



The Garrison

the GOOD FIGHT

Esther Mitchell

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Book IV

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By

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Prologue

Zurin Five

Level Six – The Garrison

6 Months Ago

“It’s you’re bet, Nya.”

Nya Soderstrom’s olive-green eyes lifted as Amani placed the stack of clay *Laris* discs in her hand, and the smoldering heat there punched him with all-too-familiar desire. They played this side-step game with the attraction crackling between them for nearly as long as they’d been playing *Laris*. Over two years.

The Banoi game of clay betting chips was safer, by far, in Amani’s opinion. No matter the attraction between them, nor the fact that he genuinely *liked* Nya—particularly her quick wit and level head—he couldn’t act on that attraction. They were guards, partners, after all, even if he hadn’t made a blood oath years ago to avoid women, after Dinara...

He yanked his mind from the painful memory, and found himself trapped in Nya’s burning gaze as she licked those sinful lips. He stifled a groan. He always liked that Nya was as devoted to order and rules as himself. Until lately. Her recent erratic behavior jolted him with concern. What was she up to?

“Okay.” She shuffled the discs in her hand, and apprehension coiled in his gut at the feral look in her eyes. “Three *tremares* means I get to collect a debt. My time, my choice.”

His heart stalled out completely, for a second. Oh, yeah. She was *definitely* up to something. Their games were supposed to be a light-hearted way to blow off steam, and their bets never ranged beyond shift exchanges or who was cooking for whom. But she just invoked the debt... a bet even the true masters of this game rarely voiced. Debts were serious stuff.

Amani swallowed hard as he met the challenge in her direct gaze. He should deny her the bet, as was only his right. Yet, he was curious. What prompted her to initiate such a rash stake? What did she want so badly to turn their friendly game upside down like this? And with *tremares*, yet. It was a reckless move on her part. There were only five of the three-spiked designs in the deck of eighty thin clay discs. Two of those five were already on the table between them. Nya’s chances of drawing the remaining three rare chips in a single hand were astronomical.

He weighed the odds of her winning against the debt he might owe. In the end, he decided her chances were far too slim to worry about it. And perhaps, by taking the bet, she would learn he wasn't one to gamble with.

“Deal.”

Her lips curved in a smile that did strange things to his insides, as she shuffled the deck one last time, and set it firmly on the table between them, the clay discs tinkling with the force. “Your turn.”

That request shot his brows up in surprise. The bettor was supposed to turn the tiles up. She knew that. Even though she wasn't of Banoi blood, she knew the game better than most Banoi he knew. Still, this was Nya. She constantly surprised him.

Amani reached out and flipped the first tile. His stomach knotted in surprise as he looked down at the small white disc in his dark hand. A *tremare*.

His gaze shot up to hers, to find her eyes locked on the deck, even as her chest rose and fell swiftly, and a pulse beat in her pale throat. She definitely had something important riding on this. His own breathing shallowed as the tension gripped him. Slowly, he turned up another disc, and his pulse leaped as he stared down at yet another *tremare*. There was one turn left, and one *tremare* not yet turned up.

Tension crackled around them, and the electric awareness in the air was so thick, he tasted it. His hand trembled as he laid the second disc aside, and moved to flip the final tile.

The final *tremare* glared up at him.

Amani's gaze snapped back to Nya's face as a gasp left her, eyes wide. His own breath halted in his lungs. Blessed Goddess, he was in trouble now.

"I win." She said the words as if she didn't quite believe them. Her green eyes lifted, and her gaze swallowed him whole. Desire thrummed between them, and an invisible cord in his chest drew him toward her. What would she claim? Suddenly, he had to know.

"What do you want?"

Her lips inched upward slowly, in a smile that zapped adrenaline along his taut nerves. She leaned forward, until barely an inch of space remained between them, and he felt the warmth of her breath on his face. "For now? Nothing. But I'll collect on that debt, someday."

And it was then, staring into her sultry eyes, that he realized the mistake he made. He'd just given her free reign to his fantasies.

Chapter One

*Zurin Five Prison Colony
Level Six – The Garrison
72 Hours to Extinction Level Event*

Amani Viyour hit the deck with a crash and barely avoided the statue of Alikma, Goddess of Death, which clattered off his altar and missed his head by a fraction as the world shook with the force of a planet in crisis.

“Holy fuck!” He rolled to his feet, compacting his six-foot-six frame into a wary crouch as his midnight-black eyes danced over the room. “Normal tremors, my ass.”

The shockwave passed as quickly as it came, but adrenaline continued to thud in his veins. And he couldn’t blame it all on the quake. His nightmares were getting worse.

With a muttered oath, he scooped the small, golden statue from the floor and ran one dark thumb over the familiar form as he replaced Her on the altar, righting candles and the incense pillar. Hardened wax covered the smoky glass offering plate in a tarry pool, and Amani frowned. The only way that would happen was if this wasn’t the first tremor tonight. He finished his nightly ritual before bed, and the altar was immaculate when he left it. Wary fear gripped him. Was it a sign from Alikma? He settled back on his heels and stared at the Goddess as one hand rubbed over the tattoo on his muscular left bicep.

Dinara. An old and familiar pain gripped him, and his heart seized in his chest. Drawing a calming breath, he fought for spiritual balance. He dared not address Alikma without calm. Eyes closed, he drew another breath, and murmured, “Blessed Lady, You tested me once by fire. Am I so unworthy that *You* refuse me *Your* grace?”

Silence answered him, the rumbling subsided, and he knew. Alikma still did not absolve him of his transgression. He hung his head as he recalled that night in Talit’s wide Underworld, and the bile of self-loathing burned straight through his gut. The wasteland base on Remonshe, where all his dreams turned to an eternal nightmare, and Blessed Alikma’s wrath descended. Through his mind flashed the words of the old Seer from his uncle’s temple in Targala.

You walk the path of shadows, until love forged of Fire and Ice frees you.

He lived in dread of that prophecy, because love was gone from his life. It died in that wasteland, destroyed at his own order. In his sorrow, he signed his allegiance to the Duran Corporation, looking to recapture the light.

The ground beneath him shuddered again.

“Guard Amani Viyour. Come in.”

The sweet, but concerned, voice of Rhonda Alendresis filled his ears—thanks to the communication implants all the guards were required to accept upon signing their contracts with Duran. An obvious tinge of worry strained her voice. The pretty medic wasn’t his type, but her tendency to drama always made him smile.

“Good morning, Rhonda. What’s shaking?”

“The planet,” she replied without missing a beat. “The Captain wants all Garrison personnel to the Control Room for an emergency briefing.”

Amani curled back off his knees to rise to his feet in one smooth motion, frowning. Rhonda’s dramatics aside, this sounded serious.

“I’m on my way.” He reached for his uniform. When Captain Riggeur used the word ‘emergency’, it wasn’t something Amani ever took lightly. Within minutes, he was dressed in a guard’s standard gray uniform, with his utility belt, phaser, and boot knife all securely in place. To these, he added one last item. It wasn’t much to look at—just a leather band with a harmless-looking metal decal of Alikma around his right wrist. Only he knew its secret—that it housed a spike containing a special potion, capable of administering either life, or death, when used by a servant of Alikma.

With an indrawn breath, Amani crossed the room and stepped into the corridor that connected the Garrison living quarters with the catwalks above the main control room. As he walked, Amani’s mind drifted. Did the Captain’s command for a briefing have anything to do with the unusually strong tremors, lately?

He didn’t see why they needed to worry. The scientists of Duran Corporation—the largest and most politically powerful company in the galaxy—had already assured them the quakes were the normal by-product of mining, and that Zurin Five was perfectly stable. Amani had no reason to doubt them, even if the tremors were getting worse. Trepidation curled in his chest, and he sprinted toward the Control Room as another quake trembled beneath his feet.

“Whoa! Slow down, soldier!”

Amani pulled up short of plowing over the woman who stepped into the corridor directly into his path.

“Nya.” Her name escaped him on a sharp breath, as electricity sparked through him. Nya Soderstrom wasn’t a small woman, by any standards. At six-foot even she easily topped most women he knew; many of the Banoi women didn’t reach her lithesome frame. Besides being tall, with legs that didn’t quit, she had a willowy frame and lush curves that were made of pure male fantasy. He swallowed a quick breath as his eyes skimmed her from head to toe. In a galaxy dominated by a darker gene, Nya’s wheat-gold hair and fair skin were oddities. His chest tightened. She reminded him of a vibrant golden star he used to watch from his quarters on Remonshe. Only, there was softness to Nya that even the brightest stars lacked. It was that softness and the unrestrained approach she had to life that drew him in ways no star could. Amani’s hands clenched against the overpowering urge to test the silkiness of her curls and the softness of her lips.

He met her olive-green gaze, to find her eyes full of concern.

“Hey, are you okay?”

He blinked, and snapped back to reality. Damn. His hand went to his left bicep, where Dinara’s mark reminded him that he had no right to the fantasies playing out in his head. He was a bastard, for the images that crowded his mind whenever he was around Nya. And ever since that bet, six months ago, he was plagued with torrid fantasies of all the ways he’d love to pay that debt. His body reacted to the mere suggestion, and he turned his gaze away before he gave in to his desires. Desires he was forbidden to have.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He shielded his lust with moody arrogance, as he turned toward the Control Room again. "You get the call from Rhonda, too?"

She fell into step beside him as they crossed the first of a series of catwalks that linked sections of the Garrison. Amani swallowed the protest that popped to his tongue. As much as he needed the space to remind himself of all the reasons he couldn't have Nya, he couldn't exactly order her away, either. Nya was his friend, and his partner. His hand rubbed his bicep again. He just had to remember where his loyalty belonged.

"Yeah. Are you sure you're okay?"

He swore inwardly, annoyed by Nya's perceptiveness. He couldn't tell her about the tattoo, or his blood oath. Why couldn't she just let it go? "I said I'm fine, didn't I?"

"Then why are you rubbing your arm, and growling at me like a rabid moonwolf?"

He winced at her direct hit. After nearly three years of partnership, she read him far too well for comfort. And he already knew that Nya worried unsolved problems like a dog with a bone. It was part of what made her an excellent Artificial Intelligence Engineer, even though it probably cost her plenty of friendships. He dropped his hand back to his side.

"It's nothing."

She looked as if she would protest, but she spared him her inquisition when Riggeur's Second-in-Command, Lieutenant Lucia Isles, and Jonathan Thrower joined them just outside the Control Room. Alikma must be with him, after all. His brow furrowed as they entered the Control Room to find that the Captain wasn't present, yet.

"Report." Isles lost no time as she looked between Rhonda and the monitors. He had to hand it to her; Isles wore her Banoi blood well. Amani's gaze flickered to Nya again, and he couldn't help but compare the two women. Isles was hard, tough, and determined. Nya was softer, more compassionate, and far too logical for her own good.

"Where is everyone?" Isles demanded.

"That's the problem." Rhonda nodded toward the monitors, and Amani nearly smiled at the bright slash of color in her hair. She just couldn't resist breaking the rules. "It appears that there's no one between here and the surface."

Amani's gut knotted. He opened his mouth to demand an answer, but Isles beat him to it. "No one?"

"No civilians."

Everyone's gaze went to the AI system that hung in the high-vaulted ceiling and ran throughout the facility to regulate the life-support systems, and clothed and fed the hundred thousand prisoners held in the prison beneath their feet. Amani's gaze flashed to Nya again, and he saw the concerned frown on her face. This had to be killing her, wondering what happened to her precious AI system. He remembered clearly when the AI's diagnostic program developed a bug the previous year. Nya fretted like a mother whose much-loved child developed a terminal illness. She wouldn't leave the AI until she had the problem solved, and the computer was running in perfect calibration, again. That dedication was part of what he admired most about her. It was the same kind of devotion he strove for in his own life. Passion drove Nya's dedication. She understood computers and circuitry, and even this complex, fully automated facility system, better than she understood most humans. He often wondered why a woman with so much passion could only connect with cold, passionless

machines. But every time he worked up the courage to ask, she shut down. He had too much respect for her to push the issue.

"Skipper, is there an emergency in the upper levels?" This was from Isles.

"All is as it should be, Miss Isles." The annoyingly cheery voice of the AI Nya had long-ago named 'Skipper' filled the room. "Nothing to report."

A grimace crossed Rhonda's face. "Skipper told me the same thing."

Nya was strangely silent. Amani frowned. What did she know that no one else here did?

"Captain Riggeur requests that I send some teams up to the surface to check what has happened." Rhonda looked worried, too, though the way her eyes kept darting toward the Control Room door told him it wasn't the quakes that troubled her.

"Good. But first, Thrower, you check for any biohazards in the upper levels."

Amani knew what Lieutenant Isles was thinking. The quakes could be caused by an explosion in the mine or labs, and if the Duran people all succumbed to a noxious chemical spill, that would certainly explain why no one alerted them or started evacuation procedures. Anxiety twisted in Amani's side. If there was a chemical leak in the labs above them, there might not be any hope of survival left for anyone. The Duran Corporation labs lay directly between the prison and the surface. There was no other way out.

Jonathan Thrower examined the screens, and his news furrowed Amani's brow in consternation. "No sign of anything."

"Okay. Nya, Amani, Javel, and Xerna, rig up and go top-side." Amani straightened at Isles' tone. He didn't mind putting himself at risk, even if there turned out to be some deadly poison loose up there. His life was expendable; Alikma already marked him to die. But the idea of Nya's beauty and fiery spirit extinguished like that... He opened his mouth to object, but a sharp glance from Nya made him think better of it. She clearly wasn't about to be left out. He sealed his lips over the objection with a disgruntled snort, as Isles continued. "Be careful. Report back what you find."

And that was it. Regardless of his attempts to prevent it, his nightmares were about to become reality once again.

Chapter Two

*Lift between Levels Six and Five
70 hours to E.L.E.*

I'm okay. I can get through this. Nya forced her breath in and out evenly, and repeated her favorite mantra to herself as the lift rose steadily toward the unknown. It was hell enough to sense the seismic changes going on beneath her feet, and know that Skipper's programming was compromised. However, with Amani's eyes burning two laser-point holes into her body, she couldn't stop the restless itch that wound through her. Her memory flashed to the debt she still had yet to claim. She wished she could be bold enough just to make her demand. But every time she met those midnight eyes, the words died on her lips. She wasn't about to claim something he didn't want to give. So she waited. Only problem was, at this rate, she might be waiting forever.

She cast her partner a sideways glance, and frowned as his gaze shifted immediately away, and he rubbed his left bicep again. He did that a lot, lately. *Too* often. She wasn't a medic, but her mind played with all kinds of possible scenarios—each one more frightening than the next. Did he have an old injury that pained him? She couldn't recall if he ever mentioned a wound like that and he only started with the arm rubbing about six months ago. Her throat tightened. Did he have some degenerative medical condition this was a symptom of? He was too young for heart problems, wasn't he? Maybe some kind of genetic defect...

"Are you sure you're okay? Maybe you should have let Rhonda take a look—"

"At what?"

Amani's abrupt attitude stung, but there was no way in Rejnard's wide, frozen realm that she would ever admit that. They'd been partners long enough that she recognized his attitude as an escape. Whenever he acted this way, he was running away from something he didn't want to discuss. Amani shifted, and his arm brushed against the side of her breast in the tight confines of the lift. Nya clamped her jaw shut on a gasp as sensation vibrated through her. Hunger curled through her like smoke, powerful and insubstantial at the same time. Her gaze flew to his face again, and the heat in his eyes tipped her world off-balance. She swayed toward him, her body tightening in reaction from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

Abruptly, Amani cleared his throat and shifted his gaze forward. Nya reeled with the loss of connection, even as she faced forward, and a flush stole up her neck as she caught Xerna's sympathetic gaze. Clearly, even the Karatzin woman thought she was out of her league in pursuing Amani. And maybe she was right. After all, what did Nya know about relationships? Her mother might claim that passion was in their people's blood—the natural response to life in a frozen wasteland—but Nya never felt it before she came to Zurin Five. Instead, she saw her parents'—her mother and adoptive father—relationship, and she knew a marriage of convenience when she saw it. And she knew who was to blame. Lilliana Valgerd sacrificed her passion for a child she should have rightly aborted, and Nya loathed the lust that birthed her, the bastard born of violence.

Nya didn't often allow herself those memories, or the feelings of complete isolation. She left those feelings behind, along with a girl far too aware of what others saw when they looked at her to ever love herself. For the better part of a decade, she consoled herself with the knowledge that not a soul in the star lanes knew who she was, or what she'd done. She no longer felt alone, or afraid. Not until she came to Zurin Five.

Nya's gaze slid back to Amani as she recalled her first meeting with her dour-faced partner. He was so grim standing there in the docking hanger with that unreadable expression on his face. And, like every other challenge she encountered, Nya was determined to find out why. Yet, even with three years of partnership, she knew precious little more about his past now than she had the day they met. And every tidbit she learned, she guarded like a hoarded treasure. Still, even after all this time, the pain of rejection stung. So she told herself she could be content with his friendship, even if her body ached for more. She was, after all, more than a product of her sire's sins. Self-control was all she had left.

That, and the debt Amani Viyour owed her. A slow smile curved her lips at the mental reminder. No matter what made her, she wasn't anyone's doormat, and she still had the upper hand in their little stand-off. She knew her partner, and his surliness covered emotions he would be mortified to realize she could see. She wasn't afraid of his attitude. With that in mind, she met his glare head-on. "Your arm. You keep rubbing it."

"You can't leave anything alone, can you?" He growled the words, even as his hand dropped back to his side. She watched in a blend of fear and fascination as his hands clenched into fists. He wouldn't strike out—Amani was too controlled to ever lash out—but she lived for the moments he reacted with emotion, and feared the return of his coldness. She licked her lips, and heard his voice turn gravelly as he mocked, "You just have to fix everything, don't you, princess?"

Her gaze locked with his as the first shot of true fear she ever felt in his presence struck her. *Princess*. Gods of her ancestors, what did he mean? Surely, he couldn't have found out anything about her past—she used her grandmother's name to avoid even the chance of discovery. She spent a lot of time and money securing her anonymity for a reason, no one could ever know where to find the prodigal daughter of the Norjardin throne.

She saw the sardonic gleam in her partner's eyes, and her stomach pitched with same force as the quakes that threatened their lives. He knew! He had to know, to use that term, and yet... There was no recognition of her secret in those midnight eyes.

With a grateful exhalation, she relaxed. Amani didn't know the truth, thank all the Gods. He was just pushing her buttons, and she reacted. Well, he should know better than to push Nya Soderstrom. She pushed back.

"It's my job to fix things, Amani. I know there's a reason you keep doing that."

"And it's none of your business."

He could have slapped her with less force than those words. Reeling, Nya retreated. There really wasn't anything to discuss, because she knew he was right. Unless he chose to tell her—which she already knew he'd never do—then it really wasn't any of her business. She opened her mouth, and closed it with a snap.

"Uh, kids..." Javel's amused voice broke in, startling Nya. She forgot they weren't alone. Blessed Tiana, how could she be stupid enough to press Amani for answers in front of other guards? No wonder he refused to discuss the issue. She turned her gaze toward Javel,

to find the Karatzin man grinning broadly. "Hate to break up the entertainment, but we need a game plan."

Nya sealed her mouth over a smart-assed response. Her game plans involved Amani and a hefty dose of truth serum. Damn it. Why did the man constantly have to be the strong one? Just once, she wanted to see that tough exterior crack, to glimpse the passion that lurked underneath...

"Someday..." she threatened in an aside she knew only Amani would understand.

She saw him tense, and her heart nearly stopped as she swore she caught the flicker of interest in his eyes. She never imagined that her bet could affect him at all. Could she be wrong? She dismissed the thought in the next instant as his dark gaze danced from her to the other two guards, and back to her once more. The gleam of relief in his eyes irked her. If he was so attracted to her, then why did he suddenly act as if she had a contagious disease?

"Great!" Amani responded to Javel with more good humor than necessary, and Nya's eyes narrowed. "Nya, you and Xerna take the Community Center and business offices on the next two floors. Javel and I'll check out the living quarters here, and then head on up to the labs on Level Two. We'll meet up at the transport dock on Level One."

"Sounds good to me," Xerna spoke up for the first time, sounding equally relieved, even as Javel uttered a dark, "Now, wait just one damned minute!"

Nya knew exactly how he felt. She wasn't about to let her death-happy partner out of her sight. Lately, his morose fascination with dangerous situations more than worried her, and she frankly didn't trust him to Javel's lackadaisical care. No, she couldn't let Amani go without her.

"Wrong answer, Viyour." She went toe-to-toe with him, and watched his eyes widen at her glare. "You know the Captain's rules. One male, one female, at all times!"

He recovered swiftly; she gave him that. "Then Xerna can come with me."

"Hell, no." Javel's expression was dangerous, and the possessive light in his eyes surprised Nya, before her gaze turned to Xerna, and the panic in the other woman's eyes told her the rest of the story. So, that's the way the wind blew, huh? She winced, not envying Xerna her estrus cycles. She spent a year on Arinzal, in Karatzin-space. She saw what happened when a Karatzin female went into estrus, and the loss of control looked terrifying. Xerna had to be miserable.

"Why not?" Amani demanded of the other man.

"You have your own partner, Viyour. Xerna and I go together."

The Karatzin woman snorted, but offered no other input. Nya cast her a pitying look before she turned her attention back to her own partner. All of a sudden, Amani was just a little too desperate to get away from her. And if that strange light in his eyes when he looked at her was the reason... Damn his stubborn streak! Why couldn't he make this easy for her? She wanted him, but she couldn't just tell him. She wasn't bold like Isles or Xerna, as much as she might like to be. Frustration tripped through her, and she met his wary gaze with a head-on glare. She saw the exact moment he resigned himself to her company by the shadows in his pitch black eyes, and her heart plummeted. Maybe he didn't want her, after all.

"Fine," he allowed after a long moment. "Nya and I will head up to the Community Center."

With that, he turned on his heel as the lift came to a stop. He jerked open the metal, cage-like door, and strode off down the corridor, rubbing his upper arm like a man possessed.

"Hey!" Javel swung toward Nya, his expression confused. "Where's he going?"

Nya sighed as her gaze tracked Amani. She couldn't figure out what was bugging him, lately. "Insane, most likely. Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

She grabbed up her pack and followed Amani. The survival pack was a nuisance, at times, but she knew it was necessary on Zurin Five. If a childhood in the frozen wasteland of Omri-Lodus taught her anything, it was to be prepared for the inevitable cold of surface life.

Pack slung over her shoulder, she jogged to catch up with Amani's long-legged, military stride.

"Hey, wait up!"

He ignored her. If anything, his pace sped up, until he was nearly double-timing it.

"Don't do me any favors." Nya muttered, and nearly ran smack into his lust-inducing backside as he pulled to an abrupt halt, and whirled around.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

She narrowed her green eyes. "I don't recall hearing the Captain make it a *suggestion*, do you?"

"Damn it, Nya! All we're doing is chasing our tails." His vehemence startled her, and she backed up an involuntary step. "We're going to find out that Skipper's wrong. The Duran people are all here. They have to be."

Nya frowned as much at his choice of words as the desperation of his tone. He sounded more worried than she ever heard from him, before. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. She sighed heavily. "Skipper's not wrong."

"How do you know?"

She rolled her eyes. Great Lodrun's Flame, he really didn't get it!

"I'm the AI Engineer, Amani. If Skipper's calibration was off even a millinotch, my implant would tell me."

"Still..." He sounded hesitant, as if he didn't want to believe her. But the look in his eyes told her he at least considered the possibility, even as he went back to rubbing his blasted arm. "I'm sure it's nothing."

A small tremor shook the floor, and Nya planted her feet against the rocking motion. As the roll stopped, she cocked Amani a skeptical glance.

"Nothing, huh?" She looked back over her shoulder. "So why'd we get off the lift in the living quarters, again?"

Amani followed her gaze, and swore beneath his breath when his gaze dropped instead to trace the line of her neck down into the collar of her uniform shirt. His own collar strangled him as his mind painted images of what her shirt might cover, and he swore inwardly. This wasn't working. Nya distracted him and, even worse, he couldn't stop wondering if and when she would collect that silly debt. He was desperate to know what she'd claim. That desperation, and the lack of sleep it caused, left him irritable and terrified to get too close to her. Still, it drove him crazy. If he had hair, he'd be pulling it out by now. Since he kept his

head shaved in the tradition of a devout Alikamite, he settled for scrubbing one hand over his head and muttering a string of epithets in his native tongue.

"Let's go." He headed back for the lift, his stride determined. The sooner they finished this sweep, the sooner he could put distance between himself and Nya, and remember that he was supposed to be celibate.

Yeah, right.

He glanced at her long legs, keeping stride with his brutal pace, and then up at the short crop of blonde curls that danced around her face, and his gut bottomed out. Shit. He was in trouble, with a capital 'T'. Ever since she made that bet, and then refused to claim her winnings, he wasn't able to think about Nya in any way that didn't involve lots of skin and body heat.

Another small tremor shook the floor, and Nya's hands shot out in a reflex action. The touch of her soft hand burned his arm through his uniform sleeve, and sent a jolt through Amani that had nothing to do with shock or electricity. His pulse kicked into overdrive, and his gaze flew to hers. Those eyes—so green—swallowed him whole. They reminded him of his uncle's Terran olive groves, back home on Ramali. He spent many a youthful day sneaking handfuls of the ripe, tangy olives. And the woman before him was just as forbidden as those olives, so delicious and hard not to sneak a taste. Hunger burned through his gut, and he swallowed a rasping breath. He tried so hard to follow the rules... Heat flared in her eyes, and he froze.

Dinara.

"Damn." Amani jerked away from Nya's touch with that muttered oath, the spell broken as shame pelted him. How could he be so disloyal? How could he forget what he did?

"Well, *that's* hardly complimentary." Forced humor laced Nya's voice, and he winced to know that, beneath the strain, she was hurt. The voice of reason whispered that he shouldn't care if he hurt her. But he did.

Amani stalked off toward the lift that would take him up to the Duran Corporation's shopping and entertainment hub. He told himself he didn't rightly care if Nya followed or not, and ignored the voice that called him a liar.

He entered the lift just as she caught up to him, her pretty face twisted in a scowl and her green eyes flashing with fury.

"You can't just leave me behind, you know."

He winced, and knew she could tell he wished just that. Only, she had no idea why. She didn't know how afraid he was for her, or how much he dreaded being the one who hurt her. Damn it, couldn't she see that she deserved better than him? As much as the knowledge galled him, he wasn't about to prove how undisciplined he really was at her expense. Instead, he braced for battle, and lobbed the first volley. "You want to play by the book, Soderstrom? Fine. But we play by *my* rules."

"Like hell!" She drew herself up to her full six-foot stature, and Amani sucked in a breath against the reminder of how well she'd fit him. Dinara was small for a Banoi woman, and even hugs were physically awkward. He told himself he didn't care; he loved her, and could deal with the awkwardness.

His gaze skimmed Nya's toned, tall body, and he knew he was a liar. Part of what attracted him most to Nya, physically, was her height. She wouldn't be awkward to hold; he

already knew she'd fit him perfectly. His gaze burnt into her as he was swept away by the familiar fantasy of that golden head on his dark shoulder, and all that pale skin writhing against his as he burnt out his lust between her welcoming thighs...

Amani swore beneath his breath as he yanked his mind from the too-tempting fantasy, before he gave in and backed her against the wall of the lift. His hand went instantly to his arm. Alikma blind him if he dared forget his place again! Every day Nya failed to collect on her debt, the fantasies grew more relentless, and he feared what he might do.

He met Nya's concerned gaze, and told himself he didn't care that she worried about him. No way would he acknowledge the twist of relief in his chest whenever she turned that look on him. He was supposed to die; he shouldn't be relieved that she was there to save him.

"Are you coming?" He couldn't help the bite of his words. Being alone with Nya, even in the midst of a search, was the last thing in the Universe he wanted to do, right now. She made him forget his oath.

Nya's troubled gaze cleared as she stepped into the lift, and Amani frowned as he caught sight of that infernal backpack slung over her shoulder, again. What was in that damned thing, anyway? Nya never went anywhere outside of the Garrison without it. Even Captain Riggeur's displeasure with her refusal to abide by the uniform rules didn't faze Nya. Yet, she never opened it.

"What's in that thing?"

She shot him a surprised look as the lift started upward, and the shocked look in her olive eyes twisted his lips in a wry grin. Did she think he never noticed? Then, with a small shrug, she faced forward.

"My gear."

He frowned. Nya had implants in her brain that allowed her to communicate directly with the AI system, and microcomputer jacks concealed beneath special skin tabs on the backs of her hands, to allow her to access to the restricted conduit systems. What the hell other kind of gear would an AI engineer possibly need?

"Gear?"

She nodded, her expression impassive. "Surface survival gear."

Now he was really confused. Through his mind flashed the standard EVA gear—the yellow gear weighed a ton. Who carried bulky EVA gear with them everywhere they went? And how did she get it to fit into that tiny pack? "Why? Duran supplies that."

"Thanks, but I'd rather not trust my life to substandard equipment developed by a company from a planet that sees less than a metric foot of snow every lunar year."

"What are you talking about?"

She faced him, and the look in her eyes told him she didn't want to have this conversation. There were secrets in those green depths that surprised him. Nya was so open that he never stopped to consider there was something important he didn't know about his partner. It was an irrational assumption, considering the secrets he held onto, but she just came across as so naïve and trusting, that he couldn't imagine she harbored any devastating secrets.

"I grew up on a planet that spends nearly the entire lunar year under a layer of ice and snow. Trust me. That Duran-issued EVA crap won't hold up longer than an hour or two once

you get onto the surface. They don't know what it takes to survive these conditions, and those suits were made for other extremes, not an ice-world."

"Great." Just his luck, Nya proved to be not only intelligent and beautiful, but also experienced. Was there anything she couldn't do? Still, he had to admit she had a unique skill set, and it would be foolish to ignore her. "Nice to know what I have to look forward to."

She flashed him a grin. "That's nothing. Wait until you see the bearcats."

Amani's breath froze in his lungs, and he told himself it was surprise—hell, fear would even be better than the truth—that made breathing difficult, and not the mischievous curl of those made-for-sin lips. He forced himself to draw a normal breath as the lift came to a stop. As he stepped out into the Community Center's main concourse, he barely noticed the transplanted trees and grass or the artificial atmosphere. His attention was riveted on the woman at his side.

"I thought bearcats were a myth." He silently congratulated himself on his even, nonchalant tone.

She laughed. "They're—"

Her words cut off on a sharp gasp as the floor beneath them heaved and rolled, nearly knocking her off her feet. Her hands shot out, and she sought to balance herself, even as Amani braced himself on spacer's legs against the bucking durancrete. The contact of Nya's hand on his arm as the quake let loose sent a shock through him that nearly unbalanced Amani. The floor tilted, and Nya loosed a small cry as the quake tossed her off her feet, and she slammed into his body.

Amani groaned as the sharp effect of the contact radiated through him, followed by a shaft of inappropriate desire as his body registered her soft curves. Then, over her head, he saw something that plunged fear through him. His heart lodged in his throat as he watched the concourse windows balloon out.

"Get down!" He roared the words even as he dropped to the madly bucking floor, his body pressing Nya's to the cracking slate causeway as every muscle tensed against inevitable pain. He winced at the cry of surprise that left her as the world exploded in a shower of glass. Tiny pellets rained down on his back. He focused on their sharp sting, to avoid acknowledging the soft press of Nya's body against his, and tensed as he bit down on a groan of pain.

The quake was mercifully brief, and Amani relaxed as the world righted itself and the deadly rain ceased. He opened his eyes, and the world tilted again as he stared into Nya's. Was this an aftershock? His breath backed up in his lungs as the warm softness of her curves melded to him, and his treacherous body remembered his fantasies, and their bet.

Adrenaline flooded his veins, and his heart sped into hyperdrive, yet her olive-green gaze froze him in place. It took superhuman effort to drag his eyes away, and he swore as they landed instead on her full, ripe lips just as her tongue darted out to turn them into glistening temptation. Hunger stabbed low in his gut, and he knew that, as close as their bodies pressed together, she had to feel what she did to him.

"Amani." His name, in that soft, husky murmur, blew the last of his resolve apart. He was a slave to temptation. Without another thought, he lowered his head, even as she arched toward him.

The world plunged into sudden darkness, and a small cry of surprise tore from Nya. The spell broke and Amani retreated, for once glad for the darkness. If he couldn't see those siren eyes, maybe he could salvage his oath.

"The quake must have knocked out the electrical generator."

He heard a shuffle of motion before Nya's concerned voice reached him through the inky blackness. "I hope not. Besides, the AI is on a backup. If the power source malfunctioned, Skipper would sound an—"

An ear-splitting siren drowned out her words, and Amani blinked rapidly as red lights suddenly strobed in the darkness. Nya clapped her hands over her ears with a wince, even as his own rang with the Community Center's amplification of the siren.

The klaxon died as quickly as it began, leaving only the harsh red lights of the warning system to blink at them like some maniacal monster. The stunned, horrified expression that settled over Nya's face would be comical, if not for the seriousness of their situation.

"Tell me something, Nya," he said in a slow, calm voice, even as his heart thumped loud and fast in his ears. "What happens to the prison if the backup goes down?"

Chapter Three

*Level 4 – Community Center
70 Hours to E.L.E.*

Nya swallowed hard at the forced lightness in Amani's deep drawl. Panic zinged along her nerves, to mix with the heightened endorphin level their close encounter caused, and for the first time in her life, she couldn't think what to do next. She was frozen, held captive by the horror of his laconic suggestion.

Finally, her body reminded her that breathing was necessary, and she sucked in a deep draught of air, and barely resisted the urge to cough as oxygen filled her deprived lungs. Then, in the harsh red strobe of the warning lights, she stared at Amani, and swore she looked into the face of one of Reisa's alluring fire spirits – beautiful and forbidden at the same time. With another indrawn breath, she found her voice at last.

"If the backup generator goes off-line, it causes a system-wide failure in the alarm grid, and we may lose contact with the AI in the levels below the maintenance shop on twelve. The protocols are sketchy. To be honest, I don't think anyone contemplated the possibility of both power systems shutting down."

She knew she didn't need to tell him that losing surveillance and control contact in the lowest levels of the prison was catastrophic enough. Levels thirteen through nineteen housed the most violent offenders in the galaxy. From the turquoise-clad violent thieves to the crimson-clad serial killers, those levels held the worst of Andromeda system's criminal minds, and power failure meant they were loose in the prison. She fought the fear that clutched her chest, and gasped as another dreadful realization shot through her. "Great Tharjin's spear!"

Amani, in the process of consulting his compad for life-signs, spared her a glance. "What, now?"

"Amani, the shutdown protocol stored in Skipper's memory bank is incomplete. It only covers when main power fails."

He blinked at her, and the unconcerned expression on his face told her he didn't grasp the problem. She loosed a small sound of frustration. "If the main power grid goes offline, the first things shut down are all systems not directly related to containment, like maintenance, medical, and ..."

"And?"

"The food delivery system. It's considered non-essential."

She watched his eyes widen, and knew the exact moment he finally understood what she meant. He swore sharply in his native tongue. "The Styx!"

She nodded. "If we can't get the main power for the AI back up within the next few hours, the most violent prisoners in the star system will be in an unstoppable withdrawal haze."

Back when the AI was first programmed, the concept of system-wide dual power failure was an idea no one dared contemplate. No one wanted to consider the ramifications. Styx was a drug made from crystals mined by Duran Corporation there on Zurin Five. The

drug had multiple uses – some more ominous than others, with the worst being a street form called Reefer. Duran used small amounts of cut Styx to control the prison population. They missed the highly addictive sedative into the prisoners' food, and while Nya didn't condone drugging people against their will, in the case of violent offenders, she was cognizant that it was the only way to keep them under control.

The problem with a prison population addicted to Styx was in what happened when the drug—or the food laced with it—ran out. Withdrawal from Styx was no picnic for a normal, well-adjusted adult. That definition didn't apply to most of the prisoners. Especially not the ones below Level Twelve. They were already violent offenders, and if they started going into withdrawal, they'd go from deadly to psychotic. In a word, they'd become uncontrollable.

"Amani..."

"Hmm?" He lifted one brow, his attention more focused on his compad than on her.

"How long does it take for withdrawal to set in?"

He shrugged. "A few hours, I imagine. It probably varies by body weight, mental state, and the level of addiction. Why?"

"Because someone has to shut the lower levels down before those prisoner's get loose."

He made a noncommittal sound, and she looked at him, irritated, to find his attention fixed on his compad with a scowl.

"What's wrong?"

"I hate that Duran didn't require its scientists to have their ID chips implanted with trackers. There's no way to tell if anyone's here, without a visual inspection, and in this blasted red light, everything looks the same."

"Not entirely true." Nya touched a hand to the back of her neck, just below the base of her skull, where the activation chip for her implanted AI wiring was. She knew people thought it was weird that she allowed someone to implant her brain with all sorts of microchips and processors. Her family certainly never understood why she went off to University and agreed to be part of the experimental protocol. They expected her to fill her assigned slot, and that space didn't have any room for science or technology. Only, Nya wasn't satisfied with being the family misfit. She had a thirst for something more, and she found it in the technology her people shunned. Nya loved computers. They didn't need emotions, and she envied them that detachment. So she agreed to have the implants, which heightened her logical processing centers, and enhanced all five of her senses with a series of AI linkups and Virtual Reality chips that allowed her to turn the ability on and off with the touch of a finger. Now, if only she could find a way to do the same with the feelings swirling inside her chest.

System activated, she scanned the near-darkness around them for heat signatures that would denote a life form. Nothing. Not that she was surprised. She didn't really expect to find anything, and her search range was limited to as far as she could actually see with her Norjarden night sight, anyway.

"There's nothing living on the concourse," she informed Amani brusquely. "We'll have to check each shop individually, though."

Amani muttered something under his breath, and her brow furrowed.

"What?"

