

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



TO THE
VICTOR
GO THE
SPOILS

SHERRILL
QUINN

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To the Victor Go the Spoils

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TO THE VICTOR GO THE SPOILS

Sherrill Quinn

Chapter One

Bane Carradoc leaned one shoulder against a corner column at the rear of the small chapel on the K4 Space Station. Hidden from most of the guests—they'd have to look over their shoulders to see him—his vantage point enabled him to view the entire room. He crossed his arms and rested the toe of one of his shit-kickers on the floor. As he stared around the chapel, his lips turned down in a scowl. The ceiling had been draped in light blue material, strands of flowers curled along the walls and the sound of chirping birds filled the little room.

Much too froufrou for him. Give him the plain gray metal walls of his ship any day.

With a soft snort, he shook his head and looked out over the crowd. Approximately forty people—an eclectic gathering of humans and aliens—were seated in straight-backed chairs. Two Regalians with their tufts of feathers towered above the group while a lone Marchan stood directly opposite Bane. The Marchan's reptilian eyes met Bane's and the lizard-man brought two clawed fingers to his temple in a haphazard salute.

One bounty hunter acknowledging another.

Bane held the other creature's gaze for another moment or two and then continued his perusal of the crowd. He hoped the fugitive didn't get snagged by the Marchan—the lizards weren't known for their mercy.

Movement to his right caught his attention. An elderly woman hobbled into the small room on the arm of one of the groomsmen. As the young man led her to a seat in the last row on the groom's side, she patted his arm and brought a lacy pink handkerchief up to dab her eyes. Then she slowly lowered herself onto her chair, holding onto the young man's arm until she was seated.

The groomsman glanced at the front where the groom stood off to the side, waiting for the ceremony to begin. A look passed between the two and the groom gave a brief

nod. The groomsman turned and pulled the chapel doors closed, then walked up to the front of the chapel. The two men took their places as the small orchestra began playing the bridal march.

Bane scowled. What was it with spring and weddings? As far as he was concerned, June was just another month. Nothing more or less romantic about it than any other month of the year.

Activating the computer implant in his prosthetic eye, he scanned the assembled guests, the wedding party and the small orchestra. His implant read body temperatures, heart rates and other physiological reactions of the various people gathered for the wedding. Although no one appeared overly anxious or nervous – well, except for the groom, and he knew the groom wasn't the person he sought – it was only a matter of time before Bane narrowed in on his quarry.

Nearly eight years as a bounty hunter had honed his senses and the addition of his cybernetic implant enhanced his own natural abilities. The fugitive was here, he knew it. His senses were on high alert. He'd learned the hard way to listen to his gut.

And his gut told him he was close. After two solid months of following leads, talking to what seemed like every lowlife scum in the galaxy, he was damned close. So close and yet his quarry continued to elude his grasp. He was starting to get a little irritated, especially after he just missed the renegade at Darva Station two days ago. If he'd only been five minutes earlier...

Hell. No use crying over spilled whiskey. This time, the damned resistance fighter wouldn't get away. If Bane had to wade through every single wedding guest, he'd get his man.

Or, in this case, his woman.

* * * * *

Being at a wedding always made Devon Maertissa think of the path not chosen. This wedding—her sister Kalle’s—brought that untraveled road to stark reality. What was that ancient saying?

Always a bridesmaid, never a bride.

She didn’t even get to be a bridesmaid today, not with a price on her head. Fighting back a shiver, she forced herself to not turn and look over her shoulder. She was ultra alert, which probably explained why the hair on the back of her neck was standing at attention. Although she wasn’t naïve enough to think there weren’t any bounty hunters taking advantage of her sister’s wedding—the lizard guy looked like a prime candidate—she knew her disguise was damned clever.

But she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was already a marked woman even though, so far, no one at the wedding had looked beyond the gray wig, round wire-rim glasses and orthopedic shoes to see the clear, unblemished skin beneath.

That someone was after her at all was another black mark against the friggin’ resistance as far as she was concerned. She’d joined them to fight against the corrupt Elysian Federation, a massive organization of armed thugs that called itself the government.

The last mission was supposed to have been a simple one—hijack a shipment of arms headed for the outer fringe, where fighting was the heaviest. The resistance needed the arms much more than the Elysian soldiers did.

Somehow, though, things hadn’t gone as planned. Instead of the arms going to the local resistance cell, the entire shipment was destroyed in a huge explosion that took half of the substation on Roma Prime with it. One person had died—the arms dealer. And so, because she played a part in the botched job, Devon was a wanted woman.

On the run with who knew how many bounty hunters after her. But one hunter in particular concerned her.

Bane Carradoc.

They said he always got the job done. They said he wasn't too particular about how he did it. They said he was single-minded in his pursuit of justice. "They" were irritating. And if "they" could ever be found, she'd kick 'em in the ass just so they'd shut the fuck up.

When she'd first learned a reward was offered for her, she'd been told Bane would be one of the hunters after her—he usually only took the jobs that paid well. So she'd hacked into the station's main computer just long enough to read his file. He'd made a fortune on the racing circuit, flying little one-man fighters called "halos" in the professional racing industry. He'd retired at thirty and began his life as a bounty hunter. That had been eight years ago and he'd gotten better and better with age.

He was big—six and a half feet of raw masculinity and cybernetic implants that made him very good at his new job. Tall, dark and handsome, she'd noticed *that* right away. A wicked-looking scar zigzagged from the middle of his right eyebrow to just under the outer corner of his eye. It in no way detracted from his good looks. Rather, it added an air of danger that spoke to the deepest core of her femininity. His status as a bounty hunter was nearly eclipsed by his reputation as a lover.

If things were different...

Ah, hell. Who was she kidding? They were from such dissimilar walks of life—galaxies apart. But, for a second, watching her sister exchange vows with the man she planned to spend the rest of her life with, Devon could dream.

A man of her own, one to settle down with, to live the "happily ever after" of long-forgotten fairy tales.

She grimaced. No sense in making herself crazy over something she'd never have. Not now, not after what happened. Not after she'd had a role, no matter how minute, in the death of another sentient being. She pushed back the heavy guilt that nagged at her, determined to enjoy her sister's happiness for the brief time she could. Even if she was about to choke on the scent of vanilla and lilac that Kalle had gotten carried away with in the small room. It was strong enough to knock over a two-ton grecca bull.

Devon stifled a sigh of impatience, shifting on the uncomfortable chair. As much as she was going to miss Kalle, the sooner she was off this pile of space rock, the better. If she stayed in one place too long, she ran the risk of being recognized, of being caught.

Finally, the handsome groom kissed the beautiful bride and the newly married Mr. and Mrs. Paavo Maxim walked down the aisle. As soon as the wedding party cleared the last row, Devon slipped out into the aisle, muttering a quavering "Excuse me" to the people she cut in front of. She needed to be one of the first well-wishers to start through the receiving line so she could get out of here.

She shook the hand of the groom and winked at him as she warbled in the best little old lady voice she could muster, "You take good care of this girl, young man."

He grinned and squeezed her fingers. "I will, ma'am. Don't you worry." His clear blue gaze was intent as he delivered that message.

When she reached her sister, a single tear rolled down Devon's cheek. She hauled Kalle into her arms. "You take care of yourself, you hear?" she whispered fiercely. "Don't take any of Paavo's crap."

Kalle responded with a watery chuckle, gripping Devon just as tightly. "I won't." She sniffed. "Oh, God, Devon. I'm so worried about you. What will you do? Where will you go?"

"Don't worry. I'm going somewhere safe." Devon rubbed her hands up and down Kalle's back. "As soon as I can, I'll get a message to you." One last squeeze, then she forced herself to release her sister. God, she was going to miss her. Maybe in a few years she could come home. But in the meantime, there was so much she was going to miss—the birth of the baby just beginning its life in her sister's womb, the child's christening...

So much. Sadness swelled within her. In a strangled voice, she managed to say loudly enough to be overheard, "Congratulations, missy."

Her sister smiled. Grabbing Devon's hand, she clasped her fingers. "Thank you for coming."

A throat tight with tears made it impossible for Devon to speak further. She tightened her hand on Kalle's, then let it go and moved in an old lady shuffle down the gray-green corridor. Her shoes made a *squeak-thump* noise with each step. She brought up her dainty handkerchief and wiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Get a friggin' grip, she admonished silently. *You don't have the luxury of time to feel sorry for yourself.*

She heard heavy treads behind her and couldn't stop from looking over her shoulder. A beefy Elysian soldier tipped his burgundy beret at her with a muttered, "Ma'am," and kept going. He hadn't seemed to recognize her as a wanted woman.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Devon turned the corner and picked up her pace. She couldn't get caught. Not by Bane, not by any bounty hunter. She'd heard the stories of what happened to prisoners at the hands of the Elysian Federation.

As much as she despised the local resistance leader, she wouldn't betray him. The colonists on the outer fringe deserved protection and Wilder and his band of merry men was it.

Her skin prickled with awareness. As she started to turn to look behind her, a big hand grabbed her upper arm. The hard clasp drew her up onto her toes for a moment.

"Just keep going." The voice was deep, well suited to the tall, broad-shouldered man walking by her side. His gaze met hers and she sucked in a breath.

Bane.

Draped from head to toe in unforgiving black, he looked stiff and unyielding.

Without thinking, she twisted around and rammed her foot as hard as she could into the juncture of his thick thighs.

He bent with a groan, letting go of her to cup his abused genitals.

Devon didn't wait around. She sprinted down the corridor, her heavy shoes clumping on the metal floor.

A deep roar echoed after her, then the pounding of heavy boots.

Gasping for breath, she ran into the passenger transport area. She pushed her way through the crowd, her lungs heaving so hard it hurt. Her body cold with fear, she kept moving. She had to get away. Had to! She couldn't be taken prisoner.

Voices behind her cried out and she turned to see Bane striding after her, dark fury on his face. Without regard, he pushed his way through the crowd. Those who had time jumped out of his way to keep from being knocked roughly aside.

Gogogo! She spun on her heel and ran toward the far end of the platform. She heard the grunts of people behind her and knew Bane was close. As she went into a crouch to jump down into the open area where the shuttles docked, thinking to duck into one of the maintenance hatches, his hand closed over the collar of her jacket and yanked her back.

"Don't think so, li'l chickie." He wrapped a brawny arm around her neck, locking her against him. The heat from his large body seeped into her, warming her fear-chilled skin.

He crowded her up against the wall and turned her to face him, bracketing her with forearms braced beside her. Using his greater height to try to intimidate her, he leaned over so close she went cross-eyed looking at the pores on his nose.

Devon cast her gaze about, desperate to make eye contact with someone who might be willing to help her. But people kept their eyes averted, careful not to draw the big man's attention. She finally looked back at his face.

Deep, dark eyes stared down at her from beneath thick, black eyebrows. As she gazed up into his face, the pupil of his right eye dilated. She realized the cybernetic implant he had was scanning her. For what, she didn't know.

At any other time, this was a man she could very well be attracted to. His face was too rugged to be classified as handsome, but it suited her aesthetic sensibilities. It was a face that was purely masculine with its narrow blade of a nose and sensual lips, lips that were now held in a tight, grim line.

A muscle by his eye twitched, making the jagged scar dance. "You're a slippery one," he rumbled. "And don't think you're not gonna pay for that kick in the balls back there."

