

Marteeka Karland



BLACK STAR

Stowaway

Changeling Press

Handwritten signature

Black Star Stowaway Marteeka Karland

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Phoebe Lightheart is on the run from *The Hand of God*, a sectarian religious group known for their ruthless rule over the space stations they control. For the last ten years, she's functioned as little more than a slave. She vows no man will ever have that kind of power over her again.

Stowing away on the *Black Star*, she's discovered by Damon Singh. Although he knows Phoebe doesn't want a man in her life, Damon is drawn to her with a passion that frightens him. And Phoebe can't deny the attraction she feels for Damon. He's the most gentle, sincere man she's ever met. And the sexiest creature in the universe.

Unfortunately, she forgot one important thing about *The Hand of God*. There is no leaving them, and even the legendary *Black Star* may be hard-pressed to keep Phoebe safe.

Chapter One

Lights from the entryway to hangar thirty-five flooded the vast, open “visitor” area of Graves Station, deserted in the wake of the strict curfew. Every footfall, every whisper was magnified in the severe silence. Phoebe Lighthouse shivered in her hiding place in the deep shadows of one of the many ventilation ducts, an iron grate the only barrier between freedom and continued life as a slave to every man on the station.

She had sat in the place for many days and nights, working loose the iron screws in order to be ready for the slightest chance of escape. Phoebe was risking her life on the hope she could sneak aboard a ship and leave this accursed place forever. If she were caught, her death would not be swift. Even now, she had reached the point of no return. She had been gone for too long. Even one day was too long. There was no doubt she had already been missed. It would still take several days for the Hand to search the lower decks. In their arrogance, they would assume she was simply hiding to avoid her “chores.” It would take time for them to realize she had betrayed their holy community and was attempting escape.

No one escaped from the Hand of God. No one.

Phoebe intended to be the first.

When the legendary ship *Black Star* had docked there the day before, Phoebe’s heart had soared. This was her chance. Her *only* chance. If this didn’t work, she doubted she’d live long enough to wait for another ship to dock in this remote area of the station. She had only been able to smuggle out a couple days’ worth of food -- which was long gone -- and she couldn’t go back. Trying this in a more populated area was as out of the question as going back to the Hand.

No one had been in or out of this hangar for hours now. It was time to move. Silently, she pushed open the heavy grate centimeter by centimeter. Crawling carefully

from her hiding place, Phoebe stayed close to the bulkheads and shadows, making her moves slow and patient. She hadn't come all this way, waited all this time, only to be discovered because of impatience.

The gangplank was down, but that was likely to be guarded from the inside. She circled the ship until she found what she was looking for. The solid waste outlet. During flight, the small hatch was locked tight, but when the ship landed, the change in air pressure released it for easy garbage disposal by the station's personnel.

And it was the perfect inlet for her.

The chute was small, and it was a very tight fit, but she managed to crawl inside. The smell of rotten food and stinking trash was strong, but not unfamiliar. While the men of the Hand enjoyed all the clean comforts of the station, women who hadn't been chosen as wives or house maids were often forced to live in places that smelled similar. The farther down in the station one lived, the stronger the stench. Compared to a whole community's waste, this was only a mild odor.

Once she reached the main garbage hold, it was just a matter of being quiet and choosing carefully. Pausing to catch her breath and muster her failing strength, she looked carefully at each hatch door. She chose one of the smaller hatches, as those should lead to a less populated area of the ship. An exhausting ten-minute crawl later, she reached another small hatch. This time, when she opened it, the smell of clean, fresh air assaulted her almost as much as the stench of garbage would have someone else. Her nose tingled with the sensation, and she had the almost uncontrollable urge to sneeze.

After days of being in almost total darkness, the dim lights of the corridor hurt her eyes. She wasn't exactly sure what she was going to do, but she knew she needed to find a seldom-used closet or vacant crew quarters and find a place to hide. With any luck, she wouldn't get caught, or if she were they would be so far away from Graves Station they wouldn't insist on taking her back.

The thought no sooner crossed her mind than she heard two sets of heavy footfalls coming nearer. Her heart slammed in her chest as she looked around. There

wasn't anywhere to hide. Every door she'd tried since she exited the trash chute had been locked. Looking frantically, she spotted a nook in the wall with two steps leading down to a closed door panel. It was probably locked, too, but with the dim lighting, if she crouched as low as she could on the landing in front of the door, they might not see her.

Quickly darting across the corridor, she made the two steps and huddled as tightly against the wall as she could, trying to keep her body in the shadows as much as possible. They were getting closer. She could hear them talking. She was sure they'd be able to hear her heart thudding. Her breath came in rapid gasps as fear assailed her. She felt like a rat caught in a trap.

Just as the men were about to round the corner, the door behind her slid open silently. Phoebe jumped, startled at first, but she'd never been one to question good fortune when it came her way. She ducked inside, and the door slid shut behind her.

The spacious cabin filled with a soft, dim light as soon as the door closed. She just stood there a few moments, letting her eyes adjust and waiting to see if the men had noticed her. If so, she expected they'd follow. They had been so close, there was no way she'd have time to hide even if she'd seen a good place right off.

She didn't. The room was so Spartan, she was sure no one occupied it. Only a desk and a large bed graced the interior. Phoebe let out a sigh of relief. If she were careful, maybe she wouldn't be noticed.

First, she looked around for some kind of food replicator. She had heard some of the Imperial ships had them, though it was rumored the Coalition preferred actual cooking to synthetic nourishment. She was terribly hungry and a trek to find food outside her new haven would have to wait until she figured out the ship's schedules. The last thing she wanted was to get caught in a morning rush.

Nothing. There was nothing she could eat. Disappointment hit her harder than she expected. She was hungrier than she could ever remember being. It had taken every ounce of energy she had left to get this far. Many more days without food and she wouldn't be able to walk across the room, much less sneak around an unfamiliar ship.

At the moment, however, there wasn't much she could do about it. She needed sleep almost as badly as she needed food, and the bed on the far end of the chamber, next to a blackened window panel, looked particularly inviting. She knew she shouldn't sleep there, out in the open. She knew it was dangerous. But she wanted so much to sleep in a real bed and not a cold floor padded with only one of the two blankets each woman was allowed. It was a temptation she simply couldn't resist.

Decision made, she crawled into the middle of the bed. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she took one deep breath, sighed happily, and fell promptly asleep.

* * *

"Lights." A husky, male voice barked out the order. Phoebe sat straight up in the bed and realized, too late, her mistake. She had fallen asleep. Now she was well and truly caught. She had no idea how long she'd been out, but she was fairly certain her escape had just been cut short.

"Well, well. A stowaway." His nose twitched. "From the smell of you, I'd say I need to look into putting security at the solid waste outlet hatch."

"I'm sorry to ruffle your delicate sensibilities, but it was the only way inside." Phoebe had never backed down from anyone. It was the reason she'd spent so much time in the bowels of the station instead of being snatched up as a man's wife or concubine, or even a maid. She tended to speak her mind. Still, this time she cringed inwardly. This wasn't the time to piss off this particular man.

His only response was a raised eyebrow. "Indeed. And now what? You expect free passage to wherever you see fit?"

"I don't suppose you'd let that happen, would you?"

"Not if I want anything to get done. Everyone on the *Black Star* has to earn his keep. If you want to stay here, you'll have to do the same."

There was no inflection in the man's gravelly voice, but the steel in his gray eyes told her exactly how serious he was. If she didn't do what he told her, he'd likely space her.

“B-but no one knows I’m here.” Phoebe stammered her response. A sense of dread was slowly but surely closing in on her. She hated being on the defensive, but she didn’t really have a way to combat him. She *was* a stowaway aboard his ship. If he chose to make her pay his passage, there wasn’t much she could do about it. Her only hope was to get him to agree to something she could live with.

“Just how long do you think that will last? How will you get food? If I bring rations back to you, everyone is going to wonder why I get double, and why I bring it back to my quarters. They’ll soon figure it out.” He crossed his arms over the massive expanse of his chest. “Hiding you isn’t an option. You want passage? You’ll have to work for it.”

Briefly, Phoebe thought about bolting for the door, but this wasn’t a small man. He stood there, feet slightly apart. As spacious as the room was, he dominated it. She might be able to get around him, but she was willing to bet she’d not get far.

Phoebe crossed her legs and sat up a little straighter. “I don’t have many skills, I’ll warn you. But I’m smart, and I’m willing to learn.”

For the longest time, the man simply looked at her as if sizing her up. Phoebe had to stick her hands underneath her to keep from fidgeting. His gaze was too intense. He saw too much.

Finally, he spoke. “Later. If I’m going to have to put up with you for any length of time, I’ll have to be able to stand being around you.” He pointed to a room on the far side of his quarters. “Shower’s in there. Have you ever used an ultrasonic shower?”

Phoebe hated looking like she wasn’t wise to the universe around her, but if she said yes, she’d used one, he’d undoubtedly leave her to it by herself. “I’m afraid not. Just show me how to operate it, and I’ll manage on my own.”

Again, he raised an eyebrow, as if the whole thing was amusing to him, but he didn’t say anything. He stepped ahead of her and into the small bathing chamber. Entering a combination of numbers on a keypad outside a booth that looked barely big enough for one person, he handed her two small, spongy disc-shaped objects.

“Put these in your ears.”

“What are they for?” Phoebe looked curiously at the things. They were pliable, but rather stiff, as if they wanted to hold their shape no matter what form they were squeezed into.

“The ultra high frequency of the shower will damage your hearing if you don’t protect your ears.”

Her gaze snapped to his. “Then why not just use water? I don’t want to get in that thing.”

“You don’t have a choice.” He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. In the small room, Phoebe got a stark visual on exactly how big he was, and how tiny she was in comparison. He wore a black formfitting uniform that should have looked silly. But on this man, it outlined every powerful curve of his body. The muscles in his arms, legs, chest and chiseled abdomen stood out underneath the material as if a master sculptor had carved them. Phoebe had to force herself to look at his face. That wasn’t any better, though. He wasn’t pretty or handsome as some men were, but his features held a wealth of wisdom and promises of something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Judging by the way his nose twitched, he also didn’t want to be near her much longer. That was acutely embarrassing, because she could have stood there and looked at him all day.

“No. I don’t suppose I do.” She fiddled with the earplugs in her hand. “So, I stick these in my ears. Then what?”

“Then you get in and let the ultrasonics do the rest.”

Phoebe stuffed the spongy things in her ears and gasped when they expanded. She immediately started to dig in her ears, trying to get them out. It felt like they were going to burst through her inner ear into her brain.

The man’s strong hands grabbed her wrists. He mouthed the word “no,” but she couldn’t hear anything. He held her gaze captive, looking intently at her, watching. Waiting.

In a few seconds, the sensations in her ears eased, but all sound was gone. The only thing she could hear was the sound of her own heart beating wildly, and air moving through her sinus passages as she sucked in breath after breath. She made an effort to slow her breathing, knowing that hyperventilating would only cause her to pass out.

He nodded his head and moved his hands from her wrists to her shoulders, squeezing them reassuringly, then let go of her. When he inserted two of the same discs into his own ears, she realized he meant to shower with her. Immediately, her breathing and heart rate shot up again. She shook her head and pushed at him, trying to shove him out the door so she could do this on her own. The last thing she wanted to do was to undress in front of this perfect specimen of a man.

He gripped her shoulders again and shook her slightly. Phoebe was beginning to panic now. What if he intended for her to earn her keep with her body? She fought madly now. His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear anything. She pushed him into the wall, and knocked over a few small bottles and a cup from the tiny vanity stand, but no sound reached her. The whole thing was so surreal, she would have laughed if she hadn't been so terrified.

Phoebe fought like a mad woman, kicking and clawing. He managed to spin her around and wrap one arm above her breasts, and the other just under her chin. Without even flinching, she bit him, all the while digging at her ears, trying to free them of the shit she'd put in them. She whipped around to face him and one well-placed kick caught him in the knee, and he grimaced. She hoped he yelped in pain, but she didn't hear it. Apparently, that was all he was going to take.

