

Black Star Princess Marteeka Karland

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Chapter One

"I need more power to the maneuvering drive!" Sweat streamed down Nadira's face and neck as she gripped the forward and lateral control sticks with a firm but gentle hand. If she gripped too hard, she might miss one of the many fine vibrations running through this great ship, and that might mean the end of freedom as they knew it. This was definitely not the way she had envisioned a battle to be. Just one more thing to prove how green she was at her job.

"There *is* no more power! You're going to have to do the best you can with what you've got."

"Take it from life support if you have to, Captain. They're smaller and more maneuverable than we are, and I promise you they *will* kick our asses if I can't turn her."

An explosion rocked the *Black Star*, and Nadira had to hang on to her control panel to keep from losing her seat.

"Three more ships bearing 10830 by 424, closing fast, Sir," Damon, the grizzled second in command, announced in his gruff, harsh voice. "That's a total of seven Asalian War Slavers."

"I have faith our --" His sarcastic pause grated on Nadira's nerves. "-- legendary pilot will get us out of this." Captain Barnus sat back in the captain's seat and crossed his arms. The pompous windbag had made it his personal mission to see her fail and removed as pilot of the Empire's newest -- and most advanced -- cyborg space ship, *Black Star*. If he refused to give her what she needed to get them out of this, he might do more than that. He might get them all captured and enslaved.

Nadira glanced at Damon before turning her eyes back to her console. The various viewscreens showed the space surrounding the *Black Star* and where their

enemies were positioned. "I can't do it with what you're giving me to work with," she bit out.

Before anyone could say anything else, the *Black Star* shuddered and pitched as one of the Slavers fired on them.

"Direct hit! Aft starboard quarter!"

Nadira blocked out everything possible at this point. They were sitting ducks. Asalian War Slavers were the most maneuverable, heavily armed ships in the known galaxy. The *Black Star* might be the most feared ship in the Vok'nair Empire, but there was a limit to what she could do, especially since she hadn't bonded with her pilot.

That was the whole point of being a cyborg war ship. The *Black Star* was supposed to use the enhanced telepathic stimulators given her by the makers to bond with the pilot, captain, or second in command -- most usually the pilot. Unfortunately, *Black Star* hadn't bonded with any of them.

Nadira guided the ship as it swerved and danced around the Slavers, putting herself in the middle. Yes, the *Black Star* was a very large ship, but the Asalians were notoriously careful with their people. She was betting they wouldn't risk their own ships being caught in the line of fire.

"Target lasers and missiles. Shoot to kill."

"Asalians aren't a mortal threat, Captain," Damon said, his voice matter-of-fact. "There's no reason to do more than disable --"

"I said," Captain Barnus snarled angrily over the top of Damon, "shoot to kill."

Nadira knew she could do anything it took to prevent her ship from being destroyed, but she refused to kill others to ensure the safety of her ship unless it was a last resort. Asalians took slaves. They did not kill. Given what she needed, she was confident she could outfly them.

She readjusted her hold on the stick and braced herself to react the moment weapons control fired. The *Black Star* would let her know when to move -- whether or not they had bonded -- if she just paid attention to the vibrations flowing through the

ship. If Captain Dumbass wouldn't do this the easy way, she'd have to do it the hard way.

The Slavers surrounded them now. She could almost feel them bracing themselves for an attack. Nadira was certain she had puzzled them by putting herself in such a vulnerable situation.

There! A minute loss of vibration in the controls. Power being diverted from all systems save life support to fire the massive guns of the *Black Star*. Her plan was to bank hard to port, but before the signal got from her brain to her hands, the ship lurched in the exact maneuver she'd planned. Fortunately, the laser shot went wide, striking its target, but not destroying it as intended.

Captain Barnus bellowed angrily at her, but she blocked him out. Nadira didn't have time to contemplate what had just happened because firing at the Asalians would definitely bring retaliation. She had to keep at least one Slaver in their line of fire or they were as good as captured.

A volley of laser fire from three of the Slavers narrowly missed them as she swerved and swooped from one Slaver ship to the next, finally settling on the one she figured to be the command ship. It was slightly larger than the others, though no other markings indicated it to be any different. Having studied every scrap of information the Empire had on the Asalians, she knew Slavers didn't travel in groups without having one ship in command of the others.

She put herself behind the larger ship, effectively shadowing it. Nadira matched the Slaver move for move -- no matter how extreme. She wasn't sure how the *Black Star* managed several of the sharp turns and climbs and dives. The creaking metal was a testament to the stress, but the ship obeyed her commands perfectly. Pride swelled within her. If it was possible for a cyborg ship to have a consciousness -- something she had begun to doubt when she hadn't been able to link to the *Black Star* -- this one recognized her as a friend. *Finally!* The ship might not have formed a bond with her yet, but she was very close. Trust was building between them, and that was the key.

Renewed hope that she might get them out of this brought an adrenaline surge through her veins. The Slaver she was using to shield the *Black Star* couldn't shake her. If she could force him into leading her toward open space, she might be able to use the jump engines to get them into hyperspace. It would seriously strain their resources, and they would be helpless once they exited to normal space until they'd had a chance to generate more power, but it would secure their escape from the Slavers. She just had to calculate their jump to be as close to a Vok'nair base as possible.

The Slaver tried a banking maneuver to rejoin its comrades, but Nadira anticipated and effectively cut the ship off. The move left the *Black Star* exposed to the other Slavers for a short time, and several volleys of laser and missile fire streamed toward them. One missile struck the port aft quarter shield, and there was an enormous *whoosh* as the shields on the *Black Star* buckled without even a moment's resistance. Nadira lost her breath as the equivalent of an anguished, terror filled scream engulfed her mind. *Black Star!*

Unfortunately for the Slaver, a shield-crippling missile -- shot by its comrade -- glanced off the smaller ship, effectively neutralizing its shields, as well. In that moment, Nadira knew she'd lost this game of cat and mouse.

She had two choices. She could duck back behind the Slaver, or she could make a run for empty space. The problem was the missiles. Asalian missiles were programmed to seek out specific generic parts of any ship they came into contact with. Engines, primary hull, even shield resonance, all had a specific energy signature. The Asilians had refined the detection of these signatures to a fine art. Unfortunately, Nadira had no idea what the Slavers would do next. If they were only looking to disable *Black Star's* engines, moving behind the command Slaver wouldn't hurt anyone. On the other hand, if they were good and pissed off, looking to breach the *Black Star's* hull, putting the Slaver between herself and the missiles might be a death sentence for everyone aboard the Slaver if someone decided taking out the *Black Star* was worth the sacrifice. It wasn't like the Asilians to risk their own ships -- quite the opposite -- but it wasn't like them to

shoot a shield missile so close to one of their own, either. One more indecision in the heat of battle. Perhaps she wasn't as good as everyone thought.

While she had no qualms about disabling a ship to secure the escape of her own, she didn't know if she was ready to sacrifice a ship whose government the Empire wasn't officially at war with. Asalians captured. They didn't destroy. Usually.

But was she willing to take that chance?

* * *

That incompetent bastard! Squad Commander Mikiel Solorum wanted nothing more than to beat the living hell out of Captain Norus. The man was too ambitious for anyone's good. In his zeal to capture the infamous *Black Star*, he had effectively rendered Mikiel's own Command Slave, *Sword Breaker*, defenseless. *Black Star* could easily destroy them.

To make matters worse, Mikiel simply could not shake the larger ship. The pilot was effectively using him as a shield between the *Black Star* and his squadron. Whoever he was, he was doing a damned good job of it, too. The Slavers should have outflown the much larger ship with no effort at all. Instead, this damned pilot was flying circles around them all.

Seven Slavers to one ship should have been more than enough. Apparently, the Empire's claim the ship was a super weapon wasn't as much of an exaggeration as the Asalian Coalition believed.

Without warning, the *Black Star* disengaged and headed to deep space.

I have her, Commander! I have her! Norus' excited, disembodied voice broke the disciplined silence of Mikiel's crew. Mikiel scowled. The man simply had no self-control. He hated people with no self-control. During battles, every Asalian soldier relied on computer signals fed directly into their brains via a psycom unit. The absence of unnecessary chaos gave a commander a tremendous advantage, allowing him to notice the slightest changes in the sound of his ship.

"You will stand down, Captain!" No way. There was no way it could be this simple to capture the *Black Star* after the ride that ship had taken them on. It had to be a trap.

And let you claim responsibility for this great victory? Norus answered. Mikiel had to grit his teeth to keep from dressing down the subordinate over the open comm. *I will take this for my family and my ship.* The arrogant bastard was going to get himself killed and lose a valuable ship and crew in the process.

"You will stand down, or surrender your rank." He bit out the words and gripped the arms of his chair. The cold metal bit into his palms, but the pain was a welcome reminder to keep his focus or he could very well give the *Black Star* the same opening Norus was offering -- playing the enemy's game, not his own.

No response from the squad's second ship, but looking at the tactical viewer, Mikiel could see for himself Norus was doing exactly what he'd told the other man not to do.

Norus's ship, *Great Sword*, broke formation and tried to engage the *Black Star*. The larger, faster ship easily left Norus behind. A volley of weapons fire from the *Black Star* leapt from her rear guns and *Great Sword* took a direct hit that buckled her forward shields.

The smaller ship slowed as the *Black Star* accelerated but one last missile leapt from the *Black Star* and streaked toward the doomed *Great Sword*.

The death of the ship was not instantaneous. A gaping hole formed where the ship's command deck had been, and a series of explosions rocked through her hull. Comm chatter from all levels of the vessel let Mikiel know the crew was trying to abandon ship before it was too late. Mikiel knew from grim experience not many -- if any -- would escape.

He listened in silence while the crew of the *Great Sword* tried to get to undamaged sections of the ship. Mikiel deployed android manned shuttles in an effort to get as many of the crew out as possible.

Before the first transport left *Sword Breaker*, however, the *Great Sword's* fuel ignited in a brief flash of plasma fire and the ship literally disintegrated before their eyes.

Mikiel slowly leaned back in his seat, fingers digging into the steel of the captain's chair again. Anger surged through him, anger and grief. He had lost a good crew, but if Norus wasn't already dead, he'd have killed the man himself.

"Do we pursue the *Black Star*, Sir?" *Sword Breaker's* pilot didn't sound at all eager to continue this battle. Mikiel couldn't blame him. Any pilot who could fly a ship that size in such extreme maneuvers wasn't someone to take on lightly.

"Anxious to pit your skills against her pilot again?" He couldn't help tormenting Ranier. He was good, but he needed to be taken down a peg or two. Perhaps he'd be easier to be around.

"Are you kidding?" Ranier turned in his seat and looked directly at Mikiel. "If he can fly circles around me in a ship as big as the *Black Star*, no way I want to meet him in battle again. I was just trying to do my duty."

Quiet chuckles broke out around the command center. Mikiel only smiled. The young man hadn't done so bad. He *had* moved them aside at the last moment, otherwise they'd all be dead. "By the way, that was a lucky move you made, Ranier. You probably saved us all."

The other man cleared his throat. "Much as I'd sincerely love to take the credit for that, Sir, I can't. The ship did it on her own."

Mikiel raised an eyebrow. "Has she linked with you?"

"No, Sir. You may think this sounds crazy -- I know I do -- but I think she linked with the *Black Star*."

"Explain." His barked order came out harsher than he'd intended, but he had to know.

"The nav computer, Sir. I almost didn't notice it -- it was only a blip -- but when I went back and checked the log there was an encoded signal that originated from the

Black Star. It was so fast, there was no way it could have been meant for a human to execute it and no way a human had time to send the command in the heat of battle.”

Mikiel had to restrain himself from cringing. That was the worst possible scenario. Ships weren’t supposed to be able to link without the benefit of at least one human surrogate. If this was true, then they needed to get the link with that ship and find out what he knew. If the Vok’nair operated anything like the Asalians, the most likely link would be with either the captain, second in command, or the pilot. Security was probably compromised. It also made going after the *Black Star* all the more crucial. No matter what the crew wanted, no matter what he wanted, they had to engage the *Black Star* again. If that ship could link with their own, they had to either capture or destroy her. Besides, that ship was a huge morale boost for the Empire’s troops. Without her, there was a chance something would give in the “non-war” between his Coalition and the Vok’nair Empire. His mission was to take that ship. Failing that, he was authorized to destroy her.

“Much as I’d love to tuck tail between our legs and take the remains of the squadron home, we can’t. We have a job to do. Our lives, and the lives of every man and woman in this unit, do not matter. What matters is capturing the *Black Star* and making the ship part of the Asalian Coalition, or, failing that, destroying her.” He sat up straighter before signaling the entire squad. “This is Squad Commander Mikiel. We are pursuing the *Black Star* with the intent of capturing her. If capture is unsuccessful, we have instructions to destroy her. Given the danger of the situation, and the destruction of the *Great Sword*, you will transfer all female slaves and nonessential male slaves to the *Broad Sword* and the *Gem of Maylar*. These two ships are to return to the Asalian home world to avoid unnecessary loss of life. You have fifteen standard minutes to comply before we leave this sector. That is all.”

