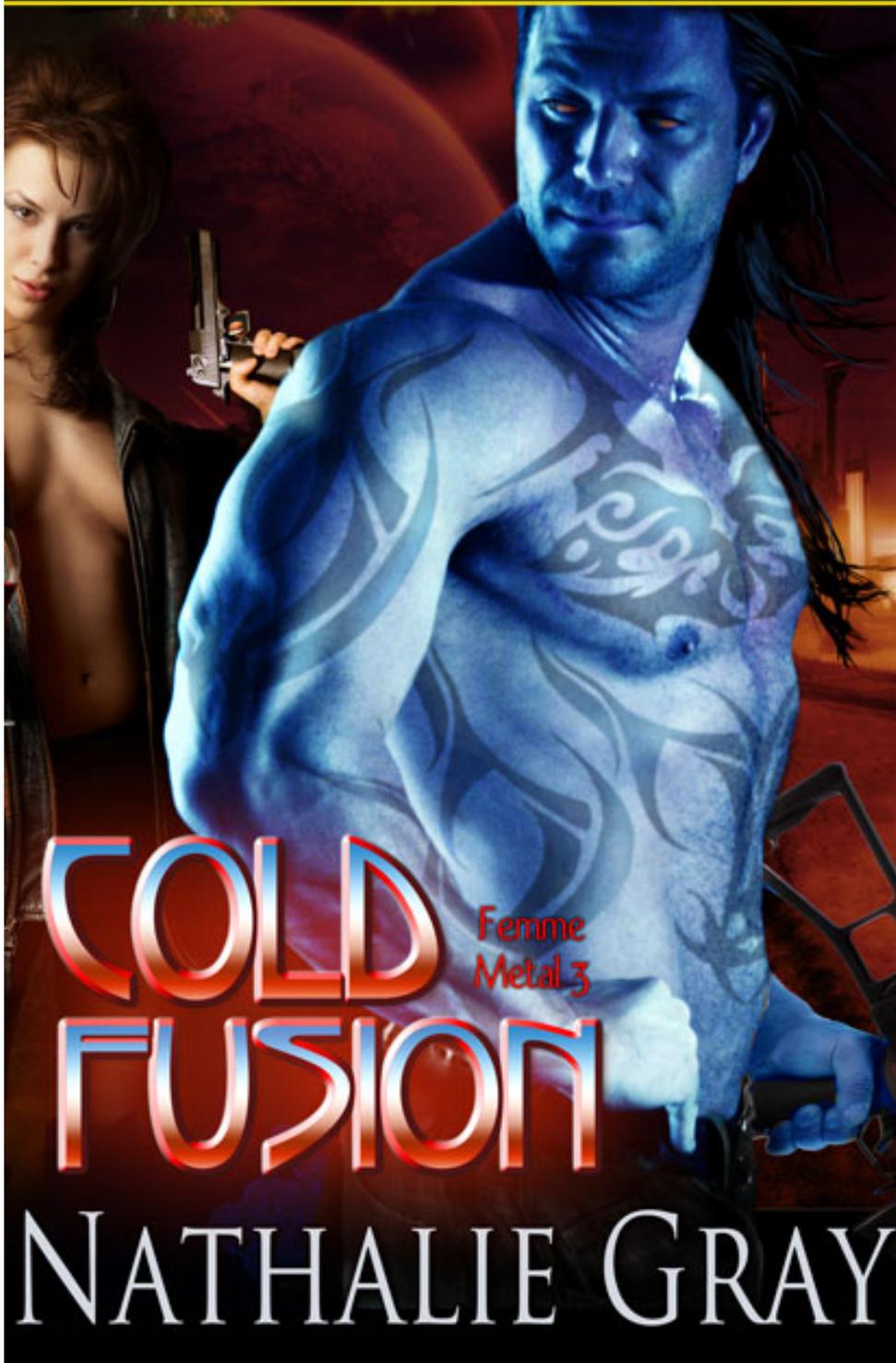


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



**COLD
FUSION**

Femme
Metal 3

NATHALIE GRAY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Cold Fusion

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COLD FUSION

Nathalie Gray

Prologue

The tough, ugly-as-hell little ship *Femme Metal* used to be home to an all-female elite extraction team captained by Alexandra Novona—Captain Steel—then served as a “totally, like, shiny” weapons factory under whiz-kid Kimberly Holmes.

Carmela de Monsalve is now the proud pilot if not owner of the notorious ship. She makes the drops, serves as liaison between her friends the arms dealing couple and their clients, and is the one adjusting attitudes as need be. With a background in close protection and a stare to melt titanium plating, Carmela takes their little “family” business to a whole new level. Unfortunately, she has a knack for collecting enemies, both human and alien.

During their last mission, Carmela contributed to the escalation of hostilities between humans and Yithians by helping get rid of the bothersome crime lord Drokesh. Because she always “keeps what she kills”, a Yithian male found his way into the *Femme Metal*'s stasis tank. Her prisoner is the sexiest thing she's ever seen. Carmela even begins to think she just might join the useful to the pleasurable and get all the intel she needs on his species while enjoying the best they have to offer—their male warriors.

But something happens to foil her plan. Carmela can't seem to keep her legendary cool if she comes anywhere near the stasis tank containing the sexy alien. Then things turn into a real *corrida* and she knows she's in deep. But that's the kind of trouble one can expect on the *Femme Metal*.

Chapter One

“That’s, like, totally outrageous,” Kim said in the view screen, and shook her head. Her hair was lime green that day and tied back from her forehead in thin, long tresses. “You should kick his ass.”

Carmela agreed with a nod. “I will. But I doubt he’ll change his mind. He says Collins would chop off his *bolas* if our transaction came to his ears.”

“And I’ll *feed* him his balls if he doesn’t pay the price we agreed on,” said a man leaning sideways so his face would fit in the videocaptor’s field. A metal canine tooth gleamed when he said “feed”.

“Titan, you totally cut me off, that is *so* rude,” Kim replied, pushing on her thickly muscled, shaven-headed, pin-striped suit-wearing arms dealer of a boyfriend. He merely snarled something and patted the large gun at his side.

Carmela enjoyed watching the pair arguing if only for the sheer sexuality emanating from the weapons designer couple. They looked as though they were doing a verbal tango—the sensual, carnal dance she loved. But not as much as flamenco. There was nothing as arousing as dancing flamenco for an appreciative male audience, a gift she rarely bestowed on her lovers.

Except for the one in the stasis tank. I’d dance for him. Too bad he’s the enemy.

Carmela felt herself flush.

“Hey, are the environmental controls working okay?” Kim asked after a particularly rough shove on her man’s shoulder rocked him despite the size difference. “You’re kinda red.”

“I’m fine. I was just thinking on what our contact said about Collins.”

Kim agreed with a nod. “He’s big trouble and totally ranks like way high on my Eeww Scale.”

The Eeww Scale, that by which their clients and competitors were weighed and judged. Collins took the prize for both categories. Carmela wished Kim would just let her have the guy taken care of. But even Titan agreed with his girlfriend that Carmela should stay away from the nasty Collins until he was done licking his wounds—Titan had shot him in the shoulder with ammo fit for a museum but made messy holes just the same. Still, she didn’t enjoy how such a dangerous enemy was allowed to come and go as he pleased. It made no business sense.

“I could have someone take care of him. Discreetly of course.”

Kim shook her head. “No way. They’d know right away. Just make sure you don’t offer him a view of your fine backside.”

Carmela grinned. "We should still keep him on our radar screen if we don't want things to turn into a *corrida*."

Both Kim and Titan smiled at this. "I love that word in her mouth, makes me horny as hell," Titan said before kissing Kim deeply. The screen flicked off.

Carmela rolled her eyes. She wouldn't hear from the amorous couple for at least several standard hours.

Alone once more in the silent ship, Carmela leaned back in her seat and let her hands absentmindedly caress the plastic penises for controls on either side of her thighs. She'd had them painted blue, in tribute to her favorite species and the hunky blue alien safely asleep in her cargo hold. Speaking of whom, she should go check on him again.

You do it three times a day, woman.

What could she say? She was a sucker for them.

Carmela shook her head. During their last momentous arms drop almost a month ago, she'd been forced to cross stunners with one of the feared Yithians, a race where anyone under seven feet was considered small. To give Titan a chance to save his beloved Kim, she'd taken on a full-grown Yithian male. Single-handedly. And the gorgeous blue hunk presently asleep in her stasis tank was her prize. He'd been hard to catch but oh-so worth the many, many bruises and contusions she'd suffered.

For some highly illogical reason—and she wasn't exactly known for her frivolity—before she visited her "guest", Carmela adjusted her one-piece black polymer outfit and her hair, which she'd arranged in a spiky black crown around her head. Her Medusa look, according to Kim. No one had ever seen how long it was—down to her waist—and even she sometimes forgot.

After she silently padded down the passageway, her thigh-high boots not making a sound on the rubber sprayed-on deck, she stopped at the top of the ladder for a quick check in the full-length mirror—it *had* always been an all-female ship—Carmela took long breaths to calm herself. Meeting her sexy catch always proved nerve-racking. Not because he was too handsome to bear or surpassed her six-foot frame by at least a head and a half, not for his muscular build and long, long legs, but because there was always a vague feeling he could sense her somehow. Carmela couldn't explain it, but whenever she was in his presence, she felt watched. By him.

And loved every second of it.

The ladder produced a twinge of pleasure to radiate down her legs when the stitching of her suit rubbed between the thighs. Another thing she'd noticed since bringing the Yithian onboard...she walked in a constant state of sexual awareness. Even in her sleep where images of their fierce lovemaking populated her dreams. She was just long overdue for a bit of fun. After she'd land on Land's End, the only remaining neutral station, she'd make sure to get some handsome, professional company. Probably two. One was never enough. Unless they were Yithian, in which case, with their stamina and skills, one was perfect even for her voracious appetite.

Letting the tips of her fingers run along the metal bulkhead, Carmela crossed the section of passageway under the ladder, pressed on the cargo hold hatch's access panel—one of many holds, both obvious and hidden. In the middle of the deck, inside a stasis tank meant for smaller and lighter humans, lay her charge. He still wore the clothes he had when she'd caught him down on Land's End station, a sort of two-piece set made of dark gray nylon compound, which hugged him in all the right places. His long and straight silvery hair rested in thick ribbons around his head, softening his angular facial features, but barely. As a matter of fact, his hair was darker than his species' characteristic silver for his tended more toward the stainless steel gray. He looked so uncomfortable with his wide shoulders touching both sides and his sinewy legs bent sideways. To her shock and excitement, a long blue-skinned hand rested over his abdomen.

He had moved since her last visit!

Any human, whom the tank had been designed for, would've been conked out for months, not moving a muscle due to the gas keeping the occupant sedated and sanitized. But he'd moved twice that she knew of. Once he'd licked his lips, which had procured fodder for several nightly fantasies afterward—still did. And now his hand. So gloriously shaped, so long, with fingers the length of...

"Mierda."

Shit, what was that?

She leaned over the clear thermoplastic pane and put a hand to her mouth. Carmela could just see a bit of black ink work peeking out from underneath his sleeve. The unmistakable sign that marked him as not only a Yithian but a special one at that...a sign that she was in deep trouble.

"So you're a Hunter."

She didn't know if she should feel thrilled at her catch or alarmed or both. Yithian Hunters were reputed throughout the system for their fierce ways and unwavering focus on their assigned prey. She didn't know of anyone who'd managed to escape once one had been set after them. The equivalent of a bounty hunter, a Yithian Hunter could spend years on a single hunt, the closest to the divine the godless race ever came. After capture, the Hunter would have a special tattoo made to commemorate the prey. She knew for a fact they never started their ink work on their wrists, preferring to cover their chest and belly first. So if he had ink right down to his wrists, this could only mean he'd been a very busy—therefore a very successful—Hunter.

Carmela squeezed her eyes shut to sever the vision of feral beauty and tried to focus on what she'd do with him. She could no longer wake him and pump him for information as had been her immediate plan—their two races were practically at war after what had happened on Land's End with that Yithian crime lord and his men trying to take Kim back to his brothel-ship. She could deal with a Yithian given the right set of circumstances, namely a stasis tank and her large silvery kinetic energy gun. But a Hunter?

“No way.”

She'd keep him sedated for as long as she could, hoping she'd find a way to deal with him securely. One thing for sure, she was going to lose a lot more sleep over him now that she knew what he was. And it wouldn't all be wet dreams either. Hunters truly *were* dangerous.

She meant to chuckle but a sudden chill at the back of her neck forced her to spin on the spot and aim a hand chop at whatever stood there. Years as a bodyguard to the rich and infamous didn't easily rub off.

No one.

She could've sworn...

Again the sensation of being watched permeated the small room, made Carmela grab the stasis tank's ledge as she forced her mind to clear. Images flashed behind her eyelids. She arched back, knocked her shoulder against the bulkhead as a series of impulses fired her nerve endings, filled her mind's eye with scenes that left her sweating and panting.

The Yithian Hunter, kneeling between her legs while she lay supine, his long, tapered tongue flicking out against her sex as his hands kept hers trapped against the small of her back, which was arched. He rolled his pearly gray orbs at her and grinned ferociously.

Carmela pulled her gun out of its holster at her waist and while she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, aimed its muzzle all around. “What?”

Another image seared her brain. *The Yithian's long, smooth cock sinking into her, his dark silver hair cascading over his wide shoulders. “Open for me,” he murmured in her ear as he pumped her hard.*

Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his tight waist.

“Open for me,” he repeated, baring his slightly pointed Yithian teeth in a grin that was as intense as it was arrogant.

His large, strong hands clutched at her hips as he pulled out then thrust back in, which tore a moan from Carmela. “Open the tank.”

She was tempted for just a second to unlock the tank and let him out, see what he'd do, maybe get a taste. He'd make for the best lover in the system, she was sure of it.

His iris-less, pupil-less eyes narrowed when he lowered his weight onto her, stopped only when their chins almost touched. “I will take you to heights you never knew existed.”

Carmela meant to say something, only nothing came out.

A small sound, shrill and demanding, teased the back of her mind, as though someone tugged on her sleeve to get her attention. She shook her head.

The proximity alarms!

Backpedaling out of the cargo hold and its dangerous occupant, Carmela knocked her shoulder against the jamb and reality flooded her dazed mind. She rubbed her eyes.

“What is going on?”

Had he done that to her, put all those images in her mind? Sneaky bastard.

Her head was clear once more but her skin felt feverish with pent-up arousal and carnal hunger—she'd need a good go at her toys tonight, if only to finish what the damned Yithian had started. Carmela rushed up to the main deck and barged into the bridge just in time to see a text-only message crawl at the bottom of her view screen.

"Mierda."

The message glowed like neon green maggots crawling along the console. *Prepare to be boarded and show identification*, over and over again on the screen. An Interworld border patrol. Shit.

She didn't even have time to go back below and hide her prisoner. She was in so much shit she could smell it. With a Yithian prisoner in the hold, she'd face at least twenty years on a penal colony, especially now with both species trying to avert war with desperate and so far fruitless talks.

Gun in hand, Carmela ran back down the passageway, scaled the ladder, skipped the last few rungs and landed with a thud—she was no shrimp—beside the airlock just as deep clunks indicated the border patrol cruiser had latched on and was preparing to board the *Femme Metal*.

She'd barely taken a step toward the airlock when steam appeared in the round porthole, indicating someone had entered the ship and was equalizing pressure. All by remote. Border patrols, Interworld in particular, enjoyed increasingly higher levels of clearance nowadays and could board anyone they wished. And a ship such as the *Femme Metal*, notorious in several systems for its shady crew and worse cargo, attracted a lot of unwanted attention. She couldn't wait for Kim to design some sort of shrouding device.

A sudden thought occurred to Carmela. She shook her head. Her first reaction had been to worry about the Yithian Hunter onboard instead of the cache of weapons she carried. It was well hidden but still. Ha!

The airlock door slid sideways and interrupted her chain of thought. In stepped a pair of male border patrol officers wearing the dark gray uniform that suited men so well. The younger, a blond man with dazzling green eyes, smiled at her. She smiled back as she slid the gun in its holster.

"Gentlemen, what can I do for you?" she asked in a smooth voice, knowing her Spanish accent usually made English-speaking men want to undo at least one button on their shirt.

Blondie blushed as he fiddled with the decoder strapped to his waist. He finally pulled it out. His boss, his belly bulging over his thick utility belt, hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "Your airlock's not up to codes, ma'am. You need to have a porthole that's at least twenty percent the size of the hatch itself."

She didn't tell him Alex Novona, the *Femme Metal*'s first owner, had had a thick-plated door installed *exactly* because she didn't want a big gaping window in her front door. Not with what they did for a living.

“Thanks, officer. I’ll make sure to put it on my list of repairs.”

“I’d like to see your ship’s cargo manifest, please,” Blondie asked, punching the small decoder when it refused to light up. “And we’ll need to conduct a visual inspection as well.”

Carmela gave him an extra-wide smile and a quick wink. “That’d be my pleasure, *hombre*.”

With the two officers in tow, Carmela showed them the official cargo hold where she stowed the usual things—cargo netting, crates, containers for spare parts. She kept them well away from the back corner where a trapdoor in the deck hid the real cargo she presently transported. Weapons. She also kept them from the narrow door beside the landing deck where her Yithian captive was “sleeping”. Of the two, she’d rather get busted for carrying illegal weapons than for having a Yithian Hunter onboard.

“What’s this, ma’am?” the boss asked.

She followed his gaze and had to fight very hard to keep the smooth mask on. The door to the stasis room was ajar. She’d forgotten to close it. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

The mantra she chanted in her head accompanied her as both officers seemed to feel they were about to hit the jackpot and marched for the small door. Blondie was reaching for his gun, oblivious she was doing the same behind him.

What’s the punishment for killing two Interworld officers, I wonder.

She didn’t want to hurt them but would have no choice. The kinetic gun felt smooth and cold in her hand when she palmed it. Time seemed to stop. She froze a few paces behind the men, gun partly out of its holster.

The boss slid the door all the way, peeked inside and shrugged.

Then he...*walked away* so he could inspect a pile of rigging equipment near the hoist.

Thankfully, neither turned around to spot Carmela hurriedly pushing her gun back in its holster.

What?

In a daze, Carmela followed them on their inspection, presented them the official cargo manifest when they asked, her ID card then flight plan. The whole while she fought against the urge to rush to the cargo hold and take a look for herself.

She should already be wearing an inhibitor around her neck, ready to jolt her should she try to attack someone, her hands cuffed behind her back as she sat in the patrol cruiser. Why hadn’t they arrested her? She had a Yithian Hunter onboard, clearly as a prisoner, yet they did nothing.

“Thanks, ma’am,” Blondie said, interrupting her mental downward spiral.

She nodded, barely managed to work up a small smile for him. He looked frustrated when he stepped inside the airlock with his boss, turned around and punched a few keys on his decoder. He didn’t smile when he nodded to her.

“Have a good trip, ma’am,” Boss said. “But watch out for Yithian cruisers. Even with the peace talks coming up, some of them still skirt the system and attack any human ship they come in range with.”

The hatch hissed shut, the whistle of air indicated pressure had been equalized, followed by the deep clunks of the mooring clamps letting go. Her heart in her throat, Carmela leaned against the bulkhead for an instant.

How could this be? There was a Yithian on a human ship, all seven feet and two hundred and fifty pounds of him, yet they did nothing?!

Sweat clammed her palms. She knuckled her eyes. After this momentary weakness, she charged down the passageway, stepped over the hatch and crossed the cargo hold. Smells of the two men still lingered. A mix of cologne and sweat.

With a shaking hand—her hands *never* shook—Carmela slid the door and checked inside.

“Mierda.”

Shit. The stasis tank wasn’t only empty, it’d been busted wide open.

* * * * *

Black eyes were looking at him, lips painted red came down over his face. He kissed the exquisite mouth, lost any semblance of control and devoured it while his hands raided the female body pressed to him. Not Yithian. Too curvaceous. Deliciously so.

“Open for me,” he told the woman, for she was human. The one who had captured him.

Surprisingly, she did not yield to him. No matter, he would taste her flesh eventually. She couldn’t keep herself in check forever. Then something else seemed to catch her attention and she left.

Fully awake now, his mind reeling, his senses in overload, Setesh cursed.

Quickly stemming the flow of mental pulses he’d been sending out to her subconscious, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

He’d never had issues with confined spaces before. Until now. To find himself trapped in an extremely small space, too short to straighten his legs and barely wide enough to move an arm at a time, felt so ignominious to him, so affronted him to his Hunter’s core, Setesh could have hid in shame. A human had caught him. A lowly *human*.

A thick-looking pane of thermoplastic spanned over his entire front, a mere three or four inches from his nose. An overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia assaulted him. With a snarl, Setesh put both fists against the clear top and pushed upward. It wouldn’t budge. He tried again with a knee without success.

Adrenaline pumped his muscles and he started panting. Perhaps it was his aroused state or remnants from his trance, but Setesh’s mind exploded with vivid images of the human female who had caught him, together with him, doing things he was sure no other humans had done before. Even her smell, piquant and intoxicating, filled his

nostrils. He growled with lust. What little he had been able to see of her, she was a fine specimen entering her second cycle, a budding flower in her upper thirty human years. Delectable. He could still remember getting his hands full of her curves, his nose full of her scent as they struggled on the second floor of the building where he'd been told to report with some warriors. Not Setesh's, mind you, for he had none. A Hunter worked alone. But they'd been his father's warriors, so doubly his to command by right.

His surprise had been complete when he'd barreled through the flimsy wall, tackled the dangerous human with the deadly aim beyond, only to realize she was female. And a luscious one at that. Every fiber of his Hunter being had clamored for a taste, quickly denied him when she'd managed to unbalance and subdue him long enough for a sharp crack on the skull with some sort of telescopic baton. He'd seen stars – literally. His palms presently tingled when he remembered the feel of her strong body arched against his in their fall. How he longed for a sip of her.

But first, he had to get out of this thing.

Everyone, from any species, always made the same mistake. They unfailingly cared more about the locking mechanism, making it tamper-proof, but never took a second glance at the hinges. Running his fingers the best he could along the seal, Setesh quickly located one of the hinges and put his fist to it, then after several deep breaths, he mustered all his Yithian force and gave a mighty punch with the heel of his fist. Setesh gritted his teeth and snarled when the container in which he'd been forced burst at the seam in a hiss of steam.

At once, her scent invaded his thought process and all he could think about was how good she would feel pinned beneath him, her legs wrapped around his waist as he pushed himself into her warm and inviting human flesh. So rosy and moist. So unlike Yithian females, all angles and sturdy skin.

Shaking his head, Setesh clawed out of the too-small stasis tank, stumbled around for a brief moment as he readjusted to blood circulation and oxygen levels inside the ship proper, before he found the door and gradually slid it sideways. A cluttered cargo hold lay beyond his door. With no weapons that he could see. He stooped under the too-low jamb – humans were so small, despite their fiery temper – and padded out of the hold and into a narrow passageway, which led to a steel ladder. Perpendicular to "his" was another corridor, which ended with an airlock. Three humans presently talked near the hatch, the first two – males – didn't seem to belong on this ship and looked as though they were in fact arriving, while a third, the female who had caught him, had her back to him. His breath caught in his throat.

It took Setesh several seconds to quiet the mad beating of his heart. Years of Hunting, of mastering his responses were required just to stop his breathing from turning into labored pants. It would seem the human female was even more beautiful now that he could admire her at his leisure. Breathtaking. Literally.

To say the statuesque human was striking would equate to commenting on how a sun was hot. She stood at least up to his shoulder, tall for a female of her species, with a mane of black hair wrapped around her head in an intricate series of gleaming coils he

found to be a teasing invitation. How long would her hair be should he undo one such coil? Could he wrap a fist in it, he wondered. His fingers itched to find out. Since her back was to him, it gave Setesh a fine view of her. Wide, athletic shoulders tapered into a narrow waist before swerving out into a superbly, almost implausibly rounded bottom that made him salivate just looking at it. And her legs. Covered in a shiny black membrane, they seemed to be carved from black stone polished to a high glimmer. He noticed the deadly weapon strapped to her waist and the even more dangerous telescopic baton slid in a long narrow holster at her thigh. When he would subdue and bring her back to Yith to be sold as slave or even escort to one of their brothel-ships—perhaps even his father's *Gorgosh*—Setesh would make these two weapons his. Then again, perhaps he'd make their wielder his first. After he caught a prey, he no longer cared what happened to it. They'd served their purpose, had provided a Hunt, which he celebrated with a symbol tattooed into his flesh so he'd remember each in its own special way. Hers would have to be memorable indeed.

Without sound, he climbed up to the second deck, knowing humans always designed the bridge to be in the highest habitable section on their ships, and quickly found it. After sliding the hatch closed and locking it from the inside, Setesh examined the tiny place as he slid into the too-small seat and wrapped the ghastly controls. Renditions of male genitals? *Blue*? Were these supposed to be Yithian? Much too small. Humans were a strange species.

Within moments, he'd wrestled the ugly, temperamental little ship under his control, locked the console and punched in—such a tiny set of crowded buttons—the coordinates that would take them to Yithian space.

While he monitored the other human ship as it slowly glided away from his, confirming his theory the two males didn't belong to this one, Setesh waited for when triggering a jump point wouldn't attract attention. He hoped for the human female's sake she'd found a safe place to weather the transition to hyperspace. He'd hate to damage her before he sold her. Or tasted her. Setesh pressed a hand to his chest. She'd made for a fine Hunt. Quick but satisfying. But it was over now. No prey had ever escaped him and a lowly human wouldn't be the first.

With his mind filled with her voluptuous form, Setesh triggered a hyperspace conduit a few miles off the prow and aimed the little ship for it. The speed and violence with which it rushed into the tear in the fabric of space left him giddy. Such a small ship! Looks could be deceiving.

Groans and creaks accompanied their bumpy ride through the iridescent conduit. Setesh had to fight the little ship the whole way, wrestling the controls this way and that to make it do what he wanted. Moody, unreliable human technology! Finally, sweating and cursing, he crabbed the ship back into normal space just in time to see through the rectangular view screen how the ship wasn't at all where he'd supposed it would emerge.

"Cranaak!"

Alarms wailed, lights blinked on the console and an amber glow spread along the pipes in the ceiling. Things were *not* going as they should! But they would. Setesh Geb wouldn't allow it any other way.

He plastered himself into the seat, locked his elbows. One of Yith's moons, the smallest and uninhabited, spun crazily in the screen as the ship, a mind of its own, seemed to be *wanting* to crash, fighting against his commands and ignoring others, but leveling off before he'd pulled the control sticks.

He skimmed along the moon's atmosphere, a hail of ice pellets hitting the ship's outer hull with terrifying clunks, triggering even more alarms, which now buzzed incessantly. The ship pitched forward, pierced the thin atmosphere. Setesh braced his feet on a pipe, which ran over the console, and gritted his teeth. Somewhere something gave and began to rattle. The ship groaned and moaned. Outside, a piece of metal plating flew off the prow, came *this* close to hitting the view-screen sensor—which would have blinded him as a pilot. He noticed a harness dangling under his thighs and quickly strapped it on. It was a tight fit but better than flying across the bridge and crashing against the metal bulkhead. Ugly, unstable, defective little piece of...

The moon's surface replaced its gaseous atmosphere. Shots of black water and impenetrable flora flashed in the screen in a crazy kaleidoscope of blue black and purple green. It grew. Closer still. The small dial by his right knee indicated barely a thousand feet. *Human* feet.

He shook his head, widened his booted feet and abandoned the blue cocks so he could clutch at the armrests. If he survived the crash, he'd demand double the price for the human, no matter to whom he decided to sell her.

When nothing else but Yithian forest filled the screen, Setesh bit down hard and squeezed his eyes shut.

* * * * *

A sound similar to a bird chirping woke him. He opened his eyes to realize he was not only still alive but relatively well, and the ship—so full of surprises—looked to be in as good a shape as he was. After pawing around for the damned control, he shut the alarm off. Finally some peace.

With a snarl, he unbuckled the harness and stood. Steam hissed from the console but after he pulled its circuit breaker, it stopped. A faint smell of burned plastic wafted to him. He rolled his shoulders, stepped over the pipe that had served as a brace for his feet and charged for the hatch, which was still locked. It required all his strength to pull the lever up. For a split second, he felt as though the ship were a sentient entity trying to thwart his every move. He could swear it was now trying to keep him on the bridge.

Setesh shook his head. Nonsense.

A small beep caught his ears. He turned back toward the console just in time to see a small green light come on then off. A quick check at the label made him curse profusely.

The outside hatch!

Setesh rushed out of the bridge, knocked his head on the too-low edge of some anchoring niche right outside the door and holding his forehead with one hand, kept the other curled into a fist as he ran down the passageway, around the corner, neatly scraped the top of his head against the ladder's handrail when he slipped down to the lower deck. By the time he arrived at the airlock, gaping wide and letting cool Yithian air waft in, Setesh was in such a state of stimulation he forgot the cramped, fickle, untamed little ship. For the Hunter in him had spotted a visually tiny detail, but a fanfare to his olfactory system. A handful of crimson dots on the metal deck splattered in a straight pattern out of the ship and into the wilderness beyond. Red blood. Human blood.

His own pumping lava-hot, Setesh sprinted out of the airlock, leaped right over a thick fallen branch covered in the purplish lichen that would give him light when night would soon fall. He grinned wide.

The Hunt had begun.

Chapter Two

So according to the panel by the airlock, the *Femme Metal* had landed – barely – on a Yithian moon referred to as YM-12, one rich in oxygen and on a balmy sixty degrees Fahrenheit day. Too bad the thing couldn't tell her if the place was inhabited or not.

The ride had been rough, the landing worse still. Luckily the *Femme Metal* was equipped with anchoring niches at regular intervals for the unfortunate soul caught without a seat during transition to faster-than-light travel. She'd strapped herself in and weathered the violent landing. If that Yithian broke Kim's ship, Carmela would bring sausages to roast over the fire the diminutive woman would light under him. Not to mention Titan. If something bugged Kim, Titan would be sure to do something about it, which unfailingly involved his monster of a gun and some to-the-point remark.

Yet after the *landing*, she'd cracked open the hatch and a quick peek had revealed the tough little ship didn't seem to have suffered much more than a few scratches. Still, Kim would have her head. Not to mention that loud woman, the first captain Alex Novona. When either learned of Carmela's little *intermission*, they would go supernova. Although the girly little ship had proven its use time and time again, Carmela didn't understand the passion the other two women felt for the ugly thing, which had always reminded her of a giant steel flea.

Carmela patted the cut on her arm and flicked some blood on the ground behind her as she cleared a thick bramble of thorny green *something*. She'd never been on Yithian soil before and didn't know what to expect from the strange, eerie vegetation choking the greenish sky. She looked down behind her at the blood trail she'd intentionally left and nodded. No Yithian Hunter would resist. Humans may be smaller but they too knew how to hunt.

The oxygen-rich environment fired her body, cleared her mind. She was in some discomfort, sure, she'd barely made it to the nearest anchoring niche before the main boosters had rumbled to life and plastered her against the bulkhead. But if the blue *hombre* thought she'd make for an easy prey, he had another think coming for she not only intended to bait him, she meant to backtrack to the *Femme Metal*, takeoff and wave at him from the porthole. No matter if he'd be stuck on this small moon for the rest of his life. She didn't care. He'd tried to steal her ship...not hers per se but under her care...and deserved a bit of quiet time alone. Cocky, arrogant –

Carmela's foot caught in some strip of lichen and nearly tripped her. With a growled curse, she pulled it out and leaped over the rest of the fallen tree limbs littering the place. She wouldn't be able to backtrack if she didn't put some distance between the Yithian and herself in the first place. She gripped her kinetic energy gun tighter so she wouldn't drop it in case she tripped and fell, something more likely than the Yithian

catching up to her. Yet the surroundings left her nervous, on edge. Dark vegetation stifled everything. The ground felt spongy and moist, covered in moss and lichen and broken tree limbs. Small sounds and smells hovered just beyond her grasp. She felt as if she were inside a giant greenhouse through which a stampeding herd of rhinos had stomped.

An eerie feeling tickled the back of her neck. She leaped to the side, whirled around and pointed her gun at...

Nothing?

When an image exploded in her mind, Carmela gasped.

She was on all fours, naked, receiving the most brutal fucking she'd ever experienced – something with which she was quite intimate – and a quick glance backward revealed her former Yithian captive savagely knocking his hips against her raised butt. His lean muscles rippled, his shoulders banded. He stared straight at her through the cascade of dark silver hair and Carmela knew, she knew, there was something special, something new in his iridescent, pearly gaze. Excitement, fervor. Respect?