"I said, I doubt anyone shops in an earthquake."

She sighed. Since he brought the issue up... "I doubt any of the Duran people are here, at all. But orders are orders."

His curious gaze made her uncomfortable, and her body heated under that laser-direct stare.

"Why do you think no one's here?"

She cast him a surprised glance, sure he had to be yanking her chain. Her eyes met his, and widened as she saw the wariness there. Not for the first time since they met, she wondered what he was really thinking.

"Duran Corporation's not noted for its loyalty to its non-essential employees. They've closed down several facilities and left any employees they didn't immediately need stranded for months. I think," she grabbed for a wall as the floor trembled and rolled, pausing in her theory until the small tremor passed. "They knew the planet was destabilizing. They did one last mine, and then cleared out everyone they could make use of elsewhere. That just left us, and the prisoners. We're expendable."

Disbelief darkened his eyes, and her heart stalled out in fear. "There's a difference between delaying transfers and just abandoning human beings on a planet that's getting ready to explode, Nya. That doesn't make sense."

"Why? Because I happen to believe Duran isn't above sacrificing a hundred thousand plus people to preserve their bottom line?"

"You make them sound mercenary." He shrugged. "I don't believe they are."

She rolled her eyes. "I forgot. You're a company man. Let me ask you something, Viyour. Did you sign a special contract that demands blind faith when you joined on?"

"I signed the same contract as everyone else," he returned tersely as he checked the first store, and frowned at his compad again.

Nya battled down the surge of annoyance that begged her to beat her partner over his stubborn head with something hard until he came to his senses. But she knew that was pointless. In three years of partnership, she'd learned one indisputable fact about Amani. When he made up his mind, it took an act of deity to change it. And since she made no claims to godhood... Nya turned her attention to the storefronts, determined not to acknowledge the sharp twist of pain at knowing that all her data counted for nothing. No one was listening, least of all Amani.

As he turned away and headed for the first of the storefronts, Nya froze, and a ragged gasp of surprise tore from her.

"Amani!"

He cast a frown over his shoulder. "What?"

"Your back..." She stared in horror at the mass of bloody slashes and spots that scored his muscular back through the gray uniform. Crimson stained the ragged edges of the tears. More blood trickled down his neck from a cut on the back of his head. "You're hurt!"

He shrugged, and she caught the flicker of pain in his eyes, this time. "It's nothing."

"Stop it, Amani." She grasped his arm, halting him when he would have moved away. She wasn't about to let him trivialize what had to be painful. He was hurt protecting *her*. "You're in pain. We need to find the concourse infirmary, and—"

“Let it go, Nya.” His quiet tone yanked her gaze to his in surprise. The grim determination in his eyes tightened her throat. “Every minute we delay for a few scratches is time we lose in finding a way off this planet. I’ll heal.”

“But...”

His lips flickered in a brief smile, and he reached to touch her cheek gently, the motion freezing Nya’s argument on an indrawn breath, even before he said, “No buts, Nya. If I need help, I’ll ask for it.”

The rest of the Community Center went with very little communication. Nya withdrew more with each area they searched, only to come up empty. Amani told himself he didn’t care if Nya sulked the whole way to the surface. He preferred the ice princess detached and unconcerned about his sorry hide. He squelched the tiny voice that called him a liar.

At a storefront halfway down the concourse, Nya finally broke her one-word vocabulary with a disgusted, “We’re wasting our time. The first bad tremors hit in the middle of the night. Who shops then?”

Pretty much what he thought, as well.

“Our next stop is the offices. Think we’ll find anyone there?”

“To be honest,” she wiped one arm across her forehead. “I don’t think we’ll find anyone between here and the surface. They’ve already left.” She swiped her brow again. “Is it warm in here?”

Amani frowned. It didn’t feel warm to him, though he had to admit the air felt a little close, like there was a problem with the air circulation system on this level. Concern wriggled through him. Was Nya ill? In three years, he never heard her voice a single complaint.

“Nya? Are you okay?”

Her answering nod was vague, distracted, as if her mind was somewhere else. Suddenly, she froze in her tracks, and her eyes took on a blank look Amani immediately recognized. She was processing data from the AI. After a moment, she blinked rapidly, and her brow furrowed as if she was trying to make sense of the data she received. She confirmed it when, in a frightened voice, she whispered, “Skipper’s sick.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She treated the damned AI like a much-loved child, instead of the machine it was. He knew she was connected to the machine, but this was ridiculous!

“Skipper’s a *machine*, Nya. Machines don’t get sick.”

She flashed him an annoyed look, and carefully enunciated, “Skipper is *not* ‘just a machine.’ It’s a complicated Artificial Intelligence system, and they quite often develop personalities of their own, as the program learns and grows. Besides—”

The ground heaved beneath them, cutting off Nya’s diatribe and reminding them both that they didn’t have time for a discussion about the AI.

“Whatever you say. Let’s go!” Amani grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the lift.

“We can’t go that way,” she protested. “The elevator doesn’t work.”

He ignored her. At the lift, he laid his hand on the access scanner.

Nothing happened.

He frowned, and tried again.

Again, the scanner remained dark. Not even a flicker of activity.

"See?" Nya sounded peeved. "I told you, Skipper has a virus."

He shot her a disgruntled look as they headed for the other end of the concourse, and the emergency stairs. "Why didn't you just say that in the first place?"

"I did."

"No. You said the machine was sick."

"The AI mainframe's been corrupted. I think heat got into the sensor conduits in one of the lower levels."

Amani didn't respond. There wasn't really anything else to say about it. At the door to the stairs, he laid his hand on the identity scanner. The scanners were a redundancy on these levels, as far as he was concerned. Only Duran personnel and guards had any access above Level Seven, and they all had the same access to stairwells and corridors. Thankfully, entrances to the stairs from this level only required one guard's palm signature. Exiting on the next level, however, would require both, though why was a mystery to him.

At the next level, where Duran's business officers were, both guards laid their hands on the readers, and waited until it approved their genetic coding, and the door slid open. Amani sighed to himself, and decided to avoid any discussion of the AI's health. The last thing he wanted to do was argue with Nya.

Nya didn't pause for a beat as she surged ahead, poking her head into one dark office after another along the right hand side of the corridor, with a stream of muttered, "Nothing", "Nope", "No one."

Amani shook his head in amusement, then started up the other side. Nya was so down-to-earth that he often forgot she was linked directly into the AI. Changes in the AI would filter through her implants. If heat got into the conduits earlier, that could explain why she felt hot. He was an idiot. Nya had the knowledge and connection to know what was going on in the facility at all times. He should listen to her when she shared that knowledge, even if she did it in a disjointed way. The problem was that he had to focus on trying to ignore her smooth curves and unconscious sensuality.

The first two rooms held nothing of interest. He heard Nya down the corridor as he ducked into a third room, and came to an abrupt halt. A surveillance monitor in the center of the room blinked at him. He squinted at the blurred images and took a step closer. The uneven feed crossed his eyes. He shook his head to clear his vision, and a frown pulled across his aquiline features. There wasn't any sound, but his gaze narrowed as he recognized the guard on the tape. That was Javel Maquand, speaking with Dr. Avelard. And it didn't look like a friendly chat. Avelard looked anything but happy about the intrusion, and Javel's devil-may-care posture wouldn't fool a blind man.

Their conversation escalated, and just as quickly, everyone relaxed. Javel and Avelard shook hands, and Javel backed off as the good doctor hurried for a waiting transport. *Wait a minute!*

Amani's stomach turned over in dread. If Avelard left, so did the rest of the scientists and, he'd stake his life, all the rest of the Duran personnel. Not a thing went on up there without the anal-retentive doctor's approval...

“Amani!”

Nya’s cry pulled him from his thoughts, and he crossed the corridor. Confusion rattled him as he poked his head into the first office, and found it empty.

“Nya! Where are you?”

“Here. In Dr. Avelard’s office.”

That couldn’t be good. He followed the sound of her voice down the corridor, and came to an abrupt halt in the doorway of Dr. Avelard’s office.

“What’s—?” He took in the haphazard scatter of furniture and equipment, and his eyes widened in surprise. This was supposed to be a business office, not a lab! The labs were all up one more level. Except for Avelard’s office. A lab table took up half of the office, complete with heating elements, test tubes, separation apparatus, and a rack of chemical jars. Most of the glass was broken, and scattered over the table and floor.

Nya, crouched in the center of a pool of broken glass and Alikma only knew what kind of toxic chemicals, looked up at him with a worried eyes.

“This isn’t right.”

“No shit,” he agreed. “What is all of this stuff?”

Before he could stop her, she dipped her fingers into a pool of liquid, and brought it near her face. Her nose crinkled in disgust, and she wiped her hand clean on a lab coat that lay discarded on the floor near her. “Smells like Quanisweed. They use that to make reefer, don’t they?”

He frowned. “I wouldn’t know.”

She stood, and her hand skimmed the digital unit on Avelard’s desk. Glass crunched under her booted feet and she made a slow circuit of the room before looking at him again. Her eyes were full of silent rage.

“Dr. Avelard hacked the AI.”

He stiffened, the image from the monitor flashing through his head. Whatever was going on around here, Avelard was clearly up to her neck in it. Still, there wasn’t enough proof to even decide what was going on, let alone hurl accusations at one of Duran’s most prominent scientific minds. He couldn’t believe Nya had the gall to accuse Avelard of first mixing the highly-illegal reefer, and now of hacking a hack-proof system. And all without proof. It was her passion talking, and his chest grew tight as he stared into her flashing eyes. He had to end this, before he got in too deep, and the best way to drive her away was to get in her face.

“You don’t know that.”

“She’s the only one who could, Amani. Only she and I have the system access codes to the main internal command module.” She moved back to his side, her expression somber as she laid one hand on his arm. “And someone’s been shutting sectors of the command module against me for weeks.”

“How do you know the AI isn’t shutting itself down?”

“Because the AI has protocols, Amani. The programming is set up to go through a specific series of steps, to shut down any sector of the system. I’ve tracked a series of unauthorized locks, outside of protocol, over the last two months.”

He frowned. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I *did*. Captain Riggeur said we didn’t have enough evidence to prove who was hacking the system, and told me to keep digging.” She shook her head, her expression disgruntled. “But I didn’t have any luck. Whoever it was knew what they were doing. I wasn’t able to track down the source.”

“Maybe it’s just a malfunction, then. You said Skipper has a virus...”

“This isn’t a virus, Amani.” She gestured to the room at large. “And neither are Skipper’s system errors. It’s sabotage.”

Everything he knew told him that she was right about this. What Nya said made too much sense to ignore. Hell, a blind man could see Avelard was up to something. And if Avelard was corrupt... He didn’t want to contemplate what that might mean.

Chapter Four

*Level Three – Duran Business Offices
69 Hours to E.L.E.*

Blessed Old Ones, not again! Nya tensed as a deep, grinding rumble rolled beneath her feet, the herald of yet another quake. Before she could react, it was on them, and the world heaved as if it meant to fly apart.

“Shit!” Even expected, the force of the quake tossed her off her feet and toward the bulkhead, tearing the oath from her. She slammed into it with a groan. Pain radiated through her.

Her head hit the wall as she jerked back, reacting to the two hands that struck the wall, flat-palmed, on either side of her head. Her gaze yanked up, to find Amani braced barely an inch from contact with her body. Her breath paused in her lungs as she stared at the tensed, muscular chest that filled her vision. Disappointment and relief mingled in Nya’s chest at his quick reflexes. She was relieved he hadn’t landed against her—she could only imagine the damage his muscular body would cause with the force of inertia behind it. Still... her nipples pebbled at the thought that she could have felt his body pressed against hers. And she wanted that. She wanted it bad.

Nya groaned low in her throat as her libido spiked. Here they were, in danger, and all she could think about was how fast she could get them both naked. Silently, she cursed her genetics. Apparently, blood really *did* 'will out', and her veins pulsed with a legacy of perversion and violence. No wonder she got off on dangerous situations.

Nya opened her mouth to apologize—for what she wasn’t quite sure—but the words froze in her throat as she looked up. Amani’s dark, hot gaze focused on the visible buds of her nipples, and the raw lust on his face spiked her blood pressure through the roof. The intensity of her desire dashed away rational thought. The earthquake that threw them together had nothing on the quake within her body, or the heat lightning that arced between them.

The memory of their close encounter on the concourse slammed through her. A gasp ripped from her as electricity pulsed through her body under the force of his gaze alone. She suppressed this ache too long—from the day she first looked into his mysterious dark eyes. Now, her entire being hummed with desire. Eyes locked on his, her tongue slipped over her lips, and she swore she could taste him as his dark eyes flared with fire. Tight heat coiled in her belly, and she suddenly knew exactly how the planet around them felt. She was ready to explode, too. She was an addict; only, her drug was sex, and Amani was her fix.

Nya buried that thought deep in her mind with an internal wince. There was no way she wanted Amani to know about her genetic predilection for sex. The thought should disgust her, but it no longer surprised her. Her sire’s blood was as strong as it was repulsive, and all her mother’s refined ways were unable to train the wild creature from her soul. She was her totem spirit’s slave—an untamable force. All she could do was attempt to control it. She managed, as long as she maintained a certain amount of distance from temptation.

With Amani this close, she was afraid of herself. Yet, even aware that her attraction wasn't new didn't give her pause. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she realized why this was so different. She actually wanted *him* to want *her*.

"Nya?" His deep baritone, flavored with the rich, exotic nuances of his homeland, washed over her in a husky wave, and Nya's insides clenched against the desire to lose herself in his unintentional embrace. This was Amani, she reminded herself sternly. He didn't want her, no matter what his eyes said, or he would have made a move, already. Still, she couldn't resist breathing in the intoxicating scent of him.

"Nya!"

"Mmm?" She blinked, then gasped, as the urgency of his tone snapped her from wicked fantasies of him, naked and at her mercy...

"I asked if you're hurt."

She shook her head mutely, and prayed the heat of embarrassment didn't show on her face as she tested limbs and buried a twinge of pain in her right arm. She wasn't seriously injured, not anywhere he was willing to heal her, at any rate.

The strange quality of the silence that wrapped around them furrowed Nya's brow, and her gaze lifted to his face. Amani's eyes shone with concern, and she swore inwardly. He didn't believe her.

"I'm fine, Amani. Really."

An odd light entered his eyes, and the air suddenly grew heavy. Her lungs sucked hot oxygen, and the twitch of her unsatisfied body returned as she stared into those deep, dark eyes. His hand left the wall beside her head, and the skim of his fingertips along her cheek wracked through Nya like a lightning strike. Her breath caught, and a tiny, impatient moan tore from her as his hand moved down her neck, and his intentions became crystal clear.

With a small growl, Nya let impulse sweep away all of her objections, and leaned into his body as she locked her hands on his shoulders and offered her lips. And, when his mouth found hers, she rocked back on her heels in surprise at the intense wave that crashed through her. She was either saved, or damned. The hell of it was, she no longer cared which.

He'd taken leave of his senses. At least, all those that weren't wrapped up in Nya's silk-soft web. The woman was a witch, there was no other explanation. In one touch of her lips, she sucked away his ability to think, or remember why this was a bad idea. Sweet, savage instinct ruled him, and every muscle in his body clenched with the need to lose himself in this woman. *Now*.

Soft hair tickled his skin, and he buried his hands in her golden curls as he drank in her unique, spicy scent. She was a creation of Lyat, Goddess of Temptation, and he was her willing supplicant. Amani angled his head, and took the kiss deeper, to where there was no more darkness or death. Only sweet, life giving light.

Nya made a small, needy sound as she rubbed against him, and each touch set off miniature tremors, until he swore the earth quaked beneath him again. He dragged her closer—so close he felt the tight nubs of her nipples against his chest, even through the layers of their clothing. His groin throbbed with want, and a primal growl rasped through him as he

nipped her lip with his teeth, and then soothed the bite with a swipe of his tongue. Great ancestors, she tasted of sweetness and sin.

She opened willingly to his onslaught, and Amani's heart paused at how responsive she was. Ice princess? Blessed Alikma, he'd never be able to see her that way, again! Not without the awareness that this fireball lurked beneath the ice. They were like night and day, this woman in his arms and Dinara...

Amani swore as icy pain slammed into his chest, and drove him back with a gasp of disbelief and self-loathing. He couldn't use Nya this way. He promised himself on the day they met that he would never hurt her.

"What—?" Nya's tone was laced with confused, and hurt, and he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and promise her...

Damn it, he couldn't make her promises! He wasn't supposed to get this close! With another muttered oath, he backed away another step, and avoided her gaze. He already knew that he'd find all the emotions her voice hinted at, shimmering there. And he just wasn't ready to face his most recent failure.

"Let's get back to work."

And this time, he prayed there'd be no more quakes. If this interlude proved anything to him, it was that he was far from immune to Nya. Another narrow escape like that, and he might do the unforgivable. And he just couldn't afford to give in.

Chapter Five

She steamed. There really wasn't a better description for her current state of agitation, Nya decided as she glared at her obstinate partner. Throughout their useless—imagine that, she was right *again*—search of the Duran Corporation's business offices, Nya fumed to herself, her narrowed gaze fixed on Amani's too-appealing-by-far backside as she contemplated all the ways she could do him grievous bodily injury without ending up wearing one of the colorful prison jumpers.

How could he be so damned cold? He turned her on with his skillful kiss, revved her engines with the promise of a sex-fest capable of propelling her clear out of the atmosphere, and then... He just *stopped!* She could gladly kill him, right now. Damn it, he treated her as if she was nothing. As if the hard heat he'd ground against her bore absolutely no significance to him.

Hah! Righteous indignation flooded her, even as her fists clenched. Give her two minutes where she called the shots, and he'd beg her for exactly what he'd just rejected. But she wasn't ready to call in her debt. Not yet; not this way.

Her gaze fixed on his ass, a mixture of anger and lust stirring in her, when Amani came to an abrupt stop at the last bank of desks and terminals in the common office area, and swung around. A deep frown etched his brow, and his eyes were troubled.

"This doesn't make any sense. The only things missing are the scientific data discs. The mining logs, prison reports, and geologic surveys are all here." He swept a hand toward the wall where rows of neatly labeled discs gleamed in the light.

Nya skimmed the titles, and realized he was right. The spot that should have housed the scientific data for extraction of Styx was empty. Other than that, nothing else was missing. An icy lump formed in her stomach. So, it really was as bad as she feared.

"It makes perfect sense, if they knew the planet wouldn't survive. They left all the incriminating records, and everyone who could testify to their activities, to be blown to space dust."

His dark gaze pierced her, so intense Nya couldn't look away. Caught in his gaze, her breath grew shallow, and her pulse stuttered. The attraction between them was palpable, but she knew Amani wouldn't follow through, which both depressed and relieved her. He proved it in the next instant, as his gaze shifted away, breaking the connection. Refusing to give in to her confused emotions, Nya brushed past him and headed for the stairs at the far end of the corridor.

"Let's hit the surface. We need to see what kind of damage the communication array's taken." She cast a glance over her shoulder to be sure he followed. "We may have to call for rescue."

As they climbed the stairs, Nya pulled item after item from her pack and donned each one, stopping only briefly when she had to pull on white, fur-covered pants and boots over

her standard issue gray suit and boots. Curious, Amani watched her slip into these final items with natural ease, and had to admit, he was impressed.

Duran Corporation's EVA suits and masks were canary yellow, and made of thickly stuffed microfiber material, which essentially turned the wearer into a huge yellow brood fowl with almost no maneuverability. In contrast, Nya's suit was artistic, and graceful, though he had to wonder how effective it really was.

The suit was snow-white, and fit over her uniform like a second skin, with microseals that sucked air from between the layers, if the way it formed to her body was any indication. A layer of soft, white fur coated the outside of the outfit, and a white hood hung loose around her shoulders. Suddenly, Nya looked softer; adorable, really. Like a human-sized stuffed animal.

Amusement spiraled through Amani, until he couldn't hold back his grin any longer. He saw Nya's gaze shift his way, and the glare she shot him could freeze ice. "What?"

He shook his head, and chuckled. How did he explain this? "You look like a white acelin."

"A what?"

"It's a creature from Magelus Prime. They're small—"

Her brows shot up in surprise as she manipulated her pack like a gaming cube, folding sections around until it strapped around her waist like a bulky utility belt. "You think I'm *small*?"

Amani nearly bit his tongue off to refrain from voicing the thought that she was perfect. He damned sure wouldn't admit that, or how hot looking at her in that white suit made him. So, he simply ignored the question. "They're fluffy kittens with large green eyes. White's a rare color, though."

Nya's olive-green eyes narrowed again. "Are you comparing me to some kind of *cat*?"

"Complete with claws." He couldn't stop that quip, or the wry grin that tugged at his lips. Yeah, this kitten had claws *and* fangs. Heat spiked his body as he wondered what they'd feel like biting into his skin.

"I'll have you know, this," she gestured to her suit, "is the very best frozen climate gear in four systems. It's crafted by special artisans, from the hide of—"

"Calm down. I was just—" His reassurance froze on his tongue as he realized exactly what he was doing.

Hell. He was flirting with Nya. That it wasn't overt or sexual in nature didn't matter. He baited her with the sole purpose of seeing that passion she hid so well burst free on her face. This was as close as he'd ever get to her again, he promised himself, even as his body twitched in protest.

Amani glanced surreptitiously at the woman beside him, and sucked in a breath as a soft light glowed in her eyes.

"It's okay, you know," she offered when she caught him watching her.

Amani's eyes snapped forward, and he concentrated on every step he climbed, in a futile attempt to banish the image of her eyes, and the fantasy of more, from his mind.

"What's okay?"

He flinched away from the gentle pity that covered her face.

"Kissing me. There's nothing to feel guilty about. I don't."

A sharp laugh flew, unchecked, from his lips. He instantly regretted it, when he saw the hurt that engulfed her face. Still... that she read him so well petrified him. No one read Amani Viyour that well.

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

She huffed out an exasperated breath, and he relaxed. He much preferred her angry with him than sympathetic. And he definitely preferred her anger to her pity.

"Then *enlighten* me, dammit. I know what I saw. Now, either I totally repulse you —"

His eyes flew wide in shock at that. No way could she ever repulse him! "Nya, you're a beautiful woman —"

"Which doesn't mean I can't still be repulsive."

He stopped dead in his tracks, and grasped her arm to bring her around to face him. Staring down into her green eyes, he cupped her cheek. "You do *not* repulse me, Nya. The idea is... crazy."

"Thank you." She gifted him with a small smile and a speculative look as they resumed walking. "Which means that shame and guilt are the only other reasons left why you would pull away like you did."

He winced at her direct hit, and wasn't swift enough to cover it. Nya's concerned expression said that much, even before she asked, "What do you have to be ashamed of?"

So much it would take him a century to lay all his crimes bare. Amani sighed, aware that he needed to deflect this conversation before it steered into truly dangerous water.

"You're my friend, Nya. I don't want to take advantage of you." *Liar*, his body accused. The ache to take her, whatever the reason, grew stronger by the moment. He met her somber green eyes, and his heart kicked. "Do you understand?"

She nodded slowly, and a shy smile touched her face, surprising him. Nya, timid? He didn't believe it for a moment. And, when her soft hand touched his arm, he nearly pulled away at the electric jolt that passed between them.

"You didn't hurt me, Amani. Not until you stopped."

And, at the soft light in her eyes, Amani's heart bottomed out. Nya Soderstrom was a woman on a mission. And he had a sinking feeling he was her target.

Chapter Six

Ground Level – Transport Bay 68 Hours to E.L.E.

Nya rotated in a three-hundred-sixty degree circle on her heel. Dismay banded her lungs as her gaze skimmed the transport bay. Numbly, she scooped up the twisted piece of aluminum her foot kicked, and regarded it blankly. Any other time, it would just be a piece of scrap metal. Nothing important. But with the planet shaking apart around her, Nya could only view it as another dashed hope. All around her, the only remaining transport ships were torn apart, their engine components scattered over the durancrete floor. No way would they ever be ready to fly. Nya swore inwardly. It was worse than she thought. They were so screwed.

She didn't even know why she was so surprised. Unlike Amani, she wasn't convinced of Duran Corporation's innocence. For weeks now, she had suspicions that Duran was about to sell them out; ever since Skipper began encoding and masking access to the mining logs, and denying her mine maintenance records. When she first brought her suspicions to Lieutenant Isles, the other woman's response sealed Nya's lips even before she finished. She had no proof, after all. Only a sick certainty that they were about to be sold out.

Still, she'd never expected Duran would leave them here to die. It stung to have her fears confirmed in this way. She would have been perfectly happy to be proven wrong. Relieved, really. It was a bitter pill to know that her employer left her to become space dust on a godforsaken lump of rock at the edge of the galaxy.

Anger rushed through her, and shoved aside fear and depression. She wasn't about to die here. Somehow, they would get off Zurin Five, and then she'd rip Duran a new one they'd not soon forget. But first, she had to get off this planet, she already knew it wouldn't be through here.

"We're wasting time," she muttered in disgust, more to herself than to Amani. "They're long gone."

"What?"

"Duran's people. They're probably clear to Upsilon Three, by now." She tossed aside a crate fitting in disgust. "At any rate, they're long gone from Zurin Five."

"You don't know that." He looked distinctly uncomfortable, and she couldn't help the crawling feeling he knew more than he was telling her.

She snorted, and cast her eyes around the bay, empty aside from several junked hulls that had long since been cannibalized for any useful parts. "So what would you call this? There're supposed to be six space-worthy transports here, Amani."

His shrug was clearly forced. What bothered him so much? "Maybe they moved the transports to a safer location when they realized the quakes were worsening."

A safer place. Right. Like Upsilon Three, or some other civilized, Duran-run world. Irritation flooded Nya, fed by her own tension. She could tell Amani didn't believe his own words. So, why was he trying so hard to convince them both?

"Stop it. Just stop it."

His eyes filled with surprise at the sharpness of her tone, and Nya bit back a frustrated grimace. She hated it when he looked at her that way. Like he'd just noticed she was there.

"Stop what?"

"You know damned well *what*. Quit making excuses for Duran. They *left*, Amani. Gone. They expect us to die here, and take their dirty little secrets with us."

It was his turn to grimace. So he didn't like what she said. That didn't surprise her. But she'd be damned if she let him ignore her now. She reached to grab his arm, but froze mid-motion as a sound reverberated in the cavernous bay, like a legion of nightmares. That growl prickled along her skin, and Nya's breath congealed in her chest. She knew that sound.

She stood rooted in place, even as Amani swore, his gaze fixed over her right shoulder.

"Nya, move!" He was sprinting for cover before she realized he was in motion. The snarls and growls behind her alerted her, and snapped her from her shock. A spike of dread replaced it.

"No! Amani, don't move! They're threatened by motion, and they'll—" A host of furry bodies struck sparks in the air as they brushed against her legs, bounding toward Amani. Sweet spirits of her ancestors! There were over a dozen of them!

Sickness built and overwhelmed. This wasn't a few adventurous bearcats, or even a misfit or two scavenging for food. This was a hunting pack—the most dangerous grouping of bearcats on the planet. And Amani just made himself fresh prey.

Nya stared in horrified fascination as the pride slowed to a crawl, skulking in around Amani with low, almost inaudible, growls. Though Skipper's databanks overflowed with theories, no one ever actually observed the tactics of a hunting pride before. She had no desire to be the first, either. Not when their prospective meal happened to be her partner, and possibly herself.

The growls dropped another decibel, and only the vibration of the air told her they still growled. They were preparing for the kill.

Nya shoved away both fear and fascination; now wasn't the time for either. Amani looked determined to fight to the death, and Nya already knew he was no match for these creatures. He didn't know them the way she did. She'd downloaded everything in Skipper's archives on bearcats when she first arrived. She was fascinated with them, with the similarities and differences between them and many of the predators she knew.

Amani saw these creatures as animals that ran on pure instinct, and trusted his ability to plan and strategize to give him superiority. She already knew that was a mistake. Bearcats were highly intelligent, and they had a system of communication that observers still couldn't pin down. One thing she did know, though. The all-female hunting prides considered males a threat to be destroyed, and they were both brutal and cunning in that destruction.

Nya shook her head slowly, her breath shallow and loud in her own ears, as she watched Amani's hand inch toward his phaser.

"No," she breathed, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. She knew that, at the first sign of threat, those 'cats would tear him apart with sadistic glee. She didn't even want to think about it.

Suddenly, her fears for her own safety vaporized, along with her sanity, she was sure. She couldn't believe what she considered. Nya Soderstrom turned her back on her planet, her mother's people, and most of all, on her totem spirit, years ago. She gave up that way of life,

and the blood that released the demon in her soul. She was not that compulsive, animalistic creature. Yet, as her gaze latched on Amani's, she knew she would do it. For him.

Her eyes closed unwillingly, even as she forced her breath to be even and slow. In this state, she had all the time in the world. She must remember that. Never hurry, that was her grandmother's caution. Impatience only made the transition worse.

Nya's hand raised to her throat, and closed around the carved bone pendant she was given at her *Hakjoral*—her Naming Ceremony—and kept concealed beneath the high collar of her uniform most of the times.

"Bone to flesh, flesh to bone..." She muttered the old incantation like a prayer, to summon a totem she half believed didn't exist, and half feared did. She'd never before called into her body the *torujor*—a wolf-like beast that was both feared and revered among her mother's people—which was her totem.

A tense moment passed, during which she wondered if the whole totem was just superstition. Then, a growl reverberated through her, and rumbled free of her chest as a wave of power and freedom swept aside all logical, scientific thought, and took with it her fears, guilt, and unworthiness.

Nya's eyes snapped open with the wild rush of adrenaline that pumped through her veins, and the world raced into view, the same as ever, and yet completely changed. Colors mixed with scents, to paint an image before her eyes that was neither sense, and yet both combined.

Musk wafted to her, and her narrowed gaze latched on the pride's leader as her nostrils flared with the pheromones of aggression. This female was the threat, and all that stood between her and her mate. The scent of Amani's anxiety hit her, and the animal in her blood identified her mate under attack, no matter that her human brain protested that she had no claim on him. Clearly, her heart thought otherwise. The growl she loosed was proprietary and defensive. No one harmed her mate!

The pride matron's attention snapped around at Nya's challenge, and the huge, shaggy bearcat's fur raised on end as she bared dagger-sharp teeth that cowed phaser-toting men. Nya stood her ground, her lips curled back in an answering snarl—alpha female to alpha female.

An ear-piercing screech echoed off the duracrete walls of the transport hanger, and the rest of the bearcat pride scuttled back, heads lowered in deference to their matron but growling in answer to Nya's threat. She should be terrified, Nya knew. The small, rational part of her brain knew that any sane being would be. But Nya, in the grip of her totem's spirit, was far from rational. She felt no fear.

Fear was his enemy. It froze him in place as he faced the snarling ocean of white fur and sharp teeth. His stomach knotted with painful certainty. Alikma finally claimed Her due.

His eyes flashed to Nya, and watched conflicting emotions jump across her face. Regret plunged like a knife through him. He regretted so many things, now that the moment was here. He regretted that she had to be here, he always expected to die alone. He planned on it.

But, most of all, he regretted that they'd never been lovers. His blood oath kept him from the one thing he'd wanted for the past three years.

A growl yanked him from his thoughts in surprise. That was no bearcat! His gaze sought Nya again, and his heart paused mid-beat. That woman wasn't the Nya he knew.

Her normally straight-backed posture was gone, her shoulders hunched and her stance lower to the ground, almost a crouch. A snarl pulled her lips up to expose teeth that had lengthened, and her face contorted like a wild animal's. Most disturbing of all, there was not even a hint of fear on her face.

A shiver of confusion passed through Amani. What was happening to Nya?

Then, as the largest of the bearcats loosed a deafening screech and whirled toward the woman he knew, Nya issued a challenge. Fear for her safety eclipsed everything else. He didn't know what Nya was doing, but it looked like a very dangerous game, to him.

The huge, white bearcat launched herself into the air, all flexing sinew, fur, and gleaming teeth and claws. Amani's world froze as terror plunged through him. He opened his mouth, tried to warn her, but fear stuck the words in his throat, and he hated that. He wasn't afraid of his own death—he would gladly embrace oblivion to escape his crimes. But he couldn't watch another woman he cared for die.

That thought galvanized him, and he jerked forward. "Nya, watch out!"

Just before the bearcat landed, Nya dropped forward into a crouch, and the 'cat sailed over her head to land behind her. Nya spun around as she rose to a fighter's crouch, even as her boot knife sprang into her waiting hand like magic. His eyes widened. She must have the knife sheath fitted with a spring release mechanism.

She caught the knife and flipped it so that the blade faced downward, even as the bearcat shook her head and reclaimed her bearings. Amani's heart thudded harsh in foreboding as his trained soldier's eye assessed the situation and he realized how uneven this match was. This would be a battle of blades—Nya's boot knife against the bearcat's razor-keen claws and dagger-sharp teeth. The bearcat had a definite advantage.

Before the bearcat had a chance to recover from her surprise, Nya lunged for the creature, and buried her knife to the hilt in the shaggy body. The 'cat loosed an enraged roar that sent the beta 'cats into a screeching frenzy that echoed like all of Talit's Unholy Host in the high-domed durancrete and metal transport bay. Amani recoiled in surprise, his eyes wide, as Nya tipped her head back and howled with triumph. She yanked her knife free and bounced back to her feet, away from the bearcat's range of immediate attack. Green blood dripped down the blade of her knife, staining her hand and the foot of her boot.

Amani's gut spasmed with dread. Even from here, he could see that the wound was superficial. It barely slowed the bearcat down for a moment. With a screech, the 'cat launched itself again, not at Nya's head or torso, this time, but at her legs. Nya swore as she leapt to the side barely in time, and one razor claw flashed out and caught her thigh, slicing through her suit and skin alike.

"Nya!" Amani started forward, but low growls froze him in place, as the 'cats around him turned as one force, teeth bared. He sucked in a breath and backed away as the bearcats advanced. He knew when he was outnumbered, and it was clear these 'cats meant to keep Nya's fight one-on-one. He couldn't help her.

Not that Nya noticed. A swift glance her way told him she was oblivious to everything outside of the threat before her. In itself, that wasn't surprising. Most people were more concerned with immediate threats than peripheral ones. But her intensity, as much as the change in her basic personality and appearance, worried Amani. What was happening to her? At that moment, he would give anything to know what was going through Nya's mind. She looked as feral as the wild animal she faced, and that sent a shiver of apprehension through Amani. Just who, or what, was his partner?

Nya moved faster than he'd ever seen a human being move as she lunged toward the 'cat. But, as fast as Nya moved, the bearcat was still quicker. Nya's blade hit empty air as the bearcat danced to the side and flattened itself to the floor. With a high screech, it launched off its haunches, directly for his partner.

Nya cried out as claws latched onto her arm, and the sharp blades ripped through her suit and dug into the flesh of her upper arm. She yanked away on instinct, and the sound of material shredding filled the dock. Blood soaked her arm and dripped from her fingertips to the floor. That was no small graze.

Amani started forward again, and the growl that stopped him this time didn't come from any bearcat. That enraged, animal cry came from Nya, as she threw herself at the bearcat. Both combatants hit the floor at a roll. Teeth gritted and snarling, Nya fought the creature's monstrous strength. Her blade plunged into the furry body again and again.

The floor trembled, and Amani's stomach tumbled as Nya barely turned her head in time to avoid a slash of claws as the quake hit. Amani watched her head turn again, and followed her gaze. A large chunk of discarded fuselage was wedged in a crack in the duracrete floor from one of the quakes, and its sharp edge stuck up a good thirty centimeters. His eyes flashed back to Nya, and his breath stuck in his throat as hope swamped him. If Nya could roll the bearcat into that metal...

Almost as if she could hear his thoughts, Nya grappled the huge creature away and to the right, and the sickening crunch and squelch of metal biting through bone and flesh filled the air. A low, rattling growl escaped the bearcat. Amani practically wilted in relief at that death rattle.

Wild-eyed, Nya launched to her feet and Amani sucked in a breath as he became aware of the shifting sea of white fur around them. Shit. Nya managed to kill what was clearly the pack leader, but that could incite the rage of the rest of the pack. Fear for Nya pushed him forward, heedless of the rest of the bearcats.

Surprise jolted him as, rather than growls and threats, the 'cats dropped into submissive stances, tails between their legs and heads lowered as they whined and yipped in acknowledgement. They weren't reacting to him, he already knew. His focus went to Nya, and he saw her blink as her stance slowly relaxed, her face drifting back toward normal. And the 'cats were slinking toward her, encircling her with heads lowered and postures submissive.

Amazing. Unless he was seriously mistaken, the bearcats actually considered her a misfit of their own kind. Her challenge of the pride's matron took on new significance. They thought she fought for leadership of the pride, and her win made her the pride's new matron. A wry smile twisted on his lips at the irony of it all as his gaze slid over her furry white EVA suit. He had no doubt that suit had at least something to do with their easy acceptance. His

smile turned to a frown as his gaze dropped to the expanding red stain on Nya's boots, and the growing puddle of blood on the floor around her. Nya was losing too much blood. They had to get her some help, ASAP.

His head jerked up in surprise as a growl reverberated off the walls. Not again! He fell into fighter's stance, determined to protect Nya with his life. His eyes widened as, in a quick scan of the hanger, he realized that sound hadn't come from a new threat. It came from Nya, herself.

The bearcats, unlike him, lost no time responding to that growl. They bolted in a mad scramble for the far end of the hanger, and disappeared behind some debris. He seriously doubted they'd be back.

Nya's head spun as her totem's control receded, and agony jagged up her arm into her chest. With a cry, she reached to touch her upper arm. Her hand came away covered in blood, and she recalled the burning tear of the bearcat's claws.