The tension in the command center was palpable. An order to destroy any vessel was far from common. Apparently, the Asalian Coalition didn’t want anyone else to have the *Black Star*. He was beginning to understand why, since the ship appeared to be

at least semi-sentient. Besides, with the possibility that the *Black Star* had breached their security systems, they couldn't let her get back to the safety of a Vok'nair base.

As his squadron made the necessary preparations, Mikiel mulled over his instructions to the main fleet. The Empire and the Coalition weren't at war. Exactly. It was more of a face-off -- who could gain the subtle upper hand without actually engaging. Both sides always vehemently denied the rare skirmishes between the two groups, so if a soldier -- or ship of soldiers -- was captured, he was left at the mercy of his captors.

For Imperials, it meant a life of slavery. For Asalians it usually meant death. Mikiel had barely managed to escape before such a fate befell him. He knew first-hand how Imperials treated their prisoners. At least the Asalians treated their slaves well -- there were strict laws outlining the rights of slaves. They were taken care of and allowed to develop their natural born talents. In many ways, it was a good life.

He was brought out of his deep thoughts as the last of his ships signaled their readiness. With a few final instructions to the *Broad Sword* and the *Gem of Maylor*, Mikiel gave the order to follow the *Black Star*. The only thing that had gone right in that battle was the beacon they'd placed on the *Black Star's* hull. They had a good lock and a strong signal. It was only a matter of time before they engaged the other ship, hopefully for the last time.

Chapter Two

Once the *Black Star* entered hyperspace, Captain Barnus exploded.

"You stupid bitch!" Nadira couldn't stop the yelp of pain and surprise that escaped her throat when Barnus hit her, then yanked her out of her seat by her hair. "You could have gotten us all killed! We could have taken out two or three of those bloody Asalians if you hadn't sabotaged my firing pattern!"

"Captain!" Damon's normally soft, raspy voice cut through the room like a Madorian laser blade.

Barnus whipped around, taking Nadira with him, and pointed at Damon with a shaky hand. "Keep quiet, or I'll relieve you of your station, as well!"

Before Nadira or Damon could protest, the ship lurched and bucked as the jump engines screamed in protest. The *Black Star* was thrown violently out of hyperspace, tumbling end over end, tossing everyone around like rag dolls.

"Evasive maneuvers! Evasive maneuvers!" Captain Barnus bellowed. It didn't do any good. She couldn't even crawl to the pilot's station the way the ship was pitching. The unplanned exit from hyperspace had thrown the *Black Star* out of control. Nadira prayed they were in open space.

She struggled to move toward her station, but with the artificial gravity, the tumbling created a centrifugal force far greater than normal gravity. Her limbs were so heavy, she got muscle cramps from simply trying to raise them from the deck. She was pinned by her own weight.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Damon flip a couple of switches on his console -- thank the Stars he'd been in his seat when this started -- and the artificial gravity disappeared. Unfortunately, that meant everyone tumbled in all directions.

Nadira felt like she was submerged in water with everything around her constantly moving. It took her a moment to work through the disorientation, but she managed to finally make a concerted effort toward her station. Once there, she strapped herself in and grabbed the control stick. Immediately, she made adjustments in pitch and yaw, bringing them out of the spin they'd been thrown into.

The tumbling lessened immediately, and within a few moments stopped altogether. As she automatically checked their position and scanned the area, the reason for their situation became clear. Four Slavers surrounded them, one of them directly in their line of flight. They weren't out of danger yet. She'd just bet their weapons were hot and trained on the *Black Star*. While they watched, another company of Slavers emerged behind them -- all part of the same group of ships they had just engaged.

"*Black Star. Black Star.* You will surrender and prepare to be boarded, or you will be destroyed. Will you comply?"

"Like hell." Captain Barnus started to say something else -- most likely something to further piss off the Asalians -- but Damon grabbed his hand in what looked like a very painful grip.

"No. You will not endanger this crew again." Over the years, Nadira had learned to read Damon's body language and facial expressions pretty well. She liked the man, mostly because he was the only man she'd ever known who hadn't tried to hit on her, but also because of his commitment to the ship and the crew as well as to her. He made sure they all functioned as a single unit, emphasizing the need to work together. He'd even made the men she'd rejected quit calling her the Black Star Princess. He'd said if Nadira had a holier than thou attitude, it was because she understood her job aboard the *Black Star*. She was the pilot, not a sperm receptacle. Nadira knew defending her honor wasn't the real reason he'd reprimanded them, though she appreciated Damon's harsh words to those foolish enough to let him hear their comments.

When Barnus started to protest, Damon spun the other man around and clipped him neatly across the jaw. Barnus' head snapped to the side and he stood there a moment before crumpling to the deck, unconscious.

Nadira was stunned. She looked at Damon, wide-eyed. "What have you done?"

"Either committed an act of treason, or saved this ship from the biggest mistake the Vok'nair Empire has ever made."

"*Black Star. Black Star.* You will surrender and prepare to be boarded. Comply or be destroyed." The Asalian Slavers weren't going to wait much longer.

"Communications." Damon didn't take his eyes from Nadira. "Signal our surrender, but with terms."

"By your command, Sir." The young officer's voice squeaked. Fine lot *this* crew had turned into. The best the great Vok'nair Empire had to offer, and all of them scared beyond imagination. All of them except Damon. He should have been captain of this vessel, not Barnus -- and he would have been, too, if not for her. Unfortunately for the *Black Star*, Damon had taken another assignment. As her bodyguard. As the pilot of the Empire's flagship, and the only female aboard, it was thought she might need extra protection.

"I'll get us out of this, Nadira."

"I know," she said matter-of-factly. "I never doubted it."

"That makes one of us," he muttered. "This may be harder than anyone thinks."

"*Black Star.* You will send your captain, second in command, and pilot for negotiations. You have thirty standard minutes to comply. A security team will meet your shuttle in the main docking lock. The area will be indicated with beacon lights. Do you understand?"

Nadira shivered. Why was she included in this party? She had a sinking feeling she didn't want to know.

"Signal our understanding and have security meet us in the shuttle hangar. Our esteemed captain might not agree with leaving his ship." Nadira knew she didn't want to. "And when we get back, I want gravity restored and this ship spaceworthy enough to get us back to a Vok'nair base."

Captain Barnus was indeed opposed to leaving the ship, but Damon and the security team didn't give him much choice. Bound and gagged, he left the *Black Star* a most unwilling ambassador.

The transport to the Slaver took exactly thirteen and one half standard minutes. Nadira felt every second of them. Her nerves were strung so tight, she could barely pilot the shuttle the short distance. Neither she nor Damon spoke, and Barnus could only offer muffled grunts.

Once they were locked with the Slaver, Damon turned to her. "Let me do the talking." His quiet, raspy voice projected calm that belied the almost palpable tension. Nadira could see Damon's unease in the way he held himself so erect. He didn't like this any more than she did, but under the circumstances, they didn't really have a choice. Though why they had asked her to join the party was still a mystery. There was nothing she could offer in any negotiation.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

"Agree with anything I suggest and don't let them see any hesitation on your part."

"Understood."

Before he opened the hatch, Damon gave her a reassuring smile as he readjusted his hold on Barnus. Nadira placed her hand on the scan pad and the air lock began to click and whir. In a few seconds, the door slid open with a hiss.

The corridor was so dimly lit Nadira couldn't see anything at first. As her eyes adjusted, however, she could see shadowy outlines of five or six very large people.

"Which one is captain of the *Black Star*?" Nadira couldn't tell who spoke, but the voice was masculine, very deep, and obviously in charge.

"This one." Damon pulled Barnus up beside him. Barnus's eyes went wide with fear as he looked from Damon to the Asalians.

There was a brief pause before the Asalian in charge responded. "I will need verification." There was no emotion in his voice, nothing to indicate his mood or state of mind.

"Understandable. I'm sure you have the Empire's registry of ships and their command crew. You can verify him by DNA."

"Agreed. You will come with us."

Nadira's eyes had adjusted to the darkness somewhat and she was able to better focus on their hosts. All five were very tall. Their body armor was dark and bulky, so it was hard to get an idea of their exact build, but Nadira knew there was no way she could take any of them on in hand-to-hand combat. Any idea of armed combat went out the airlock when they were searched and their weapons confiscated. With Asalians all around them, there was no way to return to their shuttle unless they were given permission.

She didn't like this.

Nadira exchanged a look with Damon. He looked as impassive as the Asalian sounded. Nadira wondered if he was as calm inside as he seemed outside. Damon didn't resist when they were led to a large room with an oval table surrounded by chairs. Nothing else graced the chamber's interior. It looked as impassive as the Asalian himself. The guards took their stations on either side of the door, silent but large in their presence.

"Please be seated." The Asalian gestured to the table and turned to a control panel on the wall. When he touched it, the lights brightened slightly. He turned. Nadira's breath caught and that negative feeling she'd had about this whole situation got worse. This man was a predator.

His gaze passed over her briefly before acknowledging both Damon and Barnus, but his attention came back to her and they stared at each other for several very long minutes. She felt...

Uneasy.

It was like he'd decided he *owned* her, and wanted to see what he'd purchased. She had the strangest urge to cover herself, and it was all she could do not to fidget. She didn't think fidgeting would help their situation.

He wasn't handsome by any standard, but he was striking. Nothing about his face seemed ordinary. He had a square face, with a strong, straight jawline, chiseled cheekbones and those piercing, cobalt blue eyes. His head was shaved clean, but black eyebrows slashed at an angle over his eyes.

Nadira tried to match him stare for stare, but his penetrating gaze seemed to command submission. She shivered, and her skin prickled as if she'd stepped into the freezing cold. The man terrified her. Why was he so focused on her?

"We're here." Damon broke the building tension. The Asalian continued to regard her for several more moments. After a brief pause, he turned his attention back to Damon. Damon continued to speak as if the Asalian's concentration had been on him the entire time. "Since you've agreed to meet us, I sincerely hope we can work out terms we can both live with."

"I would have introductions first and verification of your identity." His accent was strange and harsh, but the quality of his voice reminded her strongly of Damon's -- raspy and quiet. This was a man who didn't have to yell at his troops to be obeyed.

"Of course. An oversight in protocol on my part. Forgive me," Damon conceded without hesitation. He rose smoothly, gently nudging Nadira to do the same, and bowed slightly at the waist. "I am Damon Singh, second in command of the *Black Star*."

"Mikiel Anjoom, commander of this vessel and the surrounding squadron. You said this one is captain?" He indicated Barnus with a raised eyebrow; otherwise there was no indication of any emotion.

"He is. Captain Hom Barnus."

"And why is he bound thus?"

"Captain Barnus has been relieved of duty. Regardless of the outcome of the previous battles, it is not the policy of the Vok'nair Empire to fire with the intent of destruction unless there is an imminent threat of death. I know the Asalians do not kill unless there is a good reason."

“Unfortunately, second in command, I cannot say the same for the Vok’nairs. I had the pleasure of spending many months as a prisoner of war at the behest of your government.”

Both men looked at one another, neither backing down, sizing each other up. Nadira was far from the timid type, but she was next, and the last thing she wanted was Mikiel Anjoom’s unsettling stare directed at her again. When her shoulder touched Damon’s arm, she realized she was inching closer and closer to her commander and friend. Ideally, she could hide behind his larger frame, but somehow she knew Commander Anjoom hadn’t forgotten her, nor would he. He wasn’t the type of man to forget anything.

“If he is the captain, and you are the second, then the woman must be the pilot. Yes?”

Nadira’s heart thudded in her chest. As nerve-wracking as the battle had been, this was worse. When he leveled his gaze on her once again, she broke out in a fine sheen of sweat, and she had to clench her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Still, she met his eyes, trying not to flinch. She didn’t intend to show any weakness to this enemy.

“Nadira Greyson.” Damon stepped slightly in front of her even as he made the introduction, and she loved him for it. He was twenty years her senior, and though it had always irked her before, she was grateful he treated her like he might a daughter. She hated to think she needed his protection, but this was one time she wouldn’t argue with him over it.

Mikiel raised one dark brow and, if possible, looked even scarier than before. “The Black Star Princess? She is your mate?”

Nadira started, and her gaze flew to Mikiel’s face. How the hell had her stupid nickname made it beyond the bounds of the *Black Star*?

“No.”

“Your lover?”

"No, but she is under my command, and therefore under my protection, and I have no tolerance for that title."

"I see." Mikiel's eyes shifted from Damon to Nadira, a flash of annoyance crossing his features.

There was a brief period of silence while the two men stared at each other. Mikiel's guards held an identity pad to each of them for their palm prints. Damon not so subtly shouldered himself more securely in front of Nadira and gripped her hand in his own behind his back.

