



Sherrill Quinn

The
Claiming

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...She stood before him, her slender body held proudly. His gaze drifted over full breasts and generous hips, zeroed in on the soft, bare petals of her sex. Her swollen clit peeked from under its hood. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air around them. He drew in a deep breath, holding the musky aroma in his nose, wanting to sear his lungs with it. Needing to touch her, to see if her skin was as soft as he remembered, he stretched out his left hand and cupped one breast.

Rhys closed his eyes and concentrated on his sense of touch. Like fine silk under his callused palm, the soft heat of her skin sent prickles of awareness all the way to his cock. His erection, which had subsided only minutely, thickened and lengthened, constricted by the leather placket of his pants.

His lids swept up, and he snagged her dark gaze with his own, seeing the flare of passion reflected in her cocoa-colored eyes. He brought up his right hand and the chain fed from his palm, forming a Y and attaching in a loop around first one nipple, then the other.

Giving the chain a slight pull, he swallowed, hard, when she licked her lips and shivered as it tugged on her erect nipples. Gods, his cock felt ready to burst and he'd only touched her breast...

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

THE CLAIMING
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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ISBN 1-59279-555-2
Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Thank you to my kick-ass critique partner, Suz.
You make me a better writer!*

CHAPTER 1

“Get me out of these damned restraints, Marshal.”

Kassinda Marjani blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and tried to concentrate on the control panel in front of her. Her little ship was about to fall out of the sky because she couldn't afford the many repairs it needed. But she was too aware of the furious man strapped into the co-pilot's chair, his wrists manacled in front of him, and could focus on little else.

Rhys Valorian. Exiled prince of the planet Nosfer—and the guarantee of her brother's release from prison.

She looked at him from the corner of her eye, taking in long black hair that fell in shiny layers to his shoulders, a neatly trimmed beard framing a wicked invitation-to-sin mouth, and pale blue eyes that quickened to silver when his emotions were roused.

Most Nosfera were vampiric in nature, feeding off others' sexual energy and, with their mates, their blood.

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But the Nosferatu, the ruling families, were something different. Something...more. Once the Blood Rite was initiated, the mate of a Nosferatu was gifted with longevity, living as long as their mates did. Which could be hundreds of years.

Alarm bells shrieked and warning lights flashed in the small space ship she'd called home for the last two years while she'd chased the royal pain-in-the-ass across the quadrant. Never mind he was six-and-a-half-feet of hard, virile male. Never mind she'd once come very close to treating herself to all he offered.

She'd been young and much more naïve then.

No one with half a brain got tangled up romantically with a male from Nosfer, especially not one of the ruling Nosferatu. Not unless she wanted to give herself up body and soul. And blood.

And she had more than half a brain, thank you very much.

She sighed. Just once, she wanted things to be uncomplicated. Easy. Why couldn't her life ever be easy? She moved her eyes forward where they belonged and throttled back the engines. Looking at the control panel, she saw the outer hull had heated another fifteen degrees. The little ship would soon break apart from the stress.

"We're going to have to set down."

"You think?" His deep voice was dry, holding a hint of the lust that had flickered in his eyes since she'd first clamped the restraints on him.

She shot a glance at him. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes—honestly, did the man think of nothing but sex?—she turned her attention back to the panel. "There's no need to be sarcastic." The steering mechanism jerked under her hands and she tightened her grip.

"Sarcasm is just one of the many services I offer." He held his crossed hands toward her. Silver magnetic cuffs covered him from the base of his thumbs to just above his wrists and reflected the wildly blinking lights from the console. "But I would be of better service were my hands free, *ahya*."

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She tightened her lips at his insistence on using his old pet name for her, although she knew he was right about the manacles. Damn it.

“Come on, Marshal,” he cajoled.

Her title sounded odd, coming from him. Though she held the title of Interstellar Marshal, her job was nothing more than that of a glorified bounty hunter. It didn’t put her much higher on the feeding chain than a smuggler. She really had no business sitting in judgment of Rhys.

But she couldn’t think of that; she had to focus on Jax. Her brother was more important than whatever feelings she might once have had for Rhys. Shaking her head, she refused to listen to the voice inside that told her she just might still have those feelings.

Kass fished in her right jacket pocket and pulled out the demagnetizer. Once she’d pushed the blue button, his restraints clicked open and fell to the floor. She hoped she didn’t regret letting him loose. But she couldn’t very well leave him cuffed while they crashed onto this backwoods planet.

Rhys sent her a look that promised retribution, and she fought back a shiver. Retribution from a Nosferatu male was one part punishment and nine parts sensual torment.

Trying to ignore her suddenly wet panties, she punched the button for the landing gear. “Make yourself useful,” she snarled. “Grab the altitude lever. Try to keep us stable.”

A slow grin kicked up the corners of his sexy mouth, showing the tips of his fangs. A hint of silver lust sparked in his pale eyes, but all he said was, “Aye-aye, captain.” His square-tipped fingers made a jaunty salute at his forehead before they curled around the stick.

She throttled back the engines further. Leaning forward, she pressed the button that would raise the titanium shield covering the front window of the cockpit. The planet’s surface seemed to rocket toward them, even though she knew it was the other way around.

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“This is gonna be rough,” she yelled above the shrieking alarms and loud groans of the hull. Sparks flew from a control panel behind her.

“You can do it,” he shouted. “To hear Ajax tell it, you’re the best pilot in the quadrant.”

At the mention of her brother, Kass ground her teeth together. “Don’t think this lets you off the hook.” Her body jarred in the seat as the ship began to buck against the forces of wind and pockets of thermals. “You’re the reason Jax is in prison, because you got him involved in this damned power struggle between you and your uncle. As soon as we land, you’re going right back into those restraints.”

She pulled back the landing gear lever, her biceps straining with the effort to get the landing platform down under the extreme pressure of sheering winds. “I’m taking you to Tima Prime to answer the charges if I have to sling you over my shoulder and carry you.”

He muttered something, and she shot a look at him. His attention was focused on the lever between his knees. The muscles in his arms bulged with the effort of keeping the small ship steady. As the stick jerked his arms, she caught glimpses of his hair-roughened chest under the leather vest he wore. She remembered what all that hard flesh felt like under her hands, against her mouth.

Jerking her attention forward, she did some muttering of her own. *Get a grip, Kass. You’re about to crash land on one of the most barbaric planets in the system and you’re sitting here drooling over Vamp-Boy.*

“Here we go,” she murmured as the ground rushed to meet them. She knew her poor little ship wouldn’t be salvageable after this; there was already too much damage. Crashing on this planet was the final peal of the death knell.

The small craft skipped over the surface like a smooth, flat stone across a calm pond. It became airborne briefly, then dove nose-first into a small hill. With a loud shriek of metal, it bounced away and slid

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down the slope. Kass cried out, the force of the violent crash jerking her back and forth against the harness strapping her to her seat.

When the little ship finally came to a rest, she blew out a breath and closed her eyes in relief. Bringing up one hand, she rubbed the back of her neck, then brushed her long bangs out of her eyes.

“Are you all right?” she asked Rhys.

She felt something encircle her right wrist and looked to see one of the restraints click shut. Before she could do more than stare at it with open-mouthed shock, the second cuff was placed over her left wrist and the magnetic mechanism activated. The metal pieces slammed together, her wrists crossing one over the other.

