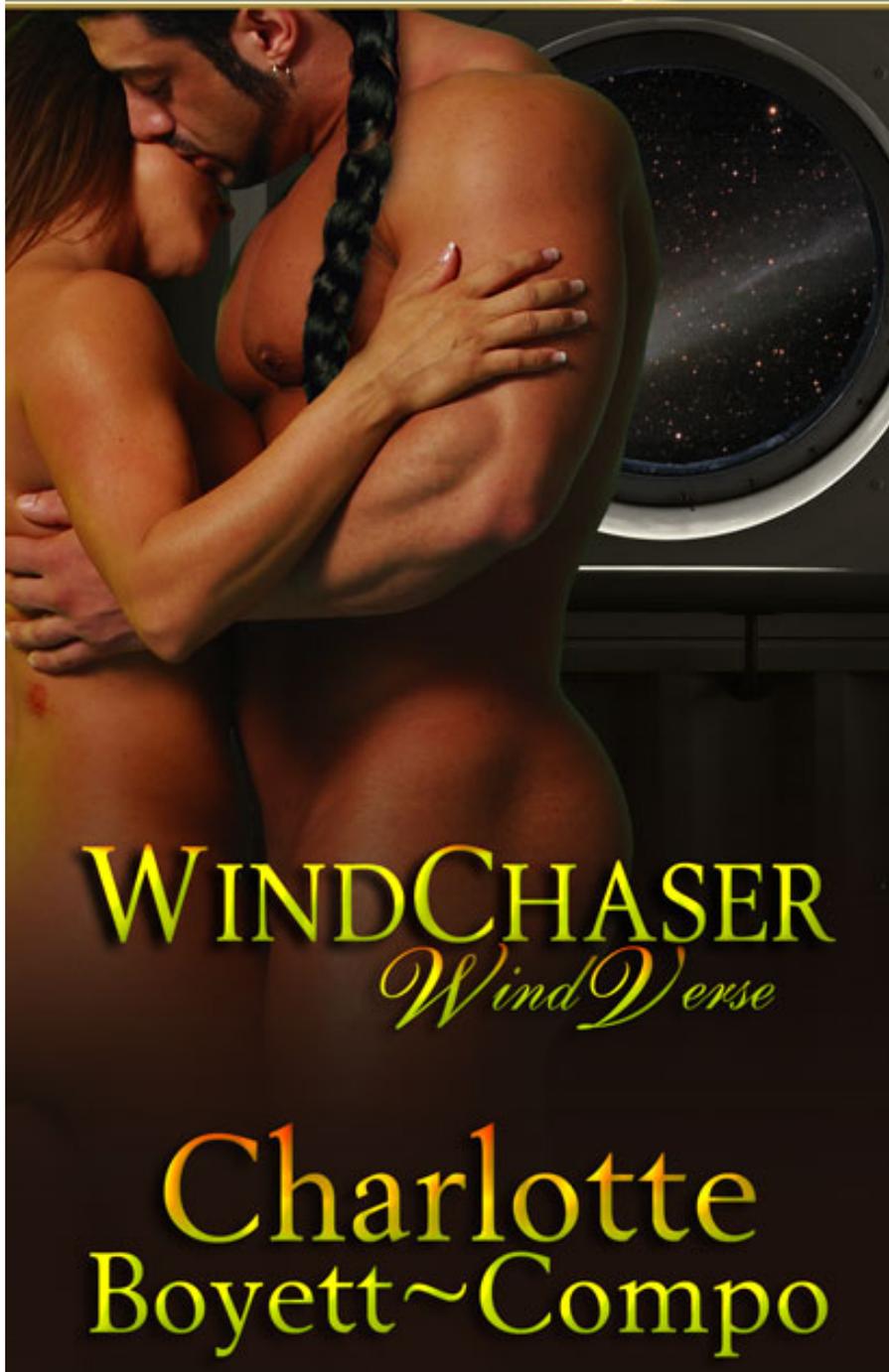


ELLORA'S CAVE AEON



WINDCHASER  
*WindVerse*

Charlotte  
Boyett~Compo

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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WindChaser

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# *WINDCHASER*

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

## Prologue

Major Jadelyn Shimota frowned at the stranger sitting behind the desk. Having just come off a deep-cover assignment in which she'd been completely out of the loop for nearly an entire year, she was in no mood to be thrown a curve. Jade expected to see Miriam Quillan smiling pleasantly at her, instead she was staring into the vapid eyes of a bleached blonde with lips the size and color of pomegranates.

"Good morning, Major," the stranger greeted her with a roll of those oversized lips. "General Strom asks that you go right in. Major Taborn is already here."

Jade blinked. "LaBella Taborn? The king's daughter?"

The secretary, whose name plate read Francine Melton, inclined her head without answering—an affection that never failed to annoy Jade.

"Where the hell is Miriam?" she snapped.

Francine sent a condescending smile toward the Chrystallusian warrioress. "Oh, that's right. My apologies, Major. I forgot you have been out of the loop, haven't you? Miri is on her honeymoon. She won't be coming back, so Command Central has given her job to me."

Taken aback by the news, Jade's thin eyebrows shot up. "Her what?"

Waving a dismissive hand, General Strom's secretary accompanied it with a brittle, phony laugh. "Again, my sincerest apologies. I don't suppose you had any way of knowing the Burgon was courting Miri. It was rather hush-hush, so only those of us in the know were aware of it." When Jade's mouth dropped open, Francine's smile turned nasty. "His excellency arrived with his son, swept Miri up in his arms and carried her straightaway to the priest. They were married within the hour and, after extricating his other son from prison before he could be executed, the four left in the emperor's Fiach. I understand he dropped both sons off on Aduaidh Prime before setting off on his honeymoon."

"Sons?" Jade repeated with a dumbfounded look. "Sons?"

"Aye, sons. As in two of them," General Maximillian Strom said from the doorway of his office. His blue eyes were filled with amusement. "And just wait until you learn their identities, Major." He beckoned her with a crook of his finger.

Ignoring the smirk on the secretary's overly made-up face, Jade followed the general into his office. She gave a curt bob of the head to the warrioress of color who was already seated before Storm's desk.

"You are well, Jadelyn?" Major Taborn inquired as she smoothed the sharp crease in her gray uniform pants.

Jade took the seat beside her fellow Riezell Guardian. "I am, Bella. How is your gallant brother?"

"Ayo is as arrogant and as selfish as ever," Bella replied. "He sends his regards."

"Extend mine to him," Jade responded. She turned her full attention to the general. "Sons, Sir?"

Strom leaned back in his overstuffed leather chair and steepled his fingers. "Before I get into that, have you heard the Burgon found O'Shay?"

Jade drew in a quick breath, pleased by the news. "No, I did not. I've no doubt the bastard is dead then."

"That is correct. His bones are slowly being scrubbed clean on the Planes."

Whistling under her breath, Jade relaxed in the chair. "Well, that is good news, although I am curious to know how O'Shay died in such a controlled environment."

"I'll let Major Taborn fill you in on those details, although one part of it I must tell you myself. O'Shay was hiding under the name Gerring Strom," the general said, frowning sharply. "Gerring was my father's name. I don't believe it was a coincidence he used that alias. The bastard was trying to rub my nose in his shit." A muscle flared in his cheek. "As for the emperor's heirs, it turns out his excellency had two offspring he knew absolutely nothing about until just recently. I must say one was a revelation that rocked the New Alliance and set more than a few warriors back on their heels as well as pissing off the Tribunal when they were denied punishing him."

"The fembot outside said one was about to be executed?" Jade questioned.

"That's an apt description of that prissy broad," Bella mumbled. "I will miss Miri."

"We all will," Jade replied.

Pretending he hadn't heard the exchange, the general nodded. "Execution was most definitely on the agenda as far as everyone at Command Central was concerned, but once our acting Burgon learned the prisoner was an illegitimate son of the emperor, he could not in good conscience sign the death warrant. Clemency had been asked—no, demanded—by the New Coalition so Ben-Alkazar thought it best the emperor handle the situation personally. Upon learning Rekia Nolz was his son, the true Burgon granted the warrior an imperial pardon, but I understand he has had him placed in prison on Aduaidh Prime where he will serve his rather lengthy sentence."

Jade gasped. "Rekia Nolz?" she repeated. "The New Coalition commander? The second most powerful man in the movement?"

"Not anymore, he isn't. The former third man in charge—Admiral Peyton DesGardens—took over Nolz' position," the general corrected. "It turns out it was DesGardens' half sister who was Nolz' mother."

"Mother of the gods," Jade whispered. "Ain't that a rancid kettle of fish?"

"But if discovering Nolz was his son irritated Ryden Bakari, it was finding out Rynlyn Rede is not only his son but his legitimate firstborn stolen from him at birth that eased the shock for him," the general stated.

The Chrystallusian warrioress was stunned by the revelations. Each one—from learning Miri and the Burgon were joined to hearing of Rede’s connection to the throne of Aduaidh Prime—was like receiving one electrical jolt after another. She slumped in her chair, turning her disbelieving face to the woman sitting beside her.

“Aye, it shocked me too,” Bella told her. “Though I must admit I’m happy for Ryn. If ever a man deserved good fortune, it’s him.”

“Aye, but...” Jade drew in a long, steadying breath. “I gotta stop going undercover. Every time I come back, the megaverse has leapt beyond my ability to cope. Chastain Neff gets married to a prince then gets pregnant and leaves the Guardians. Ardor Kahn up and marries the infamous Lord Savidos, who turns out to be none other than the resurrected Gabriel Leveche, then she becomes a Lady Reaper before leaving us. That infuriating Shanee Iphito also becomes a Lady Reaper after marrying a missing gazillionaire then decides she’d rather be a free agent and sets up her own agency with her new husband. Now all this intrigue concerning the Burgon?” She shook her head. “Hell, I don’t even know who the Principal RG is now.”

“A countryman of mine, actually. Commander Akysa Decker,” Bella reported. “Who left for a much-needed R & R this morning. So technically, that makes me the temp Principal.”

“Better you than me,” Jade mumbled.

“I’m afraid I will be handing the designation of temp Principal over to Lieutenant Colonel Dominia Alamaine,” the general informed them. “I have an assignment for the two of you.”

“Must be something major if it requires two Guardians,” Bella commented.

“I have that feeling too,” Jade put in.

“That’s because the two of you are very astute warrioresses,” the general complimented them. “Numbers two and three of what the Conclave considers its top five.”

“We know Akysa is number one so Dominia must be number four,” Bella said. “Who’s number five?”

“Lieutenant Commander Alexa Tyne,” was the reply. “The female Fleet fencing champion.”

“Good woman,” Jade said. “If women were allowed in the Order of Taibhse, there’s no doubt she’d be elected to membership.”

“My sentiments, as well,” the general agreed with a nod. He sat forward. “Now let’s get down to business.” He pointed to two small vid-pods on his desk. “Those are for you. You’ll be the first to own one of these new marvels.”

“All right! I love new technology,” Bella quipped.

The women leaned forward, picked up the vid-pods, and then settled back in their chairs before turning on the state-of-the-art media players. When the screen pulsed on,

the Guardians found themselves staring into the pale green eyes of a very handsome man with a white-toothed grin that could only be termed cocky.

"His name is Ranulf MacKirnan, codename WindChaser. The law has been after him for the last seven years but he is as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp. The Phantom Rory Quinn has nothing on that conniving little bastard, not to mention he's a master of disguise. I'm inclined to ship his ass to Hell-Twelve when we catch him for all the trouble he's given everybody, but the Burgon thinks he can be of use to the Alliance."

"Use as in working for the Burgon?" Bella inquired.

"Aye, that is the emperor's thinking," the general answered. "The Burgon wants to place him deep undercover."

"So we can't maul him?"

"Bruise him all you want, but no, don't stomp the idjut into a greasy spot as is your wont, Bella," he said with a look of amusement.

"That's good to know because it would be a shame to harm one hair on his pretty head," Jade remarked, for she found the face staring back at her mesmerizing. Though it was a striking visage and the criminal was smiling, the green eyes were gleaming with a diamond-cold hardness that was almost tangible. There was determination in that direct gaze and a message that the man lurking behind the orbs was one with whom a wise person did not trifle. He intrigued her and when she put a finger to his image, she felt a trill of energy run up her arm. She snatched her finger away from the screen.

"What exactly has he done?" Bella asked. She too was running the pad of her right thumb over the cheek of the image.

"You'd do better to ask what he hasn't done," the general grumbled. He closed his fist then his thumb popped up as he began to count the myriad offenses to be laid at MacKirnan's door—obviously having memorized with relish each count. "Arson, assault on a police officer, battery on a naval officer, bribery, burglary, civil disobedience, counterfeiting, criminal mischief, criminal trespass of a top-secret military installation, destruction of government property, disturbing the peace, eco-terrorism, embezzlement, escaping custody, extortion, fleeing the scene of a crime, hijacking, human trafficking, identity theft, illegal possession of a top-secret firearm, inciting a riot, interference with a law officer's performance of duty, intergalactic flight, intimidation of a public official, kidnapping of a public official. No, make that three public officials. Libel, obscenity, perjury, possession of a controlled substance, prostitution, public indecency, public intoxication, resisting arrest, robbery, running an illegal gambling and whoring facility, stalking, theft of a starcruiser and weapons running. The only thing he hasn't done—at least to the best of our knowledge—is commit murder, but it's only a matter of time."

"By the gods, he's a one-man crime syndicate!" Jade commented with a snort.

"He also has some pretty powerful psychic abilities."

"Ah," Bella said, nodding. "Now I know why Jade and I are being assigned to him."

"He's been accruing these crimes for only seven years? That is a lifetime of offenses," Jade wanted clarified. At Strom's snort, she asked if the Guardians had been sent after him before this.

General Strom's face bore a sour grimace. "No. Because up until now we were not asked to be involved in his apprehension, although the Conclave was more than aware of his criminal history. Before the accord was signed, MacKirnan was a Coalition problem only, but now he's branched out into New Alliance territory as well as causing mischief for the New Coalition."

"An equal-opportunity bad guy, huh?" Jade queried with a grin.

The general pursed his lips. "Had not the Burgon made the request that we find and bring him in, the *Poleenyn Eddyr-Cohollyssagh* would still be chasing the bastard all across the megaverse and missing him at every turn! Like I said, the man is a phantom."

"Those bumbling idjuts," Bella called the intergalactic policing force. "The PEC couldn't pour piss out of a gravity boot with the instructions lasered on the heel."

"Tracking him has been very difficult because they don't have his DNA on file to profile," the general stated.

"So a sequence reader can't be used to test for epithelials or hairs he might have shed in the area in which you're searching for him," Jade commented, and the general nodded.

"Hasn't he ever been arrested?" Bella asked. "They do DNA fingerprinting when a prisoner's processed."

"Aye, he's spent time in a few jail cells, but when he escaped, the samples and the profiles left with him, or were so damaged they couldn't be used in a sequencer."

"Damn, he's good," Bella said with a whistle.

"From where does this marvel of criminal adeptness hail?" Jade inquired, glancing down at the dark-haired criminal. "He has the look of the Chales about him and the gods know those bastards are as lawbreaking as they come."

"Funny you should say that," the general told her. "He's not from our part of the megaverse at all. He's from Terra. Scotland, I believe is the name of the country."

Jade's brows jumped into her hairline. "Terra? How the hell did he manage that?"

"Obviously he was here before the wormhole in the Sinisters was closed by the Multitude," Bella reminded her. "Unless he found another anomaly through which he was able to gain entry into our universe."

"No, he blundered through the old Carbondale wormhole over fifteen years ago, but he managed to stay off our radar until the last seven. The gods only know what crimes he committed before we became aware of him, or where he's been hiding," the general stated.

"That would have been right around the time the war began to level off," Jade suggested. "Before that, his antics would have been covered by the fiercest fighting that occurred during that eight-year period."

"That's my thinking too," Strom agreed. He leaned back in his chair. "I want you warrioresses to find him, shoot him full of pairilis, shackle him wrist and ankle then stick him in an E.S.U. until you get him to Riezell Nine. The Burgon—for whatever reason—wants him alive else I'd give you sanction to off his marauding ass."

"I thought the facility at R-9 had been shut down," Jade said.

"There's still a skeleton staff there and they've got one of the old Reaper containment cells with MacKirnan's name on it," the general informed her. "The Storians also maintain a base deep within the cave system."

"Leveche's territory," Jade declared.

"We'll need a ship that has an E.S.U. Ours doesn't," Bella said, referring to the extended sleep units that cryogenically froze sleeping crewmen for the long periods of time it took to travel about the megaverse.

"As soon as the Burgon requested us to find and arrest MacKirnan, I ordered a special starcruiser built for that express purpose. It will be top of the line with all the amenities you'll need while you search for him. It will also be fully stocked with whatever supplies you think you'll need beyond the medical ones that have already been stored onboard." He nudged his chin upward. "Advance the screen and you'll get a look at the prototype. It's a mid-size craft that requires a single pilot."

The Guardians thumbed the forward button and both grunted with appreciation. The sleek gunmetal gray ship looked to be all business. It had a weapons array that caused the women to sigh with contentment. There were no numbers or markings to identify the ship as belonging to the New Alliance.

"I am told it will outrun anything out there," General Strom told them. "It will most definitely run the *WindChaser* to ground. The smug bastard gave that name to his ship when he learned the codename we assigned him. Thumbing his nose at us, I suppose."

"What kind of ship does he have?" Bella inquired.

"The last we heard he had commandeered a brand-spanking-new skyraider warcruiser fresh off the Tappas Industries assembly line on Aduaidh Prime."

"Oh, that would have tweaked the Burgon's nose!" Bella laughed.

"Let's just say the emperor wasn't pleased," Strom replied. "He also has a crew of three women and five men who are loyal to him." He scratched his nose. "And what a crew he has."

"What do you mean?" Bella questioned.

"Among the men is a transvestite, two circus performers, a mentally challenged bodybuilder and a healer who lost his license to practice because of drug abuse. We know nothing at all about the three women, although it's rumored one of them is a sixty-something-year-old whom he fleeced of her entire holdings."

"What a guy," Bella said. "At least he's taking care of her in her advancing years."

"Do you have a last seen on MacKirnan, General?" Jade inquired.

“Three days ago he managed to elude the PECs by a scant five minutes over on Sauria. He stole one thousand compressed mega-bricks of pedryl crystal from the refinery near Jialgheer. That’s enough fuel to last him for an entire year.”

“So he’s more than likely somewhere in the Idimmu Galaxy still,” Jade said, hitting the reverse button so she could look at MacKirnan’s face. “If he stole fuel, that means he’s probably running low. He’ll need to hole up somewhere, shut down the skyraider’s engines to give the converters time to process one of the bricks.”

“That would be my guess,” the general agreed.

“The question is,” Jade drawled as she stared into the fierce eyes of her target, “where might that be? We need to find his home base.”

“He most likely has several. We just need to find the one in the Idimmu Galaxy,” Bella put in.

“The sooner the better, ladies,” General Strom insisted. “Study his profile. Memorize his hangouts, acquaintances, everything you can about him. I don’t want him to slip through our fingers.”

“We’ll get him, Sir,” Bella said.

“Aye we will,” her new partner agreed. “As you said, Sir, it’s just a matter of time.”

## Chapter One

The man for whom every intergalactic police officer in the megaverse had been searching for seven years, and who was now at the top of the Riezell Guardians' Most Wanted list, was at that moment enjoying the sweet pleasures of a truly limber Seabhachuan lass whose pierced tongue was driving him wild.

"Oh yeah. Right there, baby. Right there," Mac whispered. "Oh yeah. Right there, honey. That's the sweet spot." His hand flexed on her scalp as she ran the gold stud in her tongue along the base of his cock and the middle finger of her right hand pressed hard on his prostate.

He spread his legs wider, letting his knees fall far apart, and looked up at the other woman in whose lap he'd laid his head. Her fingers were tight on his nipples – twisting so boldly, so brutally – while her sister lapped him like a lollipop then swallowed him down to his very core. He could smell the musky perfume from the feminine juices of the woman above him and turned his cheek to plant a kiss on her bare thigh. He dragged his tongue over the sensitive flesh and was rewarded by a particularly savage pinch that made him writhe.

"You like that, Mac?" the woman above him asked.

"Yeah, baby," he said, his nipple aching from her punishing twist. "If you dish it out, I'll take it."

And he'd been taking it for most of the day. The sisters had worked for him when he'd run a gaming hell on Bhrasail and had made him a whole lot of gold bullion. Laran, the one whose mouth was doing such wicked things to his rod, was the prettier of the two, but Ione, with her long red nails, gave him more pleasure. Both were heavy into the sadomasochistic side of sex and Ione had a cruel streak a galaxy wide. What she didn't know about torturing a man had yet to be invented.

"You taste so good," Laran said as she released her taut suction on his cock. "And you're harder than I've ever seen you. Why is that?"

"Must be the pain, baby," he told her, squirming. He raised his head to give her a wink. If he were a normal man, the deep scratches caused from their intense lovemaking session could leave scars, but he wasn't normal.

Not anymore.

"Hand me my kit," Ione ordered her sister. "I'm going to give him a real treat."

A tremor of combined unease and anticipation traveled down Mac's spine but he made no move to put a stop to whatever torment his lover had planned for him. Instead, he eased his legs down, extended his arms until he was spread-eagle at her mercy.

“Worried, my love?” Ione questioned as she opened the healer’s kit that was never far from her side.

“Nope,” he answered as she took several items out of the kit and placed them on the bedside table beside her.

“I’ve wanted to do this for quite some time,” Ione told him. Snapping on a pair of latex gloves, she spread her fingers wide to fit them to her hands.

For just a split second he felt a trill of disquiet wriggle through him as she picked up a holder and secured a twelve-gauge needle between its teeth. Laying the needle aside, she reached for a foil pack containing a sterile swab.

Mac released a long breath for he knew precisely what she intended to do. He swallowed hard as she cleaned his nipples but watched her gloved hands at work. When she brought over the pair of slotted forceps—the triangular heads looking menacing as she peeled apart the sterile wrap covering them—then clamped them to his right nipple, he winced more from the coldness of the metal on his flesh than any discomfort caused by the tight constriction.

The pain as she pierced his nipples was not as bad as he would have thought it would be. Endorphins were racing through his system the moment the needle touched his taut flesh and he reasoned that might have been why the pain seemed less than expected. He was, however, breathing hard as she cleaned the small amount of blood away with a cotton ball saturated with a sea salt solution that stung the new wounds.

“We’ll need to use this a couple of times a day until you heal,” Ione told him.

She took a small silver box from her kit, opened it and took out what she informed him was a nipple shield. “I had it made especially for you,” she said. “One of a kind.” She held it where he could see.

“It’s a dragon,” he said of the round, gold adornment. Fashioned so the two shields would face one another when worn, the dragon bodies curled in an intricately segmented circle in which the beast clamped its forked tail between its jaws. Fiery red rubies formed the eyes and the two jeweled balls that held the shield in place over the nipple also held rubies.

“You like them?” she asked.

“Very much.”

She thrust a sterilized twelve-gauge bar through each nipple then positioned the shields behind it before screwing the ruby-studded balls into place.

“I love them!” Laran said. She reached up to touch one of the shields, but her sister viciously knocked her hand away.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Ione hissed. “Your fingers are not clean, bitch! He’ll get infected.”

Laran’s face turned red but she nodded.

“You want to do something,” Ione snapped at her sibling. “Suck him hard. I want to see him come.”

Mac was afraid Ione would continue tweaking his sore nipples as Laran set about bringing him to a climax, but instead she contented herself in running her fingers through his hair and down the sides of his face. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation.

“Captain?”

The intrusion of the vid-com didn’t stop Laran, but it caused both Mac and Ione to sigh with irritation as they turned their heads toward the screen.

“Aye?” Mac bit out, reluctantly opening his eyes.

“We received a transmission from Command Central,” Dirque Brody, Mac’s third in line of command, reported.

“So?”

“They’ve sent the Riezell Guardians after you.”

“Guardians as in plural?” Mac questioned.

“Two of them. Both women.”

Laran released her strong suction on Mac’s engorged shaft, his cock leaving her mouth with a loud pop. “Oh, that’s not good,” she said, running her tongue over her lower lip.

“We knew it had to happen,” Mac stated. “Do you know who the women are, D.?”

“We do, and I’ve everything I could find regarding them downloaded to your personal computer.”

After a thirty-second silence, Mac told Dirque he’d be in his office in half an hour.

“Gods-be-damned interfering bitches,” Mac said then sighed heavily. He lowered one hand to Laran’s head for she was once more drawing on his flesh as though she were starving.

If there was one thing in which Laran excelled, it was in blowing a man. She’d trained herself to do deep throat to absolute perfection. Unless a man was extremely large and much longer than normal, she could relax her throat until she had every last inch of him enveloped in her hot little mouth. And her tongue was just as highly skilled. It was said she could actually make it vibrate around a cock—fluttering the flexed tip while dragging it along the cock’s length.

“You’re not massaging his balls, Laran,” Ione complained. “Squeeze them, bitch! Hard!”

Mac tensed as Laran ran her free hand up his thigh and curled her fingers around his sac. He often watched her roll metal exercise balls around and around in her hand without once clicking them together. Her talented fingers were strong and flexed on his scrotum with such precision his cock hardened even more. She tightened her hand on him. What she was doing to his body made him begin to pant with the pleasure-pain.

The pressure was building in his rod—itching, burning, throbbing until he gripped the coverlet tight with one hand and with the other he threaded his fingers through her hair then arched his neck as he came so hard he saw stars.

He bucked. His toes curled. He stopped breathing as jets of fluid pulsed from him until he was completely drained. The moment he collapsed like a broken toy, Laran was up and over him, her bare breasts molded to his chest. Sucking in a breath at the pain the pressure caused, he slapped his hands to her shoulders and pushed her away.

"Um, good!" Laran said, licking her lips then lapping every last drop of his cum. "I love the way you taste. I want you to taste you." She would have kissed him had he not put a hand to stop her.

"Not right now. Let me up, baby," he said, pushing up from the mattress. "We'll continue this later." He knew if he didn't satisfy the two women, he'd never hear the end of it.

Her lower lip thrust out in a pout, Laran scampered from between his legs and rose from the oversized bunk. She reached for his pants and held them out to him as he stood. "You promise?"

"Yeah, baby. I promise," he said. "I've got to go do a little work right now."

"Oh, all right," she said, flouncing back down on the bed, her large breasts jiggling enticingly.

Ione sat where she was as he pulled on the pants then his boots before plucking his shirt from a nearby chair. "Leave it off," she ordered, and when he cut his eyes to her, she cocked her head to one side. "I mean it, Mac. Leave it off."

He frowned but tossed the shirt aside. The thought of the material touching the piercings didn't appeal to him anyway.

"How long before they heal?" he asked.

Ione shrugged. "A month," she replied. "Possibly longer. It depends."

He looked around at her when he reached the door. "On what?"

She shrugged. "How often we have rough sex between now and then. You know how carried away you get," she replied, batting her lashes at him.

Mac snorted as he slapped his hand on the door control panel, but as soon as the portal shushed closed behind him—blocking off Ione's view of him—he shuddered, dropping his head to his chest. His nipples were on fire and the pain was beginning to wear on him. He looked down at the red, swollen flesh and shuddered again. Sometimes he allowed Ione to go just a little too far, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine Belial was waiting in Mac's office. The fifty-nine-year-old woman was sitting in the chair across from his desk and did not turn to look at him as he entered. A smile pulled at her lips as his fingers trailed over the nape of her neck before he skirted the desk. Her smile slipped away as she saw the livid nail marks down his chest and the new jewelry he was sporting.

"Don't say it," he said as he took his chair.

The Meiriceánach woman who was his second-in-command made no comment, but her green eyes narrowed just a fraction then relaxed. She raked a hand through her short salt-and-pepper hair then folded her arms over her ample chest.

Feeling the censure coming from his 2-I-C but knowing she would keep her thoughts to herself, Mac leaned toward the twenty-seven-inch vid-screen on his desk where the official photos of two women sat side by side.

"Taborn and Shimota," he said then glanced up at Celine. "From the royal houses?"

"Their fathers are king and emperor," she replied. "Ironically both are seventh daughters of seventh daughters and both were born with caul. What does that tell you?"

"That they are going to be formidable opponents."

"Taborn is the number two Guardian in the corps and Shimota is number three."

Mac leaned back in his chair. "I guess I didn't rate number one." He put a hand to his temple and began rubbing.

Celine got out of her chair and came around behind him, sliding her hands to his shoulders. She began massaging the tight muscles. "You know gods-be-damned well why they sent two psychically adept women after you, Mac. Their Principal can't hold a candle to what Taborn and Shimota can do."

"But can they bake a cherry pie quicker'n a cat can lick his eye?" he mumbled, closing his lids to the wondrous feel of the tension leaving his body.

Accustomed to such strange questions from her boss, Celine said nothing. Mac's odd phrases, sayings and curses came with him from Terra and were not always understood by his crew.

"Shimota is especially dangerous," he heard Celine say. "Her weapon of choice is a very sharp twelve-inch-long ten-gauge titanium needle she carries in a special sheath sewn into her right pant leg. One jab through a man's ribs and it pierces the heart and comes out the other side. She has her move down to perfection. She's dangerous, Mac. She has no conscience and has over two hundred kills to her credit. She doesn't even bat an eye when she snuffs out a man's life."

"Humpf," he commented, opening his eyes to stare at the pretty Chrystallusian warriorress. He felt a jolt of electrical energy sizzle through him as he stared at her. "Wicked."

"You need to be very careful with her, Mac."

He reached up to take her left hand and bring it to his mouth. As he memorized the faces of the Guardians who would be coming after him, he nibbled playfully on Celine's slender fingers, smiling as her other hand moved to his hair. He raked his teeth over her thumb then drew it deep between his lips.

"Must you allow them to hurt you, sweeting?" she asked just as he knew she eventually would.

He took her thumb from his mouth. "It didn't hurt that much."

“Bullshit, as you are so fond of saying,” she remarked dryly. “For the love of the gods, I wish you’d leave those two perverts on some Class Five world where there are men more deserving of their hateful torture.”

He twisted his head to the side to look up at her. “You don’t think I deserve their cruelty?” he asked, one eyebrow raised. “There was a time when you thought torture was just what I needed.”

Celine tried to pull her hand from his grip, but he would not allow it. He clamped his teeth lightly on her thumb again then ran his tongue over the tip.

“Let go,” she said, tugging.

Mac sighed but released her hand. He watched her walk back around the desk and wasn’t surprised when she didn’t sit but continued on to the door.

“You wanted my head on a silver platter if I remember correctly,” he said softly.

Celine stopped with her back to him. “Aye, well, that was before,” she said then pressed her hand to the door panel and left.

Mac shifted his shoulders, wincing as his nipples throbbed brutally. He lowered his gaze to his chest once again—fascinated by the nipple shields—and had to admit he really liked the adornments. He wasn’t altogether sure they were manly jewelry, but Crystal would like them and Ione couldn’t have picked a better symbol that defined Ranulf MacKirnan.

Tearing his attention from his aching nipples, he returned it to the vid-screen and the two bounty hunters who would be coming after him. He took the woman of color first, clicking on the information folder that had all he’d need to know about her.

“Ayo’s little sister,” he said, a tad unsettled about going up against that hulking Necromanian, but he knew in an unfair fight he could take the burly warrior. He also knew a man didn’t fight combatants like Ayo fairly if he wanted to come out of the encounter in one piece.

And especially not if that combatant’s family honor was at stake.

“Twenty-four years old,” he read of Princess LaBella Anyse Taborn. “Five feet, nine inches, one-hundred-and-forty-three pounds. Thirty-eight, twenty-two, thirty-six.” He returned to the vid-photo of her and studied the beautiful dark face. “Hey there, sexy,” he said. He memorized her face with its chocolate eyes and black dreadlocks hanging in a thick curtain down to her waist then went back to the data that had been sent to D. from their spy at Command Central. By the time he finished the file, there was nothing he didn’t know about Bella Taborn. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and softly repeated aloud everything he knew of her, ending with a private description of the way she looked to him.

“You have a minute, Cap’n?”

Mac opened his eyes to find Dirque standing in the opened doorway. “Whatcha need, D.?”

“Bruno stabbed Gunter again.”

“How bad?”

“Bad enough to put Gunnie in sickbay for a day or two,” D. replied as he came over to sit in the chair in front of Mac’s desk. It took some doing for the man had been bodybuilding since he was four years old and was a mountain of bulging, toned flesh. His thighs were nearly as big as Mac’s waist and the chair creaked beneath his solid weight.

“What were they arguing about this time?” Mac asked, lips twitching as D. stared openly at the nipple shields across from him. “I’m up here, D.”

D. blushed, jerked his gaze from Mac’s chest to look him in the eye. “Something about a less-than-stellar performance they once gave on Ghaoth. I think the matter’s been festering in Bruno’s mind for a while now.”

“At least they weren’t fighting about Crystal this time,” Mac said with a snort.

“She’s in her quarters crying her eyes out over this,” D. reported. “You might want to drop in on her.”

“When I’m finished here.” Mac put his fingertips to his tired eyes and rubbed. “I have Taborn down pat but I haven’t started on Shimota.”

“You need to sleep,” D. advised. “How many hours you been up straight now? Thirty? Forty?”

“Closer to fifty,” Mac replied, “but at least I’m no longer horny.”

D. grinned broadly. “Getting your rocks off is more important than sleep anyway. Sleep is highly overrated,” he quoted Mac.

“You got that right,” Mac replied, but gave himself away when he yawned.

“Why don’t you take a snoozer? You really do look tired.” D. pointed to the vid-com. “Tackle Shimota when you’re bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

The man across from him was the best friend Mac ever had – even when he was still on his side of the megaverse. They met four years before on an *Fhrainc* in a filthy jail cell – both beaten to a pulp and bleeding – and had bonded almost instantly. When Mac escaped, he’d taken D. with him. They hadn’t been apart since.

A whiz with computers and anything mechanical, D. had never met a circuit board he couldn’t rewire in his sleep. He could take apart anything that ran, put it back together again and have it be much better, much faster and more efficient than it had been in the first place. He could jerry-rig, hotwire and replicate broken parts with the best of them, and was a genius when it came to fixing just about anything – mechanical or otherwise. There was only one thing wrong with Dirque Brody – he was mentally challenged. An endearing, fiercely loyal friend and more than competent warrior, he nevertheless had the mind of a thirteen-year-old boy.

“I’ll hold down the fort.”

Mac smiled. One of the charming habits D. had was repeating back to Mac at opportune moments every colloquialism, proverb, piece of slang and filthy curse Mac

had ever uttered. And the man – who had just celebrated his thirty-first birthday – did it with aplomb.

“Okay,” Mac agreed, knowing it would do no good to argue with D. His friend would whittle away at him until Mac did what D. thought was best – mother hen that he was. “But wake me up in two hours.”

“Five,” D. countered.

“Four.”

D. shook his head firmly. “Three.”

Mac nodded. “Done.”

D. didn’t move from the chair until Mac levered up from his and walked over to the sofa and stretched out. Only then did he get to his feet, reach across the desk to lower the overhead lights then turn to the door.

“Thanks, D.,” Mac said as he laid an arm over his eyes.

“Sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite,” D. said, tiptoeing out in such an exaggerated way it was all Mac could do not to laugh.

Once D. was gone and the quiet settled on him like a comforting blanket, Mac slipped easily into sleep with the image of Bella Taborn firmly in his mind’s eye. Now all he had to do was find her.

## Chapter Two

Bella sniffed disdainfully at the computer-generated food that was meant to represent her favorite dish. Her upper lip quirked. One eyebrow rose. She stared at what was on the plate for a long moment then shrugged and carried the offensive fare to the table.

"This has no resemblance to hoender whatsoever," she complained, dropping the tray onto the tabletop.

"No more so than what I am eating resembles sakana, but it's food," Jade grumbled. She was sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her and crossed at the ankle. Clad in a black tank top and loose-fitting black workout pants, she was studying MacKirnan's profile as she ate.

Poking at her food, pushing it around on the plate for a minute or two, Bella finally resigned herself to trying it and scooped up a forkful. The look on her face said she expected it to be as odious as it looked, but once she tasted it, she cocked a shoulder.

"It's not that bad," she pronounced.

"Could be worse," Jade agreed, placing her chopsticks on the edge of her bowl. "Listen to this. Our target's father owned a crop-dusting service and by the time MacKirnan was twelve years old, he was already flying his father's planes solo. He has doctorate degrees in both engineering and physical science, graduating at the top of his class before joining something called the European Space Agency. He became a flight engineer on the Prometheus Space Station and it was from there that he stole an experimental starcruiser and took it through the wormhole just prior to the anomaly being imploded."

"Aye, I read that. Makes you wonder what he did on the space station that warranted him fleeing, doesn't it?"

"Something that would have no doubt landed him in a penal colony had he stayed," Jade quipped.

"Lucky for him the wormhole was there, I suppose. It's a good thing it was closed. Remind me how the Terrans found it in the first place."

"Well, if I remember my Rysalian history, those bastards had been using the anomaly for decades to go to Terra to bring back captive females to repopulate Rysalia Prime. The Terrans most likely discovered it for themselves from following the heat sigs. Twenty-five years ago it wasn't uncommon to find Terrans on our side of the megaverse. I think there are still some on Serenia, Chale and Rysalia Prime. They breed like guppies."

"We have a few on Necroman too, though I've never met one. Have you?"

Jade shook her head. “No,” she said. “It is believed their world was populated by travelers from our side of the wormhole.”

“Gods-be-damned Rysalians will jump anything that moves,” Bella joked.

“My first lover was an idiot,” Jade confessed. “But he wasn’t half bad.”

Bella snorted. “My first was one of my father’s personal guards. It’s a good thing I came else as bumbling as he was, I’d have swung the other way!”

The two women laughed, Jade commenting that the poor man was probably terrified he’d lose his head for screwing the Necromanian king’s daughter so his performance had suffered.

“As handsome as our target is, I can’t help but speculate what he would be like in the sack. I’d sure like to find out,” Bella said. “That charge of prostitution has me intrigued.”

Jade turned off the vid-pod, stood and took her bowl and tray into the galley. “I just want to find his ass and get it to R-9.”

“His capture could mean a commendation for each of us,” Bella suggested. She decided she’d had enough of the mock hoender and also rose to her feet. She brought her tray over to the disposal unit.

“I thought about that,” Jade acknowledged. “I could use a pay increase that comes with a medal or two.”

“You and me both. What I need right now, though, is a quick sonic shower and the rack.” Bella grabbed a bottle of iced water.

“See you in the morning, then,” Jade told her. “We’ll leave at 0500.”

Bella headed to the elevator that would take her down to her quarters.

The *Caomhnóir*—the starcruiser designed to be flown by a single pilot—that had been assigned for their use was first class, Bella thought as the elevator doors shushed open without a sound. Everything was top of the line even if the food simulator was no better than any others she’d ever experienced. Her quarters were minimalistic in regard to furnishings, but she had everything that was essential and all that she really needed. She’d tried out the bunk and it was firm and comfortable and calling to her as she entered the sleeping area. Stripping off her pullover as she walked to the adjacent bathing pod, she let her clothes drop where they fell. Entering the plexshield-enclosed shower, she wished instead of the sonic bursts of tepid air peppering her body it was a warm jet of soothing water.

Sighing, Bella lifted her arms, turned her back to the vertical row of one-hundred-and-eighty-degree arcing nozzles to let the air bursts pound against her tired body. She stood that way for a few moments then turned around again, giggling because one nozzle was placed where the blast of air was striking between her legs.

“Nice,” she said, spreading her legs to better experience the feeling. She closed her eyes but then snapped them open as she felt fingers curling over her clavicle, exerting pressure.

It was at that moment she found herself completely unable to move, to even blink. Rendered immobile, she was shocked to realize she could do nothing to break or minimize the neuropressure being applied. When a body molded to hers and warm lips grazed her ear, there was no doubt in her mind who had invaded her shower. His words confirmed it.

"I hear you're looking for me, brown sugar," he whispered, his soft breath sending shivers down her spine as it spiraled into her ear.

She couldn't speak either, so yelling for her partner was out of the question. Every inch of her body where it touched his was tingling with heightened awareness. Her analytical mind realized he was sending neural energy through the fingers molded over her shoulder and that energy was traveling through the carotid artery to her brain to shut down all function of the primary motor cortex, which is responsible for controlling execution of movement.

His teeth clamped gently on her earlobe, his words like silk. "Well, I'm here."

Unable to control the shivers that traveled down her sides, she drew in a gasping breath as he spread the fingers of his right hand across her chest to capture her left breast. He squeezed lightly, circling his palm over her nipple slowly, sensually, until she felt it turn into a hard little pebble.

"You were curious about what I'd be like in bed," he questioned, teeth tugging on her lobe. "Do you really want to know, baby?"

She couldn't answer, but she knew the question was rhetorical anyway. She was in no position to either deny or agree. Helpless to prevent him from doing whatever he wished was both heady and terrifying. His palm was rubbing against her nipple, a hard bulge was poking at her through his pants and his tongue was suddenly invading her ear, probing the opening as his teeth raked gently over the sensitive flesh.

His hand dipped lower, gliding down her belly, grazing her navel, traveling lower still through the crisp curls at the juncture of her thighs.

"I want you," he whispered. "Even if you don't want me."

The tip of his middle finger touched her clit and though she could not speak, a small groan slipped from her parted lips.

"You like that?" he questioned, swirling his tongue around and into her ear. He nipped her earlobe then pressed hot kisses down the column of her neck as he made tight little circles with his finger on her sensitive nubbin. "You do, don't you?"

He ground his erection against her bare ass, nudging her stiff body forward with the motion. He tortured her clit until she wished she could scream. It was hard and throbbing, aching, then his finger moved lower, delving down one slick fold then up the other before sliding slowly into her wet sheath.

If they had been capable, her legs would have buckled at the intimate intrusion.

“Oh baby, you are so slick, aren’t you?” His voice against her neck sent ripples of pleasure down her body. He insinuated a second then a third finger into her aching cunt. “You are so hot and slick.”

In and out his finger moved – gliding up her clit with each removal, sliding down it with each penetration. She was panting, her blood racing thick through her veins, head pounding, her body needing something larger, harder, wider thrusting into it than just his finger.

She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was either going to deliberately make her come on his questing digit, or going to take her the very limit then leave her wanting, frustrated. The thought of him suspending the deep probing without giving her the satisfaction she was beginning to crave was a horrid thought.

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” he cooed into her ear. “Not in a million light-years would I do that.”

Wanting to arch her hips forward against his finger, rub her ass against his hard shaft, all she could do was stand there and let him ravish her. And by the goddess how she wanted him to ravish her! She pictured his handsome face hovering over her as he blanketed her body with his harder one. Imagined him kneeling her legs apart to bracket himself between her thighs. Wanted to know the weight and heat of his body on hers, the gliding of that muscular flesh along her own.

“You gonna come for me, darling?” he whispered, tongue once more swirling at her ear. “You gonna come hard for me?”

The pressure was building in her body and his words made her womb clench. She wanted nothing more than to come, to experience the burst of sheer pleasure the act always brought. Sweat was glistening on her upper lip as she strove for the orgasm. It was lurking there between them, waiting to settle over her with powerful ripples that would grip and release his fingers in a tight flutter.

“That’s it,” he said, raking his teeth down the cord of her neck. “Let it go, baby. Let it take you.”

White-hot heat filled her lower body and he pressed his fingers as deep inside her as it would go, hooking them upward until he found that spongy little spot and pressed against it, flinging her over the edge and into the yawning chasm far below.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Squeeze those fingers, brown sugar. Squeeze them hard. Take him, Bella. Take that bad boy and milk him dry with that sweet little cunt of yours.”

The climax was powerful – more so than any she’d ever had – and it seemed to go on and on as he tapped against her G-spot then withdrew, inserted, withdrew, inserted his fingers rapidly until he had wrenched from her the very last spasm. When he had, he made no move to remove his fingers but kept her impaled upon them as her body floated like a feather on the afterglow. She drew the clean, masculine smell of him deep into her lungs, knowing her body would bear his scent when he left her.

For the longest time he kept perfectly still. She could hear his breathing and realized it was ragged, and that the steel still pushed against her naked rump had not lessened. He was fully erect, aroused.

"Next time be careful what you wish for, baby," he said in a gruff, husky voice. "Next time, I'll be inside you when you come like that."

Had she been able to, Bella would have swallowed audibly at the promise. As it was, all she could do was draw in a quick breath, and when she did, he vanished from behind her, leaving her to stumble forward, clawing at the wall to keep from sliding down it.

On weak, trembling legs, she turned around, plastering herself to the shower pod tile, and stared wide-eyed at the empty space before him. One moment he had been there behind her with his fingers clasped to her left shoulder, and before the next breath he disappeared without a sound or movement of air.