"Give me a break," she muttered, forcing bravado she didn't feel. Her pulse thudded in her throat, and she fought the urge to reach up and hide the throbbing vein with her finger. Even though she was scared—she didn't want to be taken in to face charges of treason that carried a death sentence—her body betrayed her by responding to his nearness. Her nipples tingled, the areolas puckered as if she were cold and a hot slick of cream slid from her core. She forced her burgeoning arousal back. "Like you wouldn't have done the same thing."

"Yeah, but then it wouldn't have been me on the receiving end of that fucking thick shoe." He drew away enough to look down at her feet. One brow quirked. "Nice touch, by the way." His nostrils flared as if he was smelling her and that brow went higher, though he didn't say anything.

Devon kept quiet as well. Her gaze strayed behind him to the crowd of people still studiously avoiding them. No help there.

"Might as well give it up, chickie." He brought one hand to her face and stroked long fingers slowly down her cheek. "I've gotcha, fair and square."

Chapter Two

Bane watched emotions chase across his quarry's lovely face. Finally, he had her. Devon Maertissa, the woman responsible for Jardin ne Vil's death. It didn't matter that the little insect had been an amoral arms dealer. He'd died as a direct result of this woman's actions and now there was a bounty to be collected.

While he had no particular loyalties to the Elysian Federation, Bane did have a problem with people breaking the law. *If you break the law, you better plan on enjoying the prison system amenities*, he always said.

Her gaze strayed over his shoulder once more and he tapped her on the chin with his index finger. "It'd be in your best interest not to give me any more trouble, sweetheart."

She seemed to realize he was on the edge, for she sighed and slumped against the wall. Reaching up, she pulled off the gray wig and took off her tinted granny glasses. Jewel-blue eyes met his. God, her vid hadn't given him a good enough picture of her beauty – clear, creamy skin, straight nose and full pouty lips.

And her scent... She wore some sort of floral perfume that, mixed with the unmistakable aroma of feminine arousal, went straight to his cock, making it perk up with interest. He ruthlessly quashed his quickening arousal – he was on the job, no time to make nice with his bounty.

"I don't suppose it matters that no one was supposed to get hurt."

"Nope." If he let the whys and wherefores matter, he'd never be able to do his job.

"That those arms would've been used to kill hundreds of colonists on the outer fringe?"

Bane steeled himself against the pitiable look in Devon's eyes. She was a woman who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time and something bad had happened, but it had been her choice, after all. And now there were consequences to pay.

"Doesn't matter." He reached into his utility pack and pulled out a fugitive collar, tilting it so the attached wrist restraints swung slowly back and forth. "If you promise to be good, sweet thing," he murmured, moving back a pace, "I'll cuff your hands in front of you."

With another sigh, she dropped the wig and glasses to the floor. As he moved the collar toward her neck, she ducked to one side and kicked her foot out, catching him just above the knee.

He swore at the pain and her stubborn determination and wrapped one hand in her hair. When she continued to struggle, he tightened his grip until she subsided. With one hand, he fitted the collar around her neck and snicked it closed. "Give me your hands." His voice was gruff, hard with anger. She gave him any more trouble, by God, he *would* cuff her hands behind her back.

His harsh tone did the trick. She held her hands in front of her. As he snapped the restraints in place, she asked, "How did you know it was me?"

"Baby, your blood pressure and body heat were so elevated a blind man could've picked you out."

She stiffened and gave him an icy glare that could freeze the pelt off a snowcat.

Bane could only guess it was because of his continued use of pet names and he bit back a grin. To be sure she didn't try to run from him again, he pulled out a chain about half a meter long from his utility belt. After hooking one end to his belt, he attached the other end to her cuffs. "Let's go." He turned and strode away.

Tethered to him by the strong yet flexible fetter, she stumbled behind him, muttering under her breath. After only a few steps, she pulled on his belt. "Wait." When he kept going, she tugged harder. Without looking, he could tell she was

dragging her feet, trying to slow him down. Her voice, when it came again, was terse with frustration. "Would you just stop for a minute?"

Bane halted and partially turned, staring down at her.

She stood there, her hands stretched out in front of her with the metal tether anchoring her to his belt. With a frown thinning her lips, she sent him a fulminating glare.

"Well?" He raised one eyebrow. Now that she wasn't in her old lady slouch, she was much taller. The top of her head was level with his chin, versus being stuck at the middle of his chest. Exactly the perfect height for kissing.

Damn. Where the hell had that thought come from? He couldn't afford to let her distract him with thoughts of sex.

Just thinking about thoughts of sex with her sent blood pooling in his cock, making it stiffen. This time he wasn't able to battle back the reaction.

For God's sake, this was intolerable. He didn't have time for this. No matter how appealing his little revolutionary was.

"I can't walk through the station like this," she muttered, sending furtive glances around her. "I can't even take proper steps unless I want to risk tripping over your big feet. It's embarrassing."

She should try walking around with a hard-on. "Should've thought about that before you killed a man," he responded.

"I *didn't* kill him." Her voice was fierce and low. "I wasn't even the one who fired the shot that destroyed the cargo."

That was news to him. Bane hid his surprise. He'd been told she was the one behind the controls of the ship, the one who'd depressed the firing button that had made the trillion-dollar shipment—and the arms dealer ne Vil—go up in flames. It wouldn't surprise him if the damned government hadn't been straight with him. It wouldn't be the first time.

Her gaze searched his. “You don’t believe me,” she muttered. Her lids dropped to shutter her eyes and she jerked her hands hard enough to drag him around so that he turned sideways. “Fine. Let’s go, then. Take me off to my execution so you can collect your blood money.”

When he didn’t move right away, she gave him a little shove. “Go on, tough guy. Wouldn’t want you to miss out on your bounty, since that seems to be all that’s important to you. Why let a little thing like a person’s innocence stand in your way?”

“Keep it up, cupcake, and I’ll gag you too.” He needed to think. Having her nattering at him wasn’t helping, especially since he had the sinking feeling she was telling the truth. He’d had dealings with the Federation before that had left him with a sour taste in his mouth and he’d hesitated about taking on *this* job. But there wasn’t a whole lot that offended his moral base more than terrorists. Which was why he now had Devon restrained and tied to him.

But if he didn’t take her, some other hunter would come along and snatch her. Knowing the sort of roughnecks this line of work attracted—especially ones like that Marchan who’d been at the wedding earlier—Bane knew others would be less concerned with her guilt or innocence than he was.

So he’d get her back to his ship where he could be more assured of her safety—and her inability to slip away from him—and then he’d figure out what to do from there. But turning her over to the government seemed more and more like it just might be the wrong thing to do.

“I really wish you’d stop that,” she muttered, falling into a shuffling step behind him as he strode through the station.

“What?” he asked, so far removed in his thoughts he really had no idea what she was complaining about now.

“Calling me...*things*. My name is Devon. De-von.”

She made him sound like a halfwit, pronouncing it slowly for him. His lips twitched as he fought back a grin. He wasn’t insulted. Far from it. That she could sound

so disgruntled meant he was getting to her. If he could keep her off balance, he might just be able to stay ahead of her. She might not know she was affecting him the way she was and he aimed to keep it that way. "Anything you say, sweet cheeks."

"Arrrrgh."

Up ahead, he saw a flattop blond head and muttered an oath. Slaughter. A bounty hunter with the morals of a Slibinian slug-worm, he wouldn't hesitate to kill Bane to get to Devon. Seeing a small alcove on his right, Bane whirled around and backed into it, putting his arms around Devon and pulling her close.

"Hey!"

With her wrists still tethered to his side, her posture prevented him from pulling her as close as he would have liked. "If you want to stay alive, shut up and play along," he muttered. "Turn your head to the left."

She wasn't stupid and did as he said without another word. Bane ducked his head as if he was kissing her neck, but he kept his gaze on the people passing by. As soon as he saw Slaughter, he moved his head so his face was hidden by Devon. He felt a shiver run through her.

At last she was showing some sense. She *should* be scared, not running around attending weddings like she was a normal person. She wasn't normal—she was a wanted fugitive.

A wanted fugitive who smelled like flowers and warm woman.

He ground his jaw and pulled his thoughts back to the danger at hand. The sooner she was off his hands, the better off he'd be. He'd get back to his routine, ordinary, boring life and she...

Bane refused to follow that line of thought. What happened to the fugitive after he turned her in wasn't his problem. His job was to locate and retrieve, not worry about the legal proceedings.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that, buddy, and maybe – eventually – you'll be able to look at yourself in the mirror again.

After a few seconds, he moved his mouth to where her neck and shoulder met and peeked over her shoulder. So far, so good. Gently moving her to one side, he slid along the wall of the alcove and peered around the corner to see Slaughter moving toward the public loading area. "Let's go," Bane muttered, pulling Devon out of the alcove.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Hugh Slaughter, someone you'd better hope you never meet."

"Slaughter? Bane? What is it with you guys? Do you all have dark, slice-and-dice names? Is there some unwritten rule that says you can't have normal names?"

Bane grinned. She was feisty, his little captive. Life with her wouldn't be dull, that was certain.

His smile faded. Where did that come from? He wasn't going to have a life with her—he would either do his job and turn her over to the Elysian Federation or he'd set her on an isolated planet where she could hope for some sort of normal life. But it wouldn't be with him.

He continued back toward the business-class dock, ignoring her protest as she was forced into a shuffling trot. They reached the port where his ship was without further incident. But just as they started inside, a man called out, "Stop right there."

Bane whirled, shoving Devon behind him. She gasped, wriggling to see past the arm he put out to keep her at his back.

He narrowed his eyes on the young man standing before him, holding a neutron pistol in a very shaky hand. At least it wasn't Slaughter. Bane'd already be dead if it were. No, this was the bridegroom, Devon's new brother-in-law. Bane held up one hand, palm forward. "Steady on there, son."

The gun wobbled even more wildly. "Y-y-you l-let her g-go."

Bane dropped his right hand and let it hover over his holstered Remington phase pistol. It packed a hell of a wallop, even on stun, though he'd use it only if he had to.

Irritating as it was, the young man's courage in the face of his obvious terror was admirable.

Devon kept nudging at him with her shoulder and he finally lowered his left arm. She came around and stood at his side. "Paavo," she said, her voice soft with entreaty, "don't do this."

"We saw him follow you. Kalle told me to go after him. I can't let him take you," the young man quavered. "Kalle would never..." He shook his head and brought his other hand up to steady his gun. His gaze went back to Bane. He swallowed. "L-let her go."

Well, this was an interesting turn of events. Bane didn't want to hurt the kid, but he didn't have time to put up with this shit. "Look, kid, I'm not letting her go. You prepared to use that?" He nodded toward the young man's weapon. "You ever killed a man before? Smelled the burning of his flesh? Watched the life drain right out of his eyes?"

Paavo swallowed again, his protruding Adam's apple bobbing up and down. He shook his head.

"Then I guess this might end up being your first time." Bane watched the young man process that bit of information, saw the realization in his eyes that he couldn't take another life, not like this. The gun wavered, then dropped.

"I'm so sorry, Devon," Paavo whispered, a tear sliding down one cheek. "I can't—"

"It's all right." She started to move forward, as if to go to him, but couldn't because of the tether. "Bane!"

"Easy, honey." He lifted his chin toward the corridor and directed his next words to the quaking bridegroom. "Go on home to your new wife, son." He glanced at Devon. Her face was tight and pale, a slight tremble to her lips as she gazed at her young brother-in-law. Dammit. He hated seeing her like this and that pissed him off because he shouldn't give a damn. She was a job, that was all. If he started personalizing it, he was in deep shit.

