



RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

"I can get what I need from any male on this ship. I do not need you."

His gaze darkened, then blazed. "You will fuck no other male on this ship. You owe me."

Even though her radiance had turned dark crimson, she felt her skin pale, and a wave of faintness overtook her. She forced it down.

"Is that why you're here?" Her voice was but a thready whisper.

His gaze turned black, hard as onyx crystal, glittering and razor sharp. He stepped into the room, pressed a button, and the door slid closed behind him. He pressed another button and she heard the lock click into place.

"If you wish to think so," he responded.

A debt. She owed him. That was why he was here.

Taking a deep breath, she then slowly released it and straightened away from the wall. She lifted her chin, her jaw set.

"Very well. If you feel a debt is owed, then I will acquiesce to your request."

A corner of his mouth lifted in an arrogant grin. "So you agree to pay the debt with your body?"

Every part of her rebelled against what she was about to do. Everything, that is, except her heart. Even without the effects of the drug raging through her body she would want him—had wanted him for a long time if she were honest with herself. But she would never let him know that...

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For my family, who always encourages me to keep writing.

CHAPTER 1

“What you need is a male.”

Daelyn Kapri's eyes snapped open to pin Eluria Zydon with a directed, narrowed scowl. It was bad enough she'd let herself be talked into joining Eluria and Kierra in this activity they named female bonding. Now Eluria seemed Haydon-bent on complicating the situation by tying her with some male.

She detected the glitter of humor in Eluria's eyes and relaxed against the edge of the pool. She should have recognized the teasing tenor in Eluria's voice. She seemed to take great delight in baiting her. Often Daelyn had witnessed her doing the same thing with her taman, Devon.

This wide array of emotions Daelyn was now saddled with still caused her difficulty. Lately, irritation seemed to be the prevailing influence, surfacing with increased regularity.

She whipped her head around when a giggle erupted from the other

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

side of the pool and glared at Kierra Andromeda.

“Are you laughing at me?”

Kierra shook her head and sank deeper into the bubble-laden hot water. “Certainly not, Daelyn. But Eluria could be right. A little male attention might help to ease some of the tension you are experiencing.”

Abruptly, Daelyn shifted up, water sluicing down over her upthrust breasts. “I am not tense. I am a fighter—an Enforcer for many years. Enjoyment in these feminine bondings you both seem so fond of is alien to my nature. I do not bond. With anyone.” She punctuated the statement by crossing her arms over her naked breasts and straightening her spine.

In a dress line-up, in full uniform, standing at attention, the gesture might have received respect. Here, naked, lying in a pool of bubbles, it did not have quite the desired impact. This was fully brought home as both Eluria and Kierra broke out in peals of laughter.

She sank back into the water with a sigh. Would she ever adjust to this new turn her life had taken?

As an assassin for the Tribunal, ties to family and friends were severed. The Nanus process blocked emotion—and the enjoyment of any sort of relationship with others was destroyed.

She respected both of these women who’d immediately taken her under their wings upon her arrival on Ednos. They’d made it their mission to support her as she dealt with the surge of recovered emotions so foreign to her nature after disuse for such a long period of time.

To call it a difficult transition would be a mild statement. Once the block had disintegrated completely, she’d fought to retain her sanity. The serum administered by the healers had restored her memories, and rage had dominated her thoughts. It was an emotion she understood—one left unblocked by the Nanus process. The Tribunal reasoned rage was an influence which only enhanced the efficiency of assassins in

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

their enforcement responsibilities. Killing frenzy, rage, and stasis were the exclusive responses left to an Enforcer.

When the sadness had struck out and gripped her—the loss of her family, her life—she'd been unequipped to handle the assault of pain, like an Enforcer caught naked, not one weapon at hand with which to defend herself.

The healers had administered an equalizer drug to stabilize the return of emotions. Still, the sadness felt so alien to her nature as a trained assassin. The overwhelming grief became almost too much to bear.

Desperate to stop the tide of intense feelings, she'd barricaded herself in her apartment, hoping that without human contact she could control her reactions. Days passed without success until finally Eluria and Kierra had descended on her, refusing to go away. Knowing Daelyn attempted to endure alone was something both females refused to allow, even after her assurances she was well and did not require their assistance. Finally, frustrated at their tenacity, she'd let them in.

The women had encouraged her to meet with Dr. Xander, the psychemedic. Jarek, Kierra's taman, had met with Xander after his rescue from Odon's compound and Kierra said it had helped him to cope with the corruption of his memories.

As she studied these two strong women, she contemplated the golden radiance of shared love with a chosen mate that permeated their skin. Eluria had Devon and Kierra had Jarek. There were moments she was envious of their unions, but this was not the time to complicate her situation. It was best she remain alone.

Devon Andromeda was an Elite First Enforcer who'd had the memories of Eluria and his family wiped from his mind. Only when he and Eluria had confronted each other on the desolate planet Serdion and she'd administered the test antidote to him, had he been able to regain his Before. They'd sealed and were marked by Guardian in a union that

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

was legendary.

Devon's father had joined the rebellion after Devon's induction as an Enforcer. He'd been betrayed and then assassinated by a Tribunal Enforcer, and Kierra, Devon's sister, had been taken into bondage. Her scars from that time had slowly healed with the help of her Serdionese Mindwanderer mate, Jarek Bakari.

Each had fought for the rebellion in different ways—Eluria as a warrior and Kierra as a scientist. Both exuded femininity interwoven with their determination and loyalty to their people. They'd taken her into their midst without judgment, even knowing she was an assassin for the Argadian Tribunal.

These women had held her as she wept with pain while the memories of her family spilled from her, when the guilt of the deaths at her hands as an Enforcer lay heavily upon her spirit.

The only passions an Enforcer exhibited were rage and killing frenzy to carry them in battle. Otherwise there was nothing, every other emotion stripped from them, blocked by a procedure that rendered them lethal weapons commanded by the Argadian Council members. Stasis for an Enforcer was a state of rest, but unlike normal sleep; it was a numbing of mind and body where an Enforcer waited for the next Tribunal assignment.

She now knew regret as well as sadness. There were moments of quiet pleasure, but she had yet to experience real joy as Eluria and Kierra described it. And the passion exhibited between a male and female was far beyond the spectrum of her thoughts.

"A male?" She snorted. "You have to be joking."

Eluria shook her head. "I most certainly am not. You work way too hard and you allow yourself no time for pleasure, to relax. If we hadn't forced you to come with us tonight, you wouldn't be here now. You would be off checking weapons or monitoring ships—anything but taking time to relax. A little male companionship would go a long way

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

to helping you in that direction.”

She sighed, closed her eyes, and tipped her head back. The fact that she was here, naked, lying in a warm pool of bubbles with water jetting rhythmically against her body, was more than enough relaxation for her.

And it certainly seemed to have the desired effect as she felt her body softening beneath the gentle pulsing of the water. And her brain was mush.

“This is relaxing enough. I do not need the attentions of a male to confuse things. I have enough to worry about.”

“That’s just the problem,” Kierra remarked from the other side. “You worry too much. We all have jobs to do, and they’re dangerous. Without some sort of release, some ability to distance yourself, you will eventually break, Daelyn, and we do not want to see that happen. We care about you and are only concerned for your welfare.”

She opened her eyes and her gaze moved between the two beautiful women. They were good friends. It was something she’d never experienced before—friendship. As an Enforcer, she had never had close acquaintances, only other duty-bound and emotionless Enforcers like herself. Any down time was spent at the institute, going through tests and re-immersion. And there was no radiance for a female Enforcer. It was another facet to being an ordinary female she was attempting to understand. Like the golden radiance these women exhibited—visible signs of happiness in union.

The return of her own radiance with any of her emotions had not surfaced yet. The healers assured her it was strictly a matter of time. When she stopped rebelling against the sensations and relaxed into them—accepted them—her radiance would certainly return.

She kept to herself the fact that she didn’t think that was likely to occur in near Beyond. It was like fighting the existence of another person inside herself. Pain, pleasure, sadness—they were all there for

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

her to call upon, although rusty after so many years of dormancy, and it did not come naturally to her to accept their existence as a part of who she was.

"Think about it, Daelyn," Eluria urged. "Kierra's right, we worry about you. We want to see you happy."

Daelyn turned her head to stared at the vast sky through the domed ceiling and sighed. "I appreciate your concern, Eluria, really I do. I am not ready to be with another right now. I know you and Kierra have found the right mates, but I need more time. Let us just enjoy this feminine bonding you have forced me into." She turned to look at Eluria and a smile curved her lips. "This is nice. I've never experienced anything like this. You both care for me and I thank you for it. To have friends like you both is something I will not take for granted."

"You are no longer an Enforcer and we simply want you to be happy and to live. We don't know what tomorrow has in store for us, and we don't want you to waste a moment in dwelling and feeling guilty for what happened in Before. You're with us now. You don't belong to them any longer."

"I know. I will try." She turned away, afraid something in her eyes would betray the secret she kept locked away from them. If only they knew the real source of her guilt. She had shared some of her Before with them, but not all of it. There was a time, a split second when even the Enforcer training had splintered, almost causing her death. And it was because of a male.

Even now she could see his searing blue eyes filled with passion. His face was branded into her thoughts. And it was that memory alone which kept her from seeking companionship with another.

For one brief moment, desire had blazed through her and it stayed her hand when she should have killed him with no other emotion filling her than the killing rage of an Enforcer. For an explosive instant, just before he lost consciousness, she had also seen those blue orbs filled

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

with hate and betrayal. And she walked away without completing her mission. Run would be a better word.

No, it was not just any male she needed, there was only one who could offer her redemption and heal her, and that was a most unlikely prospect. Haydon would probably freeze over first.

Yet she couldn't tell these two women her secret, because the pirate who'd claimed a piece of her unwilling soul was Kierra and Devon's rebellious brother, Alekos—known as the Ravager—as slippery and lethal as any rogue among the stars. If they ever came face to face again, she knew the only thing he would seek was her death for her betrayal.

* * *

It was several years past when she'd awakened from stasis for an assignment—to make contact with the Ravager, get him to trust her, and then eliminate him.

He'd been sighted by one of their informants and she was given the task of seducing him, getting as close to him as possible, discovering any useful information, and then killing him. At first it had been an assignment like any other.

By questioning several Argadian sources, she'd ascertained he had a habit of frequenting a certain bar during his visits to Dhothvar, the small rebel settlement located on a remote island in the Lydian Ocean. For the most part, the Council left this particular island alone because, on occasion, the inhabitants were useful for certain tasks, with no allegiances to anything beyond payment for their dubious services.

Daelyn arrived in Dhothvar, spent several days becoming acclimated to the area, until finally she spotted him. Dressing with care that night in an outfit meant to entice, she made certain to show just enough skin to tantalize. Donning the blond wig she had chosen for this assignment to hide the signature white hair of the Enforcer, and slipping into a gown of deep gold, she then added a small, gold-colored

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

weapon strapped to her right thigh and a dagger strapped to her left. She also wore green lenses to cover the ebony color of her Enforcer eyes.

Upon entering the bar, complete silence descended over the room as all eyes turned to watch her saunter to a table near the window and settle into a chair. With deliberate intent she slid back a section of the long skirt so that her weapons were clearly visible and all would know she was outfitted for trouble. It was enough and the hum of conversation resumed. It appeared no one was in the mood to take a chance on being killed strictly for a quick fuck with a beautiful female.

Her gaze circuted the room until she located her target, who was seated at a poker table on the far side of the room directly across from where she sat. It provided her a good position from which to study him as he faced her.

Throughout the night she sat alone, drinking wine, and watching. Periodically his gaze rose to meet hers across the room and for long moments their eyes dueled.

She tempted him, she could see it in the sensual look. With subtle movements, when she caught him watching her, she would skim one of her hands over her full, rounded breasts, then glance up at him and smile a slow, seductive smile.

Finally, at the end of the night, he walked over to her table.

"Who are you?" he asked as his gaze raked over her. "I've never seen you in here before."

She sipped slowly at her wine and then licked her lips. "They call me Dae. I arrived earlier this afternoon. I like a little danger and heard this was the place to find it." She turned her sultry gaze up to cling to his. "Were they right?"

His sapphire scrutiny lasered through her and, surprisingly, her shax began to throb and liquid heat pooled between her legs. She was taken off guard by the response of her body. There should not have been any

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

such recognition and it threw her slightly off kilter, but she recovered quickly and tamped down the unexpected emotion.

“My name is Alekos. They might be right and then again they might not. Do you want to find out?”

She swept a hand toward the vacant chair opposite her and he dropped into it. He was much more attractive in person than his image likeness indicated. Dark, hard, chiseled, yet a glint of amusement lurked around his eyes and mouth. She found herself wanting to feel that mouth against her skin. Inwardly she trembled at the thought of being naked with this man. It was a surge and nothing more. It fluttered away as quickly as it rose. It shouldn't have erupted at all. Any emotion should be blocked by the Nanus process. Something was definitely not right.

He rested his hands on the table and her focus was drawn to them—long, elegant fingers, and dark hairs on his forearms peeked from beneath the sleeves of his tunic. Another rebellious vision of him stroking her with those hands caused a shudder beneath her skin and a convulsion in her shax.

Her mind warned her this was a dangerous situation and she should get out and let someone else handle it. But the longer she sat there staring at him, the less she wanted to leave. And besides, an Enforcer never turned and ran. It was up to her to complete her assignment.

Some part of her wanted to know this male intimately in ways she'd never even thought of before. The pulse at her neck began to throb frantically. She swallowed, then lifted a hand to touch the fluttering vein. She was definitely not supposed to be having these responses.

Suddenly, he reached out to grab her hand and as she watched he lifted it to his face and inhaled. His gaze again met hers.

“Nice,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice. “I'm only here for a short time, but I definitely think we should become intimately acquainted.”

She studied him closely and knew she teetered at the edge of

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

danger. Having been an assassin for the Tribunal for many years, her responses shocked her in that for the first time she felt female. He made her feel every bit of femininity that should have been doused inside her, made her respond to him.

He was dangerous, his name obviously earned. Not only was he capable of ravaging the skies, but obviously female hearts as well.

The Tribunal was right, he must be eliminated. His seductive aura was a threat to the order of things on Argadia. His lethal charm contained the ability to seduce the secrets from any female he encountered who had the least bit of knowledge of the Tribunal's activities. Alekos Andromeda, the Ravager, was a lone wolf who followed no rules, a treacherous stud who used his skills as well as any Enforcer ever had with lethal purpose.

But before she eliminated him, she wanted one taste of him so she would always be reminded the Nanus process was not infallible—even an Enforcer's suppressed emotions could be seduced from hiding.

CHAPTER 2

His whole body ached like it was one huge bruise. The chains imprisoning him rattled as he attempted to shift to a more comfortable position in the small cell he had been thrown into.

Rage shot through him at the knowledge a traitor had given him up. He knew there was a hefty price on his head, but had there been some sort of added incentive that would make one of his own crew turn on him? Carefully settling back against the stone wall of his prison, he wondered if his death would be quick or slow?

Probably slow and painful—as painful as they could make it. But at least he'd given the Tribunal a run for its money and managed to catch them with their pants down on more than one occasion. He would have liked to do more.

Reaching up, he repositioned the black leather patch over his right eye, remembering who and how he'd been wounded. Another traitor after the reward on his head.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

All these years he'd remained alone, never trusting anyone, not since the moment he'd left his family and struck out to fight against the Tribunal in his own way. Youth mingled with rage and enhanced with the feeling of impotence in being unable to help his family had driven him in those early years.

First his brother had been taken and transformed into an Enforcer. His father had turned rebel and been assassinated, and then his sister taken and sold into bondage. And he was too young back then to help any of them. His mother had managed to spirit him away to safety with the help of others in the rebellion.

As he grew older, he'd felt stifled, impotent to help his family, ease his mother's sorrow. The final blow was when Eluria Zydon freed his sister from Odon's domination. Then the rage inside him boiled over and practically destroyed him.

Kierra returned a broken woman, ravaged by the Tribunal. It was strictly through her link with the Serdionese Mindwanderer, Jarek Bakari, that she was able to hold on to even a thread of sanity. But to watch her try to cope with her nightmares, unable to be touched by anyone, even those who loved her most, was too much for him. It tore him apart to feel so helpless.

So many innocent lives ravaged and destroyed by the Tribunal—how could he do other than attempt to destroy as many as possible himself?

Even Eluria, whose father was one of the Tribunal Leaders, had turned rebel. Eluria, who loved his older brother, Devon, and been devastated when he was taken to serve as an Enforcer, had joined the Freelions. At first she had found ways to pass information by becoming a Twilight Companion. After his father's death she had embraced the rebellion openly and become a fighter.

