



Loose Id

*Lacey Savage*

**FLAME**  
*of the*  
**ALPHA**

# FLAME OF THE ALPHA

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Loose Id.<sup>®</sup>  
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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.

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## Chapter One

“There! He went through the door of that warehouse. Search every inch of the place if you have to. I want the bastard found.”

“Dead or alive, Captain?”

“Surprise me.” A hint of amusement rumbled beneath the deep, authoritative voice.

Dante Lotton clenched his hands into fists as he squatted behind a twisted rocket toboggan in a children’s playground. Ten feet away, two of the four Terran officials pursuing him entered a warehouse filled with spare ship parts.

He hadn’t been foolish enough to go through the wide open door into the dark cavern beyond. As likely as not, he’d be trapped inside, a sitting duck just waiting for the authorities to get their grubby hands on him.

His mouth twisted in a snarl. Rage roared inside his stomach, awakening the beast lying dormant in his blood cells. It would be so easy to let the lion out to play. Those men would see no more than a golden shadow as he pounced, knocking them to the ground and tearing through their standard-issue uniforms. Even those ridiculous hermetically-sealed helmets wouldn’t protect them from the feral strength of his claws.

Pain flared in Dante's wrist as he dug his claws into his palm. The need to complete the shift into lion form and overwhelm the men who'd been ruthlessly pursuing him for hours flooded his veins with adrenaline, calling to the part of him the Terran government sought to destroy.

He snarled at that thought. Who was he kidding? The Terran government wanted to destroy *all* of him, not just the part that threatened them. No mercy existed in these men. They had no intention of "fixing" him, even if such a thing were possible.

While they were at it, they'd gleefully destroy everyone else like him. They'd already killed millions of Alpha carriers since the Conception Prevention Act of 2115 had passed, nearly three centuries ago. Rendering the population sterile had been the key to achieving the government's goal of controlling every aspect of its citizens' lives.

Alpha carriers didn't take kindly to being told they couldn't mate, couldn't conceive, couldn't establish packs and families of their own. More importantly, their mutated DNA had built up antibodies so any sterilization method the government created was rendered ineffective within twenty-four hours of entering an Alpha-carrier's system.

"He's not inside, sir." The officer's voice scraped through the speaker in his sealed helmet as though he spoke from the bottom of a tin can.

The officer in charge, a tall, brawny man with a dozen etched insignias on his full Central Command armor, swept an arm out in the direction of the playground. Dante couldn't see his face, but he was willing to bet it was twisted in a snarl. "Find him. He couldn't have gone far. The spiders didn't pick up his signature, so he must still be in the area."

Dante forced himself to relax his fists. He had to think. His gaze darted upward, where an eight-legged spider-shaped camera sat atop a streetlight, its tendrils blinking as the red LED scanned its immediate surroundings for a heat signature.

Similar spiders perched atop every other streetlight in Vieux Orleans, effectively recording each movement the city's citizens dared to make. Still, he couldn't stay here. It was only a matter of time until the officers came close enough to spot him even without the aid of the devices that picked up a person's wrist implant.

Dante rubbed absently at the smooth skin on the inside of his wrist. By now, they'd be questioning why their scans couldn't locate the existence of his chip. Or maybe they weren't wondering at all.

Maybe they knew.

Identification chips were implanted in all Terran citizens at the moment of their creation, then swapped out for an enhanced version when they completed their training and were deemed ready to contribute toward meeting Terran goals.

Dante didn't have one because he hadn't been *created*, much less trained here on Earth. He'd been born, and that alone marked him as a deviant specimen. Worse yet, it put a target the size of Mars on the back of his head.

And there was nothing Terran authorities loved more than shooting at targets. Especially Alpha-gene carrier targets.

His gut churned. He wouldn't even be on this saint-forsaken planet if the authorities hadn't forced his ship to flee at a moment's notice, leaving behind anyone unlucky enough to still be enjoying the Saint Valentine Festival at the time.

A bolt of anger jarred his thoughts. Had *Enigma* managed to get away? Or had the ship and its entire Alpha crew been blasted out of the sky without so much as a warning?

*No.* He refused to think that way. *Enigma* was fine, as was everyone onboard. He had to believe that. Terran officials wouldn't have been nearly as eager to lock down the spaceport and subject everyone who came within fifty feet of the place to an impromptu inspection if they weren't rattled by *Enigma's* ability to successfully evade pursuit.

"Over here! He's hiding behind the toboggan!"



Dante's stomach tensed with the desire to jump from his hiding place, shift in mid-leap, and land with his claws embedded in one of the men's armored suits. Self-control won out at the last moment. He sprang up and bolted to his right, throwing his rage into the sprint. Government-issue boots clattered against the self-cleaning surface. Armor rattled as the officers gave chase.

The rush of the hunt pumped through Dante's bloodstream, causing his heart to hammer roughly against his ribcage. He was used to being the one doing the chasing. Playing the role of prey wasn't nearly as much fun.

Overhead, the cameras buzzed as their long-limbed cords stretched out, seeking to register his movements. A laser dart shot past his head, piercing a perfect spherical hole in a nearby tree trunk. The smell of scorched pine reached his nostrils, unsettling his stomach.

His bare feet pummeled the surface of the road, his heels slipping on the slick veneer as he burned off wave after wave of adrenaline and anger. A breeze cooled his overheated skin, drying the sweat that trickled over his chest to drip down into his navel.

This couldn't go on much longer. There were only so many places to run where he'd be out of the all-seeing eye of the cameras, and he didn't know the city. He hadn't grown up here. He'd been born on the Mars colony, where the Terran Government's strict rules and regulations didn't have as firm a hold on people as they did on their native planet.

The streets looked abandoned, providing Dante with even less cover than he'd had at the playground. In the morning light, the city barely resembled the festive urban carnival locale it had been only hours earlier. On February 14, Vieux Orleans' citizens had honored their patron saint with their hearts, their souls, and especially with their bodies. For one night out of the year, they indulged their hedonistic impulses in a carnal celebration worthy of the deity who oversaw every pleasurable encounter that took place on Earth.

This morning, the place looked as darkly desolate as it did during the other 364 days of the year. To make matters worse, Engima's abrupt departure had prompted the authorities to

declare a state of emergency. Anyone found wandering the streets would be arrested on sight.

Which left Dante scrambling for a safe place to hide. Only, there were no such places for Alpha carriers.

An intersection up ahead had Dante scrambling to choose between two paths. To his right, a stark lot stretched out in front of an old-style mansion, its French columns swirling up to a balcony that ran around the perimeter of the building. A private, T23 model ship sat out in front, black paint gleaming in the morning sun.

His fingertips itched just from looking at the chrome beast, remembering what it had felt like to grip the manual steering shaft in his hand and yank upward as the vessel's nose swung high in the air, responding to his every command.

One of the Terran officials raced to the ship, pulling out his weapon as he ran and flicked it from laser-mode to manual. A blue-tinged flame shot forth. He swung it sideways and the flame snaked a blue path along the ground, reminding Dante of engine fire and screams tearing through smoke-laden air.

He gulped down a heavy breath, practically tasting the soot on his tongue and turned on his heel to bolt in the opposite direction. Even if the officer hadn't reached the ship ahead of him, Dante wouldn't have climbed on board that craft. His piloting days were behind him. Permanently.

A wall three times as tall as his height stretched toward the sky ahead of him. His left hand shot out instinctively, claws extending even before his skin made contact with the concrete blocks. The mortar crumbled as he scraped the surface, but he used his strength and his body's forward momentum to propel himself upward until he scaled the entire height of the barrier and hurled himself over the top to free-fall almost twenty feet on the other side.

Dante's heart raced as he flattened himself against the wall, listening for the sound of pursuit. After only a few short seconds, he heard the guttural, metallic cries of the officers as

they stood on the other side of the wall, arguing about which one of them should climb over in search of him.

He couldn't stay here. It was only a matter of time until the Terran officials discovered an easier way to enter the private garden in which he found himself. Crafted with obvious care, the blossoming sanctuary was redolent with the scent of blooming flowers. Dante was no expert on flora, but this place looked like a prehistoric version of Vieux Orleans and brought to mind what the city must have looked like millions of years earlier, before humans settled here and ruined the natural wilderness of the land.

Red cedar and black walnut trees stretched thick branches toward the sky. Hyacinths bordered fern-fringed paths, and the scent of ginger lilies and orchids teased his nostrils as he moved away from the wall.

The low drone of polite chatter echoed from the direction of the main path. Dante's claws retracted. He inhaled deeply and released the breath on a heaving sigh as he stepped off the carefully sculpted path and slipped between the trees. The trunks were huge, easily as broad across as he was, providing him with the cover he desperately needed.

Now all he had to do was find another way out of here before the Terran government located him. Laying low in a gutter somewhere for a few days should give the authorities enough time to conduct a thorough search of the city and lift the lockdown measures currently surrounding the space port. Then he could figure out a way off this damned planet and contact his ship.

"Forgive me, *mon patron*. I-I have failed you."

The breathy, feminine voice stopped him in his tracks. A throaty sigh and a low groan followed the reverent statement, all sounding much too close to him for comfort.

He backed away slowly, trying to gauge the direction of the voice. It sounded like it had come from his left, where thick green foliage bordered a narrow opening between two trees.

The level of the woman's words dropped to a low murmur. Passion infused the sound with a raspy, sensual quality, reaching his ears on a light breeze. The rapturous intensity infusing her tone carried clearly, sending a jolt of heat into his groin.

His feet carried him to the left despite his better judgment.

"I tried to find a Flame for the ceremony. I searched all night. The only man who even came close to meeting your requirements was already spoken for by another of your children."

A brief pause heightened the sensual energy in the air, then a low, guttural moan fueled the raging sensations rapidly hardening Dante's cock. He *had* to peer beyond the heavy leafage, if only for a moment. Then he could be on his way, getting as far away from those officers as possible.

"Everything's prepared. Once a suitable Flame is found..." The woman's voice dropped for a moment before rising again, breathless and heated. "I still have time, *mon patron*. I can find..."

Dante pushed the edges of a low branch away from his face and stepped through the foliage into the deeper recesses of the private garden, where a glimpse of long black hair cascading over creamy shoulders instantly quickened his pulse. He went absolutely still, his eyes widening in surprise.

His gaze followed the lines of the woman's back to the lush hips and firm globes of her ass, then settled on the thick dildo she'd inserted between the delicate pink folds of her pussy.

Dante's breath caught on a groan. Need pounded in his cock, coiling inside his balls, causing them to draw up tightly into his sac. He ran his tongue across his dry lips as he watched the woman. She knelt in front of a massive statue of Saint Valentine, its bronze shimmer struggling to outshine the feminine perfection of her ivory skin. Her head was thrown back, and her hand worked furiously between her legs.

*An offering.*

He'd heard of the Terran tradition to present a...*contribution* of sorts to the patron saint of the carnal arts when asking for his favor. Folklore had it that an orgasm went a long way toward ensuring the penitent received whatever he or she prayed for. Not of Terran descent himself, Dante had believed such rituals archaic, but last night's Festival had convinced him otherwise. This achingly erotic display only served to intensify that impression.

The woman's buttocks flexed as her fingers nudged the edges of her nether lips. She pushed the thick dildo farther inside herself until the ivory toy all but disappeared from view. Her thighs trembled as she propped herself up on her knees and bent forward like a supplicant would, one hand resting on the ground before her, the other frantically thrusting the dildo in and out of her succulent cunt.

Dante reached down and massaged his bare cock. He'd be wearing clothes if not for the Festival, but he'd wanted to blend in with the revelers. If Quinn was going to bring the entire crew to this forsaken planet, Dante owed it to himself to enjoy some of the local rituals.

The elaborate, eclectic costumes hadn't interested him. He'd preferred the look and feel of bare skin as it brushed against him, sending a torrent of sensation to pour across his nerve endings.

Yet none of the erotic delights in which he'd indulged the previous night had been half as alluring as the sight of this lone woman pleasuring herself in the privacy of her garden, baring her body and soul to her patron saint...and to the Alpha who suddenly hungered for her with every cell of his mutated DNA.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It shouldn't be this hard to find a man.*

The thought flittered through Sophia Rousseau's mind as the thick girth of the dildo stretched her inner walls. A poor substitute for the real thing, the ivory *godemiché* was said to be fashioned by the first Pleasure Academy High Priestess using the dimensions of the real penis of Saint Valentine himself.

Whether the legend was true or not, Sophia didn't know. Millions of *godemichés* had been created since then, though the one she currently thrust deep into her pussy was the original item, fashioned over two centuries ago and likely worth millions of tokens to a collector of sexual paraphernalia. Luckily, no one knew the real thing still existed. The Academy priestesses had announced that the *godemiché* was destroyed in a massive fire that was responsible for annihilating a temple and its Pleasure Academy more than eighty years earlier.

The object was now a true relic, limited only to the High Priestess' use. She pulled it out gently then slammed it back inside her channel, wishing she could strengthen the connection with her Patron Saint. The *godemiché* helped, but the answers she sought were as elusive as the orgasm she desperately tried to produce.

She'd have given anything for a moment of clarity. The Academy's eager clients were already assembled for the showing, waiting on her to give her blessing over the unions about to take place. Yet here she was, chasing a fleeting tremor of ecstasy as it slipped through her fingers.

She couldn't focus. Last night's Festival had proven more demanding than she'd expected. Carnal images still flashed across the back of her eyelids every time she blinked, bringing with them an overload of sensual impressions. Still, the perceptions were fleeting and distant, like watching randomly changing erotic stills on a vid-screen. Arousing, yes, but orgasmic? Not hardly.

She needed something more than she could give herself with a *godemiché* and her own hand. No matter how attuned to her own body, Sophia couldn't come on command.

Not even for her Saint.

Frustration invaded her system, skimming over already frayed nerves. She thrust the fingers of her left hand farther back, easing her ass cheeks apart, bending low enough to the ground so her nipples brushed the tips of the dewy grass.

Her fingers slid in the damp crack, drawing some of her cream over the puckered hole, teasing the forbidden region with the tip of her thumb. Excitement traveled a swift path through her body, culminating in the heat rising between her legs. She opened herself wider, grinding her clit against the inside of her wrist, plunging the dildo harder, deeper, faster.

The statue of Saint Valentine gazed down upon her, his features benevolent, his full lips quirked in a sexy smile. She knew what he wanted from her...what she wanted from herself. And yet she hadn't been able to give it to him.

She'd failed him in every possible way. Not only had she been unable to find a suitable off-world traveler at the erotic festival for the Lighting of the Flame ceremony due to occur in seven days' time, but now she couldn't even offer her patron what she owed him. Her allegiance. Her body.

Her essence.

Sweat ran down in rivulets over the curve of her throat to drip into the valley between her breasts. It traveled lower, pooling in her navel and sliding lower still, until it dripped and matted her already damp pubic mound.

An uneven groan echoed through the clearing as Sophia pumped the *godemiché* harder, releasing a waft of musky scent redolent with the aroma of her cream. She stilled, momentarily thrown off balance.

The groan hadn't come from her throat.

Blood roared in her ears and the sweat trickling down her skin turned to ice. Tendrils of fear crawled up her spine. She was exposed. Watched. *Hunted*.

Saints, where had that last thought come from? No one at the Academy would be foolish enough to step foot in the High Priestess' private sanctuary. The patrons knew the rules as well as the pleasure servants and the other priestesses, and none would dare risk the consequences of spying on the High Priestess in the midst of her offering.

Deliberately, she turned her head and gazed over her shoulder, her breath catching in her throat. A tanned, muscular arm wrapped around the side of a large tree trunk. From her vantage point, she had a perfect glimpse of the left side of a man's body, sculpted to perfection. She gasped, taking in the planes and valleys of his perfectly proportioned form, her gaze lingering on his ridged torso, broad hips, and lean waist.

A dark blond thatch of pubic hair peeked out from behind the trunk, though the man's cock was entirely hidden from view. Awareness crept in with a potent rush, boosting her throbbing arousal from a mere thrill to raging hunger in the span of a shuddering breath.

Then he moved, and his face came into view, knocking the rest of the air from Sophia's oxygen-deprived lungs. Long eyelashes fringed golden, slitted eyes that peered at her from beneath a tumble of honeyed curls. His mouth had begun to shift, giving her a brief glimpse of full lips as they elongated, turning into a full muzzle before her eyes. He tightened his grip on the trunk and her gaze darted to his, the black claws scoring the wood, leaving deep gashes in the tree.

They stared at each other as Sophia's mind struggled to make sense of what she was seeing. She'd spent enough time around Alphas to recognize one when he invaded her sanctuary, but she'd never encountered another *panthera leo* before now.

The full impact of that realization made her stagger. Her pussy pulsed around the *godemiché*, tightening around it, pulsing with heat. The animal inside her responded to the stranger's presence with a heady, intoxicating wave of pure lust. Her nipples beaded tightly. Her clit throbbed and her own impulse to shift zinged through her veins, daring her to push past her fear and do what she hadn't been able to in years.



Electricity zinged between them with the force of a corporeal entity, binding them, keeping her rooted to the spot. And then he took a step forward, baring all of his masculine splendor in one graceful move that carried him away from the tree.

Reason crashed through her mind at the exact moment her gaze landed on his solid cock, thrusting proudly against his belly. His shift was incomplete. The powerful sex organ shimmered, thickened, and lengthened before her eyes, a drop of precum dripping unimpeded from the bulbous tip onto the dewy grass.

Myriad questions dashed through her mind, but she couldn't give voice to any of them. He was advancing, closing in on her. Soon, he'd be upon her, able to trap her with his muscular body and pin her against the statue of her patron Saint, where he'd thrust --

"Oh, *mon patron*. What have you brought me?"

Before either the stranger or the stoic Saint could answer, Sophia staggered to her feet, pulling the *godemiché* from her folds in the process. She lunged sideways and grazed the edges of her discarded robe with the tips of her fingers, lifting it as she broke into a sprint toward safety.

"Wait!"

Dante's voice came out hoarse and strained, barely recognizable to his own ears. The woman gave no indication of hearing him as she disappeared into the leafy mass that enveloped the tiny clearing. Sparing only a cursory glance at the statue of Saint Valentine, Dante tried to ignore the nagging feeling that the Saint's smirk widened just a fraction as he scampered through the bushes after her.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Branches scraped Dante's skin as he stumbled through the foliage, trying desperately to keep up with the flashes of bare flesh guiding his footsteps through the garden.

The way she'd looked at him...there'd been something in her eyes that hadn't resembled fear, though he was certain he'd startled her. No, she'd assessed him as though through a shocked stupor, but there was something else in those deep black orbs. Something that looked a lot like longing.

He ducked to prevent a particularly large branch from making contact with his forehead. For a brief moment, he thought he'd lost her trail, then a streak of blue silk had him changing direction, turning right. She'd picked up her pace, and soon Dante found himself darting between tree trunks and stepping on lush orchids in his mad dash.

"I just...want to...talk --"

The plea echoed through the garden, punctuated by grunts and heavy breaths as he struggled to avoid any large objects in his path. His erection still raged, and it took considerable control to navigate the wild bushes with their thorny branches unscathed.

His scramble toward the mystery woman came to an abrupt end when he careened around a thick tree trunk, jerked sideways to avoid a spiked plant that came up to his waist, and slipped in the dew-sprinkled grass bordering the edges of the garden. His solid, two-hundred pound frame landed with a thump and he skidded on his bare ass all the way into a clearing, which stretched out in front of an instantly-recognizable structure. A groan ripped from his throat even as panic rose in his chest.

*Saints be damned.*

As if being abandoned on a planet whose government wanted to destroy him wasn't bad enough, he'd had to take shelter at a pleasure slave training facility.

Realizing where he was caused his raw stomach to churn, banishing some of the raging lust pouring through his system. Would he never be free of the mistakes of his past? Was he doomed to spend his life running away from the memories that haunted him only to rush face-first into them again and again?

Of all the places in the Universe where he could find shelter, a slave training base would provide him with nothing but pain and misery, the same things it offered to those who inhabited its stark, dreary walls.

Only there was nothing stark or dreary about the tall building that spread out before him. Like every other Saint Valentine Pleasure Academy, this one was housed beside the Temple that guarded it. The main entrance, surrounded by a protective wall, stood elevated from the courtyard by a short set of steps. Sculptures of Saint Valentine contorted in a variety of sexually suggestive poses guarded the heavy doors leading inside. The sight made bile rise in the back of his throat.

Dante gritted his teeth hard enough to feel his jaw ache. Perhaps Vance had been right to push him into seeing a licensed counselor. They'd nearly come to blows the last time *Enigma's* second-in-command had suggested such a thing. Hell, even when Dante had been part of the Mars General Alliance Space Squadron he'd turned down his Colonel's order to report for his mandatory psych evaluation after his last disastrous mission. He couldn't imagine what would make Vance believe Dante would listen to his thinly-veiled suggestion.

Silence descended over the courtyard as at least a hundred pairs of eyes turned to stare at him. Soft gasps and sudden murmurs broke the spell, jolting Dante to the present. He hustled to rise to his full height.

Scanning the area for possible exit points, his gaze swept past two dozen pleasure slaves, marked as such by the broad leather collars around their necks. The men and women were slender and delicate, specially crafted to be aesthetically pleasing to their patrons. He knew that even their voices had been carefully designed to be as arousing as possible, especially when lifted in cries of ecstasy.

Or in screams of agony.

Saints, he still heard those screams in his nightmares. He could even smell the smoke, thick and gritty as it clogged his throat. The sound of the horrific crash still boomed in his ears every night, along with whispers that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

*You killed them. You killed them all.*

He forced himself to look away from the pleasure servants, unable to face the truth of what they were -- of what he'd done to others like them -- and his gaze fell on the mystery woman.

She stood at the top of the steps leading into the Pleasure Academy. Fully dressed in a silk robe and no longer kneeling, the confident stance of authority in the way she held herself upright was unmistakable. Her black hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders to tumble over the low neckline of the garment molding to her lush curves. The fabric hung all the way to her ankles, hiding the bounty of her body, reminding him of the way she'd trembled when she'd shoved the dildo inside her and circled her anus with the tip of her finger.

Damn. There had to be something severely wrong with him. His cock throbbed so hard, it ached. When he should have been thinking about ways to escape, he was spellbound by the haughty way she stared down her nose at him. Her chest still heaved from exertion, pulling the fabric of her robe tight across her breasts. Her nipples pushed the material, tenting it slightly. Dante's mouth watered. He wanted to taste those beautiful nipples, to nip and lick them, to swirl his tongue around them until she cried out in pure ecstasy.

The sexual rush streaming through him was so potent it nearly kept his gaze from shifting behind the woman as the doors swung open to reveal four Central Command officials marching into the courtyard.

A warm hand slipped into his right palm. He jerked his hand back, but the fingers held him tight, as another grabbed his left. Pleasure servants lined themselves in a semi-circle,

trapping him between the hard, well-oiled bodies of two men that might have well been twins.

“Showtime,” one of them said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Dante spared them a quick glance, but didn’t reply. The top of their heads reached halfway up his bicep. Mirrored frowns assessed him with thinly-veiled curiosity, but Dante’s attention kept darting to the woman on the steps and his pursuers.

One of the officers leaned in to whisper something in her ear and the relaxed, confident stance she’d exhibited only moments earlier dissipated in an instant. The rigid posture that took its place only served to intensify the dread coiling in Dante’s gut.

Whatever the officers told her had obviously made an impact. If he didn’t find a way out of here, this woman would serve him up to the Terran authorities on a silver platter. She’d already run from him once. This was her chance to get rid of him for good.

Jerking his hands out of the tight grips of the men who held him, Dante bolted back into the safety of the garden. He’d scaled the wall once. He could do it again.

He’d barely taken twenty frenzied steps before the feel of leather around his neck choked him, sending him sprawling backward. His fingernails clawed at his throat in an effort to dislodge the collar that had been strapped to him, but the leather only tightened in response.

He dropped his hands and raked his fingertips through the ground beneath him. Desperation set in, tearing at his chest and summoning forth the beast within.

“Bring him back here.” He recognized the silvery, authoritative command. Despite his captivity, the sound of her voice sent a rush of warmth to pool in his groin, stiffening his cock to the point of agony.