Fuck. Forget “if”. He’d already personalized things between them. “We need to talk,” he muttered to her. Looking back at Paavo, he repeated, “Go home.” He dragged in a deep breath and huffed it out. “Devon’ll be all right.”

The young man hesitated, then, with one last helpless look toward Devon, he turned and ran out of the docking bay.

Ignoring her entreating look, Bane turned and started toward his ship. When she dragged her feet, he reached behind and wrapped one hand around her bound wrists, giving her a little yank. “Come on.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“Why are you asking that question now?” he countered without slowing. “Why not ask me that back at the public transport area?”

“Just answer the question,” she muttered.

He stopped so abruptly she ran into him. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw her rubbing her nose and glaring at him. “It’s my job,” he answered.

“And you’re all about the job, aren’t you?” she asked, bitterness heavy in her voice. “No matter what, you always get your bounty.”

Bane wasn’t sure he liked the way she said that. He *was* sure he didn’t like the sneer on her lips. Courtesan lips like that should smile or make a soft little O of passionate surrender. Picturing her lips open and rounded made him think of what else she could do with them and *that* made his dick stiff as a piston. Again.

Muttering under his breath, he fished in his too-tight pants and pressed the remote to the ship. Lights flashed along the gangplank and the door to the inner hull swooshed open. “Come on,” he growled, pocketing the remote once more.

Without warning, he was yanked backward as Devon became as frenzied as a cornered wildcat. She twisted back and forth, kicking at him, landing a few solid blows against his calves from her thick-soled, but surprisingly pointy, shoes. Nails as sharp as a kitten’s claws dug into his back through the thin polycotton of his shirt.

Forget about getting her mouth anywhere near anything on his body that was important to him. His luck, she'd bite it off.

Bane tried to jerk away from her, but with her wrists attached to his utility belt by the short chain, all he ended up doing was dragging her along with him. Another kick, this time to the back of his knee, made his leg buckle. He went down onto the deck plating of the airlock. She had no choice but to follow him.

Facedown with the grated surface digging into his knees and palms, Bane felt like he had an enraged Bektian primate on his back. Thank God he had her tethered to his belt—if her hands were free, she'd probably try to snatch him bald—or gouge out his eyes.

"Simmer down, Devon," he warned.

She struggled to get to her feet and one knee slid between his thighs. She muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like a threat to his balls. "Fuck you," she added in a voice thick with emotion.

"Not in the mood you're in," he muttered. Time to get her under control. Figuring the easiest way to subdue her was with pure brute force, he rolled over, knocking her down once more. He rolled again, taking them from the airlock into the ship, then turned again until she was flat on the decking under his back.

She bucked a few times. Subsiding, she gasped, "I can't breathe, you great big hulk."

Bane reached into his pocket and pulled out the palm-sized remote control to the ship. Once he'd punched in the correct code, both inner and outer hull doors slid shut, and the engines fired up. Pocketing the remote, he said, "Now, are you gonna behave? Or do I stay like this until you pass out from lack of oxygen?"

Chapter Three

Devon focused on trying to breathe with the big behemoth on top of her. Heat rolled from his back like afterburners, yet she shivered. She'd thought he'd softened, for a moment, when he was dealing with Paavo. It must have been her imagination, because a compassionate man wouldn't be squishing her onto the deck plating.

Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Make that a hard *man*.

She'd been so mad earlier, suddenly and irrationally angry with him for doing what he was being paid to do. So much so that she'd been ready to walk onto his ship under her own steam and let him deal with the fact he was taking her back to the Federation to die. She'd completely forgotten her promise to herself that she wouldn't be taken prisoner. It had been those few seconds in that damned alcove that had done it, feeling his hard, wide chest pressing against her breasts, his breath hot against her neck, the scrub of the stubble on his face as he'd rested against her neck.

She hadn't been able to subdue the frisson of awareness that had caused her body to shudder in reaction. He was sexy and so be-damned dominant that it made her panties damp.

Some hotshot resistance fighter she turned out to be.

"You still conscious?" Bane's tone was deep and dark and held just enough amusement that she stiffened with resolve. If she had anything to say about it, he was going to earn every single platinum credit of his bounty the hard way.

Making sure her voice was meek, she whispered, "Yes. Please..."

"You gonna behave now?"

"Please..." She wasn't actually agreeing with him, and if she was lucky, he wouldn't pick up on it. For effect, she gave a wheezing cough.

"Let me hear you say it, sweet cheeks. You gonna behave?"

Damn. Her lungs labored for breath, and she finally had to concede defeat. Otherwise, he'd just lie there on top of her until she passed out. And she didn't want to be unconscious around Bane Carradoc. Not for a second. "Yes," she muttered.

"Can't hear you."

"Yes!" So she was a pitiful resistance fighter *and* a liar. He'd get over it. Eventually. She hoped.

He rolled off her and in one smooth movement yanked her to her feet, his fingers curled around the chain connecting the restraints around her wrists. He detached the tether, leaving it dangling from her wrist restraints.

Before she could move more than a few millimeters, he wrapped his fingers around her wrists, then returned the fob to his pocket. Shaking his head, he *tsked* her and moved farther down the corridor of the ship, dragging her behind him.

"You said you wanted to talk. Before, when Paavo..." She trailed off at his sidelong glance. "Anyway, you wanted to talk." Devon trotted to keep up with his long strides. She jumped into the air, trying to see around him, to figure out where they were headed. All she could see were broad shoulders and impersonal gray walls. "This thing needs some serious redecorating," she muttered.

"The ship's just fine the way she is, thanks." Bane stopped in front of a hatch and keyed in a code. "She doesn't distract me." The door latch hissed and released and he pushed the door open and stepped inside the room. Since he still had hold of her, she had no choice but to follow.

When the door closed and latched behind them, he released her and walked over to a computer console. While he began working on an antiquated keyboard, Devon looked around the room.

It was sparse, to say the least. A narrow bed with a storage trunk at its end was bolted to the wall opposite the computer and a utilitarian locker stood in the corner by

the outer hatch. That was it. Glancing back at Bane, she saw him type in what appeared to be her name. "What're you doing?"

"Logging into the station computer, verifying my business at K4 Station is done. That way, my clearance for takeoff will be expedited."

Devon decided not to respond to that. She looked around the room again, noting the lack of holophotos or paintings—not even a trophy from his days in halo racing. Sparse furnishings for a simple, uncomplicated man. Thinking of the way he referred to his ship as "she"—really, it was the twenty-third century, they should've gotten past all that a couple hundred years ago—and what he'd said about distractions, she asked, "You get distracted easily by pretty women, is that it?"

"Hmm. Good thing I don't have to worry about that with you, isn't it?"

Her mouth dropped open and she blinked at him. While she wasn't vain, she had a healthy self-esteem. She might not win any beauty contests, but she knew she wasn't exactly a slouch in the looks department. "You arrogant, pigheaded son of a—"

"Watch it, chickie" He straightened from the console and turned to face her. "I don't like being called what you're about to call me. It's not nice to my mother." He turned back to the computer. "I'm not saying you're not pretty. I'm just saying I'm on a job and that's what I'm focused on."

Devon ground her teeth. His damned job was what had gotten her into this mess, although, to be fair, if it wasn't him, it would've been some other bounty hunter. *Face it, girl. It's your own damned fault you're in this situation. Yours and no one else's. You made a bad choice, now you have to live with the consequences.*

The only problem was... She might not be living for much longer. Not if the Elysian Federation had anything to say about it.

Apparently finished with what he was doing, Bane walked toward her with that smooth, loose-hipped stride and she found herself staring at his groin. She hadn't imagined things before, seeing the bulk of his sex. He'd been aroused. Though, to hear

him tell it, not by her. Maybe she'd just have to test him and find out. She wasn't a *femme fatale* by any means, but she could give it a try.

She grew warm, thinking about getting all that hard, hot flesh in her hands, her mouth, feeling him thrusting into her slick depths...

"Give me your hands."

She jerked her gaze to his face, biting her lip at the amusement she saw in his eyes. Damned cybernetic implants. He'd probably "seen" her body temp rise or heard the increase in the speed of her pulse. Without a word, she held up her hands.

He unfastened restraints and she started to rub her wrists, only to be stopped with his big hands on hers.

"Don't," he said, his voice gruff. "Let me get some analgesic for that."

That's when she saw the rough, reddened marks left on her skin by the restraints. The slight injury must have happened when she was fighting him in the airlock.

He went through the open hatch into the bathroom and returned in seconds with a small spray can in his hand. "Let me see your wrists."

Devon held out her right hand.

He held her arm gently, warm fingers curled below her wrist, and began lightly spritzing the analgesic onto her skin. "This has an antibiotic too, so it should prevent this from getting infected."

"Yeah, we wouldn't want me to get a nasty infection before my execution, would we?" she asked dryly.

He glanced up at her, his eyes dark with irritation and... Was that uncertainty she saw? Looking back down, he tucked the small spray can under one arm and began rubbing the analgesic into her skin. "Tell me about that mission to the outer fringe, that last one where ne Vil died."

"I know which one you mean." She scowled at him even as she fought back a shiver at the feel of his hands on her. The man was merely looking out for his bounty. He wasn't doing this as any sign of care or concern about *her*.

He motioned for her to give him her other hand, which she did. The skin on her right wrist tingled, and she told herself it was from the analgesic and not residual awareness of him.

"The convoy was supposed to be flown by androids," she said. Finished with the analgesic, he released her hand. Seeing no other place to sit down, she went over to the bed. Sitting down, she leaned forward, bracing her palms on the surprisingly soft mattress. "Jardin ne Vil wasn't even supposed to be there."

Bane studied her for a moment, taking in the slumped shoulders, the frown drawing a deep line between her slender eyebrows. When she looked up at him, tears formed over her eyes, giving them a lustrous sheen. Placing the analgesic next to the computer console, he walked over and sat beside her. He reached out and unfastened the wrist restraints from the collar, dropping them onto the bed, and then fished the fob out of his pocket and deactivated the collar. Once he'd drawn it away from her neck and was satisfied there were no injuries blemishing her creamy skin, he placed it next to the wrist restraints. "But ne Vil *was* there."

She nodded, biting her lower lip so hard he was surprised she wasn't drawing blood. Without thought, he reached out and cupped her cheek, using his thumb to free her abused lip. She felt so silky against his palm that he lingered, the sensitive pads of his fingers brushing against the fine hair at the side of her face.

When she nuzzled against his palm, he came to his senses and jerked his hand away. *You're not gonna let her distract you, remember?* He clenched his fist on his thigh. "Give me one reason why I should walk away from three hundred and fifty thousand credits."

She stared at him. Her gaze as earnest as any he'd ever seen, she said with heartbreaking simplicity, "Because they'll kill me."

Bane gazed into her eyes, seeing the utter conviction she had of what she was saying. And he knew that he could no longer ignore the churning in his gut that told him she was right. For whatever reason, the Elysian Federation wanted to make Devon Maertissa a scapegoat in the destruction of the arms shipment to the outer fringe. The question was...

"Why?" he asked. "Why are they so intent on *you*?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

He could tell she had an idea, but she didn't trust him enough to share it with him. That was something he understood, not trusting people. He wasn't going to push her on this. At least not yet.

Her lids drooped and exhaustion seemed to hit her all at once. He understood that too. Poor thing had been running on adrenaline for how many months now and it was all catching up to her. Without a word, he stood and urged her down onto the bed. That she went without fighting told him volumes.