Seeing the pain in her eyes as she waited for a serum, some antidote, to be developed that would destroy the hated Nanus block that

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

helped to create the assassins feared by the whole planet of Argadia, Alekos could not simply stand by and do nothing.

He couldn't watch any longer, surrounded by so much pain. Once he was old enough to handle himself, training in secret, he left, needing to find his own way to fight the stranglehold of the Tribunal.

Discovering a small abandoned ship, he refurbished it, and struck out on his own. Small things at first, a gnat of aggravation on the ass of the Tribunal. Luck in a card game garnered him a much more sturdy ship and he was able to acquire a small crew. Attacking supply ships and those that carried prisoners became his sole purpose. Time after time he took lethal chances—and won.

He christened his ship the Ravager, because he meant to do to the Tribunal what they had done to his people, his family. He would never let up, not until the day he died.

Sighing, he leaned back. It looked like today might be the day. He was curious what was taking them so long. When he'd been taken by the Enforcers, he'd fully expected to be strung up there and then. But instead they'd stripped him of his weapons, took him back to Zydon's compound, and threw him in this cell. As far as he could figure, he'd been there two days and no one had come for him. A plate of food and drink was slipped through the panel at the bottom of the door on occasion, but that was about the only contact he was allowed with anyone.

This type of silence and solitude, time for retrospection, was something he didn't enjoy. It meant the memories, the nightmares returned with ruthless clarity.

For some reason it was never the good memories, the time before the Tribunal destroyed his family. All he could see in his mind was the pain in his mother's eyes, the fear in Kierra's, and the ghost-like guilty determination in Eluria.

Eluria had put her life on the line time and time again in an attempt

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

to recover his family. Her guilt was totally misplaced, but no one seemed to be able to dissuade her. She drove herself day after day in an effort to repair the wounds her father had wrought.

Commander Clorial Zydon tore his family apart because he wanted his daughter to create union with the son of Odon, one of the other Tribunal members. Zydon was the one who had Devon taken from his family to be turned into an Enforcer. When Eluria found out the truth, she took steps to subvert his machinations. She chained the ghost of Devon and his family inside her, determined to find a way to help them, and nothing anyone said could alter her frame of mind.

He couldn't stay there with them on Ednos. He needed to break out on his own, find his own way to fight. And he'd never regretted doing just that.

Twice he'd been betrayed. This time would probably be the last. Enforcers had killed his crew without mercy, but not him.

Tribunal Enforcers, creatures with no emotion, living, breathing killing machines who served at the order of the Tribunal without thought.

He didn't want to think about that other time. Yet it had served to teach him not to let his guard down for even an instant, particularly in the company of a beautiful woman. They could be the most lethal. He raised a hand to touch the patch over his eye.

She was an Enforcer and had used her body with expert precision, making him want her, crave to possess her. He couldn't recall being tempted in quite the same way by any other woman he'd met over the years.

He'd been in Dhothvar to enjoy himself for a couple of days while his ship underwent routine maintenance. The last battle had been a particularly fierce one and he'd lost one of his crew. He was also scouting for a new crew member. The criminal colony was about the best place to locate the type of person he required.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Trying to pass the time, he sat down at a game of poker. About an hour into the game, she walked into the bar and all his senses shot into alert.

He should have listened to his instincts. The female seemed out of place in an environment like that, but she sauntered in and sat at a table in a dark corner, ordering a bottle of expensive wine. Another hour passed and his gaze was drawn to her more often than it should have been, until finally, his khout throbbing against his leg, he rose from the table. Picking up his winnings, he left the game and walked over to her table.

He saw the invitation in her odd colored eyes. Thinking back, he should have questioned the color at the time, but by then it was his stiff khout doing the thinking, not his brain.

Even now he smiled bitterly. She certainly was a consummate actress. For someone with no emotion, she had mimicked her desire for him well. After finishing off the bottle of wine, he invited her up to his room and with just a brief, perfect chasm of hesitation, she agreed.

Haydon, she had been good. He'd never suspected her for a moment. And he had wanted her with every fiber in his body. He remembered closing the door to his room, then turning to face her. She stood at the center of the small room and as her gaze met his, she slowly peeled the dress from her body, exposing her lush curves to him.

Hazily, the thought came to him she might be a pleasure worker, but then as the dress dropped to the floor, any other coherent considerations but the naked female standing before him flew from his brain.

His khout stiffened even more than it had earlier and he was eager to sink it into her tender flesh. She wore no undergarments, her breasts were perfectly proportioned, nipples tight, blushing orbs.

Focused on him, she raised her hands to cup them, stroking a long finger over their surface and licking her crimson lips. As if that was not

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

enough, she slowly slid her hands downward over her ribcage, across her flat, tight abdomen toward the shadowed vee between her legs.

He could see the sheen of her passion on her shapely lips. As he watched, two of her fingers disappeared between her lips and she undulated her narrow hips, widening her stance. The only items she still wore were the little gold diffuser strapped to one leg and the dagger strapped to the other.

He should have known from that alone she was trouble. But by then, it was too late, and his body took over the process of thinking. In fact, he found the sight of the weapons' lethal presence erotically arousing.

If he could have wished his clothes gone right then he would have. Instead he quickly stripped, unable to take his eyes off her as she fucked herself with her fingers, driving his sexual heat higher and higher, his khout so hard he couldn't think straight even if he wanted to.

Walking over to stand in front of her, she lifted her fingers to his mouth. He sucked at them eagerly, enjoying the taste of her cream. Lifting a hand, he separated her fingers and slowly licked along the length of each one, then sucked them deep inside his mouth.

Her breaths quickened, and he could have sworn she felt the same arousal he had, but he now knew he was more than wrong about that assumption.

He pushed her back toward the bed and she fell upon it, legs splayed, revealing her sex to him, urging him. He remembered standing over her, drinking in her sensual scent. Why had he not questioned when no radiance of sexual arousal glowed? He should have. With any other Argadian female the crimson radiance should have been vibrating, a sure sign of her desire.

But he was so far gone by then, it never even occurred to him to question it and he dropped over her without another thought, a male

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

beyond eager to quench his thirst with her body.

Crushing her beneath him, feeling her warm flesh against his, it was all he could do to hold onto his self-control. He raised up on his forearms and looked down at her, not wanting to wait another moment to claim her. But he had to make sure she understood the rules. He wanted her, but he was not planning to make a lifelong union.

“Sex, not sealing,” he growled.

He remembered thinking there was something about her eyes, or rather now that he thought about it, there was not something. He thought at the time she might be only half Argadian and that accounted for it. He found out a short time later that was not the case at all.

She nodded. “Fuck me. We can talk later.”

He didn't need a second invitation. Flipping her onto her stomach, he rubbed his khout against her engorged lips and heard her moan. He stroked along her back with his tongue and anchored her arms to the bed with his hands. He couldn't wait to feel her surround him with her moist, hot flesh. That was the only thing in his mind as his khout separated her lips, poised to penetrate.

Suddenly, he found himself on his back, the diffuser pressed to his neck and she was straddled across his body. But it was when she yanked off the wig and he saw the signature white hair that he knew he was surely fucked. It was then lust turned to hate for her deception.

He didn't give up that easily. He saw a smile spread across her face, and it was then, without warning, he bucked, throwing her to the floor. His own weapon was near his pants, lying on the floor near the door. Idiot! He knew better than to trust anyone. Why in Haydon did he let his guard down with this one?

Scrambling across the floor, he hoped for just enough time to reach his weapon. Grabbing his pants, he pulled the diffuser free and rolled to his back just as a blast struck him in the face and searing pain shot through him.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Fighting past the agony, he vaguely remembered her standing over him, staring down at him, the tiny gold diffuser pointed at his chest. It aggravated him that the excruciating pain in his face was threaded with a hint of arousal. Then he had blanked out.

He awoke in bed, his face covered in bandages, but surprisingly, he was still alive. He lost the vision in one eye and the right side of his face was riddled with scars, but he was still breathing.

He asked himself repeatedly why she decided to spare him? Obviously, she had been sent to kill him, and she was able to get under his defenses all too easily. Her face was etched in his memory and with every Enforcer encounter he found himself searching for her.

He knew the day would come and then he would exact his revenge. She'd meant to assassinate him—he'd sensed her determination to do so—right until he'd blacked out. Had she been interrupted?

Shrugging, he stretched as far as the chains would allow. He expected he would never have the answers now.

He stiffened as he heard the iron door creak open. Surprise spread through him as a body was heaved into the room to land several feet away.

The white hair caught his attention first. An Enforcer? What was he doing here?

Once the door closed and he heard the sound of the lock clamping into place, he crawled over to the unconscious form. Turning him over, he fell back in shock.

Shirtless, bloody and bruised, the evidence of unusual markings could still be seen on his chest. Alekos' gaze slid over the body, down his arms, and he saw another band of markings on his wrist.

His heart pounded against his chest as he again studied the face, noting the familiar, yet more mature demeanor. He fell back against the wall. At least now he knew why they kept him alive.

"Haydon! You bastard." Impotent rage filled him.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He had been used as a decoy to lure his brother, Devon. And obviously it had worked. It would not be long before they were both dead. And it was his fault.

CHAPTER 3

“I shouldn’t have let him undertake the mission on his own.” Eluria’s words spoke of raw emotion. “I should have been with him.”

Daelyn saw Kierra’s arms tighten around her shoulders, trying to offer her own strength and comfort. “If you had been there, you would have been captured as well. You know that. And you would all be dead right now.

“It was a trap,” Jarek Bakari said from the other side of the table. “They knew he’d attempt to rescue his brother.”

Daelyn watched this family, torn apart with the news that not only Alekos was prisoner, but now Devon as well.

Eluria pulled out of Kierra’s embrace and glared at Jarek. “There is a traitor in our midst. How else would they have known Devon was on the planet? Tell me how they could have identified the exact location of the ship when it was cloaked?” She slammed her fist on the table. “Haydon! This should not have happened. I’ve slipped within our

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

enemy's midst more times than I can count and never been detected. Never!"

Jarek sighed. "We've already surmised that, Eluria. A team is preparing for departure as we speak."

"No, I will not leave their lives in other's hands. I am going in," she announced.

Daelyn saw the shocked look in Kierra's eyes. "You cannot, Eluria."

Eluria spun around to glare at her. "He's my taman. We are bound and I will be certain there are no mistakes."

"That's not what I mean and you know it." Daelyn saw Kierra's gaze slip down over Eluria's body, zeroing in on her abdomen. "You risk too much, you know that." Her words were softly spoken, but Daelyn heard them.

She knew Kierra was working on an antidote to the Nanus block that had been used on Eluria when she was a twilight companion—it was a process that prevented her from creating offspring. She'd confided in Daelyn that she'd never expected to be with Devon and now she regretted the fact she could never offer him Beyond because of her choice.

Since Devon's return, Kierra had worked tirelessly on the antidote, and Daelyn now surmised that maybe she'd been successful.

"I will go," she blurted out. Guilt weighed on her for her failure in volunteering for the mission in the first place. But given any other choice, facing Alekos Andromeda was something she would avert if possible, at least for the present.

Eluria turned to look at her. "I must go. If Devon dies, it will not matter anyway. Guardian has tied us and our hearts beat as one."

"Devon left your safety in my care," Jarek bit out. "He'll attempt to skin me like a wild boar if I let you go and anything happens to you."

Eluria whirled back around to pin him with a fierce stare. "Your

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

duty is to Kierra, not to me, Jarek. She is your tafai, not I. You take care of your mate and I will take care of mine.”

“But, Eluria, it is no longer just you. You must take care.”

“What is she talking about?” Jarek demanded. “Are you ill?”

“Tell him,” Kierra urged.

Eluria shook her head. “No. You promised me, Kierra. Devon must be the first to know.” A mutinous expression masked her face. “I will inform no one until I am face to face with my taman and he feels the knowledge.”

Kierra sighed. “Don’t you realize you are signing your own death warrant by returning to your father’s compound? If he discovers you, and if there is a traitor within our midst as you suspect, it is more than likely he will know of your arrival. What do you think your chances are of getting out alive?”

“Do you think I don’t know that? That I want to go back there? He is no father to me—he wants me as dead as he does my taman and his brother. Blood ties mean nothing to him.”

“Then you cannot go there.”

“He will be expecting you,” Jarek inserted. “He’ll be waiting for you to attempt a rescue. There is a reason he hasn’t killed them yet. You know that.”

Eluria nodded. “Yes, he wants me to come. I’ll pick my team carefully, only those I know and trust and have worked with in the past.” She turned to Daelyn. “If you wish to help, then I would welcome your assistance.”

Daelyn felt a strange warmth consume her at the confidence Eluria seemed to have in her. She surmised the woman was pregnant even if she would not say the words. Daelyn was determined to help her in any way she could, even if it meant coming face to face with her nemesis, Alekos Andromeda. Eluria deserved her loyalty and support; she had been a good friend.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Do you have any idea how you’ll get in? I’ve heard that compound is like a fortress, even worse than Odon’s compound.”

Eluria nodded. “Yes, but there is already one advantage—I grew up there and I could navigate it blinded.”

“What’s your plan?” Jarek asked.

Eluria turned her attention back to him. “My father has one weakness that I’m sure has not changed over the years. A fondness for women and pleasures of the flesh. And if there is one thing I know, it is how to get past the guards as a twilighter.”

“They will recognize you. Do you think they haven’t been warned to watch for you?”

“Jarek, I can do this. I know what I’m doing and what my father’s weakness is. I will use that.”

“You better be right, because Devon is going to have my hide if anything happens to you.”

She rested her arms on the table and pushed back her sleeve to expose the markings on her wrist. “Do you see this? We’re tied, Jarek, more closely than most mated Argadians. The rhythm of our hearts is as one. If he dies, so do I, no matter where I am. Whether I’m here in our fortress or on Argadia trying to save the life of my taman and his brother, it will not matter. Already I have felt the pain. I know they’ve tortured him. Do you really think I can stay here knowing that and allow others to do what should be my right?”

Daelyn saw the torture reflected in her eyes, the pain of knowing her male was suffering. She turned her attention back to Jarek.

He sighed. “I cannot go with you. With Devon gone I must remain here. I will do what I can to ferret out the spy who has betrayed us. You must be careful.”

“I will go with you as well,” Kierra inserted. Jarek turned a black look on her.

Eluria shook her head, then placed a hand over Kierra’s. “No, you

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

will remain here. You aren't trained as a fighter, and Devon would have my hide if I allowed you to be placed in danger as well."

"But—"

"No," Eluria's voice was firm. "Your place is with Jarek. And you are hardly healed after your own nightmares. This is my mission." She took a deep breath. "If something should happen to us, something of the Andromeda line must remain to go into the Beyond. As much as I know you do not want to hear it, you may be all that's left. That I will not jeopardize."

Tears pooled in Kierra's eyes. "I cannot lose all of you this way." Her other hand rose to grip Eluria's hand. "You must succeed."

Eluria turned back to Daelyn. "I have a plan if you're willing. Come with me." She rose from the table and moved toward the door. Stopping, she turned back. "Jarek, take care of Devon's sister. If anything should happen to us—"

"It won't because you'll be cautious. You will return or be assured I will find a way to come after you, Zydon. I will follow you all to Haydon if need be."

* * *

Daelyn retrieved her weapons from her apartment and joined Eluria and the remainder of the hand-picked crew on the deck of the ship.

It had been a long time since she'd been involved in a mission such as this and in a way it felt good. Even though she no longer had the Nanus block to rely on to bar emotion, she missed the physical and mental challenge of confrontation and the strategic planning it took to mount a successful mission. Already she felt the blood humming through her body. At this moment she felt more alive than she had in a long time.

"She wants you in the ready room, Captain," one of the males told her as she entered the ship. She nodded and strode past him toward a door at the other side of the deck.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Sliding her identity card into the slot, she waited for the door to open and stepped inside. Eluria was seated at a control panel, her attention riveted to what looked like a map. She glanced up as Daelyn entered.

“Have a seat.” She nodded toward a vacant chair. “Give me just a minute. I’m refreshing my memory with the layout of my father’s compound.”

After long moments, she switched off the terminal, swiveled around to face Daelyn and leaned forward, resting her hands on the desk, threading her fingers together. Daelyn could see the tension in the stiffness of her shoulders and the paleness of her skin, even though she attempted to hide it with dark determination in her eyes and the firm set of her lips.

“Thank you for agreeing to go on this mission. You know it will be dangerous and there is every chance we’ll fail.”

Daelyn’s lips curved up into what she knew was a feral smile. “It’s not the first. I am trained, Commander, you know that. I’m eager to use my knowledge on the mission.” She bent formality and leaned closer. “And even if it were not for that, you befriended me, Eluria, and I will never forget that—even knowing how many I’ve killed in the past, you’ve accepted me not only as a member of the rebellion, but as your friend. I will not let you down.”

