

Firecracker: White Rage

Sage Grayson

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Chapter One: First Blood

Bloodied crystal. Frost-white hair pink with spilled lifeblood. Sightless silver eyes. Fey-wild black ones staring. Face the color of imported Scots heather contorted and crazed.

Tail coiled tourniquet-tight around her LUNA-suited ankle, self-exiled Etrigani Crown Princess Ma'Sandrine forced aside memories of her brutalized sisters and slammed her datapad into the plasteel interrogation room table.

The *zohai-zetaken* perp winked at her. *Winked.*

Her temples throbbed in time with the razor-clawed foot she'd shove up his ass if he did it again. Flashing fang, she lifted the datapad. It flickered on -- Zohar be praised she'd not managed to break another one; Amri would've busted her so hard, she'd be paying transport to pick splinters of herself out of the satellite-belt.

"Daniel Dent. Human male, aged twenty-two Terra-stan years. Known member of the Roanoker cyber-gang. Picked up Real-side in possession of goods presumed stolen from Stanner residence, in company of known fence." She rested the pad against the edge of the table, and her gaze on the perp's face.

Though hardened Doms flinched at her violet stare, the perp smiled -- a lazy, wicked smile like he had information he knew she wanted and he wasn't planning to tell her. He tipped his head and ducked his chin. "Yes, ma'am." The words dripped from his smirk, mellow and sweet like honey. Or Iapetan venom. "I reckon that about says it all."

"It does, does it?" Unsheathed, her claws shone iridescent against the dull gray plasteel tabletop. Mere centimeters from the perp's manacled hands. If she stretched, she could pierce the webs between his thumbs and forefingers, rip them wide. Then he'd talk. Then he'd *beg* to talk. But she wouldn't do that. Couldn't.

He leaned back away from her, unconcerned. Probably would've crossed his foot over his leg if it hadn't been yoked to his chair. Smug bastard. "Yes, ma'am."

Down. He was going down. Faux-blond hair, honeyed drawl, smirking gob -- the whole damned package. "No, that's not all, you little pussbag. Felony assault on an artificial intelligence, accessory, before *and* after the fact, to breaking and entering, robbery, and rape. That's *all*."

The first hint of worry crept into those hideously human-brown eyes, but he hid it behind another grin. "Alleged, ma'am. If you had proof, we wouldn't be having this little chat."

If she had to look into those shit-browns another second, she'd gouge them out. Pop him like the pimple he was.

She put her back to him, stared at the irritatingly dull, institutional-gray wall. "Sources put you in a club, plying the Stanner girl with eraser-codes two nights before the break-in." Mind erasers, the dickhead. He might as well have raped her himself. Her claws flexed, extended. Blinding white stole the edges of her vision. "The same sources report you telling another Roanoker you could hack the Stanner house-sys."

"Circumstantial, and hearsay."

Innana's broken body and Ilyana's crazy eyes whirled in the white mist. Both irretrievable, because of someone like him. Someone who might have taught him what he knew. "Admissible to establish motive, opportunity, and ability, cyber-scum." Tail slashing, she stalked to his side. Leaned in, threatening, and curled her lips back over her fangs. "Give up the rapist and you won't do time."

"ISC-service is out. No more hard time for computer crimes. You and your partner saw to that when you took ISC down last year. I'll take my chances." He winked.

Her hand flew. Connected with his face. Skin split under her knuckles. His head flew back so hard his chair crashed into the ash-gray wall. The tang of prey-blood scented the air.

She growled, drawing back her lips. Behind her, the door irised with a hiss. She drew back her foot --

“Enough.”

Her foot hovered above the floor, claws reaching, reaching toward the bastard. Not smirking anymore, was he?

“Leave this room.” Deadly calm, dragon-strong, Amri interposed himself between her and the perp.

Her foot fell. How dare he? He was her boss, for Zohar’s sake! He ought to be on her side. Ought to want for her to take this pussbag down. Her fist jabbed out.

Amri caught it, pulled it down. Crushed her fist in his unnatural hands. She swung at him, but he dodged easily, while righting the fallen perp with his other hand. “Nerys, get down here.”

“Coming.” The med-tech’s elder-wise voice came through the wall-speaker.

The rage-fed silence in Sandy’s head grew so loud it made her sick to her stomach.

“Our med-tech will see to you, Mr. Dent. Then I’ll send someone up to process your paperwork.” That said, Amri dragged her out of the interrogation room.

When the door squeezed shut, he released her fist. Insect-wing green eyes glared at her from under midnight-black, almost Etrigani-black, brows. “Data cubes and datapads can be replaced. Cases lost to police brutality can’t.”

Azh davor zetaka antira. She dragged her claws through her hair. “I had him dead to rights.”

Amri didn’t back away from her slashing tail and clenched fists. Why should he? It wasn’t like she could damage a dragon’s consciousness-carrier. “Amri --”

“You had nothing, except a 49.C.8.” His voice came out flat, almost tinny. Mechanical, like him. No matter how good the tech, *that* body was a machine.

Cleared of all charges? “No! Amri, he hacked that house-sys. That girl --”

“Dent is twenty-two years old. Your palace was breached over one hundred years ago. There’s no connection.” His voice was clinically-kind; it tasted milk-sweet in

the back of her throat, nauseating. What did a machine, or the peace-loving sleeping dragon whose mind it carried, know of her awful emptiness?

“What do you know about it? He could’ve learned from --”

“I know you’re out of control. Take a vacation.”

“I don’t --”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Ma’Sandrine.”

* * *

Her eyes stung; vision blurred. Sandy spat and wiped her mouth. Her hand came away bloody. She kicked the man sprawled at her feet. “Get up.”

The mangled body of the challenger didn’t move. A coppery scream ripped from her throat. “Is that the best you can do?”

There came no answer. Instead, a matched pair of wine-dark adjutants dragged her last challenger away. His slack limbs and claws raked furrows in the powdery tuff -- fallen crystals ground to silky fineness by the thousands who’d come here for the ritual of proof.

Gears shrieked. The Star Wheel, already ancient a millennium before the birth of the AI that ran this sim, opened. Zohar’s cold light streamed into the cavern. It shattered on the crystal crags, hiding the challenger’s entrance behind a curtain of rainbow light.

The prismatic scattering couldn’t hide the sound of naked feet in the tunnel. Nor obscure the smell of passion-heated blood. She growled, crouched in wait, tail slashing a warrior’s warning.

Starbows broke over broad shoulders the color of Terran wheat. Tamerlan’s shoulders.

Finally, her house-sys had conjured a worthy opponent. Her lips curled back from her fangs as she leapt.

Ivory clawed hands caught her, absorbed the impact and drew her in. Instead of striking her, he held her pinned against his chest.

She hissed. “Fight me, would-be consort-king.”

“Sandy --”

Shock shuddered through her. Lan wouldn't call her that. Not even his sim. Her house-sys was well-familiar, *too* well-familiar, with his speech patterns.

She drew back, studied him. No, definitely not her left-behind love. The hair was far too light. Almost flaxen. The gaze that met her growled challenge was not Lan's tri-colored hazel but blue. Not even the shining sapphire or polished turquoise of an Etrigani, but the clear, polar-sea blue of human eyes. Eyes she'd last seen laughingly upturned from where he crouched at her feet, offering to tongue her cunt to ecstatic agony. Nathan's eyes. “Get out.”

Her partner of ten years bowed. Muscle rippled over a borrowed Etrigani frame. “I think not.”

She raked her claws through her hair. The tiny pain of scraped flesh sizzled down her spine into the tip of her tail. “I'm in no mood.”

He smiled, lightning-bright. “You will be.”

