

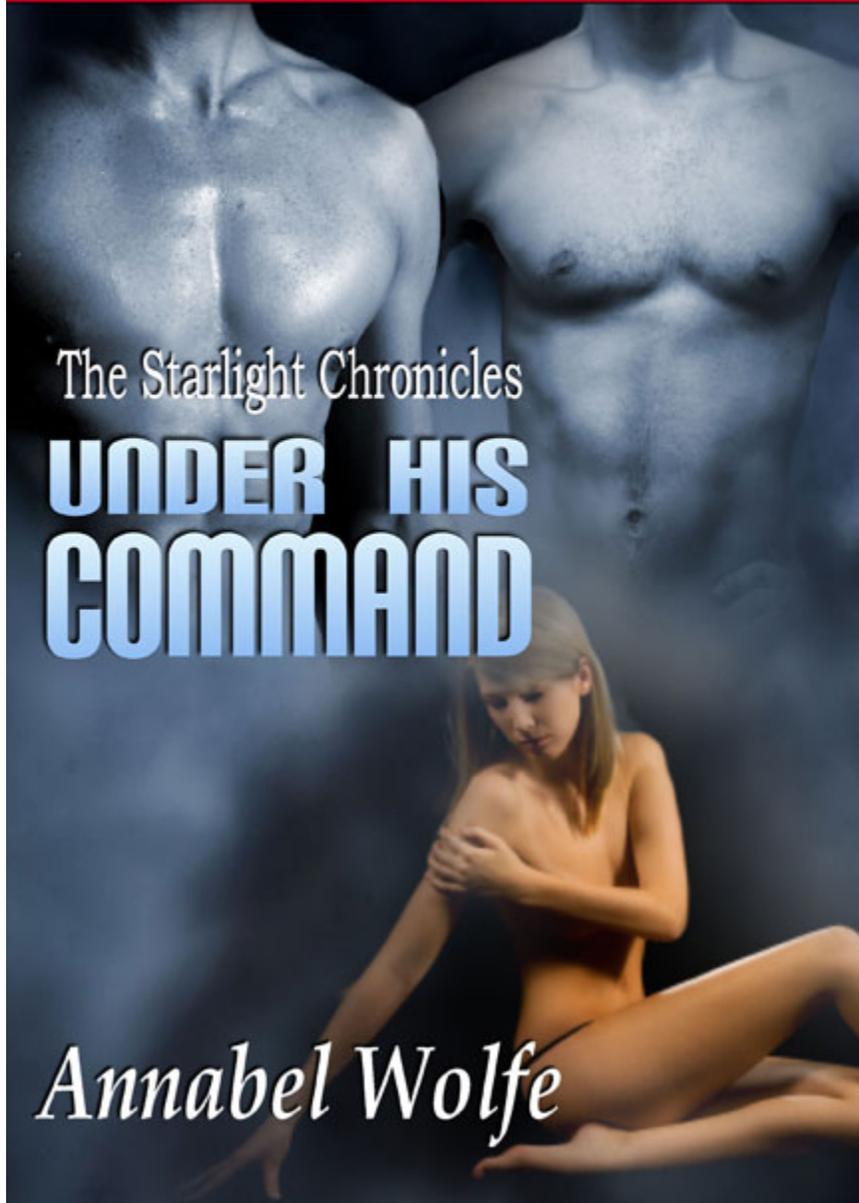
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The Starlight Chronicles

**UNDER HIS
COMMAND**

Annabel Wolfe



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The Starlight Chronicles 3

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MENAGE AMOUR



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UNDER HIS COMMAND

The Starlight Chronicles

ANNABEL WOLFE

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Chapter 1

The tall man standing in front of her had his back turned, hands clasped behind him, his gaze focused on the navigation panel.

Peyton Valmont squared her shoulders. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

For a moment there was no response. Then he said without inflection, “Are you surprised, Lieutenant?”

No, she had to admit she wasn’t. Staying quiet seemed the best course because if she voiced that out loud it meant she *knew* she was going to get in trouble and that of itself was an admission of guilt.

At her silence, he swung around and pinned her with his infamous ice cold gaze. There was a granite set to his lean jaw. Commander Gallico said in clipped tones, “You disobeyed a direct order.”

Tread carefully.

She cleared her throat. “Actually, sir, I didn’t. I wasn’t present at the briefing.”

“Are you trying to split hairs with me on this, Valmont?” His eyes were pure steel gray and about as warm as the interior of a frozen planet. “Everyone on this ship knew my decision about the stranded personnel on Epsilon. Sending in a transport was too risky. The

surface was unstable, the storm too severe to chance more lives, but I don't have to tell you that, do I? You witnessed it all firsthand."

He was right. The conditions had been horrible. She'd never seen worse and even without the storm blast the constant quakes and collapsing landscape made finding the small band left alive almost impossible. "It wasn't the most pleasant mission, sir," she conceded, doing her best to not sound flippant or worse, cocky.

Because despite not the best odds, she had managed to somehow spot their beacon, land the transport on the shaking little strip, and when the survivors scrambled aboard, she'd also taken back off, no small feat. Getting in had been a miracle—getting out had been a living nightmare. It had tested every skill she had as a pilot, but she'd done it.

To the grateful soldiers and colonists, she was a hero. Unfortunately, to Commander Gallico, she was insubordinate.

It wasn't like she hadn't known there would be repercussions, she reminded herself, standing stiffly at attention.

"It wasn't a mission, Lieutenant. It was a hijacking. Taking a military craft—even if it is the craft you are assigned to pilot—is against regulations. You know it and I *know* you know it. You risked an expensive piece of machinery, you risked the lives of your crew, and since you just proved how damn good you are at your job, you risked one of our best pilots."

She opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, he snapped, "Don't you dare point out those people are still alive. I'm more grateful for that than you can imagine, but it doesn't change my position on this."

Of course not. As far as she could tell, Kelton Gallico was so by the book he could probably spout regulations in his sleep. He was young to be in his position and good at it too, but hardnosed in a lot of ways. Basically the crew of the ship liked him for his unswerving fairness and clear head if there was trouble, but they did follow the rules to the letter under his command. She always had too, until now.

Very carefully, she said, “I wasn’t going to point that out, sir. I was going to tell you my sister was down there.”

Silence. Nothing but the blip of the surveillance screens in the background.

His eyes narrowed a fraction. “On Epsilon? What was she doing on a failing planet?”

“Planet physicist, sir. Hired by the Minoan government to try to analyze why the structure of the planet was beginning to disintegrate. She was the one who advised them to send the distress signal but it got worse even faster than she thought.”

Commander Gallico’s expression didn’t change. “I see. I hate to even ask this, but was she with the recovered party?”

“Yes,” Peyton answered, remembering the feeling of pure joy in the midst of chaos and urgency when Tara had clambered into the cockpit, her face streaked with soot, her eyes red from the virulent gas releases from the explosions, but beautifully alive.

“For your sake, I’m glad.” He turned then so he was in profile, and sighed audibly, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’ve put me in one hell of a situation.”

“Sorry, sir.” She was...but she’d do the same thing again. Whatever happened now—even if she got demoted or lost her commission—was worth it.

