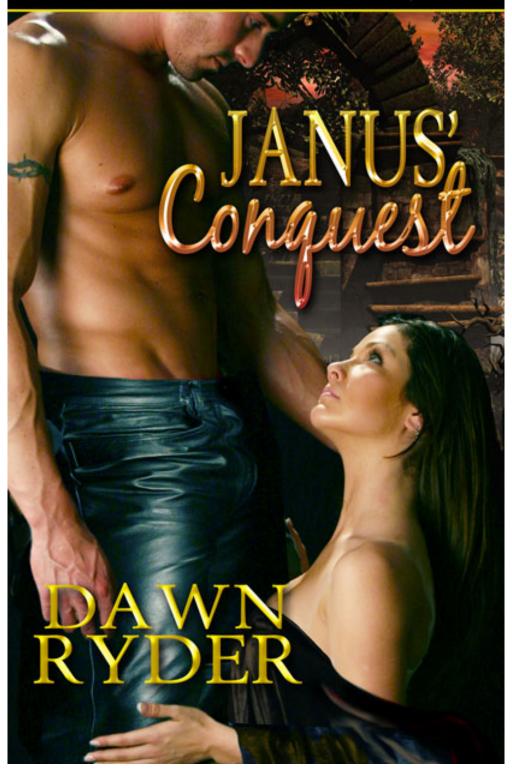
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Janus' Conquest

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JANUS' CONQUEST

Dawn Ryder

Chapter One

Hunter command sphere

"Permission to speak."

Harkin looked up, barely controlling his surprise before it hit his face. Pressing his lips deeper into a hard line, he faced the veteran Hunter in front of his desk. Edric Tailrich was one of his best men. Seasoned and balanced, the Hunter was extremely valuable. Control was something he was a master at, so witnessing the flare of emotion in his eyes was cause for Harkin to stand. Edric's rank surpassed the other Hunters, but only because he was content to be on patrol. The Hunter didn't like the stale confines of an office that went hand-in-hand with higher command. That was worthy of respect because Edric Tailrich might be sitting at the command desk if he had any hunger for the position. It was a wise thing to remember considering Harkin enjoyed his newly awarded rank. Disrespecting Hunter Tailrich just might make the man reconsider his opinion on the matter.

"Speak your mind, Edric."

A brief moment of satisfaction flashed through his eyes, but the Hunter never left his at-ease position. His feet were braced exactly shoulder-width apart and his wrists were clasped behind his waist. "The assignment should be mine."

Harkin frowned. True to his nature, Edric didn't bother to state that he was senior to the Hunter he'd just given a key assignment to. Edric didn't waste time on a fact that he knew Harkin already understood. That was something younger recruits didn't grasp. It was a skill that experience taught a Hunter. Cut to the goal. Don't waste resources on chatter.

"You have a daughter."

Edric winced slightly. "Correct. That does not change the fact that I am better suited to the assignment."

And he wanted it. Harkin could see that Edric wasn't happy about being pushed aside. An undercover assignment was rare. It was rich with danger and possible death, but Hunters proved themselves by such acts and Edric was as true a Hunter as any in the sphere wearing the black uniform. Harkin should have expected Edric wouldn't remain silent while the assignment was handed to the next man in line. To do so was to admit cowardice. Harkin admired the grit in the Hunter, it was true service spirit. The sort every man under his command should envy. Harkin did.

"I harbor no fear." Edric stated the words in a formal tone but only a deaf man could have missed the demand edging each word.

"I did not imply that you did." Harkin clamped his next words behind a stiff jaw. He hadn't intended for Edric to be offended by his assignment choice, but a good commander anticipated every possible result of his decisions.

"I request the assignment." Determination fired Edric's eyes as he remained perfectly in his stance. Harkin wasn't fooled by the look of the Hunter. The man was furious. His pride as a Hunter was stung and that was something Harkin held a great respect for. At the end of each day it was only pride that kept a man company. Your own judgment was far harsher than any man you served under or beside. To Edric's mind, not demanding the assignment was worse than being denied it. The man was brave and willing to prove it.

Harkin couldn't have respected him more.

"And your daughter? Taking an undercover assignment means that she will share your exile."

A moment of hesitation flickered across Edric's face, but it wasn't true fear, only the concern of any parent for their child. "Fay will adjust. She is no longer small. It is time for her to leave childhood and its pampering behind. She will remain in the Hunter sphere."

"Yet she might choose to join you in the penal colony."

Edric hesitated. It was a harsh truth that his choice would impact his daughter's life. He thrust that guilt aside. All children had to shoulder the realities of who their parents were. Fay should be proud of his dedication to duty. While she would not know the details of his coming assignment, it did not change who he was. It was a fact that he was looking forward to the coming hardships because there would be no doubt just who he could call friend. All the Hunters who socialized with him would be tested because only the men in his immediate battalion would know of the assignment. For the rest, he would be the lowest of criminals. A Hunter turned by greed. Only murder ranked lower.

Of course he would proclaim innocence. That fact would test his comrades completely. It would also allow him to infiltrate the penal colony and search out the underground mastermind who was bleeding off resources. Between the spheres that offered the population protection from the sun gone nova, resources were tightly controlled. Criminals were forbidden to use more than their fair share, but someone was siphoning off food, power, even water. Whoever they were, they were clever. Command was stumped, making them resort to placing a Hunter in the penal colony. He was larger and stronger than the criminals sentenced to incarceration. There was no way to hide his Hunter heritage. Too many generations of sons following in the paths of their fathers had led to Hunter children growing larger than most civilian males. It was partially due to better food, but a great deal resulted from training. A Hunter's sons began training at age three. The body responded by surging forward as more muscle was needed and tested by the young boy's regimen.

His daughter flashed through his thoughts as he considered that she was slim and well formed, but not huge. Female children grew tall but not stocky. It was his own failing that had allowed her to become as pampered as she was. That was something that the assignment in question would help him correct. Fay clung to girlhood too

tightly. She was well past her tender age, and while he was not in a hurry to see her in a male's possession, he did not care for the disdain she leveled at them. Interest between the genders was natural. There was no shame in it, and Fay needed to respect the Hunter who blatantly applied to her for attention. Only inexperienced girls spoke to Hunters with such haughtiness. It was disrespectful. His daughter needed a dose of humility, and his coming assignment would be a harsh lesson for her. However, sometimes the best instructor was the harshest one. The student absorbed the lesson deeper due to their respect for the master.

In a way, Edric looked at his own journey into the pit of dishonor as a penance for not parenting Fay with a firmer hand. He was her father, the task his to accomplish. Yet he had always savored their time together, lavishing too much affection on her due to the fact that her mother had passed from this life far too early. That did not excuse his laxness. Returning his attention to Harkin, Edric focused his attention on the matter in front of him.

"Fay is a Hunter's daughter. She will honor her blood no matter the choice." She would have to wait a full week before choosing. That was custom among Hunters. The black uniform he wore separated him from normal families. When a subject was convicted of a crime in any of the outer spheres, the family had to choose instantly to either follow them into a penal sphere or remain behind to face their community as the blood relative of a criminal.

A Hunter sphere was different. It was extremely rare that any Hunter fell from grace. Often they chose death over dishonor. Fay would be held in the Hunter sphere for a week before being offered the chance to follow him into the penal sphere. It would allow her time to make a choice that was not fueled by emotion. It would be the longest time they had been separated. There was a part of his heart that ached, but the need to prove his worth as a Hunter invaded his concern. A deeper need to push Fay from her comfortable perch reinforced his decision to be the Hunter who endured being sentenced to a penal sphere.

Life was not easy, and he had allowed his daughter to blind herself to that fact. It was time for them both to face the harsher side of life. It would enable them to savor the good moments even more once they had been tempered by the flames.

"I stand ready for my assignment."

* * * * *

It was only coincidence.

Fay tried to lie to herself and failed. She had been plotting for far too long, looking for a reason to see him. Her lower lip went dry as she peeked into the male training area. It was not a forbidden thing, but it was frowned upon for chaste females such as herself to be in an area where Hunters trained.

The reason was clear. There were no black uniforms secured to these Hunters' chests. Each muscle was in sight as they strained and pushed their large bodies to the limit. Her gaze moved around the area, trying to linger over the hard chests but they didn't hold her attention.

That only stirred her temper. Her fickle mind wanted only *him*. Her mind should be stronger, her will able to influence her thoughts because *he* wasn't a good choice. In truth, *he* was the worst possible male she might be spying upon.

She hissed at her own stupidity and pushed against the wall to get her foolish body moving away from temptation. Disappointment flashed through her because she had yet to lay eyes on Janus.

Very well. That was exactly what she deserved. Janus was too harsh for her to be seeking out. The Hunter desired her. He'd made it plain during the weekly meetings in the Hunter gathering hall. She didn't know what his relationship was to her father but younger, unpledged Hunters often visited different sections as they searched for unpledged females. Janus had been coming to her section for half a year now, his blue eyes challenging her to step up and speak with him at the border between the male and female sections.

But she had not met him.

Her mind often played with the idea of doing it. But she lingered in doubt as the women around her whispered dark rumors about him. The thing that most Hunters never counted on was the ability of women to move information among their own gender. Several Hunters brought their trophy females to the gatherings. They were convicted women, captured during their transgressions. Unlike Hunters, who only mingled with their own kind, on the female side of the room the convicted and the free women mixed freely. Many Hunters shared their trophy females with their comrades as well.

That practice was responsible for her knowledge of Janus' appetite when it came to female flesh. A few of those trophy females had delighted in detailing out the demands Janus made of them. Some of them were hard women, and they had tormented her with whispered words as he sat watching her. But she had enjoyed hearing their words. Listening to the way he enjoyed bending them to his will, often teasing their clits until they begged him for penetration. According to them, he did not always grant them the mercy they cried out for.

Fay hissed again as she moved faster. Her temper lit and flamed as she felt her nipples rise beneath her robe. The little tips became sensitive and hard. Every step she took rubbed the fabric of her robe over them, sending sensation down her chest and across her belly to the tender flesh of her slit. Fluid slowly seeped from her pussy to touch the top of her thighs, confirming that her body was inflamed from just the idea of those rumors. What the other women conveyed to her in warning, her body leapt towards.

Her face burned with that knowledge. While it might be permissible for her to understand the realities of mating now that she was grown, it was the honest truth that she knew far more. She had seen it. This was not the first time she had snuck about in the areas where unpledged males spent their time.

She was shameful, and still she did not cradle guilt next to her heart for having watched Janus fuck. Oh yes, she'd seen him in full rut. Gazed on his bare body as his cock thrust out from his belly and a trophy female applied her mouth to his erection. The memory was burned into her brain, but not because it shocked her.

It excited her. More than anything she had ever thought possible. There must be something wrong with her. Some depraved condition that held her attention to that night she had watched Janus let his cock be serviced. She had looked at his nude body with hungry eyes and even enjoyed watching his face as he pressed his length deep into his consort's body. Some of the Hunters fucked gently, but not Janus. He had grasped her hips and fucked her from behind like a bitch being bred. His face had been harsh and demanding as his consort's breasts bounced with the motion of his fucking.

Depraved. Yes, that was the word. No chaste female should be so infatuated with the image of a male using a female. More fluid coated her thighs as she walked. Her nipples now demanded freedom from her robe, her breathing rough from her pace and her thoughts.

Truthfully, no Hunter should want her. She was unworthy of their respect.

* * * * *

"You're pathetic."

"Shows how little you understand, Hawk. A wonder Tova loves you." Janus growled at his partner. "I am the very model of control, patience and perseverance."

"And a perfect example of pathetic, unachieving action."

Janus held his reply as pure devilishness filled his thoughts. Hawk offered him the chance to chuck his control aside. It taunted him with how much he truly wanted to forget every dictate he'd ever been fed concerning chaste females. Slapping Hawk's shoulder, he let his determination show through on his face.

"I hate disappointing you, Hawk. In fact, I don't believe I can live with it another second. I vow to change my ways to suit you. Beginning now."

Janus was gone a moment later. Hawk rocked back onto his heels as he considered the way Janus bled into the dark. The sun set rapidly in winter, and semi-dusk had surrendered to night in a few moments. The black Hunter's uniform camouflaged his partner as he cut across the space between them and Fay. The female didn't notice she was being stalked and that was what made Hawk linger well behind them. A chaste female shouldn't be roaming the night alone. It was a temptation that even law-abiding males found challenging. He and Janus had filed one too many assault cases for him to disregard the possibility. Janus was going to frighten her when he emerged from the night like a demon, but it was something she might do well to remember. Hunter spheres were safer than most, but no life was perfect.

Besides, he was getting tired of waiting for the two of them to do something besides glare at one another.

* * * * *

"Do you have any idea what could happen to you, walking out in the dark alone?"

Fay didn't shriek as Janus expected. She jumped and sucked in a gasp of air, but her eyes focused on him, and a flare of intense arousal flickered across her eyes for a brief moment.

It was possible he was seeing what he wanted to see, but the tip of her tongue appeared and moved over her lower lip. It was a small torment that made his cock jerk. The organ had begun swelling the moment his feet took to the chase. Only a little twinge of disappointment diluted the moment, and that was from the fact that Fay didn't know he was closing in on her.

"We are in a Hunter sphere, Janus." It was a feeble excuse, one that Janus didn't like hearing either. It was something he'd expect from a young girl, still trusting without concern for the harsher realities that might befall her. His rising need didn't fit with the idea of her still being encased in her tender years.

"Which means your sire should have instructed you better." His cock gave a twitch as he watched her eyes slip down to his chest. She shook her head and raised her attention back to his face.

"My father has not forgotten his place."

He took a step closer. "Then you are a disobedient child."

"I am not a child."

A soft, male chuckle was his response. His gaze cut over the path she'd been walking on and the surrounding area. There were trees and bushes between the gym and the next few buildings. The open courtyard was used mostly for sport games and festival dances. In the dark it was dimly lit to conserve energy. Janus suddenly moved. His body cut through the night faster than she had really believed any human might move. He slipped off the concrete path and hooked her body with one arm as he did it. It was smooth and silent and a moment later her back was pressed to the smooth trunk of a tree. Janus' chest was one small inch from her hard nipples as the dark shadows surrounded them.

"Aren't you a child, Fay? You behave like one often."

His voice was rich with frustration. His breath hit her lips as he cupped her chin and raised it up. Her eyes showed her nothing but a face washed in shadows and starlight. His breath teased her moist bottom lip. She shivered as sensation moved down her body so harshly she couldn't stand completely still.

"Because I will not meet you at the border? That is called choice, not childish. Yet I do not expect you to understand."

"There is nothing wrong with honesty. Why do you prefer to be touched in the dark instead of under the protection of the community?"

"I did not say I wished for you to touch me." She shivered and his gaze caught the little telltale motion from her body. Her brain might be set firmly to a decision, but her flesh was intent on gaining the upper hand in the battle. It wanted to be touched by him, no doubt.

"I think you force words past your lips that your body disagrees with, sweet Fay." His voice dipped to a deep, dangerous tone that sent a chill down her spine. The impulse to escape hit her too late as his gaze dropped to her lips.

"If you are a female grown, then I may treat you as such."

Her body bucked away from the tree as his words hit her ears. She arched her neck and her chin popped free of his grasp, but freedom was hers for a mere glimmer of a moment. Janus closed the gap between them, his larger body pressing her against the trunk with remarkable ease. He actually bent his knees so that the broadest portion of his chest was the same height as hers. He used that muscle-coated torso to imprison her against the tree while his mouth captured hers.

"Janus..." She jerked her lips free but he followed her mouth. Covering her lips with his, he pressed a hard kiss onto her mouth. A tiny whimper escaped her as she tasted his male mouth for the first time. This was no simple press of lips, it was a hard demand for possession. He licked her lower lip and the sound that rose from her throat was a deep moan. It sounded hungry and she shuddered as her clit throbbed between the folds of her slit. Janus lifted his mouth from hers and framed her head with his hands. He held her steady as he searched her face for a clue as to where that husky moan had come from. She was grateful for the darkness that hid her features from his keen eyes. The outline of his cock against her belly made her shiver as her mind offered up a perfect memory of what the large organ looked like. She was hungry, however depraved it might be.

"Maybe you told me the truth." Janus slid one hand down her neck. He had no right to touch her. It was too forward considering that she was chaste, but he just couldn't stop. He needed to know if he was a monster who dreamed of coupling with a child. The idea of having her spread wide for his possession tore at his dreams while he debated her age and ability to become his. He was not a man who would be content with mere sex. He needed so much more, craved things that a chaste female had never even heard of.

Chaste females were allowed to spend hours in a male's company under the watchful eyes of the community before that first skin-to-skin contact invaded their sheltered world. Trust was formed prior to any Hunter being granted the right to be alone with a female. A Hunter like Janus was expected to keep his sexual appetite hidden until she made the choice to offer her favors to him. Flirting and teasing was encouraged until everyone around them was convinced that a male's control was hard as stone. It would be weeks before he'd be allowed to bare any part of her body.

But her face was the one that caused his cock to rise into a hard, demanding pole. There was no amount of fucking that drove the image away. Lately, releasing his seed was bittersweet because it was her body he wanted to plant it in. Maybe it was the fact that his partner had recently pledged that drove him to consider sex in a different light. He was thinking about more a permanent arrangement than merely coupling to relieve his swollen cock.

And it all centered around the female in his grasp. Her elusiveness and the suspicion that she was just as attracted to him as he was to her. There had been too many nights when the idea of pulling her against his body lived in his mind while he tried to drift into slumber. Tonight, the chance to place his thoughts into action was simply too tempting.

His fingers stroked her. Fay gasped as sensation flooded her. She had expected his touch to be firmer, hard actually, but it wasn't. He moved his hand down her neck, his touch careful as though she were a length of fine cloth fit for only a baby or some noble from times long past. Her head lifted to offer her entire neck to his touch before she thought better of the impulse. There was a soft intake of breath from him as his fingers froze and then lifted from her skin. Disappointment flashed through her before he set his fingertips down on her jaw again and stroked the column of her throat completely once more. He moved away from her for a moment as he continued moving his hand down her body, over her collarbone and down the front of her robe. His breath rasped softly as he fingered one of her hard nipples. She shivered as his finger pressed against

the little nub. Pleasure shot straight down her spine and directly into her clit. It was the most intense arousal she had ever felt. Her heart felt like it might explode inside her chest as it thumped against her ribs.

"Is it fright or pleasure that drew your nipples taut, Fay?" There was a hard demand in his voice. Her eyes fluttered open as she tried to jerk away from his hold, but what felt like a lax embrace was completely solid. She was trapped in his arms without even a few inches of freedom to pull her nipple away from his touch.

"Answer me." He was ordering her now. His finger rubbed over her nipple a few last times before stopping. He just pressed against the hard point without moving. Her heart beat faster as she craved the motion again. She needed him to move and touch her, not imprison her.

"Pleasure or fright? Child or fully grown? Tell me, Fay, would you like me to bare your nipple and kiss it?"

"You mustn't..." Her voice startled her. It wasn't hers. It was husky and full of need. Her memory displayed an image of Janus lifting the trophy female's bare breasts with his massive hands and sucking at her nipples. The hard points beneath her robe cried out approval as she battled to keep her inappropriate cravings a secret from Janus.

"Why not? Because you're a child? Your nipples are hard, Fay. That's the response of a mature female who is ripe for mating." He moved and his cock was pressing against her belly again. Her clit throbbed approval as he fingered her nipple once more.

"Compliance is not nearly enough, Fay. I demand submission from you." He kissed her hard once more. His hand captured the back of her head to hold her in place as he licked her lower lip before pressing her jaw open. He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth and stroked hers for one long moment before she was free. He stepped back into the darkness, hidden from her eyes as she braced her hands against the tree behind her to support her sagging body.

"I will follow you home. Dawdle and I will consider it an invitation."

He would too. She toyed with the concept of just propping her hands on her hips and daring him to do it. That action would certainly put an end to her chaste ignorance. She spun around and moved swiftly towards her lodging. Cravings were best left unfed when they came so hot and demanding. She needed to be sensible. Challenging Janus amidst the cloak of night might feed her burning need, but it might also see his child take root in her womb.

That would end all choice.

She hissed and didn't much care if he heard her. Her body was a traitor, a scheming saboteur that spent endless moments concocting ways to tempt Janus into lifting the choice from her hands. Right then, her mind offered her the idea of turning and opening the front of her robe so that the swells of her breasts showed. It was a simple but efficient method of drawing Janus back towards her. Yet it was cowardly and that was what kept her feet moving along the path. Janus was an honorable Hunter. She might not like his demands, but she owed him a measure of respect because he voiced those demands clearly without any hint at attempting to hide them. Some males used a female's trust to trick her into yielding her innocence, but Janus was a Hunter. She owed him the same courtesy of being honest. If she wanted her passions fed, she would have to ask him to take her.

That was something she was unwilling to do.

She sighed as her dwelling came into view. Her pride was more trouble than it was worth at times like these. But she wasn't able to simply let it go either. Craving release was something she might be prepared to submit her will to, but she wasn't going to spend her entire life submissive to anyone, be it a mate or otherwise. That was the wall that stood between her and Janus. The arrogant Hunter didn't see it and that fact simply confirmed her decision to refuse him. To his way of thinking, her body was for his pleasure. Many Hunters didn't care for too strong an opinion in their mate, and she very much suspected that Janus agreed with that ideal. She could never sit on her knees and embrace the idea that she would always be the one in submission, never tasting a

bit of boldness or taking the lead from time to time. The need to reach out for her lover burned in her as much as the desire to taste being bent to his will. Both twisted together inside her, and she knew in her heart that she would not be content without a mate who allowed her both.

That truth would deny her Janus.

It was a harsh conclusion, but adult life was rarely comfortable. She stopped before touching the footpad outside her father's dwelling. Turning around, she searched the shadows and found Janus watching her. His face mesmerized her with its determination. A twist of apprehension went through her belly as her nipples tightened again. It was almost as if there was some force drawing her towards him. Some recognition deep in her brain that chose him above all her reasons to deny any union between them. His eyes watched her for a long moment before he moved forward. It was a lowering of his defenses, to move into the light. He stood in front of her, and a shiver moved over her skin. A tiny moment of indecision flickered in his eyes as he observed her simply standing in place. A little grin raised the corners of her mouth.

"You've made an error, Janus."

One of his dark eyebrows rose in response. Another shiver rippled over her skin as she tipped her head back to keep their eyes locked. Her body was acutely aware of how much larger he was than she. Her clit began to burn in response to that idea. Being pressed beneath him must be decadent.

"What mistake have I made? If it was kissing you, I disagree, Fay. It was long past time to discover what you taste like."

Yes, it certainly has been.

Her lips smoothed back into a firm line. Knowing what his kiss felt like was a torment she might have done without. The thing she truly feared was that his kiss was going to haunt her. Lifting her chin, she forced her feet to stand firmly in place. "I don't fear you. I never have. I went to the gym looking for you. It's a truth that I have

watched you before. But you're correct that I am a mature female and it is time for games like that to be finished."

She stepped onto the footpad outside her father's dwelling and it lit up. A soft snarl came from Janus as she let her sire know that she had returned. The look on his face told her he was in the mood to test her words. But she shouldn't, not when she understood that she couldn't be happy with the Hunter and his desires. It was kinder and more honest to sever any bond between them now. Leading him on was childish.

"I mean no disrespect, Janus. My fascination must not be considered anything more than a girlish curiosity. My father says you are an honorable Hunter. You should find a female who will offer you the submission you crave."

He laughed at her. A deep chuckle burst forth that scared her more than his snarl. Fay bit into her lower lip as Janus closed his eyes and opened them back up. A dark promise was sitting there, glittering at her well-meaning words. He suddenly grasped her wrist and tugged her forward. She tumbled right into his embrace as he turned her hand around, locking her arm into a solid bar that refused to bend. So simply, she was trapped and held against his body. He leaned down and his warm breath hit her ear as he cupped her chin and raised her eyes to meet his.

"Bravo, sweet Fay. You had me convinced that you were lost in your tender years still." His eyes flashed a warning at her. She jerked against his hold. Pain shot into her shoulder but he didn't release her. His eyes were hard with determination as he held her imprisoned. "You will learn, Fay, to respect my will."

"I will not offer you my submission."

He leaned down and bit her earlobe. A sharp little nip that made her jump as the small pain raced down her spine and transformed into a crazy sort of pleasure that stunned her with its intensity. Her clit was suddenly alive with a need so hot, she shifted her thighs apart because the folds of her sex pressed too hard against the little bundle of nerve endings.