"Nya!" Amani was at her side, now. He reached as if to steady her, but pulled back with a frown before he touched her. Sadness welled in Nya at his withdrawal. Before she'd melded with her totem, she never acknowledged just how important he was to her, or how much his constant rejections stung. Now, all too aware that her heart claimed him as her mate—her perfect match—that rejection pushed aside even the pain of her wound. Tears welled, but she refused to let them fall. The world spun, and she hazily realized she had a much bigger fight ahead of her than the one she just won. Somehow, she had to convince Amani that they were meant to be together.

"Amani, I..." The world went black, and Nya breathed a sigh of relief as she slid into the embrace of oblivion.

Chapter Seven

Now wasn't the time for qualms or guilt. Amani shoved both aside as he scooped Nya into his arms and the woman melted against him, unconscious. He told himself the adrenaline that pumped through him had nothing to do with fear, or the feel of her warm weight in his arms, but it wasn't an easy sell.

In quick strides, he crossed the transport bay to the emergency medical station used to treat mining and mechanic injuries. Inside the small station, he set Nya down on the exam table and found the emergency medical kit. The station was equipped with an AI medical bay, but those required someone with medical clearance to operate. Since the Duran doctors appeared to have all bugged off somewhere, that left Rhonda down in the Garrison, and he didn't have the luxury of that kind of time.

Amani frowned at the deep slice in Nya's bicep. She was lucky that was the extent of serious injury, but that luck would mean nothing if he couldn't stop her bleeding. Now, what he needed to do was treat it; but that meant he had to get her arm bare. Problem was, he already knew Nya would kill him if he cut off the sleeve of her EVA suit, even to save her life. She had some kind of strange attachment to the outfit.

He froze, and blinked in disbelief. Did her suit just move? He stared hard, and knew he was either hallucinating, or plain going mad. The fibers of Nya's EVA suit began to knit before his eyes. The damned suit was mending itself by the second. This, of course, meant he had to undress her, if he intended to treat her injury. A low groan of misery tore from him, though he resisted the urge to swear.

He steeled himself against the reaction, and the feel of warm, soft flesh as he carefully pulled the mending sleeve from her arm and eased up the left side of her EVA suit's top. Maybe if he left her uniform on...

No such luck. Amani did swear, this time, as he realized that the furry EVA suit was exactly as form fitting as it looked. It resisted his efforts to work around it and, worst of all, it mated itself to her uniform, so that he exposed pale skin instead of gray microfiber Kevlar.

Amani closed his eyes and loosed an oath in his native tongue, beneath his breath. His hands trembled, and the hunger that tightened in his gut was one he could never fill. This would be torture, but worlds better than watching Nya die. Grim-faced, he eased the suit top the rest of the way off, and fixed his gaze on the wound, to keep from being distracted by all her pale, beautiful skin. He wouldn't allow his attention to leave her arm, or the wound he needed to treat. That was the only way he had a prayer of keeping his vow.

Aware of Nya's state of health, Amani quickly retrieved a Mendpac and disinfecting cloth from the emergency kit. Careful of the wound's jagged edge, he cleaned it thoroughly, and then secured the Mendpac over the wound. It wasn't as quick a heal as the AI restorer would have been, but in a few hours, her arm should be as good as new, with only a small scar to show she'd ever been injured.

Her blood loss, however, wasn't so easily fixed. Ideally, he'd have the AI administer fluids until she was alert. But he didn't have medical clearance for the system, so he'd have to rely on good old battlefield remedies.

"Skipper, I need half a liter of iron-enriched water, with electrolyte compound twelve."

As the AI manufactured the special cocktail used to treat anemia and dehydration, Amani's gaze drifted to Nya's face, and the iron wall around his heart softened. She was so brave, and yet she looked so fragile, like this.

His chest banded, and every breath felt like he drew it through a high-gravity environment. He couldn't bear to see Nya like this; it just reinforced his past failures. She wasn't this vulnerable shell. The Nya he knew was tough, a survivor. Wasn't she? He frowned as he realized how much he didn't know about his partner. What surprised him was how much he really *wanted* to know. He wanted to go beyond the surface with Nya.

Not that there was anything wrong with what he saw, Amani acknowledged with an oath as his eyes slid away from her face. As he stared, hunger burned through him, and he knew he was in big trouble.

Nya was a goddess! Lush curves her uniform usually managed to disguise filled his vision, and he knew the image would be burned into his brain forever. His gaze skimmed her bared breasts—Blessed Goddess, he always assumed she wore some fashion of undergarments, but her creamy flesh belied that. In the chill air of the transport dock infirmary, her nipples were rosy and erect, and the urge to touch, and taste, swamped him. Amani's gaze danced away quickly, even as he felt heat climb into his face. He shouldn't be ogling her this way. His upbringing taught him to treat women with reverence and respect. But, ever since he met Nya, he kept forgetting that. She pushed buttons he didn't know he had, and her innocent sensuality begged him to explore the sexual creature he never knew he was.

His gaze drifted back to her body, and he swallowed. It took supreme effort to resist the urge to stare at her perfect breasts, and fixed his eyes on what should have been a safe area—her bare midriff. He couldn't have been more wrong. Amani's breath backed up in his throat as heat coiled low in his belly, and his semi-aroused state turned to painful desire.

Nya's pale skin was flawless, except for an intriguing series of freckles that descended from her left side down her hip, to disappear beneath the band of her pants. She looked soft and supple, and his heart lodged in his throat as he realized he couldn't resist her. Like a condemned man, his hand crept out, and he ignored the tremble that worked through his skin just before contact. He traced her belly—toned, yet still soft and womanly—and surprise shot through him when she moaned and arched into the touch. The move was blatant, sexual, and completely unintentional on her part. That didn't make it any less erotic. The heat of her skin burned his fingers, and her motions were torn from his most torrid fantasies. Add to those the awe and fear he felt when she battled that bearcat—and the swell of pride that nearly choked him when she won—and he knew he was on dangerous ground if he intended to keep his vow before Alikma.

"Amani." His name whispered from her on a sigh, and he yanked his hand back a second before her eyes flickered open.

The confused, uneasy look in those olive-green eyes slapped him with a fresh burst of guilt that had nothing to do with his quickly shredding blood oath. Nya made him forget the rules.

Nya struggled up, and winced as she put pressure on her wounded arm. Instantly, Amani grasped her, levering her into a sitting position.

"Take it slow and easy, Nya. We still have to replace the blood you lost."

“Blood? Lost?” She gazed at him in confusion, and he frowned. Her pupils were dilated—most likely from pain—but it was the pallor of her skin and the fine sheen of sweat. Those were classic signs of shock. If she didn’t come out of it soon, they could be in big trouble. Once her body started shutting down...

Careful to keep the panic from his voice, he murmured, “You were injured fighting that bearcat, Nya.”

“Bearcat?” Her confused eyes locked with his. Her face was ghost-white now, and her green eyes filled with blank horror as she stared, wide-eyed, at him. Her mouth moved, but the only sound that left her lips was a small squeak of denial.

She weaved unsteadily as she gained her feet, and Amani instinctively reached out to steady her, afraid she would pass out again. Her lush body pressed against his side, her bare breasts branding his arm and her pelvis cradling his thigh. Amani gritted his teeth and fought the urge to swear, or worse. He would *not* take advantage of this situation. He was better than that, and she was too weak. But that didn’t stop his eyes from dropping to drink in the view.

The glazed look disappeared abruptly from Nya’s eyes, and she gasped as she followed his gaze down. Her arms flew up to cross over her bared breasts as rosy heat stained her cheeks. “Amani! What happened to my clothes?”

“Calm down. I had to take your shirt off to treat your wound.” He wouldn’t let himself remember how her skin felt, even as it burned his hand where he supported her back. “Don’t you remember?”

She touched a shaky hand to her forehead. Her obvious disorientation worried Amani. Disorientation and unsteadiness were both signs of severe blood loss. Just how much blood had she lost? His mind flashed back on the puddle in the transport hanger, and sick fear assaulted him.

“Nya?”

“It’s all hazy.” She frowned at him. “I remember you were surrounded by bearcats. I had to help you, so I...” She straightened with a gasp. “Sweet spirits of my ancestors!”

He blinked, startled by her sudden reaction. Even on a good day, he found it difficult to follow the rapid shifts of Nya’s mind. How could he be expected to understand her medicated and suffering blood loss?

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” And, like lightning across liquid nitrogen, Nya turned to electric ice as she sprang from the exam table and pulled on her shirt-and-parka meld of fabric. She refused to meet his gaze, and her evasiveness and unsteadiness worried him. “We should get moving.”

“Whoa.” He caught her good arm, and frowned when she swayed. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, Nya.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he tried to keep his voice even, not to show her a hint of the worry he felt. “You should go back to the Garrison, get looked at by a proper medic. That wound could get infected.”

She followed the direction of his gesture, and her frown deepened. “Did you clean it out?”

“Of course.” He wasn’t a complete incompetent.

“Disinfectant?”

He rolled his eyes. Okay, he could see where this was going. “Nya...”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.” Her statement was punctuated by a swift nod.

Like hell there wasn’t! She’d nearly died from that wound. He’d be damned if he acted like it never happened. “Damn it, Nya! Be reasonable!”

One slim eyebrow arched, even as she steadied herself against one of the infirmary counters. “Like you are, you mean?”

Maybe he could get through to her, after all. “Exactly. I—”

“Take care of those glass cuts, yet?”

Her query hit him out of nowhere, and that innocent expression on her face didn’t fool him for a moment. They both knew the answer to her question, and he wasn’t about to get drawn into one of her convoluted debates. His wounds weren’t dangerous; hers were. End of discussion. “That’s different—”

“Really.” She rested one hip against the counter, and he saw the move for what it was. She used that stainless steel counter for balance. “So you’ve checked to make sure there’re no glass fragments in your cuts. And, of course, you’ve slathered them with disinfectant,” her brow arched further as she picked up a tube of wound sealant and flipped it back and forth in her hands. “And you did all this while you took care of my gash. Wow, Amani, I’m impressed.”

Damn it, she knew he hadn’t. She didn’t have to be sarcastic about it. He didn’t even know why she kept bringing it up, when it clearly wasn’t the same thing. “You nearly bled out, Nya!”

“And I’m fine, now.” She met his gaze levelly, and stepped away from the counter. She didn’t even wobble, her motion firm and smooth as she crossed the few feet between them. Then she was in his space, those amazing breasts brushing against his chest as she looked up into his eyes and murmured, “If I need help, I’ll ask for it.”

He winced at her direct hit, neatly turning his own words back on him. Then his gaze dropped, and he forgot what their argument was even about. All he could think of was closing the last breath of distance between them, and claiming her soft, warm lips as his prize.

“Nya, Amani, come in, please.” Amani winced as the static-filled voice of Jonathan Thrower filled his head, even as he saw Nya clap a hand to her neck in pain.

“We’re here, Thrower.”

“Nya? Amani?”

He met Nya’s gaze, and frowned when she shook her head.

“Something’s wrong with communications,” she explained quietly. “I doubt they can hear us.”

“If you can hear this,” Thrower confirmed her words with a worried tone, “be on the lookout for any space-worthy vessel up there. And make it fast. This whole damned planet’s about to blow apart!”

Nya’s gasp drew Amani’s gaze, and their eyes locked at the terrifying implication of Thrower’s statement. Though he hated the idea of his friends—and especially Nya—in this danger, Amani couldn’t fight the small burst of relief that passed through him. Finally, Alikma came to claim her own.

Chapter Eight

They had to get off this rock! Nya ignored Amani's protests for her to rest, and his order for her to drink some kind of nasty, orange-tinted water that smelled of a steel refinery. She wasn't that bad off, really. Just a little dizzy, and she couldn't get her legs to follow her commands to stay straight. She wobbled past him and out through the almost-empty transport bay as fast as her disobedient legs would carry her.

"I don't suppose it's worth our time to find out if any of these crates actually get off the ground, huh?" She cast a speculative gaze over the piles of junk parts and rusted ship hulls.

She turned in time to see Amani shake his head. "They're scrap. Probably cannibalized for parts."

"Great." Disgust stabbed her. "So, where do they expect us to find a ship, then?"

He shrugged. "Maybe we'll find something closer to the mines. The Duran people could be there, loading equipment."

She spared him a skeptical look, and saw he didn't look as convinced as he sounded. "C'mon, Amani. Be serious."

She didn't hear his response as she secured her parka's hood around her head and approached the open bay doors. She turned to glance over her shoulder. "Suit up. We're going out."

She heard the muffled sounds as he retrieved one of the Duran-issue EVA suits, and opened her mouth to ask him to repeat what he said, but winced and clapped a hand to the back of her neck as an ear-splitting squeal filled her head.

"Hello?" She shouted for the tiny implanted microphone to pick up. "Is someone there? Can anyone hear me?"

She caught the strange, confused look Amani shot her, and surprise plummeted through her. Good grief! Couldn't he hear that racket?

"I'm here, Nya." Thrower's voice came through her ear, barely audible above the horrible squeal.

Then, the sound disappeared as suddenly as it began, and Nya's ears rang as her eyes slowly uncrossed. She winced as a new sound invaded her head—the tortured squeal of gears and metal-on-metal as the transport bay's outer doors inched open. Bitter cold slapped her exposed face and hands, driving the breath from her as it seized her lungs. Early morning light filled the dim bay, and Nya instinctively raised a hand to shield her eyes. On a planet like this one, snow blindness was a very real danger.

She jerked back in surprise as a respirator and snow goggles materialized before her. Her heart resumed normal pace as she realized where they came from. Amani. Apparently, he opened the doors, too. Which left one question burning in her head.

"If the outer doors were closed, how did the bearcats get in?"

"I think I know." He gestured toward a patch of wall hidden behind a pile of twisted metal and durancrete debris. Near the floor was an opening just large enough for the bearcats to have squeezed through one at a time.

"The more important question," Amani intoned darkly. "Is who stayed behind to close up the bay doors?"

A shiver of dread passed through Nya at the implication of his query. She hated being left in the dark, with no clue what dangers lay in wait for her.

"We need to see what's causing the communication disturbances." She fitted the strap of her respirator around her head and snugged the breathing device into place so that the clear plastic filter settled over her mouth and nose. It was a necessary evil on a planet like Zurin Five. The apparatus pinched her face uncomfortably, but it would keep her alive in the extreme low temperatures outside. Respirators were designed to filter out harmful environmental toxins, and exchange carbon dioxide for pure oxygen.

Next, she secured the snow goggles around her head, and turned to be sure Amani didn't need assistance. In his canary yellow EVA standard-issue, he had limited mobility. Most people couldn't outfit their own headgear once they suited up.

Apparently, Amani thought of that. One glance at her partner showed he already had goggles and respirator in place. He must have put them on before he finished suiting up. A small laugh burst from Nya's lips as she surveyed him.

"What's so funny, Soderstrom?" His growl held no malice, and she continued to grin behind the safety of her mask.

"With the respirator and goggles, you look like a demented brood fowl in that get-up."

He growled again, and Nya suppressed a sudden shiver of awareness as the sound plunged through her. But she couldn't help the clench of inner muscles, or the erratic beat of her heart. This wasn't the time to contemplate the attraction between them. She wasn't sure there ever would be a 'right time.' That was a wholly depressing thought.

"Nya?" Thrower's voice, sounding concerned, filtered through her implanted communications device.

She opened her mouth to respond, but the words died, unspoken, as she stepped into hell. Distress plunged through her as she got her first glimpse of the exterior of the facility.

Duracrete chunks lay scattered across the snow in a pattern that indicated explosive force. Nya frowned. That wasn't an effect of earthquakes, was it?

The exterior buildings that remained standing did so under clear protest; the sharp, jagged cracks in their duracrete structures were apparent even from this distance. She could see cracks in the planet's surface, too. Deep groves leaked steam into the freezing air, and puddles of melting ice and snow grew steadily into miniature lakes. Whatever happened here, it was neither gradual nor gentle. It looked more like a war zone.

One glance at Amani confirmed that she wasn't the only one stunned by the magnitude of devastation. With a sharply indrawn breath, she managed a response for Thrower.

"We lost contact with you." Okay, that was obvious, given the lack of communication in the infirmary, but she wanted to make sure that Thrower knew they'd at least heard his request.

"Report." Lieutenant Isles' terse voice clipped in her ears. Nya shook her head. There was no way she could adequately describe the devastation that surrounded her. Instead, she tried to interface with Skipper, to show Isles and Thrower – both still in the Control Room, she hoped – what she could see. Her optical implants should transfer the images directly from her brain to the computer terminal.

A red signal light flashed in her peripheral vision, indicating the optical transfer system was down. She frowned. With communications already intermitted, and now this, she

suspected Skipper sustained heavy damage the routine diagnostics couldn't assess. Her brow furrowed with worry. What happened to Skipper?

With a tilt of her head and a mental command, she set the AI to run a detailed diagnostic of all systems and report back to her. She'd just have to do her best to describe this mess, for now.

"You won't believe it, Isles. The place is breaking apart."

"Report what you see." Isles' voice came through calm and clear, which settled Nya's jumpy nerves. It'd been a while since she had to describe what she saw, but she didn't have much of a choice, now. She had to get this right.

"Deep channels have formed, and it looks as though huge plates of earth have shifted." She squinted into the distance, and focused her optical implants tighter as the AI chip picked up a thermal signature at a distance of about five or six kilometers.

"Damn," she muttered beneath her breath when the source of that signature remained shrouded in steam and ice. "There's something very hot miles away—I can see the steam in the air from here."

"Any signs of life?"

Nya scanned left and right, tuning her optical implants for nearer heat signatures. She picked up two just entering the transport bay behind Amani. At first, she tensed, prepared for another fight. Then she noticed the cool-green cast of their signatures. One male, one female; both Karatzin. Nya relaxed as she realized it was Javel and Xerna.

"No," she answered Isles shortly. "Just we four guards."

"The facilities?"

Nya shook her head. She always admired Lucia Isles' ability to communicate a large amount of information with a minimal amount of fuss. It was a skill Nya wished she could master.

"Breaking apart." She took several steps outside, and turned to her right, where the heating and ventilation system rose from the frozen ground. If that was compromised... A short oath in her mother's tongue broke her lips.

"The glass house dome that was situated atop the heat shaft to heat the air inside has shattered." She cast a swift, questioning glance at Amani, who shrugged. She sighed inwardly. She hated guessing. "Possibly due to the earth tremors that can be felt easily up here. Cracks show heavily in the outer buildings."

Great spirits, she sounded like a frigging automation. How inane could she get? Then the ground beneath her feet trembled and bucked, and suddenly, it didn't matter, so long as Isles got the gist of how bad their situation really was. She barely held in her gasp as she grabbed for Amani to steady herself. He grunted in response and disengaged his arm from her grasp.

Nya cast him a confused glance, and sucked in a breath in surprise as his gaze clashed with hers, and the bottom dropped out of her world. The heat of his gaze singed her, and confused her. His actions said he didn't want her, but his eyes said he did. She swallowed hard. She prayed her muddled emotions didn't color her voice as she informed Thrower and Isles of their situation. "The planet is destabilizing."

"Are there any ships or transports of any kind?" The worry in Isles' voice spoke volumes Nya didn't want to read. She was relieved to know she wasn't the only one who

thought they were in big trouble, yet she wanted to believe that nothing could be bad enough to worry the rock-solid Lieutenant Isles.

"Not that we can see."

"Shit." Amani's gruff oath pulled Nya's attention his way, to find his gaze fixed morosely over her shoulder. Her heart stilled. The last time he looked that way, they were under attack.

"What?"

"The communication tower's gone."

Her stomach landed somewhere in the vicinity of her boots, and Nya barely managed to move her feet enough to see what he meant. This was worse than an attack. If the communications tower was destroyed, they had no hope of sending a distress call, or any other kind of communication, off-world. And they might soon lose all on-world communications, as well.

Sure enough, the tower was in pieces, the titatone beams severed clear through in more than one place.

"What?" Thrower's voice snapped in Nya's head. "Amani? Nya, what did Amani just say?"

"The communications tower," she managed, the words sticking in her throat even as she forced them out. "It's collapsed."

"That's not collapsed, sweetheart," Amani intoned wryly. "That's sabotage."

"The tremors?" Thrower asked.

"No." Nya tried to ignore the warm shiver that Amani's unintentional endearment set off in her, even as his words sent a chill through her. "Amani says it's been done deliberately."

"You're kidding me!" Thrower's shock and disbelief couldn't be clearer.

Isles, on the other hand, sounded as cool and calm as ever when she next spoke. How Nya envied her that confidence!

"Is there any way to link up to the emitter?"

A glance at the scattered remnants of the tower crushed Nya's brief flare of hope. The emitter looked smashed, even from here.

"No." She drew a deep breath, and the frozen air burned her lungs through her loose mask. It felt like home, and reminded her that she could survive this. She'd long ago sworn never to die in a frozen wasteland.

"No chance we'll ever get that mess repaired." She gave her compatriots below the unvarnished truth. "It looks like the emitter's been completely destroyed."

Static filled her head, and Nya winced and slapped a hand over the transmitter in the back of her neck. "Dammit!"

Amani swung around. "What?"

"I think we lost the connection again." She shook away the fuzz that still filled her head. "Thrower. Isles. Come in. If anyone can hear me, please respond."

"That include us?"

Nya glanced toward Javel and Xerna at the Karatzin man's ironic quip, even as her senses, heightened by the presence of her totem still lurking within her, picked up the sudden tension in the air. That wasn't sexual tension, either. It was threat, hostility. She shot a

surprised glance Amani's way, and the dark glower on his face confused her. Amani never showed and dislike for either of the Karatzin guards, before. Why now? She followed his glare, and her eyes widened as they landed on Javel. She had no idea what to make of that. She thought the two men were friends. So what the hell was suddenly eating at Amani? She gifted Javel with a frown of her own, for his quip.

"Not funny. We just lost contact with the Garrison."

Javel and Xerna shared a look. "Someone should go check it out."

"I'll go," Xerna piped up.

"Not without me." Javel was right on her heels as she strode quickly away. Nya watched them go, and wondered if any of the guards would ever see each other again. With a sharp breath of frozen air, she shook her head clear and turned back to Amani with a shrug.

"Looks like we're on our own."

Now, if only he didn't look so worried when she said that.

Chapter Nine

*Exterior of Zurin Five
65 Hours to E.L.E.*

"This isn't right." Nya leapt nimbly across a patch of shifting ice, and turned to monitor Amani's progress. In that ridiculous yellow EVA suit, he couldn't move as swiftly or effectively as she could. That would be a problem if the ice kept melting like this. "For the surface to get warm enough to create lakes and rivers from this ice, the belowground temperature would have to be hot enough for a geologic event."

"What's a geologic event?" Amani's voice came out muffled, beneath the mask, but his frustration was evident. He hated that suit as much as she did.

"Volcanoes, fissures, core expansion. Anything that brings the molten core to the surface." She eyed a bridge of thick, cracked ice that lay across a roaring river of meltdown, and frowned. It looked stable enough, but she knew how false appearances could be.

With a deep breath to summon courage, Nya edged first one foot, and then the other, out onto the ice bridge. She relaxed with an exhaled breath when it didn't so much as shift or creak under her weight.

"Wait." Amani's hand on her arm stopped Nya, and she swung around in surprise at the contact. Amani almost never initiated physical contact, no matter how much she hungered for his touch.

"What's wrong?"

His gaze fixed on the bridge, his dark eyes worried. "That doesn't look stable. Maybe we should find somewhere else to cross."

She stifled a laugh of disbelief as she gestured in both directions along the river. The massive body of water spanned – with no other visible means of crossing – farther than the eye could see.

"Be my guest. But, while you're searching for another way, this one's melting."

Amani swore, and Nya couldn't resist a smile at his disgruntled expression. He turned, and froze, before he swung back around. "At least let me go back and get some rope. If that bridge gives out, there's no telling where the river will take you."

He had a point. Nya nodded as she warily eyed the swell of seething water beneath the bridge. She didn't tell him that she was sure anyone who ended up in there was dead, anyhow. Instead, as Amani lumbered back toward the transport bay as fast as the bulky gear and low gravity allowed, Nya took the opportunity to study their environment from the riverbank, and her mind drifted back to her first arrival on-world.

The shuttle left dock on the Duran transport station, and Nya's heart rose into her throat. This was her last hope to disappear completely, before the space traders on Upsilon Three stumbled onto her secret. As the shuttle plunged toward the planet, she gripped the arms of her seat, held her breath, and prayed to every one of her Gods that she hadn't made a mistake

Their approach was more shallow than wise, she was sure, but then, she wasn't a spacer. She wasn't about to argue with a seasoned pilot like Jarshan Trevilei. She bit her lip, and watched the young man at the controls for a long moment, her eyes skipping over his every motion, looking for any sign in

trouble. When she saw nothing but confidence, she relaxed, and released her breath, then drew another as she turned to gaze out the porthole window, wondering what kind of planet her new home – for at least the next three months, anyway – would turn out to be. A desert, like Ramali, maybe? Or a lush jungle full of exotic plants and animals, like Menerdat? Hell, anything was better than...

Her breath froze in her lungs as the shuttle broke the planet's thick cloud cover, and she got her first glimpse. No. This couldn't be it. This wasn't right!

"Trevilei! Where are we?"

He shot her a look over his shoulder that said he thought she was crazy. That made two of them, because she couldn't really see what she thought.

"It's Zurin Five, Ms. Soderstrom. You know that."

That's where she was supposed to be, yes. She looked back out the porthole, and prayed that she'd see something different. She didn't really care what, as long as it didn't involve ice or snow. Horror plunged through her as she stared down at the planet's approaching surface. It was a ragged blanket of ice and snow, piled in drifts. The only break in the shimmering white veil were the huge, jutting mountains of frozen rock.

"But this is... this is..." It was one of her worst nightmares, come to life. Zurin Five was home, all over again. It was Omri-Lodus in a brand new guise, and she hated it. Gods of her ancestors, how she hated it already! She had no idea how she was going to make it through three whole months without going totally crazy, surrounded by all this snow, and the memories...

Nya snapped back to the present as the ground rolled beneath her with the threat of renewed violence. She blinked, and sighed as her eyes skimmed the surface of the planet around her, amazed that she'd stayed long enough to come to this. After all, she promised herself she'd never die in another frozen hell like the home she couldn't get away from fast enough.

She sighed. She supposed familiarity bred certain comforts, as much as contempt. She eventually grew immune to Zurin Five's icy likeness to the planet of her birth. Now, that comfort quickly evaporated both figuratively and literally, leaving her unsure of what to do next. The planet she saw from that first shuttle in bore little resemblance to the one that rumbled beneath her feet now. Rock formations jutted painfully through the planet's snowy skin, and deep channels, carved by the rush of churning water, scored her face. Fissures cracked wide into the planet's surface, and the ground rolled almost constantly. There was little doubt in Nya's mind that such a traumatic change could herald only one event – planetary death.

She dropped to her knees on the frozen ground and pulled off her gloves. Not smart in the subzero temperatures, she knew, but she had to feel it for herself. She had to know how much time they had left.

As her knees hit the ground, there was a sickening crack, and Nya stilled, her heart in her throat, as she realized her error. What she believed to be solid ground was, in reality, a layer of ice. Looking down, she saw the seething river beneath the ice, and swore. She was a dead woman.

"Shit!" The word pulled from her, even as the ice broke away and she plunged off the bank, spun away on a rapidly disintegrating raft in the middle of a suicide river. If she didn't think of something, and fast, she was going to end up in the water.

Amani shoved his mask into place as he grabbed up the coil of mining cable and slung it over his shoulder. He hated to admit it, but Nya was right. The evidence suggested Duran had evacuated the planet and left them behind. With no means of survival or escape. He didn't want to face the looming possibility that it wasn't an accident.

Amani shook his head as he took carefully measured steps across the frozen planetary surface past the broken dome of the mine entrance. If Duran Corporation saw a reason to evacuate, they would call in rescue transports and evacuate everyone, not just the company staff. Wouldn't they? With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, he faced the chance that they already had.

He bounced a step, distracted, and barely caught himself from drifting off in the lower gravity. He didn't want to think about Duran, or who was right or wrong. He didn't want to consider this frozen hellhole—so different from his arid native planet—or how at ease Nya appeared here. Instead, he focused his gaze on the woman in question and cursed his slow pace. If only he could risk a faster stride...

Nya knelt down suddenly, and pulled at something, before she leaned forward, then tensed, and suddenly dropped from sight over the river's expanding bank.

"Nya!" All thought for his own safety fled his mind as frightened adrenaline flooded him. His racing strides ate up the frozen ground in bounding steps until he reached the spot where she went over. His breath sawed through the respirator like the roar of an engine as he searched for some sign of his partner. She couldn't be gone. "Nya! Answer me!"

"Amani!" He barely heard her cry above the roar of the water and the sound of his own breathing. His head snapped to the right, and he saw her. She clung to a disc of ice as it spun and bobbed along the surface of the raging river.

Amani uncoiled the cable from his shoulder, bounding along the river's edge in an effort to keep pace with Nya as she bounced on the swift current. He could toss the lifeline to her and tow her in; but if he missed by even a fraction, he could lose her forever. *Just like Dinara.*

Determination solidified in his chest. He wouldn't lose Nya. He wouldn't again fail another woman in his care.

"Nya!" He called across to her, and waited the heartbeat that it took for her eyes to lift from the river. The fear on her face clenched a fist in his gut. Failure was not an option. "I'm going to toss you the line. Let me know when you've got a firm grip, and I'll tow you in."

"Hurry." Barely-smothered panic laced her voice as the ice melted and her legs slipped further into what had to be freezing water. "The ice is melting."

He hoped like hell that her special EVA suit could keep her dry long enough to get her out of the river. With an indrawn breath, he whirled the rope above his head to gain momentum, and prayed the lower-than-normal gravity didn't cause it to sail completely off the mark. Then, his world narrowed on the woman who spun rapidly away from him. Each breath burned his lungs, and he felt the friction of microfiber nylon against gloves as he loosed the end of the rope toward her.

Nya reached for the line, and a small cry left her as the water-slicked ice slipped from beneath her, plunging her beneath the fast-moving current. Amani's heart stopped for one terrible instant when she failed to resurface. Then a sharp tug on the line yanked him back to

reality. Nya broke the surface of the water an instant later, a sea maiden roused from her slumber. Water soaked the white fur of her EVA suit, plastering it tight to her body, and her face and hands were nearly purple with the icy cold. Hypothermia was already setting in. He had to get her out of there, and fast.

With a massive heave, Amani pulled the line sharply. Muscles bunched and coiled, and he strained against her soaked weight and the furious pull of the river as it sought to reclaim its prize. Nya reached out to kick with her legs, even as Amani gave another mighty heave. And then, Nya was in his arms, soaked and nearly frozen, her entire body shivering as ice shards already formed in the wet fur around her face, and Amani couldn't decide what he felt. Relief? Without a doubt. Elation? Yes, he was happy she was alive. Yet, neither explained the strange coil in his belly that demanded he warm her freezing body with his own, and claim the life he'd denied the river.

His gaze settled on her lips—tinged blue around the edges from the cold, exposure, and the lack of a respirator. Hot blood raced straight to his groin as the idea filled him of warming those chilled lips with his own, and breathing his own air into her lungs.

Then her eyes opened, and the sadness and fear there cleared his head of all though except to get her somewhere warm and oxygen rich. His mind flashed to the transport bay, and the climate controlled levels below. He needed to get her back there. But how? He couldn't carry her in his awkward EVA suit, and she didn't have the energy necessary to make it back under her own power. He met her gaze.

"Can you stand at all?"

His admiration spiked as Nya rallied, her green eyes determined as she nodded. "I'll manage."

"You can lean on me, but I need your help to get you back where it's warm."

A small, tremulous smile pulled across her lips. "Get me up and moving, Amani. I'll warm up in a few moments."

"You're hypothermic!"

She struggled to a sitting position, and then to her knees. The pained look on her face told him how much the movement cost her, but she made it. "The surface of my homeworld is a lot like this one. I'll survive. It's in my genes." As if to prove her point, she rose wobbly to her feet, and took measured steps toward the facility behind them. She cast a smug look over her shoulder as each step became smoother. "See?"

"I still don't—" A loud rumble cut off Amani's words, followed by the pitch of the planet beneath his feet. "By all that's sacred!"

Nya swore, even after the quake spent itself, and the frozen fear on her face as a new rumble sounded plunged dread straight through Amani. The quality of this rumble was different, more muffled. Like something heavy and wet sliding. His breath paused as he watched Nya slowly turn toward him, her eyes wide in horror as she stared past him.

"Avalanche!"

Time slowed, after that, and Amani was aware of each motion. He turned, just in time to see a wall of white and black rush straight at him before his world disappeared in a dark wave.

Chapter Ten

Cold, wet dots covered her face, and every breath she drew tasted of ice and earth. Nya shifted her arms and legs, slowly testing the limits of her movement from the fetal position she had curled into when the wave of white hit her. Her feet encountered something solid, even as her arms broke the surface of the snow. Relief hit her sharply between the ribs. Apparently, the avalanche hadn't buried them as deep as she feared.

Her eyes eased open cautiously, and she blinked into the near darkness. Shit. Where was she? She spent so much time focused on survival that she'd paid no attention to where the avalanche carried her and Amani. In the torrent of ice, snow, and rock, she managed to lose her respirator and goggles. Her gloves had been claimed by the river, which left her hands exposed and freezing in the blanket of snow and ice that covered her.

Amani! Fear sent a burst of adrenaline through Nya, and she scrambled free of the snow, already digging with cold-numb hands as she searched for some sign of her partner. He wasn't like her; Amani's planet never saw more than a few inches of snow in a lifetime. He didn't know how to survive an avalanche. And Nya knew better than most what common mistakes the inexperienced made. Human instinct was driven to fight or flight, like any animal. But that instinct said that, when facing the fury of a planet's weather, you fought it. With an avalanche, that could be a death sentence. It was far safer just to go with the flow.

Nya gasped as she uncovered something thick, rubbery, and bright yellow. Amani! Spurred on by her find, she quickly uncovered the rest of his arm, then his torso, and finally, his face. Like her, he'd lost his respirator and goggles in the violence of the avalanche, leaving his face exposed to the cold. He was so still... Her heart beat harshly with dread as she leaned toward him. What if he was already dead? Thanks to the blow to her head – courtesy of an ice-crust rock – she'd passed out. She had no idea for how long.

With a trembling, indrawn breath, she leaned in to perform life-saving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She froze, less than a millimeter from contact, when Amani drew a huge, gasping breath. He was alive!

Elation, and a host of emotions she wasn't sure how to express, swelled in Nya as Amani's breathing grew deep and regular. The tide of emotion swept her away faster than any avalanche, and she closed the space between them without thought.

The feel of his lips, cold and damp from the snow, sent a frisson of heat through her body that chased away any remnants of their ordeal. With a small moan, she shifted position to better seal their mouths.

Amani's hands came up to frame her face as he took control of the kiss, as if he drank the warmth from her lips. The urgency of his kiss vibrated a familiar chord deep within Nya's soul. The need to be loved, regardless of the past, throbbed between them like a living heart. Frustration and desire warred within Nya. She didn't know how to tell him she loved him, but maybe she could show him. Heat flowed in her veins, and she pressed closer with a groan as her nipples tingled and drew to hard points beneath her clothes. Aware only of her need to mend whatever held Amani so distant from her, and greedy to celebrate the joy of survival, Nya slid her body over his, until she straddled his hips.

Her body hummed with want, and the thick padding of his EVA suit frustrated her even more. She didn't want any more barriers. She needed to know that this kiss affected him as deeply as it did her. She needed to know how much he wanted her.

With another small moan, she broke their kiss to whimper his name. No sooner did the beloved name leave her lips than his dark eyes flew open, and he broke away with a muttered oath. A small, humorless laugh burst from Nya as she struggled to her knees, determined not to show how much his rejection stung. "That's hardly flattering."

"What happened?" He ignored her bitter comment, and Nya closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. She wouldn't cry. She could survive another broken heart. It didn't matter, anyway. If the planet continued to disintegrate around them, she wouldn't have to endure the pain of crushed dreams much longer.

"An avalanche." She couldn't keep the sharpness from her tone as she rose to her feet and reached to unsnap her compad from her utility belt. She powered it up and frowned. A careful step toward the nearest wall confirmed her suspicions. The grooves of tool marks cast deep into the stone, beneath the dim lights. "I think it carried us into the mine."

"How far?" Amani struggled to get to his feet, and Nya took pity on him as he floundered and swore. After all, it wasn't his fault that the EVA suits most of the galaxy wore made everyone move like drunken turtles.

"You really should take that gear off," she advised as she returned her attention to her compad, to activate the compass and level indicator.

"What about you?" He cast a look over her white-encased form, and her breath caught at the flash of hunger that lit his eyes. This attraction between them wasn't new territory, but the recent intensity of it made her nervous. She didn't know how to deal with this kind of heat.

He watched her, clearly waiting for a response, when she met his eyes again. Forcing her breathing even, she shook her head. "My suit's made to protect against all kinds of extreme environmental conditions. Besides, it doesn't weigh me down."

He didn't respond, and Nya's frown deepened when it registered their signal several hundred feet below the mine's deepest recorded level—way below the 'safe zone'.

"This can't be right." She looked up at Amani as he shed the ridiculous yellow suit. "Water must have got into the circuitry. My compad registers us at somewhere below the mine. Only that's impossible, unless..."

She let her voice trail off as she considered the possibility. Hadn't she toyed with the theory that Duran was conducting illegal deep core mining for some time, now? She shuddered, and met Amani's troubled gaze.

"Don't say it," he warned. "I don't want to know."

Nya rolled her eyes and loosed an exasperated sigh. "One of these days, that denial of yours will get you killed."

He remained silent and shucked the last layer of his EVA suit. "In the meantime, let's get moving, and see if we can't figure out where we really are."

Disgruntled by his brusque manner, Nya stalked off ahead, determined to put space between them. There was no way she wanted to be close enough to give in to her desire to hit him. Though it was tempting. Instead, she turned her night-friendly eyes to their

surroundings, and realized that the dim light came from a series of mining lights staked into the walls, and the lightly phosphorescent lichen that grew along some of the walls and ceiling.