She covertly tried to gauge his expression. He was strikingly handsome as most S-species males were, so the line of his nose was perfectly straight, his mouth chiseled and at the moment set grimly, and his ebony hair gleamed under the lights of the command center which was his domain, just brushing the collar of his uniform tunic. S-species—or Super-humans—had evolved as a result of genetic engineering when Earth decided to form colonies on different planets, and the result was they were taller, more dominant, better-looking, healthier—everything enhanced. Earth was now but a sub-colony, completely under the dominance of S-species rule. Being half-human, half-S-species put Peyton at a disadvantage sometimes and she felt it

now. He was pissed—in many ways he had a right to be angry—and being in the same room with a very much larger, very ticked off, regulation-crazy commander wasn't her idea of a good time. Weighed against the duress of the mission itself, she could feel the strain in the tension in her shoulders and the dryness of her mouth.

He glanced over finally. "Let me first say I understand your motivations and can't put forth with any sort of honesty I might not do the same thing."

Relief washed over her but it was short-lived.

He went on in that same matter-of-fact tone. "But I have to reprimand you, Lieutenant. I literally do not have a choice. Should I allow you to get away with this, I'd be setting a precedent for anyone who takes it into their head to become some sort of hero by breaking the rules and risking their foolhardy necks and government property. This time it worked out. The next it might not. My job is to maintain order and discipline. It doesn't matter that I sympathize with your dilemma. Do you understand?"

Well, fuck, there went her career. Measured against her sister's life it was a small price to pay, but she loved her job. Peyton's throat felt tight but she nodded. "Yes, sir, of course I understand. You have your duty."

"Yes, I do." One ebony brow arched upward. "It isn't always pleasant, either."

"I'm sure you'll be fair, sir."

"I'm going to try to be. Considering the high level nature of the offense, I could have you demoted down to an assistant navigator, or even released from service, if I wished. I hope you realize that."

Peyton felt a little sick.

"But instead I think I'll allow you to choose. I'm going to ignore the appropriation of craft without permission, which considerably lessens the breach of conduct." Gallico stared at her, his face set. "I'm just going to address the direct breaking of an order. Your choice,

Lieutenant. Any of the standard punishments offered in statute nineteen.”

He was being more than generous but since she wasn't a walking-talking military rules expert, she asked haltingly, “Off the top of my head, sir, I don't know them.”

There was actually a flicker of some actual emotion in his eyes or it seemed that way. “I don't suppose you ever thought they would apply to you. Your record so far is spotless. It's part of the reason I'm being lenient.”

“And I appreciate it,” she murmured, desperately trying to remember that part of her training. They'd had to read the damned rule book from beginning to end, but he was right, she hadn't concentrated on the part where it listed consequences for failure of duty. She ventured, “Six months off the controls without pay, correct?”

“That's one possibility, yes.” He inclined his head. “Or a loss of rank.”

The first sounded awful, but the second was out of the question. She'd worked hard to get to where she was, and at twenty-four, was one of the youngest females to hold her own with a very male-dominated force of military pilots. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Sir, I'm both a lieutenant and a level 4 pilot. One of only a handful of females who have risen so quickly. I'd hoped to be a major in the next five years.”

“I'm well-aware of your accomplishments. It makes this even more difficult.” He hesitated and then added without any expression, “There's a third option. If you wish, you can trade into a month of sexual service. It's up to you. It would be standard. The slave uniform, confinement to quarters for that month, full subservience.”

To her dismay, she felt her face flush. She'd forgotten about that. On long journeys like this one the males got restless without sexual activity. To keep order with such a large crew, there were human females brought on board to service them, but the numbers were

understandably limited due to space and the males had to share. If a female officer had an infraction and wished to pay the price with sexual compensation, it was offered as an alternative to punishment since it was actually helpful. When the regulation was put in place the males had grumbled at being limited to just two options when women had three, but then again, they appreciated the reverse discrimination in other obvious ways, so the rule had held.

Peyton stood there, thinking furiously. Not touching her transport for six months? Being a pilot was her life. It was what she lived and breathed. Demotion didn't hold much appeal either. If she could save her career, she would. "How many males?" she asked in a tight voice.

The commander looked at her with those cool eyes. "They have to outrank you. No female officer is obligated to sleep with anyone of lesser status. We have two colonels, four majors, and a captain on board. Due to your rank, you are permitted to just service two. If that's your choice, tell me which ones and I am sure they'll be more than happy about the arrangement."

The officers all knew each other and socialized often and she wondered if she could actually do it. She cast over the possibilities. Being intimate with her colleagues after she'd done everything possible to gain equal ground? It sounded...daunting, dammit. Embarrassing, too, and thousand other things, but then she contemplated again not being a pilot for half a year. Even worse was going back down to being just another drudge who could only pull transports in and out of docking.

No. Out of the question.

She swallowed hard and looked at Commander Gallico. Those austere perfect features, his tall lean body, all that deliciously dark gleaming hair. In private, the female officers speculated about his personal life, but he kept to himself and if he availed himself one of the humans, he was discreet about it. There was little doubt she found him attractive, despite his intimidating standoffish demeanor. In a hoarse voice, she asked, "What about you?"

* * * *

Kel had no idea what the expression on his face might be, but he did his best to keep it neutral.

This whole day seemed designed to test him in every way a male could be challenged.

First was the agonizing decision he couldn't possibly ask any officer or crew to go down to the surface of Epsilon, his anguish over the matter both private and difficult. It wasn't easy to condemn the people on the surface of the planet to certain death, yet when he weighed the odds, it had seemed clear it wasn't right to order a hopeless attempt at rescue either. Then the news came Peyton Valmont had taken matters into her own hands, left the ship unauthorized, and while he stood in paralyzed indecision over what to do about it, apparently pulled off the rescue of the millennium.

To compound the unpalatable situation, now he had to punish her. Yes, he'd let her off easy, but never did he expect she would offer *him* her body.

Did she know he'd secretly lusted after her since the moment she set foot on his ship? The lieutenant stood there, her rich dark brown hair highlighted by the subdued overhead illumination designed to make sure there was no glare on the dozens of monitors, her vivid hazel eyes reflecting her trepidation, but also her undeniable courage. She was more than classically pretty, her features delicate and feminine, long lashes framing those incredible eyes, a soft pink mouth right now compressed into a tight line of apprehension.

It was common opinion she was gorgeous and though he never commented one way or the other when the men talked about Lieutenant Valmont, he definitely agreed.

If he wanted her before, he wanted her even more now. Fuck, how was he supposed to manage this, especially when she'd suggested *he* be the one?

Kel took in a breath, hoping he still looked unfazed. “What about me in what way, Lieutenant?”

“If I have to do this, can I service you? Commanders don’t have to share either, do they? Wouldn’t you count as two?”

“No. Naiad is just a step down in rank, second in command. We share quarters, responsibilities, and just about everything else.”

Including you, should you choose this. He didn’t have to explain it.

For a moment she said nothing. Then with obvious effort, she nodded. Just once. “Okay, I can live with that. You and Commander Naiad.” There was just a slight falter in her voice. “The other officers are my colleagues.”

And *he* wasn’t a colleague. Of course he wasn’t. It was his duty to distant himself from the staff. To be above it as he dispensed orders and kept strict discipline. “I don’t...” he started to say, and stopped, not sure how he wanted to finish.

What the hell was he going to tell her? He didn’t like the idea? Yes, he did. He’d like nothing better than carry her off to his quarters right this minute. His sex drive was as healthy and strong as any other S-species male. With her—the slender yet suggestive lines of her figure under the required uniform always intriguing—it was very tempting.

She waited, her back perfectly straight, those entrancing gold-green eyes wide. When he didn’t speak she explained haltingly, “I don’t know if you understand how hard it is as a female to get treated like an equal. Right now even the officers who outrank me regard me as one of them. I’m going to lose that if I have to submit to any of them. What you are talking about isn’t like having a sexual affair, Commander, which is also against regulation for the same reason—discipline.”

