



Dark Host

Kim Knox

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Blurb

Feline Mosaic, Charis Sur, thought her mission aboard the *INS Pagidion* would be quick and easy. All she has to do is watch her target and keep him alive until Betelgeuse goes nova.

Simple. Until one of the passengers drops dead in front of her.

Suddenly everything is not simple. Her life depends on a successful mission and she has to protect her target from whatever killed this man. That throws her into the path of Jason Narak, the one man she never wanted to see again. The man who burned her six months before. Yet, even as her past with Jason hurls her mission, her life into disarray, Charis finds that...something...is waiting for them aboard the *INS Pagidion*.

It calls itself darkness. And it needs a host.

Chapter One

Everything about Ciro's stateroom doorway smelled wrong.

The sharp scent of non-humans stained the metal frame and the tight-locked door panel. I didn't stare. I stopped and glanced along the empty promenade raised above the curved green swathe of parkland cultivated around a glistening lake. It was early and the other tourists still slept. Lucky them.

I should have been sleeping too. It'd been a long, uncomfortable journey to get to the *INS Pagidion*. Strapped into a high-speed shuttle was not my idea of fun. However, the Company said it was urgent, so I endured. It was better than being dead. I rubbed at my spine, still red with strap welts after six hours. Better. Just.

My room on the secondary sphere was sumptuous, the bed soft and yielding. Yet, I'd fixed my gaze on the mirrored ceiling and sleep eluded me. I can never sleep. Not really. And this was what I got when I couldn't shut my eyes and not have my thoughts tearing in a wild rush through my head. I was stuck with an overactive nose, one that I couldn't ignore.

I leant against the golden rail running along the promenade, my fingers tapping idly against the warmed metal. Just another tourist enjoying the view. With my back to the door, I stared up at the great curve of the *Pagidion's* transparent hull. Space stared back; space filled with the bloated mass of a dying star.

I shivered. The damn thing made my skin crawl.

Pushing the fear away, I drew the scrubbed air deep into my lungs, letting instinct pick apart the individual scents. I closed my eyes. One of the ship's menials had wiped down the door, five, no, six hours before. Underneath the sharp cut of cleaning fluid, I followed the trace of four individuals.

I probed deeper and winced. Two Lofn had completed a mating spray against the frame. The poor menial must have had a hard time scrubbing that crap off the metal. I was surprised the yowls hadn't reached even my cabin buried in the secondary sphere. Another scent lay under the Lofn. Years of training and instinct deconstructed it. And it had me gripping the rail until my knuckles hurt. Before the Lofn had sprayed, a Mosaic had entered the room.

What the hell...? I was supposed to be the only Mosaic onboard. I took a deep breath, pulling in more of the scent, but the trail was too old. There was just the familiar hint of twisted DNA; a scent I carried too.

What was the Company playing at? They should have told me—

But then the last scent had me backing away. Everything in me screamed that I run, grab a shuttle and jump ship. *Right now.*

Abandon my post? I could count on my right hand how many hours the Company would let me live for betraying them.

I grabbed at the rail and forced my retreating body to stop.

I couldn't name it, but something in that scent scraped raw the Mosaic in me. Shit, why did I have to be feline? Why couldn't I have some solid bovine sewn into my human strands? Or porcine? I'd always envied their intelligence and their easy attitude towards food. No, my mix of ancestral DNA had to come from a particularly skittish and fussy

series of cats.

I moved forward, each slow footstep dragging me closer to the door.

The scent of whatever-it-was burned through me. It was something acrid, with the harsh taste of rust. I pushed back my enhanced senses; buried them. My breathing eased. Calmed, I smoothed back my hair and straightened.

Something was in that cabin and another Mosaic had followed it in. Whether the Company was playing games or not, I had to do my job. I had to protect my mark, the Lord Admiral Sir Raoul Quinn, from every possible threat. Ciro's stateroom had to be investigated.

I checked the long curve of the promenade again. Still empty. No doubt the other passengers were in the process of struggling out of bed and dialing up their party cure-alls and cleansers. Ciro's name and company data scrolled above the pad in a repeating loop. All the damn doors had the same stream of personal information and the cat in me itched to chase the bright line of letters. I focused and slid my hand over the ident.pad, sensitive fingertips teasing out the lock.

With a hiss, the door panel parted, clunked and then eased back into the frame. The room beyond was empty, silent. I controlled the nervous cat within me and stepped inside.

It appeared to be just another stateroom. Wrought gold, vibrant carpets, strewn animal skins, priceless artefacts and furniture assaulted the senses in a wild rush. The displayed wealth was almost painful. Raoul Quinn had one that looked very much the same. He was staying in the suite next door. I'd stolen in to watch him sleeping. Not exactly a part of my brief—I was supposed to keep my distance—but the cat in me was curious about him. Damn feline genes. I should have stayed away. Quinn was...unpleasant.

I pulled my focus back. Nothing seemed out of place in Ciro's stateroom. Edging past the same arrangement of lounging sofas and chairs grouped to take advantage of the view, I kept my eyes averted. The wall had a one way viewing system. No one could see in, but the occupant enjoyed a full view of the dying sun. I shuddered. I hated looking at that damn star; and now it was following me. I moved away, searching through the numerous rooms, but found only bedrooms and marble-rich bathrooms behind the closed doors.

"No one home," I murmured and my voice echoed.

I took a deep breath and let the sympathetic shift of my feline genes settle over my senses. The golden surfaces gleamed bright and a dry prickle meant my eyes had lensed to compensate. The cabin was silent, broken only by the soft hum of the power streams through the metal walls. I stole a touch from the deep fur throw slung over the back of a sofa. Cool, soft and just so... Heat built in my chest and I willed down the urge to purr.

Lifting my head, I scented the air.

I drew in traces of the Mosaic. He... yes, male... smelt familiar. I frowned. That was the problem with our kind. Besides gender, our scent didn't differentiate us. If it was there, even my sharp nose couldn't detect it. And then there was the other scent. I clamped a hand to my mouth to stop the sharp hiss I wanted to spit against its rankness. My fingers arched into long claws, nails sharpening into points as the heat of the fight burned through me.

It was alien, but like no alien I had ever encountered before. Something about the

smell said it was a living presence still in the room; and that was just insane. The stateroom was empty. Nothing was truly invisible. Mimetic, yes. Beyond touching, no. I let go of the shifting and wearily breathed out the last of it. I needed to sleep and hated the fact that I couldn't. This bloody job had my nerves stretched. I was seeing a threat behind every door.

I turned to leave.

The dying star filled the wall. The damn thing probably attracted the bizarre and strange to it. Made people go crazy. And they called this stay on the *Pagidion* a 'pleasure cruise.' Yes, only the shockingly rich could enjoy this trip.

I palmed the panel. The door slid back and a stylishly dressed thug filled the frame. He blinked.

I smiled and watched his eyes glaze.

I had two skills from my genetic heritage. I was a hunter and like most female Mosaics, I gave off another scent, something that grabbed men by the hindbrain and negated all rational thought. It had its uses. Like then.

"I must have the wrong cabin."

"Must you?"

He surged forward.

I sidestepped him.

His meaty hand gripped my arm and then something odd happened. The mist of lust faded and a darker emotion replaced it. "Nosy aren't you, little cat."

The panic of that statement almost had me shifting right in front of him. How the hell could he *know*? Mosaics weren't exactly common knowledge; in fact we were positively illegal.

"Aren't you going to deny it? Give me the standard answer, 'genetic manipulation was outlawed four centuries ago'?" His skin burned against mine, the grip tightening. He breathed in and his eyes darkened further. "But I can smell the blue lynx, the caracel and a... tabby." A wry smile pulled at his mouth. "The little domestic cat that gives you stripes across your breasts when you shift." His free hand brushed over the shell of my ear. "Though with your heritage, I would expect something here."

Who the hell was this man?

"Nothing to say?"

His fingers scorched my bare arm, branding my skin. A red flush fired under his cheeks and the veins formed a darkened network across his jaw. His arm started to shake. "Well, little cat?"

I wrenched myself free.

He stumbled back. For a moment, his gaze cleared and terror whipped through the man's eyes. "Help me. It's inside me." The words were no more than a croak and then he dropped to the floor. Blood foamed from his mouth as his limbs thrashed. He choked. His eyes rolled back and he stopped moving. Seconds. It had only taken seconds.

The cat in me wanted to climb something high and hide there. I grabbed that urge by the scruff and inched closer, expecting a hand to shoot out and grab me. But it didn't. He lay there in a large crumpled heap, his face pale and sprayed with his own blood. I leaned in. He wasn't breathing and I swore under my breath. I could not be caught with a body.

Slamming the panic alarm on the door panel, I ran.

* * * *

How I got back to my cabin was a blur.

The door clunked shut behind me. I fell back against it and closed my eyes.

What had just happened? He'd known everything about me. Everything. And that was impossible. Doubly impossible. The Company protected my information. Hid me so that I could work effectively without the complication of the authorities knowing my illegal gene manipulation.

I pushed away from the door. Whatever had happened, my cover was blown. The Company had to extract me.

Pressing the receptor below my left ear, I waited for the sharp whine to die away. More of the Company's paranoia. My receptor also scanned for and disabled shadow-ware devices. "Charis Sur calling home."

"Charis?"

I held back a sigh. Yes, my handler was annoyed. But then I shouldn't have contacted Aud Sebak before the end of the mission. "Pull me out."

"Now isn't the time for your sense of humour."

"My last handler was a joy to work with. That's my sense of humour. See? Different. I need extraction. Someone just listed my genome." I dragged my bag out from under the bed and flopped it onto the deep mattress. There wasn't much to pack. My employer had provided me with enough credit to maintain the illusion of being one of the ultra-wealthy passengers of the *Pagidion*, which would provide my every need. Supposedly. Aud was silent. For that I was grateful. I hated the implant. It jarred my teeth.

"You're serious."

"Yes, Aud, I'm serious. He said exactly what I was; then slumped. I hit the panic alarm. But he's dead."

"Dead?"

I padded into the bathroom. "Purple and dead."

"Charis..."

"It's time to get out. Just tell me how."

I stared at my reflection in the long mirror over the sink, waiting for Aud's instructions. My fingertip traced over my ear, following the path he'd taken. He was right. The images of my ancestors had fur-knotted ears. How could he know what I was so exactly?

And where was Aud? Breaking me out of a soured mission didn't take that long to co-ordinate. I frowned and watched my mouth crease. Long silences usually meant something was screwed. Usually me. At least I was in this mess with Aud Sebak. She'd been my handler for a few months. The last one? I was grateful that *he* was out of my life.

I gathered my toiletries and headed back to the bedroom. It would be a relief to get off the *Pagidion*. A cruise on a luxury liner that was waiting for a sun to explode was not relaxing despite what the brochure said.

"Charis?"

I pulled the clasps shut on my case and ident.locked them. "Not gone anywhere, Aud." She'd paused. Yes, Aud was about to deliver bad news. "All right, why *aren't* I leaving?"

"Your man was a entrepreneur, Alano Ciro, from Elberion. He suffered an

embolism. They've already packed him up. He'll be spaced tomorrow. And you? You're staying."

I sank into the mattress. "What's going on, Aud? Quinn can't be this important to the Company. Not important enough to risk exposure by spacing a wealthy, an influential man."

"Orders only, Charis. You know that."

A wry smile tugged at my mouth. "It's the cat in me. I can't help the curiosity."

Aud's soft laughter tickled my skin. *"Lord Admiral Quinn has to be alive when the sun goes nova. Ensure that outcome in whatever way possible."*

"Understood." I pinched at the bridge of my nose. "But not liked."

"It's the job, Charis."

"Yes, it is." The receptor buzzed, cutting the link. I let out a slow breath and circled the skin covering the device. Flopping back onto the mattress, I stared up at my reflection.

Ciro hadn't died of an embolism. Something, no *someone* else had been looking out of his eyes. I pushed myself off the bed, stood before the bathroom mirror and did something the Company disallowed. They didn't want us examining our abilities in private. Shifting was for work only. I still had the scars from practising my shifts in my tiny dorm room.

So I let myself shift. Lights glared and the harsh scent of the auto-cleaner burned my nostrils. I flexed my hands. Nails grew and changed. But it was my face that held my attention. The same smoothly blunt features reflected in the long mirror, short hair curling around my neck and tipped with silver. My eyes, normally a pale blue had darkened. I stepped back and hit the wall of the shower cubicle. *Ciro's eyes. They had changed; just like mine.*

I shook off the shift and the weariness of it bit down through my bones. Staring out of the small window, I found only the baleful glare of the red giant. What was going on? None of this made any sense.

The man who had died in front of me was one of my own. *Ciro was a Mosaic. So did that make three of us?*

Chapter Two

I should've been watching Quinn as he stuffed his face with greasy meat and fried vegetables. I don't know what the Company was expecting, but his diet was the most dangerous threat onboard. I *should* have been watching him. Instead, I was sitting on a bed in the medical bay while one of the junior medical technicians stared at his scanner, before banging it against his hand.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. The night shift had only just ended. I'd caught the technician in the first few minutes of starting his day. My timing was deliberate. He was barely awake.

"Odd," he said, wagging the small device. "You seem to have an adverse effect on my equipment, Ms. Sur."

I stopped myself from saying something obvious. "Could it be the star?"

The technician winced. "That thing." His expression shifted, becoming blandly professional again. "No, I'm sure it isn't, Ms. Sur."

"It's giving me this headache." I rubbed a thumb over my left temple and let out a slow sigh. "I had no idea it would be like this. I rushed myself onto the ship for fun, not to have that thing pulsing over me." I held his gaze, my head tilting. "I bet others are sick, aren't they?"

There was a betraying flicker of his eyelids. "You're the first."

"Wonderful, so I have to be the odd one." I slid down from the bed and stretched my arms above my head. Catnaps were fine for cats. Shit for humans. I stared around the sterile-white room. Doors lined the far wall. Behind one of them was the morgue and *Ciro's* body. "Though I heard..." I turned and faced the technician, scanning his name plate, "Yoel, that someone was watching the photosphere only a few hours ago and just... whoomph. He's gone."

Yoel straightened. "Ms. Sur, that is hardly—"

"Can I see?" I smiled and his pale face flushed. "I mean I've never actually seen a dead body before."

He swallowed and took a back step, hissing when he hit the side of the medical bed on which I'd been sitting. "I don't think—"

"One little peek?" I inched closer to the panicking man and pressed my finger against his lips. "Just. One. Little. Look." Each word was a light tap and Yoel reddened further. "Please?"

He edged away, putting distance between us. "This isn't professional, Ms. Sur."

So much for grabbing men by the hindbrain, nothing was working for me that day. "Well, if you stay here and play with your scanner, then I can just go through...?"

Yoel jabbed a finger at the middle door. "There."

"Thank you."

I closed the door on his mutters. Chill air ran over my skin and I shivered. Empty black tubes curved into a semi-circle before me, stretching from floor to ceiling. Well, almost empty. Frost thickened the cover of the tube to the far left. "Hello, Mr. *Ciro*."

I wiped the tube clear and stared into the face of a fellow Mosaic. His skin had greyed and with his eyes closed, he looked at peace. I still didn't recognise him. I thought

if I was calm that something about him would click in my brain. It hadn't. Alano Ciro was a stranger.

Pressing the lock on the tube, air whooshed and the lid slid back.

I wrinkled my nose. Rotting meat and sterilising fluid mixed in the chill air and I put my hand to cover my nose and mouth. Damn it, I couldn't be squeamish about decaying flesh. I had to know. Letting the shift sink over me, I breathed in the thickened odour and willed myself to separate out the scents.

They'd washed down his body with a neutralising soda. The acrid stuff burned my nostrils. It was obvious he hadn't chosen preservation. Only the shield within the tube stopped him from oozing over the morgue floor. Then there was Ciro's own scent, filled with too much meat, sugar and alcohol.

I stepped back. He smelt human. Fully human. I slammed the lid and the air scrubbers wiped away the odours.

What the hell...?

There it was again; that hint of a male Mosaic. He smelled so familiar. Breathing him in felt right; felt good. Unease prickled over my skin. It wasn't that time of the year; I wasn't in heat. Yet, he still had my heart pumping fast.

I turned away from the corpse and let go of my shift. My shoulders sagged.

I'd seen a change in Ciro. I hadn't imagined another consciousness staring out at me from the man's eyes. Was this other-consciousness the Company's threat? My hands tightened briefly into fists. I couldn't defend Quinn against an enemy I couldn't see.

"Ensure he stays alive in whatever way possible." I flashed my ident.graft over the lock and waited for the panel to pull back. "I can do that."