A series of rapid-fire clicks stopped her, and Nya glanced around with an uncertain frown. Where was that noise coming from? It was close, but only she and Amani were here in the tunnel. A quick glance at her compad revealed no other signs of life, human or otherwise. So what was that noise?

Trepidation squeezed her diaphragm, and Nya felt dizzy for a moment. Then, with a shake of her head, she chastised herself for the ridiculous fear. It was only a click, and sound traveled well in a mine. Likely, that sound was just rock settling, somewhere far off in the mine, and—

“What was *that*?” She froze and turned, her eyes tuned into the near-darkness as the noise stopped abruptly. No way was that far away. Someone lurked in the shadows, watching them. She felt it.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” Amani brushed the whole incident off with a negligent shrug. “Probably mining equipment that loosened during one of the quakes.”

Nya’s frown deepened at his apathetic response; she couldn’t believe that Amani, of all people, would brush off recent events as unimportant. She knew how devoted he was to his people’s Old Faith, and the Banoi believed in portends of disaster more than most. That alone should make him more willing to believe that real danger might lurk around them. She could feel the planet dying around them; why couldn’t he?

He probably just didn’t want to admit it. She cast one last, worried glance into the darkness over her shoulder. After all, she knew her partner as well as she imagined he ever let anyone know him. She knew that he, much like her, was on his third year in this hellhole—all voluntary. And she knew that, for reasons he refused to share, Amani Viyouur was obsessed with death—namely, his own. Over the past three years, she tried countless times to get him to open up, and really *talk* to her. She was convinced he had emotions bottled up that drove his semi-suicidal urges to place himself in dangerous situations. Yet, for all her effort, Amani gave no indication that he was inclined to open up to her. An uncharacteristic burst of dark humor spiked through Nya. Good thing she never took anything personally anymore.

Nya’s heart took up residence in her throat as another series of clicks sounded. Whatever the strain between them, having Amani with her in this mine was a comfort—albeit a cold one. He might confuse the hell out of her, but at least she knew he wasn’t out to kill her. Thank the Old Gods for small favors.

“This place gives me the creeps.” Nya’s shiver had nothing to do with cold as she cast a nervous glance around the tunnels again. It wasn’t cold in the mineshaft, and she had to wonder why not. It should be freezing, but instead she could feel a thin film of perspiration on her skin.

Amani shrugged, his expression so unruffled that Nya had the urge to hit him, just to see if he’d react at all. “It’s a mine. Lots of people get claustrophobia, or worse, in places like this.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better, right?” Nya rolled her eyes. Good thing Amani wasn’t the facility medic. His bedside manner left a lot to be desired.

She turned her attention to her compad, and winced as she recalled how long she swam with the swell of the avalanche. A quick mental calculation, based on the average speed of an

avalanche divided by the loss of gravitational inertia caused by Zurin Five's lower gravity, and she swore at her own realization. Her compad wasn't malfunctioning at all.

"We really are about a hundred meters below the prison. I've never known a mine to go this deep on a planet this small, before. Have you?"

"I don't know much about mining or geology." His response was clipped, almost angry, and caused the furrow in Nya's brow to deepen further.

"Unless they're core mining. Then that would explain the depth."

"That's illegal on an inhabited planet."

Her gaze drifted away from both Amani and her compad as she moved slowly forward, lost in consideration of the possibilities. Then, she nodded. "They have to be core mining. That's the only explanation for the increase in seismic activity. But why would they risk mining the planet's core?"

"What are you talking about?"

He sounded testy. Nya shot him a surprised glance over her shoulder as they resumed walking. He didn't look upset, except for his eyes. Those pitch wells telegraphed fear and nervous energy that left her once again convinced he knew something he wasn't telling her. Uneasy suspicion crawled along her spine as she recalled the closed doors to the empty transport dock. Just what was Amani's part in all of this?

"Duran Corporation. I think they were deep core mining right here."

His brow furrowed. "Why would you think that?"

"C'mon, Amani! We're a hundred meters below where the mine should end, and the planet's coming apart at the seams around us. You think that's all just a big coincidence?"

"I get your point. But they know it's illegal, and they signed an Andromeda Defense pact to never deep core mine once the prison opened."

She arched a brow in surprise. That was an argument she hadn't expected, even from Amani. As if the Andromeda Defense Pact mattered to a company as powerful as Duran Corporation. "And you don't think they'd break a pact, or the law, if it increased profits?"

"It's not about what I think, or what they stand to gain. The Pact says no one can core mine a planet. Not without evacuation of the planet first."

"A hundred thousand people—most of them criminals? Yeah, right. They're going to waste money on an evacuation. C'mon, Amani! You can't say that you've never considered the possibility that they *chose* to put a prison here simply because these people are expendable."

She didn't wait around for his answer. She already knew he'd considered it, but she also knew he'd never acknowledge that without concrete proof that Duran really *was* core mining. So she'd just have to find him some. Her long stride ate up ground, and she tried to ignore the return of that ominous clicking as she headed up the sloping mine shaft—more of a tunnel, really. She ground her teeth as the clicking continued to keep pace, even as she heard Amani close behind her.

"You're pissed."

Understatement of the century. She shot a glare over her shoulder at him. "You think?"

His concern deepened into annoyance. "Sarcasm isn't attractive, Nya."

She snorted a disgusted sigh and spun on him. "Nor is denial."

"I'm not in denial." His gaze shifted away, and a hollow pit formed in Nya's stomach at the uneasy expression on his face. He'd been acting strangely ever since the business offices. What did he find back there that he wouldn't tell her about? What had he done?

"What is it, Amani?"

He shot her a look that practically begged her to let the matter drop. "I don't know what you mean."

Even knowing that he wanted her to let it go, she couldn't. Couldn't he see how important he was to her? She couldn't just turn her back on him when he clearly needed to unload. "Amani, don't lie to me. You've been acting strange ever since Level Three. What did you find?"

He refused to meet her direct gaze, and her heart stalled in dread. Amani wasn't given to long discussion, she knew, but he rarely refused to answer a direct question, either. His reticence meant that whatever he found in the Duran business offices was eating a huge hole in him. That thought killed her, but not nearly as much as it did to know that getting the truth out of him would take a battle of wills she just wasn't in the mood for. She spun on her heel again and marched away, her teeth still gritted against that god-awful clicking. Okay, this was all just a little too much. She was sick of running from the battles. Time she stood up and made herself known.

She swung around again, to confront Amani, and froze as the skittering clicks went right past her head, on the other side of the mine wall. Sick certainty twisted through her.

"That is *not* loose mining equipment." She stabbed an accusing finger toward the wall and glared at Amani. As she met his gaze, she found confirmation that she wasn't alone in her apprehension. Icy sweat bathed her skin even in the sweltering mine shaft—why was it so damned hot in here, anyway?—as her hand crept cautiously toward the wall. It barely connected with stone and earth before she yanked it back in surprise. "It's *hot!*"

"How can that be?" Amani sounded skeptical. He stepped closer, to lay his own hand on the wall beside her, and Nya's breath caught on an involuntary shiver of awareness that shot through her. Their gazes clashed, black to green, and surprise lit his dark eyes for a moment, before smoldering heat flared, and his lids dropped in a lazy, sensual survey of her body that pulsed hot blood straight through all her erogenous zones. Apparently, she wasn't the only one turned on by danger.

"You're right." His voice rumbled over her, the sensation leaving her hot and shivering at the same time. Her breasts swelled, her nipples tightened, and fire licked her from the inside, until she was almost crazy with need.

"Amani..."

His hand left the wall, and Nya couldn't suppress the instant shaft of disappointment. He was pulling away, again. Leaving her empty, alone...

She jumped in surprise as the warmth of his hand brushed the skin of her neck. His touch was gentle—something she had very little experience with. She nuzzled into the touch, soaking up the human contact, as her heart picked up speed and she wondered what he would do. She wished she possessed more knowledge, more confidence in her emotions. Not for the first time, she envied the other female guards. They certainly didn't have any trouble expressing their thoughts or feelings.

“Alikma forgive me, but I need...” His hoarse whisper trailed off as he burrowed his hands into her hair and lowered his head to take possession of her mouth. She stiffened with a gasp of surprise, then sighed and melted against his hard, muscular body as she allowed herself to be swept away for the first time in her life. He didn’t have to tell her what he needed. She could taste the passion in his kiss, and feel it in the tension that radiated through his body and into hers. Hard heat pressed against her belly, and a shiver of need wound through her. She craved that passion, the uninhibited freedom to embrace the impetuous creature buried deep in her soul.

Crushed to the solid wall that was Amani’s body, Nya felt small and delicate for the first time in her life. This was what it was like to be cherished, to be craved beyond all sanity. And the siren within her soul thrived beneath the hot waves of that attention.

Amani’s touch skimmed her clothes, and she knew the instant the seal of her EVA suit opened, by the change in pressure around her body. But it wasn’t enough. She wanted more; she wanted his skin against hers, no barriers between them. Restlessly, she shifted closer, encouraging him with actions, not trusting her voice. Warm air brushed her skin when he eased the hem of her uniform shirt up as well, and skin contacted skin. Nya broke their kiss with a soft cry of pleasure as hard, callused heat skimmed her quivering belly, and played over the tight nubs of her nipples. The sensation was more intense than she expected, and she arched into his touch as the dam around her soul cracked and broke wide.

“Amani.” She pushed closer, her reason consumed by the fire that swirled and rose in molten waves through her overcharged body. Each touch burned her, and she could no longer tell where his desire stopped or hers began, and nor did she care. She was a wild creature, as surely as she had been back in the transport bay. Under the sway of primal passion, she was bolder than she’d ever been in her life. Her hand slid down, across his hip, and cupped over the hard, impressive bulge in his groin.

Amani’s hiss of pleasure warmed her cheek and neck as he pressed into her inexperienced touch. His teeth nipped her earlobe, and Nya gasped at the tug of sensation that flashed from that contact straight to her womb.

Amani nuzzled the skin just behind her ear, and another flash fire went through her, even as she felt him twitch beneath her rubbing hand.

“Nya, we can’t...”

She ignored his protest. She didn’t want any more arguments; just blessed relief for the tight, hot ache that trembled through her. She wanted Amani, and she knew he wanted her. She wasn’t above playing dirty to get what they both wanted.

She applied pressure with her palm, and was rewarded with a groan from Amani that twisted her insides with want, even as he thrust into her touch.

“Nya...” His hand suddenly grasped her wrist, pulling her gently away. She couldn’t hold back her whimper of protest as he moved away a step, deliberately imposing space. They breathed in tandem for a moment—deep, ragged breaths—before he met her gaze, his full of desire and apology. “I can’t.”

Her heart crumbled on the spot, and she yanked her eyes away. She didn’t want to see regret, or pity. She was such a fool! A lifetime spent promising herself that the man she’d release the beast that prowled her soul for would be special, worthy of the sacrifice, and he rejected her. Heat flamed her face, but it was fury and shame, not passion. She’d watched him

for years. And when he renewed his term at this post where they weren't supposed to do more than one tour, she assumed that he had no one to go back to, either. That was when the dreams started; dreams of breaking through his shell, and finding a true mate in her stone-silent partner. Only, now it was clear as day to her that he didn't have the same dreams. How else could he turn away from what could be the best moment of their lives? With movements sharpened by the pain of lanced dreams, she yanked her clothes back in order.

"Bastard."

He rocked back on his heels as if she'd slugged him in the face—not that the idea didn't have merit—and practically growled his response. "Do you even know what you're talking about?"

"I don't need to know, you hypocritical, two-faced son of a Rigelian jackal!" She could not *believe* this man! She wanted to hit him; *itched* to hurt him the same way she was hurting. Instead, she turned on her heel and settled for slugging the wall.

As her fist connected with hot stone and dirt, the sting of impact radiating up her arm, the wall beside her burst outward in a shower of sparks and molten rock. Nya screamed in surprise and fear as she instinctively leapt back.

She stumbled and dropped to the floor, just as one ugly, red-brown set of talon-like claws swiped through the air where her neck was just a moment before. Nya gasped in horror at the creature as it appeared in the hole. Never in all her travels had she encountered such a grotesque creature!

The bug—if one took the liberty of calling it that—had a hard, crustacean-like exoskeleton, with arms that extended from slits in the hard shell's front. What passed for arms, as best she could guess, were long and smooth, with the same dull, red-brown armor as what she could see of the body. The claws that tipped the ends of each arm were wickedly sharp, and she swallowed hard. If she had remained standing, she'd be dead.

The huge bug-eyes fixed on Nya, and the creature loosed a scream like nails on a slate board. Nya cringed, and slapped her hands over her ears, even as she stared at its gaping mouth, filled with jagged, sharp teeth. There was no doubt in her mind that the primary function of those teeth was to kill.

She scrambled backwards, finding her footing as the creature heaved itself through the hole and dropped to the floor on clawed legs and a segmented, worm-like body. The scent of brimstone filled the air in its wake.

"What *is* that thing?" The query emerged a horrified croak, but she couldn't make herself care. She'd never stared into the eyes of one of Nartal's fabled Legion, before.

Chapter Eleven

Amani heard the panic in his partner's voice, and couldn't blame her one bit. He'd never faced anything like this, either. These were creatures born from the collective nightmares of all people. The Old Faith had a term for them that suddenly seemed highly appropriate. *Talajeen*. The Soul Eaters.

And there wasn't just one. Behind the first came another, and then another, and still more, until the passageway teemed with snorting, snuffling sounds fit to freeze the blood of even the most stalwart warrior.

Amani flipped his phaser loose from its holster at his hip, even as he glimpsed Nya doing the same. With the practiced ease of two people who'd worked closely for years, they melded backs and took aim like a well-oiled machine. The key was to make sure that no lapse of phaser fire occurred between charges. Amani squeezed the trigger, and watched in satisfaction as one of the creatures exploded in a shower of thick, black goo that hit the floor with a sizzle. Blessed Alikma, they smelled even worse in death. He grimaced at the foul odor of brimstone and tar that filled the air, along with smoke that made his eyes water. He narrowed his attention as he heard the discharge of Nya's weapon, and the high-pitched squeal as another of the *talajeen* went down.

"We have to split up." Nya's voice was terse, clipped with the urgency of battle. "If they surround us, we're dead."

She was right, of course. The tactician in him knew that these things were out for blood, and a pincer attack of any kind would be deadly.

Before he could voice his denial, or a sound argument, she was gone, moving along the wall away from him. Instantly, the *talajeen's* attention turned, and in a wave of snorts and shuffles, they were off after her. Clearly, they understood escape, and weren't about to let one of their prey succeed.

Amani fired repeatedly into the wave of *talajeen*, hoping to turn at least some of their attention back to him. It didn't work. They were like a swarm, driven by a compulsion to prevent escape. The electric hiss and bright flash of Nya's weapon echoes each discharge of his own weapon, and more *talajeen* exploded. Enraged screeches answered each blast. One of the *talajeen* lashed out, and the back of its razor-sharp talon impacted the arm already weakened from her earlier fight with the bearcat, and her cry of pain stabbed Amani even as he watched her phaser go flying from her grip. The weapon clattered to the ground, and his heart sped as he realized Nya was now defenseless. A sea of snorting, razor-clawed creatures lay between her and her only viable defense.

Amani burned down two of the *talajeen* and wounded a third, even as he swiftly judged the distance to Nya's phaser. She didn't stand a chance without her weapon. He swore as he eyeballed the distance even as he dropped another bug. Judging by their reaction to Nya, these things were as attracted to motion as the bearcats on the surface. If he made a move toward Nya's weapon, he couldn't hesitate for even a second, or he'd be dead.

His gaze flew to his partner as he heard a high-pitched, grating squeal, and his jaw nearly dropped to the mine floor in stunned disbelief.

Nya, apparently, had never heard the term 'lost cause'. Even as Amani took out the bug creeping in behind her, its pincers snapping and its intention clear, Nya ducked away from another's swinging talon, her leg sweeping the air simultaneously to catch the *talajeen* she sparred right across its huge eyes. The creature scuttled back with another screech, but managed to draw blood as the tip of one taloned appendage raked Nya's arm and left a gash from shoulder to elbow that clenched Amani's stomach in dread. He hoped like hell the wound was superficial. Nya couldn't afford to lose any more blood.

His course determined by Nya's courage, Amani sprinted for the spot where her weapon had landed. Instantly, bug eyes turned toward him, and the sea of *talajeen* parted as half detoured back toward him. Grim-faced, Amani poured out wrathful justice as he fired into the swarm, and burned a path through the creatures.

With a burst of adrenaline, he dived for the phaser, and white-hot pain exploded in his thigh, mid-air. He landed hard, and twisted against the agony of impact, to burn a hole straight through the *talajeen* that currently had its talon stabbed through his thigh. The shock of electric heat washed backward from the blast, and stunned him. It was stupid to discharge a phaser at close range, because the heat and electrical kickback could injure or kill anything close to the beam's landing point. Still, he didn't have much choice.

Teeth gritted against pain, Amani scooped up Nya's weapon and tossed it to her. She caught it mid-air, and landed with fire blazing. As his mind glazed with the agony radiating from his thigh, Amani watched her efficiently dispatch the last of the bugs, and dimly acknowledged that she was a hell of a shot. He was so damned proud of her, and so terrified. If he wasn't careful, the warmth currently spreading through his chest could be his downfall. In the meantime, he'd just close his eyes and rest here for a bit...

As the last bug fell, sizzling, at her feet, Nya glanced around for Amani, and her heart plummeted to her feet when she saw him. Amani lay sprawled on his right side in the middle of a scattering of dead bugs. His skin was singed from what looked like phaser fire, and one long, wicked-looking talon pierced the middle of his thigh.

"Amani!" She was at his side in a flash, the burning pain in her right arm pushed aside as she assessed the severity of her partner's condition.

The burns were superficial, and no real cause for concern. Most of them would probably heal without treatment with no adverse effects. Her gaze dropped along his body, and worry gnawed her. That leg wound was another matter completely.

The talon that protruded from his thigh was probably all that kept him from bleeding out on the spot. There wasn't a lot of blood on the ground, but she feared that removing the talon would prove fatal. If it nicked a major blood vessel, either going in or when she removed it, he would very likely bleed to death. That possibility was one she just couldn't live with. Hell, she couldn't even roll him to his back without fear of jostling the wound and setting it bleeding.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she assessed her choices. She managed to hold onto her pack of survival gear—mostly because she strapped it on around her waist, a survival utility belt, as soon as she suited up, aware that its contents were crucial to survival.

She had nanopacs in there, so sealing the wound wasn't an issue. Once she secured one of the special AI-impregnated patches around his leg, tiny probes would go to work repairing the damaged tissue.

The problem remained in removing the talon. She wasn't sure how to do it without the risk that he might bleed to death, or move and do himself further injury. As she frowned at his leg, a hand suddenly grabbed hers, and Nya jumped, before Amani's voice, gravelly with pain, reached her.

"Just do it."

She swallowed hard. "I'm not a medic. I'm not trained—"

His grip tightened. "You're the only one here. Nya, I trust you."

Those final three words washed through Nya, and tears burned her eyes. She couldn't tell him that he'd misplaced his trust. She was a screw-up. She couldn't even hack being a dutiful daughter; she'd screwed up her own conception and birth. She couldn't bear to fail again... Nya's hands trembled for a moment, before she met his dark eyes, his pupils dilated in pain, but his gaze steady and clear. That calm, resolved gaze strengthened her own resolve. Amani may be resigned to death—may even be ready to meet it—but she was selfishly unwilling to let him go. Not when she was finally getting through to him. Amani couldn't die; they both had too much to live for.

Determination flooded her, and Nya gripped the talon with a muttered, "This is going to hurt."

Amani tensed, and gave her a short nod. Nya's mind flashed to the hypodermic of medical Styx in her pack. Normally, she'd give him the sedative painkiller; but they were in danger, far from the surface or safety. She couldn't afford to have him in a drugged stupor; neither one of them could, if they wanted to survive.

"Forgive me." She closed her eyes, tightened her grip, and yanked upward in one sharp, fluid motion. The talon resisted, and her heart plummeted, before it suddenly slid free, and her breath caught even as Amani stiffened, a hiss of pain sawing through his clenched teeth.

The talon free, Nya lost no time in securing the nanopac to his thigh, relieved to see that the bleeding wasn't severe enough to indicate damage to a major blood vessel. His hand covered hers, and his squeeze of thanks was weak with the ordeal, but she knew that strength would return rapidly enough.

"Help me up."

She goggled at him, sure she hadn't heard correctly. "W-what?"

"We can't stay here. Those... *things* might have more friends. So, since I'm not all that wild to become someone's dinner, I think we should go. Now."

She wanted to tell him he was crazy, or that the drugs were talking. Only, he made too much sense to be crazy, and she knew he didn't have any drugs in his system. Fresh out of a convincing argument, she bit her tongue, levered her shoulders under his arm and with her arm wrapped around his back, eased him up. He stiffened, and she bit back a smile laced with concern as he cursed.

"Sure you don't want to wait until it heals a bit?"

"No time." His breathing was labored, and Nya couldn't help the tug of awareness that coiled in her belly at the sound. How sick was she? He was clearly in pain, and all she could do was wonder if his voice would have that same harsh quality in the throes of passion.

Roughly, she shook away the thought, and silently urged Amani to lean on her.

"We need to contact someone." She knew that communication was their key to survival, now. "No one knows where we are."

Amani nodded shortly. "I think my implant's malfunctioning. I couldn't even hear what was going on when we were inside the transport bay."

"I've got a higher frequency, from the AI implant. I'll give it a try." Nya touched her free hand to the base of her neck, where the implanted communications switch was. "Any guards. Come in, any guards."

Silence answered her, its echo so loud in her ears that Nya's heart sank to the planet's unstable core. That couldn't be it; there had to be someone out there. And then, a brief burst of static filled her ears.

"Hello?" She tried again, her hand still pressed to the base of her neck. "This is Nya Soderstrom. If any guard can hear me, please respond."

Her eyes met Amani's as silence again filled her ears. The tension hummed loud in her head as she realized they both thought the same thing. If they couldn't reach anyone, then no one would know what happened to them, or if they were still alive. If they didn't find a way out of here soon, they'd be left to die on this worthless lump of rock.

"Think the avalanche ruined our receptors?" Amani cast a speculative look her way.

Nya shook her head. "No. They're made to survive greater shocks than that. They can survive a transport crash."

"You're the expert. What do you think happened?" He winced as he put pressure on his wounded leg again. His gaze went to her arm, and he frowned. "Shouldn't you take care of that?"

She ignored him. She didn't want to think about the pain right now. The gash was superficial, and the *ranisse* skin EVA suit's regenerative ability would seal it from infection.

"Well, the communication tower and AI are damaged. That much we know. That already makes communications hit or miss. And then, there's this." She drew her torch from her utility belt and shone its light on the wall beside them. The rock sparkled with multicolor flecks. She shut off the light and tucked it away. "The mine walls are full of ultrascescence. That disrupts and degrades radio waves. Put the two together, and..."

"We're screwed." Amani's tone left little doubt how he felt about that predicament.

Nya shot him a sharp glance. He didn't sound like he thought their situation was a good thing. From anyone else, that would be a normal response. From death-obsessed Amani, she'd expected a very different reaction.

"I'd think you'd be happy. We'll probably die down here."

His eyes drilled her with an intense gaze that weakened her knees and made her steps falter momentarily. "What makes you think that makes me happy?"

"Oh, gee, I don't know." She set her teeth against dropping him, and letting him make or break his own survival. "Maybe because you're obsessed with death, and it looks like we're going to do just that. Die."

He lifted one brow, but didn't comment on the obsession reference. Instead, his dark eyes took on a sultry, serious quality that made her regret her impulsive statement as his voice dropped to a rumble. "I would never be happy to see you in danger, Nya."

Nya's pulse jumped, before she told herself he didn't mean *her*, specifically. He meant he wasn't happy that the rest of the guards were in danger. He didn't give a fig about himself, and she had to wonder again, for the thousandth time, why that was.

"So, any idea how we get out of this?" She strove for a lighter tone.

He shrugged awkwardly against her. "Just keep moving up."

That sounded like a plan. Nya smothered a wry grin. She should have expected as much from Amani—he tended to work with the obvious first. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing as they continued on, their way lit by the mine's dim lighting. She knew her desire to laugh was prompted more by adrenaline and latent fear than by any real humor. What had her mother always said? Laughter kept you sane when danger came knocking.

Lost in thought, Nya stumbled to a surprised halt when Amani abruptly stopped. "Shit."

Her head snapped up at that dismayed oath, and she nearly swore herself as she took in the fork in the tunnel. Now which way did they go? One way led to the surface, and the other... "Hey, wait a minute. What's a secondary tunnel doing in a mine, anyway?"

"It's not that unusual, is it?" Amani shot her a questioning glance.

She shrugged. "Who knows? I've never been in a mine before. But I wouldn't imagine miners would be burrowing around like so many rodents."

"Which way do you want to go?"

Nya's scalp prickled as her gaze landed on the left-hand tunnel. There was an answer there. She could feel it. "That way."

And, if she was right, they might be on the verge of discovering exactly what happened to the Duran Corporation people.

Chapter Twelve

Five minutes later, Nya stopped dead in her tracks, her brow furrowed, as she sought Amani's gaze, and saw her confusion and suspicion mirrored there. It was a relief to know she wasn't alone in her surprise.

"Now, I *know* that doesn't belong here." The wry tone of Amani's observation wasn't lost on Nya. Especially since the 'that' in question was a row of abandoned prison cells and a self-contained work center like the ones Duran scientists used to monitor experiments.

"Why do you suppose it's here?"

"Not for any good reason, I'm sure."

Amani's muttered response chilled Nya to the bones and prickled her skin with dread. She'd already concluded that the station wasn't for a good purpose. She was more interested in whether or not it had anything to do with those damned bugs they just fought. One glance at Amani told her that he was wondering the same thing.

Wary now, the two guards approached the cells, and Nya's frantic pulse elevated further by the tension that radiated from her silent partner. A glance his way brought a frown back to her face. He looked calm, but she knew differently. He was definitely at least as worried as she was, despite his calm exterior. Probably more so, she consoled herself as her heart beat wildly against her ribcage. After all, Amani had a wounded leg, thanks to those abominable things, and if there were more around here, he'd never get away. While the healing nanopac allowed him more movement with every moment that passed, he still couldn't bear his full weight.

"You can let go, now." Amani straightened, removing his weight from her shoulder, and Nya resisted the twinge of disappointment at having his warm weight suddenly gone. He wouldn't take kindly to knowing how much she enjoyed having his body pressed against hers, if only for support.

Nya frowned as she watched lines of pain crease his face, and his skin paled from its usual dusky hue. "You're not healed enough."

"I'm fine."

He was lying, and they both knew it. Nya bit back her protest as she met his eyes and saw the warning there. Instead, she dropped his arm and turned toward the row of prison cells. They'd discuss this later. Right now, they had more important questions to answer.

"I'll check the cells, make sure there's nothing left. Why don't you see what you can find in there?" She nodded toward the workstation.

He nodded, his lips thinned in pain and his face still drawn and pale, and Nya bit back another surge of concern. Why couldn't Amani just admit he needed to rest? His leg had to be on fire, by now, and yet he still clung stubbornly to that stoic martyrdom of his.

She'd never understand it. Nya shook her head with a small snort of exasperation, then pushed aside her misgivings as she neared the row of cells, phaser and compad in hand. If there was anything aside from wildlife or bugs in these cells, her compad should register the signal of a locator chip, and tell her if it belonged to friend, or foe.

Nya flicked on her compad and glanced at the screen. Nothing. The compad didn't so much as register that there was a tunnel or station here. Once again, it showed her completely

outside the defined edges of the mine. All she saw were two blinking gray dots moving in space—herself and Amani. This was not a comforting turn of events.

Her sense of unease climbed steadily as she inspected the first cell. Whatever—or more appropriately *whoever* these cells housed—two things were immediately apparent. First, they weren't bugs; these prisoners were humanoid and bipedal. Which brought up the second point with terrifying clarity. Whoever was caged in these cells was somewhere in the mine.

A pool of liquid soaked into the soil just outside the workstation. Amani shined his light over the unidentified substance again, and frowned when he couldn't immediately identify its color. It was dark, and looked to have been there for at least a few hours. Wary, he crouched beside the liquid and touched two fingers to the pool, testing its consistency. It was cold, and thick, like it had begun to coagulate, which immediately ruled out propulsion fuel. Hell, it ruled out just about every chemical he could think of.

He lifted his hand, and his frown deepened as he studied the red-black stain on his fingers, and then sniffed it. The rich, iron and salt scent flipped his stomach on end and banded his chest. He knew that scent immediately; it was the scent of blood.

The discovery twisted a brand new knife in Amani's gut as he studied the blood pool closer. No wonder he couldn't tell its color on sight. What appeared at first glance to be one liquid was actually two different pools of blood that mixed in the center. One was deep red, and the other was black as midnight. And it was that second pool that concerned him most.

Through his mind flashed his fight with the *talajeen*. Their blood was black; but his gut told him this wasn't from one of those monsters. It didn't reek of brimstone, and it was the same consistency as human blood. Which meant it only had one source he knew of.

"Monack." The word slipped from his lips, even as they set in a thin, taut line. Monacks were the most dangerous humanoid race he knew of, and made up greater than seventy-five percent of the most dangerous criminal element housed in the prison. They had black blood. Since he had yet to find any bodies, he had to assume the Monack was injured. Never a good thing. An injured Monack—particularly one in the throes of Styx withdrawal—would be a serial killer's wet dream.

Given the ratio of red to black blood, his money was on turning up at least one dead body, and it wouldn't be the Monack. Amani rubbed his belly to ward off the clench of panic as the implication of his find settled in his gut. There were dangerous prisoners loose in the mine.

The image of empty cells popped into his head, and he had the sickening sense that told him how the prisoners got loose. Someone played a dangerous game, and lost. No way those cells contained any prisoners from the registered prison population. Every new arrival to the prison received a tagget with a subdermal locator chip that monitored movement, as well as providing on-demand information necessary for medical emergencies and prisoner control issues.

The chip, and the system that monitored it, was very simple. The Artificial Intelligence that monitored the vital functions of the prison read and updated the chip's information constantly. If a prisoner went missing from his or her assigned cell without proper clearance

through either a registration of movement or a scheduled transfer, the AI automatically triggered an alarm in the Garrison and locked down the floor of the last known location.

Which meant that they had an even bigger problem. They had at least one dangerous, *untagged* prisoner wandering around in the mine. He or she could be armed, by now, was probably going through Styx withdrawal, and if the blood pool was any indicator, was a consummate killer.

Chapter Thirteen

Nya was certain of one thing as she searched for clues around the pallet-style foam beds inside the first cell. These cells never housed the giant bugs she and Amani encountered earlier. She just wasn't sure if she found that discovery comforting, or not. If the bugs didn't come from here, then she had no idea where they really came from, or how many might still be out there. And it left the disturbing question of who *was* kept in these cages. Maybe—

“Look what we gots here, mates. The gray bitches make house calls!”

Nya went on instant alert, her shoulders and back tensed and her fist rested, knuckles to dirt, on the floor directly beside her right boot. The voice, while deep, didn't belong to Amani, or anyone else she knew, for that matter. There was no way she could go for her phaser in time to pull even a single shot, from this position. But if the asshole behind her and his 'mates' had trouble on their minds, she as more than ready and willing to give them exactly that. That was, after all, why every guard carried a boot knife.

“She ain't no gray, Hizat. She wearin' white.”

The new voice was a tenor, and trembled, though she suspected that was from eagerness and withdrawal, not fear. His accent placed him from somewhere near the outer rim of the Ranesol system, which made him a Terran cast-off. Those were an oddity this far out, and that usually spelled big trouble.

“Whatever thought you gentlemen are entertaining,” she advised in an even tone as she held herself perfectly still. “I suggest you forget them.”

“Or what?” The taunt came from the Terran, and the edge beneath it made her bite back an oath in her own tongue. No need to guess what crime had put him here. The edge of sexual excitement beneath his mutinous tone told her she was dealing with at least one man with rape on his mind. She tensed, and freed her boot knife in a single motion.

“Or I remove your reason to get excited.”

The deep voice laughed, and the sound sent a shiver of apprehension through Nya. She'd bet anything he was a bruiser, and she'd obviously just pushed a major button. Slowly, Nya turned to face them, and her eyes widened as she looked into not two, but *six* scowling faces, each with varying expressions of wild hate and lust. And not a one wearing appropriate colored jumpers to mark them as prisoners.

“Get her.” The deep voice growled from the biggest of the group—a huge Juzzaar who had nothing but mayhem on his mind, judging by the fire in his dark eyes.

Nya dropped to a fighting stance as the prisoners closed in, her knife gripped blade down, in the grasp her grandfather taught her as a little girl.

None of the guards knew it, but she was trained to fight hand-to-hand in the ancient style of Norjarden royalty. And, if she made it out of this, she would owe her grandfather an apology.

Nya's blade flashed out as she faked to the left, barely avoiding capture by a brawny human with a nasty scar on his face. The man howled and fell back, his leg gushing blood where her razor-keen blade bit through skin and muscle. He'd be limping for a long time to come, if he survived the blood loss.

“The bitch cut me!”

Too late, Nya realized she'd made a very costly mistake. In withdrawal, these prisoners—and she had no doubt that they were prisoners—were paranoid and easily provoked. With that single slice, she made herself an instant target for death, and more. Heart hammering in her throat, she dropped her knife and grabbed for the compad at her waist. She had to send an SOS to Amani, let him know what was happening!

In her haste, she fumbled, and the compad dropped to the floor.

"You won't need that, bitch." A large foot intruded as she dove to retrieve it, and swept both the compad and knife across the cell. They clattered against the bars, and lay there, mocking her with the distance.

Rough hands hauled her up. She kicked out with both feet, but someone's hand caught her throat and squeezed. Her lungs screamed for air, and Nya fought down the swell of panic. She had to keep focused, if she wanted to escape. An involuntary croak of pain broke her lips, and the world spun with darkness and evil faces. Regret swam through Nya's oxygen-deprived mind, and all she could think of was Amani. She was about to be tortured, and probably killed, and she'd never know what it was like to be loved.

He didn't like their odds of survival down here. Especially when he had no idea what other hell-born creatures might lurk in the dimly-lit tunnels. Amani winced and rubbed his thigh as he put too much weight on the injured leg, and agony stabbed like a fiery knife. Silently, he blessed his Banoi blood, which allowed him a higher threshold for pain, or his wound would have incapacitated him by now.

Instead, he pushed grimly past the discomfort and kept going. He couldn't stop, regardless of the pained sweat already dotting his face. He couldn't stop, because there was *one* danger in the darkness that he was only too aware of, and untagged prisoners made splitting up a danger he and Nya hadn't originally counted on.

Not that he thought prisoners would head back for their cells once released, but Amani worried about Nya alone in those cells. He had to tell her what he learned. Hopefully, if they put their heads together, they'd come up with a strategy to get out of this accursed mine that would keep them away from both the prisoners and the wildlife.

Amani came to an abrupt halt, and concern washed through him, as he reached the cells. The *empty* cells. Where was Nya? Fresh adrenaline, fuelled by fear, surged through Amani as he hobbled as fast as his injury would take him toward the nearest cell.

Inside the cell, he studied the sparse bedding for signs of blood. The congealed pool of dark red on the floor, and the presence of multiple sets of bloody boot prints, seized Amani's chest in a vise of panic. No one could lose that much blood and survive long without a transfusion.

"Nya." Her name slipped his lips, and the crush of failure descended. Again, he'd consigned a woman he cared about to Alikma's embrace. Small wonder the Goddess chose him—he was Her very own Angel of Death.

Something winked at him from the far corner of the cell. With a frown, Amani crossed the space and retrieved the item from the floor, the sick knot in his stomach growing at he

realized it was Nya's compad, clearly kicked aside in a struggle. He scooped it up and tucked it into his belt.

His determination solidified into a living, breathing being in his chest. He wasn't about to fail now. Nya might be injured, but he wouldn't let her die. He would find her, and get her whatever medical attention she needed, even if it meant giving her the last drop of his own blood.

As the significance of that thought settled, Amani pushed the tight pressure in his chest aside. He had to stay focused. Nya's life might depend on it.

Amani swallowed hard as the memory returned of the last time he held a life into his care, as vivid as that terrible night on Remonshe. He'd failed then, and Dinara paid the price. The only thing that entire year on the remote planet taught him, aside from self-loathing, was that he wasn't cut out to be a soldier. The devout son of the Goddess of Death had a problem with killing. Talk about irony.

Daxian Malforente was the Imperial Guard commander in the sector when the Rebellion overran Remonshe. Amani's first assignment as head of the base's security was never so straightforward, or so complicated. He was to keep the Imperial imprisoned, and make sure he made it to his execution. Only, Amani befriended the slightly younger man. When the time came to send him to his death, Amani couldn't do it. Instead, he helped Daxian escape. It would have been treason—and Amani's own death—had anyone ever found out about his part in the escape. So, Amani guarded the secret with his life.

Chapter Fourteen

The darkness cleared in stages, and Nya moaned as agony simultaneously seared her chest, throat, and temples. Movement jostled her, and she blinked dumbly as she watched the floor move by several feet above her head. Wait a minute...

"Hey, she's awake, Hizat! Can I have her, now?"

She stiffened at that voice—nasal and whiney, and way too familiar, after her fight at the cells. Dread sickened her. She'd been kidnapped! Someone carried her over their shoulder—probably that huge Juzzaar's, and his tight grip on her waist and thigh held her immobile against his muscular shoulder. Only, Nya felt no comfort at that knowledge; she knew she was in danger. She struggled weakly against the Juzzaar's grip, even though she already knew fighting was useless. Even Amani, with his full Banoi blood, would never take on one of the super-strong Juzzaar without being in control of the situation. At the moment, she could do nothing, physically. But she had the advantage of intelligence and a tactical mind. She needed to have a plan in mind for the first opportunity she had to escape. She might only get one chance. So she studied the walls for unique markers, and plotted her escape.