“I would never ask a friend to put their life on the line the way it will be needed here. Are you sure? I know you are trained, but every time we speak of Alekos, I see something in your eyes.”

Daelyn felt wariness shift inside her. Even after everything, she could not share the dark secret in her soul. She leaned back in the chair and shrugged. “I know how he is regarded by the Tribunal. He killed more than one Enforcer in his raids. His reputation is as bloodthirsty as any Enforcer and without benefit of the Nanus block.”

Eluria sighed and shifted back in her own chair. “I know what he’s

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

become and the price on his head because of it. He was so young when he left and filled with so much rage. But he is still Devon's brother and I remember the boy. He covered for us when we rescued Jarek from Odon's compound not so long ago. Devon would not have gone in if he didn't believe in him, as I do. Alekos is a rogue, but he is family and deserves our help."

Daelyn nodded. She'd met the rogue firsthand, and almost melted beneath an attraction she should not have been vulnerable to. She failed in her mission because of it and was reprimanded severely. There were marks on her back to prove it. "I understand. I'm here for you and Devon. Whatever you need, I'll do my best."

Eluria nodded. "As I said in the conference room, I have a plan. I don't want to discuss it with the others yet. Even though I trust those I have chosen for this mission, we must be careful."

"Have you checked the ship to make sure there are no listening devices installed?" She raised a hand to her neck to finger the scar left by the removal of the chip. "Or beamers? If there is a traitor, he or she may have already placed one."

Eluria nodded. "The ship has been swept for any sort of device. They found one. Here, in my ready room. It was removed. They're still checking the remainder of the ship, both inside and out. Once they're finished, the ship will be sealed, no one allowed in or out."

"Good. I hope Jarek is able to discover who the traitor is."

Eluria bit her lip. "I worry that there's more than one among us. We must be more careful than ever. It's difficult to turn people away or to check their past. In many cases, with those from other worlds, their records have been destroyed. We can only do what we are able to instill loyalty in our followers."

"I understand. Now this plan you have. Tell me about it."

"Most of the crew I've put together are explosives experts. Once we are off the ground I will meet with them and show them exactly where

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

to plant the devices. You and I will go in posing as twilighters called to the compound by the Commander. Once past the guards, we have entry to the building. When the explosives are detonated, there will be turmoil and we should be able to locate Devon and Alekos' cells quickly."

"If Enforcers guard the gates, it's unlikely we'll be able to make it past them. Twilighters will have no effect on them whatsoever."

Eluria nodded. "My father usually employs regular guards for the gates—he doesn't use Enforcers in that capacity. If it is as I suspect, he will not have changed the policy." She leaned forward. "My father has a reputation and it is well known among the pleasure houses, which is one of the reasons he hates me so much—I know all his dirty little secrets. Women go to the compound hoping for a night with the powerful Commander to brag about to their friends. It offers them a higher status, having bedded one of the Tribunal leaders. If the guards think the Commander might find them acceptable, they pass them through. If not, they are offered the consolation of joining the guards for a night of pleasure."

"What stops them from keeping all the females for themselves?" Daelyn asked.

Eluria's eyes grew hard. "A generous bonus for each woman who meets the Commander's requirements. You see, if Enforcers guarded the gates, without emotion, they certainly would not act as a good gauge of a female's ability to pleasure the Commander. That is his weakness. And one we will use to gain entry."

Daelyn sat back in her chair, formulating a bit different idea in her head, then she turned to look at Eluria. "You have a good plan, but I would make an alternate suggestion. One they won't be expecting."

CHAPTER 4

Alekos heard Devon groan and knew he was about to regain consciousness. There was little he could do for him, with the chains binding his arms and legs, except wait and check his breathing periodically.

With the number of bruises and lacerations on his body, he worried there might be some internal damage and remained tense and vigilant to any signs of a change for the worse. The only thing he could do was drag him to what he hoped was a more comfortable position, stretched out away from the dank corner where water dripped from the ceiling.

There were no blankets, nothing to be used as any sort of bedding or cushion against the cold stone floor. But then their captors could have cared less whether they lived or died.

Zydon had apparently made it his primary mission to finish off the Andromedas, and it seemed he found the right men to pay to get the information he needed, because now he had both the brothers.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He also had a feeling he knew why they were not dead yet. Clorial Zydon wanted the whole package. He wanted Eluria as well. If he was able to capture and kill all of them, he had a good chance of breaking the heart of the rebellion.

Everyone knew that Devon and Eluria's union was blessed by Guardian. They were larger than life and the focal point of the Freelion fighters.

He stared at his older brother, so changed by the years. Alekos had been a child when Devon was taken by the Tribunal. They were all caught by surprise when the team of Enforcers arrived to carry him off, and the memory was as vivid in his mind today as when it happened all those years before.

The look in Eluria's eyes was one of pure devastation, a part of her ripped away. He'd never been able to understand that type of love, but he remembered watching them together in their youth—her a young, pure maigen, and Devon, his hero, as an older brother often was. They seemed so perfect together.

The Andromedas were a happy family, united and loving. Eluria was an expected extension because of her devotion to Devon. Until Devon became an Enforcer. And then Eluria had arrived one day with the news that it was her own father who instigated Devon's fate in tearing him from a loving family.

Tribunal Leader Zydon personally had destroyed their lives because he hungered for more power and influence, more control. Without Eluria's knowledge, he arranged a more powerful union for her and contrived for Devon to be inducted as an Enforcer, guaranteeing he was lost to Eluria forever.

Eluria rushed to Devon's father, heartbroken with the news that she was the cause of Devon being ripped from their home. She was determined to forestall the so-called union her father arranged and took steps to make sure he would be unable to use her by becoming a

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

twilight companion, selling her purity to the first house she arrived at.

Eluria had been unable to save his father, nor had she been in time to help Kierra. But she had seen to it that their mother and Alekos, who was only fourteen at the time, were safely transported to Ednos, the planet stronghold of the Freelon rebellion.

Alekos never believed there was any hope of an antidote to return Devon to them as he had once been—his beloved brother, who'd teased and schemed with him as youths.

He remembered watching the old science fiction earth movies Devon was so impassioned with. Even now, he grinned as he remembered the project they entangled themselves with in trying to build a robot like the one that young red-headed Earth boy had on the one television show. They were absolutely certain they would be able to create a servant to do the chores they so hated.

Unfortunately for them it hadn't quite worked out the way they planned and, in fact, had ended up destroying every dish in their mother's kitchen. Their father demanded they dismantle it immediately.

But it was something they did together, cementing them as brothers, even if it did end up meaning double chores at the time. He'd held that memory close all through the intervening years. Even Kierra's I-told-you-so look of superiority was now a fond memory.

It was better than the nightmares of remembering when Eluria had rescued his sister and the Mindwanderer Bakari. She was unrecognizable as his happy, sweet sister. Tortured and abused in bondage at Odon's compound, she was scarred almost beyond hope, unable to be touched even by the people who loved her most. It was too much for him to stay and witness.

He couldn't bear the pain of looking at what the Tribunal had done to his family. Eluria with her driven guilt, his mother with her sorrow at the loss of her husband and children, Kierra with a mind at the brink of shattering.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Rage consumed him as he grew older. The females in his life had wanted to protect him, fearing his loss as well. But in the end, he had to break away from the smothering love and embark on his own path. He had to find his own way to fight against those who sought to destroy his family, his people.

He'd learned the hard way. By the time he'd expended at least some of the youthful rage and impotence, it was too late to return to what was left of his family. He was a changed, bitter, lethal man, unfit company for any loving family.

Even when he heard Devon had returned and an antidote discovered, he could not return to them as much as he yearned to do so. Devon would care for them now.

And then he heard Kierra had finally found peace and healing, and it gave him some measure of hope for the future of his family, even if he could not be a part of it.

There was always hope, a brief dream, that some day he could rejoin them. But each time he engaged in another battle, each time the price on his head rose, he knew it was but a dream that he could ever be the person they remembered.

He had taken many lives over the years, had become very good at it, relished it even. Knowing he was as merciless in many ways as the Enforcers he fought made it difficult to expect any sort of redemption from Guardian in the Beyond. He could not allow his black soul to touch his beloved family. So he remained to fight alone, a rogue set apart from the rest of the rebellion—feared for the most part by both sides, because he followed no rules, allowed for no weakness.

Devon groaned and shifted.

"Haydon," he heard him mumble and saw him grimace. He slowly shifted upward and leaned against the wall. Wiping a hand across his face, he turned, only then seeming to realize he was not alone.

Alekos saw the dawning recognition in his eyes as he focused on

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

him.

It was difficult for him to see his brother inside the Enforcer. He bore the signature white hair. When his gaze met Devon's, he expected to see black eyes, not the turquoise he remembered as a child.

But they were Devon's eyes, glittering in the dusky light coming from above.

"You're a bit the worse for wear, little brother," he said as a corner of his mouth curved upward. "I don't remember the eye patch, gives you sort of a rogue pirate look. Sort of like those games we played as youths. Do you remember them?"

Pain ripped through Alekos' chest at the memory. They managed to convince Kierra to play the captured maiden back then. She fashioned an eye patch for him so he could play the pirate, while Devon played the hero.

Who could have known what the Beyond would hold for them all.

"That was a long time ago." He tapped the eye patch. "Courtesy of an Enforcer."

He saw Devon wince. "I'm sorry, little brother."

Alekos shrugged. "Not your fault. They caught me with my pants down. At least I got away with one good eye. And you're right, it does give me that pirate look I wanted when I was a child."

Devon surveyed the enclosure encompassing their prison.

"I can't say it was in my plans for us to meet again quite this way, but apparently someone betrayed our location."

Alekos nodded. "Same here. I am betting Zydon paid pretty well for the information."

"I expect you're right. We aren't dead yet, so there's still a chance of getting out of this alive."

Devon rose slowly to his feet. His ankles chained together as they were, he shuffled slowly around the perimeter of the room, intently surveying every corner.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Ah-ha,” he said as he bent down and picked up something long and slender. He turned back to Alekos. “Ever pick a lock?”

Alekos snorted. “Does a goat give milk?” He rose to his feet and shuffled over to Devon. Leaning down he saw another slim piece of metal nestled in a crack in the floor, reached down and picked it up. As he straightened, he came up eye-to-eye with Devon.

His brother’s eyes bore into him. “Even in these circumstances, it is good to see you, little brother. I’ve missed you.”

Alekos saw pain flit through his gaze, the colors swirling, filled with regret.

“If I must be locked up with someone, it might as well be the man I trust the most,” he responded in a husky voice.

“We will get out of here,” Devon said as he moved back across the room and lowered himself to the floor.

“Zydon will not let us live if he can help it. It is going to be a challenge, as he maintains a pretty tight compound.”

Devon nodded, then bent forward, his attention focused on attempting to work the lock free in the chains on his ankle. “I know.” He lifted the pick. “But in the meantime, this will give us something to do. We need to be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“They will try to rescue us.”

“Until they find out who betrayed you, I wouldn’t think that’s the best of ideas.”

“Bakari is in charge, he’ll figure it out.” He bent over the cuffs. “Whatever happens, Eluria will come, and we must be ready when that happens.”

Alekos hunched over his own shackles. “You do realize how far down we are buried in this place.”

“It won’t matter.”

Alekos paused and looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

"You know of my union with Eluria. I am sure you have heard of Guardian's hand in it."

Alekos nodded. "Yes, and I saw the markings on your skin."

"There is more to it than that. We are bound in all ways and our hearts beat as one. I will sense when they're close. And that same connection will allow her to determine my location."

"That's crazy. You do realize what she'll be up against if she does manage to get inside."

"Guardian has connected us. If my heart stops beating, so shall hers." His fierce gaze connected with Alekos. "I must stay alive if only to be certain she lives. I will not be the cause of her death."

"You realize Zydon wants her."

"He wants her dead. I know that. If I had a choice, I would not allow her to come, but Eluria is very strong-willed."

Alekos snorted. "You have that right. I've never seen anyone as single-minded as she was, determined to find an antidote to the Nanus process when everyone told her it couldn't be done. And then she put her life on the line to rescue Kierra. She's an amazing woman."

"Very much so," Devon agreed. "And she is mine. I do what I can to keep her safe, but driving myself insane in an attempt to control her actions when she puts herself in danger is a lost cause. We simply must be ready when they get here."

"Your injuries—how bad are they? You look like Haydon to tell the truth."

"And you think you're such a pretty thing right now?" Devon retorted.

"Yeah, well, it has been an adventure. But the bruising on your ribs—it didn't feel like any ribs were broken, but now that you're awake—"

"I'll live. I have had worse injuries. I don't think they've damaged anything internally."

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Alekos was silent for a long time as he picked diligently at the locks on his chains. Finally, the one on his right ankle sprang open. "Got it," he muttered in satisfaction. He turned to look at Devon, who had his leg shackles off and was working on the ones at his wrists.

"You know why they haven't killed us yet."

"Yes," Devon responded without looking up, a tense, stony expression on his face.

"He will be watching and waiting for her. I was the decoy to get you here. And he will be using you to get to her. He means to break the rebellion."

He saw Devon's fingers curl into a tight fist. "I know that. I have to believe she will not take unnecessary chances. But on the other hand, of any of us, she will be the most knowledgeable about the layout of her father's compound. She'll have no choice but to come. I wish it were not so—I'd do anything to protect her from having to face the father who's repeatedly attempted to destroy her."

Alekos turned back to his task. Devon was right, they needed to be ready, because if someone was successful in freeing them, every minute would count.

CHAPTER 5

Daelyn felt totally naked, and it wasn't strictly her minuscule clothing that caused the feeling. It was the fact she was headed into a confrontation with so many emotions spiraling inside her. She couldn't concentrate adequately.

Maybe it was that she felt she carried too much inside her, not too little. As an Enforcer, there were no emotions to contend with, only the killing frenzy and no fear of death or reprisal.

But now, as she walked toward the Zydon Compound, she tasted fear and it was a new experience.

To compound her problems, Eluria also had provided her with a dose of the pleasure drug. Daelyn had never experienced real pleasure and there was no way she would be able to imitate the effects adequately in order to get past the guards. There was still the fact that her radiance had yet to appear on its own. Maybe it was because she fought so hard from allowing the emotions to overwhelm her.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

She was ostensibly there to provide pleasure to the Commander. These guards would examine and test her as thoroughly as necessary to be sure she could meet the voracious demands of their leader.

Even that one time with Alekos Andromeda there had only been twinges of feeling. But now, between the removal of the block and the enhancement of the drug, she shuddered with magnified emotion.

If it came down to it, she didn't even know if she would be able to defend herself adequately. She walked into this knowingly, offering herself as the sacrifice. Eluria had argued, but in the end, knew it was the better plan.

Zydon would be expecting Eluria and watching for her. A lone woman approaching the compound dressed as a twilight companion would make him believe it was Eluria trying to gain access through the main gates.

The attentions of the guard and the Commander would be on Daelyn, dressed as Eluria, a wig cloaking her hair to assist with the illusion, lenses covering her eyes, and the drug to create the crimson sexual radiance of lust.

It had to be enough to get her past the guards and into the Commander's presence before she was discovered. It should provide enough time for the others to set the explosives, take the guards by surprise, release the Andromeda brothers, and escape.

If they succeeded, then it would have been worth it. She assured Eluria that when it was over, in the midst of confusion, she would be able to escape as well. It was the safety of the Andromeda family that was paramount—they were the core of the rebellion—and if she was unable to manage an escape, at least she might have redeemed her soul in some respect by assuring their success.

She had the skills to at least give them all a good fight. But none of it would be to any avail unless she was successful in gaining entrance, or at least in focusing their attention to her as she approached the gates.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

In her time as an Enforcer she had never met Tribunal Leader Zydon, but she'd heard of his excesses, as she knew of Odon's masochistic training sessions. She hoped she was up to the challenge.

She was trained in the sex skills as all Enforcers were, to mimic responses and interest to perfection, to use her body to elicit the maximum sexual experience for her target. But this was different.

The drug enhanced her vulnerability in ways she had never felt before. Suddenly, her shax dripped with her juices, pulsed with a need to know a man's khout inside her, filling her. She could feel her sexual radiance all around her, vibrant and pulsing, indicating her need, her willingness to accept a male's attention.

Her body said one thing, and her mind another, but her mission was to seduce the enemy and that is what she planned to do to the best of her ability. Lives depended on her success.

As she drew closer, she noticed two guards at the gate. The twilighter bells on her ankles announced her arrival and what she was here for.

One of the men stepped forward as she halted in front of them. It was her guess he was the dominant of the two, and it was him she must please in order to gain entrance.

