



Natalie J. Damschroder

Pirate of the Stars

By Natalie J. Damschroder



Echelon Entice
Ultra-Sensual Fantasy

Pirate of the Stars

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There was something about a cape. Superman knew it. Batman knew it. Cardinal Richelieu in that twentieth-century movie *The Three Musketeers* knew even evil was sexy with a cape soaring around it. And Steele Bascar knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Cesca Martin watched him stride down the hall toward her, the rich brown fabric of his trademark cape swirling around his knee-high leather boots. He didn't need it, she thought. The fluttery shirt draped over a solid chest and tucked into tight breeches screamed *pirate*, which was the same as screaming *sex*. The cape merely added drool to the panting.

Cesca rolled her eyes at the docking clerks doing the panting and drooling and stood firm as Steele approached her station.

"ID check."

"You know who I am, Cesca." His voice rippled over her spine, calling up memories of things that had never happened. One side of his mouth lifted and a knowing look came into his eyes.

"ID check." She waited, unblinking, while

he grinned full out and held out his wrist. The cape fell back off his shoulder, making him look rakish. Ignoring the potency of that, she passed the palm scanner strapped across her hand over the faintly discolored patch of skin on his inner forearm. Neither of them moved as she watched the readout on the back of her hand scroll all the information she already knew.

Steele Bascar, six feet five inches, one hundred eighty standard pounds, wavy chestnut hair. Forty Earth years old, dark brown eyes, owner, and pilot of a ship he'd cheekily named *Blackbeard's Ride*. Declared weapons included not only the usual sidearm stunner and a light-fire laser gun, but a cutlass circa 1832. Cesca glanced at the empty scabbard at his hip.

"I left it on the ship," he told her. "Needs polishing."

"Purpose on Moon Station 9?"

"Same as always, darlin'. Business."

"Which is?" She held her implacable gaze and inflectionless tone with difficulty, especially when he laughed again.

"Six Earth years I've been coming here, Cesca, and still you play the same game." He leaned forward. "When will you give in?"

A blend of scents washed over her. Most men fresh off a galaxy ship smelled like metal and recycled air. Steele smelled of vanilla and

musk with a hint of mint.

Had he popped a breath mint for her? The thought was as intoxicating as the smell. She couldn't help drawing it in deep and hoped he didn't notice.

"I'll never give in, Steele." It was her standard response, but this time something unexpected made her say, "Anything you want from me, you'll have to take."

Heat flared in his eyes, but he said, "That's not what I do."

She snorted and smacked the button to generate his pass. "You're a pirate, Steele. That's *all* you do."

He frowned as she affixed the small round dot to his forearm next to the ID patch. "I'm a salvage captain."

"Same thing." But pirate was a more appropriate term, both sexier and more fearsome.

Steele backed away, shaking his head. "You spend far too much time in ancient history."

She snorted. As if he could talk.

"Maybe we can work with that." He winked, then turned with a swirl of the cape and stalked away, renewing the drool-and-pant routine down the line.

"Is it safe?"

Cesca waved Rallie out of the wet room behind her. Rallie turned off the light and shut the door, then pressed the button that commenced the flash sterilization.

"Whoo-ee!" The older, dark-skinned woman waved her hand over her face and pressed the other against the small of her back. "That man can inspire lust in the most committed woman on or off planet."

"You would know." Cesca patted the other woman's gigantically pregnant belly.

"I can't decide if it was luck or a curse that made me have to go to the bathroom right when he came up here."

"Considering you're in there every five minutes, I'd say it was inevitable." Cesca logged Steele's purpose into the computer. Moon Station 9 was like an old-fashioned market, where wholesalers bought merchandise transported in by representatives of off-planet merchandisers and salvage ships like Steele's. He had connections in Jupiter's dominant mining family and could make a fortune selling their building materials, but he seemed to prefer the edgier career of salvaging ejected goods or damaged ships and selling that instead. It was dangerous work, and the reason Cesca now managed incoming personnel on Moon Station 9 instead of captaining her own ship.

