



# The Twainer's Cube

By

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## Chapter One

Earth, 2113

Aw, *man!* Aariah cursed mentally, still fighting for control of her motor functions after the five-year hibernation cycle that had enabled the doctors to save her life but had complicated it at the same time. Fumbling with the zipper on her jumpsuit, she scowled silently at the fastening while she stood in the small bathroom stall at the start of the final hour of the workweek before she could clock out to go home and shower.

The years she'd spent in the hibernation pod at the clinic had thrown off more than her occasional battles with zippers or misjudged depth perception, which sent her walking into walls. In the five years she had slept while the doctors developed a way to override the affects of the poison which had leached its way into her system during an attack on her company's home base in the Ju Vonice Quadrant, Aariah had life had continued around her. Friends had moved on, new worlds had joined the Federation, and her last living relative, Grandma Nan had died.

She was technically twenty-eight but still looked and felt like twenty three. Although she'd only slept five years, though, she might as well have been gone for five hundred with all she'd missed out on the planet as well as the Federation and with her loved ones. Only her long-time friend, Allison, had even still been around when she was brought out of the pod, cured but still weak and certainly disoriented. But now even Allison was moving on.

As an investigative journalist, Allison had finally been offered the big chance she'd been waiting for from her editor to look into a lead she'd gotten about an underground smuggling ring from the Gherban System, something about protected alien species. Now, in less than forty-eight hours, Allison would be off and away into the final frontier. Sighing sadly, Aariah re-buckled the belt around her hips and gave herself the once over to check for any signs of her infrequent bouts of unsteady hands. Once satisfied, she exited the sanitation stall and made her way to the sink to wash her hands.

"Oh, thank god it's Friday eh?" Moxy from accounting groaned at her as she freshened her garish makeup.

Aariah hummed in agreement, cringing internally at the cliché day of the week comment.

"Aariah isn't it?" Moxy asked, eyeing her through the reflection in the mirror as she paused before applying yet another application of lash enhancer with a cosmetic wand.

"Yes," Aariah replied with a subtle smile, "don't you work in accounting?"

With that, Moxy rolled her eyes and continued to thicken her lashes. "Boring as hell, I tell ya. I've never been one for numbers, I only applied for the job because I wanted to get out of the Customer Accounts Department, all the calls from Harron were such a pain in the ass. All they do is complain."

She knew all about that. Moxy, if the rumors were true, Miss *I Hate Numbers*, had screwed up the account of one of the biggest clients their innerworld scientific equipment supply company held and had cost the company a couple hundred thousand credits. Aariah had no idea why they hadn't fired her and promoted her to internal accounts instead, although with the view

of the woman's firm ass hanging out of her faraphen skirt, she could have given a pretty good guess as to why the woman was still employed.

"So, got any exciting plans for the weekend?" Moxy cocked a finely penciled eyebrow at her as Ariaiah sanitized her hands under the particle stream.

"Yeah," she lied, trying her best at nonchalance, "going out to eat" *ordering in*, "then to a movie" *in my living room on the twenty-inch panel projector*. The non-verbal, internal monologue sounded just as pathetic in her head as if she'd actually said it all aloud.

"Any one I know?" Moxy smirked wolfishly as she turned around with a swish of her long sable hair to face Ariaiah, planting a curvy hip on the edge of the sink.

*Umm, unless Chet Jarvis, incredibly hot star of three of my four favorite movies, is a close and personal friend of yours, then...no.* "No," she replied, trying to keep as little lying out of the conversation as possible, "I don't even know him."

*Phew, that was close!*

Sympathy from the office slag was the last thing she needed right now. "Blind date, huh?" Moxy heaved a sigh, as though offering condolences to the family at a funeral of someone she hardly knew, her enhanced brows knitting in fraudulent pity.

"A what?"

Moxy took in Ariaiah's faded black, no-nonsense, three-quarter sleeves jumpsuit appraisingly before continuing. "Did someone set you up?"

"Yeah," *the network's Friday night movie lineup*, Ariaiah thought wryly, wishing for nothing more than that their conversation would be at an end.

"Well have a good time." Moxy smirked knowingly at her once more. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Ariaiah escaped the bathroom just as Moxy, began to laugh – whether with her or at her she had no idea but something told her it was the latter.

*I wouldn't want the infections that go with it*, Ariaiah scowled in unvoiced reply as she punched in the key code, and waited for the print scanner to register her so she could enter the back door of her department to finish out the remaining fifty minutes of the work week.

"Geeze," Carly, the receptionist, breathed as Ariaiah brushed by her in the back hall on the way to her small, window-less office, "what's the matter with you?"

"Oh nothing," Ariaiah lied with a sigh, this time with resigned evasion as she continued without pause to her workplace haven, "sorry Carly."

Upon reaching her desk, she noticed the light on her communicator blinking with irritating persistence. Picking up the headset, Ariaiah keyed in the command for her voicemail to retrieve the message.

After the usual automated date and time stamp, Allison's familiar voice crackled oddly through the receiver.

"Hey, it's me," the message began without formal introduction, "sorry this is such a crappy conn--tion bu ...." A large ripple of crackling interference faded her one remaining friend's voice for a few moments until fading back in as though someone had been messing with the volume. "... so I won't be able to go tomorrow obviously. I suck, I know, but you'll forgive me right? I'll be sure to send you something non-touristy, I know you're into that stuff. Well, I'm calling from the ship's communicator and I don't have a way for you to contact me yet but when I do, you'll be the first one I call – well, I guess the second after my editor...or my assistant, but rest assured you're in the top five of the people I'll call first when I finally can. This is so awesome! Love ya!"

Commanding the communicator to save the message for further deciphering, Ariaiah hung up slowly, staring at it as the blinking message light finally stopped. *Oh well, she sighed, I guess that leaves Chet and me the entire weekend to ourselves.*

Disappointed at having lost her last opportunity to see Allison before she left for the ten month assignment, Ariaiah turned back to her monitor to reply to a few more client inquiries and to check the movie listings for that night's looser-fest for one.

*So begins another thrilling weekend of wild sex and thrilling adventure, she mocked herself before shutting down, in the movies at least.*

"There you are Hollis," her director called from the doorway, a stack of file chips pulsating red in his hands with the foreboding of another last minute project of trivial busy work, too menial even for the interns. "I've been looking for you for over an hour." He frowned as he positioned himself just above her as she sat so he could take a look down her cleavage now and again.

*Doubtful, as I only just took my first break of the day so that I could go to the bathroom.* Ariaiah glared at the man in his circa 2081 suit so far from natural fiber it would melt if he walked through a body scanner.

"These reports were supposed to have been filed with the clients on Monday," he bit out as though it were her fault when everyone in the office knew very well that the supply reports were his responsibility. "Now, I don't want any excuses, just do what has to be done and get them out tonight. We're all team players here." With a nod towards Mitch as he waved goodnight with an odd glance at her, Director Barry Brier added insult to injury.

"I would have asked Jones to do it," he continued as he glanced in Mitch's direction, "but he has plans."

Without so much as a pause for breath, he dropped the stack upon her desk and proceeded to leave when suddenly he stopped and turned his head to look at her.

"Carbon copy me on all of those Hollis. I want to be positive on the time they were sent off tonight if the clients should ask."

As Mr. Brier made his way out the back door five minutes later, Ariaiah fought the urge to throw him the bird but instead attempted to break the stylus laced between her fingers, unable to relieve her of her anger but earning her some sore fingers.

\* \* \* \*

It was a quarter to nine before Ariaiah had even gotten through the first half of the stack. Having abandoned her high-heeled boots and dropped the zipper an inch or two down her neckline, she rubbed the back of her neck absently trying to follow the receiving details on the Mayschik Laboratories account. There was something slightly off about it, but she couldn't seem to pinpoint where someone had dropped a figure, even by the fourth time she was going over the shipment details when the chirp of her communicator caused her to jump in alarm.

Eyeing the caller ID suspiciously before finally picking up the receiver, Ariaiah rolled her eyes and sat back in her chair.

"Hello gorgeous," purred a silky voice on the other end of the communicator, "I was afraid I might find you with your nose still pressed to the old proverbial grindstone at this hour."

"Hi Norrik," she sighed tiredly, switching to speaker option and returning her attention to the tables displayed on her monitor, "what can I do for you?"

"Now, now, don't ask if you don't have the decency to follow through," he pouted, his deep voice full of teasing humor.

Norrik had been the closest thing to a boyfriend Aariah had in the nearly seven years since the end of her engagement and, considering she'd never even met Mr. Farvish in person, that wasn't saying much. They'd gotten to know each other when she was just a special accounts client rep and Norrik's company were new customers, mainly ordering certain Earth-exclusive items. Over the years as both of them progressed in their careers, Norrik still called her for even the littlest thing.

Their sexual banter had come into play early on and although she'd never had visual connection during their sometimes lengthy calls, the flirtatious Apollo whom Aariah had seen a few pictures of during a session of snooping through some inter-galactic press releases, even sent her the occasional dirty joke. That wasn't to say that they couldn't have a serious conversation. Boy, she was glad she could multi-task! In the time it would take her to track an order and change it for him, they could talk about anything from the morning commute buzz, to personal life philosophy.

Talking to Norrik was ... comfortable, too. He was open and warm but had a way of making a woman feel she was the only other being within the next three galaxies ... or at least the planet. They never talked about their dating lives, or lack thereof in Aariah's case, per se. It was mostly just hypothetical 'If you were in this situation, what would you do?' sorts of topics. Yes, not only did the man have a luscious exterior from what she could see in the low quality PR images in which he could often be spotted in the inter-galactic readers, but he was decent and interesting, too.

"I assume you called for a reason?" Aariah redirected him with a smile, restraining the thrill of his comment from entering her voice. God his accent was hot, like a mix between Earth Gaelic and something Slavic, sing-songy with a soft burr. The Baltons had a way of speaking that could send her from frigid to burning hot in about 15 seconds and Aariah leaned over to power up the small fan that sat on her desk to cool off her now building heat.

"Do I need one?" he cooed over the speaker. Having him on speaker was like having him in the room and the effect was hell on her libido.

"Generally a client has a reason for calling when they do. Was there a problem with your last shipment *Mr. Farvish*?" She loved goading him

Switching the subject, Norrik avoided her question. "What's that noise?"

Looking around her for a moment, Aariah's gaze soon fell on the whirling fan. "My desk fan," she supplied flatly, "now, did everything arrive as desired?"

"Isn't it the cool season there?"

Aariah puzzled over his question. "You mean autumn? Yes, it's November."

Barely contained laughter laced his voice when he asked, "Why do you need a fan on in November?"

"It's hot in here. So did you get everything you wanted?"

A small chuckle of amazement finally escaped the man on the other side of the call and passed through the speakers, "It's hot in your office?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes."

"So you're sitting in front of a fan on an early Earth autumn evening?"

"Yes. Mr. Farvish."

"Norrik," he corrected.

"Norrik, just answer my question please, I'd like to get to bed before midnight if at all possible."

"Oh gods, don't tease me," he moaned over the communicator, the animalism in his voice sprinkling goose bumps along her skin and making her nipples tighten painfully in response. "Damn these vemmish connections to Earth, I'd love to be watching you right now."

"Please Mr. Farvish." She sighed, turning off the fan and chaffing her hands up and down her forearms. The thought of Norrik wanting to see her as they spoke was more horrifying than gratifying. The connections to Balton were notoriously poor and even on the rare occasions one could get video over a communicator, the quality was usually so bad you'd generally disable it in order to keep from going cross-eyed.

"My apologies Aariah. Yes, yes, everything survived transport."

A pregnant pause filled the air between them.

"Mr. Farvish?" she called questioningly, wondering if they'd been disconnected.

"Norrik."

"Yes Norrik, why is it you've called and what made you think I'd be here at this hour – hang on, this is your office number, it must be ...," she paused a moment to calculate the time difference, "it's well past quitting time for you, as well! Who are you to lecture *me* about staying late when you're still at your office at such an hour?"

"Alright, alright, I'll admit it," he sighed dramatically, "my name is Norrik, and I am a workaholic."

"Ha, ha very funny." She smiled. "You still haven't told me why you called."

"Hmm, well you see I have a favor to ask of my favorite Earthling," he began.

"Of me?" she smiled.

"Yes, of you, now be quiet so I can get on with it."

As Aariah waited for him to ask his favor her heart thudded thickly in her chest and something began to curl low in her belly with an unexplainable expectancy.

"I'm going to be in town for a conference next week and I need a date for a business dinner I've got scheduled with a group of investors."

Suddenly she couldn't breathe. Norrik Farvish was coming to Earth ... to her town no less, and it would appear that somehow the gods were toying with her for this man, *this* man was asking her, plain-Jane Aariah Hollis, out on a date? Facing facts, Aariah instantly remembered the picture of him she'd been able to scrounge out of the company's security file used to help identify important clients when they came to one of the plants or offices.

"So," he continued, "do you know anyone I can ask?"

The air rushed out of her lungs so fast, he might as well have punched her in the gut. *That sleazy...* she fumed, trying to cover her disappointment with anger. *As if! It'd serve him right if she set him up with Moxy ... but he'd probably call me, after fucking her for dessert, just to thank me for the introduction.* A sudden mental image of their perspiring naked bodies, Moxy bent on all fours in front of Norrik on the floor of his hotel suite as he plunged deeply into the stupid bitch, both moaning in appreciative pleasure, filled her mind and Aariah wanted to vomit.

It took a minute for Aariah to register that he was laughing. Pulling herself out of the cloud of fury that surrounded her brain, she responded shakily. "I guess one of the girls in accounting ...."

"Aariah," he said, laughing, "I'm just teasing honey, and I want to take you. Are you free?"

Just before her heart could wither and die, he had to send it pulsating toward bursting again ... damn he was good.

*Hmm, let me check my schedule ... yes, what else would I be doing? Watching reruns?*  
“Um, yeah,” she stopped, mentally kicking herself, then trying to correct her blunder, “I mean what day?”

After laughing briefly he exhaled. “It’s entirely up to you. You tell me when you’re free and I’ll arrange the meeting around you. And Aria,” he waited.

“Hmmm?”

“No chickening out. I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you. I want your promise, come hell or high water – or vem-for-brains directors like Briar, you’ll be there.”

*A long time? Aria wondered. A long time as in before the attack on the company compound which left her in a hibernation pod for five years?*

Nodding dumbly to the communicator, forgetting that he could not see her, she finally stumbled through her acceptance and wrote down the address of the hotel where he’d be staying. In less than seven days she would finally come face to face with the closest thing to perfection she’d ever seen.

Sudden panic hit her at the sound of the silence after the disconnection. She had just accepted a date with the hottest man she’d ever laid eyes on, only she had not laid eyes on him or anything else for that matter, at least not in the flesh. Oh god, what had she done!



## Chapter Two

Ariah sat in her bra and stockings before the antique wood dressing table she'd inherited from her grandmother, staring at her own reflection. *A Tuesday? Who goes out on a Tuesday night?* She was only joking when she'd called him Saturday afternoon at the number he'd given her as his personal communicator code. He should have told her that he'd arrive by 'next week' that what he meant was Tuesday morning.

Examining the tiny lines beginning to wear their terrible path beneath her eyes, she leaned forward, one of her bra-covered breasts inadvertently dipping into her open jar of moisturizer.

"Damn, damn, damn!" she cried as she jerked upright and scraped the white goop off of her left size D cup. Rescuing as much of the expensive pheromone cream as she could, she stood from the padded dressing table bench to walk into her bathroom. Unhooking her bra and placing it in the laundry sanitation chamber, Ariah grimaced. She didn't even know why she had the stupid cream out. Besides, everyone knew the affect of the cream was a myth.

She made her topless way back to the bedroom to rummage around in her top dresser drawer for another bra when she realized she wasn't even sure she had another bra (other than the ones she wore to the gym), as she just sort of wore them until they fell apart. Finally, after some deep scrounging, her fingers curled around what felt like the distinctive curve of a lifter.

"Eureka!" she smiled momentarily before her face dropped as she pulled the thing free. "You've got to be kidding me," she moaned, "this is it? This is all I've got?"

It was the sexiest little, strapless—a micro bra of black sheer and lace that caressed her nipples where the seam hit her distended flesh.

"I can't wear this," she exclaimed in horror as she looked around her room helplessly for a Plan B, "I'll fall out of the top of my dress!"

She'd forgotten she'd bought the thing seven or eight years ago just after she and Evan had broken their engagement. Ironically enough, she remembered, it was the snug, black, little strapless dress she'd momentarily considered wearing that night which she'd originally bought the bra for, but she was certain she'd grown at least ½ a cup size since then and the last thing she wanted to do on her first encounter with the sexy piece of tall, dark auburn haired Balton male, was explode out of her clothing at an inopportune moment in a restaurant full of hotel conference goers.

It had been an impetuous and emotional splurge to buy the 4,000 credit dress anyway. When she'd bought it she had wanted to feel like she was still hot, then at the age of twenty-one, still desirable, but so far her track record was hardly impressive. Ha! What had she been worried about back then?

Since the day she'd handed Evan back his ring as a mutual decision based on diverging life goals after an arduous two year engagement, Ariah had dated less and less each year until finally a whole 365 days passed without one worthwhile offer. It wasn't that she couldn't get dates. On the contrary she had been asked quite regularly and she was certainly no ugly step-sister, and men loved to flirt with her, but she was just tired of the whole game.

Since her release from the clinic where she'd spent five years in a hyber-pod after the attack on the compound she'd been working at in the Ju Vonice Quadrant where she'd been poisoned with coulinium gas, she'd been transferred by the company back to Earth. When she awoke from stasis and learned how long she'd been in the clinic's pod she was just as grateful as she was shocked that all of her medical expenses had been covered, thanking god she had health insurance.

When she had returned to Earth, Aria had felt like something inside of her had died. She had always been outgoing but the years lost and things she'd missed during that time shook her confidence and only served to distance her further from the friends who'd already moved on as she slept. Dating wasn't much different.

When the communicator finally stopped ringing from would-be lovers she made a habit of avoiding, Aria retreated into a routine of work and quiet time alone. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in having a lover or even companionship for that matter but something she couldn't explain refused to allow her to attach herself to anyone. Allison would even have tired of her quickly had she not been so busy herself that she could only spare an evening every couple of months in order to check up on her.

Sighing as she looked down at the bra in her hand, Aria shrugged into it and cast a glance at the little black dress hanging sadly in her closet. Walking toward it, she pulled it out and tossed it upon the bed with an appraising eye. Aria wanted to be alluring for her encounter with Norrik, but she wasn't sure that the message she wanted to broadcast was 'Fuck me please', a statement which seemed to be written all over the short strapless dress with a slit that rose above her right thigh.

"Oh," she huffed in surrender as she grabbed it up again and unfastened it from the special hanger, "what the hell. You only live once right?"

\* \* \* \*

The drive to Norrik's hotel had taken far less time than she'd estimated. *That's one hell of a conference*, she mused as she gazed up at the sparkling white double towers of the resort that reached toward the low hanging clouds when she drove up to the valet desk and handed her keydisk to the smiling, early twenties, ball of muscle in a maroon valet uniform.

She really should have gotten fuel before she'd driven to the bay in order to take up some of the extra time but the thought of smelling like a fueling station dissuaded her. The dress, if it was possible, seemed to hug her body better than it had when she'd bought it and, overjoyed that she could still wear it, it had helped to bolster her confidence. It was more than retro in design but Aria thought it classic and sexy when she studied herself in a full length mirror before she left home. The dress' black-on-black embroidery and beadwork along the horizon of her cleavage and outlining the slit up her thigh sparkled subtly when the light hit it just right.

It was damn cold outside, but she'd refused to bring a coat, reasoning she'd be indoors all evening most likely, since she understood from Norrik that they were to eat at one of the resort's restaurants. Applying a spray of perfume from her small evening bag before she entered the lobby and left the cool November air, Aria tamped down the fluttering in the area of her empty stomach. It was hard to tell if it was nerves or hunger that was rumbling through her now but either way, it was uncomfortable.

Slowly, Aria made her way to the lesser of the two smoky bars to grab a quick glass of wine before heading toward the north tower to meet the man she'd fantasized about since she'd gotten her first call from him nearly seven years ago.

"A glass of chardonnay please," Ariaah instructed the automated bartender. Just as she bent her head to pull a five chip from her purse, a warm rumble passed over her exposed neck and shoulders.

"My mama always said that nice Earth girls never drank alone."

*Yikes!* She found herself face to...chest with Norrik Farvish, CFO of Carter and Farvish Research Laboratories.

"H-how did you know where to find me?" she stumbled through the question as she looked up...and up into the deep green eyes of the man before her, her words thick and dry in her mouth.

Leaning down to whisper in her ear, his breath was an intoxication all its own, carrying the scent of something fresh, like mint, mingled with Carnivan juice. "I always figured you for a lush."

Damn she was hot for him. Those pictures she'd scouted out didn't do him justice. He was much taller, his shoulders broader than she'd thought, and his face, she sighed .... *wow. Chet Jarvis who?* Norrik wore a sultry grin as he looked down at her with heavily-lidded eyes, a dimple casting a shadow on his cheek in the low lighting of the bar. Eyeing the muscular build of his body and focusing on his chest, Ariaah bit her lip wondering how incredible that chest would feel crushed against her as he slid deeply into her ....

*What? What am I thinking!* she admonished herself. Brushing the licentious thoughts of him from her mind, Ariaah tried to control her shaking limbs by squeezing her legs together. Bad idea...it only made the wetness between her legs, soak her further and sent a zing racing to her belly.

"I'll pay for that," he said simply, leaning towards her without breaking eye contact to toss a credit chip at the bartender before grabbing her glass. "Join me?" he smiled, offering his arm.

"That's why I'm here."

Escorting her towards a booth along the wall, Ariaah caught a surreptitious glimpse of him in a dark suit cut in a style she knew to be popular on Balton and several of the other planets in the Argi Strait. It reminded her a bit of the suits men used to wear on Earth a couple of hundred years ago with its French blue shirt and a strip of gold silk fabric she believed to be Mershic silk, tied around his throat to trail down his chest.

After sitting down, she scooted into the middle of the half-moon shaped booth to give him plenty of room only to have him in quick pursuit and snuggly settled next to her. The heady scent coming off of him was warm and male. The man looked delicious. His dark auburn hair looked brown until he leaned in close to her and the weak light glowing from a sconce on the wall behind them illuminated it.

Apparently sensing her panic, Norrik threw an arm behind her head to rest on the back of the booth and smiled seductively at her. *Dimples? The man has dimples.* If he thought that look would reassure or relax her, he was dead wrong—a ball of worms was now writhing in her stomach and causing Ariaah to shrink down in her seat. It was then she noticed his gaze dip to the swell of her breasts. *Did he just pull a 'Barry Briar' and look down my dress?* Her musing ceased the moment he leaned toward her left breast as he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. When he'd finished, he looked back at her, his eyes darker even than before and a look of intoxication crossing his features.

"Your smell," he paused to look into her eyes until he finished, "you smell incredible."

She'd sprayed the perfume on her throat, what the hell was he smelling on her left breast? Suddenly Ariaiah remembered the accident she'd had with the pheromone cream and a blush crept into her face.

"My gods you're stunning," he said finally after his gaze traveled her face, took in the upward sweep of her blond hair, and the way the low lighting gave the tone of her skin a golden warmth.

"Thank you," Ariaiah replied, "you're not so bad yourself." *Idiot, moron, what the hell was that?* She chided herself.

Smiling once more, Norrik took a sip of the juice and sat back, watching her.

"So when is dinner?" Ariaiah asked.

"That hungry?" Norrik cocked a brow.

"No...I mean yes, I am hungry, but when are the others going to arrive, the ones you're having the meeting with?"

"They're not coming."

Ariaiah's jaw dropped in question. "What do you mean, 'they're not coming'? It is tonight isn't it?"

"This was the night we agreed upon, yes, but our guests had to cancel," he paused, "sadly." But Norrik hardly looked disappointed.

"Why didn't you call me?" she began, feeling foolish and cursing Norrik for wasting her last quarter of fuel. "I'm sorry. What day do you need me to come back for the reschedule?"

"Ariaiah, don't be ridiculous. Yamao and Derzt may have canceled, but there's no reason I should." Looking her over again as though *she* were dinner, Norrik then continued. "And, I might add that Yamao and Dertz can accept my gratitude for finding themselves otherwise occupied and leaving me with you for the evening."

"Oh," she replied weakly, unable to think of anything else to say when he was looking at her that way. With that, Ariaiah finished off her small glass of wine in a hard gulp, causing her to choke for a moment and snapping him from his thoughts as he patted her back in an attempt to help.

*Leave it to nerves to confuse my brain and reduce me to a ball of uncoordinated mush. Stupid hyber-pod side-effects.*

"Are you alright?" Norrik asked, his brows pulled in a frown of concern.

Nodding, Ariaiah placed a hand on her chest and coughed into a napkin one more time, her eyes watering as a result.

"Can I get you another drink?"

Ariaiah nodded again and Norrik summoned an automated waitress.

"What would you like, madam?" the automated waitress asked, her plastic smile stretched wide across her face.

Still unable to speak, Ariaiah pointed toward Norrik's glass as he rubbed her back in long, soothing strokes and studied her face, ignoring the waitress until she returned with the drink.

"Carnivan juice?" Norrik asked in surprise when the glass was placed in front of her.

"Have you ever had it?"

Wanting to appear sophisticated, Ariaiah lied. "Of course, who hasn't?"

Reaching for the glass, Norrik caught her hand and studied her face before releasing her hand so that she could take her first sip of the outerworld ale. It wasn't at all what she'd expected from what was considered by many to be *hard* liquor. The murky orange liquid didn't

burn as a lot of the more potent Earth liquors did. It was sweet and refreshing, leaving her feeling pleasantly warm with a light spice in her mouth.

As the Carnivan juice soaked more thoroughly through her system she felt a slight change in her vision. Colors seemed richer, more vibrant. The warmth spread through her limbs but seemed to settle most heavily with a rush of blood to her breasts and the passage between her legs, causing her to grow even more wet.

She was also much more aware of Norrik. He felt cool where she was warm and warm where she was cool. The slight brush of his thigh against hers under the table when he shifted infinitesimally in his seat caused her clit to pulse oddly and she sucked in a quick breath in reaction only to disguise it as another cough.