The man backhanded Phoebe. Hard. Her head spun and she would have sunk to the floor if he hadn't caught her. Eyes blazing, obviously angry, his look said she was in big trouble. She wanted to fight him, but she couldn't get her legs underneath her. She still reeled from the blow he'd delivered.

He pulled her into his hard body and maneuvered them into the impossibly tiny stall. Her back was pressed against one wall and she was sure he was in a similar

position. Phoebe watched as he pressed a few buttons to her left before reaching above them and sticking two eye shields over her eyes, then his own. She could still see, but it was like looking through dark glasses. He pressed another combination of buttons, and very bright light flooded her vision. Even with the shields, it made her wince.

Phoebe's skin tingled and her scalp itched. She happened to catch a glimpse of her hair where it hung down her arm. No longer was it a tangled, stinking mass. It was long, silvery white, and soft as down against her shoulders. The shock and amazement combined with the recent blow to her head made her head spin, and her knees buckled. The man's strong arms tightened around her, and she gratefully, passively, let him hold her. Her head fell against the hard muscles of his chest. His musky, masculine scent filled her nostrils. She blamed the sudden lightheaded feeling on the blow he'd given her, but she suspected it was her damned woman's hormones making her drunk. She didn't believe everything the Hand of God taught, but maybe they were right about this one thing. Maybe women were weak when it came to sex. She should hate this man, or at the very least be terrified of him. After all, he held her life in his hands.

Instead, at this very moment, she wished with all her heart her first impression of this scenario had played out. She wanted to be naked with him. OK, so mostly she just wanted *him* naked. She wanted to feel his skin against her cheek. Would it be smooth, or roughened with hair? The scent of him would be much stronger, of that she was sure. What would he taste like? Would he groan if she reached out with her tongue and laved the pebbled nipple even now stabbing the material of his uniform?

She shivered. When his arms tightened around her, she looked up at him. Gentle compassion shone in his eyes, but there was something else there as well. When Phoebe shifted her position, trying to stand more fully on her own, she realized what that "something else" was.

Lust. Need.

She tried not to cling to him, but the evidence of that lust and need poked her soundly in the belly. Her legs turned to mush yet again and she balled her hands into fists to keep from clutching his broad shoulders and caressing those bulky muscles.

Seconds later, the light faded and he guided her out of the stall. Taking an instrument from the vanity, he raised it to her ear. Phoebe didn't protest, but let him do what he would. He removed first one earplug, then the other, before removing his own.

"Now," he crossed his arms over that chest again, "do you think you can make it back to the main room without trying to kill me?"

Chapter Two

Damon honestly couldn't blame the tiny woman for being scared. The first time he stuck those accursed earpieces in his ears, he'd nearly come unglued. He'd paid for his thoughtless mistake, though. The little hellcat had almost taken his leg off. His knee still throbbed, and he limped slightly, gingerly.

He was getting too old for this.

She couldn't have been much older than Nadira, the girl he'd practically raised. He had to remember that. If he didn't, he'd likely do things to this girl that would surely send him to the Seventh Level of Hell. Even before the ultrasonics got her clean, she'd stirred something primitive inside him. The second he'd taken her into his arms, even fighting as she was, his cock had gone rock hard.

He would have never taken her by force, ever. He wouldn't take her, period, until he was sure she wanted him as well. She was just too damned young. Anyway, a girl as lovely as she was would never be interested in an old goat like him.

Damon retreated to the far side of the room to give her some space. He watched her as she stared in amazement at her reflection. The transformation was astounding. She was still way too thin for his liking, like she had been starved, but she was absolutely stunning.

Her hair was the most pronounced change. Before, it had been a frizzy mass of tangles and dirt. He had initially wondered if it was a platinum blond, but once it had been blasted clean of grime, it shone a lustrous, brilliant silver-white. High cheekbones were made more prominent because she was so thin, but it gave her an exotic look that called to his baser nature.

The tattered clothes she wore were still in very bad condition, but at least they were clean now. She needed new garments, but he'd be damned if he didn't like

looking at her in what she was wearing. There were bits of creamy flesh visible in the most tantalizing places. The fine muscle of one thigh, the curve of a breast, and an amazingly sexy belly button were just taunting him like no woman ever had before.

He wanted her. Badly.

“So,” he began, clearing his throat when his voice came out more husky than normal, “what are we to do with you? What task can you do to earn your keep aboard this ship?”

She turned to him then and wrapped her arms around her, as if she felt too exposed, which she was. “If you’re thinking of anything... indecent... forget it. I’d rather be spaced than sell my body to anyone.” Her chin came up a notch or two in defiance, but Damon didn’t miss the tremor in her chin.

“From what I observed on Graves Station -- and I know that’s where you came from because it’s the only place we’ve stopped in three standard months -- I would have thought you’d done that already.” He was fishing. He knew she’d been through a lot just by looking at her. It wasn’t only her initial appearance. There was a haunted look in her eyes he couldn’t ignore.

“There’s a reason I looked and smelled so badly, and it wasn’t only your garbage hold. I did my best to stay below the station to escape notice. The nastier I was, the less likely someone would decide he wanted me for a wife or housemaid. Those women have a harder time deciding how their bodies are used, and that’s just not something I wanted to be a part of.”

“Is that why you’re here? To protect your body against invasion?”

“That, and because I’m tired of being a slave to every man on the station. I should be able to work to help myself, not in order to live.” Again, that haughty, defiant expression graced her face. She looked more like an avenging angel than a slave.

“Then you won’t mind working here.” He turned to a computer panel on the wall and began tapping keys. He accessed the areas where help was needed on the ship, but he didn’t need to. Damon knew the *Black Star* and her crew inside and out. It was more a reason to focus his attention somewhere other than the bare curve of that one

breast. His cock twitched at the thought of exposing it fully and taking it into his mouth and...

"I won't work for passage only. I need some way to make money for when you drop me off."

Damon smiled. She was a feisty little thing. "Who said you had to? I pay fair wages and anyone may leave at any time. All you have to do is perform a useful service in a necessary area and you can stay until we get to wherever you want to go, or until you've saved enough to start a life of your own."

They looked at each other for a moment, and Damon could have sworn he saw his own hunger mirrored in her eyes. Then she looked away and admitted, "I can't do much. All I ever did on the station was cook, and only for the women and girls below decks. We didn't have much, so I had to be creative."

Damon raised an eyebrow. This might work better than he'd thought. "Are you any good?"

"Well, I never had any complaints, and the kids said they loved it when I cooked."

"We'll give it a try. If the crew approves, you've got yourself a job."

When she smiled, Damon knew he was in real trouble. Her whole face lit up. Fear was replaced with hope, and she looked at him like he was somebody special. Important to her. Denying her anything was going to be almost as hard as it had been to leave Nadira aboard *Sword Breaker* several months earlier, and that was saying something.

"By the way." She gave him a quizzical look. "What's your name?"

Damon could have groaned out loud. It wasn't possible he could actually do this twice in less than one standard month. Of all the stupid things. "My apologies. It seems I still lack the necessary diplomatic skills to even exchange names before I get deep into negotiations. I'm Damon Singh. Captain of the *Black Star*."

She approached him hesitatingly, but extended her hand in greeting. "Phoebe Lightheart..."

Anything else she might have said was totally lost on Damon. The second he had her hand in his, it was like an electric charge shot up his arm and straight to his groin. His fingers tingled, and as he looked into her eyes, he had the sensation of falling into their silvery green depths. She was hypnotizing him with her subtle sexuality as effortlessly as one of the highly skilled courtesans of the Asalian people.

The two of them stood there for what seemed like forever -- at least it did to Damon. Finally, Phoebe pulled her hand free and averted her gaze.

"I won't, Captain," she whispered. "I won't sell my body, even for my life."

It took Damon a moment to find his voice because his throat was so dry. "I would never ask it of you. I apologize for my weakness." It was hard for Damon to admit this to a stranger, but he'd never been one to be dishonest. It was the only way he knew how to gain the trust of his crew. Honesty. He waited until her gaze returned to his. "I would never force myself on someone who didn't want me, Phoebe. And I would never use my position aboard this ship to influence anyone into my bed."

She seemed to consider this before finally nodding her head. "Well, if I'm going to do this, I suppose you should show me the kitchen. I'd like to know what I have to work with."

"Of course." Damon was grateful for the chance to focus on something else, but then he remembered her state of dress. Or rather undress. "Perhaps --" He almost blurted out something that might sound insulting but caught himself. "Let me get you a uniform. That way everyone will know you're a part of the crew."

She blinked a couple of times before looking back down at her garments. "I'd almost forgotten how inadequate they are." She crossed her arms over her breasts. "I suppose I look horrible."

She looked so dejected, Damon didn't even try to measure his response. "On the contrary, Phoebe. You look like an angelic fairy. The only thing missing is your wings."

Phoebe hadn't known what to say. She hoped it was a compliment, but she really didn't want to think about it. If she did, this was a man she could easily surrender

herself to, and that could be disastrous for her. She didn't know Damon. She didn't know what he was capable of, and she certainly didn't know what his plan for her was. It had been her experience that every man had an agenda. She'd just have to figure out what his was.

Once she was dressed in the black, form-fitting uniform of the *Black Star*, Damon took her to the kitchen area. It was larger than anything she'd ever seen, and she was a bit intimidated. What had she gotten herself into? Not that it mattered. She didn't have much choice but to learn.

"How many do I have to feed?" she asked, dreading the answer. The sheer size of the kitchen was answer enough.

"At present? Twenty. Assuming we pick up more from *Sword Breaker* when we rendezvous with him, you could have as many as thirty-three."

Phoebe's jaw dropped. She had had to feed more than two hundred women and girls with about half the space and equipment the *Black Star* afforded.

"Is that going to be a problem?"

She almost laughed. "Are you kidding? With all this? Unless you simply have no food, I think I can come up with something." For the first time since sneaking aboard the *Black Star*, Phoebe was excited about the prospects for her future. Perhaps she had won this impossible gamble after all.

The grand tour was just that to her. Wonderfully grand! There was enough food stored on this ship to feed everyone in the below decks of Graves Station for months. All this food for a maximum of thirty-three people? It was unimaginable.

"I don't think there will be a problem," she said when he'd finished. "I might require someone to show me how to work some of the equipment, but I think I can figure out most of it." She hesitated before asking, "There isn't anything in here that could blow me up, is there?"

He chuckled. She got the impression he didn't laugh much, but his eyes sparkled when he did. It nearly took her breath. This man affected her like nothing she was

prepared for. She was about to thank him for being so nice to her when a claxon sounded and Captain Singh was requested in the command center.

“Do you remember the way back to my quarters?” The smile she’d thought so engaging disappeared, and the stoic captain returned.

“I can find it,” she said. “Go on. I’ll be fine.”

He nodded smartly and spun around to leave. Once he was out the door, she heard his heavy footsteps quicken. Phoebe left the spacious kitchen and headed in the opposite direction of Captain Singh. She’d do what he asked of her. In the years she’d spent under the rule of the men of the Hand of God, she’d learned to assess people quickly. She got the impression he was a man of his word. She wasn’t sure why she thought that, but the sense was so strong, she was willing to bet her life.

Chapter Three

“Captain, unknown vessels exiting hyperspace on the starboard bow.” The second in command didn’t so much say the words as hiss them. Everything he said sounded so menacing, it prickled the hair on the back of Damon’s neck. Viktor scared the shit out of him, but he was one hell of a Second. “They look like they’ve been cobbled from every class of vessel in the known universe. Heavily armed, but not very well armored. One solid hit, and we’d punch through their hull.”

“Have they tried to contact us?” Damon studied the strange looking ships and their formations, and tried to get a concept of how they moved and what they were capable of.

“Negative, Sir. They’ve apparently been mirroring our course through a series of hyperspace jumps just out of range of our sensors. I only found them by accident.” The Second swung his chair around to face Damon. “My guess would be...”

“They’re waiting for reinforcements.” Damon finished the sentence for Viktor with a sinking feeling in his stomach. “Any idea who they are?”

“They’re too small to go far without a mother ship, and anything that big, I’d be able to locate as long as it stayed within the range of those fighters. The only place they could have come from was that border station we just left.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.” Why did he have the impression this had something to do with his new crewmember? “How far away is *Sword Breaker*?”