"You okay, honey?" Rallie leaned around her to peer into her face. "You look pissed."

Cesca shrugged off the regret and vowed to count her blessings sometime soon. "Just memories. I'm fine." She glanced at her twentieth-century-style watch. "You mind if I go? I have a pile of pad-work waiting for me."

"Sure, hon. I'm only here another fifteen before Jasco takes over. Go indulge your fantasies."

Her raspy laugh grew when Cesca muttered, "as if" and logged herself out.

By habit rather than necessity she studied the other ID stations as she passed. It was a quiet night as they moved in their low orbit around the moon, passing over the dark side for a few hours. Captains didn't like to dock in the dark, so they didn't process many incomings now.

Which was good for her, she sighed to herself as she keyed entry into her office. Her desk was a gorgeous unit carved from a rare material found in deep mines on Neptune, and when it was visible veins of white powder shone in the dark blue stone. But right now it was buried under computer pads that had to be uploaded and filed to track the movements of everyone leaving the station tomorrow and what they were taking with them.

* * *

She eased into her curved chair and groaned a little. The lower gravity of the station helped keep the pain in her hip and shoulder to a minimum, but some days it seemed she might as well be on Earth. Or in space.

But relief had to wait. She pulled the first pad toward her and linked it to the main.

Three hours later, she was more than ready for reward. Her pad-work was caught up and she'd sent tomorrow's expected arrivals to the docking clerks and ID staff. She definitely deserved a half hour in the anti-grav chamber. But her empty stomach growled a protest, and she headed instead for the lounge to get a late dinner.

The large room was sparsely populated. Ohm manned the bar alone, and no wait staff circulated among the pedestal tables that dotted the plushly carpeted dining area. The wide windows sparkled with distant stars that moved slowly across the display; soon the moon would be visible as the station rotated, but only as opaque blackness until they came around into the sun.

Cesca waved to a docking manager in the corner, hiding a smile when she realized he was dining with one of her clerks. Romance on the station rivaled an old-fashioned soap opera, with partners changing every few weeks or months. Cesca guessed she was one of the few, if not the only, who never indulged.

"What can I getcha?" Ohm asked as she settled into a chair-stool at the bar.

"Whatever's freshest. And a star-water on the rocks, please."

"We've got lobster. Fresh in today."

"*Mmm.*" Cesca closed her eyes. Lobster would severely tax her credits, and "fresh" was a loose term when it came to food shipped up from Earth, but she couldn't resist. "I'll take it."

"Double that order."

Cesca groaned again when Steele sat next to her. He'd changed clothes, opting for looser, more modern lounge pants and shirt and station slippers. The soft blue fabric brushed her bare forearm as he reached to let Ohm scan his ID patch, which also served as credit account access. "My treat," he added, and Ohm scanned again before she could protest.

"Why not?" she decided, tired of balking at everything he did.

"You surprise me, Cesca. And I thought nothing you did could ever surprise me."

She looked at him, the raised eyebrow, the speculation in his chocolate eyes. She hadn't had chocolate in years, and sex in even longer. For a moment, she couldn't remember why.

Ohm put their star-water glasses in front of them, and Cesca sipped, grateful for the distraction. The beverage, distilled from products grown in moon-based greenhouses, had a flash and sparkle that gave it its name and made it the most sought-after drink on Earth. Its alcoholic effects were weaker there, something to do with the gravity there or the generated air on the station, but Cesca didn't know exactly why the feeling of lightness sped through her with such a small drink. She only knew it eased the pain with fewer side effects than the drugs did.

"So, what did you bring in today?" she asked Steele. His eyebrows both went up this time.

"Are you making polite conversation, or are you really interested?"

She smiled over her glass. "Take your pick."

"Either one is enough to strike me speechless," he joked, but sobered quickly. "Cesca. Honestly. Are you playing with me or are you forgiving me?" His usual air of extreme confidence faded away. "I couldn't bear to think

you were forgiving me and then learn it was just another game."