What the hell?

“I’m just fine,” her former captive said, unbuckling her harness and hauling her out of her seat. “How ’bout you?”

* * *

Rhys bit back a grin as her eyes flared with anger. She was sassy, his Kass. Always had been, even when everyone else around him was fawning over him with simpering and snivelings of “prince this” and “prince that.”

An exiled royal-turned-smuggler was no prince. Regardless of his birthright.

“Get...these...off...me.” She struggled in his grip, even going so far as to kick him on his boot-covered shin.

By the gods, she was entrancing. Strong, determined, sometimes even foolhardy. Her pulse beat rapidly at the base of her throat, enticing him with her heat, her very essence. While he had reversed the situation and now held her as his captive, he was like a fly in her web. If he wasn’t careful, she’d have him for dinner.

But what a way to go.

He remembered how she felt in his arms, underneath his body, wrapped around his cock. “Do you still make those little mewling

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noises when you come, *ahya*?” he asked, lust making his voice deep and raspy.

When she went to kick him again, he lifted her off the floor by her manacled wrists, dangling her so her face was level with his. When her knee lunged toward his groin, he blocked it with his thigh and then trapped her leg between his.

“Uh-uh-uh,” he admonished, giving her a little shake. He couldn’t hold back the grin as she sputtered and twisted in his grasp.

She was like a frightened kitten, all arched body and spitting fury. It made him want to stroke her into calmness. He sent a gentling thought her way and felt her stiffen against him.

“Don’t even try your damned Nosfer mojo on me,” she hissed, brown eyes glittering with anger. “I didn’t like it five years ago; I don’t like it now.”

“It frightened you five years ago, *ahya*,” he said, the hurt of her rejection flaring as hotly as if the rebuff had happened mere moments ago. “Why are you so afraid to share your mind with me?”

Renewing her struggles, she fought against him until she was panting heavily and sweat trickled down the side of her face. “My mind is my own,” she said through gritted teeth. With a small grunt, she tried to thwack him with the manacles.

He tightened his grip, knowing he had merely to wait her out. She would tire and have no choice but to give up this fight. She gave it her all, twisting in his arms, kicking out with her free leg.

The sight of her passionate anger ramped up his own arousal. His cock grew hot and heavy, throbbing with insistent intent behind the placket of his pants. He wanted to kiss the frustration and distrust off her face, smooth his thumbs over her stubborn chin and full, sensual lips.

With the mood she was in, though, she’d most likely bite him.

If there was going to be any biting being done, he’d be the one

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doing it. And it wouldn't be in anger.

When she finally stilled, he put one arm around her waist and drew her closer until her curvy body was flush with his. The one-piece flight suit she wore hugged her breasts and hips. Even with her anger, her nipples were hard points against his chest, the scent of her arousal heavy in his nostrils.

She might be angry the tables had turned, but she was aroused, too. He'd stayed alive as long as he had by taking advantage of every opportunity when it came his way. He wasn't above using their situation to remind her of their mutual attraction.

Attraction. What a miniscule word to describe what he felt, the way his cock was instantly hard at first sight or smell of her, the way his canines elongated until all he could think about was impaling her with cock and fangs.

There was something different about her, something so untainted and refreshing it grabbed him deep in the gut and wouldn't let go. Even with her plan to turn him over to the ruler of Tima Prime for a trial based on charges she knew were trumped up, he couldn't let her go. He *wouldn't* let her go.

Not this time.

"Release me." Her voice was as determined as the resolve he saw in her eyes.

"Uh-uh, *ahya*. I like my current state of health too much to do something as stupid as that." He bent his head toward her lips and she jerked back. With a growl, he walked forward until he could pin her against the wall of the cockpit. Then he slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her with all the loneliness and lust he'd felt since she'd broken things off five years earlier.

He nipped and probed at her mouth until he felt her relax. Sliding her looped wrists over his head, he kept one hand behind her back, holding her soft body close to his. The other hand skated lightly over

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her jaw, down her neck to one full breast. When he cupped the warm, heavy weight of it in his palm, she moaned.

He shifted his stance so he could press his hard cock into the V of her thighs. Quick as a striking snake, she brought the hard manacles down on top of his head. When he stepped back, his hold on her loosening more in surprise than from any real injury, she brought her knee up. Hard.

Rhys grunted and bent over, one hand curled protectively over his throbbing balls. She turned to run, and he caught her by one booted ankle. She fell to the floor with a soft cry, rolling to her back as he came over her.

He pulled her arms up and anchored her wrists above her head with one hand. His other hand fished through her jacket pocket until he found the restraint control. He pulled it out and pressed the button to activate the magnetic field of the cuffs. There was a slight buzzing sound, then the manacles thumped onto the metal plating of the deck.

“Rhys! Let me go.” She wiggled beneath him, muttering under her breath, dark brown eyes glaring at him. He caught his breath as his cock lengthened and hardened even more.

Her eyes widened and she went still like a small animal sensing a much larger predator.

She wouldn't be far off in that assessment. His people were a very sensual race, but their roots were barbaric, and some of the old ways remained.

He drew in a slow breath through his nostrils, dragging her scent deep into his lungs. When her pink tongue darted out and wet her lips, his eyes tracked the movement. Her tongue disappeared into her mouth and he set his lips to hers, slipping between them to trace a lazy pattern around her tongue.

The heavy perfume of her arousal permeated the air. He knew if he were to dip his fingers between her soft folds he'd find her sweet cunt

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covered with slick, thick cream. Rhys moved his hand to the opening of her suit and he started to slowly slide down the tab.

A sudden banging on the outer hull jerked him to a stop. “I think we’ve got company,” he muttered, demagnetizing the cuffs and getting to his feet. He hauled her up at the same time. “We’ll have to get back to this later.”

She gasped and yanked away from him. “Ohhh,” she fumed. “There is no later. Let me go, Rhys. This isn’t funny.” Her cocoa-colored eyes snapped fire at him, a mixture of anger and frustrated passion.

“It’s not meant to be funny. It’s meant to keep you from turning me over to a death squad, *ahya*.” With one hand wrapped around her upper arm, he pulled along behind him as he walked toward the hatch.

“Stop calling me ‘purple spiny one,’” she snarled, jerking against his hold. “Besides, I’m taking you back for trial, not execution.”

“Semantics, Kass. You know as well as I do that the Timan High Council is collaborating with the madman who laid claim to my father’s throne.” Rhys stopped at the outer door and looked down at her. “We can talk about that later. For now, remember where we are.”

“What the hell does that mean?” she asked as the hatch slid open. He heard her indrawn breath at her first glimpse of what waited for them on the outside of the ship.

A hunting party of six warriors stood in a half-circle on the other side of the door. Carrying old-style bows and arrows, all of the men were broad-shouldered with varying shades of blond hair and at least as tall as Rhys, if not taller. Clothed in dark leather breechclouts and boots, they stared at Kass as if they hadn’t seen a woman in a while. Which, by the smell of them, they hadn’t.

