



# **All Wrapped Up: Caught Marteeka Karland**

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## **All Wrapped Up: Caught Marteeka Karland**

**Zuri Starbreeze is a bounty hunter on the trail of the catch of a lifetime. He's a cold-blooded killer wanted dead or alive in every known system, and for good reason. Eight hunters have already died trying to bring him in.**

**What Zuri doesn't know is that Cade is hunting her. Knowing she has the elite skills of an Agency hunter, he wants her to join his smuggling ring, but once he samples her erotic skills, he hungers for more. He wants Zuri for his partner, all right. Just not the type of partner he'd planned on.**

**Flat on her back, writhing and screaming in pleasure, Zuri has a choice. She can resist and risk the wrath of a killer, or submit -- and risk losing herself in a den of lust, kinky bondage, and wild sex. One thing's for sure, no matter her choice, she won't come out of this the same.**

## **Dedication**

To Sandy, Lisa, Shelly, Red, Deanna, Barb and Roz. Without these wonderful ladies letting me slide on my day job, this book would never have been finished on time. You guys are the BEST and I love you all.

## Chapter One

Almost. She almost had him. Zuri studied the feed she was getting from the surveillance satellite she'd commandeered. Cade Brighton was as good as caught.

She'd spotted him five days ago on the war-ravaged planet of Dyson 4 and had been tracking him ever since. Finding him wasn't even half the battle. Finding him was the easy part. Now she had to wait for the perfect time to nab him. *That* was the hard part.

Sitting aboard the *Hunter's Conquest*, she contemplated her next move. Screwing up was not an option. Screwing up could get her dead, especially with this subject. Five of the last eight hunters who had gone after him had never returned. The other three had been returned to the Agency in corpse containers.

Being a hunter for ten years, she'd learned to trust her gut. There was something about this particular prey that bothered her. She shifted in her seat. She'd have to be extra careful.

After checking her holding area one last time, testing the alterations she'd made specifically for Cade Brighton, Zuri selected two pulsarphaze pistols and set them for heavy stun. The restriction cuffs were an afterthought. She had no illusions he would let her simply cuff him and take him in. He'd definitely put up a fight.

Body armor and personal repulsor shield intact, Zuri readied herself. She thought all the protection was probably a bit of an overkill, but she wasn't taking any chances. Her prey -- it was always her policy to think of the men and women she tracked as "prey" instead of "he" or "she" -- was currently lounging in a roughneck bar. Zuri wasn't worried about going into the bar so much as how the other patrons would react. She didn't want to have to injure any bystanders. All the more reason for the extra precautions.

It took her thirty minutes to reach her destination on foot, but it seemed like the better choice than actually landing her ship closer to the site. Surprise was her only option. Once there, her adrenaline kicked in, and she had to take several deep breaths to calm herself. It had been a while since she'd been this hyped up about a job. Part of it was because of the dangerous reputation Cade Brighton had built for himself, but part of it was something else entirely.

Cautiously, Zuri entered the establishment. Stepping up to the bar, she ordered a drink and sipped casually while her eyes adjusted to the dim interior. This was when she was at her most vulnerable in any situation. She suspected that was the reason the lights just outside the bar were so bright. Anyone on the inside had the advantage on those entering it.

She stood at her place against the wall for another thirty minutes, making sure not only that her eyes adjusted, but that she knew where everyone in the room was located. When she spotted her prey, she knew she was in trouble.

He sat in a back booth sipping a mug of some alien brew. His eyes glowed a vibrant green in the dim light. Cade Brighton was said to have some kind of enhanced night vision. Given the eerie radiance of his eyes, she guessed the rumors of Cade's sight were more than interstellar legend. She wondered if he was genetically enhanced as well. She couldn't see much else. His head was covered with a loose-fitting black hood, leaving only the ends of his dark, shoulder-length hair visible. She suspected he'd allowed her to see what little she did. This was definitely a trap. She'd have to be ready for anything.

The two of them stared at one another for a good long while. Zuri figured he was sizing her up. She sure as hell was sizing him up. Sitting in the shadows as he was, it was hard to get a good estimate of his actual size, but she had the feeling his profile underestimated his build a good bit. In fact, unless she missed her guess, he was absolutely huge.

Deciding it was best to just get on with it, and not seeing any nearby threats, Zuri walked toward him. It seemed his focus was on no one but her, and she didn't take her

eyes from him. Her skin tingled with the caged energy that seemed to surround the two of them. A silent battle of wills raged, and there was no way in hell Zuri was going to back down. It was difficult. Not only were those glowing eyes disconcerting, but the man himself seemed to grow larger by the second. When she reached him, she slid smoothly into the seat across from him and signaled the barmaid for a drink.

“Cade Brighton.”

He didn't say anything, only raised his glass to his lips and took a sip.

“You're under arrest for murder, among other things. I'm here to take you in. But I suspect you already know that.”

Again, he remained silent. All she could see beneath his black hood was a strong chin, patrician nose and those glowing emerald eyes.

“I don't suppose you'd be willing to simply come with me? Forgo all the unpleasant nonsense that goes with resisting arrest?” The barmaid returned with her drink and set it down. She flashed Cade Brighton a nervous glance before quickly departing. Apparently the local population knew his reputation.

“I don't suppose you'd be willing to simply drop down and suck my dick? Forgo all the unpleasant nonsense that goes with resisting your rightful master?”

At first, Zuri thought he was simply being an asinine prick. But something about the look in his eyes -- something about the man himself -- told her he was serious. Panic seized her for a brief second before she stamped it down. She'd known he'd be difficult to deal with. Why she hadn't expected something like this was a mystery.

“Sure. I can manage that. But not until you get aboard my ship.” A little lie wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, she didn't feel like it was such a crime, considering the things this man was guilty of. “You do what I want, I'll do what you want.”

The expression on his face didn't change. They could have been discussing the weather instead of his immediate future. “I'll hold you to that.” There was something in his voice. Something that sent chills through her body and made her pussy cream. He was raw, unadulterated, filthy, nasty sex personified.

She bit back her gulp and flashed him her best engaging smile. "Shall we get going then?" Zuri laid a couple of local currency coins on the table beside her untouched drink and stood. Her prey calmly took one last pull from his drink before also standing.

This time, Zuri couldn't help the gulp. The man was easily two and a half meters tall -- a sure sign of genetic enhancement -- and all bulky, solid muscle. He was dressed mostly in very dark maroon. His boots and cloak were black, and when his hood was up, the only things visible were part of his face and his arms.

His skin was the pale color of a man who spent much of his time in space away from the sun, and he was extremely muscular. Zuri might have thought twice about approaching him without backup had she been able to see more of him than his green eyes when she'd first arrived. She suspected he left his arms bare on purpose. Intimidation was a powerful weapon. Her mind turned to his raw masculinity. In another life, this was the type of man she'd have sought out for some of her baser needs. And she might have given him the service he'd just demanded.

"I assume you'd prefer to use your restrictor cuffs." His gaze made her want to fidget, but she held on to her pleasant demeanor with a force of will.

"That would be my preference, yes."

He held his hands, palms open, slightly away from his body. Again, an uneasy feeling screamed at Zuri, but what could she do? Not only was it her job to bring him in, but she was being paid enough money to be able to retire from hunting altogether. Carefully, Zuri snapped a bracelet around each wrist, brought them together behind his back, and activated them. They snapped together with an audible *click*. Before doing anything else, she made damned sure they were set on maximum. Even genetically enhanced super soldiers couldn't break out of them on that setting.

"Let's go, Mr. Brighton."

"Mr. Brighton." He looked over his shoulder at her, an eyebrow raised once again. "Not 'big boy' or 'scum bag' or any of those other equally insulting names hunters love to give me?"

"No." Zuri kept her smile firmly intact. Courtesy usually made more difference than all the restraint devices in the universe. "I'm not here to insult you, just to bring you to justice."

"Justice." He gave a disgusted snort. It was the first emotion he'd shown, and Zuri's senses went on high alert. "Justice, my beauty, is nothing but a pleasant fiction. You'll realize that when you've been well and truly fucked by those you put your life on the line for."

Zuri checked the cuffs one last time before turning him around to face her. "I don't know what you've been through, Mr. Brighton, and to be honest, I don't really care. The only thing that matters to me is getting you to my ship and back to the Agency."

The mask reappeared as if it had never left. Once again, she couldn't read her prey. "Don't forget. You owe me a blow job."

She chuckled. "Somehow, I doubt that's something you'll let me forget." She gave him a gentle push in the direction of the door. He didn't budge.

"You're right." He looked down at her, his back straight, shoulders back, taking full advantage of his superior height and build. "You won't forget it."

Zuri didn't like the sound of that.

## Chapter Two

Cade marched in front of the hunter willingly. True, the woman was the best hunter he'd ever come across, but she'd caught him because he'd wished her to. The white-haired warrior intrigued him. Her file was a mess of contradictions. Nothing about her service indicated anything other than a merciless hunter, except for one glaring exception. This hunter brought every single one of her bounties in alive. That fact alone had his undivided attention.

Then there were the things not in her official file. Things like her sexual habits and taste in men. He'd been following her longer than she'd been following him, and he'd found some interesting facts. She preferred big men. She'd not sought out artificially enhanced males but if his observances were correct she seemed to like the feeling of being small next to her man. Cade suspected she kept some semblance of control for safety's sake, but he thought that was subconscious. Unless he missed his guess, she wanted to live life as dangerously as she could. She didn't want to be just on the verge of out of control, she wanted to be completely and utterly at the mercy of a man she had no hope of defeating.

The most interesting of his discoveries was her favorite hangout. A little underground club so low on the radar Cade wondered how she'd discovered it. The Hole. Only the most hard-core BDSM enthusiasts hung out there, and membership was extremely selective. To gain access, one had to be a registered dominant or submissive. He'd done some checking, and it turned out his little hunter was not only a registered submissive, but her latest master had shunned her, publicly calling her an aggressive bitch. Now, she was a free woman. No one was likely to pick her up after that. At least, no one in that atmosphere. After all, who wanted a submissive who wasn't a submissive?

Cade knew better, though. This woman was no more a submissive than he was. She had a need to be dominated sexually, which was a totally different personality trait. Unless he missed his guess, Zuri Starbreeze was just the woman he'd been looking for. She was conditioned to take whatever he wanted to dish out, and she'd crave everything he'd do to her. Not only that, but she'd be the ideal partner for him because it was ingrained into her personality to be in charge of her world. She wouldn't be a successful hunter if it weren't. Convincing her to be his business partner would probably take more doing than getting her to suck his dick, but he knew she'd do both. Eventually.

He grinned. Boy, was his little hunter in for a surprise.

She escorted him at gunpoint to her ship. He was suitably impressed with the sleek vessel. It would make a nice addition to his fleet. For a personal spacecraft, it was surprisingly bereft of personalization. It wouldn't surprise him to find the interior probably the same as it had been when she got it from the factory.

She led him to a little room with an offset area that most likely served as a cell when the force field was in place. "Step over there please, Mr. Brighton." She indicated the cell area.

Cade did as she asked, then turned to face her, his hands still behind his back. "I did as you asked -- now it's your turn."

She punched a few buttons on a control panel across the room, and a force field hummed into place. "Not today." The door hissed shut behind her.

Cade smiled to himself. He'd expected exactly that, but before this day was done, he would indeed stand before her as she knelt in front of him and worshipped his cock. This wasn't the first time he'd thanked the stars for all his enhancements. Especially the cybernetic ones. Computer implants were a wonderful pet to have.

\* \* \*

Before she put her ship in the sky, Zuri always performed a thorough systems check. It took all her concentration because it was so routine. It would be easy to overlook small details if she wasn't careful.

She was about halfway through the last screen when she was jerked to her feet by her hair. With a yelp, she grabbed instinctively for the large hand at the back of her head. It was a mistake. Her arm was wrenched behind her neck, an extension of her own movement. An enormous, muscled body shoved her against the bulkhead and pinned her there while he snapped a restrictor cuff around one wrist, then the other. Thankfully, he didn't activate them. Yet.

She tried to shove back against her attacker, but she might as well have been trying to move the entire spaceship with just the weight of her body. She kicked and elbowed with all her strength, and although she landed several blows, her attacker didn't so much as grunt. She continued to fight, thrashing as much as she could, terrified. When she was sandwiched firmly between the solid body behind her and the bulkhead in front of her, the unmistakable bulge of male arousal pressed into her ass. There was no question who had her.

Cade Brighton.

How he'd gotten out of his cell, she didn't know, but she had no doubt it was his big body pinning hers to the wall. Sweat broke out all over her, and she couldn't catch her breath. Panic was one step away, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold it at bay. She hated feeling so weak. After ten years in this business, nothing scared her, not even Cade Brighton.

It was what he represented that scared the hell out of her. Her body's reaction had very little to do with her fear, and everything to do with the outrageous sexual excitement she got from that fear. Knowing this man could do anything he wanted to her and there was nothing she could do about it had her pussy soaking her panties like nothing else ever had. And, oh, Goddess, she was actually looking forward to whatever he decided to do with that weapon he had mashed up against her ass.

"I believe you owe me something, my sweet little Zuri." That deep, masculine rumble vibrated through her body straight to her clit. "I always collect what's owed me."

This was her ultimate fantasy come true. Being taken by a man she absolutely could not stop no matter how much she tried. A fantasy she had only barely admitted to herself. It was a dangerous game, but if Cade had truly wanted to hurt her, he'd have done so in the wilderness stretch between the bar and the ship. Obviously, he was able to escape from the cuffs any time he wanted. If he wanted to fuck her, she was powerless to stop him. The really scary part was she knew if he wanted to fuck her, she'd let him, and she had a perverse feeling she'd love every second of it.

"Anything you put between my lips you're gonna lose, you bastard."

His breath seared her neck when he chuckled. Despite her resolve not to let him know how hot she was, Zuri shivered. She only hoped he would mistake it for fear.

"Not if I sink myself between your cunt lips." He let go of her hair, slid his hand down her hip and reached between her legs. Her body armor muted most of the sensations, but she still felt the pressure as his big hand roughly grabbed her crotch. "Perhaps I'll just take your ass instead. Big as I am, it would hurt more." Zuri tried to throw her lower body against the bulkhead to mash his hand between it and her body armor, but it didn't seem to faze him. The man was like a machine. "That's it, Zuri. Get me good and pissed off so I want to hurt you."

She was playing with fire, risking her life for a cheap thrill. Was she insane? Not even the limited amount of time she'd spent in The Hole had excited her this much. No dom she'd ever given herself to had elicited this kind of response from her body. What had she gotten herself into? She couldn't help the whimper of need as he continued to grind his hand into her armor-clad cunt.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but Zuri could have imagined it. Then he abruptly let her go and grabbed her uniform at the back of her neck and ripped it from top to bottom. Zuri shrieked, and her struggles began anew, but there was no stopping this man from stripping her naked. She didn't want him to stop, either.