Opening her mouth, Bella screamed with frustration, shoving the pod's plexshield door open to hurry out. She clenched her hands into fists that dug her nails into her palms and shrieked again.

She heard her quarters' door shush open, heard running feet then Jade appeared in the doorway, reaching out to grab the metal jamb to keep from pitching face-forward into the room.

"What?" Jade demanded, breathing hard. "What the hell happened?"

Trembling, completely oblivious to her nudity, Bella released another wild shriek, flung her dreadlocks angrily then stalked toward Jade, barely breaking stride as the other woman jumped out of her way.

"He was here," Bella snarled, lips skinned back from her teeth. "Here. In the shower with me!"

Jade's eyes widened. "Who, MacKirnan?" She swung her head from side to side searching for the culprit. She sniffed, caught the scent of the man that had stolen into their ship and ground her teeth. "MacKirnan was here?"

"Who the fuck else?" Bella shouted. She snatched up a cotton robe and thrust her arms into the sleeves. She marched out of the sleeping area. "The son of a bitch! That fucking Terran son of a bitch!"

They hadn't even left the docking slip at Command Central on Riezell, yet their target not only knew who they were, where they were and that they were after him, but he had skipped across hundreds of thousands of miles to boldly invade their space?

"Did he...?" Jade's eyes narrowed as she followed her partner. "Did he attack you?"

Flinging herself down on the sofa of the living area, Bella curled up with her knees drawn to her chest, arms locked around them. "He made me come!" she hissed.

Jade blinked. "Excuse me?"

“He put his fingers in me and made me come then he just left!” Bella said. “He left before I could nail his ass! And man, I want to nail his ass but good! I want him to know what it feels to come like that!”

Shock drained the blood from Jade’s face. “He raped you?”

Bella flung out an angry hand. “Hell no. No man rapes LaBella Taborn!” She hissed again, and the sound she made was like that of a cornered weretiger. “He rocked my world then he up and vanished before I could return the favor!”

“Return the...?” Jade shook her head as though to clear it. “What the hell were you doing having sex with our target?” she demanded. “And why the hell did you let him escape?”

“You aren’t listening to me!” Bella said. “He disappeared, Shimota! He vanished! I didn’t sense him when he arrived and I didn’t sense him leaving. He just came, did his thing then left!”

“I repeat—what the hell were you doing having sex with him? You know better than that!” Jade snarled.

Bella straightened her legs and shot off the sofa. “I don’t want to talk about this right now,” she said. Her body was still throbbing from having his hands on it, his fingers in it. She shuddered with returning lust. “We’ve got to find him because I’m going to make him squeal like a Diabolusian warthog!”

Jade watched her partner stalk past her. Bella’s eyes were flint-hard as she strode into the sleeping area then closed the door with a slap of her hand to the control panel.

“What the hell am I missing here?” Jade asked aloud.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Pheromones?” General Strom said as he stared out at Shimota from the vid-com screen. “You think he hit her with some kind of sexual chemical?”

Jade had thought long and hard before contacting the general this late at night, but the fact MacKirnan knew he was now being hunted by the Guardians needed to be reported promptly. Obviously there was a leak at Command Central who was in the criminal’s pocket. That leak needed to be found and sealed.

“I believe so, Sir,” Jade said on a long sigh. “She denies he raped her, but what else am I to think?”

“Forced seduction?”

“I guess you could call it that,” she agreed.

“Where is Taborn now?”

“She’s in her quarters. I’ve turned on every sensor we have onboard, so if he shows up again, I’ll be alerted. I’m hoping he will. It will save us a trip out to Sauria, although the gods know he must be closer.”

“Not necessarily. He most likely utilized the BlackMoon unit on that pilfered ship to take him to you.” The general pursed his lips as he thought about the machine that could transport objects from one point in space to another with the speed of light. “I want you to take a swing by Aduaidh Prime and have one of those units installed on your ship. It might come in handy.”

“Will do,” she said. “At least I’ll feel safer with the sensors activated.”

“Don’t relax your guard. I don’t know that your sensors will detect him, Jade. Sensors don’t work with the Phantom Rory Quinn and any member of the Order of Taibhse can wander around without being found out. You can look right at them and not see them.”

“Misdirection,” she said.

“Precisely.”

“So how did he get on the ship in the first place when it was locked tight and how did he get back out again?” she countered. “I looked at the ship’s heat signature reader. It read two sigs at 1900 then three at 1925 then only two again at 1945.” She glanced at the digital readout on her desk. It read 2314. “Right now there are only two living bodies in this ship—mine and Taborn’s. He didn’t turn to smoke and come in through an exhaust vent then slip out the same way.”

“He got past you somehow,” the general insisted. “Perhaps he has learned the revenant power of glamour.”

“I’m not familiar with the term,” she said.

“A revenant is very similar to a Reaper only far more powerful,” the general told her. “On the evolutionary scale, the revenant is the oldest race of beings in the megaverse and then comes the vampire. The Reaper race was created and is relatively young in comparison to the other two. Both the revenants and vampires use what they call glamour. With the vampire it is a hypnotic mind control that forces their victims to forget they’ve been bitten. The revenants use the same power to bend the minds of those they wish to influence. To make them forget something they saw or heard.” He scratched his cheek. “They also use it to sexually enthrall using touch by flooding the other person’s system with testosterone if it’s a man casting the glamour or if it’s a female enthralling a male, estrogen.”

“Then maybe it wasn’t pheromones,” she said.

“Perhaps not, and he could have walked right by you without you seeing him if he has learned the art. Combine that with his other psi powers...” He let the thought settle in her mind.

“The gods-be-damn-it. That wouldn’t be good, would it?”

“No, it would not. It would make MacKirnan that much more potent, and here’s something to think about, Jade. You’d better hope he hasn’t actually become a revenant, because if he has, you’re going to have your work cut out for you.”

## Chapter Three

Sitting on the foot of Jade Shimota's bed, Mac braced his chin in his hand and studied the sleeping woman. She was beautiful with a sexy body that made his cock hard and his blood race. He was drawn to her as he'd never been to another woman, but it wasn't her sexual allure that intrigued him. As he stared at the shapely leg she had thrust out from under the covers, the taut little breasts that were barely covered by the sheet, and the long silky black hair that fanned out over her pillow, he wanted to throw himself on her and take her hard. Oh yes, he wanted to screw her, he thought. So badly his teeth ached, but it was more than that. He sensed in her a kindred soul.

*"She's dangerous, Mac," Celine had warned. "She has no conscience and has over two hundred kills to her credit. She doesn't even bat an eye when she snuffs out a man's life."*

Reaching out, he circled his fingers around her ankle, absorbing the heat of her flesh into his palm. He caressed the slender joint, skimming his palm up her calf, over her knee, along her taut thigh. He stilled his questing hand when she sighed and turned from her side to her back, flinging an arm out as though in invitation.

He smiled, massaging her soft limb.

"Are you planning on raping me?" she asked, not even bothering to open her eyes.

Surprised she was awake and aware, he shrugged, continuing to caress her thigh. "Do you want me to?"

Jade slowly opened her eyelids. Her right hand was beneath her pillow, the fingers curled around the deadly needle that was never far away. One part of her wanted to jerk her hand down and stab him, but another wanted to see what he would do. She stared into his pale green eyes, thinking herself in charge of the situation.

He scooted farther up the bed, closer to her, his hand clasped lightly to her thigh. He leaned over her, his lips barely brushing hers. "Try to move," he whispered.

Although she thought her eyes widened, they didn't. She did, however, suck in a surprised breath when she found she had no control whatsoever over her arms, her legs or any part of her. She was as immobile as a mountain. For the first time in her life, Jade Shimota knew true fear and it didn't set well with her.

He slipped his hand under her pillow and pulled out her hand in which she had the needle clutched. He clucked his tongue at seeing the lethal instrument.

"Now that is a piece of work," he said. He eased the sharp weapon from her hand then placed it on the bedside table. His eyes turned hard. "Wouldn't want you to stab me with that thing."

Jade drew in a ragged breath.

“Ah no. I’m not going to hurt you, darlin’,” he said, plying his mouth upon hers. His warm breath fanned over her lips. “A woman as beautiful as you should be worshipped not wounded.”

Jade stopped breathing altogether when he sat up, removed his hand from her thigh only to grip the covers and fling them away. Mentally cursing herself for her habit of sleeping in the nude, she had no choice but to lie there rigid and unable to shield herself from his slow, penetrating perusal of her body.

“Did I say beautiful?” He shook his head. “No, baby. You are gorgeous.”

She felt his fingertips on the side of her waist. “Twenty-two inches if memory serves,” he said, trailing his fingers over the flare of her hip. “And that would be thirty-four.”

Unable to look away from the devastatingly handsome face positioned above her, she took in the long, dark hair that held a glint of red among the thick, curly strands that touched the nape of his neck. To heighten the masculine allure, there was just a trace of gray at his temples. His nose was a bit too long for his face, more hawkish than she preferred in a male, but it melded well with the chiseled features that bore just a hint of cruelty about them. The jaw was lean, the lips fashioned with a slight bow to the curves, and the eyelashes that accentuated the mesmerizing green eyes were long and thick.

“Like what you see as much as I do?” he asked, his gaze lowering to the hairless juncture of her thighs. He raised his eyes to hers. “Now that I really like.”

Heat burned Jade’s cheeks. Not for the first time did she regret having had her pubic hair lasered away a few years back. Sometimes—like at that moment—it made her feel as though she were a child again who had yet to spring her first hair.

His attention wandered to her breast. “Thirty-two,” he stated. Up his hand went to cage the pert little mound. He worked the pad of his thumb over her nipple. “I just had mine pierced.”

Jade felt her womb spasm at hearing that. Her eyes jerked from his face to the front of his shirt. Had she been able to do so, she would have swept her tongue over her lip in anticipation of viewing his piercings.

“Wanna see?” he asked, and before she could draw in another breath, he released her breast, crossed his arms over his chest and tugged the tail of his dark blue shirt over his head.

The moment she saw the nipple shields, Jade drew in a breath then her gaze slowly lifted to his.

“Like ’em?” he queried. He returned his palm to her left breast and once more swept his thumb across the nipple. “I do. Hurt like hell, but hey...” He shrugged. “What the heck, huh?”

She longed to bite his nipples, rake her nails down his back. His chest was covered with a light matting of fine light brown hair and his pecs were firmly pronounced. Washboard abs rippled down to the deep indentation of his bellybutton and the tiger line

of hair that disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants was an invitation to follow its path to the sensual conclusion.

“If I had the time, I’d take them off to let you see the package under there, but that will have to wait. Right now...” He clasped her breast between his fingers—pressing the nipple upward. “Right now I’ve got something else in mind.”

The moment he leaned toward her, she knew what he was going to do. Her heart began to race. Her blood began to run hot and thick. To her way of thinking, he didn’t move fast enough as he lowered his mouth to her breast. Wanting to claw him into submission, she cursed her inability to move. This was a man who needed her legs wrapped tight around him, cutting off his breath. He needed to be rode as hard as a woman could ride him.

He intercepted the thought and chuckled low in his throat as he laved her nipple with the heated wetness of his tongue.

Wishing she could close her eyes to the sublime pleasure he was bestowing on her, she was surprised to realize she wasn’t offended in the least by what he was doing. She wanted him to suck her nipples. She wanted his fingers inside her as they’d been inside Bella. She...

Once more he plucked her thoughts from her mind and even as his teeth clamped lightly on her nipple, his hand smoothed down her side, her hip and then across to the hairless plain of her mons. He rubbed the soft area gently with the tips of his fingers then slipped his hand between her legs—his middle finger grazing her clit as he moved them downward. He rubbed the cleft, sliding his index and ring fingers along the outer labia.

He raised his head, leaving her nipple wet. “No hair at all,” he said in a husky tone. “I really like that. The better to eat you, my pretty.”

Those words did such carnal damage to her libido she wanted to scream with the frustration of not being able to pin him down and return the favor as Bella had stated.

“That’s good to know, baby,” he said, and his strong middle finger entered her, exited, entered again, exited, and then with the slickness of her juices coating it moved up to her clit.

Sheer ecstasy engulfed Jade Shimota. She didn’t care if he was using a glamour to seduce, flood her system with testosterone, or fill her nostrils with pheromones. All she wanted was to experience the same exacting pleasure Bella had.

“And then some,” he whispered before claiming her mouth with a kiss that made her peripheral vision ripple with crackling lightning.

Jade was no stranger to sex. As she’d told her partner, her first encounter had been less than mind-blowing, it had opened a new world of possibilities. Her next partner had been more to her liking, showing her pleasures she had readily embraced. As she grew older, she began experimenting. She found what she liked, what she didn’t, and although she tried a female or two, firmly decided men were the opponents she wanted in the games she enjoyed playing.

But for all the experimentation she'd done, the myriad partners, she'd never come up against a man who could kiss like this one. His tongue was driving her mad as it swirled over her teeth, along her lips, deep into her mouth. Goose bumps were running over every inch of her body and her muscles kept clenching and unclenching. She was desperate to move, to encircle him in her arms, to feel him pressing her to the mattress.

"All in good time, baby," he said against her mouth.

Then his fingers were inside her, hooking upward, working her G-spot with such precision she wished with all her being she could howl her delight to let him know how much she was enjoying the sensation. When the climax began, that lightning returned to her vision and she thought she could actually hear it crackling as she came and came and came on the fingers that were buried deep within her cunt.

"That's it," he said, his lips against her cheek, her ear, her throat. "That's exactly what you needed."

It had been a few months since Jade had bothered to seek out a man to relieve the ache that developed from time to time. Primarily she used the vibrator she had purchased on the pleasure ship the *Foehn* when she'd taken a few days off to relax after a long undercover stint. Staring into the hooded eyes of Ranulf MacKirnan, whose fingers were gently withdrawing from her fevered sheath, she knew the penis substitution would never again satisfy her the way this handsome man had with just his fingers.

"Imagine what my cock will be like," he told her with a wink.

And then he was gone.

Jade sat up as though jerked by wires. Her eyes were so wide she feared they might freeze that way. Her entire body felt as though an electric current were running through it from hair to toenail. She was trembling violently from the force of the most devastating climax she'd ever had. She ached between her legs—actually itched there—and she shifted her bare ass on the mattress with an insatiable need to experience the wicked release again and again and again.

"Gods-be-damned Terran bastard!" she said.

"I believe I said the same thing."

Jade's head snapped around to find Bella standing in the doorway. Her mouth dropped open, her cheeks flamed.

"You cried out and I knew," Bella said, padding into the room. She came to the bed and sat down, oblivious to Jade's nudity. "I figured he'd visit you too."

"He... I..." Jade swallowed. "Mother of the gods, Taborn. No man should have that kind of power over a woman!"

"You understand now that it wasn't rape," Bella said. "Strong coercion perhaps, but not rape."

"No, it was seduction, pure and simple," Jade agreed, shaking her head. "I wanted it." Her eyes glazed. "I wanted him."

"I still do," Bella admitted.

"I do too, and when I get my hands on him, I'm going to turn him inside out!" She got out of the bed and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Bella asked.

"To get the sequencer."

Jade's brows drew together. "Why?"

"He licked me," Jade said as she hit the elevator access panel with the palm of her hand. "I've got the bastard's DNA!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine stood framed in the doorway of Mac's quarters with her arms folded. She was watching him as he sat on his bed, pulling off his boots, glad to have him back safely onboard. The overhead track lighting made the gold nipple shields gleam on his naked chest.

"You went to see them, didn't you?" she asked.

He looked over at her and grinned nastily. "Yes ma'am, I surely did." Stripping his socks, he stuffed them down into the tops of his boots.

"You like to live dangerously," she accused.

"Well, you know what they say," he countered.

Celine's smile was indulgent. "No, what do they say, Mac?"

"Live well, die young and leave a good-looking corpse," he replied. He stood, unbuttoned his pants then pushed them down his long legs. He disdained the use of underwear, which amused the older woman.

"So what did you find out?" She was staring unabashedly at his groin.

He flung the covers back on his bed and slipped beneath them, plumping his pillows behind him then leaning his back against the wall. He laced his fingers behind his head.

"I learned Taborn has a wicked temper but she's malleable. Give her a good orgasm and you have her eating out of your hand. She's not going to be a problem."

"What about Shimota?" she asked, pushing away from the wall to come sit on the foot of his bed.

"She's a different matter altogether," he replied. "Hard as nails. Cold as ice. You were right—she's dangerous. She had that needle tucked under her pillow, clutched in her hot little hand. If I hadn't glamoured her, she might have skewered me with it."

"Doubtful," Celine said. "I have a feeling they want you alive."

"They do, but they aren't above mangling me if I don't behave," he said with a chuckle.

"Which you have no intention of doing."

"You got that right," he said. He shifted in the bed, cast his eyes toward the vid-com screen.

She was so attuned to his moods and reactions she knew what was on his mind. "Don't call them."

He didn't pretend he didn't know who she meant. "I'm horny as hell, baby. I got those Riezell whatsits off and now I need relief. My cock is hard as stone."

Celine looked down at the sheet over his hips. The unmistakable tent of his erection was there to see. She lifted her gaze to his face. "You have me," she said.

"Yeah, but you won't..."

She scooted toward him, drew back her hand then slapped him as hard as she could, rocking his head to the side, splitting his lip.

"You want me to hurt you, Mac?" she asked. "I'll do whatever you want me to." She started to slap him again but he grabbed her wrist and yanked her to him, bringing her up tight to his chest.

"No," he said, pain registering in his eyes, but it wasn't physical pain. It was from his very soul. "I don't want that. Not from you."

"Don't call them," she said again. "Not tonight." The look she gave him went beyond pleading to begging. "Tonight I need you."

He released her hand to cup her cheek. "Okay, baby," he said softly. "All you had to do was say so." He moved over in the bed, tugging the covers from under her ass, and she stood up to remove her clothing. He watched her as she undressed, knowing it turned her on.

Celine Belial might have been creeping steadily up on sixty but she had the well-trained and shapely body of a woman half that age. Just recently she had shorn off the long braid she'd worn dangling down her back for the last twenty-some-odd years and the new hairdo enhanced her high cheekbones and flawless complexion. Though there was a fine network of age lines radiating from her green eyes, there was only a faint creasing on her forehead and none at all beside her very expressive mouth—the lips of which were still firm and plump. No jowls sagged from her jawline. No turkey wobble dangled at her neck. Her breasts were still high and firm. Her belly was flat, her legs terrific. The only true sign of advancing age had been the loose and crepey flesh on her hands that bore a few liver spots. Laser treatment and fat transfer had taken care of those problems and now her hands were as attractive as a young woman's.

"You are a beautiful woman," he said softly. He folded the sheet back so she could join him.

"If I could stay beautiful to you until the day I died, I'd leave this world a happy woman," she said, snuggling against him, one hand on his hairy chest.

He enclosed her in his arms, kissed the top of her head. "You will always be beautiful to me."

She ran her hand over his hard chest. Although she loved hearing his lies, she changed the subject. "What do they want with you?"

"The Alliance?" he asked. At her nod, he sighed. "They want me to go to work for them."

"To help defeat the New Coalition?"

"That would be my guess," he replied.

"Are you going to do it?"

He chuckled. "You think they'll give me a choice, darlin'?" He fanned his palm up and down her bare arm, staring across the room as his fertile mind worked over the problem. "There is an up side to the situation. At least I'll only have one side after my ass instead of both of them."

"And if they pay you well enough, you'll stay loyal to the New Alliance," she commented.

"As long as it suits me."

She craned her neck to look up at him. "You are such a bad boy."

He wagged his brows. "Want me to show you just how bad I can be? Just wait. The New Coalition ain't seen nothing yet."

Celine loved Ranulf MacKirnan with all her heart. Not even the husband she'd been married to for thirty-nine years had known the same depth of emotion she held for this man, nor had any of the many lovers she entertained before she met Mac. No other could hold a candle to Mac, who had been born on the very day—almost the very hour—Celine had exchanged her vows with Danton Belial. Even when the handsome thief had fleeced her out of the entire inheritance she had been awarded at Danton's death had she lost the love that had been steadily building since the day Mac first seduced her. Though she'd hired men to find him and bring him to her, when they had, her punishment had been meted out in bed with Mac bound wrist and ankle for her pleasure.

"I spent my last rial to find you. I no longer have even a copper to my name so I'm now your responsibility," she'd told him. "Where you go, I go."

And she had. After they'd spent a long, enjoyably wet afternoon in bed, she'd untied him and he'd swept her up, taken her to his ship, and they'd been together ever since.

"Have you ever regretted taking me with you?" she had once asked.

"No," he'd answered truthfully for once. "And I never will."

In his way, she knew he loved her too. Just as he loved the bitches Ione and Laran, and the homosexual circus performers and their transvestite "girlfriend", and the not-quite-right-in-the-head hunk who flew the ship and sometimes warmed Celine's bed when Mac was otherwise occupied with his evil duo.

Just as he would love the two Riezell Guardians she had a feeling would soon be a part of their ragtag little family of misfits.

"Remember that time on Serenia?" she asked. "What was the name of that rich woman we met near Dunswitch?"

His forehead wrinkled then smoothed out. "Darjin," he supplied. "Darjin Nyel." He shot her a hard look. "Why?"

"She offered me two hundred thousand gold sentis if I'd help her get you on her ship," she said with a sigh.

His eyes narrowed. "She did what?"

Celine nodded. "Two hundred thousand gold sentis." She shrugged. "I was tempted, but I knew you didn't like her and that if you didn't like her, you wouldn't love her and you would have been miserable with her."

He snorted. "I would have been miserable chained to a post in a breeding hut on Amazeen, sweeting. The woman was a hunter."

"What?" she asked, eyes widening.

"A hunter," he said. "They look for studs for the breeding farms."

Celine stared at him. "I know what they are. You're kidding, though, right?"

"I don't kid about hunters, baby. That bitch would have slapped an iron collar around my neck so I couldn't use my powers, taken me back to Amazeen, chained me to a bed in a hut and sold my cock to whoever wanted a ride."

"Oh dear goddess," Celine said, feeling sick. "I didn't know."

He pulled his head to one side. "Did you *really* consider selling me?"

"I entertained the notion of having all that money for maybe a second or two, but there was something kind of—ah, off—about her so I told her no. She was about to up the bid when you walked in."

Mac sniffed. "Good thing you didn't sell my ass, woman," he said with an arch of his left brow. "I would not have been amused."

Celine shivered for she knew that was an understatement. He would have been hell to live with and most likely would never have forgiven her. The thought of him ever leaving her cut deep.

"Then don't go looking to sell me anytime soon," he said, reading her mind. He stifled another yawn then rubbed at his temple. "Okay?"

"I'll try to refrain. Headache?" she asked, smoothing his hair.

"I'm tired, baby," she heard him mutter.

She ran her hand up and down his back, knowing he had to be exhausted after hopping back and forth with the BlackMoon unit, using his powers to glamour the Guardians. She wanted him. Wanted to make love to him very badly, but that could wait. She could see the fatigue in his eyes, the dark lines beneath the long, dark lashes.

"Then sleep, my love," she told him, and placed a kiss on his hair. "I'm right here. I won't let anyone come in and buy you."

He chuckled, and within seconds he was snoring lightly, his hard body weighing her down.

## Chapter Four

The marketplace on Diabolusia was overflowing with humanity and the din was so loud it gave Jade a vicious headache. Squawking chickens, bleating goats and barking dogs vied to be heard over the raucous cries of vendors, boisterous laughter of bargain hunters and the thunderous curses of those who felt they were being cheated.

“The smell is enough to make you lose your breakfast,” Bella commented about the sour stench of unwashed bodies that was mixing with the animal odors and the cloying scent of perfumes and colognes. “And will you look at that garish display? The Diabolusians are such a tacky people.”

Looking down at the sequencer unit she held in her hand, Jade paid scant attention to her partner’s complaints. She was sweeping the DNA retrieval beam through the crowd in search of MacKirnan, but so far she hadn’t had a hit.

They were two weeks into their mission—having spent three unproductive days waiting for the BlackMoon to be installed and another two waiting for parts for their communications array that had gone down during an ion storm near Cengus. Two more days had been wasted chasing a lead that hadn’t panned out and the next week had been a bust as well, taking them all the way to the Cairghrian Galaxy.

Hot and tired, thirsty, with her headache growing, Jade ran her arm across her forehead to wipe away the sweat. She hated the tropical planet with its harsh sun that bore down on a person like an inferno’s blast.

“Uh-oh. Amazeen at twelve o’clock,” Bella whispered.

Jade looked up, frowning as the trio of six-foot-plus warrioresses came strutting toward them. One had a black eye and another’s arm was in a sling. The third looked even unhappier than the other two but appeared none the worse for wear.

“Somebody got the better of them,” Bella quipped.

“Let’s hope it was one of the studs they were trying to corral,” Jade muttered. As the trio passed them, she turned to find the one with the black eye looking back at her too.

“Shimota, isn’t it?” the statuesque redhead queried in a deep voice that would have done a lumberjack proud.

Jade nodded. “You’re Shanee’s friend.”

The Amazeen turned around and came back. “I am. I am Alkidike.” She indicated the other two warrioresses who joined her, introducing first the one whose arm was in a sling. “This is Tereis and her eldest sister Chalciope.”

“I’ve heard of you,” Bella told Chalciope. “You won at the Galaxian discus tournament.”

Chalciope inclined her head. "It was the first time I entered."

"The first time any woman entered," her sister corrected with pride.

"We need many such victories," Jade observed, turning off the sequencer before clipping it to her belt.

"True," Alkidike agreed. She glanced back the way she and her friends were heading then looked to Jade. "We were on our way for a cold drink. Would you care to join us?"

Though neither Jade nor Bella cared overly much for the Amazeen race as a whole—thanks in part to their strong dislike of former Principal Guardian Shanee Iphito—they were not averse to a little one-on-one socializing with the warrioresses. Casting an inquiring glance to Bella, who nodded in agreement, the two fell in step with the Amazeens.

"How is your Queen Polemusa?" Bella asked of the defense queen. "I heard she suffered a bad fall from her mount just recently."

The Amazeens laughed uproariously at the statement.

"You could say that, aye," Alkidike replied, lips twitching. She nudged Tereis with her elbow. "The same could be said of the two of us."

"Isn't it unusual for an Amazeen to be thrown when they are riding? Especially the defense queen?" Bella questioned.

Again the three warrioresses howled with laughter, causing everyone they passed to look at them with strange looks of alarm on their faces before moving well out of the way.

"It depends on what you're riding," Tereis snickered.

"Or who," Chalciope mumbled with a sour look.

"You're just pissed because he didn't have time to fuck you before we had to leave," Alkidike said with a snort.

Jade knew even before she asked. "MacKirnan."

"Mac," Alkidike corrected. "He's been Polemusa's lover for years now. The only man she accepts between her thighs."

"Aye, we know," Bella snapped.

A long sigh escaped Jade. "How long ago was he on Amazeen?"

"You won't catch him," Tereis said. "They've all tried and failed."

"The Guardians haven't tried before now," Bella pointed out. "We'll catch him."

Alkidike shook her head. "That's what you think. Unless the WindChaser wishes for you to trap him, he'll not be trapped." She shot a sidelong glance to Jade. "To answer your question, as far as I know, he's still there."

That news brought Jade up short. "Not here?"

"Not here," Alkidike stated, reaching up to touch her black eye as they arrived at the cantina. "If he was, I'd have him on his knees apologizing for this."

"He did that to you?" Bella queried.

"Not on purpose," the Amazeen said. She swept her hand in front of her to indicate the Guardians precede her into the seedy-looking establishment. "He got a bit carried away."

Bella turned to Tereis. "Your arm?"

Tereis shrugged. "We were wrestling. It was a bad fall." She grinned smugly at Alkidike. "For which he apologized."

"As for Polemusa's fall," Alkidike said. "He bucked her off while in the throes of one mighty orgasm and she hit her head on the floor table."

"Knocked her clean out," Tereis reported with a laugh.

Alkidike raised an eyebrow to Jade. "The two of you have his smell on you so I believe you know what I mean."

Bella's eyes widened. Jade looked aghast and raised her arm to sniff at the flesh not concealed by her short-sleeve uniform tunic.

"Oh ho, look at that. He has fucked them! Didn't I tell you he would?" Tereis laughed. "You just gave yourself away. She didn't smell him on you, Shimota!"

Gritting her teeth, Jade asked what MacKirnan was doing on Amazeen.

"He brought a shipment of males for the farms," Chalciope answered for her friends.

"The human trafficking charge," Bella said. Her upper lip arched with obvious revulsion.

"Don't feel sorry for the men he brings us. Not a one of them is fit for human interaction, but they are good for breeding. For the most part they are bastards who have brutalized the women in their lives," Alkidike told the Guardians. "We teach them a very valuable lesson."

"And punish them at the same time for the horrific things they've done to our gender," Chalciope asserted.

"Tit for tat," Tereis suggested.

There was a lull in the conversation and a barmaid finally worked up the nerve to come over to take their order. As soon as she had the request for five ales, she scurried away.

"How long will he be on Amazeen?" Bella asked.

"Mac usually stays a few days when he comes. He gets challenged by many of us and is good about accepting."

"I've taken his sweet ass down many a time," Alkidike admitted, "and intend to take it down as often as possible with me on top."

The Amazeens were still laughing over that comment when the barmaid brought their mugs of ale.

"We had good intel that he was here," Jade said with irritation.

“He could have been. With that transport machine he has, he can be anywhere in the blink of an eye,” Alkidike told her. “Hell, he could even be right here in the cantina with us and you’d never know.”

Jade and Bella exchanged a look then Jade reached for the sequencer, thumbing it on as she brought it up. Sure as hell, there was a green blip on the machine indicating the entity’s DNA that had been programmed into the unit was within range.

“Gods-be-damn-it, he is here!” Jade hissed, snapping her head around the cantina. She transferred the unit to her left hand.

There were four other customers in the dimly lit room. Three were women sitting together at a table with an elderly man in the long robe of a cleric. All four were staring openly at Jade and Bella.

Jade shot out of her chair and the chair crashed to the floor behind her. Her right hand slapped to the holstered stun gun strapped to her hip. Before she could draw it, the elderly man dissolved into thin air, husky laughter echoing behind him.

Striding over to the three women, Jade narrowed her eyes. “I want to see your papers!” she demanded, hand out.

“You can want with one hand and shit in the other,” one of the women said with a snort. “See which one fills up first, *conchan*.”

Being called a cunt in Seabhachuan infuriated Jade and she reached for the woman only to have her and a younger one sitting beside her fade away, leaving a much older woman smiling nastily at the Guardian.

“He takes care of his own,” the woman told Jade before she too vanished.

“Son of a bitch!” Jade bellowed. She looked down at the sequencer but already knew the blip would have disappeared as well.

“The two *kargiolus* are the Sanchita sisters Ione and Laran. They are sado-masochists—or as they refer to themselves—sado-masts from Bhrasail. Used to work in his brothel there,” Alkidike told her, using the Amazeen word for whores. “The old woman is Celine Belial. For all practical purposes she’s what Mac calls his main squeeze.”

Jade frowned as she came back to the table and righted her chair. “His what?”

“His primary lover,” Tereis translated, “although our defense queen takes exception to that.”

“By the gods she’s old enough to be his mother!” Bella gasped, and to punctuate the quickly indrawn breath, a loud explosion sounded outside, rocking the cantina roof beams, sending dirt and dust cascading down from the ceiling. Several smaller explosions followed.

“What the hell was that?” Jade questioned.

“My guess is that was why Mac was here,” Alkidike replied with a grunt.

Going outside, the five women warriors were greeted with an acrid stench filling the air. To the south a thick, dark plume of smoke billowed into the heavens.

"He hit the ammo warehouses," Tereis said.

"That warehouse belongs to the New Alliance!" Bella hissed.

"No, not that one," Alkidike said. "That one was a secret New Coalition storage facility." She folded her arms over her chest. "I think that was a present for you, Shimota."

"Why?" Jade asked suspiciously.

"Purely speculation on my part," the Amazeen replied, "but I saw the way he was looking at you. He had the look of a man very taken by what he was viewing."

Jade's dark brown eyes narrowed. "You knew he was in that cantina, didn't you?" When the Amazeen merely smiled, Jade pressed the point. "He asked you to bring us there, didn't he?"

"Have a safe trip back to Riezell, Major Shimota," Alkidike said. "You don't stand the proverbial snowball's chance in hell of catching the WindChaser." She cocked her head and the two other Amazeens flanked her, the three walking away without a backward glance.

"Do you believe that shit?" Jade asked Bella. "He's got those gods-be-damned bitches eating out of his hand!"

"Aye, well, it's a very wicked hand as you well know," Bella said. "A hand I'd like on me again."

"Just shut the hell up, Taborn!" Jade snarled. She spun around, heading back to their ship. She knew there was no reason to stay on Diabolusia.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bruno, open the door."

Hands on his hips, head down, Mac stood outside the quarters the two ex-circus performers shared and waited to be obeyed. Although he could meld into the room with ease, he respected the privacy of his crewmen.

"I'm not leaving until we've talked. You might as well open up."

For the last two weeks Bruno Escalante had been holed up inside the quarters he shared with his life-partner of over twenty years. Gunter Van der Lar—the love of Bruno's life—was now ensconced in what was the yeoman's quarters and so unhappy about being there alone the poor man cried himself to sleep every night.

"Bruno?" Steel entered Mac's voice along with a warning.

The door shushed open. Bruno looked terrible as he blocked the opening. The silk kimono he wore was wrinkled, badly stained on the bodice, and the fuzzy slippers worn down at the heels that adorned his feet had grape juice stains on them.

"I will not forgive him this time, Ranulf! I absolutely refuse to do so!" Bruno stated, sniffing. He reached into his sleeve and pulled out a linen handkerchief to dab at his red eyes. "He has insulted me for the last time."

Mac cringed for Bruno was the only one of the crew – such as it was – who dared to call him by his given name, and he hated the name with a passion. He asked the man, who was only a few years older than him, if he could come in.

Bruno waved the handkerchief. “Of course! Of course! Where are my manners?” He stepped back, bowing slightly. “Would you like some grape juice?”

Known for consuming extraordinary amounts of the liquid, Bruno had cases of it stored in the galley of his living quarters. He attempted to foist it off on everyone who came to visit.

“No, thank you,” Mac said, taking a seat in one of four damask-covered chairs in the living area. Leaning forward, he sat with his knees apart, fingers threaded together and braced his elbows on his thighs.

Bruno fluttered around for a moment or two then flounced onto the silk divan. “How is the cheating bastard?”

Although Bruno had always been faithful to Gunter, Gunter had not always been of the same mindset. Case in point was Crystal DeBeuf, the transvestite tightrope walker who had come between the lovers on Arabach five years earlier. Had not Mac intervened, the situation might have had a deadly ending. Bruno – quick of temper – was equally quick with the blade that had earned him his reputation as the fastest and most accurate knife thrower in the Jumaine Brothers Circus. He might well have used that blade on Crystal if Mac had not stepped in to wrest it from him and point out it was Gunter’s doing, not the reed-thin Crystal’s, who had caused the problem. Unfortunately, and not for the first time either, Bruno turned the blade on Gunter, stabbing him in the back.

“He’s mending,” Mac reported. “But you have to stop doing this, Bruno. One of these days you’re going to wind up killing him.”

Bruno’s face crinkled. “But he insulted me, Ranulf! He brought up that terrible night when I was having trouble with my eye. You remember the night I mean.”

Mac met the duo right after that particular night six years ago. Bruno had missed his mark, hitting the pretty young girl spinning around on the wheel. Luckily it had been only a flesh wound but the girl was the youngest daughter of Ivan Jumaine, one of the circus owners. Bruno had been fired on the spot although both he and Gunter – who was one of the daring young men who plied the highflying trapeze – preferred to tell those who would listen that was the night they both retired.

On the night the three met, extricating the two terrified performers from an angry crowd they had been attempting to panhandle, Mac had taken them to his first ship, introduced them to Celine, Ione and Laran, and named them part of his crew. A few years later – while visiting *an Gearmáin* – the six of them attended a Korvina Brothers circus where Gunter became enamored of Crystal. Before the week was out, the tightrope walker became the seventh member of the crew.

“Dirque tells me Crystal isn’t eating. He says she’s been crying so much she’s made herself sick,” Mac said, wanting to change the subject from that ill-fated night on Arabach.

“What does that Johnny-come-lately Dirque know?” Bruno said, waving his handkerchief. “He’s just an infant!”

Mac sighed.

“You need to go talk to Gunter and settle this. He wants to come home,” Mac said, and when Bruno made a sputtering noise, he shook his head. “I mean it, Bruno. This shit has got to stop or I’m going to be forced to ask one or the both of you to leave the crew. I don’t want to be around when you kill him. I love the both of you too much to be there when it happens, and it will. Sooner or later, you will miss your mark again.”

Everyone knew Bruno always aimed his blade where it would do the least damage—never striking for a vital target. His stabbing was meant to punish, to accentuate his anger rather than do real, lasting damage. The only trouble with that was poor Gunter suffered the pain no matter how shallow the cut or where it was placed.

Tears filled Bruno’s blue eyes. “We love you too, Ranulf,” he said then catapulted off the divan and over to Mac, enveloping the younger man in a bear hug as he sobbed brokenly.

Clumsily patting his friend’s back, Mac made soothing noises to calm the overwrought knife thrower. By the time Bruno’s guilty grief had passed, Mac’s shirt was soaked at the shoulder and Bruno’s eyes were redder and puffier still.

“He’s in the yeoman’s quarters,” Mac said, gently pushing Bruno away. “I want you to go take a shower, put on your best kimono and bring him home.”

“What about Crystal?” Bruno said, breath catching on little gasps as he strove to get his emotions under control.

“You can talk to her first if you want.”

Bruno nodded. He pushed his wild white hair back from his pinched face. “That might be best. I know she’s worried about the both of us.”

“I’m sure she is,” Mac said. He thought of the thin man whose feminine face was never seen without thick kohl at the eyes and cherry red gloss layered on his lips.

Situation in hand for the moment, Mac left Bruno singing loudly in his native *an Spáinnach*. He needed a drink.

And a change of shirt.

## Chapter Five

Healer Sayyid Kadian—better known as Doc by the crew—had been the last member to be recruited. His help had been needed to take care of a wound Mac had sustained during the robbery of a large holding company. Situated in a back alley in the seedier part of town, Kadian’s office consisted of nothing more than two sparsely furnished rooms and a bathing facility he was forced to share with his neighbor in the next apartment. Having lost his license to practice because of a fondness for the powerful narcotic *tenserse*, Kadian was, nevertheless, a highly skilled surgeon and more than competent diagnostician. At Celine’s request, he’d eagerly agreed to become the healer onboard Mac’s ship in exchange for being left alone to engage in his abuse of the class-four drug.

Looking up from the ebook he was reading, Doc greeted Mac with a lopsided grin. “Wondered when you’d be in to see me,” he said, voice slurred. He removed the old-fashioned eyeglasses he wore for affectation rather than actual need.

Mac gave the healer a long look. “Are you high?” he asked gently.

“No more so than usual,” Doc replied. He put the glasses and ebook reader aside. “What can I do you for?”

Smiling at the idiom the healer had lifted from Mac’s own repertoire, he lifted one shoulder.

“The piercings are giving me fits,” Mac replied.

Doc’s ever-present smile slipped away. His dark face took on a look of sternness. He pointed to an exam table. “Do you have a fever?”

“Not that I know of,” Mac replied, going over to the table.

“You’d better hope not,” Doc grumbled. “Confusion? Dizziness?”

“No more so than usual,” Mac quipped with a grin.

“I’m serious,” Doc admonished his patient. He took his temp, blood pressure and heart rate. “What about rash, blisters, boils, that type of thing?”

“Nope, none of that,” Mac reported. “No STDs either.”

“Headache? Sore throat? Redness around the wound? Swelling?”

“Yes, no, yes, yes.”

“They shouldn’t be hurting you this far in,” Doc said. “Unless...” He glared at Mac. “Has she been pinching them?”

Mac looked away from the probing stare. “She said it would help to toughen them up. She’s been...”

“You tell that bitch to keep her hands to herself!” Doc exploded. “By the gods, I could strangle you both and that half-insane sister of hers! Have you ever heard of something called necrotizing faciistist or staphylococcal infection?” Before Mac could answer, Doc ordered him to remove his shirt.

“No, but they sound nasty,” Mac said, fingers running the buttons down the front of his shirt. He peeled it off, grimacing as the material dragged over his nipples.

Doc leaned down to take a good look at the piercings. “They are very nasty infections I read about in one of those manuals you brought from Terra, and you’d better hope you haven’t developed either in your quest to mutilate your body.” He poked at both nipples, noted Mac’s wince and then told him to lift his arm. After checking the lymph nodes under his patient’s arms and along his neck, he did a nose culture swab.

“Are they infected?” he asked. “Ione has been washing them with sea salt.”

“How thoughtful of her,” Doc said facetiously. “No, they’re not infected, but I want to give you a course of antibiotics just to be on the safe side. With you traipsing all over the galaxy and beyond, you could pick up something virulent in a heartbeat.” He went to a glass-fronted stainless steel cabinet and opened a door, rummaged inside, found what he wanted and returned to the table. “I want you to use this salve three times a day after using the sea salt.” He handed a small white jar to his patient. “You are to apply it, not Ione. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“And wash your hands thoroughly before and after you apply the salve. I also want that evil bitch in here so I can culture her just in case. Clear?”

“Clear,” Mac said. The salve being rubbed on his nipples was cold and helped to relieve the throbbing ache.

“You need something for the pain?”

Mac hesitated then sighed, shoulders slumping. He didn’t like not being in control, but he also didn’t like the constant abrading rub on his sensitive nipples either. “Yeah, I think so. I haven’t slept much the last few nights they’ve been hurting so bad.”

“Serves you right for abusing your body,” Doc snapped.

“As though you don’t,” Mac reminded him.

“None of your business, MacKirnan,” Doc told him, but he went back to the cabinet, loaded a vac-syringe with a potent dosage of tenerse then came back to administer it in the vein along the side of Mac’s neck.

“Can’t you put that shit in my arm?” Mac complained.

“It goes where it’s meant to go,” Doc replied, and shot the payload into his patient, who flinched and cursed viciously as the fiery liquid burned a pathway along his jugular.

Almost instantly Mac's world mellowed out. It was like being wrapped in a soft cotton blanket. Sound became muffled. His body began to float. His mouth was blotted free of moisture.

"Lie down," Doc demanded. "I'll have Dirque come carry you to your quarters."

"I can walk," Mac said with the supreme confidence of a man not entirely in touch with reality. He started to slide off the table but Doc put a hard hand to the center of Mac's chest and would not allow it.

"Lay your ass down, MacKirnan!" Doc ordered.

Head spinning, Mac had just enough presence of mind to see the wisdom in the command. With Doc helping him, he stretched out on the exam table, throwing an arm over his eyes to blot out the harsh overhead lights.

"Computer!" Doc called out, and when the vid-com flashed on and Celine's face appeared, the healer asked that she send Dirque to the sickbay to retrieve Mac.

"Migraine?"

"Myopia," Doc stated, meaning the alternate definition of lack of foresight.

"His piercings?" Celine said with a sharp frown. "Are they infected?"

"No, but you need to have a talk with that evil bitch and have her lay off tweaking them," Doc told her.

Steel entered the older woman's green eyes. "Oh believe me, she will!"

Five minutes later Dirque was there to carry an unconscious Mac to his quarters where Celine was waiting to tuck him into bed.

"He's out," Dirque said needlessly.

"I see that," Celine replied. "Take his boots off, please."

Dirque nodded, and when he'd removed his captain's boots and socks hurried away, not wanting to watch as Mac's mistress stripped him out of his pants.

With her lover beneath the sheets, Celine stood over him for a few moments then turned out the lights and left quietly. Her destination was Ione's quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten hours later the crew of the *WindChaser II* was on the bridge as the starcruiser hurled through the darkness. They were on their way to Oceania where Mac had learned there was to be a secret meeting between the number one person in the New Coalition and his top general. He had every intention of taking one or the other of them captive.

"We've got a shadow and it's coming up fast," Celine remarked. Mac had trained her to take over the duty as the ship's communication specialist. It was her job to monitor all incoming and outgoing data as well as handling the vid-com.

"D.?" Mac questioned. He was slumped in the captain's chair, rubbing his temple where a headache had been plaguing him since he'd woken from the heavy dose of tenses.

Dirque was the ship's engineer. "Looks like the Guardians, Captain," he reported.

"I thought we left them in the dust on Diabolusia," Ione snapped. Since she and her sister had shown a marked ability for navigation that was where they alternated their time when the ship was in transit. Laran was on the bridge, sitting at the science station where she'd been learning a second duty along with Gunter.

