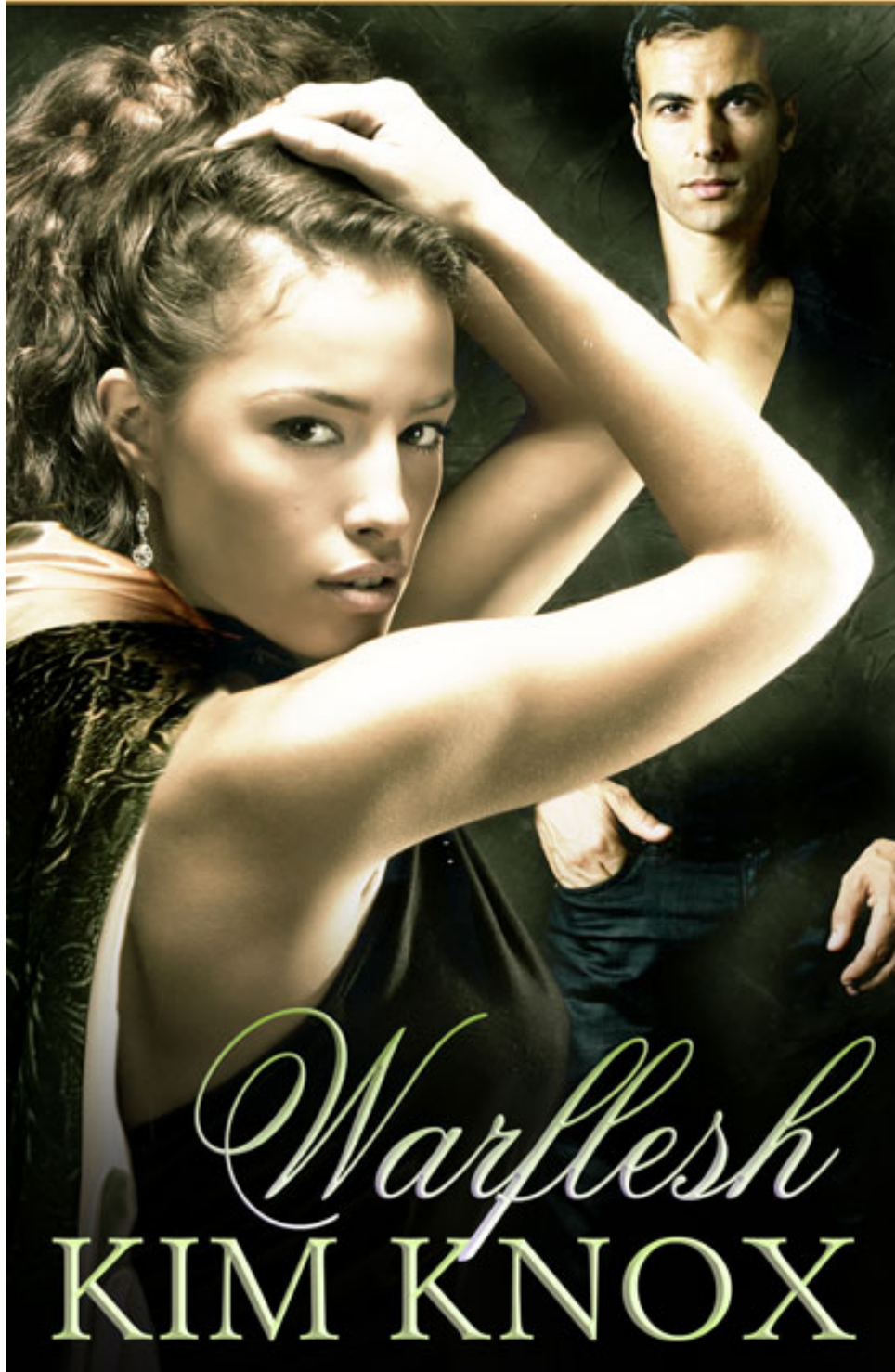


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Warflesh
KIM KNOX

Warflesh

Kim Knox

Fina Brodie is warflesh. Enhanced by her government to bring ultimate pleasure, her negotiation skills secure anything her superiors want. The choice of pleasure she offers has always been hers. Until now. She's not meeting Kian, Lord of the Tir, to negotiate for their mysterious spice-water. She's payment.

And she's not alone in bringing pleasure to the mysterious Tir leader. The man Kian has chosen to join them in the very sexual, very *public* spring festival has long headed her "never ever" list. Add the spice-water, which is rocket fuel to her already highly evolved libido, and it makes her reactions to Jonathon Raegh all the more dangerous.

But the Tir have a hidden agenda, and as the aphrodisiac qualities of the spice-water ignite long-suppressed lusts, all is revealed to Kian, Fina and Jon in the heat and passion of the arena.

Reader Advisory: Let there be no confusion. The spring festival is a sexual feast between two incredibly sexy men and one very lucky woman. Get the ice water ready!

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

Warflesh

ISBN 9781419923999

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Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication November 2009

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WARFLESH

Kim Knox

Chapter One

Fina Brodie pinched at the bridge of her nose and tried to remember why she was warflesh. The mission report scrolled over the light curve stretching across her narrow desk, the gray metal of the ship's wall shimmering behind it. Damn it, her government traded her out to secure treaties, to pull in supplies. Not this. Not for *convenience*.

She sank back in her chair and the crystal sharp image of Alpha-Lyrae-9 turned on her desk. The world glistened, its vast white sheets of ice and snow lit by its distant sun. The emperor wanted the rumored spice lakes flowing cold beneath its frozen surface. He had no thought for the war effort, no concern for protecting the troops, just an obsession with his own personal consumption.

Fina let out a low groan. Her emperor only mirrored the leader on Alpha-Lyrae-9. He and his people lived beneath the miles of ice, and demanded her in exchange for access to the lakes. Some ancient spring ceremony that legend said would thaw the planet. She snorted. She was certain he used that excuse to fuck absolutely anyone he wanted.

The door to her small office chimed and she cleared the image of the planet with the sweep of her hand. "Come," she murmured.

"You've read the latest file?" Commander Paul Waters stepped forward and the door slid shut behind with a soft hiss and a clunk as it hit the bulkhead. He gripped the back of the chair, leaning his body weight forward. "You ready?"

"What is this, Paul?" She pushed back her hair, her fingers sliding into the loose curls. "I ratify treaties. I don't secure...alcohol."

Paul tilted his head. "The emperor is an old man. He's decided that spice-water is his secret to assured longevity, to his seeing the end of the war. As well as the *other* benefits rumored to come with the water. As I said, he's an old man."

She echoed his sharp grin and then let it fade away. "I didn't sign up to be used this way. Didn't let them fuck with my genome so they could fuck with me."

Paul pulled back the chair, the metal legs scraping against the floor, and he sat. He stretched out his legs and picked at invisible specks on the black serge of his uniform. "We are all at the emperor's command." He looked up. "He picked your guard too."

Fina blinked. "The emperor?"

"The Tir leader." He snorted. "Kian, Lord of the Tir."

Silent curses rushed through her brain, but she held them back. "That isn't part of the deal either. I pick. It's my body they could be screwing and *I* get a say in that. I fought hard for that right."

Paul winced, whether from her anger or from a reminder of how she worked, she wasn't sure. She suspected the latter. None of the senior personnel on the imperial warship approved of the way she got the job done. "The emperor agreed to all of Lord Kian's demands."

"This isn't a negotiation. It was never that. I'm just traded meat." She tapped her desk and the light curve shimmered between them before curling to the side. Fina stared at the spinning world and the data streaming across it. "I have no details, Paul."

He focused on the streaming information. "Times, dates—"

She would break into her friend's little bubble of denial. "But nothing about Lord Kian. I have to bring these points into a negotiation. What he likes, what he doesn't like and how I can satisfy those demands in return for what we need. Whether he's picked this guard so he can watch—"

"Fina!" Paul ran a hand over his hair and wouldn't meet her gaze. Yes, he had *never* liked what she had to do.

She sat forward, her fingers clasped on the smooth metal of the desk. "I need as much intel as any other soldier. This." She flicked her finger to the gleaming curve. "Tells me precisely nothing."

“I’m sorry, this is all we have. Apparently, you’re promised more on the transport down.”

“Why haven’t they just stormed the planet, taken what they wanted?” She narrowed her gaze on the information flowing over her curve. “A thousand colonists. Three access drops to the city beneath the ice. No armaments...” She frowned. “That are listed here anyway.”

“I don’t know.” He followed her gaze. “There are rumors, unsubstantiated, vague and with a higher classification than either of us will ever have, that they have a planet-wide weapon that protects them. And not even the emperor will force them over it.”

Paul pushed himself to his feet and straightened the smooth line of his jacket. “Now it’s time to go, Fina. The transport’s already waiting.”

What the hell were they playing at? All this for a few tankers of water that would have no effect on the ailing emperor. But they were her orders and she couldn’t disobey them. Warflesh who failed to agree to a mission soon found a much harsher life in the community barracks. She stood and ran her hands over her hips, easing out creases. Pulling in a breath, she lifted her chin. “What’s the guard’s name?”

“Captain Jonathon Raegh. He transferred in from the Antilles Squadron.”

Paul opened the door and stepped out into the narrow, sparsely lit corridor. He waved Fina ahead of him. She was glad of it. The air brushed cool against the thin fabric of her tunic and she resisted the need to rub warmth into her arms. What were the chances of there being two Jonathon Raeghs serving in the Antilles Squadron? Her fingers curled into her palms, perfect nails biting into the softness of her skin. The pain didn’t deflect her thoughts. He had to be her Jon—she winced—her brother’s oldest friend. The sour burn in her stomach surged.

Damn it, a condition of her enhancement to warflesh had involved a list of names of those she would never fuck. Ever. Jonathon Raegh had headed the list of the non-related. He was there for good reason.

Fina pulled in a tight breath. Everything about her mission was going sideways and she couldn't shake the feeling that it would end *badly*. She had sharp instincts. Her profession demanded it.

"Jonathon Raegh will not be happy to be here." Jon was a pilot, wed to his craft and would hate the cumbersome metal of an imperial warship. As well as seeing her again. "What does he know?" Another door opened, the vast hangar deck stretching out before them. Transports dropped into docking clamps or powered up to roar out with supplies. The noise of the transports, the shouts of deck crew, the stink of hot metal rushed over her and Fina breathed past it. "Well?"

Paul didn't meet her eyes.

She swore aloud then, a quick burst of foulness that had Paul clenching his fists. "He has no clue? What is going on here, Paul?"

"I don't know. Lord Kian has set the rules. He wants Captain Raegh ignorant of his mission and of what you are."

"Anything could be asked of him. *Anything*." Anger curled tight in her gut, but she kept the calm mask of a seasoned negotiator in place. She had to remember who she was. The thought that it would be Jon had panic hot at the edges of her thoughts. She focused on her friend, on the job. She had to. "He has to be prepared. This is wrong, Paul."

They approached a transport that had a flight crew surging around it. A man stood back, watching. Fina drew burnt, foul air into her lungs and her heart hammered. Seven years and she still recognized him. Tall, lean but dressed in the bulky black flight suit the Antilles favored, it was Captain Jonathon Raegh.

"You have your orders, Ambassador Brodie."

Fina glared at Paul, angered at the warning in his voice, before she turned her attention to the man watching the crew work. "Captain Raegh?"

He turned and she sucked in a quick, unexpected breath. Why the hell hadn't they respected her contract? He hadn't changed. He was beautiful, holding a carved,

classical perfection that simply had her staring. She blinked and worked a polite smile across her mouth. "I'm Seraphina Brodie."

He gave a smart salute, his hazel eyes sharp on her and damn it, heat burned her cheeks. He was smart enough not to acknowledge their past. Good. But his look seared her down to her toes. She'd been trading her body for five years and not once had a single glance thrown her. But this was Jon.

"Ma'am," he murmured. Jon looked to his commander. "What are my orders, Sir?"

"You're guard to Ambassador Brodie here. For the length of the mission, you are under her command. Guard her with your life."

"Understood, Sir." He straightened. "Let me check on the status of the transport." He nodded briefly. "Ma'am, Sir."

He strode away and Fina winced as she realized her gaze had fixed on his ass. She crushed her eyes shut. She made her choice of men to *avoid* the problem of attraction. Lust could cloud her senses, a by-product of her manipulated genes. Hell, it was already interfering with her ability to think. Jon had always been a forbidden temptation. "This is going to end badly, Paul."

He let out a slow sigh. "What choice do any of us have?"

A slow smile tugged at her mouth. "You're annoying when you talk sense."

Paul looked beyond her to the smooth curve of the ship. "Looks like your transport is ready."

Fina turned to find Jon standing at the bottom of the central ramp. The flight crew streamed away, gear packed, ready to move on to the next job on their rotation. Jon looked...confident, ready and damn it, her mouth was dry. The attraction, the forgotten lust she'd failed to deny pulsed hot in her blood.

She straightened her shoulders and held out her hand to Paul. His grip was warm and heavy. He squeezed her fingers and Fina wished she could hang on to the security

he offered...but she couldn't. This is what she had to do. A wry smile pulled at her mouth. In all likelihood, *Jonathon Raegh* would be the one she would have to *do*.

"Safe journey, Fina. You're scheduled back here in ten hours."

Well, at least her time with Jon would be short if not sweet. "Understood."

Paul released her hand. "Protocol demands that if you don't make contact by then, you're complicit with the enemy and your lives will be forfeit." Her friend winced. "Sorry, you know I have to state this before every mission."

"I know." She patted his arm. "I promise. I will try not to be complicit."

Fina turned away and she willed herself to close the distance between herself and the calmly waiting captain. The running lights washed over his lean body and gilded the perfection of his face. She pushed down a curse. Was this what the Tir leader wanted? Her unbalanced? Hell, how did he know her well enough to know that the captain's hard beauty could do just that? Had he looked into her past? Her clients often liked to play games, but this was one step too far.

"After you, ma'am."

Jon's voice slid smoothly over her senses and she fought to remember who she was. Enhanced sex drive or not, she was still an ambassador for the Imperial Fleet. "Thank you, Captain." He didn't deserve the polite, almost frosty edge to her voice, but she needed it. And she was glad he'd built this façade. Hours in a dark, cramped transport, the intoxicating scent of his skin mixing with her raging hormones...it was a dangerous combination. It always had been. Even before she became warflesh.

His gaze narrowed, a quick, probably unconscious movement, but it cleared and he gave her a brief nod. "Your flight crews are efficient."

"For an imperial whale?" So much for her protecting layer of frost, but the slight twitch of his perfect mouth was worth it. She strode up the ramp into the dim interior of the transport. Jon followed and the whine of the closing door rose above the distant clatter of the hangar. It clunked into place.

“I wouldn’t presume to call the emperor’s flagship a whale, ma’am.” There was a twinkle in his eye that she wanted to blame on the sparse lights of the interior, but she couldn’t. Add his profession, the legend of the Antilles to his looks, yes, Jon had to be used to getting anyone he wanted. Work hard, play harder. The Antilles way. “I’d say well-built.” He paused and the darkness couldn’t disguise the deepening smile lifting his mouth. “Curvaceous. Voluptuous.”

“You seem to become rather...personal...with your ships, Captain.” Fina was all too aware of the few centimeters that separated them. The warm scent of male skin kicked in her enhancement and the urge to ask him the question she always asked her clients burned on her tongue. *What do you want of me?*

Deliberately, she took a step back from him. No, she had to be doubly careful. “And you need to get personal with this one. We’re on a tight schedule.”

His smile danced in his eyes and damn him, he knew how irresistible that made him look. “As you wish, ma’am.”

He strode toward the control cabin and Fina pinched at the bridge of her nose, a tension headache already tightening her skull. Yes, her mission had disaster written all over it. Hell, she would *not* end up in the community barracks.

“Strap yourself in, ma’am. Control has already given us clearance.”

Ma’am. The word twisted her gut. He was only five years older than her and his use of the title made her feel...ancient. Still, it was necessary. Sense screamed it. Fina ran her hand over her hair, smoothing the tangle of curls, and held tight to the belief that the sourness in her gut was good. She would grab anything that kept her from jumping him.

She found her chair in the cabin and the harness automatically snapped around her hips and chest. Fina twisted, easing the bite of the straps into her flesh. Damn things never considered a woman’s shape, just assumed she was a rake-thin, hard-bodied female pilot.

She slipped a hand under the strap across her chest, easing the tight leather over the curve of her breast. Her peaked nipple pressed against her palm and the heat of her hand teased through the thin material. Fina sucked in a breath and couldn't resist the need to flick her thumb tip over the too-sensitive nub. Little sparks danced under her skin. Yes, her body still burned with her unwanted attraction to Jon. She shifted in the padded chair. It didn't help that the bloody harness dug into *other* places. Places she didn't want to acknowledge right then.

Fina bit her lip, willing down the hot ache torturing her flesh. Damn it, she could not play with herself in the transport. Not with *him* sitting only meters away.

Fina straightened and caught Jon staring at her. The heat in his gaze almost broke her will. He'd just caught a senior official – his friend's little sister – with her hand tight around her own breast, flushed and moaning. It would've been mortifying, if she could break her gaze from his lush mouth. *Barrack whore*. The title ran cold through her, a chill she needed. "Yes, Captain?"