She was in the hands of a master killer. He had her right where she wanted to be.

\* \* \*

The second Cade heard her small cry, he knew he'd been right. That wasn't the frightened mew of a kitten. This woman was turned on beyond belief. He'd bet his life on it. Once he'd managed to get that accursed body armor off her, he spun her naked form around and slammed her back into the bulkhead. Taking a wrist in each hand, he raised them high above her head and pressed them against the cold metal wall. He punched a couple of buttons on the restrictor cuffs he'd fastened to her wrists, and they stuck to the wall like they'd been welded there.

Cade stepped back to admire his handiwork. Zuri hung suspended from her cuffs, only her toes touching the floor, naked and extremely vulnerable before him. She didn't have a woman's body so much as a warrior's. True, she had the most exquisite breasts he'd ever seen -- they looked like they'd fit perfectly in the palms of his hands -- and her hips were perfectly curved, but she was firmly, leanly muscled. Incredibly sexy. He'd never been so glad for the special modifications he'd made on these cuffs. He could keep her like that for hours, and the special tissue restoring enhancements wouldn't let her skin break down or the circulation to her hands be cut off. She was literally at his mercy.

He'd held many women before Zuri in this particular position, but none of them had the raw innocence she had. Zuri wasn't a virgin -- that much was obvious given her lifestyle. She knew what she wanted, had experimented often enough, but didn't know how to get the ultimate thrill ride she was looking for. Right now, though, Cade knew she was getting exactly what she wanted. She was caught. Caught like a frightened rabbit, only the trap was the ultimate sexual cage. A cage that bound her not only physically, but mentally.

"If you want to live, you'll spread your legs willingly. Otherwise, you might not enjoy yourself quite so much."

"I didn't know a woman was supposed to enjoy being raped," she spat. He had to be very careful here. She wanted him. Of that he was absolutely sure. But he had to make damned sure she knew she could call it quits if she really wanted to.

"No one, man or woman, enjoys being raped, my dear. Fortunately, I doubt my fucking you would be rape." In a swift move that made her gasp, Cade swiped his fingers through her curls to graze her cunt lightly. His fingers came back glistening with her juices. "Someone who didn't want to get the hell fucked out of her -- like I intend to do to you -- wouldn't be creaming so much it was running down her leg."

"There's a well documented correlation between sex and violence, Mr. Brighton. My body's physical response doesn't necessarily mean I want this." A becoming flush covered her beautiful face and neck.

"No?" He took a step toward her. If he hadn't had cybernetic implants, he would never have tried what he was about to do. She could seriously injure the average male. Fortunately, there was nothing average about him.

In one swift move, he lifted her lower body and threw her knees over his shoulders. He paused to glance at her only a moment before he thrust his face at her weeping cunt.

Cade braced himself for her to fight like a wild *baskas*, and was only mildly surprised when she tensed for a moment before moaning and wrapping her legs around his head. He grunted and curled his hands around her upper thighs and settled in to feast.

The taste of her was more delicious than he'd expected. No. It wasn't so much the taste, as the texture combined with the sensation of power he got from knowing he had such a powerful woman writhing in pleasure, demanding more because she was helpless to deny her own body.

She pulled his face closer to her core with those strong, athletic legs he was growing to adore. Cade had to restrain her hips with his hands to keep her from grinding herself into his mouth even more. Latching onto Zuri's clit, he sucked and flicked the little nub with deft movements of his lips and tongue. When she finally gave up control to him, Cade knew her struggle had been great. She drenched his face with her come, just as her body was drenched in sweat. She screamed so loudly, he was sure they'd heard her three parsecs away.

Cade was perilously close to his own orgasm, and he hadn't even touched his cock yet. He'd have been scared of his reaction to Zuri if he didn't know she was just as affected by him as he was by her. He'd never needed a woman so badly in all his life. That was a little secret he intended to keep for a very long time. She wasn't ready for it, and neither was he.

## Chapter Three

"Sonofabitch!" Zuri hated how weak she sounded. Worse, she hated what she'd just done. She'd proven to Cade just how much she really *did* want him. She wondered what that would cost her. Why hadn't she stomped his face in while she'd had the chance?

Because it wouldn't have felt nearly as good as that orgasm.

Her climax ebbed, but she still had her legs locked around Cade's neck. With one last, soul-wrenching lick, Cade pulled himself away from her and gave her a cocky grin. "Well." He smirked. "I guess we answered that question."

Zuri shrieked her outrage. Mostly at herself. Anything Cade had done, he'd given her a choice about, if in a roundabout way. She could have kicked in his teeth. Instead, she'd have come nearer to violence if he'd stopped. Still, she hated showing weakness. Especially to this man. It definitely took the edge off her post-orgasmic bliss.

"Fine! You want to hear me say I enjoyed what you did? I enjoyed it! Now let me the fuck down!"

"There's still the little matter of your debt to me. I'll let you down, but I expect a little compensation. If not..." He trailed off with a significant glance at her bound wrists. Zuri had no doubt he'd leave her there if she didn't do as he told her. The rebel in her wanted to refuse, but even though she'd gladly suffer whatever torture she had to for a just cause, she wasn't one to punish herself just to make a point.

"Well, I can't very well give you a blow job way the hell up here. Cade, the toes of my boots are barely even touching the floor!" She twisted her hands, trying to make her point. "Let me down."

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Moving toward her, he crowded his fully clothed body against her naked one and pressed a sequence of buttons on each

cuff. She would have fallen to the floor when they disengaged from the bulkhead if his body hadn't been mashed so tightly against her. As it was, he let her slide gently to her knees on the deck before taking two slow, easy steps backward and placing his hands on his hips. She was free of the wall, but the cuffs remained snug around her wrists.

"Free my cock."

Zuri had to bite back a scathing reply. His brash, commanding manner grated on her nerves. Still, if she were honest, she was curious to see what the package so recently mashed up against her looked like. Felt like. Tasted like.

When she raised her hands to unfasten his pants, he stopped her. "No." He captured her wrists and leaned forward to guide her hands behind her back. She heard a series of beeps as he pressed a sequence of buttons on the cuffs. Immediately, they snapped together. She pulled at them, but the cuffs remained locked at the small of her back, effectively binding her once again. She looked up at him to find that infuriating grin plastered across his face. "Use your mouth."

It was a good thing she was really a nonviolent person. She might have considered doing some real damage when she got his pants undone. What surprised her most was that she never even considered not doing what he asked. She was excited beyond belief and actually *wanted* to do what he'd asked. The mental visual was sexy as hell. Besides, she had an idea.

Zuri looked up at him and leaned forward to take the waistband of his pants between her teeth. Fortunately, the fastening wasn't difficult, and a series of sharp tugs freed it. She wondered how she was going to work his pants down his hips, but he obliged her by pulling his cock out for her.

He was long and thick, veins running along the surface from base to tip. The helmet was a deep red in his arousal, but he was only semi-erect. She'd have to fix that.

When she licked a wide, wet path from his balls to the tip of his cock, he hissed at her, baring his teeth. "That's it, my little hunter. More." The husky timbre to his voice told her he was definitely aroused, but she wanted him out of control with lust. Lust for her.

She circled the head with her tongue before flicking the little opening. When he took in a breath, she took the head into her mouth and sucked, hollowing her cheeks. The ridges and prominences added delicious texture to the velvety soft skin of his cock. She slid her mouth down the shaft, taking as much of it into her mouth as she could. When it reached the back of her throat, she retreated, only to start the erotic slide all over again.

Exploring his cock was a sensual pleasure all its own. The hair at the base tickled her nose when she moved against him. She let his cock slip from her mouth and ran her lips down the side, resting her cheek against his hip. She licked and nibbled her way across his abdomen to the opposite side before letting her lips glide back up his cock. She did the same down the ridge on the front of it and worked her way down to his balls. Taking one into her mouth, she gently sucked the gland and pulled until it slid from her lips. When he groaned and dug his fingers into her hair, she did the same with the other one.

He was fully erect now. Not only that, but his cock twitched when she grazed a particularly sensitive spot. She made it her mission to find those spots for later -- and she knew instinctively there would be a "later."

Licking up the front of his shaft, she flicked the little bundle of skin beneath the head. He shivered and flexed his fingers in her hair. "Ah, yeah. You definitely know your way around a man's cock, my little hunter. Show me how you intend to pleasure me when I demand it. Make me come."

Oh, Goddess! She wanted to do what he asked -- no, demanded -- of her. Nothing in the universe could have stopped her from sucking him back into her mouth and to the back of her throat. She had never particularly liked tasting a man's come, but the power of having this man's pleasure so completely within her control was an aphrodisiac unlike any other. He might have control of her body with his restraints, but she controlled his with her mouth.

His hips surged forward to meet her, fucking her mouth almost as vigorously as he might her pussy. Over and over he thrust, his cock growing impossibly hard. Zuri's

jaws began to ache, but she held on, curling her lips around her teeth to keep from scraping him when the ache became too great for her to continue much longer. With a great shout, his hands tightening painfully in her hair, Cade gave two more thrusts before making a move to pull out. She didn't know why she did it, but Zuri lunged as best she could toward him in an effort to keep his dick inside her mouth when he came. Cade took the hint and pulled her into him before pumping spurt after spurt of his seed into her mouth. She swallowed eagerly, completing what she saw as the most successful part of this mission to date. She might not have tamed the devil, but she had succeeded in making him succumb to the pleasure she'd dished out.

Zuri was amazed he hadn't hurt her, because she didn't have the use of her hands to push him away if he choked her. When she looked into his eyes, the lust was still there, but also a satisfied smirk. At the time, she'd only been concerned with getting him off, but she realized now that at no time had she needed to pull back from him. He had taken her to the limits of discomfort without actually hurting or gagging her. That was when she understood he might be at her mercy if he wanted to come, but he was still very much in control and aware of how much of him she could take. Literally as well as figuratively. While she had been exploring his pleasure points, he had been paying close attention to her limits.

Damn. This might not be as easy as she'd first thought. When his deep, satisfied chuckle vibrated through her -- warming her in ways she didn't want to think about -- she couldn't help her reflex reaction. She bit him.

Well, she tried to bite him. He was quicker than she, even caught completely off guard. Her attack hadn't stopped his damned chuckling, and she had ended up in her own brig.

Bastard.

## Chapter Four

Zuri kicked the security field in the same damned cell she'd rigged for Cade. It wasn't her fault he was an egotistical bastard. Now he had control of her ship and only the Divine Goddess herself knew where he was taking her.

Time was meaningless. After he'd left her, Zuri had lain down and promptly fallen asleep. She had no idea how long she'd slept, and had awakened when the familiar sound of the landing thrusters firing penetrated her sleep-fogged brain. Assuming she'd slept the whole night -- which was possible given how sexually sated she'd been -- they could be headed any number of directions. Fortunately for her, every system but one in a six- to eight-hour flight range required her to enter her personal ID code. Her vessel was a war-class starship, highly regulated in every system because of their destructive capabilities. Given the fact no one knew her ID, she had a pretty good idea where they were headed.

Dresden 5. It was the ultimate haven for every smuggler on the black market, a neutral planet lending its allegiance only to itself. The Agency had no jurisdiction and no persuasion there. Rumor had it Dresden 5's government housed the largest smuggling ring in the galaxy. This was definitely not a good place to be.

Knowing it was useless to try to break out of her cell, Zuri closed her eyes and concentrated on the sounds around her. If nothing else, it might give her a small warning before she had to face Cade again.

\* \* \*

The spaceport hummed with activity. Cade expected nothing less, either. They had a big job delivering "acquired restricted" supplies to worlds not in the jurisdiction of the Agency. In other words, they stole goods bound for worlds already rich in everything the Agency provided, and sent it to worlds who either refused or were

unable to pay tribute. Most places Cade and his group of smugglers went were so ravaged and drained of physical resources, they'd perish if it weren't for Cade and his men.

Life sometimes threw one into a black hole, and transformed the very foundation of everything one believed in. The very people Cade had once helped destroy were now the only people he cared anything about saving. Zuri could help him save them, and maybe exact a little revenge as well. If not, he could be making himself a very powerful enemy.

"Boss!" A young man running toward the *Hunter's Conquest* yelled as he waved a hand in the air. "Boss! We've just about got *Relief* loaded and ready. Are you coming with us?"

"Not this time, Ruso." Cade smiled and laid a hand on the youngster's shoulder when Ruso stopped in front of him. "I've got a special cargo I've got to unload." Cade couldn't stop the grin that spread across his face. Ruso had been one of many who'd bet he couldn't bring in the *Hunter's Conquest*, especially with her captain aboard, though none of them knew who that was.

"No way!" Ruso laughed, a good hearty laugh. "Boys! Look what Boss caught!" Bringing an Agency ship to them intact would probably prove to be the best morale boost these men had been given since Cade had taken over their operation more than a year ago. Besides, turning Zuri away from the Agency and convincing her to help them would definitely give them an advantage. She might not look the part, but she was the most efficient, most accurate hunter the Agency had ever turned out.

Since Cade, anyway.

Dark fury washed over him at the thought. He had given his very soul to those bastards, and they had repaid him by murdering his team and nearly killing him as well. He closed his eyes tightly. The images that haunted him daily weren't his team dying in the radioactive nuclear wastelands the Agency had created when they bombed an entire world, but the innocents he'd seen die on that same world. He should have been dead there as well, but the biochemical enhancements he'd invested in, along with

the cybernetic and cyborg implants, had kept him alive. He was truly superhuman. With the strength of twenty men, the ability to hack into and link up with any computer, combined with an impenetrable immune system, Cade was the ultimate warrior.

"So." Another man approached him. He was older and slightly balding with a cynical, almost menacing look about him. Cade had never liked him. Arimas had a sleazy demeanor that made Cade's skin crawl. "You managed to bring in the famed ship and her captain." Arimas sneered. "If we scrap the ship and kill the bitch, maybe the Agency won't figure out where she ended up. I can't fucking believe you flew that ship here. Here!" Arimas's face was red, and he gestured wildly as he yelled. "If the Agency tracks her to this place, the whole operation's a wash! You might be the hotshot marine hell-bent on saving us from them, but who's going to save us from you?"

"You know, someday, Arimas, someone's going to punch you in the mouth, and I just hope I'm there to see it." Cade didn't have time to waste on the vile little man. He had to see that everything was in order for the next flight to Panarian 12. Those people were desperate for food. If all went well, they'd have enough food to get them through their winter, and enough seed to get them started in the spring. The real trick would be hiding it where Agency spies wouldn't find it.

Lately, it seemed like those spies knew exactly where to find almost everything they smuggled in. Cade had tried his best to pin it down, but the captured shipments were never on the same route, the same planet, or dropped by the same crew. Even the cargo technicians who loaded the shipments were different. Whoever had made them was being smart about it. Of course, all that meant was it had to be someone very high up in command.

