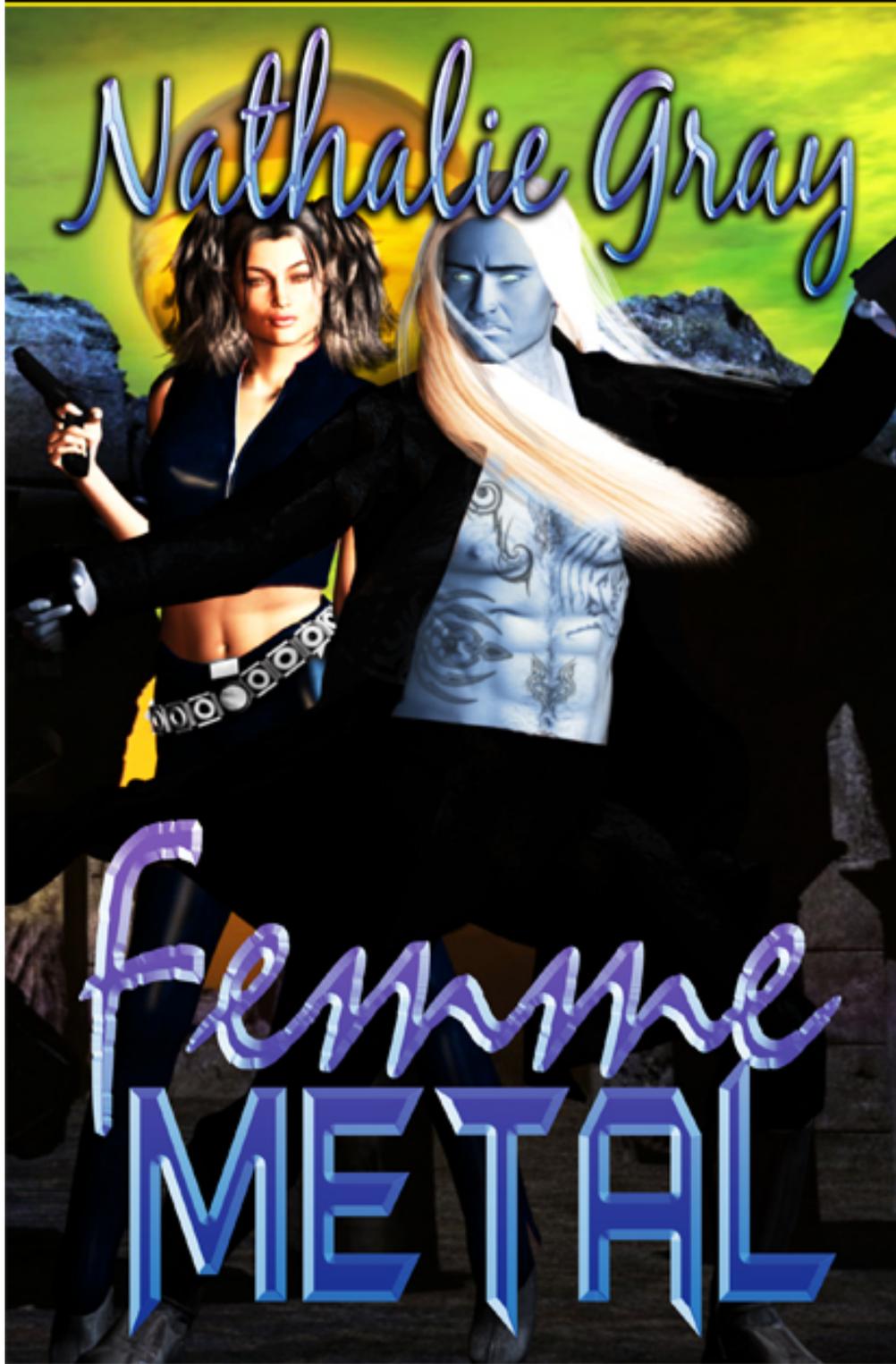


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Nathalie Gray



Femme
METAL

FEMME METAL
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FEMME METAL

Nathalie Gray

Chapter One

“Kim cracked the code, Cap’n,” Ebinay said. A wide grin pierced the smooth ebony of her skin. She motioned with her chin for the other two women waiting behind her. They stepped over the hatch and into the darkened staircase. All three, dressed in black from head to toe and wearing various weapons on their persons, turned back to wait for the last woman. She stepped inside the airlock, all six feet of her, and joined the rest on the staircase landing.

Alexandra Novona to those who knew her well, Captain Steel to those who didn’t. Only friends could call her Alex. And not many ever called her such. The nickname had bothered her at first but no longer did. All the steel she had in her knees and over her cranium unfailingly tripped metal detectors. She had to carry a medical ID disc that listed all her metal parts so she wouldn’t get arrested when traveling between the planets and crossing the Interworld borders. She had gotten used to the stares of security personnel—whatever species they happened to be—as they perused her catalog of physical restorations. Since she now frequented worlds where security personnel were mostly comprised of crooks worse than her, she no longer triggered alarms.

Alex gave a curt nod to Ebinay. “Nothing fancy this time. We go in, extract the target then get out.” Her velvet voice was barely above a whisper. She checked her watch. “Go.”

After Ebinay pushed the door, all four women crept down the narrow passageway. Their military-issue boots made no sound on the industrial-grade carpet floor. Tiny lights embedded along the ceiling gave just enough illumination to see a few feet in front. And even then...

“Why couldn’t he have been on the upper decks, with the good types,” whispered Eva, a diminutive redhead with a mouth too big for her face, or her good. “Can’t see anything down here.”

Alex grinned. “Money can buy you a good cabin on a cruise ship, but not good looks. Left here,” she added as she checked the display unit she held in her gloved hand. The cruise ship was worse than a maze. Thirteen decks, six massive booster rockets, which could have moved two spaceships of similar size, and 1,852 passengers plus 73 crewmembers. And no security to speak of. Alex shook her head. Fools.

Cabin doors to their left shone moss green under the thin light. Ebinay stopped abruptly and raised a fist. All three women froze and listened. Footsteps from up ahead broke the silence in the passageway. The dark woman turned to Alex and gestured with her thumb across her throat. Alex nodded once.

Padding ahead like a panther, Ebinay disappeared around a corner. A muffled voice cried out then a thump was heard. She came back and nodded. "A steward. We'll have to hurry now."

Alex rushed on ahead and passed her second-in-command. Their target's room was number 205. She followed her display unit, which showed a map of the ship, and navigated the darkened passageways. Before she had recruited Kim, her expert hacker, into her professional extractor team—kidnappers, in other words—Alex had had to rely entirely on what ships' schematics she could steal. But with Kim onboard the *Femme Metal*, it was a breeze to breach any cruise ship, get the target and make a hasty exit. Alex grinned. Her ship the *Femme Metal* was small, highly maneuverable and ugly as hell. Like a giant steel flea. But she could trigger a jump point to hyperspace within thirty seconds flat. Couldn't beat that.

204 came up to her left. She slowed and crept toward the following door. A "Do Not Disturb" sign glowed neon blue inside the access panel of room 205. *So he didn't want to be bothered. Poor bugger.*

From her sleeve pocket, Alex pulled out her stunner and motioned to the others to take position. Blocking the tiny Eva from view, the last woman Annabelle came forward and slung her gun around her neck. The ever-silent woman balled fists the size of cantaloupes and rolled thick shoulders.

"We're at the door, Kim," Alex subvoiced into the comms unit strapped to her throat.

The shrill voice of Kim practically made Alex's earpiece vibrate when she responded she was already working on it. As Annabelle crouched like a bear waiting for fish to swim by, Ebinay and Eva raised their stunners. A green light appeared on the access panel. No system was beyond Kim.

Alex whispered, "Go," and followed the massive Annabelle into the cabin.

A man and a woman, both humans, lay on the bed, one on top of the other. From their position and the sheen of sweat covering both, Alex surmised her team had just interrupted something very pleasant for both passengers.

"Hey!" the woman said, rising on an elbow.

Before either one could react, Ebinay rushed past and leveled her stunner at the pair. She fired. One tiny ball of polymer shot out and hit the man in the chest. The ball burst and splattered a gooey conductive substance laced with nanodarts. He jolted as blue arcs danced over his skin. After a second or two he slumped against the mattress. His companion's shriek ended when Annabelle stunned the woman. She flopped down to rest on the man's torso.

"Hurry. Get him." Alex pulled an inhibitor from her pant pocket.

After Annabelle lifted the man from the bed and wrapped him in a tight bear hug, Alex slipped the silvery band around his neck then activated it. A red light flashed once as the tiny computer inside the clasp sifted through its network, looking for human settings. Then a green light appeared. It'd found the settings and adjusted to its wearer.

Now the guy wouldn't be able to even touch the clasp without getting recognized by its tiny sensors. With that thing on, he wouldn't be trouble. Not unless he wanted one big, nasty shock.

"Let's get out of here."

With Eva in front, and Ebinay and Annabelle holding the man between them, they rushed back the way they had come. Alex brought up the rear, stunner sweeping back and forth. Fortunately, they met no one. The passageway ended with the emergency staircase they'd used. Eva pushed it open and held it there while the two women supporting the unconscious man rushed by.

The hatch Kim had hacked from the *Femme Metal* gaped in front of them. Light from the small ship filtered through the round opening. Ebinay cursed when they squeezed through and she hit her head against the handle. "The guy's heavier than he looks."

As they crammed inside the *Femme Metal's* airlock, Eva closed the staircase door, pried a metal wedge under it so it wouldn't be opened while they still worked and rushed by Alex. "It should always be that easy, huh, Cap'n Steel!"

"We're still moored," Alex warned as she waited for her crew to cross the hatch. At last, she gave one quick look around the darkened staircase then closed the hatch behind her. After quickly punching the keys she took a step back from the opening and kept her stunner poised until the hatch had hissed closed and locked. Air whistled out of the crack when the rubber seal expanded. Integrity was achieved. Her ears popped. Behind her, Ebinay and Annabelle carefully deposited the naked man to the rubber-sprayed floor. The black woman whistled appreciatively when their captive rolled onto his back.

"Nice," she said, her crooked grin rapidly spreading to Eva. Even Annabelle looked as though she wanted to smile.

Alex had to give him that—he was well endowed. His member, though flaccid because of the stun he'd received, still looked impressive. She could well imagine how hard and thick it would become when aroused. No wonder her customer wanted him so badly.

"How much are we getting this time, Cap'n?" Ebinay asked. She licked her fleshy lips.

"Fifteen thousand."

Ebinay said something in Afrikaans. Eva laughed.

A *small fortune, really*, Alex thought as she waited for Kim to equalize the pressure inside the airlock. Enough credits for her and her crew to make some repairs to the *Femme Metal*, take a full week's shore rest and buy themselves all something nice. Very nice. Maybe she'd get some handsome professional company this time around. But the *Femme Metal* badly needed some parts. Her own pleasure would have to wait. Good thing she had her toys to pass the long nights in space.

A series of deep thumps followed when Kim released the mooring clamps. The inside airlock opened and Kim poked her head in the opening. "Woo," she said, that

voice of hers filling the cramped space. "Would you look at this?" Her nostrils flared as she surveyed their still unconscious detainee.

Alex frowned. "We have less than ten standard minutes to get the hell out of here before that steward wakes up."

She slid the stunner on her belt and pushed past a still staring Kim. The girl's spiky hair was purple today. It had been green the day before. Familiar smells from the *Femme Metal* wafted to Alex as she climbed the steel ladder two by two. The ship was still in stealth mode, which meant in order to reduce their heat signature and emissions most of the ship's systems were dormant. Despite the gloom, Alex navigated her ship's twisting passages with practiced ease, ducked in the right places and reached the bridge just as a series of lights had begun to flash on the command controls.

"Shit."

A low whirr from the comms unit indicated some tracking device had locked onto the *Femme Metal*. The steward must have been tougher than Ebinay had thought. The cruise ship must have scanned its hull and discovered the tiny *Femme Metal* attached to its belly like a Lamprey fish on a shark.

As Alex was strapping herself into her seat, Kim arrived and leapt over her own, landing bottom in perfect alignment to the seat. "Ready when you are," she announced.

"Jettison the decoy but don't activate it yet." Alex leaned forward and flicked the power switches back on. Every system checked in. Everything was ready. A beep and a clunk indicated Kim had sent the decoy out. It wouldn't confuse the cruise ship's sensors for long, just enough for the *Femme Metal* to make a run for it. "Prepare for jump!" Alex yelled into the general comms system. She hoped Ebinay and Annabelle had had enough time to strap the target down, but she couldn't wait any longer.

"Ready for jump sequence."

Alex raised her hand. "Let the decoy do its thing first."

A series of high-pitch beeps announced the cruise ship had locked onto what it thought was the *Femme Metal*. Soon a tractor hook would shoot out of its side and fasten onto the tiny vessel's hull. What it would find instead would be the decoy, which was a mere cargo crate equipped with an electronic tracking device emitting the *Femme Metal*'s signal. Another one of Kim's brilliant ideas. It was crude. It was ugly. But it worked.

Alex grabbed both control sticks onto which she had glued two bright pink plastic penises. "In five, four, three, two, one. Jump."

Kim and Alex both leaned back deep into their seats as the ship lurched forward. Rattles and creaks sounded ominously as the small ship triggered a jump point some kilometers in front of its prow. Beyond the rectangular porthole, a rip of smoky blue and green opened in space. Alex maneuvered the prow into it, unconsciously rubbing both thumbs over the plastic penises' heads. She wanted out of there fast but quickly calmed as years of training surfaced. Gently, she angled the ship into the tear. Her eagerness to vacate the area calmed.

Like something had just pulled her guts out through her navel, Alex felt the rush of the jump. She groaned as she piloted the *Femme Metal* through the hyperjump and followed the twisting conduit of iridescent light. Stars flashed by in a multicolor swirl. Beside her, Kim grinned like the kid she was.

As abruptly as it had begun, the forward movement stopped, the creaking and rattling diminished. The ship exited the jump and returned to normal space, to speed millions of light-years away from its starting point. Alex was sure there'd come a time when ships could be traced beyond jump points, but until then, her ship was safe from competitors and authorities alike.

"Take her to Land's End nice and slow. We don't want to attract attention. I'll be in my cabin if you need me."

If Kim had heard, she didn't let it show, too engrossed as she was with her portable computer, which she had flicked open and furiously clicked away on. Alex stretched her tall frame and left the bridge in the capable hands of the eighteen-year-old.

"Not much of a warning, Cap'n," Ebinay said as she emerged from one of the several anchoring niches along the passageways. In the niche beside hers, the man groaned and stirred. "Couldn't spare a minute for us?"

"You know the drill. We get back in, you secure the target while I get us out. If you can't do the job, quit."

Ebinay's jaw muscles twitched. She and Annabelle each snaked an arm under the man's shoulders and half-carried, half-dragged him toward the back of the ship where they would lock him into the stasis tank. A new addition, the tank had cost twice what she was getting for the man. But well worth the expense since no "shipment" would cause a commotion before transfers took place.

Alex left the women to their duties and made her way to her cabin. She had to punch her code twice before the door finally hissed open and let her in. Kim would need to fix the thing before Alex put her foot or the stunner to it. Boots and jacket still on, Alex stepped amid the mess of dirty clothes, maps and various items falling sideways across the unmade bunk.

"I'm getting too old for this."

She chuckled. She was barely forty. Yet her life had been very full, thank you very much. Too full. Fifteen years in the military, two of which during the war with the Yithians, three years as a bodyguard to a very nice and very rich old man—her financier for this ship—and four as a privateer. The wear was beginning to show. Some silver streaked her curly raven hair while wrinkles—scowl lines, according to Kim—lined the corners of her mouth and eyes. Despite the dangers of her latest job, and the fact kidnapping males from any species broke all Interworld laws, she enjoyed the freedom of it. Her own ship. Her handpicked crew.

So what if she provided males to those establishments that required them. It's not as if they were maltreated! Escorts—males, females, humans or aliens—enjoyed all the fineries credits could buy. A golden cage was still a cage, but much better than most

other dwellings she'd known. Plus they received food at regular intervals, nice clothes and patrons drooling for a bit of time with them. *No*, she thought, *the males she collected for the black market lived nice lives.*

Alex chose not to dwell on the inhibitor most escorts wore around their necks. One step out of line and a good jolt brought them right back to their place. Two steps out of line and, well...no one ever did.

Her customer's techs had gotten their hands on the passenger manifest and chosen that specific man. Though she doubted they had seen just how well-equipped he was, she could tell he would be a popular addition to any brothel-ship. A nice body—a pleasant face. What was the man's name again? *Don't think about it.* He looked young, maybe twenty. Was he married, she wondered. Kids?

Stop it.

He'd be an escort soon, live the good life where she was taking him. Plus, she needed the fifteen thousand credits they'd transfer to her ID card to fix the ship. Alex wondered if she would see him when she next visited one of the brothel-ships floating in no-man's land, just outside the Interworld's jurisdiction. Her customer would sell the man for an even greater sum to one of these brothel-ships, probably for twice as much. She was in the wrong job.

Alex resolved to not look at his face when they transferred him to the customer's ship. No use getting all emotional and tangled up in morality. Extract the target. Transfer the target. She was good at it and well paid for it. Soon, she'd sell the *Femme Metal* and retire on some nice, quiet colony on the rim. She'd have a garden there, a real, honest-to-goodness garden. With live plants and herbs. The works. She'd heard herbs smelled entirely different as plants from what they did in shakers. Alex couldn't wait to find out.

The soothing rhythm of the ship's boosted engines whirred somewhere beneath her. She should get a shower. And something to eat. Sleep filtered in like fog over a marsh and Alex closed her eyes.

* * * * *

"Wooo, now that's a nice-looking guy," Kim quipped from behind Alex. "Can I have him?"

Alex laughed. "Can you pay me if I extract him for you?"

Kim pretended to die from a broken heart. Her laugh was too shrill for comfort, but it was genuine.

The four women had just entered what must have been the rowdiest club in Land's End. Ebinay's idea. Music placated any attempt at conversation while lights dazzled the mind. A rhythmic thump-thump vibrated in Alex's stomach. A pair of barely dressed Narays swayed by, the silver scales of their skin rubbed to a high glimmer, their shiny red hair twisted in thick coils.

"I'll be over there," Kim announced as she zeroed in on the man who did the music from his perch over the crowd. Her white spiky head disappeared amidst the multi-specie throngs.

Ebinay motioned toward the dance floor and Eva followed. "What about you, Cap'n, no dancing tonight?"

Alex shook her head. "I'll just sit, relax and get drunk somewhere on the mezzanine. I'll save you seats."

Adjusting her black latex one-piece, she cleaved a path through the crowd and climbed the stairs. Still buoyed with the recent addition to her ID card of fifteen thousand credits, she felt like having a good time tonight. Dancing wasn't her idea of a good time. What she meant to do was drink, gaze at people, drink some more and perhaps find a nice man with whom she could spend a few hours in one of the cubicles across the tunnel. Land's End was more a rock twirling in space than any real station, but what it lacked in geographical detail, it more than made up for in opportunities. Anything could be bought here. Even people. She pushed the image of her recent transaction from her mind. The guy had had the bluest eyes. But he'd be treated well. Her customer always found decent places for the males she brought back.

After finding a surprisingly deserted table by the mezzanine balustrade, Alex sat at one of the stools and swiped her ID card in the bolted-on decoder. When proof of her credit status reached the bar, a waiter came by with a rectangular tray balanced on his flat head.

"What can I get you, pretty one?" he asked in perfect English.

She smiled up at the shiny red face and asked for three Slip Knots. His three little eyes did a quick once-over before he nodded and disappeared. Not many human females, humans at all for that matter, could stomach the alien drink, but she liked its tartness. Plus, one got drunk really fast, really cheap.

The long blue flutes landed on her table and the Mers bowed deeply before waiting on someone else. He'd get a good tip for his impeccable service but also for calling her "pretty one". At her age and with her physique, she rarely received compliments on her looks. Not that she was ugly, far from it, but she had a look in her blue eyes that made most people avoid her if they could. She looked mean and used it. Plus the battle scar running from her temple down her jaw never failed to kill the mood. Men were just too damned curious about a woman with a scar. Or too finicky.

"Don't know, don't care."

Alex had a good view from her vantage point. Kim's white hair was clearly visible as she hung over the glass cube separating the DJ from the dancers. He seemed to enjoy her company for he smiled and nodded every once in a while. *Good girl, she might get lucky tonight.* Alex wondered if Kim realized everyone behind could see her bare ass up the metal skirt. *I'd never wear something like that,* Alex thought with a grin. *No room for a weapon.*

Alex leaned her elbows on the table and sipped at one of the flutes. She coughed. It was even more tart this time around. Maybe she should have stuck to one.

She let her gaze travel over the beautiful people dancing below her. Shiny bodies, some of them alien, others human, moved and shook and undulated with the pounding rhythm.

A strange sensation prickled her skin, like someone was blowing on the nape of her neck.

Surreptitiously putting her hand on the stunner strapped inside her boot, she turned back to the mezzanine and scanned the crowd. Along the wall, leaning against the counter, stood a male Yithian. Her heart skipped a beat. He was tall, even for one of his species. His pale skin shone pearly blue. Hair down in a shiny cascade over his wide shoulders gleamed as liquid silk. He was stunning. And he was staring straight at her.

Some Yithians were reputed to have certain extrasensory abilities – some even said they were telepaths. The last time she'd seen one this close was during the war. Alex straightened on her stool, patting the stunner in her boot.

A sardonic grin played on the Yithian's thin lips. Had he seen her weapon?

Good. Don't mess with the lady.

Stunners were not allowed on the station, though most people ignored the rule. Still, she didn't want to have a few hundred credits stripped off her ID card paying some stupid fine. He'd seen it, that's all she wanted.

As he stared at her from across the mezzanine, Alex had the distinct impression he knew her somehow. Had he been in the war? No matter.

Again, the feeling someone was blowing on the nape of her neck created a pleasurable ripple across her skin. Sweat beaded under the latex suit. She uncrossed her legs. Shit, it wasn't sweat collecting high between her thighs.

Alex gasped. An image flashed in her mind. It went out like a spark but left a shadow of itself behind. The image had been of her and the Yithian male caught in a fiery embrace, both their heads thrown back in the throes of pleasure as he pounded his member into her.

"What the hell...?"

To her shock and excitement, he peeled his lean frame from the wall and made a straight line for her table. His head bobbed inches over the tallest there. He must have been, what, seven feet tall? Lights overhead gave his angular face a predatory appearance. The eyes without pupils or irises glimmered like those of animals in the darkness and narrowed to slits as he approached her table.

She'd fought against hordes of Yithians, stared them down when they spilled out of their too-fast hovercrafts. She'd shot them, bombed them, killed them. Had voted "Yes" in the referendum banning imports from Yith. Yet this lone Yithian male, advancing on her like a prowler sniffing its prey, sent chills of fear and exhilaration along her arms.

Alexandra Novona, for the first time in her life, sat rooted to the spot with panic.

His thin lips curled at the corners in a sardonic grin she'd come to quickly associate with him. One long hand reached up to rest on the shoulder of a human female as he passed behind her. The woman opened her mouth in a silent "O" and followed with hungry eyes as the Yithian continued his swath through the massed bodies. People seemed to melt away in front of him.

Her heartbeat thrumming madly in her ears, Alex turned toward him as he drew nearer. *You don't scare me*, she wanted to show to him. She sat up straighter. When he emerged from the crowd and bent slightly at the waist, Alex swore she could have slipped right out of the latex one-piece for all the sweat and happy juices slicking her. He was stunning!

His face hovered over hers when he leaned and put one long hand on the table. Those big gray pearls for eyes just welded her to the spot. "May I?"

She nodded, not trusting her throat to come up with anything other than a croak. The chair disappeared under his long jacket. He kept one hand on the table—the tight black glove shining like ink—while his other hand was hidden under the table.

Alex still had hers against the handle of her stunner, just in case the seven-foot hunk decided he wanted more than just to sit and chat. But as much as she tried to fight it, a yearning began to throb deep in her belly. It'd been a while since she'd tasted a man. And one looking like this, well...

The Yithian just sat there, staring intently at her, his thin mouth curving up at the corners in a shadow of a smile.

"So, what do you want?" she blurted out, not willing to let him see just how uneasy he'd made her.

That sneer again. She'd like to kick it off his face one day. He leaned forward and cocked his head. "You do not look intoxicated."

Well, it was a strange pick-up line if she ever heard one. When he saw her expression, he indicated the Slip Knots on the table. Of course, not many humans could drink those and still act as if their brain hadn't oozed out of their skull.

"I'm used to them by now." Yeah, make me sound like a drunk. Good going, Alex. Rich.

He nodded as if he understood what she'd meant, not what she'd actually said. Maybe he had those special abilities. Alex tried to keep her mind blank, but under the circumstances, all she could think about was how good he'd look naked on her bunk.

A sparkle of amusement flashed in the pearly orbs. "You are not dancing with your friends?"

Does it look like I'm dancing? is what she meant to say. Instead, what came out was "How about you?"

She could've cringed. Acting like a schoolgirl. Her crew would laugh.

"I am alone," he replied, the last word sounding heavy with meaning. Was he trying to pick her up? Somehow, she felt he'd meant "alone" in every sense of the word, not just as a pitiful come-on. She could relate well. Too well.

Then suddenly her surroundings changed, became muted, dimmed. Lights weren't as dazzling anymore, nor did the music stab at her brain. Only the Yithian in front of her stood out against a gray background. He leaned over a corner of the table and came right up against her cheek. His breath stirred strands of his silver hair, which grazed her face and produced a pleasurable ripple along her arm. Her temperature kicked up a notch in her latex suit.

A mental image flashed in Alex, depicting the stunning alien pressing hard against her as he kissed and caressed her face and neck. Alex felt herself become heavier in her chair, numb almost.

"What is your ship's launch code?" she heard him ask in a low voice near her ear.

She shook her head to clear it but couldn't. In fact, she wasn't sure she wanted to, despite the armada of warning flags coming up in her brain. Bells and whistles, too. But she couldn't tear her gaze from his face, her mind from the gutter.

Alex barely flinched when she felt under the table one of his hands snaking up along her thigh then inside where her legs met. His long fingers caressed her tight mons softly as he leaned in even closer and murmured something in Yithian. She wasn't sure she understood the words but she sure caught the meaning.

He wanted her. Here. Now.

So did she, but a tiny voice in her head was shouting for her to run, to kick him in his pretty face and run like the devil was after her. Maybe he was. And instead of a red-horned face, he'd changed it for blue.

Alex gritted her teeth when his fingers pressed against the juncture of her thighs, where her pussy throbbed demandingly. Both hands on the table, she leaned back in her chair and stared hard at him. She should be jumping out of her chair, stunner in hand and pumping him a few good ones. Instead, she was acting like a last-rung bimbo on the dating scene and allowing him to touch her. But the pleasure from the mix of panic and anticipation rooted her to her chair. Some captain.

Sounds decreased around her and all she could hear was his breathing in her ear. Lights dimmed further until only a thin ray of blue light pierced the gloom and hit both of them at an angle. What the hell was going on? She felt under water, in a dream, a trance of some sort. Her body wouldn't react—except to his caress.

His movement became more intense, more vigorous. To her shock, she tilted her hips forward so he could have better access. He knelt beside her, placed his hot palm over her breast and, despite the latex barrier, she could swear she felt his skin on hers. The Yithian then tilted his face until his nose practically touched hers.

"What is your ship's launch code?"

The numbers popped up in her mind but she couldn't talk. Some last shred of brain activity prevented her from giving the code that would allow him to enter her ship and do only god knew what.

Between her legs, his fingers worked furiously. Sweat pooled between her shoulder blades, at the nape of her neck. Happy juices slicked her panties under the suit. He

kissed her lobe gently then flicked it with his tapered tongue. Good god, she was going to come!

Trying to stifle a moan, Alex parted her thighs wider, all pretense of dignity gone, and pressed her lower back hard against the chair. His fingers and her suit's seam rubbed against her clit. On the table, her hands clawed into fists. Then the surroundings changed again.

They were outside now. Though she'd never been there, she recognized the Yithian home world from intelligence reports she'd seen in the military. Cities of opalescent coral reef rose in spires out of a boiling jade sea while clouds shredded by the wind raced across the midnight sky. They stood along a cliff, leaning against a structure that resembled a giant blue pearl. Standing in front of her the Yithian smiled. He wore a long-sleeve top made of semi-sheer black fabric, which clung to his wiry torso, followed every curve and muscle. Looking down at herself, she discovered she wore the same type of garment, only hers was more like a dress split on each hip and trailing to the ground.

Alex was past wanting out of this strange daydream. Though her brain was screaming to get the hell out of this mess, it wasn't in control of her body. Her libido was.

When he reached out to touch her scarred cheek, Alex noticed a ring on his middle finger. A black pearl the size of a large olive, its core glowed faintly, pulsing, mesmerizing. Heat emanated from it when he touched her skin. Grinning, he wrapped his mouth around that finger. Alex watched as he brought the wet ring out of his mouth and rubbed it along her shoulder, then down her arm, repeating the process when the ring dried. *Jesus*. Tiny jolts like electricity raced over her skin. She leaned back and let him part her thighs with his knee.

"Do you want this?" he asked in perfect English.

She nodded.

Making his ring wet once more, he twisted it so the pearl faced in instead of out, and rubbed his hand down to her belly, then lower. As soon as he reached it, her bud throbbed its happy little heart out. With his feet he spread hers wider.

"What is the launch code to your ship?" he murmured in her ear while he rubbed her clit with his heated ring.

Throwing all caution to the wind, Alex raised her arms up high and arched her back. Searing heat spread all over her belly. She'd be there soon, she was coming. He flicked her lobe with his tapered tongue, rubbed circles around her clit, all the while keeping her feet well apart. Another flick of his tongue.

"The code."

