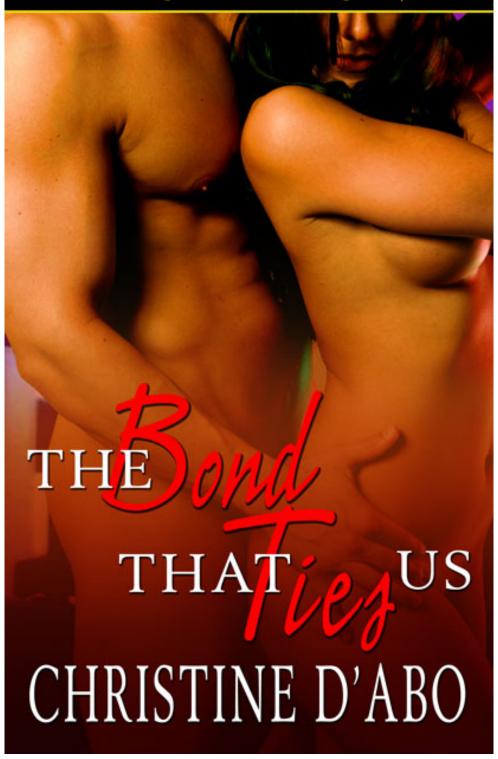
Ellora's Cave Presents



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The Bond That Ties Us

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THE BOND THAT TIES US

Christine d'Abo

Dedication

For my husband Mark, who has encouraged me every step of the way in my writing journey. Thank you for every time you kept the kids busy while I wrote, rubbed my back when it was sore and gave me a hug when I was feeling down. This book would never have been written without your love and support.

I would also like to thank my editor Briana. I know there is nothing more challenging than walking a new author through the editing process. Thank you for all of your support and advice!

Chapter One

Thank god, she was finally here. With a shiver of anticipation, Haylie Bond stepped off the shuttlecraft into the bright hangar bay of the Eurus colony. Casting a glance around she was pleased to see the large windows on the far side of where the shuttle had set down. They'd landed on the planet mid afternoon but the winds were so strong the bright red sand of the planet was whipping around the colony like traveling tornadoes. Still, the alien sight reassured her she really *had* made it. If someone had told her a year ago she'd be taking up residency on Earth's newest colony, twenty light years from home, she would have laughed.

She hadn't been this excited about anything since, well, ever. Haylie took a deep breath, held it for a moment and released it. Calm. Stay focused on the situation, take in what you need and get down to the business of being the best damn security chief this colony ever had.

The crowd behind her began to grumble and Haylie quickly found herself being pushed past by the other colonists. She sighed, grabbed her bag and hopped into the newly formed line that led them to customs. A strange scent tickled the end of her nose, something resembling cinnamon. *Must be my imagination*.

As she and Sara stood in line, Haylie scanned the rest of her surroundings. The shuttle bay consisted of sleek, reinforced acrylic plastic walls. There wasn't a sharp corner in the hangar. Black and gray seemed to be the only colors available to the interior decorators. *Oh well*. It could be worse—puce, for example.

The floors were composed of some compound she hadn't seen before. Tapping the toe of her boot against the surface didn't reveal anything special, nor did it leave a scuff. It would be interesting to see if a laser blast would mark it. She'd have to find out what it was made from. The surface was black, of course, and shiny, which added to the new feel of the station. Hard to believe this place had been around for thirty years.

Haylie spun on her heel and let her excitement sharpen her senses. The simple beauty of the place struck her. Even the warm glow of the lighting strips gave the place a surreal feel. She was grinning like a fool, but she didn't care.

"God, this place is dull. Earth has been setting up colonies all over our galaxy for two hundred years—you'd think they'd have learn how to dress these places up a bit. The first impression people get...boring," Sara said as she dropped her knapsack with a thud.

"I think it's stunning."

"You would. I bet you're twitching to grab your notebook. Do a quick sketch." God, she hated it when Sara did that.

But she'd get her friend back. "You have your papers, right? I don't want them to throw their doctor out the airlock 'cause you left them on the shuttle."

"Oh for the love of...they're right..." Sara frantically patted down her jacket, searching every pocket.

"It looks like about a ten-, no, fifteen-minute wait. Better hurry."

"Shut up."

"Check your bag."

"Ha! Here there they are." Sara pulled the papers from the end pocket of her travel bag, stood triumphantly and waved them under Haylie's nose.

"Excellent. Now put them in your coat pocket so I can keep an eye on them."

"Yes, Mom."

Haylie laughed. She was *never* this happy. But after months of preparation and the lengthy trip, she was finally at the colony. She was about to embark on the next phase of her life, one where she was in complete control. It was going to be heaven.

"I don't think I would have made it off Earth without you. I'd have forgotten to get on the shuttle," Sara said and gave Haylie's hand a squeeze.

Haylie rolled her eyes. While Sara was a highly accomplished doctor, she tended to be a bit unable to manage the daily details of her life.

But at least she had one.

Sara grumbled and gave her travel bag a light kick. "Why is this taking so long? They knew we were coming."

"We're the first settlers to visit the colony in over a year. I think they're allowed to be a bit disorganized."

"Pffft. They've had lots of time to plan."

Haylie set her own duffle bag gently on the floor next to Sara's. "What was it the shuttle pilot said again? Oh yes." Haylie lowered her pitch an octave. "Due to the large number of settlers arriving and the temporary setup, your expected wait in the hangar bay will be longer than normal. Please form an orderly line and be patient while you are processed."

Sara's laugh drew some chuckles from bystanders. "That is so perfect. You missed your calling, hon."

"Last time I checked, the ability to impersonate pilots' voices wasn't a skill sought after by most employers."

"Well, lucky for you, your qualifications considerably more padded than that."

And they were. While she had worked like a dog to earn every single acclaim she had gained, it still wasn't quite enough to win the position as the colony's security chief last year. She'd been number two. It was pure luck that her predecessor resigned and she'd gotten the nod to take his place.

Mentally, she chastised her slip. Luck had nothing to do with getting the position. Never luck. Only hard work and an opportunity to make it a success.

As the line moved slowly forward, Haylie danced her bag forward using her feet. Normally, she would have picked it up to move it, not wanting to ruin the bottom. Her hands twitched, wanting to play with the straps. She was a terrible fidgeter. The last thing she wanted to do was give Sara a reason to tease.

In typical Sara fashion, she had momentarily forgotten Haylie and was chatting with the two men standing in front of them. They were human but definitely not from Earth. And while they were exceedingly good looking and, from the bit she overheard, charming, Haylie wasn't interested in them at the moment. Because she saw *him*.

A Briel.

No chance of confusing *them* with humans, though the two races looked similar. Their size and not-quite-human skin tone alone made them stand apart. This one appeared to be some sort of dignitary, out of place in the makeshift arrival area. While the rest of the humans were ragged and tired looking, the Briel looked relaxed as he walked amongst the newly arrived strangers. She quickly looked around, but there were no other Briel in sight. *I wonder what he's doing here*.

He stood just under seven feet. Not as tall as some Briel, but larger than most humans. Well, he was head and shoulders above her at any rate. His black outfit appeared to be more of a tunic than a suit a human might wear. It was simply adorned, not that it needed fancy decorations to catch her attention. The man the tunic clung to was able to do that all on his own. It hugged his chest and well-defined arms before flaring out, concealing the one part of his anatomy she wouldn't mind getting a look at. His pants were just as tight, showing off muscular thighs. She shouldn't stare, but what the hell. She was still too far away to get a good look at his face, but there was something oddly familiar about him.

Her heart pounded and her skin tingled. This had to be the aftereffects of the trip here. That had to be it. She tried to ignore the strange sensations that teased the skin along the back of her neck.

"Yo, Haylie. Line's a moving." Sara's voice sounded amused, as always.

It took Haylie two kicks to get her bag caught up to Sara's spot in the line. The movement took the edge off her restlessness, but her skin still seemed to itch. She bent slightly at the waist to peek at the dignitary and mirrored the deep frown she saw on his face. *Damn, he looks confused.* She forced her eyes forward and swallowed another giggle as the Briel looked her way. Her face grew hot and she prayed he wouldn't notice the change in her color.

Smooth, Bond. Nothing better than getting caught gawking at an alien. They'd accuse her of being infatuated with the Briel and ship her back home.

Her stomach lurched. *No, no, no.* What was going on? This giddy schoolgirl routine wasn't her. Sara, perhaps. But not Haylie Dawn Bond.

"I need some water," she whispered.

No one heard, of course. She closed her eyes and tried the relaxation techniques her father had taught her when they'd done the shuttle supply runs between Luna colony and Earth. But each beat of her heart grew louder as it continued to push the rising levels of adrenaline through her body. *No good*.

Haylie's eyes flew open when Sara pulled hard on her arm, bringing her in close.

Sara's voice, a low whisper, was amplified in her ear. "So, Michael and Todd," she motioned with her chin, "are on the engineering team. They rather fancy taking the colony's new doctor and security chief out to supper some night in the next week. I told them that we would love to. Haylie?"

She turned her head and blinked. "Yes?"

"Cute guys, date, are you listening?"

"Of course." She hadn't heard a thing, but it was best not to admit that to Sara. She wouldn't understand Haylie's immediate crisis. If too much energy and a growing arousal could be considered a crisis.

"Then get a little more excited."

Whattt!

"Sara, we just got here. A date is the last thing I'm looking for." She hadn't meant to snap, but the sudden wave of annoyance hit her.

"You okay?"

Haylie took a deep breath. "I'm fine. Tired I think."

"You look a bit flushed. Are you sure?" Sara turned Haylie around to get a good look at her face.

"Maybe it's the change in the air pressure from what they had set for us when we were in cryo sleep." She looked at Sara and smiled. The last thing she wanted was for Sara to jump into super doctor mode. Her friend would insist on giving her a full physical before leaving the hangar.

"More likely it's the change in gravity messing with your head. You'll adjust in no time." Sara gave her a gentle squeeze before letting go. "All I ask is that you give me a sign before you pass out. Deal?"

Haylie chuckled and smiled so widely it hurt. "Absolutely. I'll make sure to give you ten to fifteen seconds' notice before any loss of consciousness occurs."

Haylie wasn't known for her poker face, but she somehow managed to convince Sara. No sense in causing worry if she didn't have to. Haylie turned away and began to tap her foot to some unfamiliar music in her head. It figured. She finally got her life exactly where she wanted it and things went to shit on her. Leave it to her to screw up her dream job with a bout of hyperactivity.

She couldn't tell if *he* was still moving down the line. Damn, she should have turned her head in the other direction. At least she would have been able to sneak a look. As the line shuffled forward another few steps, she tried to locate him again but couldn't see past the group of five or six that had begun to chat in front of her.

She mentally forced her foot to stop tapping and relaxed her body. This infernal waiting was going to kill her. She didn't mind lines any more than the next person and no one else seemed to be having problems dealing with the inactivity. She needed a distraction.

Haylie twisted around, checking out the other people in line. She tried to guess what role they would be filling on the colony by how they were acting, how they were dressed. She managed to figure out a few when a movement ahead caught her attention. She sucked in a quiet gasp. *He* was coming her way. The Briel was smiling, stopping to talk briefly with some of the new settlers before moving on. He struck her as some benevolent ruler having an audience with his people.

Oh good god, he was gorgeous. The shivers returned with a vengeance. The recycled air from the ventilation shaft high above them blew against her back and neck. Every piston in her body pumped full steam ahead as he inched closer to her. He was so much taller than any of the humans he stood beside. His hair color wasn't a human black either, lacking the half and semi-tones. She found it odd that he had it trimmed neatly in a fashion that was currently all the rage with the men back on Earth. Maybe he was trying to put everyone at ease.

From the conversations she was overhearing, it wasn't his hair that was drawing their attention, but his deep rich laugh. The sound traveled over her like a warm caress. It was hypnotic and Haylie found she couldn't look away, the pull of his voice too strong for her to resist.

The dark hue of his skin looked almost as if he had spent far too long under an alien sun. She tried to distract herself by figuring out what the color would be. Not quite olive, but darker than a human for sure. She'd check it out later. *This is nuts*! She had to pull it together quickly.

Her heart was racing, palms sweating and the tingling of awareness traveled across her body, pooling in her pussy. All of the short range travel she'd done on cargo runs had never generated this type of reaction in her. And while deep space travel was a bit harder on the system, it didn't explain the buildup of energy. The nerve-rattling desire that had suddenly built up in her body. Haylie took a deep breath and hoped to ease the tight feeling in her chest. But it didn't lessen, instead increasing in intensity with each step the Briel took toward her.

Shit. She felt her pussy juices soak through the clothing between her legs, her nipples tightened into hardened buds as they rubbed against her undershirt. Haylie couldn't control her breathing, the pants coming harder and faster. Her Briel took another step closer and she felt the tremor of an orgasm starting. *My god*!

"I can't wait to meet this guy. I wonder what he..." Sara stopped mid-sentence. She quickly took Haylie by the shoulders and led her out of the line.

"What are you doing, Sara?"

"Hon, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"I...I think I need to sit down."

"Over here, lean against the bulkhead. Head between your knees and take nice deep breaths."

Haylie felt warm, but her approaching orgasm dissipated as they moved away from the Briel. With her head in that position she could smell the strong scent of her desire. Another minute, that's all she'd needed. What the hell is wrong with me?

"This is great. The administration is going to send my ass right back on the next shuttle to Earth. 'Sorry, Ms. Bond, no wimps allowed'."

The weight of her long ponytail lifted from her shoulders as Sara gathered it in her hands.

"Come on. Section four of our contract clearly stated they can't fire us until after your ten-day probation period expires."

"You're making that up."

"Damn right I am. So smarten up and show a little backbone, Bond."

This time the laughter didn't come. "Something's wrong." Haylie had difficulty making her voice work. It barely rose above a whisper.

"I'm not blind. What do you feel? Nauseous?"

"I'm..."

Wonderful. How the hell to explain this one? Haylie inhaled deeply again, but her rising chest increased the pressure of her traveling suit against her tight nipples. Bad move. The sensation only drove her body closer to the edge. Two minutes alone with her fingers and she'd be better.

"Okay, that's it. I'm hauling your ass into the med bay. They can debrief us later."

Haylie grabbed Sara's arm and yanked her back down hard. "I don't need a medical. I'm fine."

"Bullshit, you are. You just said something's wrong. I'm talking now as your doctor. You need a full exam. God knows what kind of bug you picked up."

"I'm not sick!"

"What then?"

"You can never make something easy can you?" Haylie groaned as she shifted her weight, and immediately regretted the movement as it pulled her jumpsuit tight against her clit. She tried to keep her voice as quiet as possible. "I'm horny. Okay? Happy?"

For the first time in the sixteen years they'd known each other, Sara was speechless.

Haylie wasn't. "It started with me feeling really happy, but then I started to get really antsy. Now all I want to do is find some guy in that line." She waved her hand around past Sara's shoulder. "Throw him in bed and ride him 'til I come about ten times."

"Wow." Sara's whisper was barely audible.

"I don't know what's happening. I'm so, I don't know. I never get like this."

Desire began to build in her, each beat of an unseen drum sending her closer to the edge. Close, something was so close.

"Excuse me."

They both jumped at the sound of the deep male voice behind them.

"Is there a problem here?" The Briel had directed the question to both of them, but he was staring at Haylie. "I thought you beckoned me over."

Haylie had the strange impression he wasn't referring to her hands.

Without missing a beat, Sara nodded to the man. "No problem. My friend is just getting over a little space sickness."

She shouldn't stare, but he was so near. He was much more striking close up. The angles of his face reminded her of a Roman aristocrat from the pages of Earth history. The centers of his eyes were as black as his hair, circled by a thin rim of silver. His body, man, he was a solid wall. The form-fitting tunic snugly covered his chest, leaving little to the imagination. Did Briel have to exercise to look like that or was it natural?

His gaze was fixed firmly upon her. Her body tingled where his eyes touched. Her cheeks, her neck, her breasts. She sighed as he lingered there. She moaned and the sound of her voice broke the moment.

Haylie felt the sensation leave her breasts and return to her face. She opened her eyes that she hadn't realized were closed. So he was the reason for her arousal? That little tidbit wasn't mentioned during the information session for the colony relocation.

"Do you need a physician?" His voice was full of concern.

Haylie couldn't look away from his silver-rimmed eyes. Her body throbbed, aching for him to reach out and touch her. She watched him sway forward ever so slightly before he managed to pull himself back. Sara appeared completely oblivious to the little drama playing out in front of her.

"I'm a doctor and I don't think her condition is serious. We'll hop back in the line in a minute," Sara said in a voice that was far too cheery.

He acknowledged Sara with a nod, but his eyes were fixed on Haylie. "Please do. They are almost finished processing the new settlers."

"I'll be fine in a minute." Haylie smiled to cover her distress.

The man nodded slowly, his lips turning down slightly in a frown. His eyes probed Haylie, inspecting her for—something. She'd never felt so vulnerable. Her back braced against a bulkhead in a shuttle station on a foreign planet, horny as hell, being given the once-over by an alien. Life was not ordinary on this colony.

"Please let me know if you require any assistance. I'm Kamran."

Relief loosened the knots that had formed in her neck as his name etched firmly in her mind. "Thank you, Kamran. I'm sure I'll be fine in a few minutes."

Sara waited until he'd moved a few paces away before speaking. "Wow. I knew the Briel were a large race, but wow."

A chill ran though Haylie as Kamran turned back to stare right at her. The intensity of his eyes held her attention. *He knew*. He knew she was horny and it was because of him. But how the hell did *she* know that?

The world around her faded as he became her focus. He looked as confused as she, but nowhere near as disturbed. Maybe Briel didn't get aroused like humans did. Haylie smiled again and hoped he only felt pity for the poor human.

"Ambassador?" Someone called from behind.

Ambassador? Her face warmed, knowing she'd blushed when Sara pressed her hand against her forehead. Why would an ambassador be interested in her? A human joined him and spoke. Still, he didn't take his eyes off her. They stayed like that forever. Or was it only a minute? She wasn't sure anymore.

When the human touched his arm, the spell was broken. He turned his eyes away to speak to his companion and she was able to breathe again. Her body relaxed enough that her impending orgasm began to ebb away. *If only he'd been able to touch me*.

"I know you're not going to believe me, but I think I'm okay now," Haylie said with as much confidence as she could muster.

Sara looked her straight in the eyes, "You're right, I don't believe you. I have *never* seen you get horny to the point where you can't breathe for absolutely no reason. It's not normal."

"You're not going to make this an official report are you?"

"You know I'm obligated to put this in your files. What if it persists?"

"It won't. Please, nothing in my records. You went through the physical requirements too. You know they'll send me home in a heartbeat if they think there's something wrong."

"If you're sick, you need to get to med bay. I can't treat you here."

"Sara Fergus, I mean it. Not a word to anyone." Haylie stared her friend down, until Sara looked away.

"All right. But promise me, that if this happens again, you'll at least tell me."

"I promise. Now, I think we should get in that line. The sooner we can pass through customs, the sooner I can change my underwear." Haylie chuckled.

"You know. If this does keep happening to you, it may not be that bad." A devilish smirk slid onto Sara's face.

Haylie felt like she was twelve again, her co-conspirator firmly at her side. Things wouldn't be bad as long as they stuck together.

"You'd just get jealous and leave the station. 'Why does Haylie get to have the walking orgasms?'"

The two women laughed and Haylie rose slowly to her feet with Sara's assistance. Taking their place at the back of the line, Haylie hoped this really was an isolated occurrence. She wouldn't have been able to take care of a raging sex drive back on Earth or Luna. Now that she was on a colony with a limited number of men available, she'd

be dead in the water. The men she'd dated in the past claimed she was too overbearing. And it's not like she would be allowed to date a Briel. That was one thing they'd made clear in the information sessions.

Sara brushed a stubborn lock of blonde hair away from her eyes and nodded her head in the direction of Kamran. "Man, I can't get over the size of that one."

Haylie didn't need to see Kamran to be aware of him. She felt his movements, like sunlight over skin. Every inch of her body hummed in time with the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. When she did look, her breath slowly left her lungs, one air molecule at a time. He was staring at her again, an unreadable expression on his face. They were closer now than earlier. She swayed slightly toward him this time, the pull of his body almost unbearable.

"May I see your travel identification, please?"

The voice of the human official jolted Haylie, her eyes still fixed on Kamran. How did they get to the front of the line so fast?

"Ambassador, we will be ready to begin shortly."

Haylie's gaze flicked to the human who spoke. He seemed vaguely familiar, but, for once in her life, she couldn't pull his picture or personnel file from memory.

"Thank you, Administrator. I want to begin the debriefing soon. I will wait for you inside," Kamran said. Even though he spoke to the administrator, Haylie knew he meant the last for her.

"Everything appears to be in order, Chief. I need you to stand still while the scanner collects a sample of DNA and checks you for unauthorized weapons."

Haylie nodded and waited as the scanning beam silently passed over her body, bathing her in a dark blue hue. She should have been impressed by the scanning device, which clearly wasn't of human origin. It was too sleek and elegant, an almost organic design. A far cry from the bulky Earth designs. At that moment, the security tool was the last thing on her mind. She really wanted to see the ambassador naked.

"That's it—you're all clear. The system now has your DNA on file and keyed into the system. Welcome to the colony."

The security guard shoved the papers into Haylie's hands and Sara dragged her through the anti-bacterial scanner to the other side.

"Come on, Chief. I think you need to rest after the cryo sleep," Sara said dramatically.

"Yes, that silly space sickness." Haylie threw a thank you over her shoulder for the official as Sara led her away.

Her body felt awkward and foreign to her as she tried to navigate through the small space provided amongst the device, the people and the bags. Haylie stumbled and tripped trying to skirt around her own baggage, and blindly she reached out to grab the nearest object. Her eyes flew open at the electric touch that greeted her hand—

generated by another person. She looked into the shocked face of Kamran. His eyes were wide and Haylie could see his pulse beating in his neck.

Strange images flooded her head. People, places, conversations she'd never had were being stuffed into nooks and crannies of her mind. The room around her began to spin, colors that weren't present bled into her vision. Smells that were strange yet surprisingly familiar assaulted her senses.

As quickly as the sensation was there, it was broken when Sara pulled Haylie's hand away.

"Are you okay, Haylie? Ambassador?" Sara didn't release Haylie, her grip vise-like.

Haylie found herself staring at him a moment longer than she should, before Kamran finally gave his head a sharp shake.

"I'm fine. You should let your friend take you to med bay. Space travel can make some humans quite ill." The ambassador tried to keep his tone light and smiled at her.

She tried, but Haylie's voice didn't work. She nodded her agreement. Thankfully, Sara spoke up again.

"That's our first stop after induction."

Kamran hesitated, but then turned and made his way down the hall with the administrator. Haylie kept her eyes on him as Sara led her to where the rest of the new colonists stood. They were quite a distance behind him, but Haylie could still feel where he'd touched her, smell his scent as if he were with her now.

They entered a vast room bright enough to make Haylie cringe. The chairs were large, the white plastic smooth and shiny under the LED light strips. Haylie flopped thankfully into the cool seat and let the tension in her body relax for a moment. She still sensed Kamran's presence, even though she couldn't see him any longer. He was waiting impatiently in the outer hallway. She didn't know *how* she knew, but she was right. When she closed her eyes, she pictured him pacing back and forth.

"Now I know what gerbils feel like in a pet maze." Sara didn't try to lower her tone and her comment elicited several snickers from around them. But not from Haylie. She couldn't focus on anyone or anything but Kamran.

A hush descended on the room as Kamran and the administrator entered and made their way along the front of the room. Kamran's gaze quickly homed in on Haylie, which sent a wicked thrill through her. His face tightened and he averted his glance.

The administrator moved to take his place behind the podium. "Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to colony XT7799. Those of us who have come to love it here have chosen a more appropriate name, Eurus, for only the Greek god of the East Wind could create the powerful sand storms that are generated on the planet's surface."

The crowd broke out in applause, though she doubted it was because they had an appreciation for ancient mythology. But being the first colonists in over a year was very special indeed. If she could get a handle on her raging hormones, she'd be able to appreciate it too.

"My name is Sean Donaldson and I am the administrator of this colony. While it is true that we are an outpost sponsored by Earth, we live by our own rules and have developed several of our own laws."

Haylie tried to concentrate on Donaldson as he reviewed the history of the colony, the successes and disasters that the first people of the planet had to endure. She desperately wanted to pay attention to the rules and regulations of the colony. Even more so to the background of how the Briel began to help the humans on this world establish their home.

But she couldn't.

Every thought, every glance, every cell in her body demanded that she see only Kamran. Her attention was so fixated she almost missed it when Donaldson introduced him to the crowd.

"Without further ado, I would like to introduce the Briel representative of the Elder Council on our little world. Please welcome Ambassador Kamran."

Ambassador Kamran. Haylie watched. She watched Kamran swallow strongly as if to clear away a blockage in his throat. She watched him push his body up from the chair as if the effort were too much for him. Finally, she watched him try to avoid making eye contact with her as he attempted to speak.

"Thank you, Administrator Donaldson. I realize that you colonists have traveled for quite some time and would like to rest. So, I will keep my comments brief."

Haylie felt the pull of his body and it took great effort to sit still. She didn't think anyone would appreciate her rushing the podium and tearing his clothing off. Or maybe they would. She didn't know what passed for entertainment on the colony yet.

"The Briel people respect humanity and all you have accomplished in your few hundred years amongst the stars. Our purpose on this colony is to help you establish yourselves within the larger community of the universe. This is the farthest into the galaxy humans have ventured and we hope your people will continue to grow and expand to many additional worlds. We are here by the invitation of your government and of Administrator Donaldson. If there is anything my people can help you with as you begin your new life, please let me know."

His words were smooth, confident. His voice made her insides quiver, making her wish she could be alone with him for five minutes to relieve her growing desire.

Haylie felt his gaze on her skin. Tentative at first, she shivered at his contact against her neck. He caressed her collarbone lightly and dipped for a moment to touch the hollow of her throat. He shook his head. She realized it may have been Kamran's thoughts but it was her hand that caressed her skin. In the last hour, they'd formed a connection.

And from the look on his face, he knew it too.

Chapter Two

The hiss of the closing hydraulic door echoed in their temporarily assigned room. A quick look around the single room told her she wouldn't be able to find any place to hide. She knew the single hallway led to a small shower room and storage closet. Any attempt to hide in there wouldn't go over well.

The door hissed open again and Haylie heard Sara groan. *Figures, she wouldn't be impressed with this place*. They didn't even have a window, being stuck in the inner block of rooms in the living quarters. She would have loved a chance to see the alien stars at night.

Keeping her back to Sara, Haylie needed a moment to compose her thoughts before the inevitable barrage of questions. Perhaps if she unpacked, Sara would leave her in peace for a few minutes. *Just long enough for me to figure out what the hell is going on.*

"Okay, Bond. What's the matter with you?"

Nope.

"I wonder when they will be finished with our permanent rooms? I mean, I love you and all, but you're a slob."

"Haylie!"

"I know they're still finishing the final touches on the new wing, but that shouldn't take any longer than a month according to the reports I've read. I mean they only have to brave hurricane-force winds to get it done. Easy enough." Haylie tried to keep her tone light in the hopes of dissuading Sara of her interrogation. She wasn't ready for this conversation. Doubtful she ever would be, considering the topic.

"You can try and avoid the question all you want. I'm not going anywhere until you give me an answer."

Haylie heard a familiar rustle of clothing and she knew Sara's arms were now crossed in defiance. She sighed as she turned around to face her inquisitor. "Sara, I honestly have no idea."

"That's crap. I've known you far too long to believe that you haven't at least formulated some sort of theory. So, let's hear it." Sara tossed her travel bag into the back left corner of the room and plopped down upon the firm mattress of the bed closest to the door.

Never the easy road when it comes to dealing with Sara.

"I take it you're laying claim to that one?" Haylie wagged her finger in the direction of the bed while she slowly sank down upon her own.

"Yes, I am, and you're changing the subject. Again." Sara frowned. "What's going on?"

Haylie fell back against the bed. She closed her eyes and feigned disinterest. Every thought in her head for the past two hours had been fixed on Kamran. But she didn't understand what was going on and when that happened she preferred to keep her mouth shut. There was no way to explain it to Sara in realistic terms, anyway.

"Do we have to do this now?"

"Yes."

"I think, well, I mean. Shit." She took a deep breath and forced the words. "Okay, I think that the reason I got so horny was because of the Briel ambassador."

"The ambassador? Why?"

At least from Sara's tone, Haylie knew she wasn't about to jump up and call the psychiatry experts or whatever the Eurus equivalent was.

"It's really hard to explain."

Haylie rolled onto her side, resting her head on her arm. When she opened her eyes, she didn't focus on anything in particular. She could still picture his face. Not the vague recollection of feelings and impressions, but a crystal-clear image of every detail. It was almost like he had imprinted himself on her. She shivered at the thought.

"When I saw Kamran coming toward us in the bay, it was like every cell in my body recognized him. Somehow, I think he felt the same. I don't know, maybe I'm reading too much into this."

Haylie turned her head toward her friend. Sara nodded with a faraway look.

"I don't know, but I think you're right. He was obviously disturbed. His eyes were on you the whole time. And I got the impression that his speech wasn't what he had intending on giving. The look Donaldson gave him was pure shock."

It was Haylie's turn to frown. "I didn't notice."

"That doesn't surprise me. If it's any consolation, I don't think anyone else did."

"Except you."

Sara grinned. "Well, I have my professional reputation to live up to. They hired me for my powers of observation and my ability to form hypotheses based on strange facts. Plus the administrator is pretty good looking himself. Can't blame a girl for noticing."

Haylie managed to keep herself from rolling her eyes. Sara thought most men were pretty good looking.

"So what is your prognosis, then, Doctor?"

"You need to get laid."

They burst into laughter.

"Well, I think you're in good enough health for your doctor to disappear for a few moments. I need to take a shower before I visit the med bay," Sara said as she took a whiff of the front of her jumpsuit. "I've built up quite a stink lying around for the past two years."

"I can't believe you're going to work already. We haven't even had time to settle or eat something."

Sara shrugged. "I'm not going to work—that would be crazy. I just want to pop in and say hi. Introduce myself."

"Mark your territory," Haylie said.

Sara knelt down and rummaged through her duffle bag. "Hey, I'm the only human doctor. I want to make sure the Briel know who the boss is."

Haylie smiled as Sara swore under her breath and stuck a finger with a now broken nail into her mouth. The apparently more than proper Briel doctors were in for a surprise. They both stayed silent for a few moments. Sara moved quickly around the room, gathering bits and pieces she needed for a shower. The conversation continued only once she reached the bathroom.

"I never understood why they didn't bring in a human doctor sooner." Sara spoke loudly enough to be heard through the half-closed door.

"Probably for the same reason they're only now getting a new security chief. Politics. They've only re-established communications with Earth in the last two months."

Sara's only answer was the hiss of the shower. Haylie relaxed. She loved her like family, but Haylie always felt exhausted after one of Sara's interrogations. The only way to stop her was to bore her with facts and figures. Not that this one was bad but with all that had happened in the past two weeks she was played out.

No, it's been longer than two weeks. Hard to believe several years had gone by in the blink of an eye. Haylie sighed and stretched her arms high above her head. She prayed nothing was wrong with her because she'd go nuts if they said she had to be cooped up in one of those damned cryo pods again. This was a one-way trip—end of story.

Haylie swung her foot over the side of the bed and stuck her toes into the gap between the zipper and the end of her bag. It took an awkward jerk of her foot to force the hole wide enough to be able to fish her notebook out of the end pocket. Despite all the technology out there she preferred to use old fashioned paper and pencil for her sketches. She was able to connect on a more primal level with her art this way.

With one smooth motion, she picked up the edge of the book with her toes and pulled it onto the bed. God, she loved doing that—throwback to her youth.

She rested the notebook on its spine and let go. The covers fell open, the bend naturally falling to the page that held her charcoal pencil. She should really follow Sara's example and check in on her new security office. But an empty room and some quiet was too much temptation.

She ran her index finger along the smooth wood, the smell of it reaching her nose. With the tip of her nail, she tipped the pencil so it balanced on the lead. It hovered for a second in the air before it fell gently back into her hand.

The rest was instinct.

The smooth lines flowed easily from hand to paper, Kamran's face taking shape on the blank page. Every detail matched the image in her head, the fullness of his lips, the cord of muscles that flexed in his neck, the way his eyes seemed to stare into her. It took her only a moment to finish and, before she knew it, Kamran stared back at her from the page.

As she continued to draw, she took liberties with the rest of the picture. *Naked*. That was how she really wanted to see him. His clothes clung nicely to his sculpted body, but she would much rather take her time and strip them slowly from him to reveal every inch of his dark flesh. She drew the muscles of his forearms she'd felt when she'd touched him. His chest would be well defined, his pectoral muscles rippling. The rest of him would be close to perfect as well. She pictured his abs, the perfectly formed muscles over his stomach, strong and powerful. *God, I wonder if he's as I imagine*.

Her pencil stopped suddenly before she continued her pictorial exploration of his body. Her palm itched to continue, to draw the one part of his body she most wanted to see. No, she wouldn't draw that. She wanted to see his cock up close and personal. Feel his body shake as he came with powerful thrusts into her pussy.

Excitement rushed through her as she pictured how he'd looked at her. What *had* passed between them? She wasn't the obsessive type. Not normally, anyway. She snapped the book shut and tried to push away the memory of how her body had reacted. How she was still reacting. This was crazy.

Haylie took a deep breath and rested back on the bed. The sound from Sara's shower drifted to her ears. Concentrating on the running water, Haylie tried to clear her head, needing to forget her alien Adonis. When she closed her eyes, her imagination took over.

In her mind, Kamran made his way over to her, now clothed in a loose-fitting tunic that exposed his broad chest. She was lying naked on a bed that wasn't hers. The room had a soft glow, the color warm and inviting. The bed sheets were as soft as satin, and teased her skin everyplace it made contact. The air was warm and she reached up and ran her finger down her neck, stopping an inch above her breasts. The heated look he gave her sent a charge of desire through her that shot straight to her cunt. Haylie moaned but refused to touch herself to relieve any of the tension.

He approached her slowly, cautiously, as one might a wild animal. Her chest tightened in anticipation, her heartbeat out of control. He stopped short, close, but never touching her. This wasn't going to do at all. She pushed up from the bed to stand in front of him. Kamran sucked in a breath, stepped back and gave her room to move forward. She sauntered over to him but made sure to leave a space. She needed him to be the one to touch her first.

The heat from his body washed over her skin like liquid fire. Haylie looked into his silver eyes and saw unrestrained need. He wanted her and it didn't look like anything

she did would stop him from taking her. Kamran moved silently around her, pausing briefly at her side before stopping directly behind her.

Her skin tingled at his closeness. Her desire stoked higher than it had ever been, her body aching to be touched. God, she needed him. She heard a moan and barely recognized her own voice. When he touched her back, she moaned again, but this time she arched against him, needing more.

His hands traced a slow trail along her sides to her stomach. Haylie felt him nip tentatively at her earlobe before sucking the flesh into his mouth. She couldn't hold back and ground hard against him, feeling the pressure of his erect cock against the small of her back. It was his turn to moan, the moist heat of his breath hot against her neck. She closed her eyes as his hand moved up across her chest to cup her breast. Haylie's breath hitched as she felt his fingers roll the tight peak of her nipple, driving her body dangerously close to orgasm. His other hand lightly caressed the skin across her stomach to her throbbing pussy, damp from wanting him.

Haylie's eyes flew open as she gasped. What the hell?

She was alone with the sounds of her pounding heart and the spray from the shower. *That was way too real*. Her skin tingled everywhere that Kamran had touched her. Her back, breasts, stomach, her…everywhere.

Her mind must be caught in some weird hyper-excited cycle. Or else that was the best erotic dream she'd ever had. Haylie inhaled and swore she smelled Kamran. A light hint of his scent floated in the undercurrents of the re-circulated air of the colony. A subtle scent of musk and cinnamon she now recognized as his. Maybe she *should* get Sara to do a quick scan to make sure everything was okay.

The wail of Sara singing jolted her back to reality. No, the last thing she needed was an exam from the tone-deaf doctor.

"Hey, you napping?" Sara said as she emerged from the bathroom wearing fresh clothing and a towel expertly wrapped upon her head.

"Yeah, caught a quick one. Your singing woke me up."

"Whatever." Sara rolled her eyes. "Well, I feel a hundred percent more human. Want to get something to eat before I crash the party in med bay? I wonder if they have an alien version of pizza here."

"I doubt it. Give me a second, okay?"

Maybe a walk and some hot food would help clear her head. If nothing else, it should burn off some of this extra energy she had pent up. Haylie flicked the lid of her trunk open. Her belongings had left Earth ahead of her on a supply convoy. It was a relief to see they had arrived unscathed. She was searching for something to wear when the internal communication system went off.

"Who the hell is that?" Sara's muttering was drowned out by the chiming of the com again. She made her way over to the small, flat control panel and tapped the acknowledge button.

Haylie looked over to see the image of a woman in her mid thirties appear on the com screen. Haylie mentally flipped through the personnel records and recognized her as one of the nurses who'd been one of the original colonists ten years ago.

"Doctor Fergus? I'm sorry to be disturbing you just after you have arrived."

"That's quite all right. Is there a problem?"

It didn't take Haylie long to lose track of the conversation. Not that the details mattered much once she learned what she needed to know. She would be eating alone tonight.

Haylie straightened when Sara finished her conversation and turned to face her.

"I'm sorry," Sara said.

"No worries. Guess you won't get to scope out the scene before you have to put on a performance."

"Instead, I'll be the one getting evaluated. I hate starting without having an edge."

"You never did like to get one-upped." Haylie smiled.

"Are you going to be okay?"

That was the question of the day. "Sure. I'll get changed and go find a place to eat. Maybe there's a gym or something around here. I gotta stay buff. Don't want the locals to think their security chief is a wimp."

All kidding aside, she wanted to make sure she was in shape to handle whatever the colony threw at her. She'd been able to talk briefly to one of the security personnel after the induction. Things had gotten pretty intense on the colony recently with many of the miners acting strangely. The Eurus ore mines were some of the toughest places to work in the sector. While the occasional fight and work stoppage were normal, she'd been told of a major increase in violent crimes both in the mines and on the station. The guard also told her the previous chief lasted only eight months before burning out. Haylie wasn't about to let that happen. That was all she'd been able to learn before Sara hustled her out of the assembly.

"Well, use some of my clothing if you want. You may run into our friends from this morning and I know you don't have the sexiest wardrobe."

Haylie smacked her foot on the edge of her trunk as she turned quickly to face Sara.

"Ouch!"

"Holy crap, relax! I meant the two guys from the line, not your ambassador."

"I'm relaxed. Just clumsy."

"Well, stop it. I don't want you wandering down an engineering duct and ending up in med bay. Unless, of course, you're bored."

"Shut up and go."

Sara tapped Haylie's drawing as she passed by. "Nice! Good to see you obsessing already. By the way, Briel have more abs than that. Bye!"

Sara grabbed her jacket and laughed as she bolted from their apartment.

Maybe she *should* stay in tonight. With everything that happened this morning with Kamran, it seemed the wisest, most practical course of action. She should strip out of her synthetic jumpsuit, crawl into her flannel pajamas and go to sleep.

The cool recycled air of the room hit her skin as she peeled off her clothing. Clothed in only her damp panties and tight undershirt, she flitted around the room examining her temporary shelter. The walls were amazingly not gray or black. Never before had she considered beige to be a welcome change. There were two of everything, beds, dressers, lamps and even a small desk all made from a combination of plastic and metal. She walked around the room and touched everything once, memorizing its exact location. When she began to do it a second time, she stopped. Her father's voice scolding her for her restlessness and obsessive behavior pounded in her ears. Her control hadn't slipped like this in years. She needed to relax.

Haylie looked around her room. The low-pitched hum from the air vent made her ears tickle. She stood and listened for a moment, her brain spinning with indecision. The faint scent of cinnamon reached her again and drove her body forward. There's no way in hell she'd sit still tonight.

She'd get dressed, find some food and then do a quick inspection of the station. It'd be interesting to see her new home through the eyes of a civilian for one night. Tomorrow, she'd be introduced to her team and any chance she had to move around unnoticed would be gone.

Careful not to hit her foot again, Haylie quickly searched through the neatly folded stacks of clothing and strategically placed personal items in her cargo trunk. She paused when she came to her birthday present from Sara. She pulled out the loose-fitting silk dress and smiled. This was Sara's way of telling her to loosen up. She'd even made Haylie swear she would wear it before her next birthday.