“This *is* a punishment,” he told her, an edge to his voice.

“I realize that. I accept it,” she countered, “but can you see my position? This way at least I wouldn’t lose their respect.”

He could see her in a lot of different positions—that was part of the problem. Kel looked around at the sterile surroundings of the bridge. He was the commander, she was just a rogue female pilot, and why he should feel so guilty about this was a mystery.

Valmont had walked in tense and defiant. She'd stood there and took his diatribe on her disobedience, and then she'd waited for his edict. Not that she had much choice, but still once he heard her reason for why she had commandeered the craft and risked her life, he understood.

It changed nothing. He really didn't want to reprimand her in the first place, so making it as easy on her as possible appealed to him, but it had to be done.

She appealed to him. That was the problem. Since the first moment she stepped foot on the ship, he'd wanted to fuck her.

Now he could have her. Whenever he wanted. In any way he wanted.

Damn if his unruly cock didn't start to swell at the thought.

Still, it posed problems if he agreed to this. Kel stared at her. "I don't want the crew to think I'm meting out discipline for my own pleasure, Lieutenant."

The word pleasure made her color deepen, pink giving a nice color to her cheeks. "Excuse me for saying so, sir, but I think the crew would object more if you were too harsh. Feel free to make sure they all know this was my choice. I'll do the same."

It was probably true. She was a damned hero now. Soldiers always admired the kind of courage she'd shown, and even more so the reckless act showcased her remarkable ability to handle a transport craft under any conditions. This solution would take her out of duty for the shortest time possible and he wouldn't have to dock her pay either.

"You won't have the opportunity to tell them," he pointed out. "If you choose this route, Valmont, you'll be confined to the command quarters."

“Yes, sir.”

Naked. Nice.

“You’re sure this is how you wish to resolve this?”

“I’m certain, sir.”

“Very well.” He waved a hand past the door scanner and opened the portal, gesturing at the two soldiers who stood at attention there. He said curtly, “Escort the lieutenant to Level C. See that she’s indoctrinated.”

Both the guards were too well-trained to show any kind of reaction, but Kel felt their shock just the same. Level C was where the females were kept and instructed on their sexual duties before each voyage, so he imagined it would be common knowledge fast enough just how he’d handled her insubordination. She left with dignity, walking between the two much taller soldiers in brisk departure. Kel wandered over and examined the flight log, but he didn’t really see the notes he’d made. He needed to sit down and compose a report to be sent to Minoa on the incident. Epsilon was clearly a lost cause but at least there had been no further loss of life thanks to one daring, beautiful pilot.

“How did *that* go?”

Kel turned around and saw his second in command, Jake Naiad, enter the captain’s bridge, open curiosity in his expression. Naiad murmured, “It couldn’t have been much fun. I saw them take her out and she looked more resigned than anything.”

“It went,” Kel responded, rubbing his jaw. “And no, that part of this job isn’t my favorite. I’ve had to discharge some good soldiers already in my career. It didn’t appeal to me to do it again.”

Naiad was also tall—most S-species males were—blond, built with whipcord leanness, his angular features refined and his eyes a clear aquamarine. He was a good officer and one of the few males Kel considered a true friend. They worked well together, and when they were on Minoa between assignments, played pretty well together too.

The mutual competitive spirit meant they were good opponents in sports and other leisurely pursuits, one of which was bedding females.

“Is that what you decided to do?” Naiad asked, sitting down in his chair by the rows of panels. “You discharged her? I have to tell you; that’s going to be an unpopular decision, Kel.”

“Am I running a popularity contest?” Kel retorted, lifting a brow. “She broke about fifteen regulations.”

“Sixteen, but who’s counting,” Naiad remarked, rubbing his chin. “Two of them big ones. Still, the governor’s son was rescued, along with one other civilian and over twenty soldiers. How the hell she did it, I don’t know. Her navigator said he couldn’t help her worth shit and the thrusters quit twice. He also said she was like a machine. Cool as could be and determined as hell.”

“The civilian was her sister.”

The other man stared at him and then gave a low whistle. “Okay, that makes a difference. At least now I understand the determination. Fuck, you still discharged her?”

Kel leveled an ironic look at him. “I never said I discharged her. I said I would have been justified in front of any tribunal for doing just that. Instead I dropped the unauthorized appropriation charge and just addressed the direct disobeying of orders. I offered her the choice of any of the statute nineteen sentences.”

Naiad thought for a moment, and then nodded. “That’s more than fair. I hate to see her lose rank or be sidelined because she’s damned good, but it’s a slap on the wrist compared to what could have been. No wonder she wasn’t more upset.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t want to lose rank or be sidelined either.”

For a moment Naiad looked puzzled but then he blinked. “Valmont chose sexual servitude? That surprises me. She doesn’t seem like the submissive type.” He grinned then. “Hey, I’m more than happy to volunteer to be her—”

“She’s been assigned,” Kel interrupted. “It’s always awkward when a female officer is punished that way. I let her decide.”

Naiad let out an exaggerated sigh. “Too bad. Some of her fellow officers, I take it. She’s a delicious little piece, in my opinion. Who?”

“Me. Us, I guess, would be more accurate.”

Blond brows shot up. “Nice work there.” Naiad grinned. “I’ve had worse news. This day has gone from being a near disaster to shaping up pretty good.”

“I didn’t coerce her in any way. It was her suggestion.” Kel was irritated with himself for sounding defensive but was pretty sure there was a hint of it in his voice anyway. “She doesn’t want this to affect her status with the other officers she interacts with on a daily basis.”

“Smart female, the lieutenant.” Naiad’s blue-green eyes reflected amusement. “I can’t say I’m disappointed. Neither are you. Even before all this, I’ve caught you looking at her a time or two in a very un-commander-to-pilot way.”

Was that true? It probably was, though Kel thought he’d kept his interest hidden. Naiad had an annoying way of being perceptive at the wrong times. “She’s noticeable,” he admitted.

“Very fuckable,” Naiad agreed with a low laugh. “I wonder if she realizes how hungry for her you are.”

“She’ll find out soon enough,” Kel said in a clipped voice and went to start his reports.

Chapter 2

The skimpy gown was almost entirely sheer and concealed next to nothing, the hem not even reaching mid-thigh, the neckline low enough her nipples were barely covered. She'd seen it often enough on the human females but hadn't ever contemplated wearing one herself. Peyton looked at her image in the mirror of the cubicle and winced in embarrassment. The rules were clear. No undergarments, loose hair, and the word "no" wasn't supposed to be in her vocabulary. Available at all times, in all ways.

Since it was Gallico, she had better be able to abide by the strictures to the Nth degree. Whatever they wanted he and his first officer were supposed to get, and if she could just get through the next month it would be over and maybe she could return to a normal existence and be back on the job. She had no illusions that the entire ship wasn't talking about her choice at the moment, but it was without a doubt the most expedient and that was important to her.

There was one big problem. She wasn't a virgin, but the very brief love affair she'd had two years ago hadn't exactly given her much of an education in how to please a male. The whole thing had been a huge mistake and she and her ex-lover had really only spent two—for her unsatisfactory—nights together. The sex had been both brief and a little uncomfortable and she wasn't all that impressed with the process.

Oh well, she could grit her teeth and endure it, and as busy as the Commander and Naiad were, maybe it wouldn't be all that often anyway.

"Ready?"