"Cheers," she smiled brightly, lifting her glass and tipping it back for another sip which turned into a long draft.

\* \* \* \*

At dinner Aariah had finished off two more glasses of the sweet juice and was asking for a third when Norrik addressed the waiter and changed her order to a glass of ice water.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked irritably.

"I think you've had enough."

Aariah was just about to argue when she remembered she still had to drive home later that night and even if she could just switch her car to automatic and command it to navigate her home, it probably wasn't a good idea to be intoxicated on some alien liquor when she had no idea what the aftermath would be like in the morning. Tomorrow was a workday after all, she remembered belatedly.

"Alright," she conceded as she looked down at her nearly untouched dinner plate.

"Too much of a good thing ...."

"Yeah, yeah," she huffed. "So how long will you be in town anyhow?" Figuring she couldn't keep up the pout long, Aariah gave in to ask the question that had been burning in her brain since the moment it sank in that he'd be coming.

Smiling wolfishly, he sat back in his chair to eye her, his gaze dipping to the rounded tops of her breasts and the deep cleft between them. The simple act pulled a reaction from her body as her pulse beat furiously in some very intimate places.

"At least a week," he replied finally, "perhaps longer if I am up for finally cashing in some of that vacation wasting away in my labor account."

Aariah couldn't have replied vocally if her life had depended upon it. Squirming in her seat to try to ease the ache between her legs, she smiled at him dumbly.

"What sorts of amusements could you recommend to an outworlder here for a couple of weeks without much to do and with the sexiest woman this side of the Argi Strait?"

Aariah could think of several things she'd like to suggest as she cast Norrik a lust-darkened glance from across the table. She wasn't exactly a prude but all reservations she held seemed to float magically out of her brain and the only thing she could think of with him staring at her that way (as though he wanted nothing more than to swipe everything off of the table in one move so he could throw her down on it and have his wicked way with her) was that if she didn't get up to his room in the next five minutes, she couldn't promise that *she* wouldn't throw everything off the table so she could have her way with *him* in front of everyone in the crowded restaurant. And *that* was frightening.

\* \* \* \*

Ariah felt giddy and her breathing increased subtly as Norrik leaned in and placed his hands upon the door of his suite on either side of her head, closing the distance between them as he licked her bottom lip and sent the heat of his gaze melting through her. When he withdrew slightly to look into her eyes, Ariah remembered to breathe and dragged in a shaky breath.

"I didn't ask you here tonight just so I could fuck you Ariah," Norrik stated quietly, his voice deep and his forest green eyes dark and dilated.

The words sent a jolt of alarm through her and her grip on him tightened in reaction. Looking down for a moment to where her hands grabbed the front of his shirt, Norrik lifted her chin so she could look into his eyes.

"I want you Ariah," he confessed hoarsely, "but not high on Carnivan juice."

"It's not the juice," she whispered as her eyes pleaded him to continue, "but I just don't want you to think that I'm a ... I mean, I'm ...." She paused before some emotion passed over her face and she seemed to resolve herself to something. "Please Norrik, don't stop."

That was all he needed. Leaning his body toward her, Ariah felt his weight pressing her into the door at her back as he held the base of her skull with one hand, kissing her, and placed his palm on the lock pad of his door with the other. The door to his suite slid upward slowly, lifting the skirt of her short dress and Norrik's hand followed the movement with appreciation, moaning painfully into her mouth, when his hand came in contact with the smooth skin at the back of her thigh above the line of her garter.

"Norrik," Ariah breathed into his mouth, "I've waited too long."

Backing her into the room and against the wall of the front hall, Ariah barely registered the sound of the door sliding closed after them when he wedged a knee between her thighs. Ariah went rigid momentarily before instinct and mindless need urged her to settle her weight upon it, grateful for the difference in their heights. Slowly she began rubbing herself heavily up and down his leg, the sensation causing the pressure to build in maddening intensity and sending her closer to the edge.

"I knew it was you," he breathed in her ear in a gasp when her palm cupped his testicles, barred from her by his clothing. He shoved her harder against the wall, one of his large hands digging into her dress to massage the bud of her swollen nipple with a teasing pinch.

"What?" she inhaled at the mixture of pleasure and pain.

"I knew it was you," he repeated, placing his other hand over hers as she moved up to wrap her fingers around him through the cloth to guide it, setting a rhythm to stroke him through the fabric of his clothing, "at the bar."

Something dissipated some of the fog of her lust-heavy brain. "How?"

Halting the movement of their hands, Norrik looked down at her, his face pensive as though continuing the conversation under the present circumstances was painful. "I've seen you before," he replied finally, "years ago."

Still consumed with the prelude to lovemaking Ariah nibbled his jaw, squeezing his cock lightly, and asked, "You've seen me? When?" not really caring about the answer so long as he stayed on task. Some orange-colored haze sitting heavy on her brain told her she needed to be fucked hard and soon. In an attempt to help him regain his focus she guided his hand up the inside of her thigh to show him how wet she was already.

Hesitating momentarily, something passed over his face and the raggedness of his breathing began to calm. "During the attack," he replied in no more than a whisper, "I was on the ship that led the strike on Ju Vonice."

A cold wave washed over her, suddenly pushing the orange haze from her brain and, as her hands relaxed, they fell away from him, creating a greater distance than the billions of miles that usually separated them when they spoke over the communicator. Arian's pulse thudded thickly at the back of her throat as she searched his eyes for some sign that this was all some horrible attempt at a joke. Of course he'd known she'd been struck in the blast. He'd been her most demanding client up until then and when she'd woken up, she'd lost five years of her life and the only parent she'd ever known. But Norrik was still there when most of her friends had moved on, and he'd requested her the moment he'd heard she was back at work.

"I didn't know you were there," he added. The concern in his eyes searching her face for understanding. "It had nothing to do with you, Arian."

Before he could say another damning word, Arian's palm cracked across his face of its own will. Pushing him away from her, she glared back at him, her chest heaving and color rushing in an angry surge to her cheeks.

"Nothing to do with me?" she asked vehemently, hardly believing what she'd just heard. "The bastards sent coulinium hurdling toward us! Do you even know what that feels like? What coulinium poisoning does to you?"

Norrik remained silent as he watched the words leave her lips, still red and swollen from his kiss. A mixture of regret and yet relief for his confession warred in his eyes.

"When you inhale it, it feels as though your nose is melting off of your face and sliding down into your throat to suffocate you," she continued, stalking toward him angrily, "your skin tightens and shrinks around your body," she pushed at his chest, causing him to stumble backward, "so that it cracks. But you don't bleed. You can't, because your blood thickens in your veins." Tears creeping into her eyes, she glared at him, but couldn't stop as the horror of what she had suffered finally burst through the barrier of her memory for the first time since she'd been released from the clinic and her voice began to waiver. "It's like your body is trying to implode and explode all at once, the inward and outward forces at war with one another until the pressure crushes all of your organs and you pray God or someone in the room will kill you just to end the pain."

"But you lived," Norrik replied softly, hope and shame washing over his face.

"Shut up! What do you know about it? Do you think I was lucky? Do you think that because I was closest to the ventilation shaft that I didn't suffer because I didn't get pure coulinium? To you I just slept through the last five years, didn't I? To you it was just a lucky break to stop aging for half a decade and wait it out in a hyber-pod until the doctors could figure out how the hell to save my life."

"I'm sorry, Ar ...."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Arian screamed, covering her ears and closing her eyes, unable to look at him until she could steady her breathing.

"It was no five-year nap of empty rest, I fucking assure you! In the pod I relived it. Again and again, I saw it, the people around me sinking to the floor, the pain contorting their faces like some bizarre carnival mirror, knowing that I must look the same. The worst part was," she paused, a tear rolling down her cheek when she laughed miserably, "I couldn't have woken from the nightmare if I'd wanted to. I was trapped in dreamland to see it all, to feel it all, over and over and over again."

What could he say? As desperately as Norrik wished it had never happened, the fact was that it had happened and he couldn't do a damn thing about it now to change that. He wanted to hold her to him and comfort her, but he knew she wouldn't accept comfort from him, not now.

Taking his silence for lack of concern, Ariaah shook her head at him in disgust. “It was a family compound Mr. Farvish, there were innocent people there. There were children there. Who did you and the others *think* you were attacking?”



## Chapter Three

Norrik felt like vem ... no, worse than vem. He felt like rumarp vem ... from a rumarp that had a foul case of dysentery ... a piece of dysentery-infected rumarp vem that had been festering in the sun ... for a week and full of maggots. Aariah had been ignoring his calls for the past week and he was growing desperate to see her. With all that had happened after he'd told her he'd been aboard the ship that had attacked the compound, he'd not been able to explain why he was involved.

He tried to ease his conscience by convincing himself that if he'd known she was there, he would have taken a small cruiser to find her and haul her off that damned planet before they started firing. But he hadn't known until they had landed hours after the attack and had breached the compound looking for the insurgents that the informant had told them were hiding and storing weapons at the compound under the guise of a scientific equipment supply company located in the Ju Vonice Quadrant.

Finding her there in that damned place and seeing her body crumpled in the contractions of the gas had nearly killed him. He had sworn to all the gods that if she were alive, he'd never go on a raid again. When he'd discovered a pulse, he'd gotten her out of there so fast he didn't give a damn what his commanding officer had yelled at him as he took her back to his ship and got the medics started on preparing her for a hyber-pod so she could be transported to the best doctors he could find in the Federation.

Once she was safely eased into stasis, Norrik had sat down and thanked the gods that she'd been standing next to the fresh air ventilation shaft when the gas exploded in the compound. Her health insurance might have been good as far as intergalactic policies went but there was no way it would have covered the cost of a five-year stasis and everything else that had saved her life. He'd taken the money out of his own pocket, with the hope that he could buy absolution.

He wanted to talk to Aariah, to explain what had happened back in Ju Vonice but the chance of that now seemed nominal if not nonexistent. It didn't matter that she was working for a sham of a company that had a thinly veiled operation bent on collapsing the Federation and the peace that had taken hundreds of years to bring to fruition. Norrik could only imagine what her reaction would have been like when he told her that he'd been lying to her since he met her seven years ago as a 'client' interested in purchasing supplies from her company, and that he was really a Federation agent in the Insurgent Investigation Force which gave him the title of general in the Federation.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Norrik cast a weary glance toward the hall where he'd been so close to her, where he'd been able to smell the heady evidence of her arousal, so drunk on the feel of her body tightly pressed against his that it took every ounce of self-control he had just to resist long enough in an attempt to tell her the truth of how he'd come to know her and to care about her.

At least he hadn't lied during the entire time he'd known her. He was there for a conference ... of sorts, just not one at the resort. He and two other agents were to meet to exchange information they'd gathered. Perhaps it was for the best that he hadn't been able to tell

her everything, however. She would be safer if she didn't realize just how deeply she was embedded in the nest of vipers at work. The fact remained, whether or not he'd been able to warn her as he'd planned to, that the insurgent codemaster was someone close to her and would no doubt be suspicious of the lone survivor of the attack on Ju Vonice Quadrant by Federation forces disguised as rebel Corvans.

The very thought made Norrik shudder with the certainty that she was in such danger. He refused to interfere again ... at least until he thought she was in eminent danger and then he would take matters into his own hands whether she would accept his help or not.

\* \* \* \*

"I am sorry Miss Hollis," Dr. Ribaldi offered sympathetically as she sat upon the examination table gaping at him. "Consider yourself fortunate that we discovered it when we did. It's really not as uncommon as one might think in women who've been in stasis as long as you were and the fact that we detected the mass in one of your ovaries, well ...."

It had taken a moment for Ariaah to process the information before she could actually reply.

"So what you're telling me is that I am going to go through menopause before I'm thirty?"

"No, not technically. It would appear that due to the severe poisoning you suffered in combination with the excessive length of your stay in the hyber-pod it has affected your eggs and you only have the four left."

"Can't you do something about that?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, Miss Hollis, that is why you're here is it not?"

"What about cryogenics? Can't you just extract them and save them for me until I need them?"

Removing his glasses, Dr. Ribaldi looked at her sympathetically. "I'm afraid that isn't one of our options. Your cells are still quite fragile and if we were to try to extract them at this point, we might not only damage the four eggs you have remaining but also your ovaries. With the mass we detected in your right ovary, my colleagues and I fear that any fiddling about might cause one or both of them to rupture and I don't want to chance it, do you?"

Noting Ariaah's look of distress, he held out a thin plastic-like disk a few inches in diameter to her.

"What's that?" she asked, eyeing the device critically.

"It's an ovulation inhibitor. Just wear it on your hip at night as you sleep and it will keep your body from allowing the eggs to mature at a normal rate."

"What does that mean?"

Sighing wearily, the doctor looked down at the disk in his hand, which she still hadn't accepted. "You only have four shots Ariaah," he began again, "there aren't a lot of women who even care that much about breeding these days, but, well," he paused, "you're young yet, and I know that even though you haven't said so, I believe you want a family."

Ariaah couldn't deny it. Ever since she'd awoken and found out her grandmother had died while she was in the pod, Ariaah had felt more than just lonely, she felt detached from every other being in existence, knowing that she wasn't directly related to anyone alive on the planet, or on any *other* planet for that matter.

"It's not foolproof, though." He eyed her seriously. "It will buy you some time perhaps, as you will only ovulate once a year. If you conceive, of course, then the gestation length will be added to the one year ovulation time, but if you wish to, excuse the expression, 'put all your eggs

in one basket' by using them all, keep in mind that you will have a child every twenty-one months."

"I ... I don't know what I want to do just yet." Aariah stumbled on the words, still trying to allow the shock to sink into her fully.

"Are you in a relationship at this time?" Dr. Ribaldi asked.

*Ha!* If she weren't so close to tears at the moment she might have laughed. "No, no I'm not."

"If you would like, I could arrange for a list of donors for your consideration, but Aariah," he paused his voice becoming even graver, "I'm afraid it is more complex still."

Aariah arched a brow in question, bidding her doctor to continue.

"You're too close to ovulation now for the inhibitor to be of use this time so you may lose an egg this month if you don't conceive." Clearing his throat as though fortifying himself for what he had to tell her next, her physician continued. "Insemination is possible but with the ratio of success, the other doctors and I have calculated its one in four thousand three hundred and twenty-six, you would have a better chance of success 'the old fashioned way'."

"WHAT?"

"You don't have to use this egg, you could let your cycle end and then try your luck with the inhibitor for your remaining three eggs. It would give you a year to find a suitable donor or mate but the inhibitor can't guarantee that you'll only release one egg at a time. You might release two," he paused again, "or more."

"If you do wish to utilize this egg or at least try to, you don't have a lot of time left. I calculate you have about four to six days left before your body begins the process of menstruation, so if you are interested in looking at a list of donors, I need to know now so that I can make the arrangements and have a bio sheet listing their," he cleared his throat uncomfortably then finished, "qualities."

*As if things couldn't get any worse!* With a moan, Aariah dropped her head in her hands in an attempt to clear her brain. Beyond the fear that she might miss her opportunity at motherhood, the thought making her all the more determined not to, she nearly choked at the idea of picking a *donor*. It was repulsive and it made her feel like she was looking for a blue ribbon stud to service her.

The thought suddenly occurred to her that she'd narrowly escaped being impregnated by Norrik a week ago, but rather than soothe her that it hadn't happened, it somehow made her situations seem worse. As much as the thought of being near him made her ill, Aariah's heart began to race with a whirl that flip-flopped her stomach at the thought of having a child with him, having his child.

But she hated his guts, she had to remind herself. A flashback of what she'd seen and experienced at the compound was enough to reignite her hatred of him, just knowing that he'd been a part of such a horrible act.

"Please Dr. Ribaldi," she answered finally, resolution cool in her voice. "If you'd compile the information as soon as possible ...."

The doctor nodded and turned toward a tablet panel on the wall where he began to scribble with a stylus.

"Would it," Aariah hesitated, unsure how to ask, "would it be alright if I could interview them before, that is to say, so that I can be sure which one I should choose?"

"I'm sure a meeting could be arranged before copulation."

“Oh, thank you,” she replied weakly, her stomach churning at the thoughts rolling through her head, at the idea of what she might very well have to do with a complete stranger and very soon.

\* \* \* \*

“Answer, damn it!” Norrik barked at the communicator sitting on the table next to his hotel bed. Finally giving up hope that Ariaiah would take his call, Norrik disconnected and lay back on his bed, draping an arm over his eyes.

He had to talk to her, not just to explain things about what had happened at Ju Vonice but to make sure she was alright. The information he’d gotten from Yamao and Derzt was anything but reassuring. So far they’d still not been able to identify the group’s codemaster but Derzt had at least been able to intercept an encrypted message that seemed to be some sort of shipment and pick up information. It might just be the break they needed and then when the bastard had been caught and the news was out he would be able to explain everything to Ariaiah.

He wanted to find out if anything odd was happening in her own department, if she’d seen anything suspicious. He would have to disguise his inquiries from her, of course, but perhaps she had the missing piece of the puzzle and just didn’t know it. If she’d just pick up the damn communicator.

He couldn’t deny that the main reason he wanted to see her again, however, didn’t have a damned thing to do with codemasters or clandestine deliveries of the gods only knew what and everything to do with the constant state of semi-arousal she’d left him in since that night. He’d finally sent the clothes he’d worn that night to the hotel laundry when the faint smell of her body wafted to him and he found himself painfully erect and desperate for her.

*Gods she smelled incredible!* Sweet like a the ripe orange nectar of a pulmfry blossom but with a hint of spice mixed with her own natural musk. It made him moan and his cock jerk miserably when he remembered how his damned conscience had gotten in the way. Norrik didn’t just need a fuck, he needed Ariaiah, days and days spent making love to her, discovering every creamy inch of her and savoring it to see if she tasted as good as she smelled. But even if he did get that chance, something nagged at the back of his mind warning him that he would never be able to get the saucy little blonde out of his mind.

He’d known her instantly when she’d walked into the bar, yes, but not because of the attack on Ju Vonice. Nearly seven years ago the Federation had supplied him and the other team members with staff files on all personnel that might possibly have access to the files the Federation had assigned the team to watch. Looking through the photos of employee after employee he’d seen a few women he found attractive but when Ariaiah’s face popped up on his palm screen he was intrigued. She wasn’t his usual type, if he’d had one. She was fair, and the pale honey-colored hair that fell to a couple of inches past her shoulders reminded him of an Auturian harvest moon, white and gold in a dance of light. But it was her eyes that had drawn him in.

He’d been told that Earth people had several different eye colors, brown, green like his own, amber, hazel, but the sparkle in her rich blue eyes was amazing and half the reason he’d stood so close to her at the bar when she’d first arrived was to get a better look at the amazing color so foreign to him in that capacity. It wasn’t until he’d made a closer investigation of them as they stood in the hall of his suite that he’d noticed the dark navy line ringing her irises and the rays of amber shooting out from her pupils like the rays of a sun.

Her eyes were captivating but that wasn’t to say he was blind to any of her other charms. The lush swells of her breasts as they fought to be free of the low cut dress caught his attention

on more than one occasion. He wondered how it would feel to run his tongue along the crest of one and into the valley between them before sucking and nipping the tight, pink buds of her nipples as she panted and writhed beneath him before she came, screaming his name with his cock rammed deeply inside of her.

She was smaller than the women of Balton, but her size only made her seem more delicate and the thought that he'd almost lost her nearly six years ago made him shudder. As he'd gotten to know her through their correspondence before and after she'd been in the hyperpod, he had found his role as the needy client growing more and more enjoyable. He loved to tease her, to talk to her, hell, he just loved the sound of her voice, a lilting alto, deeper than he was accustomed to, but it made it all the more seductive, laced with humor and an audible smile.

The time she'd spent in the pod might have been five years of nightmares for her, but it was more of a hellish reality for him. When they'd discovered they could do nothing for her at that time, he'd set up an information ring of his own with her physicians so that he would be first to know of any changes in her condition. Even after her release, a couple of the doctors would notify him every couple of months, no doubt still hoping to receive the generous 'donations' he offered in return for the information.

Sighing tiredly, he nearly jumped off the bed when the communicator rang. Sitting up and reaching for the 'on' button, he was disappointed to see it was merely an automated message from the hotel's front desk to take his order for lunch if he would like room service. Anger surged through him then. What right did she have to deny his calls anyhow? He was a client wasn't he? Perhaps he would have to make a *personal* call on Miss Hollis.

\* \* \* \*

"HOLLIS!" Barry Brier, her nefarious director bellowed from across the department, "In my office now!"

Jolted out of her thoughts, Aariah jumped and walked quickly to Mr. Brier's office, closing the door instinctively. When she glanced at his face, the flared nostrils and ruddy infusion of blood in his cheeks replacing his usual pasty pallor, it was clear that he was in a particularly pissy mood.

"What the hell is wrong with you Hollis?" he hissed as Aariah took a seat in front of his desk. "Mr. Farvish called me personally not five minutes ago to tell me that he's been trying to reach you about placing an order the likes of which we've never seen from his side of the galaxy. Where the hell have you been?"

"I've been in my office all day sir," Aariah began, mentally sending curses Norrik's way.

"Well?" A tic, probably the result of an overindulgence of salt and stress, pulsed in convulsive spasms beneath his right eye and diverted her attention. Irritated by her lack of attention, Brier raised his voice a couple of decibels. "What's the matter with you? Do you want me to can your ass? Why didn't you answer his calls?"

"Sorry sir," Aariah stalled, trying to recall the events of her day that didn't involve the distraction of issues of either her biological clock or Mr. Farvish ... or the combination of the two. "I've been working with a possible new firm in Quaw. You know, the one that we've been baiting since June. I think I've ...."

"I don't give a damn about some piddly-shit account from Quaw. Don't bother getting new accounts when you can't handle the ones you've got now. Got it?"

"Yes, Mr. Brier." *Bastard, asshole, revasha-headed moron.* Aariah nearly choked trying to hold back her irritation. *Damn you, Norrik!* He knew very well what her working relationship with her boss was like. What the hell was he paying at?

“And Hollis,” her director added, “when Mr. Farvish arrives, show him a good time.”

“Arrives?” Arianah gasped, the phrase ‘good time’ hardly slipping past her either.

“Yes, he’ll be here within the hour. He told me he was in town and I invited him to take a tour of our facilities and said we’d take him to dinner afterwards if he had time.”

“You will?”

Mr. Briar exhaled heavily through his nose and narrowed his eyes derisively at her. “*I* have better things to do than keep *your* clients happy. What the hell am I paying *you* for? What department do we work in, Hollis? We work in *Customer* Accounts, CUSTOMER. So why don’t you wipe that stupid look off of your face, shut down for the day and attend to your *customer*.”

*Why, that condescending ....* Struggling to control the overwhelming need to punch the man in the middle of his smug face, Arianah nodded once in agreement, unable to do anything more, and turned to leave his office before he called to her again.

“A *good* time Hollis. Stop walking around with a stick up your ass for chrissake! I don’t know what your problem’s been the past couple of days and frankly I don’t care, just get over it or don’t bring it to work. Got that?”

Ignoring him, Arianah left his office, calm and controlled on the outside, heated molten fury on the inside. She wanted nothing more than to tell him to go fuck himself but her need for employment, particularly if she was going to make use of her last chances at motherhood, gave her the strength to bite her tongue and walk quietly back to her office.

*A good time eh?* Arianah fumed silently as she threw her belongings on her desk around, *oh I’ll make sure the Balton dirtbag doesn’t forget it, that’s for sure!*

## Chapter Four

*Where the hell is he?* Ariaah seethed as she stood in the cold, austere lobby waiting for Mr. Farvish to arrive. It was already a quarter past four and if he had any vain assumptions that she was going to work one second past five o'clock hauling him around the plant, he was in for a big disappointment. Each passing minute that she stood in the lobby waiting for him only served to make her all that more agitated as she continually revised the tour so she could still make it out the door just as the rush hour picked up.

But right as she'd turned to walk back to her office at half past four, the glass doors of the front entrance slid open with a soft whoosh and a familiar timbre swirled in the air around her.

"Give up on me so soon?" Norrik asked, smiling predatorily at her when she finally turned slowly to face him.

Annoyed more by his unabashed appraisal of her body as he slowly looked her up and down and up again than by the hour he'd kept her waiting in the lobby, Ariaah smiled over clenched teeth.

"You did this on purpose," she hissed out of the corner of her mouth when he walked toward her, ignoring the odd look that Mitch Jones from the office was giving her as he headed out for the day half an hour early.

"Did what?" Norrik feigned ignorance, obviously enjoying himself immensely.

Walking quickly toward the two-person, indoor bullet shuttle she'd parked at the back of the lobby, she snorted. "Don't bother wasting your charm on me and don't you dare call my boss again. I got shit from him for your little stunt this afternoon."

"Good," he replied as they reached the bullet shuttle, smirking at her over the vehicle's curved silver roof, "perhaps now you'll think better of ignoring my calls."

Ariaah had just opened the door when he responded, but after she listened to him, mouth open in shock, she slammed the door shut again.

"You and I both know you don't have any intention of making a big order," she snarled quietly at him across the roof of the shuttle. "You used it as leverage to get here!"

Drumming his fingers idly upon the shuttle roof, Norrik snorted a soft laugh. "Well if you keep up your nasty behavior then no, I won't place a large order."

"Did you even stop to think of the crap I'll get from my boss when that order isn't placed, especially considering he already knows you supposedly want to place it and I am your Customer Account Rep?"

Norrik's fingers froze momentarily as he stared at her from across the width of the shuttle before he opened the door and got into the small vehicle, barely large enough to hold him, let alone her, as well. Taking his cue, Ariaah took a deep breath to calm her nerves and climbed into the driver's seat. There was just something about the very sight of that man that sucked all the cool collection from her body, leaving her hot and more than just bothered by him.

"*Technically*, I didn't say I would make the order," he stated calmly as he watched the passing hallway before them once she started the shuttle and headed them off to start the tour. "I merely stated that we were in the process of expanding in a neighboring system and if we

decided to build another research facility we'd need everything in addition to our monthly orders for the rest of the labs."

"Mr. Farvish."

"Norrik," he interrupted her.

"*Mr.* Farvish."

"Norrik, Aria. After all we've been through, I would think ...."

Blushing, Aria cut him off. "Please," she pleaded quietly, "can we just forget it?"

"No! I damned well can't forget it but if you can, then it would seem your boss is right, you *are* a frigid bitch."

