foremost all the damn time. I hesitate to describe our next mission as a milk run, because that means we'd be guaranteed all sorts of complications, but as it stands, it's supposed to be light in difficulty. We've got to go pick up a pregnant woman on one planet, smuggle her offworld and over a few planets to she can have the baby, then return her, sans baby, to where we got her. Should be a decent test of both your abilities. Let's get skyward, then."

There was a moment where everyone just stood still, except Sketch, who sat down in the captain's chair. Then it dawned on them, and Lara scooted over to the pilot's console. A few minutes later, they were bathed in stars again and on their way.