She whirled around, not aware the door had opened. The two soldiers that had taken her to level C stood there, both of them looking at her. *Really* looking at her. Getting a damned eyeful too, she thought, trying to tamp down the resentment. Neither had they respectfully addressed her by her rank either. She blushed, which was infuriating. “Yes.”

“Come with us.”

She did, one of them walking in front of her, one of them behind, and she was just grateful that they didn’t encounter anyone she knew personally before they reached the lift. Impassive, both males waited as she got on, and then joined her, pressing in a code. Her own quarters were on the officers’ level of the ship and she deliberately didn’t look as they passed her door, going all the way to the very end. One of them scanned the door open and gestured her inside. She obeyed, stepping in, and the door swooshed shut behind her and she was alone.

Her first thought was she wouldn’t mind being a commander some day. The room was twice the size of her berth which she shared with two other female officers. It had a private galley, a large sitting area with a wall of screens and communication devices, and a sleeping area with two large beds in comparison with the bunks they were assigned, plus a cleansing room of impressive proportions. Everything was immaculate and no personal possessions were anywhere, but then again, she didn’t expect anything less from the formidable Gallico. The only surprise was a book on one of the lounging couches. She picked it up and looked at the spine, amazed to see it was Voltaire. The commander read ancient earth literature? She never would have guessed. Of course, because of her half-human heritage, she had an acquaintance with some of the old classics, but still it was a surprising facet to his personality. Quickly she set it down, aware of its value. Almost no bound copies existed any longer. He must have paid a fortune for it.

She sank into a seat, not sure what to do but just wait.

This had to go down as the most eventful day of her life, she mused in weary contemplation. First the terrifying danger of the rescue and her own fear she was taking her crew into a certain death, and then the wrath of the handsome commander of the ship, which she partially deserved.

Not to mention her impulsive request to be assigned to him, and where that had stemmed from she wasn't sure except Gallico was an enigma—an intimidating enigma—and the idea of him touching her was intriguing in some elemental way.

The commander aside, she was exhausted and even her trepidation over what was going to inevitably happen next didn't stop her lashes from drifting downward.

* * * *

Kel had stayed deliberately on the bridge late, as if to prove some point that he hadn't sentenced the lieutenant so he could haul her straight off to his quarters and make use of her pretty body. Naiad made a few ribald comments which he ignored, feigning an indifference to her presence which he didn't at all feel.

When he stepped inside the privacy of his berth and actually saw her there, the stark immediacy of her presence spiked through him. He had a feeling as the door swished shut, even though he had schooled himself control his expression at all times, the look on his face would have fooled no one.

Desire spiked through his body, straight to his cock, making it stiffen against the confining cloth of his fitted uniform pants.

Peyton Valmont was asleep, curled on her side on one of the two built-in couches in the sitting area. The filmy gown she was required to wear barely covered the essentials anyway, and in this position he could see pretty much everything. The thin material was bunched up around her thighs so he could not only see her luscious ass, but the enticing smoothness of her shaved pussy as well. It was one hell of an

erotic view and he guessed she'd be pretty embarrassed to know he just stood there and stared at her, his erection swelling to full mast in about two long heartbeats.

With slow deliberation he forced himself to look away, took in a deep breath and adjusted his unruly cock to try and make himself more comfortable—which didn't work—and went into the galley. He allowed himself no more than one glass a day of the crisp golden wine he favored because as the officer in charge of the entire ship, even when someone else was actually on duty, he was ultimately responsible for every decision and he needed a clear head at all times. This seemed the right moment to have that allotted drink.

He poured it into a tall fluted glass and went back in the sleeping quarters and took off his tunic. Kel sat down on the edge of the bed and removed his boots so he was at least a little more at ease if he could just ignore the throbbing between his legs, and went back out into the sitting area. Normally now he would switch on the monitors so he could observe different levels of the ship and then relax as he sipped his drink, but this wasn't an ordinary evening and the view was too distracting for him to pay any attention to anything else.

As he'd fantasized, her body was just the way he liked a female to be formed. Slender but with nice, full breasts, shapely hips, and long slim legs. Only once had he seen her out of uniform and that was a fluke, as she'd been coming back to her quarters after obviously making use of the ship's exercise facility. Usually he was on duty before most of the officers rose, but they'd received the news about the instability of Epsilon and he'd been in communications all night with Ran Kartel, the Governor of Minoa. Minoa was the central planet of S-species government and Kartel the most important resource when it came to tough choices. The decision to send his ship to see if a rescue was possible had been made, and Kel had been up without sleep for over twenty-four hours before their course was changed and the matter settled, so he'd gone back to quarters to try and catch a few hours of rest. Being sleep-deprived could be more incapacitating than

intoxicating substances and it was regulation that the officers get adequate rest.

It was that morning, seeing her in gray loose pants and a thin sleeveless top, a sheen of sweat on her face and arms, her hair not the usual neat regulation coil at her nape, but pulled carelessly back, that he'd realized the depth of the attraction. Her clothing hadn't even been at all sexy or provocative but he'd gotten the barest hint of the sway of her tits under the thin material of her shirt as she stopped short at his unexpected presence in the hallway and come to attention.

When he had fallen asleep, fuck if he hadn't had a wet dream, something that hadn't happened to him since he was coming into adolescence. He'd woken spent and shaking and embarrassed as hell.

Tonight, and for the next twenty-nine nights, he wouldn't have to imagine her beneath him, or above him, in front of him—he liked inventive positions—tonight he would get to play the fantasy and he still really couldn't believe it had all worked out this way.

He sprawled in his chair, just drinking in the sight of her as he sipped his wine. All that rich mahogany hair spilled over her pale bared shoulders, and one hand was tucked under her cheek, the fan of her long, curly lashes against her perfect cheekbones.

How long did he have to wait, he wondered, before he woke her and carried her into the sleeping area? If he was considerate, he'd let her sleep. On the other hand, her only real duties under the statute sentence was to be available if he wanted sexual gratification and that certainly was the situation of his rock hard cock was any indication.

The dilemma was solved as his communication device gave a small beep. He slipped it free from the band of his pants and saw it was the chief medical officer. Peyton stirred at the sound of his voice as he answered a question about one of the rescued soldiers who apparently had smoke inhalation illness from the toxic fumes on the self-destructive Epsilon. During the call, she sat up and desperately tried to arrange her gown to a more modest state. The silk of her tumbled hair fell down to the middle of her back and framed a face

pink with embarrassment. She cleared her throat as soon as he signed off the call. "How long have you been here?"

"A little while," he answered, taking what he hoped seemed to be a casual sip from his glass.

"I...I fell asleep, I guess," she stammered.

"That is an astute observation, Lieutenant," he remarked, amused at her discomfort.

She adjusted her position so she was perched primly on the edge of the couch, her thighs pressed together tightly, her shoulders squared. Hazel eyes stared at him, not precisely with defiance, but there was a measure of challenge there. After all, she was an officer and from what he knew of her record and her service under his command, both hard-working and skilled. This current position of subservience wasn't going to be easy. He hoped she realized it.

Kel asked, "Would you like a glass of wine?"

One brunette brow arched upward. "I don't know. You will have to explain to me how this works, Commander. Do all the male personnel offer wine to the females who are there for one purpose only or are you just being polite to me because of my rank?"

"On Level C they were supposed to explain to you exactly how it works, Lieutenant." He regarded her over the rim of his glass.

They had apparently, for her blush deepened. "They explained in great detail how *we* are supposed to act toward *you*. But there was nothing about how you would act toward someone in my position."