A cry of astonishment leaving her, she staggered sideways, was unable to clear the spiky thicket and sprawled right into it. Sharp needles pierced her suit, caught in her hair and scratched at her knuckles as she floundered back to her feet, cursing under her breath at the lost time. He must have been getting close if he could fuck with her mind this way. Literally.

Trying to block the relentless assault on her psyche—each pulse felt like a slap behind the head—Carmela ran as fast as she dared through the larger plant *things*, around boulders the size of houses then across a clearing where she skidded to a stop when the tips of her feet met nothing but air. A crevasse gaped about ten feet wide and unfathomably deep. With a good sprint behind her, she could *probably* make it. The Yithian on her ass would *assuredly* make it. After patting her cut again, Carmela flicked some blood near the edge to make it appear as if she'd jumped across the crevasse then she turned on her heels and dove for the forest again, this time in a perpendicular track that would take her somewhat back to the *Femme Metal* but at an angle.

Try to catch this old hen, *Señor* Fox!

Dense vegetation gradually gave way to rocky, broken terrain in shades of gray and black. Crystalline formations grew out of boulders in upward clusters that pulsed as she grew nearer, seemed to follow the beating of her heart. She would've stopped for the sheer enjoyment of such natural beauty but with a Yithian Hunter on her tail, she only spared a quick glance as she sprinted between the strange rock creations. The sound of water gurgled nearby. Then a tiny splash triggered her instincts.

Mierda.

She skidded to a halt on loose stones, leveled her gun straight in front and fired.

But he'd had time to attack her.

His mental pulse struck her just as the gunshot hit the Yithian hurtling right at her not thirty feet in front. As she flew backward, the gun and she separating in mid-flight,

Carmela was satisfied to see him flailing back by a good ten feet. She heard his *humph* as he hit the ground. A split second later, her own landing left her dizzy and sprawled on her ass. Out of some shred of instinct, she managed to crawl on her hands and knees to retrieve her gun. She was coming up on a knee when she spotted the Yithian by the corner of her eye groggily climbing to his feet and massaging his chest. A human would have had his sternum caved in by a kinetic energy shot but the Yithian merely looked dazed and out of breath. She didn't try to bait him this time.

"Stay where you are, *hombre*."

He froze, let his hands hang by his sides. Water darkened his pant legs up to his knees.

To keep from falling over, Carmela leaned her hand on one of the crystalline clusters while she kept the muzzle of her gun steady on her target. But he seemed more interested with the rock by her side than the weapon trained on him. She looked down—very quickly—and noticed how the crystals pulsed with a radiant amber light, blazing gold at its core when the rest of the boulder was tar black. Strange. As though it responded to her in some way.

He straightened. "Trying to backtrack to the ship was a good idea, human. It almost worked."

She tipped her chin at him.

But he was gorgeous!

Seven feet of smooth, smoky-blue-skinned, silver-haired, muscular Yithian wasn't helping her keep her legendary focus, that was for damn sure. As Kim had said when she'd first seen him, the guy had a decadent, cruel mouth. And if he'd generated hours of solitary pleasure when he lay in her stasis tank, the real thing, awake and oh-so obviously ready for a good round just about made her want to chew his clothes off. But he was a Hunter. A not-so-small complication.

Still, all that delectable male Yithian.

"You will not shoot me," he said, his surprisingly gentle voice startled her out of her visual disrobing.

"Entertain me, Yithian. Why shouldn't I shoot you?"

He had a little half-smirk thing that made Carmela want to kiss him...and smack his ass. Or both. "I am more valuable to you alive than dead."

"Who said I'd aim to kill?"

The smirk crystallized at the edges then slid off his delicious-looking lips. "You play a dangerous game."

"Carmela de Monsalve does *not* play games."

"Perhaps you do not realize what you have brought on yourself, Carmela de Monsalve," he replied, pinching the zipper on his collar and unhurriedly pulling it down.

His pearly gaze on her, he zipped his top apart, let it slide back from his shoulders and fall to the ground. Tattoos covered his entire front, from collarbones to waist, shoulders to wrists. One for each successful hunt. Thick, intricate black ink work crawled, snaked, wrapped over his chiseled torso and underlined the glorious set of muscles, the perfect symmetry of his form, the narrow waist.

He pointed to a spot near his left nipple. "This is where I will place the symbol of your Hunt. A fine prey you were."

"And it's where I'll shoot if you ever call me that again."

He raised an eyebrow. "There is no shame in it, Carmela de Monsalve. I am a Yithian Hunter."

As though this should explain everything!

Heat radiated up from her hand, which still grasped the crystalline cluster, spread upward through her arm and shoulder, warmed her chest. She looked down, hurriedly took her hand away.

The Yithian seemed very interested – and shocked – by the glowing rock at her side and kept glancing back and forth at it then at her. What was he looking for?

"What will you do now, Carmela de Monsalve?"

Her exact thought. What was she going to do with the hunky alien?

"First," she said, narrowing her gaze at him and cocking her head, "we're not letting things turn into a *corrida*. So get down on your knees and cross your hands over your head."

Her several years as a bodyguard revisited seamlessly, as though she hadn't quit the demanding job three years before when she'd taken Kim's lucrative offer instead.

"No."

She shot right between his feet, which blistered the ground and sent a couple of rock chips to fly off.

"Oh I forgot the magic word. *Now*."

Instead he took a step forward, which had her staring hard at his crotch and the way his dark gray pants molded his form, and not caring if it ruined her cool-gal attitude. He was hard! Jesus, the size of him. Unless he was packing a gun in there, a spectacular lump hung along his inner thigh, strained the fabric and made her palms tingle. She wanted a taste of this fine male bad enough to ask. But she was not *dying* to, the one thing that would happen should she let her guard down for a second. Unless the Yithian Hunter wouldn't kill her right away.

A frisson tightened the skin on her shoulders. By her side, the crystalline formation glowed dazzling white before dimming to a pulsating deep crimson. She stepped away from it, strangely feeling as though this thing were giving her away. With a quick shake of her head, she took a deep breath.

And this was when Carmela de Monsalve, for the first time in her life, lost control of a situation.

A series of sharp mental pulses surged over her defenses, flooded her mind with images of lust and carnal abandon, of the Yithian sinking his face between her thighs and licking her, of his fingers invading her, demanding, claiming and *so* skilled.

She heard herself *ahhing* as she arched back. The first ripple hadn't reached her belly when she felt a heavy weight violently tackling her down. She rolled, desperately trying to kick her way out of the tangle of limbs while fighting against the brain-numbing vision. In their struggle, they reached the body of water she'd heard earlier, slid down the embankment and splashed in the first few inches of it, fought for supremacy with their hands and legs, trying to find a fault in the other's skills. Icy-cold water filtered into her clothes, numbed her feet. When he grappled her the way a wrestler would with his head and arms smacking into her middle, Carmela *hoomphed* loudly, knocked the back of her heels against something and lurched back, her fall aided by two hundred fifty plus pounds of Yithian right on top of her. Displaying incredible force, he grabbed a hold of her inner thigh and flipped her facing down.

Like a manacle of flesh, his hand clamped over the back of her neck as he settled on top of her prone body, using his greater bulk and length to pin her beneath him. A hard mass pressed at the juncture of her legs, right below her butt. And she knew it wasn't a gun. Despite putting all her strength into it, he was inexorably forcing her face toward the water. Her chin was already dipping below the surface. She panted hard.

"So I ask again, Carmela de Monsalve," he said, his quick breaths causing strands of dark silver hair to spill down on her face. He smelled of peppery mint. "What will you do now?"

Chapter Three

Setesh couldn't believe how hard he'd had to work just to force the woman down. Already her struggles were making his wet grip more slippery. Not only was her resistance presently causing him to lose his focus but a painful erection crushed against her was also contributing to his weakening grasp on his resolve. He'd never been so aroused before, especially not with a prey. She was very, very worthy of him. Every Yithian Hunter hoped for such a prey to grace their lives even if not many could boast to having found one. An elusive, strong and resourceful prey such as Carmela de Monsalve made the Hunt not only thrilling but also special in ways other species could never understand. For the godless Yithians, especially solitary Hunters, it brought them closer to their core than anything else. It connected them to something greater than they.

She snarled something as she tried to keep her face above water. He wasn't trying to drown her, only keep her focused. If she thought he meant to kill her, she wouldn't try to unman him the way she had with those vicious kicks and elbows, and would concentrate instead on trying to stay alive. As a Hunter would. The comparison shocked him. But then again, she was a special one.

He couldn't believe how strongly he'd been able to feel her response to his mind pulse. And the way the stone had reacted to her touch. Impossible! He'd thought only Yithians could produce such intense light from a mood stone, that humans, biologically and cerebrally different, wouldn't be able to tune in to the mineral's sensory properties. But this human had nearly lit up the whole area just by touching the rock formation.

Long out of fashion, mood stones had at one time been an effective way to find a life partner quickly, although it did kill the enjoyment of first sampling out different candidates. And because it couldn't be fooled, if a stone remained black and dormant, it meant the person wearing it – as jewelry mostly – felt no attraction for his or her chosen partner. But what titillated him, confused him the most, was a mood stone only lit up when two sets of positive connection converged. Impossible in his case since he felt nothing for this human. Except lust of course. But nothing more. Perhaps the unrefined ore wasn't attuned yet and sending false signals.

False signals. An old pain flared in his chest. He pushed it down.

He should know about false signals, shouldn't he, for he'd once procured a set fashioned into a bracelet as a gift for his life partner, only to watch the loose stones remain as black as the abyss that had at that moment opened into his heart. Despite his near-adoration, she hadn't loved him. Not even a little, according to the revealing stones, which should've glowed and held together in an unending row. He'd kept them hidden from her – out of pride mostly – but had left that same day to train as a Hunter,

even if he'd never considered following in his father's footsteps. Filling his skin with black ink had worked great at blocking the void in his chest, even until now, several years later, when that wound was almost completely healed and its grief all but erased.

While maintaining his weight on the woman, Setesh shifted until his chin rested on her shoulder, their cheeks touching. She trembled from trying to remain upright, arms bent, elbows digging in the riverbed. He could feel her sinking by small increments as he pushed her body deeper into the loose, smooth rocks underneath. Water flowed black for the color of the rocks and intermingled with the dark membrane of her garment and loosening hair.

"Are you ready to cooperate?"

She nodded once, quickly.

He eased his grip on the back of her neck. "We will go back to my ship and set a course for Yith. For the homeworld this time, if the defective ship cooperates."

"Your ship?" she growled, puffed when her chin dipped below the waterline.

"I keep what I kill. The ship is mine, as are you."

She barked a quick, mocking laugh. "That's *my* line – 'I keep what I kill'. Never had it turned on me before."

"You never had a Yithian Hunter on you before." His cock was ready to explode and painfully constricted his balls in the tight pants. His willpower slowly eroded with each second pressed against the curvy human, especially since he was bare-chested and could feel every subtle detail.

"No, but I had a Yithian *under* me before."

Setesh couldn't speak for several seconds as he dissected her words and the meaning behind them. When it became clear to him she'd tasted other Yithian males, his reaction surprised and shamed him. Envy?

"And did you enjoy it?" Why did he need to know?

"As much as *they* did," she growled, her jaw now under the water's surface. She puffed, spat water, made a sort of half whimper, half snarl of frustration when she sank by another small measure. Her elbows dug in among the worn-smooth rocks.

"I have no doubt they enjoyed your touch, Carmela de Monsalve. Did you know Yithian males value their females so much, my people had to make laws to protect them? Especially the ones in their second cycles, those of experience. Like you."

All things considered, with both species' methods of time-keeping and genetic makeup compared, he must have been younger than she, closer to what humans called "twenties" even if he was nearing seventy human years, whereas Carmela de Monsalve must have hovered around the forty mark. She was dangerously beautiful, ripe and strong. No wonder he could hardly think.

He felt her rise in temperature, smelled her scent becoming more intense, even headier, and knew she'd enjoyed his remark. How he wished he could make her enjoy more than his words! Setesh suspected – was even assured – this one would not only

enjoy his fierce touch but would also grace his body with her own. He squeezed his eyes shut for a brief instant so he could collect his scattered thoughts.

Monumental mistake.

For with his eyes closed, he could feel her body's subtle movements beneath his, the way her backside fit perfectly to his groin, the camber of her back a perfect place to lay his lips and his hands, her shoulders ideal anchors as he'd push himself into her and if the feel of her nearly unmade him, the smells tickling his nostrils—female musk, some sort of perfumed salve in her hair—disintegrated his self-control. His hand had begun to caress her hip before he'd realized he'd moved.

"Hombre, now you're the one playing dangerous games," she murmured between pants.

"You would enjoy my touch as well, Carmela de Monsalve. I am very skilled and young by Yithian standards, therefore vigorous."

Another flare in body temperature. Setesh was shocked yet again at how responsive she was to him, and at his own receptivity of her every body reaction, from the subtlest gesture—such as how she'd just turned her head toward him ever so slightly—to the faintest fragrance emanating from her skin, the color of which reminded him of a human drink he much enjoyed, *cafe latte*. Licking her essence off his lips would be a delight. Just as she was.

As though the thought had turned on a switch in Setesh, his mind exploded in a series of vivid mind pulses and even if he could hardly control the tornado of blazing images, he nonetheless directed each at her, suspecting, hoping—knowing—she'd receive them, add to them and send them back. She did. Setesh growled in anticipation. She was so perfect, perfect for a Hunter, for *him*.

As a test, he sent an image.

Both of them rolled in the water, each struggling to pin the other beneath, ripping at their partly done clothes, pulling at their hair. She landed on her back, clutching his head between pitiless hands and guiding his mouth to her sex, which glistened like a rosy flower in the setting Yithian suns. Setesh licked her juices, which were plentiful, and sucked at her exquisite pearl.

He waited to see what she would do with his overture. She sent him one that burned his eyelids with visions of uncontrolled passion.

He, on his knees while she stood in front of him, hooked a leg over his shoulder, gyrated against his face so he'd eat her more deeply. Curling her spine, she said, "Fuck me."

Setesh, in the real and physical world, took a long, steadying breath. Underneath his hand, the woman's backside was curving up against his palm, her legs struggling to spread but prevented by his own. Her dark eyes rolled up to look at him. Fire raged behind the cool mask.

"If you're just going to lie there," she growled, *"get off me."*

"You wish I would not 'just lie there'? What should I do then?"

She only glared at him.

“I enjoy you human females. You are so full of fire. And you have precise words for precise actions. Like that word you humans use – fuck. It has a pleasing sound.” He put his mouth right against her ear. “I want to *fuck* you.”

A leisurely lick from lobe to shell welded her jaws with a visible twitch. He distinctly heard her teeth grinding together. Setesh was proud of her reaction. To give her pleasure and to stroke his Hunter ego – no use denying it – he did it again, followed the curve of her ear to the tip then started to nibble at her tender lobe.

Releasing the nape of her neck, he let his hand trail down her spine to her perfectly rounded behind, let his palm rest against the juncture of her legs while the tips of his fingers reached down the fissure afforded by her molded pants. The stitching disappeared between her cheeks. He rubbed it, enjoying each tiny stitch, back and forth. A soft moan rewarded him.

Another mind pulse...

She was standing now, wearing a blood-red shawl tied diagonally around her waist and those lovely underthings human females wore to cover their breasts. Setesh loved those. It was black and partly see-through. Lace, he believed the delicate fabric was called. There existed nothing similar on Yith where females dressed pretty much the same way males did. She was twirling, clapping her hands rhythmically while stomping a foot, the complex, proud, dignified cadence of which intensified until Setesh swore her pumping lower leg became a blur. Never had a simple dance – music-less, executed by a lone human female – frothed him into such frenzy, elicited a response right down to his bones. That the sound of her clapping hands and stomping feet could open – disintegrate – the watershed around his heart, his soul.

With an intense look, she raised her hands high over her head, clapped once hard, brought one down, turning it this way and that, curled her arm until she had one hand above her head and the other near her hip. Thus, she began to spin. Fast. Faster.

Setesh snarled as he raised himself on an elbow so he could turn Carmela de Monsalve onto her back and dive for her mouth. She seemed to have been waiting for him, for when his lips connected to hers, another barrage of images assailed him. He had never known humans could do this!

She, on elbows and knees, head thrown back, receiving him while he clutched at her hips and hammered away at her rosy flesh.

He had to have her now. Always. She was his. He’d keep her, make love to her all day then they’d Hunt together all night.

With a shake of his head, he tried to clear the madness gripping him. What was wrong with him?

He’d have her now but that’d be it. She wouldn’t taste the same afterward. He’d been burned this way before and wouldn’t again. Ever.

He felt her hand snaking down around his waist, searching for the closure to his pants, but didn’t try to help. If she were as skilled as he hoped she was, she didn’t need

his help. But if she fumbled and failed, then he'd push her away. A Yithian male had no use for inexperienced, immature females.

Pride made him growl deep in his chest when she readily found the closure and pulled it down, slipped a cold hand inside to caress his cock. So she had experience and skill. Such a prize!

Using his tongue, narrower and longer than hers, he explored her mouth, dueled and wrestled with her own – agile too – and retreated so he could lick her lips and chin, her jaw, her throat then lower.

Setesh withdrew until he sat on his heels, his cock painfully squeezed while she still lay on her back, raised on her elbows and stared at him with frustration blazing like an inferno. He enjoyed how lack of him would do this to her and let the moment drag for several seconds.

"*Hombre*, I gave you fair warning," she murmured in that velvety voice he'd come to enjoy so much. Because he knelt downstream to her, he could watch water flowing around her, playing with some of the loose strands of hair cascading over her shoulders.

"You will call me by my name. Setesh Geb."

"The warning stands, Setesh."

His grin seemed to please her for she narrowed her eyes, cocked her head as she waited for his reply.

"You will undress for me."

He wondered for an instant if the commanding tone would make her pounce on him or freeze in defiance, or if the proud human would indeed undress for him. He didn't have to wonder long.

With a lopsided grin, she pinched the small metallic closure on her neck and leisurely slid it down to her navel, revealing the sort of lace underthing he'd seen during her mental pulse. It was black and it was magnificent.

She squeezed an arm out then the other. Then she stopped.

"Continue."

A shake of head loosened more black hair. A coil sprung down from its confines and hung loose over her forehead. The deep V of her parted garment offered him an irresistible view of her belly and the crease between her rounded breasts. So much more pronounced than Yithian females. The last human female with whom he'd been intimate – an escort from his father's brothel-ship *Gorgosh* – had had the largest breasts he'd ever seen, perfectly round and even if he suspected them of having been artificially altered, he didn't care for they'd been splendid just the same.

"I said, you will undress for me."

To his shock and *thrill*, she spread her legs, clad in shiny boots well over her knees, until she had put a heel down on either side of him.

"If you mean to keep what you kill, you must earn it first...*hombre*."

The look on his face.

Carmela forced herself not to gasp when Setesh gripped her ankles, yanked her nearer to him, and she didn't move a muscle as he fisted either side of her zippered collar and gave a sharp tug. With a snap, the suit's neckline reached down to her pubic bone then loosened on her hips.

With practiced movements, he clipped her belt and holster off, baton still in it, whipped it behind him without a look then leaned over so he could plant a hand on either side of her hips.

But *she* knew exactly where the belt had landed.

"If I cannot command you with my words, then I will with my mouth."

His kiss had nothing tender about it. Carmela didn't care. She returned it bite for bite, groan for groan, lick for lick, in control for now, yet in the back of her mind, she knew she was slipping fast. Setesh was proving to be one tough nut to crack and if pushing him to violence had seemed a good plan to occupy him while she found a way to overcome the Yithian Hunter, she couldn't be so sure anymore she wasn't just teasing him for the sheer pleasure of it.

Never leaving her mouth, he reached to his side, clamped a fist around her ankle and brought her leg straight up so he could pull the zipper at the back of her leg. He yanked her thigh-high boot off. His face a changing mask of excitement, ferocity and eagerness, he abruptly abandoned her mouth and straightened so he could do away with her other boot. Carmela hadn't known it was possible for the usually smooth and stoical Yithians to be so expressive.

Gathering both her naked feet up with one hand, he snaked his other underneath her back, grabbed at her suit and expertly pulled it out then off. The thick layer of polymer made a sucking noise when her feet snapped out of it. He looked down and froze.

Carmela noticed her pubic hair snuck out from one side of her black lace thongs, and this was what the Yithian stared at, noticeably mesmerized. She was reminded again at their lack of body hair except for their heads and eyebrows, which weren't arched as humans' but straight over each eye. For a split second, Carmela was worried he didn't like her perfectly triangular bush. But he readily quieted her doubts when he grinned in the most feral way possible, looked at her pussy then let the tip of his tapered tongue brush against the row of stark white, slightly pointed teeth. His teeth reminded her of another Yithian's but she couldn't remember who just then. Too busy.

He said something in his language and Carmela doubted he even realized he spoke at all. Though she didn't understand the words—Kim and that Novona woman being the only humans she knew who spoke the complicated language—she did get the gist of it as he slowly ran an index finger along the thongs' elastic band, followed the lacy patterns then traced the fissure between her lips. He licked his bottom lip.

With a thumb, he hooked the front of her thongs and pulled up slightly so it'd shape and part her vulva, which he caressed with the tip of his other thumb—leisurely, in small circles. Heat radiated down to her feet. Carmela was about to shift her pelvis so his thumb would rub harder when he did just that, accentuated the pressure until he stirred her lips through the lace, pulled one aside, took a good long look then let it go. Although she kept rehearsing her moves in the back of her mind—strike for his throat first then if she were lucky and got another shot, aim for his eyes—her body had decided it could dispense with the rest of her and do its own thing. Her back arched when Setesh slipped his thumb under her panties and the combination of hot Yithian skin and cold water produced one fine peak of pleasure. A moan escaped her.

"I told you, Carmela de Monsalve," he whispered, his iris-less, pupil-less eyes on her face, "I am very skilled. Now, you will undress me."

And this was all it took for her to push him back, snap to her knees and snake both hands at once into his parted pants. She'd been dying for a look at all that glorious blue skin and could resist no longer. As he twisted his narrow hips out of the tight pants, the tattoos on his belly rippled and undulated as if they were living entities, the thick black motifs seemingly coming to life under her hands. She noticed he had ink work right down to his pubic bone as well and over one hip.

He'd been a busy Hunter. And a successful one.

She wondered at the sacrifices entailed in a life such as his and the motivation behind the pitiless self-discipline. Did Hunters get lonely sometimes? Did they have steady partners? Could they trust another being at all given their predatory nature and oftentimes exacting lifestyle?

When the gloriously smooth, glossy and pointed Yithian cock sprang out of its confines, Carmela forgot everything else.

"*Dios.*"

Now that she could see what a *real* Yithian member looked like, the other lovers of the species she'd tested didn't begin to compare. Not only in size—which Setesh completely redefined—but in beauty and symmetry. No ridges, no hair or wrinkles, his penis stood proudly like the foot-long magnificence it was. There'd never be any other like this, she knew for a fact. And when she reached for it with greedy fingers, Setesh must have known he had the upper hand for he caught her by the wrist, turned her palm upward so he could bite the tender inside.

"I must earn what I kill, Carmela de Monsalve, and accept the challenge. You must do the same."

A hot-cold-hot-cold frisson spread from her lower back to her shoulders. Arousal threatened to make her a complete hormonal wreck.

For reply, she lifted her chin defiantly and gave him what Kim would call her Flamenco Stare of Doom. It seemed to have a totally different effect on Setesh than it did on everyone else. Instead of appearing cowed or put back on his heels, he narrowed his eyes as a *torrero* would with a bull about to charge.

His nostrils flared. "You will cost me a fortune in ink."

Coming up on his knees, he grabbed his cock, weighed it in a loose fist then threaded his fingers in her hair, inexorably pulling her down to his chest, on which she set herself with fury. Biting his painted skin, she tilled it with too-rough fingers, unable and unwilling to curb her energy – this was a *Yithian*, he could take it, could take her – wanted to cover as much of it as possible. She'd scared enough men away with her intensity, for having either pinned them against a wall for a passionate kiss or scared the shit out of them with her audacious demands and preferences in bed. All she wanted was to have one lover, just one, give it back to her. Yithians had proven perfect for that. Or so she'd thought.

Until now. She knew Setesh would make for a particularly enthusiastic bed partner, even among his kind.

Setesh cupped her chin in his large hand, forced her away from him. They locked stares. "Take it into your mouth."

She wanted nothing more, suspected she wouldn't settle for anything *less* either and lamented she'd never have another lover such as Setesh Geb. All the more reason to make the best of it right here and right now.

She cradled his heavy shaft in both hands as one would an offering and bent over until she could lick the length of it from tapered end to silky base with the tip of her tongue then the blade of it, soft then hard. His belly constricted, the tattoos surged and swelled with his labored breathing.

"You are skilled as well." His voice sounded tight.

Carmela wanted to grin in satisfaction.

Crouching completely onto her knees and elbows in front of him, she took his cock into her mouth, retreated so she could dip the end into the cold water then wolfed it down her throat so he'd enjoy the contrasting temperatures and feel. Her feet were numb, her hands stiff. She didn't care. Carmela sucked him as hard and for as long as she could. Because he was so tall, she felt him lean over her. Thrill sharpened into exhilaration.

One of his hands slid down her back, traced serpentine shapes all over her feverish skin then focused on her spine. She moaned when hot, long fingers stroked her coccyx and anus, gathered her juices then smeared her with them. When she pushed her forehead against his belly, fighting against the gag reflex his long cock triggered, he pushed a finger inside her ass. So she did the same to him, reached under his sac, followed his muscled butt and penetrated him just as he had her. Her forearm crushed his balls as she thrust inside him yet he didn't seem to care. His low groan made her accelerate, as did his piston-like claiming.

Carmela closed her eyes. "Mmm."

Large hands cupped her cheeks and pulled wide. Water seeped into her vagina, which clenched sporadically as Carmela fought the instincts to expel the cool incursion.

Using her butt as an anchor, Setesh pushed his cock farther down her throat, retreated, thrust back in.

“Take me in,” he kept repeating. “Take me in.”

When she thought he was about to come in her mouth, something she wasn't about to let him do—much too personal and special for a partner she was considering conking on the head later on—he pulled out, sat on his heels with his hands cupped on his thighs and both watched as his cum jetted straight up then slid like liquid silk down the length of him to lose itself into the flowing river. Carmela watched, enthralled and shocked a Yithian would so willingly part with his precious “seed”. The peculiar moment stretched for several seconds as both examined the other's nakedness or merely gazed with the unhurried poise of those attuned to their bodies and unashamed of it. Soon though, Carmela's libido kicked up a notch. If he didn't get things started again, she just might tackle him down and spear herself to him.

“Take your underclothes off and kneel back,” he said at length, his eyes narrowed to black slits so different from the usual opalescent orbs.

Carmela did as he instructed, sent bra and thongs flying, knelt back and leaned a hand on either side of her ankles so her spine would arch and her large breasts would stand up proudly. To her immense thrill, Setesh lay down on his front, body almost completely underwater except for the pair of tight blue mounds cresting over the surface—tattoos covered part of his back as well, with one thorny symbol snaking down over one of his cheeks—and forced her knees wider with his shoulders.

“Have your other Yithian lovers fucked you with their mouths?”

Carmela nodded.

“Not like this.”

Using the strength of his arms alone, he lifted her pelvis off the riverbed so her pussy would surface and sank his face right against it. She cried out when sharp points dug in her tender flesh. He'd bitten her! But the following tongue work made her forget the temporary sting. Rapture washed over her and she arched back, sank to her elbows, the back of her head touching the water. He indeed fucked her with his mouth with the force of his tongue thrusts, which he kept coming with regularity and vigor, always ending with a sharp flick at her clit. Carmela could tell she wouldn't take long with such a skilled companion.

She was about to come when another mind pulse hit her. Hard.

Liquid fire spread from her pussy to her thighs as Setesh worked his magnificent tongue in and out, flicked her clit then rubbed it with a thumb. Abruptly, he pushed himself up on his knees, roughly grabbed her around her hips and squeezed his thighs between hers and before she could taste the fine peak he'd just given her, Setesh took her. Carmela cried out—for real or only in her mind, she didn't know.

“Open for me, Carmela de Monsaloe,” Setesh snarled while he retreated so he could push back in.

Suddenly the soft and pliable woman she'd never been and always abhorred let him arch her back with each powerful thrust, threatened to snap her spine every time, pop her hips or dislocate a knee.

Wet dark-silver hair clung to his face and chest as he pounded away, pitiless fingers digging in her flesh, cock rampaging, asserting, branding. Each inch of hard Yithian flesh made her cry out in unreserved, utter ecstasy. She came like a gunshot.

Carmela opened her eyes to see Setesh coming up on his knees, seemingly about to do exactly what he'd already done in the vision. Carmela tucked her bottom lip in and spread herself as wide as she could, not caring how rocks dug in her knees or that her hips burned with the strain. Just as in the mental fucking he'd given her, the Yithian seized her around the waist, pulled until she straddled his lap and nudged her vulva with the tip of his cock. Then he froze to stare at her.

Carmela waited for the explosion, the fireworks, the fire.

"You must earn it."

"I have, Hunter," she snapped back, long past caring if she offended his Yithian sensibilities about the Hunt or some such nonsense. She wanted the mind-blowing fucking he'd given her and she was going to get it.

"No, you have not. You have taken but not given." He curled his spine so his shaft would press against her throbbing cunt but not sink in.

"Hombre, I'm warning you, there's just so much teasing this señora can take."

"Your breasts," he replied with that predatory expression he seemed to have mastered in the crib, "you will feed them to me. One at a time."

Feed them to him? Fine!

Carmela hooked a hand around his neck, cupped a breast then raised it to his mouth. He made no move toward it.

Cursing inwardly, she raised herself as far as she could go—there *was* at least a foot difference in heights here—and elevated her offering higher until her nipple practically touched his chin. But he didn't move.

Pendejo...

Not one to take this from any lover, least of all some cursed alien, she fisted his hair—

He moved so fast, she barely managed to blink.

"Ahh!"

His cock rammed in to the base and his pointed teeth pressed over her breast.

The epic ride she'd enjoyed from the Hunter's vivid mental pulses, the one she'd craved since locking him in her stasis tank. She received it.

Carmela's rhythmic cries rose with each of Setesh's powerful thrusts. While the breast he licked and bit burned, her other bounced violently. The escalation of pleasure reached supernova proportions, surpassed anything she'd ever had before, eclipsed every single lover—and she'd enjoyed many a bed companion in her thirty-eight

years – until she reached the purest, sharpest peak of her life. Carmela climaxed just as Setesh rammed himself so deep, she felt his cock push against the end of her channel. Stars fizzed in her vision. She clenched her jaw, squeezed her eyes shut. Both shared a long groan of fulfillment as she milked him repeatedly, each spasm fisting her pussy around his smooth, rock-hard cock. Burning semen filled her sex.

She caught him staring at her with his mouth curved into a satisfied smile. The pearly, opalescent gaze held none of the predatory air, none of the former superiority. He just looked contented.

“A fortune in ink,” he murmured before pulling out of her and cradling her head against his chest.

His heart beat madly, arrhythmically. Carmela grinned against the hot, resilient skin. Soon his breathing had returned to a more regular cadence as had his heart, and he leaned sideways so he could lie down on his back. He didn’t seem to care his legs still lay in the river as he pulled himself up along the bank, rolled a few rocks out of the way and patted the ground by his side.

“Come to me, Carmela de Monsalve. We will sleep.”

She lowered her gaze so it wouldn’t betray her. Lying down by his side, she rested a hand over his chest and allowed herself the temporary – very much so – weakness of needing a good bit of snuggling against the best lover of her life. She’d hate leaving him, but she didn’t have a choice. He couldn’t keep the *Femme Metal* and he surely couldn’t keep her. Carmela de Monsalve, descendant from one of the oldest families of Andalucía, wasn’t anyone’s prey. But for now, for this short moment, she lay down beside Setesh Geb, a Yithian Hunter, unsure if she pretended or not the great languor spreading through her limbs. And not really wanting to know.

Chapter Four

Carmela took a few seconds to admire him one last time. She had no doubt now how young Setesh was in reference to his people's standards in the way his facial features didn't yet bear the deep, chiseled angles nor the cold, impassive mask so characteristic of them. And that proud lift to his chin still reminded her of another of his race but she couldn't quite place it.

