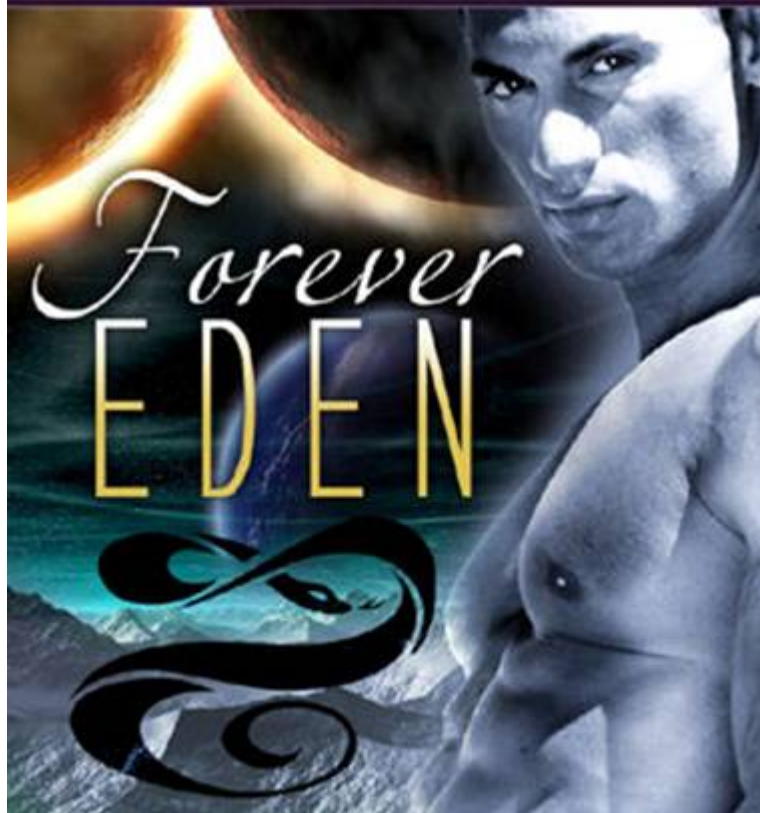


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Tryst SHIFTERS

L. Shannon



Forever Eden by L. Shannon

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By

L. Shannon

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Forever Eden

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-161-9

Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Editor: Melissa Darnell

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

Forever Eden is dedicated to my family, including those bound by genetics, housing convenience, emotions and common dreams.

Chapter One

Adam Spotted-Paw glared at his younger but bigger brother. "You fight like a dying ox, all panting and no action!" Their game of sparring had gone past pleasure and into just wanting to get it over with.

A quick ending wasn't worth the disgrace of losing to Josiah, though. Too much depended on this match.

His brother lunged at him, all anger and no focus. *Idiot*. Usually, Josiah lost for that very reason.

Adam dodged the rush, slid his leg out, tripped and, with a deft twist, flipped Josiah, pinning him flat to the ground under his knee.

"Let me up," Josiah grumbled.

He pressed down just a little bit, pushing his brother's face dangerously close to the mud-churned earth. "Not until you beg for mercy."

"Fine. I beg. Are you happy now?"

Adam jumped back. "Almost."

"So what will make you happy?" Josiah rolled over and held up his hand for help off the ground.

Their hands clasped with a slight squish and he tugged, pulling Josiah to his feet. "I'll be happy if you ask Maria to the picnic tomorrow night."

"But Maria wants you to ask her!"

"I want you to do this for me. That would make me happy."

Josiah nodded. He couldn't really refuse. He'd lost the match and so he'd lost the favor, but what Josiah didn't know was that pretty little Maria would be just perfect for him.

"Go on. Go ask her now. I don't want you to miss your chance."

"You are a bully, my brother." Josiah straightened his short black hair and dusted off his mud-splattered clothes.

Adam just watched. He held back on the laugh all of Josiah's primping inspired. He didn't need to do any of that. All it would take was one sincere look. Then those two would be as good as sold down the mating river.

That was how it always was with true love. Not that Adam had ever felt the elusive emotion. No, he'd never been so lucky, but he'd seen plenty. Someday it would happen for him, but so far...well, so far he was the oldest single man on the planet.

For seven hundred years, he'd helped pair up the first, second and third generations on Raxis. For the last two hundred years, he had attended every birth in hope of finding his own mate. For all that time, his gift had benefited everyone but himself.

What good is seeing where love fits when the blessing never fits me?

After his bath, he'd head back to the sacred temple. It seemed the only place he felt peace anymore.

As First Born, he'd claimed the temple as his territory, which had not been challenged by any other. The temple of Ra was more a shrine than the celebration Adam thought it should be, but the elders held that as custom. And on Raxis, custom was not questioned.

Once he'd bathed away the last evidence of his match with Josiah, Adam started for the temple, but paused at the door to his small home.

A strange whistle cut off all the natural sounds of people and other life. He looked up to find the sky on fire while the whistle grew into a roar.

Was it a shooting star falling on Raxis?

Someone cried out. Another screamed. Their small town became a backdrop of energy as people yelled and ran.

Adam looked around and saw his parents across the courtyard. They stood quietly, watching the falling fire with faces frozen in horror.

He covered his ears to shut out the horrible noise. Even that did little to help. The ground shook with the sound. It shook so badly that when the object crashed into the temple, the final explosion of noise was barely louder than the rush that came before.

He was running toward his burning temple when all the others were running away. The fire would burn the records, damage the holy relics. He rushed to the stone building, glad that the rock could not burn, and shocked that it had melted in places.

"Ra, help us..."

The falling star wasn't a star at all. It was a vehicle of some kind.

The long plates of black metal were torn and wrinkled like fine linen. The spine of the thing was broken, spilling out strange materials, colored ropes that sparked and jumped as if alive.

All the black was in sharp contrast to the white stones of the temple. Black scorch marks and red flames fought to bring both colors closer to gray.

His temple was destroyed, its walls battered down and its strong stones scattered and even crushed. The room holding the sacred scrolls was blocked by the flaming wreckage. Still, he had to try...

Adam started forward, but was dragged to a stop at the tumbled outer wall. He jerked his arm, but Josiah wouldn't let go.

"You can't go in there."

"I have to. The scrolls and relics need to be saved from the fire." Why couldn't his brother understand their importance?

"Don't bother. The fire seems to be banking. It'll go out soon enough." Josiah kept hold of him, kept him from doing any good. But after a few minutes of watching the flames slowly die out, he moved closer to the wreckage. "What do you think it is?"

"A vehicle," Adam said.

Other people gathered around them. The stench of smoke kept the immediate area clear, but onlookers circled around the temple.

"If that's a vehicle...where is the driver?"

A driver? Adam wanted to scream. Why hadn't he thought of that? He jerked free of Josiah in a fast, hard yank and jumped forward. If there was someone inside, then they'd have to act fast to help them. If it wasn't already too late.