Jon blinked and redness darkened his face. He pulled in a breath. "Nothing, ma'am." He swung his attention back to the wide, gleaming panel set out before him. His fingers moved quickly, automatic touches for which he was probably grateful. "Control, acknowledged. See you in ten hours."

The transport lifted smooth and slow from the hangar bay deck and swung right. Its increasing speed pushed her back into the heavy padding of her seat, and all too quickly they burst through the silver gleam of the force field into the blackness of space. The glistening white beauty of Alpha-Lyrae-9 filled half of the curved screen and Fina squinted against its glare.

The soft persistent beep of her chair broke her gaze. They'd pulled free of the flagship, so now it was time for the Tir to drip feed her more information. She hoped this was all of it. Normally her clients weren't so...coy. They knew what they wanted and were happy to state it, usually down to every last lurid detail.

The light band wrapped around the chair, a security precaution that protected the stream of information.

"Ambassador Brodie."

A rich, male voice eased over her and it did little to ease the tension gripping her body. She shifted in her seat, the leather creaking, and her hands flexed over the arm rests. The sheet remained dark. No image accompanied it and Fina wanted to put a face to his delicious voice.

"I am Kian, Lord of the Tir. Aboard your emperor's flagship, I left information concerning our spring ceremony."

The air, warmed by the wrapping sheet of technology, brushed against her skin. Fina closed her eyes and let his voice wash over her. With him, feigning attraction was necessary. A smile pulled at her mouth. If he looked as good as his voice sounded, maybe for once attraction wouldn't be an act. That would be a welcome change.

"Now, as you make your way to my planet, I can fill in some of the details."

She caught his emphasis and held down a groan. There would be yet more aspects of her mission left unexplained.

"I chose your guard, Jonathon Raegh, with purpose. Your emperor was gracious enough to give me full access to your fleet personnel and Captain Raegh, we believe, will meet your needs exactly."

Fina tried not to let her mind go where it wanted, to imagine Jon stripped of his bulky suit and his warm bare skin available to her eager mouth and fingers. Her nails dug into the soft leather of the armrest. She had to remember she would be putting on a show, that she'd have to follow Lord Kian's instruction. She had no say in how she would fuck her guard.

"Captain Raegh will learn of his full role from me."

Authority filled his voice. The emperor's surrendering to all of the Tir demands bound her and she had to obey his commands, even down to when she could reveal information. *Full role.* Fina would tell Jon that they would have sex in the near

future...but that was all. Her gut twisted and sourness filled her mouth. It would've been nice—and complete insanity—to enjoy him out of work hours. Warflesh didn't have relationships. They were a commodity, a product of the state. And even if she could have a relationship, Jon would be far too complicated.

"To prepare you both, you must drink the spice-water before you dock in the city. You must both ignore its more distracting qualities." A hint of humor lurked in his words. He obviously knew the rumors that followed his world's infamous resource. A potent aphrodisiac put it in too simple a term. It was rocket fuel for the libido. *"I look forward to our time together, Seraphina."*

A soft whine marked the end of the message and the light screen faded. The cool air ran a shiver through her and she wiped a hand over her mouth. Had someone already slipped her some of the spice-water? The way she reacted to Jon and to the slow sensuality of Kian's voice wasn't her. Her genetic modifications enhanced her sex drive in many satisfying ways, but she could always control her desires—until now.

Fina tugged at the straps and they broke free with a snap.

Jon's head jerked around. He frowned. "You should stay seated and strapped in for the duration of the flight, ma'am."

Ma'am. Yes, she would have to break him of *that* habit, even though it made sense to keep him separate. Her focus had to be on the job. "It's begun, Captain." She grabbed the bulkhead wall to steady herself, pushing her hip against the frame. "We must drink to the success of the mission."

Jon lifted an eyebrow. "We're both on duty."

"Computer, where is the spice-water located on this transport?"

"A specialized refrigerated compartment in the central console," murmured the soft, synthesized voice, filling the silence of the cabin. A panel glowed white in the middle of the central column. *"It is locked to your DNA print, Ambassador Brodie."*

"Sensible. A single flask could be ten years' pay."

“Spice-water?” Jon’s gaze followed her as she sat in the copilot’s chair. “You’re not serious.”

“From Lord Kian himself, we need to drink it before we dock.” Fina pressed her hand to the panel and with a faint hiss, icy air gushed in a white cloud from the compartment. A ridge pushed out and on it sat a small flask and two glasses. “I’ll pour.”

Jon covered her hand as her fingers closed over the ice-crusting bottle. Heat rioted under her skin and she sucked in a quick breath. His hand pressed harder. “My orders are to ensure your safety.” She held his gaze and found unwavering determination there. “I’ll take the first taste.”

Fina pulled her hand free of the flask and his warm touch. She rubbed her fingers over her cold hand, wiping away the ice crystals melting on her skin from the flask. She wasn’t thinking about his touch, about how his palm had scorched her skin and sent a wild rush of unwanted desire through her blood. Hell, she’d be a riot of need with the first sip of the spice-water. Fina pressed her thumb hard into her palm. No, her attraction to Jon couldn’t dwell in her thoughts. At all.

“Here.” He handed her the little metal cup, his fingertips just touching hers. He lifted it and a brief smile cut his mouth. “The transport’s set to automatic if I start to convulse.”

Fina lifted an eyebrow and his smile deepened. Her gaze flicked down to her own cup of the clear liquid. The light scent of cinnamon lifted on the cool, scrubbed air, wisps of white vapor twisting as the liquid evaporated. She’d performed for too many men on too many planets, bought ships, men, neutrality for their endless war against the Naderi...but never had she traded for something so innocuous to her as this liquid. Nor as deadly.

She looked up and Jon saluted her with his cup.

“Cheers,” he said, before he slugged back the shot.

Chapter Two

Fina watched him, watched the flush burn under his skin and fire light his hazel eyes. Her hand tightened around the cup, the cold biting into her skin. She recognized his hot look from a brief time before, when she'd pushed him up against a darkened alley wall, her mouth hot over his. Now Jon's interest flared heat through her flesh even without her first sip of the spice-water. "Would you say it was safe, Captain?"

He pulled in a heavy breath, straightened in his padded seat and wet his lips. He turned the little cup in his hand, his eyes never leaving her. "Safe? No." The wicked smile that curved his mouth had her wanting, needing to cross her legs. She had to deny the pulse of desire firing low in her belly. His smile deepened. "But it's not poison."

Fina's gut twisted into a tight knot. The rumors about the spice-water appeared to be true if the frank sexual interest that gripped Jon was any proof. He'd always denied any attraction. Always. The thought that he wanted her flickered fire under her flesh. Hell, her sex drive had been healthy before her entry into the warflesh program, now without control, it could turn ferocious.

"Ma'am?"

The hint of wry promise in his prompt ate at her nerves. She had her orders. Drink, but she could not allow the spice-water to overwhelm them. Fina was too used to surveillance to doubt that the Tir leader had access to the transport and all that went on inside it. "Remember that you're my guard, Captain. We must maintain that relationship."

He frowned as she lifted the little cup to her mouth. The frost from the rim burned her lips, but the lingering scent of cinnamon eased through senses. She drew a short

breath before she tipped the freezing water into her mouth. It burned unexpectedly against her tongue and heat flooded her cheeks, her heart beating hard.

“And what was my next order?”

The words brushed hot against her skin, soft, tantalizing. Her lips pressed around the rim of the cup, the vapors teasing her nose. Fina closed her eyes and let the heat sink down through her body. She had to focus on that, not on the hint of his scent, the imagined heat of his skin under her tongue, of stripping off his bulky suit to discover the beauty of his lean, muscled body beneath.

Fina crushed her eyes shut against the thought of him. Yes, her mission was totally screwed.

“Ma’am? What should I do now?”

She didn’t miss the teasing to his voice, could almost feel his smile and wanted it pressed to her throat, her breast, teasing hot kisses down over her belly. Her chest lifted at the fire flaring under her skin. Was it all about control? Was that what the Tir leader wanted to witness? Her taking his planet’s infamous drink and denying its overwhelming demands in her flesh?

Silent curses ran through her mind, foul ones learned from the soldiers with whom she’d spent most of her adult life.

Fina opened her eyes and sucked in a quick breath. Jon stood over her, blocking the dim, overhead lights. Their gleam gilded his dark hair and threw his face into shadow. He leaned forward and reflex pushed her back into the padded chair, her gaze darting to his hands as he gripped the seat’s arms.

“I need an answer to my question, *ma’am*.”

She willed her face into a mask of stone. She should ignore his temptation, make no reply, but still she had to form a relationship with him. Fina couldn’t ignore the fact that she would have sex with him...very soon. And anyway, she hated the way he said “ma’am”. Loathed it. “I’m not a ma’am...Captain Raegh.”

"Then it's Jon." He tilted his head and his hazel eyes held her, the heat of the spice-water burning through him. "If you're not a ma'am."

The warm scent of his skin taunted her and she focused on every breath. She had to, because the need to surge forward and take his luscious mouth consumed her. "This is a part of the mission, Jon. We drink the water and we...resist."

"Resist?"

Her flesh tightened at the promise in his question. He moved closer, his hands sliding over the smooth leather of the seat, bringing his tempting mouth so much closer to hers. She swallowed and couldn't stop her instinct to lift her face to his. "As I said —"

"I could take you right here, right now and no one would have to know."

Jon's warm breath brushed over her lips and she groaned. It had nothing to do with her reawakened longing for him. Nothing at all. Her years of training had evaporated under the force of a too-pretty face and an alien drink. "Captain..."

"This isn't whatever the hell was in that water." He fixed his gaze on her mouth and her lips parted involuntarily. "Had a commander not been on the deck, I would've pushed you up against the hull of this transport and fucked you." His thumb traced over her jaw, her chin, the contract electric. "You wanted that. You want me."

Her throat tightened, the thud of her heart too loud in her ears. This wasn't the Jon she knew. No, the spice-water had him in its grip. The painful memory from the darkened alley reared again, of how she had witnessed the heat die in his eyes. She'd thought to grab her chance after he'd been called up to the Antilles Squadron, as she was unlikely ever to see him again. But Jon had pushed her away, stood back and coolly said he was sorry for giving her the wrong impression. The memory pricked at her growing need. Seven years and the pain of his rejection still twisted her insides. His desire for her was false. And it stabbed at her, more than his disinterest ever could.

She forced out her answer. "No. It never occurred to me."

"Liar."

Fina stood, making him straighten. Her fingers pressed the cup hard into her palm. She needed something to distract her, but even the pain of the cold metal into her skin didn't work. "I don't appreciate being called a liar, Captain Raegh."

His eyebrow lifted. "I could use my mouth for things other than accusation."

"Our orders are to drink only."

"Really?" His thumb drew lightly across her bottom lip and the simple touch pulsed hot under her skin. Her tongue tip flicked against his thumb tip and he sucked in a quick, harsh breath. "Why?"

"Orders are orders."

His thumb slipped away, but his fingers splayed over her cheek, her neck, tangled in her hair. His lips almost, *almost* brushed hers. It forced her heart into her throat and she couldn't breathe. "You're an ambassador."

"Today. Most other days I'm a grunt." And that was an unwanted truth. She had no power, no say in her mission. She pulled in air and his breath mixed with hers, sweet, wanted and her spine arched, closing the millimeters that separated their mouths. Her lips touched his and her chest hitched. Jon's fingers curled in her hair and his slow tasting of her upper lip, the light graze of his teeth pulled a low moan from her. "We...shouldn't."

"Who's to know?"

The question sank through her and the little cup in her hand bit hard into her palm as she squeezed it. "Lord Kian would..." His tongue teased over her lip and she tilted her head, drawing them closer until her mouth covered his.

Fina closed her eyes and listened to the wild beat of her heart. What the hell was happening? How could a simple, almost chaste kiss have her blood pounding and her flesh tight? And a kiss would hardly be considered a breach of his orders. She had to convince herself of that fact, because she couldn't pull away.

The thought of pushing for more peaked her nipples. Jon. This was Jonathon Raegh, a man she had ached for. She teased her tongue against his and his fingers curled, fisted into her hair, his moan mixing with hers. Damn, he tasted...incredible. Just sweet and hot and unlike any man in her long, *long* career. Fina deepened the kiss and it was just a kiss, nothing more. Harmless. Innocent. She broke her grip away from the cup to trace light fingertips along his smooth, warm jaw, to ease into his hair and urge him closer, harder.

"This is resistance?"

His question, rushed, wild, burned through her and she took his mouth again. Couldn't help herself. His taste was addictive. Just a kiss. Harmless. But not innocent. Not this time. The clash of their lips, tongues, teeth filled her thoughts. Her other hand dropped the cup, letting it clatter to the metal deck so she could grab his arm, her fingers eager to find the hard muscle beneath his bulky suit.

His sudden shift caught her, her mouth breaking away from his with a half cry. Jon crushed her to him, his hand tight on her ass, making her all too aware of his erection. He buried his face against her neck and his low groan ran a shiver through her flesh.

Fina pressed her forehead against his shoulder. Her hands splayed his taut back, the promise of hard muscle, of strength tantalizing her beneath his flight suit. Her fingers curled to tight fists, nails digging into her palms. "We can't do this."

He swore softly, his hot breath stirring her skin. "No. But what I want, what I *need* to do..." For a moment, his strong fingers pushed over her ass, dipping between to find her. Fina arched against him, a startled moan escaping her. She needed him as much, to strip him and taste him, lick and kiss every bare inch of him...but with a long sigh, he pulled back. "I...we...have our orders." His index finger traced her jaw and she leaned into his touch, unwilling to break the close contact.

Jon swore again in a language she barely recognized and curled his fingers into his palm. He glanced at the screen, the white ice sheets of Alpha-Lyrae-9 expanding across it with every passing second. "You should sit, ma'am."

Fina sucked in a quick, pain-filled breath at the use of her unwanted title. She nodded and dropped back into the copilot's chair. Closing her eyes, she pushed down the fire still searing through her flesh and focused her thoughts on the slow inhale, exhale of her breath. He had no right to taste, to feel so good. None.

Over the dull thrum of the transport vibrating through the soles of her boots, Jon pulled in a sharp breath. He readied himself for questions, she knew it. Damn the Emperor and Kian for not briefing him. They had no right to play with lives. She almost snorted. Oh yes, they did. She winced and opened her eyes. "What?"

"We're here to get spice-water for the emperor."

Fina sat straight in her chair. She rubbed her hands together and stared out over the endless white of the frozen planet far beneath her. There was no denying his statement. "Yes."

"Why did we have to try it?"

Jon moved on automatic, securing entry shields against the burn of the planet's atmosphere. It rocked the transport and forced her to yank at the heavy straps of her chair, pulling them over her chest and hips, the lock hissing and fusing across her belly. Wisps of cloud streaked over the blunt nose of the vessel and she followed them, her mind searching for an explanation that wouldn't panic him, but she couldn't find one. So, where to begin? Not with the whole truth, that was certain. Hell, telling him she was warflesh would be hard enough. Keeping the truth from him was a part of her orders. Kian wanted the pleasure of that. "We're here to negotiate for it. I suppose we had to authenticate it."

Jon glanced at her, his brows furrowed. She recognized that look. He didn't believe her. "We're negotiating?" He turned his attention back to the controls. Information scrolled over the curve of the screen, followed by a soft, rhythmic chime. "That's the settlement beacon. Strap in." He glanced over the leather that bit into her sensitive flesh. Fina didn't miss the slight flush to his cheeks and the hunger in his gaze. He shook his

head and refocused on the instrumentation. "Good, you are. All right, I'm starting our descent."

She didn't have to answer his question for a few moments more and she let herself enjoy the reprieve. The transport dropped lower, skirting the gleaming ice fields, following the path of the beacon. He sat back, his hands still on the console and the transport slipped into the programmed flight path. Fina rubbed her thumb across her dry palm, a slow, rhythmic move that let her gather her thoughts. At least her worry broke the urge she had to pull free of her chair and straddle him. But only just.

Jon glanced at her again. "*We're* negotiating? I'm your guard."

He wasn't letting it go. Fina decided to ignore his words. "I'm brought in for delicate negotiations, when other, more orthodox methods fail."

They dropped through a cold burst of air, Fina clutching at the arms of her chair, and Jon guided the transport through jagged towers of ice, shining and sharp in slants of morning sunlight. The chime of the beacon thickened, grew faster until it became a constant ringing.

"Below us," Jon murmured, sweeping practiced hands over the panels.

"Hitrailt transport. Please descend. Is Seraphina Brodie onboard?"

"Thank you, Tir Base. Yes, Ambassador Brodie is here. Descending."

Fina smoothed her palm over her hair and watched the wall of bright ice slide and darken over the transport's screen. "Everyone's so polite," she murmured. "I'm sure this will be interesting."

"Your unorthodox methods?"

