

# HE IS MALE THEREFORE...

By

Shadoe Simmons

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She walked into the little bar as though she owned it. Her head held high, her cold eyes going over the occupants as she searched for one in particular. Dark, cold brown eyes, Kregar thought, in a face as beautiful as an angels.

Merinus Drako wasn't just beautiful, she was uniquely beautiful. Her body was lean, tall and shapely, but he knew from experience that there was strength in the compact muscles beneath her skin. Her face was pale and perfect, her mouth a sweetly curved bow made for a smile, yet had never seen one. The cold eyes are a golden brown, tilted a bit at the corners beneath slight wing shaped brows.

She was dressed in the black figure hugging pants of a League Tracker. Her long legs shapely beneath the material, her feet encased in ankle high leather boots. She wore a plain black blouse tucked into the pants, instead of the typical white blouse with a League insignia.

She looked dangerous with her black hair pulled back in a long straight tail, and the leather utility and weapon belt strapped to her hips. She was dangerous and he knew it.

He didn't help her for profit, because he knew there was very little capital in it. He helped her out of fear, because she was the best, and with a word she could have his life.

Merinus was a Tracker. The best the government owned. Her rate of success was unprecedented by any other Tracker in the League. When she accepted a contract it became the center of her attention, of her existence. She was relentless, merciless on a hunt.

It was because she was cold. Stone cold to the bottom of her black little soul, Kregar thought. She had no warmth, no life, no compassion outside her job. She might have been a robot, but he had it on the highest authority that she had been seen bleeding once, a very long time ago.

Knowing all this, he still couldn't help the edge of respect and liking he had for her. It was confusing, and caused him several sleepless nights, but there it was, she terrified him, but he actually liked her.

"Hiding from me again, Kregar?" Merinus pulled out the chair across from him and sat down gracefully and she frowned at him. "I've had a hell of a time tracking you down this week."

He knew the patient, gentle sound of her voice meant trouble. He might like her, but he sure as hell hated it when he had to talk to her.

"I just received your message a while ago." he took a quick drink of the ale to fortify his courage. "I've been away for the last week."

“Away, or avoiding me.” her eyes narrowed, and he swallowed tightly. “I haven’t enjoyed cooling my heels on this miserable little planet waiting on you.”

She was angry at him. He could see it in the cold, hard stare she gave him.

“Away.” he tried for a casual shrug as he lifted his mug once again, but casual wasn’t easy with his hands shaking so hard.

Damn, he wished he had been away, maybe he could have escaped this meeting.

“Just away, huh?” her lips tilted with the slightest mocking smile.

“Funny, I heard you were hiding up in that dingy little apartment you try to rent. I was heading there when I heard you were seen sneaking in here.”

He had tried sneaking into the bar when he received the tip that she was heading to his apartment.

“I wasn’t sneaking.” he could feel the sweat gathering along his back, and above his brow. “I was gettin’ ready to send you a message soon as I finished my drink. I swear.”

“Sure you were.” he didn’t like the way her eyes stared into him as though she could see his lies.

“I was.” he lowered his eyes, hoping she was in a good mood today and wouldn’t try to tear his throat out for hiding from her.

She shrugged as though the lie didn’t matter. “That’s okay I have you now.” he really didn’t like the way she phrased it, or the rapid jolt of fear it shot through him.

His eyes shot to hers. “Have me?” he whispered, “What do you mean? What do you want with me?”

“I want some info Kregar.” she sat back in her chair and crossed her arms beneath her breasts as she got straight to the point. “You heard anything about the Rebellions leader, Callan? I’m looking for him.”

Kregar nearly whimpered in fear. If there was one person on the face of the universe that he feared more than he feared Merinus, then it was Callan.

“Damn, you wanna get me killed don’t you, Meri?” he slunk down in his chair as fear threatened to get the best of him. “He aint around here. That’s all I know.”

He could feel the trembling that began in his gut. With a single word, she was signing his death warrant, if anyone else had heard her.

“Come on, Kregar.” she leaned forward, clasping her hands before her on the table. “You have info, so give it to me.”

"I don't know nothin', Meri." he shook his head, lowering his voice as he looked around in fear, praying no one had heard the name. "I swear, I don't know nothin' about him."

A slender black brow arched knowingly.

"You hear it all." her voice was soft and patient, a dangerous sign. "Stop lying to me and tell me the truth."

"No one tells me nothin' no more." he shook his head. "They know you hassle me, Meri."

"Hassle you?" she smiled sweetly, and his stomach clenched. "Kregar, when do I ever hassle you?"

"Meri, I swear I don't know nothin' about him." he shook his head desperately as his voice lowered to a near whisper. "No one sees him, no one knows where he is. If I had heard, I would have already told you."