Alex hissed a curse as she came right then and there. As soon as the wave of fire hit, the dance club's sounds and lights returned a hundredfold. She blinked, sat up straighter. Across from her, the Yithian stared with his head cocked to one side.

He hadn't moved! He was still sitting with one hand on the table while his other lay on his lap.

Alex felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment and confusion. *Jesus.*

A chorus of voices erupted from the dance floor. Angry voices, yells, curses. In spite of herself, Alex leaned over the balustrade to see what the fuss was about and spotted Ebinay shoving back a pair of men. Eva's bright red hair bobbed somewhere beside Ebinay. A foot wearing a black military boot flew high into the face of one of the men. He stumbled back and crashed in a tangle of bodies. Within seconds, a general *melée* ensued. Ebinay's booming voice could be heard slinging insults and challenges in an array of languages.

"Shit," Alex hissed through her lips. She turned back to her table. "I'm..."

The Yithian was gone.

She stood and craned her neck to see over the crowd. No Yithian in sight. She would kick Ebinay in the teeth when she caught up with her!

Her clit still throbbing with delight, Alex bounded down the steps just as Ebinay and Eva pushed through the crowd. The black woman was clearly intoxicated. She leaned heavily on Eva who chuckled.

"Hey, Cap'n!"

"Let's leave before they slam our asses in the brig." Alex grabbed Ebinay's other arm and both women dragged and pushed the belligerent woman through the doorway and out into the darkened tunnel.

Other people stumbled along or walked in pairs and groups under the barely-there potlights carved in the stone ceiling. Alex led the way to the *Femme Metal* moored to the very last docking station. A large cargo ship took up two stations across from her ship.

"Wanted a piece of me, Cap'n," Ebinay said with a pronounced slur. "Well, I gave 'em a piece of me. My boot!"

Eva laughed but stopped when she spotted Alex's scowl.

"I'll deal with you later, when you're sober enough to feel pain," Alex snapped.

The sound of someone running up behind them had Alex spinning on the spot and raising her stunner.

"You were leaving without me?" Kim said out of breath, her white spikes glittering.

She pushed ahead and punched the keys. The *Femme Metal's* hatch hissed open and the four women piled inside the airlock. Alex locked it behind them and leaned against the bulkhead.

Inside, Annabelle came ambling in, a book under her arm and a resigned expression on her wide face.

"Take her to her cabin. I don't care if she bumps her head on the way there." Alex's heart beat furiously. The memory of the Yithian still fired her senses. Shit. She might have gotten lucky tonight. She didn't mind screwing a former enemy, especially when they looked that good. Ebinay would scrub the toilet for a week.

As she picked Ebinay up and tossed her over a shoulder, Annabelle slipped a piece of film out of her pocket and gave it to Alex.

“What is it?” Eva asked, always the one to speak too much.

Her patience was a fistful of sand slipping away fast. Alex threw a menacing glare at the redhead.

“Come,” Kim said, tugging Eva behind her.

Once alone, Alex read the strip of film and cursed under her breath. “Another one?”

Her customer wanted another male and had given her coordinates to a cargo ship due to leave Land’s End that very night. The same one moored across the *Femme Metal* right now. A long sigh escaped Alex. Two jobs in a month, that was a lot. She should turn it down, decided she would. Another quick scan of the film made her eyes flare open. She hadn’t read the payment the first time around. Too many zeroes.

“Two hundred thousand credits.”

So this man, this Sekmeth Meroh, was worth a lot of money. He had to be a wonder.

Two hundred thousand credits. That’d make her ID card burn a hole in her pocket.

She could retire with such an amount, could have a nice house on some rim colony far from Interworld’s reach. She could have her garden.

“One last job,” she said through her teeth. That was it.

Now, she’d better get to her cabin and finish what the Yithian had started.

Chapter Two

“Wait ‘til its engaged its thrusters,” Alex said to Kim as the young woman maneuvered the *Femme Metal* out of the docking station.

In front of them, hundreds of kilometers beyond the rectangular porthole floated the cargo ship with their target onboard. The huge ship lumbered away from Land’s End at an excruciatingly slow speed. The rubber cocks under Alex’s fingers felt clammy with sweat.

Sekmeth Meroh. That sounded alien. Mers, perhaps? Or Naray?

“It’s engaging its thrusters.”

Alex leaned forward and grabbed the control sticks harder. If they’d been real penises, she’d have bruised them. “Wait.”

The wide behind of the cargo ship loomed large in front and over the *Femme Metal*, obscuring the rest of the sky. A wide cavity gaped between its two main thrusters and Alex maneuvered her tiny ship right along the cleft. Like a giant, metal butt crack. She grinned.

“Nice and steady,” she said, twisting both cocks in her hands and banking the ship to the right. A slight roll brought it right along the crack. “Now.”

Kim clicked furiously on her computer. The whole ship, from computerized engine room right down to the lavatories, was accessible by the lump of twisted wires and polymer board she held on her lap. It might have resembled an old portable computer of eons past—Alex thought it now looked like a creepy plastic squid.

A series of clangs and clunks sounded overhead. The grappling hooks had found their target. When the cargo ship opened a jump point, the *Femme Metal* would tag right along with it. Otherwise, they’d never be able to open another point right behind and expect to land in the same place. Plus, it would have been dangerous for both ships. Dead targets brought no credits. And this one was worth a fortune. She’d not risk him by doing something reckless.

A short while later, a space rip opened in front of the cargo ship. Kim and Alex followed its progress through the view screen on the control panel. A lurch then the *Femme Metal* slipped into hyperspace along with the cargo ship. When normal space surrounded them again, Alex ordered the grappling hooks be released. They’d follow the cargo a few kilometers behind and stay in its heat signature so as not to be detected.

“We’ll board it when it’s down time over there.”

“We could get the can opener and make it real quick,” Kim replied with a hopeful grin.

“As a last resort only,” Alex replied with a smile.

The “can opener” as Kim called their latest addition to the ship was one large, ass-kicking pulse cannon planted aft on the *Femme Metal*’s hull. One burst of it could perforate the thickest armor plating. But since it was illegal to even buy a small one, the mammoth Kim had rigged would get them all in a world of trouble. She wouldn’t use it unless survival depended on it. And right now, it didn’t.

* * * * *

“Everything ready?” Alex asked the three women by her side.

Ebinay, still glowering from all the toilet cleaning she’d done in the past hours, nodded silently. Annabelle and Eva both rechecked their anchoring harnesses and stunners. Because cargo ships always ran with systems down to a minimum, the women wore night-vision goggles. The narrow strip of tinted plastic on their heads made them look like skiers. Anchoring harnesses might be useful to navigate the zero gravity lower decks. According to her customer’s stolen schematics of the cargo ship, the handful of passengers were housed with the crew on the upper deck, the only one with gravity.

Alex buckled her harness, tightened the clip holding her stunner then lowered the NVG over her eyes. “Let’s go.”

From the bridge Kim unlocked the airlock, equalized the pressure then hacked inside the cargo ship’s systems. A grin pulled Alex’s lips when the green light flickered on the access panel. It opened with a loud hiss, making Ebinay curse. A black hole gaped in front of them when the hatch had swung completely inside.

Steam poured out the airlock when pressure escaped into the zero-G cargo ship’s hold. Ebinay floated in front, pushing herself off the floor and other objects. After activating her NVG, Alex followed with Annabelle and Eva behind.

“Check this out,” Eva said from above. The diminutive redhead spun several times, tucked her legs then landed feet first on the ceiling. After a mock bow, she hovered down.

They crossed the entire length of the huge cargo hold without tripping any of the detectors. *Kim is a genius*, thought Alex as she braced her legs on crates and waited for Ebinay to force the door.

“Let’s see who’s quicker,” the dark woman said with a grin. She pulled a small, handheld blowtorch from her pant leg. It emitted a blazing blue light as it sliced through the thick steel plate. But then the access panel clicked and a green light indicated it had been unlocked.

“Looks like Kim got there first,” Eva put in. Ebinay’s venomous expression sobered the little woman and she fell silently behind Annabelle.

Faint kitchen smells filtered in through the doorway. Alex put a gloved finger to pursed lips and gave a big push, which transported her across the wide passageway. The other three followed. They leapfrogged the span of the passageway and up two

decks through circular holes in the floors before finally reaching the transfer chamber. *Good thing this ship's in good shape*, Alex thought as the chamber soundlessly transferred them to the normal gravity deck above. *No one will hear a thing.*

"Single file. Come on," Alex subvoiced into her comms.

With display unit in hand and stunner in the other, Alex led her team along the dimly lit passageway. Thick doors pierced the steel bulkheads on either side. Storage rooms, electrical rooms, no cabins yet. This ship could withstand most conventional weapons, she was sure of it, though it sorely lacked in armament and proper sensors. Otherwise, its crew would have seen the *Femme Metal* coming and would have blocked all systems. Even Kim wouldn't have been able to bypass blocked systems.

"According to this, his cabin's the one by the captain's."

Ebinay swept her stunner in the other hand. "Stupid place to be. No privacy."

"That's damned close to being dangerous. What if the crew sees us? They're armed."

Alex nodded to Eva. "We'll have to be extra careful. Get—"

A man had just turned the corner. He froze when he spotted them. Too quickly for any of them to react, he turned tail and dashed through a doorway.

"Get the target!" Alex snapped as she flipped the NVG off her face and took off running.

Leaving her team behind, she devoured the ground with powerful strides of her long legs. She might be forty, but she could still make most people eat her dust. As she rounded the corner, she glimpsed his silhouette in the darkened passageway. He wore coveralls, so this was no passenger. He was making a straight line for a panel glowing on the opposite bulkhead. The guy was about to sound the alarm. Shit!

She leveled her stunner but before she could fire, the man punched the panel. A loud signal ripped the air. She fired twice. He collapsed on his front and jerked as electricity coursed through him. Poor bugger would be out for a while with two shots into him.

Alex sprinted back to where she'd left her team and followed her display's directions to the target's cabin. She met two more downed crewmembers and knew her girls had come this way. Things were turning to shit!

A voice raised in pain made her veer sharply into another passageway. There, she spotted Eva on her knees, cradling her chest with both arms. A form Alex couldn't identify stood over the small woman. It raised something high over its head. Alex fired three times in rapid succession. She must have missed for the object came crashing down on Eva's head. She went down without a sound. The person bolted away before Alex had reached the prone Eva.

"Hurry, get up," Alex urged as she pulled on the woman's harness. Eva rolled onto her back. Blood glistened between her eyes, which stared vacantly up at the ceiling.

"Shit!"

Quickly, Alex pulled the stunner out of Eva's lifeless hand and ran after the attacker. A male voice boomed somewhere ahead. A voice as a tenor's, but amplified three times. He yelled something she couldn't get. Then the already dim lights went out.

Ebinay's voice could be heard. Alex fiddled with her NVG but gasped and fell on her ass when a great weight crashed into her. Her stunner discharged, creating a flash of blue light that blinded her.

"Cap'n, we got him," Ebinay called from her left. She panted heavily.

Feeling around for her NVG, Alex cursed. "I can't see a damned thing. Are you with Annabelle?"

"Yeah, we got him here on the floor. He's something else, Cap'n."

Feeling with her hands, Alex finally closed a fist over someone's hair. Neither Ebinay nor Annabelle had long hair. This must be the man. It was long, that hair. Damned long. "You sure it's not some chick we got?"

"No, Captain, it's the man."

Annabelle's voice never failed to shock Alex. It was so gentle for someone her size. But she had to scream now to be heard above the siren.

Between the three of them, they managed to drag the man back to the transfer chamber. Alex couldn't wait to reach the zero-G decks. The guy was huge. She had him by an arm and could swear it was four feet long. Some light would be nice, too. She bumped against the bulkhead again and cursed. That siren was driving her insane!

Suddenly, Ebinay swore and fired twice. By the stunner's flash, Alex only had time to make out two silhouettes running their way. Two other shots popped and blinded her.

While the black woman fired, she let go of her side of the man and he slumped against Alex, pressing her against the plate. A faint smell emanated from his skin, like lemons, but more peppery. Silky hair spilled over her face. She brushed it away. She couldn't see a damned thing! With blind fingers, she felt for the inhibitor around his neck. A man this size would make purée of her, the other two as well. His weight was lifted from her when Ebinay announced the coast was clear.

"Kim," Alex subvoiced, "we're in deep here. Can you lock all the other hatches except our own?"

"Already done."

"Good girl."

After they reached the airlock and crammed all four of them in, Kim transferred them to the zero-G deck. The way was easier afterward as they simply pushed off bulkheads to go forward while keeping the man in tow behind them.

A sliver of light from the *Femme Metal's* outer hatch pierced the darkness, for which Alex was extremely grateful. Warm liquid dribbled down over her cheek. She bled from somewhere on her head. No wonder after all the bumps she'd suffered.

By the tiny ray of light, she could see their guy wore all dark garments and gloves, and his hair seemed blond. His head hung on his chest. Even slumped as he was, he towered over Annabelle and Ebinay. Alex reached a hand to push the curtain of hair from his face when the airlock hissed closed and pressure was equalized. Sudden gravity slammed them all hard against the deck. Only one of her ears popped. She worked her jaw. Somehow, they managed to deposit the man relatively gently on the floor between them.

"Where's Eva?" Kim asked after she slid off the ladder.

Alex coughed and wiped blood from her forehead. "She's gone. Someone bashed her head in." *Don't think about it. Forget the blood, the surprised expression on her face, the vacant eyes.*

"Gone?" Kim shoved her hands in the pockets of her coveralls and stared at her feet.

"It happens, baby," Ebinay offered tentatively. A nasty bruise was spreading over her right eye.

Now that she could see clearly, Alex noticed both women sported various bruises and cuts. Annabelle stood slightly bent. Both her hands were raw around the knuckles.

"He gave you trouble?"

Annabelle nodded emphatically.

"Took us all we had just to slip the damned inhibitor on him. Stunner didn't work shit." Ebinay angrily wiped the spit and blood from her chin. A long string of words in Afrikaans followed.

Alex ripped the harness off and glared at the man lying there on his side. Some skin showed above his collar and through his hair. And it was pale blue. Holy hell...

"Yeah, he's a Yithian." Ebinay rolled him onto his back with the ball of her foot. "A large Yithian."

It was him! The same Yithian at the club who'd come to her table and done something to her mind. Alex could only stare in shock at the massive alien lying half on his back and half on his side. As if her body remembered him as well, her clit began to ache and throb annoyingly.

"I thought your customer didn't want Yithian males. Too much trouble." A look of hostility flashed across the black woman's face.

So it wasn't *their* customer anymore but *hers*. Alex shrugged. "They're paying us two hundred thousand for him. So we'll deliver him. No questions. Is that okay with you?"

Ebinay glowered but said nothing.

"Just put him in the tank so we don't have to deal with him," Alex said, not even trying to smooth the edge in her tone. They knew the kind of business the *Femme Metal* conducted. They'd had an attack of morality now, after all this time?

"We can't."

Alex rounded on Kim. "Why not?"

Turning around, the girl shrugged and threw over her shoulder, "Because he won't fit."

Chapter Three

Alex woke with a massive headache. She needed coffee. Lots of it.

The galley was deserted this early in the shift. She poured a hot cup of coffee from the chrome canister and slumped in one of the decrepit chairs. She'd just kidnapped one huge Yithian for two hundred thousand credits. She should feel proud. They had the reputation—totally earned—of being fierce and quick. She still remembered fighting against them before the Interworld declared every species should be one happy family. She'd buried a lot of good soldiers because of the Yithians. Frankly though, good thing the Interworld had intervened because she wasn't sure humans could have lasted another two years against the Yithians.

Two hundred thousand credits. Alex grinned and took a sip from her cup. She'd have that garden now, weeks from now, maybe months if red tape became an issue, but she'd have her house on the rim.

"He's been asking for you," Ebinay said from behind.

Alex gripped the mug tighter to keep from showing her surprise. "For me?"

"Yeah. He wants to see 'our leader'." Ebinay shrugged and sat across from Alex. "What happened with Eva?"

"Like I told you, she got her head pounded in. Nothing I could've done." *Then why is guilt gnawing at me? I lost another one. Another person under my command died because of me.*

Ebinay merely nodded but something in her expression didn't please Alex. "If you have a problem, say it, don't give me those eyes!"

"With her gone, it's one more cut of the profit going back to your ID."

"If I wanted to keep the credits for myself, I'd have fired her right away. But you know what—" Alex stood, spilling coffee on the table "—next time we dock, you can take your ass off my ship. That's another five percent back to me."

She left before she did anything Ebinay would regret. Like pounding a few good ones in the bitch's face. Of all the things to say. Alex's heavy tread rattled the metal grill under her feet and she reached the brig just as Annabelle was leaving it. She hooked her thumb over a shoulder and shook her head. Bruises and cuts made her look like she'd taken a dive through a pane of tempered glass.

"I know. He's been asking for me," Alex snapped.

Annabelle shook her head. "No, that's not all. He's one of them."

"One of them what?"

"Hunters." With a shrug, Annabelle left.

Alex had to lean against the bulkhead to keep her balance. A *Hunter*. Could things get any worse?

She ran a hand over her face. Hunter. Shit. Like she needed to have one of those onboard. Yet her customer had specifically asked for that Yithian, not just any male of the species. Did they know he was one of those few elite Hunters from his home world, one of those who prized themselves in always catching their prey? No wonder they were ready to pay two hundred thousand for him. Any brothel-ship would die for the sheer glamour of displaying a Yithian Hunter among their escorts. She'd never heard of anyone catching a Hunter. They usually did the catching.

She remembered during the war how Yithian Hunters were being paid to infiltrate human ranks and either kidnap for ransom or dispose of the higher-ups. Anyone above major was fair game. The human military had had to hide its brass on Old Earth, for Christ's sake, to keep them safe, which had left foot soldiers and low-ranking officers like her to fight the damned war. Even if Interworld's propaganda called it "trade disagreement", she called it war. People fought in uniforms. People died with weapons in their hands. It was a war, dammit.

Alex leaned in so she could see inside the locked compartment. Through the narrow tempered-glass opening, she studied him. He looked positively gigantic inside the tiny compartment. Not heavy and muscular. He was long, sinewy and too damn sexy. Sitting on the narrow cot, with his long legs crossed in front at the ankles, he exuded confidence. Boots with several metal straps hugged his calves. He had discarded the black gloves and jacket, showing a tight-fitting gray shirt zipped up to his long neck. His hands must have been ten inches long. The ring was there, looking as if a black beetle was clutching his finger. It didn't glow either—the ring—not like she remembered in the trance. Alex flushed.

His hands. That's how Annabelle was able to tell he was a bounty hunter. Black tattoos covered both hands and, though she couldn't see past his wrists, Alex knew ink work covered his whole arms and torso. She hadn't even noticed if he'd had gloves on when she'd seen him in the club. *Too busy coming all over myself.*

One design for each prey they caught. Some Hunters had their whole bodies covered in ink. She'd seen one during the war. A dead Hunter stripped naked for weapons had revealed just how productive he'd been. Ink covered his whole body, except for his face. Even his dick had been tattooed. She'd always wondered if it'd been a male or female prey who'd generated such a personal tattoo.

Alex sighed. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

The Yithian presently occupying her brig looked like nothing bothered him in the least. He cocked his head toward the door, that sardonic grin tugging his lips again. Smug jerk! The inhibitor gleamed softly in the dim light. It had adjusted to him by now, which was good. She didn't want a Yithian Hunter loose on her ship. She took a deep breath and pressed the intercom.

"You going to give me trouble, Hunter?"

He smiled and shook his head. His pearly eyes narrowed to slits.

Against her better judgment, she deactivated the lock and opened the hatch. His smell permeated the tiny place. Lemons and pepper.

"You wanted to see me. I'm here."

"I wanted to see you *yesterday*, but you left." His milky baritone would have rattled her mother's good china.

"All the same," she replied, crossing her arms over her chest. Good thing she wore her jacket, for he surely would have seen her rock-hard nipples through the shirt. Damn, he could probably see them through all three layers of fabric! This alien just oozed raw masculinity. It'd just been too damn long since her last tumble with a guy. She wondered how it would feel to bite such skin. *Control yourself, girl.*

He closed his eyes for a few seconds. "I prefer your other outfit."

She felt her cheeks flush. The one he'd made her come into? "You like outfits? Count yourself lucky, the other guy we picked up before you had *no* outfit." There, put that where you want.

"Then perhaps I should comply with house rules," he said, standing. His head hovered a good foot above hers. With supple fingers, he pinched the fastening of his shirt and slid it slowly down his chest.

As much as she thought he was being an ass, she couldn't take her eyes off him. The shirt separated at the bottom. Pale blue skin glowed underneath. He shrugged the garment off, revealing shoulders artists could have sculpted. Tattoos covered the entire length of his sinewy arms. His skin was silk stretched over sharp bones. Now that she could see it clearly, she remembered there were no pores or body hair of any type on Yithians, save for their heads and eyebrows, which weren't arched like humans, but straight across over each eye. He took a step closer.

"Now, now, remember the inhibitor," Alex said, fighting against the urge to take a step back. Muscles rippled over his shoulders and pectorals.

"Please, call me Sekmeth. Our species are allies now." His chest swelled with a deep sigh. "Why did you leave the club so quickly?"

"Not that I owe you something, but my girls were getting unruly. Had to take them home. And you're the one who left first." *Don't stare at his body, just his face. Don't stare at his body, just his face.*

She chanted the mantra in her head. To no avail. The sheer magnetism of him quickened her heartbeat. And that's when her body decided to betray her. To her complete shock and self-disgust, she felt moisture seep out from between her thighs. It was probably remembering the good time of the night before when the Yithian had made her come sitting in a chair with her clothes on. That took skill, though, honestly. She would've groaned in shame had she been alone. Then again, had she been alone, she wouldn't be wetting herself looking at this half-naked Yithian.

His gaze traveled the length of her, from boots to zippered jacket. "Do you know why I am here?"

"Ah!" Alex laughed. Some nerve. "Because we conked your pretty head and dragged you back here. That's why."

Now it was his turn to laugh, which showed a row of regular, somewhat pointed teeth. Yithians always looked like predators to her. And this one was a gorgeous, blue-skinned predator with silver hair down to his elbows. One with fingers too damn skilled for his own good. Control.

Alex took a breath in. "Enlighten me."

He shook his head. "Hunters enjoy playing games. It is not pleasurable if things go too quickly."

Did he mean in bed as well? *Oh, hell, girl, get a grip!*

Sekmeth took a step forward, which brought him dangerously close. This time, Alex stepped back and went for her stunner. "One more and that inhibitor will kick in. It's had time to adjust its settings to your species by now."

"Inhibitors only pick up sharp points of aggression but not any other internal changes." He took another step, though a small one. "And I do not mean to aggress you."

"I feel so much better." She did, as shameful as it was to admit. What the hell did he want, then? All that male essence standing four feet in front of her and she couldn't even touch. Two hundred thousand credits. *That's it, focus on that.*

"Next time you come see me, would you wear the other outfit?" he asked with a rakish lift of his thin lips.

He was trying to make her lose her cool. Good old Yithian ploy. Two could play this game.

"Do you know where I'm taking you, Hunter Sekmeth? No? Straight to *Celestia*. No middleman for you. Right to the brothel-ship. I'm betting they'll be happy to get their hands on you. All those ladies—and gents—drooling over you. Mmm." Alex grinned and crossed her arms.

"You will not make it there."

Now there definitely was a note of danger. His eyes darkened from pearly iridescence to slate gray. Then they brightened again. Had she seen the change at all? "You humans are so... What is the word...adorable. You think you know everything when you know nothing."

Alex felt like popping the guy with a few stuns. See if it made her any more adorable. She'd lost half her platoon once, during a border skirmish with a Yithian unit. "Look, you asked for me. So what do you want?"

He cocked his head as though she'd said something unbelievably funny. "I already *have* what I want." Sekmeth reached out slowly, his fingers slightly curled in.

Though she wanted to pop him a few, Alex couldn't move and the stunner remained where it was, hanging uselessly by her leg. His fingers touched her cheek so gently it could have been a breeze playing with the fine hair on her skin. It'd been so long since she'd felt a real breeze and not some interior air distributor acting up. A shiver prickled up her spine.

"Did we do this, us Yithians?" Sekmeth asked as he ran a finger down the length of her scar.

"Yeah. Took a round right in the command post. Killed everyone there but me. The armor plating never did protect us from cloaked Yithian shells."

Was that sadness she saw in his iris-less, pupil-less eyes? He shook his head. "Nor did our armor plating protect us from human bioweapons."

Yes, well. There was that small matter. Alex stared stubbornly into his opalescent eyes. "War is war. But it's over. We're more mature now. The Interworld's wise guidance has been good for us."

A grin stretched his mouth. "You humans are very good at sarcasm, saying the opposite of what you mean. There is nothing similar to it in any other culture."

Alex laughed a mirthless laugh. "We're funny like that."

"Yes. Other things are funny, as you say. Take your males, for example. They are fools. They favor emaciated young females devoid of character, of any substance and experience. Did you know on Yith, females who enter the second half of their cycles become so prized we had to make laws?" He cocked his head and lowered his chin. "To keep them safe."

Alex's brain felt as though cold slush filled her skull. His face, slightly bent down, absorbed everything else until she could see nothing but him. Silver strands of hair spilled from behind his shoulders. She yearned to touch it, rub her face in it. The stunner felt awkward and dumb in her hand. Juices now slicked her whole crotch, right through the fabric of her old military-issue trousers.

As if he knew what he did to her, he ran his tongue along his thin lips, a tongue dark blue and tapered to a narrow point. Not as a snake, nothing so gross, but just enough to make her take one big breath. That tongue, it could do miracles, she had no doubt about it. In fact, she'd already tasted its skill the other night. She'd never be able to look at her latex suit the same way again.

"I have to leave," she managed to croak.

"You do not want to. I can feel it. I can smell it." His feather-light fingers went down her cheek and under her jaw, then down her neck. The ring was dull black.

As in the club the night before, sights and sounds dimmed to a dull felt-like rustling. He bent close to her, until his chin rested against her shoulder. His hair spilled down over his face and grazed her neck. She shivered. Why wasn't she giving him a good stunner jolt right now? What the hell was she doing? Nothing good would come out of this. Shit.

Without her meaning to, she angled her face to meet his. His lips brushed against hers, his breath a warm ribbon of silk across her mouth. Reaching out, he pinched the zipper of her jacket and slid it slowly, very slowly, down to her waist. Heat gushed out in a great puff. Alex gritted her teeth when he used his index finger to part the lapels of her jacket and the shirt underneath until a shoulder emerged from the garment. The stunner nearly slipped from her hand when the Yithian bent and kissed her throat.

She should do something. Now!

But he stole the option when he slipped his other hand down below her waist and over her mons. The simple touch electrified her—made her insides quiver with excitement and dread. Here was a seven-foot Yithian, in her brig, trying to get inside her clothes. And what was she doing? Standing there. Like a fool.

Through sheer grit, she brought her stunner up and pressed it against his forehead. The Yithian only looked at it before resuming his feasting on her shoulder. Gently but firmly, he pushed her back until her shoulders touched the bulkhead. There, he parted her feet with his and wedged a thigh between hers. Despite the stunner hovering over his head, he opened her jacket and shirt all the way, revealing rivet-hard nipples underneath her tank top.

She thought she was going to explode when his mouth left her neck and concentrated on her breasts. Through the fabric, he suckled and nibbled, painfully teasing each aching breast with his lips and teeth. While she let him do this, she kept the stunner poised over his head, like she ever intended to use it. Ha!

In the back of her mind, she wanted, *needed*, to have him in her. Yet all kinds of warning bells tolled. If only she could listen to them.

While he reduced her nipples to throbbing buttons, his thigh pressed hard up and down then back again over her mons, which pulsed happily with every upward motion. Snaking a hand down over her shaking belly, he bunched a fistful of her pants and pulled her up against the wall. Liquid fire surged out of her pulsating pussy. *Jesus, couldn't she even control her own body?*

Apparently not.

In her mind's eye, the ring began to glow. A tiny speck of golden light at its core pulsed while he hoisted her up by the fistful of pants he still held. A spasm tightened her belly. Twisting his ring so it faced in, he rubbed it hard against her, heat seeping through the fabric of her pants. He was *good*.

Moaning deep under his breath, the Yithian clicked her belt and deftly opened her cargo pants, which barely hung on her hips. His own followed suit. It was when his member bobbed out of its restraints that Alex's brain kicked in. Despite the near-orgasm he was giving her, the sheer exhilaration electrifying her whole body, she just couldn't give in to this guy. He was dangerous. He was the enemy.

He was her ticket to retirement and two hundred thousand credits.

A split second later, the image was gone. Sounds and sights returned. Alex reeled back and knocked her head against the bulkhead. Her clothes were intact, as were his. Another mental screw. The stunner nearly slipped from her fingers.

“What the hell was that? You fucking with my mind again!”

The Yithian looked almost contrite. Almost. “I am a Hunter, not some rock. I could not help my response.”

“My ass.”

Sekmeth’s eyes flicked for a split second to the stunner then returned to her face. “You never answered me earlier. Do you know why I am here?”

His smell was overpowering her. Her heart beat a mad cadence against her ribs. She rubbed sweat from her palms and slid away from him to stand with her back to the hatch. “Like I told you, Hunter. Bonked pretty head. Dragged you here. End of story.”

Sekmeth shook his head slowly. He took a step back and pointed to a spot on his pectoral, which was bare of tattoos. “I have a special place right here, just for you, Alexandra Novona.”

She just looked at him as though her brain couldn’t come up with anything other than “ain’t he gorgeous?”. He’d just told her he was *after* her. Finally, cerebral activity picked up a notch. Alex swore under her breath.

Someone had hired a bounty hunter, *him*, to get her? Her legs nearly buckled. She braced a hand behind her. “You’re after me? Why?”

He nodded. “I already told you.”