Don't make it last. Just do it.

One hit would suffice, right there at the temple. Her heart squeezing, she raised the telescopic baton high.

An image floated into her mind. Not one of his mind pulses but a memory of her own psyche. *Setesh looking down at her after they'd shared a mind-blowing – literally – orgasm. The quiet smile.*

She couldn't do it.

She didn't even bother trying to retrieve her clothes and just padded silently farther downriver, making sure not to step into the water and cause a splash he'd be sure to hear with those keen Yithian ears of his. But then again, he was sleeping and one thing she'd learned about the fearsome race was that they slept as hard as they played and warred.

Naked but armed, she retraced her steps into the eerily glowing forest where a sort of purplish iridescent lichen shimmered against the otherwise dark foliage and provided just enough illumination to see where she put her feet. When she had to step over a thick fallen tree, she knew she was getting close.

The *Femme Metal's* tallest antennas poked above the tree line and soon she stood by the gaping hatch, stepped inside after one last look and pushed against the heavy iron door. Locking it, she fisted the control and padded out of the airlock into the dormant ship, reactivating system after dormant system as she went, trying to ignore the strange feeling of emptiness in her chest.

She'd be stranding him on a moon with possibly no way to get back home. He'd live out the remainder of his days alone, living off what he could find. Carmela cursed under her breath as she put her hand on the first rung leading to the upper deck and the bridge.

That's no proper way to end for a Yithian Hunter.

It wasn't honorable.

"Mierda."

Running now, she reached the cargo hold, fiddled with the weapons locker door and pulled a pair of stunners, a long-range comms unit and a first-aid kit. His

homeworld wasn't far, not even a light-year away, and could be seen low over the horizon, its large water bodies making the planet an unmistakable giant green version of Old Earth. Complete with snowy caps on either poles. If the moon turned out to be uninhabited, a message from a long-range comms transmitter was sure to be heard. They'd come for a Hunter.

She waited inside the airlock, bundle in hand, kinetic gun in the other, and watched for several standard minutes for any sign of movement. When she was satisfied he hadn't sneaked back to the *Femme Metal*—yet, for he would—Carmela hurriedly unlocked and threw the door wide. She lobbed the bundle as far away as she dared so the boosters wouldn't burn everything to a crisp when she took off and locked the ship down again. This time she felt much better reaching the bridge and settling into the swivel seat.

Within minutes she had assessed the ship's damages—Kim would have her head on a *platter*, two smashed exterior sensors and several smaller hiccups with the environmental systems, no aft cannon and only half of the attitude jets functioning—and begun the launching sequence.

Despite the armada of warning bells and error messages crawling at the bottom of her view screen, Carmela fired the engines. The deep tremor made her grab the blue cocks harder—they looked puny now that she'd seen a truly memorable one—as she waited for the third booster—the most recent addition—to rumble to life, which it did with a deep whirring sound. In the view screen, Carmela watched trees diminishing in size as she lifted off, rotated half a turn so her boosters wouldn't point in the general direction of the river. Yithians weren't known for their careful and bashful ways. He just might come charging down and get fried in the process.

When she was two hundred feet off the ground, she felt confident she wouldn't burn anything of value, angled the ship's nose upward and gunned it. All three supercharged engines roared as she tore from the moon's atmosphere, circled the small orbit once then aimed at the deep void so she could trigger a hyperspace conduit, which would take her to the next drop point on her list—Land's End. A strange feeling squeezed her throat. She was trying to get back to her normal routine and deliver the weapons her boss had designed, something she'd always looked forward to and enjoyed, yet she felt none of the excitement. No rush, no thrill. Right now, as a matter of fact, all she wanted was to sleep off the melancholy.

The conduit gaped wide and hollow, just as a chasm did in her heart. Carmela couldn't remember ever feeling so despondent, despite the success. She'd just gotten away from a Yithian Hunter *twice*, no small feat.

The one thing from which she couldn't seem to get away was the emptiness inside.

* * * * *

"You said *what*?" Kim asked, coming nearer to the videocaptor, as though she could spot the damages over Carmela's shoulder. "What kind of damages?"

“Minor things. An attitude jet here, a bit of plating there. Take it out of my cut. I don’t care. I’m just informing you the *Femme Metal* will be stuck at Land’s End for a while. They’re waiting for some parts. It’s going to take at least a week.”

Kim put her hand over her mouth, her large eyes flared even wider. She shook her head, pushed off her seat but plopped back down. “I’m *so* coming over, like, right now. Do *not* let no one’s greasy fingers come anywhere near her, okay? I totally mean that, Carmela.”

“They’re perfectly able to—”

“Nobody’s greasy paw touches my ship.”

Carmela shrugged. “I’ll lock the ship tight until you get here. Oh and bring another cannon.”

“*What?!*”

Carmela cut the transmission before Kim could vent. She might be half Carmela’s size but the diminutive space babe could turn into a miniature bull if someone scratched her beloved ship.

Carmela had more than scratched it. Actually, Setesh had crash-landed it, not her.

Don’t call him by name. He’s the “Yithian Hunter” to you. Not Setesh Geb.

Sighing, she shouldered her pack and headed for the airlock. Fifty degrees, according to the panel. Land’s End was always too cold for her tastes, especially after Yithians had stopped coming. While they’d been allowed on station, they’d hounded the authorities to keep the temperature at a decent sixty-five. She shared their taste for heat.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she stepped off the ship and onto Land’s End, kinetic gun safely strapped at her waist, satchel containing the basic necessities. In her case, her toiletries bag, the arms catalogue, her music decoder and a couple more guns. The usually crowded docking ports were practically deserted. She hadn’t noticed anything different about the number of ships moored to the station. The tower hadn’t relayed any info either. Not that she’d paid much attention to the messages crawling at the bottom of her screen, busy as she’d been replaying her encounter with the Yithian. She was still delectably sore all over.

A pair of station security personnel jogged down the concrete pier toward her. She resisted the urge to grab her gun and greet them Carmela-style.

“You can’t be here,” one said, his blond mustache trimmed too thin.

“Why not? This is a public docking station.”

His partner shook his head. “Not for the next four days it’s not. The delegations are supposed to get here anytime now.” He gave her a pronounced once-over. “The station’s airspace is a no-fly zone for a week. I don’t know what you did to get clearance to dock but it must’ve been good.”

She put a hand to her gun, which was twice as powerful, twice as shiny as theirs. "My father taught me there was never a good time to show bad manners. Especially to a *señora*."

"Which of the ships belongs to you? We might have to tow it down below with the others."

Carmela smiled benevolently. Poor little man didn't even know. "The *Femme Metal*."

She watched his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed hard. "Oh."

"I'd say."

His partner straightened. "We'll clear the gate for you."

"That'd be a good idea."

They must have felt how close they'd come to a world of hurt. She just didn't feel like dispensing it. What was wrong with her?

"Who's coming to Land's End anyway?" she asked, bored with the answer before she'd finished asking the question. This apathy wasn't like her. She'd need something to cheer her. Professional male companionship perhaps.

Or a certain Yithian Hunter.

"Earth delegation should get here in about three standard hours. The Yithians aren't due until tomorrow but the bosses want everything cleared in case someone gets any ideas."

Earth and Yith had both sent delegations to Land's End? So soon after The Incident in which she'd played a large role? After she'd conked her pretty Hunter on the head, she'd come outside the Flashpoint—rowdiest club on the station—and had had to help gun down a trio of Yithians attacking her boss and her boyfriend. The Yithian crime lord Drokesh must have been a powerful figure indeed for after his death Yith had all but declared war on humans. Something neither race could really afford. So apparently each was sending a delegation to smooth things over. Smart.

"What kind of ideas?" she asked, not really interested but intel was always a nice thing to have.

"You've been in space awhile," Rude Jerk replied as they escorted her to the concrete plaza, which meant the end of the docking stations' proper. It was crowded here and smelled of food, people and trouble. "Not everyone is happy Yithians and Earth are trying to patch things up."

She didn't return their nods when she left them and crossed the gate, which she couldn't remember being there before. It resembled a store's entrance, complete with reinforced steel turnstiles. Security personnel milled about on both sides of the gates, hands on their guns. The logic of choosing Land's End, notorious for its laissez-faire attitude, as locale to hold diplomatic parlays escaped her. But then again, no other place in the system could boast to being as completely neutral as the squalid station. Perhaps

politicians had more acumen than she'd given them credit for. Her last boss sure hadn't had any.

Speaking of acumen, the trio of men tailing her must not have had much either if they thought keeping to a hundred-pace distance wouldn't give them away. Did they think she was some novice? Insulting is what it was.

Without fully turning around, Carmela gauged her pursuers. Three men. Small weapons, for she could see nothing sticking out. No professional background either if she'd managed to spot them so quickly. Clearly, these were mere thugs. Collins'? To her practiced eye, the one on the left, smaller but meaner-looking, would have to go down first.

She stopped at a cookshop, which resembled Old Earth's twenty-first-century train wagon diners, to buy some over-processed stick of sweet bread and a pouch of water. She wasn't hungry but she did need to use the stainless steel booth as a mirror and get a better feel for her unwanted company. She was paying when the smaller man decided to make his move.

He came at her from the right with a small knife pointing below his palm. So he meant for a downward or slashing attack, not a thrust or stab.

Come get hurt, you cara de culo.

Carmela pivoted on her heel, tossed the pouch at him. For a split second he lost his focus, his gaze going for the projectile instead of remaining on his target. Amateur. She had her telescopic baton in hand the next moment, extended halfway in an upward arc that ended between the man's legs. He groaned and curled in on himself.

"Never take your eyes off the target, hombre."

She snapped him a sharp little crack on the back of the skull. *Never let one walk away.* He collapsed just as his two colleagues charged at her. By then the cookshop's clientele had realized an attack was underway and pushed to get away, screaming, cursing or taking off with stolen merchandise.

The taller man grabbed her injured arm and yanked her sideways. Did he hope to achieve anything with such a stupid move? Honestly. She rarely fell prey to anger but the recent events, her short but fiery encounter with the Yithian Hunter and now this exercise in futility served to enrage Carmela beyond caution.

Her aggressor received a bone-crunching rap on the wrist for his trouble but his companion had managed to avoid her kick and pulled a stunner out of his black nylon jacket. She'd misjudged this one's speed. She *never* misjudged an adversary's speed. What was wrong with her? This lack of alertness might just have cost her dearly.

She gasped.

It took Carmela a few seconds to realize she'd been shot. The polymer round hit her in the thigh, breaking and splattering its conductive gel laced with nanodarts. She hit the ground when electricity coursed through her, jaws locked together in painful spasms.

Both men grabbed her under the arms—the gash on her forearm still burned, despite the healing balm she’d put on it—and dragged her back, with no one making a move except to get out of their way. One held her satchel in his other hand. Her legs twitched with remnants of the stunner round. But she’d been shot enough times to get accustomed—as much as one could get accustomed to being electrified—and pretended to still be debilitated as the pair rounded the nearest corner and dropped her prone by a pile of garbage bins. One knelt by her side and fisted her coiled hair so he could lift her face to his.

“Collins has a message for you.”

His breath smelled of hard meds, the telltale metallic odor making her grimace as did the burst capillaries around his eyes. Who would do this to themselves?

Meds Head flicked his right hand where a narrow but vicious-looking blade snapped out of his sleeve. She could’ve laughed had she been in the mood. As it was, after her confrontation with the fine Yithian Hunter—a worthy adversary if she ever met one—these two lowlifes merely irritated her. She still couldn’t believe she’d let them trick her this way.

That Yithian. It was all his fault.

While his companion, cradling his broken arm, watched the alley’s entrance for signs of undue interest from the general public, Meds Head brought the blade’s tip closer to her face, let it hover as he seemed to search for the perfect place to mark her.

Another image juxtaposed itself over reality.

Setesh, a feral curve to his thin Yithian lips, bending over as he prepared to kiss her.

What if he hadn’t found the bundle? What if the *Femme Metal’s* thrusters had burned everything? What if he injured himself? She’d left him behind to possibly live out his days on a small moon. A Yithian Hunter. The best lover she’d ever had, the one man—alien—able to handle her, rise to her expectations.

Focus!

Still, her body shivered at the mere *memory* of his touch, which she already missed in the most acute fashion.

That’s what Yithians do, they get inside your head and screw you. Forget him.

She couldn’t.

Mierda. *You have to.*

Guilt and fury rose, sour, overpowering like bad wine.

Carmela snapped her head up before Meds Head could react. The muffled crunch of bones preceded his snarl of pain by a second. He left her hair so he could clamp his hand over his bleeding nose and mouth, opportunity she put to good use. She bent her arms push-up-like, gave a mighty shove while simultaneously snapping her knees under herself and, now crouching, elbowed the man in the throat.

Broken Wrist whirled around, his good hand reached inside his jacket. She didn’t have a stunner, only her kinetic energy gun, and if she used it, everyone would know

and she'd end up in the brig quicker than one could say "gun-control violation". Land's End might have been neutral and pretty lax with its weapon-carrying inhabitants, but to use a kinetic energy gun was paramount to detonating explosives on the market square. Probably why the thugs only had knives and stunners. Law-abiding citizens that they were.

While she kicked Meds Head in the chest, sending him sprawling on his ass, she retrieved her baton from the ground, snapped it to its longest setting so she could reach Broken Wrist before he pulled out whatever weapon he hid under his jacket. She struck his hand – did he ever howl – and renamed him Broken Wrists. Plural.

While he danced on the spot, both arms limp at his sides, she grabbed Meds Head by the coat lapels, hoisted him to her and kneed him in the groin. While he snarled and bent in half, Carmela seized him in a headlock and rushed for the wall. At the last possible second, she launched him toward the concrete wall, let go and spun sideways so her human projectile could go on his merry way. He hit the wall with a *humph* and slid to the ground.

Turning toward Broken Wrists, Carmela tapped the baton against her palm. "I too have a message for Collins."

She raised her baton.

The thug was already rushing out of the alley, both hands flapping like flesh flags.

Without a look back at the unconscious man slumped against the wall, Carmela retrieved her bag, slid her baton in its holster – a spare one since she'd left pretty much everything with the Yithian, favorite boots included – and exited the alley. No one seemed to pay her particular attention. The cookshop clientele had already returned to its former activity. Life as usual on Land's End.

She marched for the central part of the station, near the red-light district and its colorful denizens, where she would attract no attention except for the unavoidable sexual kind, which was to be expected as human females were and had always been a favorite with many species, the shiny and reptilian Narays and intensely feral Yithians included. Although no one from the latter had come to the station since the previous month's incident. Killing Drokesh and his guards in the middle of the street had had a lasting impression on the rest of his race.

Setesh's mouth, curved at one corner, filled her mind's eye. Arrogant, cocky thing! She'd seen that smirk before. It was so frustrating not being able to recall the details. Surely it hadn't been one of her couple of Yithian lovers. She wouldn't have forgotten, would she? As for the Hunter, she'd remember every individual angle on his hard body for the rest of her days. Heat like a fever spread through her.

How could she have lost her edge this way? She'd need to purge those demons, otherwise she just might end up hurt or dead. Or worse, broken-hearted.

Carmela stopped so abruptly someone walked right into her. She apologized distractedly, shaking her head and cursing. She had *not* just thought that, had she? Her? Broken-hearted? Over some tattooed alien bent on calling her "prey" and wanting to

add “Carmela de Monsalve” to his trophy list? Yet as much as her Andalusian honor forced her to ignore the emotional pull she felt for him—she was no one’s prey—she couldn’t discount Setesh had had a lasting impression on her, if only for his skilled lovemaking.

She was in trouble.

* * * * *

Setesh cleared the bramble with a leap, landed running and swerved just in time to see the ship turning away and aiming its prow at the sky. Glowing white-hot, the giant thrusters took the ugly little ship and its precious occupant away from the surface and out of his grasp. He skidded to a stop and cursed.

Heat from the takeoff forced Setesh to shield his eyes. That...that *human!*

His naked torso pebbled when cool night air replaced the heat wave caused by the ship’s powerful departure. Surprising little ship.

A strange feeling made Setesh press a hand over his chest, the tightening and sharp stitches causing him to wince and wonder what was wrong with him. He’d never felt this way before. Was he ill?

To say the human had slipped from his fingers while he slept. How infuriating! How insulting as well. He, a Hunter. Although his body *had* needed to replenish its energy after the massive exertion of his encounter with the human. Such stamina. He couldn’t suppress the small grin of satisfaction he was able to bring her to the edge several times.

His immediate situation returned tenfold. Not only would he in all probability never see Carmela de Monsalve again, she had stranded him on Yith’s most distant and uninhabited moon. The Hunt was over, it’d seem. He had the clothes on his back—and whatever still lay strewn by the riverbank—no weapons to speak of and no way to communicate his position to his homeworld. With a snarl, he kicked a loose branch and sent it twirling several paces in front of him. It hit a tree and fell with a thud against the spongy ground.

As he stomped around the ship’s landing spot, looking for anything that could help him—they had crashed, perhaps he’d find a piece of metal or pipe he could use—all he could see were fluid stains, crushed vegetation and scuffed rocks. Which reminded him, that ship would not get far. Worry instantly flared. What if the human became stranded like him, but in the dead of space? What if marauders attacked and boarded it? Yithian ships prowled along the system’s borders for this exact reason, to catch unsuspecting ships, steal the cargo and do away with the crew. Such a delectable human female would make any Yithian crew very, very happy. Heat intensified in his chest.

Strange.

Why the sudden onset of rage? Why should he care what happened to her? She was a prey. A worthy, luscious, cunning prey. Yes, but.

But what? He enjoyed her company and that was that. He might as well admit it.

Setesh grabbed the branch he'd kicked and noticed a piece of black cloth sticking out from the base of the tree. He pulled on it, expecting some shredded piece of *something*, but instead denuded a square canvas bag filled with lumpy and heavy items. His curiosity piqued, Setesh pulled on the closing contraption along its edge and separated the flaps.

Two stunners. Some medical emergency box containing bandages and the likes and...

"A communication device," he murmured, sitting on his heels and turning the thing in his hands. Long-range.

Carmela de Monsalve was much too shrewd for this gift to be an oversight. She'd *left* him these items.

Could this mean...?

First, the mood stones glowing brightly when she'd touched them then their mental exchange, as vibrant—even more so—as if she'd been a Yithian female, and now this.

Adrenaline and arousal tightened his muscles, his cock, and he grinned. The Hunt was back on.

* * * * *

Setesh crossed the threshold of his home exactly forty-two standard hours after the human ship had left and still the excitement, the sheer rush of energy and satisfaction flowed through his veins, swelled his chest, stiffened him to the point of ache. Despite the slight embarrassment of having needed a Yithian cruiser to come retrieve him, Setesh owed them nothing. A Hunter owed nothing to no one, except to himself and his prey.

Several summons waited for him, the amber light flashing demandingly within the semi-translucent box set on the low stone table. The dying Yithian suns' light floated into his home diffused by the ochre-colored membrane stretched over the dark skeleton-like frame. He stared for a while at the contrast, so reminiscent of the human's glowing skin and dark hair. Without looking at the sources, Setesh cleared the memory crystal of all the summons he'd received while he was gone and immediately set about preparing for the Hunt.

First, he'd have to contact his father's human connection to see if he could shake information from him about his prey. She'd had some sort of relationship with the foul human named Collins, otherwise she wouldn't have been shooting at Yithians back at the Flashpoint.

He was preparing a small pack when at the bottom of his trunk, he came across the narrow box of semi-precious mineral, glistening pale pink. A twinge of melancholy made him pick up the box and crack it slightly then with a sigh, he opened it wide. Set

against a dark blue fabric, the mood stones lay dormant, black as night, a reminder of how his chosen life partner had felt nothing for him.

So when his first instinct was to put it into his travel pack, Setesh was shocked and not a little troubled. He resolutely took it out again, placed the box back at the bottom of the trunk and closed the lid.

He squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly weary and feeling isolated.

The woman looked at him as she waited for him to attack, a hand on the cluster of mood stone ore, the other holding a kinetic energy gun at him. And how those stones had glowed!

Refusing to explore his motivations, Setesh retrieved the box containing the greatest betrayal of his young Yithian male's life and slid it inside his pack to hurriedly seal it over the rosy object so his weakness wouldn't stare at him in the face.

Setesh locked his house once more, waited outside by the water's edge for his transport to the spaceport, not seeing the boiling jade sea beneath his feet nor the forest's green sky lightening to aqua with the rising suns. His eyes were set forward on the hovercraft when it landed to get him, on his journey's logistical details during the short trip to the spaceport and on nothing else but the Hunt when he finally sat in the seat of his commandeered ship. Hunters enjoyed many freedoms and perks, even more than politicians. He entered the coordinates to his father's human connection on Land's End. He'd be there in a little over a day. Plenty of time to rationalize the reason he carried the bracelet with him to Hunt for a human female who meant nothing more to him than an exceptional prey and a fine sex companion.

Unless he spent the time lusting after her and lamenting her loss. Or her temporary misplacement.

After waiting an inordinate amount of time for clearance—didn't they know he was a Hunter—Setesh was cleared for takeoff and pushed the engines to their limits. As soon as the cruiser tore from Yith's gravitational influence, he settled in the curvy, silvery seat, catching himself right away when his thoughts began to stray again. Why couldn't he put her out of his mind? What sort of influence would she have when he met her next? In a sense, he'd prefer she had none at all, that when they met next, he'd be able to retain his cool, slip an inhibitor around her neck and be done with it. Although he doubted it. Something told him the more contact he'd have with her, the less he'd be willing to part with her.

That nasty little ship must have had fouled, oxygen-poor air if he was thinking these things! Carmela de Monsalve was a prey. No more.

But no *less* either.

By fits, Setesh slept the rest of the voyage, occasionally cracking an eye and surveying the console. He'd turned every warning system on and activated his shroud so no other ship would be able to come too close to his. They'd detect him but wouldn't be able to know exactly where he was. Brand new Yithian technology. He thought it lessened the excitement of the Hunt, to be shrouded and difficult to detect—except by other Yithian ships—but he understood how it could sometimes be useful.

He triggered a jump point a short distance in front of the prow and aimed the long and slender ship into it. Unlike the little human ship, his didn't sound as though it'd implode any second as it traversed the iridescent channel filled with bright flashes and arcs of light. He spread his feet wider as the cruiser reached incalculable speed on its way to neutral space.

A black void appeared ahead of the prow and after he exited the hyperspace conduit and entered Land's End's airspace proper—so near to human-held territory—Setesh sat up straight.

A text-only message crawled from right to left at the bottom of his screen. He shook his head. As if *No Landing Allowed...All Incoming Traffic Must Divert* would stop a Hunter. He had no use for words.

Because of the shroud, Setesh was able to maneuver his cruiser right underneath the mammoth station, reverse his small lateral jets and quickly, smoothly, attach to Land's End's underbelly. His sensors showed he hadn't been the only one with the idea as at least half a dozen ships were moored there. So unofficially, Land's End was still operational. He shook his head.

Already, the idea of catching her fired his blood. He jumped out of his seat, rummaged in his bag for the small box containing the bracelet and slipped it in a pocket along his thigh. Armed with two kinetic energy guns, a vicious knife—a gift from a satisfied Naray customer with a taste for revenge—he entered his airlock, donned an atmospheric-suit and pressed his face against the porthole in search of an entry point. Some type of chute caught his attention. This should lead inside easily enough.

Steam hissed angrily around the rubber seal when he activated his ship's exterior hatch before slipping outside hand over hand, a thin magnetized line linking him to the hull and onto which he could pull if he needed to make a hasty retreat. The immensity of space pressed in around him as Setesh pushed off with a foot and aimed at the chute barely two hundred feet away.

Slowly, silently, he glided up to the station's underbelly. When he was within reach, he gripped one of the long steel handles and followed it nearer to the chute. His suspicions that Land's End's underbelly had become one busy back door were confirmed when he spotted a tool keeping a hatch propped by the side of the large chute. So someone meant to use this "entrance" again.

He floated up to it, forced the small hatch with a foot and slipped inside the darkened aperture. Faint lights along a thick metal wire illuminated the concrete tunnel leading upward, which he followed with an occasional glance down in case someone else needed to use the back door. When he met a pair of thick-looking doors with yellow warning placards and a lever, Setesh couldn't help the rush of adrenaline spreading through him. As soon as his father's contact confirmed his prey's whereabouts, he'd set out right away. He could hardly wait to get his hands on her again.

She'd left him with means to pursue her further. What a singularly thrilling Hunt!

With his feet braced on either side of the tunnel, he lowered the lever, which slid the doors apart to reveal a small airlock, pulled himself in by a hand and angled his feet downward so he wouldn't fall when he closed the hatch and established pressure.

As soon as the inside doors revealed the station's interior proper, Setesh was met with a trio of stunner muzzles pointing directly at him. Because he still had his a-suit and face shield on, he knew the three human males couldn't yet see who was inside the silvery garment.

"You didn't say 'knock, knock', Andy," one of them said. A multitude of rings along the shell of his ear glistened in the dirty yellow light.

Andy?

His companions grinned.

Setesh straightened to his full height—at least a foot greater than theirs—and watched their grins crystallize at the edges. Taking his time, he unhooked his helmet, kept the shield down over his face to keep his identity hidden until he was ready to act then pulled it up over his head. If his silver hair hadn't given him away, surely his face would as he stared at them.

"You're not Andy."

Before any one of them could react, Setesh grabbed the closest two and knocked their heads together. They slumped to the metal deck without a sound. The third, the one with all the rings, took a step back.

Setesh grinned at him, making sure his slightly pointy Yithian teeth showed well. "Knock, knock."

To his credit, the man quickly regrouped and leveled the stunner at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I am here to meet with Collins. He is waiting for me."

"Collins? He didn't say anything about—"

"He has information on a prey I am Hunting."

The human paled noticeably despite the poor light. "You a Hunter?"

Setesh slipped his a-suit off, parted his crossed-over tunic so the human could see the ink work then pulled it back together again. "I will see Collins now, human."

His dark eyes wide, the man nodded. "Come with me."

He took Setesh up several flights of grille steps. Setesh felt as if he were climbing inside the mechanism of some great machine. They emerged onto a long tunnel filled on either side with all the species he knew—and some he didn't—and was finally taken inside what appeared to be an old mining shaft, complete with rails. But it ended after only ten or so feet.

"Wait here."

Setesh didn't enjoy the human's tone and grabbed him by the collar. "I think not."

“How honored I am to receive another Hunter,” a male voice said in Yithian from what felt like right through the rock face.

A fat human male in a yellow suit walked right out of the stone wall, flanked on either side by a female Naray. He grinned. “You really do resemble your father, Hunter.”

Setesh dropped the other man and turned toward the trio. “Collins?”

The fat human nodded.

“You speak my language. Not many humans do.”

“An ace I keep up my sleeve, so to speak. I have had the pleasure of dealing with Yithians for many years.” Switching to English, he added, “I grieve for your loss, Hunter Setesh.”

Setesh couldn’t understand how Collins would’ve known he’d lost his prey but didn’t want to either confirm or deny the man’s words. He merely arched an eyebrow.

Seemingly undeterred, Collins waved him in, turned around and walked back across the stone wall, Setesh on his heels. What he’d initially thought was a clever screen turned out to be even better. A diffraction pattern, a holographic image. This human had access to technology even Yithians didn’t. No wonder his father had associated with him.

Once beyond the image, a large room carved entirely into the bedrock spread before him, as if someone had turned a grotto into a home, complete with typically human plushy furniture and carpets. He’d never understand the species’ taste for anything soft.

“How can I help you, Hunter Setesh?”

“I seek a human female.”

Collins sat in what had to be the largest chair Setesh had ever seen, even back home. The thing was made of what humans called “wood” and covered with a shiny, fuzzy material the color of their blood. Hideous.

“Don’t we all,” Collins replied with a lopsided smile. He indicated a similar though smaller chair for Setesh, who replied with a curt shake of his head.

Collins seemed to be favoring an arm while he leaned and sat in his monstrous chair, as if his shoulder hurt him a great deal.

“Which human female do you seek, Hunter Setesh?”

“Carmela de Monsalve.”

A slew of emotions flashed across the wide face, in turn twisting and reddening it. He obviously knew her or of her. Good, finding her would prove easier.

“I share your taste for revenge, Hunter, and will do my best to help you find her.”

“Revenge?”

Collins widened his legs and extended a hand so he could caress one of the Naray females' thighs. She grinned, knelt in front of him. "Humans have a proverb. 'Revenge is a dish best served cold.' Had you ever heard it?"

"I care not for word games. Do you know where she is or not?"

Collins nodded. "I do. She's meeting with one of my associates. In a few standard hours actually. How fortuitous. You see, she and her colleagues have slighted me as well and I wish to make them pay for it."

Heat flared through Setesh's body. Jealousy? Protectiveness? "You are not to touch her. She is my prey."

"Of course, your cause is loftier than mine," Collins replied with a cold smile. "They didn't kill my father after all, only maimed me."

It took a moment for Setesh to correctly translate the words. "What did you say?"

Collins must have understood he tread on thin ice for he lost the smug expression and leaned forward. "Carmela and her partners killed Drokesh," he said in heavily accented Yithian. "After your men and I failed to find you, we thought you had returned home. I sent several summons to Yith for them to inform you. Did not you get any of them?"

Despite his clothes and boots, Setesh shivered. His father was dead. "When?"

"Last month, when you and your men came. He was killed along with his guards. It caused quite a stir on your homeworld and they all but wanted to start a war. But a delegation of your people landed yesterday to enter into parlays with humans. Our species are trying to avert war, for some reason." He shrugged. "I am surprised you know nothing of it." He indeed appeared surprised and darkly satisfied by it.

Setesh ground his teeth. So while he lay in that stasis tank, Carmela de Monsalve and her partners had killed his father a *month* ago. Nothing had showed. He'd felt nothing but searing passion from her, no sense of guilt. He had no idea humans could shield their emotions so well. She had played her stones admirably.

"Drokesh was my friend, Hunter Setesh," Collins went on, back to English. "I'll help you find her so she pays for your slight and mine."

With his heart in his throat, Setesh put a hand against his thigh, over the pocket into which he'd slid the bracelet box. How foolish he'd been and how ashamed he was now. To say he'd almost let himself entertain the notion.

Sitting against the edge of a chair, Setesh didn't try to stop the second female Naray from perching a toned, scale-covered leg against the armrest and toying with a lock of his hair.

Yet despite this knowledge, he still didn't hate the human female with whom he'd shared his body. Her deception was a shock, yes, a disappointment, absolutely – even if deep down he couldn't help but admire the feat of mental self-control – but what bothered him the most was how she'd kept the knowledge from him. She must have known who he was when she was firing down into the club. Even Collins had

commented at how closely he resembled his father. Surely she knew. Why else would she have kept him alive if not to use his status? Drokesh had been a Hunter himself, a famous one as well, and then a popular entrepreneur with his launching of a brothel-ship the *Gorgosh*. He had friends in high places on Yith. She must have wanted to use Setesh as bargaining tool for some ulterior motive. There was no other logical explanation for a shrewd woman such as Carmela de Monsalve to have burdened herself with a live prisoner.

Collins ran his fat, bejeweled hand over the slender Naray's shoulder, which garnered a smile from her. "I think you'll find my plan to your satisfaction, Hunter Setesh. I'll get what I want and you'll get *whom* you want."

A sound pulled Setesh out of his dark musings and he was shocked to realize he was grinding his teeth. "Yes, I *do* want Carmela de Monsalve."

Only no longer in the way he'd first intended.

Chapter Five

Music blared from speakers right above her head. Bright stabs of light from holes in the ceiling created multi-colored beams that disappeared into the grille floor and around which the patrons danced. The club, decorated to suit its multi-species clientele, was packed, which strangely, still didn't alleviate the feeling of loneliness choking Carmela.

She didn't know what insulted her more—Collins' thugs finding her so readily or how he'd dare send them after her in the first place. If she hadn't already been committed to making the arms drop and getting the money from her client, she had half a mind of going to pay a visit to Collins and taking care of him. But neither Kim nor Titan wanted her to take the chance. So Carmela ground her teeth and adjusted the new holster she'd bought on her way to the meeting. Neither it nor her new pair of boots made her feel any better either. New boots always did the trick. Especially the thigh-high, black gleaming affairs. She'd even gone for a bit of heel this time. Still, none of the usual thrill associated with new footwear had warmed her blood. How long would she feel this way? It wasn't like her to be so depressed.