“You are Nosfera,” the man closest to the ship stated in Standard Galactic. He held a shoulder-high staff in his hand, which told Rhys he was the group’s leader. At his words, the men with him tightened their grips on their crude weapons. Though they kept them trained on the

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ground, he knew he could be skewered by half a dozen arrows in a matter of seconds.

Rhys nodded his response, keeping his eyes on those of the leader. He hoped the fact that the Nosfera were feared adversaries with strengths and abilities that far surpassed most other races would be enough to deter any thoughts of a fight.

“Your woman?” the man asked, nodding his head toward Kass, his gaze filling with hot lust.

“Yes.” Rhys stood with his arms at his sides, loosely held but ready for action should any of the men choose to challenge his claim.

The man frowned. “Yet you keep her clothed, her body unavailable for your pleasure.”

“Only during space flight,” Rhys responded. Kass tensed beside him, and he hoped she’d use her good sense to stay quiet. “She was disobedient, however, so I restrained her so she might remember her place.”

“Now, wait just a minute,” Kass began, only to be hauled up against Rhys and silenced by his mouth crashing onto hers. The kiss was brief, hard, and purely a sign of possession. She shivered as his beard lightly chafed her skin. He drew back, his voice rumbling softly in her ear, “We’re on O’Kar Six. Play along, *ahya*.” He kept one arm around her waist and turned back to face the group of O’Karians.

“Stop calling me that,” she muttered from one corner of her mouth, pasting a smile on her face for their audience.

The O’Karian spokesman peered around the edge of the ship into the corridor. Upon seeing the way Kass and Rhys stared at him, he gave a sheepish grin and drew back. “Truth, we merely wished to ascertain no one aboard was injured.” He shrugged broad shoulders. “But none of us have ever seen a ship close up before.”

“Well, if you’ll give my woman and me time to gather our things, you can come aboard and look your fill.” Rhys tightened his grip

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around her waist and, at the other man's nod, turned her toward the sleeping compartment.

* * *

Kass waited until they were in the small room with the door closed before she pushed away from his encircling arm. "What the hell was that all about? I am *not* your woman."

"You'd better act as though you are, Kass. Or be prepared to have those six men out there fighting each other for the right to claim you." Rhys stared at her a moment, his pale blue eyes glittering with irritation. "This is not about you being a liberated, independent woman. This is about survival."

She gritted her teeth and spun around to the small dresser against the wall by the bed. "It would be my luck to crash on such a barbaric planet. And you don't have to act like you're enjoying it so much," she growled, yanking open the top drawer. The restraints made it difficult to maneuver. Spinning to face him, she demanded, "Get these things off me!"

He stared at her, pale eyes narrowed as if he didn't like her tone. Tough. She wasn't about to let him go alpha on her and treat her like a possession. She deserved better than that. She *demand*ed better than that. Kass held her arms out straight in front of her. "Rhys!"

Her captive-turned-captor reached into a front pocket of his leather pants, drawing her attention downward. His erection curved thick and long against the soft material, and she remembered how hard he had felt pressed against her. Clamping her jaw against a wave of longing and regret, she held her hands still while he deactivated the magnetics of the restraints. However, he did not remove them.

"Rhys, take them off." She kept her arms straight out.

"I don't think so, *ahya*." He pocketed the restraint mechanism. "Go ahead and get what you need." He paused, his gaze drifting over her from head to toe. "You'll need to get out of that flight suit, too."

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She looked down at herself. “There’s nothing wrong with what I have on.”

“It’s too concealing.” Pressing the panel that enclosed her closet, he waited until it swung open before glancing at her. “Those O’Karian warriors will never believe you’re my woman when you’re covered from ankle to neck.”

Handing her brightly colored strips of silk, he instructed, “Put these on.”

She blinked, staring down at the long scarves she’d automatically taken from him. Varying shades of purple and blue cascaded over her hand. Kass looked up at Rhys and sputtered, “You’re out of your fucking mind if you expect me to parade around in just a few *scarves!*”

“I do expect it, Kass, while we’re on O’Kar Six.” He stepped up to her, easily crowding her against the dresser, trapping her arms between them. One big hand came up and cupped the back of her skull, holding her head immobile. “Or is that the plan, *ahya?*”

His light blue eyes sparked with silver shards, indicating his emotions ran high. In this case, suspicion and anger at her continued resistance.

She frowned at his question. “What do you mean? What plan?”

“I might be able to take on two or three O’Karians without suffering too many injuries. Maybe even a fourth. But six?” He cocked his head to one side, and waves of black hair shifted against his head, catching the light and appearing in places to be almost a deep, dark blue. “You could report back to Tima Prime that I was killed when a fight broke out over you. I’m sure the High Council isn’t too particular whether I’m delivered alive or dead.”

Her lips parted in shock at his statement and the belief she saw in his eyes. “You really think that I...” She inhaled sharply and blinked back sudden tears. How had they come to this? “You think I would let you die?”

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He leaned down until his lips were next to her ear. His breath blew warm and soft against her skin and sent a shiver of awareness straight to her core. “Don’t kid yourself, Kass. If you’re successful in getting me to Tima Prime, I’m a dead man.”

CHAPTER 2

He straightened and walked away from her. Kass licked her lips, her eyes trained on his firm buttocks as he bent over her personal computer console. Closing her eyes, she battled with herself, finally allowing the truth that she'd buried so deeply to surface. She'd known. Of course she'd known.

The High Council acted as puppets for Rhys's uncle. In her gut, she'd questioned what she was doing, questioned if the government would keep its word and free her brother in exchange for Rhys.

Rhys, her ex-lover, a man innocent of the charges against him.

Oh, she knew for certain he was a smuggler. He'd never denied that. But he'd been adamant that he had not smuggled the bioweapons of which he'd been accused.

She'd chosen to ignore what her heart told her. After all, it was her only hope of freeing Jax.

Opening her eyes, she stared at Rhys's broad shoulders and long,

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lean back. She'd missed him. She'd regretted leaving him. But she'd made her choice. As she had to make one now.

God. When every choice hurt, how could she possibly begin to know which choice was the right one?

But right here, right now, she knew Rhys was correct. If they were to make it off this planet together, she had to acquiesce. That didn't mean she had to like it. He already had too much control over her body. To think of him touching her, arousing her in public... She ground her teeth together.

"Just don't think this changes anything between us, Rhys," she muttered.

She dropped the scarves on the bed. Turning back to the dresser, she opened the top drawer and yanked out three tops and three pair of pants, plus extra underclothing. Grabbing a small travel pack from under her bed, she stuffed the clothing into the bag. Opening another drawer, she withdrew a Stunner and tossed it in the bag, then pulled the zipper shut.

"I would never be so presumptuous." He pushed a few more buttons on the computer console, then spoke a command to the unit. "Execute." He turned to face her just as she started pulling down the tab of her flight suit.

As the light pink material of her bra came into view, his eyes silvered and his nostrils flared. She remembered that look, the one that clearly said his lust was riding high. It made him appear primal, viral.

Kass had never felt so turned on as she did in that moment. She'd undressed before a man before; not many times, but enough so she wasn't nervous. And the way his pale eyes muted from blue to silver was fascinating. She tugged the zipper farther, showing the lightly tanned skin of her stomach.

His Adam's apple bobbed up and down and a cord in his neck throbbled. His eyes narrowed, his attention focused completely on her.

