



**U-4EA**  
**Bernadette**  
**Gardner**

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BY

BERNADETTE GARDNER

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U-4EA  
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# CHAPTER 1

“I really wish I didn’t have to do this.” Fletcher Gray’s lament and long-suffering sigh echoed through the cavernous hold of the Mogarthan pod carrier he and his partner, Ganymede, had just confiscated.

“Lying.” The disembodied reply came from Ganymede over the ship’s communication system.

Fletch shook his head, annoyed at his partner’s insightfulness. Actually, he *did* want to do it. He just didn’t want to admit it to himself. Wanting to do it made him feel guilty because he knew it was wrong. “No, there’s a deep, chivalrous part of me that really feels uncomfortable with this.”

“Testicles?” This word was accompanied by a strangled sound, the equivalent of Ganymede’s laughter. Fletch rolled his eyes as he continued to stroll down the narrow corridor that ran down the center of the ship’s cargo hold. On either side of him rose the luminous, tear-drop shaped stasis pods that filled eighty percent of the *Xector IV*’s bulbous hull. He asked himself again what he’d done to warrant being saddled with a Metrian as a partner. While Ganymede’s intelligence and stealth skills exceeded that of any other known race, his acerbic attitude and often single-word communications became tiresome. Conversation with a Metrian was mostly one-sided and usually pointless.

“Leave my testicles out of this, Gan. None of this would be necessary if you had a decent pair of hands.”

Another snort of laughter. Fletcher Gray argued to himself that he really didn’t have a choice in the matter and therefore he shouldn’t let it bother him. He needed help running the damn ship. He only had two arms and it took four to run a pod carrier of this size. Since Metrians existed just slightly out of phase with the rest of the universe, Ganymede was almost entirely incorporeal and therefore largely useless as anything other than a talking brain.

Hence, it was a vital necessity that Fletch decant one of the twenty-five females held in the ship’s stasis pods and recruit her to help him with navigation and helm controls. That would be after she calmed down enough to sit through a brief lesson in pod carrier piloting and assuming he could still walk, talk, and breathe when she was finished with him.

With his luck, he'd pick a wild cat who'd literally fuck him to death before he could get a word in edgewise.

He could think of worse ways to go, but he had a mission to accomplish, so he wouldn't really be able to enjoy it. Just another reason why he hated the Mogarthan sex slave trade.

"Let's make this less personal. How about you pick a number and that's the pod I'll open?" Fletch scanned the nearby pods. He didn't have a preference. Each pod held one body, floating in a carefully maintained mixture of oxygenated, poly-mechanoid, bio-luminescent gooze. The females were all perfectly formed, exotically beautiful, and naked—since the gooze tended to dissolve the polyblend fibers of most clothing over time.

Four entwined tubes attached each pod to the central processing unit that controlled the chemical makeup of the gooze. One tube delivered nutrients. One tube oxygenated the liquid. One tube carried sedative and stasis chemicals, and the final tube carried a constant, hyper-amplified dose of U-4EA, the most powerful aphrodisiac in the galaxy. A little of the semi-legal compound went a long way toward heightening any sexual experience and the legitimate producers of the stuff made quadrillions of credits selling it to recreational resorts all over known space. The Mogarthan slave trade used tubs of it to turn illegally captured females into sex-starved maniacs.

"Thinking."

"Come on, pick a number and let's get this over with. Then turn off the com. I don't want you listening in and getting your jollies vicariously when you're supposed to be searching the

ship's database for its destination coordinates."

"Seventeen."

"The coordinates?"

"Pod."

"Oh..." Fletch stopped before pod seventeen and contemplated the dark-haired beauty floating inside. He had to admit, Ganymede had chosen well.

This one was different than the others. Most of the females in the pods were Breoxan, and while Fletcher liked flaxen blond hair and huge...uh...blue eyes as much as the next man, the dorsal fin and nictating membranes put him off just a bit.

Not that he was prejudiced in any way, but a Breoxan might have had a little trouble with the navigational controls as well. In a pinch, she might need more than three fingers on each hand to work them and he didn't want to have to decant a second female and then keep them from sparring for his affections until the U-4EA wore off completely.

The female in pod seventeen was human, just like Fletch. A silky cloud of black hair floated around her heart-shaped face. Fletch liked her long, graceful limbs and tapered fingers, her sculptured brows and perfect, round...eyes. If they were open, they'd probably be lovely. She looked supremely peaceful and he regretted that calm wouldn't last for long once he drained the pod of the chemicals keeping her in stasis.

"Nice choice, Gan. I can work with this one."

The Metrian didn't answer. Either he'd obeyed Fletch and shut off the com, or he was listening from the bridge and chuckling behind his incorporeal hand at his partner's

dilemma.

“Come on, Fletch, get it together. Let’s go.” He reached for the pod controls, grateful they could all be opened individually. A man, after all, had his limitations. Fortunately sex on demand wasn’t one of them for Fletcher Gray.

\* \* \*

Talia Lory had achieved nirvana. She didn’t know quite how, but it didn’t matter. She’d never been happier, freer, or more uninhibited.

In her current dream, she floated naked in a warm, green sea, lazily drifting on a sensuous tide. The waves caressed her lovingly and carried her gently back and forth among a school of curious fish. The creatures were invisible to her, but she could feel their tiny lips nibbling on her skin, producing an all-over tingling sensation that felt wonderful. Each anonymous aquatic kiss triggered an answering electric pulse deep within her body. The reciprocal pinging on her nervous system produced a constant hum of indescribable pleasure.

Talia had no idea what she’d done to deserve this little slice of heaven, but whatever it was, she was grateful for it. If it were up to her, life would go on exactly like this forever.

Naturally, it wasn’t up to her. A sudden cooling of the water frightened away the fish, leaving Talia bereft. Her tingling skin now felt hot and itchy. So did other, less accessible parts of her body.

A wave lifted her and for a moment, she felt wonderfully weightless. Then she hit bottom.

A cold, slick surface smacked her hard in the ass and she slid forward, head over heels in a rush of tepid brine. She opened her mouth to protest and a torrent of sweet, salty liquid exploded from her lungs. She coughed and dragged in a breath of stale air that made her cough even harder.

Her lungs were on fire, her body was freezing, and everything appeared bathed in a sickly green haze.

A fist slammed into her back dislodging another lungful of yellowish liquid. When the shock of the sudden blow passed, Talia whirled around, fighting mad and fully prepared to murder her attacker.

“Take it easy, Tiger,” a male voice ordered. “Catch your breath before you take me on.”

“Who the hell—?” Talia blinked the green haze away and stared up into the most gorgeous face she’d ever seen.

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“I want you,” she said. Her voice had taken on a feral quality she didn’t exactly recognize, but that didn’t concern her as much as the fact that he was still dressed.

She catapulted to her feet and flew at him. To his credit, he caught her mid-flight, as if he’d been waiting for her.

She ripped at his shirt and dipped her head to suck on the tanned skin above his collarbone. He tasted salty and masculine. Delicious. His muscles rippled beneath her lips.

She dug in, wrapping her legs around his narrow hips. She snaked one hand between their bodies to fumble with the fastenings of his pants. The bulge between his legs grew under her ministrations, and the pleasant pressure of it was just where she needed it.

“Get them off,” she ordered before plunging her tongue into his mouth. He mumbled something unintelligible and she bit his lower lip to shut him up.

“Ow!”

She tasted the coppery tang of human blood and for some reason, it fueled her lust. “Off! Now.”

“All right, I’m working on it.” He sounded mildly annoyed, which didn’t make sense. Talia vaguely noted that she rarely ordered men out of their clothes, but on the rare occasions she had, they’d always readily complied.

She clung to him while he shimmied out of the tight black trousers and gave a joyful little gasp at the size of the equipment he revealed.

She dropped her legs and propelled him backward until his back hit the wall—a metallic wall like the bulkhead of a spaceship.

“Hold on a second,” the man admonished when she tried to thrust her hips against his impressive erection. He wrapped his gorgeous arms around her for a moment and the sensation of being trapped in his strong embrace almost set her off. She squirmed in his grasp, searching for what she needed. “We can do this the hard way or the easy way—”

“Hard!” She cut him off with a deep kiss, drew his tongue

into her mouth and ground her hips against him until his erection slipped between her legs. *Oh, yes.*

They fell to the floor with a splash and rolled through the green puddle that spread across the black deck. When they skidded to a halt, he was on top, which was exactly where Talia wanted him.

“Come on, hurry!” She arched beneath him and she swore she heard a sexy growl right before he thrust inside her willing heat.

*Oh, yes!*

Now he had the idea. Talia bucked wildly, meeting each thrust eagerly as they slid inch by inch backward across the floor.

The warm ocean had been nice, but this was better. Hard muscles under her hands, hot man between her legs. The cold, wet floor under her back she could have done without, but the contrasting temperatures and textures added to her pleasure. The commingling scents of male sweat and her own sweet musk made her wild.

The wave built to a thundering crescendo, and when it broke she tensed and held, biting her own lower lip until she tasted blood again. Her body convulsed in the throes of an orgasm that left her completely breathless.

She couldn't think, couldn't see. It had never been this good, this hard or fast before. When he came a second later, pumping hot seed into her still pulsing core, it was like heaven all over again.

They lay panting in the narrow corridor, green water

sloshing around their bodies in shallow waves. The hum of an engine replaced the pleasant buzz in Talia's spine, and blind panic replaced the fuzzy afterglow of the best sex she'd ever, ever had.

"Where the hell am I?" Who the hell was this guy who now lay next to her, one powerful thigh draped over her hip?

"You're on the *Xector IV*," he replied in a conversational tone. "I'm Fletch, by the way. Nice to meet you." He lifted his hand from her right breast and offered it to her.

She stared.

"Fletcher Gray. My friends call me Fletch. I hope you and I will get to be friends. I'd say we 'got off' to an auspicious start, no pun intended. Now, I'm sure you have a ton of ques—"

She punched him.

His head snapped back and he rolled away from her, moaning and rubbing his rock solid jaw.

Ignoring the pain that now radiated up her arm, Talia lurched to her feet, legs shaking, and backed against the wall. Her complete nakedness, which up until this moment had seemed entirely natural and wonderful, suddenly became a severe problem.

No point in trying to cover anything though. He'd already seen and touched it all.

Fletch finished adjusting his jaw and shot her a disparaging look. A wet slapping sound accompanied the retrieval of his damp pants and shirt and she watched while he slithered his magnificent body into the soggy clothing.

“Where *am* I?” Talia’s sudden bout of self-consciousness brought on a violent blush that warmed her from nipples to earlobes. Fortunately it only lasted a moment. To Fletch’s credit, his gaze was centered squarely at eye level and there wasn’t so much as a hint of a smirk on his lips.

“Right now, we’re just past Gildall II.” With that, he turned his back on her, adjusted his pants carefully, and threw open the dented metal door of a storage locker set into the bulkhead to his left. He didn’t look back. He just held out a black coverall in her general direction.

“Here. The gooze’ll dry pretty fast and you’re going to be cold.”

Talia made an incomprehensible sound. “Gildall II?”

He shook the coverall as if to get her attention, and cautiously she stepped through the remnants of the green puddle to retrieve it from him.

“We haven’t determined the ship’s exact destination yet, but I’m betting somewhere deep in Mogarthan territory. We’re going to try to divert course to a mining colony in the Threxis belt. I figure that would be the safest place to decant you all at once.”

“Us all?” Talia kept one eye on him while she slid one leg, then the other into the coverall, using the wall for support. She shrugged into the upper half of the garment and quickly fastened the front, then took a deep breath and tried to block the images of the last few minutes from her mind.