It'd been three days since she'd watched the Yithian Hunter sleeping by the side of the black river and she still couldn't shake the feeling she'd left something behind with him. Except for the life-saving bundle that is. For a split second, she feared she'd never feel whole again. A part of her, a glorious, blue-skinned, tattooed part of her, would forever be missing.

She spilled her drink. *Argh*, mierda. What was wrong with her!

Cursing, she stood from the barstool, wiped at her thighs, which triggered a pleasant tingle of memory. He'd had such large and skilled hands.

Forget him.

A loud, frenzied, techno passage in the music drowned the groan that left her as she remembered the Hunter's hands. She pushed her glass farther away from the counter's edge and leaned back against it with both elbows tucked in along her flanks. A pair of nearby male Narays, patches of scales over their shoulders and legs polished to a high glimmer, stopped drinking from their blue-colored flutes to look at her. She'd always enjoyed watching Narays move. So fluid, so graceful. One nodded, his orange hair in tight tresses held back from his narrow face and lips painted even redder than hers. She returned the nod but made no move that could be interpreted as an overture by the eager species. A mere crossing of legs could make Narays, especially males, dog one's steps for days. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have minded the attention. What they lacked in patience, they more than made up for in flexibility and imagination, and even if she'd never been intimate with one, she'd heard often enough of their bedside prowess. What

other race could give itself oral pleasure? Tonight though, she just wanted to arrange for a pick-up time and place and get the money.

She would've preferred meeting at the Flashpoint, the usual drop location. But their skittish client had refused, apparently afraid Collins would know right away he was dealing with her, something the powerful crook had declared non-conducive to one's longevity. In other words, one dealt with the *Femme Metal* crew at one's own—great—personal peril.

Speaking of which, the man sliding his drink near to her "territory" along the counter must not have had a measure of self-preservation if he thought she hadn't seen him. A smidge shorter than herself, he had dark hair, a narrow face and shifty eyes. Her client no doubt.

"You must be Carmela."

"You must be the one who's afraid for his *bolas*."

"My what?"

"Never mind. Do you have the confirmation?"

He nodded, fishing inside his black jacket.

"Not here. Just tell me if you do have the payment confirmation."

His shifty gaze flicked to the pair of Naray males, who watched the exchange with the air of those who'd just discovered Christmas was a big commercial machination. "I have it. Do you have them?"

"Yes."

She resisted a small smile at the Narays' discomfited expressions and turned toward her client. He wasn't bad-looking, come to think of it. He didn't make her blood boil but he had the bad-boy thing going for him. Other women must have thought he was a rebel. She thought he might just be Mister Quick Fix.

Why not?

She eyed him down, noticed the length of chain linking the loop of his belt to something in his back pocket. *Who ties his pants to himself?* It was so old-fashioned and tacky.

You need the quick fix, remember?

"Want to go outside for a walk?"

His eyes flared ever so slightly but he gave her a lustful look, indicated the exit nearest to them with a large square hand. She loved large hands. But this one wasn't blue. Just boring beige.

She shook her head. Beige was a perfectly good color for a hand.

Carmela passed him without a look, knowing she resembled either a queen in her court or one hell of a stuck-up bitch. She couldn't fight her proud blood nor would she start. Growing up on Earth had made her realize how humans born off-planet would always feel inferior. No fault or concern of her own. She was a proud Spaniard from a

large family of proud Spaniards...meekness and demureness weren't in her genes. She'd often been accused of being a distant, snobbish man-eater. Just jealous little men who hated her because her gun was invariably bigger than theirs were.

Carmela felt the man's hand against the small of her back as he "guided" her through the crowd and toward the back door, as though she needed help walking or navigating the place. The urge to turn around and put her fist in his thin mouth made her press her lips together. She really *did* need a quick bit of fun. This wasn't like her to be so morose.

As soon as they exited the building and emerged into the narrow and smelly alley, one filled with garbage both living and not, a hand snaked along her butt cheek and gave a quick squeeze.

"So, doll, where are we going?"

Doll?

Carmela turned around, offered him what Kim called her Flamenco Stare of Doom down the length of her nose. "Did you just call me 'doll', *hombre*?"

"Nope," he replied, raising his hands in a call for peace. "Must have been the music. I didn't call you anything."

"Ha, ha, ha. I hope you're not as *playful* in bed. I loathe games."

The smirk slid off his face. He shook his head. "You're direct."

"Life is too short to be anything but." Because she could readily guess his shortcomings—she was already bored with the man—she thought hard of a place to take their little impromptu encounter and give it some spice. She'd probably need it. "How about the Pleasure Dome?"

She felt as if she were discussing the weather.

He smiled widely. "A bit of zero-g fun is just what I need, do—"

Carmela scowled, which silenced the annoying man.

They walked side by side, not looking at one another. He for his own reasons, which she cared nothing about, and she because she was afraid if she turned and looked at the man, all she'd see would be his many faults. Too small, too skinny, too *beige*. Not blue enough, not tattooed enough, not Yithian enough.

The urge was strong to call everything off, crawl back into bed and wait there until Kim showed up to repair the *Femme Metal*. Who was she trying to convince? No man would ever compare. Such a depressing thought.

So for the first time in her life, Carmela would be going out, would have sex, with a man she didn't find attractive, interesting or arousing. Talk about lowering a woman's standards.

They had to pass through the red-light district to reach the Pleasure Dome and Carmela wondered if her companion felt like an escort. She still couldn't believe that back when she'd worked for Novona, Kim and the crew had done this for a living, kidnapping males for brothel-ships floating in neutral space, well away from

Interworld's reach and laws. Carmela never would've been able to force all these undoubtedly gorgeous men into a life of servitude. Not only for the sheer wrongness of it but also because she would've wanted to keep them for herself. Her own harem. The thought cheered her considerably. But only for a moment as her thoughts turned invariably to her blue-skinned lover. Her body missed his. Her hands missed his skin and...

She might as well admit it. She missed Setesh Geb. Period.

"My treat," her companion announced. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket—that chain, so tacky!

The Pleasure Dome loomed over them, shaped not quite into a dome but almost, half aboveground, half sunken into the bedrock itself. It resembled an early twenty-first-century sports stadium.

After climbing the steps, the now-beaming man gave his ID card to the young eyebrow-pierced woman, who swiped it in her decoder then gave it back to him.

"Fun Room 205B. Enjoy."

Carmela doubted the young woman had ever had reason to "enjoy" anything in her life, least of all wish it on someone else. In silence, they rode the elevator up to the second deck where they quickly located Fun Room 205B. Carmela yawned. Sounds from the neighboring rooms, the whirr of the fan, the whoops and occasional shameless cry of pleasure left Carmela feeling even more *blah*.

A faint breeze tickled the back of her neck. She rubbed at her nape, rolled her shoulders. She should go back to the converted tavern her boss rented and sleep off the horniness.

"Ladies first," her companion said after sliding the door sideways and making room for her.

She entered the narrow compartment, a concrete booth with a bench along the wall and hooks for the occupants' clothes with another thicker door that led into the actual zero-g environment. She'd had such fun there the last time. Her lover had been very, very enthusiastic and abundantly endowed. A blond sex god really.

She took a good look at her present companion and snorted mentally.

Who are you kidding?

"Sorry, *hombre*, but I don't think this is going to work."

His narrow face tightened. He looked meaner now that she could see him clearly in the unforgiving neon light high overhead. And uglier. She should've screwed him back at the club, in the dim and more forgiving light. At least he had nice teeth, which was important.

"What do you mean, it won't work?"

She shrugged, made a hand gesture that encompassed the room, the entire universe for all she was concerned. "I thought it'd work, but it won't."

“So you led me here for nothing?” he snarled, widening his stance and sending an armada of warning flags to rise in her ex-bodyguard mind.

“I’ll pay you back if it’s what you mean.” She kind of felt sorry for him. She *had* led him here.

He shook his head then abruptly made a grab for her wrist – never came close but it was the thought that counted.

Remorse at egging the man on evaporated. He was one of *those*. Couldn’t hear the word “no” when it kicked him in the teeth, could he?

“It wouldn’t matter if I would’ve ripped your clothes off, pushed you against the wall then changed my mind at the last second. When a lady says ‘no’, that’s all the answer you need.”

“Fuck that! I paid for a bit of zero-g fun,” he retorted, blocking the doorway with his body. “And I’m planning on getting some zero-g fun, doll.”

Doll?

“Suit yourself.”

Carmela didn’t even need to brace herself when she kicked him right in the middle of the chest, sent the skinny man flying back and out the door where he sprawled snarling on his ass a good ten feet away.

She followed him there, put a hand on her hip. “Want more zero-g fun?”

“You bitch!” He meant to reach inside his jacket.

Her kinetic energy gun was leveled at him before the tips of his fingers were even past the zipper.

“Calling women bitches around me will get you nothing but hurt, you nasty little *mierda*. What did you think? Huh? Some skinny *pringao* like you could ever get his hands on me? That you’d be enough?”

Now that she was started, Carmela wasn’t able to stop the torrent gushing out of her. She’d never let herself go so completely. She stalked up to him until she literally stood over him, one foot on either side of his legs. The incapable, inept fool! All of them!

“You men! We smile at you, hold your hand, and you think you have the right to demand we open our legs to you? As though it’s somehow owed to you that we smile and say ‘*dios, it was good*’ when you’ve barely managed to get your *rabo* out of your pants without help?! You men think when you whistle at us we ought to feel wanted? Ha!” She snapped her chin and snorted. “Because we’re supposed to depend on *your* appreciation to feel beautiful! We tweak and pluck and work out and starve for men while they grow beer bellies and lose their hair and then, as if it’s not insulting enough to have a lousy lover between our legs, we should feel like stuck-up bitches when we say ‘enough is enough’ and fuck with our toys instead? Look at me when I’m addressing you!”

The man’s gaze had flicked sideways and it burned more than his trying to grab her wrist. The insolent jackass!

"I'm a woman! I'm not some *girl* you can impress with your machismo, *mierda*, and your tough-man look." She nudged her booted foot—with heel—dangerously near his crotch.

"Hey!"

"Shut up!"

He stared at her, his eyes tokens, his chin hanging. With very much the dead-fish look. Or a dying one.

"I've lived a full life, thank you very much! I've tasted lovers with enough skills to start their own *academia*, one who pretty much blew my mind recently. So someone like you, some lowlife with a *chain* to keep his pants on, doesn't even register. Do you hear what I'm saying, *hombre*, or do I need to yell a little louder?"

His gaze flicked sideways again and this time, Carmela knew he wasn't avoiding her ire but checking something down the corridor behind her.

A fleeting sensation someone was blowing on her nape made her momentarily disoriented and unfocused. She shook her head. By the corner of her eye she spotted a very tall form a few doors down detaching itself from the wall and advancing on her.

"Tell Collins I have secured my prey. He is not to contact me until I summon him."

Setesh's voice alone triggered a massive spike of sexual energy. She was already fired—in anger but still—and his sudden appearance only served as an accelerant to the inferno flaring inside. She was so relieved he'd survived and found a way off the Yithian moon she momentarily forgot he was a very large predator.

Coming for her.

Carmela spared a quick glance to her right and spotted Setesh about a hundred feet away. He wore a cape with the hood up, but undone in front and revealing a tailored, crossed-over top made of black material and a wide, skirt-like black bottom, which reminded her of old Japanese Shoguns. A gray sash crossed his chest diagonally where hung one wicked-looking knife and a pair of guns on a wide belt at his waist. His hair was loose on his shoulders and spilled down either side of his face out of the hood.

A god. That's what he is.

The man between her legs—ha—scoted a bit higher.

"You stay right there," she snapped without sparing a glance at him. She thumbed her gun's control. A hiss indicated it was loaded.

"I said leave us," Setesh said, approaching.

"Yeah, but *you* don't have a gun, man, *she* does!"

Carmela kicked the man inside the thigh. "Shut up. Or next time I'll aim higher."

"You can let him go, Carmela de Monsalve. He is not what you want."

No truer words had ever been spoken. Her anger only accentuated. No, he wasn't what she wanted. What she wanted was right in front of her and she *still* couldn't have it. *Mierda!*

Making sure she still had her gun aimed at the man's chest, she turned her upper body so she'd face the Yithian. "Stay where you are. Both of you."

Then Setesh's words sank in.

She looked down at the man at her feet and narrowed her eyes at him. "So you're with Collins, are you?"

He swallowed hard.

"So on top of a disgusting rapist of a *pringao*, you're in bed with Collins? Did you think I wasn't going to figure it out?"

She fired right between his thighs, dislodging a large chunk of concrete and drawing one long squeal of fright from him. Just shameful.

Luckily, kinetic energy guns didn't make any sound except for a faint *shh*. She didn't need to deal with security on top of things.

"Let him leave, Carmela de Monsalve, he means nothing to either of us," Setesh said, taking another step when she specifically recalled telling him to stay put. Was all of maledom conspiring against her tonight?

Suddenly an image exploded into her mind.

She on her elbows and knees, Setesh behind her, devouring her pussy while his fingers stretched her wide.

Carmela reeled. Something knocked her behind the knee and her leg buckled. She barely managed to block the man's next kick, aimed at her other leg this time. She *humphed* when he sent her backpedaling and knocking against the wall. The gun flew out of her hand and skittered against the concrete floor farther down the corridor a split second before Setesh came charging in like a bull. At the last possible moment she pushed off the wall, spun on herself. Meanwhile, the man had rushed off, picked up her gun and aimed it at her. She froze.

"Give me a reason and I'll blow your fucking head off."

Setesh advanced on the man until he stood in direct line between the muzzle and Carmela, which made her wonder about the Yithian's mental stability. Clearly the man itched to pull the trigger.

"Give me the weapon."

A glazed look came over the guy's eyes. He blinked. For some reason, he listened to the Yithian's deep, gentle voice and actually turned the weapon over and offered it handle first.

"The human female is mine. Leave."

With a shake of his head, the man took a step back. "You can have her, man, the crazy bitch!"

"Collins is not to summon me."

"Yeah, whatever, just keep her the fuck away from me." He ran down the corridor toward the staircase, his boots clacking loudly. Obviously, he wouldn't wait for the elevator. Cowardly little thing.

Setesh slid the newest gun in his wide belt and turned toward Carmela. His mouth stretched into a mean sort of smile, which tugged at the sleeve of her memory. Where had she seen that damn smirk?

"You owe me an explanation."

"I owe you nothing," she snapped, all the while undressing him in her head. She was still throbbing from the image he'd put in her mind. Sneaky bastard.

Beautiful, irresistible, sneaky bastard.

"But you will not give your explanation here. We will need a more *private* setting." He turned toward the door through which she'd kicked the insolent jerk. "In there."

She snorted a laugh. "I think not."

Before her brain had caught up with her instincts, she'd turned tail and made a run for the staircase. She never even came close.

A heavy weight tackled her against the corridor wall, forcing a snarl of pain from her. Then Setesh wrapped a long arm around her shoulders and dragged her back, keeping his other hand to fend off the punches she aimed back over her head. Arching with all her might, she nearly unbalanced him. Nearly, but not quite entirely.

"It is unfortunate I was pointed to you right away," he puffed through both their hair. "Hunting you has been the highlight of my career."

Backpedaling furiously to keep her feet under her, Carmela wasn't strong enough to keep the Yithian from dragging her back inside the compartment. He kicked the front door shut and plastered her against the antechamber wall while he worked the access panel for the zero-g room. What did he intend to...

Carmela cried out when the inner door suddenly gaped and Setesh shoved her inside the tall, twelve-foot-wide tubular room painted a swirl of crazy neon colors. She'd forgotten about the psychedelic décor. She stumbled a step, quickly regained her balance and whirled on the spot with the telescopic baton extended in front of her. Before she could charge back for the door, he stepped inside the jamb, planted his feet wide against each kickboard and leaned back against the panel, which automatically triggered the sensors. At once, gravity fell.

She yelped when her feet left the floor and she floated up by a few inches. Unlike her, Setesh had the doorjamb against which he could wedge his feet to keep from wandering aimlessly. Strobe lights and music assaulted her senses. Carmela tried not to pedal in thin air like a fool. But the urge was strong. She was already spinning to the right from the remnants of her last movement before gravity fell.

"I know what you have done, Carmela de Monsalve," Setesh said loudly, his deep voice barely surfacing amidst the bass. "But I want to hear it from you."

His silver hair rose in locks around his face, gave him the look of a Medusa. She stared, enthralled, spellbound, at a loss for words.

"I have already chosen the symbol for you. A beautiful, razor-sharp dagger, planted right here." He pointed at his chest.

She knew enough Yithian anatomy to realize he meant his heart. "I don't know what you're talking about." She had to raise her voice significantly to be heard.

He shook his head, unclipped his cape and let it float a few feet away from him. "I think you do."

Suspended in midair, Carmela didn't feel in control the way she usually did and didn't like it one bit. Who did he think he was? Yithian sex god or not, he had no right to strand her this way. It wasn't honorable. At least *she'd* given him resources when *she'd* marooned him. But right here, right now, Setesh was leaving her hanging impotently and this wouldn't do.

"*Vaya al diablo*. Go to hell and write me a letter."

"We have no hell nor do we have gods and demons. But we do have what is called *ghers*. Honor. And yours demands you tell me why you kept me in the dark about my father. It was not honorable of you."

"*What?!*"

Despite the stroboscopic lightshow and crazy colors, she saw Setesh's eyes narrowing to mere slits. He looked *pissed*. "Did you intend to do the same to me as you did him?"

"Who?" she demanded as she angrily tried to keep from spinning around and facing the other way.

"Drokesh Geb."

The smirk! *That* was where *she'd* seen it.

Oh *dios*.

Drokesh Geb. Setesh Geb. The name, the smirk, both of them Hunters. Why hadn't she seen it before? *She'd* helped gun down the father then turned and kidnapped the son.

Setesh obviously waited for her to say something. Yet she couldn't. For the first time in her life, Carmela didn't think *she'd* ever have another thing to say. The guilt was crushing. She shook her head, was surprised to see a tiny spherical diamond floating in front of her eyes. Setesh must have seen it too for both stared as the minute sparkling tear hovered between them, a symbol of what separated them.

"I didn't know, Setesh, *por favor perdóname*."

Yet how did one ask for this kind of forgiveness? And how could she expect him to give it?

Chapter Six

The thundering music and blinding light irritated him even if the effect on his body was nothing short of explosive. He was instantly hard. Such raw energy sizzled in the tubular room it fired every single muscle in his body. Just like the vision before him did. Strobe light highlighted the woman's curvy body, her hair all twisted into obsidian coils around her head, a spiky crown of the blackest jewels. Her red, red mouth glistened, parted in obvious shock. Images of their furious lovemaking filled his mind. With a growl, he pushed them away. Now was not the time for aches of the flesh, even if he wanted to do things to her a Yithian would only grant a life companion.

Yet Setesh had not expected her to cry. Nor had he anticipated his reaction to her tears. When he should have dragged her back to his ship, taken what he wanted from her then sold the human to the highest bidder—she was only a prey—Setesh caught himself caring more than he should about that single little tear floating between them. But he pushed everything down, ashamed of his feelings, embarrassed he'd so readily lost his just anger. His father had died at the end of this human's gun.

He snarled when a particularly annoying passage made the music almost a tangible thing that reached in to hammer from the inside against his sternum. Unless it was his heart painfully squeezing.

So he wouldn't have to stare at her, Setesh examined the access panel near his hand and after deciphering the many symbols in myriad languages, he located the gravity control. He only noticed then it was also voice-activated.

"Send the weapon toward me, Carmela de Monsalve."

To his shock, she did without discussion. He caught the baton deftly and slid it inside his wide belt.

"Remove your boots."

She did.

Carmela de Monsalve now faced the other way and was gradually dipping sideways with her head pointing at the wall to his left. Both boots floated aimlessly by her side, one of them completely upside down. The music entered a rapid-fire beat and coupled with the stroboscopic light and some sort of green beam of light that pierced the tubular room up and down then angled like a search light, Setesh wasn't too sure coming here with her had been such a good idea.

Making sure nothing slid out, he removed his belt with its many weapons, the sash across his chest with the knife and baton then the boots before rolling everything into his cape and looping one corner around the thick door's lever. This way, his things wouldn't float pell-mell.

For reasons he'd rather not scrutinize, he felt none of the satisfaction he had expected from their confrontation. And *this* angered him. He should have gloated and been eminently pleased he'd caught her and would now punish her accordingly. She'd been an exemplary prey, a memorable bed companion. But he wouldn't let himself be caught in her schemes again. She'd killed Drokesh then lied to him – which of the two angered him most would surprise humans and any other species with close family ties. Yithians had different familial mores. Children weren't raised in families but in communes, trained by many, schooled by most, loved by none. Not in the way other closely bonded races understood.

Surely she'd had her reasons to fire on his father and his guards, an expected end given his lifestyle – something Setesh had never understood or tried to emulate – but to pretend he wouldn't be astute enough to find out, that she could lie right to his face... His nostrils flared.

"Remove your clothes."

Carmela de Monsalve twisted in midair to look at him. She looked worried. Good. "Why?"

"Because I do not trust you. Remove your clothes."

And he had a right to demand anything he wished from her. He owed nothing to a mere prey. He was a Hunter and when one asked, one was given. If he wanted to see Carmela de Monsalve naked in all her smooth glory, he had a right as the Hunter who had caught her to do what he wished. She'd proven a demanding quarry but now she was trapped. The Hunt was sadly over.

Yet another part of him, one he suspected of manipulating the vocal rest, hungered to see her naked before him for the sheer pleasure of admiring the beauty of her form, which had kept him on edge since waking to the sound of her ship's boosters.

In a strangely intermittent fashion because of the light, the woman pulled her clothes off, one garment at a time, her gaze fixedly on him and a proud lift to her chin. When she floated in only her black sheer underthings, she rolled her clothes and pushed them up above her head. He noticed the recently closed gash on her forearm, still darker than the healthy skin around it, and fought hard the instinctive reaction to worry over it.

At that exact moment, perhaps in some cosmic irony, the music switched to a heavier beat, harder bass, with the light show turning crimson and amber then a deep, deep blue, which it remained.

He flinched when an image flashed in his mind. Had it been from her or from his own subconscious?

Their legs were entwined, their hands hurried over the other's body as their mouths claimed and dueled. He sank in her with a snarl.

She blinked several times. Had she seen it too? How? He could swear he hadn't sent a mental pulse to her. Despite the strange light, he saw her nipples through the black sheer fabric hardening and standing proud.

Both threw their heads back as they shook in the throes of passion and fulfillment. His seed exploded from him.

How was this possible? He hadn't even *thought* anything of this sort yet, let alone achieve a clear mental picture and send it to her.

Setesh raked his hair back from his face and realized his hand trembled. Because he couldn't stop them, his hands came up all by themselves and pulled his wrapped tunic apart then out of his high-waisted pants. His tattoos seemed to come to life as he reached back and tugged the annoying garment off. He didn't bundle it with the rest. He no longer cared where it floated. His Hunter instincts were taking over and leaving the thinking Yithian behind. Setesh didn't think he could've stopped himself had he wanted to. Which he didn't. He would punish the deceitful woman not with pain but in lack of pleasure. He'd bring her a whisper away from satisfaction then leave her there, hanging on the keen edge of fulfillment and writhing for more, which he wouldn't give. Despite the best Hunt of his life, she'd lied to him, insulted his Hunter's core, and she would have to pay, not to show her who was master for he doubted anyone could ever intimidate this fierce human female, but in much more subtle ways. Setesh would take his pleasure. Then he'd leave.

She was his now.

Carmela de Monsalve's expression turned from worried to plainly apprehensive as he loosened his waistband and, in one fluid motion that spun him almost head over heels in the zero-g environment, slid his pants down past his ankles and off his feet. Naked now, with his cock tight to the point of pain and aimed at her, Setesh placed the ball of one foot against the wall behind him and gave a slight push. Slowly, by small increments, he grew nearer to her.

This time, he did send a mental pulse to herald what was waiting for her. She seemed to have received the image for her mouth parted, her eyes flared.

Setesh reached for her ankle. She tried to pull away, twist and snap him a vicious kick but he caught her anyway and yanked her to him, blocking each nasty punch, hand chop and joint lock – she'd obviously received excellent training and was proving more skilled than some Hunters he knew.

With a fist around the back of her undergarment, Setesh brought her right against him, facing him, and locked his legs around hers. His cock pressed downward between their bellies and nudged the flexible edge of her sheer garment.

"I will take my pleasure from your flesh and will not allow you to take yours from mine. Then I will leave you, Carmela de Monsalve, a defeated prey and ruined lover, because you know..." Setesh put his mouth right against her ear so he could drown the music, which had picked up again. "You *know* you will never find another lover to fuck you the way I can." He felt her rise in body temperature.

"How dare you speak to me this way?" she snarled, twisting against his grip. "I didn't know who Drokesh was."

"What if you *had* known? Would you have told me?"

“No.”

As much as the tiny word infuriated him, it'd been said with such boldness he couldn't help but respect the human for her fortitude, if not her *ghers*. Had she no honor at all? He couldn't believe this fine prey had no principles beyond opportunity and greed.

“Why?”

“It wouldn't have made a difference.”

“How would you know?”

“How will we *ever* know?” she snapped.

He thought of the mood stones in his pocket and cursed himself for a fool. He might be an experienced and successful Hunter but he was still a young Yithian, the equivalent of a twenty-year-old human male. Perhaps an older male wouldn't have succumbed to her charms as readily as he had. But then again, any Hunter he knew, regardless of age, would gladly give his left hand for a prey, a sex companion, such as her. For such a *companion* period.

She tried to wedge her knee up but only succeeded in allowing his cock to rub against her sex. Moisture seeped through the sheer fabric and onto his skin. Setesh shivered violently. He stared into her eyes the color of an abyss and couldn't look away.

Their teeth knocked together when he kissed her. He felt the vibration of her moan in her throat even if the music drowned the sound. At least this she couldn't lie about. Her body responded to his in ways both intoxicating and dangerous.

Very dangerous.

His muscled chest was rock-hard against her breasts and for a split second Carmela wondered if she could come just by rubbing her nipples against him. It would've been worth a try had she not been trying to think rationally. He meant to fuck her hard, that much was clear. The mental image of him ramming himself in to the balls had nearly fried her brain by its intensity and vividness. And even if her brain yelled at her to cut her losses and *at least* try to escape, her body had decided it would now call the shots. She could no more escape Setesh than she could forget him.

Heat gathered in her belly and seeped out of her pussy and onto the muscled thigh he kept jammed between hers. He must have known she would emasculate him if he gave her a chance. A kneecap right in the *bolas* was what he deserved. Except she couldn't do it. Not to Setesh.

She'd lied. If she could do things differently, she would. Had she known Drokesh was his father, she still would've defended Kim and Titan, but she *would* have told Setesh about it. But she'd fry in hell before she shared that valuable piece of intel with the dangerous alien.

Demanding, his mouth strayed from hers and trapped a lobe, which he sucked before releasing it and licking her throat, her chin then back to her lips. They burned when he finally pulled away to look at her.

“You belong to me now. The Hunt is over.”

Carmela snarled a curse into his beautiful, arrogant face. “My body may respond to yours, Hunter, but I belong to no one but me.”

“When I deny your release and you writhe for a mere touch from me, Carmela de Monsalve, I will remind you of your words.”

Cocky, overconfident—

Setesh bent down and kissed her again, this time keeping his mouth clamped to hers for so long she was seeing stars from lack of oxygen when he finally pulled away. She was panting, gulping air in greedy gasps. But it wasn't all about lack of O2. *Dios*, she was turned on.

“You will feed your breasts to me.”

She was about to give him a piece of her mind—extra spicy—when he flexed the sinewy thigh he had jammed between hers and produced a fine peak of excitement to shoot up to her sex. Carmela swallowed.

Setesh grabbed her by the waist—he had such large hands he nearly encircled her not-so-slight waist—and pulled her up by a few inches so he'd face her chest.

“Feed them to me. I want to taste each at a time.”

She could've kicked him in the *bolas*, kneed him in the chin, incapacitated him quite profoundly and long enough for her to make a hasty retreat. She could have. And perhaps she *should* have. Yet she didn't.

With the blue light turning the zero-g room into a dark, eerie, underwater-like world, Carmela cupped her breasts with shaking hands, used her thumbs to slip the lace off her nipples. As soon as they emerged, Setesh licked his lips. She doubted he realized the effect of seeing his tapered tongue had on her.

“Bring them together...”

His deep voice barely surfaced amid the hard, rhythmic bass and she lost the last few words. But from the intense gaze he kept riveted to her chest, she knew he meant “do it now”.

Feverish, she pressed her breasts together in front, palms sweaty, the skin around her wound burning, her fingers trembling with restrained energy. Lack of gravity worked great at elevating her breasts, which resembled cantaloupes topped with halved cherries. They were so hard they hurt.

Like a flashlight being turned on for only a second then abruptly clicked off again, she received an image that left an imprint of itself behind her eyelids.

Setesh's gorgeous Yithian mouth ravaging her breasts, his hands forcing her pelvis to his chest and her spine into a curve. His tongue, longer and narrower than humans', flicked her

nipples, teased them mercilessly before a flash of teeth heralded a burning bite on each. Carmela melted between the legs.

Setesh looked up into her face and graced her with one hell of a predatory smile. "Later, you will feed me your sex and I will feed you mine."

Carmela could only moan when he returned to his work.

The epic fuck he meant for later nearly made her wrap her legs around his waist and force him to her. Not that she'd be able to move the two-hundred-and-fifty-plus-pound Yithian if he didn't *want* to be moved, zero-g or not. Yet as much as her body hungered for his, she couldn't help the sting of regret they'd never have anything more than right now.

Because there was no gravity, Setesh only needed his hands to pull her to him. A darker shade of his skin, his tongue curled out in one corner, gave a quick flick to her nipple then to the other before retreating into his mouth. Carmela arched so she'd receive more of that magnificent organ.

"Do you want more?" he asked, his grin half expectant, half triumphant.

"Yes."

He bared his slightly pointed Yithian teeth then covered almost half of her breast with his mouth. The top of his head, long silver hair floating in thick bands, forced her chin up and soon, with his enthusiastic mouth and unyielding hands, Carmela felt a twinge of orgasm start to tighten her clitoris. She readied for it with an open-throated sigh.

Then whatever he was doing, he stopped doing it.

Carmela gritted her teeth. He'd told her he'd come at her expense but not "allow" her to come herself. Ha. As though a man could deny a woman that. Still, how Setesh would think it appropriate to bring her so damn close but stop angered her more than a little. She looked down, noticed how he was staring up into her face, probably trying to gauge her reaction. So she gave him none. He wouldn't *know* if she didn't *show*.

"Touch your lips."

Relinquishing a breast, she brought her index and middle fingers to her mouth and touched her bottom lip.

Setesh grinned like the blue-skinned *diablo* he was. "Your *other* lips."

Oh.

She reached down between his hands around her waist, down past the elastic of her panties and pressed the same fingers to her lips where moisture warmed her skin. To show he couldn't push her buttons with such ease, she resisted the urge to rub her cleft, giving herself a fine little trip, and instead remained immobile, staring down into his beautiful, angular face. His thin nostrils flared.

"Show me."

When she made no move to comply, Setesh grabbed her wrist, turned her hand over so he could take a better look at the glistening pads of her fingers. To her thrill, he

seemed to smell them—the music drowned everything—before giving them a quick lick.

“You cannot hide this from me, Carmela de Monsalve.”

Yeah, well, a señora can try.

“Touch your lips again, deeper this time.”

She did, pressed the pads of her fingers against her cleft then meant to tease him with them but he must have suspected she wouldn't play fair and hurriedly trapped her wrist.

With a greedy narrowing of eyes, he wolfed her fingers into his mouth. His tongue pressed underneath her fingers, curled around them before he released her hand.

“Tell me again how you do not belong to me.”

“I don't, *hombre*.”

Liar.

The music kept her from hearing his reply but by the look on his face, she doubted she would've liked it.

He aligned two of his own fingers along hers and slipping inside her panties up by the leg instead of the waist, Setesh followed her vulva's curve before slanting his hand so both their fingers could slip inside. She was so wet, Carmela barely felt the four fingers penetrating her but what she did feel was his mouth clamping over her nipple.

He began slowly but she could feel the energy coiling inside his perfect Yithian body, winding up. A snake about to strike. Adrenaline pumped her blood, swelled her lips. Cramps forced her thighs wider. Carmela closed her eyes, arched back and welcomed Setesh's quickening pace. His hand along hers felt hot and strong and young, his mouth over her breast so skilled and ardent. When he started slipping in increasingly harder and faster, Carmela fisted his hair. Spasms seized her legs. Her toes curled.