"Would you?" her voice was growing dangerously soft, and his hands shook harder. "Why don't I believe you, Kregar?"

"No look Meri, I've always told you honest." he whispered desperately. "I don't lie to you, I know better. I don't know where that one is. He stays hid, every Tracker in the League wants him and he knows it."

"What about a mate?" she asked him. "Who is she? Where can I find her? Any little cubs running around?"

"No mate." he shook his head. "Everyone knows he swore not to take one when he escaped the League scientists. No mate, no cubs, you know that Meri."

His eyes met hers, his breath hitching in his throat as she continued to stare at him quietly.

"I have his contract, Kregar." she told him coldly. "I want him."

He cursed silently. Dammit, he didn't want a part of this. He sure as hell didn't want to be dragged in between them. Callan would savage anyone who got between him and his quest for freedom for his people. Kregar did not want to be a casualty.

"You don't want no part of him, Meri." he leaned forward as he fought to make her understand. "You're good. You're the best, but he's better, and he's savage enough to make it stick. He'll destroy you, do you understand that?" Damn, he wished he was the more callous sort. He could just send her to him, and watch her blood fly. It was a bitch, liking this one.

"Why Kregar, I didn't know you cared." that sweet curve of her lips had him blinking and moving back quickly. It wasn't quick enough to avoid the long, graceful fingers that gripped his windpipe tightly.

As he gasped for air, she pulled him across the table, until they were nose to nose, her eyes staring relentlessly into his.

“No you listen to me you little rat.” she sneered. “You’re lying and I know it. I want to know where he is, and how to get to him, and I suggest you start talking now.”

His hands gripped her arm, his strangled pleas mere gurgles trapped in his throat.

Just as quickly as she grabbed him, she release him, throwing him back into his chair with a careless twist of her wrist.

“I swear...” he wheezed desperately, swallowing painful now and losing a bit of those more tender feelings he had for her moments ago.

“I don’t know. I swear I don’t know...”

“Save it.” she rose from her chair and stared down at him in disgust.

“I’ll be sure to give him your regards when I do find him.”

“God, no Meri.” he whimpered weakly. “I don’t know nothin’. I been honest with you, I swear.”

“Not this time, Kregar.” she said softly. “And this one was more important than the others.”

She turned and walked leisurely out of the bar, her head held high, her back straight. Kregar breathed roughly, fighting the panic rising inside him as she left the building. As he watched her disappear through the doorway, he began rethinking his reluctance to see her dead.

Damn, from the sound of it, she wanted Callan bad. He had seen her intense over a contract more than once, but this went beyond her usual dedication to her job.

From the far corner, the shadows shifted, a figure rose from his seat and began to walk slowly across the room. He was dressed as any other miner on the small colony in the rough cotton pants, and long black cape. But the eyes that stared at him from beneath the hood were anything but ordinary. Kregar shook his head. Damn, this just wasn’t his day.

The figure walked slowly past him, the whispered words as he paused at the table were a direct order.

Kregar trembled from head to foot, and he silently counted the minutes before he rose from his chair as well, and headed up the stairs that the shrouded figure had taken.

“My name was mentioned, Kregar.” the rough, purring quality of the voice was filled with menace as Kregar reach the top of the stairs.

From an opened doorway he glanced into the room, and saw Callan watching him coldly. Kregar

entered the room slowly, closing the door behind him.

“She’s looking for you.” he swallowed tightly. “I didn’t tell her nothin’, I swear.”

Callan nodded as he rose from the edge of the bed he had been sitting on, he walked to the window, looking out of broken wooden slats with interest.

“She knows you’re lying to her. You must be losing your edge.” he gestured to the window, and Kregar walked over slowly.

From the gap in the slats, he watched as Meri gave a large force of soldiers orders. She stared at the Inn as she did so, a smug smile on her face.

“She’s good, Callan.” he whispered. “She’s tough too.”

“Not really.” the lazy humor in the voice had Kregar’s stomach slowly settling. Callan wasn’t mad at him, that was all that mattered.

Meri would blast his brains on the wall, but it would be quick and painless. Callan could put a world of hurt on him, and make him beg for death.

“Don’t let it fool you, just cause she’s a woman...”

“Women are by far the superior of the species, Kregar, it would pay you to remember that. That’s why she makes such an excellent hunter. Her instincts are excellent. She knew I was there, knew I was watching her.” the was an edge of respect, of curiosity in his voice.

Damn. Kregar’s stomach tightened once again.

“She’ll kill me.” he sighed.

“No she won’t, or she would have done so downstairs.” Callan informed him thoughtfully as he continued to stare at the street below.