"Well --" Arimas was still flapping his hands about as he followed Cade. They headed for the loading area and the *Relief*. "-- what are you going to do with the ship and the bitch?"

"Nothing, Arimas. Absolutely nothing." Cade didn't bother looking at the smaller man.

"You can't just leave them here. You're compromising everything we've worked so hard for!"

"No, Arimas. I'm trying to build it. Zuri Starbreeze could be the edge we need. I don't want to destroy her trust by dismantling her ship."

"We don't need her, you fool!" Arimas pressed. "She'll compromise things worse than they already are."

"We don't have a choice, Arimas." The new participant in the conversation was a welcome one. Garath sauntered up to the two men and extended his hand to Cade, who took it readily. "If something doesn't break soon, several worlds on the fringes will see vast population decreases. Some of them might even face extinction." Despite his grim words, Garath smiled. "Good to have you back, Cade. We can definitely use your help."

"I'll do what I can, my friend, but I'll best serve you if I can persuade Zuri to join our cause."

"Then by all means do what you can. You've brought us this far. I'll not start second guessing your judgment now."

"You're not going to just let an Agency hunter with a ship that's most assuredly got a tracker on it stay here? That's absolute madness!" Arimas sputtered his protests. The man just wouldn't give up. "We have to get rid of both of them! Our purpose here is too important to risk something so futile. There's no way in the name of the Great Goddess you're going to get the Agency's prized hunter to turn on her masters."

Cade raised an eyebrow. "Watch me."

## Chapter Five

Zuri thought about making a fuss -- or at least protesting -- when Cade came for her, but one look at his face and she changed her mind. A thundercloud couldn't be any darker. Still, she didn't make a move away from him. To give ground would be a sign of weakness, and Zuri couldn't afford that. Instead, she rose from her cot and raised her chin as he approached.

"If you leave my side for any reason, I'll kill you." He certainly didn't mince words. He turned and stalked out the door to the holding area. Zuri had to trot to keep up.

"Where are we going?"

"When I want you to speak, I'll tell you to." He didn't break his stride, and he didn't look at her. "If there's anything you need to know, I'll tell you."

And here she thought the "morning after" was going to be awkward. She rolled her eyes. Was this guy for real? Did he think she'd just walk meekly beside him, never minding anything around her?

Men!

As they neared the landing ramp, Cade glanced her way. "We're entering Dresden 5's largest spaceport. You're not exactly their favorite person, and the *Hunter's Conquest* is number one on the most wanted list. These men would love nothing more than to cut apart your precious ship and use you as *robraca* fodder. You're actually worth more dead than alive, and any man here would be more than happy to collect the bounty on your head." He crossed his arms and leaned against the bulkhead. "How does it feel for the hunter to be caught?"

"Like shit." She spat her words. "Why bring me here? If you wanted to kill me and jack my ship, you could have done that a long time ago."

“And miss all the fun of fucking you until you can’t walk straight?” He grinned and shook his head. “I don’t think so. Oh, no. I’m not through with you yet.”

The way he said that sent multiple chills through her body. He scared the hell out of her, but he turned her on even more. The combination of sexy and dangerous was really driving her insane.

He opened the airlock and started down the landing ramp, not looking back to see if she followed. She was scared, all right, but not too scared to appreciate a good-looking male backside when she saw one. He wore a black leather flight suit that gleamed in the harsh lighting of the hangar and molded his ass like a jealous lover. She made herself a vow just then. Some way, some how, she had to get her hands on that ass.

She smiled and picked up her pace. She might not get out of this alive, but she’d go down fighting. Besides, she’d bet her ship he’d try to fuck her before it was all over, and she’d give him a ride he’d never forget. If it was a war Cade wanted, it was a war he’d get.

\* \* \*

He’d lied. Most of the men around here didn’t have a clue who the little wench with him was. The ones who did couldn’t give a damn. Well, all of them except Arimas. Still, everyone they passed gave her a once-over and scowled. Just as they’d been instructed to do. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to faze Zuri. He’d give her one thing. She was a brave woman.

Or stupid.

Somehow, he didn’t buy that. Most likely, she just didn’t care. She probably figured her fate was out of her hands, anyway. No reason to give up what little control she still had. Cade felt a stab of pride shoot through him and immediately stamped it down. She wasn’t his prize pet. Well, not yet, anyway. Still, that defiance of hers might prove interesting in bed. He was definitely looking forward to exploring that scenario.

They walked past men loading various cargo ships with everything from bolts of cloth to different types of food. None of it looked like contraband, but there had to be something illegal about it, otherwise their buyer wouldn't need smugglers to deliver it.

Cade stopped in front of a particularly large transport, took out his palm computer, and stared at the screen for a few moments. "You guys are headed to Panarian 12 this time, right?"

"Yes, sir." The young man directing the loading crews straightened his shoulders. He couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen. "We leave in a little over four standard hours."

"How many escorts have you requested?" Cade still consulted his computer, seemingly uninterested in the man's response, but Zuri could tell by the slight crease between his eyebrows that Cade was extremely interested.

"Three, sir. Standard complement."

He lowered his computer and looked at the young man, no emotion showing on his face. "Double it."

Without waiting for a response, Cade turned and continued through the port. Zuri noted the startled look on the young man's face as he punched something into a computer station near his work area. Probably following Cade's instructions.

Before they got to a small office on the other side of the hangar and up four flights of steps, several more of the same instructions were issued. Each time Cade consulted his handheld computer, his expression got more and more concerned. By the time he shoved her inside the tiny room, his concern had changed to fury. Unfortunately, Zuri and the crewmen on the floor seemed to be the only ones to realize he needed to be given a wide berth. Arimas and Garath didn't take the hint. They both entered right behind Zuri and Cade, both protesting the extra escorts per ship and talking over each other in their obvious anger and outrage.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? You have no authority to just show up and start giving orders!" Arimas.

"Do you have any idea how much money you're costing us? Money that could be used on more supplies or to bribe Agency outposts!" Garath.

"You're putting all our resources into a few key drops and not only making everyone else vulnerable, but building a perfect target for the Agency to shoot at!" Arimas again.

Cade stood calmly looking out a small window that overlooked the hangar and the men working there. When they finally stopped their tirade, he spoke quietly, but the tone of his voice sent shivers down Zuri's back and made the hair stand up on her neck. This was a man one shouldn't cross.

"I ordered extra escorts because the planets these carriers are headed to are the most likely to be hit soon after the cargo is dropped. The way things are going, it won't be long before our ships will be attacked, and I don't intend to leave my men unprotected. It's for the good of the supply ships as well as the fighter escorts. There's safety in numbers."

"That's exactly my point." Arimas gestured with his hands. Zuri already figured the best way to shut the man up was to tie his hands behind his back. He didn't seem to be able to say two words without some wild gesture. "If you stretch our fighters to the breaking point, what's to stop the Agency from destroying us right here at the very heart of our operation? They seem to know every move we make. How long do you think it will be before they figure out where our base is? Goddess! They probably already know and are just waiting for some bullshit stunt like this to attack. You're going to get us all killed, Cade!"

Cade moved so fast, he was almost a blur to Zuri. He spun around and grabbed Arimas by the throat, shoving him back against the wall. Zuri sucked in a breath. The man's feet were dangling an inch above the floor.

"I spent twenty years of my life working for those bastards, Arimas. I know their methods, and I know what they're capable of. I never do anything without considering both those factors and several more. I know what I'm doing."

The older, smaller man's face was turning purple. Annoying as he was, Zuri didn't think Cade wanted to kill the man, but he'd obviously been pushed beyond his limits by more than just these two men. Unfortunately, Arimas was the only one he was able to take his rage out on.

"Easy there, big boy." Zuri gingerly put her hand on Cade's massive right arm. She intentionally referred to their first meeting to bring Cade out of whatever rage had gripped him. "He might be a scumbag, but he still needs to breathe." When Cade didn't release Arimas, she patted his arm gently. "Come on, Cade. Let him down."

Arimas's eyes bulged and his legs kicked feebly. A sick gurgling sound came from his throat as he tried in vain to pull much-needed air into his lungs. Still Cade stood there, his arm supporting the other man's full weight.

"Damn it, Cade! Let the little son of a bitch go before you kill him!"

When he still didn't let Arimas go, she punched him in the side of the face with everything she had. Zuri heard Garath suck in a breath and take a couple of steps backwards, but that was the only sound in the room. Even Arimas had stopped making that awful noise.

Cade opened his hand, and Arimas crumpled to the floor. Only when Cade turned his head in Zuri's direction did Garath rush forward to drag the man toward the door. Rage-filled eyes met hers, and it was all she could do not to flinch. Hell, it was all she could do to stand there and not bolt for her ship as fast as her legs would carry her.

"I suggest the two of you leave us alone. I do not want to be disturbed." He didn't look at either man -- not that Arimas would have noticed, since the annoying man seemed to be unconscious -- only Zuri. "I'll kill anyone who opens that door."

OK, now Zuri was scared. Cade looked like he could do violence and plenty of it. She clenched her fists and held his hard gaze.

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since someone struck me and lived?"

"Well, what else should I have done? You were about to kill Arimas."

"Maybe I wanted to kill the little prick."

"If that were true, you would have done it when you first grabbed his neck. You didn't want to kill that man any more than you want to kill anyone else here. You were out of control."

All that caged fury suddenly turned on her. Before she realized he'd even moved, he had her by the throat. Just like he'd had Arimas.

"You're damned right I was out of control." He was in her face, inches from her, and spit sprayed her face as he spoke. His lips pulled away from his teeth, baring them to her. "I still am. Instead of taking out my rage on that pompous windbag, Arimas, I'm going to take it out on you." He took her mouth in a commanding fury. She had no choice but to submit. In fact, knowing he was beyond her control made her seriously hot.

He backed her up against the wall -- much as he had Arimas. Her head hit the wall hard, but whatever material it was made from gave ever so slightly. Though her ears rang from the impact, it didn't diminish her need of him. When he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she met it with her own.

They tore at each other's clothes as they kissed. With his enhanced strength, Cade had her garments ripped to shreds in a matter of seconds. Zuri didn't take much longer with Cade's. When they were both finally naked, Cade threw his head back and roared. The heat, lust, and out of control rage in his eyes when he looked back at her took her breath. This was going to be fun.

She reached for his head, grabbed the hair at the back of his neck, and pulled him to her. Her lips sucked at his, but only for a moment. Trailing her tongue down the line of his jaw to his neck, she bit down when she reached the juncture of his neck and shoulder. Again, he roared, but this time he pulled her leg up until she curled it around his waist. The other one, too. He didn't do anything more than swipe his fingers through her cunt before aligning his cock at her entrance and plunging inside.

It was Zuri's turn to scream this time. Oh, she was plenty slick enough, but Cade was big, and it burned. He didn't give her time to adjust, either. He braced her back against the wall and thrust madly. He growled and snarled as he took her. Zuri loved

his need to show the animalistic, primal nature that was part of his baser persona. She tilted her pelvis, trying to get more contact with her clit. She was so close to orgasm, it wouldn't take much.

But when he realized what she was doing, he whirled around and shoved her off him. She landed in a heap on the floor, stunned as much from the absence of sexual contact as from the landing. "What the hell?" He'd knocked the wind out of her, or she'd have managed something a little more clever.

"You will not come until I tell you or I'll never fuck you again. Do you understand me?"

As she took a couple of deep breaths, his words sank in. The *nerve* of the bastard! "I will come when I wish. You don't own me, Mr. Brighton. And I could give a damn if you fuck me at all!" OK, so that last wasn't exactly true, but she wasn't about to give any man that kind of control over her.

"Oh, really?" He advanced on her, and despite her resolve not to retreat, she scurried back until she was able to scramble to her feet. "You're so hot for me I could smell your cunt from a hundred paces." He stalked her now, his movements slow and deliberate. "Don't forget, you attacked me as much as I did you a few moments ago. If you want to finish what we started, you'll do as I tell you."

"What about you?" She pointed at his engorged cock still coated in her moisture. "Under your plan, we'll both lose."

"Don't turn this into a battle of wills, Zuri. You can't win."

"I can match your will any day."

"Not today." He lunged with those enhanced reflexes, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her to him. "Not today."

Cade pressed a button on his desk, and the top drawer slid open. Zuri gasped when she saw the delicious goodies tucked inside. Apparently this man had particular tastes.

He pulled out a chain and connected it to the cuffs around her wrists. Attaching one end to a hook in the ceiling, Cade pressed a couple more buttons on his desk. Zuri

gave a startled shriek as the chain retracted, lifting her feet off the floor about ten centimeters. She loved the helpless feeling, but this was getting old.

"I'm having a feeling of déjà vu, Cade. I would have thought the great Cade Brighton could have come up with something a little more imaginative." She was playing with fire. Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut?

"Don't worry." He grinned. At least, she hoped it was supposed to be a grin. It looked more vicious than friendly. "I'll keep things interesting for you."

He pulled out another chain. Before she realized what he'd done, he snapped another set of cuffs around her ankles, and attached one end of the chain to another hook in the ceiling.

"Now, wait just a damned minute. Oh!"

Another freaking button pressed and her feet were pulled up in front of her as well. A few seconds later, she was dangling, her hands and feet straight up in the air, and the bonds around her ankles forced her legs open wide.

She was totally at Cade's mercy.

## Chapter Six

Now, this was more like it. Zuri was suspended before him, his to do with as he wished. He was serious about her not coming until he told her, but he wasn't nearly as pissed off as he wanted her to believe. That sensation had fled with the two men. Replacing it was lust so strong, he was nearly the one begging her to let him come. She was truly an extraordinary woman. Now he wanted to test her boundaries. See exactly what she was made of.

Cade clenched and unclenched his fists as he walked around her. "Now, do you think you can do as you're told, or do I need to give you a spanking?"

"Just remember, *big boy*, anything you dish out to me you'd better be able to take in return. I just love paybacks." Her words were bravado. He could detect the tremor in her voice and intended to make sure it was lust and desire. Not fear. OK, so maybe a little fear. A little fear could be a huge turn-on for a woman always in control.

"We'll see." He reached inside his desk drawer to find the flogger he knew would make her think twice about threatening him again. It was leather with a multitude of velvet straps designed for titillation, not torture.

It was hard to keep pretending to still be angry when all he wanted to do was plunge himself deep into her again. He'd almost said, "Fuck it," and let her come and milk him dry in the process, but he knew it would be worth the wait. For both of them.

At the moment, Zuri was perspiring prettily. Sleekly muscled arms and legs bunched and relaxed when she moved. Droplets of sweat from her snow-white hair fell to the floor with her movements. Her rippled abdomen and full breasts had great beaded drops resting in hollows where her muscles worked beneath her skin. Her breathing was shallow and rapid, her face flushed. Her silky blonde locks stuck to her face in damp strands as she tested her bonds. She was truly a sight to behold. A picture

from every man's wet dreams. Given her obvious mental state, he doubted very much she'd noticed the change in him.