Just as Alex was going to give him a juicy piece of her mind, another image exploded in her brain, created havoc between her legs. Sekmeth again, this time he was ravishing her face with kisses as he held her against the wall, pumping his member into her. Pleasure waves raced up from between her thighs and fanned out inside her belly. Her breath caught in her throat.

Through teary eyes, she saw the real Sekmeth take a step forward. His hand reached for the stunner.

He was just too damned close. A Hunter, after her, right there in her face. Why didn’t that stupid inhibitor work? It glowed faintly at his neck. Useless piece of junk. No aggression, that’s why it wasn’t doing anything. He was suppressing his emotions, turning his body off. Twisted, conniving alien scum!

Alex bit her lip hard and shook the vivid image away. Leaping out of his reach, she fired three times.

Sekmeth took them all in the chest. He bent in half with a loud “humph” then sank to his knees. If she hadn’t been staring at two hundred and fifty pounds of Yithian Hunter, she would’ve laughed at his expression. The surprise. The shock.

She was about to pump another one into him when he collapsed on his belly and lay still. Only one or two arcs of electricity showed on him. Any human would have

been dancing bacon in a pan by now but not him. The sheer size nearly rendered her stunner absurd. Alex cursed and snapped him a vicious kick in the side.

So he had a special place just for her, huh? So did she—in her brig. Alex stormed out of the compartment and was about to slam the hatch closed when something jammed it.

A boot appeared in the embrasure—a big, black, steel-clipped boot.

Before Alex could cram her stunner in the opening and empty it in the alien scumbag, the whole hatch came off its hinges. She yelped in pain as the force sent her crashing back against the bulkhead. Stars exploded around her vision. Blood seeped under her tongue.

The Yithian's tall silhouette appeared in the gaping hatch. As he grew even larger, Alex's vision began to fade. She fought against the unconsciousness but knew it was too late. Her limbs had already begun to paralyze. She could do nothing when the Yithian crouched beside her and brushed his fingers against her forehead. Was it her numb brain seeing things or was the ring glowing?

"Yithians have brothel-ships too, Alexandra Novona."

Alex tried to turn her head away but couldn't move a single muscle in her neck. Damn, it hurt. Her whole back radiated with fire. "Fuck you, Yithian," she hissed.

A wide toothy grin answered her. "That *is* the idea."

Panic rose in waves through her. Then everything went black.

Chapter Four

"Damn it."

Alex rubbed her temples. The compartment spun around her. As when she'd been drinking too much, she let one leg dangle over the edge of her cot. What the hell happened? Then it came back to her.

"Sneaky scumbag."

A bump the size of a goddamn egg throbbed on her head. Rubbing it, she leaned over the edge and rolled onto the floor. Confined to her own brig. That was rich.

"What now?"

"Do humans talk to themselves a lot?"

"Fuck you."

The Yithian laughed in the intercom. "We have already settled that matter."

"Just in case you didn't hear me the first time." Alex crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the far side of the compartment. "You going to keep me here the whole way?"

"Yes."

A click and the hatch opened. Sekmeth stepped in. She swore he looked even more stunning with all his clothes on. The black jacket hugged his tall and lean frame in all the right places and hung almost down to the floor. Now that she could take a good look, his pants strained in all the right places, too. Jesus. So he *was* proportional. Alex snapped her gaze back to his face. The mocking grin again. She'd enjoy kicking it off his pretty face. Then something caught her eye, or more exactly, something didn't.

His inhibitor was gone.

Sweat prickled the skin between her shoulder blades. She swallowed. What the...?

She had it around her own neck!

"It picks up points of aggression, Alexandra Novona, remember this." He stepped into the brig and closed the hatch behind him.

She'd never had one around the neck. Not a real one anyway. She'd tried watered-down versions a couple of time in a drunken game. Slip it on and pretend. It was particularly fun in bed. Once, she'd even activated a real one around her wrist to see what kind of jolt it gave. She'd ended up on her ass.

"Good old Yithians. You guys don't change."

The grin slipped off his face. In one long stride, he came up to her and leaned in close. "We are not all the same. Some of us are worse than the rest."

Alex responded with her knee. It worked and at the same time didn't. First, she barely made it to his groin but managed to hit his inner thigh a split second before the inhibitor kicked in and she collapsed to the floor in a silent, quivering heap. The jolt had ground her teeth together with electricity. Her heart leaped in her chest. Saliva pooled under her tongue and she feared she would vomit. *Jesus, not in front of him. Please.* Through the haze of tears, she felt his hands snake under her arms and lift her up.

"If you do not learn to control your emotions, this thing will kill you. And it is set back to humans standards."

Was that concern in his voice? She didn't care. With a snort of defiance she pulled her arm away and tumbled onto the cot with much less grace than she would have liked. "How come it's on me? You couldn't have taken it off without it IDing you."

Sekmeth crouched with his knees on either side of hers. "The woman-child took it off for me."

"Kim? She'd never do that." Lying sack of space debris.

"She needed convincing, of course."

Alex meant to grab him by the collar but thought of the inhibitor and calmed down rather quickly. One learned when faced with pain. "If you touched her, I'll chop your balls off. And I know you Yithians have them."

He grinned. "We do." He leaned back and sat on his heels. "I did not touch the woman-child. To me, she is what a five-year-old would be to you. All I had to do was threaten to harm *you*. She deactivated it right away."

So he'd convinced Kim to remove the inhibitor so the sensor would only pick up human DNA and not a Yithian trying to fiddle with the lock while the settings were tuned to his species. The nasty little things had a good memory too, and would even jolt the mixed breeds.

"Yeah, whatever." Alex tried to ignore the heat rising up from between her thighs. He was just too close for comfort. She practically had him between the legs. Any other time she would have loved it. Now it just added to the chaos. "Where's my crew?"

"The woman-child is at her post on the bridge, properly restrained. The rest are safe in their cabins. Since I occupy yours, you had to be temporarily displaced."

"Don't make yourself comfy. I intend to claim it back."

He chuckled. "Perhaps we could share?"

Alex tried to ignore the heat rising along her arms and the hardening of her nipples. Of all the times to get aroused! "So what now?"

"I take you all back to the *Gorgosh* where my employer will transfer a lot of credits to my name."

He set his pearly gaze on her face and stared. His silver hair was tied high behind his head, almost on top, and cascaded around his chiseled features. To add to her growing embarrassment, he let one hand, the one with the ring, travel all the way up from her kneecap to her thigh and rest there, his palm hot like a just-fired ammunition

round. Her heart had just started to quiet down from the jolt she took then it began to beat crazily again. She stared at his hand with what she hoped was a “get-that-thing-off-me” look. It didn’t seem to work.

“Human females in their second cycle are so very... What is the word you use? Sexy?” He leaned in and smelled her. He *smelled* her. The thin nostrils at the end of his long and narrow nose flared ever so slightly. “We use the word *kashaak*. There is no proper translation into English. ‘Delectable’ is the closest word I can think of.”

Well, she had a few words for him too, but feared triggering the inhibitor. Plus, she didn’t trust her voice right now, blocked as it was by the growing lump in her throat. He was just so goddamn gorgeous. Alex noticed another lump growing elsewhere. In his pants.

He noticed her gaze and smiled one big, proud, toothy grin. “Yes, I find you very, very *kashaak*, Alexandra Novona. Unfortunately, you are not mine to savor.”

At last, Alex summoned enough control to cross her arms over her chest and turn her head away. “You better jettison me right away and save yourself a world of trouble. I’m not going to that brothel.”

Sekmeth stood, his crotch right there in front of her. Alex sneaked a quick peek. Holy hell!

“I am a Hunter first, Alexandra Novona. If you behave in a way that jeopardizes my assignment or if you damage yourself and cost me credits...then I will have to adjust your attitude.”

Alex snorted. “You don’t scare me. I’m going to do what I have to do.”

Sekmeth smiled again. Now there *was* something menacing, excitingly so, in his grin and the way he brushed a finger along his chin. “I was hoping you would say that.”

* * * * *

Trying to control her emotions so the inhibitor didn’t kick in proved much harder than Alex ever thought it could be. She walked the perimeter of the tiny compartment several times, thinking about ways to escape, to make him pay. She looked under the cot, around the hatch, along the base of the bulkhead. Nothing. She may as well have been sitting inside an armored vehicle locked from the outside.

Oh, but she was hot. No air in this place. Alex sighed and rolled her eyes. The vent barely stirred her hair. Filaments of dust clung to the grill, which looked rusted and barely holding. Alex froze. The vent looked damned tight, but maybe she could fit through. Then what? She knew her ship inside and out but had never bothered to check the schematics for air ducking and ventilation units. She wished she had now. Kim had gone in one once to fiddle with some system out of easy access. But Kim was what, one hundred pounds soaking wet with a pair of stunners in her hands and steel boots on

her feet. Alex weighed a hundred and seventy-five pounds the last time she checked. In her underwear. Plus, at six foot, she'd never make the bends.

"Shit."

She had to try. She wouldn't be able to relax until she'd settled the matter. Hell, she just might fit in the opening. The rest, well, she'd jump that hyperpoint when she reached it.

After dragging the cot right under the vent, she stood on it and was happy to see she could easily reach it. A couple of tugs and the vent fell in her hands. Dust and particles of rust floated down on her. She'd been expecting silver tubes or something. What she found instead was darkness. *Total* darkness.

"Well, think happy thoughts," she muttered. If the inhibitor activated while she hung there, she'd break her neck.

She pulled herself up to the opening and scrambled to catch a foot inside the vent. With her heel firmly caught around the ledge, she pulled herself completely in. Alex had to squeeze and wedge her hips in, then her torso and finally her shoulders. Doing this hanging upside down wasn't easy. Sweat slicked her limbs by the time she lay inside the vent, her ass hanging in the opening. Not the most respectable position, but at least the thing around her neck hadn't picked up aggression. Not that it wasn't in her mind, though. As soon as she got her hands on him, she'd make the big, sneaky Yithian pay for this.

She slid the grill back where it belonged. It rested precariously along the dented ledge and looked as though it could fall anytime. Now for the good part. Where to go? The brig took a tiny corner of the back end of the *Femme Metal*. So, technically, she was sitting—or lying—on top of the main thruster, hence the heat in the brig. If she followed the air conduit, she would eventually end up in the engine room where the ship's main computer was.

"Or on the damn bridge."

By that time her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Well, she wouldn't find out where this thing led unless and until she moved her butt out of there. Wincing from the effort, Alex squirmed away from the vent and followed the conduit until she came to a bend. She coughed.

"When I get my hands on his blue neck..."

Control. No spikes of aggression, remember? She didn't want to faint in there and wake up in the Hunter's hands.

Heat rose to her face. His hand on her thigh had kicked her heartbeat up a few notches. Those long, pliable fingers—the smooth skin. Alex shook her head. *No time for this. Get to work.*

After what felt like an hour, Alex managed to squeeze past a narrow bend. Sweat dampened her entire body. And she reeked. After a while the conduit widened. Crawling forward on her elbows and knees and fantasizing about the death of a certain Yithian, Alex made enough headway she began to entertain the plausibility she might,

just might, make it. A rhythmic whirr told her she neared the thrusters. Reddish light filtered in along the conduit ahead of her. She quickened as much as she could and reached a vent. By the sound of things, she was right above the engine room.

“Not bad, girl, not bad at all,” she murmured.

With as much force as she could muster, but keeping in mind she had to catch the vent before it clattered to the floor, Alex put her shoulder to it and heaved. It gave right away. She just barely caught it before it dangled over the ledge. Sweat made her grip seriously clammy. She held on tight as she lowered her legs over the very hot, very dangerous converter elements. Alex let go. She landed a couple of feet below, both feet on a ridge along the converter. Right away she jumped off it before her boots melted to the spot. Wouldn't it be grand to be found there, glued to the dumb thing by the soles of her boots?

After hiding the grill behind some conduits, she padded to the comms unit and activated it. The girls were locked inside their cabins, but Kim was on the bridge. Chained to her post, or so the alien said. Alex pressed the “transmit” button but didn't say anything. Hopefully, Kim's lightning-quick brain would kick in and she'd guess it was one of the crew calling in.

A few seconds later, the “receive” light came on then switched off right away. Alex sighed. Kim really was a genius. She deserved more than the five percent she received. Alex resolved to double it when she retrieved her ship. And to have that alien stripped naked and bolted to the goddamn prow.

Alex switched the “transmit” button on again and leaned in close to the panel. “You there?”

“Yeah. He's like real close.” Kim's voice was, for once, very soft.

“Can you get at the environmental settings?”

A long pause. “Yeah,” came the reply, so faint Alex wasn't sure she heard it.

“Wait 'til he's not right beside you, kill the gravity then reverse engines. Full blast, my girl.”

“Got it.”

This last comeback had been quick and sounded tight. The Yithian was probably getting too close. Alex left the comms unit and searched the engine room for anything she could use as a weapon. One of Kim's many pouches of tools lay on the floor beside the electrical distribution system. The ship's “brain”, as Kim called the massive thermoplastic panel, resembled those Old Earth communication switchboards to Alex. She rummaged through the pouch. Most of the tools were for electrical jobs, nothing serious enough to be used as a weapon. Just as Alex was starting to look elsewhere, she spotted a handle protruding from the pouch's side pocket. She grinned.

She had one shot at the alien before the inhibitor kicked in and floored her again. With any luck, she'd have time to conk him on his pretty head before she passed out. With even more luck, Kim would manage to stay conscious through the reversing thrusters and unlock the girls' cabins.

Luck, though, hadn't always been on her side.
"Today's my turn, dammit."

Chapter Five

Sekmeth buzzed the dark woman's door. She replied right away. He enjoyed her voice – smooth yet raspy around the edges, like *lak*, his favorite Yithian fruit.

"Why have you called me here?"

She wore what humans called a "tank top". He'd never seen a tank and couldn't possibly link it to what he saw now. Nonetheless, he enjoyed when human females wore these revealing things. They dressed so differently from Yithian females who basically dressed identical to their male counterparts.

The woman stood with her back against the bulkhead. Her frizzy brown hair stood out in thick tresses he found interesting. She still hadn't answered him. He came into the cabin and noticed a strange smell floating in the air. It emanated from some small cone burning in a dish.

"How much are you getting for us?" she asked. She peeled her robust frame from the bulkhead and approached.

Sekmeth thought she looked very much like one of those great black felines populating a world he had once visited. The same slow walk – the look in her eyes. "Stay where you are."

A grin pulled her fleshy lips to one side. "What? A big Yithian afraid of me?"

"Not fear. Caution." He crossed his arms over his chest and watched her come even closer. This one embodied everything the captain didn't – curves, sensuousness and willingness. Yes, a lot of that. Somehow, the dark woman didn't please him as Alexandra Novona did. An easy or, in this case, eager prey never did engage his senses. He'd much rather have to work for it. Work hard.

"They'll pay you in credits, but I have something much better."

Her breasts looked heavy and firm, and Sekmeth toyed with the idea of caressing the woman before him. "Something much better? In exchange for what?"

The last step brought her right next to him where she let a finger run all the way up his stomach. "Freedom. You let me go, and I promise you sweet time with me, baby. Ever been with a human female?"

Sekmeth nodded. It seemed to take some wind out of her sail, which he thought was sad in some strange way. "I cannot give you freedom. Someone has already paid me for it. Keep your gift for someone else more interested."

She looked down and shrugged. "Is that one of those mood rings?" she asked, running a finger over his hand.

He let her caress the ring, knowing it would remain black, dormant, unless it sensed a change in his level of awareness. A "mood ring" as she called it was a crude but

effective term. On Yith, these rings had once been popular, back when mating involved more than physical contact. Nowadays, no one wore them, preferring to not show a mate if they triggered strong emotional response or not. Until he'd met these humans, his ring had been dormant, seemingly without life. Then he'd seen *her* at the club and it'd taken all his years of training to control his emotions so the ring wouldn't betray him. Alexandra Novona shouldn't know what sort of reactions she could elicit in him. No use giving the dangerous woman an edge.

So while the dark female did her best to arouse him, watching the ring with a bird of prey's vigilance, it remained a lifeless piece of black nacre.

The change in her demeanor was night and day. Sekmeth took a step back when her eyes narrowed to mere slits. A look of pure seething hatred flashed in her brown eyes. "You'll be sorry you didn't take my offer, Yithian."

She added something in a language he didn't understand. The meaning didn't escape him though. Sekmeth grinned. "I find you obvious and dull. Do you think you are the first to make such an offer? I am a bounty hunter. Everyone has tried this one on me. Males, females. Everyone. You should rethink your approach."

With that, he stepped out of the cabin and locked it again. This one, he'd do well to keep in front of him at all times.

As he made his way to the bridge, he thought he should go visit the captain again. Just for the pleasure of it. His belly tightened at the mere memory of Alexandra Novona. He slowed then shook his head and continued on to the bridge. He needed to inform his customer he had acquired the goods. His own personal pleasure could wait.

As soon as he stepped on the bridge, he smelled something wasn't quite right. The woman-child sat with her back to him, leaning over some instrument on the control panel.

"What are you up to?"

She snapped up straight in the seat and crossed her arms across her narrow chest. "Nothing."

He went to the main command console and sat in the too-low seat. The captain's smell floated up to him when air left the foam padding. Sekmeth had to close his eyes briefly to concentrate. Keeping his eyes on the woman-child, he punched in his access code and waited for his customer to receive the transmission.

"What did you say?" he asked, leaning over in the seat and peering over her shoulder.

"Like, whoa," she snapped, slapping the hand he meant to put on the portable computer by her side. "That's mine."

"If you try anything foolish, child, I will be forced to punish someone. I would not touch you because of your age, but your captain is an adult, even by my standards. Think of her."

Tears rimmed the large, dark eyes. She twisted one of the white spikes gracing her head and slipped deeper into her seat. "I'll be good. Totally."

A small beep forced Sekmeth to turn back to his own console. "Receiving."

A male Yithian face appeared in the display unit. After a few seconds of static interference and image distortion, his face became clearer. Numerous rings adorned both his ears and nostrils. He grinned widely, showing a set of wicked-looking teeth.

"How many did you get, Hunter?"

"Three adult females and one woman-child. Plus their ship. It is small and old but sound."

"It's *not* old—"

Sekmeth raised a hand to silence the woman-child. So she understood Yithian. He should have suspected it. A glare was enough to deter her from further observations. "Because of the ship, I expect more credits transferred to me than the agreed-upon fee."

The Yithian in the screen shrugged. "Are they pleasing to the eye?"

"Some of them." Sekmeth wanted to laugh at the small human glowering at him. Some spirit she had, this one.

"Good, good. I will inform the entertainment overseer he may be receiving more participants for the games."

A twitch pulled at Sekmeth's eyelid. "Games?"

"There is more profit in the games. Drokesh out."

The screen changed back to flat gray-green. Sekmeth leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes briefly. More profit. That's what it was all about on the *Gorgosh*. Profit from games of the flesh, of luck and of violence. No respect for the hunt, though Drokesh had been one of theirs, a Hunter. He sighed deeply.

A small sound caught his keen ears. He stared at the woman-child just as she was turning something off on her console.

Sekmeth stretch an arm and grabbed her by a shoulder. "What was this?" he asked, pointing at the small light, which had just flashed green.

She tried to shake his hand away but failed. He released her and stood. "I gave you fair warning."

Bending over the clearly frightened child, he noticed over the small light a piece of tape, old and flaky, reading "Engine Room".

Sekmeth grinned.

Chapter Six

With Kim's screwdriver in hand, Alex padded out of the engine room. The worn handle felt smooth under her sweaty fingers. She just hoped the inhibitor wouldn't pick up aggression before she actually acted on it. Right now, it must have been busy sifting through the slew of her emotions, from fear and panic to excitement, even anticipation. Good thing it was set to "human mode" and could differentiate strong internal changes and not kick in every minute. It knew the difference between vomit-inducing fear and I'm-about-to-kill-you rage.

She swallowed hard. If she missed the Yithian, she'd not only get a good jolt but would also taste whatever punishment he'd hinted at earlier. Her insides twisted.

Good thing for the *Femme Metal's* small size. It'd be over quick. Good or bad.

She was reaching the ladder to climb up to the second deck when a pair of very large boots appeared on the grill over her head. Since there was more light above than below, she could see the Yithian above her, but he couldn't see her under him.

Shit.

As silently as she could manage, Alex backpedaled from the ladder, turned into the narrow passageway leading to the cargo hold and sprinted the last few feet. She could hear him coming down the ladder. His big steel-clipped boots clacked on each rung. He wasn't even trying to be discreet. What the hell could he be looking for down there anyway?

Alex squeezed in between stacks of cargo crates and watched the Yithian land on the deck and turn toward the engine room. Fear knotted her stomach. There was no reason to go there unless... Had he overheard Kim talking? What if he'd punished her? Alex gripped the screwdriver tighter. Scumbag wanted something to hit on? She'd give him options.

Images of the "trade disagreement" with the Yithians a few years back flashed in her mind. Tall blue-skinned people spilled out of sleek crafts, shiny weapons in their hands, gray pearls for eyes. She'd never forget the fear, the awe these people inspired. Her soldiers had practically cowered back inside the command post rather than face these blue giants with the expensive gunnery. She'd held her ground, mainly because she was a captain and her soldiers expected it, but she'd remained rooted to the spot also because these aliens were just so damned beautiful. They hadn't looked so beautiful the next day, though, after they'd blasted her unit to smoldering pieces. *Border dispute, my ass!*

Her surroundings came back to her and Alex shook her head. Grand time to be having some damn nostalgia attack. She was definitely getting too old for this.

After the Yithian had turned the corner, Alex raced back to the ladder. No sound, no movements from down the passageway. Good, some luck, finally. She was about to grab the first rung when the sound of footsteps froze her. The temporary lapse in judgment quickly passed, though, and she bolted.

She'd just squeezed back into her observation point between crates when the Yithian emerged into the cargo hold. The hold's dirty yellow light made him look green. It hit his face at an angle and Alex gritted her teeth.

He knew.

She knew just by the expression on his face. The Hunter sniffing for his prey. He'd seen or heard Kim, and came looking for the wayward captain lurking in the engine room. When he hadn't found her there, he'd thought logically she was still somewhere on the lower deck. Hence himself in the flesh, looking tight as hell and scanning the hold. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. His long coat had parted but she couldn't see if he had a weapon or not. Not that it mattered with a guy his size.

Alex realized she had squeezed the screwdriver with enough force it'd created a sharp indentation in her palm. She loosened her grip so blood would come back to her knuckles. She'd need those very soon. Right before the inhibitor decked her. *Just one shot, that's all I'm asking.*

The Yithian took a few cautious steps inside the large hold. His eyes scanned left then right to the piles of stuff and other junk littering the place. If she didn't move, he'd be bound to find her eventually. An idea blazed across her turbulent mind. Desperate situations called for desperate measures, or some shit like that.

From her position, she couldn't see the access panel but knew exactly where it was. If she could get to it and press the big yellow and red button, the one with a cage over it, the exterior cargo doors would open and jettison into space everything not tied down. Including the seven-foot alien standing in the middle of the place. Air would leave too, and a whole lot of stuff would go flying around, but the emergency system would kick in and close the doors.

Yeah, you big dumb thing. Let's see you fight off a giant vacuum.

Keeping her gaze on him at all times, Alex snuck all the way back to the tight space. She kept her back to the wall as she crab-walked closer to the interior hatch and its precious access panel. The button resembled a giant mushroom. Alex licked her sweaty lips. She swore the screwdriver would leave a permanent imprint in her hand.

On all fours, she crept further inside the hold until she was about twenty feet away from the panel. She'd have to be quick. Lift the small cage then slam the button. She'd done it enough times to know how it went. Only she'd never done it with an inhibitor around her neck and two hundred and fifty pounds of Yithian on her ass.

Fifty feet away, the alien reached the main cargo doors and turned completely around, probably so he could check the crates she'd just used as a hiding place. He cocked his head to one side and grinned. He was getting excited, she could tell.

It's now or never.

Alex leapt from her spot behind a pile of rigging equipment and charged for the button. Only one thought propelled her — *got-to-get-to-the-mushroom!*

Behind her, the Yithian swore in his language. She heard his big boots clatter on the metal floor. He was charging.

Before he'd taken three steps, Alex lifted the cage, broke at least three nails doing so and slammed her fist on the button.

At once, a piercing alarm wailed at rhythmic intervals. Air whistled angrily as the cargo doors cracked open. Riggings, crates, spare parts and all kinds of stuff scraped the floor as they slowly inched toward the doors. Alex looped her arm around the interior hatch handle and dug her heels in. She saw the Yithian leaning forward as he fought against the massive change of air pressure and tried to avoid the junk sliding toward him.

Alex would have applauded had she not been bent on seeing him out with the rest of the unwanted stuff. He managed to keep his footing, even made some progress. Foot by excruciating foot, he advanced toward the access panel. His hair flew about his face in mad silver ribbons. The ponytail hung loose, whatever held his long hair had been ripped off. His clothes looked painted-on in front but fretted angrily behind him.

The level of oxygen must have been rapidly diminishing for nausea crept up Alex's throat. She fought against the urge to scream and tried to keep what air she had in her lungs. Too soon, the automatic safety trigger kicked on. The doors began to close.

The Yithian straightened, his eyes narrowed to slits. The pressure was coming back now. Alex no longer felt as though her ears would pop inward. But when he charged at her, she cursed. Alex cocked her other arm back, aimed for the big blue head coming at her and let the screwdriver fly. No aggression — just deadly intent. The inhibitor didn't jolt her. Alex could have wept in relief.

The screwdriver thudded against the Yithian's forehead. He shook his head but kept on coming. Alex let go of the handle and made a run for it.

Air swooshed behind, and she knew the Yithian had tried to grab her. *Too fast for you, big guy?*

She yelped when a hand closed over the back of her jacket. A great weight tackled her to the side. She went down heavily. Rivets dug into her shoulder and hip. They'd probably have to be surgically removed later. Alex squirmed to get free but only managed to trigger the inhibitor. A jolt of pain hit her as electricity raced down her neck to her chest. Behind her, the Yithian grunted. He must have had a measure of it, too.

"Stop it," he hissed, grabbing both her arms in his and keeping her close to his chest.

She snapped her head back, hoping to catch anything softer than her skull. No luck. Another jolt of pain ripped through her. Warm liquid trickled down her nose, out her mouth. Blood. Damn it.

No fight left in her battered body, Alex slumped against the metal floor and laid her forehead against it. Between pants, she tried to swallow but it hurt too much. Her hair came down over her face in a disheveled mass of black curls.

The Yithian kept her there in a bear hug, pinned under his great weight but not enough so she couldn't breathe. She just couldn't escape. Her ears popped when the emergency system restabilized pressure.

"Are you calm now?" he asked, rolling onto his side and taking her with him.

Now that her lungs could fill with air and her chest no longer felt as though someone was sitting on it, Alex felt the closeness of him. He lay on his side, his whole body pressed against the back of hers. Long and powerful arms circled her shoulders, held her hands tightly together over her chest. Lemon and pepper came to her nostrils. He wrapped a long leg over hers, kept his heel between her ankles. Alex stiffened. Warmth surged up from the collar of her jacket. *Rich. Very rich to be drooling over this guy when he's about to beat the shit out of me.*

The Yithian climbed up to his knees, taking her with him. She seemed to weigh no more than a wet towel in his arms. He stood. Her feet dangled inches off the floor. His breathing forced his chest solidly against her back and his body heat transferred to hers. Alex squirmed.

"If you do not stay still, this thing will kill you, which would make me lose a great sum."

"Sorry to be an inconvenience," she sneered through her teeth. "You're lucky I have this on."

He chuckled. The deep baritone rumbled in his chest. He leaned his chin against her shoulder and blew some of her hair away. "You are no inconvenience at all, Alexandra Novona. Quite the contrary. I get easily bored with docile preys."

She meant to drive her heels in his shins but rethought that plan. "I'm no one's prey."

"A hunter being hunted is always a worthy prey. They should all be like you." He let her feet touch the floor. "That being said, you are dirty, you smell bad and you injured yourself. That could all affect my fee. I warned you."

Alex meant to bolt but he lifted her off the floor again. The powerlessness needled her pride. Tears stung her eyes. She'd never been afraid of much in her crazy life, but this, the prospect of this Yithian punishing her made her throat constrict and her belly quiver. Yet the added element of his hot body pressed next to hers added another layer of emotions. She'd heard of people doing stupid things for love, or even lust, but she'd always attributed it to weakness of character. She was the one now, the dumb one, excited at the idea of what this Hunter had prepared for her. Torture and rape, no doubt. He'd been obvious enough the last time he'd been in her company. What was this shit called again, the "Stockholm Syndrome" or something? She was just so goddamn confused.

When in doubt, curse.

And she let loose a long string of good ones. Some she hadn't used in a while, some she'd never heard. As she was going on, the Yithian chuckled and stepped into the passageway. He still carried her in front of him as though she weighed nothing. When they came up to the ladder, it was her turn to chuckle. *Yeah, big guy, figure this one out.*

"You will go in front and I will follow," he said after some reflection.

Alex snorted. "I'll have time for a good kick before the inhibitor gets me."

"Then I will go in front and you will follow me." The Yithian set her down beside the ladder. But he still held her tight from behind.

"Yeah, right." What did he take her for? "So," Alex asked, not even bothering to go light on the sarcasm, "how you going to manage this?"

She felt something pinch the nape of her neck. She went all limp and numb. Sneaky scumbag.

"Like this."

Chapter Seven

Alex kept her eyes tightly shut while the Yithian slowly climbed the ladder with her over his shoulder. Not the most dignified way to get on deck for sure. His little neck pinch had paralyzed her. She couldn't even curse. He bumped her head against the ledge.

"My apologies."

No hint of malice there, as though he was truly sorry for hurting her. Finally, he set foot on the landing. Instead of heading for the brig, he turned right and followed the tight passageway leading to personnel quarters. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Heartbeat thudded as blood gathered in her head. The pressure made her feel as though her face would explode.