"Yes, you will. But more importantly, you will shiver with anticipation as you do it." His voice was hard and husky. He released her a moment later and took one long step away from her. She hissed as she stumbled and forced her legs to hold her up. Humiliation colored her cheeks as her father appeared in the doorway.

"Janus?" Edric offered the younger Hunter a solid nod from his head before he swept Fay with a father's knowing eye. "I see my daughter was in good hands."

"It was my pleasure to serve as escort." Janus offered her father a slight nod of his head. It was a gesture she doubted he'd give to many Hunters, but that he received often due to his strength when it came to enforcing law.

Fay turned to look at her sire. "You should not have worried." Her father frowned at her and shook his head.

"It is a parent's duty to be concerned over their offspring. However, I approve of Hunter Janus escorting you, daughter. He is a good choice."

It was the highest praise, the kind that most Hunters worked to obtain for years. Janus felt it filling his head and he savored to look on Fay's face as her father all but openly declared approval of his pursuit. The senior Hunter might have dismissed him and that would have placed a large obstacle between Fay and himself. If her father disapproved, it would not do their relationship any good. Her father was a highly respected Hunter, one of the best. His daughter would not be pledging with any male who did not measure up to his own high standard.

Edric stepped back into his dwelling. "You may finish your conversation."

"We were done." Fay quickly followed her father into the home. Janus lifted an eyebrow at her retreat and she ground her teeth together as she faced the fact that she was, in fact, hiding behind her father.

Edric turned to consider her. His eyes were full of more than parental authority tonight. Fay felt her attention sharpen on the hint of unhappiness she saw there. Almost as if there was something looming over them that she didn't see yet.

"Then maybe Janus would care to join me in a game of *Trilph*. The night is young."

"I would be honored." Janus stepped right into their home. Fay felt his presence like a change in temperature. An extreme one. The two black-uniformed Hunters moved towards the greeting room at the front of the home. *Trilph* was a game of strategy her father excelled at. He didn't even bother to play any Hunter who didn't boast of great skill at the game. It was another compliment, and one she knew her father was making as a point for her to understand. She turned away from the men as she felt the walls pressing in on her. Unclear as to just when her chaste condition had become so important, she chewed on her pride as frustration made her steps quick. Stripping her robe off in order to bathe made her feel vulnerable simply because she knew that Janus was in her home. He invaded even her small, private room. Her father's blunt acceptance of his pursuit only made her even more determined to evade him.

She could offer her chastity to another.

Fay turned to look at her nude body. Her nipples were still little points, drawn tight by Janus' touch. There was a tiny red spot on her earlobe, marking his bite. Excitement raced through her as she quivered with need. Standing still required all of her attention because excitement was surging through her blood. The idea of displaying her body to anyone else made her flesh crawl with distaste. Her body wanted Janus, and she truly was afraid she was too weak-minded to resist the lust he inspired.

May the Gods rescue her!

Chapter Two

Rage wasn't a feeling Janus was accustomed to. He prized his control more than that. Anger was merely frustration taken too seriously. Rage was something far deeper. It could soak right into a male's soul where it might become impossible to cleanse it out.

A hard hand clasped his shoulder. Janus snarled, but Hawk wasn't deterred by the sound. His partner simply leveled a hard look of understanding at him before the other Hunter grunted under his breath as well. Neither of them was pleased.

"I believe it not." Janus didn't care who heard his words either. They could report him to their hearts' content, he still would not condemn Edric. The man he'd sat with last eve wasn't one driven by greed. He knew what that poison looked like. He witnessed it every single day he patrolled the penal sphere he and Hawk were assigned. Edric didn't reek of self-gratification.

"Agreed." Hawk shot the two junior Hunters standing closest to them a hard look. The two males turned away without comment. That suited his mood. He had not risen to the rank of commander among Hunters by measuring his confidence against the opinions of others. The garrison had been dismissed but the announcement of treason among their own kind kept the normally prompt Hunters spellbound for long moments. Hawk turned and Janus followed him. Years of dedication to each other bound them. Today that bond was more important than ever.

Janus took to his day's duty with unsettled emotions for the first time since being a raw recruit. Entering the penal sphere was a journey he took each day but now it felt different as he faced the harsh fact that Edric was a new member of the convicts living under guard. Convicted members of the community had only two options. The penal sphere or a work crew. Living inside a sphere shielded them from the harmful rays of the main star warming their planet, so most chose the sphere. But there was no privacy

for a convict. That was part of the price for breaking the law. You could not be trusted. Convicts wore purple bands on each wrist that recorded their every word and motion. Janus spent a good part of his day inspecting those recordings to ensure that peace and the law were being respected by the convicts. Any evidence he viewed that contradicted that was grounds for the convicts to be exported to a work crew where they were not even granted the privacy of a living area. Work crews labored together and slept in barracks.

Of course, some convicts chose to leave the southern hemisphere altogether. That was their right. To pit their fortune against the elements and attempt to reach the northern continent, where rumor claimed any man could live however he wanted without the law interfering.

Janus doubted that. He didn't question if there was a community north of his own society, but he did doubt that men might live together without law. If that were so, disputes would turn to murder. He couldn't see life flourishing under those terms. There had to be expectations of every citizen or they would be living like their ancestors had in caves. Certainly a man might build his own home, but it took cooperation to produce the materials the dwelling would be constructed from. If there was no law, anyone might kill him the moment that house was complete. Such a community couldn't possibly survive.

It was the core reason he wore the black uniform of a Hunter. Dedication was something that gave him strength. He scanned the convicts in front of him and noticed their lack of self-restraint. They were weak in spirit and body. His own frame was broad and covered with thick muscle from the labor he required from himself. Pampering was for children. The convicts in front of him were men who placed their own comforts above the laws that were set down for fairness. If a man couldn't understand the simple idea of not taking more than your share, he was worthless as far as Janus was concerned. He had pushed his body to be stronger and harder so that he might serve the ranks of the Hunters well. He did so with the sole belief he helped make his own life

better by ensuring he fulfilled his task as perfectly as possible. When every person in the sphere worked together, all of their lives improved.

Convicts were the defective links in that chain, men who placed their own gain above others. They were the sort of creatures who would stand by with bloated bellies while the less fortunate went hungry. Their history was filled with hard facts that had led them to the more advanced society they were today.

Janus scanned the street in front of him. Convicts rarely looked him in the eye, but he was on constant guard. His black Hunter's uniform stood out among their light-colored garments. The area in front of him cleared as he tried to detect any convict who moved out of his path a little too quickly. Guilt was easy to spot on a man because he went to great lengths to avoid being inspected, and the recording of any crime committed. It was proof of their weakness that even after conviction, most of the inhabitants of the penal sphere didn't learn from their mistakes. They still failed to embrace the correctness of becoming a productive member of the community. The convicts in front of him had to be carefully monitored to ensure they were being productive in their assigned tasks. Laziness was not rewarded. If a man didn't work, he shouldn't have the same rewards as a citizen who did. Food did not simply appear.

But today was the first time he found himself focused on his own desires more than his duties as a Hunter. A soft grunt left his lips as he hooked his hands into his belt. He didn't want to be here. His instincts were not centered on the convicts around him but back in the Hunter sphere where Fay was.

"She'll be there tonight."

Hawk's voice was gruff. Janus didn't offer his partner any comment. He and Hawk knew each other too well—it was something that made them more effective as Hunters. But when it came to Fay, Janus found himself feeling possessive. He shouldn't be. He'd shared Hawk's mate because they viewed each other's actions every day to ensure fairness in both their decisions. When Hawk had taken Tova into his bed, there was no way to prevent lust from rising up for her as he watched them during those everyday

viewings into Hawk's actions. Sharing was expected and normal among the command ranks of Hunters like they were. Hawk had known that fact and firmly insisted that Tova accept it and allow Janus into their relationship.

Today, the idea of returning that action bothered him. Hawk suddenly lifted an eyebrow and smirked at him. It was an expression Janus had given him during Hawk's courtship of his mate, Tova. Hawk chuckled before sweeping the area around them again.

"Worry not, Janus. I don't hold grudges. Even if you deserve it."

Janus shook his head. "Aye, I did earn a few set-downs, didn't I?"

Hawk offered him a dark frown. "You did, but Tova endures your surly attitude so I must do the same."

"I make up for it."

Hawk glared at him. The sexual comment wasn't exactly misplaced, but Tova was his pledged mate. The sharing nature of their relationship was only a buffer against lust souring their working partnership. It was something he would have to accept when he brought Fay to heel. Hawk would see every encounter with her. The other Hunter had already witnessed their heated exchange from last night. Sexual interest was a normal side effect in any healthy male. He should be grateful that Hawk had found a mate first. Tova could keep most of his partner's lust away from Fay.

But it wasn't her body he craved so completely. It was her submission, an unconditional acceptance of his possession. The goal wasn't gaining her flesh—it was to touch her soul in that single place where a female trusted a male. One single male. It was the most perfect union. Not once in his life had he ever touched intimacy, but Janus was willing to pursue it until his last breath.

It was time Fay understood that.

* * * * *

People were fickle.

Fay found that fact unusually fascinating as her day wore on. It should have troubled her, stabbed at her feelings, as those who normally greeted her turned around when they saw her drawing near. Instead, she was curious to discover who was willing to brave the public scorn to be seen speaking to her.

There were not many.

A precious few, but somehow she would rather have those friends than the large number she believed she had just last sunrise. Her heart gave a twist, and her emotions threatened to collapse as she looked at her desk and the current project she should be directing her attention to. She had always held a talent for numbers. Now that her schooling was complete, she spent her time working with engineers helping to calculate the mathematical equations that made future buildings sound. For the last year, she had especially enjoyed the unfeeling numbers because she could hide in her work and ignore her rising passion for Janus. She had hidden among the mind-numbing tasks in order to avoid facing the truth that she wanted to spread for him more and more as the nights passed. No other male distracted her from it, in spite of her efforts to find one who would overshadow Janus.

Today, there was no solace to be found. Her memory replayed her last moments with her father over and over again. Shock still held her in its grip from watching her sire stripped of his uniform. It was something she was certain she would never forget, even if she lived to be two hundred. That black uniform embodied her father, his ideals and his integrity. She would go to her own death before believing him guilty of lawbreaking. There wasn't a Hunter more dedicated in the entire sphere.

Except perhaps Janus.

She snorted softly under her breath as she punched the keys of her terminal a little too hard. She didn't need to have Janus tormenting her this morning. Sweet mercy, her shoulders were heavy enough without adding the concern of what she might fall into doing with a male. Janus was purely self-satisfaction, like a sweet a child ate to satisfy a craving when their belly was already full. Her growing cravings for him were selfish

when her father had been taken away on charges of theft and abuse of authority. Any daughter worth anything would be more centered on helping her sire than thinking about how much her body wanted to spread for another male.

She was shameful.

One of the bright green bracelets on her wrist caught on the edge of her terminal. The little unit flipped completely over as she glared at the green object clamped onto her arm. She could not remove it. It was a location beacon, as well as a recording unit that would keep a solid record of everything she did. Reaching for her terminal, she turned it back into its proper position but the accident had not gone unnoticed. Her supervisor frowned at her as she moved across the office floor. Fay pressed her lips into a hard line as she caught a few of her colleagues smirking with delight at the attention from her supervisor. Yesterday, she had joked and laughed with those same office mates. Today, they gleefully waited for her to be reprimanded.

"Your new status appears to interfere with your productivity." Cleo tsked under her breath as she swept Fay with condemning eyes. "I will have to report it." She raised her gaze to look at her, but Fay denied the woman any retort. Cleo was looking for something to add to that report—Fay could see enjoyment shimmering in her eyes.

It twisted her stomach with nausea. How did trust vanish so quickly? Fay retuned her attention to her work. The answer was so simple she chastised herself for not understanding before. True friends were few. Convincing herself that some females were her friends was delusional. There had never truly been any real trust between them. She had allowed her father's position to influence her own self-worth. At least she might be grateful for learning the lesson.

"Don't let it worry you. At least you have a reason. I am simply clumsy."

Fay jerked her head around to catch Zoe offering her a twisted sarcastic look. The small, dark-haired girl was always attempting to lighten the office mood, and often she succeeded with her innocent, often silly humor.

"Did you have something to add to my incident report, Zoe?" Cleo had whipped about and was frowning at Zoe for breaking the shunning silence that had been heaped on Fay since her arrival.

The dark-haired female rose and smiled at her supervisor. "Oh yes. I think we should all thank Fay for slowing down today and giving us a chance to catch up with her. It's rather sweet of her to not shame us by being so far ahead of the rest of the team, like she often does."

"Thank you, Zoe." Cleo's face turned to the green wristbands adorning Fay's arms and she held her tongue. She turned with an angry sweep of her robe and went back to her desk. Zoe sat back down and rolled her eyes as she looked at Fay. Merriment sparkled in her unusual green gaze while she worked her lips in a silent mocking of her superior.

Fay treasured the moment. Zoe was the same person she had been yesterday. The girl wasn't interested in gaining favor among the rest of the team by changing her opinion of her. That was a gift that Fay would always treasure. Even after she left the Hunter sphere. She had to go. Half a night without her father had been too much. He was innocent and she would follow him into the penal sphere as a testimonial to her belief in him.

It would not be a simple life but maintaining your principles often conflicted with comfort. She would shoulder it and endure. Of course, that meant leaving Janus behind as well. But he might just thank her for leaving. Most Hunters would join in shunning her now that her sire was disgraced.

She just wished that knowing Janus wouldn't want her now didn't hurt worse than anything else.

Yet it did.

* * * * *

"Come, Janus! Antal has a trophy to share with us." Calder grinned at him as he licked his lower lip. "Time to work off a couple of hard cocks."

The invitation didn't interest him. Janus only shook his head. He didn't understand his own emotions, so it was wiser to keep his mouth shut until he sorted his impulses into order.

Calder frowned at his dismissal. "You're a fine Hunter, Janus. Just consider it a good thing that you haven't pledged with Fay."

Janus turned to glare at his fellow Hunter. Although the comment was expected, it still grated against his temper. "Your concern isn't necessary. I do not believe in Hunter Edric's guilt. It would be my pleasure to pledge with his daughter."

Calder frowned, but the man didn't shake his head. Janus caught the indecision in the male's eyes as he considered the firm stand Janus was taking. The convicted were most often shunned completely, and that treatment extended to their offspring. Fay had the single choice of staying in her birth sphere or following her sire. It was a harsh truth that neither was a good choice for her.

Calder stiffened. "I find myself questioning the matter as well." He extended his hand towards Janus. They clasped wrists in age-old custom before Calder grinned at him. "If you change your mind, I intend to gain an introduction to Antal's newest plaything."

Calder turned and left. The Hunter didn't stop as several of their fellow Hunters turned to look at him in wonder. His words would likely be reported back to command as well, but Calder moved on his way unconcerned. Janus wasn't as detached from the public show of scorn for Fay's sire. He glared at those foolish enough to glance his way. Although dedicated to his battalion, he didn't need their approval of his female or his faith in Hunter Edric. Besides, he found it harsh to see an entire lifetime of service being discarded so quickly by Hunters who owed Edric for service he had given to them for years. A Hunter shouldn't be so quick to condemn his fellow battalion Hunter.

Fay was his choice and it was time she understood it along with the rest of his comrades.

Chapter Three

Her dwelling was silent.

Fay bit into her lower lip to fend off the sting of tears. She was no child to be weeping for something she understood very well. Her father was not coming home tonight. Crying about it changed it not. All the emotional outpouring might do was prove that she was weak. Still too tender to face adult matters.

Still it was oddly interesting to discover how much she noticed the absence of her sire. He was a veteran Hunter and she rarely heard his boots on the tile floor because he walked so softly. The difference between the normal quiet they lived in and this stark silence was deafening.

It wasn't unusual for her to be in the dwelling without her father either. He worked long hours just as she did. Tonight, the minutes passed more slowly than honey moving across a chilled plate. After considering what their cold-storage unit offered for her supper, she simply closed it again without selecting anything. Her stomach was still a twisted knot. The tension was unrelenting even after a day's passing since her father had been taken away. Knowing how deviants were dealt with and witnessing it were two vastly different things. She had been raised with the distorted view that anyone taken away by Hunters must deserve it. The black-clad enforcers of the law didn't listen to any plea, no matter how earnest. The accused was remanded into their custody in mere moments. Every detail of their lives swept aside as the law was enforced.

She shook her head. She should have known better. Her father had taught her that there were always two sides to an issue. Yet she had never questioned it even once, until now. It was a lesson well suited to today's dilemma. She considered the green bands on her wrists. She could not remove them. Because she lived in the same dwelling with her sire, she was under suspicion of having tolerated his crimes. It was a

punishable offense to stand by and remain silent as the law was broken. If there was any evidence that she had shared in the profits of unlawful activities, she would answer for those crimes.

A chuckle rose from her throat as she went back into her sleeping room. It was a distorted mess. All of her possessions pulled from their neat storage areas and placed out in plain view. Every inch of the home had been searched as the Hunters looked for the credits her father stood accused of siphoning off with the aid of his Hunter's authority. When they came to take him last evening, the Hunters had looked at everything she owned to decide if she had more than her earnings and her father's honest pay might grant her.

Reaching for an image album, she stroked the silky fabric cover. Her mother had constantly been creating little things of beauty such as the album. Fay recalled how often she had to move a box of fabrics and beads in order to sit at the dining table for supper. Her mother had used the table for her crafting creations during the day. Turning the page, she looked at the face of her mother. It had been eight years since her passing. A tragic thing that still haunted the daughter and mate she had left behind. Her mother had been near her birth time with a second child. It was almost unheard of, complications that resulted in death during childbirth, but at sunrise her mother had been smiling and rubbing her swollen tummy...by noon she'd died from blood loss. The growing baby had somehow torn her mother's body so badly that the medical personnel couldn't keep her life's blood inside her flesh. Her unfortunate baby brother had died before his mother due to lack of oxygen flowing through his umbilical cord to supply him with precious breath.

A shiver shook her body as Fay considered the last image she had of her mother. The woman staring back at her from the album page wouldn't have stood for her mate being accused either. Fay felt that truth burn through her as she set the album on its shelf with a careful hand. She began to place her other belongings into a box. She often looked at the album at night, after her prayers were said. So it would remain out for the

remaining six days she would be sleeping in the Hunter sphere. But everything else would be sorted and packed as she made ready for her new life. She sorted out her finer robes because such costly items would have no place in a penal sphere. Fay scolded herself for stroking one of the robes. It was a dark magenta one that she adored, but she needed to be stronger than the lure of a fine garment. Instead of glossy dressing robes, she placed sturdy work ones into the box at her feet. The little satin slippers that matched the magenta robe were left where the Hunters had piled them during their search.

A satisfied smile curved her lips when she finished. Two boxes held her practical clothing. She hung the shimmering social robes back in the closet. They belonged there, in the Hunter sphere. Those robes were a solid reminder of the life she was willingly casting off. A sense of accomplishment filled her as she finished hanging the last one. Her father had bought them for her to wear while attending social engagements meant to help her decide on a mate.

Janus' image rose in her memory and pain twisted through her. She hugged herself as she bit into her lip, trying to banish the regret flowing through her. The Hunter's blue eyes haunted her with their display of desire. Harsh disappointment flared through her as she faced the truth that she had seen that passion for the last time. His kiss taunted her with the possibility she had cast aside last night. So many lost opportunities rose from her mind as she recognized what leaving the Hunter sphere meant.

She would never have the chance to touch Janus again. The choice was gone now, evaporated like morning dew. Her nipples tingled as she considered the fact that she would never know what it felt like to allow Janus to suckle them. He'd wanted to, demanded her submission. It was amazing how much more agreeable she was to that idea now that she had to embrace the reality that Janus might not want her anymore.

"Well, I shall simply endure." No one would take her own confidence from her.

"Easier said than done."

She jumped and turned too quickly. Her ankle rolled under her own weight, crumpling with a painful twist that made her gasp. Janus caught her arm and slipped his arm right under hers to support her body. He clasped her to his chest as her hands landed on top of his pectorals.

"What are you doing here?" Not that her question truly mattered. He was there. Discovering the details would not change that she was pressed against his body.

"Your dwelling is no longer private, Fay."

Although true, due to the nature of her father's recent arrest, there was still honor to be observed. Her fingertips begged her to simply allow Janus the excuse, let him continue to clasp her against his body because it felt so delightful. Yet his voice wasn't harsh like so many she'd heard today. It was only firm. After a full rotation of duty with her coworkers, she was highly sensitive to any hint of kindness, even from Janus.

But that was weak of her. She could not begin to depend on his strength. No one ever grew strong if they allowed others to hold them up. Pushing against his chest she strained away from the hard body her flesh craved. "You abuse your position by entering my sleeping room. It was not something I thought to see you doing the moment my sire was removed from between us, Janus."

She was free instantly. At least her body was. She still felt overwhelmed by his presence in her sleeping room. It was as though he now could strip each and every façade aside and stare at her naked form. It was so much more than skin. At that moment she felt exposed right down to her soul.

But she had always feared Janus could do that to her. It was the sort of danger you needed to harbor a healthy respect for, unless you wanted to be consumed by the predator stalking you.

"I did depress the door chime." His eyes flashed with enjoyment for a moment before his lips pressed into a firm line of guilt. "Yet your point is well spoken, even if I have a good case for arguing against it." His eyes moved down her body. He did it slowly, taking in each curve. Heat rose up her neck and bled across her cheeks before he moved his gaze back to her eyes. "Your resistance has prompted me to become more aggressive than I intended. That is not an excuse, simply an explanation. It is time you understood how determined I am."

Wasn't that exactly like she thought he would be? Always believing in his correctness. Never granting her any space because he desired her? Therefore, she belonged to him simply because he had decided to claim her? "I have told you before, Janus. You need to find a female more suited to your demanding nature."

A hard hand cupped her jaw, holding her head in place as he stepped closer to her again. Her nipples tightened into hard peaks that ached for freedom from her robe. Heat bled over her skin, making the fabric of her garment too stifling. Janus leaned down until his breath brushed her lips.

"And I have made it plain to you, Fay, that I will have you."

"Don't kiss me."

She pressed her hand against his mouth. Surprise flashed through him as he felt her fingers touching his lips. Her voice was high and coated with desperation. But it was a vastly different form of that emotion than the fear-fueled sort he had come to expect from her. Something flickered through her eyes as the tip of her tongue appeared and moved over her lower lip. It was hunger. A deep craving that mirrored his own. Janus stared at the need shimmering in her gaze as the last remains of his doubt crumbled. She wasn't straining against his hold. The reason was clear as his gaze found the twin points of her hard nipples. Fay was more afraid of her response to him than of his approach. He had made an error but it was one he was happy to discover.

"Sweet Fay. You are better at camouflage than I ever suspected." He leaned down and grazed her inner wrist with his teeth. She shivered as sensation raced down her arm and into her hard nipples. His opposite hand rose and pressed over one breast, his thumb gently stroking the aching tip of her right breast. "I thought you feared me, but the reality is that you fear your own reaction to me." It was an acceptable fear in a

chaste female. She was not weak, merely uncertain. It was going to be his pleasure to introduce her to passion.

Her eyes rounded with guilt as a little moan rose from her lips. It was the permission he'd often dreamed of, that undeniable proof that her body hungered for the same hard connection his flesh craved. His cock swelled harder in his pants, and he enjoyed the painful sensation of it. Twisting her wrists slightly, he held them up for a hard kiss, scraping his teeth along her tender skin. He felt her limb shake against his palm. Releasing her arm, he captured both sides of her face and closed the distance between their bodies. She gasped as he pressed his mouth against hers, pushing her lips wide to accept his kiss.

Fantasies were not nearly as intense as reality, at least not when it came to Janus. Suspecting he might be able to steal every thought from her brain with his touch did not truly prepare her for the reality of her mind surrendering to his assault. Sweet pleasure poured over her, sweeping aside any further ideas of what she thought she longed for. What was independence compared to the need clamoring from her pussy for penetration? Both urges battled as Janus ran his tongue over her lower lip in a slow motion. She shivered because she only expected hard, fast possession from him. The slow lapping along her tender lip drew the pleasure out, suspending her in the moment as she hungered for him to thrust his tongue deep into her mouth where she might stroke it with her own.