She allowed her gaze to slide over him in a sensually assessing manner, attempting to maintain the most seductive pose she could. Her focus moved along his body, down to the root of his male heat, and lingered there. She waited without speaking, a small smile on her pink-tinted lips.

The drug made her want to expose him and taste his khout, but her mind controlled the need, tempered it with her duty. It was an internal fight she was determined to win.

"Your purpose?" he demanded, a leering grin on his lips as his eyes attempted to undress her.

"I am here for the Commander," she answered, in as sultry a voice

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

as she could manage. Her body responded to the nearness of the two males, as though they were the answer her needy flesh required to ease the turbulent desire surging inside.

The guard circled around her, studying her, until finally he stopped in front of her again. She kept her eyes lowered in deference as he surveyed her, indicating she understood he was in charge and would be the one to allow her to enter.

“So you want to fuck the Commander, do you? Do you not know the stories about him? Are you sure he is what you want? We could give you a better time.”

“I want to feel his power. I have heard many stories from others of his prowess. I wish to experience him for myself, firsthand.”

She heard his ugly laugh, wanted to dismember him, wanted to fuck him, never had she felt so much pain, so much desire, so much fear—and anger.

“Maybe we could test her?” the other one suggested.

She trembled inwardly at his words. Emotion was messy, she had not realized how much so in the years she was without it. It rattled her now. As an Enforcer it would not have mattered, she would simply have done whatever it took to get beyond the gates. Fucking or killing, it wouldn't have concerned her because she would have felt nothing at all, she'd have been just following orders.

This was so very different.

“Think we should do that, twilighter? Fuck you first to see if you are any good?”

It took all her concentration to form the words and maintain the illusion. “Whatever will get me to the Commander.”

“Your sex radiance says you are ready. For anything. It is pulsing pretty hot right now. You want it badly.” His eyes burned through her and she shuddered at the possible intentions they exhibited.

She said nothing. At least she had their attention, maybe more so

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

than she wanted, but still, she was accomplishing her goal and could only hope that each passing minute gained the rebels the time they needed.

“Strip,” he commanded. “We need to examine the goods before you get inside. Make sure you have no contraband and what we see is what the Commander gets. We are paid well for presenting him with prime females. Let us see if you are all you seem to be.”

It was the only way to get inside. Eluria had tried to prepare Daelyn as best she could with the knowledge she retained from her years as a twilighter. But being here now, knowing these men would touch her, and feeling their hands on her body, was going to require all of her willpower to allow herself to submit.

She was a fighter, had always been the aggressor, but now, she must submit or others would pay the price of her failure. It was she who’d suggested this change in plan; she must go through with it.

Raising shaking hands to the front of her short tunic, she pried the snaps open and then let it fall to the ground, and stood silently, awaiting their miserable examination.

Staring at the ground, she saw them move in opposite directions around her, surveying her. Long moments passed as they circled around her. Finally, the dominant one stopped in front of her and the other stood behind.

The one in front reached out to cup her breasts. She felt her body respond as her nipples tightened beneath his hard, callused fingers. He tugged at them.

“Nothing fabricated about them. They are real, no alterations?”

“No,” she rasped out, sucking in air as he twisted the nipples of both her breasts, making them turn a deeper shade of pink.

He seemed to relish her response. “Spread your legs.”

As she moved to comply with his command, she felt hands on the cheeks of her ass and she stiffened.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Do it now,” the first one barked. “We need to check you for contraband. You know the rules by now.”

“Nice and firm,” the other one remarked. “Bet she knows now to use them, too.” He snickered as he gripped and prodded her flesh. She felt a hand trace the length of one of the scars on her back. “The Commander will like these. Shows she knows how to handle pain. Do you like pain, twilighter? Is that why you want the Commander?”

She refused to respond to his taunt. If she did, she’d probably end up attempting to separate his hand from his arm—or worse. It wasn’t why she was here.

“Use the oil,” the first one responded. “If we decide she is worthy of being presented to the Commander, she better not be damaged or there will be Haydon to pay.”

The one in front of her lifted her arm, and it was only then that she remembered the markings Eluria had painted on to mirror her own, put there by Guardian on her union to Devon.

The guard studied her wrist closely, then dropped it back to her side.

“Interesting,” was all he said, but something told her that he knew exactly who she was supposed to be, and that the humiliation these two men were intent on subjecting her to was because of who they thought she was. They had been ordered to do so.

She straightened her spine, determined to accept whatever they planned to do to her, knowing it brought the others closer to freedom. Separating her legs as he directed, she waited.

What she hated was that the drug made her eager for his touch, for any male’s touch. In order for the drug to dissipate she must orgasm through intercourse. Until then it would circulate through her body driving her sexual frenzy higher and higher until she managed to find a male who would provide her with what she needed.

She had known the risks and accepted them.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

Suddenly, she felt two fingers thrust between her shax lips, deep inside her shax, and she gasped at the pleasure that spiraled through her.

Just as she attempted to adjust herself to the invasion, she felt something prod at her anus, piercing past the muscle into her channel.

She stood there between them, pierced and controlled by them, unable to do anything but await their pleasure. The guard in front of her pressed close to her breasts, and the guard behind pressed close to her back.

She felt the fingers thrust in and out of her shax as the finger in her ass pushed in and out.

The scent of their bodies, sweat, male arousal, and cruelty filled her nostrils.

"No contraband here," the one from behind her growled. "But nice and tight. The Commander should enjoy this one."

The one in front continued to saw at her. Her body was responding to the demanding use, and she felt her hips begin to undulate, needing to reach the orgasm their use would eventually provide her.

The guard in front of her moved closer, dropping his head close to her neck and inhaled.

"You want it, don't you? You would lie down right here in the dirt for us if we asked."

"Y-yes," she breathed, pushing harder at the fingers invading her. "Anything to be allowed to be with the man of power."

"You want to orgasm, I can feel it." He crooked his fingers, touch a spot deep inside her, driving her desire a notch higher. "You are so wet and getting wetter with each stroke. Tell me you want it. Right here, on the ground with anyone watching from the towers. Tell me and I might take you to him."

"Anything," she cried out, in a frenzy of need, even forgetting why she was here in the need to orgasm.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Tell me what you would do.”

“I-I will lie here on the ground and let you fuck me—both of you. Please.”

The hands retreated from inside her, leaving her perched on the edge of an abyss, painful pleasure spasming through her, feeling empty and alone, panting as though she had just run the course up a steep mountain and had yet to reach the top.

The one from behind came around to stand next to the other one as she stood there trembling, trying to regain her composure, the need to reach release a fierce beacon throbbing inside her body.

She reached inside herself, seeking frantically for self-control. This female standing here was no one she recognized and it scared her. Yet she could not allow the fear to gain the upper hand, nor the desire for consummation of the sex act.

Slowly she raised her head to look at the guards, who had savage smirks on their faces as they watched her.

“I think she will do. The Commander likes them hot and ready to do anything. We’ve just warmed her up for him.” The first one turned back to her. “Get dressed, you passed.”

Shakily, she reached down for her tunic and donned it, then straightened and waited as he walked toward her.

He leaned close. “What do you say?”

A knife in her hand right now would gut him nicely. How she yearned to see him dead at her feet.

“T-thank you for allowing me to enter.”

“How about ‘thank you for warming me up for the Commander’? Maybe ‘thank you for not making me rut like an animal here on the ground before letting me pass’?”

She was on the verge of losing it, but this time it was because she wanted to wrap her hands around his neck and ease the life slowly from his body.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Y-yes, thank you for—preparing me—for my meeting with the Commander.”

He reached out and clamped a hand on her arm and dragged her forward.

“I’ll be right back. I want to make sure she gets to the Tribunal Leader safely.” He yanked her forward as the other guard opened the gate. “You’ve been an enjoyable distraction in a boring day.”

Daelyn retained her self-control and only hoped she had held their attention long enough for the others to do as they needed. By Mylonna, if she did escape with her life, she was determined these two would be the first to die before she left.

Two Enforcers appeared to be waiting for them inside the second gate. Unexpectedly, the guard accompanying her yanked forward, skewing her balance, and threw her to the ground at their feet.

“Here she is, the one he’s been waiting for.”

She had been right—the guards at the gate knew exactly who she was supposed to be and she would now be served up to Tribunal Leader Clorial Zydon with relish. They probably expected to get a nice reward for their efforts.

The Enforcers clamped onto each of her arms, lifting her unceremoniously from the ground, dragging her across the yard and toward another door. She struggled to regain her footing as they entered the building and stepped into a tubulator that carried them up. There was complete silence as the doors opened and they dragged her to another door and into a large room.

A man rose from behind the desk. He had a head of thick, black silvered hair and a full beard. Studying her closely, he then circled the desk to stand in front of her. Reaching out, he yanked the wig from her head and her white hair spilled to her shoulders.

Anger simmered in his eyes. He turned to arrow a look at each of the Enforcers.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Leave us,” he bit out. “And see that the guards are doubled around my special guests in the prison below ground. Immediately.”

Both men nodded, released their grip, and left the room.

Zydon’s attention turned back to her. “You are not my daughter. Whatever her plan is, she will not succeed.” He reached out and thrust a hand in her hair. Gripping tightly, arching her neck back, he leaned in close. “What is your name? I see you were once one of ours, now apparently turned rebel. Well, my sacrificial lamb, I will enjoy coaxing the answers from you now that you have your emotions back.” His eyes raked down her body and then he smiled a feral, eager expression that made her want to shudder with dread. “I would never refuse so fine a gift.”

CHAPTER 6

Devon slowly rose to his feet. He circled the room, touched the walls, then looked upward to the small patch of sky visible far above. He raised a tightly fisted hand to his chest, above his heart.

"She is near," he said quietly.

Alekos scrambled to his feet. "You are certain?"

"I feel her." He pressed his hand tighter to his chest.

Alekos saw him frown, his eyebrows drawing together. "The beats of her heart are oddly patterned."

"Fear?" Alekos suggested.

"There is that, but it feels like some odd, softer, tiny echo." He hunched forward and closed his eyes.

Alekos waited, trying to remain patient, as Devon focused inward. Suddenly, Devon's spine stiffened and his eyes shot open, his focus riveted to the patch of sky.

"Mylonna! It cannot be possible." He jerked around to face Alekos,

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

his expression exhibiting a myriad of emotions. The color of his eyes went dark and then lightened. Fear, anger, joy, all passed across his face in a fraction of time.

“What is it? Is she in danger? Can you communicate with her?”

“No-no. I can sense her emotions, the rhythms of her heartbeat. This is something I never expected. She should not be here.” He began to pace the small confines of their prison like a caged savage lion.

He stopped, pivoted around and met Alekos’ worried expression with a tortured one of his own. “She is with child. It is the fragile echo I hear. If anything happens to her or the babe, I will personally see to the destruction of Zydon, one way or the other. We have to get out of here.”

Alekos stalked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know Eluria—she will not take unnecessary chances. She’s very capable, you know that. You must focus. If they are close, we need to be ready.”

Devon took a deep breath. Alekos understood he was trying to steady his emotions, then he looked at Alekos and nodded. “You’re right. At least we were able to remove the restraints. When an opportunity presents itself we will be ready—we must be. Guardian would not have given us this precious gift of Beyond if he meant to rip it from us in this manner.”

“That’s correct. Remember that, Devon. She will get us out of here. She rescued not only Kierra, but Jarek as well from Odon’s death compound, this should be a walk in the gardens for her.”

A loud explosion almost sent them to the floor as the earth shuddered beneath them.

Alekos looked at Devon. “It’s begun. We’ll be out of here before you know it. And you’ll be with Eluria.”

Another explosion rocked the walls of their prison, followed by three more in quick succession. They braced themselves against the

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

stone walls as debris showered down on them from above their heads.

Staying far back from the center of the room, they circled around toward the door. Alekos saw Devon close his eyes, apparently again focused inward.

"I must draw her to us. I cannot communicate directly, but I can direct rhythms toward her so she will know where we are located."

They waited, tense and ready. Alekos moved to the other side of the door, knowing that anyone could walk through it—friend or foe.

They stared at each other as the clang of a key inserted into the lock drew their attention. It clicked and the door squeaked open. A man fell headlong onto the floor, following by three people rushing into the room.

"Devon!" Alekos recognized Eluria's voice.

Devon stepped away from the wall. "I am here, *na nivia*."

She rushed into his arms. "Thank Mylonna, you are well." Her hands brushed across his chest as she examined the bruising left by the guards. "My father will pay for this."

Alekos stepped forward. "There is no time now. We must get out of here. How many are with you?"

Eluria turned toward him and smiled. "Alekos, I would have preferred our reunion under better circumstances. You're right, we must leave. There are enough with me to keep them busy until we get out of here. As soon as I give them the signal, they will withdraw and meet us back at the ship."

"Then let's get out of here. We'll come back and take care of your father another day. In our own time."

As Devon attempted to push her toward the door, she resisted. "You don't understand. It's not that simple."

"What is it?"

She looked up at Devon. "Daelyn acted as decoy to draw their attention and give us time to set the charges. I cannot leave her if there

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

is any chance of rescuing her.”

“Who is this Daelyn?” Alekos wanted to know.

Eluria turned to look at him. “She is an ex-Enforcer who has joined us. It was she who came up with the plan, knowing my father would probably be watching and waiting for me. She disguised herself as me and attempted to get through the gates as a twilight companion. We hoped she would turn their attention in her direction to give us time to get you out. Apparently, she succeeded. I cannot just leave her here.”

“You have no choice,” Alekos said. “She apparently accepted her role so that you and Devon could get out alive. If you go after her now, she will have given her life for nothing.”

Eluria shook her head. “I cannot do it, Alekos. I cannot leave her.”

Alekos looked over Eluria’s head at Devon. “Still as stubborn as ever.”

“I doubt that will ever change,” Devon responded.

Alekos again turned his attention to Eluria. “You and Devon must get out. I’m used to working alone and I’ll go for her. Tell me where the ship is and we’ll meet you there if I’m successful. If not—” He shrugged and looked at Devon. “You know what to do.”

“But you have no idea where she is,” Eluria protested.

“Where do you think she would have been taken?”

She hesitated just a fraction of a moment before answering. “If I know my father he would have had her brought to his office for questioning. That’s probably where she is now.”

Alekos nodded. “All right. Tell me how to get there, and give me directions to the ship.”

“If you do this alone, you could be killed. We’ve only just found you. Your mother would never forgive me if I let you do this.”

“Tell you what. Let me take these two”—he nodded to the others who accompanied her into the cell, one of whom had just finished binding the guard who let them into the cell—“and we’ll call it done.”

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He saw her hesitation. "Come on, Eluria, we don't have all day, we've wasted enough time here arguing."

"All right," she finally agreed and explained quickly how to reach her father's office and the location of the ship. She then handed him an extra diffuser she slipped from her belt.

"Devon, get her out of here. Maybe we'll have time to catch up later. Take care of each other."

Devon clasped Alekos' arm and then pulled Eluria out the door and was gone.

Alekos turned back to the two men who awaited his orders. "All right then, follow me and let's make this quick."

They rushed after him out the door and to the tubulator, taking it all the way up to the second floor. When the doors opened they were ready.

The floor was silent, not a person in sight. Slowly, they made their way down the hall to the door at the end. Alekos wasted no time removing the diffuser from his belt, pointed it at the lock, then stepped to the side, motioning to the others to move back. He fired at the panel and the door slid open.

Alekos hesitated for a moment, then cautiously stepped forward. Zydon did not appear to be inside, but his eyes caught something from the far side of the room.

He stepped farther inside and the others followed him, fanning to either side. "Wait here," he directed. "Watch for signs of any movement."

His attention was drawn again to the far wall, where he made out an overturned chair. He inhaled sharply when he saw the bloodied body tied to it. Noting the white hair, he knew this must be the female, Daelyn.

Quickly, he crossed the room, bent down, and gently lifted her head looking for signs of life. She was still breathing, yet shock coursed

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

through him as he studied her features.

It could not be possible. Of all the ill luck, she had to be the one. It was really tempting to just leave her there. But Eluria would have his head if he so much as hesitated in trying to get her out.

Using his diffuser, he destroyed the knots of cloth confining her, a soft moan of protest was the only indication she was still alive.

He lifted her into his arms, flashes of memory washing over him of another time when he had enjoyed her softness—just before she had tried to kill him.

Pushing any thoughts of tenderness down into the deep well inside where it belonged, he slung her over his shoulder and pivoted around.

“All right,” he said, “ we have what we came for, let’s get the Haydon out of here.”

Jogging out the door and racing toward the elevator, he knew there wasn’t a moment to lose. He couldn’t think about the female, because any memories he had should be hate and the need for revenge. It figured Guardian would play this sort of trick on him.