Yoel had his scanner in pieces on the main desk. He looked up, blinked and his skin flushed. "Ah, Ms. Sur." He glanced to the older woman sitting at the smaller desk; she had looked up and narrowed her dark eyes on me. "Are you all right? I know that saying your final goodbye can be difficult."

I let out a slow breath and nodded. "Yes, thank you, Yoel." I waved to the entrance. "I'll be going."

The doors closed behind me with a soft hiss and I ran a hand through my hair.

It was time for me to do something the Company would *not* like. I was going to introduce myself to Raoul Quinn. Hopefully, he'd had breakfast. I hated watching him eat.

I padded over the soft carpet following the slight curve of the secondary sphere's main corridor. The tube back up to the primary sphere stretched across the wide walkway. I flashed my ident.graft over the plate and waited for the computer to pull out the credit allowing me access to the promenade. I held back a sigh at the thought of my paperwork. The Company would make me justify every brass penny spent on this job.

Stepping out of the tube onto the wide promenade, I glanced at my ident.graft. The countdown for Betelgeuse going supernova slid across the square of shiny skin in a series of green numbers. Only twelve hours left. Good. Soon I would be free of the *Pagidion*. The fresh smell of the parkland soothed me. At some point, I wanted to get down amongst those trees and maybe scratch my claws for a while.

Another pass of my ident.graft got me into the primary sphere breakfast rooms. I rubbed at my wrist, surprised that the plastic buried in my skin wasn't burning with constant use.

Walking through the rippled-gold tunnel, I stared around the curved room. A wall of glass stretched up before me, filled with a vast expanse of brilliant-coloured reef. Fish flashed by in silver shoals. The cat in me twitched.

All of the tables and chairs were empty. Except one and that was taken by Quinn. Which was odd. Where were his bodyguards? I'd been hired for discrete surveillance. There should've been a couple of hulking brutes dragging their knuckles and frightening the fish. But there wasn't.

Quinn sat in a far corner, his gaze fixed on the red giant. His platter was empty, only a few greasy stains marring the gleaming china surface. A knot in my stomach eased. He'd breakfasted early today. I was in luck.

A waiter in a stark-white uniform swept up to Quinn's table and removed the platter. There was another waiter behind him and I held down a groan. He balanced a wide plate heavy with thickly fried bacon, sausages plump and oozing grease, and other meats I couldn't identify. Their fatty aromas settled thick against my throat. Yes, sometimes the fussy cat in me was as annoying as hell. But then even the waiter was holding his breath. Maybe it wasn't just me.

I slid into the chair opposite to him and smiled, knowing the effect I could have on anything with a pulse. "Lord Admiral. Good morning."

He stared at me, through me. "Can I help you?"

Nothing. No reaction. What was it with me today?

I had to stop myself from grabbing his wrist and making certain that blood beat through his veins. Only one man has ever been totally immune. I put that...traitor...from my mind. No, Quinn wasn't wearing his face.

"Admiral, I was put onboard to watch over you."

His dark gaze slid over my small frame with distain. He picked up his knife and fork and sliced into a sausage. "You?"

My hackles rose and a flare of heat seared over my skin. "Yes. Me."

"Benevolent put you up to this, didn't he?" He dropped his knife and took my wrist, pressing his ident.graft into mine. "Here. There's enough there to pay off this practical joke." He dropped my arm and the imprint of his fingers burned my bare skin. He pushed food into his mouth and chewed slowly. "Now. I'm enjoying my breakfast. Leave."

He had no idea how much danger he was in. But then again, neither did I.

I risked everything in approaching him. And what had it gotten me? I glanced at my ident.graft. The square of plastic skin shone up an impressive row of numbers. All right. Okay, I now had a pension. But the money would be useless if the Company had me terminated for failing my task.

"Admiral, did you meet Alano Ciro?"

Pale eyes fixed on me. He stopped chewing and swallowed. "Ciro? From Elbeiron? Owns three systems in the Povaroi sector?"

"Yes. He died an hour ago."

"Who knows about this?"

"Me. The med crew—"

He put down his cutlery. "The other passengers?"

"I imagine not."

Quinn's wide mouth twitched a smile. A chubby finger pressed against his neck and he turned his head away. Rapid mutters followed. He'd now make a killing from advance

knowledge of *Ciro's* death. He turned back to me and the grin cutting his mouth prickled my skin. "So Ms..."

"Charis Sur."

"...Ms. Sur. How can I help you?"

"As I said I was put on board the *Pagidion* to watch over you. I only know that I have to protect you for the next twelve hours."

He resumed eating. "And what do you think you're protecting me from?"

I stared at his broad chest, not wanting to dwell on the grease sliding down his chin.

"From whatever killed *Alano* *Ciro*."

"Twenty four hours in his pleasure-room is your likeliest culprit." He waved his fork at me. Runny egg yolk dribbled down its silver prongs. "That is not my vice."

"No." He didn't believe me. Time to *really* break Company orders. "I saw something in his face before he died."

Quinn looked up from his plate. He sat back in his wide chair and his head tilted.

"You were with *Ciro*?"

"Something moved behind his eyes. Something that wasn't him. It looked like this."

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for brief, precise shift. It was the nature of a Mosaic. Our non-human genes settled in different parts of our body. "If you see—"

A strong hand clamped itself around my shoulder. "The Lord Admiral would like to continue his breakfast in peace."

The bodyguard hauled me out of the chair. Hastily, I dropped my shift. His hand still digging into me, Quinn's bodyguard marched me out of the breakfast rooms. I tried to shrug free and failed.

Anger knotted my gut. I hadn't seen him. How had I not seen the man guarding Quinn? I'd been on the *Pagidion* for six hours and completely missed this man. I was past it. I was. I really should have retired. I wrenched myself free of his grip, turning to face him. "Let go of me, you—"

Words dried.

I was staring up at Jason Narak.

His scent hit me. The same one in *Ciro's* stateroom; the one from the morgue. Him. Jason Narak—the one man immune to me. The one man I never wanted to see. Ever.

"Hello again, Charis."

I planted a fist in his face.

Chapter Three

Jason staggered back. He brushed his mouth and stared at the dark stain of blood on his fingers. "I'll allow you that." His gaze narrowed. "But that is all I will allow."

I snorted. "You couldn't take me then. Now's no different."

"Oh, I took you, Charis."

The slow-drawled words flushed heat through my skin. I pushed down the forbidden, carnal memories Jason Narak always stirred and glared at him. "So now you're hired help? Nice to see you so reduced."

"What are you doing on this ship?"

"As if I'm going to discuss my business with a lackey."

Jason's mouth thinned. "We're going somewhere private." He took my arm. His dark hand burned against my pale skin and I tried to hold down the shiver at his touch. "Do you object?"

"To you? Always."

"And always the bristling little cat, aren't you, Charis?"

His words had me stumbling after him. They sounded too much like the words of the consciousness holding *Ciro*. What was Jason's involvement in all of this? His scent was everywhere. "What are you really doing here?"

He stopped before Quinn's stateroom, only a few strides from where that man was eating. Palming open the door, he pulled me inside. I wrenched my arm free. "Well?"

"Sit, Charis."

"Sorry, wrong species." And I stayed standing where I was.

"Fine." After ordering a healing pack from the initiator built into the far wall, Jason flopped into one of the chairs arranged as they had been in *Ciro*'s room to take advantage of the view of the star we orbited. He stared at the writhing mass of the red giant, his sharp face solemn. "I won't allow you to stay on this ship."

"Won't allow? Who do you think you are?"

His dark eyes fixed on me and their cool authority itched. He crumpled the pack and it dissolved. It had healed his cut and swollen lip. "I am Lord Admiral Quinn's private secretary. And that makes me a very influential man."

"So you *are* a lackey."

Jason smiled and my stomach clenched. He was beautiful; a part of me could never deny that. "Always your playful little attacks. So feline."

"As are you."

He turned back to the star, the smile faded. "You don't know what I am."

I rolled my eyes. "Please, not the mysterious and forbidden thing again. I've seen your Mosaic, Jason. Clouded leopard, mau and a light mix of jaguar are all you can lay claim to."

"You investigated me."

"What do you think?" Anger had my blood hot. The urge to shift was overwhelming. I curled my hands into tight fists and willed the change down, but the resentment still burned. "I made the mistake of trusting you. I believed you were working for the Company. But no, you were just working me."

“Yes.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Yes, I worked you.” His head tilted. “Why? What else did you think I was doing?”

I could take him. Take him and beat the living shit out of him.

“You’re a product of the Company, Charis. They own you. You were...convenient...to me.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now. It’s time for you to leave. Lord Admiral Quinn has a shuttle at your disposal.”

“No.” I straightened my spine, controlling the fury that had my blood pounding.

“Because of you I’m no longer trusted.” I ran a hand over my neck, tracing out the slight lump of my receptor. The Company had increased my regulator from simple incapacity to the highest level. “I jump ship before I should and I’m vaporised. So no, Jason, I’m not leaving.”

“Vaporised.” He mulled the word as he continued to stare out into space. “Are you sure?”

“I’m not willing to risk it.”

Jason stood and I forced myself to remain still but ready. He closed the distance between us, until he was only a few inches from me. I breathed in his scent and it dropped liquid heat through my body, all anger falling away. Something far more dangerous replaced it.

“The Company has never lied to you, has it, Charis?” His soft voice drifted over my skin and unwanted I closed my eyes. “It has always protected you, your family; never once left you alone...”

His warm hand brushed my jaw and I gasped. I forced my eyes open. He would not do this to me. Not again. “Nothing is ever perfect.”

His gaze fixed on the finger tracing over the edge of my jaw to my chin. “I beg to differ.” A smile lurked on his mouth. “You, at this point in time, are. The Company has seen to it.” His eyes, so dark a brown they were almost pure black, held me. “Can’t you feel it?” Sliding down his hand, he circled the receptor buried in my neck. My skin prickled and a hot tightness gripped low in my pelvis. “Here?”

It was hard to breathe. “What are you doing?”

“I should ask you that question, Charis.” I could almost taste his lips, his warm breath brushing over my mouth. “And what the Company’s done to you.”

It would be so easy to let my tongue flick out and touch the tip to his. My head was light at the thought. “Done to me?”

“When’s your first heat of the year?”

“First...?” I blinked and willed myself to stand back from him. Damn him, he was right. “A month from now.”

“And yet...” He stroked his thumb down my throat and I shivered. “...if I said I have a warm bed and a plan to explore every inch of you, then I’m sure you wouldn’t say no.” His thumb skirted my open shirt, the briefest touch of his skin against mine burning an ache that had me swaying. “Would you?”

“No.”

Jason’s fingers curled away and he stepped back. “And that is what they’ve done to you, Charis. You’re in heat and you’re meant for me.”

I stared at him. Need throbbed through my body and the soft promise of a warm bed and his *full* attention still swirled through my senses. It didn’t seem right. Only moments

before I would have happily beaten him. Severely. I dug my nails into my palms, forcing the pain to clear my mind. I *hated* feline heat. “It’s not them. It’s you.”

Jason laughed and ran a hand through his short hair, messing its smoothness. “Flattering, but no.” He took air deep into his lungs and let it out on a sighing breath. “They’ve changed you. I can smell it.”

“Don’t.” Sense had returned and I wagged a finger at him. “Don’t play the extra senses with me. You’re nothing more than a feline Mosaic on the run from the Company. They *will* get you.” I couldn’t help the bitterness. The Company had hunted my family. Trapped and caged them. I’d been born in captivity. “They get everyone.”

Jason’s smile was sharp. “Not me.”

“Not yet.”

“Why are you here, Charis? What lie did they spin?”

Did Jason know about the threat to his employer? He wanted me off the *Pagidion*. Sharing my knowledge would keep me onboard. “Quinn. I’m here to watch him. Protect him.”

Jason stared at me. Silent. Too calm. “Quinn?” He stood close to the curve of the wall and stared up at the red giant, the glow burning across his skin. “What do you know about him?”

“I’m still trying to work out who wants him dead.”

His mouth twitched. “Yes.” His gaze slid to me. “It could prove to be a long list. What else do you know about him?”

“What should I know?”

“Digging again? You’ve flipped back to who you should be.”

“Jason.” I sighed. “It’s twelve hours until that sun goes nova and this ship moves onto the next spectacle. The Company believes that your Lord Admiral *won’t* be moving on.” Aud’s words pushed back into my brain. I would do whatever I had to, to achieve my objective. “Our working together means you’ll get to keep your lackey’s job.”

“Even for a cat you snipe a little too much.”

I smiled. “Thank you.” I rubbed my hands against my thighs. I was crazy to join up with Jason Narak again. Especially with the kill-him-jump-him urges I was having.

“I can’t work with you, Charis.” He smoothed the front of his suit and let out a slow breath. “You’re more dangerous to me than you were six months ago.”

“I’m not leaving this ship.”

“Then what do we do?”

“Twelve hours.” I stared at him. The burning light shifted over his black suit and outlined his lean frame, edged his flawless face. My heart kicked. If what he said were true, if I was dangerous to him, it would be so easy to smile and see the lust rise in his dark eyes. Easy and probably fatal. Maybe for both of us. “Twelve hours and I’m off the ship, your employer is in one piece and I leave all mention of you out of my report. Deal?”

“And the Company wouldn’t question that? They put you here to trap me.”

“Get over yourself, Jason. Not everything is about you.”

His laugh was bitter. “If only that were true.”

“I haven’t reported you... yet.” I wasn’t going to tell him the truth; that I didn’t know he was onboard. That I hadn’t even seen him. “Let this be an easy mission.”

“Easy. Compared to the last time we met?”

I wasn't going back to those memories. "You said your Lord Admiral had a list of enemies."

Jason turned and slid his hands into his pockets. "He's one of the ultra-rich, ultra-powerful. And it came quick. That sort of luck breeds ill-will." A smile pulled at his mouth. "So take your pick of most of the passengers."

"You don't seem to be taking this seriously."

He wandered over to the initiator and murmured into the machine. The hum of the power stream changed and glasses filled with an amber liquid materialised on the black shelf of the machine. He offered one to me. I declined. "I'm not." He breathed in the aroma before sipping. "I'm also Lord Admiral's bodyguard. I, and my team, have protected him quite well. And this without the help of the Company."

"So easy for you would be to sit back, relax and let the professionals get on with their job."

Punching him again felt like a good idea. The last time was wearing off. "You're a professional con man. Nothing more."

Jason smiled and sipped again at his drink. "I'm hurt."

My gut tightened and the push in adrenalin had the cat in me desperate to shift. My sharpened claws would tear the smile from his face. "Why do you taunt me?"

"Because it's easy?"

What did he want? For me to attack him? Or for me to storm out? I calmed the riot of anger swirling through me. He would get the satisfaction of neither. "Would you like me to officially report you to my handler now? An extraction team would be here within the hour." He watched me, dark eyes narrowed on my hand as it hovered over the receptor in my neck. "Or as I said, we call a truce and work together."

"Why not just give me up, Charis?" He dropped the empty glass in the initiator's recycling unit. "That would leave you clear access to the Lord Admiral."

I lifted my chin. "Do we have a deal?"

"I remember our last time. An hour before you found out I'd lied to you—"

"Jason..."

He was close again. I could put out my hand and stroke his smooth jaw. I didn't. And the denial burned. "I locked the office door and you leapt."

My cheeks flushed and I willed myself not to remember, but his soft voice dropped liquid heat through my veins. The salt-sweet taste of his skin. The feel of smooth powerful muscles as he lifted me, my legs wrapping tight around his hips. The promises he murmured over my ear, of how we would be together...

All lies. All of them. I swallowed against the tightness in my throat and forced down the old pain. Jason's effect on me was unwanted, irrational. "Leave the past alone."

"Why? When it's so..." He traced the shell of my ear and heat rushed me.

"Stimulating."

"I thought I was a trap."

His finger slid down and circled the receptor in my neck. "Should I say hello?"

Panic swelled and I stumbled back. "No!"

His gaze fixed me, his face solemn. "Why won't you give me up, Charis?"

Words tumbled out. "Because you *are* free. Free in a way I never can be." I scrubbed a hand over my face. Stupid to admit that, but it was the truth. "Happy?"

"Charis—"

His ident.graft flashed white through his sleeve. He shot back his cuff to stare at the plastic skin. He swore. He looked up and his dark eyes burned. "With me. Now."

Jason strode from the stateroom without a backward glance.

What the hell...? I followed him back into the breakfast rooms. What I saw had my heart in my throat.

Lord Admiral Sir Raoul Quinn sprawled unconscious across the remains of his food.

Jason leant over his bulk, fingers searching through the folds of flesh for a pulse in his neck. His face was grim.

"Is he dead?"

Jason hauled him up. "Not for long."

Chapter Four

Quinn's body slammed against the medical bed.