"Are you trying to insult me or is that just a little bonus for wasting a few hours of my time in your company?"

"I don't want to forget what happened the other night Aria and as far as I'm concerned, we still have unfinished business."

\* \* \* \*

OK, so that wasn't quite how he'd intended it to come out and by the horrified blush that quickly rose up her throat and into her hairline, Aria had obviously thought he'd been referring to their unfinished *business* in his suite.

"Ju Vonice, Aria," he stated in an attempt to redirect her. "I want to explain why I was ...."

"Look, just save your inadequate excuses and explanations. I don't want to hear it and I don't care."

Turning to face her as best as he could with his six foot, four inch frame stuffed into the small shuttle, he exhaled deeply. "Don't give me that *vem* Aria, you care about what happened there as much as I do." Stopping her before she could argue, he added, "Just trust me on that one."

The silence that followed was enough to make Norrik want to stab himself in the eye with the stylus Aria had used to secure her hair in the severe bun at the back of her head. After a few more minutes, she stopped the shuttle outside of a set of large double doors and got out. Thinking she meant to escape him, Norrik rushed to get out of the shuttle, as well, a task which proved rather difficult with the combination of his height and build.

Obviously ignoring his struggle to expel himself from the shuttle, Aria walked through the doors. When Norrik had gotten free, he slammed the door to the shuttle and followed her through the doors to find her in an alcove just beyond as she was pulling a white floor worker jumpsuit over her clothes and placing special coverings over her feet and head. Following her example, Norrik sped to catch up and the two made their way to the sterilized factory floor.

Apparently shifting into tour guide mode, Aria began rattling off tidbits of information about the plant where they processed Federation regulated materials into special lab kits for field testing, one inch wafers of highly concentrated, refined substances, and finally leading him into the area where the atmosphere controllers were manufactured.

This was what Norrik had been looking for. As Aria continued to drone on, regurgitating a load of PR and sales designed dribble about that section of the plant he walked closer to the glass where, on the other side, a line of white-clad workers assembled machines that looked like a silver cube as tall and as wide as the width of his palm.

"How do these work?" Norrik interrupted her, his attention still fixed upon the cube.

Stepping closer to the glass to peer through it at the atmosphere controller, she shot him a curious glance.



"The AC 2515 is our latest aid in regulating atmospheric conditions in labs, not even on the market yet. It was designed to replicate anything from humidity and gravitational force, to temperature and even air current trends within a lab so that when storing or using chemicals and substances from worlds other than the one the tech is working on the samples won't be environmentally effected. It's quite ...."

"It can mimic air currents for natural settings of other worlds?" Norrik interrupted, turning then to look at her as he leaned against the glass.

Ariah furrowed her brow slightly, "Well, yeah. At least that's what the brochure I had to memorize says."

"So how does it know which settings to use for which substance?"

"I don't remember," she exhaled. "I guess it has pre-settings or maybe that's what the sample chamber is for."

"Sample chamber?" Something from his last meeting with Derzt pulsed red in his mind and he turned back toward the window, inspecting the cube in the nearest worker's hands with a more critical eye.

"I'm sorry Mr. Farvish, but I'm not a products specialist. If you'd like to speak to one ...."

Ignoring her obstinate use of his surname, Norrik cut in. "Can you get me one?"

"A products specialist?" A long chime sounded then and all of the workers put down whatever they'd been assembling, turning to leave, as the androids that were scattered at the workstations around them slowed to a stop. "Not now. It's five o'clock and all the products specialists along with everybody else will be on their way to happy hour by now."

"A cube, *Miss Hollis*," he clarified irritably, turning once again to face her.

"Why? I can't sell you one. The Federation hasn't yet cleared them for market."

Moving toward her, backing Ariah up against the wall behind her, Norrik's eyes captured her attention. "I've no interest in buying one. Get me a cube."

Ariah was in no mood to be civil. If Mr. Farvish thought she was going to get him a cube just because he pressed his body against her, he had another think coming ... but from the feel of his semi-erect cock digging into her belly it felt he might just have another *thing* coming.

"Why?" Ariah breathed, trying to catch her breath and hang on to her anger.

He pressed her harder against the wall with his body then, the lights from the assembly floor switching off as he ripped the cap off of his head and reached for hers. Closing his eyes for a moment as he leaned closer to smell her hair. Ariah was mortified to discover she was wet for him.

Just as she tried to push away, he grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the wall on either side of her head.

"Gods I want you," he murmured. Then, taking another whiff at her, he pulled away just far enough that she could see the seductive grin quirking the left side of his mouth. "And, it would appear you want me, as well."

"I want you to let me go! Leave me alone," Ariah spat half-heartedly.

Shifting so that he held both her wrists in one of his large hands, he used his free hand to trace the outline of her jaw with the backs of his finger in long, lingering caresses. Ariah sucked in a breath to scream but the ability was taken out of her when his hand slid down her throat, unzipping the coverall and her jumpsuit to brush a trail between her breasts, circling one of the lace-covered mounds but denying the engorged center before he continued down her ribs to allow it to rest upon her hip.

Shuddering in response, Ariaah closed her eyes, unconsciously leaning into him. The skin-to-skin contact with his hand made her lightheaded and her pussy began to throb, pouting for its own share of the teasing attention.

"It would appear you want me," he whispered close to her ear, "but do you truly want me to leave?"

*NO!* Her body screamed for him but her brain won the coin toss and she wriggled her wrists free, re-zipping her jumpsuit and the white coveralls with hands that shook with more than just motor function side-effects caused by any hyber-pod.

"You need authorization," she ground out.

Damn the man, he was chuckling at her. "By all means," he purred as he watched her chest heave, "authorize me."

"To...get...a...cube!" *The stupid animal!* He was definitely up to something and Ariaah sure as hell wasn't going to let him think she'd just materialize access codes she didn't know if he had sex with her. "I don't have authorization Mr. Farvish, and neither do you."

Just then a light chirping sound came from Mr. Farvish's inside pocket.

"Excuse me while I take this call." He smiled. "We'll pick up where we left off in just a moment."

Ignoring him, Ariaah readjusted her clothing as she watched him slip his personal communicator into his ear.

"Farvish," he answered. "Yes," he paused, "I'm here now."

Norrik stared at one of the walls as he listened to the person on the other end of the connection speak but just as Ariaah grew lax, he threw her an indefinable look over his shoulder.

"Yes," he replied to the other person, "we have no choice it would seem."

Something in the way he'd looked at her sent blood rushing to her face and an iron fist to squeeze her heart, the polarity of the two emotions causing her knees to wobble.

"Continue," he answered again in a low voice as though trying to hide his conversation further. "Plan B, yes."

He listened to the other person for a minute or so longer with his back to her.

"What the ...?" he exclaimed, the sudden shout nearly causing Ariaah to jump out of her skin. "*How* many days?" After stiffening visually at the answer, he continued, "No, tell him not to worry." Turning back to face her, Norrik narrowed his eyes as barely controlled emotions warred upon his face. "I'll handle *that* little problem myself."

There was anger with a gleam of unholy delight in Mr. Farvish's dark green eyes as he shoved the personal communicator back in his pocket and stalked toward her. It was the last thing Ariaah remembered before suddenly blacking out into the embrace of a pair of large, warm arms.

## Chapter Five

Ariah's head was killing her, her mouth was dry, and her hands and feet felt like she'd been sleeping on them most the night. That was the last time she let Allison convince her to drink four shots of congra tea in one sitting. Slowly opening her eyes to check the bedside clock, Ariah jerked up.

There were several things wrong with this picture. A) This most definitely was *not* her bedroom, let alone her bed. B) Her hands were tied together, as were her feet. C) And this really pissed her off, she was gagged and naked. And D) Mr. Norrik Farvish was drumming his fingers on the brilliant surface of a table as he sat idly in a chair, staring at her, as though abducting his Client Rep was an everyday occurrence.

Ariah glared at him, and he had the gall to smirk back at her.

"Good morning Miss Hollis," he chimed as he stood and walked toward her. "How are we feeling?"

Nostrils flaring in response and clutching the thin sheet that covered her to her breasts, Ariah wanted nothing more than to...to..., then noticing she was unarmed and trussed up like a turkey, she fumed, to...kick him, really, really hard.

"I see you're totally alert and refreshed now so allow me to explain," he added, taking a seat upon the bed next to her. As he put his hands toward her face, Ariah jerked away instinctively and he smiled.

"No, I suppose you're right. If I want to get a word in edgewise, I'd best keep you gagged for the time being." He smiled wickedly.

Ariah growled at him through her gag but Norrik merely smiled and lay down on the bed, propping on his elbow, facing her.

"You undoubtedly won't believe this, but I'll tell you anyhow and allow you to decide for yourself whether or not I am a liar. You were in danger, Miss Hollis. There are persons in your company, who work closely with you, who wanted to use you as a scape-ass." Chuckling lightly to himself as he glanced at where the edge of the sheet had fallen away to expose a white cheek of her posterior, he continued. "I beg your pardon, I believe the term you use is *scapegoat*. Anyhow, to make a long story short, the call I received yesterday was from one of my associates, Mr. Derzt. He informed me that they'd intercepted a message."

Ariah turned away from him. What any of this had to do with her she had no idea. Except for the attack at Ju Vonice which had taken five years of her life, she'd led a perfectly uneventful life. Why would anyone want to target her and what made them think that anyone would believe them if they tried to use her as a scapegoat as Norrik suggested? It just didn't make sense. If anyone was up to no good, Ariah was willing to put money on Mr. Farvish.

"Ariah, look at me!"

It was the desperation in his voice that made her turn her head, more than the command in his tone.

"Ariah, can you think of any reason why someone in your office would want to hurt you? Have you heard something odd, anything at all that seemed peculiar?"

Ariah gave him the 'go to hell' look she'd perfected in college and turned away again.

"Damn it Ariaah, I'm trying to help you!"

Pointedly indicating her bonds, Ariaah narrowed her eyes at him until he finally conceded and untied her hands and feet.

Ripping the gag from her mouth, she exploded.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? How dare you kidnap me ... kidnap? You kidnapped me! If you think that the company will pay you some kind of ransom, or if you think they will give you a cube in return for my exchange then you've got a sorely unrealistic sense of employee-employer loyalty. They won't give you a credit."

"Didn't you listen to a word I just said?" Norrik asked.

Ignoring him, Ariaah continued to rant and he finally got off the bed and moved back to his chair to wait out the moment she'd finally pause long enough to take a breath.

"And that's another thing," she seethed. Gathering the sheet to her, she scrambled off the bed, ripped the remnants of her bonds from her, and chucked them at him. "Why the hell am I naked? Where are my clothes? Wipe that smug look off your face. I don't want anything to do with you. I hate you and if you so much as touched me while I was uncons ...."

Norrik was on his feet, his eyes boring into her in that instant. Steadily backing her into the cold surface of the metal wall, he attempted to calm his sudden anger.

"Don't you dare come any closer," she warned with a hollow threat as she tried to stop his progress toward her with a hand upon his chest.

Lowering his gaze to her hand on him, he snarled at Ariaah and she yelped in surprise, snatching her hand back as though she'd been burned.

"As my *guest* upon this ship, Miss Hollis ...."

"Ship?" Ariaah repeated dumbly.

"Ship. I expect you to behave accordingly. Every person aboard was chosen for his or her skill but, more importantly, for their loyalty. You may, as you claim, hate me but I assure you that upon this vessel, you are alone in that. You will remain in my quarters until you can prove to me that you are worthy of *my* trust."

Ariaah gasped, "But these *are* your quarters."

Norrik smirked, whether in pain or amusement, Ariaah couldn't say.

"I'm touched by your concern, but I assure you that I will not go without. They will remain my quarters."

Stomping her foot and crossing her arms tightly over her chest, she growled in frustration as Norrik turned toward the door to leave.

"If you think for one moment that I will allow you to ...."

"Dr. Ribaldi is on board should you need any medical attention, Miss Hollis."

Norrik's gaze raked over her knowingly as a comprehending light grew over her face.

"You," she cried, "you bastard!"

"I may be that Ariaah, but I've no intention of allowing my son to be one. I have had a mating contract drafted, signed by every member of the Federation Council. It's ready and only wants for your signature."

Ariaah ran at him, claws unsheathed, but he caught her wrists in a quick turn, the sheet around her falling to the floor as he turned her to the wall. Angry gasps puffed through her lips and fogged the silver bulkhead against her cheek.

The cold wall against her naked body caused her skin to erupt in goosebumps but she soon felt the warmth of his body behind her. Something hard pressed into her back and for a moment Ariaah stiffened, thinking it was a weapon until soft kisses were rained down across her

shoulder and back again up her neck. Shivering at the feel of his body against hers in such a way, Ariaiah moaned softly and pushed against the hardness digging into the small of her back, unable to stop herself.

"It's up to you Ariaiah," he breathed into her ear, "now or later, it makes no difference to me if you wait until the very moment before our son is born but you will sign. You must, I can't protect you unless you do."

The puffs of moist air coming from her gaping mouth slowed and she felt the firm grip upon her wrists loosen and finally release her.

Without turning around, Ariaiah closed her eyes and held a hand to her face where she still pressed it to the wall.

"I just don't understand why," she whispered, more to herself than to him.

A warm hand touched the back of her head, slowly moving down her neck until it was removed and replaced with a soft kiss between her shoulder blades and through the curtain of long golden hair that fell just below that point.

"You will," Norrik answered quietly. "I'm so sorry, Ariaiah. One day you will."

A light breeze of cool air over her indicated his departure from the room and Ariaiah slid to the floor, turning her back to the wall so she could hold her knees to her chest and drop her head upon the arms folded upon them.

\* \* \* \*

With a great deal of irritation, Ariaiah discovered she'd been locked in Norrik's quarters without any further explanation or even her clothes. Annoyed and still suffering from the pounding in her head she'd awoken with, she spent most of the day in bed ignoring the meals that came throughout the day as a servant quietly slipped in only long enough to put the tray on the table and take the untouched tray from the meal before.

She should have been pissed. She should have been tearing the place apart and screeching at the top of her lungs. But, for some reason she wanted nothing more than to sleep ... and to dream.

Most of her dreams were of Norrik. She dreamed of the night they'd met at his hotel, of the delicious moments spent on their way up to his room and how brazen she'd been in the front hall of his suite. She dreamed about what would have happened if he hadn't said anything about attacks, hyber-pods, or Ju Vonice. She dreamed about his hands roaming her body in appreciative possession. She dreamed of his mouth upon hers, his tongue swirling in a dance with her own in her mouth.

Sometimes the dreams were so vivid, she would wake up panting, sweating, hot, her body aching for what her dreams had used to tease her and then she'd look around the empty room and curse Norrik for locking her up in a place where she couldn't help but think about him in her dreams, where his musk scented the pillows and sheets so that her mind continually turned to him for dreaming inspiration.

Having fallen asleep yet again after another such dream, it started all over again. Ariaiah was back in the front hall of his suite, his body pressed to hers but it would seem her brain had taken up a new level of cruelty by having them both naked this time, the feel of his body warm and hard next to her cool softness. She dreamed she kissed his jaw again as she had done that night, that she followed the line down his neck, over his collarbone and down to one of his nipples. She licked and teased the small dark brown bud until it stood erect and then she bit it, marveling in how real it felt. She could almost feel him capturing her hands to interlace his fingers with hers above her head as he pressed her deeply into the soft wall at her back.

Moaning, Ariaiah untangled one of her legs from underneath him and curved it around his narrow hip, amazed at how real the feel of his firm buttocks were against the inside of her calf when a sensation, like bright white heat, seared her. She dreamed she felt his hand slip from hers as he whispered, "Tell me to stop Ariaiah. Gods, tell me to stop now or I won't be able to."

"No," she moaned softly, unable to tell if she'd said it in the dream or aloud but not caring either way when his hand scraped softly down the soft underside of her arm, over her ribs then back up again to circle her nipple teasingly. His hand continued, straying from her aching nipple when she'd had enough.

Pushing her breast into his hand, she arched her back. He pinched the sensitized bud lightly at first then circled it with the pad of his rough thumb before bending his head to swipe his hot tongue over it and make her squirm as he started to suckle her. When he moved to the other breast, Ariaiah extracted her other leg, feeling the hot length of his cock in agonizing contact with her nether lips. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, Norrik, please," she began to chant then in pitiful pleas as she arched her back in a wanton movement which caused his shaft to slide painfully through the moisture gathered in the lips of her sex.

He moaned in her dream then and Ariaiah felt a hand slide down her belly to cup her mound. She exhaled shakily as he slid a thick finger into the opening of her pussy and began to slide it in and out of her slippery depths. When he shifted so his thumb could find the bud of her clit, Ariaiah cried out at the feel of his thumb circling, rubbing and lightly scraping her.

"Fuck me, Norrik," she began to sob, "please fuck me."

"I don't want to fuck you, Ariaiah," came her dream lover's voice.

Ariaiah nearly burst into tears at those words but the pressure on her clit as he continued to stroke his finger inside her with greater determination stopped her just before she felt him shift between her legs and the head of his cock take up the job his thumb had held, caressing her clit as he passed it through the moisture gathering at the mouth of her sex.

"Ask me to make love to you, Ariaiah," the dream Norrik whispered, releasing her hands finally. "Ask me to give you my seed."

Skating her hands over his soft hair, down his back and up again to his shoulders, she sought his mouth. He kissed her deeply and Ariaiah tightened her thighs around his waist, but he wouldn't let her pull him into her passage just yet. The head of his cock poised at her entrance, he pulled his mouth from hers. His voice was a pleading whisper, the sounds of pain intertwined with a moan when she shifted her hips to bring him into her but still he held off.

"Please Ariaiah, ask me," he whispered at her hairline as he supported himself on his arms above her.

Her hands progressed over his shoulders to his chest and Ariaiah scratched her nails lightly over his nipples and down the ridges of his toned abdomen.

"Just do it," she replied as her hands dipped lower and lower until she was able to wrap a hand around his pulsing cock, her fingers unable to touch as she tried again to pull him in.

"Ask...me," he moaned louder in breathy gasps.

Frustrated by the taunting dream, Ariaiah gave in and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Please Norrik, make love to me. Give me your seed."

The moment the words left her mouth, Ariaiah gasped as a shot of liquid fire pounded deep between her legs. Her eyes flew open instantly to find a very real Norrik, wide-eyed and shock-still above her.

The breath caught in her chest, she gazed at him with horrified mortification and tear-filled eyes, blinking and sending the large warm drops of her pain rolling down across her temples and into her hairline.

"You're a virgin," he whispered. Not quite a question but too unsure to be a statement.

Ariah wanted to wither and die. Closing her eyes to shut out the look on his face as she realized all the things she'd done and said with him, to him in her *dream*, she turned her face away from him and covered it with her hands wanting nothing more at that moment than to be able to scurry off to a dark corner.

"Not any more," she breathed, barely audible.

"Look at me," he commanded, "look at me Ariah."

Peeking out of one eye through a gap in the fingers that covered her face, Ariah turned her head a fraction of an inch.

"Ariah, look at me. I want you to look at me. I want you to watch me as I make love to you."

"I can't," she replied weakly. "I'm sorry Norrik. I thought it was a dream, I-I thought—"

"Ariah, I know about your," Norrik hesitated, "I know you only have a few chances left. Don't waste them baby. Don't waste any of them."

"I..." She trailed off, not knowing how to argue with him when her body was in agony, wanting to run away and lick her wounds but also feeling that primal desire and wanting him to move inside of her, to give her a family of her own again. "Norrik, you don't have to ..."

"I want to Ariah. Gods, you've no idea how much I want to, particularly at this moment right now."

As if to fortify his point, his cock jerked slightly within her throbbing channel and he sucked in a ragged breath, dropping his head beside hers on the pillow.

"I didn't intend it this way," he whispered, "I've wanted you so long and I didn't want you high on Carnivan juice that night at the hotel. I didn't want you just because I was your client and could give you a big order to appease your boss. I didn't want you because you were dreaming, Ariah."

Taking a moment to kiss her softly, Norrik continued, "I want you Ariah, all of you. I want to make love to you now, and then I want to make love to you again and again until neither of us can stand. I want it to be my son in your womb and not some stranger's who you don't know and don't care about, and I sure as hell don't intend on losing you to some bastard at the office who only wants to use you to get away with whatever he's planning."

Slowly he pulled out of her part way and Ariah sucked in a breath, amazed at how empty she felt without him there.

"Tell me what *you* want Ariah."

Looking up at him in the dark, Ariah felt a sad weightlessness as she studied him, his eyes, the pleading in them and the set of his jaw and mouth. He was gorgeous and it frightened her. He knew she'd been engaged and so naturally he must have assumed she'd had sex with Evan, no wonder he was talking like this. He must be just as horrified as she was, finding out she was a virgin when it was too late. He probably just wanted to reassure her so she would let him finish. But, she didn't have to lose. She didn't have to come out of this empty handed. He could get his pleasure and she could get just what he'd suggested, a chance at a family. She could take one of those last chances.

It was rather convenient really. If she wasn't too horrible at it, perhaps he'd come back to her and try it again a couple more times until they got wherever the hell it was he was taking

her. If he did come back to her bed and she got pregnant, she would have what she wanted. If he did come back to her bed and she didn't get pregnant, well, perhaps Dr. Ribaldi was wrong and it was already too late for her anyhow but at least she'd tried.

Unsure as to how to encourage him, Ariaiah pulled his head down to her so she could kiss him.

"I want you to make love to me," she whispered, feeling foolish, "as often as you will."

That was all it took apparently, for he kissed her back and began to move. The throbbing pain soon turned into something else as he caressed her from deep inside, stretching her so wide she thought she would split in half just to accommodate him. But as his strokes gained purpose and determination, he pushed up on one of his arms so his free hand could slide between them, down her belly and to the swollen bud of her clit, stroking her again in time to his thrusts. Ariaiah felt something build within her. It was similar to the excitement she'd experienced at take off when the interworld carrier took her to Ju Vonice for her first real job offplanet.

As he continued to rub his thumb over the sensitive area, Ariaiah's hips rose instinctively to meet his thrusts, the sensation sending her closer and closer to something unknown and she kneaded his shoulders as she panted and whimpered asking him, pleading with him for something she could not name.

Norrik lowered himself again to his elbows so that his chest crushed her breasts as he continued. Her eyes grew heavy as she concentrated on the feel of him, the contact of his touch in so many different places, in so many different ways, all at once.

"Look at me Ariaiah," Norrik ground out between thrusts until he paused and sucked in a breath and held her face between his hands. "I'm going to cum. I want you to be looking at me and know that when I do, we are making our child. *Our* child Ariaiah, yours and mine."

She was close to her own *something*. She knew it and it took every bit of willpower she had to turn her thrashing head to look at him. Sliding her hands over his back, Ariaiah grasped his ass in her hands and helped him thrust even deeper into her, their pelvic bones crushing her clit in exquisite pain between them and she moaned loudly. He was in her almost to the root when he pulled nearly out to burrow even deeper and deeper into her. Ariaiah cried aloud. Her body felt like it was bursting into a million stars and finally she fell over the edge of some unknown precipice.

It was then that she felt him explode inside of her and she fought to keep her eyes open as Norrik shouted her name above her, his hot seed bathing her womb. Rather than collapsing on top of her, he picked up the pace of his earlier thrusts, frantically driving into her as her body milked him of his seed.

He began to chant something then and a brilliant blue haze lifted off of his body like steam rising off of the surface of a lake. The haze swirled around them in a storm-like current and Ariaiah began to tingle, to feel every nerve in her body a thousand times greater than ever before. She screamed at the overload as he pushed into her again and again until finally, the blue haze formed a sphere around them and the bed, currents of lightning-like light shooting sporadically over its surface. Looking into his eyes through the tears of so many sensations, Ariaiah saw his lips move in some other phrase before he kissed her deeply.

As the sphere around them dimmed, Ariaiah's eyes drifted shut in exhaustion.

\* \* \* \*

Ariaiah opened her eyes slowly. She was sore everywhere, but she felt incredible. Rolling onto her side, she instinctively reached out to the other side of the bed only to find it cold and empty. Snatching back her hand, she sat up in the bed, a sickness settling over her.



*Of course he's not there you idiot, he got what he'd wanted. He wasn't going to stick around.* As she chided herself, she realized her hair was wet and smelled fresh, and she was wearing what looked like a pair of white linen pajamas.

"What in the world?" she asked aloud holding the shirt of the garment away from her so that she could examine it further.

Just then, the door opened.

"Good morning, mistress," a young man a few years her junior greeted as he walked into the room with a freshly pressed white jumpsuit draped over one arm and carrying a tray.

"I was told not to enter until you woke. I've brought you your breakfast and a change of clothing."

"Where are *my* clothes," Aariah asked, eyeing him with suspicion.

The young man cleared his throat quickly. "Forgive me mistress but I assume that the general discarded them."

"The general? Discarded?"

"General Farvish. As for your clothes, it is strictly procedure mistress," he began, noticing Aariah's critical gaze. "All who board are to strip in the sanitation bay. Their garments are destroyed so as to avoid the possibility of infection or contaminants, and then the newcomer is then repeatedly scanned and sterilized, uh, bacterially and virally speaking that is."

"Hmm," Aariah replied, considering whether or not to believe him when he changed the subject.

"Please forgive me for barging in here the moment I saw you sit up but I've got so much to do and I ...."

"*Saw* me sit up?" Aariah breathed. "You were watching me?"

Taken aback by her question, the young man nodded. "Well, yes. The monitor in the hall—"

"Monitor?" she parroted in horror. "Hall?"

"Yes, all of the quarters are equipped with them. For security reasons."

Aariah wanted to die. For all she knew, the whole ship had watched her and Norrik the night before. Moaning in misery, Aariah doubled over on the bed with a hand covering her face.

"Are you alright mistress," the young man jumped toward her, catching himself a moment before he touched her. "Should I call Dr. Ribaldi, General Farvish?"

"No," she cried into the covers over her lap, "just go...please."

Worried by something, the young man moved toward the door when Aariah sat up.

"Wait!" she called to him. "How many people are on this ship?"

"Including you and I?" he asked.

"Yes."

"There are 4,366 aboard, mistress."

"Oh god," she cried in mortification at the very thought of such an audience viewing her deflowering.

"Are you alright?" the young man asked again.