"I think we should discuss our current situation, Commander. We need to get back to our ship."

Mikiel sat back in his chair and steeped his hands. Nadira had a sinking feeling he was plotting something. She didn't trust him.

Damon urged Nadira to sit as he did so himself. She sat, but on the edge of her chair. She was too edgy to sit back and twiddle her thumbs. Commander Mikiel's attention kept coming back to her and there was something new in his eyes. Lust. It wasn't overt or overwhelming, but just knowing it was there made the hair stand up on her neck.

"What did you have in mind, second in command Damon Singh?"

"I'll give you Captain Barnus in exchange for the freedom of my ship and crew."

"A fine arrangement for you, but what's in it for me?"

"The captain of the *Black Star* would be quite a trophy."

"The *Black Star* would be a better one." He hadn't missed a beat, hadn't hesitated.

"I can't deny that, but we're out here in the middle of nowhere. Even with the four ships you have with you, I doubt there would be enough room for all the prisoners you'd have. Even if you left them aboard the *Black Star*, you'd be vastly outnumbered. Are you really willing to kill everyone on board for a trophy?"

"Well, actually --" Mikiel crossed his arms over his chest and looked Damon dead in the face. "-- that's exactly what I've been instructed to do."

Chapter Three

In all his years in service to the Coalition, and all the slaves he'd owned, he had never come across anyone who piqued his curiosity like the woman on the other side of the table, and he wasn't sure why. Yes, she was striking, but he'd known women more beautiful. Also, he certainly didn't know a woman -- or man, for that matter -- who could handle a ship like she could, but it wasn't that.

He'd had time to study her several times since they'd arrived on the *Sword Breaker* and the more he learned of her, the more he liked her. It wasn't just her appearance, but her spirit. She was scared -- probably beyond anything she'd ever known -- but she was holding her own. The only obvious sign she was uneasy was the finger that kept finding and twirling a strand of hair that had come loose from the thick knot of white-blond hair at the nape of her neck.

At first, he'd just wondered what it would be like to see how far he could push her before she either fought back or her spirit broke. But his wayward thoughts kept wondering what all that hair would look like draped around her naked body. He could have any number of women -- had at his disposal at least five on this ship alone -- but none of them piqued his curiosity like she did, and he wasn't sure why. He did suspect she might have been the *Black Star's* human connection, but that wasn't it, either.

The more he thought about it the more it grew into an obsession. He'd just bet there was more to this little wench than met the eye. When Damon Singh suggested taking the captain and letting the rest of them go, he got an idea. "Is this all a set up then? A trick?" Damon didn't seem convinced. The man was apparently a good strategist.

"No trick. I've been ordered to either capture the *Black Star*, or, failing that, destroy her."

"Then why haven't you done so?"

Mikiel didn't say anything for a moment or two, letting their situation sink in. "Because you have something I want."

"Aside from our ship, I assume."

"I'd be willing to spare the lives of your crew and let you retain possession of the *Black Star* for a price."

The other man sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "It must be a high price if you're willing to give me that much. What do you want?"

Mikiel looked Nadira straight in her silver-blue eyes. He wanted to see her reaction when he answered. "I want your pilot." It was a good bargain. Mikiel knew with him holding Nadira, Singh wasn't likely to go far.

"Absolutely not!" Damon Singh's outraged explosion was expected, given how he had protected the woman until this point. "We've offered to give you the captain in exchange for our vessel. It would do both our governments good. Neither of us loses."

"That's exactly my point. I have the upper hand, and my superior will not be pleased to find I've let the *Black Star* go -- no matter what else I gain -- and I might as well get something out of it. I want her." Mikiel loved watching her eyes widen. His only regret was the fear he saw in them. Fear, however, could be used to his advantage. If he could keep it focused, he could keep control of her until she gave control to him willingly.

"I will *not* give you a member of my crew for you to use as a sex slave!" Damon's contempt was obvious, if misplaced.

"Who said anything about a sex slave?" Mikiel deliberately eyed Nadira up and down. "I already have men and women more --" He paused a beat, adding more than a touch of insult. "-- suited to that task. My interest in your crewmember is her skill as a pilot. She can best serve me as a free woman, but --" He leaned closer to Nadira, driving home his point. "-- if she doesn't perform as she should, slavery is still a viable option."

He didn't miss the flush of embarrassment and fear crossing Nadira's face, but he did notice something he had missed before. There was a large, bluish red bruise across her left cheek. By next day cycle, she'd have one painful black eye.

"What happened to your face?" Mikiel knew the question came out harsh, but he didn't care. Out of nowhere, the mark of violence across this woman's face almost made his blood boil. "Who did this?"

"The good captain has a bit of a temper." Damon grunted as he folded his arms over his chest. "Why do you think he's bound and gagged?"

Mikiel stood and crossed the space between himself and Captain Barnus and backhanded the man with as much force as he could. The other man's head snapped to the side and he slumped over the table unconscious.

"Women should not be treated that way in any culture. Slave or not."

Damon stood, pulling Nadira to her feet as well, and placed himself between her and Mikiel. "I will not let you take her, Asalian."

"You cannot stop me, Vok'nair."

"I have to try."

Mikiel knew Damon wouldn't agree to simply turn Nadira over to him, and it would come down to who was stronger. Fortunately, in that Mikiel had the upper hand. "You have no hope of stopping me. You are obviously a good commander and take your responsibilities to your crew very seriously, but this is one battle you cannot win." If anything, Damon's features hardened even more, but he didn't say anything. There was nothing he *could* say.

"Damon," the girl whispered, "I'll be OK. The *Black Star* and her crew are more important than me. Get her away from here."

Few things surprised Mikiel, but this did. He'd have bet his ship she'd never been this scared in her entire life, yet she was willing to sacrifice herself for the good of her ship. He doubted there were many among his own crew willing to do the same.

Damon's fists clenched at his sides, but he nodded slowly. "It doesn't appear as if I have much choice, Nadira." Mikiel didn't miss her reaction. The blood drained from

her face and she swayed slightly, but she locked her knees and bit her lip in an effort to stay upright. The little wench was made of sterner stuff than she looked.

"What about the captain?" Damon bit out.

"I'll keep him, too. This man is responsible for more deaths in your prison camps than I am in open battle. He will make an interesting addition to the auction block." Mikiel turned to the guards at the door. "Take Captain Barnus to the sick unit. Make sure there are no lasting injuries, then put him in a holding cell."

"Yes, Commander." The guard, Ishmiel, nodded to his partner and the two men dragged Barnus out. Before the door closed again, Ishmiel returned, having passed his prisoner to one of the guards outside the door. "The woman?"

"I'll take care of her. Escort our guest back to his shuttle. Make sure he is safely aboard his own ship before we leave the sector."

"As you command, Sir."

Once the new captain of the *Black Star* and Ishmiel were gone, Mikiel regarded his new crewmember. Her black uniform and light body armor covered her from the throat down. It was, however, form fitting instead of baggy as the men's had been. Her feet were booted and her hands gloved. She was shaped generously enough. Her waist was tiny, her hips and breasts flared almost dramatically. It would be interesting to see what was underneath all that armored black leather.

His cock twitched, and he did his best to squash the thought dead in its tracks. She was here because of her skill as a pilot and her ability to bond with ships -- no other reason.

"Life as you know it has changed as of this moment, Nadira. If you do as you're told and learn this ship as well as you knew the *Black Star*, I'll see to it you get to continue to fly."

Her eyes widened and she almost took a step forward before she stopped herself. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you prove you can fly this ship as well as you did the *Black Star*, I'd have no problem replacing my pilot with you."

“And earn myself another enemy in a place already full of enemies? I think I’ll pass.”

Mikiel allowed annoyance to lace his next words. “We don’t operate that way. You’ll learn that in time. Everyone has a place. The better you learn your chosen skill, the farther you progress.” He could still see skepticism in her eyes, so he added, “Not everyone is cut out to be a sex slave, my dear. That takes unique talents indeed, and unless I miss my guess, you’ve concentrated too hard on being a pilot to perfect those particular skills.”

When she blushed again, he knew he’d hit close to the mark. Still, she took a deep breath and stood straighter. “What do I have to do?”

Chapter Four

Nadira stood smartly at attention. Her heart threatened to beat through her chest, so hard was its pounding. She was a prisoner. There would be no rescue. There never was. Anyone captured by the Asalians was simply listed as “missing” and never seen or heard from again. There were whispers that even those who managed to escape were denied entry back into Vok’nair space. The Empire didn’t deal well with those who failed it.

“I think you need some time to think about what you need to do to best serve this ship. This is your new life, Nadira. Adapt.”

He turned and headed out the door and down the corridor. Nadira fell into step behind him. No way was she going to make him tell her twice. He was right. She had to adapt and do so quickly. She wasn’t convinced by all his assurances about the way his society functioned, but if she could at least keep out of trouble and in his good graces, so much the better.

As she followed him, she couldn’t help but admire the layout of the vessel. Had she not known this was a ship of war, she might have mistaken it for a luxury ship. Unlike the corridors in the section leading from the air locks, the halls in the main crew area were brightly lit. Lightly cushioned, beige carpet covered the floors, muffling their steps. The walls held various display panels every few meters, but were otherwise decorated with unobtrusive artwork.

Then there was the commander himself. Harsh didn’t begin to describe him. His whole body was hard angles and raw power. The heavy body armor masked his true contours, but it couldn’t alter the sheer size of him. He was big. Damned big. And she had no difficulty imagining powerful musculature underneath all that armor. He was not a man to let his body go soft and risk making himself vulnerable.

He frightened her, but she couldn't help but be curious as to the flesh and blood man beneath the commander's armor. It was enough to send a sexual thrill shooting through her.

She was so lost in thought she almost ran into Mikiel when he stopped and turned toward her. In fact, she would have had he not caught her upper arms. When her gaze snapped to his, his eyes commanded her to focus on what she was doing. He was too intense, his presence too overwhelming. Worse, she could see her own sexual hunger mirrored in his eyes.

His grip tightened on her arms and she thought he might pull her to him, but he didn't. Instead, he turned her toward the door. When Mikiel pressed a hand to the wall scanner the door slid open and he directed her inside.

"This is my chamber. You'll stay here until I get you someplace else to live. There should be everything you need, including suitable clothing." That rankled somewhat, but she didn't have time to say anything even if she'd had the nerve to. Mikiel was already turning to leave. With a sharp *hiss* the door slid shut, locking Nadira inside.

For several minutes, she just stood there. This couldn't be happening. This could *not* be happening! There was no way she had what it took to take on a man the likes of this one.

Worse, Mikiel was right to assume she didn't have many sexual skills. In fact, she didn't have any. Nadira was one of only a handful of females the Empire had deemed capable of completing military training, and she had started her career as a star pilot before she'd started her monthly cycles. As a result, it had been drilled into her not to have physical relationships. Such would undermine her position among the men on her ship as well as create unnecessary strife. As far as everyone there was concerned, she was untouchable. The fact was, Nadira was a virgin and had assumed she would stay that way for a very long time.

Not anymore. There was simply no way she could be sure he hadn't lied to her, or that she wouldn't do something to make him change his mind.

She sighed. Since she was going to be here a while, she decided to look around, explore her temporary home. There were three separate rooms. The main room and bedchamber were combined, the large inviting bed the only thing that didn't reflect the occupant. The rest of the room was stark, harsh, with only necessities decorating the space. A smaller room served as a work area, with computers and graphic map screens.

But the chamber that interested her most was the bathing chamber. When she walked into the spacious room, lights automatically came up and the bathing pool began to fill with water. Steam rose gently from the surface as it filled. *Real water!* It was a luxury she hadn't had on the *Black Star*. After months in space, she was finally going to get a real bath.

There were mirrors all around the bath, and it was impossible not to catch her reflection. She'd never given thought to her body before, but now it was foremost on her mind. Mikiel had said she wouldn't be a sex slave, but it was hard not to think about that type of life. This whole situation was terrifying enough as it was, but to think that she might have to spend her time on this ship being ridiculed because her form wasn't pleasing was something else altogether. She eyed herself now with a critical eye.

Her hair was probably her best feature. Long and lustrous, its thick tresses flowed down her back and tickled her ass -- her worst feature -- when she moved. While she had a small waist, her butt and thighs, though strong and firm, were round and fleshy. Not at all attractive. When she turned back around, she noticed her breasts rising and falling with each breath she took. They were too big, but still firm and high. As she pinned her hair back up, her arms grabbed her attention. She flexed and extended them, but there was no denying the extra flesh she carried on her upper arms.

No. She definitely wouldn't make a good sex slave. Her only hope was that the commander would hold to his promise that she could still be a pilot if she proved good enough.