“She’s been here a week already, why haven’t you left?” Kregar questioned him. “You knew she was after you, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” Callan turned back to him with a smile. “The contract has been out for years, Kregar, it was just a matter of time before she decided to take up the challenge.”

“So why are you still here?” the question was redirected at him.

Kregar knew that if he lived to be a hundred, he would never understand some mens need to jump into the thick of a fight. Callan refused to run, and save the fight for another day.

“Perhaps I just enjoy the challenge.” broad shoulders shrugged as he turned back to the window and stared down at the street once again.

“Just as she does.”

Kregar shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. He didn't need this, his life was upsetting enough without Merinus and Callan making things harder on him.

“What will you do now?” Kregar finally asked. “I know you, you have something planned.”

“I always have something planned.” he was told softly. “I'll take care of Merinus Drako myself, that is if the assassin doesn't get to her first.”

“Assassin?” Kregar glanced towards the window, surprised.

“Who put out a contract on Meri?”

“Who wouldn't want to.” the thin mouth tilted into a sarcastic smile.

“In this case, the League has suddenly decided they can do without her family on the council board. Her father is now on the run, as are several other League council members. Three were killed last night.”

“Damn.” Kregar muttered, running his fingers through his short red hair. “That's bad. Meri really likes her dad. Real close to him.”

He remembered years back, hearing how close they were. One of her contracts had tried taking him hostage to get her off him. It hadn't worked, but Kregar heard it had really pissed her off.

“She's shouldn't be my problem for much longer.” Callan turned from the window and shrugged back into his cape. “If she gets out of that mess, then I will take care of her.”

Kregar shook his head. He wasn't certain why, but he knew he would have to try to warn her. He liked Meri, she was honest, and didn't kill for sport as many of the Trackers now did. He just wondered how he could manage to do it, and still keep his own skin.

She had one last meeting, then she could head back to the cruiser and take a much needed nap. She probably should have taken care it before meeting with Kregar, but the little rat had been avoiding her all week. It had been a mere stroke of luck that she had learned he had been seen sneaking into the back of the bar.

Not that the meeting had gone exactly as planned. It seemed there was something Kregar feared more

than he feared her. She was amused at the small pinch of jealousy she felt over that.

She turned the corner into one of the little, dirty back streets of the mining town, and came to an abrupt halt. She would have found her surprise amusing had some part of her not been expecting this all along. That bad feeling in the pit of her stomach was never wrong.

“Why Kyle.” she tried for a friendly smile, but was afraid it was more a snarl as she faced the League assassin. “What are doing here?”

She looked around, and managed to sight over half her squad backing him in the narrow little street. If she wasn’t mistaken, there would be several behind her as well.

Kyle’s handsome features held a shade of regret as he shook his black head at her. “This is going to be easier than I thought it would be.”

“What did you expect?” she arched her brow at him mockingly. “I’m not psychic.”

“That’s surprising.” he smiled just slightly. “I always imagined you were.”

She glanced around at the soldiers who had accompanied her on her trip, supposed support, she sneer silently.

“So, is it a League hit, or something personal?” she sighed. “I was unaware I had made an enemy of you.” She had always respected him in some odd way, even cold blooded killers had a few good points.

“I believe it’s League business, my dear.” he raised his weapon, a lethal black nerve disseminator. Damn, that would hurt. Those little babies weren’t made for quick kills, but rather painful ones.

“And did the League choose your weapon for you?” she asked him on a sigh. “Hell, I thought we were friends. The least I deserve is a quick kill.”

“That you do.” he nodded, “but as you suspect, the League chose the weapon.”

“Want to tell me why?” she was thinking furiously, praying to distract him long enough to come up with at least one viable avenue of escape.

“I’m not really certain why.” he shrugged as though it didn’t really matter to him. “Who have you pissed off recently?”

“Plenty.” she sighed, knowing this was not going to be an easy one to get out of. If he managed a direct hit with that weapon, her nerves were going to fry. It wasn’t a pleasant way to go.

Then there were the soldiers with their lasers drawn, and she was certain each weapon was set at its maximum power.

“Sorry, Meri.” she was beginning to hate the shortened version of her name, it usually meant she was being screwed. “I really do regret this.”

She wasn't going to make it, but she sure as hell was going to give it her best shot. As his arm flexed, she jumped, drew her weapon and rolled as she aimed for his arm. Laser fire erupted around her, screams and curses echoing through the alley as she began to shoot wildly at each eruption of fire she glimpsed.

Where the hell Kyle had gotten off to, she wasn't certain, but she felt a moments satisfaction at the smoking disseminator laying in the middle of the street. That didn't solve the problem of over half a dozen lasers firing at the pitiful piece of cover she had found though. As covers went, doorways weren't the best.

Until they were opened. This one opened, and rough hands jerked her rudely inside then began to rush her through the deserted shop.

