

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

BEVERLY HAVLIR

Karn'al:
Logan's
FALL

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Logan's Fall

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LOGAN'S FALL

Beverly Havlir

Dedication

To Justin and Bea,
You two are the sunshine of my life.

Prologue

Loud explosions rocked the street. Orange flames gobbled up dwellings, leaving nothing but ash and ruin. Terrified screams filled the air. The Pagans had caught wind of a Karn'alian uprising. To quash all signs of rebellion, the hated invaders were burning every house to the ground and sparing no lives. The stench of death was pervasive.

Logan Mi'an Tar ran to his house as fast as his short legs would allow, his thin arms pumping just as hard. Tears streamed down his face. He prayed his mother and sister were unharmed. Please Gods, let them be okay.

The air was thick and acrid with smoke, mixing with the smell of burning flesh. His eyes stung. He coughed, fighting to take a breath through the fear that knotted his throat. Another huge explosion rocked the ground. He ducked, clapping his hands over his ears.

He'd begged his mother, pleaded with her to come with him to the secret underground facility so they could be safe. But she'd stubbornly refused. She believed his father was alive, and she was staying put in case he came home. Despite his protests, she'd sent him to his father's lab to check for him. But Logan had known his father was dead, known it as soon as his father had failed to come home.

Logan tripped on a piece of burning debris and fell hard. He cried out at the pain that shot up his leg. Gritting his teeth, he pushed to his feet and continued to run. I'm not going to give up. They're still alive, he chanted over and over in his head.

Logan stumbled to a halt in front of his house, breathing hard. It was strangely quiet. Unlike most of the others, it wasn't on fire. But something wasn't right, he could feel it. He jumped as bloodcurdling screams of terror reached his ears.

Fury hardened his resolve. He made his way to the side of the house, careful to duck and stay out of sight. At the back where his room was located, a window was ajar. Stars exploded in the back of his eyes as he climbed through the opening. The pain in his leg was excruciating. Stifling a cry, he landed inside noiselessly. Faint sounds of masculine laughter reached his ears, but he couldn't tell where they were coming from. His heart pounded with fear as he gripped the butt of the small blaster he'd taken from his father's lifeless hand. It was the only weapon he had.

In the kitchen, he found his mother and sister on the floor. Their wrists were bound and they were bloodied and bruised. His mother's leg lay at an odd angle.

His sister, Atie'ne, saw him first. "Logan," she sobbed. "Get out of here before they see you."

Logan glanced out the window where a couple of Pagan soldiers stood talking some distance away. "I'm getting you and Mother out of here."

"No, son." His mother's voice was laced with defeat. "It's too late for us. Go and save yourself."

He fumbled with the complicated knots on his mother's wrist. "I will not leave you. We're all getting out of here."

"My leg is broken." Mar'lane Mi'an Tar sounded exhausted. "Atie'ne is hurt. You can't get us both out of here."

He began to cry. "I don't care. I'll do it. I can."

His mother looked at him through the tears swimming in her eyes. "You have to save yourself."

Logan shook his head. "No!"

"Son, listen to me." He focused on her, his chest constricting at the sight of her swollen, nearly unrecognizable face. "You're a brave boy, Logan. I have to ask you to do something that is difficult but necessary."

He wiped his cheeks. "What is it?"

"Use the blaster and put us out of our misery."

"No!"

Atie'ne wept. "It's the only way, Logan."

"I'm not going to shoot you," he cried. "I'm not."

"The Pagans are going to rape us before they kill us." Resignation laced his mother's voice. "Just like they've done to the others."

"I can't," he whispered.

"Do it now," Mar'lane urged. "Before it's too late."

"Mother—"

"There's no time to waste. Any moment now, the Pagans will come back." Mar'lane took a deep, labored breath. "The gods have decided our fate. It's the only way, Logan. We need you to stay alive. You're our only hope." Her tone softened. "Your father would want you to do this."

He wept. His father had warned them it might come to this. To let his mother and sister live would be a fate worse than death. The enemy would subject them to more suffering before allowing them a slow, painful passing.

With his mother and sister injured, he wouldn't be able to get them out in time. If he was caught, he'd die too. Logan reached out and gripped his mother's limp hand, rubbing her palm with his thumb. How had their lives come to this? The happiness he'd grown up with was now gone, destroyed by the hated invaders.

The burden of his task made his shoulders slump. His heart wrenched, protesting what he was about to do. He swallowed the lump in his throat, steeling his resolve. Hatred for the Pagans intensified, carving a deep gash in his soul. In that moment, the boy inside him ceased to exist.

There was no other way.

He stood up. His hands trembled as he gripped the blaster and aimed.

"I love you, son."

His mother's words rang in his ear as he fired two shots. Mar'lane and Atie'ne slumped on the floor, lifeless...

With an anguished cry, Logan jackknifed from the bed. His body was bathed in sweat, and his heartbeat thundered in his ears.

"Commander Logan."

He pulled in several deep breaths. "Goddammit it all to hell."

"Commander Logan. I know you can hear me."

"Leave me the fuck alone." Logan reached for the portable medication unit next to his bed and repeatedly punched the button that would release powerful painkillers into his system.

"Hello to you too," the husky female voice on the com-link quipped. "I detect hyperactivity in your neuro-monitor."

He raked a hand through his hair. "By the gods, Miranda. Don't you have anything better to do than keep tabs on me?"

"It's my job. Now turn on the damn monitor, will you?"

Shaking his head and muttering about difficult females, Logan flicked the switch on the monitor. Miranda An'hari's face came into view. "There. Happy?"

"Not even close." Concern lined the doctor's pretty features. "Another one of your night terrors?"

"It's always the same, Doc." Though his tone was mocking, Logan winced at the fierce throbbing that attacked his skull. He punched the button again. Why did it take so fucking long for the medication to take effect? "Nothing ever changes. It's my own personal torture."

"I want you to come in for some tests."

"Sorry. No can do." Logan rubbed his face, doing his best to ignore the excruciating pain reverberating in his head. "I'm in the Antion galaxy right now. I have some matters to see to on Zalian Three."

"You're pissing me off," Miranda warned. "I need to make some adjustments to your com-plant to see if we can lessen the frequency of the nightmares. I can't do that if you won't come home."

His lips twisted. "How many times have you made adjustments? It doesn't fucking work. We both know there's something in my brain that's resisting."

"We won't know that for sure until you let me run a comprehensive test. What is it with you? Do you want to keep on dealing with the nightmares and the pain?"

"Yeah. It keeps me focused."

Miranda sighed. "I've been monitoring you and—"

Logan shook his head, tired of the subject. "*Monitoring* me? What if I was in bed with a woman? You like to listen in, is that it?"

"I've heard them all, Logan. Nothing shocks me anymore. Not even that very vocal woman you had in your bed the other night."

Despite the pain hammering his brain, he managed a weak grin. "That's good to know."

"It's my job to make sure you're functioning at one hundred percent efficiency. One of the perks is listening in anytime I want." She raised an eyebrow. "Out of curiosity, what were you doing to her that made her scream like a banshee?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, Doc," he muttered. As the head of the team of doctors assigned to safeguard the health of Karn'alian Cyborgs, Miranda was privy to a lot of personal stuff, including when Cyborgs had sex. They had no secrets from her.

She snorted. "That's why I asked. Now are you coming in, or do I have to play dirty and have Tristan summon you home?"

"You're right. That is playing dirty."

"Part of my job, darling. I'll be preparing extensive tests and diagnostics. I need to figure out how to stop the nightmares, Logan. I don't want you to suffer."

"Too late for that." He'd been suffering since that fateful day years ago when his life had changed irrevocably.

"You're in pain right now, aren't you?"

He shrugged. There was no denying it. Miranda knew all about the debilitating headaches that inevitably accompanied the nightmares.

"I want to help you, but I can't do that until you come home."

Logan sighed. "We've tried to figure it out before, Miranda. I'm getting sick and tired of being poked and prodded, attached to some fucking beeping machine, having my brain scans read over and over." Frustration rose to the surface. "Nothing works."

"Do you trust me, Logan?"

He didn't bother to answer that one. Miranda was one of the few people he did trust. "I think you find it fun to make me suffer through those tests," he grumbled, clutching his head.

She grinned. "I've got to get my kicks somehow, right?"

"You should take Joren and run some experiments on him. He'd do anything to get in your pants."

"I'm not interested."

Miranda might say she wasn't attracted to Joren, but he knew better. The telltale color on her cheeks proved it. Miranda and Joren had a love-hate relationship that was amusing to watch, like a game of cat and mouse. "*Uh-huh*. If you say it often enough, maybe you'll believe it too."

"I'll be waiting for you to come home." Miranda smoothly changed the subject. "In the meantime, I'll be monitoring you closely. Take care, Logan." The monitor flickered and went black.

Logan slumped back on the bed, closing his eyes. The medication had begun to work, minimizing though not totally eradicating the intense headache. But the vivid,

horrifying images still lingered. The nightmares had plagued him for so long he couldn't recall a time when he hadn't had them. *Dammit all to hell*. When would he find peace?

Chapter One

"No!" Sharra Ardez jerked to a sitting position, panting, tears streaming down her face. The visions that had haunted her for the past two nights had come back again, clearer and more terrifying. This time she'd seen a glimpse of the two women right before they had been shot, along with the little boy, tears running down his cheeks. Then there was *him*, a tall, dark-haired, muscular warrior with handsome, rough-hewn features standing amidst the explosions and chaos.

Sharra recoiled at the bitter loathing that flowed through her, an echo of *his* emotions. There was so much anger and hate. And the pain. She moaned softly, clutching her head in her hands. He was suffering from intense, unfathomable pain. Sweat beaded her skin. She whimpered, battered by the same sensations. Closing her eyes, she focused her energy on methodically eliminating the painful, negative force, replacing it with calming, soothing waves of warmth and light.

Not for the first time, Sharra wished her parents were still alive. She needed their guidance, their knowledge. They had been her safe harbor in a universe turned upside down when the Pagans invaded their planet of Arrion. Since then, her homeworld and its people, a race of psychic empaths, had never been the same.

There had been a time when empaths were respected, their gifts used for the greater good. But the conquering Pagans had used the Arrionians' empathic powers to torture prisoners of war, to further their cruel intentions. Only a few families had escaped, including hers. They'd lived a nomadic life, moving from place to place, trying to stay one step ahead of the wretched Pagans, who'd sworn to hunt down all escaped empaths. Sharra and her parents had been forced to assume new identities every time they had settled in a new place, careful to keep their abilities secret. With the Pagans putting a sizeable bounty on their heads, it was necessary to maintain a life of extreme secrecy. Her parents' untimely deaths had left a huge void in her life. She missed their guidance, their wisdom. Now, more than ever, she felt lonely, having no one to talk to or confide in.

As her pulse returned to normal, Sharra thought of the man whose terrifying nightmares featured so prominently in *her* dreams. She could *feel* him. He was somewhere nearby, she was sure of it. Who was he? Why was she seeing his dreams? She had no idea where to begin. They were connected somehow, she and this man. Deep in her heart, she knew she was destined to meet him. She was about to embark on a new journey, she was certain of it.

Her fate lay with the man in her dreams.

* * * * *

The summons from Od'ric, the Lord Marshall of Zalian Three, came just as the sun rose in the sky. Bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, Sharra dressed. She just knew this had to do with An'ric, Od'ric's son. An'ric had made no secret of the fact that he wasn't pleased with Sharra. A cold fish, that's what An'ric had called her. Cold fish, indeed. Maybe if he learned to arouse a woman instead of just rutting inside her without any preliminaries, he might get a better response.

With her parents' deaths, Od'ric had placed her in An'ric's household for her own protection. Zalian females were less than second-class citizens, having very little say over their own lives. Without a man to protect her, Sharra would have been fair game for any rich man who wanted to be her *protector*. She knew it was the lesser of two evils to be placed in An'ric's household. He already had five women under his protection, so how often could he want to bed her? Then again, she hadn't figured on An'ric's enormous ego and his penchant for bragging about his sexual prowess. When rumors had begun to circulate that he couldn't arouse Sharra, he didn't hesitate to place the blame on her. It was *her* fault that sex with him had been unsatisfying.

With a sigh, she got into the waiting transport, which sped up the hill to the palace. Once there, Od'ric's assistant, a thin, stern-faced man, took her to the cavernous inner sanctum belonging to the Lord Marshall and bade her to wait. There was a sinking feeling deep in her stomach. This didn't bode well.

The door opened and the Lord Marshall walked in. A short man with a bulging stomach, Od'ric's benevolent looks belied a shrewd and effective leader.

Sharra bowed, lowering her eyes in respectful greeting. "You sent for me, Lord Marshall?"

Od'ric waved a chubby, be-ringed hand. "Be at ease, Sharra. We need to discuss something of great importance today." He strode to the wide double doors that opened out to the picturesque formal gardens and began to pace. "An'ric has formally asked me to place you somewhere else. It's no secret that he's found...little fulfillment with you."

She bit the inside of her cheek to stop the torrent of words hanging on the tip of her tongue. An'ric had made his disgust public, letting the whole kingdom know he'd found her inadequate in bed. Of course, she could say little to defend herself. She'd been forced to endure the humiliation of pitying looks and nasty rumors about her lack of sexual responsiveness. She'd tried—truly she had—to respond to An'ric. But there was nothing remotely desirable in his rough and fumbling style. He was impatient and selfish, thinking nothing of her pleasure. As a result, she'd lain still during the couple of times he'd attempted to bed her. Both instances had ended in disaster.

"Besides," Od'ric halted his pacing to look at Sharra. "His soon-to-be wife Neena has requested that the women in his household be limited to one or two."

Sharra almost smirked at that. Requested? *Demanded* would be more like it. Neena's jealousy was well-known. Her suspicious ways were hardly an ideal combination with An'ric's incessant womanizing. But An'ric's marriage to Neena would join two

politically influential families and Od'ric wouldn't allow anything to get in the way of the union.

"I've found a solution," Od'ric continued smoothly. "One that I think you will find agreeable. As you know, we have a visiting Karn'alian Cyborg warrior. Commander Logan saved my life during the ambush that nearly destroyed my ship." His dark gaze speared her. "As a sign of my gratitude, I've decided to give you to him."

Sharra's eyes widened in shock and a protest swiftly rose to her throat. *Dear gods, not a Karn'alian Cyborg.* Before she could utter a word, Od'ric raised his hand. "You know Zalian law, Sharra." Though his voice was mild, it contained a hint of steel. "When your parents died and left you alone, I placed you in my son's household, thereby affording you the protection of my name. Had I not done that, you would likely have ended up in a whorehouse."

Sharra acknowledged the miserable truth in what Od'ric said. Single, unattached women in Zalian Three were afforded very limited rights. It was within the law for rich and powerful men to take into their households as many women as they could afford. With the death of her parents, she was left with no protection, no home and no assets with which to shield her. Zalian law was primitive, designed to keep women submissive to the men in society. She wasn't a Zalian native, but as a settler on their world, she had to follow the rules.

"Karn'al is an important ally in the never-ending fight against the Pagans and their cohorts. They're rebuilding their world after warring with the Pagans and they've made great strides." His eyes softened somewhat. "It's a new place, Sharra. One you might find more to your liking than Zalian Three."

But you'll still be a sex slave. Though he'd left the words unspoken, Sharra knew very little about her situation would change. In fact, it had just gotten worse. It was no secret that Karn'alians held Arrionians in contempt, ever since the Pagans had used the empath's as tools for the torture of Karn'alian prisoners. As an empath, Sharra couldn't risk being taken to Karn'al. If her true identity was ever discovered, she could be put to death.

One thing was clear. She had to escape.

"I'll be hosting a celebration in his honor tomorrow. At that time, I'll present you, along with other gifts, as a gesture of my friendship and gratitude."

Her thoughts raced. That meant she only had twenty-four hours to find transport somewhere, anywhere, and get out of Zalian Three. The currency she had stashed should be enough to purchase passage on a ship leaving today, but that would leave her precious little with which to start a new life. No matter. She'd find a way somehow.

"Sharra?" Od'ric prompted sharply, irked at her non-response.

She quickly snapped to attention. "I will not contradict your wishes, Lord Marshall." It was time to move on. As soon as Od'ric dismissed her, she had to escape.

"I will be posting guards to stay with you until after the gifting ceremony with the Karn'alian tomorrow." Od'ric's astute gaze missed none of her reactions.

She listened in dismay. How was she to escape if there were security officers watching her? "Surely guards are not necessary, Lord Marshall?"

"They're for your own protection, of course," he countered smoothly. "This is your chance for a new life. An opportunity, if you will. You'd be wise to take advantage of it."

There was a hollow feeling in Sharra's stomach. Od'ric had just made it impossible for her to get away.

* * * * *

Logan wanted nothing more than to take off the full military regalia he'd reluctantly donned, itching in places he'd rather not scratch. He wasn't used to wearing such formal and constricting finery. In fact, he'd never before had occasion to wear the full Karn'alian military dress attire. Combat gear was more to his liking, consisting of government-issued trousers, shirt and a utility belt that could hold a variety of weapons. As unobtrusively as he could, he patted his sidearm, feeling somewhat reassured that it was within reach. He just didn't feel dressed without it.

Schooling his face into a polite mask, he smothered a yawn. Od'ric, Lord Marshall of Zalian Three, was droning on and on about his gratitude at being rescued from the hands of space pirates, recounting in a rather more dramatic version the incident where Logan saved him from a laser-gun-toting ragtag band of criminals bent on taking him hostage. Logan tried not to smirk. The way the Lord Marshall was describing him, he was glad his comrades weren't here to hear it. He never would have lived it down.

The richly gilded hall was crammed full with the who's who of Zalian society. Everyone was decked out in elegant clothes, all eagerly listening to the Lord Marshall's grand adventure. What a colossal waste of time. A discreet look at his watch revealed that Logan needed to be out of there five minutes ago. He scanned the room, looking for an avenue of escape.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you my savior, a man who is a hero in our people's eyes. Logan Mi'an Tar!"

Damn. Too late.

The Lord Marshall glanced expectantly at him, waiting for him to approach the dais. Logan made his way up the steps and accepted the silly little medal that was promptly pinned on his jacket. Give him a pitcher of Neehaleese ale and a soft, willing woman to fuck and he would be happy as an Istarhi clam. Keeping in mind the diplomatic relations between Karn'al and Zalian Three, Logan murmured his thanks and was about to step off the platform when Od'ric's words stopped him.

"As a gesture of gratitude from the people of Zalian Three, please do me the honor of accepting the gifts I offer you." The Lord Marshall clapped his hands. The double doors at the far end of the hall opened with flourish.

A servant appeared, bearing a trunk. *What the fuck?* The last thing he needed was more cargo for his ship. He already had fifty Karn'aliens that he was transporting home. He had no room for more shit.

"Lord Marshall, I really can't accept this." He tried to keep his tone polite even though he felt like snarling.

"Nonsense, Logan." The short, paunchy man dismissed his objections with a wave of his hand. "This is just a small token of my appreciation."

"I was glad to help. I don't expect to be compensated."

"Don't be too quick to refuse. I have another surprise for you."

Logan frowned as a hush fell over the crowd. Everyone shifted to stare at the young woman who was making her way up the aisle, dressed in a diaphanous gown that put her voluptuous body on display.

Fuck...me. He was riveted at the sight, unable to look away from the vision of loveliness walking toward him. Her hair was as black as the night, the long, curly tresses tumbling to her waist. Her full lips were unsmiling and her face expressionless...until her gaze clashed with his. Her eyes widened, the indigo orbs showing a mixture of shock and recognition. She looked...stunned to see him.

Had they met before? He didn't think so—hers was the kind of face he wouldn't forget. And the way his cock was eagerly reacting to her presence, Logan was positive he'd never seen her before.

"I'm giving her to you as a gift."

Od'ric's words penetrated the fuzz clouding his mind. *He's giving her to me as a gift?* He perused her slowly, noting the proud tilt of her head and the graceful curve of her neck as she bowed briefly in front of him. And *damn*, those large breasts made his mouth water. The sheer gown did nothing to cover them, the dark nipples clearly visible through the material. His gaze lingered on her chest for long moments before trailing down her front. The dress dipped enticingly into her bellybutton before sloping into the enticing shadow between her thighs. At the thought that she was naked under the gown, his cock stirred to burning, pulsing life.

The Lord Marshall grinned at his reaction. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

Logan knew he was being rude, gawking at her. He could see the beginnings of a flush cover her cheeks. Was he drooling? Finally mustering enough sense to turn to the man standing next to him, Logan scowled and said the first thing that came to his mind. "I can't take her."

His cock instantly rebelled at his words, but Logan quashed the feeling. No matter how tempting and sexy this woman was, the last thing he needed was to be responsible for another person. But damn, she was hot. Maybe he could enjoy her before he left Zalian Three.

"You don't want her?"

"I don't need a slave." And he sure as hell didn't need a *wife*.

"Why don't we talk about this in private?" With a few words, Od'ric dismissed the large gathering.

The people shuffled toward the exits. Logan noted men casting lustful glances at *her* and the females wore disdainful, though faintly envious, expressions. The woman really was stunning, and the proud, defiant tilt of her head hinted at a fiery personality. His stiff cock strained against the front of his trousers, which was damned uncomfortable. His com-plant registered a spike in his body temperature. Gods, just looking at her made him hot. Tearing his gaze away, Logan followed Od'ric through a side exit. *Don't look back. Don't imagine her delicious breasts and hard nipples.* This nonsense was messing up his schedule.

They emerged into a receiving room with gilded wall sconces and plush couches. The ostentatious, almost gaudy décor that marked the rest of the palace was echoed here. Zalians certainly liked to flaunt their wealth.

Od'ric's glance flicked briefly over the erection that Logan couldn't quite hide. "I can plainly see that Sharra is to your liking. Yet you say you don't want to take her?"

Sharra. What an unusual name. Logan's lips twisted. Who wouldn't like her? The young woman looked as ripe as a juicy fruit, ready to be plucked and fucked. He steered his thoughts away from that path. "She's a fine-looking woman. But like I said, I have no need of a slave."

"Nonsense," the short, paunchy man dismissed. "She was not born a slave. Since her parents' untimely death, I've taken her under my wing to give her protection. She's a free woman."

Logan frowned. "Why are you letting her go?"

"I'm sure you've heard of the Zalian practice of keeping as many women in the household as a man can afford. However, my son An'ric has no need of another female," Od'ric revealed with a slight grimace. "His fiancée Neena doesn't want Sharra around." He lowered his voice. "Neena comes from a very influential family. One I have no wish to offend. I'm merely trying to avert what could be a very unpleasant situation. You'd be doing me a huge favor by taking Sharra off my hands."

The door opened and a young man came in. "I beg your pardon, Lord Marshall. The Privy Council is awaiting your presence in Chambers."

"I'll be there shortly." Od'ric faced Logan once more. "I consider this settled. Sharra's yours. Now if you'll excuse me, there are some matters I need to take care of." He grinned. "She awaits you in the next room. Why don't you go talk to her?"

Left alone, Logan stalked to the window. A woman, by the Gods. What the fuck was he supposed to do with her? His missions took him to faraway worlds and he was constantly on assignment. He never spent any length of time at home. Military life was a spare existence. He preferred it that way—fewer problems, no attachments. But how could he say no to Od'ric who'd made it clear he wouldn't take no for an answer?

The door opened once more. A buxom woman swept in, with sultry kohl-lined eyes and deeply rouged lips. "Logan," she breathed before launching herself at him.

Logan's arms automatically went around Eli'ana, more to steady her than anything else. She had occupied his bed since he'd arrived on Zalian Three two weeks ago, happy to provide him with sexual distraction.

"I'm so sorry the Lord Marshall gave Sharra to you as a gift."

"Why is that?"

Her shoulders rose in a graceful shrug. "She's not a Zalian native, you know. Her parents settled here many years ago as merchants. They kept to themselves and hardly socialized. Very mysterious. Everybody was certain they were hiding something." Her tone was heavy with suggestion. "It's no secret An'ric wasn't satisfied with Sharra." Eli'ana rubbed against him sensuously, a practiced pout on her lips. "I believe Od'ric saw this as a way to get rid of her."

"Is that right?" he murmured.

"There's something else. She's ah, shall we say, *handicapped* in certain areas." At Logan's raised eyebrow, Eli'ana's long nails plucked imaginary lint from his coat. "They say she's more frigid than all the ice on Planet Frios."

"Really?"

"Yes," she revealed in a tone infused with just the right amount of pity. "We all feel sorry for her. Od'ric even tried to send her to a sexual mentor for some training but she refused. Can you believe that? She flat-out refused. I'm surprised Od'ric didn't send her to the mining colonies."

Sharra was frigid? Logan recalled the thrust of her breasts against the sheer material of her gown and the rounded softness of her hips. It didn't seem possible that a woman so magnificently endowed by the gods would be unresponsive in bed. "Interesting."

"Interesting?" Eli'ana echoed in disbelief. "More like a waste of your time, my darling. An'ric has said that making love to Sharra was like making love to a...lifeless sex-bot." She shuddered delicately. "By giving her to you, Od'ric gets rid of Sharra and repays you for saving his life in one fell swoop. He's a very smart man." She rubbed against him like a cat in heat, oblivious to his lackluster response. "You don't need Sharra," she whispered, licking the base of his throat. "I'll please you better than she ever will."

Beneath the seductive act, Eli'ana's smile was brittle. She was clearly jealous and obviously put off that Od'ric had gifted him with Sharra. Hard as she tried to hide it, Logan could see the malicious intent behind her words and actions. Eli'ana was a good, *temporary* fuck, one that provided a welcome diversion while he was here on Zalian Three. As for anything longer than that, forget it.

"Ask Od'ric for me instead," she suggested, stroking his cock with practiced ease. "Let another man waste his time with Sharra."

Take Eli'ana? *Not bloody likely.* Logan schooled his face into an impassive expression. "I don't think it's wise to offend the Lord Marshall."

Eli'ana mashed her unfettered breasts against his chest. "I'm confident I can convince Od'ric that I'd be better suited to take Sharra's place. Let me talk to him."

Eager to be rid of her, Logan put her from him. "Do that." It didn't matter anyway. He had no intention of taking Eli'ana with him when he left Zalian Three.

Her smile was satisfied. "I will." With a sexy, practiced sway of her hips, she walked away. "By nightfall, I'll be joining you on your ship."

Logan scowled when she left. He'd rather take on a platoon of Pagan soldiers than take Eli'ana home to Karn'al with him.

Sharra, on the other hand...

She aroused his curiosity. *Among other things*. He'd like to see her up close and personal, and determine if there was any truth to Eli'ana's words. Without conceit, he could honestly say he'd never failed to bring a woman sexual fulfillment. He had no doubt he could arouse Sharra.

One thing was for sure, his cock didn't have any qualms letting him know which woman it preferred. Adjusting his hard-on under his trousers, Logan decided it was time to meet Sharra.

* * * * *

Sharra trembled, alone in the receiving room. Her pulse raced as she quivered with shock. It was *him*! The Karn'alian warrior was the stranger whose dreams haunted her night after night, tormenting her with jumbled images of explosions, two bloody women, a little boy and *him*, superimposed against the disturbing revelation of pain and heartbreak. She'd seen his nightmares and shared his physical pain.

Now she understood why her attempts to secure passage out of Zalian Three had been unsuccessful. It hadn't been easy, but she'd managed to convince her guards to allow her to wander around the trade zone yesterday. As she'd pretended to peruse the wares of intergalactic merchants, she'd quietly inquired about paying for transport off the planet. There hadn't been a vendor or cargo ship operator who'd been willing to take her. It was now clear why the gods hadn't allowed her to escape. She wouldn't have met *him* had she been able to leave.

The initial shock of seeing the man from her dreams faded. In its place was a calm acceptance, a deep-seated certainty that their lives were intertwined. Fate had brought him to her, though what role she would play in his life was unknown to her. It just felt *right*.

His appearance in her life was no accident. Her destiny was tied with the Karn'alian warrior.

Footsteps echoed through the chamber. Sharra whirled around. *He* stood a short distance away, dressed the same as he was earlier, minus the stiff military jacket. A thousand butterflies fluttered inside her stomach. Her breath caught as their eyes met, a

wave of recognition slamming into her. This man was no stranger. She knew his dreams, his thoughts and his pain. *Kismet*. Destiny was at hand.

His eyes were dark and unfathomable as they swept over her. Sharra trembled, trying to maintain her composure in the face of his intimidating presence. He was big, well over six and a half feet, taller than any Zalian male she knew. His hair was short and thick, the color of a clear, starless night. It set off the deep green of his eyes, reminiscent of a lush forest. His nose was straight and proud, his jaw square, a perfect foil for his firm, unsmiling lips. A soft shirt molded his massive chest, outlining a taut, muscled body that appeared no less menacing than the weapon holstered at his side. Overall, his countenance was grim, daunting. Forbidding.

"I'm Logan." He ventured closer. "Hello, Sharra."

A strange, syrupy warmth seeped into her skin, penetrating clear to her soul. Her nipples tightened, reacting to his proximity. Sharra inhaled deeply, disconcerted.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured gently.

He stood so close she caught his clean, masculine scent. This near, his visage was less harsh, the striking features appearing almost handsome.

Logan's lips tilted at the corners. "Are you not able to speak?"

Sharra caught her breath at the smile that transformed his whole face. "I-I can speak fine."

"How old are you?"

"Five and twenty."

"How do you feel about being given to me?"

A shiver slid down her spine at the faint possessiveness in his voice. "It is my duty to obey the Lord Marshall."

"You are willing?"

His eyes were beautiful, darker flecks of green surrounding the lighter irises. Sharra pulled some air into her lungs in a bid to relax. "A single, unprotected woman in Zalian society has very limited options. Since my parents' death, I have no family left. The Lord Marshall placed me in his son's household in order to provide me with some measure of protection."

"As a sex slave?"

Sharra tore her gaze away. "Zalian men like to collect things. The more money and power they have, the more women they can bring into their household. I was fortunate to be given the protection of the Lord Marshall's name." She lifted her chin, trying to discern feelings of disgust or disparagement from him, but detected nothing. He wasn't easy to read. When he remained silent, she tilted her head. "You're surprised by the Zalian way of life?"

"I've seen stranger things. Are you willing to settle on my home planet of Karn'al?" he asked abruptly.

Yes. I belong with you now. That certainty was tempered with apprehension at the thought of going with him to Karn'al, where she would run a greater risk of being found out. An empath in their midst would not be welcomed or accepted. "I have no wish to be the cause of a diplomatic problem. My place is with you now."

"And what is your opinion about being given to me?"

"I'm not opposed." Sharra dared to look at him directly. The sensuality etched in the sharp angles of Logan's face ignited a fiery ripple of awareness in her body. She understood completely what being given to him meant and all that it implied. She was hardly a simpering virgin.

"And will you be forthright enough to tell me the truth about yourself?"

"W-what truth is it you speak of?"

"That you find no enjoyment in the act of mating."

Heat crept up her neck. "Who told you that?"

His gaze was quietly assessing, missing nothing. "It's true then?"

An'ric's doing, she supposed. Sharra hadn't bothered to refute the crass, careless statements he'd made in public. Letting people believe she was frigid suited her purposes. Men generally didn't like to bother with women like that.

"Take off your clothes."

Sharra blinked, taken aback by the casual order. The look on Logan's face quashed any protest she might have thought to voice. Maybe it was the glimmer of anticipation in his eyes that did it, but the thought of disrobing for him started an unmistakable pulsing between her legs. She fumbled with the clasp at her nape, the sheer dress falling to her feet.