From one end to the other, the thing was probably about twenty wolf lengths long and half that wide. But at which end would he find a driver? If it were like a carriage, there would be a door of some kind, but he couldn't see anything that looked like a door. What he did see was a great, menacing eye painted on the narrowed end that had been all but buried into the temple wall. That flaming eye would be on the front like a predator...wouldn't it?

Adam climbed over the tumbled stones, making his way to where the metal smoothed out into some sort of glossy surface. When he was close enough to touch it, he hesitated. The metal vibrated like a living thing. It felt almost obscene in its likeness to life.

Surely it was just like a wagon with no life of its own, except for what drove it?

He peered more closely at the shiny black material, which was not metal but something more like window glass. Although, it must be much stronger than glass, because it hadn't broken or bent like the metal. It was somewhat transparent. And inside...

Inside was a woman!

She lay awkwardly, partially in a seat. Her body hung limply, looking past life and on into the shadows of death. Blood smeared her pale skin, blonde hair and probably her clothing too, although the black fabric hid the red from sight.

"Josiah! There is a woman inside. Get me something to tear open this thing." Adam didn't bother to see if his brother obeyed him. He could feel Josiah moving away and knew he'd return with tools to help. Instead, Adam focused on running his hands over the metal surface, looking for any indication of an entrance or even a weakness that could be used to get inside.

The metal burned hot at his fingertips, but he didn't let the pain stop his search. His fingers slid over the metal, dipping in just slightly.

There was an indentation in a smooth line that ran up and down. He explored the aberration, searching for a handle or lever of some kind to open what must be a door.

Nothing. There didn't seem to be a way to open it.

"I brought your bar and axe!" Josiah vaulted over the rubble to his side.

Adam took the pick axe and tried jamming it into the miniscule dent he'd found. But no matter how hard he hit or how precisely he aimed, the metal didn't give.

"What's that symbol?" Josiah pointed to the damaged coloration about shoulder high beside the line he'd been working on. "It looks like a paw print."

It did, but when Adam dipped his head closer, the image changed to a man-sized palm print. He reached up and placed his hand over the strange image. In the moment of contact, a jolt of energy sizzled over his palm, dancing with his personal magic. It was both familiar and alien all at once.

But most importantly, it opened the door.

Chapter Two

The interior of the vehicle had an ugly, sterile feel, as if all the scents and feel of nature had been subdued, leaving nothing but metal and machine. Even if the machine hadn't been torn and smashed, the very anti-nature of it made the inside almost painful to bear. The sense of life was still here, but the feel of it was different from anything he knew. The strangeness of it was so odd that Adam had to force his body to carry him inside.

But once he reached the woman's side, everything but her faded from his mind. His fingers brushed over her long neck first to detect if her heart still beat.

As their skin came together, he registered three soul-changing details. She was alive; her pulse fluttered weakly under his touch. The woman was not human, but Valàfrn like he was. And most important of all...

She was his mate.

After seven hundred years of waiting, his mate had finally arrived in the guise of an angel riding the back of a metal shooting star.

Once he'd recovered from the shock, he moved his hands lightly over her twisted body to determine if he could move her without causing her any more harm.

Her short blonde hair was streaked with blood from a deep and still bleeding head wound, and she'd broken both a leg and one arm. He

couldn't reach her left leg to examine it. Even if it were injured also, she needed to be out of the wreckage and into somewhere safe.

"Is she alive?" Josiah asked from the doorway.

"Yeah." He didn't bother filling Josiah in on the other details. There would be plenty of time for that later. He scooped the woman up, gently cradling her against his chest, and made his way out of the vehicle.

"Where are you taking her?"

He was taking her to his bed. He buried his face in her tangled hair, breathing in the scent of her. Yes, she was injured and needed healing, but he wouldn't and perhaps couldn't let her leave his side.

"Adam? What are you doing?" Josiah growled the question even while he opened the door to Adam's home. Josiah was brighter than he looked.

Adam didn't bother to answer. He carried his precious burden directly to his bed. Once there, he gently laid her out and began loosening the strange fabric so he could tend to her injuries.

Josiah appeared at his shoulder with Adam's small medical kit. "You don't have much here. Do you even know how to help someone hurt this badly?"

Under the black fabric, the woman wore simple but feminine underclothes. The rich rose shade hinted at how lovely it would be on skin flushed with passion. "Help me set her arm."

"What do you want used for a splint?"

Adam glanced at the kit, but there was nothing there that would work. What would be strong enough but not too heavy? His gaze fell on his sister's painting hanging over the bed. The frame was of a hard wood, but finely trimmed to be light and elegant. Mary would understand.

He broke it into pieces of the right length, setting the painted canvas to the side.

"I'll straighten the break and hold it steady while you wrap it tightly with the healing cloth." Even as Adam reached for the twisted arm, he had to grit his teeth against the coming pain he'd be causing her.

"Thank the Creator, she won't feel this." His grip pulled and fought her contracted muscles, wrestling the bone back in line.

"Easy, my brother." Josiah handed him a square to wipe the sweat streaming from his face. "Should I call for help? By now, others will be hovering outside and probably in your home as well."

"No, let's just do her leg and be done with it." The urgency of the moment was not faked. He'd face damn near anything to finish before she awoke. The thought of harming her when she didn't feel it was hard enough.

He lifted her long, slender leg, examining the break. It was a clean break on the bone in her upper leg. He was able to use his own healing to close the laceration over the break and then, together with Josiah, he bound the break as well as he could to offer it support in the coming hours.

"Is she...?" Josiah paused while he watched the tiny cuts, which had covered the woman's right cheek, slowly heal.

"Yes, she is like us." Which explained some questions away while asking just as many new ones.

"Guess that tells us why the paw print was on the door, but who is she and where did she come from?"

"Good question." This came from their father who peered through the doorway to study the woman on the bed.

It was all Adam could do to keep from growling with possessiveness, which was completely ridiculous. His father was no threat to his mate. He maneuvered the light blanket over her to keep any other from looking at her when she was so vulnerable.

"She destroyed our temple. We need to gather the council to discuss strategy," his father said.

Strategy over what? What threat could she be now that she'd crashed like a broken angel into his arms? His father's grim expression boded badly. Adam shifted to place himself between the woman and the door.

No one would threaten her.

"Easy, son. We must think of the repercussions to our people before the welfare of a stranger. It is the nature of things."

"Don't speak to me of nature. If you must go hold council, do so. But no matter the length of time you talk, the discussion will have little to do with what happens to her." Adam continued to block his father's view. Why would they react to her as if she could cause them harm?

His father's eyes narrowed. "Is it like that?"

Much as he hated to challenge his father, he would not concede in his duty to protect her. "It is and will continue to be."

"Very well. If you decide to speak to the council, it is as it has been for the past two hundred years...your right to do so."