"Apparently not," Bruno said. Both he and Gunter had been assigned tactical jobs and controlled the weapons and defense of the ship. The only non-working member of the ship—Crystal DeBeuf—sat near them in a formfitting chair as they worked. At that moment she was doing her nails.

"Closing," Celine reported.

"And they've got their weapons primed," Celine reported.

Mac snorted. "They aren't going to fire on—" When they did, he grinned nastily. "Why those sneaky little bitches! Shields up, Mr. Brody, and bring us around. Power up those little plasma barbs D. designed."

"You're going to fire on them?" Celine queried.

"We're gonna shoot a couple up their launch tubes and let them take out their engine, leave them dead in the water for a while," he replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sweating profusely as she worked on the engine, Jade was fit to be tied. The strange-looking striations on the engine canister looked as though they'd been made by a spider crawling around the terminals. Though the damage was minimal and easily repaired, it would take hours to accomplish and being in the engine compartment was like standing in a dry-heat sauna.

"Did you miss me, spike?"

The silky voice suddenly purring in her ear sent a quiver down Jade's spine. Before she could turn to confront the speaker, he had pushed her against the wall, his front pressed intimately to her back, one leg wedged between hers. His strong hands clamped around her wrists to drag her arms up and out, plastering them to the wall as well.

"You are one arrogant son of a bitch," she said through clenched teeth. Once again she couldn't move. Whatever strange force he was exuding had overtaken her with ease, but she was surprised her voice worked this time.

He rubbed against her ass. "I've been called worse," he admitted, his chin resting on her shoulder. He dropped his right hand to her thigh and withdrew the needle from its sheath. "I thought we got rid of this neat little toy before."

"How'd you like it if I slipped it between your ribs?"

"How'd you like it if I slipped my cock between your lips?" he countered.

"Prick!" she cursed him.

"Yeah, but it's such a hard prick." He flung the needle aside then caressed her ass. "When we get down to doing the nasty, I'm going to enjoy riding you, baby. I'm gonna enjoy having you ride me, but right now it's business before pleasure." His playful tone changed.

"A shipment of plasma torps left *an Ostair* at 0645 this morning bound for Montyne Cay on Domhan. The star freighter will be taking the Primus Corridor inside the asteroid belt to avoid detection by New Alliance surveillance ships. The New Coalition has an underground base on the Cay near the waterfall. Heat sigs should locate it."

"Why are you telling me...?"

"You need to get word to Strom to send one of his tactical units." Mac paused. "He still has male operatives capable of doing the job, doesn't he?"

"We have women who can do anything a man can!" she snapped.

He bumped her with his cock. "Despite that plasti-gel dildo you have in your night table drawer, there are some things a man can do better, and this is one of them. You need to send men for this job, spike."

"Why?"

"Because the shipment is onboard a retrofitted Saurian vessel captained by Fazid Avatás, B'Rieth Avatás' son. He's even more fanatical than his ugly ass father was. If he and his crew manage to capture a female..." He let the threat hang.

"Understood," she said, swallowing.

"If the tac team isn't available, have Strom contact Cair Ghrian. The prince has issues with the lizards so he'll do a good job of wiping them out. Warn Strom the Saurians have Tappas Industry reflective shields and high-powered sensors onboard. The only warrior capable of getting onboard will have to be one capable of using misdirection. I'd do it myself but I've got places to go and things to do." He purred. "I've got women to do."

"You're disgusting," she spat.

He ran his hand over her breasts, hiked his leg higher between her thighs until her feet were off the floor. Her groan made him chuckle as he kneaded her breasts.

"You love it and you know you do," he whispered, sliding his tongue along her ear. He bumped her again. "Keep it wet and warm for me, okay?"

Then he was gone again.

"Argh!" Jade screeched more out of sexual frustration than annoyance.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That's something we don't need on two counts," Strom said when Jade reported the conversation to him. "One, we don't need Avatás running weapons and we don't need hidden bases on New Alliance-held Domhan!"

"Is the tac team where they can be sent?" she asked.

"Aye, but I'll ask Prince Cair to go along as well if he's willing. He has a long-standing feud with the house of Avatás. He'll want to be in on capturing Fazid and putting the madman out of commission." He paused then asked if she knew where MacKirnan was headed next.

"He's on his way to Oceania. He's got an hour and a half jump on me so he should be close to Virago by now. To shave time, we'll cut through the Ventura Corridor and get to Oceania ahead of him. He wouldn't take that route because of the high volume of New Alliance patrol ships out there cruising for smugglers."

"Why Oceania?" the general inquired. "What's there?"

Jade smiled. "I shelled out a few thousand menan to circulate the rumor Admiral Peyton DesGardens is to have a clandestine meeting with General Elian Rodrigo, commander of the New Coalition ground forces. The WindChaser couldn't pass up a chance of kidnapping one or the other, or even both. I let it be known the two men are to meet on Oceania at Creel Point tomorrow morning at 0800. MacKirnan will go there only to learn the meeting place was changed at the last minute to the old Fealst orphanage. By the time he gets down to Fealst, we'll be waiting for him."

"Be careful, Major," the general cautioned. "He's been known to be very dangerous when he's cornered."

"We'll be taking all due precautions, Sir," Bella said as she joined Jade on the bridge.

"And then some," Jade acknowledged.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know it's a trap and you're still going?" Celine questioned. "Why?"

"I'm tired of running from them," Mac said. "They'll take me into custody, transport me to R-9, eventually I'll meet with the Burgon, agree to his offer and then we'll get back to fighting the bad guys."

"And what if they keep you in a cell on R-9?" Doc asked. "Believe me when I tell you that would not be a good thing, MacKirnan." He dug his hands into the pocket of his lab coat. "I did a six-month rotation there when my friend Janus Tailil was the chief medical officer of the facility. It's a hellhole and R-9 is nothing more than a poisonous dust planet. Escape is impossible."

"So I've heard, but there's no reason for me to attempt escape," Mac said. "It's not like the Burgon wants to fry my ass or dangle me from a yardarm. He wants my help."

"You'd better hope he does," Celine grumbled. "Or you could wind up on Utuk Xul or Hell-12!"

“Won’t happen,” Mac said with assurance.

“Ranulf?” Bruno inquired, his swarthy face pinched with worry. “Do you think the Burgon will attempt to turn you?”

“Don’t borrow trouble, Brunnie,” Gunter stated in his thick *an Gearmáin* accent. He twirled the black pencil-thin handlebar mustache that curled to either side of his pursed lips. “Do not worry that our intrepid hero will become a Reaper.”

“Why are you worried about that, Bruno?” Mac asked.

Bruno ducked his head, refusing to answer.

“He was hoping that would be the case so he could feed you Sustenance from his veins,” Crystal piped up. She was arranging her hair in front of a small mirror propped on the science station desk. She looked around at Mac and batted her mascara-stiffened eyelashes. “I wouldn’t mind feeding you in such a way either, handsome boy.”

Mac grunted at the offer. Though he’d shared Crystal’s bed on occasion, it had usually been when he was comforting her after an incident between Bruno and Gunter and she’d enticed him to allow her to blow him in exchange for that comfort. Considering he wasn’t a man to deny any female—even one who truly wasn’t of that gender but thought of herself that way—the use of his body, he went along with her request. The last time though had been the last time in his mind for she had wanted him to take her in a way that had repelled him. He hadn’t touched her since and had no intention of ever doing so again.

“Have you any notion what will happen when you reach Fealst?” Celine asked.

“Once they have me in custody they’ve been ordered to shoot me full of olvido or some other heavy-duty neuroleptor to put my ass out so I won’t be able to communicate with you. You can track me through the implant.” He grinned, referring to the neural implant he’d had surgically embedded in his shoulder. “Then they’ll screw me while I’m unable to defend myself.”

Ione rolled her eyes. “You think entirely too highly of yourself, lover,” she told him.

“Hey, I’m prime beef, baby!” he protested with a wink.

“They’re most likely planning on locking you in an E.S.U. to get you to R-9,” Doc suggested.

“Yeppers, that’s what they’ve been instructed to do,” Mac agreed. “Make sure you know where I am in that facility at all times just in case I do need to beat a hasty exit.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We need to get him out of our systems,” Bella said. She was sitting with her foot braced on the copilot’s chair as Jade handled the actual flying of their starcruiser.

“How do you suggest we do that?” Jade asked, checking a readout for their position.

"Once we have him in custody, we strip him and have our way with him," Bella replied. She curled the fingers of her right hand toward her to examine her nails.

"You have experience doing that with prisoners, do you?"

Bella's lips stretched into a knowing grin. "Let's just say I've done some rigorous in-depth interrogation on occasion."

"And you think he's just going to lie there while we ravish him? You don't think he'll fight us."

"He'll be otherwise incapacitated with shackles. Trust me—it'll be kinky and you'll get as much enjoyment out of it as I will."

"And him?" Jade questioned. "How do you think he'll react?"

"Turnaround is fair play," Bella stated. "He came to us and pleased us at will. We'll simply be returning the favor."

Jade thought about it. When the Riezell Guardian Corps had been implemented, there had been no restrictions set forth on how they could or should approach sexual situations during missions. If seduction was what was needed to gain an advantage, it was not only allowed but encouraged. It was a *carte-blanche* situation granting unrestricted power and the Corps had embraced it with fervor.

"So you think we should just jump his bones as soon as we see him?" Jade inquired. The idea intrigued her. She was curious to know what that hard bulge that had pressed against her really looked like, if it was as potent as he suggested it was.

Bella made a rude sound. "He wants us. We want him. *Quid pro quo* as the Terrans say." She shrugged. "And once we get it out of our system, he'll be nothing more than a fellow operative with no more power over us than one of the guys in the tac units."

"I'm not so sure," Jade said, chewing on her lower lip. "He makes me feel like no other man ever has. He's becoming an itch I can't reach to scratch!"

"Aye, well, don't think he doesn't know it too," Bella reminded her. "He knows precisely what he's doing and believes we're so far under his spell we can't think straight. The cocky bastard thinks he can wrap us around his cock."

Jade turned to her partner and elevated a slim brow. Bella had the grace to blush, her *café au lait* face darkening.

"We should have caught up with him and taken him into custody long before now," Jade declared. "He's been playing with us and we've allowed it."

"All the more reason for it to stop," Bella said.

"You don't think..." Jade broke off her question, her eyes mirrored with worry.

"Think what?"

"The Burgon will pair us with him as a team."

Bella's eyes widened so the entire expanse of white showed around the pupil. "Don't even think such a thing!" she gasped.

"Why us?" Jade persisted. "Why were we sent to fetch him?"

"You know why!"

"Aye, we have psi powers and he has psi powers. Think about it, Bella. Together, the three of us would be a redoubtable force against the New Coalition."

"We are using our powers to find him," Bella said. "Nothing else!"

"Have you used your power to find him? I know I haven't. We've been relying on intel."

"And instinct!" Bella insisted. "Instinct is part of our psi abilities."

"I'm telling you. I've got a bad feeling about this," Jade said. "The Burgon is a sneaky bastard. He's just as liable to have sent you and me for this job knowing MacKirnan would cast his spell over us as not. Once bound to him, we'd be hard-pressed to break free."

"Stop borrowing trouble," Bella snapped. "The last thing we need is to have to work with that man!"

## Chapter Six

Mac grinned evilly as he materialized on the crenulated walls of the old orphanage at Fealst. He had used the sweet little toy he'd found on the starcruiser many times, but never had he appreciated it more than he did at that moment. He arrived at his destination well ahead of the Guardians, who would be setting their trap for him as soon as they landed. Leaning his forearms on the crumbling half wall, he scanned the heavens in search of their starcruiser. The day was blustery, rain was in the air and the skies overhead were gunmetal gray with threat. To the west, lightning occasionally flared and the wind smelled of ozone. For nearly twenty minutes he stayed where he was watching for the ship, and when he caught sight of it, stepped back into the shadows, though he doubted they would consider he'd be there before them.

Once the craft landed, he eased to the wall again and carefully peered over. His would-be captors were quick to engage the ship's stealth shields as soon as they'd stepped from the hatchway. He watched the sleek starcruiser vanish slowly until it could not be seen with the naked eye. The Guardians looked about then ran to the orphanage's interior courtyard.

He nodded—having seen the weapons they brought with them—then took the spiral steps down to the courtyard, moving as silently as his training had taught him. At the bottom of the stairs, he could hear Jade and Bella talking, going over a checklist of what they brought to take him down.

Using the glamour that had held him in good stead on many visits to their ship without them knowing, he strolled nonchalantly to where they were setting their trap and leaned against the wall with his arms folded to watch and listen.

"You brought the drugs," Jade said.

"And you brought the iron shackles and collar to neutralize him, right?" Bella asked, looking down at the canvas bag Jade had dropped to the stony ground.

"Check."

Mac mentally snorted. Iron could negate his psi powers if he allowed it to be used to restrain his hands or the collar be placed around his neck so he could not employ the glamour, but he had no intention of allowing either of those things to happen.

"He should be arriving at Creel Point right about now. All we have to do is wait," Jade said. She sat on the rim of a large communal well that was situated in the middle of the courtyard.

"Aye, he..." Bella stopped, snapped her head around, frowning. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

The Guardian put her hand to her ear. "It felt as though someone blew in my gods-be-damned ear!"

"You're imagining things," Jade told her.

"I know what I felt," Bella snapped. She drew the neuroleptic pistol strapped to her left thigh and flipped the primer switch with her thumb, arming it. Housed within the weapon were six one-inch-long darts filled with a mixture of pairilis and symbinox, a powerful neural disruptor strong enough to bring down the strongest man.

Trusting the instincts of her partner, Bella slowly withdrew her own n.p., although she was certain they were alone at the deserted orphanage. She'd done a thorough scan of the area before they landed and found no telltale heat signatures or neural activity that would suggest the presence of another intelligent life form.

A quick inspection of their surroundings mollified Bella somewhat but still she frowned. Her dark eyes constantly moved as she rolled her shoulders with unease. She kept her pistol in hand. It was still in her hand when both she and Jade went rigid as statues – unable to move or blink.

"You don't need these, ladies," Mac said as he plucked the offending weapons from the Guardians. Tossing them into the well, he removed the ever-present needle from Jade's pant leg. "And you sure as hell don't need this." It too was sent into the well along with the canvas bag that contained the shackles and the packet of vac-syringes in Bella's uniform pocket. He reached into Jade's pocket to retrieve the stealth shield activator.

Leaving the women frozen, he deactivated the shield and spent a few minutes inside the starcruiser, doing a little reprogramming. When he was satisfied everything was as he wanted it, he touch the mini-vid-com on the lapel of his leather jacket.

"Aye, Captain?" D. replied instantly.

"How's the weather looking up there?" Mac inquired.

"Clear and ten," D. reported. "Not another vessel within fifty clicks of us."

"Alrighty then," Mac said cheerfully. "Keep me in the loop."

"Will do."

Skipping down the starcruiser's hatchway steps, Mac strolled over to the Guardians, grinning as he drew abreast of them and caught the glitter in their eyes. Though they could not move unless he allowed it, he'd not shut down their neural pathways and the thoughts he was intercepting were turning the air around him blue.

"Naughty, naughty girls," he said with a chuckle. "I might have to apply my hand to your delicious little arses for such wicked thoughts." He cocked his head to one side. "Maybe I should just strip you and leave you here spread-eagled on the ground."

Bella's gaze bore into him with sullen anger, but Jade's glower was filled with pure venom. He whistled at the vehemence of her fury.

"Man oh man, spike! Those are some truly brutal imaginings you want to slap on me." He went to her, cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face. "Although I might

enjoy one or two of them when we have the time.” He lowered his head and kissed her. It was a thorough kiss, and when it was over, the heat and rage pouring from the dark brown eyes of the Chrystallusian woman was potent.

Letting go of Jade, Mac moved to Bella and smiled gently. “I didn’t forget about you, brown sugar,” he said, and then graced her with an equally powerful kiss. When he was finished, he waved his hand.

As though they were marionettes on strings, the two women dropped to the ground, sitting with their legs folded to one side, their hands primly in their laps. Their tormentor joined them on the ground.

“Okay, so let’s go over some FYI before I release you from the glamour,” he said. He leaned back, bracing himself on one elbow as he considered them. “I’ve visited you sugar plums, touched you as necessary for the glamour to work without me actually having to lay one finger to you.” His lips twitched. “Not that I don’t enjoying putting my fingers on you—or in you—but it’s no longer a requirement. Your bodies have absorbed enough of my psi essence to know mine without contact. That is how I can hold you enthralled and motionless without physically touching you. The glamour, by the way, is a two-way street, a two-lane highway, if you will. While you were absorbing my control pheromones, I, in turn, was absorbing enough of your psi essences through the use of the glamour to—like a Reaper—be able to sniff you sweet thangs out wherever you may go.”

A low growl came from Jade Shimota and fierce light gleamed in her dark eyes.

“Temper, temper, spike,” Mac told her. “There’ll be plenty of time for you to jump my bones and do whatever wicked little things you want to on down the road a ways.”

A flock of birds careened overhead and he looked up, smiling. The bright Oceanian sunlight warmed his face. He sighed then returned his attention to the two Guardians.

“I’ve disposed of your weapons, those nasty neuroleptic drugs and the shackles. I’ve also reprogrammed your ship so it will respond only to my voice commands, which means you can’t flood the cabin with vapors to knock me out. The E.S.U. and containment cells won’t open for either of you to stuff me into. In order for the ship to lift off, it will need a special sequence of Earth words spoken in my voice. Otherwise it will just sit here until hell freezes over.” He grinned maniacally. “In order for the engines to maintain thrust once we are airborne I must be awake and alert and at the controls. Any attempt by either of you to overpower me, restrain me in any way, will result in the engines shutting down and the craft being disabled.”

He propped his head on his fist and raised one knee to get more comfortable on the hard ground.

“I don’t know how much the Burgon has told Strom, but I’m thinking—as both of you no doubt have been doing—it is the emperor’s intention that the three of us work together to bring down the New Coalition. Together, we’ve got every one of the psi powers we could possibly need to get the job done. Unless I’m way off the mark here, Strom will cashier the two of you out of the Guardians under some bogus charge—most

likely accusing you of consorting with the enemy.” His grin widened. “That would be me. You’ll have no choice but to join my crew. We’ll pull off a few daring robberies, do some high-profile extortion, kidnap a few good-for-nothings among both the N.C. and N.A. ranks and you’ll have the PECs after you too. I imagine I’ll be the first criminal the Guardians won’t ever be able to get.” He wagged a brow. “I’ll become one helluva legend.”

A harsh snuffing sound came from Jade.

“The Burgon—annoyed with the Guardians’ ineptitude—will send his own special team after us. Of course, we’ll always be one step ahead of that team, who won’t be trying all that hard to apprehend us anyway.”

He cocked his head to one side, sensing Jade’s desperate struggle to break free of the glamour. She couldn’t, but feeling the frantic desperation, he waved a hand—giving her and Bella speech if not movement.

“You arrogant, egotistical, self-indulgent, self-important, self-centered, narcissistic, patronizing, conceited, pompous, condescending...” She spat each word out as though it were a poisonous dart aimed straight at his heart. “Son of a whoring pig bitch!”

Mac’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth formed an amused O. “Wow, spike, you have quite the vocabulary, girl.” When she switched to cursing him, his family and everything else about him in Chrystallusian, he chuckled, highly entertained by the creative descriptions she was flinging at him.

“Jade, shush!” Bella hissed in warning. “He’ll mute you again!”

“Naw, let her get it out of her system,” Mac said good-naturedly. “The little darling is just pissed because she’s no longer in charge, that’s all.”

“I hate you!” Jade shrieked.

The WindChaser shook his head. “No you don’t, baby.”

“Aye, I do!” Jade said, tears of frustration filling her eyes. “If I could move, I’d rip your fucking heart out and stuff it up your overconfident ass, you gods-be-damned bastard!”

“That’s assuming I’d let you.” His grin stretched wide. “Which I wouldn’t.”

“You won’t always be in charge!” Jade threw at him.

“Yes I will, spike, and as much as that sticks in your sweet little craw—me being an inferior male and all—that’s the way it’s gonna be.” His grin dissolved. “You’ll just have to live with it.”

“Oooh!” Jade fumed, eyes brittle with rage.

Stretching out on his back, Mac jackknifed his body and sprang to his feet in a lithe bound that made both women draw in a quick breath.

“Oh that’s a neat trick, pretty boy!” Jade bit out. “When I’m free, I’m going to stomp your ass into a greasy spot!”

Bella hissed again. “For the love of the goddess, Jade, knock it off! We are at his mercy here!”

“I will never be at any man’s mercy!” Jade snarled.

One moment she was sitting on the ground and the next she was wrapped securely in his arms, his body so tight to hers she could barely draw breath. He grasped her chin in a firm grip and lifted her face so she was staring into his probing stare.

“Woman, stop aggravating me or I swear to God I’ll turn you over my knee and light up your backside like it’s never been lit before!” A muscle worked in his cheek. “I’m fast losing my patience with you, and if you think I’m self-indulgent now, once I lose what little control I have over what I will and will not tolerate from you, you’ll find out just how truly brutal I can be!” He tightened his grip on her chin. “If you want to make an enemy of me, keep this shit up, but I promise you, I will make your life a living torment.”

“Go to hell, you bastard. I’m not afraid of you!”

He released her, shoved her away from him then shot a hard look to Bella, withdrawing his hold on both of them with a careless flick of his wrist. “Come with me, Taborn!” He turned his back and began striding purposefully toward the ship.

Released from her immobility, Bella shook her head. “We can’t win with him, Shimota. Why do you think you can?”

That said, the tall Necromanian warriorress began walking toward the ship.

Jade stood there for a moment with such murderous thoughts running through her head they stained her peripheral vision with red tint. The blood was rushing through her ears, her heart pounding. For the first time since she was a child she wanted to cry. Her hands flexed and unflexed, her nails digging crescent moons into her palms as she strove to get her fury under control. One part of her knew she was not MacKirnan’s equal and she would never get the better of him, but another part—the part that refused to bow down to any man or woman—was urging her to go after him and strike out, cripple him if she could.

“Ain’t gonna happen,” she thought she heard him whisper in her ear, and that infuriated her even more.

The ship’s engine came online and she blinked. Bella was already in the ship with him. The Necromanian had already conceded, given in, accepted him as the alpha male, but that was the Necromanian way. The women of their race tended to buckle under a superior male.

“Superior my ass!” Jade sneered, knowing full well the women of her own race were even worse in allowing a dominant male to control them. Frustration made her want to throw her head back and howl. It brought a choking pressure to her throat and a burning sting to her eyes.

Bella appeared in the hatchway. She made no motion to urge Jade forward. The woman’s café au lait face was expressionless, and from that distance Bella’s eyes were unreadable. For a long moment she simply stared at Jade then stepped back, her hand going to the lever that would close the hatch.

“Wait!” Jade heard herself shout. Her heart had leapt into her throat. She took a step forward with her hand out in pleading and that just pissed her off. She snapped her arm down, wavered, breathing hard, then she heard his voice as clear as crystal in her ear.

“Come on, spike. We need you.” There was a pause and his voice became low and sensual. “I need you.”

Letting out a long breath, Jade hung her head. Putting her hands to her hips, she closed her eyes—squeezed them together—and then relaxed the grimace that had seized her face. Slowly lifting her head, she opened her eyes to find Mac framed in the hatchway. When he lifted his hand and extended it toward her, she started walking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine looked around. “The ship is lifting off.”

“With both Guardians onboard?” Ione questioned.

“Aye.”

“Bugger,” the sado-mast swore using a word she had stolen from Mac’s collection of Terran curses.

“We’ll follow just out of range like he ordered,” Laran said. She glanced around at D. “You’ve got a lock on him in case one of those bitches tries to hurt him?”

“Locked and loaded,” D. answered. “The BlackMoon is primed.”

“Let’s hope Mac was right and the New Alliance hasn’t set a trap to toss him into a cell on R-9,” Celine said.

\* \* \* \* \*

At Command Central, Francine Melton—General Strom’s secretary—interrupted her boss’s morning break as her heavily made-up face appeared on his vid-com screen.

“The WindChaser is hailing you, Sir,” she informed him in a breathless voice.

Strom drew in a quick breath. He had read all there was available on MacKirnan and now that he would actually be speaking to the man face-to-face, he was excited. The next few moments could be to their advantage or everything could be shot to hell. “Put him through, Miss Melton,” he said, listening to his heart pounding wildly. As soon as he realized from where the WindChaser was hailing him, he tensed, stunned.

The face that appeared on the screen was smiling slightly. “Good morning, General Strom.”

“Captain MacKirnan,” Strom greeted. “I see from the readout at the bottom of the vid-com screen that you are hailing us from the starcruiser.” At Mac’s slight inclination of agreement, the general asked after his two Guardians.

"I know you intended I be doped up, shackled and unconscious in an E.S.U., and I really hate to disappoint you, but I tend to be very claustrophobic and I have a thing about being drugged."

"My Guardians?" Strom asked, swallowing hard. "Are my Guardians...?"

The vid-com image shifted to the Necromanian warrioress. "We're fine, Sir," Major Taborn stated. The image shifted again to Major Shimota standing off to one side. She nodded but said nothing.

"All is well on the *Caomhnóir*?" Strom inquired, knowing if it wasn't, his operatives would find a way to alert him to it.

"We're learning to get along," Mac was the one who answered. "There's still a trust issue but we'll work it out."

"I see you are near Ionary," Strom commented. "Are you on your way to Riezell Nine?"

"That's where the Burgon wants me, isn't it?" Mac questioned. "Locked up in a containment cell and at his tender mercy."

Strom felt a stab of unease shift through him. "Well, we..."

"Why don't you have Frannie patch the Burgon through on this channel so we can discuss this like civilized bastards?" Mac queried. "I'll wait."

"Frannie?" Strom repeated then the sure knowledge they had another informant in Command Central went through him like summer lightning. He ground his teeth. "Your spy?"

"Yeppers, she's one of mine and don't think of replacing her if you want my help, Maxi. She's right where I need her."

"I should have known," Jade muttered beneath her breath. She cut a disgusted look to Bella, who merely shrugged.

Strom was about to instruct Francine to hail the Burgon, but then the emperor's grinning countenance suddenly appeared as though he'd been waiting on hold.

"It is a pleasure to speak to you at last, Mac," Ryden Bakari said. He was sitting at the console of his Fiach runabout, booted feet propped on the desktop. "How soon before you'll be on R-9?"

"Got my con cell all ready, do you?" Mac countered.

The Burgon laughed. "Will it be necessary?"

"Not on your fledglings, Reaper," Mac quipped, and three quickly indrawn breaths sounded loud over the vid-com.

"Captain MacKirnan, you will show the Burgon the respect he is due!" Strom insisted, his face red with anger.

"The emperor knows I respect him else he wouldn't want me to work alongside him," Mac replied. "I'm an Earthman, General. We haven't kowtowed to royalty in over three hundred years and I'm not about to start now."

“From anyone else I wouldn’t allow it,” the Burgon said, surprising Strom and the Guardians. “For you, I’ll make an exception, Earthman.” He smiled broadly. “I look forward to sitting down and hearing all about your world.”

“Barring any unforeseen problems, we should be there this time tomorrow,” Mac said.

The Burgon nodded. “May the Wind be at your back, MacKirnan.”

“It’s just Mac,” Mac corrected.

“Mac it is then,” the emperor acknowledged then his image dissolved from the vid-com screen.

“Very imposing man,” Mac commented.

“And due your complete allegiance as well as your unwavering respect!” Strom snapped.

Mac stared the other man in the eye. “He has both.”

Then the screen went black.

## Chapter Seven

Jade was sullen as she sat in one of the bridge's comfortable chairs and watched Mac handle the *Caomhnóir* as though he'd been flying her for years. His hands were sure on the controls and he was humming some irritating song as he typed in new coordinates that would take them on the very outer edge of the Wixenstead Corridor.

"What is that song?" Bella inquired.

"It's an old folksong," he replied. "It's called 'Red is the Rose'. It's one of my favorite Celtic tunes." He thought about that for a moment. "Sort of like Chalean."

"Inspid music," Jade pronounced.

"Granted it doesn't screech like a cat with its tail caught in a wringer as does what passes for music in Chrystallus, but I like it," he responded.

"Do not dare insult my ancestral music!" Jade spat at him, eyes flaring.

"Then don't insult mine," he said softly as he held her glower until she dropped her gaze from his.

Jade felt her cheeks sting from the rebuke and was ashamed of her provoking rudeness. Manners had been drummed into her head from infancy, but over the years her job had negated much of what her mother, grandmother and aunts had tried to instill in her. She had become more manlike and hostile, more aggressive and antagonistic, more belligerent. Graciousness and femininity had fled with the weapons training and hand-to-hand combat, the wounding, maiming and killing she had been taught at the Academy. She had lost not only a portion of the naturally soft side of her female being but apparently her ethical comportment as well. She sighed, but it wasn't a sound filled with pique or irritation but rather of infinite weariness.

"My apologies, MacKirnan," she said, looking away from his beautiful male features. She could feel Bella gawking at her and gritted her teeth.

"My apologies to you also," Mac said.

"Forgive me," she whispered, and could have gutted Bella for the woman's jaw had dropped open.

"There's nothing to forgive, spike," Mac said. He was no longer looking at her but rather at the navigational screen and his forehead was creased, eyes narrowed. "Ladies, you need to buckle in," Mac said, drawing their attention.

"What's the problem?" Bella asked.

"We've got a magnetic storm traveling toward us and the thing is massive. It's playing hell with the instruments. The readouts are all over the place, my nav screen is pixelating. At the very least the storm is liable to knock us into the asteroid belt, so cinch in," he answered.

“That’s the least? What the hell is the worst?” Bella asked.

“The force of the solar wind flowing over us is trying to take out the vertical stabilizers. I’m having a hell of a time keeping the ship level especially when I can’t read a gods-be-damned thing on this scrambled screen,” he said in a grim voice as the ship began to roll slightly from side to side. “Setting her down is going to be a bitch and done blind, I’m afraid.”

“Evasive maneuvers to avoid the push of the wind?” Jade questioned, although she knew he would most likely have considered that.

“There’s nowhere for us to go, baby,” he told her. “We’ve been skimming the edge of the asteroid belt and the storm is spreading out as it approaches.” He glanced at the star chart on the computer screen. “What’s the nearest land mass, sugar?”

Bella swiveled her chair to peruse the screen on the console behind her. He heard her groan. “Five hundred clicks out there’s a small planet between Ionary and Chale—very mountainous but with a small body of salt water. It’s called T-38. Trying to land on what little ground surface there is there between the water and the mountains would be like trying to aim a speck of dandelion fluff at a particular grain of sand in a high wind. It’s nigh impossible.”

“Does this baby have marine capability?” he asked, though he thought he knew the answer already. He was fairly sure the starcruiser was not a submersible—at least not purposefully.

“Negative,” Jade said, beginning to feel the nervousness she sensed was gripping Bella. Her heart was racing, her palms sweaty.

“Then I’m gonna have to come in on a low trajectory over the water and hope I can keep the nose up and not hit a reef and flip us ass over tea kettle,” he said grimly. The thought of the craft coming apart around them made him shudder almost as much as hitting a mountain at high speed.

Bella ran her tongue over her suddenly dry lips. “Can you power down enough not to slam into the mountains ringing the lake?” she asked. Her hands were tight on the arms of her chair. “Are you that good a pilot?”

“We’ll soon find out, won’t we?” he said. On his nav screen he was keeping one eye on the approaching ion storm that—worst-case scenario—could hit their ship to disintegrate it, and another eye on their air speed that was increasing as the storm pushed at them. As fast as he was going, hitting the water on T-38 could be just as disastrous, but he had no choice if he was to outrun the advancing storm. Either way, death was fast on their heels.

“If we don’t survive this, ladies,” he said, “it was nice knowing you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hundred clicks out and closing fast on T-38, Mac began to sweat. The storm was right on their heels—chasing them like a hound to stag, pushing them forward

much too fast. He could almost feel the hot breath of the energy wave breathing down his neck. He tried to engage the landing gear but the onboard computer had been fried by the magnetic storm and crashed. The emergency crash pods—the plasma-filled bladders that were designed to cushion a hard landing—were also off-line. That meant the ship would land on its titanium belly.

“We’re coming in too hot,” Bella warned him.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he muttered. He edged his hand toward the thruster controls, knowing he had one chance—and one chance only—to cut the speed just enough so the ship wouldn’t sink like a rock or hit the water so hard the hull would break apart. Timing was everything, he thought, feeling a trickle of sweat easing down the side of his face. He’d already lost the stabilizers and was manhandling the craft by little more than his psychokinetic powers. Concentrating on flying the out-of-control starship was giving him the headache from hell.

“Two hundred fifty clicks,” he said more to himself than the Guardians. “Two hundred.”

A wispy curtain of vapor became towering cloud tops as the ship plunged down through the heated air of the thermosphere.

“One-fifty.”

Bursting through the cloud cover to bright blue sky, the ship lurched as Mac powered back. His breathing was loud. A slow trickle of blood was seeping from his left ear.

“One hundred.”

Another trickle came from his right ear.

“There it is.”

T-38 suddenly appeared like a blue ball threaded at the top and bottom with large dark brown bands. He knew the bands were the jagged mountains of the small planet and his mouth went suddenly dry. He sensed the fear radiating from the women. He had a good share of his own. His blood was roaring in his ears, his heartbeat loud and fast. Sweat was running from his armpits, down the center of his back, in the crease of his groin, dripping into his eyes to sting him. His attention was riveted to the navigational grid, though the images were little more than skipping squares that were useless to him.

In the back of his mind he was going over every emergency maneuver he’d ever been taught for a water landing. The last time he’d been forced to drop his ship into the brink his copilot had been killed and Mac was seriously injured. During the months in recovery he had vowed to never take another ship in for a water landing, yet here he was pinning all his hopes on one.

“Come on, baby girl. I’ve got faith in you,” he whispered to the ship. “Don’t let me down.”

Cutting as much speed as he dared—still being pushed from behind by the magnetic storm’s hot winds—he eased the nose down and aimed for the vast expanse of water. Rushing toward it, he realized with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that what appeared to be so vast from the heavens was, in fact, smaller and less deep than he had hoped. The closer he came to the rippling surface of the water now beginning to be whipped into a froth by the advancing storm, he could see the craggy lakebed beneath and that sent shudders of terror racing through him. With the very real fear of having the bottom of the hull ripped open as though by a giant can opener with a jagged-tooth edge, he held his breath and eased the *Caomhnóir* onto the surface of the wildly undulating water.

The starcruiser shuddered violently and the nose tried to dip, but he kept it up, kept it steady. He could hear scraping along the ship’s bottom and winced, but there was nothing he could do about it. Utilizing every last ounce of psi ability he had to keep the ship skimming along what he desperately envisioned as a soft runway, he was able to keep the *Caomhnóir* from settling lower in the water.

“Think brakes, ladies!” he hissed from between clenched teeth. “Gotta slow this puppy down!”

Bella’s eyes snapped open and she stared open-mouthed at the vid-screen. The starcruiser was hurtling toward a mountain at breakneck speed.

“Brakes!” Mac shouted.

Jade didn’t open her eyes but used her own psychic powers to imagine a giant hand reaching down to take hold of the ship and slow it. She concentrated as she never had before, felt Bella doing the same, but at the same time could read Mac’s fear like a sentient life form.

The ship began to slow yet they were rapidly approaching the mountain. Between the water and the ragged face of the mountain was a plot of land that seemed the size of a slice of bread—certainly not large enough to accommodate the length of the *Caomhnóir*.

Fifty feet from what looked as though would be a violent impact into the rock, the starcruiser shuddered halfway out of the water, the nose skidding in coarse black sand with the aft section still in the water, and came to an abrupt stop.

Silence. Complete, utter silence settled in the command room of the *Caomhnóir*. The aft section of the ship was settling into the silt at the lake’s edge and the nose was pointed at a twenty-degree angle upward. The Guardians and Mac stared straight ahead of them out the forward windscreen at the solid wall of dark brown rock that was no more than six inches from the nose of the ship.

For the longest time no one said a word. No one moved. There was a ticking like a hot engine cooling, the lap of water against the hull as it calmed behind the passing over of the storm and the violent descent of the starship. It was Bella who finally spoke in a childlike voice.

“What is that godsawful smell?” she asked, face crinkled.

“Probably the payload I dropped in my tighty-once-whities,” Mac answered in a strained voice.

“Sulfur,” Jade said. “Sulfur from a vent in the mountain. The fumes are getting into the ship somehow.”

“Breach,” Bella stated. “A breach in the hull.”

“Not a load in my britches?” Mac asked. He shifted in his seat as though he wanted to make sure that wasn’t the case.

“Not unless you’ve been eating boiled eggs by the caseload, warrior,” Jade replied.

“Brimstone,” Bella said. “That’s what brimstone must smell like.”

Mac unstrapped his harness and stood, his legs threatening to buckle beneath him. He could not take his eyes from the rugged face of the mountain he had come so close—too gods-be-damned close—to plowing into. His hands were trembling, his breath ragged, blood easing from both ears.

“MacKirnan?” Jade asked, looked up at him. Her forehead creased as she lowered her hands to the buckle of her harness. She queried him again.

Mac turned his face toward her but his eyes were blank, his face as pale as new parchment.

Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he hit the floor with a resounding thud.

## Chapter Eight

Mac came awake with a start, his eyes flying open. He tried to sit up, but a firm hand to his chest prevented him from doing so.

"Lie still," a no-nonsense voice ordered. "You had a brain bleed."

Cutting his gaze to the tall woman of color standing beside him, Mac stared at her for a long moment as though he had no idea who she was then memory came flooding back.

"Where am I?"

"Lying in my bunk on the *Caomhnóir*."

"What happened?" he queried, lifting a hand that felt as though it weighed a ton to his head.

"Overload," Bella informed him. "You were using your psi abilities to control the ship. You passed out."

"Head hurts like a motherfucker," he grumbled.

"Well, if you hadn't ditched all the drugs we had onboard, we could give you something for that," another voice quipped. "But since you did, suck it up and live with it." The speaker moved into his line of vision. "Or die from it. Your choice."

"You're such a softie, spike," Mac muttered.

"The good news is we aren't a splatter on the mountain," Bella told him. "The bad news is we have a ten-foot-long gash on the belly of the ship that we have no way to repair."

"And better yet," Jade said, "our com capabilities are still down and the location beacon is off-line."

Mac sighed, rubbing at the horrendous pain throbbing between his temples. "My crew will come for us," he stated.

"And they know precisely where we are because...?" Jade snapped.

"They always know where I am," he said. He lowered his hand to his shoulder. "I had a tracking chip implanted. If they don't hear from me within twenty-four hours, they know to come looking. With this storm, I suspect they'll come much sooner than that."

Jade's eyebrows shot up. She gave him a grudging look of appreciation. "Maybe you aren't worthless after all."

He turned to his side, closed his eyes, drew his legs up and tucked his clasped hands between them.

"You're really hurting, aren't you?" Bella asked, leaning over to push the hair from his eyes.

"Like a big dog," he replied.

Bella twisted her head around and looked at Jade. "You gonna help him, or just stand there and let him suffer needlessly?"

Jade gave her partner a narrowed glare.

"She'd rather see me toast than help," Mac told Bella.

"Shimota?" Bella pressed.

The Chrystallusian cursed beneath her breath. "Oh all right!" she snapped. She elbowed Bella aside then plopped down on the bunk beside Mac, nudging him over with her hip. "Move it, asshole!"

Mac groaned but managed to wiggle backward until his back was pressed against the bulkhead wall. He wedged one eye open. "What are you gonna do?"

"Heal your sorry ass," Jade snapped. "You are going to have to turn onto your back."

"Why?" he mumbled.

"She's got psi healing powers like you can't believe," Bella said. "I've seen her strut her stuff. If we could bottle it, we'd be rich women."

He grunted again, hurting too bad to talk, but he did as she demanded. His face slick with pain sweat, he turned to his back, grimacing.

Swiveling her body so she could place her hands to the sides of his head, Jade could feel the brutal tension running through his body. From the strength of the tightness, the waves of intense sensations emanating from his mind, she knew he was in agony.

"Relax, warrior," she whispered. "Let me take away the pain."

He tried to relax but couldn't. His brain was on overload and flashing memories were assailing him—memories he wished with his entire being he could lay to rest. They always came back when he'd overdone it with the telekinetic ability and there was no way to shut them down. He had to ride out the unpleasantness of remembering things he'd just as soon forget.

Jade closed her eyes to better concentrate on sending healing blue light into his overwrought brain. The waves of energy flowing up her arms from her patient were so forceful, so strong her own body perceived them as low-dose shocks of electrical current. Sending an enkephalinic agonist—a substance absorbed through Mac's skin that would bind to the pain receptors in his brain to suppress the agony—she was surprised to receive in return kaleidoscopic images folding over and over upon themselves. His brain was discharging wave after wave of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine—the key brain chemical that was the building block for memory.

Leaning against the wall as her partner used her psi powers to ease MacKirnan's pain, Bella saw Jade shudder violently, and then in quick succession she smiled, frowned and looked perturbed then annoyed. She laughed one moment then hissed the

next. What appeared to be grief caused her to draw in a wavering breath then exhale it along with a virulent curse. Her face took on a look of rage then settled into the dreamy countenance of what could only be love before morphing with a lick of her lips to undeniable lust.

As each new emotion flickered over Jade's face, Bella began to realize the Chrystallusian was doing something she had always vowed she would not—invade another person's memories. It seemed not only was Jade intruding on MacKirnan's recollections, she was experiencing them alongside him. Such a breach of Jade's personal code of conduct shocked Bella so greatly she reached out a hand to put a stop to the theft.

Jade flinched as Bella's hand landed on her shoulder. Her eyes popped open and she snapped her head around, staring at her partner with glazed, teary eyes. Her bottom lip trembled.

"Jade," Bella drawled the name out in a warning tone, turning her head slightly with the admonition.

"Oh Bella," Jade said, her voice trembling. "He's not what we thought."

Before Bella could inquire about that cryptic comment, Jade slowly released her hold on her patient and with hands shaking got up from the bed, departing Bella's quarters.

Confused by what was happening, Bella looked down at MacKirnan, but he appeared to be sleeping soundly. One arm was now lying on the pillow behind his head and the other rested across his waist. There was a peaceful look on his handsome face—the pain lines erased. He looked much younger, innocent, almost childlike.

"Ah warrior, you're a handsome one, you really are," she whispered.

Feeling the need to be motherly, Bella took a blanket from a compartment and spread it over his long legs. She stumbled over his boots as she went to the door, stifled a laugh at her clumsiness then reached down and positioned them side by side at the foot of the bunk before going in search of her partner.

She found Jade staring out the view screen. The young woman's arms were wrapped around herself. Sitting in one of the jump seats, Bella waited a moment before speaking. "What did you see?" she asked softly.

For a moment Bella didn't think Jade would answer, but when she did, the other woman's voice was filled with remorse.

"More than I should have," Jade replied. "More than I had any legal or moral right to."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No," Jade said then after a long pause shrugged helplessly. "Aye. I think I have to."

Bella waited, knowing instinctively Jade was striving for the right way to say whatever it was that had disturbed her so deeply.

"You know I never infringe on those I heal," she said. "It isn't right."

"Aye." Reading a criminal's mind to stop him or her from creating havoc was one thing. Breaking into a person's memories was something entirely different. That was personally repugnant to most psychics.

"It was like I was right there as he relived his past," she said. "Standing there watching it unfold like a vid-movie. I could smell the newly mown grass as he pushed this noisy, strange-looking machine over it. My eyes watered as smoke from a fire he was helping to fight blinded me. The tips of my fingers tingled when he touched his dying father's brow." She released a ragged breath. "I felt the things he was feeling and it shook me, Bella. It shook me to my very core." She glanced around bleakly, a tear rolling down her cheek. "He is such a deep man."

"You said he wasn't what we thought he was. What did you mean?" That enigmatic remark concerned Bella.

"He's different."

"Different how?"

"I'm not sure," Jade answered. "There was something there, a part of his mind that was closed off completely, dark, forbidden. I didn't sense that it was something I should be afraid of, but rather something that hurts him so badly he had to compartmentalize it to keep it at bay. Whatever it is, it doesn't affect how he is."

"I don't understand."

"Everything he's ever done has been done to help other people. He's done nothing to aid himself," Jade replied. "Every crime he's ever committed from the time he was old enough to walk until yesterday, he did to be of assistance to someone. His first spanking was given because he stole a neighbor boy's toy, but do you know why he took it? To give it to a little boy who had no toys at all! He's robbed from those who had it to give to those who had nothing. He's taken money from the wealthy so the poor could have medicine, a roof over their heads, a place to bury their dead with respect. Once he gave his last silver piece to a family who was being evicted from their quarters, and though he was starving gave his rations to a hungry child, gone after thieves and con men who ripped off the elderly. He literally gave a needy man the shirt off his back in the dead of winter and nearly died of exposure from it." She gave Bella a long, entreating look. "He's not what we were told he is. Most everything he's done, he's done to be of help, to put things to right."