"What do you think you're doing?"

A new voice interrupted the prisoners' bickering. Nya sucked in a sharp breath. Whoever he was, the newcomer's voice held the tremor of age, and she tried to scream for him to run.

"Get out of the way, old man." Hizat the Juzzaar growled menacingly as he squeezed Nya hard, cutting off her air supply again by compressing her diaphragm. "It's no concern of yours."

"That's where you're wrong," the old man replied evenly. "Did you feel those quakes? They mean we're all going to die here—"

"All the more reason to have a little sport," the Terran's voice was strained with eagerness, now, and a hand groped Nya's ass. Her eyes narrowed. She was going to kill them all. No man touched her without her permission; she would not be the passive victim her mother had been.

"You fool! She might be our only chance off this rock! Once they realize she's missing, the rest will come back for her. She's a bargaining chip."

Nya wanted to laugh, to tell him not to hold his breath. She was as much a prisoner on this lump of rock as he, unless she could find a ship. But she knew voicing any such opinion was suicide for sure, so she held quiet.

The mob—or at least the giant who appeared to be their leader—must not be as deeply in withdrawal as she first thought. They grew silent, as if they were actually considering the old man's words, and the Juzzaar's grip loosened, allowing her to draw precious air into her starving lungs.

"I have a map." The old man's voice broke the silence again, and Nya's eyes flew wide in surprise, even as she felt her captor stiffen.

"A map to what?"

"It leads out of the mine. There'll be ships on the surface, loaded with Styx, and just ripe for the taking."

Shifts and mutters rippled through the group, and Nya drew a hopeful breath as Hizat's grasp eased further. The prisoners were listening eagerly to the old man, now. Their addiction would win out; that much she knew. What she couldn't predict was what they'd do when they discovered that the old man was wrong. Not only were there no ships on the surface, but there wasn't any Styx, either. Still, if it bought her time to regroup with Amani and come up with a strategy, she'd take whatever she could get.

"What do you want, old man?"

"Let me have her. I'm looking for something down here, and she can find it. You're looking for a way out and some Styx, and I've got the way to both."

"I could just kill you and take it."

The old man loosed a small, disdainful laugh. "You think I'm stupid? I've got this map pad programmed. It won't show you the way until you're at least fifty yards away from me. And only if I put in the code. Now put the knife away. Or, better yet, give it here."

"Take the map, Hizat," one of the others spoke up. "We can get another bitch elsewhere. This one's too tall, anyway."

"Not for me." Hizat's growl caused Nya's heart to sink. Then, before she could blink, let alone issue a warning, he dumped her unceremoniously to the ground. She watched as the old man tapped the map pad, and then passed over the map reader. She wanted to scream at the old man that he was a fool to give up such a valuable asset, but she couldn't take the chance her luck would turn even worse. At least now she was free.

She blinked at her rescuer, and couldn't believe her eyes. He was barely five foot four inches tall, and reed-thin. His shoulders stooped with age, and his body looked spindly beneath the green prison jumper he wore. He was a Styx-related felon—probably a dealer, if his smooth handling of the rest said anything.

The group of thugs headed off, already bickering about shares and passage, and Nya shuddered as she rose to her feet and faced the old man. Her expression turned stormy as she glared down at him.

"Why did you do that? If that map leads to the surface..."

"That map leads nowhere," he said with a shrug, even as he tucked her bootknife into the makeshift belt around his waist. "I created it while I hid in the closet in there." He gestured toward a mining maintenance enclosure. "They'll wander around for a while, but I doubt they'll find an exit before they kill each other."

Her eyes narrowed. "Which begs the question of just who they—and you—are, and how you all got here from the prison."

He shrugged again, though the stiffness of the motion told her he was far from nonchalant about his circumstances.

"We were brought here and kept in cages. I assume you found them." He raised one bushy eyebrow at her, until she nodded. "They ran experiments on us."

Nya's stomach knotted. Not that she didn't expect something like this, but to *hear* it... "What kinds of experiments?"

He laughed, the sound bitter. "Styx, of course. Funny, that they peddle what got me put away, around here. Hardly seems fair, does it?"

Nya had to agree with that observation. It certainly felt hypocritical to lock people away for Styx-related crimes, only to addict them to the drug, and mine it all around them. She nearly smiled as she realized how appalled Amani would be if he could hear her thoughts right now.

“What’s your name, prisoner?”

He offered her a mock bow that shot instant panic through Nya. That she could be discovered by a prisoner was a terrifying thought, because it would mean that she wasn’t as competent at hiding her parentage as she thought. She relaxed as she realized he was merely trying to insult her, in his own fashion.

“My name is Omori Nawaur. And while I believe in proper introductions, I think we should be on our way. We need to find a way out of this mine before it collapses.”

As if in response, the ground chose that moment to tremble, and a shower of dirt and pebbles rained down from the ceiling. Nya instinctively grabbed for support, and flattened herself against one wall in case the roof collapsed.

The tremor was mercifully brief, and milder than most. Nya breathed a tiny sigh of relief as it passed.

“All right,” she told Omori once she was sure the quake was past. “But I need to go back to the cells, first.”

“Why?” Omori didn’t sound happy about that idea, and she couldn’t say she blamed him for being wary.

“My partner will be back there by now, and I lost my compad, so without him I have no idea where to go from here.”

She thought she heard him snort, but when she glanced his way, his expression was studiously blank.

“Do you know how to get back?”

She nodded. She wasn’t really in the mood to converse with a complete stranger, even if he had just saved her life. She wanted to find Amani, and get the hell out of this damned mine, before she went crazy.

“How?”

Her companion’s question caused her to blink, distracted. “How, what?”

“How do you know this is the way back?”

She rolled her eyes. Was every man in the galaxy dead from the neck up, or was it just her luck to find the dense ones? “When you’re hanging over the shoulder of a gorilla, there’s not a whole lot to do except study your surroundings and think about how the hell to escape.” She cocked a questioning glance his way. “Shall we?”

He nodded, and they set off in the direction from which the other prisoners brought her. Wary apprehension dogged her steps. She didn’t trust Omori, whether he’d rescued her or not. She’d have to be a fool to turn her back on a prisoner, no matter how docile he seemed. Nya Soderstrom was nobody’s fool.

Chapter Fifteen

Nya marked off each turn that brought her closer to her starting point with another small sigh of relief. She didn't realize how much of a maze the mine really was, before now. She had to put all of her tracking skills to the test to keep her bearings. Her gaze narrowed on her current companion as she wondered how he managed to find his way around.

"You're sure we're on the right path?"

He glanced over his shoulder from where he strode ahead of her, surprisingly spry for his age. His mouth opened as if he was about to say something, before he froze, and a sick look came over his face, just before she felt it, as well.

A rumble, so low it was nearly off the audible registry, wiped out all sound. She saw his lips move as he tried to speak, but all she heard was a low hiss and a subtle hum. She froze, then dropped to the ground as the earth heaved, throwing Omori against the wall. Nya felt the buck of packed earth all along her body, and the sting of dirt and rock as it rained down on her. She covered her head and squeezed her eyes closed.

The quake went on forever, and Nya tensed with every tremor that shook the tunnel. She froze as the floor rocked violently, and a crack like the gates of the Underworld opening reverberated in the tunnel. Nya clapped her hands over her ears, then gasped as hot air bathed her legs from below and she felt herself sliding toward hell.

Nya's heart pounded in her throat and ears, her breath coming in staccato bursts as she struggled for calm. She was in trouble. A glance over her shoulder confirmed that. The quake opened up a fissure that her legs now extended over.

Panicked, Nya scrambled to get away from the opening, even as her gaze flew to her companion.

"Help me!"

He didn't move, and Nya's heart stalled as she swore she saw the gleam of anticipation in his eyes. As if he waited to watch her fall. Then he blinked, and the light was gone as he stepped forward and reached toward her, just as an aftershock lunged through the tunnel and the ledge beneath her body gave way. All Nya had time for was a terrified scream as the world dropped away around her.

There were voices ahead of him, echoing off the mine walls. Amani followed them, his brow furrowed in consternation. One was female, and familiar. Nya. The other was male, and unfamiliar, though Amani swore he'd heard it before.

The ground trembled, then rolled, and nearly threw him off his feet. Only years of life aboard battle-pitched space cruisers kept him upright and moving, despite the quake's best efforts. He reached the entrance to the tunnel where he'd heard Nya's voice, to find his partner prone on the ground, her head covered by her hands as rock and dirt pelted her from above.

A motion pulled his gaze to the tunnel's other occupant—a prisoner in a green jumpsuit. What the hell was *he* doing in the mine?

As the quake subsided, Amani caught sight of the flash of steel at the prisoner's side, and his suspicions blossomed as he realized it was a standard issue bootknife. Was this the man who kidnapped her? It didn't seem possible, given that she was taller and visibly stronger than the man in question, and Amani already knew she could fight like a bearcat. But still... the memory of the bloody pool in the cell came back to him, and rage blasted away every vestige of common sense. There was no arguing with the deadly glee on that man's face as he watched Nya's struggle to get free of the mine floor's sudden change.

"Help me!"

Nya's sudden cry snapped Amani's attention back, to see her clawing her way forward. Her legs hung over a ever-widening fissure in the tunnel floor. Then, before he could take more than a single step toward her, the group beneath Nya gave way and, with a terrified scream, she disappeared from sight.

Chapter Sixteen

She was going to die. The thought crossed Nya's mind an instant before strong hands wrapped tightly around her wrists, and her descent came to an abrupt halt that yanked a groan of pain from her. Then, as the realization that someone held her wrists settled, she gasped and opened her tightly-closed eyes. She looked up to find Amani's strained face hovering several feet above her. His dark hands grasped her wrists securely, and his teeth were visible in a grimace of effort as muscles bulged and flexed in his fight against gravity. Slowly, he hauled her upward.

"I could use your help."

She wasn't sure if that terse request was made of her, or Omori, but she swung her feet against the ravine wall and found purchase in the jagged rock wall. In slow inches, but no longer afraid of falling if her gamble didn't pay off, Nya eased her weight down, praying the stone shelf was as solid as it appeared. Once she was balanced, the weight on her arms lessened and Nya turned to the next important task of survival; getting the hell out of this ravine. She glanced down, and ignored the hollow drop of her stomach and the harsh cadence of her heart caused by the sight of the bottomless pit beneath her. Instead, she sought out lips and hollows in the ravine wall that would serve as footholds, and assist Amani in her rescue.

Inch by painful inch, with Amani supporting her and pulling slowly from above, and her newfound footholds providing her with climbing leverage from below, Nya crawled up the ravine wall. The whole way, exhausted, hot, and panting for breath, she prayed to every benevolent deity she thought might listen that no more quakes would hit while she hung here. Because, if another one did, she wouldn't be the only one to tumble to her death.

As if the planet heard her fears, the ravine wall shuddered threateningly, and Nya sucked in a sharp breath. No. Not now. Not this close.

"Amani," she panted desperately as the groove beneath her feet gave way, leaving her dangling in empty air. The gravity was stronger here than on the surface, and she felt it pulling at her as the planet tried to claim her. Fear licked at Nya's belly. She didn't want to die here.

"I've got you." Those strained words drew her gaze up, to find Amani perched at the edge of the ravine, muscles straining as he tried to lift her against the force of the planet's pull. And a new fear welled in Nya's heart. If he kept hold of her when the quake hit in force, she'd pull him in along with her. He'd go to his death trying to save her. Nya's stomach knotted at the thought, and she couldn't let it happen.

"Amani... Let go."

"No."

"Yes!" She twisted in his grasp, trying to wriggle loose. Better she die, than they both go. "I'll pull you in if you don't."

His obsidian eyes drilled into her, intent with a determination that made her gasp, and forget why she struggled.

"I am *not* letting you go." The words grated through his teeth as he gave a mighty heave, and she flew toward the top.

Dirt shook loose from the ravine walls and ceiling as a quake trembled around them and pelted Nya in the face. She coughed against the tiny granules that filled her throat, and croaked, "Amani..."

With a roaring cry, Amani pulled hard, and Nya winced as she felt her shoulders protest the sudden, sharp yank and she crested the ravine wall, coughing. For a long moment, she couldn't move as deep, wracking coughs curled her into a ball. She lay there, sucking in huge draughts of stale mine air as she waited for her thundering heart to calm.

As the fuzz cleared from her brain, fresh adrenaline surged through her. Amani risked his life to save *her!* Of all the foolish stunts... Tears burned her eyes as she struggled up, her mouth open to give him a piece of her mind. But the words choked in her throat as her gaze landed on him. He looked exhausted. Her eyes traced his heaving shoulders and chest as he slumped against the wall, his head hung and his wrists resting limply on his drawn-up knees.

A current of awareness crackled through her, its electric wake sizzling a path straight through her hyper-alert system. A ragged gasp broke her throat as every muscle from her neck down seized with delicious hunger, and her body quaked at the sight of him. All thought of foolhardy stunts, or her own near-death, fled her mind. The only thing she wanted, right now, was to throw herself at him, but she wouldn't. And it wasn't because she was being noble, or any happy shit like that. She told herself it was respect. She respected Amani as much as she wanted him, and that respect held her back. She wasn't about to admit the truth; not even to herself.

As if he felt her gaze, Amani's head lifted slowly, and his eyes clashed with hers. Nya couldn't breathe, her lungs sucked dry of oxygen, as the heat of his gaze raked her, and every cell in her body electrified. The force of his gaze drew her forward, and her breath grew shallow with desire. The world narrowed to Amani, and nothing else mattered except the hum of her body, and the overwhelming need to feel his lips against hers.

"What in Tharsis' name are *you* doing here?" The snapped demand yanked Nya back as Amani's head jerked toward their inquisitor.

"Stand back, prisoner." He practically snarled the words. "And keep your hands visible at all times."

"His name's Omori Nawaur, and he rescued me." She bit her lip to refrain from saying that he'd also almost let her die. Amani already looked ready to kill. She wasn't about to provide him with a reason.

"Take his weapon." Amani nodded toward her bootknife.

"Actually, it's my knife." She edged up to Omori, slid the knife from his belt and tucked it back into her boot, one eye watching the old man warily. She needn't have wasted her caution; Omori's gaze was fixed over her shoulder, at Amani.

"Should've known you'd end up here."

Nya's head snapped around, to find Omori's gaze fixed shrewdly on Amani.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Amani's response was as lethal as it was clipped, even as he held out Nya's compad to her. If words could kill, Omori would have laser holes burned straight through him. "Keep your damned hands up, and shut your mouth."

Omori fell silent, and Nya looked between the two men in dread as an uneasy sense of exclusion from the full story passed through her. Then, after an icy staring contest, Omori

blinked, and a small, cold smile twisted his thin lips as he lifted his hands, palms forward, to prove he held no weapon. "I don't think I'm the one you should be worried about."

Nya frowned. "What do you —?"

"I'm tellin' you, this' the wrong way!" A new voice echoed off the mine walls, cutting off what she'd been about to ask.

"Whattya know about it, dumbass? Not like you have a damned map screwed into your brain or nothin'." A second voice mocked, clearly annoyed.

"At least I got somethin' to screw with!"

Hoots and raucous laughter answered the retort, and Nya's stomach bottomed out as she realized what Omori meant. Slowly, she turned, just before five prisoners in colors ranging from yellow to crimson—all from the deepest, most dangerous levels of the prison—came into view around the corner. They stopped as they caught sight of the two guards, and a strange hush fell over the dim mine shaft as prisoner faced keeper.

Nya forced herself to draw even breaths, and show none of the fear that ricocheted around in her chest. Unlike Omori—whom, while she didn't trust him, she didn't believe overtly dangerous, either—these men were rapists and murderers, who wouldn't think twice about killing them—or worse. And the odds were decidedly against her and Amani, she decided as she eyed one massive brute with the same shaved head of an Alikamite that Amani sported, and a series of grotesque tattoos her partner did *not* own, thank the merciful Hajarke.

"Well, well." A thin man in a crimson jumper stepped forward, clearly the leader of the gang despite his slight stature. "Apparently, someone thought to provide us with a little entertainment."

Nya's gaze skipped from the cold, wild gleam in his mocha eyes, and settled on another threat that made her cringe—a huge Karatzin male in a yellow jumper, who exuded a musk her totem-sensitized nose could easily read. He was excited, and his gaze drilled hot holes in her body that made her squirm internally in dread. Unlike when Amani looked at her that way, this perusal made her wish only for the means to wash it away.

Amani saw the attack coming before the Alikamite charged him; the gleam in his wild brown eyes was far too familiar. It was the look of one chosen by the Goddess of Death, to either kill or be killed. This prisoner's gruesome tattoos marked him as a Death Dealer—one of those chosen to execute on command. A trained assassin of Alikma's temple. Obviously, he'd gone way beyond that, and now killed for sport. That would be the only way Alikma would abandon him.

Amani ducked the man's first crazed attack even as that thought flashed through his mind, and came up with a sharp jab to the prisoner's gut. The shot wouldn't delay him long, but if Amani could just keep the Death Dealer's attention on him...

An outraged cry from Nya distracted Amani momentarily, and he paid for that as the man he fought used the moment to get a stranglehold on Amani's neck.

He couldn't breathe. Amani struggled uselessly to free his attacker's arm from around his neck. The guy was trained to kill in a thousand different ways, and his strength was the

product of Styx withdrawal's berserker stage. The berserker stage gave junkies a brief spurt of endorphins and testosterone that turned them into superhumans for a short time.

As darkness spotted his vision, Amani made one last, desperate attempt, and prayed that Alikma had not deserted him, as well. Twisting his leg forward and around, he hooked it through the other man's leg and pulled back, upsetting his balance.

On instinct, the falling man flailed out, and his grip loosened. Amani took advantage of that instant to break free. His vision cleared, and his brow furrowed as he saw his opponent exchange a fleeting glance with someone over his left shoulder. A glimpse back told Amani they were in league with the Dark Lord, Himself. Not only was Omori Nawaur one of the enemy, but Amani had the sinking feeling he was their leader.

The advantage of this information shot through Amani's brain as it cleared away the oxygen-deprived fog. If he took down the leader, the rest would be disorganized, and probably kill each other, if the argument they overheard a moment ago was any indication.

The element of surprise at his disposal, Amani turned in a sudden move and lunged for Omori before the much-larger Banoi Death Dealer could recover. A flick of his wrist activated his wristband, and he held it to the side of Omori's neck as his rage-filled gaze sought out the three prisoners who surrounded Nya. So far, she held her own, but he could see her energy wavering. She was a fighter, but even indomitable Nya ran out of steam eventually.

"Leave her alone!" he thundered at them. "Or I'll kill him."

That only earned a disdainful snort from his captive. "They can't hear you, you fool. They're in withdrawal."

"So they'll just let you die."

Omori shifted slightly. "We both know you won't actually kill me. You don't kill your prisoners. Not even when you're ordered to."

It was a lucky guess, Amani told himself, even as his grip tightened, and he sought for any hint of a memory that would tell him how he knew this man. Something about Nawaur raised his hackles, but his mind remained blank of any connection. Besides, only two people knew how he'd disobeyed orders during the Urban Wars, and the other party was likely holed up on the other end of the galaxy by now.

Nya's muffled cry of pain brought Amani's attention back to the present with a jerk, in time to see her go down in a chokehold that would keep her alive but incapacitated. And, suddenly, he couldn't take the chance that Omori was telling the truth. His eyes fixed on the Karatzin rapist as he reached for the front of Nya's suit, and made a desperate gamble.

"Call them off."

Omori arched a brow. "What makes you think I have any control, here?"

"I saw that look you gave your Alikamite friend, there," he jerked his head toward the Death Dealer who stood, frowning at them. A brief burst of dark humor went through Amani. The Death Dealer, at least, knew Amani wasn't bluffing.

"I know you're calling the shots, or he wouldn't still be standing there, glaring at me." Amani tightened his grip, making sure Omori could see the deadly spike, set to slay. "Now, call them off."

"Why should I?"

Amani growled dangerously, his temper reaching breaking point as he debated just releasing Omori and going for the Karatzin who now held Nya's boot knife. But he already knew the Death Dealer would charge him as soon as he released Omori.

"Damn it, you want to live, you'll call them off."

"I don't believe you. Besides, if you kill me, Kaileb there will kill you." Omori's eyes flashed with sadistic glee. "A bit of a stalemate, isn't it?"

He didn't have time for this. "What do you want?"

The older man's face split in a grin that was disturbing to witness. He looked like a sadistic little puppet. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Nya's enraged scream, followed by a man's groan, tore Amani's attention away from his captive. What he saw brought his heart into his throat.

Nya lay on the ground, her arms pinned immobile by two prisoners, and the closure of her white EVA suit ripped open, along with her uniform, to expose her pale skin. On the floor at her feet, the Karatzin prisoner lay doubled over, and Amani winced involuntarily. It wasn't that he cared what happened to the man, but it took no imagination to figure out what she'd done, either.

"Thatta girl." The words, muttered beneath his breath, gelled his determination. He had to remember what he bartered for. Nya's freedom. She was worth whatever it cost him to get her free of her captors.

"I want to know where you keep the Styx."

The demand snapped his attention back to Nawaur. He couldn't be serious! "Out of the question."

The old man's eyes narrowed. "I thought you wanted them to stop. My mistake."

He did. More than his next breath. But he couldn't give Nawaur what he didn't have. Could he? He tightened his grip on the prisoner. "Styx won't help you where I'll send you if they harm her. They hurt her at all, and your life is worth nothing, old man."

"Idiot!" Omori hissed the insult through his teeth. "I have to promise them something. She's running out of time."

Amani's gaze flashed to Nya, whose struggles were lessening as exhaustion set in, and he swore inwardly, knowing his only way out of this meant doing the one thing he despised above all else. He'd have to lie his ass off.

"Fine. You win. Yes, there's a large stash of Styx, and I know how you can get it. Call them off, and I'll tell you."

Omori tensed, and the gleam in his eyes turned greedy. Shit. Nawaur had them all fooled. The bastard was as deep in withdrawal as the rest. He was just more cunning.

"How do I know you won't kill me anyway?" Oh, yeah, that was the paranoia talking. Omori was definitely an addict.

"You have my word, before Alikma." Amani's anxious gaze flickered to Nya as she twisted away from the Karatzin's pawing hands. "Now, call them off. They touch her, and I touch you."

The threat wasn't lost on Omori, as the older man shrank away from the wicked point of his wristband. "You'll have to let me go."

"Hell, no. I'm not falling for that. You want to know, send your Death Dealer in to do the dirty work."

Omori frowned, but nodded, careful of the poisoned spike at his neck, and signaled Kaileb. The huge Banoi lost no time wading into the rest of the prisoners. Amani winced as two went down and stopped moving, but couldn't make himself care. They were prisoners, after all, and their crimes most likely deserved worse punishment than the Death Dealer was meting out.

The Karatzin pawing at Nya stumbled away momentarily under the force of Kaileb's shove, and the two smaller men holding her down backed off instantly, unwilling to fight the crazed Banoi. Amani bit down on a sharp laugh as he slowly released Omori.

"They're going to tell us where to find Styx." Omori's voice carried in the mineshaft, his tone severe. "But you can't harm the woman."

Amani's gaze fixed on Nya as she gasped, and covered a wince at her look of stunned disbelief. She probably thought he'd come unhinged. After all, she knew as well as he that the Styx was gone. No one had access to it. In that instant, it hit him what an ass he really was. How could he look at Nya and tell her—tell *himself*—he always told the truth, when he was really the universe's biggest liar? He'd told her he didn't care about her as more than a friend or colleague, but he'd never before compromised himself for either one. The truth went clear to his heart, and he swallowed hard as he stared into her olive-green eyes. He loved her.

He tensed, waiting for the prisoners to comply. He didn't really care if they did, because he would kill them all before he'd let them touch her again. And he'd break every bone in that filthy Karatzin's hands if he came near her again. Amani's fists clenched, and the rage that poured through him surprised him.

Clearly, the man who held Nya saw it, as well, and didn't feel up to testing his luck against both Kaileb and Amani. He released his grip, and Amani waited until Nya scrambled clear before he released Omori completely and, in a calm, cold voice, said, "It's stored in the central Control Room on the Garrison level. That's where we dispense it from."

He didn't dare look at Nya, to see if she played along. She remained silent, and he took that for complicity. Her glare flayed him, and he bit back a grin as the heat of her anger seared him. Though he knew there was a very real reason for that glare—even if he wasn't sure what the cause was, yet—the expression suited his plan almost as well as if she'd fabricated it.

The avarice in Omori's eyes nearly broke Amani's tightly-held control over a triumphant laugh. They bought it! The prisoners would head straight for the Garrison, where, with any luck, equipped guards would take them down. At worst, no one would be there, and they'd search futilely for the Styx.

"Head for the prison," Omori ordered his goons, already moving that direction himself. "We'll find the Styx, and get off this rock before it explodes."

The Karatzin's eyes slid to Nya. "We should take the woman."

Omori snorted in disdain. "She's too dangerous. There's a whole galaxy out there for you to rape. Let her die here."

Indecision flickered across the Karatzin's face, and Amani tensed. If he made one move toward Nya, that slime was dead. Then, with a shrug, the other man must have decided Omori was right, because he ambled away.

No longer of interest to the prisoners, Amani watched in satisfaction as they surged back toward the prison, where he could only hope someone was already initiating lockdown procedures.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Nya’s voice brought his attention around as the prisoners disappeared.

“Saving our lives,” he replied evenly.

“And it never occurred to you that they’ll be back, even angrier, once they learn you lied to them? How could you tell such an irresponsible lie, Amani?”

He wanted to quip that there was no such thing as a responsible lie, but held his tongue, his anger stewing. He wasn’t going to second-guess his actions, dammit. He knew what he did saved their lives, and that was all that mattered to him. So, with a shrug of his shoulders, he strode away from her, up the tunnel.

Amani could feel Nya’s continued annoyance as she dogged his steps, worrying the subject like a Craman weasel with a rotted bone.

“Why did you make a deal like that with Omori?”

“Who?”

“You know perfectly well who. Damn it, Amani, I don’t trust him.”

“That makes two of us.” He frowned. He still didn’t like the fact that he couldn’t place Omori, but the man seemed to know an awful lot about him. Too damned much. He cast Nya a sideways look to see the scowl that settled on her beautiful face.

He sighed in resignation, aware of how his feelings had changed, and uncertain what to do with them next. Right now, all he wanted to do was kiss her, but he knew he couldn’t. He’d made his choices, years ago. Nya wasn’t anywhere in them.

“Stop being so flippant.” She tossed her blonde curls in aggravation and shot him another look that said she’d rather murder him herself. “Omori might appear the least dangerous of that lot, but I doubt he’s anywhere near as calm or docile as he looks. And I think he’s as deep in withdrawal as the rest, despite his control. A man that intelligent, when he finds out he’s been had, will stop at nothing for revenge.”

Amani drew to a stop, the clear accusation in Nya’s tone cutting him to the bone. She knew he’d lied, and worse, he’d made a pact with a devil for *her* freedom. Amani scowled. Didn’t she get it? He’d forsaken vows made before Alikma, and his penance, for her. How could she turn so cold, now?

Amani’s hand raised to his left arm in reflex, rubbing the spot where Dinara’s mark burned his skin clear to his soul. His guilt. For the first time in his life, he regretted that mark. If Nya ever saw it, she’d demand answers he couldn’t give, and question the feelings he shouldn’t have.

Trapped between his desires and his less than pristine past, Amani knew his only course was silence. With weary resignation, he set off again, into a future he couldn’t escape, and a likely death he no longer coveted.

Chapter Seventeen

Nya trailed behind Amani and noted with concern the tense set of his shoulders and the way he rubbed his arm. He was clearly upset about something, and she had an idea what that was. She knew Amani abhorred lies, so his own probably made him feel like shit. Her throat tightened as she acknowledged that he'd done it for her. Without his quick thinking, she'd suffer her mother's fate, and worse. She shuddered at the mere thought of how narrow her escape really was.

With an internal sigh, she admitted she was wrong to jump Amani about his actions. At least he thought of something. She'd been so terrified of sharing her mother's fate that her brain shut down. She jogged a few steps, to catch up with his long-legged stride, and offered the first olive branch.

"I'm sorry." He didn't respond. Anxiety danced along her nerves, and she couldn't hold quiet. Gnawing her lip, she conceded another point. "You were right to do what you did." His response was a grunt, and his jaw remained set so tightly she swore she could hear the bones pop. "Hey! I'm trying to apologize, here." Her brows drew together as she studied the tick that developed beneath one dark eye. "What's got into you?"

With a sound that was half-groan, half-curse, Amani abruptly stopped and swung around. Nya's cry of surprise was cut short as he pinned her to the wall with his body, and his mouth conquered hers with a ravenous kiss that dove clear to her soul.

Her circuitry fried on the spot. Sparks radiated through Nya, and all systems went haywire. Her pulse wobbled all over the place, electricity danced through every erogenous zone she knew of, and a few she'd never known could be aroused, and every muscle in her body went limp with need in a simultaneous, system-wide meltdown at the heat that poured from Amani. A shivering moan seeped from her at the desperation in his kiss, and her world narrowed to this instant in time. Nothing else mattered.

An itch began in her hands, and spread up her arms and down over her breasts and belly. She craved his touch, and the burn of his skin beneath hers. She no longer cared to know where he ended and she began. If she could wrap herself around him, absorb him into her skin, she'd die a happy woman.

Abruptly, Amani pulled away, and Nya's eyes flew open with a shocked gasp even as she felt the hard rasp of his breath bathe her face. His dark eyes were glazed with passion, and the heat was enough to scorch her from a distance. And yet, it wasn't enough.

"*You* got into me." His husky confession washed over her, and the gentleness of the single digit he stroked along her cheek cracked her defenses. Unexpected tears rushed to her eyes, and spilled over as she offered him a tremulous smile she was sure told him more than she ever intended. His eyes blazed, and her breath caught as she shifted her hips against the bulge that told her how desperate he truly was.

"So, get into me." She hoped the whisper came out sultry, and not just breathless. She'd never played with innuendo this way before. Nya Soderstrom ruled her passions; she was sure it was all that stood between her and one of those yellow jumpsuits. If she flirted, offered herself to anyone, she was taking a step she couldn't take back. She'd never done anything so dangerous in her life.

His gaze darkened still further, and Nya burned beneath his intense regard. She knew he battled the temptation of her offer, and her body, as sure as she knew this was one battle she wanted him to lose. She *needed* him to lose.

Amani's gaze stayed fixed on her, and Nya knew the exact instant the battle's outcome was decided. With a shuddering breath, Amani blinked, and the fire banked as he stepped away completely.

"I can't."

Those words sliced through Nya, bittersweet with the knowledge that his decision was no more palatable to him than it was to her. For the first time, his rejection gave her hope. Hope that someday, whatever held him back would no longer be enough. Hope that he'd give in to what she now knew could be bright and beautiful between them.

Nya opened her mouth to let him off the hook easy, but sucked in a sharp breath instead as the wall trembled against her back, just before a distant rumble echoed through the mine. It grew louder by the second, and the tremors worsened.

"Watch out!" Amani's harsh warning snapped her gaze toward the ceiling, and an involuntary scream ripped from her throat as a large piece of the ceiling broke loose.

Before she could react, Amani gripped her arm and dragged her along as he sprinted away from the avalanche of rock, soil, and metal mine supports. And, as the dust settled and the world righted itself again, Nya took one look at the destruction, and nausea rolled through her.

"That was the only way out."

Amani looked into Nya's pale, frightened face, and his heart squeezed at the resignation that settled there. He refused to give up; whatever happened, Nya would make it off this planet alive and well. He wouldn't accept anything less.

"This mine was drilled by Duran Corporation for miners and scientists," he reminded her calmly. "You can bet they drilled secondary exits, in case of a shaft collapse. We just have to backtrack and find them."

"How?" She queried despondently. "We don't know the layout for the mines."

He smiled gently. For all her brains, Nya didn't respond very well to personal crises. "Skipper does, though. You can link to the AI, and download the secondary access tunnels."

Instantly, she brightened. "You're right! Gods, I feel like a total moron!"

He allowed himself a brief grin. "You're entitled. It's been a rough day."

She froze, before a smile that looked forced crossed her lips. "Don't start being nice to me now, Amani. That scares the shit out of me."

She was adorable when she was paranoid. He bit back a laugh, and took her hand as he led her back the way they'd come. She nearly pulled away, and he sensed her surprise at his easy touch. He couldn't blame her; he didn't understand the feelings that tugged at him, either. He was beginning to suspect they weren't new, though. All he knew, at the moment, was that he would use every chance given him to touch her. Alikma knew how many chances he might have left.

Chapter Eighteen

"Damn it, Skipper, respond!"

The oath slipped from her lips without thought as her head filled with enough static to cross her eyes and fray her nerves. She was, frankly, beyond caring what Amani thought of her. If she wanted to swear at the AI, she would!

"Problems?" He sounded faintly amused. Great. She was ready to scream, and Mr. Charming thought it was funny. Nya gritted her teeth and promised herself she wouldn't maim her partner. But, Great Crajak, it was tempting!

"Nothing I can't handle," she muttered, favoring him with a glare she hoped would turn the conversation into space dust.

Amani's frown returned when she glanced his way again. "You always do."

Those words, in his disgruntled tone, paused Nya in her tracks. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He brushed past her and kept walking. Stunned, Nya could only stare after him. When she finally regained movement, she had to jog to catch up with his rapid pace.

"Amani." She caught his arm, and tightened her grip when he attempted to shrug her off. "Amani, look at me."

With a heavy sigh, he stopped and turned; but his blank expression gave nothing away. Sadness welled in Nya's chest. How could she love a man she couldn't read?

"What do you mean, Amani?"

He rolled his eyes, and that sour expression she hated was back.

"You run around the Garrison all day and night, fixing problems. And, ever since we headed for the surface, you've had to fix every problem, handle every disaster. Do you ever admit that something's just too much to do by yourself?"

Nya backpedaled as if he struck her. Through her mind flashed images of a past she'd give anything to erase completely. Yeah, she handled her own problems. Nya learned at an early age that if she didn't take care of things, no one else would. As the family misfit, her family ignored at home, unless she screwed up. Then, everyone just shook their heads and agreed that it was no surprise, because blood willed out, and her veins pulsed with her father's evil blood. It didn't even matter that she never made a wrong move in her life. As far as the Norjardin people were convinced, she would always be evil.

Embarrassment flooded her, and heat rose in her cheeks.

"You wouldn't understand." She barely got that much out. "And I don't want to talk about it."

"Then tell me what you're swearing at." His tone was gentler than she ever expected, and Nya's head lifted in surprise. With every moment she spent trapped in this underground hell, she learned something new about her partner. Or had she just never cared to acknowledge these softer traits, before? She met his dark eyes as he murmured, "Like it or not, everything that happens down here effects us both. We have to work together, Nya."

Her shoulders drooped, and she nodded, miserable. He was right, after all. They had enough secrets to fight. Nya closed her eyes, and drew a deep breath.

"I was trying to reach Skipper, via the AI link." There, that wasn't so bad. Right?

His brow furrowed in concern. "I take it you're not having much luck."

"I'm not having *any* luck! It's like Skipper's not even there. And to make matters worse, we're lost."

The short, comforting squeeze of his hand on her shoulder drew her attention momentarily. "Not completely. We know the mine eventually leads out. Let's just keep moving, okay? You keep trying to reach Skipper, as we go. Our luck has to improve sometime."

And that, Nya decided, was the epitome of irony—morose, pessimistic Amani was giving *her* a pep talk. A smile tugged at her lips as they set off again. Maybe she *was* finally getting through to him, after all.

After what felt like an eternity, Nya began to rethink her whole outlook on life. They must have walked for hours, without any real clue where they were going. Nya grew increasingly frustrated as her muddled connection with Skipper only returned garbled images that sent them from one dead end to another, and back. The passageways were all starting to look alike. Really, what good was Artificial Intelligence if it was as dumb as a post?

Nya loosed a small screech of frustration, and kicked the wall for good measure, as they came up against yet another dead end. Fortunately, the mine's illumination torches still worked, so they could conserve their own lights in case the quakes knocked out the mine's power supply. But light meant nothing if they didn't get out of this hot, oxygen-deprived, ice-covered hell, and... "Wait a minute!"

"What is it?" Amani sounded tired, but curious.

"It's got to be at least eighty degrees, down here." Excitement thrummed through Nya as she studied the ice-encrusted wall they'd run smack up against.

"So?" Impatience colored his voice. Amani was definitely as yakked off about this maze as she was.

"So, this wall is solid *ice*!" She thumped the wall with her fist, and her hand came away cold and wet. "The only way that would be possible in this heat is—"

"If someone set it up that way!" Amani straightened, his interest restored by the idea that their most recent dead end might be manmade. Nya grinned, warmth flowing through her to know that they both reached the same conclusion. The only way there would be a deliberately made ice wall this deep in the mine was if it covered something important. Like an escape tunnel, maybe?

"How do we get through?" Amani tested the wall with the flat of his hand, and frowned at the lack of echo when his hand smacked the wall. If there was something behind there beside more wall, it was way behind there. "It sounds pretty thick."

"There has to be some kind of thaw control, in case of emergencies," Nya muttered, more to herself than to Amani. She searched the walls on both sides of the ice for some kind of switch or toggle, anything that might activate the melting mechanism. Nothing. She was just about to give up when she spotted a rock crevasse that ran alongside the ice wall. It didn't look natural. Tool marks scored the sides.

Heart pounding, Nya slipped her fingers into the space and felt around blindly. Her fingers tripped over something smooth and hard, and a grin spread her lips. "Found it!"

She slid the dial to the opposite side, and stepped back as she heard the whir of engines and a blast of air from the other side of the ice.