She made her voice cold, sharp, like the stalactites hanging from the ceiling of the sim-cavern. “This is no game. My wounds --” *And yours if you stay --* “are real.”

His smile didn't slip even a fraction. Instead he raked those icy-blue eyes over her sweat-slicked body until his gaze rested on her crimson-tipped claws. His pupils darkened, deepened. “Bring it.”

Her claws strained from their sheaths. The tip of her tail throbbed, a red-hot point in a universe of blinding white. “Get out, Nathan.”

“Not this time.” Then his fist plowed into her ribs.

The blow thudded through her, rocked her back. He hit her again, caught the underside of her jaw. And again, cuffing her head.

All concern for him vanished in the milk-white haze of fury. He wanted to play rough? Rough he would get.

She danced out of range of his next swing. Baited him by leaving herself open. He rushed. She sidestepped, swiped him with her claws as he went by.

First blood. The scent mingled with his arousal, prickled over her skin, raising her nipples and hardening her clits.

He put his hand to his ribs, then brought it to his lips. His tongue darted out, tasted. "You can do better than that." The house-sys modified his taunt so that it came out in Lan's silken growl, baiting her.

Bad idea.

The last of her restraint snapped. She pounced, raking him with hands and feet. Together, they slammed into crags, grunting with the impact. Blood spattered and stained the sparkling stalagmites.

"Hai-yee-ah!" he shouted, then flung her away. She somersaulted through the center of the cavern. In her mind, powdered crystal clung to the wounds her holo-partners had inflicted, sealing them with a grainy, irritating paste.

He crouched across the shimmery tuff from her. Smart. Harder to knock him down with his center low. Too bad she didn't want to knock him down.

She darted past him, ripped one honey-wheat shoulder. When he reached to check the damage, she flashed by and caught the other side.

The Etrigani cock rising between smooth, hard thighs quivered, expanding. Etrigani nostrils flared at her answering rush of heat.

He jumped at her. Took her down with his arms around her. His human cock dug into her inner thigh. It slid along a trail of pre-cum and sweat, grazing her swollen fore and hind clits.

A scream ripped from her chest. She slashed at his back, his shins, anything she could reach with her claws.

He rolled away from her, crimson blood streaking exertion-strained golden muscle. His massive shaft blossomed to its full Etrigani knot.

Her gaze blurred again. Hazed white.

Hungry. She was so hungry. Her tongue raked over her lips. Salt and copper and musk -- need.

He climbed to his feet. Purple in Zohar's light, his wounds crooned to her. Beckoned.

No more play.

She stalked him. Tail tip aching as it raked the cool air. His pulse quickened, eyes widened.

"Sand -- Oof." Her foot swept his out from under him. He landed on his back, engorged shaft straining for the Star Wheel.

She straddled him, triumphant. Bent and dragged her tongue through the tears on his ribs. He gasped. The harshness of his breath boiled in her chest and in her cunt.

Need. So hungry.

She hauled herself up his body, smearing blood over her face and chest. Prey-blood. Drenched her hands in it. Painted her face with it.

"San --"

"Too late, prey-thing. Plaything. Too late." She stabbed herself on his cock. Impaled herself, easily, shrieking white heat and tearing golden chest muscles with silver claws.

Lust and terror echoed off the crystal. A red scream. A prey scream. She bent to catch the sound in her mouth. Ground her wet, hungry flesh against the coarse fur of his groin.

He gasped again, vibrating her lips with the rush of air. She stared down into eyes glazed with desire. Wanted to see them wide with knowing. Wanted more than his hips snapping back and forth, thrusting up into her.

"Scream for me." She threaded her claws through the furrows they'd made. Cut deeper.

He moaned, bucking into her. The white haze sparkled, called -- "Scream."

Pubic bone smacking and crushing her clits, he thrashed beneath her. Blinding shocks and heated flares stoked her need, lifeblood on her lips goaded her. She seized his throat, rode him hard, rode the angry panic in his prey-blue eyes. "Scream! Let me hear your fear."

He shook his head; his white-gold mane sawed at her hands. "No."

The word rasped in her ears, abraded her swollen flesh, a salt scrub. She shivered with the heady rush of scraping pleasure-pain. His pulse slammed against her fingers. She squeezed. Her cunt clenched. So close, so close.

She bent over him. Dragged her tongue along his jaw. Whispered, "Scream, prey-thing," then sank her fangs into the throbbing, aching, rushing life beneath the meager protection of his skin.

He screamed and arched up into her. The sound went on and on, washing over her in waves that brought her orgasm, and his. Blood and cum and her juices spurting in time with the air-splitting screaming, screaming, screaming that echoed off the crystal like alarm-bells.

He shook and she rode every tremor of it. Taking taking taking --

"Princess!" Tamerlan's voice.

Her head whipped around. Sweat-damp hair stuck in the valley between her breasts, grabbed at her still-hard teats. Where? Where was Lan?

"Sandrine, *zohari-zeha*, cease."

But... the body beneath her still bucked with life.

She cocked her head. Tried to think why she should stop.

"Light of my heart, stop, before you go to a place where I cannot find you."

"Lan?" She slackened her grip on the prey-thing's throat. Why was Lan here? Had he not vowed he'd never give in? Sworn a binding oath never to come for her?

Yet, he crooned to her, crooned: "Come to me. I'm behind the curtain of light."

She stood, followed the voice. Ready, if it were a trick. As she turned, there came a flurry of sound. Whirring and clicking. Unnatural.

She spun --

Blinked, and saw not the crystal cavern. Not a fallen Etrigani sex-toy. But her long-time partner of convenience -- Nathan, pale and shocky on the floor of her holo-training room, attended by her smart-droid.

"*Azh davol.*" Nathan. Her throat constricted. What had she done? She stepped forward.

"Sandrine, soul-star, don't. He won't welcome your touch." What did Lan know about it? She tore off her headset and flung herself at Nathan. Reached to stroke his face, but he flinched away. There was no recognition in his cherished blue eyes, no acceptance of shared pleasure in rough play. Only hurt and accusation.

She'd broken him. Broken them.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into the echoing silence. "I didn't know."

"You are not yourself, *zohari-zeha.*" Lan's words caressed and surrounded her. Forgave her and flayed her. "Come home. It is past time. Let me help you."

"Leave me alone." Zohar's light. Was that gravelly rasp her voice? "House-sys, end Tamerlan's transmission."

"Com-link closed."

Had she heard a hint of disapproval in the AI's voice? She deserved it. Deserved far worse than a machine's censure.

Naked, coated in her and Nathan's blood, she clung to the doorframe. Unable to face him, face herself, she waited, watching as though through someone else's eyes, until at last the droid drew Nathan to his unsteady feet.

Supported by the smart-droid, Nathan made his way from the training room. With every step he winced and clutched his ribs, never once looking at her.

Then, finally, he stood in the doorway. He turned a hard and hurting sea-blue stare on her. "I thought I knew you."

Chapter Two: Inferno

The sign proclaimed the place “Inferno,” and a scrolling marquee carried the legendary text, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” Though the subtext was immediately obvious to Sandy, and probably most who came here seeking, every tenth scroll blazoned hellish flames and read, “Safewords are for pussies.”

Nathan would’ve laughed, sea-blue eyes sparkling with amusement. He’d have told her she didn’t belong here, but a manly man like him could go forward without fear.

Would have. She’d never see his nose crinkle in laughter again, never meet his eyes without the shadow of dread that had crossed them when she’d laid her hand on his arm -- the only goodbye his fear allowed.

It hurt more than she’d dreamed it might, watching him slip about on silent feet, flitting from room to room like a troubled wraith, looking for somewhere safe to settle. Even now her chest seized at the thought that he’d be gone when she returned. Gone, not for a visit to his elderly mother, or on a stellar sailing expedition, but gone for good.