Big blue eyes stared up at him before the lids fell heavily. "Please don't turn me in," she murmured, her voice a thin wisp of sound.

His gut clenched. He wasn't a heartless bastard, no matter how his dossier might read. There was more to this than he'd been told and he was determined to find out exactly what that was. But for now, he was going to let her rest.

Reaching down, Bane drew her shoes off, a wry grin curling his lips as he hefted the solid shoes in his hands before setting them on the floor. Then he pulled the cover up over her shoulders.

She murmured something and turned her head to one side. Long lashes fluttered, cresting her cheeks. Another low mutter and her breathing slowed.

"Poor little sprite." Bane stroked his hand gently down her satiny cheek. "I'm gonna find out what's going on, Devon. I promise you that." He watched the steady rise and fall of her breasts beneath the shapeless blouse she wore. His libido fired up again, his cock tightening behind the placket of his pants.

Damn. He'd had instant attraction to women before, but never before with this mixture of tenderness and fondness. This...this was something alien to him.

Something worth exploring, perhaps.

With a sigh, he stood and left his cabin, pulling the hatch shut behind him. Once the latch clicked, he hesitated, fisting his hand. Then he punched in his security code, locking the door. She was out now, but he didn't trust her not to get up to some sort of mischief once she woke up. His computer was accessible only with his security code, so he had no worries there.

He rested one palm on the door, seeing her in his mind's eye. A big part of him—he glanced down at the bulge in his pants—a *very* big part of him wanted to go back in there and crawl into bed beside her.

Thankfully, the larger of his two heads remained in control. With an oath, he spun around and stalked off to the bridge. It was past time to get out of here. His capture of Devon hadn't gone unnoticed and it was only a matter of time before someone came along to try to take her away from him.

Chapter Four

Bane stopped off in the head and took care of business. After he washed his hands, he stared at his reflection in the small mirror bolted to the hull above the washstand. Dark eyes stared back at him, the one with the implant lighter than the other. His nose had a bump where it had been broken—more than once. His cheeks had a couple days' worth of stubble. He knew women found it an attractive face, but he didn't spend much time looking at it.

"And just why the hell are you looking at it now, you nimwad?" Muttering an oath, he left the head. He stepped over the raised decking onto the bridge. Hearing a sharp *snick*, he stopped dead. The butt of a stunner nudged his temple.

"Hey there, Carradoc." It was Hugh Slaughter.

"What the hell are you doing on my ship?" Bane kept his voice even though all he wanted to do was growl with fury. Slaughter meant to take Devon and Bane'd be damned before he let that happen.

"I think you know what I'm doin' here." Slaughter took a few steps until he faced Bane, keeping the stunner trained on Bane's head. "I figured that was you and the fugitive back there in that little alcove, actin' all cozy, so I doubled back and broke into your ship." He let loose a low snicker and held up an electronic decoder. "Your security ain't worth shit, buddy." He waved the stunner nonchalantly and then pointed it back at Bane's head. "Anyway, I aim to make sure that little woman in there gets delivered to the Federation authorities."

"And collect the bounty for yourself, I suppose?" Bane clenched his fists. Dammit. If he hadn't been so distracted by Devon, he would've sensed the bastard early enough to get the jump on him. But, no, he'd let himself be drawn in by her intelligence, her sassy sense of humor, her understated sensuality.

"Well, now, I had thought of that." The other man scratched under his chin. "Though after I got a real good look at the girl, I thought I might get bounty of more than one kind."

Bane lunged forward, only to stop when the stunner jabbed into his forehead.

Slaughter laughed. "I thought I'd seen an uncharacteristic side of you back in the alcove, Carradoc. Somethin' in the way you held her. Seems you're gettin' soft in your old age."

"You lay one finger on Devon and I'll kill you."

"Oh-ho!" Slaughter laughed again and dropped one eyelid in a lazy wink. His ice-blue eyes glittered with sadistic glee. "You *have* gone soft. Makes me think just maybe I'll make you watch while I...collect." He brought one hand up and scratched his chin. "Back in the day, you couldn't care less what happened to a criminal."

"She's not..." Bane trailed off. He had to stay in control. He'd be of no use to Devon if he got himself killed. He drew in a deep breath and centered himself, pushing his emotions deep, deep down. An icy calm settled over him and his heart rate slowed.

"Well," Slaughter said. "Let's just put this bird in the air, all right?"

Bane raised an eyebrow. "You're gonna steal my ship too?"

Slaughter shrugged, a grin covering his wide mouth. "Why not? Mine's busted."

A muscle flexed in Bane's jaw as he went to the command chair. Settling into it, he pulled the lap belt across his midsection and fastened it, then yanked the safety harness down over his shoulders and chest, latched it to the lap belt and prepared the ship for departure.

Keeping his gaze locked on Bane, Slaughter moved until the back of his thighs hit another chair. He sat down and shrugged into the safety harness, fastening it with one hand while holding the stunner steady with the other. "Can't have you trying some fancy flyin' maneuver with me not bolted down," he said.

Bane slipped on the headset and clicked the comm channel for the Traffic Control Center of the station. "Control, this is The Huntress, call sign TK0326C, requesting clearance."

The static voice of one of the controllers came over his headset. "TK0326C, you are cleared for departure. Glad to see your trip was a success. One less criminal for us to worry about."

Bane grunted. Just his luck to get a chatty controller.

"Be aware," the controller went on, his voice once again impersonal, "we have several ships waiting to dock, so it's a bit crowded out there. As soon as you exit the bay, hard bank to your right and climb at a forty-five-degree angle to clear the traffic. Safe journey, TK0326C."

"Thanks." Bane made sure the auto navigation unit was disengaged, and prepared for a manual departure.

"What're you doin'?" Slaughter leaned forward to stare at the control console. "Why in the hell are you flyin' this piece of garbage manually?"

Bane ignored the insult to his ship. "Too much traffic waiting to dock to trust this to a computer program." He'd always done his best flying when he could feel the ship under his hands, when he could intuitively sense the next course correction or whether he should increase or decrease his speed. It just wasn't the same—or, in his opinion, necessarily as safe—when the computer had control.

"Huh." Slaughter watched a few seconds more, then settled back into his chair. The stunner remained unwavering. "Just don't try anything fancy, Carradoc. Or I'll take it out on the girl's hide."

Bane gritted his teeth and taxied down the lighted ramp, gradually picking up speed. As soon as the small ship left the station, he turned the stick to the right and then pulled back on it to climb steeply up. Once they were far enough away from the station, he leveled out and set a course for the planet Altier, the home of the Elysian Federation.

It would take five days to get there, plenty of time for him to overpower Slaughter and retake control of his ship.

As Bane switched the autonav on, Slaughter released his safety harness and rose from his seat. "Now, Carradoc, let's go check on that little fugitive, shall we? I saw you put her in your quarters, you lecher. So let's go say hello. You can watch me and her get acquainted." His grin was nasty. "You know what they say. To the victor go the spoils."

Bane slowly unfastened his harness and stood, sending furtive glances around to see if there was anything he could use to defend himself against Slaughter's stunner. If the weapon was set on stun, one shot would render him immobile for at least eight hours. If it was set on kill, well... One shot was all the chance he'd get.

Slaughter motioned with the weapon. "Come on, come on. Quit stallin'. I want a piece of that bounty right now."

Bane's lips tightened. He ducked through the hatch and started down the corridor, passing by the galley and the head. At the door to his quarters, he paused, clenching his fists. He couldn't just waltz in there and turn Devon over to this sadistic bastard.

The stunner jammed against the base of his skull. "You open it, or I'll kill you and figure the rest out. I'm only keepin' you alive long enough to get to Altier, just in case somethin' goes wrong with this damned pile of shit you call a ship. Once there, I won't need you anymore."

Bane reached for the security panel and he slowly began punching in the code. The only thing he could do was hope to take Slaughter off guard when the man stepped through the doorway. Just as the latch hissed and released, his stomach did a sickening flip-flop and he stiffened. That little physical sensation was one he always got just before the antiquated gravionics on the little ship went offline.

For once, the quirks of The Huntress happened at a time to help him.

When the ship went into a steep climb, he was prepared to be thrown off balance. What he wasn't prepared for was for both of them to go careening into the bulkhead.

Even as he thought, *What the fuck is wrong with the autopilot?* Bane pivoted and deliberately crashed into Slaughter, jamming his elbow into the other man's throat.

They went down onto the deck with loud thud. Bane's forehead smacked into the square grating and he shook off the sting even as he felt blood trickle down the side of his face. As he fought to subdue Slaughter, Bane felt the ship level off. Grunting with effort, he fought to keep the stunner away from his body. Muscles straining, he jerked away from the fist the other man sent toward his chin. He was just about to jab his own fist into the bastard's ugly mug when he heard a loud *zap*. Slaughter jerked and then stiffened, his eyes widening and his mouth opening in a soundless groan.

When Slaughter slumped onto the deck, his heavy body partially draped over Bane's legs, Bane pushed at him, rolling him onto his back. The blond man was deeply unconscious, his chest rising and falling with his steady breathing.

A scent of flowers wafted to him just before a shaking feminine voice asked, "Are...are you all right?"

He looked up to see Devon standing there, a stunner in her hand. Her face was sheet white, making her blue eyes look huge and dark. He grabbed Slaughter's weapon out of his limp hand.

"I take it that was you turning my ship into an old-fashioned roller coaster." Getting to his feet, he went to her, staying clear of the barrel of the weapon, and gently tugged it from her hand.

She nodded. "I came to the bridge to try to talk you out of turning me over, then I heard voices. I listened long enough to know I'd rather be with you than him—" she gestured toward Slaughter, "and I ducked into the galley until the two of you went by. The rest you know." She raised her hand and touched the blood on his forehead. When she drew her fingers away, they were coated in blood.

She blinked and made a sound in her throat, her gaze fixed on her hand.

Bane tucked both weapons into the waist of his pants. "I'm all right, honey." With the hem of his shirt, he wiped the blood from her fingers. Dropping his shirt back to his

waist, he glanced at Slaughter. He knew the other man would be unconscious for at least eight hours after taking a hit from the stunner. Keeping hold of Devon's hand, he cupped her cheek with his other hand, turning her face up to his. "No permanent damage."

She nodded, white teeth clamping down onto her lower lip. Unable to stop himself, he swept his thumb over her lip, freeing it, then covered her mouth with his.

Devon groaned at the first touch of his lips. Her eyes slid shut, her mouth parted. His tongue glided between her teeth like hot, wet silk. She gave another moan as the stroke of his tongue on hers shot sparks straight to her pussy. Rising up on her toes, she looped her arms around his neck.

One of his hands moved from her face to her nape, where it clamped down, tilting her head to the angle he wanted and then holding her immobile. The other big hand went to the rise of her buttocks, pulling her lower body against his.

Both handles of the weapons he'd tucked into his pants dug into her stomach, but it was the weapon further down that interested her the most. The thick wedge of his cock pressed against her. He began slowly rocking his hips, mimicking the motion above as he fucked her mouth with his tongue. Her lips felt bruised by the force of his grinding mouth. Her clit throbbed, her nipples tightened to diamond-hard peaks. She'd never been as turned on by a simple kiss like this before.

Her core turned liquid, hot cream sliding out to lie thickly along her sex. She wiggled against him, canting her hips, trying to get that hard ridge where it would do the most good. Twisting her fingers in the dark silk of his hair, she pulled his face closer, opening her mouth wider for the sinuous thrust of his tongue.