“Assuming they’re already at the rendezvous point, five standard hours. However, it could be as many as eight if they were delayed as Captain Anjoom feared they might be.”

“Perhaps you should let him know it would be in our best interest to have some backup.”

"As you command, Sir." If Damon knew Viktor -- and he prided himself in knowing his crew inside and out -- the cybernetically enhanced vampire loathed the idea of asking for help. It grated him to think there was a situation he couldn't handle by himself. It was Viktor's only fault. He had to learn to be part of the crew, to rely on his shipmates as they relied on him.

"Try to talk to them. See if they'll tell us what they want."

"I've been trying, Sir." Viktor sounded annoyed. "They either aren't capable of communication or they're ignoring me."

Damon tried to control the smile playing at his lips. "I see."

"I don't like being ignored, Captain." The big man was definitely annoyed. Of all the people aboard the *Black Star*, of all the people Damon had met, period, Viktor was the last person he would want annoyed at him.

"Just don't get an itchy trigger finger, Viktor. Not until I tell you to." The Second only grunted. "Keep an eye on them. If they make any sudden moves, I want to know about it."

"As you command."

Damon knew he needed to remain at the command center, but he had to get his new crewmember settled. For some reason, he didn't want to make it widely known she was here. He felt like the longer he kept Phoebe to himself, the longer she'd be his. The girl had gotten under his skin but good, and he'd only spent a few minutes in her presence. He was too old to be acting like a teenager with a crush.

He rose, making eye contact with Viktor as he did. "You're in command. Notify me at the slightest change in their behavior."

His Second didn't speak, only raised an eyebrow. Damon turned on his heel and headed out the door. Back to his cabin.

He found it empty. Phoebe had been back -- her uniform jacket lay on the bed -- but she had apparently left.

Damon's heart raced. Where was she? Had she left him already? He felt like a little boy. Insecure. Scared. And for what? A woman? A woman he didn't even know. He was obsessed with her. Ridiculous!

Heading back to the bridge would be the best plan, but he knew he wouldn't. After an hour of searching, Damon punched a bulkhead. No Phoebe. Where was she?

Actually, where was *everyone*? The ship was deserted. And what was that smell? It wafted through the halls, growing stronger and more delicious as he went.

"Captain!" Damon spun around. Connor. He was a junior officer in engineering. "I don't know where you picked up the new cook, but thank the stars you did. I thought I'd die eating that freeze-dried shit they pack for us." The man gave him a "thumbs up" as he passed him.

He headed to the galley, the aroma of food growing ever stronger. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever smelled. Coming from the kitchen. Hurrying to the crew mess, Damon found the answer to his missing crew. Every last man not on duty was eating. Not that he could blame them. His mouth was watering.

Every man in the mess raised his glass and cheered when Damon walked in. He couldn't help the crooked smile that came to his lips. "I guess this means the new cook is a hit?"

They all laughed and gave their assent before returning to their meals. He was just about to go in search of his own plate when one was set in front of him. The food was unbelievably tempting, but not so much as the sleek arm extending his plate. He gulped. What had he gotten himself into?

"I take it you had no trouble figuring out how to use the kitchen?" It was the lamest thing in the universe to say, but he couldn't seem to find any other words.

"Yes. I knew I could. You've got quite an assortment stockpiled. Making good meals for your crew for the next month shouldn't be hard."

"Month?"

"I can probably stretch it farther, but somehow, I don't think that would be a very popular decision. I'll try it if you need me to."

“No. A month will be fine. Actually, I didn’t think it would last nearly that long.” She slipped into the seat across from him, and he couldn’t take his eyes from her. She mesmerized him.

When he continued to stare at her, she cleared her throat. “Um, are you going to eat? It’s not the best in the universe, but it’s filling.”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” he stammered as he stirred the contents of his plate around with his fork. Steam rose from the concoction consisting of meat, noodles, and some kind of sauce. Scooping up a forkful, he stuffed it into his mouth. The instant his lips closed around it, a burst of rich, meaty flavor exploded on his tongue.

His brain shut down. If ambrosia truly existed, this had to be it. A groan escaped him somehow, and he began to chew. Then he took bite after bite, eating like a starving man at a banquet table until he scraped the last bit of sauce from his plate. When he finally looked up at her, she was grinning like she was the happiest person in the world.

“I’ve always loved to see people eat like they really enjoyed it. I take it you approve?”

“Absolutely! Where did you learn to make such wonderful meals?”

“For the girls. They won’t eat if it’s not tasty. We got the things the men didn’t want. Most of the time it was either spoiled or just not fit to eat. I learned to improvise to keep everyone alive.”

The instant she responded, Damon regretted asking the question. Her eyes went from happy to haunted, and she paled visibly. Whatever she’d gone through at her previous home, it hadn’t been pleasant.

“You don’t have to worry about it now. You’re here. With me. You’ll never have to be hungry again.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I’m not sure why, but you have that look about you. If you give your word, you’re the type of man to keep it. I’m just worried about the girls and other women. I’m thinking maybe the god the men of the Hand worship meant for me to stay where I was so all the forgotten females would have at least one thing to look forward to. I abandoned them.”

“I don’t know what kind of life you lived before, Phoebe, but judging by the state you showed up here in, I seriously doubt you’d have lived a very long one. No one could in those conditions. You left to save your own life.”

“Perhaps. But who’s going to save the lives of everyone else?”

When she stood, he didn’t try to stop her leaving. There was a lot he had to think about. Like how he was going to convince Viktor going after Phoebe’s friends wasn’t a suicide mission.

Chapter Four

Trust a man to ruin a perfectly good mood. Phoebe's movements were crisp and jerky in her anger as she cleaned her kitchen. Still, a smile tugged at her lips when she thought about it. *Her kitchen!* Maybe not in reality, but no one else seemed to even try to invade her domain. She'd had several offers of help with the clean up, but she'd refused. If she was going to earn her keep, she'd do just that. Everyone here had their own area they were responsible for. The kitchen was hers.

When she finished cleaning, she set things up for the next meal -- in the morning -- and left. Her choices of where to go were limited. The only place she knew how to get back to was Damon's -- Captain Singh's -- quarters, but that didn't seem proper. They hadn't had time to discuss living arrangements, and she wasn't sure she was comfortable living with a man she didn't know. But, with a certain amount of trepidation, Phoebe headed toward the captain's rooms. As uncomfortable as she was going back there, it was worse to think she'd accidentally wander into someplace she wasn't supposed to if she explored on her own.

The door slid silently open when she pressed her hand to the entry pad, which surprised her. She figured Damon would have reprogrammed the thing by now so that it wouldn't admit her so easily. Damon sat at a small desk, staring intently at a computer screen. A fierce looking man spoke from the screen and the two of them seemed to be having an intense discussion.

"I don't have any choice in the matter, Mikiel."

"You always have a choice, Damon."

"Right. The same choices you'd have in the same damned situation."

Mikiel chuckled. "I didn't say you had much of a choice, just that you had one. We should be in the sector within eight standard hours if we take the scenic route."

“That should work. Just make sure you’ve got at least one ship that can get there in the event these guys are more persistent than I think they’ll be.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” The man on the screen grinned. “Good luck, my friend. I have the feeling you’ll need it.”

Damon growled when he punched a button disconnecting the interface. He sighed and rested his head in his hands. “Stars, I’m too old for this.”

“Too old for what?” It was as good a way as any to announce her presence.

He spun around in his chair. “Phoebe. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just come in.”

There was an awkward silence. Phoebe fidgeted, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Damon didn’t take his eyes from her. Phoebe couldn’t help but return his gaze. The man was scrumptious. She would have no problem simply staring at him all day, but she’d prefer he not catch her at it. The heat she saw in his eyes, the lust shining bright, shot straight through her. Had he been just a little closer, she’d have tackled him to the ground and forced herself on him. Not that she’d have had to force very hard. If the look in his eyes was any indication, he was as close to desperation as she was.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I apologize about not getting you your own rooms. Unfortunately, the only private quarters we have are for the senior officers, of which we have a full complement. Junior officers share one large bunk area. Considering they’re all male, I didn’t think you’d be comfortable.” He waved a hand around the room. “At least here, you only have to worry about one man pawing at you.”

Phoebe giggled. She was nervous, but she recognized a joke when she heard one. Though, honestly, she didn’t think she’d mind if this man pawed her a bit. “Somehow, I’m sure you’ll be able to restrain yourself.”

Damon stood and crossed the space separating them. Phoebe could see the war he waged with himself clearly on his face. “Don’t bet your life on it.” His normally husky, soft-spoken voice sounded strained and on the verge of being out of control.

With no further warning, he swooped down and fused his mouth to hers. Phoebe felt like she was flying. Her head spun and her whole world existed where his tongue delved into her mouth to find hers. His kiss wasn't sweet or tender, but conquering and demanding. There was no way she could do anything other than respond to such blatant sexuality.

She gripped his powerful, muscular shoulders and held on. His arms snaked around her waist, and she felt herself being pulled against an impossibly hard male chest. His cock trapped between them was hard and unyielding, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

There was a brief flash of fear when she got her wits about her enough to realize what she was doing and she shivered, pushing away from him slightly. Immediately, Damon stopped his onslaught of her body, if not her senses.

"I -- I'm sorry. I didn't mean --"

"No! It's OK. I just -- I mean -- if we'd been caught doing that on the Outpost, they'd have..." She trailed off, not wanting to relive what she'd witnessed many times in her life there. She took a deep breath. "They give women of questionable morals to the unattached men on the station. Not just within the community, but to the men visiting the station. They pay a fee to the proprietor, and the women are given to them for a time. It's the worst life imaginable for a woman on the Outpost. The men who frequent that establishment aren't very... nice."

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Phoebe. You're a member of my crew now, and contrary to my actions a moment ago, I don't fraternize with my crew in this manner." He seemed to think about that a moment and added, "Even if there were any women on board. I mean, I personally prefer women to men and --"

She felt that giggle bubbling up inside her again. This man was even more uncomfortable with the attraction between them than she was.

"What's so funny?"

Phoebe quit fighting the laughter. She let it go in a joyful surge as she wrapped her arms around Damon's neck. When he tightened his arms around her waist, Phoebe

sighed in contentment. Never in her wildest dreams would she have guessed she'd want a man in her life. Now, she found herself wondering what it would be like to have such sinfully wonderful physical contact with such a powerful man every day.

"You. Me." She buried her face in his neck and kissed the bit of flesh she found exposed by his uniform. "We're both so afraid of what's happening, we're liable to miss out on something great and beautiful. Something many people wait their whole lives to find and never do."

"The great Damon Singh fears nothing."

"Right." She snorted. Then they both held each other and laughed. A good, warm, healing laugh.

Damon scooped her up in his arms and carried her to his bed. Following her down, he spread her thighs with his knees and settled atop her, his weight resting on his forearms as he gently stroked her hair with his fingers. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. With the most tender heart. I'm not sure why I'm doing this, but I've worked out a strategy with my commander and his ships. We're going after your friends."

She felt like she'd had the wind knocked out of her. This was the last thing she expected. "What?"

"We all knew there was something wrong at Graves Station. One of my men commented on the conditions at the only brothel on the station -- it has to be the one you were referring to. That, combined with the bits I've learned from you, decided my course of action. I can't stand by and know people are suffering."

Tears came to her eyes. She couldn't stop them. But she also couldn't let him do this. "They'll kill you, Damon. If you try to take something they see as theirs, or worse, threaten their entire way of life, they'll fight to the death."

"They're no match for the *Black Star*. We've seen their ships. They've taken the best of what they could scavenge, but they're still vastly inferior to us."

“But are you willing to risk your lives to achieve your goal?” She struggled until he let her rise up onto her elbows. “Those men will do anything they have to, including sacrifice themselves, to keep their community intact.”

“Let me worry about that, Phoebe. I’m smarter than you give me credit for.” He grinned. “If all goes according to plan, we’ll have the women and girls in the lower decks out of there and be long gone before anyone even knows they’re not where they’re supposed to be.”