Tendrils of heat raced along her skin as she waited for him to say something, anything. Her nipples tightened. Between her legs, moisture gathered, soaking her sex. What was it about him that affected her so? Without any effort, he aroused an intense hunger inside her. The connection, the *pull* between them, was strong and frightening. Assailed by confusion, she met his gaze.

Sharra trembled. His piercing eyes held her in place. When he placed his hand on her hip, a jagged electrical surge slammed into her, robbing her of breath. That was all he did, yet she shuddered violently.

Logan palmed her breast, cradling the plump flesh. He brushed the nipple once with the pad of a finger. Sharra choked back a moan, flushing at the half-smile he gave at her unchecked reaction. It was futile to pretend she was unaffected. Her senses whirled. She leaned into his touch, none too subtly pushing against his hand.

Logan drew his other hand down the curve of her waist, slipping around to the small of her back before sliding down to caress one buttock. He squeezed, never taking his eyes off her face. Venturing around to her front once more, he casually swiped her bare mons, rubbing the smooth, waxed skin. The sensitive area instantly warmed.

Without warning, he slipped long, blunt fingers between her slick labia and delved into the telling dampness between her parted legs.

Her surprised gasp mingled with the satisfied, utterly male sound he made.

Sharra was flabbergasted by her uninhibited reaction. Over the years, she'd learned to control her responses, showing not one iota of emotion, lest her empathic abilities be discovered. What others had perceived as coldness was in reality a defense mechanism, one designed to hide her true self and protect her life. This...this *senseless* slide into knee-weakening arousal had never happened before. Not this easily and never with this intensity. One touch from Logan and her defenses crumbled into a million pieces. The loss of control left her reeling, feeding a sudden compulsion to take a quick glimpse into his thoughts. She placed her hand over his and looked into his eyes.

The simple *push* she'd sent into his mind came up empty. Sharra was stunned at her failure to penetrate his consciousness. As if burned, she let go. Had he felt it?

Logan stared at her intently and spoke after a moment. "I think we'll do just fine, you and I."

Stark relief turned her bones to jelly. She fought to stay standing as he stepped away from her. "I'll send for you when it's time to leave."

Sharra picked up her dress from the floor after he left, shaken by the brief encounter. She felt out of her depth, floundering in a sea of emotions, helpless to do anything. Her fate was set.

Nothing could change it now.

Chapter Two

In the cargo bay of the *Guardian*, Logan conferred with his chief engineer. Boltar was a tad young for his position, but Logan respected his brilliant mind. When other warship commanders had refused to take Boltar on, he'd given him a chance. "Run a comprehensive systems check before we depart. I want a report first thing tomorrow morning."

Boltar nodded. "I'll initiate a complete diagnostic."

"Good." Logan's gaze swept over the cavernous bay. Although he had a full crew, he still liked to look over everything himself. Serving under Tristan, one of the most respected Commanders in the Karn'alian military, had taught him the valuable adage "Trust, but verify".

Spotting the trunk that had come from Od'ric, Logan knelt down and popped it open. Inside was an assortment of sex toys. *Now why am I not surprised?* There were several dildos, a rather large butt plug, even a remote-controlled bullet-shaped vibrator. At the bottom of the pile was a small, square box. Inside were two gold rings and a palm-sized transmitter. Logan flicked it on, and the rings hummed and vibrated instantly. He immediately thought of Sharra. *These might come in handy.* With a small smile, he pocketed the box before closing the trunk and instructing a young ensign to take it up to his quarters.

"Hello, Logan."

Logan tried to curb the impatience that filled him at the sight of Eli'ana standing just inside the cargo doors. "What are you doing here?"

Clad in a nearly transparent gown that hugged her curves, she thrust her chest out in an attempt to draw his gaze to her breasts. "I wanted to see you."

"Can this wait?"

"I'm afraid not. I need to talk to you."

With full preparations under way for their departure, the cargo bay was a hive of activity. There really wasn't any place to hold a private conversation. With ill-concealed irritation, he indicated for her to follow him into a small storage room. "What is it?"

"I want you." Eli'ana released the clasp of her dress and unveiled her body.

The sight failed to stir him. In truth, Eli'ana couldn't hold a candle to Sharra, who'd aroused him with her clothes *on*. In his mind, he was seeing Sharra's full red lips, the tight, delicious, berry-like nipples that made his mouth water and the faintly defiant tilt of her chin as she bared her body for him. His cock lengthened.

His erection didn't escape Eli'ana's attention. She smiled like a cat that had just licked cream. "You want me too."

Like I want a fucking headache. Logan didn't bother to correct her erroneous assumption. "I don't have time for this right now. I'm preparing to leave."

Eli'ana sidled up to him and boldly cupped his cock. "This won't take long." She knelt between his legs and unzipped his trousers.

Logan bit back a sigh, toying with the idea of picking her up and bodily throwing her off his ship. "Eli'ana..."

She wasn't to be deterred. Her skillful fingers pulled his shaft from its confines, and she tongued the plum-like head before sucking him deep. "Take me with you," she murmured around a mouthful of hard flesh. "You can have this whenever you want, *wherever* you want." She paused, meeting his gaze. "All you have to do is tell Od'ric you want me instead of Sharra."

Upon hearing that, Logan assumed nothing had come of her plans to persuade Od'ric to let her take Sharra's place. "You knew what to expect from the start." His tone was soft but underlined with unyielding steel. Fucking her while he was here was fine. But take her with him? *Hell no.*

She stopped sucking, her hand gripping his cock tightly. "I thought you loved me."

"Don't delude yourself, Eli'ana. We had a mutual arrangement, a *temporary* one." He tried to pry her hand off his shaft.

Her long nails dug in. "What are you saying?"

Logan gripped her wrist and squeezed tight, forcing her to release him before he pushed her away. *If she'd drawn blood...* His cock was red, but thankfully unharmed. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he growled.

"You used me," she accused.

Logan zipped his pants. "We used each other. I never made you any promises. You belong to Od'ric but willingly jumped into my bed."

"You'll regret this," Eli'ana spat out furiously as she tugged her dress back on. "You and that bitch Sharra deserve each other." Her face twisted into ugly lines. "She'll never satisfy you, Logan. One day you'll come crawling back to me."

Not if all the pussy in the galaxy suddenly dried up. He crossed his arms and returned her stare. "I think you better leave. *Now.*"

She clenched her fists and left, no doubt heaping curses upon his head. Damn crazy woman. When she'd crawled into his bed the first night he'd arrived, he had made it clear that all he wanted was somebody to fuck. Love? He snorted. Love wasn't for him. He wasn't capable of loving anyone. Who needed love when there was no shortage of women ready to provide him with the physical release he needed?

Eli'ana was becoming more than a nuisance. There was no telling what kind of malicious trouble she would make. At that thought, he drew up short. She wouldn't be so stupid as to do anything to harm Sharra, would she? Straightening his clothes, Logan walked out of the storage room and pressed the com-link button on his belt. "Boltar, I need that report as soon as possible. We're flying out of here tonight."

"I'm on it, Sir."

Logan signaled one of the ship's security officers. "Send word to our passengers that our departure has been pushed up. I want them onboard as soon as possible. Load everything up."

The man nodded. "Right away, Commander."

"Get my transport ready. I'll be heading out." He'd feel better when Sharra was onboard, safe and secure.

* * * * *

As soon as Sharra opened her bedroom door, Eli'ana swept in, not bothering to wait for an invitation to enter. The malevolent anger radiating from the woman slammed into Sharra's consciousness. Staggering, Sharra leaned against the door and took a deep breath, quickly erecting a mind shield. In the past, she'd always managed to steer clear of Eli'ana. What could she possibly want with her now?

"You think you've won, don't you?" Eli'ana lashed out in bitter tones.

Sharra moved to put some distance between them. The fury and hate emanating from the other woman was hurting her physically. "What do you mean?"

Eli'ana threw her a contemptuous glance. "Logan's *my* lover." With a snort, Eli'ana lifted her nose in the air. "Od'ric feels indebted to Logan for saving his life. Logan, of course, does not want to embarrass the Lord Marshall by refusing his gifts, but trust me, he doesn't want you." A triumphant gleam entered her eyes. "He told me so himself. I just came from his bed, you see."

Something suspiciously like jealousy seared Sharra's chest. The thought of Logan in bed with the other woman was hard to accept. Despite the danger of discovery, Sharra tried to probe Eli'ana's mind to ascertain the honesty of that statement, but there was too much anger blocking her *push*. It physically hurt her to even try to get a reading on Eli'ana.

"Logan has a very strong appetite. Why, he would fuck me three, four times a night." A sensual, dreamy smile played around Eli'ana's lush lips. Her voice lowered to a whisper. "He's a big man, you know. He would leave me sore afterward, but I didn't care. He's phenomenal." Eli'ana shot her a pitying look. "How do you think he'll react when he finds out you're as cold as ice in bed?"

Sharra couldn't shake the image of Logan and Eli'ana on top of tangled sheets, writhing in sensual abandon.

Eli'ana gave a dramatic sigh. "I admit I was upset when I found out Od'ric had decided to give you to him. But I suppose Od'ric had no choice. Your...um...*condition* is hardly a secret. No man would have you after An'ric made it known you couldn't please him in bed." She gave a disdainful sniff. "Logan will discard you like yesterday's trash."

But Logan had touched Sharra once, just once, and she'd gone up in flames. Their chemistry had been instant and intense. It was on the tip of her tongue to deny Eli'ana's allegation that she was frigid, but she stopped herself. It wouldn't do to antagonize Elia'na further. The woman's wrath was already battering Sharra's senses in vicious waves.

"Your naiveté astounds me. You do know what happens to women in Karn'al who fail to please the Cyborg warriors, don't you?" Eli'ana's eyes gleamed with calculation. "They give them to prisoners, to do with as they please. You'll be made into a whore to be fucked whenever, however, the prisoners want."

"I-I don't believe that."

Eli'ana shrugged. "Believe what you like. I know because Logan told me." She went in for the kill. "I suggest you talk to Od'ric and beg him to change his mind. Tell him to give *me* to Logan instead. I know how to please him. I've been doing so since he arrived here."

Sharra wished she could ascertain if Eli'ana was lying, but there was too much hatred emanating from the other woman to get an accurate read on her emotions. The palpable venom was inducing a painful, throbbing headache at her temples. "I wouldn't want to displease the Lord Marshall by going against his wishes."

Eli'ana's cold, dark eyes flashed with contempt. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you when you end up in a Karn'alian prison compound, a whore procured to service the guards and prisoners." With that parting tidbit, she stomped through the door and left, leaving behind the lingering scent of her cloying perfume.

Through the window, Sharra watched Eli'ana climb into a waiting transport adorned with the Lord Marshall's crest. She whimpered at the sharp shooting pains zinging around her skull. Falling back on the bed, she curled into a ball, closing her eyes and pressing her palms to her temples in a desperate bid to shut out the feelings of bitterness and anger permeating the air.

Despite the strength of the safeguards she'd put up, Sharra trembled with the effort to prevent the poisonous energy from seeping into her mind. As an empath, she'd been taught the importance of putting blocks in place. They were necessary to filter out the thoughts and feelings of the people around her. If she didn't have a shield, her mind would be overwhelmed by all the input, experiencing irreversible damage and possibly even death.

She had no way of knowing if Eli'ana's malicious revelations were nothing but lies. Logan's touch had held not a hint of cruelty in it. Desire, yes, but brutality, no. Sharra wished she'd been successful at probing Logan's mind, however briefly. As a Cyborg, he must possess some kind of built-in psy-protection, or else have incredible psy-control to withstand a probe. The only way it might work would be when his guard was down and his psy-control at its lowest.

Her mother had always warned Sharra against probing another's mind. If her gift was revealed, she could be reported to the authorities. It was ironic that Karn'al could

actually turn out to be a safe haven for her, affording her protection from the hated Pagans. But it was no secret that Karn'aliens hated empaths too. Her chest tightened with despair. Anywhere she went, she would be in danger. But there was nowhere else for her to go. As long as she kept her secret, she would at least be safe in Karn'al.

Loneliness weighed heavily on her shoulders. Fighting back tears, Sharra opened her trunk and pulled out the blanket her mother had woven for her, hugging it close. The love with which it was made radiated from the very threads, bringing back memories of the happy life she'd shared with her parents.

She carefully spread the blanket on the floor and sat down on it. Closing her eyes, she took several breaths and began to meditate, drawing strength from the center of her being. Peace slowly dispelled the trouble in her mind. The poison that Eli'ana had spread ceased to matter. Tranquility settled over Sharra, and with it came an acceptance of her fate. Doubt and fear washed away, leaving behind the certainty of what she must do. Bolstered by the knowledge that her future lay with the Cyborg, Sharra stood up and carefully put away her blanket.

A knock at the door gave her a start. When she opened it, she found Logan on the steps. The sight of him triggered a couple of immediate reactions. Her nipples tightened and an excited pulsing started between her legs.

"We're leaving earlier than expected," he announced without preamble. "Are you all packed?"

Sharra breathed deeply, seeking to control her body's wayward response to his presence. Her glance slid to the trunk that sat nearby. "Yes."

"That's all you have?"

"I don't have a lot of possessions."

He frowned, tilting his head and sniffing the air. "Eli'ana was just here."

Her eyes widened. "H-how do you know that?"

"I detect traces of her scent. My com-plant is highly sensitive to any differences in the atmosphere, scents, temperatures and such," he explained. "What did she want?"

His revelation gave Sharra pause. His com-plant was a high-tech version of her natural gift, which meant Logan was more perceptive than she'd initially thought. It was best to be careful around him. "She just wanted to inform me of Karn'alian customs in regards to women."

"What customs?"

Sharra hesitated briefly. "She told me that...if I displease you, I will be made to serve prison guards and inmates as their whore."

"What?"

"I beg you not to do that. For me, that would be a fate worse than death."

A frightening scowl twisted his features. "Eli'ana has fed you lies. Look at me and tell me if you think I am the kind of man to do that to you."

She detected no artifice in his direct and unwavering stare. "No."

He approached her. "Don't ever be afraid of me."

Her skin prickled, every nerve ending in her body responding to his nearness. "I'm not. Really."

His hand curved around her neck. "Eli'ana spreads poison out of jealousy and spite."

Sharra breathed sharply. There it was again, the same thing she'd felt when Logan first touched her. It was electric, a deep, elemental connection. Her blood turned molten. Every breath she took was full of his scent and her thought processes ground to a screeching halt.

"She told me you were frigid," he murmured, his lips disturbingly close to her ear. Her mouth fell open, pulling in much needed air. "I knew she was lying." Logan rubbed the pads of his fingers on her lower lip, back and forth, back and forth before slowly trailing down once more to the base of her throat. "This is one of my favorite spots to kiss. I like to feel the excited leap of a woman's pulse when she starts to become aroused."

Her pulse jumped at that exact moment.

With a flick of his fingers, he undid the clasp of the dress at her neck, baring her torso. He slid his palm over the swell of her breast, squeezing gently. She jerked against him, stifling a groan.

"You're very sensitive. I like that."

Heat swirled in her pussy. Sharra lowered her eyes, breathing heavily.

"Look at me."

She obeyed his muttered order. If she was able to think, she'd try to analyze why he affected her so easily.

"Give me your hands." He made her cup her breasts. Trapped between the heat of his palms and her own burning skin, she trembled violently. Her senses whirled in tune to the pleasure he was weaving around her with his words and touch. Her mind grew hazy, clouding with lust as he rotated their joined hands over her aching nipples. The pleasure was overwhelming. Hers. *His*—she could feel his pleasure too. Bombarded on both fronts, she felt out of control.

"Please, I—"

"Don't talk. Just *feel*." The rough, calloused pads of his fingers scraped over the stiff tips of her nipples, sending a hot, delicious sensation shooting straight to her sex. "You like that." She moaned in agreement. With a last, lingering caress, his hands fell away. At the soft sound of protest she made, he murmured, "Touch yourself. Show me what you'd want your lover to do."

Her gaze flew to his. Spurred on by the desire mirrored in his eyes, she rolled her nipples in her fingers, unable to contain a low moan.

"Go on."

The husky approval in his tone washed over her. Sharra pinched the tips. Liquid heat traveled in her veins as she manipulated the crests until they were painfully swollen and achy.

Logan pushed her hands away and replaced them with his mouth. Sharra gasped at the damp contact, unable to tear her gaze from his dark head cradled on her chest.

His lips worked her nipple expertly before he ran the pad of his tongue over it in a soothing motion. Pleasure swelled inside her, swamping her senses, sending jolts of white-hot heat whipping over her skin. She buried her hands in his thick hair, holding him close, pushing more of her breast in his mouth, wanting a deeper, harder suck. Instead, he took the nipple between the edges of his teeth and gently bit down, sending shards of jagged pleasure streaking through her.

"Please," she begged shamelessly.

He sucked hard, giving her exactly what she wanted. Sharra jerked against him, whimpering for more. The dampness between her legs increased, and the slick folds of her pussy clenched in response.

Logan straightened and captured her lips, pushing his tongue deep in her mouth. Sharra was an eager participant, kissing him back, mimicking his actions, running her tongue over his lower lip before pushing inside and tasting him. On and on the kiss went. Weak and dizzy, she clung to him, needing his strength to hold her up. By the time they drew apart, she was dazed from the exquisite and unfamiliar sensations.

Logan took her hand and placed it over the erect flesh straining the front of his pants. He was long and thick. *Oh my.*

"At the risk of sounding arrogant, I have no doubt at all that I can prove you're not frigid." He reached into his pocket and held out his hand. "'Od'ric gave me some very interesting pleasure implements."

Nestled on his palm were two intricate gold circles. *Nipple rings.* "Y-you want me to wear them?"

A wicked half-grin parted his lips. "It would be a shame not to put them to good use."

Maybe it was the hot anticipation in his eyes that did it, but Sharra *wanted* to wear them for him. The thought imbued her with a feeling of sexiness. A small part of her acknowledged her reaction, yet another glaring difference from how she was with An'ric, who had a variety of sex toys at his disposal but had never manage to arouse her.

Logan fastened a nipple ring around one stiff crest. The ring vibrated, sending a mild electric current through her flesh.

Sharra jumped. "*Ohhh.*"

"Your nipples are perfect for these." He fastened the other ring on her, surveying his handiwork. "They're programmable. I've set them to activate every few minutes."

Sharra quivered, feeling utterly desirable under Logan's gaze. She released a breath when the vibrating stopped. Already her nipples were hard and painful. It would drive her *crazy*.

"Come. I'll take you to my ship." Logan picked up her trunk. "We will leave tonight for Karn'al and —"

"Commander, we have an emergency." A disembodied male voice suddenly broke into their conversation. In that instant, waves of distress hit Sharra. Something was terribly wrong.

Logan pressed a button on his belt. "Speak."

"There's been an explosion in the cargo bay, Sir."

"I'm on my way." His face was cast in stone as he turned to her. "Let's go. We have to hurry."

Sharra shivered as she settled in the transport, cold and clammy despite the warm temperature. A terrible feeling of foreboding overcame her. Disaster loomed in the near future. As she glanced at Logan's grim profile, she knew their journey would not be free from danger.

Chapter Three

Logan surveyed the damaged cargo doors and outer hull of the *Guardian*. The explosion had created a gaping hole in one of the gates and shards of metal were scattered all around.

"We've sustained minor damage. I recommend pushing back our departure a couple of hours until all the repairs are done, Sir," Boltar reported.

Fuck. He didn't want to stay on Zalian Three longer than was absolutely necessary. Logan turned to Moran, his chief of security. "What caused the explosion?"

Moran's normally stoic expression showed signs of strain. "We don't know yet, Sir. Passengers have been coming and going with their baggage for the trip home. None of the crew noticed anything amiss. My men checked all the containers in the cargo bay but found no explosive residue." He lowered his voice. "There is one thing. Before the explosion, one of my men spotted a small container left unattended by the doors. Fragments are being examined to determine if that's where the blast originated. I've ordered security footage and computer readouts re-examined." His jaw tightened. "I take full responsibility for this, Sir. I've taken my men to task for this slip-up. It won't happen again."

With a bulky, muscular frame coupled with a bald pate, Moran's appearance inspired fear and intimidation in those who didn't know him. But Logan knew his chief was loyal and trustworthy, and Moran inspired the same feelings in the men who served under him. "At ease. I don't blame you for this. Have your men re-check every single bit of cargo brought onboard. I also want two-man teams at every station."

Logan raked a hand through his hair. Moran was right—the cargo bay had been a hive of activity since he'd announced he was pushing up their departure. Anybody could have slipped in, mingled among the crowd and planted the explosive.

Who the hell would sabotage his ship? The first person who came to mind was Eli'ana. She was the only one he could think of who would have a motive to do some damage, but where and how would she get the explosives? And would she have the knowledge required to use them? She was furious, but was she willing to risk so many lives on board his ship just to get back at him? "You instructed your security teams to conduct the standard scans on the Karn'alian passengers?"

"Every one checked out, Sir."

He clenched his jaw. "I hate to think we're transporting a traitor home."

"Its standard operating procedure to conduct continual scans of everyone's energy register. Nothing came up. We checked backgrounds, confirmed identities and checked

out known associates of our passengers. We even utilized Zalian Three security files. They all came back clean."

"Any sign of Pagan presence?"

Moran looked grim. "Negative."

"That's not to say they're not around. The damned Pagans now have the ability to cloak their signals. Our only recourse is to scan everything. Be vigilant." Logan sent a sweeping glance over the cargo bay. "Round up all the passengers. Confine all non-essential personnel and passengers to public access areas only. Until we know more, we're on high alert."

"Consider it done." With a few words, Moran dispatched the two men who stood waiting behind him.

Logan turned to Boltar, who had been waiting patiently beside him. "I want repairs finished quickly. I don't want to delay departure any longer than I have to."

"Right away, Sir." Boltar pressed buttons on his handheld unit before walking away.

Logan waited until he and Moran were alone before he spoke. "You put Sharra in my quarters?"

"One of my officers is escorting her there as we speak."

"All right. Give me a security update in a couple of hours." Logan's com-link came on.

"Commander, the *Destiny* is on the communication line."

"I'm on my way." Dismissing Moran, Logan made his way up to the operations deck and activated the monitor. Joren, the Commander of the *Destiny*, came on the screen. "Joren."

"Logan. I've just arrived in the Sector. I've heard reports you had trouble."

"There was an explosion in my cargo bay. The doors sustained significant damage, but overall hull integrity is intact. Repairs are being made as we speak."

"Do you need assistance?"

"Negative, but come on down here anyway," Logan invited. "We can have a drink and catch up."

"Roger that," Joren replied. "I'm taking the shuttle down. Meet me on the transport deck."

Logan clicked off. It had been awhile since he'd seen Joren. They'd trained together but served under different superior officers. He'd been sent to work with Tristan while Joren had been assigned under Commander Zirac. Each of them had eventually earned command of their own ships. Over the years, they'd gone on a number of highly classified missions together, cementing their friendship. Logan would fight alongside Joren anytime.

He scanned communiqués from general headquarters before he made his way four decks down, just as his friend stepped out of the shuttle. "Joren." He clasped the other man's wrist in the traditional Karn'alian greeting. "It's good to see you, my friend."

Joren flashed him an easy smile, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners. He was nearly as tall as Logan but had light brown hair that hung to his shoulders. "It's been too long, Logan."

"I see you haven't cut your hair. Still determined to get in trouble with the Defender Triad, I see," he observed with a grin.

With a laugh, Joren clapped him on the back. "Somebody's got to tweak those stiff shirts, right? I've decided it's up to me to do it."

Joren was forever on the Triad's shit list, had been since their training days. Logan snorted. "You've always been a pain in the ass."

"Hey, they can kick me out of the service anytime. Yet they choose to keep me."

"Damn right. They can't afford to lose you." Joren was a highly decorated warrior who'd been awarded numerous medals for his success in dangerous assignments.

"Do you remember the last time we spent our forty-eight together?" Joren asked with a grin. Forty-eight was the term the Cyborgs used for a quick two-day leave. "We were in Paura North, in that little club called the Hot Zone. That was some night, huh? Damn, those Pauran women were insatiable."

Logan laughed. "I was too drunk to recall what happened with any clarity. I only remember waking up with four women, nursing the worst hangover I've ever had."

"Good times." Joren chuckled. "Marron's probably issued an order never to schedule us the same down time."

Marron was the head of the Defender Triad and the highest official in the Karn'alian military. "That's because you always get me in trouble," Logan mocked.

"Me? Who got caught fucking the only daughter of the King of Bizia?"

Logan rolled his eyes. "You were right there with me. You just happened to jump out the window and hide in the damn bushes. Besides, Peta was hardly an innocent. She was the one who declared two men better than one."

"True. Her father just had blinders on when it came to her." Joren inclined his head toward the repair crew busy working on the damaged cargo bay doors. "You sure there's no trouble here?"

Logan shook his head. "Fucking explosion just set my departure back about a day."

"Have you figured out what caused it?"

"We haven't determined that yet." Logan's lips tightened into a grim line. "There were so many people around the cargo bay it's virtually impossible to pinpoint who it could have been."

"You don't think it's an inside job?"

"Absolutely not. I trust my crew."

"Pagans?"

"No sign of them."

Joren grunted. "Their new cloaking device is bad news for us. Damned Pagans are getting smarter. Thank the gods for the new scanning detection upgrades, but the software is not yet one hundred percent accurate. There are glitches to be worked out, but at least we're not completely blind anymore." His lip curled in disgust. "The Pagans constantly change the frequency and output of their signal. Our scientists are kept busy just trying to stay one step ahead of them."

The old, familiar burning anger against the Pagans surfaced once more inside Logan. "We won't stop until we win."

"Damn right," Joren agreed. "What about the Karn'aliens you're transporting? Did they all check out?"

"I don't see why they would sabotage a ship that's taking them back home, unless they're working with the enemy."

"It's not impossible."

Logan's clenched his jaw. "True. It's just incomprehensible to me that a Karn'alian would betray his own people to help the Pagans."

"They've been away from Karn'al for years. Who knows what they've been up to?" Joren reasoned. "Loyalties change."

Though Logan hated to even contemplate the idea of treason, Joren had a valid point. That possibility *had* crossed his mind. "I've placed the whole crew on heightened alert and restricted access to public areas only."

Joren shot him a thoughtful look. "How do you really fare, Logan?"

He gave a casual shrug. "Never better."

"And the nightmares? Do they still haunt you?"

"They hardly come anymore," Logan dismissed. "Now why don't we go to the mess hall and share a pitcher of ale?"

Though a shadow of concern remained in the depths of Joren's gaze, he smiled. "Are you going to try to get me drunk again? Just remember, I can take whatever you dish out."

"Come on." Logan chuckled as he led the way. "You've got to try this new ale I brought from Neehalee. Damn if this drink doesn't pack a wallop. I guarantee you'll like it."

* * * * *

A young officer escorted Sharra to her room and placed her trunk adjacent to the door before taking his leave. Restless and more than a little nervous, she walked around, inspecting her temporary home. It was small and serviceable, with a bed in one corner along with a table. It was utilitarian, no fuss and no frills.

A functional bathing cubicle was located in one corner. Sharra glanced at her reflection in the mirror, noting the anxiety she couldn't quite hide in her eyes. Her nerves were strung tight. She felt jumpy and on edge. With a sigh, she splashed cool water on her face. The close confines of the ship were battering her safeguards. As soon as she boarded, a hundred different emotions and thoughts assailed her. She quickly put up blocks, but not before she staggered from the effect, feeling weak. It was imperative now more than ever to keep her safeguards in place. She didn't want to end up like some empaths from Arrion who had to live in total seclusion, unable to handle the incredible pressure on their psyche.

Closing her eyes, Sharra drew much needed strength from her center. Calm settled over her as she reinforced the blocks that would shield and protect her. The sooner she got used to being on the ship, the less strain she would feel. Still feeling a bit drained, she left the bathing cubicle and spotted another door across the way.

Wondering where it led to, Sharra pressed the square button on the wall. The sliding panel swished open silently, revealing another room. This one was bigger, complete with a sitting area, a desk and a large bed. This must be Logan's quarters.

Knowing she shouldn't, yet unable to resist, she wandered around. Everything was spotless, nothing appeared out of place. There wasn't a single personal item anywhere. Not even an interactive picture or holo-image. No special mementos either. The room was sterile, almost as if it was unoccupied. Surely Logan had family back home? Or was it the nature of Cyborgs like him to lead such spare, uninvolved existences?

She hurried back to her own room, jumping when the nipple rings vibrated. She moaned at the exquisite sensation that kept her nipples hard and stimulated, ultra-sensitive. Just as suddenly as it had started, the buzzing stopped. She leaned against the wall, breathing rapidly, her thoughts occupied by the man who'd given her the rings. The intense attraction she felt for Logan was all new territory, one she'd have to traverse carefully if she wanted her secret to remain just that. Karn'alians hated Arrion empaths for their role in helping Pagans inflict a special brand of torture on prisoners. It mattered little that the empaths were forced to use their gifts out of fear for their own lives.

Sharra knew she was risking her life by going to Karn'al with Logan. But the vivid dreams she'd shared with him were too important to ignore. There was a reason why the gods brought them together. She had a destiny to fulfill, a role she had to play in his life. To her, that outweighed the need to tell Logan she was an empath. What a complicated, tangled web she had gotten involved in—but there was no backing out now.

A gentle rumbling in her stomach reminded Sharra she hadn't had anything to eat since early that morning. The young man who'd escorted her had informed her that the mess hall was three decks down. Maybe some food would calm her nerves. She hesitated by the door, glancing at the traditional Zalian dress she had on. At least this one was more opaque than the floor-length gown she'd worn at the gifting ceremony, affording her better coverage. Although it wasn't transparent, the clingy material of the

dress did show a faint outline of the nipple rings. Since Logan had instructed her not to remove them, there was nothing she could do about that.

With a sigh, Sharra stepped out into the passageway and nearly collided with somebody right outside the door. "Oh! I apologize. I didn't see you."

A young woman with russet-colored hair and hazel eyes smiled nervously. "I'm sorry. It was my fault."

"It's quite all right. Were you looking for Logan?"

"Huh?"

"Logan, the Commander of the ship. These are his quarters," Sharra explained.

"Uh, no. I was, uh, looking for the mess hall." She smiled. "I'm Tan'ea. And you are?"

"My name is Sharra."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sharra. Wait, did you say the Commander's quarters are through these doors?" At Sharra's nod, Tan'ea lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "What do they look like? Are they really big inside? I've never been on a ship like this before."

Despite Tan'ea's friendly demeanor, an instant feeling of unease made its way down Sharra's spine. "I really wouldn't know. I haven't seen the other rooms."

With a giggle, Tan'ea inclined her head. "Do you think I can take a peek inside? Just a quick one?"

Sharra tried to discern Tan'ea's thoughts but failed. In her weakened state, she didn't have the energy to send a quick *push* into Tan'ea's mind. In order to do so, she'd have to drop the blocks she'd put up to protect herself. She mustered an apologetic smile. "I'm sure Logan wouldn't want anybody in his quarters without him knowing about it."

A security officer rounded the corner. He approached them and directed a frown at Tan'ea. "This is a restricted area, miss. How did you get up here?"

Tan'ea gave an apologetic shrug. "I'm afraid I'm not very good with directions. I was looking for the mess hall."

"This deck is off-limits. Follow me, please." He led them to the lift.