Setesh abruptly pulled his fingers and mouth away, leaving her positively ringing with unspent release. She tried to keep fucking herself with her fingers but without his, it just wasn't the same.

“Feed me your sex,” he snarled into her neck, right below her ear so she'd hear him perfectly. “Now.”

The sharp word hit her like a whiplash. She meant to slip her panties down but Setesh stopped her. “Through your garment first.”

Through it then.

With her thumbs, she spread herself for his voracious mouth. He left no fold untouched as he pushed against her mons with his forehead so he could devour her properly. He bit her thumbs, pressed the blade of his long tongue against her pussy, even managed a trick she'd never heard of and created a sort of “wave” movement with his agile organ. Oh *dios*, she was near.

“Pull the garment up,” he said. She lost the next few words then got, “Make it tight.”

So she did. Pinched her panties and gyrated her pelvis around so the elastic lace would mold her sex for him. And she didn’t care right now what it made of her, how she’d listened to his every “command”. They weren’t commands anyway, right? Just sex-requests. They didn’t count.

Showing incredible strength, Setesh pushed his tongue against the lace, managed to tent it enough so the tip of his fine organ entered her. The heat and moisture and slightly abrasive texture of the fabric brought her one more notch closer to all-encompassing rapture. One splendid orgasm waited for her and Carmela wanted it.

Suns blazed behind her eyelids. The rhythmic music helping, Carmela shot up toward climax.

Yes, almost there, right on the edge. A ripple effect started in her anus. She readied for it.

This will be good.

Setesh stopped again and pulled his glorious mouth away so he could grab her waist and guide her down toward his.

“You will take my sex into your mouth, Carmela de Monsalve,” he said through his teeth, waited for a long rhythmic passage to diminish then added, “And I will take my pleasure.”

Because she was afire from her own lost climax – and she’d been so damn ready she still tingled all over – Carmela transferred her rage and impotence onto his cock. She grabbed the long blue rod in both fists, angled it to her and made sure *he* was going to see stars. The narrow and slightly tapered tip, so smooth and burning-hot, glided in deep then deeper still when she pulled on it with both hands. She felt Setesh’s hands trying to fist her hair and pull away but she’d have none of it. He’d left her hanging. She’d make sure he regretted it.

The vibrato of his groan passed through her as she pressed her forehead to his belly where thick black tattoos undulated and rippled with each lean muscle underneath, until she swore they’d come alive and would peel off him, wrapping themselves around her hands and forearms. Still she sucked. Hard. Not caring if she added a bit of teeth to the mix. She felt the inborn reaction, the thrusting of his hips, his thighs cramping, his fists no longer trying to push her away but anchoring her head right against his belly as he strove to douse the fire no doubt raging through him. She knew *exactly* what he was going through. Carmela knew he was close.

Then she put her palms against his hips and yanked herself from him. He must have been too shocked to try to keep her to him for Setesh only looked down at his empty hands, his chest and belly constricting, his legs prey to twitches and tremors.

Carmela hit the wall and floated slightly upward with the kinetic impetus. Spreading her feet and hands, she stopped herself against the wall and looked down at the obviously seething Yithian she’d left unfulfilled.

“I belong to *no one!*” she yelled at him over the music.

Setesh raised his gaze to her. And despite the blue light and music-relayed laser beams, she saw his eyes had narrowed to twin black slits, his mouth into a tight line.

Carmela knew she’d pushed him over the edge.

Adrenaline and primal instincts forced her to leap across the tubular room in the hopes of bouncing off at an angle and eventually reaching the door. She could’ve yelled the safe word and activated the voice-command. Gravity would then kick back in and send them both tumbling to the ground some ten feet below. But she would then no longer have the advantage with the Yithian on his two feet. With him floating helplessly while she had the wall against which to push, she had the upper hand.

She missed her target and bounced a bit lower than she would’ve preferred, coming dangerously near Setesh’s long reach. At the last possible moment, she tucked her legs under her, flew past over his head and aimed for the section of wall over the door.

Mierda.

Carmela hit the wall, scrambled for purchase but went floating away instead. Before she no longer had any footing, she kicked against the concrete wall and flew at a forty-degree angle downward and at the floor. She’d have no choice but to use the voice-command now. Damn.

Setesh took the option from her when he extended a leg much farther than she’d guessed he could reach and managed to push off the wall with the ball of a foot. His wiry body the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen in her life, he gathered momentum with another foothold before pushing off and coming directly for her. Carmela had a split second to make a decision. She could push off the wall and float downward or she could meet his charge head-on then use the voice-command and hopefully get a hit soon enough to incapacitate him and make a run for it.

Then a third choice blazed a path from her heart to her brain. And later, when this bad choice would come haunt her, she’d make sure to blame her hormones for it.

Carmela used both feet to propel herself. Not toward the floor. Not at the door so temptingly close. But directly at Setesh. She floated to him with arms outstretched, her heart in her eyes she knew and some crazy notion that what she was doing made sense in some way.

His expression turned from raging bull to confused young Yithian male in the span of a bass beat. They collided. Before he was even done wrapping his arms around her—to hold her or get a good kick in, she didn’t know nor did she want to—Carmela twisted her legs around his tight waist and bucked down. She pulled the crotch of her panties sideways. His cock sank in all at once.

Both let out a great cry of release. She came like a bomb and felt him do the same in her. Fire licked at her distended pussy, stretched impossibly wide and deep to accommodate Setesh, her elevated breasts tingled, her back muscles twitched and contracted.

He arched back so he could look into her eyes. Carmela saw something in there she hadn't seen before. Confusion. But also warmth.

Locked in a tight embrace, suspended in a zero-g tacky fun room on some disreputable space station with both their species on the brink of war, Carmela stared into the opalescent eyes of a Yithian Hunter and couldn't think of anything else she'd rather do.

So that's it? That's falling in love?

"Setesh," she began, not really sure how to go about this. She wasn't one to fear words yet couldn't find the proper introduction to such a novel and confusing business. She *had* to tell him, no doubt about that. Carmela didn't think she could live in peace without telling him about...

What exactly?

That you love the blue hombre, señora. Tell him.

She cleared her throat. For a moment, he looked at her, waited, even seemed to understand what she meant when she hadn't said a single word yet. Except for his name. Was he prying in her head without her knowing?

"Setesh."

As fiercely as he'd fucked her, Setesh wrapped his arms tight, held her to his chest and leaned his chin on the top of her head. Carmela had never felt so comfortably, utterly –

The blue light turned stark white. The music died mid-beat. And, still linked, Setesh and she fell toward the floor.

Chapter Seven

Setesh twisted so he'd take the brunt of the fall. Landing on the woman would injure her badly. His hip and knee hit first as he thudded painfully against the concrete floor. Various pieces of clothing and weapons clattered around them. Carmela de Monsalve—such a feisty, puzzling prey...no, *companion*—landed partly on him, which rammed her elbow in his belly. He barely had time to *humph* when several armed human males rushed inside the tubular room and after yanking the woman from his arms, slipped inhibitors on both their necks.

Before he could stop himself from trying, he clawed at the silvery band and received a nasty jolt for his trouble. Because the inhibitor's tiny sensors would pick up his genetic makeup and immediately recognize his species, he wouldn't be able to tamper with the clasp without triggering a painful electrical shock. Yithians weren't irreparably affected by them, but they still sapped energy and momentarily dazed them. Even enough to give the advantage to smaller and weaker races. Temporarily anyway.

"I wanted to wait outside until you were done, Hunter Setesh," Collins said as he stepped into the room and gazed at Carmela de Monsalve as she climbed to her feet, seemingly indifferent to the fact she was naked in front of many males. Collins slipped his hands in the pockets of his yellow suit. "But you two were just taking too long."

Setesh glared at the nearest humans, who hurriedly backpedaled from him. Then, his gaze going to Collins, he stood to his full height. "This is a mistake you will not live to regret."

Collins shrugged. "Hello, Carmela. How are Titan and that sweet little thing Ballistic Kim?"

The woman lifted her chin and gave the fat human one of the most potent stares Setesh had ever seen anywhere on any world. He was sure it could cut through plating.

"How is your shoulder, *hombre*? Is Titan's round still inside or were you able to pull it out? He'd love to put another back in, I'm sure."

Sneering, the human male with whom Setesh had found Carmela de Monsalve—his own jealousy at seeing them together, even fighting, had surprised him—struck her across the mouth. Setesh didn't have time to take a step when the woman had kicked the offender in the middle. He crumpled in a heap just as she did when the inhibitor around her neck gave a tiny hiss. If Yithians were moderately affected by the vicious little things, humans on the other hand could die from one of the shots. He reached out but was prevented to approach as the woman writhed on the floor, blue arcs of electricity snapping over her body and crackling off at protuberances. After a few seconds, she lay still, panting hard.

“You,” Setesh said to the still smirking man, “will die a very slow death.”

He was satisfied to notice a pronounced pallor come over the human’s face. He backed away with a snarled comment.

“It gives me no pleasure to treat her this —” Collins laughed then crossed his hands behind his back. His belly looked ready to explode. “It *does* raise the fun factor a bit, I’ll admit.” He turned to Setesh. “After you left, Hunter Setesh, I started thinking about your people’s delegation, and I had an idea. All in good time though.” Turning to his men, he snapped his many chins at them. “Get their things and let them put their clothes on. We don’t want to draw attention to our little party. Not now anyway.”

Setesh could only rage helplessly as one of the males used the tip of his boot to nudge and tease Carmela de Monsalve between the thighs before dropping on her some of the clothes his colleagues had gathered from around the room.

While the woman did the same, Setesh pulled his clothes back on, crossed his tunic over the middle, tied the sash over his chest and the belt around his waist, before adjusting his wide pants, what humans in ancient times had called *hakama*. He’d found the divided skirt-type garment perfect for Hunting as it allowed freedom of movement and the opportunity to hide weapons. As was the case now with the small but razor-sharp dagger stitched into the rigid, board-like section at the back. When the time was right, he’d be sure to make them pay for affronting Carmela de Monsalve’s *ghers* and his own.

Something warm touched his thigh. Setesh resisted the urge to look down but surreptitiously slipped his hand along the thick fabric, looking for the source of warmth and finally realized it came from the bracelet box.

The mood stones!

Why were they so hot?

He had his answer when his gaze crossed that of Carmela de Monsalve. A lifetime of words wouldn’t have put a clearer message than the one sent by those lovely orbs the color of obsidian.

The stones would heat this fiercely only if *two* sets of mental pulses converged at once. He knew about his own budding feelings—not so budding according to the mood stones—toward the human female but for the heat to be this palpable, through the box and his thick pants. It could only mean one thing.

Her arms held him tightly as she rested her head on his chest. The rhythmic thuds of her heart against his belly matched his own.

Setesh reeled from the mental pulse’s energy. He had to close his eyes to give himself a brief reprieve and to shield his emotional response from the other humans. Carmela de Monsalve...she could very well be his life companion. The stones wouldn’t lie. They hadn’t lied before when they’d remained dormant, loose and black as the abyss in his heart at discovering his Yithian companion felt nothing for him. But they literally *burned* now.

He might as well have flicked a switch on for the intensity of the radiance warming his insides. Setesh Geb had found his life companion. A human female. How ironic!

"Hurry, Hunter Setesh," Collins said, intruding upon Setesh's bliss. "I know whores who can put their clothes on faster than you."

"You'd know all about that," Carmela commented with a last tug on her garment's closure. She clipped her belt and empty holsters back on. "Wouldn't you?"

Collins only laughed, followed by his thugs, as if the comment hadn't been meant to offend but to compliment him. Humans were a strange race.

After donning the long cape Collins had found for him in the first place—treacherous creature—Setesh followed the silent procession as they exited the Pleasure Dome, ducked into a dilapidated building, which leaned against its neighbor like a drunkard, and down a rickety steel-cage elevator. Because she was tall, he was able to meet Carmela de Monsalve's gaze over the others' heads and ascertained she wasn't injured too badly from her shock.

Collins led them to another underground abode different from the last in that this one was clearly meant as a workplace and not a home. Leaky pipes ran from the ground up to the ceiling with water sounds echoing off in the distance. The smell of sewers made Setesh crinkle his nose. Living like rats. Appropriately. No female Narays glided by for which he was eminently relieved. He hadn't wanted to insult the other's honor by refusing her advances but had had no choice after she'd literally begun to undo his clothes. She'd left with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

"Now," Collins announced in a different tone of voice than Setesh had heard so far. It sounded far more serious and menacing, and readily caught Setesh's undivided attention. Mental murders would have to wait.

"Frankly, all this talk about peace efforts has me worried," he said, sitting against the corner of a table on which had been set Setesh's and the woman's weapons. Maps and sheets of plastic littered the surface. "It's bad for business, *my* business. If they feel secure, if some kind of truce is brokered, then my clients don't buy as many weapons. And this in turn makes a dent in my profit." He rubbed his belly with a hand while he toyed with Setesh's long knife in the other. "And I do love my profit, you understand."

Carmela de Monsalve made a pronounced roll of eyes. "Collins, *dios*, just spit it out, *hombre!*"

He grinned, nodded. "Ah, Carmela, you break my heart. But fine, I'll spit it out.

"Both delegations are now on station, still in their own ships but preparing to attend the summit, which will be held in the security headquarters near the docks. I'll need each of you to play a tiny but pivotal role in the success of my business. How's that?"

Setesh couldn't agree more with the woman. "I have no time for this." He took a step toward Collins, who shook his head emphatically.

"If you threaten me one more time, Hunter Setesh, I'll make sure Carmela gets her fifteen standard minutes of fame with Dirk here. I think she broke his heart."

Dirk, the skinny human Carmela de Monsalve had sent flying out of the antechamber at the Pleasure Dome, smiled a lascivious grin, which cramped Setesh's thighs. He wanted nothing more at this instant than to rush for the nasty little human and wring his scrawny neck, punch the insolent—

Collins brought the knife's tip in front of his face and admired the blade for a while. "Speaking of which, Dirk, take a few guys and go ahead to make sure we don't have problems. Meet back directly at the security headquarters when you're done."

The man named Dirk left the room but not without one last menacing scowl at the woman, who superbly ignored him. Setesh burned with the urge to *hurt* him.

"All I need from each of you," Collins went on, "is that you kill the opposing delegate. Hunter Setesh, you kill the human envoy and you, my charming Spaniard, assassinate his Yithian homologue. Then each side will blame the other and it'll be fun for everyone."

Silence greeted Collins' words. He looked in turn at the woman then at Setesh. "And?" he asked, nodding. Perhaps he waited to hear how incredibly astute his plan was.

Setesh crossed his arms. "No."

"We'd have one messy *corrida* on our hands, Collins," the woman said, shaking her head. "A lot of people would die. I have clients too and they need to be *alive* to help me earn a living."

"Oh Carmela, you so disappoint me." Collins reversed his grip on the knife and offered it hilt first to Setesh.

Was the human that stupid?

Setesh reached for it, his instincts on full alert.

At the last moment, Collins, showing surprising skill, flicked his wrist and nicked Setesh in the palm. Carmela snarled something in that other language, which regularly crept into her English, and received a sharp little jab in the side from the closest man.

Setesh looked at his bleeding hand then at Collins. The pain was much more acute in his Hunter's honor than in his palm. *Much* more.

"To make sure everyone understands their role, I'll send some of my boys to chaperone the two of you. Dee, you go with Carmela and stay with her until she's done the deed. While you, Hunter Setesh, will accompany Warren—bring extra clips, boys—and get rid of the human delegation." He tossed the knife to Setesh, unbuttoned his yellow jacket and scratched an itch under his protruding abdomen. "Go in peace, my lambs."

His laugh accompanied Setesh into a corridor hewn in the bedrock as "Warren", a smallish human male with almond-shaped eyes and lithe strength, his acolytes, Carmela de Monsalve's and her own escort, led the way to another elevator. This one was larger and cleaner. He suspected it led to a more populated part of the station.

He looked down at his knife, which he'd slid inside its sheath on his sash, then at Carmela de Monsalve, who still had no weapon with which to do her "deed".

"When this is finished and all of these humans are dead," he said, ignoring the hostile glances from the rest of the group, "I have something for you. If you will have it."

The woman arched a perfect eyebrow but said nothing.

They reached the surface and one of the men raised the grille door to reveal what resembled the back entrance of a narrow eating place. Garbage was piled high and reeked.

"Okay," Warren said, giving a slight nudge to Setesh. "We're going this way. Say goodbye to your missus."

Because he towered over the tallest there by a good head and a half, Setesh could look directly into the woman's eyes. "I will see you again, Carmela de Monsalve."

He received a wink and this warmed his insides as thoroughly as the bracelet was heating the side of his thigh. His predatory grin must have unsettled some of the human males for they gave him a wide berth, despite the alley's tight fit.

The usually crowded streets of Land's End were even more packed with people when his party spilled out of the alley. He stood taller than most, except perhaps for a few of the tallest male Narays and the odd human, and could see well ahead. Above the farthest roofs at the intersection, he spotted the docks with a pair of Yithian ships moored at the very last stations, their silvery hulls gleaming quietly in the station's artificial light and shimmering electromagnetic field, which kept the blackness of space at bay. He shook his head. Yithians never traveled in such small numbers. Especially not for such a momentous mission. Where were the rest of the ships? To his embarrassment, he suspected his species had placed a vanguard around the station, ready to open fire at a moment's notice. Unless he was being paranoid, not something for which he was known.

"Your target's a tall and dark-haired human," Warren remarked without turning to him. "He wears a silver stomacher."

In spite of himself, his Hunter training took note of the man's words. Tall human male. Dark hair. Silver stomacher.

"We'll get you in close enough for a decent shot. The rest is up to you."

"What of the man's guards?"

Warren ignored him.

Setesh nodded. Understanding had just dawned on him. He was never meant to succeed. Only to *try*.

"I will need my weapons."

"You *have* a weapon, Yithian," another human replied. "Unless the job's too hard for you?"

The pitiful attempt at rousing his ire fell flat. Although Setesh wanted to break the man's neck, if only for insulting him.

"I can eviscerate someone in a standard second with this," he retorted, patting the knife on his chest. "But I did not want to get my hands dirty with human blood."

Warren sniggered at his colleague. "You asked for it."

"And you," a female voice remarked loudly, "asked for *this*."

Detaching from the wall against which she'd been leaning, Setesh spotted a tall human female with a nasty scar down the side of her angular face, black curly hair and the palest blue eyes. She held a pair of kinetic energy guns and her scowl approached Carmela de Monsalve's in menace and intensity.

Only Setesh didn't *want* help from anyone! If one of the thugs managed to get back to Collins and relay news about this woman, he'd take out his frustration on Carmela de Monsalve. Her life would be forfeit! And he had an inhibitor on, which greatly limited his ability to break anyone's neck, though he hungered for it quite passionately.

Cranaak!

Things were rapidly spinning out of control. Setesh widened his stance, frantically searching for a way out of this mess. Who was she? Why was she here?

"Who the fuck are you?" Warren demanded, skidding to a halt and putting his hand to his jacket.

"You will use a respectful tone when addressing Alexandra Novona, human," a deep male voice said from behind them.

Setesh could easily recognize the inflections with which this last comment had been said. A fellow Yithian?

He wasn't sure who fired first, the scarred woman or Warren. All he knew was that chaos erupted around them. People screamed and pushed to get out of the way of stunners and kinetic energy shots. He was hit by one of the thugs' stunners, collapsed to one knee as the nanodarts pierced his skin and jolted him but not before clamping a hand on the offender's throat. His cape slid down from his shoulders, denuding his head and his identity to all. He jerked his wrist. A muffled crunch reverberated along his arm when he succeeded in snapping the human's fragile spine. But another jolt, this time from the inhibitor, forced a snarl of pain from him. Fire filled his skull, his veins. Spasms locked his jaws and he collapsed on his front, his hand still wrapped around the dead man's neck. Electricity sped his heartbeat, clouded his vision. He felt moisture trickling from his nose.

Amid the stampede of feet and falling people, Setesh gritted his teeth and willed his heart to quiet down. *Tsh! Tsh! Tsh!* A series of rapid shots from a kinetic energy gun announced the woman wasn't restrained in any sense of the word. What he knew to be a Yithian male by voice only snarled behind him then cursed in English. In the heat of battle he had spoken English. A *human* tongue?

“Stop them,” Setesh growled in Yithian, cleared his throat. “Do not let them get away!”

Collins must not know.

The consequences of failing loomed large over Setesh. The mood stones’ heat seeped through his pants and strangely provided some relief to the agony racking his body.

Panting, he climbed to his knees, was knocked from behind when one of Collins’ men stumbled and fell over his shoulder. Setesh resisted—just barely—the urge to pull out his knife and make him pay. He’d been the one to nudge Carmela de Monsalve between the legs as she lay on the floor in unbearable pain from the inhibitor’s effect.

“Get the other one, Sekmeth!” the woman yelled somewhere to his left. “He can’t get away!”

Good, she knew enough not to let one get away.

He heard the other Yithian’s voice receding as he lay chase to at least one of Collins’ men.

Not being a hopeful sort to begin with, Setesh couldn’t hold on to the budding optimism he’d felt at recognizing Carmela de Monsalve as his life companion. The fleeing human would warn Collins who would in turn inform his men. All was lost.

Despite knowing another jolt from the inhibitor would likely incapacitate him for a while, Setesh cocked his fist back. That man had slighted her honor and so would die. No matter the consequences to himself.

“Hang on, Yithian!” the woman snapped from behind him. “Christ, you guys are always in such a damn hurry.”

He felt warm fingers against the back of his neck. The inhibitor clicked off.

She walked away so she could roll a man onto his back with the toe of her steel-clipped boot. “Carry on, Hunter.”

Setesh did.

He didn’t hear the snap of the man’s neck for when he turned back to see if his fellow Yithian had caught the fleeing human, his words died in his throat. He was dragging a man by the foot, still struggling and screaming. So not only a fellow Yithian, but a Hunter too, dressed in similar fashion, except he wore his tunic opened wide so everyone would see his numerous tattoos. Not that the stampeding passersby would notice.

Without a look at Setesh, the other Hunter proffered the human, hanging upside down by a foot, to the woman. “This is the last one.”

She fired at the man, which silenced his threats and curses. The Hunter dropped him then turned to Setesh with a perplexed expression on his face. Recognition flashed in his eyes. He was older, perhaps not old enough to be his father but definitely an older brother.

An image of Carmela de Monsalve's face, her black eyes and red lips, appeared in his mind's eye. She was backing away from him and winking, gun pointed down as she rested her fist against her curvy hip. She was saying goodbye.

His heart all but stopped.

"Nooo! Fools!" Setesh growled in Yithian, going for his knife because he didn't know how else to vent his fury. "You have cost me my companion!"

He lunged at the other Hunter, who sidestepped and barely managed to avoid Setesh's wicked blade.

Something tugged at his pant leg and momentarily stunned Setesh. He chanced a quick peek downward to notice a hole in the fabric near his crotch.

"You act bitchy with my husband again, Hunter," the woman said, gun still leveled at him, "and I'll put another asshole into you. Got it?"

Husband?

"It is understandable, Alex," the other Hunter said. "He does not know." Then, narrowing his eyes contemplatively, he nodded. "You do greatly resemble your father."

"Who are you?"

The Hunter shrugged. "Unimportant."

Setesh hated being made to feel inferior this way and nearly attacked the smirking Yithian again. "What do I not know?"

"Anything. Everything. You choose."

After a look around, the woman named Alex lowered her gun. "That excuse's good only once. You get in Sekmeth's face again, big boy, and I'll cut you down to size. Let's go."

He had no other choice but to follow the pair as they rushed past a cookshop, veered into one of the alleys leading through the red-light district—the neon signs and blinking lights dazed his already bewildered brain—and continued their mad run until Alex shouldered a door made of corrugated metal. Surprisingly, this led to an interior courtyard littered with several crates ajar on the broken concrete ground. Weapons lined the interior. All of them shiny new and designed in ways he'd never seen.

"You will answer me now, human," Setesh growled as he grabbed what resembled a mini pulse cannon. Only he'd never heard of a portable version. It weighed a ton!

Alex planted her fists on her hips, narrowed her pale eyes. "You guys aren't the only ones with friends, you know."

"I do not understand." He was getting annoyed past his limit. Carmela de Monsalve might be in danger right now.

"Alex means Yithians are not the only ones with ships hidden underneath the station," Sekmeth said. He grinned in a predatory fashion Setesh wished he could mirror. But his guts twisted at the mere thought of his companion getting hurt or worse.

The woman nodded. "Things are gonna get *interesting* around here, goddammit."

Chapter Eight

Carmela couldn't remember ever seeing anything so damn poignant. Setesh's expression, the way he'd meant to reach out to her but let his hand drop had all but broken her heart. It was better this way though. She realized now the depth of Collins' plan. He meant for them to create a diplomatic incident and force the two species to war but he held no hope neither Setesh nor she would succeed in getting anywhere near their respective targets. They were meant to be *seen* trying to assassinate the other species' delegate then get killed. She wondered if his men knew this or if they were expendable too.

A nervous itch on her healing gash made her scratch at her forearm. She forced her hands down.

The bearded, Viking-like man whom Collins had called Dee led his group deeper into the red-light district where multi-raced, multi-gendered prostitutes milled about or performed from behind tinted thermoplastic windows. Her group skirted that neighborhood as they snuck underneath the suspended train tracks, guns sweeping back and forth. She wished she could have hers back. Dee had it strapped to his thick waist. It looked much better on her. And he had her baton too.

She knew the station due to having accompanied her former boss, before she began working for Kim, here on several "business" meetings—namely, bust a few kneecaps and adjust a few attitudes—and suspected Dee wanted to circumvent the more populated areas by using the lower levels. Her theory was confirmed when a maintenance shaft gaped between two buildings. A pair of men already stood there, waiting and covering the area with kinetic energy guns. Land's End must have become laxer with its no gun discharge law because it seemed everyone carried *something*.

Except her.

Dee spoke under his breath and she realized he carried a comms link on him. *Mierda*. Her hopes of getting rid of the team or at least some of them were crushed. Collins would know right away and tell his goons to kill Setesh. Not something with which she was willing to take a chance. She missed him already.

In the span of a few days, she'd gone from blissfully unattached to madly—and *madly* was the correct word for her state—in love with a Yithian Hunter formerly after her, whom she'd put "on ice" so to speak, then after her again then temporarily disabled, only to come back yet again to claim her. How crazy was this? This time, he'd succeeded. For Carmela de Monsalve really *did* belong to him. Because she chose to. Nothing to do with some Hunt or whatnot.

She knocked her shoulder against the ledge as she climbed down into darkness and resolved to stay focused on the next few standard minutes for they would undoubtedly change her life. Or end it.

“Say, am I to kill a Yithian with the keen edge of my wit alone?” she asked mockingly. She thought she saw something move in a corner but couldn’t be sure with the semidarkness of the maintenance tunnels running underneath the station.

Dee chuckled. “I like you. Too bad Collins already has plans for you. But no, you’re not expected to kill a Yithian with the ‘keen edge of your wit’. I’ll give you a weapon when it’s time.”

Some of the men made lewd comments about how they had something for her too. She just ignored these stupid little boys with their bravado and games. She’d known what a *real* male felt like and would never go back to human lovers.

Pot lights along the pipes running overhead gave off a dirty yellow light, which chased shadows back into nooks and crannies, plentiful around here and providing ample opportunity to twist an ankle. Or be ambushed. She cursed at her heels. She’d hoped a shopping spree would make her feel better when a simple look from Setesh had sufficed to put her world back in order. *Dios* she missed him. And the worst thing was she probably wouldn’t see him again.

Her legs still felt weak after the inhibitor’s jolt. She cursed her luck. She didn’t have a chance with that thing on as it’d pick up any point of aggression and deck her again. She didn’t think she’d survive another jolt. It’d been tuned to human settings and would recognize anyone from that race if they came within an inch of the clasp.

A small sound caught her ears. She turned back but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then after a double take, she realized they were missing one person. Carmela pretended to look in front of her but all her focus was now turned backward at whoever was tailing them. Her heart skipped a few beats. Was it him?

You’re grasping at straws, woman. Calm down. He’s gone as far as you’re concerned.

Anyway, it couldn’t be Setesh for he wore an inhibitor and wouldn’t have been able to dispatch Collins’ man.

Still, her first instinct had been for Setesh and how he might be tailing them, coming to her rescue.

The idiotic thought made her chuckle.

Might as well get one last laugh.

Soon Dee came to a halt and pointed at a steel ladder climbing into obscurity. “There, my dear. I’ll go first then you follow me.” He turned to his men. “You four, get in the next shaft and wait by the docks’ turnstiles. Don’t be seen or I’ll have your frozen balls floating in my drink.”

Grinning in his beard, Dee climbed the ladder and as much as she wanted to stay underground and give her Good Samaritan a chance, she had to follow him so as not to alert anyone. They hadn’t even noticed one of theirs was missing. Amateurs!

A circle of light appeared on the floor at her feet. She looked up.

"Come on, Carmela," Dee called from the aperture thirty feet above her head.

With regret, she had no choice but to join him up top. She emerged inside a building, some sort of factory with conveyor belts and magnetized plates for heavy lifting. Beyond the dirty windows, turnstiles separating the docks from the station resembled the entrance to a theme park. People could be heard outside, conversations in several languages. A large crowd judging by the sound.

After she'd passed a leg over the metal handrail, Carmela padded toward Dee and put her back against the wall. A few crates were stacked in a corner beyond the hole. A loud clamor erupted outside. Dee pressed his index finger to his ear and nodded.

"The Yithians are coming out of their ship."

Through a clean spot in the window, she could see up along the docks a fast-walking procession of tall and beautiful blue-skinned people, their black uniforms and silver hair catching the shimmering field's glow. So stunning. Her heart constricted. She'd almost tasted how it was to wake to one of *these* every morning. So close. But she had to say goodbye now. She had to do her part in case he succeeded and was allowed to live. She doubted Collins would keep his word but just in case, she wanted to make sure Setesh had every chance on his side. He was a Hunter. He'd survive if there was the slightest, faintest prospect. And if her sacrifice would bring him that tiny sliver of opportunity, then by *dios*, she'd do it!

The crowd's roar intensified outside the building. People were excited, others loudly protested this or that other issue. The noise made her cringe.

Dee slipped her baton from his belt and gave it to her. "Here. Have fun."

She took the baton without meeting his gaze. She didn't want him to know she *knew*.

More of Dee's men were climbing out of the hole. One was just coming out now, a hand still on the rail. Then a sound like thunder reverberated from inside the maintenance shaft. The man howled and fell into the hole.

Carmela heard loud curses coming from the hole. She shook her head for she easily recognized its owner.

"Argh, Jesus Christ," a man's voice roared. "The guy bled all over my fucking suit! Look at that mess!"

Another loud boom echoed but was drowned by the crowd outside. Dee pushed past her and ordered his men to keep whoever was down the hole occupied. He turned to her, leveled his gun but what he said was drowned by at least six or seven shots. And they were getting louder. Carmela backed against the wall. Damn inhibitor! She had a chance and couldn't do anything about it!

Collins' men returned fire but not a single one looked as if he wanted to approach the thundering hole. Up on the ceiling, sharp little explosions erupted, a telltale of the kind of weapon being used. The acrid odor of gunpowder reached her.

Carmela wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Who else would use gunpowder?

And soon enough, Titan's shaved head poked over the ledge, the ten-inch muzzle to his monstrous gun having preceded him. His gloved hand held the rail while he dispensed death to anyone crazy enough to face him.

Two of Collins' men seemed to have a spark of good sense to hightail it out of the factory. After returning a few stunner rounds, they whirled around and charged for the back door. They never made it there. One fell howling, his shoulder exploding like an overripe pomegranate thrown against a wall. After a dive and a roll, his companion sidestepped, seemed to decide he had a better chance if he just stood his ground. Titan downed him with a pair of shots to the legs, which left the man whimpering on the floor.

Despite the serious ammo exchange, Titan didn't move an inch as he fired with deadly accuracy. And all Carmela could do was watch when Dee took aim at her boss' boyfriend.

Mierda!

She couldn't attack him for the inhibitor would pick up aggression and deck her. She wouldn't even make it to him in the first place. But she could, say, give him a little nudge in the "right" direction. Namely Titan's range.

Trying to keep her body relaxed and her adrenaline under control, Carmela closed her eyes briefly.

Here it goes, woman, self-control means everything now.