What the hell. Careful not to hit her foot again, Haylie maneuvered around the boxes and trunks in their room and jumped into the shower for a quick scrub. She felt almost human again when she got out and started to search through the neatly folded stacks of clothing and strategically placed personal items in her cargo trunk.

The three-quarter-length mirror next to the door revealed a sensual surprise. *Wow, is that me?* The tendrils of her hair had escaped the confines of her elastic band so she tugged it free. Her long chestnut hair fell over her shoulders, stopping shy of her elbows. Her taut nipples poked up from the shimmering surface of the dress, a clear sign of her arousal. This was the first time she hadn't worn a bra since she was thirteen, but damn if it didn't feel good.

Without thinking, she reached up and cupped her breasts. The friction between her nipples and the smooth material was heavenly. She imagined what it would feel like to have Kamran's hands there, teasing her sensitive skin and pinching her swollen buds until she begged him to stop. Haylie opened her eyes and blushed at the shock of seeing her aroused image reflected back at her from the mirror.

"Okay, I need to get out of here."

But not before changing.

She did rebel a little by omitting her bra before pulling on her shirt and pants. It was liberating not to be bound so tightly and it felt more than a little naughty. It's not like she had much in the way of a chest for anyone to notice.

Haylie poked her head out the door into the hall, her hair falling forward across her face. *Empty*. She took an oversized step into the corridor, allowing the door to her room to swoosh shut. *Which way? Decisions, decisions*.

She'd seen the floor plan of the station shortly before leaving Earth. Having a photographic memory had its advantages at times. She knew the exact layout and where all the major areas were located. But that wasn't the same as seeing the real thing. And there was no way she'd see it all in one night. A memory popped into her head, something her mother told her as a child. "When you don't know which way to go, always start on your right. That way, you know you didn't make a wrong decision."

The rubber soles of her flat shoes didn't make a sound on the plastic veneer floor as she drifted down the LED-lit corridor. There were very few people around as she made her way through the smooth twists and turns of the colony's living sector. The place was as drab as the rest of the station. No decorations of any sort appeared on the gray walls. Everything was very utilitarian in its design, blending seamlessly into the walls. The occasional window that lined the hall was small, offering only the slightest glimpse of the outside of the planet. She paused to look out, but she couldn't see much of the surface now that the sun had set. Maybe in the light of day things would look better, brighter.

Haylie continued her walk looking for anything of interest. She couldn't help but notice the distinct lack of security as she moved about. No patrols, surveillance, or obvious security measures, at least not in the living area. Either it was extremely well hidden or she had her work cut out for her.

Something wasn't adding up here. She knew the reputation of the previous chief. He wasn't incompetent, far from it. He'd been part of the team sent in to help with the aftermath of the Jupiter colony after the riots eight years ago. It didn't seem likely he would have overlooked the very basics of security, even if he was only here a short time. What the hell was wrong with this place? She'd traveled a full fifteen minutes without seeing another soul before the hiss of a door opening behind her caught her attention.

"Good evening." Administrator Donaldson's cheerful voice vibrated in the hall.

Haylie turned and smiled when she saw Donaldson emerge from the doorway. "Hello, Administrator. I don't believe we have been introduced yet. My name is—"

"Haylie Bond. My newest security officer, granted the rank of chief. Previous to this, you were in charge of security for Luna's largest shipping company, LunaCom. You have a degree in psychology and were recognized for single-handedly reducing the crime rate on Mars outpost Beta by forty-eight percent."

Interesting.

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage, sir."

He didn't. But somehow it seemed wrong to recite his service record to him in response. At least she was able to think clearly enough this time to remember it. Plus, her warning flags were waving frantically. She respected thoroughness in a person, but there was already something about this encounter that seemed odd. It wasn't what he knew about her so much as how he was saying it.

"I take great pride in knowing everything that is happening on my colony. I made a point of learning about all of our new colonists. I expect you and I will be working quite closely together."

"I am looking forward to it," Haylie said. The muscles in her back tightened.

Donaldson gave his head a slight shake before taking a step closer. "What brings you out this evening? Getting acquainted with the area?"

Haylie hesitated. It's not like she had anything to hide. "Yes. Though it really doesn't feel like evening yet."

"Not surprising. The days are shorter here on Eurus than what you are used to on Luna." Donaldson stood completely still. But his eyes began to slip from hers, taking quick glances at the rest of her body.

Haylie crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes. I thought it might be nice to get familiar with the area from the perspective of a civilian. It'll give me better insight for when I begin in my position tomorrow."

Haylie shivered when Donaldson's gaze dipped quickly to her chest, as if he were trying to catch a glimpse of what she was hiding behind her arms. Sara was right when she said he was attractive. His blond hair was longer than Kamran's but suited the hard angles of his face. He was in great shape, from what she could tell, but she couldn't help but compare him to Kamran. When he finally looked back into her eyes, Haylie looked at him a bit too long. She hoped he noticed that she'd caught him staring. He didn't break eye contact, but a slight flush crept onto his face.

"To be honest, I've only seen the landing bay, my room and a few halls. I hope I'll be able to do a bit of exploring before I pass out from exhaustion."

Donaldson took another half-step closer. "I could give you a private tour if you'd like. I know all of the interesting spots on Eurus."

The smile that crossed her face was automatic. It took her brain approximately two seconds to review and dismiss all possible excuses for getting away. Not going to get out of this one.

"A tour would be wonderful. I will apologize in advance if I bow out early. I'm expecting sleep to overtake me soon."

"Of course. This way."

They moved slowly in the same direction Haylie had been heading originally. At first they walked in silence moving from the living area to the main hub of the station. Haylie could feel a change in the air, a type of energy starting to build. Voices drifted to

her from down the hall, and people began to drift past them. Some more than a little drunk. When two large Briel men walked by, Haylie watched Donaldson's demeanor change. He kept his eyes locked on them until they passed by. Finally, he cleared his throat and began to speak.

"The colony is very much its own world as we are so far from Earth. While the majority of us are human, there are enough Briel living here for it to have an impact on how we do things. They tend to be less social than humans, but that hasn't been too hard to deal with. Here we go. This room on your right is your new security office."

Haylie stopped in front of the glass doors. The room was dark, with only a few background lights turned on. The large computer desk sat in the middle, a bit out of place in the sparsely decorated room. She pulled the schematics up in her mind and knew she would be close to both the med bay as well as what was listed as a recreation area.

"Don't worry about the fishbowl feeling. You can ask the computer to turn on the privacy tinting when the need arises. You never know what may happen when you are interrogating someone."

He seemed a bit too pleased with that particular feature. "Are there many crimes that would need that type of interrogation?"

Donaldson didn't answer at first. His eyes searched her face, his lips pursed and he cocked an eyebrow.

"Some of the miners can be a bit on the questionable side, especially those who travel from some of the other human outposts. It can take some convincing on the part of our security force to find a clear answer to our questions. I hope that type of investigation won't prove difficult for you. I must say, I hesitated when they told me my new security chief would be a woman."

Now there was some archaic thinking. "I can assure you, I am a highly effective investigator."

"Of course, of course. Shall we continue?"

The touch of his hand on the small of her back made her skin crawl. Haylie walked a step or two faster to break the contact. They stopped again when they reached the adjoining corridor. Because of the hour, many people were milling around. A loud cheer emanated from what looked like a bar to their right. The smell of food floated in the air, eliciting a growl from her stomach. The energy in the air had increased and Haylie enjoyed the sudden rush of excitement. This is what had been missing earlier, what she'd grown accustom to on Luna. The pulse of life generated by colony living.

"We're moving into the center of the complex. The medical facility is down the corridor on your left. I believe your friend is there now, is she not?"

This guy seemed to know everything. "Umm, yes. There was an emergency."

"A mining accident. Something to do with a damaged environmental suit. We are very lucky that Dr. Fergus is here. I hate to say it but I never fully trusted the Briel doctors. I hope I'll have a chance to meet her soon."

And the first chance she had, Haylie was going to pull this guy's psych record. Something she regretted not doing sooner.

"And what is this way?" Haylie said and turned to face the opposite direction, knowing full well what was there.

She had to get out of this tour now.

"That way leads to the shuttle bays, engineering facility and labs. Straight ahead is our recreation area."

"Excellent. I think I may head that way. I'm quite hungry."

"Why don't I join you? I know several of the restaurants."

"Thank you. That's wonderful of you to offer. But perhaps I will pass for tonight. I really just wanted to find something light to eat and head back to my room to sleep. It really has been an exhausting journey." She knew she spoke too quickly, but the words tripped out of her.

His faced darkened, but only for a moment.

"Of course. Very inconsiderate of me. Perhaps we can pick this up tomorrow."

"That would very nice. Thank you."

Donaldson pursed his lips a moment and tapped his finger across them. His gaze traveled from her face down her bare neck and back up. "If memory serves, and it usually does, there is a Briel restaurant that is quite good. Plants cooked with Briel spices and such. You should try that."

Haylie would have agreed to eat Eurus dust to escape their conversation at that point. "That sounds wonderful. Straight down this hall?" Actually straight down the hall and to the right according to her memory of the station schematics.

"Yes. We call it the market, but it's more of a bazaar. Quite unusual for an Earth colony. But we like to do things differently around here."

"Thank you so much, Administrator."

Haylie began to turn away, when Donaldson's voice stopped her cold.

"Please, call me Sean."

Her voice froze, so she turned and nodded instead.

"Excellent. Let's continue this tomorrow. Your office, oh-nine-hundred hours."

It took all her concentration to keep uneasiness out of her voice. "I'll see you then. Goodnight, Sean."

It was only once Donaldson moved away that Haylie was able to breathe easier. There was something about him that didn't sit right, something that sent nervous shivers through her body. The fact that he'd gotten to her was saying something. There really wasn't any reason for her to react that way either. Sean had been perfectly amiable, even in the face of her refusing his dinner offer. Haylie shook her head and made her way down the hall. At least she'd gotten an idea of where to eat. A Briel restaurant might give her some insight into Kamran.

Haylie turned the corner and had to stop short. *Holy shit, look at everyone*. The bazaar reminded her of an old-fashioned market she'd seen back on Earth when she was a kid. While it lacked the dirt and distinct smell of cows, this place had the same energy. Booths weaved in and around restaurants, their merchants calling to anyone close enough to hear, promising to sell them a wonder. She hadn't realized trade with the other colonies in this sector was this heavy. Miners, engineers and other support staff were all gathered around. The aisles were narrow and while the majority of people who were trying to push their way through were human, there were several other races moving about as well. She heard competing music coming from several bars off to her right. *Interesting*. Those weren't in the original schematics. She wondered how many other changes she'd find.

After a few minutes of investigating, she managed to find the place Donaldson had mentioned. Calling it a restaurant, though, was a bit of a misnomer. The semi-circular preparation area was most of the establishment. The Briel apparently didn't sit while they ate, since chairs were missing from the tall tables that formed the eating area. A few Briel guards stood quietly to the side, guns tucked neatly in their holsters as they silently consumed their meals.

Haylie stood and stared at the strange array of food in front of her. The merchant turned toward her, with an expectant look.

"I have absolutely no idea what to order."

One of the Briel solders came up beside her and spoke in a language she didn't recognize.

"Pardon me?" Haylie said, surprised once again at the size of the Briel. His hair had the same black color as Kamran's, but he wore it longer. His body was taller, his frame wider and he radiated a protective aura. She knew this man was a warrior. Someone she'd definitely want on her side.

"I ordered you something to eat. Most humans seem to like it. My name is Taber. I work with Ambassador Kamran as the head of Briel security."

So this was Taber. It only took a second for her to remember what she'd read on him, her counterpart on the Briel security team. There had been very little information on any of the Briel, but there was a bit more on Taber. He'd been Kamran's bodyguard for the past twenty Earth years and was well respected by his men. From the look of him he'd seen more than his fair share of battles. The frown lines etched on his face gave him a look she recognized from other security leaders over the years. Too bad her superiors hadn't thought to include photos of the Briel in the briefing documents. It may even have helped with her Kamran encounter earlier. *Or maybe not*.

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Haylie Bond, the new Chief of Human Security."

She offered her hand to shake, but he did not take it, bowing instead.

"A pleasure, Ms. Bond. I'm sure we will be working closely together in the days to come."

The Briel cook placed a plate of food in front of her and bowed before closing the stall.

"I hope you enjoy it," Taber said.

Haylie couldn't wait to dig in and sank her teeth into a large red leaf that was stuffed full of vegetables Haylie didn't recognize. The taste was amazing.

"Wow." She managed to say between bites.

"I'll leave you to your meal." A smile tugged at his lips.

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

Taber motioned to the other solders who were still standing off to the side and the four men departed.

Between the food and her encounters with Donaldson and Taber, Haylie had pushed aside her overwhelming desires. *Much better*. She was back to her old self, calm and in control. Now all she needed was some sort of crime and she'd be in heaven. Her full belly gave her a temporary boost to keep poking around the station some more. She turned to head in the direction of the bars she'd spotted earlier. She made an abrupt stop and sighed when she saw the large crowd that had formed near the entrance. Too many people for her tonight.

She turned and headed in the opposite direction. She needed a quiet distraction tonight. The observation room was up ahead and she hoped there wouldn't be any last-minute patrons. Maybe some stargazing would take her mind off her newly acquired obsession. It's not like trouble would find her sitting all alone looking at the stars.

As she walked, things began to look a bit odd. The corridors seemed a bit too light. The surfaces a bit too smooth. And as she moved away from the market, the rich aroma of the vendors' stands faded. The lack of odor intensified the institutional feel of the place. Weird, considering the amount of people around her at the moment.

That wasn't entirely accurate either. She did smell something. Like before, the barest hint of cinnamon.

Kamran.

Chapter Three

Kamran had spent much of the evening motionless at the desk in his quarters. *A human*! If anyone had suggested such a thing to him yesterday, they would have been dismissed as foolish, insane. But all the signs were there. He'd been wild all day, thoughts of her distracting him from his job. Even his body was working against him. *Daydreaming*. He'd actually caught himself daydreaming. She'd been naked in his arms and more than ready for him. His cock sprang to life again at the thought, causing him to groan. The council would remove him from his post if they suspected he was overcome with lust.

The fact that she appeared to have a similar reaction to him was telling. In the hangar bay she'd looked more than a little affected by his presence. Goddess knows the arousal he'd been battling all day had significantly impacted him. He wasn't sure who she was, but he had to find her. Soon.

Only a mate caused such a reaction. But it was impossible for a human to be his mate. Wasn't it?

He turned off the data pad he'd been staring at for the past hour and tossed it onto his desk. Nothing. He hadn't accomplished a single thing since the assembly. Kamran sighed as he ran his fingers through his hair and down over his face. Now he understood why bonded mates returned to live on the home world. They were as productive as space dust.

It had been a few hours since he'd last seen her, but she didn't feel very far away. It was as if she'd stepped into the next room and would step back out any moment.

Impossible.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his soft mesh chair and tried to relax. Deep down, Kamran knew they had formed a connection. They were mates, or would be if he ever got out of this chair and went to look for her. Why wasn't he? He should be tearing the colony apart trying to find her. Both his father and brother told him they'd gone mad until they physically held their wives in their arms. He smiled, remembering his brother's story of passing his wife while on separate transports in the city and pulling the emergency brake, then climbing out the window to jump over to the other transport tube. Hopefully, the input of the authorities wouldn't be necessary for Kamran's courtship.

The property his father had purchased for him would not go to waste after all. There would be a celebration in his hometown. Their family's influence would grow yet again. Two sons in one family, both with mates. *Amazing*.

So why was he still sitting in this chair?

The answer was simple. There was no way for a human to be his mate—it was a biological impossibility. And if he acted on this crazy impulse, he might miss the opportunity of finding his true mate. If she was even out there.

To complicate matters, if she *was* his mate, no matter how unlikely, he'd be forced to resign his post and move back home. That was the way of his people. But this was his life's work and a resignation at this stage of his negotiations between the Ecada and the humans would place the colony in great danger. The insectoid race would take advantage of the stalled talks and would likely attempt to invade the colony. Any sign of weakness was seen as a great advantage by the Ecada people, one to be exploited. He wasn't about to let that happen.

Kamran sighed and sat up straight, leaning against the cool surface of the light, golden wood desk he'd had shipped from Briel. The loose-fitting tunic he'd changed into pulled tight, forcing an adjustment. What had possessed him to wear this anyway? The data pad was once again in his hands, the details of the latest treaty updates staring back at him. *This* was what mattered. Providing a safe place to live for humans and Briel alike. Not some false obsession with a human woman he would probably never meet again.

The door chime rang once. Kamran looked up and smiled. There was only one person who would call on him at this hour. He immediately rose from his chair and answered the door.

"Taber, how very good to see you. Please come in." Taking a step back, Kamran gestured with an open arm, welcoming the one person in the colony he considered a loyal friend.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Taber was military and would never seat himself at Kamran's table to enjoy a drink. Kamran offered regardless.

"You know I cannot. But you honor me with your invitation."

"Some day we must break with that tradition. You know I see you as my friend and not as a subordinate. What can I assist you with?"

Taber didn't answer immediately. In his typical fashion, he merely stared at Kamran. Most Briel would find this disconcerting but Kamran had known him long enough not to be bothered by his friend's intensity. Taber was renowned for his ability to get information from suspects without any physical harm. Ah, to be able to give a look like that. Negotiation times would certainly be reduced.

"What happened this afternoon?" Taber asked abruptly.

The mouthful of amber liquid Kamran took was larger than intended. It burned as it made its way down his throat.

"I changed my speech at the last minute. The humans don't need a Briel history lesson the minute they enter the colony."

"Agreed. But there was something else going on. You seemed distracted."

Kamran paused to examine his friend. How did one go about telling a friend of his sexual desires?

"There is a human. She is one of the new colonists who arrived earlier today. She was sick when she got off the ship. I offered her some assistance."

He felt his cock surge to life again at the memory. The contrast of her pale skin against her dark brown hair was striking. She was small compared to him but tall for a human. Their bodies would fit nicely together. He liked the way her breasts pushed against her jumpsuit—taunting him. He'd never noticed how tight-fitting women's clothing was. Before *her*. He'd been driven mad by an unusual floral scent that lingered in the air the rest of the day. It had to be hers.

"A sick human is not an uncommon occurrence."

Kamran, startled out of his thoughts, drained his glass. After having negotiated peace treaties with warring worlds, you'd think he'd be able to discuss this with Taber.

"I seem to have a problem, my friend. And I'm not sure what I should do about it."

Taber straightened and Kamran caught the flash in his eyes.

"I can assist with the problem. Is it with this human?"

"I don't need *that* kind of assistance." The last thing he needed was Taber starting a manhunt for his future wife. He cringed. "I don't know what to think, but I seem to have some sort of connection with this woman," Kamran said. He rose to fix himself another drink.

"What sort of connection? Is she trying to blackmail you?"

"No, nothing like that." This wasn't coming out right.

"What then?" Taber said, clearly annoyed. Kamran knew he hated not knowing everything.

Kamran closed his eyes, letting the woman's face drift back to the surface of his mind. Bright, inquisitive eyes framed in a perfectly oval face. The way she'd looked at him as she sat on the floor, like she wanted to rip his clothing off, tested the limits of his control. The way her exotic scent rolled off her in waves, intoxicating his senses.

What then indeed?

"I am aware of her on this station. I don't mean consciously, but physically. I can describe her in perfect detail. Her face, body, scent. I even know that she is walking around the station right now. It wouldn't take me very long to hunt her down."

He then turned to face Taber. His expression hadn't changed from before, but Kamran recognized disbelief when he saw it.

"That is impossible," Taber said, his voice even.

"I know."

"You are describing this woman as if she were your mate."

"I know."

"No Briel male has ever responded to an off-worlder in that manner. Many have tried."

"I know the history."

"Which brings us back to the fact of that being impossible."

"Exactly. And that is the reason I've accomplished nothing all day."

Taber's hand twitched and flexed before he laced it through the other one behind his back. He walked over to Kamran's window and paused. The winds had picked up again, pelting sand and small rocks against the glass in a mad frenzy. Kamran felt a kinship with the planet tonight.

"Do you think it's a trick? A chemical or toxin perhaps, used to confuse your body into thinking it has found a mate?"

"I thought of that. I had the computer scan me for any foreign substances. Nothing. Had you seen her you wouldn't question her reaction either. It was genuine. Besides, what would she gain by doing so?"

"The Ecada have lots to gain."

He'd thought of that too. "I cannot imagine a human conspiring with them. The Ecada see the humans as little more than a food source. It would be suicide."

"There has to be another explanation."

He straightened. His chest tightened and he had to fight the urge to hit Taber. Who the hell was he to question whether or not Kamran had actually found his mate?

"Why?" The word sounded clipped to Kamran, but he didn't care.

"Pardon?"

"Why does there have to be another explanation?" Kamran placed his glass on the table, afraid it would shatter in his hand.

"It's simply not possible."

"Again, why not? Humans are the closest race to ours in chemistry and biology. They are only missing three organs and their brains are built a bit differently than ours. As far as any of us know our two people are perfectly compatible." By the end, he was almost shouting. He had to close his eyes and concentrate hard to relax.

"You're getting hostile."

Kamran opened his eyes and saw the faint trace of a smile on Taber's face.

"I'm sorry."

"You are also dressed more causally than normal."

Kamran looked down at his tunic and pants. "My skin was irritated. I had to change."

Taber appeared to consider that information before asking his next question. "You are showing all the signs. But if she is your mate, why are you not tearing this station apart?"

Kamran took a deep breath and managed to get ahold of his growing hostility. He finally managed a smile as he found his chair and collapsed into it. "That was the very question I was asking myself when you arrived."

"Different race, different pattern?"

"It must be. So far I have been able to hold off every impulse I've had to go after her. But each time, it becomes more difficult."

"Why fight it? If she is your mate, go to her. Everything else will attend to itself."

He shook his head. "What if I'm wrong? Maybe the madness that takes us is a good thing. Forget the world outside and attend to your own desires. But I can't seem to do that."

Kamran had never spoken to anyone about his hopes, not even his family. Being a single male in a family with paired mates was painful. He was the oldest. It was his responsibility to bring honor to his clan. And he had done so for thirty-eight years. An ambassador was the highest obtainable rank by a male and the placements were few. He'd risen to that position faster than anyone else in the history of his people. In his time as ambassador he'd ended wars on several planets and initiated the fledgling relationship with the humans on Eurus.

But all his accomplishments paled in comparison to the day his brother found his mate. His people had their priorities.

"What will you do about this?" Taber said. There was nothing accusatory in his tone, merely simple curiosity.

"Nothing for now. I doubt I'll be working with the woman. Most of the new settlers are engineers. And the doctor."

"And the new human security chief. I met her this evening. She was trying to order from Cindean's."

At the mention of the title, Kamran knew it was her. Everything felt right about it.

"What was her name?" He spoke too quickly again.

"Haylie Bond. She has quite an impressive record and a habit of cleaning up corruption around her. I imagine she was getting a feel for the station before she began her duties and wanted to stay a bit anonymous. That's what I would be doing."

Haylie. It had to be.

Taber gave him a long hard stare before bowing. "I've stayed too long. I'll leave you to your rest, Ambassador."

Normally at this stage in their social sparring, Kamran would insist he stay longer. He would even go so far as to leave with him for a walk around the station. Not tonight.

"Thank you. I shall see you tomorrow."

Kamran didn't move and waited for Taber to leave. He then cleaned up his desk, putting all sensitive information into his vault that was built into a hidden compartment of his desk. He stood, triggered the door release and stepped into the hall.

She was close. She'd come as close to his room as a human was allowed. Maybe near the meeting hall, or even the observatory? Those were only one corridor over. This was the normal Briel female reaction, home in on her mate, get close enough to drive him crazy. Haylie probably wasn't even aware of what was going on.

He paused outside his room, confusion flooding his mind. His heart was pounding hard in his chest, pushing the mix of adrenaline and hormones through his body, forcing his arousal higher and clogging his brain. What was he doing? Finding his mystery human wasn't going to get him what he wanted, a wife and family. This was a mistake. Briel didn't have casual relationships, and that's all this could be. Briel only mated with Briel. A human...it shouldn't be possible.

So why was everything about his reaction to her screaming that she was the one?

"Are you well, Ambassador?" The security guard posted outside his quarters said from behind him.

"Yes, thank you. I'm going for a walk. I'll be gone for a short while."

"Would you like an escort, sir?"

Uncontrollable rage flashed through him, his hands balled into fists. Only through a fight would he let another man near Haylie. Kamran gave his head a shake and tried to relax. No, he wasn't thinking clearly. It was the bonding playing havoc on his mind as it pulled at him from deep within his genetic code. He had to fight it, maintain control over his senses until he knew for sure she was the one. Knew beyond a doubt she was his mate.

"Ambassador?" the guard asked again.

"No, thank you," he said through clenched teeth.

He didn't turn to see the guard's reaction and stalked down the hall.

People were everywhere at this hour. The bazaar had thinned out and the people had shifted over to the bars and local social establishments. The humans certainly enjoyed their entertainment. With everyone about, it took Kamran longer to pick up her scent. He stopped, closed his eyes and breathed deeply. There it was. Her scent drifted on top of the chaos that assaulted his senses. Definitely near the observation room.

He pivoted and went down the hall parallel to the one he'd emerged from. He passed several meeting rooms, the materials interconnect lab and the reliability lab. All were deserted this late at night. No one would disturb them.

The observation room was the last one on the left-hand side of this hall. Normally, it would take Kamran no more than five minutes to walk the short distance. Two if he ran. Running, however, seemed out of the question. He tried to jog at first, but an increasing pressure on his chest slowed him down. He stopped after only a few seconds and slumped against the wall.

"What ...?"

His voice choked off, caught somewhere deep in his throat. He looked down the hall, blinking to clear his blurry vision. Where was he and what in the maker's name was wrong with his feet?

Move!

His brain coaxed his body forward again, but he remained against the wall for support. He knew if kept moving and made it to the end of the hall, somehow everything would be all right. He smacked his fist against his head, knowing he was forgetting something.

Keep moving down the hall and to the left.

Why was that again?

His breathing became labored and Kamran had to consciously think about taking the next lungful of air. He felt like his body was being pulled back by invisible strings. It would be easier to move backward. He should turn around.

No, keep going. You're almost there.

Ahead of him, perhaps five feet away, was an open door. Down the hall and on the left.

Kamran's body shook violently from the strain. He collapsed at the entrance. He gave up. He felt more than heard the gasp that left his body, the last breath of air that lived in his lungs. The cold deck plating of the floor sent a jolt of pain throughout his body as he landed hard.

Kamran!

The single word didn't register until he felt a bolt of electricity shoot through his body. The charge jump-started his heart and lungs, bringing him back from the abyss.

In the next instant, Kamran felt her lips upon his, shocked by the texture, the smoothness of her skin. His eyes refused to work, but he didn't need them to know who this woman was.

"It's you." His voice was hoarse and painful to use.

"Are you okay?" She said the words against his ear.

"It happens like this...before we...I'm fine." He licked up the side of her neck, tasting her salty skin. Better than the finest food.

"Before we what?" Haylie gasped and tilted her head back.

"Before we mate. If the female rejects the male, he dies."

Her lips moved everywhere. Against his cheek. Kissing his jaw line. Making their way to his ear, she circled the ridge. He sighed, clutching her shoulders when she began to suckle the lobe.

"I need you."

Haylie's soft words in his ear elicited a dark, almost primal response from him. Kamran pulled her back, her face finally coming into focus. Her long brown hair covered her shoulders and back like a veil. She stared up at him with the most amazing eyes. They were the color of the Briel countryside after the planting rains.

Her face was flushed, the color traveling down her neck and disappearing under a soft, smooth shirt. He had to know how far down that blush went. Kamran took the tip of his finger and hooked it on her neckline. Tugging her shirt down, he now had access to the tops of her breasts. The blush continued lower, tempting him to continue his exploration. Bending his head down, Kamran placed a single kiss in the top of her cleavage. She smelled like sex, the promise of pleasure.

She pulled his head up and crushed her lips against his again, driving her tongue deep into his mouth, teasing as it went. He lapped at her, tasting her sweetness. His cock tightened and pulsed as her lips demanded more from him. Kamran, in turn, slid his hand under her shirt, brushing his fingers against the side of her breast and across her waist before reaching the smooth hollow of her back.

Her sigh told him she enjoyed the sensation and he fleetingly wondered if all Briel males instinctively knew where their mates liked to be touched. Kamran moved his mouth along her cheek to her neck. His tongue licked as he kissed her. Her heartbeat quickened under his lips and she drove her hands into his hair.

"Please, don't stop."

Her plea pushed Kamran to the edge of his control. Reclaiming her lips with his, he slipped his tongue deep into her mouth needing to taste her. Haylie's fingers were cool against his heated skin. His heart pounded as wildly as hers. She ran her hands over the tunic that covered his chest, sliding them down the length of his sides to tug on the hem.

"Take this off."

Kamran obediently stood. He watched her eyes widen as he reached his full height. He knew his size wasn't as impressive as some of his race, but she seemed pleased. He yanked the tunic off and was rewarded with a sigh from Haylie.

"Just like I pictured you."

The unexpected incapacitation he'd experienced minutes earlier was gone. In its place was blinding arousal. *This* was what his brother spoke of. When she rose to her knees and ran her fingers over his stomach, Kamran thought he'd died. His cock was straining painfully against his pants as she pressed her cheek against it. He wanted her to free him, take his shaft in her mouth so he could feel her wicked tongue on him. A groan exploded from him and the sound echoed in the hall.

They both froze, realizing at the same time where they were.

"Oh my god," Haylie said with a shaken voice.

"In the room." He didn't want anyone to come across them, see any part of her naked skin. She was all his.

Kamran quickly scanned the hall before he stepped inside and triggered the doors to close and lock. When he turned around she stood there with her hands on her hips, an eyebrow raised in question.

"I don't want any interruptions." I only want you.

Haylie spoke with her body. She slowly pulled her cotton shirt over her head, her nipples hardening more as the cotton teased the sensitive skin, and threw it aside. His gaze locked on the puckered buds.

Praise the goddess, he needed her now.

With two steps, he was beside her again and easily picked her up in his arms. Haylie wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her breasts to his chest. The smoothness of her skin against his was intoxicating.

He carried her across the room and set her down on the edge of a table. He bent his head and took one of her stiff nipples into his mouth. Her moan echoed in the silence of the observatory. He felt the wetness between her legs as she ground her clitoris against his thigh.

"Kamran, what's happening? I feel...crazy," her whisper tickled his ear as her hot breath caressed his neck.

"I can stop—"

"Don't you dare! Just touch me."

Kamran instinctively knew where to stroke her to give her pleasure. Her hands clenched in his hair pulling him in for another kiss as he tugged her nipples, rolling the tips in his fingers. He slid a hand from her breast to her waist and finally to her buttocks, taking the time to knead them.

"You're so small. So perfect. Just the right size for me to do this."

He pressed his hand between her legs, massaging her clit with his fingers. Haylie cried out and drove her nails into his arms. A possessiveness he'd never felt before pushed him on, needing to claim her, brand her so no other man would ever mistake her for anyone other than his mate. Completely, totally his.

The thin fabric of her pants was the only barrier remaining between them. He actually growled when he couldn't free them from her body. Haylie chuckled as she undid the clasp and bucked up long enough for Kamran to yank them over her hips and onto the floor. He pulled back and stared into her wide, intense gaze. When he combed his fingers through her pubic hair, she gasped.

"Amazing," he whispered. "What do you call this?" He leaned forward and touched her mound.

He watched her blush and turn her head to the side.

"I've embarrassed you."

"No, but it makes me feel..."

When she didn't continue, he leaned in and kissed her hard. She tasted better than the finest food and it made his head spin. He nipped at her bottom lip and her chin while he continued to play with her clit.

"How does it make you feel?" His lips moved against her jaw.

"Naughty," she said and spread her legs wider than before.

"It makes you feel naughty to say..."

"Cunt."

Haylie's entire body tensed as he thrust his fingers deep inside her, coaxing her juices from her. He slid his fingers up to circle her clit, brushing it very lightly.

"I think I like you naughty."

She moaned and bucked her hips, meeting his every touch. Kamran was pleased she responded to him with such intense desire. He needed to know this was real, this passion between them.

"Does that please you?"

"Shit, yes! Don't stop." Haylie moved closer to him as she spoke, rubbing against his hand.

Haylie increased the contact between them, grabbing his wrists to grind hard against him, her breath a series of short gasps. She cried out when he returned his fingers to drive deep inside her. Her hips moved to a silent beat of thrust, retreat, thrust. She arched her body back against the table.

More. He needed so much more of her. He withdrew his hand and slid away from her. Haylie moaned in protest, then in pleasure as he dropped to his knees and moved his face between her legs. He slid his arms under her legs and pulled her to the edge of the table.

"Is this what you want?" His hot breath vibrated against her pussy.

"Yes." Haylie panted.

He did not make her wait long. Spreading her legs wide, Kamran leaned in and ran his tongue in a long stroke over her clit.

"Fuck," she sighed, tilting his hips up to give him better access.

Pulling back slightly, he couldn't help but smile. "More?"

"More."

Kamran continued licking and exploring as slowly as he dared. When he sucked her clit deep into his mouth, Haylie sat bolt upright and clenched his head in her hands.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Far from it," she smiled, her eyes heavy with passion.

He smiled slowly before he buried his head once more between her legs. Within a matter of seconds, Haylie was once again moaning and grinding against him. He licked her nub once, twice, three times before drawing her into his mouth once more. Kamran

moved his fingers to her pussy, slid them into her passage and allowed the thrusting to mirror the tempo of his sucking.

Haylie gasped sharply, her fingers squeezing his head almost painfully before her orgasm. Her scream bounced around the large observation room, seemingly out into the atmosphere. Her body vibrated as he lapped up every drop of her cream.

"More." He wasn't sure which one of them had spoken.

Haylie tugged Kamran's head up, lightly pulling his face to hers. She devoured his mouth, sucking hard on his bottom lip. Kamran struggled briefly with his pants, but soon he had freed himself. His cock pulsed with pride as she gasped her surprise.

He didn't know how he measured up to human males. And at this moment, he didn't care. Haylie looked pleased with his ten inches. That was all that mattered.

She spread her legs even farther apart as he rubbed his tip against her pussy, lubricating his cock with her juices. Slowly, he pushed past her swollen entrance. Kamran kept a steady pressure forward invading her tight passage, reveling in the sensation of her pussy tightening and relaxing around him. He stopped once he filled her completely. It was too much, the pressure and pain of her touch around him. He'd never known it was like this.

"It's okay. Relax," she cooed in his ear as she held her body still, waiting for him.

He inhaled deeply and withdrew his shaft 'til his tip threatened to leave her completely. Exhaling, he thrust back in to his hilt. He felt everything, their bodies and spirits combining, moving together as one being. Their tempo increased, each thrust bringing him closer to bliss. Advance, retreat, advance. Sweat pooled between them, their bodies slick from the exertion of their lovemaking.

Her light floral scent was everywhere. Each breath sucked him deeper into the endless depths of his arousal. Mad, she was driving him mad. Kamran growled unable to control himself any longer, he thrust mercilessly into her.

"That's it. Harder!"

Haylie grabbed his shoulders and neck, pulling their bodies closer. Her fingers dug into his flesh, providing him with an intense mixture of pleasure and pain. She thrust up meeting his every advance. "Yes, harder!"

His hands moved underneath her thighs to cup her naked ass. Her breathing was ragged and he knew she was close to another orgasm. He pulled away to gain access to her. He wet his thumb with his mouth, reached down and rubbed her clit.

"Ah, shit," she moaned, her head falling back.

He felt her inner muscles clutching his shaft. Close, he was so close. Moments before he came, Kamran watched as an orgasm ripped through her body. Her face contorted with intense concentration, flushed with all-consuming pleasure. She held her breath for an instant before screaming out his name. Her cunt went wild, vibrating around his cock. It was too much. He thrust one final time hard against her and cried

out his own pleasure. He felt the rush of his seed pour out of him, filling her deep inside.

They remained locked together. The only sound in the room was the steady hum of the recycled air and their panting. Their bodies made a sucking noise as he pulled back.

Kamran brushed a strand of her hair from her face and smiled. "Hello."

"Hi." Her voice was husky.

He hesitated before taking a deep breath to speak. This was going to sound strange. "Your name wouldn't happen to be Haylie, would it?"

The laugh bubbled out of her and Kamran wondered if the excitement of the past minutes was too much for her.

"I'm sorry. It's just, I have been thinking about you all day. I find you almost dying out in the hall, we have the best sex of my life and you don't even know who I am." Haylie managed to get the words out in between gasps and laughs.

"Yes, it is strange how my people mate. But nonetheless, I want to make sure?" She instantly sobered and fixed him with a look that would have impressed Taber. "Yes, I'm Haylie. And I think I have to put you under arrest for public indecency."

Chapter Four

"I hope that's not necessary." Kamran couldn't tell if she was serious or not.

Haylie laughed again and placed a kiss on his cheek. "I see we need to work on your sense of humor."

He gathered her into his arms and sank to the floor. This was paradise. Years of loneliness, of being separate in status from the rest of his family, were over. He had Haylie.

She snuggled in tighter and ran her fingers over his chest. Just as her wriggling threatened to stir his arousal again, she stopped.

"Are you okay?" she asked, with her head resting against his shoulder.

"Pardon?"

"Are you okay? Fifteen minutes ago, you were gasping for air in the hallway," she said, leaning back to give him a once-over.

"I assure you I'm quite well." He bucked his hips up to press his cock against her.

She gasped in surprise, but that didn't stop her from grinding against him. *A human blush is quite charming*.

"That didn't take long," she said, her face reddening more.

"The Briel libido is very...healthy. You embarrass easily for a security chief."

"I certainly do not." Her blush deepened. "I think you should go see the doctor, just in case."

"Because I want to take you again right now on the floor?" He couldn't help but tease her.

Haylie rolled her eyes. "No, because you were choking to death."

"Perhaps. But not now."

She turned her head to look at him. "Wait a minute, you knew I was the security chief. I thought you said you didn't know who I was."

"Taber. He told me he met Haylie, the new security chief. You are the only Haylie I am aware of on this station."

"Ah." She rested her warm cheek against his chest once more, hiding her face from his sight. "So why were you choking back there? Was there something in the air? And for that matter, why are you even here? Not that you can't be here, but it seems rather odd that—"

"Haylie, stop, stop. It has been a while since I've had to endure an interrogation." He laughed again. The euphoria was addicting.

"Sorry."

"I was looking for you. I couldn't get you out of my mind."

"Really?"

She pulled up again and kissed him lightly. Her tongue traced a path along the edges of his mouth. He groaned when she pulled back to suck on his bottom lip. Goddess, he loved how that felt. The things she did to him were intoxicating. He shivered as a stab of pleasure raced through him once more.

"That was the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me." She murmured the words against his mouth and sealed it with a final kiss.

"You have been speaking to the wrong people."

Kamran stroked her neck, amazed at the softness of her skin. And her smell—the scent of intoxicated desire. He shifted his legs, causing Haylie to slide between them and onto the floor. The weight of her stomach against his groin was too much.

"I need you again."

He started when he realized he wasn't the one who spoke. It was Haylie. She moved on to her knees, leaned forward and kissed his chest. He thanked every deity he knew as her mouth slowly trailed kisses down his body to his shaft.

"Not so different from a human," she said against his tip of his cock.

Her tongue circled his swollen head and Kamran tensed. This feeling was beyond anything in his experience. When she sucked his cock into her mouth, Kamran forgot to breathe all together. Her fingers wrapped around his shaft and began to mimic the up and down stroking motion of her mouth. She drew him deep into the back of her throat and moaned. The vibrations sent another surge of blood coursing through his cock, making it longer and wider than he thought possible.

Reaching out, he ran his fingers through her hair, letting the long strands spill over onto his naked stomach and thighs. Haylie flexed her fingers around his cock as she massaged up and down the length of him. The intense nature of her touch ripped a moan from him.

When she stopped suddenly, he opened his eyes to see what was wrong.

"Watch," she said, her voice raspy.

She moved her face to the base of his shaft, paused for only a moment before running her tongue up the length of him. Every muscle in his body shook from the overpowering sensation.

"Di machachta!" he sighed, unable to tear his eyes away from her mouth and the wicked things she was doing with her tongue.

"Tasty," she purred.

Again she repeated the motion, only this time she swirled her tongue around the swollen tip of his cock before sucking it briefly into her mouth and tracing a path down the other side of his shaft. On her third pass, he grabbed her head to stop her.

"I can't...please...stop."

"What happened to the infamous Briel libido?"

"Apparently we grow into it." He smiled at her confused expression before adding, "This is my first time with a woman."