The sheer aggressive carnality of his marauding mouth had her on the brink. So much so that, when he drew away, she mewled a protest and leaned forward, tightening her arms around him.

"Easy, honey." Bane's deep voice was raspy, with an edge she'd never heard before.

She opened her eyes and stared at him. His eyes were nearly black with lust, even the eye with the implant. She licked her lips, her breath hitching as his gaze tracked the movement of her tongue, desire raging in their depths.

"I need to take care of him," he nodded toward the unconscious man on the floor, "and then we can pick right back up with this." He pressed his groin into her belly, his cock still hard and insistent behind the fly of his pants. "That is, if you're interested."

A fleeting thought of using sex to soften his attitude toward her, to perhaps persuade him to let her go, skipped across her mind. She quickly dismissed it. Using sex as a weapon or a bribe wasn't her style, although if it came down to it and that was the only option left to her... She wasn't above trying if it would save her life.

Even if she couldn't imagine a badass like Bane Carradoc falling for something as ordinary as womanly wiles. Anything she could think of to throw at him, she was sure he'd seen a hundred times over.

But she *was* interested in seeing where this led. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man, a long time since she'd felt hard muscles and slick, sweaty skin, smelled that unique scent of sex and aroused male. And if it turned out that he could make love to her and then still turn her over to the authorities... Well, at least she'd have broken her dry spell.

With her decision made, Devon stroked her fingers down his lean cheek. "Oh, I'm definitely interested," she murmured.

A slow smile curved his sensual mouth. "Just tell me one more thing."

"What's that?"

"How the hell did you get out of my quarters? I distinctly remember locking you in."

An answering smile curled her lips. She rubbed her thumb over his lower lip. "I don't know how to tell you this, Bane, but..." On tiptoes, she kissed him, gently nipping at his lips and sweeping her tongue briefly inside to tangle with his. "Your security system isn't worth shit."

A bark of startled laughter burst from him. The amusement went deeper than she'd seen from him before, a genuine happiness that seemed to light his eyes from within. He crushed his mouth to hers, lips bruising in their force, then lifted his head with a ragged sigh. "Let me stow him in the cargo bay," he muttered, one broad palm cupping her chin. "I'll be right back."

Devon watched the play of muscles in his arms and back as he bent and hoisted the still-unconscious Slaughter over his shoulders. He strode down the corridor, urgency in every footstep.

Another slow smile crept over her face. She had a feeling she was in for the ride of her life with this one. The smile faded. She just hoped it wasn't the last ride of her life.

With a sigh, she turned and walked a short way down the corridor to his private quarters. She punched in his code, which she'd gotten when she'd hacked into his computer earlier, and stepped inside as soon as the locking mechanism released. She wanted to make sure she gave Bane something he'd never forget.

* * * * *

Bane dumped Slaughter onto the deck of the cargo bay and reached into his utility belt for some polymer cording. Once he'd secured the man's hands behind his back, he wrapped the cording around his ankles and then tied off the ends, effectively hogtying the bounty hunter. As an afterthought, he rolled Slaughter into a crate he had left over from an earlier job, and fastened the latch. Small holes in the metal crate allowed some light and plenty of air into the container.

Turning his thoughts toward Devon, Bane left the cargo area with quick strides. He wanted to get back to her before she changed her mind. He'd never felt this kind of urgency before, like something precious was slipping through his fingers and he'd lose it if he didn't close his hands tight.

Something wasn't right with the story he'd been given, and as soon as he could, he was going to check things out a bit more closely. He trusted his contact not to have

knowingly fed him false information, but there was something off about the whole thing.

As soon as he got back to Devon, he'd let her know he wasn't turning her in. That would be at least one less worry for her. Together they could try to figure out who had set her up.

He knew she probably thought he'd fuck her and then fuck her over when he turned her in to the authorities. And even though he hadn't had a chance to check out her story, that she *hadn't* been the one to fire the shot, she'd had a chance to kill him, back when he'd been fighting with Slaughter.

All it would've taken was one kill shot to Slaughter and, while Bane was still trying to figure out what had happened, another kill shot to him. Or even two stun blasts to both of them would have worked. She would've had eight hours to fly the ship somewhere and disembark before he and Slaughter had even begun to wake. And if she'd needed more time she could've simply stunned them again.

But she hadn't done either of those things. Instead, she'd disabled Slaughter and given Bane the hottest kiss he'd had in along time. If luck stayed on his side, she'd give him more than just a kiss.

Reaching his quarters, he lifted his hand to the security panel. With chagrin, he noticed his fingers held a slight tremor as he punched in the code to his quarters. When the latch released, he drew in a deep breath and blew it slowly from between pursed lips. Then he pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

And stood stock-still.

Chapter Five

Devon forced herself to stay still under the intense scrutiny of Bane's lust-blackened eyes. She was naked, arms lying above her head, chained to the metal headboard by the wrist restraints. The restraints were closed, but they weren't locked, so her bondage was symbolic in nature. The fugitive collar was once more around her neck. Her legs were parted just enough to give him a glimpse of the slick folds of her sex.

She'd never had a man look at her like he did—as if there was a bountiful banquet laid out before him and he didn't know where to start. It gave her an incredible sense of power, something she'd not felt before. Not like this.

Bane's face hardened, his eyes glittered. "Devon..." His indrawn breath was loud in the room. "We need to talk."

"We can talk later," she murmured. She flexed her wrists, setting the wrist restraints clacking against the headboard.

With a muttered imprecation, he stripped off his shirt. He was breathing as though he'd just run the hundred-meter dash, which riveted her attention to his wide chest.

"Oh, God," she whispered, hardly aware she'd spoken aloud. He was better than she'd imagined, and she'd imagined plenty. He had the most beautiful chest—muscled, but not overly bulked up, with a fan of dark hair spreading over his pectorals and tapering down to a trail that disappeared into the waistband of his pants.

"What are you doing?" He hesitated, his hands at the magnetized tab of his waistband. He shook his head. "I know what you're doing," he muttered. "*Why* are you doing it?"

"I'm seducing you," she whispered. She arched her back, thrusting her breasts out. "If this is the last time I'm going to be with a man, I'm glad it's you. I want you."

His eyes darkened. "Just how do you want me, honey?"

"You tell me," she murmured, her breath catching at what she was promising. Herself, any way he wanted.

A low groan rumbled from his chest and, without another word, he bent to undo the fasteners on his big boots. He kicked off first one and then the other, and stripped off his socks. He popped the tab on his waistband and shoved his pants over his hips. They dropped to the floor, and he kicked them away.

His gaze drifted to a flat belt, nearly three centimeters wide, that was fastened to one edge of the bed. His eyes heated and she knew he was thinking about restraining her further. It looked like the restraint would go across her hips and, if coupled with manacles around her wrists and ankles, it would effectively immobilize her.

He shifted his weight, his cock bobbing with his movement. He met her gaze and a slow, wicked grin crossed his face. "Maybe a little later we'll try that out," he said. "For now, I want you more mobile than that." He brought one broad hand down and gripped the base of his thick shaft between forefinger and thumb.

Devon swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry, her gaze centered on his groin. His cock stood fully erect, throbbing with the frantic beats of his heart. The fat tip was ruddy, blushing darker even as she watched. She felt her clit thump in time to her heartbeat and more cream slid along the lips of her pussy.

He walked forward until he stood by the bed. His big hands fisted at his sides, the fingers clenching and relaxing as if he fought for control. His pulse thudded in a big vein running the length of his shaft.

Bringing her gaze up to meet his, she scooted over and pressed a kiss to the hair-roughened skin of one inner thigh. His indrawn breath hissed between clenched teeth. He shifted his thighs farther apart, hands coming up to grip her hair.

He smelled like musk and sex, intensely male. Unable to help herself, she nuzzled her nose into the skin at the juncture of his hip and inhaled. "God, you smell so good."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" he asked, his voice a harsh rasp.

"Mmm." She pressed a kiss to his other thigh, darting her tongue out to flick against him, smiling when he jolted and groaned. "I wonder..." She looked up at him, her smile fading as her own lust overwhelmed her. "I wonder if you'll taste as good as you smell." With her eyes on his, she took the plum-shaped head of his cock into her mouth.

His breath hitched, his eyes blazed down at her. His thick length hardened even further at her touch. Salty fluid tingled her taste buds and she hummed at the flavor. Bane growled. Bracing one knee on the bed, he rolled his hips toward her so she could reach him without disengaging from the wrist restraints.

Drawing back, she licked along the underside of his thick erection, tracing the pulsing veins that ran its length. She glanced up at his face from under her lashes and exulted in the sharp, primal pleasure hardening his features. With quick flicks, she tapped the point of her tongue against the nerves under the sensitive head, erotically teasing him. When she swiped across the fat tip, lapping up pre-cum dripping from the slit, Bane flinched and let out a rumbled groan.

"God, Devon, stop torturing me and *suck*." His broad hands fisted in her hair.

If she'd known a blowjob was all it took to get him to use her name, she might've tried this earlier. She grinned. "Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir."

Another deep rumble. "I could get used to this, you know. You chained to my bed, calling me Sir."

She kissed her way along the underside of his shaft, from the tip to the base, then slid her mouth to his heavy testicles. "Don't get any ideas," she murmured, smiling softly when he jerked as her warm breath brushed over his balls. "I may like to be dominated every now and again, but I'm not much of a submissive, not really."

"That's all right," he muttered, fingers kneading her scalp. "I'm not much of a dominant, not really. Now quit dicking around and suck something!"

Devon giggled and obediently drew one of his testicles into the wet heat of her mouth.

His hands tightened almost painfully in her hair and he bucked against her with a loud growl.

She switched to the other testicle and gave it the same tender treatment. Then, without warning, she stretched up and brought her lips back to his cock, taking as much of it into her mouth as she could.

Bane shouted and thrust into her mouth, pulling back almost immediately as if he was afraid of hurting her. How could he know that she wanted him rough and wild and out of control? She wasn't a china doll to be wrapped in padding and put away somewhere for protection.

She was a woman, one who knew what she wanted.

Humming, she took the head of his cock all the way back until it slid down her throat. She swallowed, grinning around his thick stalk of flesh as he groaned a harsh curse, his hands tightening in her hair. Apparently taking her action for what it was worth, he began shuttling in and out of her mouth faster.

Devon relaxed her jaw and let him do all the work. For long moments, the only sounds in the room were the wet, slurping sounds of her mouth on his cock and his harsh groans, punctuated by her humming every time he slid into her throat.

It was only a few minutes before he gently pushed her away. "Enough," he growled. His cock was shiny with her spit and his pre-cum, his lightly furred scrotum drawn up tight against his body. "When I come the first time, it's gonna be in your sweet pussy. For now, it's your turn." He pressed her back onto the bed.

Devon barely had time to catch her breath before his mouth was on her sex. A slow swipe through her folds from the flat of his tongue wrung a cry from her. As he settled down and began suckling on her clit, he speared one long finger into her sheath. He fucked into her slowly, steadily, adding a second finger and picking up the pace.

Soon her hips were rising and falling, meeting the thrust of his hand. Her thighs closed around his head and then fell wide open. Her core tightened and she cried out,

thrashing her head back and forth against the pillows. Her climax crashed over her and she convulsed, writhing and moaning, lost in sensation.