"How long do you think this takes?" She arched a curious brow at Amani.

"No idea. But it can't be long if this really is an emergency escape."

Three minutes later, Nya had her answer. A final blast of superheated air bathed them, before the melting unit shut down, and Nya traded a disbelieving look with her partner. She expected an exit. A lift, or even a tunnel or stairs, would do. Not what sat before her, gleaming the light that streamed down from overheads.

"What in the name of the Goddess *is* that thing?"

Nya stepped through the newly melted entrance, and her footfalls echoed in the water-soaked cavern. She'd read about these things, but this was closer than she ever expected to get to one of the giant machines. The closest she'd ever come before now was technical diagrams in digital archives.

"Something that's not supposed to be here." Her voice was hushed, but still echoed in the cavernous room. Cautious steps carried her around the xantrium-tipped borer, capable of cutting through even the solid crysmium core of Cestarine Eight. Her hand skimmed the sleek frame of the machine. The metal was cold to the touch, and yet tingled with familiar power currents. Nya's eyes raised, full of shock, to her partner's face. "It's still on!"

"What *is* it, Nya?"

"A core-mining rig. They're made to drill directly into the planetary core, and withstand tremendous heat and pressure." She patted the machine affectionately. "Supposedly, they used one of these babies to relieve the core meltdown on Brasias several years ago, but I've never actually *seen* one, before."

He leaned against the behemoth machine and regarded her with a faintly amused expression. "You really love these things, don't you?"

Not as much as I love you. Nya bit down on the words, sealing them inside. She already knew he wouldn't want to hear them. Though she knew he wanted her, she couldn't get him to follow through. He always pulled away before things heated up too much to stop. If only he'd tell her why.

And this really wasn't the time for introspection. Nya bit the inside of her cheek, and the pain brought her focus back to the problem at hand. Namely, the machine sitting before her and the puzzle it represented.

"Amani, this shouldn't *be* here. These things have only one use—to drill core material."

"And Duran swore to never drill Zurin Five's core." She watched sick dread creep across his face as the meaning of his own words, and the damning evidence before them, sank in.

Nya turned toward the bank of operation controls along the far wall to give him time to compose himself. She instinctively knew he wouldn't want her to see this glaring chink in his armor; never mind that she already knew it existed.

A small, wry smile crept over her face even as she slipped into one of the contoured seats at the console, and her fingers flew over the screen and coding panels, in her search for more information. She muttered to herself, cursing Duran Corporation to the bowels of every

system's hell as she hit one encrypted or deleted file after another. Then, in a file marked for deletion, but apparently overlooked in someone's haste, she caught her first break.

Nya's laugh of triumph turned to a gasp of dismay as her eyes skimmed the information that scrolled across the screen. "Bastards."

"What did you find?" Amani pushed off from the mining rig, and sidestepped the monstrous machine to approach her.

"They planned this from the beginning!" Fury kindled deep inside as she swung the seat around to face him. "This planet's destruction is no accident!"

Her rage was an awesome force to witness, a Death Angel in all her avenging glory. Amani could only stare, enthralled by her furious beauty and flashing green eyes, and be glad that he wasn't on the receiving end of that wrath. He tried to draw a breath, but his lungs refused to follow his command and his hands trembled – *trembled* – with the need to touch her, to connect with the passion that poured from her in angry waves.

It took a long moment for her words to sink through his awe. When they did, it broke the spell, and he sucked in a sharp breath as his gut rolled inside out with dread.

"What do you mean?" He grimaced at the rasp of his own voice.

"It's all right here. When they discovered the Styx, they did a core sample survey, and determined that the molten crust just above the core holds the greatest concentration of pure Styx. But they couldn't swing the permits for deep core mining, because Zurin Five is naturally unstable, and construction of the prison was nearly half-completed."

He didn't like where this was headed. While he had no trouble admitting that certain people in the organization looked corrupt as all hell, he wasn't as convinced as Nya that Duran Corporation as a whole was bad at its core. She seemed to think they had some massive, self-serving conspiracy going on. Which begged the question of why she ever signed on to work for them; it just didn't make sense.

"So why not just stop the prison build?" He dropped into the chair next to her.

"They couldn't wiggle out of the contract. When their application for deep mining permits was turned down, they didn't care. They went right ahead and harvested the core, anyway. They probably figured that no one would care if the prison holding the universe's worst criminals suddenly exploded."

"Wait. You're saying they mined the core with the complete understanding and plan to let the prisoners perish with the planet."

"Exactly. The prison drains finances from Duran's company assets, now that it's full. They're probably relieved to write it off."

He arched one brow. She was forgetting one important fact. "And the guards?"

She leaned back and stretched, and that skin-tight EVA suit of hers did things for her curves that tightened his gut and groin simultaneously. Damn it, why couldn't she be thin and unattractive? He forced his eyes away, unsure where to transfer them. Finally, he settled on the console.

“We’re a liability. They knew we’d start asking questions, and that we wouldn’t let them trap a hundred thousand people—even if they’re prisoners and criminals—on a self-destructing planet.”

It was an uncomfortable theory to swallow, but it also made too much sense to be pure paranoid speculation. After all, the evidence indicated that they *had* been left behind, and the planet *was* about to explode. And, of course, there was no other reason for the giant core-mining rig, except to prove that Duran Corporation actually mined, or at least intended to mine, the planet’s core.

Amani sighed heavily. “So, what do you propose we do?”

She was on her feet in a flash, the excitement in her eyes compelling, and his heart thudded against his ribs, his gaze fixed on the rising enthusiasm that suffused her face. “We need to keep searching. We weren’t supposed to be down here, or find this file. The only reason we did was because of the avalanche, and because the operator overlooked the file in their hurry to leave. Maybe something else did, too.”

“Like what?”

She was already off, headed toward a smaller chamber that opened to the left of the machine. She tossed her response casually over her shoulder.

“Like a ship.”

Chapter Nineteen

She wasn't sure what she expected to find. She certainly didn't hold out hope for much, though she wasn't about to admit that to Amani.

Nya froze, stunned beyond her sense of disbelief, as she entered the next ice-encrusted chamber—this one smaller than the last. Her heart in her throat, she turned to call over her shoulder.

"Amani! You've got to see this!"

She heard him behind her, then his oath of surprise.

"You can say that again," Nya murmured as she stared at the sole transport ship that sat, unharmed and by all appearances fully operational, in the middle of the cavern. She raised a brow at Amani as he stepped up beside her. "Think they just forgot it was down here?"

"That's possible. But why even have it down here?"

"Who cares?" Shock gave way to elation, and excitement pulsed through Nya as she started toward the vessel. "It's what we're looking for, Amani! It's a way off of this rock."

Her heart danced a gleeful jig in her chest as she bounded up the gangway, and the ship's access hatch slid open. She grinned over her shoulder at Amani. "It has power, and the electrics still function."

He moved up the gangway more cautiously than she, and Nya smothered a laugh. It was clear Amani didn't trust gifts; but she wasn't about to let his mood shatter her happiness. For the first time since they stepped into the empty transport hanger, Nya was light with relief and the hope that they could at least save themselves and the other guards.

Grin still firmly in place, she slipped into the Navigator's chair and slid her right hand into the special glove that would allow her to communicate directly with the shipboard AI via the digital ports that ran from her hand up through her arm to the implants in her brain. Once they established that navigation and propulsion were undamaged, they'd be home free.

Navigation not online. Please enter your authorization code.

Nya jumped as the words filled her head. Authorization code? What the hell was that?

"What's wrong?"

She turned her head to find Amani standing just beside her, his expression concerned.

"It wants an authorization code. Navigation's been locked down."

"So? Use the one for Skipper."

"Skipper doesn't have one."

He looked surprised by that. "Why not?"

"Artificial Intelligence systems aren't supposed to have authorization codes. Not unless they're keyed with a lockdown sequence. Then you have to know the code to gain access to any part of the system."

He sighed.

"Of course. That would be too easy." He glanced around. "Any idea where we can find this code?"

Nya blinked at him, stunned speechless. A laugh bubbled out at what an idiot she was. Since when did she give up so easily? She could kiss Amani, for reminding her of that!

She made a slow circuit of the circular bridge of the small transport, her eyes dancing over every panel of instrumentation in search of clues. She stopped at the weapons array system, ran her hand over the controls, but shook her head. Not there. Weapons systems had finite storage capacity. No codes would be stored in its logs; only coordinates used for weapons guidance.

Nya moved on, until she arrived at the large, spheroid metal object protruding from the deck at the bridge's center. This was the Kernel module—the ship's brain. Inside this main computer hub were the main operational logs, and the shipboard AI's flight journal.

A grin pulled up her lips. Pay dirt!

"I know that look." Amani's voice reached her, tinged with wary humor. "What're you thinking, Nya?"

"That there should be a navigation log on the ship's main computer, which won't be coded. You can't lock down the main logs."

She slid into the captain's chair and swung the mobile terminal screen in front of her. From this console, the captain controlled every aspect of the ship's journey, through constant contact with the ship's AI. She muttered to herself as her fingers flew over the instrumentation in an attempt to locate the ship's logs, which kept a running history of every function performed by the ship's computer and electrical system. However, after a long, tense hour of searching, she sat back with a muttered curse.

"No luck?"

She glanced at Amani, and his unconcerned expression bugged her. How could he be so damnably in control, all the time? It made her itch to shatter that control. "I think someone wiped the mainframe clean."

This news apparently didn't surprise or perturb Amani in the least. He merely raised one brow in question. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe this ship is here for a reason?"

"Like what?" She snapped, irritated by his apathetic response to her obvious disappointment. Didn't he even care that their last hope could be about to go up in smoke?

As if he sensed her annoyance, Amani sighed again, and crouched beside her chair. "I know you really wanted this thing to fly, Nya. Believe me, if I thought for a moment that it was going to move, I'd get out and push. But the simple fact is that no one parks a working transport in the middle of a mine. Look around. How would we get it out of here?"

She turned her gaze away from him, toward the forward screens, and grudgingly admitted he was at least partly right. The chances were rather slim. One of the quakes covered over what looked like the only flight access tunnel with rubble. Their one chance to maneuver the ship out of here would be if they blasted their way through. Assuming, of course, that Amani knew how to fly one of these things, because she certainly didn't. Besides, while they could put the ship on manual control to fly, the weapons systems required the AI to operate, and they were locked out of that.

Frustrated tears welled in her eyes, and Nya hated herself for them. Why was she crying? She quit crying for herself years ago, when she finally accepted her place as an outcast in her own family. Crying never solved anything.

Amani cleared his throat, and Nya's gaze lifted, and clashed with his. Breath halted as she watched pain flare in his dark eyes. That misery drew her forward, her heart drumming against her ribs; she couldn't turn away. Her body warmed beneath his gaze, and liquid heat

flowed through her veins, ignited by the fire that blossomed in his eyes. He wanted her. She didn't question that, didn't breathe, for fear of breaking the spell that hovered over them both.

His hand rose, and she nearly passed out as it engulfed hers, its heat warming her to the bone. He rose slowly to his feet, the motion and his hold on her hand drawing her along with him. She went willingly as he drew her against his body. Safe in his embrace, Nya allowed herself to feel the first hint of real fear since this ordeal began.

"We're going to die here."

"Shh." His response rumbled beneath her cheek as she burrowed into his embrace, and the warmth of his hands stroked her back comfortingly. "You're not going to die, Nya. I won't allow it."

A sad smile curved on her lips at the imperious certainty of that statement. She raised her face to his, and drank in his calm—a calm that the increased beat of his heart against her cheek told her was a charade. He wasn't any more certain of their future than she was, but she appreciated his attempt to allay her fears with certainty.

"We don't get a choice in these things, Amani. You, of all people, should know that."

He didn't answer her at first, though his dark eyes flared with memories and emotions she didn't understand. But she wanted to. More than her next breath, she hungered for an explanation to the pain she so often saw in his eyes, when he thought no one was looking.

Then, he murmured what sounded like "you're telling me," and his head dipped so that his warm lips trailed over her throat, nuzzling aside the fabric of her suit. Nya sucked in a sharp lungful of air, and then moaned as delicious sensation shivered through her. She tilted her head to give him better access, and the hot, hungry expression on his face when it lifted momentarily to hers, captivated her. The shiver turned into her own personal earthquake as the power of his passion hit her, even as she felt his hands trek down her back, his touch no longer comforting as he cupped her ass and pulled her tight against his hard, muscular body. *And speaking of hard...*

Nya's body purred as the clear evidence of his desire snapped the restraints on her primal self, and a growling moan tore from her lips. She couldn't even describe what his eyes alone did to her body. She felt turned inside out, hot and shivering at the same time.

"Amani..." She gasped his name, the only word she could remember how to form, as lust clogged her brain.

His expression was one of passion just this side of savage, and the wild creature in her thrilled to that knowledge. And yet, the small, rational part of her brain that still functioned was more cautious. Who was this man? Where had Amani hidden this passion for so long? Or was his reaction simply a response to the danger that surrounded them, rather than a genuine response to her?

That last thought cleared her head and gave Nya pause even as her hungry body betrayed her, willing to sink further into his sensual spell. Gathering her resolve, and her rational mind, she pushed aside the primal urges of body, and gently pushed away from his kiss, even if she wasn't yet strong enough to leave his arms.

The twist of pleasure and pain in her body was enough to make her want to weep, to swear she no longer cared how he felt about her, as long as he made love to her. Only, she knew she couldn't live with that lie. She couldn't forget the promise she made to herself. She would not become her sire, ruled by bodily urges. She wouldn't give into passion under a lie.

Amani's gaze bathed her in sensual energy, and it was a siren's lure. Slowly, she opened her eyes to his, and saw the mingling of heat and confusion, and even the worry. And she knew she owed him an explanation, after all the ways she encouraged him, in the past. Nervous, she cleared her throat.

"Amani, there's something I have to tell you." She hated the wobble in her voice, the fear of rejection that closed her throat. She was about to lay it all on the line. For the very first time in her life, she was about to admit what she was, and she was terrified the truth would drive away the very man she wanted more than anything.

"Nya—"

"Please." She held up one hand, then laid it on his chest. "Let me finish."

He nodded, silently urging her to continue. She drew a breath, and plunged in with both feet.

"I made myself a promise a long time ago. I'd just found out why my parents treated me so differently from the rest of my siblings. Why I looked and acted so different from anyone else in my family."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

How did she explain this? She didn't know. She'd never had to try, before. Everyone who cared already knew the ghastly story, and they hated her for it. Of that much, she was sure. But she knew she owed it to Amani to make the attempt. She needed him to understand. "My mother... She's the youngest daughter of an *Asgrim*—a kind of king, among my people. She was on her way to address the Imperial Court on Yrasi when pirates attacked her transport and hauled her off. They held her for ransom, and did unspeakable things to her." She dropped her gaze; she didn't want to face him as she relayed this story, and her shame. "She was five months pregnant with me when she first met her husband."

Amani's hand touched her chin, and he lifted her face until she was forced to meet his gaze. The tenderness and warmth she saw there took her breath away. He smiled gently, and touched his lips lightly to hers. As he drew back, he met her eyes, his own dark and serious. "You think this is the same, that if you lose control, you'll become like those men who brutalized your mother."

His perceptiveness stunned her. Most people just assumed she *was* cut from the same cloth as her sire and dismissed her. She was a pariah among her own people, and the star lanes were so cold and anonymous she no longer felt human at all. That was why she signed on with Duran, and why she stayed. One look in Amani's eyes told her that he knew she was running away from herself. She nodded miserably.

"I can't have sex for kicks, Amani. I'm too afraid of what I'll become."

His chuckle surprised her, and an involuntary moan slipped through Nya's lips as his fingers threaded through her hair, massaging her scalp. He leaned in, and pressed a soft kiss to the hollow beneath her ear, his murmur filling her ear. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Nya. It's not the way I wanted it, but like you said, we rarely get to choose."

She didn't like how that sounded. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sheathe the claws, kitten." The humor in his voice was unmistakable. Then his expression grew solemn. "I didn't want to get involved, sweetheart. Not with any woman. I made my own pacts, sworn in my own blood."

She gasped, and shock flew through her. She'd heard of Banoi blood-oaths, before, but she assumed they were exaggerated tales to intimidate those not of Banoi heritage. "Why?"

He sighed heavily. "I ... Well, let's just say I haven't had a lot of luck with love in the past."

Nya's lungs froze as her heart rose up to strangle her with hope. Did he really mean what she thought he was saying? "Amani?"

His head bent toward her, and his mouth brushed hers in another of those barely-there kisses. His expression was so serious she had to wonder how he'd been 'unlucky' in love. That set her heart into a dizzying tattoo, at the possibility that he might come to love her. Might already love her. But she wasn't bold enough to ask any of the questions that burned in her chest, so she simply offered her lips, a willing sacrifice.

He took the kiss deeper, but only for a moment, before he eased away. She tasted regret in his departure, and met his gaze, trapped there as she realized that every word he spoke was the unvarnished truth.

"I didn't want to want you, or love you. But, somehow, you keep sneaking into my dreams."

Those soft words, in his deep voice, wrenched tears to her eyes. They spilled down her cheeks even as a smile broke her lips. She offered no resistance as Amani gently framed her face and tipped his head to kiss away her tears, claiming her lips again in a kiss as carnal as it was tender. It never even occurred to her to hesitate. Satisfied by his confession, her brain surrendered to his lovemaking, and she softened against him.

What began as animal hunger transformed in that single act of surrender into a reverence that worshipped everything pure and good left in their dark, dangerous universe. The ice around Nya's heart thawed as Amani traced her lips with a series of soft, hot kisses that she was sure even a full-blown freeze couldn't cool. He eased his way into her mouth, their tongues tangled in a mating that went beyond the physical, and Nya felt his hands in her hair, holding her head steady beneath his onslaught. It was a feeling she could get addicted to far too easily.

Her entire body ached, and she itched to touch him, to feel his skin against hers, and know that they were truly one. Energy thrummed between them and, as Amani's kiss consumed her, Nya swore the deck of the ship tilted beneath her. Afraid it was another quake, she swayed against Amani for stability. He met her motion with a hum of approval. His hands left her hair and slid down, over her shoulders and back, to leave a molten trail in their wake. She felt his heat even through the layers of her clothing, and the animal musk of desire, mixed with the spicy scent she knew only as Amani, spun her reality out of existence, and dropped her smack into another of her erotic fantasies.

She wanted to affect him the way he did her. She wanted to drive him beyond the control he held so tightly to, to evoke the pure emotion that simmered just on the other side of his kiss. Release the caged beast.

A dim awareness registered, from another life. Her grandmother's warnings flashed through her to never to release a wild animal without being able to predict how it would react, and she knew she should be cautious. Pursued by her genetics, she always took the safe road, because that meant she could do no harm. But now, danger and passion hummed all around

her, and she knew the harm of stopping. So, with a small sound of encouragement, she slid her hands over Amani's body, mimicking the motion of his hands on her.

With that choice, everything soft and fragile about their mating cracked and flew apart. Nya loosed a small, feral cry as a growl she could only call primal rumbled from Amani and he yanked her top up and over, exposing her burning flesh to the cool air of the ship's circulation system. Cold shivered over her, and her nipples ached with the need for his touch. Her thighs quaked with hunger as his hooded gaze smoldered on her, and the danger shot through her overcharged system.

His kiss, when it returned, was nearly savage with desires long denied. It suited her mood just fine. Nya dug her fingers into his uniform shirt and pulled until the fabric followed her commands of up and off. Greedy for sensation, she ran her fingers over the smooth, dark ridges of his chest and stomach, noting the slightly paler skin of scars, and the flex of hardened muscles as he reacted to her touch with tiny shivers. He moaned, soft and low, and her belly tightened at the sound that proved how much she affected him. He was close to that edge, his control barely held by a thread.

Amani dipped his head, his mouth skimming over her throat and down to devour the flesh he revealed. His lips, tongue, and teeth against her sensitive collarbone tore a ragged cry from Nya as she arched closer, consumed in her need to get as close to him as humanly possible.

His hands grasped the backs of her thighs, and her feet left the floor in a swift move that told her just how strong he was. On instinct, her legs anchored around his waist, and she heard his deep growl of approval again as he backed her against the bulkhead. Nya's heart pounded wildly in anticipation, aware that there was no turning back.

She consumed him. There was no other description for the maelstrom of needs that whirled inside him, obliterating all thoughts of danger and blood pacts. His feelings for Nya were greater than all of those things, and his desire for her could not be tamed. For the first time in years, he gave in to the fantasy, and his hands cupped her perfect breasts, lifting and shaping the supple flesh as he absorbed her moans of pleasure. Her soft hands burned him, skimming his torso, and he knew what it was like to crave.

Amani stiffened, and nearly broke away, as her hands came in contact with the fastenings of his pants. It was one thing to indulge his fantasies of touching and tasting her. It was quite another thing to give in to the ultimate fantasy—one he had promised only to Dinara.

Nya paused, and their eyes met as he lifted his head from his exploration of her soft skin.

"No second thoughts." The whisper shot along his nerve endings, a pact he couldn't forsake, and a plea that punched him solidly in the solar plexus. That note of desperation in her voice nearly brought him to his knees.

He shook his head mutely, unsure how to tell her the truth, or if he even should. Then, something in her expression hit him between the eyes, and he knew a moment of abject terror.

"You?"

A soft, nervous laugh broke her lips, even as her head shook. "I've waited my entire life for this."

That quiet admission succeeded where her pleas had not. His knees quaked, and he could no longer stand on his quivering legs. With a groan, he slid to the floor, cradling her against him so that their bodies touched from pelvis to cheek. He turned, resting his quivering body against the bulkhead as he absorbed the meaning of her statement. Staring into her guileless eyes, he searched for any hint of artifice, even as he wondered if he should take her words at face value. But there was nothing but open truth, and a hint of nervous fear, in those green depths.

Finally, his shock cleared as she shifted in his lap, and the friction of flesh-to-flesh sent a shiver of heat through him.

"You've never done this before?" He couldn't help the tight rasp of his words. It took all his willpower to not dispose of the last barrier between them and take her with all the wild, primitive desire that raged inside him.

"That's what I was trying to tell you." A teasing gleam entered her eyes as she met his gaze and shifted again, a vixen's move that nearly rolled his eyes back in his head as he bit down on a curse. "I'm brand new. You?"

He nearly laughed. He knew she was just teasing, trying to get a rise out of him. She was in for one hell of a surprise. He slid his hands down her naked back, to cup her ass. There, he squeezed lightly, pressing her heat against his erection. He watched those beautiful, olive-green eyes glaze, and hunger coiled tight inside him as he rasped, "Yeah. Me, too."

Nya stilled, and her eyes widened on a gasp. "What? Why?"

He so didn't want to go there. He'd much rather watch her come, and know that he would be the only man to have her.

"Enough talking." He growled the words against her skin as he pinched her nipple lightly, then drew it into his mouth to soothe away the sting. As he lavished her breasts with attention, his hands divested them both of the rest of their clothes. He slid his hand to cup her where she was warmest, and heard the small purr that left her. He swallowed his smile. Definitely feline.

In slow, even strokes, he glided one finger through hot, wet heaven, and groaned at the feel of her. She was so slick, so hot. He'd never imagined a woman could be so amazing. Now, he was consumed with the desire to feel that slick heat wrapped around him.

He nipped her breast lightly, and Nya moaned and arched into his suckling mouth. Her hips played an advance-and-retreat game with his hand that allowed him to explore every inch of her. Her hands dropped to his waist again, and this time, he didn't stop her exploration. He was so hard he was surprised he hadn't exploded already. The edge hovered there, just beyond reach, and he knew he didn't want to arrive without Nya's body wrapped firmly around his.

Fortunately, he was trained to control himself, body, mind, and soul; because the moment her warm, soft hand wrapped around his erection, he about lost it completely. He swore, the oaths slipping between clenched teeth as his head tipped back.

"Nya." He managed to croak out her name, even as his hips bucked into the slide of her hands over his erection as she explored. His lids cracked open, and it was everything he

could do not to lose it on the spot as he caught sight of the rapt awe on her face as she stroked him.

When she leaned forward, as if she intended to plant her delectable mouth where her hands were, he couldn't take it, anymore. With a growl, he dragged her up against him, and plunged first one finger, then a second, deep inside her, and heard her gasp as she straightened in surprise, and then moan as her head fell back. Inner flesh and muscle stretched and settled around his fingers, then clenched lightly as she moaned his name.

The sound of his own name had never been so erotic, and the small thrusts of her hips and pelvis as she rode his stroking fingers was enough to undo any man's control. Then her hands grasped his shoulders, and she sobbed, "Now."

That was all the urging he needed. Sliding his fingers free, he lifted her until her pelvis aligned with his and, with only a second's uncertain fumbling, sealed their bodies in the most intimate embrace. His eyes closed and his head fell back against the wall as she gloved him perfectly, her body everything he could ever dream of as pulsing ripples worked up and down his flesh in pure bliss.

Nya's moan pried his lids apart, to a look of rapture on her face that catapulted him beyond reason. Only the need to make this experience as unforgettable for her kept him clinging to control. Until she moaned again and moved.

With an undulation of her hips, Nya stiffened, and a cry tore from her as her inner flesh spasmed around him. The sensation fried every synapse in his brain. A feral growl pulled from his chest as his hands clamped her hips in place and he bucked up hard, spilling himself into her.

They sank down, boneless with satiation, and Nya shivered lightly as she lay against Amani's chest, his arms wrapped securely around her. Here, in his arms, she could momentarily pretend that all the fear and danger beyond the hull of the lifeless ship didn't exist. For the moment, this was the only reality she knew.

"Cold?" His words, murmured against her temple, worked a warm shiver through Nya, even as she shook her head against his chest.

"No. You?"

He chuckled weakly. "I don't ever want to move again."

She smiled. She knew how he felt. Though she supposed sex was supposed to last longer, she had no complaints. Besides, as much sexual energy as they'd stored up over the past few years, it wasn't a surprise that they spontaneously combusted when they got this close. She was satisfied and sleepy, and she wanted nothing more than to stay right where she was for the rest of her life; or at least the night. If it was even night.

Silently, she cursed the return of her logical, scientific mind, which said they were running out of time. They didn't have time for tenderness; hell, they really didn't have time for sex. The planet could already be on final countdown.

As if in response to that very thought, the ground rumbled, and the ship rattled with the force of a new quake. She shared a long, resigned glance with her partner, and knew that

they were both thinking the same thing. If they didn't get off this planet soon, they might never hold each other again.

As the quake passed, Nya rose reluctantly to her feet and donned her clothes again, aware of Amani's motions as he followed suit. When she turned toward him, totally dressed, she found his brow creased in a frown. She knew he was upset, but she didn't have time to find out why. She had a ship to get moving.

Chapter Twenty

“There’s got to be a way to make this thing fly.”

Nya was moving around the compartment before he could blink. He watched her, stunned by her energy. He didn’t know where she found it; he was exhausted. To stop her whirlwind pace, he snagged her wrist on her way past and tugged her close, then bit back a wry smile at the peeved look that flickered through her green eyes. She just didn’t take no for an answer. That was probably the single most confusing trait about her. He couldn’t decide if he found it annoying, or endearing.

“I think it’s a lost cause,” he answered her stubbornly determined look, and shrugged when she turned that green glare on him. So much for afterglow. “Come on, Nya. You gave it your best shot—you even tried the manual override. The ship’s clearly damaged.”

She broke his hold on her, as her expression brightened. “Maybe not. Maybe the problem isn’t with the ship.”

Her logic was dizzying. “And you lost me.”

She whirled toward him, her eyes dancing with newfound hope. “All the vehicles on the planet access their navigation logs through the AI in the Garrison. Skipper updates travel logs as it powers up each navigation computer, to account for registered changes in the system.”

Now he saw where she was going with this. “And you think that because the AI’s down...”

“Navigation won’t come online. But if I can reach the central AI consol in the Garrison’s engine room, I can manually switch over navigation control.”

“And then what? We don’t even know how long it’ll take to get back to the Garrison to do that, let alone get back here once you work your magic.”

Her eyes rolled just before she scooted under the Navigation panel. “I just have to switch the circuits and hotwire a couple of boards, and I can control the ship by AI remote once I get the AI up and running again.”

Before he could question her, she was out from under the console and brushed past him. Amani couldn’t stifle his wry grin any longer. Nya was beautiful, and entirely driven once she latched onto an idea. Evasion was the better part of valor, he decided. Better not to let the hurricane that was Nya on a mission catch him.

Nya moved around the exterior of the ship like lightning, opening and closing conduit panels as she rearranged control boards and crossed wires. He didn’t have a clue what she was doing, but it had something to do with her plan to turn a multi-ton spacecraft into a remote-control toy.

“Got it!” Nya’s exuberant exclamation drew his attention away from the ship as she approached, a grin spread over her face that punched him in the gut and brought his confusion rushing back.

Amani swallowed hard, and his chest tightened. This was a mess. His feelings for Nya evolved with every minute he spent in her electrifying presence, and the memory of the debt she still had yet to claim tightened his gut with renewed hunger. Yet, he was only too conscious of the other debts he owed, as well. Debts sworn in his own blood, for crimes he

could never make right. He wanted Nya in his life, wanted a future with her more than his next breath. But he wasn't supposed to live. He already promised his life in reparation for his crimes. It was his penance, damn it. He didn't have a choice.

Nya's grin collapsed as she came to a stop before him, and the worry that filled her green eyes ate at his guts. He wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't touch her. Remorse swamped him.

"Amani? What's wrong?" Nya's hand trembled where it stretched toward him, as if she meant to touch him. He couldn't allow that. He was too close to forgetting, already.

With a jerk, Amani pulled away and turned on his heel. "Let's get going. We need to get to the Garrison so you can work your magic, before this whole damned rock goes up in flames."

Something bothered Amani, and Nya was desperately afraid of what. She saw the guilt in his eyes, and knew that if she had a choice, she would avoid confronting him and the ache in her heart. The problem was that she knew it would be suicide to go off on her own. There was a reason Captain Riggeur insisted on teams of two at all times outside of the Garrison. With the galaxy's most dangerous criminals housed in the levels beneath them, going anywhere without backup wasn't just stupid; it could easily be deadly. Especially now, when the planet was tearing itself apart at the seams.

They didn't have time for the heart-to-heart she needed to assure herself they were okay. They had to move fast, and there was little time right now for feelings. They were back in the charted mine, and the compad would give them accurate directions, so she swallowed her pride and deferred the lead to Amani. With accurate directions, they had a chance of rescuing themselves and the rest of the guards, at least.

"Damn it."

Amani's sudden oath yanked Nya's attention back to him in time to see him tapping buttons with his thumbs, a scowl on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"The screen just went blank."

Nya's brow furrowed. "Impossible. Those things never run out of power."

"See for yourself," he said in disgust, and slapped the compad into her hand.

Nya fiddled with the buttons, turned the compad over, and examined the back in concern. "We might have to take the case apart to see if the AI link is damaged..." Her voice trailed off as a possibility struck her. "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Our compads are linked into the Artificial Intelligence system. The same system that gives coordinates to Navigation computers also powers our maps. We could see ID-chipped people, and the magnetic compass still works, but the further away from the central system we are, the less map power we're going to have right now."

"Which means we're right back where we started."

"In a manner of speaking."

“Great.” Amani set off, leaving Nya no choice but to trail behind. Disgruntled, Nya followed, confusion furrowing her brow as she told herself she was insane for the knot of hunger that twisted inside her.

Amani never so much as shrugged or glanced back at her, and the familiar sense of being invisible assaulted Nya again. It was a feeling she loathed with her entire being; she spent a lifetime being invisible, and she had enough.

It wasn't that her family didn't love her. At least, that's what she told herself. She knew they cared, because they could have just as easily drowned her at birth, or offered her to the Gods at any point in her childhood. Neither disposing of unwanted or bad omen babies, nor sacrificing a child deemed infested with evil to the will of the Gods and the Elements of their homeworld, was a crime among the Norjardin. Their living space beneath the frozen surface of Omri-Lodus was limited, and food supplies were precious commodities. There was no space for unwanted or disharmonious people.

No. Instead, her mother and adoptive father had fought for her, had made certain her birth was legitimate, no matter that the truth came out, anyway. Against all the odds, and her bad blood, Nya's mother fought to keep her. It wasn't Lilliana Valgard's fault her child turned out to be such a misfit. Nya was never content with the simple life of her people. Technology fascinated her, and the Norjardin possessed little of that. So Nya read, and dreamed of the stars, and became steadily more invisible to the family who couldn't understand her thirst for knowledge, or life beyond Omri-Lodus.

Her mother actually fought her decision to leave Piramesa for University in the Inner System. No one in eight generations of their family ever left the safety of their homeworld for anything except official business. No one had the desire to, except Nya. And, for all her mother's protests, Nya sensed the relief in everyone as the day of her departure neared. That relief, more than anything, burned a hole in Nya's heart, and sparked her self-made oath to never return, and never settle for anything less than complete love and acceptance.

Her attention returned to Amani as she accepted the fact that some promises were made to be broken. She certainly had no choice when it came to her feelings for Amani. From the first moment she met him, three years ago, the puzzle of her enigmatic partner fascinated Nya. She couldn't resist the pull of a mystery, and Amani was that. He acted so cold, remained so detached, as if he didn't want anyone in the galaxy close to him. Even on the day they met, he stood apart from the rest, and his attitude screamed like a 'no trespassing' alarm. Most of the rest of the guards did as he wanted, though a few made initial attempts to befriend him. None lasted past his first stony glare. None, except Nya.

She couldn't let it go. The more he dug into that attitude, the more she was sure there was a softer side to him. She knew protective attitudes when she saw them, and the shadow of painful secrets rode his shoulders like one of Nartal's demonic imps. And Nya grew more determined with every day to solve the mystery of Amani and release him from his pain. She just never anticipated she would fall for him.

Nya chewed her lip as she acknowledged the feeling, and knew she was in trouble. For all his beautiful words back at the disabled ship, she refused to delude herself into believing Amani would ever really love her. He clearly had his own demons to fight.

She nearly ran smack into him as he came to an abrupt halt, cursing in his native tongue.

“Quit that.”

She blinked at him. “Quit what?”

“I can hear you thinking about me from here.”

She loosed a surprised laugh. “What makes you think my thoughts involve you at all?”

He cast her a skeptical look, before a wry smile twisted his lips. He turned to face her completely, and his hand lifted. One finger skimmed over her cheek and across the lip that still bore the imprint of her teeth. Instant heat coiled in Nya, and she saw a corresponding flash of desire in Amani’s eyes as he murmured, “You can’t hide it from me, kitten. Your face gives away all your secrets.”

Her desire died at the thought that he could know her so well, when she felt like she barely knew him at all. It disturbed her that he might have known she lusted after him for all these years.

“We should keep going.” It was her turn to pull away, and she prayed to all the Gods of her ancestors that he couldn’t tell she ran away from her own fears.

The tension was unbearable. She could feel him beside her. His scent and presence surrounded her, and she couldn’t breathe for the tightness in her own chest. She had to break the silence, do something to end the tension.

“We have to be getting close.”

Amani shot her a strange look for her annoyed comment, and Nya cursed the loss of her compad, even though Amani already proved it would have been useless to tell them where they were. If only they had some way of telling where they were! She hated stumbling around in the dark – figuratively, of course, since the mineshaft had some dim lighting and her night-friendly eyes made up for the rest.

“Wait.” The contact of Amani’s hand on her arm froze Nya in place as her heart leapt into her throat and danced a jig there. Electricity crackled through her body, raising the fine hairs on the back of her neck as her nipples peaked and her sex burned to have him there.

She gasped, cursing herself for being so aware of him. “What?”

“Listen.” He held up a hand for silence. Nya sealed her lips and tuned her hearing, waiting for whatever noise he heard to reach her, as well. She heard her own heartbeat, and Amani’s breath near her ear. Beyond that, she heard only the persistent, low rumble that vibrated the floor beneath their feet almost constantly, now, and the drip of melting ice. Then she jerked as a sound like a muffled, distant scream plunged down her spine, followed by hoarse grunts and sinister laughter.

Nya exchanged glances with her partner, and knew they both thought the same thing. Whatever was happening, it was neither good nor normal.

The two guards took off at a run, and Nya kept an alert lookout for trouble, even as she slid her weapon free of its holster. There was no way she wanted to charge into a hostile situation unarmed. Just behind her, she heard the unmistakable hum of energy, and knew Amani’s weapon, too, was drawn and primed.

As the sounds grew nearer, Nya slowed until she crept cautiously toward the corner around which the noise carrier. She raised her phaser and glanced one last time at Amani, who gave a sharp nod to indicate he was ready.

Nya edged to the corner and peered quickly around, eyeballing the scene in a glance. What she saw chilled her blood.

Two men, both muscular and wearing the yellow prison togs that denoted violent sexual offenders, held down a smaller, struggling prisoner garbed in lavender—a non-lethal offender. One of the rapists held the smaller prisoner’s wrists pinned to the ground, while the other thrust his lower body violently between her thighs, wrenching more cries of pain from the lavender-garbed female prisoner.

Nya’s blood raged as animal fury took over. They were raping her!

Not on my watch.

Without looking to see if he saw her gesture, Nya signaled Amani and pivoted around the corner, weapon leveled at the ready. She discharged the first shot at the large man currently on top of the woman, and the flash of her weapon’s blast alerted the other two prisoners, even as a second bolt hit true, burning the man down before he could react. He fell heavily, and Nya winced as she heard the woman’s groan of pain. Clearly not her best strategy ever.

Another weapon discharged, and Nya watched the second yellow-suited prisoner fly backward from the impact, his hold on the woman disappearing. Nya moved before the second prisoner hit the ground. She dropped beside the woman, holstered her weapon, and rolled the giant attacker over onto the ground. The female prisoner drew a ragged breath, and hesitantly opened her eyes.

“Are you all right?” Nya studied the woman, who looked hardly more than a girl, and frowned. What crime could this woman have committed, to end up here? She certainly didn’t look like much of a threat, as petite as she was. Yet, Nya was far too aware of how dangerous such misconceptions could be.