She faced him, keenly aware of his body only inches from hers. When her eyes closed, she could feel every muscle straining toward him. She had no idea why things had changed, or how, but they had. Perhaps they'd done enough damage to each other over the years. Or, maybe it was simply time. But it didn't matter. Not really.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, opening her eyes. Steele stared into them as if he could see into her brain. Or her heart. Neither of them acknowledged the plates of steaming lobster and rice that Ohm set on the bar. A million questions and answers flew between them. Tension built until Cesca couldn't stand anymore, and she turned and left the lounge, fatigue and emotion making her unable to control her limp.

"I'll just send these to your rooms, then," she heard Ohm say, and knew Steele was following her.

Old emotional pain she'd thought long resolved bubbled up in her chest, overwhelming the physical pain. Memories sped through her mind, images of soaring through space, beating Steele to one salvage and being beaten to the next. Until that last time, when they'd

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recklessly jumped without scanning the location and crashed into each other.

For years they'd been on that collision course, the attraction and competition between them ratcheting up with each job until the inevitable. But it hadn't ended quite the way she'd always expected.

* * *

She made it back to her quarters and slid the door shut before Steele caught up to her, but paid for it when her hip stopped merely protesting and just gave out. She stumbled to the floor and laid there, trembling, fighting tears.

After the crash she'd made a vow never to say it wasn't fair. It was as much her fault as Steele's that he was still flying and she was station-bound. She put up barriers to his pursuit because she was afraid it was guilt that caused him to do it. How could he be interested in the broken version of Cesca Martin?

The communicator outside her door beeped, and the computer identified a delivery-bot with her dinner. Sighing, Cesca dragged herself to the wall and engaged the tray through the center of the door. The bot slid her covered dinner onto it, and it came back through, the access door shutting behind it. If Steele was out there, trying to fool her into opening the door, she wasn't going to let him.

She pulled herself upright and stared at the food. Her hunger had been chased away by

emotion and she let it sit.

Longing for oblivion, she headed for the anti-grav chamber. The empty room was only slightly larger than she was tall. She'd never bothered to understand the technology that allowed her to shut off the station's artificial gravity just in the chamber, but she was always grateful for it. She entered the room and sealed the door, then removed her uniform and donned a silky robe, fastening the loops over her chest and hips. Her clothes went into a chute that sent them to the laundry, then she accessed the keypad that programmed the chamber.

The regular lights went off and colored ones came on, so dim she could barely see. A few more taps on the illuminated keypad and strains of music filled the air, volume low. Then she set the timer and closed the panel, stepping to the center of the chamber and closing her eyes.

Thirty seconds passed and she began to rise from the floor. She leaned back and her body floated, all the tension slipping away. The ache in her shoulder disappeared. Her hip had been worked harder and still throbbed, but it was dull now, only remnants.

Cesca let her thoughts go as freely as her body. No more past, she told herself. She had no room for regrets. And the present wasn't

satisfying her, either, so she wasn't going to consider the endlessness of her job duties or her loneliness on the station. The future was unclear, her options limited to nothing. So she'd go to fantasy.

She moved her arms so her body rolled. The silky robe shifted over her skin, raising goosebumps. She concentrated on the sensuality of it, letting it rub over her chest and chafe her nipples, then moving her legs so it fell between.

The arousal surprised her with its speed. Hormones rushed through her and she felt her breasts and labia swell. When she shifted her legs, her juices dampened the robe. She began to ache.

Masturbation had never been her preferred method of release. For Cesca, even meaningless sex was more intimate than self-gratification, which only left her more lonely and frustrated. Immediately she wished for Steele. They'd never had sex but oh, had he driven her fantasies.

Take what he wanted, she had challenged him. If he'd accepted the challenge, now would be the perfect time. Her yearning was so great she thought she'd conjured him when she heard the panel slide open.