Had she really just demanded that a perfect stranger fuck her? If it hadn’t been the best sex of her life, she might have

believed it, but the experience she'd had just now seemed more like a distant dream.

"Look, I know you're a little disoriented, Miss—?"

"Talía."

"Miss Talía, but—"

"Lory, Talía Lory. I work for CalTak Corp. I'm a trinium scout."

"That's nice." He shrugged, peered over his shoulder and, finding her dressed, turned back to face her. "Kind of a solitary job, though?"

"How did I get here and what...just happened?" Talía gestured to the floor where the puddle that surrounded their feet seemed to be evaporating.

Fletch held up his hands. "Slow down. Let me go through my speech because I had it all rehearsed before I decanted you."

"Decanted me from *where*?"

He sighed and rolled those gorgeous eyes. Gods, he was cute, and she was so...hot...and overly dressed. Her fingers slid involuntarily to the front of the coverall and the first of the snaps she'd just fastened over her breasts came undone. She shot him an innocent glance and bit her lower lip.

He crossed the slippery floor and grabbed her hand. "Can you just hold on for a second, please? I need you to listen to me before you go wildcat again."

"Sure," she purred.

"I know you're a little disoriented, but what I'm about to tell you is very important. This is a Mogarthan slave ship."

“Uh huh...” Talia ran one finger over his lips while he talked. What if she dipped her thumb into his mouth and let him lick— “Slave ship?”

Now she remembered...or vaguely recalled a faint snippet of something that might have happened before her ocean dream began. “I was on Demar, scouting for trinium in a switchback canyon and something bit me.”

“A Mogarthan tranquilizer dart, no doubt. You were captured and put in one of those pods.”

Talia saw them now. Stretching along the dim corridor, glowing bulbs of bright green gooze with women floating inside them. It boggled her mind that the sight hadn’t registered on her muddled brain before this. There had to be at least two dozen of them, gently humming, the fluid inside pulsating with a rhythm that matched that of her heart.

“How long?”

“I don’t know. A few months, maybe.” Fletch’s tone was apologetic.

“Months!”

“We can worry about that later. Talia—Talia, focus...” Fletch loomed before her, his eyes clear and his expression serious. Her vision blurred and her gaze fell to his sensuous lips. The enticing scent of sex filled her senses once again, and she leaned toward him, her pelvis leading the way toward his.

The sound of his fingers snapping drew her back to reality for a moment. “Stay with me here, Talia.”

“Am I drugged?” she asked, wishing he’d shed his clothes again for her.

“Yep. You’re so high on U-4EA you can’t see straight.”

She blinked. She’d heard of U-4EA. They sold it at all the clubs, the resort worlds, and luxury liners—all the places she couldn’t afford to go on her salary as a scout. So this is what it felt like to have your sexual senses heightened to the max...not bad...not bad at— “Oh, my God! You...you!”

Fletch backed up. “Good news! It wears off eventually. Bad news, it can take a while. You’ve been literally swimming in the stuff for a long time.”

Talia wanted to be angry. She wanted to slap him for taking advantage of her strangely inebriated state, but he looked so damn good and she was sooo tight and wet and ready for another dose of Fletch. Her fingers found the collar of his shirt and slithered inside. “I’ve never used U-4EA before...it...it’s *good*.”

He grasped her elbows and pushed her back just a step. “Yeah, it’s a hell of a holiday all right, but it’s also a nuisance. The reason I decanted you was because I need help flying this ship. It’s a two-person job. I’m going to show you some basic piloting and navigation controls and you’re going to help me get this ship somewhere safe where we can decant the rest of the women in those pods. Got that?” He lowered his head and looked up into her face. So sweet. So sincere. She wanted to eat him alive.

“Talia, do you understand what I need you to do?”

“Sure.” She winked.

“So you think you can help me?”

She nodded. “Only if you help me, first.” She slammed

into him with the force of a tropical storm hitting a mountain.

They dropped to the damp floor, a writhing mass of limbs and, fortunately, he didn't resist when she began pulling off his clothes.

"Finished?" A voice echoed through the cargo hold, seeming to come from everywhere at once. Talia started. Was there another man here she could use when she'd worn Fletcher out? Never mind. She'd track him down later; right now her objective was simple. She sank down onto Fletcher Gray's straining erection and rolled him on top of her.

Before setting to work easing her sexual frenzy, he looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "Not quite yet, Gan. Not quite yet."

## CHAPTER 2

Talia stared at Fletcher over the rim of a metal coffee cup in *Xector IV's* mess hall. The hot, hyper-caFFEinated liquid seemed to clear the cobwebs from her brain and help her get her bearings after the second round of sex with Fletcher in the cargo hold.

She'd known him for an hour and they'd had sex twice already. She wondered if maybe the fuzzy, hazy U-4EA high was better than full knowledge of reality at this point. At least when the sexual wave took her over, she forgot how utterly mortified she felt.

"Start at the beginning again," she said after a long, soothing sip. She couldn't quite begin to process everything

he'd told her thus far.

He sighed and continued to arrange vita-wafer rations on a small plate that sat before him on the table. He pushed the plate toward her before answering. "Eat something. It'll help. Now, from the beginning again. Gan and I are with Earth-Sec Pan-Galactic Division. We're working undercover to crack one of the largest Mogarthan slave rings in this sector."

"The Mogarthan's have slave rings? How come I've never heard of that before?"

"War," said a voice from behind Talia. She turned her head just slightly, having already discovered that Fletcher's Metrian partner was better viewed from an angle. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the alien's shimmery form. The outline of a broad-shouldered being with a snout-like nose and long, tapered ears appeared next to the food recycler.

Fletch nodded. "During the war, Earth-Sec didn't really have time to police the Mogarthan's properly. They've been getting away with this stuff for decades."

"Go on."

"Gan and I stowed away aboard ship when it landed on Vega for refueling. It's disguised as a typical freighter. The pods would normally be full of grain or other perishable foodstuffs, but we had inside intelligence that the captain of this ship belongs to one of the slave cartels."

"Where is the captain now?" Talia didn't know much about Mogarthans. She'd always thought they kept mostly to themselves, shunning races like humans and Breoxan. She had no desire to meet up with one now.

“Brig,” said Gan.

“We’ll take her back to Earth-Sec headquarters for ques—  
,,

“Her? The slaver captain is female?”

Fletcher shrugged and Talia ignored the stab of desire caused by his bewildered look. It had only been half an hour. Could she be starting another cycle of U-4EA-induced heat already?

“The best Mogarthan pilots are female. It’s because of the four-arms and all, which brings us back around to why I had to decant you. I can’t make the necessary course corrections without your help.”

\* \* \*

Talia blinked at him and took another long, languorous sip of coffee. Despite his frustration at having to explain all this to her again, his body responded to her hot scrutiny. Her dark eyes were so deep and keenly intelligent, it was hard for Fletch to keep in mind that she was geared for only one thing right now. The overdose of U-4EA had clouded her judgment and, in all honesty, had Ganymede been corporeal, she’d be giving him the same sultry, longing looks right now.

Eventually the aphrodisiac would wear off completely and she’d probably hate him, so he had to force himself not to think of how much he’d enjoyed their two juicy interludes so far, or how nice it felt to have a woman want him so badly. His undercover mission had kept him away from human-inhabited worlds for too long with only Gan for company.

Fletch needed some female companionship and he hated that thus far, the only way he was going to get it was from a woman who had absolutely no other choice in the universe at the moment.

He shook off his disappointment and finished the last cold swallow of his own coffee. "If you come with me to the bridge, I'll show you what you need to do."

"Okay." Though the coffee seemed to improve her mental status quite a bit, she hadn't quite shaken the U-4EA buzz. She gave him a smile that said she'd follow him anywhere, and she snagged a vita-wafer as she rose from her seat. "I'm not much of a pilot, you know."

"Don't worry. Gan is the navigator. He can read Mogarthan and he knows exactly what we need to do to change our course. All we have to do is follow his instructions."

Fletch left the mess with Talia wandering behind him. He realized halfway to the bridge that she'd fallen behind to get a good view of his backside. He should have been flattered.

"Can we step on it? There's not much time before you cycle through again and I'd like to get started."

"Getting started sounds good to me." She winked, then sobered a bit. Fletch could almost see the waves of chemically enhanced hormones surging through her body. She was on a down swing again. "You knew what was going to happen when you decanted me, didn't you?"

"Ah..." Fletch leaned back, cast his eyes up and pleaded with the gods to grant him strength. He'd wondered how long

it would take her to get around to this. “Yes. I knew. I didn’t have a choice. Gan can’t use the controls for obvious reasons. If I’d decanted you and left you...alone, you would have hurt yourself. It may not be the ideal solution, but sex is the only cure for a U-4EA high.”

“There’s no other antidote?”

“Sorry. Most people don’t really need one.”

“Well, don’t think you’re going to get lucky again, Mr. Gray. I’d prefer it if you left me alone from now on.”

“Actually, it’s Agent Gray, if we’re being formal, Miss Take-Your-Pants-Off-Right-Now. I have no problem leaving you alone. Just remember, *you* jumped all over *me*.”

She huffed at him and stormed ahead through *Xector IV*s narrow main corridor.

He followed. “Aren’t we past this? If it means anything, I didn’t enjoy it.”

She swung back in his direction and now she looked really mad. “You didn’t?”

“I mean, I did, on a purely...physical level. But I didn’t want to. The way U-4EA works is it ramps up all your mating hormones to a dangerous level. If all that...energy, for lack of a better word, has no outlet, things can get ugly. You know what would happen if we decanted all the other women at the same time?”

She shook her head. “They’d literally screw me to death, then they’d start on you and since that would be kind of frustrating, they’d end up killing each other. The only safe thing to do is get to a planet where I can recruit a couple dozen

men who can handle them until the overdose wears off.”

“So twenty-four men get free sex slaves for what, like a month?” Her dark eyes blazed. Fletch rubbed his jaw, remembering her last down cycle.

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“How about a hospital station? There must be something that can be done.”

“No known antidote.”

“Sedation?”

“You were sedated in the pod. It prolongs the effect.”

She glared at him, clearly not certain she believed him. He wished he was lying, but honestly there was no alternative. She whirled away. “Show me what I have to do, then stay out of my way. No more free rides for you.”

Fletch glowered at her back. “No problem.”

## CHAPTER 3

She smelled like warm honey. The scent was a remnant of the stasis gooze, but nevertheless intoxicating.

It bothered Fletch that he had to force himself to concentrate on the navigation controls while he pointed out the relatively simple sequence of commands he wanted Talia to remember.

It was hard enough forcing *her* to concentrate, though she caught on quick enough. A trinium scout had to have a brain, so it was obvious she was capable, but after thirty minutes on the bridge, the U-4EA cycle had begun again in earnest.

“Now, when I shut off the autopilot, you’ve got to turn on the aft thrusters immediately and maintain power for thirty

seconds while I re-calibrate the overdrive. You have to keep output at seventy-five percent or better, so you need to watch *this* gauge.” Fletcher tapped the controls impatiently. Talia stood so close that he could see minute golden flecks in her brown eyes.

She bumped her hip against him as she spoke. “How long will it take to lay in a new course?” she asked.

“I think I can do it in thirty seconds, but, if not, you can ease back on the thrusters just a little. Once it’s set we’ll have smooth sailing for about a day. Gan will keep watch over the long-range sensors and alert us if anything turns up in our path. We shouldn’t have to do more than minor course adjustments for a while, but when we do, I’ll handle navigation and you handle thrust.”

She smirked and licked her lips. Her demeanor had done a one-eighty in less than the blink of an eye. “Maybe *you* should handle thrust.”