A sharp tug on his collar jerked him to his knees, then up to his feet. His gaze skittered to the side, where a woman nearly as tall as he was held what looked to be a remote control in her right hand. Her left hand was clamped around a laser weapon she pointed at his chest.

A current of electricity ran from the device in her hand to the collar around his neck, jolting him toward the blue-robed goddess who'd climbed off the steps to head toward him.

He inhaled deeply, stifling the urge to shift, knowing he'd be signing his death warrant if he as much as summoned forth a sharp claw.

"Showtime indeed," he murmured between clenched teeth as he struggled to force what he hoped was a charming smile onto his features.

Surprisingly, summoning a seductive grin wasn't as difficult as he'd feared.

## Chapter Two

That morning, the idea of a muscular stranger appearing out of nowhere inside the protective walls of the Pleasure Academy had seemed preposterous to Sophia, but it hadn't kept her from fantasizing about the possibility. Only she'd never imagined her patron Saint would grant her wish. Or that he'd send her an Alpha *panthera leo* for the Lighting of the Flame ceremony.

One who was wanted by the Terran officials, at that.

"He's secure, M'Lady. The collar will trigger if he attempts to do anything ill-advised." Brianna, one of the Academy's guards, stepped back a few steps as Sophia neared the captive.

Out here, in full view of the pleasure servants and the Academy's patrons, she was in complete control of the situation. He couldn't hypnotize her with that austere masculine body of his. And since she knew who -- or *what* -- he was, glimpses of his gold-flecked eyes shouldn't disturb her either. Only now, the golden feline eyes had dimmed to a pale green, and no hint of his leonine features still existed.

Yet, Saints, he was beautiful. That head of tousled golden curls framed chiseled cheekbones, a square jaw, and a nose that was a touch too long for the dimensions of his face.

His nose also looked to have been broken a time or two, as evidenced by a thin scar running all the way across the slightly skewed ridge.

That wasn't the only scar marring the delectable structure of his face. Another ran from beneath his ear to the tip of his jaw, as though a knife's edge had been drawn across the sensitive skin. A third silvery strand divided his right brow in two but did little to hide the frown that wrinkled his forehead as he watched her, completely at odds with the cocky smile tilting his full lips.

He opened his mouth as though to speak. Frantic to silence him before he could mention their previous meeting, Sophia placed both palms along his cheeks and lowered her mouth to his in a lightning-quick move. He gasped, a soft, tumultuous sound that rumbled through her lips. She'd intended to hold him there for a fraction of a second and throw him off balance, in order to keep him from attracting the attention of the officers before she was ready for them, but the man had other ideas.

As fast as she'd been, her captive was faster. He opened his mouth slightly and darted the tip of his tongue across her lower lip, stripping the measure of control from her as though she'd never had it at all. A tremor of heat hummed along the seams of her mouth and sizzled through her veins, tempting her to open to him, teasing her with the promise of more to come.

He tasted of musk and male determination. The scent of sweat mingled with his natural odor to cause a flood of delicious warmth to course through her body. It pooled in her pussy, slicking her wet labia with more cream as a shudder spiraled low in her belly.

The intensity of her attraction to the man sucked at her, threatening to pull her into an inferno of lust and confusion. She braced her palms on his shoulders and pulled away before he could delve deeper into her mouth and taste the desperation that lingered on the tip of her tongue.



“Listen to me and listen good.” Saints, was her voice really that husky? She drew back a little more, fighting to put some much-needed distance between them.

“With a mouth like that, I’d figure you’d have the attention of any male within a twenty-foot radius.” His smile widened. To her surprise, it wasn’t a fake, deceiving grin, but the genuine, self-satisfied smile of a man who had the upper hand.

He glanced down at her breasts, and the weight of his stare seemed to coax them into fullness to press against the material of her robe.

Sophia blew out a breath to ruffle her bangs, wishing she could lift herself to her full height. Since he still knelt, his head would come up to her shoulder, putting *her* in the position of authority. Exactly where she needed to be.

Unfortunately, she needed the intimacy of close proximity to say her piece even more. And she had to do it soon, before the officers grew restless and decided to ignore the sanctity of the Temple garden by marching into it fully armed.

She narrowed her gaze. “Those men over there want you, and I have no problem turning you over to them.”

He glanced up at her, green eyes the picture of innocence. “You don’t want to do that.”

*Damn him.* “You’re right. I don’t. But I will, unless you follow everything I tell you to the letter. Understood?”

His smirk grew wider. In a flash, he’d wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him so her breasts crashed into his chest, her nipples rubbing through the thin material of her robe into the sleek, masculine perfection of his muscles.

The zap of the collar’s electric charge sent a tremor through Sophia’s limbs as it careened through him, but he barely grimaced. Far from looking threatened, he tightened his grip around her, bringing her down fully on his lap and shifting his palms so they cupped her ass. He nuzzled the side of her neck. “Yes...M’Lady.”

Another jolt, this one more potent, jerked his head up. Veins stood out in his neck as he struggled to bear the rough charge of the collar's fury.

"Stop!" Sophia commanded. She glanced in Brianna's direction and shook her head. "No more."

"I'm sorry, M'Lady." A blush crept up Brianna's pale cheeks. "I thought...I just..."

"Leave us."

"Yes, M'Lady." Brianna moved back to blend in with the crowd of onlookers, all of whom gaped at the High Priestess entangled in a captive's embrace.

Blood roared in her ears. She knew she should push the infuriating man away, but her body seemed to mold to his as though they'd been created to be fused together. That absurd thought brought to mind a barrage of images, each more carnally wanton than the next. Pictures of his thick, firm cock delving into the soft folds of her pussy, filling her channel, pumping inside her until the tremors of orgasm erupted --

She shook herself out of that fantasy and gritted her teeth. Saints, what had gotten into her? Brianna had only been doing her job, and she should have been allowed to carry it through. It was due to women like her that the Pleasure Academy was safe from criminals who dreamed of taking what didn't belong to them.

A shudder stole up Sophia's spine. She knew as well as anyone what the outside world was like. Even with government controls, Vieux Orleans was filled with people driven to the brink of their limits, men who'd eagerly rape a pleasure servant simply because they saw it as their right.

Sophia should have been alarmed at the Alpha's advances, or at least scandalized by his nerve. No one touched a High Priestess without her explicit permission. Yet, wasn't that what she'd done when she'd kissed him? Given him permission to take more, encouraged him to push things further than she'd anticipated.

The warmth of his skin seemed to scorch her through the barrier of her robe. Suddenly, she ached to take it off again and feel the touch of his bare flesh against hers.

"You're a new breed of pleasure servant," she murmured in his ear as quietly as she could. "Stronger, leaner, rougher than those most of our patrons are used to."

He growled low in his throat. The menacing sound seemed to caress her clit, making her tremble.

"I'm not --"

"You are," she insisted. "At least for now. We'll discuss what you really are when these men leave."

He glanced up at her, all traces of mirth gone from his face. "You know."

Of course she knew. Did he not realize she'd seen him begin to shift in broad daylight? Narrowing her eyes, she nodded, wordlessly.

"I'm Dante," he said after a moment's hesitation. His thumb rubbed small circles into her hip, warming her skin.

"Sophia," she whispered. "High Priestess of Saint Valentine's Pleasure Academy in Vieux Orleans."

If he was shocked by her title, he didn't show it. "Well, Sophia, I don't know how much longer those men will be content to watch us. Whatever you're planning, you'll have to do it soon."

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to disengage from Dante's arms and rise to her full height. She smoothed her palms over the surface of the robe in a feeble attempt to flatten out the wrinkles that made her appear as disheveled as any pleasure slave after a tryst then turned to face the crowd.

"The showing will continue as planned, with one addition. Dante was meant to be a surprise for a...private showing to take place later. As he couldn't wait, we'll have to make his presence known a little early." She smiled at the patrons, who returned her easy grin.

The officer in charge shifted from foot to foot at the top of the steps, clearly not buying her explanation. “Madame Rousseau,” he called out. “A moment, if you please.”

Her heart lurched in her chest. She nodded toward the pleasure servants and clapped her hands twice. “Form the receiving line again, please. And do include Dante. He’s to be presented, like everyone else.”

She could feel Dante’s scorching gaze on her back as she ambled toward the officers, forcing herself to remain calm. She couldn’t afford to have them questioning her motives. The secrets of the Pleasure Academy were too sacred, and too much depended on them. She didn’t owe Dante a thing, yet the truth of what he was -- the rarest of all Alpha species -- ensured she had to at least try to keep him safe. And whether she liked it or not, he was perfect for the Lighting of the Flame ceremony. Without him, she had to face the possibility that she’d have to cancel the Ceremony...something no High Priestess had done for decades.

“Gentlemen, thank you for waiting.” She tilted her head in a respectful nod. “As you can see, this man isn’t dangerous. He’s a pleasure servant. Created for the specific purposes of delivering sexual satisfaction.”

“Then why was he running naked through the streets this morning?”

“Ah. I’m afraid that was my fault. As his breed is so new, there will be great demand for pleasure servants of his caliber in the future. Because of that, I didn’t want him revealed until the official showing. I’ve been keeping him confined to the Temple since he was brought to us. Last night’s Festival was too tempting, however, and he escaped without our knowledge. I guess he wanted to sample some of what we’ve been teaching him for himself.”

“I don’t believe you,” the officer in charge snarled through his helmet.

“If you’d like a demonstration, I’m sure Dante would be amenable to having one arranged,” she answered sweetly. “Though like any other prospective patron, you’ll have to abide by the Academy’s rules. No clothes. No armor. And no testing kits or identification requirements on Temple grounds. All our pleasure servants are fully certified, even those

who haven't yet been re-implanted with the official Academy seal. Of course, we include the proper paperwork for each one upon purchase."

She lifted her chin a fraction of an inch, challenging him to accept her generous offer. He wouldn't, of course. She knew his type: stuffy, morally superior. Men like him never mingled with the common folk and avoided pleasure slaves like the plague. At least in public. In private, they were often among the most sexually adventurous.

Luckily, there wasn't a measure of privacy in the Temple gardens during a showing. A hundred potential patrons, hand-picked by the High Priestess herself, arrived every year on the day after the Festival to choose from among the new Academy graduates. Since pleasure servants were one of the most expensive pieces of property a patron owned, the selection process could take days.

When the officer reached for his helmet and pulled it off, revealing thick black locks that tumbled over his shoulders and into fierce sapphire eyes, Sophia gasped. Her hand fluttered to her chest. "You -- you'd like a demonstration?"

"Captain Jolen! Are you sure this is a good idea?"

The captain silenced his subordinate with a flick of his fingers. "The lady offered. And besides, I think the good Priestess is lying through her teeth."

Sophia forced herself to take a deep breath. "*High Priestess, Captain.*"

He shrugged then pressed down on a small flap located in the crook of his left elbow. The metal armor made a smooth, sucking sound and retracted on either side of his flat abdomen, revealing a strip of flesh and muscle.

Sophia averted her gaze and glanced out over the crowd. Her eyes met Dante's. He was surrounded by women, most of which she recognized as being wealthy enough to own a couple of pleasure slaves. A knot of jealousy tightened in her belly.

Dante nodded once, almost imperceptibly. He'd told her that whatever her plan was, she had to put it into motion soon. Well, here it was. A hell of a plan.

She didn't know who he really was, but one thing was clear, Dante was no pleasure servant. If Captain Jolen knew enough about the carnal arts to detect a fraud, Dante wouldn't be the only one to suffer the consequences.

"Well, Priestess, I'm as naked as the Saint commands me."

The captain's mocking voice tugged Sophia's attention back just in time to see him tossing aside the rest of his armor. True to his word, he stood on the steps in all his naked glory. If not for the haughty, arrogant look in those startling blue eyes, she might have considered him handsome. His lean lines and broad shoulders didn't come close to Dante's raw power or feral grace, but the Captain could hold his own against any laboratory-crafted Central Command officer.

"Very well." She bowed at the waist and swept out an arm in the direction of the garden. "You may enter."

He did, leaving his friends to stare in uncomfortable silence. The captain swept past Sophia and marched toward Dante with single-minded determination. The crowd parted for him, recognizing the stride of a Central Command officer even without the rattle of the plate armor to mark him as such.

Stopping a few inches away from Sophia's captive, he reached out and cupped Dante's soft sac in the palm of his hand. Sophia grimaced, but Dante only stared at the man with grim understanding. For a moment, they assessed one another like two warriors meeting on the battlefield.

Then Dante smiled and the spell was broken. He dropped to his knees, dislodging the Captain's hand from his balls in the process. Despite herself, Sophia exhaled a sigh of relief.

Dante reached around the officer and cupped his firm ass in both hands. "I didn't know I'd be evaluated by a government official," he said, his voice low and husky. "Or else I'd have practiced more."

Captain Jolen grunted. His cock stiffened, straining against the planes of his abdomen. “I’m told the carnal arts aren’t as much a skill that can be learned as they are a talent. In any case, Saint Valentine’s pleasure servants are the best in the quadrant.”

Sophia couldn’t stifle the groan that escaped her throat. So he was familiar with their graduates. Great. She might as well have signed the death warrant of everyone who lived on Academy grounds.

Dante lowered his head demurely, though not before Sophia caught the glint of feral rage beneath the surface of those limpid green eyes. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch, along with her libido. If he played along, at least they had a chance of convincing this man that Dante was who she said he was. Not a good chance, granted, but a chance nevertheless.

Caressing the Captain’s ass with his broad palms, Dante rubbed his cheek against the man’s outer thigh like the feline he was, his gaze never leaving Sophia’s.

At once, she knew what she had to do. Dante needed her as much as she needed him.

Without a moment’s hesitation, she untied the blue silk sash that kept her robe closed. The material fluttered over her skin like a lover’s caress. With a shrug of her shoulders, it slid down the length of her arms to pool onto the grass.

“It’s a real shame we’ve had to keep Dante hidden for so long,” she said, watching his eyes widen at the sight of her as he drew back. “Someone needs to enjoy his remarkable talents. If we’d sold him sooner, perhaps he wouldn’t have run away.”

Captain Jolen tangled his fingers in Dante’s curls, pulling him forward. “An insubordinate pleasure servant? You haven’t been doing your job, Head Priestess.”

Sophia’s skin prickled and a wry retort settled on her tongue, but she bit it back, content to hang back and watch. For now.

“A male servant needs a man’s touch,” the Captain continued, yanking Dante’s head back cruelly so he was forced to look into his eyes. “Only at the hands of another man will he learn the most important thing he needs to know.”

“And what’s that?” Sophia couldn’t help asking.

Captain Jolen thrust his hips forward, nudging Dante’s lips with the head of his cock. The bulbous tip disappeared inside Dante’s mouth. “Obedience.”



## Chapter Three

“Harder.” Neo Jolen tightened his hold on Dante’s hair, twirling one particularly unruly curl around his thumb and yanking the man’s head closer to his groin.

He ignored the speculative murmurs around him. As a Captain for Earth’s Central Command, his identity was constantly hidden beneath layers of armor, as necessary for his protection as it was for his ability to do his job. Undercover work was sometimes necessary, and being able to blend in with space-faring traders and other nefarious types served a purpose.

But he didn’t always live his life masked by his government uniform. At night, he shed the Central Command ensemble and stepped into another role, one that had nothing to do with protection, but which used his leadership abilities and exhaustive training all the same.

Like many other Terrans, Neo hadn’t been created for a dual purpose. His role in society was clear: serve the Terran government in all things and protect its interests. whether that entailed chasing possible Alpha-carrier suspects or apprehending sexual deviants.

He was damn good at his job. His record was spotless, boasting more arrests than anyone else in the squadron, even though he’d been a part of the C.C. unit for only eleven

years. Everything Neo did, he did better than anyone else. Driven and ambitious, he never let anything interfere with his duty.

Although his professions had little in common, he approached both with that same single-minded determination. Until today, the two vocations had never overlapped. Yet a few minutes ago, he'd made a choice. One that was irrevocable, perhaps even dangerous, but necessary for him to move forward in both lines of work.

With his face freed from the protective helmet, he'd been instantly recognizable to those assembled at the Academy for the annual showing. He'd known a few familiar faces would attend, but he hadn't expected to encounter so many of his own clients at this gathering.

Impervious to the low gasps and hushed murmurs, he avoided the inquisitive glares and focused entirely on his goal.

"His technique is flawed," Neo announced, loud enough for his voice to carry through the inner Academy sanctuary.

To his left, Sophia stiffened. "I don't see how --"

"His swipes are uneven. The pressure on my cock changes as his tongue sweeps from base to tip, and the swirls are awkward."

Dante glanced up, his green eyes narrowing with something akin to annoyance, but his mouth never stopped working. He circled his tongue around the tip of Neo's shaft slowly in a clockwise motion, concentrating all his attention on the delicate skin behind the head.

Neo hadn't been lying. The man's strokes were untutored, wildly different from the expert swipes of a trained pleasure servant, but there was something so raw and rugged in the way his brow furrowed as he poured every ounce of that unbridled fury into the task at hand.

His lips fused to the head of Neo's cock, then slid down to envelop him from tip to base. He pulled up slowly, drawing his tongue over the subtle veins throbbing along the shaft and ended by sucking just the tip, coaxing a bead of precum from the slit.

Throughout it all, the man's eerie gaze held Neo's boldly, as though daring him to continue complaining even as his cock swelled and expanded inside Dante's mouth.

The unabashed eye contact sent a jolt of lust deep into Neo's balls. He gritted his teeth as a tremor ran down the back of his legs, testing his ability to keep his knees from buckling.

This wasn't working. Dante didn't act like a pleasure servant, but if Sophia had been telling the truth -- which Neo still highly doubted -- then it was possible that Dante had been created specifically to be lusciously rebellious, undisciplined, and defiant.

No one knew better than Neo how desperately people wanted a pleasure servant who didn't obey blindly. One who could give orders, push a patron to her knees and swat her ass with firm, sharp strokes that brought her to the edge of ecstasy with each flare of pain flashing across her buttocks.

But if such a pleasure servant had been created, Neo would be out of a job. Still, the possibility thrilled him to the core. He'd spent years training the Academy's male graduates to be the dominant specimens so many patrons demanded. He spent months with them trying to undo the damage the Academy's priestesses had done. Nothing helped much. Oh, the men were able to wield a whip when he was through with them, but the blows they delivered were mere kisses compared to what their masters really craved.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Neo could do about that. A slave's subservient nature was part of who he was, his DNA specifically crafted to provide a pleasure drone with little ability to resist a patron's wishes, much less bluntly refuse and turn the tables on his master.

That was exactly why Neo's skills were in such high demand, both as a trainer and as a Dominant himself. Master Neo was a different man than Captain Neo, but his ability to command remained unchanged from one persona to the next.

How ironic, then, that he'd be labeled a sexual deviant by other officers if the government had refused to license his work. He charged for his services, and the Terran government received a large percentage of his profit. For that, he had their blessing, but it didn't mean he was willing to divulge the duality of his personality to his officers.

Until today. The opportunity with which Dante had presented him had been too good to pass up.

Neo had been eager to infiltrate the grounds of the Pleasure Academy for years, but its mysteries were off-limits to him as a government official, and the priestesses had no need of a Dominant.

He'd spent enough time with pleasure servants to know there were secrets within these hallowed walls, secrets that were forbidden to him. Even the servants in training didn't know anything more than what they'd heard whispered in darkened corners by priestesses who thought they were alone.

Unfortunately, Neo hadn't learned much from the pleasure servants. But there was a wealth of information to be had from a priestess...or if he played his cards right, from the High Priestess herself.

Whatever was going on behind closed doors at the Academy went against everything the Terran government believed in. It was Neo's duty to find out what kind of deviant behavior went on inside and bring those involved to justice. If the High Priestess was offering the sexual talents of her priestesses outside the government's sanctioned service, then she'd be punished like everyone else.

"Stand," Neo commanded, his voice thick with desire.

*Shit.* When had that happened? He was the one in control here. He'd been mastering his own sexual impulses long before he'd learned to master the sexual demands of others, and he was damned good at doing both.

Scowling, he pulled back out of Dante's reach and cupped his saliva-slicked shaft as the man rose to his feet. Sophia went to stand beside him, the back of her hand gliding across Dante's. The pleasure servant glanced down at her, the fury in his eyes softening for an instant as he inhaled deeply and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. She didn't fight him. For a fraction of a second, she looked as though she might lean against him, but then eased herself out of his arms, shrugging him off.

*Odd.* Actually, the whole thing was fucking bizarre. She still stood too close, as though wanting to reassure the collared slave. And he let her.

Neo's nostrils flared. If he hadn't already been certain that something untoward was happening, witnessing this little moment of intimacy would have served to cement that belief.

What game was the High Priestess and her little pet playing? Worse yet -- were they playing *him*?

"He failed the first task," Neo informed Sophia as bitterness rose to the back of his throat. The statement was only partially a lie. Dante's talent had been unschooled, but the raw, natural emphasis of his tongue gliding across Neo's flesh had nearly made him squirt his cum in the man's mouth anyway.

They didn't need to know that. As long as he acted like the authority figure he was, he'd remain in control. And in the process, he'd learn everything he needed to know about the Academy's surreptitious affairs.

The High Priestess lifted a slender shoulder in a half shrug. Her breasts, large and tipped with rosy areolas and hard nipples, shifted as she moved, heaving with the rhythm of her shallow breathing.

Oh, yeah. The woman was nervous, all right. Now to push her a little farther over the edge and he'd have her exactly where he wanted her.

Neo's cock pulsed, another bead of wetness snaking up to the tip of his shaft. With any luck, he'd have them *both*. The idea of finally training a man who could keep up with his carnal, commanding lessons made his sac swell full and tight against the base of his shaft.

He stilled his strokes, realizing he'd taken over where Dante's mouth had left off and forced himself to drop his hand to his side.

"The second test is much less complicated, though no one but a true pleasure servant will be able to appreciate it."

Sophia's spine straightened and she exchanged a silent message with Dante, her eyes speaking volumes even though her mouth didn't utter a word. She was anxious. More so than Dante, whose easy stance and confident attitude betrayed an inner rage, which only served to intensify Neo's turbulent arousal.

Neo pointed to a nearby bucket and the thick leather handles that stuck up above the rim. Whips lay dormant in water, waiting for a patron to test their potent sting on a pleasure servant's creamy flesh. "Bring me one of those."

Dante looked like he was about to argue. His gaze shifted to Sophia, who nodded almost imperceptibly. The man's gaze dropped to her chest, where it lingered for the span of a heartbeat. His cock stiffened, rising up proudly against his flat stomach.

*Doubly interesting.* Sucking Neo's cock hadn't been a completely unpleasant act for Dante. His cock had responded as much as could be expected, but the man's erection raged out of control from one potent glance at Sophia's full, lush breasts.

Heat pulsed in Neo's groin as he watched Dante's long, muscular legs stride toward the bucket. The other patrons were busy dallying with a few pleasure servants of their own choosing, but their gazes continued to dart in Neo's direction.

Dante chose a whip and swished it through the air, sending water droplets in every direction. He ran his fingers down the length of the eight-woven switch, his eyes once again locking with Neo's in silent challenge.

"I think you'll find that our servants are as well trained in the art of receiving pain as you'd expect from any of Saint Valentine's children," Sophia said. She fidgeted, her fingers intertwining in front of her stomach, betraying her confident words.

"We'll see."

Neo crossed the distance to Dante and yanked the whip from his grip, then grabbed his wrist and led him to the center of the inner sanctuary, where they were in full view of everyone assembled.

Saint Valentine's Pleasure Academy graduates were valued for one ability above all others...that of associating pain with pleasure. The two were almost indistinguishable for a properly trained pleasure servant. The touch of a whip would send exquisite longing into every sensual nerve ending, as would the bite of a switch or the sting of an open palm. It didn't matter what tool a master chose to use with his or her slave. The result was the same. Pure, unadulterated lust.

That was one of the reasons Neo had such a difficult time re-training Academy graduates. They wanted to be on the receiving end of the whip and revel in the bliss that came with the anguish of a thorough whipping and the humiliation that was never far behind.

"Kneel," Neo commanded. "Over the cushion on that bench."

He didn't have to point. There was only one bench where they stood, and it was higher than most, crafted specifically for such a demonstration.

Dante's tongue snaked out to wet his lips, the gesture more erotic than he'd probably intended. He glanced at the crowd, which had fallen deathly silent to watch the display.