She held herself still and kept her eyes

closed. It was him. She smelled him, the vanilla and musk. Somehow he'd broken the security code on both her outside door and the anti-grav chamber. She should be furious, but couldn't drum up the emotion over the lust and anticipation.

Something brushed her hand and she closed her fingers over his cape. But where was he? The chamber was tiny. She should be able to touch him from anywhere in the room.

Her sense of direction had disappeared, though, in the absence of up and down. She stretched one arm in front of her and touched a wall or ceiling only inches away. She pushed off gently...

...and came up against him. He still wore his pants, but his powerfully muscled chest was hot against her back. One of his arms wrapped around her waist to keep her in place, and she felt his breath at her ear.

He didn't speak, barely moved. They floated there for un-measurable time and Cesca let herself disengage, her mind finally fully silent.

Her body wasn't so compliant. Not for long. At first the absence of stimulation allowed her arousal to fade, but when her brain shut down her senses took over even more completely. Steele's legs tangled with hers as

they floated. The fabric of his pants tugged against her robe and it rubbed between her legs, stimulating her clitoris. Steele's fingers were unmoving below her breast, but he held the robe tight against her so that every breath made her nipples tighten against the cloth.

Finally, he seemed to read her mounting desperation and his other hand closed over her breast. A moan escaped her, and she heard his breathing quicken. When he pinched her nipple sensation shot straight to her clit, swelling it to unbearable sensitivity. She arched. His hand released her breast and dove straight for her mound, pressing hard.

Cesca exploded, the pleasure so intense that if her eyes hadn't been closed she'd have been blinded. Her blood roared in her ears and she arched in a silent scream.

As she regained her senses, she became aware that the timer had shut off the anti-grav. She descended gently to the floor and realized something else.

* * *

Steele was gone.

How could that be? She looked blankly around her. The regular lights came on and the music went off. There was no sign of Steele, not even his cape, and she could no longer smell him.

Disoriented, angry, and feeling—despite her orgasm—as aroused as ever, she smacked her hand on the door opener and stomped out of the chamber.

Her room was empty. The lobster dinner still sat, now cold, on the access tray on the main door. Nothing had been disturbed.

What the hell had just happened? The chamber wasn't equipped with virtual reality, and even if it had been, she couldn't have turned it on with her mind, for cripe's sake. Steele had to have been in there with her.

But doubt flooded her. He couldn't have entered without disturbing the anti-grav, and her weightlessness hadn't changed. It had to have been all her imagination. She spun and checked the access panel to the chamber. It told her the last access had been thirty-five minutes before.

That was when she'd first entered. The main door panel was even more conclusive, listing the last access as the delivery tray that had accepted her food.

"Well, shit," she said. "What now?"

Impulse wanted her to go find Steele, to finish what had been started. Her body felt charged, and only real sex, with a real man, would satisfy it. And Steele was the only man she had any desire for.

But she'd told him she'd never give in. That he had to take what he wanted. But she knew he was too honorable to do that, whatever image he projected as the pirate of the stars.

She bit her lip, thinking. He might take, if he knew she really wanted him to. So she had to send a signal. Something blatant—she had no time for subtlety. He'd only be on-station until tomorrow, and she needed him *now*.

Destination set, Cesca reset the lights to low flicker, to simulate candlelight. Real flame wasn't allowed on the station. She eyed her bed. The plain blue coverlet wasn't sexy enough. She opened her closet, grinning. Rallie had given her a red satin comforter for her last birthday, telling her she needed *something* passionate in her life. She replaced the drab coverlet with the fiery one, and grinned. Much better.

The communicator was conveniently next to the bed. Cesca angled it so the camera would encompass the whole bed, then sat on the edge of the bed, and swallowed hard. It was one thing to plan a seduction, another to do it, especially electronically. What if he simply disconnected?

An old saying popped into her head. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." So be it.

She knew the number of the room Steele was in, as she'd programmed it onto his pass earlier that day. She keyed the code, pressed "send," and waited.