"Rest assured the females we harvest from Earth and bring on board for sexual purposes are treated very well. They share quarters with the males in the crew and more often than not, attachments form beyond the physical part of it. Governor Kartel's wife was a human female serving on a ship taking him on a diplomatic mission. He married her, so obviously neither was unhappy with the arrangement."

It was true. Very few of the females chose to go back to Earth once their service was over. Most selected Minoa or one of the other

colonies and many of them ended up with S-species husbands or were bred to keep the gene pool from becoming too narrow.

“I know they are not ill-treated,” she murmured. “I suppose, though, I am not used to being regarded as an object with no rights.”

“Care to change your mind, Lieutenant?” As Kel made the offer he sure as hell hoped she wouldn’t accept it. His hungry body tensed even as he spoke. “This isn’t supposed to be easy for a female officer, remember? If it was, it wouldn’t be offered as a sentence for an infraction.”

She hesitated and then shook her head. “No, I don’t want to change my mind, sir.”

He relaxed. All but his aching cock. It kept sending little signals to his brain. *Hurry, hurry, hurry*. But there was a part of him reluctant to let the beautiful pilot sitting so rigidly across from him know how deeply she affected him. At thirty-four he was the youngest commander in the fleet and he didn’t get into his position by drooling after officers in his command. This situation was different, of course, but under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have touched her.

Pleasantly, he asked, “Well, since you seem determined, let me ask you again, would you like a glass of wine?”

* * * *

He lounged there, larger than ever even in the more spacious commander’s quarters, his piercing eyes holding her gaze.

The fact he’d removed his tunic shouldn’t have startled her since he was off duty and in his quarters, but it did.

The material of the undershirt molded to shoulders impressively wide and emphasized a muscled chest. Raven hair framed the chiseled features the female officers whispered over, and brushed his strong neck. Seeing him sitting in a relaxed sprawl, half-dressed, a glass of wine casually in his long fingers brought home the intimacy of the situation. He was even barefoot, she noticed.

Then she noticed something else. Despite her resolve to stay calm and composed, Peyton's eyes widened as she stared at the bulge in the front of his tailored pants. It was undeniably large but why she would be surprised was a mystery. He was a tall man and an S-species. With her inexperience, she really didn't have a lot to compare him to either.

She could feel the race of her pulse beat in her throat and her palms were suddenly damp.

"Peyton?"

She jerked her gaze up at the use of her first name. He'd never done that before. "What?"

The color of his eyes had changed she saw, from the usual icy gray to more a storm cloud color, darker and mysterious. His lips twitched into something that might even have resembled a smile, though she had never seen him anything other than stern and remote.

Shit. He'd noticed her staring at his crotch and that was mortifying. She had a sinking feeling he might find her relative innocence amusing, or worse, a nuisance. It wasn't that she hadn't had a few relationships, but they just never developed into anything she felt strongly enough about for sexual closeness. When she did finally try, she realized it was more out of curiosity than anything and the resulting disappointment had caused her to break it off quickly. Since then, she'd been too busy with her career to really fraternize with anyone.

But here she was, basically undressed because the skimpy little garment they issued the females in her position was designed to arouse, and apparently it worked. The commander looked like he was going to make sure she served her sentence. S-species males had enhanced sex drives along with everything else. From the look of his arousal, she wasn't going to get off lightly.

An unfamiliar feeling of excitement coiled in the pit of her stomach and her breasts felt suddenly tight and full. Absently she rubbed the sore spot on her thigh where one of the medical staff had given her an injection. It was supposed raise the level of her libido,

the young doctor had explained in a pragmatic tone. Peyton wondered if it wasn't working because she felt a little flushed.

"I take it you want to skip the drink."

The statement, said with a cool undertone of amusement made her realize he was no longer looking at her face, but instead at where her now taut nipples made hard points against the gauzy material. She really didn't want any wine, so she said, "I'll pass on the wine, Commander, but thank you for offering."

His gaze drifted lower, to examine her bared legs. "You have a very nice body, Lieutenant Valmont. I might even say spectacular. Why don't you disrobe?"

She could think of a few reasons why she shouldn't, the first one being she never thought she would ever, ever be naked in front of the formidable ship's commander but the rules were clear. *Whatever he wants, whenever he wants it.* She stood and reached for the hem of the garment but before she pulled it off over her head, she took a breath and blurted out, "There's something you should know, sir."

Ebony brows arched upward over those remarkable eyes. "Is there? Go ahead then, inform me."

"I'm not good at this." That sounded wrong and made her feel ridiculous, so she amended, "Or let's say I haven't had much chance to know whether or not I'm good at it."

"Sex or taking off your clothes?"

Who knew the man even had a sense of humor, but there was definitely a note of what could even be teasing in his tone if you stretched your imagination a little. Peyton lifted her chin and slipped off her gown over her head. She said crisply, "The former, sir."

"I see." He sat there and examined every inch of her, from her head down to her toes with a slow, sweeping assessment. "I think your statement is flawed, Lieutenant. You could have had as many chances as you wished. You're a very attractive female. If you lack in experience, I am going venture an educated guess from a male point of view that it has been your choice."

He was right, but that option was now gone. Nude, embarrassed but trying not to show it, Peyton stood there obediently and watched him finish his wine and set aside the glass on a small console next to his chair. Then he stood in a leisurely fluid motion at odds with his obvious arousal and inclined his head toward the doorway to the sleeping quarters. “I think we can improve the level of your practice in a very short time.”

The indication she should precede him was hard to miss. With as much dignity as she could gather—especially since she was naked and felt infuriatingly vulnerable—Peyton walked past him, aware of the sway of her breasts with every step. At this point she wished she was full S-species because then he wouldn’t be so very much larger. The females were usually almost as tall as the men, and while she wasn’t as petite as a full-blooded human, she was still a lot smaller.

Males enjoyed that, she’d heard. The disparate sizes of their bodies meant her tightness would enhance his pleasure.

His pleasure. A shot of that strange sensation twisted in her stomach again. She gave a small involuntary shiver as she stared at the bed. It stood on a slightly raised platform, the utilitarian military issue white linens giving the sleeping area a stark look, the floor polished tile, the only color in the room a small pile of more antique books stacked on a small metal table by the side of the bed.

Peyton jumped when she felt a large, warm hand settle on her shoulder and she realized he stood right behind her. His touch was light, almost delicate, as he trailed his long fingers down her arm until he grasped her hand and urged her to turn around. She obediently—but reluctantly—did as he wished, taking in a breath as she tilted her head up and stared into his eyes. They held a glitter she had never seen before.

His mouth quirked at the corner. “Relax. Surely anyone with the nerve to land a transport on a disintegrating planet and manage to pilot it back through one of the worst cosmic storms I have seen isn’t afraid.”

“I’m nervous, sir,” she admitted. “Behind the controls I am the equal of any pilot, male or female. In this situation, you are very much in charge even discounting your rank. I dislike feeling helpless.”

It was true. She barely came up to his shoulder so he towered over her and the width of his brawny shoulders was intimidating. His voice was a little husky as he said, “You won’t be helpless, Peyton. If at any time you are uncomfortable with what we’re doing, ask me to stop. I will. You have my word.”

She found herself staring at his mouth, wondering how it would be against hers, how his lips would feel roaming across her skin...

“I am not allowed to ask you to do anything.” She almost forgot and added, “Sir.”

“I really don’t think much about rank in bed.” His breath was warm against her lips as he lowered his head.