After only a moment's hesitation, Dante turned his back on those assembled and bent over the cushion, lifting his sculpted ass high in the air. A wave of pure, unadulterated lust washed over Neo.

Saints, the man had the most perfect ass he'd ever laid eyes on. Perfectly formed cheeks bordered the crevice hiding Dante's tight sphincter. Below the mouthwatering crack, his balls hung, low and heavy, between his rippling thighs.

Before Neo could raise the whip, Sophia ran around the other side of the bench. She tangled her fingers in Dante's curls and pressed her mound to his mouth.

Dante inhaled sharply, his balls drawing up close to his shaft at the smell of her. She urged him on silently, her hips moving, her pussy pushing close to Dante's face.

Neo frowned, confusion swirling through his mind. He couldn't remember ever hearing of a High Priestess participating in a showing ceremony, but then again, he hadn't attended any in the past, either. Perhaps this was part of a bizarre ritual required by the Academy's patron Saint.

Dante's mouth clamped firmly on Sophia's pussy. Her back arched and a tortured cry escaped her lips as Neo brought the whip down, lashing Dante's skin. A perfect red welt rose up where the braid had touched the man's flesh, but no sound rose from his throat.

A second strike hit lower, at the junction where Dante's buttock met his thigh. This time, a low gasp muffled by Sophia's pussy slid through the garden, followed by the appreciative murmurs of those assembled.

Dante didn't try to kick or twist away. Instead, he licked Sophia's cunt with more ferocious hunger, delving inside the pink depths of her folds, making her cry out again and again. And he angled his ass closer to Neo's whip, the motion defiant and sexy beyond belief.

*Oh, Saints.* This was definitely not what Neo had expected. The need to push Dante past of the point of resistance burrowed low in his balls as he gripped Dante's waist, holding



him down though it wasn't necessary. The man's skin radiated warmth, heat blazing from the places where he'd been hit.

Lust raging out of control, Neo continued to whip Dante. The pleasure servant's tongue worked faster, harder, at Sophia's pussy, swirling around the tight little nub Neo could see peeking from beneath its delicate hood and the neatly-trimmed black curls decorating her plump labia. Dante drew out her musky scented heat, letting it linger and wrap around Neo until he felt like he was drowning in the combined scents of male and female arousal, both wreaking havoc on his libido.

Neo let his sharp strokes fall vigorously, holding nothing back. He removed his hand from Dante's waist and wrapped it around his cock, pumping his fist over the length of his shaft in time with the blows. The plaited switches lashed Dante's ass, turning it a vivid red, marring the perfectly sculpted flesh with deep scores that marked him as Neo's property even before the paperwork had been drawn up.

There wasn't a doubt in Neo's mind that he wanted this man. He had to have him, had to train him. Dante took the whipping like a trained pro, but the fiery hunger in the way he pleased Sophia told of barely constrained anger simmering beneath the surface of his obedience.

Oh, the things Neo could do with -- *to* -- a man like that! The things he could teach him. His mouth went dry and his cock shuddered, spasming furiously as the seed spurted from the tip of his cock to land in creamy streaks across Dante's back and dripped down the striped flesh of his ass.

Neo pumped harder, drawing every drop of cum from his balls, drowning in the hoarse sounds of Dante's moans and Sophia's cries as she reached the peak of her own climax.

A round of applause filled the air, bringing Neo back to the present. He didn't acknowledge his audience, but fixed his gaze firmly on Sophia and waited for the haze of her euphoria to pass. She blinked her eyes open, watching Dante with unrestrained awe.

Then she looked up, and the awe turned to ice. “You’ve had enough of a demonstration for today, yes?”

She wanted him to leave. Hell, she’d wanted him gone from the moment he walked through those doors.

“Yes.”

She sighed, relief flooding her features. “Good. My guards will show you out.”

“I didn’t say I was leaving. I said the demonstration was sufficient.”

Confusion wrinkled her brow. She pulled back a fraction of an inch, her hand languidly sweeping through Dante’s hair in a fond, appreciative gesture. “I don’t understand.”

“Congratulations, *High Priestess*,” Neo said, imbuing the title with as much sarcasm as he could muster. “It seems you were correct. Dante is a...unique specimen.”

She cleared her throat, watching him warily. “Thank you.”

“That’s why I’ve decided to purchase him. He’ll be coming home with me. Today.”

Sophia felt the color drain from her face. She didn’t have to look at Dante to know he was furious. Tension rolled through him like a maelstrom as she smoothed his curls over his forehead and let her fingertips trail down to his shoulders.

She dug her nails into his flesh, hoping the message she sent him was clear enough.

*Don’t do anything stupid.*

She squared her shoulders and met Captain Jolen’s unreadable black gaze. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

The bright mid-day sun scattered golden hues across the Captain’s aristocratic face, doing little to hide the subtle nuances of emotion furrowing his dark brows. “This is a simple purchase, Priestess. The Terran government looks favorably upon such transactions, and this

is no different. I'm a potential patron, ready and willing to buy one of your servants. You *will* draw up the papers. Immediately."

Dante stiffened and jerked out of her grip, rising to his feet. She caught a small grimace as he straightened, the pain across his buttocks obviously flaring to life with the small movement. Sophia's inner walls clenched, fluttering madly with remembered pleasure.

Dante met the Captain's haughty glare head-on and Sophia grimaced. So much for the dutiful servant. He'd taken the whipping well enough, but she didn't fool herself by believing he'd have been as obedient had she not offered herself to him. He'd gripped her hips fiercely as he'd licked her pussy, varying the intensity to match the speed of the strokes slamming against his ass.

Fast, slow, then fast again...each swipe of his tongue across her slick folds had been pure heaven. She'd closed her eyes, depriving herself of her sense of sight in order to better hear the braid cut through the air with a potent *whoosh* before slamming down across Dante's firm buttocks. Her clit had responded to his ministrations as well as to the sound of the whip, her senses filling in the blanks for her, imagining what he felt with each blow of the lash.

If she could have, she'd have taken Dante's place. As a priestess of the Pleasure Academy, Sophia had been training pleasure servants since reaching the age of twenty, what the Terran government considered the official age of consent. At twenty, Earth's citizens were deemed to have reached their prime, and were able to carry out their assigned duties.

She'd had a number of tutors herself while growing up at the Academy. Some had been kind and eager to pass along what they'd learned of pleasure. Others were cruel, delighting in delivering heavy doses of miserable torment and agony along with their lessons.

Having been acquainted with the kiss of a whip herself, Sophia was familiar with the bliss that could be found in submitting to a master's expert touch. She'd grown accustomed to

the nuances of a whip lashing against bare flesh. She recognized the sound of an angry, jarring blow as well as she could identify the confident strike of a maestro's flicked wrist.

Captain Jolen wasn't an unskilled patron. At best, he was a connoisseur of the twin highs of pain and pleasure. At worst, he was a skilled specialist, adept at bending a pleasure servant to his will with nothing more than a few whispered commands and the promise of an open-handed slap across a fleshy cheek.

In either case, Dante wouldn't last an hour alone with this man.

"His training isn't yet complete," Sophia said, imbuing her voice with as much confidence as she could muster. "You said so yourself."

Captain Jolen shrugged. "No matter. I can continue his training myself."

Sophia's stomach sank to her knees. So the good Captain was used to delivering instruction away from the spaceport and Central Command. That made matters a hundred times worse.

"I couldn't allow that. It would be highly inappropriate," she argued. "We only sell Academy graduates. Those who haven't achieved that status cannot have their ownership transferred to a master."

"If he's not ready to be acquired, then why put him on display at the showing? And why offer me such a delectable demonstration?"

Sophia faltered, her mind spinning as she tried to come up with another lie. "I --"

"She did so at my request."

Sophia's eyelashes fluttered closed for an instant to hide the wild relief that would be obvious in her eyes. She'd never been so grateful for a patron's interference in her life.

"I asked for Dante specifically. Rumors of his existence had been circulating for weeks. Quite an impressive specimen, wouldn't you say?"

Faye Laurens dragged the tip of a perfectly manicured finger across Dante's washboard abs. His stomach rippled beneath her touch and a muscle ticked wildly in his jaw.

Sophia watched Dante as he assessed Faye from beneath long lashes. His gaze swept over the touches of gray in the mane of black hair bound in a fashionable coil behind the woman's head and lingered on the faint lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. At last, he tilted his head in a polite gesture of respect, but was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

Sophia placed a palm on Dante's shoulder, urging him to step closer to Faye. "He's magnificent, but difficult to train."

Faye's easy laugh carried through the garden. "Why, darling, I believe that's the point." She pressed a hand to her cleavage, which pushed up through the low-cut top of a yellow sundress. Looking remarkably youthful for a woman her age, Faye never failed to attract the attention of the most skilled pleasure servants.

At the last showing, Faye had purchased Rhyanne Hamilton, a lovely and demure Academy graduate who'd drawn nearly half a dozen bids from interested parties. Sophia was the only one of the Academy's staff who knew Rhyanne hadn't been acquired for Faye at all, but had been meant as a gift for Quinton Stillwell, the Alpha whom Faye had raised from a wild, careless pup into the captain of a transport ship.

Sophia flipped her loose hair over her shoulder and turned her attention back to Captain Jolen. "As you can see, Dante's already spoken for. Faye had expressed interest in acquiring him some weeks ago, although she's aware he won't be available for another couple of weeks yet."

A scowl deepened the lines in the Captain's face. He spun around to face Faye. "I can outbid you."

"Doubtful," Faye said, her fingertips drifting lower to glide across the slick surface of Dante's cockhead. He shuddered at the contact. "I've already declared my intent to pay six million tokens for him."

A gasp rose up from the nearby patrons who overheard the outrageous sum. Even Sophia's mouth went dry. She was used to dealing with large transactions, especially for

pleasure servants who had demonstrated exceptional skills during their training, but any sum larger than four million was unheard of.

Dante's lip quirked upward in an amused smile, the first genuine one she'd seen from him since he'd drawn her onto his lap after being collared. She couldn't help the urge to smile back.

"Ten million."

At least a dozen patrons crowded in around them, jaws gaping. Sophia instinctively slid her hand into Dante's, curling her fingers around his. "That's insane," she whispered.

Faye blanched, the color draining from her face. She darted a glance from Dante to Captain Jolen, then shrugged apologetically at Sophia. "I can't beat that."

"I know." Sophia swallowed past the lump in her throat. She couldn't hand Dante over to the authorities any more than she could let them sweep through the Academy.

Besides, she needed him. She refused to be one of the few High Priestesses who couldn't execute the Lighting of the Flame ceremony. Her name would be permanently erased from the history books, and she'd be stripped of her title and sold to the lowest bidder in punishment for disobeying her patron Saint.

Dante was her best hope of assuring her legacy. She'd been the High Priestess for six years, and although she'd found suitable Flames in the past, none had garnered the blessing of Saint Valentine.

Dante was different. He *had* to be different. Sophia was nearing her thirty-fourth birthday. She had only a few more years left before her body began to work against her, fighting the natural pull toward granting Saint Valentine's fondest wish.

"Two weeks," she murmured, fighting the panic that welled in her chest. "You can claim him then."

Captain Jolen looked ready to argue, but Dante released Sophia's hand and strode forward with a purpose, stopping only when his chest was flush with the other man's. Their

cocks touched, Dante's large, swollen member prodding the Captain's spent shaft to full awareness in the span of a heartbeat.

"I want to be ready for you," Dante whispered huskily in the other man's ear. "The wait will be worth it."

The captain snatched a handful of Dante's curls and dug his fingers into the nape of the man's neck, pulling him closer still. "Kiss me."

Sophia stiffened, a groan catching in her throat. Would he do it? This was another test like all the others. One Dante could easily fail.

Her pulse pounded, hammering a steady beat in her ears as she watched. And waited.

A hush had fallen over those nearby, until the only thing Sophia could hear was the beating of her own heart. It thrummed in time with her arousal, her pussy fluttering with need as she took in the two firm, masculine bodies pressed against one another, the battle of wills that kept them together, daring one another to make the wrong move.

"Beg me," Dante said, his voice low and demanding.

Sophia forgot to breathe. She was certain the Captain would push him away and summon his men to arrest him. No pleasure servant would dare to speak that way to a prospective patron, or to *anyone*, for that matter.

Captain Jolen's hands stroked up and down Dante's spine before cupping his ravaged buttocks in his broad palms. Dante let out a sharp hiss between clenched teeth.

"The day I beg you for anything, slave, will be the day one of us takes his last breath."

He yanked Dante to him, grinding his cock against the other man's groin and pressed his mouth to Dante's gorgeous lips. For a moment, neither man moved, then Dante's lips parted and Sophia saw his tongue snake inside the other man's mouth.

The kiss was fierce, a struggle for dominance between two men used to being in control. And it was hot as hell.

Arousal unfurled deep in Sophia's belly. Cream slicked her nether lips and her hand drifted of its own accord down her stomach to nestle in the curls at the apex of her thighs. She pressed the heel of her hand against her clit, lost in the erotic display before her.

She'd seen men kiss. Hundreds -- perhaps thousands -- of times. Yet never had a masculine kiss been as erotically charged as this one. Not once had she wanted to thrust two fingers inside herself and fill her aching channel until stars sparked behind her eyelids because she was loath to shut them long enough to blink for fear of missing a second of the delicious spectacle.

Much too soon, Captain Jolen pulled away. With one last haughty glare at Sophia, he smacked the flat of his hand across Dante's ass, drawing another half-strangled grunt from the man's throat.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"I said two weeks," Sophia reminded him, fighting to keep her voice even.

"I know what you said, but I'm not about to trust my property exclusively to your...*expert* care."

She gritted her teeth, struggling to swallow back the angry retort that settled on her tongue. How was it that this man managed to make even a compliment sound like an insult?

"I'll put down a deposit immediately, which will entitle me to daily visits," Captain Jolen continued. "I expect Dante to be ready for me when I arrive. He's mine, Madame Rousseau. *Mine*."

The captain stormed away, leaving behind a flurry of excited voices raised in speculation. Sophia sighed. She watched as he climbed the steps and lifted his uniform. A few minutes later, the Central Command armor once again encased his body in white metal. Relief poured through Sophia when the Captain gestured to his men and marched out of the inner courtyard.

"Master Neo isn't a man you want as an enemy."



Sophia jerked her gaze away from the doors, alarmed by the unusually subdued tone in Faye's voice.

"I'd rather we didn't attract the attention of *any* Terran officials. You know that."

Faye acknowledged Sophia's words with a slight nod, but her attention remained fixed on Dante. She grabbed his wrist and tugged him through the crowd, murmuring polite greetings to the other patrons as she swept past them.

Sophia shrugged into her silk robe, the thin material shimmying over her sensitized skin to summon another shiver of arousal. She followed Faye and Dante to the edge of the garden, where they could speak in private.

"Since he knows about you now, I can't hide you," Faye said, her pale blue eyes shimmering with something akin to tears. "You're on your own, Dante."

He shrugged a massive shoulder. "It's not the first time. I've dealt with men more menacing than this guy."

"Don't be so sure of that. The captain has a reputation among the patrons who are...dissatisfied with the Academy's training procedures." She darted an apologetic look at Sophia.

"Dissatisfied? I've never heard any complaints about our graduates."

"Of course not. Master Neo isn't governed by the Academy's rules or regulations. He's a freelance instructor of sorts."

"What does that mean?" Dante asked.

Sophia sighed as the truth of Faye's words sank in. She studied Dante's face, wondering if he really didn't know, but found only confusion etched across his features. And damn if that didn't make him even more endearing.

Tough and rugged, the man looked like he could snap any one of the usual pleasure servants in half with no effort at all. He gave as good as he got, but he knew next to nothing about surviving as a pleasure servant.

“He’s a Dominant,” Sophia said, looking to Faye for confirmation. When the woman nodded, Sophia’s gut churned. “He trains pleasure servants to go against their nature and learn to punish instead of submitting to punishment themselves.”

A frown wrinkled Dante’s brow. “I’m not the submissive type.”

“I don’t think he wants you to submit,” Faye said, running a hand through her bound hair. A few strands escaped the tight bun, drifting lightly around her face. “As odd as it sounds, I think he wants you to learn from him.”

“He certainly seems determined. Ten million tokens?” Sophia let out a low whistle. “Even with the government taking its cut, that’s a huge payday for the Academy.”

“Neo can’t be allowed to get his hands on Dante,” Faye stated firmly. “Not alone. If the Captain figures out what he is --”

“Whoa!” Dante made a crisscross motion with his hands. “Time out. Does *everyone* know?”

Sophia smiled and placed her palm over his hand. “Just us. Some of the priestesses will suspect when they meet you, but none of the pleasure servants or the patrons have any way of discerning what kind of blood runs through your veins.”

“Unless you leave the safety of these walls,” Faye warned, leaning close to Dante. “Out there, you’ll be prey. In here, Sophia can protect you.”

Dante scowled, his cock bobbing as his spine stiffened. “I don’t need protecting.”

“Just until the lockdown measures are lifted,” Sophia put in helpfully.

*And until after the Lighting of the Flame.*

Faye released a deep breath on a shuddering sigh, her gaze assessing Dante from head to toe. At last, she shook her head and turned away from them, but not before tossing one last statement over her shoulder. “Quinn was right about you.”

## Chapter Four

Dante had never been so happy to hear a familiar name in his entire life. Grabbing Faye's elbow, he stopped her before she could rejoin the crowd.

"You know Quinn?" he hissed in her ear, frustration and impatience simmering at the edges of his self-control. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

An enigmatic smile curved Faye's rouged lips. "I know enough about you, Dante Lotton, to know you like to be in control. But you're not in charge here. You can't be. And I can't let you run around Vieux Orleans like you own the place."

Dante grunted and released the woman's arm. "He's all right, then? *Enigma?* The rest of the crew?"

"For now, yes. They're being pursued by Central Command, of course. And there's a bounty on the ship and each crew member's head, which means mercenaries will soon get in on the fun."

"Fuck!" Dante swept a hand through his hair. A stubborn curl fell over his forehead, reminding him there was a reason the Mars General Alliance officials insisted recruits should get regular buzz cuts. "I should have been there with them."

Sophia's hand skimmed over his shoulder blade, a feather-light touch that sent a shiver of awareness down his spine. "You will be. Just as soon as we can get you out of here."

"I need to go, but I'll return for the ceremony." Faye's eyes narrowed a fraction. "I trust there will be one?"

Dante's gaze darted between Sophia and Faye, noting the tension bubbling just beneath the surface of both women's controlled demeanor, but not understanding its cause.

"Why wouldn't there be?" Sophia answered, her smile a little too bright.

Faye nodded approvingly, then turned to Dante. "I'll let Quinn know you're safe. He'll be glad to hear it."

She was almost out of earshot before Dante recalled her words. Curiosity won out and he ran to catch up to her, stopping her for a second time as she reached the base of the stairs leading into the Temple. "What did you mean when you said Quinn was right about me?"

She laughed, sounding genuinely amused. "He told me once that bringing you onboard meant *Enigma's* crew would be protected from most of the trouble that came their way. He also said Enigma now had twice the amount of trouble to contend with than they did before you stepped foot on the ship."

He watched her disappear through the double doors bordered by Saint Valentine's ever-watchful presence. Regret coiled in his gut, raw and unfamiliar. Was this what homesickness felt like? The sensation was entirely new, and altogether unpleasant. He'd never felt this way on any of his missions away from Mars. Not that there was anyone left to care whether he returned alive by the time he joined the General Alliance and began soaring through the universe. His mother had died in childbirth, and his father six years later, in an aero-racing competition. He'd moved from orphanage to orphanage since then, but none of the sterile hospices ever felt like home.

Until he joined *Enigma's* crew.

Damn it, he even missed Vance and his incessant lecturing. That had to mean something in Earth's atmosphere was scrambling his brain cells, because those feelings would have never surfaced on their own. Vance and Dante had clashed since the moment Dante had stepped foot on the ship. Vance was moral to a fault, principled, stubborn, and had a stick up his ass the size of Jupiter. In contrast, Dante's carefree attitude and his reluctance to think about the past, much less talk about it with some blasted psychoanalyst who got his kicks from digging around in people's brains, was always a point of contention.

"Hey," Sophia said softly, coming up behind him. "You all right?"

The scent of her arousal mingled with the aroma of wild orchids. He drank in the heady fragrance before turning around, remembering the way she'd looked in the privacy of her sanctuary. Dante's flagging cock snapped to attention as images of Sophia on her knees, her beautiful ass and quivering pussy bared to him, flooded his mind.

He spun around sharply. "Why are you helping me?"

She smoothed a hand over his forehead to tuck back a stray curl, her palm cool against his heated skin. The contact sliced hot arousal through him, and she'd only touched his *head*, for Saints' sake!

"Let me show you to your room," she said, darting a glance toward the crowd. "The first patron won't be ready to take home his chosen servant for at least a few more hours."

Dante squinted, hostility churning inside him as he watched the potential patrons take carnal liberties with the servants. "How can you be so sure?"

"This is only the first meeting. Very few patrons make up their mind so quickly. Most like to return and visit their chosen servants for at least a few weeks before reaching a final purchasing decision, and then the negotiations begin." She lifted the hem of her robe and swept past him onto the steps. "It's not as simple as buying a flashy spacecraft or picking out your next vid-screen."

Dante scowled as he fell into step beside her. “Then why do so many people treat the servants they buy with no more care than they’d give a stylish piece of furniture?”

He hadn’t expected an answer, and Sophia didn’t give him one. Instead, she pushed the ornately carved door open and stepped into the cool interior of the Temple. Closing the door behind them plunged the cavernous room into shadowy darkness. Sophia crossed her arms over her breasts and assessed him carefully as his eyes adjusted to the dim surroundings.

He’d never been inside an Academy Temple before, but he’d heard stories of the elegant architecture that persisted throughout every such building’s construction phase. Still, nothing had prepared him for the angles, colors, and textures inside the place.

The central hall was dome-shaped, leading to two exits distinguished by their massive curved archways. Sculptured representations of Saint Valentine and his worshippers engaged in carnal displays of wantonness decorated the perimeters of the Temple, while colorful paintings emblazoned on the curved walls showed more scenes of debauchery and unbridled lasciviousness.

Dante’s gaze flashed across the various images, lingering on couples fucking in every position imaginable -- and even some he hadn’t considered.

“It’s a little overwhelming when you first take it all in, but you get used to it.” Sophia’s voice seemed much too loud in the shadowy midst of the Temple hall.

“Sensory overload,” Dante murmured. Even the air smelled of sex, drenched in a pungent, musky aroma that made him think of burying his face in Sophia’s cunt and inhaling deeply all over again.

That image made his already rigid shaft grow harder. He grabbed Sophia’s hand and yanked her to him until they stood fused together, her hip pressed against his upper thigh. He could feel the heat of her skin even through the thin material draping her luscious curves, and his libido fired up in response.

“My room,” he growled under his breath. “Where is it?”

“That way.” Sophia pointed in the direction of the other exit, across the temple dome.

A breeze wafted in through a high, circular stained-glass window, carrying with it the sounds of erotic activity from the inner courtyard. The volume of the passionate chorus seemed to intensify, echoing off the walls of the Temple hall and driving him even farther out of his mind.

She was so close he could smell the nuances of her intimate scent. He knew the aroma of her arousal from swirling his tongue through her delicate folds, but this was different. The smell blended with the wanton miasma permeating the room, culminating in a throbbing need that pulsed in his groin.

Was it this place, or was it Sophia who had him so far over the edge? His skin smarted where the Captain had whipped him, but even those wounds conspired to send tingles of heat into his cock.

He should have been ashamed. Embarrassed by being tossed over a bench and smacked like a schoolboy who’d misbehaved, yet he felt none of that. Being able to bury his nose and mouth into Sophia’s delicious cunt had taken the sting out of the humiliating scene. He’d been able to throw himself into the task of pleasuring her, but the experience had been erotically stimulating for him, too. Each lash had driven his tongue deeper inside her, questing, seeking, desperately hoping to unleash his pent-up frustration into her pussy.

And now that they were alone, when he should have been contemplating ways to avoid the Captain’s return visit, Dante could think of nothing but yanking up Sophia’s robe and baring her long legs so she could wrap them around his waist and sink onto his meaty cock.