The woman’s eyes gave her away, hard as aventurine chips, as she struggled to sit up, and pull her tattered suit closed over her body. How much of that that hard shell was pure bravado, Nya didn’t want to guess. This woman was a victim, after all, no matter what crimes she might have committed.

“I’ll live. Thanks for the assist. I knew you guards couldn’t be like those Duran bastards.” She winced, gasped, and clutched her side as her face drained of color. “Damn.”

Nya watched her face undergo a minute series of shifts, each shadow revealing a different change of feature, and drew in a sharp breath. Only one species in the galaxy underwent involuntary form changes to cope with pain. “You’re a Monack!”

“Half,” the woman confirmed weakly. “And believe me, it’s not the fun some would have you believe. Those aren’t the first two who’ve done that. People see proof of a Monack in your family tree, and they do whatever they can to prove how unafraid of you they are. Stupid, really. I mean, do I really look like a threat?”

Amani crouched on the woman’s other side, his expression troubled. “What’s your name, prisoner? How did you escape your cell?”

The woman glanced at Amani, before her wry grin turned back to Nya. “He always this cheery?”

Nya contained her answering grin as the woman hit Amani’s problem dead on. He really needed to lighten up. Not every prisoner was the enemy, after all. These were people, too. “Usually. But he does have a point, in this case.”

"My name's Kjara." The woman winced as she tried to move again. "Kjara Thistlen. And I didn't 'escape' from my cell. I was dragged out by those two crispy critters, there. They're the ones you should have asked about escaping."

Amani didn't look convinced, but the steady light in Kjara's eyes assured Nya she was telling the truth. Still, something wasn't right.

"You don't look like you're in withdrawal."

Kjara's gaze turned again to Amani as he issued that challenge. "I know Duran pumps the prisoners full of Styx to control them. I saw what everyone else on my cellblock was going through."

Which meant that the power failure was more widespread than just the lower levels. Nya's heart sank. "But not you."

Kjara shook her head with a small, humorless laugh. "They can't give me Styx. I have a genetic defect, and even the smallest dose would kill me outright. Duran probably didn't want to risk that happening. They knew it would prove me right."

Nya unstrapped her pack and searched around until she found pressure-wrap bandages. From the lack of blood and the continued presence of pain when she breathed, Nya guessed Kjara had at least one fractured rib. How bad was a question for a properly equipped medic, but she had to do what she could to make the other woman comfortable. She gestured for Amani to help Kjara sit up.

"Prove you right about what?" Even in his skeptical tone, Nya knew Amani's query was meant to distract Kjara from the pain, not antagonize her. Nya smothered a smile. For all his stubbornness, Amani could be sweet and sensitive when he didn't stop to think about what he was doing. It was how she knew he wasn't really the ill-tempered grump he showed the world. "What's your crime?"

Kjara cursed as Amani moved her, before she answered. "That Duran Corporation is evil to the core. I'm here because I stole evidence of their crimes, and accidentally torched a lab in the process. That's how I got caught. But, mostly, I'm here because I know the truth, and they don't want me talking."

"What evidence?" Amani's head lifted, and his gaze clashed with Nya's. She knew they were both remembering the borer, and what they discovered in the operator's system. But there was an edge to Amani's voice that hinted at the secret he'd kept since the Duran offices. He obviously believed Kjara. What had he found? Kjara lifted her right arm, then tried to move her left.

"Don't!" Nya ordered. "You've got at least one cracked rib. You shouldn't move until I'm done."

Kjara ignored the warning. Her left index finger suddenly began to grow, extending into a sharp talon, which she laid against her own skin, just over an old scar on the inside of her right arm. Nya gasped as Kjara flexed her arm, and a tiny bump appeared beneath the surface of her skin. Gritting her teeth, the prisoner slid her taloned finger over the spot, and the skin split open in a wash of blackish-red blood to reveal a tiny microchip.

"Take it," she urged Nya quietly. "It'll tell you everything Duran's done in the past, and all the ways they've already dropped a death sentence on the galaxy."

Nya eyed the chip, then lifted her gaze to Amani's face to find her partner staring at the microdot with an expression of pure horror on his face. What did he think they'd find on the

chip? She wasn't sure she wanted to know, as she continued to study his face, nausea squeezing her stomach. Nya reached out and retrieved the chip, tucking it into a secure pouch in her utility belt. She drew a breath and told herself she was ready for the shitstorm. It was only going to get worse from here out.

Chapter Twenty-one

The universe had turned inside out. That was the only explanation that made any sense to Amani as he fought sickening dread. He stared at the two women as his brain fought for an escape from the nightmare that closed in around them all. He wanted to believe Kjara was a liar, that Duran wasn't *all* bad. But that would mean Nya was, too, because they'd both voiced the same opinion of Duran Corporation. His gaze landed on Nya. He drank in her beauty, and the bright honesty that shone in her eyes, and his reality underwent another massive shift. Why had he ever doubted her? Why had he mocked her certainty? If Nya said Duran Corporation was up to its eyeballs in something illegal, it was. And, from the damning evidence he'd uncovered in the business suites, Duran might not be the only one.

Sick certainty built in Amani's abdomen, until he wanted to groan with his own stupidity. Was he really that blinded by his need to be loyal, that he'd convinced himself what he saw was one person's greed, and not a corporation directive? He scrubbed a nervous hand over his bald head. He had some serious thinking to do about his life and his choices.

His gaze still focused on Nya, he blinked, and saw her turn a concerned frown his way. She was worried about him. The knowledge sent a warm flush through his body that he now had to acknowledge meant something. Being a part of her life, and one of the people whose welfare she concerned herself with, felt good. But he couldn't give in to that feeling. Instead, he yanked his gaze away before she could guess his true feelings, and stood.

"Can you walk?" He couldn't help the clipped tone of his voice as he turned his gaze Kjara's way. With this new evidence, he was desperate to get Nya to safety, and hyper-conscious of time slipping away.

She nodded, her eyes wary. "I'll manage."

"No. Amani, she shouldn't—"

"Good." He ignored Nya's protest, unable to look her way. They didn't have time to coddle this prisoner. If she was so severely wounded that she couldn't move under her own steam, they'd have to leave her behind. He wasn't about to risk Nya's chance of escaping Zurin Five for anyone. His gaze flickered to Nya, to see the storm brewing in her eyes. "We need to get moving. We have to get back to the Garrison, ASAP."

Kjara, in the process of rising to her feet, froze. Her gaze swung to Nya, and Amani saw fear flash over her face.

"Why?" The prisoner demanded, her voice cracking with tension. "I won't go back. You can't put me back in the cells. They'll kill me."

He arched one skeptical brow. "You're in the non-lethal section."

Her glare cut straight through him. "Which means nothing. Tell me, *guard*; have you ever seen what a man—or woman—will do for survival when they're paranoid out of their minds from withdrawal?"

She had a point. He frowned as he considered what she said, and a shudder worked through him. He was suddenly grateful that the AI performed lockdown procedures automatically. He didn't want to think what would happen if guards had to lock the place down manually.

"We won't return you to the cellblock." Nya's promise snapped Amani's attention around, and he flinched as her severe gaze burned through him. "Right, Amani?"

At the moment, he'd agree to anything, just to never see that distrustful look on her face ever again. Amani nodded.

"If what you say is true, Duran Corporation has a lot of explaining to do," he told Kjara quietly. "We'll handle that. But first, we have to get off this planet before it explodes."

Kjara's wide, shocked gaze traveled between the two guards, and Amani battled the uneasy question of how much she really knew and how she'd learned it.

"The *planet*?"

Nya nodded in answer to her question. "Duran Corporation was deep core mining without permits, and now the planet's core is expanding."

"Which explains the earthquakes." Kjara swallowed hard, and her gaze danced between the two guards. "So, you'll make sure the truth gets out, right? You'll make sure Duran is held accountable?"

Amani sensed her resignation, and concern tugged at his gut. Kjara thought they would leave her behind; she trusted them so little. That, more than anything she'd said so far, convinced him of her innocence. This woman wasn't a criminal. She hadn't tried to bribe or barter for her life; she only requested that they follow through on her cause. Respect swelled, and he laid a hand on her shoulder in reassurance.

"You'll tell them. We don't leave innocent people behind. You clearly don't belong here, and you shouldn't have to pay for another's sins."

His gaze went to Nya as he said the last, and he hoped she understood that those words were meant for her as much as the woman they'd rescued. After what she told him about her parentage, he suspected that Nya didn't trust herself around him. She spent a lifetime paying for her father's sins until she believed she was no better. But she wasn't her sire, and he hungered to see her passion released full-force. It was time to end the fear.

A soft smile broke her lips, and that single motion tugged at Amani's heart like nothing ever had before. His breath stuttered to a stop, and he could no longer fight the overwhelming tide of love for her. He knew, as sure as he knew there were stars in the sky, that Nya's love was what he'd left home – and Dinara – to find. This was how love was supposed to feel – this burning, all-consuming feeling in his chest. And that feeling scared the shit out of him.

"Let's go." He never meant the words to come out brusque and cold. All he knew was that he needed space. He needed time to come to grips with the feelings that threatened to consume him.

He didn't dare look at Nya as they set off, but her eyes on him were like laser points and he knew she was upset. Hell, he couldn't help that, or the relief that hit him at the idea of her being pissed at him. Right now, her anger would act as a shield against the foreign emotions that stumbled through him every time he looked at her. Whatever came next, he was only safe as long as Nya Soderstrom hated him.

Whoever said women were the ones with mercurial mood swings clearly never met Amani Viyour. Nya snorted a sharp laugh beneath her breath as she helped Kjara, the much-shorter woman supported by one of Nya's arms across her back.

"So, did you pick the short straw, or did you actually volunteer to work with Mr. Personality over there?"

Kjara's wry query brought Nya's attention around to her charge, to find a faintly amused smile on the other woman's face.

"We both served our first tours here together. It was luck of the draw."

"He always this cheerful?"

The repeated question drove a familiar spike of concern through Nya. Hadn't she once wondered that very thing, herself? She'd worried that he never smiled. At first, she chalked his surly attitude up to basic personality. But over the years she worked alongside him, she'd come to know that wasn't true. Something had happened to turn a gentle, compassionate man into a snarling animal. And when he made love to her earlier... Nya swallowed hard as heat flushed her body at the thought of how he'd touched her, and what he'd confided. No, he was definitely not a surly person by nature. Still, he refused to discuss what drove him to these maudlin, distant moods. His reticence was enough to draw down the wrath of the most benevolent of gods, and she made no claims to deity.

With a resigned shrug, she answered Kjara, aware of the other woman's shrewd regard. "No, he's not always like this."

Kjara nodded slowly, and Nya's belly hollowed out at the expression on the prisoner's face as her gaze went between Amani and Nya. Kjara, at least, knew exactly which way the wind blew. Too bad Amani wasn't that observant.

Nya's eyes widened as Kjara suddenly removed her weight from Nya's arm with a wince, and a smile.

"Go get him," she murmured conspiratorially.

Nya blushed. She'd never felt as close to another woman—not even her mother or sisters—as she already did to Kjara. They were kindred spirits, and they read each other so well, even though they'd only just met. "I don't—"

"Sure you do." Kjara winked at her. "I'm a sucker for romance. Give 'im hell, sister."

"I can't leave you here," Nya protested immediately, even as her gaze went to Amani again. She desperately wanted to confront him, to demand answers she already knew he didn't want to give. But Kjara was injured, and shouldn't walk on her own. They still didn't know what was wrong.

"I'll just rest right here."

Nya glanced to where Kjara pointed, and her eyes widened. How had she not noticed the door? Inset in the tunnel wall, it was marked with a medical symbol, clearly denoting the level's emergency station. Her eyes went back to Kjara and worry slashed through her. Kjara's calm humor was pure bravado. The other woman was in excruciating pain, and she'd known they couldn't treat her with Styx, so she hid it. Until now. Now she had a chance to find something else. The expression in her eyes told Nya all she needed to know, and she swallowed her objections with a nod.

"Go rest." Hopefully, she'd find some painkillers to take, as well, though Nya didn't voice that thought aloud. "I'll deal with Amani."

She waited where she was as Kjara hobbled off, and her worried gaze followed the other woman until she disappeared through the infirmary's sliding door. Then, Nya's gaze slid back to Amani. This moment was long overdue. Amani Viyour had crossed that line for the last time. She wouldn't budge another inch until she had some answers, and if he didn't like that, it was just too damned bad.

"Stop right there, Viyour."

He froze mid-stride, and turned with a surprised expression on his face.

"Where's Kjara?" His gaze swept the tunnel, then came back to Nya.

"In there, trying to find something to dull the pain." She gestured over her shoulder toward the infirmary door. "As if you really care."

His eyes widened at her attack, and Nya watched disbelief and concern flare in his dark gaze. "Nya, I—"

"No." She cut him off with a sharp chop of her hand through the air. She was so pissed she shook with it. Anger and pain—and not the kind one could, or should, medicate—held her muscles so tense she felt the vibration. She was ready to fly apart, but she couldn't be sure she wouldn't *fall* apart instead, so she held onto her emotions with every ounce of control she possessed.

"No more excuses. No more games and no avoiding the situation. You've been a sulky child ever since we had sex." She watched emotions flare in his eyes, and wondered at their source. "I want to know why."

"I don't know what you mean."

The response was so classically Amani that Nya's temper snapped. She'd warned him, damn it! She wasn't about to dance this old dance, again.

"Give me a fucking break, Viyour! You're so damned obsessed with death, so wrapped up in your own martyrdom, that you can't see the truth when it's right in front of your face waving a red flag."

He stiffened, and she knew she struck a nerve, even before he growled dangerously. "I am *not* obsessed with death."

She bit out a laugh. It wasn't funny, really. But that he'd singled out that one statement to deny said a lot more than she'd ever wanted. And it was such an easy denial to turn on him. With another short laugh, she grabbed his wrist and yanked up his sleeve to reveal the wristband he wore. "So, what do you call *this*, then?"

His gaze dropped to study the decal she knew full well he could describe in detail in his sleep.

"That's personal."

"*That*," she intoned in a slow, furious tone, "is a representation of the Banoi Goddess of Death."

His eyes snapped up, full of such surprise that Nya nearly laughed. He really thought she didn't know?

"You know Her?"

"I know a lot about a great many things." She held his gaze steadily, urging him to release whatever demon held him trapped from life. They would never survive this hellhole unless they could trust each other implicitly, and were both completely dedicated to living. She knew no other way to express that certainty than to give him the cold, unvarnished truth.

“I know that only those sworn either to kill or to be killed curry Alikma’s favor. Her wrath is legendary when crossed, and men are said to have died horrible deaths for abusing Her trust. And, since I also know that you’re not a Death Dealer, that means you took an oath to die. What I *don’t* know is why.”

She watched his face for signs that his resolve was weakening as the moments ticked by. She needed him to give in, to tell her why he kept pushing her away every time she got close to the truth. And, more than anything, she needed to know why he was so convinced he had to die.

Chapter Twenty-Two

As he stared into Nya's green eyes, so full of concern and compassion, Amani knew a moment's overwhelming terror. She couldn't look at him that way. He wasn't strong enough to resist that pain in her eyes, or to know that she felt that pain for *him*. He owed her the truth, and more, and avoiding it would destroy everything between them.

A sigh shuddered from him, and he nodded.

"My father died when I was just a kid. Since my mother was... incapable of caring for herself, let alone a child my age, and I wasn't old enough to see to myself, I was sent to live with my father's brother Vashri on Ramali."

Her gaze stayed fixed on him, silent and encouraging, and that gentle presence soothed him. He was surprised; he hadn't expected that feeling. Nor did he expect the way the words spilled out so easily. He wondered why it surprised him so much. After all, hadn't he always considered how easy it would be to talk to someone as understanding as Nya?

"Uncle Vashri is a great man, and a devote follower of the Ancient Faith. His kindness, strength and faith in the inherent goodness of the Universe inspired me, and I wanted nothing more than to be the man he saw in me."

"That's how you learned to trust the system, and rules. From him."

Her observation surprised him, and he wasn't sure why. She was very astute; he should have expected no less.

"One thing he told me early on, that I've clung to in the most difficult times, is that people make systems, not the other way around. Systems of belief and thought rise and fall on the faith of those who support them. He taught me to never support a cause, or a belief, that I didn't believe in with all my heart."

A smile flirted at the edges of Nya's lips, captivating him with the desire to kiss her. "He sounds like a very wise man. Is he still alive?"

Amani shook himself, and dragged his attention back to the conversation.

"Alikma willing, yes," he answered her, even as he sketched two fingers in an elaborate motion across his throat—a sign against evil—and watched surprise flicker in her eyes.

"You mean you don't *know*?"

The first of his many shames. Amani couldn't meet her eyes as he shrugged. "We haven't spoken in years. I couldn't face him, after... after what I did."

He saw the furrow in her brow, and knew she was confused. Not that he blamed her; he never claimed his life, or his decisions, made any kind of logical sense. His entire life was a state of perpetual chaos. The only thing he could control, most times, was himself.

His gaze slid over Nya, and he rethought even that assumption. Since meeting her, he'd had damned little control over anything, *including* himself. He cleared his throat, even as his body took a sudden interest in proving just that. Eyes averted, he gathered what strength he could. The next part of his tale was harder to tell.

"While I lived with my uncle, I made a friend—a girl just a few months younger than myself." Gods of Old, was that hoarse croak really his voice? Amani grimaced. It seemed all wrong to discuss Dinara with this woman. Nya deserved to know she was special. The last thing he wanted was for her to think of herself as a replacement. Dinara held a special place in

his heart, too, but the more time he spent around Nya, the more he realized how different, and immature, his love for Dinara had been. "Her name was Dinara Yequa."

"You loved her."

"Yes, in my own way."

Her brow furrowed, and she frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means I thought she was the world. I thought I loved her beyond all things. I was young, she was beautiful and sweet, and claimed to love me. I thought that was all love was about."

Nya's hand skimmed his cheek gently, and he met her gaze, surprised to see soft compassion bloom there. That gentle warmth tripped his heart and clogged his throat, even as questions formed in those amazing olive eyes.

"There's one thing I don't understand."

He covered her hand, holding her in place when she would have pulled away. "What's that?"

"If you loved her, then why...?" She blushed and looked away.

Humor burst in Amani as he realized what she meant. "You want to know why we never made love."

She nodded mutely, her blush darkening until her throat and cheeks were awash with a rosy hue. She was stunning, and he hungered to kiss her again, to turn that embarrassment to sexual heat. But as long as the past remained between them, he knew there was no chance of that. He would not continue a relationship built on lies and silence.

"We were both children of the Ancient Faith, Nya. Chastity until marriage is one of the sacred tenets of our faith. So, once we realized that our feeling changed from simple, childhood friendship to love, we made plans to marry."

He watched her face drain of color, and wondered what she thought, or if she was ill. He reached for her, but backed off, confused, as she reeled away from him.

"You're *married*?"

The horror on her face would have been comical if he didn't feel her withdrawing, slipping away from him. Desperate fear clutched him.

"No!" He reached for her, but she backed out of his reach, and his heart plummeted as he scrambled to explain. Gods, how could he have made such a mess of this? "There's a certain courtship period required. We were betrothed. *Engaged*, Nya, not married. But I'd already joined the Alliance Resistance by then, and I was called away before our courtship period elapsed."

"The Urban Wars."

He nodded, no longer surprised by the speed at which she put the pieces together. At least she was listening again, her posture no longer combative.

"So what happened?"

He swallowed hard, and his palms went cold and clammy with dread. This was the difficult part, and the confession that could drive her away for good.

"I was six months into my tour on Remonshe when the courtship elapsed. I sent for Dinara, so that we could be married right away by the stations chaplain."

"But she never came?"

Pain, as fresh as that terrible night, seared the backs of his eyes and burned a hole through his heart as his hand moved to the mark on his shoulder – the symbol of his penance.

“Oh, she came.” He croaked the words through a throat tight with anguish. Memories played in slow motion through his mind, and each one was made more harsh by the knowledge that he was on the verge of repeating them all with Nya. If he couldn’t protect her, if he’d led her to her death here, there would be no penance for his crime. Even death wouldn’t satisfy his need for self-vengeance, if this woman ever came to harm.

Nya regarded him in confusion, when he opened his burning, pain-blurred eyes again.

“I don’t understand...”

“The night Dinara’s transport arrived we were embroiled in heavy fighting. The Imperial Guard had bombarded our station sites on the surface for days, and we’d sent several messages for all civilian transports into the sector to find safe harbor away from the fighting until we cleared them to continue.”

“You weren’t expecting a civilian transport.” Understanding colored her voice, and it sank clear to his soul, a healing balm to his guilt that he never expected.

He shook his head. “When we saw the unmarked transport in the viewer, we thought it was a trick. It felt like trouble, to a bunch of battle-scarred kids. I was running the anti-invasion battery, and we’d shot down more than one unmarked Imperial Marine transport over three straight days. So when they told me they had another in their sights, I never even hesitated to give the order.”

Nya’s brow furrowed. “Wait a minute. How do you know that *wasn’t* a troop transport you ordered shot down?”

“Because after the zero-gravity torpedoes were already launched, the transport sent its authentication code, to initiate docking procedures. Three damned seconds before the torpedoes blew her out of the sky.” Three seconds in which his entire existence ground to an abrupt halt, and he knew he was damned.

Nya’s gasp of dismay cut straight through him, and he couldn’t look at her. The last thing he ever wanted to see on that beautiful face was disappointment or pity. That was the reason he hid his shame from his partner for so long. All this time, he told himself he was protecting Dinara, the truth was that he’d been protecting himself. He wanted Nya to believe he was a good man. Well, that was all over. Now she knew him for the monster he was, and he couldn’t bear to witness the death of her respect.

The touch of her warm, soft fingers on his face startled him. The soothing motion of her touch snapped through him like lightning, raising the hair along his arms, and coiling in his abdomen like a hungry snake. Against his will, a tortured groan slipped between his teeth, and he knew he’d do, or say, whatever she asked so long as she kept touching him.

He didn’t resist her motion as she urged his gaze toward hers, and the gentle compassion he found there tore open the festering wound in his soul, and allowed in a healing breath of air. His eyes stung with moisture.

“That’s when you got the tattoo, isn’t it?”

His eyes shot wide in shock. How had she known? He’d been careful to hide it from her, hadn’t he? The faint smile that ghosted over her lips answered his silent fears.

"I saw it when we got dressed, earlier. At first, I was jealous. But that's a mark of penance, isn't it? You swore to give up your life in repayment for a crime you only *think* you committed."

She was wrong to believe him blameless, though it was kind of her. He drew a breath, and tried to convince her of how wrong she was.

"I *killed* her, Nya. I murdered someone I was supposed to love and protect above myself, and I killed dozens of other innocent people, too."

"And if it had been a troop transport? How many lives would have been lost, then? Amani, you made a decision in the heat of battle, and you have to quit blaming yourself for that. You had no way of knowing who was on that ship! You said so, yourself. You can't blame yourself."

"Too late," he growled, and turned away. Damn it, Nya was supposed to understand! He refused to admit that her compassion and faith in him, even in the face of his unspeakable crimes, warmed his heart. He didn't deserve that compassion, and certainly not her faith. Only the technicality of war stood between him and one of the crimson jumpsuits that clothed the galaxy's worst criminal offenders.

Empathy stabbed Nya, a knife driven deep into her chest. She'd made her own mistakes in life, and a few not of her own making. But she'd never taken them to the extreme Amani clearly had. Because of a command decision he made as a kid, stuck in the heat of a battle bigger than all of them, Amani was determined to punish not just himself, but her as well, by denying them both the love she knew they could have. Instead, he was willing to die. She frowned as she studied him. If she didn't know better, she'd say he even *welcomed* death, and that killed her, inside.

"Amani, you—" A sharp gasp cut her off as a horrific roar filled the tunnel, spawned by a distant screech that sounded like an old woman in the throes of death. Dear Lords of Light, this wasn't just another quake! This was a man-made seismic event!

The ground beneath her rolled with a force beyond even the worst of the quakes they'd weathered so far, and the sick certainty grew stronger. Someone was trying to blow them all up!

Nya barely leapt backward in time to avoid dropping straight into the fissure that opened at her feet. Her stomach dropped to her boots as she stared down at the churning, superheated swell of magma. The heat was so intense she could barely breathe as it filled the tunnel, and the stench of sulfur gagged her.

She flattened herself against the tunnel wall as mining lights flickered and went out all along the wall nearby, leaving the tunnel bathed in the sinister red-yellow glow of boiling magma. She heard a faint sound that froze the breath in her lungs, and every drop of blood in her veins.

That sound emanated from the fissure, and grew louder by the second. Her heart thudded heavily, and Nya's gaze glued itself to the fissure opening in abject terror. She was far too familiar with that horrible clicking. It was a sound that would haunt her nightmares for as long as she lived—no matter how long or short that might be.

Chapter Twenty-Three

With a great wave of snuffling, clicking armor, the *talajeen* surged from the lava-filled fissure, their shells glowing from the heat as steam rose off them. They were a mighty stampede, sure to decimate anything that barred their path. With a horrified cry, Nya flattened herself against the wall besides the infirmary door, her expression one of utter terror. Amani was sure mirrored his own face.

He watched helplessly as the *talajeen* swarmed past Nya, all the while praying that they wouldn't notice her. Thankfully, he didn't believe they could smell, or the scent of human flesh would likely be a target too tempting to pass up. His own leg throbbed with the remembered pain of one sharp talon, and he would spare Nya that pain if he could. Unfortunately, the chasm between them was too wide to jump. With the seething, molten pit between them, he couldn't protect her except with a phaser. But that might put her in greater danger than just remaining still.

After what felt like an eternity, the final stragglers scuttled past Nya and down the tunnel, headed the direction the guards had just come. Watching them disappear from sight, Amani released the breath he didn't realize he held, even as Nya sagged against the wall with a small sob of relief. She looked up, and their eyes met across the steaming chasm. Suddenly, all his doubts evaporated. All he wanted in life was to hold her. Forever. Or for however long she'd let him, anyway.

Nya's gaze fell, and he followed it, frustration and concern welling in him as his own gaze landed on the pit that spanned the tunnel's width. It didn't appear there was a way across, but Amani refused to give up this easily. There had to be a way across. He refused to accept that everything they'd found together could be torn away so easily. He ignored the throb in his shoulder that reminded him that it was *exactly* that easy.

"Whoa. That's some crater! What happened?"

Both guards' attention swung around at the sound of Kjara's voice, and Amani noted with some relief that the prisoner was now respectably covered, having changed her torn prison uniform for a miner's dusty togs. Amani's eyes narrowed at the heightened color in her cheeks, and the overt brightness of her eyes. Unless his eyes were playing tricks on him in the constantly shifting light, Kjara was high on something. Apparently, she'd found something for her pain.

"You just missed the bugs," Nya intoned wryly.

Kjara faced her, and suddenly went pale. Seeing the stark expression on her face, Amani opened his mouth to warn Nya to catch her, afraid she was about to faint. The petite woman's gaze shifted past Nya, and all blood drained from Amani's head as he heard her say, "No, I don't think I did."

As one, the guards returned their attention to the pit and Amani swore, chilled to his soul, as he watched a wounded *talajeen* struggle out of the pit. The long, thin groove carved across its side and over its head could only have been caused by phaser fire.

Amani's throat closed as he recalled the *talajeen* he wounded in their last meeting with the terrifying crustaceans. It couldn't be the same one, after all. Could it?

The creature's head turned toward Nya as she shifted, and the screech that filled the air left no doubt in Amani's mind that it recognized her and wanted revenge. With a furious heave, the *talajeen* threw itself toward the Nya, and Amani could do nothing except watch helplessly. The creature was too close to her for him to risk discharging his weapon. He could kill her just as surely as it could.

"Nya, get down!" The screamed order came from Kjara just before a small, compact body appeared between the *talajeen* and its intended target. *Talajeen* and human shield impacted in midair, and there was a sickening crack, and a cry of pain, before hot, black goo splattered over the path.

"Kjara!" Nya leapt forward, heedless of the danger to herself as the prisoner impacted the ground and promptly folded over, vomiting as she clutched her stomach.

Nya was on her knees beside the other woman in a flash, already easing her from her fetal position. Even from where he stood, Amani could tell the wound wasn't good. Black-red blood covered Kjara's hands and soaked her borrowed clothes. His heart wrenched at the small sob that tore from Nya.

"Shift, Kjara," she ordered through her tears, and his chest clenched. "Monacks can heal if they shift..."

"Only...*half*... Monack." Kjara choked, and turned over to cough up blood. Definitely not a good sign. Then she drew a rattling breath, and had to fight for every one of her next words. "Can't... shift... form. Nya..."

"Why?" Nya demanded, her voice harsh with distress. Amani could see the glimmer of wetness on her cheeks even from where he stood, and the knowledge that she was crying tore at his soul. "Why did you do it?"

"You... believe... me." Kjara struggled and a low, groaning rattle shook her. "P-prom-promise—"

"Anything."

"G-get... Duran. Make...them...pay."

Amani's throat clogged and his eyes burned as he watched Nya's overflow and her head bow. If he hadn't already been convinced that Kjara was innocent, her selfless act of courage and her single request would have sealed it. Even aware of her own imminent death, she clung to her belief that Duran Corporation was a danger to the galaxy at large, and should be held accountable for as-yet-unrevealed crimes. He met Nya's anguished gaze as her head lifted, and nodded. He was in this all the way.

Nya's lips trembled with a smile that looked strained, even from where he stood, as she laid one hand over both of Kjara's blood-stained ones. "We will, Kjara. You have my promise on that. As long as we live, we'll both make it our mission to see that everyone knows what happened here, and that Duran is responsible."

Kjara went slack, and Amani saw the heartsick look that crossed Nya's face. He knew in that instant that the other woman was dead. Gently, Nya eased Kjara to the ground and closed her eyes. She rose to her feet, chin lifted proudly, though her lips trembled and her eyes were huge. She looked shaky, and Amani forced his lungs to draw breath as he fought pain, for Nya's sake as well as Kjara's. Right now, he'd give his very life to hold Nya and erase the pain that lingered on her face.

"Nya."

She lifted her gaze in lackluster interest. Amani's eyes moved to the large metal support that had fallen from the wall when the floor split. It was dangerous, but it was better than the idea of leaving Nya here. "I'm going to make a bridge if I can move that thing. Once it's down, you'll have to cross quickly, though."

She nodded dumbly, and his concern mounted. He wouldn't feel any better about this until he felt her in his arms, again.

Nya was numb from the core out. Everything was surreal, as if she was watching it through long-distance goggles. Amani's grimace of effort, the strain of muscle and sinew as he heaved the massive beam away from the wall, all seemed like it was part of a dream, not reality. Not to say it was outside the realm of possibility for Amani. His Banoi blood gave him plenty of strength to haul heavy metal around.

"Nya! Come on, before it melts!"

She blinked, snapped from her shock by the terse urgency in his tone. Without another thought—she'd think later—she followed his directions and balanced carefully on her precarious makeshift bridge as she inched across the pit. The metal was hot against her feet, even through her heat-resistant boots, and she gritted her teeth as she moved, aware that stopping could prove fatal. With every second that passed, she swore she felt the metal melting away beneath her feet. It was certainly hot enough to melt steel. Each updraft of superheated air that hit her turned her trek even more difficult, nearly unbalancing her.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity, strong hands grasped her arms and tugged her the rest of the way across, straight into Amani's comforting embrace. No sooner did his arms close around her than the dam holding her tears in check broke wide and the flood poured out in a harsh, wracking sob that surprised even her. She clung tightly to Amani as she sobbed out all her pain, anguish, and fear. His lips nuzzled against her temple, and his soothing murmurs instilled a peace that made her feel that, for the first time, everything would be all right.

After a moment, she stepped away, and offered him a shy smile before she glanced over her shoulder toward Kjara's body. For the first time in her life, she'd felt a kinship that said there was at least one woman in the universe she could call friend, and that bond was ripped away in its infancy, aborted by a situation beyond anyone's control. She felt the pressure of Amani's hand around hers as he gave it a gentle squeeze, and turned to meet his gaze with staunch determination. They would get off this rock; she would see to it. And once she did, she had a promise to keep. An innocent woman's life would be avenged.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“At least that quake didn’t knock out *all* of the lights.”

Nya offered Amani a wan smile, aware that he was just trying to lighten the dark cloud that hovered over her.

“That ‘quake’ wasn’t natural, Amani. Whatever caused it most likely knocked out the lights in that sector of the mine, as well.”

He nodded and squeezed her hand lightly. “You all right?”

She regarded him for a moment, amazed at the difference in him. If anyone had asked her even forty-eight hours ago, she would have sworn Amani Viyour didn’t have a single emotion in his body. But the expression in his eyes now was alive with emotion, and it flipped Nya’s heart end over end in warmth. With a tiny, shy smile, she nodded.

“I have to believe Kjara chose her death. I think she believed no one would listen to her, and that she’d end up in exactly the same situation again.”

“We believed her.”

“And she knew that we’d probably be the only ones to ever trust someone convicted of burning down a Duran Corporation lab, because we knew what happened here, firsthand. No one in power would believe a convicted felon with a history of violence against Duran. But the word of two guards who actually *worked* for Duran? That carries a lot more weight.” Her smile collapsed. “She knew they’d listen to us.”

Amani’s pensive expression got to her. Nya swallowed hard. “She liked you, you know.”

His lips flickered in a brief, half-hearted smile. “She was a good woman.”

Nya laid her hand on his forearm, drawing his attention as he turned toward her.

“When do you plan on telling me?”

One dark eyebrow lifted in question. “Tell you what?”

“What’s bothering you. What you found back in the business offices.”

He couldn’t quite hide the flash of panic in his eyes, before his expression cleared. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t lie to me, Amani. Not now. I know you have suspicions, now tell me.”

He sighed, and she watched resignation move across his features, before he finally admitted, “I’ve got more than suspicions.”

She waited quietly for him to continue. So far, he hadn’t told her anything she hadn’t already figured out from watching him. The man was riddled with confusion, and he didn’t have a clue how much it showed. With every minute that passed since the Duran business offices, his arguments for their innocence had faded, along with his devotion to them. And that told her volumes about what he discovered. But she wanted to hear it from him, and she needed to know the whole story.

“You found something.”

He nodded, and the clench of his jaw told her that, whatever he found, he hated talking about it. “I caught a surveillance feed. It was choppy, and without sound, but...”

“But what?”

Amani sighed. "Dr. Avelard was definitely up to something, and there was plenty of proof she was trying to cover it up." He met her gaze somberly. "Nya, I watched them load up those transports and leave. It was all there on the screen."

The blood drained from her head, leaving Nya weak and dizzy with disbelief. He'd *watched* it all happen, and never said a word?

"Why, damn it? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

He backed away from her combative stance, his dark eyes wide in surprise.

"I didn't want to believe it, at first. It just seemed all wrong." His eyes moved away from her face. "I guess I kept hoping we'd find something that would prove I didn't see what I thought."

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the play of emotions across his face. His eyes held too many secrets for this to be over. "What *else* aren't you telling me?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes. Always a bad sign.

"Amani..."

"All right, all right!" He threw his hands up and gave in. "I think one of the guards sold us out."

Nya sucked in a sharp breath in surprise. This, she never even considered. She couldn't believe Amani kept this to himself for so long. Only one question burned in her mind. "Who?"

She watched his jaw clench again, until a tic developed in his right cheek. Clearly, he wasn't interested in pointing fingers. Tough. She needed to know.

"If one of us was bought, don't you think we all have a right to know."

His expression turned pensive, and she waited as he silently considered her words. Finally, he nodded, and started walking again. "It was Javel. I saw him talking to Avelard on the feed. They were arguing, and then they both shook hands, and Javel watched the transports load up and lift off."

Nausea wrenched Nya. Suddenly, Amani's attempt to send Nya and Xerna off together felt more like a premonition than panic. Had he been suspicious of Javel, even then? She wasn't brave enough to ask; she didn't want to know. If they ever got off this planet, there would be plenty of time to question the Karatzin guard. And if they didn't make it out of here alive, it wasn't going to matter at all.

They walked in silence for several moments, and Nya's mind drifted back to when they'd first met Kjara Thistlen. Her heart caught as she realized exactly why Kjara had used herself as a human shield. "The chip!"

Amani shot her a strange look. "What?"

"Kjara wasn't just protecting me, Amani! She was protecting the microchip she gave me!" Her hands shook as she dug around in her utility belt, coming up with the tiny chip. She regarded it with a quizzical frown before she closed her hand around it again and tucked it away safely. "What do you suppose is on it that's worth dying for?"

"Something equally worth killing for." His grim tone and hard expression sent a chill down Nya's spine. He was right. Kjara had evidence incriminating enough that Duran

Corporation made sure she met the same fate as the planet, along with her evidence. One glance at Amani's tense, angry expression, as much as the evidence he revealed to her, told her he was ready to take on all of Duran to get to the truth.

"She said she had evidence of their crimes. I doubt she meant the way they were using Styx on the prisoners."

He shook his head. "That's nothing to a corporation the size of Duran. But I'm guessing you have a theory about what's really on there, or you wouldn't have brought it up."

She couldn't resist the twist of her lips into a wry smile. "How'd you guess?"

"Maybe I just know my partner."

She winked, then grew somber as their very serious job intruded. "You sure you really want to know?"

"Yeah. Kjara had to have something pretty damning for Duran to have her incarcerated on a planet they knew they were going to destabilize."

Which was her thought exactly. Nya nodded and withdrew her hand from his grasp as she strode forward, trying to put together all the pieces in her mind. She had suspicions, after all, and she needed to make sure she had her own evidence in line. "Remember that Quanisweed we found in Avelard's office?"

He nodded, and she resisted a smile as he relaxed. Clearly, he'd feared she had something far worse figured out in her head. Still, his more natural movement gave her the courage to continue.