“Just promise me one thing, Damon.” She took his face in her hands, caressing his cheek with her thumb. This was so surreal. The lust shining in this man’s eyes was matched only by the tenderness she saw there.

“Anything.”

“Don’t do anything that would get you taken away from me.”

His smile was full of promise, and something Phoebe was afraid to name. She wanted it to be love, but if it wasn’t, she didn’t want to know about it. She wanted this illusion as long as she could have it, because she was very much afraid she’d fallen in love with him when he’d first found her in his cabin.

Damon descended on her once again, kissing her until she no longer feared anything that might happen. The only thing that mattered was the here and now. This man’s arms, lips, and body loving hers so completely she felt like the most treasured woman in the universe. He broke their kiss only long enough to unzip her uniform and help her out of it, and loosen his pants to free his cock.

“Have you done this before? I don’t want to hurt you.” He probed her pussy with his fingers, stroking her deep, testing what he found.

“I’m not a virgin. You won’t hurt me unless you stop.”

As he stroked her cunt, his thumb brushed her clit lightly, and Phoebe arched her back. Her whole world centered around what Damon was doing between her legs. She cried out and spread her legs farther, inviting him inside, needing him as she needed to breathe. Never in her life had anything compared to this.

The man in her arms trembled as he readied his powerful body to enter her. "By the stars! I've never wanted a woman more." Damon guided his cock to her entrance before resting over her once again.

"Damon, wait." Phoebe couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. "I don't have a contraception or disease prevention implant. I don't think I'm infected, but I can't be sure."

He kissed her nose. "I have both, sweet. I'll protect you until we can get any implant you want."

She smiled. "Then love me, Damon. I need you."

He needed no further encouragement. With one smooth, slow stroke, he entered her. Phoebe was stretched, full. The sensation was so erotic it was almost unbearable. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer. His body was flush with hers, his hair-roughened skin abrading her tender flesh exquisitely.

Both of them gasped for breath as their movements became more erratic. Sweat slickened their skin. The sweet smell of sex hung heavily in the air, combining with their own musky personal scents. Phoebe's tongue tingled when she tasted Damon's skin and lips. It was an experience unlike anything she'd been prepared for.

Damon surged into her faster and harder with each stroke. The slight burning sensation in her cunt only added to the intensity of the moment. It wasn't long before a tingling sensation started where their bodies joined. She gripped him with her arms and legs ever tighter. Her breath caught, and she struggled to look Damon in the eye. "Oh, sun and stars!" Her voice barely worked.

"Push, Phoebe. Reach for it and push through it." Damon buried his fingers in her hair and locked his gaze with hers. "Now, Phoebe. Come for me. Now!"

Phoebe screamed. And screamed and screamed. Her whole body convulsed. She wasn't alone. Damon's own shout of release shook the walls.

Eventually they both came down from the orgasmic high they'd taken each other on. Damon collapsed on top of her and rolled them to their sides.

“By the moons of Solum.” Damon pulled Phoebe close. Her naked body felt so good against his, he didn’t ever want to let her go.

“I second that.” She sounded about as content as a woman could possibly be. And she might have stayed that way for a long, long while.

Gods. Just looking at her made him hard all over again. Damon wanted nothing more than to sink his cock into Phoebe’s sweet, hot cunt over and over again till she screamed out his name with her every breath. Unfortunately, Viktor -- and a couple of security guards -- chose that exact moment to barge in.

Chapter Five

Damon groaned. Phoebe squealed and would have jumped away from him had Damon not held her fast. How many more ways could he look like an idiot? He snatched at the cover to shield Phoebe from the eyes of his unwanted guests.

“What the holy *fuck* are you doing, Viktor?” Mortified didn’t begin to describe Damon’s feelings right now.

“We heard a disturbance. It sounded like you were in trouble.”

Ranier -- the *Black Star*’s pilot and a man Damon liked and respected above anyone else in his crew -- snickered. “Oh, he was in trouble all right. It sounded like he blew his tonsils out his --”

“That’s enough!” Damon knew his face was as red as a Tamarian Blood Ruby. “If I need help, I’ll ask for it.”

“What exactly would you like us to wait for?” Viktor crossed massive arms over an equally massive chest. “We could hear your screams from the corridor.”

“We’re aboard the *Black Star*, Viktor! Nothing can happen to me here.” Why wouldn’t they just *leave*?

Ranier’s continued amusement grated on Damon’s nerves. “Yeah, well, I didn’t think it was possible to pick up a stowaway either. Yet, here she is.” Ranier winked at Phoebe. If he hadn’t been butt naked, Damon would have crossed the room and cheerfully punched the man. “My apologies, miss. I sincerely hope you won’t hold such a barbaric intrusion against me and withhold my rations. My friend, on the other hand --” he nodded toward Viktor, “-- doesn’t need his rations anyway. Keep me in mind if you have extra, will you?”

The soft, muffled giggling next to him drew his attention. Phoebe had the sheet pulled up to her nose -- her enormous silvery-green eyes and mass of silver-white hair

were all that was visible. Damon rolled his eyes. Why was he the only one so acutely embarrassed?

Viktor turned to leave. "*Black Star* should reactivate your security protocol once we leave. And just so you know, the ship is as amused as the rest of us."

"Just because you've managed a tentative link with the ship doesn't mean you can stand there and make fun of me and Phoebe."

Viktor whipped around and raised a hand against further protest. "No, my link with the *Black Star* doesn't give me the right to have a chuckle at your expense -- being your friend does. As to the young Miss Phoebe, if such a beautiful, passionate woman were mine, I would love her as thoroughly as you just did. I'd hold nothing back."

The man hardly ever spoke more than a couple of sentences at a time. The mere fact Viktor considered himself Damon's friend shocked, but also flattered, Damon. The big vampire wasn't *anybody's* friend.

Viktor slowly turned and left the room. As soon as he did, Phoebe burst out into gales of laughter. Did everyone on the entire bloody ship -- including the bloody ship -- need to have a good laugh at his expense?

When Phoebe's arms snaked around his neck, and she kissed his shoulder in between giggles, the humor of the situation finally hit him. He could only imagine the look on his face when Viktor and Ranier had come rushing in on them.

"Oh my, but I don't see how any of them kept a straight face." Phoebe wiped tears from her eyes and pulled Damon back down on top of her. "I never thought I'd find humor in that kind of an entrance, considering what it would have meant in another lifetime, but I've never laughed so hard in my life."

Looking down at the smiling woman with laughter in her eyes as bright as the tears, it struck Damon exactly how deep he was in. Up to his eyeballs.

Damon Singh was head over heels in love with Phoebe Lightheart.

* * *

Phoebe finished cleaning up after the morning meal. The men had scarfed down everything she'd fixed. There wasn't even a drop of gravy left. More, one of the

younger men had insisted he help her with the dishes. The work had been done in half the time and she'd finished preparing for the midday meal early enough to explore a bit.

Her new home was wonderfully spacious, if a bit plain. The floors were covered by a thin padded runner down the center, and computer linkups were the only thing that marred the smooth surface of the metal walls. Even the doors didn't break the continuity. The only entryways she found that did break the illusion of a never-ending hallway were the captain's, the one leading to the engineering section, and the one leading to the command section. Command was a very formidable place to be if you didn't know your way around.

She wondered again how she'd managed to end up where she had. She could just as easily have wandered into the detention area and gotten herself locked up. Still, she rather liked it here. It was clean. Almost painfully so.

At the moment, however, something was wrong. She wasn't well versed in navigation, but she could have sworn they were going in the wrong direction. More than all that, though, the place was empty. There were no sounds other than the normal mechanical sounds everything made when not planet side. No one was in the recreation area, or the mess hall. The one person she did see was in a big hurry and looked a bit strained. He didn't even acknowledge her as he passed. Strange.

Phoebe turned to head back to the kitchen when the ship gave a tremendous lurch. Claxons blared, and the ship continued to shudder for several minutes. Phoebe stumbled to her feet. Staggering down the corridor, she finally made it to the mess hall where she ducked under a table and braced herself. There wasn't much in the area to fall, but if anything did, she didn't like the idea of it falling on her head.

Used to a space station that made a continuous orbit around a dead planet, Phoebe felt every move the *Black Star* made. They pitched from side to side, up and down, every movement quick and precise. Phoebe had the sinking suspicion they were avoiding something, dodging a battle.

"Phoebe."

The mechanical, but ultra-feminine voice coming from the comm startled Phoebe so badly, she bumped her head on the table. Stars danced in front of her eyes and she had to shake her head to clear it.

“Phoebe, can you make it to Damon’s quarters?”

“Who said that?”

“There’s no time to explain. You need to go to the captain’s quarters and lock yourself in until either he or I tell you it’s safe.”

“What’s going on?” Phoebe knew this conversation was real and not the result of head trauma only because the voice had precipitated her head trauma to begin with.

“Don’t be difficult! Just do as you’re told before you’re taken!”

An explosion rocked the ship this time. There was a sound suspiciously like that of a hull breach. Phoebe had heard it only once. Three women on Graves Station lost their lives that time. “Was that a hull breach?”

“Yes! Get to Damon’s quarters and hurry. We’re being boarded!”

Phoebe didn’t waste any more time contemplating the wheres and whys of the disembodied voice. Things were happening fast, and she very much didn’t want to get caught in the middle of them.

She ran down the hall, colliding with two crewmembers wearing the remnants of tattered space suits -- Toshie and Brenner. Toshie looked like half his face had been burned off, and Brenner was half carrying, half dragging him toward the medical unit.

Phoebe immediately grabbed Toshie’s other arm and put it over her shoulder. “What happened?”

“We were ambushed.” Brenner grunted as he shifted Toshie’s weight to allow for Phoebe’s assistance. “Damned cultists waited until we had everyone on board here or *Sword Breaker*, then attacked.”

Phoebe was betting they were after not only their “stolen” people, but the *Black Star* herself for salvage. It was how they made their “fleet.” They captured the ship that had the parts they wanted and incorporated the technology into whatever vessel they

needed it on. As a result, no two ships of the Hand were alike, and that made it difficult for anyone to identify a lone ship as belonging to the Hand.

“Captain Singh is trying to fight them off, but he’s going to need the vampire’s help.” Brenner said that like asking a vampire for help was worse than being taken by the Hand.

“The vampire. Viktor?”

“Hell, yes, Viktor! If the captain lets that man loose, blood will flow like a river. Not only that, but it will be hard to get him back under control.”

Brenner carefully lifted Toshie and laid him on an exam table. The doctor, whom Phoebe had met only briefly at the last meal, examined Toshie carefully. “Leave him to me. I’ll start the grafts and see if I can stop the burn’s progression. If I don’t, he won’t be fit for anything other than cybernetic recycling.”

With nothing more to do, Phoebe and Brenner left the unit. Brenner scrubbed a hand over his face. He looked worried, and scared.

“I’m sure the doctor will help him, Brenner. What happened?”

“Plasma burn. He got caught in the flash fire when the bulkhead gave way.”

A sickening feeling washed over Phoebe. “Damon?” she whispered. “Is Captain Singh all right?”

“He was burned, but not badly. Thank the stars he and most of the others managed to get atmospheric suits on before the inner bulkhead failed. Right now, they’re fighting those thrice-damned fanatics. With that section of the hull exposed, it’s not easy.” The young man looked nervously back the way he came. “I’ve got to go. The captain will need all the help he can get. Excuse me, ma’am.”

Phoebe thought she might be sick. Damon needed her, but if she was captured, she was as good as dead. She started back to the cabin, but stopped after a couple of steps. No. If Damon lost, they’d find her wherever she was. If it was meant for her to die, it would be at Damon’s side.

Chapter Six

“Keep heavy fire on that ramp! It’s the only way in or out!” Damon fought through the pain. His right leg and hip hurt, but he’d live. If he didn’t lead his men in this fight, they’d all very likely die. They were a great crew, but they weren’t terribly experienced.

Except for Viktor. And he had to keep the cyborg vampire out of this or he would die. That wasn’t acceptable to Damon.

The men of the *Black Star* fought fiercely, but they couldn’t afford to lose another man. The *Black Star* was vastly outmanned, but they still held the advantage in firepower.