Ten years was a long time to spend with someone. Even for someone who lived as long as she would. Even if they’d never loved each other nor pretended to. They’d grown comfortable, as odd as it was to think of the kind of sex she and Nathan liked as comfortable. Built a shared illusion of forever, though they’d known from the beginning it couldn’t last.

Ten years. Nine years and three hundred sixty-four days longer than she’d dreamed the first time she’d brought him home and raked furrows down his still-smooth back.

Ten years, gone. The illusion shattered because she’d been so determined to prove Amri wrong that she hadn’t seen the signs. Hadn’t seen herself.

Nathan might once have said she didn't belong here, and Tamerlan would doubtless say it was beneath a Crown Princess of Etrigani to seek absolution in a pay-for-punishment dungeon. But they were both wrong. She belonged -- by Zohar's light, she craved it. She deserved the pain. And not only for Nathan's sake.

She fought down the surge of nausea that accompanied the memory of Nathan's haunted gaze -- and Lan's so-understanding tone -- then ducked through the ostentatiously spooky flaming archway. Her pulse quickened and her breath hitched. Piped in along the hermetically-sealed entry, the sounds of screaming -- the pleasures of the damned -- made her shiver, not only with fear.

Tail tucked between her legs, she hurried down the mirrored tunnel lit with infernal reds and oranges. She looked neither left nor right but toward the black hole of a door at its end. She'd had more than enough reflection these past three days, almost as much she'd had lecturing from her self-proclaimed King-to-be.

Tonight wasn't about thinking or pasts or futures. It was about the forgiveness Nathan would never give her, but she must find. About expunging the demons from her flesh, so she could get back to normal. Or at very least back to work.

* * *

Inferno had none of the raucous chaos the exterior signage promised. Yes, there were beatings and clampings and fuckings and moanings. Chains and fetters and crosses and poles -- some in use and others vacant -- lined reflective black walls. Everywhere faux-leather-clad Doms and Dommes had gags and floggers to hand and subs of every stripe in tow.

Still, in spite of the howls and whimpers, the welts and bruises, and the meters of bared skin in every color from human cream to Iapetan violet, Inferno gave Sandy the overwhelming impression of orderliness: as though upon entering through the gaping black maw, each "soul" was measured and tested, numbered and known, then fitted out with appropriate punishment.

The metallic tang of blood and cloying scents of prey-fear and predator-glee had her tail scything and her clits hard enough to scrape her inner thighs. Yet even before

she'd removed the black trench that hid her nakedness, she'd found a measure of calm in this infernal realm. Whatever happened here, it would be what she needed. What she deserved.

She'd just seated herself -- wet cunt pressed against an uncanny fabric that adjusted to cradle her flesh and tease it, with no hope of release -- when a massive hand gripped her braid. It dragged her head back and back until she looked up into the tanned face of the largest human male she'd ever seen. Like Nathan, he had golden hair and blue eyes, but there the resemblance ended.

Where Nathan's eyes sparkled with the good humor of a tropical sea on a calm afternoon, the stranger's eyes held a brooding darkness, a tempest barely restrained. His hair, as long as hers, but shaved on the sides and gelled to a bronze crest atop his head, almost hurt to look upon, so sharp were the spikes and color. He sported golden hoops in his earlobes -- a Dom's no-no he flaunted with a brutal confidence that said any sub stupid enough to use the rings for leverage would find their genitals painfully pierced.

"No safewords, no limits." The voice that flowed from his lips sounded incongruously sweet, melodious.

A Benthamite; she should've known him from that heavy-grav world by his size and self-styling. "You know what I am?"

He laughed. "Yes, little demonness." Something in the way he said it suggested he knew who she was, too, but that didn't matter here. Names didn't, only roles. And tonight, her role was "the penitent."

She blinked, movement deliciously constrained by the fierce strength of his hand in her hair. "No safewords, no limits."

He released her, then spun her stool to face him. "Do not speak again until you are given leave. Make no sound that is not a scream. From now until I choose to free you, you are mine." At his words, the memory-cloth seat tented into her, sealing her leaking slit, taunting her with her emptiness and filling her with an odd trepidation -- equal parts desire, fear, and fury.

She said nothing as he withdrew restraint-cuffs from the pockets of his ivory faux-leather vest and fitted the surprisingly lightweight weave around her wrists and ankles and tail. The light-colored vest and the matching fitted trousers -- snugged over a bulge that must terrify human women with its size but seemed merely pleasant to her -- said he wasn't into blood-sport. Just as well, given what had happened with... given how blood-scent inflamed her of late.

He took her white-cuffed hand and drew her from the stool. "Come."

She followed because she had no choice. Refused to wonder what came next, because it didn't matter, so long as it hurt.

He led her away from the bar that served as the waiting room and back toward the gate to the "upper world." When she thought of the shadowed recesses she had passed when she entered, her gut flip-flopped, just like it always did coming out of subspace transit. She balked -- no, not there, too public, too many prey-faces.

He turned back, thunderclouds gathering in his eyes. Instead of the ringing slap to her breasts that she deserved, he reached between her legs. Her groin tensed, clenched, preparing for the piercing pain of a pinched clit.

He offered her a knowing and malicious smile. Then his thick finger parted her swollen folds. As it dipped into her, she shuddered, pulled back --

And was immobilized by the force cuffs. She could do nothing but wince as he probed her sex, stroking at the inner walls. With that same self-assurance that said "don't fuck with me," he caressed and caressed until her slick honey ran over his fingers, and then withdrew.

She held her breath, waiting, waiting. It always hurt worse, hurt better, if she was aroused.

He took her chin in his hand, tilted it up. The finger that had slid not-near-deep-enough inside her painted her lips with her own musk. Soft strokes, like wet velvet. Sweet pleasure. But where was the pain?

"Come."

What did he mean by being so... gentle? For all the lush softness, his manner still seemed to promise a thousand lashes with a thin, stinging whip.

She tested her bonds and found them relaxed. Uneasy, stomach knotted, she followed him to the entry portal. He laid his palm on a sensor-pad, intoned a few unrecognizable words in an obscure Benthamite dialect of Starfed panglot, and then the ground opened near her feet. A St. Andrew's cross -- still styled as such so many millennia past that martyr's death that none remembered the cause -- rose from beneath the floor.

Sweat beaded at the base of her cuffed tail. The tip pulsed in time with her heartbeat. Her tormenter crooked two fingers, beckoning, and acid flutters streaked through her system. It was all she could do to remain standing.

This was more like it.

Blocks of ice seemed to encase her feet, but somehow she managed to move to his side. By contrast, he had no trouble lifting her and mounting her on the cross. Mere seconds passed, it seemed, between him taking her hand and him standing back to survey her, spread-eagled before him.

He frowned. "Not quite right." He muttered more untranslatable phrases in Benthamite before disappearing.

Where had he gone? Her eyes widened, and nostrils flared, scenting. His subtle blend of spice and tea -- that called to mind marble and velvet foyers in elegant skyscraper hotels -- came from her right, and mingled with a musty-musky animal smell she didn't recognize. She sucked in a breath, tightened her abdominal muscles, her ass, and waited for the first blow.

It didn't come. Instead, he moved to her head. Would he slap her to make her lips and cheeks swell? Some Doms liked their subs well-bruised. She squeezed her eyes shut.

He chuckled, a low rumble, and slipped a blindfold over her eyes. A blindfold of the softest fur. Softer even than the sweet spot at the base of a feline's ear.

Now uncertainty gave way to something worse, something darker. Her throat tightened, and she couldn't seem to swallow.

He stroked a calloused hand over her naked breasts, the delicate scraping far too light for pain. "Open your mouth."