He slid one hard hand around her face and into her hair. His fingers tightened slightly, sending a little tingle of pain down her spine. It mixed with the need in her pussy, making her hips thrust towards his body in blatant invitation. He thrust his tongue into her mouth as his hand tipped her head back to take his penetration. His free hand boldly stroked down the length of her neck. He moved his fingers slowly over her bare skin as she let her tongue mingle with his. His taste and scent combined, fanning the flare of need burning in her pussy. It was no longer confined to her clit—there was a deep need to be filled clamoring for her to yield to him. Even the knowledge that Janus

would demand her submission made her shiver. Her body wanted only the strongest male to possess it.

"You're soft. So smooth and soft." His voice was low and edged with demand. He held on to the nape of her neck, keeping her prisoner as he stroked her neck all the way to where her robe prevented him from touching her shoulder. His fingers slid over her chest to one breast. "Except here. This is hard."

A whimper rose from her throat as he teased her nipple with a thumb, rubbing over it in a small circle while his gaze remained steadily locked with hers. "I enjoy touching you, Fay." His thumb stopped and remained in place as he tightened his hand once more to pull her hair slightly. "But you will offer me your submission or I will leave your body hungry."

It was a firm promise. She hissed into his face and he chuckled at her temper. "Such a temper. It's far past time I proved my ability to master you."

"Don't you dare!" Whatever else she might have spat at him died in a muffled gasp as she was turned and pushed facedown onto her own bed. Janus controlled her descent, pressing her into the soft sleeping surface as he caught the hem of her robe. She gasped a moment later as the cool night air brushed her wet thighs. He tossed her hem up to her shoulders and boldly rubbed her bare bottom. Pleasure twisted through her pussy. It was so deep, she couldn't do anything but pant for a long moment as his fingers gently massaged and rubbed her cheeks.

"Your thighs glitter with the proof you deny me." His voice was harsh now, disapproval clear. He leaned his forearm across her shoulders to hold her down as he stroked the top of her inner thighs with a single finger. "Wet with a compliance that no amount of sputtering can deny."

A hard smack landed on her exposed bottom. She cried out as she bucked up off her bed. Janus pressed her down easily as he delivered a second slap to her opposite cheek. "I will be most happy to take you in hand." He smacked her right cheek and then her left. A crazy pleasure was racing through her. Some kind of primitive enjoyment of being held down by his greater strength. It doubled her hunger as a snarl of pure passion escaped her lips. She had no idea if the sound was enjoyment or temper, she simply could not separate the impulses. Everything centered under his hand as it rose and descended on her bottom. The sharp sting of the blow traveling into her pussy as she listened to the pop of flesh hitting flesh.

"I will not fuck you until you kneel in front of me." Janus smacked her bottom again and growled with approval as she hissed. He leaned down until his chest was pressing along her back. "Do you like that, Fay? My hand on your bottom? I can smell how hot it's making your pussy. Did you know that?"

A single finger stroked her slit. Her hips bucked in response, but the folds of her flesh were slick just as he'd said. Pleasure shot up from his touch as he stroked the center of her slit from the opening to her pussy to the little button of her clit. A hoarse cry rose from her lips as he fingered her clit, gently rubbing it. Sweat broke out all over her skin as tension tightened under that finger. His breath hit her ear. Her bottom was hot from his smacking. It was all too much, and there was no way to control her body. Too much sensation pulled her down into an abyss of pleasure edged with sharp sensation. It all centered under his finger as he pressed harder on her clit. Her thighs spread wider to allow him better access. A deep growl hit her ears as he increased the speed, rubbing her clit faster. A moment later pleasure ripped up into her pussy. She cried out as it jerked her body and snapped it like a leather whip. Pleasure raced along her nerves, pulling and jerking her as it moved out from her clit. Her heart raced so quickly her lungs couldn't keep pace with it. Dark spots danced before her eyes as she shivered and clawed at the bedding beneath her face.

A second later, Janus rolled her over. His hands were unexpectedly gentle as he pressed her back onto her bed. His hand settled onto her bare belly, smoothing over her belly and mons. He grunted approval of her hairless state. Only females of mature age

visited a hair-removal salon. Each and every pubic hair was now lasered off for the rest of her life, the follicles killed at the root. It was just a custom, but now she understood as Janus stroked the smooth skin, just exactly why females had begun subduing their modesty long enough to have the hair removed. Little ripples of delight were moving up her slit from his fingertips.

"I'm not going to fuck you."

She gasped as her cheeks flushed scarlet. Pressing her hands against his arm she tried to free herself, but Janus only tsked at her. He leaned down, hovering over her still-wet lips as his finger found her clit and rubbed it gently once again. Pleasure instantly renewed its grip on her, tugging at her attention and making it hard to recall exactly why she wanted him to stop touching her. Hunger still gnawed at her body, but if he listened to her words, she would be left wanting. Her temper rose in the face of that idea.

"I didn't ask you to."

"Fuck you? No, you didn't." One thick finger teased the opening to her pussy. He circled the tender skin, slipping through the fluid that had seeped from her body. "But your body has made its wishes plain enough. A wet pussy is the sign of arousal, Fay." He penetrated her body with that finger. A little wet sound hit the silent room and she shivered. The walls of her sheath tingled with delight as he filled her. But it wasn't enough. She needed more than a finger.

"I know it." The words tumbled from her lips as her hips lifted towards his hand. Even in the midst of her temper, she couldn't continue to protest something that felt so good. Janus might be a demanding male, but he was an honorable one, worthy of honesty. He worked his finger up into her body again and her eyelids fluttered as sensation crested over her thoughts once more. Forcing her eyes to open, she shot him a hard glare.

"Yet that does not mean I offer you submission. You should not even ask anymore, Janus. You need to consider your own goals. I am not a good choice of companion."

He frowned at her. She wasn't sure why she felt compelled to warn him away from the stain of her father's guilt, only that the words crossed her lips before she might hold them back. She wasn't sorry though, becoming a weight that dragged him down soured her delight. His hand left her slit as he stood up. She closed her thighs in a protective motion as his gaze moved up her bare body. Her robe was pressed up to her waist, her lower body bare to his gaze. A twist of pain went through her as she faced the reality that he might take her suggestion and leave before his career suffered any tarnish due to her father's arrest.

Janus lowered his body onto a knee instead. He pressed her knees wide and pulled her to the edge of the bed before glaring up her body at her face. "Do not offer me protection again, Fay. I came here willingly and as testament to the fact that I do not believe your sire to be guilty. It is time for you to adjust to me and our impending union. It will be my cock that opens your body. My seed that seeps inside your womb. Yet I confess that I'm going to enjoy teaching you the rightness of our relationship. So protest as long as you are able."

"No."

Her protest died in a moan as he leaned forward and lapped her slit. He licked her slowly as he held the folds of her slit open. Her hips bucked up off the bed as pleasure raced into her sheath. It was hard and deep, twisting into her with such a fierce need she moaned low and deep. Her fingers clawed at the bedding beneath her as Janus moved up to the front of her sex. He tongued her clit with small motions, sending more pleasure into her aching passage. All at once she was acutely aware of how empty her pussy was. While she had craved him before, it was only a small fraction of the need curling through her at that moment.

"I will be very happy to prove my worth to you, Fay. What I will not tolerate is more foolish denials from your lips." His voice was harsh. He looked up her body and she shivered at the expression on his face. It was hard, so immovable, but there was something inside her that shouted approval for that. Some part of her that enjoyed the

fact he had taken up her challenge at last. He fingered her clit once again, slowly and gently as he kept her thighs spread wide with his shoulders. "Tomorrow I am going to place you in a training harness."

Excitement leapt through her. It really shouldn't have, but having tasted the pleasure her clit could produce, there was no denying how much she would like to experience it again. A training harness would be fastened around her hips. Strips of leather would run between the lips of her slit and three pleasure beads would be placed against her clit. As she moved, the motion of her hips would draw those beads back and forth across her clit sending pleasure up into her pussy exactly the way his finger was doing right now. The strips could also be adjusted to hold her slit wide, exposing her clit.

"I see the excitement dancing in your eyes, Fay." And it almost undid him. His cock was straining against his pants. Janus clamped his control over the instinct to rip his uniform open and split her body open with one hard thrust. A Hunter never tore his female. He might prove his ability to master her body, but he never mounted her pussy until her sheath was loosened by several orgasms. It was the core of who they were. Only animals mated without concern for pain. For him, mating with Fay would be the greatest challenge, one he was going to enjoy moment by moment until he finally pressed his length deep into her body.

Leaning down, he sucked her clit back into his mouth. She moaned as her hips bucked beneath his tongue. Rubbing the little bundle of nerve endings with the tip of his tongue, he sucked harder as he listened to the whimpers coming from her. Fay didn't have any practice at holding off her pleasure. She moaned as a second climax tore through her. She gasped as he thrust two thick fingers into her sheath. Working them back and forth, he began stretching her tight sheath, fucking her with his fingers so that her pleasure might ease the muscles of her pussy.

Her emotions were boiling. She didn't seem to be able to hold them back any longer. One short day and her life was no longer her own. Even her body was being

penetrated, and her cursed flesh was enjoying it. She tried to reason it out but her brain was exhausted and unwilling to think anymore. The bed beneath her was all the comfort she needed as Janus pulled his fingers from her body and began to smooth his hands over her thighs. He pressed her knees closed as he soothed the tension in her muscles. It was too tender for the invasion that had just passed between them. While she had expected his harder nature, this tender side of his personality confused her.

Lifting her legs, she rolled right over her head in a somersault. She kept going off the bed and caught her weight on balanced feet. Her robe fluttered back down into place as she stared at Janus. He was still just as huge and imposing as always, but her memory offered up the image of his hands smoothing over her tenderly as well. It was an odd combination, one that touched not only her hunger for him but her heart as well.

"I believe you have made your point, Janus."

He lifted an eyebrow at her. Fay lifted her chin as she looked at him without shame. She was a female past her tender years. There was no guilt in admitting that his touch created pleasure in her flesh. That was a natural thing. It was time to for her to surprise him for a moment.

Fay moved across the space between them. Janus held his position as she approached him. He was almost afraid to breathe because it might shatter the illusion. He wanted to remain immersed in the fantasy. She laid her hands on his chest and rose onto her toes to press her lips against his. He had to angle his head down so that she could reach his mouth. It was a sweet kiss. Almost cold, considering the taste of her pussy still clung to his tongue, but it was by far the most treasured touch she had ever gifted him with.

One freely given kiss. It was something no amount of strength might pry from her.

"Good night, Janus."

She shivered as she waited to see what he might do with her command. It was a gentle dismissal, but one that tested the foundation of their future relationship. Trust was not something that might be taken from her. All his mastering and demands still had to respect that moment when she decided enough was enough. At least while she was chaste, it did. They were both too excited by each other now. They needed to part before nature pushed them beyond their control. Perhaps that was what made it so exciting—the conflict between control and need. The two forces pushed against one another sending out a shower of sparks that was mesmerizing.

"Agreed." He caught her chin once more, cupping it in his palm as he leaned down to press a firm kiss against her lips. He lingered over that kiss, teasing the opening to her mouth with the tip of his tongue before he drew away from her.

Fay wrapped her arms back around her body as she moved to the doorway of her sleeping chamber to watch him leave. He never looked back, his back stiff in his Hunter's uniform. She caught the faint scuff of his boots against the floor.

At least she was not alone in her turmoil. Small comfort, but there was intimacy in it. That was the most surprising thing she had learned tonight. Of all of the things she might ever have considered to find in Janus' embrace, intimacy wasn't one of them. She felt exposed, and shivered. Even now that he had departed the dwelling space was marked with his scent. She no longer felt buffeted against his encroachment by his invasion of the living quarters she had always called home. It wasn't the safe haven that had cradled her since childhood. It was now a place where Janus might corner her and use her own body against her will.

Her body urged her to follow Janus and invite him back, but surrender still sat uneasy in her mind. No good answer presented itself as she pressed her palm against the door to seal it. She frowned as she looked at her new wristbands. Her hand imprint was no longer able to lock the door completely. Janus had entered her dwelling because he was a Hunter, and she the daughter of a convict now. For the remaining six days until she made her formal choice to stay or follow her father, any Hunter might override the lock on her front door. It left a harsh taste in her mouth but she forced herself to swallow it because living in a penal colony would be even more exposed.

She would have to learn to live with it no matter her choice because Janus had proven his point. She might not like it but her body did. A little bubble of joy formed in her heart as she savored the fact that he was still interested in her submission. She frowned at her own joy but couldn't erase it. There was no denying that being valued was sweet and far more valuable than anything else in life. The possessions in her dwelling meant nothing. Tonight, what she valued most was the friendship of a little coworker named Zoe and the frustrating demands of a Hunter called Janus.

It was a perplexing tangle, to be certain. But she was sure of one thing.

He would be back as long as she was in the Hunter sphere.

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Edric didn't worry about looking for his deviants. Laying a trap was far more his style. The penal sphere was crowded, and gossip moved faster than an open flame. Leaning against the doorframe to his assigned dwelling, he considered the eyes watching him. Greed was a powerful demon. It took control of the soul and drove its victim insane. All around him were creatures who spent their lives as willing slaves to possessiveness.

It turned his stomach.

A man should be able to master his own mind. You didn't have anything if you didn't have your own self-control. Where was the value in money if you didn't have a family to share it with? How did you sit down to enjoy a fine meal, knowing that others starved because you had stolen? The occupants of the penal sphere would have snickered in the face of his questions and that was exactly why he had always enjoyed being a Hunter.

"I am Alana. It is my duty to bring you your first rations."

The man in front of her frowned at her. Alana was used to the dark look, but there was something about his look that sent a chill down her spine. Maybe it was his size.

She wasn't a stranger to Hunters because they patrolled the sphere and inspected her whenever they chose, but she had never encountered a convicted Hunter. The purple clothing of a convict looked misplaced on his huge shoulders.

"They sent a female?"

She laughed at his comment. Males did have one thing in common—pride. Oh it was a wonder they survived at all with their arrogance. Her amusement died as she considered her past weakness of the flesh. Well, in truth, the female was engineered by nature to be prey to the urge to mate. Even the overblown pride of most males hadn't kept her from lying down with one. She'd been too blinded by passion to see him for the thieving greedy bastard that he was.

"Everyone works here, Edric. Rations can be delivered by females most effectively. A Hunter should know that convicts wear wristbands that protect all inhabitants of this sphere from violence simply because you will be exposed if you decide to take advantage of my smaller size."

"I did not grant you use of my name."

He growled at her. Alana relaxed as the sound hit her ears. She was used to males grunting at her. It had been his dark frown that made her nervous. The look had almost been personal, as if he cared about her well-being. Which of course, he could not. The man was a convict. Any form of good intention was extinct in him.

"Excuse me, convict. Enjoy your rations. I will bring you more in two days." Alana turned and moved away from him. She shrugged off her annoyance. He was just a new convict. His surly attitude was to be expected.

It was still too bad. There was something in his eyes that she hadn't seen in a very long time. A little smile tugged at her mouth as she went about her duties. Alana enjoyed thinking about that little something because her dreams were her only escape from a harsh life. It had been a long time since she'd had any reason to be amused.

Chapter Four

"Zoe has been reassigned."

Cleo announced her news with a flourish that stunned more than just Fay. There were horrified looks from the others who worked in her section as well. Fay made sure to keep her eyes on Cleo as her superior smirked at her department. She wanted to remember how ugly self-glorification could make a person. It was a lesson you might be lectured on but never truly absorb until you witnessed it. Zoe's laughing face flashed through her memory with its sparkling humor. Cleo was making a point to the rest of the department—stand up against the leader and you would be made an example of.

It worked. No one dared to even glance her way out of fear that Cleo would notice. If she moved past an area, everyone immediately stopped talking until she was out of hearing. The report that her supervisor had threatened to file yesterday was neatly waiting for her signature this morning. Fay affixed her name without a thought, still confident of her record. All the shunning in the sphere couldn't change her work history.

Yet it was such a shame. The team had done well together, helping one another and being more efficient because they didn't allow pride to interfere. Today that teamwork was absent as Fay watched her coworkers refuse to hand off work to her. Instead they struggled with it, choosing to cut their production level instead of utilizing her ability.

Well...they would have to learn to get by without her. The hours crawled by as her eyelids drooped from lack of rest. She had spent the night torn between nightmares of her father's arrest and passionate recollections of being pressed down by Janus. She'd witnessed the dawn because sleep was no friend of hers. At least she would drop off tonight, if for no other reason than the flesh had needs that could only be put off so long.

There was no reason to linger at her workstation. She was gone the moment her duty allowed. The afternoon was warm, and her robe clung to her back as perspiration broke out on her skin. Fay didn't care—she kept her pace quick as she hurried home and pressed her hand to the door to seal it shut. She tossed her robe over her head before heading towards a shower. She left the water cool, and laughed at the stark contrast as she stepped into the cool spray of water. Cupping her hands, she splashed water up into her face. A chill shook her body, but she wiped the water out of her eyes and giggled again. The tension knotting her shoulders began to loosen as she relaxed.

Stepping out of the water, she rubbed a length of fabric against her hair. It removed some of the water and she took a brush to it before frowning at her robe. Her skin was still alive with little tingles of awareness, a lingering memory from Janus she couldn't banish. Her nipples began to tighten as his face rose in her thoughts. There was no denying that the male was to be admired. A little wicked grin covered her lips as she considered turning his demands against him. Oh yes, it might be worth kneeling in front of him just to hear his reaction to her when she reached forward and handled his cock. Not because he demanded it, but because she simply wanted to upset his perfect control by surprising him. Fay let her eyes close as she considered shocking Janus. It was a pleasant idea that tempted her, but her body was tired and she fell asleep while she schemed, arousal stroking her body gently.

* * * * *

"You are driving me insane." Janus snorted and Hawk glared at his partner. "I suppose you believe I deserve it as a payback for tolerating me while I subdued my mate."

Janus smirked and Hawk snorted at him. They moved forward through the penal sphere, their gazes roving over everything in sight. Patrolling the convicts was not a duty to take lightly. More than one Hunter had learned that lesson at the expense of his life. Hawk considered the female casting them a worried look. The male beside her spat on the ground but looked back at her breasts with a leer that was unmistakable.

Prostitution ran rampant in the sphere. Everything that might be sold, was. There were very few exceptions. Even the innocent who chose to follow their convicted family into imprisonment often became as greedy as the convicts. Hawk's mate was an exception. He'd found Tova on these streets and inspected her wristbands only to view an argument between her and her sibling over her refusal to prostitute her body for money. She had snared his interest with her solid strength in the face of so much lawlessness around her. Like a single blossom that grew up between stones. Transplanting her had been his greatest deed.

"Tova is expecting my child."

Janus grinned. The news spread through him like heat on a cold morning. Maybe they were mellowing with their age because a baby had never interested him before. Sure, he made the expected responses when his comrades announced births. He looked at the images of their families and smiled, but children had never really impacted his life before.

Tova was different. He and Hawk shared each other's lives. Hawk viewed each and every inspection he did to ensure that Janus was dealing fairly with the convicts they patrolled. He did the same to Hawk. When Hunters were assigned any command or penal sphere duty, they were expected to tolerate a partner. Many Hunters didn't take well to the lack of privacy, but it was a mark of accomplishment for both of them that they had endured it and become productive through their teamwork.

The side effect of it was that he'd witnessed each and every encounter Hawk had with Tova. Lust was a natural reaction to watching the couple touch each other. Sharing Tova had been considered natural as well, but Janus was not in love with her as Hawk was. Tonight, Hawk would see the first encounters he'd had with Fay and it would be his turn to shoulder the reality of another male lusting for his chosen female.

He could share with Hawk. But a growl surfaced from his lips as he considered letting Hawk inspect his last day's rotation. Fay was his and he didn't like sharing that

with anyone. At least until he'd wrung submission from her. Janus caught a gleam in Hawk's eye and groaned. "You are too punctual by half in viewing my actions, Hawk."

"And you are impatient for our shift to end for a good reason. Do not be annoyed, I wanted to ensure that Fay was not left alone last evening." Hawk shrugged his powerful shoulders. "I hoped you would ensure that she was not prey to any Hunter with the nerve to chime her door now that her sire is gone."

Janus felt his temper cool. That was the reason he and Hawk worked so well together. There was no judgment between them. Lust was a natural thing. Honesty with their mates was the key to keeping their working relationship a steady one. "She belongs to me."

Hawk nodded agreement but lifted one eyebrow. Janus felt the unmistakable sting of jealously rise up but he clamped his control over it. Hawk would know Fay—he already did because he'd seen every moment that had passed last evening. Lust was expected in his partner. There was no way to avoid it. Sharing was the key to harmony between his working requirements and his personal quest to capture Fay.

"I will bring her to you soon."

Hawk chuckled. "There's no hurry. I don't linger in a cold bed at night." His partner turned and smirked at him once more. "Like you do."

Janus glared back at him. "Since Tova is with child, she has no further need of you bothering her at night."

"Oh she has need. Plenty of it." Hawk lost his taunting mood. His face smoothed into a firm mask as lust brightened his eyes. Janus watched the way his partner pressed his lips into a firm line, refusing to speak aloud what was growing in his mind for Fay.

Janus tightened his own expression, pressing any hesitation down. He would have to make sure Fay understood that Hawk would share her body from time to time. A grin tugged at his lips. She was going to spit her fiery temper at him when he informed her of that. It was the truth that he was looking forward to it. A deep surge of

anticipation moved through his cock as he considered the pleasure two males might drive a female towards during a shared experience.

Indeed, he was going to ensure she was informed of that approaching event and how much he was looking forward to it.

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Fay jumped as the door chimed. The lights instantly brightened in response to the chime being touched. Rubbing her eyes, she sat up and tried to shake the slumber from her brain. She had been so deep in the embrace of sleep that her brain didn't want to respond to her commands to think.

"Fay?"

Janus' voice from the outer room startled her. A soft shriek escaped her lips as she looked down at her nude body. She heard his steps quicken in response to her cry. Her hands fumbled with the bedding as Janus charged into the open doorway. Yanking on the sheeting, she pulled it over her breasts as his face appeared in her sight.

The look on his face was one she hoped never to witness again. Dark and dangerous, it sent a chill of fear down her spine. She sat staring at a Hunter who could kill if necessary. His face changed as he took in the sight of her. Heat flickered in his eyes and it shocked her because she had never really considered that she was attractive enough to make a male look at her the way Janus currently was. Hunger drew his face taut as a dangerous glint entered his eyes. His hands tightened on the doorframe just a small amount, but it sent a spike of anticipation through her because it felt like he was trapping her in the room.

It was a hard fact that he was doing exactly that. Pinning her in her own sleeping chamber with his superior strength. It wasn't that she feared he'd hurt her. It was a deeper knowledge that her own body would succumb to him that taunted her. She pulled the sheet higher in response.

"You should leave. I did not grant you permission to enter."

He nodded but stepped into the room anyway. His mouth was set into a hard expression that frightened her slightly. Janus wasn't in the mood to be pushed back. He'd gained ground last night, and the look on his face told her he wasn't going to give even an inch of it back.

In truth, he looked ready to stage the next phase of his assault. She shivered as she recalled exactly what he'd promised to do to her next.

"I will not wear a training harness!" Her cheeks turned scarlet as she recognized the error she'd committed by blurting out the name of the contraption. Janus' eyes flared with wicked delight as he reached into his belt for a moment. His black-gloved hand drew thin straps from a pouch. He held them up as his eyes considered where her nipples were showing through the sheeting.

"You mean *this* training harness? I think you shall wear it, Fay. In fact, I am looking forward to placing it on you myself." He moved a single step closer, the harness dangling from his hand. Her eyes were drawn to it without her consent because her clit was heating and throbbing with just the idea of being at the mercy of the three pleasure beads she could already see attached to one of the strips. Those little beads would drive her insane with pleasure, rubbing against her clit until she climaxed. A deep male chuckle drew her gaze back to Janus. He'd closed the distance between them and she pushed back across her bed before thinking. A soft snarl rose from her lips in response to her impulse.

"What displeases you more, Fay, my demands or your response?" The harness landed on the foot of her bed as he tugged each of his uniform gloves off. Watching the black fabric being removed felt oddly intimate and she shivered as she anticipated watching his jacket be discarded.

"It is my choice. I do not offer you my submission." She was pleased with the firm tone of her voice. The tremor moving through her body had worried her, but her voice did not fail her. Janus frowned again and she rose on her knees, pulling the sheet with her.