She’d indicated the direction of his room, but neither one of them moved. They stood there, bare skin pressed against flimsy fabric, making no move to touch or explore one another.

Dante's breathing grew shallow, matching hers. She glanced up at him with impossibly dark eyes, her lips parting a fraction of an inch. When the tip of her tongue swept out between them, the remainder of his self-control slipped another notch toward oblivion.

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pulled her to him for the kiss he'd been imagining since he'd tossed her across his lap. Sophia's eyes widened with raw awareness; then her lashes fluttered down as she moved her lips slowly against his.

Energy crackled along his veins, fanning the flames of his arousal. The animal in him called out to this woman, demanding to undress her, ravish her, *possess* her. Blood roared in his ears as he stroked his tongue between her lips and delved inside the sweetness of her mouth.

She moaned, a sweet, tender sound, and relaxed in his arms. Wrapping her hand in his hair, she tugged at his curls. The captain had been rough and unyielding, but Sophia was all softness and warmth. The contrast sent a near-painful jolt of intensity through his nerve endings.

He'd been with many women in his life. Men, too. He knew the nuances of each sex, knew how to tease them, please them, have them begging for more. What he didn't know was what to do with a woman who trained others in the carnal arts, a priestess who looked like she'd walked out of a teenage boy's wildest fantasy, a *goddess* who was comfortable with offering her body and allowing herself every pleasure Saint Valentine condoned.

Her kiss, however, told a different story.

She kissed him slowly, as though uncertain of herself. The tip of her tongue stroked along his almost reverently, sending lightning streaming down his veins. Saints, how long had it been since this woman had been kissed? She seemed lost and hesitant, her responses fluctuating between brash aggressiveness and uncharacteristic modesty.



When she swept her tongue along the crease of his lips, Dante's hands flew down to grip her ass. His fingers dug into her flesh as he lifted her off the ground and growled into her mouth.

To his surprise, she growled back. Aggressiveness, she obviously knew how to handle. Sensual caresses and a delicate approach threw her off her game.

*Good to know.*

Her delicate exploration of his lips, tongue, and mouth turned savage. She nipped at his lower lip, drawing it into her mouth, sucking on it until his cock swelled to impossible proportions, digging into her stomach, making its needs known to anyone who cared to pay attention.

And Dante cared. Damn, the way his shaft throbbed and pulsed, he'd have to be dead not to care. Sophia's growl reverberated through him, making him tremble when her mouth parted under his, offering more of herself to him.

He eased back with a groan to whisper, "If this was your plan all along, Priestess, you could have let me fuck you in the garden."

Her head jerked back as if she'd been slapped. She snaked out of his arms, her silk robe rustling and slipping against his skin. Without a word, she marched toward the Academy exit.

"Hey," he called out, rushing after her. His balls ached, the throbbing sensation driving him wild with wanting. "What'd I say?"

She spun on him and jabbed her index finger into his chest. "Let's get this straight. I'm not in the habit of fucking without a contract, and my services are not for sale. I won't be purchased for a few hours of bliss, even if you could afford me."

Dante's mind reeled as he struggled to remember all the nuances of government regulations. Sex was restricted to those who could enter into a contract regulated by Terran

government laws. Without a solid contract, the act of engaging in any kind of erotic play wasn't just forbidden, it was illegal.

Saints, no wonder Alphas had run off this planet as quickly as their paws could carry them. Their wild, animalistic natures called out for the passionate act of mating while the possessive part of them demanded the intimacy sex created between two people.

He cupped Sophia's face in both palms, forcing her to look at him. She was even more beautiful when she was angry, her black eyes darkening to deep onyx, a flush tinting the apples of her high cheekbones. Saints help him; he wanted to devour her whole.

Struggling to get his libido in check, he skimmed the tips of his thumbs across her cheeks. "Hey, I'm sorry. I-I'm not used to this."

"What? Common courtesy?"

Ouch. He supposed he deserved that. "Keeping myself in check."

Her eyes softened and her brows unfurrowed, smoothing back into the high arches that suited her delicate features. "Captain Jolen's deposit makes it clear that he owns you, at least as long as you're here. I could get involved in public because the entire point was to demonstrate your prowess. Now that we're alone, I can't interfere with those patron-servant bonds."

He brushed his lips against hers in a tender, barely-there kiss. "Even if I'm not a servant?"

"You may not be a servant, but I'm still the High Priestess. And the only way to fuck me is to --" She clamped her mouth shut, grimacing as though she'd said too much.

"To?" Dante prodded.

She hesitated, and for a moment he thought she wouldn't answer. Shadows flittered across her face as she fought an obvious internal battle that had him wishing he could kiss her agitation away.

At last, she embedded her teeth in her lower lip and swallowed hard, not meeting his eyes. "To be my Flame."

Saints, why had she told him?

She'd been so taken by the genuine curiosity in his eyes and his soft, feather-light kisses that *not* telling him didn't seem to make any sense. He was an Alpha. He had as much to risk by being on Earth as she did by divulging the Academy's secrets.

The blistering need to share parts of herself with him made no sense. He was under her protection, but he was also a stranger, a man who could hurt her and everyone else at the Academy, if he chose to align with Terran officials rather than his own kind. Still, Faye trusted him. That had to count for something.

"I don't understand. Tell me what I have to do. What you need from me?" Dante stood so close she could feel his breath fan her lips when he spoke. The sensation unnerved her even more than his tender words, so Sophia stepped back, out of his reach.

Putting some much-needed distance between them dissipated the fog of arousal that clouded her mind and prevented her from thinking straight. Unfortunately, it also made her heart pound wildly against her chest, the loss of his taut muscles pressed close to her suddenly physically painful to bear.

She turned away before she could do something stupid, like throw herself back into those strong, powerful arms and kiss him savagely until he fucked her right there on the altar.

"Come. I said I'd show you to your room. I'm sure you'd like to bathe and see to those wounds."

*Fuck.* Just mentioning the raw welts on his sculpted buttocks caused her pussy to clench with remembered pleasure. Cream slicked her nether lips and the scent of her arousal

intensified as she strode out the side doors, until she was certain he'd be able to detect her heightened excitement even without his ultra-sensitive Alpha nose.

Dante fell into step beside her and they walked out of the Temple onto the Academy's grounds. She expected him to pepper her with more questions, but he remained blissfully silent. Even their bare feet made no noise as they touched the marble walkway leading through the narrow outdoor passage to the servants' quarters.

The glistening path snaked through the cloister, where sunlight beamed through the side colonnade and latticed roof. Sophia kept her gaze fixed firmly on the ground, watching her shadow lengthening alongside Dante's. They cut striking silhouettes against the pale marble, the dark edges of their outlines only inches away from touching and melding into one another. If she stepped just a little closer, their shadows would unite and merge into one, making it impossible to discern where Sophia ended and Dante began.

Her chest tightened as the full impact of that thought slammed into her. She'd always been so sure of her calling. She'd been born on the Academy grounds. Her childhood had been spent under the protective gazes of priestesses just like her. She knew the dangers that lurked outside the walls, and she'd heard stories of the freedom that could be found outside Terran influence.

She could have left the Academy at any time. Left Earth, if she'd chosen to. Yet she'd stayed, out of obligation to her patron saint and her own fervent belief that she was following the path laid out for her.

Yet now, walking alongside Dante, she wondered whether there was more to life than playing a well-rehearsed role. Since she was old enough to understand the other priestess' teachings, she knew exactly how her destiny would unfold. What would it be like *not* to know? To experience each moment as though it hadn't already been scripted far in advance? To make each decision worrying of nothing but that moment's pleasure? To give in to her rampant need and let Dante fuck her senseless until he brought her to the height of ecstasy that culminated in an offering worthy of Saint Valentine's greatest blessing?

She shook her head, snapping herself out of such absurd thoughts. The carefree, pleasure-filled life she imagined wasn't hers. It never would be.

She had a duty to perform. If Saint Valentine had delivered Dante into her path to be used in the Lighting of the Flame ceremony, then so be it. She'd fulfill her responsibility to the best of her abilities, but that was all. She wouldn't allow herself to get emotionally involved or give into flights of fancy that stepped outside the boundaries of her position.

Sophia rounded a bend in the path and strode past a series of wooden doors leading to individual servants' rooms. Most were occupied, but there were a few at the end of the path that had remained empty since last year. Although the Terran government delivered yearly shipments of newly-created pleasure servants to be trained by the Academy when they reached the age of fourteen, she never knew how many bio-engineered specimens would arrive. Some years, they only dropped off a handful. Other years, the Academy barely had enough space to house them all, and many had to double-up in the small, intimate quarters.

"Welcome to your home, for as long as you're with us," Sophia said, pressing her palm to the scanner embedded just outside the door frame. The vid-screen flared a deep red color and her hand tingled as the security system analyzed her handprint.

A sharp beep echoed a moment before the lock mechanism clicked and the door swung open of its own accord. "You'll need to have your handprint read, too, so you can come and go as you please."

Dante nodded and followed her instructions, pressing his broad, masculine palm to the sleek screen. The system flared to life, shimmering orange, green, then finally red as it approved its new occupant's seal.

Sophia gestured toward the open door. "You'll find everything you need inside. If you require something that hasn't already been provided for you, press the call button beside the bed. Someone will see to your needs."

She spun around, eager to return to the showing and surround herself with familiar faces. Guiding Dante to his room had seemed like a good idea at the time, but it had proven to be a grave error in judgment. She should have sent someone else to look after her guest. Someone with the ability to resist his animalistic presence.

At least out in the courtyard, she knew who was in charge. Here, alone with a man who awakened fevered desires and fantasies of giving in to those carnal flames, she also knew who had the upper hand.

And it wasn't her.

Dante's fingers on her elbow stopped her dead in her tracks. He pressed his body to hers from behind, the thick line of his erection molding to her spine, heating her skin through the silk material of her robe.

"You're the only one who can see to my needs. And I think I'm the only one who can see to yours." His low baritone rumbled in her ear and through her body. Lust flared to life, beading her nipples and making the tight buds scrape across the thin fabric.

She chuckled, wanting to appear dismissive. Instead, the sound chimed hoarse and uneven to her own ears. "Persistence isn't going to get you anywhere with me. Neither will arrogance."

He nipped at her earlobe, drawing it between his teeth. When he released it, she couldn't help the groan that echoed from her throat.

"What's a Flame?" he asked, his breath skittering across her ear.

Sophia sighed. She should have known the man wouldn't be deterred so easily. It was her own damn fault for opening her mouth. There was a reason High Priestesses chose the Flames on Festival night. It was so much easier to drug them and ensure their participation in the ceremony if they'd already been indulging on their own.

The liquid ecstasy provided by the Temple did nothing to hinder a man's performance, but it did wonders for dulling his short-term memory. Ensuring the Flame didn't remember a

thing the next morning had been key to guaranteeing the Academy's secrets remained hidden from the authorities.

She swallowed hard, wondering if she could distract him from pressing her on her stupid admission. "There are clothes in the closet, though they may not fit. They've been tailored specifically to match a pleasure servant's measurements, and you're...umm..."

"Bigger," he provided helpfully. "In every way."

Another moan lodged in her throat. She wanted to accuse him of boastful arrogance again, but this time his egotism was well-deserved. Every pleasure slave who walked out of a government laboratory was the exact same height and weight as the one before him. Oh, they had different eye and hair colors to appeal to a wide variety of patrons, but the rest of their physiques were identical, right down to the girth and length of their well-crafted cocks.

Everything about Dante screamed he was one of a kind. Although he hadn't been created to take his place among those who delivered pleasure on command, Dante flaunted his sexuality with the ease of someone who knew what he had to offer and took pride in his ability to turn heads.

While the government laboratories produced the type of pleasure servants who appealed to a dominant patron, there were those who craved a little more adventure...a little more uncertainty.

Like her.

She closed her eyes, forcing a deep breath into her lungs. This was quickly getting out of hand.

"A Flame is someone who takes part in a worship ceremony." There, that was true, and with any luck it would keep him from asking anything else. "Now, if you'll let go of me, I need to get back to the others."

The pressure on her elbow eased. She breathed a small sigh of relief as she felt him move away. For the span of a few heartbeats, Sophia waited for the inevitable barrage of

follow-up questions, wondering how she'd continue to evade his dogged determination to figure out what drove her to help him in the first place.

Nothing happened.

Sophia stiffened her spine, refusing to turn around and find out what he was doing. She shuffled from foot to foot, knowing she should take the opportunity to march out of the cloister, but unable to bring herself to walk away.

This was it? Could he really be satisfied with such a standard, evasive answer? Disappointment slid through her like a lightning bolt. She should have been glad he'd given up. That was what she'd wanted...wasn't it?

Gritting her teeth, she spun around quickly, only to find herself alone. Her gaze darted to Dante's door, which still gaped open, echoing a silent invitation that slid through her core and burrowed deep into her cunt, pulsing with heat and expectation.

*Get away. Walk away. Run away.*

The thoughts slipped through her mind like scattered beads of mercury. One step brought her closer to his door, then another and another until she stood in the doorway and peered inside the interior of the small chamber.

"Dante?"

Darkness seeped into every corner. The blinds draping the singular window on the opposite wall were drawn tight and the lamp beside the standard-issue bed remained unlit. She could make out the white sheets neatly tucked beneath the one-person mattress and the pale, undecorated walls. To the left, a small doorway led into the adjoining bathroom.

The servants' quarters were stark by design. While the training areas inside the Academy more than made up for the austere décor in the individual rooms, these bedchambers were intended for sleep and quiet meditation. Any training activities were to be conducted in the designated pleasure areas.



She stepped over the threshold, ignoring the alarm bells ringing in her ears. She'd just make sure he was settled in and had everything he needed. Then she'd leave. Really.

"Why, High Priestess... I do believe you're trespassing."

Sophia allowed a small smile to grace her lips. "My Academy. My rooms."

Dante leaned against the frame leading to the bathroom, his presence overtaking the entire interior of the room. Suddenly, the place felt even smaller than it was and it took all of Sophia's self-control not to step back into the relative safety of the cloister.

It had to be the darkness that cast menacing shadows around Dante's muscular form. He was taller than her by at least a foot, yet he hadn't appeared quite so powerful outside. Here, in the claustrophobic interior of the servant's chamber, he seemed larger than life.

A turbulent shimmer of awareness traveled through Sophia's veins, reminding her that she was as powerful as he was. The same animalistic desires ran through them both. The same Alpha urges drove them, and it was that mutated DNA that drew her to him, not his kisses or the careful, almost reverent way in which he touched her.

As long as she kept reminding herself that it was her nature and not her emotions pulling her forward, she could keep a tight grip on her reactions to this man.

Regaining a measure of self-control, Sophia crossed her arms over her breasts. She focused on his silhouette and breathed in his scent. Earthy and rich, it seeped into the filtered air and imbued it with the aroma of male sweat and desire, an irresistible aphrodisiac to any woman. Even one trained to withstand every seductive skill known to mankind.

The Alpha in her, however, knew nothing of counteracting the spell of heat and raw desire woven by an Alpha male. A purr lodged in her chest, tickling the column of her throat.

"Tell me, Priestess..."

His words drifted away into nothingness and she found herself stepping closer, pulled forward by the playful promise in his voice. Somehow, she didn't mind when he dropped the

first part of her title. Just calling her “priestess” seemed intimate, shrinking the distance between them.

He lifted his right hand, showing her a jar she recognized instantly as the container of soothing balm that was a staple of every servant’s room. Used to cool the sting of an instructor’s whip, it was as much a part of the training as the whip itself.

Dante advanced on her, then used his foot to slam the door shut. The sound resonated with finality, causing Sophia to start as her stomach flip-flopped.

He reached down and captured her wrist. Turning her hand over, he dropped the jar into her palm.

“Would helping me relieve the bite of the Captain’s crop cross the boundaries of propriety?”

## Chapter Five

Dante's body heated with the weight of Sophia's gaze as it darted over the planes of his stomach, then drifted lower only to jerk back up to his eyes a moment later.

"Uh..." She cleared her throat, a flare of crimson tinting her high cheekbones. "I don't think I'm qualified for that sort of thing."

"It doesn't take training, Priestess. Just a gentle touch."

Sadness tainted the wry smile tilting her mouth. "Now I know I'm definitely not the right person for the job."

"Come on," he coaxed in a ragged whisper. "I can't reach back there. Not as well as you could."

Sophia swallowed hard, her throat constricting with the effort. Her lips parted, and another jolt of lust rippled through Dante's body in response. His cock was already as hard as he could ever remember it being. If she left, he could take matters into his own hands. Literally. He could wrap both palms around the throbbing shaft and tug on the delicate skin, harder and harder until he spilled his seed all over his stomach in a jet of warm liquid ecstasy, all the while screaming her name.

“Lie down.” She spoke the command so softly he was afraid he misunderstood. When he didn’t move, she nudged his shoulder with her fingertips, guiding him in the direction of the bed.

The contact poured lightning through his veins. It felt as though an electric bolt had slammed into him, sizzling every nerve ending between his shoulder and his groin. A drop of precum leaked down his shaft, making him shiver.

Saints! If that’s what she did to him with one unfocused touch, how could he hope to get through entire minutes of having her palms rubbing, caressing, and soothing his tender flesh?

With a grunt of acknowledgement, Dante ambled over to the bed. He wanted to say something witty, something to remind her that he was the Alpha here, but the best he could do was another groan as his cock pressed into the mattress. The blanket cradled his erection in softness and warmth, making him crave Sophia’s moist heat more than ever.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured as her fingers made brief, feathery contact with his skin.

Dante yanked the pillow propped against the headboard and thrust it beneath his head, gripping it with both hands to keep from grinding his hips into the mattress. “For what?”

“For this.” The cooling sensation of the balm mixed with the scorching heat from Sophia’s palms formed an almost unbearable sensation of pure rapture. It streamed through his blood cells, thrumming along his veins and into his scrotum, where it pulsed like liquid fire, licking the underside of his shaft.

He forced a low, rumbling chuckle from his throat. “Oh, yeah. You should be sorry. Those magic fingers could kill a man.”

“Not for *this*,” she said, gathering up more balm and applying it where the seam of his left buttock met his thigh. “For the wounds. For putting you in a position you should have never been in. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Dante closed his eyes, letting her soft caresses fan the flames of his desire until all his senses were honed in only on her. He could smell her arousal. It had become imprinted on his nose, flooding his lungs with every breath. Her breathing had quickened, coming out in little pants she fought hard to keep under control.

He remembered the musky taste of her cream flowing over his tongue. It had been his anchor while the bursts of fiery pain had flicked along his flesh. He'd challenged himself to keep up with the strokes, to match the Captain's rhythm with his own tongue.

Although the whipping had been genuinely painful, something unexpected had happened when he'd allowed himself to give in to the experience. The pain became secondary. Sophia's pleasure took center stage, and he'd focused all his efforts on her cries of bliss, on the way she dug her fingernails into his scalp, on her pussy's intoxicating responses as he licked, sucked, and nibbled on her tender labia.

He'd still felt the braided switches falling against his ass, but it no longer mattered. What did matter were the languorous, silky strokes of his tongue against Sophia's nether lips, around her clit, and inside her tight channel. He'd licked her everywhere, pouring everything he had into the act as each stroke of the whip flashed through his system, forcing him to delve deeper, to *focus* harder. To please her better.

"Dante?"

The sound of his name on her tongue reached his ears as though cutting through a haze of arousal. It lingered in his mind, teasing him with the possibilities of hearing her voice speak his name that same way again and again, wondering if he'd ever get enough.

She cupped both ass cheeks in her palms, squeezing gently. A sharp flood of pain returned to drift along his skin, bringing him back to the present. "Hmm?"

She swirled the heels of her palms along the base of his spine, then slipped her fingertips sideways to brush the sides of his hips. "I said I was finished."

"Ah. So you are."

*Well, fine.*

But he wasn't finished. Not by a long shot.

Still, she'd made it clear enough that having sex with him wasn't something she was interested in doing. Or rather, wasn't something she *could* do, despite the way her body all but screamed for him to take her. He'd seen the way her nipples pebbled when he came within touching distance, and she couldn't mask the scent of her feminine heat. He knew that if he reached between her legs, he'd find her soaked through, her sex throbbing with the same need that flooded his own veins.

"I also asked you to turn over."

Dante sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. He hadn't heard her make that request, but then he'd been drifting in a sea of euphoria, lost in his memories, weaving his own private fantasy.

"Priestess, if I turn over, there will be more of me that could benefit from your expert touch."

"Dante?"

Ah, there it was again. He hadn't been mistaken. His name sounded magical on her lips.

"Yes?"

"Don't speak."

A chuckle rumbled up from the depths of his soul. He turned over, the sore flesh of his ass tingling as it rubbed against the soft blanket.

His breathing came in shallow gasps. Blood roared in his ears and in his cock. He'd been aroused for so long that his hardened state should have been pure agony. Instead, it heightened his senses, awakening sensations of which he'd never before been aware. Was that her doing, or his?

He didn't know. It didn't matter.

Sophia looked at him with wide, hungry eyes. Her gaze drifted over his face, his chest, his stomach, and stopped at his cock. Unlike last time, she didn't redden or avert her gaze.

Surely, she'd seen hundreds of aroused cocks in her time at the Academy, and he severely doubted she blushed like a schoolgirl at the sight of each one. So why was he different?

It could have been his size, he supposed, but there had to be more to it than that. What was it Ty used to say back on *Enigma*? Seen one, seen 'em all?

He almost chuckled at that. The statement was particularly amusing coming from the only blind pilot in the galaxy. Dante didn't know how many cocks she'd seen with her implants, or whether the male sex organ looked the same to her as it did to someone like Sophia. He and Ty didn't have that kind of relationship.

In fact, he'd never been intimate with anyone on the ship. He thought of them as family. And if there was one thing he'd learned early on, it was that you didn't screw with family. If anything, they were likely to screw you first.

Sophia's fingers hovered just above his cock. Her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed, as though she debated with herself whether to cross that invisible line she'd erected in her mind.

He shifted, angling his hips upward almost imperceptibly. Whether Sophia caught the movement he couldn't be sure, but a moment later she'd wrapped her palm around his length, enveloping his cock in her delicate fist.

She squeezed slightly as her hand pumped up and down his rod, drawing a convulsive shudder from Dante. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together, knowing she meant it when she'd told him not to speak. The slightest word from him could cause her to run out the door, and Saints help him, he couldn't be sure he wouldn't spontaneously combust if she didn't continue to touch him this way.

Tension coiled in his gut and rolled through his body. Every muscle tensed with the effort of holding back his cum. His balls drew up close to his shaft and the familiar tingling of impending orgasm shook him to the core. He could let go, release the rigid control he had in his grip, and let his seed spill all over Sophia's hand.

Still, he held back. It took every ounce of effort he didn't know he possessed to keep from coming, but he used everything at his disposal to do just that. He couldn't watch her. Focusing on her small, feminine hand stroking his large shaft would instantly send him over the edge.

He kept his eyes closed and fisted his hands in the blanket, straining until he could feel the veins in his arms tightening with exertion. Sophia's scent flooded his senses, making his nostrils flare.

He needed her. Craved her. Hungered for her with every part of his being.

The blanket tore. He felt the fabric give way beneath his nails. The part of him that was still fully human nudged him, making it clear he couldn't have ripped the blanket with his nails.

Not nails, then. Claws. He didn't know when that had happened. When had he lost control of the beast inside him? How was it possible, when he still clung on so desperately to his ability to hold back his cum?

And then -- a miracle.

Lips touched his cock. The questions and confusion fled his mind. He could think of nothing but the warmth enveloping the head of his shaft, the tongue sweeping just beneath the underside of the tip to drift over the sensitive skin there.

Sophia took her time, slowly lowering her mouth over the length of his rod. She was the one in control here, and she was making that fact known with every stroke of her soft tongue against his flesh. Despite the rampant need that raged in Dante's groin, a need Sophia couldn't possibly ignore, she would do this her way.



And damn, he wanted her to.

Her fingers dipped lower as her mouth welcomed the entire length of his cock, delving into the crease between his buttocks, spreading them slightly. He moaned at the pain coursing through his limbs. A violent shiver tore through him.

He could feel it now -- the shift lurking just beneath the exterior of his human façade. Could she feel it, too? If so, why wasn't she terrified, or at least put off, by the fur sprouting across his stomach and his elongating muzzle?