Adam forced his chin to drop just slightly to acknowledge his father.

He wouldn't be seeing the council. He wouldn't be leaving his mate's side. He waited until his father left before relaxing his stance.

Josiah seemed to be following the situation well. "I will go to the gathering and listen. I haven't the years to be heard, but I can bring back news to you if there is any reason to do so."

Adam sank onto the bed beside her, letting his fingers run through the tips of her curly hair. "Thank you, Josiah."

"She is your mate, isn't she?"

Adam smiled. Josiah was young, but he was intelligent. "How did you know?"

"Because I have never seen you act as you did today. Once you set eyes on her, the temple and our clan's history were forgotten. As was your family."

"Not my family..."

Josiah waved aside the objection. "That was not a judgment. Before today it might have been, but life has changed today for us both."

Maria. "You spoke with her?"

Josiah nodded. His eyes gleamed with a light that had been missing before. He hesitated only a moment then left the room to see to the self-appointed task.

There had been a time when Adam would have resented that light, the beauty of a love revealed, but that time was past.

Adam retrieved a small cloth and a bowl of warm water to bathe the blood from her skin and hair. Every touch reassured him, and in a way he thought it might be a comfort to her as well. She didn't wake or move, but her heartbeat and breathing both settled into better rhythms.

The signs of her mending were a great relief. If she had worsened or not improved, the fear of losing her might have torn him apart. He just couldn't lose her now. After so long alone, he had found her. Or rather, his mate had come to him.

His world had changed completely. And he didn't even know her name.

Chapter Three

Evelyn awoke to someone else brushing her hair. At first, the languid motion lulled her back into a fugue of relaxation. She just lay there and took it in while her mind refused to put the information together and her soul said it didn't matter.

Maybe she was dead?

If she'd had a bit more energy, she'd have laughed at the thought. Not because it was ludicrous, but because she'd wondered the same thought several times before.

When was the last time that I wasn't dead? Lamini4 when she'd been sent in to rescue the stranded supply crew? No, that wasn't the last time. The last time was when she pulled Commander Blackwell out of that itchy battle over in Jumplake Falls. That day she'd been shot in the back just as she threw Blackwell into the transport.

Thankfully he'd pulled her in behind him.

And six weeks later, she'd been back out in space with CS working the edge of the battle, sometimes working farther in.

CS... What had happened to him?

She blinked her eyes, fighting against the grit that had sealed them shut. She started to raise her hand to wipe the sand away so she could see, but a weight on her arm kept her from lifting it. "Wha..."

"Don't move. You've been hurt." The man's voice was a quiet, comforting rumble.

She forced her eyelids open. "Who are you?" Besides being the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Even through her irritated eyes, she was amazed by the guy leaning over her. His bronze skin and long black hair fit him perfectly. So did his black eyes...no, not black. She blinked furiously. His eyes were very dark brown.

And those eyes glistened as if he'd been crying. Why would he feel anything for her? Why did she want to comfort him and erase whatever stress brought that anguished look to his face? She settled for reaching up and cupping his angular jaw.

He ducked his head into the touch. Then he turned into it and pressed a feather light kiss to her palm before lowering her hand and holding it gently in his.

"I'm Adam." His voice was soft like a sigh and yet low with the suggestion that it would sound just as good with a growl in it.

"Nice to meet you, Adam. My name is 7RC2, Evelyn Moonchaser. How did I get banged up?"

"You crashed into my temple."

"Oh, my God...I forgot about CS."

His face closed up. "What is CeeEss?"

"CS is my ship. The thing that crashed? CS is a seventh generation Hybrid Cruiser. He...he is okay, isn't he?"

"I don't know. The vehicle you were in was very damaged."

"Can we go see him? I need to see if there is any way I can help him make repairs." The truth was CS would probably tell her to leave him alone, and she'd be lucky if her partner managed to be that nice about it. He was always a little cranky after a crash.

"We can go, but you should probably rest longer before making the walk."

"How long has it been?" she asked.

He stroked the hair back from her face. "You crashed nearly a day ago."

"A whole day?" There must have been serious injuries to keep her down all that time. So far all she'd noticed were the splints on her arm and

leg. "I still need to check on CS. He's my partner and we count on each other."

The man, Adam, nodded with a slight frown. Obviously he didn't like the idea of her being out and about. But whether that was because of the injuries or because she was being held captive she didn't know. The way his gaze softened when their eyes met, pushed the argument more toward him wanting to protect her.

She used her good arm to push herself upright. Then she swiveled the wrist of the wrapped arm, testing the mobility. "You did a good job patching me up." If he'd slacked off on the straightening before splinting her breaks, she'd only have had to get them rebroken by the first shipdoc. As fast as she healed, breaks could make a mess of her real quick.

"I don't think you should walk on that leg yet."

He was probably right, but she didn't really have a choice. "I need to check on CS."

"I'll carry you."

"What?" She must have heard him wrong. Surely he hadn't just offered to carry her back to CS just to keep her off a leg that was probably almost as good as new. "You don't have to carry me. I can walk fine, probably even run if I had to."

He nodded in agreement. "Just the same, I'll carry you." His smooth, tanned jaw turned into rock even as she watched. He wasn't going to yield.

"You know my father used to have that same stubborn look when he was serious about not giving in." She should argue, force him to acknowledge her independence, but after thinking of her father, she just didn't feel up to that kind of battle. "Fine, carry me."

"You will want to get dressed?" He waved to her ShipSkin, which was neatly folded on a chair next to the bed. When she nodded to the question, he glided around the bed and retrieved the clothes. "Will you need help dressing?"

"No, just a little privacy." Her face heated just a little as she looked around the room for a privacy area. "And..."

He opened a primitive folding door, which she had taken for a closet, revealing a small privacy room. "I'll be back in a moment." With that he left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

She hobbled her way into the little room. After emptying her overfull bladder, she happily gave herself a fast but thorough washing in the sink. Not that there was much to wash. Any blood from her injuries must have already been cleaned off at some point. Was that thanks to the strange man, Adam?

If so, she'd have to thank him. There was nothing worse than leftover blood from days old injuries. Okay, there were plenty of things worse, but she was still glad to be clean.

She pulled on the ShipSkin, testing her body with the slow motions. Both her arm and leg were tender to touch, and she knew they wouldn't support her completely for another few hours. Her abdomen was a sickly yellow color, indicating she'd had some serious internal bleeding. She also sported a new dent to her head that was still sensitive. That would account for the long time being out.

All in all not too bad. She'd lived through another near death moment. Oh, goodie.

She jumped at a tap on the door.

"Do you need anything, Ms. Moonchaser?"

She pushed the door open. "Sorry, I was admiring your stellar care of my body. I really appreciate the time and effort."

He nodded. "If you're ready, we can go to the temple now."

"The temple?"

"I'm afraid your CS has destroyed the temple quite completely."