Fletcher clamped his lips shut and glared at her until her smirk morphed into a pout. A very kissable pout. He looked away. “We’re almost done here. Then you can go lock yourself in the crew quarters.”

She tossed her hair. “When are you going to shut off auto-pilot?”

“Whenever you think you’re ready. We can’t stop in the middle, so you have to be able to focus.”

“I can focus now. Let’s do it.”

The seductive purr in her voice didn’t fool Fletch for a nanosecond. “Not now.”

“Why not? I’m ready.”

“You might be ready for something, but piloting isn’t it. You’re going to lose it any minute now.”

“How do you know?”

“Because unless the Mogarthan pilot escaped from the brig or Gan suddenly became corporeal, that’s *your* hand on my—”

“Thruster?” She licked her lips again and winked at him.

“Yes.”

In response, her fingers tightened on his crotch for a moment, then trailed away. Fletch realized he was sweating.

“Okay. How about as soon as we’re finished?” Her lips grazed his jaw and her hot tongue laved his skin. His balls went tight.

“I don’t have a problem with that, but you did say not half an hour ago that I should forget about any more free rides. I figured you’d want a couple of bulkheads between you and me before you went all sex slave again.”

She laughed, deep and throaty. “The only thing I want between you and me is a layer of sweat.” She purred into his ear, growled and nibbled. “I might have been mad at you before, but I’m over it. Now I want you over me. There’s room on the floor.” She grabbed his collar and wrapped one leg around the back of his thigh.

“We could go to my quarters. That way Gan won’t—”

“The Metrian can watch. I don’t care.” She slid one hand under his shirt and the other burrowed into the waistband of his pants.

“Sure, you say that now.” He wanted to refuse her, maybe

lock her in the brig for a while until she really cooled off, but his hands traveled of their own accord to the snaps of her coverall. A second later, she was kissing him, heaving her body against his, and trying to drag his shirt over his head without breaking lip contact.

The still-coherent part of Fletch's brain reasoned that if he didn't participate, she'd probably hurt herself or him. Coming down off a U-4EA high without sex was torment. He'd seen it enough times, during early raids of other pod carriers. Providing a willing sex partner was the only humane way to deal with a U-4EA overdose.

Fletch doubted any man alive would have sympathy for his plight right now.

Talia pushed him down into the extra wide pilot's chair and straddled him. Rising up on her knees, she freed his all too ready erection from his flight pants and cooed her appreciation.

"Just don't get mad at me later," he panted while she licked his nipples. Her dark head bobbed in front of him while she performed some limber movements that liberated her from her own clothes. "I offered to lock you up."

"Fine, fine. I promise I won't blame you for letting me fuck you senseless." She threw her head back and moaned as she lowered herself onto his shaft. Good gods, she felt fantastic. Fletch arched a little and she purred, then slithered her upper body across his chest. Her hot sheath tightened around him when he filled his hands with her perfect breasts.

She began an undulating rhythm that had him groaning to

a hard, fast orgasm only minutes later. “Now who’s a sex slave?” She punctuated her question with a movement he’d only read about in a Breoxan sex manual. He wondered how she’s learned that trick. The pressure on his balls from heaven knew what part of her anatomy had him practically squealing with ecstasy. He was certain, had she not been riding him, his seed would have shot across the room, he came so hard.

She moaned through her own orgasm and collapsed on top of him, panting. “I’m ready now.”

Through a blurry haze of satisfaction, Fletch murmured, “Gods, woman, give me time to regroup.”

“I mean to pilot the ship.”

“Oh. Uh...sure, just give me a second to...”

“Regroup?” She smirked and caught his lips in a succubus kiss that left him breathless. Deep in his chest Fletcher’s heart stuttered when a stab of unfamiliar feeling lanced through it.

Damn, he didn’t have time for this. He had a job to do, granted one that currently came with perks most men would kill for, but nevertheless. He could not afford to develop any real feelings for Talia Lory, even though right now she seemed ready to crawl into his skin with him. When the U-4EA wore off for good, she’d probably want nothing more than to crush his balls for good measure and to be honest, he couldn’t blame her for that.

Gently, she pushed her sleek body off him and retrieved his pants from around his ankles.

Her contented sigh made his cock pulse with gratitude.

“Okay, then. Can we get back to work now?”

She winked at him and slithered back into her discarded coverall. "Ready when you are, captain."

\* \* \*

Less than an hour later Talia closed the door to the small stateroom Fletch had led her to and leaned her sweaty forehead against the nearest bulkhead.

The next down cycle had begun shortly after they switched the ship off of autopilot and reset a course for the GemCon Mining Dome on Asteroid X7658 of the Threxix Belt. The two dozen full-shift emerald miners there were apparently doing zero-gee back flips at the prospect of hosting a cargo of sex-starved females for a month. By the time *Xector IV* reached them, they'd be caught up on their vaccinations and sterile patches and ready to perform their civic duty for the Mogarthan abductees.

The idea still didn't sit quite right with Talia, but her muddled brain could not formulate an alternative at the moment. She wondered if the other women in the slave ship's cargo hold would be grateful to be saved or resent, as she did, that there was no choice but to work off their sex addiction with the nearest willing male.

Annoyed now by thoughts of Fletch, she tried to follow a path through her jumbled memories to her last coherent thought before he'd decanted her. How could she not remember being abducted by a Mogarthan?

A ragged sigh escaped her and she sank to the floor. She ran trembling hands over her face, which burned with shame

when she thought of the way she'd used the Earth-Sec agent. Not that he really seemed to mind but—

“Help you?”

She looked around, searching the room for the source of the echoing syllables. “Gan?”

“Here.” The Metrian shimmered into view, nothing more than a dim outline in the corner of the room.

“How long have you been there?” An hour ago the prospect of an alien voyeur had turned her on, now it made her shiver to think of Fletcher's partner floating aimlessly around the ship, nearly invisible, observing anything he wanted to.

“Short time.”

“Go away.”

“Help you?”

“Help me do what? You're incorporeal.”

He made a choking sound that Fletch had already explained was Metrian laughter. “Help you remember.”

“How can you do that?” She unfolded her arms from around her knees and sat forward, trying to focus her tired eyes on Gan's barely visible form.

“Close eyes.”

She wanted to protest, shoo him away, but there was something strangely soothing about his gravelly voice and his simple, direct communication. She obeyed. “Now what?”

“Think back.”

“I tried that.”

“Again.”

She sighed and ran events back through her mind, skipping

over the unforgettable sex she'd had with Fletcher. The pleasant floating dream came back to her and before that, her last moments on Demar. Could Ganymede read her mind, or was he guiding her thoughts? How could the events that had been so elusive a moment ago, be coming back to her now?

"Speak."

She obeyed. "I was alone in the canyon. I'd found a small lake that shimmered with a layer of trinium scale. The flakes colored the lake bed and the surrounding soil silvery blue. I moved closer to take a reading."

"Go on."

"The reading was faint, but I figured the water was interfering. The trinium scale seeps up through the water table from deeply buried deposits, so the lake was a good place to start an excavation. I set a marker at the water line where the readings were more stable. Then...something bit me...right below my ear. I slapped it away. Figured it was an insect and I'd had all my vaccinations so—"

"Tranq dart."

She nodded. "You're probably right. I don't remember anything after that. Crap. How long ago could it have been? CalTak has probably given up looking for me by now and cancelled my payroll account. With my luck they've probably listed me dead, probated my will and sent my death benefits to my next of kin."

"Parents?"

"No. CalTak. I don't have any...family." No one she cared to acknowledge, anyway. That thought actually caused her

more distress now than the idea of nearly being sold as a Mogarthan sex slave. She'd disappeared from Demar—maybe months ago—and no one except CalTak's payroll computer would care enough to wonder what happened to her.

Talia's shoulders sagged and her head drooped. She sensed, rather than saw the Metrian cross the room. "Lonely?"

She sniffled once and glared up at the specter above her. "Hell, no. I like solitude. Why do you think I'm a trinium scout?"

"Fletch, too."

"Fletch what? He's lonely?" She pursed her lips. "He's got you. What's your deal, anyway? I didn't know Metrian's bothered with the corporeal races. Don't you get tired of hanging out with people who can barely see you, surrounded by things you can't touch?"

"Curious."

"You joined Earth-Sec because you were curious about corporeals?"

"Of course."

"Do you have a family? Do you get to go home to them now and then?"

"Of course."

"Do you miss them?"

"Of course."

"What's with the two syllable thing anyway?"

"Fletch."

"Huh?" A knock on the stateroom door cut off any further conversation. Ganymede's pearlescent form floated through

the closed door without another word.

Talia tried to ignore the knocking, but it only grew more insistent.

“What?” Her voice held a bit more impatience than she planned.

“I thought you wanted to take a shower.” Fletch’s muffled voice sent a wave of shame through her. She’d thrown herself at him, demanded things from him...that he’d willingly given despite her altered state. What would she have done if he’d refused her?

She set her jaw. “I’m going to. Can you leave me alone until I’m done?”

The door opened a crack. The man had no shame. Of course, as far as he knew, neither did she.

She scowled when he peered into the room. “Ever hear of privacy?”

“Not with a Metrian for a partner. Sorry. Was Gan bothering you? I saw him leaving.”

“We were having a conversation.”

“Did Mr. Monosyllable talk your ears off?” Fletch laughed. His quick smile lit his handsome face and Talia’s heart lifted for a moment.

“Yeah. Does he read minds or something? He seemed to know what I was thinking.”

Fletch shrugged. “A little. That’s why the one word answers, or if you’re really lucky, two. Metrians communicate non-verbally to each other for the most part. They use words just to convey major ideas and the details come through

telepathically.”

“So you can read his mind?”

“Nope. I just guess a lot. He tells me when I’m wrong.”

“How’d you get him as a partner?”

“He picked me. Thought I’d be interesting. This is sort of a hobby for him, but he’s a damn good agent. I can see and hear things through him that no other human agent could. It’s like being telepathic sometimes.”

She gave a short, rueful chuckle. “I suppose he comes in handy for undercover work.”

“When he’s not in a chatty mood.” Fletch sighed. “Look, I know this has been a difficult day for you. If you don’t want me around, I understand. I just wanted to check on you and thank you for your help on the bridge.”

“You’re welcome. After the Belt, then what?”

“We’ll take the pilot back to Earth. You, too, if that’s where you’d like to go.”

“Could I get dropped off at CalTak headquarters? I need to know if they will rehire me.”

“Sure. Earth-Sec will vouch for you, if you need a reference. You’ll get your job back.”

“Good.” If only she was sure she wanted it back. Right now, all Talia could think of was Fletcher’s strong arms, his masculine scent and the way one dark eyebrow lifted when he smiled, or came. She just had to find a way to keep her hands off him, and her lips and all her other body parts until this damn U-4EA addiction wore off.

He rose and dusted off his hands. “Okay. Well, I’ll be

around, if you need me.”

“I won’t need you.”

“Suit yourself. There are plenty of vita-wafers in the mess if you get hungry again. Don’t eat any of the Mogarthan food, though...it has a high lead content.” He didn’t wait for a response and Talia was glad. She’d already begun feeling flushed and the rough fabric of her coverall had begun to abrade her tightening nipples. Not again. She absolutely wasn’t going to use Fletch for sex a fourth time today. She’d stay away from him, even if it killed her.

She moaned softly when the door closed behind him and forced herself to think about that shower, cold water sluicing over her skin, cooling her desire and clearing her head. That’s what she needed. Nothing more.

## CHAPTER 4

“I need you, right *now*.” Talia’s demand reached Fletch through the closed door of the captain’s quarters.