Writhing against her lips, Dante rocked his hips up and down, driving his cock deeper inside the wet heat she offered. She took him eagerly, sucked him fiercely, and swirled her tongue up and down the length of his shaft.

A growl escaped Dante's throat. Primal, animalistic need rose up inside him, drawing another cry to echo through the room, forcing his eyes open.

As soon as his gaze landed on Sophia's face, serene and rapturous as she sucked him, he knew he'd made a mistake. The self-control he'd wound so tightly around himself unraveled at the speed of light, flinging the remnants of his lust through his body with violent force.

Dante howled as his climax hit, overtaking him in a potent rush. He struggled to pull out of Sophia's mouth, but she refused to release him, her palms clamping down on his bucking hips, her lips forcing him deeper into her mouth. Spasm after spasm hit in waves of delicious agony, freeing the torrent of seed to gush and flow down her throat.

Her fingernails dug into his skin, giving him something else to anchor on as his orgasm began to ebb. Slowly, she swept her tongue over his shaft and the head of his cock, licking him clean. When she lifted her head and released him, she wiped away the trickle of cum that had dripped from the corner of her lips to her chin with the end of her little finger, and then snuck that between her lips, too.

Dante didn't think he'd ever seen a more erotic sight.

She met his gaze boldly, drawing her lower lip between her teeth as though daring him to say something. No doubt she expected another wry, arrogant retort.

Well, she wouldn't get it. Not this time. He'd paid attention to her warning, especially to those words she'd left unspoken.

Dante opened his arms. The need to shift had subsided along with his orgasm, leaving him wholly in control of himself. He waited, watching her analyze him through narrowed eyelids as though she had no idea what to make of him.

She could leave, of course. She could rise and walk out of the room as though nothing had happened, and no one would be the wiser. But he didn't want her to. As selfish as it sounded, he needed her in his arms. He ached to hold her, if only for a moment.

This was what the Terran government feared; what they tried to abolish through any means necessary. The need for intimacy between two people, for the connection that could only be forged through the closeness and familiarity that came with mind-blowing sex, would always lurk in the hearts of Alphas.

"Just for a moment," Sophia whispered.

She still wore her robe. Drawing the belt loops tighter around her as though for protection, she lowered herself down to the mattress and tucked her body between the wall and Dante. Her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder.

"Just for a moment," she repeated. "Then I'm gone."

He tightened his hold, pulling her closer to his body. Despite her insistence that she'd leave before he could get comfortable, Dante pulled the edge of the blanket over them both anyway, enveloping them in a cocoon of warmth.

Sophia sighed and nestled closer, the exhalation resonating with a sound so foreign that it took Dante a moment to name it.

When he did, the smile blossoming across his lips echoed her sentiment.

*Happiness.*

That wasn't a word Dante had ever associated with Earth. Yet right at this moment, with Sophia snuggled close in his arms, he couldn't remember why not.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The universe stretched out on a boundless sea of black velvet, kept at bay only by a large, impenetrable window and a few hundred tons of heavy steel. The floor vibrated under Sophia's feet. She'd expected more of a lurching motion, but the flight was smooth and even, like floating on a cloud.*

*"I never get tired of the sight of you in my room."*

*Sophia's heart skipped a beat, but she didn't turn around. She didn't have to. Dante's reflection stared back at her from the glassy surface of the window, superimposed upon the shimmering rainbow colors of a nebula.*

*"How was your shift?" she asked as the door slid shut behind him.*

*"Uneventful. There's only so much work for a security chief in outer space. Especially since we haven't seen another vessel in days."*

*Sophia shook her head. "I don't know about you, but I've had enough excitement to last me a lifetime."*

*Dante's image warped and waved as he stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist to pull her against his chest. His palms traveled up the side of her ribcage to cup her breasts. "Are you sure you couldn't use just a little more excitement? Maybe the kind that comes with lots of heavy breathing? Perhaps the occasional moan?"*

*She chuckled and slid her hands over his, encouraging him to squeeze the firm globes. Even cradled in his broad, masculine palms, her breasts felt bigger than she remembered. Heavier, too.*

*"If I must," she said, feigning a heavy sigh.*

*Dante chuckled. "Such a good sport you are, doing your wifely duty without a word of protest. Don't worry, Mrs. Lotton. This will be over before you know it."*

*She laughed at that, and the carefree sound echoed through the interior of the small room, bouncing off the metallic walls and sleek steel furniture.*

*Freeing her right breast, Dante skimmed his fingertips over her stomach, dragging her own hand along for the ride. She followed the reverent motions of his palm as it caressed her swollen belly to dip lower until he could press his hand against her mound.*

*She moaned and tossed her head back against his shoulder, steeling herself for the pleasure already beginning to course through her body. "Saints, how I love --"*

The piercing sound of a door chime tore through Sophia's mind, jerking her awake in the span of a heartbeat. She lurched to a sitting position, bringing the blanket to her chest as she struggled to make sense of her surroundings.

These weren't her quarters.

Dread pooled in the pit of her stomach. Afraid of what she'd see when she glanced at the other side of the bed, Sophia flexed her shoulders and stretched out her right arm, which was tense and stiff from sleep. At last, she allowed her gaze to slid along the hills and valleys created by the blanket to the slumbering form of the man beside her.

Her breath halted in her throat. She'd thought Dante beautiful before, but lying here in the semi-dark, a sliver of sunlight streaming through the curtains to illuminate the high ridge of his scarred brow and tumble over his leather collar, he looked magnificent. His lips were slightly parted, and the low rumble of a deep snore echoed from his throat.

Against her better judgment, she'd begun considering nestling back in the crook of his arm for a few minutes longer, when the door chime pealed through the room again.

This time, Dante blinked his eyes open. A broad smile curved his lips at the sight of her. "Good morning, gorgeous."

"It's not morning," she shot back, fighting to ignore the thrill that ran through her at the sound of his husky compliment. "I only lay down for a few minutes. It's probably late afternoon, though, which means I'm desperately needed at the showing."

"Far be it for me to keep you from your duties." His smirk didn't waver. If anything, it only seemed to grow broader until all she could see was a perfect set of white teeth and a feral, almost predatory grin gleaming in the shadows.

Sophia rolled her eyes and slid forward along the length of the bed. "Most of the Academy's at your disposal. Feel free to wander a little and get to know the place. Any section of the building that's off-limits will be easy to spot, as the doors won't open to your hand imprint."

"Mmm...intriguing."

The interest in Dante's tone didn't escape her. She forced a sense of casual ease into her voice. "What is?"

"The fact that you'd feel the need to keep some rooms locked away from prying eyes."

"Many of our patrons demand privacy, whether they've initiated an acquisition or simply want a demonstration of our graduates' talents," Sophia said as she retied the sash holding her robe together. The garment was a mess of wrinkles, but there wasn't much she could do about that now. With any luck, she'd have time to swing by her quarters and change before the first patron decided to have official purchase papers drawn up and she had to be present for the negotiation phase.

"That's all it is? The need for privacy?"

Sophia opened her mouth, but the infernal peal of the door chime silenced her before she could say more. Whoever was out there didn't seem satisfied with merely the chime the third time around. A rapid series of thuds shook the doorframe.

"*Mon patron!*" Sophia pressed her hand to the panel to the right of the door and watched it slide seamlessly aside. "Someone better be dying out here, Brianna."

The guard's well-trained gaze took in Sophia's disheveled state, then slid past her to Dante, who'd propped himself on an elbow to watch Sophia move around the room. She cleared her throat. "Not yet, but I believe Captain Jolen has threatened something to that effect if we keep him waiting much longer."

Sophia's spine went rigid. "Why is he back so soon?"

Brianna lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "He said you'd be expecting him."

"Tomorrow!" Sophia threw up her hands in exasperation. "We were expecting him tomorrow. I haven't prepared a training room for his use and Dante..." Her voice faltered. She licked her suddenly dry lips. "Dante's not ready."

"I don't think he's going to care much for that excuse this time around," Dante said.

The low whirr of the motorized closet alerted her that he was on his feet and rummaging through the available clothes. Judging by Brianna's furtive glance past her, Sophia guessed he hadn't bothered to cover himself as he crossed the length of the room.

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, remembering the taste of his cock in her mouth, the feel of the thick shaft as it settled on her tongue, the way it spasmed and pulsed when the burst of seed spilled from the tiny slit to flow down her throat.

"I apologize for disturbing you, M'Lady. We searched everywhere before coming here. Captain Jolen insisted on having you bring Dante yourself. We didn't think to look here for both of you." A flush crept up the other woman's cheeks. Brianna had been working at the Academy for years, yet she'd never gotten used to the blatant sexuality of the place.

Sophia couldn't blame her. Anyone who hadn't been trained as a pleasure servant still had the enviable ability to be awed by sex and all it entailed. Priestesses typically fell somewhere in between. As the Academy's trainers, they were required to familiarize themselves with every nuance of the carnal arts. However, none of them had experienced the thrill of sex for the sake of pleasure. They offered themselves willingly to the pleasure

servants in the name of the training and as part of their worship of Saint Valentine, but that was out of duty rather than passion.

Until earlier today, Sophia had never done anything even half as impulsive as sucking Dante's cock for the sheer enjoyment of the act. She'd wanted to atone for her part in his captivity, for the hardship he'd have to endure at Captain Jolen's hands. More than that, however, she'd wanted to bring him pleasure.

Only she hadn't imagined that the act of making him come, an act she'd performed at rituals and gatherings countless times in the past, would bring her satisfaction as well. And she certainly hadn't imagined she'd want to curl up with him afterward. Saints, she hadn't done anything so reminiscent of her Alpha nature in...well, *never*.

"I wasn't gone that long, Bri. You could have told Captain Jolen to wait. As it is, he'll have to wait anyway. I have to attend to the showing and make sure the patrons are pleased before they leave for the evening."

Confusion etched itself between Brianna's blonde brows. "The showing's over, M'Lady. The patrons all left when you didn't return. Yesterday."

Sophia gaped at the woman. "That's absurd. I wasn't gone that long," she repeated. Spinning around on her heel, she fixed Dante with a narrow glare. "What did you do to me?"

Dante crossed his arms over his bare chest. He'd pulled on a pair of linen pants made for a much smaller man. They stretched across his groin, drawing her attention to the impressive bulge that strained against the material between his legs. The pants' hem reached halfway down his calf.

"My cum has magical properties. Or didn't you know? One drop can knock a woman out cold."

It took Sophia a full ten seconds to figure out he was teasing her. She ground her teeth together, a muscle twitching in her jaw. "Not funny."

How was it possible that she'd slept through the night and part of the morning without waking once? She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly. Or for that matter, the last time she'd dreamed.

*Oh, mon patron...that dream.*

The memory of the dream shook her to the core. A trembling shudder traveled up the length of her spine, awakening sensations that had felt incredibly real while she'd slept beside Dante. She remembered the easy way she'd laughed at his teasing remarks, as though she'd become used to his irreverent quips. And the way he'd touched her, and called her *Mrs. Lotton*. And, oh, Saints, her rounded stomach...

She forced herself to draw a deep, shuddering breath and release it on a soul-cleansing sigh. A dream. That's all it had been. Dreams held no weight in the realm of the living. They weren't important. And they certainly didn't predict the future.

Dante would leave as soon as Faye was able to get him off Earth, and Sophia would return all her attention to worshipping Saint Valentine. This was where her destiny lay. On Earth, with her patron Saint watching over her. And if it so happened that Dante was to be the man whose seed would finally take root within her womb? That was a very real possibility she couldn't ignore.

After years of participating in the Lighting of the Flame ceremony and failing her patron Saint miserably each time, she refused to let her emotions for Dante cloud her judgment. She'd already found her Flame. Now all she had to do was convince him to stick around long enough to go through with the ceremony, and keep him out of the Captain's greedy clutches in the interim.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger did little to keep Sophia's growing headache at bay. "How long has the Captain been here?"

"A couple of hours, M'Lady. He's in the *Sanglant*. And he's not happy."



Sophia's eyelids drifted closed as she forced her ragged breathing under control. Of course the Captain would choose *that* room of all those available. "No, I don't imagine he would be. See to it that he's served refreshments from the kitchen. Fresh strawberries, if we have them. And a bottle of champagne. Spare no expense. It might not soothe him completely, but I'm hoping it'll calm him down enough that he won't take his ire out on Dante when we arrive." Brianna hesitated, so Sophia made a flicking gesture with her fingertips. "Go. We'll be there shortly."

When the woman disappeared into the inner cloister, Sophia spun on her heel to face Dante. "You can't meet him like this. You haven't been trained and the Captain is...he's..."

"Volatile?" Dante filled in for her.

"Something like that," Sophia acknowledged. "He trains pleasure servants to switch from their submissive personalities to dominant ones. It's technically a role reversal, and something we don't encourage here at the Academy. Every pleasure servant is created with the submissive gene ingrained deep in his or her psyche. An obedient slave is a valuable slave."

Dante's lip curled in distaste. "I've seen the way people treat their obedient slaves. Frankly, I'm not sure what this captain guy's doing is such a bad thing, especially if he's teaching servants to think for themselves and fight back when the occasion calls for it."

Sophia shook her head. "It doesn't work that way. A pleasure servant trained to become a Dominant can perform the act, but he'll revert back to his submissive tendencies, especially in an emergency. If his life or safety is threatened, he'll cower and plead rather than fight back, simply because it's what he's been instructed to do here at the Academy. Even the captain can't change someone's attitude so drastically, and I think he's come to realize that. Which is exactly why he wants you." She blew out a breath that ruffled the bangs falling into her eyes. "You're different, Dante, and he knows it. You can give him what he craves."

Anxiety flittered across his features for an instant. It dissipated quickly, leaving Sophia to wonder whether she'd imagined it all along. The cocky grin returned, and with it, the Dante she'd come to know. He strode toward her purposefully and swept her off her feet, lifting her in the air and pressing a firm kiss to her mouth.

She barely had time to react before his tongue slipped its way past her defenses to sweep against hers. A moment later, he withdrew and placed her back on her feet. The world tilted and the room spun around her as she gasped for breath. The feel of his mouth on hers made her lips tingle, and she pressed her fingertips against the spot.

"What about you, Priestess?" Dante asked, his crooked smile stealing the breath from her lungs. "Can I give you what you crave?"

She shook her head, though not in answer. "You're incorrigible."

"I've been called worse."

Sophia stepped over the threshold and into the cloister. Rays of early afternoon sunshine beamed down through the latticed roof. The scent of blossoming orchids filled the air. Unlike the synthetic, year-round blooming plants that grew outside the Academy walls, the flora in the garden and the inner cloister was as real as it came.

Sophia drew in a deep breath, but instead of orchid, another scent dominated her senses. The musk of aroused male blended with the spice of sweat. Far from being unpleasant, it caused a trickle of cream to drip along her inner folds.

She drew in a sharp breath as they rounded a corner, remembering the way Dante had looked when he'd hovered on the precipice of climax. Her hand shot out and she gripped his wrist, stopping him in mid-stride. "You can't come."

Dante raised an eyebrow. "You want to take my place?"

"No. I mean, you can't *come*. Climax. Orgasm. Shoot your load."

He looked at her as though she'd lost her mind. "Jealous, Priestess?"

“No!” Aggravation pooled in the pit of her stomach until she was ready to stomp her foot in annoyance. “You can’t control your inner beast. Not when you’re that close. If you let yourself come, he’ll know what you are, even without the use of his fancy DNA scanning tools.”

Dante looked skeptical, his mouth quirking upward in a smile. “I can control myself when I have to, Sophia. I hate to break it to you, but I’ve come before. With humans, no less. None have ever been the wiser as to my true form.”

That admission gave her pause. A sliver of something akin to true jealousy settled low in her belly. She pushed it aside, focusing on Dante’s words instead. “That can’t be true. I saw you in the garden when you were watching me. I could tell you were close. You were...” *Beautiful*. “Changing.”

“I was not,” he said, almost defiantly. “I know how various races across the galaxy treat those like me. Some are kind, others are indifferent, but there are those who’d wipe me out in an instant just because of the DNA that flows through my bloodstream. Trust me. I know what’s at stake.”

Sophia swallowed hard. “I don’t think you do.”

Before she could change her mind, she let her fingers slide from Dante’s wrist to his palm and wrapped them around his hand. If he was surprised, he didn’t show it.

She turned right, away from the training rooms where Captain Jolen waited and led them through a large archway that gave way to a narrow passage. To his credit, Dante didn’t ask questions. He let her pull him through a series of double doors, each requiring a more significant security check than the one before it.

She paused in front of the last door. Unlike the other doors in the temple, which were mostly wood etched with elaborate carvings depicting Saint Valentine in various states of debauchery, this one was made of pure metal alloy. Impenetrable, and shielded from Terran officials’ heat scans. For all intents and purposes, the room didn’t exist.

“Can I trust you, Dante?” Sophia whispered as she pressed her palm to the security panel and leaned in for a retina scan.

“You know you can.”

She swallowed hard. A breeze of filtered air blew from an overhead vent, tousling her bangs. “Not good enough. I need to hear you say it.”

“You can trust me, Sophia.”

She closed her eyes, analyzing every nuance of his voice. She had no way to know for certain whether he was telling the truth. Not really. But she hoped she’d judged him well enough to risk...*everything*.

The door slid open with a dull hiss.

“Sophia!”

Saints, there was no sweeter sound than the voices of half a dozen children hollering her name in unison. She made it as far as the middle of the room before the youngsters leapt upon her, hugging her and squealing happily as they wrapped their small arms around her waist.

She ruffled the hair of a blond, blue-eyed boy named Michael. “Children, I’d like you to meet a friend.” She glanced up and met Dante’s stunned gaze. “This is Dante. He’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“Hi, Dante!”

The cheerful chorus drew a genuine smile from Dante. There was nothing cocky about this grin. Instead, it showed surprise and pleasure, widening when the kids abandoned Sophia to attack him, instead.

They leapt upon him with big, exuberant hugs. Astonishment flared across Dante’s face for only an instant, before the kids knocked him to the ground. His laugh echoed through the cavernous room and bounced off the metal walls.

Sophia's hands shook as she walked to stand beside him, so she folded her arms across her breasts to keep him from noticing. Looking down, she met his questioning gaze.

"You wanted to know what a Flame is. As I told you earlier, a Flame is someone who takes part in the most important ceremony conducted at the Academy in worship of Saint Valentine. What I didn't mention is that a Flame is the only one who can claim a Head Priestess. He's a suppliant. An *inamorato*." She smiled at the sight of the children tumbling on top of Dante. "And if the Saint grants it, he's also a father."

## Chapter Six

The filthy whores were ignoring him. No, not just ignoring him. They'd *locked* him inside a training room like a common slave!

Neo paced the length of the cavernous chamber, hands balled into fists at his sides. How dare they treat him worse than a common patron? Didn't they know how much pull he had with the Central Command authorities? How he could have them storm into this place and tear it down brick by brick if he as much as suspected the priestesses were harboring Terran enemies or Alpha carriers?

A low growl escaped his gritted teeth. He'd been in this room for almost three hours. Three fucking *hours!* With the door fused shut from the outside. Someone had to pay for this gross insult. At the moment, he didn't care who.

Draining the remaining contents of champagne from a two-toned goblet, he tossed the glass against the wall. It shattered instantly, spraying the marble floor with shards of crystal. For a moment, he allowed himself to picture the High Priestess on her knees, the glass slicing her flawless skin as she sucked him off.

His cock hardened, pulsing sleek and hot against his bare stomach. He'd discarded his armored uniform, along with his concealed weapon, long ago. He wouldn't need either for what he had in mind.

Neo trailed his palms along the lush breasts of a bronze sculpture as he grew harder. It was a woman's life-sized nude form, delicately sculpted to showcase high breasts dangling like two perfect pendulums as she bent over. Behind her, a man -- presumably Saint Valentine himself -- thrust a thick spiral dildo into her. With one hand, he held her wrists firmly behind her back, which only caused her breasts to jut out further as she bent over. The woman's face had been carved with exquisite care. Her eyes had rolled back into her head and her mouth formed a perfect "O" at the level of Neo's crotch.

If only that luscious mouth hadn't been made of bronze...

Not that he was desperate enough to thrust his cock into a statue, no matter how life-like it seemed, but he needed *something* wrapped around his dick. Anger boiled in his veins, making him even harder. Adrenaline surged through him, pouring the ire into his balls, stiffening his rod until it seemed to be made of the same solid material as the sculpture.

The hiss of the door opening alerted Neo to someone's presence. Aggravation flared anew as he spun around, ready to rail at whatever minor servant they'd sent in with food or drink this time.

But it was the High Priestess herself who strode through the door, followed closely by Dante.

Her face was flushed, her eyes fever-bright. The smile that tilted her lips looked anything but genuine. "I apologize for keeping you waiting. We were...needed elsewhere."

Neo waited until the door slid closed before replying. When he spoke, the words came out gritty and hoarse. "I don't enjoy being caged like a wild animal. And any excuse you utter for Dante's absence is irrelevant. The only reason he'd be kept away from me would be if he

had a prior engagement. I will not tolerate anyone else touching my servant. My deposit makes him mine exclusively. Or have you forgotten?"

"No one's touched him except for the purposes of training, I assure you." Long eyelashes shrouded the High Priestess's eyes as she spoke, making it impossible for Neo to gauge the truth of her words.

Could she be stupid enough to lie to him? She was brazen and bold, confident in her patron Saint's protection, but would she take her brash assuredness so far as to blatantly violate the Academy's contract with him?

Neo forced himself to take a deep breath. He was getting too worked up over this. No doubt the High Priestess wanted him agitated. It would throw him off and make him careless. She still had the right to refuse his bid for Dante, if she thought Neo was capable of harming the servant in any way. Patrons owned their pleasure slaves in every sense of the word, yet there were rules that governed proper behavior. The Terran government didn't tolerate abuse.

It simply wasn't profitable.

He swallowed past the irritation lodged in his throat and flexed his fingers, relaxing his tense muscles. He didn't want to hurt Dante, anyway. At least, not in any way that would cause the man permanent harm.

He wanted to push this unusual servant past his boundaries, to shove him hard through the point of no return. A slow smile replaced the scowl that had been straining Neo's features.

He'd do just that. Starting now.

"Take off those pants," he instructed. "They're ridiculous."

Dante's eyes were hooded against the crimson light flickering from overhead neon lights. The illumination in the room had been toned down to a shimmering, dull level, just



strong enough to add an eerie atmosphere to a chamber whose name translated directly to “bloody.”

Perhaps it had been named for the condition of the servants as they exited the room. Judging by the instruments of pain and pleasure sprinkled liberally among the statues depicting various BDSM techniques, Neo didn’t doubt that the room’s designation had been chosen in direct correlation to its purpose.

While abuse wasn’t tolerated by either the Academy or the government, playful bondage and the liberal application of pain for the purpose of pleasure wasn’t just abided, it was encouraged.

There was a fine line between abuse and playfulness, one the Academy’s patrons often straddled. As long as no complaints were issued, though, no one seemed to care in which direction a patron leaned.

When Dante made no move to obey, Neo stalked around him like a predator assessing its prey. His gaze took in the fine details of muscle and sinew stretched taut over a broad chest and strong, massive arms. Despite Dante’s size, the man held himself with a fluidity born of self-assuredness. Even when exposed to Neo’s obvious displeasure, he didn’t flinch or tense. He simply stood there, as though what Neo wanted or didn’t want was of no concern to him.

“You didn’t train him too well, now, did you?” Neo growled between clenched teeth, directing his question to Sophia, who stood in front of Dante like a human shield. One almost a foot shorter than the man she sought to protect. The image would have been amusing if she hadn’t been standing in Neo’s way.

“I told you he wasn’t ready,” Sophia shot back, her black eyes glimmering with barely disguised hostility. “You’re welcome to leave, and return in a couple of weeks. He’ll be much better prepared by then, I assure you.”

Neo clasped his hand around Sophia's throat so quickly that she barely had time to react. Her eyes widened and a small cry escaped her throat. Her skin felt warm beneath his fingertips, echoing the sensation of raw heat stirring in his groin.

"Don't play with me, Priestess. You won't like the results."

From the corner of his eye, Neo saw Dante tense. The man's eyes narrowed and veins stood out sharply along his biceps. Neo didn't have to glance down to know his hands were clenched into fists.