Pushing those thoughts from her mind, she stepped into the bath and immediately the sting of the hot water gave way to a pleasant warmth that seeped its way into her tense muscles. The groan that slipped past her lips couldn't be helped. It

felt lovely to be submerged in warm water again. When the jets started to gently but firmly pummel her back, legs and feet with water deep within the pool, she knew she'd found heaven.

She sat back in an indentation built into the wall of the pool and relaxed. This might be the only time she'd have the opportunity to do so, and she fully intended to take advantage of it.

Thinking back on her time in the commanding presence of her new "boss," there was something about the way he looked at her that made her feel different than she'd ever felt before. Not beautiful, or sexy, but sensual. He looked at her as if he'd like nothing more than to explore her body for his own pleasure. His hot gaze also promised he'd give as good as he got, but Nadira instinctively knew it wouldn't be as simple as that. He looked at her as if her sole purpose in the universe was to please him in every way he wanted. Any pleasure she received would happen only if it pleased him to do so.

The idea gave her a perverse surge of lust. To be used as a plaything for a man to take his pleasure from. To exist only to please him lest he move on to another. It should have made her feel degraded, like she was no more important as a person than the artificially intelligent androids that did most of the heavy labor throughout the Empire, but instead, it made her feel...

Powerful. She could have power over the pleasure of such a dominant man and make him *want* to return to her -- and only her -- because she did things to him that felt better than anything done by any other man or woman at his disposal.

If she was good enough. Pure fantasy, but what a heady thought! It made her cunt tingle.

The jets continued their delicious massage, and it wasn't long before she shifted her position so that one of them pointed between her legs. She gasped when the stream of water brushed her clit. Jumping with the unaccustomed contact, she moved out of the jet's path, only to readjust her position so that it shot straight at her once again. It didn't take long for the persistent stream to create very pleasant sensations within her

core. Pleasure shot through her, so intense she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out. In a sudden burst of energy, her world exploded. Her sight narrowed and spots of light pricked her vision as she reached her orgasm.

Breathing hard, Nadira let the sensations fade away and slumped in the water. She sat there for several moments before realizing she might not have long before Mikiel returned.

"Was that your first climax?" The familiar deep, rumbling voice from the doorway made her jump, and it took a moment for the question to penetrate the pleasurable haze fogging her brain.

When she found her voice, all she could manage was a shaky, "No."

"Have you cleansed yourself?"

"I --"

"Yes or no?"

She shifted in the water to cover her breasts beneath its surface. "No."

Without another word, Mikiel began ridding himself of his clothes. Off balance as she was, Nadira couldn't take her eyes off him. As each inch of flesh was bared, her body did things it had never done before. Her stomach fluttered when his abdominal muscles rippled, and her nipples tightened beneath the water. Mikiel seemed to be unaware of his effect on her -- which was good as far as Nadira was concerned.

He slid his pants down his hips and stepped out of his shoes. Powerful, muscular legs bunched and undulated with each movement. Heavily muscled arms and shoulders were the final testament of how correct her assumption had been that he took great care of his body.

When he finally stood and started toward Nadira, she saw the semi-erect flesh of his cock for the first time. Even in a flaccid state it was impressive, and she couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like. Mikiel might not be what she considered "handsome," but his body was a work of art. It was as if he had been fashioned out of her deepest, darkest, wildest fantasies. She didn't *want* to see him as anything other

than her “master” at worst, her enemy at best, but seeing him like this made her see him as a man. Nothing more.

Nadira resisted the urge to move away from him as he stepped into the bath and settled himself in the water. When he opened a bottle of liquid cleanser, a crisp, clean fragrance of mint spilled into the room.

He took her arm and pulled her toward him. When his arms closed around her, she caught a brief glimpse of lust on his face before he turned her around and removed the clip from her hair. White-blond tresses spilled down her back and into the water. She wanted to protest, but bit her lip to keep from it.

Mikiel guided her to a depression in the bath so that she sat in the water slightly lower than chest high. He was behind her, his legs at her back. “Rest your head on my knee.” Nadira wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted, but moved to do his bidding and found she didn’t have to understand what he wanted. His hands guided her into position.

She lay face up with the back of her neck resting on his strong thigh and her hair floating gently in the water behind her. He scooped water over her head and when he started massaging the wonderfully scented soap into her hair, she couldn’t suppress the groan. His fingers worked through her hair, then on her scalp. The cleansing gel tingled and cooled the sensitive skin underneath his fingertips. Mikiel urged her to lean her head back farther and he rinsed the soap from her hair in careful but methodical movements. The air felt cool as the peaks of her breasts emerged from the warm water as she was repositioned.

Once her hair was clean, Mikiel began to cleanse her skin with the same lightly scented soap. He soaped her limbs and it seemed like he was going through movements he’d done hundreds of times. The methodical motions were designed to do nothing more than cleanse her, and she almost allowed herself to relax and let him pamper her.

As he caressed her from head to toe, her mind focused on the sexual abilities of the incredible man touching her so intimately. What kind of lover would he make? Would sex simply be a means of release for him, or would he expect her to draw out his

pleasure until he tired of the game? Would he make sure she enjoyed herself or would he take what he wanted and leave her to find her release on her own? Would he train her to please in the manner Asalian men liked, then rid himself of her? All these questions flew through her mind before she finally landed on, *Does he find me physically appealing?* Moon and Stars! She hoped he kept his word that she wouldn't be a slave. She didn't think she could handle the emotional ride involved.

With that line of thought, it didn't take long for her to interpret his ministrations as sexual. It seemed like he might have lingered on her breasts longer than was necessary and, after a few passes over her fleshy globes, Nadira wanted to squirm. The moan that escaped her lips was slight, but any doubt Mikiel heard her moan and knew exactly what it meant evaporated when she saw the hot look of lust in his eyes.

With a growl, Mikiel hefted her out of the water and his lips closed over one nipple. Nadira didn't even try to stem the cry this time. The sensations flowing through her were overwhelming, and she knew that if this man chose to take her body as he had done to countless others, she wouldn't raise her voice in protest. In fact, she thought she might even beg him to continue should he stop now.

She arched into him and her fingers found his bare scalp -- seemingly on their own because she couldn't remember raising her arms -- and she held him to her as tightly as she could. When she felt one of his hands push between her thighs, she parted her legs eagerly. Nadira screamed the second his large, callused hand touched her clit. Mikiel stroked it several times before plunging his fingers inside her and Nadira rocked her hips in time to his movements. It didn't take long before she felt the tingling sensation start, centering around her clit and pussy.

When Mikiel pulled his mouth from her breast and looked at her, Nadira's breath caught. This man was as affected by their intimate moment as she was. An orgasm like none other she'd ever experienced washed over her, and spasms seized her body. A reflex action caused her to wrap her arms around Mikiel and cling to him, her lifeline in a sea of sensation.

When her climax passed, her eyelids grew heavy but she made an effort to hold them open. As she focused on his eyes once again, she found a trace of annoyance but as he continued to stroke her cunt and clit, his expression grew more and more filled with lust and possession. Now it seemed like everything he'd done had been designed to give the master a better sense of the property he'd newly attained. Even if she wasn't really a slave, she felt like one in that moment.

When Mikiel had stopped caressing her pussy, he urged her to sit, then stand. Once he'd exited the bath and dried himself, he helped her out and dried her with gentle but brisk movements, leaving her the towel to finish herself. Finally, Mikiel said the one thing Nadira had hoped to be able to keep to herself, at least for a little while. Now she had to deal with it. "You are untouched."

She felt her cheeks heat up. Never having had sex before wasn't something she'd ever been embarrassed about. Then again, it had never seemed important before now. As it was, there was a very real chance she wouldn't remain a virgin much longer if her bath was any indication. She didn't want to answer Mikiel, but something in his eyes told her it would be in her best interest to answer quickly and truthfully.

"Well, I've had orgasms, but --"

"Have you been with a man or not? It's not a difficult concept." His clipped, brisk question made her flinch when she would have preferred to stand her ground, but standing there in nothing but a towel gave her a feeling of utter helplessness. She was so far out of her element, so off balance, she couldn't shut out her emotional responses like she was able to in the pilot's seat. As it was, she was tense, stiff.

When she flew the *Black Star*, the one thing she relied on was her ability to pay attention to every little vibration within the ship, no matter what was going on around her. Now she felt like she was too focused on what was in front of her. It felt like she was flying blind. "No. I haven't."

His only response was a slight grunt before he took the towel from her and directed her to the bedchamber. Mikiel hardly spared her another glance. "I have

arranged for you to have access to my computer if you wish it. You'll find everything you need to know about flying a ship of this class. My study is open to you."

Nadira knew an order when she heard one.

She was relieved, of course. Having to be in the same room with Mikiel after what had just happened was more than she was prepared to deal with emotionally.

Cold chills covered her body and she shivered. It reminded her she was still unclothed and her hair was still wet. She was definitely chilly, and promptly went in search of clothing. What she found was a sleek black flight suit that covered her from throat to ankle yet still managed to hide very little. It hugged every curve of her body, showing every imperfection she had. Sighing, she recognized there was little she could do. This was obviously the way he wanted her dressed and she'd simply have to deal with it. With a shrug, she decided to block it out by doing exactly what Mikiel suggested. She'd learn this ship as well as she knew the *Black Star*. She might not be able to do that solely by computer, but she could go a long way toward her goal.

Going to Mikiel's private workstation, she sat and tucked her legs underneath her in the large, high-backed, padded chair and pressed her palm to the screen imbedded in the surface of his desk. When the welcome popped up on the three-dimensional screen, Nadira started her studies.

Chapter Five

Mikiel dropped to his bed. All he wanted was to close his eyes and rest for a week. What the *fuck* had he just done? He had taken Nadira for her piloting skills. Nothing more. He *had* to remember that. Without her full attention on learning how to fly *Sword Breaker* as efficiently as she had the *Black Star*, she wouldn't be able to bond with the *Sword Breaker*. At present, *Sword Breaker* was the only Asalian vessel to be equipped with cyborg intelligence -- computers combined with human brain cells -- but who knew how many the Vok'nair had. So far, no one had been able to bond with *Sword Breaker*. Who knew how many Vok'nair vessels had been bonded.

When he'd seen the way the *Black Star* moved and fought, he knew he had to find out everything he could about her pilot. When the *Sword Breaker* had been commissioned, the ultimate goal had been for the three key people aboard a ship to bond with it -- the captain, the second in command, and the pilot. Given the degree of skill with which the *Black Star* had moved, of those three people, the pilot had been the most likely to have bonded with the ship. It was still possible one or both of the others had bonded as well, but given the fact that they hadn't pursued yet, he figured they either didn't have a good bond, or hadn't bonded at all. With the addition of Nadira to his crew, he began to think there might be a possibility of finding the key to this stupid three-quarter cyborg, one-quarter human tin can. The only reason the Asalian Coalition had built *Sword Breaker* in the first place was to keep up with the Vok'nairs' technology. It was a colossal waste of time, materials, and manpower as far as he was concerned.

Still, he had to make sure she stayed focused, and fucking her until they were both sated and sleepy would not accomplish his goals. If anyone was going to bond with his ship, it was Nadira. He knew it in his gut.

Now he had to be strong, had to live up to the reputation of the cold and calculating commander he'd worked so hard to achieve. There was more at stake here than his engorged cock.

As he lay there, remembering how silky her skin had felt, how beautifully she'd responded to him, that aforementioned engorged cock twitched as if reminding him it still needed attention. Ignoring it wasn't an option, not when it was this hard.

Touching Nadira had been the worst kind of heaven. Once he'd slipped his fingers inside her and knew beyond a doubt she was a virgin, a quick fuck was out of the question. Sex with a virgin might be a heady thought, but there were invariably messy emotional complications. Always on the part of said virgin. Mikiel wasn't the kind of man to be with only one woman.

But what a fuck it would be! He took his dick in one hand and squeezed gently. It pulsed in his hand as if eager to begin. Pulling up, then down, he stroked himself steadily at first, wanting only to get off quickly. It was working, too, until the image of Nadira's lips enveloping his cock popped into his head. The air left his lungs and for a moment he couldn't breathe. In his mind, she looked at him, drawing her lips up the shaft and letting go of the head with a popping sound before wrapping her lips around him once again and starting over.

On second thought, he wanted this to last as long as it could. The possibility of actually getting Nadira into this position was virtually zero, and the image was too damned good to rush. He wondered what she would think or do if she came out of his office and found him like this. With that thought came a rush of lust so strong he couldn't hold back his climax any longer. He let go and a low groan escaped his throat as stream after stream of his own seed spurted onto his chest and belly.

For a few moments, he simply lay there trying to catch his breath. It had been a long time since the mere image of a woman going down on him had brought about such a powerful orgasm.

Fuck! He had to keep his wits about him and quit thinking with his dick. The Coalition was counting on him to figure out how to bond this ship, and Nadira was his best hope.

Taking a deep breath, Mikiel sat up. He touched his hand to his chest. It came away sticky and he winced. He needed to clean up, and a bath sounded really good.