If he wasn't so aroused, he would have found the look of shock on her face funny. Slowly, Haylie pulled herself back up to his face, the length of her naked body pressed tight against his.

"So I am your first?"

"The only one."

"Then I want to make this count."

Kamran wanted to ask what she meant, but the question flew from his mind as she straddled his lap. Wetting her fingers in her mouth, she rubbed her saliva over the head of his cock as she positioned it at her entrance of her wet pussy. Haylie closed her eyes and smiled as she sank down onto his hard shaft. He could feel her muscles stretching to accommodate his width until they were joined completely.

All words between them were gone. The only thing that mattered was the movement of their bodies. She repeatedly thrust herself upon him, each movement driving him wild. In this position, he was able to capture one of her breasts in his mouth. He pulled her nipple gently with his teeth, running his tongue over the sensitive tip. Haylie moaned and pulled his head closer, preventing him from moving. An entire Ecada invasion force couldn't pull him away at this moment. He could feel her pussy pulse around his shaft every time he flicked her nipple with his tongue.

Each time she sank down, she paused long enough to squeeze her muscles around his shaft. The sensation sent a jolt through him and pushed him closer to the edge each time she did it. But he wasn't going alone. He sucked the tip of her breast harder, flicking the nipple over and over with his tongue. Haylie's moans were loud in his ear, her panting causing his pulse to race.

Her motions grew frantic. He felt her climax approaching and desperately wanted to wait for her. He felt his own release threaten to explode and fought to keep from coming. Haylie tensed and screamed as her orgasm hit. One final thrust was all he managed before his own cries of pleasure joined hers.

Neither one of them moved. They sat on the floor clinging together, the sound of their panting and heartbeats the only thing audible. Haylie leaned in and gently kissed his neck.

Haylie looked up at him and grinned. "Oh wow. That was awesome."

He smiled back. The human ability for understatement was amazing.

"We may want to consider getting dressed and returning to our quarters." His gaze slipped to the door.

"Your place or mine?" She smiled and kissed the tip of his nose.

He knew she didn't understand the complications their joining would have for them. And while he needed to tell her, the selfish part of him, the one he usually ignored, told him to keep quiet. Just for a bit longer.

"We can figure that out later. I'd hate to be...interrupted."

Haylie pouted and Kamran immediately wanted to kiss her again.

"It didn't look like there were too many people in this area." But despite her protests, she slid from him and went in search of her clothing.

"Nonetheless, I'd rather not make love again on the floor."

He watched as her blush moved from her face to the tops of her breasts. "Shit, I can't believe I did this."

"Mated with a Briel?"

"No, had sex on the floor in a public room. I'll never be able to come in here again."

"That may prove difficult. There are many functions that are held here and, as security chief, you'll have to attend."

Haylie pulled on her pants and tugged her shirt over her head. Kamran watched, fascinated, as she raked her hair into a knot on her head.

Shifting her hands to her hips in mock impatience, Haylie said, "Well, are you coming?"

A combination of lust and pride filled him as he admired her beauty. How was he going to keep his hands off her?

"I'm impressed. I keep hearing human males complain about the speed in which their women dress."

"First off, I'm not most women." Haylie grinned again. "And second, beauty cannot be rushed. In my case, I take practicality over primping."

Kamran thought she looked absolutely gorgeous. Time to primp was unnecessary.

Getting himself dressed took a bit longer. Who knew a boot was aerodynamic enough to fly halfway across the room with a single toss? Finally, he stood beside her, ready to unlock the door.

"All set?"

"Of course, Ambassador," she said and slipped her arm around his.

His gut clenched and he stiffened as he barely managed to contain his panic. Humans would think nothing of such an act of affection. Especially after what they had done. To the Briel, it would be the same as declaring over the com system that he'd found his mate.

And he had. She simply didn't know that part yet.

"What's wrong?"

Haylie's voice was calm, yet held an edge to it. Taber spoke much the same way when he was puzzled. Her face betrayed none of the emotion that he was sure she was feeling.

"For my people, contact between males and females in this manner indicates that they are bonded. You would call it married. I wouldn't want to confuse those who might see us."

She pulled her arm away almost a bit too quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think of that."

"I didn't mind. But you may not wish to marry a man you just met."

Not wanting to see her response, Kamran opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. Why now? Everything he'd ever wanted was before him. A family of his own. Someone to grow old with. A life beyond serving others.

What if she didn't want the same things? He knew it wasn't the same for the humans, their relationships tending to be more casual.

He tried to push those thoughts from his mind as Haylie dropped into step beside him.

"Tell me about yourself." He kept his tone soft, not wanting to disturb the calm that had descended over them.

"Well, I'm from Earth originally, but I've spent most of my life on Luna. And, as you know, I arrived on the colony this afternoon."

He saw that she'd laced her hands behind her back and walked half a step behind him. Kamran mentally cursed. He'd done that to her, caused her to distance herself from him. While he still wasn't sure what to do about their situation he much preferred the close contact of earlier.

"Let's see. My father passed away last year. He was a shuttle pilot on Luna where I was deputy security chief. "

"Thank you. But those are things I can learn by looking you up in one of your records. I want to know about the real you."

That seemed to catch her off guard a bit, her lips turning into a slight pout.

"I'm thirty-one?"

"Haylie."

By the goddess, he sounded like his father.

"What would you like to know?"

Kamran stopped and thought for a moment. "Tell me something that you haven't told another being."

She was about to answer as they turned the corner and walked into a crowd milling around one of the station's bars. He would have to work on his timing. Paying attention to the world around him might also help. But that would prove more difficult as time went on and the two of them grew closer.

"What's going on?" Haylie asked one of the men on the edge of the group.

She stepped between Kamran and the man and Kamran had to fight off a smile. It would figure she'd be like Taber. Security instincts.

"Bar fight. A real slugger 'til security showed up."

Kamran's height allowed him to peer over the tops of the humans who had been displaced from the bar, their drinks still firmly in their hands. Security had the situation well under control, with the drunks being escorted toward the door.

"I think everything is fine," Kamran said. When she didn't move, he leaned in and whispered in her ear, "You're not on duty yet, Chief."

That got her moving.

Only once they had cleared the group did she speak. "Is that common here?"

"Not normally. Though Taber mentioned that there have been greater occurrences of fights in recent weeks."

Haylie frowned. "I wonder why."

"I'm sure that's one of the reasons the administrator is anxious to have you on board. He needs someone who can monitor these situations. I've been telling him for months that his talents are better spent elsewhere."

"I thought it odd myself that the colony administrator would be in charge of security while you waited for a new chief," she said—her tone was formal.

This wasn't good. "What's wrong?"

She stopped short and simply looked at him. Kamran was struck again by the exquisiteness of her eyes, the rich hazel color reflecting her deep emotions. But this time, he noticed the strength that mingled with her beauty. There was more to his Haylie than he first realized.

"Are we permitted to go somewhere and talk?" Her voice was very quiet, but there was no mistaking her meaning. They had to talk. *Now*.

"Of course. As long as it wouldn't be perceived as intimate."

"Excellent. I believe this hallway loops around to the main corridor where my office is located. I assume the interrogation room sufficiently lacks intimacy."

As an ambassador, Kamran had dealt with many hostile races in the past. Humanity was the only one he knew who expressed their anger passively. Based on the pace with which Haylie was now walking, this conversation wasn't going to be pleasant.

Haylie's legs were almost as long as his own and she set a brisk pace. They reached the security office in record time. She paused only long enough to release the door lock on the control pad and strode into the dark room.

"Lights, computer."

Her voice echoed for only a moment in the dark before the lights came on. When they did, Kamran cringed. Hurt and confusion was clearly on her face as she stood there, arms crossed over her chest.

Before he could say anything, she added, "Computer, privacy screen."

"Haylie –"

"Are you playing me?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you playing me? Use me for a quick one-night stand and then play stupid the next day. I don't mind. But I'd appreciate knowing before this goes any further."

And there it was. Kamran respected bluntness. As an ambassador, he'd wasted many hours of his life trying to sort through lies and half truths to get to the heart of the problem he was trying to solve. He should offer his future wife the same courtesy.

"How much do you know about my people?" he said and sat down in the metal mesh chair meant for visitors. It was uncomfortable and he wished he'd suggested they talk in his quarters.

"Very little beyond what is recorded in our official records. Your society is a matriarchy, but only males hold positions of danger or positions that take them off world. Your people have been instrumental in helping humanity become established in space, especially with this colony."

She then paused, and Kamran watched her fight off some unknown expression and keep her face impassive. "And you are some of the largest beings I have ever interacted with."

He wanted to smile. But that would be the wrong move. "Mostly correct. Some of our older matrons, those who have lost their mates, do take positions off world. They belong to our Elder Council. Do you know why we are a matriarchy?"

"Good sense?" She tried to keep a straight face, but her lips twitched in a small smirk.

"There are fewer females than males in Briel society. As they are the givers of life and theirs is a limited number, our society evolved to listen to the advice of our female elders."

"So if there are fewer females, how does your society decide who can marry and who can't?"

And here lay the crux of the matter. Kamran sat forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees.

"No one does. Biology chooses for us."

When Haylie didn't react, Kamran thought she hadn't heard. Or chose to ignore him. Within a few minutes, she made her way around the desk and sat opposite him. She kept her face impassive, hiding her feeling behind a blank stare.

"How does it work?" As she spoke, Haylie kept her voice low, but steady.

Fate, luck and a bit of magic. "Our scientists have been trying to figure that out for centuries. Once it was determined that there were fewer and fewer females, our leaders wanted to ensure that all of them were able to find their mates early in life."

"To increase the chances of reproduction. Makes sense. But not very romantic."

"Is that important to you?"

Her face was impassive, but her eyes...they looked hurt.

"I'm not the romantic type," she said quietly.

He knew only the basics of human mating rituals. Physical contact resulting in an emotional attachment. Very different from his world, yet something about it was very appealing. The elaborate dance that humans engaged in to choose who they spent their lives with was...different.

"But I didn't answer your question. Our scientists discovered that Briel mates are able to detect their mates through the detection of pheromones. Female Briel are genetically triggered to be receptive to only one male's scent. She will respond only to him. Likewise, that one male will be—to use a human phrase—turned on sexually by only that one female."

She still didn't respond. Kamran had the near uncontrollable urge to stand. Did she not understand what he was telling her? He was hers and she was his. The cosmos had decided.

"Haylie?"

She inhaled a deep breath, leaned back in her chair and frowned. "So why have I responded to you? Has this ever happen before? I mean, between a Briel and non-Briel."

"Not that I am aware of. I can check my records to confirm this, but I trust the answer will be the same."

"I don't believe it," she said. The words came out clipped. She was clearly upset.

Kamran didn't blame her.

"I can appreciate how this might be hard for you to—"

"Bullshit!" She stood up from her chair so quickly it rolled halfway to the wall. "I'm not going to stand here and listen to you tell me I have no choice in this relationship."

His annoyance began to rise. In his mind, he quickly recited his meditation mantra, calming his frustration.

"You didn't seem to mind an hour ago."

"Don't you dare," she said, her anger barely contained. "You knew all this and you didn't tell me. You never gave me the choice."

"When did I have a chance? Besides, we don't have a choice."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Of course we have a choice. Everyone has a choice. It's called free will."

Kamran was on his feet and beside her before he realized he had stood. "No, you don't. Why do you think you reacted the way you did in the hangar bay? It was the pheromones. Biology. Nothing you have any control over."

"So next I guess you'll say I have no choice over what happens to our relationship."

"You don't. Neither of us does."

They stood facing each other for several minutes. Their eyes were locked on each other, both braced for battle. Kamran's heart was pounding. He didn't know if he wanted to fight her or kiss her. Maybe both.

Finally, Haylie broke eye contact and sighed. She walked over to the food unit and banged her head once over the top of the dispensing slot.

"Computer, water."

The sound of the glass being pushed into the food dispenser and filled with the liquid was surprisingly relaxing and Kamran felt the urge to sit back down. It was only after he'd returned to his seat that Haylie returned to hers with the glass.

His next words were hard to speak. Kamran swallowed and had to concentrate to keep his voice steady. "Would it be so bad?"

She took a slow drink of water, set the glass on the desk and wiped her thumb across the condensation that had formed on the outside.

"I don't know. In my experience, long-term relationships don't work out."

Kamran shook his head. "They can be wonderful. I've seen it first hand with my parents, my brother."

"And I saw my father suffer through years of guilt and anger when my mother walked out on him with some jerk she'd met at an art exhibit."

To that, Kamran had no answer. Human relationships were so complex.

Haylie finished the contents of her glass before looking him in the eye and asking, "Now what?"

"As you can guess, we Briel don't engage in casual relationships. When a Briel male has been chosen by his mate, he must relinquish his post and, in this case, return with her to our home world."

"They'll make you quit your job?"

She said the words so matter-of-factly, Kamran's hackles rose.

"You too. They'll ask us to relocate to Briel where we will be expected to start a family as soon as possible."

He braced for another outburst. Rebuttals to her possible responses instantly sprang into his mind. None were necessary.

She started to laugh. And kept laughing until tears streaked her face.

"Haylie? Are you okay?"

"I'm...fine...sec..." and another fit of giggles overwhelmed her.

Kamran looked over his shoulder, trying to gauge if he could safely make it to the exit before Haylie could catch him. Just in case she had—what was the human expression—gone off the deep end.

It took another minute for Haylie to regain her composure. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm okay now."

"Are you sure?" Kamran relaxed his hold on the armrest.

"Yes." She sighed. "It's been months of hard work getting ready to take this post. I just spent that last several years of my life frozen in a tube so I could get here. The guy I'm replacing didn't last two months in this job. I was not only determined to outlast him, but to do such a great job that everyone would forget that he'd even been here."

"And now, you will be forced to leave."

"Basically the same day I arrived."

She rested her head against the headrest of her chair. Her eyes didn't leave his, as if she were searching for a long-awaited answer. For once in his life he didn't have one to offer.

"I can't leave this place. I don't imagine you want to leave either," she said softly.

"Of course not." If she had walked into his life six months later, there would've been no questions. The colony would be safe and he'd be free from obligations. But not now. "I am in the middle of delicate negotiations between your people and the Ecada. To walk away now would shut down the peace talks and open up an opportunity for the Ecada to invade."

"I read the report. They trust no one but you."

"I would use the word trust lightly. But they do know that I will not strike at them without provocation."

"So, Ambassador, it appears we have a problem," Haylie said, her voice taking on a professional tone. "We can either return to Briel, which will cause major problems for the colony. Or we can stay, break Briel laws and face the consequences if they ever arise."

"Which is incarceration for me until I agree to return home and begin a family."

"Excellent!" She sighed. "This is so fucking mental, it's not funny."

Haylie stood and began to pace around the confines of her office. She slapped her hand against her thigh as she walked. Kamran smiled. The woman was incapable of sitting still.

He jumped when she laughed again.

"Screw it. Let's not tell anyone."

She sounded so sure, so confident, Kamran almost instantly agreed.

"You realize what you are saying? The consequences of what will happen if we are discovered?"

"Yup. The new security chief of Eurus is about to commit a major crime after only being on the planet for less than..." she checked the computer console, "six hours."

She stood there, hands on her hips and stared at him. Her expression was almost a challenge, a look that shouted, "I dare you to come up with a better idea".

He stood and walked to her. Her scent filled his head, making him feel a little drunk. He was aroused. *Again*. Only this time, he knew there would be no relief.

"That means when we have to work together, we can't give any indication that there is anything between us. And we can't continue with our physical relationship either. Briel simply don't do that." Kamran balled his hands into fists, trying desperately not to touch her.

For her part, she moved her hands from her hips to behind her back, lacing her fingers tightly together once more. "That won't be a problem on my end."

"Oh, really."

Kamran leaned forward and brought his cheek so close that it almost touched hers. Why he had the urge to tease her, he didn't know. Nor really cared. The vindictive side of him knew that being this close to him would drive her wild. He didn't want to be the only one in agony. He made sure that his breath would caress her ear.

"Then we shouldn't have any problems."

Haylie shifted her weight, but didn't squirm away as Kamran had hoped. Instead, she swayed within a hair's distance from him and chuckled lightly in his ear before she spoke.

"Nope. None at all."

With amazing agility, she slid out from underneath where he stood and made her way to the door.

"Goodnight, Ambassador. I'm sure I'll see you around the station."

Before she opened the door, he felt it only fair to warn her.

"You'll dream of me tonight."

Haylie didn't respond, but he knew she didn't believe him. The doors closed silently behind her as she left. No matter. She would understand soon enough.

Chapter Five

Haylie had to pause before she entered her quarters. So much had happened in the last few hours that her head felt like a spinning top. And if Sara was inside, she'd be sent around for another turn.

She scanned her hand on the security panel to release the door lock. It whooshed open to reveal a blessedly empty room. At least someone was giving her a break. Three steps got her into the room far enough to allow the sensor to automatically close the door behind her.

What a day.

Was it still today?

Her mind was racing, turning over possible answers to her problem. *The Kamran Incident*. She laughed and wondered if he would mind being referred to as an incident. *Most likely*. In fact, she imagined she was already being referred to as the Haylie Predicament. He probably even has Taber trying to figure out a way of dealing with things.

She'd have to tell him that she preferred "incident" to "predicament".

Haylie caught a glimpse of her profile in the mirror and stopped. Her face was flushed, but she looked rumpled and more than a little tired. *Having sex on the floor in a public place will do that to a girl.*

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

This always happened to her. She found someone and something always screwed it up. How the hell was she going to fight against biology and alien laws? It's not like she could use a blaster to solve her problems this time.

Haylie realized that she was still standing by the doorway and moved to her bed. She didn't bother to undress and instead flopped onto the mattress and pulled the blanket and sheet over her.

To top things off, she was still horny. You'd think that a couple orgasms would cure a girl of that particular itch. *Apparently not*. And there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it now.

Well, she could. But that would require moving and she wasn't about to do that.

She wasn't even mad at Kamran, simply at the situation. How the hell could she believe that fate had pushed them together? That was something her mother would've accepted. She'd take off to Briel without a second thought about the consequences. There was no way Haylie would ever live her life like that.

But when she thought of Kamran and the feelings their short time together had pulled from her, her heart ached. She hated being alone. She'd spent too many days and

nights with her own thoughts. Nothing but her sketches and her blasted perfect memory to keep her company. The loneliness ate at her.

Not like her father. Other than the times they spent together when he was in port, he preferred solitude. Especially after her mother left. He'd died over a year ago now, but the pain was still there, still raw. Haylie smiled and wiped a stray tear away. He would have liked Kamran, a man with strong convictions. At least that was how he came across. Shit, she really didn't know the first thing about him or his people. But the chances of the two races being pulled together this way seemed impossible. It was probably nothing more than an aftereffect of the cryo sleep.

She had to forget this whole mess. Get a good night's sleep and begin fresh tomorrow.

Haylie propped herself up for a moment and pounded her pillow with her fist. She then gave her blanket a quick tug to balloon the air underneath. When she settled again, she took a deep breath and tried to calm her thoughts. She pushed away every image of her parents, her grief, even her desire and focused on the darkness behind her eyelids.

But in the dark, in the place moments before sleep could come, she was more in tune with Kamran than ever before. She could almost pinpoint his location if she concentrated hard enough. No, not concentrate, but relax. She sighed. There he was, down the corridor, across from where they had been earlier. His office?

When she tried to focus on the schematic of the station, she lost part of the thread that tied her to Kamran. She was still aware of him, though. Had he been there earlier, touching the back of her mind? The connection she hadn't been aware of before, she now couldn't miss it pulling at her consciousness.

Haylie sighed and felt the beginnings of sleep creeping up on her. Everything would be better...tomorrow.

Suddenly, she sat upright in bed and knew that Kamran was on the move and coming in her direction. Strange that that it took only a few rounds of mind-blowing sex to awaken one's sixth sense.

She thought she should close her eyes to concentrate on his movements, but it turned out that she didn't need to. Her awareness, coupled with her memory of the station schematics, made it more than easy to track his progress.

He wasn't happy, more antsy than aggravated. She smiled—that must be her fault.

No, that wasn't it. Haylie frowned, not used to the strange sensations she was now experiencing. The more she concentrated, the faster she lost the feeling. All she knew for sure was that Kamran was on his way to her.

She took a deep breath and concentrated on relaxing her tensed neck muscles. Nothing seemed to work. Her body was hyperaware of everything. And somehow she was even more aroused than before. Her nipples hardened and she felt the moisture building in her pussy once more.

Haylie knew the second he entered the long corridor that led to her quarters. Her heartbeat began to trip over itself. *Not fair*. Why the hell wasn't her brain in control of her body anymore?

As suddenly as his journey to her started, something halted it. What the hell? Haylie threw the blanket off, but struggled to get her sheet untangled from around her feet and get out of bed. She hopped on one foot and somehow managed to keep her balance. She'd have to remember to take her shoes off next time.

Her short delay with the bedding was enough to prevent her from making it to the hallway in time. She could already sense Kamran going away. She froze for a second, indecision keeping her locked in place until she gave her head a shake. Like she would let him get away that easy.

Haylie slammed her hand against the door sensor and took a step into the hall. She looked up in time to have Sara run smack into her.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" Sara held her forehead as she spoke.

"Other than my newly acquired headache, I'm great."

Haylie had to give her head a shake to try and clear away the burst of pain.

"Did I hit your nose? You're bleeding. Let me see."

Haylie swatted Sara's hands away from her face. "Can we at least go inside first? I don't want to bleed over the hallway."

"I wonder if the food dispenser can manufacture some ice."

Sara shoved her way past Haylie and made a beeline for the console along the back wall. Within minutes, Haylie was sitting back on her bed with a cloth full of ice cubes.

"Do I tilt forward or back? I never remember."

"Here. Like this. And stop talking."

Sara adjusted Haylie's head until it was tilted slightly forward, but not too far down. A newfound tension in her neck started to scream at her.

"Well, that's comfortable." Haylie didn't even bother to hide her sarcasm.

"I could run back to the med bay and get a cauterizer, but the bleeding would have stopped by the time I got back."

"I'll be fine. But if you broke my nose I'll kick your ass."

"Stop talking. And it's not my fault you weren't looking where I was going. Where the hell *were* you going in such a hurry, anyway? I figured you'd be sound asleep by this time. Wait, don't answer. Hold that thought for five minutes. I don't want you to talk until the bleeding stops."

The last thing Haylie wanted to do was explain the evening's events to Sara right now. The five-minute delay gave her a small amount of breathing room. At least long enough to come up with a lame excuse.

"I thought I heard something...outside. I was going to investigate." Haylie said as she pulled the now wet and bloody cloth away from her face, allowing Sara to examine her injury.

"And you complain about me never taking it easy. Heard something outside of a soundproofed room. Crazy girl." Sara's frown deepened as she cleaned the remaining blood from Haylie's face. "Man, I didn't hit you that hard. Not hard enough to cause this. Did you do something earlier to your nose?"

"No. Could be the dry air?" Haylie cringed. She didn't remember hitting her face during her sexual escapades earlier that night. A side effect to great Briel sex?

"Maybe. Keep an eye on it. You've been acting weird since we arrived. I may want to run some tests if strange things keep happening. And don't bother to try to argue this time."

"Yes, Doc."

"Good. Now that we have that settled, we need to find you a man."

Haylie started to cough. "What?"

"Don't do that, or you'll start your nose bleeding again. You need a man. Someone who will take your mind off things."

Oh, if only she knew.

"You know how I am on the dating scene."

"Roger doesn't count. He was a jerk, anyway," Sara said and waved her hand in the air as if she were swatting a fly.

"Yes, well, according to him, I'm a cold bitch who generates as much heat as an ice cube. I believe that's an exact quote."

Sara leaned in close. "Did he say that before or after you arrested him for smuggling?"

She had a point. "After. But our relationship was faltering before that."

"Gee, I wonder why." Sara rolled her eyes. "You need a *real* man. Speaking of which, you'll never guess who just stopped me outside the door. Don't bother, 'cause you won't get it."

Haylie didn't miss a beat. "Ambassador Kamran?"

"No, it was Ambassador...hey, how did you know? You're not going all psychic on me again, are you?" Sara inspected her through squinted eyes.

"No, it was a lucky guess."

"How the hell do you make a guess like that?"

Haylie gave a noncommittal shrug. "Easy. I figured out who you thought the most unlikely person in the world was to come visit me and said that name. Hence, Ambassador Kamran."

Sara harrumphed. "I guess that's why you're in security."

"Now what did he want?"

"Who?" Sara grinned.

"Smart ass. The ambassador." Haylie grinned back and remembered to unclench her teeth so she wouldn't look vicious.

"Well, he first told me to call him Kamran." Sara fluttered her eyelashes. "Second, he said you needed to have this."

Sara retrieved a data pad she'd set down next to the food dispenser on her way to gather ice.

The cool plastic of the thin device seemed strange as it touched Haylie's fingers. She could feel the residual warmth of his hands clinging to the device. *Impossible*. Haylie tapped her fingers along the bottom edge just below the control buttons. Why would he send her this?

"Did he say what this was for?"

"No. But I'm assuming it's for something or other related to security. Why else would the Briel ambassador send you a data pad?"

Haylie cringed, "True."

"Look, I'm beat. I'm going to pop into the bathroom for a quick minute to clean your blood off my hands and get a warm cloth so you can wash your face. Read your message and then we both need some sleep. Doctor's orders."

"Yes, ma'am."

Haylie waited until Sara left the room before activating the message. The backlight on the pad was bright, causing Haylie to squint for a second before her eyes adjusted.

Ms. Bond.

It was a pleasure to meet you this evening. I'm sorry that we had to cut our meeting short, but I hope we can continue our conversation in the future. Here is the information you requested on the background of my people. I hope you find it an interesting read. I would also like to discuss with you the potential of pooling our security resources. I hope you will be able to fit me into your schedule sometime tomorrow. Thank you for your time.

Ambassador Kamran.

A history lesson and an excuse for another date. She remembered what he had said about the Briel not having casual relationships and smiled. Maybe this was his way of getting to see her without raising suspicion. She knew he wasn't going to be able to stay away. She could tell by the way he stood back in her office. His body was taut, like he was concentrating extra hard to hold still. She hadn't meant to push him earlier, but she couldn't resist. It had taken every ounce of her self control not to touch him, but the look on his face as she'd pulled away had been worth it.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary. Did he ask you out or something?" Sara said tossing her a warm cloth from the bathroom.

Haylie looked up fast from the data pad and barely managed to catch it. Better not to lie to Sara. She'd know anyway. "Briel don't date. They find their mate through some

weird biology trick and stay with that person forever. The ambassador and I were...ah...discussing it earlier tonight."

"Really? Damn." Sara actually looked disappointed.

"Why?"

"Oh nothing. There was a really nice Briel doctor that I met tonight. Never mind."

Interesting. "Hey, I'm not entirely sure how it works. Don't give up on your doctor yet."

Sara waved Haylie's concerns away. "So you met up with the ambassador? I leave you for a few hours and you develop a social life? What else did you do tonight?"

Images of Kamran devouring her breasts sent a tremor straight to her clit. Squirming where she sat only increased the sudden buildup of desire. If she didn't do something to relieve herself there was no way she'd get any sleep.

It took a minute for her head to clear, but she felt her face heat. Thank god, Sara was too busy getting changed to notice the blush. "I went for a short walk and ran into Administrator Donaldson. He told me to call him Sean," She tried to mimic Sara's earlier announcement and was rewarded with a giggle from her friend. "I then ate at a Briel restaurant and...ah...spent some time in the observation room before coming home."

"Wow, you're on a roll. An ambassador and the colony's administrator in the same day. And you've only been here, what, seven hours? I'm thinking coming here was a good idea for your sex life."

Haylie couldn't help but laugh. "You have no idea."

A now changed Sara collapsed on to her bed. "I don't think I'll move for a week." Her voice was muffled by the pillow.

Haylie shook her head. She'd been so wrapped up in her own affairs, she'd selfishly neglected her friend. "I'm sorry. How is your patient? I heard there was a problem with an environment suit."

Sara rolled onto her side and yawned widely. "The miner will be okay. Some sort of freak accident with the oxygen controls. I'm going to go back early tomorrow to check on him. Hopefully, I'll get to squeeze in a tour of the entertainment district once I'm done. This is quite the station."

"You've got that right. Get some sleep. We can chat at lunch tomorrow." As Haylie spoke, she swung her legs under her own sheets.

"Sounds good. Maybe you can take me to that Briel place you found tonight." Sara managed to say through a yawn.

"It's a date. Now get some sleep."

Haylie watched her friend pass out from exhaustion, before turning off the lights and closing her own eyes. Sleep conquered her quickly.

Despite what he said, her dreams didn't focus on Kamran. It was a strange sensation. She knew she was dreaming but couldn't quite force herself to wake up. It

was like seeing herself on one of the security vid screens. The dark halls in her mind mirrored the station. In her dream, Haylie watched as she walked down a narrow corridor, leading to a room at the end. That wasn't in the schematic. *Was it?*

The door was locked. She didn't have to try to open it to know. What was behind it?

Open it. Administrator Donaldson spoke in her ear. He stood behind her, causing goose bumps to crawl across her skin. His nearness was familiar yet alien at the same time.

Haylie wanted to run away, but Donaldson prevented her by wrapping his arms around her body.

Go on. You have the key. I know you want to see what's inside.

She shook her head violently from side to side. Why was she so scared? Haylie wanted to tell him it was locked, but she knew he wouldn't believe her. She closed her eyes and found her back was being pushed against the corridor wall. Donaldson stared at her, expressionless.

Since you don't want to see what's behind the door, maybe you'd rather be with me.

Her mouth opened, but the words of protest didn't come. Donaldson slid his face close to hers with the steady persistence of an ant. She couldn't move. She hated not being able to do anything. She watched, trying to scream at her other self to get out of there, but with no success.

Donaldson kissed her. Haylie felt the contact of his skin. The cold methodical way in which he moved his lips against hers. There was no passion in the press of skin against skin, no butterflies in her stomach or pleasure humming from her core. It was like he wasn't really human, only a husk of a man.

When he pulled back, he smiled. It was then that Haylie saw that he was missing all of his teeth. She watched her own mouth open in surprise and quickly turn to horror as Donaldson morphed into some kind of monster.

She began to run then, the Donaldson monster only a few feet behind her.

Quickly turning a corner, Haylie found herself suddenly bathed in soft amber light. The monster couldn't enter the room and it howled in rage at the loss of its prey.

Haylie couldn't quite make out the shapes in her dream room. They appeared tall, but shapeless. She tried to call out to them, but her voice still wouldn't work.

Haylie.

The voice that called her name was familiar and she struggled to place it. *Haylie*.

Nearer now. The glow of the room dulled into a brown wash. It was then she felt the touch on her shoulder.

"Yo, Haylie. Wake up already."

Sara gave her one final shake before Haylie managed to pry her eyes open.

"What?" Her voice was gravelly, but she was relieved that she was able to use it.

"What do you mean, what? Time to get up."

Sara stood in a crisp jumpsuit, her new uniform. Haylie gave her head a sharp shake, trying to clear the cobwebs.

"What do you mean, 'time to get up'? I just closed my eyes. This better not be one of your jokes, 'cause I'll flatten you."

Sara quietly walked over to the wall console. "Computer, time please."

"The time is zero eight hundred hours and fourteen minutes." The clipped sanitized voice promptly replied.

"Holy crap." Haylie threw the covers back and bolted to her trunk.

"I think the travel and all your excitement yesterday, pardon the pun, did you in. Want some breakfast from the food dispenser? It does a reasonable impersonation of bread. Oh, and they've perfected coffee!"

Haylie hardly heard as she ripped apart her clothing trunk. "What...oh yes. Bagel, please. With butter."

"Trying the fake dairy. Brave girl. You know the two of us are going to have to remember to unpack sooner or later. I'll never find a man if I'm dressing in my uniform all the time," Sara said as she slipped her medical coat on over her jumpsuit.

Ignoring her friend, Haylie quickly set to work cleaning up. The image in the mirror was nearly as scary as the monster in her dream. Mentally pushing those thoughts away, she tried to focus on preparing for the day.

In record time, Haylie slid into her new uniform. The sleek, composite body armor was still stiff and rubbed her in interesting places. If the thick coating wasn't so important in keeping her safe from laser blasts, she would have changed into something more comfortable. Now that she was officially on duty and people would recognize her, the chances of her being a target had increased. Next, she set about tackling the mess of hair and managed to force it into a thick braid.

Sara thrust a round, darkened blob that looked like bread under her nose. "Here, eat. You still have lots of time to make it."

"I hate being late. Especially on my first day."

"You're not late. Well," she fixed the collar on Haylie's uniform, "not yet anyway. Eat, get a coffee. Give yourself a few minutes to wake up."

"I hva metn aa nin."

"And I'm supposed to know what you just said? I know your father told you not to talk with your mouth full." Sara smiled.

Haylie swallowed. "I said I have a meeting at nine. I have to haul ass."

Haylie gave Sara a quick hug and shoved the rest of the bagel in her mouth.

Sara's voice chased her out of the apartment. "I'll come find you at lunch. You can take me to your spot."

The echoes of her footfalls bounced around the corridor behind her as she moved in record time toward her office. She would have thought it would be an easy record to break, considering she'd walked it slowly the last time. Things were never that easy for her. The corridors were filled with people moving about doing their daily tasks. The halls that were dead a few hours earlier, now buzzed with life.

She heard hellos from some of the new arrivals and waved as she zipped past them. The sun shone through the small windows in the hall of the living area, casting shadows on the floor. Haylie jogged in and out of the light and dark patches on the floor, wishing she'd had a few minutes to stop and take in the sights of her new home.

She passed the hallway that led to the entertainment section and paused. There were two human guards flanking the entrance and neither looked impressed. It seemed a useless assignment for a security team that was dangerously understaffed to begin with.

Haylie smiled. She couldn't pass an opportunity to introduce herself, and to see how her new crew would react. Spinning on her toes, she made her way to the guards.

"Gentlemen," she said briskly.

The first guard barely paid her any notice, but the second straightened immediately.

"Good morning, Chief."

"Shit," the first guard said and also straightened. "Morning, ma'am."

"Gentlemen. Why are you posted here?"

"Ma'am, Administrator Donaldson wanted the bar down the corridor closed for a twenty-eight-hour time period. We had an incident last night where a miner was killed in a fight."

What the hell? "Killed? I was here last night and there was no indication of a death. Did this happen inside the bar or where the suspect who was arrested?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am. We were only given our orders at the last minute this morning."

"Please, Chief is fine. Ma'am makes me sound like my mother or like I'm eighty."

The second guard smiled. "Yes, Chief."

She was going to have to look into this further to figure out what the hell was going on.

"I believe there is a meeting scheduled for later today to introduce myself to the security staff. I will see you both later." She nodded, turned and left.

As Haylie was walking away, she heard the first security guard whisper, "A girl? He'll be rid of her faster than the first one."

Something strange was definitely going on here. If she'd had a bit more time she would have gone back and asked the man what he meant. She'd remember to do that later.

Haylie took a single breath before she stepped into the range of the door sensor and walked into her office. Donaldson was already inside and sitting at her desk.

"Good morning, sir. Haylie Bond reporting for duty," she smiled as she nodded a greeting.

"You're two minutes late, Bond. I hope this won't be repeated again." Administrator Donaldson said, a clear edge in his voice.

She frowned when she realized he was serious. "I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

Donaldson rose and moved smoothly toward her. He showed no expression until he stood half a foot from her. Haylie couldn't stop herself from staring at his mouth. Only then did he smile.

"Not to worry. I remember the last influx of new staff had problems adjusting to the time difference here. At least you're not late for the meeting."

She was about to ask what meeting when she heard the door open behind her.

"Ah good, Ambassador, we can start."

Haylie turned to stare at Kamran.

Chapter Six

Kamran watched to see if there'd be any change in Haylie's demeanor. There wasn't. He shifted his gaze to look at Donaldson who was standing far too close to Haylie for his liking. He was able to relax only once she took a step away from the administrator.

"Punctual as always, Ambassador," said Donaldson in that tone that grated on Kamran's nerves. He hated that Donaldson could get to him so easily these days. He seemed to enjoy taunting Kamran, no matter how subtly.

"I believe I'm a few minutes late. And I apologize for that."

"Not at all. A few minutes are hardly to be noticed."

Haylie's jaw tightened and she locked her hands behind her back. Kamran had spent enough time with her to know that she was angry about something.

"How rude of me," Donaldson spoke again, "I don't believe you are acquainted with our new chief of security. Ms. Bond, this is Ambassador Kamran."

Haylie smiled and extended her arm. "We actually had the pleasure of meeting last night. Nice to see you again, Ambassador. I forgot to mention how much I enjoyed your speech yesterday."

The warmth of her skin as he wrapped his hand around hers traveled up his arm and seeped into the rest of his body. He couldn't stop himself from running his finger up the length of hers before he released her hand.

"Thank you, Ms. Bond. Though it wasn't quite what the administrator had in mind."

Averting his gaze from Haylie's hazel eyes to the black pools of Donaldson's, Kamran wanted to see if the comment elicited a response. They had spent hours revising his speech, Donaldson wanting very specific information relayed to his new citizens.

But in typical fashion, there was little reaction from the administrator. He hadn't been himself for well over a year now and Kamran still couldn't figure out what had changed. At one time he'd considered Sean a close friend. Now, they barely spoke outside of official capacities.

"It simply wasn't what we discussed. However, in the stead of accuracy, brevity will always suffice."

Kamran fought his body's impulse to stiffen. He'd be damned if he'd give in to the flash of annoyance. That was exactly what Donaldson wanted.

The shocked look on Haylie's face caught Kamran's attention. He was impressed with how quickly she'd regained her composure, and his annoyance changed to pride.

Haylie had pulled her dark brown hair back into a braid that hung straight down her back. It had always amazed him how human women were able to do that. While completely functional, it accented her round face and dark eyes. Her standard issue uniform clung tightly to her. His cock also noticed and he was thankful his tunic covered the evidence of his arousal.

She was beautiful.

"Well, now that the introductions are completed, we can begin." Donaldson's voice was overly loud in the small security office. Or maybe his presence was what made the room feel small.

Donaldson motioned for them to gather around a flat-paneled computer terminal tucked away in the back left corner of the room. Kamran had been in the security office only a handful of times over the years and it felt strange to be here now. There had been little need with Taber keeping a watchful eye on things and keeping Kamran informed. Despite that, he immediately associated this room with Haylie. She seemed in her element here, instinctively fitting in to the environment. Without being told what to do, Haylie quickly took the seat in front of the terminal, logged onto the system and waited for further instructions.

Kamran was hoping to catch her eye, but she didn't look his way again. He wanted to talk to her. He could feel her prickling annoyance, but if it was directed at him or Donaldson, he couldn't be sure.

Donaldson stood to the right of the terminal, reached over Haylie and tapped several commands into the computer until a schematic of the colony and statistics of the planet covered the display screen.

"As you may or may not be aware, Ms. Bond, this colony is in constant danger of being invaded. The ambassador has been working closely with a race known to us as the Ecada."

As Kamran spoke, he studied Haylie's profile, memorizing each line and freckle. "The Ecada claim that the humans who first colonized this planet had done so illegally. While my people are not aware of any land claims made in this sector, the Ecada argue that they were in the process of terraforming the planet."

Donaldson nodded once in agreement and Kamran watched as the other man subtly stared at Haylie's body as well. The administrator seemed particularly taken with her breasts, his gaze lingering there a moment too long.

He forced his jaw to relax and took a deep breath. Jealousy would not be an appropriate reaction if he wanted to maintain his impartial façade. But every time Donaldson's gaze would dip down to study her breasts, her tapered waist or the creamy skin of her neck, Kamran's muscles clenched tighter.

"There were several reasons you were asked to come to this colony. We needed a replacement for our last security chief, who vanished almost ten months ago. We needed someone with both the skills to control a colony as large as ours and someone who is comfortable working with non-humans."

Haylie's hands froze over the keypad and she whipped about to face Donaldson. "Missing? I was told he resigned his post after a short service here."

Why hadn't Donaldson told her the truth? Kamran looked at the administrator for an answer, but the man merely shrugged.

"We found no foul play in our investigation. It looked as if he'd left the station in a hurry, taking only the bare essentials. I'm told that his psych profile wasn't entirely accurate and that he may have lied on the stress test."

"So he grabbed his bags and left." Haylie didn't sound like she believed him.

"It can happen to the best of us, Ms. Bond." Donaldson didn't sound like he cared. He stiffened, scowling down at Haylie. "I'm sure he'll turn up on a supply shuttle or on one of the other mining ships soon enough."