Ah. So *this* got a reaction from the otherwise stoic pleasure servant. Interesting. He filed that away, knowing he might be able to use Dante's obvious attachment to Sophia in some way when an opportunity presented itself.

For now, though, the Priestess wasn't the one who interested him. Dante was different from all the other pleasure servants trained at the Academy. Perhaps different enough to warrant being entrusted with the Academy's secrets.

Since Sophia would never willingly reveal what she and her kin were hiding, Neo knew he had to find other means to extract the information. At the moment, Dante was his best bet.

Abruptly, Neo released Sophia. She stumbled backward a step, her hand going to her throat.

"Leave us," Neo commanded. "I need some time alone to get to know my servant."

He watched as Sophia darted a glance at Dante, her hand rubbing distractedly at the flesh reddened by Neo's ruthless grip. Their eyes met. Held.

Sophia broke the connection first. She straightened her spine and leveled Neo with a firm gaze. "He's not your possession yet, Captain. I'm staying."

Neo opened his mouth to protest then thought better of it. A slow smile spread across his features. So the Priestess wanted to watch, did she? A shiver of anticipation ran down

Neo's spine. Saints, this was even better than he'd hoped. With any luck, he'd get everything he wanted right in this very room.

The Academy's secrets. A natural Dom.

*Everything. Right here. Right now.*

Fighting to keep his enthusiasm in check, Neo crossed his arms over his chest. He looked from Dante to Sophia, then back again. "Strip. Both of you."

Sophia's jaw inched up a notch. "I'm a High Priestess of the Order of Saint Valentine. You can't command me. I'm simply here to observe and ensure you're treating your servant-to-be in accordance to the pre-purchase contract."

Neo moved slowly, deliberately, until he stood directly behind Sophia and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "No deal, Priestess. I know the contract as well as you do. Better, perhaps, since I've been studying my copy all night."

He hadn't been able to sleep more than an hour or two all night because his thoughts had continued to stray to Dante. The man had so much promise. Even the way his mouth had wrapped around Neo's cock to suck him with such untrained precision had been a testament to his natural dominant abilities. He could submit, but not willingly, and certainly not out of his own desire to do so.

When images of Dante's ass flexing and reddening as Neo's blows carved delicate stripes across the pale flesh had become too much to bear, he'd resorted to reading the eighty-page contract in the hopes that it might alleviate some of the constant need simmering in his groin.

But the Priestess didn't need to know all that. "I'm entitled to privacy while I assess Dante, just as any other patron would be. After all, purchasing a slave is a big decision, and not one to be made lightly. But since I'm such a nice guy, I'll allow you to stay. For a price."

Though Neo's cheek was pressed to Sophia's hair, he was able to see Dante shift from foot to foot. Neo knew Dante couldn't hear what he was saying, and it had to be driving him

mad. For a disconcerting moment, Neo wondered if the man was considering lunging at him and bashing his skull in with his bare hands.

Hell, Dante certainly had the ability to do him harm. At least a head taller, he also possessed the kind of feral strength Neo had never encountered in a Terran citizen. Men were usually bred for purpose and efficiency. Even military men like himself depended on technology rather than sheer brawn alone to get them through a fight.

Still, there was something about Dante that reminded Neo a lot of himself. Sure, they looked different. Dante's head of blond curls was a direct contrast to Neo's long black locks. And while Neo took pride in the taut firmness of his body's lean lines, he knew Dante's rippling muscles were better defined than his own. As for his cock...well, Neo held no illusions that they were a match in that department, either.

They'd clearly been created in separate laboratories, for particular purposes. But there was something in the man's steady resolve and the way he refused to take orders with a grateful smile that tugged at Neo's self-control.

He had to have this man. Had to possess him, to make him his. In every possible way.

Saints, could he finally, after years of searching, have found a servant worthy of receiving his unique brand of training? A man who could wield a whip as thought it was an extension of his hand? One who could attach nipple clamps without whimpering and thrust an anal toy in a back passage with the rough determination of a born Dominant?

Excitement surged through him, making his cock throb. He couldn't wait to find out.

"I won't submit to you," Sophia said, jerking Neo out of his reverie. This close, he could make out the slight tremor in the Priestess's voice, though he knew she'd tried for a calm, authoritative tone.

A low, rumbling laugh erupted from Neo's chest. He pressed his cock against the base of her spine, letting her feel his intoxicating need. His head reeled with lust and fervent, unfettered hope.

“It’s not me you’ll be submitting to, Priestess.” He raised a hand and pointed past her to the doorway, where Dante looked ready to put those sleek muscles to use. “It’s him.”

“Strip.”

Until that very moment, Sophia hadn’t known one word could elicit such a maelstrom of emotions in her. Such a simple word. The captain’s word -- his command.

Spoken by Dante.

*That* made all the difference. She could resist the arrogant Captain -- Master -- Jolen. Sure, he had the ability to order half the Central Command officials to storm into her Academy, but he wouldn’t do it without at least a shred of solid proof. And that, she wasn’t willing to give him.

Dante, on the other hand... Her gaze raked over his body, settling on the firm bulge between his powerful thighs. After meeting the children, he’d agreed to do everything in his power to remain aware of his inner impulse to shift at all times. She still didn’t think he believed her assertion about being unable to control himself, but there was too much at stake to ignore the possibility that losing control could cost them everything that mattered.

Everything she’d worked so hard to keep safe.

Her hand went to the sash draped across her waist. She tugged at one end and it unraveled, baring a strip of skin down her middle. Dante’s gaze darted over the newly uncovered flesh to linger on her pussy.

She groomed herself daily as custom dictated, but this morning she hadn’t had time, between waking up in Dante’s bed and meeting with the insistent Captain. For a moment, she worried about the appearance of her neatly-trimmed curls. Steeling herself for Dante’s inspection, she pulled the robe back and allowed it to drift over her arms to pool onto the floor.

“Stunning, isn’t she?” the captain said, his gaze raking her body. A shiver crept up her spine, though the emotions it stirred in her weren’t what she’d expected.

She was used to men’s appreciative stares. She’d encountered them for years, ever since reaching the age of majority and taking her place among the other priestesses. *This*, however, was different.

She felt exposed. More so because baring herself hadn’t been her decision. She’d been ordered to do so, and for the first time in her entire life, she’d obeyed someone other than her patron Saint.

Sucking in a breath between her teeth, Sophia felt her nipples harden under scrutiny. Heat swirled around her breasts, as though invisible fingers coaxed strands of arousal and bound her with them, until she was hyperaware of every trembling nerve ending coming to life across the surface of her skin.

She was about to surrender control of her own free will. The knowledge frightened and confused her, but it also excited her beyond belief.

Dante had agreed that in order to keep the captain from becoming interested in what went on at the Academy -- and why they’d insisted on keeping him locked in the training room while on the premises -- they had to distract him. Fast.

They’d known the captain would want to train Dante...and what better way than to provide him with a willing submissive on whom to practice?

Sophia had argued she was the best choice. No man was allowed to touch her without her express permission. More importantly, no man was allowed to fuck her except as part of strict rituals performed in worship. Everyone knew that -- even the captain. She was certain that despite his insistence that she submit to Dante, he wouldn’t -- *couldn’t* -- force her to betray her patron Saint.

But, oh, how she wanted to. The slick wetness between her legs spoke volumes about the inner torment clawing at her soul. She’d spent her life doing what was expected of her.

Just once, she wanted to give in to the desperate need that filled her, threatening to send her over the edge.

Yet, if she tumbled, she took Dante with her. As long as he couldn't fuck her or watch her be fucked, she hoped he could call on every ounce of self-control he possessed to keep from relenting to the bliss of a shuddering orgasm. He had to keep a tight leash on his inner beast, and it was her duty to make sure he didn't give in and doom them all.

She only wished she could share some of her own self-control with him. Hell, she hadn't shifted in years. It had been so long, she wasn't sure she even remembered how. And yet...there was something about the feral grace flexing Dante's muscles as he strained at the peak of climax, when his body rippled with the rampant need to transform, that had stolen her breath.

Envy had pierced her heart for a brief moment as she'd watched him in the throes of his release. She'd never been that free, that accepting of who -- or *what* -- she was. She was master over her inner beast, not the other way around. Never in her entire life had she felt the stir of a shift without consciously initiating the change herself.

"Look at her," the captain instructed.

Sophia swallowed hard as she lowered her gaze, no longer able to handle the fierce scrutiny in Dante's eyes.

"See the way she's ducking her head, ever so slightly? The Priestess has a genuine submissive tendency, like all good pleasure servants."

"She's not a servant," Dante growled. She almost smiled at the possessive way he rejected what the captain had said.

"Sure she is. Just a different breed, but created in a laboratory along with the rest of them and instilled with the same traits as any other servant. Docile behavior, an eagerness to please, and the ability to find pleasure in pain."

As though to punctuate his words, the captain strolled behind her and gave her ass a solid smack. She jerked upright, her spine stiffening as pain blossomed in her right cheek. Wetness flooded her core and along with it, the unmistakable aroma of spicy female arousal.

“What did I tell you?” She couldn’t see the captain’s face, but she could hear the pride in his voice. “She loves it. Just like the rest of them.”

Sophia stifled the urge to roll her eyes. Oh, if he only knew just how different she was from the pleasure servants they trained on Academy grounds. Thanks to Saint Valentine’s ritualistic demands, she’d been born of a priestess mother and an Alpha father, formed from conception with the traits and abilities that marked her as a deviant on Earth.

How ironic, then, that the submissive tendencies that made pleasure servants so valuable had been part of her genetic make-up as well. A natural addition, or the Saint’s way of toying with her? She didn’t know. Until today, she wouldn’t have thought of her patron Saint as a cruel deity. Now, knowing the captain would be able to draw on her innermost desires and use them against Dante, she was no longer sure that her patron was as benign as he seemed.

“Come here,” Dante said.

Another order, delivered in that same sultry, expectant tone. How could she resist?

She moved away from the Captain and met Dante halfway across the room. Keeping her gaze level with his had become a task too difficult to complete, and she lowered her head until she was staring at Dante’s bare feet.

Sliding two fingers beneath her chin, he raised her face to his. She watched him expectantly as he lowered his mouth until it gently brushed her lips. “I’d never hurt you,” he murmured against her mouth a split-second before kissing her with a savage passion mirroring her own raging torrent of need.

“Enough of that.”



Something metallic rattled off in the distance, too far away for Sophia to discern what it was. Dante pulled back first, leaving her with nothing but the ghostly impression of his lips and the taste of him lingering on her tongue.

“Bring her here, then cuff her.”

*Cuff her?* He couldn’t mean...

*Oh, Saints.*

Sophia suddenly felt light-headed. Dante grabbed her wrist and pulled her along after him until they stood beside Captain Jolen, who held a pair of antique handcuffs in his hand. “I’ll bind her. You need to finally take off those pants.”

Dante looked like he was about to argue then thought better of it. Shedding his linen pants quickly, he tossed them aside, not caring where they landed. As luck would have it, the material got hooked on the bulbous tip of Saint Valentine’s massive cock and hung from the bronze sculpture like a defiant reminder of what was to come.

Captain Jolen yanked her wrists and pressed them behind her back with much less force than she’d expected. Sophia’s breath halted in her throat as she stared at the cage stretched out before her. The handcuffs closed with a snap. The captain adjusted them, tightening until the metal edges bit into her skin.

She knew every instrument in this room intimately. She’d been bound in most of them, and she’d used every one on the servants she’d trained. The cage, however, had always been one instrument of pleasure/pain she’d avoided at all costs.

Sophia’s head swam, confusion and slivers of terror zinging through her veins. “N-no. No,” she repeated, louder this time.

She might as well have been talking to one of the bronze statues. No one answered her plea, but she thought she heard a low chuckle. The captain, no doubt. Dante would never laugh at her discomfort.

Funny, how she was so certain of that, though she had no real reason to be. She'd only known him for a couple of days, yet every mutated cell in her body screamed at her to trust him.

She peered down at the alarming proportion of the cage. The entire purpose of the tool was to reinforce the slave's loss of control. Trapped between slender metal bars, the slave had no room to move, no ability to free herself from the tight constraints.

Dante's palm at the small of her back brought some much-needed courage into her quivering limbs.

"Do it, Sophia," he whispered in her ear. "Let go."

She shook her head. She didn't want to let go. She wanted to remain in full control, to be the one uttering orders and watching as men rushed to obey them. And yet, the idea of allowing herself to be at the mercy of two impossibly determined, arrogant men made her limbs grow weak.

"This was your idea, Priestess," Captain Jolen reminded her. "You're welcome to leave at any time. I'm sure Dante can keep me entertained in your absence."

A fresh wave of panic flooded her body, tightening her throat. She couldn't leave Dante alone with this man. She *wouldn't*.

Inwardly reciting a prayer to Saint Valentine, Sophia sank to her knees, then slid forward across the metal bars of the cage.

The enclosure had been created for a woman of her approximate size: average height, with full breasts and a narrow waist. Her curves molded to the unyielding metal. The bars dug into her skin. Her nipples peeked through the slender bars of the curved shapes created to accommodate her breasts, while thicker bars closed around her thighs.

The hinges of the cage squeaked as the captain lowered the lid. Sophia's nails dug into her palms. More metal encased her back and torso, leaving only her head, her ass, and her

pussy bare of restraints. The structure of the cage had her on her knees, bent at the waist, facing the door.

Had the room begun to spin? Her vision wavered, the statues rippling and undulating before her eyes. And still, despite the hysteria lodged in her chest -- or perhaps, absurdly enough, because of it -- her pussy grew damp and sticky. A trickle of cream dripped down her inner thigh, her body betraying her with every breath.

She'd wanted to participate because Dante needed her, but she hadn't imagined the captain's tastes would run to such extremes. The feeling of being encased from all sides, trapped to the rampant desires of two men, neither of whom cared much about obeying Saint Valentine's wishes and treating his High Priestess with the respect she deserved...it was almost too much.

Her gaze jerked up from the floor and she found herself staring at Dante's thick shaft. His hand was closed around it, sliding from tip to base, pulling on the delicate skin with each smooth stroke.

It was close enough that she could almost reach the head with the tip of her tongue if she tried. She could make out every nuance of the perfect rod, from the blue veins snaking up its length to the drop of precum dotting the tip.

"She's earned a taste." The captain's palm flattened across the curve of her ass. She stiffened, preparing for a blow that didn't come. "Go ahead. Let her take you in her mouth."

Dante smoothed a strand of her hair behind her ear then cupped the back of her head. She glanced up at him, meeting his eyes. They glimmered, turning into gold-speckled feline orbs for a fraction of a second before smoothing back to their pale green color.

Sophia's heart hammered so hard against her breastbone she was sure even the captain could hear it.

*Hold on, Dante.*

Saints, how she wished the Alpha mutation came with telepathic abilities. She desperately wanted to reassure him, but the only thing she could do from her spot in the cage was stretch her neck as far as the metal bars would allow and sweep her tongue around the fine skin of his scrotal sac.

Dante sucked in a breath and tightened his fingers in her hair, drawing her closer. His shaft flattened upward, trapped between his belly and her face. She pressed her lips against the underside of his cock, then ran her tongue along the firm length from the bottom to the top, sliding back and forth just beneath the head.

She didn't want to take his entire length in her mouth. If she did, there was no way she could expect him to hold back his natural urge to release his seed and let it spill down her throat.

"Pull her hair. Hard."

Sophia heard the order a moment before her head was yanked back. Her pussy clenched, an instant reaction to Dante's aggressive behavior.

Dante thrust his hips forward, sliding his cock up and down a fraction of an inch along the seam of her lips. She opened to him, slipping her tongue along his length, pausing to dip into the tiny slit and sweep a drop of salty precum into her mouth.

She licked a path down the flat base of his stomach, dipping into the coarse curls and burrowing her nose in the blond thatch. As she inhaled, she allowed his scent to drift inside her, imprinting itself on her senses. Musky and slightly spicy, tinged with the unmistakable aroma of masculine sweat and arousal, it seemed to burrow deep into her core and pulse outward, drenching her already slick nether lips in more heat and sticky cream.

His muscles tensed, corded. She could feel the amount of self-control he expended, knew what it cost him to hold back.

Rubbing her cheek across his shaft, she felt her breasts grow heavy with need. Her nipples stiffened, sharp little points dipping through the metal bars. She wished she could

squirm to alleviate some of the pressure building in her body, but that only dug the metal deeper into her skin, bringing another level of discomfort to the pleasurable sensations coursing through her.

A hand brushed across the lips of her sex, drawing her up short. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Very good. Move back.”

Dante did as he was told. Sophia strained forward, hunting for the lost warmth of his body pressed against her face.

“Addictive, isn’t he?” It was the first time the captain had addressed her since putting her in the cage, and Sophia started, taken aback. She’d begun to believe he’d forgotten about her, choosing to treat her as nothing more than an instrument of pleasure just like the other tools in the chamber.

“How much of this are you willing to endure, Priestess?” Captain Jolen asked, sliding the tip of his index finger along the length of her slit. She shuddered as stubborn desire made its way into her clit, pulsing there like a living beast.

“I’ve endured worse,” she said between gritted teeth.

The captain chuckled. “No doubt.” He paused for a moment and she heard him snap his fingers. “Come. Kneel. Right here beside me. I want you to watch this carefully. Consider it your first real lesson in female anatomy.”

Sophia saw Dante’s lip curl before he walked past her cage and disappeared from view. “I know my way around a woman’s body.”

“Again, no doubt. But this lesson is different.”

Someone -- the captain again, most likely -- spread the lips of her sex apart. She squirmed and the tiny bars etched deeper into her skin. Sucking in a deep breath, she forced herself to relax while the men inspected the most intimate secrets of her body.

She could imagine what she looked like, her cunt spread open for their thorough inspection, her folds pulled back, her opening gaping and pulsing with need. Another drop of cream trickled from her entrance and she swallowed back the shred of shame that tickled her throat and made her cheeks burn.

“So wet,” the captain murmured, swiping the trickle of cream from her labia with his thumb. “Such a good little whore.”

Sophia’s head jerked up so hard her neck strained under the pressure of the metal lid. She wasn’t used to being talked to as though she was beneath a common pleasure servant. She was a Priestess, damn it. The High Priestess. No one spoke to her in that way.

Except the captain clearly wasn’t speaking to her. He was instructing his student -- his property.

Desire and frustration warred within Sophia, making her tremble. How much longer would she have to subject herself to this humiliation? Why couldn’t the damned man just wait two short weeks?

Saints, what if he came back the next day? And the next? How was she supposed to keep up this charade? Worse yet, how could she expect Dante to hold back his release when inevitably the game would grow more heated with each day that passed?

“Tell us, Priestess...when was the last time you had your pussy whipped?”

Sophia drew her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down. Hard. She wouldn’t answer. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

The low, throaty chuckle drifting through the room told her the captain didn’t care much whether or not she responded with words. Her labia fluttered, pulsing with barely contained arousal.

Something soft flickered across her slit. She swallowed hard, recognizing the instrument as a supple suede whip. She knew it well. She’d picked it out herself, though she’d never had it used on her.

The students had no reason to discipline their instructors, even if one of them would dare to attempt such a thing. She knew the way the whip felt in her hand, though. She'd flicked her wrist often enough while gripping the wooden handle and hearing a female servant's strangled cries of pleasure as the slender edges bit into her outer lips and scraped across the pink flesh of her inner folds.

She'd delivered those blows with careful consideration, always certain of the exact spot the one would land even before she lifted the whip. Now, flanked by two men on either side of her cunt, she knew she wouldn't have the luxury of knowing where the next blow came from.

"Gently at first. Lift your wrist and bring the whip down. Let the surface of the tails thud across her pussy. That's it. Good."

Sophia's cunt throbbed as the sensation of the first blow careened through her. Her mind reeled from the feeling of being spanked. It hadn't been painful -- not yet -- but the blow had caused a renewed surge of adrenaline and lust to pour through her veins.

Her clit ached, desperately needing to be touched. She'd have done it herself if her wrists hadn't been bound behind her back. As it was, even writhing against the cage brought no relief. The nearest bar crossed the top of her mound, leaving the rest of her cunt completely devoid of stimulation, with the exception of any the men chose to apply.

"Keep going. She's practically trembling with need."

Sophia bit her lip to keep from protesting. She wasn't trembling. She was...

*Trembling.*

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she focused her gaze on the serene face of Saint Valentine. Her thighs and ass muscles tensed as another blow landed across her labia, harder this time.

On the third smack, she cried out at the exact moment that something hard and heavy clamped across both nipples. Her head whipped to her right as sharp, biting pain dug into

both breasts. She could barely make out the edge of the captain's shoulder, but the feel of the toothed nipple clamps he attached was unmistakable.

A heavy chain rattled between them, and she realized she knew this instrument of pleasure/pain, too. A weight had been attached to the center of the chain, dragging it down, tugging on her nipples hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. The added sensation of being wrenched toward the floor while being supported by the metal cage caused another stab of pain to lance through her. Warmth chased the agony, seeping through her skin and settling low in her cunt.

Another blow landed on the skin between her anus and her pussy opening, drawing a gasp from her throat. The tears that filled her eyes threatened to spill over her lower lash line. She sniffed them back and Dante froze, a breeze cooling her nether lips from the motion of the swaying whip.

"She's in pain. We'll have to stop."

"That's not pain, my pet. It's pure ecstasy." As though to prove his point, the Captain moved to stand behind her and thrust two fingers inside her pussy.

Sophia cried out. No man had invaded her channel outside the confines of the Temple during a ceremony. It was forbidden. She was pure...meant for Saint Valentine's chosen alone.

*The Flame.*

"Dante." His name came out as a low whimper. "Let Dante touch me."

"You heard her. Fuck her with your fingers, but don't stop the spanking. You see the way her labia's turning a deep shade of red? Keep an eye on that and make sure the blows don't land in the same spot. Flick the whip so the edges of the tails caress her clit, and your fingers."

His words swirled around Sophia, making little sense until Dante followed through with the man's orders. She felt the Captain withdraw his fingers from her soaked depths and



she sighed in relief, and then held her breath as Dante's fingers took their rightful place inside her body.

She shuddered, pleasure and relief streaming through her veins. His fingers moved in and out of her with a steady rhythm, while the blows continued to fall on her thighs, her ass, her open pussy. As instructed, Dante jerked his wrist at the last moment so the suede tips of the flogger bent around her pussy and caressed her swollen nub.

*In and out...In and out...*

She closed her eyes. Her breath came out in harsh, ragged pants, streaming between her lips with wild abandon. The captain said something else, gave some other instruction she could barely make out.

It didn't matter what he was telling Dante to do. The only thing she cared about was how good his fingers felt stretching her to capacity, her inner walls squeezing down on the intrusion, widening to accommodate the thick, delicious invasion.

The strokes of the whip grew farther apart. For long minutes, she felt nothing but Dante's fingers as he toyed with her soaked cunt, tracing a long swathe across her slit then plunging into her depths again. Each lengthy caress was punctuated by another sharp smack, bringing with it a new flash of pain, just sharp enough to awaken her nerve endings to the delectable bliss flowing across her skin.

*Stroke and soothe...stroke and soothe...*

She clung on to those words, drifting through her mind like a mantra. Her back arched as far as the lid of the cage would allow; she pushed her ass and pussy out farther toward him, begging him to give her more, to touch her clit, to send her over the edge.

Just because he wasn't allowed to come didn't mean she couldn't.

A sharp yank on her hair had her eyes blinking open in a flurry.

"What are you hiding, Priestess?" The captain's mouth was close enough to hers to feel his warm breath flutter across her lips.

She swept the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip instinctively as another blow landed, grazing her fevered nub. “Nothing.”

A squeak echoed back at her. Saints, she wasn’t even sure she’d uttered a coherent word.

“Not good enough.” He flicked his gaze up, over her head. “Harder.”

The next blow landed perilously close to her anus, smacking the tender skin around the puckered nub.

She inhaled deeply and blinked back more tears even as her pussy squeezed down on Dante’s fingers, begging him to fuck her, just like the Captain said.

*Harder. More...Saints.*

Her head swam in a cloud of euphoria. The clamps dug into her nipples, sending streams of painful convulsions through her breasts, making her aware of every single pain and pleasure receptor situated there.