"Yes...I suppose so, but someone won't be," she replied, thinking of what she'd do to Norrik when she got her hands on him. *That sleazy...*

"Where is," Aariah continued, summoning her courage and the most innocent voice she could muster, "the general this morning?" Seeing his puzzled look, she then threw in a couple flutters of her eyelashes for good measure.

"Is there something in your eye, mistress?" he asked, instantly crumbling her façade.

“No.”

“I am sorry, but the general is attending to other duties this morning and asked that I inform you that he will be detained the rest of the day and perhaps through the night.”

Anger surged through her so suddenly and it surprised her. “Other *duties*?”

The young man flushed visibly and averted her eyes. “Yes, mistress. Please forgive me, uh, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. Good day.” With that, he sneaked out of the room and the door shut solidly behind him.

*Duties? So I’m a duty am I?*

## Chapter Six

"No, no, no," the chancellor screamed over the communicator upon the table as the council sat around it. The chancellor's bulging eyes roamed each of their faces in turn through the small projected image hovering above the communicator at the center of the table.

"What would you have us do then, sir?" Norrik asked, trying to strike the irritation from his voice.

"I am only one, sir, general sir. It is you that are the council, are you not? No?"

The chancellor's bird-like way of speaking, even through a translation chip, was giving Norrik a headache. In the seven hours the council had spent debating with Chancellor Whinop for permission to stage the next part of their plan on his planet, Norrik's only remedy for alleviating the pounding blood in his head was by recalling the events of the night before, a problem of its own, for it sent the blood pounding in a rush to another part of his anatomy.

Ariah's scent permeated his every thought and Norrik found himself shifting uncomfortably in his chair to relieve the pressure in his groin. *Gods, she was tight!* It took everything he had not to explode in her immediately, and the way her silky thighs felt wrapped around him, that was sweet torture he would gladly suffer. He thought he'd pass out when he'd pushed into her. If it hadn't registered in his brain that he'd broken through the barrier of her virginity, he would have told her then how exquisite she felt around him.

*A virgin!* Norrik still couldn't believe it. He'd heard plenty of tales about such things, Balton women didn't possess any sort of virginal membrane but plenty of the other humanoid races did. It was just that he couldn't believe Ariah had never been with a man before. Gods, she'd been engaged! What the hell could have kept the idiot away from her? She was sex on two legs as far as Norrik was concerned and he was as grateful to the bastard as he was amazed that her ex-fiancé hadn't sampled her body. Just the thought of taking her again made him salivate. He would have lived up to his promise to make love to her the rest of the night had she not blacked out in the aftermath of the twaining sphere.

Even Norrik had not expected that, the shock of her virginity coupled with their mating should have made *him* pass out. His parents had been truly twained, but it was so rare that he'd never really considered it could happen to him, and with an Earth woman at that. It was incredible how the sphere had heightened everything. It was as if he could physically feel her desire in the form of electric currents as he moved in and out of her. The fusion of their bodies had created a protective barrier or something, and Norrik struggled to recall what he'd been taught about the properties of such a union. He knew so little about them, since they were almost obsolete, he wished he'd listened more to his father's explanations.

He doubted Ariah realized what it was and no doubt she'd have fought it had she known. No doubt. She wouldn't have believed him if he'd told her that he had no control over it, that he could no more stop himself from chanting the blessing than he could have pulled out of her hot, wet, body. But *she'd* asked *him* to make love to her. He'd given her the choice but even the thought of it made Norrik realize he was kidding himself.

She'd allowed him to have sex with her, not to bond them body and soul for eternity. He tried to wash the guilt from his conscience as he recalled how her eyes had darkened with desire,

how she had thrown her head back in delirious pleasure with his thrusts...ah, he couldn't wait to get the hell out of this damned meeting so he could lick every inch of her body, taste her sweet, creamy depths, and then mount her from behind to slowly let her tight pussy wrap around his ....

"General!"

"Y-yes," Norrik answered instantly like a child caught stealing java cakes, as he fought to recall the line of conversation this time, "we will draft a proposal considering these new requests ...."

"No, no, no requests general sir, requirements!"

"These new *requirements* and then we'll reconvene in twenty-eight hours, one Etheroc solar day, agreed?"

Norrik cast a glance around the table of weary faces from every stretch of the Federation.

"By, we the council," they all droned as one, "it is agreed."

"Chancellor?" Norrik asked.

"By the Chancellor of Etheroc, it is agreed, yes," the man finished.

"Very well, see you then." Norrik ended the communication and examined the expression on Horwell's face.

"Well senator?"

"Farvish, the man is insane."

"Here, here," called a few of the voices around the table.

Horwell continued as he leaned back in his chair and surveyed his long-time friend.

"We've gone over every chart for this quadrant. It has to be Etheroc and the man knows it. He's trying to get something more out of this arrangement. I just don't know what. Why else would he act this way?"

"What else could we offer him?" Norrik asked, turning to Kut Bolk, head of accounts.

"Unless he fancies something on this ship, we've got nothing else to offer, that's it. The Borvin Valley is a wasteland to them, no one goes there and nothing lives there. The operation will be small and unobtrusive to the populace. I agree with Horwell. Chancellor Whinop wants more than the credits and port rights at Vannue and frankly, I wouldn't trust him farther than any of us could throw his slimy ass."

"You're sure he hasn't been contacted by the codemaster at the plant?" This question was directed to the dark Tolhean, Nirrel, seated directly across from Norrik. Nirrel had served as head of Interception and Decryption and had been working directly with Yamao and Derzt for close to seven stellar seasons.

"Nothing's been through there," Nirrel replied. "I think he's just one hell of a greedy son of a bitch."

"General, forgive me." Agent Poema, the only other person in the room with a Federation agent background and the only woman in the room, said with a smile, "but I am curious as to why we're even attempting to sweeten this offer for the chancellor. The Federation has been more than generous already, am I right gentlemen?"

Norrik paused for a moment as he studied Agent Poema's cool smile. She was turning her charm on for the other members of the council but the full force of it seemed directed at him as she crossed her long, nearly naked legs in her short jumpsuit and sat back in her chair awaiting his answer.

"I believe you know as well as the rest of us that the Federation's policy for such ventures is to negotiate first, demand as a last resort."

A warm deep-throated laugh seeped around her lush closed lips. "But negotiations are pointless." She grinned seductively at him. "The only way to get what you want *is* to demand." Her voice purred through the room and she leaned forward in her chair to touch his hand where it rested on the arm of his chair. "Isn't that so senator?" she finished with a belated glance at Senator Horwell who seemed to be as suspicious of her sudden act as Norrik was.

"It is true that we often must press our purpose with Chancellor Whinop and others like him," Horwell replied carefully, "but we cannot negotiate with some and not the rest."

"Alright." Norrik sighed, removing his hand from her grasp in order to rub both of his hands over his face. "Let's break for..." he paused to decide, "oh, twelve hours and meet back here to redraft the proposal with fresh ideas."

Agent Poema brushed slowly past him as she made her way to the door, casting him a long, knowing glance before making her way into the hall. It had been a mistake to allow her to sit in on the negotiations. That was clear now, but she had asked earnestly and pointed out that she would continue to be passed over for promotion if not given an opportunity to broaden her skill set just as the senator had done for him years ago.

They'd been on a few assignments together, sometimes posing as lovers or even siblings as their coloring was so similar, but it was all strictly business. Knowing what he did of Agent Poema, she was merely playing the cards she thought would work best for her since, evidently on her home planet of Rwani, it was as difficult or more for a woman to advance her career as it still was for women on Earth. Even with all of that in consideration, though, it was clear that Agent Poema either didn't truly understand the need to present the different heads of state with options or she didn't care to, neither of which were acceptable for any agent in the Federation looking to advance his or her career.

Dismissing it for the time being, he watched the other council members leave. Norrik tried to act as calmly as possible, eager to return to Arian but not wanting to look like a little boy excited to rush home and play with a new toy. Just as he turned the corner to the corridor where his quarters were located, though, his communicator chirped with a call for his assistance on the captain's deck.

\* \* \* \*

"General," Captain Berell greeted in a grunt without so much as lifting his salt-and-pepper head from the chart that he was studying with one of his men.

Norrik's patience was close to fracturing when he caught part of the conversation.

"We don't have much fuel remaining, even in the reserve tank, but it should at least get us to Usal," the captain commented wearily to the young lieutenant. "Chart out the course and get a reading on meteor activity, Chabot."

"Yes, captain," the young man answered before closing the chart projection which had been hovering in front of them like a small replica of the galaxy the ship was currently cruising.

Norrik waited for Lieutenant Chabot to leave before turning his question to the captain, noting Captain Berell's uncharacteristically worn appearance.

"Usal?"

Captain Berell sighed and took a seat in a chair that faced a large window, thousands of sparkling stars winking back at him when he glanced out of it absently.

"One of the maintenance techs found a reever during a routine sweep an hour ago."

"A reever? But how could anyone have planted one? We haven't touched a port in months. I'm the only one who's even left ship and that was in a micro-cruiser."

"It is my belief," the captain shook his head wearily as he turned to face Norrik, "that whoever planted the device either concealed it until this point or has been moving it to various parts of the ship since our last port call seven months ago in order to avoid its detection."

"Do you have any idea if it's transmitted our location or any of our other information?"

"No, not at present. Chabot has a technician working on it now. We've not told the crew yet – figured it would be best if they didn't know until we knew the certainty of the danger."

Norrik nodded his approval. *A reever?* How in the hell could anyone have gotten that aboard when you couldn't bring so much as an unauthorized toothpick without the security monitoring system tattling to security?

"Any ideas as to why the person who got it aboard allowed it to be detected now?" Norrik asked, already dreading the answer.

Captain Berell lifted an eyebrow before taking a deep breath to answer, "I have my ideas just as you do. I think we're both leaning toward the possibility that your codemaster or one of his or her henchmen is trying to keep an eye on us, but general ...." The captain paused, changing to a more personal tone. "Norrik, I can't help but find it rather suspicious that we find a Level A reever leaching information out of our main, no more than forty-eight hours after your little *souvenir* joins us."

"Miss Hollis was scanned as was I when she came aboard," Norrik retorted, "not to mention the fact that she was out cold the entire time and didn't even know she would be leaving her planet. You know very well that she had no say in the matter. She was brought aboard for her own safety as a matter of importance to our mission."

Captain Berell leaned his head on his hand as he sat back in his chair.

"I mean the woman no disrespect, you know that. I am simply looking at possibilities."

"Miss Hollis being capable of that level of espionage is not a *possibility*. If you mean her no disrespect then I suggest you start by investigating the loyalty of your men," Norrik replied in a heated challenge.

"That is precisely why I've asked you to meet with me general. I am in command of my men and this ship, but if you were to head the investigation you could bring greater weight than I could," the captain began with patience. "We aren't, as you know, a Federation created outfit, only a registered and allied sister fleet. You, as a Federation general, outrank me ten times over and I think that alone might be enough leverage to root the culprit out."

"I sympathize with you Berell, but the fact of the matter is that I simply don't have the time. The council only has a few more hours to find something with which we can tempt the Chancellor of Etheroc or else he won't give us clearance to use the planet for the final stage of the operation."

Captain Berell looked toward the large porthole, deep in thought for a moment before returning his gaze to Norrik.

"I'm afraid that if we don't root out the traitor among us immediately, appeasing the chancellor will be the least of our problems," the man replied finally, his eyes conveying the severity of their situation.

"Meaning?"

"We spotted a cloaked vessel, off the starboard side."

"You told me you didn't think the reever had transmitted our location," Norrik shouted. "How long have you known about this?"

"The vessel was here when we arrived," Berell answered calmly. "We wouldn't have even known about its existence were it not for a fluke. Their cloak disengaged for only a

moment or two early this morning, just long enough for our scanners to detect its presence but not long enough even to identify anything about the ship.”

Sealing his features, Norrik took a seat opposite the captain.

“You were to have notified me the moment the ship was discovered, but by not doing so and by endangering the lives of your crew and the council aboard, you have acted in violation of Federation guideline numbers 487-2D, 266.”

“With all due respect general,” Captain Berell interrupted, “it doesn’t seem that rehashing my errors at this time will do us any good. I would have interrupted your communication with the chancellor, but I thought you would not like him to know that there was anything out of the ordinary going on.”

“In that respect we are agreed.”

Admittedly, the last thing Norrik needed was even the slightest scent of trouble for Chancellor Whinop to get a whiff of and end their negotiations right there on the spot. If Captain Berell was right and the cloaked vessel had merely been laying in wait for them to arrive so that the whole ship could be conveniently disposed of, then why hadn’t they fired? Why hesitate?

Unless of course, there was perhaps something aboard that was of greater value to them in one piece?

“I can give you a few hours captain,” Norrik added finally. “Do you have a list of suspects already assembled?”

“I do.”

“Good, we’ll begin with those and untie the knots as we go.”

“Whatever I can provide for you general,” Captain Berell offered, “you’ve only to ask.”

Norrik was tired in virtually every way possible but unfortunately rest was not one of his options. “Have someone send me a clean uniform from my quarters and a hot meal.”

“Anything else?”

Considering it a moment, he added, “And see that Miss Hollis is locked in my quarters with sentinels placed at the door.”

“That afraid of her,” the captain quirked a tired smile, “are you?”

“Admittedly, yes, but far more afraid for her.”

With that said, Norrik began discussing his plan to find out the answer to why the reever was brought aboard and who was responsible.

\* \* \* \*

*That dirty, conniving...*, Aariah seethed internally. Placing the guards in front of the door was adding insult to injury when she hadn’t even been aware that the door had been unlocked before. It was a pity she hadn’t known he’d requested a dress uniform until a crewman came to fetch it or else she would have happily ripped it to shreds before handing it to the fellow.

Armed guards? What the hell did he think she was capable of ... alone ... unarmed and without the faintest idea where she was or how to get back to Earth? Perhaps she should have felt flattered by his belief that she was such a threat as to put two guards on the door to see to it that she didn’t step one toe out of his damned quarters.

It was bad enough earlier being caged up in the small one room, one bath, dwelling but now that she knew without doubt that she was to be some sort of house arrested prisoner, she wanted nothing more than to just walk around the corridors for a while to stretch the soreness and cramps out of her legs and other places. It didn’t help her temper either that the large, lumbering guards posted at her door used any excuse their tiny brains could muster to open the

door and ogle her, no doubt entertaining some perverse idea that the show *General Farvish* had broadcast of their coupling could prove interactive.

It was the thought of his betrayal that stung more than anything. How could she have been such an idiot? Not only did he not give a damn about her beyond using her body but to have allowed everyone on board a peep at how naive and inexperienced she was caused the sick burning feeling fisting her stomach to tighten painfully. Hell, for all she knew he'd broadcast it across the Federation as well just for kicks.

He was probably with one of his other 'duties' at this very moment, watching the playback and laughing at her while in the arms of some long legged and well-tutored woman. *Oh god, I think I'm going to puke!* Ariaiah grimaced at the vivid mental image of him doing just that.

Yes, she had given in with the thought that she might be able to 'use' the experience for her own designs but to publicize the event to every voyeur on board made her blood boil with a concoction of outrage and mortification, and just a dash of self-righteous indignation.

Her anger and humiliation was too much to handle and Ariaiah searched for something to hold on to...such as what she'd do to him if she got her hands on his mangy hide again. The thought of strangulation proved rather satisfying, and she fantasized about it for several hours until one of the guards grinned stupidly at her as he announced that Norrik had sent word that he wouldn't be joining her that evening.

"Damn right you won't," Ariaiah hissed to herself as the door swooshed closed behind the messenger. "I'm sure you're busy making the rounds."

"Well," she smiled viciously as she cast a glance around his meticulously clean and organized room, "since it would appear I'll be here for a while, I might as well make myself at home."



## Chapter Seven

Captain Berell and Norrik had gone through half the list, interviewing the suspects individually for several hours without any luck until he was to join the council once more to discuss their new ideas on how to achieve the desired cooperation with the chancellor. After a little less than an hour, a new offer was drafted and sent to the chancellor's office. Although the disagreeable man still asked for more, the council was able to persuade him much easier than they had anticipated and by mid evening, nearly two days after he'd left Arianah asleep in bed, he was finally on his way back to her.

He was exhausted. His eyes were raw and overtaxed and he thought he would barely make it back to his quarters without falling on his face in a comatose sleep until he heard gunfire coming from his rooms. When he reached the unguarded door, weapon in hand, his heart was in his throat at the wild images of horror with which his imagination tormented him. Afraid to open the door to his quarters for fear of what he might find within, it was the sounds coming from the other side that spurred him forward in a headless rush.

"What in the name of Goratek's balls are you doing, woman?" Norrik bellowed, reholstering his gun and casting an angry glance around the main room of his quarters.

He needn't have worried that Arianah would find the day dull for it seemed she'd found plenty to entertain herself in his absence. All of his personal belongings: charts, weapons, clothing, even his pathetic-looking Carnivan plant, had all been shoved into one corner while all the furniture was spaciouly arranged at the other end of the small room. An odd smell emitted from behind him and Norrik cast a glance at a smoking hole in the wall above the door.

"The next time you feel the need to broadcast a show for all of your shipmates, you can cast someone else as your leading lady," Arianah's voice cut through the air toward him.

Turning around to ask her what she was talking about he noticed a line burned into the floor.

"I hope you don't mind *general* but I used one of your gun-thingies to divide the room, as well as to take care of your little peep show problem."

Nostrils flaring, Norrik stalked towards her.

"Ah, ah, ah," she chided with a wag of her finger, pointing down to the floor where one of his feet had crossed over the line burned into the white padding of the expensive shock floor, "this is *my* side. All of your junk is over there," she indicated with a look of disdain and a wave of her hand, "on *your* side."

Norrik pulled in a raging breath, but Arianah just kept going.

"That is to say, if you choose to have a side at all. No doubt you might just prefer to spend the rest of the journey in the company of one of your other *duties*."

"Right now," he hissed as he pointed to *her* side of the room, "I've no intention of doing anything other than sleeping in *my* bed."

"Hmm, that may prove to be a problem I'm afraid," she answered with a mocking pout.

"Why?"

"Because you no longer have a bed, at least not one in *this* cabin. This bed," she continued as she threw her thumb over her shoulder forcefully at the item in question, "as well as

all the other furniture now belongs to me. I figured it was my right seeing as you abducted me, against my will, without any of my own belongings and *discarded* the one outfit I had, so," she smirked, "by rights, all this goes to me in the form of damages."

"It would appear you've already damaged quite enough," Norrik replied, pointing toward the smoking hole where the security monitor had been.

"I don't appreciate the role of unwilling porn star," Arianh replied hotly.

"Porn star?" Norrik asked, casting a questioning glance back at the security monitor which had begun to sputter and spark. Sudden comprehension fell over him like a sheet of ice water. "Arianh, it wasn't ...."

"Perhaps you thought it might appease the band of heathens you have aboard, *General Farvish*," she cut in, her voice rising with emotion, "but if you learned nothing else from the unfortunate occurrence of the other night, I would have hoped you'd learned that I am not into sexual exhibition."

"What the hell are you raving about?"

Arianh crossed her arms then and narrowed her gaze to glare up at him as she tapped her foot. "Your cabin boy proved to be rather informative about your sordid goings on." She exhaled angrily.

Unable to speak around the irritation and anger her little speech had aroused in him, Norrik crossed the line, so to speak, of the room. Grabbing her by the arm, he hauled her to the door and commanded it to open.

"Shalz? SHALZ!" Norrik bellowed.

The young man who'd brought her meals the past two days came hurrying toward them, ashen-faced.

"Yes, general, sir?"

"Shalz," Norrik cut in, "pray, tell me what you told your mistress concerning the security monitor."

"The monitor, sir?"

"The security monitor, damn it! What did you say to her?"

Glancing nervously toward Arianh, Shalz seemed to be searching his brain for whatever he'd said or done that had anything to do with the monitor.

"Oh," the young man whitened guiltily.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I am terribly sorry, sir, mistress." He nodded to Norrik and Arianh in turn. "Yesterday morning I was waiting for the mistress to rise, as you had instructed me not to disturb her until she rose, so ... I force entered the code to view the room so I could know when she was awake," he confessed with a gulp.

Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Norrik snorted.

"Please forgive me, mistress, sir. It is just as I explained to the mistress, that I had a great many chores to do and couldn't wait around for her to summon me."

Arianh huffed and Norrik turned his gaze to her as she looked away from him and crossed and crossed her arms under her breasts again, inadvertently pushing them together in the open neck of her partially unzipped jumpsuit. Norrik's mouth watered at the picture despite his gnawing fatigue, noticing the faint lines of dried sweat which had created a path of least resistance that disappeared down her cleavage, and was no doubt caused by her exertion of the day. Unfortunately, Norrik wasn't the only man who noticed.

"That will be all, Shalz!" Norrik snapped irritably at the young crewman who jumped in reply, tearing his eyes away from Aria's chest and then scurried hurriedly around a corner and out of sight.

Dragging Aria back into their quarters and closing the door, Norrik addressed her. "As you see, you were not broadcast until sometime late that morning *and* I had nothing to do with it."

"All the same," Aria huffed weakly.

Too tired to argue, Norrik sighed. "Look Aria, it's late. I'm exhausted and I just want to take a shower and go to bed. I've had a long couple of days and I have a lot of duties to attend ...."

"That's another thing!"

"Oh gods," Norrik moaned, dragging a hand down his face to look down at her.

"Don't worry, I didn't expect you to hang around anyhow, but if you're going to dick around, pardon the expression ...." She smiled in a way that made it clear she was anything but pleased. "Don't you dare expect to come back here and get the same. I've enough crap to deal with, medically speaking, than to worry about getting some foul disease from you via one of your *duties*."

"Aria! What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Exactly!"

"Exactly what?"

"Exactly what I am talking about. I don't want any diseases from you because you're busy fucking around with god only knows what. So don't bother trying to pull again, what you did that night," she said, blushing.

Grabbing her by the upper arms, Norrik leaned down to look at her eye-to-eye, their noses nearly touching. The close proximity afforded him a provocative view of her breasts as well as a tantalizing whiff of the scent that was all her own and could draw him from miles away.

"Aria, I am very tired. Either you tell me what the hell you're talking about or let me go to bed."

"Your young friend," she replied heatedly, pointing a finger at the door, "told me about your other duties."

Norrik narrowed his eyes and shook his head in confusion.

"I realize that the other night was a fluke, ok? I'm not," she hesitated momentarily, "I mean, I don't expect anything further from you and had I known that you were so liberal with others, I wouldn't have allowed ...."

"Aria."

"I wouldn't have allowed *that* to happen."

"Are you insane?" Norrik asked, eyeing her in disbelief. Aria made to protest but he finished before she could say anything further. "Do you honestly think I would go whoring around after I'd just had the best sex of," he paused trying to think how long it had been since he'd had anything remotely as incredible as he'd had with her, "gods damn it all, of my whole life?"

Aria opened her mouth to say something but closed it again and exhaled heavily out her nose.

"Vem, Aria! You haven't even been my mate for more than a couple of days and you don't even trust me?"

"Just because we had," she gulped nervously, "sex, doesn't mean anything and don't call it 'mate', it makes us sound like animals."

"Doesn't mean anything? Don't you remember the sphere?"

"So," she shook her head, unable to meet his eyes.

"Do you even know what it is? A twaining sphere only happens once in a lifetime for Baltons, if that. Mating contract or no, we're married, mated, sealed, bonded, whatever you want to call it, sweetheart, you're stuck with me."

"Like hell I am!" Aariah shouted.

"It can be that way, hell, if that's what you want Aariah, but personally I can think of a lot better ways to spend the next couple of hundred stellar cycles."

"Couple of hundred," Aariah repeated as though the air had been knocked out of her.

Sensing her panic, Norrik sighed tiredly. "When we fused, our added life span doubled."

"But how?" Her eyes seemed enormous with gods only knew what. Fear? Horror? Revulsion?

"No one knows exactly," he answered as soothingly as possible, "the sphere just knows how long you would have lived, adds it to your mate's life expectancy and then doubles the sum."

"Hundreds?" she said in dismay as she took a seat upon the bed. "Stellar cycles? But a stellar cycle is like 75 Earth years!"

Taking a seat beside her he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her to his chest, resting his cheek on the top of her head. "I know baby. We won't have as much time as most because Earth lifespans are so short but that's why we should ...."

"As much time?" Pushing away from him to look at his face, she replied incredulously. "Do you realize I'll outlive everyone I know on Earth by thousands of years?"

"Gods willing," he answered dryly "your office is full of Carithian harpies. Why do you think I called *you* whenever I needed anything from that place." Trying his luck Norrik began nuzzling her ear, "other than the fact that you're incredibly sexy?"

Pushing him from her with a hand on his chest, Aariah asked "How would you have known? We never got video during your calls."

Not wanting to ruin what could mean another opportunity to mate with her, Norrik considered his answer carefully. "I didn't need a video connection to be able to tell you were hot, Aariah." His gaze roamed over her then as he thought of all the different ways they could enjoy one another's bodies that he was oh so very eager to try.

"Why?"

"Huh?" Norrik grunted distractedly.

"Why wouldn't you need video?"

*Oh gods, you're close, don't screw this up!* "From the first call, Aariah Hollis, not only were you confident and helpful but you put up with a lot of vemm from me and worked out my problem."

"That just means I'm good at my job." She frowned, looking away from him. "It has nothing to do with being sexy."

"Ah, Aariah, just listen to you," he tried again, moving closer to her and earning himself a wary glance. "Don't you see how much fire you have? How when you don't take my crap, it turns me on?"

Blushing, Aariah looked away from him.

“And that,” he said with a smile in his voice as he brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek. “I’ve never seen another person, not even on Earth do that. I don’t know how you do that, turn pink here,” he caressed her cheek, “here,” moving his fingers down her throat, “and here,” murmured. He lowered his face to her breastbone and bent her slightly over the arm he wrapped around her back so that he could place a kiss between her breasts on a point just above her zipper. “But gods, it’s incredible.”

Scooting away from him on the bed a little, Ariaiah turned her head towards the far wall. “It’s called blushing. It’s no big deal, lots of people do it on Earth. I do it when I’m embarrassed.”

“Why are you embarrassed?” Norrik asked, hooking her around the waist to slowly bring her back so that he could make her look him in the eye. “What do you think you have to be embarrassed about with me?”

Ariaiah gulped audibly as she glanced at his lips before turning her head once more.