She pulled in a deep breath, the air tasting of the faint leather of the seats, the metal interior and Jon's clean scent. He smelled delicious, warm, fresh and hell, she could still taste him on her tongue. She held back a sigh. "The government of Tir doesn't want an ordinary payment. No tech, no precious metals, no, they want one thing." She gave Jon a tight smile, the interior lights of the cabin casting heavy shadows over his suddenly

sharp features. The transport dropped to the base floor with the dull thunk, jarring her feet. Time for him to know a portion of the truth that she was allowed to tell. "They want me."

Jon powered down the engines on automatic, his attention fixed on her. "You?"

She forced a smile to cut her mouth. "I've never been requested before. My reputation must've run ahead of me."

"Ma'am..." Her eyes narrowed, holding as he muttered, "Ambassador," then finally, "Fina...I'm your guard. This roundabout way of sharing intel, while fascinating and faintly dramatic, is not helping me do my job."

Her practiced smile twitched into a real one. No, Jon wasn't her usual dour bodyguard, but then they had history. She was his friend's annoying little sister. Her smile faded. She could easily slip into more than liking him and that wasn't a wise or professional move. "They have a spring ceremony. How did the Tir phrase it? I will 'form the land to the everlasting winter'." Jon's jaw had tightened. She could obviously only push him so far and he had to know what she did. Hell, she was as much a part of the war effort as he was. "I have to fuck the head man, Jon. That's my skill. That's what I do."

He blinked. And then he blinked again. "Fuck him?"

Fina pressed her palm to the lock holding her straps. The metal warmed, hissed and then the leather loosened against her chest. Pulling free, she stood and stretched her arms, arched her spine. "We get naked, or there's a costume, sometimes props or toys." She rubbed a hand over her jaw. "Hopefully not feathers. I hate feathers."

"You're going to sleep with Kian, Lord of the Tir?"

"That's the plan. You are to deliver me and ensure I leave in one piece in the allotted ten hours." Not exactly all of the plan, but he was already having trouble digesting *her* role.

She watched him stand, the interior lights cutting across him. His bulky black uniform, cinched around his thigh by the weapon strapped to his leg, couldn't hide the

lean hardness of his body. He was young, strong and when naked, Fina suspected, quite delicious. A naked Jonathon Raegh. How often did that thought use to fill her head? It went hand in hand with her illicit fantasy of his ordering the other civilians out of her cramped communications room. The heavy thunk of the closing door followed, imagined words and sounds that would make her heart pound and her pussy tight. The dim lights would drop shadow over his perfection. In her fantasy, he didn't speak to her. He never did. She couldn't imagine him saying that he wanted her. That would be one step too far.

"Shall we go?"

His question broke into her old daydream. She twitched a smile and waved her arm. "After you, Captain."

Jon palmed open the outer door. With a dull series of thunks and a long, slow hiss the narrow door broke away from the frame. It curved back against the interior bulkhead and cold air washed over her. Fina pulled in the cool odors of ice and stone. She straightened and lifted her chin.

She always remained detached. It was always a job. Her ailing emperor demanded her skills for his own benefit. She had no choice but to obey. She would do her duty. As always. The thoughts were almost a mantra, calming her, reminding her of her job and how she could *not* screw it up.

The steps of the shuttle eased down and hit the smooth, stone floor. Jon scanned the hangar, his hand tight on her arm. The heat of his palm bled through the thin material of her sleeve and Fina kept her breathing even. "They didn't brief you at *all*, did they?" she murmured, glancing at him.

"Brief me?" His gaze remained fixed straight ahead, arrowed on the small delegation striding across the hollowed cavern floor toward the shuttle. "Brief me on what?"

"My guards don't touch me."

A wry smile tugged at his mouth and she could practically read the thoughts in his head. *But you're here to be pawed by a stranger...and by me. "Really?"*

"I'm here to sleep with another man. Some of them become...annoyed...at seeing me touched." Unless it was what they wanted. But she was not going to tell him that.

Jon's fingers slid away and the loss of his warm touch almost had her shivering. Fina told herself it had everything to do with the chill of the stone cavern buried under so much ice and because the spice-water still had her blood surging. She gritted her teeth and denied the hard pulse between her thighs.

"If they threaten you, then I will ignore that order."

The quiet authority in his voice had her looking at him. His hazel eyes held her and for a strange moment, Fina felt her heart squeeze. A spark almost arced between them and it had her palms damp. Damn it, she would not let alien water make her believe there was anything more between them than drug-induced lust. "Understood," she said, wanting to break the sudden, unexpected connection between them.

Jon gave her a brief nod. "Good." He looked back to the approaching Tir. "Time to begin," he said.

Chapter Three

“Ambassador Brodie.” A tall, thin man broke away from the small knot of dignitaries and strode toward them, his heavy robes kicking out from his fast stride. He stopped at the bottom of the transport steps and gave them both a deep bow. “And Captain Raegh. You are both very welcome. I am Torian Arval, first secretary.” He waved his arm back to the entrance of the hangar. “The Lord Kian awaits you.”

“Already?”

Fina fought down the urge to elbow Jon in the ribs. She should’ve added the rule “keep your mouth shut” too. “Thank you, Secretary Arval.” She padded down the steps, Jon at her shoulder. They followed the bobbing, bowing dignitaries from the hangar and she grabbed her opportunity. The Lord of the Tir had no qualms about telling Jon the full truth and in some way she wanted to prepare him. Her stomach knotted. Her superiors often left the uncomfortable fact of her guards’ involvement for her to share. They hated the idea of gaining allies and trade by the act of one woman lying on her back and spreading her legs. Always had. Always would.

She risked her future, and the panic of ending her years as a barrack whore tightened her gut. Yet she had to explain everything that she could. He was still her friend...in a way. “You mustn’t react to what I’m about to tell you. Above everything stay calm and stay *quiet*.”

Her attention fixed on Torian’s dark head, but beside her, she felt Jon tense. He kept his voice to a hard, quick whisper. “What is going on here, Fina?”

“You were hand-picked for this mission.” The need to put her hand on his arm, to offer reassurance, itched under her skin. But she didn’t and her fingers curled into her palm to stop her. “I’m the land. Kian is the winter. You.” She paused and silently cursed. She walked into these situations with full knowledge. Her superiors, the Tir

leader should've had the common courtesy to brief her guard. "You, you're the coming of the new spring."

Jon's stride faltered and fury ripped off him. His raw whisper pricked her skin. "I have to fuck him too?"

"No!" Fina shot a glance at him, finding his jaw tight and a dark flush coloring his cheeks. She forced a smile as one of the delegation turned to look at her. Taking calming breaths, she focused on the smooth stone beneath her boots. The tramp of so many feet echoed off the walls and she used the rhythm to quell the sour rise of anxiety in her gut. "No, just me."

A slew of rushed curses tore from his mouth. "How can you let yourself be...be *used* in this way?"

"We're at war, Jon. You fight with ships, weapons, I signed up to enhance and use what my genes gave me." That wasn't the whole truth. She'd had no option to say no when the selectors chose her. But she would not admit that to him and invite his pity.

"That's it? You let any man paw you," he leaned in, his hot breath brushing her ear, "*fuck* you, for the good of the cause?"

A shiver ran through her flesh at the almost-touch of his lips against her ear. He'd worked under her skin. Again. It interfered with her ability to do her job. Her focus had to be on Kian, not her guard. She held Jon's gaze, almost daring him to say something. "And they pay me well."

A muscle jumped in his jaw, a spark flaring through his hazel eyes that looked like disdain. Fina had to ignore the sudden stab to her gut. It was a job. Hell, *he* was a job.

She ripped her gaze from his and for a few moments they followed the delegation in silence down the long, carved tunnel. Fina's attention flickered over the smooth stone, the cold air sinking deep into her lungs. Would Kian expect nakedness in these temperatures? She shivered at the thought.

"So he fucks you, then I just fuck you, the emperor gets what he needs—spice-water—and we go back to the fleet?"

The hard edge to his voice forced a tight band around her chest. She breathed past it. "I think those are the basics, yes. The Tir weren't very forthcoming. It's a private and important ritual to them." Her gaze slid to him. He'd taken it better than she expected. But then she'd had clearance long ago and had read Jon's file in a weak moment. He seemed to be good at obeying distasteful orders. "If you need chemical help..."

Fresh fury gripped him, his face burning. "I think I can manage." He grated out the words. His hands had curled into tight, bloodless fists. "Don't you?"

They fell into a tense silence and Fina told herself that she'd just done the right thing. It was better he learned from her, learned what she did. She'd had sex with her guards before, more than one treaty had demanded it, and it was easier if she kept them isolated from her. There was always the brief objection, the "I'm not a performing monkey" argument, but they gave her the most important missions for a reason. She was very, *very* good.

Torian led the group through wide doors to a small hall. Heat washed through her and the sudden shock of it in her lungs had blood flushing her face. Fina quickly regained control and focused on her surroundings. The small, domed cavern hung heavy with ornate tapestries, and thick rugs covered the floor. A dais with a stone throne cut out from the far wall and a man sat there.

Snow-white hair flowed over his shoulders, blending with the soft silk of his robes. Kian, Lord of the Tir, a man who they thought had ruled for four decades, didn't appear as old as he should. Brown skin formed a sharp contrast to the paleness of his hair, and his face possessed a hard, male beauty that she found almost breathtaking. Fina held eyes the color of darkest shadow and her heart jumped. She felt his look down to her toes. Her mission was turning out to be anything but regular. First her need for Jon, and now her reaction to Kian. She had to stay alert, focused. Her future depended on how well she performed.

"My Lord Kian." Torian dropped to his knees on the thick rug set before the dais' wide stone steps. "Ambassador Brodie and Captain Raegh have arrived."

“So I see.” Kian’s voice rumbled around the chamber with a tone as dark as his eyes. Fina’s nipples peaked, pressing against the thin fabric of her smooth tunic. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “You may approach.”

He lifted a dark hand from the throne and curled a finger toward them. An unexpected tug in her chest almost had her stumbling forward. The burn of Jon’s hand, hot, tight against her arm as he supported her, pulsed need down her through her flesh. Damn it, her disorientation was bloody annoying.

“Torian, thank you. I will call you again when our guests wish to be escorted to their chamber.”

Fina dropped to her knees as Torian had, bringing Jon down with her. His hand slid from her arm, but he stayed close. Too close. The almost-press of his body to hers skittered across her senses.

Kian smiled and rose with fluid grace from the dark throne. “You will not kneel.” His fingers teased over her shoulder and a pulse throbbed under her skin. A smile touched his firm lips and the need to cover his mouth with her own swept through her. He gripped her upper arm, urging her to stand. “In this we are all equals.”

“‘This’ being?” Jon asked.

Horror flashed through her. He was meant to stay silent, he knew that. She was the ambassador, not him. “Jon!” She rapped his name, tearing her gaze from Kian to glare at her guard. She met his stubborn expression and a hardness to his eyes that tightened her gut. She’d been wrong. He wasn’t taking this well at all. “Please...”

“Captain Raegh has equal rights to speak in this hall,” Kian said, his smooth voice drawing her back to the Tir leader. “This ritual is ancient and we must adhere to every aspect of it.”

“And wouldn’t that be nice to know what they are.”

Fina’s gut tightened. Damn him. “Jon...”

“The abrupt energy of spring. We chose well in you.” Kian’s dark eyes fixed on her again and Fina’s heart squeezed. “In both of you.” His finger traced her jaw, a light touch, but one that had her leaning into it, her eyes drifting shut. She didn’t have to act with him, force the semblance of an attraction. It was a refreshing change.

His cool lips brushed hers and she gasped, his tongue teasing the inside of her mouth. The slow exploration deepened, his fingers sliding through the loose strands of her hair to cup her head, splaying his palm against her skull. His other hand gripped her hip, a delicious bite into her flesh. The rise of need had Fina reacting on instinct alone and she arched into him, her fingers fisting into the smooth silk of his robe. He tasted of cinnamon, cedar and with sparkling hints of the ice that shrouded him. Fina moaned, wanting more of his mouth, his hands, his taste, pressing her hips hard to his and finding the satisfying length of his erection—

Jon coughed, an impatient, tight sound that burst through her haze.

Fina eased back, melting kisses from Kian’s lips, reluctant to leave the heat of his mouth. She felt Kian smile and she let out a slow sigh.

“Yes, you are a very good choice,” he murmured, his dark eyes heated with the same need that had her heart pounding. His thumb traced over her lip and wiped away the moisture. He looked to Jon, while his hand started to stroke her hip in a sensuous, almost possessive way. “Only the right woman will bring new life to our planet. It is my role to find her.”

“That has to be a chore.”

Sarcasm dripped off Jon’s words and Fina held down a wince. They’d get thrown off the planet. “Lord Kian—”

“Simply Kian,” he said, his gaze sliding back to hers, his attention hitching her breath. His head tilted and a brief smile curved his lips. She had to fight the urge to kiss him again. Damn, he was addictive and that had her thoughts spinning. “I will be Kian as you will be Seraphina and he will be Jon.”

Fina willed herself to step back from him and crushed the regret of his hand sliding from her hip. "I understand we must begin at midnight."

The tip of his tongue wet his lips and Fina sucked in a sharp breath. A hint of a smile touched his mouth. The bastard was playing with her...and she wanted more.

"If you hurt her..."

Kian's attention swung to Jon, and Fina grabbed at the chance to find her calm center. No man had thrown her so completely, making her simply react rather than act with thought and planning.

"You care for her."

Jon flushed and refused to look her in the eye, his gaze fixed on Kian. "Ambassador Brodie is my responsibility."

"Of course she is." His smooth voice, cut with something that sounded suspiciously like condescension.

Jon tensed and Fina put her hand on his arm, squeezing hard against the thick serge of his uniform. Touching him burned under her skin and she held down a hiss. "Can we have time to prepare for the ceremony, please, Kian?"

The Tir leader gave her a short, elegant nod. A door to the side opened silently and Torian bowed and stood back. "Torian will take you to your chamber. Aides will come for you, prepare you when the time comes." He stepped back. "I look forward to sharing the ritual with you both."

Fina caught his slight emphasis on the last word. "Both?"

Kian's eyes gleamed and he slid a brief glance to Jon "As is the custom for the spring ritual, we will share you." He smoothed a hand down the silk of his robe. "Until midnight, Seraphina."

Chapter Four

She watched Kian give a short bow and then stride away, his white silk robes kicking out. All right. Something else she wasn't expecting. Her teeth grazed her bottom lip and she tasted the Tir leader against her skin, on her tongue. She pulled in a steadying breath and turned to Torian standing waiting for them.

"Shall we?" Fina gave Jon a tight smile, ignoring the anger burning in his hazel eyes.

"Share you?"

"Not now." She slid her arm free of him and followed Torian into a narrow corridor. Jon stalked behind her. A chill swept over her, her breath steaming in cold air. A few twists and turns and Torian stopped at another set of similar heavy doors. He waved his palm over a panel and the doors parted with a soft hiss.

"Attendants will come to prepare you."

Fina gave him a warm smile. *"Thank you, Torian."*

He inclined his head. *"Ambassador, Captain Raegh."*

The doors closed behind them and Fina let out a heavy breath. The large bed, hung with heavy drapes of golden cloth, dominated the small room, but that was all she caught as she buried her fingers in her hair and turned on her guard. Anger surged. *"What the hell do you think you were doing?"*

Jon stood too close his, face only inches from hers. *"Me? I wasn't the one with my tongue down his throat."*

Adrenaline fired through her blood. She'd faced down more terrifying adversaries than Jonathon Raegh. *"It's. My. Job."*

“And now it seems to be my job too.” His finger traced over her jaw, following the path Kian had taken. It burned and a mirroring heat swelled in her belly. “Did you know it would be both of us? Was that another truth you were waiting to tell? And when did you plan to? On the walk here, just before, or when I started to fuck you?”

A band tightened around her chest. The bloody mission had her thoughts in disarray. This wasn't like her. She was calm, centered, went in, did her job, secured the deal and got out untouched, unscathed by whatever she was forced to do. But they'd taken away her choice, her ability to decide what she would offer. And her reaction to both Jon and Kian had tilted her balanced world. “I didn't know,” she said, lifting her chin, his finger slipping under her ear to the sensitive skin of her throat. “I thought it would be him then you.” A thin smile cut across her lips. “But now we accept the changes and move on.”

“That's it?” His fingers dropped away and Fina tried not to miss his touch on her skin. “We just *accept* the fact that we both have to get naked with that slimy son of a bitch?”

“We must—I must—follow the orders dictated by the emperor.”

He stood back from her. “Will we get medals? Be rewarded for services to the empire?” Blowing out a hot breath, he scrubbed his face. “This is insane. You having sex with two men will not thaw this planet. Space clouds, a fluctuating orbit, whatever caused the glaciations, ‘the right woman’ will not solve that.” He held her gaze. “This is *not* right.”

“I can easily make it an order.”

Jon blinked. “You wouldn't.”

“It's not that important, Jon.”

“Stop using my name.” He almost growled the order as he paced away from her, his boots silent on the thick rugs. “Damn it, I want to speak to command.”

“We're hundreds of meters under ice and rock. And the ritual is in about two hours. We go ahead or we have to wait another eighteen standard months before their vernal

equinox rolls around again." She reached out to touch him, wanting to stop his fast, angry stride. He flinched at the brush of her fingers over his arm. Her gut tightened. "I'm sorry, Jon. I am. The Tir requested me and gave requirements for my guard. Kian chose you."