“Tell me. Tell me what I need to know, or I swear to your Saint, Priestess, I will have Dante fuck you.”

The blows had stopped, she realized belatedly. She wasn’t sure what Dante was doing, but she knew he couldn’t have taken the threat well. Her climax continued to build around Dante’s thick fingers, calling to her with the flames of the need he’d been fanning.

If she could just come, she could think...could reason out a way to keep the captain from continuing this line of questioning.

“But you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Captain Jolen said, a mocking smile curving the corners of his mouth. “You’d like Dante’s cock embedded in that sweet, tight, unused pussy of yours.”

She shook her head and her hair streamed into her eyes. “N-no.”

*Yes. Yes, oh, Saints! Yes.*

“Of course you would. Your patron trained such a good little whore.”

He moved to stand and a fresh wave of hysteria jammed itself in her chest. "Wait, no. You can't -- *I can't* --"

A low chuckle was her only reply. Tears clouded her vision, making Saint Valentine's statue once again waver and ripple before her eyes. Lust and agony merged inside her, swirling low in her belly, thrumming through her cunt. She could barely think.

Lifting her gaze skyward, she focused on her Patron's calm visage, trying to draw strength from his beautiful face.

Then, through the haze of tears, she saw the statue's head move. She froze even as Dante began his ministrations anew, delving his fingers deep inside her core and curling them, touching a spot inside her that made pleasure swirl, hard and fast, into her clit.

*You've already chosen him, ma petite. Take him. Take your Flame and let it burn.*

She watched, unable to breathe, as the statue's head swiveled back around to its proper position. And then, a perfect smack across her spread lips took her over the edge.

For a moment, she hung there, suspended in confusion and pure bliss, hovering on the precipice of the kind of offering she'd never made to Saint Valentine in all her years of worship.

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks as her body spasmed and her clit pulsed, finally free to pour all that pent-up need into every inch of her body. She sagged against the cage, her head drooping until her cheek hit the metal panel, her body shuddering with aftershocks of streaming ecstasy.

Captain Jolen grasped her chin in his hand, lifting it until she was forced to look into his sapphire eyes. "Or maybe you'd prefer if I fucked you?"

Terror plunged ice into her veins. "No. Him. It has to be him."

For a heart-stopping moment, she thought the captain might refuse, choosing to take her himself as a way to prove his dominance over her. Then he grinned, and her muscles loosened once more as relief made its way into her limbs.

“Luckily for you, Priestess, I could care less who fucks you as long as you tell me what I need to know. And you *will* tell me what I need to know.”

## Chapter Seven

Dante's self-control was slipping. It had been steadily lapsing ever since he'd applied the first tender smack to Sophia's delightfully pink pussy, turning the delicate folds a rosy red.

He'd thought licking her delicious cunt was as good as it got, short of plunging his cock deep into her and feeling that tight channel close around his shaft, milking him with each shudder of her orgasm. Now he knew better.

It was as though the captain had known all along what would make Dante tick. The longer he pushed, the more Sophia gave in -- and the harder Dante became.

And now he was supposed to fuck her, too?

"No way," he said, pulling his fingers out of Sophia's pussy. Her cream dripped down the back of his hand, and he couldn't resist the impulse to bring it up to his mouth and swipe his tongue over the trickling drop.

Her taste -- musky and sharp -- assaulted his senses, causing his cock to jerk hard against his stomach. The familiar onslaught of impending orgasm gathered low in his balls, churning with agitated hunger.

To banish the desire, he turned his head and fixed his gaze on his pants, hanging from the statue's massive dick, and bit the inside of his cheek. Hard.

The metallic taste of blood trickled down the back of his throat, chasing Sophia's heady miasma of raw, feminine flavor. "I won't do it," he repeated, wondering if anyone was even listening to him.

"You seem to think I'm giving you a choice," Captain Jolen said. "I'm not. I have plans for you. Yet, if you choose to be difficult and refuse, I'll chain you over there by the opposite wall, and you'll watch me as I fuck your Priestess."

Dante's nostrils flared as he ground his teeth together, trying to keep his temper under control. It would be so easy to unleash the inner beast and tackle this man to the ground, to let his claws dig deep into the captain's tender flesh. He'd be dead before his head knocked against the marble floor.

Dante fisted his hands. His nails dug into his right palm, while the fingers of his left hand gripped the wooden handle of the whip so hard his knuckles turned white. He couldn't allow his animalistic urges to get the better of him, whether they were inciting violence or lust in his soul.

Thanks to Sophia, he now knew what was really at stake. Images of joyous, innocent children flittered across the surface of his mind. Killing Captain Jolen would guarantee a formal investigation. The safety of the little ones depended on the Academy's ability to not draw any unwanted attention upon itself. It operated as a profitable business, which was good enough for the Terran government. If they had reason to believe otherwise, however, they'd storm the place in the blink of an eye.

On the way back from the children's quarters, Sophia had told him everything he'd wanted to know about the Lighting of the Flame ceremony. He knew those kids had been born, not created in laboratories. Even if they didn't carry Alpha genes, they were an

abomination in the eye of government officials. And if they were unlucky enough to have mutated DNA running through their bloodstream, they'd be killed instantly.

A shudder ran up his spine, cooling some of the outpouring of lust raging through his system. He could do this. He could do whatever Captain Jolen asked of him. And then he could find a way to draw the captain's attention away from the Academy. Even if it meant going home with the man.

"She's sacred," Dante said, trying again to dissuade the captain from the course he'd chosen. He might have agreed to go along with the man's plan, but that didn't mean he was going to allow Sophia to be defiled. She'd made it clear that only High Priestesses bore children, and that those offspring were created by the grace of Saint Valentine, who blessed the union during the ceremony. One day, the female progeny would grow to become priestesses themselves, while the male children would eventually be sent to off-world colonies where they could live the rest of their lives free from Terran persecution.

The Lighting of the Flame only happened once a year. For the other three hundred and sixty-four days, the High Priestess remained pure. Untouched. Ready to receive a man's offering and grant her own to the Saint when the time came.

"Right." The mocking tone in Captain Jolen's voice didn't escape Dante. "So sacred that she works in a whorehouse, leading the troops."

"The Academy isn't --"

"Isn't what? A place where you train people how to be good little submissive sex slaves?" Captain Jolen grabbed a fistful of Sophia's hair and yanked her head up again, forcing her to look into his eyes.

Rage surged in Dante's veins, reminding him that he was doing this to keep her safe, too. "It's me you want. Leave her alone."

The captain's lip quirked upward in a wry smile. "Ah, so you do have a backbone. Good. Do as I say, and she won't get hurt."

Dante grimaced. "What is it you want from me?"

"Fuck her. Drive her to the brink of madness, then ask her again what secrets the Academy's hiding. Withhold that next orgasm she needs so much, if you have to. Then do it again and again, for an entire week if she doesn't talk. You know as well as I do no one would interrupt our games for longer than it would take to deliver food."

"That's torture."

"The sweetest kind," Captain Jolen agreed. "Consider this your second lesson."

"It's fine, Dante." Sophia's voice was hoarse, gritty. She tried to turn her head to stare at him, but the cage around her shoulders limited her movements. "Do as he says."

"I won't --"

"You can hold out. So can I."

He stifled the words of protest that rose to the tip of his tongue and gritted his teeth. She was right, of course. He'd promised her he could hold back his own release, since she seemed so intent on convincing him that he lost control of his shifting abilities when he came.

That wasn't true, of course. He'd come thousands of times. On his own, in front of a mirror...he'd have noticed if he changed without initiating the transformation himself. Still, he'd agreed to go along with her plan. For some reason, she seemed to wholeheartedly believe in what she was saying.

Dante squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The scent of her arousal wafted around him, enveloping him in the sweet odor of feminine heat. His erection raged, pulsing against his stomach as he kneeled.

He could hold out. He prided himself on his self-control. Hell, he'd learned enough about controlling his urges in the Mars General Alliance. He knew those drills would come in handy some day.

"What about the rest of it?" he asked. "The ceremony?"



She hesitated for a moment. "This is it."

Dante gaped in confusion. The Festival he'd been able to handle. This...this entire experience bordered on the surreal.

He shook his head, knowing he was too far gone to back out now.

Dante's palm traveled up the metal wrapped around Sophia's thigh, making brief contact with her flesh. She trembled slightly, her head tilting at an angle as her breathing quickened while his fingers trailed closer and closer to her pussy. The folds were deep red now, and heat emanated from her core.

"Good decision. Mount the cage, Dante."

Grabbing his cock in his right hand, Dante rose and bent over the cage. For the first time, he noticed the lid was slightly indented on the sides that didn't reach Sophia's body. His left arm slid easily in one of the depressions, and he gripped the edge of the cage with his fingers.

He nudged Sophia's folds with the tip of his cock and she gasped. He pulled back slightly, knowing he'd hurt her. "I can stop. I can --"

"No," Sophia and Captain Jolen said in unison.

Dante shook his head and pulsed his hips a fraction of an inch. Sophia cried out, but the sound was pure pleasure this time. He felt her pussy muscles squeeze, inviting him to delve deeper.

"See? That wasn't difficult, was it?" Captain Jolen reached for a small plastic bottle at the edge of one of the tables, which was laid out with a variety of leather crops. "Remember what I said. She can't come."

"Yeah. I heard you."

The head of Dante's cock slipped easily between her nether lips and into her channel, stretching her inner muscles as he thrust himself inside her in slow, rhythmic strokes.

He gritted his teeth as pure pleasure streamed down his veins. Saints, she felt even better than he'd imagined. Soft and hotter than *Enigma's* furnace, her cunt gripped him tight and trembled around his cock, driving him to the brink of distraction.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Captain Jolen stroke his cock. Fine. If the guy wanted to watch, Dante wasn't about to stop him.

Leaning deeper onto the cage, Dante stretched his body across the metal grills and placed a soft kiss on top of Sophia's head, then tucked her long hair behind her ear and grabbed her earlobe between his teeth, swirling his tongue around the tender flesh. Her moan turned into a whimper and she thrust her hips back against him as far as her restraints would allow.

Closing his eyes, he gave himself over to what it felt like to be inside her, knowing this was likely the only time he'd get to experience such bliss. After today, he'd convince Sophia to let him go with the captain. From there, he could figure out a way off the planet on his own. Hell, he was resourceful. He'd gotten himself out of worse binds in the past.

He couldn't expect her to continue to shelter him. It was too dangerous. For her, for the children. For him.

A muscle jumped in his jaw. He thrust hard, his cock reaching deep inside her core. Where had that last thought come from? It wasn't any more dangerous for him to be here than with Captain Jolen. If the captain learned of what he was, he was just as dead there as he'd be here.

Except... He sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. Emotions swirled through him, fast and furious. He yearned to reach out and hold Sophia as he delved within her sweet folds, to kiss her mouth and stroke his tongue over that full bottom lip.

He wanted to make love to her. He wanted to give her more pleasure than she'd ever possibly imagined, with his hands, his mouth, his cock. He wanted her to scream his name in the midst of climax, again and again and again.

He craved more than sex. The inner beast needed -- no, *demanded*-- a deeper intimacy.

His cock pulsed, hardening to impossible proportions as she writhed inside the cage, her cries filling the air.

He wanted her. As his friend. His lover.

His mate.

Saints! He blinked his eyes open, focusing his gaze on the blissful face of Saint Valentine. If he stayed here, the danger wasn't to his life.

It was to his heart.

The captain placed both hands on Dante's hips, taking him by surprise. With skilled fingers, he spread his ass cheeks and nudged the tip of his cock against Dante's back entrance.

Dante sucked in a gasp as his head reeled from the impact of what was taking place. "Ugh!" He grunted loudly as the Captain's cock stretched him, filled him.

"I own you, Dante," Captain Jolen said, his voice a booming contrast to Sophia's frenzied moans. "This is just a sample of what's to come."

He thrust harder, plunging his shaft deeper into Dante's ass. A wet substance coated the inside of his back entrance and Captain Jolen's rod. With a groan, Dante remembered the bottle and the man stroking his cock. He'd been preparing for this all along.

The captain's balls smacked against his ass, making Dante grip the cage harder and pump his own needy shaft into Sophia's pussy.

"Dante! Oh, Saints!"

His name spilling from her lips was still the most erotic sound he'd ever heard. He wanted to hear it again, to make her scream it a thousand times while he toyed with her pussy in myriad ways, bringing her to the brink of pure erotic sensation before letting her tumble over the edge into sheer ecstasy.

Captain Jolen's fingers dug into Dante's hips, keeping him steady while he worked his shaft in and out of his entrance.

He'd been with men before. This wasn't an entirely new sensation, but being sandwiched between a dominant male intent on possessing him and a submissive woman who'd captured his heart was utterly overwhelming.

He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to think of something other than the pleasure streaming through his cock, his balls, and his ass. The captain was gentler than he'd expected, fucking him with slow, easy strokes, never pushing or demanding, just enforcing his authority and claiming his property.

The familiar tingle in Dante's balls intensified. Sophia's pussy clamped around him, spasming in a way he recognized. She was close. As close as he was.

He couldn't let her come. Couldn't let himself come. He couldn't --

Every coherent thought flew from his mind when Sophia tilted her head at an angle and rubbed her hair against his cheek. The feel of those silky tresses against his skin was so sudden and unexpected, so *intimate*, it reminded him of feeling her hair across his abdomen and thighs as she'd sucked his cock into her mouth the night before. Then, her attention had lingered on the tip of his shaft before she took the engorged length between her lips and flicked it with her tongue.

Erotic images poured across his mind's eye. And just when he thought he could force himself to shut down that train of thought, Sophia did something she definitely shouldn't have.

She arched her neck, swung her head back toward him as far as she could and brushed her lips against his jaw as her pussy clamped down hard on his cock.

Dante's hips bucked wildly as he tried to restrain himself, impaling his body deeper on Captain Jolen's cock. The man cried out and dug his fingernails hard into Dante's flesh as his cock pulsed, unleashing a jet of hot cum deep in Dante's ass. The rush of sticky heat

intensified the rampant desire in his own balls, drawing another strangled cry from his throat.

The sound echoed through the room, a rough, growling roar hardly recognizable to his own ears. Jagged strands of electricity poured through his body, calling to the inner beast that lived within his soul.

His head reeled. He fought for control, but the animal in him was stronger, more desperate than he was. His balls tightened, drawing up flush against the base of his shaft and raw, violent need coursed through his veins. Lightning flamed up and down his skin, tearing at his self-control, drawing on his last reserve of discipline.

He watched through a veil of streaming pleasure as his arms widened to forelegs, his hands turning into broad paws covered in dark golden fur. Claws sprouted where his fingernails should have been. His jaw shifted and the sound of cracking bone and cartilage filled the air as it readjusted itself into a muzzle. Teeth lengthening, tail sprouting, ribs cracking and reshaping themselves -- all those nuances of the transformation were lost to him as he shuddered violently and unleashed the pent-up desire he'd been trying to hard to hold back.

Colors, vibrant and organic, flashed before his eyes. Above him, Saint Valentine's tranquil bronze features seemed to distort themselves. His lips broadened into a fragment of a smile while his brows drew down as though in a concerned frown.

Dante had no time to make sense of the oddly contrasting visage. Through the chaos of emotions pouring through him, only one coherent thought made itself known.

It wasn't the orgasm that made him lose control. Not entirely.

*It was her.* It had always been her.

A razor-edged slash of pain against her labia cut through Sophia's euphoric afterglow, drawing a sharp cry from her lips. Her head spun. Hell, the entire room rotated on its axis, whirling around her as though she stood still and the rest of the world had gone on tilt.

The offering she'd presented her Patron Saint had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced, whether on her own or during a Lighting of the Flame ceremony.

Having Dante in her, thrusting his massive cock inside her tight channel, grinding his pubic bone against her ass, his balls slapping the nether regions of her folds...it had all been too much.

Despite the captain's warning, Dante had done nothing to prevent her from giving in to the bliss of release.

So she'd come. Saints, had she come.

Her orgasm had been violent, wild, furious. It had shattered from her very core and spread outward, hard and fast. And she'd let it, without a thought for the repercussions.

Until now.

"By all holy Saints! The man's a shifter!"

The captain's wild cry resonated through the room, bringing Sophia's surroundings back into focus. She grimaced, knowing instinctively what had brought the sudden agony upon her tender, bruised folds.

There was a reason *panthera leo* didn't have sex in their animal form. The tiny spikes that protruded from an erect lion's cock were enough to elicit raw agony in a woman -- human or otherwise.

Dante had slid his shaft out of her, leaving her sore pussy empty but thoroughly satisfied. She could feel the soft fur of his paws brush her cheek as he clutched the edges of the cage.

Her heart hammered hard against her breastbone, thudding into the metal bars.

They were dead. Oh, Saints, they were *so* dead.

She barely had time to register that thought when Dante leapt off her and swerved around the cage. He came to rest in front of her, where she could take in his fully transformed form.

Her mouth went dry. He'd gone from six and a half feet of pure masculine perfection to ten feet of raw, untamed physical force.

She'd thought him beautiful before, all feral strength and brawny muscle, but he was absolutely regal in his lion shape. Powerfully built, with strong, lean limbs and a rippling dark blond coat that hinted at the sturdy muscle beneath, he was by far the most stunning creature she'd ever seen.

His long tail swung from side to side in silent challenge. The brown tuft at the end of the tail stood straight up, daring the Captain to come closer. When he tossed his head back, his wild mane ruffled around his elongated muzzle and he roared, the sound shaking the foundation of the statues at the base.

"I never thought...I mean, I knew there was something not right with him, but this...this is insane." The captain's voice had gone dangerously soft. Sophia wished she could see him, but judging by the confidence in his tone, she doubted he was quaking in his non-existent boots.

"Dante! Listen to me! You have to leave. Run. Get out of here! Understand?"

Her words seemed to fall on deaf ears. He turned his massive head and pierced her with those feline golden-flecked eyes, but there wasn't a hint of retreat in his stance.

Her eyelids drifted closed momentarily as fear pressed in on her from all sides, more tangible and concrete than the metal bars keeping her prisoner. When she opened them, it was just in time to see all hell break loose around her.

Captain Jolen darted left, to the corner of the room where his armor had been discarded. Dante stalked him, moving slowly, but with a determined purpose.

Man against lion. It shouldn't have been a fair fight.

The captain swung sharply around a six-foot statue of Saint Valentine and rammed his shoulder into it, bringing it toppling down a few inches from Dante's head. Dante reeled backward, his paws slipping on the marble as another rampant roar broke free from his throat.

He shoved at the loose pieces of shattered bronze, clearing them out of his way. From her captive position, Sophia focused on the captain, who was rapidly tapping out a message on his inner wrist implant.

Her blood turned to ice as she recognized the pattern and the colors beaming from beneath his skin. A distress call. Reinforcements would be storming the Academy walls in ten minutes, if they were lucky. If the captain had thought ahead and brought backup, men who were even now awaiting his signal, they had perhaps two minutes. Tops.

"Hurry! He's called for help!"

Dante heard her this time. He spun around, claws grasping for purchase on the slick marble. He skidded toward the captain and clocked him hard with a back-handed paw across the chest.

The captain went flying toward the far wall, where he slammed with a loud, bone-crunching crack. He slid down the length of the wall and came to a grinding halt at the base, his right leg twisted beneath him at a skewed angle.

"Damn it!" she snapped. "Get me out of here. We don't have much time!"

Dante ambled toward her, moving with that same slow, deliberate speed. He neared the cage and sniffed, his nostrils flaring as he took in her scent. Before she could urge him to hurry once more, he swept the tip of his rough tongue out and trailed it over the edge of her jaw.

A shiver born of exquisite sensation ambled up her spine. Sophia's heart beat faster, but this time the panic was a fleeting impression at the edges of her mind. Lust clouded her



vision, hazing her common sense with flickers of the sudden need to shift, to join him with the same wild abandon and show him she was right for him.

Show him that maybe, just maybe, she was meant for him.

Such an absurd thought. She knew better. She was a priestess. She'd dedicated her life to Saint Valentine, giving up the idea that she might one day meet her Alpha mate. And yet --

A sudden shaft of blue light split the crimson illumination in the room. It crackled with energy, tearing through Dante's left shoulder a moment before the scent of scorched fur and flesh reached Sophia's nostrils.

Dante pitched forward, his head making contact with the edge of the cage, his weight propelling the metal enclosure to skid across the marble floor until it slammed against the opposite wall.

Sophia didn't wait for the enormity of what had happened to register. The flash of a small weapon no larger than the Captain's palm, gripped tightly in the man's hand, made a brief impression on her senses, but a split-second was all it took for her instincts to kick in.

She'd been denying her birthright for years. In the blink of an eye, it all came rushing back with the fierce ferocity of an ability that had never really been far away from her psyche, only pushed to the side and ignored for much too long.

Her skin rippled as her bones twisted, elongating and thickening as the shift overcame her. For once, she didn't fight it. Her tongue scraped against lengthening canines. Her vision became sharper, more acute. The metal bars groaned beneath her expanding mass, squeaking in protest.

Her breath halted in her lungs, squeezed by the tight constraints of her cage. The antique handcuffs snapped first, popping with a loud snap. The hinges gave way next, scraping and grating against the metal as they fought to contain her growing bulk. Even the nipple clamps slipped away, no longer finding the same type of purchase in her flesh.

And then she was free, and soaring through the air. Another blue flash pierced the space mere inches from her left ear. Adrenaline poured through her veins, hot and insistent. It drove her forward, her prey frozen in the span of a split-second in her field of vision.

The protective nature of her inner lioness had been unleashed, and she'd be damned if she denied it again. The children were in danger. She was in danger. Her mate --

Saints, this wasn't the time to think about it.

Blood pounded red-hot in her field of vision. Captain Jolen was still down, holding the weapon with his left hand, steadying his aim over his left wrist. He fired again, faster than she'd expected, but she swept out of the way at the last moment. She was quicker than Dante. Sleeker, too, despite the feral muscles she wasn't used to having.

The laser missed her, though it grazed the tip of her tail as it swept aside. No matter. The scent of scorched fur only added to the wild fury already streaming through her veins.

The captain tried to rise. The weapon shook in his hand. He said something to her -- not a scream, not a plea -- she didn't know what. Couldn't hear him past the roar of blood and fury in her ears.

And then, he did something wholly unexpected.

He threw the gun down.

Stunned by his unanticipated action, Sophia's center of gravity flowed forward. She landed with a thud, half on top of him, and kicked the weapon across the floor with her hind leg.

The breath flew out of the Captain's lungs. He gasped for air, but she was stronger, pushing down on his chest, letting her momentum and fear for Dante spur her on.

He struggled, flailing and bucking against her, clawing at her leg with his fingernails. Her claws extended and she pressed down on his windpipe, but stopped short of scoring his flesh. After what seemed to Sophia like an eternity, his body went slack.

She held him there for a moment longer. The wild, untamed part of her urged her to kill him, to end the threat. She might have, too, only she knew the threat wouldn't be over with the demise of this one man. If anything, the danger to her and anyone the Academy sheltered would only grow worse if she murdered a Central Command official in cold blood.

Her body teetered on the edge of metamorphosis. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off, leaving behind a sizzling wave of dizziness. She sucked in a breath and rode out the pain of the transformation, until she found herself once again in human form, kneeling over the Captain's body, her hand gripped around his throat.

She released him and staggered to her feet, then rushed over to where Dante lay, crumpled against the side of the cage. He'd transformed as well, his chest gleaming with rivulets of sweat. A raw, circular wound marred his left shoulder and blood trickled down his arm.

"Dante? Oh, Saints." She knelt beside him and pressed two fingers to the side of his throat, her other hand instinctively grabbing his inner thigh as she leaned over him.

"How many times do I have to get shot for you to touch me just a little higher?" he rumbled, his voice throaty and hoarse.

A relieved laugh bubbled up from her throat. She wanted to hug him, kiss him fiercely, leap into his arms and never let go.

And she would, she vowed. But not now.

"Can you walk?"

He nodded, wincing as he lifted his arm a couple of inches. The wound bled again, and Sophia thought she could make out the jagged white edge of a shoulder bone.

"Damn it." Fighting back a shudder, she grabbed his other elbow and helped him to his feet. "Let's go."

He leaned against the cage as she retrieved his pants. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked as he slid them on.