“What do you want me to do, Ariaiah?” His voice was soft, almost a whisper over her face when she turned back to look at him. His arm still around her waist, Norrik pulled her to sit astride his lap.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

“I asked you what you wanted,” Norrik replied placing light kisses across her brow, “not what you were afraid of.”

“Please Norrik,” Ariaiah whispered. How the hell had he turned the tables like this? If the hard bulge she felt digging into her thigh was any indication, it would appear that Norrik was above holding grudges, at least where burning lines in his floor, shooting out monitors, and throwing his stuff around was concerned.

As he nuzzled her face and placed a few nibbling kisses along her throat, one of his arms tightened around her back, causing her to arch her back and roll her pelvis harder against him with agonizing pleasure that shocked her as it stole her breath momentarily. Slipping his other hand between them, Norrik slowly unzipped her jumpsuit and peeled it down her shoulders to reveal the plump, creamy globes of her breasts as he placed soft kisses across her face and down her throat.

After releasing her zipper, Norrik’s free hand skated slowly up her belly, leaving her skin tingling and covered in goosebumps. The cold air in the room caused her nipples to tighten into painful buds and when he leaned down to lave one of the sensitive buds, nipping at it in slow, playful movements, Ariaiah gasped. Threading her fingers through his thick, trim auburn hair, she encouraged him to take the aching center into his mouth as she arched her back farther, inadvertently tilting her hips and spreading her thighs farther apart to sit fully upon him and bringing her femininity in pleasurable contact with his hardened length through their clothes.

She couldn’t seem to stay upset with him. Ever since they’d made love, she’d had an overwhelming desire to touch him, but the two days he’d been away had been torture. She ached to touch his skin, to have him touch her. She’d never been the clingy type, not even with her ex-fiancé, but she craved the contact. She could smell him on the pillow, on his clothes in the closet, but he hadn’t been there. But he was here now.

Pulling back from her breast to inhale sharply, Norrik took the other nipple between his fingers, rolling and pinching it lightly, spurring Ariaiah to move her hips in time to his teasing in innocent blindness, unaware of what she was doing.

“Anything Ariaiah, just tell me what you want me to do for you, to you.”

Some beast inside of her leapt to life now that she was so close to him. She'd tried desperately not to think about him while she was trapped in his quarters, surrounded by his things, but a deep longing filled her now, a longing for him. When he touched her like this, gentle yet lustful, kind but not without purpose, a tingling sensation coursed through her, to her finger tips, to her toes, her lips, her nipples, and, as horrified as she was to notice, in more intimate areas. It was as if something in his body literally charged something in hers and when they touched, Aariah imagined she could see currents of electricity jumping from his fingertips to her body or vice-versa.

"I want..." She hesitated, not knowing how to put in words what she desired.

"Tell me, Aariah. What do you want?" Norrik coaxed her, taking her hips in his hands and gently rocking her body into his with the unspoken suggestion of what he had in mind. It was maddening! She wasn't a seductress. She didn't know what was pleasurable to a man and she didn't have the faintest idea what *exactly* he wanted her to do.

"I want," she faltered, still unsure, "you to tell me what you want."

Norrik moaned and kissed her deeply, using his hands to free her arms from the jumpsuit and then press her naked chest against him in an embrace. The contact of her receptive skin against the texture of his uniform was enough to send her over the edge and she wrapped her arms around his neck, rubbing her breasts against his hard chest as she picked up, once again, the rocking movement of her hips that he'd momentarily abandoned.

"I want to taste you baby," he moaned into her mouth. "I want to make love to you with my mouth and then I want to see you ride me any way you like."

"What?" Aariah squeaked, pulling away from his chest and covering her breasts with her hands embarrassedly.

Lowering his arms from around her back to behind her hips in order to keep at least the contact of their groins, Norrik leaned his head back against the wall with a thud. He was exhausted, drained, then she fired him up and got him ready, now she was cowering away like some timid schoolgirl. But she was timid. He'd been so amazed by the realization that he had been the only man to have her that he'd forgotten what that meant. No matter how passionately they kissed and petted one another's bodies, no matter how well her instincts had been the other night, Aariah was still innocent.

Taking a deep breath, Norrik sat up again and looked into her eyes. "Aariah, there are lots of ways to make love."

"I am well aware of that, thank you," she huffed, shifting one of her arms to cover both her breasts so she could slip the other back into the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

"Are you?" He'd asked it in earnest, without mocking or teasing, careful to make his voice quiet and comforting.

Aariah stopped short. "I am sorry that my lack of experience is a bore for you, sir," she fumed, trying to pull the other arm through its sleeve. "Had I known I'd be stuck with you I would have enjoyed that sort of education before I was abducted, as you evidently have."

Norrik had had quite enough of that thank you very much! He whipped her around in one quick movement. Aariah's eyes widened when she found herself pinned beneath him on the bed.

"Why do you insist on taking everything I say as an insult?" he breathed with exasperation. "Knowing that no other man has had you is ... is..." he faltered and Aariah turned her head toward the wall, a tear straying from her open eyes, "... is the most gods damn incredible feeling!"

Ariah stifled a small sob and he gently used his hands to turn her face towards his. "Ariah, your innocence is an incredible gift," he added tenderly. "I am honored and one lucky fool to have the privilege of your *education*. The thought of anyone else touching you," he growled out, unable to finish, causing her to shiver. Gathering her in his arms, he rolled to his side and took her with him. Stroking her back soothingly, he placed a kiss at her hairline and made soothing coos as her shivers evolved into quiet sobs.

"I know you are not entirely naive in everything," he whispered after voicing the command to turn off the cabin's lights, "but if there is something you don't understand, tell me and I will explain it to you. I want you to always feel safe with me."

Ariah felt like a complete fool. Norrik's kindness only made it worse in a way, proving what a baby she was, how stupid and naive she must seem to him. Everything was still just ... too much. She was in shock.

In the last seventy-two hours or so, she'd been told she either had to have her family now or not at all. She'd been humiliated by her boss, abducted by a client, put aboard an alien craft going god knows where, lost her virginity which she thought had been telecast around the ship, trapped in the quarters with a man who was as infuriating as he was enticing, and now he lay in the dark, cradling her because she'd freaked out when he suggested they try something new in their 'love-making' that ....

*That what?* She asked herself. *That embarrassed you? Excited you? Frightened you?* *He must think you're such an idiot*, she moaned internally, pressing her forehead against Norrik's chest, the movement of that gesture tearing from him a great snore.

"You're asleep!" Ariah gasped, as annoyed as she was relieved that their conversation had ended.

Carefully disentangling herself from him, Ariah crawled out of the bed. She zipped up her jumpsuit subconsciously before arguing with herself that she might as well change into the pajamas Norrik had left her sleeping in the other night. Shrugging out of the jumpsuit and changing quietly in the dark, Ariah stood by the bed debating whether or not she should join him. Folding her arms under her breasts with narrowed eyes, she looked down at his shadowy form in the pale light emitted from the bathroom.

*After all I've been though I am most definitely NOT sleeping on the floor*, she huffed mentally, *so you'll just have to deal with it or find your own bed*. Smiling as she crawled carefully back into bed, she added, *I've never been happier to know I kick in my sleep*. Her smile lingered until a large arm and leg swung over her in a living cage and dragged her tightly against him, spooning them together.

"Go to sleep, wife," Norrik whispered sleepily in her ear, "even in the dark I can see that smile and I am too tired for your mischief."

## Chapter Eight

Ariah woke to the sound of grumbling in the dark room, moving her hand slowly across the bed's expanse for Norrik only to discover she'd awoken alone again.

"Norrik?" she whispered tentatively through the dark towards the small amount of light trickling from around the bathroom's vertically retracting door.

"Gods damn it," he exclaimed from the other side of the closed door.

Sitting up, she started to slip a leg out of the covers when the bathroom door opened. Norrik paused in the motion of walking back to the bed when he saw her, standing there wearing nothing but a thin pair of pajama pants and a irritable frown. Ariah couldn't help but enjoy the view as her eyes adjusted to the light from the bathroom behind him.

"In all of your," he paused to cock an eyebrow at her, "*reorganization* of our quarters yesterday, did you happen to recall where you tossed my shaving kit?"

Try as she might to hide it, a small smile crept over her lips and she shrugged. "Not really."

"Then, madam, would you mind assisting me to locate it? I've got to meet with the captain in twenty minutes."

"Serves you right." She sniffed.

Norrik grunted a reply and took her offered hand to assist her out of the bed. Ariah found the kit in a small pile of weapons heaped carelessly in a corner. Just looking through the guns, which included a fire cannon, made her wince at how foolish she'd been to toss them on the floor. They could have discharged and with her luck, found their mark in her ass.

Ariah made her way to the bathroom where Norrik stood in front of a mirror applying shaving lubricant. Leaning against the doorway as he shaved then finished, she watched his reflection until he met her gaze after bending over the basin to rinse his face.

"I only have a few minutes, Ariah," he told her, still meeting her gaze in the mirror.

"I didn't ..."

Before she could finish the thought, he'd turned to face her, their bodies only a breath apart in the small room.

"I have to meet with the captain," he breathed, his gaze roaming slowly over her face.

Ariah started to say that she wasn't trying to stop him, that she was just watching him, when he lifted her around the waist in his arms and pressed her back into the doorway. Instinct urged her to lace her arms behind his head and wrap her legs around his waist just as he leaned into her with a heady kiss. His thumbs caressed either side of her jaw as he deepened the kiss and pressed his body more intimately to hers.

Gasping for air when he finally drew back from her mouth but continued to hold her in his arms, Ariah clung to him. The look on his face was odd and seemed strangely intense, as though there were things working within the walls of his mind that he should tell her about but chose not to. There was a distance in that look and it made her study his eyes for clues into what lay in the hidden areas.

"I have to go," he whispered.



Ariah didn't know how to respond, what she should say. "Then go." She sighed tiredly, already loosening her grip on him and waiting for him to release her.

Leaning his forehead against hers, Norrik closed his eyes and exhaled through his mouth. "Gods Ariah, hot, cold, hot, cold. I don't know how much more I can take of this."

She assumed he'd let her go then, but when he lifted his head to meet her eyes once again, his arms stayed firmly in place around her waist. "This is not how I wanted to spend our first week twain. I promise you now, though, when all of this..." he paused to close his eyes and shake his head briefly, "vem is over and done I'll take you away and we'll go somewhere you've always wanted to go but never been able to go. No early morning meetings with the captain, no council business, no... tours of the plant with obnoxious clients. Just you and me and every day free to do what ever we want." He smiled.

Ariah's face fell into soft wonder as she looked at him, eye to eye where he pinned her against the wall.

"What?" he asked.

"You're serious," she replied in breathless amazement.

"Why wouldn't I be? You deserve a..." he hesitated as though searching his memory for the Earth words, "wedding tour, a honeymoon."

Pushing at his shoulders until he let her slide down his body to the floor, Ariah blinked up at him. "You really meant it," she whispered, astonished, "all of it."

"All of what?"

"You really believe we're married, that we're twain."

Norrik's face clouded and he stepped back from her. "Goratek's balls Ariah, you have an uncanny ability to ruin a moment."

He turned then, leaving her standing in the small bathroom doorway as he made his way into the main room and barked out the command for the lights so he could rescue a dress-down jumpsuit uniform from a pile on the floor. Turning suddenly to face her where she still stood, framed by the bathroom doorway, he shook his head.

"Did you think it was all just an elaborate joke, a ploy to humiliate you?"

Ariah stood silently, unable to explain but still afraid to admit just how close to the truth it was.

With a disappointed shake of his head he snorted derisively. "How long have you known me, Ariah?" He waited a couple of breaths for her answer, but she hesitated and he continued at a tone close to a shout. "How long?"

"Seven years," she replied quietly.

"And in the seven years we've known each other, have I ever hurt ...?" He stopped suddenly.

Ariah's eyes grew cold across the short expanse of the room. The chill of his own words made a slight shudder skate up his bare spine with the remembered image of her contorted body lying on the floor next to the ventilation shaft as his entire existence slowed to the sound of his own pulse and his breathing through the ventilator from within the combat suit while he bent down to check for her pulse, for a sign that she was still alive.

"I think we both know the answer to that, General Farvish," she replied, as her eyes filled with the emotion that she fought to keep from her voice.

Their gazes were locked in a shared memory and Norrik's anger fled.

"Ariah, I ..."

Before he could even finish, she'd turned into the bathroom and pressed the button to close the door.

He debated as he dressed, whether or not he should try to talk to her through the door but as he approached the physical barrier between them he could hear the soft sound of her sobs. He placed his palms on the door and dragged his hands down its cool surface as though he could soothe her in the motion.

"Ariah," he began tentatively, awaiting a reply but continuing when he heard only silence. "Ariah, *kirja*, I have to meet with the captain. I'll have Shalz stop by to look in on you, to walk you around if you like. I'd feel better if you stayed close to our quarters." Finally when she didn't answer, he added, "Please, forgive me."

He'd already half-turned to leave when the bathroom door slid up. She stood in the doorway, eyes red and slightly swollen with her tears, looking small and delicate in the white pajamas that were too big for her.

"Why am I here, Norrik? Why am I really here?"

"I told you, there's someone at your office who ...."

"If it was concern for my safety then why did you secretly subsidize my doctors' fees? Why demand to be returned to my client list the moment you heard I'd returned to work? Why the mating contract Norrik? You don't owe me. You paid my bills while I slept. I lived. Your conscience is clear. I didn't die. You don't have to bond yourself to me as penance. You're free. I release you. Please just take me back home. Let me go."

"I can't Ariah." He shook his head, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes," she answered in a whisper, "you can. I haven't signed anything, no mating contract, no marriage license. You don't owe me this, even though you think you do, even though you believe you do."

"Ariah, the twaining sphere ...."

"I haven't told anyone. You don't have to either. I won't hold you to anything. You don't owe me anything."

Her voice was so calm, so reasonable. She was hoping he would agree with her but everything in him shouted 'NO!' She was his. He was hers. They were twain and there was nothing that either of them could do to change that. She held half of his soul and he, half of hers and nothing could ever make him forget that, no distance, no amount of time, no lack of a contract. She was his and he would do everything in his power to keep her safe and as happy as she would allow herself to be.

"No, Ariah, you're wrong. And if I have to give up everything I have and all that I am for you to see that, so be it, but you are wrong."

Before she could argue further, he opened the door to their quarters and walked out into the hall, commanding the door to close after him. When he reached the hall, he leaned against the wall for a moment and prayed to any deity listening, that Ariah could just understand ... everything.

\* \* \* \*

Something wasn't right. Ariah kept trying to tell herself it was stress but the depression had kicked in when she realized that most of the signs of her period were there already, the tenderness in her breasts was worse and the aching in her joints but apart from bleeding, it was as if she'd already started. Still, the very fact that she hadn't yet started to bleed seemed odd.

An hour and a half after Norrik left, Shalz arrived. She called the door to open so he could enter, but when he'd walked in, he found her lying on the bed in a fetal position, the

cramps had gotten that bad. The poor man had repeatedly tried to call for Norrik, but she begged him not to and they compromised when she said that if she was still in pain in an hour he could call the general.

In that hour however, she'd also convinced him to sit on the bed and rub her back while she convulsed with the intensity of her cramps. The poor guy seemed incredibly uncomfortable with his assignment and jumped off of the bed like a guilty man anytime he heard a noise, terrified that the general would return to find him massaging his 'mate' as he'd called her.

But as the cramps worsened, she cared less and less what Shalz feared and more about remembering to breathe through the pain. Her cramps had gotten worse after the attack with coulinium gas. None of her doctors were able to explain it when she exited the hyber-pod. Only one attempted to, saying that it was most likely related to the muscular and nerve flare-ups she had as a side effect of the gas which made it difficult to do little things like zip up her jumpsuit on occasion. But this was hardly the same thing.

"Please mistress," Shalz begged again. "Please, may I call the general?"

"No," Aariah whispered into the pillow as her body tightened with the pain of another cramp, her voice shaking as she fought for control. "Keep rubbing Shalz, please. It ... hasn't .... been an hour," she gasped painfully.

He continued but Aariah could feel his displeasure as it communicated down his arm and into her lower back.

"You are very ill mistress. If not the general, then may I get a medic or one of the women officers to ...?"

"No! Please, just stay with me," she whimpered in pain.

"You are very stubborn. The general told me I was to do what you asked, but I am sure that he would be angry if I did not tell him about this. There are only ten more minutes until it has been an hour and you are in even worse condition than before."

Aariah couldn't argue on that point. It seemed like no matter how she positioned herself or how hard or gently he rubbed her back, the pain just continued to increase. Yet at the back of her mind sat something, as though she knew what would make it stop but couldn't seem to think long enough between the bouts of pain to think about it.

A small chirping sound made her tense and Shalz removed his hand from her back to answer his communicator.

"Shalz," he began, "Yes, general, I am here with her now. No general, she is very ill. I know, sir. I told her, sir. Yes, sir. Very well, sir. My most humble apology, sir."

With that, he clicked the communicator back to his belt and stood from the far corner of the bed where he'd been sitting like a nervous bird on a ledge with a temperamental cat.

"He's going to give me hell all because I didn't tell him immediately," Shalz pouted angrily. "You have to tell him that I tried to call him, but you wouldn't let me. Please, mistress, please tell him."

Aariah's head ached and the throbbing behind her right eye seemed to intensify with Shalz's whining. "Fine, I'll tell him. Just get out. You're making my headache worse."

"I can't leave. He told me to stay with you until he got here."

"What?"

"He's in route now," Shalz replied as he crossed the room to stand in front of where she still lay on the bed. "He said he'd be here in a few minutes."

"Ohhh," Aariah moaned, trying to sit up, only to drop back to the pillow. "Why? I thought he was supposed to be with the captain all day."

Shalz offered her a hand, but she batted it away with an unhappy moan. "He said he wished to take the afternoon meal with you and was coming to collect you."

"Collect me?"

Exhaling noisily, her young, sandy-haired 'keeper' glared down at her with pale green eyes as though she were an impertinent child and a reply to her question was a waste of time. Aariah didn't give a flip what he thought. At that moment the aching in her abdomen and the pressing thud of her headache consumed her entire world. So Norrik was coming back hours sooner than she expected, who the hell cared? All she cared about was absence from the obscene pain she was disabled with at that moment. The sooner it went away, the better.

The cramping reached a fevered pitch and Aariah ground her teeth, causing the tears in her eyes to run out from under her closed lids as though they too wished to escape the pain of her body. She hadn't even realized she'd stopped breathing until a warm hand rested near her ear, the thumb caressing her brow soothingly.

"Breathe Aariah," Norrik called to her, "Breathe, baby. Come on."

Gasping air with a shudder, Aariah's eyes fluttered open. "Please, Norrik," she whimpered as the pain arched to a higher level.

Norrik shouted something over his shoulder and the sound of the door swooshing closed told her that Shalz had left.

"I'm here, baby," he whispered, bending over her face to lay a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Gods, you're cold."

The bed shifted as he climbed into it in front of her and drew her close to his body. Aariah huddled in towards his warmth and he pulled her even closer, finally resting a hand on the small of her back. The moment his hand rested there, some of the pain lessened and she relaxed slightly.

Apparently sensing something had happened, Norrik started rubbing her back gently and eventually Aariah became aware that she was clenching her jaw and fists, and started to relax them consciously. When he whispered some unknown words in her ear she exhaled and rested her cheek more comfortably against his chest. But it was when he dipped his head to kiss her mouth that the pain fully began to dissipate.

Aariah opened her eyes slightly to look at him as he continued to kiss her, and only then was she truly aware of his presence. It was as if he'd kissed the pain out of her, sucking it from her lips and taking it into himself. Slowly she relaxed more fully and snuggled against him, pressing as much of her body to him as she could.

Her hand trailed up his chest to touch his face as if it were hungry for contact with his skin. Lingeringly, her fingers traced his jaw and down his neck until she found the zipper of his jumpsuit. Her hands shook a bit with the zipper, as they often did with her own. She got it half-way down his chest when her hand started shaking harder and he gently cupped his warm hand around hers to fulfill the motion.

Shrugging his shoulders out of the garment, Norrik whispered into her hair.

"Its withdrawal. We need to mate, to recharge our batteries."

"W-why," she stuttered barely able to find her voice at all. Her hands roamed hungrily over his chest and arms, the very contact with his skin serving to bring her closer to awareness, out of the sinking abyss of pain.

"The powers we gained with the sphere may drain one or both of us. We have to," he paused to finish getting completely out of his clothes, "recharge."

"Recharge?" she asked weakly as he began to unzip her jumpsuit and help her out of it.

"Touch me, Ariaah," he breathed as he trailed kisses down her neck and chest to end between her breasts, "you have to touch me."

"I hurt," she whispered as a sudden wave of pain rode over her and sucked her breath away.

Kissing her deeply again, Norrik stroked his hands over her body, stretching her out so he could press the length of his body against hers more fully. The pain weakened with the contact and turned to a shimmering metallic thing beneath the surface, its power weakening the closer she got to Norrik. Her hand skimmed over his shoulder and down his arm to his elbow before she rested it on his hip. She kneaded his hip with her fingers as he continued to nip and suck at her lips, his knee working its way between her thighs until he finally rolled them off of their sides and pressed her back into the mattress.

Her hands were hungry for the feel of his flesh and they played over his back, shoulders, and finally on his buttocks as he wedged his hips between her legs.

"Let me in Ariaah," he breathed into her hair.

Ariaah opened herself for him and he rested hard and hot on her thigh for a moment, causing her to gasp.

Norrik rubbed his length in the dew collecting in the lips of her sex, coating himself with her arousal. Coming up on his palms in a sort of push up, he slowly slid into her and she whimpered, pulling at his shoulders to bring him closer to her as she wrapped her legs around him to pull him in deeply.

He let out a sound that was half moan, half gasp when she lifted her hips and tightened her thighs to bring him in all the way. Pausing for a moment just to relish the feel of her body encasing him so completely, Norrik thought he could die happy at that moment, that nothing could feel better than the sensation he had right then. She was made for his body and he for hers. A perfect match, body and soul. But soon he wanted to move, to stroke her from inside.

Taking a deep breath of the mingled scents of their bodies, Norrik pulled gently out of her until only the head of his cock was still in her channel. It took a moment of convincing to get her to move her legs from around his waist to drape them over his shoulders but when he pounded into her, she writhed with a sharp gasp of appreciation for the new position.

"Gods, Ariaah, you're so tight. You're perfect."

She smiled until a breath caught in her throat when he ground against her clit. The days of tension, of sleeping next to her without being able to make love to her and touch her like this when it drove him to near madness, consumed him as he pushed into her over and over again in long, deep, strokes. He supported his weight on his arms, looking down at her as her breasts danced beneath him with the force of his thrusts.

Gods he loved her breasts! They were heavy and round in his palm – a thick mouthful. Watching them rock erotically in time to his movements made his mouth water and he shifted his weight to his elbows to get closer to them. The movement caused him to push into her at an angle and Ariaah gasped loudly beneath him. His eyes widened. He thought he'd hurt her until she moaned his name with a plea, "Again!"

Shifting his hips, he continued to push into her at the same angle and as he did so, she grew even more wet, her pants and moans increasing, spurring on the rhythm of his movements until he felt himself building to a climax, his balls tightening and drawing in close to his body.

"I'm," she gasped, "I'm going to..."

Norrik fought to hang on, but if she didn't come soon, he didn't know if he could last much longer. Again he pushed hard and deep into her at the special angle and she cried out her pleasure.

Ariah knew now what the sensation building up low in her belly meant and she savored it as Norrik rammed himself into her. She thought it would hurt to have him make love to her so violently but it didn't. In fact, it felt incredible and she urged him deeper, harder, hoping that her cries, her moans, could communicate her needs.

She was so close to that ... feeling now and she sank her nails into his forearms as she looked up at him with lust-heavy eyes. He was so deep she thought he'd plow himself up her body and into her chest where her heart beat frantically, like a caged bird desperate to fly away.

"Please Norrik," she cried just as that crest crashed over and she felt her body convulse, sending her upper body shooting off of the bed into him and her own knees, still positioned over his shoulders.

He exploded in her then with another thrust and continued to drive himself in and out of her body as she felt her muscles contract around him, milking him. He was scalding and the sensation of it made her whimper until he finally stilled, resting fully on top of her.

Gently lowering her legs from his shoulders, Norrik kissed her deeply and she noticed for the first time, a pale blue light shining weakly beneath their skin. She marveled at how energized she felt, how completely alive her body felt when she should be exhausted – sated but exhausted.

"Norrik," Ariah whispered, the weight of him crushing her so that breathing was difficult.

Apparently sensing the problem, he kissed her as he rolled them to their sides but remained embedded inside of her. His hand massaged her hip, dipping to caress the curve of her ass and follow down the length of her thigh where it rested atop of his hip.

"Feel better?" he asked quietly.

"Mmm," she began, smiling lazily, her eyes nearly closed, "much, much, much better."

"Good. I make house calls, cabin calls, hell, you call and I'll answer." He smiled.

Ariah's burst of energy faded with the mysterious blue light and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to sleep with him still buried deep within her body. Sleep and contact, that was what she needed, she thought as her eyes drifted shut.

She felt Norrik stir but she gripped him tightly to her, not wanting him to slip from her body as he slowly softened.

"No," she sighed tiredly with her ear over his heart, "stay here. Stay with me Norrik, just like this."

He pulled the covers over them and wrapped an arm around her, pressing her closer to him then. Placing a soft kiss on the top of her head, he cradled it to his chest and stroked her hair.

\* \* \* \*

"Forgive me general," Captain Berell cocked half a smile at him, "but that must have been one hell of a lunch break. You were gone for," he paused to check the time, "two hours. Is Miss Hollis well?"

"Yes, very, very well ... now," Norrik replied, unable to hide his grin as he returned to the captain's quarters to continue planning their course of action once they reached Usal.

Captain Berell's smile softened and slowly faded. "Chabot's team recovered a message."

"And what message was that?" Norrik asked, as he helped himself to a small glass of Earth scotch from the captain's bar.

"You mentioned, in your briefing to the council, that Miss Hollis took you on a tour of the plant where she worked."

"Among other things I mentioned, yes," he answered.

"There was an item they had in prototype production that interested you, a cube?"

Norrik took a seat at the small charting table where Captain Berell stood. "It was all in the report. I believe you received a condensed version of that. What does this have to do with our little information parasite, the reever?"