He caught her elbow. "Please allow me, Ms. Moonchaser." Before she could do more than register his words, Adam swept her up into his arms.

Chapter Four

The intimate position of being cradled in his strong embrace was like nothing she'd felt before. His body was hot against hers even with both their clothes between them. And the sensation of security was alien. She should have been worried about not being in control. She was always in control. And yet, she let it go and let herself drown in his strength.

She wrapped her arm around his neck, unable to resist touching his thick black hair. The hair hung in a straight curtain, far longer than most of the military men she knew.

"Call me Evelyn, or even Eve, but not Ms. Moonchaser. If you must use a formal name, I would prefer Independent Rogue Commander Moonchaser, or IRC Moonchaser, since I do hold that rank." She ran her fingers through his hair once more, pleased when his steps faltered. Good to know he was affected by her touch.

"We are almost there, Evelyn."

She reluctantly tore her gaze off him to study the surrounding landscape. The temple was trashed. She'd demolished it completely just as he'd said. "Was anyone hurt by my crash?" Mentally she prayed she hadn't killed anyone.

"No, the temple was empty at the time, and nothing else was damaged."

She sighed in relief. It was bad enough that many planets and races lay in ruins thanks to the galactic wars. It would be tragic to add this lovely, seemingly untouched land to the list.

The village consisted of fifty or so houses scattered in a spacious circle around a few more official looking buildings. There were people out on their porches and standing in front of their homes, watching Adam carry her to the wreck site.

She must look helpless to them, like prey. "Put me down."

He didn't argue, but there wasn't much point to it since they'd reached CS.

By the time she was back on her feet in front of the cruiser's entrance, she was beginning to worry. CS was well and truly wrecked. He definitely wouldn't be able to do all these repairs on his own.

"Cee, are you in there?" She placed her palm over the door lock and waited anxiously as the panel opened with a squeal.

"Kind of you to inquire, Evelyn. I was beginning to think you had abandoned ship."

She smiled at the irritated tone of the detached voice. "You know I'd never leave my partner behind. Who would I bother, if not for you?"

"I'm sure you would find someone, but if you insist on hanging around, could I coerce you into patching the internal transmission cables?"

"Of course I will." She reached back and caught Adam's hand, thrilled by the way his fingers closed around hers. "Before I do, though, I'd like you to meet Adam, the man who has been caring for me."

"We have met. He used a leverage bar to beat on my exterior."

"You what?" She gaped at him. Why had he been beating on CS? She'd thought this planet was not involved in the war, but perhaps they were Green supporters after all.

"I believe he was attempting to open the hatch in order to rescue you," CS said.

"Ahh." She couldn't blame him for that then. "Thank you, Adam, for beating my hybrid cruiser." She cupped her hand and whispered to Adam, "Just like I so often want to do."

"I heard that," CS grumbled.

Adam stood still barely inside the entrance. His hand was a bit tense in hers. "Does your vehicle always speak to you?"

"Don't mind CS. He's more than a machine."

"I don't understand."

"CS is short for Celestial Serpent. He is a shape shifter sort of like us, only he can process the 'air' in space to create an environment suitable for carbon-based life."

Adam tilted his head in curiosity. "Please, tell me more."

"Let me tell you while I work on the repairs, or CS will be greatly annoyed with the delay." She smiled and released Adam's hand. She gathered materials and tools while maneuvering back through the interior to where CS's twisted frame exposed the transmission cables.

Adam followed and squatted down beside her when she sat on the floor to begin working.

"As I was saying, CS is able to change his shape to accommodate passengers or, in my case, a partner. He is a living being, but also has had many mechanical upgrades to help him maintain a solid structural form."

"So the metal-like material is metal?"

"Yes, in their natural forms, they are often called space worms. They can reach thousands of light-years in length. CS here is basically an infant in a sort of larval stage."

Adam nodded and reached into the cables to hold the pieces together while she taped them in place.

"About twelve hundred years ago, the Independence Corp discovered a means to communicate with the space worms. That was when they learned that the 'new' species was nearly extinct. The worms were exposed to a toxic radiation, which altered their genetics and left their young's external shell too thin to support their growing bodies in space."

Before she could reach for the next cable, Adam had it paired up with its matching piece and held ready for repair.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure." His voice held more meaning to it than what the words said.

"Why are you helping me? Don't you have something else to do?"

His lips widened briefly. "You crashed into my temple. Until we get CS moved, I can't even reach the record rooms."

"Oh. I'm sorry about that." She had trouble meeting his soft brown gaze, yet she couldn't really look away. "I...just so you know, I don't crash often, and this is, to the best of my knowledge, the first temple I've ever demolished."

"Why did you crash?"

"We were returning from a mid-space skirmish and were ambushed. The damage left us limping, and we made it this far."

One of his eyebrows crept upward. "You are a warrior?"

"Yeah, a soldier for the Independence Corp military. My clan has been in the Corp since its incorporation back on Earth. I had an uncle who was one of the ones to sign the declaration doc."

"This is some kind of battle then?" he asked with a frown.

"The galactic wars have been going on for fifteen hundred years. I guess that means your clan isn't choosing sides."

"We have only been here for nine hundred years." His puzzled expression left her wondering where they'd been before that.

But she didn't have time to ask, because a pounding at the door jarred her back.

"Adam! Are you in there? If so, you'd better get out here now. The counsel is calling a sanction against your mate!"

Chapter Five

Adam jumped to his feet and faced the door. In two strides, he was back at the entrance and eye-to-eye with Josiah.

"Did you hear me?" his brother asked.

"They can't issue a sanction against her. She hasn't done anything wrong."

Josiah smiled blandly. "She did explode the temple of Ra."

"You know that was an accident. They can't use that to declare her a danger. There must be more to it."

"I wasn't in the meeting. I heard from Halston."

Halston was a second gen like him, but since he'd been mated young, many treated him like a first generation. "What did he say exactly?"

"He said the first gen were all in an uproar about her being here and how it could destroy all they've built." Josiah peered around him, eyes widening. "Are you going to introduce me?"

"Did you take Maria to the picnic?"

"I did, and we will be binding at the river with the next moon." Josiah chuckled.

"Then I would like you to meet Evelyn Moonchaser." He didn't introduce CS because his brother would surely have a fit about a talking machine.

Josiah held out his hand in welcome. "Pleasure to meet you, Evelyn Moonchaser. I'm Adam's brother, Josiah."

"Call me Evelyn, please."

"I couldn't do that. Adam would beat me into the mud again." He released her hand and turned back to Adam. "Seriously, brother, you need to do something."

"I won't let them take her into custody," Adam said.

"Then I recommend you close this door and lock it up at least until they cool their heels. I can bring by some food when dark falls and you two can hole up here for a few days."

"Once they come with their sanction, that is what I'll do then."