When he brought the flogger down on her right breast, she yelped. Not giving her time to adapt, he slapped the other one as well. Her belly. Between her legs. The backs of her thighs. He circled her body, swatting her in different areas.

"Oh, Goddess." Her prayer was only a faint whisper, but Cade knew he had her. He trailed the flogger over her body, this time in a sensual caress. When she moaned out loud he moved between her legs, trailing the tails of the flogger as he went. Cade flipped it around and rubbed the handle against her clit the way he might do with his cock. Again, she flinched, but with every stroke of the flogger's handle, she arched her back in an effort to get closer to the device, giving her the pressure she needed.

"Come on, Cade," she finally said, though her voice was a bit husky and not the least bit cocky as it had been. "Don't make me beg you for it." She took several deep breaths. "Because I won't, you know. I will not beg you for something that's mine, anyway."

He didn't say anything. Instead, he carefully, gently inserted the handle into her cunt. She gasped before moving her body against the makeshift dildo. Cade honestly didn't know if he could deny her a second time. He *wanted* her to come. He wanted her to know who'd given her such tremendous pleasure and wanted her to come back to him for more.

\* \* \*

Sweet Goddess, if Cade made her beg, she'd kill him. Never mind what she'd said to him, Zuri was so desperate to come she would definitely beg if he required it.

Suspended as she was, it was nearly impossible to move the way she needed. Any contact with her clit was totally up to Cade. Somehow, Zuri just knew the son of a bitch would drag it out as long as he could.

The flogger handle sliding in and out of her cunt was exquisite. It had enough texture to be stimulating without overly chafing. If she could just get something against her clit, she was sure she'd come.

"Eager little slut, aren't you?" There was an almost cruel twist to his mouth, but the careful way he occasionally removed the flogger handle and filled her with his fingers belied that cruelty. He brushed his fingers gently around her lips, never touching her clit, spreading the moisture from there to the flogger. "I know you want my cock. You want me to fill that wet little cunt." He plunged his fingers inside her, stretching her deliciously.

She bit her tongue to keep from screaming "Yes! Stick me with it!" or something that sounded equally needy. Zuri wanted relief without giving him anything of herself. With someone like Cade Brighton, any such revelation would be foolish indeed. She had no doubt he could use her body against her if he knew the extent of the torment she was currently under.

"You can't deny you want me, Zuri." His voice was seductive, hypnotic, as he raised his fingers to his mouth and licked her intimate moisture from them. "Your pussy would name you a liar." He dipped his head and made one slow, wet swipe with his tongue. Zuri gasped sharply. She was holding on by a thread.

"Come on, my delicious pet," he coaxed, and for a moment Zuri thought he actually meant to let her come. "Ask me, and I'll give you such pleasure, you can't even imagine." She wanted to scream in frustration. If she ever got down from this contraption, she really would kill him. This time, she actually drew blood when she bit her tongue.

"Do it. Or don't," she snapped. "But get it over with. This thing is uncomfortable as hell." She'd hoped he would stop this nonsense and let her down. Instead, he simply grinned that bad boy seductive grin of his and stood to his full height.

"Your wish is my command."

Now, how had he turned her defiance into a plea for him to fuck her? She had no idea, but that was exactly what he was getting ready to do.

He stood in front of her, his cock in hand, and headed toward her cunt. When he made contact, he rubbed up and down, spreading her moisture around the head of his cock and over her clit. The contact was almost enough to send her over the edge.

“Shit!” She screamed the expletive and arched her back, trying to meet his thrusts with her own. If he didn’t fuck her soon, she thought she might go mad with lust.

“Don’t you dare!” Cade’s hoarse command told her volumes about the state of his own lust. “Not until I get inside you. Not until I tell you to.”

Somehow, she managed to do as he told her. She hung on to her climax by a thread. Once he shoved the head of his dick inside her, however, it was all she could take. She exploded before he was able to settle himself completely within her cunt. Pulses of excitement and pleasure coursed through her.

Her vision narrowed until all she could see was the large, naked man standing between her legs. His hands were large on her thighs and his abs rippled with every surge forward. Her body swung from the chains as he pounded mercilessly into her. When her climax ebbed, he snarled and brushed her clit with his thumb. Instantly, the fading sensations gained in strength until she thrashed about as much as she could, bucking against him with the force of this new orgasm.

With three more hard, powerful thrusts, Cade threw his head back and howled his release. Her screams were overshadowed only by his shouts of completion. He stayed buried inside her for a few moments before pulling himself out. Sweat slickened his skin. Hers as well. Neither of them spoke.

Zuri didn’t know what he was thinking, but she knew she’d never had such explosive, emotional sex before and knew she probably never would again. There was something about Cade that she couldn’t get enough of. Yes, he was abrasive and too damned cocky for her own good, but he was also sexy as hell. She’d never met a man to match his beauty of body. The several scars on his arms and chest only added to his masculine perfection. He was a man’s man. A man like she’d been looking for all her life. Why did he have to be her bounty?

All Zuri wanted to do was curl up in a big soft bed and sleep for a week. Surprisingly, her wrists and ankles didn’t feel chafed, and she hadn’t lost circulation in

her hands and feet. She was getting a little uncomfortable, though. She needed to move. To stretch.

She wasn't sure what she expected from Cade. When he let her down from her erotic restraint, instead of letting her crumple to the ground when her legs wouldn't support her, he scooped her up into his arms. It was in direct contradiction to the cold-blooded killer persona the Agency had presented her with. Why was he showing even an ounce of compassion? He owed her nothing. He had to know she'd take him in the first chance she got -- great sex or not, she still had a job to do. Immediately following that thought was gratitude to the Agency for her combination contraception/disease control implant.

Going to a small storage area, Cade pulled out a large, warm blanket and set her on her feet long enough to wrap it around her until only her head and her feet were uncovered. Then he swooped her up again and left the room with her. He was still butt naked, but no one seemed to pay him any attention. In fact, most people who saw them turned and almost ran in the other direction. It seemed like even his own people had the good sense to be afraid of him. So why didn't she have any more self-preservation than to passively hang from the ceiling while he fucked her brains out?

Out in the hangar area, men were busy loading freighters. Zuri recognized many of the crates as belonging to the Agency. The really strange thing was there appeared to be no weapons among the lot of stolen goods. The vast majority of those crates were full of food, or clothing, or simple bolts of cloth. Building materials, educational materials, cleaning supplies -- nothing she would expect the largest black market in the sector to be concerned with.

At the far end of the row was a huge battleship. The thing made the *Hunter's Conquest* look like a midget tow ship. It was the sleekest, most powerful-looking ship Zuri had ever seen. She'd just bet this ship had the muscle to back up her looks, too. That was the ship Cade took her to. It was also the ship most heavily loaded with goods, and the one she heard the deck hands saying would be the next to depart. Only there were no fighter escorts scheduled to fly with this ship. Apparently, this vessel

would go it alone. Zuri thought the big lady could hold her own, but she was puzzled as to why Cade would take a chance on such an obviously important ship.

He strode down the corridor of the ship as if he always walked the halls naked carrying a naked woman wrapped in a blanket. The ship was large enough to hold a crew of at least a hundred, but there didn't seem to be anyone other than herself and Cade.

"What are you doing?" As curious as she was about this hidden side of her bounty, she was getting a bit nervous. It looked like Cade was planning on her joining him wherever he was going, on whatever "mission" he fancied himself on. She'd just bet the boss wouldn't approve.

"Getting ready to take off." His voice held no emotion, and the shared sexual splendor of a few minutes before might never have happened.

"That's fine. But I'd like to go back to my own ship." Zuri's heart hammered inside her chest. If she let him get her offworld without her clothes -- and her personal transponder -- she was caught. The Agency would have no way to find her, and Cade Brighton could keep her long enough for the Agency to think she'd turned. All they would know was the *Hunter's Conquest* was docked at Dresden 5 and their prized hunter had disappeared. It wouldn't take them long to write her off. She shivered. This was the worst possible scenario. She'd rather Cade have killed her than be branded a traitor.

"And have you following me so the Agency knows where we're taking our supplies? Not a chance."

He sat her in the co-pilot's chair -- she was still wrapped in the blanket -- before taking his own seat and booting up the onboard computer. The displays in front of both of them glowed and scrolled through data screens as the computer ran through the complicated checklists. As advanced as her own ship was, Cade's was even better. He was proving to have many surprises up his sleeve. What else was his ship capable of? What else was *he* capable of?

“Look, you don’t understand.” She kept a reasonable tone, trying not to panic. After all she’d been through, if she panicked now, she’d simply die from embarrassment. “My ship has a locator beacon. All Agency ships do. Even if they can’t track my individual movements, they will find your base. May have already found it. If you let me go, I promise to take whatever course you set for me.”

“You think that would prevent them from finding me or this place?” He swung his seat around and faced her in all his naked glory. Just the memory of that wonderful cock of his was enough to make her shiver in anticipation. “They already know how to find me, Zuri. They’ve been following me for years. Why do you think they send hunters instead of simply invading our camps? They know what I’m capable of, and they’re terrified I’ll retaliate if they come after my men again.”

He turned back to the console and punched a few more buttons. The ship hummed to life and rose off the hangar floor. Cade gently eased the big craft through the enclosed space until they emerged into the dim sunlight of this dark world. It was perfect for a smugglers’ hideaway.

Once they were outside, the ship turned away from the hangar and headed skyward. The trees and foliage that hid their fortress diminished rapidly as they ascended into space. Zuri couldn’t help but feel her life was about to take a drastic turn, and she didn’t know if it was in the right direction.

## Chapter Seven

Cade was taking an awful chance. The people of Kuam were in dire straits thanks to the Agency. Kuam's planetary government had resisted Agency control for far too long. Sanctions against their planet had reached the point that without help from Cade and his band of smugglers they would all soon perish. The super-condensed food Cade had crammed into the cargo holds was enough to feed the entire planet for the next two solar years if they rationed it carefully. If Zuri wasn't the woman he thought her to be, he was risking not only his own life, but the lives of everyone living on Kuam.

It took a few seconds to set their course. He'd made a habit of stopping at several worlds before and after going to his target destination. It was time-consuming and expensive, but worth it to keep the Agency from knowing his primary customers. All shipments to worlds on his "needs list" were large enough to ensure he wouldn't have to go there again soon. This meant it would be doubly hard to track his clients down and destroy them.

It had taken the death of his squadron to make him see the reality of it. The Agency wanted power. To think he'd helped them in their bid for universal domination made him sick. It also explained why he went from being the highest paid assassin in Agency history to a thief and smuggler. He'd just bet Zuri was in the same boat he had been, and his goal was to save her from herself.

Making the transition from normal to stealth mode took only moments -- programming in their course took longer. He had to start over three times because he couldn't help trying to take an indirect route. He knew the Agency knew his methods, which was why he decided to try something new this time. If he went straight to Kuam, they would likely think the real target was later in his route. Assuming they could track

him with the new stealth drive he'd acquired. He hoped his planning and strategy would be unnecessary.

"Well." He swiveled the chair around to face his blanket-clad companion. "We have twenty standard hours before we reach our destination." He did his best to give her a wolfish grin. "We're both naked." He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. "What shall we do?"

She pulled the blanket tighter around her and drew her knees into her chest. "I want to go back to my ship. Take me there."

Cade laughed. He couldn't help himself. Even as helpless as she was, she still tried to take control of the situation. He wondered if it was her training or simply her personality. "You're in no position to argue with me, my little pet. You live or die at my whim. Just like the people you hunt live and die at yours."

"I've never killed a bounty, Cade." Her denial was vehement. "I don't kill needlessly. In fact, I've never killed anyone. If I do my job right, I'll never *have* to kill."

"You don't honestly believe that? Did you expect to take me in without violence?"

"I didn't say that." She sat up straighter and lifted her chin in defiance. "I've spent my entire career building a reputation as a hunter who brings them in alive. I'm not so naive as to think some people wouldn't try to take advantage of my policy, but I'd like to believe it's why some will surrender only to me. The ones who fall into the former category, I can handle without killing."

Cade admired her dedication, but he knew how the Agency worked. They'd keep sending her on more and more difficult hunts until she had no choice but to kill. It was probably why they'd sent her after him. Once she had actually made that first kill, she'd find it easier to pull the trigger next time. And the next time, and the next. They'd turn her into...

Him.

He might be a cold-blooded killer, but she was a hunter like he'd never seen before. He'd managed to elude her, but only just. If they succeeded, they'd have transformed her from something wholly good into something wholly evil.

Like him.

He stood, taking the two steps that separated him from her, then leaned down and braced his hands on the arms of her chair and looked her in the eyes. "I have no interest in killing you, Zuri. But what would you have done if I had wanted to? Would you have killed me on your ship if my purpose had been more violent than simply seducing you? Or would you have fought until I defeated and killed you?" When she didn't answer, he continued. "The Agency is grooming you, Zuri. They're grooming you to take my place."

She was cool, he'd give her that. The only time she'd been out of control of her emotions was when he'd fucked her. They'd both been a little out of control then, but given the chemistry they seemed to generate, it was only natural. But now, he'd finally shocked her. Even more than when he'd eaten her out and she'd wrapped her legs around him and held on instead of kicking him in the face. Her head snapped back as if he'd slapped her.

"You worked for them?" Her eyes were sharp now. Focused. "The Agency is the only thing helping worlds with nothing. Why would you choose to leave such noble work?"

"You're kidding. Right?"

"No, I'm not kidding!" She shoved him backwards. She couldn't actually make him move if he chose not to, but he gave her this small measure of control. "There are worlds out there on the fringe who have nothing. They're so far off the trade routes, the only ships that are willing to go have to be paid ten times the worth of the goods they're selling. No one could afford that, so the Agency picks up the tab. The only thing they ask for in return is loyalty."

"And how does the Agency raise the funds to pay such extreme prices?"

"The food tax every world loyal to us pays is enough to cover everything. It's a small amount to pay for the ensured survival of an outer world."

"How much money would the Agency be getting per solar year if they *didn't* use that money for less fortunate worlds?"

She opened her mouth only to close it sharply. She shook her head and tried again. "They wouldn't do that, Cade. They wouldn't take money from everyone under their protection only to misuse it."

"Wouldn't they?" He let the question hang there. "Are you sure they couldn't find a better use for such a vast amount of money than to spend it on overpriced trade fees?"

They stared at each other for a few seconds before she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "That's simply not possible, Cade." She opened her eyes again, conviction shining brightly. "The Agency exists for the betterment of every planet discovered. What you're talking about would be a gross violation of everything we stand for."