"Patient for you." Jason stood back and wiped the sweat from his face. "No brain activity for just under two minutes. He's been poisoned."

Yoel stared at me and then Jason. He shook his head and turned to the bulk of Lord Admiral Quinn pale and lifeless on the soft mattress. "Stand back, please."

Two other techs rushed past Jason's team with equipment and fluids. I stood near the open doorway and watched the future of my career in the young doctors' hands. The slow whine of the monitors rawed my nerves. "Believe me now?"

Jason glared at me. "Not the time for humour, Charis."

I shrugged. My sense of humour was the only thing to which I could cling. "What happened?"

Jason lifted his arm to show me his wrist, his focus still fixed on the doctors as they tried to revive his employer. The ident.graft flared red and listed a toxin alert. "Someone poisoned his food." He frowned. "A substance specific to his DNA."

"Mr. Narak." A ship's officer skidded to a stop in the open doorway, straightened and pulled his uniform. "We've detained the kitchen staff and waiters. My security chief is already questioning them."

"Good, I want—" A beep. And then another. Quinn's eyelids twitched and his fingers rippled with movement. Jason surged forward. "Admiral? He pressed his hand to the man's damp, pale face. "Can you hear me?"

Quinn swallowed and his lips parted, but no words came out.

"Admiral—"

"Mr. Narak." A doctor pulled his hand back, her face stern. "He needs to rest and recover. Shouting at him is not helping."

"I want him back in his stateroom."

"Now is not the time to be ridiculous." The doctor pursed her lips and she reminded me of someone. On instinct, I picked apart her scent. Human, still heavy with the aromas of breakfast and the sharp stink of adrenalin. Nothing definitive. "He will be safe in our care."

"No." Jason's men standing by the emergency tube moved forward on an unseen signal. "He's going back to his stateroom and *I* will ensure his safety."

The doctor's gaze flicked from the ship's officer, to Quinn, to me. She stood back and held up her hands. "On your head be it," she said.

Surrounding the bed, the men moved it back to the tube. Jason pushed me ahead of him as the tube door slid in front of us.

"Is this wise?"

"The Admiral is my responsibility. My team has medical training." Jason rubbed at the back of his neck and grimaced. "And I don't want to camp out in medical. The stateroom is easier."

The tube opened onto the primary sphere outside the breakfast rooms. His team took the bed into the stateroom. With easy efficiency, the blank-faced men transferred the Admiral to his own vast bed and in a few busy moments, set up equipment around him.

“You sit there.” Jason pointed to a high-backed chair beside the bed and indicated for a member of his team to stand at the doorway. “You watch her.”

The heat of anger curled through me again. How dare he. I opened my mouth—

Jason’s mouth twitched. “And *you* watch him.” He pulled at his jacket, straightening the lines. His eyes were hard. “I need to debrief a few people.”

The door slid behind him with a soft hiss.

I stared at Quinn, watching his broad chest rise and fall.

How had someone poisoned him? Security shrouded him, yet someone had managed to slip easily past all of us. Retiring called to me again. I was almost thirty and pulling myself out of active service would put me on an extraction team. I winced. Chasing down rogue Mosaics and bringing them into the Company. Not something I wanted...but if I didn’t have to shift, to have that tiredness eat into my bones, then I could live with my conscience. Maybe.

I glanced at the blank-faced guard and found his attention fixed on me. I twitched a smile. “How long have you worked for Jason Narak?”

His expression didn’t change. His eyes remained steady and curiously lifeless. When I stood, his gaze followed me. “All right, now you’re creepy.” I stretched my spine, the ache of exhaustion still sitting on me. Jason as well as being free of the Company seemed happy in his Mosaic skin. Some people were born lucky.

I sighed and folded myself back into the chair, with his eyes tracking me. Opening myself to the bodyguard’s scent, I picked out human mixed with something...odd. Not the scent from Ciro’s room and not a Mosaic. Something about him didn’t mix in the right way. My eyes shut. I was too tired to question it. With Quinn right next to me, I could rest. I let my body drift, relax and for a few moments, I found sleep.

Quinn’s groan jumped me out of doze. His head twisted and his hand flopped against his mouth. He drooled. I wiped him clean with a flannel and his fingers brushed against mine. His eyes opened. “You...”

“Don’t try to talk, Admiral.”

He ignored me. “...said this would happen.” Quinn’s bleary eyes searched beyond me. “Where’s Jason?”

“Here.” Jason stood behind me, resting a hand on my shoulder and my skin prickled. “How are you feeling?”

Quinn groaned. “A diet. I want...to go...on a diet.”

Jason laughed. “Flushing out whatever it is in your system will start the process.” His fingers dug against the sharp bone of my shoulder and I held down a wince. “You rest, sir. We caught it in time. A few hours of care and you’ll feel well again.”

He pulled me up. “Come with me, Ms. Sur.”

A second man stood outside the door, but as to the whereabouts of the rest of Jason’s team, I had no clue. But then the men seemed to be ghosts. I focused, concentrating on the frail woman who sat on one of the sofas, a mug gripped hard in her thin hands. She wore the tight black flight uniform of one of the command crew, the thick material glued to her tiny frame. Her patchy scalp was a network of reinforced holes.

A shiver ran through me. She was an Alpha, the heart and brain of a neural-ship. What was she doing in the Admiral’s stateroom?

“Rachel?”

Jason’s soft voice made me start. I stared at him as he knelt before the small woman.

He brushed her cheek and that hot burn firing in my belly was not jealousy. It wasn't. Jason was probably playing her along too.

"Do you feel any better?"

Rachel leant into his touch and a smile curved her pale lips. "Yes, thank you. Your mind is clean, Jason Narak. Theirs..." A shudder shook her slight body and her hands tightened around the mug. She took a sip and it seemed to calm her. "The people they asked me to scan, their minds swirl with lies and hot emotion."

Yes, Jason Narak could even fool an Alpha, the highest form of psychic yet developed. There was no end to the man's talents.

Rachel's sharp green gaze whipped to me. "This one doesn't trust you."

"I know." Jason smiled and his hand dropped to her knee. He patted it. "So, are you ready to go back?"

She closed her eyes and with their bright glare gone, her skin grew greyed and taut. Dark circles carved deep beneath them. The life of an Alpha was hard, short and ended in a bright flare of burning death. Pity twisted for her and I bit my lip.

"I'm ready." Rachel's eyes opened and the adoration there as she looked at Jason turned the pity to ash. "And thank you. Thank you for ending it."

Jason looked down and a flush darkened his cheeks. "No, don't thank me." He pushed himself up and offered his hand to her. She stood, coming no higher than his shoulder, a fragile, pale doll. "One of my men will escort you back to the engine room."

Her gaze slid over me and her green eyes narrowed. "Your feelings burn inside you, Charis Sur."

I winced and stepped back as she passed me. The Alpha left the room, one of Jason's blank-faced men walking at her side. I let out a slow breath. At least she hadn't named the feelings. I wasn't even sure I could.

Jason took my arm in a tight grip and I jumped. He led me to a small, private sitting room. One long window looked out onto the clean blackness of deep space. He released me and I dropped onto a softly padded couch. Enfolded in the cool leather, I just wanted to curl into a tight ball and sleep. Yet, sleep wasn't an option. I wiped at my eye and held down the yawn. "What did you learn?"

Jason paced, undoing his jacket as he did so. "They don't know anything. No one saw anyone who shouldn't be there. They truth-scanned them." He winced. "Dragged that poor scalp-patched Alpha up from the engine room and made her touch every one. By the end, she was gibbering, but she confirmed the kitchen staff and the waiters are innocent. I gave her time to rest before they had to plug her back into the ship."

"Did your own men see anything?"

Jason stopped. He stared out to the blackness, his face reflecting in the transparent alloy. "No."

"And they certainly stare enough." I met his gaze in the window. "Don't you think?"

"They serve their purpose."

"They smell odd."

Jason's mouth twitched and he slid his hands into his pockets. "Who doesn't smell odd to you?"

"True."

He stared at me and the intensity had my skin itching. "Charis, get some sleep."

"I'm fine." I blinked and tried not to feel the raw dryness of my eyes.

“Quinn is safe.” His dark eyebrow lifted. “For the next few hours at least. So take your nap, before you drool on the couch.”

“I don’t drool.”

Jason smiled and there was something knowing in it. My stomach flipped and I cursed the heat rising up through my face. “I used to watch you sleep, Charis. Yes. You drool.”

Jason did this; played with my mind, my feelings. It proved he was still immune to me. I pushed down the old pain. I did need to sleep. I’d used my cat shift too many times that morning and I was exhausted. To fight it was stupid. “Which room?”

He waved his arm to the door straight ahead of me. “Make yourself at home.”

I ignored him. The door opened before me and I padded into the small room, containing only a large bed. In the dimness, starlight washed over the frame of the window. The air smelled of Jason and I hated myself for thinking *warm* and *safe* when I breathed deep.

Kicking off my shoes, I crawled onto the bed and pulled the heavy cover over me. His scent formed a shroud. I closed my eyes and tried not to remember, but Jason Narak always inhabited my dreams. He had since he burned me six months before.

I turned over and buried my head in the pillow. More of his scent mixed with the fresh aroma of clean sheets and I crushed my eyes shut against it. No, I couldn’t sleep like this. I cursed, threw off the cover and stood. Calling up a fresh blanket and pillow from the initiator, I curled up on the floor. The curve of the window high above washed starlight over my face. Closing my eyes, I slipped into sleep.

“You must be Charis Sur.”

I looked up from my desk and my breath caught. The man lounging against the doorframe was lithe, beautiful with a sinful smile lurking on his delicious lips.

Yes, I was in lust. Blood burned in my face and I shifted uneasily over my chair. There was a reason I was hiding in my office deep into the night. My heat cycle had started that day. The Company always grounded me and kept me away from the other staff. Me in heat? I was deadly.

I took a hold of what little control I had and stared back at the soft glow of my screen, but the report I’d been writing simply danced before my eyes. I willed away the need to look at him. “Leave now.”

“Is that any way to speak to your new department head?”

“Sir.” I grated out the words and made the mistake of turning to him. “You obviously haven’t read my file—”

He breathed in and his eyes half lidded. His smile deepened. “I think I know all I need to know.”

Heat sank through my body, pooling low in my belly at his soft words. “This,” I waved a hand at him, at his perfection, “is hardly fair.”

Liquid black eyes held me and I had to cross my legs, tight. At my reaction, he lifted an eyebrow. “Then would you like me to leave?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“My name’s Jason Narak.” He moved forward and closed the door. A flash of his ident.graft over the panel forced a soft hiss from the mechanism. He’d locked the door. Bad. Very bad. “And I’ve been waiting for you.”

I jumped to my feet and scrambled behind my chair, gripping its back until my

knuckles hurt. *“Don’t say that. I don’t know you. And you don’t know what I am.”*

“Oh, I think I do.” He brushed a fingertip over my mouth and I gasped at his searing touch. “A feline Mosaic. Just like me.”

The Company had captured only one feline family before: mine. Another cat. I’d never experienced heat with another cat. My hormones raced and all sense deserted me. I didn’t question why he was there, how they had caught him. Nothing. I saw only the shine of need in his dark eyes and welcomed the responding tug that had me closing the gap between us.

“I’m hidden away for a reason, Mr Narak.”

He flashed a sharp white grin; something wicked, decadent. “Are you saying I should be afraid of you, Ms. Sur?”

“Most men are.”

His hand slid over my jaw, fingers tangling in my hair. His lips almost touched mine, the warmth of his breath brushing my skin. “I’m not most men.”

“No.”

“Charis...”

But the first slide of his mouth never came. I arched my spine and the thick scent of carpet mixed with my memory of Jason. Everything ached, ached for the memory of how he would feel under my hands, my mouth, inside me, and slipping back into memory would—

“Charis!” Jason leaned over me, too close, his face in thick shadow.

I yelped and scrambled back against the wall. Scrubbing at my face, I crushed the urges I had to grab him and throw him on his back. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Wondering what you were dreaming about.” He drew back. “Anyone I know?”

“No.” I pushed my back up the wall, needing to keep as much distance between us as I could. “What do you want, Jason?” My brain kicked in. “Has something happened to Quinn?”

“The Admiral’s fine. Making a remarkable recovery in fact. No.” He waved his hand towards the open door. In the softly lit room beyond, a table had been laid with food. “You’ve been asleep for four hours, Charis. You must be starving.”

Four hours? I hadn’t slept that long since...since I’d last been in Jason’s company. I pushed myself up and I padded past him, keeping a safe distance. He was right. My stomach was already starting to grumble. I sat and stared over the impressive spread of roasted prawns; of peeled carena eggs nesting in leaves and smothered in a rich sauce that had my mouth watering. In the centre, squatted a Eulaie lobster, brilliant red and bristling with legs. Damn him. Every one was a weakness of mine. “None of this is from the kitchen, is it?”

Jason smirked and sat opposite. “It’s been thoroughly tested.”

“Are you crazy?” I wrung the cloth napkin in my hands and cursed him. Presenting me with such food, only to deny it was an unforgivable torture.

“Trust me, Charis. It’s safe.” He snagged a large roasted prawn and dropped it onto his plate. “Anyway, who could poison someone with a nose as sharp as yours?”

“You.”

With a sharp crack, he broke the prawn and sliced out a pink, fleshy segment, spearing it with a gleaming fork. He waved it at me. “You flatter me.”

“I’ve learned never to underestimate you.” I stared at the curving arrangement of

prawns, their hot scent forcing my stomach to growl. I gave in. Cracking its outer shell, I cut away the flesh. It melted in my mouth and I sighed.

“See?”

“Doesn’t mean I trust you, Jason.” The shell was almost empty before I spoke again. “So the Lord Admiral has recovered?”

Jason’s smile was wry as he poured a glass of the same amber liquid he’d drunk earlier into my glass and his. I took a tentative sip, finding it dry, crisp and whetting my hunger. “Raoul Quinn has a remarkable constitution. It would take more than a synthetic poison to keep him dead for long.”

“Now who’s having inappropriate bouts of humour?”

“You must be rubbing off on me.”

I scooped eggs onto my plate, licking my fingers as the sauce dribbled. Jason frowned at me. Etiquette be damned. I was hungry. “So it’s what? Seven hours till the sun goes nova?”

“Seven hours and twenty one minutes.”

“So we sit tight, wait for the star to explode and you and I happily part.”

Jason lifted his glass. “Not the one I wanted to go with but it’s *a* plan.”

The main door opened and the Lord Admiral lumbered in. “Ah, Jason, there you are. And Ms. Sur. Good. You’re invited too.” His eyes narrowed on the food, until he frowned and shook his head. “There are rumours that I’m dead. That is unacceptable. So, it’s time to have a party!”

Chapter Five

“Sir, I don’t think that’s wise.”

Quinn huffed out a breath. “I feel fine. You’ve trained your people well. But millions have been wiped and I’m losing more every passing second. I need to be seen. Contact the Captain. Arrange it. Now.” He disappeared back into his bedroom and the door hissed shut behind him.

I stared after the admiral. “He can’t be serious.”

“Oh, he is.” Jason scrunched his napkin and threw it across his plate. “The accumulation of wealth has always been his first thought. No matter what I do, I can’t fight that.”

“And I’m invited?” The thought unnerved me. The obscenely wealthy often had disturbing tastes.

Jason’s gaze slid over me. “So it would seem.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “Choose something from the initiator.” He frowned. “Something conservative.” He was silent, thinking. Anger and frustration shone in his eyes. He looked up and caught me staring. “These parties always follow a precise format. Stay away from the private rooms. Believe me, you don’t want to know what goes on there.”

Seemed I was right. “Doesn’t he realise he was dead?”

“That can’t compare to losing money.” Jason grabbed his jacket and shrugged into it. “Get ready.”

I watched him leave and pushed back my plate. My appetite was gone. Only a few moments before it had all seemed simple. We sit out the time, eat good food, maybe even... All right, I cut out *those* thoughts. He was right. Someone had screwed with my biology if I was considering jumping Jason Narak. And that was unnerving.

I pushed myself out of the chair. So...time to find something to wear. “I hate dressing up. And I hate parties.” I stared at the initiator, the long blank screen reflecting by face and body. “Something conservative.” Images flashed by of garishly bright clothing. A smile quirked my mouth. Some were *not* my idea of restrained. “Stop. Enlarge.” The image increased. Yes, that outfit offered ease of movement and completely covered me. “That. Charge it to Jason Narak.”

There was a pause and I could imagine Jason’s exasperation at finding himself lumbered with the bill. Tough. His employer was orchestrating this.

“*Accepted,*” murmured the softly computerised voice.

With that done, I went in search of a shower.