"Are you saying that some people of your clan think I'm a danger to them?" Evelyn asked from his side.

He was glad she was asking about that rather than the part about her being his mate. He wasn't sure if her clan even believed in mates being predetermined. Many of his own people fought the inevitability of it even after seeing him in action for centuries.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go. See you after dark." Josiah turned and jogged out of the rubble.

Evelyn left his side and moved to the seat where he'd first seen her. "CS, I need an estimated TOD. How soon can we get off this rock?"

"With your assistance, we should be able to leave in forty-eight galactic standard hours. Longer would be better, though."

"Will they give me that much time?" Evelyn asked him.

"You do not have to flee, at least not yet. I won't let them bring you any harm."

"I'm not keen on being taken prisoner either."

"It won't happen."

"I can sense that you are powerful, but can you keep them from taking me if they decide to do so?"

"Yes," he answered, although he wasn't sure how he'd hold them off. He gritted his teeth. There was no way he'd let any of the others threaten Evelyn.

"Not that I doubt you, but I think I'd better get back to work on those cables." She turned and would have left him at the door, but he caught her uninjured wrist, pulling her to a stop.

"I won't let them harm you, and I won't let them drive you off." The doubt in her eyes bit at him. What kind of mate would he be if he couldn't even protect her from his own clan?

"Why do you care?"

He pulled her fully into his arms and claimed her lips with his own. The contact exploded through him, arousing every molecule of his body. He deepened the kiss, delving into her mouth, pouring all his need into her.

She responded, burrowing her body against his, sinking her fingers into his hair, kissing him back with a ferocity that left him ready to claim her with his body as well as his mouth and hands.

But he held back, slowing the kiss, gradually retreating until the wild contact was broken into shorter, lighter kisses. When he finally drew back, he whispered, "I can't help but care, Evelyn. You are my mate."

She froze, turning to stone in his arms. "I'm not your mate, Adam." She pushed herself free of his embrace, turning her back on him.

Evelyn fought to steady her breath. How could he claim to be her mate? They'd barely met. Being mates took time. It didn't happen when a soldier crashed into a temple. He was wrong. What they had was really good chemistry, of the exploding neurons variety.

But they weren't mates.

Maybe they could be in time, if she was allowed to stay long enough to get to know him. So far Adam was wonderful, and she could imagine how well they would come together sexually. That would be a big bang, seeing how just a kiss left her aching for more.

Adam was still standing at the doorway. The sight of him looking out at his home and seeing it as a threat made her ache in a whole other way. The poor man was putting himself between her and his clan. Very few of their kind would do such a thing for an outsider. Did he truly believe in their being mates?

Like the Earth wolves they could change into, Valàfrn were loyal to clan above all. Pack mentality kept them stable even when members could live into the thousands of years. Even in her own clan, when they'd had

more than two members, being together and united helped them each be stronger. The only reason to go against one's clan was...

For a mate.

She sighed. Even if she didn't believe it, he obviously did with all that he was. She couldn't insult him by belittling his reaction.

"Adam, will you help me finish with the cables?" She moved to his side and gently touched his arm.

"My parents are coming."

She looked past him to see an older couple walking toward them. She immediately recognized them. "How can it be...?" She swallowed over a lump of fear.

"Adam," the older man said evenly.

Adam slid one arm around Evelyn. "Father, may I introduce Evelyn Moonchaser —"

"Independence Corp Captain." The woman interrupted her son. Her face was scarred in a harshly straight line down one side, and Evelyn identified the wound as one that had been caused by laser fire.

"Admiral Shadowcaster, it is an honor." Evelyn bowed deeply to the legendary warrior. "I had no idea you were still alive."

"Just as we hoped," the man said.

"Mother? Father? What are you talking about? Why did Evelyn call you by a warring rank?" Adam's eyes had narrowed, but he stayed solidly between them despite the shock of what his parents must have hidden from him.

"I'm sorry, Adam, but we only did what we felt was best for our clan." His mother sighed deeply then sank to sit onto a large stone broken from the temple wall. "Please, sit and I will tell you all. Then we will have to make a hard decision."

Evelyn sat on the raised step of the cruiser, catching Adam's hand to pull him down beside her. She had a feeling he would need some support in what was coming.

"Evelyn spoke truly. I am, or rather was, an admiral in the Independence Corp, a soldier just as she is. We crashed here nine hundred years ago and, after much debate, my clan and crew decided to settle here

as colonists rather than rejoin the war." She ran her fingers through her partially grayed hair. "Our superiors would have called us deserters, but all we wanted was to build a life without all the death and fear. We managed that."

Adam shook his head. "You're saying that everything I have built my life on is a lie."

"No, son, not all. We believed in rebuilding our clan and finding a smaller happiness."

"What about the creation story? It was a lie," Adam accused.

"It is taken from stories in our past." His mother attempted to reassure him. "Not untrue, just not really ours. We never meant to hurt you or any of the other children. All we wanted was to find a place where you could grow up and grow old and never face the kinds of lives we left behind."

"I've spent my life memorizing the temple scrolls thinking they were spoken by our god. Now you tell me that you were crashed here. One of you wrote the scrolls." He paused. "Daniel wrote them, didn't he? I always thought the writing looked familiar." Adam slouched in on himself.

Evelyn couldn't help but comfort him. His anguish reached out and clenched around her heart. He'd never have guessed the truth if she hadn't crashed into his life. She wrapped her arms around him in a hug, offering him her strength. "I'm sorry, Adam."

He turned slightly in her arms and nuzzled the short curls of her hair. "You didn't do this."

"If I hadn't crashed here—"

"Then I would never have found you. I will be forever grateful to the enemy who dared to shoot you down into my temple."

Admiral Shadowcaster sucked in her breath. "The war has reached us here?"

"Not yet," she answered slowly.

"Could the ones who shot you down come here in search of you?" the admiral's mate asked with a growl.

She wished she could have said no. That it was safe, that their home would be in no danger, but it wasn't. "One of the Green scouts escaped because we were too badly hit to pursue. They might gather reinforcements and come searching for me."

He wrapped an arm around Adam's mother. "What scanning capabilities does your ship have?"

"CS, is your DMS back online? Can you do a scan of the quadrant?"

CS answered immediately. "Yes, and there is some activity beyond the eighth planet. The movements are too erratic to positively identify."

"Best guess?" she asked.

A heartbeat or two passed before CS confirmed their worst fears. "The schematics of three of the ships are similar to the scouts. The activity is most likely the Green scouts with two battle cruisers as reinforcements."

"Why would they spend that much effort on retrieving one cruiser?" Admiral Shadowcaster asked.

Evelyn straightened her back and fought back the urge to formally report to a superior officer. "I may have taken something of value to their strategic plans." Not only that, but she might be taking it to IC headquarters where the information could be the key to putting an end to the galactic wars.

The admiral's eyes narrowed. "How valuable?"