"Yes. It would. So who do you know whose values are least like your own?" Cade stood, but held her gaze for several moments. Perhaps he'd made her think about everything she thought she knew about the Agency. Perhaps, before this was all over, he'd prove to her just how very wrong things were within that organization. Right now, however, he needed to dress. As much as he'd love to dally with his new "partner," he needed to make plans for landing on Kuam.

As he dressed in his quarters, Cade remembered a time when he had been exactly like Zuri. He'd believed everything he'd done was good and just. All the killing, all the children he'd left fatherless or motherless -- or both -- had all been part of the greater good. He'd believed the Agency had nothing but good intentions. He'd given them everything he had, including his soul.

But when there were no more worlds left to conquer they'd conspired to do away with him. Permanently. The fact was, he'd become too good at his job. The sheer number of high-ranking officials he'd eliminated made it difficult to keep him or his

team's involvement a secret. They were the stuff of adults' nightmares. The mere whisper of his team's street name -- Red Death -- had turned many strong men white with fear. He and his entire team had been led into an ambush. He had been the only one to survive.

That was his punishment for blind devotion. To live while those in his command died. Perhaps he saw Zuri as a chance to redeem himself. Perhaps he hoped Zuri would be the salvation he'd been looking for since finding himself in the hell he now lived in.

Cade scrubbed a hand over his face. According to her file, Zuri had been working for the Agency since she'd turned eighteen summers. She had been raised in an Agency Home for Children and fed Agency propaganda since she was a child. Making her see the truth of things wouldn't be easy. Very likely, she'd lash out at him before it was all over. Cade hoped he lived through it.

## Chapter Eight

With Cade gone, Zuri decided if he'd wanted her to stay put, he'd have chained her to the damned chair. She had many things to think about, and she needed to move. At home, when something troubled her, she went to the practice arena, chose an available android, and beat the living shit out of it. Here, she didn't know what to do.

She'd been raised to a certain set of beliefs, but she'd noticed things -- subtle things, but discrepancies nonetheless. She was raised to believe a member of the Agency was supposed to act with compassion and caring toward every planet regardless of that planet's allegiance. The things she'd been asked to do directly contradicted that primary belief.

Once, there had been a village that refused to conform to the wishes of the rest of the planet. The tribal leaders had refused to pay tribute to the Agency, saying they had survived in the Great Universe without anyone's protection for eons. They could look out for themselves. The village had been the oldest and most respected tribe on the planet, and other leaders had followed suit, voicing their doubts about any coalition being formed. Zuri's orders had been to get the cooperation of those tribal leaders at any cost. If she couldn't persuade them to agree to pay tribute, she was to kill them.

At first Zuri had thought it had been meant as a joke, or at most, to motivate her into doing a good job at diplomacy. Later, when she had failed, and the order was given, she'd begged for a few more days. She was told they'd been granted, but when she'd returned, there was a new council and no one would speak of what had happened to the old one. They treated her like living death. Children who ran to greet her the day before cowered behind their mothers and fathers, the elders readily agreed to any terms she set forth, and no one looked her in the eyes.

She'd been told the council had been displaced by members of other tribes. At the time, she had believed it without question. Mostly because the alternative was unthinkable. She had been young then. Ten summers had passed since that time, and only a blind and dumb woman would continue to fool herself in such a manner. She didn't consider herself either, but the fact that she'd closed her eyes and remained blissfully ignorant screamed stupidity.

Having discarded the blanket, Zuri ran down the halls of this great ship. No one was there, and she really didn't care if the damned thing carried a full crew complement. Anyone who tried to stop her would take a beating. She needed to destroy something, hurt something. She'd rather it weren't anything living, but anyone stupid enough to approach her now deserved anything they got.

"Zuri!" Speak of hell spawn itself. The *master* was looking for her.

Fuck him.

She continued to run. Faster and faster she fled. Away from Cade. Away from the Agency. Away from the monster she'd become without even realizing it. She tried to fool herself that always bringing her bounties in alive somehow made her different from everyone else, but what did she think happened to those men and women she turned over to her bosses?

She'd bet every last credit chit she had they were all dead. Perhaps not by her hand, but because of her actions. Of the many thousands she'd brought in, how many deserved death? How many of them simply had a different set of beliefs?

Her vision blurred, and she swiped at her eyes as she ran. When her hand came away wet with tears, a rage like none she had ever experienced washed over her. Damn Cade and his self-righteous bullshit! If he hadn't hijacked her ship, none of this would be happening. She'd still be living in blissful denial and not facing this crisis of conscience.

She stopped and sank to the deck, laughing a sickening, maniacal laugh. Hadn't she just been thinking she wasn't a blind or stupid woman?

Unfortunately for him, Cade happened to turn down the very corridor where she sat in a naked heap, crying.

"Zuri? Are you --"

The war cry she screamed came from somewhere deep inside her. She launched herself at Cade, her grief and anger giving her strength of body she never should have possessed.

She hit him low in the gut, her shoulder spearing into him. He grunted, but otherwise didn't seem fazed by her impact. Ducking back away from him, she barely missed his grasping hands. She could read nothing in his face but a readiness for battle.

Again, she came at him, this time kicking aside a reaching hand with one foot, only to follow through with a vicious kick to his face with the other. Twisting her body hard, she landed on both feet, facing him. Again, the impact didn't seem to affect him in anything other than the slight turn of his head.

In one last attempt to inflict damage on the man who had so completely ruined her life, Zuri threw herself at him again. This time, she jumped at him and drove her face into his unprotected neck. She bit hard, tasting blood, and tried to rip the flesh from the wound she'd created, but Cade held the back of her head tightly into him. "That's it, my little hellcat," he whispered. "Let it out. You'll feel better."

"Asinine swine!" she screamed. "I hate you! I've never intentionally killed anyone in my entire life, but before this is over, I'll kill you with my bare hands!" Again, she bit and punched and tried to head butt him, but he held her to him so hard, she thought her ribs would break.

The rage continued, but Zuri couldn't gauge how long before her struggles became weak and all she could do was sob while he held her to him. The harder she cried, the tighter he held her. No one had ever seen her cry before, and she tried to hate him even more because he had. Instead, she clung to him. Needing him more than she'd ever needed anyone.

"If you tell anyone about this," she mumbled into his neck, "I swear I'll kill you."

"Your secret's safe with me, hellcat." His words sounded teasing, but their inflection told her he was serious.

The insistent bulge of his groin pressed against her and now that she was more herself, she couldn't help but react. She knew well the link between sex and violence, so she couldn't really blame him. He hadn't forced himself on her, or made any overt move to steer her in that direction, but now she wanted everything he could give her.

She rested her forehead against his shoulder and gave an experimental squeeze with her legs. He reacted with a soft grunt, his cock twitching against her. Encouraged, she tilted her pelvis up and down, rubbing herself against him, tickling her clit with his length.

"You're going to be the death of me." He pulled her head back by her hair so that she had to look at him. Lust stronger than any she'd ever witnessed sparkled in his eyes, and her pussy instantly became even wetter. "One of these days, you're going to push me too far."

"What if I do?" At this point, living dangerously was all she could do. Playing it safe wasn't an option. "What exactly would you do to me?"

He growled at her, snarling. "I might fuck you to oblivion and back again."

"Not if I fuck you first."

She reached between them for his cock, the material of his uniform her only barrier. With the other hand, she undid his pants and pulled him free. He hissed, baring his teeth. "You're playing with fire. Don't start what you don't intend to finish."

"Shut up and get inside me." Even as she spoke, she guided him to her entrance and sank herself on top of him.

He filled her completely. She moved, and the friction was the closest thing to heaven she was ever likely to reach. Nothing mattered to her in this moment but this man, and getting from him all he would give. She knew he'd take anything he wanted this time because he knew she was more than willing to give it. In a way, that frightened her more than any truth she might have figured out about the Agency or herself. A broken life could be fixed with enough love from friends and family. A

broken heart would haunt her for the rest of her life. As it was, the person she wanted to trust, the only person she wanted to turn to, was the person most likely to break her heart.

Cade spun them around and braced her against the bulkhead. The riveted metal chafed her back, but at the moment she didn't care. All that mattered was his cock thrusting in and out of her as hard and as fast as he could make it go. Zuri caught his rhythm almost instantly, and their bodies moved as one. Cade latched onto one breast with his mouth and sucked as he fucked her. The combined sensations of his mouth and cock worked together to send her flying over the edge into madness.

Once again, she screamed at him. "Fuck me! Dearest Universe, don't stop!"

"That's it. Take my cock. Take it all!" He bit out the words, as if it hurt to utter them. "When I'm done today, you'll never want to be without my cock inside you."

"Harder, Cade! Fuck me harder! Make it hurt!"

He pulled away from her breast, but his pace only quickened. Deeper and harder he pounded into her, sliding her up and down the wall with the force of it. He gripped her hips with bruising force and moved her to his own pace. He was so deep inside her, it felt like he hit her very soul with each thrust. No doubt she'd be sore tomorrow, but the pain only fueled her lust.

"Sonofabitch! That's it! Fuck me, you bastard, fuck me hard!" Her screams echoed throughout the empty ship. When her orgasm neared, and she knew she'd reached the point of no return, Cade's own shouts and screams mingled with hers. His seed gushed into her just as her own spasms started, and she milked him of everything he had.

Her climax seemed to go on forever, but eventually it subsided. When it did, lethargy swept over her almost instantly. Her eyelids became heavy, and all she wanted to do was collapse in his arms and sleep.

And that was exactly what she did.

## Chapter Nine

Staring at the ceiling from his bed, contemplating what the hell he needed to do, Cade held the sleeping hunter securely in his arms. Somehow, some way, he had to keep her right where she was. He didn't intend to let her go back to the Agency. She was better than that.

And he needed her. It wasn't about her being a partner, though that would be a definite plus. It was about the woman herself. She was like nothing he'd ever encountered. She touched something inside him he'd thought long dead. Everything good and decent he'd always wanted to be a part of him existed within her. That she'd kept that part of herself intact after so many years of Agency influence was a testament to her strength of will and character. He'd given in. Done their dirty work for them. She'd never taken a life, though she'd fooled herself into believing she'd given her bounties a chance at life. It didn't make her a bad person, only one trying to make the best of a bad situation.

She seemed to be piecing it all together, coming to terms with everything she'd seen and done, but he wasn't sure she was ready to simply accept his version of things. If she decided to leave him, he wasn't certain he could stop her, cybernetic enhancements or not. His ship had emergency shuttles that would take her to any Agency-controlled planet she wanted.

He sighed. Who was he kidding? If she decided living a lie was better than taking a chance on him, he'd take her back to them himself even though it meant a death sentence for him. If a woman this good and just and decent decided he wasn't worth a second chance, then he probably wasn't.

She whimpered and snuggled closer into him. Cade kissed the top of her head and tightened his grip on her.

"I'm sorry I attacked you," she mumbled sleepily. "You didn't deserve to be treated that way."

"I deserve everything you dished out and more, but that's not the issue at the moment." She smelled divine. He greatly suspected he'd not be able to keep his cock to himself much longer.

"Then what is the issue?" She turned over and rested her chin on her hands crossed over his chest. "I may not be able to verify whether or not you worked for the Agency, but everything you said was true. Just because I was stupid enough to deny what was right in front of my face didn't give me the right to treat you like that when you made me face the truth."

Cade grinned. Perhaps he'd have things going his way sooner than he hoped. "True, and you'll be punished for it later, but right now I have a proposition for you."

"What do you mean, punished?"

"Later. I want your help. One run, one chance. Want to hear more?"

"I want to hear more about this punishment. I don't want to be punished!" She squirmed, but Cade held her fast.

"Yes, you do. But we'll talk about that later. I want to know if you'll give me a chance to prove to you the Agency is run by people with their own agenda. You're part of that, whether you want to be or not."

Zuri closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. "No. I don't want to be punished. Yes. I'll give you a chance to prove I've been an idiot all these years."

Cade pulled her down for a kiss. He took his time and really tasted her. Before, he'd been rushed or simply drugged with need, but this time he intended to relish the passionate woman he had in his arms and, finally, in his bed.

The sweet flavor of mint clung to her tongue as it tangled with his, and his moan of pleasure echoed hers. He rolled them both so that he lay over her in the dominant position. He remembered thinking she wasn't necessarily a submissive so much as she wanted to be dominated in bed. He was more than willing to accommodate her.

"Put your hands over your head." He moved his mouth to her neck, not waiting for her to comply. He licked the juncture of her neck and shoulder before nipping sharply.

"Ouch!" she squealed. "What was that for?"

"That was payback. Not because I didn't deserve the nip before, but because there are many, many erotic pleasures that I can give you with nips like that. I just wanted you to know."

She giggled, but it sounded a bit nervous. "I didn't mean that bite to be pleasurable."

He kept her body pinned beneath him as he reached for the table next to his bed and got the restraint cuffs. "It reminded me of the dominant creatures on Cerulian." He fastened them to her wrists, pressed a couple of buttons, and stuck the cuffs to the head of the bed. Once again, he had her body to do with as he wished. It was a position he really liked.

"You're the most delectable female I've ever encountered, Zuri." He saw no reason not to lay it out for her. She wasn't a woman who'd appreciate dishonesty on any level. "I won't insult you by pretending I'm not affected by your raw sensuality on more than a sexual level. You make me want to be the man I was before the Agency turned me into a monster."

He didn't give her a chance to respond. Having her reject him would break him for sure. It might still happen, but he'd have this one time to pretend she was his. He fastened his mouth to the inside of one breast and laved his way to her nipple. Latching onto her, he sucked and nibbled, wanting to savor her as much as he could. He intended to get enough of her to last a lifetime if necessary. However long or short that might be.

Her body was a treasure trove of sensitive areas. Underneath her breast, her underarm, the dip in her waist on either side, her navel. When he reached the area just above her pubic bone, she shrieked, and her belly quivered. Cade gave the little spot a small nip before venturing lower.

Normally, Cade preferred his women to have bare cunts, but her snow-white curls, trimmed so neatly, were a huge turn-on. He'd noticed earlier, but hadn't had time to properly appreciate it. Now, he'd take his time.

He grazed his nose in those lovely, downy, soft curls now, inhaling the sweet fragrance of her desire. She was responsive as hell. When his tongue snaked out to taste the evidence of her passion, it slid through the wetness weeping from her cunt and came to rest on her clit. He circled the sensitive flesh over and over, wringing out several gasps of pleasure from the lovely Zuri.

She tilted her pelvis to meet him every time he retreated slightly. He could see she was pulling at the cuffs now, wanting to touch him. Her whimpers and screams of pleasure were music to his ears. He wanted her writhing and desperate. If at all possible, he'd make this a night neither of them would ever forget.

He grazed two fingers against her slit, knowing she was more than ready, but needing to make sure. Moisture coated his fingers, and he plunged inside her, first two fingers, then three.