Scrubbed and feeling more awake than I had for a while, I padded back into the central room. My clothes awaited me and I changed, fighting my way into the slippery material. I readjusted the tabs over my shoulder before I attempted the boots. Strapping them up around my calf, I stamped until they didn’t pinch.

There was a mirror in Jason’s room.

I palmed the light and stared at my reflection. The grey metallic suit clung to every part of me and shimmered as I twisted to examine the fit. I pushed the gloves tight over my fingers. Not exactly conservative, but then if I had to shift it would hide my claws and the staining on my skin.

My face was make-up free and my hair damp and ruffled. I winced. That needed to change. I had to blend in and no respectable person on the *Pagidion* left their suite without layers of paint.

I brushed over my indent, graft visible thought a clear panel of fabric on my sleeve. The skin glowed. "Jason?"

"*Charis? What's wrong?*" His voice, even softened in transmission, still sounded sharp.

"Nothing. I need cosmetics from my cabin."

There was a pause. "*Fine. Be quick.*" The panel faded back.

I stopped the urge to salute. The man really did annoy me.

The main living area was empty, except that two of Jason's men stood outside the Admiral's bedroom. Blank gazes followed me out of the doors. Quinn was safe in his stateroom. I had time. The doors closed behind me with a soft hiss and I let myself shudder. How Jason worked every day with those men was beyond me.

I followed the curve of the promenade back to the tube.

Below me, menials swarmed over a platform floating on the lake. Thin golden girders gleamed as the workers started to construct the lattice network what would support the large dome. Yes, the preparations for the party surged ahead.

The tube slid down to the secondary sphere and I padded along the corridor to my own, more modest rooms. My plan was to slap on some make-up, slick and tie back my wild curl of hair and get back to the Admiral.

I palmed the lock and the panel shot back into the frame.

I stopped.

That smell. The one that had the cat in me hissing and spitting. I drew in a deep breath and shifted. My sharpened nails scraped again the inside of my gloves and acute sight picked out someone waiting for me in the gloom. "Who are you?"

I stood in the doorway, my gaze fixed on the man sitting on my sofa. I gripped the frame. There was another smell cutting under the one that had me wanting to run. It smelled familiar. I concentrated... Neutralising soda. I put a hand to my mouth to stop the vomit. The soda hid yet another odour. Rotting meat.

"I think you know who I am."

I waved my hand over the interior panel and light flooded the sitting room. "Alano Ciro."

"Used to be." His mouth moved, but slack and drooling off to one side. "Don't ask me to get up."

Dark fluid stained the red satin covers of the sofa. He was leaking. "Wouldn't dream of it." I stepped forward and the door hissed shut behind me. I edged along the wall to the antique writing desk and sat on the padded wooden chair. Ciro's clouded gaze followed me, the scrape of twisting neck bones forcing me to wince. "You're not looking well, Mr. Ciro."

He wheezed a laugh. "No."

I waved a hand around my room, glad that the glove hid my claws. "How did you get here?"

"Walked."

"That must have been a shock for Yoel and the medical staff."

"You're handling this very well, Ms. Sur."

I wasn't. My gut was in a knot, the food I had recently eaten souring. I was talking to *a corpse*. "Thank you. So..." I managed a smile. Maintaining the shift was wearing, especially with the overpowering stench *Ciro* generated. "How can I help you?"

"I don't have long before this body becomes too decayed for me to bind." He paused and in the silence, there was the soft slurp and slosh of his escaping bodily fluids as they sank deeper into my sofa. I tried not to think about it any further. "This ship is a trap."

I blinked. "For whom?"

"There's the question." *Ciro's* shoulders sagged, the right dropping lower than the left. "For Raoul Quinn, for Jason Narak and for you."

"Who are you? Really?"

"I am from the darkness; a place without time, without space." *Ciro's* jaw dropped. He lifted a hand with a jerk, to hold it in place. "What we're doing is wrong."

"What *are* you doing? Why did you kill Alano *Ciro*?"

"I didn't kill this man. One of the others took his life. And the others are coming. They're coming." His neck shrank into his chest, his head listing. "My time here is gone. Stop us. Stop us from taking a host."

Ciro's body sank in on itself and liquid gushed over the cushion, over the floor. I yelped and reacted on instinct, leaping up onto my chair. What was left of Alano *Ciro* flopped sideways. The thing possessing his corpse had rotted him to nothing more than a skin suit.

I scrubbed at my sweating face. Sitting in a room with the remains of a man who had died six hours before was *not* what I had signed on for. But it seemed I had no choice.

I leapt, clearing the pool Alano *Ciro* had become.

Leaning against the door to my bedroom, I let the shift slid away. Tiredness sat on my shoulders, dug into my bones. I shook my head, but my eyes still itched with the need for sleep. So much for the long rest I'd just had.

"Makeup. Hair creams." My case still sat on my bed. Grabbing it, I picked my way out of the cabin. I locked down the room. Hopefully, I'd be off the ship before cleaners found the puddle and skin sitting on my sofa. If nothing else, Yoel would swear to my abnormal interest in the deceased. I could say I wanted a souvenir.

I breathed in freshened air.

And what the hell had he been talking about? Darkness? Others? A host? None of it made sense; especially when a corpse had delivered the message. I turned back towards the tube. *Ciro*, and I *had* to think that it was him, had offered a warning for three of us. Someone had already poisoned Raoul Quinn. My grip tightened around the handle of my case and I had to stop myself from hunching my shoulders. Were Jason and I also on a killing list?

The empty corridor pressed against me and I increased my speed. Flashing the ident.graft, the tube doors opened.

"Hello again, Ms. Sur."

The tube's soft, synthetic voice gave me a start. I wiped a hand over my mouth. The darkness could occupy a living body; manipulate a dead one. How could I defeat something so powerful?

Chapter Six

I stared into the mirror watching my hand shake. Shock was taking over. I put the lipstick down, gripped the edge of the sink and breathed. I'd been in worse situations. Shot, stabbed, manipulated; there wasn't much I hadn't suffered working for the Company. My knuckles whitened around the cool porcelain. Except maybe sitting in a room with a talking corpse who slowly leaked his insides out onto the floor. *That* I hadn't done before.

"I have to put in for a transfer when I get back."

Picking up the lipstick again, I focused and ran the brush over my lips. Standing back, the soft golden lights of the bathroom washed over my skin. Too much paint and power. I fitted right in. My suit had wrinkled and I began to twist my torso to even it out.

"Not exactly what I had in mind." Jason stood in the open doorway, watching as I resecured the last of the tabs along my right shoulder. "Obviously you and I differ *greatly* on what conservative means."

A sudden rush of panic hit me, but I forced myself to smooth the slight wrinkle in the grey metallic material over my hip. "Covered from neck to ankle, Jason."

"It *clings* to you from neck to ankle."

I ignored him. "Do you like the boots?" I ran a hand over my hair, smoothing a stray strand. "I need freedom of movement. And really, with my," I wiggled my fingers, "*charm* having worn off no one will be paying attention to me."

"That just leaves me." The door slid softly shut behind him.

Heat bled under my cheeks. "Jason, you know I didn't mean..."

"Didn't you?"

The thin, cool material sucked to my bare skin and I felt strangely exposed. Jason could do that; make me feel as if I was standing naked before him. I stopped myself from crossing my arms. "There's no way you'd peel me out of this thing."

Humour lightened his face. "Is that a dare?"

I licked dry lips and his eyes darkened. "Maybe."

Drawing in his scent, I let it drive the thrum to my blood. I should've been thinking, thinking that having sex with him was crazy. But any chance of saying no stopped when he brushed my jaw, his other hand sliding hot down the slick curve of my suit.

Jason's mouth hovered over mine. "You're here to trap me."

"So?"

I pushed him back against the wall and took his mouth. The heat of his body burned through the thin layer of my suit. What was I doing? I should've stopped. But I couldn't. And neither it seemed could Jason.

His mouth pulled away and found the rapid pulse in my neck. Teeth bit at my skin, the heat of his lips, his tongue searing. I swallowed down the need to purr. "What are we doing?"

"Have you no memory, Charis?" His breath eased over recently bitten skin and I moaned. "I bite. You purr. I know I have you when you growl."

I exposed my neck. "Too much talking."

"Oh no." Jason ran his fingers down the slippery smoothness of my suit, his fingers

inching across my pelvis. "I'm waiting..."

I covered his hand with my own, working his fingers until he... There. Right there. Little aching pulses fired my blood. My chest was tight, burned with the need to make my desire vocal. It thrummed, but the ache to have him bite me, claim me bound my release. I pressed hard against his body, rubbing along the solid length of his erection. "Bite."

Eyes shining with lust held me. "Growl."

There was a cough and "Mr. Narak?"

Jason snapped back, but his forehead rested against mine. For endless seconds, I breathed out the need to have Jason hard and fast up against the bathroom wall. I couldn't look at him. Damn it. Sex was a bad idea.

"When this is over, there'll be a large bed and I'll devote hours, I promise *hours*, to you. Is that agreeable?"

His rushed whisper kicked my heart. I couldn't help myself. "Yes."

"Good." A final kiss brushed my neck. He turned away. "How can I help you, Captain Fariel?"

The Captain of the *Pagidion* stood in the open doorway. A glint cut his pale eyes as he looked from Jason to me. "Everything has been prepared for the Lord Admiral's party."

"Your efficiency is commendable."

Fariel nodded. "Nothing is too much effort for Lord Admiral Quinn." He stood back from the door. "If you are ready, we can inspect the arrangements together."

We walked ahead of him out through Jason's apartment to the Admiral's central room. The Captain stopped and stared up the broiling star that dominated the view. "And if we're fortunate, then Betelgeuse will form the final entertainment."

Jason stilled and something about it lifted the hairs on my neck. "Yes." His shoulders straightened. "Charis, please stay here and see to the Admiral's needs."

I nodded, watched them leave and stopped myself from punching the wall for being such an idiot. Fariel's interruption had been timely. My need for Jason clouded all better judgment. I had to remember that I was onboard the *Pagidion* to do a job. Fail and the Company would not let me live long; no matter how far I ran.

I examined my reflection in the ornate mirror hanging amidst a rash of oil paintings. No smudges marred my makeup. I ran a finger along the bruised skin of my neck, trying not to remember the burn of his lips, the hot press of him against my body. Shock played havoc with my brain. That could be the only explanation for what I'd just done. And how far I would have *gladly* gone.

Now my dilemma was should I tell Jason what I'd learned from Alano Ciro? Would he believe me?

Quinn's low rumbling voice coming from his bedroom interrupted my thoughts. The countdown staining the transparent wall marked the time as six hours and twenty five minutes until the sun blew itself apart. Not long until this insane mission was over and Jason and I could go our very separate ways.

My nails curled into my palms and plain, human nails dug into my skin. I couldn't wish for more. Not if I wanted to keep Jason Narak and the Company for whom I worked, far, far apart.

I stared down beyond the promenade to the wide curve of the primary sphere. An intricate, interlocking structure of arched gold and translucent blue now covered the

gardens. Water shimmered around it, reflecting the burning red of the sun. The *Pagidion* catered for every whim. Throwing an immense party seemed no exception.

“Ah, Ms. Sur, I see that you’re dressed.”

Quinn came to stand beside me. He’d washed and the thick mixture of his soap and cologne had me wincing. “I’m glad you were able to recover so quickly, Admiral.”

“Jason has this amazing team. I don’t think there’s any miracle they can’t perform.” He smiled revealing glistening white teeth, brighter than I remembered. What miracle *was* Jason performing?

I stared back to the golden structure that gleamed in the light of the dying sun. “How long has he worked for you?”

“Jason? I think it’s...” He paused and that brought my gaze back to him. He was frowning and doubt had his brows contracting. “You know, I can’t actually remember a time when he wasn’t working for me.” He laughed, but there was a nervous edge to it. “I’m seventy eight. And he’s...”

“Thirty seven.”

“Yes. So it has to be fairly recent.” Quinn rubbed a meaty hand across his forehead. “No matter. It’ll come back to me.” He gave me the same toothy smile. “Will you accompany me down?”

Not exactly what the Company had in mind when they asked me to watch over Raoul Quinn. They stressed covert surveillance. But as this mission had gone to hell anyway, I saw no harm. “I’d be honoured, Admiral.”

Jason’s men appeared behind us and I shivered. I hadn’t sensed them and that still scared me.

“Unnerving, isn’t it?”

The door to the promenade opened before us. “Yes. Where did he find them?”

But the frown creasing his forehead told me that he didn’t know that either. What game was Jason playing with his employer? Two of the guards preceded us into the tube, the other two followed after. I blinked. There had been five, I was sure.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Quinn broke my thoughts. I stared at the immense golden dome filing the gardens. These people had far, *far* too much money, could command anyone to do anything. “Yes, it is.”

“And it’ll soon be gone, burnt to ash. The ship’s shields will protect us from the gamma radiation blast.” He smiled. “Which is lucky.”

The star. He was talking about the monstrosity broiling above our heads. “Only six hours to go.”

The tube opened and the smells of fresh grass, trees and flowers washed over me. The soft swell of the lake on which the dome floated rippled beneath the rush of bird song. So tranquil I could almost forget where I was.

“Admiral.” Jason strode along the wide curve of the bridge connecting the dome to the shore. “Everything is ready for you. Your guests are assembled and eager to see you.”

“I’m sure. How many broadcast that I was dead?”

Jason twitched a smile. “All of them?”

“Vultures.”

Quinn strode forward, Jason’s men following him and I fell into step with Jason. “He can’t remember how long you or your team have worked for him. A side-effect of the

poison?”

Jason didn't look at me. “Yes.”

Too quick an answer. He was lying. “Then shouldn't you—”

“Remember the rules. There are rooms on the lower floors, indicated by a polished black door, that you mustn't enter. Avoid the blue doors too.”

“Should I just stand at your shoulder?”

Jason's smile was sharp. “That would probably be your safest option.” The doors to the dome had swung back for the Lord Admiral and Jason waved me inside. “Though probably not mine.”

Beyond the tunnel, the dome shone with a soft golden light. Stairs led up to several platforms, already heaving with people. The Admiral huffed up the long flight of stairs, Jason's men flanking him and he was met with a great ripple of applause. The crowd swallowed him. I stared down over the rail as I climbed the wide staircase. Circling around the bottom of the stairs, almost lost to the dim light were a series of doors in shades of blue and black. I pulled my gaze away. There were some things about which even a cat should not be curious.

Jason took my hand and linked my arm through his.

The crowd melted before us.

I gripped Jason's arm. Something about their watching made me nervous. Ciro's warning had my finely honed paranoia on high alert. There was an intense heat, a coveting that had the need to shift and fight bursting beneath my skin.

“Stay calm.” Jason's voice cut through my rising panic. “You're fresh blood. The novelty will soon wear off when the pleasure bodies start to circulate.”

“Pleasure bodies?” I winced. “No, I don't want to know.”

“Good plan.”

Jason wove through the crowd, and I stuck to his side. I didn't mingle with the ultra-wealthy. The short mission on the *Pagidion* was my first real brush with their lifestyle and they had the skittish cat in me very nervous.

The Captain stepped out in front of us. His smile was smooth and practised. “The whole of the ship has turned out to witness the event.”

Jason's muscles tightened under my fingers. There was an undercurrent to Fariel's words and it had him on edge. A nervous Jason Narak worried me. “Who wouldn't want to see a resurrection, Captain?” he asked.

Fariel's smooth smile drifted to me. A hardness in his gaze said the pleasant smile was a lie. Was he the one behind the poisoning of Lord Admiral Quinn? He was in charge of every aspect of life on the *Pagidion*, after all. Did he know something was coming?

“True.” The Captain stepped back. “Take pleasure in your time here today.” He nodded a farewell. “Mr. Narak, Ms. Sur.”

I let the shiver escape. “He's disturbing.”

“Yes.” Jason smoothed a hand down his black jacket. “I think we should find a quiet place.” His mouth twitched a smile, but like Fariel, it wasn't in his eyes. “I also need to watch the Admiral.”

More stairs led up to small semi-circular booths, from which we could watch the noisy crowd. Quinn's bulk was unmistakable and sticking closely to him were Jason's four black-suited guards.

Jason waved away a hovering waiter and waited for me to slide around the curve of

the pale leather bench. He sat next to me. In the soft light from the glow-ball set in the middle of the table, he looked tired as he pinched at the bridge of his nose.

“Why would someone want to kill Quinn?”

He looked up. “You’ve met him.”

Yes, he was being his usual evasive self. “I’ve met worse. You for example.”

Jason leaned back and the leather creaked. He stared out over the crowd. “Oh, even more people want to see me dead.”

“Am I top of that list?”