He’d had the chance to leave her to her fate, yet he knew, even without Eluria’s urging, he couldn’t have left her there. She could have killed him and ended everything on that long ago day, and he still wondered why she hadn’t. He didn’t know her name back then—it hadn’t seemed important at the time.

So at the very least he had to return the favor—a life for a life. But that’s where it ended. This paid his debt in full.

So why the Haydon did he try to cushion her against his body, want to protect her from harm? And why was he so filled with rage at her mistreatment by Zydon?

She didn’t deserve his consideration. She was an assassin, the worst because she used her seductive body to entice and then kill with no emotion involved in any respect. Not one speck of concern for her victims.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

One thing he knew was that he did not want to be around when she regained consciousness. She was a tempting bit, and he wanted no part of her. He'd tasted more than enough of her brand of seduction.

He felt every inch of her against his body. Her softly rounded breasts taunted him. It was going to be a long journey back to Ednos—if they got out of there alive, that is.

CHAPTER 7

Commander Clorial Zydon. She studied him, waiting, as the waves of drug-induced arousal washed through her. He was the enemy, no matter what her body tried to tell her, she had to stay in control with her mind.

He was still a handsome man. No wonder females flocked to his gates. It was not just his title, but the energy and power he exuded.

Unlike Odon, who had bled evil from every pore, this man was a dark soul cloaked in beauty, wooing the unsuspecting into his web far too easily.

He raised a hand to place it beneath her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. His eyes seemed to laser deep inside her, then she saw surprise reflected there.

“You are drugged. The radiance of sex is manufactured. I would not have expected it from an experienced Enforcer. Who are you? You should have been able to project sufficiently to gain entrance past the

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

guards.”

She refused to answer him, continuing to hope she was buying enough time for the others to complete their tasks and get out of the compound.

“Answer me,” he barked and she flinched at the sudden change in attitude, his look hardening, demanding.

Inhaling deeply, she fought for composure. “My name is unimportant, Commander.”

He leaned closer. He was now near enough for her to almost reach out and taste his skin. Her shax convulsed as he pressed more intimately toward her. She refused to back away, to show fear.

His eyes roved over her face, his hands snaked out to grab her hips and draw her against him. She could feel the hardness of his erection again her body, felt the desire rise to the surface seeking release.

She fought its effect on her, refusing to give in, even though she was certain she could waylay him using sex for quite a sufficient period of time to allow the others to gain their freedom.

What he would do with her when it was over, she had no idea, but the purpose of her subterfuge was to turn his attention from them to her.

She licked her lips and attempted to soften her body, pressing closer to him. Reaching up, she cupped his face. “I have heard many stories of your expertise, Commander. I’m not sure who you are waiting for, but I am here now. The rebels gave me back my emotions, but I am no rebel. I have come to you for help.”

She saw interest peak in his gaze, yet his eyes were still tinged with suspicion.

“Why should I believe a turned Enforcer about anything?”

She reached up to stroke the tips of her fingers along the contour of his face. Her Enforcer training should be good for something and the presence of the drug would at least help to make her efforts more

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

believable.

“What have you to lose, Commander? I’m an unarmed female inside your compound surrounded by your guards. Show me how to feel the emotions I must mimic without the drug. Show me how to use them to help the Tribunal and I am all yours.”

He lowered his head and possessed her lips. Forcing her head back, he claimed her. She felt the heat rise inside her, consuming her. It was as though her body was a flame of arousal, which he stoked, adding fuel to the already roaring blaze.

Remembering why she was there became more difficult in the need to assuage the flaring heat of lustful hunger. Lifting her hands, she stroked his back, along his hips, over his ass.

He was tight and hard, as firm as any younger male she had ever taken as an Enforcer in pursuit of her assignment. Yet this was different. Now her emotions were dangerously engaged and there was nothing she could do to stop the waves of consuming lust that enveloped her.

He lifted his head to look down at her. “You beg for this, do you not? You need it.” He shifted away from her and she felt bereft by the distance he created.

Her panting increased as she struggled for composure. Panic ensued as she felt him pull free of her. “P-please,” she found herself begging.

What did it matter? She was here to hold his attention. She might as well gain something from it, some ease of her heat.

She saw him grin. It was a look of hard anticipation, an expectation of female entertainment. He leaned back against the desk and studied her as she stood trembling before him. She could only imagine the impression she made with her aura of sexual need and arousal more than evident, burning bright, pulsing as her body quivered.

He folded his arms across his broad chest. “Dance for me.”

She blinked. “Here? Now?”

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He nodded.

“But there is no music.”

“Improvise, female. When someone such as you comes to me, I expect to be fully entertained with your feminine allure. Show me why I should fuck you. Show me why I should not just give you to my men.”

She had no choice but to do as he demanded. If she should manage to get out of this alive, never, ever was she taking another drug that would alter her mind and body the way this one did. At least when she had no emotion, there could be no arousal or no shame at what she was required to do.

How had Eluria stood being a twilight companion for so many years? She'd been required to use the drug regularly in order to gain the trust of her companions and thereby information to help the rebellion.

Never more than right now did she admire Eluria's courage, her commitment to the rebellion and to Devon Andromeda. Never more than right now was she determined to do everything she could to facilitate their escape.

So she began to dance in slow, undulating movements meant to entice the man waiting for his entertainment.

Where this would all lead, she had no idea. She turned and lunged, lifted her tunic to display her legs, teasing the male, offering him just enough of a view to whet his appetite to see more.

“Stop,” he commanded after what seemed like eons of time. She halted, out of breath and again stood before him. His gaze raked over her. “Remove the garment. I will see what you have hidden beneath the tantalizing covering.

Grabbing the edges of the robe, she lifted it, inch by slow inch, revealing her flesh to him, offering him tiny samplings of what she offered.

In encounters in the past, when she'd been an Enforcer, it was she

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

who dominated the encounters. This meeting was far different from those. She had come here of her own free will, but in order to succeed, she must accede to his orders.

How had such an immoral man sired a strong female such as Eluria Zydon. Her mother must have been quite a strong force in her life not to have been warped by the presence of the Commander.

Finally, she dropped the robe to the floor at her feet. Long moments passed as his gaze roamed over her body.

“Turn,” he said in a low, guttural voice, dripping with lust.

She did as he asked, turning around in a complete circle, coming back to face him.

“Stroke your breasts.”

A part of her rebelled against the action. But the part controlled by the drug eagerly sought to comply with the Commander’s demand.

She brushed her hands across the top of each mound, over her hardened nipples, and cupped beneath them, displaying herself to him as he seemed to want.

He rose from the corner of the desk to walk toward her.

“Very nice,” he said, as he reached out to touch her.

Suddenly the room was rocked by an explosion, followed quickly by a series of smaller ones. Zydon whipped his head around to glare at the door.

Daelyn took the opportunity to kick out and landed a blow dead center to his most intimate region, driving him to his knees.

Unfortunately, it did not last long. Before she could reach the door, he grabbed her arm and whirled her around, driving his fist into the side of her face.

Her head snapped back as he shoved her against the wall.

“Whore,” he bit out. “You will pay for this. It is *her*, is it not? She planned this whole thing. His fingers bit into her forearms and she saw her demise in his eyes.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

She'd accepted death as her fate before she entered the compound. This was her payment for the wrongs she'd committed in the name of the Tribunal.

Her face throbbed from the blow, yet she sneered up at him triumphantly. "She is more fit to lead than you shall ever be, Tribunal Leader. Your days are numbered."

His face turned a bright mottled red. She fought him as he dragged her across the room. He turned and struck a hard blow across her face, and another closed-fisted punch to her stomach drove her to her knees.

She was winded and unable to fight back as he dragged her across the room and hauled her into a chair. She wiped at the blood on her face and looked up at him defiantly.

"You and the rest of your brethren will not win. It is only a matter of time and you know it."

He turned away to pick up her robe and quickly shred it as he tied her to the chair. "She is a whore as her mother was before her. I should have known back then and gotten rid of her just like I did her mother."

He tied her hands to the arms of the chair and then tightly bound her ankles to each chair leg.

"What do you mean?"

He glanced up at her as he finished tying the last knot. "She is no child of mine. I could have put her to good use, but she thwarted me on that as well. When I get my hands on her, she will die a slow painful death."

Daelyn's eyes widened in surprise. Eluria suffered for nothing. The man was not even her true sire. She couldn't help but laugh. If only she could relate the truth to Eluria. "She is more lucky than she thought. She will be pleased to learn she shares no blood with a murderer."

He glared at her with hate flooding his expression. "It will not be from you she learns it. I have no time for you now, but when I return, your death will be just as slow and painful as I plan for her—after I've

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

had my pleasure of you.”

Her smile turned just as lethal as his. “You think to live through this yourself? I think you underestimate Eluria Zydon and Devon Andromeda. Just as you have all of those you have abused over the years.”

Tied as she was, there was no way she would be able to avoid what she saw in his eyes. He raised his fist and slammed it into the side of her face. Her head snapped back against the solid frame as stars burst before her eyes, followed by excruciating pain. Unable to defend herself against the action, and with the force of the blow, the chair tipped over onto its side and she landed on the floor. Thankfully, she knew no more.

CHAPTER 8

He paced restlessly across the deck of the ship, needing something to occupy his mind. Holding her naked body that close was more than a male should be required to tolerate.

It had not taken much to get out of the compound, all the forces seeming to have been centered on tracking Eluria and Devon. The males accompanying him had known the location of the ship, and they made their way to its location without incident.

With Devon at the helm, they lifted off, shot through the sky, and vaulted out of the atmosphere before Zydon's forces were able to target them. Of course, several of the explosives were set near the munitions sites, which helped with slowing the pursuit.

Now cloaked, it was possible to ease back and take a deep breath as they made their way back to Ednos.

Unfortunately, it gave him too much time to focus on the female. He still wanted to wring her neck for what she'd done on their earlier

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

acquaintance. Yet, seeing her again had stirred something else inside him as well. He did not like it, not at all.

Upon his arrival at the ship, Eluria had directed him to follow her with his unconscious burden and then, after he laid her on the bed, had shooed him from the cabin. That was fine with him, and he hurried back to the deck to assist where he might be of some use.

He couldn't help the feelings of anger surging through him when he looked down at her before he left. Her face was already discoloring from the beating she'd obviously taken, and dried blood clung to her flesh.

At that moment she looked helpless, unlike the female Enforcer he remembered from so long ago. He wanted to touch her, to comfort her. And the emotion angered him.

He pivoted and hurried out of the cabin before he did something he would regret.

Several hours had passed since he'd left her there with Eluria to tend to her wounds. He still found it difficult to believe she now sided with the rebellion.

Eluria returned to the deck. She and Devon studied the panel, watching for signs of any detection by the enemy.

It felt odd for him to be here, to see them together after so many years. It seemed strange to not be on his own ship, alone, as had been his way for so long.

"How soon before we reach Ednos?" he asked, uneasy with his own thoughts.

He noted Devon's possessive arm around Eluria's waist, holding her close. The white hair still threw him and he tried to come to terms with the changes in his brother. It was difficult to believe that after so many years, he was looking at his brother, alive, and well, with his emotions intact.

They both turned to look at him.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

"It will not be much longer. Luckily, we haven't been detected."

"What about her?" He couldn't say her name. "How is she?"

Eluria studied him for a long time. "She'll be all right. The bruises are superficial and she will heal. Fortunately, there are no broken bones."

He gritted his teeth. "Too bad we didn't get him. He belongs with Odon, burning in Haydon." Clorial Zydon had eluded them yet again. His demise would have to wait for another day. He saw the pain flash through Eluria's expression. "I'm sorry, Eluria, I should not have said that."

She shook her head and straightened her shoulders as though bracing against attack. "No, you're right. It just pains me to think that it was my sire who assisted in causing so much heartache to so many people I love."

Devon pulled her closer in his embrace. "It is not your fault, *na nivia*."

She leaned against him. "I know, but I cannot help it. If I could undo everything he has done, I would."

"Forget it, Eluria," Alekos said. "I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. I'm not used to being around people, you know that. Certainly not family. And if it wasn't for you, in more ways than one, I wouldn't be here now, nor would Devon. Or for that matter, Kierra wouldn't be safe on Ednos. We probably would all be dead."

She looked at him and a ghost of a smile crossed her lips. "I'm glad you are here with us, Alekos. It has been too long. Your mother and sister are waiting to welcome you home."

"Home seems like an odd word. I've been alone for so long." He inhaled deeply. "I don't know how long I'll be able to stay. I'm not the same as I was, you know that. I'll be glad to spend time with my family, but I doubt it will be anything permanent. I'm too restless to settle. I'll need a new ship and that will take some time."

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“But you will remain for a while? You need to be with your family as much as they need you. We'll find you a new ship. But then you must keep in better touch with all of us.”

“I will try to do better.” He licked his lips as his thoughts turned elsewhere.

Eluria nodded. He saw worry again pass across her face. “I am concerned about Daelyn.”

All of Alekos' senses went on alert. “Why? I thought you said her wounds were superficial?”

“They are,” she agreed, “but it is the effects of the drug I am concerned about.”

“What do you mean? What drug?”

He saw her shift uncomfortably. “In order to get past the guards and convince them she was a twilight, she ingested the pleasure drug.”

“An enhancer? Why in Haydon would she do that?”

“Without her own sexual radiance, they would have been suspicious of her reasons for being there. She did it to buy us time to gain your freedom.”

“Haydon.”

“Exactly. Unless she is able to find some physical release through intercourse with a male, the effects will linger for some time as the chemistry will not dissipate as it is meant to.”

“Send one of the males to her to ease her discomfort.” Even as he said it, he wished to recant the words. He wanted no other male touching her. What was the matter with him? Why did he constantly need to keep reminding himself he wanted none of the Enforcer female?

Eluria shook her head. “She will not. I pleaded with her before I left her cabin. She has had no intimate contact with another since she was brought to Ednos, not since her emotions were unblocked.”

“You are mistaken.”

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

"No. She fears the emotions. She is not yet comfortable with them. I believe it's one of the reasons her own radiance has not unveiled. Her fear overrules although she won't admit it, even to herself."

"I'm surprised she agreed to ingest the drug if that was the case."

"She had no choice—not if we were to complete the mission successfully and free you both."

"Did she know it was not just Devon you came for?"

Eluria nodded. "Of course. She knew you were in danger as well."

It surprised him that she would agree to play decoy in an attempt to save his life. What game did she play? First she tried to kill him and then she attempted to give up her life in an attempt to save him. It didn't make sense.

"Aw, Haydon." He turned and headed toward the ladder leading to the lower deck.

"Where are you going?" Devon called.

He turned to look over his shoulder. "To do what needs doing," was his exasperated response.

* * *

She paced her small cabin, afraid to leave it, embarrassed to have others see the manufactured red radiance that still clung to her, throbbing intensely, announcing her desperate need to everyone around her.

She could not expose the evidence of the heated spasming of her shax, her womb contracting painfully, needing the contact of another body, needing to release. Pleasuring herself would not dim the effects of the drug—it required the presence of the male inside her body, and she refused to allow anyone to touch her in that intimate fashion. In plain words, she needed to be fucked. Badly.

Wrapping her arms more tightly around her midriff, sweat broke out on her brow, and she continued to pace. She would simply need to find a way to handle this, even knowing the lingering effects could last for

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

months without surcease.

Yet, she would do it again if need be. The mission was successful and that is what mattered. Except that Clorial Zydon still lived. That miserable slitherer should be dead. Most assuredly. Not only for what he did to the people of Argadia, but for what he had done to Eluria and to the whole Andromeda family because of his appetite for power.

In her mind she'd failed them all in that respect. She should have found a way to take him out. She was skilled as an Enforcer and could have terminated Zydon with her bare hands. Unfortunately, for some reason the drug clouded her mind to the extent she could not think straight, could not respond in the way she should have.

She sucked in air and gripped her hands tighter to her body as waves of undulating need swamped through her again. Each time it seemed to become more insistent, more intense.

Another one gripped her and she reached out to grab the edge of the counter, holding tightly, arched with desire. The need to go find the first male on this ship she could, and fuck him there and then, just to ease the tension in her body rode her hard.

She fought the demand with all the self-control she could muster. It's why she refused to leave the cabin, to be tempted by the smell of the males, to the call of their body heat.

The problem was there was only one male she wanted and that was an impossibility. She now knew that she had wanted him for years, even when she should not have desired him. To leave this cabin now tempted her own downfall. She would not beg him.

How could he do other than hate her for what she'd done to him all those years ago? She deserved no reprieve, she deserved to be punished, to eternally want and desire in reparation for what she had done—or almost done.

Guilt washed through her along with the unrequited desire she felt.

Knowing she was altered by the Nanus process did not help. She

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

should have fought harder from being inducted as an Enforcer. She should have run away or allowed them to kill her first.