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It was as if they were the only two people on the planet. Her breathing grew ragged as her arousal escalated.

Rhys seemed to be having as much difficulty. His chest rose and fell with his quickened breathing, his big hands clenched at his sides. When she shrugged her shoulders to let the one-piece uniform slide down her arms, it snagged on the metal restraints still clamped around her wrists. She pursed her lips. *So much for the grand seduction.*

“Uh, Rhys?”

He stared at her, his eyes riveted on the little bit of flesh he could see.

She held out her hands. “I can’t get out of the flight suit with these on.”

Wordlessly, he took them off, but only long enough for her to slide the sleeves off her arms. Then he clamped the manacles back on.

Holding the flight suit at her hips, she toed off her boots, then bent and pulled off her socks. When she straightened and saw the intent way he stared at her, she licked her lips, shivering as his heated gaze tracked the movement of her tongue.

Her nipples tightened and his attention centered on the hard tips pressing against the silk of her bra. Kass ducked her head to hide a smile, knowing it would show pure feminine triumph. He might be bigger and stronger than she, but flash some skin and most men became putty in the potter’s slender hand. She pushed the flight suit to the floor and stepped out of it, then reached for the scarves.

“Uh-uh, *ahya.*” Rhys stepped forward and pulled the scarves slowly out of her hand. “It all has to go.”

“But... You can see right through those things,” she said, pointing to the scarves in his big hand. Forget about teasing him. Forget about any damned acquiescing. She had to draw the line somewhere. “I’m not wearing those without at least *something* underneath.”

“Most women here don’t even get to wear scarves, Kass,” he said.

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He ran one lean finger along the top edge of her bra, tracing a path over the swell of her breasts. “If any O’Karian male suspects for even one second that I don’t control your every action, he’ll challenge to claim you.”

Kass spent a few seconds fuming, resisting the urge to stomp her foot in a surge of temper, then muttered, “Fine. All right.” She reached behind and unclasped her bra, surprised when Rhys placed the scarves on the bed, turned away from her and walked over to the replication unit.

Holding her bra in front of her, she watched him open the panel and reach in. When he faced her, he held a long, gold chain in his right hand.

She knew exactly what it was. “Oh, no,” she said, waving her index finger at him. “I’m not wearing that.”

He sighed. “Kass, we don’t have a lot of time. How long do you think those men are going to wait?” He walked over to her, stopping an arm’s length away.

“I suppose you think you’re going to put it on me?” Kass clutched her bra to her chest and tried to look outraged even as excitement coursed through her. Her womb clenched with sharp desire, moisture seeped along her swollen folds, and the sudden craving for his touch nearly overwhelmed her. She braced herself for what was to come.

She had to play the part of a woman totally submissive to her master’s command. And if she knew Rhys, he was going to enjoy every second of it.

She probably would, too, damn it.

* * *

Rhys’s breathing quickened, and his hands clenched around the delicate chain as he watched Kass make her decision. When she dropped her hands and her bra fell to the floor, a smile curved his lips. Triumph and relief swirled through him, mixed with the lust that was

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ever-present when she was near.

His gaze tracked from her face down to her breasts where her pink nipples were hard and tight. Clearing his throat, he said, “The panties, too.”

He heard her breath hitch, but she shimmied out of the little scrap of cloth without a word.

She stood before him, her slender body held proudly. His gaze drifted over full breasts and generous hips, zeroed in on the soft, bare petals of her sex. Her swollen clit peeked from under its hood. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air around them. He drew in a deep breath, holding the musky aroma in his nose, wanting to sear his lungs with it. Needing to touch her, to see if her skin was as soft as he remembered, he stretched out his left hand and cupped one breast.

Rhys closed his eyes and concentrated on his sense of touch. Like fine silk under his callused palm, the soft heat of her skin sent prickles of awareness all the way to his cock. His erection, which had subsided only minutely, thickened and lengthened, constricted by the leather placket of his pants.

His lids swept up, and he snagged her dark gaze with his own, seeing the flare of passion reflected in her cocoa-colored eyes. He brought up his right hand and the chain fed from his palm, forming a Y and attaching in a loop around first one nipple, then the other.

Giving the chain a slight pull, he swallowed, hard, when she licked her lips and shivered as it tugged on her erect nipples. “Hold out your hands,” he instructed, his voice raspy with need. Gods, his cock felt ready to burst and he’d only touched her breast.

She did as he commanded, and the chain once again split to wrap around her wrists, curling over the silver restraints, leaving enough length for her to have freedom of movement. When he dropped the remaining length, it slithered down her body until it reached her soft, feminine folds and attached to her clit.

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Kass gasped, her hands coming up as if to touch her breasts, then falling back to her sides. Wordlessly, Rhys picked up the scarves. He wrapped one around her breasts, tying it between the soft mounds. The other two he wrapped around her hips, tying them together at the sides. Standing back, he studied the effect and his entire body clenched with desire.

The chain attached to her nipples kept them taut against the nearly transparent blue and purple silk of the scarf. Golden metal glittered around her cuffed wrists and trailed over the slight curve of her belly to disappear beneath another translucent scarf, taunting him with what he knew was there but could not clearly see.

When he took a step toward her, she raised her hands, palms out, then gasped as the movement tugged on the chains. A flush highlighted her cheekbones and she bit her lip. “We have people waiting for us, remember?”

He wove his fingers between hers, clasping her hands gently. Leaning forward, he kissed the corner of her mouth and murmured, “Don’t think this gets you out of anything, *ahya*. Here on O’Kar Six, men touch their women all the time. Whenever they want, wherever they are, no matter when or where.”

His cock jumped as he thought about touching her, tugging on her nipples, sliding his fingers in her moist slit, into the hot clasp of her body. He shifted his stance, trying to ease the ache of his erection.

She looked at their joined fingers, and her thumbs rubbed against the back of his hands. “And will you do the same with me?”

Her voice was husky. He could feel the fine trembling in her fingers. When her lids lifted and she met his gaze, he saw the excitement in her dark eyes.

His lips lifted in a grin. Bringing her hands to his mouth, he kissed her knuckles. “You can count on it, *ahya*.” Letting go of her hands, he stripped the blanket off her bed and efficiently folded it in half

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lengthwise, then rolled it up. He picked up the travel bag and shoved the rolled blanket through the straps.

“Is this it?” he asked. “What about shoes?”

Without a word, she went over to the small closet and yanked out a pair of sandals. She slid her feet into them and turned. “We should grab some rations from the galley,” she said. Her eyes drifted down his body and lingered on the bulge at his groin. Her tongue traced over her lips as they lifted in a sultry smile.

“Don’t be too smug,” he warned her, knowing where her thoughts were going. She thought she had him in the palm of her slender hand. Not yet, but before the day was over, she would.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Stay at least two paces behind me, Kass.” As the fire rekindled in her eyes, he added gently, “It’s their way, *ahya*. Anything that looks like you aren’t yielding to my authority will be seen as a right to challenge me to claim you.”

She huffed a sigh. “I know. It’s just... This really reeks. Next time we crash land on a planet, it’s gonna be Amzon or Omar. Then you can walk two paces behind me with a ring in your...” Blushing, she broke off.