"Come on. I'm hungry too," Sharra said lightly. She wished she could probe Tan'ea's mind to be certain her feeling of unease was just a residual reaction from the emotional bombardment she'd received when she'd boarded. What if she was wrong about the girl?

The young man pressed the button for the mess hall, located several decks below the officers' quarters, before he stepped back. Once again, Tan'ea peppered Sharra with questions about the ship during the ride down to sublevel three. "I'm afraid I know even less about the ship than you do," Sharra confessed.

Tan'ea had the grace to flush. "You're right. Forgive me. I have a tendency to talk too much when I'm nervous. And we haven't left Zalian Three yet, but I'm homesick

already." Her beautiful face clouded for a moment. "This is the only home I've ever known, you see, but my parents were only too eager to pack up and go back to Karn'al."

Sharra heard the bitterness that Tan'ea couldn't quite stifle quickly enough. "You'd rather stay."

"My parents are homeopathic healers—practitioners of natural healing—which was widely practiced before the war but now is almost extinct. It's important for them to return home and resurrect the age-old Karn'alian tradition." As if she realized she'd said too much, Tan'ea shrugged. "Please, let's not talk about my troubles. I'd rather forget them." She looked away.

The strained silence failed to quell Sharra's feeling of discomfort. When the lift doors finally opened, she felt relieved. The mess hall was a large rectangular room filled to capacity with crew members and passengers alike. In a place this size, it would be easy for her to get overwhelmed by thoughts and emotions. She hung back, taking a deep breath and strengthening her safeguards before stepping out.

Her gaze swept over the occupants. As if drawn by a magnetic force, her eyes zeroed in on Logan. Even sitting down, he projected a commanding aura, the cloak of authority settling easily on his shoulders.

Logan glanced up, catching her gaze. The rest of the room faded in the background as he returned her stare. His gaze was like a physical touch, reaching out to her despite the distance that separated them. When his lips slowly curved in a half-smile, she felt it all the way to her sex.

Blushing to the roots of her hair, Sharra blinked. "Tan'ea, I—" But the young woman was gone. A quick look around revealed no sign of her. Sharra frowned, still troubled about the whole encounter, uncertain what she should do. It was out of the question to even try to mention it to Logan. She wouldn't be able to explain without revealing her secret.

Maybe it was nothing, just a byproduct of her jumbled thoughts and emotions. May the gods of Arrion grant her some peace of mind and much-needed strength. With a sigh, Sharra made her way toward Logan.

* * * * *

"Well, *hellooo*," Joren muttered under his breath with a soft whistle. "Who do we have here?"

At the clear admiration in his friend's tone, Logan suppressed the urge to declare Sharra off limits, surprised at the sudden surge of possessiveness that rose to his throat. His eyes locked on her as she drew to a stop by the table, taking in the soft, generous curves of her body.

Without waiting for introductions, Joren jumped to his feet and took Sharra's hand, pressing a kiss on her wrist in a bold, outrageous greeting. "Hello."

A soft pink flush stole over Sharra's cheeks. Logan deliberately stepped between the two and dislodged Joren's hold on her hand. He gave Sharra a lingering kiss before performing the introductions.

Joren shrewd gaze swung from him to Sharra then to the arm Logan had looped around her waist. He raised an eyebrow. **It's like that, huh?** he murmured, using the com-plant every Cyborg was equipped with to communicate with Logan privately. **She's off limits then?**

Back off, Logan retorted mildly.

Joren snorted, turning to Sharra with a charming smile. "I'm very glad to meet you."

Logan's jaw tightened at the way Joren was practically eating her up with his eyes. He pulled her closer, a gesture that wasn't lost on his friend. At that exact moment he felt the vibration of her nipple rings. Sharra gasped and leaned into him, burying her face in his chest.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Joren asked dryly.

Sharra's cheeks were delightfully pink. "No, please, don't do that. I didn't mean to intrude. It was very nice to meet you, Commander Joren." She glanced at Logan. "I'll go get something to eat," she muttered before hurrying away.

"So are you gonna tell me about her or are you just gonna leave me hanging?"

Logan tore his gaze away from Sharra. "There's nothing to tell. By virtue of being in the right place at the right time, I rescued Od'ric, the Lord Marshall of Zalian Three, from a band of space pirates. He was so grateful that he insisted on giving me gifts. I was about to refuse when I saw Sharra was part of the package."

"You lucky bastard." Joren put a hand on his shoulder. "I always thought you were the fuck 'em and leave 'em type and yet here you are, bringing Sharra back to Karn'al with you."

"I can't leave her behind, now can I?"

"Are you going to take her as your mate? Because if you are, I wouldn't mind being the second man during the Ritual."

Cyborgs were blood brothers, sworn to protect a comrade's mate should one of their own die. This covenant was entered into during the Ritual of Acceptance, where one chose another man to join him and his mate on their wedding night, forging a bond of protection. Logan frowned. "I hadn't really thought about anything beyond taking Sharra with me."

Joren raised an eyebrow. "No? Then what's going to happen to Sharra when you do decide to take a mate?"

Cyborgs mated for life. Unless their mate died, they only married once. Logan shrugged. "Since I'm not planning on getting mated any time soon, I'm not going to worry about it."

"Same old Logan, I see."

"I'm not cut out for that commitment shit. Too much work, if you ask me."

Joren grinned. "Ain't that the truth?" An alarm beeped from his com-link. "Duty calls, I'm afraid. I'm headed to the Trinity Sector before I take some time off. With any luck, I'll see you back at general headquarters."

Logan walked Joren back to the transport bay, glad the conversation had returned to the much safer topic of their respective missions. It wasn't long before Joren boarded the shuttle and left. Logan rode the lift back to the operations deck. As soon as the repairs were done, he was getting off this planet.

* * * * *

Clouds obscured the three moons of Zalian Three, casting a dark pall around the spaceport. Three figures huddled in the shadows, talking in hushed voices, casting furtive glances over their shoulders.

Eli'ana tossed her head, glaring at the men in front of her. "Your stupid bomb didn't work."

Nim barely held his temper in check. He glanced at his brother Ismail, who hadn't spoken but had kept his pale silver eyes focused on the woman. If Nim had been in charge, they wouldn't be dealing with Od'ric's whore at all. "You set it up wrong. I told you to put it near the cargo control console."

Fury twisted her features. "You dare talk to me that way? You were supposed to arrange for a distraction. As it was, I risked being discovered loitering around there. At best, your bomb only delayed Logan's departure. I wanted his ship to sustain enough damage to derail him indefinitely."

"You don't ask a lot, do you?" Nim muttered under his breath. "I have another plan."

"What? Another explosive?" she derided. "I should have known better than to deal with smalltime amateurs like you and your brother. No thanks."

Nim clenched his fists, aching to wrap them around the bitch's neck. "When we approached you with our plan, you agreed readily enough. You professed to hate the Karn'alian commander."

"That was before your pathetic little bomb didn't do its job," Eli'ana snapped. "I'm done with the two of you. You're on your own." With a swish of her skirts, she stalked away.

Nim turned to his brother. "If there was time, I'd make that slut regret treating us this way."

Ismail put a restraining hand on Nim's arm. "Let her go. We don't need her. Our cover is in place and the cloaking device is working. It will allow us to get onboard the Karn'alian ship. That's all that matters."

"So we're going to Karn'al?"

"Yes. We will infiltrate their planet and do as much damage as we can. This is the chance we've been waiting for."

"We can't fail."

"We *won't* fail. For too long, Karn'alian Cyborgs have wreaked havoc with our defenses. Now we can take the battle back to them."

"What are you planning?"

Ismail's smile was cold. "We will kill them off one by one until all their precious Cyborgs are gone. Starting with Commander Logan."

Chapter Four

"Report."

Boltar consulted a handheld diagnostic unit that flashed different sets of numbers and codes. "The outer hull has been successfully repaired. No damage to the integrity of the shield, no breach. Both engines are functioning at one hundred percent and can deliver maximum power."

Logan nodded. "Then power up and let's get out of here."

"We're not waiting until morning?"

"No. If there's somebody out there whose intent is to do more damage, we need the element of surprise on our side."

"Yes, Sir."

"Secure the cargo bay, close the doors and get ready for launch." Logan couldn't wait to get out of Zalian Three. "Let's go home."

* * * * *

Trey, a young officer in charge of the energy read-out scanner in the security bay, frowned at the blinking screen. "There it is again. What the hell?" he muttered. "Hey, Cid. Come look at this."

"What is it?" came the mumbled reply from the next station.

"Will you stop that thing for a minute and check this out?"

"All right, all right. Don't lose your shorts. Let me just tell Ordy to take a quick breather." Cid's fingers flew over the keyboard.

Trey curbed his impatience. Ordy was the ord-bot—a small, robotic ordnance detector—tasked with the systematic hunt for traces of explosives on every piece of baggage in the cargo room.

Cid strolled over and peered at Trey's monitor. "What is it?"

"It's a strange energy reading. I saw it once this morning then it was gone. I thought it was just a blip on the screen. A few seconds ago, it showed up again but I lost it."

"Are you sure you're not seeing things, Officer Mizner?" Cid asked teasingly.

Trey threw him an irritated glance. "I'm not shitting you. I'm positive I saw it."

"Maybe it's some kind of magnetic interference? This sector is notorious for that."

"I don't know. Should I tell Chief Moran?"

"Tell him what? That there was a blip in the energy readout and now it's gone? Besides, we're powering up to leave. The Commander is anxious to get under way."

Cid wiggled his eyebrows. "I'd be anxious too if I had a woman like that with me. Did you check her out?"

"Will you get your mind out of your pants?"

Cid snorted. "Come on, Trey. I caught you looking at her too."

"I think everyone got a good look at her when she came onboard," Trey replied dryly. He fiddled with the scanning controls, trying to find the glitch. "I don't know what to do here, Cid. I can't just ignore it."

"Will you stop worrying about that? If it makes you feel better, why don't you run the previous scans? Print it out and we'll go over it. If there was a strange energy spike, it'll be there for sure. Then we'll take it to the chief."

Trey sighed. "You're probably right."

"I *am* right." Cid grinned. "Now run your reports and we'll examine them so you can quit worrying. Afterwards, we can go to the mess hall and check out the passengers. I heard that there are some pretty interesting girls onboard."

Trey pulled up the previous scans and pressed print. It was going to be a big report, over a hundred pages. With Cid's help, they'd look over it carefully and try to isolate the brief, abnormal reading. Maybe Cid was right, maybe it was just interference or something. No use in bringing it to Chief Moran's attention unless he had solid facts. Moran would chew his ass out if it turned out to be nothing.

* * * * *

Logan sat in his chair, watching the monitor as the *Guardian* flew out of the Antion galaxy. The operations room hummed with power as they sped through the vast darkness of space. At this late hour, most of the ship's personnel and passengers had bedded down on cots, crammed in large rooms. Even his chief engineer had turned in for the night, as had the security chief. An efficient team would man operations until the shift change in the morning.

Truth to tell, he didn't need to stay up. His crew was top-notch, reliable and experienced, and yet tonight, like most nights, Logan lingered in the operations room. He'd made his rounds earlier, inspecting the cargo and transport bays. Sleep was something he'd much rather avoid, but there was nothing left for him to do but retire to his quarters.

With a sigh, Logan drained the ale in his tumbler, relishing the fiery slide of the potent liquid down his throat before heading to the lift. It sped to the upper decks where his quarters were located, right next to Sharra's. He'd thought about going to her room tonight but decided against it. A full night's rest would do her good. Her whole life had been turned upside down when Od'ric had arbitrarily decided her fate.

Stifling a yawn, he entered his quarters and undressed. Maybe tonight, the gods of sleep would bless him with uninterrupted rest for once. Just a few hours of sleep, that was all he asked. Just once...

Darkness beckoned. Fear was a bitter taste in Logan's mouth as he glanced at the wall before him. Beyond was a maze he needed to traverse, a journey he must make in the menacing gloom. He clenched his little fists, gathering his courage.

"Mother! Mother!"

As the eerie echo of his voice quieted, he heard her. "We're over here."

He pulled in a deep breath, trying to quell the panic he felt. "I'm coming for you." He edged toward the lone opening. "I can do this. I can find them." Swallowing the lump that lodged in his throat, he walked past the entrance. A strong gust of wind hit him, but he forged on. It was so dark he could barely see the pathways that veered off in different directions.

Cruel, mocking laughter filled the air. He clapped his hands over his ears. "Shut up! I can find my mother. I can! You can't stop me."

He ran blindly to the first passageway he came upon, crying out in frustration as he smacked against a wall. He ignored the pain that exploded in his body, doggedly following another path, but it too led to a dead end.

Terror was a vise around his heart. Time was running out. He needed to save his mother and sister. "Mother! Atie'ne! Tell me where you are."

All he heard were their heart-wrenching sobs.

His breath came in pants. "Tell me where you are," he cried out. He turned left and right, desperately trying to find a way to reach them. Again and again, he ended up where he'd started. He was going around in circles, never getting any closer.

"No! I'm not giving up. I'm not!"

The darkness grew heavier, the air colder. The gusting wind seemed to ridicule him, laughing at his distress. Walls materialized out of thin air, thwarting his efforts. He didn't know how long he kept going until finally, exhausted, his knees buckled under him. He raised his fists. "Mother, Atie'ne, I will never give up," he sobbed. "I will never give up!"

Sharra cried out in pain, jerking to a sitting position. Logan. Scrambling off the bed, she wrapped the sheet haphazardly around her body as she ran to the door that connected their rooms. He was in such agony. With no thought other than to ease his torment, she placed her palm on the cold panel. She closed her eyes and began to draw the pain and anger away from Logan to absorb it into her body.

She gritted her teeth as waves of arrow-sharp, pounding torture came at her. She trembled with the effort, tears rolling down her cheeks as she lost her breath and swayed on her feet. Marshalling her strength, she sent him soothing pulses of energy to counter the hurt, trying to absorb all of it. It proved to be too much. Sharra stumbled back, her vision dimming. She took several deep breaths, her sobs turning to soft hiccups as she methodically worked to obliterate the pain now locked inside her. She stilled, her gaze shifting to the connecting door between their rooms.

He was coming.

The sliding panel swished open silently. Logan's eyes immediately found her. "You're awake."

His face was ravaged by the aftereffects of his nightmare. But it was the intense need emanating from him that seized her, pinning her where she stood. It slammed into her, obliterating any thought but to give him the comfort he needed. She was so sensitive to his feelings, in tune with his emotions, that she knew right away what he needed. Her body responded to the call, moisture gushing between her legs in preparation. Sharra dropped the sheet on the floor, offering herself, holding nothing back. "Come to me."

No more words were necessary. Logan swept her into his arms before heading back to his room. Sharra clung to him, plunging her face in the masculine curve of his neck, filling him with waves of healing energy. She didn't question her need to ease his pain. She'd give him anything to erase the ugliness of his nightmare.

Logan placed her on the bed. Hunger had replaced the earlier terror of his nightmare. It swept over her, a burning, primal need to reaffirm life. The hot arousal pulsing through his consciousness flooded her susceptible senses, setting her body on fire. She felt what he felt. Before he even laid a hand on her, Sharra knew there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her. It was a dangerous game she was playing, putting herself at the mercy of his desires, but she wanted to do it. She *needed* to do it for Logan.

As he settled his big body over hers, Sharra held him close, silently offering him a safe haven from the anger and bitterness that inhabited his heart. He claimed her lips in a kiss that sent her reeling into unknown territory, plundering her mouth like a starved man. Heat swamped her body, turning her blood molten in her veins.

Logan palmed her breasts. He pinched the nipples through the rings that vibrated at that exact moment. She moaned, the dual sensation unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

"You're so beautiful," he muttered hoarsely.

Her heart skipped a beat. His desire conveyed itself to her, telling her what he wanted. She cupped her breast. "Suck me hard." There was no time to be shocked at the words she'd never before said in her life. It was what Logan was thinking, what he wanted. This kind of intensity was alien to her. She'd never felt this needy, this subservient to any one man's desire.

Logan's eyes gleamed as he took in the flesh erotically decorated with the gold rings. He bent low and licked the tips before sucking them deep into his mouth. The push and pull reverberated all the way to her soul. Sharra was sopping wet, unbearably aroused, need pulsating in her cunt. She fought to think through the fog, channeling her energy into reading what Logan needed from her. Her senses told her he didn't want gentle. "Bite me," she gasped.

The flicker of pain she felt as he bit down on the stiff, ringed crests was overshadowed by the stinging heat that coalesced in the very heart of her body. Sharra

welcomed the nip, feeling Logan's desire escalate. Exactly when her own desire surged to overtake her senses and merge with his, she didn't quite know. It was as if a switch had been flipped, releasing the eager, needy woman who lay dormant within.

When Logan lightly bit her nipple again, she cried out sharply and begged for more, his name a whisper on her lips. He held her still while he feasted on her adorned breasts. She rubbed her leg against his, loving the rasp of his body hair on her skin. He was so hot to the touch. Drawing her palms down his muscled back, she caressed the smooth, taut contours, ending on his tight, firm buttocks. Not done, she insinuated a hand between their bodies and wrapped it around his cock.

The shaft was smooth as the finest silk and as hard as steel. Sharra caught her breath at the size and breadth of him, tracing the length from root to tip and back again. Fresh moisture coated her pussy, adding to the urgency she felt. She wanted him inside her, every single, glorious inch of him. Swiping at the drop of moisture that leaked from the slit on the broad head, she brought it to her mouth, savoring his taste.

"By the gods. What are you doing to me?"

Sharra knew he was puzzled by the intensity of the desire between them. Their need fed off one another. "It's you. *You're* doing it to *me*," she whispered.

His hot gaze swept over her. "You're some kind of sorceress."

"No. Not a sorceress." Sharra welcomed his thoughts, his feelings, absorbing them inside her, intensifying her hunger. Oh the lustful things he wanted to do to her.

Logan pushed her thighs apart, a feral expression twisting his face. Pulling her nether lips apart with his fingers, he surged inside her pussy, thrusting through soft, pliant tissues, aided by the copious moisture coating the slick folds. He didn't stop until he was buried to the hilt, the head of his cock nudging her womb.

Sharra whimpered.

He gritted his teeth and drove inside her with long, mind-destroying strokes. Logan was hardly being gentle, ramming his cock hard and deep, powering into her faster and faster, but she didn't care. She could only hang on, wrapping her legs tightly around his waist, drowning from pure pleasure.

He cupped her ass and angled her higher, drilling her with his shaft. Sharra was no longer cognizant of her surroundings. All she could focus on was the erotic sensation of having Logan inside her. Her world shrank to just the two of them, not knowing where she ended and he began.

He rubbed her swollen clit with his thumb, and just like that, Sharra lost it. With a cry, she came, the waves so razor-sharp they were almost painful. Logan buried his face in her neck, letting loose a rough groan. His cock swelled impossibly larger inside her before he blasted her inner walls with his seed. Sharra moaned, whimpering his name. Tremors still rocked her quivering flesh, her heart racing with his. By the time she regained her senses, she was bathed in perspiration, her limbs weak and boneless.

Logan slumped beside her. His eyes were closed, his breathing deep and heavy. Gingerly, she placed a hand on his chest and closed her eyes, sending a *push* into his

unguarded mind. There was no sign of turmoil or pain. All she detected was immense satisfaction. She'd done that, given him the succor he needed after another horrifying nightmare. Her lips curved, even as her eyelids drooped. That was all that mattered to her. Only then did she let the blissful peace of sleep claim her.

* * * * *

"Sharra."

Coming awake slowly, Sharra opened her eyes. She sat up and realized she was back in her own room. Logan was nowhere to be found. What —

"Turn on the monitor next to your bed."

There was a square screen that sat within arm's reach. She pulled the sheet up to her neck and flicked on the switch. Logan's image came on the monitor.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in a gruff voice.

She flushed. "Okay." Except for a little soreness between her thighs, she felt wonderful.

"Good. Get something to eat in the mess hall." His tone softened somewhat. "I have matters I need to take care of today but I'll check in on you later."

She sensed a guardedness about him, one that was missing last night. Sadness engulfed her. She stared at the screen, wishing she could touch Logan and eliminate the distance between them. "I'll be okay. Don't worry about me."

He stared at her for a moment before switching off without another word. Sharra wondered if Cyborgs were wary by nature. As warriors, they probably weren't given to showing emotion. Last night, she'd taken Logan's pain as her own and had given him a small measure of relief. The physical connection between them was real and powerful. Would sex be the starting place for her to ease his pain? Why not? It had worked last night. Even if he hadn't verbalized it, he'd needed her. Something compelled him to come into her room despite the agonizing pain he'd just experienced. A man like Logan—battle-hardened and trained for combat—wasn't used to admitting weakness or need. But in her arms, he'd found peace. Maybe that was the destiny she was meant to fulfill—to heal the deep scars in his soul. But to do that, she'd have to find out why he was plagued by nightly terrors.

She plopped back on the bed. The tenderness between her legs reminded her of his powerful possession. He hadn't hurt her, though he hadn't exactly been gentle. Surprisingly enough, Sharra didn't mind. It was...exciting. They'd been so in tune with each other's feelings, magnifying the desire they'd felt for each other.

If she wasn't careful, she'd lose control and try to mind-bond with him.

Sharra grimaced. That could never happen. For empaths, mind-bonding occurred during sex, when two people who were destined for one another transcended the physical plane and melded their minds and souls, producing a breathtaking joining.

Her connection with Logan was incredible, but to mind-bond with him would give away her empathic gift. It was imperative to keep her secret. Her life depended on it.

* * * * *

With time on her hands, Sharra explored the ship, keeping to the designated public access areas. There were plenty of amenities available to the passengers. Games and vid-shows kept small children occupied, and there was a holo-image room where Karn'alians could familiarize themselves once more with their home planet. In the years since the Pagans' defeat, Karn'al had gone through a lot of changes. After the massive rebuilding effort, a new world awaited them.

As Sharra wandered inside the holo-image room, she spotted a familiar face. "Tan'ea," she greeted.

The young woman's hazel gaze flickered with what seemed like anxiety for a moment before she smiled. "Sharra."

Sharra eyed the two men with Tan'ea, wondering who they were. "How nice to see you again. You disappeared last night when we got off the lift."

Tan'ea waved her hand airily. "I was so hungry I couldn't wait to get some food. I'm sorry I left you rather abruptly."

She was lying. Sharra felt it deep in her bones. "I understand completely. I myself was famished." She directed a smile at the two men. "Hello."

Tan'ea introduced them, albeit with obvious reluctance. "This is my fiancé Ismail and his brother Nim."

A deep chill abruptly settled over Sharra, dark and heavy, pressing in on her. It intensified as she met the eerie, pale gaze of Ismail. There was something unsettling in the cold, thin set of his lips and the arrogant tilt of his nose, which gave him a sinister air. With great difficulty, she managed a greeting, trying to ward off the negative energy.

Ismail gave her a false grin. "And you are?"

Sharra caught her breath at the violent hatred she sensed in him. "S-Sharra."

"Sharra," the one called Nim murmured. Unlike Ismail, his eyes were dark, nearly black. His face was blunt and wide, with a long, crooked nose. He gave off the same menacing vibe as his brother.

"Commander Logan's woman," Tan'ea spoke sharply.

The brothers exchanged glances. A deep, oppressive feeling bore down on Sharra's chest, nearly cutting off her air.

"It was very pleasant meeting you, Sharra," Ismail declared politely. "Tan'ea is not feeling well. We're taking her back to our quarters." He took Tan'ea's arm and led her away, with Nim bringing up the rear.

Sharra wheezed and coughed, fighting to breathe. The tightness didn't ease from her lungs until they were out of her sight. The feeling of impending disaster choked her. Evil intent had radiated from Ismail and Nim. They were planning something horrible.

On impulse, she hailed a passing security officer. "I-I need to speak to Commander Logan."

"He's in a restricted area, miss. No one's allowed to go there without authorization."

"B-but—" Sharra wrung her hands together. Should she just go back to her room and wait for him there?

A uniformed man came up to them. "Is there a problem here?"

The security officer snapped to attention. "No problem, Chief Moran. She wanted to speak to Commander Logan."

"I'll take it from here," the man said, dismissing the young officer. He flashed Sharra a friendly smile. "I'm Moran, Chief of Security. You must be Sharra."

"Hello." When she took his outstretched hand, a warm, comforting feeling filled her. Right away she knew Moran was a loyal, trustworthy man. "Should I call you Chief?"

Moran grinned. "Whatever makes you comfortable. I'm afraid Commander Logan hasn't cleared you to go to the Operations deck. I can ask for authorization, if you'd like."

"I'd appreciate it, but only if it's no trouble."

"Not at all." He pressed a button on his belt and spoke in quiet tones. "It's Chief Moran, Sir. Do I have clearance to bring Sharra up to Operations?"

Logan's response came loud and clear over the com-link. "Not right now. Tell her I'll get back to her later."

At Moran's apologetic smile, Sharra's cheeks warmed. What made her think Logan would drop everything he was doing to see her? Come to think of it, how could she tell him about Tan'ea and the two brothers without compromising her own secret? He would end up with more questions than answers.

She pushed her embarrassment aside and gave Moran a smile. "I understand he's busy. I was about to get something to eat and I'd love some company."

"Of course." He courteously escorted her to the mess hall, telling her tidbits about life onboard the ship. By the time they sat down with plates full of food, Sharra knew she'd made a friend.

"The passengers are excited to return to Karn'al," she observed.

Moran nodded. "The Pagan war decimated our home world and killed most of our people. Recovery has been slow, but we've made a lot of progress. Karn'al needs her people's help. To do that, we must find all Karn'alians who fled and bring them back."

"Do they all come willingly?"

He was surprised by her question. "Our race is almost extinct. They understand that we need to rebuild our numbers in order to survive as a people."

"And Karn'al is still at war with the Pagans?"

"I don't think the Pagans will ever stop trying to avenge their humiliating defeat. They're a treacherous lot. We have to be vigilant at all times."

A disturbing thought occurred to Sharra. "What about those you transport home? I suppose they have to pass some kind of security clearance?"

"Certainly. Everyone goes through extensive, mandatory security checks. We have ways of confirming their identities and other vital, personal information." Moran smiled. "I wish I could tell you more, but it's classified."

"Of course." Her thoughts raced as she mulled over what Moran had just said. Tan'ea, Ismail and Nim must have passed the security check to get onboard the ship. So why would they want to do their fellow Karn'aliens harm?

She caught the curious glance Moran gave her. It was time to change the subject. The last thing she wanted was for the ship's chief of security to wonder why she was so curious about their safety measures. "How long have you been with Logan?"

"I've been with him since he was given command of the *Guardian*." Moran's admiration was clear in his voice. "We've been through a lot of battles. Commander Logan is one of the bravest and most daring in the service. I wouldn't want to serve under anybody else."

"He's not an easy man to understand," Sharra blurted, then flushed when she realized she'd spoken out loud.

Moran cleared his throat. "I, ah, don't really know what to say to that."

"I'm sorry," she offered in low tones. "I didn't mean to put you in an uncomfortable position. It's just that Logan and I didn't really know each other when I—" she broke off and sighed. "Do you know how I came to be here?"

"It is something of a common knowledge, yes," he replied hesitantly.

"I don't expect others to understand the Zalian way of life." She'd known there would be talk, in fact, she'd expected it. To others, she must have appeared nothing more than chattel, used to pay Od'ric's debt of gratitude.

"Sharra, I don't judge other people's ways and don't meddle in the Commander's life. It is nobody else's business but yours."

"Thank you. A new life awaits me in Karn'al and there is much for me to learn."

Moran smiled. "I understand completely. I have some books you could read. Would you like that?"

"That would be wonderful."

"It's a small enough matter to put you at ease about your new home." His com-link beeped. "I'm afraid I have to go back to work." He stood up. "If you need anything, you can get any of my men to find me." With a last wave, Chief Moran headed for the lift.

Sharra glanced out the panoramic view screen at the vast darkness of space that lay before her. She wished she could tell Logan about her suspicions regarding Tan'ea and the two brothers. But how? She'd need solid evidence before she could expose them.

* * * * *

Logan briefly debated calling Moran back and allowing him to bring Sharra up to Operations. His finger hovered over the com-link button. One push and he could have her up here, next to him. With an impatient sigh, he decided he didn't need the distraction.

He shifted in his chair, letting the buzz of activity surround him. His thoughts drifted back to the previous night and the nightmare. *Nothing new there.* It was what happened afterwards that was unsettling. The sex had been quick but had also been the most satisfying since... Actually, he couldn't remember *ever* feeling that level of pleasure and satisfaction. His need had been unprecedented. He'd sought Sharra out, propelled by a compulsion he couldn't explain. Afterward, he'd felt...soothed. The pain that always followed the night terrors had faded rather abruptly. As he lay in her arms, he could still remember the peace that filled him—a precious feeling that had eluded him most of his life—before he'd fallen into a dreamless slumber.

He'd been with women who were more experienced when it came to sex, women who knew how to titillate and seduce. Sharra's innocent smile and sweet body put them all to shame. Eli'ana couldn't have been more wrong when she called Sharra frigid. Sharra had been just the opposite, hot and passionate, eager and greedy.

"Commander." A young communications specialist interrupted his thoughts. "I have Dr. An'hari on the com-link."

"Tell her I'm busy."

The young man swallowed. "With all due respect, Commander, she told me if you put her off, she'd blast us with a red-alert emergency communiqué."

A red-alert interrupted all communications within the ship, guaranteeing immediate attention. Damn pushy woman. She knew exactly how to get him to answer her summons. "I'll take it in Central Command."

"Yes, Sir."

Central Command was his office within the ship. He settled in his chair before he activated the monitor. "Threats don't work with me, Miranda."

"I will not be ignored, Logan. You have a penchant for conveniently forgetting to get in touch with me."

"I'm busy."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "As am I. But I always take the time to talk to you. It would be nice if you could return the favor once in a while."

"I'll keep that under advisement. What can I do for you?"

"You had another nightmare last night."

"What else is new?"

"But something was different this time."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I've been reading your brain scans. After the initial spike in neural activity because of the nightmare, the intensity of the stress immediately leveled off. I'd like to know what caused it to drop."

"You mean you weren't listening in, as usual?"

"I was out of my office, but I programmed my portable scanning unit to alert me when you had elevated neural activity. What did you do, Logan?"

"Nothing," he muttered.

She frowned. "I don't want you taking risks by experimenting on yourself. I need to supervise whatever procedure you're carrying out."

"I'm not experimenting."

Miranda stared at him for long moments, concern written on her face. "Whatever it was, it worked better than any medicine I've given you. It resulted in an immediate calming of your neural activity. A hell of a cure, if you ask me. It's something you should consider doing on a nightly basis. But first, I need to determine if it's safe for you to do so," she cautioned.

Miranda was genuinely concerned and had been tireless in exploring avenues to rid him of his nightmares. "I'm not really sure what I did last night. Let me see if it happens again, all right?"

She looked like she wanted to argue further but reluctantly nodded. "I want to see you as soon as you get back here, you hear me?"

The screen went blank as Miranda signed off. He didn't tell her that he'd felt a difference last night, a big fucking difference. After the usual garbled images in the nightmare, he hadn't felt like his head was being pounded by a thousand electromagnetic hammers. In fact, he'd felt better than he had in a long time as he'd lain in Sharra's arms. It must have been the sex. What else could it have been?

It's something you should consider doing on a nightly basis. Miranda's words echoed in his mind. Sex with Sharra certainly wouldn't be a hardship. Even now, just thinking of her made him hot. Hell yeah, he'd like to fuck her every night.