She obeyed, but instead of a gag, he poured a tart citrus-type juice down her throat.

"A climax inhibitor. No sense absolution coming too easily. Can't have you thinking *sin* pays. No easy outs for you. Not this time."

It was almost as if he knew, truly knew, what had driven her here to this place that promised clarity of body and spirit. The cross tilted until there was no strain on her arms, and both her breasts and sex were exposed and accessible. A pneumatic hiss announced the arrival of another penitent or punisher.

"Give her no pain." Her torturer's silken voice buzzed in her ears like a cloud of flitwings on a bloodied carcass. Her belly quivered as understanding broke. The sick bastard meant to discipline her with *pleasure*.

A tongue, flat and soft, stroked across her slit. A tiny spiral of warmth cut through the acid fear in her belly. Then again, the warmth, like a cleaning cloth against her cunt.

Her head dropped back against the cross, as the agile tongue curled around first her left, then her right clit. No safewords, no limits.

No pain.

Those two words echoed on and on in her head, tearing at the space behind her eyes, as body after body crouched between her legs. Male, female, human, insectoid, Iapetan, Corollan -- she couldn't see, but smells and voices identified her tormentors.

Gentle licks, teasing sucks, tentative probing, quivering, shivering, swelling, aching, until she was nothing but her sopping sex and the ringing words "no pain, no pain, no pain" repeated for every penitent who knelt between her legs. For every deft and subtle tongue, every slender sucking tubule, every slick fin and velvet furred paw that took its turn at her cunt.

As she'd agreed, she made no sound that wasn't a scream -- screams of fury, of pleasure, threatening screams and sobbing ones. Ecstatic screams, agonized screams -- for there was no climax, only feathery touches, gentle shudders, and the sweet, sweet, dreamy-sweet drowning in iridescent honey.

On it went, unending, insipid, excruciating in its tenderness. The sweet, languid, liquid pleasure, for minutes, hours, days -- she didn't know. Didn't know anything but the distended, desperately sensitized flesh between her legs. Didn't care, just wanted the twist, or pinch, or bite, please Zohar, the bite, that would cut through the inhibitor and let her come.

No matter how she prayed, none defied that commanding voice. But somewhere in the torment, something changed. The mouths moved higher. First along her ribcage, with butterfly kisses and ticklish licks, then higher to the bottom curve of her breasts, but not the breasts themselves, and not her nipples, longing, pining, yearning for touch.

That, on and on, for an eternity, during which one intrepid soul -- only one because the shape and the pressure stayed the same -- slid his finger in and out of her asshole. In and out, in and out, unvarying, relentless, frictionless -- for whenever the finger dried the slightest, the imp dragged his finger through her sex again.

Slowly, as if in a dream, the finger left her ass and the sucking mouths went to her breasts. Her cunt pulsed with every suckle. Her tail throbbed.

Ah, emptiness. An ache, of a sort.

But no sooner had she felt it than a dildo of a pleasant size found its way into her cunt, soothing the ache. Another, neither too big nor too small, slipped almost tenderly into her anus. Once belted into place -- with a fur-lined cuff, Zohar be damned -- the flexible, faux-skin cocks caused her nothing but delight.

Tears leaked from her eyes as soft, soft, soft tongues laved her tight nipples. Mouths sucked, not fierce like a lover, nor even toothy like a child, but adoringly, worshipfully, like a Terran hummingbird sipping from a flower.

No pain, no pain, no pain.

She lost track of everything. Everything except the sensations washing over her. Like waves of liquid sunlight, bliss lapped at her.

She screamed with the pleasure and her withheld orgasm, screamed but even that didn't hurt because periodically her torturer gave her something that coated her throat and soothed her head.

And then, a tormented eternity later, she was somewhere else. She lay on her back, chained to what seemed a bed of clouds. A woody musk scent rose from her skin. When she inhaled, it sparked a vague remembrance of oil being massaged into her after her cuffs had been removed.

Though she tried to gather her thoughts, they melted away like droplets of butter on the Terran waffles Nathan had loved for breakfast. Nathan. That one thing she knew: her guilt over Nathan had not abated. It huddled in her chest, a cancer to be beaten out of her.

Her tormentor removed her blindfold, and she blinked into the thoughtfully dimmed light. There was nothing to see, nothing but him, for the room was bland in all details.

He was naked. Quite gloriously so for an unadorned human male. His cock would've done a lesser Etrigani proud, rising as thick as her wrist and near as long as her forearm from a nest of bronze curls.

He withdrew the dildos, slowly, and not without working them in and out of her several times to unfurl gossamer streamers in her groin.

But then she was empty. Empty, untouched, and for a glorious minute, she ached, desired. Needed. Needed so bad nausea closed her throat and squeezed tears from her eyes.

"You may speak, but only one sentence. Choose it wisely."

"Fuck me so hard it hurts." She'd wanted it to sound alluring, throaty. It came out a plea.

He laughed. Laughed. And when he topped her with his big body, white crept around the edges of her vision.

“I think not. I’ve always wanted to make love to a princess.” His lips grazed her neck, just below her ear.

A frisson of pleasure shot over her, but her jaw clenched, the muscles ticked.

Centimeter by centimeter, he covered her heated flesh with kisses like the brush of wet satin. Lipped at her, licked, and suckled her nipples while his fingers stroked, stroked, stroked from the base of her tail out to the tip.

Her cunt swelled and wept. Her clits grew hard enough to burst. She had only the restless ache of need, and the interminable *good* sensation of his fingers and tongue.

Need. She needed pain, needed harsh, raw pain to rip away the emptiness, the long, long, long time of nothing but duty and sorrows that stretched out before her. Need. She screamed with it. He laughed again, then bent his head to her cunt.

If only he’d stab her with his gel-spiked hair. Hurt her and break through this awful constant dullness, fill the deafening need!

But no, no, and still no. Just his velvet tongue, and his silken lips, making the circuit of her four clits. Around and around and around, toying with each, teasing it hard, but not hard enough to hurt, then moving on to leave her blissfully aware of each aroused and aching clit as he worked the next, but not ready to come, not quite.

Wanting to come but not needing to. Not yet, never yet. The tide of climax swelled, then ebbed, swelled and ebbed, swelled and ebbed, until she screamed and dug her unsheathed claws into the cloud-bed. Screamed again when they met no resistance. Was she to be given all desire and arousal, but no completion? Denied all substance? All sustenance?

He lifted his head and met her gaze. “Does not the punishment fit the sin?” His tone seemed to mock her. He was no demon, this no true hell, no matter the trappings. He was a Dom and she, this time, here-now, a sub, and he knew what she needed.

Bastard. She hated him. Hated him. Hated him. Hated herself. Begged: “Please.”

He stood, suddenly, triumph in his tempestuous eyes. “I did not give you leave to speak.” But his voice was even more victorious than his gaze upon her chained naked flesh.

He came down to her again, buried his massive-for-a-human cock into her. Her greedy cunt took it all, swallowed it whole and would've taken more if he had it.

Hated him, hated him, hated him -- because still there was no pain. Nothing but the pleasure of being filled, not stretched, but filled. And the deep, steady thrusts that didn't quite hit her womb, didn't quite hurt, but felt so damned good. And the stirring, Zohar be damned, the rotation of his hips, squeezing her clits, touching everywhere inside her.

Her body spasmed around his cock, milked it. White, snow white, star white, frost white surrounded her -- in the room and in her mind. White rage -- she didn't want to come this way, wanted to come in shrieking, rending, soul-searing pain, not in puling-tepid empty pleasure.

Another spasm. More white. More need.