She met the woman's worried gaze without flinching. As much as she might regret bringing danger to these people, she would not feel guilty for doing her duty. "I would not be surprised if the force searching for me doubles or possibly triples."

"That important? Then you will be leaving us as soon as your ship is space-worthy." Admiral Shadowcaster spoke the statement as fact.

"Yes." She couldn't meet Adam's questioning gaze. She had to leave, and no pain she saw on his face would stop that.

"It is for the best, Adam. Protecting the clan must come before all else." Admiral Shadowcaster's eyes softened, and she leaned into her mate for support.

"Not all. If she leaves, then so do I," Adam said quietly.

"You can't be serious!" his father said.

"No, Aaron, he is serious." Adam's mother clung to her mate, but her eyes found Adam. "She is your mate, isn't she?"

"Yes," Adam said without even a shrug.

"He can't know that," Evelyn protested. It wasn't that she didn't want him. She definitely did, but her life wasn't exactly a kind one. He deserved better, or at least time to see what he was getting into.

She leaned forward to pat Evelyn's arm. "He does know. Adam has always been able to see those meant to be together. For seven hundred years, he has helped others to find love, but never found his own true mate. Now you are here, and if he says you are his mate, then you are."

Evelyn didn't know how to respond. She knew her mouth was hanging open. She'd never heard of such a skill among her people.

"Don't fight it, my dear. He can be a stubborn one if he has to be," Aaron added.

"But you've protected him here. He doesn't know anything about the wars or how ugly a soldier's life can be." She stood and backed a pace away from Adam. "You would be far better off if I left here the moment CS is able. Even now, my being here with you is endangering your whole clan. Being with me just isn't worth it."

Adam's eyes darkened, but with what emotion she couldn't tell. His face was unreadable. "You will do as you think is right, and if that means leaving me behind, then I will find a way to follow you." His gaze drilled into hers. "Somewhere on this planet is one or more ships, and if that does not offer what I need, then I will build another."

"That's crazy." He didn't know anything about space ships or space travel. Yet, with the look of iron in his jaw, she couldn't really doubt that he would find some way to follow her.

Admiral Shadowcaster interrupted. "No matter what Adam decides to do, I'm afraid you will have to leave here the moment you are able."

"On that we agree completely. As beautiful as your home is here, my duty to the Corp comes first."

Aaron said, "Is there any way we can assist you in the repairs?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I have the materials and the skill."

"Then I must insist that you stay within your ship until such a time that you can safely leave Raxis."

"I will be staying here with her. Josiah has offered to bring us supplies later tonight. Your secret will stay kept for as long as you wish it."

"I believe the time has come to at least teach the young ones about what lies beyond our territory. Perhaps some may wish to join the battle, but my hopes remain that we will be able to offer them peace and security here on Raxis."

Evelyn didn't agree with their choice, but she could understand it. "I'll do all I can to leave your secret safe. Meanwhile, if I am to help protect your world, I need to get to work on the repairs."

"Thank you, Commander. Your understanding is appreciated." Adam's parents shook her hand politely then left her alone with Adam and CS.

She had no idea how to deal with Adam and his determined plans. She supposed there was little she could do. Their course was rather set already. The only questions that remained were whether he was right and if they would get away in time for it to matter.

"CS?" Adam asked. "What is next on the repairs?"

"The cables still need completing and then the repairs to the external panels."

"I'll be able to move better if you help me take these splints off." She sat down next to Adam and held out her arm. "Don't argue about this. You know I've healed enough that I'm in no danger of rebreaking the bones."

He didn't argue. With a series of deft motions, he unwrapped her arm then her leg. The act of removing the splint from her leg demanded that she open the side of the ShipSkin from ankle to upper thigh. His fingers moving over her thigh were a wild temptation.

If they weren't in a hurry to get her back into space, if the Green Fleet wasn't chasing her, if his family didn't hate everything she represented... The treatment might have ended with them having a highly enjoyable afternoon.

As it was, they were not so lucky and instead spent the next four hours working on the ship together.

It was actually kind of nice having another person to help. Rather than CS barking orders at her nonstop, he could now boss them both around. He took it as his personal duty to help teach Adam all about the inner workings of space travel. The repairs proceeded much more quickly than expected.

All through the work, Evelyn worried over Adam's coming decision. How could he consider leaving his whole life behind? If he did leave with her, how would he cope with the strangeness of her life and duty? And her biggest fear...how would she keep him safe on a barely flying ship with the enemy biting at their heels?

Chapter Six

Night fell, and Josiah brought a huge basket of food.

"Thank you, Josiah." Adam took the basket, setting it inside the ship.

"No problem. Will you need more?"

More food? More time? Yeah, he and Evelyn needed more of everything. He could see that she doubted his declarations, and wished they had more opportunity to get past her hesitation. "Yes, if you can gather some that will travel well."

"You plan to go with her?"

Adam met his brother's gaze. The truth was they didn't have more time. When CS was repaired, she would leave, and when she did, he would be with her. "Yes, if she doesn't find a way to leave me behind."

"She doesn't believe you?" Josiah laughed. "I guess you will have to convince her in the old fashioned way." The laughter trailed off into chuckles that faded away even more slowly as Josiah left.

"Is that the food?" Evelyn asked from behind him. "It smells wonderful."

"You must be famished." She hadn't eaten all day. He should have seen to it sooner.

"Quit looking guilty, Adam. I have food here too. It isn't your job to see to my every need." She sat on the floor beside the basket and began looking through the food. "Normally CS would convert the jumpseats into

a table and chairs, but with him still recovering, it's better if he conserves his energy."

Adam sat next to her, waiting for her to pick out the vegetables and roasted field hen.

"Funny how food looks much the same, no matter the planet. Nearly everyone has some fowl to harvest, and they all have some sort of fruits and vegetables. Though, I have never seen one of these before." She lifted the Barak's Bait to study the shiny pink skin.

"That is called Barak's Bait because of the animal that lives year round on the fruit. When the plant is done bearing fruit, the Baraks go into hibernation."

"Fascinating."

"Even more so when you realize that a Barak is close to a thousand pounds of territorial beast with three sharp horns for aggression or defense."

"Indeed." She bit into the fruit and juices squirted out, dousing her chin.

She looked so good there, covered in sweet juice and laughing at the mess she'd made, that he couldn't resist. He leaned in and claimed her sticky lips, pulling back after one quick press to lick and nibble at the Barak's Bait juice.

"Mmm..." Evelyn leaned into his touch. The rest of her body quivered but didn't move.

When he had licked her clean, her lips tugged upward in a mischievous grin. Then she took another bite of the fruit.

This time she offered herself up like a banquet. She advanced on him to touch her lips to his, tickling him open and plunging in to stroke the sweet flavor over his tongue. She sparred with him in a delicious battle where in the end, they both won. She drew back.