“Why haven’t the temporary bulkheads automatically engaged, Captain?” Juanas, a young man from *Sword Breaker*, fired off several shots, his automatic comm unit keying up when he spoke inside his airtight suit. “If that hole was sealed, we could move away and blast those bastards into oblivion. Not to mention fighting with no atmosphere and no gravity ranks up there with eating *yassat* turds.”

“Because they’ve stationed two men directly under the breach. The computer won’t engage until they move. A safety feature I could do without right now.” Damon repositioned himself, braced against a support beam and fired again. Juanas was right. Damon thought he’d rather eat the *yassat* turds.

“Did the women all make it?”

“All but one. Last I saw of her, she had on a mask, but I don’t know if she got a suit.”

Both men fired at the gaping hole in the side of the *Black Star*. They scored direct hits on the two men, but the energy bolts were absorbed by some kind of force field. Damon didn’t think it surrounded them. The energy the shield couldn’t absorb was

bouncing off, sometimes behind the second guy where his shield couldn't reach. The odds were, they were frontal shield only. Those would be less difficult to maintain.

"What do we do?" Juanas looked at him like Damon remembered looking at his commanding officer when he was Juanas's age. "They've made our numbers. Any attempt to rush them from the flank would be instantly recognized."

"I know." Damon looked around him, desperately needing something to give them an edge.

Viktor laid a hand on his shoulder. The look in his eyes said he was ready to sacrifice himself. The thought chilled Damon to the bone.

A female voice with a strange accent combed in. "Lay me some cover fire." It wasn't one he recognized. "I can make it behind them through that blow hatch." Damon looked around to see the one woman he hadn't accounted for. She had indeed managed to get her suit on and she moved with the grace and efficiency of someone who had worn a suit just like it many times.

"I take it you've fought in deep space before?"

"A time or two. The name's Diamond. Cover me, and I'll see what I can do to help."

"That's suicide," Viktor hissed. "If they catch you, you'll be a sitting duck."

She turned to Viktor. "You have a better idea, vampire?"

Damon saw the tiny tic in Viktor's cheek. Most likely, it wasn't that she'd called him "vampire" like he was a bug she'd like to squash, but the fact that he *didn't* have a better plan.

The woman nodded her head smartly. "Good. Just keep them focused on you. I'll do the rest."

Damon wasn't sure Viktor didn't have the right of it, but he didn't have a better idea, either. Damon threw everything he had into their defense. Three enemy soldiers dropped almost instantly -- another followed a few seconds later. Still, they kept coming.

“Viktor, we need to know how many people they have. Can the *Black Star* give you any idea of their troop strength?”

“She estimates eighty to one hundred, but there’s another carrier on the edge of sensor range that’s capable of carrying at least a thousand more.”

“If they’re looking for us, that’s a bit of overkill, don’t you think? A thousand men to take one ship?”

“If that ship is looking for us, my guess is their intention is to capture the *Black Star*. The carrier is designed to transport ships as well as troops. It’s empty.”

Damon winced. “How close?”

“If they follow their present course, they’ll be here in forty-seven standard minutes.”

“Damn.” Damon thought for a second, trying to figure out the best way to help the woman currently saving their asses. “Everyone. Concentrate your fire at the top of the bulkhead. If we can get it hot enough, the laser fire should melt the titanium alloy and give them something else to worry about.”

It didn’t take long for bits of hot metal to start falling on top of the two underneath it. One of them jumped back with a yelp, but another took his place. The new man extended his shield to cover his head, but it left his feet and ankles exposed. Damon fired several shots at the guy’s boots, causing him to jump, but otherwise did little damage.

“Damon.” Viktor gripped his arm. “Have you noticed the firing isn’t as thick from their end?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.”

“Something’s happening outside.” Viktor shook his head slightly. “*Black Star* says there’s more than one female outside. The second one’s Phoebe.”

Ranier snorted. “Figures.”

Damon gave the young man a sharp look. “I doubt she knows how to put on a suit, much less walk outside a space vessel.”

“Are you really sure about that, my friend?” Viktor said quietly. “Do you really know anything about her at all? I’ve learned to trust *Black Star*. If her sensors tell her it’s Phoebe, then it is.”

Damon couldn’t respond. He *didn’t* know Phoebe. Not like he should have before falling in love. Of course, in matters of the heart, one couldn’t always help the little things. None of it could be helped. At the moment, the only thing he could do was try to protect her as much as he could.

He was about to tell Viktor it didn’t matter -- all that mattered was getting out of this mess and back to Asalian space -- when the ship was rocked by a nearby explosion. Grabbing an open panel door, Damon reached for Ranier but missed. The man would sail straight to the gaping hole in the ship if someone didn’t catch him. Either way -- into enemy hands, or into open space -- would be a death sentence. Damon craned his neck to find Viktor. The vampire had used his cybernetic enhancements to drive his hand into the inner bulkhead and hold on tight as he snagged Ranier before he sailed by.

Once they all regained their equilibrium, the firing continued until one of the men behind the shield, under the bulkhead breach, was yanked off his feet. His tether apparently cut or otherwise disengaged from its anchor, he floated through space, flailing his arms and legs. The second simply slumped over and bumped into the shield from the back. It wasn’t long before he, too, floated off into space.

Damon called a cease-fire and waited. “What’s happening, Viktor? The women? The rest of the attackers?”

Viktor held up a hand while he processed the information. Viktor’s link with the ship wasn’t very strong yet, and it took time to understand what the ship was trying to tell him.

“The explosion was on the enemy vessel. It seems one of our girls planted an explosive device on the outer hull. There’s only a handful of them left, and their ship’s completely disabled.”

“What about the women, Viktor?” Damon gritted the words out. He could give a flying fuck about anything else at this point. He’d deal with it later.

“They’re both alive --” Viktor moved to the compartment beside the hatch where the woman had exited and grabbed two short tether lines, “-- but they’re both injured. Phoebe not so bad as the other woman, but they both need help.”

“I’ll go with you.” Damon moved toward the gaping hole in his ship. “Just let me shut down those force shields and let *Black Star* make temporary repairs. Has *Sword Breaker* gotten here yet?”

“Just pulling alongside us now, Sir.” Viktor tossed him a tether when he pushed off in his direction. “*Black Star* has apprised them of the situation. They’re awaiting your instructions.”

“Have them ready their medical unit. They’re better equipped than we are.”

Viktor nodded. “Understood.”

“Let’s go.”

“You concentrate on finding the women. I’ll keep us attached to the ship.”

With Viktor’s strength, Damon didn’t doubt for a moment he could keep them both from floating off into space. “Keep me posted on their condition.”

“Will do.”

Once they got around the hull breach, Damon had a chance to look at the vastness surrounding them. He didn’t like being so exposed on the threshold of something that empty. It was strangely peaceful, though. The only thing keeping him grounded with reality was Viktor’s slight tug on the tether every now and then as they moved together.

“There’s one of them!” Damon had to restrain himself from shoving off from the ship in the direction of the body gently tumbling in space. Instead, he gave the gentlest of pushes, floating out to the end of his tether.

“That should be the other woman,” Viktor commed. “Phoebe is near the hull breach just outside the temporary barrier. She’s fine, but running out of oxygen. Tie on to this one quickly and let’s get Phoebe.”

Viktor pulled them back and they went after Phoebe. She had just enough oxygen to keep her conscious until they got back to a pressurized area.

Damon hurried to get everyone to the medical unit and checked out. He was worried about Phoebe -- so much he felt like his heart was going to explode -- but there were many more who had been injured in this attack. All of his crew were important to him.

"*Sword Breaker* is opening her aft cargo bay doors for us." The smaller ship had pulled dangerously close, but the two ships seemed to move like dancers who had anticipated each other's movements for a very long time.

The four of them floated into the bay and into an airlock. A few seconds later, the airlock pressurized and the crew of *Sword Breaker* helped carry the two women to the medical unit. Damon lost his grip on Phoebe. He yelled her name, desperate to get to her, but Viktor held him back. She made eye contact with him and gave him a weak smile as they whisked her off. It would have to do for now.

Damon stood there with Viktor. Just the two of them remained. Damon sank to the deck, his knees unable to support him any longer. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I know, my friend. You love her."

"Yes, Viktor, more than I'm comfortable admitting to just anyone, but it's not only that. How many did we lose? I don't even know. In all my years, I've never lost a crewman before."

Viktor reached his hand to Damon. "That's why you're a good commander, Damon. Men the Empire has in command now don't care about the lives lost, only the power gained." He pulled Damon to his feet. "We've got to get back to the *Black Star*. I think something's happening."

"Like what?" Damon had a sinking feeling he knew. He also had an even worse feeling he knew why. It was the only explanation.

"That carrier is now on an intercept course and will be here in less than ten standard minutes. We've got no time to spare."

The two men got permission to take a shuttle and headed back to the *Black Star*. It was time for the most feared ship in the known universe to earn her reputation.

Chapter Seven

The medical unit on this new ship was smaller than that of the *Black Star*, but it was a great deal more comfortable. This was a ship built with her crew's comfort in mind. For all the technology she saw, and all the comforts afforded the patients here, Phoebe didn't see nearly enough staff. From what she could gather, there was one doctor and three nurses. Compared with *Black Star's* one doctor, she supposed it was a lot, but there were at least eight men injured in the fight, not to mention Diamond, who was by far the most critically injured.

Everyone's time was taken up with the care of Diamond, the woman who had initiated the daring assault, and the men were left to wait until someone was free to tend them. Phoebe's injuries were minor. She'd been hurt worse on the station and managed to treat herself.

Looking around, she saw things she could do. The man sitting next to her was burned from his knee down, the flesh red and covered with blisters, but not charred and blackened. It probably hurt like a son of a bitch. If she put some clean cloths over it and found clean cool water, she could at least give him some temporary relief. It wasn't anything she hadn't done before for the females in the lower part of Graves Station.

No one was paying any of them any attention, so Phoebe took a quick look at everyone around her. Some of the patients had burns as severe -- or worse -- than the first man she'd looked at, but most were minor burns, cuts, and bumps. Phoebe then pilfered every cabinet and drawer she found for bandages and basins. This ship seemed to have plenty of water, thankfully, so treating the burns was relatively easy.

Caring for these men wasn't the burden she had felt back on the station. She had only been with them a day, but already she got the impression they embraced her as one of their own. As she started her rounds, treating them as best she could, they

thanked her. With hopeful looks when she passed, hoping for a little relief, maybe just a kind smile, they all looked at her like she was someone important. She didn't see the insulting or suggestive looks she often did from men on the station. These men expected she knew what to do and would take care of them. Even more, she didn't want to let them down.

By the time the unit staff returned from their critical patient, Phoebe had done all she could. Many of the wounded would require more than she was capable of giving, but she had eased their pain and gotten to know all of them in the process.

"Will she make it?" Phoebe was as anxious about the one person in the group she didn't know as she was about the men she now considered friends.

"I honestly don't know," the doctor stated frankly. "Time will tell. She's strong, and fighting hard." He glanced in the direction of his patient. "With rest and strength of will, she's got a good chance."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful for the hospitality, doctor, but how soon can we return to the *Black Star*? They only have one physician on board and no staff. I'm sure they could use any help they can get. These men are roughly half his crew. I'm sure he needs them."

The man glanced around the room once, did a double take and walked to one of the men from the *Black Star*. After examining the wound Phoebe had dressed, he asked, "Is there anyone who still needs attention?"

"Well --" she cleared her throat, "-- Josiah has some pretty bad burns. He's comfortable, but he'll need something more than my pitiful efforts. Cain has a pretty deep gash on his right thigh. It's bandaged and the bleeding's stopped, but it will need to be sealed. I think Evan has a broken wrist, but the rest aren't so bad. They can tell you more about what they need than I can."

"Don't let her fool you, Doc." Cain, who was sitting next to where Phoebe was standing, clapped her on the back hard enough to make her stagger forward. "She's had experience with patching people up."