When she settled back down, Bane came up over her, his body supported on his elbows on either side of her. The hot, hard glide of his cock against her thigh left a wet trail of arousal on her skin. His kiss against the corner of her lips briefly tickled, making her smile. Then, as he covered her mouth fully with his, letting her taste herself on his lips, she jolted with pleasure and forgot all about smiling. As he nipped at her lips, nibbling and sucking, she thrust her tongue into his mouth to mate with his.

When he opened his mouth wider and parried her movement, sliding his tongue between her lips, she sucked on it. Their teeth clicked, clashing together. He groaned and fucked into her mouth with his tongue, smooth, steady strokes that made her want his cock doing the same thing to her pussy. Now.

She tugged one hand free of the loose restraint and reached between their bodies, curling her fingers around his thick shaft, and tugged. "I need you inside me."

"No more than I need to be inside you," Bane murmured against her lips. He drew away and flipped her onto her stomach. The movement caused her other wrist to slip free. She braced herself on her elbows and raised her ass higher in the air. Knowing the position put her wet and swollen vulva on display only made her hotter.

His big hands went to her waist and he lifted her hips up. He thrust into her deep and hard. "God, you're so tight." His voice was not much more than a hoarse rasp. "Tight, hot and wet. God!"

As she was impaled on his thick length, all Devon could do was moan. She curled her fingers into the soft sheets, shuddering as he stretched and filled her. She caught his rhythm, pulling him deeper and deeper with each hard jab. She swiveled her hips and pushed her ass against him, her greedy body sucking his cock even deeper. Pressure built, a tight coil in her belly.

With a large hand on her back, he urged her forward until her shoulders rested against her folded arms, the angle allowing his cock to sink into her even deeper.

The grasping clasp of her channel around his shaft was exquisite torture to Bane. He slammed into her again and again, wanting the moment to last but knowing he was too close to hold off much longer.

She threw back her head and screamed, her body quaking underneath him, around him, as she was hurled into her orgasm.

That final tightening of her sheath around his shaft was too much for Bane. He thrust into her one last time and stiffened, his release roiling from his balls through his cock to spurt into her in hot jets.

When he was able to think clearly again, he carefully pulled out of her, rolling to his back. Devon collapsed against his chest and nuzzled her face against his neck. He felt her tongue flick out and gather a bead of sweat that ran down his throat. The warm rasp of her tongue against his neck sent a jolt straight to his still-hard shaft. He cupped her ass and began to knead, separating her cheeks and then pushing them back together again. The taut globes were like silk under his fingertips and, one day, he'd take her here too.

But he needed to satisfy himself with her sweet pussy first.

Chapter Six

Hours later, waking from his sex-induced sleep, Bane wrapped one arm around Devon and pulled her closer. Unable to stop himself from touching her smooth skin, he rubbed his palm lightly up and down her upper arm.

He felt her yawn against his chest. "What happens now?" Her voice was soft as she drew small circles around one of his nipples.

Dammit. She'd been naked and ready and he'd forgotten about telling her. He'd meant to tell her first thing. Shifting to his side, he leaned on one elbow and looked down at her. "I'm going to check into things more thoroughly. Something doesn't smell right about all of this."

She stared up at him, the beginnings of hope stirring in her eyes. "Wh-what are you saying, Bane?"

"I'm saying your actions aren't those of a killer." Leaning down, he placed a soft kiss on the end of her nose. "I'm saying I believe you."

She blinked once, twice. A tear rolled from the corner of one eye. "Then...you're not going to turn me in?"

He shook his head. "I was gonna tell you when I first walked into my quarters, but you distracted me."

"Typical male. Can't do anything with more than one head a time."

At the dry amusement in her voice, he relaxed fractionally. At least she wasn't angry. While he could handle an angry woman, he didn't particularly want to spoil the present mood. He was sated and content—for the first time in a long time.

The one thing he needed to do was find out from Slaughter who'd hired him. It wasn't the Federation's style to have two bounty hunters after the same prey, so Bane figured someone else was in the play. He wanted to know who.

Devon was warm and relaxed in his arms, and her even breathing told him she'd fallen asleep again. Poor little sprite. She couldn't have gotten much sleep over the last few weeks.

He eased out of bed, taking great care to leave her as undisturbed as possible. She muttered something and sprawled onto her back, arms stretched above her head. In the cool air of the cabin, her nipples beaded, the areolas puckering, inviting him to warm them with his mouth.

A frown crossed her face and she sighed and turned onto her side. The curve of her body drew his gaze and he tracked down the length of her from shoulder to knee, then zeroed in on her shapely bottom. His fingers curled against the urge to part her smooth buttocks so he could have access to her sweet rosebud opening.

"Simmer down, boy," Bane muttered to his cock as it twitched with renewed interest. He needed to let her catch up on her sleep. He'd go have a heart-to-heart with Slaughter.

Pulling on his pants, he fastened them and then pulled on his boots. Not bothering with a shirt, he pulled open the hatch and left his quarters, closing the bulky metal door as quietly as he could.

Quick strides took him to the cargo bay, where he found the bounty hunter where he'd left him. Only the other man was now awake and not too happy with being shut up in a crate.

"Answer some questions for me, and I'll let you out." Bane crouched in front of the metal crate and met Slaughter's gaze steadily.

"Let me the fuck out and I'll answer some questions," came the quick response. "I need more air."

Bane narrowed his eyes. Not seeing a problem with the request, he stood and took a step back. With the tip of his boot, he pushed up the latch on first one side and then the other. The front of the crate fell open with a loud clatter and Slaughter scooted out of the cramped space.

"God almighty." He rotated his shoulders. "Don't suppose you'll cut me loose so I can get some feeling back in my arms?"

Bane raised his eyebrows.

"Didn't think so," Slaughter muttered. "Can't blame a bloke for tryin'." He looked at Bane, his gaze resting on the unsatisfied bulge between his thighs and a smirk curled his lips. "Looks like you been busy. Puttin' your bounty through her paces before you turn her over, huh?" He barked a laugh. "Or have you already turned her over? You had her in the ass yet, buddy?"

Bane ignored the question. "I'm not turning her over. She's not guilty."

Slaughter blinked. "You gotta be *shittin'* me." He gave a bark of laughter. "Talk about bein' led around by your dick."

Bane fisted his hands. "Keep it up, *buddy*, and you'll have more bruises to go with that one you're sporting on your cheek."

The other man shrugged. "Just callin' it like I see it." He stared at Bane, a speculative look in his eyes. "She that sweet a piece of ass that you'd walk away from three hundred and fifty thousand credits?"

"It has nothing to do with that." Bane scowled. "I believe she's innocent."

Slaughter made a face. "Yeah. So?"

At the nonchalant acceptance in the other bounty hunter's tone, a knot formed in Bane's gut. "You knew?"

Another shrug. "Doesn't make a bit of difference to me. A bounty's a bounty, any way you look at it."

"You don't care that she's not guilty?"

At Slaughter's offhand "Nope," Bane let a punch loose. His fist slammed the other man's head into the deck with a satisfying *thunk*. "You son of a bitch. They're planning to *execute* her," Bane snarled.

Slaughter shook his head, then waggled his jaw. "Damn, son. She must be an awesome lay for you to get so worked up." He shook his head again, this time in confusion. "What's one less resistance fighter, anyway? And if they want to take each other out, who are we to care? Especially if there's money to be had."

Bane took a step back. He had to distance himself physically or Slaughter might not survive. He narrowed his eyes and in a low and hard voice said, "Tell me what you mean by that."

"Not if you're gonna hit me again." Slaughter lifted his shoulders. "It's not like I can defend myself lying here like this. But, then, you were never one to worry 'bout niceties. Which is why I can't exactly figure out why you're so worked up over this girl. I mean, there's plenty more ass in the universe."

Bane's lips tightened. "It's not the girl, you piece of shit. It's the principle. I don't make a habit of turning over people who are innocent of the charges just to collect the bounty."

Slaughter rolled his eyes. "Ah. Bane, the bounty hunter with the heart of gold." He snorted. "Right."

Bane ground his teeth together. "Just tell me."

His gaze glued to Bane, Slaughter said, "Toman Wilder's the one who hired me. He offered another fifty in addition to the bounty offered by the Elysian Federation if I made sure the girl was delivered in the first category of 'dead or alive'."

"Son of a bitch." Bane paced the width of the small cargo hold, his gaze centered on the other man. "You're telling me the fucking leader of the resistance is your fucking client?"

"Seems the Wild Man and your little gal had a fallin' out, and he wants to make sure she keeps her mouth shut." Slaughter gave another one of those nonchalant shrugs

that made Bane want to whale away on the bastard. “Her bein’ dead would take care of that little worry.”

Bane muttered a curse. *We’ll just see about that.*

He motioned toward the crate, ignoring Slaughter’s protests. Once he’d secured the bounty hunter inside, he turned on his heel and left the cargo bay, making sure the hatch was locked behind him. He’d make his communications from the bridge rather than his quarters. He didn’t want to disturb Devon, plus...

If the news wasn’t good, he wanted to protect her from the hurtful truth.

* * * * *

Bane stared at the vidscreen in disbelief. He could hardly believe what his boyhood friend was telling him. “So Slaughter was telling the truth? The charges against Devon are bogus?”

Major General Laban Atonay raised one eyebrow. “Now, I didn’t say *all* of the charges are bogus. The capital charge of murder has been dropped, as has the felony charge of hijacking an official Federation shipment. But she still has to answer the felony charge of treason for her part in the raid.”

Bane bit off a curse. A charge of treason could be punishable by exile or death—it was all up to the presiding panel of judges. He knew some of them, but not enough to make any difference or sway any opinions.

Shit. Either way, Devon was fucked.

“Worst-case scenario,” Atonay went on, “she surrenders herself—”

“And is put to death,” Bane growled.

Atonay shook his head. “I don’t think so. Too many influential people, both in the government and in big industry, have been very vocal against capital punishment for anything but the most heinous of crimes. There hasn’t been anyone executed for treason in nearly ten years.”

"There's always someone wanting to set an example, make a point, Laban." Bane sat back in his chair with a sigh. "God dammit. I just don't know what to do."

"It'll go over better for Ms. Maertissa if she turns herself in," the general said. His gaze went to something over Bane's shoulder. "Is that her?"

Bane swiveled in his chair to see Devon leaning against the console behind him. Damn. People kept sneaking up on him. It was time to get out of the business.

She met his gaze, her own solemn and determined. "I can't keep running. At least now I'm not wanted for murder. That's something, at least." Moving closer, she perched on the arm of his command chair.

He heaved a sigh and scrubbed one hand along the back of his neck, then dropped it to rest around her waist. "I know, honey. I don't like it. There's always a chance..."

"From what you've said, it sounds like the Federation needs to focus their attention on Toman Wilder." General Atonay directed his next words to Devon. "What exactly did you do to the Wild Man, young lady, that has him so hell-bent on your demise?"

She drew in a deep breath. Hesitating, she glanced at Bane.

"You can trust Laban," he said. "He and I go back a long way."

"We've been friends since we were kids. This guy," Atonay said with a nod toward Bane, "doesn't make friends easily. Anyone he's willing to do battle for has to be stand-up. You have my word of honor that I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"It's not what I know that he's done against the Elysian Federation that has him worried. It's what he's done against the resistance." Devon bit down on her bottom lip.

At the sight of her teeth digging into that plump lip, blood shot to Bane's groin. He shifted in his seat, trying to ease his sudden erection. *He* should be the one doing the biting, dammit.