Now his thrusts came stronger. Almost painful, driven by his lust. She smelled it, predator-glee, at the bound prey, *helpless* prey.

He drove into her, and her body welcomed him, even as her mind screamed, "No, no, no, no, not this way, no."

Faster and deeper, harder, 'til pain glimmered just out of reach.

Zohar, pain. Please, pain.

She shuddered again, and again, and again. Climax broke over her, gentle, unceasing, like waves of white foam hitting white sand, white upon white.

"Good girl, princess." He released the bonds that held her to the bed. "Arms and legs around me now."

The white crests continued, but she obeyed, pliant.

Then it came, finally, the pain she'd sought. He slammed into her, hips pistoning, forcing his swollen cock through her clenching, pleasure-raw cunt, jarring her clits.

Need. Zohar, she needed it. She screamed.

He screamed. Raked his fingers down her arms. Blissful agony.

Blood. Her blood.

Hungry. So hungry.

Her claws sank into flesh, shredded his back, flayed it as he came, screaming and bleeding, cursing her and shooting hot cum.

She rolled him over. His eyes widened, as she straddled his still-hard cock and rocked herself on it.

Coppery-red prey-scent.

Run or fuck. Fuck or bleed. More.

Hungry. Need more. Ripping, tearing, screaming, bleeding.

Something bit her shoulder as her claws pierced his throat. Hot, red blood splashed her breasts, and then the room went black.

Chapter Three: Recriminations

Sandy buried her face in the lush maroon velvet spread, trying not to listen too closely to Tamerlan's fierce reproof on the subject of attacking humans and losing her job. She'd have cut the connection, but he'd find some way to deliver the lecture. Now was as good a time as any. Since she had no lover, and had been fired from her job, any time was as good as any other.

"You severed his jugular, Sandrine."

She rolled over. "He'll live." No thanks to her, but of all the people in the universe, Tamerlan was the Zohar-be-damned last she would confess to.

"This one, this time." Lan sat forward on the black velvet cushioned gilded chair that wasn't a throne but might as well have been. His tri-colored eyes pleaded with her through the com-screen, even as he ripped her a new one.

If Etrigani did ever thaw and she bonded to Lan, he'd have the compassionate sovereign act down pat. Too bad she'd sooner confess to him than make him King. Or become Queen.

"Nathan, this Dom." That word he said as if it were too vile to contemplate, her getting from a BDSM-master what would be natural between them. "Who's next, Princess? Must someone die before you see the danger?"

Oh, she saw it clear enough. Now that she'd destroyed her life with Nathan, and killed the Dom, Rickard, almost-beyond revivification. "I'll handle it."

"*Zohari-zeha*, you are not yourself. Let me help you. I won't bind you to me. Just let me guide you through this bedazzlement."

The comforting maroons and golds of her bedchamber spun. Non-binding. Just this once...

She sat up, punching a small tassled pillow at the same time. “No.” She’d managed without him over a hundred years. This was hardly the first time her failures had blinded her. Hardly the first time she couldn’t see through the white haze to a future. “No. I can handle this.”

“You’ve done such a fine job so far, what with getting kicked off the force for attempted murder.” The last traces of smoky warmth left Lan’s voice. “What will you do now? Become a mercenary, perhaps?” Each word snapped like the touch of a springy whip to firm flesh. Desire sizzled along her nerve endings, seared her senses.

Yet another reason not to go back. After one hundred years, one touch and she’d be his, all of her resistance broken with a single kiss.

She shrugged, mostly to break the tension in her shoulders, but let him think her unconcerned if he would. “Get a job with Hawk and Tiana, at the new ISC.”

He said nothing for a full minute, but his face shifted through myriad expressions. “Very well.” His considered tone, and the odd light in his eyes, gave her pause, but he continued before she had time to chase down the reason. “Only have a care, *Princess*. Diplomatic immunity may protect you from prosecution there, but if someone dies, it will not protect you here.”

The image zoomed until the screen showed only his wheat-gold face and golden mane. His eyes, brown-green-and-gold pinwheels, locked onto her. “You may not want to be hailed as Queen, but even you must find it preferable to being executed for murder.”

* * *

Sandy exited at 510 Galactica Way, one of three “private” stops on the entire magtrain line. Only the residents and their identicoded guests could disembark here.

She tilted her head up and up, trying to glimpse the top of the Galactica Building, the penthouse, where Hawk and his *s’ressa*, Tiana, now lived. When the third tilt failed to reveal the tip, she laughed, but it sounded forced even to her.

No denying it, her old partner had moved up in the world. So far up that even an ex-Crown Princess might feel awkward at being invited for dinner. But that was all it was. Just social awkwardness.

Still, no good keeping the prospective new bosses waiting. Even if they were friends. So she mounted the front stairs, and took them two at a time. She let her tail wave as it would -- it helped her shake off the imposing hyper-reality of the silver tower glimmering in Telsun's violet light.

By the time she reached the entry, she'd left unease behind. Hawk *was* her friend. Her best friend. So what if his life had changed? It would still be good to see him.

She laid her hand on the DNA-plate and opened her eyes wide for the retinal scan at 6:00. Neither early, nor late, but precisely the time given on the silver-gilt real paper invitation the droid-courier had delivered twenty-four hours after she'd commed.

The elegant platinum-foiled marble door shushed open -- not into a long foyer with crystal chandeliers, but an elevator, decorated in tasteful lavender, gray, and cream. She stepped in, and the door shushed closed behind her. There were no buttons or switches or hand-plates, which felt like a trap. Her malaise returned.

The elevator rose. Whatever its mechanism, it made even less noise than a speeding mag-train. Only the whispers of changing scents and the minor pressure on her eardrums told her it moved at all.

When the door shushed open, Tiana greeted her dressed in a diaphanous gown that left nothing to the imagination. Not even the delicate silver chains connecting opal-pendant nipple clamps to matching labial clamps, each triple hung with heavy opal teardrops.

"It's so good to see you!" Tiana's cheerful soprano wasn't a squeal... quite.

"It's good to see you, too."

The glimmering jasmine powder dusted over Tiana's limbs and cheeks tickled Sandy's nose when they embraced. While it left no traces on her violet sarong, its mild scent also didn't mask Tiana's arousal.

Sandy's tail tip twitched. Her clits fluttered, as she followed Tiana into a serene parlor, but she forced a wry tone. "I didn't think I'd, ah, see so much of you."

A faint blush crept over Tiana's elfin-high cheekbones. She bit her lip. "Hawk's still mad at me for running off with the Squiddies." Then she winked. "So he says, but I think he just likes to remind me that I'm his."

Tiana's gaze swept over her, bold and appraising as Lan's. "Purple becomes you. You should wear it more often."

"If that was a sly way of saying I should take my mother's throne, it failed. Our royalty doesn't wear purple." Though she didn't quite snarl, Sandy flashed fang.

"It wasn't." Tiana's tone held a hint of disapproval. "Feeling defensive?" Gesturing for Sandy to sit, Tiana settled on a cushy chaise with her legs tucked underneath her. The parting of her lips and small sighed breath at the tug of her chains spoiled the casual effect.

That, combined with the scent of Tiana's desire, rasped Sandy's raw nerves like a tongue on sensitive flash. For all her newly-gained poise, Tiana would always be prey. She took a seat. "Where's Hawk?"

"He'll be along soon. I hope you don't mind." Her hostess's eyes widened slightly, enticing. Her lips swelled into the tiniest of pouts.

The impulse to slide her tongue between those silvery lips hit Sandy so hard her chest seized. *Zohai-zetaka!* Forcing Tiana to her knees to suckle clit would *not* earn her any favors. And she needed a big one.