"I want to make love to you, Adam."

His heart pounded in response. "I want that too."

"But it doesn't mean I am your mate. I want that up front because I don't want to lie to you."

"But you are my mate." He kissed her again, this time shifting her weight back flat on the floor, using his body to pin her.

"Maybe I will be, but what we do now doesn't have to mean more than it does. I want you physically. I like you as a person, but I will love my mate, and I don't know you that well."

"Then stop talking. We can get to know each other all night." He claimed her mouth again, this time keeping her lips occupied until he had them both naked. By then neither was capable of speech.

He left her mouth, kissing a line down her body, lingering over her lovely breasts. She was so responsive he couldn't help but lavish attention on her, licking her nipples into tight buds, rolling them in his teeth until she arched into his touch, moaning demands.

He stroked his hands ahead of his intention, letting his hand cup her mound, using his fingertips to caress her already damp sex.

Then he moved lower.

Evelyn gasped as he moved between her legs. He felt so damn good. Everywhere he touched or tasted tingled with awareness, and when his head dipped between her thighs, she was a goner. He pressed chaste kisses to her flesh before getting down to business with that fantastic tongue of his.

She had to grip something. Her fingers furrowed through his hair, anchoring him against her need.

His lips and tongue parted her and delved deep, stroking her pleasure, sending her up in flames. He surged and retreated until she writhed under him, begging for release. Then he angled upward, sucking her clit, sending her over into a shattering orgasm.

As she came back to her body, she met Adam's satisfied gaze over her belly. "Don't say it."

He didn't. Instead he moved up her body as if he were stalking prey. His lips claimed hers, sharing her taste, jumping her arousal back into high gear.

Then his body dipped against her. The head of his cock bumped against her entrance, sliding deliciously over her clit in a series of strokes that left her gasping into his mouth and clinging to his shoulders. She

couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All that mattered was joining him, becoming one. She bucked against his body.

The moment she lined them up, they slammed together in a moment of complete understanding. His length parted her, filled her, completed her. They were one. This moment, the action of coming together over and over, the perfection of their union was beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

He slowed the tempo, drawing out the rising waves of pleasure until she cried out. Then they raced together to the waiting gratification. The orgasm hit him first, slamming him deep into her, until she exploded with him, clenching around him in climax.

Softly the world crashed down around them. They lay on the floor of the cruiser, naked, sweaty and deliriously satisfied.

He was right.

They were mates. There was no other explanation for the way they came together. She'd expected good. But what they'd had was closer to supernova. And more important, it was something she couldn't walk away from.

Much as she loathed to move, they had things to do. "Get your ass up, my mate. We have to get this boat in the air and save your planet from certain destruction." She slapped his ass and squirmed out from under him. She almost paused at his sexy, far-too-satisfied grin, but he had a right to gloat, so long as he didn't keep it up too long.

Chapter Seven

Thirty-six hours and three sessions of love play later, CS was ready to fly. Which was damn lucky considering the Green Fleet was closing steadily on Raxis.

"Are all systems go for atmospheric exit?"

"All go for Tee minus sixty-eight galactic standard minutes."

Adam sat in the copilot seat. "And how are the Green Fleet doing?"

"They are still closing steady," CS answered.

He turned to face her, but he didn't question the plan she'd devised to protect his planet from discovery. Instead he just gave her the look.

"It is the only way. We have to use ourselves as bait if we want to be sure they don't look too closely at Raxis."

"I know," he said.

"Do you want me to run the numbers again?" She'd already checked them twice, but it wouldn't hurt to give them another look.

"Better yet, why don't you just explain them to me so we can both worry them over?"

He amazed her, and it wasn't the first time. Adam was serious about going with her, but he also planned on being an equal partner in the new path of his life. He wanted to know everything about CS and how the workings came together. Even though he didn't have any prior knowledge of space cruisers or anything equivalent, he was eager and intelligent. Not to mention, his wry sense of humor lightened even their rushed flight from the jaws of death.

"Well, the general plan is still the same. We will exit this direction to keep in the planet's shadow. We want to get out beyond the fourth planet so that it looks like the cruiser crashed there. Once we are in position, we wait for them to come through here." She motioned to the diagram on the consol, pointing out the distance notations.

"Will this give us enough time to escape?" His muttered question was more to himself than to her.

"The truth is, I don't know. We have to cut it close so they pursue without investigating the local planets." But if they cut it too close, then the fleet would catch them or shoot them down again.

"Be honest, is it worth the risk? What if the fleet reclaims the information you stole? Is Raxis worth risking what might end the war for everyone?"

He asked exactly the questions she'd gone through over and over. She told him the same conclusion she'd come to. "The maps and intelligence I have might go a long way to ending the wars. If it does, then the peace that will be given to the hundreds of planets involved in the war might be worth any price. But all those maybes and might do not equal the peace that your planet already has. I won't sacrifice Raxis and your clan for a maybe."

He nodded. "Show me again how these acceleration speeds are generated."

She did and was pleased by how quickly he caught on to even the complicated mathematics.

"Tee minus thirty minutes," CS said.

"Is there anyone you want to say goodbye to? We may not get back here for quite some time."

"I spoke with my family while you and CS did the full mechanical check." Adam leaned over the consol, peering at the screen CS used to monitor the incoming fleet. "Evelyn, what are these new alerts coming in on red?"

"Red?" Red wasn't good. She leaned in over his shoulder. "Damn, those are a problem I wasn't counting on. Those are space terrorists. The

Green Fleet uses them as mercenaries.” She counted them off. “Nineteen more added to the twelve Fleet ships.”

“Can we still do this?”

“The mercs usually have better weaponry than the Fleet. We need to move up our timeline.” She dodged through the interior, doing a last minute check while calling out to CS, “Bump up the schedule, buddy. We need to head out in under five.”

“Tee minus five. I’m engaging the external boosters,” CS said.

“Do it quiet as you can. Stealth is our only hope at this point.” Her teeth worried at her lip while she rushed through the motions.

All too soon, CS said, “Tee minus one. Evelyn, strap in. This will not be my best maneuvering.”

She threw herself into the pilot seat, belting her safety lines in place in time for CS’s countdown.

“Four, three, two and lift off.” The cruiser jerked and shuddered before lifting from the temple rubble. The monitors flicked to show the receding village.

Adam watched as his home became nothing more than a tiny dot in the distance. He was leaving everything he knew behind and had not a single regret. All his life he’d yearned for his mate. He knew the feel of being without and was willing to follow her into the unknown so long as he was at her side.

Her hand found him and clasped his hand in a tight grip, which anchored him to the present. They were together and would stay that way for as long as they had.

For as long as their creator gave them.

His parents may have made up their creation story, but in his heart he still believed in the spirit of what they’d built, even if the facts were torn away. Besides, the Green Fleet might catch or kill them within the hour. Now wasn’t the time to have a crisis of faith.