In seconds his face popped onto her screen in full color. "Yeah, what?" He sounded grumpy, and panic clenched in Cesca's throat. An icy sweat broke over her before he saw it was her and smiled, the grumpiness apparently banished.

"Hey. You okay?"

Cesca didn't answer. She caught his eyes with her own and when they held, sparks erupted between them as if they weren't separated by technology and distance. Steele made an *'hmm'* sound in his throat and just like that, the lust flared back to life.

Cesca let her lips curl in a half smile and leaned back. The robe, still fastened at her breasts, strained over them. Without looking

down she could tell her nipples were prominent beneath the thin material. She crossed her legs and the robe fell open over them, exposing her almost completely. His eyes dropped and he licked his lips. "Uh, what's going on, Cesca?"

In answer she pushed back until she could stretch out on the bed. Her preference for lots of pillows finally paid off as she leaned against them, still fully open to Steele's view yet able to recline comfortably.

"Cesca?" Steele was all but pressed against his monitor now and Cesca bit back a giggle. She dropped her eyelids to slits so she could watch Steele but look like she was lost in herself. Slowly she unfastened the top of her robe. One side fell away, exposing her breast. She fondled it, pinching the nipple, and moaned despite the fact that touching herself like that did nothing for her.

"Oh, man."

Obviously, it did something for Steele, and that *did* arouse her. She licked her finger and circled her nipple with it, then squeezed it again between two fingers, arching as if it had had some effect.

Frustration began to take over. Why didn't he do something? Did he think she just wanted to give him a free show?

Upping the ante, she slid her hand down her

abdomen and between her legs. The silk still felt good against her swollen flesh, so she rubbed, this time gasping for real at the sharp pleasure it induced. It wouldn't take much to generate another orgasm, she realized, but damnit, she didn't want to do this alone again! What did she have to do to get the point across?

"Please, Cesca," Steele whispered. She opened her eyes and saw his hand pressed against the monitor. He looked tormented. "You said you'd never give in. You'll hate me if I let you give in."

Growling, she glared at the screen. Then she smiled and it was Steele's turn to glare. "Is this another game? Are you trying to get revenge or something?"

Still not answering, Cesca leaned over the side of the bed and rummaged in a storage locker underneath. A clink of metal at the bottom told her where they were and yes, the key was there, too. Triumphant, she held up the old-fashioned Earth handcuffs so Steele could see them, then snapped one side around her wrist and the other around a grab bar above the bed.

"God love your quirky collection," Steele breathed. "I'll be right there."

* * *

The screen went blank and Cesca sighed, relieved. He couldn't get here fast enough for her. She rearranged the pillows so her arm wasn't stretched, made sure the key was secure in her pocket, and laid back, waiting. It seemed an eternity before her entry communicator beeped.

"Entry granted," she said loud enough for the speaker to pick up. The door slid open and there he was, dressed again in his traveling pirate's outfit. The cape swirled from his shoulders to brush his booted ankles. Cesca's heart fluttered. Damn twentieth-century pop culture. This wasn't about her heart.

Steele stopped in the middle of the room and braced his hands on his hips. Cesca could feel the heat burning in his eyes, emanating from his skin. His tight breeches didn't hide his arousal, and she imagined the searing fire when he finally came into her.

"Why—"

Cesca cut him off. "No, Steele. It will end here if you insist on talking about it."

Wisely, he closed his mouth. She could

almost hear the shift of focus from mental to physical.

He waited until she looked at him, then unhooked the cape, swirled it around him, and draped it over a chair. Next came the boots. They fit snugly over his calves and Cesca wondered if he'd be able to get them off without making a joke of things, but he spotted the old hearth cricket in her display of artifacts. He set it on the floor, stepped on it, braced his heel between the cricket's feelers, and pulled off the boot. The other came off just as deftly, and Cesca felt herself melting. He was made for her, she thought, and quickly erased it. Such things would get her into trouble.

Instead of removing his shirt and breeches he walked to the end of the bed, knelt, and crawled up over her. The heat she'd sensed was real and surrounded her, making the room around them feel chilled.