She pushed Dee in the back, sent him stumbling a few paces forward, enough to make him miss Titan's nice round head. Dee turned, death in his eyes. But he stumbled, collapsed on his knees. From behind the stack of crates in the corner stepped a tiny woman with hair the color of kiwi flesh.

Carmela wanted to hug Kim but couldn't move for fear of triggering a jolt that would surely finish her off. She was still weak-kneed from her last one and felt a sort of dizziness she couldn't shake. Carmela nodded as she took cover farther along the wall.

While her man reloaded his gun, her face set in a tight mask, Kim fired a long volley of stunner shots. After a few seconds, the last two of Collins' men decided they'd had enough, jumped onto a conveyor belt and ran along its length, probably aiming at the front door not far beyond the end.

They didn't make it far as Titan climbed completely out of the hole and stopped the men's advance with a pair of bullets that sent them tumbling off the conveyor. He stomped to where the pair had disappeared. Carmela couldn't see from her position, but judging from the expression on Titan's face, those men had better run. She saw him shoot twice at something below her line of sight, curse, reload then shoot another four times.

He looked down at himself, dusting his black, pinstriped suit, and shook his head. "One hundred percent fucking wool and it's completely ruined by some moron with

not enough common sense to go die somewhere else." He kicked the nearest dead body. A disgusted curl to his mouth, Titan leaped over the conveyor belt, slapped Kim on the butt when he reached her then snapped his chin at Carmela. "Hey, woman. You all right?"

No she wasn't. *Nothing* was right.

For when the tumult ceased, she could clearly hear a tiny voice coming out of Dee's earpiece as he lay facedown on the floor. Collins must have known his plan had failed.

Setesh was as good as dead. She rubbed at her arm with a vengeance.

Prey to the deepest chagrin she'd ever felt, Carmela leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on her heels. Her eyes welled. She didn't even try to hide it. She no longer cared. The baton slid from her hand.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Kim asked, coming over after she slid her stunner back into its holster by her thigh. She wore her "portable" decodex strapped to her slender forearm. Barely portable now with additions shaped into a black squid-like *thing* hugging her arm.

"Setesh. Collins killed him."

"Who's Setesh?"

"The Yithian in the tank...Drokesh's...Setesh *Geb*." She choked on the family name.

"Oh *that* Yithian."

Carmela shot her a warning look. "He means more to me than my own life. Be careful what you call him."

Kim patted the air. "Okay, Carmela. But right now, it's totally important that you hear me because I don't think they could've gotten to him. Unless they went through Alex and Sekmeth, something, like, way hard to picture right now? Especially pissed off as she was? Oh man, the hissy *fit* she threw. Carmela, you *broke* the *Femme Metal*."

Carmela barely heard the rest. "Get this thing off me," she snarled, her hand coming up to her throat. "Get it off me."

"No problem, Carmela, just sit still though, okay?" After a sidelong glance at Titan, who only shrugged and sucked something out of his teeth, Kim clicked rapid-fire against one of the tiny screens along her arm.

Not even ten seconds later, Carmela's inhibitor clicked off and fell on her lap. She threw it far from her, the damned thing that might have cost her Setesh, then stood. She didn't bother to check Dee's pulse and hurriedly retrieved her gun.

"Collins."

Titan must have approved her chain of thought—if he only knew the reason—for he nodded and patted his belt where an assortment of clips was strapped. "Got something right here for the fat jackass. I won't aim to maim this time."

"Says the man who just shot a guy in the balls. You're just, like, argh! Gross."

Kim's comment brought Carmela careening from the landscape of revenge and murder just long enough to be perplexed. "Who do you mean?"

Titan couldn't have looked more disgusted if he'd tried really hard. "Some moron with a chain—a fucking *chain*—to hold his pants up." He mumbled something about silk and pure wool and smoothed his jacket.

"Dirk," Carmela remarked, darkly satisfied the slimy little thug had tasted some of the couple's special brand of justice. "He was our client. Or pretended to be."

"Know all about that, woman," Titan replied before kicking a leg over the handrail and stepping across the hole. "You'd be surprised how chatty guys get after I shoot them in the crotch. And in his case, Mister I'm Scared For My *Bolas*, I figured it was appropriate. Novona and her blue boyfriend got to finish him 'cause, you know, I'm generous that way."

Kim snorted. "We left him to them because we had to be at the docks before the baddies. Generous."

Titan beamed and kissed the air at her. "You coming, baby?"

Kim looked up at the ceiling, her green tresses spilling over her back. She sighed. "We'll tell you all about it on the way back to where we found that guy, okay. I'm sure Alex and Sekmeth got your Yithian. Don't worry." She patted Carmela on the shoulder and followed her boyfriend into the hole.

For a second, Carmela forgot everything else but the beauty of having someone special with whom to spend the rest of one's life. It only lasted a moment as her hope disintegrated into ashes. She *refused* to hope the Novona woman and her Yithian husband had saved Setesh. For if it turned out not to be the case, Carmela feared she'd go mad. Instantly, irreversibly, completely mad. Being broken-hearted wasn't at all what she'd expected it to be. Not that she'd wished for it. But she'd often seen it in others—the apathy, the grayness of their skin, the dullness in their eyes. What she hadn't expected was the abyss yawning under her feet. A simple breeze would suffice to send her tumbling over the edge. She'd rather die actually. Quicker. Cleaner.

But first, Collins would pay for stealing Setesh from her.

Gun and baton safely back in their respective and new holsters, Carmela followed the pair down into the maintenance shaft and along the same tunnel through which Dee and his men had taken her. She knew if they followed it long enough, they'd eventually reach the older part of the station, the one carved from the bedrock.

The sound of feet running had the three of them leveling their guns at the gloomy intersection coming up in front of them. A small group of people ran out of the perpendicular tunnel, never even looked into theirs, and charged into the opposite.

Titan rushed forward. "What's the big hurry?" he yelled after them.

A woman skidded to a halt, turned and pointed back. "The Yithians! They're attacking! Two of 'em are down below!"

Before he could ask anything else, the woman had turned and disappeared around a bend.

"Yithians are attacking down below? Attacking what?" Kim asked, shaking her head. "And just two of them?"

Titan agreed with a nod. "There's nothing down below except..."

"Except for rats," Carmela finished for him.

Collins!

The couple must have reached the same conclusion for all three sprinted into the tunnel the group had just exited and didn't stop running until water had reached their ankles. The sound of kinetic gunfight—or the resulting shots hitting rock more aptly—echoed then a loud *BOOM* was heard, one that had Kim slapping her latex-covered thigh. She wore her "power suit", that chemical-spill orange one-piece.

"I *told* you reversing the polarity would totally *not* affect the output!" Turning to Carmela, she added, "It's our newest toy. And shiny? Mm-mm. So if folks are seeing *two* Yithians and we're hearing our toys going off, then that means your guy should be okay, Carmela." She beamed.

Don't hope, woman. Do not hope.

A tiny tingle started at the nape of her neck. Carmela rubbed it, her heart swelling, her eyes filling with tears. Could it be?

They rushed forward but with more caution, and when they emerged into a large tunnel carved entirely of rock with old tracks remaining from the station's mining days, a scene of chaos greeted them. Smoke and debris floated around the cavernous place with shouts and shots resounding nearby. She could make out Yithian! A male voice roared in Yithian but given the grotto-like sound effect, she couldn't be sure it was Setesh. Her heart beat in a detuned, frantic metronome.

Please, dios, let it be, please.

Black scuffs along the wall and ceiling all pointed in one direction, directly at a blank wall. More shouting from beyond, human and Yithian this time. A woman's voice rose above the rest.

"Get your head outta your fucking ass, Yithian!"

Who was this chick talking to? Setesh? She better not be. The tingle at her nape intensified.

Heart in her throat, Carmela approached, gun pointing in front and cautiously pressed against the wall. Her hand went right through!

"A holo!" Kim squealed, seemingly very happy with this bit of technology. "Oh Titan, can I keep it?"

"It's all yours, baby," he replied as he retrieved a second gun, smaller but still substantial, and joined Carmela. "Ladies first."

She steeled herself for the potentially heart-breaking scene beyond—that woman had better not touch Setesh, if it was him she'd heard yelling. Although the tingly

feeling hadn't lied yet. Carmela stepped through the holographic image and froze there. Titan walked right into her, cursed then sidestepped.

She didn't hear Kim joining them. She heard nothing, saw nothing except *him*.

Setesh stood about twenty or so paces to her right and into the large, underground disco-themed room—complete with laser ball, chrome bar, narrow stage and pouffy red velvet couches—holding the largest, *baddest* gun she'd ever seen in her entire life against his hip. So this was Kim's newest toy? He held it pointed at Collins, who sat sprawled in one of the red chairs, his bottom lip bleeding, his hands in front of him in supplication. Novona stood partly between Setesh and Collins with a Yithian Hunter by her side and this one she *did* notice because he was pointing a gun at Setesh.

"We need him alive, you dumb Yithian," Novona yelled at Setesh. "Otherwise we won't know where they *are!*"

"That's right, Hunter S-Setesh," Collins stammered, trying to keep himself from sliding off the chair. His canary-yellow suit was a torn mess. "Maybe my men took her off-station. If you kill me, you'll never know."

Setesh shook his head, which whipped strands of dark silver hair over his V-shaped back, and hollered at both in his language. That other Yithian—Sekmeth—scowled.

"Collins," Novona roared, shaking a fist at him. "Would you shut the hell up?"

"Move away!" Setesh yelled in English, taking a step sideways. "He will die for what he did!"

Sekmeth shook his head and said something in Yithian.

Carmela wanted to laugh. But Sekmeth would have to lower his weapon first. This wouldn't do.

"Talk about a *corrida*," she commented loudly enough for everyone to hear.

She saw Setesh's shoulders tighten. He turned his head gradually, as though he feared seeing what lay behind him. When their gazes met, Carmela thought she'd start crying again.

"Hey, *hombre*," she said.

His smile created long creases along his cheeks. She'd never seen a Yithian smile so widely. Then it turned darker, more sinister. He narrowed his gaze, turned away from her and back toward Collins.

Novona threw her hands up. "Finally! Christ!" She stepped away, grumbling.

Not a second later, Setesh fired his mammoth gun and was projected a good two feet backward.

Where Collins had sat there only remained a scuff mark on the ground. Bits and pieces, mostly burned beyond recognition, floated down around the room. He'd literally been *vaporized*.

Setesh dropped the gun without a backward glance—Kim squealed in protest—and walked toward Carmela, his hands reaching up, widening, creating the perfect shelter she was quick to seek. When they collided, she swore their hearts had merged into one.

She heard Kim's subdued, whispered comment from behind her. "Whoa, Titan, the recoil is totally uncool. We'll have to work on that."

Chapter Nine

Setesh's heart beat so hard and so fast he feared for a quick, crazy moment he was about to collapse. An ache the likes of which he'd never felt welded his jaws together. Oh and he knew exactly what it was.

Fear. Abject, paralyzing fear.

He had no idea fear could be so painful. Nothing had ever frightened him. He'd never known what others talked about, that sinking feeling, the gut-wrenching, mind-numbing *fear*. He could've lost her. His companion.

Setesh held on to the woman's curvy form with all the strength he dared use. So he could focus even more on her—if he could, he'd wrap his entire body around hers—he leaned his face into her coiled hair and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, enough to see stars.

He'd come so close to losing her.

"Not that I want to be the party pooper," a male voice said, "but could we get the fuck out of here? The stink is getting into my clothes."

"Titan," a high-pitched voice snapped. "You Cro-Magnon. Give them a moment."

Setesh opened his eyes to catch the other Hunter staring at him with that knowing look he'd quickly come to associate with him. He also noticed Hunter Sekmeth had just furtively glanced at a tiny human female with green hair and his expression had gone from smug to contrite in the span of a second.

Carmela de Monsalve pulled away, rubbed her eyes and grinned. "Titan is right, it does smell like smoked ham in here."

The woman named Alex stomped toward the holographic wall, throwing over her shoulder, "Let's go back home up top. We'll talk there."

She must have been used to her orders being followed for she didn't even wait to see if anyone would move and walked through the fake rock wall. Titan, after retrieving the giant silvery gun Setesh had dumped to the ground and the tiny human, followed her out.

Hunter Sekmeth walked to the holographic image, stopped and turned. "You will have to tell them who you are, Hunter Setesh, especially to the little one Kim. They will not take it well if they learn on their own. Humans do not enjoy being 'out of the circle', as they say." He left.

"It's 'out of the *loop*'," Carmela murmured with a shake of her head. She looked up into Setesh's face. "What now, Hunter? Do you want me to tell Kim?"

He shrugged. "I care little what these humans think of me."

“These humans, *hombre*, are my friends. Except for the bitch. If you mean to be around me a lot as I hope you do...” She smiled. “Then I think we owe it to them. Drokesh has made many enemies, Setesh. And something happened between him and Kim. Something bad.”

He had no doubt his father’s later years had generated even more enemies and indeed Setesh cared little about that, but what *did* bother him was Hunter Sekmeth’s insistence he speak with the tiny woman named Kim. Who was she? She looked barely old enough to be considered adult, even by human standards. It was hard to believe she’d known his father, who’d run the Yithian brothel-ship *Gorgosh* and...

A faint sensation of unease squeezed his stomach. Had she been an *escort*? He shook his head. Too young, too slight. Unlike other species, emaciated and unripe females with no signs of experience only generated pity or indifference on his world. No Yithian male would look at Kim twice.

They retraced their steps to the surface. Setesh recognized very little since he’d been in such a rage when he’d first made his way to the weapons’ cache. The “home up top”, according to the foul-tempered woman, resembled more of an abandoned drinking establishment than a real home. It had a large common room and a wide staircase covered in dark purple carpet. Hideous.

By the time they got there, the shaved man sat at a table in the common room, meticulously cleaning his weapons, which he’d disassembled and laid out in order of size, smallest to the left. Setesh silently commended the man for his work habits, if not his strange accoutrement. The man looked up, grimaced then returned to his work.

“We have to talk, Titan,” Carmela de Monsalve said at his side. “You’ll want to know this.”

“It is mine to tell, Carmela de—”

“Just Carmela will be fine, *hombre*.”

He nodded.

Titan didn’t look up from his work. “Yeah, so? Need an invitation?”

This human had killed his father and presently acted in a confrontational way. Any other time, Setesh would’ve loved fighting him—he looked more than worthy. Strangely though, despite Titan’s deed and attitude, Setesh felt none of the rage he’d initially experienced at hearing the news about his father. Although it’d never been his demise that had bothered Setesh the most but the fact Carmela de Monsalve—Carmela—hadn’t told him. This had piqued his Hunter’s honor to its core. He realized now she hadn’t known. None of them had. No one had realized the link. Drokesh had been killed and his son stuffed into a stasis tank—the ignominy would never leave him, he knew—not because of their identity but because of their deeds. This, he could understand and approve. And this alone eased much of the grief about the death of Drokesh Geb and he could confront this human before him without losing his temper.

Setesh stood in front of Titan, ready to retrieve his knife from his sash if the vicious-looking human tried something. “I am Drokesh’s son. And you killed him.”

He heard Carmela's teeth grinding. She rolled her eyes.

"What?"

Yithians hadn't been burdened with what humans called "a sense of humor" but despite his genetic lack of predisposition for the funny elements in life, Setesh would've laughed at Titan's expression. His face went from pink to a dark shade of red. He snapped to his feet, meant to pick up one of his guns—the largest with a muzzle longer than Setesh's hand and wrist combined—but since he'd disassembled them, what he grabbed was the truncated handle. He still pointed it at Setesh.

"Fucking *what?*"

"Drokesh Geb was my father. I am his son Setesh Geb. You killed him." He turned toward Carmela, who seemed to be in deep conversation with some unseen entity above her head. "You humans are strange."

"Don't turn away from me, you asshole," Titan snarled as he stalked around the table and stood right under Setesh's chin. "You give me twenty-seven seconds so I can put my SIG back together and I'll show you what I did to your old man."

Carmela interposed herself, her back to Setesh, and wrapped an arm over Titan's shoulders to pull him back. He never even budged. "Don't hate the son for what the father did."

"Guilty by genetic ass-o-ciation. Fucking good enough for me."

"What has my father done to you, human?"

"Not to me, you big fucker, to *Kim*. He wanted her to be his first concubine or some crazy shit like that. I helped him get back with his inner dead guy. I'd love to do the same for you."

"First *concubine?*" Setesh snorted as he grabbed the man by the strip of shiny, pink-colored cloth dangling from his neck. He pulled him in, bringing Carmela with him. Heat from her body intruded into his focus.

Titan wrapped a considerable fist around Setesh's wrist. The pain from the steel grip was surprising. Not bad for a human. "You let go of my tie before I make a nice hole in your forehead."

"You lie. No Yithian would take this tiny human to be first concubine."

"Drokesh *did* want to make her his first concubine," Hunter Sekmeth calmly remarked as he walked in, the two other human females in his wake. The dark-haired one appeared angry. But Setesh was starting to believe she always looked this way.

He released Titan. "How do you know this?"

"Because five years ago, he had to give the symbol back to get me out of your father's bed," said the tiny woman. Her large black eyes flashed.

Even Titan seemed taken aback by this and both he and Setesh looked in turn at Hunter Sekmeth and Kim. Clearly these two shared a special bond.

"Give the symbol back? Aren't symbols tattoos?" Titan asked. Setesh noticed the man had a metal canine tooth.

Humans really *were* strange.

Hunter Sekmeth nodded. "I let Drokesh carve the symbol out so I could reclaim the prey. A fair price to right a wrong."

"Without him..." Kim said, shook her head.

Even the snarling Titan seemed overcome by emotions. He cleared his throat, mumbled something about allergies while he rubbed his eye. Finally he blew air through pursed lips. "Whew. Fuck." He looked at the ceiling, cracking his neck. "Y-you let a guy carve out a piece of your hide...for Kim? Sekmeth, man, me and you are gonna have to talk. I'll even buy you big fucker a drink."

After an affectionate pat on Hunter Sekmeth's shoulder, who nodded solemnly, Kim approached Setesh, the top of her head barely reaching his sternum. He still couldn't believe his father, well into his second cycle—at least mid-fifties in human aging patterns—would be debased enough to entertain carnal thoughts about such a small, unripe female, and *five* years ago, which would have put her at barely past puberty. Setesh ground his teeth but forced himself to uphold her gaze. Even if he had nothing to do with his father's affairs, he still felt partly responsible for her pain and entirely liable to her revenge or that of her companion. He clearly itched for it.

She looked up into his face, clearly gauging him. There was more wisdom and pain in those two black orbs than he'd ever seen in someone so young. Another reason he held her stare was Carmela. He wanted to show her he wouldn't shy away from responsibility, he was strong enough to bear both his faults and his father's, as any worthy Yithian male ought to do for his companion. If these humans meant something to Carmela, he would make them mean something to him too.

"He was a total pig," she said at length. "But you're not him, are you?" A mocking grin lifted the corner of her glossy mouth. "You're much cuter. And anyway, if Carmela likes you, it's good enough for me."

She went to stand by her companion, who wrapped a protective arm around her tiny shoulders and brought her against him. Setesh died a hundred deaths in the man's murderous glare.

First concubine. He couldn't believe it!

Setesh turned toward Hunter Sekmeth, searching for a flaw in his story. She was much too small. He could scarcely contain the thought. Carmela slipped her hand in his. Her silent show of support touched him. Still, Drokesh Geb's actions *would* taint him by genetic association as the man had said and rightly so, for what sort of Yithian would take a bed companion not even half his size and well, *well* below acceptable maturity standards? For Yithians anyway. Drokesh had indeed been a "total pig".

Silence fell around the large room while Setesh waged his inner battle. No other Hunt had generated such mental struggle. And frankly, he was no longer sure he wanted to keep Hunting either. What if he became another Drokesh Geb?

"Yeah, I don't know what it is about you Yithians," remarked Alex with a roll of eyes. "We just can't think straight with you guys around."

Kim snorted a laugh. "Totally."

With the women's quiet chuckles, the electricity in the air dissipated, for which he was glad. It was enough he kept dying every few seconds while the man stared at him and sucked through his teeth—a *metal* tooth! Setesh knew this one would never forgive and accepted his lot.

"Well, kids," Alex went on. "That's it for us. We have to get off Land's End before the Yithian delegation realizes Sekmeth's here. We're not terribly popular, are we? We'll see you guys later. Oh, almost forgot." She put her fists on her hips and scowled. "Who's the moron who crashed my ship?"

"My ship you mean?" Kim snapped. "We'll tow *her* back home and fix *her*."

Alex nodded. "You better fix *him*. But that doesn't answer my question, does it?"

Carmela stepped in front of Setesh, also fists on her hips, which were much curvier and enticing than the wiry, scarred woman's. "I did. Is this a problem?"

Before his companion could retort, Hunter Sekmeth nodded at the rest of the group before slipping his hand through the woman's short curly hair and making a loose fist. Her nipples noticeably hardened. "Forget the ship," he murmured in his milky baritone. "I look forward to some time alone with you," he finished in Yithian.

While Alex and Kim grinned, envy and misery stabbed Setesh when he noticed the other Hunter's ring. He hadn't seen it before now. A mood stone! And it was *blazing*.

"I'll fix *her* all nice and pretty like nothing happened, Captain Steel. Don't worry." The small woman detached a piece of the apparatus strapped to her slender arm and put it on the table. "I'll give you a buzz sometime tomorrow after I'll have had a look at her. From what you told me, I'd say a week or so."

Setesh waited until they had left, Titan assembling his gun in precisely twenty-seven seconds as he'd boasted, then Setesh sat on a corner of the table, his gaze drawn to Carmela as soon as she'd said her goodbyes and joined him.

"It looks as if I'll stay here for a while until things settle down then we'll resume the drops." She looked at the wood simile front door and grinned. "After a while, fish and company both smell the same."

He didn't understand the humor in this comment but let it go. Something else presently occupied him. He caught her wrist and brought it to his mouth so he could nibble the tender inside. "Did you understand what Hunter Sekmeth said to his companion?"

She shook her head.

Carmela might not have understood what the extra-yummy Sekmeth had said to The Bitch Monster From Hell—what he found in the loud-mouthed bully, she'd never understand—but she more than appreciated the light in Setesh's pearly eyes. Now that the gut-twisting fear of losing him was gone and with it the apathy that had gripped

her, she could better assimilate the keen edge of arousal poking her in tingly waves from her toes to her scalp.

"I want to get this off my chest first," she said, gathering his large hands into her own much smaller ones and looking up into his face.

He instantly appeared worried. Men. Males of every species!

"If I had a pair, I would've kicked myself in the *bolas* at least twenty times today for not being wise enough to recognize the signs. Do you follow me?"

Setesh cocked his head. "Follow where?"

She would've laughed had the situation not called for absolute self-control. Now was not the time to let herself go, tear his clothes off and jump him where he stood. That would be for later. She had to be calm and collected right now and so only shook her head. "It's a figure of speech, Setesh, a way to put images into our words. It's supposed to make them clearer."

"Yes, you humans use these much. But it does not make anything more clear. *This* does."

Both of them naked. His tattoos rippled and undulated as he anchored her hips and tilted his forward. Hot and incredibly smooth, his cock glided in for a gentle but deep penetration. Dark silver hair cascaded over his defined pectorals, hid the tiny nipples. Another thrust, this one taken right at the end of the first when Carmela thought he was already as deep as he could reach. She gasped his name. He smiled.

The mental pulse engulfed her so completely Carmela felt herself vacillate. Strong arms kept her from falling. Setesh knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her thighs, leaned his burning-hot forehead against her pelvic bone and if it was the only sign of his affection he would've shown, it still would've been enough to convey everything he felt for her. She *got* him completely. Carmela welcomed him into her arms as she encircled his head, combed through his hair. Still, she had to tell him how she felt. It *demand*ed to be let out.

"Shh," she murmured, closing her eyes. "Let me finish.

"Sometimes, we humans tend to put ego before reason and we say and do things that in retrospect make little sense. I knew as soon as I was done stuffing you into that tank I'd be in trouble from then on."

She wondered if anyone anywhere had ever been told someone loved them as they were "putting them on ice" inside a stasis tank. There wouldn't be odes sung to this method, she was sure. Not very romantic.

"So," she added, "it means I love you very much, I'd like to keep you with me if I could. It also means if you don't feel the same, it's okay not to tell me and just pretend for a while so you don't crush my little human heart."

She felt his sigh against her belly. "Humans."

Because she wanted to see his beautiful Yithian face—hell, she'd stare at it for the rest of her life if she were allowed to—Carmela knelt in front of him, one knee between

his and the other by his thigh. Something hot touched the inside of her leg. She looked down but only saw the wide, skirt-like pants.

He must have felt it too for he looked down, slipped a hand in some pocket she hadn't seen and brought out a narrow box made of some opalescent mineral. It rested in the palm of his hand and he only looked at it. Perhaps he silently gauged its color or heat, for the thing positively radiated. Yet nothing betrayed what lay inside.

"I have denied it to the best of my ability," he murmured, still staring at the box. "These have shown me how wrong I could be, how...I do not know the proper word. *Kresh*...lost? I thought I had something but I had nothing. I thought I had someone but I was alone. I was awake but the stones slept through my loss."

Carmela was loath to break the silence but after a while, she realized Setesh would say no more. *Could* say no more. His chin trembled. "What is it?"

He looked up. His eyes were so pale, so iridescent. Moisture had gathered along the eyelids. She'd never seen him this way. "We call them mood stones. They reflect what is here with a glow." He pressed his other hand to his chest. "But only if the other feels the same. They have betrayed me once, Carmela de Monsalve. They have shown me my lie. Now they are awake and I fear I am only dreaming of being awake with them."

Despite the difference in languages, she understood.

Setesh must have loved someone who hadn't loved him back. She wished she could tell him she'd lived through such heartbreak but she hadn't. All she could do was wrap her hand over his and squeeze hard.

"I don't think they're lying now, Hunter."

He shrugged, sat on his heels, still contemplating the box.

"Open it."

If the words sounded like a command, she made sure her tone relayed the request for what it was.

After a long intake of air, Setesh cradled the box in both palms, used his thumb to separate the top from the bottom and gradually, as if some poisonous snake would spring out and bite him, he lifted the lid...

To reveal a string of tiny pearls the color of pure amber, only there was a strange glow in each, a tiny pulsating heart. It was mesmerizing. And she couldn't see any sort of thread linking each pearl, as if each kept the half inch distance to its neighbor by force of will alone. Carmela stared in mute awe as he tenderly passed the pad of his thumb over the bracelet, which seemed to pulsate even brighter. The sight tickled her memory. Then she had it. First, Novona's husband Sekmeth had a ring that looked a lot like this but with only one stone. And second, back on the Yithian moon, she'd touched a large cluster of crystals and it'd glowed. Nothing as beautiful as this, but it could've been the unrefined ore she'd touched. Carmela had never seen anything so exquisite.

"Remind me again, the glow, it's a good sign. *Si?*"

Setesh's smile began slow and uncertain then spread to his whole countenance. He nodded, his mouth parted, clearly he meant to say something but couldn't push a word through. With trembling fingers, he lifted the bracelet from its blue velvety home inside the box, which he placed on the floor, and let it dangle over his other palm with the care of one who feared something might break any second and spill all over. But the stones held, some sort of cohesion she couldn't see even if she understood. Love kept them together.

"You *are* my true companion."

The whisper triggered a tingle up her spine. "I am, Setesh."

With reverent hands, he cupped the bracelet, looked up into her eyes then waited. "For you."

Carmela de Monsalve, proud Spaniard, descendant from fiery Andalusian stock, couldn't emit a single, articulate syllable as her Yithian lover slipped the warm bracelet around her wrist, the tiny pearls coming apart just enough to let her palm pass then squeezing back together by some unseen force. Setesh wrapped his hand over her wrist and pulled her to him for one *passionate* kiss.

His mouth was both tender and demanding as he plundered hers, trapped and nibbled her lips, her tongue. She moaned unabashedly when he pressed against the back of her head so he could kiss her more deeply. Carmela opened wide for him and returned each of his nips. Too soon he pulled away, a finger twirling a strand of loose hair falling over her temple.

"You will uncoil your hair for me, Carmela de Monsalve. I wish to see it free."

No one had ever gotten away with ordering her around this way. Except him. In his case, she blamed translation, but then again, she'd make an exception even if he were a native English speaker.

So while they sat on their heels looking at one another, she slowly pulled apart the tiny clasps holding her hair into tight coils around her head. One at a time, the long black locks fell with a bounce. With each, Setesh's nostrils dilated, his eyes narrowed.

Carmela toyed with a coil, which held a thick piece of hair away from her face. She couldn't help teasing him by toying with the clasp, pinching it wide to release the hair but not fast enough for the curl to bounce down over her shoulder. God, she enjoyed the look of predatory attention he gave her every move.

She pulled the clasp away, set it on the floor by her side. Her long hair hung loose around her shoulders.

"Put your hands in it again," he murmured through his teeth. A twitch pulled at his sculpted jaw.

She did, raked her hair back and shook it loose. She gasped when he reached out and fisted it.

His eyes narrowed to slate-gray slits. "You will not bind it again. I wish to see it free."

“My hair, my head, my call.”

Setesh cocked his head. “Why do you wish to hide it?” His fist loosened so he could thread his fingers down the length of it, twirl his index finger around it. “Do you fear it makes you less formidable? Less of a Hunter? It does not. You are more fearsome than any of your males—you have beauty and grace. The way you move, your eyes. They speak for you. They kill for you.”

Dios, when had this young Yithian male become such an astute student of human psychology and gender biases?

She had to admit she tied her hair not only to keep it out of the way when things turned ugly but also because she knew men tended to be sidetracked by attractive women, especially with the kind of curves and long black hair she had. She wanted to be taken seriously without resorting to breaking every pair of legs that came between hers. Beating respect into men was fun but only for so long. She’d grown tired quite fast and had decided to keep her hair out of the equation. Respect was something she *had* to have. And it had helped, she thought. That and carrying a giant kinetic energy gun.

She joined her hand to his and fisted the last few inches of hair, which she brought to her nose, smelled and smiled. “I won’t tie it again, *hombre*. But only if you shave yours off.”

The look on him!

He must have realized she’d only thrown him a dart for he shook his head, mumbled something in Yithian before cupping the end of her hair in both hands, which he brought up to his face. As though it were the most reverent thing in his world, he dipped his face into her gathered locks and took a long whiff. When he rolled his eyes up at her through the parted bangs, she could notice the difference in expressions. It turned darker, more intense.

“I wish to *fuck* you now, Carmela.”

He definitely had a way with words.

“I thought you’d never ask.” She grabbed the back of his head and forced him to her. Their tongues dueled, retracted, lunged at each other again. He bit her bottom lip. She returned the favor.

He straightened then cupped her chin. “But I wish to be clean before I touch you further.”

“That’s such a long time though—a shower,” she replied as she bit his bottom lip and chin. “I won’t wait so long. I want you *now*.”

Setesh arched an eyebrow. “I will make it worth your time.”

She knew she grinned like an idiot but couldn’t stop herself. “Shower. Hurry.”

Carmela didn’t know how they managed to make it up the purple-colored, moldy carpeted stairs to the second story of their decrepit *pied-à-terre*. It was an old cabaret-style club Titan and Kim had rented where they could hide the weapons until clients would ferry them off station. Neither did she assimilate any stimuli during their

hurried shower and subsequent tumble, still dripping wet, into the mammoth canopied bed throning in the center of one of the bedrooms. Carmela's only personal touch in the entire abode. She loved everything cushiony and plushy. With the Yithian's weight, they settled quite deeply in the middle of the bed, pillows—genuine *feather* pillows, a rare find—and synthetic duvet fluffing up like angry birds.

Carmela raised her hand over her face to look at the bracelet. The glow gave her skin a dark bronze quality. She loved it.

Setesh rolled on top of her, trapped her underneath him and jammed a thigh between hers. Because she hovered near six feet, she rarely enjoyed a lover so much taller than herself and she thought it was a nice change, a thrilling change in fact. Aside from the other two Yithian lovers she'd had—both skilled and large, the way she liked men—she'd never felt overpowered this way. And even if her Andalusian blood demanded she fight the Hunter, take him by the horns—or *horn*—and wrestle him to the ground, another angle of her personality that rarely received any light was happy that for once, a lover could give it to her the way she'd always wanted. And how she loved this Yithian with all her heart compounded her wish for him to engulf her entirely. She wanted all of him.

He raised himself on his elbows so he could put his mouth right against her ear. His whispers triggered the fine hairs along her arms to rise in waves. She clawed at his back, wrapped her leg around the back of his. Yet she couldn't understand a single word. *Mierda*.