He squeezed her hand back, lifting it to press a kiss to her knuckles. “You maybe don’t want to hear it, but I want to tell you anyhow. I love you, Evelyn Moonchaser. I love you and would follow you wherever you will lead.”

She met his gaze with suspiciously shiny eyes. "Much as I'd like to fight it, I love you too, Adam. I'm very glad for your stubborn nature."

"Oh, kiss him already," CS said. "In fact, once we hit the fourth planet's shadow, you can do him so long as you keep it under seventeen minutes."

Adam laughed. "CS, you need to mind your own business. You take all the romance out of lovemaking."

"My apologies. I thought that seventeen minutes would require you to skip the lovemaking and get right to the sex."

"CS!" She was more than a little grateful for CS breaking up the tension. The laugh did them all some good, and twenty minutes later when they reached the shadow of the fourth planet, their plan felt as good as before despite the much longer odds they faced.

She unbuckled herself then Adam's safety belt, tugging him to his feet and leading him back to the small cabin. "Tee minus seventeen. We'd better get busy."

Adam didn't waste any time complying. He used magic to dissolve their clothes and, as fast as that, had her on the bed and slowly thrust into her waiting heat. Unlike prior times, they came together in a rush of passion. Their desperate touches and frantic coupling brought them both to orgasm in far less than seventeen minutes.

Once the almost violent need was satisfied, he cradled her in his arms. There they cuddled until CS interrupted them with a "subtle" reminder.

"Are you done yet? Get your asses back up here. We have work to do."

Adam dressed them both using his magic once more. She was able to do so, but had never really invested the time to fine tune the skill. And now wasn't the moment to be wearing pants for a hat.

They made it back to the front in time to see the first merc ships come into sight.

Evelyn strapped into the pilot seat. "CS, you know what to do, but just in case, turn on my manual steering as well."

"No, you will panic and throw off my groove."

Groove? Where had he heard that? "Have you been accessing old vids again? You need to stop that. Besides, you know I don't panic. I just want to be prepared."

"Oh sure. I suppose you want me to provide pilot privileges to your new mate as well. It is not happening." Even while he babbled on to her, CS maneuvered out into view of the oncoming fleet. He waited about three heartbeats in a powerless drift before loading all his speed into his rear thrusters, using them to race at an angle past the fleet. The immediate focus of the enemy jumped into motion, turning on them and blazing to full power.

"I am more than happy to sit back and listen to you two bicker. I have no need to pilot," Adam said with a tense smile. He obviously got that they bickered to stay in tune. It helped them when little else would.

"Don't think you're getting off that easy, mister. You will learn to pilot, just not today." She turned her whole attention on the rear monitors. Her job during this race was to be sure the Fleet stayed in pursuit but never got close enough to shoot them down.

"I'm happy to learn, but I think the fancy driving will still be your job."

"CS, three degrees to port. The battle cruisers are dropping back. We have two GF12s picking up to right flank."

CS adjusted. The scouts gained for a moment, then they veered farther out. The behavior wasn't right. "Something is up, watch for anomalies."

"What kind—" The cruiser jumped hard to the left. "We have company up here."

Damn, CS was right. A handful of scouts appeared from behind a moon. "We've been herded."

"Hang on." CS angled straight for them.

"CS? What are you doing?" She grabbed at the controls and found them unusable. He'd left her locked out. "Damn it, CS. You're going to ram them."

"I need your power," CS demanded with a roar.

"Oh, shit. It's one of those, is it?" She grabbed Adam's arm, tightening her grip until she felt the corded muscles. "Adam, we need to feed our magic into CS. He's about to do some acrobatics and needs the extra oomph. If you're not sure how, feed it to me and I will channel it to him. Either way, do it on my mark." She turned her attention to CS and focused on the tendril thin connection they'd had since she'd claimed him as a hatchling. "Get ready to catch."

One deep breath. Then a second. "Get ready, Adam. Almost there. Just about. And... Now!" She opened herself up and poured everything that was wolf magic into CS. A second wave of power joined hers and hit CS.

The cruiser shook once then began a violent spin, which increased their speed exponentially. The enemy fleet loomed up before them, then just as quickly they rocketed past the scouts.

Then they were all gone. Not like they'd left the enemy behind, but rather they'd been engulfed in the blackest of black.

"What the hell?" Evelyn studied the monitors, but the readings made no sense. "CS, where are we?"

"We are inside." His voice was decidedly smug.

"Inside what?" His tone might offer comfort, but his hedging left her with a small remaining worry. CS was still relatively young, and he at times thought he had great ideas that turned out to be not so great.

"Momma." The soft, worshipful word was answered by a low hum.

She gaped at the numbers on the panels, puzzling how they could support what CS was saying. "Do you mean...we are inside a space worm?"

"Yes, when I realized how thin your escape plan was, I made alternate arrangements. The Green Fleet have nothing that can affect a being as powerful as my momma."

"Ah...okay. I do have one question, though. Where will we come out, and will we be digested between now and then?"

"Of course not, Evelyn. You are aware that Celestial Serpents do not devour organic material. We will be near headquarters just as you wished."

Oh, shit. "If the fleet followed us in, then they will be taken right to headquarters? What have you done, CS?"

"Nothing so dumb as that, I assure you. After our entrance, the location was moved to prevent exactly what you mentioned."

"So we're safe?"

"Yes." His smug tone was going to get annoying, but for now she was just grateful he'd saved them.

"And well on our way to where we need to be?" She smiled at Adam. He was studying the numbers and looking out the view screen with interest. "ETA?"

"Twenty-four to thirty-six hours."

"Then you have the helm. I need to celebrate our survival with Adam. And since we did live, I need to discuss a wedding in the near future as well."

"Not that you thanked me, but you're welcome anyway." CS muttered a few more comments while she hurried Adam back to their little room.

"What is this about a wedding?"

"I agreed to be your mate, but I know my grandfather will expect you to make me an honest woman. Since Grandpap is my whole clan, I can hardly ignore his wishes. Will you marry me, Adam Spotted-Paw?"

He pulled her into his embrace. "I've waited a long time to find you, my mate. No other woman has torn my world apart nor offered me my every desire. I can't imagine a life without you at my side. I love you, and I'd love to marry you, Evelyn Moonchaser."

The End

Author's Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. In the time Shannon doesn't spend bothering her hubby, she shows dogs, gardens and watches over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. Shannon's always been a reader and lover of books, but never considered writing until one night when she ran out of books to read. She began writing that very night as the first line of defense in a battle against insomnia. Her writing has steadily grown into a war against reality. Her friends kindly say reality never stood a chance. L. Shannon's novels have expanded to fill an entire world with paranormal wonders including Valàfrn werewolves, Tascryn demons, vampires, selkies and many, many more. Be careful if you choose to enter Shannon's hunk-filled world. You may never wish to leave...