She spotted her cabin door, upside down, and gulped. He was taking her back to his—correction—her cabin. This time, real fear jabbed her in the gut. He punched the access code, which he had undoubtedly forced from Kim, and the hatch slid into the bulkhead. From her vantage point she could see he had cleaned the place up quite a bit. What kind of bounty hunter cleaned his prey's cabin? His smell permeated the place.

The Yithian slid Alex off his shoulder and deposited her on the floor. "Feelings to your limbs should return shortly." He left her there and stepped into the tiny cubicle that passed for a washroom on the *Femme Metal*. The door swung closed with a click.

As much as she tried, she could not get her legs or arms to function. She tried to roll toward the hatch but couldn't even make half a rotation. All she managed to do was flop onto her side and lay there, cursing under her breath. As promised, tingling began to make her toes and fingers itchy. The sound of the shower interrupted her misery. He was taking a *shower*? The smug, conceited brute.

Renewed efforts to escape brought no great accomplishment—a full rotation toward the hatch, no more. By that time, her whole body tingled painfully. After a few quick breaths, she floundered to all fours and crawled forward a couple of feet but then slumped back to her side. Her heart beat as though she'd just run around the obstacle course—ten times.

Inside the cubicle water shut off and the rattling of the stall indicated he'd stepped out. For a split second she tried to imagine the seven-foot alien attempting to stoop under the spigot, but the thought zipped out of her mind when the door slid back and out he came. A towel wrapped his lean waist. The thing barely reached mid-thigh. A nasty bruise spread on his chiseled brow. The screwdriver hadn't pushed him off her ship, but at least it'd made a dint. Made him look fallible. She liked him this way.

He looked surprised to see her by the door and grinned. "You are resilient."

She jutted her chin defiantly when he picked her up and helped her to her feet—his skin still beaded with water. “You will feel much better after you have one yourself.”

She felt like she’d drunk four Slip Knots in a row. Her legs barely managed her weight. Alex tried to push him away but feared triggering the inhibitor. The shame of it all but made her eyes well up. She could take the beatings, the stunners, the pain, but this debilitation was so humiliating she had to stare at her feet to hide the pain. No point giving him satisfaction on top of things.

“I do not enjoy using such methods. In truth, I rarely have to. Preys usually do not behave like this.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Very well, Alexandra Novona. Take a shower. You stink. Is that better?”

“I’m not your plaything. You want me, you’re going to have to take me dirty and smelly. And you can go—”

He put a finger to her throat. “Do not wake it. Now clean up.”

“No.”

Water dripped in crystals from his silver hair down his chest. He pinched her jacket’s zipper. “I will do it for you, Alexandra Novona.”

Sensations to her limbs slowly returned and Alex pushed his hand off. “Bite me.”

He grinned ominously.

“Fine, just so I can get your stink off me,” she snarled, slamming the door to the cubicle open and stepping inside. His clothes neatly hung from the pipes overhead. So he was a clean freak on top of things?

As she closed the door, he put a hand to the handle and shook his head. “I do not trust you. Leave it open.”

Alex did the only thing she could under the circumstances—she made a rude gesture with her hand and whirled around. Luckily, the shower stall wasn’t in direct line with the door, but still.

She watched him sit on the narrow cot, stretching his long legs in front of him and leaning back. He resembled one of those Old Earth white marble statues carved by some long-dead civilization—only seven feet tall and spray painted blue.

One piece at a time, Alex dropped her clothes in a pile beside the stall. Good thing an extra towel hung on a hook. She draped it over the shower’s inside wall so he wouldn’t see too much of her should he decide to take a peek. Fingering the metal band around her neck, she stepped inside the stall, closed the door then pressed on the chrome pommel. Steaming water hit her like hail. She sucked in her breath and adjusted the temperature. How could anyone sustain such heat?

As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. She felt much better. So much, in fact, she decided she could take him on, whatever he meant to do. The inhibitor might stop her from booting him in the chops but she could...let’s say, make something happen to him without resorting to violence. Alex grinned. Her locker. There were

some clothes in it, relatively fresh ones, but more importantly, there was another jacket with a stunner in it.

Scheming, she showered then toweled herself dry. It was then she noticed her clothes weren't where she'd left them.

"Sneaky bastard," she snarled as she wrapped the towel around herself. Not much coverage but it'd have to do. She spotted her clothes on the floor, folded in a nice square. She froze in the doorway, watching the Yithian as he lay on the bunk, his eyes closed. She'd have to go around him to reach the locker and get the stunner.

He must have thought she was dumb, faking sleep. "Like I'm going to fall for *that*."

Giving the slightest start, he opened his eyes. He'd actually been asleep. Alex could have kicked herself.

"You smell much better."

Leaning against the bulkhead, Alex crossed her arms over her chest. Goose bumps rippled along her arms. "I want clothes."

"Then get clothes." He indicated the locker then sat up.

The towel rested against his lean thighs and created a triangle of darkness she wouldn't have minded exploring any other time. Too bad she wanted to kill the guy with her bare hands and use his hide as clothing. A nice blue purse would be cute, with silver fur boots to match! She tore her gaze from the towel and stared at him as she went around the cot. She padded by tentatively.

As fast as a striking snake he caught her wrist. "Did I startle you?"

Biting back the yelp of shock, she shook her head.

He grinned then let her hand go. "Good. I was afraid you were losing your edge because of this," he said, pointing to the inhibitor. As if seeing her for the first time, he studied her from head to toe then back again. He sighed.

Alex tightly gripped the towel. "What?"

"You will be very popular where I am taking you. Especially with those." He pointed to her legs.

She looked at herself and shrugged. All she could see was a pair of legs that needed shaving and a map of scars. Her knees took the prize with long pink lines on either side where steel plates held the joints together. "Yeah, well, they'll have to fight just to see them."

"They will."

Now why did it bother her, the way he said that? "What do you mean?"

"Yithians have differing...expectations of females. We are not humans. We do not lie back and take pleasure in passivity."

"You mean you like it rough, like to knock your females around. If that's what you mean, say it." She clutched the towel tighter.

He shook his head and stood. "My English is imprecise, my apologies. I mean Yithian males enjoy females who have physical signs of experience. Lines, scars. To us, a body without any mark is uninteresting. Like a patch of sky without stars. These—" he went on, running a finger over his tattoos "— may be mere paintings to you. But they represent my life, my hunts. You will be part of it soon."

"I'm no goddamn trophy, Yithian," Alex snapped, taking a step back.

His face tightened. He took a step toward her and grinned another of his ominous grins. "*Sekmeth*. To me, you are not a trophy, but to them, you will be."

"Like hell I will. This thing around my neck will kill me before I set foot on that brothel-ship, you got that? I'm going to fight you every step of the way until I have nothing left." She flicked the metal band with her thumb.

He reached out and grabbed her by the fist holding her towel. From up close, the ring looked more blue than black. Had it just glimmered or was it her eyes? She tiptoed forward so he wouldn't tear the towel off her. Before she could do anything else, he pinched the inhibitor and it clicked off. The silvery band fell in his hand. "You wanted to fight me 'every step of the way', as you put it? Now you can."

Alex opened her mouth to say something but snapped it shut again. She threw a quick peek at her towel then glowered at the Yithian. "You think that's going to stop me?"

"I hope not," he replied with a wolfish grin before he tugged his own towel off. "There. Fair?"

His narrow waist came down to lean hips, which spread out in the nicest pair of thighs she'd seen on a man. But what kept her gaze riveted to him was his manhood. Alienhood. Whatever. Blue and hairless—like the rest of him—with not a single mark or indentation except for a tiny slit at the very end. One smooth, pale blue rod tapered to an enticing point. Alex looked up into his eyes, which narrowed to slate gray slits, and gritted her teeth. She'd get only one chance, may as well make it a good one.

She kicked him in the shins then bolted. Despite the grip he had on her fist, the suddenness of her attack must have taken him by surprise for he winced and bent at the waist. Alex leaped over the low table and went for the locker. The stunner. Always charged. Always ready.

She slammed the metal door open and tugged her other jacket off the hook. It came with a ripping sound. As she turned around to aim, the Yithian slammed into her and both went tumbling down in a tangle of limbs and hair. She rolled away just as he was reaching to grab her. The towel slipped off. Blocking that fact out of her mind, Alex climbed to her knees with her stunner in front but didn't have time to fire as the alien wrapped his hand over hers and pulled it down. She yelped when he put his knee on her knuckles.

"No weapon."

She cursed as she pulled her hand free. Unfortunately, the stunner slipped out of her grip and he slapped it across the cabin. Curling her fist as tight as she could make it,

she swung for his face and caught him on the chin. Good god, that hurt! She swung again, this time for his temple.

He avoided the nasty hit and replied by seizing her hand and pulling her to him. Both arms around her, he leaned back on his knees until she practically straddled him. His member felt hard and hot against her thigh while her breasts pressed against his sinewy chest. For a few seconds, they held still, Alex's heart thudding a mad cadence, both panting through disheveled hair. As with the night she'd seen him in the club, a prickly sensation stiffened the nape of her neck.

An image flashed across her mind. Her heart skipped a couple of beats. Him under her. Sweat slicking both. Heat radiating up her belly. Alex struggled for breath. The vision had felt real. Too goddamn real.

Hunger for him blazed inside. Before checking it over with her brain, she leaned forward and planted a kiss on his thin, dark blue lips. Rumbling deep in his chest triggered some kind of animal reaction in Alex. She stopped struggling to arch back and free her hands. Instead, she let herself rest squarely on him. Perfect fit.

"*Kashaak nisk loy,*" he growled in her ear. The force of his breath stirred strands of hair around her face.

What little Yithian she'd learned comprised mostly of insults so she didn't get what he said. But she could get the gist of it. Especially since he wrapped his hands around her face and pressed it against his while he kissed her in a feverish way that stole her breath. Her scar tingled when he ran his lips over the length of it, as if the thin, pink ribbon tasted of the most succulent fruit in the world. Alex sucked in air through her teeth when he dug his fingers in her hair and tilted her head back. Teeth almost too sharp for comfort dragged against her throat, her shoulders. He bit her, hard enough to hurt but not hard enough to scare. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Jesus on a cross! A cry escaped her.

Her actions seemed to spur him on for he renewed his intense caress. Alex let go of his neck to grab him on the lower back and rake her fingernails all the way up. A great tremor shook the Yithian.

"Careful, Alexandra Novona, I am not a human male." His voice sounded deeper, rougher.

"Like I care." She did it again, enjoying the look of absolute bliss tightening his features, as though he fought a losing battle for self-control.

Pleasure beyond measure swelled Alex's chest. To have such devastating impact on this seven-foot feral male intoxicated her. She'd never had sex with a Yithian before, and she prayed to god it wouldn't be the last. Her implant would last for another few months, so no worries about babies. With avidity, she dug her nails in his skin. His reaction was immediate.

Alex wasn't too sure how he did it. One moment she knelt, pressed firmly against him, the next she lay on her back with him between her legs. Air left her lungs in a great "humph" when he lay on top of her and seized one of her nipples between his lips.

She arched. “Holy —”

The rest couldn't choke past her throat. He lodged his member into her. The sheer heat of him drowned what inarticulate sound struggled to be heard. Alex threw her head back. If his size first intimidated her, it no longer did, not with the skill he handled it. Gradually, he sank into her like a stunner in its holder. Heat radiated through her thighs and stomach. As Kim would say, “like, whoa”.

Muscles twitched on his lean pectorals as he lifted his weight off her and rested on his elbows. His eyes, usually gray pearls, looked more like black incisions as he stared at her through disheveled hair.

“Don't stop,” she growled through her teeth.

A feral grin peeled up his lip. Still, he made no move, only stared down at her.

When she turned her head to bite his arm, she spotted the ring. Now it definitely was doing *something*. Not glowing, but sputtering, as a flame caught in a draft.

Fearing the heat in her belly would subside, Alex heeled the floor and tilted her hips so he would slip deeper into her. Happy juices rendered the move unbearably pleasing. Alex groaned. But he wouldn't meet her halfway. She'd lose it if he didn't move soon. Already her belly relaxed, as did her thighs. What was he playing at? Tease.

His teeth gleamed in the poor light of the cabin as the Yithian angled his head so he could brush his mouth against her ear. “Is that all a human female can do?”

Alex felt as though someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over her head. Before she could respond, the Yithian reached over her and slipped something around her neck. Too late, she struck at his hand. The inhibitor clicked over her throat. She froze.

He pulled out of her and stood. “I should have left it on. It made no difference.”

Not many times in her life had she been speechless. Emptiness wrung through her body as if he'd pulled her guts out along with his penis. Some clean clothes landed a few inches from her elbow. She put them on in silence, slipped the boots on and buckled them with numb fingers. A painful stitch cramped her side, right under her left shoulder. Shame and bitterness forced her to stare at anything but his face. She feared what she'd do if she looked at him too long. The thing around her neck might kill her. She wasn't sure she cared.

On second thought, she did care — if only to make him pay later.

When he drew near, she stood and faced him. With as much ice as she could put in her words, she said, “This isn't over.”

His eyes had returned to a more familiar opalescent gray. “You already showed me what you could do, Alexandra Novona.”

Naked, he escorted her back to the brig, where he closed and locked the hatch behind her. He didn't even bother with the vent, nor did he seem overly worried she'd try to escape again. Perhaps he knew she wouldn't. She hated him for it.

Alex didn't watch him leave through the porthole, instead she sank onto the narrow cot. As she leaned back against the bulkhead, tears of rage threatened to spill over. She fought, forced her eyes to remain fixedly open, not yielding to the pain, the humiliation he'd just put her through. He'd used her, manipulated her to serve some morbid need.

She'd get him back. Yithians had no gods – he'd need one if she ever had her way.

Chapter Eight

Sekmeth returned to the cabin and pulled his clothes on. Heat from the pipes radiated pleasantly from the fabric to his skin. He shivered. Rubbing his hands through his hair, he noticed with some surprise they shook. Shock tightened his mouth when he noticed his ring glowed faintly, as if struggling valiantly against him. He'd almost lost control, let the ring show too much. Perhaps he should remove it when he was around her. But doing so would mean failure, a loss of self-control over his emotions. Hunters always controlled their emotions. Well, most of the time.

His stomach felt tight, his lungs too small. *Merely hunger and thirst*, he thought. He would have to rummage through the tiny kitchen to find something to eat. A pleasant scent floated to his nostrils. He sniffed his arms and hands. He smelled of the human female. Sekmeth gritted his teeth and stormed out of the cabin. There had to be something to eat on this crude little ship. His stomach tightened even more. Irritation settled in as well. The quicker he disposed of this cargo, the better.

He'd never had to resort to using his extrasensory skills to get a prey before. Sekmeth loathed using it. It spoiled the whole spirit of the hunt, blighted what victory might be achieved. Alexandra Novona was a special kind of prey—he'd sensed it right away. Using his mind to influence her felt wrong and dishonorable. The tattoo representing her would have to be exceptional to absolve the means he used to get her. Sekmeth angrily pulled a hasty meal together and ate in morose silence.

On his way back from the pitiful place they called kitchen, he came across the passageway leading to the bridge. He'd completely forgotten about the woman-child. She was slumped in her seat, her wrist resting over the edge where he'd secured it to a piece of metal tubing. She looked fast asleep.

Sekmeth made no sound as he slid into the seat next to her. He ignored the garish control sticks gleaming bright pink on either side of his knees. Delicately, he lifted her hand and let it rest in her lap so circulation would return to her tiny fingers. She woke with a start.

"Hey, like, whoa! Don't touch me." Fear made her eyes larger than they already were. Yet anger hardened her jawline.

"Do you need to eliminate?"

She seemed shocked. She opened her mouth to say something then snapped it closed again. After a few of these entertaining motions, she shook her head. As if on second thought, she nodded. "Yeah. But you're not coming with me."

Sekmeth grinned. "I would not think of it."

He unlocked the thin silver coil binding her wrist. "Once you are done, you will return to the bridge. I already had to punish your captain because of you. Do not make me do it again." *More like I punished myself.* Sekmeth pushed the silly notion away.

The look of absolute loathing on her pointy face heightened the irritation twisting his insides. He shrugged. "I warned you to cooperate."

Settling deeper into the seat afforded no measure of comfort whatsoever. Rubbing his chest, he crossed his legs at the ankles and closed his eyes. Soon, faint sounds from the woman-child triggered his keen senses. The loose, shapeless garment she wore allowed for very little stealth. Without turning back, he indicated the seat next to him. "Sit."

She did, not before casting one venomous look his way.

"We need to jump to these coordinates," he said, pointing to her display unit.

She took an instant to analyze his entry then nodded. "I'd say hold on tight, but you can go ahead and stand if you want."

Sekmeth could have laughed. Spirited little thing. "Initiate whatever sequence you need to jump. I will watch and learn."

After clicking furiously at her patchwork of computer parts, she sat back and indicated the control sticks. With a sigh, Sekmeth grabbed the plastic renditions of human male genitals and waited.

"Prepare for jump in five, four, three, two, one. Jump."

Sekmeth had never felt such a sudden jump point before. This ship may be small, but mighty thrusters drove it. A rip opened in space, ribbons of blue and green fog shredded outward from a thin slit. He aimed the prow for it and let the ship do the rest. Following the zigzagging conduit of hyperspace in this ship proved harder than anticipated. After a few jerky compensations, he stabilized the ship and emerged sideways into a section of space he knew well.

The woman-child snorted. "You're, like, the worst pilot."

"How far are we to these coordinates?" he asked, gladly taking his hands off the pink plastic controls to show her his screen.

After punching a number of buttons harder than necessary, the woman-child crossed her arms. "ETA to *Gorgosh* is one standard hour and seven minutes."

"This ship is too slow."

"She's not slow, you're just totally too heavy for her." As if her words caught up with her brain, she swallowed and stared with wide eyes.

"What do they call you, woman-child?"

"Kim."

"Kim. Small name for a small person."

He pulled the crew's ID cards from his pocket and flicked through them. When he came across the captain's, he stopped. Alexandra Novona's square face and determined

blue eyes stared up at him from the strip of plastic. Her hair was shorter then, barely touched her athletic shoulders. He liked it better now. Beside him, Kim watched it all with the vigilance of a nervous bird. Sekmeth gathered the cards and returned them to his sleeve pocket.

“Can this ship move faster?” he asked, more gruffly than he intended.

“Nope.” That seemed to please the little human very much.

He decided not to push it. “Wake me when we reach the *Gorgosh*.”

She looked as if she’d rather plant something sharp in his back. He grinned, deciding he liked the little human.

* * * * *

“Hey. Wake up.”

A tiny sound resembling a chirping bird accompanied the voice. Sekmeth straightened in the too-small seat and rolled his shoulders. Once they reached the *Gorgosh*, he’d have someone rub the kinks out of his body.

Something bleeped at him. An annoying light flickered green. On his right, the little human with the little name pointed to the view screen in front of him. The smallish, rectangular display unit barely gave him a sense of things, but enough to let him know where he was. Some hundreds of kilometers ahead loomed the *Gorgosh*.

“Brothel-ship” didn’t really do the mammoth justice. It more or less resembled a city of rock and steel ripped out of some planet and sent floating into space. Lights of every known color flashed and twinkled and glowed along its shiny surface. Bristling with buildings and antennas, the ship amalgamated every entertainment enterprise imaginable. Sekmeth sent a request for docking. Beside him, Kim snorted as she twisted one of her shiny white hair spikes.

“What is amusing?”

“This,” she replied, pointing to the vast vessel. “And god created the *Gorgosh* so man could commit all cardinal sins in one convenient location.”

Sekmeth burst out laughing. “Not man – Yithian. But fairly assessed.”

He could tell she wanted to smile but forced herself not to. As if remembering what he’d told her about punishing her captain, Kim frowned and crossed her arms tightly against her chest.

“Prepare for docking,” came the reply from the *Gorgosh*.

With lightning-quick fingers, Kim clicked on a series of keys and activated the ship’s docking clamps. Clunks reverberated along the hull. Maneuvering the *Femme Metal* with practiced ease, she burned just enough fuel to pull the ship alongside the giant floating city’s docks situated on its underbelly. An insect landing under the leaf of a plant, the ship shuddered as its clamps fastened on their assigned hatch. One long quiver tightened his stomach then the ship powered down and the little female pushed

her computer away. She turned to look at him with an expression he found hard to sustain.

“Yithians are not savages, woman-child. You will be well treated here.”

Why did he feel the need to comfort this human, his prey? He’d never felt as though he had to before. He’d delivered others before, some as young as she. He shook his head. Fatigue, no doubt. He’d make sure to stay onboard the *Gorgosh* for a few days before he took on another assignment.

“Where is the onboard communication control?”

Kim pointed to a small yellow button. He pressed and held it. “I will disembark and take the little one with me to arrange for your transfer. If you do not cooperate with security personnel, I will kill her.” He stood. “Follow me.”

She did, albeit reluctantly. Just in case, he slipped on her fragile neck a spare inhibitor he found in the weapons’ bay. He led her to the airlock and breathed in the fresh air of the *Gorgosh* when the hatch hissed open. Sounds assaulted his ears. After the quietness of the little ship and deep space, the floating city’s chaos placated his breath for a few seconds.

“This way.”

He led the little human through a maze of passageways and docking ports, all numbered in Yithian but bearing symbols other species could understand. A hovercraft already waited for him when he emerged from the terminal. It looked as though it had been dunked in bright green liquid plastic. A computer voice informed him Drokesh waited in his office. Amid a whirr of lights, sounds and smells, the small craft lifted off and zoomed between buildings, zigzagged at dizzying speeds among other crafts like it, before finally setting on the roof of a tall glass building. Overhead, the dome-shaped field, which kept the vacuum of space at bay, gleamed a smoky blue.

After nodding to the security guard who held the door open, he strode across the landing pad. Other guards escorted him to the building proper. Amid the Yithian males, the woman-child seemed even smaller. Her shoulders looked tight and drawn in. He waited for the elevator to get them down to the story below his feet. Finally, the door opened and he stepped onto the plush carpet of his customer’s office.

“Ah, Sekmeth, finally.”

Drokesh walked out of a door to the right and slid it closed behind him. He only wore flowing pants made of shiny black material. Tattoos of his hunts gleamed with freshly retouched ink. Drokesh had been as fearsome a Hunter as he was a shrewd businessman now. Yet Sekmeth never understood why the older Yithian had chosen to run a brothel-ship instead of ending his days during a hunt.

“As agreed.” Sekmeth pulled the cards from his pocket and extended them to Drokesh.

“Is this the woman-child?” Drokesh asked. The multitude of rings on his ears and face glittered as he drew near and leaned close to her face. She obviously fought not to recoil. The difference in height was almost ridiculous.

“Three adult females, as well,” Sekmeth replied, pushing the cards in the other’s bejeweled hand.

Drokesh took them and flipped through. He stopped on one and turned it so Sekmeth could see. He grinned a sharp-toothed grin. “This one is particularly pleasing.”

Sekmeth stared into Alexandra Novona’s face for a second. “She is. They all have their unique attributes.”

The woman-child looked down at her feet.

Drokesh chuckled. The sound of a cracked bell. A tic pulled at Sekmeth’s eyelid. He rubbed his face and wished for this interview to end soon.

“You look tired, Hunter. Come and enjoy some rest. By the looks of these humans, you have earned it.” Drokesh’s gaze lingered on the little human again. “I may decide to keep one or two for myself.” Kim visibly stiffened.

Sekmeth fought the impulse to place his hand over her shoulder. “My fee?”

Drokesh nodded then crossed the length of the huge office. After flicking a wall panel open, he slid a plastic envelope out and brought it back to Sekmeth. “Two hundred thousand credits will be transferred to your ID. Here is the transfer deed.”

“What about my additional fees for the ship?”

Drokesh shrugged. “Keep it. I have no use for such a small, worthless craft.” He winked at the woman-child and left through the same door.

With him gone, Sekmeth sensed the human relax and start to breathe again.

“That was totally gross. And, just so you know, my ship’s not worthless.”

“To him it is. And to me as well.” Irritated in more ways than he cared to admit, Sekmeth led the human back to the ship where security personnel already waited to take charge of the newest “employees”.

He stood as they were brought out, inhibitors snugly in place. The large one followed placidly, though the size of her arms betrayed the strength lying dormant. Glowering fiercely, the dark female strode past without so much as a glance for him.

Then *she* emerged from the ship.

The captain’s steel blue eyes killed him several times as she crossed the landing pad and marched past him. She managed a quick wink to the little one who tried to show fortitude by pumping out her small chest.

Sekmeth turned away from the woman-child. He would do well to engage in his post-hunt routine before the mood left him. It was enough to struggle with the self-doubts plaguing him, he didn’t need the guilt as well. All he wanted was a long, hot bath and some entertainment to dull his mind.

A few minutes later he stood in the lobby of one of his favorite parlors. As soon as he stepped in, a tiny Mers female greeted him, showed him to one of the luxury suites nestled deep within the watery building. Heated fountains gurgled, unseen behind frosted glass walls where sheets of water fell down to pebbled channels. A steaming bath—more a rectangular hole in the tiled ground—awaited him, and he slid out of his

clothes to sink into the searing water with a contented sigh. Scented steam flowed out of jets along the bath's rim, arced a few inches in the air to settle down into the water, which came up to his chest. Stretching his long legs out, he let the water's music dull his irritation.

A small sound announced the first part of the parlor's specialty. Two Mers slid into the room, bearing trays of food and the special brew that blunted everything but physical sensations. He wolfed down the food, tiny rolls of seaweed with a vinegary sauce then burned his lips drinking the first cup of the pungent infusion. Already, his shoulders relaxed. He sunk deeper into the water.

When they'd left, a tall and wiry older Yithian female walked in. She wore nothing but rows of black crystals around her waist and a regal smile on her fair face. This one he knew well, remembered vividly her last performance. His member remembered as well.

"I greet you, Hunter Sekmeth."

"I greet you, Mistress," he replied, gazing down the glorious body where lines and tiny scars created a web he longed to pluck.

"Would you enjoy watching Mistress at work or would you rather participate?"

Sekmeth grinned widely. "Admiring your work is participating."

She seemed pleased with his answer and nodded. A moment later, another Yithian female, this one a good number of years younger, stepped in. What she lacked in attractive skin pattern, she more than made up for in tone and sinewy muscle. Her hair was very long, past her waist, and had been cut square. She also wore a crystal belt. But in her hands were two things that made Sekmeth sit up straighter. A *Ghars* and a length of silver ribbon. The *Ghars* gleamed in the young female's hand and she gave it to the Mistress. Expertly, she rolled the wand in her hands until it glowed golden. She looked down at Sekmeth who nodded.

With the hot brew coursing through his veins, Sekmeth watched as the older female took the other by the hand and twirled her around as a dancer would. Music wafted down from the ceiling, reaching his buzzing ears. He leaned his head against the bath's edge. The jets stopped, the water became smooth as silk while the temperature rose to accommodate Yithians' taste for heat. Sweat created a shine over both females as the Mistress led her companion to the edge of the bath where both knelt, inviting Sekmeth to caress the young thigh, the smooth hip. He did, letting his fingers gently graze the blue Yithian skin.

After dipping the *Ghars* in the water, the Mistress ran it along the other's leg, up and down, over her backside, then between the small breasts. A moan escaped the young Yithian who spread her knees over the tiled floor, curved and undulated with the music. Following the rhythm, the older female let the *Ghars* reach from behind and low over the other's belly, before angling it so it rubbed along the hairless, wet-looking entry. All the while, she watched intently for Sekmeth's reactions.

It was all he could do not to burst out of the water and take them both. Yet as pleasing as the performance was, his mind kept changing things. A detail here, a feature there, until the older Yithian resembled a certain human he knew. But because of the mind-numbing infusion, Sekmeth couldn't suppress the fantasy taking hold, until he watched not two blue-skinned females, but Alexandra Novona and the younger Yithian.

The human pulled her companion up to a standing position where she guided her toward the wall. A small ring protruded from the smooth surface, and she threaded the length of ribbon in, letting the looped ends dangle. Knowing what was coming, Sekmeth felt his eyes narrow, his lips tighten with anticipation.

Alexandra Novona made the Yithian female turn to face the wall and snaked both hands in the ribbon. Standing back to admire the blue-skinned beauty stretched taut, the woman turned to Sekmeth and smiled. The *Ghars* glowed brightly now, gold and rosy as an opal, and the human used it along the inside of the Yithian female's legs. From ankles to cheeks then back down again before transferring it to her own body, letting it trace a teasing path down her belly, up between her breasts and along her lips.

Thanks to the brew, Sekmeth could watch it without his seed exploding out of him. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his ring glowing fiercely.

Twisting the Yithian's silver hair into a tight coil, Alexandra Novona fisted it and pulled, forcing the other's head back. With her feet, she spread the other's legs.

"Shall I?" the human asked, though Sekmeth knew it was the Mistress speaking. He nodded, licking his lips.

She stroked the inside of the blue thighs until the Yithian was writhing. Then the *Ghars* went in, deep, its radiance making the skin around the entry glow blue-white. A hiss escaped the female while her sheath received slow and leisurely thrusts. Muscles rippled under the human skin, and Sekmeth thought he would lose it. Black curls stuck to her forehead, Alexandra Novona worked the rod in and out, unhurriedly, according to the music. Up over the females' heads, a tiny jet spurted steam down on them both. The sheen covering both bodies created mesmerizing points of light.

Then the music intensified. So did the human's thrusts, matched by groans of pleasure from the Yithian. A tempo pounded increasingly louder, steam now turned to water and cascaded over both females, Sekmeth's bath water rose in temperature.

In. Out. Hard and fast, Alexandra Novona plunged the *Ghars* in the Yithian who arched her head back, aided by the fistful of hair in the human's hand. His own heartbeat drowned the music. He bit his lip, threw his head back. His seed gushed out of his throbbing member.