"English, Setesh, speak to me so I can understand," she said through both their hair, a mix of silver and black, a fusion of human and Yithian.

He nipped her lobe. "They are special words in Yith, those we reserve for our companions. I have never said them to anyone." He leaned back so he could look her in the eyes. "Humans say them all the time for all the wrong reasons. I hear them for things that have nothing to do with this." He snaked a hand along her flank, past her hip and converged at the apex of her legs. With a finger meticulous yet possessive, he slipped into her pussy. "Special words for common things. It is wrong. Human males will call a female a *kunt* when she rises above them. Instead of seeing it as a challenge to be fought, they sulk and drink and gather with others similar to themselves...what is the English word? Losers? I pity your men, they know nothing of their own females."

While he spoke, Setesh rubbed in and out of her, added another finger. She tried to arch but his bulk kept her pinned down. *Dios* she loved this!

"I say to you, 'I want to fuck your cunt then your ass' and humans see it negatively because they have used these words for things irrelevant. They have lost their meaning." Setesh shook his head.

"This human doesn't see it that way," she snarled, cramping her thigh. Oh he was good.

He licked his lips, tucked his bottom one between his teeth when he undoubtedly felt the spasms tightening her sex. She was getting near. "I wish for you to receive me,"

he said then he abandoned her throbbing flesh and sat back on his heels. She wanted to kick him!

"I want you to receive me in your cunt, your mouth, your ass. I wish to fuck you in all manners. As a true companion. And you will do the same to me."

Even if the words were definitely commands, the way he said them let her know he was asking, confirming she wanted him, all of him. Carmela couldn't remember wanting anything else quite so forcefully.

Setesh spread her legs wider so he could kneel between her knees. His chest rose and fell quicker now. His cock bobbed with each powerful breath. "You will receive me?"

Carmela rose on her elbows. "Yes."

"As Yithian companions would? Completely?"

The bracelet blazed by her side. She glanced at it quickly. If this was a barometer for things to come, she was going to enjoy herself. A lot. She locked gazes with Setesh. "I will receive you. As a woman loves her man with all she has."

Setesh's expression turned solemn. And she knew he was about to share something with her, something special and intensely private. Her heart beat like a jackhammer against her sternum. She inhaled, let it out through the nose and readied herself.

He pressed a hand to his breast, over his heart, which was a bit more to the left than a human's, and the other hand over his lower belly. He closed his eyes.

An explosion of colors in a kaleidoscope filled her mind's eye. Everything dimmed then blinked out. Carmela gasped.

Both of them in an embrace, hands and legs and mouths against the other, whirling, upward, like a rocket shooting up to a black sky while stars blinked with a rhythm that matched their hearts. Carmela held on to Setesh and he on to her.

"Open for me," she heard his voice inside her head—low, calm and tender but uncompromising.

She wrapped a leg around his waist.

She felt one of his hands slide down to her coccyx where he followed the natural curve and pressed a finger against her anus. But he didn't push it in. His cock nudged her pussy. But he didn't penetrate her. His tongue brushed against her upper lip. But he didn't kiss her.

"You will receive me."

Carmela wanted to shout at him she would, yell and storm and rage, arch into him so he'd stab himself in to the hilt, take her then take her again. A low whimper escaped her.

Setesh's chest rumbled. Frustration rose in waves and she was about to voice it when it happened. An explosion within an explosion. A penetration within another. More profound than anything she'd ever felt.

Simultaneously, he thrust his cock into her sex, his finger into her anus, his tongue into her mouth and his mind into her own. Filled with him in every manner possible, Carmela moaned and held on for dear life.

Undulating, muscles like iron bands, Setesh entered and retreated, widened and unfurled her flesh, infused her entire being, penetrated her deeper still, until the pressure of all four points converged into a single, blazing flash of brilliance. A climax of cosmic proportions ripped through her. She cried out despite their deep kiss. Burning stabs filled her vagina and she knew he'd come too.

He pulled his mouth from hers. "Kashaak nisk loy," he breathed in her ear. "My beloved one."

Carmela felt something hit the back of her head. She'd fallen back against the pillows. Setesh still knelt on the bed, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, a look of absolute concentration on his angular face and with a sheen of sweat covering his hairless body. His tattoos rippled like living entities as he made love to her in both their minds. The exacting mental pulses seemed to take their toll for he grimaced.

Carmela closed her eyes. It was time for her to take over and share herself with him.

Chapter Ten

Tentatively at first then with more assurance, she cleared her mind of his image, of everything else so she could gift him with something she rarely shared with anyone else. Although she had shared it with him once, if only for a few seconds. She would go all the way this time.

In both their minds she appeared, wearing nothing but the glowing bracelet and a diaphanous shawl of the deepest red tied around her waist. Small red beads were sewed at regular intervals. Her hair was loose as she knew he wished. In the mental pulse, she saw him looking shocked but excited as he stood in front of her. She tried to block out everything else but them and a wooden floor. That would be all she'd need.

"How?" he asked. "Where are we?"

"Inside me."

She pressed a finger to his lips as she backed away from him, her naked feet creating a slow rhythm against the wooden floor. His hands hanging at his sides, he watched her like a bird of prey would a mouse. He looked ready to pounce.

Carmela couldn't concentrate with him looking at her this way. Inside her mind, she closed her eyes.

Leisurely, measured, she started a beat with the balls of her feet, twirled once, brought her hands up as she would in prayer but a few inches apart. While she twirled again, her right foot tapping harder now, the beat accelerating, she opened her eyes and kept her gaze on his with every rotation.

Then suddenly she clapped her hands once. Setesh looked as if someone had shot him. He cringed, opened his mouth but remained silent. A lick of his thin lips announced she'd succeeded in trapping his full attention.

She twirled again, clapped her hands once. Then twice quickly. Her blood burned with the dance of eons past, the complex and sensual moves, the compás she was now establishing. She would dance flamenco for Setesh Geb, her Yithian lover.

Carmela clapped her hands and stomped her feet with the rhythm she'd created. Every few beats – third, sixth, eighth, tenth and twelfth – she accented her moves, smacked her hands hard and sharply so her palms would tingle and the soles of her feet burn. She danced fast now, achieved a furious beat that set her blood on fire.

Snarling, Setesh took a step forward. His cock seemed to grow another few inches. The smooth tapered blue rod bobbed and pulled on his sinewy abdominal muscles.

Carmela lost herself in the dance.

Setesh had never seen anything like it. For a human to be able to send mental pulses to him of such clarity and vividness was unbelievable. She truly was his companion. In every sense of the word. The stones had not lied to him. And he hadn't been mistaken. Not this time. His heart swelled with pride and love for this human female. Carmela moved in ways that stirred him to his Hunter's soul. He wanted her all to himself and would gouge the eyes out of any other male who dared offend her honor.

When she slowed, with sweat making the thin strip of fabric around her waist cling to her hips and thighs, Setesh understood the subtle signs. He would now take over. When she twirled next, he was standing behind her, grabbed her hips to abruptly stop her and fisted the thin fabric, which he yanked off and discarded. Without his need to say a word, she reached up and back over her head, laced her fingers at his nape. Setesh used his thumbs to tilt her hips so her backside would curve up for his taking. His cock seemed to have grown a mind of its own for it nudged her rosy flesh and entered her right away. Setesh curled his upper lip then thrust in. She gasped.

Opening his eyes, Setesh saw Carmela lying on her back, her legs spread wide, her fingers furiously at work stabbing in and out. With a growl, he pushed her hands away and dove for her exposed sex, which he covered with his mouth and licked as hard as he could. She arched and fisted his hair.

No longer able to sustain the mental pulse because his body demanded he take her right this moment, Setesh focused on the here and now.

Using his thumbs, he spread her wide and watched as contractions tightened her lips, which glistened with both their essence. She was so wet as he fingered her, using two, three fingers. Her pearl was swollen and protruded from its sheath. He trapped it between his teeth.

Carmela punched the mattress. "Ohh! *Dios!*"

Setesh growled encouragements at her so she would crush herself to his mouth. He stabbed his tongue, his fingers, stretched her, claimed and conquered her. And she received him. Welcomed him. She *loved* him.

Her flesh shimmered a dark rosy color by the time he gathered her wrists in one hand and brought them over her head. Her eyes appeared glazed. She seemed lost for a few seconds.

"You will stay this way." He slipped the blazing bracelet off and fisted it.

She looked groggy but nodded.

After planting her hands above her head and pushing them into the pillows to make sure she understood, Setesh straightened her legs, spread them wide and pressed her feet into the mattress.

He watched her for a few seconds, spread wide for him, this proud and fearsome female warrior. His companion.

Setesh slid the bracelet around his cock, all the way to the base. The mood stones tightened around his shaft and created a warm ring, which they'd hold until he took them off again.

Carmela watched him do this and her eyes flared.

His hands unyielding around her knees, which he could almost completely encircle, he pinned her down as he lay on top of her. Their sweat fused.

His gaze on hers, he curled his spine back, let the tip of his rod rest against her slick lips then sank in gradually, all the way in, until the mood stones pressed against her flesh. Carmela let out a long O of satisfaction. Setesh retreated to the tip, angled himself so her clitoris would receive most of the stimulation and pushed inside her again. The tight and wet fit forced a growl from him. But he had to hold himself in check so she could feel the mood stones' heat. Then he'd restrain himself no more.

He drove in and out of her this way for a long time. Each push tightened her sheath around him. He knew she was near. He was too. Then he bucked sharply, sank in all at once.

Her eyes flared. "Ahhh."

"Again?"

She nodded empathically.

He thrust deep and hard. The stones dug in both their skin. "Again?" he panted.

"Yes!"

Setesh used every fiber in his burning back and thigh muscles for his next thrust and cleanly heaved her off the mattress. "Again, Carmela? Do you wish for me to take you again?"

He felt she would have wrapped her legs around him but he squeezed her knees harder, knowing in the back of his mind it probably hurt. He couldn't bring himself to stop.

"Take me, Yithian, and do it hard," she growled, fisting her hands above her head. "Come on, *take me. Fuck me!*"

Knowing his grin must have been more predatory than loving, Setesh stabbed himself in as deep as he could and for a sublime second, felt he'd reached the end of her, that she couldn't take another measure of him. Not that he had anything else to give. Even his seed had long passed to her.

Their cries of ecstasy filled the room. He knew she'd come again. Delectable human females. They had been built for loving. And this one had been built durable and strong—for him.

When he released her knees, Carmela wrapped her legs around his waist and held him to her. He withstood her assault, her nails digging in his back and undoubtedly drawing blood. She would leave her mark on him, which fulfilled him more than any of the symbols tattooed on his skin. He'd relish those long scars on his back and would take pride in showing them to anyone who'd challenge his love for Carmela de Monsalve. For a body without scars or marks meant the same to him—or any other Yithian—than a patch of sky without stars.

Below the timbre of her voice, he could hear an insistent little beep. Rhythmic, high-pitched, it gradually but resolutely stole his moment of glory with his companion. He

was instantly angered by the noise and would make sure whoever had bothered them would pay with their life. He climbed on his elbows and turned his head toward the door, which was partly slid into the decrepit plaster wall.

“What is that noise? I will kill whoever makes it.”

Carmela sighed, licked her lips and elevated her head off the pillow so she could hear it too. The satisfied grin died on her lips. Her eyes flared. “*Mierda!*”

Setesh pulled out of her with regret and not a little frustration as she pushed him off and sprang out of the bed. Such grace, such power. He wanted her again. Right here and now. He cursed and sat on the edge of the bed, rolling the mood stones off him while she rushed outside the bedroom. He heard her steps as she charged down the stairs. A fleeting thought she might be in danger propelled him out of the room quicker than he’d ever moved before. What if one of Collins’ men wanted retribution? What if enemies presently filled the back alleys and wanted to harm his companion? Setesh snarled as he barreled down the tiny steps four at a time, the bracelet bunched in a fist. He would rend them limb to limb if they so much as touched a single hair on her.

He grabbed his knife as he rushed by, pulled it out of the sash in one fluid motion and sprinted to the common room where he saw Carmela standing with her back to him. She held something to her.

He reached her just as she was spinning on her heel and meant to pass him. He caught her by an arm and stopped her. “What is it?”

“It’s Kim!” she replied, shaking the black device the little human had left on the table. “They’re being attacked! Do you have a ship?”

“Yes. Moored underneath the station.”

“We *need* it, Setesh. Desperately.”

“All I have is yours, Carmela.”

“Come on then. Hurry!”

There was fear in her voice. And this, more than any danger facing the tiny human and her vicious-looking companion, urged him into action.

He released her arm, followed her up the stairs and wrestled his clothes and weapons back on while she did the same with the delectable one-piece black suit, which could so effectively render him a lusty beast. It was more of a treasure hunt than anything else as both their garments were strewn along the path they’d taken on their way up and into the bathroom.

With their clothes in a semblance of order and the bracelet safely in his pocket, he led her out of the converted drinking establishment and into the station’s lower levels. After encountering half-hearted attempts to force them to pay for access to the emergency hatches underneath the station, he donned the a-suit he’d stashed there on his way in.

“I will get inside my ship then return with another atmospheric-suit on a line for you.”

She nodded, biting her lower lip as she fingered the large silvery weapon at her hip. Her hand trembled. He cupped her chin, brought her face up to meet his.

"They will be safe. They both seemed capable and fierce."

"I'm afraid it won't be enough," she snapped, angling her face away.

Her gesture stung him but he nodded. "I will hurry."

When he faced the hatch and was about to open the airlock, he turned and caught the look of fear on her again. "Who is attacking them?"

She cleared her throat, shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Just hurry."

"Who?"

Carmela cursed. "*Yithians*, Setesh. Four *Yithian* cruisers are after my friends."

Shock then rage flashed across his face. Setesh nodded, spun on his heel then fisted the access panel. He didn't turn around once as he slid the face shield down, waited for the airlock to achieve a perfect seal then launched into the blackness of space, the suit's reflective bands the only thing marking her lover.

Goddamn *Yithians*!

Kim had sounded hysterical on the message, which played over and over in an unending loop. Alex and Sekmeth's ship was also involved, but they'd taken a heavy beating and apparently wouldn't hold much longer. Carmela had checked the signals and knew Kim had tried to reach her several times before. But she'd been too busy screwing with Setesh to hear her friend's call for help. They might be dead by now for all she knew. A twinge of pain squeezed her heart. They wouldn't have been able to jump to hyperspace, not while towing the crippled *Femme Metal* behind them. *Mierda*. Just when life was taking a definite upturn.

A small bump heralded Setesh as he returned with another a-suit rolled tightly under an arm. She equalized the pressure inside the airlock and waited until the green light announced it was safe to work the hatch.

"It will be too large but still safe," Setesh said from inside his own suit, his voice muffled yet undeniably tight and angry. She couldn't see his expression for the face shield pulled down low.

Sighing, she slipped the suit on—which dragged at the hands and feet—and lowered the face shield. She stepped inside the airlock with Setesh, tried to gauge his humor by his stance but he stood rod-straight, facing the hatch as he waited for the telltale steam to hiss out of the rubber seal. After only one of her ears popped, pressure stabilized and Setesh pushed against the hatch. Immensity of space pressed in on her visor and suit. She hated space-walking and usually tried to avoid it at all costs.

She followed the thin silvery line Setesh had stretched from the hatch to some point beyond the dirty pot lights set under the station's belly. She spotted numerous ships moored nearby and couldn't help but shake her head. Despite the no-fly decree while the talks went on, it was business as usual on Land's End.

Hand over hand, Setesh pulled himself by great measures until he'd put enough distance between him and her that she could barely make out the reflective bands around the soles of his magnetic boots. She felt so alone, the urge to cry choked her. Carmela cursed at her stupidity and doubled her efforts to keep up.

Not soon enough, she caught up to him just as he was working the hatch to gain access to the smooth underbelly of a Yithian cruiser. Setesh had money to afford a whole cruiser all to himself. Unless he wasn't alone.

Mierda.

She'd never even considered it. What if a shipload of Yithians waited for her? What would they say? Would the bracelet mean anything to them or would she have to fight them, fight her lover's own people? Just as she was about to do. Actually, she was asking *Setesh*, a Yithian Hunter, to fight his own people for her friends. *Humans*. And he seemed ready to do it, even if it must have torn him inside. *Dios*, how she loved him.

They crowded into the tall but narrow airlock and while Setesh worked the foreign-looking controls, Carmela made sure her feet pointed downward when gravity would take hold. She huffed when it did and sent her slamming hard against the bulkhead. Setesh's lightning-quick reflex kept her from sliding sideways and making a big fool of herself. Still, the opaque silver face shield didn't betray his expression and she wondered if he was angry. Understandable. She *was* asking him to betray his people.

After pressure popped both her ears and did so painfully, Setesh ripped his shield up, wrestled the suit off and helped her get out of hers—Yithian a-suits were very different from humans and she couldn't quite figure the closing mechanisms.

"Follow me," he said in a dull voice. A twitch pulled at his sculpted jaw.

She did, walked as fast as she could as Setesh led her deeper into the Yithian cruiser. She'd never been inside one. If from the exterior they reminded her of twenty-first-century submarines, only silvery and bristling with antennas, the interior was much sleeker and more polished than she'd anticipated. Everything appeared to have been dipped in silver paint then lacquered. But the decks weren't slippery strangely enough.

Instead of the usual ladders, Carmela had to climb what resembled a fireman's pole with tiny ledges protruding at intervals much too sparse for her human limbs. But she managed without Setesh's help, for which she was infinitely relieved. They reached what had to be the bridge, a sort of semicircular room with four high seats a full three feet off the deck and angled toward the front. Yet she couldn't see any view screen or portholes.

"Take a seat there," he said, pointing to the seat next to the one in which he sat. "Where are they?"

"Not far. They're towing the *Femme Metal*." Carmela read the coordinates from Kim's message. The young woman's voice pierced the uneasy silence of Setesh's bridge. He closed his eyes briefly as Kim called for help repeatedly while Titan could be heard cursing in the background. When the last message ended, silence rang like a cracked

bell. With her heart doing the same, Carmela sank into the molded seat and tensed when straps popped out and clipped into place on her lap.

"Yithian cruisers are fast ships, Carmela. Make sure you sit straight when we jump to hyperspace."

"How long does the sequence take?" she asked as she straightened and grabbed the edge of the seat on either side. He was going to jump to FTL despite the short distance. Good man. It'd be like crossing town with the turbo on, but time was of the essence here.

"Three seconds."

Dios. And Kim who's proud to have chipped a few seconds from the Femme Metal's thirty-second launch sequence.

Hope her friends would have survived an attack by four Yithian cruisers evaporated. Despite all the "totally shiny" weaponry the couple had, there was no way anyone could hang on for very long when faced with such fearsome ships. She hoped they'd died quickly and not been boarded first.

"Your friends are skilled and we are on a fast ship," Setesh commented coldly without looking at her. "They have a chance."

She couldn't even speak and only nodded.

A section of floor detached itself and rose between Setesh's feet. His hands flew over the smooth surface and almost instantly the deep whirr of engines was heard then felt. At once, a glowing aqua-colored rectangle appeared about ten feet in front of the semicircle of seats, hovering in midair and relayed the exterior in vivid details. So this would be their view screen. A holo.

Land's End was already shrinking to a tiny glowing dot as they swerved away from the station and aimed for deep space.

Setesh took a deep breath. "Hold on."

Carmela only had time to cringe. The ship felt as if it'd implode while a rip in space yawned a few miles in front, immediately swallowing them up and churning them down the hyperspace conduit. Multi-colored lights blazed on the holographic view screen and Carmela squinted. Unlike the old *Femme Metal*, no groans and moans indicated the ship was going through the violent transition phase. When they shot out of the conduit after their quick FTL frog leap, crabbing a bit to the right and at a forty-five-degree angle, Carmela couldn't help but admire the fine Yithian technology. The same killing her friends now.

The view screen relayed their new surroundings and she could readily see the battle still raged on. Although it was clear who was winning. Too clear.

She meant to come up in her seat but was prevented by the straps. "*Cará.*" Oh dear.

The supercharged boosters on Titan's brand new matte black ship glowed white-hot as he maneuvered it the best he could given the *Femme Metal's* dead mass trailing

behind. They'd secured it with a few miles of steel cable and the trio of tractor hooks—no hooks at all in fact, more similar to magnetized manhole covers.

Two Yithian cruisers had him sandwiched, firing at will. Despite Kim's reinforcements and god knew what she'd welded to the hull, it was clear their ship wouldn't last another few rounds. Not far from them, hanging "upside down" was another ship, larger but clearly slower, Alex's most probably. It was dead in space but still firing from its awkward position. That woman just didn't give up. A new respect for the loud-mouthed bitch grew in Carmela and if she were afforded the chance, she'd congratulate Novona for sheer determination if little grace.

One Yithian cruiser was firing electromagnetic burst after burst despite the human ship obviously being disabled and dead in space. No mercy. But Sekmeth and Novona returned fire with equal fury, even managed to tag the cruiser in its main booster. It glowed bright orange then died. Then it too floated dead in space. Debris littered the impromptu battleground. She couldn't see a fourth ship—in her message Kim had warned there were four—and wondered where it was.

Setesh snarled something in Yithian. A console sprang out from between her feet and snapped in place right above her knees. As with everything else, it looked dipped in molten silver. "You will control the weapons and communications while I pilot the ship."

She couldn't even read the language!

Although after a quick scan, each ideogram effectively communicated the caliber of weapons it represented and Carmela thought she'd manage the weapons console without too much problem. But the comms, she wasn't too sure. She passed a finger over what she thought was the "send" portion. It glowed then blinked, perhaps waiting for her.

"Kim, are you there?"

"Change frequency. Only the Yithians hear you now."

She cursed. *Great. Tell the bad guys where you are.*

"The symbol resembles a small flower with a missing petal. Press it twice."

She did then repeated her message.

"Where the *fuck* were you?!"

Titan's tenor filled the bridge and made the speakers—wherever they were—fizz loudly. Kim's high-pitched voice followed. "We're in total shit, Carmela. Get them off our ass, like, *now!*" She stretched the last word, as if she needed to put emphasis.

"We're here now. Hold on to your *bolás*, Titan."

"I'm getting me some Yithian steak for supper!" Titan's voice sounded tight despite the bravado. "And I like my meat blue, if you know what I mean!"

"*Fire!*" Setesh roared, interrupting Kim's next words.

Carmela couldn't see anything on the holo screen. "At *what?!!*"

“Directly in front, *fire!*” His eyes had turned dark slate-gray and reminded her of thunderstorm clouds.

Just as she pushed against the console’s smooth screen, choosing the largest ideogram, the one that seemed to represent the heftiest aft cannon, Setesh rolled his ship into a steep bank. A split second later, a deep *whomp* reverberated throughout the ship. A tracer attached to whatever she’d just fired announced a dead-center aim. Yet there was nothing but empty space in front of their ship. What the —

Their missile must have hit something for a glow then a series of blue waves silhouetted a Yithian cruiser, as though someone had used a neon blue highlighter to trace the ship against the black sky. They must have been under a shroud!

“You, *pringao*,” she growled.

“About time you showed up,” a deep female voice interrupted Carmela’s indignation at the Yithians’ fancy technology. Ah, The Bitch Monster from Hell.

“Stand by,” Carmela snapped.

“Like hell I will. You just wait ’til —”

Carmela gasped when Setesh executed a brutal maneuver that brought them right alongside the wounded Yithian cruiser, only he dipped his prow and reversed the engines until they were effectively backing away from the other ship.

“Fire!”

Carmela pressed on two ideograms, the same large one and a smaller, which she unofficially translated as an EM pulse cannon. It was, for another tracer shot out of Setesh’s prow, accompanied by the *whomp* and relayed in vivid detail by the holo screen. It hit the target in the side. A split second later, a blue arc whipped out and licked the cruiser’s aft turret. A blue wave spread around its hull then all of its lights went out.

“Wait for my command then fire,” Setesh snarled as he brought his ship underneath the other.

By that time, the other Yithian cruisers must have realized this latest ship, though it resembled them, wouldn’t be helping their cause. One abandoned Novona’s ship and aimed for Setesh’s instead. Carmela gritted her teeth when a blue arc whipped out of its blind cannon and only Setesh’s savage piloting saved them from being disabled. He rolled once, twice. Carmela’s feet and hair flew up.

With a punch against one side of his console, Setesh dove behind the crippled ship and took cover there. “Now!”

“Watch out!” Kim yelled out of Carmela’s console. *Mierda*, this comms thing was just a distraction.

Carmela pressed the same weapons controls again, twice rapidly.

Whomp-whomp.

One then two deep tremors passed through her stomach as both missiles shot out, arched gracefully when each of their built-in propulsion and guidance systems kicked

in. As in a dream, she watched as both hit the crippled ship. Blazing white-hot for a split second, it burst with the wet, untidy spurt of an overripe silver melon and spilled its content into the unforgiving blackness of space. Because he'd undoubtedly dimmed his exterior lights to offer as small a target as possible, Carmela couldn't see in too many details the ship's demise. She didn't *need* to see Yithians twirling in space and dying a most horrible death. Such a big waste.

"Take that, you blue fuckers!"

Carmela quickly tuned down the sound, glad she'd found the setting right away. A quick glance at Setesh didn't reveal his state of mind at his species being called "blue fuckers". He seemed deeply focused on piloting the ship. Good.

"Shit, they're coming back at us," Kim said. She gasped. "Titan, come on, reverse engines! Come *on!*"

"I can't, baby! We're dragging that piece of—"

Carmela shook her head. The *Femme Metal*, a dead mass at the best of times in her book, was preventing Titan's ship from reversing engines. They were going to get hit right in the chops.

"Cut it loose!" Carmela snarled into the console. Where the hell were the mikes on this thing?

"Nuh-uh!" Kim snapped, almost in perfect unison with Novona.

"You must let the ship go," Sekmeth put in, his calm voice such a contrast to his woman's bitchy tone.

To add credit to Sekmeth's and Carmela's warning, one of the Yithians cruisers fired a direct hit at the *Femme Metal*, which sent it into a roll. If they didn't cut the ship loose, it'd smash right into them. Both ships would be lost.

"Let it go!" Carmela yelled, repeatedly smacking the corner of the console as she watched the holo screen. Titan was doing his best—he was a *fine* pilot—but the twirling *Femme Metal* was only a handful of miles away and coming in fast. The miles of steel cable would rip everything off Titan's hull. It'd crash into them.

Setesh growled something then repositioned his ship in direct line with the advancing Yithian cruiser. Carmela knew he was trying to buy Titan some time but it wouldn't work. They were going to jackknife with the *Femme Metal*.

Mierda!

"Do it, little one." That'd been Sekmeth. He added something in Yithian.

Carmela sighed in relief when Titan reversed engines—and he must have put the pedal to the metal too for it veered sharply, banked then its massive booster blazed white for a second. The *Femme Metal* slung right over his stern.

Holy...

True to his wild nature—*dios*, the man would kill them all—he used the momentum to send the spinning *Femme Metal* right at the Yithian cruiser. He'd effectively used the

two ships like a trebuchet and catapulted three hundred thousand tons of reinforced titanium and steel at the enemy ship.

"Jesus Christ," Novona snarled into the comms. Carmela for once agreed.

"Nooo!"

Kim's voice broke when the *Femme Metal* went hurtling past the Yithian ship, which had been forced to abruptly change directions in order to avoid the mammoth missile coming for them.

A flash in the upper right corner on the holo screen caught Carmela's attention. Someone was coming out of hyperspace right beside the ship, which had successfully averted collision with the *Femme Metal*! This new Yithian ship charged out of the iridescent conduit, only there wasn't room for both it and the *Femme Metal*.

They hit.

A full three-second silence spread to all three friendly ships. Even Setesh watched openly awestruck as the shimmering conduit collapsed, unable to withstand the shock's violence. The *Femme Metal* and the Yithian cruiser disappeared, swallowed into a glowing amber ball laced with white flashes. Telltale colors of explosions. Then normal space folded back on itself and sealed the rip as though nothing had happened.

Carmela couldn't believe it.

"Watch out!" Setesh snapped. He gunned the engines, backing farther away from the ship Carmela had crippled with the EM burst.

The crippled ship's explosion must have been violent enough to reach its colleague for the one that had been coming for them hurriedly veered. Too late. Debris and remnants of the EM burst flicked and whipped at it. Then it too went completely dark and continued rolling aimlessly with the momentum of their initial charge. But it kept firing, damn it. Setesh must not have thought it dangerous or relevant for he veered away. Carmela cringed.

"Watch your tail, for fuck's sake!" Novona's voice grated on her nerves, even if the sound was down at its lowest.

A split second after the woman's warning, Setesh's ship shuddered. The holo screen flickered. They'd been hit!

"Bank low, I'll open their can from here," Kim snapped after mumbling something, undoubtedly talking to Titan, her pilot. She sounded *pissed off*.

Carmela shook her head. Why such attachment to a ship? A hunk of metal?

Setesh must have understood Kim's intent for he banked with violence then leveled. A massive tracer shot by a few hundred feet from where they'd just been. Carmela couldn't help the smug grin. Ah, so Kim had fired The Principal, what she affectionately called "a giant titanium penis". That was what the Yithians would get for destroying her pet ship.

Good girl.

The ship rolling dead in space was hit directly in the underbelly. It split in two, each half disintegrating into a million twinkling bits. Two down, two to go. Fortunately for them, these Yithians died quickly.

One of the ships hammering Titan's had turned on Setesh's and was now chasing them, unrelenting, showing deadly accuracy with its aft cannon and vicious armor-piercing darts. She heard them thudding against the hull. The holo screen flickered, died for a second or so then blinked back to life.

Just in time to show the last Yithian cruiser joining its companion and both coming at Setesh's ship, one from above, the other from below. Setesh snarled something and the lights dimmed considerably. Carmela could barely see the console above her lap.

"What are you doing? I can't see a thing!"

Someone said something in Yithian and Carmela recognized Sekmeth's smooth voice. Setesh grunted something in reply then spread his feet wider. "They are not the only one with a shroud," he said to Carmela.

The holo screen glowed an eerie blue-green as it relayed both enemy positions, a mesh of coordinate lines partitioning them. Like ghost ships bent on taking down the living.

The two chasing ships fired simultaneously. Carmela cringed when one of the missiles flew so near a set of what she guessed were warning signals blinked red from Setesh's console. Hers too showed the near hit. But the second cruiser didn't miss.

Shroud or not, Yithians were expert at fighting. Earth had tasted their neighbor's skills some twenty years prior during the war – officially called a Trade Disagreement – and had barely made it. A violent tremor plastered her in her seat. They lost the holo screen.

They were now blind!

Setesh stomped his foot, his face twisted in a grimace of fury. He glanced at her. Their gazes held.

His expression softened, his eyes paled to their normal pearly gray. "I am saddened it will end this way. My *kashaak*. My beloved. I had hoped for a long life with you. Perhaps even with little ones."

Carmela gritted her teeth when another brutal jolt shook their cruiser. No quarter from Yithians. A third hit rocked her back against the seat then another direct strike. She smelled smoke.

"So had I, *hombre*. So had I."

She could actually feel her heart breaking. At least they wouldn't suffer too long.

Chapter Eleven

Setesh's hopes for a life with his beloved human companion crashed in a thousand jagged shards at his feet. He'd had such great expectations for a future with her. And as he'd said, with perhaps children if she were willing and able to bear them. Their species were compatible, given the human partner, if female, was large enough to carry a Yithian baby in her womb. Carmela would have been perfect.

He reached out to her and she to him. Their fingers could almost touch but not quite.

The moment seemed to last forever, even if they only had seconds left to live. Those two remaining Yithian ships would rip them apart.

"Why the fuck aren't you guys firing!" demanded the human male named Titan.

Setesh cringed when the special moment burst like a soap bubble.

"Our view screen is dead," Carmela replied with a calm Setesh found commendable. But he wasn't really surprised.

"We'll, like, totally guide you." This from the little woman Kim. Her tone was different. Cold as ice.

"Fire now, dammit! At your three o'clock!" roared Hunter Sekmeth's fierce companion.

As if she'd snapped from a trance, Carmela's hands flew over the console. His ship fired three hollow-tipped missiles in rapid succession.

"Not three o'clock, *four!*" Kim snapped.