What was it about her that drove him to such heights of pleasure, and at the same time soothed his pain? Sex was sex. What made it so different with Sharra?

Chapter Five

After eating in the mess hall, Sharra met some of the other passengers and even enjoyed some vid-entertainment with children. The Karn'alians were a friendly bunch, eagerly regaling her with tales of their lives before the Pagans came. She listened intently, wanting to learn more about the place she would soon call home. That was where Logan found her a few hours later. Her reaction to him was immediate. Her skin warmed, her pulse accelerated. She smiled when he drew close. "Hello."

His dark gaze was warm and faintly assessing. "I have some free time. I thought you might like a quick tour of the ship."

"That sounds wonderful," Sharra agreed with embarrassing eagerness. Logan had sought her out, wanting to spend time with her. That was good. Really good. Side by side, they walked down the passageway to the lift, which took them to the operations deck.

"This is the main command center, where we control the ship's engines and navigation, communications and weapons."

"It seems very complicated." It was a busy hub of activity, with a thousand blinking lights, small beeping alarms and complicated-looking consoles manned by the crew. She glanced at Logan and saw the pride on his face. "You love it."

"The *Guardian* is my first ship. We've been through many battles together."

He led her back to the lift and punched the top level. When the doors opened, Sharra found herself on a completely transparent viewing deck, small enough to fit just a handful of people. It afforded them a breathtaking view as the ship navigated through space. "It's beautiful."

Logan jammed his hands into his pockets. "I like to sit up here sometimes."

Sharra placed her hand on the clear enclosure. "I feel like I'm outside. That I can just reach out and touch something."

"This floor actually serves a dual purpose." Logan strolled across to the other end. "It opens to reveal a powerful laser cannon. It's very useful in hostile encounters."

"Have you been in a lot of battles?"

"I'm a Cyborg. It's my job."

"To fight the Pagans?"

"The Pagans and anybody else who seeks to harm my people."

She swallowed at the cold, implacable tone. "They hurt you."

"When the Pagans invaded Karn'al, they destroyed everything, raped and killed the women and made a sport out of torturing helpless children."

"W-what did they do to you?"

"I lost my family."

Sharra wished she could come right out and ask him if the women in his dreams were the family he'd lost. "How old were you?"

"I was ten years old. The Pagans executed all able-bodied men who could fight against them. My father was among the first to die."

Her heart broke for the young boy who'd suffered through such horrific trauma. "I'm sorry they hurt you." She touched him, wanting to soothe him in any way she could.

Logan's fists clenched. "I won't stop fighting the Pagans as long as they continue to hurt the weak and the innocent." He speared her with a hard glance. "That's who I am, Sharra. I'm a warrior, sworn to defend my home and my people. That's all I've lived for since the day I became an orphan."

Oh the pain he must have gone through to carve such bitterness and hatred in his heart.

"They cut off my arm," he revealed flatly. The twisted cruelty he'd suffered brought a sharp pain to her chest. "Doctors and scientists equipped me with a cybernetic arm to replace the one I lost."

Did he think she would think any less of him because of what he was? He was a Cyborg warrior who wouldn't hesitate to kill, but she believed there was still a little boy inside whose innocence was ripped away by the horror he'd gone through. She wrapped her arms around him. "I wish I could take away your pain. I wish I could help you get rid of the bitterness in your heart, but only you can do that."

Logan stood unmoving in her embrace. "Don't expect much from me, Sharra. I'm not interested in emotional ties."

He won't allow himself to love. She closed her eyes. His warning came too late. She already had feelings for him.

He cradled her nape, tipping her face up. "Did I hurt you last night?"

She refused to look away even as she blushed. "No."

Logan trailed his fingers down one cheek. "I didn't scare you?"

"Never," she whispered. "I know you'd never hurt me."

He gave a slight shake of his head. "You don't know me at all, Sharra."

"I know enough."

"I'm not a gentle man."

"I'm not asking you to be."

He ran his thumb over her lower lip. "I don't even know why I brought you with me."

Sharra relished his touch. "I'm glad you did."

"You're willing to let me fuck you any way I want without asking for anything in return? For what?"

She refused to flinch at the deliberately crude words. How could she explain that she was meant to be with him, that there existed a deep connection between them, that she shared his dreams?

"I won't ask for anything you don't want to give." Opening her senses, Sharra absorbed his escalating desire and let it combine with her own. *Feel it. Feel how right we are together.*

Logan pressed his lips to hers. Her response was instant and total as she poured herself into the kiss. Sharra eagerly dueled with his tongue, drawing him deeper, closer. Her body liquefied, readying itself for him.

He pulled her bodice down, freeing her breasts and catching them in his palms. Her gasp turned into a moan of bliss when he skillfully plied the tips with his fingers, adding to the sting of the nipple rings.

"Brace your hands behind you."

Trembling, she did as he bade, the position thrusting out her chest. Logan pushed her dress down past her hips and to the floor. He slid his hands up her thighs, followed the contour of her hips to the curve of her waist. It was slow, as if he was committing her shape to memory. "I've never felt anything as soft as your skin."

Sharra bit her lip, struggling to stay still, willingly submitting to his touch. It became increasingly difficult when he reached her buttocks, his fingers encompassing the plump flesh. When he traced the crease in between, she held her breath, waiting for what he would do next. When he moved on, she grappled with a mixture of relief and disappointment. She didn't have time to analyze this, all thought fleeing her mind when he reached her breasts once more.

"They're beautiful, full and round. I could suck on them for hours."

Heat pooled between her legs. She rubbed her thighs together, looking for some surcease from the fire surging in her pussy. It made her proud that he found such enjoyment in her body. He made her feel desirable, uninhibited. With Logan, she wanted to give of herself totally. It was wanton. Wicked. Just for him.

He tweaked her nipples through the delicate rings, sending a brief pain streaking through her. "Oh *yesss*."

"Open your legs."

Sharra widened her stance, smothering a gasp when he ripped her underwear off. She bit her lip as he stared at her smooth, hairless sex, knowing he could see the slick moisture coating her labia. Raw anticipation turned her body into one quivering mass of need. *Please, please, touch me now...*

When Logan fastened his lips to her pussy, she cried out. The hoarse voice was almost unrecognizable as hers. Sharra clawed at the wall, needing something to hang onto. The physical pleasure was overwhelming. He concentrated on her clit, nudging

the sensitive button into stinging, pulsing life. The rough abrasion of his tongue on the swollen mass of nerves drove her insane. He gave her just enough to keep her teetering on the edge until she was begging him to let her come. "Logan," she gasped. "I n-need to..."

He pulled her clit between his lips and sucked hard. With a scream, Sharra came. Stars exploded behind her eyes as her orgasm washed over her in powerful waves. Shuddering, she fell against him, grateful for his grip on her hips. She ground her pussy against his mouth, sharp tremors sapping her of strength.

Logan gritted his teeth, desperately trying to regain some control. Sharra had come in his mouth but he was hardly satisfied. Unable to resist, he tongued the tight little bud again, loving the way she moaned his name and trembled. She was so fucking responsive, how could she have been branded as frigid? Od'ric's son was an idiot.

Unbuttoning his trousers, he pushed them down his hips. His cock sprang free, thick and painfully erect. By the gods, he'd love to feel her lips wrapped tightly around his shaft. As if she'd read his mind, Sharra sank to her knees. She caressed the stiff stalk of flesh, running her hands up and down the rigid length. Holding his gaze, she fit her lips around the ridged head. Her tongue, warm and soft, fluttered around the slit, drawing out a drop of liquid, driving him insane.

Logan sucked in a sharp breath. Every lick, every stroke of her tongue was exactly what he wanted. She seemed to know when to take him deep and suck him tight or give him light, flickering touches right on the sensitive underside of the head. It was uncanny, almost as if she could read his thoughts—which wasn't possible. The idea flew from his head as her hot mouth encased the length of his cock, slowly drawing him deeper. He groaned.

Her answering moan hummed along his sensitized shaft.

"Open wide." Plunging his fingers in her hair, Logan steadied her for a moment. "Take my cock all the way in." The sight of her lips stretched wide over his shaft was erotic as hell, and he resisted the urge to just thrust deep. "Let me feel your tongue."

He stifled a groan when she complied. *Damn.* He'd never had a hotter mouth than hers. "Kneel up. Let me touch your breasts." He cupped the mounds, loving the little sounds of pleasure she made. She was incredibly sensitive there, responding to the slightest stimulation. "You like it when I play with your nipples?"

Sharra nodded eagerly, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked him deep. He pinched her through the rings, loving the vibration that zipped along his cock at her moan. "Show me how much you love having your nipples played with."

She cupped her breasts, pushing them higher, harder against his hands.

Logan thrust more of his shaft in her mouth. "All of it. Take all of it." The eagerness with which she complied had his balls tightening. He was going to come soon, but he didn't want to take his cock out of her mouth. It felt too damn good. He wanted to pour his seed between those sinful lips.

Sharra released him with a small pop, flattening her tongue and rubbing it around the head. "Come in my mouth. Give it to me. Please."

He marveled again at how she seemed to know exactly what he wanted *when* he wanted it. But he was too far gone to analyze that now. His body was intent only on coming. "Put your fingers in your pussy."

Her fingers immediately descended between her legs, the soft wet sound telling him she was soaked.

He couldn't hold back any longer. "I'm coming," he growled. The tingling started at the base of his spine, signaling the start of a powerful orgasm. His cock swelled and jerked between her lips before he plunged it deep in her mouth. Pulse after pulse of semen spurted from his cock. "Fuck." He fought to keep his eyes open, not wanting to miss the erotic sight.

Below him, Sharra moaned with blissful satisfaction. Her hips arched as she fucked her fingers, the digits disappearing into her pussy. "Come, Sharra. Now."

As if his voice was her cue, Sharra groaned and shuddered violently. Her eyes flew open and met his. In that instant, a hot rush of pleasure suffused Logan, expanding in his chest and spreading through his whole body. It was almost as if he was feeling what she did, sharing every jolt that racked her body. Amazing. By the gods, sex had never been this way with anybody.

As Sharra trembled beneath him, Logan grappled with strange, newfound feelings. There was something about being with her that he couldn't explain. He pulled her up, compelled to enclose her in his arms. Her arms went around him in a tight embrace. Later, much later, he'd examine why he felt this way with her. Right now, he just wanted to savor their time together.

* * * * *

"Look at them." Nim snorted in disdain, his glance following Logan and Sharra as they exited the mess hall and got on the lift. "The Cyborg freak and his bitch."

Ismail put a restraining hand on his brother. "Lower your voice. You don't want to be overheard."

Nim exhaled loudly. "Are we just going to sit here and do nothing, Ismail?"

"Patience, brother," Ismail intoned beneath his breath. "We need to bide our time and plan our moves." He glanced at Tan'ea, who stood beside him. "Are you certain your information about Sharra is correct?"

She nodded quickly. "Her family took pains to hide their real identities and they were careful not to settle too long in one place, but my informant confirmed they're from Arrion. He assured me his source is very reliable."

"More reason for caution while in her presence."

"We should have finished the job on Zalian Three." Nim threw a contemptuous glance at Tan'ea. "If you had done your job like you were supposed to, phase one of our plan would be complete."

"Security is tight. I couldn't get into Logan's quarters," she hissed before turning to Ismail. "I don't like your brother blaming me."

"Shut up," Ismail snapped. "My patience with you is wearing thin, Tan'ea."

Hurt showed in her eyes. "I helped you get onboard this ship, didn't I?"

Ismail moved to shield her from other people's sight and pulled her hair back roughly. "Be thankful you're a good fuck. Otherwise, I'd have disposed of you a long time ago." At the excitement that flared in her eyes, he grabbed her breast and squeezed hard. "And then what would you do? Who would give you exactly what you need?"

Tan'ea licked her lips. "I'm sorry."

He released her abruptly. "We'll just have to wait until we arrive on Karn'al before we act."

"What are you planning?" Nim asked.

Ismail smiled. "Don't worry, little brother. I'm planning a strike that will take out not just one Cyborg, but many of them. With one blow, we'll deplete their numbers."

Nim grinned, rubbing his hands together. "I like that. And the empath?"

"We'll leave her alone for now." Ismail's eyes glinted coldly. "She might be useful to us later."

* * * * *

Logan cried out, coming awake suddenly. He was breathing heavily, his body drenched in sweat. Tossing aside the thin sheet, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and cradled his head in his hands. "Goddammit."

Once again, crystal-clear images of his bloodied family flashed over and over in his head while he stood by helpless and unable to do anything but watch them die. And the screams... By the gods, would he ever get the sound of the bloodcurdling cries out of his head?

The sharp, skull-splitting headache attacked suddenly. He stifled a groan, twisting his hair with his fingers. He closed his eyes, taking deep breaths, which did nothing to alleviate the pain. It felt like his head was being cleaved in two.

He grabbed the portable medication unit that sat next to his bed. One press of a button would send painkillers streaming into his system. Logan tossed it angrily on the floor. The fucking stuff never worked. The sharp ache increased, spreading between his eyes to the top of his head and the back of his skull. He moaned at the excruciating pain. Why couldn't he fucking find peace?

Sharra sobbed softly, leaning against the connecting panel. Logan was in great pain. The piercing hurt reverberated in her head and she doubled over. Closing her eyes, she inhaled long, measured breaths, reaching deep inside herself for the strength to deal with it. It took some time but it finally dulled to a manageable level. Only then did she concentrate on sending healing energy through to Logan. Again and again she tried, but felt little change in him. She clenched her fists in frustration. She needed to be *with* him. Her finger hovered uncertainly over the switch. Logan might not like her going in there without an invitation, but how could she leave him suffering like this?

She couldn't.

Sharra pushed the button that activated the panel. Though the room was in semi-darkness, she spotted him right away, sitting on his bed, cradling his head in his hands.

"Not now, Sharra." His voice shook. "I need to be alone."

She walked toward him on unsteady legs. "Please, let me help you."

He raised dark, tortured eyes. "Nobody can help me. It will pass. I just...have to give it time. Now go!"

He was no doubt going to be furious with her later, but for the moment, her utmost concern was for him. She climbed on the bed, kneeling behind him and wrapping him in her arms, heedless of the tears rolling down her face. "I can help you."

Logan threw off her hands violently. "I don't want to hurt you. Just leave me."

She reeled from the intense pain he was feeling and struggled to stay upright. "Let me help you. Please." She wrapped her arms around him again, holding tight, linking her fingers together when he tried to pull her off him.

He ceased thrashing. "It goes away after a while," he explained in a pained voice. "There's nothing you can do, Sharra. Right now, I just need to be alone. Leave me be."

"I can't leave you," she whispered against his damp skin. "Let me try to help." When he didn't try to shake her off, Sharra placed her palms on his scalp. Closing her eyes, she called on every ounce of strength she possessed.

"Sharra—"

"*Shh*. Don't talk." She began to softly knead his scalp, sending him healing energy, taking his pain from him and drawing it inside her body. "Let me do this for you."

Logan didn't utter a word, didn't move or push her away. Sharra gritted her teeth at the hurt that flowed into her body, determined to release him from its bondage. Sweat dotted her skin. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. At long last, she felt him relax.

Logan groaned and slumped against her. Sharra closed her eyes, feeling his pain gradually subside. His stiffness slowly dissipated as she filled him with soothing, healing feelings. She worked with her hands and her mind, slowly depleting him of the poison brought by the nightmare and the physical pain that accompanied it. It hurt her to see him suffer. Her heart broke over the anguish he suffered night after night. *Oh Logan. I would do anything to spare you from any more pain.*

Logan was completely relaxed against her. All traces of his headache were gone and he was close to sleeping. With soft words, she gently tugged him back to lie down on the bed. He did so without any complaint. Cyborg or not, his body could only take so much. His mind was an integral part of his system, and he was mentally spent.

Sharra settled beside him, careful to maintain physical contact. The pain would no longer plague him tonight. She pushed at the lock of hair that fell over his forehead, looking down at his face relaxed in sleep. If it was within her power to ease him in any way, she wouldn't hesitate to do it.

She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him, fatigued from her efforts. His heartbeat, deep and steady, reassured her. One last time, she reached for his mind, making sure that he was at peace. Satisfied that she'd eased his pain, she gave in to the exhaustion that overtook her. In moments, she was asleep.

* * * * *

Sharra stirred, slowly coming awake. She opened her eyes and encountered Logan's dark ones. "Hi."

"About last night..."

She cupped his cheek. "Don't be mad at me for coming in here."

Logan took her hand in his. "How can I be angry? You helped me."

Her heart swelled when he pressed his lips against her palm. "No more pain?"

He shook his head. "What did you do?"

"Nothing." It wouldn't do for him to suspect anything. "All you needed was a little massage to relieve the pain."

Logan shot her a skeptical look. "I've tried everything from massages to pain medication and even the much-vaunted healing needles from the planet Kurai-ka. Nothing worked." He glanced at her as if he was trying to solve a puzzle. "But all you did was touch me and I felt the pain draining away."

Happiness filled her. "I'm glad I could help." She touched a finger to his lips. "Does the pain come every night?" Sharra held her breath, hoping he'd tell her about his nightmares.

"It differs."

She began a gentle, kneading motion at the base of his scalp, determined that his evasiveness would not dissuade her. "What brings it on?"

"I'm not sure."

Clearly he wasn't ready to tell her about the nightmares. "Does anything seem to trigger the pain?" she persisted gently.

"Are you a doctor too?" he countered with a teasing smile. He arched against her fingers, obviously enjoying her touch.

"I'm just trying to understand your pain and maybe help do something about it."

Logan exhaled softly, his eyes closing. Sharra's heart ached. He was in such need of comfort and love and she longed to give him anything to ease his pain. Driven by a need to show him she cared, Sharra leaned up and kissed him softly on the lips.

Logan stilled, his eyes opening to meet hers, his gaze unguarded. She kissed him again, this time longer, rubbing her lips against his. His hand spread over her waist, lifting to touch the bottom curve of her breast. She came up on her elbow and opened her lips over his, spearing his mouth with her tongue, wanting to share with him the feelings threatening to overwhelm her. In the short time they'd been together, Logan had come to mean so much to her. She wanted him to feel it and accept it.

Sharra curved a hand around his nape and held him tight. He shifted, pulling her over him as he sat up. She straddled him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

His gaze was solemn. "Thank you."

She placed her palm over his heart. "I'm here for you. Always."

"My life is not an easy one. I'm used to being alone."

"It doesn't matter."

Logan drew her hair back, softly caressing her cheek.

"I'll never do anything to hurt you," she said softly. It was important for him to believe that. She wanted his trust. With his past and all that he'd gone through, reaching his heart wouldn't be easy. "Do you believe me?"

He pulled her close but didn't answer.

Sharra hugged him, burying her face in his neck, hiding her disappointment. He had been given very little reason to trust other people, but she wished he could trust her.

Chapter Six

As the ship ate up the distance to Karn'al, Sharra was more and more certain that something bad was about to happen. The feeling of impending doom hung like a cloud over her. Visions of destruction, carnage and bloodshed came to her with frightening regularity. Screams echoed in her head. Through the haze of smoke that shrouded the images, she could see a man lying wounded on the ground but couldn't make out his face. Sharra also saw herself, her face tear-streaked and darkened with soot. Over and over again she saw the images, filling her with abject terror and belief that something disastrous was about to happen. It intensified every time she glimpsed Tan'ea, Ismail and Nim.

They were planning something, she just knew it. Fear and anxiety plagued her, but what could she do? She couldn't tell Logan. The only person she could even think of approaching was Chief Moran. Logan's chief of security had become a friend, always ready to help her with anything. When she dared to send a simple *push* into his mind, she knew for sure he would be inclined to believe her, but only if she possessed solid evidence to support her suspicions.

Trying to get proof turned out to be tough. On the surface, Tan'ea and Ismail acted like normal lovers, never doing anything that would raise attention. As the portent of disaster increased, Sharra knew, just knew, that things were going to change—and not for the better. She longed to talk to Logan, to share her visions and feelings and enlist his help. But there was no telling how he would react after finding out she was one of the hated Arrionian empaths.

As she lay in bed early one morning, Sharra tried to reach within herself, desperately seeking clarification of her visions. All she got was a gray, heavy feeling that did nothing to ease her foreboding. Her lack of proper training prevented her from fully utilizing her natural psychic abilities, which added to her frustration.

At that moment, Logan came out of the bathing cubicle. He leaned down and gave her a kiss. "We should arrive in Karn'al soon. Unfortunately, I won't see you until much later. I have to meet with some commanders once we dock." He gave her a small smile. "Duty calls, I'm afraid."

"I understand." She sat up, mulling over the information. If they were due to arrive at their destination shortly, she'd have very little time to find proof to support her suspicions about Tan'ea and the two brothers.

"I should have some free time afterward to take you to my house and show you around."

"I'd like that."

Logan stared at her for a moment as if he wanted to say something else, but he merely shrugged. "I'll see you later."

What had he been about to say? She'd never known Logan to be reticent about voicing his thoughts. She sighed. Although they had grown closer to each other, coming so far in such a short time, patience was needed for her to penetrate the wall he'd built around his heart.

Sharra threw back the covers. It was time to resume what had become her daily activity—keeping tabs on Tan'ea and the brothers. She spotted Ismail and Tan'ea as soon as she got off the lift. The two made their way from the mess hall to a secluded and deserted passageway. With the excitement over the ship's impending arrival in Karn'al, nobody paid them any attention. Sharra followed the couple, making sure to stay unseen while keeping them in her sights. Her heart thudded nervously as she peered at them from between some bulkhead columns.

Ismail drew a finger down Tan'ea's chest, swirling it lazily around the tip of her breast. "Did you find out anything useful from that young man you've been friendly with?"

Tan'ea arched against him, pushing against his hand. Her laugh was sultry. "That was an easy assignment. He handles incoming communications, you know."

He slid his hand under Tan'ea's skirt, steadily pushing it up her thigh. "What did he tell you?"

The young woman widened her stance, clearly inviting him to explore further. "It seems that three other ships will be arriving the same time we are. The commanders of the ships are meeting at a defense outpost right in the spaceport."

Sharra watched Ismail's thin lips part in a smile. "Very useful information indeed. Three commanders in one location is more than we can hope for."

"Ah, but that's not all." Tan'ea rubbed against Ismail like an animal in heat. "According to the communiqué, they will be joined by two others commanders, Tristan and Jed."

"This is our chance. We'll blow up the defense outpost and take out five Cyborgs in one fell swoop."

Tan'ea wrapped her arms around Ismail's neck. "So I did a good job?"

He hefted her up in his arms, unzipping his pants with one hand. Uncaring that they were in plain sight of anybody who might come by, Ismail released his shaft and plunged inside Tan'ea. He took the young woman with little gentleness, his thrusts fast and brutal.

Sharra froze in shock. She had no time to waste if she wanted to prevent the attack Ismail was planning. She whirled around, intent on finding Chief Moran, but bumped into something hard and unyielding.

Nim smiled. "Going somewhere?" He gave her no time to react. Something hard hit her on her head. With a moan, she slid to the ground, unconscious.

* * * * *

Sharra struggled to sit up, moaning at the pain that lanced through her head. She blinked to clear her vision. Total darkness surrounded her. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was turning to find Nim right in front of her and then blackness. She gingerly ran her fingers over her head, wincing when she touched a tender, damp spot. It felt like she had a nasty wound up there. Gritting her teeth, she pushed off the floor and stood up, swaying unsteadily. With her fists, she banged on the wall, screaming for help. She whimpered in frustration when nobody came.

Surely there must be a door here somewhere? Sharra groped blindly for a switch or a button, anything at all, when she realized something didn't feel right. She placed her ear against the wall, straining to hear. There was only silence. There was no detectable hum from the ship's engines. That could only mean... *Oh no!* The *Guardian* must have already docked!

Frantic, she searched for a door panel and found a small crevice in the wall that contained a keypad. Cursing the darkness, she pushed all the buttons, hoping she'd hit the right one. After several attempts, the door swished open. Sharra stumbled out, shielding her eyes against the sudden brightness. The passageway was deserted. She started to run, fear choking her throat, heading for the cargo bay.

When she got there, she saw that the huge doors were wide open. Sharra grabbed the first crewmember she saw. "Have any of the passengers disembarked?"

The young man gave her a curious look. "Yes. We just unloaded the last of their belongings. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Where's Chief Moran? I need to talk to him right now."

He pressed a button in his com-link. "Chief Moran. I have a young woman here at the cargo bay looking for you."

"Please hurry." She glanced outside again and spotted Tan'ea and Nim walking down the ramp. "Tell Chief Moran to meet me by the cargo doors." She moved to follow, afraid to let them out of her sight.

"Wait! Miss!"

Sharra ignored the crewman's attempt to stop her. Out of breath, she came to a halt right where she'd seen them moments ago. Pivoting, she frantically scoured the area for any sign of them. The spaceport was bustling and the crowd jostled her, pushing her along. She finally spotted Tan'ea hovering by some metal crates a short distance away, appearing anxious. "Tan'ea."

Tan'ea looked shocked to see her. "Stay away from me."

"I know what you're planning to do." Sharra stepped closer. "Don't do it. I know you're not a killer."

"Shut up," Tan'ea hissed.

"Is it worth it to betray your own people?"

Tan'ea shoved her against a steel container and pulled a knife from her pocket. Sharra gasped as the sharp tip pressed into her skin. "I could kill you right here, before anybody even figures out what happened."

In the middle of the busy terminal, nobody paid them any attention. For the first time in her life, she knew what real fear was. She gulped, acutely aware that with one push of the knife, she could be dead. "There's good in you, Tan'ea. I know it. It's not too late to change your mind."

"Stay out of my business or I'll tell everyone here that you're from Arrion."

Sharra could only stare at her, speechless.

"Do you seriously think nobody knows?" Tan'ea taunted her. "I knew before we even left Zalian Three. All I have to do is scream that you're an empath and they'll throw you in the prison hold so fast your head'll spin."

"W-why are you doing this?"

"You ask too many questions," Tan'ea growled.

In a split second, Sharra knew Tan'ea was going in for the kill and pushed her away. But it wasn't soon enough. The knife sank into her side, blood seeping from the wound. In shock, she bowled over from the pain, unable to stop Tan'ea as she disappeared among the masses of people in the terminal. Gritting her teeth, Sharra straightened, determined to get help. The lives of five Cyborg commanders were in danger.

Moran saw her at that moment and rushed to her side. "Sharra!"

She stumbled, pressing her hand on her wound, hoping to stem the flow of blood. "Chief Moran." He was the only one who could help her now.

"You're hurt, by the gods. Let me call the medics."

She swallowed, clutching his arm. "No! Don't worry about me. You've got to alert Logan," she gasped. "The five commanders...in the defense outpost. Explosives..." She struggled to speak. "Tan'ea, Ismail and Nim. Find them..."

"What?" Moran blanched. He pressed the button on his com-link. "Red alert. All available security to the spaceport defense outpost. *Now.*"

Sharra stumbled against a crate. With an oath, Moran caught her. "I'm fine," she wheezed. "Go. Don't let Logan get hurt."

Moran ran toward the defense outpost, already on the com-link to Logan. Sharra doubled over from the pain, fighting to stay upright. Her only concern was for Logan. *Please gods, don't let me be too late.*

In the next moment, a powerful explosion rocked the spaceport. The impact shook the ground, sending debris flying everywhere. Screams of terror ripped the air as people scattered in all directions. Panic ensued. Sharra cried out, pushed by the stampeding crowd. A shrill alarm sounded, the piercing bell loud and insistent.

She slid to the ground, tears coming to her eyes, bombarded by fear, terror and disbelief. In her weakened state, she could barely keep up her safeguards. Ignoring the

blood gushing from her wound, she concentrated on blocking out all emotions and struggled to get to her feet. She pushed against the swelling crowd. *Logan*. She had to get to him, to make sure he was okay.

Her progress was slow. Blood coated her hand, and she felt like toppling over. Up ahead, sirens blared and emergency lights flashed. Through the haze of smoke, she could make out security officers swarming the defense outpost. A gaping hole appeared where a wall used to be. Fragments littered the space dock. The acrid smell of smoke made her cough, intensifying the throbbing pain from her wound. She squeezed her eyes shut and pushed on. She had to find Logan.

The surrounding area had been cordoned off, a line of heavily armed military personnel keeping people away. When she managed to shoulder her way up to the front, she was dismayed at the extent of the destruction. "Logan," she whispered, leaning against one of the damaged containers. He couldn't be dead. He just couldn't.

The crowd parted and a group of security men came through, clutching an injured man who thrashed against them violently. "Let me go! My brother is hurt!"

Nim. Blood poured down the side of his face from an ugly gash on his forehead. He could barely stand from the nasty wound on his leg and he was moaning piteously. His right hand was missing some fingers.

An officer threw him to the ground. "We found this one hiding behind some crates. We found remnants of a small, crudely improvised device, Sir. It must have exploded prematurely, injuring him."

A tall, forbidding-looking man came forward, an air of authority surrounding him. Sharra knew right away this was a man you wouldn't want to cross. "Who is he?" he bit out.

"We don't know yet, Sir," the officer replied.

Moran broke away from the cluster of men by the ruined doorway of the outpost. "Commander Tristan, I know who he is."

Tristan. Logan had mentioned him a couple of times. As Tristan listened to Moran, his face became even more frightening. Cold fury etched his harsh features. "This man's brother. Where is he?"

Another group of uniformed security officers walked up. Two held Tan'ea in a vise grip and another two hefted a body next to Nim. "Sir. She tried to sneak past the checkpoint with him. He took a shot at us and we fired back." Ismail lay sprawled on the walkway, his eyes open and lifeless. "We found chemical explosives in her bag."

"Let me go," Tan'ea screamed as she wept. "Ismail's dead. You killed him. You killed him." She flailed against the men holding her. "Let me go to him. I want to be near him!"

Nim howled. "Ismail! My brother!"

Through the haze of smoke, a man emerged from within the wrecked structure and approached Nim. Sharra burst into tears. *Logan*. She drank in the sight of him, noting

the gash on his arm and a cut on his forehead. His trousers were torn in several places but he appeared to be all right. *Thank the gods he's alive.*

Despite the extent of his injuries, Nim spat at Logan. "I will kill every single one of you. Do you hear me? Every single one of you cursed Cyborgs!"

Logan grabbed Nim by the shirt and hauled him to his feet. "You'll wish you killed us all today. You will pay for taking the life of a Cyborg commander."

"We got one. That's better than none," Nim taunted weakly, blood gushing down his face.

Logan grabbed his throat and squeezed. Nim choked, his mouth hanging open, gasping for air. "Fitz was a good man with a family. I swear on his life, you'll pay dearly for this." He threw Nim back on the ground, anger written on his face.

Tristan turned to Moran. "What else do we know?"

"Sharra warned me about them," Moran's gaze swung from Tristan to Logan. "Right before the attack happened."

"Where is she?" Logan asked tersely.

Moran looked around. "She was wounded —"

"Logan," Sharra called weakly. "I'm here."

Logan's eyes swept the crowd and hurried over to where she was. He pulled her into his arms. "How did you know about the attack, Sharra?"

"I-I overheard them talking and —"

"Liar!" Tan'ea's scream pierced the air. "She's with us. She's been lying to you all along, Cyborg."

Sharra had forgotten about Tan'ea's threat to expose her. "No..."

Tan'ea's eyes gleamed with malevolence. "She's an empath from Arrion."

Logan wore a look of stunned disbelief.

Nim glared at Sharra, struggling to speak. "I-It's true."