"To the New Alliance?"

Jade flung out a hand. "To them and to the New Coalition, to those who are straddling the fence between the two factions. He doesn't discriminate with his help. He doesn't see color or race or gender or afflictions. He sees people," Jade said, her voice breaking. "He helps people. Not governments or politicians. People!"

The drone of an engine overhead made both women look to the ceiling. Around them, the starcruiser shuddered in the wash of what was surely a larger starcruiser hovering overhead.

"Looks like his crew has found him," Bella said.

"And his crew is different."

"How so?"

"They are people nobody wanted," Jade said of Mac's team. "Each of them. They are human beings who were broken, thrown away, and he picked them up and made them whole again."

"All right, so he's the next best thing to mafé and doesn't stick to the roof of your mouth," Bella said, referring to a pureed Chrystallusian delicacy with a roll of the eyes. "We..."

The three women who suddenly appeared on the bridge of the *Caomhínóir* were the same three Jade and Bella had seen in the cantina on Diabolusia. The two younger women were armed with Dóigras – long spear-like weapons with a bulbous glass star at the business end – and looked as though they knew how to use the deadly Amazeen weapon. The older woman with short salt-and-pepper hair had two phospho guns aimed point-blank at the Guardians.

"Where is he, *conchan*?" one of the Dóigra-wielding women snarled.

Jade's eyes narrowed dangerously. "That's the second time you've called me a whore, you Seabhachuan cunt," she spat.

"*Conchan*," the other woman threw at her again.

"Stand down, Ione," the older woman ordered. "We've got..."

"Oh, you're the sado-mast who loves to hurt him," Jade interrupted, taking a step forward only to have Bella shoot out an arm to restrain her. "We're gonna have a talk, you and me."

"He belongs to us!" Ione said with a snort. "I can do whatever the hell I want with him!"

"Maybe until now you could," Jade said, "but all that's about to change, you ugly bitch. He is mine!"

Bella blinked, snapping her head toward her partner. "He's what?" she asked.

Ione raised the Dóigra, but the woman Jade knew had to be Celine stepped in to knock it aside.

"I said stand down!" Celine shouted, her face as hard as flint.

"But she..." Ione began to protest.

"She is of no importance!" Celine told her. "Only Mac is important." She swung her brittle glare to Jade. "Where is he?"

For a reason she couldn't explain, Jade was a tiny bit afraid of the older woman. It wasn't just the look in Celine's sharp gaze but an aura the woman was giving off that said she was far more dangerous than either of the Dóigra-wielders. She begrudgingly answered, "Sleeping."

"Drugged?" Celine demanded, a muscle working in her lean cheek.

"He passed out after we landed," Bella answered for Jade. "She healed the bleed." Celine lifted her chin. "He had a seizure then."

"No, I didn't say that," Bella corrected. "He passed out."

The third woman finally spoke. "He had a seizure. Sometimes it manifests itself as a blackout but most of the time it is more severe."

"By the gods I'd hate to see a more severe manifestation!" Jade said, eyes wide.

"It is an unnerving sight to be sure and thankfully it rarely occurs," Celine said. She surprised the Guardians by holstering her weapons. "Take me to him."

Bella and Jade exchanged a look but neither had weapons and the two sado-masts didn't look as though they were going to lay aside theirs.

"Your ship is disabled," Celine said with a touch of exasperation in her cultivated voice. "He will want you brought along with us, although if it were left up to us we'd leave you here to rot."

"With the greatest of pleasures," the woman with the long red fingernails concurred as she flexed her hand around the staff of the Amazeen weapon.

"He will want you treated with the respect you are due," Celine continued, but upon hearing a snort from one of her fellow shipmates, clenched her jaws together before speaking again as though straining for patience. "So we will adhere to his wishes."

*What do you think?* Bella sent to Jade on the psychic link they shared. *Do we acquiesce?*

*With no option other than trying to overcome them, I don't see we have much choice,* Jade replied with a grunt of irritation.

"Now take me to my man," Celine said.

"Yours?" Jade questioned aloud with an arch of her brow.

"Mine," Celine said. "And make no mistake about it."

"She deigns to share him with us on occasion. You better be nice to her if you want your piece of his ass," Laran said.

After leading the trio to Bella's quarters where MacKirnan was sleeping deeply, and Celine made sure he was in good shape, the five women returned to the bridge and Celine called someone named D. down to carry Mac onboard the *WindChaser II*. When the burly man appeared, Bella gaped openmouthed at him.

"Mother of the gods but you're a big one!" Bella said, looking D. up and down. She was a tall woman in her own right, but he towered a good six inches over her.

"In more ways than you can see," Laran quipped.

D. blushed, ducking his head, but when he looked up again, it was Bella he couldn't seem to take his eyes off. He grinned at her – showing strong white teeth.

"He's back there, D.," Celine said, pointing aft. "Try not to wake him."

"He won't," Jade said. "I planted a demand for eight hours of deep sleep."

"That should be enough, but he'll be pissed he was forced down that long," Celine warned.

"Tough shit," Jade growled.

"My thought as well," Celine said with a grin.

"The transport won't cause another bleed, will it?" Ione demanded of Jade.

"It shouldn't, but to be on the safe side, I'll stay with him and—" Jade started to say.

"The hell you will!" Ione snapped. "Doc will see to Mac!"

"If he's not stoned out of his mind," Laran reminded her sister.

"Oh, that's just what he needs," Jade sneered. "A drugged-up healer!"

Celine gave Jade a stony look. "You can stay with him unless Doc says otherwise."

"But Celine...!" Ione complained.

"She belongs to him," Celine cut in. "I can smell his aftershave on her. Stop fighting what can't be fought, Sanchita. I learned long ago he'll do what he wants no matter how it hurts us."

Jade stared at the older woman. She felt Celine's sorrow at having to share the man she loved, and for the first time in her life knew what jealousy was.

"Aye, you'll learn more about it than you'll ever want to," Celine said softly as though she had intercepted the thought then reached up to touch the transmitter on her lapel. "Bring me onboard, Bruno." With that, she disappeared.

Seconds later the sado-mast sisters vanished as well, leaving Jade and Bella alone.

"You don't think they would," Bella began saying while she stood on the bridge of the starcruiser and finished the sentence when she and her partner appeared onboard the *WindChaser II*, "leave us here, do you?"

Two very handsome men were staring at them from the nav and com centers while a tall, thin woman smiled shyly. She advanced on them, slender hand extended.

"I am Crystal," she said in a deep, throaty voice. "So pleased to make your acquaintance."

Bella didn't make a move to take the proffered hand, but Jade did. She shook Crystal's hand, blinked, blinked again then turned a stunned look to Bella. "She's not really..." she began.

"I am what I am," Crystal said, releasing Jade's hand then turning to Bella.

Reluctant to touch people she didn't know, Bella nevertheless suddenly felt a need to touch this one. As soon as she did, her finely drawn eyebrows shot up. But what might once have disgusted her did not at that moment. She clasped Crystal's hand firmly. "It is good to meet you," she said, truly meaning it.

"Thank you," Crystal said softly then eased her hand from Bella's. She walked to one of the men—a tall blond with ice-blue eyes—and laid her head on his shoulder and spoke to him in a low voice. "They don't hate me, Gunnie."

"Of course they do not!" the man said. He clicked his heels together. "I am Gunter." He indicated the other man. "He is my life-partner Bruno."

"Doc is in the sickbay with Mac," Bruno said. "The women trailed along but someone has to keep this hunk of flying scrap in the air."

"It's quite a ship," Bella said, glancing around at the marvel of engineering that surrounded her.

"She's as easy to handle as she is beautiful. Want to take her up?" Bruno inquired.

Bella's face creased into a grin. "Do warthogs fart in their sleep?" she asked, rubbing her hands together.

"I'm going to check on MacKirnan," Jade said, but Bella was already deep in conversation with the two men.

"I'll show you the way if you like," Crystal said. She clamped her bottom lip between her teeth as though she expected to be rebuffed.

"I would appreciate that," Jade said, and once again was amazed at the sudden change in her persona. She had always prided herself in being a tough-as-titanium, no-nonsense warrioress without a heart, but since delving into Ranulf MacKirnan's mind she was being bombarded with emotions that were constantly bewildering her.

"This way," Crystal said.

After one final glance at Bella, who seemed to be taking great delight in the starcruiser's finer points, Jade followed Crystal into the ship's elevator.

## Chapter Nine

Mac sighed deeply, turned from his side to his back, and with his eyes still closed, kicked the covers from his bare legs. He turned his cheek into the cooler plane of the pillow then slowly opened his eyes. He smiled.

“We’re on my ship?” he queried.

“In your quarters.” Jade answered his smile and reached up to smooth a lock of fallen hair from his temple. She was sitting at his bedside, leaning toward him. Her fingers went from his face to his naked chest, her palm splayed upon the thick mat of hair nested there. “We’re in orbit around Ionary at the moment. Celine said you’d let her know when you are ready to head to R-9.”

“Um,” he acknowledged. He stared into Jade’s dark eyes for a long, long time without either of them speaking. Her fingers flexed on his chest. She moistened her lips, the tip of her tongue curling over her bottom lip.

“I want you.”

It was a simple statement and it came huskily from her lips in a tone of voice she barely recognized as being her own. She held her breath, waiting for him to reply.

Mac reached up to cover her hand with his. “Baby, you can have me any time you want me,” he told her.

For a moment or two she said nothing then eased her hand from under his. Leaning back in the chair, she brought her right leg up to tug off her boot. Tossing it aside, she removed the left.

“You feel up to this?” she asked.

He nodded, the scrape of his day-old beard rubbing against the crisp cotton fabric of the pillow.

Getting to her feet, she put her fingers to the buttons of her uniform tunic and began undoing them. As she undressed, his hot gaze never left her face. His attention slid to her lips then returned to eyes.

Jade peeled the tunic from her shoulders and let it drop to the floor. She reached for the hook of her uniform pants and popped it open, ran the zipper down slowly. Sliding her hands under the waistband, she pushed the pants down her legs, stepped out of them and stood there clad only in her black lace bra and thong.

“You are beautiful beyond words,” he whispered, gaze raking over her body.

“I am happy I please you,” she told him, her fingers on the front closure of her bra.

She was more amply endowed than most of the women of her race, he thought as her firm breasts sprang free of the lacy garment. The dusky tips of her nipples—large

and swollen from her desire – made his cock leap. As she eased the bra straps from her slender shoulders, he felt his pulse quicken, the blood rushing through his veins. The article of clothing fell to the floor behind her and his gaze crawled from her proud breasts to the band that held the thong in place. He swallowed, his breath quickening.

Hooking her thumbs beneath the elastic of the thong, she eased the flimsy underwear down her hips and thighs – lifting first one leg then the other to remove the garment. She let it drop to the floor.

Heat pooled in his groin, tightened his shaft. His mouth flooded with the need to taste the sweetness between her thighs. His palms itched to stroke her soft flesh. His fingers twitched to slip inside her heated core.

Jade's scrutiny lowered from his face to the bulge in the shorts that were all that stood between her and what she wanted. She put her right knee on the mattress then swung her left leg over Mac, seating herself gently upon the thick swelling. It flexed beneath her and she groaned from the feel and heat radiating from it.

Mac put his hands to her hips – his thumbs running up and down the tight nip of her waist. The scent of her arousal drifted to him and he inhaled deep, his eyes half closing to the scintillating aroma. He felt her leaning toward him.

Her lips were as soft as chrysanthemum petals as they touched his. The hot thrust of her tongue slipping sensuously into his mouth made him shiver, his hands tighten on her hips, his thighs tense. It was a kiss meant to plunder his very soul and it did – doing very wicked things to his libido. Lips moving expertly over his, tongue thrusting deep, dancing with his own, warm breath mingling with the rhythmic push of his and hearts beating in rhythm, he laced his arms around her and pulled her to him as though he'd never let her go.

He took the kiss from her and gave it back tenfold, twisting his mouth over hers, flicking his tongue into and out of her mouth, along her lips. He sucked her lower lip between his teeth and nibbled until she groaned and writhed atop him. Splaying his hands across her back, he lifted one leg between hers so she was riding his thigh. He rocked her body upon the taut thigh.

"Evil boy," she whispered against his lips, and managed to break free of his firm grip, sliding down his body as though their flesh were oiled. She took the waistband of his shorts with her teeth and tugged them down, her fingers aiding her in removing them from him. His cock leapt forth and she laughed – a low, growling sound from deep in her throat as she continued to work the boxers down his legs and off his body.

Mac sucked in a harsh breath as her mouth engulfed his rod, took him deep inside her smooth warmth, swallowed him to the core. She drew hard upon his shaft then slipped her mouth from the base to the tip. The wet, heated slickness of her tongue lapping him, licking, fluttering over the engorged head, sweeping down his length and across his balls, probing at the very base of him before dragging up his hard shaft to poke wantonly at the weeping slit. He felt the sensation from the tip of him all the way

up his cock, along his spine and then into his brain where it burst like a firecracker with unbridled need.

"Spike?" he questioned, on fire with the building lust.

"Hmm?" she replied with her mouth still tight on his erection.

"Baby, I'm about to come," he warned her. His hands went to her hair. He tried to draw her head up, but she clamped her sweet jaws around him and sucked hard, looking up at him through her lashes. The groan that escaped him was a prelude to the hot flash of cum that shot from his cock like a rocket. His hips bucked and his entire body stiffened as the climax pulsed from his shaft. He dug his heels into the mattress, held his breath until darkness fringed his vision then with one final spurt, he sagged – body going limp as his heart pounded.

"That's my sweet man," Jade said, lapping every bit of cum from his cock. She ignored the tremors that shook him as she ran her tongue up and down his shrinking flesh. She caressed his balls then rubbed her body along his as she stretched out atop him, his hands sliding down her to cup her rump.

"You've drained me, baby," he told her.

"That was my intent," she said.

"But I didn't satisfy you," he protested.

"The night is young, WindChaser," she said, and when he lifted his eyes to hers, he smiled.

"Yes it is." He enfolded her in his arms and shifted her to lie beside him. "Give me a few minutes to recharge and I'll rock your world for you."

Jade snuggled against him with her head on his shoulder, his chin atop her head, her arm over his chest. She stared at the nipple shields but refrained from touching them, though she wanted to.

"Do whatever you want to me," he said in a sleepy voice.

The gentle look left her face to be replaced with one of guilt knowing he could read her mind.

"There's something I must tell you," she said.

"Um."

"I did something I should not have done," she confessed. "Went somewhere I should not have gone."

"Where was that?" he queried.

She didn't answer for a moment then in a small voice replied, "Through your memories."

"I've nothing to hide, spike," he said. "Visit that murky landscape all you want, any time you want."

She hesitated, a crease forming between her eyes. "There was something I encountered, MacKirnan. A sealed doorway I..."

He squeezed her. "I'm sleepy. Let's talk about this later, okay? Lights off."

The vid-com extinguished the lights.

She sensed his weariness and stopped talking. His health was more important to her than the curiosity that was eating at her. Her hand caressed his chest and he placed his over it. Beneath her palm she felt his heartbeat begin to slow – much more so than it should have.

"You're not entirely human, are you?" she asked softly. He took so long in answering she thought he must have fallen asleep, but then he replied.

"No, spike. Not entirely."

A trill of unease shifted through her. What he was concealing in that hidden room within his mind had to be brought out into the open if she was to ever feel totally comfortable with him. Jade didn't like mysteries, enigmas, conundrums. She liked things cut and dried and understandable. But as much as she wanted to question him about whatever it was he was hiding, she'd let it go for now. His slow, rhythmic breath told her he had fallen asleep. There would be time for questions later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac sat bolt upright in the bed, dragging rapid, shallow breaths into his depleted lungs. He was soaked with sweat, his hand trembling as he raked it through his damp hair.

"Bad dream?"

He started, having forgotten the woman lying beside him. He looked down at her, trying desperately to get his breath and wildly beating heart under control. She was propped up in bed with her fist bracing her head, watching him like a hawk would a field mouse. At some point while he slept, she found one of his shirts and it now covered her body to the knees.

"Bad memories," he managed to reply. "Lights up one-fourth."

The vid-com control eased the lights to a low level.

"From that secret room in your mind?" she asked gently. She reached out her free hand to touch his arm.

He nodded. "Yeah."

He flipped the covers back and sat on the edge of the bed with his hands gripping the mattress, head bent, still struggling to breathe normally. His hand shook visibly as he reached for the bottle of water on the table-shelf beside the bed.

Jade watched him tip his head back and drain the bottle, thinking the sight of his throat working as he swallowed had to be the sexiest thing she'd seen in a long, long time. When the bottle was empty, he rested it on his thigh and stared across the room, eyes narrowed as though he were in pain.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked, stroking his arm.

"You know curiosity killed the cat," he said in an ironic tone then glanced around at her. "But then again, satisfaction brought it back."

"One of your Terran sayings?" she queried with an arched brow.

"I've got a million of them, baby," he mumbled. "My favorite is 'shit happens' or when I'm feeling gentlemanly, 'feces occurs'." He put the bottle on the table-shelf, drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly. His gaze returned to the far side of the room.

She continued to rub his arm. She could feel the tension in him, could almost taste the desperation that had driven him from sleep. His skin was slick with cold, clammy sweat and every now and then he would shiver.

"Does this happen often?" she asked.

"The nightmare?"

"Aye."

"Only when I sleep," he joked. "Doesn't happen when I'm awake."

She smiled at his flippancy. It was endearing. Every alpha male she'd ever encountered had used impertinent levity to mask the things that disturbed them. Gallows humor she'd once heard it called. The male Guardians had turned it into an art form.

Once more he spiked his hand through his hair then his shoulders slumped as though he were giving in to something over which he knew he had no control. When he began to speak, his voice sounded much younger than normal.

"I was fresh out of the Space Cadet Academy," he said, snorting lightly. "That's what we jokingly called the astronaut program on Earth." He sniffed then exhaled loudly. "It was my first assignment. I was given the job as payload specialist for a five-man crew being sent to relieve another team on Lunar-4." He looked around at her. "Earth has one moon and there were six research facilities up there. L-4 was one of two on the dark side. Tours of duty were generally eighteen-month rotations, but due to lunar storms the crew we were replacing had been there two years. They were anxious to get home." He cocked a shoulder. "I was anxious to get there."

"Your first venture into space," she said, remembering her own.

"Man, I was like a puppy straining at a leash," he acknowledged. "I was also the youngest member of the crew, but the other guys didn't treat me any differently. They could have razzed me unmercifully but they were cool with it."

She had never heard the word "razzed" before but had a good idea what it meant. "They liked you," she said.

"Yeah, they did." He chuckled. "I'm a likable guy."

He was silent a moment—deep hurt shifting across his face—and she knew what was coming next had deeply affected him.

"We'd been up there about two weeks when it happened," he said, his voice lower. "It was 2100 hours and I was about to hit the rack. I had the top bunk and was just climbing up when the building started shaking." He ran his arm under his chin to catch

a drop of sweat. "Moonquakes aren't as common as earthquakes and they're not as strong but they last longer because there's no water up there."

Jade wanted to ask why that lessened the quake but didn't want to interrupt.

"I held on to the frame of the bunk until the tremor passed then tried to climb up again." He squeezed his eyes shut. "That's when the alarms went off."

She knew he was reliving that night. As he opened his eyes, there was abiding grief creasing his face.

"The alarms meant there must have been a breach in the exterior wall. Temps at night get down to -153°C up there and there is no atmosphere. That meant we'd have to suit up and go out to repair the damage. I was not a happy camper."

"Not pleased with the situation," she translated.

"Not pleased at all, as the Irish say. I put my clothes back on and left my quarters, running down the corridor toward the command area where I knew everyone would have gathered. The overhead lights were flickering then they went out altogether and the red emergency beacons came on, giving everything a bloody glow. When I got to command, the com officer was trying to raise L-5 and L-6 but there was no answer from either facility. She tried L-3 but they hadn't felt the quake. Same with L-2 and L-1. Neither of them had experienced any tremors."

"Must have just been in your area."

"But then the battle stations klaxon sounded," he said as though he hadn't heard her. "That meant an intruder." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Something had infiltrated the facility."

"Something?" she questioned, brows drawing together. "From what I know of your moon, there is no indigenous life."

"There isn't," he told her. "What had broken into the research center came from somewhere else."

"From the wormhole?"

"Possibly," he said. "Most likely. We knew of the anomaly, of course. Several scout ships had gone through and come back. We knew there was another galaxy over here, had encountered other life forms that were basically no different from us."

"It's believed your world was settled by explorers from Chale and Rysalia."

"Yeah."

"But what intruded that night wasn't like us," she said, sensing that to be the case.

"No," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Nothing like us at all."

She waited—giving him time to gather his thoughts. He was trembling, sweat pouring off him to make his flesh shimmer in the low light. It was so still in the room she could hear him breathing.

"There were twenty-one of us in the facility—thirteen men and eight women. Security armed ten of the men and sent us in pairs to different parts of the facility. My

partner was Jake Collum. We headed for the bio-thermics section. That particular part of the facility had a long corridor that dead-ended in a T intersection. We were about ten feet from the turn when it lumbered around the corner."

She saw him tremble violently as though he were shaking himself at the memory. His fingers were digging into the mattress to either side of his thighs as he stared unseeingly across the room.

"I used to watch cartoons when I was kid," he said, his words confusing her. "I used to think it was so funny to see a cartoon cat or dog come to a screeching stop when they encountered something that threatened them." He shook his head. "That's what I did that night. I came to a skidding stop when I saw that thing and..." He shuddered again. "I pissed my fucking pants. Jake turned and ran, hightailing it with a piercing yelp that made the hair on my head stand up, but I couldn't move."

She wrapped her hand around his arm, sensing he needed the comfort of her touch. He went on as though he didn't notice.

"I'm standing there in a puddle of my own piss, staring at this butt-ugly thing with my eyes popping out of my head, my mouth open in a silent scream because I was too fucking scared to make a goddamned sound. It stared back at me, cocking its head from side to side like an inquisitive dog, then it took a step toward me. The floor beneath my feet shook."

Jade saw a drop of sweat careen down his cheek before sliding off to plop on his shoulder.

"I couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but whimper as it sidled closer. I peed again and the smell of my piss running down my leg was so strong it made my eyes water. It stopped and I saw it sniff the air, its nostrils flaring. This deep, rumbling sound came out of its chest and I realized it was laughing at me." He hung his head once more. "Then it grinned and I thought sure I was going to shit myself as well."

A full minute passed before he lifted his head again. This time when he spoke, his voice was stronger, more impartial.

"Can you see it in my mind?" he asked.

"No."

"It's just as well," he said. "The damned thing was hideous. The ceilings in the facility were nine feet high and its head nearly brushed it. Its skin was a pukey green, armored with thick bony scales. Long yellow talons protruded from the ends of these massive paws, and though it walked upright on these huge feet with thick claws, it had a long tail like an alligator."

"A what?" she questioned.

"Row after row of needle sharp teeth in this overly elongated snout," he said as though he hadn't heard. "There were two hornlike things just above its eye sockets and sharply pointed triangular ears." He shuddered. "The goddamned creature was so hideously ugly and it stank like a dead thing left out in the sun for a few days and ready to pop. When it walked, its claws clicked on the floor."

"You're describing something that sounds gods-be-damned familiar, MacKirnan, she said, unable to give name to the picture.

He wasn't listening to her.

"It came closer and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't do anything but whine like a child. By the time it reached out to grab me by the neck, I figured I was a dead man. Even though I couldn't make a sound, I was praying like you wouldn't believe. I was hoping I wouldn't scream when I bought it."

"I imagine I would have done the same," she said.

He put a hand to his throat as though feeling the creature's grip.

"It lifted me off the floor as if I weighed no more than a sheet of paper and brought me nose to nose with it. The stench of its breath was unbelievable as it grinned at me, showing up close and personal those needle-thin fangs lining its mouth. I couldn't even blink. I alternated my attention from those teeth to the blood-red glow of its snakelike eyes. I dangled there thinking this fucking thing is a fucking reptile and it's gonna open its mouth wider and chomp off my fucking head like I'm a drumstick."

"That would have been my thought too," she agreed although she had no idea what a drumstick was.

"But then it laughed," he said. "It threw back its head and laughed. I'm hanging there like a sausage on a smokehouse wall and this bastard is laughing at me. That just pissed me off and I remember rage pushing aside the fear for just a moment or two. It must have intercepted that rage for it stopped laughing, lowered its head and growled at me. But instead of frightening me, that only made me madder. I figure I'm gonna die anyway. I'm thinking I don't have long to live so why go out a cowering prick. If I had been able to, I'd have spit in its eye."

"It was controlling you, not the fear," she surmised. "Like you controlled Bella and me."

"Yeah," he replied.

"Well, at least you know how we felt," she said dryly.

"Just when I thought it was going to make slimy goop of me, it put up its other hand, splayed the fingers across my back, dug its claws into me and slapped me over its shoulder like I was a baby it was about to burp."

"Charming image," she said.

"Then it turned and went back the way it had come. It took me to the lab, put me in one of the primate cages, locked the door and then ambled away." He shuddered. "It had killed all the research animals, and as I lay in that cage with a pulverized chimp, I heard it massacring the rest of the people in the facility." His hands dug into the mattress. "The screams were godawful."

She watched tears easing down his cheeks and her heart went out to him. His pain was so sentient, so overwhelming she felt her own eyes prickle with moisture.

“When it was through, it came back, squatted down in front of the cage, opened the door and just sat there staring at me. The thing was covered in blood and excrement; the smell made me gag it was so terrible. I had regained some mobility once it was out of sight so I scrambled to the back of the cage, pressed up against the bars as tight as I could. With it once more in front of me, I couldn’t even blink, could barely breathe. I had come to terms with my death, thought it was coming, but when it reached its paw into the cage, I started whimpering. If I could have begged for my life, I would have. The moment it touched my face, splayed its hairy palm over my nose and cheeks the most horrendous pain I ever experienced shot through my head. It was sheer agony – like lightning frying every molecule in my brain. I saw brutal, ungodly images flashing through my head, felt something slithering there. I remember screaming then everything went black. When I came to, it was gone and I was alone with the stink of spilled blood all around me.”

“It had left?”

He nodded, reaching up to swipe at the tears. The feel of them on his fingertips seemed to confuse him and he looked down at the moisture, rubbing it between the pads of his fingers as though he were trying to discern what it was. Four deep furrows appeared above his nose. Finally, he absently ran his palm down his bare thigh, rubbing away the moisture.

“I didn’t want to get out of the cage. I wanted to curl up and simply cease to be, but the thought of the other bases being invaded by that...thing...cut through me and I finally crawled out. I think I already knew it was too late, but I had to try. My legs were like rubber but I staggered down to Command. Just about everything in the room had been completely demolished. There was no way to contact anybody, to even send a distress beacon.” He took a shuddery breath. “Everywhere I looked there was nothing but carnage. The men had been eviscerated, mutilated, partially eaten. The women had been raped then it had broken their necks but otherwise left them intact. I couldn’t stand seeing them like that so I carried all the bodies to the cold storage.”

“When did help arrive?” she asked softly.

“A week later,” he said. “The recon team went to the first three bases, found the massacres, collected the bodies, the tapes, and then arrived at L-4, shocked to find a survivor. Every other living thing on the moon had been annihilated.”

“Tapes?” she questioned, and felt the hair stir on her arms when he laughed brutally.

“Yeah, the tapes that ran 24/7, recording everything that went on in the facilities. Everything had to be documented for the bean counters back on Earth. Even the bathrooms were monitored for use of toilet paper. Do you believe that? The creature had left the tapes intact. There is one close-up of it sneering into the camera lens just before it swiped its warty green tongue over the glass.”

“Why leave the tapes?” she asked, her brows drawing together.

He shrugged listlessly. "They think it was so the investigation team could see what it had done. See how powerful and unstoppable it was. There were places on the tapes where it was shot repeatedly but still kept coming like a golem."

She wanted to ask what a "golem" was but he shot up from the bed, strode to a cabinet and took out a pair of boxers, stepped in them then began pacing, plowing his hands through his hair and tugging at the strands as though he could pull the memories out of his head.

"They took me back to Earth and put me in Baybridge, a top-secret government-run mental institute in Iowa where no one could find me. The military didn't want anyone knowing what happened at the Lunar bases until they could put their own spin on the situation. God knows what lies they finally came up with, what they told my mother. She'd already lost my father and younger sister, both to cancer." He stopped, put his arm on the wall and laid his head on his forearm. "I stayed at Baybridge for ten months and not once was I allowed to contact my mom. Then they shipped me to the space station."

"Where you proceeded to steal a ship and come through the wormhole to find the creature," she stated, knowing that was what must have happened.

"I wanted it dead," he said. "I wanted to find it and take it apart with my bare hands."

"And you've been searching for it ever since."

He didn't answer. There was no need.

"Were you psychic before it touched you?"

"What do you think?" he asked in a brittle tone.

"I don't think you were. I think it gifted you with the ability. That was the pain you felt. The images were of things the creature had done already."

"You and I both know it isn't a gift, spike. It's a goddamn curse."

"Aye, but perhaps it thought it was bestowing a favor on you." She got up from the bed and came over to him, put her hand on his back, rubbed tenderly. "Why do you think it didn't kill you too?"

"I don't know."

"It had a reason," she said. "Something it saw or perceived in you that wasn't in the others and..."

He looked around at her and his slow smile was unnerving. "And?"

She felt the hair on her arms bristle once more. "And it did more than just give you psi abilities." She stared into his hooded eyes. "The misdirection, the ability to render immobility. That was part of it but there's more, isn't there?"

"Oh yeah. There was more."

"What else...?" she started to ask, but he swept her up in his arms, and before she could protest, took her to the bed, fell with her to the mattress—his body hard as he nudged her thighs apart.

“No more talk,” he said, grinding the heat and steel of his erection against her core. Beneath the oversized shirt she was naked to the bulge of his cock. “Just hold me. Bite me. Scratch me. Hit me. I don’t care. Just make me forget.”

It came to her then why he allowed – even encouraged – the sado-masts to hurt him the way they did. It was payback, retribution. It was atonement for not having been able to save those who had died on the Lunar bases that night. The pain was his personal brand of self-punishment, the only way for him to accept that he had lived when the others died. Like a martyr with his hair shirt or metal cilice the pain was Ranulf MacKirnan’s penance.

“Hit me, spike,” he said, lips drawn back. He was not holding her hands, not preventing her from doing so. He was sitting atop her, waiting for her to hurt him.

“No,” she said. “I won’t do that.” If any other man had asked her, she’d have accommodated him and taken pleasure from smacking him as hard as she could. But as far as she was concerned, this man – above all others – deserved no more pain than what he’d already suffered.

To her horror, he put his fingers on the nipple shields and twisted viciously.

“Don’t!” she shouted, reaching up to grab his wrists, pulling them away from his flesh.

Tears were flowing heedlessly down his cheeks. His lips trembled then he collapsed atop her, burying his face in her shoulder.

“Hurt me,” he begged. “I need to be hurt.”

“No,” she replied firmly. “I think you’ve been hurt enough.”

“Not enough,” he sobbed. “Never enough.”

“That kind of talk pisses me off, MacKirnan,” she snapped, pushing him away. She got off the bed. “I don’t want to hear it again.”

Mac sat up, scrubbed his hand over his face. “I haven’t cried in years.”

Then stop doing it now,” she told him. She crossed her arms then leaned a shoulder against the wall. “It’s distracting.”

“Sorry,” he apologized.

“And stop being such a wimp!” she snarled.

His shoulders slumped as he dug the heels of his hands against his eyes. “What the hell do you want from me, Jade?”

Jade’s mouth twisted. “Hell if I know. One minute I want to strangle you and the next I want to straddle you, ride you like a wild horse.” She shrugged. “Can’t decide which would satisfy me more.”

“Well, I wish you would. I’m getting mixed signals here,” he grumbled. “You either want to maim me – which you’ve been told you can’t do – or fuck me. Make up your mind.”

“What do *you* want?”

"I told you what I want."

Jade snorted. "I'm not going to torture you, MacKirnan, so you can forget about that." She narrowed her eyes. "And I'm not going to let either of those psycho-twits torture you again either."

He gave her a long, considering look. "Where do you get off telling me something like that? You going to try to dictate my life now, spike?" He shook his head. "I don't think so." His expression changed to one of irritation. "Hell, why would you even want to?"

She had been asking herself that very question since she'd healed him. The emotions that had crashed through her as she viewed his past life—the things she saw that had made him what he was—had affected her on a deeper level than she was willing to accept. She had seen the man in the making and from one scene to another she'd witnessed the events that had helped shape him. Some had been sweet. Some had been strengthening. Many had been hateful and mean and would have crippled a lesser man. But Ranulf MacKirnan had risen above it all to become a man she knew she could trust at her back in any fight. He was a worthy man, an honorable man, a man she would like to spend hours getting to really know on a deeper personal level. Not a man just to jump into bed with to satisfy an itch, but to lie beside on a cold winter's night and play tootsies with beneath the covers.

Such an out-of-character revelation for her was like being slapped in the face with a slimy wet rag. It was also a wakeup call she wasn't sure she was ready to accept. She'd planned her life and any alterations to that plan had to be examined carefully before being implemented. She wasn't a spur-of-the-moment type of gal in her personal life. Snap decisions in her professional life was another matter. When she was off duty, she thought things through carefully, methodically, although there were times when she hated that about herself.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, watching confliction emotions passing over her pretty face.

"That I'm wading into deep water here and I'm not altogether sure there's not a maelstrom out in the middle of it waiting to suck me into oblivion."

"Then don't stick your toes in the water," he advised.

"What if I'm willing to take the chance that there's no maelstrom? No black hole lurking out in there to trap me?"

"You've lost me, baby," he said with a tired sigh. "I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Cause and effect," she answered. "Do you know what they say about cause and effect?"

"You make your choices and you accept the results. That's the Universal Law of my world."

"Mine too."

“Yeah, so what’s that got to do with the price of tomatoes?” he queried.

Jade smiled at what was obviously Terran jargon. “Sometimes the choices are made for you, but does that mean you have to accept the result?”

He scooted up in the bed to lean his back against the wall. “Not following,” he said. “Not sure I want to.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure I want you to either.”

He drew his knees up and rested his wrists on them, lacing his fingers together as he watched her push away from the wall and begin pacing.

She stopped to pick up a paperweight from his desk. There was a huge spider embedded in the glass and she lifted it to get a closer look. “Ugly ass thing, ain’t it?”

“It’s a tarantula,” he said. “From the desert southwest of my world.”

“Looks a bit like a Cengusian amptrid,” she commented before putting the paperweight down.

“So cause and effect, choices and results?” he questioned.

She pulled the chair out from his desk, twirled it around and sat on it backward, curving her fingers over the backrest.

“All my life I have been an island,” she said. “That was how I intended it to be, to remain until the day I draw my last breath.” She cocked a shoulder. “I live alone and most of the time I like it that way, although I have been known to take a warrior home with me occasionally to warm my bed on a winter’s night. I kick him out when I’m tired of him. I can go to bed when I want to; I get up when I want to. I eat what I want, when I want, where I want, and in regard to my personal life I don’t have to answer to anyone. I am an independent woman and I like it that way. I need that independence.”

“There is an old earth saying—no man is an island. Even a hermit in a cave on a mountaintop in the frigid climes of the Himalayas depends on something other than himself to survive. Without a cave, he would have no shelter. Without clothing, he would freeze to death. Without food and water, he could starve. Nothing exists independently, spike. Everything is connected. What happens to one, happens to another,” he told her. “You can’t live your life as a hermit. You need to interact with others.”

“I’ve never played well with others,” she scoffed.

“Maybe you need to learn to do so.”

Jade pulled against the chair back in frustration. “Am I wrong in choosing to spend my life alone without the inconvenience of having someone else tell me when to get up, when to go to bed, what and when to eat?” she asked.

“No, but is a life of solitude really what you want, or is it something you’ve convinced yourself you need?” he countered.

“Is asking to be hurt something you really want, or it is something you’ve convinced yourself you deserve for being the lone survivor of that massacre?” she threw back at him.

Mac chuckled and wagged a finger at her. "Touché, spike."

"And just because a platter of food is randomly set before you and it looks tasty, does that mean you have to delve into it?"

"No, but the megaverse is not random. Things happen because they were meant to. That's your cause and effect in action."

"Like us meeting on a level beyond the official?"

"Maybe. There's another earth saying—what will be, will be. If you believe in a higher power—any higher power—you also have to believe in destiny. Things over which we have no control whatsoever are set into motion and we're pulled along in their wake."

"Like being pulled into a maelstrom against our will."

"Sometimes we don't have a choice."

"There is *always* free choice," she said. "You can either accept your destiny or attempt to change it. I believe in the law of cause and effect, but I also believe if something doesn't feel right for me I can change it and make it right."

"Can you?" he queried.

She lowered her forehead to the backrest. The question pricking at her like a hot barb wasn't whether she could change her destiny but rather if she wanted to. Every instinct in her body was screaming at her that the man sitting across from her was her destiny. She had been meant to meet him. He had been placed before her at the right time in her life. It was up to her to decide if she was willing to accept that destiny or if she was going to fight it tooth and nail.

When she had been inside MacKirnan's memories, she had seen him struggling to change what was happening around him. Sometimes he was successful, but most of the time he wasn't. Things happened that altered his course, flung him far afield, but time after time she had watched him adapt, make the most—the best—of the situation and in the doing, become a better man for it. He accepted the cause and went with the effect without railing against it.

It was his failures that he had turned to successes that had made her start to analyze her past experiences, her failures and what she had thought of as her successes. Most of the choices she'd made had been bad ones, selfish ones, and they hadn't helped her to become a better woman. They had turned her into an arrogant, self-centered bitch. She had made her own bad karma.

"Man, I think I'm royally fucked here. No, I don't believe I can change what's going to be," she said in a miserable tone.

"Answer me this," he said.

"What?" she replied, not looking up.

"Are you really happy with the choices you have made up until this point in your life, or are you now beginning to question them?"

"I'm questioning whether they were the right choices," she mumbled. "I'm wondering if by making the decision I'm about to make if I'm going to fuck up my life forever. If I'm making a big fucking mistake here and I find out there's no turning back, life could get very ugly."

"And this concerns me how in regard to you dictating my sex life?"

She slowly lifted her head. "You're the platter of randomly placed food."

His brows drew together. "You're losing me again."

She got out of the chair and came over to sit on the foot of his bed. "Cause and effect again, MacKirnan. Let's just say for the sake of argument that the higher power of whom you spoke decided to put you in my path." She flung out a hand. "Not just as a criminal I was sent to apprehend but as a roadblock in the course I'd set for myself, a wakeup call."

"A roadblock?"

"Do I go around you and continue on my way like before as though nothing happened, or do I pick you up to set you aside then continue on my way?"

"Depends on how big I am as a roadblock," he replied.

Jade ignored the answer and the amused look on his face. "Or do I accept that the roadblock is an analogy for needing to change the path of my life and take you with me on my journey?"

"There again it depends on how big a roadblock I am," he said.

"A pretty gods-be-damned big one, actually."

"Then why not just go around me and continue on as though we'd never met?"

"Because I think you are the effect of some cause that I need to embrace!" she snapped. "I think you were sent to make me change the way I've been going. I think I was sent to change things for you."

"Are you even open to change?"

"Are you?"

He shrugged. "Hell, baby. You're asking a man who doesn't even like to change his socks if he can make life-altering decisions based on a conversation with a woman he barely knows. How am I supposed to answer that?"

She stared into his eyes. "The more I mull it over, the more I realize that I haven't really been living. I've been existing."

"Okay, now that makes sense. That's basically how I've been going through life too, so I understand where you're coming from. But realizing that doesn't necessarily mean you have to start changing things."

"Are you lonely?" she asked.

Mac frowned. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Are you?" she insisted.

He looked away. "Yeah, sometimes."

“When I was in your mind I saw how you reacted to adversities. They made you stronger, they changed you, they made you grow. Adversity just makes me madder, more set in my ways. I think I need balance. I need to change. I need to stop being lonely.”

“Then change. No matter how much you might want something to stay the same, it never does. Nothing is permanent, spike. That’s the primary law of nature. You are directly responsible for each and every event that appears in your life. If you want to change, you will, and maybe that change will be for the better. Maybe you’ve been looking for something to goad you into doing what you knew you should be doing all along. If you’re lonely, find someone to be with.”

She scooted closer to him. “You’re saying that unconsciously I was looking for you?”

“Not me per se,” he replied, “but someone—or something—to help you move on with your life, to help you out of the stagnation, to put your feet on the right track. I’ve a feeling you’ve been dissatisfied with your life for a long time. Like you said, you’ve just been going through the motions. Maybe something you saw inside my head was the molecule that started a chain reaction, got you to thinking.”

“I saw you,” she said, searching his eyes. “I felt a connection.”

He smiled. “I felt a connection to you too the first time I saw your picture.”

“What if I choose to see that as a sign you and I were meant to be together?” she asked. “As a pair? Action and reaction, sowing and reaping?”

He snorted. “I’m not sure any woman should be saddled with me as the yin to her yang, baby.”

Although she had no idea what that meant, she locked gazes with him. “I think we need one another.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he said. “We probably both need to change some aspects of our lives but—”

“You need stability in your life, WindChaser. You need someone who will stand at your side and protect you for a change.”

“What do you need?”

“I believe I need you. The gods know I want you in a sexual way.”

“Don’t they all,” he joked.

“You need someone who won’t let you keep putting yourself down,” she stated.

The deep lines appeared above his nose again. “Are you saying you’re that someone, spike?” he asked.

“I could be.” She put a hand on his leg. “I saw your entire life when I was healing you. I know you inside and out, MacKirnan. I know who and what you are, and I am offering you a different kind of partnership.”

“Partnership?” he queried, the lines creasing deeper in his flesh.

"We get along well enough. Hell, we are a bomb in the sack. What I'm offering you is my body for your pleasure, my hand for your protection, my shoulder for you to lean on but – most importantly – I am offering to share my life with you if you want it and I never imagined I'd make that offer to any man."

"But you think you're ready to do that now?"

"If it's to be any man, it will be you. Every fiber of my being is telling me that we belong together as a pair. I've fought it right from the start but – like you – I think I knew the moment I saw your picture that you would belong to me one day."

He laughed. "Are you claiming me for your own, spike?"

"Aye, MacKirnan," she answered. "That is precisely what I'm doing. I want to play tootsies with you beneath the blanket on a cold winter night."

For a long moment he stared into her eyes. He lightly touched her with his psi abilities – so fleetingly gentle he doubted she felt it – and found something there in her mind that surprised him.

"You really do want to spend time with me other than just between the sheets," he said with awe. "To get to know me." He tilted his head to one side. "Why would you do something like that?"

"Do you find it so hard to believe someone could actually like you for who you are?"

"Aye, I do."

"I've got news for you," she said with a grunt. "The women of your crew are in love with you, pretty boy. Any one of them would jump at the chance of having you exclusively to herself."

"Celine, maybe, but make no mistake. For the others, it's lust. Pure and simple lust. For Celine, I really think it's more maternal than anything else."

"You're fooling yourself if you do think that. The woman is – what's your Terran saying? Head over heels?"

"She'll get over it. Women always do when they've taken all they want from me," he said, lowering his eyes.

Jade's mouth tightened. "You've got some strange notions about your effect on women, pretty boy."

He raised his eyes. "I'm good in the sack, spike. Women like that. Hell, some even crave it. I know they see eye candy when they look at me and they want to taste me to see if I'm as sweet as they think I'll be." He shook his head. "I'm not sweet at all. I can be a real bastard. I –"

She brought his face to hers and claimed his lips to shut him up, sliding her tongue firmly into his mouth. Her kiss was deep and full of desire, but when he slipped his arms around her and drew her close to him, she pulled back.

"Let's get something straight here, Mac. I am offering you something I've never even considered offering to anyone else. By the goddess, I never thought I'd ever *want*

to," she said, locking her gaze with his. "I'm not offering Joining, a legal marriage, swapping vows, buying china. The goddess forbid, nothing like that! All I am offering you is a lifetime of partnership."

"I've got partners. I think I might consider companionship though," he countered.

"If that's how you wish to view it," she said, "but there is a stipulation."

He was getting hard, his cock pressing tight against her abdomen. "And what would that be?"

"Just me," she said. "No other woman for you from this day forward."

"Only one?" he queried, eyes widening. "You mean monogamy?"

"I mean monogamy or you running like a warthog from my carving blade."

He moved so he could lift her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her, one hand splayed in the center of her back and the other across her rump.

"I think I could try that."