When he kissed her, she fought a gasp, his hard mouth covering hers in insistent pressure.

It was unlike any kiss she’d ever experienced. Hot, dominating...exciting. Molten heat speared through her body. His tongue invaded her mouth and she relinquished the battle.

She had to, she excused herself.

But even if she didn’t...

She would have.

He didn’t so much kiss her as possess her. The palpable hunger surprised her in a male so normally controlled and cold. As he feasted on her mouth, his hands began to roam. Over her ass, across the small of her back, to her shoulders, and then downward, so his palms separated them as he cupped her breasts. The reaction of her body was instant, her nipples going taut.

“Let’s lie down,” he murmured against her lips. “Standing up is good too, but this first time let’s keep it simple. I’ve been abstinent this entire time out. I didn’t think it would be this long because we didn’t anticipate the problems on Epsilon.”

Through his regulation pants she could feel his erection. He was huge, the long length hard against her stomach, giving her a nervous quiver. “Sir, I—”

He paused in the act of lifting her nude body onto the bed. “You what, Lieutenant?”

What hell was she going to do? Try and back out now? “I don’t know,” she confessed, staring up at him.

“I do know,” he said, that very slight smile surfacing again. “You defied orders, correct?”

“Yes.’ She gasped as he deposited her on the bed.

Long fingers went deftly to the fastenings on his pants. “And chose sexual servitude over losing rank or flying status, right?”

Peyton nodded, watching him undress.

“Then you requested to service me and Colonel Naiad. Do I have this all straight?” He shoved the material down his lean hips, revealing his jutting cock.

By the stars, she hadn’t really expected he would be so large. She stared at his erection, fascinated, and squeaked out, “I think so.”

“I just wanted to make sure.” He stepped out of his pants and climbed onto the bed. On top of her, in fact, settling his weight on his elbows. Raven hair brushed his shoulders and one stray lock fell across his forehead, giving him a softer look than his usual icy command. He kissed her again, taking his time, exploring deep, licking the corners of her mouth, skimming her teeth. His skin was hot, smooth, the muscles in his upper arms bulging impressively as he kept his weight balanced. His mouth trailed a warm, seductive path along her neck. “Hmm...”

She quivered, excitement mixed with panic spiking through her body.

“This works better if you spread your legs.”

At first she didn’t register the suggestion, nor did she realize she had her thighs pressed tightly together. She wasn’t resistant as much as intimidated. The idea of the latter bothered her. He was right.

Hadn't she risked her life, her craft, and beat the odds just hours ago? Hadn't she faced him down and made her own choice: a choice she still agreed with since it impacted her career in the least harmful way?

She could do this. If she was sure of one thing in her life, she knew she wasn't a coward.

Peyton took a deep breath and opened her thighs. Wide. Her fingers clenched in the sheets but otherwise, she lay acquiescent and docile. To her surprise, he didn't position himself at once but instead went on with his leisurely attention to her neck, moving upward now and then to kiss her lips again. It was different each time, sometimes fervent and demanding, then soft and intimate. Gallico lingered over her mouth as if she wasn't spread-eagled below him, tasting, rubbing his tongue against hers, coaxing an unexpected response from her wayward body. She barely noticed when he shifted position and the tip of his cock touched her, nudging her pussy, testing the pliant opening.

"How do you like it?" he whispered in her ear.

"Like what?" she countered, hardly able to breathe after the last mesmerizing kiss.

He actually laughed. Commander *Gallico* laughed. He said, "Sex, Peyton. How do you like it? Fast and hard? Slow and soft? I'm not alone in this bed and no matter the circumstances, I'm not a selfish lover."

"I don't, sir."

"You don't what?"

She shrugged. "Like it any particular way. I'm not sure I like it at all."

Uh-oh. More honesty than she intended.

He lifted his head and stared at her intently. His eyes had taken on a smoky warm color unlike his glacial reputation. "Why not?"

Well, she'd opened her mouth, so she might as well tell the truth. "I've only done it twice. It wasn't particularly a pleasant experience either time. I told you earlier that I—"

“Were you forced? I want his name. Did he hurt you?” In an instant the ruthless commander was back.

Now she *was* embarrassed. This wasn't supposed to be about her lackluster love life. This was about sex, pure and simple. “No, not really, and his name doesn't matter. I just didn't think it was all that spectacular. I see you read the old earth author Shakespeare. Let's just say I could quote him. *Much Ado About Nothing*.”

He touched his finger to her lower lip. Just a brush, but it made her stomach clench in an odd way. “Damn, if I don't like anything better than a challenge, Lieutenant. I warn you, if you want to test me like this, you might find walking difficult for the next thirty days.”

From the sheer size of his stiff cock, she was worried about that anyway. He penetrated her a little, and she took in a deep breath at the incredible stretching sensation. “Whatever you wish, sir.”

“You're wet. Your body likes this. And it only gets better.” He nudged again, just a little deeper.

“If you say so.” She had no idea if he was right or not. All she knew was her hips tilted up of their own accord to ease his entry. Muscular thighs pushed her legs so wide she felt vulnerable like never before in her life.

This morning she'd been ready to sacrifice her life. She had a fateful feeling she was taking even a bigger risk at this moment.

Chapter 3

If you say so.

Kel couldn't help but be amused at both the comment and the slight edge of insolence in her breathless tone.

Peyton wasn't acquiescent by nature—he knew that by the way she'd disobeyed him and stolen the transport. Not to mention the stiff set of her slender shoulders and defiance in her eyes when she'd faced him earlier. And now, even as he started to take her, Kel could sense what wasn't actually resistance but maybe insubordination.

In other words, she didn't really disagree, she just wanted to argue.

Too bad. He was a bit too far gone for changing his mind and he'd given her more opportunity than necessary to change hers.

Fuck. She was exquisitely tight. Just as he'd imagined the first time she'd stepped on board the ship and he'd taken in a deep breath. Those long slender legs were open in welcome, but her body was tense beneath him and he had to do something to make her relax. He was well-endowed and she was half-bred. The discrepancy could cause pain or give sublime pleasure. The difference was the attitude of the participants.

"Let me in," he whispered, touching his mouth to hers, his hand sliding between their almost joined bodies. "My size will make you feel good if you relax, Peyton. Your body can do this, I promise."

"I hope you're right," she said in a voice that sounded strangled but her hot little pussy loosened a fraction and he slid in another crucial inch. Perfect. Kel stifled a groan of satisfaction. God, she was warm and wet and ready.

His hand worked against her breast, lightly squeezing and fondling. She had the kind of perfect tits he liked, not really large but very feminine with pert rose crests. Now, with her lustrous brunette hair spilled over his bed and her gold-green eyes glazed in passion—perhaps resistant passion, but he knew the signs—Lieutenant Valmont resembled any man's wet dream, all long supple limbs and silken skin.

His for the taking. He pushed in a little more, noting it was getting easier. The lady was hot and slick.

"I need to be all the way in." He nibbled on her lower lip, sinking deeper. "You'll find it worth it."

"So arrogant, Commander." She arched and shifted, panting.

Her feisty attitude should irritate him. He certainly had been furious over her daring earlier. But he found he liked her spirit and independence.

Almost as much as he liked her warm, enticing body. "Let's call it a calculated conclusion based on experience." He kissed her neck, working at it, his cock going deeper.

And deeper.

All the way. To his balls. The hug of her inner muscles rippled a telling shudder of pleasure through him. He withdrew, rocked a little forward and sank back in, exerting pressure on her clit.