"She planned the whole thing with us, right from the start," Tan'ea exclaimed with triumph. "She furnished us with valuable information for this attack."

For as long as she lived, Sharra would never forget the anger and betrayal that twisted Logan's features as he stepped away from her. She reached for him. "I-I would never betray you."

He turned away. "Get her out of my sight."

Sharra sobbed. "No. Please, Logan. Listen to me. It's not true. I can explain." But it was too late. He was no longer listening. Guards came forward and held her tight. Pain sliced through her side. She gasped.

"Take all of them to the hold," Tristan ordered.

"No!" Spots danced in her eyes and her ears buzzed. The pain was stronger now, more insistent, sending jolting arcs through her whole body. "Logan," she managed to call out one last time before everything turned black.

Logan ruthlessly quashed the concern that filled him when Sharra fainted. Her clothes were soaked in blood and she was deathly pale. As a medic rushed to her side, he steeled himself from caring. An *empath*. He'd taken an empath to his bed. Logan pulled in a deep breath, raking a hand through his hair. How could he have been so fucking blind?

Moran approached him. "Are you all right, Sir?"

"I'll live. Joren and Marcus are being treated in the med-transport. But Fitz..." He trailed off, feeling the loss of a friend. "Fitz didn't make it."

"I tried to warn you on the com-link but it was too late. I heard the blast."

Logan gripped Moran's shoulder. "You did the best you could. Don't blame yourself."

"If Sharra wanted you dead, why would she tell me about the explosives?" he reasoned. "She was already wounded, Sir. Yet all she could think of was you."

There was an odd little thump in Logan's heart. "They claim she's with them."

"My gut tells me she isn't. I just can't believe she's involved."

"She didn't tell me she's an empath."

"If she really wanted to kill you, she could have done so at any time onboard the ship. She had more than enough opportunity to cause massive damage," Moran pointed out quietly.

Logan couldn't get past the fact that Sharra hadn't told him the truth about herself. And to think he'd begun to trust her. What a fool he'd been.

"If I may say so, Sir. I think she's innocent."

"Wake up and open your eyes, Moran. She's an empath from Arrion. She's been lying to all of us from the beginning." Logan clenched his fists. "Both attackers identified her as part of their team. The investigation will determine the depth of her involvement. If she is found to have taken part in the attack, she'll be put to death."

"Do you really believe she could do that?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe." Even as Logan spoke the words, he couldn't help but look as the medics carried Sharra off in a stretcher. She lay still, pale, her eyes closed. For one moment, he was tempted to make sure she was okay. But the specter of her betrayal was like a hot knife in his chest. *She'd lied to him*. He turned away, walking through the rubble, reminding himself of the life lost here today. Whatever happened to Sharra now was out of his hands.

Chapter Seven

Sharra stayed in the infirmary for two days while they tended to her wound. The Karn'aliens made sure she was on the mend before they transferred her to the hold where a med-bot came to visit her daily, cleaning the area around the knife wound and dressing it with a fresh bandage. The first couple of days of incarceration were the worst. She couldn't stop crying. Sleep eluded her in the small, dark cell. She welcomed the sliver of sunlight that shone through the tiny slats in the ceiling, although it was a poor substitute for the warmth of the sun.

"Sharra." Tristan stood on the other side of the electromagnetic field that went from floor to ceiling. "I'm Tristan, head of General Command."

She already knew who he was but didn't bother to mention it. Wary, she moved forward, careful to keep away from the blue-tinged rays. The slightest contact with them could be fatal.

Although Tristan's features were harsh, there was an underlying integrity in them. Sharra instinctively knew he was a fair and just man. "I'm here to ask you some questions."

She nodded.

"Your wound has been tended to?"

"Y-yes. Thank you."

"I'm investigating the attack. Needless to say, your full cooperation and honesty can only help prove your innocence, if indeed you are." He stared at her directly. "I don't have to tell you to stay out of my head."

She winced. "No. I would never —"

"I don't want to resort to drastic measures. Should I feel the need to do so, you will be attached to a neural inhibitor."

A neural inhibitor would pump synthetic chemicals into her brain, preventing her from using her empathic abilities. Too much of the chemicals could kill her. Not for one moment did Sharra think Tristan was making an empty threat. She wrapped her arms around her middle. "There's no need for that, I assure you."

"Good. Then we understand each other." He linked his hands behind him and began to pace. "The Lord Marshall of Zalian Three gave you to Logan as a gift, am I correct?"

It sounded so tawdry, hearing it put that way. Sharra flushed. "Yes."

Tristan's gaze was dark and unfathomable. "Was that part of the plan? Was Od'ric involved in the attack?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "The Lord Marshall didn't know I was an empath."

He raised an eyebrow. "I find it surprising and a little too convenient that he would choose you in particular to gift to a Karn'alian Cyborg."

She wrung her hands together. "Logan saved Od'ric's life and he was grateful for that. To show his gratitude, he gifted Logan with...me."

"I see."

She flinched. "I'm not a whore."

"I never said you were." They stared at each other across the bluish rays, until Sharra looked away. Tristan continued to question her, probing into her past. Though the questions were intrusive and painful for her to answer, Sharra did so with honesty. Lying would not get her anywhere. Her secret was out. There was nothing more to protect.

"If Tan'ea's claim that you conspired with them is not true, how did you know of their plan?"

She swallowed. "When I met Tan'ea, I detected certain...unpleasant feelings from her. It was worse with Ismail and Nim. They harbored hatred and a...deep anger. I-I decided to watch them, to see what they were up to."

"Yet you didn't tell Logan."

She winced at his accusing tone. "What could I have said to explain what I felt or even how I knew it? Empaths are hated, Commander Tristan. The Pagans have put bounties on our heads. I couldn't reveal to Logan what I knew without putting myself in danger." His face remained impassive, giving nothing away of his thoughts. "I didn't get the proper training and education to use my gift, as I would have had I been raised on Arrion," she continued softly. "I can detect feelings like anger, sadness or hatred. I can also feel when something bad is about to happen. But I'm not able to use the advanced psychic powers that empaths possess. I-I can send a *push* into someone's mind for a quick look. S-sometimes I have visions but can't always interpret them." She looked at him, wishing he would understand. "After I overheard Tan'ea and Ismail talking about the attack, I intended to tell Chief Moran. But Nim found me. Next thing I knew, I woke up in a dark room and the ship had already docked." Tears came to her eyes. "I regret that a life was lost because I was too late," she finished sadly, bowing her head in misery. Whether Tristan believed her or not was up to him. She'd told him the truth. There was nothing more she could do.

Without saying a word, Tristan left as quietly as he came. Sharra fell on the bed and clutched the pillow. She hoped that it would eventually be found that she had no part in the attack. It remained to be seen, however, if they would keep her a prisoner forever because she was an empath, or worse, put her to death. Silence pressed in on her, surrounding her in its gloomy cocoon. *This is how the rest of my life is going to be.* Her empathic gift had become a curse.

* * * * *

Sharra marked each day that passed, counting the hours. Nobody else came to see her or talk to her. The guard who delivered her food every day was her only outside contact, and he never said a word. He'd deposit a tray on the floor and leave, only to pick it up a half hour later. After a week, Sharra resigned herself to the fact that Logan wasn't coming. It was clear that she wasn't going to get the chance to explain why she hadn't told him the truth about herself. Her stab wound had begun to heal, but in its place, a new one opened. Her heart broke, but she was all cried out. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop thinking of Logan.

Horrific images were once again invading her dreams. She sat up, shivering despite the warm temperature. She shut her eyes tightly. *His nightmares were back.* Even locked up in a cell, she still felt a connection with Logan. Pain struck her, sharp and intense. She whimpered, falling back on the bed, curling into a ball. *Oh Logan. Come to me. Let me help you.* Sharra desperately wished she could hold him until the nightmares were erased from his mind. She sent him soothing waves of energy, hoping they would reach him somehow. It wasn't until weak rays of sunlight shone through the slats in the ceiling that the pain finally went away.

Sharra lay on the bed, too listless to move even when a door opened and footsteps echoed in the silence.

"Sharra."

She struggled to sit up. "Chief Moran."

"Are you all right?" he asked gruffly.

There was a wariness about him that saddened her. "I'm well. Thank you for coming to see me."

He jammed his hands inside his pockets. "This is awkward, finding out you're an empath. It makes me uncomfortable."

Sharra lowered her face. "I understand."

"It's just a shock, you know? Empaths were instrumental in helping the Pagans torture our people. It's hard to get around that. But dammit, I know you didn't have anything to do with the explosion."

"You believe me?"

"I do. I don't know why, but I do." Moran's gaze softened. "The investigation is still ongoing. They've retrieved security footage from the ship. I'm hoping that will prove you didn't even know Tan'ea before you came onboard, much less conspired with her and the brothers. Unfortunately, Tan'ea and Nim are sticking to their story." He hesitated. "I just wish you would have come clean with Logan, Sharra."

"I wish I had too." She swallowed. "How is he?"

Moran sighed. "As well as can be expected."

"He's not coming to see me, is he?" she choked out. "I was hoping he would so I can explain and..." She stopped, unable to go on.

A flicker of pity crossed his face. "I don't know how long this investigation will take, but I know it'll prove your innocence. Don't lose hope."

Sharra raised her face and mustered a grateful smile. "Thank you, Chief."

"I have to go." Concern flitted across his kind face. "I'll try to visit you again soon." With a small wave, he left, the door closing behind him with a solid click. The silence closed in on her once more.

She could take the mistrust, the wariness that people automatically felt upon finding out she was an empath. She could live with that. However, she couldn't accept that Logan no longer cared what happened to her. He couldn't even bring himself to visit her in the holding cell. To him, she was a traitor, an empath who had conspired to kill him and his fellow Cyborg commanders. It was too much to bear.

Sharra finally accepted what she had sensed from the start. She loved Logan. She knew him, shared his fears, his dreams, his pain. She admired his strength and was drawn to his vulnerability, the part of himself that he never showed anyone else. The tears she'd thought used up welled in her eyes. Logan would never return her love. To him, she was the enemy. She buried her face in her hands and cried. There was no hope for them, no hope at all.

* * * * *

Dr. Miranda An'hari attached the neuro-analyzer sensors on Logan's head. "You look like death warmed over."

Logan ignored her comment. He lay unmoving on the diagnostic table until she finished hooking him up to the infernal beeping machine.

"I suppose I should be happy you actually came in for some tests. But just one look and I can tell you're worse than before."

"Just do what you have to do."

"Don't bark orders at me, Logan," Miranda warned. "I'm not one of your lackeys."

"I'm in no mood to fuck around. Either you do the tests and get it over with or I'm outta here."

She put her hands on her hips. "Then why don't you come back when you're in the mood to *fuck around*, as you say? I can't conduct my tests when you're in such a foul temper."

"I thought we were conducting neurological tests," he bit out. "My mood has nothing to do with that."

One perfectly shaped eyebrow rose. "Did it piss you off to be ordered to show up at my lab? Is that why you've come here looking for a fight?"

"I don't want to play twenty questions or make small talk when I don't feel like it. Just do something to help. That's all I ask."

She exhaled. "I've been monitoring your neural activity. The nightmares are more intense."

So were the headaches that accompanied them, but Logan didn't say that out loud. Even now, hours later, traces of the sharp, throbbing pain still lingered in his head. "I'm tired of the tests, Miranda. They all yield the same useless results."

"I have to keep trying. Maybe there's something I'm missing."

"Just give me stronger pain medication."

"Logan, I've given you the strongest there is. Any more and I'm scared it will damage your com-plant."

"There's got to be something I can take. Customize it for me so that it concentrates on the pain only."

"It's not that easy. If we could just pinpoint what triggers the nightmares—"

"Sleep triggers them." He ran a hand through his hair. "The moment I fall asleep, the nightmares come. That's all it takes. Look, just double my usual shot, okay?"

She took the chair next to the diagnostic table and perused his chart. "For a time the nightmares stopped while you were on your ship. What exactly did you do differently, Logan?"

He stiffened. "Nothing."

"Getting information from you is like dealing with a recalcitrant child. Now will you please answer my question? How did you get the nightmares to stop?"

For a brief moment, Logan debated telling her about Sharra. It was clear to him that Sharra had done something to make the nightmares stop and soothe his headache. But what? His fists clenched. Who knew exactly what kind of powers she had? It pissed him off that he'd fallen for her ruse so easily. How she must have gloated at how easily she'd fooled a Karn'alian Cyborg.

"It's a woman, isn't it?" Miranda was too damn smart for her own good. "Whatever she did, Logan, it helped. It worked so well that for the first time in years, your neural readouts were perfectly normal and the chemical levels were stable." She leaned forward eagerly. "How did she do it? An elixir? A secret concoction? If I can get its chemical makeup, I can duplicate it for you."

Logan clenched his jaw. "She didn't give me anything."

She frowned. "Then what did she do?"

Logan yanked the sensors off his head and tossed them angrily on the floor. He sat up, sick to death of the questions, sick of being reminded of Sharra. Most of all, he was sick of hearing how she took away pain that no medication could.

"She touched me, all right? All she did was touch me and the fucking pain went away. She's a goddamned witch." He jumped off the diagnostic table. "If there's nothing else that can take the nightmares and the pain away, then I guess I'll have to live with them. I'm done with the tests, Miranda. No more."

He left. She called him back, but he didn't stop. He didn't want to think of anything that reminded him of Sharra. For a brief second, he let himself remember how her touch had soothed him. Even the slightest contact with her had acted like a balm to his body and soul. Logan closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Damnation. *Leave me the hell alone!*

* * * * *

"We've interviewed all the passengers on your ship, Logan," Jed announced as he walked into Tristan's office. "Every single one of them said the same thing. None of them can attest to seeing Sharra with Tan'ea or the brothers on a regular basis."

Logan grunted. He had nothing to say about that and planned on letting the investigation run its course. *Liar*, a small voice inside his head taunted him.

Tristan leafed through the report on his desk. "The investigation revealed the chemicals used to make the explosives were brought onboard the *Guardian* labeled as homeopathic cures. The container was marked as belonging to Tan'ea's parents and successfully cleared security. On their own, they were harmless. But Nim and Ismail were clever enough to fashion improvised explosives using a combination of the chemicals."

"Forensics didn't find any trace of explosives on Sharra," Jed pointed out.

"That only means she didn't handle them," Logan offered curtly.

"True," Tristan agreed in a mild tone.

"If she was involved with the plot, wouldn't that show up on the vid-surveillance?" Jed argued.

"My thoughts exactly," Tristan mused. "We've gone through the security footage from the ship. They corroborated what the passengers said. Sharra was never seen with Tan'ea, except once or twice." At the knock on the door, he pushed a button on his desk and the door slid open.

Moran came in, followed by two young officers. "Commander Tristan. These young men have some information I think you should hear."

One of them stepped forward. "My name is Trey, Sir. It was my duty to run the scans on the Karn'alian passengers on the ship. I—ah—I found some discrepancies on the readouts the day Commander Logan ordered everyone to board."

"Discrepancies?" Jed repeated with a frown.

"Yes, Sir." Trey glanced at the three men nervously. "It was like a glitch. There one second, gone the next. I thought it was nothing and therefore didn't report it to Chief Moran, Sir."

Tristan pierced him with a hard stare. "That was derelict of you, Trey. Any discrepancies in scanner readouts are to be reported immediately."

Trey paled. "Yes, Sir, I know that and —"

The other young officer came forward. "My name is Cid, Sir. I convinced Trey to reprint the scanning reports. We went over them together but found nothing."

"A discrepancy in energy readings could mean Nim and Ismail utilized Pagan cloaking device," Jed murmured.

"This means that Sharra could indeed be part of it all. Pagans have always used empathis to further their goals," Logan injected into the silence.

Moran stepped in. "With all due respect, Commander Logan, I don't think it helps to jump to conclusions here. So far the investigation has yielded nothing that would implicate Sharra."

Tristan held up a hand, halting the discussion. "You two," he gestured to Trey and Cid. "You'll be subject to disciplinary action. Your failure to discharge your duty responsibly cost a Cyborg commander his life and resulted in putting all of us in danger. Dismissed." The two men hurried out of the room, their heads hanging low. Tristan turned to Moran. "A ship's been dispatched to Zalian Three, correct?"

"Yes, Sir," Moran replied. "The *Avenger* was in Sector Fifteen, the nearest one to Zalian Three. They've begun their investigation."

"How is Sharra, Moran?" Jed asked. "I hear you've been to see her."

Logan walked stiffly to the window. He didn't want to know how Sharra was faring. He didn't care.

Moran appeared uncomfortable. "I visited her in the hold yesterday. If my actions were inappropriate—"

"Relax," Jed assured him. "I personally don't see anything wrong with what you did. Right, Tris?"

Tristan grunted. "So far nothing's come up that would substantiate the allegations that she's part of the attack."

"She's an *empath*," Logan growled, looking over his shoulder. "Have you all forgotten that?"

Jed returned Logan's hard stare with one of his own. "No, we haven't. Let's look at the facts here. Fact number one. Sharra sustained a stab wound from a knife we later found in Tan'ea's possession. Testing confirmed it contained traces of Sharra's blood. If she was part of the team, why would Tan'ea stab her?"

Logan fought to get Sharra's blood-soaked image out of his mind. He'd questioned the medic at length, getting repeated assurances that the wound hadn't hit any vital organs. He'd wanted to go with the med-transport and make sure she was fine, but her betrayal was a bitter pill to swallow. The thought of her reading his mind, knowing his innermost thoughts and fears, sent a fresh surge of anger through his body. There were precious few people he let close to him, even fewer still who knew about his night terrors.

He thought back to that night Sharra had come to him and eased the tremendous pain he'd suffered. How had she known? Had she been reading his mind all along,

privity to all that was happening in his head? By the gods, she had no compunction about invading his privacy, using her gift to get under his skin. She'd toyed with him, insinuating herself in his life until he thought he couldn't spend another night without her.

"Logan? Are you even listening?" There was slight irritation in Jed's voice. "Fact number two. Sharra warned Moran, even though it was a little late."

"And Fitz?" Logan tossed back harshly. "Do we just forget about him?"

Sadness flickered across Tristan's features. "Fitz will never be forgotten. But neither should we forget that we are after the guilty parties here, not an innocent who only sought to help."

"She knew about the attack but didn't see fit to warn me before we docked at the port. Does that make her innocent?"

Tristan's gaze was hard as steel, pinning Logan where he stood. "She was knocked unconscious and locked in a room. When she regained consciousness, the ship had already docked."

Logan snorted. "How do you know she's not lying?"

"The medics who treated her confirmed that Sharra had a nasty cut on her head, most likely caused by a blunt instrument," Jed countered.

"I talked to her at length, Logan," Tristan said. "Sharra spent a lifetime hiding her true identity. To inform you of her suspicions would have forced her to admit she's an empath." He sighed. "I detected honesty, not duplicity, while I questioned her."

"She's a skilled actress," Logan snorted.

Tristan's gaze narrowed. "My sensor readings were accurate. *I* was not overcome with lust."

Logan bristled. "Are you implying that I didn't read her correctly because lust overruled my senses?"

Tension thickened the atmosphere. Jed's gaze flicked between Tristan and Logan, his stance alert and ready. Moran looked on, wide-eyed and silent.

Tristan raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps."

"Have a care in what you say, Tris. It was you who recommended me for command of the *Guardian*. Are you saying my performance has been lacking?"

Jed sighed. "Logan—"

Tristan held up a hand, halting Jed's words. "Sharra didn't share her suspicions with you. She didn't tell you she was an empath. *So what?* She's explained why she didn't. Aside from not revealing the truth about her identity, she has done nothing wrong that we can prove. I'm trying to figure out why one secret should cause you to feel so much anger."

Logan acknowledged silently that Tristan was right. Sharra had hidden her powers to protect herself. If he'd been in the same situation, he'd have done the same thing. Why was he so angry?

Because she'd hurt him. She hadn't trusted him enough to tell him the truth. For the first time in his life, he'd allowed himself to care for another, only to be disappointed in the worst way. Sharra had begun to matter to him, dammit. Little by little, she'd insinuated herself into his heart, only to tear it apart.

Logan exhaled and unclenched his fists. "If you believe that I've failed in this instance, I will accept it. Assign me to the farthest outpost you can find. Do what you will. I no longer care." He stalked out of Tristan's office, hardly noticing the clear skies or the warmth of the sunshine.

He began to walk aimlessly, his gaze unseeing, ignoring greetings from acquaintances. He wished he'd never been sent to Zalian Three, never set eyes upon Sharra. Only a fool would let his heart get involved after the horrible trauma of his childhood.

And that's what he was. A fool.

* * * * *

The click of heels on bare floor echoed throughout the cell. A woman with long, curly dark hair and stunning features came into view. She wore a white coat over a soft, violet dress that molded her curves. "Hello, Sharra."

Sharra approached her warily, murmuring a greeting.

My name is Dr. Miranda An'hari. I oversee the wellbeing of all Karn'alian Cyborgs." Her deep blue gaze was sharp and assessing, full of curiosity. "I'm going to come directly to the point. I'm here to talk about Logan."

Sharra's heart tripped. "L-Logan?"

"Do you know anything about Cyborgs, Sharra?" When Sharra shook her head, Miranda continued. "All Cyborgs are implanted with a computer chip at the base of their skulls that regulates their physical and neurological functions. As far as we know, it's foolproof. It can never be infiltrated, never be influenced. One of its main functions is to protect a Cyborg's mind, to protect the integrity of his thinking. It puts up a shield, if you will, to make them invulnerable to all known viruses or chemical attacks."

"W-why are you telling me this?"

"For as long as I've known Logan, he's been plagued by night terrors." Miranda's tone held concern. "His com-plant is functioning at one hundred percent efficiency and yet it can't figure out how to stop the nightmares and suppress the pain. I've run every test I know, but I've come up with nothing. Pain medication relieves the headache, but even that is temporary. I've given him the strongest dosage I think his system can handle. Any more would be dangerous."

Tears welled in Sharra's eyes. She hated the thought of Logan suffering.

"You took his pain away while you were with him on his ship. For the first time, his neural readings were normal. He was *fine*. What science and I couldn't do, you

achieved. But now the nightmares are back. The headaches are worse, more intense this time around."

Feeling sick at heart, Sharra turned away. Logan needed her, but she knew he would never admit it.

"In the middle of more testing, he walked out of my lab." Miranda's voice was tinged with frustration. "Logan wouldn't volunteer any information about you. But he underestimated the curiosity of a scientist. I made some inquiries." A small smile played around her lips. "It helps to have a level five clearance. In no time at all, I was apprised of how you came to be on Logan's ship and how you ended up here in the hold."

With reluctance, Sharra faced Miranda. "I don't know why you're telling me this."

"There's a vid-monitor over there." Miranda pointed to the small camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling. "The guard tells me you've been having restless nights. They showed me the recording of the past two days. At first, I didn't realize what was going on. You toss and turn on your bed, moaning and crying, doubling over in pain. Then it hit me. You've been having the nightmares too. Not only that, you've been suffering from the headaches as well. You feel what Logan feels." Miranda's tone held both realization and confusion.

Sharra bit her lip, stifling a sob. "Please stop. I don't want to hear any more."

"You're an empath and you have a connection with Logan."

"I would never hurt him."

Miranda's gaze softened. "I believe you."

"Y-you do?"

Her expression was open, sincere. "It amazes me that you were able to penetrate the Cyborg and reach the man inside."

At this, Sharra knew Miranda wanted to understand, to figure out if there was a way she could help Logan. After a moment's hesitation, she told the doctor of the dreams that had come to her before she and Logan even met.

"You became lovers."

Sharra flushed but didn't deny it. "Do you believe in destiny?"

"As a scientist, I believe what I can prove. As a woman," Miranda's tone lowered, "I do."

"I knew I was meant to be with Logan. I felt it in my soul. He thinks I betrayed him when I didn't tell him what I really am." Anguish twisted her heart. "I just wish—" She pulled in a shaky breath. "I just wish I could take away his pain, but I don't dare reach out to him."

"Logan's a fool."

"Please. Do what you can to help him. I can't stand the thought of Logan suffering night after night."

"Were you involved in the bombing, Sharra?"

Sharra stared directly at Miranda. "No."

"I believe you," the doctor admitted after a moment. "If you truly meant to do Logan harm, you wouldn't have helped him through his nightmares. That alone speaks volumes of how much you care for him."

Somehow Sharra felt she had a friend in Miranda. "Thank you."

"Tristan is nothing if not thorough. I have no doubt the truth will come out," Miranda assured her. "Keep your chin up. This will all be over soon. I'll be in touch."

Alone again, Sharra buried her face in the pillow, wishing it was possible to turn back time and do things all over again. But it wasn't.

* * * * *

"Tristan, there's no evidence Sharra was involved in the bombing. Correct?"

Tristan glanced at his wife Ava as she poured *tin'ka*, a cool mixture of native Karn'alian fruits, into a tall, chilled glass. Even after all these years, she still took his breath away. Every day he thanked the Gods he'd been sent to Eros, where they'd met. Several happy years and two children later, he'd gladly accepted a promotion to take over General Command. It gave him more time to spend with his family. "Correct."

"The investigation is over and Sharra has been cleared?" Miranda added.

"We concluded our investigation this morning. It's been determined that Ismail and Nim planned the attack with Tan'ea's help."

Kate, Jed's wife, gave a sigh of relief. "I told Jed all along that Sharra was innocent. Don't ask me how I know. I just do. In fact, I wanted to visit her in the hold but Jed forbade me to get involved." She rolled her eyes. "He said to wait until after the investigation was complete because it might not look good for Sharra to be visited by a half-Pagan like me. What a silly thing to say."

"Ridiculous," Ava agreed. "Everybody knows you're one of us now."

"I agree," Miranda chimed in. "Absolutely unnecessary."

Suspicion began to form in Tristan's mind as his gaze swung from Ava to Miranda then to Kate. "What are you three up to? And why are you all here?" His wife rarely came to his office.

Ava gave him an innocent smile. "Up to?" She nudged his chair back and sat on his lap. "Don't be silly. We were in the area and we decided to stop by."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Any time she was near him, he felt a heady intoxication, which she knew all too well. Tristan fixed a stern expression on his face. "Uh-huh. I'm not buying it."

Miranda leaned forward. "We have a proposition for you."

At Tristan's raised eyebrow, Kate held up a hand. "Hear us out, please."

"I'm listening."

"Sharra will be released, right?" Ava asked.

"Eventually."

Miranda frowned. "What do you mean, eventually? She's innocent, Tristan. You've found no evidence against her. What reason do you have to let her sit in the hold any longer?"

Tristan sighed. "Truthfully, I don't know where she'll stay if we let her go. She doesn't know anyone here. And although I've tried to keep a lid on the investigation, I don't know how people will react when they find out she's an empath."

"That's why we're here," Kate informed him with a smug smile.

"Miranda?" Ava prompted.

"We know where to take Sharra," Miranda announced.

Like a lamb being led to slaughter, Tristan asked, "And where would that be?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he just knew he was going to regret asking.

"We're taking her to stay with Ampara," Ava smiled, obviously pleased with their plan.

"At the *pleasure house*?"

Miranda was quick to answer. "Ampara is willing to give her a job as an assistant."

Tristan snorted. "Assistant?"

Ava cupped his cheek and turned his face toward her. "We've already spoken to Ampara and made the arrangements. She's willing to take Sharra in."

"She'll be safe there, Tristan," Kate assured him. "People won't know she's an empath. She'll live a quiet life."

"A quiet life in a pleasure house? You really believe that?"

Miranda lifted her chin. "Where do you want Sharra to go? She has no family left. She came to Karn'al intent on a new life. Do you mean to take her to another world and leave her to fend for herself?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly.

"Ampara assured me she'll take care of Sharra. She's my dearest friend, Tristan. I trust her," Ava stated quietly.

Tristan hated to admit it, but they were right. Sharra had nowhere else to go. If word got out that she was an empath she'd never be able to start anew. Whereas with Ampara... That plan seemed the best option. As he encountered their expectant gazes, he realized that they had taken up Sharra's cause. The gods help anybody who got in their way.

He relented. "I'll agree to it. On one condition." He fixed them with a steady stare. "I want Sharra to know exactly what kind of place Ampara runs. After that, if she still wants to stay there..." He shrugged.

Ava gave him a teasing grin and kissed him softly. "Underneath that big, bad Cyborg exterior, you're such a prude. You met *me* in a pleasure house, remember?"

He tightened his arms around her. "Yeah, but you were a dancer. Not a pleasure worker."

Kate rolled her eyes. "All right, you two. Let's focus on the matter at hand. Are we agreed, Tristan? You'll release Sharra and let her come with us?"

"Agreed. Although I don't know how Logan will like the idea of Sharra in Ampara's pleasure house," he mused.

"Too late for that," Miranda scoffed. "Can you believe he hasn't even been to see her? He told me he doesn't care what happens to her."

"He's a stubborn ass," Kate sniffed.

Ava rolled her eyes. "Men."

"Hey, easy now," Tristan chided. He had no wish to get into an argument about the differences between men and women. Not with these three. One thing he did know. Logan might say he didn't care about Sharra, but Tristan knew better. But for now, he kept his mouth shut.

His wife jumped from his lap. "It's all settled then. Let's get Sharra out of the hold."

"Now?"

"No time to waste," Kate reasoned. "She's innocent. You can't keep her locked up any longer."

Ava looked at him with those big blue eyes. "You know it's the right thing to do, my love."

"Have you talked to Sharra at all about this grand plan that you three concocted?"

Miranda grinned. "Don't worry. We'll take care of Sharra. We promise."

Chapter Eight

"Sharra?"

Sharra pulled her gaze from the stunning profusion of colorful flowers blooming in the garden surrounding the sprawling house. "Ampara."

A shadow of concern crossed Ampara's striking features. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing's wrong."

Ampara took Sharra's hands in hers. "Everything will be fine, don't worry. You'll be safe here. I hope you'll be happy here too."

"Ava, Kate and Miranda assured me I would be welcome. I cannot tell you how thankful I am that you agreed to let me stay here."

"Ava helped me escape from Eros and brought me here. I owe her a debt of gratitude I can never repay." She squeezed Sharra's hands. "If Ava trusts you, then I trust you. That's all I need to know. Now if you'll follow me, I'll give you the grand tour."

They walked down a long hallway. "This is the residential wing. All the girls have their own rooms here, separate from the pleasure rooms on the other side. Over here is the entrance to the pleasure house." Ampara opened the wide, intricately carved double doors. Here was a very noticeable difference from the residential wing. The colors on the walls were dark and bold. Intimate. Soft, recessed lights lined the room, adding to the hushed, relaxed atmosphere. A hostess sat at the reception table, a welcoming smile on her face.

Ampara gave Sharra a faintly amused look. "I can almost hear your thoughts. Come on, ask me questions. I'd like for us to be friends."

Sharra hesitated for one second. "I'm just wondering why you choose to operate a pleasure house."

Ampara gave a graceful shrug. "It was the only thing I knew how to do. Eros was the playground of the galaxy, where every sexual desire could be fulfilled. I worked as a hostess at a place called Pleasure Palace. That's where I learned the business." She smiled. "Karn'al has gone a long way in rebuilding from the ashes of war. Trade is booming. Merchants come here from distant galaxies to do business. A pleasure house is necessary in a thriving society like this."

"What exactly will I be doing here?" Sharra asked hesitantly.

"You'll be my assistant. Running a pleasure house is time consuming, you know." There was a naughty glint in her eyes. "If you decide later on that you want to be a pleasure worker," she grinned, "just let me know. We can train you."