"According to the message Chabot's team intercepted, someone on board this ship has not only stolen one of those cubes but has smuggled it onto this ship. The message included an encoded delivery time."

"Yamao and Dertz intercepted that same message days ago while I was still on Earth," Norrik replied, taking another sip of the scotch, "that, too, was in my report. However the exact content of the message wasn't in the non-council version."

The captain took the seat across the table from him then. Every year of service to Balton seemed carved into Berell's face, every journey winding a white path through his dark hair. Leaning forward on his elbows, Captain Berell clasped his hands together with a tired sigh. "I need to know everything that damned box is capable of and what that means to this ship and my crew, General."

Norrik looked across the room for a moment before meeting the man's gaze. Captain Berell had been a mentor to him of sorts while serving the Balton government before he was recruited by the Federation. The man might not have known every person on board but he sure tried and he damned well cared about what happened to them while they were under his command. There was only one person on board besides perhaps the person who smuggled the cube that could answer Berell's question, but Norrik didn't want any suspicion aimed in that particular direction.

"I believe that is a question for Miss Hollis," he finally answered, "but let me assure you Berell, she had nothing to do with this."

"Is that your fully professional, fully objective opinion?" the captain asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Norrik replied flatly, "it is."

"Very well." Berell sighed with fatigue. "We will arrive at the Usal port in a matter of hours, but I assume the council members who are still on board would like to question her as much as I do about the dangerous capabilities of this cube before then. Please, ask Miss Hollis if she would join us in the large conference room on this deck in an hour."

Norrik stood. "Very well. We will meet you there within an hour. But make no mistakes captain, she is not a suspect."

Captain Berell hesitated for a moment before nodding his understanding. With that, Norrik left the room to return to Aariah in less time, but also in less enjoyable circumstances, than he had hoped for.

\* \* \* \*

Aariah sat on the edge of the bed, her elbows on her knees and her head propped in her hands as Norrik towered over her.

"I already told you, I can't remember all that crap," she moaned. "I never thought I'd have to give a damned recital of the PR information for a client, let alone a table full of Federation council members."

Squatting in front of her, Norrik placed his hands on hers and Ariaah lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You are the only person on this ship, besides perhaps the very person who brought it on board, that might have any real grasp as to what this thing is capable of or why anyone might want to steal it. Anything you can tell them about it is valuable.”

She looked into those lush green eyes that were so sure that whatever she could remember was important, that seemed to care for her at least a little.

“Alright, but if they don’t learn anything, don’t blame me.”

Norrik leaned forward and placed a quick kiss on her lips before standing and pulling her to her feet.



## Chapter Nine

Ariah recited the PR packet about the cube she'd been given to memorize months ago to perfection, thank you very much. But when she expected them to dismiss her when she was done, they began firing a variety of questions at her. *How does it work? When were the permits filed with the Federation? How many finished prototypes are in existence? Can it replicate atmospheres it hasn't been exposed to?* It was the last one, which raised the tension in the room to an uncomfortable level, that made Ariah close to squeamish as they forgot her momentarily once she'd told them that there were indeed a few presets. It was the news that two of those presets just happened to be 'Black Hole' and 'Worm Hole' which seemed to scare everyone shitless.

Norrik came to her rescue after a few minutes and asked the council members if they were finished questioning her for the time being and if he could take her back to their room. She nearly planted a big wet kiss on him at that moment, she was so eager to get out of there. The air positively vibrated with power with so many Federation big shots in the room and it gave her a headache just listening to them talk about codes and laws, treaty violations, and a million and one other things she didn't understand.

They walked back to their quarters in silence. Ariah assumed Norrik was still thinking about everything they'd been discussing so when she walked through the door to their rooms and he followed and sat down on the bed to pull off his boots, she was surprised.

"I thought you were going to go back," she stated as she looked down at him where he sat.

Running a hand over his face, he stopped to look back at her. "No. This is now a matter for the council to debate. When they decide on a course of action, then I'll be responsible for carrying it out, but not until then." He looked at her with neutral eyes at that point. "Do you want me to go back?"

"No." She shook her head before pulling at her bottom lip with her teeth. Her voice grew softer as she added, "Will you stay here?"

He smiled at her faintly then and reached for her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "If you promise not to throw me in the corner on my side of the room with all the other crap."

"No, my stuff stays on this side." As soon as the words left her mouth Ariah wished for them back. He wasn't hers. She'd told him that very morning that he had no obligations to her for god's sake.

The motion of Norrik's thumb paused over her knuckles as he looked up at her, silently exploring her face. She blinked at him, wide-eyed, not knowing what to say but in one fluid movement he'd pulled her close and rolled her on the bed beneath him. His lips claimed hers in a bruising kiss that sucked the air from her lungs as he pushed his tongue past her teeth to swirl it in a dance with hers. Ariah kissed him back, swallowing down her doubts and worries about what the future might hold, about the day she would see him for the last time, touch him for the last time.

Norrik stilled suddenly and lifted his head to look down at her, brushing the hair from her face. His eyes seemed to search her soul and she fought to keep those thoughts from the foreground of her mind where he might be able to pick up on them. Hoping to distract him, Ariaiah sat up. Norrik frowned until she reached for her zipper and pushed it down to her hips. Following her, Norrik stood from the bed and stripped completely. He leaned over her then and helped her do the same, grabbing the material at her hips and pulling it the rest of the way down her body in a quick move that brought her to the edge of the mattress.

His eyes lowered and the dark green of his irises seemed to be swallowed as lust dilated the pupils. He looked over her body as though drinking in the very sight of her in long, languorous movements as he stood nude and proud before her, his sex swelling thick and hard with his desire. Ariaiah made to cover herself, but he grabbed her wrists and pulled her to her feet in front of him. He continued to allow his gaze to roam over her, each pass making her shiver as though it carried a physical caress.

"Get on your knees." His voice was thick and low as it rumbled over her skin.

He released her hands and Ariaiah slowly sank to her knees, eye level with his shaft so that she could see the detailed marbling of veins around it. She licked her lips as she looked at the swollen head. It was the size of a small plumb and she wondered if it would taste as sweet.

"Oh, not tonight," he answered with a sultry smile. "I've got other plans. Turn around and lean over the bed."

Ariaiah did what he asked but had no real idea what she was doing. She kneeled beside the bed and placed her hands on the edge, waiting for further instruction when she felt him kneel between her ankles and walk forward on his knees so that she was forced to part her legs a few more inches. He leaned over her then, a warm breath on her neck.

"Bend over," he breathed.

"What?" she whispered, barely able to think with him acting like this but scared she'd ruin the moment with the question.

"Bend," he repeated in a sharp whisper as he grabbed her hips and pulled her body back the few inches that separated them so that she could feel his cock digging into the small of her back, "over," he finished, placing a large warm hand between her shoulder blades and pushing the front of her body towards the bed. The movements bent her at a forty-five degree angle, her elbows digging into the edge of the mattress. Norrik's hand followed the line of her spine, applying pressure to it so that her back arched and her ass was tilted in the air towards him in a wanton offering.

She looked at him over her shoulder. He sat back on his heels, his attention focused on the soft round cheeks of her butt and his hands trailed down the curve with hungry appreciation. He stroked her ass with firm hands, gripping the flesh in his hands in a nearly painful move that made Ariaiah moan and moisture fill her sex.

"Perfect," he whispered reverently, his eyes still fixated on the soft, firm flesh in front of him and he lifted up on his knees again.

Ariaiah pushed back against him and he smacked one of her ass cheeks in a quick slap that was too hard to be teasing but not hard enough to really hurt.

"I love your ass," he growled, "and I'm going to take my time with it." He'd barely finished when she felt him pull away from her slightly right before teeth sank into the meat of her right buttock.

She let out a low scream that turned into a moan when his bite softened and he began to suck on the offended flesh, licking it slowly in deliberate swirling circles. He continued to lave

the area, occasionally placing a soft kiss on it as his other hand trailed up the inside of her thigh and down again, up and down, up and down, repeatedly going painfully close to the area most desperate for his attention but never touching it.

Ariah arched her back deeper, tilting her hips more and opening herself wider in invitation. Shifting his mouth to the other cheek, Norrik trailed a finger down her spine slowly and traced the line between the globes of her buttocks. His fingers lingered there at her core and Ariah thought she would scream in frustration until he suddenly slipped a finger deep inside of her, pulling a gasp from her chest.

She leaned back on his finger and he held still. When he still did not move, she rocked forward and then back again down the length of his finger. She continued to pump his finger but hesitated slightly when she felt him add another finger. Slowly she worked them both into her body without his help.

Ariah moved a hand off of the bed so that she could touch the bud of her clit, but he grabbed her hand and trapped it on the mattress, the movement bending his body over hers.

"No," he breathed in her ear as he bound her hands together in one of his. His free hand glided softly down her ribs and over the curve of her hip. Ariah whimpered when he paused and he nipped her earlobe in reply. The press of his erection, hot and hard between her buttocks was torture and she fought his hold on her hands. He then continued the progress of his other hand until his thumb was buried between the fold of her pussy, over her clit.

"Please, Norrik," Ariah panted, desperation filling her voice, "stop teasing me."

His thumb then began to work around her clit in slow, hard circles and Norrik pressed his body against hers rhythmically, continuing his wicked game without the pleasure of penetration.

She was on the verge of climax when he pulled back. Ariah wanted to cry until finally, he pushed his shaft deep inside of her, instantly triggering her orgasm.

"I don't," he panted, "want to hurt you."

"You won't," she cried, "please."

Norrik pulled out as again she spasmed around him. Her muscles clung tightly as he pushed in and out of her in long deep caresses. Groaning deep in his chest, he held off his own release even as her body quieted. He continued, gaining speed when his strokes became shallower and the force of his movements smacked his testicles hard against her in an erotic cadence.

Ariah felt the pressure building again deep inside of her, more quickly this time. Norrik paused to lick a line up her spine, finally biting her shoulder before he picked up his pace once again.

"Now, Ariah, now!" he shouted. And, as if her body could not help but obey him, she climaxed a second time. The muscles of her sex clutched painfully around him, tighter than ever before, like a pulsing fist as he slipped though the moisture in her channel and Norrik burst inside of her with a roar. His strokes slowed as his hands began to caress her back tenderly, worshipfully until finally he wrapped an arm around the front of her hips and sat back on his heels, pulling her with him and keeping him inside of her.

Norrik wrapped his other arm around her stomach, and settled her against the sculpted planes of his chest. Leaning down to place a kiss over the earlobe he'd nipped earlier, he whispered with a voice that was hoarse.

"Thank you, *kirja*, thank you."

"No problem," she smiled lethargically, "this time I get to be in control."

"*Kirja*, you already are."



## Chapter Ten

Dr. Ribaldi, left the examination room with the small vile of blood, casting them a smile as he did. Turning her reddened face away from Norrik, Aariah crossed her arms over her chest, feeling demoralized after the exam Norrik had insisted on the moment they awoke.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"No," she lied. Nervous was hardly the word. She was torn, hoping that she hadn't lost the ova and she was pregnant, yet terrified that she was.

Wrapping his arms around her, Norrik pulled her from the examination table in a deep embrace. "We can always try again if it's negative, we have another day by the doctor's calculations. I don't mind. I love a challenge." He smiled.

Aariah paled. This was ridiculous. She had no idea why this man would not only want to have sex with her ... more than once, but why he kept calling her his *mate* and was actually hoping she'd be pregnant.

The arms around her stiffened momentarily before, Norrik took a step back to look at her face. A scowl soon wore its way onto his face.

"What?" she asked defensively.

"Of course I hope you are with child," he replied, as though a part of her internal conversation.

"Excuse me?"

"You are my mate, Aariah. The twaining sphere proves that, and why shouldn't I desire a child with you?"

"How did you ...?" Aariah gaped. "I didn't— what the hell is going on?"

"What?"

"How is it that you just *happened* to reply to my thoughts?" she answered accusingly. "How did you even know the very words I was using?"

"Your thoughts? I didn't ...." Norrik stopped, sudden understanding creeping across his face. "The twaining sphere."

"What about it?"

"It must have opened your mind for me," he responded, his gaze searching her features as though trying to read a road map.

Aariah pushed out of his grasp. "I beg your pardon, but if you can read my thoughts then why can't I read yours?" Aariah pushed out of his grasp.

"Try. Just concentrate on me. Tell me what you find."

Studying his face guardedly, Aariah looked into his eyes. It was as though she were listening in to one end of a communicator conversation and her ears felt pressurized, like when she used to dive into the very deepest part of a pool when she was little.

Jumping back from him, Aariah gasped.

"You're a pervert!" she replied shaking a finger at him.

Smiling devilishly with a quirk of his eyebrows, he stalked toward her. "You've no idea. I can't help it, you're corrupting me."

Placing a hand on his chest to stop his crowding, Ariaiah startled at the lazy caress of his fingers as he traced the insides of her own on the hand she had spread above his heart. "But why telepathy? Does that always happen?"

"I don't know." He sobered, pausing the motion of his fingers. "My parents are truly twained but not many Baltons are these days. I am amazed that I was able to twain and, particularly so, with an Earthling. I've heard of a heightened knowledge of your mate's emotions but to be honest, I didn't know it was possible."

"Why *particularly so* with an Earthling?" she asked, her eyes narrowing as she removed her hand from him, awaiting his reply.

Clasping his wrist with his other hand, Norrik exhaled deeply and turned to lean a hip against the examination table at her back. "I supposed I just assumed that it wasn't possible, as twaining is so exceptional even between Baltons."

Ariaiah rolled his answer around on her tongue like a fine wine. "OK, so it is uncommon for couples to ...."

"Twain," Norrik offered.

"To twain. But I just don't understand why you're so anxious to get me knocked up."

Norrik grinned and dropped his head, shaking it tiredly before lifting it again to look at her. "Oh my little *kirja*, do you not?"

"No, that's why I'm asking. And what does *kirja* mean? You keep saying that and I don't know what it means. I've never heard that word before."

"If you have to ask then I'm obviously not doing something right."

"You still haven't answered me," she continued, dismissing his cryptic answer. "Why do you want to get me pregnant?"

He smiled beautifully at her and she was about to repeat her question when the door to the small examination room slid open.

Dr. Ribaldi had a cocktail of expressions running across his face. A jumble of emotion iced through her blood and suddenly Ariaiah felt cold. What little of her courage she had began to pale the longer he kept them waiting for the news of his findings. Norrik moved closer, her shoulder brushing his upper arm and she began to feel better with his touch. When he took her hand in his, raising it to his mouth to lay a brief kiss upon the inside of her wrist, Ariaiah turned to look at his calm face.

In that moment, she realized it was more than telepathy or the knowledge of one's *mate's* feelings, it was as though Norrik could anticipate what she needed a moment before she herself could—that he'd known she would need the added comfort and provided it the moment that need arose.

"Hmm," Dr. Ribaldi began, "I don't know how to explain this so I suppose I'll just tell you what I know." He paused momentarily to pinch the bridge of his nose in an odd, forceful gesture. "I cannot tell if you are pregnant or not. All the tests came back inconclusive."

"What exactly does that mean?" Norrik asked, stroking her knuckle absently.

"Inconclusive?" Ariaiah repeated.

"She has raised levels of progesterone," the doctor replied addressing Norrik, "but our tests were unable to detect anything for certain beyond that."

Continuing to stroke her hand with his thumb, Norrik asked, "Why do you believe there wasn't a clear result?"

"There are a few variables that my colleagues and I have considered such as atmospheric change, the impact of a Balton twaining sphere during conception, her medical history – we certainly haven't discounted stress due to her new *circumstances*."

Norrik furrowed his brow. "New circumstances?"

"Well, Miss Hollis might consider finding herself suddenly twain rather *overwhelming*, particularly considering that she was not in a relationship of any kind when she left Earth. I am sure the emotional shock of finding herself in a relationship as permanent as a twaining must have been quite a surprise"

"But beside the twaining and atmospheric change due to our travel, you already considered the other factors when you first told Ariaiah about her circumstances, didn't you?"

Ariaiah stiffened as she'd watched Norrik and the doctor discuss her as though she were in another room or unable to understand what they were talking about. Dr. Ribaldi had inhaled to answer Norrik but she cut him off with an angry stamp of her foot.

"Excuse me for interrupting, but you're talking about *my* body here. The least you could do is address me while you're doing it!"

Dr. Ribaldi looked surprised, as though just realizing she was still in the room, and Norrik began to laugh quietly.

"I don't know what you think is so funny," she snapped, crossing her arms under her breasts, "but where I'm from, it's considered rude to talk about someone as though they're not there."

"My apologies, Miss Hollis," Dr. Ribaldi began as he played with the small chart reader in his hands nervously. "I assure you, I meant no disrespect. Forgive me, but I have been reporting your medical information to General Farvish for so long now that it became habit to discuss you in such a way. Terribly sorry."

Ariaiah fumed, still angry with the news that Norrik had given her only a few days ago that he'd paid all of her doctors to spy on her and report her *medical information* to him as Dr. Ribaldi had for the past several years, even before she was revived from the pod. Turning her irritation to look at the general, Ariaiah narrowed her eyes on him.

"Well?" she demanded.

Norrik gave her a crooked grin, his handsome face set in perfect ease and good humor which only worsened her mood. He wouldn't even answer her and worst of all her anger seemed to amuse him to the point that he began to laugh out loud. Ariaiah and Dr. Ribaldi exchanged a glance but when she turned her attention back to Norrik, tears of laughter began running down his face.

"What the hell is your problem?" she hissed at him.

She'd had enough of people finding their amusement at her expense to last a lifetime, thank you very much, and that he continued to laugh when she was not amused suddenly flared her anger to a boiling point. Before she even realized what she was doing, her fist made contact with his face in a meaty thud, causing him not only to shut up but to slide down the side of the examination table and pool at Ariaiah and the doctor's feet.

"You hit him!" Dr. Ribaldi breathed in amazement before bending over to assist Norrik up.

Ariaiah crossed her arms under her breasts with a heated exhale after shaking out the sting in her hand. "At least he shut up," she huffed.

Norrik smiled at her through a steadily swelling cheek as he stood. "Well doctor, if you and your colleagues had any doubt that she is pregnant you needn't have any now. My little Aariah has just exhibited the first sign of pregnancy for a Balton female."

"What?" she exclaimed.

Gathering her in his arms, Norrik kissed her solidly. "Irritability coupled with added strength."

Aariah pushed at his chest and leaned back from his embrace in order to cast him a suspicious glance. "What do you mean *added strength*? How do you know I couldn't deck you like that everyday?"

Kissing her on the forehead, he grinned but the movement made him wince and he removed one of his arms from behind her back to gently explore the offended area on his face. "Perhaps you could, but I think I would have seen it coming any other day. I didn't get to be a general in the Federation by having poor reflexes."

"That still doesn't mean I'm pregnant." She frowned irritably.

"No, no. I believe the general may have a point. Perhaps your enhanced reflexes and added strength, as well as your, forgive me ..." He grimaced apologetically at her. "*Irritability* are indeed signs of pregnancy. They are, after all, all signs of pregnancy for Balton women. Maybe the twining between yourself and General Farvish is creating affects in your body as though you were a Balton female rather than an Earth female."

"Did you conduct tests that would take that into consideration?" Norrik asked over the top of her head when he pulled her back to his chest.

"No. To be frank, we hadn't even considered that a possibility. If I may, I would like to do that now Miss Hollis," he ended and made a point to look directly at Aariah so that she was sure to notice he asked for her permission and not the general's, probably more afraid of getting his lights punched out than of offending her.

"Yeah, alright." She exhaled tiredly.

Without another word, the doctor left the room. Norrik began passing his hands soothingly over her back while he still held her to his chest and she sank tiredly against the warmth of his body, suddenly very tired – most likely from their long night of experimental love-making.

"Are you alright?" he asked quietly a few moments after the doctor left.

Aariah blushed, turning her face into his chest. "I might ask the same of you. I didn't mean to hit you. I'm sorry."

"I deserved it," he replied with a shrug.

Aariah lifted her head to look at him and the mess she'd made of his perfect profile. "What?"

"I had a hunch that you might be showing more Balton than Earth signs so I sort of ... antagonized you on purpose."

Leaning back from him again, she cocked her head to one side. "You pissed me off on purpose just to see if I could beat the shit out of you?"

"Don't flatter yourself," he replied wryly with a trace of a smile. "It was a hell of a punch but not exactly a beating."

"Don't push it." She frowned.

"Oh I won't, at least not for the first cycle of your pregnancy."

Snuggling back into his arms, Aariah yawned. "Cycle? Is that like a trimester?"



Norrik hugged her to him for a moment, thinking before he answered. "I suppose so. Balton women go through five cycles before the baby is born."

"Five?" Aria's voice cracked with panic. "How long is a cycle?"

"Don't worry, the pregnancy is just shy of nine months. Each cycle is little more than a month. Many Balton women say the first cycle is the worst. You can always tell when a Balton's mate is breeding." He smiled down at her. "He looks like shit and comes up with new bruises every other day. You can slug me anytime."

Aria moaned against his chest. "But why hitting and irritability of all things?"

"Hey, they don't complain and neither will I."

Lifting her head, Aria looked at him curiously. "Why?"

He grinned down at her then with that predatory look which was becoming so familiar to her now. "Because they say the sex during pregnancy is incredible."

Aria's face dropped. "Oh."

Norrik was laughing loudly even when Dr. Ribaldi came back into the room several minutes later with the lab technician and another pregnancy test, this one tailored to Balton women. The doctor looked at Aria for an explanation but she shook her head, unable to offer any.

God her life had changed in the last week.

\* \* \* \*

Norrik hadn't let go of her hand since they'd left the medi-deck with yet another inconclusive test and he'd started dragging her toward the closest dining cluster as she was not only distracted by the doctor's news but also found it difficult to walk in the three inch heeled boots she'd been given with the white jumpsuit that belted around her hips and zipped up the front (a feature Norrik was especially fond of for quick access). It was the first time since she'd been brought aboard that she'd been able to walk around and see what sights the ship, virtually the size of Rhode Island, had to offer but she was too preoccupied with the odd test results to so much as look around.

Norrik, of course, was happily accepting his self-declared diagnosis that she was pregnant but how he could be so sure when neither of the tests came back clear, Aria didn't know. Dr. Ribaldi told them, when he came back with the second set of test results, that perhaps the tests were just too rigid to take in the possibility that one of the would-be-parents was a Balton and the other was an Earthling. The doctor had tried to smile at her but the gesture failed with the puzzlement and worry that was apparent in his eyes.

It wasn't like she was the first Earth woman to get pregnant (if she indeed was pregnant) by a Balton male. Humanoids throughout the Federation had been interbreeding for at least fifty years, so what made her so *special*?

"Chip for your thoughts?" Norrik asked with a quick squeeze of her hand as they rounded a corner into a spacious corridor decorated only with advertisements for the various restaurants up ahead.

"Can't you just read them yourself?" she sulked as she lagged behind, being pulled like a foot-dragging child.

Norrik stopped and Aria nearly plowed into him. Looking up at him, her petulance melted at his concern. "I thought you might like some privacy in there," he replied with a gentle tap of his index finger on her temple, "so I asked."

Ariah sighed, cocking her head to the side and ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm just tired," she answered, her reply followed by a large growl from her tummy. The volume of it made her jump and Norrik smiled teasingly down at her.

"It would appear you're more than tired. Let's get some lunch and head back to our quarters. I have another meeting with the council this afternoon, but I've got enough time to see you fed and tucked in for an afternoon nap before I have to meet with them."

"Alright," she agreed, letting him pull her through the corridor to a cluster of restaurants.

She hadn't realized just how hungry she was until the smells of various foods wafted her way. They seemed to energize her and she was soon pulling Norrik along.

"Slow down Ariah. They're not going to run out before we get there," Norrik said, chuckling.

"I'm hungry."

"Yes, I'm sure you are but if they see me run in there it could cause a panic," he replied soberly.

Ariah paused her pulling. "Don't you run anywhere?"

"Outside of an emergency, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Not unless I'm on the recreation deck. With this many agents, Balton soldiers, and Federation personnel it would not be a good idea to run into any room unless I had a very good reason for it." He took her hand out of his and instead, hooked her arm through his before calmly leading them towards the cluster. "Now what would you like to eat?"

"General," purred a woman behind them, causing Ariah to stop suddenly and face the long-legged woman with dark red hair trailing past her hips in a swaying curtain. "I was hoping I might have the pleasure ... of your company before the meeting with the council."

Norrik turned. "Now is not the best time Agent Poema."

Agent Poema's mouth curled down in a sultry pout. "But I haven't gotten any alone time with you since you got back. And there's so much I would like to ... discuss with you." Her pout turned into a lazy smile.

"I'm sure I know what you want to discuss, but doing so in the corridor outside of a dining cluster isn't the best idea," he replied.

"You're right. You know I've never been into public displays and declarations."

Norrik hooded his eyes. "No, not unless you were ordered to."

The agent smiled more brightly then. "Yes, I am very good at taking orders from you, Norrik."

Exhaling tiredly, he crossed his arms over his chest, forgetting Ariah's arm was still laced through his and squeezing it painful by accident in the motion.

Ariah dropped her arm from Norrik's and he cast a brief questioning glance at her before the long-legged agent stepped closer. Fight or flight was clawing its way up Ariah's throat and after the damage she'd done to Norrik's cheek earlier that morning she figured the latter was the safer response.

Poema frowned moving yet closer so that she could trace a finger over his swollen cheek. "Norrik, what in the Federation happened to you?"

That was it, Ariah couldn't stand there a moment longer being ignored by Agent T&A without introducing her fist to the woman's teeth. What was worse was that Norrik barely even acknowledged her as the other woman flaunted herself in front of him. Though she'd hate herself later for it, though she'd kick herself for being a coward ... Flight it was!

Turning abruptly, Ariaah started for the cluster of restaurants, but as she approached them she found she'd lost her appetite and made quick b-line for one of the nondescript hallways to the side. She'd barely walked a few feet into it when she heard Norrik run up behind her.

"Ariaah, where are you going? The restaurants are behind you."

"I thought you didn't want to run, unless you were on the recreation deck," Ariaah replied coolly

"What about lunch?"

"I'm not very hungry," she answered in a tone that should be award-winning for its utter lack of emotion.

"Stop Ariaah. You're going to make me put everyone in the dining area in a frenzy at the sight of me running." He smiled.