"Not try, MacKirnan. It's either you agreeing to a monogamous relationship..." She shook her head. "Companionship or nothing at all. If it doesn't work out, we'll cut our losses, shake hands and go our separate ways."

He thought about it for a moment. "What if there is a maelstrom out there in the water, spike? What if we both sink into it and can't get out?" He stared deep into her eyes. "What if we fuck up and fall in love?"

That thought scared the hell out of her. She had a feeling it was heading that way for her and that there was no way to detour from the path that had been set before her. Only time would tell.

"We'll cross that bridge when the time comes," she said. "Are you willing to give it a try?"

"I think so."

Jade's eyes bored into his. "But do you *want* to?"

His gaze traveled over her lovely face. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and there was something about her that drew him like a magnet. He wanted to stay in her arms and let the worlds pass them by. "Aye, spike. I believe I do. I can see the two of us as a couple."

"A monogamous couple," she corrected. "Like I said, I don't play well with others and I don't share my toys."

He sighed as though the weight of the world had settled suddenly on his shoulders. "Okay, if you insist."

Jade grinned. "I do. You better believe I do!"

"But I can still look," he said. "Looking ain't touching."

"Look, but if you touch, I'll whop off your dangly in a heartbeat, pretty boy!"

"Please don't," he said. He tipped them sideways, sliding her. "I need my dangly to pleasure my lady."

He slanted his mouth over hers to give her a searing kiss. Their tongues swirled around one another as his hand lowered to her breast. Kneading the lush mound, rubbing his thumb over the hardening peak, he kissed his way down her chin, her neck. Molding her breast in his palm, holding it firm so the nipple was thrust upward, he locked his lips around it to draw it into his mouth.

Jade spiked her hands through his thick hair, loving the way he sliced his lower body between her legs, pushing hers apart with his knees. The weight of his muscular body, the heavy erection that prodded at the opening of her sheath made her shiver. No man had ever made her lose control of her emotions, of her disciplined body, but she was beginning to think this one would.

"Stop thinking, spike," he mumbled against her breast, the vibration causing her to shiver once more.

"Start acting then, pretty boy," she countered, tugging on his hair.

He lifted his head, moved so he could position his lower half just where he wanted it then shoved his hands beneath her hips. He dug his fingers into her buttocks, lifted her then rammed his hard cock all the way home.

"That enough action for you?" he teased. He grinded against her, withdrew then thrust deep again.

"It'll do 'til something better comes along," she said with a saucy look. She lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist. "Show me what you got, WindChaser."

Mac paused in mid-thrust, arched his left brow. "I've been holding back until now. You sure you want me to give it my best shot?"

She pretended to yawn, tapping the fingers of one hand over her mouth while she kept the other hand threaded through his hair.

"Oh baby, that's a challenge if ever I've had one flung at me," he said with a growl.

As he began a systematic delicious and wicked assault on her body, her senses, and—if she was to be honest with herself—her heart, Jade clung to him. She panted as he prodded. She giggled as he goosed her. She trembled as he took her to the peak of release then let her hang there before starting all over again. Time and again she would almost reach the point of climax and he'd withdraw. The frustration brought tears to her eyes.

"Quarter, warrior! Quarter!" she finally pleaded.

He stopped his slow thrusts into her aching body. "You sure, spike?" he questioned, sensuously circling his cock inside her.

"Aye!" she said, a single tear of exasperation slid down her cheek. "Please!"

"Please?" he repeated, withdrawing almost all the way out.

"Do it!" she screamed. She clawed at his back. "MacKirnan, fuck me!"

She heard him laugh and then her entire world exploded around her as he began to thrust in and out of her slick cunt with sure, powerful strokes that had her all but

babbling after she came and came and came. When the last quiver died away and he spilled his seed into her, she clung to his shoulders, unwilling to release him.

Aye, she thought as he settled his weight on her and laid his sweaty cheek to her breast. She could grow to love this man so completely she might lose herself forever in his arms.

“Might not be so bad,” he muttered.

She stroked his back.

“We’ll see,” she said, and kissed the top of his head. Within moments she was sound asleep.

Mac eased off her and rolled to his back. Sleep was the last thing on his mind at that moment. He turned his head toward her. She was beautiful and she was his and he wondered if he had blundered up shit creek without his paddle, or if he was willing to reach the maelstrom and not care if he was sucked down. Everything—he thought—hinged on what happened once they reached R-9.

## Chapter Ten

"We'll be arriving at R-9 in two minutes, Captain," D. reported.

Mac had been quiet all morning. There were dark circles under his eyes. He sat slumped in the command chair with Celine hovering close by. Jade kept her attention riveted to him, and when he would look in her direction, she could see the nervousness lurking there. When Celine reached out to touch him, Jade tensed, digging her fingernails into her palms.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Celine asked, smoothing the hair from Mac's forehead. When he did not answer, she turned to exchange an uneasy look with Jade.

Jade narrowed her eyes.

Celine withdrew her hand.

"I'm all right," Mac said softly, picking up on the tension between the two women.

"*WindChaser II*, this is R-9 control. Drop into orbit and maintain position."

"Acknowledged," Gunter replied from the communications chair.

The vid-com screen pulsed into life and a small red-haired male with a face emblazoned with freckles appeared. "Major Shimota?" he inquired in a brusque tone.

"That would be me," Jade told him as she stepped into range of the vid-com.

"Why is the prisoner not in the E.S.U. as was ordered?" the man snapped.

"Because it wasn't necessary," Jade answered.

The man's chin came up. "You were ordered to incapacitate the target. That you did not is both a dereliction of duty and a failure to obey a direct order. I will so note your disregard of procedure for the record. We will have a security team on hand in transport to properly restrain the target since you failed to do so!"

"Prissy little bastard, isn't he?" Doc smirked from where he stood on the bridge.

"You can take your restraints and shove them where the sun don't shine, bubba," Ione spoke up. "Better yet, I'll do it for you. No one is going to put shackles on Ranulf MacKirnan!"

Mac smiled slightly.

"Not only will he be shackled, he will be escorted to a containment cell where he will be manacled to the wall until the Burgon arrives!" the redhead declared.

"Since that is your intention, our captain will remain onboard the *WindChaser II* until such time as his excellency is available," Celine insisted then swept her hand across her throat a couple of times to indicate Gunter was to end the transmission.

The redheaded man was sputtering with outrage as the vid-com screen went to black.

“See if you can raise the Burgon’s ship,” Celine ordered Gunter.

“There’s no need,” Gunter said. “He’s hailing us.”

Once more the vid-com screen blazed to life. This time it was the amused face of Ryden Bakari who was gazing at them. “I am now available, Madame Belial, and with your captain’s permission,” he said, “I would like to come onboard your ship.”

“You don’t need my permission, your excellency,” Mac said softly. “I am at your command, Sir.”

“Then I’m on my way,” the Burgon said.

There was a slight strobe of light and the emperor of Aduaidh Prime appeared on the bridge of the *WindChaser II*. He surprised the crew by coming aboard unaccompanied.

Both Jade and Bella went to one knee with heads bowed, their right hands doubled into fists and pressed against their hearts.

“At ease, ladies,” the Burgon told them with a glancing look. He strode forth—hand extended to Mac, eyes crinkled in a smile. “I’ve been looking forward to this meeting.”

Clasping the Burgon’s wrist warrior-style, Mac answered the smile. “It is an honor, your excellency.” Even though his headache had returned full force, he pushed the discomfort aside, eager to really get to know this powerful man.

The two men sized one another up and both seemed to like what they saw. Equal in height and size, their eyes locked and held then their hands released. They smiled in unison, each having taken the other’s measure and approved.

“We’re going to be great friends,” the emperor said. He splayed his palm over his heart. “I can feel it here.”

“I had hoped that would be the case if we ever met,” Mac agreed. “Welcome aboard the *WindChaser II*.”

The Burgon looked around. “It’s good to see you are treating her as she deserves to be treated,” he said of the ship. He shook a finger at Mac. “I had to increase security tenfold after you skipped off with her, you know.”

Mac grinned unabashedly. “I just showed you where you needed to tighten your safety measures.”

Throwing back his head, Ryden Bakari laughed then hooked an arm around Mac’s shoulder. “So tell me,” he said. “Are you ready to become a privateer instead of a pirate, Mac?”

“Privateer?” Celine spoke up.

“That was my intention,” the emperor replied.

“With the sanction of the New Alliance?” she asked.

“Of course,” the Burgon replied. He looked at each of the crew. “With full pardons for each of you effective as of this moment.”

“We’ll be operating under a letter of marquee?” Mac queried.

“Precisely.” The Burgon reached into his pocket. “I have the letter right here.” He handed a buff-colored envelope closed with the imperial seal into Celine’s keeping. “In essence, it grants Captain Ranulf MacKirnan and each member of his crew immunity from reprisal or prosecution by the New Alliance for any acts committed during the detaining, searching, seizing and – if need be – the destruction of any and all assets and/or personnel or agents of the New Coalition. I’m not giving you *carte blanche* to ravage and plunder your way across the galaxies willy-nilly but rather giving you permission to raid, capture and take into custody any asset or citizen you deem harmful of or an enemy of the New Alliance.”

Celine’s eyebrows shot up. “That is a very encompassing order, your excellency.”

“And one I would not offer to just anyone,” the Burgon replied. “Rory Quinn enjoys such autonomy – as do a few others.”

“Like Gabe Leveche, Cair Ghrian and Ruan Cossaint to name those few,” Bella quipped.

The Burgon chuckled. “They are among them, aye.”

“‘All crimes previously committed will forever be expunged from their records,’” Celine read aloud.

“Does that include murder?” Crystal inquired demurely.

Turning his head toward the speaker, Ryden Bakari slowly nodded. “Circumstances being as they were in your situation, aye, milady, that includes murder committed in self-defense.”

Gazes leapt to Crystal, who ducked her head, blushing beneath the gentle words of the Burgon. “I am grateful, your excellency,” she whispered.

“Attention, *WindChaser III!*” the imperious voice of the redheaded man on R-9 intruded. “Are you debarking with your prisoner, or will we be required to board and –”

“The only thing you will do is shut the hell up!” the Burgon snapped, the vid-com onboard the *WindChaser II* homing in on his angry face. “I will handle this situation personally, now stand down!”

Face flaming the color of his hair, the man on R-9 opened and closed his rubbery lips as though he were a large-mouthed fish jerked from a pond. His eyes bulged as he stared into the annoyed countenance of the emperor.

“Speaking of pissing yourself,” Jade mumbled, casting a sidelong glance to Mac.

“Vid-com out!” the Burgon snapped.

“I take it we won’t be going down to the planet,” Mac said.

“There’s no need,” came the answer. “What we have to discuss can be done here.” The Burgon looked around. “Pray tell me you have some Chrystallusian brandy so I can wet my whistle as you Terrans are fond of saying.”

“We do,” Gunter spoke up. “And a very good year at that.” He motioned Bruno to fetch the libation.

"Let's go into the conference room where we'll be more comfortable," Celine suggested. She looked to D. "Engage auto orbit, and then join us if you would, D."

"Will do."

Seating themselves around the long oval conference table, the crew with Mac at one end and the Burgon at the other settled into the formfitting chairs. On the starboard side of the room sat Bruno, Gunter and Doc. On the port were Jade, Bella, Celine, Crystal, Ione and Laran. D. slipped into an empty chair beside Celine.

"I don't have too much time," the Burgon began. "There are those who are not happy Rekia was not hanged on Rysalia. I've a bit of damage control to do when I get home."

"You didn't come out here alone, did you, your excellency?" Mac inquired, a deep frown forming between his eyes.

"Rynlyn is with me," the emperor replied. "He's piloting the runabout." He looked to the Guardians. "And sends his regards, Majors."

Jade blinked. "I didn't get as much as a hiccup on my screen," she said. "You must have some hellacious stealth capacity for your Fiach."

"The newest thing from Storia," the Burgon said with a grin. "A wedding present from Lord Savidos." He steepled his fingers. "A gift I will be sharing with you before I take my leave. Gabe assures me only those of my choosing will be given the technology. You'll be able to maneuver sight unseen, unheard, unfelt wherever you travel."

Mac whistled. "That's some technology."

"Leave it to the Storiars to come up with something like that," Gunter commented. "I've always said outside my own race, the Storiars are fine engineers."

"So here's what I need you to do," the Burgon said. "Your first assignment will be to journey to the Brúidúil Quadrant of the Ainmhi Galaxy where you will shut down an illegal operation at the mining facility on Staillin Major."

Jade's head came up. "That's Rune Degendesch's outfit, isn't it?"

"Aye," the Burgon answered. "The Faolchú owns it."

"But Rune isn't running an illegal mining venture," Jade protested. "He walks the straight and narrow so tightly he couldn't be budged in a hurricane."

"No, indeed he isn't, and the werewolf is one of my operatives, but I'm not ready for that to be revealed yet so I need someone else to cover this problem so Rune can stay undercover awhile longer."

"What exactly is happening on Staillin Major?" Celine asked. "I own stock..." She swept an irritated look Mac's way. "At least I used to own stock in the company."

"You still do," Mac told her. "Everything I took from you, I put back long ago, sweet cheeks."

Celine clenched her jaw, speaking around the restriction. "Stop calling me that," she warned in a voice that said she'd made the complaint many times in the past.

“Are you familiar with that part of the megaverse known as the Wastelands, Mac?” the Burgon asked, trying to hide a laugh. “The area beyond Faolchú and Staillin Major the last settled planets in that galaxy?”

“Know of it, but I’ve never been there,” Mac replied with a shake of his head.

“It’s that region of space, two star systems over from Faolchú, a no-man’s land, if you will.” The Burgon rocked back in his chair, the steeple of his fingers pressed beneath his chin. “The only inhabited world out there is not a vacation spot to be sure.”

“It’s called Lupina,” Bella observed, “and it has five moons—all of which are used as penal colonies of some sort, each one worse than the last.” She shrugged. “Rough place. It’s where they recruit for the Modartha.”

“The Faolchú werewolf police,” Laran put in with a shudder.

“Commanded by a real badass by the name of Colonel Crevan Byrne,” her sister said. “We’ve had the displeasure of meeting him.”

“The most powerful law enforcement officer in the galaxy,” Doc added his two cents. “I know him well. He is a sinister one.”

The Burgon nodded. “Aye, he is. There are a few other small planets out that way but they are so far out, colonization wouldn’t be profitable or safe. As you can well imagine, many a criminal has fled into that area to escape justice. Byrne is responsible for his own bailiwick on Faolchú, so what goes on in the Wastelands doesn’t concern him, the Modartha or the *Sládáil Phoiblí*, the Faolchú National Security. Until now it didn’t concern us either.”

“What changed?” Jade inquired.

“As I’m sure you know iron is being mined on Staillin Major,” the Burgon told her. “Ore is extracted and shipped to the smeltery on Crionna. It’s processed and sent back to Staillin Major as compressed iron plate that will be turned into steel for ship hulls and off-world housing.” He scratched at the wicked scar that ran down his cheek. “Here’s where what chemistry I learned at the Academy fails me but part of the process of the smelting produces a by-product called slag, which is a mixture of metal oxides. When you dump slag into water that contains dolomite—a common sedimentary rock-forming mineral—they form glasslike crystals in a rainbow of transparent colors. One of the satellite companies owned by Tappas Industries is called Moonstone Gems and they produce paperweights, costume jewelry, sun catchers, aquarium accents from the transformed slag.”

“They’ve got their hands in just about everything,” Ione complained.

“If there was a copper to be made, you can bet your last senti Riordan O’Shay knew how to go about finding it,” the Burgon sneered.

“What you’re talking about sounds like beach glass,” Mac said. “That’s what we call it on Earth.”

“Good name for it,” the Burgon observed. “And while it is lovely to look at, as far as we knew it held no particular value. No one questioned T.I. cornering the market on the slag.”

“Until now,” Celine said.

“Until now,” the Burgon agreed. “It seems there is another market for the slag, one that is big business for the New Coalition. A substantial segment of the slag is being siphoned off in Crionna then shipped back to Staillin Major in secret compartments under the cargo holds of the mining frigates then later put onto garbage scows destined for the Wastelands.”

“As waste,” Jade said, stating the obvious.

“Waste for the Wastelands,” Bruno said. “Who would think to inspect tankers carrying trash?”

“Precisely,” the Burgon acknowledged.

“Do you have any idea what the slag is being used for?” Mac asked the emperor.

“Not a clue, but according to our source, it is worth more than gold to the one getting it.”

“Interesting,” Mac said, his forehead puckered in thought.

“You’ve got that look,” Celine said, directing her words at Mac. “What are you thinking?”

“Laser crystals are doped either with trivalent rare-earth ions or transition metal ions. The ions enable the crystal to amplify light. They have a smaller absorption and emission bandwidth, but a higher thermal conductivity.” He pursed his lips as he stared down at the tabletop then looked up. “What if someone has found a way to use the beach glass as a super-conducting crystal for some new type of very powerful laser weapon?”

“By the gods that’s a scary thought,” Bella declared.

“Or it could be for some new kind of super fuel,” Mac amended. “Like pedryl crystals only easier and quicker to process.”

“Fuel,” the Burgon said. “Now that would make sense from what Rune told us.” He leaned forward. “I think most of you know I found O’Shay on Staillin Major thanks to the werewolf. I owe him a debt of gratitude I’ll never be able to repay, but that’s beside the point. In the process, Rune discovered this slag operation thing quite by accident when he questioned one of O’Shay’s underlings there at the mining facility. It’s amazing what a man will tell you when he thinks you’re about to tear out his throat.” A nasty smile tugged at the emperor’s face. “At any rate, Rune learned the man who is getting the slag has a deep-space cruiser that supposedly can outrun any border patrol we send after it. He meets up with the garbage scow, they off-load the cargo then he goes merrily on his way to wherever it is he is based.”

“Do we have a name for this bastard?” Gunter inquired.

“O’Shay’s cohort gave the man’s name as Beithíoch Stiúrthóir.”

"What?" Crystal yelped, coming to her feet. Her heavily kohled eyes widened to bulging, her ruby red lips trembled.

"Do you know the man, milady?" the Burgon inquired.

Shivering violently, Crystal wrapped her arms around her thin body, flinging her head from side to side. "No, no, no. I can't... I don't..." She looked at Gunter. "He can't have come through again. If he has he might bring..." Her face turned pale beneath the rouge.

"Milady, calm yourself and tell us," the Burgon ordered, drawing Crystal's terrified eyes to him. Only the three other psychically empowered among them could feel the strong mental push the emperor settled upon the frightened transvestite. "Sit and tell us what has you so upset."

For a moment Crystal stood quivering then she swallowed – eyelids fluttering – and sank into her chair. Her hands fluttered in her lap like wounded birds. Seemingly unable to look away from the Burgon, she stared into his amber eyes – held there by the power of his ability.

"Tell us," he said softly.

"He came to my world," Crystal said. "Many years ago when I was a child."

"And you hail from where, dearling?" the Burgon asked.

"Ciallte," she replied.

"The Lost Colony," Bruno clarified for those who did not know or had forgotten.

"It was in the Diamhair Galaxy," Jade told Mac.

"My mother had the sight," she said. She looked to Mac. "Like you. She knew something bad was going to happen and began warning everyone to leave but no one would take her seriously. When Stiúrthóir arrived at the colony, she grew frantic, nearly killed herself in a mad dash to get to my father. She kept insisting to the point where my father – afraid she'd have a stroke and to humor her – decided to send us to my grandfather's villa on Domhan." She hung her head. "He would not come with us though my mother begged and pleaded on her knees. But she had five children to protect and so she was forced to leave without him. Two days later everyone on Ciallte was massacred."

"It was a particularly gruesome..." Jade stopped, eyes flaring, and turned a face suddenly drained of color to Mac. "Oh my gods, MacKirnan! The men were eviscerated and the women raped, their necks had been broken. That's why your tale seemed so familiar to me!"

"What tale?" Celine asked, looking back and forth between Mac and Jade.

"Crystal does not need a reminder of what transpired, Guardian!" Gunter growled.

"No!" Jade said. "That's not why I told him. He..."

Mac didn't spare her a glance. "What killed them, Crystal?" he interrupted.

Instead of answering, Crystal turned tearful eyes to the Burgon. "You know the old language, don't you, your excellency? You know what Beithíoch Stiúrthóir means."

Twin furrows formed above the emperor's nose then straightened out abruptly as he translated the name. "The beast conductor." He sucked in a harsh breath. "By the gods, the Nikkeson?"

"What is that?" Mac queried.

"Stiúrthóir brought the Nikkeson with him when he came," Crystal whispered, looking about her as though she expected something to come through the walls.

Mac's brows drew together. "What does that mean?"

"You don't know that for sure, Crystal," Doc said. "That was just speculation from those holy-rollers on Ildathach who are afraid of their own shadow."

"My mother knew," Crystal said. "She knew the minute Beithíoch Stiúrthóir stepped off his ship! She told everyone he was a powerful sorcerer, a very dangerous man."

"Tell me about this creature he brought with him," Mac demanded. "Everything you know about it."

"Why are you so interested?" the Burgon asked.

"I have my reasons," Mac snapped. He could feel the emperor's probe and sent it right back at him – twofold – without thinking.

Ryden Bakari jumped as though he'd been prodded with a red-hot poker. His eyes widened for a moment then narrowed dangerously. He opened his mouth to rebuke the Terran but must have thought better of it for he clamped his lips together. The red glint in his eyes was the only outward sign he was angry.

"Crystal?" Mac prompted. "Tell me!"

"I don't..." Crystal shook her head, buried her face in her hands.

"It's a creature from the Tabhartas Galaxy," the Burgon answered for her, drawing Mac's undivided attention. "You want the abridged version or the whole thing?"

"The whole thing," Mac stated. "Every last detail you know."

"Then you tell me why and I'll tell you more about that blasphemous thing than you'll ever want to know," came the reply.

"It put its filthy paw on me," was all Mac needed to say. Everyone in the room save the Burgon gasped, but the great man suddenly turned pale.

"You've seen it and lived to tell the tale?" the emperor questioned.

"We think it gave him his psi powers," Jade said into the deadly silence that followed.

"Think or know?" the Burgon wanted clarified.

"Know," Mac answered. "I didn't have them before it touched me."

Staring hard at Mac for the longest time, the Burgon finally drew in a long breath then released it very slowly. He sat forward with his elbows on the table, fingers threaded together and held Mac's gaze.

“As far as we know the Tabhartas Galaxy is made up of two Arcs—the Maitheas Arc called the Over in which the gods live on a planet called Jeeoil. It is thought that is also where the Triune Goddess keeps her *girt*. I believe on Dilleachta although that planet is so closely guarded no one really knows if the *girt* is there or not.”

At Mac’s quizzical look, Ione supplied the meaning. “Hatchery for those Reapers She gives birth to.”

“Nursery,” Celine corrected. “Not hatchery. You make it sound like Morrighunia lays eggs.”

“She’s a dragon!” Ione defended her explanation. “They lay eggs.”

Celine rolled her eyes. “Go on, your excellency,” she said.

“The second is called the Drochtrom Arc or the Under, which is home to one planet and two spatial continuums. The planet is Treigeilys, which means the abandoned in the old language, and that is home to Yn Drogh Spyrryd, He Who is Evil Incarnate. On Treigeilys he has dominion over Four Higher Archdemons who in turn preside over the Peccoil, the Sinful. Seven Lesser Archdemons known as the Focal Fiends manage the Peccah Shiaght or what you on Terra would call the Seven Deadly Sins.”

“Lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy and pride,” Mac said.

“All those wonderful little emotions with which mankind throughout the megaverse has been plagued with since time began,” the Burgon amended.

“In other words, Treigeilys is hell,” Mac put in.

“Some would say so, aye,” the emperor agreed. “If Treigeilys is hell then Yn Drogh Spyrryd is your Satan and his lieutenant, a Higher Archdemon named Kerreyder, is the equivalent of Beelzebub.”

“You know your Earth history,” Mac said.

“I have read everything I could get my hands on concerning it,” the Burgon admitted. “I find history fascinating.”

“So what is this Nikkeson then?” Mac pressed.

“A bloodbeast. Kerreyder holds the keys to the lowest levels beneath Treigeilys, a place called Prysson. It is a megaversial prison in one of the spatial continuums called Charvaal. It is better known as the Abyss,” the Burgon told him. “This is where the worst of the worst are interned and the very worst of the worst is the Nikkeson. It has been called the vilest of the vile, the most depraved of all the depraved. There is no sin it has not committed, no atrocity it has not devised to torture, maim or kill humankind. It is said all evil began with the Nikkeson. They call it the Destroyer of Worlds because where it visits, all life is extinguished.”

“And it resides on Treigeilys,” Mac wanted clarified.

“No, I did not say that,” the Burgon replied. “It lives in the slimy putridness beneath the lowest level of the Abyss. There it is kept chained until Yn Drogh Spyrryd calls it forth, but not even that god can control it completely. He must unleash the Nikkeson from time to time to allow it to do what it does else the creature will turn on

its master and slay him as well. When it is set loose, Kerreyder comes with it to keep it from completely annihilating mankind. Unleashed without any kind of restraining force, it would continue to kill until no life was left in the megaverse."

"You say it touched you," Celine spoke up. "This is what frightens you from sleep, isn't it?" At Mac's distracted nod, she shook her head. "I wish you had told me."

"Why? There was nothing you could do," Mac said. "Until I find the creature and destroy it..."

"It cannot be killed, MacKirnan," the Burgon told him. "It is immortal."

Mac's forehead creased. "But surely there is something that can stop it!"

"Other than Kerreyder, only a Ridge Lord can send it back to its prison, but he can't kill it," Doc said. "I've never met one of the hierarchies of the Shadowlords so I don't know if they exist or are merely legend."

"They exist. I have met several," the Burgon said. "They are very powerful sorcerers, but even they can do no more than return the beast to Prysson. As Doc says, a Ridge Lord can't kill the beast. Kerreyder was the first Shadowlord, the first Deathlord, the Prime Ridge Lord before he was corrupted by Yn Drogh Spyrryd. Not even He Who is Evil Incarnate can kill the beast."

"Shit," Mac said. "That blows chunks."

"Delightful analogy," the Burgon mumbled as he fingered his scar.

A muscle worked in Mac's jaw. "How do I get to this Treigeilys?"

"Why in the gods' name would you want to?" Celine demanded with a gasp.

"It left me alive when it killed everything living around me," Mac said. "I want to know why. I need to know why!"

"And you think to walk up to it and simply ask?" she demanded. "You believe it will tell you?"

"Treigeilys is outside our known galaxies, MacKirnan," the Burgon told him. "It is said the Nikkeson comes out through a black hole and only it can do this."

"Nothing *human* can escape a black hole," Doc said. "You go in, you don't come back out."

"And once inside, you and your ship would be distorted beyond recognition from the powerful gravitational pull," the Burgon added. "It is believed no human can survive such force."

"But I'm not altogether human," Mac said.

"You're more human than the Nikkeson," Doc snapped.

"Then I'll have to wait until it comes out again."

"And do what exactly?" Celine insisted.

"Find out why it left me alive."

"I think I can tell you," the Burgon said, and every eye shifted to him. He shrugged. "It has plans for you."

## Chapter Eleven

Mac had spent nearly twenty years chasing a phantom he hoped one day to destroy only to be told there was no destroying it. Vengeance would not be meted out against the evil that had claimed the lives of so many in such a horrific way. No revenge would be exacted. Accepting that was the way it had to be caused him debilitating despondency. It crushed the spirit within him. Even those in the room who had no psi powers could feel the depression into which Mac had sunk.

"I'm sorry," the Burgon said quietly. "I know what it is to want retribution and be denied it."

The emperor of Aduaidh Prime had asked the others to leave the conference room so he and Mac could speak in private. Once everyone was gone, Mac got up to pace. "I was uneasy before this. Now I'm scared shitless," he told the Burgon.

"Why do you think that is?"

"It left a part of itself inside me when it touched me. Until now I hadn't felt it," Mac said. "Now I do." He looked hopelessly at the emperor. "Is it morphing inside me? Is it changing? Will it eventually take over what is good within me and turn me into something evil?"

The Burgon walked over to the younger man and put a hand on Mac's shoulder. "I wish I could answer that, but I honestly don't know, Mac. I hope not. I pray not. Some believe the hellions within a Reaper are inherently evil and perhaps in the case of the rogues they are, but the one inside me has only made me a better man."

"This...*thing*...inside me has given me powers beyond anything I could ever have imagined but I've never used any of them for evil," Mac said. "Hell, I've never used all the ones I know I have!"

"Then perhaps you never will."

"But we don't know that."

"No, we don't. You have to remain vigilant," the Burgon advised. "You're a strong man, a good man. I would like to think the good in you is so powerful evil could never get a foothold within you."

"I'd like to think that too," Mac said on a long sigh.

"All you can do is fight the good fight, Mac," was the recommendation. "Stand on the side of right. Use your abilities to help me to put an end to the New Coalition and bring its leaders to justice."

"I intend to," Mac said.

"Then let's call everyone back in and go over what I want you do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine threw back her head and laughed. "He is going to pitch one hell of a fit. He's gonna give you trouble like you can't imagine. Are you sure you don't want to warn him ahead of time about what we're doing and why?"

Mac shot her an irritated look. "You know him that well, do you?"

Wiping the moisture from her eyes, Celine continued to chuckle. "I've known him since he first became a man."

"Before my father took the throne, he served as tribunal judge for the UCJ on *an tSualainn*," Jade said, referring to the United Court of Justice. "Rune and I grew up together. I received my first kiss from him." She smiled wistfully. "Among other things."

"Which I'm sure he did as equally well with you as he did with me," Celine stated.

"Celine!" Mac hissed, flicking an embarrassed look to the Burgon.

"Oh pooh! You were not my first man, MacKirnan," Celine said. "Nor was Rune, for that matter."

"You're old enough to be mother to both of them," Ione complained.

Celine batted her eyelashes at the sado-mast, her smile cruel, her lips puckered into a taunt.

Clearing his throat, the Burgon said, "Let's stick to the issue at hand, ladies." He cast Mac a commiserating look, glad he didn't have to contend with the three women. "No, it will be better if Rune doesn't know this isn't a real kidnapping. We want it to look as true to purpose as possible. Once you have him aboard the *WindChaser II* and his new Fiach safely stored in the hangar bay, you can let him in on the subterfuge then rendezvous with Captain Taegin Drae over Tiogar. He'll take Rune off your hands."

"You do know they don't get along, don't you, your excellency?" Celine asked. "Tae and Rune?"

"They'll have to suck it up," the Burgon told her.

"Bad blood between them?" Mac asked.

"Weretigers and werewolves don't mix," Bruno said. "No more so than do cats and dogs."

"That's part of it, but there was also the matter of Celine and the Tiogar," Ione cooed.

"Him too?" Jade asked with a giggle, and when the older woman winked at her, Jade jabbed a finger to her chest. "Me as well!"

Grinding his teeth, Mac exhaled an exasperated breath. "I don't want to hear about any more of your conquests, you horny little witches. Is that clear?"

"Jealousy becomes him, don't you think, Jade?" Celine queried.

"Indeed it does," the other woman acknowledged.

"Stop it! I am going to have to work with those men!" Mac exploded, slamming a fist on the tabletop.

"Forewarned is forearmed," Doc commented. "You have the little witches, as you call them, now and those guys don't, so as the Burgon said, suck it up."

"I don't have time for your wounded pride, MacKirnan. I should have been on Aduaidh Prime two hours ago," the Burgon grouched. "Now once Drae has Degendesch, you are to go on to Cearbhail and send the ransom note to Rune's father Quirin at the UCJ. To make it as realistic as possible, Q. hasn't been brought into the loop. As far as he will know, this will be an actual ransom demand for his kidnapped son. He'll call out the PECs and the Guardians and will more than likely ask for Crevan Byrne's help as well. You'll have at least three and possibly as many as five megaversial law enforcement groups after your hide, but then that's nothing new for you. You will leave Rune's runabout on Cearbhail and using the new Storian stealth technology, head for Lupina. There you will make contact with Beithíoch Stiúrthóir."

"You're sure he's there?" Doc asked.

"He's there and has agents who report everything to him. He'll have heard about the kidnapping and he'll want to meet the man brave enough to take on the Degendeschs as well as the UCJ. It will be up to Mac to get in tight with him. I suggest being your usual arrogant self, Mac."

"If he is a powerful sorcerer, won't he be able to sense the Nikkeson's influence within me?" Mac asked.

"You'd better believe it," Bruno spoke up. "And that will work to our advantage."

"Bruno and I have dabbled with the occult," Gunter said. "We've used it on occasion, although we are not masters of the art by any means."

"But that will also work to your advantage," the Burgon said. "Once you're in with Stiúrthóir, begin foiling his operations then shut him the hell down. Arrest him, but if need be, you have my permission to dispatch him with extreme prejudice."

"What about us?" Jade asked, pointing to herself and Bella. "He'll know we're Guardians. Won't that throw a chink in the plan?"

The Burgon smiled. "That's already being taken care of, milady. While we've been here chatting, Rynlyn has been up there merrily ruining your reputations. He's sent transmissions to my good friend General Strom informing him the two of you have fallen under the WindChaser's formidable charm and have thrown in your lot with him. You've tossed aside those spiffy gray uniforms and from now on you'll be renegades along with your lover."

"Damn, I'm good," Mac said with a chuckle. "Women just fall at my feet."

"Yeah, sure they do," Ione quipped.

"You didn't get the memo?" he inquired innocently.

Jade frowned but Bella grinned cheerfully. She looked across the table into D.'s soft eyes and something passed between them.

"My father is going to disown me," Jade said. "He will be so ashamed."

"Mine too," Bella agreed, losing her smile.

"When it's all said and done, I'll personally explain to everyone it was nothing more than a ruse, that you were working for me," the Burgon told them. He put his palms on the table and pushed to his feet. "Any questions?"

The others rose, looked at one another then shook their heads.

"Alrighty then," the emperor said. "I'm outta here."

In a flash, the great man was gone and every eye went to Mac.

"You gotta love that Tappas engineering," Celine said. "Whoever invented the BlackMoon technology was a genius."

"Okay, let's get this bird winging her way to Staillin Major," Mac told them. "We've got a werewolf to kidnap!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Rune Degendesch had been out of sorts all morning. The temple on the right side of his face was bruised. He had been rubbing it constantly in an attempt to alleviate the pounding migraine that had begun plaguing him soon after waking. With a sour stomach and the wavering aura of the brutal headache warping his vision, he stomped down the corridor from his office to the break room to fetch a cup of coffee. Even the sound of his boot heels echoing off the bare concrete floor was a misery unto itself and he winced with every step he took.

"One more day," he mumbled to himself. "I shouldn't be getting this fucking agony for another day!"

What annoyed Rune more than anything about being a Faolchú was that he had been cursed with the same kind of ailments menstruating women had when his transition cycle came around. Bloating, water weight gain, the godsawful headaches, moodiness, belly cramps and all-around bitchiness accompanied the cycle, which lasted anywhere from three to five days. During that time, Rune was no different than a Reaper who transitioned once every quarter. He locked himself in a containment cell and waited it out. Unlike a Reaper though, he didn't need to worry about getting stuck in transition.

Hating the way he felt, the werewolf stalked over to the duplicator, snatched up a ceramic cup and shoved it under the beverage nozzle. "Breasian coffee, strong, hot and black," he mumbled.

The tangy smell of the rich coffee wafted up to him on a column of steam as the coffee flowed into the cup. He inhaled deep then brought the cup to his lips.

"Do you like your women the same way, stud?"

Not expecting the feminine voice since there were no women on Staillin Major, Rune jerked, splashing the hot coffee over his hand. He moved back with the cup held away from him to keep from sloshing the liquid on his pants and snapped his head

around. His eyes flared as he took in the beautiful woman of color standing there smiling at him.

“How did you...?”

Bella Taborn’s hips swayed as she came over to the werewolf. Her lips were painted a deep, rich red shade and the black jumpsuit she wore fit her like a second skin. When she lifted her hand to run her palm over Rune’s chest, she leaned toward him to give him a good whiff of the potent pheromone Doc assured her would catch and hold the werewolf’s attention, blocking everything else from his very agile mind.

“Compliments of Ruan Cossaint,” she said then molded her shapely body to his, sliding her arms around his neck to bring his head down.

“You can’t...” he began, but her glossy lips covered his and her tongue slipped wickedly into his mouth. Her lower body bumped against his groin, ground into him. She lifted one long leg to wrap it around his hip, the heel of her boot rubbing the crack of his ass beneath his pants. He growled low in his throat a second before the ceramic cup shattered on the concrete floor and his arms shot around her to gather her closer.

It had been months since Rune had lain with a woman, but it took only milliseconds before his cock was standing at full-mast—as hard as a flag pole, hardening like a big wolf’s. Forgotten completely was the raging headache that had been blasting away inside his skull. The throbbing he felt now was coming from the steely erection that was pressed tight to the lovely woman’s belly.

One moment he was straining against the delightful surprise and the next he felt a jolt go down his neck and wiggle its way to his toes. He slapped a hand to the pain, encountered cool flesh and tore his mouth free of Bella’s sensual seduction to find himself staring into the amused eyes of a man he didn’t know.

“Who...?” was all he got out.

He felt strong arms lifting him before the world shut down around him.

## Chapter Twelve

"As you say on Terra he is not going to be a happy camper when he wakes up," Celine warned Mac as he came aboard the *WindChaser II* with the werewolf in his arms. "You'd better restrain him."

"You really think so?" Mac asked as he laid the unconscious warrior on a bunk in sickbay. "If it were me, I'd be pissed even more at being tied down."

"Aye, *lhiannan*," she replied. "I *know* you should. Rune has a very nasty temper."

Mac glanced up at Doc. "Buckle him in, Doc."

"With the greatest of pleasure," Doc said as he began buckling the straps dangling from the sides of the gurney. "I've experience with an enraged werewolf and I've no desire to be on the receiving end of those nasty claws ever again." He nudged his chin toward the claws that had retracted from the tips of the werewolf's fingers.

"Instinctual on his part," Celine told the men. "A defense mechanism."

"One swipe from them will leave a nasty wound," Doc commented.

"Those restraints won't hold him when he's awake either. Like Reapers, he has the strength of ten men," Celine told the men. "You'd better move him to the containment cell while he's out of it. And remove his belt, boots and socks. I'd say strip him but that's just the female in me wanting to see him naked."

"Will do," Doc agreed with a grin.

"I suggest you tell him what's going on as soon as he comes to," Celine suggested. "Otherwise, you're going to see what fury really looks like and it ain't pretty."

"I'm thinking we should vid-tape him for his father and the megaverse to see. We need him angry, fighting the kidnapping so everyone will really believe he's in deep shit here," Mac said. "After we've done that, I'll let him in on the plan."

"Your call," she said, but her tone left no doubt as to how she felt about waiting.

"I don't think he should see you or Jade until afterward either," Mac told her.

"All right," she agreed. She reached out to stroke the unconscious warrior's handsome face. "Somewhere out there is a woman who'll one day tame this pup. I envy her the journey to his heart."

Mac clenched his hands, driving his fingernails into his palms. Celine's words lit a fire in his light green eyes and turned them a deep emerald color. "Do you have something you need to be doing, Celine?" he barked.

Startled by the tone, Celine lifted her head and looked into Mac's very angry eyes. She snatched her hand away from Rune Degendesch.

"Aye, MacKirnan," she said softly. "I do."

"Then get to it!" Mac snapped.

Doc's eyebrows rose as he listened to the exchange. He had just finished buckling the last ankle strap. "Want me to roll him down to the con cell?" he inquired.

"Yeah!" Mac growled then spun around on his heel to stomp out of sickbay.

"Whoa," Doc said, casting a quick look to D., who was standing nearby. "What the hell was that all about?"

"Hell if I know," D. replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac made his way to his quarters before he let loose the angry howl that had been pushing at his throat. Once the doors shushed to and he was alone, he arched back his head to let rip the howl. The overhead lights rattled in their stanchions as the roar erupted. Hands on hips, he unleashed another furious yowl then lowered his head to his chest, panting with the rage that was rippling through him. He ignored the vid-com chime that heralded a visitor at his door. When it came again, he bellowed for whoever it was to, "Go the fuck away!"

"Mac, open the door."

The words were calm, softly spoken but filled with no-nonsense.

Lifting his head, Mac glared at the vid-com screen and the beautiful face staring back at him.

"No." The one word was belligerent, and even to his ears sounded immature.

"You want everyone onboard to be a party to what I am about to say to you?"

"Go. Away," he said, stressing each word from between clenched teeth.

"All right, then I will say what I have to, and if there are ears that are eavesdropping, so be it." There was a brief pause, an intake of breath, then, "When you royally fucked up my life on Meiriceá..."

"Open!" he hissed at the vid-com, cutting her off. As soon as the titanium door peeled back into its slot, he spun around and stalked into the galley, snatching a bottle of Chalean brandy from the counter. Not even bothering with a glass, he took the bottle with him to the plush leather sofa and plopped down, popping the glass stopper from the bottle with a flick of his thumb. He tilted the bottle back and took a very unhealthy swig of the fiery gold liquor, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth afterward.

"Is your intent to get bricked as you Terrans say?" she inquired, taking a seat demurely across from him on the love seat.

"The word is plastered and yeah, I do!" He swilled another gulp, eyes watering as the liquid burned a path down his throat.

"Very adult of you," she said as she brought her legs up to tuck them beneath her. She rested an arm along the back of the loveseat. "As has been every wild affair, every occasional fucking, every..."

"What's your point?" he snarled.

"Since you and I became lovers, I have counted thirty-nine women you have nailed, MacKirnan, and that's just the ones I know about."

"It's been fifty-three since you're keeping count," he informed her after taking another long pull on the brandy.

"It's a wonder you haven't screwed your dangly to the nub," she mumbled, "or garnered a particularly nasty disease."

"Again. What's your point?"

"How many times have I snapped at you for your indiscretions?"

"Is that what we're calling them?" he asked, a lopsided grin on his face. "How polite."

"Would you rather I called them what they truly are?" she countered.

"I know what they are, Celine."

"So do I, but I imagine my take on them is far different than your own."

"And that would be what exactly?"

"The randy exploits of a spoiled, conceited little snot who equates being able to fuck any woman who'll let him as being a conquest when all it is is a pathetic cry to be loved."

She was looking at him with a gentle expression on her face, but it was a look that enraged him.

"Screw you," he told her.

"Not ever again," she stated, her chin going up. "You've screwed me for the last time."

To give Celine her due, she didn't even flinch when he hurled the half-empty bottle of brandy across the room and sprang off the sofa like a weretiger. His hard fingers bit into the soft flesh of her upper arms as he bodily lifted her from the loveseat to toss her to her back upon the sofa. The sound of the powerful slap she aimed at his cheek was loud as it snapped his head to the side.

He opened his mouth to scream at her, but the gleam in her eye told him nothing he said, nothing he did would move her. Celine Belial had taken a stand and when she did, nothing could deter her from her decision.

"I didn't have to bring you with me that day, you know," he said.

"No, you didn't," she agreed. "You could have left me to my husband's creditors, to the poor house, to plying my trade on the streets."

He winced at those last words. "Is that what you think I've done?" he asked. "Turned you into a whore?"

"Haven't you? Wasn't that your intent from the beginning?"

He smiled. "What about Rune Degendesch and Taegin Drae?" he reminded her.

"All before I met you," she said. "One look at you, one touch of those very skilled hands and I became just one more notch on your bedpost."

"No, that's not true. I didn't have to bring you with me," he said again. "I wanted you with me."

"As a mommy figure?" she said in a snide tone.

He chuckled. "Believe me when I say you are nothing like my mother."

"Then why?"

"You want the truth?"

"I think you owe me that much after all this time."

He flung both arms over the back of the loveseat, lifted one leg to cross its ankle over his knee. "I first saw you at Senator Warren's party at the marina."

"You were there looking for marks to fleece."

"You were co-hosting the event with the senator's shrew of a wife."

"Lanette," she said. "A perfect harpy if there ever was one but a really good friend."

He shrugged. "I fucked her," he said.

"Oh, I know you did. She told me."

"And both her daughters as well as two maids and – if memory serves – a couple of the other guests. That part is fuzzy because someone dropped something into my drink."

Celine smiled. "That would have been me, *lhiannan*."

He cocked his head to one side. "Really?"

"You don't remember waking in my bed?"

A long sigh escaped him. "Afraid not."

"Too bad. We had a great time."

"We always do," he said softly.

"So you saw me at the party, but don't remember sleeping with me or waking the next morning between my sheets. What *do* you remember?"

"Your husband and his two goons beating the living shit out of me," he said.

Celine's brows drew together. "Excuse me?"

"I remember waking up with the headache from hell," he told her. "Someone was shaking me, slapping me then dragging me up and down some stairs. I remember my shins hitting every riser, my toes scraping on rough concrete, the glare of the morning sun. I remember someone yelling he should castrate me."