Groggy from barely an hour of sleep, his first instinct was to ignore her. After all, Gan would hear her. He could find a way to keep her busy so Fletch could sleep.

“Come on, hot stuff, you know you want it.”

“Go away.” He pulled one thin, Mogarthan pillow over his ears and tried to imagine something unpleasant that would take his mind off sex. The vision of a Mogarthan orgy came to mind...definitely a sight that would shut down even the wildest of human libidos.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work.

His brain said no, but his cock had other ideas. It had enjoyed itself way too much today and now, the mere sound of Talia's sultry voice woke his desires.

She'd begun pounding on his door.

"You told me to stay away from you. I'm trying to do that!"

In response, she whimpered quite convincingly. "Please? Just one more time. Come on, Fletch. I'm sooo hot..."

Yes. She was that. Damn. Why hadn't he chosen a Breoxan to decant? It would be so much easier to turn down the sexual demands of a woman with gills.

He threw the blankets off and rolled to his feet.

"It won't take long, I promise...I'm halfway there already." A sexy purr laced her voice and Fletch began to imagine what she might look like, standing naked in the corridor, sweat-slicked and panting, needing a warm male body to...

He turned his back to the door. "Come on, Talia. You know you don't really want to do this."

"Yes, I do. I've been, you know, trying to take care of it myself, but it just isn't the same."

"Ah!" Fletch growled in frustration as he palmed the door controls. How could he let her suffer, after all?

She was on him the moment the panel slid aside, and sure enough, she was naked.

Her warm skin smelled of sex and the faint, sweet scent of U-4EA. Surely the stuff would have begun to wear off by now.

“I don’t think this is—”

She cut off his protest by plunging her tongue into his mouth. Something gripped his insides like a fist, tangling his gut and stealing his breath. He let her kiss him until they were both gasping.

“God, you taste good!” Talia slithered down his body and had his pants open before Fletch could form a response.

“You’re going to regret this,” he said, though he wasn’t sure if he was talking to her or to himself.

“Yes, yes. I know.” Talia pulled off his shirt and sank her teeth into the flesh of his right shoulder. He moaned and his cock surged, begging not to be denied.

“Ooh...a bed!” She dragged him toward the captain’s cot and threw herself down on the thin mattress.

“Take me!” With one arm flung melodramatically over her eyes, she assumed the classic pose of a quivering virgin about to be deflowered. “Do what you must. My virtue is yours.” She giggled as he landed on her.

“Are we channeling Twentieth Century romance novels now?” Fletch tried to focus, but with her hips heaving under his and her breasts in his palms, he really couldn’t think straight.

“Trinium scouts read a lot.” She panted the words between hot, wet kisses planted on his chest and neck. “Did you know that male Leonids tie their females to trees to keep them upright during the sex act, which can last as long as three days?”

Fletch groaned as he settled himself with one determined

thrust into her willing body. She let out a sound that was half sigh, half growl and locked her legs around his ass. “No, really?”

“God, yes! They...oh, harder! Come on...that’s it. The Leonid couple remains in coitus for days and sometimes have to be...oh, good...pried apart by—by—” She tightened around him and her body went rigid, squeezing him to his own heights of ecstasy. “Kiss me, Fletch,” she demanded, her story momentarily forgotten.

He obeyed because he wanted nothing more than to taste her while her supine body shuddered under his.

It was too good. Too sweet. He’d hate himself in the morning, but probably not as much as Talia would hate him. At the moment, that was a chance he was willing to take.

\* \* \*

Talia awoke entwined with Fletch, the thin, blue sheet of the slaver captain’s bed barely covering their bodies.

He looked so good. Handsome and virile, sleeping peacefully. His broad chest was dark beneath the pale skin of her own hands and his heartbeat was a steady rhythm under her fingers.

Damn him. He’d done it again, and again apparently, several times throughout the *Xector IV*’s night cycle. Why hadn’t he turned her away?

Silly question. He was a man. There was no way he was going to turn down sex, especially if she begged for it.

If she wanted to put an end to all this free love, she was

going to have to do it herself. Anything to preserve what little was left of her dignity.

On the downswing of her U-4EA high, and self-conscious again, she extricated herself from his embrace, careful to quell the urge to run her hand over the smooth expanse of his back. She had to get away from him before the U-4EA kicked in again because, by God, she refused to be caught dead begging him to tie her up and spank her. At least he hadn't complied with *that* request, but she groggily recalled his cooperation in the master-slave scenario she'd devised after she'd finished telling him about the sexual rites of the uninhibited and strangely acrobatic Leonids.

This was getting totally out of hand. Wasn't the drug supposed to be wearing off? Shouldn't she be getting *less* horny? A sobering thought stopped her. What if the U-4EA had permanently changed her metabolism somehow and she was destined to be a nymphomaniac for the rest of her life?

That would certainly explain why she was entertaining thoughts of burrowing under the blankets and waking him by wrapping her lips around his magnificent—

“Morning.”

“Ah!” Talia dropped to a crouch, her heart hammering against her ribs. “Ganymede? Is that you?”

“Who else?”

“Don't you knock? Silly question, forget I asked. Shhh!”

“Said nothing.” Fletch's mostly invisible partner sounded quite amused with himself.

“I know...I know. I'm shushing *me*. I don't want to wake

Fletch.”

“Why not?”

On the bed, Fletch stirred. He rolled to his side and bunched a pillow beneath his head. The look of contentment on his face made Talia’s belly tighten. God, he was so cute!

Not cute.

In fact, he was a horny bastard who deserved a kick in the balls for letting her talk him into having sex with her three—no four!—times during the night.

She slipped out the door of the captain’s quarters before responding to Ganymede’s question. “I don’t want to talk to him. Do me a favor, Gan...Gan? Where are you?”

The Metrian appeared then, a shimmery outline in the center of the dim corridor.

“There you are. Oh, my God, I’m naked.” A blush heated her face and she crossed her arms over her breasts.

Ganymede’s broad silhouette seemed to shrug. “So?”

“Gan, can you do me a favor?”

“Maybe.”

“What’s that supposed to—oh, you mean it depends on the favor?”

“Yes.”

Talia wondered if the Metrian could roll his eyes in frustration. With a quick glance at the closed door of Fletch’s room, she plowed on. “Can you not tell him where I am today? I’m going to try to get lost for a while. I can’t keep tracking him down and...um...”

“Fucking?”

“Yes.” Now Talia rolled her eyes. There was obviously no point in being subtle with a Metrian. “Yes. I can’t keep doing this. So for both our sakes, I’m going to avoid him. Can you just tell him not to look for me for a while?”

“Yes.” Ganymede made a sound that might have been a wistful sigh. Talia ignored it. The last thing she needed was a Metrian matchmaker.

“Good. I’m going...*that* way.” She pointed down the corridor in the general direction of the stateroom Fletch had assigned to her. The first thing she needed to do was put some clothes on. “I’d appreciate it if you’d do whatever you can to make sure Fletch and I don’t cross paths for a while.”

“Small ship.”

“I know. That’s why I need your help.”

Again, the rippling outline of the alien seemed to shrug. Talia took that as acknowledgement. Had Gan been corporeal, and she been fully clothed, she might have hugged him. Instead she hurried off down the corridor, hoping there would be some place she could hide until the desire to jump Fletcher Gray’s bones wore off completely.

\* \* \*

Talia stood knee deep in the crystal surf on a little beach somewhere on the planet Narex. Dotted with thousands upon thousands of tropical islands, Narex was a lovers’ paradise, a place Fletch often dreamed about dropping anchor with a gorgeous woman someday when his commission with Earth-Sec had run to retirement.

Wouldn't Talia look perfect there? He contemplated the sexy vision even as his mind floated back to consciousness. With the sugar-white sand beneath her feet, the salty ocean breeze teasing her dark curls, she was every man's fantasy.

Maybe after all this was over, he could convince her to...not cut his balls off and fry them in hot oil. No point in hoping for any more than that.

What was he thinking? Reality crashed around him, cold and unforgiving. The Mogarthan mattress was lumpy and the pillow too thin. The bed was too short for him to stretch out comfortably, although it had seemed large enough last night when Talia had mounted him...

Fletch sat up, rubbed at the stubble on his lower jaw, and blinked his blurry vision back into focus.

Of course she was gone. Once the U-4EA buzz wore off, why would she stay with him? Her scent lingered on the thermal sheet, and on his hands, reviving the ache in his gut that had plagued him from the moment she'd first kissed him.

And right now she was probably in the galley looking for a sharp knife and some seasonings to compliment fresh gonads.

"Dammit, Fletch. Why didn't you listen to the big brain?"

"Not here." Gan semi-materialized then, nearly startling Fletch off the bed.

"Crap, Gan. Can't we tie a bell on you? What do you mean, not here?"

"Big brain."

Fletch sighed. "I didn't mean *your* big brain. I meant mine."

Gan's response was a chortle. Fletch hated that Metrian's could chortle. "Very funny. Have you found those coordinates yet?"

"Yes."

"Ah. Finally." Fletch rolled out of bed and retrieved his pants and shirt from where Talia had flung them during their recent escapades. "What was the Mogarthan's destination?"

"Camilax."

Fletch nodded, shrugging into his shirt which also smelled like Talia. Damn. Why couldn't he seem to get away from her? Not only did her very essence seem to cling to him, he'd actually wasted valuable dreaming time by imaging he'd taken her on vacation to Narex.

Maybe the U-4EA was rubbing off on him, because all he could think of at the moment was finding her and tearing her clothes off.

"Camilax. Okay. Well, I'll go transmit that to Earth-Sec—"

"Already done."

"Good. Now we just have to drop off our cargo and then we can get to work on our next assignment. What's our ETA to the Belt?"

"Two days."

"Perfect. Where's Talia? She'll be happy to hear that."

"Avoiding you."

That stopped Fletch short. Of course she'd be avoiding him. The fact that she'd been lying in his arms only a few hours ago blissfully asleep, content and trusting, meant

absolutely nothing. To her.

It shouldn't have meant anything to him, either.

With a grunt, he padded into the head, tossing instructions over his shoulder to Ganymede. "Good. Better to have her out of the way for now. Let's give the miners an update on our ETA and send all our data back to Earth-Sec. I'm not greedy. If they can get started shutting down the Mogarthan operation on Camilax, all the better."

"Will do." Gan's voice receded, and though Fletch couldn't exactly see his partner, he had the impression that the Metrian had left the stateroom.

"Yep. Glad to have her out of the way for a while," he told his reflection in the small, square mirror above the sink. Talia Lory had served her purpose by helping him change the ship's course. Apparently, he'd served his as well as far as she was concerned.

## CHAPTER 5

The urge to track down Fletch and tear off his clothes crept up on Talia while she wandered through the bowels of the pod carrier.

It started with an itch at the back of her neck. Her coverall seemed to become more confining by the moment and her nipples hardened and began to ache for his rough touch. Sweat broke out across her brow when she allowed herself to remember how good he'd been last night.

Relentless and obedient by turns, he'd given her everything she'd asked for and more. What harm, really, would there be in a repeat performance?

"No." She started with a simple, firm statement of fact.

“It’s the U-4EA. Get over it. Get over him.” She flung herself deeper into the dim corridors below decks and a wave of relief washed over her when she found herself standing before a door marked BRIG.

The word had been written in black ink, scrawled under the painted symbols that most likely represented the Mogarthan equivalent. “Perfect.” A cell was exactly what she needed. That would keep her away from Fletch and his magnificent body until these urges wore off.

She let herself into the brig, which was surprisingly large for such a small ship. Apparently the Mogarthans liked to take prisoners.