Some other topic of conversation, fast. Preferably an unpleasant one. Like the throne she didn't want. "Sorry to snipe at you after you paid me a compliment. Lan's been after me again. It's a strain."

"I understand. Alpha mates can be such a trial."

"He's not --"

"Oh, I know." Tiana waved her hand in a dismissive curl, then the clamps snatched her back and her eyes glazed in response. "Let me get you a drink, while we

wait for my domineering mate." She tossed off a bright smile, not bothering to pretend that domination and mating weren't foremost in her mind.

If she stood, moved, the chains, the tension on her tight little breasts, the scent -- "No." That came out a little sharper than she'd intended. "No, don't put yourself out."

Tiana cocked her head, and scrunched up her face, amused. "I won't. Really. Silver, fix our guest a drink. Something..." A knowing smirk, then, "with a bite."

Little bitch. Who did she think she was? White crept around the edges of Sandy's vision.

She is your prospective new boss. Behave.

Silver, the too-smart smart-droid, handed Sandy a glass of an unfamiliar foamy red brew. She took a sip, and, as advertised, it tasted sharp, almost like Terran birch-bark, but not so unpleasantly sweet. "It's good. What is it?"

"Iolian cloudberry ale."

She almost choked. "But that's --"

"Rare and several hundred credits per liter. Owning StarFed's largest trans-solar corp has its perks."

And so would working for it. The message was clear. Unexpected from an ex-anarchist, but perhaps it oughtn't be. Sandy sipped the cloudberry ale, savoring the piquant complexity. Even if Hawk and Tiana hadn't changed at their core, certain things would simply be demanded by the media, the populace, the lesser employees -- her old partner and his *s'ressa* were symbols now. As she would be, if --

"I understand you've been having a little trouble keeping your claws to yourself."

Sandy sputtered, spewing half a mouthful of ridiculously expensive ale. "What?"

Tiana sat up, and despite the pleasurable wince as the nipple weights readjusted, she had nothing of the pet about her now. "You are a friend, Ma'Sandrine. But I'm a hacker. Did you imagine I wouldn't dig to find out precisely why you'd come looking for a job?"

Yes. No. "I don't... I assumed you'd know some of it from the rags, but..." She shook herself. "It's not what you think."

Pulling her pointless gown over her head, and -- Zohar damn her for looking -- stretching her nipples to wicked lengths in the process, Tiana stood. "Then what is it? Show me."

Zohai-zetaka. Azh davol zetaka antira. Fuck, fuck. Fuck. She pressed her knuckles to her eyes. If only she could gouge them out, and remove the image of Tiana arched in offering. It wouldn't work. She'd still smell her heat, taste her musk. "Hawk would kick my ass."

"No, he won't." Tiana curled a soft hand around Sandy's bicep. The muscles trembled and twitched with desire and restraint. "C'mon, Sand. I haven't been punished in three days. I need it."

Three days. It had been three days since she broke down and called. She pulled her hands from her face. "You two set me up." A white growl rose from her lips.

Tiana raked her teeth over her bottom lip, wanting. "Maybe a little."

Reaching out, Sandy hooked a claw around the silver chain that connected Tiana's nipple-clamps. Tugged it, not too hard. Just hard enough to make Tiana's lips part on a whimper. "You want to know?" A harder tug, and then she pulled, dragging Tiana to her, until their mouths were centimeters apart.

"Need to... employ you... risk."

Made sense. Also made the milky haze cloud her vision. "Fine." She pressed her firm lips to Tiana's swollen pout, thrust her tongue between her fangs and forced Tiana to accept, to take. Still tugging on the chain, now feeling the wet proof of Tiana's need against the side of her thigh. "Fine."

Sandy stood, drawing Tiana, gasping, to tiptoe. "Let's get this over with."

Chapter Four: Set Up

Hawk and Tiana had furnished the playroom with everything an enterprising Dom-sub pairing could need. Everything but an escape hatch.

Except that it was private, and the walls slowly cycled through a collection of erotic art containing everything from tentacle-porn to ancient Japanese prints, it might've been Inferno. The thought provoked an unpleasant chill of foreboding.

Coming to Hawk had been a bad idea. Domming his *s'ressa* was a worse idea. Too bad she was fresh out of good ones.

No, no, it would be all right. She could do this. Punish Tiana, keep her head, show she could be trusted in charged situations. Prove she had herself under control.

A voice that sounded entirely too much like Tamerlan's chided, *Yes, because you've had so much success with that this past week and a half.*

Bite me, she growled back at it, then reached for a heavy, thuddy flogger. The steel-tipped cat-o'-nine called to her, but she wouldn't risk drawing blood for all the... all the what?

Nothing. There was nothing in all the universe she could bring herself to want. *Shut your kingly yap*, she snarled inside her head at the voice that told her this lack of desire was precisely the problem.

"Hands against the wall, Tiana. I won't chain you. If you deserve this, then you'll stay and relish it all the more for knowing you could go." And if she got too edgy, Tiana could get away. But she had a role now, the Dom, and not breaking character would be her salvation.

The tip of Tiana's tongue, pink and moist, darted between her lips. She didn't move.

“Against the wall, pain-slut. Now.” She lashed out with the flogger, curling it around to cup Tiana’s buttocks with strips of faux leather.

The blow forced an “oh” from Tiana’s lips. Which provoked another image of Tiana nursing at her aching clits. Swinging again, she caught Tiana, who was turning toward the wall, square on the farther ass-cheek.

The little pain-slut hurried to the wall, spread her arms above her head.

“Legs apart. I want to see those opals swing.” So far, so good. Though Tiana’s compliance sent waves of warmth cascading over her, and definitely made her tail throb, the white rage remained at bay.

Sandy gave herself over to the flogging in earnest, sinking into the rhythms of the play. Several twirling blows in quick succession, on the ass and thighs. Then long sweeping blows over the shoulders and back. More fast thwacks to make Tiana gasp and dance; then drag the flogger up the inside of her slender leg, across her dripping sex, and down the other leg, being sure to catch the pendants from the labial clamps with the straps.

Sandy’s muscles tensed and released through another series of dancing blows. A light sheen of sweat polished her obsidian skin, and gathered between her breasts. The satiny drape of her sarong caressed her thighs and nuzzled her nipples.

After ten minutes or so, Tiana’s skin was nicely pinked and Sandy’s cunt throbbed in time with the lash, dripping. Tiana’s right cheek, visible when she turned her head to rest the other against the wall, wore a deep crimson blush and shone with tears. It matched her inner thighs, which glistened with fragrant juices that beckoned Sandy’s fingers.

It was a bad idea, but the session had only started. If she meant to prove herself, she had to punish Tiana thoroughly, which meant turning her around. Which meant flogging her breasts and vulva. Which meant removing the clamps.

Gritting her teeth, Sandy laid the flogger back on the display table where she’d found it. When she got within clawing range of Tiana, she limited herself to short,

shallow breaths through her mouth. If she didn't smell Tiana's reaction to the pain and her fear of the next blow, she could get through this.

"Don't turn around, little slut. Don't make a sound -- not a moan, not a whimper." *Zohar*, please *don't whimper*.

She reached around front first, squeezed a clamp and released a captive nipple. Because it would be expected, because the sub -- best not to think of her as Tiana now -- needed it, she pinched and rolled the tortured bud. The sub's flesh scalded her fingers, pled for more and still more torment, but with a last sharp pluck, Sandy abandoned the first nipple and attacked the second.

True to her orders, Tiana made no sound beyond the hiss of indrawn breath. It didn't stop her from showing her need, though. She canted her hips and ground her ass in hot little circles against Sandy's groin.

Zohai-zetaken, she wanted to fuck her, to drive the prey-thing to the ground and crush her breasts against its smoldering back, work her cunt against its pert little ass.