His laugh was short, bitter. “You’re not even in the top one hundred, Charis.”

I was unsure about bringing up what the...darkness...had told me. It was also starting to feel unreal, as if I had dreamt it. Pulling in a short breath, I had to start my interrogation of him. “What is going on here?”

“Do you know how Mosaics got to be free?” A sharp look to his eyes kept me silent. Damn him, could I *ever* get a straight answer out of the man. His hands locked on the table and he stared off over the milling crowd. “Experiments, that’s all Mosaics are. An attempt to find the perfect balance of human and animal. But two hundred years ago, the test subjects rebelled.”

He looked back to me and then down to my hands. “They found they could shift and take on the aspects of the animals fused within them.”

“I know this, Jason.” Despite the protecting gloves, I hid my hands under the table, removing them from his sharp sight. My hands were my only physical change; that and the tabby stripes across my chest. “I was born in captivity, not in isolation. My mother told me. The scientists let us go. But with the formation of the Company—”

Jason’s harsh laughter stopped my words. “Let us go?” He shook his head. “The Mosaics killed every one of those scientists.” He paused and muscles worked in his jaw. “Butchered them and escaped. Thirty years ago, the Company stumbled across the research, and realised that the powers of the shifters could make them wealthy.” His smile was twisted. “And they think they can breed Chimeras. The idiots.”

I held down a shudder. Chimeras. Foul creations, rumours said, sought after for their regenerative properties. “What has this got to do with anything?”

“You have to ask yourself, why did those original scientists want to achieve perfect balance?”

I was tired of his games. “And what answer would I give myself?”

“Funny, Charis.”

“You may like these games. I don’t.”

His smile was wry and he rubbed at his face. “Maybe I’ve been playing them for too long.” He sank back against the leather again and stared up at the intricate latticework of the gold and lapis lazuli ceiling. “But tonight it ends. One way or another, I’m done.”

“And when you’re done, will I have a clue what you’re talking about?”

He snorted. “Probably not. I’ve been at this too long.”

I called a waiter and ordered two iced waters. Within moments, he was back, placing the tall tumblers before both of us. I ran a finger down the moisture coating the glass, tracing patterns in the coolness. The need to tell Jason what I knew burned. But I couldn’t. I didn’t trust him and I wouldn’t make the mistake of trusting him again. That thought turned my mind back. “How have you escaped the Company for so long?”

“Planning and a fair dose of luck.”

Picking up the glass, I sipped at the cold water. Ice chinked and cracked. “And I was a part of that plan to evade them?”

“Yes.”

I tightened my grip around the glass and asked the question that had twisted inside me for six months. “Why?”

“Can we not get into this here, now?”

“In five hours we go our separate ways. I think I deserve answers. Don’t you?”

Jason sighed and twisted the glass, leaving wet rings on the ebony surface of the table. “I needed...” He stopped the glass and gripped it, his knuckles showing white. “I needed information from the Company. Using your security clearance was the easiest way into its system.”

“And that’s all I was?” The furious knot in my gut turned tighter. I knew I shouldn’t be airing our past, but he was here and I had to know. If he explained, maybe the plaguing dreams would stop. “And what was the sex? A bonus?”

“Charis...”

“Was it?”

“At first.”

Heat bled into my face and my fingers curled into a fist. I forced my hand to remain on my thigh. The need to shift bubbled under my skin, that and the need to punch him again. “Really?”

Jason let out a sigh and closed his eyes. “Charis. Really, here isn’t the place to do this. After... After all this is over, I *will* explain everything.” He opened his eyes and his liquid black gaze held me. I saw sincerity, regret...but then this was Jason. He could fake any emotion. His hand brushed my jaw and the contact burned through me. “Believe me. You were one thing I *didn’t* plan.”

The pain turning inside me wasn’t anger and that made it worse. I turned my head and his touch fell away. Jason Narak, the man who wanted to fuck with my mind as well as my body. “And yet you still managed to walk away.” My laughter was bitter. “Well, actually run.”

His expression hardened as he stared into the glass. “I couldn’t take you with me. I live, I work alone. I can’t explain, Charis. Not yet. But it’s the life I have to lead.”

“Except you live and work with the Admiral and your team.” My gaze drifted over the crowd. It was already thinning, most wandering down the staircase to the black-doored rooms. Men and women gleamed in their jewel-encrusted scraps of gold, bodies painted in swirls of copper and silver leaf. Others wore more, but only just. I was positively overdressed. White-suited waiters circulated with trays of food, drink and the drug-shots of choice. My pulse spiked. White suits, but no black suits.

I blinked. “Or you did. Jason.” Sitting straight, I focused and then I cursed. “Where’s the Admiral?”

Chapter Seven

Jason pushed past the slowly milling crowd, curses and me following in his wake.

“I looked away for a minute.” He ran a hand through his hair, scanning the rest of the platform. But the Admiral and his unit of black-suited guards had stood out. Now they didn’t. “If he’s gone through a black door, I swear...” He left the threat hanging.

I padded after him down the stairs. Ciro’s slurred words cut through me. *The ship is a trap.* “Jason? Maybe we shouldn’t look for him.”

He glared at me. “Raoul Quinn is my responsibility.”

I stretched my fingers in the cool gloves. “I think... I think it’s too late for him.”

“What do you know, Charis?”

I glanced around and found too many sharp gazes fixed on us. “Not here.”

Jason gripped my arm and pulled me out onto the bridge outside the dome. “Tell me.”

I stared at my boots, still not certain that any of it had actually happened. “Alano Ciro was in my room.”

Jason gripped the bridge rail either side of me, pressing close. “What has that to do with Quinn? They didn’t socialise—”

“An hour ago. He was there an hour ago.”

Jason was silent, just staring at me. Something flickered in the depths of his eyes and it looked like fear. “You talked to a corpse?”

“And he talked back.”

“Charis...” He growled my name. Jason took a calming breath and his hands flexed around the rail. “What did he say about the Admiral?”

“You don’t seem surprised. At all.”

“No. Now what did he say?”

Ciro’s words still burned. “This ship is a trap.” I winced. “For all of us.”

Jason frowned. “All—”

“Is everything satisfactory, Mr. Narak?” Captain Fariel smiled at us from the open doorway, his uniform gleaming brighter than the surrounding gold. His eyebrow lifted. “We do have rooms that cater for every need.”

“We’re fine.”

“The core collapse has been confirmed. Now it’s just a matter of time before the final event.” Fariel stood back. “I insist you come inside.”

“Captain, I assure—”

There was a gun in his hand, small, delicate but deadly at such short distance. “No, Mr. Narak, this is a direct order from the Captain of the ship. Come inside.” He gave us his polished smile again. “Please.”

Jason stood back and took my hand, his fingers pressing hard into my palm.

I hoped I understood him as I built up the strength to shift. The scents of grass and the surrounding woodland strengthened, overlaid with the Captain’s nervous sweat. Talons pushed at the seams of my gloves.

Jason looked at me, his dark eyes bright. “Shall we?”

“Yes.”

Jason released my hand.

Years of training kicked in. Time stilled. The measured beat of my blood and breath filled my senses. I leapt, my body twisting in the air. Fariel's eyes widened just before my boot slammed into his face. He dropped.

I landed in a half-crouch and reality rushed me. I staggered, bending double and I let out the last of the shift. The Captain had slumped against the dome wall. A trickle of dark blood leaking from his nose was the only sign that he wasn't sleeping off a drug-shot.

"Nice work, Charis." Jason picked out the gun from the unconscious man's hand and tucked it away in his pocket. He wiped at the run of blood with a handkerchief. "Now we have to find the Admiral."

I straightened, but still had to lean against the doorway, weariness making me sag. "I think we have to get off the ship."

"Oh no." He took my arm and led me back into the dome. "Quinn is vital. And it's your job to see that he stays alive. Otherwise the sun *and* you go nova."

"What is going on, Jason? Possession? Talking corpses that warn about hosts?"

"That's what Quinn is."

"A host?"

"Yes." A few guests chatted on the stairs and the ones milling towards the rooms had thinned. Jason buried his hand in his pocket, the tip of the gun pushing against the material. "Host to the thing that killed Ciro."

"And what's that?"

Jason followed a narrow corridor to its end. My skin prickled. This was insane. We were trapped. I touched the walls, stroking over the smooth, almost damp fabric. Vibration throbbed through my fingers. Staring back to the curve of the entrance hall, shining bodies passed in the subdued light, costumes sparkling. I counted one, then two, then more, milling around the entrance. "Jason, hurry up."

He swiped his ident.graft over the panel. "He's here. I can feel him."

"*This* feels wrong."

He looked at me before the door slid silently back into its frame. "This ends tonight." He took my hand. "It has to."

The room beyond was dark, only glimpses of grey light cutting thin shafts to the floor. Scents of damp cloth, earth and the thick odour of humans filled the air. I couldn't smell Jason's men. "Are you sure he's here?" My voice sounded flat, obscured.

"He's here."

The door closed softly and the dark thickened, but still we moved forward. My eyes lensed and pierced the blackness. Narrow walls closed in on us, sloping down and curving.

My skin itched. *The ship is a trap*. I tightened my hold on Jason's hand and tried not to listen to my own harsh breathing. "This is a bad idea."

"I know he's here."

"Your men aren't."

"I know that too."

The tunnel ended in a bulbous chamber, lit from a single source high in the ceiling. I rubbed at my eyes and the shift fell away. My eyelids burned.

Quinn sat in a heavy chair, his chin resting on his chest.

"Admiral?" Jason tilted his head back. The white light washed over his skin,

bleaching it. Quinn's eyes were shut, his mouth slack. He looked simply asleep.

"Is he alive?"

Jason pressed his fingers against his neck, searching through the folds of fatty skin for his pulse. "This is getting to be an annoying habit, Admiral." He let out a slow breath. "Got it. He's alive." He stood back and wiped a hand over his face. "Let's get him out of here."

"*And you think it's that easy?*" The Captain's voice, flat but with a hint of smugness enveloped the room. "*You just take your beard and we all pretend as before?*"

Jason stared up. "And what do you think you know, Captain Fariel?"

His laughter prickled my skin. "*Shall I tell Ms. Sur how old you are? Shall I start with that?*"

Jason's jaw tightened. He looked at me and there was panic in his eyes. "Leave her out of this."

"*The woman who broke my nose and cheek? I think she deserves to know who she's working for.*" He paused. "*His ident.graft lists him as thirty-seven.*"

Jason's gaze dropped from mine and a fist gripped my gut. "So?" I said.

"*Jason Raed Narak. Born twelfth of August 2246. Parents—*"

"That's ridiculous." The words burst out. I stared at Jason, but he wouldn't meet my eye. The light washed over him, over his smooth skin and short dark hair. He *looked* thirty-seven. But to be born in 2246... My voice was just above a whisper. "You can't be over two hundred years old."

"*There's more—*"

"What do you want?" Jason cut into the Captain's smug voice. "Whatever you think you know is probably wrong."

"*Patronising to the end, isn't he, Ms. Sur? No wonder you punched him.*"

I was still staring at Jason. He couldn't be over two hundred years old. It was impossible. And then I remembered the sourness in his voice as he talked of the scientists who had created the Mosaics. Bitter satisfaction had twisted his face. "You were there." I stepped back from him. "When the Mosaics rebelled."

"Charis..."

My stomach dropped and my hand covered my mouth. "What are you? Chimera?"

"They're a myth—"

"*So modest, Jason. You're more impressive than a mere Chimera.*" There was a soft hiss surrounding us and a rectangle of blackness opened up on the wall. I turned and found a seamless wall where we had come in. "*Follow that path, both of you. We have four hours to wait.*"

"What about the Admiral?"

"*Your pet is safe.*"

Jason took my hand and I shivered. He held my gaze, but I could only see the man who was over two hundred years old. "Come with me, Charis."

"What's happening here?" I raised my voice to the light, wanting an answer from the Captain. I knew I couldn't get anything straight from Jason. "What has he dragged me into?"

The Captain chuckled, his laughter oddly flat in the sound-sealed room. "*Oh, you were involved from the beginning, Charis. Hasn't he told you about that either? You will have a lot to talk about. Now move.*"

With a tug from Jason's hand, I stumbled forward.

"This day just keeps getting better and better." I followed Jason into the blackness. The narrow tunnel pressed around me and I willed myself to breathe slowly, deeply. I hated enclosed spaces. My eyes lensed further, but even my feline sight couldn't pick through the heavy darkness. "Where are we going?"

Jason squeezed my hand. "A holding cell."

"Holding for what?"

A door slid back, revealing a circular room beyond. Grey, diffuse light seeped over the smooth walls. It was empty except for a lip of a low bench curving halfway around the room. We stepped inside and the walls became seamless.

Jason stalked around the room. If he was looking for an escape, I let him. I flopped onto the bench and ran a hand through my hair, messing the gelled smoothness. If they had lured someone like Jason Narak into a cell, they were going to make it escape-proof. "So what did he mean, Jason? What the *hell* is going on here?"

"He's mistaken."

He pressed his hand into the wall and a swift hiss accompanied a moving panel. I started, half rising from the bench, but realised I was getting excited about a toilet. I sat back down. "About you being two hundred years old?"

Jason let the panel close again. "Who do you believe? An insane Captain or the Company?"

My mouth twisted. "Is that a trick question?"

He sat next to me and stretched out his legs. "The Admiral is the host. Not me. He's the one who's two hundred years old."

"He smells like a human... I think." I pushed at my memories. I hadn't scented the Admiral and now I cursed against such stupidity. His grease-filled diet had made the fussy cat in me reluctant to breathe him in too deeply. "I should have scented him."

"Too much bacon?"

"This is not funny, Jason."

"No." He sighed. "I didn't mean to drag you into this."

"That's not what Fariel said."

He glared at me "Again who are you going to believe?" The anger in his eyes faded. "Yes, Captain Fariel before me every time."

"Hardly surprising, is it?" I stretched my spine. "So...saying that I believe *something* of what you say, what is the Admiral a host for? What is the darkness?"

Jason shrugged and his shoulder rubbed against mine. "My job, like yours, is to keep him alive. He never shared anything beyond that."

Some twisted part of me wanted to think that Jason was finally telling me something like the truth. However, he'd burned me in the past with his believable lies. I didn't know what to think anymore. I snapped away from thoughts on him. They never got me anywhere. "So how do we get out of here? You still have his gun."

Jason pulled it out of his pocket and turned it over in his hand, the diffuse light glinting off the ornate casing. He stood and found a section of wall. Pressing the muzzle hard into the damp wall, he released a burst of energy...

Nothing.

He fired the release twice and still the gun was dead in his hands. "Fooled by a fake." His gaze slid back to me. "I was obviously distracted."

“Then I call in backup.” Jason watched me as I pressed the receptor in my neck. Flares and fizzes shot around the room in sequence. “So much for their shadow-ware,” I muttered before the tell-tale rush of contact with my handler fired through my skin. “Aud?” Silence. Seconds pulsed by. “Aud Sebak, I’m calling home.”

“*Charis?*”

What was that in her voice? Shock? “Yes, twice in one day. A record. Look, Aud, I’m stuck. More than stuck. The mission has gone sour. Quinn is unconscious and I can’t get to him. *Really* can’t get to him.”

“*What do you want from me?*”

The hesitation in her voice had my nerves pricked. “I want an extraction team. This mission wasn’t a total loss. I found Jason Narak—”

With terrifying speed, Jason pinned me to the wall, his grip tight around my wrists as he forced them above my head. The bench dug into the back of my knees and I winced. Fury seared off him, but he didn’t speak. His gaze bore into me and it was hard to breathe.

“*You have? That’s...that’s good.*”

Everything about Aud was off. I tried to focus, but couldn’t, not with Jason pressing his body hard up against me. “Send in the team.”

He forced my hand to brush my neck and the receptor fired and faded.

“I should have known.” He growled the words, anger flushing his face. “You couldn’t resist. Is this revenge, Charis?”

“If you’re right and what they’re really after is you, then they’ll come running. And if it’s not, then they just found Jason Narak. They’ll come running. I promise you.” His breath brushed my face and the fire in his eyes had my blood pounding in response. “We have to get out before that sun goes nova.” My gaze slid to his mouth, I couldn’t help myself. “I’m assuming that Quinn as a host is bad?” His parted lips looked good enough to taste and the heightened awareness of feline heat had my mind dizzy at his scent. Warm, right, needed. Desired. I swallowed. “Jason?”

“What do you want from me?”

“The truth.” That came out without the benefit of thinking. “You used me.”

His grip on my wrists eased, his fingers trailing down the slippery smoothness of my arms. Heat pooled low in my belly and I tightened my muscles against it. That only made it worse.