"What the hell..." she tried to turn back, to get a glimpse at her sudden savior.

"Keep moving." a harsh voice ordered her, pushing her quickly out another door as hard hands wrapped a long black cape over her. "Put that hood up and keep it there."

He jerked her around a corner, then brought her to a sudden stop. Pushing her against her wall, he leaned in close enough to whisper.

"If you want to live, keep your mouth shut, your head down, and stay at my side. I can get you out of this, but you damned well better cooperate."

She nodded quickly, not prone to argue as she heard Kyle barking out orders, and soldiers curses as they entered the street. The hand on her arm pushed her forward and began a sedate, if nervous walk along the crowded walkway.

As she peeked through the folds of the cape, she realized she was blending in with the various miners wives as they went about their daylight business. Hoods were drawn over their faces to protect them from the harsh sunlight, and on their feet they wore boots similar to her own, for climbing back into the mountains with their purchased goods.

"Who the hell are you?" she directed her question at the tall, broad form at her side. "And why help me?"

"Because you're such a sweet, gentle woman." he answered her dryly, the hand on her arm directing her to turn down another street.

"Why else?"

"Okay, that answers my last question." she bit out, "Now answer the first."

"All in good time." he informed her. "Let's get you out of this mess, before you immerse yourself in



another.”

She frowned, as answers went, that one was less than satisfying,

but she was content to wait a while. With Kyle on her ass, and a troop of League soldiers trying to sniff her out, it wasn't as though she had a choice.

They turned down several other streets, working their way deeper into the maze of shacks and small houses that sheltered the colonies workers at the base of the mountain now being mined. Finally, he drew her into one of the houses, bolted the door behind them, and stationed himself at a small, boarded window. There, he watched the deserted street through a small crack in the boards.

“‘bout time.” she turned quickly, drawing her weapon as Kregar stepped from one of the back rooms.

“For Gods sake Meri.” he raised his hands quickly, his face paling as he stared down the barrel of the laser gun. “Put that damned thing away, I’m just trying to help you.”

She grabbed him by the throat, and threw him against the wall, her nose butting into his dangerously.

“What the hell do you have to do with this you little rat?” she bit out furiously. “Why didn’t you warn me at the bar?”

“I didn’t know then.” he cried out hoarsely, “I swear Meri. I only found out after you left.”

The laser was taken quickly from her hand, the man at her back moving away swiftly as she kicked out at him.

“Settle down.” he ordered her quietly as he tucked her weapon beneath the folds of her cape. “And sit down. We’ll be here for a while, so we may as well make ourselves comfortable.”

She watched in silence as he moved to an old fashioned cold unit and drew out several tins of drinks.

She turned back to Kregar, narrowing her eyes and flexing her fingers as he swallowed tightly.

“Come on, Meri.” he smiled weakly. “I only wanted to help you.”

“Why?” she lowered her voice dangerously.

“Hell if I know.” he muttered, shifting his narrow shoulders beneath material of his own cape. “You treat me like waste. I shoulda just sat back and watched that assassin fry your nerves for you instead of trying to save you.”

“Both of you sit down, and relax.” the stern order as the stranger placed the drinks on the table which sat along the wall, had her bristling.

Merinus turned on him, a snarl on her face.

“Why don’t you stop ordering me around and tell me who the hell you are.” she was just about mad enough to tackle the broad form bare handed.

Instead, she stood stock still in amazement when he whipped the cape from his body and stared down at her with mocking amusement.

“Son of a bitch.” she whispered, “I knew this wasn’t going to be a good day. I just knew it.”

Before her, his hair flowing down his shoulders and around his face like a lions mane, his amber eyes mocking, his feline features sensuous and deeply tanned, stood the King of a race which should have never existed.

Merinus lowered her head, and shook it slowly. She had been saved by the man she had been sent to kill. Callan, known as the strongest, most intelligent of the strange breed which had escaped League laboratories nearly a century ago. He was the grandson of the first Lion man, and by all accounts, the breed was growing more dangerous, and coldly intelligent with each generation.

“Sorry Meri.” Kregar sat down across from her, his hands clasping around the cool can Callan had sat on the table. “I didn’t know about the contract on you until Callan told me. We saved you though.”

“Yeah, you did that, Kregar.” she whispered, shaking her head again. “You saved me.”

She glanced up at the Lion man, frowning as he watched her with a slight smile. She didn’t like the expression in his eyes one little bit. The amber color seemed to glow, and deepen when their eyes met.

“Seems we’re stuck in similar messes.” he told her softly as he sat down in the remaining seat. “We both have contracts out on us. Where will your loyalties lie now Merinus?”