"He must have come to my room and found you while I was in the shower," she said, her face filled with apology. "When I came out and found your clothes gone, I thought you'd just taken off. I had no idea Danton had discovered you in my room."

"They nearly killed me. They broke my jaw, ruptured my spleen, turned me inside out with their fists," he said, "then they pitched me into the bay. Luckily one of the guys I had working for me fished me out before I could drown."

"Mac, I'm sorry," she said. "I had no idea."

He shrugged again and wiggled his foot as though annoyed by her apology. "Doesn't matter. I made the decision to ruin Danton Belial and everyone connected to him for what he did. I vaguely remembered screwing you so I decided to take you from him as part of the revenge." He took a deep breath. "I could have just left you alone after I took everything of his, but I couldn't. I kept remembering seeing your face that first time at the party and thinking how beautiful you were. How much I wanted you. Taking you was just an added benefit of ruining your husband."

"So you took all my money, turned me into a homeless wretch then asked me to be your whore."

He flinched at the reminder of what he'd said to her that day. "That was unforgivable. I was pissed at the time."

"I believe your exact words were 'everything you once owned belongs to me and now you belong to me, or would you rather ply your trade on the boardwalks?'"

"Like I said, that was unforgivable," he mumbled.

"I much preferred being your whore to working the streets and boardwalks so it wasn't a hardship for me to go with you, Mac. What else did I have going for me but my – how did you put it – 'juicy hot cunt'?"

"God, but I was a foul-mouthed little shit, wasn't I?"

"Truth be told, *lhiannan*, I would have followed you even if you hadn't asked. I'm afraid I started falling in love with you that first night and I've been helplessly falling deeper and deeper into that rift ever since." She swung her legs off the sofa and moved over to where he sat, sinking to her knees before him. She put her hands on his knees as he lowered his leg and opened them so she could move between them. "But all good things must end. We can't go on as we've been. I'm getting too old and too cranky to share you, so now the ball is in your court. If you want to trade me in for a newer model, that's okay. It'll hurt like hell but I'll accept it. Just make the decision, Mac, and make it now."

"I don't want you touching other men," he said stubbornly.

"Other men aren't on my agenda, Mac," she said. "I'll be sixty in June. I'm tired of playing what in essence is a young woman's game. When I go to bed at night, I want to go there with the man who intends to spend his golden years with me. Who'll hold me in his arms until I fall asleep, but who doesn't want to maul me or screw me until daybreak." She squeezed his knee. "And you aren't that man." She leaned forward so she laid her palm against his cheek. "I saw the jealous anger flash through your eyes when Jade let it be known she knew the Tiogar."

"You slept with the weretiger too!" he snapped. "You didn't see the jealousy when I heard that?"

"Aye, I saw it and it did this old woman's heart good. Jade..."

"You are not an old woman!" he snapped.

"Jade's closer to your age and of child-bearing years," Celine stated as though he hadn't interrupted. "The two of you will make beautiful children unless you allow Ione to damage you so badly you won't be able to sire any."

Mac's eyes flared. "Children?" He shook his head. "Hell no! *Hell* no! That's the last thing I need!"

Celine sighed. "You need a son to teach and a daughter to spoil," she told him.

"Goddamn it, Celine, I..."

"And with Jade it wasn't just jealousy I saw, Mac. It was covetousness, pure and simple. I think you've met your soul-mate."

"Yeah, but..."

"And are you willing to try to make things work with her?"

He thrust a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I think so. I..."

"Captain?" the vid-com interrupted. "The Faolchú is waking."

"You need to go," Celine said. She used his knees to lever herself from the floor. "Take care of the business at hand and then the three of us will talk later this evening."

"Three?" he questioned, but he knew what she meant. He didn't need to utilize his psi powers to know she had already handed him into Jade's keeping whether that was what he wanted or not. To her way of thinking, all that was left was to set down the ground rules.

## Chapter Thirteen

The six-foot-by-six-foot titanium plate slid back to reveal thick tungsten-encased titanium bars the thickness of a large man's forearm set in a grid pattern. Behind a thick plexigon panel placed five feet from the first barrier was a second set of bars. Beyond that was the titanium-walled containment cell. Seven feet by seven feet in diameter, twenty feet in height, the cell had no windows. Embedded in the titanium wall were two horizontal tungsten beams upon which was welded a solid sheet of tungsten six feet long by four feet wide, this served as a bed although it had no padding or covers. In one corner of the cell was a four-inch-wide waste removal hole, in another was a showerhead set flush against the ceiling. A wire-encased light was recessed into the center of the ceiling and the light was never extinguished. A constant temperature of fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit. was maintained at all times within the cell. The only fixture in the con cell that was not normally there was the gurney upon which the Faolchú lay strapped.

Mac rested his arm against the wall and laid his head on his forearm. He had a vicious headache that was throbbing to the beat of his heart. Ever since learning the name of the creature who had changed him forever and left something alien to hibernate within him, he had been feeling strange. The feeling was increasing as he stared at the werewolf.

Degendesch was moving his head slowly back and forth on the gurney, without doubt straining to rid himself of the pairilis that had taken him down so effectively. A low groan came from the con cell then a savage jerk. Another jerk, a grunt and the Faolchú's eyes popped open. He roared like a wounded bull as he twisted his hands to break the restraint, kicked his feet to snap the straps holding his ankles.

*"Son of a fucking bitch!"* Rune bellowed, and the gurney jumped beneath him as he jackknifed his body in an effort to get free.

Wincing at the horrible snarls and growls that were so loud they made the plexigon panel vibrate, Mac was only mildly surprised at how easily the werewolf freed his arms and legs, springing from the gurney in a crouch with lips skinned back from fully extended fangs. He barely moved when Degendesch threw himself at the first barrier and wrapped deadly claws around the bars.

*"You are a dead man!"* the Faolchu shouted as he tugged savagely upon the bars.

*"And you know damned well you won't be able to get out of there,"* Mac replied.

*"Terran!"* Rune hissed, recognizing the other man's accent. His nostrils flared and pure rage sparked in his amber eyes. *"MacKirnan!"*

*"That would be me and how 'bout looking up at the light and giving your old man a little wave to let him know you're okay."*

The werewolf's head snapped back. His eyes narrowed as he saw the winking red light that let him know he was being vid-taped. Jaws clenched, he lowered his head to shoot Mac a look that was colder than the farthest reaches of space.

"Ransom," he snarled.

"One million gold bars," Mac said. "I would have asked for two, but what with the war and all, one mill will be easier for Pops to come up with."

A tic pulsed in Rune's cheek. "He won't pay it. He won't even lower himself to answer your demand."

Mac smiled. "Sure he will or he won't get you back."

"He won't pay it!" Rune all but shrieked with frustration. He pulled brutally on the bars. Hissing, roaring, growling, grunting, he jerked with all his might on the metal.

"If you don't calm down, you're gonna stroke out, Degendesch," Mac warned him. "It's mox-nix to me, but I'd just as soon deliver you to your daddy as hail and hearty as possible."

"*Fuck you!*" Rune thundered.

"Sorry, big boy, but you aren't my type," Mac said, not moving an inch as the werewolf slammed against the bars, thrusting his arm through in an attempt to reach the plexigon shield.

"I'm going to make runny shit of you when I get my hands on you!" Rune swore. "I'll tear your fucking head off and stuff it up your Terran ass!"

Pain was eating away at Mac's head but he laughed at the threats. It wasn't that he didn't believe the Faolchú would make good on them given the chance, but he had managed to slip past the werewolf's defenses and into his mind. As he was rummaging around unnoticed in there—thanks to the fury controlling the enraged warrior—he was learning all there was to know about Rune Degendesch and what he was learning both impressed and intrigued him.

"How close are you to having your period?" Mac asked, lips twitching when he saw the werewolf's eyes narrow, his fangs glint and his claws curl under. He would have sworn he saw the man's sideburns bristle.

"*I am going to fucking tear you apart!*"

"Knock yourself out, wolf boy. By the way, do you need a box of tampons or pads or whatever?"

An ululating howl that was eerily like the one he'd unleashed himself in his quarters ripped through the air, vibrating the plexigon. The Faolchú spun around, grabbed the gurney and began tearing it apart with his bare hands—lips drawn back in a vicious snarl, eyes glowing red. Thoroughly awed by the warrior's strength, savagery and single-minded intent to reduce the gurney to rubble, Mac straightened, his arms folded across his chest, watching the spectacle with eyes wide and mouth ajar. When Degendesch began throwing pieces of the gurney against the bars, Mac let out a low whistle.

For half an hour the werewolf vented his rage. When he finally wound down, he slid down the wall with his back pressed against the slick titanium, drew his legs up and buried his head in his hands. He was panting, the front and underarms of his shirt soaked with sweat.

"Did you get it all out of your system?" Mac asked softly.

"*Diúl mo bhod,*" the Faolchú hissed.

Mac tsked at the nasty command that urged him to use his cock as a lollipop. "Keep that up and I'll be forced to wash out your mouth, wolfie."

"*Thoir do chasan leat!*" Rune told him to get the hell out.

Mac heard a sound and looked around. D. was standing at the end of the corridor. "Whatcha need, D.?" he asked.

D. came up to the con cell. He glanced in, frowned and then turned a perplexed look to his captain. "He all right?" he inquired.

"Wore himself out dissecting the gurney," Mac said. "Did you get all that on vid?"

D. nodded. "I was just worried about him. When he sat down, he looked like he was sick."

Out of the corner of his eye, Mac saw Degendesch lift his head. The werewolf was staring at them. "He's okay," he told D. "Have you sent the vid on to his father with the demand?"

"Aye," D. said then moved closer to the barred opening. He was studying the Faolchú. "You sure he's not hurt?"

A movement in the con cell brought Mac's head around. Degendesch was on his feet. Kicking aside the debris from the gurney, Mac saw him flinch and heard D.'s automatic intake of breath.

"You shouldn't do that, Captain Degendesch," D. warned. "You could hurt your foot real bad." He looked down to make sure that hadn't happened. "I'll go get your boots for you."

The Faolchú shot Mac an inquiring look. "*He's slow?*" came the psychic whisper through Mac's mind.

"*Aye, but he's a good man to have at your back,*" Mac sent back.

"Is that all right, Mac?" D. asked. "Can I get him his boots?"

"Not just yet," Mac said. "Why don't you go back up on the bridge and let me know when we hear from his father."

"Alrighty then," D. said, using one of his favorite Terran idioms. He smiled at Rune then turned and walked off, whistling.

"I knew a boy in lower school who was slow," Rune said. "I was his only friend."

"Well, when your deep pockets spring for your release, you can make friends with D."

"*Póg mo thóin*, I told you he won't dignify your demands by answering them," Rune bit out, inviting Mac to kiss his ass. "My father won't pay you anything for my return."

"Ah, didn't-um your daddykins luvem him little wolfie pup?" Mac questioned.

Degendesch ignored the jibe. There were only the two sets of bars, the plexigon and five feet of space between them, but it felt to Mac as though they were toe to toe. Since the two were of the same height, pale green eyes were fused with stormy amber ones at a blistering level.

"When I get out of here..."

"That's assuming you do," Mac cut him off. One dark brow elevated. "I could just leave you there to starve."

Rune snorted. "You won't." He braced the palms of his hands on the top of the barred window. "Murder isn't your style, MacKirnan."

Mac smiled slowly, nastily. "For you, I might make an exception."

Another snort told Mac the werewolf had no fear of him. He cocked his head to one side. "Can't read my mind though, can you? You've been trying."

The Faolchú gave a dismissive shrug. "It's murky in that cesspool you call a brain, Terran."

"That's what comes of having the Nikkeson delving into it," Mac replied. "It left some real stinky shit behind."

At the mention of the creature, Rune's eyes widened. His thick brows drew together. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he queried.

"It's how I got my psi powers," Mac answered. "Compliments of ye olde badass motherfucking starjumper."

"Not good," Degendesch said quietly.

"I didn't think so at the time and I'm hating it more with every passing minute," Mac confessed. "Since I learned what it is, I've had one hell of a bitching headache."

Rune slowly nodded. "You would. It's probing you."

Mac had suspected as much. "Would the Burgon have known that?"

The werewolf blinked, surprised at the question. "You've met him?"

"He's the one who ordered you borrowed," Mac said, one side of his mouth lifted in a grin. He relaxed the guards, the barriers he'd thrown up before coming down to the con cell so Degendesch could at last slip inside his mind to garner the truth of what he was saying.

It took a moment or two for the knowledge to be gleaned of all that had transpired then Rune sighed like a man much put-upon. "That devious son of a bitch," he said. "He could have warned me."

"Then the kidnapping wouldn't have looked as real on the vid."

"Why the subterfuge?" Rune asked.

"He doesn't want the NC to know you're working for him. He said he wasn't ready for that to happen yet."

"Who was the black beauty you sent to distract me?"

"Black beauty," Mac said then snickered. "I call her brown sugar, myself."

"Who is she?" the werewolf repeated, eyes narrowed.

"A former Riezell Guardian named Bella Taborn," Mac replied then laughed when Degendesch cursed.

"Ayo's little sister," Rune said with a grunt.

"That's her."

"She and I are gonna have a talk," the Faolchú said. "A long, *private* talk."

"Jade Shimota and Celine Belial are also onboard," Mac said, watching the werewolf's reaction to that news.

"I knew Celine was with you," Rune said, "but Jadelyn? Now that is a very pleasant surprise."

Mac felt a tic pulsing in his cheek at the way the werewolf said Jade's full name. "Just so you know?" he said. "Jade and Celine both belong to me."

"*Is cuma lion sa diabhal,*" the werewolf scoffed, stressing that he didn't give a damn. "When I want them, I'll take them."

Mac grinned, but his eyes were as cold as the winters of his homeland. "Might be hard to do without your dick, wolfie," he stated.

Rune returned the merciless smile. They understood one another.

"So," Mac said, tired of the banter. He slipped effortlessly into the werewolf's mind then nodded. "You'll be Transitioning come tomorrow?"

"Tonight," the werewolf corrected, having sensed the intrusion. "Late."

"You'd best stay in there for now then," Mac said. He pointed to a shallow grate that sat at the bottom of the cell's thick door. "I'll have D. bring you something to eat and drink."

"Have brown sugar bring it," Rune said.

Mac's slow grin and thoughtful nod caused Degendesch to shrug his wide shoulders. "Something tells me you've got some particular nastiness intended for Bella up your sleeve," Mac commented.

"Maybe."

"I warn you – she's a tough one."

"So am I," the Faolchú declared.

"And she'd got her eyes on D."

That brought an immediate frown to the other warrior's face. "No shit?"

"No shit."

"Fuck," Degendesch growled. "I won't mess with her then." A cold grin stretched his full lips. "Correction, not with her body, but her mind is another matter."

Mac chuckled. "If it's physical release you're in need of, I have two sado-masts who'd love to get their hooks into you if you're game," Mac told him. "We're headed for Tiogar and that will take at least a week so you'll have a day or two to play with them if you're of a mind to."

"Why Tiogar?"

"The Burgon told me to turn you over into Taegin Drae's safe keeping."

Rune rolled his eyes. "*Cac capaill!* Be still my wayward heart! This just gets better and better. Being around that gods-be-damned weretiger is all the hell I need. Son of a bitch probably has fleas."

"I'm not familiar with that one. Translation?"

"*Cac capaill?*" At Mac's nod, Rune told him it meant horse shit. There was a pause then, "Sado-masts, huh?" the werewolf questioned. "Hard-core or lightweights?"

"One is as hard-core as you're ever gonna meet. Got kicked off her homeworld for nearly killing a man in the throes of passion," Mac reached down to rub his sore cock. "She nearly bit off my dangly last time we sparred."

"Cool!"

"You may not think so once she's done with you," Mac warned. "She can be a truly cruel bitch, but don't call her one. That only makes her worse." He started to leave.

"Hey, MacKirnan?"

Mac stopped, turned.

"I'm still going to whip your ass when I get out of here," Rune said, but it was voiced in a pleasant tone. The Faolchú was grinning.

"You can try," Mac said, returning the grin, "but whatever this is building inside me isn't about to let you."

That sobered them both. Mac gave his prisoner a one-fingered salute as he turned to go. Rune nodded in acknowledgment of the gesture.

Degendesch sighed deep.

"I wouldn't be you for anything, MacKirnan," the werewolf said then shuddered.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He says he'll be Transitioning late this evening," Mac told Celine. He glanced at Bella. "He wants you to bring him his supper."

"As D. tells me you are fond of saying, he can want in one hand and shit in the other," Bella said. "See which one fills up first." She shook her head. "Don't think I don't know why he asked for me."

Crystal raised her hand. "I'll do it."

"I don't think so. He's not a very nice man sometimes, Crystal," Jade warned.

"Oh," Crystal said, crestfallen. "You mean he doesn't like my kind."

"He's very...alpha," Jade replied.

"He has no problem with those who practice alternative sex so long as it isn't aimed at him," Celine asserted.

"I'll leave him be," Crystal said.

"Aye, that would be best," Bruno told her.

"I'll take him his food," Celine volunteered.

"I don't think so," Mac said. "Gunter, will you do the honors?"

Gunter shrugged. "If that's your order."

"It is," Mac agreed.

"All right then, that leaves you, Jade and me free," Celine said. "Now is as good a time as any to have that talk."

Mac frowned, opened his mouth to protest but both women were looking at him with expressions that said they would not be denied. He snapped his mouth shut. "Let's get it over with," he grouched, extending a hand toward the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

About as unhappy a camper as he could ever remember being—even when his father had sent him to what he affectionately remembered as Camp Fuck-Up when he was twelve—Mac was in no mood to be waylaid by Ione on the way back to his quarters.

"MacKirnan, we need to talk!" the sado-mast demanded.

He stopped, put his hands on his hips, let out a hard sigh and hung his head. "What's up, Ione?"

"That Chrystallusian whore said I was not to lay a hand to you again!" Ione growled, eyes snapping. "She said you belong to her and..."

"I do," he said, hoping that would end the conversation but knowing it wouldn't and that those two words were going to infuriate Ione.

"The hell you do!" she shouted. She thumped her chest. "You belong to me!"

He lifted his head and put up a staying hand when she would have reached for him. "Ione, no."

"Don't tell me..." She reached for him again and he knocked her hand away.

"I said no!" His eyes were stern, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because Jade made me realize I came to you for punishment," he told her. "I've known that all along but it was what I felt I deserved, I needed at the time. Now I know it really doesn't help. It changes nothing. The things I wanted to be punished for are

long in the past and even if I never atone for them, there's nada I can do about it." He searched her eyes. "It doesn't matter how much pain you dish out, how much blood and sweat I shed. When it's all said and done, it changes nothing."

She gave him a long, disappointed look. "So that means you won't be coming to me or Laran again?"

"Or Celine or Crystal," he said. "Just Jade."

Ione rolled her eyes then turned her head and spat. "As if she can give you what you need!"

"She can."

"Well, when you find out she *can't*," she said with a flip of her hair, "you know where to find us!"

## Chapter Fourteen

Staring at the ceiling, Mac was all too aware of the transition happening in the cell. As he lay rigid on his bunk, he could feel the changes happening inside Rune Degendesch's body as easily as he could remotely view the physical changes that were taking place. There was a raw energy zinging through his body he'd never experienced before and hoped never to again. His flesh was crawling as though a million fire ants were nipping at him. His heart was racing and his head was pounding with a viciousness that brought nausea to his throat. Even the sinews, muscles, arteries and veins in his bones—the very marrow—felt as though it were morphing in tandem with the werewolf's. It was an excruciating sensation he was experiencing and the only way he could keep from screaming in agony was to let it flow through him. It would stop soon. At least he prayed to God it would. Until this, he had never had to endure the psychic bombardment of being an empath.

That had now changed.

*"MacKirnan?"*

The psychic link was strong but the name garbled.

*"Yeah?"* he sent back.

*"Get the fuck outta my mind."* Those six words were weak, spoken between pants.

*"I wish I could."*

Silence followed as the pain increased in crescendo then slowly—very slowly—began to ebb.

Mac shuddered violently then turned to his side, drawing his knees up, hands clenched and pressed between his thighs. He was shivering, his body coated with sweat. When the bed dipped, he had neither the energy nor will to look around. As soft arms enfolded him, he closed his eyes.

*"I felt your distress as though it were a blanket of flame wrapping around me,"* Jade whispered to him. She stroked back his damp hair.

*"It feels as though I'm on fire,"* he admitted, *"but I'm so cold my teeth are chattering."*

*"What's happening here, Mac?"* she asked softly.

*"I don't know. I felt every second of his Transition."*

She ran her hand up and down his bare arm, frowning as she felt the gooseflesh prickling her palm. Her lover was shaking as though he lay in a blast of frigid wind yet his body temperature was very high.

Jade felt it too, but it had shown itself to her in a series of uncomfortable prickles that undulated down her backbone. At first she hadn't realized what was happening but the moment she became aware of Mac's misery, she had hurried to his quarters, using her psi powers to gain entrance.

"It's using me," she heard him say. "Somehow it's using me to show it our weaknesses – mine and Degendesch's. It's binding us together, linking us psychically."

"But for what purpose?" she inquired.

"MacKirnan?" Rune's voice was more animal than human.

"I'm all right," Mac said aloud.

"I feel her arms around us."

The garbled words made Mac bristle. They brought out a wild jealousy within him he did not know he possessed. That the werewolf was experiencing the same tactile comfort he was feeling did not sit well. For a split second he wanted to lash out at Degendesch – knowing he could hurt the man if he wanted to – but managed to get his feelings under tight control.

"Go to sleep, *Faolchú*," he sent in a harsh command.

His words were met with silence, but it was a hurt silence for he knew the werewolf was receiving the same comfort he was accepting so gratefully. Shame rocketed through him. He had endured the same ripping pain the other warrior had, was still enduring a portion of it though the agony had receded to a tolerable level. His uncharitable thoughts were disgraceful and he regretted them.

"I understand. It's all right," Degendesch whispered then fell silent once more. "*She's your woman, not mine.*"

"We'll figure this out," Mac said.

"Aye," Jade replied, thinking he was talking to her. "We will." She caressed him, laying her head to his shoulder. Her soft lips pressed against his flesh for a moment.

He forced all thought of the werewolf out of his mind. He needed what Jade was silently offering him.

"It's happening, you know," she said softly.

He felt Degendesch withdrawing, putting up a shield between their linked minds.

"What's happening, spike?"

She said nothing for a moment then fanned her hand over his chest. "The love. I feel it like a tiny sprout just piercing the soil." She caressed him. "Can you see the little spike of green showing?"

Yeah, he thought. He could. It was just the tiniest speck of pale color poking up through the black loam, but he could see it in his mind's eye.

"It's gonna grow, MacKirnan," she told him. "It's gonna grow and be a big, sturdy plant."

He turned his head so he was staring into her eyes. "Have you ever been to the palace on Aduaidh Prime?" he asked.

Jade shook her head to indicate she hadn't. "I've been to Tappas Industries but not the palace. Why?"

He reached up to cover her questing hand with his.

"There is this plant that grows only on Aduaidh Prime. It's called a *scorapella*. It has thick, lush vines with shiny oval leaves covered with tiny little hairs – aerial roots – that constantly twist and turn. It gives off a sweet, spicy scent as the hairs rub together. They say it has sentience and when a child touches it, it will quiver as though its laughing then reach out a vine to encircle the child. It's nicknamed a giggle vine because it just makes you want to laugh when it touches you."

"Have you ever touched it?"

"No, I've never been in the palace and that's where it grows, but I am looking forward to seeing it, touching it one day. It has another nickname."

"Which is?" she encouraged. He was stroking her hand with his palm.

"The love vine. They say whoever touches it will find true love one day and that love will be as hardy as the vine."

She saw sadness flit through his eyes. "But...?"

He was silent for a moment then sighed. "As I said it only grows on Aduaidh Prime. Horticulturists and plant huggers have tried to grow it elsewhere but it only withers and dies."

She rose up to hover over him. "Mac, are you worried that this growing affection between us will wither and die before it ever takes hold?"

"No, spike. I'm not. I'm just a little afraid it will take root so deep, so strong in both of us that nothing could ever kill it."

"And that's not a good thing to your way of thinking?" she questioned, hurt filtering through her smoky voice. He shook his head. "Then why are you uneasy?"

He searched her eyes. "What if after all this is over I'm interred on R-9? What if they toss me into a containment cell and let me rot there? I've a lot of crimes to pay for, spike. I've pissed off a lot of people, the Burgon included."

"I won't let them."

A sad smile tugged at his lips. "You may not be able to stop them."

"I will," she said, easing her hand from under his to slide it down to his cock. "Believe me when I tell you, pretty boy, no one is going to put you in a cell and throw away the key. It ain't gonna happen."

"Yeah, but what if – ?"

Her hand curled around his cock a moment before she slithered down his body.

"Why don't I give you something else to obsess about?" she asked, her mouth closing over his shaft.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the con cell, Rune Degendesch lay in a fetal position that mirrored Mac's, but instead of being on the streamlined bunk, he lay curled on the hard floor. The clothes he had had been wearing were now nothing more than scraps from when they had ripped from his body.

Staring across the room without blinking, his red, feral eyes moved constantly beneath the shagging bristle of his eyebrows. His nostrils quivered in what had become a muzzle. Thick reddish-brown fur covered him from pointed ears to bushy tail, his paws flicking nervously on the floor from time to time as he panted with the pain of his organs settling into the rearrangement from human form to wolf. His flews drew back over sharp, pointed fangs for a moment and he growled then grunted in pain.

As his body continued to transition human consciousness became harder to hold on to. He was sinking deeper and deeper into the wild predator, the perfect killing machine, but the feel of a warm hand stroking his fur calmed him.

He whined low in his throat.

Through the connection between him and the human male, he could draw the female's scent deep into his lungs. It was a scent he recognized—a scent that had once rubbed against his body. He sniffed, sniffed again and closed his eyes to let the human memory come.

*Jadelyn*, he thought as the last bit of humanity faded but the memory of the female's petite body remained behind to taunt him. Though every trace of his human self had left him, memory had not. He'd always thought that a punishment of sorts but now it remained behind to sustain him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac felt the werewolf slipping into sleep and the moment Degendesch began to dream about Jade, Mac turned his head on the pillow to watch Jade as she too slept. With sleep, the werewolf's shield had slipped away and Mac was right there in the mind of the Faolchú as Degendesch relived a long-ago night in this beautiful woman's arms. Blood oozed from the wounds in his palms where his fingernails clamped brutally into his flesh as jealousy rode him like a cruel master. A muscle ticked in his jaw and his head pounded—as much from the resentful feelings bombarding him as the alien malevolence that was slowly taking him over.

"Get out of my fucking head!" he hissed at the creature, and could have sworn he heard malefic laughter winding its way through time and the pitch-black darkness of space.

"What?" Jade asked in a sleepy voice.

"Nothing," he said. "Go back to sleep. I was just thinking out loud."

Her hand slid over his hip, grazing his cock—the touch bringing it to life. "You think way too much," she accused, her psi powers intercepting his thoughts and at once

he shut them down to keep her out. He heard her laugh but it didn't matter for her fingers were stroking him, her fingernails grazing his balls and all thought turned to the expertise she wielded in those soft little hands. He gave himself up to her entirely.

Sweet fire raced through his groin as she tugged and stroked his shaft, cupped his sac. Her thumb slid over the weeping tip and burrowed gently into the slit. As she flexed her fingers around his straining length, her foot ran up and down his shin, her heel riding higher until it touched the sensitive underside of his knee.

"You are so hard," she whispered against his ear. She nibbled on his earlobe, grazed the inner swirl of flesh to send shivers down his side. Her warm breath slithered into the canal and he shivered. "So hard. So ready to be rode."

It was her voice as much as her delectable body that thrilled him. The musical Chrystallusian accent lent itself to submission and domination, obedience and surrender. Like the geishas of her magical homeland, she used her entire body to entice and entrance. She mesmerized him. He could see himself with her always, forever entranced by the many facets of her beauty.

As though he were a sacrifice to the ancient gods, he lay still with his arms flung wide as she rose up and settled between his thighs, nudging his legs apart as she positioned her body over his. His cock was as rigid as iron, throbbing to the wild beat of his heart as he looked up at her firm breasts—long, black silky hair falling around her shoulders like a satin cape. He longed to reach out to cup those lush globes but he knew that was not what she wanted. She wanted him acquiescent and acquiescent he would be as she pushed up to her knees and placed the heated tip of him to her moist flesh.

"Tell me what you want, WindChaser," she ordered, squeezing him tight in her fist, her cunt poised over him.

He swallowed hard as heat and desire and aching lust drove through his body. "You," he replied.

She pushed the head of his cock between the outer folds of her moistness. "And what is it you want me to do?"

The blood was racing through his veins. A light sheen of sweat popped out on his upper lip. He knew better than to move even one muscle. Knew he should not blink or gasp or pant or shiver. He knew what she expected of him. He'd been through this many times before.

"I want you to fuck me," he said, his voice a husky growl.

She tilted her head to one side and regarded him with an arched brow. "For how long, Mac?"

"Until I beg for mercy," he answered.

And she could make him do it, he thought, and would. She would slide him into her velvet heat—engulf him, swallow him, settled down to the very base of him and tighten her inner muscles until he groaned. She was very good at what she did for she'd had plenty of practice—on him.

"For how long, Mac?" she repeated.

"For always," he pledged.

The head of his cock slipped inside her and she pulsed those tight little lips around him.

"Oh God, spike. The things you do to me should be outlawed," he whispered. He ached to thrust his hips upward to impale her, but if he did, she was as liable to get up and dress and leave him in agonized misery as not.

"What else do you want me to do, Mac?" she asked, her knees tightening against the outside of his hips.

He swept a tongue over his dry lips, his eyes steady on hers. Thunder was beating at his temples. He could barely force the requisite words out for his throat was closing as he strained not to move. "I want you to milk me."

"Milk you?" she asked, her head tilting the other way, her long hair dipping down to touch his belly.

He quivered. He couldn't help it. It was instinctual, purely physical but she frowned.

"No!" he denied, fearful she would end it. "No, baby, please!"

"Milk you?" she repeated, her face stern.

"Milk me until my cock is dry," he said, swallowing again.

A full minute passed as she stared down into his pleading face—now glistening with sweat. It was entirely up to her. She could end it or she could continue. He had no say in the matter though every nerve in his body screamed at him to grab her, roll her under him and thrust into her with wild abandon.

She smiled slowly. "You are hurting, aren't you, pretty boy?"

"Aye," he managed to say. "You know I am."

She clucked her tongue in commiseration, all the while studying him as though he were a bug on a microscope slide. At last, her smile began to fade until her face was once more severe and uncompromising. "So what is it you want me to do about it?"

"Take pity on me."

Her eyebrows rose in tandem. "And if I do? What will you do for me in exchange?"

This was what he'd been waiting for. He took a couple of breaths to steady himself, to slow his galloping heartbeat then spoke to her in a voice as demanding as it was sensual.

"I make you come like a fucking race horse, baby."

"You think you can?" she challenged.

Slowly he lifted his arms then placed his hands on the flange of her hips, tightening his fingers to dig the tips into her soft flesh to anchor her.

"I know goddamned well I can," he replied then arched his hips powerfully to drive his cock deep inside her sleek heat.

Jade cried out as he seated himself within her. Her hands went to his forearms to clamp her fingers around him as he lifted her and slid her down his shaft once, twice, three times. Her head fell back. She began to ride him—rotating her hips, lifting and lowering, grinding, bucking against him as he continued to hold her body captive to his. Her breasts bounced, her buttocks slapped against his hard thighs.

“Ride him, baby,” she heard him growl. “Ride him hard.”

And she did with complete abandon. Her muscles contracted and released around him—vibrating, undulating, pulsing. Her fingernails dug into his arms. Her long hair whipped back and forth as she made little whimpering sounds deep in her throat. She rolled her hips forward and back, bucking on his cock as he surged upward to thrust hard into her.

“Aye, Mac, aye!” she cried out, her fingernails creating little half-moon indentions in his flesh.

He stared up at the arch of her throat as she flung her head back. Her breasts strained, her nipples hard little buds. Her stomach muscles were quivering. She was lost to the pleasure his cock was giving her. She was slick as she slid up and down him.

“That’s it, baby,” he whispered. “Hard. Do it hard.”

The first lick of heat began to curl in his lower body. His cock was like steel as it forged through the folds of her slick, scorching sheath. Blood pounding, breath held, eyes narrowed as he watched her body begin to tense, he clamped his lower lip between his teeth to keep from howling as the seed shot—white-hot and thick—from his pulsing shaft. His fingers tensed on her hips and he slammed her down hard and held her still as the quiver of her inner muscles ticked over and around him even as he continued to pour into her.

“Mac!” she screamed, the cords in her neck standing out.

Depleted, drained, milked of all available juices, he relaxed his hold on her hips and she fell forward atop him. Without missing a beat, he flipped her over to her back and stretched out between her thighs, her legs coming up to imprison him with ankles locked, her mouth going to his shoulder where she sank her teeth as he collapsed upon her.

Arms wrapped securely around him, breath fanning along his neck, her heart was pounding savagely against his own, their mingled sweat and musky body odors tickling his nostrils.

“Not bad, WindChaser,” she managed to say in between gulps of air. “Not bad.”

He smiled, closed his eyes and let his body rest, his cock withdraw, his fluids seep from her cunt. She settled beside him with her head on his arm and within moments was sound asleep.

Mac stared into the darkness. Knowing sleep would not claim him any time soon, he eased his arm from under her head and moved as quietly as possible from the bed. Stooping down to pick up his pants, he stepped into them then—shirtless and

sockless—left the suffocating claustrophobia of his quarters and ventured out into the corridor.

It was nearly four in the morning and there would be only one person on duty now. The *WindChaser II* was speeding toward Tiogar and would be there in a few days. Idly he wondered who was watching over the starcruiser. Not that it mattered. Her captain was—for the moment at least—not thinking of the sleek ship. His mind was on the growing unknown lurking inside him.

Making his way to the galley, he got a cup of coffee and took it over to the bank of portals that held a black-velvet view of the heavens. The streaks of light were the asteroids and stars past which the ship moved. In this part of the megaverse, there was little more than that. There were no major planets nearby.

Hoisting his ass onto the top of one of the tables, he put his feet on a chair seat, took a sip of the scalding brew then stared out at the ebon wastelands.

“Copper for your thoughts, Cap’n.”

Mac looked around and smiled at D. “Can’t sleep?”

“Bella wore me out,” D. answered. “But no, Sir. I can’t.”

“More information than I needed, D. Grab a cup and keep me company then.”

D. nodded. His beverage of choice was something called *spazhin*—hot water into which a lemon slice, a cinnamon stick, several drops of clove oil and a small green *jhukta* root were dropped. It was a particularly foul-smelling brew that never failed to turn Mac’s stomach but it seemed to comfort D.

Once the malodorous brew was in hand, D. joined Mac at the table, hitching a hip onto the top just as the man he idolized was doing.

“I checked on the wolf,” D. said, squinting against the steam rising from his cup. “He’s sleeping.”

“That’s good,” Mac agreed.

“He looks funny.”

Mac smiled. “You’d look funny too if you suddenly sprouted fur.”

D. giggled just as Mac knew he would. They were silent for a moment then the easygoing expression faded from the younger man’s face. “You’re worried,” he stated. “I can feel it.”

D. might not be psychic but he was very attuned to the people around him. He sensed things others didn’t and was very receptive to moods and feelings others tried to hide.

“It’s expanding inside me, D.,” Mac said. “Whatever that creature left in my head when it touched me is growing.”

“Maybe it isn’t all bad, Mac,” D. said. He sipped the *spazhin* noisily then licked his thick lips. “Maybe there’s some good in it.”

"Maybe," Mac agreed, although privately he found nothing good about the burgeoning feeling roiling around inside him.

"Are your powers warning you?" D. inquired.

Mac shook his head. "No, not really."

"Then what's happening?"

He had to be honest with the younger man. "I really don't know, D." He turned his head to look at his companion. "You know how you say you feel when you think someone is watching you?" At D.'s slow nod, Mac shrugged. "That's how I'm feeling."

"Like somebody is watching you?"

"Like that, yeah."

D. thought about it for a moment then looked around them. "Maybe it's here with us." His voice was soft, whispery. "Do you think so, Mac?"

"No, D.," Mac said, although that wasn't precisely the truth. He had the feeling he was being observed, but whatever was doing the watching couldn't possibly be on his ship.

Or could it?

He too looked around—half expecting to see glowing red eyes glaring back at him. He rolled his shoulders to rid himself of the uneasy feeling. "I'm just antsy and don't know why."

"Well, you wanna run it by me?" D. asked. "We'll hoist it up the old flagpole and see if anyone salutes it."

Smiling to himself, Mac took a long drink of coffee. D. loved Terran idioms and seemed to have an ironclad memory when it came to storing them away for use in just such a situation. Whenever he heard a new one—a slip Mac made from time to time—he asked that it be explained. It might be days, weeks—even months—before D. used it, but use it he eventually would. Unerringly, the idiom would match the moment perfectly.

"I think you need to get it off your chest, my man," D. said, nodding.

Mac laughed. "Yeah, maybe I do."

"The doctor's in," D. assured him. "Proceed at your own peril."

For a moment or two Mac didn't respond, but once he'd gathered his thoughts he slipped off the table and sat in the chair, his long legs thrust out in front of him.

"I think what the creature did to me was give me a mental time bomb along with the psi abilities. I believe it wanted to know where I was and what I was doing at any given time."

"Why?"

"There's an old Terran saying that states keep your friends close but your enemies closer. I think that fits the situation perfectly."

"What does it mean?"

"It means it's better to keep a closer eye on your enemies than your friends. You pretty much know what your friends are capable of doing, but you're not so clear about the motives of your enemies. You need to watch them more carefully."

D. seemed to be filing that away, dissecting it. His eyes narrowed as the meaning finally settled into his cloudy mind. "I understand," he said at last.

"So I'm also beginning to understand why it let me live."

"And why is that?"

Mac glanced to his right to find Doc leaning against the frame of the galley door, arms crossed over his chest. "It needed eyes and ears on its enemies."

"You encountered it on Terra?" Doc inquired.

Mac shook his head. "On our moon. We had bases there and it slaughtered everyone but me. I believe it crossed back into this side of the wormhole with the intent of going back to the other side to attack Earth. When the anomaly was destroyed, it must have lost its chance."

"Good thing for Terra," Doc suggested.

"Yeah," Mac agreed. "But I get the feeling it will find a way to get there again, that it keeps looking for another wormhole."

"That doesn't explain why it let you live though, Mac," D. reminded him. His eyebrows were drawn together with in confusion.

Finishing his coffee, Mac leaned forward to place the cup on the table beside D. He braced his elbows on the chair arms and tented his fingers. "When the Burgon came aboard, my head started pounding like a big dog," he told the two men. "The entire time he was on here, my head was giving me fits. When he left, it quit. But when we brought Degendesch onboard, the pain started up again, but only worse this time. I think it might have something to do with the energy levels that were building in the werewolf."

"As he readied for Transition," Doc surmised.

"I believe so," Mac acknowledged. "I've never been an empath. I can sense emotional fields, read minds, but I've never been able to experience what another person with psi abilities was feeling until now." He shrugged. "There again, I had never been around Reapers or weres or revenants. I always stayed clear of anyone I knew who had psi abilities until I started annoying Bella and Jade because I knew they'd sense me too."

"Fucking with them," D. said, no doubt repeating Bella's take on the situation.

"Even with the misdirection hard at work, if you're around others with psi powers, sooner or later you're going to let your shielding slip and be discovered," Mac went on. "That's why I've rarely targeted those in league with the Reapers or revenants. I wanted to maintain my anonymity."

"Makes sense," Doc said, pushing away from the door. He strolled over to the table, swung a chair around and straddled it, crossing his arms on the back as he studied Mac.

“And now that you have empathic abilities, does that mean you are open to a whole other range of abilities?”

“It seems that I am. I have already experienced some of them—clairsentience, remote viewing, retrocognition.”

“Huh?” D. grunted, looking from Mac to Doc and back again.

“Clairsentience is feeling what someone else is feeling, D.,” Doc told him. “Remote viewing is seeing something or someone when you’re not in the room with them, and retrocognition is a fancy word for seeing what went on in the past.”

“You seem to know a lot about psi abilities,” Mac said.

“I read up on it when I first became a crew member. I wanted to know what I’d be dealing with if something happened to you and I needed to work on you.” He rested his chin on his arms. “I imagine all those powers were latent within you—just waiting to be released. Do you think being in a prolonged situation with the Burgon and now the Faolchú has awakened the abilities?”

“I think it activated them, yes,” Mac replied. “I could do a lot before, but I seem to be able to do it all now.”

“Are you saying you won’t need the BlackMoon from now on?” Doc inquired. “You’ll just teleport yourself wherever you want to go?”

“I could do that before,” Mac said. “Just not through great distances and not in space. Now?” He shrugged. “Well, now I may be able to do it. I won’t know until I try.”

“You can’t breathe in space, Mac,” D. reminded him.

“I wouldn’t need to, dude,” Mac said. “I’d just think about where I wanted to be and I’d go there in the blink of an eye. One minute I’m here then—poof!—I’m somewhere else.”

“Cool beans!” D. said.

Doc was frowning and Mac asked what was troubling him.

“Why now?” Doc asked. “What’s happening here, Mac? You’ve got these powers and apparently they are being honed. For what purpose?”

“Hell if I know,” Mac said, “but my guess is it has something to do with what’s going down with those slag shipments from Crionna. I think everything hinges on that and I think Degendesch knows more than he thinks he does. When he comes loping back from wolfie land, he and I are going to have a sit down.”

“A powwow,” D. said, slapping his thigh. “A confab. A hash out. A huddle.”

“Yeppers, that’s exactly what we’re gonna do,” Mac agreed with a laugh.

“Give me five, bro!” D. lifted his hand with his fingers spread and slapped it against Mac’s upraised hand.

Doc shook his head, crammed his hands into his pockets and turned to go. “Let me know when you come up with why that slag’s so important,” he said over his shoulder.

“Will do, and, Doc?”

Doc swung his head around. "Aye?"

"Do some research on dragons, will ya?" Mac asked.

The healer's eyebrows shot up. "Dragons? Why dragons?"

"Don't know, but the word keeps popping up in my mind. It may or may not have anything to do with this, but forewarned is forearmed if we have to go up against such beasts."

## Chapter Fifteen

Coming off a Transition, Rune always felt disoriented and hungry and so thirsty he felt like a dry cornhusk. Sitting on the bunk with his back against the wall, knees drawn up, he kept staring at the plexigon window. Without the benefit of clothing to conceal his powerfully built body, he felt vulnerable. And because he felt vulnerable, he was out of sorts. Combine that with the disorientation he was experiencing and he was not in a good frame of mind when MacKirnan appeared.

"You took your fucking sweet time," he snapped.

Mac ignored the growled insult. "Brought you some clothes and a plexibag of Sustenance. Which you want first?"

"The gods-be-damned clothes," Rune grumbled. "It's fucking cold in this cell."

Mac nodded. Instead of opening the four-by-twelve-inch cover over the grate at the bottom of the door and pushing the jumpsuit through, he unlocked the heavy cell door and swung it open.

"You gonna try to pound on me?" he inquired as he walked into the con cell.

Rune snorted disdainfully. "Do I look like I am the kind of wolf who likes to wrestle in the nude, asswipe?" he hissed.

Mac tossed him the black jumpsuit then a plaxibag filled with thick crimson liquid. "What do you know about dragons?"

The Faolchú easily caught the jumpsuit, licked his lips as he caught the plastibag but resolutely set it aside. He blinked at the strange query, blinked again, and then began thrusting his long legs into the jumpsuit. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"I can't get the word out of my mind. It's like a fucking red flag popping up every so often. I can't believe it's coincidence."

Dragging the jumpsuit up his body, poking his arms through the long sleeves, Rune didn't answer until he ran the zipper halfway up his broad chest. "Ever hear of Gurgón?"

Mac folded his arms and leaned against the cell wall. "Nope. What is it?"

Rune scowled. "Ever heard of the Drochtrom Arc?"

Mac nodded. "It's in the Tabhartas Galaxy. That's where the Nikkeson comes from."

"It's also where dragons are bred," Rune informed him. He took up the plastibag, bit off the stopper then drained the bag, wiping his lips on the back of his hand when he'd finished. A light red smear streaked his hand. "I guess you don't know the story if you've never heard of Gurgón."

"Enlighten me."

Looking down at his bare feet, Rune frowned. "Can I have my boots back now?"

"Yeah, sure," Mac told him then asked Bruno to retrieve the boots. At the werewolf's nod of thanks, he arched a brow. "Gonna try pounding on me now that you've got your dangly covered?"

Rune shrugged. "Not yet. Still feel like shit from the Transition. Give me an hour or so then we'll go at it."