There were four cells. Three empty and one occupied by the pod captain. The slaver.

Talia tried to back up before the sleeping Mogarthan female awoke, but her movements attracted the prisoner’s attention.

Stretching her four arms at once, the alien female rolled to a sitting position on the narrow cot in her cell. She blinked large, languid eyes at Talia and then began to sob.

“Oh...thank Ertema you’ve escaped, little one. Come closer. Let me look at you! Have they hurt you? What have they done to the others?”

Talia squinted at the Mogarthan. Her work as a scout kept her isolated most of the time, so she’d had little contact with the warrior race. This female was large, broader in shoulder than Fletch, tall by the look of her massive legs and dressed in a coverall that showed generous portions of her four breasts

through strategic cuts in the fabric. Long gray hair hung down in surprisingly delicate braids around her shoulder which heaved with her sobs. She wiped fat tears from her eyes with several thumbs while she waited for Talia's reply.

"I...didn't escape. They let me out."

"Of course they did. Dogs. All males are dogs. They've taken advantage of your inebriated state no doubt?" The Mogarthan rose and hobbled to the bars of the cell. She seemed to be in pain. "Captain Kreth-Regana, little one. I'm a leader of the Mogarthan Anti-Slavery Movement."

Right. Was it possible for a Mogarthan to sound utterly sincere? Talia backed up. "I shouldn't be in here. I'm going to leave now—"

"No! Please, don't go yet. Can you get me medicine from the infirmary? I need something for the pain." The female shifted her stance to reveal a vicious wound in her thigh. "I pleaded with him, but the human refuses to believe I'm not the owner of this ship. He thinks I'm a slaver." She spat on the floor of her cell to emphasize her disgust with the term. "The human wouldn't believe me when I told him I was the one who rescued this ship. You were all on your way to Camilax—the slave planet—to be placed in the games—played in the arenas until you died from exhaustion."

Talia pursed her lips and managed to resist the urge to cross her arms over her chest. Hadn't Fletch told her the Mogarthan had refused to reveal the ship's intended destination?

"Camilax?"

“Yes. The arenas are known throughout Mogarthan territory for their brutality. Games of sex—the winners given to the highest bidders for their unrestricted use. The sex trade is a shame my people have borne for centuries. Only a few of us are brave enough to try to put an end to these barbaric practices.”

“Well, I’m sure if you explain that to Earth-Sec...” Talia’s back connected with the door of the brig, which wasn’t quite far enough away from Kreth-Regana’s cell. The Mogarthan’s long arms reached through the bars and she brushed trembling fingers over Talia’s arm. “Please, little one. Help me. Can you just get me the medicine I need to stop this pain? The human has ignored me. He’s left me here alone for days, hungry and bleeding.”

None of this made sense. Why would Fletch mistreat his prisoner? Even if she was a slaver, she deserved medical attention and food. “I’ll see what I can do.” The wound on the female’s leg did look angry and untended. Surely there had to be some rudimentary first aid supplies available in the ship’s infirmary.

Kreth-Regana looked hopeful. “In the infirmary, the green syringes in the case nearest the door are for pain. In the back cabinet, near the floor, you’ll find the antidote to the drug—small red tablets. Take some, then the male won’t be able to command you to his will any longer.”

Talia raised a brow. “He told me there was no antidote.”

The Mogarthan made a sound halfway between a chuckle and a snort. “You sexed him, then? More than once, I gather.

Why would he tell you about an antidote?"

Damn him again. If the Mogarthan was right, Fletcher Gray's next date was going to be with the wrong side of an airlock.

Oddly, the desire to watch him depressurize battled with memories of him rising above her in the throes of passion. He'd been gentle with her, loving at times, and then powerful and demanding. She'd loved every minute of...

"I'll see what I can do. If you're telling the truth, the *Human* is going to wish he'd never been born."

Talia stormed out of the brig and, after charging down a dead end corridor, finally oriented herself and headed back toward the more familiar parts of the ship, cursing Fletcher Gray every step of the way.

\* \* \*

He refused to admit that he missed her. After all, Fletch usually worked alone— Ganymede's dismorphic presence notwithstanding, of course.

Nevertheless, by midday-cycle, Fletch found himself scanning the ship for Talia. He located her in the infirmary, depicted on the screen by a red dot moving quickly around the small room. He wondered if she was sick. Did U-4EA have any unpleasant side effects besides near constant arousal?

Ganymede's silhouette crossed the bridge in front of him, distracting him from his task. "Problem?" the Metrian asked.

"Talia's in the infirmary. Maybe you should go check if she's all right." He wanted to go himself, but he figured she

would accept an alien's presence more easily than his own. He could have simply used the ship's intercom, but then she'd know he was tracking her movements.

"Will do." As quickly as he appeared, Gan faded from view. One of the perks of being largely incorporeal was that Gan could phase shift through the decks as well as the bulkheads and reach any part of the ship in a matter of seconds.

Even that short span of time was too long for Fletcher. If Talia was ill, he wanted to know about it. In fact, he felt responsible for it. The other women still floating in the U-4EA pods would at least have the mining colony's medical staff to help them with any non-sexual side effects of the aphrodisiac. Talia was on her own.

"Gan?" He took the chance and called his partner on the intercom, hoping he sounded nonchalant.

"Not here."

"Don't play games, Gan...oh, you mean she's not in the infirmary any more?"

"Gone."

Fletcher checked the scanners. Why did it matter, after all? If Talia wanted to avoid him, he should just let her do that. Despite himself, he let his gaze wander back to the scanner. The red dot representing Talia seemed to be heading toward the bridge now.

Ah. So she couldn't stay away for long, could she?

Relieved that she didn't appear to be ill, he laced his fingers behind his head and waited for her to arrive.

\* \* \*

Just as Kreth-Regana had said, Talia found green syringes in the cabinet in the infirmary and a heavy bottle of red pills tucked away on a lower shelf.

Armed with both, she stalked toward the bridge to confront Fletch after a brief stop in the brig. She'd get some answers or he'd get a close-up view of the *Xector's* hull from the outside.

She found him lounging in the captain's chair when she arrived, daring to look smug. Of course he'd been expecting her to seek him out again. He'd been sitting here waiting for her to need him again.

She dropped the bottle of Mogarthan pills in his lap and he grunted with the weight of it. "What the—"

"Is this the antidote to U-4EA? The one you told me didn't exist?" She wished she could read Mogarthan script.

Fletch's blue eyes widened and his fingers curled around the pill bottle. "Um...these are lead tablets...Mogarthan dietary supplements. You didn't take any, did you?"

"No." She raised an eyebrow. "Not yet. But how do I know you're telling the truth? I can't read Mogarthan."

"Gan?" Fletch sat forward, the pill bottle cradled in his lap. "Ask *him*. He wouldn't lie to you."

"But you *would*? Kreth-Regana said she's part of the anti-slavery movement. Why do you have her locked up in the brig with no food and no medical attention?"

"You've been in the brig?" He looked nervous. She had him now and she planned to haul a complete confession out of him. If only she could fight the desire to climb in his lap and

kiss him.

“You didn’t think I’d go there, did you?”

Fletch squinted at her. “I didn’t think you knew where it was. What did Kreth tell you?”

Talia withdrew one of the green syringes from the pocket of her coverall. She’d already given one to the Mogarthan captain, who seemed eternally grateful to get some relief from her pain. She brandished the sharp-tipped instrument at Fletch. “She told me the destination of the ship. Something *you* said she was trying to hide. Now, why would she do that?”

Fletch put up his hand in a calming gesture that did nothing to assuage Talia’s anger. “Maybe because she’d have to realize by now that I’d be able to extract the information from the computer, *and* because you’re nothing more to her than cargo and she doesn’t see you as a threat.”

“Even so...” Talia hesitated. His reasoning made sense, but it didn’t explain his harsh treatment of the prisoner. The Mogarthans were a fierce race, but they were not generally antagonistic to humans from what little Talia knew of them. Their slave trade notwithstanding, they’d even aided humans during the war, and were considered allies, albeit ones who preferred to keep to themselves. “You left her in the brig with no food or medical supplies.”

“Mogarthans eat once a month. She’ll be in custody with Earth-Sec before she’s hungry again, and I was in a lot worse shape after I captured her than she was.”

“What about her leg? She had a bleeding gash—”

Fletch held up his hands, cutting her off. “In the middle of

her right thigh?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not a wound. That’s her...um...genitalia.”

Talia’s jaw dropped and a slightly sick feeling swept over her. “Oh...so why did she want pain medication?”

Fletch surged forward then, dropping the pill bottle. He snatched the syringe from Talia’s hand. “You gave her one of these for *pain*?”

Talia nodded, uncertain now, and a little frightened by the suddenly wild look in Fletch’s eyes.

“Gan!” He yelled to the seemingly empty bridge. “Can you hear me?”

In response, the bridge plunged into darkness.

Beneath Talia’s feet, the deck lurched, sending her sprawling. Utter silence followed, broken after a few moments by Gan’s distant voice.

“Dead meat.”

“Oh, fuck, you said it, partner.”

Talia sensed Fletch’s movements. He stumbled past her in the darkness as she felt around for the edge of the captain’s chair and tried to pull herself up. “What’s happening?”

“Do you hear that?” his disembodied voice asked.

“What? I don’t hear anything.”

“Kreth shut off the compressors. She stopped the ship, and cut off life support to the upper decks. When Gan said ‘dead meat’ he meant that’s what *we’re* going to be in a few hours.”

“How could she escape?” Talia searched the darkness for the faint outline of Fletch’s body. She found him kneeling by a

storage compartment. Before he responded, an orange glow flared to life in his hands. The palm-torch leant a sinister cast to his features, but at least it illuminated a portion of the bridge.

He seared her with a look. “How? That’s easy. You gave her a hormone boost that turned her into a *him* and tripled her strength.”

“Me?”

“That green syringe. Those aren’t pain killers. They’re chromosome suppressants. Didn’t you know Mogarthan’s can change sex?”

“How would I know that?” Was he serious? This was *her* fault?

Fletch shrugged as he crossed the bridge. “I don’t know. You seem to be an expert on *Leonid* sex habits. Why not Mogarthan’s, too? Gan! Gan, where are you?”

There was no reply from the Metrian. Talia gaped while Fletch flipped switches on the *Xector IV’s* control console. “Damn. She cut off the intercom.”

“Gan knows where we are. I’m sure he’ll be all right.”

“Gan’s not the one I’m worried about. He doesn’t need our air to survive, and even if she—*he*—vents the ship, Gan can cling to the interdeck plating to keep from being blown into space. It’s one of the few things he can actually touch in this dimension. *I’m* the one I’m worried about, sweetheart. I’m really not in the mood to die, and Mogarthans take their revenge *very* seriously.”

“So I helped her escape.”

“Mmm. Yep. Thanks for that. I was getting bored with my mission going pretty much as planned. I really needed the diversion.”

Talia sank into the cushions of the captain’s chair. She’d been so gullible. She’d wanted to believe the worst about Fletch, so it hadn’t been a stretch to assume Kreth-Regana was telling the truth.

He brushed past her, his footsteps heavy in the dull, unmoving air of the bridge. “Stay here. There’s no hatch-lock on the bridge, so you won’t be sucked out into space immediately if she vents the deck.”

Talia spun around in the seat and stared at Fletch’s retreating back, cast in silhouette by the palm-torch he carried. “Where are you going?”

He swung around and gave her a dark look from under his brows. “To try to take the ship back so we don’t all end up sucking Mogarthan dick on Camilax.”

He left her then, alone in the dark.