"You must find another, Janus. I intend to follow my father." She delivered her last statement in a quiet tone because she did not want to be abrasive to his pride. Janus was a Hunter worthy of her attention. He simply needed to understand that it could not be. She was a daughter first.

A hard arm clamped around her waist and imprisoned her. "Really? You are on your knees, nude, in the middle of your bed. I can smell your pussy beginning to heat. Tell me, Fay, is it the sight of the harness that is making you wet, or the memory of me tasting your slit?"

"You are coarse, Janus!" He lifted her off her knees, but not high enough for her to unfold her legs and gain any position of control over her body weight. He pushed her backwards, but controlled her landing as his body pushed hers back into the bedding, her knees spreading as his hips pushed her thighs wide.

"Nay, I am determined, Fay." His breath hit her lips and she gasped. Heat was racing through her body as her heart accelerated. His warm skin smelled delicious and her pussy was growing wet as she struggled to resist the urge to let her fingers touch his neck and discover what his skin felt like. His eyes locked with hers as she battled against the temptation to touch him and spread her legs wider in invitation.

"Would you rather I let you remain chaste?"

Her clit lamented that idea. Her pussy twisted with hunger. Where her mind might be set upon one course, her body wanted Janus to proceed with his conquest. The pleasure he'd given her yesterday had been a mere taste of the deeper ones she knew he could grant her. Her rebellious body craved that possession. Maybe even more because she knew she could not pledge with him. One single taste to keep her company on lonely nights in the penal sphere. There was one thing she was certain of—there was no way she would ever let a convict touch her now that she knew what Janus felt like against her skin. He was strong and aggressive, completely Hunter, and so very male she ached with the need to couple with him.

"I cannot offer you submission, Janus."

He stroked one scarlet cheek and tapped her lower lip before letting his hips settle against her spread body. Only the thin sheet lay over her exposed slit and the hard bulge of his cock pressed against her tender flesh. A hard whimper shook her chest as he watched her.

"You will offer me that submission, Fay. It is your choice alone." He pressed his cock against her body, mimicking the motion of mating. Her clit throbbed and her hips arched towards him. "I demand it." He leaned down and let his entire body press against her. Sweet enjoyment washed through her as he let just enough of his weight rest on her so that she wasn't crushed, but it triggered a surge of feminine delight that stunned her. He nuzzled her neck for a moment as she stretched her head up to offer the tender skin to his lips. His warm breath hit her ear as his hands captured the sides of her face to hold her in place. "But more importantly, I crave it. There is nothing I would deny you. Yet it will be by surrender." His voice was oddly tender, making her heart swell with emotion. It was an unexpected response because she had always viewed his attention as solely physical. She had never entertained any concept of deep emotion from him. Her fingers stroked the nape of his neck for a moment. The skin-to-skin contact was oddly intimate, and she heard him draw a harsh breath as she repeated the motion. He lifted his chest and held his weight on his elbows so that their eyes could lock. His fingertips grazed her cheeks as he considered her.

"You might even begin to love me."

There was an odd note of hope in his voice that was surprising. It tempted her to just give in to the moment and let him sweep her away because it was far more inviting than walking into a penal sphere. But she had never settled before and her heart certainly wasn't going to be cast aside when it was the only true thing that she had to give. "Love is not a game, Janus."

His lips kicked up into a grin. "Do you think I consider it such? I will have to show you otherwise."

"Can you?" She bit into her lip as she heard the pleading note in her own voice. Lusting for his body did not prepare her for the emotion filling her heart. Loving him would be so much more dangerous.

A deep male chuckle was her response. "Do not confuse dominance with an inability to love. I am honest with you, Fay, in what I will demand. That does not mean I cannot love you." He pressed a hard kiss against her mouth to seal her response behind her lips. His hands held her head in place for his kiss. Her breasts craved his body weight again as he ran his tongue over hers in a slow tangle. Surrender shimmered with unmistakable appeal as she ran her fingers through his short hair, seeking more skin-to-skin contact. The need to be pressed completely against his harder, male body consumed her as she stroked his tongue with hers in bold invitation.

He left her a moment later. A shiver raced over her skin as she was suddenly cold without his body pressing against hers. The sheet was pushed up over her thighs a second later as Janus knelt at the foot of her bed and pressed her thighs wide. She was fascinated by the shimmer of heat in his eyes. It held her mesmerized as his hands smoothed over her hips.

"You will wear the harness." The first strips hit her belly and she flinched. Janus locked stares with her for a moment as he soothed her bare belly with a firm hand. "Because I will have you and I will not see your body torn."

His voice was firm with his determination. A training harness was something she had grown up knowing about but never truly understood. Maybe it was the difference between the genders but females dreaded the training harnesses and Hunters anticipated the moment they would place one on a female. But the look on Janus' face as he drew the straps over her bared belly was not one of possession as she had assumed it would be. Determination glittered in his eyes but his lips were set into a hard line as if he was struggling to do what he considered the correct thing.

She had never entertained the idea that a training harness was for her benefit. The contraption was going to slide and rub against her clit with every move she made,

pushing her towards climax over and over without any emotion, only pure physical stimulation. Janus stroked the center of her slit before placing the little pleasure beads against her tender flesh. He tightened the straps of the harness and clamped them in place with a small hand tool. It would have to be cut off her body, yet another design aspect that had always made her loathe the idea of wearing one.

Tonight she was torn between the idea of being a captive in harness and the knowledge that she would not be chaste when dawn broke. Janus stroked her belly with a hand that shook slightly before he looked at her face and grunted with hard approval. Small lines around his eyes showed the stress marking his face as he stood up. He offered her a hand and she stared at his open palm for a long moment. Not taking his hand felt so petty, so she lifted her own and placed it into his.

"Let us go someplace. I confess that being in this room is more than my control can take."

A soft laugh escaped her lips because Janus had never struck her as being overcome before. His fingers tightened on her for a moment as he tugged her forward. Her amusement died as the beads hidden in her slit moved, smoothly gliding over her clit. Janus cupped her chin with a firm hand to keep her eyes on his.

"Have a bit of pity and contain your amusement. I might demand many things but I would never willingly cause you pain. Is that not worthy of love?"

Swallowing hard, she turned and let a robe slip over her nude body. Somehow, she had become relaxed with his seeing her bare flesh. Whether or not she wanted to trust him was not within her power to control. The emotion was already growing, sending its roots deep into her. So much that she hadn't worried about standing near him with her body bare. But the way he looked at her made her confidence surge forward. Beauty truly must be in the eye of the beholder because she felt beautiful from looking at the expression on his face.

She slipped her feet into a pair of shoes then moved towards the door. The beads slipped against her slit as she went, making her nipples contract. She stopped to pull a

brush through her hair. There was no hesitation because she craved the last intimacy as much as he did. Maybe more because she understood that it would be a single night, stolen before the reality of life shattered their hopes for anything more. For now, she was going to follow him so that the training harness would do its work.

"You cannot claim to love me, Janus."

"I didn't." He came up behind her and clamped a strong arm around her waist. "Yet love cannot exist without trust. You do not trust me yet." His eyes connected with hers as he moved her forward and the training harness performed its task. She shivered as sensation shot up into her pussy. More fluid eased from her sheath to coat the little beads as Janus moved her forward a few more steps. "I accept the challenge of earning your trust. Love will follow."

He said it with such determination it would have been simple to believe him. As pleasure began to build beneath the little pleasure beads, she found it hard to recall just why she needed to resist leaning on him at all. She had always refused to be his pet, but love was an entirely different matter. Only the fortunate loved. It was that thing that her parents had treasured and she had viewed as their child. There was no force greater or more frightening because it endured beyond death. Her father was an example of that.

"Come, Fay, let us be done with this struggle."

She raised an eyebrow at him and moved forward without his aid. "Since I am wearing a harness, what do I need you for, Janus? I believe you are correct—there is no further need for struggle. I can see to my own needs."

She walked out the front entrance with her chin level and a suspicious curve on her lips. It was more of a smirk than a smile, but Janus found himself chuckling at her bravado. It was very possible he was falling in love with her. It would explain the amount of effort he'd invested in bringing her to this moment. If it were mere physical release he craved, he could have found it a hundred times over. Fay was more. Her resolve only increased her value in his opinion. There were a few daughters who had

cast him flirting looks, but they coveted his position. Fay only longed for his embrace. He had noticed it at the weekly gatherings and it was those stolen looks that he craved.

Cornering her was only half the fun. Gaining her trust would be one of the greatest tasks he had ever undertaken. Stepping forward, he followed her and let his eyes linger on the sway of her hips, drawn to the sight of her with a devotion that went far deeper than anything he'd ever felt for another female. If that was the beginning of love, then he welcomed it.

* * * * *

Edric missed his daughter. The veteran Hunter tried to fend off thinking about her, but it was impossible. That was not a terrible thing though. Family should miss each other. It was a sign of affection and he treasured that bond with his child.

"Miss me? I brought you more rations."

Edric jumped. He turned and sent a hard stare at the female who had managed to sneak up on him. He didn't like the fact that she moved so silently. She actually winked at him as she placed a bundle on his doorstep. All convict dwellings were required to have the front door open during the sunlight hours.

"You're welcome. Have a nice day."

She delivered her words in a mocking tone that was too sweet to be considered serious. But there was also a sparkle of enjoyment in her blue eyes that reminded him of Fay. His mouth was twitching up before he stilled the emotional reaction. Alana raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well now, that's a pleasant surprise. Didn't know you had it in you, Edric."

She used his name on purpose. Edric knew it and the laughter dancing in her eyes confirmed it. She offered him a shrug.

"Don't worry. If you want surly, sullen company, you're in the right place. I'm just an anomaly."

"Then I am lucky to have you assigned to bringing my rations."

"Well, you were. This is your last delivery. You have to pick them up now, like the rest of the convicts. But I'll still bring you work. I'm assigned the task of keeping count on parts."

That brought a little twist of regret to him. Edric clamped his control down on top of it. Alana was a convict. The bands on her wrist were black, confirming that she had been judged guilty of a high crime. The only thing beyond that was execution.

"Then you have my thanks for your efforts, Alana."

"No problem."

She turned and left. Edric watched her go and frowned. She seemed misplaced among the convicts on the streets. Her step was light, and he could still see the way her eyes shimmered. He had devoted his life to keeping the law, and today was the first time he had ever questioned a result of that law. Alana seemed misplaced in the penal sphere. There was a feeling burning through his gut that told him she wasn't vicious.

Shaking his head, he resumed his labor assignment task for the day. Every convict worked, so he would too until he drew his thieves out. Time was not the issue—what mattered was getting it done. He could not move too quickly. He would have spare supplies to trade, but couldn't begin to offer them on the underground market too soon or his buyers might become suspicious. The only thing that bothered him was the thought of his daughter. Edric grinned at his own musings. Every parent had a portion of themselves that refused to conform to duty. He would tend to his task, but his mind would still wander to his daughter. That was what made a man rich, his family. Material things meant little when you had no one to share them with. Even this duty would not mean very much if Fay wasn't there when he returned to the Hunter sphere. Being dedicated to his duty was a form of honoring their little family unit. He persevered so that the name he shared with her was an honored one, or at least it might be once he had completed his assignment.

And he missed her sorely. It was to be expected.

Alana was the only surprise he had had today.

Chapter Five

Moonlight shimmered all around her as the planet rotated away from the sun. Fay considered the view as the night breeze blew against the perspiration coating her forehead.

"Do not bite your lip."

Fay offered him a soft snort instead. "Stop telling me what to do, Janus. I am not a trophy."

He chuckled as his hand stroked her back, all the way down to her hips. He curled his fingers around the curve of one hip and guided her forward a few more paces. The beads slid through her wet slit making it impossible to hold back a whimper. Too much pleasure was twisting through her now from the walk to the park. She quivered as her clit demanded more friction to grant her relief from the sensation.

"If you were my trophy, I would be able to use your ritith to expedite this matter."

She gasped as the idea of a *ritith* went through her mind. It was a little bar, inserted through a female's clit that would vibrate at the press of a button. Hunters used them on Trophies. The idea being that those females would quickly lose their taste for defiance as a *ritith* stimulated their clits, distracting them from any resentment over their loss of rights.

"If I were a trophy, you would not be interested in me." She tossed her words at him, watching for his response. There was a part of her that needed to be valued, as she had two days past. Maybe it was a weakness, but she could not deny the feeling. She did not want to be anything like a trophy female. She was a Hunter's daughter.

"I know who you are Fay and it has been my wish to learn more about you."

He gently but firmly pushed her forward again. Somehow, his hands were twisted around her arm, and she was powerless to resist. Pain shot up her arm if she resisted.

Janus moved her in a slow circle around him as he stepped backwards. The beads slipped against her clit and she moaned as climax broke through her. Her body jerked and Janus clamped her against his body as the pleasure swept through her. She clutched at his uniform as her legs refused to hold up her body completely. The pleasure even went through her brain, stealing her ability to think for long moments.

" A *ritith* is for a convict."

Janus cupped her chin and raised her face so that their eyes met. "You might enjoy it." His eyes glittered for a long moment. "But I admit to enjoying bringing you to climax myself. Handling you will be my pleasure."

She hit him, a soft punch that didn't really inflict any pain because of the thick muscle covering his chest, but she enjoyed giving in to the impulse anyway. Frustration was taking on so many forms, she had trouble keeping pace. Her reactions were spilling over the dams built up by years of training that taught you to temper your responses with wisdom.

The corner of his mouth twitched up in amusement, making her groan with frustration. But there was an additional emotion moving through her as well, an enjoyment of being able to tease him. He tolerated it, even looked as though he was enjoying it. She had never pictured them playing with each other. Mating, yes, but this was teasing, and that was surprising because she treasured the little intimacy. In his own male fashion he was poking fun back at her as well. Her father was the only person she played with.

"Maybe I should simply keep the harness and send you back to your dwelling."

Janus moved alongside her hip, with his chest against one of her shoulders. With her wrist held in one strong hand, he moved her around him again. "I like the idea of handling you better." He stopped and turned her to face him as his arms held her against his body. The beads slid over her sensitive clit with every step. Her hands spread out over his uniform as she shivered in the grip of hard arousal. She wanted to climax but recalled in vivid detail how much more she preferred Janus' touch to the

training harness. She detested his uniform because it stood between her fingers and his chest. The fabric of her robe was uncomfortable, scratching her ultra-sensitive skin with each movement she made. Time seemed endless because all she wanted to do was return to her dwelling where the waiting would be finished and she could succumb to her cravings. Tipping her head back, she witnessed a flare of arousal in his eyes. His cock was hard against her belly and she suddenly didn't care for the tender concern he was lavishing on her. She wanted to taste the hard, arrogant Hunter who had pushed his way right into her life. The impulse didn't make any sense, but she was past reasoning anything out.

"Take me home, Janus. I loathe this harness and this waiting." His face lost its controlled expression. She stroked her hand up to his neck and sighed as her fingers touched his bare skin. "I have been thinking about you for far too long."

His hands tightened on her hips. A flexing of his fingers over each curve as he pressed his cock harder against her body. There was a hint of uncontrolled hunger in his eyes and it empowered her. Even that little hint of being in control of such a powerful male was addictive. A bolt of fear went through her as well, but it mixed with her desire creating a potent mixture that was intoxicating.

"You have masked it well enough." Her words were too much temptation. Janus couldn't let it flood his mind because it would wash aside every well-thought-out strategy he had. Yielding so much control wasn't his style, but that was the dangerous part of answering his need for Fay. She was an addiction that might control him if he weakened. That was the main reason he'd resisted claiming her for an entire year.

"One does not choose a lover without consideration, Janus." She stepped away from his body and enjoyed the slide of the pleasure beads against her clit. Her body was alive with sensation and she embraced it as she cast a hungry look back at Janus. "Would you prefer I answered my sexual impulses lightly?"

"I offered for you in front of your father and my comrades. That is not lightly."

His voice was rough with frustration. He reached forward across the space she'd placed between them and grasped her wrist. Such a simple gesture, but it felt intense. His fingers closed around her limb, securing her in his grasp once more. Satisfaction flickered in his eyes now. "Was that not worthy of your expectations?"

"If kneeling in front of you with witnesses is what you crave, you need to find another, Janus." Her voice was laced with disappointment, but she meant each word. There was confidence in her voice, even if she heard the fear of rejection in it as well. It might have been much wiser to simply leave her feelings unspoken, but she could not use him. Her temper flared up at the sparks that rose between them. They were opposites. Two things that would never mix well, very much like oil and water. Each touch only chained her to him further, but it was a doomed attraction. He wanted a female who would bend and she was as rigid as the trunk of a tree.

"You see? I was correct to resist you. We do not suit. You must find another."

She turned, but never made it even one full step away from him. A hard arm snaked around her body as he closed the small gap between them. She whimpered as his body heat wrapped around her and his cock pressed against her lower back, taunting her with its presence. A deep shudder shook her body as need became too much to contain. There was no more control, only enduring.

"You will belong to me." His voice was low and laced with determination. His arms closed tighter around her, allowing her to feel his strength for a mere moment before he relaxed enough to keep from crushing her smaller body. His breath teased her ear as he leaned down to whisper. "But you are correct about one thing. There will be no more waiting."

He grasped her wrist and let her body go as he knelt in front of her. He dragged her over his shoulder with the use of his grip on her wrist. He pushed back up to his full height and her feet left the ground as her head landed against his back. His free hand landed on top of her bottom. He cupped one side of it and grasped the flesh as he began retracing their steps towards her dwelling.

She had pushed him past his limits.

Fay stared at Janus, fascination capturing her complete attention. She rested against her own bed and let her gaze rest on her companion. He was blocking the doorway of her sleeping room as he began to pull his uniform gloves off. Now that they were inside once more, he was shedding his uniform, pushing his duty aside in favor of joining her in intimacy. Gone was the Hunter who had challenged her for weeks on end. She faced the man. Beneath his uniform was a male she knew precious little about. The only thing she seemed positive of was the fact that she was not sorry she had tempted him.

Anticipation surged through her blood at a speed that threatened to make her lightheaded. Her heart was pounding beneath her breasts as she watched him work open the front fastenings of his uniform top. Her gaze followed his hands with a devotion that bordered on obsession. He pulled the edges of his uniform apart to reveal the dark hair covering his torso. The image had sprung up in her memory endlessly but it was so much better in person.

Fay pushed up off her bed and moved towards him. She was too excited to remain still any longer. Hunger flickered across his eyes as she moved smoothly across the floor until her fingers threaded through his chest hair. A shiver moved over his chest, rippling past her fingertips as they lingered over his flesh.

Janus was positive he'd never before been so aware of a single touch.

Yet it was more than that. Fay was stroking him, savoring the contact of their skin as she slowly moved her hands until her palms were also pressing flat against his abdomen just below his ribs. She fanned her fingers out over his lowest ribs and he watched as she gasped delicately in reaction to touching him. It was by far more moving than tasting her slit had been. No one might have ever made him believe that he'd come to think of such a simple caress as so important, but it hit him with the force of a tidal wave. This had been what he truly craved, her compliance, a touch that was freely given, not taken once he'd cornered her.

Fay bit into her lower lip again and pulled her gaze up his body until their eyes met. Uncertainty filled her face as she waited to see what he would make of her boldness. She hadn't been able to resist the impulse to touch him. Fear laced her rising anticipation as she tried not to consider him leaving her because she was not timid as chaste females were expected to be. But she also felt a rising need to make sure he valued her as she was, not as he wished her to be. Living life as an ornament frightened her more than the idea of watching Janus leave her.

Sliding her hands up, she pushed his uniform open wider. "I have wanted to touch you. Like this."

"Finish the job, Fay." He caught her chin in a firm hand to keep their eyes locked. Leaning down he whispered against her ear, "Push my uniform over my shoulders."

It was a command. Yet it was one she wanted to obey. Her hands smoothed over his chest to his male nipples. She traced their flat, smooth surface and gently pinched the center of each one. A small shudder shook his chest, making her smile.

"As you like." She pushed the black uniform over his shoulders but didn't follow the black fabric down his arms. She left it there, binding his arms as she leaned forward and licked one taut nipple. A harsh groan escaped his lips as the hand that had been holding her chin threaded through her hair to grasp the back of her neck.

"Suck it." This time his voice was harsh and it awakened the frantic hunger that had gripped her when she spied him fucking a trophy. Her lips closed around his nipple instantly and she drew on it hard. His hand gripped her nape as she flicked her tongue over the little point and felt fluid moving down the inside of her pussy.

"Now stroke my cock." His voice was rough with emotion. The telltale emotional response empowered her and her hand was slipping down his chest as she moved her lips to his untasted nipple. Her fingertips glided across the ridges of hard muscle on his abdomen until they found the waistband of his pants.

"Keep going."

She released his nipple with a little pop and looked up into his eyes. His grip on her neck remained firm as his breath hit her wet lips. Hunger blazed in his eyes, mesmerizing her as she let her hand smooth over the fabric of his pants until they rested over the hard erection pushing the front of the garment forward.

"Very good." He pressed a hard kiss onto her mouth. The uniform top didn't bind him in the least. He shrugged it back up onto his shoulders as his mouth pressed her jaw open to allow his tongue to thrust deeply into her mouth. He cupped her bottom with his free hand and pulled her against his body, trapping her hand on top of his cock. His tongue stroked her as he walked her backwards across her living space. The beads on her training harness slipped up and down her slit.

She tore her mouth away from his as she gasped. Pleasure was tightening under the beads once more, making her desperate for release.

"Not yet." Janus released her and stroked his hands down her arms. He grasped either side of her robe and pulled the garment up. That quickly, he bared her. A shiver went over her skin as her arms crossed over her breasts. It was a defensive reaction to being stripped so quickly. Being bold only allowed her the illusion of control. Janus might take it back whenever he chose. There was a sharp chink of metal as he removed a knife from his belt. The meager light in the room flashed off its polished surface for a moment before she felt its cold blade against the skin of her bottom. A flick of his wrist and he cut the training harness off her.

"You were right to refuse a *ritith*." Something blazed in his eyes that made her back away from him. "I much prefer being in command of your pleasure, and not with a button. I want to feel your flesh when I hear you cry out."

He shrugged out of his uniform top and tossed it aside with one flick of his wrist. The knife was pushed back into its sheath before he pulled the waistband open on his pants. A wicked look crossed his face as he curled one finger at her.

"Come here, Fay, and remove my cock from my uniform."

"And if I don't?" Her pussy hated that idea, but the arrogant tone of his command deserved the tart reply.

"You'll still be chaste when the sun rises."

She frowned at him. Janus tightened his control as he forced his feet to stand in place. Keeping that promise was going to be the greatest test of his control, but he needed to know if she wanted him. Wanted him deep inside her body where no male had ever touched her, the intimate embrace that needed to be offered if a man wanted it to have any value. Any male might take a female's body, but only a tempered warrior got to taste what the gift of a lover was like.

He refused anything less from her. "I will leave if you like but I will have your submission if I am going to claim your body. Come here and handle my flesh. Bare it. Invite me to become your lover. No doubts between us. You may never say that I overwhelmed you."

He needed her to issue the invitation too. Pride coated his words and it only enhanced his appeal. Maybe that was the reason she had never been able to shake her fascination with him. His demands might be arrogant, but the male beneath that commanding tone was far stronger than any other who had tried to attract her attention. It touched something deep inside her, setting off a need to allow him to be her mate.

"But are you sure you can stand still for the time it takes me to issue that invitation?" Her voice was husky and almost sounded like a stranger's. A little bubble of laughter shook her chest as she moved towards him. She laid her hands on his chest once more, moving her fingers through his crisp chest hair. She lingered over the touch as he shook and bit into his lower lip to contain a snarl. All she heard was a smothered sound. It made her smile as she slipped her hands down his torso in a slow, lingering touch designed to test his compliance.

"As long as your hands are on me, I can stand."

He lifted his hands and he let them glide over her breasts. She sucked in her breath as he returned her teasing touches. Determination flickered in his eyes as his fingers rolled her hard nipples.

"I will be happy to match you, Fay, touch for touch."

Her hands shook but she gained control over them as she sent them down his belly determined to keep pace with him. "Ah, but I believe we must make allowances for the differences in our bodies. I need to make sure that I am touching something just as tender on your body."