A ragged cry of bliss echoed in the room as the Yithian female pulled hard against the ribbon around her wrists. Behind her, the human had left the other's hair so she could reach in front and grab a breast. Still driving the *Ghars* up, deeper, all the way to her knuckles, she pressed her whole length against the other. They stayed thus a long time, with Sekmeth panting ragged breaths.

After a while the Mistress returned to her usual form, pulled the darkened *Ghars* out of her slumped companion. She arched an eyebrow when she noticed Sekmeth's glowing ring. A look of pride flashed across her face and, beckoning to the other, she left the room.

Though she was undoubtedly thinking herself the cause of the ring's glow, Sekmeth knew it had nothing to do with either Yithian. It was a certain human female who'd made his ring betray his emotions. And a sweet betrayal it was.

Chapter Nine

"It's all good, Cap'n," Ebinay said as a pair of fierce-looking Yithian males led her down a brightly lit corridor lined with potted plants. "You'll see."

Alex watched the back of her second-in-command as the trio left the elevator, which was huge in comparison to any she'd entered before. Probably to accommodate all the species using it. A small chime announced another floor. Annabelle, four guards and she remained behind, going down more levels. She didn't even know why they were separating the group. Fiddling with her inhibitor brought a sharp glance from one of the guards. She glowered back. As soon as the chance came, she'd take it.

A chime sounded and the steel doors slid back and two more guards, Annabelle between them, stepped off the elevator. This level resembled some sort of prison, with grills on the windows and thick-looking doors. The woman left without a backward glance. Unflappable Annabelle. Alex almost laughed. Almost.

"Where you taking me?"

One of the remaining two guards looked back at her but said nothing. They went down two more levels. The chime sounded and when the door opened, Alex wanted to whistle her appreciation but thought better of it. Luxury. No other word for it.

Here though, the place teemed with people. Some wore silvery bands around their necks, others didn't. She garnered quite a bit of attention as she and her escort stepped off the elevator and crossed what resembled the grand hall of some massive mansion. Not many humans in attendance. Well, make that no other human period. So she'd be a delicacy. Great.

Her eyes scanning the place, Alex followed her escort through the airy room. They didn't carry weapons as far as she could see. Even with the inhibitors, she'd had thought they'd arm their guards. Though, come to think of it, why would a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound Yithian need a weapon?

Alex gazed up at chandeliers that looked very much like those humans would come up with and which hung from coffered ceilings at least twenty feet high. Members of both—make that all—genders and ranging four species she could identify stopped to watch her. She felt ill at ease under the scrutiny but would chew rivets before she let it show.

Not many places to hide. Save for the elevator. If she could get to it, she could have a chance. A chance for what, though? To get the hell beaten out of her by very large Yithians? Where would she go if she managed to escape the pair?

Don't know, don't care.

Sometimes, she did things she couldn't explain but which felt right at the time. Escaping potential harm numbered among those. She'd spent most her life hating Yithians—still did, one in particular—and years selling people to places like this, and now to look at her, walking on a Yithian brothel-ship. The irony never ended.

A female Naray crossed their path and smiled at one of Alex's guards. He returned the favor, even made some polite comment about her glossy scales. The trio stopped so her guard could exchange words with what looked very much like a future date. People had stopped staring by then and had continued on their business. Alex crossed her arms and looked around. Behind her, maybe fifty feet, the elevator chimed.

Without thinking, Alex bolted.

She must have caused quite a shock for people yelped to get out of the way. She thundered past a pair of tiny Mers. An older Yithian male stepped out of the elevator. Alex pumped her legs as fast and hard as she could. The thick steel doors began to slide back. She'd make it!

She cursed when something tackled her. To the hard glossy floor she sprawled, knocking her elbows and knees and hips. Goddamn, her knees hurt! Blue hands grabbed her by the shoulders and lifted her clean off the floor. Both her guards grinned.

"We should have more humans here," one said to the other in English. An emphatic nod answered him.

Alex wanted to thrash against them, kick them in their baby blue faces but feared getting a jolt for her efforts. Panting, she forced her heart to quiet down as the pair carried her the rest of the way, each by an arm.

"There," one of the Yithians said as he led her past translucent columns standing guard to some monstrous glass door. The size dwarfed Alex, even the two Yithians.

It slid noiselessly when they stepped up to it. One of her guards said something to a thick Yithian female. She nodded and the people gathered around her left.

With a pleasant grin on her handsome face, she opened her arms. "Drokesh had not exaggerated. Welcome, Alexandra Novona. Are you hungry? Tired? I will have your room ready in a short while."

As much as Alex tried to hate the Yithian and make it really apparent, she found it hard to do, especially since no one there seemed overly sad or damaged. Save for the odd inhibitor gleaming here and there. She reached to touch her own. Damned thing.

"You will get accustomed to it," the Yithian said. "*Tkish ror.*" One of the guards licked his lips as he studied Alex then both left. "Come with me, Alexandra Novona. There is much to do before you are ready."

Alex planted her feet wider apart. "Ready for what?"

The Yithian smiled lightly. "We pride ourselves in placing our escorts in fields of operation they will excel and feel comfortable in. The large one in your group, for example, will serve on a security detail, the dark female as a consort. You have been placed—"

“What about the young one? What happened to her?”

The Yithian’s face tightened for just a split second. She batted hairless eyelids. “She is to remain with Drokesh. As I was saying, you have been placed within the gaming element of Drokesh’s enterprise.”

Alex shivered. Poor Kim. Her lungs tightened, felt too small for the air she tried to breathe. She tried not to snarl when she said, “I don’t play games.”

The Yithian female approached and toyed with a strand of Alex’s hair. “We can make this as pleasant or unpleasant as you wish. We cater to every known taste and can accommodate quite a few more.”

After that, Alex kept her mouth shut.

She was shown where she’d stay, the lavatories, the gymnasium, the pool. She wanted to scream. What else had she expected, though, when she’d spent the last four years selling slaves to places like this one? She’d kept telling herself how these escorts would have the good life. Now, when she viewed things from the other side of the fence, she suddenly supposed it would be all bad?

True, some of the others she’d met didn’t seem fond of the place or the silver band around their necks, but others looked quite satisfied with their lives. Just when she thought life was black and white with a very thin gray strip in between, things became complicated. Lots more gray than she ever realized. Too much.

“You are to wait in your room until someone fetches you. After your health check, you will be given new clothes and a chance to bathe. Then I will speak with you at that time to discuss your involvement in the games. Meanwhile, you may visit any place you wish. If you try to leave this building, you will be brought to a much less pleasant place than this.”

Alex snorted. “You Yithians have a way with words. So you mean, if I try to escape, you’ll slam me in your brig and beat the shit out of me.”

The Yithian smiled. “I will enjoy our association.”

When she was finally allowed some privacy, Alex sat on the bed and rested her head on her knees. Around her, the room felt as though it was closing in on her, suffocating her. She punched the mattress.

Captain Steel on a brothel-ship, but not as a patron, as an escort. A slave.

“Yeah, I’ll call them that from now on. ‘Slaves.’”

* * * * *

Sekmeth watched as the shadow of a very well-endowed female Mers squatted right on top of a thick rod fastened to an ornate table. It disappeared deeply inside her. The “dancing shadows” as these shows were called on *Gorgosh* had always pleased him. A thin screen of polymer membrane glowed yellow from the bright light behind it, while the dancer performed her, his—or their—routine. He enjoyed the element of mystery, of subtle detail only keen eyes could detect. There was always something

special for those who knew where to look. This Mers female, for example, wore anklets, which rolled up and down her thick legs as she performed her dance. He watched for a while longer then walked by the club's façade. There was something important to be done. Excitement made him lengthen his pace.

People seemed to melt to the side as he cut a swath in the crowd, marching toward his destination with apparent resolve. He had hunted well, and the symbol would crown the day with the usual ecstasy. When he rounded the corner of a marble and steel court, the small, silver sign he knew well shone as a beacon.

Sekmeth removed his gloves. Pushing the door, he stepped into the tattoo artist's workshop. Not many could afford her, and those who did would not come back repeatedly. But he was a Hunter. Her fees were not above his credit status nor her skill matched anywhere else in the system. A hunt's symbol was a personal, highly stimulating act, one he wouldn't trust with anyone else.

"It has not been long since I marked your skin," Jall said from behind the copper-studded draperies shielding her work area.

Sekmeth smiled in spite of himself as she parted the curtain and poked her head out. In typical Naray fashion, she wore very little, her scales as rows of tiny sapphires. Milky eyes, though blind to the world, shone with intelligence and not a little cunning. She beckoned him inside.

"Please sit," she said, her forked tongue stretching the sibilants.

Sekmeth lowered himself onto one of the sleek metal chairs and crossed his legs. "I have a special request, Jall."

One of the female's hairless ridges arched above a white eye. She cocked her head.

"The hunt yielded four preys, but I wish for one to have her own symbol. A special one. Here," he indicated his chest, knowing Jall would, somehow, sense where he pointed.

"She is prized, this one, yes?"

Sekmeth nodded.

A smile stretched Jall's taut face. "It will be my honor to mark your skin for one so esteemed."

He wasn't sure if she referred to him or to the human female for whom the symbol was meant.

From behind the curtain, a pair of Naray females, both in their middle cycle, swayed in. One bore a tray meant for Jall, while the other brought what implements they would need to make his visit enjoyable. They removed his clothes while Jall prepared her tools, the clicking of her nails against the metal a soothing music to Sekmeth. Escorted by the Narays, he made his way to the chaise where he would spend the next few hours. About four foot high, the supple polymer membrane adapted to his frame as he lay on it. Already his member stood erect. Sekmeth licked his lips.

Jall dipped the steel-tipped pen into the ink, producing a musical little chink as she tapped the excess off. Simultaneously, the other two Narays positioned themselves on either side of his thighs. With hands both dexterous and firm, one grabbed his member while the other cupped his testicles. When Jall pierced his skin for the first time, both of her attendants squeezed what portion of him they had in hand. The mixture of pleasure and pain made him hiss a breath.

Grinning, Jall murmured something in her tongue, which Sekmeth couldn't understand. Her attendants nodded, and he was left to wonder what had been said. When one of the assistants reached into the tray and produced what resembled a length of chain, Sekmeth found his mounting desire hard to control.

Each one of the links was in fact a separate ring held to the next by magnets. Several magnetized rings were slid to the base of his shaft. Sekmeth closed his eyes and let them work their magic. Soon, Jall's precise stabs had dulled from acute burning to a diffused throb, which radiated from his shoulder down his whole arm while the pair's ministrations awakened parts of him hard to control. Mental images involving himself and the two seductresses danced in his mind. Knowing he, like some so-gifted Yithians, could convey images into others' minds, Sekmeth made sure his arousal was shared by the two. He was rewarded with renewed vigor.

In his mind, he rose from the chaise and bore down on one of the Narays, raking his teeth along the resilient scales on her neck. Turning around, she offered her barely covered behind with all the nimbleness Narays were known for. Her spine curved into a tight C, which accentuated the bristled quality of her scaled skin. Sekmeth gripped her by the hips and rubbed his member along her entry. Without further ado, he drove in. Heat seared his flesh, made him moan.

Jall jabbed particularly hard then, producing exquisite pain, which contrasted with the Naray's delicious admittance. While he thrust his full length into the deep Naray, her companion began to flick her forked tongue along his spine, then down his thighs and up the other female's belly. They kissed, both dark tongues entwined as dueling snakes. Reaching out, the one receiving his ardor retrieved another tool from the tray. Shiny, opalescent, it looked too thick to be used on any body orifice but a Naray's. As he continued pumping into the increasingly wetter female, her counterpart put a foot on the chaise, biting her purple lips when the shiny rod was rubbed along her own entry. Then it went inside.

Pure ecstasy swelled his muscles, filled his senses. Matching him thrust for thrust, the Naray holding the tool undulated under his assault, moaned and pumped her arm to pleasure her companion.

But abruptly, the Narays in his mind began to change. The one receiving the other's attention faded, until she disappeared completely. Sekmeth slowed his enthusiastic drive when the other female began to dissipate as well. Mentally, such changes were normal, even for a Yithian. But they usually occurred when he wanted it, not like this, as if he was a mere spectator inside his own mind. The Naray's skin lost its scaly quality and was replaced with smooth ivory. Her red hair darkened, lengthened, became curly.

With his member still inside her increasingly tight sheath, he stared back at a human female, one he knew too well. Without his meaning to, his seed surged out of him.

“Alexandra Novona.”

Sekmeth heard his voice, knew he had spoken outside his mind.

After opening his eyes, his embarrassment was deepened by the fact all three Narays grinned, the two assistants seemingly nonplussed at his indiscretion. He looked down at himself to inspect the tattoos and nodded. The first one wrapped his left shoulder, three distinct patterns interwoven into a curved seashell pattern. The other, the special one, was directly over his heart and represented a black flower in full bloom. Perfect. No one could surpass Jall’s skill and perceptiveness.

While her attendants cleaned him of his seed, Jall placed the pen back in the tray. “She *is* special,” she commented, dabbing his pectoral with a cloth.

Skill and perceptiveness.

* * * * *

Music thundered louder than a vengeful storm when Sekmeth stepped into Drokesh’s exclusive club and scanned the place. The incident at Jall’s had left him tight and cross. The human was intruding into his mind, breaking down barriers he’d worked a lifetime to build and years to master. Hunters were never caught unawares, especially in their own minds.

The tattoo over his pectoral itched. He was no longer sure it’d been such a good idea to come here. And he had work to do, the little ship to take care of. Perhaps he should auction it off. Yet the thought of getting rid of it didn’t please him. Keeping it would probably be the best choice since he suspected the *Femme Metal* was worth more than it looked. And it did remind him of her. Sekmeth shook his head in frustration.

Several species rubbed shoulders here—when they had them. He noticed only a handful of humans, mostly males. The beige and brown skin tones looked drab compared to the rest, but for their lack of luster, humans moved with grace and agility. Plus, they had hair. He’d always been fond of species with hair.

Shiny bodies, some sporting jeweled scales, others mottled skin or even the odd feather, pressed to find a spot on the dance floor. Around it, a high balustrade afforded a stunning view through the giant glass panels of the floating city sprawled below.

In every corner of the bar, a dancer perched on a thick silver disc performed for the crowd’s delight. As he entered the mass of bodies, one of these dancers spotted him and beckoned. He shook his head but smiled when she let her prehensile tail graze another Yithian on the shoulder. This one took the invitation and climbed on the disc with the dancer. Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed them both together, with the Yithian enthusiastically grabbing at her many breasts. They were mating in a matter of moments.

Someone brushed against him. He turned to find a female Naray, shiny scales painted gold and blue, staring up at him. Her slanted eyes closed rhythmically. He'd always found this species charming, in every sense of the word. Yet his encounter of the afternoon had made him acutely aware that for all their qualities, Naray females weren't as enticing as humans. He'd demonstrated his penchant explosively enough.

She slipped her limber arm under his. "Drokesh requests you join him."

His skin felt hot through the clothes, and he'd much rather sit in a corner and watch people than play at being nice. He was a Hunter. He should be hunting.

"Of course, lead the way," he replied as he enfolded her hand with his own.

She smelled nice. Some kind of flowery scent he could detect even here. It wasn't as nice as —

He'd been about to think of her again. That human female with the scar. Alexandra Novona. Sekmeth shook his head and focused on not stepping on anyone. He climbed the steps behind his companion, admiring the way multicolored lights hit her red hair and the ridge along her back. What little she wore hung perfectly over her toned body.

In a corner occupying practically one whole side of the club, throned Drokesh's personal table and his entourage. The Yithian sat with two females on either side of him, one of which Sekmeth recognized. He tensed. The Naray at his arm looked up questioningly when he squeezed her hand too hard.

"My apologies," he muttered without taking his eyes off the woman-child on Drokesh's left. She wore garments fit for someone three times her age and half her size. Ribbons, mostly of shiny blue gauze, wrapped her tiny torso and shoulders. Her plaited hair matched in color. She stared hard at him as he approached the table. The inhibitor gleamed like a snake.

"A fine evening, Hunter. Sit down. Enjoy yourself, you look so glum."

Sekmeth nodded to the human then pulled a chair for his companion. She slid in it with her species' typical grace. He sat on one opposite Drokesh.

The owner leaned back in his seat and wrapped his tattooed arms affectionately around each female sitting beside him. While one looked about to swoon with delight, the other just glowered. Though he displayed no aggression toward the woman-child, Drokesh had the reputation of being demanding of his companions. Of any genders, from any world.

Sekmeth let his gaze scan the club again, trying to avoid looking at the woman-child. The couple on the disc were now a threesome with another female, this one a Yithian, enthusiastically lifting her shirt so the other two could get access to her breasts. She arched back when they both began to suck on her nipples.

A pair of thick glass cylinders landed beside Sekmeth's hand. He slid one to his companion who smiled graciously and flicked her forked tongue at it. Holding the glass tighter than necessary, Sekmeth brought it to his lips while he stared at Drokesh.

"Have you placed your bets yet?"

Sekmeth shrugged. "On what?"

Drokesh laughed jovially. "The games, Hunter, the games. Your latest acquisition will compete. The one with the delightful temper. She tried to escape not even halfway across Lajinia's hall."

Sekmeth grinned noncommittally while he tried to swallow his drink. "Not the horrid spectacle of a few years back, I hope."

Drokesh shook his head. A wave of relief flooded through Sekmeth. He still remembered the last game he'd attended and didn't wish to repeat the experience. Some things weren't meant for entertainment.

As he toyed with the human female's hair, Drokesh grinned happily. "These new games will be much more entertaining, much more profitable."

"Even more so for you, I wager."

Drokesh raised his glass in mocking salute. "Of course. These games, Hunter, will probably please you. I came up with it a few months ago, while...but never mind. The games are such—a slave is offered as combatant, the highest bidder wins the chance to enter the dome with him or her. Then they must fight to first blood. Nothing serious, of course."

"Of course," Sekmeth echoed, his heart sinking by the second. He found it hard to ignore the woman-child's accusing stare.

"If the slave wins, he or she returns to me. If he or she loses, the opponent wins the slave. In case of a tie, the second-highest bidder decides. What do you think?"

If ever Sekmeth sensed a loaded question, it had to be this one. "What if the slave refuses to fight?"

"That, my dear Hunter, will not happen."

Sekmeth glanced at the woman-child. She looked ready to sink her teeth into Drokesh. Or ready to cry, whichever would come first remained to be seen. A sigh struggled inside his chest, but he could not afford to let it out. Some things had to remain hidden, guarded.

A loud cheer came from the corner where the threesome had succeeded in fitting another member into their party. Sekmeth wasn't too sure who was doing what to whom. The crowd seemed to enjoy it. He turned his gaze back to his table. "How many have placed bets on the human female?"

Drokesh could not be fooled. He left the little human aside and leaned forward over the table. A wide grin pulled his lips tight. "You mean to fight her. I should have bet on *that* instead. Ha!"

Beside him, Sekmeth's companion excused herself. He barely registered her leaving. Excitement burned through his veins. His last encounter with Alexandra Novona had left an ashy taste in his mouth. He'd been forced to punish her, yet ended up punishing himself instead. No doubt she'd want to skin him for what he had done. The

possibilities excited him. Sekmeth's grin matched the former Hunter's, only for different reasons.

Drokesh shooed him away. "Go. Hurry. Place your bet. I am delighted to report the waiting list to face her is growing by the minute. I put pictures beside each of the combatant's name. Hence, the wait." He chuckled and resumed toying with the human's hair.

Sekmeth swore she would fly into a rage. As surreptitiously as he could, he shook his head at her. If she noticed, she didn't let it show. The scowl could surely kill someone fainter of heart.

Adrenaline pumping his muscles, Sekmeth left the club and hurried to the games house so he could place his bet. His hands already tingled in anticipation. He was a Hunter. The whole idea of the hunt wasn't the outcome, which unfailingly meant victory. No, the core objective of hunting a prey resided in the changes it triggered, the journey it represented. The tattoos on his skin represented such passages, not merely a symbol of the prey. And the one presently burning his chest represented a lifetime of victories. It also meant much more. He'd come to the realization after his mental fantasies had turned without his meaning to. The human had found a way in.

For the first time in Sekmeth's life, catching a prey wasn't enough. He had to make her his. Alexandra Novona might not have meant for it, but she'd changed him to the core of his Hunter's being. He'd never cared much what happened to his preys once he caught them and relinquished them to his customers. This time, he did. Not only this, he would toil to earn her affection, her respect, even if it meant undoing some things he'd done.

Chapter Ten

“Yeah, right. Like I’m going to wear *that*.” Alex dropped the skimpy outfit and crossed her arms.

Lajinia smiled benevolently, which only fueled Alex’s fire. “Every combatant does. So will you.”

“It’s not even clothes. It’s a headband.”

“Granted, it will not keep you warm,” the Yithian female said, picking up the garment and unfolding it. In her large hands, it looked even tinier. “But it will take the bets through the dome.”

“What if I won’t fight?”

Lajinia slowly shook her head. “Then someone will take your place. The little one, perhaps? She would surely be highly entertaining.”

Aggression rose to dangerous levels and Alex had to take a few breaths. No use getting jolted before even stepping in the damned place. “Leave her out of this.”

“I thought so.” Lajinia set the combatant uniform on Alex’s bed. “For what it is worth, I enjoy your company very much and would hate to see something happen to you. I will fetch you when it is time. Rest.”

“Rest’,” Alex parroted when the Yithian had closed – and locked – the door. What? They didn’t trust her? How crushing. She laughed a mirthless laugh.

The black garment resembled leather, only thicker and more pliable. Some sort of synthetic compound. She took her clothes off and slipped the thing on. A sleeveless top zipped under an arm barely covered the essentials while its matching bottom could have been called underwear. Straps were supposed to go somewhere over her legs but she couldn’t figure them out and left them there. Bracers of the same thick, rubbery fabric slipped on her arms without effort. Those, she could see a use for. At least she’d have something to block the blows with. She didn’t even know what kind of weapon she was supposed to use. A *lisk*, she’d been told. Some Yithian blade thing. She hoped it wasn’t proportional to their stature. She’d have a grand time trying to wield a ten-foot spear. Alex muttered as she pulled the thick black boots up to her knees. These could easily pass as weapons, come to think of it. Buckles the size of blades stuck out at the ankles.

“Here’s hoping for a nice ten-inch knife,” she muttered as she sat on the bed and waited.

An army of attendants had spent the day on her. Not that she minded the treatment. Her black hair had been pulled into a tight ponytail, her nails polished and lacquered blood red. She’d been assured the inhibitor would come off as soon as she

entered the dome. She sure as hell hoped so. The thing could kill her as surely as a Yithian shell.

Alex spent almost two hours waiting for Lajinia. How long had she been supposed to take to get ready? All a girl needed was a bit of time to manage the hair and slip into some clothes. Jesus.

Not soon enough, the door clicked and Lajinia entered. She too, wore special garments accentuating her height and regal mien. She smiled approvingly and motioned to a pair of guards behind. They fell into step behind Alex, but not before she spotted the hungry looks in their eyes. The Yithian Hunter had been right – males of his species had something with scarred women.

Thinking of him caused a stitch of pain in her chest. The memory of his mouth over her face, his hands in her hair. Alex swallowed hard. He'd taken her almost to the point of no return but left her dangling there, unfulfilled, needy. *Used me like a goddamn dishrag*. The hurt was too acute to measure, too deep to fathom. She'd never been treated this way. Alien scum.

Lajinia led them through countless doors and porticos, up some stairs then out into *Gorgosh* proper. There, a wide and shiny hovercraft waited for them. People stared, some even cheered. Alex gritted her teeth and kept her gaze locked to the ground.

The craft lifted off and sped past buildings the likes of which she'd never seen. Too tall to see the end, too narrow to be real, they glittered like dark jewels. Lights in all colors flashed in a brilliant dance outside the craft's tinted windows. Alex tried not to stare but found it hard. The Hunter's customer had credits. He had a *lot* of credits. Even human-owned brothel-ships weren't this big, this populated, this magnificent. The sheer size of the place would give anyone a complex.

Lajinia said something to the craft's computer and the thing slowed to a crawl by some monstrous affair that appeared to be a giant glass dome, pinkish, with antennas sticking out at odd angles. A crowd already massed by the doors. The craft pulled alongside the barrier keeping the crowd in herds and floated down to the ground.

"They are all here to see you, Alexandra Novona. Do not disappoint them."

Alex crossed her arms over her chest. She painted on an air of profound ennui. "Just give me someone to purge my demons on."

A grin revealed Lajinia's sharp teeth. She stepped off the craft to thunderous applause, which doubled when Alex followed. Her small group entered the dome amid a roar of voices and music. Inside, the place felt relatively calm. They entered through a door bearing warnings in so many languages Alex didn't have time to wonder what it was they weren't supposed to be doing. A wide glass and metal corridor led to a lounge where food and refreshments waited. Alex felt like a doll – a high-priced doll. It left a bad taste in her mouth, made her cranky.

Display units lined one wall, in front of which were chrome chairs too high to be for anyone but Yithians. Lajinia pulled a small portable comms unit out of her bustier and flicked it on. "She is here."

Not even a minute later, the door opened and a very slim Yithian stepped in. Dressed all in black, he exuded confidence and power. Rings pierced his nose, his ears, even his lips. When he grinned to Alex, she was reminded of a pale blue shark with clothes.

"You were right, dear friend, she is perfect." He approached, much too close for Alex's comfort, and smelled her. "Delectable."

Before Alex could think of anything other than "piss off", he leaned in and kissed her. "For luck," he said, straightening. He must have thought her murderous scowl very amusing for he stepped back and cocked his head. "And a temper, too. My dear, you will be my brightest jewel. Take that off."

One of the guards clicked the inhibitor and it fell in his hand. He retreated faster than necessary, which made the pierced Yithian grin wider. "You taught them well, human. Perhaps I should choose another to take your place. Why risk such a gem?"

Alex's heart skipped a beat. Kim's spiky hair and large eyes flashed across her mind. She wouldn't last a minute in a place such as this.

"Or I could maim your opponent, protect my investment. Mmm."

With one last hungry look for her, he left. Lajinia dusted some imaginary lint from Alex's arm. "Drokesh does not give praise lightly or freely."

Great. He could wait in line. Alex nodded and balled both fists. With the thing off, she could entertain all the murderous thoughts she wanted. "How long?"

"Half a standard hour. Drokesh must stoke the crowd before you can be let in." As if struggling against herself, Lajinia leaned closer. "The fight is to first blood. Strike hard and fast. If you lose, your opponent will acquire you."

Things are just getting better and better. Alex nodded.

A roar of cheer rose somewhere over her head. Thunderous applause, some clear voice making an announcement then deafening silence. Alex sat up straighter. The door to the lounge opened and two guards stepped in. Both wore stunners in plain view on their belts.

"You enter first, then your opponent."

She adjusted the thick rubber-like bustier, ignoring the Yithians' interested expressions, slapped her cheeks then blew air through pursed lips. She'd either go there and get splattered all over the place or she'd go there and just lose. With some luck, she'd do it gracefully.

The corridor through which they strode started out wide and high, and brightly lit but grew darker as she progressed. The guards walked behind her, which didn't please her much since she could well guess what they were looking at. *Feast your eyes, guys, 'cause you won't get to touch.*

Sweat slicked her hands. Could be worse—she could be an escort and be having to fight off some lustful patron and getting zapped in the process. Fighting it out in the

open in some arranged fight afforded at least some degree of dignity. Save for the outfit.

Sound grew in intensity until she could make out music and voices, both raised to a deafening pitch. Light filtered in through a crack at the end of the tunnel. One of the guards passed her and opened the doors. Expectant silence settled over the crowd. She emerged in bright blue light, which made the sweat over her skin look covered with tiny blue crystals. She thought she'd emerged on ground level, with the crowd above and around. Instead, she realized the dome was more a giant sphere split in halves—one underground, the other reaching to the sky.

A twenty-foot wide strip of transparent material spanned the edge of the spherical building's lower half. Like a bridge made of thermoplastic. She stood at one end of it, while the other hid in shadows. So she'd have to fight on this thing? Great.

The bowl was, what, three hundred feet wide and fifty deep? The crowd sat along the edge, where the dome widened, and about a quarter of the way up. At the bottom of the bowl, water up to about a third of the way glimmered ominously. She half-expected to see dorsal fins any moment. What kind of silly arena was this?

A spotlight zeroed in on her. "Enter the dome," one of the guards murmured behind her.

Alex took a step forward and into the bright spotlight. A rumble of applause and cheers erupted.

A loud booming voice made a rousing announcement in Yithian. All she understood was "human", "female" and "weapon".

She snorted. "Yeah, that, I already got."

The box, no doubt where Drokesh and his entourage sat to enjoy the show, glowed like a green fungus across from her and higher than the rest of the bleachers. The blue light made everything else look incandescent, like opals.

Behind her, the guards closed the doors. Her belly quivered with nervousness. As she stared at the doors opposite hers, she began to shake. Good god, she'd never been so damn jumpy. The thousands of faces melded into blurs of colors and texture. Alex fought to regain control of her senses. Wouldn't it be grand to faint right on the spot? *Get a grip, girl.*

Another announcement, this one spoken with much flourish and long pauses. What the hell was going on? Silence settled around the place. She looked around and noticed how everyone stared at the other door. A bright beam of light hit it. The door opened.

Alex squinted but saw no one standing there. Whoever had won the bid wasn't there to do the fighting. As she was about to cross her arms over her chest, movement from within the darkened doorway caught her attention. Her opponent was tall, that's all she could see at the moment.

Where the hell was her weapon? Nothing broke the shiny thermoplastic surface. She looked around, hoping to see where they could be keeping the weapons. Nothing.

The crowd exploded in cheers when a tall Yithian male stepped fully into the light across the wide bowl. Alex saw the tattoos from where she stood. Both arms full of black ink work, right up to his shoulders and pectorals. She balled fists at her side. The back of her neck tingled as though someone had blown on it. Alex shook her head to clear it.