"And what exactly has he done against the resistance?" General Atonay asked, his tone full of curiosity.

Bane could see her battling with herself, trying to figure out just how much to say and about what.

Finally, with a gusty sigh, she offered, "When it's suited him, he's played one resistance cell against another, making it look like the Federation is involved when it's not. I also know of at least two occasions where he's tipped off someone pretty high up in the government about planned attacks by various cells." She gave a hard look to the general. "I won't betray the cause, sir. There are a lot of people, especially out on the fringe, who depend on the resistance for their very survival. I won't give them up."

Atonay's eyes narrowed and, for a moment, Bane thought she'd gone too far. He could usually read the other man, but his childhood friend could be inscrutable when it suited him. Head tilted to one side and steeped fingers touching his mouth, the general studied her. "Let me make a few calls," he said, apparently coming to a decision. "I'm not making any promises, but I'll do what I can."

Bane lifted his chin in acknowledgement. "Thanks, buddy."

A slow grin curled the other man's mouth. "If I pull this off, you owe me one. A big one."

"Just name it. Anytime, any place," Bane said solemnly.

General Atonay sobered. He inclined his head. "Try to lie low. It may take me some time to work something out. I'll be in touch."

The comm link disconnected. Bane stared at Devon. "Be sure about this, honey. It could go bad for you, you know."

She slid off the arm of his chair onto his lap, twining her arms around his neck. Head against his shoulder, she was quiet for a few minutes. Bane stayed still too, letting her work through things.

"It's not like I wasn't part of the resistance, Bane" she murmured, rubbing her temple on his shoulder. She seemed too resigned too...willing to face the consequences.

God, this was a complete turnaround for him – not wanting a fugitive to pay for her crimes. That told him more than anything else how important this woman had become to him.

“But I really played such an itty-bitty part in things and I got out as soon as I found out what Wilder was up to.” She sighed and rubbed her fingers across his collarbone.

“Which was when he set the hounds loose on you.” He tightened his arms around her. God, if Slaughter had found her first... Bane would never have known her, never have known how full and bright his lonely spirit could feel. His muscles bunched as he prepared to stand. He felt a need to hit something – or someone – and Slaughter would do nicely.

Devon leaned forward, slender palms against his bare shoulders to keep him in his seat. She knew from the look in his eyes that he was planning on doing something he’d probably regret later. Besides, she wasn’t about to let him get away. She swung one leg over his lap and straddled him, settling her crotch against the bulge in his pants. “I’ve never made love in a cockpit before,” she said.

A bark of laughter burst from him. “Technically, this is called a bridge. But with this,” he thrust his hips up, driving the wedge of his erection deeper into the V of her body, “I think cockpit might be more apt.”

She grinned and bent her head, bringing her face closer to his. “What d’ya say, cyborg? Care to push some buttons and start something up?”

She slid her hands up into his hair, loving the contrast of the heat of his head and the cool, silken texture of his hair against her skin. When his eyes went black with passion, she slowly leaned closer, prolonging that first meeting of lips. Just as her mouth touched his, their breaths mingling, she watched his lashes drop and his lips part.

The anticipation on his face was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen. As cream slid from her core to coat her labia, she shivered and dropped her head that last millimeter to touch his mouth with hers.

One of his big hands came up to curl around the base of her skull and his mouth opened wider, lips and tongue meeting hers again and again. Her own eyes fluttered shut. He brought his other arm around her, pulling her tighter against him.

The hard muscles of his chest rubbed against her nipples, hardening them even through her layers of clothing. Devon let loose a whimper of need and pressed against him, her mouth ravenous on his.

Her womb clenched. She began rocking against him, dragging her crotch against his thick erection. Almost weeping with need, she brought her hands between their bodies, her fingers fumbling for the fastening of his pants. She wanted his cock hard and hot in her hands and she wanted it now.

She slipped off his lap and got on her knees between his legs. As soon as she had his pants undone, she pulled his erection free.

The ruddy head of his cock wept with arousal, and she swiped it up with the flat of her tongue. His harsh groan and the way his hips bucked was all the encouragement she needed. With no further preliminaries, she took his thick length into her mouth all the way to the back of her throat.

"God!" Bane's voice was little more than a growl. "More," he demanded. "Suck me harder."

She did. With one hand, she stroked his balls, the other she curled around the base of his shaft and slid it up to meet her mouth every time it descended. She sucked, she licked, she tormented him with lips and tongue until he arched upward with a loud shout. The salty essence of his passion jetted into her mouth. She swallowed and kept working him until he settled back into the chair with a heavy sigh.

She loved doing this for him, giving him that expression of complete sensual satisfaction. With any luck, she'd have a lifetime to see that look on his face.

Chapter Seven

The next four days passed in a blur of conversation and sex. Mostly sex. Bane had ship duties to perform and had to spend time with Slaughter, giving the prisoner meals and letting him take care of personal business. During those times Devon had a few moments to herself, like now. She perched on the edge of the bed and brushed her hair. She was learning a lot about this man – especially that he loved having sex.

If she didn't know any better, she'd have sworn he had a penile implant in addition to the cybernetics in his eye. Not that she was complaining – she was just as addicted to him as he seemed to be to her. After the first several times they'd made love, he'd had to give her time to get over the initial soreness. But twenty-four hours later, lying in bed on a lazy morning, his big hand had slipped between her thighs and they'd both agreed that the wait was over.

The one subject he'd broached that they hadn't followed through with yet was her taking that big cock up her ass.

Devon shivered. She'd had anal sex before, but never with someone as thick – and as dominant – as Bane. It made her a little...hesitant.

But excited at the same time.

It was a painful pleasure she was sure to enjoy if she could calm her instinctive fears about having something that big inserted into a space so small.

But she was determined that today would be the day. She'd open herself to him completely, allow him that final intimacy. Then...

The ship shuddered violently, and Devon grabbed onto the bed in reflex. The next instant, the small craft gave a loud groan. She felt her belly do a somersault. Another impact shook the ship, tossing her onto the floor. Crying out, she landed with a thud. She began floating and grabbed onto the frame of the bed to keep herself at floor level.

"What the..." What happened? The antigravity unit wasn't working and, as the little ship quaked again, she knew something was very wrong.

Hand over hand, she hauled herself toward the headboard, where she'd be able to reach the comm unit. Once there, she hit the button to the bridge. "Bane, what's going on?"

"We're under attack. The fucking gravionics unit is down."

No kidding. The ship veered to one side and she flew around, her back slamming into the bulkhead. Air was forced from her lungs with the impact. She wheezed, struggling to drag in another breath. She lost her grip on the bed but managed to grab onto the small workstation where the computer console was housed.

"Are you all right?" When she didn't immediately answer, Bane's husky voice came sharply over the comm. "Devon!"

"I'm fine," she managed. "Who's attacking?"

"Don't know. Looks like an overhauled Federation ship, which might mean that it's resistance fighters."

Resistance. She bit her lip. In her gut, she knew the person firing on them was Toman Wilder. The Wild Man.

The small ship changed course, and Devon swung back around. Her hands slipped off the console, and she smashed into the bulkhead just above the bed. Quickly scrabbling for a good hold, she grabbed the mattress and pulled herself down. Then she gripped the restraining belt Bane had used in their lovemaking on several occasions and strapped it across her waist, tying it off through the round hook at the other side.

Though her body felt weightless — her legs and arms floating in the air — at least she wasn't stuck up on the ceiling.

"Devon?"

She sighed. "I'm all right, Bane." She'd probably have some bruises to show for it but he didn't need to know that right at this moment. He had other things to worry about. "I'm strapped in now."

"Hang tight, honey. I hope to have the grav unit back online in just a few minutes. If the damned controls will cooperate."

His voice was tense. The ship made a few more violent maneuvers but, thankfully, no more impacts shook the small craft.

A series of clicking noises sounded. Her arms and legs thumped onto the bed. Finally! The artificial gravity unit had come back on.

She unfastened the restraint and hopped off the bed. Heart racing, she ran barefoot to the bridge.

Bane gave her a glance as she sat in the other chair and fastened the safety harness. His jaw was set, his eyes narrowed with fury.

"I figured I'd be just as safe up here as I would be bouncing around in the cabin."

He nodded. "It's Wilder," he muttered and turned his gaze back to his control panel.

"I guessed as much." Devon looked at the control console in front of her. "Can I do anything?"

He shook his head. "As long as all systems are working, a chimp could pretty much fly this old girl." He nodded toward her console. "If that big green button starts flashing, let me know."

"Why?"

"It means the weapons system is offline."

"Oh." She stared at the square grass-green button. "That wouldn't be good."

"No, it wouldn't." He maneuvered the ship into a series of loops. "If I can just get behind him..."

Devon could see the other ship on the vidscreen at the front of the bridge. Another blast of plasma fire streamed toward them, and she braced herself for the impact.

The little craft quaked. Devon could hear Bane swearing above the noise of the weapons fire. "Hang on," he yelled. "I'm gonna try something that could be a little tricky."

"Like what?" she shouted back at him.

He didn't respond. Instead, he throttled back, slowing the ship to a near crawl, and dropped below the flight path of the attacking ship. The other pilot wasn't prepared for the sudden move and shot past them. Bane immediately roared back into action, firing point blank at the other ship's tail section.

Pieces of hull came off the ship and it listed to one side.

"That should do it," Bane said. "I've disabled his drive and weapons, and it looks like his artificial gravity too." He punched coordinates into the computer, and their ship pivoted and flew off in the opposite direction. Once they'd put several thousand kilometers between them and the damaged ship, he sighed and released his safety harness.

Devon did the same. When she approached him, he reached out and snagged her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. Burying his face in her neck, he inhaled deeply and held her in silence a few moments.

She could feel his strong arms trembling and realized just how close they'd been to dying.

"God, I was so scared for you." Bane warm breath puffed against her throat. "I thought..."

When he didn't finish, she sifted her fingers through his hair. "I'm all right, Bane."

He nodded, his rough cheek sliding against her skin. He held her like that for long moments, then sighed and lifted his head. "I've set coordinates for a little planet about half a day's journey from here. We'll land and make repairs. It's a fairly out-of-the-way

place and I have a friend with a private hangar. I don't think Wilder will look for us there. If he even can make repairs to his ship." He rubbed his bristly cheek against hers. "With any luck, he'll float around in space for a few days."

Devon looked into his eyes. The only thing she cared about was that Wilder was no longer a threat—at least for the time being—and that the trip they were making would take roughly twelve hours. She raised her eyebrows and looped her arms around his neck. She gave her ass a little wiggle. "So what do we do in the meantime?"

His cock thickened beneath her. With eyes dark and voice deep with passion, he drawled, "Oh, I imagine we'll think of something."

He stood with her in his arms and carried her back to his cabin. Once there, Bane set her on her feet. She kept her hands clasped behind his neck and drew him down for a kiss.

It was the sweetest, most tender kiss they'd shared yet. Breaths mingling, she sipped at his mouth, savoring the closeness, the fact that they were both alive.

But all too soon it wasn't enough. He gave a groan and crashed his mouth into hers, lips bruising, tongue wending around hers and drawing it back between his lips where he sucked it with hard force.

Bane tightened his arms around Devon, drawing her up onto her tiptoes so her soft pussy would fit just right against his throbbing dick. The clothing between their skin irritated him, and he pulled away from her long enough to yank her clothes off, then his own. Once they were naked, he jerked her back into his arms. Sliding one hand around the back of her neck, he splayed his fingers so they cradled the base of her skull. He tilted her head to give him the angle he needed, and dove back into her mouth.