## CHAPTER 6

Gan appeared in the corridor leading to the ship's auxiliary control room. The Metrian was little more than a shadow within a shadow. "Talía alone?"

Fletch made only a half-hearted attempt to tamp down his annoyance at the question. He had bigger problems right now. "She's safe. I left her on the bridge. More importantly, where is Kreth?"

"Pod room."

"Uh huh. If she...*he* decants anyone else we're going to be in trouble."

"May dump cargo."

Fletch's heart lurched. Would the Mogarthan really kill all

the remaining women just to be able to make a faster getaway and destroy evidence of his/her crimes?

“I don’t think so. We’re equidistant from Camilax and the Belt right now. If Kreth can get me out of the way, she’ll try to get to her original destination. She won’t give up that kind of money for a full shipment.” Fletch thought for a moment. He had few resources available on the ship. An extra pair of eyes with Gan, with Talia, an extra pair of hands.

It stung that she hadn’t trusted him. Why should she, though? She’d been abducted, drugged, and dumped cold and naked in the middle of a Mogarthan slave ship where he’d promptly taken advantage of her state of hyper-sexual arousal. There was certainly no basis for trust there.

She’d naturally felt some sympathy for the Mogarthan in female form. Kreth had managed to play on her sympathies, and Talia was just looking for an excuse to think of Fletch as the enemy.

Two days ago life had seemed so much simpler. Hijack a slave ship, free all the cargo, move on to his next assignment.

Fletch leaned against the bulkhead and drew in a breath. The air already seemed stale and warm. It wouldn’t be long before he and Talia were out of atmosphere. “All right, let’s brainstorm. We caught Kreth the first time during a sleep cycle, but she’s not going to close her eyes again until I’m dead. We need another weakness to exploit.”

“U-4EA.”

Fletch squinted at Gan’s shimmering outline. “You don’t mean make her horny, Gan. That’s just not funny.”

“Better idea?”

“I’m sure I could think of one, given enough time.” Unfortunately, there wasn’t any time. “I certainly don’t like this one.”

“Empty pod.” Gan’s voice held a hopeful lilt.

“Right. We can put Kreth in the empty pod. Once we get the ship to the Belt, we can have Earth-Sec come and retrieve her, pod and all. Oh...wait a minute. She’s a *he* now, Gan. The last thing I want is to be chased around this tin can by a horny *male* Mogarthan.”

“Get Talia.”

“For what?” This didn’t sound good at all.

“Bait.”

“Oh, no. That’s a really bad idea.”

Gan shrugged and their gazes held for a split second before the Metrian faded away into the shadows. “She’s not going to go for that, you know. She already hates me. I can’t ask her to—”

“I’ll ask.” Gan disappeared completely then, leaving Fletch alone in the corridor shaking his head. He knew what his next move needed to be to get his partner’s outlandish plan to work and he didn’t like it one bit. He might have hesitated except that, despite his misgivings, he trusted the Metrian completely. Ganymede would make it work, somehow.

With a sigh, Fletch headed toward the pod control room.

\* \* \*

“Gan!”

Talia nearly jumped out of her skin when Gan appeared next to the captain's chair in which she sat. She'd been trying to remember some of the commands Fletch had taught her, hoping she might be able to figure out how to override Kreth's auxiliary control of the ship.

Shame battled with her determination to help. If she hadn't been taken in by what she perceived as the Mogarthan captain's plight, if she'd only trusted Fletch enough to go to him first...

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that." She resisted the urge to reach for the Metrian's hand. "What's happening? Where's Fletch?"

"Needs help."

Talia struggled to focus on Gan's outline in the near darkness of the bridge. "Tell me what I can do."

Using more words that she'd ever heard him utter before, Gan explained his daring plan to lure a sex-starved Mogarthan into the pod chamber and imprison him/her in a vat of U-4EA gooze.

It sounded risky, but with Kreth in control of life support, there seemed to be few options. She agreed to do as Gan instructed, hoping her own U-4EA addiction had worn off enough that she wouldn't actually find herself turned on by the four-armed alien she-male.

## CHAPTER 7

Holding a weapon in each of his/her four hands, Kreth-Regana made an imposing sight.

Fletch watched the Mogarthan from a storage niche in the pod room, a scalpel from the infirmary poised to sever the feed line from an auxiliary canister of aerosolized U-4EA. He'd have to be quick and efficient and choose just the right moment to cut the line and spray the U-4EA gas in Kreth's direction.

Gan shimmered through the wall next to him and gave a barely perceptible nod. "Your mask." The Metrian pointed to the plastic air filter that hung around Fletch's neck. It certainly wouldn't do for him to get a snootful of the aphrodisiac at the

## *U-4EA*

same time as the now male Kreth did.

Fletch flipped his mask into place, nodded to Gan, and sliced the tube that sprouted from the top of the gas canister.

With precision born of necessity, he rolled the canister across the floor toward Kreth, who lowered three of his weapons long enough to take a curious glance at the metallic object. The greenish gas hit him in the face, but only after he'd managed to squeeze off a single shot from his reclaimed blaster, did he inhale.

The Mogarthan roared and flailed, trying to staunch the flow of gas from the tank. In the storage niche, Fletch sank to the floor, lips clamped tight against a sudden, burning pain. Kreth's blaster shot had grazed his shoulder—not a fatal wound, but painful enough to knock the wind out of his lungs and buckle his knees. If he made a sound, Kreth would no doubt be able to finish him off with a second shot before the effects of the U-4EA rendered him/her too randy to shoot straight.

\* \* \*

Talia waited a beat, watching from the narrow corridor outside the pod room. She cringed when Kreth squeezed off a blaster shot and held her breath until the Mogarthan managed to bend the thin metal tube, cutting off the flow of U-4EA gas.

Kreth swayed, and one by one, dropped her weapons. That's when Talia made her move.

She sauntered into the pod room, determined not to stare too long at the rows of naked women floating in the gooze-

filled pods. Her only objective was to get Kreth near enough to the one empty pod from which Fletch had freed her, for him to push the alien captain inside.

The Mogarthan's limpid eyes fell on her and tracked her movements hungrily the moment she rounded the corner. "Come here, female!" Though she still appeared outwardly female, Kreth's voice had changed thanks to the dose of hormone enhancement Talia had unwittingly provided. She forced down fear and revulsion and concentrated on two important facts. Kreth's strength had increased three-fold, and he/she was now horny enough to mate with a Crenelian Rock Slug.

Talia had to move fast.

Sporting her best come-hither pout, Talia sauntered in Kreth's direction, careful to remain just out of reach of the captain's four, grasping hands. "Ooh, you're going to have to come and get me, big...boy. That's it, right this way."

Disarmed, but just as dangerous, Kreth lurched after Talia, slavering and panting. "Stand still, female. Let me get my hands on you."

"In good time, sailor. Come this way." Talia forced a saucy grin and crooked her finger at Kreth. She backed up toward the empty pod, searching behind Kreth for signs of Gan or Fletch. Where were they? They should be sneaking up on the Mogarthan, ready to wrestle him into the open pod.

Two arms swiped at her while a third began unfastening Kreth's uniform pants. Talia noticed when Kreth unceremoniously dropped his trousers, that the wound-like

genitalia she'd seen on his/her thigh earlier seemed to have disappeared. She refused to let her gaze linger too long below Kreth's belt, though, as she had absolutely no desire to see what passed for sex organs on a newly transgendered Mogarthan male.

A roar escaped Kreth's drooling mouth when Talia slithered out of reach one more time. She'd almost reached the pod and the faint, sweet aroma of the U-4EA gooze flavored the air, heightening her own arousal. Good lord, this would not do! She had to get Kreth in position fast and try not to breathe too much in the process. The only thing more humiliating than actually considering Kreth as a sex partner, would be if she found herself shamelessly chasing after Fletch again in the aftermath of their little mutiny.

"That's it, right here. Come on." She coaxed Kreth, her voice lilting but a little shaky. A few more steps and she'd be home free, but with her back to the pod, she had to time her escape just right or end up trapped under a hundred kilos of undulating Mogarthan flesh.

*Where are you, Fletch? Come on, I'm cutting it close here.*

Fighting the sudden heat and a full body flush brought on by thoughts of Fletcher Gray's hard body pressed against hers, Talia took two more steps back. She winked at Kreth and blew him/her a smacking kiss. "Jump my bones, big boy! Right now!" *Gan! Anybody!*

She dropped to her knees and flung herself sideways as Kreth lunged for her. The Mogarthan's huge body flopped over the lower edge of the pod and hung there, half in, legs

kicking, four hands beating on the slick insides of the clear pod bubble.

“Fletch! Where the hell are you?” Talia whirled around, regaining her feet. For a brief instant, the incongruous sight of Kreth’s bare ass bent over the open rim of the pod imprinted itself on her unwilling brain. Later, the memory of it would probably be hilarious, but right now it made her slightly nauseous.

“Legs!” Gan’s voice echoed in her ear and she jumped back.

“What?” She couldn’t see the Metrian at all, but the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, telling her he was close by.

“Grab legs.”

“Where’s Fletch?”

“Injured. Grab!”

*Oh, fuck.* The last thing she wanted to do was get any closer to Kreth’s naked anatomy. Squinting to avoid too detailed an inspection, she bent over and wrapped her arms around the Mogarthan’s knees. “He weighs a ton!” She kept up a stream of expletives while doing her best to shove Kreth the rest of the way into the pod.

“The hatch!” Gan’s command guided her. She slammed the pod closed while Kreth rolled over inside. Arms and legs entwined, the Mogarthan looked like a roly-poly insect that had been flipped on its back.

“Now what?”

A gray shimmer marked where Gan stood next to the pod

controls. “Green button.”

She obeyed the shorthand command and a stream of gooze began to flood the pod.

“Now red.”

She followed Gan’s instructions and within minutes had executed the entire command sequence that would keep Kreth in a blissful state of near-orgasm indefinitely. By the time the pod had filled completely with the neon-yellow liquid, the Mogarthan’s struggles had ceased. His/her eyes drifted closed and a satisfied grin replaced the lecherous smirk Kreth had worn.

Talia let out her breath and sagged against the controls. Fortunately, what little buzz she’d gotten from the remnants of U-4EA left in the air had already dissipated. All she felt now, was exhaustion.

“That was too easy.” Fletch’s voice, tight with pain, cut through the momentary silence in the pod room. Holding the scorched remains of his shirt together over the wound on his shoulder, he limped out of a storage niche behind the last row of pods. His skin was ashen and his gait unsteady, but he managed a thin smile. “I was expecting to have some real *fun* with this plan.”

Talia’s jaw dropped. She hesitated only a moment, then rushed forward and ducked under Fletch’s arm, bolstering him upright when his knees started to give out. “Yeah, easy. Flipping a hundred kilos of horny Mogarthan into a stasis pod is child’s play for me.”

Fletch laughed, but the sound was laced with pain. Gan

hovered before them as they limped toward the corridor. “Not fatal,” he said, though his voice sounded more hopeful than reassuring.

“Nah, I’m gonna be just fi...fine.” Fletch stumbled and Talia tightened her grip around his waist. She’d seen enough blaster burns before to know he would surely live, but that didn’t ease her worrying much. She was no medic and she’d already screwed up her attempt to help what she thought was an injured Mogarthan. How could she possibly offer any reasonable assistance to Fletch?

“Yep, that’s right. You’re going to be fine. Just keep walking, though. You’ve got to stay on your feet because I don’t have the energy to drag your butt all the way to the infirmary, got it?” She offered him a shaky smile and for a moment, his eyes held hers in a look that threatened to ignite the fire she’d been trying so hard to quell.

Then he passed out.