"Fine by me," Mac agreed. When Bruno brought the boots, Mac cocked his head toward the open door. "Let's walk, Rune."

Allowing the werewolf to precede him from the cell, Mac fell into step beside Degendesch. "So what's the scoop on dragons?"

"In the old language Gurgón means gargoyle. Know what that is?"

"I know what it is on Earth," Mac answered. "There they are grotesque stone carvings used on the edges of buildings as spouts to carry water from the roof and away from the building. A lot of people stick them in their gardens or on shelves as ornaments."

Rune winced. "That is a truly frightening thought. Have you Terrans no idea what those things are?"

"Apparently not," Mac said with a grin. "What are they?"

"Winged creatures with an insatiable appetite for humanoid flesh," Rune said. "Just the thought of them sitting on someone's bookshelf makes me shudder."

"They're just art on my world, wolfie," Mac suggested.

"Aye, well, on this side of the megaverse, a graven image is a representation of the dark soul of a creature. It can view you through its eyes," Rune stated. "Have you never wondered why you don't see such things scattered about?"

"Huh," Mac commented as they reached the elevator. "Never thought about it, but now that you mention it, I see your point. On Earth you see gargoyles on most of the big, impressive buildings. They are supposed to ward off evil."

"They draw it," Rune snapped. "Like flies to road kill."

"Okay, so these gargoyles hail from Gurgón. What's that got to do with dragons?"

"It is said gargoyles are ectoparasoids."

"Which in normal speak means...?" Mac asked.

"They reproduce by laying eggs. Unfortunately they lay their eggs on another creature's body instead of in a nest."

"Like wasps on a tomato hornworm," Mac observed as the elevator door shushed open.

Rune cast him a look that said he had no clue whatsoever what the other warrior was talking about.

"Go on."

The men entered the elevator and did an about-face as the door closed behind them.

“Or they disperse their seed into the wind for it to land wherever it can take hold on a fertile, living thing. The god Raphian—the Destroyer of Men’s Souls—is a gargoyle,” Rune said. “He...”

“I thought He was a serpent.”

The werewolf swept out a dismissive hand, annoyed at the interruption. “There are many types of gargoyles, MacKirnan. Will you let me finish?”

Mac made a motion to indicate he was zipping his mouth closed.

“What I was trying to explain was that Raphian is one of the kind that broadcasts its seed to the wind. Most gargoyles, though, lay their eggs on a host body. They prefer the bodies of dragons for such an incubation because dragons are the closest things in the megaverse to gargoyles in the evolution chain.”

“Ah, okay. I see. What does the dragon think about the freeloader?”

The elevator arrived at the bridge. Stepping from the cage, Mac indicated Rune was to follow him. He led his companion to the conference room.

Rune glanced at the people on the bridge, didn’t recognize anyone so ignored them. “Who the hell knows, but I imagine it feels as any unwilling host would. There’s a parasite stuck to you in the center of your back where you can’t reach to dislodge it, burrowed under your skin so if you try to scrape it off on a rock it gives you excruciating pain. Not even one of your buddies can pluck it off for you because it has become a part of you. You’re stuck with it while it grows. Until it matures, hatches and flits off, the dragon is shit outta luck. It’s not a happy symbiosis is what I’m saying. Dragons have nasty tempers.”

“Ever seen one?”

“Once,” Rune replied. “Ugly prick with truly foul breath.”

Mac closed the conference door and indicated Rune was to take a seat at the table. “What about Morrighunia?” he inquired. “Tell me about her.”

“The Triune Goddess?” Rune asked as he settled into the comfortable leather chair. “Now She’s a different breed altogether. Just like with gargoyles, there are different species of dragons and I think Her kind is called *dragan*. From what I’ve heard the *dragan* are a snotty lot who consider all other dragons to be at the very bottom of the food chain and expendable. She wouldn’t give any She feels beneath her the time of day. Must have been a class war between them somewhere in the past. Who knows? But if it were left up to the *dragan*, their winged cousins would be toast, although they don’t seem to be inclined to take matters into their own hands and wipe them out.”

“So gargoyles lay eggs on dragons. I take it the dragon race lives in the Tabhartas Galaxy too then.” The werewolf nodded. “So how did they get over here?”

“As with the gods and goddesses from the Maitheas Arc, the dragons can come through what is called the *Uige* into our part of the megaverse. It’s an anomaly, a wormhole off-limits to those from Treigeilys and Charvaal. Should the Nikkeson

attempt to come through the *Uige*, it would get trapped in the *damháin alla*, the spider's web, that protects it and since the Nikkeson can't die, would spend eternity locked in there. Needless to say, it won't risk it."

"Okay, so are dragons something we need to be worried about in all this?" Mac asked. "They must be else I wouldn't keep getting the word stuck in my head."

"In what context are you thinking it?" Rune questioned.

"That's just it," Mac replied, running a hand through his hair. "It's the word. It comes popping up. I get the idea it has something to do with the slag shipments."

Rune stared at Mac for a long moment then a very slow grin spread over the werewolf's full mouth. He rocked back in his chair. "Son of a bitch," he said. "So that's what's happening to the shit."

Mac's eyebrows clashed together. "What?"

"Dragons have bizarre feeding habits, Mac," the Faolchú said. "There are some that are strictly vegetarians and they eat daily. Those that are carnivores gorge themselves on living meat but they won't eat carrion. They eat only once a week. They've been known to trap a human and keep him stored until its mealtime. While humans are a tasty snack for the carnivorous types, the main diet for all dragons is precious metals and gems. They are particularly fond of fiery stones like rubies and garnets."

"The slag is to feed the dragons," Mac said almost in a whisper.

"That would be my guess," Rune agreed. "And not the gentle shrub-munching kind but the full-blown murderous breed that likes to gobble living flesh."

Mac slumped back into his chair. "The New Coalition is marshalling an army of dragons to go against the warriors of the New Alliance."

"Looks that way." Degendesch cocked his head to one side. "Consider it from their perspective. You don't have to worry about an army like that marching on its stomach. You're not wasting money by providing food, just a by-product that is otherwise not all that useful to you. In other words, you don't have to take food out of the mouths of your warriors or your supporters. You don't have to worry about fueling it, housing it, storing it, doctoring it if it gets wounded, notifying next of kin or burying it if it dies. It's a fighting machine, flying machine and killing machine all wrapped into one. To the NC, it's a win-win situation."

"Damn," Mac said on a long sigh. "That is *not* good."

"Here's something else to consider. I don't know why I never thought of this when I told Ryden about him. Beithíoch Stiúrthóir is a master dragon sorcerer," Rune informed Mac. "He can not only summon them from Dragane, he can control them as long as he has something they want. In this case, it's the slag. Cut off his supply of slag and they'll retreat back into the *Uige* with a flick of their tails and a merry fuck you just the same, Beithíoch Stiúrthóir."

"That's my intent," Mac said. "To cut off his supply and to bring him to justice."

“Now that might be harder than you think,” Rune suggested. “He’s a wily s.o.b. and he’s got a cadre of protectors like you wouldn’t believe according to my source. It would be easier to dispatch him than try to arrest him.”

“I can do that too if need be,” Mac said. “The Burgon gave me the authority.”

“Then that may be your best way to go.” He shook his head, lips peeled back. “I wish Ryden hadn’t hobbled me like this. I’d like to take a shot at taking down Stiúrthóir.”

“He’s got other things in mind for you,” Mac said.

“He’d better,” the werewolf grouched. “I’m getting gods-be-damned tired of sitting on the fucking sidelines with my claw poked up my arse!”

“Which brings us to Jade,” Mac said softly.

Rune’s eyebrows shot up. “How did we go from a claw up my...?”

“I just want you to know, I will fight for her,” Mac stated, a muscle grinding in his cheek as he held the Faolchú’s gaze.

Degendesch rocked his chair forward, placing his elbows on the table. “As beautiful as she is, and as sexy as I find her,” Rune said, ignoring the low growl from his companion, “I’m not ready to fight for her or any female.” He shrugged nonchalantly then leaned back in the chair again. “I seriously doubt I ever would.”

Mac nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “All right. I’ll take your word for it.”

“That’s not to say I’m not going to stomp your ass for kidnapping me – Burgon’s orders or not – when I get the chance,” Rune told him.

“When you get the chance, you’ll know where to find me,” Mac said with a cocky grin. He held out his hand and Rune clasped his wrist warrior fashion. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Rune agreed, and they shook on it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Taegin Drae sniffed disdainfully and turned his back on the werewolf. He nodded curtly at Mac. “The Burgon sends his regards,” he said.

“Fuckhead,” Rune muttered under his breath.

“Asswipe,” Taegin returned without blinking.

“Gentlemen,” Mac said. “Let’s keep this professional.”

The Tiogar sniffed again, crossed his arms over his brawny chest and cocked a brow. “I may be at the emperor’s disposal, MacKirnan, but that doesn’t mean I have to willingly embrace every assignment he sees fit to hand me.” He glanced around, his upper lip lifting, before returning his full attention to Mac. “I don’t appreciate being the designated babysitter for a lupine.”

“Any more than the lupine wants to spend time in the company of a feline,” Rune injected.

“You’re the reason brothers and sisters shouldn’t marry,” Taegin growled.

“Oh, shut the hell up, Drae. If I want any shit out of you, I’ll squeeze your head.”

“Gentlemen!” Mac snapped, trying not to laugh. “You are going to have to work together to—”

“Don’t feel bad for him, MacKirnan. A lot of people are stupid,” Drae snapped.

“You’re a fucktard!” Rune shouted. “Every village has one!”

“Aye, well your mother bays at the moon!” the Tiogar hissed. “Oh wait! So do you!”

“Here,” Celine said, nudging Mac aside. She handed an old-fashioned ruler to Rune. “Go into the head and settle this once and for all!”

Taegin looked down at the ruler, at Rune, and then narrowed his eyes. “I dare you,” he said in a low challenge.

Pivoting on his heel, Rune led the way past the elevator bay and down the short corridor to the unisex restroom.

“I’d better go along,” Mac said with a shrug. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and ambled behind the warriors.

“Me too!” D. called out.

“Men,” Bella said with disgust. She shook her head. “Only they would come up with such delightful pastimes as lighting farts.”

“Aye,” Laran agreed. “It’s is a shame such big heads hold such small minds.”

Doc chuckled, exchanged amused glances with Bruno and Gunter then settled back to wait for the return of the others. A loud whoop made him state the obvious. “I believe we have a winner.”

Mac was the first to come back to the bridge. He had a disgruntled look on his handsome face.

“Did you gauge yourself against them?” Jade inquired with an elevated brow.

“Aye, and he didn’t measure up,” Taegin said as he walked behind Mac.

“Neither did you,” Mac groused with a sidelong grimace.

Rune came next and his expression said it all. He ignored Celine’s snort. “The bastard isn’t human.”

“Aye he is and all man,” Bella stated, leaning back in the com chair.

“Eleven inches,” Mac said. “Do you believe it? Eleven!”

“What did you come in at?” Ione queried then snorted when Mac shot her a hateful look. She turned her hard eyes on Rune. “What about you, babycakes? How’d you do on the erection scale?”

Rune mumbled something no one heard.

“Don’t mind him. He’s just pissed because his father wanted a boy,” Taegin said dryly.

D. came back grinning from ear to ear, tapping the ruler against his thigh. He extended it toward Celine, who held up both hands. "I'm not touching that!" she declared. "I know where it's been."

"Now that you've had your fun, I suggest you two get a move on," Mac told Drae and Degendesch. "I want to get to the Wastelands by Friday."

"Ryden said you're going to meet with Beithíoch Stiúrthóir," Taegin said. "Be careful around him, MacKirnan. He's psychotic."

"And that from a man who doesn't know the meaning of the word," Rune ventured, "but then again, he doesn't know the meaning of most words."

"You know something, Degendesch?" Taegin said, coming nose to nose, toe to toe with the werewolf. "You're going to be on my ship for at least a few weeks. That would be a gods-be-damned good time for you to become a missing person. They say space is a dangerous place—"

"Aye, especially if it's between your ears!" Rune threw at him.

No one knew Mac could move as fast as he did. Two arms drew back, two fists doubled and would have made contact with two very angry faces had Mac not pressed between the enraged warriors—slamming his arms against two puffed-out chests.

"Knock it the hell off!" Mac snarled, shoving the men apart. "What you two do on Drae's ship is your business, but you aren't going to pound one another on mine!"

Taegin lowered his fist along with his brow as he glared at Rune, but he clamped his jaw shut, letting the angry sparks shooting from his glower do the talking for him. Rune—stepping back reluctantly—also put his hands down but kept his fists clenched. Both men were breathing hard and everyone watching them knew they would continue the confrontation on the *Revenge*, Drae's warship.

"Get your asses off my bridge," Mac ordered. "Now!"

Muscle flexing wildly in his cheek, the Tiogar nodded curtly then reached up to slap his palm against the mini-vid on the lapel of his jumpsuit. "Bring us aboard, McGregor," he said through clenched teeth.

Drae and Degendesch vanished from the *WindChaser II* to the sound of breaths being released.

"I'd love to get that Tiogar in my bed," Ione said, breaking the silence that followed.

"I doubt his lady-wife would allow him the dubious pleasure of fucking you," Celine said. "I knew Marin Deringnoe's mother Neala Acet, and if Marin is anything like her, I wouldn't want to make an enemy of her."

"The Grand Leader of the Riochasians?" Crystal inquired. "I've heard terrible things about that woman."

"I would venture to say every last thing you've heard is true," Celine said. "The woman was as mean as a cornered ghoret."

“Did you enjoy your time with the werewolf?” Jade whispered to Ione. It was common knowledge the werewolf had spent the last two days in close contact with the sado-masts.

“Aye,” Ione said. “He was everything you said he would be. I pierced his...”

“Shut the fuck up!” Mac bellowed, and both women jumped. He shouldn’t have been able to hear their low words but he had and was glaring at them, his face filled with fury. “We don’t need to hear that shit!”

Jade obviously took exception to his demand. Dark eyes flashing, she snapped right back at him. “We weren’t talking loud enough for anyone to...”

“Set course for Lupina, Mr. Escalante!” Mac shouted over her words. He spun around and stalked toward the elevator.

“Oh no you don’t!” Jade spat. “You aren’t going to yell at me then hightail it.” She started after him.

“I’d leave him be if I were you,” Celine warned.

“Well, you aren’t, so keep out of it,” the Riezell Guardian grated as she slipped into the elevator beside her lover.

Mac ignored Jade, hissing at the elevator to take him to the deck upon which his quarters were located. As the doors closed to shut out his angry visage and Jade’s face hard set into battle lines, the ship’s crew breathed another sigh of relief.

A palpable silence blanketed the cage as the two stood side by side. Neither looked at the other, they didn’t touch. When the doors slid open, Mac bulldozed his way out first, stalking like a predator to his door. He slapped his palm against the entry panel – barely breaking stride as the door peeled back to allow him entry. Not glancing around at Jade following close on his heels, he went through the living area – the motion-detection lights coming on as he went – and strode into the bedroom, yanking the shirt from his pants. He sat on the bed and pulled viciously at his boots, dropping them to the floor with a loud clunk.

“We’re going to talk about this,” Jade said even as she ran down the zipper of her jumpsuit while she kicked off her boots.

“There’s nothing to say,” he countered, shrugging out of his shirt and reaching for his belt.

“I don’t appreciate your jealousy.”

“I don’t appreciate you ogling the Tiogar either,” he responded, the sound of his zipper loud in the room. He shoved his pants down his long legs.

“I wasn’t ogling,” she disagreed, “but he is a handsome man. I’d have to be blind not to notice.”

“He’s a married man,” Mac reminded her. He snatched off his socks and leaned over the bed to fling the covers back.

“I’m not looking to fuck him, MacKirnan,” she said. “There’s nothing that says I can’t admire the way a warrior looks.”

He flung himself on the bed, rolled to the middle, staring up at her as she unhooked her bra then removed her panties. His gaze darkened when she paused with her legs apart, hands on hips, chin tilted up.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Come here,” he growled.

She shook her head then gasped as he shot out his hand and snagged her arm, jerking her none-too gently onto the bed with him.

“When I command, woman, you come!” he told her, and before Jade could react, he had her beneath him, his knees pushing hers wide apart, his hard body pressing to hers, a hungry mouth devouring her soft lips. The stab of his shaft thrust at her opening then rammed so deep, so hard inside her slick folds it took her breath.

Jade drew her legs up to encircle his waist, dug her fingernails into his back. He was slamming into her with force, his mouth grinding hers—tongue stroking hers. She clamped her legs tight around him, arched her hips and hung on for the ride. His cock was huge, rock-hard over moist velvet—filling her, stretching her, robbing her of all thought save the fierce desire building in her cunt. Her body was sliding along the mattress with each powerful plunge of his potent body.

He slid his mouth from hers and buried his forehead against the curve of her shoulder. “Love me,” she heard him whisper. “Love me for who I am.”

His words surprised her and she sent a light psychic probe into his mind. There were no shields up to prevent her from prying, no blocks to keep her out of his thoughts. She was stunned to find his subconscious filled with unbearable uncertainty, incapacitating insecurity and debilitating doubt.

And those emotions were growing with every breath he took.

“It’s all right,” she said, her hands roaming down his back to soothe him. “Everything will be all right.”

Instead of comforting him, her words acted like a prod, a goad to his manhood, and he rammed into her even harder, with more force, and a low growl like that of a wounded beast. He grunted with each powerful surge into her body.

“Let it go,” she whispered to him. “Pour it all into me and let it go.”

She had just a glimpse of what drove him, frightened him before he slammed a solid door down over his thoughts. She clung to him as his thrusts increased in speed until he was a runaway engine pistoning into her soft body with ruthless purpose.

“I need...” he said, hot breath washing over her breast. “I need...”

“I know, baby,” she said softly. “Let it go. Let it out.”

She would be sore come morning, raw from his lovemaking. He was mindless now with his lust, his fingers curled painfully into her rump as he held her for his invasion. The bunk beneath them was vibrating with the power of his unguarded emotions. Overhead the lights flickered then went out as the circuit shorted. Only the softly glowing phospho lamp on the table beside the bed remained lit. There was so much psi

power being wielded she could smell the gathering ozone and even hear the water bubbling in the duplicating machine in the kitchen area of Mac's quarters. If they had been outside on some night-darkened world, she was sure lightning would be zinging through the heavens, thunder rolling the ground beneath them.

"I don't want this," he hissed. "I can't stand it being in me!"

"Let it out," she repeated.

He bucked against her and rose up, arching his spine as he flung his head back. She looked up at him to see his lips skinned back from his clenched teeth, the cords in his neck standing out as he strained. Still his lower body pumped into her fiercely, savagely – she might even have said brutally – yet she could feel not only his frustration but his sorrow at treating her in such a way.

"I'm yours, MacKirnan," she said.

A single thought flew through his mind and she intercepted it. *It should be Ione!*

"No!" she snapped, drawing his head down, eyes to her. "No, never again with Ione."

"I am hurting you," he said, but he didn't seem capable of stopping the wild plunges into her body. She noticed the deep creases over his nose as he struggled. His confusion, his bewilderment was carved there in those twin furrows between his thick brows.

"No, you're not hurting me," she said. "You are giving yourself to me."

The moment she said it her muscles squeezed tight around his hard shaft. Her own passion came full-blown at that moment as the first tiny ripple ticked and then undulated through her cunt. She clawed at his hips for she could not reach his back. He was staring down at her as she came with such a heated look of satisfaction her orgasm flared red-hot. She cried out, her head whipping from side to side on the pillow.

"Yeah," she heard him say. "That's what I wanted." He threw back his head and pumped vigorously into her then spilled hot seed deep into her channel. The jet of his cum was so powerful, the force of his cock going so deep, she thought she'd pass out. His flesh was slapping against hers and at the moment he howled the last surge of his release, he went as still as death.

Jade was panting as she stared up at the strong underside of his chin, at the throbbing vein running the length of his throat. Sweat glistened on his upper torso, ran down his cheek and dripped onto her belly. His hair was tousled and a fleeting thought went through her head that he was the handsomest man she had ever seen.

But when he lowered his head and she found herself staring into his eyes, Jade Shimota knew a moment of abject terror for the first time in her life. Her own eyes went wide. Her mouth opened in a silent scream. Her breath ceased.

It wasn't the soft, pale green eyes of Ranulf MacKirnan that stared down at her with unbelievable intensity, with undeniable possessiveness. Instead there was a deadly crimson glow from the elliptical pupils. Face hard, shadowed from the dim glow of the

phospho lamp, those serpent-like eyes were sparking with power and when the man still locked within her body spoke, his words came out with a hiss.

“Mine,” he said. “You belong to me, Shimota.”

Jade trembled at those words. She wanted to push him off her, run, get as far away from the being hovering over her as she could get.

He smiled and it was a slow, lethal grin that challenged her.

“You’ll never get away from me,” he told her then stretched out atop her, rolling to his back, bringing her with him to lie like a living blanket over his damp body. “Never.”

Another tremor racked Jade’s body as he lifted his head to nuzzle her neck. She felt the rasp of what could only be fangs across her jugular before he planted a feather-soft kiss at the base of her throat.

“Mine,” he said again, his arms wrapped possessively around her.

It was a long time before Jade could relax enough to fall asleep in his arms, her cheek pressed to his shoulder. His heartbeat beneath her ear didn’t sound human. There was something strange about it and his flesh felt rougher to the touch where her palm lay on his chest.

Then there was the faintest smell clinging to him now.

It was the scent of evil.

## Chapter Sixteen

Lupina was a very inhospitable place. To the north soaring mountains with jagged peaks covered in waist-deep snow rose up like unfriendly sentinels. To the south was scrub land dotted with huge boulders that had tumbled down from the higher elevations and lay scattered like the playthings of a petulant child. A harsh wind whipped through the seven-foot-high corrugated metal tunnel that led from the docking platforms where Mac had left Celine, Crystal and Doc aboard the *WindChaser II*. Everyone else save D. was walking behind him down the tunnel. D. walked ahead with his hand resting on the grip of the phospho gun with which he was an expert shot. Acting as Mac's personal bodyguard, D. strutted when he walked, scowling at everyone they passed.

"You're bad," Mac—dangerous-looking in a black turtleneck pullover and black leather pants—murmured under his breath. On one thigh was strapped a silver sheath containing a long dagger with intricately carved ebony handle and on the other a phospho gun.

"Yeppers, I am," D. responded with a fierce snarl. He caressed the gun grip, swung a lowered glance at a man walking past them.

Directly behind Mac were Ione and Laran dressed in the slick black vinyl outfits that screamed their obsession with the darker side of sex. Behind them were Bruno and Gunter clad in black jumpsuits identical to the one D. was wearing. Bringing up the rear were Jade and Bella in utilitarian black pullovers and black jeans. With the exception of Ione and Laran, who were armed only with ebony-handled daggers strapped to their shapely thighs, the others carried phospho guns in black leather holsters riding low on their hips.

Like the spoke of a giant wheel, the tunnel opened up into what was called the Hub. At that time of the morning, few people were milling about the main terminal of the facility. Most of those ranged about the huge circular room stopped dead in their tracks to watch the new arrivals. A few slunk away as though expecting trouble. One or two glared nastily but remained quiet as D. led the way to the circular information desk behind which stood two agents. The silence was telling.

"G-good m-morn to you," the shorter of the two agents greeted D. with a slight bow. "Welcome to Lupina, Captain MacKirnan."

A low mumble went through those gathered.

"I'm Ensign Brody," D. snapped. He stepped aside, half facing Mac. "He is Captain MacKirnan."

"M-my apologies," the agent was quick to say. "Welcome, Sir! How may we be of service to you?"

"I'm looking for someone," Mac said. He was standing about four feet back from the desk, hands hanging loosely at his side. "I heard he was here."

"Who might that be, Captain?" the taller agent inquired with a slight inclination of this head.

"Beithíoch Stiúrthóir."

Another low rumble went through the room and furtive glances were exchanged.

Fear flowed over the faces of both agents. Their complexions bled of natural coloring to be replaced with a ghastly gray hue.

"Is he expecting you, Captain?" the shorter man queried. "He doesn't like visitors."

"And I don't like nosy bastards who have no right to question me," Mac grated. He took two steps toward the desk only to have the agents move back so quickly they stumbled. "Is he here or not?"

"Aye, Captain, he is!" the taller man replied. "He is most likely in the canteen having breakfast with his followers."

Out of the corner of his eye Mac saw a man slip silently from the room and head hastily down one of the many tunnels leading from the Hub. Sending out a quick probe, he discovered the man's destination and reason for hightailing it. He smiled grimly at the agents. "Much obliged," he drawled, and motioned for D. to head toward the tunnel he knew led to the canteen.

"Don't you want to know where the canteen is?" the shorter man questioned.

"Tunnel eight," Mac said without another glance at the agents.

Those people clustered close to tunnel eight scurried out of the way, obviously attempting to make themselves invisible to the newcomers. The ones who were still glaring made no such moves but watched Mac and his crew with hawklike stares that might have been unnerving to most visitors to Lupina.

Jade tapped Laran on the shoulder then wedged between the two sado-masts, jerking a thumb over her shoulder to indicate to Laran that she should walk beside Bella. "Followers?" she moved up close to Mac to ask in a low voice—unwilling to use her own psi abilities.

"He's running a cult," Mac responded.

"Why are we just learning about this now?" she asked, a hard edge to her voice that said she didn't appreciate the surprise.

"Apparently the werewolf's informer left out that pertinent little detail," Mac answered. "I read it in the mind of one of his men."

"I don't like cults," she grumbled.

"Neither do I, but I may be able to work it to our advantage."

Jade frowned. The last time she'd been involved with a cult, sixty people died a gruesome death on Gebel. It was an incident that still bothered her though the

undercover assignment that had taken her to the desolate world had been ten years earlier.

“Guards at ten and two,” D. said quietly as they neared the end of the dimly lit tunnel.

Mac put the palm of his right hand on the grip of his gun, eased the trigger guard aside with his thumb. “Easy does it,” he told D., whose fingers were flexing around the grip of his own gun. “We don’t want trouble unless we can’t avoid it.”

“Roger that,” D. acknowledged.

Two men stepped into the tunnel from a brighter patch of light beyond which the smells of duplicated food was wafting. They were big, burly warriors with bulging upper arms and mean faces that framed noses that looked to have been broken many times over.

“Private area,” one of the men spoke up. He crossed meaty arms over a broad chest with a smirk.

Mac lifted his left hand and the guard’s body jackknifed before sailing backward as though a hurricane force wind had picked him up. Stunned by the action, the second man went for the weapon at his side, but he too went flying out of sight, hurled so powerfully and strong his movement was nothing more than a blur and a rush of sound.

“Holy shit,” Ione breathed in awe. “Where the hell did you learn to do that?”

Disregarding the query, Mac motioned for D. to continue. D. moved forward with his fingers curled around the grip of his gun, his broad shoulders tensed.

Four more men were waiting at the end of the tunnel and they stepped into D.’s path to block him. In the space of a heartbeat, they were gone, tossed like confetti across the room though not a finger had been laid upon them.

Standing beside the tables at which they’d been having their morning meal were dozens of young men and women—as well as about twenty middle-aged warriors and a few who looked to be in their sixties. They all wore the same incredulous expression.

“Come and join me, Captain,” a strong voice called out.

Mac turned his head toward the speaker and watched the followers of Beithíoch Stiúrthóir part like a stand of wheat through which a scythe had passed. Silently folding back in an ever-widening wedge from the table at which sat a cadaverously thin man, the crowd turned their attention from the new arrivals to their leader.

Nude, he sat with his lanky legs drawn up so the knees actually touched the underside of the table. His elbows rested on the table, his chin pressed against the tops of his crooked hands. His posture reminded Mac vividly of a praying mantis and he had the same predatory gleam in his slanted, oversized black eyes. They were devoid of pupils so it was like looking into a highly polished stygian mirror.

“Ceannus,” Bella whispered.

Gray warty flesh the color of a dead man's was stretched thinly over a bulbous head. His long fingers were tapered into sucker-like pads at the tips and when he swept a hand to indicate the empty seat to his right, his arm was loose-jointed, having the appearance of a flexible rubber tube.

"It is a pleasure to meet the infamous WindChaser," Stíúirthóir said. "I have heard such interesting things about you." The lipless slit that was his mouth lengthened, showing just a hint of the milky white interior. "Surely the tales have been exaggerated."

"You should never believe what you hear, Master Stíúirthóir," Mac said, and was rewarded with a slight incline of the sorcerer's hairless head.

"I rarely do, Captain." Stíúirthóir smiled to reveal rows of tiny, sharply barbed teeth as Mac took a seat beside him.

"You are a long way from home," Mac said, wondering why Degendesch had failed to discover the sorcerer was a Ceannus from the distant Diamhair Galaxy.

"Aye, Chiaroscuro is indeed a long way from Lupina, but I am quite content to make the planet my home," the cult leader replied. "For now, at least."

"In order to do the bidding of the Nikkeson?" Mac inquired.

The broad, flat nose of the sorcerer quivered along the triple rows of vented nostrils and his pointed chin lifted. "You would know more about him than would I," Stíúirthóir answered. "After all, you have his scent cloaking what is remaining of your humanity."

Mac bristled at those words but managed to keep his temper in check. He dealt the Ceannus a steady look. "Are you not teaching your disciples the Nikkeson is the Enforcer of the Laws of Yn Drogh Spyrryd, He Who is Evil Incarnate, and they the Vessels into which the Unholy Blood will be stored?"

Once again Stíúirthóir inclined his overly large head in acknowledgement of his companion's words. He laced his very long fingers together and studied Mac, the convex, insectlike eyes gleaming.

"You are an exceedingly handsome and virile-appearing man, Captain," the sorcerer said. "I am sure you please well the females who come to you."

"I do what I can to make them smile," Mac replied.

Looking past Mac's shoulder to the four women who had accompanied him to Lupina, the Ceannus tilted his head to one side in contemplation. "You have seeded each of them. They too carry the scent of the Nikkeson."

Bella drew in an audible breath that caused the sorcerer's gaze to lock upon her. The glare from those soulless black orbs riveted her to the spot, making her unable to look away. She felt cold sweat breaking out on her body.

"A Riezell Guardian!" Stíúirthóir exclaimed, the thin lips twisting with disdain.

"She was," Mac said. "They drummed her out."

"Why did they do this?" the sorcerer demanded.

Mac leaned back in the chair and folded his arms. He assumed a sardonic look. "It was her job as well as that of the Chrynx to bring my head on a platter." He cocked a shoulder. "As you can see my head is still attached to my shoulders and their precious little Chrystallusian warrioress is dancing attendance upon my cock."

Jade ground her teeth at the bigoted word for her race of people. She'd never been called the pejorative term within her hearing and to hear her lover use it insulted her so deeply she felt tears enter her eyes.

"And the Neccer?" Stiúrthóir inquired, using the hateful word for the Necroman race. "You have seeded her, but does she dance attendance upon your staff as well?"

"Every chance she gets," Mac answered. "Isn't that right, brown sugar?"

"Aye, Captain," Bella said, her voice silky and as sweet as honey. "Give me leave and I'll take care of your staff right here and now."

D. cut his eyes over to his new lady. Her tone brought an unsettled look to his face. Both Laran and Ione reached out a hand to lay it upon him in warning. A slow shake of Ione's head seemed to soothe the younger man.

Stiúrthóir's thin slit of a mouth stretched over sharp, serrated teeth. "You seed the females belonging to your men and they dare not gainsay you." The sorcerer nodded. "You are to be commended for the power you wield."

"Let's cut the bullshit," Mac said. His face became deadly hard, the pale green eyes glittering with crimson sparks. The full lips twisted with disdain and the double crease appeared between his eyebrows. "I'm here to do business, not to discuss who and what I fuck."

"And what business would that be, Captain?" Stiúrthóir inquired.

"I want in on the slag action you've got going."

Stiúrthóir's bulbous eyes blinked slowly. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

So fast not even the guards standing behind Stiúrthóir had time to react, Mac snaked out a hand and wrapped it around the spindly neck of the Ceannus, dragging the seven-foot-tall being across the table.

"I wasted my time kidnapping that asswipe of a werewolf after being told he was the one selling the slag in the Wastelands. Imagine my irritation when I found he wasn't and I'd flown halfway across the fucking megaverse to take him!" He shook the sorcerer none too gently. "I had to pawn him off on someone else and hie myself way the fuck over here to deal with you!"

Stiúrthóir's men had drawn their weapons but then so had Mac's. The sorcerer flung up a staying hand to keep his guards from firing, the gray flesh covering his face turning darker as his black blood flooded the capillaries.

"We can deal together, Captain, only if I survive our encounter," the Ceannus croaked. "Otherwise we will all die here on this backward world."

Easing up on the hold he had around the sorcerer's pencil-thin neck, Mac's lips skinned back to reveal fangs.

"I could snap your neck like a twig. You know that, don't you?" he growled.

"True," Stiúrthóir agreed, "but then you and your people would die."

Mac's slow smile was not only lethal, it was hateful. "We both know that isn't altogether true, now don't we? You won't survive, that's true, but I'm a different matter, huh?"

Stiúrthóir swallowed hard. He put a gentle hand to the WindChaser's arm and applied a light pressure. "I would like to live to barter another day, Captain. I believe we can do business together without the violence."

For a long moment Mac stared into the ebon lens of the Ceannus' eyes then released the sorcerer, leaning back in his chair as though nothing had happened. His smile was genuine now. "I think we understand one another," he said.

Rubbing his bruised neck, Stiúrthóir nodded. "It would seem we do." He reached out a shaky hand to take up the glass of water in front of him. After taking a long drink, he replaced the glass on the table and asked Mac what terms he wanted.

"I'm not here to take over your business," Mac told him. "I just want a cut of the action. In exchange, I'll make damned sure both the New Alliance and the New Coalition stay off your scrawny sexless ass."

"You don't believe we are working with one against the other?" Stiúrthóir inquired.

"You're working for the Nikkeson," Mac said. "To feed the dragons."

The bulbous black eyes blinked rapidly several times and the thin slit mouth opened in surprise. "You know about them?" the sorcerer asked.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" Mac snapped.

After a brief silence, Stiúrthóir lowered his head. "I should have known," he said. His entire demeanor changed. "Would you like to see them?"

"They're already here?" Jade asked, and held up a hand when Mac whipped his head around to send a furious look her way.

"Did I tug on your tampon string, bitch?" he snarled, eyes narrowed.

Jade opened her mouth to call him on the insult but an energy spike of warning drove through her head and she staggered back. Putting a hand to her nose, she felt a trickle of blood. "Forgive me," she whispered, realizing Mac had had no choice but to chastise her for her blunder.

"You would do well to beat that one," Stiúrthóir advised. "Females should be seen, seeded and set down."

"I agree," Mac said, turning his angry glower from Jade to the sorcerer. "And yeah, I would like to see the winged warriors."

"Winged warriors," the Ceannus repeated. "I have not heard them called such in a very long time."

"You haven't been around a dragon master," Mac scoffed.

Stiúrthóir raised his chin. "I *am* a dragon master," he corrected. His ebon gaze swept down Mac. "A *true* dragon master."

Mac snorted, dismissing the claim. "I assume they are in the Wastelands."

"At the edge of the known megaverse, aye," Stiúrthóir answered. "They wait there on a dwarf planet I have named Placus."

"We'll take my ship," Mac said, and got to his feet. "You can bring three of your men with you."

Stiúrthóir pushed back his chair and stood as well, towering over Mac. "Normally I would insist on taking my own vessel, but I believe you can be trusted, Captain. After all, you belong to the Nikkeson."

Grinding his teeth at the reminder, Mac turned his back on the sorcerer and his people and headed for the tunnel. "Don't keep me waiting," he flung over his shoulder.

Their phospho guns still trained on the cult followers, Mac's people backed toward the tunnel, aims steady on Stiúrthóir. Once Mac was out of harm's way, they spun around and followed, glancing back to make sure Stiúrthóir's men weren't going to give them any trouble.

"*They wouldn't dare,*" Mac said, reading their thoughts as he strode through the tunnel. He spoke to them in their minds on a channel no one else could intercept. "*Holster your weapons. You don't want to give anyone an idea you're worried.*"

Reluctantly, the phospho guns and knives were holstered. As the crew of the *WindChaser II* passed the round desk where the two agents stared back at them with shock, they snarled at the people milling about, sending them scurrying. Even those who had glared at them when they arrived were now looking at them with respect. One even bowed slightly as they passed.

"*Oh yeah, we're bad,*" Mac whispered to them, and it was all they could do not to grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uneasy with the Ceannus and the three guards who had accompanied him on the bridge of his ship, Mac nevertheless tried to ignore them. His craft was speeding away from Lupina and into the No Man's Land where there were no inhabitants and no protection from whatever lay ahead of them.

"You are a very brave man, Captain," Stiúrthóir told him. "One word from me and my followers would have torn your people apart."

"One word from me and you'd have ceased to exist then they'd be looking for a new prophet," Mac reminded the sorcerer. He twisted his head around to lock gazes with the Ceannus. "Who do you think that would be?"

Stiúrthóir smiled. "Oh, I've no doubt who it would be, Captain, but you need me."

"If it makes you feel better, keep right on thinking that," Mac said with a sneer.

"I can control the dragons," Stiúrthóir said, stiffening his spine. "They have given me their allegiance."

"Begrudgingly," Mac scoffed.

"I have what they want," Stiúrthóir declared. "Gemstones are becoming depleted on Dragane. They are nonexistent elsewhere in the Tabhartas Galaxy. As long as there is an abundance of slag on this side of the *Uige*, the dragons will do as I command even though they might do so unwillingly."

"One misstep and they'll have you as an appetizer," Mac said. "Not that there's that much meat on your bones."

Stiúrthóir inclined his head. "I have no illusions of what they would do given the chance." He waved a spindly arm. "They will treat you the same."

Mac shrugged as though the warning were of no importance to him. He glanced at D. "How much farther to Placus?"

"We're about half an hour out, Cap'n," D. replied.

"Then I've got time for a quick lay," Mac said. He turned his attention to Jade and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Let's go, spike. Call me when we get there, D."

Jade's eyes widened. She exchanged an enraged look with Celine but fell into step behind her lover, glaring at his back as he waited for the elevator door to open. As soon as they were inside the cage and the door closed, she hit him as hard as she could with a fist to his shoulder.

"Bastard!" she snapped.

"Ow!" he complained, rubbing his shoulder. "I needed to get you alone, but I don't need a broken shoulder, woman!"

"A quick lay?" she queried. "A *quick lay*?"

"So it wasn't a cool thing to say," he replied, and was rewarded with another hard hit. "Damn it, stop that!"

"If you ever—" she began, but he whipped an arm around her, jerked her to him. His head came down and he slanted his mouth brutally over hers, giving her a kiss that took her breath away. When he ended the kiss, she was limp in his arms.

"As soon as Stiúrthóir is taken care of I need you to take down his three guards," he told her, his lips within inches of hers. "I don't want there to be a chance they could harm any of us or the dragons."

"You couldn't have just told me that?" she said, putting a trembling hand to her swollen lips.

"I don't think anything is going to go wrong on Placus, but if it should, I want to make sure you take out those guards—Stiúrthóir as well if I'm not able to—then get the hell out of here. Get my people to safety as quickly as you can. I doubt the dragons will come after you, but if they do, take out as many as you can before you go down." He locked gazes with her. "Do you understand me, Jade?" He searched her eyes. "Don't

lead them back to civilization but away from it. Blow the ship to space dust before you let one of those flying rodents get its jaws on you or the others. You understand?"

"And just what the hell will you be doing while we're hightailing it out of there?" she demanded, fear turning her eyes almost black.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Mac took her by the arm and led her toward the door to his quarters.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. I just want to make sure nothing happens to you and the others. I'll join you when I can."

"We're just supposed to leave you there?" she countered. She began shaking her head vigorously. "No. *Hell* no!"

"I'm not giving you a choice about whether or not to leave me. I'm ordering you to," he told her. "You are to leave as soon as Stiúrthóir and the guards are taken out. Under no circumstances is that bastard to be allowed to live." He pressed the palm of his hand against the entry pad to his quarters.

"No!" she said. He was pale and she realized he was using his psi powers to block their conversation from the Ceannus. The strain of keeping the shield in place was showing on his face. "I won't leave you there, MacKirnan!"

He jerked her around as the door to his quarters shushed to and brought her against him. "I love you, Jade," he said. He was staring into her frightened, angry eyes. "I will always love you. Don't you ever forget that."

"Mac..." she said, tears gathering in her eyes.

"I have to do this, spike," he said, cutting her off. "Everything has been leading up to this. No one except me can do it."

"Do what?" she hissed. "What are you talking about?"

He enveloped her in his arms, holding her tight although she struggled to break free.

"Listen to me, Jade," he said, refusing to allow her to push him away. "You must promise me you'll get my people to safety. Make every effort humanly possible to get everybody back without a scratch on them. Go to the Burgon. He'll protect you."

Tears were falling down Jade's cheeks. "Not without you," she said. Her fingers were clawing at his shirt. "We won't leave you. *I* won't leave you!"

He put a hand under her chin and gripped her jaw firmly, lifting her head, forcing her to look into his eyes. "You will," he said, and it wasn't just his voice he used to ensure her cooperation, her agreement, her capitulation. He forced his unbreakable will into her with the deep, penetrating gaze that was holding her captive. "You will."

Jade stared into those mesmerizing orbs—locked there, trapped, unable to break free—and felt herself falling. The world around her darkened so only his eyes were visible, only his soft voice intruding on the deafening silence.

"You will," he repeated again.

"I will," she said, lost in that gaze.

"That's my girl," he said then sealed the bargain with a tender press of his mouth to hers. His lips plied hers for a long, sweet moment before he released her and stepped back. He ordered her to sit quietly on the sofa. When she did—walking in a trance to the sofa and taking a seat without another word—he came to hunker down in front of her with more instructions, his hands covering hers.

"Once you're clear of Placus, I want you to erase all data on its whereabouts from the computer. I don't want anyone to know where it is or how to get there. Do you understand?"

Jade nodded, eyes glazed.

"None of you will ever talk about the dwarf planet. Not even to the Burgon. Whenever I am mentioned, there will be nothing in your minds but a solid, blank wall." He caressed her hands. "I am going to touch each of you before I leave this ship and wipe out all memory of the trip. When you think of me, you'll remember only that I loved you and I left you because I loved you. You'll make no attempt to find me. Is that clear?"

"Aye," she said softly.

He rose to his feet. "If anyone asks, we had one helluva romp in the hay while we were in here."

"Romp," she repeated.

"Which we are about to have," he said, pulling her into his arms.

He undressed her with care—slowly and reverently—then stood still as she removed his clothing. When they were naked, he swept her up into his arms and carried her to his bunk. He laid her down as though she were a fragile glass figurine then gently moved to stretch out beside her.

"I want you to listen carefully to what I am about to say," he told her. "I don't want you to ever forget it. Okay?"

She nodded, tiny lines appearing between her eyes. He put a fingertip there to stroke them away.

"I never wanted commitment, spike," he said. "I didn't think I could handle it."

"You..." she began, but he moved his fingertips to her lips to silence her.

"Just listen."

Jade stared into his handsome face, trust settling over hers.

"I didn't believe I was worthy of a good woman's love," he continued. "I thought of myself as damaged goods. A wink, a squeeze, a quick roll in the hay and that was all I needed." He ran a finger along her jaw. "Until I saw your face on my vid-screen. It felt as though I'd been sucker-punched with a poleax. Now I know why."

She turned her face into his palm, kissed it then smiled lovingly at him.

"I've fallen for you, spike," he said. "Hook, line and sinker. Now I know how old man Thomas felt about his wife."

At her perplexed expression, he smiled then looked up at the ceiling as though he were remembering.

"They were an old couple who lived next door to us when I was growing up." He cocked a shoulder. "Well, down the road a bit since we lived out in the country. I used to see them walking along the lane holding hands, smiling at one another. He always had such love in his eyes when he looked down at her and her eyes were filled with trust and complete devotion. I wanted that. I wanted to have that. Even as a kid, I knew it was special. I knew it was something to strive for, to fight for."

"You have it now," she said softly.

"Yeah, I'm beginning to realize that." His smile faded. "A little too late, maybe, but I know it's there. I see it in your eyes when you look at me and you have no idea how that makes me feel."

"Loved, I hope."

"That and much more, spike. So much more. More than I ever thought I would deserve and more than I should have."

"MacKirnan, stop belittling yourself. You aren't the bastard you think you are," she chastised.

"No, I'm worse," he said.

Before she could deny that charge, he moved over her, wedging between her legs and settling there even as his mouth dropped to hers. His kiss was fiery, powerful and it made her clutch at him with need. He ground against her then slid his lips down her throat to her breast—capturing one nipple in a hard pull that brought her hands to his hair.