She'd hoped he would simply turn out to be another grunt, happy to serve, happy to serve her. However, none of her other guards had faced this particular problem. They would go through with it. They had no choice. "The emperor has ordered me to do this." Hell, she wasn't going to tell him her fate if she refused. He wouldn't go through with the ritual through guilt or pity. "And I will."

"This is a part of the pre-negotiation?"

"There is no negotiation. This is Kian's payment. We satisfy the ritual, as stupid as it sounds, and the Tir gives the emperor access to their vast spice lakes."

"You mean satisfy *him*."

"Believe me, I've had a lot worse —"

The anger had faded and something else held him, something hard, bitter. "You shouldn't have to."

Fina touched his face, following the familiar, pale scar edging his jaw. She shouldn't touch him, but the heat of his skin, the smoothness of his recently shaved cheek drew her fingers. "The emperor's need to dominate the quadrant asks sacrifices of us all and this...deal...is safer than most. I'm warflesh. It's what I do." A smile curved her mouth, the Tir leader's exotic taste lingering on her tongue. "And Kian, well..."

"Does Jens know what you do?"

Fina curled her fingers away. She lifted her chin. "Yes."

Jon tensed. "He *knows*?"

She snorted. "That's what yes means, Jon." She rubbed her hands together, her dry palms still chilled. "Midnight isn't that far off." Fina stared at her thin, rumped tunic,

feeling goose bumps running fast over her skin beneath her sleeve. She hoped for warmth in the ritual. "I imagine the attendants will be here soon."

He ran his hand through his hair, his fingers fisting. "Your brother *knows* that you're warflesh?"

A wry smile pulled at her mouth. "The ministry approached us both. Apparently, something about the Brodie clan made us prime candidates, though the enhancement didn't take for Jens."

"How long?" He ground out the question.

"Jon..."

"How *long*?"

"Five years, since the enhancements became permanent."

He paced, the deep rugs absorbing the heavy tread of his boots. "He never told me."

Fina sank to the bed, the soft mattress dipping low. So that was his problem. Not that she was warflesh, but that his best friend had kept something from him. "We're sworn to secrecy." She smoothed the wild tangle of her curls back, catching them at her neck. She tilted her head. "I shouldn't even be discussing this with you now. This is a job, just like yours." She wet her lips and found Jon's gaze fixed on her mouth. Heat fired under her skin and, damn it, her client question—*What do you want of me?*—burned on her tongue. She fought it. "You're still feeling the effects of the spice-water."

"Is that what this is?"

Darkness lurked under his question and her blood drummed. She was trapped in a small room with Jonathon Raegh and the heat in his gaze seared her. "Yes."

He closed the short distance between them. Fina placed her hands in her lap and met his gaze, willing her expression calm, controlled.

"Did they teach you that face?"

Fina ignored the fist in her gut. Jon had to understand that it was her job. "An initial negotiation team determines what the client wants. Resources, money, pleasure, whatever they want, whatever they think they want. And warflesh reputations are growing. People are curious. I come in and the bartering begins."

Jon's knuckle teased down over her temple to her cheek. "But not here?"

The need to grab the belt of his suit and yank him down onto his knees so that his mouth was level with hers had her fingers itching. He loomed over her, his face lost to shadow, and something about him felt unreal, too close to her distant fantasy. "We go in, we do what Kian wants and we leave in the allotted time. You go back to Antilles and I—"

"What? Move onto the next client, the next *guard*?" His thumb teased her mouth, pressing the tip lightly against her bottom lip before pulling back. "Why did you agree to this?"

"I've made a difference—"

"And that's how you justify it?"

Anger curled tight and hot in her gut. He wanted to fight about her status as warflesh? Fine. Fina rose to her feet, finding her eyes almost level with his. "I don't have to justify myself or what I do to you." A brief smile cut her mouth. "You made it very clear that your interest in me was limited to my being Jens' sister." She took a step closer, the heavy material of his suit rough against the smooth silk of her tunic. It was a mistake, her instinct screamed it, but Jonathon Raegh and common sense had never mixed well in her head. He tensed and her smile deepened. "The enhancements heightened my sex drive, gave me *incredible* flexibility and a newly sharpened brain. It's been...interesting."

"Fucking jaded old men?"

"I wouldn't call Kian old." Her head tilted. "Though *technically* we think he could be over a century old."

Jon's mouth thinned. "So you enjoy this life?"

His fury bubbled under the surface, Fina could almost taste it, ached to. What she was, added to the wild fire of the spice-water, and the simple fact that she'd always wanted him drove a heavy ache through her body. He didn't like what she did? Tough. He'd stepped back from her life seven years before.

She ran a finger along his stubby collar, almost touching the smooth heat of his skin. Jon sucked in a breath and Fina held his gaze, finding the water-induced heat burning there. "I never have to fake it. Ever. Whatever happens, whatever Kian asks of me I'll enjoy it."

"I don't want to know this, Fina."

"No, but you need to." Her finger followed a slow path up his throat to his jaw. His skin burned under her touch and she ached to press her lips to him, to lick, bite him. "You have to accept how this will happen." She ghosted her lips over her his jaw and her palm eased over his smooth skin to tangle her fingers in his hair. Cool, silky and she fisted it, had always imagined sinking her fingers into its wildness as her mouth devoured his. "What *you* could be asked to do."

"Fina..."

His warm breath brushed over her cheek and she closed her eyes. Her anger had melted away unnoticed and her desire for him ran molten through her veins. His scent, so familiar, so wanted, eased into her with every breath. Damn him. "Kian didn't share any information about the ritual. You must be prepared for anything."

"Prepared?" His hand shaped her hip, the warmth of it burning through the thin material of her trousers. His fingers flexed, his thumb teasing closer to where she ached for him. He pressed his lips to her ear and the shock of it forced a gasp. "I wouldn't be much of a guard if I didn't prepare for every situation."

Fina pulled back to stare at him. Darkness gripped him, she could almost taste it, hell, she wanted to taste it. "Prepare, how?" His mouth curved into a wicked smile and her chest hitched. "Jon, this isn't in the job description." Still, she couldn't drag her gaze away from his lips, and the memory of his taste filled her. He wanted sex, and by

everything unholy, so did she, but something about him screamed...dangerous. Real attraction threatened her professional façade. Threatened the distance that kept her sane. "And I have no way of knowing what Kian will want from us."

Muscles tightened in his jaw, she felt them under the light touch of her fingertips. "I'm not talking about him." His gaze narrowed on her. "And he didn't say we couldn't do this. That we shouldn't."

"We didn't ask."

"Semantics."

Fina opened her mouth to protest and Jon dipped his mouth down to hers. He tasted hot and dark and everything, *everything* she wanted. Her fingers fisted in his untamed hair and she pressed herself hard against his lean body. Jon's arms wound tight across her back, the hard rub of his suit against her thin tunic taunting her. She wanted skin, bare and delicious.

Her professional voice stabbed at her. It was wrong. He was wrong. To...enjoy...him without reservation, not to think, to have to assess every touch, every response, not to think only of his pleasure and lock her own urges away went against everything that the behavioral therapists had drilled into her. Her client question burned on her tongue and she recognized what it was now. It was her defense. If she spoke the fated words then all that she was would shut down, remain hidden and untouched.

"Fina..."

Her name was a soft, dark growl that flared fire under her skin. He nipped at her neck and sparks danced behind her eyes. "We shouldn't do this."

Jon looked up and the heat of the spice-water gripped him, a hot need that fired liquid need low in her belly and made her words a lie. "Stop me," he said and his fingers breached the thick band of her trousers to tease over her ass. "Because I have to do this." He buried his face in her neck as both hands gripped her, squeezing, his fingers hard, searching. "I have to know you before he does." Fina's breath caught and

the tight pull of her release already tugged low in her belly. "All of you. Taste you. Make you scream my name."

"Yes." The word escaped her without her consent. Fina's mouth brushed his skin, his scent sliding through her memory. She tugged at the front of his suit, yanking open the hard tabs and finding the heat of his hair-roughened skin. The assault of him on her senses had her dragging in a ragged, desperate breath. "Yes." Now the word was little more than a groan. "Yes, make me scream."

His wicked smile grew against her neck. "Just us." Determination ran hard in his voice and he turned his hands to pulling at the thin material of her trousers. Cool air brushed her skin. "Only us."

Chapter Five

Fina's heart pounded, the fierce rise of want pressing her hands against his chest, her fingers pushing against hard muscle. Her body throbbed. Hell, she was in an illicit dream, with Jonathon Raegh at its center. Another voice, older than her professional one, whispered its disappointment. This wasn't Jon, this was a man driven by an aphrodisiac –

“Stop thinking.” His lips brushed her ear, his breath as hot and ragged as her own. He worked the tabs loose on her tunic and it joined her trousers in a puddle of cloth at her feet. Jon's hands roamed over her bared flesh, his touch igniting her growing need. Damn it, this would be over for her far, *far* too quickly.

“I need you naked.”

Jon laughed, something low, warm and entirely wicked. “If that's what you want, who am I to argue?” He eased back from her and shrugged out of the top half of his flight suit. Soft light spilled over the hard perfection of his chest and Fina curled her fingers into her palm, resisting the fierce urge to touch him. She bit her lip to stop the smirk. A naked Jonathon Raegh looked very promising indeed.

His quick, strong fingers unclipped the holster strapped to his leg and dropped it on a nearby chair. He bent to unstrap his boots. Fina pressed her hand to her face and tried to deny how the lean strength in his back, the play of muscles, ran her blood hot. She wanted to blame her obsession on the riot of spice-water still coursing through her body. She wanted to...but couldn't.

Jon straightened and pushed down the rest of his suit until the heavy cloth hit the rug. He lifted an eyebrow. “Naked enough? Or do you want to stare some more?”

“I'm sure you're used to being ogled.”

"Maybe." He closed the short distance between them and her heart beat hard. His fingers slid over her hot cheek, the touch of his skin against hers making her lean into him. Jon brushed his lips over her jaw, her cheek. "I know you used to."

"Did not!"

"Fina..." His smile against her cheek tightened her insides. "You wore a hole in my uniform staring at my ass."

A spluttered laugh escaped her and she enjoyed the luxury of running her hands over hard muscle, of finding his buttocks...and squeezing. "I wasn't the only one."

Jon walked her back toward the bed, until the cool sheets brushed the back of her thighs. "No, you weren't." He eased her hands from his skin and urged her to flop into the deep covers of the wide bed. The cool sheets shocked her hot skin. "But you looked the longest."

She watched him now, watched him crawl over her, his eyes darkened with need. "So?" The question was little more than an unprofessional squeak as his hot mouth found her breast. She arched her spine, letting the freedom of simple reaction run warm through her flesh. "You know most of the contingent lusted after you."

He smirked and curled his tongue around her hardened nipple. Fina crushed her eyes shut against the sudden spike of need. Instinct threaded her fingers through his hair and she fisted it. Humor shone in his eyes. "They still do."

"Modest."

"Observant." Slow kisses pulsing down over her stomach had her pulling in a deep breath. Fina opened her eyes to find Jon watching her and the heat of his gaze thrummed under her skin. "How you tried not to stare when I came into the comms room." He pressed more open-mouthed kisses down to her navel, teasing her with his tongue. "Stuck in your light-pod, pretending to work."

"Pretending?"

His fingers played over her hips as his mouth worked lower, lower, until his lips brushed over her mons. "You can't deny it, Fina." His words stirred her flesh and she sucked in a quick breath. "You looked...hungry."

"I—"

"What did you want?" Jon's lips teased her, almost pressing to where she ached for him. "For me to order the others out? To order you to bend over and take it?"

Her blood pounded and hell, simply his words had the first threads of her release coiling tight and hot in her belly. He'd guessed her fantasy, but she didn't care, not when his mouth, his tongue was so close to licking, to eating her. "Would you have?"

"It's the middle watch. The ship's silent. There's just you working as I've ordered the team away. I close the door. Lock it." He kissed the crease of her thigh and she yelped. With a low, wicked laugh, Jon gripped her, pinning her legs to the bed, holding her open to him. "Tucked away in your corner pod, the light of the comms traffic covering you, you don't hear me approach." He pressed another kiss to her too-sensitive skin, his thumbs idly stroking her inner thighs. "What do I do then, Fina? Tell me."

The warm air, the cool slide of the expensive sheets, all thought of what lay ahead for them faded from her mind. Jon paused, his breath hot over her mons, and the sensation spun her fantasy. The darkened comms room, silent but for the soft hum of the equipment wrapped around her. She tasted the familiar dry air, the hint of cleaners and metal and something else...the scent of a man who fueled her fantasies.

"You're silent, quick." Fina pressed a hand to her mouth as her heart beat rioted. It felt all too real, the strong hands gripping her, yanking away the tech that bound her into the clear pod. The light died and hot darkness shrouded them. Silence pressed around them, only broken by uneven breathing. "You push me up against the curve of the pod wall." The press of his body at her back, his breath hot and ragged at her neck, fired through her mind and she cried out at the first curl of Jon's tongue as he found her clit.

“What then?” His gaze found her as his lips teased her pussy with his question.

Fina met his darkened eyes for a brief moment and the desire she found there fueled her fantasy.

He tugged at her civilian uniform, dragging it down over her shoulders, spine, ass. On middle watch, she never wore underwear, because she had always hoped, prayed that Jon would find her in those dark, early hours. She gasped as he nudged her legs apart and his calloused hand stroked over her ass. His lips pressed to her ear, teeth tugging at her lobe, before he murmured, “Tonight, this is mine.”

Fina swallowed, caught up in the vivid fantasy and the slow laps of his tongue that sparked fire in her blood. “You strip me, kick my legs apart and—” Her spine arched off the mattress as Jon’s tongue fucked her, his fingers digging hard into the firm flesh of her thighs. Light flashed under her eyelids and the coil low, low in her belly tightened. Her body shook and she fisted the sheets, fighting the inevitable rise of her release. Not yet. She couldn’t, not yet—

“Tell me how I fuck you.”

He muttered the words against her pussy before his tongue found her again and Fina’s mind spiraled back into the fantasy.

The thickness of his cock teased her ass and she pushed back against him. Her own fingers had been her only companion in her shared civilian stateroom and it had been too long, far too long... She gasped his name as he sank deep into her pussy with one stroke.

Liquid fire tore through her veins and fuck, she wanted it to be more than a fantasy, more than her imagination.

“Jon, you’re hot and thick, inside me. Fucking me. Making me come.” Her release teetered, she could drop away and lose herself in bliss, but she had to have him, he had to— “Make it real.”

“Fina...”

And then he was kissing her, mixing the intoxicating scent of herself with his own taste, crushing his hard body hot and damp around hers, the brush of his skin, his hair spinning her emotions, her needs and she could almost, almost let go... Jon groaned as he eased into her, breaking the kiss to bury his face in her neck.

"You're so tight."

Fina arched into him, wanting him deeper, clinging to him, urging him. "For you," she murmured, her teeth nipping at his shoulder. "It's our first time."

"Don't..."

The word was little more than a groan and he stroked into her, harder, faster. She forgot everything but the increasing fire in her flesh, the ache and the need to scream out Jon's name and pull him down into bliss with her.

"Just us." She met him thrust for thrust, Jon arching over her, his eyes fixed on hers, his dark desire catching her breath. He didn't want her to have anyone else in her thoughts, didn't want to know how her altered body built on his fantasy. There was only him, only them as they could've been, she knew that now. "In the comms room. In the quiet, the darkness, I'm yours to fuck. Just yours."

With a low moan, his mouth found hers in a violent clash of lips and tongues and teeth. Wild sensation flooded her, stoking the heat through her shuddering body. Almost, she was almost—

Jon's mouth broke from hers, his breath hot, ragged against her cheek. "Mine." The word was little more than a growl. "You're mine." He thrust deep, the sudden shock of it forcing a cry. His rhythm increased, hard, brutal, and her body craved him. "Come for me. Scream my name."

She could only obey. Orgasm crashed over her in a molten wave, his name tearing from her lips as her body arched under him. Still he stroked into her, harder, faster, driving, feeding the fire in her body, not letting her go. Fina clung to him, unable to control the riot in her flesh, only wanting him, wanting him to join her in her ecstasy.

“Jon...” She sank her teeth into his shoulder and he stiffened, her name breaking free from him in a low moan as he came.

Fina fell back into the softness of the bed, Jon’s weight a heavy comfort over hers, letting the bliss of his hot skin, the gentle brush of his lips over her neck, her shoulder, course little aftershocks through her flesh. Her hands stroked down his damp spine, muscles twitching under her light touch. She felt light, free, the pressure of the spice-water lifted. She sighed and kissed the reddening bite on his shoulder. Now it would get...messy. “I marked you, I’m sorry.”

Jon stilled and Fina knew in that moment, he’d come to his senses, the last of the spice-water drained from his flesh. “Fina...”

She pressed a final kiss to his shoulder, memorizing the unique taste of his skin after sex. She closed her eyes and denied the pain that twisted hard and hot in her gut. Her brief chance of freedom, of enjoying what she wanted was over. “We need to get dressed. They could come for us any time.”