Sharra turned red. "Oh no. I—"

Ampara laughed. "It's not a bad thing. You can pick what you want to do." At Sharra's wide-eyed look, her eyes twinkled. "Believe it or not, you have choices. You can do girl-girl. You can try bondage too, if you like. There's also ménage à trois. We fulfill every sexual fantasy." She took Sharra's arm and led her down the plush hallway. "Come on. It's time to expand your education."

* * * * *

The late afternoon sun's warmth was a nice contrast to the cool interior of the pleasure house. In the quiet sanctuary of the garden, Sharra sat with Ava, Miranda and Kate under the shade of a tree. Since she'd moved in a few weeks ago, they'd come to visit her several times. Sharra appreciated their concern and eagerly embraced their offer of friendship.

Miranda sipped the chilled, pale golden ale that a server had brought out to them. "You look great, except for those shadows under your eyes."

Sharra wrinkled her nose at the bitter taste of the ale. She placed it on the table and smiled. "You just can't resist playing doctor, can you?"

"Guess not," Miranda quipped. "So are you having trouble sleeping?"

Sharra shrugged. "Some nights are better than others."

"Do you still have the dreams?" Ava asked quietly.

Sharra had been surprised that Ava knew about Logan's nightmares until Ava had explained that Logan and Jed had served under her husband for a long time. The three men were close friends. When she became Tristan's wife, Ava became part of that circle too. "Yes."

"Oh Sharra. I'm sorry. Is there any way you can block them? Protect yourself somehow?" Kate asked, concern in her eyes.

Once a deep, emotional connection had been made with an empath, it could only be severed by death. "I'm afraid not." The question that hovered on the tip of her tongue slipped out before she could stop it. "H-how's Logan?"

The women exchanged glances. Miranda placed her glass back on the table. "I've started him on new pain medication. I hope this one will be more effective than the others. I've also put him on temporary medical leave. He can't go on any missions until I clear him, which as you can imagine, puts him in a pissy mood."

"Tristan approved your order. Logan's not exactly fit to go traipsing through the galaxy," Ava added dryly.

"Has...has he asked about me?" Sharra couldn't disguise the naked hope that accompanied the question.

The silence that followed was answer enough.

Kate patted Sharra's hand. "Try not to think too much about him."

It would be like asking me not to breathe. Sharra gave a shaky smile. "I wish I could."

"I've tried to get through to him, Sharra, but it's like talking to a damn wall. He's a pain in the ass." Miranda shook her head in frustration. "Can I offer you a piece of advice? Don't wallow in misery because of Logan."

"W-what do you mean?" Sharra asked.

The doctor's gaze was full of compassion. "All Karn'alian Cyborgs have suffered untold cruelty at the hands of Pagans. That, and the intense training they've gone through, have shaped the men they've become."

"What Miranda is trying to say is that men can be dense creatures. Cyborgs even more so," Ava explained. "They are trained to be cold, clear-thinking soldiers who can kill without hesitation—that's what makes them so lethal. If you're waiting for Logan to wake up one day and suddenly realize how much he's hurt you, well..." she trailed off.

"We don't see that happening," Kate finished bluntly, compassion in her eyes.

Sharra's shoulders slumped. "No?"

Ava reached for Sharra's hand. "It takes a really strong woman to take on a Cyborg. There are times when you're going to have to stand up and give him a stiff kick in the balls to make him realize he can't just roll over you."

"We just don't want you crying your eyes out, languishing away because Logan is too thickheaded to accept you for who you are," Miranda said.

In spite of the hurt Sharra felt at the way he'd turned his back on her, there was still a part of her that couldn't relinquish hope that Logan would eventually accept that she was an empath.

"Men," Miranda declared with the wisdom of one used to dealing with the lot, "can sometimes be unreasonable and unbending. Ava and Kate are braver than most women, because they actually took Cyborgs as their husbands."

That comment earned a grin from Kate. "I happen to love that particular Cyborg, faults and all."

Ava gave Miranda a curious glance. "Is that why you're so determined to keep Joren at arm's length?"

Miranda gave a self-deprecating laugh and sipped her drink. "He's such a gorgeous animal. I'm hot for him, but I'd rather die than admit it."

"Why?" Ava asked curiously.

"He's domineering and possessive." Miranda looked off in the distance. "He scares me. Getting involved with him would be a mistake."

A frown marred Kate's smooth brow. "Are you afraid he'll hurt you?"

"Physically?" Miranda shook her head. "Oh no. Not that. What I feel for him is so strong, so overpowering." She lowered her voice. "I'm scared that I might get in too deep, lose myself so much that I won't be able to function without him."

The words struck a sharp chord within Sharra. Miranda had just described how she felt for Logan. It was a daily battle to go without thinking of him every second. He dominated her thoughts and dreams. Without him, she merely existed. Each day spent

away from him killed a little part of her inside. "I know what you mean," Sharra agreed softly.

"You do?" Miranda's face fell as she realized what she'd just said. "Oh Sharra, I'm sorry. I can't believe I've gone on and on about that, knowing how you feel about Logan."

Ava gave Sharra a solemn look. "You miss him."

With every breath I take. It proved difficult to face each day when Sharra knew she'd spend it without Logan.

Kate shook her head. "You can't live your life pining for him."

Sharra's throat felt tight with unshed tears. "If only it were that easy."

"You need to forget about him," Miranda asserted in her usual I-know-what's-best-for-you tone.

"Miranda's right." There was a soft glint of sympathy in Ava's gaze. "Logan might never come around. Have you thought of that?"

Sharra closed her eyes. *It's not true. He'll come for me. He'll want me back.* But deep within her, she doubted Logan would ever be able to accept her because of her gift.

"I wish we could do more for you," Ava murmured.

She kept her head bowed. "You've done enough. I can never repay you for your kindness."

Ava squeezed Sharra's hand. "We care about you, Sharra. We just want you to be happy here."

"If I could give Logan a kick in the balls for you, I would, believe me," Kate assured her. "You need to keep yourself busy to keep your mind off that stubborn man."

Miranda inclined her head, a thoughtful look on her face. "Just ask yourself, how long are you going to shed tears and wait for him to come to you?"

"I don't know," Sharra confessed.

"We all have to make choices," Miranda said gently. "You need to move on and live your life. Sometimes happiness is not always a given. I've made choices too." Her tone rang with honesty. "I live here on Karn'al, away from my home on Dakara. I...got lonely sometimes. I longed to go back home, to be among my people. After a while, I decided I had to find a way to ease that loneliness. I think that's what you have to do too. You've got to start living your life for *you*."

Long after Sharra settled in for the night, Miranda's words echoed in her head. She found it hard to believe that a woman like Miranda—smart, strong-willed and beautiful—would lack male companionship. What did Miranda mean when she said she'd found a way to ease the loneliness? Maybe it was something she could do too. It was getting more and more difficult to get through the day without thinking of Logan. Ava and Miranda were right. She couldn't live her life pining for Logan.

Unable to sleep, Sharra scrambled from the bed and pulled on some clothes. A walk might do her some good. She didn't want to spend another sleepless night thinking of Logan, wishing he would come for her. It was torture to wonder what he was doing and who he was doing it with. Was he with another woman?

Stop. Don't do this to yourself.

Sharra took a circuitous route from the rear of the sprawling structure. Dimmed lights provided just enough glow to illuminate the hallways, creating an intimate atmosphere. Through the walls, she could hear faint sounds of female giggles and male groans. After being here for weeks, she'd gotten used to them. The pleasure house was booming, catering to a clientele with a never-ending need for sexual favors.

Past the private rooms where the pleasure workers entertained their clients, Sharra entered the northern wing of the house where different performances were held. Through the open door of one of the lounges, she could hear the excited buzz of conversation, the clinking of glasses and the beat of low, sexy music. Eager anticipation permeated the air, managing to trickle through the safeguards she'd put up. The intense excitement of the spectators was palpable. The atmosphere was hot and heavy. Sharra swallowed, getting caught up in the crowd's enthusiasm despite herself. She'd never seen a show before. Why not stay and see what it was all about? Slipping inside, she scooted to the back wall, well away from the patrons.

The music faded away. It seemed to be some sort of cue, for the din of conversation died until there was total silence. Somewhere, a gong sounded. A lone spotlight came on, illuminating the center of the platform. A collective gasp filled the air. A woman stood on the stage, naked. Her head was bowed, her dark hair hiding her face. Her skin gleamed smooth under the smoky lights. Thick manacles, connected to chains, wrapped around her wrists. A loud cranking sound echoed in the silence. The woman's arms were slowly pulled up until they were stretched over her head. Her breasts, large and topped with pale pink nipples, bobbed softly, pulled taut by the position. The crowd murmured its appreciation. Sharra gaped at the sight.

A man strolled out of the darkness, clad only in pants, the top half of his body bare. He was muscled, sculpted and hard. Sharra recognized him. Derek. She'd seen him around the pleasure house before but had never had the occasion to speak to him. Her gaze zeroed in on the whip in his hand, at the way he flicked it with grace and expertise. At the crisp sound, the woman strained against her bonds, finally lifting her face. Shock slammed into Sharra. The chained woman was Miranda.

What happened next was a revelation. The crowd watched, mesmerized, as Derek whipped Miranda. The sound of leather meeting flesh reverberated inside the lounge. Low moans came from Miranda, but Sharra knew the woman wasn't in pain. Far from it. Pure bliss was written on Miranda's serene features. When she murmured "*more,*" the crowd cheered.

The sheer sexual atmosphere seeped into Sharra's consciousness, drawing her in. Her nipples tightened and something hot and liquid pooled between her legs. The whip kissed Miranda's bare, reddened skin again and again. Sheer naked ecstasy radiated

from her face. Sharra caught her breath, unable to look away, feeling every blow that landed as if *she* was the one onstage. By the gods of Arrion, what was happening to her? Why was she reacting this way to the sight of a woman being whipped by a man?

The audience leaned forward eagerly, not wanting to miss any part of the show. Derek played with one of Miranda's nipples, pinching, pulling and tweaking it with his fingers. At the same time, he slipped the whip between her parted legs, using the handle to rub against her pussy. Miranda whimpered, arching her body against him, eager for his touch. He shifted suddenly, slapping her bare pussy with the ends of the whip. Miranda cried out and shuddered, clearly in the throes of a powerful orgasm. Derek gave her rhythmic slaps, hitting her clit directly. She moaned and whimpered, arching toward the whip, lost in the pleasure. When she quieted down and her head slumped forward, Derek nodded to somebody offstage. The same loud cranking filled the silent lounge as Miranda's arms were lowered back to her sides. Derek bade her to kneel, his voice low and commanding, echoing eerily in the lounge. When she knelt in front of him, he unzipped his pants and pulled out a long, tumescent stalk of flesh.

"Suck."

That was all he said, yet Sharra shivered as if she was the one ordered to take him in her mouth. She couldn't look away from the erotic sight of Miranda wrapping her lips around the broad head of Derek's cock and pulling him deep within her mouth. Sharra was hypnotized as Miranda bobbed up and down, obviously relishing her task. While she did this, Derek tapped different areas of her body with the end of the whip, every *thwack* sounding crisp and sharp against the dampness of her skin.

There was a slight tensing of his back muscles. "I'm coming," he groaned. Miranda moaned and sucked harder, her cheeks hollowing out. Her throat muscles worked rhythmically as she swallowed Derek's seed, sheer ecstasy written on her face. It suddenly dawned on Sharra. *This* was what Miranda meant by easing her loneliness.

The same release Miranda had told her she should seek in order to forget Logan.

A tight fist of need knotted in Sharra's lower belly. It had been so long since she'd been with Logan. Need throbbed within her pussy. The urge to touch herself *there* and relieve the hunger was so overwhelming that she ran from the lounge. She ran all the way to the private wing and didn't stop until she reached her room.

That night, for the first time in her life, she sought the blessed numbness that physical release gave her. Her fingers delved into the wetness of her pussy, rubbing her swollen clit until she came, a soft cry escaping her lips. It was quick, the pleasure sharp and so *good*. For a brief moment, she was relieved of the bone-deep loneliness that had been her companion every night. As she lay panting on the bed, Sharra finally admitted that she'd never forget Logan. She'd never stop wanting him. But it was time to accept that he'd never come back.

A sob rose to her throat. It was painful to think that way, but reality stared her in the face. Any respite from the constant pain in her heart, no matter how brief, would be a gift from the gods. The emptiness eating away at her soul would kill her if she didn't

do anything about it. Miranda was right, she had to find a way to assuage the loneliness. But how? She didn't think she could ever be a pleasure worker...but what about becoming a performer? The idea bounced around Sharra's head as she clutched a pillow.

Why not? In addition to her duties as Ampara's assistant, the nightly performances would keep her busy and leave her no time to dwell on her bleak existence. The physical release she'd derive from it would in no way make up for Logan's absence, but it was a start. It was time to start living and stop hanging on to the hope that Logan would forgive her.

At this point, anything that would help her forget Logan, even for a few hours, was welcome.

* * * * *

The Boozin' Spot alehouse was a favorite among Cyborgs, a place where comrades could regularly get together and swap war stories. Buxom servers weaved around the tables, dispensing colorful drinks and delicious food. Logan sat in a corner booth, staring at the chilled mug of ale in front of him.

"You're about as much fun as patrolling the Black sector," Joren mocked.

"Kiss my ass."

"No thanks." Joren sipped his drink. "You're not my type."

Logan's lips twitched. "Why don't you find somebody else to piss off?"

Joren grinned. "Been there, done that. Marron kicked me out of his office, calling me a good-for-nothing slacker who should never have been given my own ship in the first place."

"One of these days, you'll push him hard enough that he'll assign you permanently to the Black sector."

"Nah. Deep down, that stiff-neck likes me."

With a laugh, Logan settled deeper in the seat. Joren has been called a lot of names and been in trouble more times than Logan cared to count, but his friend was a damn fine warrior.

"So? What's up with you?"

Logan shrugged. "I went to see Miranda today."

"Let me guess. You want to be reinstated to active duty."

"There's nothing *wrong* with me. I can't stand sitting around on my ass."

"Miranda refused to clear you?"

"She's taken off and nobody knows where she is. Her own staff doesn't know when she'll be back." Logan tossed back his drink and slammed the mug down on the table. "That woman drives me nuts."

"You and me both. I don't know whether I should spank her or fuck her," Joren muttered.

"I can guess which one you'd prefer," Logan quipped dryly.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Joren sat back. "She's kept me dangling too long. One of these days, I'll teach her a lesson she won't soon forget."

"Have you tried asking her out?"

"I've asked her out plenty of times. She always has an excuse. No more Mr. Nice Guy."

From the determined look on Joren's face, Miranda's time was running out. Logan was a witness to how long his friend had chased after the doctor. Inexplicably, Miranda had steadfastly refused Joren's attention. Never mind that whenever the two of them were in the same room together, the sexual tension could be cut with a knife. "Should I warn her then?" he asked with amusement.

"Ain't gonna change a damn thing." Heat flashed in Joren's eyes, hunger flickering across his features. "Miranda will end up in my bed, sooner rather than later."

"Just have a care, will you? I don't want her to get hurt."

"I would never hurt her. She's...special to me." Joren's seriousness surprised Logan. He'd never seen his friend so worked up over a woman. Joren was in love with Miranda, whether he knew it or not.

For a brief moment, a flicker of envy hit Logan in the chest. Thoughts of Sharra came to him again. He bit back an irritated sigh. No matter what he did, Sharra was never far from his mind. Too many times he found himself wondering where she was and how she was doing. He was damn tired of it. The fact that she was untrustworthy didn't seem to make a difference to him. Fool that he was, he still couldn't forget about her.

The nights were the worse. In an effort to stave off the nightmares, he put off sleep. In the dark, alone in his bed, images of Sharra danced in his head. Of her generous breasts jiggling softly as she rode him, her large, pale nipples jutting out stiffly. Of her ruby lips wrapped around the head of his cock, sucking him slow and taking him deep, until he blasted in her mouth. Of her pussy splayed wide for him to see, the swollen clit poking from the puffy lips in desperate need of some hard licking. Every night, Logan jacked off to those images, fisting his cock in his hand, eagerly reaching for the release that would relieve the ache that plagued him endlessly. *Shit*. Even now, his cock lay stiff against his trousers, demanding to be appeased.

"Have you heard anything about Sharra?"

The question hit too close to what had lately become Logan's obsession. "Why the fuck would you ask me that?"

Joren raised an eyebrow. "Take it easy. I was just wondering where she is, since she's been released from the hold."

"I wouldn't know."

"You haven't asked?"

"What the hell do you want from me, Joren?"

His friend wasn't fazed by his temper. "I just can't believe that you can turn away from her just like that. Don't you care what happens to her?"

He clenched his jaw. "She lied to me. She's a fucking empath, remember?"

"So? How's that hurting you?"

"Am I the only one who remembers what empaths have done to our people?" he bit out tautly.

"Yeah, I remember. But what has *she* done to *you*?"

"She can't be trusted." He stared into his mug of ale and shook his head. "She was in my head, reading my thoughts. I was easy pickings for her. The one thing I learned from all this? I can never trust anybody. Ever."

Joren stared at him. "You gotta get over it, man. Think long and hard before you do something you'll regret later."

"What's the fuck's gotten into you?" Logan groused.

"Hell if I know." Joren gave a brief chuckle. "Just trying to talk some sense into you."

"Well, don't."

"Fine." Joren tossed back his drink. "You know what you and I need? We need to get laid."

"Why the hell not," Logan agreed. It was time to put Sharra out of his mind. "I could use a good hard fuck."

Joren wiggled his eyebrows. "I believe Ampara would be eager to help you with that one."

Beautiful, passionate and generous Ampara. They'd been lovers in the past—on and off since she'd arrived in Karn'al and opened her pleasure house. Logan had liked to think it was a mutual arrangement. She satisfied his needs. He did the same for her. But even though the sex was good, it didn't come close to what he felt with Sharra.

Goddammit. He was thinking of her again. He surged to his feet. "Let's go."

As their transport sped toward Ampara's pleasure house, Logan forced his thoughts away from Sharra. Tonight he would wallow in pleasure. He wouldn't spend one minute thinking of her. Not one minute.

* * * * *

Sharra breathed deeply, staring at her reflection in the mirror. The silk gown she wore was gossamer-thin, molding her curves, outlining her body. Ampara had given it to her as a gift after agreeing to the idea of Sharra becoming a performer. She hadn't asked any questions or demanded answers, accepting Sharra's explanation that it would help ease the heartache that haunted her every day. And so here she was. In just

a few minutes, Sharra was scheduled to have a private session with Derek in order for him to teach her what she needed to know to become a performer.

With damp fingers, she smoothed the gown over her hips. Just like Miranda, she wanted to lose herself in physical pleasure, to feel the same ecstasy that had flitted across Miranda's face while she performed. Maybe, just maybe, Sharra thought, she'd feel like she was *alive* instead of just existing.

A thousand butterflies flitted around in her stomach. There was no need to be nervous. It wasn't as if there would be an audience tonight. It was only going to be Derek and her. A glance at the red-tinged numbers on the small clock by her bed told her it was time. Sharra walked to the door and pulled it open. From the residential wing, she made her way to the training room, which was adjacent to Ampara's private quarters. This proximity enabled Ampara to watch the proceedings and make sure everything was how it should be. In no time at all, Sharra reached her destination. She pulled in a deep breath and gripped the doorknob.

Tonight was the start of a new chapter of her life.

* * * * *

"I'm glad you came to see me."

Logan accepted the tumbler of ale Ampara offered him. "You know I make time whenever I can."

"I'm not complaining," she countered with a light laugh, settling next to him. That was the thing he liked the most about Ampara. She was undemanding, readily accepting whatever he chose to give her.

He forced himself to relax as he eyed her. Her thick, light-colored hair was coiled on top of her head. Her lips were rouged an attractive deep ruby color, a perfect contrast to her clear, smooth skin. She was beautiful without trying too hard to be, with the curves to match. High, firm breasts pushed against the softness of her gown. The slit on her skirt afforded him a generous view of her shapely thigh. Yes, Ampara was very easy on the eyes. Yet his body wasn't responding as it used to. Logan drank the ale in one gulp. "This place is thriving," he commented.

"There'll always be the need for the sexual relief that can be found in my pleasure house."

Logan grunted. He waited for the usual surge of lust that filled him whenever he was with Ampara. It vexed him that it was absent. No matter, it would come. Tonight, he intended to lose himself in her body.

She stood up and walked behind the couch. Soft hands descended on his shoulders and kneaded lightly. "You're very tense." Skillful fingers massaged the stiffness from his muscles.

He sat back and prepared to enjoy her touch. But the unease that hovered around him wouldn't go away. Where was the fire in his belly? Where was the urgency to fuck?

There was a time not too long ago when he would have had her naked and spread within moments in her company. Now? Aside from a mild stirring in his loins, there was nothing. Logan clenched his jaw, irritated at the lack of response from his body.

After a few moments, Ampara stopped her ministrations and made her way around the couch. He watched her walk toward him, her body swaying softly under the thin gown she wore, her stiff nipples tight points that grabbed his attention.

She settled on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "You seem far away tonight."

"Do I?" he hedged.

She leaned in, raining small kisses at the corner of his lips. Logan held her close, his hands settling on her rounded hips as he deepened the contact. To his disappointment, the kiss didn't produce the reaction he sought. Irrked at his body's lack of response, he curved a hand around one supple breast, cradling the weight in his palm. He caressed her all over, determined to wake the urge inside him that he knew lay sleeping just below the surface. Ampara's eager response was unmistakable as she widened her legs, snuggling closer, inviting a more intimate touch.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Here was a beautiful, passionate woman in his arms, willing and available. He'd never before passed up the chance to bed an agreeable female and he wasn't going to start now. Focusing on the kiss, he mustered up the enthusiasm to delve into the warm cavern of her mouth, inwardly cursing his lifeless cock. Maybe something was wrong with his com-plant and it was affecting his sex drive.

Their lips parted. Ampara's expressive eyes met his. A gentle hand settled on his chest, directly over his heart. Her smile was tinged with sadness. "Oh Logan. I've lost you."

He frowned. "What do you mean? I'm right here."

"You're here but you're elsewhere as well." Ampara placed a finger on his lips. "I feel it."

"It's nothing."

"There's someone else, isn't there?"

How the hell did she know that?

"A woman knows these things about her lover."

"She doesn't matter," he replied, deliberately being vague. "I won't bore you with a long, complicated story, but believe me, she's not important."

"I understand," Ampara assured him gently. "You don't have to explain. We don't have any hold on each other. You never made me any promises and I didn't expect any."

"You're too good for me, you know that?"

She gave him a lingering kiss. "Why don't we save this for later? Perhaps you'll be in a better mood by then. I'll get you another drink."

Logan accepted another tumbler of ale. At that moment, a light came on next door, spilling through the wall of glass that took up one whole side of Ampara's sitting room.

She pushed aside the heavy curtains that hung from the ceiling, revealing a view of the adjacent room. "This is where our performers are trained. I like to look in and make sure everything's going smoothly. They can't see us, don't worry."

Restless, he stood up from the couch and moved closer. A muscled, half-naked man moved about the room, positioning a chair under the chains that hung from the wall.

"You remember Derek? He's our resident trainer. He also performs nightly in the lounge."

Logan recalled meeting him during an earlier visit. "I remember." Joren, who had been present at that time, had declared Derek a lucky son of a bitch to be able to fuck different women—all in the name of training, of course.

"He's training a new girl tonight. She's been here for a while but only recently decided she'd like to participate in the nightly shows."

"What changed her mind?"

"I don't exactly know, although I suspect it has something to do with the sadness that seems to surround her all the time."

"And she thinks being a performer will take that away?"

At the skepticism in his voice, Ampara shrugged. "I don't judge. I only want to help."

Logan's gaze swung back to the training room. A neatly made bed sat in the center. Whips, floggers and clamps in a dizzying array of sizes hung on hooks. Various chains and restraints fell from different heights on the wall. There were also a variety of sex toys on a white cloth-covered table. Some were small, harmless looking things. Most were phallus-shaped and as thick as his wrist. *Gods. Maybe watching the training session would arouse him. Yeah, keep saying that and it just might come true.*

In the other room, Derek opened the door. "She's arrived," Ampara said softly. "It's about to start."

The man's sheer size and bulk made it impossible for Logan to see the woman who was about to undergo training. He could only see Derek as he tied a blindfold over his trainee's eyes. Logan gulped down the ale. A few more of these would wipe his mind clean and give him the numbness he sought. He looked through the glass wall into the training room once more and froze in shock.

He knew of only one woman whose hair resembled the color of midnight and who possessed a body made to be loved. *Sharra.*

She was the trainee? Logan couldn't speak. Through the red haze clouding his vision, he watched as Derek stripped Sharra of her gown, leaving her naked save for the black cloth covering her eyes. She was here in the pleasure house? Logan couldn't tear his gaze away from the heavy thrust of her breasts with their stiff nipples, the feminine dip of her waist, the mysterious valley between her legs. The plump lips of her pussy,

smooth and bald, glistened under the pale light. The hot, sickening feeling of jealousy choked him as Derek touched Sharra all over her body. The tumbler fell from Logan's nerveless fingers, the crash breaking the silence.

"Logan?"

The concern in Ampara's voice jarred him out of his stupor. "Is this a fucking joke?" he gritted out. "What the hell is going on here?"

Confusion and shock chased each other across her expressive face. "What do you mean?"

"Did Sharra put you up to this?" Logan turned away, unable to watch the stomach-churning *sexual* training that would soon commence. Anger twisted inside him. He clenched his fists, wanting to smash the glass wall to vent the anger and jealousy twisting his insides.

Ampara shook her head emphatically. "No, I didn't even know you were coming today, Logan. I didn't even know you knew her."

The truth did little to mollify the rage that surged through his blood. The sight of another man's hands on Sharra's naked body replayed over and over in his mind, taunting him with what he'd lost.

"She's the one," Ampara whispered.

Logan didn't bother to refute her conclusion. He sought to get his emotions under control, standing rigid and unmoving.

"Sharra's the reason you don't want me anymore."

"Do you even know anything about her?" he snapped.

"When she came here, I didn't ask any questions. She needed a place to stay and I gave her one. Sharra's never given me any reason to distrust her," Ampara countered gently. "I had no idea that...*you're* the reason she's sad all the time."

Logan shook his head to deny both her words and the sudden concern he felt. Fuck this. He couldn't stay here one moment longer. The best thing to do was to leave and forget he'd seen Sharra again.

"Are you just going to leave without talking to Sharra?"

The faint challenge in Ampara's words stopped him in his tracks. "I have nothing to say to her. You don't know what happened between us, Ampara. Don't meddle in things you don't understand."

"She wanted this, Logan. She *asked* to be trained." Ampara's voice wavered ever-so slightly. "Don't you see? I believe Sharra is ready to put you out of her life, ready to move on. She craves the relief that sexual release will give her. It's her way of healing, of teaching her body to forget, hoping that her mind will soon follow."

Against his will, Logan glanced over his shoulder as Derek led Sharra to the bed and tied the restraints around her wrists. She was laid out like a veritable feast, her smooth, creamy skin glistening softly under the light. Derek cupped her breasts, tweaking those mouthwatering pink nipples.

A surge of lust hit Logan, his cock stiffening with embarrassing eagerness. *Leave now. Walk out that door and put Sharra out of your life forever.* His feet wouldn't budge. Jealousy ate away at his sanity, mocking his wish to run off when, by rights, Sharra belonged to *him*. Od'ric had given her to *him*. Underneath the bitter betrayal and anger, he felt that she was still his. And by the gods, he wasn't about to give that up. *He* alone had the right to teach Sharra about pain and pleasure.

"She wants to be trained? Fine. I'll do it." At Ampara's wide-eyed astonishment, Logan added, "Sharra's *mine*." Heat coursed urgently along his veins. He stalked out of her chambers, aware that Ampara followed closely at his heels. He opened the training room door, quickly signaling a surprised Derek to remain silent and to get out.

Derek shifted his questioning gaze over Logan's shoulder. Not about to be denied, Logan swiveled to give Ampara a hard stare. With a barely perceptible nod, she gave her consent before walking away. Though Logan knew the other man was curious, Derek didn't ask any questions and stepped outside.

Sharra cocked her head at the soft click of the door. Logan suppressed the urge to just push his hungry cock deep inside her, to hell with everything else. He took a moment to get his baser instincts under control.

"Derek?"

At the sound of her soft, whispery voice, he nearly exploded. His fingers went to the fastening of his pants, his cock twitching hungrily as he undressed. Soon, soon he would have the little liar again.

Sharra's heart was beating so fast, she thought it would jump out of her chest. For a moment there, she'd had the strongest feeling that Logan was in the room with her. *Impossible*. He didn't even know she was here. Maybe her longing for him was just so great that she was conjuring him up in her mind.

There was a light stroke on her waist, right below her breasts. Sharra stiffened. She *knew* that touch. She whimpered, pulling at her bonds. Was she going insane? Her senses screamed that Logan was here with her.

"Derek?" No answer.

When something soft and bristly traveled over her leg, Sharra jerked on the bed. Her pulse skittered like crazy. It wasn't rough, yet it wasn't soft either. It was just enough to scrape ever-so-gently against her skin, leaving a tingling in its wake. It glided over her shoulders, down her arms, around her middle. The progress was slow and tortuous as it slipped down her legs to her feet before it began its gradual trip back up, stopping just below her breasts.

Sharra held her breath, biting her lip in frustration. Derek was not the one doing this to her, of that she was sure. It was different somehow. Too...*knowing*. Like he'd touched her before and knew exactly what to do. Confusion and arousal combined to besiege her senses.

Once again, it moved, circling one breast. Just when Sharra thought it would surely touch her aching nipples, the object moved to her other breast. She bit back a whimper. Again and again, it came close to the tip but never quite touched it. She arched, seeking some relief, hoping the bristles would scrape over her nipple...just a little bit...

Then it was gone. Deflated, she choked back a moan and slumped back on the bed. A hot palm landed on her hip. Her thoughts scattered. The touch was like a brand, imprinting itself on her skin. There was no mistaking the rough, calloused feel of that hand. *Logan.*

It slid lower, down to her upper thighs, giving her pussy an almost careless swipe before forcing her legs wide apart. Behind her blindfold, Sharra closed her eyes, bombarded by a host of conflicting emotions. She was so excited that she couldn't breathe, and still there was that strong, unshakable knowledge that Logan was touching her.

The bed dipped. Warm male skin brushed against her as he positioned himself between her splayed limbs. Her breath caught sharply. His skilled hands seemed to be everywhere on her body. He stroked her tummy, up her sides and down her arms before he slid down to her hips, her calves and even her feet. Sharra gritted her teeth, trying not to squirm on the bed. When his hand trailed up her thigh and stopped before reaching the apex, she couldn't hold back a moan.

What kind of game was he playing? There was no doubt left in her mind that it was Logan. There was only one man who knew how and where to touch her to ignite the fire inside. He didn't say a word, other than the ragged breathing that mingled with hers. Sharra longed to utter his name, to plead with him to take off the blindfold. She wanted to see him. It had been so long...

He pushed her knees up, keeping them wide apart. The first touch of his questing fingers on the sodden folds of her cunt made her moan. A blunt finger traced her plump lips, gathering her wetness, spreading it all over. Without conscious thought, she arched up, trying to draw the finger into her hungry pussy. He zeroed in on her clit, stroking the sensitive nub hard.