Where did they lie. She had given her life to the League, swore to defend it, and they had turned on her with no apparent reason. It had happened too fast, without warning.

“I have to find out what’s going on.” she reach back and freed her hair from the thong that held it, then massaged her scalp wearily. “This has happened too fast.”

“What’s going on, is you are now a liability to the League.” she raised her head as Callan’s soft voice wrapped around her. “Three days ago, your father slipped through a net they had set for him as well. I believe he’s now on his way to Centarie Three, if the League cruiser’s don’t catch up with him first.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” she whispered, trying to grasp the information he was giving her. “My father is a League council member. They would never turn on one of their own.”

“You Father, and those who oppose their new mandates will be systematically outlawed or killed.” he told her. “Those new mandates are being drafted as we speak. Immediate imprisonment of all genetically altered life forms. They will then be bonded out in slavery or summarily executed. The League favors purity in the human form.”

She had known it would come, she had just hadn't thought it would happen in her lifetime. Since the escape of the Lion Men nearly two centuries before, League scientists had experimented with other genetic combinations, looking for specific humanoid traits that would serve as soldiers. Obedient, yet vicious in war. They hadn't succeeded in giving life to any of those alterations, since the Lion men.

The treatment of that race had been under question for nearly a decade. They had been hunted, used in slavery, and abused until they revolted over ten years before. The League had been in several skirmishes with organized bands of the warriors both in space, on Earth and its outlying colonies. The Lion Men refused to surrender and accept the League's position that they were inferior humans, and therefore not deserving of the fair treatment.

"They've moved fast," she whispered. "Father only told me about the rumors of it last month. We never thought it would happen in this century."

"It's happening," Callan growled. "My people are being secretly taken from their homes in the middle of the night, and imprisoned. Several high ranking members of the Lion community have already been murdered, as well as those within the League who oppose the mandates. We're at war, Merinus, and now you're sitting right in the middle of it."

She lowered her head and covered her face with her hands. She had friends within the Lion community, friends within the League who she knew opposed those mandates. This was madness. It seemed history was doomed to repeat itself once again. The systematic removal and murder of a race the League deemed unworthy. As though they were gods with the right to give life or take it as they chose.

"Choose your side now, Merinus," Callan told her softly, causing her to raise her head and stare into those mesmerizing eyes once again.

"Because there's no escape for any of us now."

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Marinus Fortuna studied the male specimen before her. The tawny eyes were near golden, his thick pelt of hair fell from his head and below his shoulders in a luxurious mane of shifting sun streaked colors. He was tall and muscular, his face broad, his forehead high. He was an exceptional product of a species began by science, then cast aside when the experiments went awry. The species had refused to die out.

She examined his hands. Large, rough palms, the nails carefully cut and filed down to ease the

claw-alike appearance they naturally assumed. His large body was covered with a nearly invisible pelt of ultra-soft hair that felt especially fine against the skin. As King of the Lionmen, Callan's arrogance was more than offended by the inspection process, she knew.

Royalty, she thought with a sigh. It didn't matter the species, they could all be a pain in the ass.

"He is male, therefore he may be hard to control." The Control Master of the auction pens on Delta Two snorted grotesquely, his pig-like features scrunching up as he sneered at the Lionman they were discussing. "The female of the species seems to be much more domesticated, and easier to contain. I would not advise buying this particular specimen in any case. He is more unruly than others, and often the instigator of escape attempts."

"What is this particular specimen's date of extermination?" Marinus asked as she ran her hand over his tightly muscled derriere. She nearly smiled at the outraged tensing of muscle, and low growl of warning which resonated from his throat.

She raised her hand to halt the Control Master as he made to shock the Lionman with the long wand he carried at his side. Then Marinus raised her brow as she awaited the answer to her question.

"Date of extermination is midnight," he responded with an air of glee. "He's been here for several weeks, and he's been nothing but trouble."

"Where was he captured?" She moved back to face Callan,

staring into the arrogant features which looked down at her in growing fury. His lips were pulled back to show the excessively sharp incisors which could shred flesh from bone within a mill-second. The flat, broad contours and his nose flared in anger, his slanted eyes narrowing at her as she flashed him a deliberately sultry look.

"He was captured outside the Vinci parameters." Control growled as Marinus continued her examination "Several of his pride were captured that week, and he was obviously trying to find a way to release them."

"And where is that pride now?" her hand smoothed absently over the hard muscular back she was inspecting as she questioned the Control Master.

"The pride is still in Vinci," the Control shrugged. "Four adult females, and several children, along with eight full-grown males. This habit of males banding together within the pride is becoming extremely worrisome to the Coalition," she was informed. "Such evolution can be quite harmful in keeping the natural order maintained."