## CHAPTER 8

“Oh, damn, my arm is all numb!” Fletch awoke in a panic, memories of the searing pain of a blaster burn competing with snippets of garish, Technicolor dreams. He felt as though a ten-ton weight held his right side flat against the firm mattress of the infirmary cot on which he lay, and for a moment, he feared he’d never be able to aim a shock pistol again.

A bandage covered his chest from his nipple to the back of his shoulder and two analgesic patches had been stuck just beneath his collarbone. A thin blanket covered his lower half, which gratefully moved on command, assuring him he hadn’t been completely paralyzed.

“Relax.” Gan’s voice floated above him. In the half light,

only a very faint outline of the Metrian was visible. “You’re fine.”

“I can’t move my arm.”

“Overkill.”

“What?”

“I think I might have given you too much pain killer. I’m sorry. It’ll wear off soon.” Talia’s face swam into view. She looked pale and a little tired, but strikingly beautiful to his drug-addled brain. “Good thing Gan knows a lot about first aid.”

“Removed testicles.”

Panic shot through Fletch’s groin followed by the sound of Gan’s laughter. Talia chuckled, too, and hitched one lissome hip onto the cot to sit next to him. “Metrian’s have no comedic timing. He was supposed to tell you that *first*.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Gan. Do you think I really would have believed you could con Talia into removing my testicles to treat a shoulder wound?”

“Trust me, he tried. He’s a funny guy once you really get to know him.” She patted Fletch’s left shoulder, but snatched her fingers away self-consciously before he could get used to the soothing warmth of her touch.

“Yeah, he’s a scream. How long have I been out? What’s our ETA to the Belt?”

“One day,” Gan replied.

Talia shrugged. “I have half a mind to give Kreth another intra-pod dose of that sex-change hormone. I’m sure there’s some hapless miner who would be happy with a four-armed

sex slave.”

“Hmm.” Fletch grunted. He wanted to get up, get back to the bridge and make sure everything really was under control. “Poor guy wouldn’t last a day. Besides, humans and Mogarthan’s aren’t all that compatible. Kreth is better off right where he is.”

“I’m not convinced the other women aren’t, either. I still don’t think it’s fair to dump them into the waiting arms of a bunch of horny miners.”

Fletch sighed. “You still don’t believe me that there isn’t any other antidote? It may seem a little barbaric, but trust me, everyone will have a good time.”

Her only response was a withering glare as she rose from the cot. He stared after her, wishing he had the strength to follow her across the room. She’d done a magnificent job helping him wrest control of the pod carrier back from Kreth and he wanted to find a way to thank her, but all he could come up with on short notice involved the use of all his extremities, several of which were a bit non-functional at the moment.

“You rest,” she said finally. “I’m going up to the bridge so Gan can teach me more about how to fly this thing.”

Fletch’s eye’s widened and he searched the shadows for Gan’s distinctive outline. “What?”

“No worries,” the Metrian said, a smile evident in his tone.

“She’s not a licensed pilot, you know—don’t go giving her the helm just for kicks.”

Talia winked and blew him a kiss before ducking out of

the room. “Don’t worry.” Her voice floated back to him from the corridor beyond. “For kicks, he’s going to show me how the *laser cannons* work!”

Fletch’s eye’s fluttered closed and he moaned as theatrically as possible, though he was certain his dubious crewmates were long gone. He’d probably have been better off if he’d just stayed unconscious.

\* \* \*

Talia lounged in the captain’s chair watching the stars go by on the main view screen. Irregular in shape and surrounded by a faint blue glow, one star in particular had begun to grow larger at the center of the screen. The mining colony. Built on one of the myriad asteroids that made up the Threxis Belt, Asteroid X7658 housed some two dozen employees of GemCon, the galaxy’s principal manufacturer of industrial grade emeralds.

She imagined she could see the whole habitation dome just vibrating with excitement over their very first, and hopefully last, delivery of sex slaves. Though Gan had assured her that the medical personnel on board would see to the physical and mental well-being of each of the women decanted from the pods, Talia still felt somewhat responsible for them.

Every one of the females Kreth had captured would wake up just as she had, horny as hell and ready to fuck anything that moved, and the miners would be lined up, prepared to do their civic duty by helping the women overcome their U-4EA addiction.

The thought of it made her angry...and just a little hot. The place was going to be like an orgy for several days. That thought reminded her that she hadn't even touched Fletch in twenty-four hours. It bothered her that she wanted to. Since she'd left him in the infirmary yesterday, they'd managed to avoid each other. She'd almost begun to think all the effects of the aphrodisiac had worn off, except that now, imagining the sexual frenzy that would ensue on Asteroid X7658 in a few hours, she'd begun to wonder if it wouldn't hurt to just get one final fix of her own.

*No.*

She didn't want Fletcher Gray in any way. Not near her, under her, over her, or in her. God, it was hot on the bridge. She fanned herself with her hand and shifted in her seat. She could do this. She could get through this and put Fletch completely out of her mind forever. After all, Gan had arranged a transport to take her from the Belt back to CalTak headquarters. She'd seen the communiqué that Earth-Sec had sent to her employer explaining her absence from work, as well as commending her for her part in rescuing the other women from Mogarthan slavery. There would even be a tidy reward to help make up the wages she'd lost while she was Kreth's unwitting prisoner.

Her ordeal was almost over. Soon, she could get back to scouting on some distant, empty planet, with only herself for company. Just the way she liked it.

\* \* \*

Fletch paced along the central aisle of the pod room, pausing briefly here and there to check stats on several of the gooze-filled containers. Each of the twenty-four remaining women seemed to be in good health according to the minimal life support monitors attached to each pod. He hoped there wouldn't be any complications associated with their long incarceration, though any illness or injury they suffered would only serve to extend the length of Kreth's sentence once his/her trial came up at Earth-Sec.

He stretched his shoulder and rubbed at the tingling flesh beneath the new bandage he wore. Talia had done a good job fixing him up and that was one more thing he had to find a way to thank her for. She'd made sure their paths hadn't crossed in the last day, and now that they were only hours away from station fall at the mining colony, they would soon part ways forever. It was, after all, a big galaxy and the likelihood that they'd ever run into each other again somewhere was extremely slim.

Nevertheless, he hadn't been able to shake the vision of her standing in the cool, blue water on Narex. His lusty dream haunted him and made him wish, to his personal shame, the U-4EA high had lasted just a few days longer. They'd been good together, both in bed and out and he'd guiltily indulged in the fantasy that she might join Earth-Sec and become his partner—not that he didn't appreciate Gan, but a Metrian was a poor conversationalist at best and once in a while it would be nice to be able to high-five someone who actually had a hand.

Ah, well. He hadn't signed on this mission detail to make

friends or to fall in love.

*Where the hell had that thought come from?*

He shook his head. Time to get back to work and stop thinking about Talia. He firmly put all thoughts of her utterly and completely out of his mind forever.

Then he turned around and stepped on her foot.

“Ow!” She staggered back, hopping and wincing. “Crapallmighty, Captain Gray, are those lead-lined boots?”

He reached out to steady her and surprisingly, she took his arm. “Actually, they are. I use these for EVAC. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.” She cringed a bit and tapped her toe experimentally on the deck. “I can walk, but I can’t dance.”

“Sorry...uh...but what were you doing sneaking up behind me?”

She tossed her hair and those dark eyes of hers flashed. “I was not sneaking up on you.”

“I work with a Metrian. I know sneaking when I see it.”

She huffed and let her fingers drop from his bicep. “I actually just came to say good-bye. I wanted to be ready to hop on the transport Gan lined up for me.”

“Oh.” Right. Of course she’d want to get going as soon as possible. She did have a life, after all, and it made sense that she’d want to get back to it.

“You seem disappointed.” Was that hope in her voice, or just curiosity?

“No. Of course not. I just figured you’d stick around to

oversee the decanting. I know you were concerned about the other women.”

Her eyes widened just a fraction. “Right. Yes. I am, very concerned. But the medical personnel on Asteroid X7658 will probably have things well under control. There are twenty male miners and one lesbian...and a few of the men have offered to take on two of the women, so no one should be left out of the...festivities. I’m sure you could lend a *hand* if need be.”

Fletch watched her from under lowered lashes. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. “I can’t really do that...because...uh, I have to get back to work, right away. Gan and I have another mission lined up. We’re going to be tracking ships leaving Camilax, trying to catch them with slaves on board.”

“Oh.” She nodded and seemed to step a little closer to him. The sweet scent of her reached him. Did she naturally smell like sex or was his libido in overdrive due to the tons of U-4EA gooze that surrounded them? “That sounds very...interesting and *dangerous*. You’ll be careful, won’t you? I don’t read the news pages much, but I’d hate to find out you got hurt again.”

Yes, she was definitely closer. Fletch moved in, his gaze on her lips. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve got Gan.”

“Gan is ninety-eight percent incorporeal.” Her breath warmed his face and her fingers found their way to the collar of his uniform. “What happens if you need someone to bandage you up again?”

Fletch let one hand rest on her hip, luxuriating in the gentle

curve and the firmness of her ass. He drew her closer, a millimeter at a time so as not to scare her off. If she wanted him again, if she needed him, he was ready. He was more than ready. "I'm sure I'll manage. Somehow. But who's going to keep you from getting captured by Mogarthan slavers? Trinium scouting is a lonely business and I'd hate to think of you floating in some pod somewhere, all...naked and covered in U-4EA."

"I'll be fine. I'm going to stick to the settled territories for a while."

"Oh." Their lips hovered just centimeters apart and Fletch wondered if he could come just from the anticipation of tasting her again. He hadn't indulged in any U-4EA, yet he felt like every nerve in his body was on fire. If his mouth touched hers, he'd be lost, completely at her mercy, and he longed for it.

On the next heartbeat he closed his eyes and plunged into emptiness.

"Wha—" He flailed a bit, then regained his balance. Talia stood a step away, and the dim outline of a Metrian hovered between them. "Gan! You're interrupting a private conversation."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, right. What's up?" Fletch tried to shrug off the sensual itch that plagued him. He was hard as a rock and so hot for Talia that it hurt.

"Docking procedure."

"Can it wait a minute?"

“Wanna crash?”

Fletch threw up his hands and sighed. “At this point, I almost don’t care.” He squared his shoulders. Ignoring the twinge of pain beneath his bandage, he gave Talia a stern look as he passed her. “Don’t you go anywhere. I’ll be back.”

She bit her lower lip. “Famous last words.”

He muttered a few choice curses at Gan under his breath and stalked off toward the bridge.

\* \* \*

Talia watched him go, seething for release beneath the calm exterior she portrayed. One more time. That’s all she wanted with Fletch, just one more time so she could remember the best sex of her life before the U-4EA buzz wore off completely.

He probably had her all figured out, smug bastard that he was. She’d seen it in his eyes, how much he wanted one more romp. Of course, he could probably have his pick of the other women from the pods. Surely there would be one he could snag for himself and some poor miner would just have to settle for one insatiable sex slave instead of two.

She left the pod room, having no intention of staying put until he came back to claim her. The moment had fled, thanks to Gan. She wondered, as she made her way back to her quarters, if Metrians had sex. Surely they could touch *each other*, even if they couldn’t touch humans. If not, what a terribly lonely existence it must be. No wonder Ganymede seemed to revel in teasing his companions.

She'd barely made it over the threshold of her room when a familiar whisper of air crossed her path. "Gan? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't you be on the bridge with Fletch?"

"Under control."

"Ah. Well, I might as well say good-bye to you now. I'll be heading right for the transport when we dock, so do you think you could say good-bye to Fletch for me? I don't want to drag this out any more than I have to, and I'm sure he'll want to get on his way as soon as all the pods are empty."