Peyton dug her nails into his shoulders and gasped.

"Good?" he asked tersely, not used to a female with such little experience. She'd been disappointed before.

Not this time. It was a silent vow.

"I...yes," she admitted. "Oh."

"Thank the stars," he muttered, setting himself against her as he really started to move. In and out, one long slow stroke after another, the erotic rhythm as old as the universe. His cock pulsed, his blood raced, and the exquisite tightness of her vaginal passage made him wonder if he would hold on or embarrass himself.

At least she'd started to pant. He felt the breathless exhalations against his neck with acute sensitivity to the growing enthusiasm of the female beneath him. She moaned, and since he could give an educated guess she didn't *want* to moan, he felt a flicker of triumph. Her hands slid over his shoulders and she arched into his next thrust.

Good girl. That's it. Let's do this together.

"Oh...ooh." Peyton's eyes closed as if she was concentrating on something, hopefully the erotic rhythm of their joined bodies. With his forefinger he massaged her clit with each inward glide of his cock.

His traitorous body finally decided he was going to embarrass himself, and he didn't care.

To his relief, at that crucial moment, she went wild beneath him. It happened suddenly, the contraction of her inner muscles telling him it was genuine, and he knew he'd wear the marks from her nails on his shoulders. She cried out and trembled violently. The reaction sparked a barbaric reflex in him he didn't even know existed. Kel surged inward, his muscles knotting, and closed his eyes as he stiffened and exploded, pouring into her with such force it felt as if he'd stopped breathing.

His immediate thought—when he could think again—was he should have taken more care. Shit, he was usually controlled and easy, especially with human females. He lifted a hand to smooth back her tumbled hair and found it shook. It had been *that* damn good. "I didn't hurt you?"

"I have no idea," she answered with surprising audacity, her eyes still closed. Lush lashes rested on her perfect cheekbones. "Am I still alive?"

He chuckled. It didn't happen often that his mirth was spontaneous. His life and occupation didn't call for a lot of laughter. "I take it that is a no, then."

Those long lashes lifted and she stared into his eyes. "It wasn't like that before."

A curious statement but he'd already learned her past experiences hadn't been very satisfying. "Does that mean an adjustment in your assessment of sexual intercourse has occurred?"

"What do you think, Commander?"

"I hope so," he conceded with an inner smile.

"Hmm." The murmured sound could mean anything.

"I'll be hard again soon." He had no obligation to warn her, to explain anything, but he *liked* her. She was beautiful, yes, but also interesting. How did a female submit and yet not come across as submissive? He wasn't sure, but she'd managed it.

"So fast?" She looked up at him. "I thought it took a while for most males."

"We've been out for some time." To prove his point he lifted his hips, his still semi-rigid penis, encased in her tight sheath, already swelling as if he hadn't just climaxed. "I could probably go all night."

"Is that so?"

Was she teasing him? It was a startling notion, especially since she gazed up at him with a provocative light in her beautiful gold-green eyes.

"Lieutenant, can I give you some advice?" He lowered his head and nibbled on her lower lip. "Don't challenge me any more than you already have today."

"Yes, sir." Her lashes lowered just a fraction as if she meant it, but she ran her fingers down his back, her nails trailing along his skin to the curve of his buttocks.

Kel choked back a laugh. "It might just be me, but your sincerity seems suspect."

"Your sincerity, on the other hand,"—she wiggled her hips—"is unmistakable. Somehow I knew it would be this way."

The ingenuous remark took his off-guard. "What does that mean?"

In answer she tugged him down and kissed him.

Hard. With lips and tongue and persuasive enthusiasm.

He may not have wanted to punish her for that rogue flight down to the surface of Epsilon, but at the moment, his arousal surging again, Kel was glad it had all happened. He also had the impression that though he might be the commander, he wasn't the one in control.

Impossible. He was always the leader, the decision-maker, the dominant one.

She moaned into his mouth. Just a small sound, but it made him rigid instantly. He rocked into her willing body, his prick at full attention, her small sound of enjoyment penetrating his brain.

Kel began to move again, thrusting into the wet, welcoming heat of her vaginal passage, savoring the breathless sound of her pants as she lifted her hips to take what he offered.

Somehow I knew it would be this way...

Even as he took her, he registered the sentiment, the analytical recognition of her meaning striking deep.

She'd thought about them like this. Him, inside her.

The fantasy hadn't been his alone.

* * * *

It felt so good, so incredible, there was no way to conceal her open enjoyment. Peyton arched shamelessly, her clit tingling with each powerful thrust of his cock into her pussy, a deep yearning for that singular exquisite pleasure to wash over her again, taking the breath from her lungs.

She gasped.

She clung.

She came.

Three times. It seemed like as each shuddering peak of ecstasy waned, another one crashed over her until she wanted to beg Gallico to stop, but at the same time implore him to continue.

This was what it was supposed to be like, she thought, pressed against him, her arms around his strong neck as she quivered in

response to the motion of his lower body. When he went rigid, his tall form tense and his head dropping so his face was buried in her outspread hair, the pulse of his orgasmic release filled her with such force she shuddered with him in perfect sync.

The whole thing was...enlightening. Empowering.

Who would think being reprimanded would turn out to be a rapturous experience?

He adjusted his position, sliding free of her body and rolling to the side. The broad expanse of his chest lifted and fell rapidly and his eyes were half-closed, his expression enigmatic. There was a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead. Peyton felt deliciously limp, well-used, but then again, well-pleasured also. Her thighs were streaked with semen and her breasts still tingled.

“You’re probably exhausted.” Gallico murmured the words. Deftly he turned her so her back was to his front, her ass nestled against his groin. “We’ll save “all night” for some other time. I’m tired myself. Let’s get some sleep, Lieutenant.”

The warmth of the embrace was almost shocking, maybe even more intimate than the actual act they had just completed. One strong arm circled her waist and his breath stirred her hair. While she’d known she would have to service him sexually, she really hadn’t pictured sleeping nude in his arms. She blurted out, “And here we all thought you never slept, Commander.”

“Is that so?” His tone was dry.

“You must know you project a somewhat...” she searched for the right word, “formidable presence.”

“You seemed to have no trouble disobeying me.”

“There you’re wrong, sir.”

“I’m wrong? Oh really? I think you just disagreed with me, proving me right.”

She had. Peyton felt her cheeks flush but at least he couldn’t see it with their bodies spooned together. “I meant taking the transport without permission wasn’t something I did lightly.”

“I’m aware of your reasons, Peyton. But you should also be aware that the ultimate decisions about what happens on this ship and with this crew are mine. I was given the responsibility, and in the end, I am the one to face the consequences if something goes wrong. Had you been less skillful, and less lucky too, I would have had to answer for not only the loss of life on Epsilon, but a destroyed transport craft and a dead crew.”

She protested, “*I* disobeyed. It wouldn’t have been your fault.”

“I’m afraid the Minoan government wouldn’t take the same view.” His arm tightened just a fraction. “A commander is supposed to be able to control his men.”

“I—”

“Peyton, go to sleep. That’s an order.”

Continued argument was probably a bad idea, she acknowledged silently, stifling her reply. She was tired, he was correct on that point. Obediently she closed her eyes and listened as his breathing began to shift in rhythm, the sound comforting in the sterile room. Behind her, he felt solid and large.

When this was all over, she thought sleepily, she might have to disabuse her fellow officers of Gallico’s cold, distant persona. The crew routinely—behind his back of course—called him The Ice Chip.

There was nothing icy about the heat radiating from his rangy body or those long, intoxicating kisses.