“Nose?” he finished with a grin.

“Close enough.”

Rhys laughed and opened the door. “Go on to the galley and get whatever foodstuffs and water we can carry. Don’t be long.”

She saluted with a muttered, “Aye-aye, captain,” and turned, walking off with a sensual grace of which she probably wasn’t even aware.

Through the nearly transparent purple hues of the scarf, he could see the shadowed cleft of her ass. His cock twitched, his gut clenched with raw, hot need. Gums tingling as his mating fangs elongated, Rhys took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, trying to maintain control.

He couldn’t very well go out and talk to the O’Karians with his

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teeth hanging out over his bottom lip. Let alone allow Kass to see him this way in her present mood. With a sigh, he turned and walked down the short corridor to the hatch, where he found the O’Karian hunting party seated on the ground, patiently waiting.

“I apologize for the delay,” he said, and exited the small space ship. He and the leader clasped wrists in formal greeting. “Rhys Valorian,” he introduced himself, letting loose of the other man’s wrist.

“Dar Rajak of Treknor.” Giving himself the title of “Dar,” he confirmed to Rhys that he was the leader of this group. Rhys’s grasp of their language was sketchy at best. If he remembered right, “Dar” was the term for what amounted to a tribal Chieftain.

Peering over Rhys’s shoulder, Rajak glanced into the ship, then looked back at Rhys. “Your woman does not join you?”

“I sent her to the galley for provisions for our journey.” Rhys scanned the surrounding area, seeing flat desert sands in front of him, the beginnings of rugged hills behind him. “Where is the nearest port? We need to continue our flight.”

Rajak pointed westward, which would take them straight over the flat desert terrain. “Esticana is a small port a matter of a two-hour walk through the desert. You can find off-world transport there. We would take you ourselves,” he said, gesturing to his companions, “but we must continue our hunt or our village will not have enough meat this winter.”

Rhys shook his head. “It’s not a problem. Are there any predators or topography we should know about?”

“Not in this part of the desert,” Rajak replied. “It’s just a straight walk to the town.” He started to say more, but stopped.

Rhys turned his head and smiled at Kass. She stood behind him, her expression uncertain, her eyes filled with an entrancing mixture of anxiety and bravado. “We’ll be all right, *ahya*,” he murmured to her. “Two paces behind, remember?”

“Only as long as we’re on this backward hellhole,” she responded

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through her teeth, a smile plastered on her face. “We’ve been here a whole half-hour and I can’t wait to get out of here.”

Although Rhys could lose himself on O’Kar Six and never have to worry about bounty hunters again, he completely agreed with Kass. He had a mission to fulfill. First, they would find a way to free her brother.

Then he would kill his uncle.

CHAPTER 3

Kass hopped on one foot and pulled her sandal off the other, shaking sand out of it for what seemed like the hundredth time. She slid the sandal back on and repeated the process with the other foot.

“Sandals may not have been the best choice of footwear,” she muttered to herself.

Looking up, she saw Rhys had stopped several feet ahead, waiting for her, although he didn’t turn around. They were just beyond the walls of the small port of Esticana and they now each had a role to play.

She swallowed, hesitating, although she knew she had no choice. Once they entered the port, Rhys would begin touching her, arousing her for his pleasure. She wanted to think she was dreading it, being put on display in public. But it wasn’t dread that coursed through her, tightening her nipples and engorging her clit.

It was excitement.

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She wanted his hands on her, his cock plunging inside her. And somehow, the thought of having an audience heightened her arousal. Swallowing, she picked up her pack and started walking again and, as soon as she was within two paces of him, Rhys started walking again as well. As soon as they cleared the entrance, two men came out of a small, squat building, laughing and talking to each other. They were heavily muscled and clad merely in loincloths and knee-high leather boots. Thick, gold bands delineated the hard bulges of their biceps. Rhys raised a hand, calling out to them, and they changed direction.

When they stood in front of him, Rhys asked, “Where might I charter a ship?”

The taller of the two motioned over his shoulder with a short movement of his head, his eyes on Kass. “I would try your woman,” he said, his dark eyes glittering with lust.

When he took a step forward, Rhys stopped him with one hand flat against the other man’s chest. “I don’t think so,” he growled. His voice held such lustful possessiveness that Kass shivered with renewed arousal at the raspy tones.

The man stopped and wrapped his fingers around Rhys’s wrist. From her vantage, Kass couldn’t see from Rhys’s face if he exerted pressure or not. “Then you must claim her for all to see,” the man said, “so none will challenge your right to her.”

“Where?”

One word. That was all Rhys spoke, but Kass heard the menace in his deep voice. The other man obviously heard it as well, for he released Rhys and took a step back. “Come with us; we will show you.”

“And act as witnesses,” the second man added. He turned and led the way, followed by Rhys, then Kass. The other man walked behind Kass, and she could feel his gaze burning on her backside.

Her breath quickened, her heartbeat increased as she followed her “master” down the street to a large common area. A lush lawn

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surrounded by benches and framed by purple and yellow ground cover sat in the center. At the center of the lawn was a tall T-shaped wooden pole.

Already on the benches reclined a few women, their men touching them intimately. Kass's gaze was riveted on one particular couple, the woman's hips thrusting against the man's face as he licked and tongued her pussy. Within the golden loops of the chain, Kass's nipples tightened and her clit began thumping in time with her heartbeat.

"Stake your claim there," the taller man said, pointing to the pole.

As she followed Rhys onto the grass, Kass glanced around the growing crowd. Most of the men were tall and well-muscled, and well-armed. She saw Stunners and other types of automatic weapons strapped to toned thighs, swords or bows sheathed on broad backs. A mixture of old and new.

There was no way Rhys could fight them all, and she'd probably never get a chance to pull the Stunner out of her pack. When Rhys turned to face her and she saw the hot, feral look on his face, her breath hitched in her throat and she forgot all about Stunners and fighting. Color rode high on his cheekbones, the nostrils on his straight nose flared slightly as if he were drawing in a slow, deep breath.

His full, sensuous lips were parted slightly and she saw the tip of his fangs. Her breath quickened, and she had to force herself to hold her ground as he moved closer. She could feel the heat from his big body. Dark hair swirled over the hard chest visible through the opening of his leather vest. Her gaze dropped and she saw the way his cock strained against the placket of his pants.

She felt dainty and fragile next to him. She shivered, her skin pebbling with goose bumps, and her stomach knotted with anticipation. The travel pack dropped out of her suddenly nerveless fingers.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice husky, his pale eyes searching hers.

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She drew in a breath and released it slowly. "I'm not sure I can do this in front of people, Rhys." When a woman cried out, Kass's gaze darted back to that one couple. The woman had just climaxed around her companion's tongue, and he now stood, his thick cock poised at the entrance to her vagina. With hands clamped on her hips, he drove his erection into her sheath, groaning loudly.

Heat suffused Kass's face. That would be her and Rhys in a few minutes. Could she do it? How could she not? If she didn't allow Rhys to fuck her publicly, she'd open him up to countless challenges, and herself to potentially dozens of rapes.

It wasn't as if she was completely unwilling to have sex with Rhys. She'd been hot for him from the moment she'd finally nabbed him and put him in restraints. Ever since he'd clamped the manacles on her, she'd been waiting for this moment.