"Oh, Cade. Do it again. Lick my clit, too."

"Does it make you want to come?"

"Sweet Stars, yes."

"No." He stopped everything and pulled away from her completely.

"Bastard!" Her scream was filled with anguish, and he actually saw a tear leak from the corner of one eye. He needed her so badly he was trembling. He wanted her needing him just as badly.

He grinned. "Maybe. You'll probably name me worse before tonight's over." He knelt between her legs, his cock head grazing the entrance to her pussy. This was a position he could stay in for a very long time. She tried to arch into him, but he retreated just enough to keep himself outside her body.

"Please, Cade," she whispered. "Oh, stars, please."

Still, he rubbed himself against her. How long would he keep torturing both of them? He didn't know. All he knew was that it felt good. So very good. "How does it feel, my lovely?"

"Oh, sweet stars, I'm burning, Cade. Fuck me! Please!"

"If I do, will you follow me for the remainder of this drop off? Will you let me show you what's really happening on the outer fringe planets?"

She laughed almost hysterically. "That would be a promise made under extreme duress."

Cade's smile felt tight, but he couldn't keep it away. "Yeah, but I'll still hold you to it."

"I swear it, Cade. If you give me what I need, I'm yours for this entire journey."

He didn't say anything else. He simply plunged deep. Hard. He wrapped his arms around her thighs for leverage and pulled her to him with every thrust he made. The sound of flesh slapping flesh was loud. Their breaths came in shallow gasps.

Finally, when Cade couldn't hold himself back any longer, he reached between Zuri's legs and found her clit. "Now, Zuri! Come for me! Now!"

"Cade!" Her face was flushed, and the veins stood out in her neck and at her temples. Her pussy clamped down on him and he threw himself on top of her, pumping into her cunt as hard as he could. The force of it scooted Zuri against the head of the bed. Cade growled and clamped down on her neck with his teeth.

"Sweet stars! Yes! Oh, yes!" Zuri spread her legs wide and bent her knees, giving him all the access to her body he needed.

The explosion started in his balls and pulsed through the base of his spine. He wouldn't have been surprised if he'd blown the top of her head off with the force of his orgasm. His hips thrust with each pulse of his cock as he came deeply inside her. It felt like an eternity, but it didn't last nearly long enough. It would never be enough.

Cade was totally drained. He managed to roll off Zuri and release her before going limp. "Are you OK?" Cade breathed.

"You sound as weak as I feel, Cade." Zuri chuckled and threw an arm over him, snuggling close.

"Well, even a cyborg has to rest after something like that."

"You know, I've still got these wrist restraints on -- I could simply lock my arms around you and keep you here until the Agency found us."

"True."

"I mean, that *was* a promise made to save a life."

He lifted his head to look at her. "What the fuck are you talking about? I wasn't going to kill you."

She laughed and held him tighter. "Not me. If you had stopped, I'd have killed you. If the only way to save your life was to make a simple promise, I was more than willing to do that."

For a moment, Cade just stared at her. Then he let his head fall back to the pillow and laughed loudly.

## Chapter Ten

Kuam was a dark little world, far from the system's sun, and cold. So very cold. It was amazing there was life there at all. Any heat during Kuam's summer season came from the intense lunar radiation of one of the two nearby moons. Even that wouldn't have been possible if the moon hadn't been in perfect alignment every year. For three of Kuam's months, the largest moon orbited directly over the little continent before its orbit was pushed wider by the smaller moon for the remainder of the year. The effect allowed for the short growing season as well as some spectacular light displays this time of year.

Still, there was no doubt life wouldn't exist in such abundance much longer if a regular supply route couldn't be opened. The planet was sparsely populated by an incredible warrior people. Even with his enhancements, Cade would hesitate before taking on one of them. What they lacked in strength -- which wasn't much -- they made up for in sheer determination. They never gave up, even if it meant certain death. Which was why the Agency wanted to do away with them. If these people had access to technology available to the rest of society, they would be unstoppable.

As it was, they were starving. The Agency had let them grow dependent on the trade routes. Their population had surged, and they simply hadn't been able to produce enough local food to feed everyone. When trade was stopped, it was devastating. Their climate was unforgiving, and not having enough land mass to feed the current inhabitants meant there was little chance yielding a self-sustaining food supply, especially given the population increase of recent years. There was no way the majority of Kuam's people could last until the next harvest. By closing trade routes, the Agency would probably wipe out the majority of the Kuams in a couple of years. Cade and his men were the only thing standing between these people and near extinction.

The only problem for the Agency in most of this was Devlin 4, a planet on the same trade route as Kuam. By keeping the trade route to Kuam closed, the Agency was unable to access Devlin 4's resources. That planet was a gold mine of natural wealth. At the moment, the Agency was hiring their own smugglers to go off recognized routes, but it was costing them a fortune. They needed the Kuams gone, and Cade was an obstacle. Unless he missed his guess, he and Zuri would be engaged by Agency ships before this stint was over.

In fact, he was counting on it. If he could make her see, prove they were using her for something sinister, maybe he could save her innocence. Of course, this was all assuming she was as compassionate as she seemed. He wasn't normally a bad judge of character, but anything was possible.

He grinned. The time they had left was unknown, but he intended to make the most of it. He'd start by doing something he rarely did. They were going to the surface to deliver the goods themselves. A good humor that was hard for him to find most days filled him, and he couldn't help but chuckle. This was going to be fun.

\* \* \*

"I'm absolutely *not* wearing this out anywhere." The stubborn set of her chin reminded Cade how very not submissive Zuri really was. She was just as dominant as he was. Even in bed, where he knew she loved being physically dominated by him, he couldn't help but notice the many orders she gave him. She was a woman unafraid to go after what she wanted.

"Fine. You'll stay aboard the ship while I deliver my shipment. It shouldn't take more than five planetary days."

Her eyes widened. "Five *days*? You expect me to just sit here and wait five *days* for you? I'll take this ship and head straight for the first Agency base if you leave me here alone."

He grinned. "No, you won't. There's a computer chip in my brain that emits a data stream. My ship cannot function without that data stream." He crossed his arms and leaned against the bulkhead. "Call it a security blanket."

“Why five days? You said if I went with you it would only take one.”

He shrugged. “It would take five days because unattached males on this world are expected to participate in certain events. It happens to be the beginning of their fertility celebration. Thanks to the Agency closing all the supply lines near this place, their people are dying. Naturally, this festival is the center of each solar year. Men or women traveling alone are considered available.

“For men, it means making themselves available to any woman who desires him. For women, it means they are expected to choose at least one mate for each night of the festival. The more men a woman mates with, the more likely she will conceive a child. The only way to avoid staying for the whole celebration is to go as a mated couple.”

He grinned.

She scowled. She also didn’t argue with his comment about the Agency. “So, why the slutty outfit?”

He couldn’t really blame her there. It wasn’t strictly necessary, but she didn’t need to know that. Besides, the heavy cloak would cover her. Midsummer might make the locals want to strip down and run naked by a river, but it was still cooler than either of them was used to.

Her outfit was little more than a few scraps of leather with straps and buckles. The trunk of the outfit ran the length of her body from breasts to pussy, covering everything, yet plunging low to stop just above her pubic hair. The top part covering her breasts narrowed to two straps that merged with a collar that buckled around her neck.

The back of the outfit might as well not have existed at all. A narrow strap ran the length of her back, fitting snugly into the crack of her ass. That strap had eight more sprouting from it to hug her rib cage, waist, and hips, then buckle to the leather covering her front.

Of course, he’d had to come up with appropriate shoes. Black, eight-inch platform heels with straps that buckled around her ankle and lower calf completed her outfit. The shoes made her finely muscled legs even shapelier. They seemed to go on

forever. Cade swallowed. Maybe he'd gone overboard. He wasn't sure he wanted anyone seeing the fuckable vision standing defiantly in front of him.

Much as he loved it, he couldn't blame her for resisting wearing it. However, if she had been really averse to it, she wouldn't have put the damned thing on. She wouldn't be the only one wearing such a revealing outfit. In fact, given the unusually warm summer, most single women would wear far less. Mated females would also, but only those who intended to allow their mates to prove their virility in public.

Obviously, he didn't intend to tell her that.

"Because I wish it."

"You're such an ass!" She spun around and headed back to their quarters, probably to take off the outfit. Unfortunately for her -- and Cade rather liked this arrangement -- she didn't have anything else. He couldn't keep the smile from his face. When she didn't come out after several seconds, he followed.

"You could always go in the buff. Of course, in this culture, a mated female going nude means a child has not been conceived in at least five years. The Kuams consider that to mean the male has given his consent for other males to breed her. We'd be there until you'd been fucked by every interested man at the celebration. Do you really want --" He broke off, catching sight of her.

His clothes were a tad large for her, but she'd done a fair job of rolling sleeves and pant legs trying to make them fit. Not to mention using one of the straps from the other outfit as a belt.

"Much better." She squared her shoulders and looked at him with a smug, cocky grin. "Ready?"

\* \* \*

Zuri didn't have different shoes to go with her improvised outfit, but wiping the smirk off Cade's face was worth any discomfort from the damned things. Almost. She wasn't sure how much longer she could walk like this. They'd been walking in the only city on Kuam for about four hours. This village might be small and a bit primitive, but they had more respect for their elders and leaders than any culture Zuri had ever

encountered. If an elder wasn't on their tribal council, they were still consulted as if they were. As far as Zuri could tell, no decision was made that affected the tribe without consulting every elder in the city.

Through it all, Cade told his story of offered aid more times than Zuri could count with infinite patience. He also had to explain her. And her strange attire. They were grateful for the aid, amused by her, and they welcomed both her and Cade with open arms.

"Cade? Is that you?" A small woman with large brown eyes and a care-worn face approached them. Love shone on her face, and she had eyes only for the large smuggler. "I thought you might never return."

"Alana." A gentle smile graced Cade's face, and the cyborg killer Zuri had hunted was transformed into something else. This was a man capable of so much love, so many good emotions and actions, Zuri found it hard to reconcile one with the other. "It is good to see you." Cade enfolded Alana in his strong arms before kissing her gently on the mouth. A sudden pang of jealousy and pain shot through Zuri with such force, she nearly doubled over. Neither of them seemed to notice her discomfort.

"My father asks of you often, as does my brother. I trust you are well?" Alana was very different from the other inhabitants of Kuam. She was very slight of build, short, and looked as if a gentle wind would carry her off. She wasn't exactly pretty, but she carried a delicate grace about her that went beyond the surface and found a stellar inner beauty. The difference in size between her and Cade was startling.

"I am very well, little flower." The loving look didn't leave his face, and Zuri grew more and more uncomfortable watching them. She felt like she was intruding in the worst way. What their history together was, she didn't know. Wasn't sure she wanted to know. She just needed to be away from it. Because, deep down, she knew she'd never get that look from Cade. She hadn't even been aware how much she wanted -- needed -- that look from any man, but seeing the love these two obviously had for one another made her ache to love and to be loved by someone.

While Cade and Alana conversed, Zuri backed away from them very slowly, trying not to be noticed. When she was far enough away and Cade had his back to her, she simply turned and walked on. She didn't have a clue where to go -- certainly not back to the ship. Maybe she could find a way off world and could hire someone to take her back to an Agency base.

That didn't seem right, either. She knew she could never go back to them. Not after the soul-searching she'd done. They had used her as an instrument of death, and she had let them. She didn't want to bring death to the universe, or even a very small part of it. She wasn't that kind of person. Maybe she'd explore this place more. It certainly seemed like a place she could learn from.

She wandered to the festival square, just following the flow of people around her. Everywhere, people were laughing, dancing, singing, or otherwise having a wonderful time. She noticed there were no children around, and remembered Cade saying their people were on the edge of starvation.

Curious, she continued to walk and watch until she saw a man and woman exit a small hut at the edge of the city with a small boy about four or five. The three of them laughed as they walked, the man tossing the boy into the air and catching him, much to the boy's delight.

They continued to skirt the city until they came to a rather large camp filled with children. A woman of about fifty summers met them and hefted the boy to her hip, saying something to him just before she kissed his nose and tickled his belly. The boy giggled and squirmed, sliding down the woman's body to the ground and running off to join the other children. Zuri noticed several adult men and women of similar age mixed in with the younglings, as well as older children caring for the younger ones. She figured this must be where those not participating in the Fertility Festival spent their evenings.

Again, she followed the young couple when they left, staying well hidden within the trees. They were about halfway back to the square when the man suddenly grabbed

the woman from behind. Both his big arms went around her waist and she shrieked, followed closely by a laugh of pure happiness.

The man spun his mate around and fused his mouth to hers. Her shrieks soon turned to moans and whimpers of pleasure as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hooked one leg over his hip. He backed her against a tree and ground his groin into her.

Again, Zuri felt uncomfortable. An intruder in every sense of the word.

She quietly backed away and headed back to the village. It was late in the day now. Soon the two moons of this world would appear. This night promised to be filled with passion for everyone. When she had seen the lengths to which Cade had gone to adhere to the customs of these people, Zuri had assumed she and Cade would participate in the Fertility Festival in some fashion. Now, she didn't really know what to do.

"You are unattached?" The deep but pleasant male voice startled her, and she jumped. So much for the prized hunter of the Agency. This was why it was never a good idea for a hunter to take a lover. She became preoccupied. It could get her killed.

The native man was almost as large as Cade, with thick musculature and vein-roped limbs. His skin was a rich, sun-kissed caramel, dusted liberally with dark blond hair that matched the hair on his head. He wore only the smile he greeted her with, which Zuri was only too happy to return. "So it would seem."

"I am Lars." He lifted his chin when he spoke, as if he were very proud of who he was, and extended his hand to her. "It would greatly honor me if you would allow me to escort you to the Fertility Festival."

After all the formality she'd witnessed today, Lars's didn't surprise Zuri. This culture seemed to thrive on ritual, custom, and respect for every member.

Zuri laid her hand in his. "The honor is mine, sir."

This seemed to please Lars. His smile was warm and genuine. Nothing about anyone she'd met seemed any different. These people were warriors, and therefore knew when and what to keep to themselves, but with someone they perceived as a

friend, they were amazingly open. Zuri wasn't used to such straightforwardness. Among the Agency, you offered nothing, trusted very few with little, and no one with everything. The Kuams seemed to be the exact opposite of everything she'd ever known.

They stood like that a second or two before Lars noticed the restraint cuff at her wrist. "Why do you wear this?"

"I honestly don't know. I guess so I don't run off."

He laughed, a full, rich sound. "Apparently, it didn't work, warrior queen."

Lars led her back to the festival square in the center of the city. With the moons' rising, inhibitions were shed with ritualistic intensity. It was like one giant orgy started almost spontaneously. Nothing she'd witnessed this day had prepared her for this.