In the bathing chamber, he took a long, hot bath to wash the semen from his torso and collect his thoughts. Well, at least it was done. He wouldn't have to worry about his wayward cock rearing its pesky head for a while.

Then he walked into his study.

She stood in the center of the room, her arms outstretched, her face tilted upward as if looking to the sky, but her eyes were closed. There was a look of utter concentration on her face. She looked like she was listening to something. No sooner had the door whooshed shut than she lowered her arms and took a step back away from him, the spell broken.

"What were you doing?" He regarded her with wariness. He'd bet his life she'd done it already. Bonded with his ship.

"I -- nothing."

"Don't lie to me, Nadira." He didn't raise his voice, but he made his tone as sharp as he could. If she'd linked with the ship, he needed to know. "Have you bonded with *Sword Breaker*?"

"No." She took a step backwards, then held her ground, raising her chin. "But I might have if you hadn't broken my concentration."

Mikiel took a few deep, calming breaths. Even still, his heart was racing. Just like that. For twenty-one Asalian sun cycles they had tried to figure out how to access the organic parts of the computer brain in this ship and she had done it in less than five standard hours.

"How?"

"I'm slightly empathic, but only with closely related family members. Somehow, this ship reached out to me on an emotional level."

Mikiel thought hard about his next question. If the *Black Star* had indeed linked with the *Sword Breaker*, Nadira would likely know *Sword Breaker* was not bonded and maybe even that they didn't know how to form a bond with their bloody cyborg ship. If she hadn't picked up that information, he didn't want to volunteer it. That was information that could be potentially damaging if Nadira were to escape. He tried to phrase it as carefully as possible.

"Do your people have to be empathic to bond with a cyborg vessel?"

When she didn't answer right away, Mikiel knew she was measuring her response as well. "We believe so, yes," she finally answered.

Mikiel huffed an exasperated sigh. This was going to get them nowhere. If they were going to figure this out, they had to work together. He wasn't going to let her go, anyway. Why not simply tell her? Maybe she could solve their problem for him.

"We thought telepathic enhancers for the neurological conductor pathways in the synthetic brain would be enough."

Nadira shrugged and turned away. Apparently she wasn't going to volunteer information. While he admired her for it, it also made him angry. They had one of the most technologically advanced vessels in space and they couldn't fucking figure out how to use it.

He crossed the distance between them in three long strides, grabbed her arm, and jerked her around to face him. Her body landed flush against his.

"You're not going anywhere, Nadira." He gritted the statement out through clenched teeth. "Even if by some miracle your government decided it gave a damn because you've bonded with one of their ships, I absolutely *will not* let you go." He shook her slightly to emphasize his resolve, and she cried out. "I need you to tell me how to create a human-to-ship bond."

"You don't understand!" she yelled back at him. "I don't know how! This ship reached out to me, not the other way around." She paused for a moment, her breathing shallow and her cheeks flushed. "I didn't even bond with the *Black Star*."

For a moment, Mikiel was too stunned to say anything. He simply gaped at her, trying to decide if she was telling the truth. Her silver-blue eyes were wide in shock and fear. When he had pulled her to him, he hadn't realized the arm not holding onto her upper arm had snaked around her waist, but now he used the leverage to pull her closer.

He wasn't sure why he did it, but when her mouth parted in surprise, he couldn't help but taste what she'd inadvertently offered. He didn't take her gently -- quite the opposite -- he swooped down like he meant to conquer. He pulled at her lips with his teeth and plunged his tongue inside to explore.

When she moaned and tilted her head back, something inside him snapped. His other arm went around her to grasp her ass, and he pulled her pelvis into him. His cock had gone rock hard, and he ground it into the soft flesh of her belly. The form-fitting outfit offered only a scant barrier between them. The heat from her flesh seared him.

After a brief hesitation, Nadira kissed him back. Her touch was tentative at first, but before long she kissed him with as much vigor as he kissed her. Wrapping one leg around his hip, she struggled to find a position that gave her some relief. Mikiel knew what she wanted and pressed his thigh between her legs. When Nadira made contact with him, she cried out yet again and began to ride him rapidly. She ground herself onto his leg, obviously hitting her clit with the friction she needed.

It wasn't long before her breathing became erratic and her cries louder and more frantic. Within moments, she tore her mouth away from his, threw her head back, and screamed out her climax. When she fused her mouth to his once again, Mikiel was startled when she bit him, actually drawing blood. He pulled her back with a fist clenched tightly in her hair close to her scalp. The fierceness in her eyes, the unadulterated lust, called to his own baser nature. She might be a virgin, but she certainly knew what she wanted and went after it as aggressively as she flew ships.

With that thought, a realization of what he was about to do came crashing down on him. He shoved Nadira away from him a little harder than he should have, and she stumbled and fell. Her face hit the edge of his desk. Mikiel resisted the almost

overpowering urge to help her to her feet, but he was afraid that if he touched her just then, he'd rip the uniform from her delectable body and fuck her until they both collapsed. Even so, when she turned back to him, tears trickling down her face -- he could see from the look in her eyes it was from the shock of the blow as much as from the pain -- he almost went to her, anyway.

Nadira touched the injury gingerly with her fingertips. "I guess I'll have matching bruises." She gave him a deprecating smile. "I supposed I deserved that."

Mikiel wiped a trail of blood from his chin where it had dripped from his lip. "No woman deserves that, Nadira. We don't treat our woman like that, slaves or not."

"So you said once before." She got shakily to her feet and almost fell. Mikiel couldn't stop himself this time. He did reach out to her. When she flinched, he thought he'd throw up. He wanted -- needed -- to keep his distance from her emotionally, but he didn't want her to fear for her safety. She was needed as a pilot. Anything else would have to be her choice and not like this. She had to make a rational decision, not one made as a result of stress and sexual tension. Mikiel had never taken advantage of a slave -- or any other woman for that matter. He didn't intend to start now.

"Nadira --"

"No." She held up a hand and looked away from him, as if she couldn't bear the sight of him. "I don't want to hear how sorry you are, or how 'if only we'd met in another lifetime' or some other shit. You don't want me. That's all I need to know. I'll never do that again."

That statement enraged him and he wasn't really sure why. It was what he wanted, wasn't it? Why did he feel so strongly for this woman out of the blue? The thought that she would never seek him out was almost as troubling as the thought that she believed he didn't want her. He took a few deep breaths, hoping it might slow his pounding heart and get the blood flowing to his brain instead of his cock.

When he had better control of himself, he spoke with more conviction than he had ever felt about anything in his life -- up to this point. "You *will* do that again. Once

you've bonded with this ship and learned her as you knew the *Black Star*, you will come to me on your own."

"What makes you so sure of that? What makes you think I won't escape and spill all your secrets to the Coalition once I learn them?"

"Because I don't believe you can share that kind of bond with this ship only to betray her in such a manner."

She looked helpless and afraid for a moment before she schooled her emotions and blanked her face. "I will not pursue a man who does not want me. I won't lower myself."

He advanced on her again and almost pulled her into his arms to show her how very wrong she was. "There's a difference in not wanting a woman and not wanting to take her before she's ready." He pointed his finger at her, bringing it inches from her face. "You need to learn the difference. When you do, then you'll come to me."

Mikiel watched Nadira for a few moments, purposefully letting his lust for her show on his face. She would come to him, and when she did he would prove to her how very much he wanted her. Nadira gasped and would have taken a step back if she had been a lesser woman. She might look young and fragile, but she had the heart of a warrior.

Satisfied he'd gotten his point across, Mikiel turned and left the room. His life was going to be hell for a good long while.

Chapter Six

Nadira thought about his words as the days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months. She never did get her own cabin, and the one time she asked about it Mikiel snapped at her, "I'll get to it when I have time!" She got the impression he wasn't one to yell, but he seemed to have no patience where she was concerned.

Their time together grew more and more strained, and it confused Nadira as much as it hurt her. To make matters worse, the sexual tension between them was almost palpable. He never touched her -- he'd promised he wouldn't -- but that didn't stop the smoldering looks he gave her. Unfortunately, with all the time that had passed, she wasn't sure if those looks were looks of lust or anger and resentment. In her quest to master the *Sword Breaker*, she had done her best to ignore him and even though this was what he expected her to do, she was afraid he had grown to hate her for it.

For her part, she'd gotten to the point where she couldn't concentrate when he was around. Any link she might have been able to form went out the window every time Mikiel walked into the room. She could sense the ship's impatience with her, which was also frustrating, but it wasn't a sensation new to her. Nadira had often sensed the same emotion from the *Black Star*. That combined with her constant sexual awareness of Mikiel made concentration impossible.

Now she sat at the pilot's station performing one mindless hyperspace maneuver after another. Mikiel sat behind her and to the left. She could almost feel the burning sensation at the back of her neck, knowing he was as focused on her as she was on him.

Without warning, there was a tremendous lurch. The ship made an emergency rapid descent into normal space. The only possible cause for that kind of immediate descent was a near collision with something that wasn't supposed to be there. Claxons blared, lights flashed, and she expected pandemonium to engulf her. But all noise from

the other officers in the control room ceased and everyone concentrated on their respective panels. A stream of information flooded her console.

Immediately, she began to process, as a stream of data was force-fed into her brain. It was uncomfortable, and totally unexpected, but she managed and was amazed when she realized she actually understood most of what was being given to her -- information that would have taken her several minutes at best to process in any other manner.

"It's the *Black Star*, Sir." Hers was the only voice all around them. "And it's directly in our path."

"I'm aware of that," he snapped, and waved her to silence. Apparently she had made some breach in protocol but she'd be damned if she knew what it was. Her face heated and she knew it must be as red as a Drazilian Firebush.

Without another word, she turned to the information streaming into her head. The *Black Star* seemed unaware of their presence, but Nadira had no doubt they were looking for her. Apparently her father wasn't willing to let her go so easily. Not only were the *Black Star's* defenses on minimal only, but there was no indication she was ready to fire, which meant they had time to capture her old ship without firing a shot.

Her heart raced. What should she do? This was her one chance to get out of this, but if she did anything to give them away, she might lose any possibility of linking with a cyborg intelligent ship.

And she might get them all killed.

Nadira sat motionless at her console. Apparently, the rest of the crew were communicating by some means other than what she was used to, so she concentrated on processing the data stream. The only clear order she could make out from the conversation within *Sword Breaker's* master internal comm system was to stand down and not make a move. There was simply too much information for her to pick out anything else.

Are you ever going to let go and let me have control?

The voice was male, deep, and very soft. It was almost buried underneath the torrent of information flowing inside her brain and seemed almost to be an afterthought. As if the voice didn't expect her to hear it, anyway.

So. You've finally decided to pay attention. Took you long enough. The voice was stronger now, but still very non-obtrusive. Are you ready to do this?

Nadira was stunned. The *Sword Breaker* had made first contact with her, not the other way around. She didn't know what the ship meant, but the only answer that popped into her head was, *I'm not taking advantage of the vulnerability of the Black Star to catch Mikiel an interstellar prize.*

Do you really think that's what he wants?

Do you really think he doesn't? I haven't learned much, but I do know the Asalians don't have any more of a clue about cyborg intelligent ships than the Vok'nair do. He knows I couldn't link up with the Black Star, but his government doesn't believe him and wasn't happy he let her go in the first place. They still want the Black Star and if he can take advantage of this situation, he might still get back in their good graces.

Do you think the opinion of anyone matters so much to him that he would endanger the lives of so many people?

If not for that, then what? Why engage the Black Star at all?

Have you not been listening to anything going on around you? The ship was annoyed now and Nadira could tell he thought her daft.

They haven't said a word.

Have you not used your psycom?

My what?

Psycom. Everyone aboard this ship is fitted with one to avoid confusion during battle.

Well, not me. I guess that's something my benevolent master forgot to see to. I get all the data entered into your data banks at once, and what little I can glean from your master comm, but nothing else. And the information coming to you is simply too much for me to catch more than bits and pieces.

There was a sigh and a very long pause.

No wonder you're confused and frightened. The last thing Mikiel wants right now is a confrontation with the Black Star.

If that's true, then why did we come out of hyperspace?

Did they teach you nothing when they trained you to fly space ships? The voice was more than just impatient now, it was condescending. You came out of hyperspace because there was another ship directly in your path. Had I not pulled us out, we would have hit the Black Star at a speed faster than light. What do you suppose would have happened then?

I know that. But one order from him and a minor course correction, and our flight is not disturbed at all.

Not if the Black Star was also in hyperspace.

Nadira blinked, startled. Oh. I didn't think of that.

You weren't thinking about anything. And I'd appreciate having your full attention when you attempt to fly me. You might have a grand reputation in the Vok'nair Empire -- the tone in his voice said he believed otherwise -- but I've yet to see any of it here.

Goddess! Are all the male members of this society so exasperating?

Only with females who are acting stupid. You are far too intelligent and far too adept at flying ships to be so careless.