“You and I,” his soft voice stole over my skin, “are not like anyone else. Felines are rare, powerful.” His hand traced the edge of my breast and I sucked in a quick breath. “Beautiful.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Aren’t I just?” The spark in his eyes promised wickedness. “But I think a little revenge of my own is in order. You told on me.”

“Jason, this is hardly—”

“Deny me.” His hands slid slower until they found the curve of my backside. His grin was evil as he squeezed flesh. “I dare you.”

Chapter Eight

“I get one truth from you.”

His head tilted. “One? But how would you know?”

Jason had escaped the hold of the Company for too many years. One extraction team distracted by a primary mission of saving the Admiral wouldn't catch him. I knew that. He would vanish again, as easily as he had left me six months before. The pain of that desertion and the powerful need to throw Jason on his back and ravish him warred within me. “For just this one time you won't lie to me.”

He stood back, his hands falling away and leaving me cold. “I never wanted to hurt you.” Jason let out a slow breath and nodded. “One truth.” He held up his hand. “I swear.”

I slid back down onto the bench. “Thank you.”

Jason's soft chuckle made me look up at him. “You want the truth more than you want my body?”

I tried to bite down my smile and failed. “I've *had* your body.”

“Oh, that's low.”

He stroked my hair smooth and then knelt before me. I blinked, my heart beating faster as he parted my knees and leaned in close. I breathed him in and closed my eyes. “You smell nice.”

“I know.” The brush of his lips startled my eyes open. He deepened the kiss, his tongue flickering against mine.

“You taste nice too.”

“And you talk too much.”

His eyes held me, the gleam in them raising a flush in my face. My heart pounded. I wanted him; he had burned in my blood since I had first met him. “Are you going to make me stop?”

Jason's slow smile dropped heat through my chest. “Is that what you want?”

I took his face in my hands. “Remember, one truth, Jason.”

A shadow passed through his dark gaze. “I swore to you.” He turned his head, kissing my palm and firing a jolt through my body. “Have you finished? Isn't it time I solved the puzzle of your clothing?”

“Not too difficult.” I tugged at the discrete shoulder tabs and the fabric slipped away. Cool air brushed my bare skin. “Now you.”

Jason pulled at his tie, and slid fingers over the front of his shirt. The scent of warm, bare skin hit me. I almost growled then. I'd forgotten how the smell of him could fire my blood. My shift was slow; an ease of change that pressed claws against my gloves.

His grin was feral. “So that's how you want to play it?”

I stared down at my chest, stained with pale grey stripes. My gaze flicked up to fix on his. “Is your suit self-repairing?”

“Around you? Always.”

I pulled off my gloves. “Good.” And I tore through his jacket and shirt with one swipe of my claws. The material fell away, exposing more smooth skin. I hissed. I'd nicked his pectoral, thin scores cutting across the hard muscle. Blood seeped and the

copper scent of it had my pulse thudding.

The tiny drops of blood beaded and grew sticky. My tongue could dart out and taste—

“I’m never sure of your intentions.”

I ripped my gaze from his tantalising flesh. “What?”

“Am I fun,” his eyes gleamed, “or food?”

“Can’t you be both?” I gave in and licked the droplet of blood. Jason groaned and gripped the back of my head. His fingers curled into a fist, snaring my hair. The copper tang of his blood burned on my tongue and his intoxicating scent wove through me. Warm skin, the spicy odour of his soap and the natural musk had my head light.

“You’re evil.”

I pulled back, staring up at him. My smile was sharp. “Bite me.”

Jason laughed. “Oh, I intend to.”

His teeth tugged at my lip, hard and then he kissed me, pushing me back against the soft wall. His hands pulled away more of my suit. He pressed close and then his mouth started to move, edging over my jaw in a slow slide. He nipped at skin, each bite shooting little curls of heat down through my body.

Jason knew how to play me. It was why I couldn’t shake off thoughts of him. Only another feline knew—

He bit my neck.

The growl burned up through my chest, escaping as a soft rumble.

Jason’s chuckle sent a bubble of warmth down deep into my belly. “I can do better than that.” His breath stirred my bruised, wet skin and unthinking I exposed my throat for more of him. He didn’t bite. Instead, he buried his face against my neck, crushed my body to his and breathed me in. “Oh I’ve missed you, little cat.”

Tears burned behind my eyes, but I wouldn’t say the same. Couldn’t, not if I wanted to stay sane. My hand hovered over his head, fighting the temptation to stroke his dark hair. No, I would not play this game. Sex and lust drove us. Nothing more.

I ran my claws lightly down his spine until I traced the curve of his buttock through the material of his trousers. “Should I remove these too?”

Jason lifted his head and need burned in his eyes. Yes, there was nothing beyond sex, for either of us. “Still so polite.”

I shoved him and he toppled backwards, crashing to the floor. Standing astride him, I pulled the rest of my suit free and dropped it into a puddle of slippery cloth. “Happy now?”

Jason propped himself up on his elbows and stared at me. “Leave the boots.” His smile was sinful. “I *like* the boots.”

“Strip, Jason.”

He kicked off his shoes and pushed down his trousers. Sitting up, he took my hand and pulled me onto my knees. Sitting over his lap, my bare skin deliciously pressed against his. I ran my mouth along his shoulder, biting, licking, his taste burning memory and need in a hot surge through my flesh. I slid forward, easing over the head of his erection. Jason groaned and wrapped his arms around me, tight. The ache to have him sharpened, edged with something I knew he could never give me.

“Charis.” He cupped my jaw, his mouth close to mine. “We haven’t much more time.” He breathed deep, closed his eyes and that familiar smile lurked on his lips. “You

smell nice too.”

“I know.” I moved my hips, slipping back and forth, heat building. Jason nipped at my shoulder, teasing little bites in rhythm in my rocking. Tension tightened low in my belly, a delicious warmth crawling over my skin.

He licked and sucked his way from the base of my neck to the sensitive skin of my throat. “Growl for me.”

His heated words brushed my damp skin and I shivered. Hands tight on my backside, he urged me hard against him, pushing, pushing... The rumble built up in my chest, an expanding pressure of sound. I shook with it. He slid deep, *deep* inside me and still the growl within me grew.

In a blur, Jason had me on my back, the carpet soft and cool against my hot skin.

Liquid black eyes held me. And then he smiled, white teeth gleaming, before he sank them into my neck.

My body bucked, the rush of fire and need tearing through me. I grabbed at him, wanting him harder, deeper, faster. Almost, I could almost taste the approaching roar burning through my flesh, bringing with it my release. Just a little—

My spine arched. The orgasm splintered through me, through both of us and I screamed. Light, heat surged over my brain, blinded me. My shift burned away, forgotten, unneeded. The joy was never ending. Glorious. I was forever, golden, perfection.

I slumped. My body was spent and shaking with the tremors of an insane orgasm and even more insane thoughts. What the hell had just happened? I stared up at Jason and brushed a trembling hand over his damp face. His gaze fixed on me. “Jason?”

He struggled away, a hand scrubbing over his eyes. “Get dressed, Charis.”

“What was that?”

“Is that your one truth?”

Something shrivelled in my gut at his sarcasm. The fire of the heat was dowsed and everything was worse. Everything. “No.” I shrugged into my suit and struggled with fumbling fingers to connect the tabs. What had I wanted to know? Scratching at my scalp, I tried to focus, to remember. “What where you really doing at the Company?”

Jason slid on his shirt and the clawed cotton knitted together in a swift surge. He didn’t look at me, staring up at the diffuse light curving above us. “I was planting a history.”

“Why?”

His gaze flicked back. “That’s another question.”

I bit down on a string of curses that needed to fly against the man. We’d just had sex, more than that. I shied away from tying emotions to what we’d done. Maybe Jason was right and the Company *had* twisted my genes into another knot. Whatever that...brain rush...had been, I hadn’t experienced it before.

I stood, stretching my spine. “All right, Jason. Don’t tell me anything.” I stared around the cell. I should have said no, we did have more pressing problems. However, Jason and sex? I could never resist. “But we have to get out of here and get to the Admiral.”

“This room has been purpose-built to contain us.” Jason pulled on his newly-knitted jacket and straightened the lines. “So we wait.”

“And that’s your plan?”

“Yes.”

Before I punched Jason, I turned into the tiny bathroom and let the door close behind me with a clunk. I ran water into the sink and splashed it over my face. The cell was pressing in on me. I hated enclosed spaces and loathed not having a plan on which to act. My indent.graft said less than three hours until the sun went nova.

The door slid back. If there was nothing else I could do, I wanted answers from Jason. “What history?”

He stood by what had been the door and didn’t turn to face me. “Charis, this isn’t the time.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” I made myself as comfortable as I could on the narrow ledge and stared at Jason’s back. “So you decided that you wanted to plant a history with the Company. Odd thing to do for a man who wanted to keep himself secret, breaking into the very place that was hunting him.”

“Were you? Hunting me that is, six months ago?” He stretched his shoulders and when he turned there was a hardness to his face that surprised me. “When did the Company know that there was another feline strain on the loose?”

I blinked. “That makes no sense. You told them about *you*?”

“I have my reasons.”

My gaze dropped from his and I fixed on the carpeted floor. “Your life is far too complicated.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” He ran a hand over his hair, smoothing it back into place. “Look, Charis. I can’t explain what’s going on. Not here, not now.” There was a twist of a smile on his mouth as he approached me. “I know it goes against the laws of nature, but you’ll have to trust me.”

“You’re right, it—”

His hand slipped over my jaw and I froze. His palm was ice and skin tingled at his touch. Dark eyes held me and resignation lurked there. “I’m sorry, Charis. I am. Really. But you’ve become something you shouldn’t and I can’t allow that.”

The cold burned through my brain.

The half-formed curse died on my lips and I slumped to the floor.

Images of Jason, of the broiling sun seared through my brain. The star bubbled and in a final surge exploded, showering me in consuming blackness—

With a shriek, I burst into consciousness again.

I lay on the floor, hot, sweating and trying to remember where I was and what the hell had just happened. Lifting my arm, I forced myself to focus on my indent.graft. Luminous numbers showed the countdown to the sun exploding at an hour and twenty minutes. My arm flopped back to my side and I stared up at the diffuse grey light in the cell’s curved ceiling.

Jason. Jason had done...something...to me. A burning cold searing my skin, my brain until I couldn’t see, couldn’t move and finally blackness engulfed me.

I pinched at the bridge of my nose, rubbed at my eyes and cursed him.

“Trust you, Jason Narak? I trust you as far as I can gut you.”

“Charis?”

Jason started forward, shocked. Good. I jumped to my feet, about to beat the crap out of him. “Surprised I’m not dead?” My boot connected with his chest and he staggered backwards. “Had your fun and thought it was time to finish me?”

He caught my punch and held my fist firm, his knuckles white at the strain. His words came through gritted teeth. "I wanted to spare you."

"Spare me?" With a neat twist, I was free and he'd doubled up from a fist to the groin. "Like I need any favours from you."

Jason slumped against the narrow ledge, pain dragging his face. "Was that necessary?"

I smirked at him. "Well, I feel much better."

"Funny, Charis."

I stood over him, angered energy bubbling through my blood. He had fooled me again and I wanted to pound him for it. "So, spare me from what?"

"You've changed. Again." He ran a hand over his sweating face his eyes distant. "Maybe it wasn't the Company. Maybe it was just...time."

I felt no different and Jason was just a feline like me; he possessed no extra powers. Was he doing all this just to confuse me? I would not be drawn into more of his lies. "Jason, you can either stop being cryptic and tell me the truth. All of it. Or..." I raised my fists. "I start talking."

His eyes narrowed. "Deadly when in heat?"

"Always."

Jason pushed himself up. "Raoul Quinn is the host. I am not Chimera." He put out his hand; I darted back from his touch and for a brief moment, something like pain flickered through his dark gaze. "To know more? I'm sorry, you can't."

"Why?"

"Charis..."

I moved closer. "Why?"

His jaw muscles twisted, tightened and he let out a slow breath. "No. You'll have to kill me."

I stared at him. "This makes no sense, Jason. What is so important?"

The door shot back and distracted me. Two guards grabbed him, but he fought free. His hand brushed icy cold over my cheek and dropped away. He stood still and let the two men take him again.

"You, Charis." A smile pulled at his mouth. "You."

His answer followed me into blackness.

Chapter Nine

I erupted off the floor, a scream tearing from my throat.

The cell was empty. The guards had taken Jason and left me.

My ident. graft said twenty minutes until the sun went nova. I had to get out. The Admiral was a host. Ciro had said the other darkness had killed him when it took possession. So, Quinn would die...and I would die right along with him for failing in my task.

Jason's fate I couldn't dwell on. Not if I wanted to function.

I rolled onto my feet and worked out the kinks in my muscles. My last hope was Aud and the extraction team. Pressing the receptor under my skin, the familiar buzz surged through me. "Aud? Any news?"

"There you are!" She sounded relieved and oddly out of breath. *"I couldn't reach you. I thought—"*

"Run in with Jason Narak. Made the mistake of letting him into my personal space." And wasn't that the truth. "How close are you?"

The door to the cell shot back, too quick for me to react. "Right here."

Her words reverberated in my ears and under my skin. I stared at the woman standing in the doorway. The grey light spilled over a gun pointed straight at me. "Aud?"

She wagged the gun, urging me farther back into the cell. Moving forward, her features fell under the light and I knew who she was. The doctor, the one who had wanted Quinn to stay in the medical bay. "Try anything and I fire."

I was still out and dreaming of a bizarre form of rescue. Or I was delusional. A sharp pinch of my skin proved that I wasn't asleep, so it had to be the latter. "What's going on?"

"For a cat, you are decidedly dense." Aud edged around the cell, her gun staying fixed on me. "Move forward. I need you alive, but that doesn't mean I won't put holes in you."

"What do you want?" I lifted my hands and followed her instructions. I was escaping from my cell, in however a bizarre a fashion. And that had to be my first thought. "What does the Company want from me?"

Aud's laughter was harsh. "The Company? That organisation has no clue what it stumbled upon and it was so easy for me to warp your use. It uses Mosaics for grunt work. Wants to breed Chimeras so the very wealthy can have rejuvenating spare parts. And what it's really been sitting on is the host."

"The host?"

"Playing ignorant is not winning me over."

I looked back at her. The hand-light she carried cut across her face. I had never had an image to put to her voice, but I hadn't imagined a tall, thin-featured blonde. Aud had seemed warmer, smaller, somehow plumper. She had lied to the Company? So...was the Admiral a false mission? I couldn't be sure, but the device in my neck was real. I forced a smile. "Did you confer with my last handler? He grew to hate me too."

"I have no interest in you, Charis. You simply inhabit the shell."

My gut tightened. She thought *I* was the host. They were all insane. Yet, maybe she

would tell me what Jason wouldn't. "What will the darkness give you?"

"Power beyond imagining."

Could she really be that gullible? *Power beyond imagining* was a line if ever I heard one. "So what? A planet, a system, a galaxy?"

Aud pressed the gun into my spine and pushed me forward. "At least the darkness has no sense of humour," she muttered. "That will be a relief."

"I'm devastated." I put my hand out to steady myself in the darkness. Events were starting to slot into place, namely a certain doctor smelling too much of breakfast. "You poisoned Raoul Quinn. Why? And why set me up as his protector?"

"Jason Narak," Aud almost spat the name, "wanted to confuse us. Some think he's the host." Her laugh was harsh and I realised the handler I had known really was an act. "And he has Quinn posing as it. I wanted to prove that the Admiral was just a man."

I had to point out, "He's still alive, though."

Aud ignored me. "We've watched your line for decades and know what you are. This mission has you on this ship at the time of Emergence. And the Company would have backed down from a hit on Quinn...though that would have wrecked Narak's scheming."

"Spent much time with Jason?"

"No."

"You surprise me. That level of hatred usually comes from *intimate* knowledge."

"You're disgusting."

I smirked. "Thank you."

The blackness parted and opened out onto the room in which Quinn had sat. Now, the circular room was empty.

"Carry on," Aud said, jabbing my spine again.

"Where are we going?"

"Wait and see. I wouldn't want to spoil it for you."

I could take her; I knew that. Take her and have her flat on her back with her own gun in her mouth. Seconds and she would be broken and bloody. But I waited. Aud knew what was about to happen and I had no clue. She was also much more garrulous than Jason. "I'm so annoying. Are you certain you don't want to rub it in?"

Aud cursed, making me smile. She palmed open the polished black door and nudged me out into the narrow tunnel. Sharp light at the tunnel's entrance forced me to squint. "All right, I'll tell you how you'll die."

"Die?"

"You're a shell to the darkness, Charis. It will live through you and rule the bright world."