Some were dressed, others only half-dressed. Still others were completely nude. No one was excluded. Appearance didn't seem to be a factor, only availability. Zuri even noticed same sex couples, though as she watched, she noticed members of the opposite sex join them for a brief coupling. In a high tower overlooking the entire scene, seven elders prayed and offered blessings to the crowd below.

"This is new to you. You have never participated in Festival before." His statement didn't have a ring of condemnation to it, only curiosity.

"I'm not from here. I came with Cade Brighton when he brought you supplies."

"Ah. I see. You reside off world." Again, there was no ill intent in his words. It was as if he simply accepted her statement as a fact that had nothing to do with the current situation beyond that she might not know what was expected of her.

"I'm afraid so." She smiled. "If you wish to find someone else for this, I understand."

He chuckled. "Among my people, it is a great honor for one warrior to take another to her first Festival."

"Are all your people warriors then? Even the women?"

"Not all. Most. Fewer women than men. But we all must do our part to protect our land and way of life." He bent to touch his lips to hers. "Even educate curious

outsiders to our most sacred ways." His expression grew serious. "I must warn you that if you participate as an unattached female, you will be required to stay here until the elders are sure you have not conceived a child. If we are blessed, and a babe grows inside you, you must stay until he or she is born. After that, you may leave if you choose, but the babe will stay with us."

Zuri's first reaction was to back away and politely refuse his earlier invitation to the festival, but she didn't. Had she not admired the ways of these people with their honesty? There might be things she didn't know about their culture, but she got the feeling they were exactly as she saw them. Their very nature decided there could be no hidden agenda.

"Assume for a second I did get pregnant. I'm an outsider, not one of your people. How would I be treated?" Surely there could be no harm in asking a few questions to lay everything out in the open. Besides, she had an implant. There was no way she could get pregnant.

"You'd be treated as any pregnant female. With the greatest respect. It is well known that some tolerate the pregnancy better than others, and you would not be required to do anything your body is unable to do. Once you have the child, you would be expected to do nothing but care for that child until he or she reached three or four summers. By then, both of you should be able to tolerate short periods of separation which would be beneficial and necessary. After that, assuming you choose to stay, everyone is expected to work to help the community. Your first responsibility will always be to your children, but you would be required to help the community as we help you."

"What about a permanent mating? Is it required of a female who is with child after the festival?"

Lars frowned. "It is not required, but most find it helpful in caring for a new babe, as well as during the child rearing years. The community will always provide for anyone who needs it, but it is helpful for a woman to have the support of another -- whether it be male or female." He took a step forward. "And as a man who sincerely

hopes to father a child with a woman of your beauty --" he caressed her lower abdomen gently through her clothing, "-- I would hope you'd at least allow me to remain a very close friend if you chose not to mate with me for life."

"So, it is always my choice. A husband wouldn't be forced on me, and I wouldn't be some kind of outcast because I'm an off worlder?"

She almost laughed, Lars looked so offended. "What place are you from that such thoughts even pass through your lovely head?"

Not wanting to offend the very large warrior, Zuri smiled and placed a hand on the side of his face. "I come from a very bad place, Lars. Not like here. Your people have shown me nothing but kindness, and I saw how much Cade respects your ways."

"You are not Cade's woman, then?"

She sighed. "I won't lie to you, Lars. We came here together. He hinted at the possibility that we'd be at the festival together, but when I left him, it looked like he'd found someone else to go with."

"I see."

Coming from anyone else, she'd have thought he'd said that because he knew nothing else to say. Coming from this man, however, she got the impression he really *did* see. The mirth in his eyes said he knew Cade, and the infernal man was forever doing something stupid. At least, that was how Zuri interpreted it.

"Never fear, my lovely." His smile was once again warm and inviting. "What Cade denies himself, I will gladly accept, and be the envy of every man at Festival. I would only ask that you allow me to take you as mine. It wouldn't mean that we have mated for life, only that no other man may have you during Festival."

Zuri blinked, not understanding. Then it hit her. "Oh. So that if I conceive, you would know who the child belonged to."

"Actually --" Lars wrapped one arm around her waist and urged her leg around his hip with his other hand, "-- unless either you or Cade has an implanted contraceptive device, I would have no way of knowing for sure any child conceived

wasn't Cade's. And I find it highly unlikely one or both of you doesn't have a contraceptive implant."

"What makes you think I've slept with Cade? I didn't say that."

He gave her a "you've-got-to-be-kidding" look.

"One more thing." Zuri took a breath. This might be the hardest obstacle to overcome. "If I decide to leave, will I be able to? I mean, Cade will likely be long gone and I don't have a ship."

"I happen to have a very advanced space craft. Probably the only one on Kuam, but if you choose to leave, I'd be happy to take you someplace where you could charter a flight to anyplace you wanted."

Well. That covered *that*. As Zuri saw it, she had nothing to lose.

"So, we're back to why you'd want to be my only lover. I can't get pregnant, so you know there'll be no child -- yours or anyone else's."

"I would want to be your only lover during Festival because I highly suspect a taste of you would be addictive. Should you decide to stay among us -- even though there is no child -- I would want first rights to win your heart and be allowed to be your husband."

She wanted to cry. No one had ever cared enough about her to want to win her heart. She didn't know Lars, and he didn't know her. She had no intention of being with the man for the rest of her life at this moment, but the mere fact that he considered her worth that kind of commitment warmed her heart.

Her next thought was to wonder why Cade wasn't more like that.

Despite her best effort, the tears did fall then. Only two. But two more than she wanted to waste on the likes of Cade Brighton.

Immediately Lars dipped his head to hers and lapped the tears from her cheeks. "Forgive me if I said something to make you sad, my lovely. It was not my intention to cause you pain."

"No. Not you." She was desperate to wash Cade from her mind and heart. How the hell had she managed to fall in love with the son of a bitch? "Fuck me, Lars. I need..." She trailed off when she found his mouth and let her lips mesh with his.

They were tender kisses, desire-filled, but with less intensity than she'd experienced with Cade. She wanted that raw emotional need to be there, but it wasn't. Not with Lars. Not with her. Lars touched her body as he kissed her, molded her shape with his hands, and she experienced pleasure from his touches. But she didn't have an all-encompassing need to have more of Lars. The magic simply wasn't there.

"You *need* to get the *fuck off* my best friend." Cade was standing not five meters from them, his face filled with anger. She didn't know how long he had been there, only that he was looking at Lars like he might murder the man. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Lars? She's not yours to do with as you please. She's here with *me*, you asinine *droda*."

Though Zuri struggled to get loose from Lars's arms, he held her fast, still occasionally kissing her neck or face or mouth as if he simply couldn't help himself.

"You should have thought about that before you let her wander off, my friend. Or were you simply too occupied with another to notice she was gone?"

"I was with your sister, Lars."

At first the other man blinked, as if he hadn't expected Cade's response. Then his eyes narrowed. "We've had this discussion before, Cade. I know Alana fancies herself in love with you, but we both know it's only because you saved her life. You're a good man, near brother, but she's too gentle for you."

Cade rolled his eyes. "I know that. I respect that. And I think she's beginning to realize it, as well. But she still considers me a friend, and I feel the same about her. I love her as you do, my friend. Not as a man loves a woman."

"Then why leave such a delectable lover as this to dally with my sister?"

"The bloody wench snuck off! She's not my lover -- exactly -- she's my captive. She's an Agency hunter."

Lars pulled back slightly to look at Zuri, disbelief plastered across his face. "This little thing?"

Cade grinned. "The best they've turned out since me, near brother."

Zuri had a moment of panic. If the Agency was responsible for nearly starving these people to extinction, Lars might not accept her as readily as he had a few moments before. "Lars, I --"

Before she could try to explain her change of heart toward the only home she'd ever known, Lars interrupted, and silenced her with a look. "No need for explanation, near sister. If you were a spy or any kind of reasonable threat, Cade would never have brought you here during our most sacred time."

When Lars still didn't release her, Cade crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you going to let my prisoner go? I'd like to pay our respects and get going before the Agency figures out this isn't a mere decoy stop."

"Well --" Lars sighed in mock resignation, "-- I suppose I must. Though I confess I'd love a chance to beat those bastards on my home turf. They might not find us so easily defeated if they'd but fight like men instead of cowering billions of miles away, waiting for us to starve."

Before releasing her, he bent his head to Zuri's and kissed her tenderly. Pulling her to him in a tight embrace, he whispered, "Courage, near sister. He's not the bastard he wants you to believe he is. In fact, I think he already loves you." He gave her a hard squeeze before adding, "Bring him to his knees before you admit you love him, too."

When he released her, they held each other's gaze until Cade roughly grabbed Zuri's arm and dragged her toward the festival square.

## Chapter Eleven

Cade said nothing as he stomped through the city. By the stars, he didn't know what to do. When he'd realized Zuri wasn't with him any longer, he'd become a little anxious. He didn't want her to get stuck here until the council decided she wasn't pregnant. Worse, if her contraception implant failed, she'd have to remain here until after the baby was born. Unless he found a way to keep the Agency away from Kuam, sticking around that long could be a death sentence. Even with the provisions he'd just given them, it would be hard going until the supply lines were opened again, and that could be a very long time indeed.

He hadn't said anything to anyone, but he'd long suspected the Agency was interested in Kuam for reasons that went beyond the tiny planet's refusing to pay tribute. They wanted everyone on this planet dead. Sure, they could hit it with a strike force, or some other military operation, but if it ever got out, they would be hard-pressed to keep other governments in line.

By the time they reached the other couples, there was no one who wasn't participating in some kind of sexual activity. This festival was the very heart of their planet's solar year. It was the only time many of the warriors got to see lifemates and lovers. All men and women on guard in the outer continent were brought home unless the warrior's mate was either too old for child bearing, or living with him at their post. He wasn't sure about Zuri, but Cade felt very much overdressed at the moment.

Sex in public wasn't Cade's style -- he preferred the privacy of his ship -- but to be considered an honored guest on this planet and leave during Festival without participating would be the greatest of insults. This was a place he considered home more than any other place in the universe, and he wasn't about to dishonor these people in any way. Not when they had welcomed him, accepted him as one of their

own. He wasn't sure if he could convince Zuri, but this was too important to him to give her a choice.

In the center of the square was a large, flowering tree. Two trees, actually. They had been planted there at the beginning of the Fertility Festival centuries before when the population had been threatened by war with another interstellar enemy. Those very different trees had been planted side by side very close together. It represented the need for neighboring tribes to interbreed no matter how different they seemed to be in culture or beliefs. It was the only way they would be able to survive. The day the trees were planted was celebrated with the first Festival. Kuam being a relatively small planet with only one moderate-sized continent, the entire population had been involved.

Year after year, the trees grew. As the elders had hoped, instead of one tree choking out the other, their trunks intertwined and several years later, no one was able to tell where one tree started and the other began. One tree bloomed fire-red flowers, the other snow-white blooms. The combination was stunning.

Just like a permanent mating between two people committed to the well-being of each other. Cade had always liked the analogy. This was his favorite spot on Kuam. It was the only place he could even consider making love to Zuri during Festival, and that scared the hell out of him.

When they reached the tree, Cade didn't give Zuri time to argue. He simply grabbed her wrists and pressed a couple of buttons on her restraint cuffs, locking them together.

"What the hell? Not again."

Cade ducked underneath her arms, threading his head through them, and stood. Their gazes locked. "I don't like performing for an audience, but as an honored guest on this planet, I'm expected to participate in Festival. I can do it with one of the locals, but I'd prefer it be with you." Zuri's smile made him wince -- he was perilously close to admitting how much she'd come to mean to him in such a short period of time. So he added, "There will be fewer complications."

"You son of a --"

Cade didn't want to talk. When he'd found Zuri with Lars, he'd seen red. He'd have beaten the other man senseless if he hadn't yielded. He pulled her roughly to meet his lips. He needed to know she was his. This game had turned into something more. He was pretty sure he'd convinced her about the Agency, but he had gone beyond the need to have her only as a business partner.

She wrapped her legs around him and squeezed. His cock was hard enough to make him ache with the need of her. He didn't know how, but Zuri had gotten under his skin but good. He needed her like he needed to breathe.

Reaching between them, he grabbed the material of her pants and pulled, ripping a gap in her crotch. Freeing his cock, he wasted no time sheathing himself inside her. She cried out as he settled them both into a comfortable position.

"You'll never be free of me, Zuri." He rested her back against the smooth bark of the mating tree. "If I have to keep you tied to my side every second of every day of every year, I'll do it. But I will not let you leave me. Ever."

Cade began a rhythmic thrust, the moist heat of her all but driving him mad. Everyone around them seemed to disappear. The only thing that mattered was making love to Zuri. He didn't know if he'd ever get another chance, and he needed to make the most of this time.

She responded beautifully. Her cries of pleasure rose to the heavens like birdsong on the wind. She tightened her legs and dug her heels into the tops of his thighs as she met him thrust for thrust. Cade gripped her hips, guiding her movements. Never had he felt so completed. Never had he needed the pleasure of a woman so much. It was Zuri. She made him forget the past and look to the future. For the first time in a very long time, Cade began to think maybe something other than violence lay on the horizon.

Sooner than he wished, he felt the approach of his orgasm. Sweat dripped from Zuri's eyelashes, and judging by her increased breathing and her jerky movements, she was as close as he was.

"Now, Zuri. Come for me. Please, sweetheart." His whispered command was closer to a plea, but she obeyed. When she screamed, he felt her pussy clamp down on him, milking him of everything he had. His shouts of release seemed to go on forever, as did the pleasure. Nothing in living memory felt as good as this. He wanted it to go on for eternity.

But something drew him from his sexually fulfilled haze. Screaming. Terrified screaming. It took him precious seconds to regain his wits, disengage himself from Zuri, and release her restraint bands. He saw an armor-clad Agency warrior running straight for them, and he didn't get Zuri released before the man was upon them. He turned to face the assailant and was caught across the jaw with a pulsar rifle. His head spun, but he remained upright and conscious.

Another blow from the butt of the gun rattled his skull. His cybernetic computer implants kept him conscious, but he was unable to mount an offensive. Probably because his only thought was to protect Zuri. When a bioelectric dart penetrated his skin, everything shorted out. He had two heartbeats of time before everything went black.

\* \* \*

Playing the part of avenging angel was hard with the crotch of one's pants ripped open and come dripping down the inside of one leg, but Zuri managed as best as she could. She had no weapon -- she'd wasted several precious seconds looking for anything she could use -- and she stood on wobbly legs, but she stumbled over Cade to stand in front of him, putting herself between Cade and danger. The Agency hunter wasn't one she recognized, but she doubted they would send someone she might possibly be able to sway with familiarity.

"Very nicely done, Agent Starbreeze. We would never have caught this renegade without your help."

"You haven't got him yet." She was still weak in the knees, but her blood pumped hard now, the releasing endorphins clearing her head and giving her strength born of desperation.