She'd just never really thought it would come down to a public claiming.

Rhys took her chin between bent forefinger and thumb and gave it a gentle squeeze, drawing her attention back to him. Lowering his mouth to the corner of her lips, he kissed her and whispered, "Focus on me, *ahya*. It's just you and me. No one else." He held her gaze for a moment, then his long fingers went to the knot in the scarf between her breasts and began undoing it.

She kept her gaze on his face, seeing the flare of silver in his eyes as the silky material dropped away, baring her breasts. "Do only what I tell you to do, Kass," he murmured.

Bending her over one arm, he sucked a nipple into the wet heath of his mouth. His tongue tugged on the golden loops of the nipple chain as he suckled her strongly, pulling as much of her breast into his mouth as he could. Moving to her other breast, he licked over the taut peak before pulling it between his lips.

As the sucking continued, the chains tugged the other breast and her

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clit, building an answering throb in her pussy. Kass closed her eyes. Her nipple became more sensitive than she could have imagined. She could feel every slide of his tongue, the light nip of his teeth on the hard tip of her breast. With every breath she took, the loops tightened around the hardening buds.

He switched back to the first nipple. The strong pull of his mouth threatened to melt her into a puddle of goo. She felt her legs begin to shake and brought her hands up to fist in his silky hair.

Immediately he pulled back. His eyes were silver with arousal, almost luminescent in his primal lust. "I didn't tell you to move."

Her eyes widened at the hard, gruff tone. She realized that part of it had to do with their audience, but she still felt a thrill at the mastery she heard. It tempted her to be bad so he would have to punish her.

Gods above. When had the strong, independent woman she'd always thought she was get replaced by a willing submissive?

When Rhys Valorian stormed back into her life, that's when.

Rhys pulled the restraint mechanism from his pocket and pushed the green button. The silver cuffs made a slight buzzing noise and *thwapped* together. Pointing to the wooden pole, he said, "Lie down."

With a deep breath, Kass did as he instructed. Once she was down, he knelt beside her and drew her hands above her head, securing her bound wrists over a hook that was skewered into the pole roughly six inches above the ground. The movement pulled the chain taut, yanking on her nipples and her engorged clit. Then he grasped her hips and pulled her down until her arms were stretched to the point where she didn't have enough leverage to get them loose.

He brought his face to hers, his breath stirring the hair at her right temple as he placed a kiss there. "I promise you, Kass, I won't let anyone take you from me. Are you all right?" he asked in a low voice.

She heard the care and concern and, with the realization that he would give his life to protect her, she relaxed underneath him. "Yes."

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One big hand stroked the side of her face, and his lips pressed against the corner of her mouth. He stroked his tongue over her lips slowly, a soft caress, fleeting but hot enough to send renewed moisture to her pussy. Her body tightened in anticipation of his full kiss.

When it finally came, it seized her like floodwaters rushing through a dry, desert wash. His lips covered hers and his tongue surged into her mouth with a ferocity that stole her breath. When she opened her mouth even more to his assault, he groaned and ravaged her lips like a man dying of thirst.

His mouth was hot and greedy, tasting of the berries they'd eaten just before entering the city. Kass slid her tongue along the ridge of his teeth, drawing his taste in even deeper.

A sharp nip and the salty taste of copper flooded her mouth from where his fangs had lightly bitten into her lower lip. He sucked at the small wound, and she moaned, her hips undulating slowly as heat built in her core.

“Spread your legs.”

As soon as she complied, Rhys moved between her thighs. He brought his hand down to the scarf at her hip and untied one side, sweeping it off her, baring her completely. “Don’t be embarrassed, *ahya*,” he murmured, correctly interpreting the wave of red that washed over her face. “Focus on me, on my touch. Look at me. See what you do to *me*.”

His big hands cupped and lifted her ass, tilting her so he could taste her. It was the most arousing thing she'd ever seen, his dark head between her thighs, his silvered eyes holding hers for a heated moment before he turned his attention to her pussy. He blew against her clit, then the flat of his tongue swiped through her folds. His beard rasped against her inner thighs and her bare labia, making her shiver and moan. The silent crowd faded from her consciousness; her entire being focused on Rhys and what he did to her.

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He groaned, the sound vibrating against her clit, ramping up her arousal. Her breath shuddered through her lungs, her gasping cries sounding loud in the otherwise silent area.

“Brace yourself with your feet,” Rhys murmured. Once she’d done so, the fingers of one of his hands slipped into the slick folds of her sex, his thumb moving the clamp on her clit with slow, even strokes. His other hand skimmed down the cleft of her buttocks, fingers pressing against the rosebud opening of her ass. She twisted under his hand, wanting more, needing more.

Ready for more.

She’d missed his touch, realizing only at this moment just how much. She’d been a scared little girl with him before. She only hoped she’d have the chance to show him how much she’d matured. He took another long swipe, and all thoughts fled like leaves scattering before the wind.

He moved his hand to slide two fingers into her needy channel. Bringing his head down, he blew against her clit just before he flicked it with his tongue, a quick back and forth motion that vibrated the clamp and caused the chain to tug on her nipples. She clenched her fists.

“Rhys.”

“Call me Master,” he muttered around her flesh, pumping his fingers in and out of her with a steady, maddening rhythm. One long digit pushed through the tight ring of her sphincter, pushing in, in, in until it could go no farther.

“Master. Rhys!” She gasped when the fingers inside her pussy curled, hitting her most sensitive spot. Another flick of his tongue on her clit and her climax rolled over her, tightening her body around his fingers. Kass cried out, her back arched as she rode the pounding beat of her orgasm.

* * *

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Rhys held her through the aftershocks, his tongue still drinking her honeyed essence. The fragrance of the flowers surrounding them blended with the scent of her feminine musk. He'd never smelled anything quite so arousing.

He pulled his finger out of her ass. After wiping it against the soft grass, his hands went to the fly of his leather pants. With rough, uncoordinated movements he wrestled with the opening, finally freeing his rigid shaft.

As her legs started to straighten, he stopped, putting his hands under her thighs. "Keep your knees bent, your legs spread. I want to see every inch of you."

Even though a blush flared over her face and flushed her neck, she did as he ordered. Pausing for a moment, he stared at her slender beauty. She had beautiful breasts, high and firm, more than enough to fill his hands. Her nipples were a soft pink, the tips now tight and dark red with arousal, still in their loops of gold. His gaze traveled down her torso, over the slight rise of her tummy and down to the bare petals of her sex.

The outer folds were creamy white, the inner folds a deep pink. Prettier than the flowers that bloomed all around them. He slid his fingers into her slit. Her gasp and the thrusting of her hips against his hand brought a smile to his face.

Reaching up, he plucked her nipples. She gasped and jerked. When he repeated the caress, building her hunger and his as her nipples lengthened and swelled, she moaned, her eyes fluttering shut. She rocked against the soft emerald grass, her hips circling restlessly.

Rhys pushed her breasts together and bent his head. He released the loops from her nipples, then took the buds into his mouth and suckled, hard. She was salty with sweat, and tasted like a slice of heaven he'd never thought he'd taste again.

He took his time with her, suckling, laving, kneading her breasts.