Stopping so he could catch up to her she forced herself to meet his eyes.

"Ariaah, what's the matter? Are you ill? Do you want me to order something for us and have it delivered to our quarters?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled slowly. "I'm not feeling very well Norrik. Please just take me home."

He shrugged, concern creasing his brow, "Alright, let's go back to our quarters."

She shook her head. "No Norrik, home, *my* home. I don't understand why I'm here and you still haven't told me. I don't expect anything from you. I mean if there really is a baby ...." Ariaah paused as a small group of women walked by on their way to the dining cluster, consumed in their own conversation. "You don't have to worry about it. I'll be fine. We'll be fine."

Norrik's features furrowed deeper into a scowl and he pulled her into a small, abandoned side hall as another group came toward them.

"You were fine a minute ago. What happened? Is this some pregnancy mood swing thing I don't know about? Talk to me."

Ariaah shook her head again and closed her eyes. "Just take me to your quarters, for now, please."

Norrik stared down at her for a moment before placing his hands on her shoulders and laying a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Alright, I don't understand you all the time, but the gods know I try."

Ariaah began walking back to the main hall without him when he added quietly, "I try."

## Chapter Eleven

The walk back to their quarters was virtually silent, except for the occasional greeting Norrik returned when they were met by those who knew him well enough to say hello as they passed them in the halls.

When they arrived back in their quarters, Ariaiah sat down on the bed and took off her boots before laying down on the bed, rolling away from him on her side. Norrik, too, removed his shoes and took off the top of his two piece uniform as he looked at her small form huddled on the mattress. Grabbing an extra blanket from the small linen cupboard, he draped it over her and sat next to her.

He began stroking her hair. "If this has anything to do with Agent Poema, I can assure you that you've nothing to fear."

That certainly got her attention. Ariaiah turned her head on the pillow to look at him.

"It is." He marveled, unable to understand exactly why Ariaiah would be worried about the woman. "Ariaiah, *kirja*," he continued, placing a hand on her hip, "Agent Poema is trying to get promoted, and she thinks that by offering me or any other commanding officer sex, she'll get it."

She continued to look at him from where she lay on the bed but sadness crept into her lovely dark blue eyes. "You were lovers."

"No, actually, we weren't. We've taken a few assignments together over the years where we played the part of lovers, but we weren't. I never had sex with her, if that means anything to you."

"Truly?" she narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"General's honor." He smiled as he made a crossing gesture over his heart.

"Good." She frowned. "I didn't like her."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Sniffing her nose snobbishly, Ariaiah raised her chin at him. "She reeks of desperation."

Norrik laughed out right and bent over her for a kiss. "Well, if you're still not hungry do you mind if I collect my dues?"

"Dues?" she frowned in question.

"Yes, I believe you owe me incredible sex, for this incredible shiner I'm sporting." He smiled as he pointed to his bruised cheek.

Ariaiah winced. "I really am sorry about that."

He raised his eyebrows at her, "I'm not. It is my free admission to your bed and your good graces after all."

"You don't need to let me belt you for that." She blushed.

"No?" He grinned. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Oh shut up and kiss me. You talk too much."

\* \* \* \*

"You can't fire me Mr. Brier," Ariaiah droned on again for what must have been the fourth time in as many minutes.

"You abandoned your job Hollis. According to company policy abandonment is grounds for termination," he hissed in reply

"Mr. Brier, my doctors sent you my medical leave request forms. Personnel approved the emergency leave so therefore my job is still *my* job."

It had been Norrik's suggestion to call this horrible man but of course, now that she was on the communicator, Norrik was no where around to deal with him. He'd convinced her to call and try to fish for information regarding the cube, but so far she hadn't even gotten past the point of Mr. Brier being able to accept that she was suddenly on emergency medical leave. She wasn't about to tell the man on the other side of the communicator screen what had qualified her for the emergency leave, however. That was entirely too personal.

She'd been assured by both Norrik and the company's personnel executive that she most certainly did still have employment. Norrik had somberly pointed out that they wouldn't dare consider canning the one survivor of the attack on Ju Vonice who'd only just come back into the embrace of their ranks. He hadn't been able to meet her eyes when he explained why her company would be so hesitant to fire her, but the guilt he still carried for his involvement in the attack which killed so many innocent people and left her injured still hung like a heavy cloak over his shoulders.

"Don't take that tone with me Hollis, there are plenty of people who are far more qualified, not to mention *accommodating*," he threatened.

"And what the fuck, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

There was a pause on the other end of the connection that virtually crackled with regret. Aariah was afraid she already knew exactly what the slime ball was talking about. Oh, Mr. Brier would regret that comment, yes he would.

"I mean to say, Miss Hollis, that I have already had inquiries from people about your job," he returned with a bit more force in his usually officious tone,

"From whom?"

"Mitch Jones happens to have a very qualified friend who ...."

"Well then, too bad you'll just have to inform Mr. Jones' little friend that you don't have an opening, and to look elsewhere," Aariah interrupted.

"I know that Personnel says, Hollis," he breathed dangerously, leaning in towards the communicator screen so that she could see the twitch under his left eye flutter irritably, "that because you survived some god damned attack, you're home free and can't loose your job. Well, when you come back from your *leave* if I don't see some serious improvement in your attitude perhaps I'll just have to enlighten them as to all the complaints you've gotten from clients since you've come back to work."

Aariah crossed her arms under her chest and leaned back in her chair. "A) Those weren't my clients Mr. Brier. They were Aimison's and B) that was my first week back. Personnel won't consider that. Sorry."

Mr. Brier inhaled to retaliate but Aariah threw all caution to the wind and interrupted him. "So I heard one of the cube prototypes was stolen."

That took the wind out of his sails as he exhaled noisily. Furrowing his brows, Brier eyed her suspiciously. "Where would you get that idea, Miss Hollis?"

"It's all over the Federation," she lied with a mocking laugh. "Don't play coy. It really isn't becoming."

The communicator screen flickered, distorting Mr. Brier's angry features. But there was more than anger in the look he sent her from her home planet. Fear or panic danced behind his eyes like a bird sitting on a wind-shaken branch. "This is precisely the kind of attitude that needs

adjusting, Hollis. If you have any desire to *remain* employed I suggest you adjust it or don't bother coming back."

"So, how'd somebody sneak a cube out from under your nose?" Aariah continued, ignoring the warning in his voice.

"It's nothing but a rumor. This conversation is over."

Before Aariah could argue, the screen went blank and the access disk popped out of the machine with a chirp, signaling that the connection had been severed.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled the disk which authorized her to make the interplanetary call out of the communicator and sat back in her chair, tapping the small disk against her cheek as she thought not so much about what he'd said but more about how he had looked when she'd mentioned the cube. Fear. Mr. Brier knew something or if nothing else, he suspected something.

But if the cube was as potentially dangerous as the council members seemed to think, why hadn't the company told them they suspected one was missing? Barry Brier sure as hell knew it was gone and any shock she'd seen on his face when she'd mentioned it had been caused by the fact that *she'd* known it was gone. Aariah could sense his anxiety at the thought that, if what she'd told him was true, and half the Federation already knew about its disappearance, then the shit would hit the fan. What she wanted to know was just how close Mr. Brier was to that fan.

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you, nurse, that will be all for today," Dr. Ribaldi smiled absently as he continued to look over a few intergalactic medical journals before retiring for the afternoon to his quarters. He'd been quite puzzled over Miss Hollis' lab results, still reluctant to diagnose her as officially pregnant regardless of the general's assurance that she was.

Nurse Collack closed the door behind her, on her way to meet some friends for a late lunch at one of the restaurant corridors on that deck. Grateful for the solitude that would allow him to concentrate more fully on Miss Hollis' file, he turned from his journals to hold one of the celluloid scans up to the light on his desk. It was that odd little mass in her right ovary that kept bothering him. He'd first noticed it when she was about a year into stasis and it had bothered him then, too, but now, with the possibility of a pregnancy, Dr. Ribaldi felt even more compelled to determine what exactly it was.

He squinted at the scan, adjusting the glasses on his nose before giving up and sliding the scan into his desktop reader. The readers on this ship were brand new, far better and more powerful than anything he'd ever used and he hoped that it's ability to find even the most minute details in scans would allow for some clarification on this mystery.

The image appeared instantly on his screen and the doctor typed in the command to magnify, repeatedly readjusting the area of focus whenever he asked it to magnify the mass. As the image grew larger on the screen, a feeling of unease crept over him. This was no cellular mass, it wasn't even organic.

Pushing his glasses up his nose, Dr. Ribaldi leaned closer to the scanner in an attempt to read the microscopic writing on the side of the foreign body lodged in Miss Hollis' ovary. He sucked in a breath with a hiss and leaned back again, shocked.

Just as he leaned back however, he felt the needle dig deep into the side of his neck.

"Tsk, tsk," came a voice through the haze of the drugs now rushing through his bloodstream, "no peeking."

With the doctor out cold, the intruder ejected the celluloid scan and gathered all the others from AriaH Hollis' file before making their silent way back out the office door.

\* \* \* \*

"Please councilors," Norrik pleaded again, "it is in the Federation's best interest. You cannot stay. If something were to happen on board this ship and any of you were injured ...."

"That is precisely why we must stay, general," Kut Bolk replied tiredly. "We are duty bound to act in the best interest of the Federation and if means that we place ourselves in harm's way, then so be it."

The members of the Federation council who sat around the ship were only a few who made up the large governing body, but it was more than the need to protect them as government officials which had prompted Norrik to attempt to convince them to flee. He'd known several of them for years, such as Senator Horwell who had helped him progress to his current rank, and he was concerned for their safety.

He'd already arranged for a micro-cruiser to be launched towards Usal. It was big enough to transport all of the council members as well as the handful of civilians aboard. But there was one civilian in particular that Norrik was anxious to see safely off the ship so she could wait for him at one of Usal's ports until he could return for her. The very thought of AriaH and the child he was certain she was carrying in danger was enough to push him again in the argument.

"Surely you agree that you and the civilians aboard should ...."

"The civilians, yes," Senator Horwell interrupted with his characteristic, quiet calm. "We do not dispute the need to evacuate civilians, General, but my fellow councilors and I will not leave."

Captain Berell looked at Norrik, capturing his attention. "If the councilors were to leave the ship before the negotiations are complete for Etheroc, the crew would grow suspicious."

"Very well." Norrik sighed.

"Come, General," Captain Berell said, "let us return to my cabin to arrange the departure of the micro-cruiser and allow the councilors to retire for the evening."

Gathering his things, Norrik followed the captain out of the room. He'd no sooner stepped into the corridor, however, when he felt an arm slip through his.

"Is it true? Will our councilors be leaving us so soon?" Agent Poema asked with a pout.

Casting her a glance, Norrik gently removed his arm from hers. "Nothing yet has been decided."

Captain Berell threw *him* a glance then.

"We will be transporting all civilians to Usal as soon as possible," Norrik added. "I will need your assistance in gathering them when the time comes."

Dropping the sex kitten act momentarily, Agent Poema nodded thoughtfully. "Of course."

When they'd reached the captain's quarters, Norrik and Berell left her standing in the corridor before shutting the door.

"You're quite the ladies' man, Farvish." Captain Berell smirked.

"Not that lady's man, however." Norrik dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. "She's a good agent and she's up for advancement. She believes that sort of behavior will put her in better standing with her superiors, which it won't, that's all."

"Hmm." Berell nodded thoughtfully before turning his attention to the ship's civilian list. "Including Miss Hollis, it appears we have twenty-three civilians on board. My own wife and

two of my children, Lieutenant Jersha's wife, an Invenian research team that's been with us for the past five rounds, and a few others who worked out transport with us through the Balton government or the Federation."

"Have you contacted the Usal port?"

"Yes, they're expecting the cruiser in the next couple of hours."

Norrik picked up a small round sphere of stone sitting on the captain's desk and tossed it in his hands as he paced the room listening.

"What news of the ship that was cloaked as we waited outside of Etheroc?"

Captain Berell sat on the edge of his desk, clasping his hands together. "No sign of it."

Pausing his actions, Norrik faced the captain. "You think it tailed us, don't you?"

Raising an eyebrow, the captain nodded. "I am certain of it. In my gut I know it's still with us even though we've no evidence and that alone makes me anxious to get my wife and kids, and all the other civilians, as far away from here as possible."

\* \* \* \*

Ariah had been asleep for hours before the sound of the cabin door sliding open filtered through dreams about cubes and Barry Brier. Norrik had been meeting with the council members, who were on board for the negotiations with some chancellor of a planet Ariah had never even heard of, about their current situation. As far as Ariah knew, they still hadn't informed the crew that a cube was possibly on the ship.

There was the shuffling of footsteps in the darkness of the room and then the door slid shut. Something felt odd. Deep in her gut a small seed of panic spun slowly. Turning towards the door, she listened to the footsteps approach the bed.

"Norrik?" she whispered to the darkness.

Silence.

"Norrik?" Ariah tried again, a bit louder.

"Sorry, sweetheart," a male voice cut through the dark, "but I'm afraid sleeping with the clients is against company policy."

Before Ariah could even inhale to scream, a hand clamped down over her mouth and pressed her head into the pillow as the man lay on top of her, kicking her panic up another notch. Struggling to free her arm to punch her attacker, Ariah jolted when she felt the prick of a needle in the side of her neck and a second pair of hands grab her wrists.

Her body started to still from the heavy fire of the drug pushing its way through her veins. With every beat of her heart, Ariah felt herself slipping into a darkness deeper than the one in the room. The hands and body used to subdue her, slowly lifted and when they were removed two voices flitted above her in a hush.

"Was that really necessary?" the man's voice hissed. "I thought we were just going to kill her and dump the body."

"And then how in gorza would we find out what she'd told the council?"

The second voice, female, seemed more irritated than anything but the man's voice seemed familiar. Ariah bobbed up and down through the surface of conscious thought as the two continued.

"Then what do expect to do with her?" the man asked. "I sure as hell am not going to haul her ass around until the drop off."

"You'll do what you're told to do. She's not to be harmed until we can retrieve the device."



A hand grabbed her chin roughly then as a light was shined into her partially hooded eyes. The sudden brightness in the dark of the room stung her eyes, but Ariaah was helpless, unable even to blink.

“She’s awake!”

Another hand, the woman’s Ariaah supposed, took her chin and turned her face to a second light. After a moment, the second hand dropped and the newest light was clicked off. “No, she’s out. Her motor function is zero. Close her eyes.”

The man slid her eyelids shut in a quick motion.

“Be gentle with our little sleeping beauty,” the woman added as the bed moved with the shift of someone standing from it, “she’s holding something very important for us. Keeping it nice and safe.” A hand pinched Ariaah’s cheek, then patted the offended flesh. “Aren’t you, sweetie?”

Masculine arms dug her out of the mattress and lifted her from the warm bed. “God she’s heavy for someone so little.”

“Shut up! Vem, I can’t wait to be rid of you. All you ever do is complain.”

Ariaah felt herself being carried towards the door when the woman spoke again. “Damned convenient that she shot out the security monitor.” The woman laughed quietly before smacking Ariaah’s ass as she lay limp over the man’s shoulder. “You couldn’t have made this much easier on me short of finding your way to the Corvan ship yourself.”

With that, Ariaah lost the fight for conscious thought and slid down the slippery slope of nothingness.

## Chapter Twelve

"Agent Poema," Norrik began over the speaker option on his communicator. "I've put the names and cabin numbers of all civilians in your file on the ship's system. Please begin escorting them to the shuttle waiting room on deck 15."

"All of the civilians, General?" she asked.

Norrik leaned against the captain's desk. "Yes."

He could hear her punching in an access code for the system, probably at one of the corridor locations. "The Earth woman isn't on this list. Is she going to be staying with us on board?"

"No on two counts. She'll most definitely be on the cruiser, but I'll take her there myself right before it leaves. And, you won't be staying with us on board either as I'll need you to accompany the civilians to Usal."

Agent Poema sighed with an audible pout and Norrik shook his head at Captain Berell. "You want me to baby-sit you mean," she replied.

"Captain Berell needs all of his officers here. We need someone of authority to accompany them and to mediate with the Usalian officials should anything happen to this ship."

"Will it look good on my record?" she asked hopefully.

Clearing his throat, Norrik answered, "Agent, it always looks good on your record to obey your commanding officer."

"Allllright." She sighed once more.

"Very good. Report back when all the civilians have been relocated. Take a team to help."

Ending the connection before she could say anything else, Norrik slipped his communicator back in his breast pocket.

"A good agent?" Captain Berell asked skeptically.

"She's best when she's busy or working undercover," Norrik replied, rubbing his tired eyes.

"Hmm," the captain replied doubtfully as the door chirped, announcing someone waiting to enter the room.

"Enter," Captain Berell called.

Lieutenant Chabot strode quickly into the room, his face set in grim lines. "We've spotted the cloaked vessel, sir."

"Where?"

"Just behind us. There was another glitch in their cloak and the scanners picked it up."

"What about the reever? Has it tried to send any data?"

"No sir, but we've identified the vessel. It's a Corvan destroyer."

"Corvan?" Norrik asked, rising to his feet. "It's the insurgents. We've got to notify the closest Federation fleet as soon as possible."

"Yes, General, should we send a distress call through the main channel?"

"No," he replied automatically as he turned to punch his access code into the captain's console on the desk, "send code through a leader. The Corvan's will fire without hesitation if

they think we're sending a distress call. Send it to the second ship of nearest fleet under the guise of a request for a meteor report. The Feds'll know what we're really asking. Get a time estimate, as well, and make sure they're well aware that it's urgent."

Turning to Norrik, Captain Berell frowned. "Get that agent of yours moving general, I want my wife and kids out of here now."

"Mine, too, Berell, mine, too."

\* \* \* \*

They'd been putting out calls for 'meteor reports' the better part of an hour and still there'd been no response from the Federation fleet. The Usal port authorities were ready and waiting for the micro-shuttle full of civilians and assured Norrik that they would turn the passengers over to no one without Federation endorsement but something in his gut told him not to give the order yet. No matter how badly he wanted to keep Aariah in his sight, the desire to get her to safety hung heavy in his chest. Even now he felt as though some sort of connection between them was ... missing, or severed.

Perhaps it was that which kept him from giving the order to send them all on their way. He was anxious to get back to the cabin and escort her himself to the shuttle but still hadn't had a chance to do so. He might as well send Shalz to go in his place but the thought that it might be the last time he saw her in this lifetime made him want to keep that errand for himself.

When the message board lit up at Chabot's console in the navigation deck, Norrik and Captain Berell raised their heads from whatever they were doing and quickly made their way to the man.

"They say they've detected a 'meteor' and will be here with the fleet within two hours."

"Unacceptable," Captain Berell said angrily.

Chabot continued to read the message as though the captain hadn't said anything. "They apologize but that's the soonest."

"They're playing it cautious," Norrik added, looking at the message over Chabot's shoulder, "in the event they were delayed. They've given their latest estimate." Turning to the captain's worried gaze, locked on the large observation window and the view of Usal and its white swirling surface, Norrik continued, "They wouldn't risk the council members or your crew. They'll be here as soon as they possibly can."

"Launch the micro-cruiser, general," Captain Berell replied flatly.

"As soon as Miss Hollis is on board."

"Then put her on board. I want those civilians out of here."

Nodding, Norrik left the navigation deck in order to do just that.

\* \* \* \*

It was the rattling of her teeth that finally roused Aariah, sending her senses crashing to the surface. She hurt everywhere it seemed and instantly fought back a moan of agony when she realized her wrists and ankles were tied. Without opening her eyes, she took in her surroundings by touch, sound, and smell. She was in a vehicle of some sort, probably on the floor of a bullet shuttle's cargo locker. That would account for the movement, the tight confines, and the suffocating interior.

The small space in which she was crammed was enough to send her into a fluttering panic, so reminiscent of what it had been like to wake up in the dark hyber-pod confused and in pain. If it were not for the movement of the shuttle and the sound of voices filtering in through the walls, she would think she was reliving that hellish experience all over again.

"Don't say a damned thing," the woman hissed to someone in the passenger compartment with her, "don't even fucking breathe unless I tell you to."

The vehicle slowed to a stop, causing Ariaah to rock backwards on her side in the claustrophobic locker. Testing her fingers, she tried to wiggle them and found that she was able to do so without much effort. Her motor functions were returning.

"Hello agent, another civilian for transport?" a man outside of the bullet asked.

"Yeah, part of the research team. Is it OK if I just let him stay in one of the back rooms by the cruiser until it leaves? I need to put him somewhere and the waiting room is already overflowing." The smile in the woman's voice positively dripped with sexual innuendo.

"Lieutenant Chabot gave strict orders that ...."

"Oh, pretty please Bosht? I'd owe you a great, big favor," she purred.

Ariaah had to hold her breath to hear his reply through the walls of the locker, but she was betting that Bosht had leaned into the bullet when he let out a low groan that sounded closer than his earlier replies.

"And that's just a little taste," the woman added huskily. "I'd be happy to give you a bite...when we have more time."

"Alright, take him through but I plan on cashing in as soon as possible." Bosht laughed, his voice low and intimate.

"Mmm, I hope so." She smiled through her words.

A bead of sweat rolled across Ariaah's forehead as she listened in the dark of the locker consciously controlling her breathing to keep from hyperventilating in the small space of the locker. After a few more moments, the bullet continued forward and made a turn to the left. It was silent for nearly a minute when the woman exhaled irritably. "That is the first *and* last time I grab a man's balls for you."

"And they weren't even mine." The man in the passenger compartment laughed quietly.

"Now don't forget what I told you," she continued, ignoring him, "remove it as soon as I leave. If you have any problems just kill her but don't do a fucking thing until she tells you everything she told the council and the general."

"What does it even matter?" the man asked. "I mean, if we're about to make the delivery, why do we care what she told them?"

"Are you really that stupid? *Because*, idiot, if the council knows about the presets on the cube, then they'll know, or at least have a damn good idea, what the Corvans want to use it for."

"Oh."

"So," the woman continued, "try to get the information out of her *first*, then, if she doesn't cooperate, you can kill her. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"It damn well better be or I swear I'll send in every fucking thing I've got on you about Ju Vonice and the false leads you planted and don't think I won't."

"What," he spat bitterly, "no threats to kill me?"

"If the Federation finds out you had anything to do with what happened on Ju Vonice, you'll be begging me to kill you, Mitch. Because of the false information *you* planted in their records system, they didn't even know it was a family compound. They thought it was an insurgent base. You think they'd just accept an apology and let this one slide if the guy who sent them barreling into their biggest fuck up ever was delivered to them? I don't think so."

Ariaah nearly choked. She couldn't breathe and her heart nearly stopped in the thick heat of the small cargo locker.

Mitch.

Ju Vonice.

Mitch.

Ju Vonice.

She knew she'd recognized the man's voice when he came to her room. God! Mitch Jones, Barry Brier's office golden boy was responsible for the false lead that had led to the attack on Ju Vonice?

"You're the one who sent me out there to get them in the first place. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have the plans or the cube. Nothing."

"Just do what you're told, Jones. Carve the thing out of her body and get on that damned cruiser before the strike. We've got a delivery to make. If it's one second late, I won't hesitate to you sell you out to the Corvans. They're one pissy bunch, especially since they were blamed for *your* mess. If they're shouldering the blame they want the benefit. You're just lucky they waited this long for it."

"What about the Feds? You can't sell me to both," he spat.

"I will Mitch. I won't fucking hesitate."

"Yeah, yeah," he dismissed her. "I just needed a place to hide them that the Feds wouldn't scan. I would've gotten the chip back but ...."

"Hey, I'm not the genius who thought to hide the plans in her body. You are!"

"How the fuck was I to know she wouldn't die in the attack?" Mitch yelled defensively. "You're not the one who had to sort through hundreds of bodies looking for her. If she'd just died, I would've had the plans and been out in no time. The Corvans should actually thank me for that happy accident. There weren't any prototypes back then. With the wait, they've got the real deal now as well as the 'how to' for their very own black hole."

Ariah strangled a sob and turned her face into the arm serving as her pillow. Black hole? Plans? What the hell had he done to her? She wanted to vomit, but she forced her stomach to calm in the bumping of the vehicle. Putting her own feelings aside, she concentrated on the possible negative uses for a cube but Mitch's mention of black holes sent a shiver running through her sweat-slick skin.

If the Corvans were to use the cube as a weapon of sorts, the amount of devastation they could reap would far outweigh any sort of explosives. Whole systems could disappear. What were the engineers thinking, putting a black hole setting on the cube? Stupid bastards!

"You are so damned lucky no one found the chip while she was in stasis. How would you have explained that, huh?"

"I wouldn't," he growled. "They wouldn't be able to trace it back to me."

"No? Gods you're such an idiot. I suppose they won't think to run your little ol' double helix through the Federation's database when they find something on her body where you've dug a fucking whole in her ovary. I think a little detail like that will definitely draw attention. Don't think they won't go looking for information about other women who died with similar mysterious wounds."

Curling into a horrified ball, Ariah's tied hands moved down to her abdomen protectively. She had to get out of the locker and away from these people.

"I won't leave anything behind," he sulked.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll destroy the body. They won't find it."

The woman let out a derisive snort. "You're twisted, you know that? You and your little ovary transport fetish."

"Fuck you!" Mitch spat.

"You know who's on board, Mitch? Dr. Ribaldi! The general's little pet back there was being treated by Dr. Ribaldi. Do you think he wouldn't have found it eventually if I hadn't interceded and gotten all the celluloid scans from his office? They say she's pregnant for gods' sake."

Mitch was quiet for a time and Aariah began testing her bonds fitfully when he gave a quick laugh. "Not for long."

"See, twisted," the agent paused. "Don't ever ask me to carry anything for you, I'm no damned envelope. Just get the information, kill her, and dig the chip out. Get rid of the body if you can but don't do anything stupid."

"What about the cube?"

"Do you honestly think I'd let you handle it?"

"I'm the one who got it here in the first place," he growled, "aren't I?"

"Miracle that it is. Do you know how much crap I went through sneaking your transport in at the same time as General Farvish's? Carry the plans for the cube. No offense, but I don't trust you with anything that could turn this ship into a black hole." She ended hotly with a bite of sarcasm, "thanks."

"Yes," he hissed angrily, "Agent Poema."