Jon lifted his head and his eyes narrowed on her. Something like confusion flickered there, before he eased his tight hold and flopped back onto the bed. He let out a low sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Fina.” Her name was a groan. “This is...” His words trailed away. “Shit.”

Fina stopped herself from replying. She rolled away from him and planted her feet on the floor. Her fingers caught in the tangle of her curls. The sour taste of his regret, of his rejection, one that reflected his rejection of her seven years before, filled her. “Get dressed, Jon. No doubt the ritual will involve bathing of some sort.” A wry smile pulled at her mouth. “It always does.”

She shrugged into her discarded clothes, running warm hands over the creases to smooth them. Each movement kept her back to him. She couldn’t trust that her face, one that had negotiated treaty after treaty with the utmost professionalism, would reveal what? Pain? Disappointment? Anger?

Fina pulled in a quick breath as the bed creaked behind her. She lifted her chin and willed the mask to fall into place. "Ready?"

Jon looked up from strapping his gun to his thigh. "Not particularly." He snorted. "Despite being one of the infamous Antilles, I've not shared a woman before."

"We do what he wants, that's the job." Fina smoothed more of her hair away from her face and straightened her shoulders. "It's always the job."

His gaze, hard, endlessly dark, gripped her and she couldn't read the emotion there. "And you don't know anything about the ritual?"

"You know as much as I do." The door whined and Fina pressed her fingers to her lips. Damn, their time was up. She should've taken the time to talk over the shit storm brewing between them. That would have been the professional path to take. But she'd avoided it, avoided him in those important few minutes.

It couldn't be helped. She ran a hand over the smooth silk of her tunic one last time and watched the door roll back. A gaggle of attendants slid into the room on silent feet, the soft cloth of their plain robes brushing the stone floor, bringing with them a rush of ice-laden air. They bowed as one.

"Ambassador Brodie. Captain Raegh." They straightened and a woman stepped forward. Wisps of pale blonde hair escaped her heavy cowl as she pushed the material back, her hair curling around her sharp cheekbones. Her face glowed, her beauty almost irresistible. Damn, were they all so attractive? "It is our great honor to prepare you both for the ritual." Her soft voice warmed the cool air. "If you will please follow me."

She glided past them to a curve of white wall behind the large bed. Fina fell into step behind her, too aware of Jon at her shoulder. He was still her guard, still doing his duty in protecting her. The professional mask protected her and she was grateful for it. "What happens now...?"

"Anrika." Her perfect lips curved into a glowing smile and Fina willed herself not to blink. Was it something to do with the spice-water that transformed them into elegant beauty? "You will both be bathed in the room just beyond here." She pressed a

pale, slender hand to the smooth wall. A low hum and then the grate of stone against stone and gray dust drifted on the cooled air. "Then you will each consume a goblet of...spice-water, as you call it. I will then escort you to Lord Kian."

The door shifted back, scraping over a tiled floor. The soft glow of light flowed over the curved walls of the small room from an unknown source. Two metal circles hung from the ceiling and Anrika waved her delicate hand beneath them. The first trickle of hot water splashed to the floor, steam curling into the cool air.

She turned back to them, the same perfect smile gracing her mouth. "If you would please remove your clothes."

"You're going to wash us? All of you?"

Fina pushed down the need she had to elbow him. He couldn't question what they had to do, he didn't seem to be able to get that into his head. No, he didn't want to.

Anrika's smile didn't falter. "We have no interest in you, Captain Raegh. Our joy comes from sharing our minds. It is Lord Kian's burden to find interest only in bodily pleasures." Her smile deepened and Fina thought she caught a quick, wicked gleam in the woman's eyes. "Though we make certain he never has to suffer his burden alone."

"Why just him?"

"Jon..." His name was just a mutter under Fina's breath.

"The Tir are special, Ambassador Brodie. If the ritual is successful then you may discover how special. Now." She waved her delicate hand toward Fina and then Jon. "Please, you must remove your clothes. Midnight approaches."

Chapter Six

One of the attendants rubbed a soft, white towel down the length of Jon's back, the woman's pale hand skimming his skin. Lean muscles twitched under her light touch and Fina fought not to curl her own fingers into bloodless fists. Her jealousy was irrational, hell the behavioral therapists had supposedly worked out every negative emotion, but there it was, twisting a knot in her gut.

Fina closed her eyes and ignored the three women who dried her, letting them carry on with their job. She found it odd that a society who lived over vast lakes of spice-water had no interest in it, in the wildness it inspired. The Tir piqued her curiosity and she didn't need that. She needed to focus. It wasn't about her now, it was about Kian. Jonathon Raegh didn't belong in her head. Yes, she could deal with the fallout of sleeping with him the next day.

"Please wear this, Ambassador Brodie."

She opened her eyes to find Anrika holding up a long white shift made of translucent fabric. Fina bowed her head and let the woman ease it over and arrange the light material against her bare flesh. She looked beyond Anrika and found Jon staring at her as his own attendants fussed around him. He wore a similar, sleeveless shift and the nature of the material delineated the lithe strength of his body and gave her a tantalizing hint of his skin.

"Now you must drink this." Anrika pressed a goblet into Fina's hands, another attendant doing the same for Jon.

The cold metal of the goblet touched her lips and Fina sucked in a quick breath. Vapors rose, the hint of cinnamon wrapping around her senses. She caught Jon's gaze again. He watched her over the rim of his goblet and then tipped up the metal cup and drained it. An attendant peeled away his fingers, taking the cup from his tight grip.

Fina's heart hammered. His hazel eyes had darkened to a deep black, almost mirroring the shadowy darkness of Kian's eyes. A wicked smile curved his lips, promising oh so many depraved and wanted things. She swallowed and the first trickles of the ice-cold water eased down her throat. Heat bloomed and a sudden, sharp thirst made her tilt her head back. Spice-water burned cold against her tongue, its ice turning to fire in her chest, before it flowed in a molten wave through her flesh.

Anrika eased the goblet from her lips and Fina pressed her hand to her flushed cheek. Her thoughts whirled and unknown hands steadied her as her body swayed, her bare feet finding the floor uneven.

"Fina..."

Jon's voice melted over her and she sucked in a quick breath, her nipples peaking and a hot liquid ache sliding low into her flesh. She needed him. Right there, right now. She strode forward, determined to close the distance between them. "Jon." His name was almost a growl, in a voice that didn't belong to her.

"Ambassador." Anrika's voice stabbed through the heat of her thoughts and the hands that had gently held her up tightened their grip, restraining her. "We must find Lord Kian."

Kian. Fina shook her head, trying to refocus. Kian was the one she had to please, not Jon, not herself. She let her head fall back and fixed her gaze on the curve of the stone-carved ceiling. She let out a long, slow breath and felt some of the fire, the driving need to strip Jon naked ease from her thoughts. Control, she needed control for just that little bit longer. "Yes, Kian," she murmured. The hands gripping her slipped from her arms, her waist, her hips and she willed herself to meet Anrika's placid gaze. "I'm ready."

A smile curved the woman's perfect lips. "Yes, you are. Maybe with you the ritual will finally be completed." She took Fina's hand and guided her from the bathroom.

"Wait—" She tried to pull her hand free of Anrika's suddenly fierce grip. Panic rioted heat through her body and she fought to see Jon. They couldn't separate him from her. He was her guard. He was hers. "I need —"

“Captain Raegh is coming with you, don’t worry.”

Her calm tones didn’t ease the panic flooding Fina. No, that ebbed away when Jon and his attendants fell into step behind her. The heat of his gaze, heavy with need and desire, caught her breath and she ached to escape the woman who kept them apart. Then they would find a dark corner...and she would devour him.

Fina held down a long and vivid curse. The emperor would turn into a raving lunatic if he drank even half a cup of the potent liquid. She focused ahead of her and willed herself to ignore Jon’s close warmth. Two of the Tir opened the doors onto the long corridor and chill air whipped around her. Fina pulled in a steadying breath as the mix of ice and stone brought Jon’s scent too, something warm, heady.

A sharp smile tugged at Fina’s mouth as their party almost jogged along the twists and turns of the cold corridor. The ritual, whatever it was, had to be simply physical. Her smile grew. A damn fine bout of fucking, as one of her modifying therapists had said. Anything else would be beyond her. She wanted Jon and Kian. The coil of heat low in her belly tightened and flared and her body flushed with quick desire. Yes, both of them inside of her, fucking her.

The first threads of an approaching orgasm teased her flesh.

“Ambassador, please.” Anrika’s curt voice cut through her spiraling thoughts. “Not yet.”

Fina fought to crush the wild need racing through her body. “What do I have to do?”

“It can’t be explained. The everlasting winter, the rejuvenation of the spring all are bound to you, to the land. You will bring the balance. You have to be...who you are.”

A knot twisted Fina’s gut. She hadn’t been who she was for more than five years. Her scattering thoughts tried to remember whether this payment involved the words “successful completion” in the contract. And if it did... Damn it, she hadn’t had time to think through the consequence of her payment not being perceived as enough.

“We’re here, Ambassador.”

Doors rolled back over smooth stone and a gust of icy air swept over them. Fina sucked in a tight breath as the cold caressed her sensitized skin. Someone brushed her arm and Fina jerked away, her attention snapping around and finding Jon.

He didn't look at her, his focus on the hall beyond the doors. A muscle jumped in his cheek. "Fuck," he muttered.

She closed her eyes at the word and denied how the thought played with her.

"Fina, open your eyes."

His low whisper rioted in her blood and her body tightened.

"Open them."

The urgency in his voice broke through her haze of need and she obeyed him. She focused, kicked her brain into a higher gear and pulled in a quick breath. Her heart squeezed for a brief moment, before her professional training eased through her body. A wry smile quirked her mouth and she glanced back at Jon. "Well, this is new."

"Fina..." The strained growl in his voice whipped fire under her skin. "This isn't payment. This is humiliation."

She ached to stroke her fingers over his, tangle their hands and offer comfort, but she knew that if she touched him, she wouldn't be able to stop. She let her teeth pull at her bottom lip, before her warflesh persona took control. "No. This is the job."

She took the first step into the great curve of the carved hall, her spine straight, her chin lifted. Cool light washed down over the center of the arena, tiered seating stretching up into the ice-crusting ceiling, the upper rows falling into heavy shadow. The first murmur of the crowd washed over her, and unexpectedly sensation rippled through her flesh. Damn, the hall was *full*. And that had to be the spice-water, making her enjoy the adulation of an audience.

Their voices rose in an echoing chant, the words in a strange language that pushed at her thoughts. She wanted to understand, because if she did then she knew that everything would be...right.

“Ambassador.” Anrika’s soft whisper broke the spell of the crowd. Her fingers touched Fina’s elbow and guided her across the circular stone floor. Kian stood in the center of the great hall on an ice-white dais, wearing the same white shift as she did. Her heartbeat ramped and she fought the need she had to break away from Anrika’s slow formal pace. He looked beautiful, with his snow-white hair falling loose about his shoulders. Light sheered through the thin fabric of his robe and her breath caught at his lean perfection.

Kian’s lips curved in an appreciative smile and the spice-driven heat flowed through her flesh. She wanted him, and the chant of the crowds pulsed through her, urging her to find him, strip him, for his hands, his mouth to tease and taste her skin. Fina sucked in a quick breath, denying the thickened need low in her belly. Anrika had said not yet, and Fina had to obey that order. The whole thing was a job, but unlike any she had ever experienced. She wanted this, wanted both men, and Anrika’s slow pace was killing her.

“Not long now, Ambassador. Soon.” Her cool hand slipped away from her elbow. “I believe we’ve been waiting for someone exactly like you.” There was a smile in her voice. “Now, go to him.”

Fina’s heartbeat ramped, her body screaming that she run. Kian’s mouth quirked into a knowing smile and she couldn’t deny her need. Tugging up her shift and gripping the bunched material in tight fists, she tore across the cold stone to the low dais.

“Fina!”

Jon’s voice echoed over the arena, and for a long second it pulled at her. She turned, finding his attendants holding him as he strained to follow her. “Jon...?” A sharp tug in her belly ached for her to run back to him. The need she had for him went beyond sex, beyond her job as warflesh—

“Seraphina.”

Kian's smooth, rich voice reached out to her and she swallowed. She bit at her lip. The way the Tir leader said her name made it sink deep through her flesh, connecting with the heat of the spice-water tearing through her body. "I'm sorry." She mouthed the words at Jon, before she turned back to Kian.

Her heart pounded as she followed the short line of steps to where he stood.

Kian touched her jaw, a light caress, but the contact surged through her, a gasp escaping. "Maybe this time," he murmured. "With you."

The hint of a smile touched his lush mouth and Fina stomach hollowed, the tight need in her flesh urging her forward. She pressed herself against the long, lean strength of his body, the thin fabric denying her the delicious press of bare skin. His erection taunted her and she couldn't help herself, she rolled her hips.

Kian let out a slow breath and his mouth hovered over hers, so close the ache to taste him burned through her. "Are you the one, Fina? The one to complete the ceremony?"

"I..." She knew she should say yes, play the part he wanted for her, the one that would complete the deal for her emperor. She let her fingers trace over his brow and stroke along the hard plane of his jaw. His beauty was flawless, mesmerizing. Fina wanted nothing more than to please him, but lying had her gut in a knot. Her client's question hovered on her lips. *What do you want of me?* But that was wrong too. He had to have the truth. She pulled in a nervous breath. "I don't know."

His eyes closed and his hands slid down over her ribs, her waist, to curve against her ass. His mouth found the curve of her shoulder. "An answer I've waited for," he murmured. "So many have given me what they thought I wanted to hear. But you..."

Slowly, he drew up her white shift. The brush of the cool material against her hot, sensitized skin caught her breath, and then his fingers teased against her backside, caressing, parting her. His fingertip slid across her puckered hole and Fina bucked, her body throbbing. He'd exposed her to the crowd, the chill air pricking her skin, but she didn't care, couldn't. "I'll have you." He whispered against her neck and the words

burned through her, his smooth voice sinking deep into her flesh. "Fuck you right here." His fingertip breached her hole and Fina breathed against the gasp of the crowd that came with it. She couldn't deny the thrill that coursed through her. Kian curved a smile against her skin. "We must perform for their delight."

She didn't question it. The first threads of pleasure tightened low in her belly. "Yes."

"The bind of duty, but if could, I'd have you for my delight." He stroked his finger deeper, her body prepared for him, taking him. He pulled back and the resistance of her flesh teased fire along her spine. "Spread you on the sun wheel and fuck you every way I could."

Fina's body ached at his words, her throat tight, need throbbing through her. The image of her stretched out for his pleasure seared through her thoughts. She wanted him, all thought of her job, of the emperor and his petty needs gone. She pressed her mouth to his throat, tasting his cool skin, the hint of cedar and of ice quick against her tongue. "I want that."

He growled against her skin and jerked her up. Fina wrapped her legs around his hips, locking her ankles. His cock, still annoyingly covered by the thin material of his shift, teased her pussy. She ached to sink down on him, ride him, but she could only find his mouth, stroke her tongue against his, fist her fingers in the icy-cold smoothness of his white hair.

His fingers found her again, parting her and pressing in a slow, even rhythm in and out of her ass. He broke the kiss, his breath hot and ragged against her lips. "Are you going to come for me, Seraphina?"

The question made her pussy ache, the head of his cock hard against her damp flesh. The thin fabric formed a barrier that had her gritting her teeth. She wanted him. Wanted all of him, hot and hard inside her. She yanked at his robe, working it free as Kian's long fingers thrust harder into her ass, his hips pushing forward, taunting her

with the cock she couldn't have. The wicked grin he gave her, the shine in his dark eyes said he knew exactly what he was doing. But then so did she.

Bare skin touched bare skin and they both groaned. Fina eased herself over his cock and Kian closed his eyes. Two of his fingers sank deep into her ass and the fullness had the blood pounding through her flesh. She gripped his cock and guided him, her thumb pressed against her clitoris. Heat enveloped her. Fina wanted this, wanted him and she *would* have him. "Let me fuck you. Please."

Kian stared at her. "This is not allowed." But his hips urged her, pushing his cock closer to where she ached for him. "I have never..." His words dissolved as Fina eased him into her body.

They both stilled and she held his gaze. She found naked desire and knew it was reflected in her own eyes. She didn't give a damn about being warflesh, about her mission, about the ailing emperor's need for spice-water. "Keep me here." The murmur of the crowd swelled around her, filling her as Kian did, and the hollow pressure low in her belly grew. She cupped his jaw, her thumb pressed to the fullness of his bottom lip. "Keep me here. Spread me and fuck me."

Kian sucked in a quick breath and his dark eyes gleamed. He rewarded her with a slow push of his hips, burying himself deeper. Fina arched into him, desperate for more. "You want to be one with the Tir?"

Something about his words, the way the pressure of the crowd increased against her flesh screamed that he asked another important question. She almost groaned. Couldn't she just have wild sex with him? Let the Tir watch while they had their fun?