Instead she helped to wreak havoc, to do so without guilt or care or concern. No matter how often Eluria tried to assure her it was not her fault but that of the Tribunal, she knew it was by her hand Argadians had died and others had been enslaved...because of her abilities as an Enforcer.

She deserved her predicament right now.

She'd watched Eluria and Devon, obviously so much in love and dedicated to each other. What would that be like? To care so deeply for another. It frightened her to think about giving of herself to that degree.

With her emotions intact she admitted she was afraid to fuck even on a purely recreational basis. What if she sealed with someone who cared nothing for her? What would that do to her? It was much better to remain alone even though she yearned for the type of relationship that Eluria and Devon enjoyed. And Kiera and Jarek. How did one know when they found that mate that was the other part of themselves?

There had to be some way to fight the effects of the drug without requiring she fuck a male. Some way to relieve the pain and need. Part of the problem was that the sexual need clouded her brain and she could not think clearly enough to come up with a solution.

She whirled around as the door to her cabin slid open. When she saw who it was she backed away, afraid of pouncing on him, ripping his clothes off, and begging him to fuck her.

Alekos studied her like a predator seeking the weakness of his prey. His expression was dark and she was surprised when she saw lust lurking in the glint of his eye.

She backed farther away. "W-what do you want? Go away."

He just stood there, looking at her, waiting for...something.

She could stand it no longer. If he didn't leave, she would do exactly what she envisioned. She looked at the eye patch and the fine

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

white lines littered over the right side of his face and knew she was the one who had caused the loss of sight in his eye, and the scars. Why did he not look at her with hate rather than lust?

"I understand you have a problem," he finally said.

His voice washed over her, almost like the brush of his hand across her skin, driving her crazy.

"Get out," she growled. "Leave me alone."

He leaned negligently against the side of the open door, arms and legs crossed.

She clenched her hands, her body tightening, attempting to fight the desire to stride across the small space and drag him onto the bed.

"Get out," she screamed, wrapping her arms around her midriff, in an attempt to suppress the desire.

A dark eyebrow rose, making him look more the pirate that she knew he was. "I have what you need."

"I can get what I need from any male on this ship. I do not need you."

His gaze darkened, then blazed. "You will fuck no other male on this ship. You owe me."

Even though her radiance had turned dark crimson, she felt her skin pale, and a wave of faintness overtook her. She forced it down.

"Is that why you're here?" Her voice was but a thready whisper.

His gaze turned black, hard as onyx crystal, glittering and razor sharp. He stepped into the room, pressed a button, and the door slid closed behind him. He pressed another button and she heard the lock click into place.

"If you wish to think so," he responded.

A debt. She owed him. That was why he was here.

Taking a deep breath, she then slowly released it and straightened away from the wall. She lifted her chin, her jaw set.

"Very well. If you feel a debt is owed, then I will acquiesce to your

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

request.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in an arrogant grin. “So you agree to pay the debt with your body?”

Every part of her rebelled against what she was about to do. Everything, that is, except her heart. Even without the effects of the drug raging through her body she would want him—had wanted him for a long time if she were honest with herself. But she would never let him know that.

“To pay a debt,” she affirmed.

He moved closer to her, until she could feel his searing heat against her own body. Lowering his head, he brought his mouth to within a whisper of her own.

“You are sure?” he breathed against her lips.

She closed her eyes, felt herself weave toward him, wanting the touch of his lips against hers.

“Y-yes,” she sighed.

She felt him move away from her, her whole body tingling with need, her radiance raging, a fiery crimson all around her. She opened her eyes, blinked and focused on him.

“In payment of your debt?” he asked.

“In payment of the debt,” she affirmed, unwilling to voice the real reason she was about to let him fuck her.

What she truly wanted was so much more than that. She wanted to seal with him, to know him, to give him that which she had never given another. To be with him in the most intimate fashion that an Argadian female can be with an Argadian male, and to seal him to her.

But that was not to be. He wanted nothing more than her body, in payment of past betrayals. She had no choice, not according to her own conscience. Maybe by giving herself to him in this way, she could assuage at least some of her guilt.

She met his dark, unyielding gaze and waited.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Strip,” he commanded.

CHAPTER 9

Again, she lifted her chin, wanting to defy the need, to defy him. But she wanted him too badly. If she were honest, she wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. Even the presence of the drug could not alter that fact. It would be dishonest for her to blame the drug for her desire. If there was one thing she could not be, it was dishonest with herself.

She unsnapped the front of the skinsuit and slipped out of it. In her opinion there was no point in wasting time or pretending a demureness she didn't feel.

Stepping out of the suit, she tossed it across the room, then straightened to look at him. She could feel her body readying itself; the liquid desire coating her thighs grew thicker. She knew with a certainty that it would not be like this with any other male—only him.

It was clear to her now that was why over these last months she had refused to fuck any other male. She did not want them or their hands on

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

her body. Only Alekos. Who would have thought she would have the chance to experience what she desired most? Even if it was strictly to pay a debt.

She met his gaze steadily. She would take whatever he offered, in any way that he offered.

He was a hard male, had lived a dangerous life, as alone as anyone could be. A rogue who defiantly lived by his own rules. If one accepted his reputation as fact, he was more dangerous than any Enforcer she had ever known. The eye patch only served to heighten his attraction.

Dark skin, and small lines around his eyes and mouth bespoke of a hard, demanding life. Blazing sapphire intention riveted to her body, lasered deep into her soul. She felt the heat of that gaze strike flint and scorch her deep.

She waited as he moved toward her, remained motionless as he circled her to stand behind her. She felt the fire of his flesh against her bare skin, wanted to move back, to have him embrace her, to feel his hands at her breasts, stroking her, his khout driving deep inside her. She wanted to feel his orgasm with her anstillia cord buried deep inside him, pulsing, claiming him as her own.

But that was not what he desired. She reminded herself he wanted only payment of a debt long overdue.

And then she felt his firm, callused hands grasp her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh, and a ripple of desire passed through her.

She felt him press close, his breath at the nape of her neck, sending shivers quivering through her.

“Your radiance has darkened, Daelyn Kapri. It is so deeply red it is almost black. Do you want this so much? Or is it the drug?”

Her breath shuddered in her chest, her heart pounded. “I want this.” She could feel the beginning tendrils of her true inner radiance reach out to meld with the drug-induced aura. It was an odd sensation that was rooted in her core, something she’d never experienced before.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

His fingers clamped more firmly into her hip. "Say my name."

She licked her lips, afraid of voicing the name of the male she desired more than any other. His grip pressed harder. "Say it."

"Alekos Andromeda."

The pressure of his hands eased somewhat and his fingers slid down over the slope of her body toward the center of her need, pausing at her mound. Liquid gushed from her shax. Unable to stop, a soft whimper escaped through her parted lips.

As one hand left her mound and reached up to stroke her hair, she wanted to scream in denial. She needed his hand on her shax, his finger tunneling into her shax-ra, opening her, claiming her.

"The sight of white hair has always instilled only hate in me," he said softly as he stroked its length. "But your hair, so silky and soft...I want to feel it on my body. It is not hate I feel at this moment. It is not strictly the payment of a debt I want from you."

He yanked her back against him. She arched, enjoying the feel of his hard body against her.

"It is more than a debt I wish to pay," she responded.

"Then we understand each other." He moved his hands around to cup her breasts. His head dropped to nuzzle at her neck, tasting her skin. Her body felt hot and cold at the same time.

"Please," she whispered, pressing her spine against his chest, wishing he were as naked as she was.

His tongue swept across the back of her neck, nibbled at the rounded peak of her shoulder as his fingers kneaded her breasts. She leaned her head back and he sucked at the exposed column of her neck, his hands becoming more insistent on her breasts, tugging at her nipples, drawing deeply on her flesh.

She could feel his khout, thick and steely against the curve of her spine. She rubbed against him, unable to help herself.

"Not yet," he whispered. "I've waited a long time for this. I am

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

going to enjoy every inch of your body before we fuck. I want to enjoy the radiance of your sexuality—it was not present at our last encounter. I should have realized then you were not who you presented yourself to be. But I wanted you too much.”

“I wanted you as well,” she admitted, unable to dissemble.

He lifted his head. “Do not lie. It isn’t necessary. You had no emotions back then to be able to feel desire.”

“It is no lie. I didn’t realize it then, not until it was too late.”

His hands were suddenly at her shax, pressing deep inside. “No more talk,” he growled as his fingers entered her. “Mylonna, you are so wet, so tight. This time I know you want it—I can see it as well as feel it.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I want you inside me, more than you can know.”

His fingers separated her, spread her wide as he delved deep inside, retreated, circled her clitoris, and pushed inside again and again until she was unable to resist countering his demands, pushing against his fingers time after time until she was mindless with need.

“I want to taste you,” she blurted out. “I want to feel your body against mine without the barrier of your clothes.”

His fingers exited her body and she felt empty. “Then undress me.” He stepped away from her and she turned to look at him, needing him desperately.

She looked up at him, saw the desire mirrored in his eyes as he gazed at her. “I didn’t understand the emotions of sexual need back then. But now—these feelings—I cannot explain.”

“Undress me,” he repeated.

She wasted no more time and unsnapped the opening to his skinsuit. But it was not enough. As she peeled it from his shoulders, she fastened her mouth around his small nipples, suckling and nibbling at his body as she pulled the suit down his shoulders.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

She felt him inhale sharply as she sank to her knees, tasting his skin, licking his abdomen, down to the hard, steely khout that sprang free. She inhaled his scent, enjoying the lingering spicy male heat, and then she was unable to wait any longer. Pulling at his boots and yanking the suit off, she knelt before him and took him into her mouth.

She could have orgasmed just at that moment, enjoying the taste of him, the hot, pulsing evidence of his arousal. She licked up and down his khout, swirled around the plumed head, tasted the pre-cum oozing from his slit. She took her time, enjoying his flavor, lingering, licking, cupping his balls with her hands.

“No more,” he growled. Pulling her to her feet, he turned her and pushed her onto the bed. Pulling her thighs apart, he pushed her onto her knees and she steadied herself on her hands, bending forward, knowing she was about to experience what she had waited years to feel inside her.

She felt his fingers at her entrance, pressing deep. Then stiffened as she felt his mouth clamp onto her opening and his tongue pushed deep inside her.

Unable to stop, a moan of need erupted from her throat and she arched her back, pushing against his questing tongue, driving him deeper still. She wanted more, needed it—so badly.

His hands stroked across her backside, kneading her cheeks, separating and circling, a finger tracing a path between them, his touch driving her higher and higher toward the edge of release.

The only sound she could hear was her own panting need, her moans of pleasure, the sucking, swirling tongue driving beyond reality.

She had never known such pleasure, such blinding passion. His hands stroked along her calves, feathered at the backs of her thighs, pulling her shax lips wider, burrowing his tongue deeper. His fingers circled her clit, demanding—everything.

And then she was there, freefalling into space, screaming as pulse

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

after pulse of her orgasm consumed her as his mouth sucked her juices from her. She bucked and arched, swirling emotion consuming her.

Then his mouth was gone, replace by something far larger than a tongue. She felt the tip of his khout press between her shax lips, opening her, pushing inside her.

“Yes,” she screamed, ramming her hips back, forcing him deep inside. She felt his hands bite into her hips as he fucked her in deep, long strokes, burrowing to her center, retreating.

The need to seal with him was overwhelming, knowing he was about to climax, she wanted to possess him. And then all thought was gone as he pushed deeper inside her and one of his hands came around to circle her clit, and she felt herself reaching once again to fly into space.

He stopped moving, and his hand fell away and she wanted to protest.

“Do you feel me inside you? Do you have any idea how it feels to be surrounded by your hot shax-ra? I want to explode, yet I do not want to stop. I want to fuck you until we are both unconscious.”

She undulated her hips. “I know,” she gasped. “I want it as well. Please. Fuck me until neither one of us can move. I need to feel this, more than you can possibly know.”

He circled his hips, pulled out until the tip of his khout was at her entrance. He pushed until only the tip was inside her, then circled again. She wanted more, but he held her firm.

He pushed in a little further. “What do you feel?” he asked.

“You possessing me, joining with me, filling me. I want—” She stopped herself. She could not reveal the deep longing she felt to seal with him.

He burrowed in deeper. “What do you want?”

“I want you to fuck me. Hard.” She could not reveal her deepest soul to him.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He rammed deep. "What do you feel?" he asked her again.

"You filling me completely."

"No. I want to know what you feel—your emotions."

"I do not know how to answer you. It is too much. The pleasure, the joy, the need to know more. How can I tell you? It is more than I can express with words."

"Yes," he said as he powered in, pulled out and began a steady rhythm of fucking.

The small cabin was scented with their passion; it was an aroma she would never forget. It permeated her skin, sinking deep inside, the melding of their bodies, their pleasure.

Again, he reached around with one hand to stroke her engorged clit, spiraling her upward yet again. She felt his khout expand her shax-ra as he grew larger and then finally he shouted his triumph as his khout exploded inside her, again sending her over the edge into her own subspace of release.

He did not stop, but continued to fuck her, driving her over the edge again and again. His hands working their magic on her body. There was no thought in her mind but to respond to his demands, to meet him thrust for thrust.

Finally, he withdrew and she collapsed onto the bed, trying to catch her breath, unable to believe what she had just experienced.

He helped her to lie on the bed and turned her over. His hands were gentle. It took all her self-control not to say "I love you, seal with me, please."

She looked up into his eyes and saw his dark gaze again studying her. But she did not see the love she wanted reflected there.

What did she expect? Her attention was drawn to the patch and remembered guilt flooded her. She did that to him. How could she possibly expect him to love her or to care for her in any way?

She turned onto her side, toward the wall. The effects of the drug

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

were diminishing. Alekos had received his payment and she would soon be free of the drug. She curled into ball.

She felt him draw the blanket over her body, but she could not turn to look at him. Her emotions were too raw.

"Where did the scars on your back come from? Were you captured and tortured?"

It was a question she had not anticipated. In the heat of passion she'd forgotten about the marks. "They are of no consequence."

"Where?" She felt a hand move to caress her back and she stiffened at the intimacy of the touch. "Answer me."

She couldn't look at him. "I failed in an assignment. I was punishment for my failure, all right? Now go away."

"The Tribunal did this to you? Haydon, the slitherers—they're worse than even I imagined. To do this to one of their own females."

"Go away," she whispered as she curled inward, away from him. She didn't want his compassion. Not now. She felt the blanket carefully repositioned over her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Look at me, so I know you are well—that I did not hurt you."

She could not do it. "I am fine. You have helped me and I thank you for that. I believe my debt is paid."

"Daelyn—"

She heard apology—and possibly pity—in his voice. She could not bear that. "No more, please—Alekos—just leave me alone. I am fine."

She heard soft movement behind her, the rustle of clothing, then the click of the lock, and finally silence. She knew she was alone.

Tears slid down her cheeks. Her body still tingled from his touch, and she knew it would always haunt her. Given time she would be able to accept that he could not be a part of her life. The closeness they shared in these last hours were all she would ever have. Had there ever been a moment when she felt more alone than now?

CHAPTER 10

Once the ship landed, Daelyn waited for everyone else to disembark before lifting her bag onto her shoulder and exiting the ship.

A swift glance to the side as she stepped onto the landing pad and she was met with the sight of Alekos being welcomed home by his family. She heard laughter and crying, saw the warm embraces, and an ache settled in her chest.

It was the sight of Gavrielle reaching up to touch the patch covering his eye that had Daelyn hurrying away in the opposite direction. Would he tell her how he had been injured? Who had caused him the loss of sight in his eye?

She remembered his beautiful sapphire eyes. They were the first thing about him that she noticed when she met him. And she had almost destroyed that completely. Yet even when she had no emotions to call on, she hesitated in killing him. To this day she would never understand what caused her to waver.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He should hate her for her subterfuge. So why did he come to her on the ship? Why had she allowed him to fuck her? She could have accepted any one of the males on board. Why had he not just allowed her to continue in discomfort and pain?

As she reached the door that would take her out of the landing bay and down the hallway toward her own quarters, she heard someone call her name.

Slamming her hand against the release, she hurried out, unwilling to answer their curiosity. She had stayed in her cabin until the ship landed, unwilling to face anyone after the intimacy with Alekos. She could not bear to hear their questions or to face him again.

He'd wanted payment of a longstanding debt and she'd given him what he demanded. But for her it was pure pleasure to enclose him in her body, to feel him swelling inside her shax-ra.

She slipped her identity card into the slot to her quarters and quickly stepped inside and locked the door. Dropping her bag to the floor, she leaned back against the door, exhaustion flooding her.