She sounded insane. But I'd met darkness and it did live in people. It also killed them. Ciro's face still burned in my mind, the fear and horror consuming him moments before he died. I pushed that memory down. "And it's all inspired by the supernova?"

Aud took my arm in bony fingers as we padded out into the space below the platform stairs. Above us, there was low chanting. "The darkness has watched us, taught us, and waited for us to prepare the way."

I'd changed my mind. Aud *was* insane. She stank of adrenalin and her skin had flushed. Her grip on my arm was fierce. I doubted there was a logical thought in her head right now. "That's nice."

“The faithful will be rewarded.”

She pulled me up the wide stairs to the platform. The chanting was louder now. Rows of people, all of them still dressed in their jewelled scraps and copper and silver leaf knelt before a huge golden frame. It twisted into the dome roof.

The chant changed and I dragged my gaze away. My stomach turned.

Jason. The Captain gripped his arm as he led him through the kneeling crowd. Jason’s bare skin shone, thick with gold leaf and an unknown script spidering in thin, intersecting lines across his legs, torso, arms and face. Why was he allowing this? Sacrificing himself? I started to tremble. His last words burned.

You, Charis.

I clamped a hand to my mouth to hold down the rising panic. This was wrong. Raoul Quinn was the host, not Jason. He should be the one to die. Not him. Not for me. The urge to shift pounded beneath my skin.

“Shift and I remove an arm.” Aud’s voice burned over my ear.

“Try it.”

I stopped caring about Aud Sebak.

A column of fierce white light surrounded Jason and with a slow curve, lifted him through the air, unmoving. With a creak, manacles snapped open on the gleaming frame and clamped Jason to it.

He saw me. Anger and fear rushed through his eyes and he strained against the metal cuffs securing him.

“What is she doing here?” Captain Fariel’s stern voice cut through the chanting, causing it to falter. “We’re only minutes away and—”

“And what if it’s not him?” Aud jabbed her gun at Jason. “What if *we’re* right and Charis Sur is the host?”

“Hey!” Jason’s voice echoed around the dome. “Nobody asked my opinion. I vote for Raoul Quinn.” His sarcasm whipped an unexpected smile to my mouth.

“There is no time to prepare her. We must welcome them with the gleam of metal.” Doubt had crept into Fariel’s voice and he looked at his ident.graft. There were only minutes to go before the sun went nova and whatever they were waiting for happened. Fariel’s mouth thinned. He snapped his fingers and a cold column of light shrouded me. Frozen, it tugged me upwards.

I couldn’t move, couldn’t fight it as I swung towards Jason and then around him. Clamps caught me and held me to the frame. I strained at the golden cuffs but couldn’t free my wrists or ankles.

“I didn’t want this, Charis.”

I turned, twisted my head, but could only catch the edge of Jason’s profile. “Where’s the Admiral?”

He snorted. “Fariel also didn’t chance *not* including him. He’s down amongst the devotees.”

“What? The frame wouldn’t take his weight?”

Jason laughed. “Something like that.”

A slow, soft hiss swept over the low chanting and made us both look up. The top of the dome was parting and the burning light of the sun poured down over us. “How did we get into his mess?”

“Both of us were born with the wrong genes.” Tremors vibrated through the frame as

Jason yanked at the binds holding him. The scent of his blood cut the air. “I can’t get free. You have to shift, Charis. Get yourself free. The Admiral is the only one who can save us.”

The sun pulsed above me, its churning photosphere chilling my skin. “You can shift too.”

“No. No, I can’t.”

“But you’re—”

“Charis. I will happily argue with you later. I have the genes, but I can’t shift. Believe me. Your shift will be different. Be ready. Now do it.”

I focused and let the change of my altered genes shift over my body. My skin burned, the boil of my blood firing through every muscle. Not the same. Not just my hands and senses were changing. The shift poured over all of me, ripping away my human form and charging energy through different muscles, skin, fur.

I roared and a beast’s voice shook the air.

The chant died.

Thin bands of metal couldn’t hold me and with one pull, the cuffs tore like the thin gold leaf that stank in my nostrils. I twisted through the air, landing on soft, heavy paws. I ignored the screaming humans scrambling from my path and scented the air. Raoul Quinn was close. The odour of meat and grease clung to him.

Fariel blocked me. He pointed a gun at my face, a flimsy thing only able to spit pellets of energy. It would not stop me. “What monstrosity are you?”

I growled, the sound a delicious vibration in my chest. Fariel blinked and stepped back. The hand holding the gun began to shake and the quick stink of fear coated him.

“Whatever you are, it’s too late.”

I followed his gaze upwards. The surface of the sun flared. Seconds and the sun would lose its outer shell in a brilliant wash of light. The *Pagidion*’s shields would protect us from the radiation surge. But Quinn was close. I leapt over Fariel, ignoring the peppering of his gun across my fur-thick belly and landed beside the unconscious Admiral.

I grabbed his shirt with long teeth and hauled him up. I cursed the taste of him. And no, he didn’t smell fully human. He smelled like...one of Jason’s men. But there was no time to dwell on Jason’s scheming. He said the Admiral could save us and I was willing to believe that.

My new form had incredible strength and I bounded towards the frame, clambering up the network of struts with the limp fat body of the Raoul Quinn. More bursts of energy singed my fur. I ignored them.

I stared up at Jason, held that dark, liquid gaze. He twitched a smile.

And then the sun exploded.

Chapter Ten

Blinding light surged over me. I could see nothing.

The Admiral pressed against my furred chest as I jammed him up against the golden frame. His stink burned my nostrils. Raoul Quinn was not a natural thing. But I clung to his alien scent in the endless burn of the exploding star. Clung to it and believed that Jason was right; that this man would save us.

Fear knotted in my stomach and I couldn't push away the thought that when the glare faded and I looked up at Jason I'd see someone else behind his eyes.

I pushed the Admiral harder into the frame. He would die; he had to for Jason to live. I accepted that. And if I lived, the Company would kill me for Aud's corruption. My jaw muscles tightened, locking my teeth and their grip on Quinn's clothes. Jason would live. It was worth it.

I could think about how insane I was when I was dead.

The light changed. Dark splashes broke up the white glare, sliding through the brightness and curving towards me. The stench of rot and death flowed around them. Darkness was here for the host.

Wisps of brown-black smoke swirled around me, brushing my fur with ice.

I shuddered and clung to the frame. Cold ate through the fur-edged pads on my paws and claws slipped on the frosted metal. Jason's scream cut the air and the frame shook. My blood surged. But I forced myself to stay still and hold tight to Raoul Quinn.

The blackness thickened around me, pouring over my fur, my senses, bringing with it the acrid burn of rust. Whispers pushed against my brain. Cold, ancient thoughts stabbed at me, twisting, testing, needing to find a path to live. Hooks caught and buried themselves. Howling burst around me. It took me a second to realise the panicked yelps came from me.

I was going to die.

And Jason. Was he already dead?

Light faded. Pain seared through my skull and I tasted blood at the back of my mouth. I willed myself to hold on as Raoul Quinn jerked, his face contorting. Half-open eyes gleamed black, but nothing of the Admiral shone through. His smell changed. His fingers flexed and gripped the bars of the frame.

The barbs in my brain pulled free and I screamed.

The Admiral's bulk slid away. I scrambled to hold him on instinct, but he shrugged free and climbed easily down the frame. Men and women flocked to him, painted hands stroking over his body. I collapsed against the cold metal and breathed. Above me, the soft hiss of the closing dome ran cold over my skin.

It was done. Darkness had its host.

"Charis?" And the host wasn't Jason. His choked voice pulsed heated relief through my body. "Change back."

I'd forgotten I still lived in the powerful form of a large cat. The shift eased over me and exhaustion sat in every bone. I shoved my arms further into the frame and hung there. Far below, the chanting started again, fast and wild.

"We have to get away."

“It’s over, Jason.” I found the energy to look up. He hung off to my left, blood staining his gold-leafed skin. I winced. “What did they do to you?”

“Free me.”

Yes, hanging battered and practically naked from a golden frame and he still wouldn’t give me a straight answer. Why did it still surprise me? I hauled myself up and slowly dragged and pulled my limbs to him. The cuffs were dull. I tested the mechanisms and the energy powering through them had died. It was easy to pull the restraints apart.

Jason slumped beside me. “The Admiral’s cruiser. We have to get off this ship.” He stared down. “Now.”

“What is the Admiral? He didn’t smell—”

“Not here. Not now.”

And that was the usual answer. He had proven that Quinn was the host, saving both of us. For a moment, I let his usual avoidance slide. We climbed down, slow. My feet hit the floor and my knees buckled. Jason held me up.

The Admiral still strutted around the platform, his arms outstretched, welcoming the touch of the fawning men and women kneeling before him. He looked back to me and his chilled smile forced a shiver.

Quinn moved towards me and I stumbled backwards. I didn’t want his foulness anywhere near me. He stopped and more devotees clung to his body. An absent hand stroked a woman’s long blonde hair, teasing it through his fingers. “Jason, this is not exactly the body we were expecting.” He stared down at his fat fingers caught in blonde tresses. “But it fulfils the function required.”

The Admiral’s gaze turned back to us. Black smoke streamed around his pale irises. “And now the question becomes what to do about you?”

Jason’s hand dug into my waist. “I gave you what you wanted. You have a host.”

Quinn patted his cheek and tension stiffened the arm that held me up. The Admiral’s hand dropped and he rubbed the brittle gold leaf between his fingers. “We wanted you. The immortal Jason Raed Narak. But your little playthings fulfil our need.” His gaze slid to me. “More than fulfil it.”

I stared at Jason, but found only a warning glare. “What happens to us now?”

“We leave.”

Quinn laughed. “Is that what you think?” He pulled his hand free of the woman’s hair. “Is that what we promised?” His laughter prickled my skin. “You will be our first hunt; our first feast. Now.” Cold eyes bore into me. “Run.”

We ran.

Leaping down the stairs and pounding out of the dome, I forced my exhaustion back. We raced across the bridge and across the parkland. The fresh scents of wet grass lifted the sour burn of the darkness inhabiting Admiral Quinn. Trees thickened, light dappled and the air grew heavy with the odour of soil, leaves and damp bark. The tube to the flight deck lay beyond the forest.

I glanced back and wished I hadn’t.

Men and women surged from the dome and charged along the path we had taken. Faces had twisted into hard masks and darkness consumed their eyes. “Quinn said feast. I’m guessing he’s not inviting us to dinner.”

Jason snorted and pushed me through a gap in the trees. “They are desperate for sensation.” He followed my gaze back to the rush of people charging across the grass.

“And they’re already spreading.”

“Spreading?”

“They live permanently in this dimension through the host. But they can now take...excursions...into others.”

“What do you know about this, Jason?”

“Too much. But we’re being hunted.” He shoved me ahead of him. “I’d rather save my breath for running.”

The Admiral’s words hit me. *The immortal Jason Raed Narak*. Fariel was right. “Why run? Nothing can hurt you.”

He dragged me through the last of the dense patch of trees and through the carefully manicured bushes. “Chop me up and cook me and I *will* die.”

The tube to the flight deck stretched up no more than a hundred metres ahead. The stench of the chasing horde washed over me, pumping strength into my tired legs. So close I could feel the pulse of darkness burning in every one of them. And Quinn. He was there, in with the pack, moving faster in death than he ever could in life. Hard fingers grabbed at my clothes and slid off the slippery fabric.

“Eat you raw.” The man’s harsh voice cut through me, driving panicked blood through my body. Fariel. It was Captain Fariel’s voice. “Taste your flesh.”

Jason slammed his palm against the tube panel, threw me inside and dragged at the transparent seal, desperate for it to shut. A hand gripped the seal edge, others joined it and they pushed. Pushed hard. The panel started to give way.

“You want flesh?” I shifted, became the beast and with one swipe of razored claws sliced through skin, bone and muscle.

Jason slammed the panel shut, blood splattering the clear alloy. The possessed howled and fell upon the wounded, grabbing at the slashed hands, tasting the ripped muscle, ignoring the shrieks of those they ate.

I fell back, sickened and the shift fell away. I slumped to the floor and my body begged for sleep. But we weren’t free. Not yet. Quinn pushed his way through the carnage, that same chilled smile cutting his mouth.

“There’s nowhere you can hide.” He smeared the blood on the tube, lifted his hand and licked his fingers. “Not now. You freed us, Jason. And we will live in this bright world until it is consumed.” He glanced back to the possessed cannibalising the fallen. “We are the richest, the most powerful people, the rulers of your worlds. Nothing can stop us.”

“Have you finished gloating?”

Quinn’s heavy lips quirked upwards. “For now.” He wiped at a droplet of blood caught at the edge of his mouth. “Though I quite enjoy it. Very satisfying.”

Jason wiped his ident.graft down over the panel and the tube dropped away. My final view of Lord Admiral Sir Raoul Quinn was his dark, smoke-twisted eyes watching us descend.

I ran a trembling hand through my gelled hair. “Well, *officially* he’s alive after the supernova. If that was my mission. I don’t know anymore.” The laugh burst out of me. “So, job done.”

“Yes.”

“What the hell are we going to do now, Jason? They *eat* people.” I swallowed bile against the memories of only moments before. “Eat each other.”

He pulled me to my feet. “Oh, this isn’t over. In fact,” the tube opened out onto the long, narrow flight deck, “this is all going exactly to plan.”

“You’re insane.”

“Yes.” He smiled, and an edge of madness sparked in his eyes. “Quite probably.”

Chapter Eleven

The former Admiral's shuttle squatted in a holding bay. Jason palmed the door and it slid back, silent. He pushed me inside. Lighting flashed across the ceiling and floor, revealing a plush white interior. The air was scrubbed, but the faint odour of carpet, fabric and Jason lingered. The door closed and Jason moved past me to the controls. To my surprise, he sat in the flight chair and plunged his hands into an organic console.

"Where's your Epsilon?" I grabbed at the back of his chair as the shuttle shook and pulled away from the holding bay. "You can't fly without one."

"Sorry, forgot to include a human brain in my ship."

I stared at the curve of the console, Jason's gold painted hands buried beneath the oddly white-blue and wet surface. "You did this."

"I do a lot of things."

"Damn it, Jason."

"Sit." He nodded to the small ledge cut out of the wall. "When this is over—"

"It's over, Jason. Darkness has a host. We lost." I tucked myself into the ledge, gripping at the edge as the shuttle banked and entered the flight deck. "So you don't need to keep your secrets any longer."

"It's not over."

His hands curled into fists and the shuttle shot along the narrow deck.

"What about the—" we burst through the force shield, "—shield. All right, not a problem then." The cloud of expelled gas and debris shrouded the *Pagidion*. Jason guided the shuttle, his finger flexing through the console. It was disconcerting. "So you designed this?"

"Yes."

"You created a ship that doesn't need a brain?"

"As I said, yes."

"But that's impossible." I rubbed at my eyes and tried to think. The events of the last twelve hours weighed heavy and I wanted to crawl into a corner and sleep. Now, Jason claimed to have invented a wholly new form of technology. "Who are you?"

The shuttle banked left, turning back towards the cruiser. "I lied."

I couldn't help the laughter that burst from me. "Really? I'm shocked."

Jason glanced away from the screen and a wry smile quirked his mouth. "Thought you'd like that one." He twisted back in his chair, resettling his shoulders. "I *am* old. Older than even Captain Fariel thought."

I stared at his familiar profile. What was I looking for? Some sign that he was telling the truth this time? But he looked the same as he had only a minute before: sinfully beautiful. I winced. "All right, not the place I'd thought you'd start. So..." I bit at my lip and then finally asked the question. "How old?"

"What? Are you expecting antediluvian?"

"From you? I have no idea." The bright round glare of the *Pagidion* shone through the swirling gas cloud streaming out from Betelgeuse. What he was doing finally hit me. "Jason, why are we heading back?"

"It's not over." His jaw tightened and he flicked his gaze to me. "Listen. I know I've

held a lot back.” I snorted, but he carried on in the same heated tone. “But there is a reason. There have always been cracks into this dimension. Darkness took advantage of them. It can live within the human brain for a brief time and takes the knowledge of its host. I couldn’t, can’t share what I know.” Dark eyes held me. “With anyone.”

I didn’t want to admit it, didn’t like it, but he made sense. “So what can you tell me?”

“I’m four hundred and twenty two years old.”

“So *not* antediluvian.” The sarcasm soured my mouth. “That’s impossible, Jason.”

His hands formed fists and the shuttle surged forward. I gripped the ledge and braced my feet against the pale carpet. The shimmer of the *Pagidion’s* force field arced against the gas and debris. The shuttle skimmed it, so close I could see the parkland, the forest and the golden dome still squatting on the lake. There was no sign of the other passengers.