Her opponent wore a similar outfit, black and rubber-like, which consisted of a bottom only barely covering the essentials and high boots. His came up over his knees to hug his wiry thighs. His lean and strong body gleamed under the blue light. Her heart thudded madly against her chest. God, he was some beautiful! And treacherous. And a liar. A thief. Vermin.

Her opponent widened his stance and let his hands hang loosely at his sides. He looked ready to pounce. She didn't know what was going on with the maître d' since he kept going on and on in Yithian, but it looked as though the fight would start any second.

Where were the goddamn weapons!

Alex planted her feet wider apart and leaned forward. Her hands curled like talons as she stared at her opponent some three hundred feet away. She'd prayed for a chance to wring his neck and now she had her wish. She should go to church more often.

The humiliation of succumbing to his charms, only to have it rubbed in her face. To be discarded like an old boot. To be treated like a whore. Anger boiled in her veins, tightened her chest. Tunnel vision, terrible clarity. And all she could see was him.

"Sekmeth Meroh, I'm going to make you pay."

Chapter Eleven

A horn sounded somewhere overhead. Alex meant to look up but saw Sekmeth charge across the span. She followed suit, aiming directly at him. As they devoured the distance between them, she spotted two gleaming crescents right in the middle of the span. The weapons!

The Yithian had seen them, too. With his longer legs, he reached them first and kicked them off the bridge. The two half discs tumbled and disappeared into the water. The crowd cheered loudly. Alex cursed. First blood without a weapon would mean this nastiness might drag for a bit.

He veered sharply to the side and acted as though he meant to circle her and attack from behind. She'd seen this move before during the "border skirmish" and expected it. Instead of trying to follow his rotation, she spun the other way around and was there first. A well-placed kick to the thigh made him wince and leap back. A rising round of applause greeted the first attack of the night.

She barely had time to dive aside when he countered with a kick of his own. His big boot came straight for her middle. She sidestepped and hand-chopped him behind the back when he flew past. If she hurt him, he didn't let it show. How could he be so goddamn quick? Spinning faster than she would have thought possible for anyone but an eel, he struck. Alex yelped when his knuckles rammed into her shoulder. Numbness deadened her muscles. Another cheer – this one much louder. So the crowd was biased. Typical.

Alex spat at him but missed. He took a few steps back and feigned to the right. What did he take her for? She didn't fall for it. He pretended to pounce. Alex replied in kind. Circling him wearily, crab-walking, she changed her guard and put her other foot forward. The switch seemed to please him for he grinned that toothy grin she liked to hate. With a nod, he switched as well.

"I don't care if you win, Yithian, I intend to get a few good ones in."

A sparkle of the predatory expression she found so irresistible flashed in his eyes. Gone were the grayish pearls. His eyes now resembled two black slits. He charged at her – straight in the middle.

Alex didn't have time to dodge or parry and only raised her knee so he wouldn't completely bowl her over. She stumbled back from the force of his attack. Amid thunderous cheers, they tumbled to the thermoplastic and rolled once.

"You cost me a fortune, Alexandra Novona," he said. At least he panted some.

Alex drove her elbow into his throat and tore her legs from under him. His grunt of pain felt highly satisfying. She stood before he had turned around. This sort of

opportunity wouldn't present itself many times, so Alex took it. She spun and delivered a bone-crushing kick. He took it right in the belly. A great hump of air rushed out of him. He floundered to his feet then back a few steps. He had that infuriating sneer of his plastered on his face. His hair hung around his face and he blew it back.

Before Alex could make more with the opportunity, he rushed forward like a bull and slammed into her. Backpedaling several steps, Alex clutched his shoulders and neck to keep from falling on her ass. Then her feet encountered no resistance. Just air under her.

She yelped as wind rushed by her head. They'd fallen off the bridge. Holy hell!

Sekmeth wrapped his arms around her and they plummeted into the frigid water. Her nose filled with it, as did her mouth. She pushed him off her and struggled for the surface. Her head broke out amid a round of cheering so loud her ears buzzed painfully. Where was the Yithian? Sputtering, she swam a few feet away and watched for him. As much as she hated herself for it, she hoped he'd make it back up. He surfaced not long after, his hair plastered to his skull, water beading as crystals on his skin.

Sounds alerted her someone approached from behind. She turned to see a small powered vessel cleave the water. A lone Yithian piloted it. He pulled alongside her, cut the motor and hoisted her onboard. He did the same for the Hunter. Somehow, spitting water through his mouth and nose really did a number to his Hunter macho image. Alex found she had to fight the urge to laugh at his discomfited expression.

"Don't like water, big guy?"

Sekmeth turned away and angrily shook his hair. Their pilot approached the edge of the bowl where a small steel ladder popped out of the surface and indicated she should go first. Alex did, climbing as fast as she could. Fatigue was starting to settle in. Chancing a quick peek under her, Alex discovered Sekmeth looked fresh as a rose, despite the pummeling, the plunge and the wounded ego. She cringed and clambered back onto the bridge. The crowd had begun to clap rhythmically.

After she jogged halfway down the bridge, she turned to follow his progress. She was right—the guy wasn't tired at all. He stood on the platform and shook water off his arms, all the while looking as if he'd just woken from a nap. He caught her studying him and grinned. To add to the embarrassment, he pointed to his pectoral, to the spot he had said belonged to her.

That smug jerk! How dare he?

A veil of red clouded Alex's vision. With a yell surprising even to herself, she crossed the distance and pounded on him with a barrage of kicks and punches and hand chops. He countered each one but had to step back from the sheer force of her assault. He didn't look as smug as usual. If she survived, she'd have a drink to that!

"You stole my ship." Kick to the thigh.

“You kidnapped my girls.” Punch to the belly. He bent in half but pushed her away before she could do more damage. She meant for a devastating hook to his precious mouth but never made it near.

Sekmeth caught it mid-flight and held in there by sheer brute strength.

Alex tried to pull her hand away but only brought him along with it.

He shook his head. “You are only making this difficult for yourself.”

She kicked him in the shin. His face didn’t even register the hit.

Her strength quickly drained away, she attempted to pull her fist out of his palm. Out of desperation, she tried to knee him in the groin. He was much too tall. Her kneecap didn’t connect with anything more valuable than the inside of his thigh. Alex struggled against the arm he wrapped behind her back. Both their stomachs were pressed tightly together, a situation she knew too well. Tears stung her eyes. Options rapidly dwindled with her stamina.

Why couldn’t she feed off the hatred, use it as energy to beat the shit out of him? He richly deserved it. She thrashed against him. Her waterlogged boots felt about fifty pounds each, her whole body radiated with hurt, her heart squeezed painfully at the forced contact and the memories associated with it.

Sekmeth leaned in close and murmured something in her ear. Amid the deafening noise in the dome, she couldn’t hear him. “What?” she yelled.

“First blood,” she read on his lips when he repeated.

Shit.

His whole expression changed from battle lust to sadness. Alex could only stare in mute horror when he bared his teeth and sank them into her bare shoulder. She howled in pain—the crowd howled in glee.

Sekmeth released her right away. Alex sank to her knees when she saw blood dribbling from the bite. It wasn’t a sucking stomach wound or anything. She’d faced much worse. Her face had been cleaved in half once. But the way it had happened utterly floored her. He’d bitten her. First blood.

The announcer practically shouted in the mike. His excited voice reverberated around the structure, amplified too many times for Alex’s tastes. She wanted to cram her fingers in her ears, cry, dive back into the water and never come back up.

“That was low,” she snarled.

The Hunter approached, looking as though he meant to help her up to her feet, but she scrambled away and pointed an accusing finger at him. “Sneaky bastard you are. Don’t touch me.”

“I had to, Alexandra Novona. Otherwise, it would have gone on too long and we would have injured one another. This way is better.”

“Yeah, sure, you get yourself a nice human whore to play with. Come near me and I’ll show you how grateful I am.”

Sekmeth straightened, looking hurt by the force of her accusation. "You do not know everything."

"What's there to know?" she demanded loudly. "You're alien scum, the worse kind. I hate your guts!"

Despite her raging humor, she spotted his ring glowing with a fierce golden light. He looked down at it, seemed surprised to see it that way then gritted his teeth. The glow dimmed.

Already, guards marched toward them. Alex spotted an inhibitor in one's hand. She cursed and spat at Sekmeth. His jaw muscles twitched as he looked away.

The guard with the inhibitor neared Alex but the Hunter interposed himself and took the silver band. He kept it in one fist, saluted the VIP box and beckoned to Alex.

With no better option in front of her, she followed.

Under the noise of the crowd going on madly behind them, they entered "his" side of the dome and strode down a tunnel similar to the one she'd used to enter. There, Sekmeth spoke in curt tones to the guards who nodded and left.

"Come," he said, opening the door and waiting for her to enter first.

Alex noticed his lounge hugely surpassed hers in space and luxury. Water still dripped from both of them and she trailed wet footprints on the purple carpet. She turned just as the Yithian closed and locked the door.

"What's going on?" she asked, trying to keep the fear out of her voice. She couldn't even beat off a fly right now, let alone this muscled specimen. Her thigh muscles twitched with cramps and spasms, her belly shook at its core from cold, pain and adrenaline. She felt too choked to even look at him. Lying, slippery piece of shit!

Sekmeth leaned back against the door and ran a hand in his disheveled hair. "We need to talk."

She made a rude gesture with her shaking hand. A long shiver raced up her entire body. Nothing but walls, carpet and some chrome chairs. Only one other door in the room and if it was anything like it had been on her side, it led to a lavatory. When she looked down at it, she decided the bite mark wasn't as bad as she'd initially thought. It'd stopped bleeding. Still, he'd *bitten* her just so he could win. How sick was that?

A look of deep vexation crossed his angular face. He peeled his frame off the door and marched toward her. "There was no other way."

Like it would make any difference. Alex crossed her arms and stalked to the lavatory door. He preceded her there, blocking her way. Alex only noticed then the fresh ink work on his shoulder and pectoral, with the skin around it swollen and darker. He saw her looking at it.

"This one is for your companions," he said, pointing to his shoulder.

She meant to punch him. Kick him a good one in the balls. But that kind of energy she didn't have. So she just stared stunners at him.

"And this one," he went on, his voice becoming deeper, gentler, "is for you."

It wasn't lost on her he was pointing to his heart. The tattoo resembled a messed-up black orchid with thorns coiled around its stem and made the whole thing look both fierce and soft. She lowered her gaze. *Don't let it get to you. It's nothing but a trophy. A trophy for your head.*

"Don't I feel special."

"You are." He looked down at his ring, sighed. "This should be proof enough."

The strange pearl glowed as if a firefly was trapped in it. She thought she knew what it meant, but didn't want to think about it. Did she care his stupid mood ring lit up? She didn't care. Not one bit.

"Move over, Sekmeth, or I swear on my life, I'll—"

He kissed her on the mouth. A jolt of electricity—nothing like what the inhibitor dispensed—shot through her. She staggered back a step and slapped him. Hard. Wet-on-wet skin clacked noisily. The blow must have caught him by surprise for he cringed and rubbed his cheek.

Alex put a shaking hand in front of her. "Oh, no, you're not doing that to me, not again."

"I treated you shamefully. That was a mistake. I never repeat a mistake."

"Not good enough. Stay away," Alex snapped.

He nodded.

For the life of her, she could swear he looked serious, contrite even. What was up with that? He'd try to manipulate her again, use her then make fun when he was done. Well, this girl wasn't going to take such crap a second time. No matter he stood in front of her, dripping wet in his barely there rubber underwear, his eyes so intense as to set her skin on fire. No matter, either, if he was currently drawing near and raising a hand to touch her face. A sweet tingle prickled the nape of her neck. It didn't matter one bit. She could kick his ass anytime she wanted. She could take a step back, completely ignore the beautiful alien and not even feel ragged with lust. Alexandra Novona was in complete control of herself. Like Kim would say—"totally".

Sekmeth bent slowly until his mouth hovered an inch above hers. A drop of water hung on his chin, a blue diamond. Lips like shiny silk ribbons parted. "Just tell me to stop when my debt to you is repaid."

Alex swallowed hard. "That's one hell of a big debt you owe me, Yithian."

The tips of his teeth showed when he smiled. A real smile, nothing predatory about it. "I know."

His fingers brushed against her cheek, his thumb tracing the scar there. He closed his eyes and pressed his mouth against hers. Exhilaration and alarm and passion swelled over her in a tidal wave of emotions she didn't know she'd feel for anyone, *could* feel for anyone. A deep sound rumbled in her chest, struggled to get free, to rise up her throat and make her a complete, lust-blinded idiot. What was wrong with her? He'd played her only a couple of days ago, for god's sake, had she already forgotten the

shame, the pain? Alex put her hands against the firm, smooth barrier of his chest and pushed him to arm's length.

Sekmeth pressed his hand over hers, squeezed it until she could feel the mad thumping of his heart against her palm. "My mouth can lie and cheat well, but not this."

Alex closed her eyes briefly to follow the rhythm. No one could fake this. The thing felt as if it would burst out of his chest. She met his gaze. "Suppose it's true. What do you want?"

"You."

Heat rose to her cheeks, made her want to scratch her head, rub her chin, anything but just stand there and stare. "Yeah—"

Sekmeth pushed against her arm until she bent her elbow and allowed him closer. His hands felt feverish as he ran them up her arms, shoulders and neck. Driving his thumbs under her jaw, he forced her head back. Alex let out a silent "O" when the tip of his tapered tongue glanced all the way up from the space between her collarbones to her throat and over her chin. He kissed her again, this time she could feel it, the heat, the urgency. He was shaking.

In Yithian, he said something in a loud, clear voice. The lights dimmed and the display units flickered on all at once, each showing a portion of the crowd or arena as more combatants dueled. The strangeness of it quickened Alex's heartbeat. So many faces looking yet seeing nothing—the music, the roar of voices.

He surrounded her with arms covered in goose bumps. His hands pressed the small of her back against him, arching her spine until their bodies clamped together from hips to chest. The force of his hunger drove deep in her belly. She feared for a moment his garment would burst. With his feet, he nudged hers apart until she stood braced. Alex stared into his darkening, narrowing eyes. It was there all right—quite different from the last time he'd held and kissed her. The fire.

Sekmeth abandoned her back to trail his hands down over her bottom where he cupped each cheek and clutched hard. As much as she wanted to, Alex didn't touch him. Let him do what he'd planned. Her hands ached for the touch of his skin, of his firm body, but she denied herself the pleasure, suspecting, *knowing* more would come if she just remained still and took it all in.

A low growl rumbled in Sekmeth's chest. His barrage of kisses left Alex breathless. When he parted his lips so his tongue could flick past, she rose on tiptoes to not miss a thing. His hands left her bottom and pressed on her shoulders until her heels touched ground again.

"My debt to repay," he murmured in her ear. He snapped his garment open and let it slip from his legs. The might of his desire swayed with each breath.

She sucked in air as his tongue struck out under her lobe to flick and torture it in various ways. The sharpness of his teeth raked along her neck. Abruptly, he deserted her neck to concentrate on the dawn of her breasts. His mouth felt hot and demanding.

Alex groaned. She wanted to tear her clothes off, rip them all off and throw them far. His too, but he'd robbed her of the fun.

As she reached up, he snatched her arm back down against her side and held it there, slightly behind and exposing her flank to his mouth. Sekmeth had to kneel to reach down that far. Rapid breaths rattled in his chest as he raked his teeth all over her side, enough to hurt, not enough to scare. Alex wanted to grip fistfuls of his silver hair and yank him to her. She fought the urge, bit her lips.

Her bustier snapped open, releasing her breasts, one of which Sekmeth quickly captured with his mouth. A tongue both quick and agile soon reduced her nipple to a throbbing garnet. Alex balled her fists. *Whoa. Definitely whoa.*

She yelped when he straightened and grabbed her in a bruising embrace that left her feet dangling inches off the floor. His breaths came short and quick. Sekmeth walked over to the display units and pressed Alex against one. Music blared inside the arena and reached the lounge—muffled and distorted but loud nonetheless. Light and static electricity prickled her back and hair. Cold glass and plastic screen pressed against her wet skin. Sekmeth ground himself against her and kept her feet wide enough so he could fit in the middle. His ring was blazing—enough to cast a golden glow on the rest of his hand.

Under the dim lights and reflections from the screens behind, he looked mottled gray, black and blue, his thick tattoos seeming to come to life in undulating patterns and swirls. His hair shone as pure liquid light. Alex succumbed to the yearning tormenting her hands and reached out to stroke his dripping locks. Pleasure ripples shot up her arms. Good god, she could be like this forever.

Sekmeth ripped the loose bustier from her and slapped her arms away. He soon had her bottom piece down around her ankles. She bent to unbuckle the boots.

“Keep them.” He forced her wrist outward and bit the tender inside.

The fire of his breath seared her belly as he knelt in front of her and trailed tongue-flicks down over her mons and below.

Alex took in a deep breath. “Oh.”

That tongue.

She meant to help, to force away any annoyance that would keep her from the full force of his tapered tongue. But Sekmeth seemed to manage quite well on his own, thank you very much. So she let him take her there, to the place, the state where everything and everyone could go to hell and Old Earth could bust in two, and she wouldn't care one bit. A sudden urge to hit something gripped her, and she bit her lip for fear of hurting him. The things he could do with that organ.

Then something so hot it almost burned touched her clit, rubbed it expertly. She glanced down to watch him put his middle finger in his mouth to wet it and rub her clit with his ring, which he'd twisted so it faced inside. In circular motions he rubbed, licked, rubbed some more, until she started shaking.

When he stood, she felt bereft and cheated without his tongue on her, his burning pearl on her. She glowered at the Yithian and was about to voice her frustration when he ground his pelvis against hers and lifted her off her feet with the sheer force of his being. His member rubbed in all the right places. Alex groaned and threw her arms around his shoulders. A violent shiver shook his lean frame.

Suddenly feverish and shuddering as though he was a man in the fight of his life, Sekmeth parted her legs wider with his knee and scooped her up with his member. As it slid in deep, the glossy rod infused a fire that spread to Alex's thighs and belly. Her feet left the floor as her wits left her skull.

She snarled something even she couldn't understand. Her vision blurred. Tattooed skin rippled in the most beautiful fashion on his chest and shoulders as he extended his legs and stood erect in every sense of the word. He planted his palms on either side of her face and stared hard.

Then he began to move inside her. Up. Higher. Until she had to stifle a gasp.

His stoic face registered none of the assault he put her body through. The rhythmic thump of his urgent thrusts shook and plastered her against the screens but she didn't care and, in fact, quite enjoyed the near-brutality. Their boots rubbed together in pleasant squeaks. Gravity kept her skewered to him while he crushed her with his chest. Yet he managed to keep staring at her, and she, back at him. That was until Alex felt the telltale tightening of her inner thighs. That place—he was taking her there hard and fast!

Alex couldn't suppress a moan, the long cry. Inside her, Sekmeth trembled and grew still. His breathing was so fast she feared for his health. Sweat slicked his lean body, made it appear as though his tattoos had melted to his skin, made clumps of his smooth hair. Thick strands of it spilled over his shoulders, down to his elbows.

He licked his lips. "Alexandra Novona."

So strange to have this alien say her name in that manner, like the sweetest nectar he'd ever tasted. Alex couldn't stop grinning. "Sekmeth Meroh."

He smiled one of his lopsided grins and nodded. "Thank you." His eyes slowly returned to the usual gray pearl. With a long sigh, he deposited her to the floor and pulled out.

Alex leaned back against the screens while the Yithian slumped on the floor, clearly exhausted. Though his member still flaunted its narrow head up high, Sekmeth brought his knees up so he could rest his elbows. "You humans. So much stamina in such tiny vessels."

Throbbing in more places than she could count, Alex plunked her behind on the carpeted floor and blew air through her teeth. She'd be sore in the morning. The thought made her smile.

"So, what's the deal now? You're my boss or what?"

Laughter made him look much younger, though she had no idea how old he was. Yithians always looked in their mid-thirties. "The transaction made me your master." He bared his predatory grin at her. "But in truth it made me poor."

The thought had crossed her mind that the Hunter had paid for her. "How much?"
"A fortune."

Alex turned to him, crossed her arms. "Come on, how much did you have to transfer?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand credits for the infinite honor of getting pummeled by you."

"But it cost you two hundred thousand to reel us four in," Alex said, unsure if she should feel honored, slighted or what. Such a strange situation. He'd been paid to hunt her, succeeded, then he himself transferred even more credits to beat her up so he could get her back.

He nodded. "Some things come before numbers."

Chapter Twelve

"You *are* stubborn."

"And that, too," Alex said, nodding emphatically. "Look, they're my girls, my responsibility. I'm the one who got them into this mess."

Sekmeth shook his head. "No. I did."

But he could be stubborn, too! Alex threw her hands in the air and stalked to the couch. Sitting on the armrest, she crossed her arms and looked out the window. Hovercrafts flew so close the thermoplastic shuddered. Sekmeth's posh home high above other *Gorgosh* buildings afforded a stunning view of the protective dome around the brothel-ship. Alex turned to watch the Yithian adjust the shirt around his long neck. His hair hung loosely today, which suited Alex just fine.

"You are not part of my plan," he said after a while. "And the *Femme Metal* is my ship now."

"Don't go there. It's my goddamn ship."

A long sigh swelled his chest. "Do you have another plan, one that does not put anyone in danger and preserves my name here?"

She didn't. But she'd walk to hell and back before she admitted it. "All we have to do is go there while he's having fun with someone else, I don't know. Anyway, we bust into his place, get Kim then come back here. No need to give the guy anything."

Sekmeth's face tightened, his hands curled into fists. "He will not 'have fun' with someone else, Alexandra Novona, and we cannot just 'bust in'. It has to be done correctly. I will go to Drokesh and ask the transaction be nullified. Alone. With you everything becomes complicated."

If she ever had her way with Drokesh, there'd be bits of him floating around the station. Alex stood and cocked one fist on her hip. "Why do you want to help anyway if it's so damn complicated? Why not just keep the ship and get off this rock?"

A long black coat covered Sekmeth right down to his big black boots. He rolled his shoulders and avoided looking at her. Embarrassment? Where did that come from?

"Look, Hunter, what's going on? Why are you trying to help? And don't give me that 'Drokesh tainted the hunt' crap. I don't buy it."

He ran both hands up his face. Alex had never seen him looking so miserable, as though he fought a losing battle against his better judgment. "The woman-child... Lajinia told me Drokesh intends to keep her as his first concubine. She is too little, in age and body. She would not survive."

A chill prickled the length of her arms. First concubine. She didn't know what it entailed, only that it left her mouth dry. Alex placed her hands on his cheeks, forcing him to look at her. "Survive what?"

"Children. She is one herself. Drokesh should know better." The last words were a snarl. He pulled his face away.

Kim a mother? To Yithian children? The size of them alone would kill the tiny girl. Anger bubbled up her throat, made her grit her teeth. "He's not going to get her pregnant, I can tell you that much. I'll cut his —"

"Alexandra Novona," Sekmeth said, putting a finger over her lips. "I will get the woman-child back, then the other two and we will all leave on my ship. Meanwhile, you must put this back on."

The inhibitor gleamed in his gloved hand. His ship.

"Like hell I will." Alex took a step back before he had any ideas.

"I deactivated it. But you need to wear it so no one bothers us when we get the others. I do not want my...transaction with Drokesh to be a public affair."

A Hunter buying back his preys couldn't have rated very high on the cool factor, especially when Yithians prided themselves on their warlike stance. She took the silvery band from him and checked it all over. True, the tiny knob under the closure had been filed off. She clicked it on her neck. "If you're not back before the end of the shift, I'm going there myself."

He grinned.

Alex watched him enter a hovercraft from the landing pad below his window. Wind buffeted his coat, an angel with silver hair and black wings. She had to trust the guy, though she wondered about his motives. He seemed genuinely annoyed with the whole deal. Perhaps some Yithians were a cut above the rest. Trust had never come easy for her, but maybe, just maybe, she could trust this one.

The craft zoomed out of view and over the building. Heat from its thruster hit the pane against which she leaned and rattled it.

"Three hours, Yithian. Then I'm going there in the flesh to deal with Drokesh."

* * * * *

Sekmeth sensed trouble as soon as he stepped off the elevator and into Drokesh's posh, private apartment. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, a shuttle roared past, its emissions trailing snakes of warm air. A small sound alerted him someone had entered the room behind him. The faint smell of Yithian musk reached his nostrils. Drokesh had just mated. The human-child's tiny person flashed in Sekmeth's mind, a painful reminder of his species' less-than-perfect traits, especially when it came to carnal hunger.

"You surprise me, Hunter."

Sekmeth turned to the older Yithian. "Then you are losing your edge."

If Drokesh was slighted, he didn't let it show as he approached and stopped only when he stood practically under Sekmeth's nose. "I cannot recall a single instance where you have wanted to see me so soon after a hunt. Should I be flattered or worried?"

"I have come to reclaim the human females."

Drokesh's eyes narrowed to slits, the pale opalescent orbs darkening considerably. "Directness was always your chief virtue. May I inquire as to why you would wish to reclaim what is no longer yours?"

A stab of self-reproach pricked Sekmeth's heart. His motives, though clear to him when he was with Alexandra Novona, were less so now, faced with another Hunter. Why, indeed, would he wish to encumber himself with these humans? All he wanted was the one. Yet he recognized, as surely as the scent of a cornered prey, he also wished to make her happy, to redeem himself in her eyes. How she'd changed him in only a few days.

With a defiant lift of his chin, Sekmeth set his jaw. "My motives do not concern you."

Drokesh's eyes narrowed even further, until only a thin strip of slate gray orb showed through his lids. "They *are* enticing humans, are they not? I would be hard pressed to part with mine."

"I would transfer the credits back to you." Sekmeth hated how his words sounded. Like a plea.

With a bejeweled hand, Drokesh smoothed some imaginary crease on Sekmeth's shoulder, all the while staring up at the younger Yithian, as if judging the true intent behind the unexpected request. The robe he wore glimmered like oil in water. After a while, he shrugged. "You may keep the one you won and reclaim the other two. The little one stays with me."

It took a supreme act of willpower for Sekmeth not to show his disgust. "I must insist she be part of the deed as well. She belongs—"

"Human!" Drokesh called, drowning Sekmeth's words.

Saliva thickened in Sekmeth's mouth as he watched a portion of wall slide to the side to allow in a pair of Yithian guards flanking the woman-child. She wore that thing again. When they drew near, Sekmeth could still smell Yithian musk on her. His revulsion must have showed for Drokesh chuckled then wrapped an arm around her tiny neck, pulling her close to his side. He died many deaths as she glowered up at the towering Yithian.

"You won her captain, reclaimed her peers. Must you deprive me, as well, of such delightful company?" He kissed the top of her head.

Sekmeth realized he was fisting both hands sporadically. His gaze was drawn to the woman-child, the large eyes staring up at him, the silent accusation mixed with

confused hope. Alexandra Novona's threat she would come there and "deal with" Drokesh only deepened his resolve to reclaim all three humans. She wouldn't survive fighting such an accomplished, ruthless Hunter. But she wouldn't die easily, either.

"Name your price," Sekmeth said at length.

"I have credit, Hunter, as you well know. So my price will not involve credits." He let his hand rest on the woman-child's shoulder, the tips of his fingers reaching down over a breast. Tears welled up in her eyes. Sekmeth had to look away to hide his shame. Drokesh was tormenting her for Sekmeth's benefit, to teach him, to hurt him.

After the older Yithian had toyed with her nipple to his satisfaction, he let his hand fall to the side. "My price will be paid in a way only a Hunter can. It is the only adequate payment for such transaction, one true to the spirit of the hunt."

The woman-child's confused expression turned to one of alarm as the two Yithian guards approached. A knife gleamed in one's hand. Drokesh gently steered her to Sekmeth's side, giving her one last kiss on the mouth that made Sekmeth want to smash his boot in the other's face.

With a smile as glacial as it was wide, Drokesh crossed his arms over his sinewy chest. "Now, Hunter, remove your clothes."

Chapter Thirteen

Two hours and fifty-two minutes had passed. No Sekmeth.

Alex rummaged in the kitchen, or what looked to be the kitchen, for anything she could use as a weapon. She'd have to go there, in the lion's den. God knows what she'd find. She'd just spent the last hour scratching the back of her neck, where an itch had generated by the minute. The exact opposite of the pleasant tingle Sekmeth triggered. She wondered if anything had gone wrong. Some kind of residual ESP thing, maybe? Nah. She was just itchy and cross and nervous. Dread filled her gut. Her brain knew Sekmeth was a Yithian Hunter, well equipped to protect himself. Now, if only her heart would listen. Stupid, useless organ.

The sound of thrusters rumbled in the distance, then the *pof-pof* of a light landing very close by. Alex rushed to the window just in time to see a hovercraft retracting its skids and pressing its belly to the landing. The hatch opened and something black and silver and blue rolled out and flopped down onto the ground.

"Oh, shit."

Alex wrenched the door open. She emerged onto the landing pad just as another form, this one tiny, landed near the first.

"Kim!"

The young woman stood on unsteady legs as the hovercraft took off again and veered sharply away. Its heat emissions hit Alex. She put a hand up to protect her face. When the wind and heat had abated, Alex rushed up to the landing and floundered to a full stop a few feet away. Kim's face was a white mask of fear. She was barely covered, for god's sake! But what stopped Alex's heart was the prone form on the concrete landing pad.

"Cap'n...he...they sliced it off of him – it was horrible, and...the blood."

"It's okay, girl, I'm here now. It's all good." Alex squeezed Kim's naked shoulder. "You all right?"

She nodded, her eyes still looking a bit too wild for Alex's tastes.

Sekmeth stirred. Then like a bowstring, he flopped onto his side and snapped his head up. His eyes were black slits. He snarled something in Yithian then seemed to recognize his surroundings. His face relaxed, he sat on his heels.

"Help me get him in," Alex said as she rushed to the Yithian and snaked an arm under his. With Kim's help, they half-dragged, half-guided the stumbling alien into the apartment and onto the couch. His leg dangled over the side, which opened his coat all the way down. Alex gasped.