Focusing her attention across the room, she saw her image reflected back, a murky radiance of scarlet surrounded her. She felt heat seep through her, embarrassed by the thought that others might have seen it as she left the landing bay. She would have to be more careful in her thoughts, learn to mask her sexual arousal, especially now that it seemed her true radiance had been released. The other females seemed able to do it and she would master it as well.

But they'd had years to perfect it, whereas she'd never been required to harness it as she had no emotions to contend with. She gazed at herself in the mirror, pulling in her emotional desire for sexual release. Gradually the radiance dimmed, imprisoned inside her.

Self-control was not something she'd ever been forced to deal with. Guilt had never been part of her make up either. And now she was assailed by both.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

She needed to get past this fixation for Alekos Andromeda. Unfortunately, their recent encounter only made it worse. She would have to stay as far away from him as possible in future. But then knowing his wandering nature, she doubted he would stay on Ednos for very long. If he did, then she would be the one to leave.

Reaching down, she picked up her bag and headed toward the bedroom. Rest was not something that came easily to her these days.

She enjoyed the friendship of Eluria and Kierra, but she did not belong here on Ednos. Her family was gone, the village where she grew up destroyed shortly after she was inducted as an Enforcer. She had no one.

So where did she belong? Her life as an Enforcer was over and it was not something she wanted to restore. Every face she saw here on Ednos reminded her of what she had been a part of. To each person she wanted to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't know." But what use was that?

The weight of the deaths lay heavily on her shoulders—faces haunting her nightmares. Men she had taken to her bed to acquire knowledge about movements of the rebel forces. Females she had befriended to find out information about their families. As her village had been destroyed, so had theirs, and she was responsible for it.

She dropped onto the bed, hunched forward, lowering her head into her hands, swamped with the hopelessness of lost lives that were her fault.

Why had Alekos helped her? She didn't deserve his consideration. When she looked in the mirror, all she saw was the vision of an Enforcer, an assassin only equipped to take lives. She lifted her head and looked down at her hands. They were the hands of a killer, weapons used to force others to do her bidding, or to end their lives.

There was nothing she could do to change what she was. The only thing she could do was use her knowledge to help those she had so seriously harmed in the past, to try in some way to make amends for

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

what she had been a part of.

But would she ever merit forgiveness by any of them? She represented all that they hated and feared on Argadia. They might allow her to fight for them, but she would never be a part of her homeland again. She was separated from them because of the Tribunal and the Nanus process and what they had made of her.

Heaving a deep sigh, she fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. At least on this mission she'd helped to restore the pieces of a family. In that one sense she felt she had assisted in accomplishing some goodness. She would have willingly given her life for that to happen.

But what of her future? She was a warrior, an assassin, and she couldn't change that. Was she always meant to remain alone because of her past?

Her body again reacted to the memory of the intimacy she had shared with Alekos Andromeda. Was that all there would ever be for her? She raised her hands to cover her breasts, remembering the feel of his hands as he claimed her body. The hard grip as he thrust inside her, the feel of his lips on her neck, her back, his tongue.

Her shax spasmed with the ghost of remembrance, and she dropped a hand to cover her mound, remember the feel of pleasure as she climaxed again and again. Remembering the force of his own release inside her.

Dropping her hands away from her body, she gripped the bedcovering, fighting against the memories washing through her. In his own way he was gentle with her, more than she deserved.

In honesty, she realized she loved him as she never would another. She would have to come to terms with that and deal with it somehow. She had loved him for years and survived. She may not have recognized it as love, but she had followed his every movement, every bit of gossip absorbed about his whereabouts, whether he lived or died.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

To have experienced the intimacy on the ship was more than she ever could have hoped for. To experience even a peripheral closeness with his family was more than she could ever have expected.

Guardian had sent her here, but why? To punish her? To make amends for the past? To taunt her with what she wanted most but could not have? Each day here would be like someone taking a lash to her body, flaying her skin.

Yet she would accept what was apparently her Beyond. She dropped an arm across her eyes, attempted to block out the memories of the Before. A deep, shuddering breath passed through her lips. She was so tired, so very tired.

* * *

“Why do you watch her?”

Alekos stiffened at Eluria's softly spoken question from behind him. “I don't know what you are talking about.”

“Daelyn. You watch her. And when you are not looking, she watches you.”

“You're mistaken.”

“I don't think so. Do you really think I don't remember what it was like wanting Devon and certain I would never be with him again? I see the same yearning in your eyes. And in hers. Are you really unable to see what all this is doing to her?”

He studied the weary form of Daelyn as she exited the ship. It had been two weeks since their return from Argadia. His family required his attention for most of that time in becoming reacquainted with his mother and his siblings. But he had not forgotten Daelyn Kapri.

It was punishment for my failure. Words she uttered that he would never forget. Had she been punished for her failure to kill him? Was that how she had earned those terrible scars? It humbled him to think of what she had suffered during her time as an Enforcer. What allowing him to live had cost her. Too many thoughts and feelings warred inside

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

him. He couldn't get her out of his mind.

She had closed herself off from all contact in some way since returning to Ednos. He was unable to find an opening to talk to her, to find some opportunity to get through the barriers she had erected.

Right now she looked as though ready to collapse with dark circles beneath her eyes, and he could tell she had lost weight.

"She volunteers for every assignment," Eluria said softly. "It eats at her. The same way it has done with Devon. Though I am there for Devon as is the rest of his family."

Finally, Alekos tore his gaze away from the female he yearned to possess again and again. He focused on Eluria standing beside him.

"What are you talking about? What eats at her?"

"The guilt. They were Enforcers who killed at the command of the Tribunal without emotion or concern, and they both are having a hard time coming to terms with what they did. In the night, when Devon awakens from his nightmares, I am there for him. But the guilt of the past lies heavy within his chest. I cannot imagine how much worse it must be for Daelyn. She has no one to share that pain with and it eats away at her. One of these times, she will not return from a mission, you can see it in her eyes."

Something inside his chest thudded to a halt. "She would not do anything to herself. She is stronger than that."

"Is she, Alekos? Her monsters haunt her without relief. How long can she go on this way?"

"What about a counselor? I know there are several here."

Eluria shook her head. "She bottles it up inside. She refuses to talk about it. We never realized when we began to utilize the antidote to the Nanus process, the guilt that would be associated and rise to the surface when their emotions and memories were returned. Nor the response of our own people to having ex-Enforcers walking and working next to them. There is so much anger. This war must end soon. Our people

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

cannot stand much more.”

Alekos nodded his head. “I know. Each day brings more and more casualties—not just in deaths, but in spirit, in the scars to the mind.”

“I agree.” As he watched, Eluria pressed a hand to her abdomen, then looked at him. “I want this war ended for our children. We must make it safe for them.”

“It will happen, Eluria. Your child will know safety—and freedom.”

He saw Eluria’s gaze turn back to watch Daelyn. “What of her? Will you help her?”

“What makes you think I can?”

Again, she looked at him. “There is more between you than you let on. Why is it she would let no other male near her on the ship? Except you, whom she has known for a shorter period of time than the others—a virtual stranger to her.”

He could not answer her. What was between him and Daelyn was private. He should hate her—but that was not the emotion he felt for the female. He wanted to protect her from any more pain. If he explained how he knew her, he didn’t know how his family would react.

He stood there watching as Daelyn checked in her weapons and then heaved her backpack onto her shoulder. He wanted to go there, to take the heavy burden from her shoulders onto his own.

After long moments, he heard Eluria’s deep sigh. “She does not sleep. There are many nights when she goes to the exercise room and works until she drops. She does not rest, she does not eat, and she volunteers for every mission. How long do you think she can keep going like this? All right, you don’t want to tell me what is between you, but will you allow her to continue doing this to herself without some effort to stop her?”

“I doubt that she wants my help.” His gaze followed Daelyn as she

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

exited the bay. He wanted to follow her.

“Oh, she wants it. There are times when I see her watching you and for a fraction of a moment her sexual radiance becomes visible. She has learned to harness it, but sometimes I think it is more than even she can control. She is my friend, Alekos. She is not the Enforcer she once was, and every day I see her try to make amends for what she did through no fault of her own my heart breaks for her. The continuing guilt she and Devon carry is misplaced and they struggle with it.”

Alekos ran a hand across his face. He was planning to leave Ednos—would it really do any good to confront Daelyn when he did not plan to stay around? He was a wanderer—he was not like Devon or even Jarek Bakari, Kierra’s taman. And he had always been alone and done for himself. Was it fair to any female to ask them to share an uncertain life with him? But that is what he wanted with Daelyn more than he thought possible. He wanted her with him.

“I will think on what you have said, Eluria.”

She nodded. “That is all I ask, brother. If you have no feelings for her, then I apologize for my intrusion. But I think you do. Before you leave, things must be set right.”

She reached up and hugged him, then turned and left him alone. He pivoted back to look at the empty bay. Every mission he knew she was part of, he waited for her return. He stood right here hidden from her view and watched to be certain she came back safely. Every time he feared the worst, yet he had not approached her.

Maybe it was time. At least he would know one way or the other the nature of her feelings for him, if any existed.

CHAPTER 11

“What are you trying to do, kill yourself?”

Daelyn whipped around, almost losing her balance to encounter the hard stare of Alekos Andromeda. She glared at him and then pivoted back to throw another punch at the bag hanging in front of her.

Before she could make contact, he grabbed her wrist and whirled her back around, drawing her flush against his hard chest.

She felt angry determination in his hard embrace, felt his body heat singe her.

“Why are you here?” she demanded.

“You need someone to take you in hand. You are obviously attempting to put yourself in a grave. Look at you. How much weight have you lost since we returned?”

She struggled against him. “That is none of your business. I am trying to keep my edge. We are at war, there is no time to relax.”

He leaned closer and she fought against the arousal she felt building

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

inside her.

"You need down time as much as you need this practice. You should be in stasis, not honing your edge in the middle of the night."

"Leave me alone."

His gaze glittered intensely, boring into her. "I cannot." He pulled her up harder against him.

She stilled at his words; her breath caught in her chest. She broke the connection, looking away, her self-control beginning to shatter.

"You must." She took a shuddering breath. "Or do you feel another payment due on this debt you feel I owe you?"

She again connected with him, saw a flicker of something in his determined look just before the world turned upside down and she found herself slung across his shoulder.

His arms locked around her thighs as he turned and strode from the exercise room.

"What are you doing?" she demanded as she struggled against his firm hold.

"Taking you in hand as I said."

"You have no right to do this." She continued to pound at his back impotently. It was as though he was made of hard rock and nothing seemed to affect him. His arms bound her legs to his chest and she could not use them to gain purchase.

"You will pay for this, Andromeda."

He entered an apartment, strode across the room into another, and dropped her onto a bed. She gasped and pushed back her hair, then jumped to her feet.

"Why have you done this? What do you want from me?"

"You're mine," he ground out, eye glittering, face set.

She stilled. "What are you talking about? I belong to no one."

"You let me into your body and from that moment on you belonged to me."

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

She tried to inch toward the door. "That was fucking, nothing more."

He pounced on her, grabbed her wrists, and shoved them above her head, anchoring them against the wall. "Do you really believe that?" he whispered hoarsely. "Since that first time so many years ago, I have thought of no female but you. Your scent has clung to me like a solarian spider's web-soft silk, clinging and never letting go." He ground his hips against her and she felt his hard erection. "When I took you on the ship, I claimed you as surely as any male claims his female."

"No," she gasped. "It was a debt. Your pride was wounded because I had bested you. It was nothing more."

Like a striking slitherer he sprung at her, claiming her lips, his tongue burying itself inside her mouth, demanding, searing.

Quivers ran through her body. She struggled against his grasp, yet her body yearned for more. Lifting his head, he glared down at her.

"It was no debt I wanted paid by you. I wanted you. No other, only you."

"That's not possible. I tried to kill you. You cannot possibly want me."

"You were an Enforcer, why didn't you kill me? There was nothing stopping you. You had the chance, I remember it well. Why did you not point that disrupter at me and end it?"

She shuddered at the memory his words invoked. "I-I don't know."

"Because even then there was something between us, some spark that pushed past those Nanus blocks and spoke to you. It was the same for me even though I've tried to deny it all these years. I want you, Daelyn Kapri. I will no longer deny the feelings I have for you, nor are they clouded by the Enforcer you were."

"You had me, that should be enough."

He pressed nearer and again lowered his head. "It will never be

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

enough," he whispered just before he again claimed her mouth.

She could not fight him; she wanted him too badly. His tongue stroked at hers, sucked at her, a blaze erupting inside her. Yes, she wanted, she *needed* him.

He broke the kiss, his lips hovering enticingly close. "I want you for all time." His gaze moved away from her face and she saw a smile curve his lips. "I see your radiance. How much longer do you think you can hide from me? You want me, too."

She tried to draw in her emotions, tried to deny the feeling he aroused in her, but it was no use. "Sexual need doesn't mean I love you."

"Does it not? What about the fact that you didn't kill me when you had the chance? What does that speak of? After that night, I made it my mission to find out all I could about you. I know what your reputation was as an Enforcer. You were considered no less lethal than Devon. There was a reason you didn't complete your mission."

"I could not end your life," she acknowledged. "But that doesn't mean—"

"It means a great deal for a fully trained Enforcer not to complete a mission. And you paid a high price for it as well didn't you? That's what those scars on your back came from. I was the mission you failed to complete."

She didn't want to remember how high a price she had paid, days of unending pain at the Nanus facility, reminding her of her duty. Yet, there had not been a time when she'd regretted her actions in sparing his life.

"I would do it again," she admitted. She turned her head away. "It doesn't matter. The past would always haunt us. Argadians will never again see me as female, only as Enforcer. I was brought here to use my skills and knowledge as an Enforcer. That is what I am doing. Eluria gave me back my emotions, my memories, and I will use what I know

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

to help the rebellion.”

“Is that really all you think they want from you? What any of the people here want? What about Devon? He is looked upon as a leader, a friend. Yet he was an Enforcer as well.”

She felt the pain of guilt assault her. “He is family. It’s different for him.”

He cupped her face, searching for what she didn’t know. “How is he different? He is Argadian, he was an assassin, and he is now here to help our fight. He has many of the same memories that you have—do you think it any easier for him?”

“It’s not the same,” she tried to argue.

“Do you think the demons don’t ride him as well? Yet, he doesn’t distance himself from everyone or attempt to drive himself into the ground.”

“He has people who care for him and whom he cares for,” she blurted out, then bit her lip at her own betrayal.

His expression softened. “Do you really think no one cares what happens to you?”

“How could they?” she asked in a tortured whisper. “Do you know how many people I killed? Innocent lives taken? Because I was programmed to do so? How can anyone not look at me and hate the sight of me?” Again, she tried to get away from him, but he pressed her more firmly against the wall.

“I care,” he said quietly.

The walls guarding her heart began to melt beneath the searing need those two words evoked inside her. Her feelings for him had never made sense—not from the beginning, when she should have experienced no emotion at all for him. But something far deeper had occurred. Could she turn her back on it yet again? Or did she dare to take a chance.

She gazed up at him, searching his face, the grooved lines and scars

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

of a male who had lived a hard life without compromise.

So much of her life had been lived without emotion, without choices. She had a choice now, and it was probably the most important she would ever make. She knew that Alekos Andromeda had the ability to make her experience more than she had ever known.

“You make me feel things, want what I should not.” No longer able to fight him as well as herself, she leaned up to claim his mouth, drinking greedily from his lips.

He released her hands and threaded his fingers through her hair, pulling her to him. Then his hands moved down to her suit. He ripped it open, pushed it from her shoulders, and leaned down to sup eagerly at her breasts.

She shuddered with need at his touch, her shax-ra exploding with her juices. For the first time in her life she felt it, her radiance surrounding them both within its red heat, undulating around them. She yearned for something beyond her reach.

He pushed her uniform down, divesting her of her clothing quickly, and then finished removing his own and tossed them to the side.

He moved back to her, consuming her body with his mouth and his hands stroking along her hips, her arms, her legs. He knelt in front of her and pushed her thighs open. When his tongue sank deep inside her, she moaned with need as her juices slid from her.

His tongue darted quick and deep, lapping at her, stroking her, retreated and swirled at her opening, teasing her clitoris. His hands gripped her buttocks, kneading and releasing.

“Hard, tight silk,” he growled. “I cannot get enough of you.”

Her legs began to quiver and she knew they would be unable to hold her for much longer. The pleasure was too intense.

She gasped as she felt herself lifted and pinned to the wall, her legs pulled over his shoulders as he continued to suck at her clit, driving her higher and higher. She saw stars before her eyes, a building of need

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

inside her, like the boiling heat of a volcano about to explode. Her body tightened, preparing for the impending explosion she knew was close. Then his mouth lifted away just as she was about to burst.

"No," she cried out, her hands slapped flat against the wall behind her, nails digging deep in denial. "Mylonna, please, I need it."