Marinus nodded as she received confirmation that the Pride she had sent several of her agents after, was where she had expected them to be. She did not remark on the growing unrest within the ruling council of planets. The Coalition seem to be nervous about many things these days.

"He is male, therefore he will suit my needs. A very arrogant one no doubt, but he can be controlled with the right incentives. Have him cleaned and dressed and ready for departure within the hour."

“Departure!” Control burst out. “But, the extermination date has been set. It’s too late to sell him, mistress.”

“So, falsify the records. You are quite good at that, are you not?” She turned, her dark eyes flashing in irritation. “This is the specimen I require, Control. I told you I was searching for a particular type of male. Did you not want to sell this one, then you should not have shown him to me. Now ready him before I call your superior and make my displeasure known.”

She ignored the little Swine’s sulk, the way his snout seemed to tremble in anger. The Swine were rarely a pleasant lot, but this one seemed to consider himself much above his betters. If she wasn’t mistaken, she would swear the breed was beginning to develop a higher advancement of intelligence. Now, wouldn’t that worry the Coalition, she thought as they had taken Swine off the extermination lists altogether.

“I want to see no more marks of punishment, either,” she ordered him as she turned and walked away. “I counted the ones he carries now. For each new one added, you shall receive three.”

Knowing her orders would now be carried out, she sauntered to the doorway of the auction house and out into the bright sunlight of the desert. She drew a deep breath, thankful to be free of the stench of the specimen pens.

“Was he there?” Ansell Cordman, a Lieutenant within the Rebellion, moved to her side, his low voice barely audible as he moved from the entrance of the holding pens to join her.

“He’s there,” she answered. “He’s being delivered within the hour. What about the rest, have they been purchased?”

“The Pride is now being loaded on Demalina’s ship. I received a transmission from her before heading here. We’re to meet her in Quadrant Three in a days time. All is going well.”

“Keep it that way.” Marinus nodded. “This is a serious undertaking my friend, and it could be made more difficult by the fact that I was forced to purchase him so blatantly. I don’t think he cared much for the inspection process.” She would have smiled if she wasn’t so worried over how he would react when he was freed of the chains which bound him.

“You know him well?” Ansell asked as they reach the relative safety of their ship.

“I know him.” She wondered how much Ansell had heard about her relationship with the Lion King. “He’s one of the few Lionmen left of the original strain. That’s what we need, the intelligence, stamina, and strength he possesses. The women of the Pride are just as exceptional. Royalty among a race which should never exist, and yet thrive against all odds.”

“You sound quite fond of him, Meri,” Ansell watched her closely.

“Just how well do you know him?”

“Well enough to be wary after the way I purchased him.” If the situation weren’t so serious, she would have found amusement in the anger Callan had displayed.

"I've heard he's barbaric," Ansell warned her as they entered the main control deck of the ship and he took his seat. "Is that true?"

"He can be barbaric." Marinus began a careful check of the ship's weapons, energy cells, and food stores. "He's civilized in his own way, though. Don't worry, you won't be in any danger."

Marinus pretended interest in the displays coming up on her boards. Her heart was thundering, her palms still moist from contact with the flesh of the animal she had purchased. She had made him angry, and that made her nervous.

"When the League learns he escaped so easily, you may lose your place within the Coalition," he warned her. "They'll punish you, even though we'll make it appear none of your fault."

"I'll not be returning to the Coalition," she said softly as she thought of the ruling council which control the planets beneath it.

The Coalition had turned barbaric, issuing death warrants by the millions against the non-human species which had been created so long ago. Even the children born of human and sub-human species were to be put to death, or used only for slave labor on the harsh mining colonies of the moons.

Coalition excuses were numerous. The sub-human labor population had no voice within the council members of the planets. They were looked upon as the animals they were originally created from. They were used, brutalized, hunted down and often killed just for sport. Even the outlying auction moons were no different as they were a death sentence themselves.

The auction moons were run by the Swine who were too greedy, too cowardly to ever turn against the coalition. The Swine were one of the few species spared, but only because their cowardice was well known, and no human wanted the low paying, dirty jobs they took.

"Marinus, you've been a vital link between the Rebellion and the Coalition," Ansell reminded her. "Are you certain this is wise?"

"Perhaps not wise, but my only course now," Marinus shrugged. "I can do no more within the Coalition. The corruption there has grown too great. The failure of our ruling classes are too severe. Civil disobedience is only a matter of months away. The planets will become warring zones within a year."

She sighed as she foresaw the future of all she held dear. "We've saved as many as we could, Ansell. I'm running out of funds, support, and excuses. I'm already under suspicion concerning my lack of profit, and now my extermination lists are being scrutinized. I have little remaining time before the extent of my fraud is found. Better I openly join the Rebellion now."