"It definitely looks like it." Doc made a quick examination of every man in the room. "As much as I'd love to let you get back to your ship, I can't." Everyone in the room protested at once. Doc held up his hand for silence. "I'm sorry! There's nothing we can do. There's a carrier ship just out of hyperspace in the sector. Captain Anjoom has given orders for closed quarters. No off duty personnel is to be roaming the ship. We all have to stay put for safety reasons."

Outrage spread across the men. Some of them jumped up from their beds and would have advanced on the poor doctor if Phoebe hadn't stepped smoothly in between them.

"Just wait," she hissed at Josiah. The tall, lean redhead backed down, but not willingly. "Just wait, Josiah."

"The captain needs us, Phoebe. He's running on less than a skeleton crew."

"I know, but the doctor can't countermand an order from his own captain." She needed to keep them calm if her plan was going to work.

"So what do you suggest we do? Leave Captain Singh to defend himself?"

Phoebe grabbed his face in her hands and made him look her in the eye. "Yes, Josiah. That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

There was silence while Phoebe willed the young man to trust her. She hadn't survived the wrath of the Hand of God by being stupid. You tell the powers that be what they want to hear, then you do what you have to. Fortunately, the doctor on *Sword Breaker* wasn't a member of the Hand.

"Good." The old doctor clapped his hands together. "I'll get back to my patient. Just stay put, and as soon as the crisis is over, I'm sure the captain will see to it you're returned to your ship with all possible speed."

It was obvious the doctor wasn't interested in staying around to confront anyone. When he left to go back to his patient, Phoebe let Josiah go and went to a computer display. A graphic of the ship's interior was displayed prominently, most likely for ease of movement in the case of an emergency.

“Look.” Phoebe pointed at the image. “The shuttle bay is only a few hundred meters away. It shouldn’t take long to get there.”

“I just looked out the door, Phoebe.” Evan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “There aren’t many people out there, but I seriously doubt they’re going to let us just roam around the ship at will.”

“Who said anything about going out the door?” Phoebe raised an eyebrow and grinned.

* * *

It only took them ten minutes of crawling through the ventilation and maintenance crawl spaces, but it was six minutes too long for Phoebe. Unfortunately, those shafts weren’t made for solidly built, really *big* soldiers, especially with each dragging a suit through the shafts. There was more pushing and shoving from the men in the ducts than feeding time in a herd full of starved *yassats*. More than one of the men got stuck, but everyone managed to make it.

Phoebe crouched behind a crate in the main hangar area, assessing their options. They weren’t good.

“Somehow, I doubt we’d make it to the shuttle and manage to take off before anyone notices it missing,” one of the older men -- Lammet -- observed. “Besides, with all the fighting going on, I’m not so sure a shuttle is a good idea. We’d be blown to bits.”

“True,” Phoebe agreed absently. She was thinking. The shuttle was definitely out of the question. “But, what if we didn’t take the shuttle?”

Eight pairs of eyes looked at her with a combination of disbelief, dread, and that you’ve-got-to-be-kidding look only men could produce.

* * *

Laser fire streaked through space at horrifying intensity and concentration. Explosions flashed on all three ships engaged in the battle as lasers bounced off deflector shields, but no sound reached Phoebe’s ears inside the airtight helmet. It was like watching a film with the sound switched off.

For space to be so empty, Phoebe would have thought she and her companions would have had more room to maneuver, but instead it just made the laser bolts seem that much bigger. They were designed to bring down a destroyer class warship, after all. This close to them, one bolt looked three times as big as a shuttle bay outer door. Perhaps a space walk from ship to ship using the portable tractor beam they'd "borrowed" as propulsion wasn't as great an idea as she'd first thought. Especially not during a battle. Hell, it would have sucked *yassat* turds in the best of conditions. This was not the best of conditions. There was nothing like floating through the vast emptiness of space to prove exactly how tiny you were in the great universe. As it was, Phoebe was getting a panicky feeling from being in such an open area.

"We're sitting ducks out here," Evan commed. At the end of the line, he double-checked everyone's tether for the fifth time as they were pulled along. "Not to mention the risk of losing the tractor lock if they do too many extreme maneuvers."

"I know, but would you rather wait until this is all over to get back to your ship?" Phoebe couldn't agree more with Evan, but they'd come over halfway. Turning around now wasn't an option. They didn't have enough oxygen to get back.

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying there had to be a better way than this."

"You had your chance to come up with a better idea. No one said anything."

"Well, this seemed like a good idea at the time. I revised my opinion the first time the heat of a near miss made my hair sizzle though."

"We're almost there. Only a few hundred more yards and we'll be inside the *Black Star's* shields. That should give us enough protection until we get inside."

"Are you sure we can penetrate those shields?"

"Sure," Phoebe lied through her teeth. She wasn't at all sure. "The basic design of a standard deflector shield is to prevent super heated or fast moving material from penetrating. Since we're neither, we should have no problems getting in."

No one said anything. Phoebe knew the principle was sound, but she had no idea if *Black Star* used a standard shield or not. All she knew was Damon needed manpower, and if these men were willing to follow her, willing to try, she'd do

anything she had to in order to get them there. They knew the risks -- probably better than she did. Besides, another few seconds would tell the tale.

"Phoebe, what the hell are you doing?!" The voice that squawked over the comm unit was Damon's. He wasn't a bit happy. In fact, he sounded furious. If she'd known she could have communicated with the *Black Star*, she'd have given them a heads up before they got caught in the laser fire.

"We're approaching your deflector shield. Can we get through or will we bounce off?"

"I have your location. I'll deactivate that section. Get through as fast as you can and get your ass aboard this ship. Out."

Phoebe winced. This might not have been the smartest thing she'd ever done.

The rest of the trip didn't take long, and it was made in silence. By the time they entered through the same blow hatch Phoebe had used during the first skirmish, the battle was over and Captain Singh was waiting for them. There was no mistaking he was indeed *Captain Singh* -- the tender, loving Damon Phoebe had fallen in love with was nowhere to be found.

"You risked not only your life, but the lives of eight members of my crew with that little stunt. What exactly did you think you were going to accomplish?" Damon's features were hard, and his eyes flashed in unmistakable anger. Pissed didn't begin to cover it.

"You were fighting with so few men aboard the ship, I thought you could use some extra hands."

Damon slammed his fist into a nearby crate. "And how did you help us? The fighting's over! You took *my* men into the middle of a firefight -- without even the protection of the most rudimentary of ships -- for no reason! That was the craziest thing I've ever seen, not to mention the stupidest! The way you were tied together, if one of you had been hit, the force would have sent the rest of you hurling off into deep space!" He had to lean down because he was so much taller than Phoebe, but he got in her face, almost nose to nose. "Consider yourself relieved of duty." He turned his back on her

and stalked away. As he did, he gave one final order. "Viktor, Phoebe Lighthouse is charged with intentionally and recklessly endangering the lives of eight members of this crew -- possibly the entire ship as well. Place her under arrest and put her in a holding cell."

Phoebe's heart pounded. What had just happened? "Damon?"

"You'd do well to address him as 'Captain Singh' or 'Sir,' Miss." Viktor gave her the creeps from the first moment she'd met him. Now, he looked more terrifying than anything from her worst nightmare.

Tears formed, but she refused to let them fall. She looked back at the eight men who'd come with her on that crazy stunt. They stood smartly at attention. None of them met her gaze. "I don't understand. I was only trying to help."

Viktor ignored her. "You will come with me now." He didn't give her a chance to comply. He simply took her by the upper arm and practically dragged her to her cell, shoved her in, and turned on the force field. Before he left, he growled at her, "You've betrayed this ship and her crew, but more importantly you've betrayed a man who loved you more than you'll ever know. That man is the best friend I've ever had, and I take this very personally. You may not have figured it out yet, but I'm not someone you want for an enemy." The smile he gave her was positively evil. "Sleep well, my dear. If you dare."

This was all of Phoebe's fears come true. She could have still been on Graves Station. Locked up without understanding why and unsure of what her future might be, Phoebe sat on the slim cot and folded her hands in her lap. She would sit there until they came for her. When they did, she would do what she was told and accept her fate as it came to her. Most importantly, she would not let them see her cry.

She would *not* let them see her cry.

The tears came, anyway.

Chapter Eight

"Is there even the slightest possibility you're wrong about this, Viktor?"

Damon was not only trying to salvage what was left of his heart, but his pride as well. During the battle, Viktor and Ranier had figured out how the Hand of God ships had managed to keep course with them from such a distance. They hadn't locked onto them -- they'd been following a beacon set to beam a high intensity burst to a special receiver on the other ship. The problem was finding it. When the enemy had started firing on *Sword Breaker*, Viktor put it together and had *Black Star* comb the area for that transmitter. When Phoebe had isolated herself outside the ship, finding the thing had been easy. It was on Phoebe herself.

"It's there, Captain. Planted deep within her brain. *Black Star* found it, but she says the probabilities of removing it are not good. Well, not without killing -- or severely damaging at best -- the host. When this was done, it was done with the intention of it staying there forever."

"So, she sneaks on board with a tracking device implanted in her brain. Why? The one time we were in danger, she and that other woman saved our asses. And when we caught her, it was because she removed herself from the presence of too many people." Damon scrubbed a hand over his face. "What was she out to accomplish?"

"Maybe the idea was to get us away from witnesses, or to catch us by surprise to give them a greater advantage. They had to know they were no match for us on an even field." Viktor shrugged. "I suppose you'd have to ask her. I'd ask the men who followed her, but they fled as soon as they were able."

"Well, whatever the reason, they'll always be able to find us as long as that chip is in her head, or as long as she's with us." Damon felt tired. Old and tired. "Damn."

“If you’ll pardon me for interrupting, there’s something you should know before you go making rash decisions.” The silky feminine voice startled Damon, but Viktor didn’t seem a bit surprised.

“I take it you’ve kept something from me? Again?” When Viktor was angry, things like this only enflamed him. “How am I supposed to be your link to the human world if you won’t give me information I need?”

“I’m trying to, dear, but you’re a tad hard-headed. You tend to hear what you want to hear and not what you need to hear.”

If Damon hadn’t been in such a bad mood, he probably would have laughed. The ship sounded like his own mother.

“Well, enlighten us, *dear*. I’m sure we’re just dying to know.” Viktor looked angry enough to punch something.

“First of all, if you’d care to look, you’ll notice not one, but two beacons. One of them is coming from somewhere on *Sword Breaker*.”

“So?” Viktor was probably getting himself in deeper and deeper. If he was going to continue his relationship with this ship, he was going to have to learn not to argue with a woman who had all the facts when he didn’t.

“So, dear, who is still aboard *Sword Breaker* who came from the same place little Phoebe did?”

“OK, so she and the other woman are both spies.” Now Viktor was being stubborn. Truth be told, he had been stubborn the whole time because the man hated being wrong even more than he hated asking for help.

“Or they don’t know they’re being followed. Have you even researched your enemy at all, Viktor?”

“I --”

“Of course you haven’t.” *Black Star* was as smug as any woman Damon had ever met. He continued to believe his policy of keeping silent was a good thing. “If you had, you’d have discovered that no one has ever left their community. Those who tried were always hunted down and killed. Now, I know I’m just a hunk of metal thrown together

with a human brain, but you add that to the very specific type of transmitter imbedded so deep inside the brain of these women and you realize the Hand was looking for the escaped women, not you or myself.”

For the first time since Damon had met the man, Viktor was speechless. He stood there, a murderous look on his face and a vein in his temple prominent in his anger. “Damned ship.”

“Best you not forget it either, Viktor. I’ve been damned since the day I was transferred to this hunk of metal. Naturally, I have no patience for people who refuse to see what’s right in front of them because they’re too proud to admit they’re wrong.”

“OK.” Damon figured they’d work out their differences eventually -- they had to if they were going to survive together and function as the symbiotic beings they needed to be. Perhaps if he had Nadira explain how she and *Sword Breaker* managed to find peace together it would help him. He looked at Viktor’s normally fierce controlled features. The pure rage and impotent fury shining there made him think there was probably nothing that would help. The man would have to find the answers on his own. For now, however, there were more important things to worry about. Damon knew the woman the *Black Star* had been, and she hadn’t changed much at all except maybe to be less tolerant. He knew Viktor, too. The man could only be pushed so far. Pushing him any more was unhealthy for everyone around him. And futile. “They were after Phoebe and her friend, but the question is did they know and simply refuse to tell us?”