Playing lost its luster as she sent her hands into his open pants. She clasped his erection and pulled it free as she pressed the open edges of his uniform away from his cock. She couldn't resist looking at it. The head was crowned with a thick ridge all the way around and it was very thick. The thing thrust straight up from his belly as she closed her hands around it.

A harsh growl came from him. Moving her hand, she pressed it all the way to the base before moving it slowly up to the ridge on the head. There was a slit on its top and it glistened with a drop of fluid. The memory of spying on him offered up another thing she had witnessed. It was wicked, but keeping him poised on the edge of control as he did to her was too tempting. Lowering her body onto one knee she licked the slit before Janus realized her intention.

He snarled and caught the back of her head in a hard grip. A little twist of pain shot out from her hair as he gripped it, but she tipped her head up to lock stares with him. She let her thumb rub over the wet spot she had tasted and his cheek ticced.

"Let go of my hair, Janus." Fay purred out her order and laughed at the incredulous look that took control of his face. "Obey me, or I won't suck your cock."

She was going to be the death of him. Janus glared at her, but his hand had already released her hair before a single thought got through his clouded brain. Going to his grave at her command was worth it. His cock throbbed as he watched her shift her attention back to it. Her fingers tightened around the staff before she leaned forward to

lick the slit once more. Pleasure raced down the length and into his balls. He ground his teeth together as she dragged her tongue in a lazy circle around the head before opening her jaw to take it into her mouth. She held the staff steady as her lips sealed closed around the entire head of his cock. He gasped as pleasure nipped along his cock and his hips thrust it forward.

Janus grasped the back of her neck once again. Satisfaction rippled through her as she relaxed and allowed him to gently fuck her mouth. She enjoyed the taste of his precum as his cock worked in and out of her mouth in jerky motions. He hissed through clenched teeth but didn't drive too much of his length into her compliant mouth. He might have—it would have been simple with his grip on her nape, but he maintained control as his hips flexed and pushed his cock a little deeper into her mouth.

"No chaste female should know how to suck a male so well."

She chuckled, but frowned next as Janus used his grip on her neck to hold her away from his cock. The ruby head was wet from her suckling and she wanted to push him further, witness his climax beneath her touch as he had done to her. He lowered his body to her level instead. Knelt in front of her and held her neck in one hard hand. She still had to tip her head up so that their eyes could connect. His eyes were mere slits as he placed a hard kiss against her mouth.

"Who taught you about sucking?"

She laughed at his question. Janus frowned and that seemed to amuse her even further. "You Hunters are so naïve when it comes to females."

"Yes, naïve. Your fellow Hunters bring their trophy females to meeting hall and leave them to mingle freely. What do you think females who are sex pets talk about? Some of them delight in spreading information on the Hunters they've been shared with."

His hand tightened on her neck as his eyes burned into hers. "Like me."

It was a flat statement. She watched the surprise fade into acceptance as she shrugged.

"Of course. Did you think trophy females don't enjoy being in control for a few moments, even if that is while they taunt chaste females? Some of them are very nasty and enjoy attempting to frighten others. There are others who prefer to torment pledged females with stories of their pledge-mates."

The fingers on the back of her neck began to massage the tense muscles. Just the memory of some of those females taunting her drew the cords running up her neck taut.

"I never wanted you frightened of me."

"I wasn't." She said it too quickly. Doubt filled his eyes as the hand on her neck stopped rubbing. Firm determination flickered at her as he moved closer to her body.

"That is good to hear. Now we need only make sure that you believe it. I would never hurt you, but I will have you."

Reaching forward, he fingered her wet slit for a moment. A gasp crossed her lips as he slipped a fingertip over her clit. She lost the confidence that had filled her as need renewed its grip on her. She could feel his body heat along her entire body. Her skin more aware of each touch as anticipation surged through her.

"I'm going to penetrate your body now."

She licked her lower lip as a shiver shook her delicate neck beneath his fingers. Janus kept his grip firm as the moment drew closer. Claiming her body with the minimum amount of pain was a matter of honor. Controlling her movement was key to ensuring he mounted her as painlessly as possible. Later he could fuck her hard. Tonight, he needed to stretch her pussy without tearing the delicate skin.

"I know."

One thick finger thrust into her pussy and she whimpered. Need had turned painful as her hips lifted towards the penetration.

"Spread your knees."

She hesitated because it was such a submissive position. He didn't wait for her to comply though. He released her neck and pulled his finger from her body. She gasped

as she lost that touch, her pussy lamenting its leaving. She felt so empty, like her body had been made to be stretched and filled. Janus gripped her knees and pushed them wide. She was still kneeling and he slid his knees right between her open thighs, sitting back on his hunches. The head of his cock brushed her slit as he moved his hands up her thighs in a slow stroke.

"Do you want me inside you?"

She cried out as his hands grasped each of her hips in that same iron grip. The head of his cock was pressing against the opening of her pussy but she was powerless to move any farther onto its length by his hold. The hair on his chest teased her belly and nipples as she reached for his shoulders in a desperate attempt to be closer to him. But he held her hips steady as he locked stares with her. Demand simmered in his eyes.

"Fay?" His voice was harsh with the demand for submission he'd always made of her. Even now he was not content with mere capture, he craved conquest. But her body didn't care, if submission granted her the pleasure she needed.

"Yes."

He gently massaged her hips as a soft, male chuckle shook his chest. He leaned towards her and whispered next to her ear, "Is it so hard? Desiring me? I have been drawn to you since the first moment my eyes landed on you. Tell me to claim your body. But I admit I want much more than just your flesh."

"Oh yes." She was breathless with the tenderness she heard in his voice. She had never suspected his heart might be involved in his quest to claim her. Gripping his shoulders, she nuzzled her face against the hard column of his neck as his hips thrust and he pulled her lower body forward. His cock penetrated easily due to the thick fluid the training harness had milked from her pussy. Her sheath hummed with approval as she was filled. But pain twisted through her as her pussy was stretched beyond anything it had ever experienced. She trembled and gasped, setting her teeth into her lower lip to silence any cry. She wanted the penetration as much as he did.

"Shhh..." He dropped a light kiss on her temple as he held her hips still. Only part of his cock was lodged inside her. His shoulders shook with the effort needed to control the urge to ram his entire length into her body. She heard his breath rasp between his clenched teeth while he waited for the first pain to dull. Her fingers were curled into talons on his shoulders, and she drew a harsh breath into her lungs.

"More," she gasped and tightened her grip on his hard shoulders but lifted her head away from his neck to ensure that her words were heard. "Be done with this waiting, Janus. I am not so fragile."

His cock slid from her body as she heard a soft snarl escape his lips. His hips flexed between her spread thighs as he pulled her towards his cock. This time he pressed farther into her body, opening her channel with his cock. Pain bled though her pussy as she leaned her upper body away from his chest. She held on to his shoulder as she looked at the ceiling and felt her unbound hair brush her bottom as her head hung back.

"Sweet Fay, you are magnificent. Take me." He pulled free and pushed deep as he gasped. His cock lodged completely within her body as he held her in place. The pain subsided as pleasure rose above it. There was no controlling the urge to lift her hips towards her lover. Her clit demanded friction as the need to climax took complete control. Raising her eyes to his, she cupped the sides of his head with her hands. His eyes glittered with hunger as she felt his cock throb deep inside her pussy.

"Show me, Janus, show me how the pleasure is really meant to feel. Take me." She wanted to come on his cock. Not under his tongue or finger or pleasure bead. She needed to feel her body being stretched as climax ripped through her.

"Your wish is my command." He snarled his words as he pulled his cock from her body. A hard thrust sent his cock back into her pussy as little wet sounds filled the air. As his cock moved, it slid along her clit, making her whimper. Pleasure rose from each stroke as he began to thrust and move between her thighs. His hands taught her the motion as he tipped her towards each incoming thrust and pulled her back while his cock was leaving her pussy. She clawed at his shoulders as pleasure tightened and bit

into her body. Her entire pussy tried to clamp around the hard cock filling it. The pleasure wasn't confined to just her clit—it raced through her sheath and up into her womb as she cried out with the pure abundance of it. There was nothing but the hard flesh inside her and the shoulders she clung to while pleasure jerked her away from conscious thought.

The grip on her hips tightened painfully as Janus bucked between her thighs. His cock suddenly jerked inside her and she felt the warm spurt of his seed filling her. He bit her neck as that seed triggered another climax. This one was deep in her belly. She whimpered as his teeth inflicted a sharp sting on the side of her neck and it mixed with the deep pleasure radiating up from her womb. Her lungs couldn't inflate fast enough to keep pace with her frantic heart rate. The world spun out of focus as she let her head lie on one hard shoulder. The cock inside her was still throbbing as her thighs gripped his hips, unwilling to release her lover just yet. Nothing mattered but the sound of his heartbeat as it filled her ears and began to match her own.

Nothing.

Chapter Six

She looked too delicate, secure and snug in her narrow bed. He smoothed a sheet up over her shoulder. She muttered in her sleep as the last two days of emotional demand took control of her. There were dark smudges beneath her eyes that betrayed the fact that she had slept little since her father's arrest.

Janus grinned as he shrugged and the little punctures on his shoulders stung. Fay was smaller, yet she was as bold as he was. She wasn't any more docile than he. That only made him more confident of his choice to claim her chastity. Maybe she hadn't offered him submission but sharing her virgin body with him had been far more intense than seeing her kneeling in front of him. It was odd the way you pictured a moment in your life and than came face to face with the reality of being wrong and enjoying that. He would not have changed this night for all the public offerings of submission in the Hunter sphere.

Janus turned and walked back into the front room. His body wanted to lie down next to Fay, to pull her against his frame and spend the rest of the dark hours inside her. He grunted as his cock pressed against his pants. He'd reclosed the garment as a barrier against the demanding flesh that didn't see the wisdom in waiting before sinking back into the hot pussy it craved.

The light over the doorframe flickered, announcing someone stepping on the threshold. Janus frowned as the door simply slid open. His body responded instantly, pressing back against the wall where the incoming person would see him last. The two males who stepped into the room didn't bother to sweep it with their eyes—they were already inside before they found him.

That was too late.

"State your business." Janus held his sidearm directly over the closest one's heart. The pulse beam weapon could deliver a fatal dose of heat to the organ with the touch of a button. But in so tight a space, he would have to take the second one with his bare hands. That suited him well enough. He lowered it as his eyes took in the features of his uninvited guests. Hunters Gilson and Fratz were newer additions to the force, but he had seen them. What didn't make sense was the civilian clothing both males wore. The sleeves of the tunics pulled down over their Hunter communication bands.

"And state why you have entered this dwelling." It wasn't official, or they would have come in uniform. Janus felt his temper rise as he contemplated the only thing of value in the dwelling—Fay, but she belonged to him.

"It's none of your concern." Fratz's voice betrayed his lack of confidence. The younger Hunter shifted on his feet but stepped back as he took in Janus. Even with the disruptor back on Janus' belt, neither man looked any more at ease.

"It is very much my concern. This dwelling is used by a female. You entered it without her permission. State your official business or report your transgression to your commander." Janus stepped forward and shot a hard glare at the younger Hunter. "Because I will do so before midday tomorrow."

Gilson swallowed roughly. The male tried to hide the nervous motion by coughing. Janus didn't believe it. His gut burned with suspicion and he trusted his instincts. Gilson shrugged before he offered him a lewd smirk.

"We just came for Fay. You understand how it is. Fratz is my partner. We might not be promoted yet but we'll share the females between us. No need for her to become a prostitute among the convicts."

Oh no! Fay watched from the shadows of her sleeping chamber. No need for her to sell her body to convicts when there were plenty of Hunters who would use her cheerfully. She wanted to blister their ears before ejecting them from her father's dwelling, but the tingle of pain between her thighs held her back. She was not as noble as her temper might like. Righteous anger hadn't interrupted the sweet flow of heat that

had seen her welcoming Janus into her body, so there was little point in screaming at the next pair of males who thought the same of her.

Janus stiffened. She watched his neck tense as he stepped right up and loomed over one of the invaders. "Fay is a free female. You have used your Hunter authority dishonorably to enter this dwelling. Get out."

They left and too fast. Fay watched the way both males abandoned the field in the face of Janus. Power radiated off him—it always had. That was the thing she was addicted to. The strength and the knowledge that he was more aggressive than any other male she had seen. Maybe it was a fatal flaw in her character, but she didn't want either of the two males who had just scurried out of her front door without a single protest. No, all they wanted was her body, and only if it came simply. Neither of them would have spent months pursing her.

"Yet you used your authority to enter."

Janus turned swiftly. His face was a hard mask of pure intent until he recognized her and scanned the room behind her for anyone else. His features relaxed as one side of his mouth rose in a grin. "I rang the chime first. Three times." He stepped towards her and stroked one side of her cheek. His fingers stopped under one eye and traced the dark circle she knew was marking her light skin. "I didn't think that you might be sleeping at such an early hour. But your bands reported you inside. I was concerned."

"I see." Her words were a mere whisper because his explanation touched her tenderly. His demands made her passion soar, but the moments when he took the time to explain things to her invaded her heart with a rich flow of affection. There was no thinking about it. Feelings didn't wait for the brain to sort them out or decide to accept or decline. The heart simply swelled with happiness, and at that moment she was flooded with affection.

Janus frowned for a moment. "You cannot stay here. It is unsafe." All traces of tender concern were now hidden in a firm tone of authority. He moved right past her

and brightened the room. Looking around, he took notice of the box she had already packed.

"This is my home."

Janus looked at her for a moment before he turned and pulled three of her colorful robes off their hangers and placed them on top of the practical ones she had decided to take with her into the penal sphere. "Any Hunter may open that door. I should not have overlooked that fact, but I assumed that my brethren would conduct themselves with honor. It appears some of the younger males have yet to mature past their impulses. You will come with me tonight."

"But you may open your door. I will not be able to keep you outside."

Janus turned and smiled at her. It wasn't a kind expression. Determination flickered in his eyes as he moved across the room and captured her waist. He pulled her snug with his body. A shiver raced down her frame as the robe she'd donned felt too thin to offer any true protection. She felt so vulnerable with him, as though he held the ability to strip aside her practiced social façades to get at the female who craved him. "I will follow you anywhere you go, Fay. But for tonight, you need rest, so let us not quarrel until sunrise." The corner of his mouth twitched back up into that boyish grin. "I wouldn't want to take advantage of you while you weren't at your fighting best." He slapped one side of her bottom as he released her and turned back to the box of clothing. He placed two pairs of her beaded silk slippers on top before lifting it.

"Get what else you want and come out. We're leaving."

He left her sleeping chamber and it felt like a challenge. She did not have to obey him, but there was a part of her that wanted to. Chewing on her lower lip, she cast a look around the room she had slept in since her birth. Without her father, it was only a place, with little value. Reaching for the photo album, she hugged it close and stepped into her shoes. She could not sleep here anymore, not when the two younger males might return. Emerging from the chamber, she found Janus watching the doorway. A look of relief mixed with approval filled his features as she stepped into the outer room.

Reaching for her personal bag, she hid the uncertainty that was racing through her. Her life was stretching out in front of her like a vast desert. She had no clue as to what she might find on the journey.

"Come, Fay. Let us find someplace private."

"All right." The concession in his order pleased her. Two days ago, he hadn't wanted privacy, but he was tempering his desires with her own whims. Now he was meeting her in the middle, and that filled her with enough confidence to step away from her family home. It was enough for now. Maybe she might be intent on joining her sire at the week's end, but for this night she would enjoy the company of her lover.

* * * * *

"They say you were a Hunter."

Edric noticed the sneer his profession provoked and clenched his teeth against the urge to dress the convict down with a few well-placed words. It would be a waste of time. A look at the male standing in his doorway showed him a scruffy individual, who, from the scent drifting on the evening breeze, didn't bother to use his ration of water for bathing his body. His was as ripe as two-week-old cheese.

"I've been a lot of things. Still am." Edric kept his hands moving in the steady motion of assembling. It was mindless work and that made it simple to continue to observe his guest without alerting him to the intense scrutiny he was under.

"Yeah. I heard that." The male looked around the dwelling and sniffed. "You might fit in around here. If you know how to be friendly that is."

Edric stopped working for a long moment. He met the man's eyes before he began moving his hands once again. "I like friendships that benefit both sides."

His guest snickered. "Heard that too. But since you got caught, I don't think there's anything you got that I want."

Edric let a deep chuckle rise up from his chest. The sound came from his enjoyment of watching his bait being sniffed by the local scavengers. This was merely the point man, not the convict in charge. It was an interview of sorts, but a very important one if he wanted to close his case with convictions. "You have no idea what I have."

The convict licked his lower lip and stepped closer. He lowered his voice as he cast a look out the open front door to see if anyone was watching or listening to them. "Like what?"

Edric shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing but friends. Isn't that the only thing a man truly owns? His comrades...contacts?"

Greed shone from the convict's eyes before he shook his head and looked suspiciously at Edric. "Around here, you got to prove what you say."

"There's more than one way to get a point across. What did you have in mind?"

The man's eyes filled with greed once more. Edric absorbed the expression and stored it in his memory as a lesson. Once you let yourself become lazy, selfishness ruled you. It was something he'd devoted his life to keeping out of honest spheres. Convicts were exiled to protect the honest citizen and this was a perfect example of why that was a just law. He would serve it even more determinedly after this assignment.

"Here." Reaching under the table he was working at, Edric pulled out a small tin container of preserved meat. He slid it across the table and picked up another energy pack to begin securing it to a base plate. It was simple electronics work. The completed boards would be used for home identification sensors or something similar. Each and every component he was given was carefully counted to ensure he was not pilfering units to trade on the black market.

"Where'd you get meat?" The convict licked his lips and smacked them before looking over his shoulder and hugging the tin to his belly to hide it from the street. Meat was strictly rationed among convicts to prevent them from building up too much muscle with the aid of high-protein foods. His own shoulders were broad and far more imposing than those of his company. Remaining behind the table was the best way to hide his greater strength and gain the confidence of the convict.

"Enjoy it. I don't go hungry. Never will." Edric tossed another completed circuit into the box and looked up at his guest. "Just remember that I like favors returned. You want stuff then I get something in exchange. Simple friendship."

"Yeah, I hear you. Fair enough." The convict stuffed the tin into his tunic and returned to his study of Edric. He sniffed again before rubbing the concealed tin. "I could get used to your friendship."

He turned and left. Edric fought off the smile that tried to lift his lips. He'd celebrate when the ring was busted out onto a work gang. Convicts were still offered choices. Even after judgment they could remain in a penal sphere and have better lives than those convicted of high crimes, but only if they reformed and did their fair share of labor each day. Food did not appear on the table, and clean water was not magically flowing into the sphere. All the resources that everyday life required took team effort. No single member of the population held the right to take more than he gave. That was the foundation of their law. If a convict could not join the effort, he was a felon and deported from even the penal sphere.

They were sent to the outer wastelands for chain-gang duty. It was backbreaking work. They sweated under the hot sun without the shield of a sphere to protect them from gamma radiation. Their skin leathered, and their eyesight suffered but there was work that needed doing if the population inside the spheres was to thrive. It seemed fair that those who could not behave decently ended up exiled. The law-abiding members of the population should not be exposed to their evil ways. More importantly, their genes must be removed from the breeding pool. All convicts were sterilized.

It might appear harsh, but it stabilized the population whose history was rich with unfairness that had lead to starvation and war. You earned your right to privilege by being a team member. Each person gave to the best of their ability. Convicts were tainted by their greed, and Edric was dedicated to their exile.

It was the honest truth that he was going to enjoy this assignment far too much. Of course the only person he owed an apology to was Fay. Leaving her was his only regret,

even if he knew she was past the age that he should feel so protective. His lips did twitch up. Maybe his protection was the barrier that needed lifting so that she might understand more of adult matters. Who knew? It was possible he'd return home to a pledging ceremony.

Now that would please him. Janus would be a fine addition to their family and the idea of a grandchild made him want to chuckle. Family was a man's true wealth. Edric nodded as he went back to assembling. It was strange the way you learned life's lessons. It took separation to understand how much he had. He would thank the gods for his newfound knowledge and pray that his daughter was doing as well.

Chapter Seven

She had no idea what she was doing.

Fay stood in Janus' dwelling and simply stared at the hints of its male inhabitant. It was strange to notice it so much more keenly here when she had shared a dwelling with her sire all her life. But she could practically feel it. Relaxing felt impossible as she turned slowly, listening for a hint of a sound to let her know when Janus returned from the back room. He'd carried her box of belongings right through the open living space without missing a step. Almost like a message.

She bit into her lower lip as she decided that his actions were very much a message. Janus was always direct and she liked that facet of his personality, even if it did frustrate her as often as it pleased.

"What are you thinking, Fay?" Janus' voice filled the room before he stepped into view. Her cheeks heated with a blush as she recognized how simple it was for him to remain in the darker sleeping chamber and view her. His shoulders filled the doorframe as he lingered in it a moment, judging her reaction to his company.

"That I am insane." She shrugged as she watched him frown at her reply. "Yet contentedly so. I suppose it's the same for all senseless creatures. They don't worry about being out of control."

"You mean to say, you must be unbalanced to share my company?"

Janus moved away from the doorframe and closed the distance between them. He reached out and combed his fingers through her hair. The motion felt intimate in an odd manner because she had never viewed her hair as attractive. Some females did, but her waist-length brown hair wasn't thick like many of her friends' and it had always paled in comparison.

She rolled her eyes at him. Boyish mischief sparkled in his eyes—she was certain of it. "Stop tugging at my hair. We are not children at study center."

"I never pulled the girls' hair." He offered her a frown that the sparkle in his eyes betrayed as false. Fay cast him a suspicious look and his lips twitched before breaking into a grin. The expression suited his face far better than she might have ever suspected. Seeing Janus as relaxed was not something she had ever really considered, but it must happen at some time—even to Janus. Everyone needed relaxing and fun. Why else did you devote your life to a profession if there was no fun after your duty hours were finished? Stale existence was bleak indeed.

"I tied their braid tails in knots."

She giggled at the image. "I believe that."

"I wouldn't tie yours." He wound it around his hand and used it to hold her head in place. "There are far better uses that come to mind."

He used that hold on her hair to keep her head in place while he leaned down to kiss her. It was a firm press of his lips against her mouth as he kept her captive with her mane. His free hand skimmed over her hip and up her belly to her breast. Her nipples tingled as his mouth became bolder and more demanding. He pressed her lips apart as her nipples contracted into hard little points that poked at her robe. His fingers smoothed over the delicate surface of her breast until they found the hard evidence of her arousal. The hand in her hair tightened a fraction, sending little nips of pain down her neck. But he controlled it expertly, never allowing the feeling to rise into true discomfort. It remained another level of sensation that sent her body surging back towards arousal as his tongue thrust into her mouth, boldly stroking and penetrating. Her clit throbbed between the folds of her slit as she reached for her lover.

Once more. He needed her at least one more time before he let her rest. There was a dark urge trying to push past his control. To pin her body in the center of his bed to fuck hard and deep for the rest of the night. But sweet seduction was far more intense. She slid her hands over his chest and it sent a bolt of intense pleasure straight into his

cock. He realized he didn't want to fuck—he wanted to lie with her. It was different, somehow more intimate, even if it involved the same motion of hips, the same penetration of his cock into her body. It was deeper and more intense somehow.

The last thing he planned to do was question just why that was.

Janus swept her off her feet without a single sound. His larger body cradling hers as he moved back into the dark sleeping chamber. Light spilled in from the main living space granting her a dim view of the huge bed waiting there. Her body hummed with approval as he angled her body and set her on it. He pushed her back, covering her body as he took her wrists and held them pressed to the surface of the bed.

"I've dreamed about this for a long time too. Trapping you beneath my weight. Waiting for you to wrap your thighs around my hips and welcome my cock into your body."

A deep shudder shook her as he whispered his words next to her ear. His hands gripped her wrists, keeping her captive as he licked her neck before scraping the tender skin with his teeth.

"Did you like it when I bit you?" He lifted his head, showing her a face deepened with shadow. He pulled her hands higher above her head as his hips slipped between her thighs, his body weight pushing her knees. The fabric of her robe refused to let her spread any further. A soft snarl came from Janus before he was pulling her off the bed with her captured wrists. Her feet touched the floor and he released her in order to bend down to grip the hem of her garment. A hard tug and he pulled the thing right up and over her head. That simply she was nude again.

"I like this much better. I might just hide that box of clothing and deny you any garments until you offer me submission."