Kian's lips twitched and that promise of a wicked smile lurked. Hell, could he read her thoughts? Was that another gift of the Tir? He drew back and thrust again, his fingers mirroring as they sank again into her tight ass. Fina groaned and the ache for him, the need for him to take her hard, fast, rushed through her thoughts. Did she want the Tir? If they could make her feel like this? Hell yes. "I want them." She bit at his bottom lip and pushed herself down to meet his slow thrust. "I want you."

Kian melted kisses against her lips. "You'll have me. I promise." Kisses chased over her jaw and traced a path down her neck. He nipped at sensitive skin and released a soft groan. "Everything about you is right. Your taste, how you feel wrapped around me." Kian thrust harder, his cock, his fingers pushed deep into her and Fina buried her face against his neck, clung to him as fresh pleasure spiraled through her flesh. "Hot and tight."

His ragged breaths, the slap of their bodies and the increasing thrum of the crowd rushed through her. He wanted her pleasure, wanted her to come, wanted it to burst over them...and damn, the crowd deserved a show when she did.

The thoughts seared across her mind and she eased her arms free. Her thighs clamped to his hips and she arched her spine. Being warflesh came with benefits, after all. Her strength and flexibility were a major part of it. Cool air washed through the thin material of her shift, over her stomach, her breasts and Kian's large hand splayed between her shoulder blades, supporting her as she lay back.

"Seraphina..." He groaned her name and then she lost his touch from her ass, his fingers biting into her hip as he held her. He looked up, looked beyond her and a sharp smile cut his mouth. She gasped as warm hands slid over her shoulders, sliding under her shift to caress her breasts, tease her nipples. "Jon. Please. Join us."

Chapter Seven

Fina stared up and met Jon's liquid black gaze. Heat and rage warred within the darkness of his eyes and his lips thinned. "Fina." Her name was little more than a growl and she couldn't help the thrill that chased through her body, forcing a low groan from Kian.

Jon's gaze slid down her body and fixed on where her flesh joined with the Tir leader's. A muscle jumped in his jaw. "They held me back. Kept me away, while he—" He bit back more words, his breath short. He closed his eyes and pain tightened their corners. "Damn it, Fina..."

"Kiss me." She reached up to run her fingers through his hair, needing him to share in how Kian made her feel. "This is right, Jon."

His body tensed. "It isn't."

"Please." She arched into his touch and he sucked in a quick breath. No, he couldn't deny the power of the aphrodisiac that flowed through his body either.

His mouth hovered over hers, hot, sweet, and she tilted her head to take him. Her tongue teased his, a slow tasting that echoed the easy slide of Kian in and out her body and melted pleasure through her flesh. Jon deepened the kiss, something soft, full, her low moan becoming lost with his.

"We'll share her, Jon. Follow my instructions..." Kian's words trailed away and he deepened the strokes into her pussy. "Remove her clothes."

The chant of the crowd increased as Jon broke his mouth from hers. Her fingers stroked down his bare arm, unwilling to break contact.

"How?" His eyes didn't leave hers as he slid his hands down over her ribs to the curve of her belly. The feel of him against her flushed, hot skin, touching her as Kian continued to stroke into her, deepened the fire pulsing through her blood.

“How do you want to do it?” Kian’s question caught her breath and something sparked in Jon’s eyes, something that had the Tir leader groaning at her reaction. His fingers flexed against her hip. “Is that what you want, Jon?” Satisfaction warmed his dark voice, sparked fire in his gaze and Fina tightened her thighs, pushing back against his increased thrusts. Her breath came in short pants now, the tension low in her belly fierce, tight. “Do it,” he said.

Jon bunched the shift in his fists and pulled. The thin material ripped, exposing her to the watching crowd. Chilled air ran goose bumps over her hot skin and the low, rhythmic chant filling the hall beat with her blood, with the hard thrusts of Kian, with Jon who took her mouth in a fierce kiss.

“Damn it, Fina.” He growled the words against her lips as he held her, his hand flat against her belly, his arm beneath her shoulders, holding her, supporting her supine body as Kian drove hard into her flesh. “This is insane.”

“No. It isn’t.” She ran her fingers through his hair, loving its silky coolness, wanting him to understand, to feel how right Kian fucking her was. She closed her eyes, letting herself fall into the delicious rhythm, the soft chant he echoed from the crowd. “Lick me, taste me.”

“Fina...”

She laced her fingers through his, holding them against her belly before she pulled his hand up to her breast. “Make us come, Jon.”

Kian groaned and the satisfied sound rippled through the crowd. “Taste her skin,” he murmured. “Lick and bite her. Make her eager for me.”

Jon sucked in a quick breath and his hand tightened against her breast. “Where?”

“You know her.” A smile lurked in Kian’s voice and his sudden thrust arched Fina’s spine, made her cry out. “Clench her around me. Make her milk me.”

His order seared through Fina’s flesh and she gasped at the sudden hot brush of Jon’s open mouth against her belly, his tongue teasing her navel. Kian’s groan echoed her own. She sucked in a sharp breath as Jon’s fingers teased over her mons, playing,

curling in time with Kian's heavy thrusts. Fire twisted over her thoughts, coalescing with the wild echoing chant of the people in the hall. Everything in her screamed, ached for her release.

"Touch her." The Tir leader's voice was little more than a growl.

Fina crushed her eyes shut, riding the swell of fresh need. Her pussy clenched around Kian's cock. By everything unholy, this mission was going to kill her. Jon's breath ran hot and ragged against her stomach and his finger slid over her wet flesh, finding her clitoris. She bucked and sparks danced across her eyes. Almost, almost... Her body shook and the reality of her release burned so close she could almost taste it.

Suddenly the insane feel of so many hands, mouths on her flesh, kissing her, stroking her, wanting her, swelled through her. The people filling the hall shared her, wanted to feel her, share in her release.

"Come for us." Kian's voice, fast, desperate, speared her flesh. "Bring me with you."

"Yes."

The word broke from her. She grabbed at Jon, pulling him up her body, desperate for his mouth, for his hands. His tongue fought with hers as his fingers flicked her clit, joining Kian in fucking her, harder, faster, the slap of their flesh caught in time with the voices of the watching crowd. She mewled, Jon swallowing the sound.

Kian's hands gripped her hips and he stroked into her. "I have to have her." He growled the words and Fina had to obey. Jon pulled back and the action ripped her mouth from his. She wrapped her arms around the Tir leader, her fingers buried in his hair. She found his mouth, the taste of Kian and Jon mixing, coalescing, firing through her.

Fina rode him, groaning at each wild thrust. Her heart pounded and her flesh was so tight, so hot, she ached to find her release. The press again of fingers, palms, of mouths whispering unknown words against her skin almost, almost let her soul fly...and then his fingers found her ass again.

She screamed as orgasm smashed through her, wild, fierce, flowing fast through her flesh and still Kian thrust into her, riding out the heavy waves. His body shook with his own release and he buried his face in her neck, his lips against the sensitive skin of her neck. Slowly, slowly, the wildness ebbed from her blood and she kissed his shoulder, his neck, his jaw as he lifted his head.

Kian smiled at her and pressed a soft, melting kiss to her lips, teasing her, and fresh heat tightened her muscles around his cock. She couldn't help it, she rolled her hips against him, enjoying the little aftershock of pleasure rippling through her body. His smile was wicked. "Yes, I'm not finished with you either." He looked beyond her. "Jon."

Fina closed her eyes as his warm hands caressed her spine. Kian stroked into her, slow, easy, and a soft moan escaped, brushing against his lips.

"You want him," he murmured. "You've always ached for him."

Fina closed her eyes, wanting to deny the pulse of pleasure Jon's touch brought to her, but she couldn't. Kian's hard body, his heat, his scent wrapped around her, had brought her incredible joy – still did with his cock buried hot and hard within her – but she wanted Jon. He was right. She always had. "I've wanted him for what feels like forever."

"And winter must give way to spring," Kian murmured. He rolled his hips, the sudden thrust making her gasp and cling to him. The tension low in her pelvis had her heart pounding, and her thighs gripped him. She pushed down, taking him deeper. Kian groaned and closed his eyes. "You are temptation itself, but we must all follow our duty."

His hands stroked over her thighs, easing her tight grip and Fina reluctantly drew away from him, her feet touching the cold floor. Jon's arms wrapped around her, strong, possessive even as Kian's gaze scorched over her skin. "Is..." She swallowed, her throat tight with the need that still filled her. "Is it over?"

Kian pulled the shift over his head, dropping it to a puddle of cloth on the stone dais, and revealed the lean perfection of his body. His dark skin glistened with sweat and her gaze fixed on the hard length of his cock. He ran his palm along it and she watched, mesmerized. Her heart squeezed. She wanted him again, her altered body already eager for more. His gaze slid over Jon's hands on her breast, her belly, and desire flared in the Tir leader's eyes.

"Not yet." A dark smile lifted his mouth. "Touch her, Jon."

Jon brushed her damp, tangled hair from her neck and his mouth teased the sensitive skin below her ear. Liquid need flowed into her belly and she tilted her head for more of his touch. His covered erection pushed hard against her ass. She rolled her hips and his fingers tightened over her breast.

His soft curse burned over her damp skin. "I'm sorry, Fina."

She closed her eyes at the pain in his voice. "Enjoy me," she murmured. "There's no one here but us, Jon." Her hand covered his, teasing it down over her mons. "No one I've ever wanted more than you. Ever."

"Tell her what you want to do."

Kian's smooth voice had Jon tensing against her. For a moment, his mouth stilled on her neck. "Whatever the hell this water has done to me..." He pulled in a slow, heavy breath. "I want, I *need* to fuck you hard in front of these people." His admission burned through her and she pressed his fingers into her pussy. Heat ignited under her skin. "They have to see me buried in you, see me take you as he..." She worked his fingers, making them push through her wet flesh. His hips rocked against hers, his cock a tantalizing slide into the cleft of her ass. "As he takes your ass."

Little sparks of fire danced behind her eyes, her body alive, aching for both of them. "I want that. I want you both fucking me."

"Fina..." She didn't know whether her name was a plea or an apology. "These people are crazy."

She wriggled back against him. He couldn't regret what they had to do. She didn't. "They know how to have fun though."

Jon snorted and his lips pressed to the shell of her ear, his breath hot, hard. "Then fun it is." He paused for long, long heartbeats and then his growing smile caught her breath. "You looked so beautiful as he fucked you." His thumb tip teased her clit and only his hard hands held her up as her legs ran weak. "As we fucked you."

"Your reaction to me, to this," Kian stroked her jaw and her eyes shot open, "is beyond our expectation." His dark gaze roamed over her face before he turned to the softly chanting crowd. His chest lifted. "For the first time in a long time, you give us hope."

"Hope?" Her thoughts were fusing, becoming lost in Jon's touch, in the promise in Kian's eyes that he would have her again. "For the ceremony?"

"Every spring equinox we bring candidates to this hall. Every year they fall short. But you, both of you..."

A smile touched his lips before he leaned in to kiss her. She opened her mouth to him, wanting, aching for the cool mix of ice and cedar that her body craved. The kiss deepened and she ran her fingers through his hair as Jon's fingers fucked her, his hand tight on her breast. His whispers burned against the shell of her ear, promises of what he would do, how he would lick and bite and fuck her for the entertainment of the crowd. She moaned, her body tight and humming. Jon was with her, sharing the wild joy of the moment. It was what the Tir wanted, she could feel it in the rhythm of the words echoing throughout the hall, in Kian's ferocious mouth.

Kian's erection pushed hard against her stomach and her pussy tightened around Jon's fingers scorching heat under her skin. His bare flesh taunted her and she wanted nothing more than to be caught between them. "Time is against us." He pulled back with a sigh. "Jon. Step away from her."

Jon tensed and his words were little more than a growl. "I need her."

A wry smile pulled at Kian's mouth. "And you'll have her." He gripped his arm, pulling Jon back down the short steps of the dais.

Fina's fingers curled into fists, the chilled air of the hall washing away all warmth. Her skin prickled and she shivered. She stared at Jon, at Kian, wanting them, needing the heat and passion of their bodies. "What should I do?"

"Just wait."

"For what?" The stone floor vibrated beneath her bare feet, shaking loose a pattern she hadn't seen. A rough, dark circle dropped away, with spokes running to a large central dais on which she stood. Voices chanted over her, strange hypnotic words that flowed through her, urging her to trust them, to lift her arms, to rise up onto her toes...and float. Her heart hammered. All right, yet another strange part of the strangest mission she'd ever been on. She could deal with that. Fina breathed and let the chants ease her panic.

Lengths of light radiated from her and caught in a brilliant circle. The sun wheel. A mirror of the dark one carved into the stone beneath her feet. She sucked in a quick breath, trying to deny the sudden flush tearing through her body. Kian had promised her this. Binds of cold light wrapped around her wrists, pinning her. Something invisible tugged at her legs and she let it spread her. Her blood drummed and she stared out over the crowd and found every man and woman staring back at her, chanting, their gazes hot, fevered.

Her nipples peaked and their adoration flowed over her. She crushed her eyes against it. Nothing would be the same after this event, nothing.

"Fina." Jon stood before her. The light washed over him, thinning the material so that she could almost see his naked beauty. He threaded his fingers through the wild tangle of her hair and made her look at him. The fierce desire gripping him forced a gasp from her. He tugged at his shift and the thin material ripped and dropped away to the cold stone at his feet. "Now it's my turn."

Chapter Eight

Long fingers stroked down her spine, filling her with liquid heat. "So few have ever made it to the sun wheel." Kian pressed his lips to her shoulder, stringing light, burning kisses to the curve of her neck. "In the centuries that we've waited...this..." his hands curved around her hips and his thumbs teased over the cheeks of her ass, "is a rare joy."

But Fina wasn't really listening to the Tir leader. Her gaze fixed on Jon, her breath short, her heart pounding. "I'm yours."

His head tilted and he stepped closer. Fina looked down. A thin crust of stone supported his bare feet. Her gaze lifted and she stared at his erection. The smile tugged at her mouth. "Planning to use that, Captain?"

Jon smirked at her and pulled a soft kiss from her mouth. "Aren't you being presumptuous, Comms Officer Brodie?"

"That must be some sort of offense." Her fingers flexed, the light binds at her wrist making it impossible for her to touch him. She arched her spine, aching to move her body closer to him, to brush her naked skin against his. It had only been less than an hour since she'd touched him and it was already an hour too long.

"I'm sure it is." His palms teased over her waist, her hips and he pressed against her, his cock pushing hard into her belly.

Fina drew in a sharp breath, the heat from his body, from Kian's as he followed Jon in easing himself against her body, sank need deep into her flesh. The heavy thrum of the crowd increased her desire for them.

"Is your body ready for me?" Kian murmured the question against her ear and her pussy clenched. His large hands teased down over her ass, his thumbs parting her. "I need to fuck you now."

Fina wanted to tilt her hips back to him, but she couldn't move, and the thought of him taking her, of her being unable to resist, burned through her. And hell, her modifications made her always ready. She had never been more grateful to be warflesh. "You know I am."

The blunt head of his cock teased her ass and she closed her eyes tight, her pussy throbbing. "So perfect..." Kian murmured over the shell of her ear, before his teeth tugged at the lobe. He gripped her hip and his knuckles brushed her ass as he guided his cock to her tight hole.

The first push forced a gasp from Fina and a fiery need flared through her immobile body. Her fingers curled into tight fists and she fought not to come right then. Kian's ragged breath heated her skin and he eased forward, his cock breaching her, finding her slick and so, so ready for him.

Licks of fire chased up her spine and Kian gripped her hips in both hands, pushing, pushing, filling her ass. Fina stared at Jon, finding his eyes dark and heavy with desire.

"How does he feel?" he murmured, his fingers teasing down over her belly to play just above where she ached for him. A smile tugged at his mouth as Kian pulled back and Fina couldn't hold back the soft, pleased whimper. "Want him to fuck you harder?"

Her belly hollowed at the thought, her throat tight with her need. She wanted to nod, but her head was as caught as the rest of her body in the glimmer of the sun wheel. "I want," she swallowed, the sudden touch of his fingers against her wet pussy shocking her, "I want you both."

Jon pressed his cock against her clitoris and the sudden spark of pleasure had her panting, her body aching to move, to touch him, wrap herself around him. But she couldn't and her thighs quivered, her body barely her own at the thought of both men fucking her, taking her.

He slid over her wet flesh, his gaze never leaving hers, making it impossible for her to close her eyes. She had to watch him. His hand eased over her ribs and stopped just above Kian's, and the nearness of him, the knowing that soon, soon...

Fina cried out against his sudden thrust. And for a long, endless moment, both men stilled inside her, allowed her stretched body to accept them. Fina breathed hard, the need tight in her belly building, promising to explode through her flesh all too soon. The soft chant of the crowds washing over the hall intensified, the teasing words filling her as the two men did. Liquid fire scorched through her veins. The incredible ache of being at their complete mercy danced sparks behind her eyes and she fought to focus on Jon. "Please. I can't...I can't hold on much longer."

Kian nipped at her neck and the heat of his bare flesh against her spine was intoxicating. Then he pulled back, the friction delicious and forcing her to bite at her lip, before he thrust deep into her ass. Fina cried out. "You're ours." The words were little more than a growl and her pussy clenched, drawing a groan from Jon. "Ours to fuck."