“That I couldn’t say, Captain. All I know is you have a young woman in a cell who’s frightened and hurt. Perhaps you should have asked her that before you treated her like the very men she was running from.”

Yep. Just like his mother. And just like his mother, she was right.

“What I don’t understand is why she risked the lives of those eight men, taking them on a crazy space walk like she did. The only way that makes sense is if she knew she would be detected and was trying to draw the Hand back to the ship she was supposed to be on in the first place. She hadn’t intended to be taken to *Sword Breaker*.”

“And her mad dash outside to help Diamond? The two of them single-handedly saved this ship and everyone aboard. Does that sound like someone who wanted to intentionally hurt those men?”

“No matter what Viktor thinks, Nani, you are a very wise woman. You always were.”

“Nani is dead, Damon.” The sarcastic know-it-all persona was gone in an instant. The *Black Star* now sounded angry, bitter, and very much alone.

The only relief from her tortured existence was when she was allowed to link up with *Sword Breaker*, who had been her lover in another life when both of them had been human. Mikiel, the captain of *Sword Breaker*, and Damon both tried to allow them a continuous link, but distance sometimes interfered. As a result, they tried not to separate the ships unless it was absolutely necessary.

“All that’s left of Nani is her love for Darian. The rest of her died the day the *Black Star* was born.”

“I’m sorry. Things might have been different if I’d spoken up or tried to stop the madness Samair precipitated.”

“Certainly things would have been different. You’d have been executed, or worse, stuck in a hulk of twisted metal and computer chips.”

None of them spoke for a while. The silence was deafening and very uncomfortable.

“There’s something both of you should know,” *Black Star* continued in a more controlled tone. “These two women may well be the key to the salvation of both the Vok’nair Empire and the Asalian Coalition. I can’t say why, but there’s something tickling my sensors about this whole situation. I just can’t figure it out yet.”

Damon looked at Viktor. He’d hoped to have the man offer some insight, but Viktor’s eyes were glazed over and pure fury covered his face. “You just love making a fool out of me don’t you, bitch?” Viktor was almost frothing at the mouth, he was so angry. “Why didn’t you tell me before? Better still, why didn’t you let me in on your little secret when we last practiced our link?”

"I hid nothing from you, vampire. Anything you didn't pick up is your own limitation."

Damon held his breath. The strain on Viktor the last few months had been tremendous. The link he had established with the ship caught him completely by surprise. Combine that with the fact that he'd had to alter his survival methods drastically since taking on the assignment aboard the *Black Star*, and he had pushed himself to the breaking point. No one would serve on a ship with a vampire who fed from anything other than synthetic blood, so it had been necessary, but very uncomfortable. Add a frustrating female into the mix and it was a wonder the vampire had lasted this long.

"Viktor, what do you need?"

"You *know* what I need! Find me a willing female and let me drain her while I fuck her senseless, and I might be sane for a few minutes." He wasn't lying. That was exactly what it would take. Unfortunately, there was no one outside of a woman from his own race who could tolerate what Viktor needed to dish out. Damon *had* to find a way to get them to the vampire home world. Fast.

"You're confined to quarters for the remainder of the journey. We'll use best possible speed to get you home. Until then, you'll understand if I place security fields on your residence."

A moment of sanity returned to Viktor's eyes. "I'm afraid it might be too late, Damon. Double and triple secure everything. I don't want to hurt anyone. Please."

It was a horrible thing to see a man Damon considered the most controlled person he'd ever met slipping into a madness of violence and lust. It was like watching the most gifted of minds degrade with the ravages of age, only much, much worse. The violence about to be unleashed could kill them all.

"I'll see to it personally." It pained Damon to watch as three guards escorted his friend away, but he didn't have a choice. A vampire on the rampage was a horrifying prospect.

But not nearly as horrifying as the possibility of either learning Phoebe was a spy for the Hand of God, or losing her because he had treated her like the very people she was running from.

* * *

Phoebe was numb. She had come to terms with the possibility she'd lost her freedom. What she was having trouble with was why. There was no way she could have completely misjudged Damon. He simply wasn't that type of person. So the question remained -- why?

Her tears dried soon after they fell, and she vowed she'd not waste them on a man who didn't love her. She'd been strong her whole life. She'd fight her way through this, too. She hadn't survived this long only to let a man strip her of her pride. If she was to be a captive the rest of her life, however short that might be, she'd meet the challenge as she had every other -- with her head held high.

Lying on the small cot -- the only furniture in her cell -- Phoebe faced the wall, pulled her knees to her chest, and tried to calm her mind enough to rest. The stars only knew what lay in store for her over the next few days. Or months. Or...

She cringed. She'd deal with that when the future was more certain.

She'd just about dozed off when the door to the holding area whooshed open. She didn't have to look to know who it was.

"Leave us." Damon's gruff, husky voice held a deadly note of command. Phoebe sat up and took a deep breath. She didn't want the guard there any more than Damon did, but she needed someone there to make her keep her resolve. Breaking down in front of anyone other than Damon wasn't an option.

The guard, Chaz, stood at attention, but made no move to leave. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't do that."

Damon looked a little startled. "I beg your pardon?"

"The rumor ship-side is you and Viktor believe she's responsible for the attacks against us and *Sword Breaker*." The young man swallowed. "We respectfully suggest

that your logic is flawed in that line of thinking, Sir." The poor man obviously didn't like going against his captain.

Damon smiled. "Relax, Chaz. We've already seen the error of our ways." Damon turned to Phoebe. "I still have some questions, but rest assured --" he turned back to Chaz, "-- she's perfectly safe with me."

Chaz -- bless his soul -- looked to Phoebe. "Miss?" It was obvious the young man didn't take going against his superior's orders lightly, but having done so, he wasn't about to back down.

Phoebe stood. "I'll be fine, Chaz. Thanks for your help. You and everyone."

"We know what you did during the first battle, and the others told us how you got them back to the *Black Star* during the second one. That was the most creative and bravest thing any of us have ever heard of. We figure we owe you for that." He grinned then. "Not to mention the food."

Phoebe's heart lifted. "Thanks for standing up for me." She glanced at Damon, and bitterness filled her heart. She wanted to say so much. No one had ever had the courage to take her side in anything. No one had ever cared enough. No matter how much she'd done, no matter how many times she put her life on the line for others, no one had ever returned the favor. "You'll never know how much it means."

Neither Damon nor Phoebe said anything until Chaz got to the door. "I don't want to be disturbed. See to it no one enters, no matter what anyone hears this time." Apparently the entire ship had heard about Viktor and Ranier's breach of Damon's cabin door security, because Chaz snickered quietly as he exited.

They were alone. Phoebe drank in the sight of him. Even though she was hurt and angry, he still looked good enough to eat. His reference to the last time they'd made love took her breath as the memory washed over her. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the pleasure she had found in the arms of this man. She doubted if anything in the universe would ever give her as much pleasure ever again. He was everything she had ever wanted in a lover. He could be so gentle, yet his passion for her had matched

hers for him. When he had experienced his own pleasure, he had held nothing back from her.

“You have every right to hate me, Phoebe.”

“What makes you think I don’t?” She couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t right that the perfect man for her had to be an asshole.

“The way you’re looking at me.” He started walking toward her, a predator stalking his prey. “The lust shining in your eyes tells me you still want me, and I don’t think you’re the type of woman to want a man you hate.”

Phoebe refused to retreat. Instead of backing up in the face of his advancement, she planted her feet and raised her chin to look him in the eye. “Just because I still want to *fuck* you doesn’t mean I want *you*.”

Her words seemed to make something snap inside him. He crossed the remaining distance between them in a rush, fisted a hand in her hair and pulled her to him none too gently.

“I can definitely fuck you.” He kissed her, plunging his tongue into her and, in the process, taking her soul as completely as he took her mouth. “Nothing in my life has ever compared to the way I feel when you’re in my arms, Phoebe. And I’m not leaving you this time until I make you feel the same way.”

Chapter Nine

Oh, sweet universe, she *had* to love him as much as he loved her. Damon tangled both hands in the snowy silk of her long tresses, turning her head to the perfect angle to plunder her mouth with his tongue. Phoebe whimpered, and it was only a few seconds before she was kissing him back.

She hooked a leg around his hip and pulled herself into him, grinding her clit against the ridge of his engorged cock. Damon was lost. Nothing mattered -- not the ship, not the Hand of God floating out there somewhere picking up a signal from her brain, nothing. Only this woman. This place. This moment.

He was filled with her sweet essence, a scent that was uniquely hers. Rose petals and lotus blossoms danced with a musky feminine scent only Phoebe carried. There was a sweet, minty flavor lingering on her lips Damon was only too glad to lap at.

Until she bit him.

A sharp intake of air was all he was able to manage. He tasted blood leaking from the wound on his tongue as he pulled back. She didn't let him go far.

"That's for being an asshole. Whether you deserve more is something I'll figure out later." She was breathing hard, and her breasts underneath the form-fitting uniform heaved with the exertion. "Now, fuck me."

That did it. Any semblance of control Damon might have had went right out the air lock. With a growl, he grabbed her suit at the neck and tore until she was exposed to the waist. He wanted to see all of her, but those wonderful, rounded globes of flesh beckoned him like a plasma string calls to an *arnat* entity. There was no force in the universe that could have stopped him from diving face-first between her breasts.

Kissing the valley between them, he grunted when her hands found his head and pulled him to her. He licked a path to each peak, sucking the nipples into his mouth

before releasing them with an audible pop. She cried out when he nipped one with his teeth, so he did the other one.

“Sweet sun and stars, Damon, that’s good! So very good. Oh, yes! Like that! Bite my nipples!”

Sweat slicked her skin, and he felt flushed, himself. His cock ached with the need to be inside her, to fuck them both into oblivion. Going back between her breasts, he licked her sternum and the inner curve of each breast until they were slick with his saliva. Once he was satisfied, he freed himself.

“On your knees, Phoebe. I want you to suck me.”

She sank to her knees, a wicked grin playing across her face. “What happens if I don’t?”

Damon knew she was playing. All might not be forgiven yet -- and he was sure there would be hell to pay before it was over -- but she loved this as much as he did. “You’ll force me to punish you.”

She raised an eyebrow, but the smile stayed in place. “Oh, really? And how would you go about that?”

“I’d bare that sweet little ass of yours, turn you over my knee, and spank you until you begged to be fucked.” He was only half joking. The image he’d just conjured was almost his undoing.

“Is that supposed to be an incentive to suck you off? ’Cause it’s only making me want to defy you all the more.” She opened her mouth and took the head of his dick inside her mouth, but let it slide free after only a couple of strokes.

Damon had to grit his teeth to keep back the moan. “You truly want a spanking? Your cries and the sound of my hand smacking your ass would only cause Viktor to break out of his cell. What if he caught you in that position?”

If Damon had once thought Phoebe an innocent of any kind, her next words shot that image all to hell and back. “Then maybe he’d like to join us.”

That was it. Damon yanked her to her feet and threw her on the cot. She landed on her back with her legs hanging over the side. Before she made a move to get up,

Damon braced his knees on the edge of the bed and lowered his pelvis to her chest. His cock rode between her breasts, and she squeezed them around his cock with her hands. He was helpless to do anything but thrust against her chest as he would thrust into her cunt. The fleshy mounds hugged him as snugly as she had the first time they'd made love.

"You like this, don't you, Damon." It wasn't a question. He was sure the sweat popping out all over him was a good indication he was enjoying himself.

She raised her head up slightly and licked the end of his shaft. Her saliva, the pre-cum oozing from the tip of his cock, and her sweat increased the lubrication deliciously. Several times she licked him, the sensation teasing him unmercifully. He could no longer keep the grunts of his efforts at bay.

"That's it, Damon. Fuck my tits. Come on my face and chest, and I might let you spank me while Viktor watches. Would you like that?"