His naked torso gleamed with blood.

He cringed when she tried to peel the coat off his shoulder. "I will do it."

"Get your dirty fingers away from there," Alex snapped, pushing on his hands.

She gently drew the coat over his shoulder and as far down as she could go. After bending his arm, Sekmeth's hand passed through the sleeve. He closed his eyes. What she saw stopped her cold. Her mind refused to believe the signals her eyes sent.

A patch of tattooed skin was missing, right over his shoulder and coming down a bit over his pectoral. The size of a hand. No skin, just raw, dark-blue flesh beading with blood.

"What *is* that?" she murmured, sinking to her knees by his side.

"Drokesh's price."

Alex turned to Kim who had drawn near and stood uncertainly by the couch's edge. She crossed her arms and held herself tightly. "To get me. That was the price."

"What price? What's going on?"

Of all the crazy things happening lately, this topped it. Then it hit her. Of course. Alex cursed under her breath when the realization, the full weight of it crushed her. Sekmeth had given up one of his tattoos, one of his preys, in other words, so he could get one back. Sadistic, demented affair, the whole thing. Bile seeped up her throat.

"You were supposed to *buy* them back, Sekmeth. Jesus...not like this."

He stared at her. "Drokesh was a Hunter. He had a right to name his price and reclaim the symbol."

Her whole chest constricted at the mere mention of the name. "I'm going to get myself a piece of him, too, the crazy bastard. Some sausage-shaped piece, that scum—"

Sekmeth shook his head. "It is over. Kim is back. Now," he said, pulling himself up and sitting. "I need to take care of this before the rest peels away."

Alex wasn't sure if she should try to laugh, cry or take a stunner and shove it up Drokesh's blue ass. Sideways, too!

They bandaged his shoulder the best they could while Kim sat and stared out the window. After a while, Sekmeth leaned back into the couch and closed his eyes. His face looked drawn and flushed. Alex resisted the urge to hover around his head and offer help. She hated it when she felt sick, so she wouldn't do it to someone else. Still, the urge was strong. Instead, she drew near Kim and leaned against the thermoplastic pane.

"You going to be all right?"

Kim nodded. "Drokesh was enjoying it, Cap'n, he totally was. The Hunter never made a sound, you know, like he wasn't there. And I was like, 'oh my god, stop it' but no one listened and I nearly puked. Gross. And...and I miss Eva and it's all turning to shit, like everything, you know—I hate this place!" She shivered.

Alex took the top Sekmeth had lent her and wrapped it around Kim's shoulders. The thing came down to her knees. With a small smile, she nodded. "Thanks."

"I miss her big mouth, too. We'll get Ebinay and Annabelle back now and take the *Femme Metal* the hell off this chunk of rock. It'll all be all right, you'll see."

Kim looked from one to the other then back again. "How come...? I mean, you're together?"

"I'm not sure, Kim. I hope."

She expected Kim to say "like, totally gross" or something. The girl only nodded.

Alex did hope they were "together" as Kim put it. How shocking was that! Alexandra Novona, Captain Steel from her time in the military, was falling for an alien. A Yithian, for god's sake! The enemy. How had that happened? It wasn't just a physical thing. Something else drew her to him, something much deeper. But she'd poke around that later. High time now to get some rest and wait for Drokesh to hand over the other two.

She pushed her plan for Drokesh to the back of her mind. Not too far back, just not in front where it'd get in the way. But she knew someday, somehow, she'd be coming back here to settle the score. Maybe she'd get something of his Kim could hang on the *Femme Metal's* view screen. Wouldn't it be a riot to have two blue balls happily bouncing there for all to see? Alex grinned.

* * * * *

Alex woke up from a bad dream. She couldn't remember what it was, only it'd left her shivering and cold. She stood from the narrow couch in Sekmeth's living room and padded to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Underneath, *Gorgosh* gleamed all colors.

That strange sensation on the nape of neck, one she'd come to associate with him, made her hair stand on end.

"You cannot sleep."

It wasn't a question, so she didn't answer, only grunted and leaned against the thermoplastic panes. "Sorry I woke you," she whispered so she wouldn't wake Kim who slept in a smaller bedroom down the hall. Poor kid needed her sleep.

"We will get them back," Sekmeth said, approaching but remaining behind her.

"I don't trust Drokesh, he's a pig. He's going to stab us in the back."

Sekmeth sighed. "The word of a Hunter is binding. He will keep it. We should know soon when he will transfer your two females."

Yeah, right. "How do you feel?" she asked, uneasiness creeping in her heart again. Why couldn't she just talk to the guy without getting all tangled up in her own two feet!

"Better now."

"Why, uh, why did he keep it...you know, the tattoo?"

"To reclaim the symbol and make it his own," Sekmeth replied.

"Like Kim would say, 'gross'."

"He will copy the symbol to his skin so the hunt will be his."

Hot hands landed on her tensed shoulders, expert fingers massaging knots of stress and anger. She meant to lean into him and relax but couldn't. So she just hovered near the panes, wanting to touch him, yet afraid to open something she wasn't sure she could close again.

He stopped rubbing her shoulders. "Are you afraid of me?" he asked, a hint of amusement in his deep baritone.

The mere thought piqued her. She was afraid of no one. Especially not some —

She grinned. "Almost got me."

"What must I do to convince you to trust me?"

She *did* want to trust him. God knows she did. Only he was Yithian. The bad guy. "It's not you, it's me. I live in the past, I guess."

"The past when our species were at war?"

She nodded.

"I was not in the war, and so never participated in any of the border conflicts, although I did vote for those who organized it all." His sigh unsettled a few curls from around her ear. "For what it is worth to you, Alexandra Novona, Yithians are not all bloodthirsty monsters. Some of us are pacifists."

"Like you?" she asked, trying to tone down the sarcasm, partly succeeding.

He chuckled. "No."

"What did you do before becoming a Hunter?"

"I always was a Hunter. One is born this way then groomed, molded by years of training and conditioning. It is quite an honor to be caught by one, you know."

She could tell he was going for sarcasm, only he wasn't very good at it. His boast almost sounded genuine.

Sekmeth's hands resumed their dance on her shoulders then slid lower on her back. Tingles of excitement rushed up her spine.

"What are you doing?" she asked, heat rising to her cheeks. This looked a lot like an invitation.

"You *know*."

Ah. So she did.

When she turned to face him, she noticed he only wore some thin metallic skirt thing glittering at his hips. And he was very, very happy to see her, which wasn't helping her resolve any.

Then her gaze settled on his pectoral where her tattoo gleamed inky black. "He let you keep this one?" she asked, regretting she was bringing up the subject again. *Good going, woman.*

Sekmeth ran gentle fingers over the fresh ink work, tracing the petals so similar to what was presently throbbing and making her all wet. "If this one was ever removed, it would kill me."

Alex wasn't sure she should trust his tone, which was deadly serious, or the rakish lift of his lip. Before she could ponder it any further, he bent down and kissed her. It didn't take ten seconds before Alex was wet, horny and ready to throw all doubts through the airlock. His tongue flicked out and grazed her parted lips. She sucked it all in then held it there with her teeth. He grinned, and she released him.

"There's something else I want to taste, too," she said. He raised an eyebrow when she pushed him back against the thermoplastic, taking care not to hurt his injured shoulder, and went right down to his skirt thing. After fiddling with the clasp for a bit, she figured it out and let it drop to the ground. His member bobbed into view, its head a glistening invitation.

"I do not think it will fit in your mouth, Alexandra Novona."

She grinned. "Don't you worry about that, sir," she replied, fisting his member and pumping once. That silenced him. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the clear panes. Around his head, a multicolor halo formed with the bright lights from outside and the force field above the city. His silver hair was full of static and stuck out at the ends.

Alex went down on one knee, which creaked noisily. A few licks to moisten it then she took the glossy organ in her mouth. Working clockwise with her fist, she pumped slowly while she licked and wrapped her lips around as much as she could take in. With her other hand, she gathered his balls in her palm and squeezed firmly. He hissed something in Yithian.

"Too hard?"

He shook his head emphatically.

Alex spent a while running her hands under and around his shaft while she kept her mouth around the tapered end. A sugary liquid—the Yithian equivalent to pre-come, she surmised—shone near the tip. After sucking it, she wrapped her lips fully around his member and glided almost right down to the base. His breath caught in his throat. She allowed a bit of time for her throat to become used to the fullness then proceeded to give Sekmeth her most vigorous performance ever. With a hand, she countered the rhythm of her mouth while she squeezed and kneaded his testicles. Mouth up, hand down. The silky skin was pulled taut and glistened. Sekmeth groaned.

Alex stopped and stood. Staring at him, she pulled her top off and her panties down. He reached out to touch her but she batted his hand away. "How do you want me?"

A feral grin tugged at his lips. With shaking hands, he spun her around and pressed her chest against the thermoplastic while he pulled her hips back toward him.

"Reach up with yours hands," he said, caressing her flanks when she did what he asked. Sekmeth stood behind her and spread her legs wide. Planting his feet in between hers, he forced them even wider, until she stood with her legs spread-eagle, her chest against the panes but her butt sticking out toward him.

"This is how I want you."

He made it sound like a request, so Alex nodded then let her head loll back.

Encircling her waist, Sekmeth reached down toward her mons and slipped his ringed finger inside her. Happy juices made his movement extra sweet and a moan floated out of her throat. The hot pearl was just the best friend a girl could have. Good, good man he was! Within seconds, she came, right in his hand. Waves of pleasure rippled out to her whole body, curled her toes.

She growled. "Jesus, man, fuck me. Now."

As if he'd been waiting for it, he grabbed her hard by the hips, used his thumbs to stretch apart the inside of her thighs and thrust his member into her.

The force of his entry practically lifted her off her feet. She bit her cheek to stop the cry swelling her chest. Sekmeth pumped into her, deeper, harder than anything she'd ever had. His breath rattled in his chest. He pumped and thrust and writhed, all the while keeping his searing ring crushed against her clit, the warmth of his arm around her waist the sweetest caress.

"Yesss," she murmured, when she meant to scream.

His panting stirred hair in her face, which she pressed against the pane. Her breath steamed up the membrane, made halos of lights from buildings outside while the immensity of space loomed over them. She arched back as far as she could and braced her elbows to receive the full thrust of his ardor. His movement quickened, so did his breathing. Sweat slicked his thighs and hands.

The inferno built up in her gut again, spread and danced over her skin, butterflies of fire. Another wave hit her, this time Alex couldn't suppress the moan. A second later, Sekmeth emitted a soft growl before slowing down then stopping altogether. He was panting heavily.

"Good god, man, whew." Alex leaned her forehead against the panes while he pulled out of her.

"Please come and sleep with me," he said in her ear.

"Sleep, yeah, right."

He chuckled as he retrieved his skirt garment. To her amazement, Alex decided to follow him to his room, something she'd refused earlier in the evening when he'd first offered. How things change after a good lay! Grinning to herself, she entered the bedroom after him and slid the door behind her.

Sekmeth went to a cube-shaped piece of furniture by his bed and clicked on the corner. A portion of the top flicked open. After retrieving something from the opening, he sat on the bed.

"You will sleep standing?"

Alex shook her head as she leaned against the wall opposite the bed. "What's that?"

He showed her a clear wand with a ring at one end and a tapered tip at the other. Grinning, he beckoned her to the bed.

"Sleeping, huh?"

"You do not have to do this, Alexandra Novona."

For reply, she went to stand in front of him and took the wand. "What do you do with it?" she asked, rolling the thing in her hand. As if movement had triggered something, it began to pulse softly then grew warm.

"Yithians enjoy this with their special partner," he replied, reverently caressing her scarred knee. "Do you wish to try?"

How could a girl say no? Alex slapped the pliable wand against her thigh, provoking a feral grin from Sekmeth. "How does it work?"

He took it back then began to rub it against the inside of her legs, up and down, then in circular motions. Slowly, the thing heated up, the pulsations grew more rapid. A sheen covered it, almost like oil. *Yep, there definitely was potential in this thing.*

"Slide the ring down like this," he said, taking her hands in his and guiding them to his stiff member.

She threaded the glistening blue rod in the wand. It was a tight fit. "What now?"

He closed his eyes briefly, took a deep breath then lay on his back, the soles of his feet square on the floor. "Now put it in me."

Whoa.

Knowing to speak would kill the moment for him, Alex gritted her teeth and bent the other end of the foot-long wand so it curved inward between his thighs. Sekmeth spread his knees wider, hooked them on either side of hers while he stretched as a cat and let his good arm drop over his head.

Slowly, Alex angled the tapered end near his anus, careful to do it right. Keeping the middle secured in her fist, she inserted the point into Sekmeth, marveling at the ease with which it slid in. A hiss escaped him.

She froze. "Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head, said something in Yithian.

Continuing her advance, she slid the wand in until the knuckles of her other hand rested against him. A series of images like rapid gunfire flashed in her mind. Sekmeth writhing on the bed while she pumped the wand in him, slid the other end up and down along his member.

Alex gasped at the intensity of the images. His mental ability to transfer his thoughts still shocked her. But she kept a tight fist over the middle of the wand and began to move it out of him. Slowly at first, she was bolstered by his obvious pleasure. Then she too began to enjoy giving him pleasure this way. She felt powerful, sexy, in control. In and out she thrust the tapered end of the wand into him which glided the ring back and forth along his entire shaft. He arched his back, bunched the sheets in his fists, rolled his head side to side while murmuring in Yithian the whole time. His toes curled up, which made Alex smile. Some things transcended any species. Tremors shook his entire frame. Then he grew still.

"Thank you, Alexandra Novona," he whispered.

Alex gently slid the wand out. Though she knew he'd come, there wasn't any liquid so she surmised the tight ring had choked it back.

His member had begun to shrink, so she could pull it out of the ring. Heat flushed her cheeks at what she'd done. When he opened his arms to her, she lay by his side, laying her head on his tattooed chest so she could hear the mad thump of his heart.

"Do you wish to try?"

Alex shook her head. "Maybe another time."

Sekmeth dug his fingers into her hair and twirled curls around a finger. "Another time." His breathing slowed, became deep.

Grinning, she went up on an elbow to watch him sleep. There was nothing she could remember being more beautiful than this. Silver hair fanned out around his head, eyebrows smoothed in peaceful sleep, thin lips curved at the corner in a contented smile. Her gaze was drawn to his chest, where the tattoo he'd done for her gleamed inky black over his heart. Now if she could only let him into her own. Alex sighed.

Chapter Fourteen

A beep woke Alex. She bolted upright when she realized where she was. She heard Sekmeth's voice outside the bedroom door. Gathering the clothes he'd bought her so she didn't have to walk around in that awful rubber outfit, Alex marched out of the room and happened on Kim as she was coming down the corridor, apparently to get her. Her expression was tight but better than the day before.

"Drokesh sent Sekmeth a message." The girl gave Alex a handheld decoder.

Alex and Kim joined Sekmeth in the living room where he was busily wiping the thermoplastic panes with a cloth. Heat rushed to Alex's cheeks.

"Did you read it?" she asked. The message was in Yithian, and though she could scribble a few lines of it in toilet stalls, she couldn't read it very well.

He nodded. "Drokesh says we can collect your females at the docking stations at twenty-three standard hours. Our ship has been cleared for take off for the twenty-three-fifteen slot."

Oh, it was "our ship", now was it?

Alex shook her head. "I don't like this. Doesn't smell right."

"Drokesh's a disgusting pig, Cap'n, but I don't think he's a backstabber. He never hid what he had in mind. I should know." Tears came to Kim's eyes. "We can't stay here. I want off this place. We have to go with what Drokesh says."

A look of sadness flashed across Sekmeth's face. He nodded. "The little one is right. We all need to be off the *Gorgosh* before anyone learns of this. And the sooner the better."

"Or before Drokesh decides he wants a bigger cut," Alex muttered under her breath. This plan smelled like days-old shit.

* * * * *

"You sure you won't pass out on me?" Alex asked again. She studied the Yithian and found him too pale for her liking.

Sekmeth flexed his injured arm. "I should be well enough to get you off this place. Then you will have to take good care of me and abide by my every wish."

Kim tried to hide her grin behind a hand but failed miserably.

"What are you laughing at?" Alex said, crossing her legs and staring out the hovercraft's porthole.

She felt exposed and useless without a weapon. But Sekmeth was right, two human females wearing inhibitors *and* stunners would attract attention. Since she could

appreciate why he'd want to keep his transaction private, she'd agreed to go sans stunner. Still, she didn't have to like it.

The clothes Sekmeth had bought for them felt so much better compared to the awful stuff escorts were supposed to wear. *Slaves, remember, they're slaves.* It wasn't her old army fatigues, but the blue one-piece suit would have to do.

They sat in silence the whole way. Buildings flew past in dizzying strips of colors and light. The darkness of space overhead flashed in the porthole when the craft veered tightly down into a large tunnel. Green triangles made of some reflective material indicated the way as Alex craned her neck to see outside. Soon, darkness settled onto the small craft as it descended into the brothel-ship's underbelly.

Then the docking stations came into view. Space loomed large there. As their craft zipped by, Alex spotted crews working on ships, loading and unloading cargo. She hoped there wasn't anyone onboard the *Femme Metal*. Not that it mattered much. They had Drokesh's blessing.

"There," Sekmeth announced as they slowed near the end of the docking stations.

Outside, a deserted dock greeted them.

The Yithian scowled as he scanned left and right before activating the latch. After a puff of steam, it hissed open and he stepped out.

The *Femme Metal* dwarfed them, looking like a giant metal flea.

"Don't she look happy to see us," Kim said as she stepped out of the hovercraft.

Alex came out last, looking left and right. There was nobody there. Not a soul. "Shouldn't the place be crawling with workers?"

Sekmeth slung his thin bag over a shoulder. He'd shared with Alex earlier how he doubted he'd ever come back to the *Gorgosh*. Sekmeth shrugged then something must have caught his keen ears for he turned to his right and pulled a stunner out of his jacket. She hadn't even known he carried one.

"Took you long enough," Ebinay said, coming out from behind cargo crates. She wore an outfit entirely white and glittering with each step. She rushed toward the trio and rubbed her hand over Kim's hair. "Been stuck here for hours, had to find a place to sit. Good to see you, kid."

"I never thought I'd say this, but it's damn good to see you, woman," Alex said to Ebinay who winked.

"So, he's coming with us, is he?" Ebinay asked, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

Alex's face tightened. "He is."

A shrug put Alex's worries to bed. Ebinay didn't seem to care either way.

Annabelle followed, placidity incarnate. "Captain," she said, her melodious voice a sharp contrast to her massive frame. She wore the clothes she'd had on the *Femme Metal*. She just nodded to the Yithian and walked by.

"Let's, like, get the hell out of here, okay?" Kim said, passing Sekmeth and trying to run-walk toward the ship and retain some dignity.

He followed with a scowl on his face. Alex and Ebinay reached the ship just as Kim dispatched the lock with barely an eye for it. She hadn't lost her touch with systems. The hatch hissed and popped then gaped open to reveal complete darkness beyond.

Kim batted her hands. "Come on, I want off this chunk of metal."

They went in, Ebinay checking the dock one last time. Then they closed and sealed the hatch and climbed up to the main deck.

The *Femme Metal* smelled nice to Alex as she clambered up the steel ladder and rushed to the bridge. It hadn't gone too bad, all in all. Maybe Drokesh would keep his word and be content with his disgusting price. She grinned for the first time in days. Things were looking up.

"We'll go fire up the computers in the engine room," Ebinay announced before disappearing down the other ladder, Annabelle on her heels.

Without a word, Sekmeth rushed down the corridor leading to personnel quarters, the bag containing his possessions bouncing against his thigh. Amid the tumult, Alex didn't ask what he was doing. There'd be time for that later.

Alex slipped into her seat while Kim leaped over her own to land with her usual precision. She'd discarded the killer heels somewhere between the ladder and the bridge. Her painted toes wriggled like blue-faced worms.

Sekmeth, back from whatever he had been up to, leaned in close behind her. "Something is not right," he murmured.

Alex waved in front of her. "Damn right, we still have to get off the place. Nothing's done yet."

"That is not what I meant—"

"Shit," Kim said from the next seat over. She clicked with furious determination on her computer and several systems flickered on. A low whirr could be heard as the generator kicked into life somewhere under them. "She's rusty, Cap'n. Rusty like an old nail."

"The thrusters should be up and running in about two minutes, Cap'n," Ebinay announced through the comms.

"I don't like it either, Sekmeth," Alex replied, turning to him. "But we don't have a choice." Then, turning to Kim, she added, "In case things turn to shit, when it's time, you give me a nice jump point two inches in front of the prow."

The girl rubbed her hands in anticipation.

More systems checked in, lights and buzzers filled the bridge. Soon, the *Femme Metal* shook itself into full life.

A wave of nervous tension tightened Alex's stomach. "Waiting for clearance."

Not even a second after she said it, a sharp command came over the waves. Sekmeth nodded. "They have cleared us. We may proceed."

"Release the mooring clamps," Alex said.

Kim punched her computer screen. "Ah, shit!"

"What?"

Kim clicked, frowned then clicked again. "It won't release. They probably do it from their end at the tower. That's too gross. I'll try to—oh, wait, here we go."

Sweat beaded at Alex's temples. She rubbed her cheek against her shoulder and blew air through her teeth. "And?"

"I'm getting at it. They have all kinds of totally—Uh-oh."

Sekmeth backtracked from the ladder, where he'd been ready to go down below, and bent over Kim's shoulder. She didn't seem to be bothered by it and looked up at him. "The screen's, like, going ten light-years a second, all in Yithian. I can't read it that fast. What channel did they say to switch to?"

As he gave Kim quick instructions, Alex tried not to tap her foot but ended up bouncing her knee rhythmically just so she had something to do.

"They're taking their goddamn time—"

Three loud clangs jolted the ship.

"The mooring clamps came off, Cap'n, we can totally go," Kim said, her voice excited and higher pitched than usual.

She leaned over to look at Kim's screens. "Anyone trying to crawl up our ass?"

The girl shook her head. "Drokesh is keeping his word so far."

"He is a Hunter," Sekmeth put in from behind.

Alex didn't even want to answer that one. Then a series of tiny beeps made her heart skip a beat. Three dots gleamed red on the dark green background of her radar screen.

Kim cursed. "That pig! Look there, Cap'n."

"What are those? Do you know the configuration?" Alex growled, kicking her foot down.

Sekmeth crouched beside her seat. "Those are security vessels. They have no reach but a lot of weapons. This ship is no match."

"Shit."

Kim nodded. "Like, totally."

Chapter Fifteen

Sekmeth's heart pounded a painful tempo. He'd paid the blood price, relinquished the hunt's symbol, yet the old Hunter had betrayed him. He felt such a fool. Honor didn't visit those like Drokesh, and he should have suspected it. Foolish pride.

Alex pushed down on the controls, and the *Femme Metal* glided off the brothel-ship's docking station. Concrete and steel layers passed up through the view screen. Approach lights flickered by then big black space filled the portholes. More alarms went off inside the ship.

"The goddamn clamps won't retract," Alex snarled. After punching hard on some controls, she leaned back and flicked a switch back and forth. "Someone's messing with our systems."

"Try the auxiliary panel," Kim replied without looking up from her computer. "It's bound to work if we reroute the whole thing."

Muffled clunks indicated Kim's plan had worked. Sekmeth saw Alex's shoulders relax a bit. Sweat beaded her temples and throat, which elicited a sudden response from his belly. Even his tongue began to tingle with excitement.

Sekmeth shook his head to clear his thoughts. No time for needs of the flesh. This wasn't going at all according to plan. He felt very useless, but realized the humans knew the ship more than he did and would be able to find a way. If a way could be found. Drokesh would have to be dealt with. But later—when Alexandra Novona and her females were safe. Sekmeth would return to the *Gorgosh* and deal personally with the traitor.

"Ah, gross. Company's coming," Kim warned.

Alex turned on another view screen and cursed. From where he stood, Sekmeth spotted the three dots moving rapidly toward their position. Drokesh's security teams sent to either reclaim them all or salvage what little would be left after they'd blasted them to bits. For all the captain's skills, he doubted this little ship could withstand three Yithian cruisers. The *Femme Metal* had no weapon to speak of, aside from the strange contraption on its aft turret.

Kim emerged from her furious assault on the keyboard and grinned ferociously. "Should I plug in the can opener?"

Can opener? Sekmeth craned his neck over the woman-child's shoulder but saw nothing of interest on her screen. What was a can opener? What was a can, for that matter?

Alex nodded. "Wait 'til we have no choice. But like you say, totally, like plug it in."

Kim growled a ferocious laugh and bent far between her knees to retrieve a bunch of wires and some gray contrivance she connected to her already bristling computer. She hooked the device to her seat and held it up between her legs. Two red buttons gleamed like blood. She put her tiny finger over one and looked back at Alex. "Ready, Cap'n."

Alex flicked the onboard comms on. "Brace yourselves, ladies!"

She then jerked those lurid control sticks to the left. Sekmeth gasped when the tiny ship banked right away into a tight downward roll. Outside, the brothel-ship disappeared from view. He held on with one hand to some pipes running along the ceiling and spread his feet apart. While the ship was small, it seemed more than capable of outmaneuvering any other. Still, his every instinct was telling him more was at stake.

As he watched her give commands and steer the ship, Sekmeth felt the heat in his belly rise up to his chest. This human female had taught him much in the few short days he'd spent with her. Even back at the nightclub where he'd first spotted the tall, wiry human, he knew she'd be special. Just how special, he only couldn't have guessed. His hands longed for the feel of her, his whole body quivered at the thought of hers. They were a perfect fit in more ways than one. He could see himself sharing more than lustful nights with her—he could picture them together, doing normal things. He just hoped he'd get the chance to make his offer before they were all blasted into tiny particles.

"Here they are," Alex snarled. She jerked on the controls and the ship swung up, around half a rotation then back down the other way. Right behind one of the cruisers!

"Fire!"

Kim pressed on a red button. A split second later, a deep *whomp* echoed along the bulkhead above him. In the display unit, the cruiser shook then banked far to the right. Sekmeth followed its course until it disappeared behind the *Gorgosh*. An orange glow appeared briefly where the cruiser had vanished. The tremor reached them a few seconds later.

The tiny ship had just destroyed a Yithian cruiser three times its size!

"Come get your can opened," Kim quipped as she wiggled in her seat. The venom in her voice didn't surprise Sekmeth. After all, she'd been Drokesh's first concubine, if even for a few days. She undoubtedly had some issues to deal with. As long as she didn't group all Yithian males into one unpleasant classification.

Alex cursed. "Another one at four o'clock. *Kim.*"

Another *whomp*.

The cruiser was hit in the stern and spun a few rotations before righting itself and limping back to the brothel-ship, its tail blazing and sending sparks far behind. Sekmeth shook his head. He'd had no idea. He would have had a good price had he decided to sell the little ship.

"Brace yourself, loves, we're going down," Alex warned before wrenching the controls down and leaning far over her legs.

Sekmeth barely had time to do so when the ship bore down at a tight angle and sent him halfway across the bridge. He banged his injured shoulder against the bulkhead and snarled. He was still paying Drokesh's price. Jets of light flew past. The last cruiser fired at them. If a single shot touched, they'd be picking up pieces of this ship for years to come.

Alex leaned to the right, flicked another switch. "Don't let them come over us."

"We're far enough to open a jump point." Kim squirmed in her seat as she managed both her computer and the control stick of whatever piece of weaponry was sending Yithian cruisers whimpering back home.

"We can't open one with them on our tail. Fire at will."

Kim did, pressing the red button several times. *Whomp-whomp-whomp*. Sekmeth felt the ship shudder under his feet.

"Finally!" Alex said, slapping one of the plastic male genitals with her palm. Turning back to him, she grinned. "You should head for one of the niches. We're jumping."

Sekmeth planted a kiss on her before striding off the bridge. Her voice crackled out over the comms, warning everyone to prepare for hyperjump. He squeezed into one of the niches and strapped himself in—they had never been intended for Yithians. He waited for the lurch of hyperspace. Nothing.

The sound of running feet. Kim came rushing by, an expression of near panic on her pointy face. He reached out and grabbed her by an arm before she'd gone completely by. "What is going on?"

"The engines are powering down!" She tried to tug her arm away. "My computer won't work... It's like the connection's broken. I have to go there and start the brain manually."

The brain? Sekmeth shook his head. "Return to your station. I will go." He extirpated his shoulders and legs from the anchoring niche. She nodded, patted his hand then charged back up to the bridge. Her blue spikes had begun to fall limply on her head and it gave her a sad kind of look.

Sekmeth rushed along the passageway then slid down the ladder to the lower deck where he noticed the lights had been dimmed considerably. A pair of boot soles sticking up poked out of the gloom. When he drew near, the large female's body came into view. Four stun marks burned in a straight line marred her wide back. His neck tingled. An image flashed in his mind.

The dark human, coming up behind him with something in her hand. He whipped around on his heels. Too late.

The shock rattled his teeth as something hard struck him across the forehead. He slumped against the bulkhead, dazed but conscious. Something hissed against his arm. An injection pellet?

"You've one hard head, honey."

The dark human bent over him, her fleshy lips pulled back in a glacial smile. She reached out and pushed a strand of hair from his face. He meant to grab her wrist but realized he could not move a single muscle.

“Don’t try, it’ll only make the drug work faster.”

Lights fizzed around the edge of his vision. He tried to stand, meant to but couldn’t move. Shock floated into his numb brain. He was lying on the floor! He couldn’t remember falling. The woman straddled him. He wanted to push her away but only managed to grunt with the effort.

She kissed him hard. “I offered it nice the other day, but you wouldn’t have it. I have to settle a few things. Then I’ll come back for you, and we’ll play for a bit. The drugs won’t keep long, so I have to hurry, you see. If you’re nice, I’m going to keep you. If you’re not...”

She kissed him again, brushed her breasts over his face then stood. He recognized his stunner in her hand.