A soft growl came from her lips in response. Janus chuckled at her temper. He turned her swiftly so that she faced the bed. His hands captured her hips and he pressed his body firmly against her. His uniform was harsh against her bare skin but the hard erection rubbing up and down the cleft of her buttocks made her quiver as

need flared up inside her pussy. She shouldn't need him so much again, but her body was impatient to taste the bliss he'd introduced her to. Her nipples wanted to be tasted, and they were painfully hard as he remained behind her, denying them any contact. She snarled again before wiggling her bottom from side to side across the hard cock pressing against her bottom.

"Stop." She jumped at the hard command in his voice. Shock held her frozen as she tried to decide what to think about the abrupt change in his voice. A hard smack landed on her ass as she deliberated.

"Janus!"

He clamped his hands around her wrists and bent her over until her hands touched the bed. He used his body to bend her into the submissive position as he bit into her neck. A whimper escaped her lips as the sensation from that nip raced straight into her clit. There was no rising passion this time, her pussy quivered with hot, immediate demand. The details didn't matter to her flesh.

"You will not move." His voice was hard but rich with hidden promise. She shivered when he left her hands on the surface of the bed and straightened up away from her. A warm hand rubbed the stinging side of her bottom. "You will remain as you are until given permission to move."

"This is nonsense." She groused at the idea but didn't move as he smoothed his hand over her other cheek.

His body suddenly covered hers once more as he cupped both of her hanging breasts. Another cry rose from her lips as he pinched both nipples. Her bottom twitched up, offering her pussy to him, but his uniform prevented any contact.

"Ah, Fay. Passion doesn't make sense. It is an experience that doesn't conform to logic. The only way you discover what truly satisfies you is to give in to the urge to sample each and every new sensation." He rolled and pinched her nipples once again before trailing his finger down the center of her spine. Pleasure raced into her clit as he continued right down the center of her buttocks and through her wet slit.

"Do you know why I took your virginity?"

His finger rubbed at her clit as her feet wiggled farther apart to allow him access. She wanted to come already, and her bottom was lifting for him in complete surrender. Nothing mattered but the pleasure shimmering under his finger.

"You need to be mastered, Fay. That's why you refused every other Hunter who cast a look at you." He slid his finger through her slit to the opening of her pussy. He teased it with a small amount of length as she whimpered. "You are not meant for a weaker male. You demand the chase and capture." He pressed his finger deep into her pussy as her bottom lifted for the penetration. He leaned over her back, his breath hitting the wet skin he'd bitten as he fucked her with a single finger. "And I demand submission, Fay. Here, between us. You will obey my commands or I will let your pussy burn with need. Do you understand?"

She snarled at him. Janus chuckled because the sound fit. Meek compliance wasn't what he craved. The combination of fire and surrender was what drew him to Fay. He worked his finger up into her pussy and grinned at the hot, wet sheath. His cock throbbed with need as he fingered her a few more times.

"Do not move. Not even your head."

He was gone a moment later. Fay hissed as she strained to hear any steps. All she could see was the shifting of shadows across the bed. Temptation to turn her head was strong but she remained in place as his words rang inside her head. It truly was within her power to submit. Excitement was flowing through her like strong wine. She was intoxicated with its grip. She needed to anticipate the next touch, and seeing it coming wasn't nearly as acute as waiting for it to land. Every inch of her skin was alive and eager for contact. Not knowing where Janus might stroke her next made it so intense she had trouble remaining still.

"Addictive, isn't it? The need between us isn't common, Fay." He smoothed a hand over her bottom and she sighed as sweet sensation moved through her spine. "Spread your feet farther apart."

She was moving before she considered the action. But her temper didn't offer up a hiss this time. She was too distracted by the hard throb in her clit. Just one little touch and she would climax. It was that intense.

"Ah, Fay, I could become used to seeing you waiting for my touch, my cock."

She laughed at him. Janus chuckled as he leaned over her once more. She gasped as his bare body connected with hers. His cock lay right down the center of her spread slit. The ridge of flesh that crowned the head of his cock rubbed over her clit making her frantic.

"I need to come, Janus." It was as close to pleading as she could get. Her pussy was begging for the hard flesh so close to it.

"First we'll play."

She snarled and he straightened back up. A hard smack landed on her unprotected bottom. "I told you I wanted you, and I do mean all of you." His hand trailed through the valley between her buttocks. He teased the back entrance a second before the shadows shifted and something smooth touched the puckered opening. A hard shiver shook her as he injected more lubricant directly into her bottom before tossing the small applicator aside. It landed on the bed in full view of her eyes as she felt him stroking and teasing the little opening. He pressed one finger into her and she shrieked. The sensation was too sharp.

"My cock is too large for your bottom, but it still belongs to me." He pressed his finger deeper into her as he pressed her hips down to hold her steady. Sensation snaked through her pussy and she sobbed without any clear reason why. She only knew that she could no long contain all the sensation inside her. Janus worked his finger in and out of her for a long time as she quivered and her clit begged for friction.

He pulled the finger free and the shadows shifted once again as he reached for something she could not see. The smooth tip of something touched her bottom before it was pressing into her well-prepared flesh. The skin around her back entrance protested but her hips were already pushing back towards the penetration, and the plug filled her before she could gasp with the discomfort. The thing pressed her pussy tight as it filled her bottom.

Janus smoothed a hand over each cheek before he ducked right under her body. He came up in front of her and she grasped his shoulders as he sat on the edge of the bed. His hands captured her hips as he pulled her down onto his cock. The thick, erect flesh penetrated her pussy. The plug in her bottom made her passage even tighter and she clasped his neck as she cried out with pleasure. Climax wasn't going to be fended off any longer. Janus held her hips as she used her thighs to rise up and then press down onto his cock. The hard flesh pressed against her clit as she lowered back onto him and pleasure jerked though her. Her voice bounced of the wall behind the bed as her pussy clamped down on his length and pleasure twisted through her womb. She lost track of time as she was tossed among the waves of pleasure. Her head landed on a hard, male shoulder when she finished and the cock inside her pussy twitched as Janus tightened his hands on her hips.

"Look at me."

His voice was hard but not with authority. There was something so personal edging it, she lifted her head to look into his face. He surged off the bed and her back landed in the middle of the soft surface. He held her hips hostage as he locked gazes with her.

"Tell me to claim you, Fay."

His face was covered in need and hunger. In spite of his superior strength, she held the power to grant him release. Acceptance couldn't be forced, only sex might be taken. Janus wanted surrender.

"Take me, Janus. Leave your seed in my body."

He fucked her hard. The bed shook with his powerful thrusts. Her thighs spread wide as he drove his cock deeply into her. The plug pressed his length against her clit with each stroke. Her hands clawed at him as her breasts bounced and her cries mixed with the harsher grunts coming from her partner. Climax gripped her once more but this time when her pussy contracted she felt the hot spurt of his seed being milked from

his length. Her hips lifted off the surface of the bed in an effort to drive his cock as deep as possible, pressing the hot seed against her womb.

Janus landed on top of her. His chest labored in hard breaths as her own heart pounded against her ribs. There was only the sound of their panting as the last twitch of his cock moved inside her.

"Did I hurt you?"

His shoulders shook as he lifted his chest off her. He hooked her waist as he rolled onto his back. His hand smoothed her into place against his chest as the sound of his heart filled her ears.

"Answer me."

He sounded as tired as she felt. Hurt? She had no idea. There was only deep satisfaction. It wrapped around her like a blanket as he stroked her hair. "You will have to learn to not doubt my strength, Janus. Somehow, I get the impression that a tender female would not last long in your bed. Or that you would endure any whining from me very well."

She laughed at him in a deep, feminine voice.

"You are correct."

Neither slept but they stroked one another for long moments as the dim light granted them a bubble to hide in. There was nothing but each other and the tender emotions budding up through each of their hearts.

Janus broke the moment when he rolled up and took her with him. "Let us bathe."

He pulled her through the dark room to a bathing pool, stopping to remove the plug from her bottom. Her body was suddenly sore when she moved. A strong arm guided her forward as the warm water relaxed her.

"I am sorry you're sore."

The note of pity in his voice rubbed her temper. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she enjoyed the way the sight of her nude breasts distracted Janus. His blue eyes

focused on her nipples as he lost track of what he'd been saying. Reaching out, she gripped his chin for a change and he jerked his eyes back to hers as he stopped just short of twisting her hand and wrist aside. His fingers had closed around her wrist before he identified just who was touching him. "Don't be. I made my choice." A little laugh rippled over her lips at the frown that creased the skin on the side of his eyes. Reaching up, she smoothed one area with her fingertips.

He caught her waist and pulled her against his frame. The water swished around them as he lowered them into it. His eyes considered her for a long moment before he nodded with a low grunt. "Good. We have an understanding. You will meet Hawk tomorrow." He took her head right under the water, cutting off her response. She struggled against his trapping embrace but there was no hint of slack granted to her. The water filled her ears, cutting out the sound of the surface until Janus pushed up and their heads broke through the water.

"That was mean!" She slapped his shoulders and the water coating his skin popped as her skin smacked it.

"Yet effective. You must become more compliant concerning Hawk. Tomorrow he will witness every single thing we have done tonight."

Her eyes rounded with horror. Janus frowned at the response. "Does that mean you now regret your choice?"

He tried to sound harsh but she heard the hurt in his voice. It was slightly shocking to consider that she could wound so strong a male. It would not be so if he didn't value her beyond the pleasure her body might grant him. "No, yet I'm not sure that I am eager to have anyone else witnessing it either."

"What are you ashamed of?" His embrace tightened and his eyes flickered with frustration.

"It is not shame."

"Then explain." Janus carried her right out of the pool. "You know that Hawk sees everything I do. Sharing is the only means to prevent coveting between us."

"I understand that."

Her voice was low and it sent his frustration up another few degrees. But Janus was at a loss as to how to deal with her tender emotions. Releasing her, he turned to pull a length of toweling from a shelf and wrap it around her shoulders. A low growl escaped his lips as she once again returned to biting her lower lip. Lifting her chin, he stared into her perplexed eyes.

"Explain it to me, Fay. Please."

That single word meant so much to her. While self-confidence might make you sturdy, there was no substitution to being valued by a lover. It deepened the bond, dragging her into a whirlpool of tender emotion. There was no way to avoid the rush of tenderness. She sank down into it until her heart simply refused to struggle any longer. It felt too glorious.

"I just don't want to begin something that must end." Looking up, she felt a twist of regret spear through her heart so hard it hurt. "Yet it must. I intend to join my father. I am caught between you and him. It is not a simple matter or one I find clear."

Janus' face darkened but hurt flared through his eyes too. His jaw was so tight the muscles on the side of his neck were corded. The flare of emotion stunned her. Never once had she considered herself so important to any other person besides her sire. A warm hand cupped her cheek as he considered her.

"We will discuss that later. You are too newly claimed."

He clasped her wrist and pulled her behind him. One touch of his hand and he turned the dim lighting in the bathing chamber off. "We will not discuss this topic until you have rested."

Hard authority rang in his voice as he lifted her once more and placed her in his bed. He stood for a long moment absorbing the sight of her among the rumpled bedding before he moved towards the doorway and turned the last light off in the dwelling. Darkness embraced her as only a meager amount of star shine made it in through the sleeping room. Janus almost looked as if he were made of it as he moved

back towards her as a silver shadow. The bed moved as he sat down. A small click hit her ears as he placed something on the stand next to the bed.

"I keep a disruptor at hand."

"Of course, you are a Hunter."

Hard arms closed around her. He tipped her head up and pressed a warm kiss against her lips. It was a sweet tasting of her mouth that didn't press her for any flare of passion. It was more territorial in nature, a firm reminder that he would kiss her whenever he chose.

"This is my bed. Hawk will never share it. Only you will."

He pulled her down and covered her with the bedding. Her head was pressed against his shoulder as the warm scent of his skin filled her senses. Being so close to a male was slightly alarming, she had never considered just how pledged couples actually slept in the same bed. It hadn't crossed her mind that they touched while they slumbered. She squirmed out of his relaxed hold to sleep without the distraction of trying to understand her need for him. He was correct in postponing conversation until they had rested. She needed to be strong and most of her strength was spent.

Janus snorted softly and pulled her back against his body, turning onto his side to curve along her back. One hard arm draping over her waist, his hand cupping her breast. His feet caught her ankles, trapping her in place as she felt the beat of his heat against her back.

She needed to consider why he was holding her so close now that his seed was inside her body, but nothing seemed to matter beyond the comfort surrounding her. It was so simple to let her brain drop all the details that needed her attention in favor of drifting off into slumber where there was only the warm embrace and the certain knowledge that Janus wanted to share his bed with her...and only her. That was the thing that love was made of. None of the details mattered, only the fact that her heart was full.

Janus frowned into the darkness. Wasting the moment on sleep wasn't inviting. He wanted to savor the scent of Fay in his bed, listen to the sound of her breathing as sleep took over her body. There were twenty little things he noticed about her as she wiggled and tried to escape from his unaccustomed presence next to her. All of the information raced through his brain like critical evidence. He memorized each little motion of her sleeping body as he tried to confirm the fact that she was content. He needed her to be right here at the week's end. Sheer terror filled him for the first time in years as he considered her walking into the penal sphere. There were precious few souls there unspoiled by greed and selfishness. But her determination to stand by her sire endeared her to him even more. He had no idea if that was love, but it was far too intense to allow it to slip away.

He was a Hunter, and he always succeeded.

Always.

Chapter Eight

"So, I hear you have a daughter, convict."

Edric stood up from his worktable. The male in front of him swallowed roughly before he stiffened. "Just something I heard about."

"My daughter is not for trade." Edric kept his voice low, to disguise the deadly note in it.

"Why not? I heard you were interested in being friends. Don't be stingy. Females have uses too. A chaste one goes for a lot her first time spreading. It would be a mighty good way to prove your worth."

Edric had to control the impulse to grasp the scrawny neck of the convict. It had been a long time since he'd battled against loss of control so much. He could almost feel his fingers compressing the fragile bones of the male's throat in retaliation for even thinking about touching his daughter. The first uncertain thought crossed his mind in relationship to his assignment—he had not seen to the matter of ensuring that Fay didn't choose to follow him into the penal colony.

"She will pledge shortly with a Hunter." Edric let his face display the rage coursing through his blood. "Why do you think I'm here? The cost of outfitting a daughter isn't cheap. I got sloppy."

The convict smirked at him but visibly relaxed as he swallowed the lie. "Yeah, those Hunter bitches are pampered, the way I hear it. Never seen one myself."

"I doubt you'd like her anyway. She wouldn't like this life very much." Edric crossed his arms to keep his hands off the greedy convict's neck. "She isn't coming here, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be friendly."

The convict shifted between his feet for a moment. "Maybe." His eyes surveyed the room. "Want to take a walk?"

"Sure."

The streets of the penal sphere were quiet. Convicts moved along their way without much conversation. Black-uniformed Hunters stood out as they patrolled the population. Edric followed his companion and stepped into a large structure that backed up to a laundry facility. The noise of machinery filled the building. Edric frowned. Even wristband records had their limits. The noise from the machines would down out the recordings.

"Come on. My buddies are back this way." The male stopped and poked a finger into Edric's chest. "You'd better be as good as Kendry said you were. He said you had meat. You'd better have meat to trade."

"I have everything you need. But it isn't free."

"That's good. Everyone trades good stuff. But we don't like new guys. You're only here because you got something we don't. I'm Levi." He turned and looked behind them before waving Edric towards a back room. The noise was nearly deafening as the machines clanged away and the sound waves were caught between the thick concrete walls. An odd collection of convicts was already in the room. There was also a back-street store set up. Jugs of water were stacked on the floor, power cells were leaning against a wall, while two of the males played with a young female's nude breasts. She shivered, but remained motionless as her body was handled and her nipples pinched. She slapped the hand of one who tried to open her robe past her belly.

"You have to pay for anything else." She snapped out her words and the two males snickered but another convict stood beside her, and they didn't try to bare her pussy again. Haggling began as the two returned to pinching her nipples.

Edric turned his attention to the other supplies in the room. The Hunter sphere packaging on new power cells wasn't hard to miss. It was wadded up and lying on the floor. Picking up a power cell, he inspected its new condition. It was displaced among the rest of the merchandise. Most of the water was held in reused containers that were stained with age.

"Told you we got good stuff to trade." Levi stroked the shiny power cell with a single, dirty finger. "Got any meat? My men need protein."

"I got plenty. What else do you have? Meat isn't easy to get into this sphere." Edric looked up and waited. Anticipation rose as he considered the prime opportunity he'd just discovered. It would still take weeks but confidence in his assignment grew as he watched Levi begin to offer him things. "Name your price. You like pussy? Boy ass?"

"A disruptor."

The men all turned as a few low whistles rose over the noise. Levi's eyebrows rose. "Now that's a high-ticket item."

"Thought you were hungry for meat." Edric stared right back at him. "Let me know how hungry and you'll get it but I want a disruptor."

The female moved away from her bidders and moved right up against his body. Her hands slid over his cock as she offered him a practiced smile. She smelled stale to him as he looked at the harsh reality of living among convicts. She had been somebody's daughter once. Now she was a prostitute. She laughed at him before pushing away from his body.

"He likes boy ass. His cock is softer than mud."

"All the better for me." One of her bidders yanked her robe up over her hip, baring her bottom. He pushed her over one of the machines as he fumbled with his pants. She hissed as he mounted her like a bitch right in front of everyone.

"You didn't pay me!"

Edric winced at the words because she wasn't worried about her body being used, only that she hadn't placed a price on it yet. The convict fucking her grunted as he worked his hips. "Don't worry, Tilly, I'll give you something for your time."

A smile appeared on her face as she lifted her bottom higher now that she had secured a promise from him. She moaned and wiggled as he fucked her harder. "I love your cock." Additional endearments rolled out of her mouth but they all sounded

hollow. Edric felt his stomach twist at the lust because he knew just how much better love could be.

Levi clamped a hard hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. No one cares if you enjoy boy ass more than pussy. Not around here. I've fucked a few myself. No one sucks a cock like a boy lover. But it'll cost you. Two cans of meat."

"I want the disruptor first." All weapons carried identification marks. It was something that might be traced without doubt from the Hunter sphere. Once he had that, he could net his conspirators. "Name your price. It ain't easy being an ex-Hunter. I need a little insurance against unstable tempers."

Levi grinned. "Yeah, I guess you might. I'll look into it."

Edric left as he hid his satisfaction behind a practiced mask of self-control. There was only one thing that clung to his mind and that was making sure his daughter never fell to the same level as Tilly. His gut twisted with revulsion as he realized how easy it would be for her to follow him into this den of vice. Wanting her to grow strong was one matter. Wading through filth was quite another.

* * * * *

"Fay? You must wake up."

She muttered instead and nuzzled against his hand. Janus grinned at the picture she made. It was the honest truth that he enjoyed the picture of her relaxed and in his bed. Daylight streamed in the window from the top of the sphere and he sighed before he pushed the bedding away from her body. The day held no regard for their personal relationship. There was duty to attend to before he could get back to the much more interesting pursuit of conquering his little companion. Her nose wrinkled as the cool morning air brushed her skin. Her eyelashes fluttered and opened to reveal dark eyes. Her lips pushed into a tiny pout and the tip of her tongue even appeared as she stuck it out at him.

"It's a non-work day for me." Sweet relief swept through Fay in response to that thought too. Even waking up in Janus' bed didn't dim her enjoyment of the morning. But a gasp escaped her lips when she moved and her lower body bitterly protested. Janus frowned at the telltale sound of discomfort. Pushing her body up, she rolled away from him as his eyes locked on to her with suspicion.

"I am well." Fay stood up and refused to let the discomfort show on her face. She forced her lips into a pleasant expression. Janus rose to his full height and she felt a little ripple of awareness move over her skin. He was already in uniform, covered from boot tip to collar in the black fabric of a Hunter. The entire suit was designed to protect his body, but she remembered well the hard muscle he had built to make sure he survived anything that came his way in the line of duty.

"You are sore." His voice was firm as he considered her, but there was a twinkle in his blue eyes that betrayed how pleased he was with the blunt fact that she wasn't chaste any longer. Heat colored her cheeks because it was so extremely primitive of him to be proud of such a thing. His expression softened as his gaze settled on her cheek. He stepped closer and stroked the scarlet stain with a single, ungloved hand.

"You will get used to me, sweeting. I will enjoy every moment of you doing so."

A second shiver shook her as she tried to cover her breast with one arm while her opposite hand spread out over her mons. Being his lover had not prepared her for standing nude in his presence while the bright light of day illuminated her body. She couldn't recall ever feeling so exposed before. While she did not suffer from a fear that her body was unattractive, she was still far from confident displaying herself.

"I'm going to break you of that habit. Your lips are as soft as ripe summer fruit. Don't bite them." His hand cupped the side of her neck as he closed the distance completely. Her body was pressed against his larger one as his lips pressed a warm kiss against her neck. His breath brushed her ear as he held her head in place. "I will take over the duty of biting you as well."

Fay slapped his chest and wriggled. "Your uniform is harsh against my skin." That wasn't her true complaint, but it sounded better than whining about how simply he managed to set her emotions bubbling. Her uncertainty was tripling by the second as she recognized how vulnerable she felt. It was more than skin, it felt as if her heart was on display as well, a simple thing for him to take possession of. She felt powerless to prevent yielding even her more intimate emotions to him.

Janus released her with a stiff nod. "I had not considered that." He brushed a hand over his chest. His fingers were still bare, the black gloves that completed his uniform still clipped to his weapons belt. One corner of his mouth twitched up into the boyish grin. "I promise to remove it the moment I return from my duty."

"Don't trouble yourself on my account."

Janus chuckled at her sarcasm. "Come into the front room. I need to record your prints in the main computer so that you can command the living space while I'm gone."

Fay stared at his wide back for a long moment before she managed to shake herself enough to follow him. She yanked a male shirt off a neat stack of clean garments waiting to be sorted into his clothing storage cabinets and shrugged into it. The light fabric covered her nude skin and it fell below her mons. Janus was waiting for her and his eyes swept her as she crossed over into the front room.

"I like that outfit. You should wear it more often."

A husky little bubble of laughter escaped her throat. A giddy ripple of enjoyment moved through her, empowering her to move towards him with a confidence she'd lacked in the sleeping chamber. "This thing? I just picked it up on impulse somewhere." She flared her hand in a few circles as she shrugged and enjoyed the way Janus grinned at her jest.

"You should shop there more often." His eyes shimmered with an appreciation that made her heart fill with tenderness again.

"I'm not sure I can recall just where I got it."

He moved like a raptor, swooping down to capture her in his unforgiving talons. She was held captive against his hard chest as one of his hands threaded through her unbound hair to grip the back of her head. "I will be most happy to jog your memory."

His mouth sealed out her gasp. But it was the sound of delight fueled by the excitement rising up inside her. She was suddenly hungry for his taste and she reached for his shoulders as she opened her mouth for his kiss. His tongue thrust deeply into her mouth and she stroked it with the tip of her own. A harsh groan shook his chest as she felt his cock hardening behind his uniform. Her clit throbbed with approval as his fingers tightened on the back of her head so that he could kiss her harder. It was hard, but it sent more excitement racing through her. She felt her pussy heating as fluid moved down the sensitive walls. Janus trailed his lips across her cheek and jaw to her neck. He growled softly next to her ear before licking the tender skin of her neck. A hard shudder shook her and she heard a second growl of approval from him.

"The scent of your pussy drives me insane—did you know that, sweet Fay?" He scraped his teeth gently over the spot he'd licked. Her nipples contracted until they were hard points stabbing into his chest. "I can smell your slit as it becomes wet."

She whimpered, but it wasn't a pathetic sound. It was a deep yearning communication from her body. His words were as powerful as the scent of his skin. No one had ever used words such as those in her hearing, but they simply fit him with their bluntness.

"I want to back you up against the wall and fuck you as you clasp me with your thighs."

His voice became harsher with each word. His fingers tightened, pulling her hair until little nips of pain traveled over her scalp, but it mingled with the hot need clamoring in her pussy. Opening her eyes, she licked her lower lip and listened to the little pants coming from her mouth.

"Then do it."

His head jerked away from her neck and their gazes fused. Hunger blazed in his blue eyes and it sent another shiver down her spine. Running her tongue over her lower lip, she watched the way his eyes followed the little movement. Gripping his shoulders she dug her fingers into the hard muscle slightly to regain his attention. "Do it, Janus. Take me." She pulled his head down and whispered next to his ear. "Lift me up and fill me right now."