What was going on here? Kamran cleared his throat and the two looked at him.

"It sounds like there was a miscommunication between here and Earth. I'm sure Ms. Bond will have many questions. May we move forward with our current problem?" Kamran said, keeping his voice calm and reassuring. The last thing he needed was for the humans to begin fighting amongst themselves.

Haylie closed her eyes for a second before speaking. "My apologies, Ambassador. Administrator, after we're done here, could I trouble you for the ex-chief's file? I would like to make sure I have all the information in front of me."

"Of course, of course. I'll release it to you."

Kamran watched Haylie regain her composure. He was impressed she could do that so quickly. He'd heard the rumors that many believed she wouldn't last long. If any of those people had seen her now they would rethink it their opinion.

She nodded. "Please continue with the briefing, Administrator."

Donaldson smiled. When he spoke again, his voice had returned to its normal impassive self. "The other reason you were hired was for your expertise in information security. The current hostilities with the Ecada have mostly been a war of words and data. We need to ensure that none of that information has been tampered with while the ambassador is in negotiations."

Haylie wasn't quite able to lose the edge to hers. "I know I'll be able to live up to both those expectations."

"I hope so, Ms. Bond. Otherwise, I'll be forced to send you home and begin my search again for another new security chief." Donaldson sniffed at her.

Haylie's fingers froze mid-air, her head snapping around to stare at Donaldson. She opened her mouth as if to respond but seemed to think better of it. When she finally turned to Kamran, he could see her frustration.

"Ambassador, perhaps we could meet for a few moments to discuss your concerns. That way I will best know the way to proceed."

"Well, I'll leave you two at it then. Please keep me apprised of any changes, Ambassador. I'm looking forward to finally resolving this matter." Donaldson nodded curtly to Kamran, gave Haylie a final once over and strode from the room, the whoosh of the closing door filling the space behind him.

Then they were alone.

Kamran sat motionless. Haylie was angry, not even aware of the proximity of their bodies. He was. With each movement that brought her closer to him, his body reacted. His already stiff cock was tortured by her scent, overpowering his senses. Her anger intensified the pheromones pounding through her blood, out through her pores to torture him.

Her hands resumed tapping away at the key pad. He should be equally concerned about Donaldson's behavior, but it was the furthest thing from his mind. He'd spent all night trying to force her face, scent and taste from his mind. This morning, he'd managed to get his libido under control.

From the minute he'd walked through the door, his body had stirred to life. Now it was completely out of control. He had to shift in his seat, thankful that his clothing wasn't like the tight-fitting uniforms the humans wore.

This wasn't going to be easy.

Haylie's mumblings brought him back to reality.

"What was that?" he prompted.

"I said, can you believe that guy. He practically threatened to fire me. Shit, he even accused me of being late this morning. I was here before you!"

"Haylie..." He needed to calm her down. His body couldn't handle her intensity right now.

"Don't *Haylie* me. You're not my father. I worked my ass off to get here and that asshole has done nothing but lie to me. What the hell is going on in this place?"

"I'm not sure. But there have been some strange occurrences recently. That is why I sent you the note last night."

Kamran couldn't help but stare as she worked on the computer. Her anger had brought a flush to her face and her eyes were bright with emotion. Her breathing was faster than normal, each intake thrusting her breasts high in the air. All he wanted to do was throw her over his shoulder, take her back to his room, strip her naked and suck on those breasts for the rest of the day.

Well...maybe not the rest of the day. He had a few other things he wanted to do as well. Like slowly lick every inch of her body before ramming his cock into her over and over again until she screamed his name.

"What is this problem you would like to discuss, Ambassador?" Haylie's voice was even, if a bit husky.

She had no idea the battle he was fighting.

His blood pulsed in his ears. "Pardon, Ms. Bond?"

Haylie turned to look at him and gasped. He wanted to smile, but that would have wasted valuable energy that he currently needed to stop from throwing himself on top

of her. He could tell she knew Donaldson was the least of her worries. Haylie licked her lips, her eyes roaming over his face.

While her uniform accentuated her perfect breasts, it showed him very little of her flawless skin. It would only take a second to have the computer darken the privacy screen so he could strip it off her and fuck her senseless.

"Ah, Ambassador, your...note mentioned there was a problem you would like to discuss."

"Kamran. Call me Kamran. Give me that small pleasure." He knitted his fingers together to keep them from reaching out. He had to keep control of his desires or else they'd never be able to keep up this charade.

"What if someone comes in and hears. Won't that draw suspicion?" Haylie tilted her face ever so slightly toward him, her braid sliding from her shoulder to hang over her chest.

Without thinking, he reached out and pushed her hair back, exposing her neck. He caressed the soft skin for a moment before letting his hand drop. A jolt of energy passed between them at the contact, sending a renewed blast of lust through his body.

"Kamran." Haylie's voice was soft, almost desperate sounding. He knew she wanted him as badly as he did her.

Every muscle in his back and neck was screaming at him to relax or take action. But he couldn't. He was trapped in limbo with nowhere to go. Mates weren't meant to live like this.

"We knew we were going to be forced to work together. Let's keep our time together as short as possible. Then we can go about our business. Move on."

"Move on? Is that what you want to do?" she said, her voice strained. Her expression was not the relief he'd expected to see. She was hurt.

He sat up straighter. "I thought that was what you wanted as well. Leaving the colony and living on my home world didn't seem very appealing to you last night."

Kamran's heart was racing. Haylie sat there, staring wide-eyed at him. It would only take the slightest hint on her part, that she was wanted him and damn the consequences. In that moment he would willingly give up everything to be with her.

He watched her eyes light for a moment before she looked away. His heart sank.

"Hell no. Would you want to pick up and move to Earth with a person you'd just met a few hours ago? I don't think so," she said with a distinct lack of conviction.

When Haylie moved to stand up, Kamran quickly pointed to something on the screen. "Sit down. We are being monitored in here."

Haylie continued to stand but instead of leaving, she touched a few buttons that were just out of reach on the monitor before sitting back down.

As she spoke, she nodded and smiled slightly. However, her tone of voice told him how angry she was. "What the hell do you mean we are being monitored? We're in my security office. You didn't say anything about it last night."

"Bring up something on the history of the Ecada for me. After you left me, I received a message from Taber. He received word earlier in the day that Donaldson has placed monitors in most of the human areas of the station. Video only. When he found out I was with you, he wanted me to know immediately."

Haylie shivered. "That son-of-a-bitch," she said, then froze. "Shit, what about the observation room?"

He'd shared her panic earlier. "I had him scan the room. He couldn't find a recording device. If Taber couldn't find one, then there isn't one to be found. It seems we were lucky."

"Thank god. Wait, did you tell Taber why?"

"He knows already. He's as close to me as family. I'd never be able to keep such a thing from him. There are too many changes to my personality."

"Oh."

Haylie seemed to accept this far too easily. He knew she didn't understand. With every passing day it would be harder and harder for them to pretend there was nothing between them. The more their bodies grew in tune with each other, the more obvious it would be. And not only to the people who knew them, but to everyone.

"Taber's going to spend the day scanning the Briel quarters, in case Donaldson's managed to get some cameras in there without our knowing."

"Wouldn't that break about half a dozen treaties we have with your people?"

He reached out and brushed her hand with his. Even the slight contact was almost too much for him. Kamran ground his teeth together painfully until his lust ebbed.

"Yes, but I don't think Sean is worried about that any longer."

"I'll scan my own quarters once I get off duty. I'll have to do it before Sara gets home or she'll ask a million questions."

Action. He was beginning to understand her. She needed action, something to do in order to feel in control of her life. Even now he saw the tension was starting to melt from her face.

"So the computer glitch you mentioned in your note was referring to the cameras? I want to be sure I'm not missing something else."

He wasn't sure, but she almost sounded disappointed.

"That was why I sent the note. Was there something else you wanted to...discuss?"

"Nope, simply wondering."

They sat in silence for a minute, the only motion in the room was the computer screen as it searched through the mountains of data stored on the system. Kamran looked over and watched Haylie rub her thumb over her fingertips.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked.

Before she could answer, the computer beeped at them.

Haylie's voice had lost its angry edge. "There are one thousand and eleven articles on the Ecada. How would you like me to cross-reference them?" She turned to look at him, clearly puzzled. "What makes you think I wasn't feeling well?"

"You seemed bothered by Donaldson earlier. And it was more than him threatening to replace you. Did something happen before I arrived?" He paused before adding, "Bring up any Briel articles referencing this planet. You'll find them in a separate section of the database."

Haylie took a deep breath as her fingers worked frantically. Kamran stared at the speed in which they moved.

"No, Donaldson didn't do anything. But I had a dream last night."

"I told you that would happen." At least something was predictable between them.

"No, this wasn't of you. The dream was..."

She stopped and frowned.

"The dream was what?" he asked. She couldn't stop mid-sentence like that!

"Shhh. Let me read."

There was something in the tone of her voice that pulled him out of his lust-induced haze.

"What's wrong?" Leaning forward, he tried to see what had intrigued her in the reams of data.

"I'm not sure. But...that can't be right." Haylie's curiosity was all encompassing.

She readjusted her chair before bringing up a document. The crest at the top indicated it was an official council report.

He scanned it quickly and tried to find a problem with the information before him. "This is a standard Elder Council planetary survey. Our people create one of these for each new habitable planet we encounter. Everything seems to be in order."

"Is it the survey for this planet?" She faced him fully, her rich hazel eyes wide.

And, for a moment, he forgot to breathe. The contrast of her dark hair against her pale skin was mesmerizing.

"Kamran?"

"Sorry." Re-reading the document was a thankful distraction. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Yes, this is one of our preliminary land assessments for this planet. Why?"

"I'm not sure, but there's a check sum mismatch here."

Kamran sighed. "I'm going to pretend I know what that is supposed to mean."

Haylie began to sort through reams of data as it scrolled continuously over the screen. Kamran could feel her heartbeat increase, smell her excitement as she attempted to solve the puzzle. He couldn't follow the complexity of the code and chose to watch her instead. It was a far more enticing sight.

"Anything?"

She turned to face him, eyes wide and sparkling with excitement.

"I still have some work to do. But it looks like someone hacked into the document and was tampering with it."

"Hacked?" He needed to brush up on his human idioms again.

"Tampered, changed, altered – usually for not very nice reasons."

Holy maker. "No one has ever tampered with Briel reports before. The security in place is more than adequate to prevent someone from breaking in."

In all his years as ambassador, he had never encountered something like this. The council would have to be notified.

"Well, someone has shot down that theory. Look, see this," she pointed to a serial number that seemed out of place on the screen, "that's a marker. Hackers love to leave them when they've done a job. It's their way of pissing off security. We can track what jobs they do by their markers but can't trace the marker back to them."

"Where would we find such a person? We need to know what he did."

"He or she could be anywhere. But with the security that the colony has on its data feed, I'll start by checking the station first. Even that isn't the right question," Haylie said. She touched his arm and he instantly felt her excitement course through him.

His heartbeat matched hers as a surge of adrenaline pounded through his blood. He wasn't merely engaged by her excitement, he was absorbing it.

Kamran's throat was dry. "And what do you suggest is the right question?"

Haylie didn't speak. Her eyes were focused on the spot where their bodies connected. She began to move her fingers over the warm skin of his arm, flexing them as she went. She wanted to do more. She wanted to slide her hand up his arm and across his chest. She wanted to pull open his jacket so she could lean in and kiss his neck.

Kamran inhaled sharply. *He knew*. How was he able to know what she was thinking? Not guessing at thoughts and feelings, but truly knowing what she wanted. The noise of his surprise was enough to break the momentary spell they were under. Haylie removed her hand, but reluctantly so.

"Who," she said, he voice shaky. She coughed once and started again. "Who would want to tamper with documents of this nature? Humans would need this to be accurate in order to prove the legitimacy of their claim on this planet. And the Briel would not gain anything by altering the files."

She still faced him, and Kamran had to look away to focus. He wasn't going to be able to do this. He couldn't think straight when he was in the same room as Haylie. How would he be able to work with her on the tampering problem if he couldn't be near her?

Distance. That's what he needed. Kamran stood and began to move around the room. After a moment, his head cleared and he could concentrate once more. He could feel her watching his every move. For the moment he had to ignore her.

"Perhaps someone wanted to make it look like the Briel tried to incite a conflict between humans and the Ecada. Give the humans false information, knowingly put them in a dangerous situation," he offered.

Her voice drifted to him from over his shoulder, "There's no basis for such a claim. The Briel are respected by most races out there as being impartial. Lord, you're a planet full of negotiators and diplomats."

"Not true. All of our diplomats and negotiators are off the planet."

When he turned, she was smiling at him. "That's crazy. What kind of race sends all their smart, single men off their world?"

"A race with not enough women," he said, returning her smile.

They stayed like that for a while. Looking at each other across the short distance of the room, each of them wanting to do a lot more and both knowing they couldn't. How long could he fight against this?

"So..." Haylie said, turning her face away to stare back at the computer screen, "What do we do from here?"

Kamran could think of a few things, and none of them had to do with the damned computer files. It only took a few steps to return to his chair beside her. He needed to take advantage of their short time together. Once he sat down, he shifted his position so that his back was to the windowed wall and placed his hand on Haylie's leg. He shifted the chair over to block his actions from the camera.

"Don't move," he said.

"What about surveillance?"

He slowly slid his hand up her thigh, "I'm half insane with desire and you're sitting there perfectly calm."

"I'm not—" she didn't finish, sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes as his fingers reached her pussy.

He smiled. "Yes, Haylie?"

He pushed his fingers a bit harder against the spot he knew would send her over the edge, circling her clit. She bit her bottom lip as her hands gripped the edge of the table in front of her. He increased the pressure and could feel her dampness, smell her arousal as her cream began to flow. His cock was threatening to explode, his balls tight against his body. A single touch was all it would take.

"We...shouldn't do this."

"Would you like me to stop?" He withdrew his hand only an inch.

She moaned and swiveled her hips as she sat. She was perfect, ready for him to pound into her over and over. He could see she wanted him and he wanted nothing more than to claim her for his own. But he couldn't move. His hand fell in his lap with a soft thud.

Haylie's eyes flew open. "What's wrong?"

He hadn't intended to stop and now, seeing the look of confusion on her face, he wished he hadn't.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It's okay."

Pain and confusion washed over him. He couldn't tell if the emotions were his or hers. It really didn't matter. He'd made things worse for both of them.

She then made an attempt to change the subject. "Do you want to tell someone in your government about what we found?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Haylie, we need to talk about this. Us."

"I don't think so. You're not very good at finishing your conversations."

He opened his eyes and looked at her. Really looked at her. Her jaw was clenched, the muscle in her cheek jumping from the pressure. Her normally beautiful eyes were clouded over, making it difficult to read her emotions. He didn't need to worry about that. Their bond was growing stronger every second. She didn't like being out of control. Everything he did to her, their whole relationship, grated against her personality. He was the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

All he wanted was to be with her.

He stood quickly, knocking the chair to the floor. The crash echoed in the small room.

"I won't bring this new information about the documents to the council at this point. I'm afraid of how they would react without any proof."

"Kamran?" She reached for his arm.

"Don't." His breathing came out in harsh gasps. He had to get out of here.

"Are you okay?" Her voice was soft.

He couldn't look at her. He had to leave before he lost complete control.

"Please get me the proof of the tampering and I'll be able to get help from the council."

Kamran spun on his heels and left the room as quickly as he could.

Chapter Seven

Haylie's eyes began to itch. The lines of code stood silent before her, refusing to present their secrets.

"Computer, time please." Her voice sounded thick, the words barely making it out of her mouth.

"The time is twenty-hundred hours, twelve minutes." The computer sounded more like a woman speaking to her lover than a machine of wires and circuits.

This wasn't going anywhere.

Several hours earlier, Sara had arrived for their lunch date and immediately left when Haylie looked up at her. She'd commented before that when Haylie fixated on a problem, there was no point trying to talk to her. Apparently, the look on Haylie's face spoke volumes.

Other than that, she'd stopped only once to meet her security crew. The meeting had been brief but informative. The complement of twenty-five officers were exhausted, under-trained and overwhelmed. She had a lot of work cut out for her. She'd promised them she would request additional personnel from Earth. God, even if she recruited some of the miners from the outlying colonies to help it would be something. At the very least she won her team over by the sincere promise to do something about their problem.

After that, she met with the man who'd acted as the liaison between the security crew and Donaldson. He wasn't shy about showing his relief at being free of the administrator. When the men had left and she returned to her desk, Haylie was feeling a bit overwhelmed herself. Not that she was one to shy away from hard work, but this was a lot even for her. She returned to the data files and hoped if she spent enough time staring at her monitor, she'd solve the problem.

It hadn't done a damn bit of good. She was still no closer to figuring out what exactly had been changed in the Briel document. She'd been able to track the hacker's marker to a number of other jobs on neighboring colonies. His real name was Brent Hughes. He'd arrived on the colony three months ago and was working in the mines until yesterday. In the process of locating him, she discovered that he was the man killed in the bar fight last night. That death was a little too convenient for Haylie to ignore.

The only positive thing to have come from this day was the fact that she'd somehow managed to push all thoughts of Kamran from her mind.

Her fingers hovered above the keypad. Their encounter this morning had left her completely shaken and horny as hell. When he'd walked into the room earlier that day,

she'd felt her heart stop. His scent had washed over her, setting her hormones raging again. It was only when Donaldson spoke that she'd been able to refocus. *Donaldson*. He was another problem, one she'd save for another day. When she had the energy to fight.

The lids of her eyes grew heavy, closing of their own accord for only a second. No, she needed to keep going. After a few more minutes, her lids repeated their mutinous attempt to get her to rest.

The yawn didn't help, either. She was about to ask the computer for the time again, try and refocus when she yawned a second time. *Shit*.

"Fine, just a quick nap."

Haylie crossed her arms on the desk to cradle her head. Five minutes, ten tops, and she'd be ready for action.

In the darkness of her mind, she saw Kamran. Somehow this dream was different from ones she'd had in the past. She could feel her surroundings, but they weren't quite within her grasp. She felt a current of energy pulling her toward Kamran. Haylie stepped forward, more on instinct than with curiosity, and found herself within his room.

He was sitting at his desk, his head down, his gaze flicking across a data pad. She looked down and saw that her uniform was gone, replaced with the dress she'd worn the other night. The silk caressed her nipples and ass, tugging at her pubic hair. Her body was humming with arousal.

Kamran looked up and stared. His tunic was gaping at the front to reveal his smooth chest. She stepped toward him, hoping that he wouldn't move.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Once she reached him, she pushed the data pad from his desk to the floor. She replaced them with her body, stretching out on her side. His gaze was on her and she felt the warmth of his body.

"Hi."

"Hi." His voice was deep and rich, pouring over her.

"I think you need a break, Ambassador."

"Really?"

"Really."

He reached for her, running his hand from her rib cage down her side to rest on her hip. She was dripping wet with excitement, but she fought the urge to move. She wanted him to work for it this time.

"That's not where I want you to touch me."

"No?" He smiled.

His hand traveled back up her body, but this time he continued over to her breast. He pinched her hard nipple, driving a sigh from her.

"Is that better?"

"Don't stop."

He nudged her gently onto her back and she was more than happy to comply. Kamran pulled his seat closer to the desk to have easier access to her body. Leaning forward, he sucked her nipple through the silk, her body instantly responding to him. Haylie drove her fingers into his hair, sliding them through his dark locks and pulled his head against her. She needed him closer, needed him to push away her loneliness.

He pulled back only long enough to drag the thin strap of her dress down, freeing her from the damp material of her bodice. He continued to suckle one breast as he teased and tormented the other with his hand. Each flick of his tongue drove her wild. Haylie bucked her hips up, squirming under the intensity of his touch.

"You too." She tugged at his tunic.

The next thing she knew, they were both naked. Kamran rose, his engorged cock jutting out proudly in front of her face. Haylie scooted herself onto her bottom and swung her legs so they trapped him in place.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh."

Her fingers wrapped around the base of his shaft, circling the object of her pleasure. His scent rolled off his body and filled her head. Haylie breathed it in, memorizing it, branding her memory with it. She leaned forward and ran her tongue over the slit in the tip of his cock. He tasted like musk, salty and intoxicating. Again she flicked her tongue over the smooth skin before rubbing her bottom lip over his smooth ridges.

Kamran said something, but Haylie ignored him. She was too intent on her task at hand. She moved her head side to side as her tongue flicked back and forth over his tip. It was his turn to clutch her head, his fingers massaging into her scalp. She kept up her teasing for a few more seconds before she pulled back enough to allow her to run her tongue up the entire length of his cock. She wanted to devour him whole.

"You're killing me."

Again and again she repeated the motion, his cock twitching against her each time she slid her tongue from his base to his tip. She knew that wasn't what he wanted—it wasn't what she wanted. She knew he trusted her enough to take him all the way. Only when she thought he'd adjusted to the sensation did she lean forward and take his tip into her mouth, teasing him as she began to stroke his length with her hand.

"Haylie," he pleaded. She knew he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

Shifting her weight forward, she leaned over and impaled her mouth on his thick cock. Kamran groaned and his body shuddered when she did. She felt him grow in her mouth and was scared that she wouldn't be able to accommodate all of him. With a firm grip on his shaft, she sucked him hard and deep into her. Slowly, his hips fell into a silent beat with her. Stroking in perfect beat to a silent erotic dance. Faster, she increased their tempo, driving him up to orgasm.

"I'm...going to...come...soon."

One final hard suck and she released him. "I want you in me."

She didn't wait for his response. Leaning back onto the desk, she spread her legs wide. She blinked and he was on her, kissing her face and neck. His mouth ravaged hers, his tongue driving deep inside. His cock found her entrance, wet with her arousal. He slid easily into her core and held for only a second before withdrawing almost completely. Again and again he repeated the motion. Each thrust brought them closer to the release they so desperately needed.

Haylie grabbed at him, kissing and licking his ear, his mouth. She could feel everything. Their bodies as they rubbed together, his heart pounding against her breast. She could even feel the hum of his emotions, the possessive need and consuming desire he felt for her. Every thrust brought them in sync, closer together.

Kamran ground against her clit hard until she couldn't hold on anymore. Haylie cried out and thrust her hips up increasing the contact. *So close now*. She was frantic under him, crying and clutching at his back.

"Oh god. I'm coming!"

She screamed and her body shook, every muscle contracting from the force of her release. Kamran cried out with her. She felt the pulse of his cock as his semen poured into her. He collapsed onto her. His hot breath came out in gasps against her ear. Sweat from their bodies pooled on her chest and stomach.

"Ms. Bond?"

"We are so good together," she spoke the words without thinking.

He nuzzled her ear. "Why do you fight it then?"

"I'm not. I'm just..."

Suddenly, he began to fade. She tried to squeeze him, prevent him from going anywhere.

"Kamran!"

"Ms. Bond?"

Haylie jumped awake at the noise. She looked around to find Taber standing beside her, his hand on her shoulder. She was still in her office. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Are you well?"

Depends on your definition of well. She sat back in her chair trying to get control of her body. Her emotions. It had been so real, every touch.

"I'm sorry, Taber. I'm sorry, I must have drifted off to sleep. Guess I'm not awake yet."

"I can see that," the giant bowed his head slightly.

As much as she liked Taber, she needed to be alone. She wanted some time to figure out what the hell was going on. "Is there something I can help you with? I'm afraid I haven't set foot outside my office at all today."

"I've come with a message from the ambassador. He wanted to know if you have had any luck with your research."

Haylie felt the muscles in her back relax slightly as she shook off the erotic aftereffects of her dream. "He couldn't get in touch with me on the viewer?"

"Until this matter is resolved, he doesn't want to trust the view screens. They could be tampered with."

"Point taken." She stood on shaky legs. Her skin was sensitive, her clit hard and wet. "I'll present him with a report in person in the morning."

"He requested that you update him this evening. He has a meeting with the elders in the morning and needs all available information." Taber frowned. "I'm sorry."

Haylie closed her eyes. *No, not tonight*. At least not until she could do something about her arousal. Two minutes alone. While it might not be overly satisfying it would get her through the conversation with Kamran. Right now she didn't think she could keep her distance.

"He wanted me to escort you."

"Of course he did." Haylie sighed. She had no logical reason to refuse. "Let me get a few files together and I'll be right along."

Taber nodded, laced his fingers together behind his back and waited.

Great. Haylie wanted to scream, she was so frustrated. She didn't want to get within five feet of that man in her present condition. Forcing her body to relax, she took a step and immediately stubbed her toe.

"Are you well, Ms. Bond?" Taber was at her side, lending an arm for support.

"I'm fine. Just forgot to stand up today."

Haylie smiled, winced and collected her things. Absentmindedly, she touched her braid, the hair starting to escape its confines. It took a second, but she managed to untangle the braid and quickly comb her fingers through the mass of hair. A quick glance at her dulled reflection in the computer monitor told her she didn't look too messed up.

Well, that wasn't entirely true either. She hoped Kamran didn't care.

"Let's not keep the ambassador waiting," she sighed.

It took a full five minutes before she felt she had control over her arousal. Thankfully, they walked in silence. This whole situation was killing her. One minute she wanted to string Kamran up by his toes and the next she was fantasizing about sucking his cock. Either their bond was growing stronger, or she was losing her mind.

She'd get through this meeting, head back to her place and stand under the steam shower for a while. That would help. Shit, she may even pay for a bath. It had been years since she'd sprung for that luxury. To feel the warm water slide over her body as she washed every inch, massaged every muscle. Now that would be heaven.

Haylie was lost in her thoughts of a long soak in a steaming tub and almost missed the fact that Taber had turned toward the Briel living quarters.

"Ummm, isn't the ambassador's office that way?" She pointed to the left hallway.

Taber stopped moving and looked at her. "Yes. However, the ambassador is in his quarters."

A wave of arousal coursed through her and Haylie stopped in her tracks.

"His quarters?"

"Yes. Is there a problem, Ms. Bond?"

She could think of a few.

"Isn't it a bit unusual for the ambassador to be receiving reports from the human security chief in his bedroom?"

"Not entirely. The ambassador keeps a private office where he does a large portion of his daily work. He receives many reports from a variety of different people from this station."

She hadn't considered that.

"While his bedchamber is close by, I don't believe there have been any meetings conducted there."

Haylie swore she heard an unspoken *yet*. She looked Taber over carefully, but he betrayed nothing.

"Ah. Lead on, then," Haylie said.

They walked for a moment in silence before he spoke again.

"How did you know the ambassador's office was down that hallway? Had you been there before?"

The question caught her off guard. No one had ever questioned her unerring sense of direction. "I studied the station schematics before arriving at the colony."

"You must have a good memory." He spoke but didn't look at her, so Haylie couldn't read his expression.

She stopped again. "Do you find that odd?"

Taber nodded and smiled slightly. "Yes. In my experience, humans have difficulty remembering what they are the meal before. You must have a unique ability to be able to remember detailed schematics of a facility you are completely unfamiliar with."

Haylie blinked. That was the most he'd said to her at any one time. And it sounded suspiciously like an accusation.

"I have a photographic memory."

It was his turn to look confused. "Pardon?"

"Very few humans are able to do this. Somehow my brain is able to remember in great detail the things that I read. I don't know how it works for others, but I see the things like a picture in my head. Images, words, mathematical equations, all stuck there." She tapped her temple.

"A useful skill as a security officer."

"It gives me a headache sometimes."

Taber frowned. "Not many people know of your ability to do this?"

"No. It makes people paranoid. They think I'm going to study everything about them and store it away for a future interrogation," she said.

"But you do. Don't you?"

She shrugged. "Wouldn't you?"

Memories of her last boyfriend surfaced. He wasn't happy when he found out a communication from Earth he'd let her see briefly had been his undoing. She'd spent days deciphering the message in her head. The second she'd cracked the code, Haylie arrested his sorry ass. Smuggling Boost, a hallucinogen manufactured on Luna, to Earth was a very lucrative business. Too bad he was stupid.

Taber gestured for them to move again. "Does the ambassador know?"

"It's not something I bring up in normal conversation. If you think he should know, then I'll make sure to tell him."

"Not necessarily. But he may find it interesting."

Haylie filed that away under the suggestions section of her brain.

They walked the rest of the way to the Briel section in silence. This was the second time she'd made a late-night journey through the station. Everything was cast in shadows from the artificial lights, giving the station a haunted look. There was little life to the place. The people they passed looked drained, barely having the energy to nod a hello to them as they passed. Tomorrow she'd make a point of coming out during the daytime. Maybe things would be different then.

Haylie noticed the subtle differences in layout became more pronounced as they moved farther within the Briel residential section of the station. The halls weren't as harshly lit as they were on the human side. There were plants of some kind placed along the corridor. The long vines traveled along the walls, giving them an organic feel. The air seemed fresher even without the background hum of the air reclamation system buzzing in her ear. Even the paint on the walls was a different color. Gone was the black and gray, replaced with a moss green that added to the feeling of life.

The alien residence felt more like home.

"I'm surprised at the differences between the human and Briel living areas."

"Yes. The ambassador insisted on certain...necessities for our people." Taber ushered Haylie down a long corridor that was flanked by two Briel guards. She noticed an increase in security measures as they moved deeper into the Briel section of the station. Taber had taken great pains to hide their security sensors and cameras. No one was getting into this section without him knowing.

"I take it Donaldson was responsible for the décor on the human side."

"Not surprising, is it?"

Haylie smiled. "No, not at all."

"Some say the ambassador is an idealist. That he sees good in those where there's no good to be found. Unlike some, he truly believes if people are given what they need in this life, they can't help but do good."

"And the administrator. What does he believe in?"

"Order. The chain of command. Rules are the only thing holding a chaotic society together. And he must be the one in charge."

No wonder she got the creeps around Donaldson.

"Not that he's always been like that. But he's changed over the past year," Taber said, and Haylie was sure she detected a note a regret in his voice.

"I got the impression that Donaldson and the ambassador had been friends at one time."

Taber nodded as he slowed his steady march and came to a stop in front of a door. "The ambassador would never admit it, but he misses the friendship they once shared."

"The ambassador's room?" Haylie asked and ran her tongue over her lips.

"Yes. I'd offer to escort you back to your quarters, but I doubt you'll need my assistance."

She smiled at him again. "That's not necessary. I'll be fine."

"I thought not. Have a good evening, Chief."

Without waiting for her response, Taber spun on his heels, nodded to the guard on duty and retreated back up the corridor.

Haylie stood facing Kamran's door, left with the sinking suspicion that this was a bad idea. The guard beside her never made eye contact or gave any indication she was even there.

Now what? Ring the chime, she supposed. He was expecting her, after all. Haylie took a deep breath. The air outside his quarters held no sign of Kamran's scent.

Maybe their bond wasn't as strong as Kamran had led her to believe.

She lifted her hand to trigger the computer sensor when his door suddenly whooshed open. Kamran stood there, his tunic half buttoned, looking concerned.

"Are you well?" His voice sounded as grave as hers had a short time earlier. His eyes were wide, checking her over, looking for some invisible mark.

"Yes. Are you?"

His hair looked as if he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. His tunic, which looked vaguely like the one in her dream, did little to conceal his body. Her heart began to pound as bits of her dream came rushing back. Her mouth watered at the thought of seeing him naked. She felt her body sway closer to his, the invisible pushpull between them more powerful than ever.

Kamran didn't immediately respond, but instead checked the hallway and pulled her quickly inside. The room remained a mystery to Haylie, as his large frame blocked everything from sight. "What are you doing here?" His fingers tightened around her biceps.

"Kamran, stop that. I'm here because you asked me to be."

"I did no such thing. Having you here is the worst thing we could do right now. I have to get ready for a meeting first thing in the morning."

"Well, Taber brought me here at your request. Something about not trusting the vid screens, but needing information."

She looked down at where his fingers gripped her arm. His grip was firm, but not painful. It only took a single look from her and he released her.

"Sorry," he muttered and ran his hand through his hair.

"So, would you like your update now, *Ambassador*, or would you like to continue with the interrogation?"

"Interrogation? I'm trying to do my job. "

"That's what I'm trying to do as well. You need information, I have it."

He started to speak again, but only a groan came out instead. She knew how he felt.

"This is ridiculous. From now on, please use the vid screens. I'm sure they're fine," he said, his breathing labored.

"You were the one who said we'd have to work together. Now, can we get this over with? I'm tired and, other than a ten-minute nap, I haven't slept much recently." Haylie managed to sidestep Kamran, made her way over to what she assumed was a large couch and sat down. She refused to look at him and instead found a painting on his wall and stared at it. At least she liked his taste in art.

"I assumed..." he started.

Impatient, Haylie closed her eyes to keep her temper in check. "Ambassador, would you like me to begin with the accidental death of our hacker in the bar fight last night? Sorry, after the bar fight, but not when he was security's custody. Or perhaps how he did an excellent job of covering his tracks? More than that, how it was surprisingly simple for me to discover his identity *after* he was dead? Or perhaps we can discuss how the information contained in these documents is relatively benign. If you are unwell and would like me to meet you tomorrow in your official office, I can do that also."

When she opened her eyes, Haylie's breath caught. Kamran was staring at her with such hunger in his eyes, she felt her blush immediately warm her face.

"What's wrong?" her words stammered out.

He took a deep breath before he spoke. "I'm going to kill Taber for bringing you here."

"Why?" Haylie felt compelled to bring her hand up to her neck to stroke the sensitive skin. She sighed. "What has you so upset?"

"Another matter, not you. I've been buried in my work all day. I try to sleep and I...have strange dreams. I wasn't prepared to see you. Especially like that."

Haylie felt a surge in her arousal. "Like what?"

She watched fascinated as the muscle in his jaw tightened.

"Sitting on my bed, touching your neck like that."

"Ouch!" Haylie whacked her shins on the edge of the table as she stood quickly.

Kamran didn't move, smiling at her. He looked dangerous, like a predator who has his supper in sight. She liked that he was looking at her that way.

"I knew you were going to do that."

"Just like you knew I was at the door?" She bent to rub the pain from her legs. When he didn't answer at first, she looked up. "What?"

"You spoke my name through the intercom."

"When?"

"When you were at my door. You spoke my name and I answered it. I even had to scramble to get my shirt on."

Straightening to her full height, Haylie paused. It took her a minute to replay what happened in the corridor. Taber had left her, she was thinking about Kamran when she reached for the door...

"No, I didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Speak your name through the intercom. You opened the door just as I was reaching for it. I was standing there thinking about you when the door opened."

"Are you sure?"

Haylie didn't need to replay it again, she knew what had happened. Again she touched her neck. Her skin felt nice under her fingertips, her pulse beating strongly beneath them. She then traced the hollow of her neck.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of the touch, small shivers driving the goose bumps up on her skin. Lost in her own world, she didn't even notice Kamran move beside her.

"Why are you doing that?" His voice was surprisingly close and gentle.

Haylie opened her eyes and felt her skin grow warm. "Doing what?"

"We were talking. You closed your eyes and started caressing your neck. Why?"

She had to give her head a shake, trying to clear the fog. "I...I don't know. I had an overwhelming desire to touch myself there."

"I know why." Kamran brought his hand up, stopping just short of touching her neck. "I was looking at you and thinking how soft you looked. I wanted to touch you right here." His fingers skimmed the surface of her skin.

Her eyes fluttered closed, the sensation too overpowering. "What the hell is going on?"

He didn't answer and Haylie was too distracted by his touch to question further. Kamran slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close. It was only when he pressed his lips to her neck that he began to speak through his kisses.

"Whether we like it or not, we have a bond. That's why we can't stay away from each other. Not for long at least."

The small part of Haylie that wasn't distracted grabbed hold of his words. "How is this possible?"

"I'm not sure, but it's quite apparent." He pulled back from her neck and tilted her head forward so she was looking him straight in the eyes.

"Reading each other's minds is part of this bonding process?"

Images of her naked, writhing in pleasure on top of him in his bed flooded her mind. His mouth quickly swallowed her gasp as he pulled at the zipper of her jumpsuit.

When she imagined pulling out his cock and taking the length of him in her mouth, she heard him groan and he rubbed his groin against her stomach.

Haylie pulled back and smiled up at him. "I think I could get to like this."

Chapter Eight

Kamran knew he was in trouble. Images of Haylie licking his body, stroking him, riding him hard on his bed slid in and out of his mind. He could tell the minute Haylie stopped forcing the images and slipped into a haze of desire. The thoughts she was projecting became more sporadic and much more erotic.

And she hadn't even moved.

They stood locked in each other's arms, unmoving. When he envisioned unzipping her jumper and sucking her puckered nipple into his mouth, she shivered against him.

"We shouldn't be doing this." She spoke, her words hushed. The heat of her breath was quickly absorbed by his tunic.

"We haven't done anything yet."

She was unsure of what to do next, and he knew that upset her. He wanted to reassure her everything was fine. That this connection they shared was a natural thing. He couldn't help but think of Briel and the life they would have if they gave in to these impulses.

Haylie pulled back instantly and moved out of his arms. "This is crazy. I don't know what's real and what's in my head. Or your head for that matter."

"That wasn't fair of me. I shouldn't think of my home, but sometimes I can't help it. What it would be like to bring you back with me. Make you a part of my family."

He picked up a flash of a dark sky, a bright blue planet far in the distance. Haylie's home. Feelings of warmth, belonging, loneliness were quickly pushed away. He'd always assumed she'd been happy back on Luna. Kamran took a step toward her, but the look in her eyes told him she needed space right then.

His head knew that he should make use of her uncertainty and encourage her to leave. Get her out of here before they did something she would regret in her present state. His body, however, had no intention of doing any such thing.

No matter how aroused he was at this moment, he couldn't take advantage of her. Kamran made his way over to the sleek black cabinet that held his special reserve of Hapes. When he set two glasses on the table and filled them with the black liquid. Haylie eyed them suspiciously.

"This is a drink from my home world. It is similar to your alcoholic drinks. It has a sweet taste and has been known to calm many people in times of great stress."

She stared at the drink for a long time. Kamran couldn't read her mind, at least not literally. He couldn't choose what parts of her mind he wanted to explore. He could hear her voice in his head sometimes, feel her thoughts as she did.

Right now she was trying to decide between running quickly out of the room and taking the drink.

With a slightly shaking hand, Haylie reached out and took the glass. Kamran released the breath he'd been holding and grabbed the drink he'd poured for himself.

"Now, there is a proper way to drink this. First, you must turn your glass onequarter turn to the left. Then close your eyes and take a sip."

Her brow puckered again. "Why turn the glass?"

"Tradition."

"That's crazy."

"I believe you have similar customs on Earth."

She smiled. "I don't really consider myself from Earth. With the exception of a few years, I've practically grew up on Luna. We usually down our drinks with little ceremony."

"Humor me."

Haylie sighed. "Go ahead."

"Turn and drink." He closed his eyes, took a sip and enjoyed feel of the sweet drink as it slid down his throat, leaving a warm trail in its wake. His eyes opened in time to see Haylie swallow a large gulp of her own.

Her cheeks immediately flushed. "Wow."

Her mass of brown hair fell over her shoulder and rested on her breast. He reached forward and wound some of it around his fingers.

Haylie's giggle vibrated in the room. "I never thought of my hair as an erotic tool before."

Of course she would have picked up on that particular image.

"Briel females don't have hair like yours. Most don't have any hair at all. That's why I find yours so...stimulating."

"And do you really want to see me like this?"

She stood and moved a close distance from him. She sucked on her bottom lip, before tugging down the opening of her jumpsuit.

The goddess be blessed, she was heaven itself. Her nipples stood firmly out as her breasts were freed from the synthetic fabric cage. Her skin was so pale, like starlight beckoning him.

Kamran didn't move until Haylie had finished removing every scrap of clothing that covered her. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the contrast of color that stood shivering before him.

Haylie tried to cross her arms over her breasts, before reaching up and twirling her hair around her finger. He fought the urge to wrap her in his arms and comfort her. His little warrior didn't need coddling. She needed passion.

"Are you cold?" he asked and tried to keep his mind clear of the things he was about to do to her.

"Why? Want to come warm me up?" She said in a teasing voice, a small smirk playing on her lips.

Yes, she was ready to play and Kamran was happy to oblige her. She let out what he could only describe as a squeak as he scooped her up in his arms. She wriggled playfully, trying to escape but he was able to hold her tight. The warmth of her body seeped through the light fabric of his tunic, teasing him. The chance to be naked beside her was the first thing on his mind.

Her lips were soft and smooth. He drove his tongue into her mouth, tasting every corner. The emotions flooded over him, finding the deepest parts of his psyche. Desire and caring. Her arms entwined themselves around his neck for a moment before exploring his body. He felt her press her hands against his back and run her fingers through his hair and across his chest.