"Yeah, let's count the goddamn minutes while we're —"

"Blue fuckers straight ahead! Come on! *Fuuuuuuck!*"

"Who're you calling blue fuckers, you jackass —"

"Enough!" Carmela yelled, bent over the console. Perhaps she thought her voice was recorded from there. The sensors were along the ceiling. "This is turning into a *corrida* here! Only Kim and Sekmeth, the other two, shut the hell up!"

"One ship, straight ahead," Hunter Sekmeth said calmly. "One ship coming in low to your five on the dial."

While Setesh blindly banked away from both enemy ships, guided by his companion's friends, Carmela fired at will. A loud cheer filtered in through the transmitters and revealed at least partial success.

"You totally opened his can!" Kim said in her high-pitched voice. "It's going belly up and — oh the other's turning low. Watch out."

"They will try to out roll you, Hunter Setesh. You must fly up and to your left." Hunter Sekmeth had spoken in Yithian. Perhaps even he was getting tense.

Setesh did as instructed while Carmela followed the tiny human female's strange but precise instructions. The word "like" kept intruding into her speech.

Whomp-whomp-whomp.

Carmela's hands worked furiously over the weapons console and for someone who couldn't read the language she was doing admirably. His heart swelled with pride. Of course she would. She was Carmela de Monsalve, his companion.

Then everything happened fast.

A violent hit sent both Carmela and him slamming back against their backrests.

"Ohmygod! Fire! *Fire!*"

"Level off, reverse engines. They will wait for you at the end of the loop."

Carmela fired. Setesh leveled his ship and reversed the engines for one violent change of speed and heading. His entrails pushed against his sternum. He squeezed his eyes.

A split second silence followed.

"Boom and motherfucking *boom!*"

"Titan," Kim's voice drifted in through the transmitters, subdued. "You're such a Cro-Magnon, *shush!*"

Carmela turned to stare at Setesh, an eyebrow arched high. "I'll take this as a good sign."

He nodded. "So will I."

"Well done, Hunter Setesh," the other Yithian commented smoothly in English, as though he were talking about the weather. "One ship has been destroyed and the other is breaking pursuit."

But Setesh wasn't done yet. "Give me their position."

"They're done," Carmela said with a shrug. "It's not something I usually say, but just let them gather up their *bolas* and leave."

Setesh shook his head. "Their position, Hunter Sekmeth. *Now.*"

It was Kim's little birdsong of a voice who answered him with precise coordinates. She didn't say the word "like" once. The ugly little ship had been hers and she undoubtedly wanted revenge. He could relate to this feeling. Setesh entered them on his console then nodded at Carmela.

"Fire."

"They're your people, Setesh. My friends are okay now." Her large black eyes held no sadness for his comrades but she did look a bit hesitant nonetheless.

"You are my companion and they have harmed people you care about, destroyed a ship dear to them. Therefore they have harmed me. For this, I wish them dead. If you do not wish to fire, I respect your choice. But I *will* destroy them."

Without a word, she passed a hand over the console and a single missile shot out. She'd chosen the largest aft pulse cannon. A clean kill. A method he approved with a nod.

"The ship lost hull integrity. It is over," Hunter Sekmeth announced after a few seconds of tense silence.

Setesh glanced at his companion and nodded. No, it was only beginning.

* * * * *

"I can't believe he's gone," Alex murmured as she stood across from her companion in Setesh's cargo bay. She didn't look the way she had when he'd seen her last a few standard hours ago. Sadness tightened her mouth. She shook her head.

The little human crossed her arms over her chest—no curves there, unlike his glorious Carmela—and stared at her big, black boots, which hugged her slender legs right up to the thighs. He still couldn't believe his father would have entertained carnal thoughts about her. She was barely adult. What, mid-twenties in human aging patterns? But so experienced. She had needed only a few standard minutes to get his holo screen back online. Even he would've been hard-pressed to find the fried breaker so fast. But she'd crawled behind the panel, changed breakers and dusted herself before he was finished wondering how she knew Yithian cruisers' schematics so well.

"I have a spare gyrocompass but no stabilizer breakers." Setesh held the lid up on one of the crates so Kim could choose the parts she needed for her ship's repairs and that of Hunter Sekmeth's. Both had been damaged but not irreparably so.

Titan, after cracking his neck—humans seemed to enjoy cracking their joints for some reason he couldn't understand, especially this one—adjusted the strip of shiny fabric around his neck and helped his companion pull a heavy piece of cargo netting out of the way. They obviously made an accomplished team.

Setesh looked at his own companion, who didn't seem affected by the loss of the ugly little ship and mentally commended her for showing objectivity in this time of stress. It'd only been a *ship*. Yet both other females looked subdued and morose as the two couples rummaged around his cargo hold, gathered what they needed and made neat piles by the airlock.

He then took them all to the galley of his commandeered ship and let them prepare their own meal. But Setesh made sure his companion had first pick for everything and would glower at anyone who retrieved something from the compartments without first offering it to her. He knew he was making her edgy but couldn't stop. After a while, he forced himself to behave rationally and went to sit at the end of the long bench along the bulkhead and put his things on the counter there.

"How long do you think it's going to take? The repairs I mean?" Alex asked. She leaned against the counter and sipped at a mug of hot Yithian seaweed broth.

By her side, Titan checked into her mug, curled his upper lip and sat farther away. "That stuff reeks. Got any coffee?"

Setesh shook his head. "I am the only Yithian I know who enjoys this bitter drink."

"It's not bitter if you put sugar in it," Kim replied with a fake grin. "The way it's supposed to be enjoyed."

He nodded his assent and made room for Carmela to sit by his side. None of her friends seemed to be happy, despite the day's success. "What was on that ship?"

Kim looked him straight in the eyes. "My heart and soul were on her, that's what."

Titan made a noise with his throat. "I thought they were right here." He pointed to his thick chest.

"Of course, baby. But you know what I mean." They exchanged a quick kiss.

A jolt of electricity shot through him. The sudden urge to make love to his own companion caused his entire body to itch and tingle. He rolled his shoulders but couldn't alleviate the irritation. He wanted Carmela now but knew he couldn't send her friends back to their unsafe ships. It'd seem everyone would sleep on his Yithian cruiser tonight. Good thing it was a large one with plenty of cabins. And privacy.

Alex shrugged. "Maybe he's not destroyed and just floating around in hyperspace..."

She didn't look convinced and neither did anyone else. After clearing her throat, she downed her mug, licked her lips. "Got any spare bunks on this older clunker, Setesh? I'm all for campfire stories but I stink and I need a backrub."

Hunter Sekmeth was instantly on his feet and with a look of predatory hunger in his eyes. His ring pulsed with a soft amber glow. "I will show you the way." Turning to Setesh, he bowed slightly. "Your actions honor you, Hunter Setesh. I wish you many successful Hunts."

Setesh stood, returned the bow. "As I do you."

"Yeah, yeah, Hunter boys," interrupted Alex. "Back to a language I'm good at cursing in, okay?"

The pair left, with the woman slipping her hand into her companion's much larger one. At the door she stopped, turned around and grinned. Her scar crinkled when she did and for the first time, Setesh could see the beauty that had undoubtedly attracted his colleague and kept him with her despite her foul mood. "The *Femme Metal* was my heart and soul too. I spent many years on him and had a riot leaving other ships in my space dust. There won't be another one like him. But holy hell, he *was* an ugly little shit, wasn't he!"

Her throaty laughter reverberated in the corridor as the pair disappeared around the corner.

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one who noticed," Titan said. "I mean, stenciling and purple paint on a ship? That's just...ugh." Titan shivered theatrically, stood and dusted his pants. Setesh had never seen any such as these, black with thin, gray vertical lines

and that matched his jacket. He thought it was the ugliest accoutrement he'd ever seen but wouldn't comment on it for he knew he'd incur the little woman's ire and this one, he wouldn't want to cross. She may be small but the fire in her eyes would burn anyone who came too close.

"Coming, baby? I'm hitting the fart sack too. I got a hard-on like you wouldn't believe and need some TLC." Titan raised his hand in a mock parry when Kim punched his thick shoulder. Yet the hit must have hurt, even if slightly, for the thickly muscled man cringed. "Ouch, dammit."

Kim came over to Setesh, raised herself on the toes of her boots and forced him down to her level by fisting the front of his crossed tunic. He bent over, not by the force of her pull but to receive either a strike, an earful or...

A kiss on each cheek?

"Thanks, Setesh. You're cool. You saved our pink butts and I'm totally *not* gonna forget it." She winked then went to hug Carmela, who stood silently with her hands crossed behind her back. She returned the tiny woman's embrace, murmured something in her ear. Both grinned and nodded. "Thanks, I think I'll keep my hair that way from now on," Carmela said.

Titan made a sour face and grumbled something that sounded like "kissin' everybody...hope you got some of that left for old pinky here". It made not one iota of sense to Setesh. But in the short time he'd known Titan, the vicious-looking man had never made *any* sense to him.

"Humans," he murmured when the pair had left. Smacking sounds indicated these two would soon be occupied in ways Setesh itched to be.

Carmela grinned. "Exactly."

She raked her long black hair and let it bounce back over her shoulders. Setesh was instantly and painfully hard. He knelt in front of her, gripped her wrist and pulled her to him. She leaned over and rested her forehead against his until her breath stirred strands of his own hair. Heat from her smooth, gold-colored skin seeped into his own.

"I. Am. Beat." She sighed.

"Beat?"

"Tired, *hombre*. Dead on my feet."

"Another figure of talk?"

"Figure of *speech*," she replied with a quick kiss on the tip of his nose. "We use those a lot. You better get used to hearing it in at least two languages."

"You will learn Yithian as well."

"You have to stop using the 'will' word on me, Setesh, or I might have to chop off your *bolas* and put them up as lucky dice above your holo screen."

"You..." He searched for another word but couldn't be this precise in English and didn't find one. "You *will* teach me both English and that other tongue you use when you are agitated."

"Spanish. Oh yes, you'll learn it, don't you worry. And your first lesson is *sí*."

"A short enough word. What does it mean?"

"Yes."

Setesh grinned wide. He angled his chin up and trapped Carmela's mouth against his own, cupped the back of her head for a more profound claiming. Pulling back, he watched her as she panted, licked her lips. "I think we were interrupted earlier today."

"We were."

"You were about to receive me."

"I'd *already* received you, *hombre*."

"But I was not finished with you yet."

"Oh?"

He fished inside his pant pocket and retrieved the glowing bracelet. Every time he watched the mood stones glowing fiercely, he was reminded yet again how much he loved the woman and how his world had been cold and empty and meaningless before her. How could anything have made sense, held any importance whatsoever, before he knew her? How could he have lived at all without her by his side? Each breath had been wasted before her, each Hunt hollow, despite the pleasure they'd brought him.

"My companion," he murmured.

Carmela threaded her hand inside the bracelet and smacked her lips. "Hey, are you so happy to see me that you poked a hole through your pants?"

He wondered what she meant for a second then remembered Alex had shot him there. He nodded knowingly. "Ah yes, sarcasm."

"No, just a plain old joke." Carmela grinned. "You'll learn."

"I wish to fuck you now."

Carmela tut-tutted. "That's direct. I like that. But we say 'make love' when we're a couple."

"It means the same thing."

She shook her head. "There's a world of difference. Fucking is what you do when your body hungers for another. Making love is reserved for two—or more—people who wish to share themselves completely. Do you understand?"

"There will not be more than two."

Carmela wanted to kiss the scowl bringing his thin and straight silver eyebrows over his nose. He looked adamant there wouldn't be more than him and her in their marital bed. She'd only meant to tease him. There wouldn't be a need for anyone else but Setesh Geb in her life, her heart and her bed. He filled her perfectly, in every manner possible.

"So what if—whoo!"

Setesh had stood abruptly and scooped her up in his arms. It was so, *so* thrilling to have a man be able to lift her up and do it easily, without making her feel as if she were heavy or too tall for him. But he wasn't a man, now was he? He was a Yithian male in his prime – hell, barely past twenty in human years – a fierce Hunter, a predator. *Hers*.

While Setesh carried her down the passageway into which both couples had previously disappeared, Carmela wrapped her arm around her lover's neck and held him. She even dug her face in his lustrous silver hair for the sheer pleasure of smelling him.

The sound of laughter wafted in from one of the cabin doors as they passed it. Carmela recognized Kim's voice. At least the girl wasn't too heartbroken over losing her precious little ship. Carmela had to admit she too kind of missed the ugly but reliable little *Femme Metal*. It was most assuredly destroyed but she couldn't help but wonder...

Setesh put his mouth against her ear. "I wish to receive you in my mouth first, Carmela. Then I will do the same in yours."

She licked his earlobe and trapped it between her teeth with a deep-throated *mmm* of acquiescence. She *would*. "We call it sixty-nine, Setesh."

He repeated it, clearly tasting it in his mouth. He must have liked it for he grinned as he carried her to a glossy door down to their right. Just as the rest of the ship's interior, everything looked molded and painted silver. A long and narrow mat of bluish bamboo-type material in a corner was the only piece of "furniture".

"Luxurious."

Setesh didn't seem to get the sarcasm for he nodded, his expression one of delight, and stepped on a plaque along the bulkhead. At once, a section of floor retreated underneath another partition to reveal a rectangular hole lined with blue squares that resembled ceramic tiles. It all looked like a whirlpool to her. But she'd never seen any similar to this one. The "pool" was about five feet wide and maybe three deep. Along the ledge, a pair of spouts, silver as the rest, snapped up and noisily jetted water into the pool where steam began to rise in thin tendrils. Yithians had faster metabolisms and therefore could tolerate much higher temperatures. They thrived in hot and humid weather and particularly enjoyed scalding-hot water.

"You will let me bathe you," Setesh announced without a trace of amusement.

She waited for the usual "and you will do the same for me" but he didn't say anything else and only looked at her expectantly. When she said nothing, he put her feet on the deck and knelt by the pool to test the rapidly rising water. What was wrong with him now? His hand shook. She suspected she'd just goofed but didn't understand how or why. Moody Yithians.

"What's wrong, Setesh?" She stood behind him, admired the way his hair reached down to the middle of his V-shaped back.

"To wash a companion is special for us. For a female to let a male wash her..." He inhaled and let it out through his nose. "Earlier today, I was hoping you would let me

bathe you but we were both carried away. We have time now, yet you will not accept my invitation."

She knelt by his side, cupped his face and turned it to her. "I'm not Yithian, Setesh. You'll have to explain some of the decorum to me. I don't know what it means for a female to let her male bathe her. Aside from the obvious fun! So fill me in. What does it mean?"

He didn't mirror her grin. "That she means to keep him always. That he is good enough for her to remain by her side. That she trusts him with her body."

Carmela would've rolled her eyes. Yithians were just so damn full of symbols and protocols. "I do want to keep you by my side. Always. Don't these mean anything anymore?" She pointed at her bracelet.

A tentative smile rose to his lips. "They do. Forgive my words. English makes me imprecise." He shook his head. "I will teach you my ways and you will do the same for me."

She stood. "Good. Who first?"

"The female, of course. Only humans allow their males to come first. It is absurd for us." He looked disgusted just saying it.

"I like you guys more and more."

So Setesh stood – and those burning hands of his just about set her blood on fire – and proceeded to slip her weapons out, peel her clothes away – unhurriedly, adroitly – until she stood naked before him. He took his time devouring her with his darkened gaze. His nostrils flared. He licked his lips, pointed at the pool by his feet.

It'd filled up to the rim by that time. She gasped when tiny holes in the ceiling above their heads fired ribbons of steam down around them. No wonder there was no furniture. And the steam was scented too. Wow. Some sort of marine smell, similar to a salty breeze from an ocean but softer with a trace of something sweeter. Flowers? Soon the whole room was filled with scented steam. Everything glowed. Setesh spoke a single harsh-sounding word and the lights in a groove around the ceiling dimmed to a soft amber glow. Instead of silver, everything now looked dipped in gold. She shivered.

"Into the water."

Carmela sat against the edge of the pool and dunked her lower leg into the water. She hissed. So hot.

"Stay this way," he said, stripping quicker than she'd ever seen anyone do it. Clothes literally flew off him, weapons thudded against the wet floor, even the gorgeous knife.

"I wish I could've taken your clothes off myself."

He arched an eyebrow. "You will. Not this time."

She rolled her eyes. *Will this, will that, will-will-will.*

"Today is for you only."

"Now this I like the sound of."

He joined her in the pool—with his height, he didn't even need to sit against the ledge first and just stepped in directly. He knelt in front of her. Water reached his rib cage and with the small ripples, made every tattoo on his sculpted body look alive. It was mesmerizing.

He cupped water and let it trickle down her front, her thighs. She shivered. Her nipples hardened painfully.

Steam had soon plastered their hair over their skulls and created a sheen of transparent silk over their skin. She wanted to lick off every droplet. But she'd probably have to fight him down for the chance as he pushed her hands away every time she meant to come near him and caress him. Setesh seemed bent on honoring his promise and making this *her* day.

Oh well. There are worse things in life.

"You will spread your knees now."

Carmela wasn't about to argue with such a request, even if it was worded into a command. For once, she didn't mind getting bossed around.

Planting her palms on either side of her for support, she spread her thighs, let her feet swing back and forth in the hot water. This was so good.

Setesh approached. The end of his hair floated on the water surface for a while before he leaned over between her legs and, keeping both hands on his lap underneath the water, proceeded to lick her knees, carefully, tenderly, as if she were some delicious fruit. She shivered. The reaction must have produced something in him too for Setesh's skin pebbled, his nipples tightened. He licked her thigh, the inside of it. Then the other. Carmela spread them wider as his tongue reached higher and higher.

"Open for me."

She heard it inside her head as well as in her ears. And so she did it. Stretched wide for him. He dove for her sex right away, making sounds in his heaving chest. Without his hands, which he kept over his lap in a show of extreme self-control, Setesh licked and lipped and stabbed his tongue. Carmela was pushing against his face within moments.

"The bracelet," he murmured between her legs.

She showed him her wrist and he pinched the bracelet as one would pinch off a dead flower from a healthy stem, using his thumbnail to sever the link between two of the tiny stones. Now a length of glowing pearls dangling from his fingers, Setesh brought it against her skin and used his palm to roll the warm pearls all over her vulva. A spasm passed over her belly.

"Lie on your back. Close your eyes."

Not flopping down on her back and spreading her knees as wide as they'd go proved very, very hard. It was all she could do not to jump him right then and there. She felt him work diligently as he inserted the length of pearls in her sex. The heat spread immediately.

“Ohhhh.”

“Squeeze them, Carmela. As hard as you can.”

Setesh helped in this with his mouth, licking her clit and making her squeeze those pearls as though her vagina were a fist. Then he reached between her lips—such delicate fingers for a man so large—and slowly pulled the pearls out. Each small release fired a sharp jolt of pleasure up to her entire front.

“Ohh dear...ohhh.” She arched off the floor, clutched at her hair.

She felt so bereft when the last pearl popped out. Then he did it again. Introduced the pearls into her sheath, pulled them out again.

“Setesh,” she snarled. Head lolling, she chanted his name over and over.

Inside her lower belly, a wave unfurled like a flag, spread and ballooned and billowed. Carmela squeezed her eyes shut.

“Dios!”

A climax ripped through her. Her spine curved into a tight C off the deck. At that precise moment, Setesh clamped his mouth over her sex, his teeth pressing into her flesh, and proceeded to give her the best tongue-lashing she’d ever had. He even pulled the pearls out with his teeth. Good man! Then she felt his precise fingers putting the hot bracelet back in.

“Into my mouth, Carmela, I will receive your pleasure into my mouth.”

He growled when she did. Juices slicked her folds, her anus and still she came. A series of sharp peaks then one long wave. She cried out. His name. Always his name.

Setesh greedily pulled at her nether lips. A loud gasp left her when he finally used his hands and spread her with his thumbs, gave her great wide passes of tongue then narrow and deep stabs.

“You will receive me into your mouth now.”

Carmela sat up like a broken bowstring. He stood in front of her. She bent over her knees, grabbed his Yithian cock—smooth and hairless and a good foot of gloriousness—in both fists. Half still stuck out of her hands. She wrapped her lips over his glans, licked off the salty pre-cum, so much more potent than human males.

He moaned when Carmela pumped him brutally, collected the juices then repeated the process. With a ruthless hand, she grabbed his sac from underneath and squeezed it hard. Muscles over his abdomen contracted sharply.

“Carmela.”

She squeezed harder.

A rough hand fisted her hair. He thrust in deep, drowning her gasp of shock and thrill. Carmela gagged as he retreated to the end of his long shaft and remained there, using a palm to bounce his heavy cock and tease her with it. She dug her fingernails into his hip, tried to angle the delectable member back into her mouth but he’d twist his hips every time and escape her. She was about to voice her frustration when he began to pump himself with near brutality. Oh she knew *those* signs.

"You're not stealing this from me," she murmured.

She bit his hand. Literally bit it!

He hissed something and took it away. Carmela fisted the wonderful blue rod and wolfed it down with a growl. Tiny pulsations started at the base of his cock. She savored seeing her lover come and retreated to his glans, cupped him and stuck her tongue out so his cum wouldn't be wasted. Burning jets of Yithian semen surged at her mouth, like wet spiderwebs, landed on her lips, her chin, her knuckles. So much of it!

"Carmela, my *kashaak*," Setesh kept whispering as he caressed her head.

She wasn't even done harvesting him when he put a palm against her forehead and pushed her back. Hard.

"On your back."

Carmela flopped onto her back with no amount of dignity whatsoever. Setesh towered between her legs, his cock still dripping onto her. Each burning drop landing like a pebble in a pond and creating a ripple effect of heat.

"Take the bracelet out of your cunt."

So it was still in there? Um.

Carmela reached between her legs and pulled it out with a shiver. They were *hot*.

"Put them into your mouth."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Do it."

With comments piling onto her tongue, Carmela inserted the first pearl into her mouth, still wondering how they could hold together without any string or visible link.

Setesh bent over, planted a hand beside each shoulder so he could watch her. "Each stone. One at a time."

With her lips, she sucked the bracelet in each pearl at a time. They still tasted of her essence. His nostrils dilated. When she looked down, she saw his cock hanging heavy and pointing at the juncture of her thighs. It bobbed with each pant.

When the second to last pearl disappeared between her lips, Setesh smiled a predatory grin. He licked his upper lip methodically, as a cat would looking at a mouse. His eyes narrowed and darkened to pure black slits. Carmela would've been scared if she hadn't been so damn turned on.

"Now give them back to me." He grinned triumphantly, showed his slightly pointed teeth, which she swore had just grown by inches.

"Come get them," she muttered through her own.

Carmela clenched her jaw and trapped the bracelet behind her smile. Only the last pearl stuck out in front of her teeth, the invisible link holding despite the barrier. The glow reflected in his iris-less, pupil-less eyes.

Setesh didn't seem to enjoy her little stunt. His gaze on hers the entire time, he unlocked his elbows, lowered himself push-up-like until he was almost right on top of

her but instead of letting his weight bear down, he kept himself suspended thus and backed away, lower, his chin reaching her navel. She was panting so hard she feared swallowing the damn thing!

“Give the stones to me. *Now.*”

Carmela shook her head. Even twirled her tongue around the length of pearls and made them click against the back of her teeth. She felt merciless today.

So must have he.

He dove for her breasts. Bit them, licked them, pulled on her nipples with loud sucking sounds. Setesh even climbed out of the pool, straddled her waist so he could squeeze her breasts together and fuck them. His glistening glans appeared and disappeared below her chin. She stared at him and grinned, clicking the pearls behind her teeth again. He snarled something in Yithian and pushed back into the water again.

His mouth was pitiless against her thighs and belly and breasts. She arched and groaned under the assault but wouldn't let go of the pearls. Sex so much resembled tango, a war of wills. A power struggle with passion and control the two main players. Yet she realized half the pleasure lay in the back and forth, the tug-of-war, and even if she enjoyed giving with Setesh, she enjoyed *receiving* a whole lot more. Someone *had* to lead at tango, it was part of the dance. For once, it might not be her.

Setesh proved to be as ruthless as he was magnificent. With that wicked mouth he brought her near, almost to the edge then left her unfulfilled and swaying on a razor's edge. He plundered her body with his lips and teeth and tongue, showed her in the most potent way possible what a real lover felt like and by *dios*, she relished every second of his furious lovemaking. Muscles bulged over his shoulders with the strain of keeping himself off her. One tattoo, a sort of bird-like creature, seemed to undulate with the shifting of his lean musculature. He licked her between the breasts, stared into her eyes when he reached the apex of his pass then retreated and licked her again from navel to chin.

Carmela closed her eyes and let her head loll to the side.

“Look at me.”

She did. And that was when she saw what he intended to do.

Setesh curled his spine up, snarled her name then took her.

A cry left her.

“*Ahh!*”

Just as she feared losing her hold on the pearls, he dove for her face and sucked the first few into his mouth. He didn't take it all out. One end of the bracelet disappeared behind his rapacious grin, gleaming teeth rendered pale gold under the amber light, which gave everything a surreal, platinum glow. But she held on to her end of the jewel and there they were, linked by the blazing pearls, a thread as strong as their love, as true as their trust and as deep as their fusion.

Half in the water, half hanging over her as she lay back against the edge, Setesh fucked her. He didn't make love to her. He *fucked* her. And Carmela cried out with the sheer exhilaration of his claiming. She let go of her end of the bracelet.

"Yes! Yesss!"

Waves sloshed around his legs as he pounded himself into her, harder, deeper, his face a grimace of determination, of sheer dominance. When the skin of her back squeaked under the assault, Setesh pinned her beneath him with a brutal hand around each hip. He redoubled his taking. Carmela clutched at the pool ledge with all her strength, which was barely enough. And when he grabbed at her knees and raised her legs straight up so he could curl his hips higher, take her deeper than she'd ever been before, all she could do was scream her pleasure at him, taunt and goad him, try to push him to his limits – and hers.

Her knees in his implacable grip, she received him. Oh did she receive him!

Perhaps he couldn't get his fill of her quickly enough for he dropped her legs, pulled out of her and flipped her onto her stomach. Carmela retracted her arms and waited for the explosive penetration, which followed a second later. Her juices coated her back to front and his cock glided in effortlessly and if Setesh's thrust proved violent, his aim was flawless. An orgasm tingled at the back of her vulva, squeezed her anus then spread in a hot wave through her entire body. She threw her head back, filled the room with her ecstatic cry.

Setesh trapped her beneath him when he leaned down over her back and gathered her hands behind so he could hold them in one of his. His mouth came to rest on her ear. The bracelet still dangled from his teeth.

Worse than a pit bull that one!

"Is this what you meant by fucking?"

She panted too hard to reply. Talking was *not* on her mind!

After a vigorous stab, he jammed his thighs between hers. His free hand anchored her hip. "Is it?"

Come on, hombre, no time for chit-chat. The end of the bracelet dangled along her lip. *Dios*, they were hot! Silver hair spilled over his shoulders and covered her face, clung to her wet skin.

His voice sounded raw and much deeper than she'd ever heard it. He retreated, stabbed back in. "Is it?"

Just take me...take me, take me...

"Is. This. Fucking?" He punctuated each hissed word with a brisk penetration.

"*Sí! Goddammit! Sí! Sí!*"

She came. And she came. And again.

One climax meshed with the next. She heard whimpers and was shocked to realize they were hers.

Setesh froze, sheathed to the hilt, and remained immobile for several seconds as climaxes shredded every fiber in her aching body, swelled every tissue, every vein, made stars pop at the edges of her vision, made a jackhammer of her poor heart and a blank slate of her mind. With a last pant of exhaustion, Carmela whimpered when Setesh released her hands and gently placed them by her side, palms up. He was still inside her and she knew he hadn't come yet. For the first time in her life, Carmela didn't think she could withstand another measure of her lover, she'd come and was all done, thank you very much.

Setesh moved then, retreated by a few inches, slid back almost reverently and with a moth-light kiss on the edge of her ear. A shiver shook Carmela from heels to skull. A tender hand landed on her butt cheek. Round and round it went before sliding in the middle to rub her cleft back and forth.

From fierce, his impetus turned loving, deliberate. In and out. Gently. Profoundly. All the while Setesh murmured in Yithian in her ear. Though she couldn't understand a single one intellectually, emotionally she recognized each of the clipped sounds and hard consonants. These were words one said to a lover. To a companion.

A frisson tickled the base of her spine, edged upward over her vertebra as would a pair of "walking" fingers and when the tingle reached her nape, Carmela recognized the subtle signs of an impending orgasm. Again?

"And is this making love?" he whispered in her ear.

"Ohhh Setesh, dear...ohhhh."

When she came on a moan, she felt the burning jets of his own release firing inside her, deep and intense and linking them into one being. A fusion of human and Yithian. A synergy greater than the sum of its two parts. They were indeed *making* love.

She *humphed* when he collapsed on top of her. He panted hard. No wonder. The man – Yithian – had come not long ago and again now.

Carmela had always thought sleeping right after having sex was the domain of the unfit but as her eyelids grew heavy, her breathing more regular, as Setesh lay over her in a protective blanket of muscle and fierce Yithian nature, she succumbed to deep, repairing sleep.

* * * * *

Something heavy rested over her thighs. Carmela woke to find Setesh on his side, his long leg over her own as he lay beside her on a narrow bed in another room than the one in which she'd fallen asleep. This room was a real bedroom, or as real as a Yithian could make it. She felt as if she were inside a giant seashell, not that she knew how they looked from the inside. Still, the walls looked made of pale, bluish nacre and extremely glossy. The bed was too hard with only a mattress cut into a slab of some sort of dense foam. No sheets, nothing. No cushion? No pillow? Frugal at best, these Yithians. Speaking of which.

Awww, look at that.

Setesh slept like a baby. A blue-skinned, tattooed, seven-foot, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound...

Okay, not a baby.

But he *did* look even younger this way. His angular facial features were softened, the harsh lines smoothed, the mouth curved at one corner in a mocking, cocky grin. Was he dreaming he was fucking her or making love?

She scratched an itch along her thigh and felt the pearls' warmth against her skin. They were back at her wrist. Good. She felt incomplete without them. Carmela chuckled.

Setesh's eyes flared. He raised his head, his hand going behind his back and returning with the knife.

"You always go to bed with a lover *and* a weapon?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Do you not?"

Humor was clearly lost on the entire Yithian species.

A black plaque by the bed caught her attention. It kept blinking. Setesh couldn't see it because it was behind him.

"That thing wants something." She pointed with her chin.

He twisted so he could take a look and grimaced. "It is only the communications panel. It can wait."

"Can't you turn it off? It's blinking into my eyes." She yawned and squeezed her thigh muscles. She was pleasantly sore all over. Yum.

"It cannot be turned off. This is not a human ship. If something blinks, it will keep blinking until someone responds to the prompt."

"I'm going to ask Kim to fix that. No later than today."

At least on human ships, things blinked off after a while. Yithians just weren't used to subtlety, were they?

Carmela reached over his shoulder and tapped the black screen. Nothing happened. "Let me guess. Voice activated. In Yithian."

A cocky grin answered her. He snarled a word at the panel.

Several long strings of turquoise-colored text crawled at the bottom then wrapped upward from right to left.

"What does it say?"

Setesh scowled then said another word. The panel blinked out. "The summit at Land's End was successful. There will not be war for now."

"That's good news!" Carmela grinned and shook her head. "Why the long face?"

"There was also another message."

"And?"

He made a face. "From my father's business associate Lajinia. She has heard of my *return* and wishes to inform me I now own the *Gorgosh*."

Carmela whistled. "That's a nice piece of real estate."

"Of course it is 'real'. That brothel-ship is worth its mass in Interworld credits."

"Figure of speech, *hombre*, remember?"

"Ah." He rolled onto his back, crossed his hands behind his head. "I will sell it to her. I have no wish to follow in my father's footsteps. He acted dishonorably and betrayed his *ghers*. I will not."

"Why sell it? Why not run the show?"

"I am not Drokesh. I will not be a slaver."

"No need to be one if you take inhibitors out of the equation," Carmela replied as she traced a tattoo shaped like a thorny flower stem that wrapped round and round his right upper arm. "Some people enjoy having multiple partners. And getting paid only makes a good deal even better."

Setesh cocked his head at her. "Remove inhibitors." A predatory grin pulled his thin blue lips sideways to reveal his slightly pointy teeth. *Dios* she loved that cocky smile!

"We could even add zero-g fun rooms. Remember?"

"I will not forget a single moment spent with you, my *kashaak*."

She rolled her eyes. "That 'will' word again. We have to start weeding it out."

"I *will* have my second Spanish lesson now. You will give it to me."

Carmela sat up and straddled his waist. "Will you ever, *hombre*!"

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).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorasCave.com.

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