It was the most carnal thing she had ever spoken aloud. She shivered as need and shock over her own brazenness combined to make her body uncontrollable. Her hands roamed over his shoulders as she bit back into her lip and waited for his response.

"What's wrong, Janus? Can't you take a few orders for a change?"

His face filled with savage enjoyment as he released her head and reached for the front of his pants. He held her steady with his opposite hand while he worked the front of his pants open. "I could get used to it."

Fay pushed her lower lip out in a pout. "Hmm, when someone gives you an order you say 'yes ma'am'." She reached down and stroked his erect cock. His entire frame jerked as her fingers curled around his staff. A word escaped his lips that she was quite sure he didn't mean to use in her hearing, but she enjoyed the tiny flush of red that colored his neck when her touch surprised him enough to make him cuss right in front of her. Moving her hand down to the base of his cock, she closed her grip around its width and pulled her hand up to the head.

"Go ahead, Janus. Obey me. Tell me what you crave."

She stroked his cock once more as his eyes narrowed and a hard look entered their blue depths. He caught her hips and backed her across the floor until the wall touched her back.

"Fuck. I want to fuck you." And it was the only word that was stuck in his mind. Lifting her up, he pressed her backward until her entire back was pressed solidly to the wall. Her thighs spread wide as he moved between them. The borrowed shirt fell open and his cock slipped right into the open folds of her sex.

"But that's not all I want from you, Fay." She gasped as those words hit her. Emotion edged his voice as he pressed his cock up into her. The walls of her pussy were sore but stretched around his cock without any real pain. Janus held her like that as his eyes connected with hers.

"I want so much more than fucking. I want to hear you whimper with delight as my cock rubs your clit just the right way. That isn't something a male thinks about when he's just fucking."

No it wasn't. She could see it on his face right then. Hard need was blazing from his eyes, but it was different from the pure physical act she had witnessed him performing with a trophy. Tightening her hands on his shoulders, she felt his fingers gripping the twin sides of her bottom. "Then make me whimper, only move because I can't wait any longer."

"Your wish is my command."

He flexed between her thighs, pulling his cock free as he held her weight with a combination of his hands and his body pressing her against the wall. She was powerless to move as he thrust smoothly back into her pussy. His cock rubbed against her clit as he entered her and pleasure shot up into her belly. Sweat broke out on her forehead as her hips tried to buck towards him. A soft chuckle was her response.

"Does that mean you approve of my performance?"

A little moan was her reply. He pulled free and thrust back faster. His breath hit her ear as his body took up a steady rhythm between her thighs. Pleasure spiked through her in slow waves that didn't carry her into rapture because he kept the pace just a fraction too slow to allow her to climax.

"Tell me to fill you with my seed."

Her body shouted yes as her hips strained towards his next hard thrust. His body slammed hers into the wall as his cock pressed deep into her. Need was coursing through her, but it was more than release she wanted. She wanted to feel him releasing his own pleasure when she came.

"Yes, come with me."

He bit her neck and growled as his hips bucked between her thighs. Her cries bounced off the opposite wall as he sent his cock in and out of her body with fast motions. Her clit throbbed and pleasure burst through her as she felt his fingers tighten on her bottom. Hot seed pumped out of his cock to hit her womb as she screamed out with the intensity of the pleasure. It shook her as Janus trembled against her, their hearts thumping in the same frantic rhythm while their breaths came in harsh pants.

"I didn't wake you up for this." But he wasn't sorry. Fay heard it in his voice as his hands smoothed her bottom before lifting her off his cock. Her legs were wobbly when he placed her back onto her feet. He smoothed his hands up her bare torso to cup her chin and raise her face to his.

"You should be careful what you ask for."

She slapped his shoulder. "You started it. Complain again and I will become disappointed in your lack of interest in me. Maybe you are a male who simply likes to roam."

His hand tightened around her wrist. He stepped close to her, their gazes fusing. "I am not and if you hear it from the lips of any trophy, know it for a lie. Now that you belong to me, I will not touch another."

It was a promised edged with his determination to breed an answering commitment from her. "What of Tova?"

"That is not wandering. Tova is Hawk's pledge-mate."

"Some females see it the same as wandering."

He stepped back from her but retained his grip on her wrist. "You must come to terms with it. I do not love Tova but Hawk is my partner. You knew this last night."

He shrugged his shoulders before clasping one of her hands and placing it on the main identification panel set into the wall. It chirped as it recorded her fingerprints and took a heat picture of her hand. No one had the same heat signature. Fingerprints might be duplicated with plastic, but heat signatures could not be fabricated.

"Do not return to your father's dwelling."

That hard authority was back in his voice as he closed his pants with swift, efficient motions. She pushed the edges of her shirt closed as she moved slightly away from him. "What does it matter?"

Janus frowned at her. "It matters to me. The dwelling is unsecured. Here you need only worry about me."

"And your partner?" The words left her lips before she considered why she even thought about Hawk. She had seen the male often enough because he was always with Janus at the weekly gatherings.

"Hawk will never touch you unless I am here." Uncertainty flickered in his eyes, but he stiffened and hooked his hands into his belt. "You must come to terms with it. Hawk will always be a part of our union. Sharing will avoid suspicion between you and me. There will never be cause for me to accuse you of harboring affection for him. It is too natural a thing, attraction between a male that you will be in contact with often due to him being my partner. Hawk will desire you because he sees each encounter we share. By sharing, we can all be at peace." Janus stroked her cheek with a finger. "You understand it but you will now have to embrace it."

He turned and moved towards the door. He cast one hard look at her before he left, and the moment the door slid shut, her teeth bit into her lower lip.

It was a dilemma, to be sure. But more so for her because she found her mind unwilling to deny anything that would place a barrier between her and Janus. By rejecting Hawk, she refused her lover. Today, she found herself unwilling to let him go, even if it meant sharing her with his partner.

She was going mad. The stress was eating away at her sensibilities, making her prey to the fascination she'd harbored for Janus so long.

That, or she was falling in love with him, in spite of every reason she'd ever constructed to warn her heart away from him. But the reality was so different from what she had thought she understood about him. A little sigh escaped her lips as she went back into the room they had shared. She let the shirt flutter to the rumpled bed as she went to bathe. She could detect his scent in the room and it sent a little ripple of enjoyment through her. It was the honest truth that she had never thought that a male might smell good.

She liked the way he felt too. Slipping her fingers through his male chest hair had delighted her much more than she had ever dreamed it could. Womanhood was far better than girlish fantasies. But along with her new awareness came the understanding that she did not control her body's cravings. She wanted Janus and no other. She might spend the day with logic ruling her thoughts, but that would crumble the moment he touched her. It was an honest reality that taunted her with the fact that he might not crave her as much in return. Yes, he wanted her body. True, he seemed intent on seeing his child growing inside her, but that was not love. Her parents had loved. The thing that haunted her was the fact that not all couples did the same. She was definitely spoiled, but not in the way Janus believed. Having witnessed how deep love ran between a male and female, she was unwilling to settle for anything less. Even if it meant going without the rapture Janus could unleash in her body.

It was very possible that Janus would never love her in return. Many Hunters considered the emotion a soft thing that only females harbored. They went to great lengths to avoid such emotions. A little spear of pain hit her heart as she stepped back down into the bathing pool.

Janus was the embodiment of a Hunter. That truth was as hard as the stone beneath her feet.

* * * * *

"Make sure my daughter does not come anywhere near this sphere."

Janus controlled the urge to turn his head. It was difficult because he still respected Edric. The new convict didn't stop, but moved right by him as though he hadn't spoken. But his eyes shifted for a moment as he shot Janus a hard look.

"Do not disappoint me."

Janus watched him move away down the street as he considered the other convicts in his sight. Patrol was filled with danger, and he'd learned to keep his eyes moving and his attention sharp in order to stay alive. Hawk moved beside him and stood silently, watching Edric depart.

"Interesting."

Janus shot his partner a hard look. Hawk raised a dark eyebrow at the tension between them. "Be glad that I met my mate first, Janus. You are not suffering the test well."

"Why?" It wasn't the response Janus expected. He was on edge and knew it. The idea shouldn't bother him so much but it was rubbing at him, irritating the new intimacy he'd discovered last night with Fay. The fledgling emotion touched his protective instinct in spite of the fact that he understood that Hawk was a part of any life he forged with Fay.

"Because, my friend, I spent the night with my mate and am in no rutting heat." Hawk turned to consider him. Janus caught a little smirk twisting Hawk's lips. "Still, it's rather enjoyable to watch you squirm as you consider sharing your newly gained submission."

Janus snorted at him. "Fay is hardly submissive." But there were parts of her unbending will that he found far more attractive than he had ever considered he might. It was a fact that it made his cock hard to watch her face him with determination shimmering in her eyes. The challenge was addictive.

Hawk chuckled before shaking his head. "You deserve a little squirming for the enjoyment you gained while I courted Tova."

"Chased and begged, you mean."

Hawk frowned and half turned to consider his partner. "That is exactly what makes you deserving of a little squirming."

Janus lost the battle to contain a grin. He cut a swift glance around the street before returning his attention to Hawk. "Tova was worth it."

Hawk lost his playful edge. Deep emotion shimmered in his eyes as he considered his newly pledged mate. "She is. I wish you the same journey."

Janus wasn't sure if Hawk was referring to the chase or the pledging, but he didn't ask because Tova wasn't a matter for jesting. She might be Hawk's mate, but she was also a part of his life, and he cradled tender feelings for the woman who loved her mate enough to share her body with him to prevent them from fighting over her. He watched every action Hawk took, just as Hawk saw everything he did. It wasn't possible to witness the passionate moments in his partner's life without harboring lust for the female involved. The accepted method of dealing with that natural reaction was to share. Tova had loved Hawk enough to come to terms with his joining them from time to time. But she did not love him in that same manner.

It was a gift that he had not truly understood the value of until today. It humbled him with the sheer amount of emotion the couple held for him. That was the thing that enriched a Hunter's life. There was no material thing that might earn you that sort of bond. It was forged through years of partnership and through the honest love of a female for one male.

But he also realized that sharing Tova had not extended to the deeper emotions she and Hawk shared. He had touched every inch of her body, pressed his cock deep into her pussy, but he had never really sampled her love. Not the sort that bound her to Hawk anyway. He had never shared their bed, only her body. His memory offered up the way that Fay had felt against his body last night, and Janus knew without a doubt that he had come face to face with the one female who might be able to make him kneel in front of her.

* * * * *

"How did you get convicted of murder?" Edric shouldn't have cared, but the words were out of his mouth before he thought about them. Alana's dark eyebrow rose as she shook her head.

"Because I ended a male's life."

There was no further explanation, and the expression on her face was calm. Edric studied her because she was not the first life-taker he had faced, but her manner was different. Every convict life-taker he'd met was either frantic to avoid being caught or rigid with righteous fury fueling their crime. Alana was neither. She was simply honest. That bred more questions, but she lifted a hand and placed it so that her palm was facing him.

"Knowing will not change anything. I am a life-taker and a convict. The details matter not. There is no place for me in any sphere."

"I disagree."

Alana offered him a grin. It was full of youth and mischief. "That lightens my heart, oh yes it does."

"Good. As you told me there is no shortage of frowns here."

Alana laughed. "Ah, you noticed, did you?" She cast her eyes around the street. "Now the real talent is picking out the ones who manage to find a new reason to grouse every day. It proves how creative they truly are."

Edric shook his head. "Only you would make a game of ill manners."

"I have my talents." She offered him a curtsy before handing his newest bag of counted work. "But I'd better go. Eyes are watching and weighing my productivity."

She turned and left. His work was piled on the table and the box of completed work was perched on her hip like a toddler. Her hips swayed beneath her robe as she made her way swiftly down the street. Edric turned to the box of new parts she had left for him. Dumping the contents onto his worktable, he put his fist through the false bottom

of the box that Alana hadn't noticed was there. Tins of meat were stacked in the hidden compartment, and he collected them before sweeping the unassembled power supplies back into the box. Laying a trap meant making sure that very few people actually knew what he was doing. His payment needed to be smuggled into the penal sphere as well. Alana didn't even know she was a party to smuggling.

Edric glanced up, but she had disappeared from sight, leaving him to the task of getting on with looking like a convict. It was best, but he couldn't stop the feeling that invaded his gut. Alana simply didn't seem like she belonged in the category of lifetaker. Greed didn't shimmer from her eyes and her face lacked the harsh, self-serving look that went along with murder. Maybe it was the separation from Fay that made him consider such things. Alana was not much older than his daughter. Somewhere, she had a father who must have wanted to dance at her pledging ceremony.

It was a shame to be sure.

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Fay exhausted her meager list of things to do before noon. Most of the things she might have done on a day off were no longer appealing to her. Shopping held little interest, since she was still set upon joining her father. There was no point in buying things that would only be tempting to a thief, or clothing that she would have no chance to wear. Spending hard-earned money on beauty treatments for her fingernails seemed absurd when she would soon have to work at menial labor. Everyone in the penal sphere worked.

That left her with socializing, but the memory of her work team made her shudder as she considered attempting to join any of them for a meal. It was possible that not everyone would shun her, but the odds were not in her favor. She shrugged. The law worked well because the population did not tolerate a convict. While it was harsh for her, the shunning of her peers served as a stern example. She could at least console herself with the knowledge that it might teach others to stay on the correct side of the law.

But her mood was still so low she doubted it could sink any further. With a small huff, she found herself wandering. The day was nice, the sun warm, and she lifted her face to feel it kissing her skin. The green wristbands adorning her arms served to keep her alone as she walked. Those she passed cast astonished looks at the marks of her father's shame before moving away from her as fast as possible.

"You find out rather quickly who your true friends are."

Fay frowned and looked up to find Hunter Calder considering her. She hadn't been paying very much attention to where she was. Hunter Calder had walked right up to her without her even noticing his approach. Heat stained her cheeks in response.

His face was set into a serious expression. "I respected your sire greatly and still do."

"Thank you." Her spirits caught the firm admiration in his voice and rose. Calder nodded before a sparkle entered his eyes.

"Janus is a fine Hunter as well. I believe your father would approve of your choice."

"There is nothing decided."

Calder shook his head and offered her a frown. "The proof is clearly written on your face."

The Hunter left on steady strides as Fay battled the urge to shout out a denial at his back. She hissed at herself instead as she tightened her fingers into fists. Her temper surged up, making no sense, but it did fuel an impulse. She turned and moved off towards her father's dwelling. Janus' warning was swept aside as she focused on the annoying fact that everyone appeared to be making choices for her.

Oh, but you enjoy a lot of choices Janus makes for you...

A snort passed her lips as she listened to her own thoughts. Aye, it was true and it was also annoying.

So exactly why did she like being cornered so very much? In truth, she did not understand herself.

Chapter Nine

Janus didn't ring the door chime this time at her father's dwelling. The lights over the doorway flickered and filled with bright light a second before the panel slid open. A dark frown was covering his face as he stepped into the room and hooked his hands into his belt while his eyes shot a harsh reprimand at her.

A small stain crept back over her face as she witnessed his displeasure. She almost squirmed under his gaze because she couldn't brush off the validity of his concern. His eyes moved to the blush for a moment before his expression changed to one of deep consideration. Stepping closer, he looked at the craft she had been toying with for most of the afternoon. It wasn't much of anything, just odds and ends of some project her mother had left behind. For the first time in her life she had found herself with absolutely nothing to do. She was truly humbled.

He extended his hand over her worktable, with the palm up in invitation. "Come with me, Fay."

His voice shook with the effort he invested into making it a request. It was one of those gestures that touched her heart. Her hand was already resting against his black glove before she formed any further thoughts. His fingers closed around her hand as she caught a flicker of relief move through his blue eyes.

He pulled her hand up and inspected the green wristband clamped around it. "Your father spoke to me today." Janus' eyes flickered up from the wristband to her face. "He told me not to let you near the penal sphere."

She bit her lower lip in response. Janus watched the indecision in her eyes as she battled against the urge to fling his words right back at his face. The fact that she held that impulse back filled him with renewed confidence. Trust wasn't something you ordered anyone to do. It grew from inside, and right then, he was witnessing it in Fay.

"The penal sphere is no place for a non-convict." He turned and pulled her along by his grip on her hand. "Yet, you do not need to take my word for that."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Hawk's mate knows more about life in the penal sphere as a non-convict than I do." Janus slanted his gaze to her for a moment before he continued along the path towards his destination. She was scurrying to keep pace with his longer strides. "If you are still set on attempting to live with your father, you should at least speak with a female who has endured the life you will find."

He stopped and pulled a small blue vial from his weapons belt. It was a medical applicator, something common but he turned her arm over and pressed it against her bare skin. A hard grunt of approval came from him as he replaced the vial and nodded once more.

"You might have asked me before doing that."

His eyes were full of arrogance when he met her gaze. "No, it is something that needed doing. You do not care for the reason behind the necessity but that does not change the fact that you need to be protected against Hawk's seed. Tova takes injections to ensure she does not conceive my child as well."

"So you treat me like a child who cannot take what it needs for its own good?"

Tears stung her eyes as Janus refused to concede. Some things you understood so clearly without a single word. Tonight, he was proving his need to have her submission. Only it wasn't the sort of need that she had always feared he'd demand from her. No, it was a far more intimate sort. Janus wanted her willingness to stay with him, that choice that all daughters had to make at some point. She felt poised on the border of adulthood, and her heart was urging her forward, even though she couldn't see clearly what lay ahead. Giving her a conception preventative injection against his partner but not himself was just another link in the chain that he was using to secure her to him.

She just wished there weren't such a tender spot growing inside her heart for his determination. She felt treasured and needed. The new emotions conflicted with her determination to join her father.

Hawk answered the door that Janus stopped in front of. She knew the other Hunter, or at least thought she did. His mate Tova was someone she recalled well from meetings. A brush of heat touched her face as she recalled asking Tova about Janus once she'd seen the female enter the Hunter sphere alongside Hawk. She had not been able to resist the chance to discover intimate details about him. Since Hawk was Janus' partner, any female in a relationship with Hawk would know a great deal about Janus. Fay had made it a point to ask.

Tonight, there was a relaxed look on his face that she could not recall seeing before. He stepped aside and welcomed them into his home as Tova looked around the corner. The savory scent of cooking filled the dwelling as Janus pulled her forward and the door slid shut.

"Come join me, Fay" said Tova. "If I leave, dinner will be ruined." Hawk watched her go and Fay was conscious of his eyes on her. Shifting her attention to Janus, she caught the unmistakable hint of rising passion in his blue stare. The difference was plain, and it sent a little jolt of heat through her. Her nipples pulled into tight peaks as she sent him back a smile, a subtle teasing motion of her lips that she fully intended to back up later.

"You need to save me," Tova said. "Cook this meat. The scent is turning my stomach." Tova abandoned her post and moved across the cooking space. She cast only one look over her shoulder to see if Fay was taking over the cooking chore. She shuddered as she looked quickly away from the cooking meat.

"I cannot stand the sight of meat, nor the scent." Tova said, offering her a grin as she began working on the large salad that would accompany the meat. "I have been told it will pass."

Tova suddenly laughed as she pointed a finger at Fay.

"I can only surmise that the look on your face means you have not considered the fact that you might also be expecting a child." Tova pressed her lips together into a firm line of disapproval. "It doesn't shock me that Janus failed to attend to bringing up the subject. He has been stalking you for too long now. I imagine he is hoping you are with child just to place the matter to a final rest."

"I didn't consider it either." Fay wasn't willing to let the blame sit on Janus. She had wanted him, and the idea of contraception should have risen in her thoughts. Her life had suddenly jumped forward. In one week she was unable to recognize her own life, it had changed so much.

Tova offered her a naughty smile. "Passion has a way of taking command, doesn't it?"

"Was it that way for you?" Her hands were busy but she was poised in anticipation of Tova's response.

"I barely had time to notice the details. It felt as if time had sped up because one day I met him, and the next moment I was burning for him." Tova shrugged. "And now we are pledged with a child expected. If you had told me half a year past I would be standing here, in a Hunter sphere, I would have laughed at you until tears ran down my cheeks."

Fay laughed. "I believe I understand that feeling. My life has turned inside out in the last week."

Tova finished her chopping and turned to look at her. "Yet Janus has been steadily stalking you for months. Hawk is terrible about noticing it, and has been making remarks each week when he sees the two of you circling one another. I believe he is enjoying it far too much."

Fay felt her face burn. Was it really that obvious? The look in Tova's eyes told her that no one had been as fooled as she believed. In a way, it was a relief to realize that her recent journey into Janus' bed had not been sudden, or, worse yet, a reaction to her father's conviction.

"Hawk says congratulations are in order," Janus' voice came from the doorway.

Fay turned her head to find Janus hesitating there. He looked undecided for the first time she could ever recall. His blue eyes considered her for a long moment before he crossed the cooking area and pulled Tova into his embrace. Fay stared at the couple as they kissed. Janus didn't linger over the kiss. He lifted his head and looked at her from above Tova's head. A solid arm went around Fay's waist as Hawk moved right up against her body from behind. A little quiver went through her as she looked into Janus' blue eyes, while held in Hawk's embrace. It unleashed an unexpected rush of excitement as she recognized the fact that she enjoyed Hawk's touch. Both men remained motionless as they waited for her reaction.

But knowing that Janus was watching fueled her rising excitement. Instead of shame, she felt bold confidence bubble up inside her. Turning around, she rose up onto her toes and pressed her mouth against Hawk's. The Hunter leaned down, or she never would have touched his lips. His hands held her hips in a firm hold as he followed her lead through their kiss, allowing her to be the aggressive one.

She jumped when a second hard body pressed against her back. Janus smoothed his hands down her arms as he leaned close to her ear. "Kiss him again."

There was hard determination in his voice. His hands smoothed over her bottom, pressing her against Hawk's erection. But Hawk didn't rush her. He stood still, watching her with dark eyes. Lust flickered in his eyes, but it wasn't the same thing she witnessed burning in Janus' eyes for her.

It was simply a reflection of what she and Janus did to each other. Reaching up, she slid her fingers over his neck. Grasping the back of his head she pulled his mouth back towards her, angling her own head to fit their lips against one another. Hawk's kiss was hard this time as he let his tongue explore her mouth and her compliance. Fay refused to think about what she was doing. All that mattered was what Janus thought, and Hawk was a part of his life. The second Hunter was an extension of her lover. Between them her passion rose and she simply surrendered to it. Hawk broke their kiss on a

harsh rasp of his breath. His hands moved up from her waist to cup her breasts as he watched her reaction. She leaned into his grasp, shuddering as he brushed her hard nipples.

"I think I'd better take back the cooking." Tova laughed as she lifted the pan off the range. A curl of smoke was rising from it and she wrinkled her nose before dropping it onto the counter and backing away. A shudder shook her body as her face turned pale. Looking up, she caught Fay watching her. "Maybe not." Tova looked at her mate still touching Fay and offered her a wicked smile. "But it looks like no one is interested in food."

Her enjoyment swept aside the last bit of resistance Fay clung to. Slipping her hand down Hawk's chest, Fay kept going until she stroked the hard cock straining beneath his pants. Hawk sucked his breath in on a harsh note as Janus leaned over to bite Fay's neck. The sharp little pain raced down her spine to her clit. Heat was filling her pussy as she felt fluid touching the tops of her thighs.

Tova joined the embrace, boldly handling Janus' erection. Janus hooked an arm around Tova and captured the back of her neck. Holding her steady, he lowered his mouth and pressed a hard kiss onto her lips.

Hawk took the opportunity to claim Fay completely. His arms wrapped around her as his hands covered the sides of her bottom, pressing her forward. He slipped one hand down her thigh and lifted her foot right up off the ground as he pressed her leg around his hip. His opposite hand tangled in her hair and pulled her head back so that their gazes locked again. Lust and hunger were simmering in his dark eyes. Fay felt the same emotions racing through her blood. But it wasn't love, and she suddenly understood the difference. Hawk nodded his head in understanding.

"Good." Hawk offered Fay the single word before grasping her hips to lift her. He placed her on the counter as he pushed her robe up her thighs to bare her lower body. A shiver shook her frame as she felt the brush of the night air against her wet slit. Need

burned through her, strong with the desire to remain in Janus' life. Accepting Hawk was a test of her resolve, but it was not an unpleasant task.