"Perhaps interplanetary disobedience would not be so bad in the long run, Marinus." He knew how much she feared such an event. "The Coalition has been making noises towards human-racial segregation in the past years. It reminds me of our history lesson from Primary, about the early years which were marked by racial wars, and fears within the human race. To return to the Dark Ages would be a terrible step for the Coalition to take."

"Yet they will take that step," she warned him, her eyes locking with his as she voiced her fears.

“There’s more talk of it every day. The ruling councils are now comprised of the purest of the Pale Race. It’s as though it were destined to come to this. Total rule by those whose values and beliefs are placed within the color of one’s skin, and the strain of DNA they possess. When that final step is taken, there will be war unlike any of the planets have ever known. I won’t be caught on the side of the Coalition at that time. My name will not be placed in the record books as having once been part of what they are trying to build.”

She glanced at the monitors which showed the outside activity. The form coming closer could not be missed or mistaken. His head held high despite the chains which bound him, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on the ship he was being led to.

She took a slow, deep breath and told herself she really wasn’t worried about his reaction to the way she had bought him. He would know it had been necessary, she told herself as she rose from her seat.

Surrounding him were half a dozen Swine, their wands held ready should he attempt to either escape or attack. They had no way of knowing how eagerly he would have come to the ship, even if he knew certain death awaited him. No use fooling herself, he was good and pissed, and there would be payback.

“He’s here,” she announced softly, running her palms down her leather clad legs, then heading for the hatch doors. “Get ready in case we have any problems. We lift off as soon as the Swine are cleared.”

Ansell nodded as he moved to the controls and began the pre-flight preparations.

Marinus moved quickly through the ship until she came to the main hatch doors. There she pressed her palm to the control panel, and took an arrogant stance as the doors slid smoothly open. She lifted her own wand control from her belt, fingering the lever which extended it to its maximum three-foot length.

“I’ll take him from here.” She nodded to the Swine as she activated the hold doors, and indicated to the captive that he should proceed there.

Rage trembled along the bunched muscles of his arms, but he did as he was ordered. She then closed the doors, turning to the Swine who watched her with their, beady eyes.

She lifted the pouch of diamonds from her belt, and tossed it to the head Control. Marinus stood impassively as he opened the velvet lined pouch, and poured the contents into his greedy little hands. He turned to face the unrelenting sun, allowing it to strike the stones and reveal the quality and depth of the payment he was receiving.

“Very good, mistress.” he nodded his satisfaction then gestured the others away as he turned back to her.

Marinus stood impatiently as he surveyed her, taking in her form-fitting pants, the low rough-terrain boots and scarlet breast cloth which covered only the required amount of skin. Lust blazed in his eyes, but he was smarter than he looked because he didn’t attempt to touch.

"I hope you are pleased with your purchase, mistress," he spoke, his voice low as her eyes narrowed on him. "Your payment is most worthy, but I would not seek a return trip within this quadrant were I you."

"And why would that be?" she asked him with a growing feeling of trepidation.

"Because not twenty minutes ago, a message came over Coalition frequencies. Your credit for purchases of sub-human species has been revoked, and you are being sought for questioning of your practices of re-sale and possible non-exterminations."

"And yet you sold to me, Control?" she asked him softly. "Did you also sell me out?"

For a brief moment the Swine regarded her with an expression nearing intelligence.

"None know that you were here, but I must relay the information soon. Be careful, mistress," he warned her. "Those with the Rebellion will eventually be found and exterminated along with us sub-humans. Valor and honor are rare enough these days. It would be too bad were you to fall victim to the punishments meted out for it."

For a moment he appeared saddened, then his eyes dimmed, a disgusting little snuffle sounded from his snort, then he turned and hurried from the ship. Slapping her hand to the security plate, she quickly closed the doors, then contacted Ansell.

"Get us out of here, Ansell," she ordered him. "Coalition is already looking for me. They'll receive notice soon that we were here."

She stood silently, feeling the acceleration of the ship's engines as he powered up, and then the steady lift and stomach-jolting acceleration which would throw them out of the atmosphere. She braced herself against the cold steel walls, and closed her eyes against the reality of what was coming.

Long moments later, she disengaged the locks to the hold and stepped carefully inside.

The breath whooshed from her body as she was thrown against the wall then trapped there by the warm, muscled contours of the man she had bought.

"You play with fire, perhaps once too often, Marinus," he snarled against her cheek, baring his teeth and allowing her to feel the scrape of the feared incisors.

She cried out as she felt those teeth at her throat in a sensuous scrape. Her head falling to the side as his tongue tasted her bare skin, and his hands clasped her hips, pulling her tightly against him.

"Perhaps I just missed the heat," she groaned as his fingers released the clasp at her side, and her utility belt fell to the floor.