“How?” he managed to croak.

She laughed a velvety, throaty laugh. “For all your charms, baby, you’re not too bright. Drokesh didn’t enjoy what you were doing, buying back your slaves and all. Spoiled the spirit of the hunt, or some shit like that. Anyway, I can see a good deal a hyperjump away. He made me one, and I took it.”

So Drokesh had indeed betrayed him—another Hunter—even though the blood price had been paid. Drokesh had stained the spirit of the hunt, what’s more, he’d abandoned the Yithian ways, betrayed a brother for a human. And the human whose perfidy matched Drokesh’s? What did she intend to do with Alexandra Novona and the little one? Sekmeth wanted to wring the human’s neck but couldn’t even move a finger.

“Don’t look so miffed, honey. His deal was too sweet to pass. If I returned his prized possessions, he’d let me have the ship. But he got it all wrong ’cause I don’t want just all of this,” she said, her hand encompassing the whole passageway. “I want this, too,” she added, running a hand over his crotch. “So to hell with him, right. Now that his thugs are blown up, I can have everything I want and not owe him a damn thing.”

She climbed up the ladder. The last sight he had of her was the curvy behind cinched in the glittery white garment.

Chapter Sixteen

"You said he'd go check," Alex told Kim who shrugged helplessly.

"Hey, Cap'n, the outbound comms are totally on. There's one transmission logged in."

Someone had called from the ship out to the station? Alex shrugged. "Don't care. Where's that Yithian?"

She swiveled in her seat for the tenth time in the last few minutes. He'd been gone what, four, five minutes? An eternity when one has Yithian cruisers lining up to take a shot. Cursing, she unbuckled her five-point harness and stood.

A sound alerted Alex someone approached the bridge. "What took so long?"

Ebinay strolled into view. She grinned. "Had some things to take care of first, Cap'n." A stunner gleamed in her hand. And it pointed directly at Kim.

"No!"

The polymer projectile hit the girl right between the shoulder blades, splattering its conductive gel laced with nanodarts. Kim went down without a sound. She convulsed for a few seconds then lay still.

Alex leaped over the armrest to check on the girl. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

A look of sublime triumph lit Ebinay's face. She popped her hip sideways and leaned a fist on it. "Nothing's wrong, Cap'n. Everything is all right now."

A shiver tightened her belly, made Alex's hands curl in as claws. She rolled Kim onto her back and checked for a pulse. Someone so small could be seriously hurt by a stun. Not this time. She sighed. Standing, she pointed an accusing index finger at her second-in-command. "Spill it. Now."

Ebinay scowled. "You're in no position to boss me around, Novona. I have the stunner, you have the inhibitor. So take it easy. Wouldn't want you to get hurt and spoil the fun for Drokesh. He's expecting you, see."

Cold seeped into Alex's gut, froze her body, numbed her mind. Intellectually, she understood what Ebinay was saying, but emotionally, she couldn't force the words into a nice little row. "You sold us out? Just like that?"

A nod confirmed it. "In return for you three, I get the ship and the business, which will get me disgusting sums of credits transferred to my ID. That's one good deal. This is what Drokesh thinks anyway. I have an even better one. I keep your guy and the ship, toss your and the kid's asses out the airlock."

Alex couldn't understand. "Why? How? *When?*"

Ebinay laughed. "Oh, for god's sake. Don't you get it by now?" She stepped onto the bridge and leaned against the bulkhead. "I wanted to get rid of you long ago, when we boarded the cargo ship. I meant to get the Yithian and bring him back to our customer. But he muddled things for me, your blue-skinned friend. Had to wait for another chance."

Realization hit her full force. The struggle on the cargo ship, the person who'd attacked Eva, it wasn't some guard. Alex slumped against the backrest of Kim's seat. "You killed Eva."

"Had no choice, she would've blabbed about it, you knew how she was. She'll be quiet now. Plus, she'll be with Annabelle. They'll keep each other company." The dark woman joined her hands in mock prayer.

Annabelle, too? The acute pain of betrayal stung Alex's heart. Anger quickly replaced the ache, though. "You killed Annabelle, too?"

Ebinay shrugged. "Stupid cow wouldn't join me, you believe that?"

Alex shook her head in disgust. "You bitch."

Ebinay fired. Alex collapsed to the deck and tried to ride the wave of electrical jolts. *Stay conscious. For god's sake, stay conscious.*

A boot appeared out of nowhere and struck her in the middle. Gag reflex churned Alex's stomach. She tried to roll away but was kicked again. As she floundered onto her side so she could stand, Ebinay grabbed her in a headlock and forced her back.

"So," she said in Alex's ear. "Did you fuck him? I bet he's good. Is he?"

Alex tried to hit the woman but didn't get far enough. Stars popped around her field of vision. Air stopped coming in.

"Fine, don't tell me, I'll find out soon enough."

Alex froze.

Ebinay chuckled in her ear. "Yeah, I intend to play with him. He's waiting for me down below, got plenty of meds to keep him docile as a kitten. I'll have my very own brothel-ship of one." She laughed.

A rush of adrenaline fizzled through Alex at the mention of Sekmeth and what awaited him. Down below. What did she mean, the traitorous bitch? Alex managed to crane her neck and breathe some. "If you hurt him—"

"I did, so what are you going to do about it?" Ebinay stood, taking Alex with her. "That thing's going to keep you nice and quiet," she added, tapping a finger against the inhibitor around Alex's neck.

Alex had completely forgotten about it. Ebinay had no idea the thing was deactivated. How could she? It looked plenty real from the outside. Alex let her arms fall to her sides in mock surrender. Let the lying bitch believe what she wanted.

"So now, what we'll do is send another message to Drokesh's goons to tell them the Hunter died but he can have the humans. That should keep him off my back for a few minutes, long enough to open a jump point."

Ebinay pushed Alex forward until she'd reached the control panel. "Switch to the peripheral frequencies, then enter zero three eight. That's Drokesh's personal channel." She sounded mighty proud of such knowledge.

Sekmeth, probably hurt, was somewhere down below. Anger threatened to make Alex lose her cool. Good god, what if Ebinay had given him something that caused irreparable damage to him, what if she'd turned him into a walking zombie? Fear mixed with anger made Alex force her lungs to function with at least some rhythm. She bent over the controls, keeping her feet wide apart. There'd be hell to pay.

And the time was now.

She kicked out and wide, caught Ebinay right under the elbow. The stunner went flying. Alex whipped around and faced her second-in-command. The dark woman's gaze flicked to the inhibitor. Fear tightened her face.

"That thing's going to kill you, Novona."

"This?" Alex said, giving the silvery band a good yank. It broke and fell to the floor where it disappeared through the metal grill. "It wasn't on. But this is." She rammed her fist into Ebinay's face. Her head snapped back and she backpedaled out of the bridge.

To her credit, she quickly recovered and charged for Alex. They tumbled down the corridor, stood, struggled then lurched over the ladder's railing and fell eight feet below into the cargo hold and onto some rigging equipment. Metal coils and nylon netting broke their fall, but not entirely. Alex cursed when she rolled away to stand but collapsed back on one knee. Those damned metal plates weren't worth shit!

Ebinay kicked her feet high and under her and flipped back onto her feet. A roundhouse kick, which would have decapitated Alex, came flying her way. She barely had time to roll and scramble away. From her position, Alex spotted Sekmeth on his back. She couldn't tell if he still breathed but suspected so since Ebinay had intentions toward him. Annabelle's form lay not far from him.

The dark woman chanced a quick peek back and grinned. "Isn't he gorgeous? I can't wait!"

Alex charged.

Ebinay tried to sidestep but misjudged and received Alex's shoulder right in the middle. A great hump of air shot out. Grabbing her by the short tresses, Alex delivered a quick succession of hits—right hook, once, twice then uppercut. Ebinay's head snapped back. But Alex wasn't finished yet. Still clutching a fistful of hair, Alex forced the other to bend while she slammed her steel-plated knee into her. Blood dribbled on Ebinay's chin. Alex groaned as the other grabbed her in a tight bear hug and tried to unbalance her.

Stars exploded in Alex's vision when Ebinay elbowed her right under the jaw. She bit her tongue, tasted blood. Dizziness made her sink to her knees. The weight of Ebinay suddenly lifted. Alex clawed against the bulkhead to a standing position and spotted the woman rummaging through the hold. She bent and grabbed something.

Turning, she advanced on Alex, one nasty piece of rigging apparatus high over her head.

Alex raised her guard but knew she'd never deflect three feet of metal, rivet-bridling tubing without sacrificing something else in return. She prepared to kick and hoped Ebinay wouldn't aim for her knee.

"Hang on, Cap'n!"

Kim's voice over the comms sliced the air.

Alex braced herself against the bulkhead just as a great lurch rocked the ship. Ebinay went flying sideways as though some great fishing line had reeled her in. The weapon clattered against the deck. A grin pulled Alex's bloodied lips. They were jumping to hyperspace!

The lights dimmed, the very air seemed to roil in on itself. Creaks and groans echoed around the cargo hold, as though it was closing in on itself, imploding. Alex groaned as the jump plastered her to the bulkhead, its force pressing against her chest, her innards. She shut her eyes tightly and hoped to god Sekmeth wouldn't be hurt. Ebinay screamed.

After a few seconds, the ship righted itself, seemed to swell back to its normal size and shape. Pops, clanks and clunks resonated. Alex shoved her battered body from the bulkhead and stumbled toward Ebinay who lay on the deck, her face bloodied, one of her arms clearly broken. Through strength she didn't know she possessed, Alex grabbed the semiconscious woman and towed her across the hold, toward the landing pad. Sweat and blood dripped on her arms and hands. She didn't care. This woman—this bitch—had killed Eva and Annabelle, tried to steal the *Femme Metal*, tried to sell them back to the *Gorgosh*. She'd tried to—no, did—hurt Sekmeth. *No room for garbage like that on my ship. Not now, not ever.*

While she held onto Ebinay's ripped-open collar, she slammed her fist against the access panel. The hatch hissed opened. With a grunt, she shoved Ebinay into the airlock, pushed with the ball of her booted foot whatever was sticking out. She stepped back, pressed the access panel and watched the hatch close.

Alex stared through the porthole as Ebinay struggled to her knees, clawing against the hatch and yelling. Alex didn't hear. She didn't care.

The red light switched to green.

Steam hissed around the outer hatch when it opened and released what air pressure was in the airlock. The great vacuum of space sucked Ebinay out the airlock like gelatin through a straw. She went tumbling outside, head over heels, floating amid the immensity of space. The airlock closed.

Alex leaned her forehead against the porthole and let out a long sigh. Behind, small sounds alerted her. Sekmeth tried to roll onto his side, failed then laid back down on his back, his hands resting on his chest. His breathing came in short and shallow.

"Alexandra Novona?"

Alex snorted a tired laugh. "You can call me Alex, you know."

She went to sit by his side just as Kim clambered down the ladder. "Oh..."

Alex could swear the girl's eyes would pop out of her head as she came down beside Annabelle's lifeless body. Kim looked so young, yet steel laced her gaze and Alex knew the girl would be all right. She'd had to grow up quickly in the past few days.

"Where's Ebinay?"

"Space debris," Alex said, hooking her thumb over her shoulder.

Kim stared at the airlock hatch. After a while, she nodded. "Gross."

"Remind me not to anger you, Alexandra Nov...Alex." Sekmeth clutched her arm and tried to pull himself up but flopped back down.

"You could tell something wasn't right. You tried to tell me back on the bridge and I wouldn't listen. Me and my goddamn pig-head."

A look of mock horror flashed on his face. "You have a pig's head?"

Kim rubbed his foot through the boot while Alex knelt beside him. "What did she give you?"

He shrugged weakly. "Something strong."

"Kim, get me the medikit, would you? Good thing you're a big guy," she added for Sekmeth's benefit. "The drugs won't last too long given your size."

When Kim returned with the box, Alex spilled it onto the deck, rummaging around the injection pellets until she found the right one. Sekmeth closed his eyes in silent thanks when Alex pressed the neutralizer pellet in the crook of his elbow and triggered it. A hiss announced the release of meds through tiny dermal jets.

Without checking with her brain first, Alex leaned over and hugged him fiercely. Her heart warmed in a pleasant manner when he returned the embrace twofold. The ring went from dull black to golden light in a matter of seconds. Alex wanted to ask, had meant to several times, but wasn't sure she was prepared to hear the answer.

"We have to do something about Annabelle," Kim said in a small voice.

They did, wrapping the large woman in a tarp, tying it as best they could and giving her a burial at "sea". Alex had nothing to say, so they just stood around the crude wrapping for a minute's silence.

After a while, they gathered in the galley, sat at the table, each in their own thoughts. Alex wanted to look at Sekmeth but couldn't bring herself to.

Kim sighed and tapped Alex on the shoulder. "I don't want to rub it in, but, like, someone has to fly this ship, you know. She won't do it herself." She stood, looking suddenly pensive. "But if, like, I rerouted the internal sensor systems, coupled that with recurrent navigations controls. It'd totally work..."

Alex grinned as Kim rushed off, muttering about such and such system she could take apart, strip or completely reinvent.

"She seems better," Sekmeth said. He reached for Alex's hand and stood. A look of pain crossed his angular features.

"Your shoulder?"

He nodded. "That, and my head, and my leg and my hands." A big sigh swelled his chest.

"You poor dear. I'm going to have to take care of all that, won't I?"

A predatory grin answered her. Then he sobered and cocked his head. "Why did you do it?"

"You mean save your blue ass? I'm not quite sure." She pushed her chair back against the table to give herself something to do.

Good question. She could have double-crossed Ebinay, sold the Yithian to their customer and gotten rich. Yet retirement at such a price didn't entice her. When she looked at the gorgeous alien, all she could think about was spending time with him. So, yeah, she'd saved his life. For not a single credit. Go figure.

He reached out and caressed her scarred cheek. "Whatever your reason, thank your god for me for letting us meet."

Alex chuckled. "I'll let her know, I talk to her all the time."

They climbed up the ladder, arms linked, and made their way to her cabin.

She'd not gone two steps inside before Sekmeth rested his hand on her shoulder. "What now?"

"What do you mean?"

Teeth gleamed in the cabin's dimmed light when he grinned. "You do not need me, Alexandra Novona. You have your ship back, your crew."

"So you're giving me my ship back, are you?"

"It has always been yours."

She didn't like the sudden seriousness in his eyes. Correction, she did like it, but just didn't know what to do with it. She barked a mirthless laugh. "Yeah, my one-woman crew."

"Do not avoid my question," he replied, taking his hand off her. "What now?"

"I don't know," she lied, still staring at the black pearl. Did that mean...? Had she been mistaken when she'd seen it glow? The mere idea tightened her throat. She'd have to ask, she couldn't go on like this.

"So what does that ring really mean? Does it... I don't know, do something?" She just wanted to hear him say it. *Please say it.*

"It only glows when I feel strongly about something. *Someone.* Do not turn away," he said, cupping her chin and searching her gaze. "It has only ever glowed for you."

"It wasn't doing anything when we first met. And it's not now."

Sekmeth shook his head. "It took all I had to keep it from betraying my emotions to you, as I am doing right now."

Good enough for her. She tried to smile, felt tears coming instead.

"But you changed the subject again, Alexandra Novona."

"What do you want to know? That I hope to god you'll come with me, retire, spend hours looking at the stars, drinking coffee and talking? Is that what you want to know, Sekmeth?" Now why did it have to come out so damn harsh? She looked down at her feet.

"I do not drink coffee."

Alex had to fight the urge to give him another bear hug. She just couldn't take the chance she'd misunderstood what he'd just said, the implications of it. "No?"

"No. But the rest sounded totally good."

His poor imitation of Kim made Alex laugh. "Was that a joke, Hunter?"

He shrugged. "You try to tell a Yithian 'joke' some day." A grimace twisted his face when he tried to shrug his jacket off but stopped midway.

"Would you hold still for a moment?" she snapped as she pinched the garment and slid it off him. Blood had seeped through the bandages in some places, but on the whole, it didn't look too bad at all. Especially considering what kind of injury it covered.

"We have to wash this. Here, sit there and don't you move an inch." She indicated the bunk.

He sat and leaned back until his head rested against the wall. Lines circled his eyes, and a twitch pulled at an eyelid. Alex went into the lavatory and pulled a washcloth from the rod, ran it under hot water then squirted some soap on it. When she was back by his side, he opened his eyes and watched her intently as she pulled his shirt off. The hot washcloth seemed to do him good for he sighed and let her wash his chest and shoulder. Some blood had dried and crusted over, but it came off right away.

The black orchid tattoo. She ran a finger along the twisted stem. "It looks all thorny and grumpy, that thing."

Sekmeth only grinned.

Alex concentrated on washing him, though the sight of his naked torso produced an ache between her legs. *Leave the poor guy alone, he's barely conscious, for god's sake.* Yet the way he was looking at her made her very aware of how little space there was between the two of them.

"Does it mean something special when a human female washes a male?"

She grinned. "Yeah, that he stinks like hell."

He didn't seem to think she was funny at all. A shadow passed over his gaze. "For us, it does."

She sobered right away. "Sorry. What does it mean?"

“That the male is valued enough for her to keep.” He wrapped his long hand over hers to stop her from rubbing the washcloth over his pectorals. A golden glow rapidly intensified inside the pearl ring. “It is a pledge.”

“Does the male wash her right back?”

A deep laugh shook Sekmeth. “When he is not incapacitated as I am right now, yes. The male washes her ‘right back’, as you say.”

To hell with caution and fear and doubt. To hell with keeping people at arm’s length and constantly being afraid they’d stab her in the back. For once in her life, she was going to follow her heart, not her head. Alex leaned over him and planted a fierce kiss on his mouth. As though he’d been waiting for just this invitation, Sekmeth pulled her to him and wrapped his good arm around her shoulders. God, it had to be the best feeling ever. She felt valued, cherished. Like a goddess. Alex laughed.

He pulled away and stared.

“Never mind, resume.”

As if he was seeing her for the first time, Sekmeth took his time letting his lips connect with hers. The fire it created low in her belly threatened to short-circuit her resolve to be gentle with the guy. All she wanted was to fist his hair and lick him and bite him and skewer herself to him like there was no tomorrow.

As if he’d felt her yearning, Sekmeth yanked her jacket off her shoulder in one quick move. Blood boiled in her veins. She was getting tunnel vision. Damn, she wanted him so bad it hurt.

“*Kashaak*,” he murmured between kisses. “My beloved.”

The word alone must have held some sort of power over her body, for Alex straddled his lap and pulled her jacket, shirt and bra over her head. She chucked the tangle of clothing away. A gasp escaped her when he leaned into her and bit her breast. Not hard enough to scare, but it definitely stung. Silver hair spilled over his face as he traced the bite mark with his lips, gently blowing on it and kissing the red skin. As she’d been yearning to, she balled both fists in his hair and pressed his face between her breasts. Soft growling sounds escaped him, rumbled in his chest.

Alex couldn’t suppress the urge to rub herself against him, even if in the back of her mind she was afraid to hurt his injured shoulder. It was as if nothing else mattered than being close to him, being one with him.

Pearl now bright as a tiny sun, he snaked his hand between her legs and rubbed her aching mons over the pants. The hard bud of his ring crushed her clit. He was good with the thing! Wetness seeped into her panties. Good god, she could come just like this. Charged to bursting, she dry-humped him as though her life depended on it. He responded by clicking her belt open, licking his middle finger and twisting the ring inside. Alex bit her lip when he squeezed his hand inside her pants. Adroitly, he followed her natural curves and wound his ringed finger along her drenched entry then slipped into her.

“Yesss,” she hissed, tilting her hips forward rhythmically. She planted both palms on the wall over his head and speared herself over his finger.

Thanks to his height, he was able to crane his neck and still reach her breasts, which he tormented with his long tapered tongue and sharp teeth. Alex rolled her hips, his finger nearly slipped out then stabbed back and took it all in until knuckles from his other fingers dug in her flesh. Cramps tightened her belly and thighs but she didn’t care. She rocked and recoiled and slammed back down again and again until the wave of fire tingling in her clit spread through her. Searing heat from the ring spread to her thighs and belly.

With his other hand, Sekmeth jerked his pants open and twisted his hips until his member bobbed out between them. She thought she was going to yell her delight at seeing the glistening blue organ. Spurred on, Alex raised herself from his finger and chucked her pants, then Sekmeth angled his shaft right under her. Already slicked with happy juices, she didn’t need anymore stimulation and bore down on him with all her weight. A hiss tore up his throat and he threw his head back, which connected against the wall.

A searing hot poker, his member plunged deep inside her and forced a long “oohh” out of Alex. As Sekmeth scooted down lower onto the bunk, Alex braced her palms against the wall and resumed her frantic thrusts. This time though, the sensations quadrupled as his long member rubbed along her clit and produced the fiercest pleasure yet. She squeezed her vagina as tightly as she could to accentuate the pressure, to grip him as if she was drowning, to hold on until nothing else mattered.

When the first wave hit, Alex cried out. Then the ripple effect burned a path in her flesh and waves upon waves of pleasure rolled out from her belly, up her chest and her spine. Holy hell!

“Look at me,” Sekmeth said through his teeth.

The commanding tone riled her for a split second before she understood what he wanted. Alex opened her eyes and stared hard into his. She realized with shock she’d never looked at a lover while they had sex. She’d never been interested in seeing the effect of the pleasure she was giving them. All she’d ever wanted was to take her own pleasure then kick them out of her bed so she could take a nap. Not this time. She wanted to see Sekmeth’s pleasure flash across his angular features, she needed to know he enjoyed himself—that she could do this to him, send him beyond the edge.

“Be with me,” he said, this time his tone much gentler.

Alex nodded, staring at him through his disheveled hair and hers, their sweaty bodies glistening and shaking. His whole body tensed, muscles rippled like metal bands. A low growl rumbled in his chest. He gave one mighty buck, which nearly sent her off the bunk. She would’ve enjoyed just staying this way as he came inside her, spilled his burning Yithian seed in her womb, but another wave hit her as well and she arched back to better savor it.

Sekmeth clasped both hands around her waist and pounded into her with all his impressive might. The bunk creaked and moaned underneath. "You are with me," he growled, thrusting hard and fast now.

Alex nodded.

"I want to hear it." His eyes darkened to slate gray. His fingers dug in her flesh around her waist.

"I'm...with...you," she forced out as her whole body rocked with a violent orgasm.

Then he stopped abruptly, his hands becoming gentler once more, stroking her skin, teasing her sore nipples with the burning ring. Through his hair, she saw his eyes become the usual gray pearls, his mouth curving at the corners.

He grinned. "Humans," he said, shaking his head as if in disbelief. "Tiny but mighty, as you say."

Alex laughed, her belly and vagina contracting around his member. "Yeah, and don't you forget that, big guy."

"I will not have to. You will be there to remind me."

There was a conflicting mix of confidence and hope in his tone. Her eyes welled up. "As long as you can stand me and my bitchy attitude, you've got yourself a mate."

"More than a mate, Alexandra Novona."

Alex nodded as he reached forward and wrapped his good arm around her shoulder for a tight embrace.

"Much more," she whispered in his shoulder.

Chapter Seventeen

"Damn. It's like a circus tent, that thing." Alex patted Sekmeth's lower belly over the blanket.

He looked down at himself and frowned. "What is a circus?"

Alex chuckled. "Never mind."

When his fingers reached under the cover and caressed her nipple, she closed her eyes and leaned back. "Mm, that's good."

"Would you like to try the *Ghars*?" Sekmeth asked before he raked her shoulder with his teeth. Tiny red lines on her skin followed in the wake of his mouth.

"The what?" Alex watched as he pulled the wand out from under the covers. "Where did you hide that thing?"

A quick laugh brightened his eyes. "I doubt I will ever return to the *Gorgosh*, so I brought my things with me."

Alex looked at it for a while, wondering how it would feel to have it in her. Finally, she nodded, deciding she could trust him.

It didn't take ten seconds for the wand to begin to pulsate and heat up. Sekmeth ran it along her side, her thighs then between her breasts. The thing was hot. Alex sucked in air through her teeth.

"Feels good?"

She nodded.

While he kissed her breasts, her belly, her hips, Sekmeth let the wand travel even lower, between her legs. "Come closer to the side."

She did, her butt right up against the edge, with him kneeling between her knees, the wand still rubbing. When he put his ring finger in his mouth, Alex let out an excited moan. This would be *good*.

And it was.

The fiery pearl traced circles around her clit while he teased her anus with the tapered end of the wand. He pressed the ring end right over her lips so her sensitive bud poked out in the middle, which he tormented with his ring. Alex threw her arms over her head. Her jaws felt welded together.

When her clit began to throb with the first signs of orgasm, Sekmeth left it so he could insert the tapered end of the wand into Alex. Instinctively, her anus clenched hard around the intrusion, but when he stopped and waited, the heat and pulsations soon loosened her up so he could continue. Heat spread upward, deep, then fanned out in her belly. In and out, slow, precise movement tore a ragged moan of bliss from Alex.

Spasms shook her, tightened her clit inside its ringed prison. She gasped when he bent close and flicked her exposed clit with his tongue.

She cried out, fisted his hair, meaning to pull him to her. But he resisted, kept on thrusting with the wand, occasionally giving a tongue lash to her aching bud. Alex came too many times to count, came until pain was greater than pleasure. But Sekmeth must have sensed it as well for he pulled the wand out, chucked it on the mattress beside him.

"Did you enjoy?" he asked, knowing full well she had, but probably only wanting to hear how good he was.

He was damn good and she told him so. With a snarl she wrapped her legs around his lower back and pulled him down. He thrust hard into her throbbing pussy. Rolling her hips, she met each drive with her own until her heels practically supported her entire weight. His eyes now darkened to black slits, Sekmeth withstood the assault, after a while straightening so Alex was thrust up high over his thighs.

When she thought she could take no more, Alex discovered another wave budding on the horizon. And when it crashed over her, a wall of pleasure and fire, she groaned his name over and over.

Panting, sweating, they grew still, their bodies cooled and their heartbeats returned to normal. Alex shivered and pulled the cover over them both.

"I look forward to our life together," Sekmeth said after a while.

Alex laughed, a true belly laugh that brightened her entire outlook, and she realized she hadn't done so in a long time. "I'm not always the charming girl you've come to know. I *can* be a bitch."

"You humans have strange word play. First, you have a pig's head, now you are a female canine." He shook his head, as if lost for words.

The comms unit clicked on and interrupted Alex's laugh. "We're there," Kim announced.

Both showered, dressed and joined Kim on the bridge. She wore coveralls and her hair sparkled bright orange. Alex was glad to have her old hacker back, chemically enhanced and all. It'd taken her days to stop jumping every time the comms clicked on. Kim was *back*. Alex grinned.

"Finally out for some air, you two? It's like, totally gross." Kim giggled. "Check this out."

Out the view port, a thick cluster of small planets revolved around one larger and brighter. Alex whistled. "The Aeos System. Damn, it's beautiful."

Two weeks of hyperjumps had taken them to the very edge of chartered space, where Interworld would never think of sending its tentacles. Even the Yithians, the most experienced spacefarers, didn't come out this far. The rim. Free people. No rule.

Alex slapped the backrest. "I've been waiting for years for this. How does this sound – 'Retired Captain Alexandra Novona'?"

Sekmeth only looked confused while Kim chuckled and clicked on her even bigger computer. The thing would soon need its own time zone.

"You sure you won't come. Even for a short while?"

Kim shook her head. "And do nothing but watch you two copulate? Gross, Cap'n. I have things totally out there to do."

Alex couldn't believe the girl wanted to stay onboard the *Femme Metal* and continue the business. Flying alone was a hell of a boring thing to do. "Won't you get lonely up here? Plus, it's not safe."

"Yes, Mom."

Kim wasn't quick enough to avoid the slap behind the head Alex sent her way. "It's Cap'n Steel to you, girlie. I'm serious. What the hell are you going to do up here all by yourself? You can't even shoot a stunner straight."

A wide grin stretched Kim's mouth. She nodded slowly, as though Alex was particularly dim in the brain department. "I said I'm leasing the *Femme Metal* for trade. I didn't say I'd be trading *people*." She sobered as a shadow crossed her gleaming eyes.

The things that girl had endured. Alex crossed her arms. "What else is there to trade?"

"Like, can openers!"

Sekmeth looked from Alex to Kim then aback again. He shook his head. "What *is* a can opener?"

The women both laughed hard and long before they could answer him.

Kim winked at the scowling Yithian. "It's a totally cool toy to pry open a box full of goodies."

"Weapons, Sekmeth. She intends to deal weapons."

"How gross! Design them, Cap'n. Not deal them, just think them up, slap their shiny parts together and hire someone to sell them."

"Who's going to do that?" Alex asked, trying not to sound too worried. A kid designing weapons for deep-space ships. How many laws and principles did that break? Not as many as making her a Yithian male's first concubine. Alex gritted her teeth.

"Remember the totally cute DJ at the club on Land's End? He's like, very good with people. I'm sure he'd be happy to see me again. Especially with her." Kim patted the controls.

"You will make an excellent weapons designer," Sekmeth said, looking as though he'd just said the most serious thing in the world.

Alex rolled her eyes. She could feel more white hair growing. She sat in her seat, strapped herself in the harness then wrapped her bruised hands over the plastic penises. "I should paint them blue, you know."

Sekmeth looked horrified at the notion.

Alex threw a sidelong glance at the Yithian. If anyone had told her she'd be with a Yithian, she would've laughed. If anyone would've told her she'd come to *love* one, she would've slapped them upside the head.

"Strap yourselves in, ladies and gents, I'm landing this thing."

The *Femme Metal* lurched down into a tight roll, aiming for the tiny planet that would be her new home. Sekmeth's idea. Apparently, the place had the sweetest soil, perfect for gardens. Like he'd read her mind.

Aeos System, planet 23-9. That'd make a nice address. Behind her, Sekmeth held on to the pipes above his head. He winked at her. Alex winked right back.

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

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