She moaned and pressed against him, her hard nipples prodding his chest. He rubbed his cock through her folds, feeling her slick arousal coating him. His balls drew tight. God! He was about to come like an untutored boy, without even being inside her.

Jerking away from her, he took deep breaths to regain control. "Get on the bed," he ordered gruffly.

Without a word, but with plenty of banked humor and flaring passion in her eyes, she turned and did as he said. But instead of lying on her back as she usually did, she got on her knees, both hands gripping her buttocks to spread her cheeks and show him the puckered rosette of her anus.

He swallowed. "Are you sure you want to do this, honey?" She hadn't seemed all that enthusiastic when he'd brought it up before and he'd let it drop. Anal sex wasn't something every woman wanted to do or even enjoyed, and he wasn't about to force anything on Devon that she didn't want.

No matter how much his body screamed for it.

"I'm sure," she murmured and met his gaze over her shoulder.

He saw instinctive fear there, but also such trust that he felt a pang in his chest. Absently, he raised one hand and rubbed across his left pectoral. But when she wiggled her little butt, he forgot all about pangs except for the ones in his cock.

Bane went to the small storage chest bolted to the floor at the foot of his bunk. He opened it and scrounged around until he found the bottle of lube he was looking for. Coming around to the side of the bed, a slow, feral smile curved his mouth as he stared at her tiny puckered hole. God, he couldn't wait to work his cock through that tight ring of muscles.

He climbed onto the bed and got between her legs. Putting one hand between her shoulder blades, he urged her to bend forward until her shoulders rested on the mattress. Her ass was high in the air, and she still held both cheeks spread apart with her hands.

Spraying lube on her rosette, he worked the slick liquid into her hole with first one finger, then two, his gaze going from his fingers spearing into her ass to what he could see of her face. He knew this would hurt—the first time usually did—but he could make the pleasure far outweigh any discomfort she'd feel.

He lubed up his fingers again and stroked into her, scissoring his fingers to spread her tight muscles even farther. She moaned and pressed back against him, her hands falling away from her buttocks to grip the covers on the bed.

"You all right?" he asked.

"This is...this is..."

"Yeah. I know." Pausing for a moment, Bane lay on his back, his head between her splayed legs. He started pumping his fingers into her again. "Bring that sweet pussy down here. Let me taste you."

The pink folds of her cunt unfolded as she lowered herself to his waiting mouth. He swiped his tongue up her slit. God, her flavor was fresh and tart all at the same time.

As he began tonguing her sex, she jerked and moaned. He kept up a steady rhythm with his fingers in her ass, widening her opening, preparing her for his cock. Latching onto her clit, he suckled her and, as he felt her body trembling with the upsurge of a climax, he added a third finger to her ass.

She screamed and shoved downward on his face, her pussy flaring with heat and slick arousal. Bane dipped his tongue into the well of her body and gathered as much of her cream as he could.

Before her tremors completely faded, he was on his knees again behind her. He sprayed lube on his cock and spread it around and oiled up her back entrance again. He guided his cock to her tight little hole and watched her face as he slowly worked his way in.

Devon gasped and shivered. She flushed with arousal, tears and acceptance shining in her eyes.

"Push out while I'm pressing in," he said, holding onto his control with effort. His body screamed at him to ram into her, fast and hard and so deep he wouldn't know where she ended and he began. "It'll make it easier."

"All right."

He felt her muscles relax and give way to his insistent pressure and the head slid through the tight ring. He groaned and kept pushing in, slowly, allowing her time to get used to the feeling of fullness.

When his balls slapped against her swollen pussy, they both moaned.

"Now it begins," he muttered, jaw clamped as arousal spiked higher and higher. He started a slow slide out, then a slow glide back in. Soon, though, he couldn't do slow. As his strokes increased in speed, he rasped, "Rub your clit, honey. I want you to get as much pleasure out of this as I do."

As soon as she did, she whimpered and tightened around him. Bane groaned and shuttled in and out of her tight ass, faster and faster, his balls slapping against her with each downward stroke. He held off as long as he could, though he could feel the fire burning through his balls. When she cried out, moaning and quaking beneath him, around him, he pumped hard and fast, his own climax so violent it left him shuddering and panting above her.

His head spun and his pulse thundered in his ears. He collapsed onto the bed, falling onto his side and bringing her with him, keeping his cock buried in her ass. He wanted nothing more than to take her again, but he knew she wouldn't be ready for another go 'round so soon.

As he started to ease out of her channel, she whimpered at the movement. "It's all right, honey. We're not going to do this again right now." He pulled all the way out of her and got to his feet. He pulled her up and gave her a quick kiss. "We're going to take a shower and then see where we're at. We shouldn't be that far away from my friend."

She looked so adorable, so fuckably delicious standing there wearing only a sated smile... Somehow he found the control to lead her to the shower. The sonic shower wasn't built for two people and the tight quarters forced them close so that their bodies continually touched. Once he made sure they were both clean, he couldn't keep from telling her to wrap her legs around his hips while he fucked into her slick pussy under the bombardment of sonic waves.

Afterward, while they dressed, he kept stealing kisses. Each one was progressively longer and deeper. He couldn't seem to help himself from acting the primitive around her—all he could think about was ramming his cock into her until neither of them could move.

With a moan, Devon danced out of his reach, holding out one hand to ward him off. "You need to go steer the ship," she reminded him, her voice shaky.

"The autonav unit is on," he replied, stalking toward her. He should've made sure she had some clothing other than what she'd been wearing when he brought her on board but, damn, she looked hot wearing one of his shirts and nothing else. The hem came to about mid-thigh, showcasing her slender legs and inviting his hand to ease it up so he could look his fill at her naked cunt, her sweet ass.

He'd just drawn her toward him when the comm unit beeped. "Fuck," he swore softly. He looked at the readout. With a sideways glance at Devon, he said, "It's Laban."

She nodded. The creamy skin of her throat moved as she swallowed.

Bane sat down at the computer monitor and activated the vidscreen. Laban Atonay's face appeared onscreen, and he wore a big smile.

"Great news," he said without preamble. "The Chief of Planetary Security was so excited about a chance to get Wilder, he about wet himself. He took it to the highest authority and they're willing to cut whatever deal necessary with Ms. Maertissa there, in order to nab him."

Devon caught her breath, hardly daring to hope. "You mean...?"

"You give them what they need to track Toman Wilder down and you're a free woman."

She squealed and jumped up and down, clapping her hands. She'd be free!

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Bane said dryly, "since we just sent him limping away after he tried to blow us out of the universe." He was less exuberant about the offer than she was.

"You all right?" Laban asked, a frown of concern drawing down his brows.

Bane gave a brief nod. "We're just going to set down and make some repairs—shouldn't take too long. A day at the most." He paused, staring intently at Atonay's image. "Before we get too carried away, is this on the level? They're prepared to let her just walk away?"

Atonay nodded. "She'll be free and clear." His gaze shifted to Devon. "Just provide the information and be willing to testify when he's brought to trial."

She sobered. Having the ticket to freedom waved under her nose was a heady experience after having been on the run for so many months, but she knew Wilder would never see the inside of a courtroom. "You know as soon as the other resistance leaders hear what he's done, there'll be a price on *his* head. He'll never be brought in alive."

She had mixed emotions about that. Part of her—a fiercely primitive part, she admitted—wanted him to pay for his crimes in the same way he'd carried them out. But the other more civilized part of her believed that everyone deserved a fair trial, no matter what they were accused of.

"Even though I don't condone vigilantism...better him than you," Bane muttered, echoing her thoughts in reverse order. "Whatever happens to him isn't because of anything you did, honey. It'll be because of things *he's* done. It's that simple."

"Things are never that simple," she responded dryly. But he was right. Toman Wilder had been the cause of a lot of innocent people's deaths, and he needed to pay for that. She just hoped she wouldn't end up with another bounty on her for what she was about to do.

"The government's willing to put you in the witness protection program," Atonay said, apparently seeing—and correctly interpreting—her fear. "They'll give you a new face, a new name, a whole new life."

She brought one hand to her cheek. Another face?

Bane stood and drew her into his arms. "While I'm partial to this one," he murmured, nuzzling her neck, "I'd rather you be alive with a different face than dead with this one."

She put her hand against his cheek, then looked at Atonay. "Make the deal."

He nodded and prepared to sign off.

"Wait a minute," Bane said, lifting his face from her neck. "I have some...cargo I need to unload. Think you can help me with that?"

A slow smile creased Atonay's face and he gave another nod. "Once you've made your repairs, meet me at—" he leaned to the side and pressed a few buttons, "those coordinates and I'll take him off your hands."

"Will do. Thanks, Laban."

"No problem. But you owe me one." He grinned again and gave a jaunty salute, then signed off.

Devon twined her arms around Bane's neck. A week that had started out with the promise of the future for two lovers still held that same promise, though for two different people. "So, what now?"

His strong arms looped around her waist and he pulled her close. One hand slid over her bottom, grasping the hem of the shirt until he could drag it up over the curve of her ass. His palm stroked over her buttocks. The heat from his big body seeped into her, and her arousal revved up once again.

"Now we get back to business."

He brought his mouth back to hers and, as she willingly gave herself up to his passion, she knew the future wouldn't always be easy, especially over the next few months. But it would always be exciting with this man by her side, and she couldn't wait to get it started.

Sometimes being between a rock and a hard man was exactly the right place to be.

Epilogue

Devon stood in the small side garden and drew in a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she tilted her face to the sun. The aestheticist had finally decreed her skin was healed enough from the surgery to endure limited exposure to the sun. As soon as the woman had climbed into the shuttle to take her back to the med ship, Devon had raced outside.

Her new husband walked outside, an indulgent grin on his handsome face. "Couldn't wait another second, could you?"

She shook her head. Without opening her eyes, she murmured, "I hate being cooped up."

"You hate being told you're not allowed to do something," he corrected. Strong arms curled around her and he pulled her back against his chest. His mouth nuzzled the crook of her neck, warm breath drifting over her skin. "But I'll tell you this much, Nareese, you're allowed to love me forever."

She opened her eyes and twisted in his arms to face him. Looping her arms around his neck, she shook her head. "Nareese. I'm still not used to it, even though it's been five months since the trial and two months since the start of my new life."

"Our new life, Mrs. Carradoc." Bane ran his hands up and down her back. He flashed his teeth in a wolfish grin.

"What?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about something Slaughter said to me." His hands crept lower, cupping her buttocks and pulling her against his hard body. "'To the victor go the spoils.' And what lovely spoils you are too."

She laughed and drew his head down to hers. Not all that long ago things had seemed so bleak. Now she had the man she loved and a secure future to look forward

to. Wilder and Slaughter were both in prison, and when they got out Devon Maertissa would have disappeared. In her place was Nareese Smitton-Carradoc.

Bane swept her into his arms and carried her inside. He placed her on the bed and came down over her, his mouth meeting hers once more.

Being the “spoils” couldn’t agree with her more.

About the Author

Sherrill Quinn grew up in Northeast Ohio on the southern edge of the snow belt. After sloshing through too many winters of ice and snow, she moved to southern Arizona where she's lived since 2000. After twenty years building a career in Human Resources, she went back to her early love of writing and started a second career in erotic romance in early 2005.

Sherrill welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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