She whimpered as she felt his hands go to her back, and knew by the sudden loosening of the waistband of her pants that he had jerked the closure of them open.

"You dare to treat me as you would a piece of meat for sale," he growled low in his throat as his nails bit into her bared flesh.



She made no excuses, though she felt a small spark of anxiety lance through her stomach. She had never seen him like this, enraged and yet desiring her as well. The change in him was frightening, yet terribly erotic.

Her hands clenched the hard muscles of his arms, feeling the silky down that covered them, the heat of him.

Her fingers flexed as she reveled in the feel.

“You have nothing to say to me?” he asked her as he ripped the breast cover from her body.

She moaned low in her throat as his hands covered the bared flesh, and she wondered how much longer she would be able to stand on her own.

“You know it was required,” she gasped as his teeth scraped her collarbone and moved lower.

“I am not a piece of meat to be bartered, mate.” He jerked her against his nude body as his hands pushed her pants lower.

She felt the swell of his manhood enter her immediately, and she cried out at the sensation, the fullness of all she had been missing in the weeks she had searched for him.

“Never,” she cried out, the erotic feel of him taking her in such a way it was nearly more than she could bear. “Let me undress...”

“I think not, temptress.” He raised her, his hands gripping her thighs, spreading her just enough to allow him to sink to the hilt inside her. Just enough to tease her with the touch she needed. “Take me in this way, so you will know the punishment should it ever happen again.”

Punishment had never been meant to feel so damned good, Marinus told herself with hazy pleasure.

He backed her into the wall, holding her steady then began to plunge powerfully into her. She screamed out at the sensations, hanging helplessly in his grip as he pleased her in a way he never had before.

She begged for release, she cried out for more, and when her climax tore through her, she felt her breath lodge in her throat, unable to cry out so intense were the sensations, the pleasure gripping her.

He met her in her release, groaning her name, his teeth biting into her neck as he trembled against her.

Her hands gripped his powerful back and she felt the shiver that rolled over his skin and she knew that his pleasure in her had been powerful.

It was long moments later before he released her then gently pulled her pants back to her hips, refastening them slowly.

"I have missed you, mate," he whispered against her lips as his hands caressed her arms. "More than you know."

"As I missed you," she sighed as she laid her head against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart beneath her ear, content that at least for now, she was where she belonged.

"When must you return to the Coalition?" Callan hated the time he was forced to spend without her, she knew. Hated the danger she faced.

"There is no chance of return now," she told him quickly what had happened in the past months since his disappearance, and the Pride's capture. She detailed the growing unrest within the planets and the measures the Coalition was beginning to take.

"We must gather the Lions together then," He moved away from her releasing the door to the hold so she could move to her quarters. "One place. A location where we will be safe while we plan our next move."

"I've already arranged it." She nodded as they moved through the ship. "They are being taken from their respective locations and being transferred to the Allerron." She spoke of the starship which had been stolen years before from the Coalition. One of the few which still existed as the Coalition felt that explorations of other galaxies were a waste of funds. "We meet Demalina in a few days time and pick up the Pride. Then we will rendezvous with Allerron ourselves. From there, we can decide what to do."

They entered her room and Callan moved quickly to the bathing quarters, and Marinus listened as he stepped into the cleaning unit and she knew he would be thankful to thoroughly clean the memory of the pens from his mind. She removed his clothes from the compact closet and laid them on the large bed they would share later. Then she changed her own clothes, dressing in her more traditional outfit of snug pants and hip length, tunic style shirt.

The clothes she had worn earlier not only aroused Callan's lust, but his sense of possessiveness as well. Callan had marked her as his months ago and the thought of another man seeing her bare flesh in such a manner enraged those possessive instincts.

Before meeting him, she would have been angered over this. Yet, as she had grown to know him, to learn his ways, and the parts of him that made him that man he was, she had conceded the smaller things to him. It was little enough, especially considering the fact it was not her preferred style of dress.

"We need to..." Callan began as he entered the room, stopping short as he watched her adjust her utility belt over her hips.

She turned to him with a quizzical look surprised as his fingers caressed her cheek.

"Only this moment," he whispered, "did I realize how I have missed you. We will fight together from now on."

She smiled up at him, and nodded. He was male, therefore he wanted her at his side, wanted to

know she was safe and that she was his. His male arrogance was an innate part of him. His confidence and position of power among the Prides ensured that he would always be given to issuing orders.

She wouldn't always take them but she knew she would always respect them. His race was one that would never be conquered and the coming battle with the Coalition would test not only the resolve of the Lionmen, but also their formidable strength. It was a battle she knew would change the course of the Coalition and of history itself. A battle they might never win completely, yet neither would they lose.

~The End~