No!

She slapped the side of the sub's breast so hard it made her own hand sting. The pain-slut stiffened, stifling a moan.

White boiled up, rage chanted: need, need, empty, need.

No. Sandy would punish the sub, but that was all. That was all.

To buy herself some breathing space, she pinched the sub's nipples as hard as she dared, as hard as she could without pressing her claws from their sheaths. Pulled the ravaged buds and twisted them, disengaging herself by focusing on the job she wanted, on using ISC's resources to track house-hackers and solve the mystery of the palace break-in.

Settled, calmed, she slid a hand between the toy's legs. When the scent of prey-fear-sub-need assaulted her nostrils, Sandy recalled Ilyana's crazed eyes and bizarre ramblings -- an antidote to the slippery honey that bathed her fingers as she plucked the labial clamps like unwanted hairs. She tossed them into a pile with the nipple jewelry.

“Harder. Punish me harder,” Tiana -- no denying that distinctive, breathy voice, remembered from tapes of her covert ops for CC -- begged.

Sandy gave, because the role and proving herself required it. Holding slick pussy lips between her knuckles, she pulled, twisted, stretched until Tiana cried out.

Then harder, because her duty to the sub was to take her farther, punish her not as the sub wanted but as the Dom decreed. This bratty sub needed to hurt until she wept. Then she would please her Mistress, make her Mistress come and come and come until she earned her own reward.

“Bad toy, manipulative toy.” She released the silky labia, firmly sheathed her claws and slid two fingers into the sub’s steaming cunt. Worked them in and out of the clinging, grasping flesh, while the slut’s hips rocked, and rocked, and rocked, seeking release. Seeking her Off. When it neared, Sandy withdrew, her own breath rasping.

“Turn around, now, pain-slut. Ass against the wall.”

The sub didn’t move at first, but when she did, when she turned, her eyes were wide and black. Need shone from them, undisguised. Prey-fear, prey-hunger. She fell back against the wall, and when her shoulders bumped it, her hands dropped to her sides. “Do me. Cut me. Bleed me,” she whispered.

No. No. No.

“Please.”

No. No. No. Instead Sandy picked up a clit-whip, light and zippy. If the prey-toy was this far gone, flogging wouldn’t do it. It needed real pain, sharp pain, cutting pain.

Sandy flipped the whip, brought it down on a candy-red nipple. Again, and again. Then the swollen clit, and pouty pussy lips. Again, and again, over and over. Nipples then clit, cunt then nipples. Her own ached, throbbed, shrieked in time.

She wanted it, needed it, needed to give as much as the sub needed to take. Needed to take as much as someone could give. And as the whip snapped and the sub screamed, she shook her head, dodging visions of ivory claws carving her back, scraping her nipples, slicing her.

Screams of pain and pleasure filled the playroom. Pleas for respite, pleas for more. Musk, sweat, need, fear -- Sandy's nostrils flared.

Her hunger grew. There was a reason she couldn't indulge it, but she couldn't remember, couldn't think. The prey-thing in front of her wanted it, wanted to bleed, and she had a duty, an obligation... yes.

She dropped the whip, flexed her claws --

Something heavy smashed into her.

The collision with the ground drove the air from her lungs. She came up slashing at her attacker, snarling, biting.

A body, bigger than hers, pinned her. A heavy cock, thick and long, forced its way between her legs.

Predator-gee. Challenger-gee.

She fought back. Raking, ripping, tearing. They rolled over and over, her claws piercing his skin, rending his flesh.

Zohar, it felt so good. To struggle. To not be sure she would win. So good to fight to protect herself, and her prey from this predator.

They crashed into tables, stands, benches. Sent floggers and clamps and chains flying. But no matter how she twisted, she couldn't get free.

It didn't matter. Only the battle mattered. The trial of strength against strength. Cut for cut, blood for...

She sniffed. No blood. Not her attacker's, not hers.

She stopped slashing. Looked.

Hawk.

But, of course. He didn't bleed. How many times had she swiped at him in fury? How many times had he let her claws pass through and re-formed? "Bastard."

"Feel better?" he asked in a voice not his own. Tamerlan's.

"*Zohai-zetaken davol.*" Her lips curled back over her fangs.

"I'll take that as a 'not yet'."

Hawk breathed, inhaled and exhaled, chest abrading pebbled nipples. Inhaled and exhaled, crushing tender, yearning breasts. His substance shifted, appearance altered. Without releasing her from his grasp, he became Lan.

She spat in his face, but he just laughed. Laughed not Hawk's laugh -- short and sharp as if he were surprised to be so happy -- but the rich timbre of her would-be consort's rumbling laugh.

In spite of the white frost that still clouded her gaze, her heart beat triple-time. Sizzling pulses of desire raced up her arms from where he held her wrists.

Hawk-Lan lowered his head, but she turned her mouth away. He just laughed again, taut, muscled belly rippling against her own, then he nuzzled her throat, scraped fangs over her carotid.

She shivered. Prey-fear. Predator-glee. Fight or fuck? Fuck or flee?

Big, ivory-clawed hands gripped her wrists, yanked them over her head. He pinioned her arms against the floor with one hand. She kicked and clawed, raging, but he hung on, held her down without trying.

"Done?" he practically purred, and traced one wrinkled areola with a razor-sharp claw.

"I hate you."

The face shifted, became Hawk's. "Me?" She squeezed her eyes shut against the acid shame churning in her gut. "Or me?" Lan's voice slipped over perfect golden-brown lips.

"Both of you."

"No. You need this." A stinging pain in her nipple, and then the tang of predator-blood, prey-blood. Her blood.

She looked down at her breast. A single scarlet bead formed where he'd pierced her with a claw tip. Her cunt wept; her tail throbbed.

Hungry. So hungry.

No, she shook her head, flinging it back and forth. "No."

"Oh yes. Oh, my, yes. Scream for me, pretty prey-thing."

He took the wounded breast into his mouth, swirled his tongue around the nub and sucked to draw out the blood, her blood. Pulled her up by the aching tip until her hips cleared the ground, then released it, dropping her.

When she moaned at the abrupt cessation, he speared her mouth with his tongue. His bloody tongue.

Her blood on his lips, a clear claim to her. A predator's stake. A victor's brand. Her legs fell open, exposed her cunt. Needy. Starved.

The cockhead that pressed against her opening was Etrigani. Thick to stretch and spread and take. Long to fill and probe and give and give and give.

When had she been so wet, so open? Years? Ten, twenty... a hundred. Not since Tamerlan. Not since the night before she left, when he had sworn not to follow, but made sure she would never forget.

Centimeter by rock-hard centimeter, he entered her. Not slow, not fast. Relentless. Inescapable. Forcing her wider, forcing her hips to shift to accommodate him.

Zohar, it hurt. Hurt, tore. Red-scream, prey-scream. Good, *good*.

Something firm found her anus. Not a finger, glory, not a finger, but the pointed spade of a tail. It slipped around the massive shaft still only halfway in her, to tickle her clits.

She squirmed, almost laughed, opened wider, and he took another few centimeters. Gasping, clawing at his restraining hand, she thrashed. Wanted something to rend, to bite, but he held her, pinned her. Impaled her.

Then the fleshy spade wiggled against her asshole again. Strong cartilage worked the tight hole apart, until it fit inside. It held her open, expanded and contracted in heated pulses -- a flesh butt plug, to hurt her harder, please her better, urge her cunt to accept the invader, the victor, the mate.

Her own tail snaked out from under her. Restless, pulsing, it slashed the air, slapped at the strong muscles of his ass to cool the fire of need. Always with Lan, she penetrated him as he penetrated her.