Kamran couldn't wait any longer. He yanked his tunic over his head, needing to feel her skin again his.

"What about these?" Haylie toyed with the waistband of his pants as a smiled played on her lips.

"Why don't you remove those?"

He used an image from his earlier dream, her in front of him sucking on his cock as she fondled his shaft and balls with her hands. Haylie sighed, leaned in, took his face in her hands and kissed him hard. Her tongue entered his mouth, but hers was on a mission. There was no softness left in her movements, only raging desire.

Yes! Fuck the rules.

Kamran had to agree with her unspoken thoughts.

Haylie kissed her way down his body, stopping just before the edge of his pants. She then slipped her fingers into the waistband and waited. She smiled shyly before inching the edge down. Haylie kissed each inch of his body as it was revealed. His skin burned where her lips touched it. Kamran almost came undone. He had never been with a woman before Haylie. But he now understood why Briel held bonded relationships with such reverence.

When Haylie ran her tongue around the tip of his cock, his entire body stilled.

"Does that please you?" Her voice sounded both far away and right in his head at the same time.

Yes.

He wasn't sure if he had spoken the words or merely thought them. It didn't matter, as Haylie continued to lick up his length. Her hands cupped the sensitive skin of his balls, massaging them until Kamran thought he would explode.

Knowing he was close, Haylie pulled back.

"Not yet. I don't want to rush this time."

"I'm a diplomat. I know when to not argue."

When he was able to open his eyes again, Kamran saw Haylie sitting beside him on the bed. Her full breasts were flushed and the nipples were puckered.

"What do you want to explore?" Haylie opened her arms, inviting him to choose.

The calm, diplomatic demeanor he'd taken years to build disintegrated in seconds. Selfish want overpowered him and he pushed Haylie back on the bed. To hell with what was right or proper. This woman was his and he was hers.

"I find every part of you fascinating. But this intrigued me," he spread her legs and ran his thumb along her clit, "last time we met."

He felt rather than heard Haylie suck in a breath. She was so sensitive there, her pleasure infectious.

Kamran bent his head and deeply inhaled her scent. And, as he had done only a night earlier, he leaned forward and took her sensitive nub into his mouth. Her legs tightened around his head as he sucked and licked her.

Haylie moaned and he could feel her swell under his tongue. When he took a deep breath all he could smell was her musk. Combined with the alcohol, his head began to spin. He ran his hands along the inside of her thighs memorizing the way her skin felt under his touch. She groaned and spread her legs wider, giving him better access. Her body began to vibrate, she was so close to the edge of release. He wanted to feel her euphoria again, feel the pleasure that caused white light to blind her mind.

He moved his hand up to her mound, taking two of his fingers and sliding them into her pussy. Haylie began to thrust hard against them, moaning and thrashing above him. She was so wet, ready for him to thrust inside her, claim her for his own. He kept one finger inside her and teased the rest of her swollen skin with the other. Her hand flew to the back of his head pushing his face close.

When she began to scream, he sucked her hard and thrust both his fingers frantically in and out, prolonging her pleasure as long as possible. Only once he was sure her orgasm was completely finished did he pull back, rising to his knees. His face was wet from her desire and her juices covered his hand. Her eyes opened, still hazed from her orgasm.

"I need you. I need more of you. Please."

Her pleading tone sent shivers of passion through him. If she could push him over the edge to release with only words, he was far gone indeed.

Her legs wrapped around his waist and she pulled him forward. Kamran was off balance and fell forward onto her. Haylie grabbed his face and pulled him down for a frantic kiss. With her legs wrapped around him, he slid into her pussy easily.

It only took several thrusts to realize this wouldn't take long. Either their bond was growing quickly due to their intimacy or Haylie was using her greater experience to push him to a fast release. Her hips pushed against his in sweet torture, milking pleasure from his body. She pulled away from their kiss and stilled her body.

"Roll over. Let me be on top."

Her words didn't make sense. Kamran could only stare at her.

"Here, like this."

She shoved at him gently, pushing him over to lie on his back. With his shaft jutting straight up in the air, he couldn't quite imagine what she was going to do. It was only when she swung her leg over his body and positioned his tip at the entrance to her opening that he understood.

Haylie leaned forward, breasts rubbed against the middle of his chest and the friction caused her nipples to tighten even more. Half sitting up, Kamran sucked her swollen nipple into his mouth.

"Oh god. Don't stop." Haylie ground down hard on top of him.

Kamran wouldn't stop, even if the universe exploded around them.

He continued to suckle one nipple while he reached up and lightly stroked the other. She shivered. He sucked the taut flesh hard and switched to the other breast. His tongue danced around the tip, circling around and around before he covered it completely with his mouth.

"You're amazing," she gasped.

"I'm still a novice."

"God help me when you become an expert."

Haylie was close to reaching climax again and she began to tremble. Relinquishing her breasts, he grabbed her hips in an attempt to control their pace. He wanted to savor everything. Each thrust was unique, bringing them closer.

Suddenly, she stopped moving.

"What's wrong?"

The smile on her face was stunning.

"Nothing. Close your eyes."

Not about to argue he did as she asked. He was rewarded by the clenching of her pussy around his cock. The tightness then relaxed.

"Oh," Kamran managed to whisper.

"Exactly. Just feel."

She continued her campaign of pleasure against him. Tighten. Relax. Over and over. Sweat covered his skin and his muscles began to vibrate.

"I can't take much more of that," he managed to say.

Without warning, Haylie lifted her hip up a moment before grinding back down. She gasped in his ear and repeated the motion.

"Together. Please, together," she said, her words making his skin tingle.

Kamran closed his eyes and tried to recite the Briel constitution in his head. He quickly followed that with complex mathematical calculations. Anything to delay his inevitable release. It wasn't helping.

He licked his finger and reached between them to touch her clit. At his contact, he felt her muscles tighten and vibrate around his shaft. She ground against the contact, bouncing madly on top. She sucked in a breath and cried out. Her orgasm pushed him over the edge. He let go of what little restraint he had left and began to pound mercilessly into her.

Their screams chorused in the room. In the back of his mind, Kamran wondered if Taber would come bursting into the room to see what the problem was. He didn't and they fell in a tangled heap back into the bed. Kamran sighed and wondered if he would ever get used to such a wonderful feeling of contentment.

They lay in each other's arms. Unlike the night before, Kamran knew the name of his mate. He also knew he would do everything in his power to stay with her. But what he wasn't sure of was what was to become of them.

"I don't think we need to worry about Taber." Haylie's voiced sounded otherworldly.

It was going to take a lot of getting used to, having her being able to sense his thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"He must have put two and two together somehow. He gave us an excuse to be together tonight, knowing what would happen."

"I trust him with my life. But Taber has always been a man who believes in the letter of the law, not the spirit. By all rights, he should have reported us to the council."

Haylie moved against him. "Perhaps he would rather see his friend happy than forced to give everything up?"

Kamran chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Let's hope so."

Another puzzle for another time. His thoughts were quickly consumed by a peaceful slumber. With Haylie in his arms, her thoughts and feelings intertwined with his, he found contentment like he'd never known before.

When the intercom chimed, he hadn't even realized he'd been asleep. Haylie miraculously hadn't woken and he took great pains to slip from the bed without waking her.

It only took a moment for him to slip on his tunic and right his hair.

"This is Ambassador Kamran." His voice was surprisingly smooth despite the exhaustion he was feeling at the moment. If only he could climb back in bed...

When Councilwoman Tia's face appeared before him, Kamran immediately knew there was trouble. He adjusted his stance so there was no way she'd be able to see his bed, or the fact it wasn't empty.

"Ambassador? I'm sorry to disturb you at such a late hour." Her voice was strained and held a slight edge.

"No apologies necessary, Councilwoman. What can I do to help?"

"I'm afraid we have a problem. Our envoy to the Ecada home world sent a partial transmission. Only a portion of the message managed to get through to us, which was quite disturbing. I have my opinion as to what this means, but the council wanted to get your opinion as well. You know these beasts better than any of us."

"Of course, Councilwoman."

"Oh, and bring me some of that human coffee. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

"I will." He smiled.

"Thank you."

The screen blacked out and Kamran started to scramble.

"What's wrong?" Haylie's sleepy voice floated from his bed.

"Nothing to concern yourself with. I have to attend a meeting."

"Meeting? It's past midnight..." She pulled back the blanket, revealing her rounded breasts.

He almost fell back into bed with her. Almost.

"I know. Councilwoman Tia thinks we may have a problem. I need to check a transmission that was sent to the council."

"Do you need help? I can get dressed."

"It may be nothing. I'll let you know if it's something serious. Go back to sleep."

Haylie's head flopped back on the pillow. "Okay."

"Rest. I'll see you a bit later."

He assumed the muffled noise emanating from her was her agreement.

It took his eyes several minutes to adjust to the harsh glare of the hallway lighting. As a result, he didn't notice Taber right away.

"She's sleeping. It was a very long day for her in front of the computer."

His friend had the decency not to laugh. "Would you like me to stay here and wait for her, or accompany you?"

"Please stay with her. I'm on my way to meet with Tia. It would be noticed if you were to accompany me."

"Be careful tonight, Ambassador. I've heard rumors in the past few days. There is something strange taking shape here."

Kamran felt his stomach tighten. Taber wasn't an alarmist. "If that's the case," he nodded toward the room, "keep close watch."

"No one will get near her."

The promise of a Briellian protectorate was unbreakable. Taber slipped back into the shadows as Kamran made his way to his meeting.

There were even fewer people around than normal this evening as he made his way to the opposite end of the station. Even the human coffee vendor had disappeared. Councilwoman Tia would have to suffer without her beverage.

As Kamran turned the corner close to the meeting room Tia opened the door and stood in the opening.

"Thank you for coming as such a late hour, Ambassador."

Kamran slowed his approach when something caught his attention. A movement from the darkness.

"Is everything all right?"

"A moment, Councilwoman."

He'd caught sight of someone turn the corner to an adjacent hallway. The human guards who normally held post in this area were absent.

"Hello?" He called and began to make his way toward where the man had gone. The last thing they needed was trouble from some of the human miners. His short pursuit left him empty-handed and he turned to make his way back to the meeting.

Kamran saw the flash of light as he turned. His brain didn't register what had happened until the blast of burning air from the explosion threw him to the ground.

Chapter Nine

Haylie bolted from the bed and stood shaking in the room. The smells of burning wire and melting plastic were everywhere. Bile rose in her throat and she swallowed down the sick taste. Why the hell were her ears ringing?

She shook her head several times, trying to clear away the numbing sensation in her neck. That was some dream she'd had. Or else she'd slept funny. Or both. But even as she thought it, she knew it was more than a dream.

The door chime sounded, cutting through the other noises in her head. It took a minute, but she managed to find her jumpsuit and squeeze it back on. Without thinking, she ran to the door and opened it.

"What?"

"Did you check to see who it was before you opened the door?" Taber barked at her.

Her brain kicked into gear. "I forgot I wasn't home. What's wrong?"

"There's been an explosion. The Ambassador —"

Explosion. She tried to reach out to Kamran using their strange new connection. But she couldn't. She swallowed a lump in her throat and put her hands on her hips. "Where is he?"

"My men are looking for him, don't worry. I need to see that you get back to your room safely."

Haylie's mind kicked into security mode. A loud dismissive grunt escaped her, as she pushed past him and she stalked down the hall. "Like hell. I need to get to the scene."

It only took Taber a moment to catch her. "Ms. Bond, you can't do that. Humans shouldn't be in this section of the station at this time of night. It would raise suspicions if people saw you leave here."

She didn't pause. "A few hours ago, you didn't seem to have a problem with it."

"A few hours ago, most of the station wasn't on high alert. Many have been injured or killed. I need to get you to safety and get back to the scene quickly." As he spoke, Taber moved Haylie down the hall.

But once she got into the junction of the corridor, Haylie stopped. She didn't need Taber to tell her where Kamran was. A large crowd of people were being held back from a corridor on the other side of the bazaar. Large blast doors had been secured preventing further onlookers from getting close to the crime scene. At least something was working properly.

"I'm the security chief on this station. And while the Briel people are your main priority, this station's wellbeing is mine. It would look strange if I wasn't there."

He lightly touched her arm. Not enough to stop her, but simply to catch her attention. "I promised him I'd keep you safe."

"You should have promised to keep him safe!" she snapped.

Much to his credit, Taber didn't back down.

"I promised," he said simply.

She wanted to scream at him, but Haylie knew it wasn't his fault. When she really looked at him, she could see the worry and concern for his friend. His conflicting emotions between wanting to keep his promise and needing to find Kamran. Haylie knew exactly how he felt.

"Fine, you can keep me safe at the explosion site." When he didn't move, she added, "How would you feel if someone wouldn't let you do your job?"

He stared at her long and hard before releasing her arm.

The two proceeded through the throng of people. Many patrons from the bars two corridors down were standing around with their drinks, trying to catch a glimpse of the carnage. *Sick bastards!* Haylie had to push and yell at people to make a path large enough for them to pass. It was only once she was on the other side that the horror of the scene hit her.

She knew there was supposed to be a large meeting room at the end of the corridor. Instead, blasted metal and acrylic plastic were strewn about the hallway. Blast marks scorched the once-gray walls, leaving the telltale signs of where the bomb had gone off. In some sort of perverted way, the design it left could be considered beautiful if it wasn't the harbinger of the current destruction. Haylie tried to force herself to look at the scene analytically and keep to the professional detachment she'd cultivated over years of experience. This wasn't her first bombing and not the messiest by far. But as she moved deeper into the destruction her heart began to race.

Once again, the stench of burning wire struck her. The room's fire suppression system had kicked in and quickly doused the fire in thick foam. What fire it hadn't been able to stop, the emergency personnel did. Now all that was left was to sift through the pieces and try to figure out what was what.

An explosion of sparks from a live wire cascaded down over her from the ceiling and Taber quickly yanked her out of the way. Dread squeezed the air from her. No one could have survived this. The force of the blast had ripped the metal piping from the ceiling. It now dangled from weakened cables, dangerously close to the rescue personnel. She turned to see bodies or parts of bodies being brought out from what was left of the conference room.

"The medics have only been here a short time. They wouldn't have found everyone yet." Taber ground out angrily. She felt his frustration.

"I only see Briel security. Where the hell are my people?" Haylie moved to the computer panel in the hallway and hooked into the security grid. Thankfully, it hadn't been damaged. "All security personnel, report to junction 43-B. This is not a drill." The claxon immediately began to sound, creating another flurry of activity.

Haylie didn't wait. She shut down her emotions and waded into the carnage. Mentally, she went through the procedure manual, trying to think of only the basics. Look for anything that might resemble a bomb. A lot can be learned about the maker from examining the device. Look for a point of origin. Where the device was placed can give an indication of size. She turned back to the blast marks on the wall and tried to trace them back. Her vision blurred and she realized tears filled her eyes. She brushed them away and prayed no one noticed.

Maybe he wasn't in here. Squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed and prayed hard that he wasn't.

Eight disheveled human guards finally arrived, some of them still half dressed in EV suits. The oldest, a woman in her thirties, spoke. "Sorry, Chief. Ten of us were dispatched to a disturbance out at the mine. It turned out to be a false alarm, but it took us a while to get back."

Haylie's temper flashed. Who the hell was messing with her crew? "And the others?"

"They've just gotten off a double shift."

"They need to rest, then. With the Briel here, we should be able to handle things for now." Haylie proceeded to give orders, spreading her people as thin as they could go.

"Haylie!"

Sara's voice caught her attention. When her friend reached her, Haylie could see she was covered in soot and blood.

"You're not bleeding, are you?" Haylie asked in a flash. She couldn't handle it if Sara had been hurt by this too.

"No. This," she indicated her stained suit, "isn't mine. Are you okay?"

Haylie felt her insides quiver, but she'd never let her concern outwardly show. "I'm fine, but Kamran is missing."

Sara's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, hon. I'm sorry."

"He's not dead. I'd know if he was. But he's hurt somewhere."

Sara gave her head a shake, "What do you mean?"

"Later. Right now we need to find him."

"We will," Sara said and gave Haylie a squeeze.

Sara was called away by one of the doctors, leaving Haylie to search on her own. The scene was devastating, and Haylie knew there was little hope of finding anyone alive. The bodies pulled from the room were twisted and disfigured. She wouldn't recognize Kamran's body if he was in there. It wasn't until she was halfway to the meeting room that she saw the adjoining hallway. The destruction carried down there

as well, bits of the wall had fallen, blocking most of the hall. She was about to walk past, to deal with the mess a bit later when something that didn't look quite right caught her attention. She squinted trying to force her eyes to adjust to the dim light. Suddenly she realized what she was seeing.

A leg.

"Medic!" she yelled as she bolted through the destruction. It took her a minute to climb over the heated beam that blocked her passage. Her hands burned as she leveraged herself over the hot metal. When she landed she was suddenly overwhelmed by what she saw.

Kamran was lying unconscious on the cold marble floor. Metal and plastic covered parts of his body. Somehow she managed to pull a heavy metal sheet from his chest. She dropped to her knees, placed her cheek above his mouth and looked at his chest. Haylie held her breath and watched, praying to see his chest rise, to feel the slightest tickle of breath against her skin. Her entire world focused down, her eyes searching for the slightest hint of life. Finally, a light caress of air against her and the slightest movement sent her heart soaring. She cried out with relief before she was shoved out of the way by a medic, who moved to Kamran and slid a plastic mask over his mouth and nose.

Haylie choked back the tears when she saw a light fog condense along the inside of the mask.

Sara was at her side. "Haylie, hon, you have to move."

"I told you he was fine," she said, barely recognizing her own voice.

"Yes, yes, you did. But you have to go now." $\,$

"I had to find him." Her voice was shaky and she was forced to swallow several times.

"And you did. But there are other people who need your help now. I'll make sure you can see him later in the med bay." With a firm grasp, Sara led Haylie from the crowd before taking off to get Kamran to the med bay. Haylie tried to reach out to him again but she was met with a black haze, blocking their connection. One of her men called to her yanking her attention back to the carnage before her. She dove into the mess with more determination than before.

The next few hours flew by for Haylie. She tried to turn off her mind and concentrate on the scene in front of her. Sara and the medical team drifted back and forth over the next few hours with the remains of the victims, finding no other survivors. Haylie started to follow at one point, wanting to see if there was any news about Kamran but was caught by her team. She had her own investigation to conduct. Personal feelings would have to wait.

The remainder of her security staff arrived after getting word of what had happened. As a group they began to wading through the rubble of the meeting room, picking out clues to what had happened.

"Chief?" It was the female lieutenant from earlier.

"Yes, Sweeney?"

"We've found parts of the bomb, but it's going to be a nightmare to find the rest in this mess."

The woman looked exhausted. Haylie felt drained. Shit, how long had they been at it? A quick glance at the rest of her team and she saw they weren't the only two.

"This is crazy. Things are going to get missed." Haylie's head hurt. God, she hoped Kamran was okay.

Sweeny smiled and lightly squeezed Haylie's arm. "We'll get the job done. Not a great first few days for you, Chief."

Had it only been two days? Haylie sighed. "I'd like to say I've had worse starts, but I'd be lying."

"We appreciate you being out here with the rest of us," the other woman nodded and was joined by a few others.

As much as she wanted to find the people responsible for hurting Kamran, she couldn't put her team's wellbeing at risk. They'd all had enough.

"I need two volunteers to stay on and keep watch over the area. Nothing but guard duty," Haylie announced. Every face turned with a glimmer of hope at the prospect of sleep.

"We can look after that, Ms. Bond." It was Taber.

She wanted to immediately jump at the offer, knowing it would mean her people would have the first opportunity for a real break in days. But there was too much at stake to accept it blindly.

"This is a human investigation. I know your people were the targets, but I want to ensure an impartial inquiry." Haylie was a good judge of character. But she still didn't know what to make of her Briel counterpart. "I don't want anything to jeopardize this, Taber. Least of all the suggestion of Briel tampering with the crime scene."

"You know we would never do that."

"I do. But whoever did this must have supporters on the station. Let's not fuel their suspicions."

"Chief, I can stay with them." One of her team spoke up.

"Are you sure, Ryans?" She felt silent relief.

"Yes, ma'am. I have been off shift for a while now. I'll stay with the Briel guards."

"Excellent. Everyone else, this is a direct order to go to bed. Those on Delta shift, I expect to see you back here at oh-seven-hundred. Alpha shift, you man your normal posts. Any questions?"

"What happened?"

Haylie spun to see Administrator Donaldson standing in the doorway. His eyes were wide, like a child who's woken too soon and doesn't know where he is.

"Administrator, you shouldn't be here. It's not safe."

"What happened?" His voice was soft, trembling. It sounded nothing like the man who'd grilled her earlier that day.

"There was an explosion, sir. Didn't anyone tell you?" she asked, still surprised by his reaction.

When he didn't respond, Haylie was concerned something else was wrong. She went to him, slid her arm around his side and turned him from the carnage of the room. He leaned into her embrace and shivered, his eyes locked on to the scene before him until she started to lead him away. She felt his muscles tense and relax, over and over as they moved.

"Let's get you back to your room, Sean."

Sweeney took control of the scene as Haylie slowly directed Donaldson away from the destruction. She reminded herself that she needed to have an official second-incommand. Sweeney was stepping up to the job.

Donaldson was quiet for several minutes as they moved through the now empty hallways. The crowds disappeared shortly after the bodies were taken to med bay. He walked with slow deliberate steps, weaving as they went.

"I heard a loud noise and I came to see." His voice was soft and sounded very far away. If she didn't know better, she'd suspect he was sleepwalking.

Gone was the ice man from earlier. Haylie was surprised to feel him still trembling slightly under her touch.

"There's been an explosion, sir," she repeated, making sure to speak softly.

"Oh dear."

Oh dear? Her anger flashed. Kamran was lying injured in the med bay, countless others were dead and all he could say was Oh dear? She knew she was being irrational and tried to bite back her frustration over what had happened. He barely looked aware of where he was. They moved on in silence.

It wasn't until they reached his quarters that Haylie turned to face him. When she did, she was shocked to see silent tears on his face.

"Are you okay, Administrator? Sean?" Haylie lightly touched his arm.

As her fingers touched his skin, she watched something change in his eyes. Confusion and remorse bled into blank nothingness. His humanity disappeared. She jerked her hand away.

"I am fine, Ms. Bond. Excuse me while I return to bed."

"Of course."

And that was that. She stood alone in the hall, tired and deflated. There was nothing more she could do. Not tonight, at least. Her internal autopilot took over as she walked the distance to her quarters. She was almost there when she came to one of the larger windows that looked out to the planet's surface. The wind was light allowing her to see quite a distance. The sky took on a beautiful shade of purple as the alien sun rose.

The light cast shimmering patterns on the red sand making the high dunes sparkle under the rising sun.

Very suddenly, she missed home. Missed the familiar blue ball of Earth as it floated in the sky above the Luna colony. Missed the beautiful yellow glow of the sun that warmed her, gave life to what she loved. If it weren't for Kamran she would probably consider leaving.

Pushing all thoughts of him from her mind, Haylie scanned her hand to release the lock of their apartment. Sara called out from down the hall and was beside her before she got through the door.

"I had a short break and wanted to find you before I had to go back. Are you okay?"

Not bothering to answer, Haylie moved past her friend and collapsed on her bed.

"Are you hurt? Let me take a look at you."

She squeezed her eyes shut against her tears. "I'm fine, Sara...tired."

Sara's voice came from her bed. "You wouldn't tell me even if you were hurt. Aren't you going to ask about Kamran?"

Haylie rolled over to face her friend. "He'll be fine...right?"

Sara smiled. "He sure will. I'm looking after him. He was in stable condition when I left. He was far enough away from the explosion when it happened that his injuries were mostly superficial. Except for the concussion."

Relief rolled though her, relaxing muscles Haylie hadn't realized were tense. He was going to be fine.

"Hon, are sure you're not hurt?" Sara moved beside her and stroked her hair.

"I couldn't tell he was alive until you put the oxygen mask on him. I should have known."

"I'm not going to pretend to know what is going on between you two. Now isn't the time to discuss it. I'm going to give you something to help you sleep."

She didn't even flinch when Sara pressed the needle into her arm.

"Sleep and we'll talk in the morning. Okay?"

The injection had already begun to take hold, preventing an answer. Haylie tried to form an image of Kamran in her mind. The color of his skin, his eyes and hair were there, but nothing else. His features blurred together and she lost the image as she drifted into sleep.

She could tell the instant she was dreaming. The walls surrounding her were too bright. The corridors were too straight. Her ears were humming.

Haylie had to concentrate to move her head so that she could see above her. The straight lines of the vent cover were blurred, as if her mind didn't want her to see too clearly what was beyond the protective barrier.

Using her arms as a lever, she pushed herself away from the wall and walked slowly down the hall. She recognized that she was close to the med bay where Kamran was resting. She had to mentally force step by painful step to get to him.

When she reached the door, it was already open. Poking her head through, she was able to see Kamran lying on a steel medical bed, a crisp white sheet draped over him in straight lines.

In a blink, she was standing beside him. His olive skin seemed amplified against the whiteness. His eyes were closed and his breathing was shallow. But, as in reality, Haylie knew that Kamran was alive.

She wasn't sure how long she was standing in her dream. Time had no meaning. When she looked up from her post, she realized she wasn't alone. Donaldson stood diagonally across from her.

She got goose bumps at the sight of him.

"What do you want?"

He smiled at her, displaying a perfect set of teeth. "Everything."

"Did you do this to him?" Haylie registered somewhere that she was much calmer in her dream that she was in reality.

"What does it matter to you if I did or not?"

Donaldson didn't move, but the distance between them disappeared. Kamran's bed was suddenly off to the side of the room. Haylie wanted to run, but her body didn't respond.

Don't tell him the truth. Her mind was screaming at her.

Donaldson took a half step toward her and bent down to whisper in her ear. "Don't tell me the truth about what?"

In her dream, Haylie could see the shock on her face, her half gaping mouth snap shut.

She realized she couldn't think, only react. "The truth that I am attracted to the ambassador. And that I am also attracted to you."

That seemed to please him and he licked the length of her neck up to her ear. Somehow she managed not to shudder.

When he pulled away to look Haylie in the face, he didn't even attempt to hide his smugness. "I think you will like me more in the end."

"Why's that?"

The med bay vanished and they were standing on the surface of the planet. Haylie didn't recognize the location, but a mountain range close by hugged around them. The flat area where they stood was protected from the high winds.

Just as quickly, they were back in the bay. This time Donaldson was standing behind Haylie.

"Because the ambassador has no real power."

"But you do?"

His grip tightened around her biceps, "You'll soon see."

Haylie sat up in her bed, gasping. Her sweat-drenched hair was slick against her cheek and neck. She fumbled out of bed, barely making it to the toilet in time.

Sara woke quickly after the first of Haylie's retching.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. The meds must not be agreeing with me."

Haylie managed to pick herself up and make her way to the sink. The thin trickle of water actually felt good against her face. After a few minutes, she felt able to make it back to bed.

"Computer, time?" Haylie asked before gingerly slipping back between her sheets.

She couldn't quite remember the details of her dream. It slipped away much faster than normal.

"Time is oh-nine-hundred hours."

Haylie sat up, her head pounded from the action. That wasn't possible. She got back out of bed and made her way over to the computer. Light from the hallway blinded her for a moment as Sara made her way through the door.

"I never want another night like that again."

"What the hell? I just went to sleep." Haylie tried to shake the fog from her brain.

"It's been three hours. I only gave you a light sedative. You shouldn't be feeling any effects. Maybe you should call in sick today? No one would blame you. "

Sara lightly took Haylie's arm to help her back to bed. Pain shot instantly through her, causing Haylie to cry out.

"What the -"

Cautiously, Haylie pulled her uniform down allowing Sara to inspect the skin. "Computer, full lights."

They both gasped when they saw the dark bruising that had already begun to rise around the biceps.

"Are these finger marks?" Sara took a closer look at the damaged area. "Who did this to you?"

Everything from her dream came flooding back. Kamran, Donaldson, even the strange valley. "I..." But she couldn't answer.

Sara released her arm and sat on the edge of the bed. "Sweetie, you have to let someone in. You can't go through life keeping things bottled up."

"I'm not bottling things up. There isn't anything to tell."

"I think you forget who you're talking to. Are you a coward?"

If anyone but Sara had said that to her, Haylie would have brushed them off. She wasn't easily goaded. Instead, she looked at her friend, took a deep breath and

explained everything. Not leaving out a single detail she talked for a solid fifteen minutes before her story was done. By the time she had finished, Sara simply sat there, unmoving.

Haylie stared back. "Well, say something."

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me that you have found your cosmic soul mate. Who is now in the hospital because someone wanted to blow him up?"

"Yes."

"You are being stalked by Donaldson, who seems to have the hots for you, *in your dreams*."

"Correct."

"You have an alien bodyguard, but you don't know where his loyalties lie."

"No, Taber will do anything to keep Kamran safe. I just don't think he trusts me."

Sara stood and began to move quickly around the room, "And to top it all off, you say there is someone trying to sabotage the colony by hiring, then killing, a hacker to tamper with documents that don't really seem to cause any harm?"

"The really stupid thing is, I can't believe I let myself...I mean, I never thought I'd do this." Her feelings sounded stupid whenever she tried to express them.

"You're not your mother, Haylie."

She glared at Sara. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you're not a bad person for finding someone you care for. It also means you're not going to abandon who you are to follow a romantic whim."

Both women stared at each other. Sara was crazy. Of course she wasn't anything like her mother. She'd spent her entire life in pursuit of everything that was opposite to that woman. Sara damn well knew that. Haylie wanted to yell. Her jaw refused to cooperate by opening.

"I know how hard it was on you and your dad when your mom took off. She said it was fate that she met that guy."

"There's no such thing as fate." The words slipped out.

"No, there isn't. Everything happens for a reason of someone's choosing. That is more painful than fate."

"Kamran wants me to believe that our relationship was preordained or something. Why can't I find a nice, normal guy who happens to like me?" Haylie's throat tightened.

"Who's to say your ambassador isn't that guy? What if we're wrong and you two are meant to be together? Would that be a bad thing?"

Gone was the light-hearted doctor. Haylie really looked at her friend for the first time in a long time. They had both come so far in their lives, changing without really noticing.

"You look older," Haylie said, and smiled.

"I was arm deep in body parts for six hours before coming home to my friend who's being assaulted by her dreams. With experience comes age." Despite her words, Sara smiled too.

"Doctor, I think you need your rest."

"I would suggest the same for you. As long as you promise no more crazy dreams."

"I wish I could." Haylie touched her arm and pushed down the panic that threatened to rise. "I think I might stay up. I need to figure out why someone wanted to bomb that meeting."

"Okay. But wake me if you find anything. You can come with me to med bay to see Kamran later."

Haylie moved over and sat at her computer to see if she could crack the mystery hidden in lines of code once more. She tried to be as quiet as possible and it only took a few minutes for Sara to drift back to sleep. Haylie wished she could sleep too, but she'd rather have something to take her mind off Kamran. As the numbers scrolled past her, her mind drifted to the edge of sleep. She should go to bed. It was then Haylie noticed something she hadn't before, an out-of-place directory.

"What are you doing there?"

Her fingers tapped quickly against the keys, increasing their tempo as her adrenaline began to flow. There was no protection, so it only took her a moment to access the single file buried within.

The same repeating words began to fill her screen, taking her breath away.

The ambassador will die. The ambassador will die. The ambassador will die.

Chapter Ten

The med bay was a torrent of noise when Haylie walked through the doors later that day. The room had the same industrial feel as the rest of the human section of the colony. Instead of gray, the walls were a faded white. There were no windows to the outside so everything was cast in an artificial glow. She noticed a few plants had made their way into the waiting area, mostly shoved into the corner. She detected Sara's handiwork when she noticed some of the leaves were browning.

People were lined up, filling every chair in the waiting room and standing along the edges. Haylie couldn't believe the array of injuries, everything from lacerations and burns to broken bones. A frazzled-looking orderly tried to push past her, but she caught him gently by the arm.

"Excuse me. I'm here to interview Ambassador Kamran."

"Who the hell are you?" He gave her a critical once over.

"Haylie Bond, Security Chief. I need to interview the ambassador as a part of my investigation into the bombing last night." She returned his stare with a look that would have made a hardened criminal squirm.

He made a half snort, half sigh noise. "Ah. Well, I'll have to run it by the boss. Wait here." With a half-step around her, he slipped past and into the chaos.

Great. Haylie waited ten minutes for the man to return. When he didn't, she ground her teeth together and went in search of him.

She began to wander around nodding to the people as she passed. An assortment of people, miners, scientists mostly, smiled and gave her words of encouragement and thanks of her handling of the bombing. She finally came to an injured security officer who tried to stand when she approached.

"No, no, no, don't get up. What happened? Curtis, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm not sure to be honest. I was on patrol earlier this morning when I started getting a pain in my leg. When I looked down, there was a huge cut down my calf. But I don't remember injuring it on anything."

She could see that the man was confused and worried. She gave his shoulder a light squeeze. "No worries. My friend is the best doctor in the sector. She'll have you up and running in no time."

"Thanks, Chief. Are you hurt?" he said.

Haylie's arm twitched, revitalizing the dull ache that had been with her since the dream. "No, I was hoping to speak with the ambassador. An orderly was checking to see if it's okay, but I think he may have forgotten."

"You mean Mr. Sunshine and Roses? He probably ditched you and went on a rest break. I'd like to throw him into a shuttle and kick him out the air lock once we get to deep space. You may want to tell your friend about that jerk."

Haylie tried not to smile but couldn't quite hold it back. "I'll be sure to do that."

"If it's any help, I saw a Briel doctor going back and forth to that back room earlier this morning." He pointed to an area that was separated by a large set of double doors. "I haven't seen him since my arrival, so I'd assume they're keeping the ambassador back there. Probably to get him away from all this noise and craziness."

"Thanks, Curtis. Don't rush back to your shift. If you need the day to recover, make sure you take it."

"Are you kidding? And miss all the crazy shit that's going on around here? I'll be back at it as soon as I get the all clear, Chief."

"Glad to hear it."

She nodded, took her leave and made her way toward the doors. No one tried to stop her and there were no guards posted on either side. She was going to have to hire more personnel. The more she thought about it, the more determined she was to enlist some of the miners into active duty. When she pulled the door closed behind her, a blissful silence descended over her. She assumed this was where they kept the critically injured patients. A series of curtains partitioned the room into private areas. Not wanting to disturb any other patients, Haylie quietly peeked behind each one. After a minute of searching, she finally found Kamran in the last cubicle on the left.

Haylie stepped behind the curtain and sucked in a breath when she saw him. She couldn't tell if he was sleeping or drugged. The rise and fall of his chest was steady, his skin seemed to be back to its normal hue. His eyes fluttered slightly and she saw his hand twitch.

"Kamran?" she whispered.

He frowned and slowly opened his eyes.

"Haylie?"

"It's me. Are you okay?" She slid her hand down along his arm and entwined her fingers in his.

He turned his head to fully face her, disbelief clear on his face.

"Are you real?"

She felt his words like a physical blow. *Are you real?* She could only guess he'd been having the dreams too. She bit her bottom lip when she remembered hers. Kamran had been in the room with Donaldson when she'd arrived. What had he been doing to Kamran?

"Yes, I'm real. How are you feeling? Do you still hurt?" Questions about the dreams could wait for a moment.

Instinctively, she reached out and brushed his hair. There were still chunks of dried blood crusted to his scalp. She wanted to cry but instead she stroked his forehead and cheek, careful to avoid the stitches. She was going to find whoever did this and make them pay.

"Haylie—" Kamran tried to move, but winced at the effort.

"Hey now, take it easy. Sara will kill me if I hurt one of her patients."

He fumbled for her hand. "One moment. I need a moment."

So they sat that way, hands entwined on the hospital gurney, in silence. She surveyed his injuries, trying to keep her fear at almost losing him squashed. He didn't need that right now. He needed her strength to get through this mess. She continued to let her fingers wander over his body, taking note of every cut and scrape. There was a large bump poking from his mass of black hair. There was a large black bruise that resembled a metal bar and rivet on his cheek, along with other various cuts and scrapes. She was surprised at the relief as the weight lifted now that she could actually see him, talk to him. He was going to be all right.

Her diagnosis was succinct. "You'll live."

Kamran winced. "That's reassuring. I have to say, getting blown up isn't pleasant."

She didn't mean to laugh. But she did it anyway. "I'm sorry. You always sound like a diplomat."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, lightly stretching a nearby cut on his forehead. "What would you like me to say? I'm still getting accustomed to human emotional states and as much as I hate to admit it, I don't always get it right."

"Hmm...let me think. How about something like, 'Holy shit, I hurt'. No, that's not you. Maybe, 'Someone shoot me'," she said smiling.

"Someone shoot me." His own voice lacked humor.

Haylie laughed again. "That's better."

Down the hall, Haylie heard the seal of the door suck open. She leaned close beside him. "I bet that's Sara. Probably wondering where I am."

"Haylie?"

"How well you know your friend." He managed a weak smile of his own.

Haylie removed her hand from Kamran's. "I'm here."

Sara pulled the curtain back with a single jerk. She planted her hands on her hips. "What do you think you're doing? Disturbing my patient when he needs his rest?"

"I would never dream of it, Doc."

"How are you feeling, Ambassador? Our overzealous security chief isn't bothering you, is she?"

"Not at all, Dr. Fergus. I believe the chief was going to ask me if I remembered anything about the explosion." He rolled his head to the side and winked at Haylie.

"Do you?" She really shouldn't push him, but he seemed better than even a few minutes ago. Their investigation would be so much easier if they had even a small clue to go on.

"Not really. Though..." he hesitated, his mouth hanging open for a second before he closed it.

Sara made her way over to the bed and checked his vitals. "Don't try too hard, Ambassador. You took a nasty blow to your head. Things will probably be a bit foggy until things have a chance to heal."

"How long do you think that could take? We could really use the ambassador's help in finding the people responsible." Her irritation flared. She didn't want Sara that close to him, touching Kamran in such a personal manner. She pushed the feeling aside and cursed herself. While she wasn't experiencing any of the overpowering lust of earlier, the possessiveness hadn't disappeared. She was going to have to keep herself under tight rein.

"There's no way to know. I don't think the Briel are any better at predicting the outcome of such an injury than we are. Hours? Weeks?"

Haylie pinched the bridge of her nose. "Great."

"You need to get some sleep. You look like I feel, Chief."

She looked down at Kamran, his concern clear on his face. She felt him reach out with his mind, but barely. She smiled, not wanting him to know how deeply affected she'd been by everything that had happened.

She shrugged. "I'm tired. But I've been having some...strange dreams. Kept me up last night."

"That reminds me. I want to hook you up to the computer for a bit," Sara said and beckoned to Haylie with her finger. "Come on."

Sara disappeared into the next area. Haylie was about to follow when Kamran caught her by the hand.

"Dream?"

"Umm, yeah. Not a very pleasant one. It left a calling card too. A nice bruise on my arm."

"Donaldson." His voice barely rose above a whisper.

She shivered.

"Haylie Bond, please." Sara called her name very formally, a short distance away.

"We'll talk soon. Once Sara leaves." She gave his hand a squeeze and left the safety of the cloth room.

When she entered the exam area a short distance from Kamran, Sara was busy adjusting a computer stationed by the gurney.

"Okay, Chief, this will be a full physical. Strip and put on the sexy blue smock. I'll be right back." Sara grinned.

Haylie blinked. She was going to kill Sara.

"You've got to be kidding. You put me through one of these before we left Earth."

"And now you're spawning spontaneous injuries. I want to make sure there isn't anything wrong," Sara said and smiled. "Humor your doctor."

"I'm going to kick my doctor's ass." Despite her protests, Haylie began to undress.

"I'll give you a few minutes to change. I need to get something, anyway," she said and left the area.

It took Haylie longer than normal to remove the jumpsuit. Her hands shook as she unfastened the catch that held her clothing in place and pulled the garment off her sore body. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"You need to relax." Kamran's voice drifted from the other bed.

"Is that your professional opinion, Ambassador?"

He muttered something she didn't quite understand.

She heard the metal rungs of the curtain slide. Quickly donning the smock, she poked her head out. "What?"

"Donaldson was in my dream too. You were there too, for a second at least before he took you away."

She froze. Flashes of the dream surfaced in her mind. The barren landscape, the secluded mountains. His grip was so tight. Her arm began to ache. No, she wasn't going to do this now. Focus on the present.

"Anything like this happen between Briel couples that you know of?"

"Sharing dreams? No. But who knows what strange things may come as a result of our relationship."

Haylie straightened. "We don't have a relationship. Remember?"