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She cried out again and again, writhing under him, rising to meet every tug of his mouth. She sobbed his name, then remembered and gasped, “Master. I mean...oh, gods. Master!”

Pressing the tip of his thick cock against her sex, he wet himself in her cream. She moaned and pushed against him. “Rhys... Master. Please...”

His control left him at the sound of her hoarse plea. Bunching his hips, he pushed into her, filling her with one long, smooth stroke. “You’re so fucking tight,” he groaned, holding himself still for a moment, giving her body time to accommodate his girth. Her channel rippled around him, pulling another groan from deep in his chest. With a growl, he curled his fingers around her hips and rode her, hard. She cried out and wrapped her legs around him, pulling him deeper yet.

Rhys desperately wanted to perform the Blood Rite, but never in such a public place. The first bite between mated pairs was something to be done with reverence, no matter how hard lust rode the pair. He would wait, though it would enhance both their pleasure were he to clamp down on her neck with his fangs.

He fucked her hard and fast. Another stroke, then another. Her inner muscles clenched around him, her heels dug into his buttocks. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh, his balls pounding against her cleft, rose in the air. Rhys moved one hand to her clit and scissored two fingers around it, tugging on it with hard pressure.

“Now, *ahya*,” he ground out, his own ecstasy not far off. “Come for me now!”

She screamed and convulsed, wringing his own orgasm from him. Throwing back his head, he roared his release, spurting his seed into her, the heated flood flowing from his balls to his cock and into her tight sheath. Rhys continued to pump into her, his cock sliding through the viscous fluid, until it was finally enough.

Bracing himself on his hands, he leaned down and caught her lips

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with his, giving her a slow kiss that started the blood pulsing in his cock. He drew away, a drop of sweat falling from his forehead to splash on her lips. Her pink tongue swept out, licking it away, and her cocoa-colored eyes flickered with renewed heat.

“Rhys,” she whispered.

“The next time I have you, *ahya*,” he murmured, “will be in a bed, in private.” He rose to his knees and tucked his cock back in his pants, fastening the fly quickly. He reached over her and released her hands from the pole, then rose and pulled her to her feet at the same time. He refastened the loops on her nipples, then bent and picked up the scarves. He wrapped them around her hips and breasts, covering her nudity once more. He was chagrined but not surprised to see a slight tremble in his fingers.

She did that to him. Always had. Drove him past his control, made him crazy with lust.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the restraint control and pushed the blue button, turning off the magnetism of the cuffs. She flexed her arms, grimacing slightly.

“All right?” he asked.

She nodded. When he slid an arm around her waist, she leaned into him, a blush skating over her cheeks. He ducked his head close to her ear and murmured, “You’re beautiful, *ahya*. Every man in this commons envies me.”

Raising his head, he looked at the men who had brought them to the claiming area. “I need to charter a ship, and my woman needs a place to refresh and rest.”

The taller of the two nodded. “I will take you.” He beckoned a woman standing nearby. “This is my thrall, Keeliana. She will take your woman to the inn.”

Rhys clenched his jaw at the sight of the erection straining against the man’s breechclout. The bloodlust still rode him; all it would take

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was one misplaced word or glance, and Rhys wasn't certain his control wouldn't snap.

"Go with her," he said to Kass, though his gaze never left the O'Karian's. "I will join you shortly."

As Kass left with the other woman, casting one last look over her shoulder, the male started down the street and Rhys followed. The ship he chartered had better have private quarters. His cock still throbbed with need; his gums ached nearly as much with the need to pierce her skin so he could taste her blood.

When he got her alone...ah, heaven.

Of course, he must first ascertain that she no longer planned to turn him over to the authorities on Tima Prime. He would do all he could to ensure her brother's release from prison, legally or otherwise, and he could not do that locked in a cage himself.

CHAPTER 4

Kass reclined in the large bathtub and swished the bubbles around. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the rim and thought back over the events of the day. It amazed her that it had been less than twenty-four hours ago she'd captured her quarry, the means to her brother's release from prison.

What was even more astonishing was that she was going to let him go.

She blinked back tears. What if he truly left? What if the tenderness and possessiveness he'd been showing toward her had been nothing more than a means to an end? What if he no longer loved her?

After all, he hadn't said the words.

Neither have you.

"Shut up," she muttered to the irritating inner voice that cropped up at the most inopportune times. Never mind that it was right.

Five years ago she'd loved Rhys with a passionate fire she'd never

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thought would go out. Yet the first time he'd tried to bite her, to mate her to him for eternity, she'd run scared.

Forever was a long time.

But she'd never stopped loving him. She'd grown up a lot since then, had a lot of regrets. Not the least of which was her cowardice toward Rhys.

If he let her, she'd spend the rest of her life making it up to him.

There had to be another way to free Jax. A tear trailed down her cheek and she impatiently scrubbed it away. Dammit. She refused to give up. Her brother's days in prison were numbered.

She'd find another way.

* * *

Two hours later, she and Rhys walked up the gangplank and into the passenger liner on which Rhys had booked passage for them. She was clad once again in her garment of scarves, the gold chain adorning her nipples and clit. She felt sexy and was incredibly aroused, and the thought that she'd regret when she'd be able to wear normal clothes flitted through her mind.

"Welcome aboard," the ship's purser said, his tone cheerful. Kass nodded politely and kept her hand in the crook of Rhys's arm. His big hand covered hers, the heat from his skin warming her hand, which was cold with nerves. Rhys remained silent which, to Kass's way of thinking, was probably a good thing.

They'd booked passage as a newly married couple, the Steerons from Cobalderon, but Kass wasn't so sure they'd be able to pull it off. As long as Rhys kept his mouth shut and didn't go around flashing his fangs, kept his emotions under control and didn't go all silvery-eyed on her, they'd be fine.

With the lusty looks he'd been sending her way... Well, she just didn't think they were going to be successful in their subterfuge.

"You're on deck four," the purser went on, looking up at both of

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them with a smile. With his pointed ears, bulbous nose and short stature, he appeared to be Quorandan. He made Kass, at five-eight, feel gargantuan. “Take this hallway until it forks and turn right. The maglift is at the end of the next corridor. Take it down three decks, make a left out of the lift. Your room is 421.” He handed a small metal card to Rhys.

He looked down at the hand-held computing device in his hand, then back up at them. “Congratulations on your recent nuptials. Enjoy your stay.”

Kass barely got out a polite, “thank you,” before Rhys urged her away from the little man. With long strides, Rhys walked down the corridor, urging Kass along at a near trot. When the hallway forked, he took the right so fast her shoulder knocked into the wall.

“Hey, what’s the rush?” Craning her neck, she looked back over her shoulder. “Did you see someone?”

The maglift doors slid open and he crowded her into the small lift. As soon as the door swished closed, his lips came roughly down on hers. He kissed her mercilessly, his mouth hungry as his big hands swept up her arms to cradle her head.

“Destination, please.” The disembodied voice came from above them.

Rhys lifted his head long enough to say, “Deck four,” then plundered her lips again. His callused palms rasped pleasantly against her cheeks as he tilted her face. His tongue thrust into her mouth, stealing her breath.

Her nipples tightened in their golden chains, and hot liquid slid from her sheath to lie slickly on her labia.