She parted the crack of his ass, shuddering with the stroke of silky down on the sensitized nerves of her tail-tip. Probed for the tight entrance.

Steely muscle clamped down on her tail. She cried out, tears sprang to her eyes. It would've hurt less if he stamped on her toe.

"You'll have to go home for that."

Then she understood. Too late. Too late to stop the magnificent cock from bottoming out in her cunt. Too late to stop herself from wailing in pleasure-pain as it owned those last three hard-won centimeters. Too late to say "no" to what was given in friendship, arranged in love.

Slow at first, because she was virgin-tight after one hundred years. Slow because he, they, wanted her to remember, to want but not quite have. He withdrew, almost completely, then worked back in and down, as her cunt muscles quivered and straining tissues protested the slick friction.

And she remembered...

The first time. He'd come to her in the candle-lit cavern, gleaming gold and ivory, then with whispered words of love, he'd fucked her, slow, sure but fierce. Thorough. No flesh untouched. His fingers, tongue, tail and cock filling every hole. He'd torn a jagged furrow along her collarbone, the one cut she'd never had healed. It'd marked her as his, marked her in fiery agony and blood, and she'd come then, crying his name, over and over.

Even that first time, he'd let her take him, too. Let her work her tail -- throbbing with a restless ache she'd never felt, didn't know how to appease -- into the tight channel of his ass. Gripped her tip in dark heat and given her the gift of *his* pulsing release. And, though she penetrated him, he surrounded her, owning her, even in that farthest part.

No. She squeezed the memory away, locked it up.

But the thrusts came faster. Arms still pinned above her head, she couldn't fight it, didn't want to, wanted cock. Needed fucked. Received.

And remembered...

Twisting under a silken lash, bound wrists chained to a pillar, stretched high. Then later, legs held wide -- manacled to her wrists -- taking him deep, so deep her cunt had ached from the pounding, ached for days after, and her screams had echoed off the crystal ceilings...

Hawk-Lan fucked her harder now, pummeling her. He released her wrists, let her claw him. No blood still, no shared penetration, but better. Being taken, giving back.

Over and over, he forced his cock into her, to the very depth of her cunt, leaving no part of her sex untouched. Over and over, she raked her claws down his back, his arms, his ass. Drawing him deeper still, and fighting him off, all at once.

Her nipples burned, coals in a fiery furnace. Her tail-tip burned, an iron poker super-heated to glowing red. Her clits burned, supernovae in a black-hole galaxy.

He pounded into her, with Lan's strength, Lan's lust, Lan's knowledge, but it wasn't enough. She hung there, hung suspended between pleasure and pain. Wanted, needed --

Two more burning points joined her wreath of fire. Pinned, penetrated, pierced, she screamed. Coppery-heady-spinning-hungry-need.

Spasm upon fiery, bloody spasm, she came -- clenching around his cock, his tail, his fangs. The burning points collapsed, fire consumed her. Hot, hot, red like blood, burning, bleeding, struggling. Living. Alive.

A final burst of crimson and fire, and she collapsed back, screams drained. Spent but not sated.

Through heavy-lidded, though not quite peaceful eyes, she gazed upon the one who had beaten her. Not truly Hawk, but not Lan, either, he stood. Shifted.

The massive Etrigani cock slimmed down, shortened. Wheat-gold became tan, and gold became brown. The tail simply reabsorbed, and then he was Hawk again.

Hawk, naked, still aroused, hunting his *s'ressa*. Hawk, finding his *s'ressa* perched on an overturned bondage bench. Hawk, lifting her chin and kissing her with a welcoming-claiming tenderness.

Tiana, for it was safe to think of her that way again, twined her arms around Hawk's neck. Pressed herself to him, eager, despite nipples and clit still raw from Sandy's abuse.

He righted the bench, then placed her face down over it. Spreading her legs, he tested her sex with his fingers. Still wet, apparently, because he smiled and brought them to his lips to suck.

Without a word he knelt behind Tiana, took her swift but gentle. No ceremony, no games. Just the familiar tenderness of mates, slaking mutual need.

Sandy turned her eyes away to let the lovers have their privacy. They'd risked themselves for her, together, shared a purpose in this, even as they had in stopping the Squiddies.

The white ache returned. Squeezed her heart. Not just nothing to fight for. No one to fight with.

Not here.

But at home... at home, she had an entire kingdom to fight for.

Tamerlan to fight with.

She was going to kill him. After she made him her King.

Epilogue: Prey-mates

Ma'Sandrine, Crown Princess of Etrigani, stalked her maroon and gold bedroom. Tense, waiting for the comm-link, she shredded the soon-to-be-torn-out carpet with her claws.

Her house-sys beeped, entirely too cheerfully, and the beloved face she'd been reviling for the past three hours and one hundred and two years appeared on screen.

Before he could speak, she pounced. "You set me up."

He laughed, a delicious rumble that sent a predatory thrill down her spine. "Yes."

She bared her fangs, extending her claws in the universal symbol for *I'm going to wring your neck*. "I hate you."

His tri-colored eyes muddied with hurt. Then he nodded, regal, even now. "It was necessary."

She plopped down in her reading chair. "You had no right."

Green flashed in his eyes, then he growled. His anger made her tail-tip swell; she smiled inwardly, waiting for what she knew he would say.

For a few seconds, he struggled, emotion plain on his face, then he burst out: "I had every right, *zohari-zeha*. You are mine. My mate. My Princess. My responsibility."

"Yes. And I love you for it, as presumptuous as it was." Ducking her head, she hid a smile. Pretending to knead a pillow to sharpen her claws.

"But I thought you said --"

"I do hate you. But I love you, also... *zohari-zehan*."

For the first time ever, Lan looked uncertain. "Then... you understand?"

"I was depressed. I lost my best friend to his *s'ressa*, lost my enemy when they reformed the ISC. It's been one hundred and two years since Inanna was murdered and

Ilyana raped, and I've found no trace of the members of the attempted coup." She raised her chin, gazed into his beautiful eyes. "I had no purpose and no partner. No one to fight with, and nothing to fight for."

He drew back his lips to show sharpened ivory fangs. "For an Etrigani, life is struggle. You were lost in a white maze."

"I think I'll make a good queen." The words tumbled out. Her secret, one she hadn't even let herself know.

His hands moved, just below where the screen cut off. "I know I'll make a good king."

She snarled. He growled back at her and her clits fluttered wildly. "I'm still going to bleed you, Tamerlan."

"You will try, soul-fire." The screen flickered at the edges. Crackling bursts exploded, as if in the distance.

It sounded like... but it couldn't be. "Are those fireworks?"

He smiled. "They are." The view changed to reveal showers and blossoms of violet and silver sparks in black velvet sky.

Her colors, framing her prey-mate's powerful gilded form. "Why?"

"A standing order, Sandrine. Every day for one hundred and two years. The Etrigani rejoice. At long last, our Queen is coming home."

Sage Grayson

Whether the American West or the vastness of interstellar space, Sage Grayson loves wide open places and unexplored territories. Happiest riding bareback with the wind in her hair and the sun on her shoulders, she's a country girl at heart. Contrarily, which is natural enough for a Gemini, she also dreams of high-tech futures, digs gadgets, and longs to travel to the stars.

Sage lives in the Sonoran desert with her husband of two years, her two spoiled Siamese, his two bossy New York alley cats, and a gaggle of plush people -- six Technicolor kokopellis, a seahorse, three reindeer, a trio of moose, six bears, a fox, a horse, two adorable ponies -- presided over by Crispin Makepeace, the biggest moose stuffed toy you ever saw. When she's not writing high-stakes stories with steaming sex, you'll find her reading, hiking, building a future in which she has horses again, or just absorbing the magic of an Arizona sunset.