As soon as he reached her Steele leaned down and closed his mouth over hers. The assault took her by surprise. She hadn't thought, ever, in all her fantasies, about kissing him, and the reason why was immediately apparent. Kissing Steele Bascar was much too intimate an act. His taste was perfect, his lips firm as they mated with hers, his tongue masterfully thrusting into her mouth so she took all of him.

And all of him he gave. It wasn't just lust that drove him. There was passion, true passion, and not just physical. Cesca could feel something more under the surface that she couldn't acknowledge without mourning time wasted.

But what he gave demanded response, and she was helpless to withhold it. She matched his passion, reaching up with her free hand to hold the back of his head, pressing him harder to her. His hair was as silky as her robe, and she marveled that she'd never touched it before.

Never touched *him* before. Boldly, she dropped her hand to his neck, feeling his pulse and the tight cords under his warm, smooth skin. Down to his shoulder, sweeping the shirt out of her way, yanking at the tie closure so it gaped over his chest. She knew he practiced swordplay and it showed in the firmness of his pecs. She slid her hand down and around his side, pushing the shirt off his shoulder.

But quicker than a moon-cat on a mouse he grabbed her hand and slammed it against the pillows. Cesca stared up at him, her breath coming more quickly when she saw his intensity. He lowered himself over her, pressing her into the bed, and leaned down to suckle her neck.

"*Ohh.*" She sank into the pillows, awash in

sensation. He held her hand down, his fingers wrapped around her wrist, and she was powerless. Instead of frightening her, the freedom of that truth aroused her to the point of pain. She thrust up against him, seeking relief for the burning between her legs. She cried out in frustration as he moved his hips away, but then his mouth closed over her nipple and the cry changed to one of ecstasy. Now she arched her back and he took her deeper into his mouth, pressing her nipple against the roof of his mouth with his tongue.

More, she wanted more, and she couldn't *take* it, not trapped as she was. Then he pressed his thigh up against her and she rode it, not caring how wanton it was, only caring how it felt. The piercing climb of an orgasm beckoned but she pulled away, moaning. That wasn't how she wanted it. She wanted it *all*.

She also wanted it now, and it was clear he wasn't going to oblige. As soon as she pulled back he raised up on his knees. Their panting breaths echoed against the metal walls and Cesca was grateful for modern soundproofing. She didn't care right now who heard them, but she'd care when it was over.

Slowly, Steele reached over his shoulder, fisted his shirt, and pulled it over his head. Cesca's breath caught. The flickering light

played over his rippling muscles. He was so carved, so gorgeous, and she'd had no idea. Her fantasies shattered under weight of the reality.

Oh, God. If his chest and arms were so much more than she'd imagined, how big was his...?

She didn't get to check, though, because he was bending over her again, stroking his hand over the bare flesh of her abdomen. Leaving the robe fastened across her hips, he lay it open on either side of her, then pressed her knees apart. He tested her readiness with one finger, then put that finger in his mouth to taste her. With a smile, he bent and put his mouth on her.

Her gasping cry rent the air when his tongue stroked over her clit, then delved down inside her, then up again. He licked her with broad, wide strokes, then flicked the swollen nub with the point of his tongue. When she lifted her hips he did it again, then faster and harder, until she felt the orgasm coming like a freight train.

He sensed it somehow and stopped, pressing his mouth to her inner thigh as he slid two fingers deep inside her. When he pressed upward, the pleasure was more than she'd ever felt; more than she'd ever known was possible. She needed him, *now*.

But he wasn't done. He reared back once

again and unfastened his pants, shoving them down and exposing his—yes, his gigantic penis. Cesca had heard some women talk about his rumored size and express fear, but all she felt was *gimme*.