Our engines began to drone, the noise throbbing through my ear bones. I winced, trying to cover my ears and keep my seat as Jason swung the shuttle closer. My gut tightened and I tried not to think that he was going to ram the cruiser.

“My father was a scientist.” His voice rose above the whine of the engines. “One into self-experimentation. He screwed with his own genome.” Jason’s face was hard, bitter. “When he bred, I was one of the results.”

“Chimera.”

“No. Even Chimeras die.”

We bounced the shield. “Jason!” The screaming engines intensified. A face flashed on to the screen, pale, with a cloud of dark hair that didn’t belong on her scalp. The Alpha, Rachel, smiled.

“Jason. I’m ready.”

He twitched a smile in return. “Thank you for this, Rachel.”

“You’re ending it.” Her bright green eyes shone with sad relief. “We owe you.”

“No.” Jason’s denial was bitter. “It was my fault. I should never—” He broke off. “Initiating burst.”

His hands spread wide and swept beneath the console. The shuttle juddered and then a ripple of energy broke free and swept over the sphere below. The *Pagidion’s* shield collapsed. Stellar matter hurtled towards the cruiser’s transparent shell, the gas cloud following in a swirling rush. I saw the first crack splinter across the ship’s hull, before the pale cloud obscured it. Life pods burst automatically from the perimeter, but I lost them in the thick dust. Light died on the cruiser and winked out, becoming a floating black ball. No air, the cold of space and radiation pulsing from Betelgeuse was a death sentence.

“You killed them.”

Jason’s golden hands tightened into fists. The shuttle shot away. “I’ve done worse.”

“Jason...”

“Charis, I had to stop them. Darkness would feed, wipe this dimension clean and move on. It’s what it does. It’s *all* it does.”

“Jason.” Rachel’s face half-formed on the screen, drawn, grey. “I’m sorry. The virus is free but I didn’t... I failed you—” She vanished.

“Rachel!” Jason swore. “All right, Charis, in a second I’m going to be... Charis?”

I didn’t hear him.

A cold, ancient weight sat on me, my limbs and I couldn't move. I only knew that I breathed in and out and that my heart beat in a slow, solid rhythm. I moved my head to stare at Jason. But it wasn't me. I had lost all control of my body. I tried to scream, to shout, but my tongue didn't belong to me, not anymore.

"Oh secrets, Jason Narak. The secrets you kept in your little cat."

It was my voice, but it wasn't me speaking. The heaviness in my mind shrouded me, pressed and drove deeper into my brain. Pain seared, but I didn't thrash, didn't cry out. I was trapped in my own rag doll body.

"She's changed. Perfection sits in every cell. Ah, Jason, like you, she's natural."

Jason stared at me and I saw horror in his eyes. "You can't have her."

"Too late."

Darkness pressed and images flashed through my thoughts, of a man, dark like Jason, but older, a man bartering his son for knowledge. I pushed for more and hollow laughter rang in my head. Jason's image jumped forward, then more of them in a vivid rush. In a surgical unit, he sliced out the innards of a tiger. Another of him, reading the bio-signs of a human male, the test subject's brain exposed and floating in a gel tube. And yet another of Jason running as a laboratory exploded and Mosaics chased him into the night. He had done it all. Created shifters, created human brains for ships. I wanted to be sick, but I couldn't.

"She's learning all about you, Jason. And now your precious little cat despises you."

"Leave her."

My voice was sarcastic. "And go where?"

"Into me."

He deserved it. He should be the host. Jason had been avoiding it for centuries, twisting the human race to his meet own ends. I wanted to glare at him. But the thing possessing me had me smiling. I wanted to hate him. But all that I could see in his eyes was fear and desperation. And I didn't know whether it was for himself. Or for me.

"Charis, I'm sorry. You were never a part of my plan." His face hardened as he glared at the thing inside me. "Now leave her."

"Why? You only ever wanted her body." My hand slid over my breast, tracing over the curve of my hip. "That you can still have." My smile grew. "Right now, if you want..."

Who did I believe? All that I knew swirled in my head, but deep in my gut, I knew I had to trust him. He *wanted* to become the host. And Jason Narak didn't do anything without a reason. Darkness needed a human brain. So I was going to deny it one.

I willed myself to shift, pushing out all the strength I had to change into my new form. Pain seared over my brain as darkness fought back.

"What is she doing?" My voice sounded panicked and I jumped to my feet.

Jason was grinning. "More than I dreamed possible."

I dropped to all fours. Agony lanced through my brain, burning in images of Jason as he wired a human brain into the first interstellar prototype, as he grew humans in vats with the faces of the Admiral's bodyguards. Jason had worked down through the centuries, worked for this one moment, the one moment where he could trap darkness.

My tail swished.

The thing inside me screamed with my voice.

"Charis..." Jason's voice gave me strength.

Fur rushed over my skin. My bones reformed and muscles thickened. An animal's heart beat within my chest. I crushed my eyes against the tearing in my head. My eyes. *I'd* moved them. With a final rush, my shift erupted and I roared, the sound bursting against the silence.

Darkness ripped from my thoughts and I sagged.

"She gave you up." Jason's voice mocked me. "She believes that you're going to save everyone." His lip curled and derision settled on his familiar face. "Stupid beast." He turned back to the screen. "Now to get away from here."

He stopped.

Jason had never removed his hands from the organic console. The wet, white-blue surface gleamed. He tried to pull himself free, but his hands remained glued beneath the panel. "What have you—?"

Jason started to scream.

I willed myself to stay shifted. It was his plan. If I changed back, I wouldn't have the strength to shift. Darkness would have a host again.

He writhed, twisted, fought. Nothing freed him and for endless, agonising minutes, he screamed until I wanted to will myself deaf. It died and he slumped across the console. I didn't move, not trusting the thing possessing him. Cautious, I slunk forward until I sat beside the flight chair. I nudged his arm with my muzzle.

Dark eyes opened and stared at me. I counted my heartbeats and tried to breathe. I wanted to say his name, and cursed my animal form. My tongue curled, a flowing gentle vibration slid over my teeth and a soft growl slipped from my throat.

"I made you growl again." He winked. "Excellent."

Chapter Twelve

My heart contracted and I let my shift fall away. I slumped back and my eyes closed. “Glad you’re still you, Jason.”

“That makes two of us.” A slow slurp shot my eyes open. It sounded too much like Alano Ciro... Jason had pulled his hands free of the console. The panel solidified and began to contract, to curl and tighten until a clear solid ball the size of my fist sat before him. He picked it up and held it to the light. Something flickered at the centre. I winced. Darkness screamed. The sound vibrated through my senses. “And now it’s over.”

“What did you do?”

“They wanted me. They got me.” He tossed the ball up in the air and caught it again. “I synthesised my DNA and created this trap.” He turned the ball in his palm. “As you forced it out, so did I and the only place it could go was into this. Just as before when it only had Quinn.”

He peered at the tiny speck of darkness at the ball’s heart. “This is all of it. All darkness. We stopped the cycle.”

I stared up at him, too tired to move. “Who are you really, Jason?”

He put the ball on the console. “I was born Jason Raed Anders. Narak is my mother’s name.” He spread his hands again over the curved panel and it flared with life. The shuttle jumped forward, leaving the dead star and the dead ship light years behind. Jason pushed himself to his feet and scrubbed a hand over his painted face. “I will tell you more. But you need to sleep. Though first.” His golden hand brushed cold over my neck and a pinprick of pain jolted me. “No more regulator.”

I searched for the familiar bump under my skin, but found it flat. “Thank you.”

“At least you won’t explode now.” He winced as he looked at his arm, still thick with gold leaf. “I need to wash.” He offered his hand and pulled me too my feet. “This way.”

A panel slid back in the soft white wall. Beyond was a small room, with a bed and a shower room to the rear. It was furnished in the same universal soft white. Jason shrugged. “Quinn liked white.”

“How did you meet him?”

“I didn’t. Quinn was another synthesised version of me.” His smile was brief. “Albeit skewed. I grew him in a vat.”

“Like your team?”

Jason stopped and stared at me. “It showed you that?” He let out a slow sigh. “Sometimes the clone would fail, or die. The bodyguards replaced him.”

The level of Jason’s technological knowledge was staggering. I sank onto the bed. Jason was subdued. He had defeated his enemy. Saved us. For four centuries, he had planned, worked and done some pretty horrific things... “You don’t think it’s worth what you had to do?”

Jason stopped in the doorway. His hand tightened around the doorframe, before he looked at me. “You’re still you. It was worth it.”

That got a hitch in my throat, but the panel slid shut behind him and there was the hiss of a lock. Jason needed to be alone.

I unstrapped my boots and paused. Clothes, I shifted and I had clothes. Which was bizarre. It had felt real. I had whiskers and a tail, had roared. My boots dropped to the floor. I would think about it later. No doubt, it was a part of Jason's scheming.

The mattress supported my curled body and I drew the cover over me. I found instant, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

"Charis..."

I drifted up from sleep to the soft sound of Jason's voice. I stretched the kinks out of my body and finally opened my eyes. "I keep passing out on you. Of course some of it was your doing."

He was smiling and my heart squeezed. "I think I have a lot to tell you."

"You know, that's still unnerving. I never think of you and sharing the truth in the same sentence."

"I'm crushed." Jason settled into the chair beside the bed. He smoothed his hand down over his tie. The man and his suits; seemed he couldn't live without them. "The compact version. My father started this. Darkness found him and for limitless knowledge the old bastard sold his sons."

I blinked and struggled to sit up. "Sons?"

Jason's hands knotted in his lap. "My older brother, Kien, born twelve years before me. Darkness told my father about the supernova, about their full entry into this dimension. It always prepares its way. Four hundred years ago, humans had no clue about interstellar travel. My father changed that. With Kien's help." He snorted. "He ripped his head open and stuck him in a vat. My brother was the Alpha template."

"Jason, I..." I swallowed. I didn't know what to say. The image of the man floating in the tank sharpened in my brain. His brother. "You helped."

He gave a sharp nod. "For a long time, I did. I was a good son."

"What...what did he use you for?"

A wry smile twisted his mouth. "Why do we all smell the same?"

"He made Mosaics from you." My stomach dropped and I didn't want to look at him. "So...we're related?"

"We might have been. It didn't work. He could never replicate me. I bested him there." His smile was harsh, but his gaze was unfocused. Was he reliving memories? "That failure annoyed him. It took him a couple of centuries to find another like me who he *could* copy."

"He's still alive too?"

"The copy? No, he was mortal. And my father? No. His creations tore him limb from limb."

"The Mosaic rebellion." I scrubbed my hand over my face and fell back into the deep pillows. "Can I take back not wanting to know the truth?"

Jason laughed, something sour, tired. "You and me both."

I rolled over to face him. "What are we for, Jason? Mosaics. Why the 'perfect balance'?"

"There is the host...and yes, that was me...and then there are the vassals. Humans are fragile; burn out too quickly for their taste. Mosaics have a stronger constitution to experience life."

My heart lodged in my throat. That was the larger truth and then there was what existed between us. “Why me?”

Jason took my hand, his thumb tip rubbing slow and sure over my knuckles. The affectionate gesture almost had me sighing. His lips pursed and he held my gaze. “I knew one of the factions had you in its sights. I planned to use you as a diversion. Then I found you in your office.” He lifted my hand and kissed my palm. “My plan changed.”

“You used me. Left me.”

“I ran.” His laughter was soft. “You scared me, Charis. You got under my skin and I panicked. Instead of pushing them towards you, I left my amended history in the company archives to throw off the faction that thought *you* were the host.”

I watched him rub my hand, the warm, slow touch soothing. I needed it. He had offered too much information too soon and I couldn’t think. I willed myself to focus and centred on the one thing that had always burned. “And what happens to us now?”

Jason let my hand go. “I don’t know. I never planned for what happened *after*.” The muscles in his jaw tightened and he stared at the bed cover. He pulled at an errant strand of white fibre. “It showed you what I was, what I’ve done. I wiped out the *Pagidion*. Killed the ruling class. Eventually, through Rachel’s spreading of a virus, all interstellar craft will die. I’ve destroyed our civilisation.” He paused and sank back in his chair. “At least I kept one promise to Kien. I stopped the neural-ships.”

He looked up and his eyes were cynical. “Darkness touched me a long time ago, Charis. Only a thin thread, but I knew it, spoke with it, shared its memories. It made me into the man I am.”

“The man who, despite all that he had planned, was willing to sacrifice himself for me?” I twitched a smile. “Maybe I misjudged the darkness.”

“Very funny, Charis.”

“I try.” I rolled back and stared up at the curved white ceiling. Smooth, calming, so different from how I had arrived strapped into a cage, bones and mind shaken. I blinked. “You have this ship.” My gaze slid to him. “The only working interstellar craft left in operation.”

“I don’t plan to be Emperor, Charis.”

“Shame. The robes, the crown...”

“...the harem?”

My eyes narrowed. “All right. Not Emperor. But this technology can replace neural-ships.”

Jason’s head tilted to one side. A smile lurked. “You trust me, Charis.”

“What?”

“No fighting and only the lightest touch of sniping.” He smiled the smile that made me remember I was in heat. I swallowed. His smile deepened. “You believe me.”

Warmth filled my face. “So?”

“So...it’s nice.” He let out a slow breath. “It’s like it was before I ran.”

I smirked at him. “Because I scared you.”

There was the hint of the old gleam back in his eyes. “I shouldn’t have admitted that, should I?”

“No. You’ve exposed a weakness I may have to exploit.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Do you promise?”

I bit back laughter. “You’re an insane man, Jason.”

He pushed himself up and settled his jacket on his shoulders before he refastened it. "Get used to it. I'm still not certain what my life span is."

My gut knotted and the desire to throw him on the bed shrivelled away. I'd forgotten. He wasn't a man, not really. *The immortal Jason Narak*. Quinn's words burned back and forced me to move. "I shifted, Jason, really shifted." I willed a lightness into my voice. "I had a tail."

"I thought the Company had been meddling. Darkness said it. You're a natural."

I followed him through to the flight cabin. The deep blackness of space filled the screen, the stars a rush of milky streaks. Jason settled into his flight chair and spread his hands over the console. The smooth silence of the cabin changed and there was the rumble through the hull of engines. Stars slowed and solidified.

The shuttle lurched and I grabbed at the back of his chair.

On the screen, we dropped into orbit above a small pale green moon. The raging storms of a blue gas giant churned behind it. The thin atmosphere buffeted the shields and I found my little ledge again. "Jason." I had to shout over the engine roar. "What am I? How the hell can I shift *with* my clothes?"

"Yes, that was impressive." His dark eyes flicked over my body. "And a shame really."

"Jason..."

"I have unexpected skills too." The ship dropped lower, streams of pale cloud swirling over the screen. "I shut down your mind." He glanced at me and winced. "Sorry about that. I also have the ability to hide in plain sight."

That explained why I hadn't seen him in the first few hours aboard the *Pagidion*. "And I can shift into a large cat, but keep my clothes? So useful." I watched the screen as we dropped into clear air above a white-peaked mountain range. "But how can I..." I stared at him and a smile twitched over his mouth. "I've changed." My stomach dropped, and it had nothing to do with the fast decent of the shuttle. My altered genes. Somehow the more than perfect balance had triggered in me. "I'm...like you?"

"You're a host, Charis. Welcome to the club."

"So Aud was right?" I scrubbed at my face. "A host. Like you. With a life span. Like you."

Jason smiled. "Yes."

We swept over a glistening tarn and towards a columned building carved from the living granite. I forced myself to focus. "Jason, where are we going?"

The craft swooped below the great rock canopy and along a brown-black tunnel. Within moments, red dust surged around us and with a gentle bump, the shuttle landed. Jason pulled his hands away from the console and stood. He straightened his jacket as he turned to me.

He held out his hand. Mine slipped into his automatically and I wanted to ask if that was another of his special abilities. "I made you a promise, Charis." His finger traced over my mouth, slipped along my jaw and teased the skin below my ear. I leant into his touch and the need to purr filled me. "This moon is my home." He lifted an eyebrow. "And all this is over."

The surge of the heat burned through my blood. "How big's your bed, Jason?"

"Big." And the smile he gave me was sinful.

The End

About the Author:

Kim lives on an ancient boundary line, once marked by a Neolithic burial tomb. The tomb's now a standing stone circle—thank the Georgians for that one—and stirs her mind with thoughts of history and ancient myths. She mixes the essence of the past into fantasy, along with the essential mix of magic and sex. She also writes science fiction romance, pushing out into the far future with effortlessly sexy men and the women who can't resist them.

Kim is multi-published. You can contact her on her website: www.kim-knox.co.uk or come and chat at her blog: www.darknessandromance.wordpress.com

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