The shock of the touch electrified her all over. She shifted restlessly on the bed, pulling at her restraints. He continued to play for a little bit more before he plunged a finger into her vagina with a suddenness that took her breath away.

"Yessss."

He continued to finger-fuck her, adding two more, driving her toward the edge of madness. Her mind hazed over, sensual need overriding thought. "Logan...please," she cried out.

Without warning, the blindfold was suddenly torn away. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you knew it was me."

Sharra blinked, trying to clear her vision. "Logan," she whispered.

After so many nights of dreaming about him, he was once again with her. Like one starved, Sharra ate him up with her eyes. His hard, muscular body still emanated brute

strength. Beneath the contempt twisting his rugged features, lines of weariness etched his sharp, angular face. His dark eyes, aloof and mocking, were shadowed with fatigue. Despite the scorn that accompanied his words, Sharra's heart thudded with concern. It was obvious the nightmares had taken their toll on him. She knew because she'd felt everything he felt, night after night, right along with him.

Their eyes met. "Don't even try to get into my head," he warned softly, his tone laced with steel.

Sharra flinched. "I couldn't tell you the truth about me," she explained, wanting to make him understand. "I was only trying to protect myself. I never wanted to hurt you."

Logan's handsome face was unreadable. "Your words do not move me."

Had she really killed whatever affection he had for her? "Logan—"

He plunged his hand into her hair and tugged. "Had I known that you like it rough, I would have done my best to accommodate you," he taunted softly. "You want to be trained to fuck in front of an audience? I can help you with that."

"Is that why you're here?" The crude language he used failed to faze Sharra. He was lashing out at her. Underneath the angry bitterness, just below the surface lay a hunger he couldn't deny. The long, thick erection that rose proudly from a nest of dark curls was proof of that.

"I came here to see Ampara. I had no idea you were here."

Ampara? The thought of Logan with the other woman made Sharra's stomach roil. He hadn't come here because he wanted her back. It was by accident he even found out she was here. She choked with a mixture of resentment and jealousy. "I don't want you to train me. I prefer Derek."

He raised an eyebrow and indicated her bound wrists. "You think you have a choice?"

She lifted her chin. "Why would you want to train me, Logan? Do you want to hurt me? Will that erase the bitterness you feel? How many lashes of the whip will it take? Twenty? Fifty? You've already hurt me enough by turning your back on me when I needed you the most."

Was that a fleeting expression of remorse that crossed his face? "Maybe I want to pay you back for what you did."

"Oh that's *rich*." For the first time since everything that had happened, Sharra was angry at him. She glared at his rigid cock. "Who's the liar now?"

"Your impudence is astounding, *empath*." He made it sound like an insult.

"If you're telling me your sole purpose for coming in here is to give me pain as payback for what I did to you, then you're a liar too," she taunted recklessly, refusing to heed common sense. "I don't have to read your mind to know you're aroused. You may think you hate me, but you *want* me." When he froze at her words, she felt momentary triumph. Score one for her. She'd suffered long enough because of her love for this man.

"Are you saying you're not wet for me?" he countered softly. "You can't lie either."

"It doesn't matter," she insisted, cursing the shakiness in her voice. He knew she wanted him, no matter what happened between them. "There's no point in doing this. Let me go."

The mattress dipped as Logan moved off the bed to peruse the array of whips and floggers that hung on the wall. He stood tall and proud, the taut muscles of his back hard and unyielding. Despite the chasm that existed between them, the sight of his naked body made her hot and needy. Cool air wafted over her nipples, the tips beading tightly in anticipation. Dammit, how could she still hunger for this man?

Sharra breathed deeply. "Logan—"

"Quiet. Trainees aren't allowed to talk." He examined the different-sized phallus-shaped sex toys. After a moment, he picked up something from the table and palmed it.

Wetness gushed in her pussy. Sharra bit her lip. Was she depraved to be so eager for what was to come, even knowing how Logan felt about her?

Logan came back, making room between her legs, pushing them far apart. Sharra lay unmoving, bracing for his touch. He cupped her breast, tweaking the nipple softly between thumb and forefinger, sending a quick streak of pain through her. "I've got something for these hungry little things." Something cold and metallic went around the sensitive tip of her nipple, the ends digging softly at the fleshy base.

"With a little adjustment," he continued casually, belying the heat in his eyes, "this will give you a sensation you won't soon forget." Little by little, he tightened the object over her nipple until the tip was caught snugly between the prongs.

He'd *clamped* her. Blood rushed to the engorged crest, producing a sensation that was part pain, part pleasure. A thick knot of heated excitement throbbed inside her, sending jagged streaks of hunger shooting through her bloodstream as he clamped the other tip. She moaned, pulling restlessly at her restraints. "Stop this," she whispered breathlessly, her words lacking any force.

His nostrils flared as he gazed at her. "Too late," he muttered. Then the torture started. Nothing else could describe what Logan did. He didn't inflict pain. Instead, he used a whip's fringed bristles to scrape over her nipples, bumping against them again and again, intensifying the sting of the clamp. Sharra couldn't avoid it even if she wanted to. On and on it went, until her nipples were so sensitive she cried out at the slightest touch. She thought she heard him groan, but it was gone too quickly for her to be sure. With his free hand, he flicked against her swollen clit, rubbing over and around, driving her insane. She felt Logan's hunger rise as well, which only served to increase what she felt. She writhed against his hand, biting her lip to stem a moan when he flattened the bottom of his palm against her clit and pressed. *Gods. Yes. Yes. More.*

He pulled away. "Not yet."

Sharra uttered a small cry of protest, needing to come so bad. She froze at the sharp *thwack* that broke the silence. In the next moment, he smacked her upper thigh softly with a leather paddle. Shock mingled with the heat that enveloped her. She'd barely

recovered when there was another one. The pain was minimal and temporary, but it hit so close to her hungry pussy, ramping up her need. The firm taps only aroused her more until, after several blows, she was making small, incoherent noises, pleading with Logan to touch her *there*. Then a blow landed on the top of her mound, swiping her swollen clit.

"Logan!" she cried out in startled pleasure.

The next one was a direct hit. It quickly but expertly struck the engorged nub dead on. Sharra screamed as she spun out of control. Her pussy clenched, flooding as she came. Logan flicked at her nipples, the tingling shooting directly between her legs, eliciting another cry. He followed this with another blow to her clit, sending her into paroxysms of ecstasy, her eyes opening in shock as her orgasm went on and on.

He slanted his lips over hers, swallowing her cries. Sharra jerked against him, parting her lips hopelessly under his, beyond control, beyond shame. Hunger swept away anger and jealousy. Their tongues tangled and she moaned at the delicious pleasure of tasting him once again.

With one smooth, sure thrust, Logan entered her. She gasped, relishing the feel of her muscles stretching to accommodate his thick girth. He'd scarcely given her a moment to breathe when he began to power in and out, his cock filling her deep, again and again. Her senses spun. Nothing mattered except the pleasure she derived from his shaft spearing her pussy.

Logan placed her feet on his shoulders, the position enabling him to reach new depths, driving the air from her lungs. Sharra flailed against her bonds, wanting to wrap her arms around him. She keened, uttering hungry cries with every bone-melting stroke of his hard flesh. The heavy weight of his balls slapped against her rhythmically with every down stroke. He kneaded her breasts, torturing the clamped tips with his fingers.

Sharra was on overload. Her brain ceased to function as she hurtled over the edge to another mind-blowing orgasm. "Logan..." she sobbed.

A harsh groan escaped him and he fucked her harder and faster. Again and again, he plunged deeply. Her pussy clenched around his cock as he sank into her with one final thrust. Her eager muscles milked him hungrily. She slumped back against the bed, exhausted, tremors continuing to rock her body. She forced her heavy eyelids to open and looked at Logan. His face was damp with sweat. For a moment, his gaze was unguarded and open. He looked as stunned as she felt.

In a flash, his expression was once again an unfathomable mask. He disengaged from her in one abrupt move. With an air of detachment, he released her wrists from the restraints. At the rush of tingling sensation in her arms, Sharra whimpered. She sat up, rubbing her skin absently, keeping her gaze locked on him. He was so distant. The emotional gap that separated them made her heart ache. Though her body still pulsed with the pleasure of their physical joining, it was overshadowed by the sadness of the circumstances that hung like a cloud over them.

Chapter Nine

Logan walked away from Sharra, trying to ignore the trembling in his limbs. The sex had been incredible. The white-hot sensation of being clasped in the tightness of her pussy had been almost too much to bear. When he'd come inside her, he'd been filled with possessiveness and savage satisfaction. Being with her shouldn't be so damn fulfilling that he felt it all the way to his soul. This was about her punishment, about assuaging physical hunger. Contentment wasn't supposed to seep into his bones. He didn't want to feel the urge to lie down next to her and surrender to the sleep he'd been shunning. He swept aside those feelings and forcibly dredged up the bitterness and anger he'd worn like a cloak these past few weeks. *She's a liar. Don't ever forget it.*

"Logan."

The sound of her voice whispered over his skin like a caress. He closed his eyes, hardening his heart, calling himself ten kinds of fool for being so susceptible to her. He pretended to examine the variety of sexual toys on the table, picking out an anal plug. He braced himself for the sight of her naked body before turning to face her once more. He still wasn't prepared for it. With her hair streaming down her back, her skin flushed pink, her eyes shadowed and vulnerable, he was filled with the gut-wrenching need to take her in his arms. "Been fucking a lot while you've been here?"

The deliberate crudity of his words made her wince. Her beautiful eyes glinted with defiance. "Do you care if I have?"

Answer the question, dammit. "Not really."

"You and Ampara are lovers."

"You sound jealous," he taunted, a small payback for the anger that gripped him at the thought of her with another man, even for *training* purposes.

"I don't want to do this again, Logan. Not with anger and hate."

He set the plug back on the table and sat down on the bed. "You're free to go if you wish."

Sharra stared at him but didn't move. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, drawing his gaze to her quivering breasts and clamped nipples.

Logan released the breath he wasn't aware of holding. Gently, he slipped his fingers inside her soaked sex. "I think like me, you want more."

Her eyes darkened. "What for? You're just going to leave me again."

The pain and naked yearning in her voice touched something deep within his frozen heart. "I'm here now," he growled. He carefully removed the clamps and laved the sore nipples with soothing licks. At her whimper, he sucked her harder, intensifying the pain and pleasure she felt. Need soared inside him, obliterating any thought other

than to have her again. He straightened and captured her mouth, eating away at her lips, unable to get enough of her. She held nothing back, kissing him back just as hard and as deep.

He flipped her over on her stomach, running his palms down the gentle slope of her back to the plump cheeks of her ass. As if he hadn't recently been satisfied, his cock stood at rapt attention, stiff and ready once more.

With his fingers, he explored the tempting crevice between her buttocks, tracing the line that separated the globes. She jumped at his touch but didn't object, sending his pulse racing. He reached for the lubricant on the table, spreading it over his cock and around the tight ring of her anus. With ease, he slipped one digit inside her, burrowing in the rosy aperture. Her untried muscles tightened instantly around him like a vise. The soft moan she uttered coincided with his hastily stifled one. He moved in and out, gently stretching her, getting her used to his presence.

Her hips shifted restlessly, jerking when one finger became two. Logan gritted his teeth as he continued to stretch her, scissoring back and forth. The sight of her body laid out for him was beyond erotic, the soft sounds she made spurred him on.

Sharra looked over her shoulder at him. Her face was flushed pink, her eyes heavy with arousal. Jealousy choked him at the thought of an audience seeing her like this, memorizing every luscious curve of her body. It shouldn't matter to him if she chose to expose herself like that, but it did. Furious at himself and his conflicting emotions, he placed his cock at the well-lubricated opening instead. Her low whimper echoed in his ears as he slowly penetrated the small ring of muscles, pausing when the head popped in.

Logan clenched his jaw. She was slick and tight. When she squirmed under him, he held her steady. "Stay still." He gave her another inch, gritting his teeth. It felt so fucking good. All he wanted to do was thrust and bury the whole length of his shaft inside her. Sharra shuddered as he worked his cock deeper, stretching her, penetrating her depths until at last he was in all the way.

"Ohhh."

His lungs seized. He couldn't speak. Logan leaned forward, bracing himself on the bed. Their sweat-dampened bodies clung together, his front to her back. With his other hand, he drew her hair away from her shoulder before slipping down her front, seeking her breast. Then he began to thrust, long, slow and deep, while twisting a nipple between his fingers.

Beneath him, Sharra uttered soft, keening cries.

Dazed by the pleasure hammering into his brain, he rode her hard, slamming into her again and again, pushed past the edge of reason. Sharp, searing jolts of white-hot heat raced over his skin. Dimly he wondered what it was about Sharra that could reduce him to a level of primitive hunger he'd never felt before. She'd bewitched him somehow. Damn her and her *gift*.

She urged him on with breathless moans, pleading with him for more. All thought fled his mind and he became intent on completion. He drew his hand down to her pussy, seeking her clit, massaging it firmly. With a scream, Sharra came. She bucked against him, thrusting back urgently. Her clenching muscles squeezed him, tightening around him rhythmically. That was all he needed to go over the edge. With a harsh groan, Logan slammed into her ass a final time before he gave in to the most incredible orgasm he'd ever felt in his life.

Exhausted and satiated, he withdrew from her. The last thing he remembered was slumping onto the soft mattress, his eyes closing. He was barely aware of Sharra snuggling against him, the warmth of her body strangely comforting. Contentment flooded his brain, more effective than any painkiller he'd tried lately. His body relaxed against hers. For the first time in weeks, he slept.

* * * * *

Sharra was awakened by searing pain. With a cry, she jackknifed into a sitting position. *Logan*. He lay next to her, thrashing in his sleep, muttering angry, bitter words. He was having the nightmare again.

She tried to shake him awake, wanting to rouse him before the terror took its toll. Still asleep, he twisted on the bed, his face a mask of fury as he lay lost in his dream. Sharra's mind filled with the images he saw. She wrapped her arms around him, holding on tight. Pulling in a deep, shaky breath, she reached deep within her to send him a soothing wave of energy.

"Logan. You must wake up." Stubbornly latching onto him despite his thrashing, she persisted in trying to wake him. She already knew the intensely painful headache lay ahead.

With a terrifying shout, Logan reared off the bed, throwing her off him easily. He panted—deep, harsh, tortured breaths—as he sat up. Blinded by tears, Sharra knelt behind him, wrapping her arms around his middle, laying her cheek on his back. "Let me help you."

He tried to push her away. "I don't need your help."

"Logan—" she sobbed, feeling it too.

"No!" But his words lacked the usual anger. He was racked by too much pain. "Just get the fuck away from me."

"I will not leave you like this." Marshaling all the strength she possessed, Sharra closed her eyes and sought to draw the hurt away from him and into her. She gasped at the lightning bolts of throbbing torture that slammed into her, nearly driving her into unconsciousness.

"Stop it." Logan jumped to his feet. His eyes glittered wildly. "Stay out of my mind," he groaned, cradling his head in his hands.

The stabbing pain reverberated in her skull. "D-don't you see? I can *help* you." Sharra drew in a shaky breath. "Give me your pain, Logan. I'd rather suffer than watch you hurt like this."

"I don't need your help."

Sharra sobbed at his harsh words. "Y-yes, you do. Let me help you. *Please.*" It felt like a thousand knives were stabbing into her at once.

"Just leave me the fuck alone." He let out a tortured groan, stumbling back onto the bed.

Unable to watch him suffer any longer, Sharra cupped his face in her hands, careful to maintain contact despite his struggles. She sought to rid him of the aftereffects of his nightmare. Sharp, breath-robbing pain slammed into her as she tried to draw every ounce of the hurt from him and into her. She gasped, gritting her teeth in agony. Her knees buckled under her and she slumped against him on the bed. The effort sapped her of strength.

Despite what he'd done to her, despite how angry she'd become at his treatment of her, when it came down to it, she couldn't let him suffer. "I love you," she whispered.

Her vision dimmed. Blackness surrounded her. With a sigh, Sharra soaked up the last remaining ache that plagued him and sent it deep within herself before she surrendered to the blessed escape of darkness.

* * * * *

"You gave us quite a scare."

Sharra mustered up a smile for Miranda, turning away from the window. "I'm fine."

Miranda perused the med-chart, writing some notes. "All your tests came back normal. No lingering headaches? Pain?"

Just in my heart. "No."

"It was pretty frightening when you didn't wake up at all yesterday." Curiosity gleamed in Miranda's gaze. "Logan was at the pleasure house with you."

"Yes."

"Is it safe to assume that because he's a stubborn ass, it was hardly a pleasant reunion?" At Sharra's flush, the doctor rolled her eyes. "You don't have to answer that. One look says it all."

"He's still angry."

"Let's be clear here. Whatever atrocities your people committed against the Karn'aliens, they were done at the behest of the Pagans. You, personally, didn't have anything to do with that," Miranda said with exasperation. "If you ask me, I think his anger may be due to the feelings he has for you."

Sharra wished she could believe that. "I doubt it."

"Then why did he summon the med-bots when you lost consciousness, frantic as a madman? Ampara's physician was there, but Logan insisted on bringing you here."

Sharra gave her a wistful smile. "It's time I accepted that Logan will never forgive me. I've lost him."

"He's a fool."

Unhappiness was a heavy weight pressing on Sharra's shoulders. "I've decided to leave Karn'al."

Miranda looked at her thoughtfully. "Where will you go?"

With no family left, no home to go back to, she really didn't know where to go. "Anywhere I can start over. I'd like to go to a place where nobody knows me."

"Logan's an idiot." Miranda sighed. "Will you let me help you?"

"You've done enough for me. I couldn't ask you for more."

Miranda took her hand and squeezed it. "I care about you, Sharra. I consider you a friend. If you'll let me help you, I can get you settled in Dakara, my home world."

"Dakara?"

"Yes." Miranda smiled. "I can help you find a place to stay, introduce you to my friends and family. They'll welcome you with open arms and look out for you like they would do for me."

Tears came to Sharra's eyes as she hugged her. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve your help."

"I can't very well let you go out there in the big, bad world alone, now can I?" Miranda's tone was light and teasing but Sharra detected sincerity in her. "Consider me your family."

"Thank you."

"When would you like to leave? I can make transport arrangements for you."

Her heart tripped. No sense in staying any longer. "As soon as possible. Tomorrow, if it can be arranged."

Understanding shone in Miranda's beautiful blue eyes. "Pack your stuff and get ready. I'll secure passage for you on a shuttle. Don't worry, I'll take care of everything."

Long after Miranda had left, Sharra stared unseeingly out the window. Soon she would start a new life in a place where nobody knew her. She should feel relieved, excited or *something*...anything other than the crushing melancholy that was tightening her chest. The thought of leaving Logan and never seeing him again brought tears to her eyes. He'd made it clear how he felt about her. The contempt and disgust evident in his words had killed any hope Sharra had of him ever forgiving her.

She pulled in a deep breath. Though her heart was heavy, she'd do what must be done. Leaving Karn'al was the only way. A new life in Dakara beckoned.

A life without Logan.

* * * * *

Logan closed his eyes, blocking out the sight of the wires attached to his head. The constant beeping of the machine drove him crazy. For a moment, he was tempted to get up and walk away, to hell with the neuro-analyzer.

"I'm almost done. Try to sit still, will you?" Miranda punched in some numbers and pressed some buttons.

He stared straight ahead, thinking of Sharra. He hadn't been able to think of anything *but* her. He shifted uncomfortably on the diagnostic table. Over and over again, he replayed their last meeting in his mind, remembering the cruel words he'd said to her. But she hadn't let them stop her from taking his pain away from him and drawing it into herself. He had been terrified when she fainted. Fear had choked him when he wasn't able to rouse her. In a panic, he'd run into the hallway and found Ampara, who summoned her physician. He'd even sent for med-bots and insisted they take Sharra to Miranda's lab.

The sight of Sharra, pale and out cold, slumped on the bed, was something he'd never forget. For hours, he'd paced outside her room, waiting for news. Even when he'd been assured that her tests were normal and her condition stable, he'd felt compelled to stay, to make sure she was okay.

Sharra had done it to spare him the pain. And when she'd whispered *I love you...*

Logan swallowed. His chest tightened as the words washed over him again. The emptiness that had surrounded his heart for so long began to dissipate. The anger and resentment he harbored against her were...no longer there. He flinched when he remembered the cutting words he'd said, the callous way he treated her. Gods, he was a fool for hurting the one person who'd shown him nothing but love from the start. Could she ever forgive him?

He had to see Sharra.

The machine powered down and the beeping stopped. Miranda pulled off the sensors. Logan sat up, eager to be off. "All done?"

"In a minute." She wrote on his chart. "How did you sleep last night?"

"Like shit. What else is new?"

"It seems to me you *want* to suffer."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Miranda raised an eyebrow. "Sharra is the cure for what ails you. Yet you refuse to see that."

"Don't start on me, Miranda," he warned, still grappling with his newfound feelings.

She shrugged. "I just thought I'd point it out since you're too stubborn to see it. Well, you should be happy anyway. Sharra's due to leave Karn'al today."

Logan froze. "What did you say?"

At his tone, Miranda frowned. "There's nothing for her here and —"

He gripped her arm. "Where is she going?"

"Logan —"

"Tell me."

Something in his face must have convinced her of his seriousness. "She's boarding a shuttle to Dakara leaving in," Miranda glanced at her watch, "fifteen minutes."

The thought of never seeing Sharra again was intolerable. She couldn't leave. He wouldn't allow it. Logan pressed the com-link button on his belt. "Moran."

His chief of security responded instantly. "I'm here, Sir."

"Meet me at the spaceport in a few minutes. We've got to stop a shuttle to Dakara."

"Roger that." Moran was too well-trained to even ask why. "I'll take two security teams with me. We'll meet you there."

Logan jumped off the diagnostic table and pulled on his shirt. He had to stop Sharra.

"Logan." Miranda's voice stopped him. "What are you trying to do to that poor girl? You've hurt her enough. Let her go."

Remorse, guilt and fear choked him. "I can't," he confessed. "I can't let her go." He ran out of the lab, desperately hoping he wasn't too late.

* * * * *

"Passengers bound for Dakara, proceed to Docking port 25-B."

Sharra gripped the boarding chip in her hand. It was her passage to a new life. A small suitcase lay at her feet containing everything she owned. Somebody jostled her, almost knocking her over. Just across from her was the gate to port 25-B. She really should board the shuttle now, but her legs refused to move.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes as she looked over her shoulder at the city. Once she boarded the shuttle, the deed would be done. She'd leave Logan forever. It seemed so final...so drastic. Her heart felt leaden, much like the rest of her body. She couldn't take that last step that would take her away from Logan.

"Last call for passengers bound for Dakara. Proceed to Docking port 25-B. Shuttle will be launching in two minutes."

The announcement boomed loudly from the spaceport's public address system. This was it. She had to board now or the shuttle would launch without her. She took one step forward then sank slowly to her knees. *Get up. Board the shuttle and leave him behind.* He'd hurt her too much. There was nothing left for her to give.

A commotion broke out as security rushed through the busy building and ran into port 25-B. Passengers scattered in every direction, clearing a path for the officers. Confused, Sharra picked up her suitcase and stepped out of the way, hugging the wall.

Her heart hammered as she clutched the boarding chip between cold fingers. What was going on?

* * * * *

Logan walked up and down the center aisle of the shuttle, checking every passenger. His jaw tightened as he pressed the com-link button. "Report."

Moran replied immediately. "She's not here, Sir."

Frustration surged inside him. "Search again."

"We have, Sir."

"Do it again," he barked. "Search the cargo compartment. Search every corner of this fucking shuttle. Sharra's here somewhere. I want her found!"

"Roger that."

She was here. He knew it. Unless... "Was there another transport that left earlier?" he asked the shuttle commander hovering behind him.

The man swallowed, clearing his throat. "No, Sir. This is the only one scheduled to leave for Dakara today."

"If I find that you're lying to me..." Logan trailed off, giving in to the fear that Sharra had somehow slipped away.

"I'm not," the man stammered. "I swear that everybody went through security. I'm not harboring a fugitive."

Logan narrowed his eyes. "You won't be allowed to leave until we find this passenger." He turned away, prepared to turn the ship upside down if necessary.

The shuttle commander called him back. "W-wait! T-there was one passenger who didn't check in."

"What?"

The man nervously punched in numbers on the onboard computer. "Here's the manifest." He ran a finger down the screen. "Boarding chip number 551-F was never scanned."

"What the hell does that mean?" Logan growled.

"It means that passenger is not onboard." The commander gestured nervously. "Have you checked the spaceport terminal? Perhaps the passenger is still out there somewhere."

A little kernel of hope flared inside Logan. By the gods, he would find Sharra if he had to tear the whole place apart. He met Moran at the boarding gate. "Sharra's in the terminal somewhere. Clear the whole place."

Moran hesitated. "That's gonna take more men than we have right now."

"Just do it."

At that moment, the terminal doors swung open. Tristan and Jed came in, followed by more security officers. "I received a report about a disturbance." Tristan frowned. "What's going on?"

Jed's assessing glance swept over the area. "The general alarm wasn't sounded. What's the emergency, Logan?"

Moran's efficient security teams were busy herding the people out of the terminal. Logan met Tristan's gaze. "I ordered the terminal cleared. I, uh, I'm searching for a passenger."

Tristan raised an eyebrow. "Passenger?"

Fuck it. Logan straightened his shoulders. "Listen, Tris, you can chew my ass out later. Right now, I need to find Sharra."

"You ordered the whole space terminal cleared just so you can find *Sharra*?" Tristan asked, disbelief lacing his voice.

"Yeah, I did," Logan admitted, refusing to analyze the foolishness of his actions.

Jed's wide-eyed gaze swung from Logan to Tristan. "Shit's gonna hit the fan, Logan."

Tristan crossed his arms over his chest. "You realize that you can be thrown in the stockade for ordering this evacuation without prior authorization. Not to mention utilizing security teams for a personal matter."

"I know that." Logan met Tristan's stare unflinchingly. "But you're just going to have to do it after I find her, because there's no way in hell that I'm calling a halt to this search. She can't leave Karn'al."

Jed suddenly snickered. "Lost her, did ya?"

Logan clenched his jaw, ignoring Jed's needling comment. "So what's it going to be, Tris? Are you going to get out of the way and let me find Sharra?"

Tristan stared at him for a moment before he released a breath. "Once again, I find myself in the unenviable position of saving your ass, Logan. What the hell, right? We might as well help him, Jed. He's clueless enough as it is."

Only after he heard that did Logan relax a bit. "I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"

Jed chuckled. "Hell no. This is way too good. I can use this for *years*, Logan."

Tristan's lips twitched as he slapped Logan on the back. "You're one sorry bastard, you know that?"

Logan snorted. "So says the man who's as pussy-whipped as Jed."

Jed pretended to bristle at that. "Hey. Don't knock it until you've tried it. Besides, from the looks of it, you're already pussy-whipped yourself."

"Come on." Tristan grinned. "Let's find Sharra before Logan tears this whole place apart." He addressed the officer behind him. "I want four teams of two to search the

terminal." The officer nodded and assembled his men. Within moments, the whole spaceport was efficiently cleared, all departures temporarily halted.

Jed strode in from one of the connecting terminal doors. "No sign of Sharra."

"I got the same report." Tristan faced Logan. "Are you sure she's even here?"

"She's here," Logan muttered in frustration. "She's got to be here somewhere."

Moran ran up to Logan. "Sir, I've just received a report from perimeter patrol. They have Sharra."

"Where is she?"

"They found her outside. She must have slipped out with the other passengers. Should I have them bring her here?"

Tristan laid a hand on Logan's shoulder. "We need to get out of here so the terminal can resume normal operations."

"Take her to my house," Logan instructed Moran. "Let everyone back onboard the shuttles and have the men clear out." Moran nodded and quickly left.

Passengers shuffled back inside the building. In no time at all, operations were resumed. Logan, Tristan and Jed made their way outside the terminal.

"Does this mean you plan on taking her as your mate?" Jed asked.

"If she'll have me," Logan replied. He wasn't too sure about her acquiescence.

"Grovel if you have to," Jed suggested cheerfully.

"You'll have to petition the Defender Triad for permission," Tristan reminded him. "It's necessary because she's an empath."

Logan grimaced. "Will that be a problem?"

"The best thing to do would be to approach Marron beforehand," Tristan advised. "You need him on your side."

Jed patted him on the back. "I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. With Sharra cleared in the investigation, there are no pending complaints or cases against her." He lowered his voice. "It's probably best to keep it quiet that she's an empath."

Logan straightened his shoulders and leveled a stare at Tristan. "Can I count on your support?"

"No question about that," Tristan replied without hesitation. "I'll set up a meeting with Marron tomorrow morning to give him a heads up."

Jed grinned. "Now you just have to do your part and prepare Sharra for the Ritual."

He had to ask for her forgiveness first. "If she won't have me..." he trailed off. He didn't even want to think about that.

"If you want my advice, talk to Sharra immediately and make all the arrangements," Tristan suggested.

"Then you have to decide who's going to join you for the Ritual." At Logan's glare, Jed held up his hands, his eyes twinkling. "Not that I'm interested. I'm married, remember?"

Tristan chuckled. "Kate would have your balls if you even dared consider it."

"You're one to talk," Jed drawled. "Ava would probably do the same to you. You and I are in the same boat." He steered Logan toward the door. "Now get outta here and see to your woman."

The echo of his friends' laughter rang in his ears as Logan pivoted and left the spaceport quickly. Groveling was something he didn't mind doing, as long as he got Sharra back.

* * * * *

Sharra bit her lip, pacing the length of the sparsely furnished dwelling. The guards had transported her from the spaceport to here—wherever *here* was—and they now stood outside, ignoring her questions and pleas for answers. What did this mean? Was she a prisoner again?

The door opened. She whirled around and barely smothered a gasp. *Logan*. The last time she'd seen him, he'd made it clear he didn't want her. "Why am I here?"

"You're forgetting that Od'ric *gave* you to me. You can't leave without my permission."

She lifted her chin. "I didn't know I needed it."

"Did you really think I would let you go?"

"I don't want to play any more games. It would be better all around if I left Karn'al."

"Better for whom?"

She threw her hands up in frustration. "Better for you and me. You hate me, remember?"

His eyes were hot as they swept over her, leaving trails of fire on her skin. "I would've forcibly stopped the shuttle and boarded it mid-flight if I needed to." He walked toward her.

She backed up a step. "What are you saying?" she demanded. Her heart thumped in her chest. An answering fire kindled in her lower belly, igniting a flame between her legs. She suddenly felt breathless, warding him off with a raised hand. "Stop it."

He halted inches away from her. The harsh angles of his face looked carved from stone, serious and unsmiling. "When it came down to it, I couldn't bear the thought of you gone from my life."

If he was just toying with her... "No more games, Logan," she entreated. "I don't think I can take it."

"No games," he echoed solemnly. "I don't know how to ask for your forgiveness for how I treated you. I'm not making excuses, but it's hard for me to trust anyone, and when I'd found out you were an empath..." He pulled in a deep breath. "I felt deceived and humiliated because you knew about my nightmares."

"I knew about them before I'd even met you," she confessed. At his look of surprise, she explained. "I'd been having these dreams of a young boy with two women. You were in it too, but I had no idea who you were or what it meant. I'd also been suffering from the same headaches."

"How is that even possible?"

She looked away. "I don't know. But I recognized you that day in Zalian Three and I knew, just knew, that I was destined to be with you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked hoarsely.