I can't concentrate! That infernal beast behind me keeps me in a state of constant arousal and I can't think when he's around! Make him stop and I'll be more careful!

I see. In a flash, all the annoyance and condescension was gone, replaced by understanding. Nadira could almost believe the ship had experienced it first hand.

I could be off the mark as I can't connect with the good captain's thoughts and feelings as I can yours, but I think he is experiencing much the same thing. His actions indicate he wants you near, yet is unwilling or unable to satisfy himself. His argument with you shortly after you arrived seems to have prevented him from, shall I say, making the first move.

We're wasting time with useless nonsense. How am I supposed to communicate? He's either unaware I haven't been fitted with their communication devices or doesn't want me to know what's going on now with the Black Star.

Just be ready. When I tell you, push the sublight engines to maximum to a point one thousand meters off the starboard side of the Black Star. They haven't detected us and you should be able to engage a tractor beam and capture her without firing a shot.

I don't understand. Any second in command worth his pay will see us coming.

Not if he's not linked and the Black Star doesn't want him to see.

Nadira sat in stunned silence, barely able to input the instructions she was preparing to execute. There was a bigger picture here she wasn't seeing.

Only because you haven't tried, my dear. Sword Breaker sounded more like a fatherly figure now than a cyborg entity.

The claxons had long since quieted, and the silence was deafening as Nadira waited. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck and between her breasts, and the clingy uniform stuck to her damp skin. She reached out with all she was to the *Sword Breaker*, trying her best to get a feel for what was happening. All she sensed was a building sense of excitement. *Black Star* would finally take her place beside him. *After all these decades.*

Now, Nadira! Now!

Nadira pressed the button to execute the commands she had already entered. It worked like a charm, just like *Sword Breaker* had said it would. The *Black Star* seemed to be caught completely off guard, except Nadira knew better. The information *had* been there. She could sense it in the back of her mind. The link with the *Black Star* she had tried so hard to form all those months ago was grossly incomplete, but a link nonetheless.

The command team let out a collective breath. One young man a little less disciplined than the others pumped a fist in the air in celebration. Mikiel's expression was blank. He gave nothing away, but his eyes were focused squarely on her. She tried to hold his gaze, but it wasn't long before she dropped her eyes. He knew something had happened.

"Even though we have every right to bring the *Black Star* back to Homeworld, I gave my word to let her go. We can hardly fault her captain for attempting to rescue a

valued crewmember. Tow the *Black Star* back to Vok'nair space and disable her weaponry. If she tries to follow us, disable her engines. Then set a course back to Asalian space with all possible speed. I'll be in my quarters." When Nadira turned to obey his command, he grabbed her arm and dragged her from the pilot's station to the door. She cried out as his fingers bit into her arm, but he didn't loosen his grip. He hissed in her ear. "Not a word until we're alone."

You cannot let him make Black Star go away. The ship sounded almost frantic, not the smug, self-assured entity of only a few moments ago. Convince him to bring her with us and try to get her to join forces with the Asalian Coalition.

He doesn't care about my opinion. What makes you think he'll listen to me?

Just be honest with the questions he asks you. Answer everything. Tell him what you feel.

Why? Why is this so important to you?

Sword Breaker answered her with silence.

Before she could question the ship further, Mikiel opened the door to their quarters and yanked her inside. "How did you know what maneuver I was planning? I know for a fact you haven't been implanted with a psycom unit, yet you executed my exact command the instant I opened my mouth to give you the instructions."

Nadira swallowed. She was so confused and disoriented she didn't know what she should do. If she did as the *Sword Breaker* instructed, the goal would be to capture and turn the *Black Star* into an Asalian ship. If she didn't, they would tow her old ship to safety. Only a few months ago, she would have kept her mouth shut. Now, well, she missed the *Black Star*. She might not want her old ship turned into an Asalian vessel, but she wanted to walk her decks again. Besides, Nadira realized there was something else going on. Something she was missing, but thought she ought to be able to see clearly. "I've made a tentative link with *Sword Breaker*. He told me what I should do."

Mikiel studied her intently. "What else did it tell you?"

"That you should take the *Black Star* with you and convince her to join us." Goddess, Nadira hoped she'd done the right thing. If not, even her father wouldn't be able to get her out of this one should he succeed in rescuing her.

Mikiel paced the room twice before sitting down on the bed and scrubbing a hand over his face. "The ship told you this." He made it a statement instead of a question. He looked wearier than Nadira had yet seen him. Usually he wore a mask over his emotions. This sudden lapse in control meant he was either weary indeed, or he was simply becoming used to her. She rather liked the latter.

"What would you have me do? I doubt your *friend* Damon will join an enemy force without a very good reason. The longer we stay in Asalian space, the greater the likelihood of us being discovered by another vessel more concerned with bettering their career than the good of the Coalition. Your precious *Black Star* might end up stardust."

"Then take us to neutral space."

Good idea! Thank you, my dear. Thank you. The *Sword Breaker* now expressed his relief with an almost human inflection to his words.

Mikiel raised an eyebrow. "Neutral space." He considered it for a moment. "Do you think you can convince Damon to defect?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Is there anyone there who has linked with her?"

"I don't know." Nadira found she enjoyed this simple information exchange with Mikiel. He wasn't yelling at her, and she wasn't avoiding him. They simply talked. It was a pleasant experience. "I do know that there is something going on between the *Black Star* and the *Sword Breaker*. I just don't know what it is, and this stubborn ship of yours hasn't seen fit to tell me."

Yet. Not yet. Soon, my dear.

Nadira wasn't sure why she suddenly felt bold enough to openly study Mikiel, but she did so now. His black uniform, lined in gold, fit his large, firm body snugly, hugging the contours of his muscles. From strong arms and powerful thighs to a massive chest and rock hard abdomen, Mikiel was the perfect specimen of manhood as

far as she was concerned. The intense features of his face only accentuated his masculinity and rugged maleness. Nadira didn't think of herself as having a very creative imagination, but the things she had done to this man in her dreams and daydreams made her wonder at that assessment of her character. Even now, she was wondering if he would stop her if she simply shrugged out of her clothing and draped her body over his.

"We'll try it your way. If you can't convince Damon to join us, we can always part ways without fear of a Vok'nair ambush." His statement startled her. She had been sinking fast into a sexual haze. When she realized he was actually listening to her input, she almost had to shake her head to make sure she'd heard him right. Before she could comment on his last statement, he opened communications with the command room. "Central Command, this is the commander. Change our course to the Sclactian sector. Best possible speed."

"As you command. Sir, the *Black Star* is demanding to know our intentions."

Mikiel stood and walked to Nadira until her breasts would surely touch him if she took a deep breath. She had to tilt her head back to keep his gaze. Never taking his eyes from hers, he gave instructions to the officer. "Inform the *Black Star* we will be discussing a possible alliance between our two ships. Make sure you word it exactly like that. Don't embellish."

"It will be as you command, Sir."

Nadira couldn't stop herself. Her hands rested lightly on his chest before she realized she'd moved them. Her palms burned where they touched him and she could feel the ridges and valleys of his muscular frame. His chest moved in and out deeply and rapidly with his breathing and desire sparkled in his eyes.

"I understand what you tried to tell me when I first came aboard. What I don't understand is why it mattered to you that I make a conscious decision to come to you."

"I want no regrets, Nadira, and I don't believe in taking advantage of a woman for sex. But you --" He brought a hand to her face to stroke her cheek and chin. "-- I

knew from the moment I saw you I wanted you. Now I'm beginning to think I'll do anything I have to in order to keep you."

Her breath caught in her throat. Goddess, the man knew the way through a woman's defenses. Especially ones as flimsy as hers. "Then why have things been so awful between us? I thought you might hate me and I didn't know why."

He smiled then and pulled her to him in a tender embrace. "It is difficult to keep a civil tongue when one is sexually frustrated beyond belief and the object of that frustration lies only a few feet away each night."

"You could have given me the separate living space you said I'd have that first day."

"And give someone else the privilege of joining you there? I think not." He held her to him tightly, sending a thrill through her that was almost overwhelming. "Besides, there's no one on this ship who would be as gentle with you as me."

Nadira snorted. "Forgive me, but you aren't the first person I think of when I picture a tender lover. You're more the type to swoop down and conquer."

"You don't think I can be gentle?"

"I think -- oh!" She cried out in surprise when he scooped her up and threw her onto his bed, following her down to cover her body with his. He lay sprawled out between her legs and rested his weight on his forearms. Nadira's breath came in little gasps of excitement. This was it. This was really it.

"I can be gentle." He lowered his head to hers and whispered once more, "I can be gentle." And he kissed her.

Chapter Seven

Mikiel had never felt such a tremendous sense of relief in all his life. She was finally his. He might have made the first move, but she had made the decisions she needed to make. Yes, he had kept her in his chambers when he should have given her solitude, but he just hadn't been able to let her out of his sight. He'd had a need to keep her as close as he could. There was something about her that called to something inside him and he couldn't fight it anymore. A hardass he might be, but he was putty in her hands. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Right now, all he felt was an overwhelming need to be inside her, to fill her with his cock and his seed. To claim her as his. She was right. He wasn't a gentle lover, and he was very much afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself this time. The woman beneath him was lush, full-figured. Just looking at her enticed him. She was unlike any other woman he had ever known. He had always held himself back for fear of hurting the delicately built women he usually bedded. With Nadira, he knew already from their previous encounter she was as aggressive as he was, and he had a feeling she wouldn't be impressed by a gentle lover any more than he was.

She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him to her more firmly, her hands pulling at his clothing. Their kiss was an explosion of pent up lust. There was nothing as important at that moment as getting their clothes off and joining to their mutual satisfaction.

Mikiel wasn't sure how he managed it, but he got his uniform off and simply ripped Nadira's from her body. Her wide, lust filled eyes told him he'd shocked her, but she approved. Greatly. He knew he needed to take his time, he knew he had to be as careful as he could so as not to hurt her, but all he could do was reach between them with one trembling hand to ensure she was slick with readiness before guiding his cock

to her entrance. With one mighty thrust, he pushed past her barrier. They both cried out. He in ecstasy, she in a combination of pleasure and pain. He did pause then, needing to make sure she was okay.

“Nadira?” To her, it sounded like Mikiel’s voice was coming from the other end of a dimensional gateway. Her ears rang and she was light-headed -- probably from hyperventilating -- and she couldn’t decide if the sensations coming from her cunt were the ultimate in painful pleasure or just plain painful. She burned and felt full to bursting, but she also had an almost overwhelming need to make him do it all over again. Her pussy tingled and throbbed where they were joined. Her clit was in firm contact with his body and she was stimulated beyond anything she’d ever dreamed of every time either of them moved.

“Don’t stop.” She forced the words out as best she could, but they sounded hoarse and raw, far from the commanding tone she would have preferred. She used her legs to pull him into her again when he retreated.

After a few strokes, he finally began a fierce, almost violent rhythm. He grunted with each powerful surge forward and their bodies slapped together loudly. Satisfied he wouldn’t stop, Nadira spread her legs wide, allowing him to drive just a little bit deeper. She pulled her knees as close to her shoulders as she could and forced them open as wide as she could possibly manage. The new sensations blew her mind. Never had she imagined anything could strip away all self-control and make her crave the harsh, raw fucking Mikiel was introducing her to. She had to have more.

Mikiel covered her body with his, only the retreat of his hips and her spread legs separating their bodies. His forehead rested on the bed beside her head, supporting some of his weight, his breathing harsh in her ear. His arms were wrapped tightly around her, holding her to him as if afraid she’d try to flee. Nadira knew how he felt. She had the same fear, afraid he’d push away from her and leave her in this awful state of needful lust.

"You like it rough, don't you?" he growled, his own need abundantly clear in the husky timbre of his voice. At least she wasn't alone in that area.

"Goddess, yes!"

"You love being fucked by me. Say it!"

"Yes! Fuck me! Goddess, please! Fuck me harder! Now!"

And he did. Unbelievably, harder and deeper than before. Nadira wrapped her legs around him once again and lifted herself to him, meeting him thrust for thrust. Her head thrashed from side to side as the pleasure built and built and threatened to overwhelm her. Just as her orgasm began to wash over her, her lips accidentally collided with his neck. She didn't know why she did it, but she latched on to his flesh and bit down as she came. Hard. On both counts.

Mikiel was so surprised by Nadira's unexpected and aggressive bite that he lost what was left of his control. When her pussy contracted around his cock, his seed spurted so explosively from him he wondered if he might have actually blown the head off of his dick. It was so violent, a heady combination of pleasure and pain. Never in all his adult years had he had such a ferocious, complete orgasm. Never had he held a woman so tightly, or wanted to continue holding her to prevent her from leaving him and denying him such astounding pleasure whenever he chose. But he found that, deep in his mind and heart, he had a driving need to see she was pleased, too. He would have delayed his own release indefinitely, no matter the pain to himself, if it meant she would find even one more ounce of pleasure. He didn't know why. Only that it was so.