Damon couldn't seem to form a coherent thought. Of course he didn't want Viktor to watch! But he couldn't make himself say it. Just the thought of the big vampire leaning against the wall behind them, his arms crossed over his chest, his fangs bare and ready to drink from one or both of them was enough to push him past the point of no return.

"Moon and stars! I'm coming, Phoebe!" That hoarse croak couldn't have been his voice, could it?

Phoebe lifted her head again, sticking her tongue out and licking the head of his cock as it thrust madly up at her. "That's it, that's it," she panted. "Give it to me, Damon. Show Viktor I'm yours and no one else's. Mark me with your seed."

When his orgasm hit, it did so with the force of a thermonuclear detonation. He couldn't have stopped the shout of utter ecstasy if he'd tried. Cum erupted from his cock. He sprayed her with spurt after spurt of thick, white semen. Phoebe opened her mouth and caught some of it. She let it dribble down her chin to mingle with what she hadn't caught, and Damon was hard all over again. She was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen. The look of ecstasy on her face was worth any price Damon had to pay. She

hadn't come herself, but she had enjoyed what she'd done to him. Most likely, she enjoyed the power it gave her to be in total control of his pleasure.

When he'd had a chance to catch a couple of breaths, Damon stood. "All right, you little temptress. You asked for it -- you're going to get it."

Damon yanked her up from the bed by one arm. She yelped, but made no move to get away. In fact, when he split her uniform the rest of the way down, she helped him by kicking off her shoes and stepping out of the tattered remains of her clothing.

Once she was naked, he sat on the bunk and pulled her face down across his lap, her bottom raised perfectly atop his thighs. Phoebe looked back at him over her shoulder. The look in her eyes dared him, begged him to do this. His hand rested on her rounded bottom, rubbing her cheeks, kneading them.

He waited until her breathing grew deep and rapid, until he knew she was as hot as he was. When she trembled beneath his hands, he smacked one cheek sharply. Phoebe hissed. He swatted her again, and again, never in the same spot. When she whimpered, he stopped and caressed her reddened bottom.

"That lovely ass blushes prettily when I give it attention." He smacked it again. "I love that sound. Especially when I wonder if you deserve it." He had to bring up the transmitter in her brain, but he didn't want to do it in an accusing way. He felt her tense at his words. He had to be very careful. "*Black Star* says it's not her or *Sword Breaker* the Hand is after. She says it's you and your friends."

Phoebe's eyes narrowed. "That's not a surprise. They don't let anyone walk away from them."

"It's more than that, Phoebe." When she opened her mouth, most likely to either protest or add something to her previous statement, Damon swatted her ass smartly. She squealed but didn't say anything else. "You have a transmitter on you. It's sending your location straight to the Hand. No matter where you go, they'll know exactly where you are." Damon measured her response. "Did you know that?"

As he talked, her eyes widened, then a look of horror washed over her. "Sweet sun and stars!" Phoebe made a move to get up, but Damon stopped her with a stinging swat across her backside, as well as a hand on her upper back.

"I didn't say you could get up yet." He swatted her a few more times, careful about placing his smacks on a part of her bottom he had yet to hit. "Let's try this again. Did you know you had a tracking device on you? Yes or no?"

"I --" His hand connected with her flesh three times in rapid succession. "No! I didn't know!"

"Good girl." He rubbed her bottom again. "What are the chances that Diamond knows?"

"Damon, let me up -- oh!" Her ass was bright pink now from the smacks on her back to the tops of her thighs. Despite her demand, she didn't really try to get up, and she wiggled her butt so enticingly, Damon couldn't bring himself to stop. For several more strokes, he continued until the heat from her skin burned his hand.

She had spread her legs, and now she trembled with the effort of keeping them that way. Her ass was as high in the air as she could get it, which left her pussy open to him if he wanted it.

He wanted it.

When his fingers came in contact with her slit he wasn't surprised to find her dripping wet. "I'll let you up when I'm good and ready. Now, answer the damn question."

"No. No, I don't think she knows. Oh, stars, Damon! Stick your fingers in me. Neither of us knew. We're innocent. I swear it!"

Damon dipped his fingers into her once, and she cried out sharply. "Do you know why you and Diamond would be fitted with transmitters while the other women weren't?" It was a long shot, but Phoebe knew these people better than he did. If anyone had an insight into their thinking, it would be her.

"I -- Damon, I need to think." Her words came out through panting breaths, her cheeks were almost as flushed as her backside, and her hair stuck to her face from the sweat.

"Then I'll remove my fingers."

"No!"

Damon chuckled before sliding his fingers in deeper and repeating his question. "Why were the two of you singled out? There has to be a reason none of the others have similar transmitters."

Phoebe was sure her eyes rolled back in her head when Damon plunged his fingers back inside her grasping cunt. She couldn't remember her own name, much less come up with a reason why she and Diamond had been singled out. All she knew was she didn't want Damon to stop anything he was doing.

"Look," she stammered, "maybe everyone has one and you just can't find it. I find it hard to believe they'd put tracking devices on some and not all of us. In their whole existence, no one has ever escaped from them for long. It's part of the stigma of who they are. You know when you're brought there, you're not getting out." She would have arched her back and raised her ass higher if she could have. Anything to get him to take the hint. She wanted more.

"No. *Black Star* and *Sword Breaker* both checked everyone thoroughly. The two of you have very sophisticated tracking devices implanted in your brains. We didn't notice them at first, but *Black Star* doesn't give up easily. It took her a while, but she found it."

Phoebe froze. In her *brain*? "Sweet stars." OK, now she was officially freaked out. Sexual haze or not, that was just too weird. Damon must have been prepared for her mood change because he immediately withdrew his fingers and urged her to turn over.

"*Black Star* has isolated it and done a full diagnostic. She knows exactly how it works, just not how to block it. Yet." He kissed her forehead, then her nose.

"Is it a transmitter only? I mean, they can't blow my head off or anything, can they?"

"Absolutely not. It's a tracking device only. Like I said, *Black Star* has mapped this thing down to its last nanotransister. Once she figures out how to block the signal, we can use it to our advantage. Until then, we just have to stay a step ahead of them. Having *Sword Breaker* around will help too." His smile was genuine, the compassion in his eyes almost as great as the lust. Phoebe also saw a vulnerability there she'd never expected to see. He was genuinely sorry for what had happened. "Phoebe..."

"Shhh." She covered his mouth with the tips of three fingers. "It's OK. You did what you had to do. I didn't enjoy it, and I'll remind you of it often, but I do understand." She smiled. "At least, I understand you have to protect your ship. I'm not so sure you had to throw me in the brig."

"Well..." Damon urged her to straddle his hips, "... here, we actually have a door that will lock."

"Right. We had that before. And I'm sure you planned it exactly this way, too."

"Just shut up and fuck me, Phoebe."

Phoebe was more than ready. She reached between them and found his cock, hot, hard and ready. After a few experimental pumps, Phoebe rose up on her knees and impaled herself on it.

Both of them screamed. Phoebe loved the full feeling of having him inside her. She ground her pelvis into him to put much-needed friction on her clit. His hands gripped the deliciously punished flesh of her ass, and his grunts of exertion were music to her ears. He was just as affected as she was.

It wasn't long before Damon flipped Phoebe onto her back, never breaking their joining. He hooked her legs over his shoulders and began to thrust in earnest. Deeper and harder with each stroke, Damon plunged into her over and over again.

"Now, Phoebe. Come for me. Come on my cock and milk me dry!"

She wanted to comply, was about to comply, when she heard a small sound to her left. She turned her head, and the man she saw was familiar, but the vicious, lust-filled look was totally foreign.

"Focus on me, Phoebe." Damon gritted the words out. "Only me."

It wasn't hard. Even knowing Viktor watched, and was on the edge of his control by the looks of him, didn't bring Phoebe down from her sexual high. In fact, it escalated it. When her orgasm overtook her, she was sure she'd die from the intensity. Her ears roared as tingles and pleasurable spasms spread from her clit through her abdomen and legs. She screamed.

With one final thrust Damon followed, yelling loudly, and emptied himself inside her. He let her drop her legs, then collapsed on top of her. Phoebe looked to where Viktor still stood, the look on his face frightening to behold.

"You're supposed to be confined to quarters," Damon reprimanded.

"Ranier is waiting on me. I had to see..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "If I don't get relief soon, Damon, I am lost."

Damon's expression softened with worry. "Go back to your quarters. If you break out again, I'll have you shot, Viktor."

"You should, my friend."

Damon rolled to his side and pulled her close. "Someday, perhaps we'll be able to do that without getting interrupted."

"Only if you learn how to keep quiet." Ranier grinned at them from the open doorway.

"Shit." Damon scrubbed a hand over his face. "Not again."

"Sorry, Sir, but I thought you'd like to know all enemy ships have retreated. They don't seem too concerned with us since we kicked their asses."

"It couldn't have waited?" Damon was annoyed, but Phoebe knew he could see the humor in it.

"Well, yes. It could have. But that wouldn't have been any fun." The younger man chuckled as he ducked out of the doorway.

"One of these days, I'll kick his ass on sheer principle."

They both laughed.

"So, now what?" Phoebe snuggled into him. She loved the clean smell of this particular man. She could just lie there and let his scent wash over her all day.

"*Black Star* believes whatever is inside your head is essential to the grander scheme of things. I agree with her, but one thing still bothers me. Why were only you and Diamond bugged?"

"From what you said, I'd assume those little devices weren't cheap. Maybe they only had a limited number and just ran out."

"Or they planted them on those most likely to run."

"That's a thought," Phoebe mused. "How do we keep them away from us?"

"Let the ships worry about that. They seem to be the only ones around with a clue as to what's going on. I swear, if one more sentient ship starts talking to me like I'm an idiot, I'll unplug the whole lot of them."

"I heard that, Damon," *Black Star's* voice squawked from the intercom. "There's more going on here than is obvious. Right now, the two of you need to get dressed and, more importantly, get Diamond aboard this ship ASAP."

Damon raised an eyebrow. "Diamond?"

"Just do it. The lives of everyone on this ship could well depend on it."

"Am I the captain, or are you?"

Phoebe laughed and turned Damon toward her for a kiss. "You'll do well to remember, sweetheart, never to argue with a woman who has more facts than you do."

"I seem to remember thinking the same thing about Viktor. Well, not the woman part, the other part." Damon laughed. "It will be as you command, ma'am."

All was well with Phoebe now. This man completed her more than any person she'd ever known. But she was troubled. She could feel the tension in Damon even during their happiest moments. Something was wrong. She'd bet a week's wages that problem was Viktor.

Epilogue

Viktor's heart raced. Sweat soaked his body. He had to have blood. Preferably with a female of his own species to supply it, but at this point, he'd take what he could get. He knew the *Black Star* was worried about how to rid Phoebe and Diamond of their unwanted brain implants, but he had problems of his own just now. If he didn't get what he needed soon, he'd take it. By force. No one on this ship could stop him if it came to that. If he didn't give in to his baser nature soon, he'd lose all sanity, and that nature would take over forever. If that happened, the entire crew was at risk. Viktor would kill them all in his need for blood. He only hoped it wasn't already too late.

He stumbled into his quarters and locked the door. His head spun, and he pressed his fists against his temples and roared his frustration, need, and desperation.

"So, what does a vampire do when he can't get blood or sex, hmm?"

The female voice was deep, husky, and had the most exotic accent Viktor had ever heard. When he turned around, he knew he'd found his salvation.

Or maybe his damnation.

Marteeka Karland

Marteeka is an ordinary woman with an overactive imagination. Thank God for a computer, or tape recorder, or pen and paper... what ever she can create a story with! Her husband sometimes thinks she nuts and asks her every time she gets frustrated with her latest deadline, "Is it really worth all this?" And every time, she answers, "HELL YES!"

Apart from writing, Marteeka's alter ego has worked in the Emergency Room for more years than she'll admit. She has a loving husband, who still chuckles when he tells a buddy exactly what that *Goddess of Water* T-shirt is all about, and a son who is blissfully ignorant to anything other than he's not allowed to "push buttons" on Mommy's computer.

Marteeka welcomes mail at mkarland@net-power.net, and you can visit her website at www.marteekakarland.net