A soft groan from Janus hit her ears, and Fay cast her gaze over to see Tova pulling his cock from his pants. She fingered the spot beneath the ruby head as Janus hissed with male appreciation.

A hard finger brushed Fay's spread slit as she watched. Fay jerked her attention back to Hawk and found him offering her a wicked grin. He moved his fingers deeper into her wet slit, stroking the delicate skin from the opening of her pussy to the top where her clit clamored for attention. A little moan escaped her lips as he pressed on her clit, rubbing it and sending pleasure up into her pussy. She heard soft little wet sounds as Tova took Janus' cock into her mouth.

A moment later, Tova landed on the counter next to her. A little laugh came from the female as she smirked at Fay. "Janus doesn't like to play." She pushed her lip out in a pout as Janus pushed her robe up over her thighs to bare her as well.

"You're a tease, Tova." There was a snicker from Hawk in response to Janus' disgruntlement.

"Teasing is good for you. It teaches you patience." Tova smiled as Fay offered her words of agreement.

Fay laughed at the sour expression Janus shot Hawk. Her amusement died when a thick finger penetrated her pussy. She returned her attention to Hawk as his mouth claimed hers in a hard kiss. He worked his finger in and out of her body as he thrust his tongue into her mouth in the same rhythm. She was suddenly too hot to think of anything except fucking. Lust curled through her in a hot wave that made her reach for the male in front of her. Pulling on his pants, she worked them open and greedily sent her hands searching for his cock. Tova's gasps and moans only fueled her need more. Her fingers found his hard cock and pulled it free of his open pants.

The fingers left her pussy as Hawk grasped her hips and pulled her forward. The head of his cock pressed against her wet slit, penetrating her pussy in a smooth thrust.

She grasped at his wide shoulders, her hips bucking towards his thrusting as she listened to the sounds of Janus fucking Tova. Everything reflected off the other couple, building her own need higher. There were no drawn-out moments, only hard thrusting towards her companion as they satisfied their lust.

Pleasure twisted through her as she felt Hawk slam his cock harder into her. Tova moaned as she found release and there was a hot spurt of seed deep inside Fay's pussy from Hawk. She let the climax tear through her, but it left her craving a deeper embrace that wouldn't be satisfied until she was lying beneath Janus once again.

Janus claimed her back almost the moment Hawk finished shuddering. Hawk didn't dispute the action either. He eagerly reached for his mate and pressed tender kisses along her neck.

Janus pulled Fay against his chest, his arm pressing her tightly to his body. A tremor shook his frame as his hands smoothed down her back and over the back of her head. Capturing her face in his hands, he lifted her head so that their gazes met. Deep emotion shimmered in his eyes and it sent tears into her eyes.

Her belly rumbled and she punched him lightly in the belly. "I believe there was dinner mentioned."

"We got distracted." Janus' arms tightened slightly around her as he spoke.

Stroking the back of his neck, Fay let her fingers caress his skin with slow tenderness. She was suddenly tired of sharing him. "Take me home."

A smile broke across his face. His lips parted to flash his teeth at her before he lifted her off the counter. Her robe fluttered down to cover her legs and her skin complained bitterly about having to remain behind the garment. She wanted to be bare and pressed against an equally bare lover.

Her lover.

Hawk was already carrying his mate towards their sleeping room. Janus grasped Fay's hand and pulled her toward the door without a single parting word. The pace he set made her scamper to keep up, but she didn't mind. Running would have suited her

because all that seemed to matter was getting to his dwelling where Janus belonged to her completely.

He let her hand go the moment she crossed the doorway into his dwelling. He blocked the door with his body, but she wasn't sure that he did it consciously or simply by instinct. His face was set into a hard mask of concern and it bothered her immensely. Moving back towards him, she lifted her hands to smooth his features. His huge body actually trembled as he shut his eyes and inhaled a sharp breath. His arms closed around her as she traced the lines around his eyes with her fingertips.

"Tell me you can understand, Fay."

Somehow, she had never envisioned Janus worrying about her reactions to his life. Sharing between Hunters was something she had grown up knowing about. There were females who sought out command personnel just for the added bonus of knowing they would be allowed a second lover. She had offered it up as a reason to reject him, but she sat facing the hard truth that it was just another ploy to avoid facing her own need for him. Love did not listen to commands—neither hers nor his.

Backing up, she fingered her robe. "I don't know what I understand. Everything I thought I knew last week seems to be proving incorrect." Pulling at her robe, she raised it above her knees. Janus tried to keep his attention on her words, but his gaze was shifting to her rising garment and the skin her actions exposed. "Yet I have never felt more unconfused."

A soft chuckle came from Janus. She couldn't see his expression because she was pulling her robe over her face. When she was free of the garment, she found him grinning at her as he tugged his uniform gloves off his hands. The stark black Hunter trappings were slowly stripped away as he moved towards her. She shifted backwards as nervousness made it impossible to stand still.

"For once, I understand you perfectly, my sweet."

The term of endearment made her frown. Janus shrugged out of his uniform jacket, exposing his wide chest. It was her turn to be torn between watching his face and letting

her eyes roam over the hard muscles on display. Her fingertips begged for the chance to smooth over those sculpted ridges as she had his face.

"Even if you are still not happy about craving me."

There was hint of hurt in his voice she hadn't noticed before. Looking into his blue eyes she found the hard determination absent as she stared at a male who wanted to be valued by her. "I didn't think you could want me because I knew I couldn't be meek."

A deep chuckle shook his chest. "No, you are not meek. But I admit to liking that discovery."

He stroked the side of her neck before walking towards the sleeping room. He stopped in the doorway to look back at her. Invitation shimmered in his eyes and her feet followed him instantly. He left the lights off as he opened his pants and draped them over a chair. His weapons belt hung from his hand as he stepped closer to the bed. There was a slight clink as he laid it on the bedside table. He considered her for a moment. "Yet you have illustrated one error to me."

Fay stepped farther into the room as his comment surprised her. "And that was?"

"I did believe I wanted true submission." He rolled onto the bed and stretched out his huge frame. His cock was erect and thrusting up from his body as he relaxed on his side, propping one elbow on the bed, his head resting in his hand. He patted the surface of the bed next to his body. "In fact, I enjoy your spirit when you let it free."

She shook her head at the contrariness of them both. But a little shiver of anticipation moved over her skin as he waited for her. The way power shifted between them was addictive. It deepened their relationship because he did not demand control every time they came together. That was something she could embrace.

"Hmm...but can you take my orders?"

She rubbed her hands over her bare breasts and down her belly in a slow motion. A grin flashed his teeth at her as he watched her touch herself.

"Depends on the order."

She laughed because somehow, she got the idea that telling him to sleep in the outer room wouldn't meet with compliance. No, the hard cock thrust towards her said otherwise. But there were still so many things she might demand from him. Moving towards the bed, she cupped her breasts and watched the way his eyes settled on her hands.

"Stay."

Janus enjoyed the way she spoke the single word. A naughty smile turned her lips up and it was by far the most attractive thing he'd ever seen on a female. The pure willingness to engage him both physically and mentally. His feelings for her were far past control now that he was uncovering all of the details that explained why he'd been drawn to her. The stubborn determination to refuse him was in fact part of a woman he was falling deeply in love with.

He didn't answer her but rolled onto his back, letting his head rest on the pillows at the top of the bed. Fingering her nipples, she climbed up onto the bed at the foot and leaned over his feet. Moving her hands to his legs, she slid her hands slowly up to his knees and then on to his thick thighs. The teasing light died in his eyes as she neared his belly and rigid cock.

"If you move, I won't fuck you."

Fay lifted a single finger and traced the underside of his cock. "Payback is fair. I believe you ordered me to stand in place, now it is my turn." Her finger went back down to the base of his erection. "Stay."

"As you wish."

He growled out the words and his face tightened with anticipation. Her own body was shivering with excitement as she leaned forward to lick his cock. A harsh breath caught between his teeth as she trailed her tongue all around the width of hard flesh before sucking the head into her mouth. His hips gave a jerk and she pulled her mouth away. A low curse rolled out of his mouth before he shot her a look full of challenge.

"You must obey, Janus."

"Then you must do the fucking."

A shiver shook her body as anticipation ran through her. It was a completely wicked idea and one that made her lick her lower lip. Her hands grasped his cock and he groaned as she fingered the spot under the head. Leaning back over his body, she sucked it back between her lips and teased the slit with her tongue.

"I am your willing servant."

His voice was harsh with male enjoyment. Relaxing her jaw, she moved her head up and down on his length in a teasing motion of the one he'd challenged her to perform. Her clit throbbed with need as she tasted the first drops of his seed. But the idea of riding him was too powerful to ignore for long. Rising up on her thighs she placed each knee on either side of his hips. The head of his cock stroked the wet folds of her flesh as Janus' gaze burned into hers.

"Lower your body onto my cock."

His voice rasped with harsh need but he held his body still as he watched her hover over his erection. Letting her weight down slowly, she watched his face as she took his length into her body. Hunger blazed in his eyes as his fingers tightened into fists on the pillow beneath his head. Pleasure filled her as her pussy sheathed his cock.

"Brace your hands on my chest."

She was already leaning forward before recalling that she was commanding him. It didn't matter. Her hands pressed down onto his hard chest and her breasts hung free. His gaze moved to her nipples for a moment before he groaned and shot a hard look back at her face.

"Fuck me."

His voice was hard with demand and it excited her as much as waiting for his touch had when she was bent over. Raising her body she complied and a little whimper left her lips as her position allowed his cock to slide along her clit. It wasn't the hard pressure that resulted from being pressed down beneath his weight but a teasing stroke of hard flesh along her little clit.

"Down."

She pressed her body back onto his cock and he growled softly in approval. "Now fuck me."

There was no teasing left in her. She licked her lower lip as she moved up and down over his body, controlling their pace as she felt each stroke send pleasure up into her pussy. Her pace increased as the pleasure tightened. The bed rocked with her effort as a climax began to twist up into her womb. Janus lost his battle to remain in place and his hands closed around her hips as she moaned with rapture. He worked her through the next few strokes and his seed spurted up into her womb. The walls of her pussy clasped his cock as his seed filled her, milking it from his body and holding it within hers.

Every muscle she had began to tremble as the pleasure receded into ripples. Her head lowered onto his chest and the sound of his heartbeat filled her head. Their breath mingled in little pants as she slipped down to the bed surface next to him. His hands moved in soothing motions over her back as he cradled her next to his length.

Contentment settled around them. Janus listened to the sound of her even breathing long after she had fallen asleep. Holding her was a sweet gift he was enjoying. Long after the passion was spent, he found the little mutters she made in her sleep delightful. His bed was no longer merely a place where he rested—with Fay in it, it was a sanctuary. The place where his soul was at peace because love filled it.

Threading his fingers through her hair, he stared at her face. Tomorrow, he would battle her stubborn defiance again and the day after and the one after that too. As long as it took to convince her that she belonged to him.

The reason was simple—he already belonged to her. Love was not a Hunter emotion but it was tangled so deeply into his soul, he knew it would never be banished. Not that he wanted it so. There was no training that might have prepared him for the way it felt to hold a female that his heart savored as well. It was a stunning combination

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that left him humble in the face of it. But he would never let it go because he was a Hunter and that determination had sustained him through every trial in his life.

Fay would be the greatest reward he had ever sought.

Chapter Ten

"Your father is waiting at the visitors' section for us."

"You gained approval for a visit?" Fay sighed. She had been denied any contact with her sire in spite of begging the Hunters on duty for even a tiny slot of time. She had been given only excuses of it being for her own welfare that she was prevented from listening to a convict who would no doubt try to convince her to follow him into prison life.

"I was surprised to get it, so we should not be late. Yet it was important that I attempt to face your sire to declare my intentions. I would not disrespect him." Janus grasped her hand as she chewed on her lower lip.

"What are you worrying about?"

"What?"

Janus lifted an eyebrow at her. "You're biting your lip."

He knew her habits already. A little sigh left her lips. They really had been circling each other far longer than she wanted to admit. She knew many of his expressions as well. "I'm not worried, just thinking."

His face said he didn't believe her. They moved through the Hunter sphere quickly and Janus pressed her hand onto his forearm as they walked. It was a clear declaration of possession. A few eyebrows rose as they passed his fellow Hunters. Her pride rose in the face of the public display. He did not have to face her father. The fact that he did endeared him to her. He was also proud of their relationship and that made her love him. When so many turned their backs on her, the walk towards the visitors' section became the most treasured thing Janus ever had or could gift her with. There was no item on the planet that could be more valuable than his joy at having her on his arm in full view of everyone who mattered in his life.

The visitors' section was a heavily guarded area. Uniformed Hunters screened anyone who entered. It was a tube connected to the penal sphere with heavy doors on either end. Most visitations were for legal council, taking care of the details of selling off property of a convict since they were incarcerated. Very few family members braved the stigma to visit with the convicted.

Her father's eyes went straight to the hold Janus had on her hand and stayed there for a long moment, absorbing the reality that she was not the chaste daughter he'd left behind. Heat colored her cheeks before her father stiffened and drew his eyes up to meet Janus'. They stared at one another for a long moment.

Her father looked straight at her and Fay felt her spine snap stiff. "I approve."

He shifted his eyes towards Janus for a moment. "You have my permission to pledge with my daughter."

Edric turned and left before either Fay or Janus answered him. There was still authority in his stature as he crossed the visitors' section and left. Fay took a step after him but Janus held her back. He leaned close to her ear as his hand covered hers. Imprisoning her unless she wanted to flail like some distraught child.

"Allow your sire to maintain his pride." Turning her face up, she stared into Janus' determined stare. "I do not believe in his guilt but there is something working here that is by his design."

Frustration gripped her so hard she wanted to snarl. She jerked on her hand instead and Janus glared at her. He released her hand but moved his body a half-step to block the path towards her father and the penal sphere.

Turning around, Fay set her feet towards the Hunter sphere. Escape pounded through her brain but you couldn't run away from your emotions. No, she had to face herself.

Janus grabbed her arm when she turned towards her father's dwelling out of habit. He pulled her about to face him. "You will not return to that dwelling, Fay. Even your father has told you that now."

"He doesn't have the right to tell me who to pledge with."

Janus cursed under his breath. It wasn't a pleasant sound. The hands gripping her forearms tightened as his temper exceeded his control. A moment later he hooked one arm and pulled her down the path towards his dwelling. Anger radiated from him but it only bounced off the conflict raging inside her. Janus pulled her through the door and spun her away from the exit as he placed his body firmly in front of it.

The look of anger on his face only fueled her temper. "I refuse to be a gift to anyone, even from my father."

Her words produced an immediate reaction. Dark temper flared though his eyes right before she was flipped up and over his shoulder. Janus kept going and tossed her into the center of his bed. She bounced in a tangle of fabric and limbs. A shriek got caught inside her robe as Janus hooked his fingers into it and yanked it off her body.

"I don't need your father to give you to me." His fingers opened his uniform and bared his body with amazing speed. Fay rose onto her knees but he was between her and the door as he finished disrobing. Warning flashed from his eyes as he flexed his fingers. "I brought you to heel, Fay, and you will pledge with me."

Janus tackled her, pinning her body in the center of his bed. All of the strength that she'd known was trained into his body was suddenly felt as he pressed his knee between her thighs and spread her wide. Each wrist was caught and pulled up above her head as he pressed his wide chest flat against her to keep her prisoner beneath him.

"I have never spent months on end waiting for any female, my sweet." He ground out the endearment in warning. "You mistake my actions as insignificant and that is a mistake."

It was. She knew it, but she wasn't completely repentant. A ripple of excitement went through her and it banished the doubt that had prompted her to question his sincerity. She couldn't deny the spark of enjoyment that flared up in the face of being captured. Suspicion flickered in his eyes for a moment as his lips pressed into a hard line.

"But maybe there is a part of you that needs to be convinced." A shiver shook her frame and he felt it through his chest. A flicker of determination crossed his eyes as his fingers tightened on her wrists. "It will be my pleasure."

"Janus..."

Her words trailed off as he lifted his body off hers. One of his knees landed on the outside of her spread thighs and he rose over her body. With both his knees planted on either side of her hips, he used his grip on her wrists to pull her farther up the bed. He pushed her hands through the decorative ironwork headboard as she heard the green wristbands chirp in recognition of his Hunter authority. Any Hunter could use the wristband to restrain her simply by pressing his fingers against them.

"Stop-"

"Not a chance." His voice was rich with anticipation. He pressed her wrists towards one another and the green bands instantly bound her in response to his fingerprints, activating the restraint function of the bands. Janus released her hands and caught her body with his hands. He lifted her torso and moved her closer to the headboard, so that her arms could bend and rest on the pillow comfortably. He settled her body weight against the bed and slid his hands up her ribs until he covered each breast. His eyes flashed with hunger as he brushed her nipples with his thumbs.

"My sweet."

A tiny moan escaped her lips. A chuckle rose from his chest as he began playing with her nipples. His cock thrust straight up as he continued to sit lightly on top of her belly. The swollen head of his erection taunted her with how much she wanted to feel it inside her pussy.

"I believe you should keep the wristbands," he said. "They can be such fun." Leaning down he licked one nipple, teasing the hard point with his tongue. Pleasure shot down her spine to her clit. "After all, sweets are meant to be savored and enjoyed."

"Release me, Janus." Her voice lacked the firm demand she had hoped might gain her freedom.

He lifted his head and his blue eyes surveyed her arms for a moment. "Are you uncomfortable?"

It was an honest question. Fay bit into her lower lip as she struggled against the urge to admit she was a coward. Her arms were supported perfectly on plump pillows. Uncomfortable? Only with the idea of being completely at his mercy.

Janus pulled her chin down with one hand, his thumb moving her lower lip out from beneath her teeth. He clicked his tongue at her in reprimand. Leaning down, he hovered over her lips, his breath teasing the wet surface of her lower lip where she'd bitten it.

"Sweet Fay, why do you fear being at my mercy?" His eyes flashed with something hard and deep. "I've been yours for a very long time."

She whimpered as emotion surged up, combining with the hunger burning in her flesh. Together there was no way to resist. He stared at her for a long moment. "No one chooses love, not even me. But I have no intention of losing it. I always play to win."

His mouth pressed against hers in a hard kiss. She twisted, trying to reach for her lover but her hands remained bound as Janus pulled her jaw down to allow his tongue to thrust deep into her mouth. Her pussy cried out for the same treatment as she felt his cock being pressed against her belly.

"No male could ever please you as I do. Do you know why?" He rose up off her and stood up beside the bed. Watching him, she pressed her thighs closed in instinctive defense against being so completely exposed.

"Do you, Fay?" One hand trailed up the center of her body. He stopped right between her breasts before moving his hand down to her bare mons. But he didn't touch her clit. His finger teased the soft skin, just a mere inch from the little bundle of nerve endings that begged for his touch. His eyes watched her as her hips gave a jerk up towards his hand.

"You would never accept or love any male who wouldn't prove his worth to you." His fingers moved and slipped into her slit. The folds covering her sex were already wet from just the idea of being at his mercy. He pressed one fingertip onto her clit, and her lower body arched up off the bed as a moan crossed her lips.

"I couldn't agree with you more." His finger moved and she cried out as pleasure tightened under the single touch. "That is why I love you. I crave the challenge of knowing you save your affection for only the best." Her eyes shot to his as his words hit her. His finger moved on her clit once, twice and then stopped. Her body shivered and demanded release but he refused her.

"But you will always be my sweet, in spite of the fact that I love you." His finger twitched and rubbed her clit. He pressed down onto the little nub, working it in a small circle. Pleasure tore through her as her body arched up. A deep moan left her chest as sensation shook her.

But it wasn't enough. The release was bittersweet, with only his finger touching her. She wanted his body close, the scent of his skin filling her lungs as she drew breath. The pleasure was incomplete without the weight of his body pressing against her own or the hot spurt of his climax telling her that she had satisfied her lover as well. Lifting her eyelids she found him staring at her. Need shimmered in his eyes, an emotion so strong he felt it over the urge to fuck her for the physical release.

"I do love you, Janus, even if I cannot understand it."

One side of his mouth lifted. "And you think that I understand any better?" His hand moved and the bed rocked as he sat on it. Pressing her knees wide, he covered her body. His hands clasped the side of her face as his chest hair teased her hard nipples. The head of his cock thrust smoothly into her body and she sighed with satisfaction.

"I am only asking that you join me in this madness. Alone, I'll become a drooling idiot fit for nothing but pity."

She laughed at the idea. Janus frowned before sliding his hands up her arms to unlock her wrists. "Love me, Fay, because I love you too much to go on, even as your lover, without the same affection from you."

She clasped his hips between her thighs. Her hands twisted around his head as her eyes shimmered with emotion. "I cannot go on without love either. Love me, Janus."

He moved and began pumping his erection in and out of her body. There was no hurry, only hard, deep penetration that shook the bed. She held onto his powerful shoulders as pleasure built in slow, steady degrees. There was no rush towards relief, because the true satisfaction was gained by their bodies being as close together as possible. Climax was only a different sensation. Right then, pleasure filled her as they continued to move together in a steady rhythm that granted them complete intimacy.

But the flesh had its limits. Janus rose up above her as his breathing became harsh. His hands fisted in the bedding as his thrusts came faster and harder. Spreading her thighs wider, she cried out as his cock rammed into her pussy. Everything tightened around the hard motion until she cried out with it and felt her pussy contracting around the hard flesh filling it. A harsh growl hit her ears as she felt the hot eruption of his seed. Janus pressed his cock deep into her body as he pressed down on top of her to hold her captive in that moment when climax ruled him. A second, deeper climax rippled through her womb in response.

Tears eased down the side of her face as she struggled to breathe. Janus pressed his hands against the surface of the bed and rolled over onto his back, taking her along with him. Her head ended up on his chest as one of her thighs draped over his lower belly. A hard arm bound her to his length as his opposite hand smoothed over her head.

"Will you pledge with me, Fay?" His voice was formal and practiced, but the tender touch of his fingers as he wiped her tears aside made it the most endearing proposal any female might ever wish for.

"Only if you are willing to pledge yourself to me and all my demands."

"You are the only female who can demand my love and receive it." He tipped her chin up so that their eyes met. "But you will have to submit to being my sweet. Many, many times."

"I love your cravings." His lips rose in a grin. "As I love you." There was a shimmer of love in return to her words. Fay sighed as she let her eyes close. The scent of his skin filled her senses as she drifted off into slumber with her lover holding her.

Love was perfection for anyone willing to give up their pride to embrace it. The reason was simple—love was not something a single person might possess. Without unity, love was empty. But together, it was breathtaking.

* * * * *

Six Months Later

The feel of a disruptor in his hand once more was a good one. Edric gripped the weapon and grinned as he savored the feeling. A frown darkened his mood as he looked at the item that had broken through a thief's deception. Another Hunter was being stripped of his uniform and even in spite of knowing his guilt, his stomach twisted because he knew the path that man was about to walk down.

At least he had held the hidden knowledge that he would not remain a convict for the rest of his life. Pushing the disruptor into a bag, Edric looked around his tiny cabin. His work was completed and waiting for Alana to pick it up. The sun was just beginning to turn the horizon pink. It would be his last morning living as a convict and sleep hadn't interested him last night.

Alana made him grimace as he considered the girl. So much like Fay, it actually hurt to think about her facing the day without the hope of anything better. She was a convict, would always wear the bands on her wrists that declared her dishonest. He didn't understand it. There was life inside her that even living among the convicted hadn't killed.

On impulse, Edric flipped a box over and placed his remaining smuggled cans of meat into it. Scrapping some of his completed work of the table, he covered the cans. It wasn't much, but it was the only gift he might make to her. He could not change her conviction. It soured his own approaching departure but he straightened his back.

Such was the burden of a Hunter.

Edric Tailrich did what every convict dreamed of. He stood as his convict wristbands were released and he became a free man once more. Alana stood in the street watching with countless others but he only saw her before turning and moving back towards his life.

Free.

The family and life waiting for him back in the Hunter sphere were his earnings from a life devoted to honor and correctness. Somewhere, Alana had lost sight of those values and taken a different road. It was such a waste but one that he could not waste too much of his own attention on. His daughter was waiting for him and a new son by law. If his luck was really good, there might be a grandbabe kicking beneath his daughter's heart for him to look forward to feeding too much candy to.

Alana had to be left behind in the penal sphere.

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