Aariah heard the chirp of a communicator but Agent Poema's end of the conversation was difficult to hear as she dropped her voice and spoke carefully to whomever was on the other end. Suddenly, the bullet stopped and Aariah's back slammed into the wall of the cargo locker before rolling her back in the whiplash so that she barely had time to push her bound hands up in front of her face before it, too, was knocked into one of the close walls of the locker. They'd stopped and now they were going to kill her.

*Oh God, Norrik, she thought with another futile tug at her bonds, help me!*

## Chapter Thirteen

Norrik took a look around his quarters and walked right back out into the hall. Slipping his communicator into his ear, he tried to settle the pounding of his heart in his chest.

"Shalz, did you take Miss Hollis to the shuttle waiting room on deck 15?" He waited for the man's reply, but when Shalz said he hadn't seen her in hours, an icy fist seemed to clench painfully in his gut.

Cutting the call with Shalz abruptly, he then called Agent Poema. "Poema, did you escort Miss Hollis to the waiting room?" Again the reply was negative.

"Of course not, General. You told me not to take her to the waiting room so of course I wouldn't go against orders and take her ... there."

There was something odd in her response, but he couldn't seem to place it. Something about the conversation made him uneasy and yet he felt that the connection he had with Aariah somehow sparked as he listened to the agent. It was almost as though he *felt* Aariah when he spoke to the other woman.

"Where are you, Poema?"

"What?" She was trying to hide something in her voice but it only peaked Norrik's curiosity further.

His patience far past gone, Norrik spat, "Where—Are—YOU?"

"On my way to the waiting room on deck 15. Is everything OK?"

Norrik had known Agent Poema for at least six years. Hell, as one of the few female agents under his command, they'd gone on undercover assignments together a few times where he'd had to put his life in her hands but something in her voice made him cautious and he wouldn't dismiss it.

"It damned well better be," he replied coolly before ending the call and stuffing his communicator back into his breast pocket.

If Aariah had been a member of the crew or a Federation employee, Norrik could have simply had the mainframe do a search for her based on the DNA information the system stored, but she was a civilian. With that option out, there was only one way to find her if she was still on this ship.

Walking back into his quarters and closing the door behind him, Norrik took a deep breath and headed for the bed.

\* \* \* \*

"Awe, hell it smells worse than hot, rotting shit down here!" Mitch exclaimed. "My eyes are watering."

"Great, just great," Agent Poema hissed before Aariah heard her exit the bullet shuttle with a slammed door.

Mitch exited, as well, with a rivaling slam, causing Aariah to cringe as the noise rattled behind her eyelids.

"What is it now?" he asked, his voice strangely thick as though he were avoiding breathing through his nose as he spoke.

“You’ve got about five minutes to haul her out of that shuttle, get the chip, and get rid of her.”

“What?” Mitch exclaimed. Ariaiah could feel the panic bubbling inside of her and she silently cried out to whatever gods were listening to help her find a way out of what was the tightest corner she’d ever found herself in. “That’s not enough time, it’s a delicate ....”

Agent Poema hissed close to the cargo area, “Put a hole in her head and dig it out, Jones. You don’t need a fucking degree in neurosurgery for gods’ sake. Hack her to pieces. At this point I don’t even care what she’s told them. General Farvish knows she’s missing and he was a *teensy* bit suspicious when he called, understand?”

Biting a sob back, Ariaiah brushed a trickle of sweat from her eyes along with a few tears. If the gods’ weren’t listening to her silent plea, then hopefully someone else might. Forming a plan, she groped around the dark floor for anything she might be able to use as a weapon to buy herself a little more time.

\* \* \* \*

It was perhaps one of the most ridiculous things he’d ever tried but at this point, Norrik was willing to try anything if it would help him to find her. The connection between them was still a bit tenuous owing to the fact that they were still so newly twain but it was worth a try.

Lying down on the bed, Norrik shut his eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the scent of Ariaiah still lingering on the pillows and bedding. Concentrating deeply, Norrik filled himself with her scent and visualized her dark blue, lustrous eyes before him as they had been only hours before when they’d last made love. With his mind’s eye, he continued to search her eyes with increasing detail, adding the dark blue outline of the iris and even thin gold lines that stretched from her pupil like the rays of a darkened sun during an eclipse. From there, he was able to capture the image of her dark lashes, tipped in the same gold as her hair, her brows and eyelids relaxed in pleasure.

Norrik willed himself to *see* more, to find the thin thread of their connection through the replay of their last mating as his own clothing seemed to melt from his body. The mingled scent of their desire filled his lungs as though drifting on a warm summer breeze and his hands slid away from where he clutched the bedding at his sides, to slide up the cool flesh of her arms as she rode him deeply, his shaft swelling inside her tight passage.

Slowly, he saw her soft golden hair caress her shoulders, swaying gently with their intimate rhythm. Her breasts, thick and full called to him and his hands reached up to gently tease their pink, engorged centers. The vision-Ariaiah then leaned down, skating her hands up his abdomen and over his chest as if to kiss him as she continued to pump her hips. Falling into the surreal allure of it all, Norrik’s lips parted to accept the gesture. But the Ariaiah above him whispered into his mouth instead, brushing her lips against his as she tried to convey her message, her eyes looking deeply into his. He felt their climaxes approaching as she continued to whisper, but he couldn’t hear her, gods damn it, he couldn’t hear her!

Cupping her face in his hands, she mimicked the movement and their bodies stilled on the verge of culmination.

“Where are you *kirja*? Help me find you,” he pleaded.

Fear crept into her eyes to replace the passion as she grew closer, turning their coupling into a clinging, desperate embrace, her body tightened around him, her arms clutching at him.

“Oh god, Norrik,” she cried, “*help me!*”



Norrik felt the tight confines of the small space in which she was trapped as she sent him a mental image of complete darkness. The air in the confines smelled of perspiration and faintly of something else, something Norrik recognized.

“Where are you *kirja*?” he repeated desperately, hoping for confirmation of his suspicion.

Ariah sobbed frantically and Norrik could taste the coppery tang of her panic in his mouth. “In a cargo locker, in a bullet shuttle cargo locker.”

Norrik was about to ask her another question when her eyes clouded and her nails dug into the flesh of his shoulders. “He’s coming. Help me Norrik!”

“Who is coming? Where are you?” he replied, trying desperately to keep her focus on him so as not to break the connection.

“It’s Jones. He’s the one who ...,” she faltered, “Ju Vonice, it was Mitch Jones, Norrik, Mitch Jones and Agent Poema.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Ariah's breath grew shallow as the connection with Norrik faded with the sound of Agent Poema's receding footfalls.

"Five minutes, Jones," Ariah heard the other woman whisper vehemently. "That's all the time you've got before we have to *eject* our parcel to the Corvans. I have to intercept the general on deck 15 and you'd better be done by the time I get back. And keep it down, the ventilation shafts there are connected to 17."

*Seventeen!* With that knowledge, Ariah tried to reform the connection with Norrik, but all she got was a hazy image of some indistinguishable corridor before it faded completely. The knowledge that she could communicate with him at all in this way gave her a lifeline of hope.

"But I thought you said the air traveled from 15 to 17 because of the waste containment modules."

"It does, *fortok*," Agent Poema retorted in a huff, "but that doesn't mean that sound can't travel the opposite direction! Gods, you're an idiot."

"Bitch," Mitch muttered near the cargo locker when Agent Poema's rapid footsteps had all but disappeared.

Ariah had only a brief moment to prepare herself then before Mitch would open the cargo hatch, only a moment to wrap her tied hands securely around her one chance at escape. Clinging to the bar as though it were her only handhold on the edge of a cliff, Ariah waited with her back to the hatch so she could get the most leverage with her swing when the click of the release on the hatch sounded.

She heard the click she'd been waiting for and tensed.

"Rise and shine, Miss Holl ...."

Ariah's arms shook in the aftermath of sending the steel crossbar used to divide the cargo locker for transporting supply pods around the ship, into Mitch's face. Stunned, he danced backwards with the force, a hand feebly holding the shreds of his cheek in place where the collision of the crossbar sliced through the vulnerable flesh in its way to make contact with his teeth.

Mitch blinked wildly, his eyes wide as his other hand numbly pushed fingers through the hole in his face, no longer meeting with the barriers of his flesh or teeth as he poked at his tongue. Ariah froze momentarily, disgust at the horrible sight before her claiming her focus until Mitch let out a garbled, choking scream causing the blood pouring off his face and down his throat to sputter towards her as he regained himself in his fury.

She fell out of the cargo locker, the crossbar still clutched desperately in her hands as she struggled to her knees. She couldn't stand since her ankles, too, were tied to one another but in a kneeling position she felt she had a better angle to dispatch another damaging blow, the force of her back adding to the power of her strike.

"...uking ...itch!" Mitch roared, his voice high and crazed with his injury as he ran for her.

Ariah uttered a small whimper but steeled herself for the contact as he charged haphazardly towards her. Waiting until she was sure she could bring the crossbar into him with enough force that the barb at the end of it would offer more than a glancing injury, Ariah held

her breath in the putrid air of dock 17. Mitch threw himself at her then, throwing his weight into the crossbar as she wielded it into his abdomen. The strength of the collision knocked her off her knees and twisted her shoulder awkwardly until she heard a sickening pop mingled with the ripping of fabric and flesh as her weapon was torn from her grasp.

Dazed, she scrambled back up on her knees and spun around on them to fix her eyes on Mitch where he lay face down on the dock floor. Blood oozed out from under him, it's dark, sticky fingers reaching for her and Aariah instinctively slunk back, evading the liquid's progress towards a drain in the slightly graded floor.

The crossbar lay half under him and one of his arms. A slight twitch in his fingers, spurred her into action and Aariah scuttled back to him to retrieve the steel bar. As she reached for it, Mitch hissed, his body seemingly deflating, and Aariah snatched her hand back momentarily before willing herself to retrieve the only thing close at hand that could possibly save her life.

The bar was stuck underneath Mitch's weight and she had to use her own bodyweight to leverage it out from under him, the action pulling bits of flesh hooked on the barbed end flying towards her face and neck. Frantically swiping the flesh off of her to then flick it off of her hand, she let out a horrified sob and inched back to the bullet shuttle to search for a pocket laser or anything that could sever the bonds around her hands and ankles.

As she reached the cab of the shuttle, Mitch let out a hissing groan and she turned so quickly that her blood-slick hands slid down the bullet's sleek silver exterior, causing her to fall on her wounded shoulder. The jarring pain knocked the breath out of her but fortunately popped her dislocated joint back into place.

Struggling for air, she heard Mitch die with a sputter before she blacked out.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry, General," Mrs. Berell shook her head again, "but we haven't seen Agent Poema for nearly an hour. She said she had to collect another member of some research team."

"Research team?" Norrik repeated incredulously, searching the faces of the civilians. At that moment a woman in her sixties, long salt and pepper hair tied back in ponytail stood from her chair.

"General Farvish, if you'll excuse me, I'm Dr. Lyndia Stannick, head of the B.I.A. research team onboard, the Invenian research team." Norrik turned to face her and she continued. "My team is accounted for. Everyone under my charge is waiting to leave on the cruiser. Agent Poema couldn't have left to fetch another person from our team. I already told her we were all here."

"Those were your words, that you were all accounted for and ready to depart?" Norrik asked quickly.

Dr. Stannick nodded, her brows furrowed.

Turning to Captain Berell's wife, Norrik began giving orders. "Mrs. Berell, do you feel confident leading this group in the cruiser to the Usal port? There's no need to navigate, the course is already programmed."

"Most certainly," Mrs. Berell replied with spirit. "My husband may direct this ship but I *captain* the captain!"

Norrik nodded. "Then take this group there now. Everyone, follow Mrs. Berell and her children into the cruiser as quickly and as calmly as possible." Turning his attention back to the captain's wife he added, "You can communicate with the bridge through the communicator panel in the front. The frequency is 001, the Usal port should be 002."

Watching briefly as Mrs. Berell took her children in hand and led the way into the micro-cruiser before he turned and exited the waiting room. Something told him that if he could find Agent Poema, he would find Ariaah.

\* \* \* \*

"Shit, shit, shit," Agent Poema cursed silently as she listened to Dr. Stannick from a corner by the waiting room door. Shifting the sling-pack that crossed over her chest and rested on one of her shoulders so that the cube rested in the pouch at her back rather than in front, she listened to the old hag continue.

"My team is accounted for ...."

Pushing away from the wall, she made her way back to the emergency ladder leading to dock 17. "Damn you, Jones!"

Hooking her ankles around the sides of the ladder, Agent Poema held her breath. The heat of friction stung her hands as she slid down the ladder to dock 16 and then once more to the portal entrance for dock 17.

*Gods it reeks down here*, she whined mentally. Wringing the burn from her hands as she stepped away from the ladder portal, Agent Poema made her way towards the waste chamber of the dock hurriedly, one hand bracing the cube against her back in the pouch.

She called out as she rounded the corner where she'd left Mitch. "You'd better be done, Jones or ...."

On the ground before her lay Mitch Jones in a streaked puddle of blood. From what she could see of his face, it looked as though something had ripped a gapping hole through his cheek and taken half his teeth with it. Instantly on guard, Agent Poema pulled a laser from the holster on her hip and cautiously followed a smear of blood from Jones' body to the hidden side of the bullet shuttle.

"Miss Hollis?" she called timidly, in an attempt to seem as non-threatening as possible. "Miss Hollis are you alright? It's Agent Poema," she called coaxingly, smirking internally when she added, "General Farvish sent me to find you, he's very worried."

Rounding the hidden side of the bullet shuttle, Agent Poema frowned. The blood smear ended at the closed door but there was *no-fucking-one there!* Snarling, she spun around, the cube shifted in the pouch but the laser remained secure in her outstretched arms as she scanned the area. There really weren't a lot of options for hiding. The main waste containment drums for the entire ship loomed over most of the dock. Three in total, they stood like stoic giants on the left. Behind them, a system of large pipes used to suck the ship's sewage to the containment drums where the waste was processed and concentrated before what was reusable as a fuel source was reintegrated into the energy core and the non salvageable remainder was then ejected into space. The pipes were too tightly fitted into the space between the bulkhead and the waste containment drums for anyone to really hide, and the agent dismissed it.

On the right was an automated shelving system for degradable ejection drums used to send the ejected matter into space. The drums were dark in color and could easily fit two average Balton males in them, and, Agent Poema smirked, more easily one soon-to-be-deceased Earth female. Creeping quietly towards the empty ejection drums, she barely noticed a glistening, bloody smear on one of the drums on the bottom row and automatically changed course for it.

Pursing her lips in annoyance she added soothingly, "It's OK now, that man is dead. He can't hurt you anymore. Come out so I can help you."

Taking aim at the center of the barrel's head, Agent Poema smirked as she pulled the trigger, her back to the dock entrance as a figure rushed in and stood frozen.

"NO!"

Turning around in surprise at the shout, Agent Poema got the full force of Norrik's laser blast in the chest, sending her backwards into the wall of barrels, a look of shock frozen in her features. The power of her fall rocked the shelving unit and sent ejection barrels careening to the floor to bury her in a makeshift grave.

\* \* \* \*

Ariah was dying. She was losing both sense and feeling as blood soaked her clothes. She felt cold in the dark of her small hiding space. After the laser blast, she thought she'd heard someone yell. She thought it was Norrik, but he couldn't hear her. She'd cried and pleaded for him as she waited, hiding. Knowing the woman was coming for her.

She'd nearly suffocated in terror when she heard Agent Poema stop mid-sentence as she barked a warning to Mitch before realizing he was dead. Ariah had killed him. She'd killed another human being, at least she thought Mitch was probably a human-being. Well, she'd killed another *humanoid* being at any rate. No matter, she frowned, that the bastard had tried to kill her ... twice. Regardless, the knowledge that she'd killed made her nauseous.

Agent Poema had fired the laser but someone else had shot a blast off, as well. Someone else had shot Poema and now the two of them were either dead or dying. *Just my luck*, she smile weakly, *find a decent guy and I have to go and get killed*. Her smile was quickly replaced as a sudden stab of pain from her shoulder wracked through her body. Her breathing became gradually more and more shallow then and her fingers began to tingle. The thin sheen of sweat on her face cooled and Ariah shivered wondering how long it would take for the rest of her to cool.

\* \* \* \*

Continuing to train his laser on Poema, Norrik's vision blurred momentarily, a tight aching in his chest burning with what his eyes had seen but his mind would not accept. She had to be alive. He would know it. He would feel it if she weren't. But even as he reached out to her mentally through the force of their twaining, he felt nothing.

Blank.

Cold.

Nothing.

Reaching for the blasted barrel smeared with blood, Norrik tried to turn it around to peer into the open end. Holding his breath with what he might find while his other hand holding the laser remained on the spot where Agent Poema had fallen, he struggled with the barrel, one-handed for a few agonizing moments until it fell free from the shelving unit, rolling onto the floor only to spin around.

Empty. It was empty.

A tear slipped down his cheek and he nearly laughed aloud. The barrel was empty.

A quiet rattling filtered through his relief to his brain. Turning his head towards the bullet shuttle, Norrik side-stepped to the small vehicle, still directing his laser on where Poema had fallen beneath the barrels.

With his free hand, Norrik released the cargo hatch and looked inside the dark interior of the cargo locker. There, in a small ball, lay Ariah, shivering, bound at both her wrists and ankles, blood smeared across the top of her white pajamas in a dark wet pattern over her chest. The red-black of the blood stood out in heart-stopping contrast on the stark white of her top as

well as her pale skin. Norrik's relief at finding her choked in his throat as he looked down at her shivering form, a steel bar clutched desperately between her bound hands.

Throwing the pile of barrels another glance to assure himself that Agent Poema wasn't going anywhere, Norrik holstered his laser and reached for Aariah but she jerked back from him, pulling her knees tighter against her body protectively.

"N-nn... noo...oo," she shuttered quietly but forcefully.

"Aariah," Norrik called soothingly. "Aariah, *kirja*, it's me, Norrik. Aariah can you hear me?"

He made to stroke her hair, but she jerked away from him, raising the steel bar in her hands defensively.

"Aariah, shhh," he continued, kneeling down so that they were eye-to-eye. "It's OK, it's OK."

Blinking her eyes twice, she went momentarily rigid before her body relaxed and she started to calm. Norrik tenderly brushed the hair out of her face with his hand, trying to calm her further before attempting to cut through her bonds.

When he helped her out of the cargo locker, Aariah relied heavily upon him, the feeling not yet returned to her limbs. Norrik searched her chest and shoulder looking for a wound to explain the blood but found no more than a quickly bruising shoulder that Aariah wouldn't allow him to touch.

When Norrik held her a bit too tightly, Aariah whimpered in protest as she held her elbow in order to relieve the pain in her shoulder. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"I thought I was dying," she said simply when she was able to speak.

Placing a kiss to her brow, Norrik held her close. "No baby, I wouldn't let you."

Norrik held her as tightly as she would permit, rubbing her arms gently with his free hand to get the circulation back. He kissed her eyelids, the tip of her nose, her brow, along her jaw, unable to get enough of the feel of her alive in his arms. She slowly became more pliant as she became more aware of her surroundings, relaxing into his embrace.

Norrik turned his head from where it rested against her hair to look at what had frightened her as she stiffened suddenly in his embrace.

"I want that chip," Agent Poema rasped, holding the missing cube prototype desperately in one hand, a laser trained at Aariah's chest in the other.

"What's she talking about, Aariah?" Norrik breathed quietly as they both kept their sights fixed on the injured agent.

"The fucking chip Jones, the *codemaster* you've been looking for, planted in her ovary while she was getting her medics done just before the attack on Ju Vonice, *General* Farvish. He was working on the migrating medic team that left just before you and your buddies barged in blasting coulinium. Either you dig it out and give it to me or I'll kill you both and take it myself. The Corvans aren't known for their patience. Getting them to wait for it while she was in the damned hyber-pod wasn't exactly a treat, I assure you."

Aariah gathered her strength and tried to pull away from Norrik then but he wouldn't let her go. "It was Mitch Jones, Norrik. He's the one who sent the false lead to the Federation that the compound was a covert insurgent base."

"Why?" Norrik shook his head.

"Because he's a sick fuck?" the agent offered.

"He was using it as a cover to get into files at the base, wasn't he?" Aariah asked, the thought occurring to her for the first time. "That's why he tipped the Federation off by saying it was a Corvan insurgents base. So anything taken would be blamed on the Corvans and the

Federation agents went along with it, thinking that they would blend in if they were dressed as Corvanian foot soldiers.”

Agent Poema smirked at Aria's added information. “Blah, blah, blah, plots and intrigue, traitors and secret-sellers. Your girlfriend's a bit naïve, Farvish,” she rasped bitterly. “Does she know you were there on Ju Vonice? Does she know you were right there with me and the other members of the team who released the coulinium?”

Norrik stood stock still, refusing to release Aria even as his fingers seemed to gouge roughly into her ribs, as though attempting to send her some silent warning—a message. Not knowing how to respond, Aria said nothing.

“He didn't, did he?” Agent Poema began to laugh but was unable to as she clutched at the wound in her chest and struggled for air.

Using the agent's distraction as an opportunity, Norrik shoved Aria to the ground roughly and pulled his laser from its holster at his side, sending another round of blasts into the woman's chest and causing her to fall back into the pile of barrels before standing over her and sending a final blast into her skull.

Certain now that she was dead, he grabbed Aria to haul her up but the wide-eyed look on her face caused him to still. Following her line of sight to where it rested a few inches from the agent's hand upon the floor, his eyes lighted upon the missing cube prototype.

“It's been set,” Aria breathed as she gazed at the blinking cube. “She's set the cube to black hole.” The cube pulsed bright white light before turning successively darker shades of yellow then gold as a voice droned in the Federation language, confirming the setting. “We've got to get rid of it, when it turns red it'll go off,” she said, calling again upon the information she'd been forced to memorize about the damned thing.

Pulling her up to her feet, Norrik turned on Aria. “How was Agent Poema to transport the cube to the Corvans, Aria? How were they to accept the delivery?”

“I-I don't know,” she mumbled quickly, shaking her head. “It'll go off. We only have a minute, maybe two.”

“Think Aria, why were you in dock 17. Did she or Jones say anything about the delivery?”

Looking around frantically for any clue, Aria racked her brain for anything that might have been said until she cocked her head to the side, staring at Agent Poema's limp form under the barrels. *Eject*. They had to *eject* their delivery for the Corvans.

“The ejection barrels,” she whispered to herself.

“Is that it? They were to send the cube and the plans to the Corvans using an ejection barrel?”

Aria looked up at Norrik. “She said they had to eject the parcel. It had to be the cube and the plans chip. There's no other exit on this dock, is there?”

“No, there isn't.” Norrik sighed.

Rushing for the cube, Norrik carefully wrapped his jacket around the small pulsating box to cushion it for its ride and placed it inside one of the empty barrels before sealing the lid and sending it through the ejection shaft.

“Our only hope,” he told Aria as they watched the barrel drift lazily out into the darkness of space through a small virtual porthole monitor, “is that the Corvans will take the cube and speed off with it before they realize it's been activated.”

Almost as if on cue, the barrel seemed to be sucked in a specific direction at a racing speed until it disappeared within the cloaked Corvan ship. A moment passed where the vessel

flickered, its cloak wavering, before it sped off at light speed. The strength of the Corvan ship's abrupt departure rocked their own ship dangerously, knocking Ariaah and Norrik to the floor and the dislodged barrels careening over them.

Covering Ariaah with his body instinctively in order to absorb the blows of the large barrels, Norrik held her tightly, flinching as a distant explosion sent waves of space particles towards their ship, sliding them across the dock's floor until they slammed into a bulkhead.

"The cube," Ariaah muttered weakly, "it's gone."

Norrik groaned in reply. After he gave his full report to the council he would see to it personally that all other prototypes were deactivated and destroyed. The thought of allowing Ariaah to deliver the news to Mr. Brier, along with her resignation, pasted a pale grin over his lips before he said, "One down, only another twenty or so to go."



## Epilogue

"Congratulations General," Dr. Ribaldi said, smiling as he handed him a squalling infant. "Twins!"

Norrik smiled down at the chubby little face of his new daughter as she sniffled, quieting, and blinked up at him. The baby latched on with her fist as he held his little finger out to her.

"Again," Aariah finished the doctor's statement wryly, sitting up gingerly in the medi-deck bed before Dr. Ribaldi handed her the other strawberry-blonde baby girl. "You might have told me doctor, that Baltons don't have babies, they have litters." Casting her husband an accusatory look, Aariah watched Norrik merely shrug in reply.

"I'm fertile, can I help it?" Norrik grinned.

"We are more than fertile. Two sets of identical twins in less than two years and I'm ready to get my tubes tied."

Clucking disapprovingly at her, Dr. Ribaldi looked down at the baby resting sleepily in her mother's arms. "Children are a blessing from the gods. It may be common for Baltons to have multiple births, but I couldn't be certain it would be so with you, Mrs. Farvish. Your circumstances were uncommon. You still may only have two more ova remaining," he added as he peered at Aariah from over the rim of his glasses.

"Only!?" Aariah cried, terrified. "Good lord doctor, I'm a veritable baby farm as it is, don't give him any ideas."

The doctor knew when to bow out of the room, shaking his head as he left.

Wiggling his eyebrows at her as he held little Farvish #4 cuddled next to his face, Norrik grinned. "Oh my little darling, listen to mummy grouching on. Surely she couldn't say no to a couple of brothers for you, could she? How terribly, terribly cruel!"

"I thought you said you preferred girls." Aariah arched an eyebrow at him as she brushed her index finger softly over the tiny hand clinging to her thumb. "Something about wanting an all girl flight squad."

"Of course I do!" he replied instantly as he looked fondly down at the now yawning infant in his arms. "What lovely little treasures they are, but who will help me to look out for them and keep all the men at bay when I'm old and gray?"

Aariah's mouth fell open. "Old and gray? You'll hardly reach middle age after 100 stellar cycles. I'm sure you'll still be vigorous enough to look after four grown daughters."

Sitting on the bed in front of her, Norrik leaned forward, the baby still cuddled in his arms as he dropped his voice low and intimate. "Oh I assure you *kirja*, even at 200 stellar cycles I'll be vigorous enough to do a lot of things."

"Thank god I only had four eggs left," she whimpered, shrinking down into the medi-deck bed.

"And I intend to use every one of them." Norrik grinned wolfishly.

THE END