Still clutching Nadira, he tried desperately to catch his breath. In a few short minutes, his life had changed completely. Utterly. Keeping his distance from her both physically and emotionally would be next to impossible now. With her on his ship, there was absolutely no way he could pretend none of this had happened. And he wouldn't try. It might take everything in him; he might eventually lose himself in her. It was totally opposite from the way he was as commander of the *Sword Breaker*, but he

would make sure everyone on this ship and every other they encountered knew she was off limits.

The Black Star Princess belonged to him.

* * *

Nadira opened her eyes. She was still in Mikiel's bed, but he was no longer with her. When she sat up, her body protested greatly. Every muscle in her body ached, to say nothing of how she felt between her legs. Perhaps she shouldn't have participated so enthusiastically. The most amazing part was she could actually feel the *Sword Breaker* going through his routine programs as the ship sped through space toward their destination. There was a tension in him, but she attributed that to the impending meeting with the *Black Star*. She had the same feeling of anxiety, so she didn't think twice about it. Swinging her legs over the side, Nadira sat there a few moments, trying not to whimper. She needed a hot soak in that bathing pool again. Thinking of that, she couldn't help the silly grin on her face.

When she trusted her legs enough to hold her, she carefully made her way to the bathing chamber. There she found Mikiel leaning over the sink with his head hanging down as if he thought he was about to be sick. He must have heard her because he raised his head and caught her gaze in the mirror. What she saw there made her take a couple of steps back, and caused a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Anger.

Hurt.

Despair.

"When were you planning on telling me?"

Oh, Goddess! He knows. "It's not something I think about on a daily basis."

He pushed away from the vanity and whirled on her. "How can you *not* think about it? It's who you are!"

That rankled a bit. "Who I am has nothing to do with who my father is. Who I am is what I've chosen to be."

"Don't play games with me!" The explosion shouldn't have been unexpected. Still, his shout made her jump. "You knew all along they'd come for you, didn't you?" When she didn't answer immediately, he repeated his question in such an awful, angry yell Nadira actually cringed and raised her hands as if to protect herself. "Didn't you!"

"I had no reason to think my father would treat my capture differently than he would the disappearance of any other Vok'nair soldier. Our parting wasn't exactly --"

"You didn't think the king of the mighty Vok'nair Empire would send a rescue team after his only daughter?"

"He didn't exactly approve of my career choice. We've barely spoken in a couple of years. It's so bad, we yell at each other most of the time when we're forced into a meeting. No. I didn't think he'd send anyone after me. I figured most likely he'd be glad to be rid of such an embarrassment."

"You're not stupid, Nadira. You knew. You had to know."

She didn't know what to say to that. The only thing she could think of to say was, "How did you find out?"

Mikiel pushed past her back into the bedchamber and began to dress. "Your friend Damon Singh enlightened me when I contacted the *Black Star* to gauge his mood. I like to know my chances of a successful negotiation before I enter into one. He informed me he was instructed to bring you back at any and all cost. The penalty for him if he fails will be death."

Nadira felt like her world was crashing down around her. "I can't go back, Mikiel. I can't. I've learned so much, and leaving the *Sword Breaker* would be like leaving home. Your people, this ship. You." She pushed a hand through her thick tresses. When one lock fell over her right breast, she was suddenly self-conscious about being nude. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she scanned the room for something to cover herself. A tunic she often donned after her duties were finished for the day was draped on a chair in the far corner of the room. She crossed quickly to it and slipped it on. When she pushed her head through the opening, she found Mikiel regarding her with a mixture of interest and outrage.

“What do you expect me to do? Take on the whole Vok’nair Empire?”

“No.” She managed to get the word out through the lump in her throat. “I don’t expect that.” Pulling herself together and clearing her throat, she asked him, “When do you meet the *Black Star*?”

“One standard hour. Be ready to leave.” Without another word, Mikiel finished dressing and left their cabin.

Nadira stood there a moment, unable to move. She felt hot tears trickle down her cheeks. She’d finally accomplished what she’d set out to do -- bond with a cyborg ship - - and accidentally found a man who could spin the stars in a thousand galaxies when he took her to bed. Now she was going to lose them both and she didn’t know what, if anything, she could do about it.

Chapter Eight

When Mikiel left his quarters, he wasn't sure where he was going. He needed to think. He needed to get Nadira back aboard the *Black Star* and run like hell back to Asalian space. If he had any sense, he'd simply stop and shuttle her over. But damn it, he didn't want to. Never mind she would seriously compromise Asalian security -- he simply didn't want to let her go.

The more he thought about it, the faster he walked until he was jogging, then running, then sprinting as fast as he could down the corridors. People scrambled to get out of his way, but he hardly noticed. He was losing her. She'd stumbled into his life with the force of a thousand gigaton neutron plasma cannon, blown his world to bits, and nothing would be the same again. Ever. Even if they hadn't just shared the most explosive and satisfying sex in the entire universe -- several entire universes -- he knew he'd never be able to simply let her walk out of his life. There was something about her that felt like...

Home.

He couldn't imagine going back to a life without her.

Before he realized it, he found himself back at his cabin door. What was he going to do now? He'd just tell her how he felt. He didn't give a damn if an entire fleet of Vok'nair ships pursued them, she was staying here and that was final. If she didn't want him, too bad. She was a security risk. Mikiel was certain he could get backing from his government on that fact alone. He could probably make a good case on her being a prisoner of war, or some peacetime equivalent.

Pressing his hand to the entry pad, he stormed inside, but Nadira was nowhere to be found. He only had a few minutes before they arrived in the designated sector.

Damn it!

With an exasperated -- and desperate -- huff, he stomped out of the room and made the trek to the command center. There, at the pilot's station where she belonged, sat Nadira. Her back was ramrod straight, her face pale except for a delicate flush to her nose, and he noticed her hands trembled slightly as she made minute course corrections. Mikiel watched her trail a hand lovingly over the console as if it were something precious to her. The sight was heartbreaking to him, and for the first time in his adult life, the stress of the situation was enough to make him need to vomit. He was so torn apart inside he wasn't altogether sure he could make it through without embarrassing himself in front of the crew.

"Status report," he barked.

"We're here, Commander," Ranier reported. "All's clear for twenty parsecs."

Mikiel punched a few buttons on his console, then addressed the *Black Star*. "Commander Singh. We will speak."

"There is nothing to speak about. You will return Nadira to me, or we will take any and all measures to take her from you."

"So you've said." Mikiel's heart pounded. He couldn't breathe. He had faith his ship could outfly the *Black Star* with anyone other than Nadira at the helm of the *Black Star*, but he had to try to convince Damon to join with them before he left. He knew it was important to Nadira. "However, I find myself in an awkward situation. Nadira has been studying this ship in an effort to adjust herself to life aboard the *Sword Breaker*. Simply letting her return to you would be a security risk of the greatest kind."

"I will not leave here without her, Commander Anjoom. I cannot."

"And I will not part with her, Singh. I'd say we have a big problem."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nadira's head whip around in his direction. He couldn't see her expression, and he refused to look at her for fear of seeing something in her face he didn't want to see. Instead he gripped the armrest of his seat and kept his attention focused on the display screen in front of him that monitored the *Black Star*.

"Mikiel." Nadira's voice was soft, hesitant. Goddess, he didn't want to look at her! He didn't want to see rejection in her lovely eyes. This woman had made him soft, turned him into putty in her hands, and though he hated how weak it made him, he couldn't condemn her for it.

"I've made my decision, Nadira. You know too much about our ships and their capabilities."

"That's exactly why my father wants me. He truly might stop at nothing to get me back." The desolation in her voice was easy to hear. She hadn't figured out how to hide her emotions yet, thank the Goddess.

He met her timid gaze head on and knew the emotion on his own face must have been fierce because she wasn't the only one who cringed. "And I will stop at nothing to keep you. You're *mine*, Nadira. Nothing and no one will take you from me."

The look of hope that graced Nadira's features was worth the slight snicker he heard from Ranier. The man might have been young, but he knew Mikiel better than anyone. He also knew this was so out of character for Mikiel, Ranier most likely couldn't stop himself showing his mirth. Seeing his commander and friend fall so completely for a woman would, no doubt, amuse him for months. Well, that was all right. This particular woman was worth it. She was worth anything.

"Keeping her is a death sentence. Do you realize that?"

"If I only had a credit chip for every time I've heard *that* line. I'm confident I can overcome anything the Vok'nair Empire throws at me."

There was a pause, and Mikiel could imagine the older man considering his words. "Coming from anyone else, I'd say you were simply overconfident. But somehow, I think you just might be able to back up your claim. I should tell you, however, that I am just as committed to freeing Nadira from you as you are to keeping her. Not because her father told me to, but because I love her as if she were my own daughter. So, it would seem we've reached an impasse."

"Not necessarily." If he was going to be able to persuade Damon to join the *Black Star* with the *Sword Breaker*, this was his only chance. "The only question is, did you really mean you love Nadira like a daughter, or are you bluffing?"

"He's not bluffing, Mikiel." Nadira had turned almost completely around to face him now. "He raised me from when I was a very small girl. In fact, the reason I wanted to become a pilot was because of his influence." She must have guessed where he was headed. The excitement and hope in her face made his heart ache. How could she have gotten under his skin so completely?

"What do you want from me?" Mikiel could hear a wariness in his voice, but also resignation. He had him. It was time to explain everything.

"Nadira has formed a bond with the *Sword Breaker*. She believes the *Black Star* has a part in that bond, though she doesn't know the nature of it. We'd like you to give her the chance to explore it."

"Interesting. How much of a role does this ship play in that bond?"

Mikiel looked at Nadira and nodded, giving her the go ahead to explain.

"It's not so much that I've bonded with the *Black Star*, though I did have a very small connection with her before I left. It's more like the *Sword Breaker* has bonded with her. Don't ask me how, but it's the only way I know how to describe it."

"Wait a minute. Did I understand you to say you believe the *Sword Breaker* has bonded with the *Black Star*?"

"I think so, yes." Damon seemed to be very interested in Nadira's mild reply.

"Has the ship said anything in particular about the *Black Star*? Has it told you why it has this bond?"

"He, Damon. The *Sword Breaker* is unquestionably male, just as the *Black Star* is female."

"Did he *say* anything, Nadira? Please! It's important!"

"What's going on?" Mikiel interrupted them, not because he was curious -- though he *was* curious -- but because Nadira cringed when Damon yelled at her. He got the feeling it hadn't happened often, and it upset Nadira.

"Quiet! Nadira. What did the ship tell you?"

"When we were knocked out of hyperspace, he said 'after all these years.' I got the feeling he meant the *Black Star*."

"Of course he did." The reply was no more than a whisper and a deep, resigned breath. "OK. I'll join you. But you have to give my crew a safe way back to Vok'nair space."

Mikiel wasn't surprised. There was something going on with these ships only Damon knew. He wasn't pleased to be left out of the loop. "I assume you'll fill the rest of us in on this?" He couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his reply.

"Just promise my crew won't be harmed."

"I'll give them one of my best ships to return to Vok'nair. I have no interest in harming anyone. I only want the ship."

"The ship has a name! *Black Star*!" The intercom screeched both from the ship's speakers and all internal psycom units. Crewmembers screamed and covered their ears, though it didn't do any good.

"*Sword Breaker*! Please stop!" Nadira screamed her protest. Mikiel wanted to go to her, help her, though his head throbbed with the sudden burst of sound inside it.

"I'm tired of both of us being treated like inanimate objects. We are people. Not things." The volume was considerably less, but the voice still came from both sources.

"What's he mean, 'we'?" Mikiel was losing the thread of the conversation. He knew he had missed something somewhere, but things were moving too fast for him to keep up.

"He means the *Black Star* and the *Sword Breaker*. Do you know how cyborg vessels and cyborg androids are made?" Damon's voice from the intercom sounded wary, as if he was trying to measure his responses. Nadira wished she could have seen his face to gauge the situation a little better.

"A synthetic brain is grown from manufactured neurological cells. It is then implanted into the central computer. I don't know which parts, but it's the brain that

allows the computer to free think, and more importantly, to allow a living human to link with it."

"Didn't you ever wonder what would happen if a *non*-synthetic brain from a living person was housed in the central computer? The Vok'nair have been linking with synthetic cyborg vessels for several years now. The Asalians only built one. Me. They could never find anyone to link with me and never tried an alternate method. The Vok'nair solution was simply too costly, not to mention slightly immoral from the Asalian viewpoint.

"Now, we have little Nadira. She's linked with me and I just bet you don't have a clue as to why." *Sword Breaker* was impatient by the sound of him. Like he was dealing with a bunch of lack wits.

Mikiel shook his head. It was like hearing an echo. The voice in his head was a split second faster than the voice from the speakers. It was distracting, but not so much he didn't understand what *Sword Breaker* was saying.