"Quanisweed is illegal to possess in *any* quantities. I think Duran runs the illegal drug syndicates, as well as the legit pharmaceutical companies. There's nothing that involves Styx that they don't have their fingers in somewhere along the line. I bet they manufacture reefer specifically for its street value, which they can control through product accessibility."

She tensed, awaiting his reaction. She knew it sounded far-fetched, even with all the details of what they'd found. The silence that greeted her theory was nerve-wracking. She had no idea what it meant, and Amani's expression gave away nothing.

After a long moment, during which her eyes never left his face, Amani nodded, and Nya dared to breathe again.

"You might be right, Nya. At the very least, they have a lot of explaining to do."

Those words sent a spike of pleasure through Nya, and she couldn't hold back the brilliant smile that inched across her face.

The soft light that came into Nya's eyes, and the shy smile that spread over her lips sucked the air from Amani's lungs. He forgot how to breathe as the hunger to kiss her overwhelmed him. His hands itched to explore those curves, slowly and thoroughly, until she came just from his touch. However, he was aware that their relationship was undergoing another evolution; he recognized the fragility of their connection, and he wouldn't strain it with the embrace he wanted so very badly.

That didn't mean he was above taking advantage of an opportunity. His eyes glued to her backside as she struggled to shift a fallen equipment conduit that normally allowed the AI

to move heavy machinery automatically between the levels. Right now, it just blocked access to the passageway.

Not that he was complaining. He was a man, after all, and the sight of that heavenly backside as it wriggled around made him immensely glad of that fact. Nya had the perfect ass – smooth, generous curves that tempted him beyond sanity. Lust flared in his belly as she bent over, and the pleasure-pain tightening south of his belt told him his rational brain was about to suffer meltdown.

Gentlemen were fools, he decided as he stepped up behind her and reached to grasp the conduit on either side of her hands, thus pressing his front against her back. She stiffened in surprise and the catch of her breath as he pressed closer drove him wild. He wanted to bend her over this conduit and bury himself in her warm, willing body.

She glanced over her shoulder then, and some hint of his thoughts must have showed on his face, because the little minx got an unholy gleam in her eyes, and then, she got even. As he shifted his weight into the lift, rocking forward for leverage, she pushed back, and brought the soft, round warmth of her backside in contact with his straining erection. He nearly lost his grip as a hiss of pleasure rocketed through him. That did it. He had to have her...*now*.

Spurred by the strength of his desire, he heaved the heavy metal conduit aside and, before she could move away, banded his arms around Nya from behind, which brought her delectable backside flush against him. He growled in satisfaction, his lust heightened by the small, sultry laugh that poured from her.

"I thought you didn't want to love me," she murmured teasingly, and he could hear that mischievous smile in her voice. Too bad he wasn't in the mood for playful.

"Too late," he breathed against her ear, and had the satisfaction of knowing that his confession had the desired effect. Nya gasped, and turned in his arms with a wide-eyed expression of awe that grabbed hold of his heart and squeezed.

His head descended, and he drank in another of those tiny gasps as he took her mouth in a carnal kiss that turned his world upside down. It didn't surprise him. Nya inspired him, possessed him, and he was determined to give back every measure of pleasure she gave him just by breathing.

Nya shifted closer with a whimper, turned fully in his arms so that he felt the branding warmth of her breasts, the tremble of her stomach muscles, and –

Amani swore as he broke away, cursing the planet's bad timing as the tremor suddenly became a full-fledged earthquake. His attention, consumed by desire for Nya just a moment before, was now one hundred percent intent on protecting her from harm. He felt the telltale spatter of dirt and pebbles against his head and shoulders, and sick dread washed through him. They'd miscalculated the conduit's usefulness. It held the quake's force in check in this badly damaged section of the mine. Now, all hell was about to break loose.

Amani shoved Nya ahead, into the safer area where the mine supports still looked steady enough that even the aftershocks wouldn't budge them. As the quake rumbled on, vibrating the earth all around them, a sickening snap filled the tunnel, and Amani looked up, just as the final support beam above him gave way, broken nearly in half by the force of several tons of dirt and rock. His world disintegrated in a shower of rock and sand, and his only regret was that he'd wasted so much time by being a self-centered ass that he could have spent with Nya. And he'd never even told her he loved her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Amani!” Nya clawed frantically at the rubble, tossing small rocks and handfuls of steaming earth over her shoulder as panic lunged through her. He couldn’t be dead! He just couldn’t be! She hadn’t told him she loved him, yet.

“I don’t think he can hear you, love.”

The unfamiliar voice echoed with sinister intent in what should have been an empty tunnel, and every muscle in Nya’s body seized with apprehension. Slowly, she turned, already knowing that she was in trouble. And without her partner.

Breath sawed through her lungs, and the heated air burned like hot pokers in her chest as she faced the four men—two humans, a Karatzin, and a Juzzaar—all dressed in the canary yellow jumpsuits of Level Sixteen.

Nya’s heart came to a complete stop. She might be tall and versed in self-defense, but she already knew these men were in the throes of Styx withdrawal, which made them dangerous and crazed, and she could never fight off four berserkers, all aware of any number of ways to subdue a struggling woman.

She swallowed hard as she stared at their lust-crazed faces. Level Sixteen housed the most violent sexual predators in twelve systems. Normally, the prison’s regimen of stupor-inducing Styx controlled their deviant behavior. But, by the glassy, feverish look in their eyes, they were in full withdrawal now, and looking for a very different kind of ‘fix’.

“Stay back,” she warned them in the most authoritative tone she could muster. The last thing she wanted to do was draw her phaser. Any overt sign of threat could send them over the edge. She might take out one—maybe even two—before they got close enough to make phaser fire dangerous to her. That would still be two too few. Certainly not worth the risk of provoking them

The men closed in, clearly ignoring her command to stay back, and Nya swallowed hard. If they had any doubts that she wouldn’t defend herself, they were sorely mistaken.

A blast of phaser fire sizzled through the tunnel, and cut down the biggest of her attackers—the Juzzaar. Before Nya could react, another dropped, his gaze filmed with the sightless chill of death. Nya’s startled gaze jerked to the left, hoping for reinforcements from the Garrison.

Her heart plummeted as she caught sight of her rescuer. He was fresh from the Garrison all right, toting a standard-issue phaser from their armory. But this was no rescue party.

The lone man, his green jumper now replaced with civilian clothes he must have pinched somewhere in the Duran sector, stood with a weapon leveled at the final two prisoners as he growled, “This bitch is mine. Go find someone else to play with.”

Nya swallowed hard. Omori Nawaur’s cold eyes drilled into her, half-crazed in withdrawal, and his intent clear. She’d warned Amani it was dangerous to toy with a man like Omori. He’d obviously discovered there was no Styx in the Garrison, and he’d returned with revenge on his mind.

He heard Nya calling to him, her voice full of a fear that spurred him from his stupor. He pushed against the crushing weight on his chest, and his arms burned with the effort, until he managed at last to shift the weight away. Still, he couldn't breathe. He quickly depleted the little pocket of oxygen he'd managed to protect by curling his body inward, thanks to his exertions in removing the boulder on his chest. He was lucky the whole damned thing hadn't collapsed on him in that stupid maneuver.

Slowly, like a swimmer moving through glue, he inched his way toward the surface of the rubble, pushing debris from above him toward his feet, and using the dirt he shifted to propel himself forward another inch. He heard other voices—unfamiliar ones—answered by a garbled command from Nya, her tone obviously stressed. Then, there were two loud, electrical sizzles, which made Amani's scalp prickle, and froze him in place. Someone just discharged a phaser!

Desperation spurred him on, and Amani heaved himself toward the outside world, the sense that Nya was in grave danger prodding him on. Then, a sharp cry from Nya sent a wave of frightened adrenaline through him that catapulted Amani through the final layer of rubble. But, even as he drew his first full breath of air, he realized his miscalculation. In his haste, he dislodged the delicate infrastructure of his tunnel, and he grunted in pain and disbelief as crushing weight descended on his legs before he could free himself.

Amani swore, and then froze as another cry from Nya drew his gaze to a scene ripped from his most terrifying nightmares. Omori—that bastard clearly found them again—had Nya's wrists pinned to the ground with one hand, and was yanking at her suit with the other.

"You think you're so smart, bitch," his harsh voice carried to Amani, the intent to cause harm ringing loud and clear. "I'll teach you to mind."

Shit! Amani struggled, pushing uselessly at the rubble that held his legs trapped from the thighs down. He couldn't get the leverage he needed to wriggle free. The more he struggled, the more trapped he became, while Nya fought for her freedom and her sanity bare feet away. Helpless, Amani watched the battle between Nya and Omori, and knew his partner was losing ground. Then, as Omori straddled her, Nya brought her knee up in a swift jerk that landed hard in Omori's groin, and he fell backward with a howl of pain and rage.

"Good girl," Amani murmured, overcome with admiration, as Nya scrambled away from Omori as fast as she could move.

Still unable to move his legs, Amani grabbed his phaser from his utility belt and took aim on the prisoner. But, before he could shoot, Omori was back on his feet, his expression crazed as he turned his phaser on Nya.

"You even *think* of firing that thing at me, and she's a dead woman."

Amani froze at that declaration and swore inwardly. As he met Omori's crazed, blood-shot eyes, memory struck him hard and left Amani reeling as his strange standoff with Omori from before suddenly made perfect sense. He *did* know this prisoner!

He drew in breaths that tasted of sweat and human fear, and wondered what hell in all Alikma's realm he'd landed in.

"New kid, huh?" The scorn in that mild comment drew his attention to the shorter man standing before him.

This man was a veteran, from the craggy look to his face and the gray that streaked the neatly clipped hair at his temples. The sardonic twist of his lips, however, left an uneasy feeling in the pit of Amani's stomach.

"Recruit Amani Viyour, sir!" He drew himself up and offered a smart salute, just like they taught him in boot camp.

"Drop the canned shit, kid. We're stuck in the underbelly of everything. It's all shit down here." The older man stuck out one scarred, grubby hand. "Sergeant Nawaur. Let me give you the bit tour of our little paradise here."

There was no mistaking the sarcasm. Uneasy now, Amani followed the older man as they passed the nearly empty cells.

"Where are all the prisoners? What happens to them?"

Nawaur's gap-toothed grin, tossed over his shoulder, was a sinister image that Amani knew would stay with him forever. "They stay until they break. Then they take a spacewalk without the zero-grav suit. Best part of the job."

Amani's gut roiled at the image that flew through his mind. His footsteps slowed as he followed Nawaur, sure that this job was one he didn't want to keep.

"And this," Nawaur gestured toward a spookily dark tunnel at the end of the cellblock, "is our emergency escape in case the bastards decide to blast us out of here. Whatever you do, don't let the prisoners anywhere near here."

Amani snapped back to the present with a jolt. Shit! No wonder Omori knew he'd let that Imperial Guard go. He'd done the one thing a captor never did. But he'd do it again in a heartbeat. Even back then, Omori Nawaur was a cruel, sadistic bastard who delighted in torturing captives.

In Amani's opinion, the older man deserved charges that would sink him into the bowels of Zurin Five's hellish core. But the madman in question held captive the woman Amani loved. Nawaur threatened to kill her, and Amani knew better than anyone that it was no idle threat. He had no doubt that Omori would do exactly what he said.

His gaze went to Nya, and he swallowed hard at the look in her eyes—never had he witnessed an expression so full of love and forgiveness. Emotion clogged his throat, and he knew that, whatever he did next, Nya had to survive this. He couldn't lose her.

She gave him a tiny, barely perceptible nod, and Amani filled his lungs with a deeply indrawn breath as time slowed around him. He could kill her, too, if he didn't aim just right, or if the current went through her as well as Omori. He remembered the burn of electrical backwash far too well. His gaze narrowed, and his breathing slowed, as he aimed and fired.

The beam hit Omori square in the forehead, and the impact threw him backward. He hit an exposed electrical conduit, and the world exploded in a shower of sparks and light as he jerked around like a marionette on a mad puppeteer's strings. A wide beam of phaser fire erupted from Omori's weapon as his finger closed reflexively on the trigger. Amani surged forward, fed by the adrenaline of battle, as he realized the direction of that wild beam was straight toward Nya.

"Shit!" She swore and spun away from the blast before it hit, but not fast enough to escape its destruction as it hit the wall behind her and exploded rock and debris from the wall. A sickening snap echoed in the tunnel, and Nya went down with a cry of pain, clutching her arm. The large rock had hit with the force of a speeding flier. Amani's stomach lurched. Her arm was bent at a totally unnatural angle.

Amani swore, and struggled free of the rubble in painful inches, determined to reach Nya. Finally, with a heave fed by frightened adrenaline when she wasn't moving, he dislodged the boulder that held the pile of debris pinned to him, and wriggled free.

He wasted no time getting to Nya's side, bypassing Omori's lifeless, charred body along the way. He barely noticed the smell of death and charcoal that filled the air. His attention was focused entirely on his partner. Nya was pale, her teeth gritted and her face already awash with sweat. Shock. She was going into shock as the pain set in full-force.

Amani wasted no time with stupid questions he could answer with one look at her. Clearly, she wasn't all right. He scooped her up and ran, his legs pounding like pistons and his breath sawing in and out of his lungs, until he hit the next mining infirmary. They would have splints and medical grade Styx, if she needed it, just so long as the prisoners hadn't already cleaned out the stash of supplies.

Inside the tiny infirmary, Amani lowered his now-shivering cargo gently to the exam table and rooted through the meager emergency supplies until, with a crow of triumph, he came up victorious with a skin-tight, impact resistant splint made of super-strong duranfiber in one hand, a hypodermic press, and a single, overlooked ampoule of medical Styx.

Back beside Nya, he eased her up, noting with concern the feverish glaze of her eyes and the dampness of her hair. Sweat drenched her, and she was practically unresponsive. Worried, he gently peeled away her top to gain better access to her wounded arm rather than cutting the sleeve of her EVA suit. He knew she wouldn't appreciate him mutilating her suit. An involuntary cry tore from her as he eased the sleeve away from her broken arm, and the shiver that lunged through her concerned him. Breaks were dodgy things, and everyone reacted differently to them, but this one had to be bad even though the bone never broke skin. Nya was in too much pain for a green fracture, and he already knew she had a high tolerance for pain.

With a quick shake of the ampoule, he snapped it into the hypodermic press, and set the dosage at the lowest setting he believed would ease her pain and numb her sufficiently for him to reset the broken bone, but not enough to knock her out completely. They didn't have time for her to sleep it off, and he certainly couldn't carry her, unconscious, in this dangerous mine.

Nya muttered and thrashed weakly, her skin stretched in pain, as shock set in full force and sweat poured down her exposed skin. Shit. He hoped he was giving her enough Styx. He was tempted to up the dosage, but knew that could prove disastrous to them both. He didn't even know how drug tolerant she was, and he was afraid to give her too much. His jaw set, he pressed the hypodermic to the inside of her wounded arm before he could second-guess the action.

A tense moment passed. Her face still scrunched in pain, though he swore her color was a little better. Or was that just wishful thinking? He was about to give her another dose when she suddenly loosed a tiny sigh and relaxed, as a blissful smile slid over her lips.

He gave her a moment for the drug to take full effect before gently probing her arm. It took no time to locate the break, and he winced as he realized how bad it was. While the bone hadn't broken skin, it was split clean apart. Not resetting the bone would leave her in excruciating pain, and would probably be septic within hours. But resetting a bone this far misaligned, without surgery or even proper medical training, wouldn't be easy or painless. He'd witnessed far too many battlefield breaks—and the resets—to think she wouldn't be in

pain, even after he set the bone. All he could do was pray he didn't make matters worse by tearing any muscles or slicing any veins with the sharp edges of bone as he reset it.

Tension pounded in his temples, and he knew he had to do this. His breathing short and tense, he grabbed hold of her arm on either side of the break before he could question the wisdom of what he was about to do, and applied as much of his strength as he could as he pulled and pushed to realign the jagged edges of bone. Nya jumped involuntary, more in reaction than pain, as he moved the bones around in her arm until he felt the sudden jolt of the bones sliding back into natural alignment.

When Nya sank back without so much as a whimper, he worried for a moment that he gave her too much of the drug. He lifted the splint and, as he fastened it gently but securely to her arm, his heart stalled as her eyes opened lazily, and a sensual, mischievous smile slid over her lips.

Savagely, Amani ordered his body under control. Nya was under the influence of a strong sedative that often caused erotic euphoria. Some people even believed that it acted as an aphrodisiac and heightened erotic pleasure, but he doubted anything could top Nya's passion. She was one hell of a woman; the same woman who now arched suggestively on the exam table, her bared breasts thrust forward, her nipples flushed and tight-tipped. He watched with bated breath as her eyelids fluttered, her lips parted, and her good hand began a slow, erotic trek over her own bare flesh. His heart bottomed out somewhere in the region of his groin as his gaze fixed on her motions. Shit. She was in an erotic haze, and she was about to get herself off.

Unable to stop himself, now that he realized what she intended, he reached to remove her roaming hand, and placed it firmly but gently by her side. He didn't want her tempted to use her bad arm. Nya moaned in protest, and her heavy-lidded, limpid eyes opened again, zeroing straight in on his.

"Screw me." The words left her in a husky voice that might have made any other man do just that. But Amani couldn't. His feelings for her were too complicated; she was too important to him to use that way, even at her own request, even if his body was eager to do just what she asked of him. He drew a shaky breath, determined to take it slow, to make love to her in every way possible, until the effects of the drug wore off. But he'd leave her no reason to regret trusting him.

Slowly, he skimmed a hand up the same path hers had taken just moments ago, and heard her moan as she shifted hungrily into his touch. A languid smile spread over his lips as he touched one finger to a distended nipple, and watched the quiver that worked through her. He knew the Styx in her system heightened her responses and sensitivity, but he also knew Nya. If she didn't want to do something, no drug in the universe could induce her to do it. And her response to his touch was too elemental.

Gently, he leaned to taste her lips, lingering there in a soft, carnal kiss that allowed him to drink in her passion, and sent sparks of heat through his body as she responded. A small hiss of protest left her as he drew back again, his hands stroking over her face. He smiled softly.

His hands slipped down her neck, over her shoulders, and down to cup her breasts, delighted in the feel of soft, warm weight in his palms and his smile spread as she shifted restlessly in an erotic move that caused his erection to twitch as desire twisted his gut. Still, he

was in no hurry. First, he wanted to see her come. The hunger to see her face in that moment of supreme passion was more overwhelming than his hunger to be in her.

He leaned in, and took one of her plump nipples lightly between his teeth, tugging as she twisted and fretted. She moaned in protest when he released it, then uttered a quivering cry as he soothed the flesh with his tongue, absorbing the texture of her arousal in the tight skin. Closing his mouth over the tender peak, he drew lightly, and she trembled against him.

He played there for a while, alternating his attention between her breasts and the sensitive arch of her throat until Nya arched off the table with a gasping cry, and he watched her face and body tense; she was on that ledge between pain and pleasure. A feral, primitive smile twisted his lips to know he could bring her to that edge with her still half-clothed. That knowledge was a powerful aphrodisiac. Easing her to the edge of the exam table, he pulled her into his embrace as he moved between her legs. With the barrier of their clothing still in place, he pressed his arousal to the hot apex of her thighs and shifted against her.

Nya exploded with a cry of pleasure that plunged straight through him, her head tipped back as her body wracked in his arms, pulsing with the force of her release. He held her, watching her beautiful face until she went slack in his arms, and her eyes slowly opened. The hungry light there sent a bolt through him, and he nearly exploded himself. Her good hand slid over his chest and clutched the material of his shirt.

"Amani." She breathed his name like a prayer, and nothing ever sounded so erotic. She shifted against him and tossed her head back with a tiny, shivering moan. "Make love to me. *Please.*"

She was begging. That sent a spike through him; she never had to beg him for anything. He loved her more than he loved his own life. He stripped off his shirt, and then eased away her pants to have access to all of her. But he left his own pants in place for now. He needed that illusion of control.

Lightly, he touched her, his fingers trailing over her thighs before he cupped the swollen, wet heat of her. She shifted against his hand, and moaned as he slipped one finger gently into her heat, rubbing lightly against the tight, swollen bundle of nerves that sent a tense quiver through her as she gasped and arched her hips reflexively. One arm supporting her weight, he explored her as thoroughly below as he had above, dipping in to test the tremor of inner flesh and rub over the hidden spot that made her cry out with pleasure, and then out, to spread slickness over her sensitive folds.

He was so absorbed in her body and her sweet responses that he barely noticed Nya's good hand on his chest, or felt the trail of her fingers over his stomach muscles. But when he suddenly felt air against his overheated groin, he lifted his head to meet her hot green gaze, and the lust and love mingled there shot him into the stars. Her hand slid down, and he bucked his hips with an involuntary growl as her warm, soft hand closed around his erection. She stroked him, soft, then hard, her hand working him like a pro until he was sure if she didn't stop, he'd never make it inside her.

With a growl just this side of animal, he lifted her hand away and dragged her to the edge of the table. With a flex of his hips, he impaled himself in her slick heat, and groaned as he felt her flesh convulse and settle around him. She moaned low in her throat and arched against him.

“Yes, Amani...” Her whispered encouragement was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. As she moved against him, he drew back and thrust again, feeling her body cling as he moved away, and receive him in a hot embrace at his return. His arms banded around her, and he dipped his head to feast at her breasts as he moved over her until release exploded like a shower of stars that carried him to paradise. Her cries of fulfillment echoing in his ears, and he knew he’d never be able to walk away from her again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Restless energy thrummed through him, and sleep eluded his grasping mind. Amani lay staring at the infirmary's ceiling, Nya's warm, naked body draped across his side, her bad arm supported on his chest. He glanced down at her, and sucked in a breath at the vision of perfection she made. At any other time, he would wrap her in his arms and be content to lay here, holding her. But the memory of their passion was still too fresh, too intense, and his response to it bothered him.

Amani hated the feeling of helplessness that came with knowing that, no matter his best efforts, he might not be able to protect Nya from death. The knowledge squeezed his chest, and drove sleep far from his exhausted brain. He had no idea how many hours elapsed since that first terrible quake woke him from his last restful sleep, but he couldn't summon the peace of sleep. Instead, his mind fought for ways to make sure that Nya, at least, made it off this planet before it exploded. He could die, would die willingly, as long as he knew she was safe.

Unable to lie still any longer, he sat up slowly, careful not to disturb Nya. She needed the sleep to heal properly. He found his clothes in the dim infirmary, and dressed quickly. He was just pulling on his boots when a sound caused him to turn, and his heart stalled mid-beat. Nya lay, cheek propped on her good hand and her face still softened by the vestiges of sleep, as she watched him.

She winced as she came fully awake in the next instant, and grabbed for her injured forearm. "Fuck. What the hell happened?"

He sighed, and scooped up her clothes from the floor as he approached her. So much for a quick escape. "You were injured. The rocks broke your arm and you went into shock, so I brought you here to fix you up. I had to reset your arm. It's going to hurt for a while. If you want something for the pain—"

She shook her head. "And be a zombie? No, thanks, I need a clear head."

She took her clothes from him before he could respond, a grateful, confused smile flitting at her lips. He glanced away. He hadn't wanted to think about the fact that she might not remember their lovemaking. Alikma knew it was burned forever into *his* brain. Amani cleared his throat. "I had to give you a sedative, and you ... I mean, we..."

She sighed in gentle exasperation. "We made love. I remember, Amani."

Relief rushed through him, to know he wasn't alone with that memory.

"What I don't recall is the reason why we're suddenly on the move, again. I mean, I know we need to get to the Garrison, but—"

Which was precisely where the problem lay. Soberly, he stared into her eyes. "I have a bad feeling about that, Nya. Don't you think that, if the Garrison AI computers were running correctly, someone would have come looking for us by now? I think the Garrison's been abandoned, or Omori wouldn't have been able to break into the armory."

He hated putting that despair into her eyes, but they had to face reality. And it was a very real possibility that either they'd been deemed dead, and the rest of the Garrison had left the planet, or the rest of the guards were dead. Either way, he knew they had to accept the possibility that they were alone.

"I think we'd better spend our time searching for another way off this rock rather than waste time on what will probably turn out to be a lost cause."

Her eyes dropped, and a resigned sigh broke from her before Nya finally nodded. Amani's chest tightened as she silently dressed, her expression pensive, and he knew she was sinking into hopelessness. They had to find something, quick. Before she gave up completely.

Resolved to his course, Amani led the way as they left the infirmary, but Nya soon fell into step beside him. He bit back a smile as she matched his stride, her long legs allowing her the speed few people could match. Even faced with the possibility of complete failure, Nya wasn't giving up. Not even after what he'd told her about Javel and Avelard. Nya's courage and determination were part of what he loved most about her. She wasn't afraid of the truth.

Not that their path was at all an easy one, Amani acknowledged with a grunt as he shifted a fallen support beam to one side. The debris was getting larger and more dangerous the higher in the mine they moved—probably caused by the combination of the avalanche rushing through and the quakes that destabilized what remained standing after the avalanche.

"This is pointless," Nya griped, her voice despondent as she allowed Amani to help her over a particularly perilous chasm, spanned by a fallen maintenance conduit. "We're going to die here."

"We're not going to die, and it's not pointless," he argued without rancor as he squeezed her hand. "It's expedient."

She shot him a skeptical look. "And I suppose another ship—this one in perfect working order—is simply going to appear out of thin air, to whisk us away. You sure you didn't take some of that Styx, too?"

Even her sarcasm was charming to him, Amani decided as he chuckled and skimmed a hand along her back. "What happened to your faith, Nya?"

She glanced over her shoulder, back the way they'd come, and frowned. "It died a very horrible death back there."

Amani's good humor faded at the pain in her eyes, not all of it caused by her wounded arm. He stopped as they hit a fork in the tunnel, and drew her into a comforting embrace as he murmured against her ear. "It'll be all right, love. I promise you, it'll be all right."

She tilted her face up to his, and her eyes drove nails through his heart. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Amani."

He sighed and released her. Nya was clearly in no mood to be placated. "What choice do we have, really? We could waste a lot of time trying to get your ship back there to fly, when we don't even know if any of the quakes since haven't completely destroyed it. Or we can keep searching. Even if all we find is a planetary escape pod, that's better than nothing."

Her gaze flew to him, full of shocked fear. "Those things are only made for one person."

He didn't meet her eyes. He wouldn't let her see what he was thinking. Her indrawn breath told him she figured it out, anyway.

"Amani Viyour, you are not—I repeat, *not*—going to play martyr for my sake!"

He raised his eyes to hers, then, and let her see how serious he was. "I'm getting you off this planet. If that means you go alone—"

"Then I won't go, dammit! I won't leave you behind."

"Nya..."

"No, Amani. We're going to make a pact, before we go another step." She crouched down and freed her boot knife, and his brow furrowed in concern. His concern turned to angry disbelief as she dragged the point of the blade across her bad hand. He reached out, and yanked the hand holding the knife away.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She met his gaze staunchly. "Give me your hand."

"No way."

"Do it, Amani, or we'll die right here. I'm not moving until we do this."

He knew what she wanted, and he wasn't about to seal any kind of blood pact. Not when he knew that, if it came to a choice between her survival and his, he'd drug her again if he had to in order to get her off the planet. "No."

She glared at him, and planted her feet firmly against moving when he tried to tug her toward one of the tunnels. He met her glare with one of his own, and decided it was damned good thing he loved her, because she could be the most obstinate woman in the galaxy. "I'm not swearing a damned blood oath over this, Nya."

She raised one brow in calm skepticism. "Yes, you are."

"Nya—"

"I'm calling in my debt, Amani. Give me your hand."

He froze. She couldn't be serious! "You can't—"

"My time, my choice," she reminded him quietly. "I can demand whatever I want."

Illness launched through him. She was right, after all. She could ask for anything, and he had to give it. He'd agreed to it. Only, his foolish libido assumed she'd make the demand sexual—a game. He never expected her to take it this far.

"Fine." He thrust his hand out, palm up.

The sting of the blade slitting the upper layer of his skin was nothing compared to the burn in his chest. He knew that, once he made this pact, there would be no turning back. Nya would hold him to it.

Nya pressed their hands together, so that their blood mingled and welled up between their palms, even as she whispered, "We make this pact here, and now. No one gets left behind. If it comes down to a choice of one escaping while the other stays, we both stay."

"You realize that means we could both die here, when it would be unnecessary."

Her eyes held his, her expression somber. "Without you, I'd be dead, anyway."

Those words flipped his heart over, and he tightened his grip on her hand, dragging her forward to cover her mouth in a kiss that sealed their deal for him more than any blood oath ever would. Now he knew why she'd done what she did. He would have done the same, in her place. As he drew back, he smiled down into her face. "Together."

He released her then, and Nya slid her boot knife back into its sheath and tore matching strips from the pack she wore like a second utility belt around her midsection. She wrapped his hand, and then her own, and smiled for the first time since they left the infirmary. "So, which way do we go?"

He lifted his head, and narrowed his eyes, as a cool draft hit him from the tunnel to their left. "Do you feel that?"

She sniffed the air like an animal scenting prey, and her smile blossomed. "Smells like fresh air! We must be near the surface!"

And, with a whooping laugh, she was off, sprinting down the secondary tunnel, and Amani followed her, hope alight in his chest. They could be at the end of this, at last.

Nya swallowed her disappointment as she entered an open cave instead of the wide space just outside of the mine entrance near the prison. Sure, she could see sky, but the view from this point told her they were kilometers away from the Garrison and any hope of rescue. In fact, she had no idea where they were. And there was an annoying, machinery hum in the air.

"We are so screwed."

"Maybe not." Amani's voice was low, and filled with stunned hope. "Turn around, sweetheart."

She did as he asked, and stopped dead, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"I'm hallucinating."

"Well, if you are, then so am I." Humor tinged his voice as the shock wore off. Nya blinked again, but the image refused to be banished. Which meant...

"It's *real*!" She stared at the gleaming hull of a ship painted white enough to blend in with the ice and snow that covered the surface of the planet.

She paced out its length with her eyes, and gasped. It was a forty-five meter long beauty that looked capable of easily carrying a small army. And, even better, the lift engines were already primed, and the hatch was open. The ship was ready and capable of lifting off from its makeshift dock at a moment's notice, and Nya blinked as she recalled the heat signature she'd passed off as a planetary anomaly when they'd first hit the surface. *This* was its source! She now knew exactly where they were!

Excitement coiled in Nya as she looked toward Amani. "It's not Duran. It's not linked into our AI. What do you suppose it's doing here?"

He snorted derisively. "The way it's painted, I'd say someone went to a lot of effort to hide it, and as it has no planetary origin markers, it's probably mercenary. Smugglers maybe, given what we know of Duran. I bet they came for the goods, and either ended up lifting with Duran, or were killed by the quakes or wildlife."

"Or they could be looking for their loot, and be coming back," she offered quietly.

"Yeah. Could be. But I don't think we have any options left." He raised a brow at her. "Think you can send out a message to get everyone here ASAP, if they're still alive?"

She grinned. "I can try."

Giddiness thrummed in Nya's veins as she activated her AI communications system, and opened a channel to the Garrison crew.

"This is Garrison guard Nya. For those of you guards out there listening, we have good news. We found a ship..." She cut off with a wince as static filled her head, crossing her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, she shot Amani a helpless look. She couldn't even tell if her message was getting through, let alone if there was anyone listening.

"Keep trying," he encouraged gently, rubbing her tensed shoulders.

She drew a breath and nodded, then continued through the static. "It's not a shuttle, or a Duran vessel. We think it's a mercenary ship that could belong to Styx smugglers. It's been

parked illegally on a hidden landing platform for quite some time from the look of things." She gestured to Amani for his compad and, using the still-functioning compass, gave the best directions she could. "The coordinates are forty by sixteen in the Beta sector. But we don't have a lot of time, and we're not sure how much fuel it's hauling, so get here as fast as you can."

She drew a breath, shared a glance with Amani, and said, "There's enough room for the whole Garrison and more. But watch your backs. If the mercenaries are still in the vicinity, they won't like us borrowing their ship."

Static filled her head again and Nya gave up, shutting down the link. She'd given them enough information, anyway. The rest would be in the hands of whatever other guards still survived, and their gods. She frowned at Amani. "Do you really think the mercenaries will be back?"

"Oh, I'd count on it." A new voice answered her, and the sound of laser rifles arming spun Nya around, even as Amani turned. The woman gasped in disbelief.

The men that surrounded them were not your run-of-the-mill mercenaries or pirates. For the most part, they were young, disciplined, and garbed in identical forest green and emerald uniforms that reminded her instantly of the Imperial House of Andromeda back before the war.

The man who strode toward them wore a similar uniform, but silver braid edged his shoulders. She didn't recognize him, but she felt Amani stiffen in surprise, before a quiet oath left him. "Daxian!"

The man straightened in response, his gaze flickering to Amani before coming back to Nya. He stopped, and studied her critically.

"Pretty," he observed. "But I don't know you."

His eyes—a spring-green color—moved back to Amani, and his lips tugged upward. "You, however, I know."

"I should damned well hope so. What the hell are you doing here?" Amani's tone was sharp, almost angry, and Nya cast him a concerned glance. Just how did he and this man know one another? Her head snapped around at Amani's next words. "I saved your life. You weren't supposed to go back."

Daxian nodded. "We're two of a kind, you and I. Neither of us can walk away from duty when we probably should. But you did, to save my life, so now I'll spare yours. However, since I can't have you stealing our ship, either, I'm placing you under arrest for now. I hope you understand. Please surrender your side arms and any other weapons in your possession."

Amani didn't budge. "Only if you grant us and our friends passage on your ship."

"It's not mine to extend that offer, but if you refer to the guards in the Garrison, we've been ordered by the ship's captain to accommodate all of you."

Nya exchanged a confused look with Amani. How would the captain know they were even there, let alone looking for a ship? She watched Amani study his friend, and then relax, and her own trepidation eased. She followed suit when he unstrapped his phaser, then removed his boot knife, surrendering them both. If Amani trusted this man's word that they'd be safe, she would, too.

"We need a computer terminal we can plug a chip into."

The words, as much as Amani's grim tone, surprised Nya. Her gaze snapped to her partner, and she blinked as he shot her a quelling look before she could utter the questions that spun in her head.

Daxian's eyes narrowed for a moment, before he nodded. "There's a system in the galley that's not plugged into the ship's AI. You can use that. But not for long, Amani. Captain doesn't want any of you wandering around the ship."

Amani nodded, and Nya bit her tongue against the sharp retort that sprang to her lips. She would wait until they docked in a safe port, before she gave this mysterious captain a piece of her mind over his idea of 'hospitality'. For now, however, she followed Amani's lead.

As they followed their guard to the galley, Amani turned a quick glance her way, but didn't say anything. Surprise shot through Nya when they reached the terminal they'd been granted use of, and Amani gestured for her to take the station's seat.

"You're the expert." He offered her a smile that took her breath away.

Nya smiled back as she slid into the seat and reached into her pack to remove the chip Kjara entrusted to her. Opening up the front panel of the computer, she inserted the chip and sat back to watch the show.

She gasped, even as she heard Amani swear at what scrolled across the screen. This wasn't the product of one illicit foraging expedition. This was *years* worth of diligent data collecting! And the data Kjara collected... Nya couldn't believe her eyes. It was all here. There were lists of Duran Corporation employees involved in the conspiracy to rape a planet of life, and then control the galaxy by drug-induced stupor.

There were journal entries from scientists on the project, detailing their test of Styx's viability as an agent capable of rendering the general population of the Andromeda galaxy unable to resist the take-over. It was terrifying and fascinating, at the same time. Like a shuttle wreck. Nya fought to unglue her gaze from the horrifying details that filled the screen.

"Am I really seeing this?"

"If you're seeing proof that Duran's as corrupt and power-hungry as they get," Amani's voice was a low, dangerous growl. She nodded. "Then we see the same thing."

"They've been testing their mind-control drugs on the prisoners, Amani. That's what the Styx protocol is all about—a test. This entire prison is one big experiment lab, and now they're disposing of the test subjects."

He huffed out a breath. "It does explain why they felt the need to destroy it."

She cast him a surprised look. "Amani?"

"We're all evidence, Nya. As long as Zurin Five remains, or anyone who knows the truth survives, their plans are in danger, according to this chip. That's why they had Kjara sent here, even though they couldn't drug her. She was here because they couldn't silence her, or find the evidence she was hiding."

A smile tugged at her lips as she stretched her good hand to skim his cheek. "I could kiss you."

He leaned in, his eyes dark with passion. "No one's stopping you."

A throat cleared behind them, and Nya jumped as her heart lodged in her throat in surprise. As one, the two guards turned, to find an emerald-uniformed soldier in the galley hatch.

"Lieutenant Malforente says it's time to go."

As she rose from her seat, Nya popped the chip free and slipped it back into her pack. Then, aware of Amani's presence shadowing her every step, Nya followed the young man. She didn't much care where they went from here, as long as it was away from Zurin Five.

Moments later, alone in a compartment of the ship's brig, she faced Amani at last, worry creeping through her.

"Do you think we're the last ones?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "But even if we're the only two who make it off-world, at least we'll be able to make sure everyone knows the truth. I promise you this, Nya – whatever happens, and wherever we end up, I won't stop fighting Duran's corruption." His eyes bored into hers, full of questions that caused her heart to pound wildly against her ribs with hope. But only one question mattered, she knew, and she waited for him to voice it.

"Will you stand with me?"

Joy swelled in her chest. She laughed and cried at the same time as she leapt into his embrace, careful of her injured arm. Staring up into his eyes, she knew they could weather anything the future might bring; their love was forged and tested in the fires of a hell that had changed them both, and nothing could tear that apart. So, with a soft smile, she took his bandaged hand in her own, and pressed their palms together as she whispered, "From here out, we fight the good fight, together. Always and forever."

It was a promise she knew they would keep.