"What was I supposed to say? By the way, I'm an empath and I've been sharing your dreams?" Sharra blinked back sudden tears. "I knew I had a role to play in your life, Logan. I didn't question fate. I just followed it." She swallowed. "I'm profoundly sorry that I wasn't honest with you. I've lived my whole life with the fear of discovery, of being found out and persecuted because of what I am. It was necessary to hide my true identity. I had to protect myself." She choked back a sob. "Then I met Tan'ea, Ismail and Nim on your ship. Right away, I knew they were dangerous."

"You should have come to me."

"With what? I had no proof except for what I'd sensed. I decided to follow them around until I had solid evidence to present to you. Then the *Guardian* docked at the spaceport and you know what happened after that."

"I'm sorry I didn't trust you. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Logan—"

"If you tell me that we can't start over, I'll accept it."

Tears came to her eyes. "Y-you want to start over?"

"Gods yes, if you'll have me. I know I hurt you."

"A-and you'll let me go if I ask you?"

Logan flinched but still leveled a direct stare at her. "Yes."

"What if I don't want you to let me go?"

His nostrils flared. "I want you to be sure. I don't want to force you into—" He caught her as she ran into his arms.

"I'm sure." She pressed her lips to his. "Promise you'll never let me go."

He groaned. "You couldn't get away from me if you tried. I turned the terminal upside-down looking for you." He kissed her, stealing the air from her lungs. Sharra melted against him without a thought of resisting. Insistent fingers made quick work of her clothes. "Last chance," he muttered. "Tell me to stop now if you have any doubts at all."

As an answer, she peeled off her last remaining piece of clothing. Wasting no time, Logan picked her up and strode quickly to the bedroom. Logan tumbled her to the bed, his lips instantly latching onto a nipple, sucking her deeply into the hot cavern of his mouth.

Sharra arched against him with a groan. Her legs splayed underneath him, making room for his big, hard body, rubbing against him sensuously. The desire he felt for her drifted into her consciousness. She detected a willingness in him to let her see what he thought, let her feel what he felt. He was opening himself to her.

Logan bit at the sensitive tips of her breasts, worrying the stiff crests with his teeth. Sharra moaned, her hands seeking warm male skin. She pulled at his shirt, her fingers raking his back. Logan drew back, fumbling with the fastening of his trousers, his breath escaping in an impatient hiss when he couldn't wrench them open. She moved to help him. When his cock spilled into her hands, she let out a blissful moan. Logan pushed his pants down his thighs, positioning the hard shaft at the entrance of her pussy. In one smooth stroke, he slid all the way in.

Sharra caught her breath sharply. "Ummm." Her arms snaked around his neck, pulling him closer, savoring the feeling of being one with him.

Logan flipped their positions, ending up on the bottom. He gripped her hips, shifting until he sat on the bed. Sharra whimpered, absorbing the feeling of his thick cock pulsing in her pussy. It was too fast. Too much. The fire that originated from the spot where they were intimately entwined began to radiate outward, consuming her swiftly. "I have to..." she gasped, trying to slow down, trying to catch a breath. "Oh Logan."

His dark eyes flashed with heat. He allowed her a moment, his palms gently rubbing her stomach before sliding up to play with the tight tips of her breasts. Strong, blunt fingers pulled at the crests, applying just the right amount of pressure in a combination of pain and pleasure. A moan escaped her lips as she received the stimulation she'd been craving. She writhed on top of him, biting her lip at the heat that gathered in the folds of her soaked pussy.

Leaning down, he took one swollen nipple between his teeth, grazing the surface, letting her feel a fleeting bite of pain. "Ride me."

The hoarsely uttered words were all she needed. She rode him, taking his thick shaft deep inside her again and again. The broad knob of the head pushed through the pliant inner muscles of her channel. Every stroke left her gasping for more, hungry for the firm kiss of his ridged tip against her clenching cervix. "Yes...yes..." she chanted.

His heavy-lidded eyes locked on her jiggling breasts. His jaw clenched tightly as he gripped her hips with rough hands. She found herself lying flat on the bed once more, looking up at his handsome, strained features. His cock pummeled her pussy with deep thrusts, driving her insane. "More," she demanded. "Harder...harder."

"Gods," he rasped.

Sharra clenched tightly around him. She wanted it to last, wanted it to go on forever and ever. He rode her hard, the rhythmic friction against her clit sending her spinning toward the edge. His name spilled from her lips as she stiffened and came. Pleasure swelled to unbearable proportions, robbing her of breath, taking her completely. Logan

gave one mighty thrust, his cock swelling inside her a moment before he bathed her with his seed. Weak and satiated, Sharra snuggled against him.

Logan rubbed his cheek against her. "After the explosion, when the med-bots said you'd lost so much blood..." He squeezed her tightly. "I was terrified that you would die."

"But you were so angry."

"Yes I was," he admitted gruffly. "I tried to hide what I really felt by focusing on my anger. But I couldn't get you out of my mind. After you were cleared of the charges and released from the hold, I convinced myself that I didn't want to know where you were. That I didn't care what happened to you."

"Miranda, Ava and Kate convinced Tristan to release me and they took me to Ampara." Sharra drew in a deep breath. "You two were lovers."

Logan tipped her chin up. "Long before I met you. We came together when the need arose. It was a convenient arrangement."

Curving her hand around his cheek, she drew his face to hers. "Are you sure you don't mind that I'm an empath?"

His expression was somber. "Being an empath is part of who you are and I don't want to change that. I care about you, Sharra, more than I have for anybody else. I just..." He breathed deeply. "The thought of you reading my mind, knowing my deepest fears, was disconcerting. There are things you don't know about me. Things you might not want to know. I'm not a good man. I'm not an easy man to —"

As a Cyborg warrior, Logan wasn't used to vulnerability in any way. Sharra laid a finger on his lips. "I love you. I want to share every bit of who I am with you. Do you think you can trust me enough to do the same?"

"Time and again, you've shown me that you would never hurt me." He kissed her softly. "Yes. I do trust you."

"I want to open myself to you completely so that you may understand who I am and what I can do."

"Is this a test to prove that I've accepted that you're an empath? Because if it is —"

"It's not. I would've sensed it if you weren't telling me the truth about that," she said gently. "Will you do it?"

Logan leaned down and captured her lips in an achingly sweet kiss. "All right. What are we doing?"

Happiness suffused Sharra. "It's called a mind-bond. It's the highest form of intimacy for my people. I want to do that with you."

At Logan's acquiescence, the last of her doubts melted away. Sharra pulled him to a sitting position, his legs straight and flat on the bed. She sat across from him, placing her thighs over his, scooting closer until they were chest to chest, their lower bodies aligned with each other. His arms wrapped around her waist. She put hers around his shoulders. "Now just relax."

Looking into his eyes, Sharra initiated a deeper link. Time seemed to freeze as she entered his mind. Something clicked and their thoughts became perfectly aligned as the connection was made.

The mind-bond began. Their hearts slowed down, adopting the other's rhythm, beating as one. Strong, pulsing energy surrounded them, enclosing them in a warm cocoon. Sharra sensed no fear or hesitation within Logan, only eagerness to participate in the ultimate joining that transcended the physical.

She shared the incredible love she felt for him, revealing all her memories and thoughts, her hopes and dreams. He would know her like no other would, just as she would know him. On and on it went, until every fiber of their beings was intertwined. Sharra opened herself completely, immersing herself in the mind-bond. All of Logan's thoughts, memories and feelings flowed into her, the good with the bad. As she absorbed everything into her, she finally saw the root of his night terrors. Tears came to her eyes at what she saw, and with it came the determination to wipe it away from him any way she could.

I love you. She whispered it into his mind.

I love you. His swift response, delivered in the same telepathic way as hers, told her their joining was complete. Now that they'd mind-bonded, nothing could ever tear them apart.

Sharra burrowed closer, taking his lips in a gentle kiss. The sharing was beautiful and overwhelming. The mind-bond slowly dissipated, releasing the connection gradually. She relaxed and trailed her lips down his neck. He was truly her mate now.

"Amazing." His voice was filled with wonder. "It felt..." He trailed off, clearing his throat. "Unbelievable. I'm surprised we were able to do that. With my com-plant regulating my neuro-sensors, I never would've thought that was possible."

"I don't know that it's possible for everyone. It is for you and me." The warmth of his body comforted her. "Logan, about your nightmares..."

"It's just the same horrible dream over and over."

The love she felt for him welled in her chest. "Don't tear yourself apart with guilt. You had to do what you did."

His hand came up to push her hair away from her face and shook ever so slightly. "When I told you I'm not a good man, I was telling the truth. I've done things that I'm not proud of."

She shook her head. "You were only a child."

"A child who killed his mother and sister," he admitted in a tortured voice. "I *killed* them."

Her heart shattered at his pain. "Your mother and sister were already hurt, broken and bleeding when you found them. The Pagans were going to rape them and eventually kill them, Logan. Your mother asked you to end their suffering."

Logan swallowed, blinking away the moisture in his eyes. "I went to my father's lab to get him but he was already dead." He looked pained, reliving the past. "I ran back to our house. I knew I had to get my mother and sister to safety, but the Pagans found them first."

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Oh Logan."

"I snuck inside and tried to convince Mother that I could get them out of there. But she knew it was too late." His voice broke. "She saw the blaster I had tucked in my pants and told me...to shoot them. Death was better than suffering in Pagan hands."

"It was the only way."

"I didn't want to do it," he countered harshly. "But I wanted to spare them from more pain, so I did as she asked. A Pagan soldier caught me and grabbed me by the neck. I pointed the blaster at him and fired off another shot so I could escape." Logan gripped her arms tightly. "I killed my mother and sister, Sharra. They were my only family left."

Sadness for the little boy he'd once been consumed her. "You only did as she'd asked and the guilt has been tearing you apart since then." It broke her heart to see this proud, strong and courageous man hurt so much. "It wasn't your fault," she declared fiercely, wrapping her arms around him and filling him with warm, soothing energy. "You did what you had to do. You were only a child, one who had to make the horrible choice to take two lives that were precious to you. Don't hate yourself for it." She cried for the boy he once was and the man he'd become. "Let it go, Logan. Let *them* go. It's time to forgive yourself."

If it was the last thing she did, she'd rid him of the heavy burden he'd been carrying for so many years.

* * * * *

"Is there a dearth of Karn'alian women willing to become Cyborg mates?" Marron groused. "We've built up our population considerably. Most of our people have come back. Why can't you Cyborgs find a mate amongst the local women?"

Jed smothered a grin. Tristan barely managed to keep a straight face. Logan gripped Sharra's hand tightly in his as they faced the leader of the Defender Triad in his office. "She's the one for me, Marron. No one else will do."

"It's not enough that Jed has taken a half-*Pagan* as his mate? Now you want to take an Arrion *empath* as yours. What's next? A treaty with the damned Pagans themselves?" Marron asked irritably.

Sharra felt hot color spread over her cheeks. The fear that their union would be denied was very real. Logan squeezed her hand reassuringly, reading her anxiety perfectly.

Tristan stepped forward, clearing his throat. "With all due respect, Marron, I heartily endorse this union. Sharra has proven herself to be trustworthy. We need your support to suppress other...ah...opposition."

Marron's gaze swung from Logan to Sharra, who tried not to cower under those sharp eyes. "Young lady, are you willing to become Logan's mate?"

She lifted her chin and sought to hide the apprehension she felt. "Yes I am. I love Logan with all my heart."

The Triad leader's piercing eyes didn't waver from her for several long moments. Silence descended in the office. "Well then," Marron finally spoke, "you've sealed your fate. I give your union my blessing."

Logan exhaled. Sharra almost crumpled with relief. Jed and Tristan exchanged grins.

"I will inform the Triad of my decision and avert any attempts at a formal objection." Marron's eagle eyes zeroed in on Logan. "Get the Ritual done tonight. Understood?" At Logan's nod, he gestured with his hands. "Now all of you leave my office."

When the door shut behind them, Tristan shook Logan's hand. "Congratulations. You've just passed the biggest obstacle."

Logan grinned. "Thanks to your support."

"Does Sharra know about the ritual?" Jed asked quietly.

"Know what?" Sharra asked. At the expectant look on everyone's faces, she turned to Logan. "What is it?"

"Uh," Tristan spoke into the sudden silence. "Jed and I are going to leave you now. We have—ah—some matters to attend to."

"We do?" Jed echoed doubtfully.

"Yes we do." Tristan's reply was firm. With a wave, the two men walked down the hallway.

"Logan?" she prompted, noting the distinctly uncomfortable look on his face. "What was that all about? What ritual?"

He drew her aside into a quiet corner. "It's called a Ritual of Acceptance. It's a tradition among Cyborg Defenders to...um..."

Sharra frowned and sought to read his mind. Their connection was so deep and complete that she had no trouble discerning his thoughts. Her lips fell open in shock. "W-we have to do that?"

"All Cyborgs and their mates do," he explained, his voice low. "I have to choose another to join us for one night. In case something happens to me, this man is sworn to take care of you and our children."

"Only once?"

"Just once," he quickly reassured her.

She stared at him. "And this is okay with you?"

He seemed slightly uncomfortable. "I don't think I'd want to share you with another man on a regular basis but..." Logan moved closer to her, enclosing her in his arms. He bent low, skimming his lips against her cheek. "I have to confess that there's something very sexy, very *erotic*, about the thought of two of us pleasuring you."

Sharra shivered. The images he conjured up in his mind came easily to her. Three bodies tangled together atop mussed sheets, moving in unison, writhing erotically. "Well," she managed to say weakly, "if we have to do it, we have to do it, right?"

Logan breathed a sigh of relief and kissed her. "I'll make tonight unforgettable. I promise."

Tonight. She leaned weakly against him. "I don't doubt that at all." Excitement ran through her bloodstream at the thought of what was about to happen. Anticipation dogged her footsteps as they made their way home. Logan was quiet most of the way, handling the controls of the transport expertly. Sharra fought the urge to fidget, already looking ahead to the upcoming ritual. Whom would he choose? Who was going to join them in their bed tonight?

* * * * *

"Is this really necessary?" Logan couldn't quite keep the irritation in his voice as Miranda, Ava and Kate flitted around his bedroom. He frowned at what seemed like dozens of candles they'd scattered all over.

Kate shot him a quelling glance. "You want tonight to be special for Sharra or not?"

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Ignore him, Kate. Logan would be perfectly happy with some wham, bam action." She placed more candles on a makeshift platform they'd positioned against the wall.

Ava chuckled. "Wham, bam, huh?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Miranda?" Logan asked. He didn't like being outnumbered by women. They usually ganged up on him.

"You know *exactly* what I mean," Miranda replied with wide, innocent, mocking eyes. "Men have a tendency to get to the nitty-gritty, give a couple of grunts, then bam, it's over." Feminine laughter followed her statement.

Logan grimaced. "This is worse than facing a whole platoon of Pagan soldiers. Where are your husbands, anyway?"

"Jed knows exactly where I am," Kate announced with a twinkle in her eyes. "I told him we had to try to make tonight special for Sharra."

"Jed was probably only too happy to foist you off on me," Logan grumbled.

Ava grinned. "Tristan knows I'm here too."

"You badgered your husbands, that's why," he groused. "I don't understand why you three think I need your help getting ready for tonight. I'm perfectly capable of making it special for Sharra."

"Trust us." Kate gave a confident nod. "We're women. We know what will make Sharra feel comfortable tonight."

"Dare I ask who you've chosen for tonight?" Ava asked curiously. Her glance slid over to Miranda. "On second thought, forget I asked."

Miranda crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't care if he's chosen Joren. I'm fine with it."

Kate paused in arranging the pillows on the bed. "You are?"

There was an infinitesimal moment when Miranda hesitated, but she quickly recovered. "Of course. I don't have any claim on him, nor do I want to. I just want him to leave me alone."

Logan snorted. Too late for that. Miranda didn't know it yet, but her fate had been sealed the day Joren first laid eyes on her.

A short, uncomfortable silence ensued after that. Kate and Ava knew as well as he did that Joren would stop at nothing to get Miranda. Ava was the first to recover. "Well, I think we're done here, don't you?"

Even though he would never admit it out loud, the three women had done wonders with the plain appearance of his bedroom. Kate had brought over some silky-looking sheets that she'd assured him Sharra would love. They'd arranged pillows artfully over the bed and when he lit the dozens of candles the room would be filled with a soft, intimate glow.

Ava smiled happily. "Now all you have to do later is—"

Logan raised his hand, interrupting her. "Thanks, but I know what to do, Ava. Trust me."

"Big, bad Cyborg doesn't need pointers from us women?" Miranda teased.

He shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not. Now if you don't mind, I'd like all of you to leave."

Ava rolled her eyes. "I guess it's time for us to go."

Kate swept the room with one last glance. "Everything looks good to me."

Miranda tugged the two to the door. "Come on. We can visit Sharra in a couple of days and check in on her."

Logan endured their female mutterings until they slipped out the door. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief. In truth, he was grateful for their decorating help, he really wanted to make tonight special for Sharra. Beyond that, he knew perfectly well what he was doing. In *that* department, he didn't need their help at all.

* * * * *

Sharra hurried back home. Miranda had sent her to a “grooming” lady. It had started out innocently enough with a relaxing massage. After that, she’d been scrubbed and bathed before she’d been rubbed down with a wonderful-smelling cream. Her hair was fixed in tousled curls on her head, and they’d even applied a light coating of enhancing color on her face. How would Logan react when he saw her? Would he like the way she looked?

The house was quiet and still when she walked through the door. “Logan?” she called softly. He was here, she knew it. She could feel him. Heading for the bedroom, she entered slowly. There were candles everywhere, filling the room with a soft, intimate glow, their shadows dancing on the walls. The bed was artfully made with deep crimson sheets that looked soft and inviting.

“Sharra.”

She almost jumped. Logan sat on a chair across from the bed, his pose casual and relaxed. She swallowed, sensing his arousal, attuned to every emotion he felt.

“Take off your clothes.”

Excitement licked at her nerve-endings, swamping the brief nervousness she’d felt a moment ago. Her heart was trying to beat its way out of her chest, the thumping echoing in her ears. With fumbling fingers, she sought to unclasp her dress. One flick and the soft material fell to her feet. She shimmied out of her underwear, until she was naked.

“Come closer.”

Pulling in a deep breath, she made her way to him. His face was shuttered. Here was a man intent on controlling her pleasure, giving her only what *he* wanted her to have, letting her see his dominant side. She wanted this, wanted the primitive man within.

His eyes locked on her. Her nipples tightened in response to the heat in his gaze. “M-Miranda arranged for me to go to this...grooming place.” She flushed. “I hope you like it.”

“I like it a lot.” Logan walked over to her. Instant warmth engulfed her as his hands grazed her waist, snaking around her middle to pull her close. “You smell good.” His kiss, when it came, curled her toes. Sensual, possessive and devouring, Sharra was swept along the raging tide.

The bedroom door suddenly opened. “Am I late?”

Sharra looked over her shoulder. Joren appeared on the threshold, a small smile on his lips. His gaze roamed over her, reminding her that she was very naked. The temperature in the room grew hotter.

“You’re just in time,” Logan murmured quietly.

The atmosphere was one of sheer sexual intent. Heat shot down her spine. Desire beat at her senses, the incessant waves turning her into a quivering mass of need. Her gaze swung from Joren to Logan.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" A hint of concern shadowed Logan's question.

She touched his cheek. "I accept you, Logan, and everything that comes with being your mate. Your pleasure is mine as well."

With a gentle hand, Logan drew her hair back and kissed her shoulder. He led her to the bed, placing her in the center before shifting to sit behind her. His long legs stretched out beside hers, strong and muscular, his skin dark against her lighter tone. He began a massaging motion, moving from her nape down to the low of her back, his touch alternately light and firm. He stoked the fire inside her, escalating her arousal. Sharra tossed her head back, leaning against him. She lost herself in the sensuality of his caresses, though not so lost that she didn't feel Joren settle on the bed directly in front of her. At the first touch of dry, hot palms on her skin, a different touch than Logan, she nearly jumped.

Logan trailed soft, nipping kisses on her neck. "Relax. Just concentrate on the pleasure we'll give you."

Sharra stifled a moan. Relaxing was easier said than done when she was in the middle of two men intent on pleasuring her.

Joren explored her body, tracing the curve of her waist down to her hips. "So beautiful." He went back up her front, swiping the quivering tips of her breasts. Sharra caught her breath sharply. "So *sensitive*," Joren murmured, plying her nipples with an expert touch. The crests hardened, tingling in response.

Logan's hands coasted over her belly to the junction between her thighs. He plunged inside the folds of her pussy. Sharra shuddered, splaying her legs, giving him complete access to her. All coherent thought washed away. She could only respond to their touch and absorb the hunger emanating from both of them. Her senses spun. Their caresses grew bolder, more demanding. They drove her higher, faster, each touch calculated to push her over the edge.

Sharra balanced precariously on the edge of satisfaction, bombarded by the pleasure she felt compounded by the desire both men felt. Their combined hunger seeped into her consciousness and ate away at her sanity. Fingers flicked at sensitive points, manipulating her susceptible flesh, driving her crazy. It no longer mattered that for the first time in her life she was to be shared by two men. What mattered was the nearly overwhelming pleasure that swamped her senses, their expert touches sending her soaring.

Logan fondled her nipples, gently pulling at the tight tips. Her eyes began to drift shut. "No. Don't close your eyes. Let Joren see your pleasure." His fingers snaked down to her sex, rimming her pulsing slit.

Joren eased back, no longer touching her. His lips were pulled in a grim line, his eyes locked on Logan's hand. Joren wrapped his hand around his cock, which rose to kiss his navel, intimidating in its hardness. The slow, almost lazy way he caressed himself was mesmerizing. The thick stalk of flesh seemed to pulse with every

movement, the head flushed and swollen. Logan's shaft, hot and hard against her buttocks, snuggled in the crease, never let her forget its presence.

To have both men was utterly wicked. Wanton. Instead of recoiling from the thought, anticipation shot through her nerve-endings. Excitement knotted her stomach. Joren was a silent, watchful participant, waiting for Logan's cue. The two men's eyes met, communicating silently. Sharra didn't need to read their thoughts to decipher them.

Joren scooted closer, sliding his fingertips up her legs. "So soft and smooth."

Sharra sat still, her heart beating furiously. Her skin tingled where Joren touched her, leaving goose bumps in his wake. He was sensual and practiced, obviously an expert. Her senses stirred in a purely physical reaction.

"Don't be afraid," Joren murmured.

His softly uttered words washed over her. Her brain had ceased to work. She was functioning on feelings alone, skating along on the undulating swells of sensation flowing over her. Joren explored her body, seeking out dips and curves, ramping up the fever raging in her flesh. When he leaned down to suckle at her breast, Sharra jumped. Warm, firm lips worked a swollen nipple, pulling her deep into the hot cavern of his mouth, drawing on her hungrily.

Sharra threw back her head, unable to believe the feelings coursing through her. Joren grew bolder and more demanding. Logan's eyes were locked on them, his nostrils flaring, his breathing choppy. Sharra sensed his arousal at watching his friend caress her body. Joren's hand slipped between her legs, finding her pussy wet and accessible, plunging inside the slit.

Her eyelids became heavy as pulsing waves of need attacked her. She lowered her safeguards, opening her thoughts to Logan to let him see and feel the pleasure she felt.

Joren took her hand and wrapped it around his engorged cock. Surrendering to the sensual instincts guiding her, she fisted her hand around Joren's shaft. She didn't resist when Joren urged her to straddle him. Wicked excitement curled her stomach, tying it up in knots with hot anticipation. Joren murmured sexy words of encouragement. "Take me inside you."

Sharra shuddered. Lust coursed like molten lava in her veins, spurring her on. She lowered herself, feeling the bulbous tip of Joren's shaft pierce her nether lips, the soft tissues stretching to accommodate him. A look behind at Logan confirmed that he was watching intently, unblinking from the spot where she and Joren were now joined. Joren's hands at her hips pulled her inexorably downward until his thick cock hilted inside her sheath, drawing a gasp from deep in her lungs.

"Gods," Joren muttered. "You better join the party now, Logan, unless you want me to have her alone."

The words managed to penetrate the fog clouding Sharra's mind. Dimly, she became aware of Logan shifting behind her, getting on his knees. She moaned as Joren's

cock twitched inside her, a potent reminder of his presence. Logan placed the tip of his sex against the puckered ring of her rear orifice.

Logan's hands, hot and familiar, curved around her waist. "Relax and take me, Sharra. Take all of me." He nudged her opening, pushing in steadily.

Sharra felt her muscles ease, helped by the cold lubricant that coated the thick head of his cock. Logan's hands cupped her breasts, pinching the tips while he sucked on her neck, all the while pushing inside her.

"Logan, I..." Sharra shuddered and gasped. The tight ring gave and he slipped in. With Joren already inside her, it was a very snug fit. "Ohhh..."

"Feels so good," Logan whispered in her ear, plying her breasts with his flattened palms. A hand zeroed in on her clit, working the sensitive mass of nerves until with a cry, Sharra relaxed. Logan slipped in her ass all the way.

Harsh, panting gasps rushed from her lungs. Sharra grappled with the sensation of having them inside her, feeling utterly possessed, a mere vessel for their pleasure.

"So tight." Logan's lips touched the soft shell of her ear, his breath hot and fast.

"Fuck, Logan," Joren protested with a faint grimace. "I don't think I can last much longer. We've got to..." Helpless and unable to stop, he began to thrust in Sharra's pussy.

Logan followed suit, pushing inside her in counterpoint to Joren. Her world ceased to exist. She could only gasp and hang on. "Logan," she chanted over and over.

A large hand clamped around her chin and forced her face sideways. Logan's handsome features were twisted into harsh, sexy lines. "Mine," he whispered, right before he captured her lips in a devastating kiss.

What happened next was an erotic blur. Logan matched Joren's thrusts, hard and merciless, driving them all toward oblivion. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, working his cock deeper inside her. Sharra was dimly aware of Joren's groan as he spilled inside her. Her eyes shot open and met Logan's.

"Oh Logan," she whispered a moment before she shot to the heavens. A gigantic orgasm slammed into her. Sharra stiffened and leaned against Logan for support, her nails digging into his arms. She heard his groan and stifled growl before he spewed his seed in her clenching backside. They kissed at the moment of completion, sharing mutual ecstasy.

Aftershocks still rocked her body when Sharra opened her eyes and met Logan's dark gaze. Satiation seeped into her muscles, leaving her limp and boneless against him. "I love you," she whispered.

The open emotion on his face was an answer in itself, but before Logan could speak Joren cleared his throat. "Suddenly I feel as though I'm no longer needed."

Logan didn't even look at him, just shifted Sharra so Joren could disengage from her and get off the bed. Joren gathered up his clothes and pulled on his pants. "See you two later," he murmured and headed out the door.

Alone at last, Logan gathered Sharra in his arms. "Are you all right?"

She smiled. "Oh yes."

"Did you...uh...enjoy it?"

"Y-yes, I did." She flushed. "It was certainly different."

"Just don't expect that to happen again anytime soon," he said gruffly, pulling her close. "I don't think I could take it. You're mine, you know."

She cupped his cheek. "And you're mine."

Logan nuzzled her neck. "Thank you. I know it wasn't easy for you to do this tonight but..." He sighed. "I'm just glad it's over."

Sharra gave him a thoughtful look. "But you've shared women with Joren before."

He blinked. "What?" He frowned and had the grace to flush, pressing a kiss on the top of her head. "None of them meant as much to me as you do."

She snuggled closer, hiding a pleased smile.

Threading his fingers in her hair, Logan tugged her face up. "I love you, you know."

Sharra laid a hand directly over his heart. Her big, bad Cyborg loved her. "I know."

Logan inhaled deeply, tucking her against him. Nuzzling her neck, he sucked gently at her skin. "About that mind-bond thing..."

"What about it?" she asked on a sigh, angling her head to give him more room.

"You think we can do that again while we're...you know," he murmured, licking at the base of her throat.

A soft, husky giggle escaped her lips. "You liked that, huh?"

Logan cupped her buttocks, kneading the pliant flesh. "Roger that. I *really* liked it."

She kissed him on the lips. "I think that can be arranged."

With a chuckle, he took over the kiss. Happiness blossomed inside Sharra and she knew that from now on, her tomorrows would always be with Logan.

* * * * *

Loud explosions rocked the street. As fast as his legs could take him, Logan ran toward his house. His heart hammered with fear. He hoped he wasn't too late. Left and right, fires greedily licked at the now empty dwellings. He came to the end of the street and swallowing his fear, cautiously looked around the silent house where he lived. He heard voices. He made his way to the side and found a group of Pagan soldiers taking orders from one of their officers.

This was his chance. He slipped inside, sneaking through a side door. One by one, he quickly checked the rooms. At the end of the hallway, in his mother's bedroom, a pale sliver of light showed through the door. Fear raced through his veins. Was he too late? Please, gods, don't let them be dead.

Pushing the door open slowly, he stepped inside the room. Bright light blinded him. He raised a hand to shield his eyes.

"Mother?"

"Logan." Her voice, so soft and sweet, echoed in the room. Warmth filled him at the sound.

"Where are you? I can't see you. Are you all right?"

"Your sister and I are fine. Thanks to you."

"W-what?" he asked, confused. "Mother, what's – "

"We're in a better place. Don't torment yourself with guilt."

Logan burst into tears. "I don't... I couldn't..."

"My son." He felt a hand sweep over his head, bringing warmth and light. "It's time to let us go, Logan. Forget the past. Start over."

He felt her move away. "Mother?"

"Everything will be all right. Trust me." A gentle kiss slid over his cheek, suffusing him with love. Then she was gone.

Logan's eyes slowly opened. He wasn't drenched in sweat. His heart wasn't trying to beat its way out of his chest. There was no blinding headache that felt like it was splitting his skull apart.

Sharra stirred next to him. "What is it? Another nightmare?"

He closed his eyes and hugged his love, his mate for life. The one who'd brought him peace and happiness. "No. Not a nightmare."

She swept a hand over his thick hair. "Any pain?"

"None at all." He skimmed his lips over warm, smooth skin, immersing himself in her scent. "I'm fine. Never been better."

"I'm glad."

"I love you, Sharra. You're as necessary to me as the air I breathe."

Her smile was tender, loving. "You'll always have me."

Logan looked deep into her eyes as he slowly slipped inside her. Like two pieces of a puzzle, their hearts beat as one, connecting in an instant. Completely in tune with Sharra's feelings, Logan stroked inside her with slow, deep thrusts, holding nothing back. A rush of warmth poured into him, a deluge of love that permeated his senses. She was so giving, so generous. He kissed her, telling her without words the depth of what he felt for her. Together they climbed higher. Her soft cry combined with his harsh groan as they came. The loving that followed was even more poignant, full of whispered words and tender caresses.

Logan trailed his lips down her neck as the mind-bond dissipated. No more nightmares. No more pain. The guilt that had shadowed him for so long melted away, replaced by Sharra's love. He looked forward to a lifetime with the woman who had taken his heart and made it hers.

About the Author

Beverly Havlir writes her books surrounded by plush pink and white heart-shaped pillows and soft, sexy music playing in the background. She plots her stories dressed in sheer, silky lingerie while eating bonbons and sipping champagne.

Now for a dash of reality...

After running around doing totally unglamorous chores all day, Beverly writes at night when all is quiet and she is (at last!) alone. Exhaustion disappears as soon as she sits down in front of her computer, doing what she loves best: writing stories that bring women's fantasies to life.

Beverly welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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