"We thought he might trust you enough to bring you here."

"Here." Zuri wasn't following him. "The Agency already knows about Kuam. You cut all supply routes through this sector when these people refused to pay tribute. You've been trying to starve them into extinction." She wasn't sure about that, but she was curious how the agent would respond to the accusation.

"Yes. And it was working. Until your boyfriend there started supplying them."

"Why? They're warriors, yes, but they don't seem to have an interest in anything beyond their own planet. They're not a threat."

The hunter shifted his aim slightly to include Zuri in his field of fire. "Maybe not, but their ocean floor is rich in a mineral we want."

"Then work out something with them for trade. I'm sure there's something these people need that the Agency has in abundance."

"We're not in the business of giving backward little worlds what they want, Zuri. Everyone pays us tribute, and in return they have access to our considerable trade network. That is enough."

Zuri couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But you're killing women and children!"

"We, Zuri. We. *You* are a part of '*we*'."

She clenched her fists, unsure if she could reach the hunter in time to prevent him from killing her or Cade.

"The Agency sends only one hunter?" The familiar voice of Lars sent relief coursing through her. "I'd have thought you learned your lesson the last time, Mathis."

Mathis's eyes grew wide, but he managed a smile as he turned to face the large Kuam warrior. "Two. Zuri is the finest hunter ever turned out by the Agency, or didn't you know?" Thank goodness Cade had already broken that information to the large Kuam. Mathis was trying to force Zuri into fighting on the Agency's behalf in order to keep herself safe. Still, Mathis carefully shifted his position so as to keep all three people in his line of fire. He maneuvered around so his back was near the mating tree. Once again, Cade's unconscious form was between the hunter and Zuri.

Zuri watched Mathis carefully as he fastened restrictor cuffs around Cade's wrists and ankles. She was beginning to grow desperate when she felt Lars's large, strong hand grip her shoulder firmly. Knowing better than to make sudden or large movements, Zuri waited until Mathis was busy programming Cade's cuffs to look around her. There must have been a hundred warriors or more surrounding them. None of them wore clothing, but most had spears or swords in hand ready to attack when Lars gave the word.

"If you think I'm helping you slaughter these people, you can bloody well think again," Zuri bit out. "You're vastly outnumbered, hunter. I suggest you leave before you find yourself a prisoner. We both know the Agency would let you rot here before they'd even acknowledge the fact you'd been captured by such a primitive culture."

The hunter stood and finally saw the bleakness of his situation. He paled visibly. "Zuri, you can't turn your back on a fellow hunter. That's treason. You'll be killed."

"I'd rather be dead than be responsible for any more deaths." She lifted her chin. "I can't do anything about the past, but I can damn well change my future."

"So. This is it." The hunter's smile was more of a smirk than anything else. "The Agency was right to want to keep an eye on you. You might get them results, but they knew a bad seed when they saw one." He raised his gun to point at Zuri's head. When Lars tried to shove her behind him, Zuri blocked his movement. If it was her time to die, she wasn't about to take anyone with her. "By the authority given to me by the Great Council of the Agency of Universal Rule, I sentence you, Zuri Starbreeze, to death for the crime of high treason."

Before Mathis could pull the trigger, Cade swung his shackled hands into the side of Mathis's knee with all the force his cybernetic implants would allow. The man's leg broke completely in two, and the bone pierced the skin. Mathis's sick, agony-filled scream filled the air, and he crumpled to the ground, his lower leg hanging only by skin.

The material of his pant leg was already soaked in blood. The jagged bones of his lower leg ripped a gaping hole in the fabric of his uniform pants. Mathis lay on his side

with the foot of his almost dismembered leg lying beside his hip. Blood spurted freely, spraying the ground in this sacred place. Immediately, one of the men from the village ran to Mathis and kicked his weapon out of reach. An older man -- the village doctor -- took a small device from a bag at his side and ran it over the wound, cauterizing it, by the stench of burning flesh. Mathis screamed again, but the bleeding stopped.

Cade stood, his hands still shackled by the restrictor cuffs. "Because this is a sacred time on Kuam, a healer will gladly see to your injuries. If I were you, I'd get to my ship as soon as I was able and run for Agency space." The furious look in Cade's eyes made even Lars take a step back. "Consider yourself lucky you chose to do this during the most sacred of times on Kuam. Otherwise, these warriors might have tortured you for days before you were allowed to die. For what you've done now, you deserve nothing less." Cade looked down at the blood soaking into the earth at the foot of the mating tree and closed his eyes. He looked back at Lars, a sad, tortured expression on his face. "Blood has been spilt on the mating grounds, near brother."

Lars snorted. "And the man responsible will be punished severely, but that man is not you, Cade. Mathis did this on his own. It was only a matter of who stopped him. You were in the better position, but had you truly been unconscious, one of us would have done the same thing. You honor us with your aid, near brother."

The relief on Cade's face was total. This man Zuri had once hunted wasn't so cold-hearted, after all. When he looked at her, Zuri lifted her chin in salute. He might have shed blood, but he had prevented even more harm from being done.

"Splint this man's leg and take him to his ship." Lars spoke to a couple of warriors who immediately left to get the appropriate materials. "And you, Mathis, tell your Agency how we spared your life. Tell them the next time they send a hunter to this world we will destroy the hunter, and take to the stars and make the Agency our next target."

Mathis wisely said nothing. Most likely, the message wouldn't get delivered. Mathis would probably ditch his ship for one without a tracking device and do his best to disappear. At least, he would if he was smart.

It didn't take long for Mathis to leave. The celebration continued, if slightly muted compared to before. Lars kissed Zuri gently on the mouth before tossing Cade a wicked grin. Zuri couldn't help but chuckle.

"I don't see anything so damned funny," Cade grumbled. "And turn these damned cuffs off."

"I can't believe I forgot that. You should have said something earlier." She didn't make a move to undo them, though. She had an idea. "What happened to your cyborg strength?" Zuri raised an eyebrow.

"These cuffs are different. I can't break their hold, and I can't hack into the computer inside them. Besides, it seemed more important to get Mathis taken care of than to free myself. Now, get them off."

"Hmm." Zuri tapped a finger on her chin as if contemplating something world-shattering. "I wonder how these things work. Are they only magnetic? Do you think they would work on the mating tree as well as they work on a bulkhead wall?" She gave him her best wicked grin.

"Now, wait just a damned minute." Cade's expression was priceless. He could see the tables being turned. Unfortunately, he was too busy watching Lars for a sneak attack to see Zuri move in for the kill. Zuri might not have had cybernetic strength, but she had spent her entire career learning to take advantage of the situation when an opponent underestimated her because she was a woman.

She moved swiftly, putting the entire force of her weight behind her when she lunged for his hands, brought them over his head and knocked him off balance. Pressing a couple of buttons herself, for a change, she changed the cuffs' physical properties and grafted them into the mating tree. He struggled against their hold, but the cuffs didn't budge. She simply loved turning the tables on her big bad smuggler.

Cade Brighton was caught.

## Chapter Twelve

Cade had never felt so ridiculous. Zuri was supposed to be hanging helpless from the mating tree, not him. When she slid his pants down his hips and ripped open his shirt, the strangest thing happened. Sexual excitement unlike anything he'd ever experienced surged through him and straight to his cock. Cade couldn't hold back the moan that escaped his lips.

Zuri's hands seemed to be everywhere. She caressed his chest and abdomen, his ass and thighs. Her body rubbed sensuously against his as she trailed her lips over his skin.

"Paybacks are usually hell, Cade." She murmured her words for him alone. Cade doubted anyone in the immediate area could hear anything she said. "I'm hoping this one won't be so difficult for you, but I'm not letting you down, and I'm not letting you come until you tell me what I want to know."

This didn't sound good at all, but his cock twitched in response. He was the dominant sexual partner. Being at the mercy of his woman wasn't something he'd have volunteered for. He doubted he'd ever volunteer again, but this was the most erotic thing he'd ever been involved in.

All he could do was watch as Zuri circled one of his nipples with her tongue, then the other. Sweat broke out on his body when she traced the valley separating his abdominal muscles down to the tip of his cock. She didn't take him in her mouth as he'd expected. Instead, she ventured farther down to his sack, taking first one gland, then the other into her mouth before starting over again.

He thrust helplessly at her, willing her to take his cock into her mouth, but she didn't. She licked a long, wet line up his cock to his navel where she dipped and circled.

Her breasts hugged him when she ventured back up his body, and she stopped to pump him several times, continuing the erotic torture.

"Sweet stars, what the hell are you doing to me?" he croaked.

"You have something to tell me."

"What?" Did the woman mean to drive him insane? How did she possibly expect him to carry on an intelligent conversation in this condition?

"I believe you've been withholding something from me. A vital piece of information I need in order to decide what I should do with my life now that I've officially left the Agency."

Uh oh. "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

She broke contact with him immediately. "You don't?" She looked up at him, a look of puzzlement on her face, but laughter in her eyes. "OK. I'll just go find Lars. He's willing to help me plan a future if I need the help. In fact, he had a plan all laid out, but it involves me being his exclusive partner through the festival." She smiled and waved. "See you later."

"Zuri!" Cade hadn't meant to bellow, but she wouldn't let him get a word in edgewise.

"Yes?" Damn the woman! She was intentionally baiting him.

"What is it you want me to tell you? I can't read your mind."

She placed her hands on his chest, studying them, as if trying to choose her words carefully. "Cade, why did you get so angry at me when you found me with Lars?"

"I wasn't angry at you. Lars knew you were with me, and he still tried to stake a claim on you."

She shook her head. "No. He didn't know until I told him, and you never made your claim on me known."

"I never said I had a claim."

"So how was Lars supposed to know?"

"He's supposed to bloody read my mind!" Was she really going to make him say it? He wasn't sure he could put into words his feelings for her. He'd given her clues along the way, but he wasn't sure he was ready to admit everything he was feeling, even to himself.

"Well, he did." She grinned before going to her knees and looking up at him from beneath his engorged cock. "But I need to hear it from you."

"What?" The sexual haze she created was dropping his IQ dramatically. Nothing was making sense.

"Lars told me how you felt about me, but I want to hear it from you."

"How could he possibly know that? Hell --" He took in a couple of deep breaths, trying to clear his head. "-- I don't even know how I feel."

"Yes, you do, my love." He almost didn't hear her whispered reply. "You know. And I'm not letting you leave here until you tell me."

She was going to do it. She was actually going to make him say it. Something he'd never said to another person in the universe.

"Zuri --" He started to sweat. Profusely. "I --" He broke off when she slid back up his body and hooked one leg around his hip, bringing her sex in contact with his.

"Tell me, Cade." She kissed his lips lightly while she coated his cock with her intimate moisture. "I need to hear it." Her eyes pleaded with him, and she looked at him as if he was the most important person in her world. As if she'd be devastated if he said anything other than the three words she wanted to hear. "Please," she whispered.

"Sweet Mother." Breath wouldn't come. He felt like he was suffocating. What the hell was this? The killer, Cade Brighton, having a panic attack because he found himself in love with a fantastic woman and the only thing she wanted was for him to tell her so. If Lars was watching, he'd kill the man. He took a deep breath before blurting out, "I love you, Zuri. By the stars above, I love you!"

Her cry of joy was music to his ears as she let him slip inside her. With one foot still on the ground, Zuri began to ride him. She built the pleasure slowly, deliberately.

"I love you, Zuri, but if you don't let me down soon, when I *do* get out of this, I'm going to spank your ass." He needed more. He needed to have full access to her. To be able to bury himself in her until he wasn't able to get out. Who was he kidding? He'd already done that. She would always be a part of his soul. No matter what happened, no matter if she left him after this night, he would always love her.

She laughed and reached above him to release the cuffs. Once she did, he tore them from his wrists, then yanked her back to him and kissed her roughly.

"I've never given my heart to another person, Zuri. I've never loved like this." He picked her up, only to lay her gently on the grass -- careful to stay away from the bloodstains -- beneath the mating tree. "There isn't a part of me I can deny you."

He parted her legs and situated himself between them, guiding his cock back to her entrance. With one quick thrust, he sheathed himself inside her. They both cried out, and Zuri wrapped her arms and legs around him tightly.

"I love you, too, Cade." She urged his head away from her neck where he'd buried it so she could look at him. "You are the most honorable man I've ever known. These people are lucky to have you as their champion, and I'm lucky to have captured your heart the way you've captured mine."

He surged into her again, unable to form words to express his feelings. The only thing he knew how to do was make love to her. If he could give her unstoppable pleasure, maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to make her understand just how much she meant to him.

Zuri clung to Cade like he was her lifeline on a space walk. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the feelings she had for this man. Funny that she should owe this newfound love to the Agency. She would have laughed if she'd been capable of anything other than a screaming orgasm. As it was, she was only seconds away from dissolving into a heap of exhausted, sated flesh.

Cade urged her legs from around him and spread them wide. He lay on top of her, his arms trapping her legs open and close to her body. She was helpless to do anything other than let him fuck her at his own pace.

Finally, in desperation, she grabbed his ass and urged him on. Faster and harder she pushed him. His grunts made her smile. He was just as affected as she was. It didn't take long for his breathing to turn erratic, his movements jerky. He was on the verge. Just like she was.

"Now, my love," he croaked. "Come for me. Sweet universe, please come for me!"

She didn't have a choice. At his pleaded command, she was helpless to resist. She didn't *want* to resist. Never again. All she wanted was to please him in every way, because she knew he'd be striving to do the same for her.

Her orgasm washed over her like a blanket of fire. It burned and tingled, before settling into a sleepy warmth that left her sated and happy. Cade's orgasm took longer to subside, she suspected because he wanted to make sure he lasted long enough for her to finish hers. That was just the kind of man he was.

He rolled them both so he didn't hurt her, and Zuri snuggled into him. Neither spoke for several seconds. When Zuri was finally able to put more than a couple of words together, she laughed. "Who'd have thought we'd be here in this situation when I first met you in that bar?"

"I knew it." That mocking, male superiority tried to assert itself, but Zuri only laughed.

"Liar. You might have intended to bring me here, might have even intended to fuck me in this very spot, but I seriously doubt you ever intended to fall in love with me."

He groaned. "You have a point there." She swatted at him playfully, and he chuckled. "I wouldn't trade this moment for anything in the universe."

"Neither would I. I never thought it could be so much fun getting caught. If I had, I'd have gone after you years ago."

"You caught me, too, just as you'd intended. But I have one request, Zuri."

"Anything, my love."

"Don't ever let me go."

She grew serious and framed his face with one hand. "Never."

"Never." His answer was just as serious. "You are mine forever."

They held each other close, both feeling the enormity of the moment. Zuri knew that in this moment was born a new life for them both, and together, anything was possible.

Anything was possible.

## **Marteeka Karland**

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

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

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