He drew away and took a deep breath. “Gods, I can’t get enough of you. You smell so good,” he whispered, and buried his face in the crook of her neck. “Kass—”

The door pinged and swooshed open. Whatever Rhys had been

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about to say was lost as another couple crowded onto the lift. Rhys scowled and scooped Kass into his arms, striding off the lift and down the hallway until he reached their room.

He let Kass slide down his body until her feet were on the floor. Her breath hitched at the feel of his hard erection against her belly. She watched him swipe the card and push open the door. With one hand at the small of her back, he urged her inside, then closed the door with one foot.

Kass turned to face him, holding up her hands to hold him off as he reached for her. “Wait, Rhys. I need to tell you something.”

He went still, his entire body rigid, looking like a man who was about to be tortured and was preparing to face the worst.

Kass took a deep breath, determined to do right by this man, determined to not let her cowardice ruin one more minute of his life. “I’m not going to turn you in.” She shrugged and her gaze dropped to her fingers, twisting together at her belly. “I don’t know that I really ever would have. It’s just...Jax.”

* * *

Rhys’s breath left him in a rush of relief. While he hadn’t believed she could look at him the way she had and still turn him over to the death squad, a small part of him had worried about it. “I’ve already got a plan in motion, *ahya*,” he said, and pulled her into his arms. “I made some calls when I was chartering our passage. In two days, your brother will be moved from isolation to the general prison population. He’ll be assigned duties in the kitchen and be liberated from there.”

“But, how...?” Her gaze, bright with curiosity, held his.

Rhys grinned, feeling lighter and more carefree than he had in years. He kissed the tip of her nose. “I may be exiled, but I’m still a prince with a lot of money.”

“I love you.” She blinked, looking surprised that she’d said the words aloud, but then shook her head. “And I’m not just saying that

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because you're helping me with Jax."

He pressed his lips to hers, moving gently over their soft fullness before drawing back. "I know, *ilea zahma*."

"Ill-ee-ah *zah*-ma," she repeated slowly. "What does that mean?"

"It means 'one loved beyond all others,'" he said, his voice husky.

She stared at him, eyes searching his, then a wide smile curved her luscious mouth. She shrieked and threw her arms around his neck. Just as his hands slid up her back to clasp her close, she backed out of his arms. Standing with her hands on her hips, she looked him up and down. "I think it's time I paid you back for earlier."

Without waiting for a response, she reached out and unfastened his leather pants. When her knuckles brushed against his erection, he sucked in his breath. His gums began to ache, signaling that his fangs were elongating.

Kass gently freed his cock. Dropping to her knees, her hot mouth enveloped the head of his erection. He bucked against her and, with just that one touch, he was nearly out of control. She took him deeper, the tip touching the back of her throat. He closed his eyes on a moan.

"Gods above, *ahya*," he ground out. "That feels so damned good."

She hummed around the thick stalk of flesh in her mouth, and his eyes flew open. Her lips stretched around his girth, she worked him up and down, tip to root. The wet, sucking sounds of mouth wrapped around cock heightened his pleasure and threatened to make him spurt like an untried youth.

"Suck harder." His voice was guttural, primal. He felt the burn in his eyes and knew they were molten silver. "Faster."

She sucked mercilessly, faster and harder. She moaned a little, the sound vibrating all the way to his tight balls and very nearly driving him over the edge. Watching his shaft disappear between her swollen lips, feeling it gripped by the depths of her throat was the most erotic thing he'd experienced in his life. His balls drew up even more and his

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cock began to jerk and throb, signaling his impending climax.

With a growl, he bent and pulled her off his cock and up into his arms. Two long strides brought him to the wide bed, where he tossed her down. The silken scarf covering her hips fluttered up, baring her pussy. Coming down over her, he covered her soft frame with his larger, harder body, then slanted his lips over hers. His tongue thrust deep into her mouth, in and out, mimicking the action he would very soon take with his cock.

“Fuck me, Rhys,” she moaned, her face flushed, her dark eyes glittering with desire. “Make me yours.”

He grasped his shaft and positioned the tip at the slick opening of her body, then slid inside with one smooth, long stroke. Once his hips were flush with hers, her tight cunt gripping him like a velvet fist, he took a deep breath, then another to stave off his orgasm.

“Be sure, *ilea zahma*,” he said. “If I conduct the Blood Rite, if I take us to that last level in mating, there will be no going back.”

Her slender hands cupped his face, the pads of her thumbs rubbed over his lips. “I don’t want to go back. I only want to go forward. With you. I’m not sure I’m cut out to be royalty, though.”

“Don’t worry about that, Kass. You’re a natural. And what you don’t know, I’ll teach you.”

She leaned up and kissed him, then whispered against his mouth, “Bite me.”

Rhys turned his face and kissed first one soft palm, then the other. When her hands slid to his shoulders, he reached up with one hand and tilted her head to the side. A pulse ticked steadily at the side of her neck, and he groaned as his cock hardened further.

Pumping his hips, he started thrusting into her pussy, long, slow strokes that soon became short and choppy as his arousal heightened. His balls slapped against her soft, slick folds. Bending his neck, he licked over the throbbing vein in her throat, the rough buds on his

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tongue preparing her skin.

After taking a breath, he fit his fangs into her neck, the sharp tips piercing her flesh easily. Hot blood flowed into his mouth, and he swallowed, drawing her essence, her soul, into his body. He tangled his thoughts with hers, feeling the emotions and sensations coursing through her, letting her do the same with him.

His drawing of her blood triggered her climax. The strong contractions of her sheath around his stiff flesh made him flex against her. Throwing back his head, he roared her name, every muscle in his body tensing. He came hard, violently, spurting ropes of thick semen against the mouth of her womb.

He continued to stroke in and out of her. She threw her hips up at him, meeting his every thrust. He kept up the frenzied pace until she'd milked every last drop of seed from him, and he finally collapsed on top of her.

"I love you, *ilea zahma*," he murmured, his voice hoarse.

"I love you." Kass rubbed her hands along his back, under the leather vest, loving the feel of his sweat-slicked back against her fingers. She nuzzled his neck with her nose. "You suppose at some point you'll make love to me with your clothes off?"

His wide grin curved against her skin, making her smile. Then her smile faded. "Rhys..."

He raised up, bracing on one elbow. He brushed a strand of hair off her face. His touch was tender, but she felt his body readying itself for her again. Already his cock was hard within the clasp of her pussy.

"It's not going to be easy, this road you've chosen to travel with me," he said. "But know this... I love you. Right now, that's the only thing that matters."

As he started moving within her again, Kass clutched his back, holding his pale gaze with her own dark one. He was right. It wouldn't be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever was.

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No, she and her prince would not have it easy. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

SHERRILL QUINN

Sherrill Quinn spent twenty years building her career in Human Resources, reaching the pinnacle as Vice President only to realize her life needed to go in another direction. After taking a “how to write erotic romance” course online in February 2005, she discovered her true calling and hasn’t looked back. *The Claiming* is her first book with Amber Quill Press.

You can read about her current and upcoming books at her website, <http://sherrillquinn.com>. She’d love to hear from her readers at sherrill@sherrillquinn.com.

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