He didn't say anything at first. His eyelids looked heavy, sleep threatening to overtake him. He inhaled deeply and Haylie swore he straightened his posture, looking very much the diplomat. "How would you describe the way in which we've...interacted? We've been intimate."

"That's sex. Not a relationship."

"Pardon my ignorance of human semantics. What's the difference?"

She'd upset him. His face was flushed and she could see his hands were balled into fists. *Not a good idea to upset him.*

"When you get out of here, I'll explain it."

And with that she retreated back inside the safety of her examination area. She slowed her breathing and tried to relax as much as possible. Her blood pressure being through the roof right before a physical wouldn't be a good idea.

She hated that he was right. They did have a relationship of sorts. But despite Briel laws and biology, it was nothing more than sex at this point. So what if they were reading each other's minds and popping up in mutual dreams? The concern she'd felt for him at the explosion site was natural considering what they'd been doing an hour prior. It didn't mean anything more than she'd proved she wasn't a heartless bitch.

The seal on the outside door broke again and Haylie heard two sets of feet approaching.

"Are you decent, hon?" Sara asked from outside the curtain.

Haylie quickly sat down on the edge of the gurney. "Come on in."

Sara pulled back the curtain to reveal a large Briel. "Haylie, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Ray. Ray, this is my friend Haylie, our diligent security chief. And there's something not quite right about her."

"I've been telling you that for years," Haylie said and smirked.

"An honor, Chief Bond."

Ray was easily as tall as Taber, but much slimmer in build. His onyx hair was slightly longer than Kamran's and an errant bang hung near his eyes. From the look on Sara's face, this was the mysterious Briel who had caught her eye.

"Ray's going to give me a hand. Double check a few things for me. Now lie back and relax."

"That's easy for you to say," Haylie said and swung her feet onto the bed.

She hated physicals almost as much as the freeze-dried food her father had made her eat growing up. Sara began to rub a gooey gel into her hair and attach sensors to her scalp.

"Lord, I'm going to look great after this."

A chuckle from down the hall reached her ears. Kamran was laughing at her.

"Sit still, will ya?" Sara turned Haylie's head so that it was facing straight again and pushed a sensor firmly onto Haylie's temple.

Haylie sighed and crossed her arms across her chest. "What are you hoping to find?"

"I'm not sure—that's why I want to run the tests. But what happened to you last night isn't normal. There, all set."

Sara took a step back and gave Haylie a once over. Wires protruded from most of her upper body, especially her head which was now itching like mad.

"The computer is calibrated and ready to go, Dr. Fergus."

Haylie jumped when the Briel doctor spoke. How could she forget that he was in the room? It's not like he could hide anywhere. Haylie gave him another quick glance.

She'd frowned. "Dr. Ray doesn't sound very Briel."

He gave a small shrug. "My full name is Raylinq. Your friend had difficulty pronouncing it."

"I told him nicknames are very popular on Earth." Sara blushed.

Haylie smiled. *Very interesting*. There was something very charming about Dr. Ray and they both picked up on it quickly.

"So what are you here to observe?"

"I'm here to learn more about human physiology. Dr. Fergus has been kind enough to allow me to spend some time with her today."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to get my interview with the ambassador anytime soon?"

Sara patted Haylie's arm before pulling up the blanket. "No worries. These tests only take a few minutes. I'll have you out the door before anyone on your team misses you."

"My shift already started and I'm sure they are all trying to find me." But she wasn't in much of a hurry. Kamran was a short distance away. Despite what she'd said to him earlier she had to admit they *did* have a connection. Being close to him somehow eased her edginess.

She hoped that they wouldn't have company the whole time.

After a few minutes of silence, Sara began to engage Ray in conversation. Haylie's eyes grew heavy, the light noises coming from the computer lulling her to sleep. She fought to keep her eyes open but it was pointless. If she didn't know better she would swear Sara had given her a sedative. Unable to resist any longer, Haylie drifted off.

She slipped into the dream easily. As she spun around the room, she saw the simple surroundings. A window drew her attention. The landscape beyond was lush, the sky full of colors as the sun set. She knew this was Breil, it felt right. No wonder Kamran was anxious to return home. She couldn't imagine a better place to raise a family.

"This is my home."

She turned to see Kamran lying in a large bed, a sheet pulled up enough to cover the lower half of his body. He was naked and she was overcome with the desire to yank the sheet away.

"Beautiful," she said with a smile, completely forgetting about the landscape.

"Maybe someday you will come here with me," he said and patted the empty mattress beside him.

Without another word, Haylie walked silently across the room and joined him beneath the sheets. It was only then she realized that she was naked too.

"Whose dream is this?" she asked before kissing the hollow of his throat.

"Mine, I think. Though I'm glad you're here."

He tipped her head back and returned her kisses. Haylie relaxed into his touch stretching her legs out as far as they would go. He reached down and cupped her breast. His thumb rubbed and teased the nipple until it was hard.

Haylie arched her back in invitation. He dipped his head down and captured the peak in his mouth. She slid her fingers through his hair, encouraging him. He lifted his head after a minute, desire etched across his face.

"How can you say we don't mean something to each other?"

"I never..."

The words died in her mouth. She couldn't lie to him. He did mean something to her. But exactly what that was, she didn't know. Not yet.

"Make love to me."

His legs nudged her knees wide. The weight of his body was a welcome distraction from the thoughts he'd generated. This was easier, to show him what she was feeling. Haylie wrapped her legs around his back and drove her pelvis hard against him.

Kamran growled and thrust into her in one swift motion. They both stopped for a moment, trying to regain control over their bodies. She caressed his cheek, his skin smooth under her touch. It was his eyes that sent a shiver through her. His intensity and passion were there all for her.

Slowly, he began again. The gentleness of this steady thrusting quickly faded into urgent need. She gasped and moaned each time he reached her inner core. Each thrust designed to win her over. To prove to her this was all they needed. Her body agreed, melting against his, meeting his every movement with one of her own. Her lips found his and kissed him greedily. His mouth tasted sweet, like his cinnamon scent. She devoured him, refusing to pull away until she was drunk on him.

Her body began to tingle as her release rushed toward her. Kamran broke their kiss to bend his head once more and take her nipple between his teeth. His tongue circled around the tip. The added sensation proved too much for her and pushed Haylie into a mind-blowing orgasm.

He grinned at her like a conquering warrior and kissed her with amazing intensity. She responded to his every move, arching desperately trying to get closer. She thrust her pelvis once more in time with his. He was close to the edge and she felt the tension in his body. Mimicking his earlier action, she bent her head and licked his nipple. Kamran gasped, his thrusting pausing for a second before he cried out. Haylie loved the way he clutched her, as if he were holding on for life itself. He pumped hard against her several more times before he collapsed. The sweat from their bodies mingled together as they lay wrapped in each other's arms.

"Now this is a sweet dream," she said against his chest.

The room began to darken. Haylie blinked a few times, hoping her vision would clear. When she sat up and looked out the window, the sun was as high in the sky as it had been a short time ago. So why was it getting dark?

"Haylie?"

When she turned to look at Kamran, he was gone. The empty bed beside her was cold.

"Kamran?"

She slid from the bed and looked down. She was now clothed in a white linen nightgown. It looked like the one her mother wore when Haylie was a child. The room had fallen into a state of disrepair. Her body still clung to the feelings of pleasure she'd shared with Kamran only moments ago. She immediately sensed something had changed, that she was no long in Kamran's dream.

She ran to the window to look out. She no longer recognized the landscape. The air stank of sulfur and it was foggy out. From far in the distance she could hear a sound that reminded her of the chattering of teeth.

"Hello?" She called out to the dark.

Suddenly, a child ran to her from the corner of the room. She barely had time to turn around when he buried his face into her stomach and began to cry.

"Hey, hey, hey. Shhhh. It's okay." She bent down and cooed soft words into his ear.

He looked up, his face streaked with tears. "They're going to get me."

"Who is? Where are your parents?"

"Help me."

Haylie hugged the little boy tight. The urge to protect him was overwhelming. He clung to her, trying to get closer, all the while trembling with fear.

The chattering had turned into a low buzzing sound, coming from the dark corner where he'd been a moment before. The boy whimpered.

Sean. The voices called to him.

"Sean? Is that your name?" Then it hit her. "Donaldson?"

"Go away!" he screamed and pushed away from Haylie, knocking her to the floor as he ran out the front door.

She didn't have time to think further. The buzzing was getting closer, moving toward her like a black shadow across the floor. She tried to move backward, but her feet got tangled in the nightgown and she landed with a thud.

The shadow moved inch by inch toward her, almost close enough to touch her. The buzzing was now in her ears and her skin itched. She couldn't breathe. She gasped for air and tried to get the buzzing sound out of her head.

Wake up!

With a huge gasp of air, Haylie sat up on the hospital gurney.

"Haylie? Are you all right?"

She was looking into Kamran's eyes. His hands were about her shoulders. The sensation grounded her back in reality. Her heart rate was setting the computer off and she had to take several deep breaths to bring it back to normal. It took a minute but she managed to get herself under control.

"I think so. Where's Sara?"

"She and Ray left a while ago. The test is long finished, but you had drifted off to sleep. They didn't want to wake you."

"I was—" she shook her head and tried to clear the fog from her brain. "I was dreaming."

"I know."

Their eyes met and she knew he had been there.

He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair. "What happened? One minute we were together, the next you were gone."

Haylie could feel her body trembling. She closed her eyes until she was able to relax enough. Somehow in the back of her mind she knew if the darkness in her dream had reached her, she wouldn't have woken up.

Ever.

"I think...I'm not sure, but I think I was pulled into someone else's dream." Even as she spoke the words, she knew it was true.

"What? That's impossible."

"According to you, we shouldn't be sharing dreams either. But we are."

He didn't respond at first. Slowly, he slid his hand into hers, lacing their fingers. "I always assumed that we had bonded. I still think we have, but it is possible there is another explanation."

If he was feeling anything, his face didn't betray it. The diplomat's mask. Haylie leaned in and brushed a kiss across his lips. She didn't want to lose him, not after everything they'd gone through.

"We don't know anything at this point. We could be bonded and these other dreams are totally unrelated. Once we both get out of here, we can investigate. Okay?"

He nodded his agreement.

"You better get back to your bed. Hey, wait a minute, you're out of your bed," she said and smiled.

"Briel can recover from injuries quickly, and I still feel terrible, but I wanted to make sure you weren't hurt. When you disappeared, I feared the worst."

She ran her hand along his cheek. "You didn't look this good when I arrived earlier. It's amazing you're even on your feet."

"I have an attractive incentive to get better," he said. Kamran then gave her a kiss of his own before standing. "I hope to be out of here later today. We need to meet and talk."

"Agreed. Contact me when you can. I'll be working on your files."

He bowed slightly and left her makeshift room, dragging some sort of IV behind him.

Once she was alone, her body began to shake. What the hell was going on with her? She wiped a lone tear from the side of her face and began to dress. She had to get out of here and figure out what was happening on this station.

She'd worry about her situation with Kamran later.

* * * * *

Kamran had been drowning. Every time he'd tried to reach the surface, someone pulled him back down. It wasn't until Haylie arrived that things began to focus.

At first, he couldn't make out the words, but he knew it was really her. Not some phantom that had been chasing him for...however long he'd been trapped. He was finally able to start to claw his way back to the surface of reality.

He opened his eyes and knew he'd been dreaming again. This was insanity.

Sara came in a few minutes later, "How are you feeling, Ambassador?"

"Better." His voice still felt strange, like he hadn't used it in a long time.

"Dr. Ray will be by in a few...oh, never mind, here he is. Ray wanted to talk to you about your status and when you can get out of here. I'm going to check on a few other patients."

The Briel doctor stood silently in the hallway. Kamran was forced to stay an extra day in the med bay because Ray wanted to confirm some tests. The results would hopefully mean his freedom.

"Thank you, Dr. Fergus," Kamran said and sat up.

Neither man spoke until Sara had left the area. The man she referred to as Dr. Ray regarded him closely, before speaking in their native language.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been trapped in fluid. I can't shake the feeling that I just survived a drowning."

Ray frowned. "That could be the result of the explosion, but I doubt it."

"The dreams?" Kamran gave his head a shake. He'd told Ray what was happening and the doctor had given him a drug to help him sleep. It had the fortunate side effect of keeping the dreams at bay.

"Do you remember any more of what happened the other day?"

"The explosion?" Kamran frowned. "Not really." He'd gone over what had happened a thousand times in his head.

He'd been walking down the hall. Tia was standing at the opening to the meeting room. He saw something out of the corner of his eye. A person.

"A human."

Ray didn't respond.

"There was a human there. Leaving down the side hallway. That's why I was there. I followed to see who it was."

"I suspect Chief Bond will want to know that piece of the puzzle. Dr. Fergus told me her friend has been tearing the station apart looking for answers since we freed her from med bay."

Kamran smiled. That sounded like Haylie. He imagined she had half of the miners whipped into shape or scared half to death.

"You like the chief?"

He was startled by the doctor's question. "Yes. The chief is a very interesting human. I enjoyed the time we have spent together."

Ray hesitated for a moment before speaking again. "I noticed something strange when I looked at the results of her tests earlier. Human brain activity is quite different from our own. The patterns should have looked quite foreign to me. Strangely enough, they didn't."

Kamran's stomach sickened. "How strange. What was it you recognized?"

"Oddly, they were very similar to those of a mated Briel female. That is, of course, impossible, since she is very human."

Kamran put on his most practiced, diplomatic mask. "An interesting puzzle for you. Please let me know if there is something I can help you with."

"I would love to check all the Briel males to see if any of them are showing similar signs. But that isn't possible." Ray chuckled.

Kamran knew he was serious.

"I would imagine any mated Briel would be so excited the whole station would know of the match."

"Very true, Ambassador. I think you are well enough to be released. I will let Dr. Fergus know."

"Thank you, for everything."

He had to warn Haylie. They were in trouble.

Chapter Eleven

Kamran winced as he tried to manage to get through the door to his quarters. It didn't help that the orderlies were fumbling around him, getting in his way. Despite taking his meds before leaving med bay, every inch of his body ached. The Briel medical staff flitted around him, trying to ensure his comfort to speed his recovery. It took far longer for them to leave than he wanted. It took them several minutes to calibrate the computer to monitor his condition.

His body was improving quickly, faster than that damned Dr. Ray had anticipated. He'd been able to convince them to release him to his quarters for bed rest. Not that he had any intention of resting. As the doors shut, Kamran threw off the blankets and shakily got to his feet. He wasn't as strong as he needed to be. His response to Haylie's dream in med bay had been instinct, not an indication at how well he was doing.

But he wasn't going to let an explosion prevent him from helping Haylie now. He slowly walked over to the computer and called Taber using a secure channel.

"We have a situation. I need your help again."

"Not until you've rested. Things can wait until the morning." His friend's message was distorted.

"Where are you? You're breaking up."

"We received a report of some strange activity in the lower section of the station. The humans don't have enough resources to cover everything, so we are assisting."

Kamran's frustration gnawed at him. "As soon as you're able, stop by my quarters. I have something I need to discuss with you."

"I don't think—"

"Taber, please."

His friend sighed and gave a single nod. "I should be finished in thirty standard minutes." The screen went black, cutting short their conversation.

He wanted to pace, but the throbbing in his head prevented any such movement. Instead he sent a message to the Elder Council requesting a meeting and climbed back into bed to try and relax.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply. Haylie had been here only the night before. Her scent still clung thickly to the sheets and pillows. He desperately wanted to contact her but knew he shouldn't.

Ray knew something was going on.

Goddess, life would be so much easier if this was out in the open. As much as he wanted to convince Haylie that Briel was a beautiful place to live, now wasn't the time.

The station and everything he'd worked so hard for was in danger. He'd never let his personal wants get in the way before and he wasn't about to start now.

She can take care of herself. And knowing Haylie the way he did, he was sure she'd punch him for thinking otherwise.

Someone had tried to kill him. Briel documents were being tampered with and people were being murdered. Right now, the only person who was in a position to do anything to help him was Haylie.

For once in his life, he wasn't alone. He had someone who was bound to him and he to her. If they were discovered, he would lose everything he'd worked a lifetime to achieve. A part of him, a very selfish but small part, didn't want to give up his ambassadorship. Not now. Not with things in such a critical state.

The larger part of him missed her. Terribly.

He shifted over to his side and closed his eyes. Haylie's face drifted to the surface of his mind. She smiled at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She looked so happy, every trace of worry erased from her face. Arousal nipped at him. He leaned forward to kiss her and her face dissolved before him into nothing.

Kamran's eyes flew open, but he kept his body still. The damned dreams were bad enough when they involved things happening to him. But for the past day, they'd revolved around nothing *but* Haylie. This had to stop.

The chime for his door sounded.

"Who is it?"

"Taber."

Kamran shook his head. "Computer, unlock door."

Taber entered the room, looking exhausted. "I apologize for being late. Were you sleeping? I rang several times."

"I must have dozed off. Though I swear I only just closed my eyes. What happened to you?"

Taber walked closer to the bed and assumed his normal military stance. "We ran into some trouble in the lower levels."

That didn't sound good. "Was anyone hurt?"

"A few humans, miners, were acting strange. Trying to go outside without their EV suits on. We were forced to subdue them for their own safety. I am not even sure what they were doing down there."

Kamran shook his head. "There are too many anomalies. Something is happening here and I fear we are running out of time."

"Agreed. Now what is it you wished to discuss with me?"

Kamran hesitated. His friend was exhausted, most likely not having slept in the days since the explosion. Or at least not sleeping well. The dark blue circles under his eyes were pronounced.

"Have you had trouble sleeping?"

Taber frowned. "Pardon?"

"Have you had trouble sleeping? Experienced any strange dreams?" Kamran's voice trailed off. He couldn't put his finger on it, but somehow this was all tied together.

"I haven't had an opportunity to have a rest cycle in several days. Before that, I had no difficulties. Is this why you asked me here?"

Kamran sighed, "No, but I was hoping to find another possible explanation."

"Is this about Haylie?"

Kamran motioned to the chair, "Please sit. Your standing is giving me a headache."

"You know I—"

"Taber, please."

The two men stared at each other for several seconds, but Taber didn't move. Kamran would have to live with a stiff neck.

Kamran inhaled deeply. "While I was incapacitated, a Briel doctor took a scan of my brain patterns. He compared them to Haylie's. I think he knows about us."

Taber stood quietly, his expression blank.

"The problems and violence on this station have escalated sharply in the past few days. I want her kept safe from our laws so she can do her job without interruption. The last thing we need distracting us from our investigations is a Briel council tribunal. I think we need to make our relationship known to the elders."

Taber met his gaze. "You know what they will do to you."

Kamran closed his eyes against a growing headache. "Given the circumstances, I cannot see the council acting too severely. A relationship with a human isn't exactly covered by our laws."

"Of course. But there is more to this."

"Considering the state of things, I believe I can convince the elders to postpone action until after the trouble on the station has been resolved. Removing both the ambassador in charge of negotiations and the human chief of security at the same time, even if for only a temporary time frame, is a move I doubt they would take."

"This is a risky move, Ambassador."

"I know the council. They are reasonable. I believe they will understand, given the circumstances." At least he hoped so.

"Very well. When will you approach them?"

That was something Kamran had been considering all morning. "Tomorrow. I need at least one night's sleep in my own bed and a chance to collect my thoughts. I have already notified them that I wish to speak before them before I left the med bay."

"Have you discussed this with Haylie?"

Kamran wanted to lie, but knew there was no point. "Not yet."

Taber seemed to absorb this information. "Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

He would love the ability to make the next few days easier, but doubted Taber could help much with that particular request.

"Other than keeping an eye on Haylie? No, thank you, my friend. Rest. I'll be in touch with you after the meeting."

With nothing else to do or say, Kamran returned to his bed as Taber let himself out. Rest was what he needed and the only way to ensure that was to take the medicine Ray had provided, though he loathed to take them. He popped the pills and swallowed a mouthful of warm water. The drugs hit him quickly and he barely managed to make it back to his bed before they tugged at him to sleep. He was beginning to drift to sleep when the chime to his quarters rang again.

"Computer, identify."

"Human - Chief Bond."

What the...

Weak from the pills he couldn't make it to the door. Instead he swung his legs over the side of his bed and straightened his clothing. "Computer, unlock."

Haylie strode into the room, her muscular legs carrying her swiftly. She was to him before he managed a few steps from the bed.

"Are you out of your mind? Or is it lack of sleep?"

Kamran winced. "Good evening. How are you doing, Chief?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing, making a decision like that without talking to me first?"

Her face was flushed, her chest heaving. Kamran knew anger when he saw it and from the look of her, he was in trouble.

"Answer me, Kamran."

"It's the right thing to do."

"Bullshit! I can't believe..." her words died on her lips.

She was clearly hurt. In a way, he didn't blame her.

"How did you find out?"

"Taber." They both spoke his name at the same time.

"I was on my way to check in with you. I ran into Taber in the hall and could tell he was bothered about something. It didn't take long for it to come out."

He had to offer her some reassurance. "They won't do anything. Not now."

"A few days ago, you claimed they would ship us off planet the second they learned what was going on between us. But hey, it's all good now. Perfectly fine since someone's blown up five of the Briel elders on the station and damn near killed their ambassador too." Her voice rose dangerously close to a yell.

"No. No, everything isn't fine and I never said that it was. This station is starting to tear itself apart. People I care about are being blown up, or attacked in their dreams." He felt his own annoyance creeping up. "The fact that we have a relationship is minor."

Seething was the only description that came to his mind as he looked at her. He could feel her anger racing through her mind, along with some images of unpleasant things she wanted to do to him. She began to move silently around the room, clearly trying to gain control over her emotions. When she spoke again, her words were clipped.

"Did you at least think about telling me what you were about to do?"

He was finding it hard to keep his own anger under control. Instead of fighting it he used it to push to his feet and cross the distance between them. "Yes, in the morning, once I had rested and before speaking to the elders. I'm not a complete asshole, Haylie. You know me better than that."

She turned to look at him, surprised. "What?"

"That's the name you keep calling me in your head."

Haylie blushed but ignored the comment. "How can you say that when we only met a few days ago."

"You know me well enough to trust me."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"Prove it."

They were on each other in a heartbeat, their lips locked. His hands pushed her hard against his chest. Her own were against his back, in his hair, around his neck.

"I was so scared."

"I thought you were dead."

He didn't know who spoke what, their thoughts mingled as their bodies did. He needed her. *To be in her*. He trembled with need and excitement.

She felt him. "What am I doing? You're hurt." As she spoke, she tried to pull away.

"Don't you dare. I need you."

Haylie didn't move at first, her eyes probing his. Her rational side threatened to ruin everything. To prevent that from happening, he kissed her neck and ran his tongue along her skin.

"The bed is behind me." He spoke against her now wet skin, tugging her back with

He sat and pulled her onto his lap. Neither of them moved. He stared into her eyes, willing the concern he saw there away. She was inspecting the damage to his face and ran a finger over the now healing wounds.

"You're healing so quickly," she whispered.

"You're not that easily rid of me."

"Did they tell you I was the one who found you?"

No one had, though he wasn't surprised by the revelation.

"I suppose you are looking for a thank you?" he said and hoped his smile looked playful.

"Only if you are up to giving one."

His erection pulsed to life against her thighs. Despite the events of the last few days, nothing had quashed his passion for her. She looked serious and ran the back of her hand against his cheek.

She leaned forward and brushed a light kiss where her hand had been a moment ago. Her mouth then explored his face, attempting to kiss better the wounds he'd sustained. Kamran held still, enjoying the tender moment. Their relationship was fire. Now he felt it change. A deeper caring now supplemented the heat.

Her lips finally reached his, gently probing. He felt her tongue slide over his lips in search of its mate. He moved his hands into her long, thick hair to draw her closer. Their pace didn't increase, but the intensity of the contact did.

Kamran's eyes were closed, but the rest of his senses were heightened. Her moans were honey to his ears as she writhed against him. Her scent fed his hunger. He needed her now.

It only took a second to roll Haylie onto her back. Her hair spilled over the white of the soft sheets. Her uniform slid off her with some difficulty, causing Haylie to chuckle.

"I haven't had this much trouble with my clothing since high school."

"I hope you weren't doing *this* in high school." He covered her breast with his hand, squeezing her nipple until it peaked.

She moaned again and thrashed her head from side to side, once, twice.

"That's good." Relief relaxed him. He knew she was experienced, but he didn't want her thinking about the others.

Only him.

His own clothing was easily discarded. Soon he slid the length of his naked flesh beside hers. The soft contact gave him strength, his body drawing what it needed to heal itself from her. Her leg hooked around his, drawing it up. He shifted his body so he lay on top of her, covering every inch with himself.

They didn't speak. Haylie opened her legs wide and wrapped them around his back. Her wet pussy now lay against his throbbing shaft. One thrust forward and he was buried to his hilt. He didn't move at first, relishing the feeling. Then need pushed him on. She met his every action. Never a misstep.

He found her lips again and eagerly kissed her. She clung to him, moaning her pleasure into his mouth, rubbing her nipples against his chest. Her body began to shake, a sign he now knew meant she was close to orgasm. Increasing the tempo, he ground his pelvis hard against her clit. One stroke, two and she cried out with pleasure.

He moved his hands to clutch the sheets on either side of her head. He furiously began to pump into her, his own release shouted into the dark of the room.

The sounds of their panting echoed in the otherwise quiet room. He rolled off her, but pulled her back against him, refusing to give up their contact. She said something softly against the pillow.

"What was that?"

She rolled to face him and smiled. "Nothing."

He couldn't be sure, but he thought it sounded like she said she loved him. He wanted to ask her about it, but he couldn't keep his eyes open. His body had used its energy reserves, leaving him spent.

He could hear her steady, deep breathing. She was already asleep. With his eyes shut, it was only a moment before he joined her in oblivion.

At first he thought he was dreaming. A quick look at his surroundings revealed an alien landscape. This time, he was sharing Haylie's dream. Her mind was warm and welcoming. Kamran sighed and let her peace of mind wrap itself around him. He felt a wisp of her silken hair brush his cheek.

The serenity was suddenly shattered. Kamran jolted as Haylie's mind screamed out. Snatches of images of a long hall flashed in his head. She was running, something close behind her.

Haylie!

He tried to warn her, but too late. She turned a corner and right into the arms of a dark man. He couldn't quite make out the face, although Haylie seemed to recognize him. She opened her mouth to scream, but Kamran couldn't hear the noise. He was too far away to help.

No, no, no. He was beside her in bed. If he could only wake up.

He forced his way through the fog and fought his way into her dream that wasn't a dream. He stopped suddenly as everything became clear. She was being attacked through her dreams from the outside. They all were.

A surreal feeling of nausea washed through him as he walked down the hall in the direction that the dark man had taken Haylie. The floor and walls rose and fell, twisting in unnatural directions. An eternity seemed to pass as he climbed and crawled his way to Haylie's last location.

He heard the voice, not with his own ears, but somehow through Haylie's

"Tell me." The voice was distorted, highlighted with tin and feedback.

No. "No." Haylie's voice vibrated from the walls.

"I'll kill him. Then you. You won't be able to stop me." The dark man's voice was smiling at her, teasing in its torture.

Haylie stiffened slightly, before raising her chin. "Bastard."

From out of nowhere, Haylie produced a knife and buried it in the dark man's shoulder. Kamran tried to cover his ears to protect them from the piercing screams of the enemy before he vanished.

Haylie dropped the knife and it vanished into nothingness before landing upon the floor. She turned to face him, a curious expression on her face.

"Why are you here?"

"I came to help." Struggling to his feet, he managed to take several steps toward her before collapsing once more.

"It's not safe for you here."

"I don't understand. What's not safe?"

A strong wind gusted sand into his face and he brought his arm up to shield himself.

"See. You're too weak. I need to find out what's in the valley."

The wind lessened slightly and Kamran could see once more. Haylie was dressed in a long wrap that covered her head, face and upper body.

"Where are you going?"

"The desert. I have to find the valley."

"Haylie, show me. What valley?"

The landscape shifted again until they were standing in a valley he had been to once before.

"I know this place. The humans call this the Corridor." Kamran looked around but something didn't quite add up. The image Haylie was showing him was wrong. There were missing landscapes.

"Haylie, this isn't right."

Once again, they were back on the station, but this time in the observation room.

"You need to rest. Go back and sleep. I'll figure out what is going on." Haylie smiled.

She then reached up and buried her fingers in his hair. Kamran stilled as she reached up and moved her lips against his cheek in a light kiss. When she pulled away, she wore a sad expression.

"What is wrong?" He tightened his grasp on her waist, afraid to let her go.

"Things have changed for me, but I don't think they have for you."

"What things? I don't understand."

Kamran started awake with a gasp. The air of his quarters felt heavy and it took effort to slow his breathing down to normal.

Haylie was out of bed and dressed. Her face was pale and her body trembled where she stood. The chair where she must have been sitting was lying tipped over on the floor. "What just happened?" he said softly.

She swallowed. "I woke up shortly after you fell asleep. I got dressed but didn't want to leave. So I sat down in the chair to watch you sleep for a bit. I must have drifted off."

"And you dreamed."

"And you got pulled in also."

Kamran sat up and welcomed the cool air of his room against his skin.

"This isn't normal. Briel mates are close, can even read each other's thoughts occasionally. But not dreams."

"These aren't dreams. We're—"

"Under attack?" he offered.

"That sounds right. But by who?"

"The same person or people who altered the Briel records, organized the explosion and created other disturbances on the station."

Before they were able to carry that thought further, the door chimed. He quickly dressed in his casual tunic and pants as Haylie righted the overturned chair. She made her way over to the office section of his apartment. It had only taken seconds to erase the intimate surroundings they had enjoyed moments earlier.

His legs shook as he managed to make his way to the door. "Computer, identify."

"Elderwoman Calla."

Goddess. "Computer, time."

"Time is oh-eight-hundred hours."

"Time is disappearing. Your meeting is when?" Haylie spoke from behind him.

"Not for another hour."

"Shit."

Immediately upon opening the door, a tall willowy woman pushed her way inside. She was followed by several Briel guards he didn't recognize and Dr. Ray.

"Elder, what can I do for you? Is there a problem that can't wait until our meeting?"

"Chief Bond, excellent." Calla spoke, ignoring him.

"Elder." Haylie made a half bow. The proper sign of respect for a Briel dignitary. She'd picked up a few of his customs. "I was taking this time to interview the ambassador on what he remembered about the explosion."

"There's no need. Though it is fortunate that you are here. It has come to the council's attention that the ambassador is working with the Ecada to sabotage this colony."

Kamran felt as if someone had slapped him. "Forgive me, Elder, but what did you say?"

Calla sniffed her distain. "Do not play games with us. And to think the council held you in such high regard."

Haylie was now beside him. "My own staff haven't completed their investigation. Nor have we discovered anything that would support such a claim. May I inquire as to the nature of your proof?"

"Of course, as humans were also killed by this explosion, we will share everything with you. But not until this villain is safety in a security facility."

With a flick of her hand, several of the guards approached him. One of whom Kamran recognized as Taber's second-in-command faced him directly.

"I'm sorry, sir."

There was nothing he could do. Kamran nodded once and tried to smile as the guard placed the prison bracers on his forearms.

"Does Taber know?"

"Elderwoman Calla thought it best if he was kept away from this matter for the time being."

"Hurry up. I don't want him paraded in front of the others." Calla began to move down the hall, her plain gray robes chasing her.

Haylie touched his forearm. "Don't worry. I'll see what they have against you. We'll figure this out."

"Talk to Taber and let him know what is happening. He can help."

"As you can see, Chief Bond, we have everything under control." Calla said, her dismissal clear.

Haylie turned to Calla, her tone brisk. "Indeed. Until I can examine your proof, this is an internal Briel matter. I would like copies of everything sent to my office within the hour."

"Yes, ma'am." Taber's second spoke.

There was nothing left for her to say, so Haylie bowed again, cast one last look at him and left the room.

With her gone, Dr. Ray took her vacated spot by Kamran's side.

"And why are you here, Doctor?"

Dr. Ray kept his voice low, "To make sure nothing happens to my patients."

The plural use of the word told Kamran that the doctor was on their side. Haylie had at least one other ally. They may survive this after all. That is, if he wasn't executed for crimes he didn't commit.

Chapter Twelve

Haylie threw her pillows at the wall and let out a wail of pure frustration. The computer beeped at her as she hit the sensor to the communication panel.

"I can't believe this is happening."

Sara made her way over to the wall and picked up the discarded items. "Do you want to throw them again? It might help."

"Piss off, Fergus."

"Hey now, I didn't rat out your boyfriend."

Why Kamran? That was the question that Haylie had been turning over in her mind for several hours now. She'd reviewed every stitch of evidence the Briel had against Kamran. They claimed that the forensics indicated he was the one who planted the bomb. He was caught in the blast by mistake as he was fleeing the scene. *Bullshit*. Pure and utter bullshit. They had also caught snips of an encrypted message between the station and the Ecada home world. The encryption code was Kamran's and the message was damning.

To add insult to injury, she couldn't convince the Briel council to let her lead the investigation. It was an "internal matter". She took the pillow from Sara and threw it again.

"Haylie, please sit. What the hell is going on?"

There was no reason for someone to set up Kamran. They hadn't discovered anything. Unless her investigation had gotten her closer than she realized.

Haylie stopped pacing. "Maybe 'what' isn't the right question?"

"What do you mean?"

"Instead, maybe we should be asking why?"

Haylie strode over to the bed and sat quickly cross-legged on the edge.

"There have been a number of strange things going on here. The altered documents that no one seems to have changed, the bombing of the Briel meeting and now Kamran's arrest, have all thrown the station into chaos."

"Not to mention the increased number of sick patients that we've been seeing in med bay." Sara flopped sideways on Haylie's bed.

Haylie looked down and ran a hand over Sara's hair, pushing the blonde strands from her face. Sara looked so tired, probably having been up as much as she had over the past little while.

"What is wrong with them? Anything odd?"

"Nothing major. Some broken bones, high levels of radiation showing on their scans. General exhaustion. It turns out that we had a batch of tampered EV suits that didn't get caught until this last inspection. That sent the union rep into a complete flap."

"That's...unbelievable. Those suits are under close guard." Haylie pinched her eyes. "Okay, these events have to be related."

"Did you see anything else in your dreams that can help?"

Sara's question sent shivers down Haylie's back. There was a lot in her dreams, but she wasn't sure how it all tied together. And to make matters worse, the violence had increased.

"Well?" Sara rolled onto her back and crossed her arms across her chest.

Haylie froze. She knew what she needed to ask but desperately didn't want to drag Sara into the middle of a political nightmare.

"Don't question why I'm asking you this. Simply answer." She paused and took a deep breath. "Has Administrator Donaldson come into med bay in the last day with an injury? Say a stab wound?"

"Why the hell would he—"

"Sara?"

Her friend sighed. "No, I haven't seen him since my first day here. If he was injured, he attended the wound on his own. Or he went to one of the Briel doctors, but I can't see that happening."

"Thank you," Haylie said, completely confused.

She'd seen him. Once more in her dream, threatening her, but this time she'd been able to gain control and fight back. She'd hurt him and damn well knew *that* would show up in the real world. Haylie lay back on the bed and rested her head next to her best friend's.

Sara lightly tapped her head against Haylie's. "Hon, I know that the past week has been rough on you. Shit, I can barely believe we've only been on the station for such a short time. You need to rest and relax. Get your head about you so you can figure things out."

Easier said than done.

"I need to talk to Kamran."

"Then go talk to Kamran," Sara said, sounding very much like her mother.

"I believe I mentioned he was in jail. Accused of treason."

"You dumbass. You're the human chief of security on the station. Can't you get in and see any prisoner you want?"

Haylie opened her mouth to answer but nothing came out.

Sara pressed on. "Don't you have an in with your counterpart? Kamran's friend?" "Taber."

"Exactly. It seems plausible that you would want to check things out. He can get you in."

Haylie was on her feet and across the room to the computer vid screen before Sara moved.

"Taber, we need to talk."

"Ms. Bond. I believe that would be an excellent idea. Your office in ten minutes?" "I'll be there."

She stopped long enough to throw on her boots. Her sleeveless shirt and uniform pants would have to do.

"Hey, be careful," Sara said and tossed Haylie her blaster.

She caught it easily and tucked it into her holster before heading out the door. After a quick conversation with Taber, she knew everything would be all right. They'd be able to figure out the best course of action to get Kamran out of there. Haylie ignored the few individuals she skirted in the halls. Her progress was slowed as she had to pass through several of the blast doors they'd been forced to close after the explosion. She prayed there wouldn't be another explosion, but if there was, Haylie wanted to minimize the casualties. Once she finally reached her office, she felt like she could breathe again.

"Computer, privacy screen."

The windows immediately darkened. The last thing she wanted was to feel like she was on display.

A quick look at her chair told her sitting was out of the question. Instead, she prowled around the room for several minutes until a blinking light from the corner of her eye caught her attention. The lights on her computer indicated a waiting message. She reached to answer it as the doors to her office opened. Expecting to see Taber, she was surprised by her visitor.

"Dr. Ray? How may I help you?"

The Briel looked concerned, but hesitated before speaking. "Good evening, Chief. I just missed you at your quarters. Sara mentioned you were coming here. I hope I haven't disturbed anything."

She smiled and waved him toward a seat as she sat on the edge of her desk. "Not at all. What can I do for you?"

He accepted the chair and smiled warmly. "I'm a bit concerned about Ambassador Kamran. I think his health could very well be affected by his imprisonment."

She felt the blood drain from her face to pool in her stomach. She fought to keep her reaction in check but knew Ray noticed. She needed to get in and see him. *Now*.

"I'm not sure what I can do to help." She kept her voice even and tried to sound disinterested in the whole matter. She didn't want to cause additional problems for Kamran by revealing their bond.

"They won't let me in to see him. They're limiting access to only a select few who have clearance. I was hoping you might be able to get me in so I could check on him. Make sure he hasn't taken a turn for the worst," he said earnestly, taking a step closer to her.

Something nagged at the back of Haylie's mind, but she pushed it away. "I am certainly more than willing to help. But I'm not sure what good I'd be to you. The elders have refused my assistance on this case."

"You are more likely to persuade the guards to let you in than I am. Perhaps you can even get me in to see him. But if not, you could take some readings for me. I worked hard to get him back on his feet. I don't want to see a good man waste away for no purpose."

Ray reached forward and grabbed her hands. They were like ice on her palms and she snatched them back instinctively. His only reaction was to smile before he laced his hands behind his back. "Please."

"Of course. I was planning on visiting the detention block to see if I could check on the ambassador," she said and smiled. "I'm sure they won't refuse to let you accompany me."

"I appreciate that, Chief. Do you think they will let us in to see him now?"

Haylie looked at the clock in her office. Taber was late.

"I actually had an appointment with Taber regarding access to the ambassador."

Ray sat back releasing her hands. "Oh, Taber won't be coming."

Haylie blinked, not liking the fact that Ray seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than he should. "Really?"

"Yes, I saw him and several of his men called away as I was making my way to see you. Not sure where they were going."

The message on her computer. "Excuse me one moment." Haylie slid off the desk and made her way over to the console.

The light on the computer was still silently blinking. She reached up to trigger the playback. "Computer, security mode. Low volume."

Taber's face filled the screen, the audio silent enough that Ray wouldn't be able to hear.

"Ms. Bond. I am unable to make our meeting. It seems that the individual who has framed the ambassador has been busy. The council is claiming they have undisputed proof of his guilt. I am taking several of my trusted investigators to examine their claims. I'll report back to you as soon as I learn something. In the meantime, I have spoken to the guards on duty. You shouldn't meet with any resistance if you choose to visit the ambassador."

Haylie gently rapped her knuckles once against the cold, smooth top of the desk. She was going to make Donaldson's life a living hell if anything happened to Kamran. She turned to face Ray.

"It seems you are right. But things are in our favor. If you are up for it, I say we pay the ambassador a visit now."

She moved forward quickly and was halfway across the room when it hit. The world began to swim before her eyes. She reached out blindly and took hold of Ray's arm, needing support.

"Chief? Are you well?"

Blackness threatened to win out over consciousness. She was able to give her head a shake, but it didn't help.

"Here, breathe deep."

She did, the musky odor from something Ray shoved under her nose filled her head. It took a minute, but her vision began to clear.

"Sorry. I haven't been sleeping well. Guess it's starting to take its toll on me." She looked up and smiled her appreciation.

"You're fortunate that I carry a few essentials on me." He showed her a small vial that held several small rocks. The odor must have come from them. "The last thing this station needs is its chief of security passing out. Are you well enough to walk or would you like to wait until later?"