"Soon," his voice vibrated against her thigh, just before he nipped with his teeth and soothed with his tongue. He licked around and over her inner, sensitive thighs, keeping her at the edge of the precipice, lingering, needing to jump, yet the pleasure he provided made her gasp for breath.

He sucked at her flesh, licked at it lingeringly as though he savored the juicy flesh of a succulent fruit. Her skin burned with need, her radiance glowed bright enough to light the night sky, swirling and consuming them, pushing the passion higher and higher.

"Please, Alekos," she begged as she tried to thrust her hips against him. Yet he had her anchored against the wall, totally in control of her body.

"Do you know how many nights I've lain awake envisioning you like this?" His breath was so hot and moist against her skin. "Have you dreamed of me, *na nivia*?"

His love? Her hazy mind could not fathom that he meant the words. As much as she wanted them to mean something, she knew it had to simply be the sexual heat of the moment.

His tongue suddenly thrust deep, taking her breath away, then receded. "Have you?" His mouth on her skin demanded an answer.

"Yes," she screamed. "I want you to fuck me. Please, Alekos. I need to know the pleasure. I need to feel you inside me."

"When I take you, Daelyn, *na nivia*, it will not simply be a fucking. I wanted more on the ship, but I knew you were not ready and the drug colored your need." He looked up at her from between her splayed legs, his face wet with her juices. "I want more from you."

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

“Please, Alekos.” What was he trying to tell her? Already, she burned with need for him. She would not refuse him, could not.

“I will seal with you. Will you accept me as your taman, Daelyn Kapri? For I will settle for nothing less from you than union.”

CHAPTER 12

Shock held her in its grip. He could not possibly mean it. How could he want to seal with her, an ex-assassin?

“Forget the past, think only of the Beyond. Will you allow yourself to seal body and soul with me in the most intimate way a male and female can be together? It shall be all or nothing.”

His mouth teased at her thighs, making it difficult for her to think clearly. Oh, Mylonna, but she wanted him in that way, more than she wanted anything in her life. To feel a part of something so special, her heart would burst if she did not experience the intimacy just this once, with this male, who had so indelibly impressed his memory into her spirit for so many years.

“Yes, Alekos, oh, Mylonna, yes. I want to seal with you. Only you.”

His tongue again pressed deep inside her sheath, licking and stroking at her. His hands pressed against the cheeks of her ass, traced the crack, then sank into her shax-ra as his tongue receded. Had she

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

ever felt anything as erotic as what he was doing to her now?

Her mind was consumed by him, her body responding like a musical instrument to the plucking fingers of the musician. She could not stop the need, like hot, flowing lava, pouring out of the mountain.

Again the desire mounted, hot and heavy inside her, building rapidly, a searing ball of fire wedged in her loins, swirling heat expanding upward and outward throughout her body, until finally he sucked hard and she exploded, screaming her release, gasping for air as her body pulsed and spasmed and he continued to lap at her juices.

She could not catch her breath as he forced her to climb, to stay at the peak, burning brightly, her aura a blaze of glory all around them. Darkness began to enclose her, exploding stars all around her as he pulled another climax from her, her body quivering with the intense pleasure she was unable to control.

In a haze of feeling, she felt him lower her legs and lift her into his arms. He brought his lips down over hers, not letting her drift to the ground as his tongue tangled with hers, sucked at her taste as she absorbed his. She wound her arms around his neck as he quickly walked across the room and lay her on the soft bed.

She knew his intentions and as quickly as his arms left her, she yanked at them and pushed him onto the bed, crawling over his body.

"You have given me so much. Now it is my turn to play ravager." She felt his acquiescence as he lay back and her tongue explored the hard contours of his body. His nipples peaked and she nipped and teased at them. Her hand enclosed his hard erection, thick and ready, bursting with passion.

She licked her lips as she moved down his tight, firm abdomen, her tongue swirling over the definition of his lean hips, playing across the surface of his skin, savoring his taste, until finally she encountered his pulsing khout.

Hot skin, the tip sheened with the liquid evidence of his desire. The

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

tip of her tongue touched the plumed, burgeoning head, tasting exotic flavor that zinged through her body. Oh, she planned to savor the taste of him like the sweet fruit blooming only one week of the year.

She used her tongue to stroke down the long shaft, swirled and bathed the heavy twin sacs beneath, as though supping at an elegant dinner created for her delight.

She heard him moan, felt his body tighten, saw his fingers fist in the blanket beneath them. Moving her mouth upward, she again swirled her tongue over the deeply reddening shaft and enclosed him in her mouth, sucking as deeply as she could, enjoying the pulsing heat of his khout, feeling it invade her own body, driving her desire high yet again.

Her head bobbed along the sleek, slippery length, as she used her hands to stroke him, felt his body tighten, preparing, as she had done when he sucked at her body. She knew he was close, so very close, and pulled from his khout at the last moment, leaving him as he had left her, wanting, needing the release.

She heard him gasp, heard his struggled breath as she nipped at his thighs, enclosed his sacs in her mouth, bathing them with her tongue.

“Daelyn, you are torturing me with your mouth. Pleasant torture to be sure, but still torture. Come to me.”

“Soon,” she breathed against his skin. She licked at his thighs, over his hips, along his abdomen, wanting him to experience the same high exhilaration that she had experienced. Finally, she moved back to give his khout the attention it demanded, sliding her tongue along the deeply embedded pulsing vein along its length and at last enveloping him into her mouth once again.

She felt it building, sucked hard, tonguing aggressively over his sex, until she felt him fall and her mouth was flooded with his seed. She sucked and swallowed, her hands working frantically at the pulsing khout as his semen poured into her mouth. She lapped at him as he shouted, his body tight, hands gripped in her hair.

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

He pulled her up to him and she released his again rising khout. He yanked her up his body, slamming his mouth down over hers, claiming her voraciously, his arms clamping around her, then driving her body into the bed as he came over her, forcing her submission to his demands.

He pulled his lips from hers and looked down at her, his blue gaze glittering, dilated with lust.

“Now,” he ground out. With his legs he separated her thighs and she felt his khout, which had hardened quickly once again, at the entrance to her shax-ra. “You are mine, Daelyn, always.”

He thrust inside her and she felt her channel expand and accept him. Quickly she sheathed him, felt his hard length filling her. It was exquisite pleasure.

He ground against her, driving her higher. She lifted her legs to wind them around his hips, sending him ever deeper. In and out she felt his slippery length burrowing inside as she pulsed around him, felt him recede to swirl the tip over her sensitized shax lips, then tunnel deep yet again. Over and over, she met his rhythm, feeling the pleasure swirl around them both, feeling the pulse of her sexual radiance gain depth, matching their rhythm.

“One,” he breathed against her ear just before his tongue flicked around the outer sensitive curve. “Say it,” he demanded as he nipped at her lobe.

She inhaled sharply, her body tingling brightly with awareness, feeling the burgeoning beginning of the seal about to erupt. “One,” she responded, feeling the heat of his loins slap against her.

“Union,” he ground out. “Union as one.” His hips pushed against her, demanding her acceptance.

It frightened her. She looked at him as he raised his head to lock his gaze with hers, increasing the tempo of his thrusts.

“Say it.”

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

How could she resist him? She wanted him like no other, but what he asked of her...how could he demand the ultimate avowal? Why would he want to?

She turned her head away, but he placed a firm hand beneath her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Say it."

"U-union as one," she finally whispered.

"Mean it," he demanded. "Body and soul. I will have union with you and only with you. Give me your oath."

Unwanted tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. He leaned down to lick the moisture away and more followed. He continued to consume them.

"Union as one," she sobbed.

He moved his head and claimed her lips. She tasted the salty presence of her tears on his tongue, the essence of her pleasure on his lips, and an overwhelming need to seal with him, to trust him, to become a part of him filled her completely.

He slammed into her, wedging deeply and stilled. Lightly, she felt the tentacles of his vibris feather against the opening to her womb. Pleasurable shudders engulfed her as she sensed her passage opening wider to him, ready to accept his seed.

More awaited as she felt the shy anstillia cord secreted in her body extend outward. Pulling at the cheeks of his ass, separating them, she felt the slick cord preparing his anus and finally passing through into his body, linking them as one.

"Accept me," she whispered.

She felt him shudder against her, felt his khout lengthen, locking at the entrance to her womb as she sealed him to her. The cord stroked at his rectum and she felt the pleasure echo inside her own body, ripple upon ripple of unbelievable pleasure. Yet when he exploded and she felt his ultimate orgasm inside her own body, it was so much more than she could ever have imagined. Her own release followed quickly. His

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

lips fastened over hers, as the shudders vibrated through their bodies. His climax became hers and she felt the merging of souls, of hearts, of bodies in an unimagined melding of two beings, where the balance and combining of spirits fused them as one.

His arms wrapped around her tightly and hers around him. Her tears refused to stop and she sobbed, flooded with joy and ecstasy as she never experienced before this moment.

“One,” she screamed. And she heard the echo of his deep voice.

“One,” he shouted as they blended into a single being for a fraction of an instant, wrapped in the pulsing radiance of her sexual core.

She never wanted this moment to end. There had never been this closeness with another being, never this need to climb into their skin, to become so deeply entrenched inside them, that she was no longer a separate being.

Finally, her anstillia cord slowly retracted from his body and he separated from her, drawing her up next to him on the bed, into his arms.

She still shuddered in the aftermath of the experience. But as the last vestiges of hot passion receded, she had to wonder what came next. They were silent for long moments, just laying content, wrapped in each others arms.

She wanted to remember this feeling, this night, for as long as she lived. It would carry her into the Beyond.

“We are one now,” he finally said into the silence.

“I-I would not hold you to the vows made in the heat of sex,” she said, needing to offer him a way out.

He tilted her chin up to look at him. “Did you think I made my oath lightly? We have completed union, we have sealed. There is no act more intimate between a male and female than what we have just experienced. None. Do you doubt what has just happened?”

“No, I...I just do not want—” She burst into tears, unable to help

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

herself. She had been so alone for so many years, it simply was not possible for her to believe in the reality of what she experienced with Alekos.

"I will be leaving Ednos in a few days and I want you to come with me."

Shock arrowed through her. She'd never expected this. "You cannot be serious."

"I've thought on it. It won't be an easy life, but it will not be boring." He took a deep breath. "I've watched you ever since we arrived on Ednos, wanted you, feared for you when you accepted mission after mission. Hungered to be with you. Eluria finally brought me to my senses. I could only hope that you felt the same as me, and I believe you do. I would never force you, Daelyn, even though we have spoken the vow. Yet no other will do for me."

She wanted to deny what she felt for him, to force him from her. What he offered was fantasy.

"Come with me now. Say you will accept me as your taman."

He had no idea how badly she wanted to go with him. She had never sealed with another male, never known that level of intimacy with another, had never wanted to. Her depth of feeling for Alekos frightened her. She realized now that she would have given her life to save his when she went with Eluria to mount the rescue.

It had not strictly been out of guilt and to make reparation. She had loved him even then.

She reached up to touch his face, knowing there was no other answer, no matter what the Beyond held for her. "I will come with you, but I will not follow you. I will stand and fight by your side. I will be your tafai if you wish. I cannot give back what I have taken from you, but I will give you the Beyond if I can."

He pressed her hand to his lips, his tongue stroking her palm and she shivered at the intense pleasure of his touch. He then pressed it to

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

his cheek.

"I do not want you out of some misplaced guilt you may hold. I don't want your guilt. Tell me it isn't the need to pay for the Before that drives you now. Leave the memories in the Before where they belong. We move forward from here to the Beyond, both redeemed by this odd love we have found."

"It is not guilt that makes me wish to be with you. I believe Guardian set us on this path from that first moment. I tried to deny it, but it was not to be. Are you certain, Alekos? Is this truly what you want?" She had to be sure it was.

"I'm not like my brother. He knew from the beginning who his mate was and all of that was taken from him. But he's found his happiness. I've lived with uncertainty all my life. Life with me will not be easy, I'm used to being alone and taking care of myself." She saw the corner of his mouth quirk upward. "And giving the orders." He again gazed down at her and brushed his thumb across her full lips. "But when I met you, something inside me changed. I would have continued alone had we not met again. We cannot refuse what Guardian has offered us."

"One," was her answer. "Union as one."

He leaned over her and his hands and mouth again claimed her body.

CHAPTER 13

Tonight was their last night on Ednos and Gavrielle chose to host a family dinner. Surprisingly, Daelyn looked forward to leaving with Alekos and being alone with him, eager to begin the adventure with her chosen taman.

She still had a difficult time believing that Alekos Andromeda was her taman. It was something she never would have dreamed would occur. Yet so much had happened over the last few weeks. She could not now imagine a Beyond without him. Oh, he still attempted to exert his dominance, but they had come to an agreement.

She smiled as she thought about their method of negotiation. It was her feeling that they argued just so they could have the pleasure of making up.

As an Enforcer she had always worked alone, unlike some who worked in tandem. Alekos, the infamous Ravager, had also led a solitary existence. In the last few weeks as they prepared the ship and

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

reviewed maps, listened to the more recent reports of Tribunal activity, they came to act more as one with like minds. Except for the occasional disagreement.

“What are you thinking?” Eluria asked from across the room. “It looks like you are far away.”

“Looks to me like she has my brother on her mind.” Kierra laughed. Daelyn shook her head. “It seems he is no longer far from it.”

Kierra nodded. “As it should be between those sealed in union. I’m glad you found each other. I didn’t like to think of either of you alone. You both deserve happiness.”

Alekos assured her he had not divulged how he sustained his injuries. His belief in her at times still left her breathless. He truly did love her and Guardian had offered her a most precious gift in making him her taman.

“How are you feeling, Eluria? No ill effects as of yet?” She wanted to turn the subject from herself. Eluria smiled and patted her abdomen.

“None yet. But Devon is being ridiculous. He treats me like spun glass and thinks I will break at the least movement.” She laughed softly. “He will make a good sire.” Tears glittered in her eyes.

Suddenly a memory surfaced in Daelyn. How could she have forgotten? “Eluria,” she gasped, “I’ve remembered something. Haydon, how could I have forgotten something so important?”

Kierra and Eluria turned to look at her. “What is it? What has you so upset?”

“On Argadia, when I was with Zydon, he revealed something. How could I have forgotten? I am so sorry.”

“What is it? What did my father say to you?”

“It must have been the drug,” Daelyn muttered, then turned to Eluria. “It was just before the explosion. He told me that he had not sired you. He is not your true father.”

Eluria gasped and fell back onto the lounge. Kierra sat beside her

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

and grasped her hand.

“Mylonna, how could I not have known? It all makes sense.” She looked up at Daelyn and the look in her eyes took Daelyn’s breath away. “I do not carry his blood. I cannot pass on the evil to my child.” Then she burst into tears, covering her face with both hands. “You do not know the guilt, the fear I have carried for my child.”

Daelyn hurriedly sat down next to her and put her arm around her. “I’m sorry. I should have remembered. I don’t know how I could have been so thoughtless.”

Eluria wiped the tears from her cheeks, turned to Daelyn and clasped her hand. “He beat you, Daelyn. And you had the drug in your system. It really is a wonder you remember anything of that day. But you did remember and you have eased me with your words in ways nothing else could have.”

“I just wish I had remembered sooner.”

“You have done so now and that’s what is important. And you have given me peace with that knowledge. My child will be safe. One day we will end the Tribunal’s reign of terror.” She rose from her seat. “Come, the others are waiting.”

All three got up and moved toward the dining room. Devon, Alekos, and Jarek were already seated, involved in a tactical discussion of some sort. All three looked up as their tafais entered the room. They separated and joined their females. The look in Alekos’ gaze filled her heart with joy. His arm circled around her as she sat next to him and his lips claimed hers.

They separated as his mother entered the room with a tray of serving dishes, and Kierra hurried to help her lay them out on the table. They all sat in silence for a moment, their heads bowed in thankfulness to Guardian, hands clasped.

Daelyn glanced up and around the table, looking at each face individually. It was a wonder to her that she had become a part of such

RAVAGER'S REDEMPTION

a wonderful, loving family. How her life had changed.

This was the heart, the knowledge that although they might be at war with a savage and powerful enemy, wounds and scars could be healed, love could blossom, and life would be renewed.

Her hand tightened on Alekos' hand, and she felt his strength and forceful love pass into her. She in turn passed that strength on to Jarek who sat next to her, and on and on it went, each giving to the next, depending on the person next to them to magnify the strength, determination, and commitment to a society built on freedom for all, and not fear.

On the morrow she and Alekos would board the ship they had made their own and renew their fight. Together. It was the beginning of their Beyond, on a ship newly christened Ravager's Redemption. And her own as well.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

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For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com.

* * *

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