"His room."

"What?"

"Stop there."

"You want me to go to Fletch's room? What for?"

"Good-bye."

"Oh, Gan." Talia sighed. "I don't have time for that. I...it's not a good idea. We need to go our separate ways. He saved my life, in a way. I can't imagine what would have happened to me if Kreth had managed to get all the way to Camilax with the pods. I guess I'd belong to some Mogarthan playboy now." She shuddered at the thought. Fletch truly had saved her life.

"Saved *him*."

"Oh, I wouldn't say I saved him. A few bandages, a shot or two of pain killer. Anyone could have done that."

"Not me."

Talia grinned. "Well, I guess you're right about that. So that makes us even."

“Not quite.”

Talia growled her exasperation. “Come on, Gan. I know you don’t *have* to do this cryptic stuff. You can just come out and tell me what you want me to know.”

“His room.”

“Gan!”

“Just go.”

“Ahhh! All right. All right. But this better be good. I don’t want to look like some love sick foo—uh...I don’t want to look stupid, sitting around waiting for him to show up.”

“You won’t.”

## CHAPTER 9

The *Xector IV* docked at Asteroid X7658 with much fanfare and celebration. For a few minutes, Fletch worried that the miners, in their enthusiasm to welcome the pod-refugees, might, in fact get started on Fletch. He'd never been so welcomed anywhere in his life.

Fortunately, the decanting went well, with the station medical team keeping everything orderly. Each woman was paired with a miner and after an initial orgasm or two, given a full explanation of where they were and how they'd arrived. Each and every one seemed by turns stunned and grateful to have been liberated from Mogarthan captivity and several of them offered to thank Fletch personally for his participation in

the mission.

He hated himself for refusing, but despite the tempting aroma of sweet U-4EA in the air, he found himself not the least bit aroused by any of the other women.

By the time the last of them had cleared out of the pod room, Fletch felt only exhaustion. He sighed as he shut down the last of the stasis systems and headed to his quarters.

Talia was gone. He hadn't really expected her to hang around, but a final good-bye would have been nice. He felt foolish that her departure left him so out of sorts.

"Gan? You around?" he called to his partner when he reached the door of the captain's quarters. The last leg of their mission would be to return the *Xector IV* to an impound yard at Earth-Sec headquarters and pick up a new skimmer for himself. The accommodations would be sparse compared to this and if nothing else, he was looking forward to having the extra room to himself for a few more days.

"Right here."

"I'm going to take a long nap. Can you monitor communications for a while?"

"Will do."

The faint breeze of Gan's departure stirred Fletch's hair and he wondered briefly why the Metrian seemed to be in such a hurry. With a shrug, he opened the stateroom door and let himself inside.

"It's about time." Talia stood in the center of the room, hands on her hips, shoulders squared in defiance. "I've been locked in here for hours."

Fletch did a double take. Was he already asleep and dreaming that Talia hadn't left on the transport to CalTak? How could she still be on board? "Locked? In here?"

She stalked toward him, eyes hard as the emeralds GemCon mined from the asteroids of the Belt. "You put him up to this, didn't you? All that talk about us not being even, that was just your plan to—"

"Whoa. What are you talking about? Not being even?" He resisted the urge to put his hands on her shoulders as she approached. She stood toe to toe with him now, her lips twisted in a pucker of annoyance.

"You know. You saved my life, I saved yours. We're even, so I thought, but Gan said—"

"You didn't exactly save my life. I mean, you slapped a bandage on me and..." As the words left his mouth, Fletch noticed the distinct flavor of foot replacing them on his tongue. He clamped his lips shut in an effort to prevent himself from saying anything else that would make him sound like a complete cad.

Talia nodded sharply. "So you're saying I owe you something more? You definitely put Gan up to this."

"Up to what? Why aren't you on the transport to CalTak?"

"Because your partner lured me into your room and locked me in! I don't know how he did it, but he disabled the door controls and the com-link. I've been screaming my head off for over an hour, but of course no one heard me. I guess you were too busy servicing the women from the pods."

Fletch didn't know whether to be angry or pleased at the

hint of jealousy in her tone. “Oh, yes. They all wanted me, so how could I refuse?”

“I bet. Well, on that note, good-bye, Agent Gray.” She spun away from him and launched herself at the door, which failed to open when she palmed the controls. She stopped, her pert nose barely a hairsbreadth from the sliding panel and sighed in exasperation. “Enough is enough, Fletch. I’m done.”

“Do you need a push or something?” He couldn’t resist that one. She was a classic example of passive aggressive ambiguity all rolled up in an angry but very sexy package. If she didn’t get her cute little butt out of his sight immediately, he might not be able to let her leave.

After a few deep breaths, she whirled around. “It won’t open. Tell Gan to give it up already. The two of you can’t keep me here any more.”

“Uh...” Fletch shouldered past her and palmed the door control as well, eager now to be rid of her. If hanging around him made her this cranky, then good riddance. He liked her better when she was a raving sex fiend. Just one tap on the door control and she’d be out of his life forever.

And nothing happened.

He tried twice more, but the door remained stubbornly closed. “Gan!” Fletch pounded on the door. “This isn’t funny.”

“He’s incorporeal. How does he control the computer?” Talia demanded as she joined Fletch in hammering on the door with her fists.

“Wet wire interface. He can tap into some of the ship’s

controls telepathically thanks to a psionic enhancer.”

“So how come he couldn’t help you fly the ship?”

“Most Mogarthan navigation systems are largely manual. All those levers and toggles are beyond his capabilities in this dimension.”

“He can’t fly, but he certainly can lie.” Talia sighed and leaned against the bulkhead next to the door. “The two of you make quite a team.”

“Wait a minute, don’t think I had anything to do with this.”

“Oh, come on. You didn’t want me to leave, but you were too timid to say so. So you had Gan hold me prisoner.”

Fletcher glared. “Timid? I’m a lot of things, but timid isn’t one of them. And in case you don’t recall, I *did* tell you to hang around so I could say good-bye. I was planning on...” He stopped himself again. Why bother confessing now when all she wanted to do was leave?

“On what?” She faced him again, breathing hard.

“Nothing.” How long could they stare at each other until one of them broke, he wondered?

“Tell me.”

He broke. “I was planning on asking you to dinner. The mining colony’s cafeteria isn’t fancy, but I hear the food is good and I didn’t figure it would be too crowded this evening with everyone otherwise occupied.”

“Dinner?”

“I figured you’d be sick of protein bars by now. I know I am.”

“And then what?” Her voice softened and so did her

posture. Her shoulders rounded and she leaned back against the bulkhead, her expression expectant.

Fletch shrugged. "I was going to kiss you good-bye, and give you this." He dug into his pocket for the small object he'd been carrying around with him all day. It glinted in the dim light.

"What is it?"

"The antidote to Mogarthan sleep darts." The small cylinder held a single dose of a powerful stimulant. All Earth-Sec agents carried them to combat being drugged and kidnapped by their enemies during missions. "I thought if you were scouting somewhere and you got tagged again...well, you'd have a couple of seconds to administer this. The only side effect is the stuff in here will keep you awake for three days straight."

Talia reached up and palmed the cylinder. Her fingers brushed his briefly and Fletch swore he felt an electric spark pass between them. Gan must have forgotten to degauss the ship after they'd slid into space dock. "Thank you. That's very thoughtful."

He shrugged. "I can get more. Over the last few days, I spent a lot of time worrying that you might not be safe scouting out there all alone."

Talia stared and for a split second Fletch wondered if he'd said the wrong thing again. He was about to apologize when she leaned forward and kissed him.

This time, he definitely felt an electric spark, and it had nothing do to with the friction from space dock.

\* \* \*

Talia threw her arms around Fletch's neck and pressed herself against him. She caressed his lips with hers and drank in his warm flavor and masculine scent. This is what she'd been fighting against, trying to deny that she didn't need U-4EA to make her respond to his touch.

When he broke the kiss and met her gaze, she forced herself not to tremble in anticipation. What if he didn't feel it any more? What if she couldn't convince him to give her one more sweet release?

"Talia—"

"Fletch. You don't have to say anything. Just make love to me. I need you, one more time."

Fortunately Fletch didn't hesitate. He swept Talia up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She would never have admitted how much she'd enjoyed the night they'd spent here, how wonderful it felt to wake up in his arms. She'd grown so used to working alone, being alone, that she'd forgotten how much more restful sleep could be when it was shared with someone.

Right now, though, sleep was the farthest thing from her mind. She had him right where she wanted him, and even though it was for the last time, she planned to enjoy every moment of it.

She let him undress her, reveled in having him pull her coverall open and slide the rough material off her shoulders and down past her hips. She spread her legs to accommodate him and moaned when he planted a line of kisses along the

column of her throat. Every touch felt like fire and her body responded with a coiling of muscle, a tightening of nerves that had her ready for release in an instant.

U-4EA hadn't done this.

Talia realized when Fletch stripped off his uniform and slid his erection into her, that the aphrodisiac was not responsible for the feelings colliding in her body. Her throat had gone tight and her heart thundered when he began to move. Every sensation seemed heightened beyond what she'd experienced even the first time she'd demanded that he take her. This was different.

This was real.

Fletch brought her to one shuddering release after another and left her panting and clinging to him on the narrow bed. With a final thrust, he completed his mission and Talia moaned her complete satisfaction.

"Yes. That's what I needed. But once isn't enough. Fletch."

He laughed between laying kisses across her nose. "Once? That was three times, I believe."

"It's still not enough. You know, CalTak told me I didn't have to report back to work right away. I get some R&R, considering the ordeal I've been through." She met his gaze as he shifted his body to lie next to her.

"Oh? Like a vacation?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe you could use my help with the Camilax affair. I mean, now that I know about the Mogarthan slave trade, I feel compelled to do something about

it. There've got to be plenty of other pod ships full of unsuspecting women that need our help."

"*Our* help?" He grinned.

"I'm sure there are rules and regulations, but couldn't I come along for a while? Since I missed my transport and all."

Fletch gazed at her, his blue eyes soft with understanding and something deeper. For a moment, Talia worried that he was going to give her the lead boot and send her on her way with nothing more than a good-bye kiss.

Instead he ran a hand up over her shoulder and cupped her face. "You really want to deal with me and Gan on a daily basis? I can guarantee you'll grow to miss the solitude of trinium scouting."

Talia shrugged, covering her nervous anticipation with nonchalance. "I'll take my chances. I can always hide in the brig when I need some peace and quiet."

Fletch leaned forward and kissed her. "Let me talk to Earth-Sec. I shouldn't have trouble getting you some clearance, and in the mean time why don't we pretend we're Leonids?" His grin was wicked and promising and Talia laughed while he pulled her body beneath him again.

"Anything you want, Agent Gray. I'm with you all the way."

## JENNIFER COLGAN

Drawn to spicy tales of adventure from an early age, Jennifer Colgan (who also writes as Bernadette Gardner) made the leap from writing hard science fiction to writing erotic romance in 2005 and has never looked back.

Now multi-published, Jennifer also writes paranormal, fantasy and contemporary titles as well as science fiction erotica (under the name Bernadette Gardner). When not exploring distant galaxies or alternate universes, Jennifer can be found at home with her husband of fifteen years, two children and one slightly neurotic Dalmatian. She spends her spare time reading, quilting and haunting the local craft stores and looks forward to bringing steamy stories to her fans for decades to come.

You can visit her websites to learn about her works in progress at [www.bernadettegardner.com](http://www.bernadettegardner.com) and [www.jennifercolgan.com](http://www.jennifercolgan.com).

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