Steele climbed back up the bed and straddled her shoulders. Cesca didn't need instruction. She took him in her free hand and pressed downward so she could put her mouth around him. His groan was gratifying, even more so when she did a simultaneous squeeze and suck and he shuddered with his whole body. Letting her tongue lead she examined him, tasting every inch she could reach. Then she lowered her mouth over the tip again, rubbing her tongue over the most sensitive spot. His balls contracted under her hand and he pulled back out of her reach.

Cesca pressed her head against the pillows and lifted her hips, ready for him. She felt the soft, probing head of his cock on her and shifted, relishing the sensation, the renewed rise of ecstasy. She was ready, so ready for him, but he hesitated.

When she opened her eyes he was holding himself, watching her. He rubbed her lips with his penis and she spasmed. He did it again and she came.

"No!" But it was too late. The orgasm

washed over her like an ocean wave, long and rolling, breaking into swirls, then receding.

Before it was over he was inside her, mimicking the flow of the orgasm with long, heavy strokes. Somehow he'd found the key and released her, and then it was about so much more than physical pleasure.

Steele buried his hands in her hair, pulling her up to him and kissing her as if his entire soul was open. Cesca wrapped her arms around him and held him tight to her, raising her legs to wrap around his hips and pull him still deeper.

He thrust faster, moaning her name, burying his face in her neck. Incredibly, she felt the orgasm returning, this time with the piercing pleasure she'd felt at first, the sharpness that promised a shattering so intense she might never recover.

"Steele," she gasped, grabbing his butt to pull him even harder into her.

"Cesca. I love you." And then he came, and so did she, the explosion coming from her heart as much as her groin, shattering not only her body but her entire life.

* * *

It took forever to come down, and when she did Cesca realized she was sobbing into Steele's shoulder.

"*Shh*, baby, *shh*, please, I'm sorry. What did I do?" He rolled to his side, cupping the back of her head, rubbing her back with his other hand. "I'm so sorry, Cesca. Please, baby, where did I hurt you?"

She calmed with difficulty, feeling his pain as much as he did hers. "No-nowhere," she tried to assure him. "I'm okay." But the tears kept coming. He held her more tightly, his uncertainty clear in the words he murmured over and over. Finally, she controlled herself. But instead of trying to explain what she didn't understand, she rolled on top of him and grabbed his mouth with hers, kissing him tenderly and giving him all the emotion he'd given her earlier.

She pulled back a little to look at him. He tucked her hair behind her ear, and she smoothed the worried wrinkle between his brows.

"If you take it back, I will kill you before

you can get off the station," she warned him, half serious.

"Take what back?"

Shocked, Cesca reared back and lifted her arm, fury disappearing when he laughed and caught her hand.

"I'm joking, Cesca. Joking." He pulled her back down to his chest. "I love you." His amusement drifted away, replaced by the light she'd seen in his eyes every time he landed on Moon Station 9 but never recognized. In fact, she'd seen it every time they'd met at a salvage location. She'd always attributed it to the thrill of the game. But now...

"How long?" she whispered.

"Forever." His murmur vibrated through her. He braced his hands on either side of her head, making her look at him and see the truth of his words. "I can't remember a time when I didn't love you."

"Why?" she asked, barely able to get that one word past the burning in her throat. But he understood. She wasn't asking why he loved her, but why he'd never told her.

"I didn't think you'd believe me. I was a rival, competition. I wanted to merge our enterprises but I enjoyed the game as much as you did. Then—"

"Then we crashed." And her ship had

become salvage for his, and her hip and shoulder damage severe enough to take her out of the game.

"I thought you hated me," he admitted. "I wanted to stay away, but I couldn't stand to be away from you too long. I was waiting for some sign that you'd allow me back into your life."

Cesca laughed, and felt the weight of six years fall off her shoulders. "Steele, you never left my life." She rolled to his side and braced her head on her hand to look down at him. "Did you know I was offered a council position down on Earth, and an advisory role at Saturn Ring Station?" Saturn Ring Station was a research station with no commercial activities. "I turned them both down and took a job where I'd be able to see you."

"Oh, Cesca." He reached up for another kiss. "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that." She pulled his hand away. "I'm not sorry. What happened had to happen. We're together now, and I don't know about you, but I'm not letting go."