"So, you're saying you have a brain from a human donor housed inside your computer?"

The voice responded with contained fury. "No. I'm saying they paralyzed my voluntary muscles, shaved my head, and cut my skull open. They then connected my brain to the master computer, which was later connected to the lesser computers running this ship. Once that was done, my brain was severed from my body, which died immediately. And here is where I've been for the past twenty-three years. I'm not saying I have the brain of a human donor. I'm saying I *am* the brain. I *am* the human donor." No one spoke for several moments as the *Sword Breaker* let the image sink in. "Worse, I was very much alive and conscious during the entire grotesque procedure. So was the *Black Star*. It was the only thing in a hundred years the Vok'nair and Asalian governments did together."

"But --" Mikiel could see Nadira's hands shake as she fiddled with her console. "-- the *Black Star* was only commissioned in the last six months. If the Vok'nair government had her all this time, why keep her a secret?"

"Because no one has been able to bond with her. It is the same with me, only the Asalian Coalition saw fit to use my other talents and change crews every so often in case someone was actually able to bond with me."

"You sound as if you know what the problem is." Mikiel was incensed. What the ship was describing was nothing short of torture.

"Asalians have very few true telepaths, or empaths for that matter. You can enhance my telepathic and empathic abilities all you want, but if the person trying to form a link with me isn't capable of telepathic communication, a bond will not be formed." *Great Sword* made perfect sense. It would explain why they hadn't figured out the key to bonding with the ship.

"What about enhancers to the one who is to be bonded?"

"Enhance all you want. You can multiply zero by a hundred million and you still get zero. If you don't have the gene that enables telepathic ability, enhancing a gene that's not there isn't going to make a hell of a lot of difference."

"But what about me?" Nadira looked at Mikiel then. He could see she was confused. "I was never enhanced. My telepathic ability extends only to close members of my family. I've never had contact with anyone else."

"Then --" *Great Sword* made his statement without holding anything back, without softening the blow one little bit. "-- it is quite likely that you would never share a telepathic link with anyone outside your family."

Mikiel thought he might be sick, and from the look on Nadira's face, she felt the same way. He could see there was no way she could force the words out, so he said them for her.

"How are you related?"

There was an awful silence. His command crew had identical looks of sympathy directed at Nadira, but she didn't seem to be aware of it.

"Damon?" Her voice was small, like a child going to a beloved parent for answers to life's questions.

"The essence within the *Sword Breaker* is your father." Damon's whisper was almost lost as it came through the speakers.

"Wait a minute." Mikiel had stood and was now beside Nadira with a hand squeezing her shoulder in support. "You told me Vok'nair's king was Nadira's father."

"So I did. And I'm probably the only other living person who could say otherwise. Her mother was in love with a star pilot named Darian, but she was forced into a marriage with Samair, Vok'nair's king. Even still, Nani kept seeing her lover. When she became pregnant, the king had the six-month-old fetus tested and found out the child wasn't his. He knew immediately who the father was, and had Darian arrested and condemned him to death.

"Instead of carrying out the sentence, however, Samair was persuaded to turn Darian over to the science division of the Empire, where they were working with the Asalian Coalition to develop cyborg vessels such as the *Black Star* and the *Sword Breaker*.

"As for Nani, she was allowed to deliver the baby and the same fate was bestowed upon her. Six months after Nadira was born, her parents' brains were transferred into the ships you see now. And here they'll stay until the organic parts wear out. When that happens, the ships go back to being ships. When everyone failed -- and I mean many, many people tried and failed -- Samair figured the only other alternative was to allow you to try. *Black Star* was altered yet again. This time, blocks were created within her telepathic matrix to keep her from relaying any information that would compromise the secrecy of this project. He needed you to bond with this ship, but he didn't want you to know who she really was."

"Why did he keep me in the first place?" Nadira asked. "I-I mean, you raised me and he's not had much to do with me, but still."

"That I couldn't say."

"Well --" Nadira stood. "-- what do we do now?"

Mikiel needed to bring this to a close and get Nadira back to their quarters. She needed time to process this. "We send the crew of the *Black Star* on their way and get

back to Asalian space." He turned to Ranier. "How long will it take *Morning Star* to rendezvous with us?"

"Not long, Sir. Two standards hours maybe."

"Very well. Damon, ready your people for transfer. Anyone who wishes to stay aboard the *Black Star* may do so -- the rest will be transferred to the *Morning Star*. That ship is scheduled for sale and has been stripped of all nonessential equipment. It will get them safely back home without giving away too many secrets."

"I'll make the necessary arrangements. Nadira --" Damon's voice changed. Mikiel could hear the sadness there. "-- I'm so very sorry you had to find out like this. Your father was -- is -- a good man. He didn't deserve his punishment, but since it's done, you couldn't be in safer hands. As long as you're aboard that ship, you'll have the best guardian angel anyone could ever have."

Mikiel saw a tear trickle down Nadira's cheek and decided that was enough. "I'll be in my quarters, Ranier. Alert me when the *Morning Star* is ready for departure with its new crew." Then he took Nadira by the arm and led her down the corridor to their dwelling. She didn't even try to resist.

Chapter Nine

It was all too much for Nadira, though it did explain a great many things. Her father's indifference to her at times for one thing, his adamant refusal to give her permission to learn to pilot a space ship for another. Still, it was hard to imagine the man who had ordered such horrible fates for his wife and her lover had allowed his wife's bastard child to be born and then taken on the responsibility of caring for that child himself. True, he hadn't had much of a hand in raising her, but he had given her the protection of his name and had never denied the privileges that went with that name.

Mikiel didn't say a word on the way to the privacy of their quarters. He held her arm firmly, but gently, in his grasp. Over the time of her stay with him, she had started to see a whole new side of him. He might not have said the words, but she had no doubt this man loved her.

When the door finally slid closed behind them, shutting out the rest of the universe, Mikiel wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to him. There was no sexual implication, only affection, support, and comfort.

Nadira couldn't help herself. Silently, she let her tears flow. When her vision blurred from the moisture in her eyes, she simply buried her face in Mikiel's chest. He scooped her up into his strong arms and carried her to the bed.

"Are you all right?" His voice was more tender than she could ever remember hearing from him.

"I will be. There are so many unanswered questions."

"There always are, Nadira. You were born into a world where there will always be more questions than answers."

She smiled. "I know. It doesn't mean I have to like it."

Mikiel dipped his head to kiss her and she accepted willingly. After the mental beating she'd just taken, she needed a soothing balm and Mikiel was exactly that. His tongue lapped gently at her, demanding neither her response nor participation. It was a kiss meant totally for her pleasure, and she loved him for it.

After long moments, Mikiel ended the kiss and pulled her close to him, fitting her easily into the curve of his body. "What am I going to do with you, Nadira?"

"What you're doing now seems pretty nice."

His slight chuckle warmed her to her toes. "It does, but I was thinking in longer terms."

"Why should things have to change? We've managed to find a comfortable way to coexist with each other. And the sex wasn't bad either."

"Very funny." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he flipped her onto her back and covered her body with his. "But things *do* have to change. As a Vok'nair, you could never be anything other than my mistress."

Nadira felt the blood rush to her face and wasn't sure she could breathe as the meaning of what he was saying sunk in. "Mikiel?"

"I sent a request for asylum and citizenship for you several weeks ago and today I got the approval. I thought you should at least have the choice if you wanted it. It's up to you."

She was so excited her heart felt like it might pound out of her chest. With a swift move and a hard shove, she flipped Mikiel to his back and straddled his hips. "Mikiel, is this your roundabout way of asking me to join my life to yours?"

He looked a little annoyed, but Nadira could see the vulnerability in his eyes. "Yes. That's what I want, Nadira, more than anything."

"Then I accept."

She leaned down to kiss him and he wrapped his arms around her to hug her close. The emotion she felt from the touch of his mouth and arms brought tears to her eyes. When he ended the kiss, she smiled at him. "Who said you couldn't be gentle?"

Mikiel laughed. He had never felt so good in all his life. For the first time, he felt complete. Whole. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to keep her with him.

"I love you, Nadira. With all that I am, I love you."

"I know." She giggled when a look of male suffering came across his face. "You're pretty good at hiding your feelings, but I figured it out."

"And you? I took you, kept you here against your will, and made your life miserable for several months. Can you find it in you to love me back?"

Nadira grew serious, all kidding and joking pushed aside while she spoke what was in her heart. "I'm not exactly sure when I realized I loved you, but I've known it for a while now. I think it was your decision to keep me here rather than give me my own place that started me down that path. I lived with you -- difficult as you were sometimes -- saw you in a way no one else ever could, and managed to see through the gruff exterior you present to everyone else." She cupped his face in one of her hands. "You're a good man, Mikiel. You've always done right by me, even if you did trade me for the *Black Star's* freedom." She chuckled at that. "Which, by the way, turned out better than I could have hoped. Not only do I have my freedom, but I have a wonderful man and a father I never knew. I'd say things turned out for the best. You even got the *Black Star*."

"Yeah, well. I think it might be wise to keep that a secret for a while. I don't want these ships separated until I can figure out what to do. What happened to them simply wasn't right. I won't compound that injustice by running back to Homeworld with a war prize."

Nadira's heart swelled. He truly was a remarkable man. "Just one more reason why I love you, Mikiel."

She wrapped her arms around him as he took her mouth again. This time, he demanded her participation. His hands shaped the curves of her body. If he lived an eternity, he would never grow tired of how womanly she felt in his arms. Every curve, every contour, was created with him in mind. She was the perfect woman for him, both in body and in spirit.

He rolled off her so he could rid himself of his clothes and she did the same. When she bent her knees and spread her legs, Mikiel situated himself in the cradle of her body. With one forward surge of his hips, he filled her. Nothing felt so good as Nadira's tender flesh surrounding him.

She arched her back, and he took the offering of her breasts. One hand supported her back while the other squeezed and fondled one large mound. His mouth latched on to the other and he knew he had reached the glory of the afterlife. Surely there could never be a place or time as wonderful as the moment he was in right now.

Nadira met him thrust for thrust, her pussy hot and becoming wetter with each pull of his mouth and each surge of his hips. Her breath came in short gasps, and when he lifted his head to take her mouth once again, he noticed sweat dotting her forehead and upper lip. Her cunt clenched and unclenched and Mikiel knew it wouldn't be long before she came.

"I love you, Nadira. I always will." He managed to get the words out as he pumped himself into her faster yet until he felt the spasming of her pussy growing out of control. When she threw back her head and screamed her pleasure, he let himself go. Stream after stream of his cum bathed her inside. With any luck, he had planted the seed of his child inside her.

Time would tell.

Time would tell.

Epilogue

Black Star had never felt so empty. Damon had just put the last crewmember aboard the ship that would take them back to Vok'nair. He had no doubt a bounty would be issued for him as soon as his crew arrived. The king would not be forgiving in this betrayal.

But that was okay. If he had stood up for his friend all those years ago, none of this would be happening. Anything the king saw fit to do to him, he probably deserved.

Only a handful of the *Black Star's* crew remained -- those who were loyal to him and not the Empire -- but he needed a pilot. When he'd requested assistance from the *Sword Breaker*, they had sent a man only slightly older than Nadira named Ranier. In only a couple of hours, he was handling the helm as if he belonged there. His easygoing manner put the rest of the command crew at ease, and they soon settled into their regular routine. Confident everything was under control, Damon headed back to his quarters to lie down. It had been an exhausting day.

When the door swished open and the lights didn't automatically come on, Damon went into full battle mode. Something wasn't right. He stepped carefully around the room, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light, the only illumination coming from starshine through the window. That was when he noticed the oddly shaped lump on his bed.

"Lights," he barked. The computer complied, and the lump shrieked and sat straight up. In the middle of his bed sat an incredibly thin woman dressed in nothing more than tattered rags. Her long white hair tumbled around her face in a frizzy tangle. Dirt and grease smudged her skin. And she stank.

She must have snuck aboard at the last outpost they'd visited to pick up supplies. Wherever she had come from, she was here now. Probably after a better life for herself.

Well, time would tell if she had made a wise decision. For now, he'd clean her up and feed her. Then they could figure out what came next. Damon had the feeling life was about to get interesting.

He'd just acquired a stowaway.

Marteeka Karland

Marteeka makes her home in Kentucky with her brat husband and her darling son. (Or is that the other way around?) Family has always and always will be her passion in life. She works as an Emergency Room Technician and has for the past eight years. She has been writing for most of her life, but has only recently realized her potential when she found erotic romance. This genre opened up a whole new world of possibilities for Marteeka and she is thriving on the endless promise of what is to come. Science Fiction has been her favorite topic since she saw her first episode of *Star Trek*. Now she combines sci-fi with erotic romance and feels she has found her place in the writing world. You can visit her website at <http://www.marteekakarland.com>.