Haylie's chest tightened as momentary panic flooded her at the idea. She needed to see Kamran now.

It took a second, but she managed to calm herself, "Not at all. We're here and ready. Let's go."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to push yourself."

"Let's go, Doc."

Her feet moved her before her brain had registered what was going on. Ray silently kept pace beside her. When she snuck a quick peek at him, she could see the grim determination on his face. No wonder Sara had a crush on this man. They walked in silence through the bazaar and past the bars. Everything was quiet, with only a few humans milling about. The Briel had all but disappeared. Taber had told her their people mourned in solitude with prayer and song. It seemed strange yet beautiful at the same time.

The fact they were gone was probably for the best. The humans were becoming distrustful, and tensions were running high. Everyone was too scared or too busy with everything that had happened since the explosion.

Haylie frowned. "It's too empty for this time of day. The night shift is usually unwinding right about now."

"I heard that production is behind from an explosion in the mines. Something about a malfunction in the laser drill. Administrator Donaldson has requested that everyone pull double shifts. Which explains the massive amount of exhaustion cases we've seen in med bay over the past few days." She stopped to look at Ray. "How do you know this? Shit, *I* didn't even know and I know most everything around here."

"The Briel community on this station is small. We are close enough that we are all aware of most everything that goes on. I inquired as to the situation in the mines and what was the cause of my full med bay. They told me. Why?"

Good question. Haylie tucked her hair behind her ear and clasped her hands behind her back when she realized she was shaking.

"No reason. But you did answer my question as to how all the Briel on this station seem to know what is going on."

"Glad I could help." He smiled once more and led the way to the detention cells.

Something was wrong. The normally dull gray walls looked brighter. Halos outlined objects as she looked at them. She pressed her hand against the side of her head for a moment, easing the dull ache that had formed.

"I have a question, Chief. But don't feel obligated to answer." Ray's deep voice was hushed.

Crap. "Yes?"

"Why are you doing this?"

The pressure in her head increased with each step she took closer to Kamran's cell. "Going to the cell? I thought it was to help you get in the check your patient."

Ray slid his hand around her arm to stop her. "I've noticed that you and the ambassador have spent a great deal of time together since your arrival on this station. Is there something going on between you?"

She almost blurted out that she was in love with Kamran. *Almost*. "I know your people have life mates and they are determined by biology. I will admit I am rather taken with your ambassador but, sadly, he said nothing will ever come of my infatuation."

Ray looked long and hard at her before smiling. "I see. My apologies, then, Chief" "Not at all. Let's go see your patient, shall we?"

Warning bells were sounding loud in her head. Why the hell would Ray want to know unless he suspected something? Something must have shown up in her physical. The computers picking up something that Ray recognized. But what? And why the hell didn't Sara warn her?

The last turn brought them face to face with a rather large pair of security officers, one Briel and one human. Haylie didn't recognize the Briel, but she knew all of her people at this point. Still, it took her a minute to remember the lieutenant's name. When this was done, she desperately needed some sleep.

"Hello, Lieutenant Roark, Officer. How are things here?"

"Chief." Both men nodded a greeting to her.

Roark brought his hand up. "I'm going to have to ask you to stop there, Doctor."

"Is there a problem?" Haylie clasped her arms behind her back and widened her stance. She hated doing this to her people. They'd grown close as a team in a very short period of time.

"We're under strict orders not to let anyone in to see the ambassador. The doctor has been down here once already today."

"I'm merely concerned about the welfare of my patient. I'd be more than happy to stay out here if someone would take some readings on his vitals," Ray said and pulled out some sort of medical device.

She straightened ever so slightly. "Who gave these orders? And I'm assuming that restriction doesn't pertain to me."

This time it was the Briel officer who answered. "Of course not, Chief. And it was Administrator Donaldson. He said he wanted to make sure the ambassador was safe from everyone before his trial. For some reason, the council agreed. I don't think they fully trust that Taber won't free the ambassador."

Haylie heard Ray mutter something under his breath in Briel. She was going to have to learn their language. When she looked over at him, annoyance was etched on Ray's face.

"Yes?"

When he looked at her, he smiled, clearing away any trace of what he was thinking. "Nothing. I was thanking our lucky stars the ambassador still has some friends. Taber's reach is quite far and very protective when it comes to his friend."

She would have to remember that and thank Taber later. "I will go in with the doctor to ensure there are no problems. If one of you would like to accompany us, that should prevent any accusations of mistreatment of the prisoner."

The two men looked at each other, then back at Haylie. The lieutenant stepped to the side. "You're the boss, Chief. He's in the third detention cell."

He punched in a code and the doors slid open, allowing them to step in before they closed smoothly, the magnetic seal sucking shut behind them. They were forced to wait to let the computer scan for weapons or other concealed items. The scanner beeped the all clean and they were on their way.

Roark led them down the hall to the third cell. The walls possessed an even more institutional feel to them than the rest of the station. The thick gray concrete radiated coldness. The surface was completely smooth, only the occasional electrical console jutted out. There was no mistaking this for anything but a prison. She remembered the schematic and knew there was only one way in or out.

And Kamran was trapped here.

They stopped in front of the closed cell door. The door was solid with a single, small one-way window in the center. Haylie felt Kamran's pull from inside the cell and felt his surprise. It was odd, but it wasn't until she was this close to him that she could

feel what he was thinking. Their bond had weakened considerably in the past few hours.

Something wasn't right with that.

Roark released the security lock and opened the door. Haylie stepped into the room first. "Good evening, Ambassador."

Haylie's breath caught when she finally saw him. Kamran's normal impeccably clean appearance was now disheveled as he lay in bed. His pitch black hair refused to lie flat against his head, giving him a boyish tousled look. But it was his eyes that stopped her short, being anything but boyish. The silver blue burned as his gaze slinked over her. He was pissed.

When she looked more closely, she realized that his wrists were restrained. Who the hell would do this to him?

"Hello, Chief." His voice was thick, sounding unused.

She swallowed the lump that had mysteriously formed in her throat. *No emotion, keep this professional.* "I'm sorry I wasn't able to come down sooner. I was reviewing the evidence against you."

"Are you involved with my case?"

"Officially? No."

"Unofficially?" His eyes darted to the others.

Haylie needed to be alone with him. "Doctor, if you could conduct your exam quickly, I think it might be best for you to spend as little time as possible here."

"Agreed. Ambassador, this won't hurt a bit."

Ray stepped forward and began to scan Kamran, his data pad making various blips and bleeps. He frowned for a second before pulling out an injector.

"What the hell is that?" Roark spoke from the hall.

"Nothing to worry about. I want to help boost his immune system."

Before Roark could protest further, Ray pushed the injection into Kamran's neck, took a step back and smiled.

"I'm done. Thank you. I will leave you to your rest."

The lieutenant spoke up from the hall. "Let me escort you out, Doctor. Chief?"

"I'm fine. I have a few questions I'd like to ask the ambassador. Please see that we're not disturbed."

"Yes, Chief."

As the two men walked away, Haylie reached over and tripped the sensor on the door. It closed with a thud behind her. With the distractions gone, Haylie found she was finally able to relax. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

She was here with him. Finally.

"Haylie." His voice was thick with emotion.

Her eyes opened and she was faced with the man she loved. She couldn't help it. Despite her protests, resistance and denials, she couldn't deny how she felt. The ache returned to her head and she had to move to the bed and brace herself against the edge to hold herself up. This was too much.

"Why are you here? You're going to get hurt and there will be nothing I can do to stop it."

She chuckled. "I've never needed protection before. I doubt I need it now. I'm worried about you."

"You're not feeling well. You should let Sara check you over." He moved his arms in a failed attempt to reach for her. He swore loudly in his own language. "Can you remove these?"

"Why did they tie you down?"

She reached for his arm and let her fingers brush lightly against his skin. The temptation to remove the restraints was laced with the desire to leave him like this. Knowing he was at her mercy was strangely arousing.

At the brief contact between them, Kamran sucked in a breath. Haylie felt the same jolt that had surely passed through him. Images of them locked together, screaming in a mind-blowing climax blinded her. Her knees weakened and she dropped her full weight against the edge of the bed.

Her vision cleared enough to see that Kamran had felt it too. He swallowed hard but he didn't look away from her.

"It is meant to humiliate the prisoners as much as it is for security. Though they normally don't bind people to beds. Let me up." His breathing was ragged.

Without thinking, she reached over and ran her hand over the sheet. She felt his leg muscles tense at the contact, vibrating with strain. He was at her mercy. And damn her if she didn't like it.

"Haylie?"

"They knew you needed bed rest, that's why they have you in bed. I wouldn't want to you exert yourself and end up back in the med bay. I think you should stay here."

His groan filled the room as she caressed the base of his cock. She ran her finger around the thick shaft before cupping his balls in her hand. His flesh pressed tightly against the thin cloth, tenting the material.

"What are you doing?" He sounded far away.

"Interrogating the prisoner. Do you have any problems with that, Ambassador?" "Only if you stop."

Her laugh was deep, throaty. "I'm not into torture."

Haylie leaned forward and took the tip of his cloth-covered cock into her mouth. She could taste him though the fabric. His heated sweat seeped through and onto her tongue. Kamran swore again.

The Bond That Ties Us

She nipped his tip lightly with her teeth and pulled back. "Then again, torture does have its pleasures."

Chapter Thirteen

Kamran felt the blood drain from his face and rush into his cock. He was completely powerless to prevent her from doing anything. What he couldn't tell was if the sudden rush of excitement he felt was coming from him or her.

It took help from all of the goddesses to make his voice work. "What has gotten into you?"

"Hopefully you in a moment," she said coyly.

As before, images of what she wanted to do to him jumped into his mind. Her mouth on his cock, her breasts in his hands, his mouth on her pussy. Her scent was suddenly surrounding him. Five minutes earlier, he had barely recognized that she was standing in the same room as him, now his senses had kicked into overdrive.

Slowly, she pulled the thin blanket back from his body. The air was cool as it touched his skin. He had been stripped of his own clothing and dressed in a prisoner wrap tunic. Traditionally, it was meant to shame and degrade, barely covering the accused. Practically, it also prevented prisoners from concealing weapons.

For Kamran, it couldn't hide his arousal, his shaft poking through the opening of the tunic and up against the sheet. His heart was pounding madly and his skin tingled in anticipation of her touch. Their thoughts mingled and Kamran could feel her restrained emotions. She was holding back something, but he couldn't tell what.

Haylie slid the synthetic material slowly over the tip of his cock, caressing the sensitive skin until he came close to bursting. With a final tug, she flipped the sheet free of his body. His arms were bound down by his sides, but his feet had been left free.

He shivered half a second before he felt her warm fingers touch his chest. He didn't remember closing his eyes, but he must have. Otherwise he would have been prepared when her mouth descended onto his nipple.

Her wet tongue circled slowly around the now erect nub. He could feel her hair tickle his skin as she moved her head. Had it been pulled up? He couldn't think when she was doing that. She pulled her mouth back, but not her hair. The silken strands moved across his chest and stomach as if they took on a life of their own.

"How have you been feeling, Ambassador?" Her voice sounded husky.

He kept his eyes closed and swallowed. "Say my name." He didn't intend it to sound like a demand, but he was past caring.

Her hair left his stomach and relocated to his face. He could feel her above him. But still he kept his eyes closed. Her breath was warm against his ear.

"Kamran."

He sighed as she sucked his earlobe into her mouth and ran her tongue around the outer ridge of his ear. There was only the single point of contact between them and he strained against his bindings once more, desperate to touch her. He wanted to possess her but couldn't. The frustration ate at him, pulling out a growl from deep down.

"Have they hurt you?" Her breath was warm on his face.

Kamran turned his head, rubbing his lips against where he knew hers would be. *Soft heaven*. He ran his tongue over her lips before plunging it deep into her mouth. He could feel her desperation as her mouth opened wide, devouring him. He could taste it, smell it on her skin. His tongue found hers, the intimate caress stoking his desire higher.

She pulled back a fraction of an inch out of his reach.

"Open your eyes." It was her turn to demand.

He did. Concern, desire and some emotion he didn't recognize were clear on her face. She brought the back of her hand up and stroked his cheek.

"Did they hurt you?" Her voice was soft.

He turned his face, strengthening the physical contact between them. "No. I'm fine."

He kissed her palm. She flexed her hand wide as he ran his tongue over the flat surface. He traced a pattern of the deep lines that covered the surface.

"Did they tell you anything?" she asked, her voice rising barely above a whisper.

He heard the tremor in her voice. She needed him as badly as he did her. He brought his knee up so it touched the outside of her thigh. Haylie looked at the contact before her eyes darted over to his painfully hard shaft.

"You can't make me say another thing, Chief." He smiled and hoped he looked playful.

Most likely, he only looked pathetically horny and unable to do a damn thing about it.

Straightening slowly to her full height, Haylie placed her hands on her hips. She looked at the door, chewed on her bottom lip for a fraction of a second before returning her gaze to him and smiling. It was a slow, mischievous grin.

"I have ways of making you talk, Ambassador."

His innards did a flip of anticipation. She was so beautiful, embodying everything he wanted so perfectly he ached for her. But he would have to wait for his prize. Despite her earlier words, she seemed more than willing to engage in sensual torture. Taking a single step backward, she was now out of reach of even his knee. He was able to easily see her body and for the first time he really looked at her.

She couldn't be on duty. She was wearing her uniform pants, but the black, form-fitting shirt she had on was hardly standard issue. The material stretched seductively over her rounded breasts, leaving little to the imagination. Jealousy stabbed at his gut, causing him to ball his fists. Other men had seen her like this.

"Why are you wearing that?" He jerked his arms hard against the restraints and gave his feet a kick. A vain attempt at escape if there ever was one.

"What's wrong with this?" She slid her hand along her side and over her hip.

"Nothing, if you want every male on this station panting after you."

He remembered the way Donaldson had looked at her. Kamran wasn't naive enough to think others hadn't viewed her with the same desire. Uncontrollable anger surged up in him once more. She was his—not some object for others to ogle.

Haylie shrugged. "A girl has to keep her options open. After all, you claim that a relationship between us is impossible. And as hard as this is to believe, I may want a family of my own someday."

The growl left his mouth as he jerked hard against the restraints. He couldn't clear the images of Haylie in the arms of Donaldson. Their children running around, playing in their family home. Kamran wanted to kill him.

He jumped as Haylie touched his chest.

"What's wrong with you? I wasn't serious."

Looking at her, he knew she was lying. She did want a family and a mate who could take care of her. Even love her. The thought was soul shattering.

"If you promise to calm down, I'll release your arms."

"No, don't." A small rational side of him knew if she freed him there'd be trouble.

Haylie rested her head on his chest, right above his heart. He could feel it beating strong against his ribs. His surging emotions calmed slightly, but he still wasn't himself. He swore in his own language.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked at him, confused. He felt more in tune with her now than ever before. As if their absence had strengthened their bond. Haylie gave her head a light shake and smiled. The tension between them passed.

"If you're going to speak like that, then it's time for a language lesson. We'll save the naughty words for another day. For now, let's start with the basics. What is this called?"

She rose above him on the bed and kissed his nose. Her breasts bumped against his throat.

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"Nalaa."
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Moving down his body, Haylie sucked, kissed and licked her way back down to his stomach. Kamran was at his limit of self-control. How could anyone resist a woman like this?

[&]quot;And what about this?" She leaned forward and sucked on his earlobe.

[&]quot;Shrish."

[&]quot;And this?" She ran her tongue across his throat.

[&]quot;Rotha."

Haylie paused for only a moment above his cock before he heard her voice in his head say *and this?*

He wasn't sure if he responded or not, verbally or otherwise. The sensation of her mouth sucking the sensitive tip of his cock was more than he could handle. Slowly she leaned forward, taking the length of him in her mouth, pausing for a second before slowly bringing the suction back to the top.

The steady pumping motion of her mouth and hands set his skin on fire. His balls tightened against the base of his cock and he had to fight the sudden urge to try and rip the restraints from the bed. He felt every muscle tighten, his release urged on by her skillful mouth.

She withdrew at the last possible second before he came, leaving his heart racing and his breath coming out in gasps.

"Di machachta."

"What does that mean?" She asked as she slid her leg over his body once more.

"It's not...the type of language...an ambassador should be using."

"Thank god you're a criminal," she said and flashed him a wicked grin.

Haylie climbed up onto the bed, swinging her muscled leg over his body to straddle him. It only took her a moment to move his swollen tip to the heat of her entrance. The tip of his cock now pressed against her pussy. She didn't continue and kept him from the place he most wanted to be.

"You're going to kill me." His words came out in a half groan, half growl.

Haylie didn't seem to notice. She leaned forward, rubbing her breasts against his chest. He felt her tight nipples with the contact. Her softness against him. Kamran realized how much he needed her, needed to be a part of her. A need that went far beyond the physical.

She rested her head against his. Her breath hot on his neck. "At least I can guarantee a pleasurable death."

Kamran couldn't resist bucking his hips, grinding hard against her clit. He didn't want her thinking about anyone but him, ever. Her moan drove him wild and he strained, wanted to plunge inside her.

"Yes, okay," she answered.

Opening her legs wide, she positioned him at her entrance. With a short sigh, she impaled herself on top of him.

For a second, neither one of them moved. The realization that this was where he belonged hit him hard. By the goddess, didn't want to consider the possibility of another mate. Haylie, *his* Haylie, was all he wanted.

There were no more words between them, only the steady hum of their bodies locked together. Kamran was lost in her, not only her body, but her mind. Pleasure and longing cocooned him, causing him to lose track of which emotion belonged to whom.

She began the slow up and down rhythm that he'd been craving. Her pussy muscles tightened around him, milking his pleasure. His fingertips brushed her knees, his thumb rubbing against her skin. He wanted to touch her everywhere. Hold her.

But she was in charge.

Haylie made her own explorations. She licked his neck. Placed kisses at the base of his throat. He watched as she leaned back, continuing to ride him on the bed, and touched her breasts. Her fingers rubbed lightly over her nipples, rewarding her with obvious pleasure. Each touch caused her to grind down hard against him. Her pace increased.

"I'm going to come," she cried out.

He couldn't look away.

Her eyes fluttered closed and her fingers squeezed her breasts. Soft mewing noises escaped her before growing into groans. He had to fight his own release as she squeezed, pumped and ground hard on him. Her pace increased, carrying them both to the edge.

"Oh god!" She threw her head back and cried out. Her face flushed, a bead of sweat rolled down her chest between her breasts.

It was his undoing. Thrusting his hips up once, twice, he exploded into her. Her muscles tightened and released around his cock, squeezing every drop from his body and sending another tremor of pleasure through him. Finally, Haylie collapsed against him. Their breathing was ragged. Her weight on his chest made him feel safe. A minute or two passed before she stirred.

She didn't speak as she reached over and fumbled with the leather restraint that held his right wrist. Kamran panicked. Without a word, she turned her head and kissed him. The kiss was gentle, probing. Her tongue flicked in his mouth, exploring, distracting. A loud clicking noise signaled his partial freedom. His hand found her ass, which he loved and he squeezed firmly.

She broke the kiss long enough to say, "Only one."

"One," he agreed.

He was still hard as stone and he didn't need to look at her to tell she was ready. With his left wrist still bound, he managed to roll on his side. Haylie's head rested on his arm, her back flat on the bed. The side of the bed and his confinement kept them close together. Ignoring the pain of the awkward angle, he bent his head and captured her nipple in his mouth. He felt amazingly close to her like this.

Haylie entwined her fingers in his hair and kneaded his scalp. He loved her taste. The sensitive tip grew in his mouth. His tongue circled the hard bud, coaxing further pleasure from her.

"Hon, we need to talk."

He didn't want her thinking, so he slid his hand down over her stomach and rested between her legs. "Later."

She bucked her hips at his touch, reached over and grabbed his cock. "I promise we'll finish. But we need to talk. Someone wants you out of the way. They have had us chasing ghosts, taking us away from the real issue"

He swore. No, he didn't want to do that now. He was with his mate and he was only now beginning to understand the depths of how much he cared for her. The rest of the universe could go to hell.

"Then why did you free my arm?"

She squeezed his stiff cock, running her finger up and down the length of him. "Because I knew it was bothering you. But you're too freaked out of have them both removed."

"I might kill someone." He retaliated against her sensual attack by sliding a finger into her slick cunt. It was well lubricated from their lovemaking a moment earlier.

"Do you...remember the valley from...my dreams?" She panted in between each thrust of his fingers.

He didn't want to answer. Leaning forward once more, he sucked her nipple into his mouth once more.

Kamran?

Haylie's voice rang clear in his mind. He froze, his brain unable to process that she really hadn't spoken aloud.

"How are you able to do this?"

Think the words.

Haylie?

Her smile was beautiful. We've never been able to do this before.

This isn't a common ability, even among Briel mates. Another anomaly?

She shrugged and slipped her fingers from his cock to his testicles. *Like everything else about our relationship. Now, answer my question.*

"Do you remember the valley from my dreams?"

His head was clearly muddled because he couldn't think. It wasn't until she flashed the image of the valley that the memory of the dream came rushing back.

That was your dream?

She lightly slapped his chest with her hand. "Where's that valley? I asked a few of my team, and even some of the miners, but they didn't recognize my description."

"Absolutely not." He pulled his hand away from her core and cupped her chin.

"I don't think you have much to say about it. I need to follow this investigation where it leads me. Don't you want to get out of here? Cause if you don't care, then I have a mountain of paperwork waiting for me back in my office."

"I don't want you going anywhere near there."

Haylie slapped his hand away and glared at him. "I'm not some Lunar crystal to be protected from the universe. If I don't get the information from you, I'll go to someone else."

"Who?"

"Taber, to start. But I'm sure even the Elder Council would help if they thought there was a chance you might be innocent."

"There is nothing you can do to prove to the council that I'm not guilty. Even if there is proof, I don't want you risking your life to get it."

That is my decision to make.

"No, it's not. I'm the one who stands accused of treason. I'm not going to have you run off and get yourself killed when it won't make a difference anyway."

For the first time in his life he truly felt terror. Kamran had to struggle to control his body under the weight of his emotions. His breathing became labored and he could feel his blood pounding through him. Mentally, he erected a barrier in an attempt to contain his fear and concern. The last thing he wanted was for her to see the depths of his emotion.

He knew he was successful instantly. *Too successful*. Not only had he blocked her from seeing his fear, but he had broken the rest of their connection. Haylie sucked in a gasp and looked hurt. Her hand fell away from him.

"Why?" Her voice sounded strange.

Her question echoed in the room when she pushed away from his body, cool air replaced her warmth. He knew he should say something. He opened his mouth, but closed it again. He wouldn't give her the information she wanted. His life wasn't worth hers, no matter what she thought.

Instead, he was forced to watch her dress. The clothing that she had enticed him with a short time ago, she now donned as a protective barrier against him. She jerked her pants up and turned to face him. He didn't like the expression on her face.

"Please, don't." He somehow managed to keep his concern from his voice.

Haylie pulled out the strands of her thick hair that were caught in her shirt. With a fascinating movement of her hands, she tied the silken strands into some sort of tight bun. No, this wasn't good.

"Haylie?" His voice didn't rise above a whisper.

"I'm not a child who needs protecting," her words were clipped. "I've lived my whole life dealing with the scum of humanity, so you needn't worry about that. And yet again the universe has reminded me that relationships are nothing more than vapor. You'd think I'd have learned that lesson when my mom left us. But I guess I'm not too bright."

"Please don't think that."

"Thank you, *Ambassador*. I will keep you informed of any breaks in our investigation," she said coolly. Haylie pressed a button on the key pad by the door. "I'm done here."

Kamran closed his eyes and almost reached out with his mind. He didn't want to lose her. Not this way, not ever. But no matter what she thought, he knew that somehow the valley would be dangerous for her.

The sound of the door swooshing open reached his ears a second before the blast of cold air from the hall.

"If you're not going to listen to me, please be careful."

She looked at him, her mouth opened for a second before snapping shut. Without even a backward glance she left him alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Haylie tried to scratch her nose yet again through the environmental suit and cursed once more as her finger jabbed the reinforced plastic that kept her alive. This was crazy. She was crazy. Her dreams were probably nothing more than a byproduct of her oversexed libido. But she couldn't walk away from her duty, no matter how pissed off she was.

Stupid, god dammed, conceited, smug...alien.

Not that it mattered much anymore. Once she solved this mystery, she was going to hop on the first transport off this nightmare planet and head somewhere else. Titan colony was looking for an assistant chief of security. They were only a three-month journey by cargo shuttle and had fresh water on the planet. And they had the added bonus of having no Briel.

Unfortunately, solving the mystery meant finding this damn valley to see what the hell was out there.

"Are you well, Ms. Bond?" The speaker in her EV suit crackled in her ear.

Haylie looked up. Dr. Ray was waiting for her at the top of the ridge. The wind had let up, giving her enough visibility to see what lay beyond. Not that it was anything other than more sand until they hiked another two miles.

"I'm fine. Just thinking."

"We don't have time for your feet to go idle. If we are to make it to your valley and back before nightfall, we must hurry."

She nodded and increased her pace until she was beside him. It was impossible to clearly see Ray through the EV suit. And even if she could, his body was as completely covered as her own. Between the high winds whipping the sand in her face and the haze from the EV mask, visibility was poor. The added layer of clothing between her and Ray set her more at ease. She didn't feel the same comfort around him as she had back in med bay. And the rest of her personnel were either on duty or resting, so she didn't want to ask any of them to come. For now, having Ray act as her guide made sense. Still, something wasn't right about this whole situation.

Haylie shook her head. Why the hell had she run into him just as she was trying to leave? She really wanted to do this alone in case it turned out to be nothing. The only other person who posed more of a problem was Taber. Damned Briel were a stubborn bunch. She'd decided to bypass asking others for information on the valley and turned to the old Briel archives. Her access allowed her viewing privileges on non-classified information, including geological surveys of the planet. It was in one of those files that she'd found an early survey done of the Corridor. The place was a non-area. Nothing of

note for minerals or resources that the surveyors could find. No reason at all for it to appear in her dreams. She had to see what was hiding there. She would have been able to slip out without anyone noticing if Ray hadn't come looking for her with a message from Sara.

As soon as he discovered what she was about to do, Ray announced that he intended to help her find whatever it was she was looking for on the planet's surface. What the hell did he think a doctor could do to help? If she did run into anything dangerous she doubted he'd be able to do anything in time to help.

She'd tried every tactic she could think of to keep him from following her. Even threw her weight around as security chief and claimed that it was too dangerous for the colony's main Briel doctor to be traipsing around the planet's surface.

She even tried to use the truth. She was investigating the strange occurrences on the station and it led her to the Corridor. Ray simply smiled as he slipped the EV helmet on and twisted it into place.

"Are you coming?" His voice was almost cheery.

He was going. What choice did she have? Now she had to watch her back and his.

As they walked, she probed him for anything information she could. Best to keep him occupied and not worrying too much about what she was looking for.

"So what can you tell me about this place? Anything we need to be aware of before we get there?"

"The first settlers referred to this place as the Corridor. Not a totally appropriate description, but one that stuck nonetheless."

Haylie heard him start to speak further, but then stop.

"What? What is out here?" she asked as casually as she could. Her throat hurt from the minute dust particles that wriggled their way past the air filter in the ventilation unit, making it difficult to speak.

"Nothing at all. Sorry, I thought I saw something. I remember the Briel who scouted the area years ago were surprised that a planet had such an unusual area. Dead patches like this are rare. No microbes or plant life of any kind. That's why I was intrigued when you told me this is where you suspect the root of our problems lie."

"Well, my information could be incomplete, but I trust the source."

Ray stumbled, letting out a curse she'd heard Kamran use before.

She turned to face him, completely shocked at his outburst. "Are you okay?"

Haylie reached out to catch his arm. As she made contact, a blinding cold burned its way up her arm and slammed into her chest. She couldn't move and gasped slightly for air.

Ray turned his head so they were mask to mask. His eyes, cold black beads, stared at her.

"What's your source again?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I'd rather not say." Her skin seemed to itch like a thousand ants crawled over it.

"It would be reassuring if I could trust it. I'd hate to think you're putting our lives in danger based on the word of a scoundrel. Or a traitor."

Anger flashed through her. "My information comes from official records and my own observations. As chief of security, I think my word would be enough for your confidence."

"Of course it is. I didn't mean to imply otherwise." He smiled, but even through the EV mask she could tell it didn't reach his eyes.

Like hell he didn't.

As they scrambled up the next dune, it was Haylie's turn to slip in the heavy sand and instincts kicked in. She caught Ray's shoulder in a tight grasp in an effort to stay upright.

He winced and cried out in pain as he jerked his arm free, sending her tumbling to the ground. They stayed like that for several heartbeats, staring at each other. She felt the blood pool in her stomach.

He was going to kill her. She wasn't sure how or why, but she knew beyond a doubt that he would. He was going to take the knife he had in his survival kit, slash her air hose and suit and leave her to die.

"What's wrong with your shoulder?" She adjusted her body slightly, so as to not alert him to her next action.

Something in his voice changed. His hands flexed into tight balls. "I had an accident. I tripped and someone drove a knife into it."

As he lunged at her, Haylie swung her leg out, sweeping his feet out from under him and sending him crashing to the ground. The slight incline they were on made it difficult for him to regain his footing and gave her enough time to run. She bolted down the hill, heading southwest from the colony.

"Get back here, bitch!" his voice screamed through the speaker.

"Computer, switch to channel seven." The words came out in gasps as she ran.

"Briel security. Is there something we can help—?"

"Shut up and listen. This is Chief Bond. Tell Taber there is an attack planned from the Corridor. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I think it's the Ecada."

"Hold." The voice was replaced by the steady hum of static.

Please god, let Taber be there.

"Haylie?"

She didn't stop moving, but chanced a look behind her. Ray didn't appear to be anywhere in sight.

"Taber. I don't know where I am exactly, can you give me a loc."

"You're in sector forty-five. The scanner shows you just north of the Corridor. What are you doing there? Do you need assistance?"

She spotted some rocks to her left and made her way over to them as quickly as she could. Ducking behind one of the larger ones, she pulled out her blaster and waited. After a minute, she realized Ray wasn't behind her. He should be right on top of her. Where the hell did he go?

"Haylie, respond." Taber's concern was apparent in his voice.

"Listen carefully, Taber. Ray must be off to alert whoever is waiting for him in the valley. He was the one who organized everything. I have to find out what is there quickly before they do whatever it is they are doing."

"Doctor Ray?"

"No time to explain. Send every available squad to the station perimeter. Once they're ready, I want you to maintain radio silence, but keep the line open. I don't want to draw any more attention to myself until you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

Haylie prayed she was wrong. "For an attack against the station."

She heard a flurry of activity on the other end as Taber barked commands at the officers in the room.

"Is there anything else you need me to do, Chief?"

Haylie reached out with her mind, hoping she'd find the one thing she'd missed more than anything in the past few hours. Kamran still blocked her. She should be mad still. But with the threat of attack, she couldn't keep hold of her petty annoyances.

"Yes. Please see that Kamran is released. That prison is the last place I want him to be when all hell breaks loose."

"That's not possible, I-"

"Please." Haylie heard the quiver in her voice, but didn't care. She had to know Kamran was safe.

"I'll find a way. Be safe."

Why the hell had Kamran shut her out? "Just get him out of there. And keep him out of trouble."

She switched into silent running mode and carefully made her way over the rocks toward her destination. She'd remember the layout of the survey map and what was there. She was closer than she'd realized to the valley. As she picked her way over rocks and across the slippery gray sand of the barren landscape, her mind continued to drift back to Kamran.

Taber would see that he was safe. She really didn't need to worry about him. So why was she so freaked? She didn't like the answer that was staring her in the face. Despite his arrogance and his unwillingness to see past a future that may never come to be, she loved him. Not a passing fancy, infatuation, or even strong feelings like she'd had for the few other men in her life.

This was gut-wrenching, mind-blowing love.

She had to stop to catch her breath. *Great timing for a revelation*. Hopefully, she'd live long enough to share this with Kamran.

* * * * *

Kamran had lain completely still, half naked on the table, for some time after Haylie left. It was only once the quiet had gotten to him that he'd released his other bound arm and got up from the bed. His legs were weak and it took him several minutes to lose the shakiness. He tried the computer pad that Haylie had used to contact the guards. No answer. Perhaps they'd gone on a break.

He took advantage of his solitude to explore his small surroundings. There was very little. The human cell contained mostly human amenities. Cup, toilet, clean worker's uniform. He picked up the uniform, size large. Holding it up next to his body, it barely came up to his chest. Haylie was taller than this thing. His thoughts caught him off guard.

By the goddess, what had he done?

He sat back down on the bed, closed his eyes and inhaled every scent he could. A part of her was still here with him. The rest of her was in danger.

He spent the next few hours sitting quietly in his cell, pondering the events of the past few days. No one came to check on him. He hadn't seen Taber since his arrest. And where was his defense council? His trial time would be approaching soon and they hadn't worked on a strategy. Unless they intended on throwing him into the fire.

He walked over to the console on the wall. "Computer, time?"

Silence greeted him. Now that wasn't right.

"Computer? Guards?"

Not right at all. He pounded on the cold metal door. "Hello. Is anyone there?"

Nothing. It stayed that way for another hour. He even considered going against his better judgment to open his mind to Haylie. Almost. The image of her storming away, leaving him alone, grated on him. He was wrong about her, about them. She couldn't be his perfect mate, or else she never would have abandoned him this way.

He jumped from the bed and began to pound on the cell door again, calling out.

He was getting sick of this.

The scrape of the magnetic door sent him flying backward. His heart was racing, but there wasn't anything he could do to protect himself. When Taber walked through the door, confusion filled him instead of relief. A group of Briel soldiers stood anxiously in the hall.

"What in the maker's name is going on?"

Taber waved a hand to silence him and threw a bundle of clothing at him. "We have no time. Can you walk?"

He didn't hesitate and quickly got dressed. "I'm missing boots, but physically I'm fine. Why?"

Taber motioned to one of his men, who removed his boots and handed them to Kamran. "There is going to be an attack on the base."

"From who?" *Attack*? This must have been what they weren't meant to know. Haylie had found something.

"We're not sure yet, but Doctor Ray is involved. Something is in the Corridor. Haylie is there now."

"Ray? Is Haylie okay?"

"I'll explain as we go. Come on."

* * * * *

The thirty minutes it took for Haylie to make her way over the outcropping of rocks seemed an eternity. Her own harsh breathing and the constant blowing of wind were the only sounds she could hear. She'd made it.

With great care to not rip her EV suit, Haylie rested against the jagged rocks and tried to see what was so dangerous that Ray had tried to kill her.

"Damn. I see something moving down there, but I'm too far away to make it out." She spoke the words to no one in particular.

She switched on the zoom goggles built into her suit's mask. Automatically, the device zoomed in on the area where she had been staring. It took her brain several seconds to acknowledge that what she saw was real and not something out of a nightmare.

The reptilian creatures walked on all fours moving about the confines of the valley, looking very much like they were swimming in water, not pacing on land. Their alien nature was difficult for her mind to grasp. But not only that, she had the feeling that they knew she was there. Her mind felt the itching sensation of her dreams. They were beating at what little protection her inner mental walls could offer.

"Oh, shit."

Haylie took the chance and broke radio silence. "Taber?"

"Chief Bond? Taber isn't here. What is it?" There was no mistaking the concern on the other end of the speaker. She vaguely recognized him as one of Taber's men.

"I don't...I've never seen creatures like this."

"Can you describe them?"

"Ah, ever see a crocodile? Kind of like that, only pumped up on steroids, silver, with spikes coming out of their spine."

"Crocodile?"

She shivered. "Tell Taber it's the Ecada."

There was suddenly a riot of voices on the other end of her speaker before a long silence. Haylie's heart was pounding by the time the Briel officer returned.

"Ms. Bond, Taber and his men are on their way. They want you to stay there."

The creatures in the valley must have sensed trouble was brewing. As if in sync with his statement, they began to pour from the valley, spilling over the sides of the rocks like a quicksilver river.

"No can do. These things are on the move. Tell Taber to lock onto my suit's tracking ID signal. I'm going to follow them."

There was no response. She'd half expected the Briel to protest in that politely annoying manner that they all seemed to possess.

"Eurus colony? Over?" she said, tapping the earpiece through the helmet.

Just wonderful. Haylie pushed off from the rocks and tried to keep as close to them as she dared. As she did before, Haylie got the sense that the creatures knew she was there. As she approached them, it felt like her brain was itchy and she fought to keep her eyes open.

Pull yourself together, Bond.

She had to give her head another hard shake to clear it.

Come on, Haylie. Where are you?

It took her a second to realize the voice in her head wasn't her own.

Kamran?

Yes, it's me. What are these things you're following?

She then stared hard at them, trying to get as clear an image as she could.

Di machachta. It's the Ecada.

Her eyes dropped closed, but this time she almost couldn't get them back open. The buzzing in her mind now filled her ears. She wasn't going to make it. They knew she was there and somehow they were trying to stop her. Forcing her body and mind to shut down.

"Haylie?"

Kamran's voice now crackled from the speaker, jolting her awake again.

"They are going to attack the colony. Kamran, you have to make sure they don't. They'll kill everyone."

"It's not safe for you there. Can you take shelter somewhere?" $\,$

Why the hell was he worrying about her when the entire colony was in danger?

"Don't worry about me, Ambassador. I'm close to the colony now and should make it back before they get to me. Just get our defenses up."

"Taber has pulled everyone he can find. Even the miners have grabbed their equipment and laser torches for weapons and have joined us. We're moving as fast as we can, but we need time."

Time. Never enough of it.

"There's a supply depot south of my position. I don't think I can get to it, but it's full of explosives. Have some of the miners set it to blow. That should cause enough of a distraction to buy a few minutes."

She hoped she sounded braver than she felt right now. There was no way she'd make it back in time. Even if she did, she was on the wrong side of the fight with little more than a blaster. Her safety wasn't worth all the lives on the colony. Kamran was protected and that gave her a sense of satisfaction. As she collapsed to her knees, consciousness fading, everything seemed all right. The buzzing of the Ecada in her head was too much, too strong to fight.

"Where are you? I don't want you getting caught out there with no place to go."

She heard him talking, but despite her best efforts, she couldn't reply.

"Haylie?" Kamran sounded desperate, even to his own ears.

She wished she'd been able to tell him how she felt before now. Life wasn't fair. Haylie gave up the fight and let unconsciousness take her over.

Chapter Fifteen

Kamran tapped his own communication unit in his EV suit, before letting out another curse. He tried once more to reach out with his mind, but their intimate connection was fading as well. The warmth of her now constant presence in his mind began to retract, leaving a dead space in its stead.

He stood at the brink of their quickly erected defenses between the oncoming horde and the fragile colony. Briel and humans alike were bringing out what limited firearms they had, preparing for battle. With the damage that had been done to their backup EV suits many were left to wait inside the colony in case the Ecada breached their outer defenses. Few spoke as they listened for sounds of the approaching horde. Kamran grabbed an X5 pulse rifle and pushed his way past a huddle of security officers strategizing over a map.

"Ambassador, where do you think you are going?" Taber's gruff voice invaded his ears, coated in static.

"To get Haylie. I'm not leaving her out there alone."

"That is not wise."

Kamran turned to face his friend and fixed him with a stare that sent Taber's second in command scurrying away.

"At least let me send a unit with you."

"No. They won't bother me. Individuals aren't seen as a threat by them. Plus, we need everyone we can get here."

"They *may* bother with the ambassador who tried to stop them from getting what they wanted."

He didn't respond, taking the time to check the rifle's power supply. Fully charged.

"She can't be too far from our present location. She was moving toward the base when we lost contact," Kamran said with every ounce of conviction he could muster. If only he could still sense her.

Why had he blocked her earlier? Stupid fool.

Taber nodded. "I have every confidence that the chief is well. She may have needed to break contact for safety reasons."

Great makers, let that be the case. "I hope to beat the Ecada back here."

An unnatural scream pierced the silent planet landscape, silencing every soul at the defense base. The sand began to tremble with the slight rumble of the enemy's approach. The beat of hundreds of feet were coming toward them.

"That may be overly optimistic. You better move. They will be here in moments."

Kamran saluted his friend in the traditional military form. With any luck, they would see each other again. He then slung the rifle over his shoulder and set out in search of Haylie.

Despite his long legs, it took an unacceptably long time to make his way toward her last known location. His weight made walking quickly a challenging prospect. Once he found her, he was going to kill her for doing something so stupid. She was only one person. What made her think that she could take on an entire army?