He smiled. "Me, either." The smile became serious. "I'll have to decommission the crew and maybe take some of them back to Jupiter. In the meantime I'll apply for a job here, or even on Earth if you'd rather. Then—"

Cesca stared at him, mouth agape. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't keep salvaging. It takes me away from you too much."

"I can't come with you?" For the first time, uncertainty colored her voice. She didn't understand what he was getting at.

But then he made it clear. "I thought you couldn't fly."

Relief had her muscles going lax. "I can fly. Not at first, I couldn't. My ship was gone, too, and I couldn't afford to start over. But there's nothing keeping me off a ship except my own fear." She brought his hand to her lips. "And now that I have you, that's gone, too."

Steele pulled his hand from her mouth and replaced it with his lips, his fingers caressing her breast. In seconds Cesca felt as if they hadn't made explosive love moments before, as if she'd never had him inside her and would die if she didn't get him in there soon.

"God, you're good," she gasped when his other hand snaked between them to stroke her clit. Her fingers closed convulsively around his penis, making him jerk. "Too hard?" she asked, almost not caring, pumping her fist up and down his length, encouraging him to catch up to her.

"Not nearly." Steele took his magic fingers away and lifted her up over him, but when he

would have guided her onto his penis she held herself high. Smiling mischievously, she edged back and lowered herself so his cock rested in her cleft. Steele's eyes closed as she rocked, rubbing her juices against him and making them both slick. The friction brought her quickly to the edge so she shifted her hips and let him slide inside, just a little. No matter how he clutched her hips and tried to go deeper, she held back, letting them only get a taste of each other.

"Cesca!" he growled, gripping her hard enough to bruise.

"Stee-le," she teased, taking him all the way in slowly, squeezing with her inner muscles until his breath hissed through his teeth. Then she bent and gently took his nipple between her own teeth, rolling the other one between her fingers.

"That's it." Steele shoved her off him, flipped her over, and drove into her from behind so swiftly and smoothly Cesca's eyes rolled back in her head. Now he had full control and he pounded into her, deeper than she'd ever taken anyone. The sensations he generated shook her to her toes, but it wasn't enough.

"Steele!" she cried, arching. He pulled her back up against his chest, then held her in place with one hand on her hip. His hips never stopped driving, but he pressed his other hand to

her clit.

"I'm coming!" she sobbed, unable to stop it, begging him to come with her. With one final, pulsing thrust, he came with a yell, pouring into her as if he hadn't just done so fifteen minutes earlier.

They were snuggling a little while later under the satin comforter, basking in the glow of just-admitted love.

"So," Cesca ventured, tracing his pec with her fingertips. "How long has it been that you were so rough and ready so quickly?"

"Six years. Maybe more."

She froze. "Six years?"

He shrugged. "When I realized I was in love with you, I got together with a woman here and there in an attempt to erase you from my heart."

Cesca frowned, not happy that he had found that necessary. "But—"

He pressed a finger over her lips. "But after the crash, I couldn't face another woman. Not knowing all I wanted was you."

She sighed. "So I guess tonight was a one-time thing, huh?"

Laughing, he rolled her onto her back. "Are you challenging me, woman?"

"Get used to it, pirate. I'll be challenging you for the rest of our lives."

Pirate of the Stars

"Good," he sighed, bending to kiss her. "I'll accept that challenge."

Meet the Author:



Natalie Damschroder still has the first book she ever wrote—at age 5. For years after that she hated writing until, in college, she had the opportunity to write about something she was actually interested in. Then came academic awards, newspaper and newsletter articles and, finally, novels.

After obtaining her degree in Geography and Environmental Studies, Natalie completed an internship at National Geographic Society and several non-writing jobs before she started writing seriously.

Natalie's alter ego is Operations Manager of Alternatives in Health Care Management, Inc., wife of Jim (the most supportive partner in the world), and mother of two beautiful girls.

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