Her guard powered his hips forward, finding a slow, alternate rhythm to Kian's. The pure, carnal pleasure in his eyes caught her, made her heart pound. "You're bound to us. For us." Jon strung out little bites and licks along her neck until his lips found her shoulder and he thrust hard against her. "And we're going to make you scream."

"Yes." She bit out the word, fighting down the heavy throb of her release. Not yet. Everything screamed at her to hold on, just that little bit longer. Fina crushed her eyes shut, the increasing rhythm of their thrusts, the heat of skin brushing, stroking over hers. Too much. And not enough. Her body was hardly her own, lost, shaking, and she wanted them to fuck her faster, harder, to take her. The chants of voices flowed over her, through her, a vortex that swept her up. And then the light, maddening brush of ghostly lips and tongues tasted her thighs, her arms, teased over her mouth leaving the intoxicating hint of cinnamon.

Her body throbbed, caught up in the overwhelming sensations of the two men filling her, fucking her, and the incredible touch of so many against her skin. They wanted her, adored her, wanted her to come.

“Seraphina.” Kian’s voice, ragged, hot, burned against her skin as his hips thrust harder and deeper, the pull and push into her ass licking fire up her spine. His fingers bit into her hips. “You belong to the Tir. Say it.”

“I...” The chants of the crowd filled the hall, drowning her thoughts in their need, the need for her to repeat Kian’s words. They burned on her tongue. There was nothing she wanted more, to be one with the people who could drive such fierce passion through her flesh. “I belong...”

“Say it, Fina.” Jon matched the Tir leader’s fierce thrusts and then they took her together. Filling her, and the wild sensation of them, of the lips, tongues, teeth and the hot breath of strangers on every inch of her skin surged through her flesh. Her orgasm teetered, so close she could almost touch it. Her body shook and still they fucked her together, faster, harder, the heat of their skin and the fierceness of their hands gripping her, tipping her ever closer...until...until...

“I belong to the Tir.”

The words escaped her in an insane rush, and chasing it through her body was an increasing pressure. Fina ached to scream. Her release burned so close.

“Come for me, Fina.” Jon whispered the words against her lips. His mouth took hers and Fina’s world exploded.

Heat and light and joy swept over her in a vast, molten wave that continued to roll through her. The crowd cried out, an ecstatic sound of intense joy and the insane sensation of unknown mouths on her skin flowed away. Jon swallowed her cries, his own low moans lost with hers, the thrust of his hip growing erratic. He clung to her. His tongue fought with hers and Kian growled against her ear, whispering how he could fuck her, how he would eat her, lick her...and another orgasm took Fina, a fast, brief flare of fire that ripped her mouth away from Jon’s in a short cry.

Kian groaned and his heat filled her, Jon following as his release took him, and their erratic thrusts slowed into an easy stroke into her still-thrumming body. Fina let her head fall back against Kian's shoulder and her arms flopped down to Jon's hot, damp skin. Shocked, she wriggled, but the Tir leader slid his hands under her ass and urged her trembling thighs up. She gripped Jon's hips and the change in angle encouraged the slow push of his hips and the deep slide of his cock into her pussy.

Kian took her mouth, kissing her long and slow, his tongue mirroring the slide of Jon into her flesh. Already fresh need tightened in her belly, increasing as both men's hands met on her breasts, the tease of so many fingers making her clench around Jon, squeeze Kian's cock still buried deep in her ass.

Yet, Kian released her mouth and nuzzled her neck, pressing light little kisses against her skin, echoing the ghostly kisses that had trailed every inch of her body. "That I could stay with you," he murmured. His heavy breath ran goose bumps across her chest. "But you completed the ceremony, Ambassador Brodie."

Her gut tightened and the thrum of pleasure died within her at the use of her title. She was no longer his Seraphina. His hands caressed her thighs and she ached when he eased himself from her body. Kian stepped back and Jon took her weight.

For an endless moment, she met Jon's unreadable gaze. It was over. They were over. The shuttle would take them both back to the Imperial carrier and to their separate lives. Her heart squeezed tight in her chest and she wanted nothing more than to ride him, find one last desperate joy in him. She'd taken so long to find him again. Damn it. Her eyes burned. Hell, she didn't know if Jon even wanted her. Her throat tightened and she had to wonder whether his attraction to her was simply the power of the spice-water in his blood

"Ambassador, Captain."

The command in Kian's voice had Fina loosening her thighs from Jon's hips and her feet reluctantly finding the floor. She turned to him. Jon stood silent and all too separate behind her. She ached for his touch, just something simple. The brief brush of his

fingertips against her shoulder, her hip. But that contact never came. Fina pulled in a calming breath. "Lord Kian." She laced her fingers together and couldn't help it when she covered herself.

His dark eyes followed her action and for a brief moment, desire burned in their depths. Slowly, his gaze eased up her body and she flushed at the heat still lingering in him. "Look around you, Ambassador."

She obeyed and blinked as she found the once-crowded tiers empty of people. "Where is everyone?"

"The ceremony is complete." A warm smile curved his lush mouth and she wanted nothing more than to kiss him again, lose herself in his taste, wrap herself around him and stay with him beneath the ice. "It's time for this generation of the Tir to move on."

"Move on?"

Jon's voice startled her and she willed the rapid thud of her heart to slow. "How?" she asked.

Kian lifted his arms and light shimmered around him, a soft, glowing white that bathed every inch of his skin. "For centuries, we've taken the waters from this planet, and every spring we test its potency to see if we are ready for the next stage of our evolution." His voice flowed around her, smooth, a ghostly touch against her bare skin. "You proved its power." His gleaming hand touched her jaw and ice prickled her skin. "And now you are the new generation."

She blinked. "Me?"

He stepped closer and the chilled light emanating from his lean body forced a shiver through her flesh. "As I was drawn here from Epsilon-Eridani-2 three hundred years ago, so others will feel the pull to come here." His lips brushed hers and ice pressed against her skin. "This planet needs us to continue its cycle. You will lead them to their evolution."

"This is insane," Jon muttered. He gripped her arm, pulling her back from the icy touch of Kian's body. Her skin rioted at the heat of his hand on her bare skin. "There is

no way that the imperial command will allow Fina to stay here. They'll bombard the mantle and storm the planet." He stared around the frozen, empty hall, his jaw tight and anger flushing his skin. "Within the hour, this planet, and its...resource...will be in the hands of the emperor." He focused on Kian again. "And we'd be traitors to the state. An hour later and we'd be dead."

Kian's head tilted. "You've always fought against how much you care for her." He stroked Jon's jaw and he jerked away from that touch. Jon's fingers flexed around Fina's arm. "Why is that?"

"You've changed the subject."

"No, I haven't." Kian stepped back and the glow to his skin intensified. "You have a bond." He waved his hand, tracing the air. "I can see it now. It wraps around you both...actually shimmers." His laughter had a strange echo that lifted the hairs on her skin. "We never got it quite right with the candidates we chose before you. You will no doubt endure the same frustration as you search for the man who will complete *your* evolution."

Fina didn't want to admit it, but Jon was right. For the first few moments, when Kian had said that the planet would be her home, relief had swept through her. No more warflesh, no looming threat of being a barrack whore in her future. She'd wanted to grab the fantasy. But she knew it was just a fantasy. The imperial troops would sweep down over them and take the spice-water. If they resisted, tried to claim Alpha-Lyrae-9 was *their* planet, they'd be dead in their next breath. "You're rumored to have a planet-wide weapon here. Is that true?"

Kian stared up at the curved ceiling. "We have no weapons, Ambassador. The Tir have always existed here in peace."

"You never reckoned with the Hitrailt emperor," Jon muttered.

The last of her hope dissolved. "Then we can't stay, Kian."

"I'm afraid you have no choice." He...floated...back from her, his form growing more nebulous, a simple shimmer of ice-white light rather than the man he had been. "You are the next generation of the Tir. You can't escape your new responsibility."

And then he was gone and his echoes died away, the hall falling to empty silence.

"We get out of here, find our clothes and get to the shuttle. Our mission time is practically up." Jon's hand slid down her arm and gripped her hand tight in his. His warm strength eased her pounding heart. "Agreed?"

Fina gave him a quick nod and followed him as he strode across the cold stone floor. He was so eager to leave and something about that twisted tight in her gut. "Do you think the emperor will give us a reward for securing the entire planet for him?" Jon slid her a look and she couldn't help the smile that escaped. "No, I didn't think so either."

The doors to the hall stood open onto the narrow corridor and the silence pressed against her. Everyone had vanished, somehow transforming into wisps of chilled light. It was crazy, and she'd think herself insane if she hadn't seen it herself. Jon stopped at an intersection, obviously unsure in the maze of tunnels cut through the dark rock. Fina pulled him to the left, taking them back to the room they had shared.

"Are you sure...?"

"They screwed with my brain when they made me warflesh." She tapped her skull. "Eidetic memory." She walked quickly down the twists and turns, the icy air and the cold stone beneath her feet giving her speed.

The doors to their room also stood open. Jon hustled her inside and closed them, the wood thudding into the frame. The air grew warmer and Fina shivered again. Their clothes sat in a neat pile on a chest tucked against the smoothly carved wall. They dressed quickly and silently. Fina sank onto the bed to pull on her boots. She watched Jon restrap the holster to his leg and wanted to ignore the tight, twisting knot of regret in her stomach. All too soon they would separate, never to meet again. Warflesh had sex with the same guard only once.

She pushed her hands over her tangled hair, trying to find the calm ambassador who normally lived in her flesh. But that woman didn't want to resurface right then. There was only Fina Brodie, former Comms Officer, and she wanted the truth before they walked away from each other forever. "You were never attracted to me, were you?"

Chapter Nine

Jon's attention snapped to her. He frowned. "What?" He settled his gun into its holster and secured it. "Fina. Not the time."

"Tell me it was the spice-water." She pushed herself up and her head tilted. She closed the distance between them. "Tell me it was the Tir's insane drink and I'll shut up."

Jon closed his eyes and expelled a heavy breath. "We have only minutes before our people realize that the city is unmanned. We have ten hours. Any longer and we're the enemy."

"Then it's easy enough to say, isn't it?"

His mouth thinned and he stared at her. A muscle jumped in his jaw...and the silence stretched.

With each passing second, Fina wished she could've pulled back her stupid question. Knowing that he wanted her without the lure of the spice-water only made the regret sink deeper into her flesh. But still her mouth asked questions without any help from her brain. "Is this something new?" She snorted and traced a finger along his jaw. He flinched. "Something that came with my modifications. New tits, new ass, being ever so flexible and hell, *tight*—"

"No." His chest rose and he lifted his chin. "You want me to admit it? Fine." His hard gaze gripped her. "I wanted you from the minute you disembarked from the civilian carrier." A bleak smile curved his mouth and it tightened her heart. "We used to do that. Rate the new intake. If you hadn't been Jens' sister I would've had you that afternoon. Happy?" He wiped a hand over his face and let out a slow sigh. He stepped back from her. "But our unit made it a rule. A fellow officer's family was off limits. Too often it screwed everything. Caused too much tension." He ran his hand over his untidy

hair. "It was hard." He snorted. "In more ways than one." His gaze burned over her and she felt the heat rush into her cheeks. "Especially when I knew you were alone in the comms room."

He'd wanted her? They could have been having serious, incredible sex for *years*. Her palm itched with the need to slap him. Hard. "You could have said."

"It was easier to ignore the need I had to shove you up against the nearest bulkhead." He gave a sour laugh. "Admit it to you? I'd have you stripped in the next breath."

Fina pressed her hands to her face. "This is so fucked up." She let herself breathe past the tightness of her throat, to try to find the calm center that she needed to carry on in her job as warflesh. Old mantras ran through her thoughts as she fought to ground herself. Her hands dropped from her face and she straightened her shoulders. Her warflesh persona slipped over her, tight and of little comfort. "All right. We go. We tell them the truth. Something about the ritual made them vanish." She snorted. "Tell them drinking too much spice-water transforms you into light. As if they'll believe us."

"Fina..." Jon took her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "I'm sorry. If I could stay here, start some insane colony where we sat around and drank spice-water all day. I would. In a heartbeat. But..." He squeezed her fingers and released her hand. "I can't protect you here. And that has to be my priority."

Her professional façade gave him a brief smile, while her gut twisted and the regret threatened to swallow her. "It would have been...fun."

His soft laughter warmed her skin and she ached to touch him, run her fingers over his mouth...but knew that would break her control. The need to taste him would inevitably follow. And that would be bad.

His hazel eyes darkened. "I was thinking more like hot, wild, exhausting and sweaty."

It hurt that she liked him so much, but still she smiled, something real, bright. "As I said. Fun." She rubbed her hands over her hips, her nerves making them damp. "Time to go."

Jon gave a short nod. "Stay behind me and stay close. If they've taken the base, advance troops tend to be...indiscriminate."

Fina straightened her shoulders and let who she was sink into her skin, forced it to mask feelings she now had to deny. Jon drew his weapon and she followed him through the chilled corridors. The stone curved high above, crusted with ice, and the fantasy of it being her home, of her being free of the bind of being warflesh cut through her. Her gaze stayed on Jon's broad, strong back, and the idea of a home with him burned around her heart. She quashed the unneeded thought and waved to the right as Jon paused at a dimly lit intersection.

The open doors to the bay lay ahead, their shuttle squatting on the pad. It seemed everything in the city now lay open, abandoned. Imperial troops would storm through it and take everything they wanted. It was wrong. Anger curled hot and tight in her gut, but there was nothing she could do about it. She and Jon could not stand up against the imperial war machine. She ran fingers through her cold hair. Well, they could, and they'd find themselves dead very shortly after. No one stood up to the Hitraitl emperor. The whole quadrant, as well as their ancient Naderi enemies, were learning that very hard fact.

Jon scouted the inside of the open ship and then waved for her to climb inside. She found the copilot seat and sank into the deep leather. Recent memory threatened to swallow her, of their first kiss, his taste, heat and how she would've stripped him then and there. Fina pulled in a breath and yanked the straps over her. "Ready to go," she murmured.

Jon nodded and his fingers ran over the console panel. "Fifteen minutes left before we're complicit. We cut it close." The steps retracted and the metal door thunked into place. Warm air ran over her skin and she rubbed her hands together, focusing on the

rasp of her now dry hands. "The shaft is open. We should be able to get a signal through to the ship." He tugged his restraints over his body and flexed his long fingers around the guidance controls. "This is Captain Jonathon Raegh. I have Ambassador Brodie on board and we're ready to return to the ship." He paused and Fina counted her rapid heartbeats, but there was only silence. Jon rubbed at his jaw. "Shit. All right, we'll have to fly to the surface and rebroadcast." He glanced at her. "They may fire at us before they identify us. It could get bumpy."

She couldn't help the sour laugh that escaped her. "No wonder the galaxy hates us."

"You noticed that too?" He fired up the engines and the shuttle shook, the vibrations growing stronger under her booted feet. Jon let out a string of curses and his fingers ran faster over the instrumentation.

Fina clung to her seat as the shuttle practically rocked, the scream of metal and the roar of the engines harsh and loud in her ears. "What's wrong?"

Jon shook his head. "I don't know." His face flushed. "I've injected enough power to break through the atmosphere and I can't pull it off the ground." The engines powered down and fell to silence. "They have to be holding us here somehow." He yanked the straps free from his body and stood up. "The shuttle's internal scanners can't pick up the layout of this place, but we have to find the main control tower. Broadcast our status from there." He stared at the panel. "Shit. Eleven minutes."

Fina followed his fast exit from the shuttle. "They want us to stay."

"Yeah, well, we aren't going to turn into a glowing ball of light." He turned into the corridors and broke into a run. "There'll be blood and holes and pain."

"Do you know where you're going?" Fina kept up with him, her boots pounding beside his against the smooth stone. Her heart thudded hard and the icy air burned into her lungs. What the hell were the vanished Tir playing at? They had no weaponry. Maybe in the past, they didn't need a planetary-wide defense against attack. Now they did.

"I'm making a guess," Jon muttered and turned back to the arena.

The familiar cold gusts of ice-laden air greeted them in the wide doorways. Fina pulled it into her heaving lungs and her chest tightened as she thought she caught the hint of cedar and cinnamon. Sweat cooled fast against her skin and she shivered. "You think it's somewhere beyond here?"

"If it isn't..." He shrugged and took her hand. His warmth and the solid grip eased the fact that if they didn't find a way to contact their people soon, they would be dead. Jon pulled her across the circular arena and she found him staring at the raised central dais. "For the record, Fina, I wasn't lying." He grinned at her and squeezed her fingers. "You did look hot when he fucked you."

To her surprise, her face reddened. Hell, she hadn't blushed in years. Being warflesh negated it. "And are you upset that he didn't have you?"

Jon narrowed his eyes and humor shone there. "Maybe..." His gaze returned to the dais. "Let's try something."

"What?"

Jon ignored her and tugged her after him toward the raised circle of pale stone. He stood at its center, his hand firm around hers. "All right. They want you to be in charge of this place. Ask this tech where the control center is."