A sense of knowing exactly what she was capable of created an air of confidence in her he'd only seen in a few other beings in his life. Even if she held doubts, Haylie charged ahead sticking to her convictions once she'd made a decision. Whatever reason brought her out here, he knew she wouldn't stop until she saw it through. Or she was killed. He closed his eyes and breathed as deeply as he could in the EV suit. *She'd better be okay*.

Because he didn't think he could live without her.

Over his shoulder to the right, Kamran tried to catch a glimpse of the oncoming Ecada horde. They had either switched routes after Haylie's last transmission or had engaged a cloaking barrier. Neither of which boded well for the defenders. A second later, a large explosion shook the ground. The miners had created their distraction.

A loud beeping from his hand broke into his thoughts. The EV location ID tracker had a lock on a lone signal—Haylie.

"Haylie, can you hear me?" He repeated his message on several different channels. *Please let her hear.*

The locater showed that she was due south of his current position.

He began to run as quickly as he could. "Haylie, I'm almost there. Hold on a few more minutes."

Static answered his plea.

He should be able to see her once he crested the next hill. But reaching the top didn't reveal a body. A glint in the sand caught his eye and he slid quickly down the hill.

No.

He picked up the metal transmitter, bits of Haylie's torn EV suit still clinging to it. Kamran spun around, but there was no indication of anyone or anything. Someone else had gotten to her first. Kamran's stomach sickened. He was too late.

He stood motionless, not knowing what to do. He needed to find her to be able to put things right between them. He needed to tell her that he loved her. She drove him crazy with her brashness, but he could live with that. She gave him something he never knew was missing from his life. A companion, someone who would love him for himself, not his political accomplishments. Someone who would challenge him in life without judging him. Someone who could love him back.

"Ambassador, did you find her?" Taber's steady voice broke through his thoughts.

Kamran swallowed away the lump in his throat. "No. Someone tore her transmitter out and left it. I'm going to have to come back to base."

"The Ecada were drawn toward the explosion. It must be the heat. That won't distract them for long. They are approaching from the southwest."

Kamran squeezed the transmitter tightly before tucking it into his pocket. "I'll swing around and approach from the east."

"Hurry. They haven't attacked yet, but I don't anticipate that lasting much longer."

The journey back to base took twice as long due to the roundabout route. With each step, Kamran tried to figure out who would have taken her. The Ecada didn't take prisoners unless they were short on their food supplies. That left only one person.

"Taber, has anyone been able to track down Ray?"

"I've had to pull all our men to the perimeter."

"But no one has seen him enter from that side?"

Silence for a moment before Taber responded. "No sightings at all. What are you thinking?"

"There's a secondary access tunnel on the north of the colony base. I think he's taken Haylie there."

The main channel automatically cut over the private chat. "Weapons ready. Here they come!"

Goddess protect them.

Kamran switched off his communication unit. The last thing they needed was him as an added distraction. He reached the base and turned right instead of left making his way toward the access tunnel.

The door was large, the metal dented and pitted from the constant beating it took from the sand. At first glance it didn't appear that it would open, but a spark from the door mechanism caught his attention. He picked up the wires and touched them together, once, twice. The doors whooshed open, sending a cloud of sand swirling around his feet.

He had to force the doors shut, using the exposed wires on the inside. Ray had clearly been in a hurry, not bothering to cover his tracks. Sand and dirt from outside were sucked into the room, creating a cloud of haze to fill the small antechamber.

How the hell was he going to figure out where they'd gone? All four of the access doors were closed, but something drew Kamran's attention to the far left one. The security panel had a wipe mark, fingers drawn quickly through the dust.

Haylie.

With a flash of his ID badge, the door opened effortlessly and Kamran barreled through. He pushed his EV helmet from his head and took in a lungful of clean air.

"Havlie!"

This was a service tunnel. He ran with great strides up the corridor until it emptied into a control room.

"Preflight sequence engaged."

The computer's sanitary voice sent a chill through him.

"Computer, override. Cancel preflight cycle."

"Please provide override authorization."

"Kamran, five-nine-alpha."

"Access denied."

So much for that. A glance out to the hangar gave him another idea. Releasing the security seal on the door, he slid down the ladder to the hangar bay floor. The whirl of the short-range shuttle's engines increased, blowing the dust that had penetrated the force field's barrier into his eyes.

With a yank, he pulled his helmet back on but couldn't fully secure it to his face. At least he could see a little. Well enough to locate the one thing that could keep the shuttle grounded.

When he passed in front of the nose of the shuttle, a booming voice assaulted his ears.

"Well, Ambassador. Nice to see you outside med bay for a change. I hope you haven't had too much of a headache recently."

Kamran stumbled over a toolbox. He landed on the ground next to the docking clamps.

"I'm perfectly healthy. Not a great day for a pleasure flight."

"If you're referring to that little attack from my friends, I think it's a perfect day for one. Their orders are to kill every last human and Briel on the planet. So I thought it best to take a little day trip."

Kamran grabbed a wrench from the tool box and pounded the clamp's casing until it popped open. He knew what men like Ray were like. Keep him talking, taunt his ego long enough to finish what he needed to do to keep the shuttle grounded.

"And you felt the need to take Chief Bond with you?"

Carefully removing his gloves, Kamran tightened his hands into balls before diving into the panel. A shock from the unshielded wires made him cry out. It had the happy side effect of numbing his fingers to the pain and he was able to force the security panel open, exposing the metal clamps that could prevent the shuttle from taking off.

"I wanted to make sure I had a pleasant distraction while I orbited the planet. I've always wanted to dissect a human."

"We'll see about that," he said through his clenched teeth.

Movement from Kamran's right caught his attention. Donaldson stepped into his line of sight. "What are you doing, Kamran?"

Kamran tensed, ready to defend himself from attack. Donaldson had been working with Ray this whole time. He tightened his grip on the wrench.

"Just a little last-minute maintenance."

It took a second but Kamran realized something was different. There was no malice in Donaldson's voice and he'd used his given name. He was filthy and his eyes were bloodshot with heavy bags underneath. Gone was the coldness that had been so much a part of who he had been in the past year. What remained looked tired, scared and confused.

"Are you well, Administrator? Sean?"

The engines from the shuttle kicked into the next phase. The last one before takeoff.

"No time. I'm going to stop him." Donaldson muttered.

Kamran watched as he pulled out a blaster and stumbled toward the shuttle door.

"No. Sean!"

Kamran stopped and tried to think back to his basic piloting course. In case of emergency, clamps can be manually released by turning the handle clockwise. So to lock them...

"Docking clamps engaged. Preflight sequence paused." The computer's voice echoed in the docking bay.

He released his breath. "Thank the goddess."

"Not smart. I would hate to see your girlfriend get hurt."

Kamran looked up in time to see a limp, helmetless Haylie being shoved at him. He barely managed to get his arms up in time to catch her when Ray launched at him.

* * * * *

Haylie landed hard against the hangar floor, the pain from the impact jolting her from unconsciousness. The world was spinning, her head throbbed from the impact with the floor and her lungs seized in a fit of coughing.

What was going on? The last thing she remembered she had been circling around the Ecada close to the colony defenses when she'd fallen unconscious. The next thing she knew her suit was ripped and she couldn't breathe. She barely managed to hold the tear together before Ray dragged her back inside the building and she passed out again.

She managed to roll onto her back as someone kicked her leg. She looked up to watch Ray swing a wrench at someone's head. The impact sent the helmet flying.

"Kamran?"

"Run. Now!"

"Like hell!"

On her feet, she stumbled toward the shuttle. A weapon, she needed one now. Her vision blurred, she misjudged her distance from the shuttle's nose and ran into it. Her hands managed to find a groove and she held on tight. Focusing straight in front of her,

Haylie saw a heap lying on the floor. *Donaldson*. He was moaning, clutching his gut. But he did have one thing she needed. Haylie threw herself at him, landing hard on her knees beside him.

"Give me your blaster."

"I'm so," he gasped. "I'm sorry."

"Just give me the fucking gun!"

Haylie ripped it from his outstretched hand and tore back around the front of the shuttle. Haylie pointed the blaster at the two Briel as they grappled with each other on the shuttle floor. For a second, she thought Kamran had the upper hand until Ray managed to kick his feet out from under him and Kamran's head banged hard against the floor. *God, let him be okay.*

"Freeze!"

Ray spun to face her. He smiled a wide toothy grin. "Chief! Nice to see you up on your feet again. Though I haven't given you permission to return to duty. Have you, Administrator?"

Haylie didn't dare take her eyes off Ray but she knew Donaldson now stood very close behind her.

"No, I haven't."

She didn't panic. There was something in his tone that was different. She knew it.

"Donaldson...Sean, Ray is the one who's been behind everything. The attacks on the colony. Your nightmares. Everything."

She watched Ray but listened for Donaldson. For his part, Ray didn't move. The cocky bastard thought he'd won.

"Sean. I know he's been using you. Controlling what you've thought, even the things you've said. But you're stronger than that. Help me."

Ray made a tsking noise. "Chief, I'm surprised. I would have thought you of all people would have realized that our friend here is weak. I would never have been able to keep control over him for as long as I have otherwise. What's it been now, almost two years? No matter. Now you and your boyfriend here," he gave Kamran's leg a kick, "proved to be quite challenging."

Haylie cringed, but Kamran didn't move. She reached out with her mind and while he wasn't answering her, she knew he was alive.

"Isn't that sweet. Checking to see how he's doing. Too bad he's not conscious to answer you."

She fought to keep the shock from her face. "How can you know that?"

"I know everything both of you were thinking. How do you think it was possible for your bond to form in the first place?"

"Bastard. That's not true. Briel mates are chosen by biology." It couldn't be.

"Of course it's true. And who better to trick biology than a doctor?" Ray began to laugh. "You didn't really think that some mystical force chose *you* to be the mate of a highly distinguished Briel, did you? Stupid girl."

Tears filled her eyes and Haylie tried to fight them off. "You're under arrest for murder, attempted murder and treason. Hands up."

Instead of complying, Ray knelt down and lifted Kamran's lifeless head by his hair. He withdrew a knife from his pocket and held it to Kamran's neck.

"Now, now, Haylie. I know the drugs I gave you earlier aren't out of your system yet. Your reflexes are slow and your vision is blurry. What do you think your chances are of actually hitting me? Hmm? And if your Briel boyfriend can't slow me down, someone who's stronger and faster than you, then you're not going to be able to stop me. Sean, if you would please take the Chief's firearm."

Every instinct was screaming at her to shoot. When Ray pressed the knife hard against Kamran's throat, she released her blaster and Donaldson took it quickly from her hands.

"Pathetic. Secure her."

Donaldson jerked her arms hard behind her back, pressing her wrists together. She turned to glare at him as he slid a plastic handcuff around her left wrist but kept her right free.

"I hope I've made those tight enough. I wouldn't want you to be comfortable," Donaldson said.

It was then that Haylie realized she hadn't really looked at Donaldson. He'd changed. Somehow he was able to fight Ray, or Ray's control had somehow slipped and he hadn't noticed. Or no longer cared.

"Why are you doing this?" She kept the contempt in her voice but nodded her head slightly toward Donaldson. They might have a chance to get out of this after all.

"Because I'm sick of everything Earth has forced on us. They've been controlling this colony from across the galaxy for years. No more. Ray promised that when the Ecada are finished destroying all life on this planet, they have agreed to pay an obscene amount of gold for this place. Enough that I can retire anywhere in the galaxy and never be found again."

Donaldson then pressed a cool plastic handle into her hand. It took Haylie a few seconds to recognize what she now held—a flare gun.

Ray dropped Kamran's head, letting it fall back to the ground with a thud. Kamran moaned.

"Kamran?"

She couldn't keep her voice steady. Thank god he was alive.

"Haylie?" He sounded stunned.

"Touching reunion. Bring her over here so she can be with her boyfriend one last time."

Donaldson yanked her arm and managed to keep himself between her and Ray, keeping the gun from sight.

"Kamran, are you hurt?" she asked. Before things went to hell, she had to know.

"I'm fine."

Ray moved a short distance from Kamran. "Fine until the Ecada locate you. They won't even bother to listen to your pleas for mercy, you know. They'll simply rip your bodies apart. Too bad I won't be here to watch the fun. Donaldson, when you're done there, release the clamps so we can get out of here. Our friends will be along shortly."

Kamran slowly rose to his feet, clearly in no condition to be able to help. She was going to have to move fast. But it was Donaldson who made the first move.

"I wouldn't go with you if the entire Ecada horde were on me." Donaldson sneered.

Ray spun to face him. "What?"

"If you think I'm going to get on that ship, knowing you have every intention of killing me before we even take off, you must think me a fool."

Even Haylie was surprised at the hate in Donaldson's voice.

"Of course I think you're a fool. Why else do you think I targeted this colony? You were such an easy mark, I knew I'd have no problem getting what I wanted from you."

Donaldson roared and leapt at Ray. The Briel sidestepped the attack easily and landed a punch on Donaldson's head, sending him to the ground with a crash. It was the opening Haylie needed. She pointed the flare gun at Ray's chest. It only took a heartbeat for him to recognize the danger. He lunged at Haylie but couldn't move fast enough to prevent her attack.

The mini explosion from the hydrogen cartridge echoed in the hangar. Haylie fought through the hard recoil and hit her target. She saw the butt end of the flare was sparking from his stomach, a look of horror twisting into pain on Ray's face. He didn't speak, looking into her eyes briefly before falling to the floor. The smell of burning flesh hit her hard.

Kamran? "Are you hurt? We need to get out of here."

She reached him and they quickly hugged.

He pulled her to him. "I'm okay. Are you..."

She felt him stiffen. She pulled back to look into his eyes. She watched as they rolled back up into his head. Haylie tried to say something or at least she thought she did. But the words never left her mouth. The thoughts stopped as they were formed.

Pain sliced through her mind. Her hands flew to her head in an attempt to keep it from exploding. Screams surrounded her mind. If they were real or imagined, she was long past caring.

Right before she passed out, she realized that they came from her.

Chapter Sixteen

Haylie woke slowly. Opening her eyes provided her with a blinding pain in her head so she quickly closed them again.

"I feel like I've been out partying all night."

"Well, you don't look much better."

At the sound of Sara's voice, Haylie braved another peek into the world.

"Thanks."

"You have a concussion, some minor internal bleeding and dust from the planet's surface stuck in your lungs. Other than that, you're the picture of health."

She felt Sara sit on the edge of the bed and then a piece of hair stuck to her cheek was moved away.

"You gave us quite a scare back there."

Haylie's brain finally kicked into full gear and she bolted upright. "Where's Kamran? The Ecada? Oww."

"Easy, hon. Take it easy or you're going to end back up in isolation."

"Sara." God, she sounded desperate.

"Kamran is fine. He's in isolation."

"What's wrong? Will he be okay?"

Haylie tried to reach out with her mind to find Kamran. There was nothing. Not the nothing she felt earlier when he was blocking her. Simply nothing. Her stomach soured. They'd lost their connection.

Haylie watched as Sara's face scrunched for a moment before realization dawned.

"Kamran's not there as a patient. Taber was injured in the battle. Kamran's visiting."

"Will he be okay?" It then hit her where they were. "I'm assuming because we are having this conversation that we won?"

Sara stood and moved behind the bed. She began to fiddle with the monitoring computer. The steady blipping noise told her everything she needed to know. She was fine. Sara didn't look as good.

"Sara?"

"We didn't exactly win, more that they stopped fighting."

Something in her tone didn't gel. Haylie sat up to get a better look at her friend.

"What do you mean?"

When Sara looked at Haylie, tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"I was there, you know. All the medical staff were. We tried to patch people back together as fast as we could to throw them back into battle. They just kept coming and coming. Walked through us like we were paper in a rainstorm."

Haylie's throat tightened. She blinked back her own tears and held her arms wide. Sara returned to the bed and embraced her.

"So many people died and there was nothing I could do to stop them. A guard tried to fight them off when they made their way toward us. One of those things ran him through with its tail."

Haylie swallowed hard, "I'm so sorry you had to see that." The words were painful. Sara had always been sensitive. Haylie knew this would eat at her for a long time to come.

"It's okay," Sara said. She stopped for a minute before continuing. "I thought I was next. They came so close. Then, all of a sudden, everything stopped."

A multitude of explanations ran through her mind but Haylie could only figure one possibility. Somehow, Ray was controlling the Ecada the same way he'd controlled Donaldson. He was the power source that drove the horde forward. His death ended the attack.

"At first they seemed confused, like they didn't really know what to do next. It gave us the chance we needed. The soldiers were able to push them back. Killed enough of them they were forced to retreat."

"I don't think we have to worry about them again."

Haylie tried to explain what had happened in the hangar. Her memories were splintered. Whole slices of her mind seemed to be missing, as if someone else were holding the memories.

Sara sat up and dried her face with her hands. "That somehow makes sense. If Ray was tampering with Ecada telepathy, it would explain a lot of the weird behavior around here."

"Things were spilling over from his mind and into the minds of those who favored telepathy? Like Donaldson?" Haylie asked.

"We humans only use a portion of our brains—we don't know what our full capabilities are. It could be that with the Ecada's help, Ray took advantage of Donaldson by gaining access to a small part of his latent abilities."

That would mean she had this ability as well. But why hadn't she felt this sort of thing before? Haylie wanted to explore this further. One look at her friend told her Sara didn't need any more problems.

Sara was lost in thought but she began nodding her head. "It makes more sense now that I think of it. The miners who were randomly going out to the planet surface. The fights in the lower levels. Increased incidences of violence. People were picking up Ray's hate and Donaldson's fear."

Haylie forgot what she was going to say next when the door to her room opened. Kamran's surprised expression told her he wasn't aware she had regained consciousness.

"I'm sorry. I'll come back later." His voice sounded raw.

"Not at all, Ambassador. I have to do the rest of my rounds." Sara stood and smiled a little too quickly at Haylie. "You're going to be just fine. Have a good visit but then I want you to go back to sleep."

"Yes, Dr. Fergus." Haylie captured Sara's hand and gave it a hard squeeze. "You take it easy today too."

"Will do."

* * * * *

Kamran took a step inside the room to allow Sara's exit. It brought him face to face with the one thing he didn't want to deal with. Looking at Haylie and not knowing how she was feeling was strange. He tried to open his mind, reaching out to find some thread of her. Silence greeted him. Was she doing this?

He hesitated. "Is Sara well?"

She looked at him, a strange expression on her face. "No. But she will be, given time."

He laced his fingers behind his back. She must be mad at him for something. Maybe for blocking her earlier. But why, after all they had gone through today, would she be holding on to such petty anger?

"How's Taber?" Haylie sounded unsure of the question, as if she didn't know what else to say.

Kamran felt the same. "He's doing well. The majority of his wounds were superficial. But he'd taken a nasty blow to the side from one of the Ecada. He's recovering and should be on his feet soon." And then after another awkward pause, "I didn't know you were awake. I would have come sooner." He stopped speaking, not knowing what to say.

"It's okay. I just woke up a few minutes ago." Haylie bit her lower lip and turned away from him. "Are you still blocking me?"

Panic raced through him with amazing speed, contracting his stomach, lungs and fists as it passed.

He tried to keep his voice steady but it didn't come out as strong as he'd hoped. "No. I thought you were blocking me."

Kamran didn't know how he felt. He'd never asked to be bonded to Haylie. The fact that a human and Briel had been able to form any type of connection was unbelievable. He shouldn't really be surprised that it didn't last.

But he was.

Haylie adjusted the tube that went from her arm to a plastic bag filled with some sort of clear liquid. Her fingers fidgeted with the tube. "I think whatever Ray was doing with the Ecada was the reason we bonded."

With three steps, he was across the room and standing in front of her. "What?"

"Whatever telepathic connection he had with the Ecada, it was spilling over. The humans seemed to be mostly affected. But I imagine some Briel were as well."

"What in the maker's name are you talking about?"

Kamran listened to Haylie's theory, slowing sinking to her bed as she talked. It did make sense. It fit everything he knew of the Ecada species. While independent beings, they preferred a symbiotic relationship. One that Ray was willing to provide by supplying them with the humans as a food source. Thank the goddess they'd stopped Ray in time. The Ecada would have killed everyone.

"Somehow, he was the catalyst that allowed our bond to form. When he died, it died too."

Haylie's words were flat and she spoke with her eyes closed. He watched her, trying to get a feel for what she was thinking. He hadn't realized how much he'd begun to rely on their connection. There was no guesswork. Simply the steady hum of warmth in the back of his mind.

Haylie opened her eyes wide, her gaze pierced through him. "It's so quiet now. In my head."

"I was thinking the same thing."

He couldn't move. At that moment, he would have given anything, everything, to be able to feel Haylie's thoughts. He'd grown to love the connection. Kamran felt a chill roll through him at the realization. When did that happen?

Looking at Haylie, Kamran's heart began to beat faster. His hands flexed and he had to fight back the urge to reach for her. He'd realized he loved her back in the hangar bay. But what if that love couldn't last? With no bond, how could they be together?

He'd met many mated Briel who weren't in love with their partners. Their bond made them close but never transcended the physiological connection. He reached out and brushed a finger down the side of her face. His heart ached, the feelings as strong as they were yesterday, last week even.

He loved her.

For once in his life, he didn't care about what was expected, what was normal or natural. Only what he wanted. Biology and whatnot be damned. Kamran didn't need the bond that had unexpectedly formed their relationship. He wasn't going to give her up.

"Are you okay?" Haylie's voice was a whisper.

For the first time in a while, he thought he was. He took her hands and brought them up to his lips. Slowly at first, he kissed the knuckles of each finger. Then with greater speed, he turned her hands over and placed a single kiss on the insides of her wrists.

Haylie sighed and leaned into him, resting her forehead against his shoulder. Her weight felt odd without her thoughts guiding him, telling him what to do. Following his instincts, Kamran slid his hands up the soft skin of her arms. Her hospital gown granted him easy access to the parts of her he desperately wanted to touch.

Her breasts were heavy in his hands, the nipples hardening at his touch. Haylie sighed again, her breath more ragged than before.

"I know how much you like it when I do this." Kamran spoke against her ear, getting a thrill of his own when she shivered.

"We shouldn't."

"We shouldn't because you don't want to?"

"We shouldn't because Briel don't have casual relationships and we're not bonded. You'd be giving up the chance of finding your true mate."

"I don't care." He looked hard at her, willing her to understand. "I need *you*, Haylie. And you can't tell me you don't want this. I read your thoughts and feelings long enough to know better."

Removing one of his hands from her breast, he tilted her head back. He was beyond thinking, beyond holding back his emotions. He crushed her lips with his own, plunging his tongue into her mouth. He poured every emotion he felt into that kiss. His loneliness, fear and every ounce of love he had inside.

When he pulled back, Haylie was gasping, her eyes wide. He wanted to tell her how he felt but he didn't have the words.

"I want...I need to...I don't quite know how to—"

The room door whooshed open, revealing a young Briel woman. She was dressed in the garb of an Elder Council woman, but she was far too young to hold such a post.

The Briel woman cocked an eyebrow at him. The maker be damned, Kamran would not be apologetic for his love. He felt Haylie stiffen, but he pulled her closer to his body.

He kept his tone formal. "May I help you?"

The young Briel straightened, pulling her hands deep inside the council robes.

"Ambassador, you have been summoned to appear before the Elder Council immediately."

Two security officers stepped into the room, one human, one Briel and both clearly exhausted from battle. The last thing they wanted to be doing was escorting him about.

"Have the doctors examined you yet?" Haylie pushed away from him, sitting up.

The human soldier shook his head. "Not yet, Chief."

Kamran smiled at Haylie and tucked an unruly strand of dark hair behind her ear. Perhaps their bond was still there in a fashion.

He softened his tone as he spoke, "Then you should stay and be seen. I will see the council now."

The human officer began to protest when the Briel officer stopped him. "If the ambassador says he will go, then he will."

"And I'll go with him," Haylie said.

She looked at Kamran, as if to gauge his reaction. He knew she was up to something but also knew better than to argue.

"You should stay and rest. I doubt Sara gave her approval for you to get out of bed."

If he thought for a second that any consideration for her health would keep her away, she proved him wrong.

"Ordered me to go back to sleep, actually. But she's not here and you need me. Give me a minute to get dressed and I'll join you."

The young councilwoman spoke up. "Ambassador, you know outsiders are not allowed before the council."

Before he had a chance to speak, Haylie slid from the bed and pulled her IV along with her in search of her clothing. "Tell them I'm a witness in defense of the ambassador. I can prove that he is innocent of treason."

"Haylie."

She ignored Kamran's disapproving tone. He wasn't surprised.

"Very well, Ms. Bond. But be prepared that they may not see you."

"Please let them know the ambassador and I will arrive shortly. And Michaels, get yourself and your friend to a doctor."

The councilwoman and the two guards left silently. She turned and faced him, her face not betraying any emotion.

He didn't want her doing this. He didn't need to prove his innocence any longer. He'd been able to find the proof of Ray's collaboration with the Ecada in his apartments. "You don't have to do this. They know Ray was the cause of everything."

"I know. But I need to see them. I can't explain why, but it's important. Call it woman's intuition."

"I know better than to argue. I don't want you to cause yourself any further injury." "I'll be careful," she said.

Kamran watched as she scooped up her battered uniform and began to fight with the cumbersome IV. He moved from the bed and took her hand in his. She flinched when he removed the needle. He took extra care as he covered the wound with a bandage. His body thrilled at the contact, as innocent as it was. His cock hardened, sending ripples of desire throughout him. He watched as her nipples tightened under the sheer hospital shirt. He leaned in and kissed her again. There was something different in the kiss. Something changed between them in the melding of lips and tongues. The passion was white hot, yet calmer. When she pulled back, there was no mistaking what he felt. He loved her.

"I have to get dressed. We don't want them sending more guards after you."

"I'll wait outside." They both knew why.

Haylie's hands shook as she dressed, making the process slower than normal. She was sure if any evidence remained against Kamran, they could easily disprove it. Then he'd be free to go about his life, as was she.

Fate was no longer meddling in her life.

A quick look in the mirror proved frightening. She was white as death, her hair a nightmare of tangles and knots. Nothing she could do about it now. She walked into the hall, madly combing her fingers through her hair and forcing it into a clip she'd found on the counter.

Kamran checked her over, brushing his fingers over the bandage on her neck. "It's not too late to back out. You need to rest."

"Let's get this cleared up first. Then you can take me home."

He raised his eyebrow, but said nothing further.

Her legs screamed at her as she walked the length of the station to where the Briel Elder Council had their chambers. Kamran slowed his normal pace so she wouldn't have to fight to keep up. They had to stop once when she was overtaken by a coughing fit. A multitude of guards, both Briel and human, held their posts at regular intervals in the hall. Each acknowledged her as they passed. The walls were marked with blast marks and blood.

She slowed even more to survey the damage. "I had no idea."

"Taber said the Ecada breeched the outer defenses and headed straight for here. If you hadn't killed Ray when you did, the council would have been wiped out."

No one tried to stop them as they approached and entered the chamber. Haylie was shocked at what she saw. The room was very large, filled with what looked like tropical plants. A small stream flowed behind seven large chairs, each one holding a Briel councilwoman. The air held the hint of floral freshness, but it was tinged with blood and burned metal. They'd been lucky.

The one who sat in the center, who, by Haylie's eyes, looked to be the oldest, spoke. "Ambassador, you know our feeling regarding outsiders."

"My apologies," he said as he bowed deeply. "Haylie has come to offer support and evidence if need be as a representative of the humans. She is their chief of security."

The elder stepped down from her chair and approached them. Haylie watched fascinated as long pale blue robes flowed behind her. The woman stopped directly in front of Haylie.

"We know who she is," one of the elders said, but all eyes were on her.

"You use her first name. Is such familiarity necessary, Ambassador?"

"We are close, Elder."

The older Briel narrowed her eyes, leaned in and gave Haylie a hard stare. Haylie tried to keep the eye contact, but was amazed when she looked away after a minute. No wonder women like this led the Briel people.

Kamran cleared his throat. "Elder, if this is regarding the charges brought against me, may we proceed immediately? I fear Haylie's injuries are greater than she led me to believe."

The elder straightened and took a step back. Haylie felt every muscle in her body start to relax.

"No."

Kamran looked at Haylie. Even his ambassador's mask couldn't hide his surprise. She had to do something.

"Elder, we know Kamran isn't guilty of committing treason. We have eyewitnesses, other than myself who will confirm Ray was the instigator in these aggressions, the bombing of your people and other strange occurrences here on the station."

The Briel laced her fingers together and lowered her gaze once more at Haylie. "Your proof, while appreciated, is not necessary." The elder paused, her lips tightening slightly. "The council has dropped all charges of treason against you, Ambassador Kamran."

"Thank god," Haylie whispered.

She felt tears fill her eyes but fought against them. She never cried and wasn't about to start now.

The elder smiled before continuing. "Now we just have the matter of your relationship to discuss."

Haylie snapped her gaping mouth shut.

"If you thought we were not aware of what was going on, you are losing your keen perception, Ambassador. Perhaps we should reassign you."

"With respect, Elder, we were not purposely trying to deceive the council. Haylie and I," he took her hand and gave it a squeeze, "we were not entirely sure what was going on."

Haylie swallowed, her love for him washing through her. She couldn't let him lie for her.

"Elder, that's not the entire truth. We suspected that we had become bonded. Kamran told me about Briel relationships and that we would be required to return to Briel. I wasn't willing to throw everything away and follow what I considered a whim."

"That's not true, either." Kamran turned to her and planted a kiss on her hand. "I wasn't willing to take the chance that I'd meet my Briel mate after we'd solidified our relationship."

"Are you leading this council to believe that you are no longer concerned with this, Ambassador? What if you meet your Briel mate tomorrow?"

Kamran turned to face Haylie. He cupped her cheek with his hand. She closed her eyes, simply enjoying the contact.

"I've already met her." His voice was confident.

Her hands began to tremble. Reaching up, she threaded her fingers through his hair, stroking lightly before reaching up on her tiptoes and lightly kissing his lips. Before she could pull away, his hands trapped her body, his mouth opening wide to deepen the contact. She could feel his body tremble against her, his touch full of need and desire across her neck and down along her back. When they finally broke the kiss, Haylie was left panting, her body shaking with need. Their bond may be gone, but they still shared a connection.

And she loved him very much for it.

Haylie heard the elder clear her throat. She felt the heat flood her neck and face. How could she have forgotten the elder stood before them?

The elder looked past them. "I thought you said their bond was broken?"

Haylie turned at a noise behind her.

"It was when they killed Ray." Taber said as he approached from the door.

"You should be resting, my friend." Kamran reached out to offer Taber support.

"My wounds are healing quickly. The council asked me to attend."

"Ambassador," The elder's tone was crisp, "please continue with your explanation of the nature of your relationship with this woman."

Kamran didn't answer at first. Haylie watched him closely, her breath held fast in her lungs. He smiled at her and her heart sang. She didn't need their bond to recognize that look.

"Haylie and I love each other. While we may not be bonded anymore, I would ask her to become my partner." He brushed his thumb against her bottom lip. "That is, if she would agree."

She'd fought against this her whole adult life. Resisting any chance to become close to someone. Careful to protect her heart from the pain her father had experienced. But when she looked at Kamran, she knew she didn't have to worry about it. He would never hurt her. At that moment, Haylie knew everything would be okay.

A tear streaked down her face. "Yes."

"Then it seems we have a most peculiar problem before us. A Briel and a human, who are not bonded wish to remain together as husband and wife. The council needs to discuss this. Please wait outside the chamber for our decision."

The woman spun around with amazing grace and returned to her seat.

"What does that mean?" Haylie whispered to Kamran as they left.

They were escorted out of the chamber and the doors were shut behind them before he answered. "I'm not sure. I don't think this has ever happened to my people before."

She stopped herself short. Her fingers wrapped around his arm. "What if they try to separate us? You said they don't approve of outsiders."

"It's okay, love. It doesn't matter what they say. I love you and I won't leave you again. If I have to resign my post, I will. I'm sure I can find something else to do on the station."

Haylie leaned her head against his chest, taking solace in the steady beating of his heart. "I love you too."

They stayed that way, wrapped in each other's arms, until Taber emerged from the chamber.

"They've reached a decision."

For once, Haylie wished Taber was more of an emotional open book. They didn't have to wait long to know the verdict. They were no more than two steps in the door when the Council leader spoke.

"I have seen many bonded Briel in my lifetime. Many of whom never cared for their mate even half as deeply as what the two of you seem to share."

This is good. Haylie tightened her grip on Kamran's arm.

"It is the decision of this council that you may be married. Further, if you so desire, you may also be re-bonded."

Haylie couldn't move.

"How is that possible?" Kamran's disbelief echoed her own.

"The council has knowledge of rituals that are not widely known. There are things our doctors have learned about our biology that are best kept from the public. We keep it secret to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. Several years ago, records from one of our high security council databases was stolen. I wouldn't be surprised to discover if Ray had somehow come into contact with it."

"And a part of the information from this database has a way to recreate our bond?" She couldn't believe her ears.

"It won't be exactly the same. But that is not what is important. The question is, do you wish it? There would be no walking away from the relationship once the ritual is performed."

Haylie wanted it. Without doubt or reservation, she wanted it. She turned to Kamran and smiled.

"I'm game. How about you?"

* * * * *

Kamran whistled as he made his way down the long corridor toward the bazaar. It was a new skill he'd acquired. One that he took great pleasure in.

Candles.

He had to wait in line at his favorite Briel eatery before he was able to pick up his order. The wine was nicely chilled, causing the skin of his arm to pucker under the cold. It had cost him a small fortune to have it shipped all the way from Earth. But he knew it would be worth every penny.

Silk.

The common area that once held Briel and humans separated now embraced a new formed respect for each other. The rebuilding project was well under way for both the structures as well as the people. The colony had sustained extensive damage during the attack, with very little remaining unharmed. Many had lost friends and family in the attack. But both the Briel and humans alike were stronger as a result. Their futures would be brighter.

The gray of the walls was gone. Many people were gathered around painting the walls. One of the far walls held a collection of pictures, flowers, trinkets, reminders of those they had lost.

Kamran smiled at the sight knowing they would all be okay. Nodding a greeting to several soldiers he recognized, he smiled before departing home. He had plans this evening that couldn't wait.

Ropes.

He smiled at the lone guard that stood just outside his door.

"Ambassador Kamran."

"Haylie and I wish to spend a quiet evening at home tonight."

Not that quiet, Ambassador.

"Of course, sir. We'll ensure that no one bothers you."

"Thank you."

It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark once he stepped into the room. He chuckled knowing she was feeling very playful. This would prove to be an interesting night.

"Haylie? Where are you?"

Come and find me.

He took a deep breath. Her scent filled his head, giving him a buzz. Goddess be blessed, he loved her.

I love you too. I'm horny, so hurry up.

"Well, let's see how well hidden you are. You never know, I may get lost in our new place."

He made his way to the office. His papers had been cleared from his desk, his mesh seat neatly tucked under his desk.

"It could be interesting to make love in the chair."

Boring.

Kamran sauntered into the bathroom. The air was damp from a recent shower. He could smell her, the scent her freshly washed skin generated drove him mad. Haylie's neatly folded towel was set upon the counter.

"Too bad you're not in here. It would be fun to make love in the shower."

Maybe next time.

"We're running out of hiding spaces in our little apartment."

He couldn't hear her chuckle, so much as feel it. He laughed as well.

As he made his way to the bedroom, he removed his tunic, tossing it aside. He found her lying naked on top of a set of silk sheets on their new bed. He stood there staring. She was beautiful.

"What about the food?" he asked automatically, displaying the contents of his shopping excursion.

She smiled at him, lifted her breast and flicked her nipple with her tongue. "It can wait."

He set the food aside but brought the wine with him. He paused long enough to remove his pants and stand naked before her. Closing his eyes, he imagined everything he wanted to do to her. Tease her breasts with his tongue. Drive his cock deep inside her while she was on her back, then on top of him, then from behind. Haylie moaned and spread her legs wide. He could see her pussy glisten with her desire.

Then she did something unexpected. Lifting her foot, she flexed her toes around his thick tip before tracing the vein down the length of his cock. The nail of her big toe scraped lightly over his scrotum. He flinched.

Haylie chuckled. "On second thought, I'd much rather taste you."

She rolled over onto her knees and crawled across the sheets to him. Her warm breath caused his balls to tighten and his cock to twitch. She rose to her knees, braced her hands on his hips and impaled her mouth on his shaft. The suction pulled the blood into the tip, her tongue swirling around increasing the sensitivity. She then slid her tongue back down to his base. He couldn't last long against the ministrations of her mouth. In a few minutes he'd spill his seed but not where he wanted it to be.

Kamran growled and pushed her back against the bed. Two could play at this game. He set his knees on the edge of the bed before reaching forward for her body. He wrapped his arms under her legs and pulled her exposed pussy to him. He didn't move at first and cleared his mind of all thoughts. He heard her whimper above him and she wriggled her hips in front of his face. Temptation was overwhelming. Dipping his head down, he licked slowly over her lips and clit, once, twice. He avoided the one place he knew she wanted him to touch. He ran his tongue in circles around her clit one last time before sucking the nub into his mouth.

Haylie's moans filled the room. Her hands pushed his face hard against her, but he refused to increase the tempo. He breathed deep, her scent making his cock stiffer, pulsing madly. Yet he made no move to relieve his own needs. Instead he continued his

steady lapping and sucking. His tongue found her entrance and he slid it deep inside. *You taste better than any food.* After a minute of this, he slipped his finger inside her pussy, rubbing the spot he knew was sure to drive her wild.

Losing all control over her body, Haylie bucked her hips off the bed. God, she was so close now. He returned to her clit, teasing her. He knew what she needed and increased the pressure against her. As she was about to find release, he stopped. Haylie pouted and moaned her displeasure.

"No, love. I know what you really want."

When her sly smile slowly spread across her face, he wanted to thump his chest with pride.

"You know, you're becoming more human every day. Images like that are really funny."

"It's all for you, love."

Kamran moved up to cover her body with his own. It only took a moment to guide his cock into her already wet passage, her muscles tightening around him. *Too fast*.

"It's okay, we have all night," she said with a sigh.

He pushed until his swollen shaft reached deep inside, holding still for a moment before withdrawing and driving deep again. Haylie bucked her hips up with each thrust, driving him farther inside until he filled her completely. Lifting her breasts, he assaulted her nipples with his teeth and tongue. Her silky skin tasted of sweat and the remnants of soap. He lifted his head but continued to tease her with his fingers, pinching and rolling the tips between his fingers.

She shivered. "God, I love that."

"You love this too."

He reached between them to tease her with his fingers. Her juices drenched the curls of her pubic hair, making the folds of her pussy slick. She cried out as he touched her clit, her pussy gripping him tight. He kissed her, then poured his love and devotion into the joining of their lips.

Her fingers squeezed his arms, slid up him and around his neck. He knew she couldn't hold out any longer. He slammed into her hard, pushing her over the edge. Her first cry of release was all he needed. His body tightened, his seed moving up his cock and into her in a rush of ecstasy. Kamran collapsed on top of her, both panting. It took a minute before he had the ability to roll off her so his full weight wouldn't crush her.

They lay there quietly as he listened to the hum of her sated mind. He rolled onto to his side and pulled her close to spoon. He must have dozed off for a bit but when he opened his eyes, he noticed the black ropes coiled on the chair beside the bed.

"And pray, what are those for?"

An image of him spread-eagled and tied to the bed surfaced in his mind.

"I thought it would be more comfortable to try it in our own bed this time." Her body shook with laughter.

His cock twitched, clearly agreeing. Indeed, this was going to be a long night.

"Are you scared I'm going to run off, wife?"

She turned her face to show her wicked smile.

"Of all the things I fear in the universe, that isn't one of them."

"I'm so lucky to have found you," he whispered. He brushed her sweat-soaked hair from her face.

She turned in his arms and found his mouth with hers. There was no urgency to their kiss, as there had been so many times before. This kiss was deep, slow and full of love.

Haylie pulled back and brushed her fingers against his cheek. "We're both lucky. Now lie back so I can tie you up."

Stretching his arms wide, he laughed. Being married to Haylie was proving to be the greatest adventure he could have imagined.

Haylie laughed, "Oh, you have no idea what I have in store for you."

About the Author

It took Christine a lot longer than the average bear to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. When she was home on maternity leave, she decided to take a stab at saving her sanity and sat down to write a romance novel. After dabbling with various sub-genres, she realized she really enjoyed creating strange new worlds and writing about sex. Whether due to the pregnancy hormones or sleep deprivation, she thought this was a great combination.

Many years later her kids are in school and she's back at her day job, but the writing bug is here to stay. When not torturing her characters, she's busy playing with her children or conducting "research" with her husband.

Christine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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