"I love you and no matter what, I always will," he said against her flesh. "I want you to remember that and this."

Without another word, he slid down on the bed. She gasped as his mouth locked on the ache between her legs. His tongue rasped along her folds, lapped at her flesh, stabbed at her clit then thrust deep into the damp recess for a moment before being replaced with a hard finger then another. He devoted as much time to that portion of her anatomy as she needed, dragging himself up her welcoming body when she tugged on his hair.

"Come here, you," she said, and he covered her, shoving her thighs apart with his knees. With her hands clasped in his hair, she brought his mouth to hers and inhaled the scent of her own juices on his face. It was a turn-on that set her body to throbbing.

He reached between them to guide his cock into her, seating himself deep before pushing his hands under her to hold her rump. Slowly he began thrusting, rocking his pelvis against her, rotating his hips to grind the heat and hardness of that steely cock into her velvety warmth. Just as his cock advanced and retreated, so too did his tongue as he ravaged her mouth.

Jade held his head, her fingers tight on his scalp. She arched her hips, lifted her legs and looped them around his slim waist, locking her ankles together. The kiss turned brutal as his thrusting increased in speed and force until he was slamming into her with piston-like velocity.

She heard him grunt with each stroke as he rammed into her hard. He was striving to give her one helluva climax and she could feel it coming. She suspected he had trained his cock as he had trained his body and the gods-be-damned thing had a life of its own when he took a woman. It was eating her alive inside, doing things to her that were most likely illegal on every planet in the megaverse but it felt good. It felt so good! she thought. She clung to him, digging her nails into his back, grunting with him as the release hurtled toward her. Such was the force of the passion he was expending the bed shook even though it was bolted to the floor.

One more hard stab into her cunt and she came with such force she nearly blacked out. The powerful squeezes of her inner muscles around his rock-hard shaft felt as though they would tear free of her abdomen. She milked him, drained him, drawing on his flesh so forcefully she felt him wince as he spilled the last of his seed. He tore his mouth free of hers and flung his head back, roaring like a lion.

Staring up at his arched neck—at the cords standing out like ropes—she watched him shake himself. His pupils were dilated when he lowered his head and looked down at her. That look sent shivers through her for she saw it each time he took her.

The vid-com chimed.

“Captain, we’re nearing the dwarf planet. We’ll be there shortly,” D.’s voice said over the vid-com.

“Roger,” Mac said absently. “Come on, baby. It’s time to go.”

They dressed in silence. He kept glancing at her confused face, gauging how deep the psi commands had been absorbed into her mind. Satisfied she would do as he had ordered, he held his hand out to her, and when Jade nestled her cool fingers into his warm hand, he hugged her once more, whispering in her ear, “I will always love you.”

She clung to him as the hold he had upon her slowly dwindled away and only the deep-seated command remained. She told him she loved him too.

“Let’s do this,” he said. He walked her to the door with her hand clasped tight in his.

“Mac?” she questioned.

“Everything will be all right, spike. Really it will,” he said. The door peeled back. “There’s no need to worry.” He let go of her hand. “Now go.”

When he arrived on the bridge, he made a point of laying his hand to each and every other member of his crew—Doc, D., Gunter, Ione, Bruno, Laran, Bella, Celine and finally Crystal, who stared up at him with adoring eyes. He sent the potent psi commands deep into their minds while hiding his intent from Stiúrthóir. The effort cost him greatly—causing a brutal headache that nearly buckled his knees—but it had to be done. He had to protect those for whom he cared.

"We must transport to the planet's surface," Stiúrthóir said. "The dragons will have hidden at our approach."

"Who's we?" Celine asked.

"Stiúrthóir, his guards and me," Mac replied, and when his crew immediately voiced their opposition to the plan, he held up a hand. "Don't argue with me!"

"But Mac..." Bruno protested.

"Everything will be all right," he told the former circus performer.

"No harm will come to the captain," Stiúrthóir said. "You have my word on it."

"Aye, well, your word don't mean squat to us!" Doc snapped.

"We don't trust you any farther than we can see you. Leave your men behind," Jade said, eyes narrowed. "Only you and Mac go."

"Aye!" the other crew members shouted just as Mac intended they do.

"Lord Stiúrthóir," one of the Ceannus' guards spoke up. "That is not wise."

"I trust the captain," Stiúrthóir responded. "He knows I control the dragons. He'll not make a false move against me." He turned his bulbous eyes to Mac. "Will you, Captain?"

"You pose no threat to me," Mac hedged. "When is the next shipment of slag to arrive here?"

"Within the next day or so," the sorcerer replied.

"And how often after that?"

The Ceannus frowned but apparently saw no reason not to answer. "I have guaranteed the dragons twelve shipments in as many weeks. This is the third shipment."

"Is that enough to satisfy them?" Mac inquired.

"More than enough," Stiúrthóir answered.

Though his crew worried about his safety, when the *WindChaser II* was placed in orbit around the dwarf planet and the Ceannus and Mac stepped into the BlackMoon to be transported to the surface, they kept silent. The three guards who had accompanied Stiúrthóir to the ship remained behind, exchanging worried glances with one another as their leader vanished amidst the loud hum from the transport machine.

It was to a wide, craggy plateau that Mac and the sorcerer were taken. A hot, dusty wind blew across the rocky ground beneath their feet. The barren expanse around them was dull gray with the sky above a darker shade of the color. Lightning zinged through the heavens like writhing snakes but there was no sound save the susurrations of the wind. Dust particles pebbled against Mac's face and blew into his eyes, making them water.

"A very inhospitable place!" Stiúrthóir shouted above the skirling wind.

Milky-white formations appeared on the distant horizon with each successive lightning flare. Behind them was a sheer wall of opaque granite rising up a good two

hundred feet but extending out from the plateau was utter darkness. The gloom made it clear to Mac there was a large crater in front of them. Cautiously he stepped to the edge of the plateau.

“Be careful!” Stiúrthóir yelled.

Peering over the rim of the upland, Mac stared down hundreds of feet into the bowl of a huge basin. He squinted against the intrusion of the dust stinging his eyes, striving to see what was down there. A slight movement undulated over the bottom of the crater then—two by two—red dots of light began to appear. He leaned farther over the edge then drew in a slow, stunned breath.

Thousands of pairs of crimson eyes were opening, fiery light glinting from the elliptical orbs. What appeared at first to be a solid sheet of dark gray matter shifted apart, broke open to reveal the individual bodies of massive winged creatures lumbering to their feet. The sound of scales rubbing against scales, talons scraping the rocky terrain, a loud hissing that rose to drown out the keening wind rose up the walls of the crater to send a chill down Mac’s back. Long necks bobbed as the beasts turned to face him. A concerted roar shook the ground beneath his booted feet.

Mac felt a sharp tingle go through his nipples where the dragon nipple shields circled. The pain was agonizing but he managed not to make a sound as he stared into the seething mass of reptilian bodies.

“My wards,” Stiúrthóir said. “The Nikkeson’s mighty warriors.”

Once more the roar sounded and rocks broke apart from the plateau and fell into the basin. Fire shot from the maws of several of the bigger beasts. Long, armor-plated tails swished, thumped the ground with a thunderous rattle.

From somewhere deep inside him it came. White hot, scalding, ripping through him on a brutal energy wave that sizzled along his nerve endings, it moved with the speed of a lightning bolt through his body. The blood in his veins boiled and a bright red haze spread over his vision. Crimson light poured from his pale green eyes like laser beams. His body began to give off an incandescent glow, quivering like a desert mirage. His hair whipped savagely around his head in the blustery wind. Of their own accord his arms lifted and spread wide.

“*Cloan ny mollaght!*” he shouted, addressing them as the cursed children.

Below him, the creatures stilled—unmoving, unblinking. Silently, they stared up at him.

The Ceannus stared as well, but with a growing expression of concern on his pallid, cinereous face. He stood beside MacKirnan, looking at the human’s profile, but did not see the white glow that shimmered around the younger man’s body. He did not see the blood-red gleam shooting from Mac’s eyes. Yet though he did not see those things, he felt the change that had come over his companion—the intense evil permeating his being and the strange power growing within him—and took a few steps back from the ledge. He looked around for help, remembering with escalating fear that he was alone on the plateau with MacKirnan.

*"T'aym E jeih- vac! Eaisht my fockle yn sarey!"*

Stiúrthóir reacted to the words as though he'd been struck. Calling himself the Chosen son, the human was asking the dragons to listen to his command. "What are you doing?" he asked Mac.

As one, the creatures lowered their massive scaled bodies until their bellies were pressed to the ground, their heads lowered, a long sigh escaping the giant maws that served as their mouths.

"What are you doing?" the sorcerer hissed again, plucking at Mac's sleeve. "Of what command do you speak?"

Mac shrugged off the Ceannus' hand. He was vibrating from the massive power surging through him. Pain engulfed him like fiery licks of flame but he stood tall with his arms outstretched to the beasts lying on their bellies below him.

*"Shegin dhyt bial hym,"* Mac called out, instructing the creatures to obey his words.

"No!" Stiúrthóir denied, shaking his large head. "They listen only to me! They are mine to command!"

It was in that unguarded moment when the sorcerer forgot to shield his thoughts that Mac saw the truth of the situation. Stiúrthóir had been contacted by Riordan O'Shay long before the wily bastard had been cornered on the Plains of Geschäft and dispatched by the Burgon. O'Shay had instructed the sorcerer to bring the dragons to his side of the megaverse to aid the New Coalition in its war against the New Alliance, to set them loose on O'Shay's enemies. But Stiúrthóir had an agenda of his own. The Ceannus saw a way to destroy all mankind with the help of the dragons. He intended the New Alliance and New Coalition alike would be obliterated by the winged warriors.

"You evil bastard!" Mac snarled. He drew his dagger from the sheath at his right thigh and plunged the long blade into the spindly body of the sorcerer, twisting the business end of the weapon from side to side then ripping it up Stiúrthóir's belly to spill greenish-gray innards and odorous black blood to the rocky ground.

Grabbing his trailing organs, Stiúrthóir stumbled back then slipped in his own gore, staggering over the edge of the plateau, screaming a high-pitched ululation as he fell into the mass of beasts below.

Alerted to the scent of freshly spilled blood, the dragons rose to their feet and those closest to where the Ceannus fell pounced upon the flailing, shrieking body to devour it. With snapping fangs and rending jaws they pulled apart the hapless sorcerer, gobbling every last morsel of bloody flesh they could scramble to find.

"Get out of here." Mac sent the psi command straight into Bella's head for it was she who sat at the helm of his ship. "Now!"

While the dragons were feasting on the meager flesh of the Ceannus, Mac knew the sorcerer's three guards would be meeting their own fate at the hands of Bruno and Gunter and the sharp knives those men kept. Faintly he heard the roar of the ship's engines as it gathered power in preparation for leaving orbit. He saw several of the

dragons look up from beneath lowered brows and knew the creatures were aware of the ship. He saw their haunches flex in preparation for launching themselves into flight.

"Listen to me!" he yelled, and as one the beasts swung their massive heads toward him. "I am your master now. It is my words you must heed!"

There was grumbling but the beasts recognized him as the representative of the Nikkeson and they feared that entity.

"Go home," Mac said. "Return to Dragane. Leave the humans be."

"Food!"

The one word shot through his head like a fiery missile. It made him stumble beneath the onslaught of thousands of angry hisses and growls.

"Our young are hungry!" another voice screamed into his mind.

"We starve!" still another bellowed.

He realized why these creatures were here. They had not come to do the Nikkeson's bidding. They had not come to destroy mankind. They had come to gather food for their dying fledglings and nestlings. The weight of their grief, their desperation washed over him like acid to eat away at his heart.

"I hear you, my brothers," he said. "I swear to you on all I hold sacred that I will see shipments of slag are sent through the *Uige* to you. I..."

"We must take it in our bellies!" a booming voice rang out. "There is no other way!"

The thought of the creatures regurgitating the digested slag made him ill but he understood that was their nature, the only way they could feed their young too weak to feed themselves.

"Then chose six strong warriors to remain behind and I will have the shipments sent here for them to deal with as they will. I personally guarantee the safety of those warriors. No humanoid will lay a hand to them or they will answer to me!"

There was grumbling, the stomping of thousands of clawed feet upon the crater's floor as the beasts debated Mac's words. Ancient words Mac did not understand were mumbled in a wave of angry voices and petulant protests as the creatures went over his proposal.

"What of you?" the loudest voice among the creatures asked. "If we let you leave, what assurance do we have you will keep to your bargain?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I will remain here with your warriors until the last shipment you need has been sent," Mac said, his soul withering at being alone on this barren precipice with only reptilian beasts as his occasional companions. He rubbed at the pain that was crushing his temples.

"Why would you do this?" the dragon demanded. "Why do you not wish to be with your own kind?"

Mac opened his mind for the beasts to read his thoughts. He heard their indrawn breath but did not give them time to question his actions.

"When time has passed and you find you are in need of more slag, you can send those same six warriors back through the *Uige* to contact my friend Rune Degendesch, or an agent of his choosing if he is no longer in this plane of existence. I will send a message to him alerting him to what is needed. He will arrange to have more shipments sent."

"Why would he do this?" the same dragon asked again. "We are nothing to him."

"Because he is my friend," Mac said. "He will do it for me."

Another rumble of debate moved through the dragon warriors. Then the crowd parted to allow a single dragon to stand alone among them. It was an enormous warrior with many battle scars upon his scaly hide and only one eye with which to regard the human on the ledge above them. It was his deep, sonorous voice that had questioned Mac. As he spoke, there seemed to be a growing respect in his tone.

"I am Torrent," the dragon said. "Son of Vohr. I am the leader of our flight."

"I am MacKirnan," Mac responded. "My friends and brethren call me Mac."

"Mac," Torrent said. "A strong name. In our language it means son of. Who was your sire?"

"Wyatt," Mac replied.

"MacKirnan, son of Wyatt, we welcome your help and we thank you," Torrent said. He flung his giant head, looked about him. "It is greatly appreciated. What may we do for you in exchange?"

"Go home," Mac said. "Leave the war of the humans between the humans."

"This we will do for we had no real desire to clash with your kind. We only came when the sorcerer called because of the hunger of our young. It is agony to see our nestlings die and our fledglings grow weaker by the day." Torrent took a step forward, cocking his head to one side. "But surely there is something we can do for you in this time of your great need."

Mac smiled. "Be my friend, Torrent. That is all any warrior can ask of another."

Torrent flexed his mighty haunches and shot straight up in the air, wings extending to slow down his acceleration then render it stationary at eye level to Mac. The creature hovered five feet away, the large head with its curved horns taller than the human standing before it. The deep red striations in the single pupil were fiery but not with anger.

"You have our friendship, MacKirnan, son of Wyatt, for as long as time is spun and our sympathies for what you do. May you go from this world with the Wind at your back," Torrent said, inclining that giant head.

"May you journey back to your world swiftly and safely and your young be nourished to adulthood," Mac replied.

The soft, warm wash of air flowed over Mac as the creature bobbed its head then slowly sank back to the floor of the basin. One by one, Mac watched the dragons take

flight, arcing their lumbering bodies gracefully into the heavens, winging into the darkness of space until only six stalwart warriors remained.

Mac stood on the ledge of the plateau for hours staring down at the six young dragons left behind. They stared up at him with curiosity and one inclined its head in greeting.

"I am Surge, son of Torrent," the mighty beast said.

"It is an honor to meet you, Surge," Mac said.

"The honor is ours," Surge replied.

Mac sat down with his legs dangling over the edge of the plateau and closed his eyes. His head was aching miserably, the blood throbbing between his temples. He put up a hand to rub at the discomfort and sighed.

"Rune?" he sent out across time and space, unprepared for the immediate answer to his call.

"Where are you?" the werewolf demanded. "I am going to kick your ass three ways from the feast day when next we meet! The Tiogar is wearing on my last nerve!"

Mac smiled. "I am on a dwarf planet at the edge of the Wastelands. The sorcerer – who you forgot to mention was a Ceannus – is dead."

There was a small silence then a heavy sigh. "I didn't know. If I had, I would have told you. What of the slag? Were you able to stop the shipment?"

"No, and I don't want it stopped," Mac told him, sending a replay of what had transpired between him and Torrent to the werewolf. "As a matter of fact, I want you to make sure nine more shipments are sent here for the dragons and make arrangements so that when they are needed in the future, you or your agent will provide them."

Once more silence met Mac's words then the Faolchú whispered a curse. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Their children are starving, Rune," was all Mac needed to say.

"Then it is our duty to help feed them," the werewolf said. "It will be seen to, Mac."

"Thank you," Mac said.

The pain in his head had grown so bad Mac had to lie back, an arm flung over his eyes. Hot nausea was creeping up his throat and that only added to the intense agony.

"Are you ill, MacKirnan, son of Wyatt?" Surge inquired.

"Yes. I thought I could stay with you, but I need to leave this place for the pain is only getting worse for me here. It is intolerable now. Please explain to your father I am not breaking my word but I can't take the agony much longer," Mac told the young dragon. "I have contacted my friend about the shipments and he has vowed to make sure your race is fed. He'll not go back on his word."

Not waiting for the thanks he knew he would receive, Mac willed his body onto the astral plane. In two heartbeats he was on another world. It was to another No Man's Land on the other side of the megaverse that he leapt – to a place he'd been only once before.

This place was called many things—Sector Nine, the Sinisters, Montyne Vex, the Carbonham Gate. Once there had been a wormhole there, an anomaly that led from the Cairghrian Galaxy to Earth. The wormhole had been destroyed as he chased the Nikkeson, but the stark dwarf planet was the closest he could come to his homeworld.

He had come to where it all began.

He had come there to die.

## Chapter Seventeen

It had taken Rune Degendesch five months to make his way to the Sinisters. He had been gone – along with Gabriel Leveche, Taegin Drae, Ruan Cossaint, Ailyn Harmattan, Rory Quinn, Rynlyn Rede and even the Burgon – to find the missing WindChaser. The moment he swooped low over the Vex, he knew he'd found his quarry. With the engines idling, he checked and rechecked the heat signature of the lone inhabitant of the small planet. There was no doubt it was Ranulf MacKirnan's heat sig. The readout of the personal energy field surrounding the WindChaser had been taken by the Burgon when the emperor first met Mac and inputted into the computers of the searchers.

"Got him," he sent via the vid-com to Prince Cair Ghrian, who was monitoring the various search teams aboard his runabout *Saoirse*.

"Is he all right?" Cair asked.

"He's alive and breathing according to my instruments, but he's shielding his gods-be-damned thoughts from me."

"I'll let everyone know. Bring his ass to Aduaidh Prime ASAP, Rune."

"Acknowledged," Rune said.

Landing his Fiach on the rocky planes of the Vex made the werewolf nervous. The gray ash swirling around the belly of the midnight blue runabout obscured the jagged peaks beyond and blotted out the darker gray sky overhead. Ice crystals immediately began forming on the windshield to further lock him into an unseeing world.

Glancing down at the temperature gauge, Rune's mouth tightened. It was colder than a witch's teat out there and he hadn't brought any cold-weather gear along with him. "Fucking great," he mumbled as he unhooked his safety harness. "Just what the hell I needed. Why couldn't you have hied yourself over to Hell-12?"

Sighing like a man much put upon, he got out of the pilot's seat. He was wearing a heavyweight jumpsuit, but the only jacket he had with him was a leather one that would do little to keep out the frigid temps. As soon as he had the hatch open and took one breath of the arctic air that hit him in the face like a concrete block, he ground his teeth.

"Damn you to the Abyss, Ranulf MacKirnan!" he snarled, struggling to make it down the runabout's steps for the wind was a true force with which to reckon. It pushed him back into the opening, making it necessary to grab hold of the side of the runabout's hatch to steady himself. He staggered down the steps, turned away from the piercing wind to press his hand against the entry panel to close the hatch. When it was in place, he pressed into the wintry onslaught, headed for the crags about a hundred

feet from his craft, barely able to see the jagged peaks through the shifting volcanic ash being kicked up by the wind.

Eyes watering, he reached for the mini vid-com clipped to his belt. He had entered the coordinates to the cave where he knew he'd find MacKirnan, so the flashing beacon on the screen would lead him straight to his target. Ice pellets were slamming into his exposed face and beginning to crust on his eyelashes. His hair whipped around his head like a nest of vipers. Having forgotten to look for any gloves, his hands were soon stinging from the icy blast, rapidly becoming as numb as his nose and lips felt. Even his toes felt dead.

"I'm going to make mincemeat of you, MacKirnan," he muttered, and sent a vicious, brutal thought into the cave. It bounced back at him with a polite fuck you too, and he smiled grimly, his cheeks stinging from the movement.

He squinted through the swirl of freezing wind, the rocks toward which he was headed gave off a faint milky glow that suggested veins of embedded quartz. Mounds of tumbled scree littered the miles upon miles of wasteland stretching away from the plateau. It was hard walking in the thick volcanic ash covering the ground, difficult just putting one foot ahead of the other in the gale-force wind. A sheer cliff of wind-beaten stone off to one side sported a succession of steep steps leading down to a plateau and the cave's entrance.

Breathing in as little of the icy air as he could, the werewolf carefully made his way down the slippery, icy steps, praying he didn't fall and break a limb in the descent. There was little to hang on to and the wind kept trying to push him off the steps, but at last he was standing on the rock-strewn table of the plateau, the beacon on the vid-com flashing wildly to indicate he wasn't that far from his goal.

From one cave system into another he wound deeper into the complex of underground rooms. The night vision of his kind held him in good stead for there were no torches to light his way and the small phospho lamp he'd brought with him had decided not to work. Cautiously sliding his feet forward, he rounded one sharp crease in the rock wall and was relieved to see flickering light in the distance. The smell of wood smoke was like a pheromone.

"Heat," he said on a long sigh, increasing his speed, careless of where he stepped now that the promise of a fire beckoned.

Rune's quarry was sitting tailor fashion before the crackling flames on a thick pile of furs, hands resting on his knees. He barely glanced up as the werewolf came hurrying to the fire with outstretched hands, quivering lips and trembling body. He did, however, wince as Degendesch dropped to his knees before the warmth for the Faolchú grunted from the pain of flesh connecting with sharp rock.

"Why are you here?" Mac asked.

"Give me a m-minute to warm up t-then I'm gonna whip your ass," Rune said around numb lips.

"For what?"

"For c-causing m-me so gods-be-damned m-much t-trouble!" the werewolf hissed as he rubbed his hands together over the flames.

"No one told you to come looking for me, wolfie," Mac reminded him.

"F-Fuck you," Rune growled.

"You're not my type," his companion stated then leaned back, propping himself on one elbow, long legs stretched out, one leg crooked at the knee. "I'll ask again. Why are you here?"

"The B-Burgon sent us," Rune stated as though that should be explanation enough.

Mac frowned. "Us as in whom?"

"As in all his p-personal cadre! Even he's been out searching for your ass."

Mac's frown deepened. He leaned over, picked up a tin cup and tossed it to the werewolf. "Pour yourself some coffee and thaw out those damned lips of yours. That stuttering is starting to wear thin."

Growling, Rune looked around for something to wrap around the handle of the enamel pot rested on a grate over the flames. He spied a folded cloth and scooped it up, used it as a pot holder to pour himself a cup of the steaming brew.

"Where'd you g-get coffee out here?" he grumbled.

"After I realized I was royally screwed, I decided it would be best to make myself as comfortable as possible," Mac answered. "So I fetched a few things to make my self-imposed exile a bit more palatable."

"I saw n-no s-ship," Rune said, taking a sip of the scalding liquid, narrowing his eyes to the steam.

"Don't say another goddamned word until you can talk without that fucking stutter, or I'll come over there and pin your ears to the rock wall," Mac snapped. "God, I didn't miss having assholes to annoy me!"

Eyes narrowing even more, Rune peeled his lips back from glistening fangs, but the man across from him merely rolled his eyes and snorted.

"Like that's supposed to put me in my place," Mac said then without so much as a flicker of movement his countenance changed to something so petrifying, so gruesome and horrific the werewolf dropped his cup and scrambled back with a cry of fright, eyes wide and bulging.

Pressed against the far wall, Rune Degendesch knew true terror as he stared into the gleaming red eyes of a real monster. Even when MacKirnan's human face replaced the ghastly visage of the demon that was now a part of him, the werewolf made no move to unglue himself from the wall.

Mac's lips stretched over very sharp fangs as he slowly smiled. "Still want to try whipping my ass, wolfie?" he inquired in a menacing tone.

"No," came the immediate answer. "Don't think I do."

"Didn't think you would," Mac returned. He nudged his chin toward the tin cup lying on its side on the ground. "Pour another cup and sit your ass down. I don't like anyone hovering over me. Makes me nervous."

It took a moment longer for Rune to shore up his courage, tamp down his nerves and put the steel back in his backbone. He peeled his back from the cave wall and bent cautiously to pick up the cup, keeping his eyes on Mac the entire time.

"I'm not going to bite you, Rune," Mac told him. "Just mind your manners from here on out."

Rune nodded, swallowing hard against the dry husk that was now the interior of his mouth. Had his life depended upon it, he couldn't have dredged up one molecule of moisture. Hands shaking, he managed to pick up the cloth, the coffee pot, and slosh liquid into the cup, the spout of the pot rattling against the cup's rim.

"You're not my enemy, Rune," Mac said. "You have no reason to fear me."

"Have you looked into a mirror lately?" Rune countered then flinched at the sarcastic tone he'd used.

Mac drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly. "Unfortunately I glanced down into the stream when I was trying to catch a fish and the goddamned thing kept eluding me. Pissed me off something fierce." He laughed. "I saw the face you just saw in the water and it scared the shit out of me."

Rune had to ask. "Is that what the Nikkeson looks like?"

"Believe me when I tell you I'm Johnny Handsome compared to that bastard," Mac admitted. "I doubt there's anything as horrendous as it is."

The werewolf shuddered at the thought of anything looking worse than what he'd just seen. He took a long gulp of the coffee, mindless of the burning pain that flooded his mouth. He needed the sear of it scorching its way down his throat to calm his nerves.

"Does that happen often?" he asked, praying that it didn't.

"Only when I'm pissed or if I want to show off my good looks to a fellow monster," Mac said with a grin.

Hunkering down before the fire, Rune became aware of the sweat that was dripping down his sides. From the amused look on the WindChaser's face, he knew Mac was aware of his discomfort. "Why are *you* here?" he asked.

Mac shrugged. "I came here to die, but that got fucked up big time so I'm just cooling my heels until I decide what else to do."

Rune's eyebrows clashed over his hawklike nose. "Die? What the hell does that mean?"

"Did you make arrangements to keep the dragons fed?" Mac asked, ignoring the werewolf's question.

"The Burgon is handling it."

"Good."

"You trust them?" the Faolchú asked. "The dragons?"

"They came to our side of the megaverse because they needed to feed their young," Mac said. "Yeah, I trust them. We've allies in them if we ever have the need."

"Because of your ties to the Nikkeson?"

"Partly, but also because I offered them our help and saw they got it," Mac told him. "They had no desire to fight us."

"You said the sorcerer was a Ceannus," Rune reminded him. "Do you think they signed an accord with the New Coalition?"

"Beithíoch Stiúrthóir was sent here to begin the systematic destruction of mankind," Mac said. "Those who controlled him had no loyalty to the NC. It was our hides they wanted annihilated. Thankfully, the Nikkeson has other plans for us."

Rune scowled. "I don't understand."

"Well, let me enlighten you, my friend," Mac said. "Sit your flat ass down, make yourself comfortable and I'll spin you a tale that will straighten the curlies nestled over that pitiful thing you call a cock."

Rune's nose twitched. "I'll have you know my cock is..."

"I've seen it, remember?" Mac interrupted with a crooked brow.

The werewolf's face turned red. "Ah aye, I remember," he muttered, eyes darting away from Mac's.

"It's like this," Mac said, chuckling at Degendesch's embarrassment. "When I saw the dragons on Placus—that dwarf planet at the edge of the Wastelands—I knew precisely why I had been brought there. Everything came to me in a flash of understanding that nearly drove me to my knees. It all made sense in that moment and—stupid me—I thought I could do something about it." He sighed deeply. "Unfortunately, I was just a bit too quick with my assessment of the situation."

"Destiny sent you there to stop the dragons from slaughtering mankind?"

"In a manner of speaking, you could say that. The Nikkeson sent me there."

"I don't understand," Rune confessed. "Why would it...?"

"Think about it, Rune. This is its feeding ground," Mac said. "Whenever it manages to get free of the Abyss, it is ravenous and it goes looking for its next meal. I don't think it's all that particular about what it eats as long as the thing is alive, has blood or sap running through its veins. Blood, sap—that's where the life is within any living thing and that's what it craves. It needs the life drained from a creature, a being, a planet. Where it goes, it leaves behind destruction."

"The Destroyer of Planets," Rune remembered.

"Aye, and if the dragons were set loose over here to slaughter humans, if the Ceannus was allowed to annihilate mankind, the Nikkeson would lose a prime food source. It couldn't have that so it needed a representative to stop the holocaust from happening. It needed someone who looked human so dragon and humanoid alike wouldn't fear it. It needed me."

“Are you saying it is omnipotent?” Rune asked, horrified at the suggestion. “That it knew way back when it first came into contact with you that this was going to happen? It chose you that long ago as its champion to preserve its feeding ground?” He shivered. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I *know*, Rune,” Mac said. “It gave me the powers to read minds, to influence, to do all the things my psi abilities have given me so it could tell which humans to be wary of, to watch. It used me to gauge how powerful those with similar abilities are, to keep track of you.”

“Why? For what purpose?” Rune asked, a shiver going down his spine at the thought of being on the Nikkeson’s radar.

“Because it needs to know who the Ridge Lords are since they are the only ones who can send it back to its prison, who can control it. So far, I haven’t come into contact with any of the Shadowlords, but eventually I will. When I do, the Nikkeson will become aware of that warrior. My fear is it will use me to strike at the man, and so I came here—the closest place I could get to home—to end it all.” He flung out a hand. “Alas, it was one of those pivotal moments in life when you can honestly say ‘the best laid plans of mice and men’ and all that.”

“I’m not following.”

Mac held out one arm, pushing the sleeve of his black shirt up to show the smooth expanse of flesh. “First thing I did was take my dagger and run it up both arms from wrist to elbow. I thought I’d just lie down and bleed out.” He twisted his arm from side to side. “Look, ma, no scar! The flesh began healing as soon as I got halfway up my arm.” He shrugged. “Stabbing myself in the gut and twisting the blade did nothing. Absolutely nothing. The wound healed in record time.”

The werewolf whistled silently.

“Next I thought I’d tie a rope around my neck and jump off a tree branch.” He grimaced. “Did that. Felt the constriction. Heard the neck break but then the rope did too, and I splatted on the ground to the music of my neck snapping back into place and mending. Got a brutal headache for that try.”

Rune’s lips parted but he made no comment.

“With my new powers I fetched an old-fashioned guillotine from the museum on Francach. Stretched myself out, triggered the blade—which promptly bounced off my neck.” He held up a hand as Rune started to ask. “Yes, I tried the blade beforehand. I could have shaved with it, the blade was so sharp. The edge is no longer sharp though. The contact with my neck dulled it.”

“Mother of the Goddess,” Rune whispered.

“Building an inferno and walking into it did nothing more than burn the clothes off my body and set me to sneezing from the smoke inhalation. Diving into a roaring whirlpool gave me one helluva nasty case of seasickness from spinning around and around under the water but otherwise had no other ill effect. Visiting a planet devoid of

oxygen didn't do it for me either, although I couldn't stop hiccupping for two days." He shrugged. "The thing is, I can't die. I. Can. Not. Die! But that's not the worst part of it."

"What is?" the werewolf queried softly, almost afraid to ask.

Mac rubbed a hand over his chin, up his jaw. "My hair doesn't grow. It's been five months and not one whisker has shown up on my face. My hair is the same length it was when last I saw you. If I try cutting it, the blade snaps in two." He looked down at his hand, curled the fingers toward him. "And my nails don't grow either."

"Well, that's not a bad thing."

Mac shrugged listlessly. "I suppose not."

"Can you eat?"

"Like a racehorse," Mac admitted. "All I need do is think of what I'm craving and it appears."

"Rare steak, baked potato, crisp green beans, cherry pie and a frosty tankard of ale?"

The repast appeared on the ground beside the werewolf.

"Enjoy," Mac said on a ragged sigh. "I had lobster earlier."

Plopping his ass on the ground, Rune dove into the meal, rolling his eyes at the perfection of the fare. "I could get used to this," he said, juice running down his chin. "Nifty little power you've developed."

"And I'm horny as hell," Mac said as though he hadn't heard. "I need Jade so bad my teeth hurt."

That sobered the Faolchú. "But you're afraid to leave here."

"I've thought of fetching her here, but she'd be as miserable as I am in this barren place." He shook his head. "What am I going to do, Rune? If I leave, I could encounter a Ridge Lord, give the Nikkeson an edge over that man. I don't want to be the cause of a warrior possibly being defeated by that monster!"

"We need to talk to the Burgon," Rune said. "There has to be an answer, and if so, he'd be the one to have it."

"It sickens me that the Nikkeson knows more about the Burgon than it should," Mac said, lowering his head. "Every time I am around the emperor, the beast will learn more about him."

"My guess is Ryden already knows that. He doesn't miss much," the werewolf said as he scooped up the last of the baked potato. He'd been consuming the food as though he hadn't eaten in several days.

Mac slowly raised his head. "What?" he asked. "What did you say?"

"He doesn't miss much?" Rune repeated, licking the cherry glaze from his fingers.

For a long moment Mac reclined there beside the fire then he moved to a sitting position, his unblinking gaze steady on the werewolf. When at last he spoke, his jaw was clenched. "Son of a bitch," he growled.

“Who?”

“He knew,” Mac stated. “He knew about my connection with the Nikkeson all along! The bastard knew and that’s why he sent the Guardians after my ass!”

“Sounds like something Ry would do,” Rune said with a wary chuckle.

“He could have just asked,” Mac snarled. “Without all the subterfuge.”

Rune shook his head. “Not his way. The Burgon loves his little games. Sometimes I think he – what’s that Terran saying? – gets his rocks off that way.” He wiped his hands on the cloth he’d used as a potholder. “Look at what he did to me by turning me over to the Tiogar. That was two weeks of hell I’ll never get back, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, now that I look back on it, it served a purpose,” the werewolf admitted, hooking a finger down his nose a couple of times as though embarrassed. “We sort of – well – bonded I guess you’d call it. We found out we had a lot in common. Still don’t like one another, but if push comes to shove, we could work together and I think that’s what Ry had in mind when he threw us together.”

“One of these days the Burgon’s covert little games might go wildly awry,” Mac predicted. “Elite little bunch of merrymakers we got here. Too bad I’m not handy with a sword.”

Rune snorted. “Don’t give me that shit. I’ve heard all about your abilities with a rapier. Unless I miss my guess, you’ve already been put up for membership and that’s probably one of the reasons he wants you on Aduaidh Prime ASAP.”

“Whatcha mean?” Mac questioned.

“The *Toshiaght* is coming up in two months,” Rune said. At Mac’s look of confusion, he explained what that mean. “It’s the Initiation into the Order. You’ll need training with the scytheblade but I don’t think that will be much of a learning curve for you.”

“What if I don’t want to be a scythemaster?” Mac snapped.

“The term is scythelord or deathwielder,” Rune corrected, “and I don’t think you will be given the choice. If you are to be a *laoch rúnda*, you need to be in the Order.”

“What does that mean?”

“A secret warrior,” Degendesch translated. “One of the Burgon’s cadre of special agents.”

“Whoopee,” Mac said with a heavy sigh. He got wearily to his feet. “Well, I’m not accomplishing anything here and I’m tired of talking to myself and the occasional rodent that passes through. If the Burgon thinks he knows what’s best for me, I’ll have to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“You can bet he has plans for you past the Initiation,” Rune told him.

“For me and my crew,” Mac corrected. “I go nowhere without them from now on.”

Rune frowned, turned his head to the tunnel down which he’d come. “You realize it’s colder than a witch’s hind teat out there, don’t you? I...”

One moment they were in the cave and the next they were sitting in the pilot and co-pilot seats of the Fiach. Wearing clean, dry clothing, they were already buckled into the safety harnesses and the engine of the sleek runabout was revving on all cylinders.

“Neat,” Rune said, laughing. “That’s a gods-be-damned neat ability you’ve developed!”

Mac grinned back at him. “You ain’t seen nothing yet, wolfie.”

## Epilogue

Mac ran his fingers lazily up and down Jade's arms as she stared up at him. There were vertical lines between his thick brows that signified he was deep in thought and that whatever he was considering was troubling him.

"Copper for your thoughts," she said, fanning her palm over his bare chest.

"Penny," he said. "It's penny for your thoughts."

There was a little more than jealous curiosity in her voice when she asked, "Who's she?"

He chuckled and gave her an absentminded kiss atop her head. "A penny on my world is a copper on yours, sweetness."

"Well then, a penny for your thoughts," she said as she curled her finger around one wiry section of hair over his left pec.

"That man who was with your brother today. Who is he?" he asked.

Jade sighed. The last thing she wanted to talk about was her brother, the Chrystallusian emperor-to-be. Out of nowhere her sibling appeared with two bodyguards and a man she hadn't seen in many years as he demanded she leave Mac's ship and come home with him.

"Disgraceful!" her brother had hissed at her. "Drummed out of the Guardians and living in sin with a Terran!" He spat the word at her as though it were a foul taste he was striving to get out of his mouth. "A Terran! Have you no shame?"

"Get a life, James," Jade told her fraternal twin. "What I do with my personal life is none of your business."

James sniffed, upper lip tight, nose in the air. "It is when it affects the integrity and honor of the imperial family!"

"Take a hike, fat boy," Jade had advised, falling as easily into using the Terran idioms as the rest of her lover's crew.

"Fat boy? *Fat boy?*" James sputtered, outrage causing his dark chocolate eyes to narrow into pinpoints of pique. Her sibling was very conscious of his weight—was ashamed he could not be as slender as their father—and any mention of his obesity rankled him to the point of murder.

The young man who was next in line to be the emperor made the mistake of raising his hand with the intent of slapping his sister. He got no farther than bringing the offending limb over his shoulder before his pudgy wrist was caught—and held—brutally in the grip of a man who towered over him.

"You really don't want to ever try that shit again," Mac had warned with eyes blazing blood-red, lips dragged back from very long, very sharp fangs.

Lying with her head on her lover's shoulder in the big bed he had found for them on Virago, Jade laughed as she remembered the fear in her brother's eyes, the way he had cringed. If it was truly possible for a man to be scared shitless as Mac so often said, that had surely been the time.

"Do you know who he is?" Mac repeated.

"If you hadn't been so busy intimidating poor porky James, you would have been introduced," she teased him. "His name is Rasheed Ben-Ashaman. For some strange reason he and James have been fast friends since they were boys."

"Where's he from?"

"One of the moons of Rysalia," she answered with a yawn. "I never cared enough to ask."

He smiled. "You don't find him handsome, spike?"

Jade shrugged. "I suppose he is in a dark kind of way. I'm not particularly fond of that race of men. They tend to be too bossy by far."

"They expect their women to kowtow to them, you mean? Walk five steps behind? Never speak until spoken to? That kind of thing?"

"Precisely, although I don't think Rasheed has a woman of his own." She frowned. "For all I know he and James could be lovers."

"I seriously doubt it," Mac said. "Not the way he was looking at Ione. I can't be sure but I thought he might have even had a boner."

"Let him have her then," Jade drawled.

Mac laughed. "I don't think so. What's mine stays mine."

A hard elbow slammed into his side so savagely it took Mac's breath away. He rolled away from another blow, chuckling as he twisted off the bed and got to his feet, holding up his hands.

"Peace, woman! It was a joke!"

"The hell it was!" Jade snarled. She came to her hands and knees on the bed, glaring at him with teeth bared. "Touch that bitch again and I'll castrate you, MacKirman!"

Mac felt pure, unadulterated lust shoot through his body, hardening his cock to steel. His woman was crouched there before him—totally nude, completely enthralling—with her lush breasts hanging like ripe melons from the vine. Her long hair was tousled, streaming over her shoulders. The flare of her slender hips, the curve of her ass sticking up in the air, the tight bunching of her thigh muscles as she stalked him across the plain of the mattress.

"I mean it, WindChaser," she snarled at him. "What is mine stays mine too! If she ever lays a hand to you again, I'll snap it off at the wrist and shove it up her wide-load ass along with my spike!"

Primitive desire drove deep into his groin and he was on her in an instant, covering her nude body with his, flipping them over so she lay beneath him, his lower body pinning hers to the bed.

"Big bad mama," he said, lowering his lips to her ear, licking the gentle curve of it, probing into the channel.

"Bastard," she retaliated. He had her arms pinned above her head, was grinding his engorged cock along the wiry curls at the apex of her thighs.

"My big bad mamma jammer," he cooed, teeth closing on her earlobe.

She bucked under him. "What does that mean, asswipe?"

"To me? A pretty lady with a badass attitude," he replied. "I haven't a clue what it might mean to anyone else."

"A badass attitude, huh?" she said, grinning up at him. She wiggled her body along his.

"The baddest," he said as he nuzzled the side of her neck.

"Let me ride you," she whispered against his temple. "Let me show you my badass self, pretty boy."

Mac pushed himself up to look down with half-lidded eyes at the lovely woman stretched out beneath him. "You wanna ride me or hurt me, baby?"

Jade's gaze fell to the nipple shields that she had been stunned to learn could no longer be removed. The dragons had become a part of her lover's flesh—sinking into it to become one with him. She pulled her attention from the red glint of stone in the jeweled eyes of the dragons.

"I'm not Ione," she said, gaze fused with his.

His head tilted slightly. "What if I asked you to hurt me?" he asked. "What if I tell you I need it?"

She looked at him for a long time then shook her head. "Then I'd say we'd best end this here and now, MacKirnan, because that isn't something I will do to you."

He had asked. She had answered. There would be no further discussion of such things so he rolled off her to lie on his back, his head turned toward her. "All right," he said. "I can accept that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Jade rose up and slung a long, shapely leg over his hips, sat on his upper thighs. She wasn't surprised to find him stone-hard still and oozing what he called prep juice. He seemed to become easily aroused now and stayed that way much longer than any man she'd ever known. His shaft grazed the spiky hair at her mons, flexed when she looked down at it, then seemed to harden even more.

“Ride him, then. Hard,” he said in a husky voice. His hands were palm up beside his head and when he spoke, he reached up to take hold of the fancy brass headboard D. had had one helluva time securing to the wall.

Pushing to her knees, she wrapped her hand around his cock and guided it into her sheath, settling down on the velvet-wrapped tool. She smiled when he arched his hips up to her in invitation.

“You’re a randy satyr, aren’t you, WindChaser?” she asked, beginning the slow rocking motion that slid her cunt up and down his pulsing length.

“Oh yeah,” he agreed, lifting his hips in counter rhythm to hers. When she bore down, he pushed up.

Jade closed her eyes and let her head fall back as she ground her body against his, tightened her inner muscles around his hard cock. She rolled her hips and when she did, her breasts bounced and swayed and drew his undivided attention. She could feel him staring avidly at her chest. She arched her back and thrust out her chest for his pleasure.

“He’s a Ridge Lord,” she heard him say, and lowered her head, opened her eyes.

“Who?”

“Ben-Ashaman,” her lover said. “And a very powerful one. He thinks he’s able to hide it, but I knew the moment I saw him.”

“But does the Nikkeson know?” she asked, worry halting her movements for a moment.

Mac smiled and that smile made Jade shiver for it was the meanest, most brutal, most lethal smile she’d ever encountered. He lowered his hands to her hips and urged her into the sensual sexual dance she had started.

“No, baby, it doesn’t and it isn’t going to,” he said.

“But...” she began, only to have his fingers dig into the fleshy pads of her hips.

“We’re going to go after it,” he said. He thrust upward, impaling her all the way to her womb. “Me and the Ridge Lord.”

Jade stared into his fathomless eyes and felt a cold shiver go down her spine. He was more powerful now than he’d been when she first met him. There was something primitive lurking in the glint of his green gaze, something dark and dangerous and deadly.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she replied.

“No matter what happens, that will never change.”

Jade smiled. She wasn’t afraid of him. She had accepted him for who and what he was. The darkness within him was to be respected, feared, but she knew he would never let it hurt the ones he loved, those under his protection. He was a powerful man – perhaps even more powerful than the Burgon – but she knew he’d never let that power rule him and would only use it to help those who needed him.

“One day, there will be peace in the megaverse,” he told her.

“One day,” she agreed.

For now, all that mattered was the love they shared. A love to ease him, soothe him, and never to hurt.

She intended on having a lifetime to heal all the wounds Ranulf MacKirnan had ever suffered.

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over seventy books. Married 42 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia, and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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