Fina straightened her shoulders. "Show us where the control center is. Please."

Jon looked at her, an eyebrow lifted. "Please?"

She shrugged. "Doesn't hurt to be polite."

He shook his head, biting back a smile, but his expression sobered as the stone shook beneath their feet, the low rumble filling the silent hall. He kept her steady as the stone circle sank down, down beneath the surface of the arena.

"This is crazy." Fina's voice echoed around the cold stone rising above her head. She ducked down and caught the first glimpse of a round room beneath the arena floor.

Lights flashed through the dimness and the familiar scent of metal and warm tech cut through the icy air.

“And this looks like the place we want.” Jon jumped down, taking Fina with him. The stone thumped into the floor with a dull thunk and a burst of grit.

Light screens and panels flickered in the heavy shadow and the low whine of advanced tech vibrated under her skin. A large panel of light displayed the full Alpha-Lyrae system. Their flagship took up half of the panel, information streaming beside it. Fina winced. They were preparing to attack.

She pulled her attention away. They had only short minutes now before the ship bombarded the planet. She recognized comms pods, similar to the one she’d worked in before she became warflesh, tucked behind the broad curve of the display panel. “There.”

She strode toward the light-wrapped station, but Jon reached it before her. He pushed the curve of light open and pulled on the wire set. Turning his head from side to side, the pieces settled over his right ear and eye. “This is Captain Jonathon Raegh. I’ve completed the mission with Ambassador Brodie. We’re ready for evac.”

He paused and Fina found herself holding her breath, her heart pounding in her ears. Jon’s face tightened and she knew he hadn’t received an answer to his signal. “What the hell is going on?”

“Tir Authorities.” A man’s voice boomed around the control room. Fina’s stomach dropped. Shit, their time was up. She’d recognize that heavy accent anywhere. It belonged to the commander of the imperial carrier orbiting the system, Admiral Istvan. “You have continued to ignore our request for information concerning our delegation sent to your planet in good faith.”

“Admiral Istvan!” Jon cursed, his shoulders tight. “Damn it, sir, we completed the mission!”

Fina’s gut tightened into a knot. Had they realized the Tir had no weaponry with which to defend themselves and now they had the excuse to fire on the planet and take

what they wanted? The slim justification would be their finding herself and Jon slaughtered. She met his gaze and Jon knew they were dead too.

“Tir Authorities, you give us no choice but to seek retribution for the loss of our people.”

Jon yanked the wire set from his head and held out his hand. She took it, letting him pull her into a tight embrace. Fina closed her eyes and turned her head into his shoulder. “It was probably always going to go down this way.”

His warm hand stroked the length of her spine. “Our superiors are nothing if not devious and underhanded.”

Fina snorted and pulled back to look at him. “Yes, they are.” She pulled in a breath. They were dead, but she would tell him how she felt. “Jon—”

“And here is your choice.” Kian’s voice eased over her and her skin prickled. Jon stiffened, his hand jerking to the gun strapped to his thigh, but there was no shimmer of light to break the dimness.

“Choice?” Jon almost barked the word. “Dead or...?”

“To rule here is your destiny.”

“Then as you said before, we have no choice at all.” Fina peered into the shadows, wanting to find Kian, focus on him. His disembodied voice still tugged at her, something unexplainable. “We’re trapped here for the rest of our lives.” She thought she caught a glimmer of light beside one of the monitoring stations. “And if you’re anything to go by, we’d be stuck here for centuries.”

Kian’s soft laughter played over her skin and she shivered, the unexpected pulse of need easing through her flesh. “I have yet to see a negative point.”

The low rumble of impacts against the ice crust vibrated down to the control center, and the flash and whine of the instruments cut through the dim quiet. Grit shook free of the low curve of the ceiling. Fina’s heart kicked into a faster beat and Jon’s hand squeezed hers, offering comfort. She looked at him. “Dead or...?”

He lifted an eyebrow. "Hot, wild, exhausted and sweaty?"

A smile broke from her and she pressed her hand to her face. Their life was about to become insane. Another impact vibrated down through the stone, heavier, harder, and it threw her off balance. Jon caught her. "We'd be safe here?"

"You will be protected."

"That's not the same thing." Jon's mouth thinned. Another shockwave burst through the room. "How would we be protected?"

"Are you agreeing to stay?" Kian's disembodied voice rose above the rumble of stone.

Fina shrugged. "We have no other option besides death."

Kian's low laughter, warm, wicked, ran another shiver through her flesh. "You make us sound so unappealing." He paused. "You're both in agreement?"

Larger chunks of stone hit the instrumentation. The crack and spark of broken panels flared around the room, acrid smoke rolling down across the stone floor. "Yes," Jon said. "You have us. Good enough?"

"For now."

For a long second, Kian was silent, only the spit of fire from the damaged panels breaking the quiet. Fina held her breath. What the hell had they bound themselves too? Living out their lives on a cold rock beneath tons of ice and snow? Jon's strong arm encircled her waist and for a moment she let herself enjoy that reality. He would share her isolation. *Hot, wild, exhausted and sweaty.* A smile tugged at her mouth. Damn right.

"This is Kian, former Lord of the Tir." Kian's voice echoed around the room. "Our planet is defended. Ambassador Brodie and Captain Raegh will remain here. If your emperor still wishes to receive his consignment of spice-water, you will leave now."

"Our deep scans have penetrated the crust. We find no defenses." Istvan's arrogant voice followed quickly. "Surrender now in the name of the Hitrailt Emperor."

"I think that will be a no," Kian murmured.

The air warmed around them in the control center and the rush of it around her body felt too familiar. Fina sucked in a sharp breath. The Tir. Generations of them, bound to protect and nourish the planet, powerful, eternal, for a brief second she shared in their strength as they ripped through the vacuum in streaks of brilliant light toward the carrier.

The display panel monitoring the flagship dulled. Fina scanned the ship information scrolling in a sharp stream beside the image. The cramp in her gut eased. Not destroyed, merely disabled...but the crew manifest didn't add up. "Kian...?"

His glowing shape appeared before her. Its brightness eased and his face took on its human form. His mouth hovered over hers and she tasted the familiar hint of cinnamon mixed with ice and cedar. A ghostly hand stroked over her breast, sliding a slow path to her hip. Her skin reacted to the contact and it almost felt as if his fingers found her through the barrier of her clothes. "Complete the ceremony again, Seraphina. Search the stars for a man who will be your new spring, as I was the man to complete Arion and Dirce's ceremony so many years ago. Bring us a new generation." He smiled and his lips brushed hers, a tantalizing shock to her mouth. "Then our fun can begin."

"Promise?"

Jon's hands splayed over her hips, tight, possessive, and the heated memory of both men surged through her. "Fina..." His lips teased her ear, but a warning lurked under the word. "Put the man down."

She couldn't stop the grin that broke from her. Kian's mouth covered hers for a brief unsatisfying moment and she ached to deepen the kiss, press herself against the hard length of his body...but the former Tir leader faded back.

"Until we meet again."

Kian's voice faded and Fina pressed her hand to her lips, a smile growing around her fingers. She would taste him again. She'd make sure of it.

Chapter Ten

Jon pushed shut the doors on the ornate room. He leaned back against it and closed his eyes. Fina tilted her head and let her gaze slide over him. He'd abandoned his bulky flight suit in favor of a plain tunic and trousers. The cut of the pale material accentuated the lean hardness of his body and desire rose in her again. Damn, she would never get tired of him. Didn't want to.

"They're settled in." Jon let out a slow breath and pushed himself away from the door. "I found ten of your former crew. As well as hydroponic caverns and enough advanced tech to make your toes curl." He stared up at the curve of the ceiling. "And if you're going to transport people off a carrier, try to drop them all in the same place."

Fina snorted. "I think the older Tir have finished talking to us youngsters."

Jon laughed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Am I the only one who thinks this whole situation is insane?" He fisted his fingers in his hair. "One short day ago, I was an Antilles pilot, now I'm some sort of colony leader? And the colony is already growing."

Fina pushed herself to her feet. Her toes dug into the heavy wool of the rugs and she lifted her shoulders. He'd insisted she rest while he tracked down the life signs sparking all over the warren of tunnels and rooms that made up the city, but she'd stared up at the silk canopy of the bed and counted the seconds until he came back. They had unfinished business.

"We're alive, Jon." She traced her fingers down his chest, the heat of his skin warming the thin fabric. "About four hours ago, that was in doubt."

"True." He dug into his pocket and opened his palm. A silver disc sat there. "And I also found this."

Fina narrowed her eyes on the inscribed metal. It was obviously advanced tech of some sort. It was also just as obvious that he wasn't interested in sex right then. She held back a sigh. Her warflesh needs would drive a spike between them. "What is it?"

He pressed his thumb to the surface and a shadowy image of Kian in his pristine white robes rose up from the disc.

"If this technology has found you, then the ceremony has completed and the cycle will begin again."

The former leader's dark voice ran smooth over her skin, rich, deep and not at all like the flickering shadow that represented him. "We know this, Kian," Fina muttered. "Get to the point."

His image wasn't interactive and he ignored her. *"The natural waters of this planet transform a special few, bringing both them and this world into a perfect balance. For them pleasure will increasingly come from the touch, the merging of minds, marking the start of your evolution. However, you must retain your need for bodily pleasures until the very end of your time here. As I did."*

The shadowy image straightened his shoulders. "No children will ever be born here. When your colony numbers reach one thousand you must begin the spring ritual to bring life to the next generation." He paused and a serious expression hardened his face. *"In the meantime, you must drink the waters every day. Without it, you cannot survive here."*

Kian's head tilted and the gleam of dark amusement shone from him. Her heart squeezed. Fina hadn't expected to miss a virtual stranger quite so much. *"There is a host of dull detail I must share with you, but that can wait. I'll return when you need me."*

The image collapsed and the thrum of the tech died to silence. Jon dropped the metal disc back into his pocket. "And that's our life until the spring festival starts again."

Fina met his gaze and pressed her hand to his chest. His heart beat low and strong under her palm. Something about Kian's message had wormed under his skin. "Would that be so bad?"

His hand closed over hers, this thumb idly stroking her knuckles. "Every day," he murmured. "That water every day." A wry smile tugged at his mouth. "Not how I imagined spending my time with you."

She blinked. "You imagined...?"

"I imagined...a lot." His hand cupped her cheek, his gaze fixing on her mouth. Fina wet her lips, quick, almost unconscious, and his eyes darkened. "But it was me, not some crazed man dosed up on alien water."

"I'll do you a deal." She stepped closer to him and her fingers teased at the thin material of his tunic. "I *am* a negotiator, after all." Her heart lifted at the light curve of his lips. She wanted an eternity with him—and she would have it. "We're clear of the spice-water now." She rose up on her toes and pressed a chaste kiss to his mouth. "We wore it off. So, let us make the assumption that the water's effects diminish after sex." Fina melted another kiss against him and another. His palm shaped her waist, her hip, and eased her flush to his body. "I suggest we get naked and drink the water after." She lifted an eyebrow. "Would that be a satisfactory compromise?"

Jon walked her back to the bed, their feet silent on the thick rugs, and Fina fought to keep her grin contained. "And this would be a daily activity?"

Liquid heat slipped fast and hot into her belly, quicker than the burn of spice-water. "If you can keep up."

"If...?" Jon lifted his brows. "Is that a challenge, Ambassador Brodie?"

Her thighs hit the edge of the bed and she grinned at him. "The reputation of the Antilles is at stake."

Jon found the tabs in her tunic and pulled them apart, exposing her skin to the cool air. He pushed the material back from her shoulders and his mouth ran hot over her neck, little nips and bites chasing heat under her flesh. "I'm a leader in this city now." He smiled and Fina let her eyes drift shut. "Will be for a *long* time."

Her fingers inched under the thin fabric covering his chest. The simple joy of touching him, of there being no agenda other than sharing pleasure, lifted a weight

from her, one she hardly recognized anymore. "I'm in charge here, Captain. You report to me."

His palms teased down her back and she arched into him. His erection pressed into her belly and she rolled her hips. His soft groan made her smile. "In every way?"

"Every way you can imagine."

"I can live with that." His fingers tightened against her ass and she let out an unexpected squeak. Her laughter followed. Yes, Jonathon Raegh broke all of the modified behavior of warflesh. Fina was glad of it.

He eased her down onto the smooth silk sheets, the mattress dipping under their weight. His gaze held hers, his hazel eyes darkened with need and something else. His thumb teased her parted mouth. "I've missed you."

The admission squeezed her heart and unexpected tears burned. She blinked. "You missed me?"

His smile made her throat tight. "You have no idea."

Fina closed her eyes and a tear slipped down her temple. She bit her lip as he kissed away the wet track from her skin and chased butterfly kisses over her cheek and neck. His hot mouth teased down to her collarbone and Fina pulled in a shuddering breath.

She'd realized she loved him long before, the pain of it churning her stomach as she'd watched the Antilles scout pull out of the hangar, taking him away from her forever, but it was a feeling she'd buried. The modifying therapists had ripped all such emotion from her, or so she'd thought. A wry smile tugged at her mouth. Yet, here it was again. Just as fresh and stomach churning as it had always been. Her smile deepened. Time to do something about it.

She watched his dark head as he pressed open-mouth kisses to her stomach, his fingers already tugging at her trousers. "I love you."

Jon stilled and a tremor ran through his hands. He looked up and simply stared at her.

Her heart pounded and her sudden nervousness almost had her head light. "I have for too long." His silence did little to ease her stress. "Well? *Anything?*"

His sudden speed surprised her. His mouth found hers and she almost lost herself in a soul-searing kiss. Jon held her to him, his hands stroking over her skin, holding her hard against him. Desire rose fast through her blood and she pushed at his clothes, eager to free him. Their mutual groan vibrated through her flesh as his cock pressed against her belly.

"I wanted to go slow," Jon murmured, his hand slipping down her stomach to guide his cock. He pulled in a ragged breath. "But you..."

"Me, what?" Fina grinned at him and rolled her hips, teasing his cock, eager for him to sink deep inside her. Her body thrummed. Hell, they did not need spice-water. Their own desire was the greatest aphrodisiac. "Jon...?"

He pushed forward and Fina forgot about her question, about anything else other than making love to him. She took his mouth, her fingers tight in his hair, and met every hard thrust. Need pulsed low in her belly but she needed more. She hooked her leg over his hip, the change of angle letting him sink deeper into her pussy.

Her mouth broke from his and she buried her face against his shoulder, the scent of his skin mixing with the fabric of his tunic. The hint of cinnamon, of cedar caught her and her heart jumped. Kian had brought them together and she wanted to imagine the brush of air against her spine was his clever mouth, wanted him to share in her love for Jon.

"Fina..." Jon whispered her name over the shell of her ear. "I love you."

Her breath caught and then she was kissing him again, the wild play of their bodies driving faster, wilder need through her flesh. Tension curled and Jon's increasing thrusts, the hard grip of his fingers on her ass, drove pleasure through her flesh. Almost, she could almost taste her release as her heart hammered and her tongue fought with his.

And then sudden fire burst over her thoughts and she cried out, her body shaking, lost as her orgasm swept her up. Jon groaned and pressed his face in her neck as his release found him. Fina clung to him, unwilling to break away from the joy of holding him, loving him. He pressed light, melting kisses to her throat, her jaw and she felt his smile against her skin.

“Yes, so much for slow.”

Jon laughed and stroked a damp hand up her spine. He kissed her mouth, teasing her bottom lip with his teeth. “I can’t resist you.”

“Good plan.”

His laughter deepened and he eased away from her. Disappointment growled until she watched him tug the tunic over his head and push his loose trousers down. He dumped the crumpled clothes on a nearby chair and she had the pleasure of watching him walk naked across the room. He stopped at a smooth, almost shiny panel of stone and pressed his hand to it. The low whine of activating technology cut through the silence. Jon turned and his eyes narrowed.

“You ogling again?”

Fina smirked at him. “As leader of this city, I think it’s my right.”

Jon shrugged. “True enough.” He held up two small metal cups as he came back to the rumpled bed. “I discovered that every room has access to a supply.” Fina took the cup he offered, the icy metal chilling her fingertips. “I will hold to my side of the deal.”

She stared into the clear liquid, vapor rolling over the rim. Her daily dose would keep her alive and drive a fierce insatiable need through her body. She looked up at Jon. Her life was bound to him now, centuries in flesh and who knew how many eons as chilled light. The thought made her heart miss a beat. She grinned as she lifted her cup and clinked it against his.

“Cheers.” Fina knocked it back in one ice-cold gulp, making Jon laugh before he followed her example.

She gripped his hand, yanked him onto the bed and he hit the mattress with a groan. Already, fresh heat and need surged through her. Fina shucked off her trousers and straddled him, pinning his arms above his head with modified strength. He smirked at her and she teased her pussy over his erection, pulling a soft moan from him. "Every day," she murmured, her teeth tugging at his full lower lip. "I'm going to do this every day."

"Promise?"

Fina held his darkened gaze, the wild need of the spice-water surging through him. But she saw more, saw the affection, the love that burned through both of them. "Oh yes." She sank down on him and she closed her eyes. "It's going to be the best deal I ever made."

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.

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