Sophia swallowed hard. “What would I have said? That I’m just like you and I get along on Earth just fine -- and, oh, by the way, would you like to stay here forever and ever?”

He fixed her with a piercing green gaze. “You want me to stay?”

She turned away and picked up her robe. “We can’t stay. Officials are on their way even now. They’ll take this place down brick by brick. It’s not safe any longer.”

She tied the sash tightly around her waist and ran for the door. As it slid open, Dante grabbed her wrist and turned her to face him. “But if it was...you’d have me stay?”

Sophia debated with herself for only a moment before truth won out. She’d done enough lying, enough hiding from what she really was. Standing on her tiptoes, she brushed a brief kiss across his lips. “I need a Flame. Not just for a one-time ceremony, but forever. I think that’s what Saint Valentine had been trying to show me. I’ve chosen Flames for years, and they’d never been...” She cleared her throat before continuing. “Like you.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she stopped him by pressing her index finger to his lips. “Whatever you need to say to me, it can wait. The children can’t. We have to get them out of here. We have to get *everyone* out of here.”

He nodded his assent and together they ran down the way they’d come, toward the children’s quarters.

“Where will we go?” Dante asked as they came to a halt in front of the double doors and Sophia began the security scan to unlock the seal.

“Faye’s house. For now. She’ll shelter us for a while, but then we’ll need to find a way off-world.”

“All of us?” Dante raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical.

Sophia swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Can you think of a better plan?”

“My plan involves keeping us alive for as long as possible. Beyond that, I don’t tend to plan too far ahead.”

She shook her head as a smile made its way to her lips. Why didn't that surprise her? Worse yet, why didn't it frighten her half to death? She'd lived her entire life always knowing what the next day would bring. For the past forty-eight hours, nothing had gone the way she'd intended.

Most of the kids were down for their afternoon nap. Sophia filled in the priestess assigned to the ward for the afternoon on what had happened, leaving out the gory details of the acts that had transpired in the *Sanglant*. The woman's face drained of color and she ran out to tell the others, while Sophia and Dante began scooping children out of their beds.

"Where are we going?" Charmaine, a little black-eyed, blonde-haired girl clung to Sophia's neck, her soft baby smell permeating the air.

"Somewhere safe," Sophia whispered. *I hope.*

The vid-screen blinked to life as Dante lifted Benji, one of two little boys in the room, on his shoulders. He winced at the pain from the wound, but didn't let it deter him from hoisting the kid up and letting him hold tight to his curly hair.

"You can't come here," Faye said, her voice booming through the room.

Sophia spun on her heel to face the wall-length screen. "Why not?"

Faye's face looked drawn, worried. She'd aged a decade in the last day. "You'll never make it. Officers are storming the Temple as we speak."

Sophia's breath halted in her throat. Around her, children began to cry. First one, then another, then all of them.

"Where do we go?" she whispered. "There's nowhere else."

"A friend of mine lives in the mansion across from the outer Temple courtyard. You know the one I mean?"

Sophia nodded.

"Good. He has a craft. It's small. A private, T23 model. The two of you and the children will all fit, but it'll be cramped." Faye narrowed her eyes and stared beyond Sophia, her

limpid blue gaze focusing on Dante. “You’ll need a damn good pilot to get off this planet. Luckily, you have one.”

Sophia spun on her heel. Dante could pilot? He hadn’t told her. Then again, he hadn’t had much time. There were probably thousands of things she didn’t know about him.

“I --” His face had gone as ashen as that of the priestess who’d scurried out of the room. “No.”

“You don’t know how to pilot?” Sophia asked, feeling the last vestiges of hope begin to flutter away.

“No -- yes.” He shook his head. A muscle twitched in his jaw. “No.”

“That’s not what Vance told Quinn,” Faye said. “Moment of truth, Dante. Will you save them? Or will you let them die, like the others?”

## Chapter Eight

Dante was never, ever -- *ever* -- sitting in a pilot seat again.

He'd promised himself. Vowed. Sworn to every Saint he didn't believe in, and a few he did. And yet here he was, running through the thick foliage of the outer garden, scrambling for the back wall he'd climbed to get into the Academy property in the first place, all with the intent to make his way to the T23 model and get Sophia and the six frightened children off the ground.

He had to be insane. No, worse than insane. He'd had to have lost every marble that had ever rattled around in his thick skull.

He knew what happened when he got behind the steering device of a craft. People died. Horrible, flaming deaths filled with the stench of smoke and burnt flesh.

Images flashed behind his eyes as he ran. The boy gripping his hair threatened to pull the strands out by the roots, but the pain in his scalp and shoulder were preferable to the sheer terror that made his knees buckle every time he allowed himself to think of the past.

He'd been young, then. Not that he was old now, at the age of thirty, but he *felt* old. Killing twenty-four pleasure servants did that to a man.

As a fighter pilot -- a captain, no less -- in the Mars General Alliance Space Squadron, he'd been sent on dozens of missions, each more dangerous than the last. He was used to things getting a little out of control. He just hadn't imagined how quickly events could take a turn for the worst.

The mission had been simple enough: fly a military general into foreign territory. Set him down safely on unfriendly soil and accompany him to meet with the dignitary who owned every living thing on that planet. He even remembered the dignitary's name. Lacrombie. Darsus Lacrombie.

The man was a pompous jackass. Dante thought that from the moment he'd met the guy, and his initial impression had only intensified the longer he stayed on the scumbag's planet. While the general schmoozed Lacrombie, Dante had a chance to wander the grounds and see Lacrombie's "collection" of sex slaves. Each created on Earth, all subservient and demure, one more battered and beaten than the next.

He'd never come across such cruel conditions for sex servants anywhere. They lived in squalor, getting a ration of half a loaf of bread and some watered-down broth each day. When they were unlucky enough to be chosen to grace Lacrombie's bed, they returned with joints popped out of their sockets, eyes bruised, teeth knocked out.

When Dante reported what he'd seen to the general, the man had agreed not to allow Lacrombie's tiny planet into the General Alliance. They didn't have the authority to pull the servants from Lacrombie's home, but they could teach him a lesson by denying him the economic and security benefits that came with being a part of the Alliance.

It would have ended there, Dante supposed, had Lacrombie not decided to fire upon Dante's ship. Despite Dante's best attempts, the craft had come crashing down. Dante and the general had evacuated, but the ship had collided with the outer quarters, killing most of the sex slaves in the explosion that ensued. Those who survived were injured badly enough to no longer be of use to Lacrombie, who had them killed by his own men.



“We have to climb that wall,” Sophia said, jerking Dante out of flame-filled thoughts of the past.

He nodded and lunged at the wall, his claws leading the way. The boy on his shoulders gasped with surprise as they soared through the air. At the top, Dante crouched down and scanned the street. It was empty, but he could hear the buzz of a craft nearby, as well as the clatter of armored men in the distance.

He reached down as Sophia handed him one child at a time. She came up last, then helped the kids climb down to the other side.

“You’re sure you can fly?” Sophia asked him, skepticism slipping into her tone.

“No.” He winced against the pain as the boy kicked his tiny foot against the raw wound in Dante’s shoulder. “But I’m sure I know how to fly.”

The T23 model craft was still there, exactly where Faye had said it would be. The same place Dante had last seen it when the Central Command officer had warned him away.

Saints, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

They kept to the side of the street as they ran then swerved around the back of the gleaming black craft. Dante punched in the security code Faye had given him and the far door slid open, revealing a sleek two-seat interior cab and a bench in the back.

The children, perhaps too stunned to protest, climbed into the back. Sophia buckled them in, two to a safety-strap.

“Hop in. We’re leaving,” Dante said, hoping he’d imbued his tone with more confidence than he felt.

Sophia hesitated. He turned to face her, wondering if she’d heard him.

“I’m not coming.”

He stared at her, propped his right hand against the side of the craft, and leaned in close. He couldn’t have heard her right. “Say that again.”

She blew out a breath that caused her bangs to ripple over her eyes. "I said I'm not coming with you. I belong with them." She pointed in the direction of the Academy walls, where the rattle of armor had turned into frenzied screams. "I should be there. Fighting."

"Dying, you mean."

She lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug and smoothed her face into a mask of indifference. He wondered if she practiced that look, or if it came naturally. Like that stubborn streak and this newfound death wish.

Saints above, he didn't have time for this.

Lunging for her, he lifted her off her feet in a smooth glide and hoisted her over his right shoulder -- the one he could still feel. She writhed and pummeled his back with closed fists, but what was a little more pain added to the agony that had been flaring in his body for the past twenty minutes?

"Hey! Put me down!"

He did. Right in the passenger seat.

Before slamming the door closed, locking it with the security code and enforcing his own added override, he also pushed the small blue button that would strap her in.

She was struggling with the keypad on the inside of the door when he climbed into the pilot seat beside her. "I changed it. The door won't open."

She craned her neck to look at him, her eyes dark and unreadable. "You're an ass, you know."

"I've been called worse."

In the back, one of the toddlers started to cry. Sophia stared at him for another long moment, then sighed and turned to reach behind her and calm the bawling tot.

"They need me, you know. The priestesses, the guards, even the gardening staff. I'm responsible for all of them."

Dante keyed in the new code and felt the motor beneath him rumble to life. Memories flooded his thoughts as adrenaline turned his blood to ice. He could do this. He had to do this.

“What do you think the former High Priestesses would say about that? They’re back there, fighting to give their offspring a chance to escape. Right now, these children and their mothers are depending on you. They need you more.” He licked his suddenly dry lips. “And so do I.”

She looked like she was about to argue. Dante sighed and yanked on the steering column. The feel of the craft leaving the ground jolted a shuddering thrill through his limbs. Saints, he’d forgotten how much he’d loved to fly. Being in control of a ship, having it obey his every command as it soared through space...there was nothing like it.

The only time he’d even come close to capturing the euphoria of flight had been with Sophia, having her strapped down, completely at his command as he made her tremble with a mere flick of his wrist.

His growl echoed through the cabin. The craft soared, higher and higher, toward the powder-blue sky. He didn’t know where they were going. It didn’t really matter, as long as they left Earth and all its archaic beliefs behind.

The craft could get them as far as Mars. They’d find shelter there, at least for a little while.

The sudden jolt that shook the craft was so unexpected it took Dante a full ten seconds to recognize it for what it was. “We’ve been hit! Hang on!”

He focused on the blinking lights across the dashboard, pin-pointing the Central Command military ships assembling in formation to give chase. *Fuck!* He should have seen them sooner. He was out of practice. He’d needed to keep an eye on the enemy in order to avoid them before they landed a solid shot.

None of the controls were flashing red, indicating nothing critical had been hit, but it was only a matter of time. Agony slid through him, sharp and intense. It speared his chest, knocking the oxygen from his lungs.

He swerved to the right, letting the craft's momentum carry it higher. If he could break through Earth's atmosphere, he knew of an asteroid field nearby where the tiny craft would feel right at home. He just needed to evade the pursuit for a little while longer.

His knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering column. He refused to look at Sophia. The tension rolling from her was almost palpable as it filled the ship.

The second shot to hit them wasn't as benign as the first. It pierced the outer hull and jolted the inner-left engine, knocking it out. Thick black smoke filled the cabin.

As he fought to keep control of the craft, the sudden soaring climb came to a grinding halt. In the blink of an eye, they were swirling downward, descending at an alarming rate.

Earth's landscape filled the view screen. He yanked hard on the steering column, to no avail. Trees flickered in his field of vision, growing larger alongside aged whitewashed buildings and metallic structures that spoke of newer designs.

One of the Central Command ships flashed past them. The T23 had no weapons of its own. It was a private craft, not a military machine. Not that Dante could aim a laser weapon in the craft's rapidly descending condition, but it would make him feel better to have his finger on the trigger anyway.

Smoke clouded the view screen, blurring the image. Children's coughs filled the air, high-pitched and terrifying. Through the dark haze, Dante could make out the angled archways and pointed roof of a structure he recognized well.

"Saints, the Academy," he whispered hoarsely as his fingers flew over the controls. "We're going to crash into the Academy."

As though in mocking response, the craft began to plummet faster, taking a sudden nose-dive toward the inner cloister. The servants' quarters were located there.

It was happening again. He'd kill the very people he'd wanted to protect and take even more innocent lives in the process.

Blood roared in his ears, drowning out everything but his own inner fury. This time, the beast remained leashed in its cage as the man took over.

He called upon every moment of training he'd had in the Squadron and his fingers tapped out a series of commands across the flaring lights of the dashboard. He wasn't familiar with this type of ship, but right now, that was the least of his concerns.

The mechanical whirr of the remaining engine rolling over caused his seat to vibrate. He worked fast -- faster than he'd thought himself capable. Going on instinct alone, he transferred a small percentage of power lodged in other areas of the ship -- life support, lights, audible alarms -- into the working engine.

The ground rushed up to meet them. Central Command officers dove out of the way as pleasure servants darted wildly between chambers, looking for a safe place to hide.

*There are no safe places on Earth. Not anymore.*

The thought flashed through his head for the second time in as many days. He darted his right hand out to grab Sophia's while his left remained clamped on the steering column. He'd done all he could. It hadn't worked.

Sophia wrapped her smaller fingers around his palm and clung on for dear life. Behind them, the children's coughs and whimpers had given way to a sudden, all-encompassing silence as everyone braced for impact.

The engine turned over. Again. A third time.

On impulse, Dante jerked the steering column toward him. When the craft stopped its sinking plummet and ground to a halt, he thought his heart might stand still right along with the ship.

And then, two feet above the tiled roof, the craft's nose filled the view screen. The ship sputtered and groaned, but held. The energy Dante had transferred from auxiliary sections propelled them swiftly upward, toward the sky.

A moment later, another shot took out the remaining engine.

## Chapter Nine

Events unfolded around Sophia in slow motion, as though she was wading through a dream over which she had no control. One moment, the ship was diving in a spiraled arc toward the ground. The next, it seemed to reconsider, deciding they were worthy of saving after all. And then, seemingly trapped in a nightmarish loop she couldn't escape, they were once again plunging toward the Academy.

By the time the craft came to a grinding halt again, she didn't know which way was up anymore. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her fingernails digging frantically into Dante's skin hard enough she thought she might have drawn blood.

For a moment that stretched into eternity, she awaited the impact that never came.

Then they were climbing again, slower this time, as though dragged along by an invisible force. Shots still shook the interior of the cabin, but they no longer rattled the equipment. Even the smoke had begun to clear, and the cries of small voices filled the air once again.

She didn't think she'd ever heard a sweeter sound.

*"Enigma,"* Dante murmured, awe and disbelief in his voice. "They came."

She didn't remember much of what came after that. Perhaps she'd passed out, the smoke clogging her lungs overcoming her will to fight. Or maybe coming so close to death had finally taken its toll.

She didn't know what had happened, or what would happen next.

For once, it didn't matter.

She woke up to hushed voices whispering around her. Trying to open her eyes had no effect. Nor did speaking. She heard the voices clearly, though, talking about the force field someone named Ty had used to yank them out of harm's way, and of the dogged Central Command pursuit.

They spoke of a meteor field good for hiding small ships, and of Dante's courageous attempt to get her and the children out. As for the children themselves, they were given a clean bill of health by *Enigma's* doctor. Her heart seemed to lighten at that, as though a heavy weight that had lodged there had been lifted.

She even thought she heard Rhyanne, the pleasure servant Faye had purchased for Quinn, speaking in hushed tones among all the other voices blending around her.

The one voice she longed to hear above all others, however, remained silent.

She must have passed out again, because by the time she could actually open her eyes, she was alone. She craned her neck a fraction of an inch and pain flared in her head. A steady ache slid down her limbs. It wasn't acute enough to worry her, but it made it clear that she'd hadn't moved in days. Perhaps longer.

"Dante?" Her voice came out hoarse, as though she hadn't used it much too long. Her lips were dry, too, and she moistened them with the tip of her tongue. "Are you here?"

No answer. She tilted her head and glanced around the room, her pulse quickening when she realized it looked familiar.

She recognized the large bay window facing the black velvet dotted with stars from her dream. And the sleek, metallic furniture with a distinctly masculine appeal. On the wall



beside the bed, an old-fashioned quilt depicted a slumbering lion. To her right, the nightstand held a slender, curved glass vase with a simple synthetic rose. An electronic hand-held device had been propped against it. Words flickered across the surface, and it took Sophia a minute to focus long enough to read them.

*If I'm not there when you wake up, tap the screen. I'll come running.*

Her heart lurched, knocking hard against her breastbone. Her fingers trembled as she reached out and did as she'd been instructed.

For long, never-ending minutes, nothing happened.

And then the door slid open and Dante's muscular form filled the doorway. He wore a tight trader's uniform stretched over his body, showing off his feral strength to rugged perfection. The leather servant collar was gone, leaving the column of his throat bare of everything but a faint, reddened imprint.

Sophia's lower lip trembled. Tears stung the back of her eyes. "You're all right."

He neared the bed slowly, watching her with hungry, reverent eyes. "So are you."

She nodded and struggled to sit up. The room spun around her. "What happened?"

Dante grimaced. The mattress dipped as he sat beside her and reached out to flick her bangs out of her eyes and to the side. "The energy I diverted from other areas of the ship interfered with your restraints. When Enigma caught us in its force field, you tumbled out of your seat and hit your head."

She prodded her forehead gingerly and noted a large bump just above her left temple. "That explains the headache."

Before she could make sense of what he intended, Dante leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. She opened to him greedily and pressed her hand to the back of his neck, tangling her fingers in his curls. His tongue darted between her lips, stroking hers. A shiver of awareness ran down her limbs, awakening nerve endings that had been asleep for much too long.

“So everyone’s all right, then?” she asked when he drew back.

His gaze skittered to the side and his muscles tensed. In the blink of an eye, his body language changed from relaxed relief to guarded reluctance.

Sophia sucked in a breath, awaiting the worst.

“We’ve lost contact with Earth. Quinn hasn’t been able to reach Faye. We’ve heard nothing of what’s happened there. Central Command has locked down all off-world communication. The planet is under self-imposed quarantine. Nothing goes in or out.”

“Saints,” she whispered. “We know nothing of the Academy?”

Dante shook his head. “Not a thing.”

She closed her eyes as a tear slid down her cheek. Dante reached out and wiped it away with his thumb. “The children are safe. You’re safe. Our baby --” He slammed his mouth closed for an instant before continuing. “I’d do everything the same way in a heartbeat.”

Sophia drew her bottom lip between her teeth and swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Did you say...baby?”

His large, masculine palm covered her stomach over the cream-colored blanket draping her to the waist. “I did.”

Tears fell freely now, wetting her lashes, dripping onto the pillow cradling her head. He wiped them away one by one, with infinite patience.

When the teardrops stopped falling, Dante placed a tender kiss on the tip of her nose and slid into bed beside her. The blanket slipped lower another couple of inches, revealing the hem of the men’s shirt she wore. Below that, she could tell she had on a pair of panties, though considering she hadn’t been wearing any when they’d left Earth, she wasn’t sure where they’d come from. Or whose they were.

That was a topic best left for later. If they came with the room, Dante had some explaining to do.

He cupped her breast through the shirt, the warmth of his palm seeping through her pebbled nipple and causing a trembling shiver to break out over her skin.

“This is going to sound supremely selfish, Priestess, but I’m never letting you go. I just thought I should make that perfectly clear.”

She tilted her head, ignoring the pain that flared to life behind her brow and met his gaze head-on. His eyes had that same feline, golden-flecked quality that indicated he was close to losing control. Instinctively, she knew that only her condition and his concern for her kept him from tossing the blankets aside and thrusting his cock in her wet and more-than-willing pussy.

She reached down and wrapped her hand around the bulge tenting his uniform. His cock pulsed beneath her palm, hot and thick and hard.

“You promise?” she whispered against his mouth.

“I can do better than that.” He tweaked her nipple between thumb and forefinger, wringing a desperate moan from her throat. “I’ll marry you.”

She nearly choked on her surprised gasp. “Marriage? That’s been outlawed for hundreds of years. It’s impossible. It’s --”

“Perfectly legal on many other planets. Call it whatever you will. A bonding ceremony, a mating union. Marriage. It’s all the same. I love you, Priestess. More than I ever thought possible. So what do you say? Will you marry me?”

Saints how she loved him, this wild, feral man who’d taken her life by storm and turned her predictable world upside-down. He’d swept her off her feet -- literally, and given her the stars. What more could she ask for?

“On one condition.”

Dante raised a questioning eyebrow, his golden eyes darkening with passion.

“When we make love, the lion and his barbed cock stay where they both belong.” She stroked his shaft through the material of his uniform. “Locked up tight.”

He bent his head and took one of her nipples into his mouth, drawing the fabric of her shirt and the stiff bud between his teeth. When he released it, he graced her with a wicked grin. "What can I say, Priestess? You bring out the animal in me. I can control it...with practice."

"Practice?" She feigned a heavy sigh. "I suppose we can do that. One or two --"

"Thousand times?" he put in hopefully. His hand inched its way down her stomach to cup her mound. She arched her back, grinding against him. Cream seeped from her folds, soaking the fabric of the borrowed panties.

"In that case," she whispered as he slid the edge of the panties aside and nudged her wet slit with the tip of his finger, "we better get started."

## Epilogue

Sweat trickled down the back of Neo's neck to disappear inside the high collar of his starched shirt, despite the air-conditioned breeze that wafted in at full force from a vent above his head. Appearing before the C.C.C. -- the Central Command Council -- always put him in a foul mood. This time was no different. They'd been going over the events that had occurred at the Academy for the past six hours, with no sign of letting up.

The Council had fired the same questions at him, again and again. Why was he there? What had he been doing? Why couldn't he stop an Alpha shifter and his Alpha whore before they fled into outer space?

He could read the writing on the wall. His career was ruined. No, make that both careers. Not only would he be dismissed from Central Command, but no one would hire a Dom who couldn't keep a leash on his only servant.

"There have been serious charges raised against you, Captain Jolen. How do you plead?"

Neo didn't have to look up to recognize Lead Councilor McClane. He had a reputation for being a formidable investigator, and an absolutely ruthless opponent.

"Not guilty, sir," Neo replied.

Silence descended around the room. Neo blew on his fourth refill of coffee to cool the steaming liquid, then looked up at the pedestal where the Council members sat at a long table, watching him with cold, judgmental gazes.

“My esteemed colleagues wish to have you removed,” Councilor McClane said.

Neo refused to take the bait. He folded his hands before him and waited for the inevitable conclusion to this never-ending day.

“I, however, disagree. I think you have it in you to prove naysayers wrong, Captain Jolen.”

Neo took a small, noncommittal sip of his coffee, but didn’t reply. There had to be a catch. There always was.

“Standard pursuit methods have netted us nothing, Captain. Less than nothing, in fact. This trader vessel and its Alpha crew have become a liability, one we cannot afford to have traipsing around the galaxy, mocking us. We need this ship destroyed. Soon.”

*And how’s that my problem?*

Neo knew better than to let his annoyance get the better of him. He tilted his head, nodding slightly, encouraging the Councilor to continue.

“You’ve seen these people. Some of them, at least. You know who they are. You can get close to them. Use your...” His lips flattened in distaste. “Dominant persona, if you must. Just get in there and kill these bastards. Any way you can.”

A genuine spark of hope flared to life in Neo’s chest. “And if I can’t?”

The Councilor smiled, an easy, amused smile that revealed a flash of cruel determination. “The next guy we send after the Alphas will come after you, too.”



## Lacey Savage

Lacey Savage began her love affair with romance at an early age. In high school, she checked out steamy romance novels from the public library and would often be found reading them in the middle of class.

Lacey still reads more than she cares to admit, and probably more than her husband would like, considering how many books she keeps bringing into the house. Her favorite genres have always been erotica, romance, fantasy, science fiction and mystery, so she tries to incorporate a little of each into her writing.

She initially majored in Marketing then went back to school to major in English Literature. After earning her degrees, she decided to turn her efforts to her true passion: writing. A hopeless romantic, Lacey loves writing about the intimate, sensual side of relationships.

She currently resides in Ottawa, Canada, with her loving husband and their mischievous cat.

You can learn more about Lacey by visiting her website at [www.laceysavage.com](http://www.laceysavage.com), and can reach her at [laceysavage@rogers.com](mailto:laceysavage@rogers.com).