The last thought she had before slipping away in slumber was that she was surprisingly looking forward to the next twenty-nine days.

* * * *

The bridge was quiet compared to the turmoil of the morning and the catastrophe on Epsilon. Jake Naiad sat in his chair, observing the screens, but only with mild interest. Captain Ammati, one of the navigators, watched a nearby meteor shower with vigilance, her hands

hovering over the keys. Her sculpted profile was limed by the artificial light, her pale hair caught in regulation style at her nape.

“So, tell me, Captain,” Jake said conversationally, “how do you feel, as a female, over Lieutenant Valmont’s punishment for this morning’s heroics?”

“Sir?” Ammati lifted her head and almost turned it so she could look at him. Almost.

“You. Feel?” he repeated dryly. “I’m curious over your opinion.”

“You don’t want to hear it, sir.”

“I don’t?” He stifled a laugh over the combativeness in her tone. “Well, let’s keep in mind I did ask. Go ahead, please.”

The captain turned and looked at him. She wasn’t a raving beauty but somehow still strikingly attractive—a little too tall for his tastes, almost his height—and she had lovely eyes. Long-lashed, sapphire blue, and extremely direct. “Would you leave your sister to die on a disintegrating planet, sir?”

“I don’t have a sister.”

“I thought you wanted my opinion, not to spar with words.”

She had a point. Her professionalism was undisputed. He inclined his head. “Sorry. Not very sportsmanlike. All right. No. I doubt I could leave anyone in my family behind if there was something I could do about it.”

“The sexual service option for insubordination punishment demeans females.” Ammati glanced at the screen and automatically moved to make an adjustment.

“Would you have taken a reduced rank or demotion to a non-flying craft?” He was genuinely curious. Of the female officers, Ammati took her job more seriously than most. Like Peyton Valmont.

“No, sir.”

“But you just said—”

“I’m career military, Colonel. I’d do what Valmont did so I could get back on the job. I just wouldn’t like it.”

Jake elevated his brows. “That would depend on the males involved, wouldn’t it?”

“Perhaps.” There was challenge in her declaration. “Most males bore me.” She added, as if an afterthought. “Sir.”

He’d wondered. At a guess most of the men had wondered about Ammati. Too bad. He wouldn’t mind a stab at changing her mind...

The door lifted in a low hiss. One of the senior officers came in, an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry for the interruption, sir, but she insisted and I received a request from Minoa—”

“Where’s Gallico?”

The furious interruption made him swivel in his chair. Jake saw a young woman storm through the doorway past Major Grand, her face flushed, and behind her a young male S-species who looked familiar.

Lounging back, irritated at the intrusion in an authorized area, Jake said in clipped tones, “This is for command personnel only. Care to tell me what’s going on?”

The young male shifted uneasily. “I’m sorry. My father helped us, sir. She insists on seeing her sister and I—”

The governor’s son, of course. Jake recognized the resemblance to the former head of the now defunct and uninhabitable Epsilon. He cut off the young man. “So you pressured Minoa for a pass onto the bridge of this ship because of who your father is? I’m afraid even if you can open the door, I can still toss you out. I realize her sister pulled you off a disintegrating planet, Mr. Janssen, but you still can’t violate federation rules. There’s a briefing planned in the morning.”

Tara Valmont narrowed her eyes. She wore what must be borrowed regulation off-duty military pants and a shirt of the same drab color. Her loose hair was the identical rich color as her sister’s but her eyes were tawny, not hazel. There was a slight mark on one smooth cheek that looked like a chemical burn and one of her hands was bandaged. She said tightly, “Don’t blame Will. He happens to have the capacity to actually feel gratitude for my sister’s courage, so

he offered to help. It probably stems from still being alive thanks to her.”

The implied criticism was irritating. “Look, Ms. Valmont—”

“*Dr.* Valmont. I have advanced degrees in both physics and planet dynamics.” Her chin lifted a few degrees. She stood with her shoulders back, radiating militant outrage like a core mining blast furnace.

“All right, Dr. Valmont, let me first disabuse you of the idea the lieutenant’s courage has gone unnoticed by this command. Commander Gallico however, has an obligation to keep discipline on this vessel. She broke the rules, however well the outcome turned out to be. Maybe as a civilian you don’t comprehend it, but I assure you, your sister understood the repercussions.”

“How convenient this all is for you and Commander Gallico.”

“There was nothing convenient at all about the situation on Epsilon.” His tone was clipped. “Not for any of us. I saw the commander struggle with his decision. Do you think he took it lightly to leave anyone there to die? If so, it proves you know nothing about him. The odds of rescue seemed very slim from this side, Doctor, and because it was so risky, he didn’t want to send more people to their deaths. And what did he do when she proved him wrong? He used the lightest sentence possible by dropping the charge concerning unauthorized appropriation of military property and gave her discretion in how the punishment was meted out.”

For a moment she seemed silenced. Then she visibly swallowed, the muscles in her slender throat rippling. With quiet dignity, she asked, “Can I see her?”

“No.” Jake softened the denial by adding, “But I’m almost off duty. If you have a message, I’d be happy to relay it for you.”

Chapter 4

Peyton sipped idly from her cup, the beverage reminiscent of the fruity earth wines she and Tara had enjoyed on their one journey to her mother's home planet. She'd already used the cleansing facilities to wash, eaten the rations provided for both the morning meal and midday, and used the interactive gaming equipment for entertainment. From where she sat in the galley, she could see into the sleeping quarters. Colonel Naiad was sound asleep, his tall body sprawled carelessly across his bunk. One arm was curved over his head, his face averted and his broad chest lifted evenly with each measured breath.

The man was stark naked.

At some point he'd kicked off the sheet. Peyton worked in a male-dominated part of Minoa's forces and she'd seen her share of bare chests, but Colonel Naiad had a very nice build. He wasn't as heavily muscled as Commander Gallico, but long and lean. Dark blond hair was tousled against the stark white bedding and the dusting of pubic hair across his groin was a slightly deeper shade. His cock was lax at the moment, but still looked impressively large nestled between his powerful thighs.

The night before had been enlightening in many ways. Peyton wasn't naïve about her lack of sexual experience, but she also hadn't been prepared for the revelation of erotic pleasure either. It heightened her understanding of why the sexual service regulation existed in the first place.

If what had happened between her and Kelton Gallico was an indication, no wonder males craved sexual release, Peyton thought.

The handsome commander had been surprisingly sensitive in contrast to his cold reputation and the experience had revised her previously lukewarm feelings about sex.

However, the daunting fact remained she was still supposed to please *both* of them. While Commander Gallico was attractive in a distant, unapproachable way—though she didn't think him cold any longer—Colonel Naiad was a little irreverent, his cynical humor legendary, and he had a reputation among the females on the ship, though word had it he didn't touch anyone when they were on a mission.

Peyton took another drink of the sweet wine.

“What time is it?”

She jerked, her gaze coming up at the sound of the husky voice. A little of the beverage in her glass sloshed over the rim and splashed her hand. “What?”

Unmindful of his nudity, Naiad sat up and ran a hand through his hair. “I never did go to sleep yesterday because of the Epsilon crisis. What time is it?”

She'd been partially responsible for the “crisis” so Peyton flushed. “Past midday. Are you hungry?”

“Oh yeah.” He smiled in that lazy signature curve of his mouth that made the female members of the crew squirm. “Pretty hungry, Lieutenant. Food sounds good, too.”

Where Gallico was cool and distant, Naiad was intense, and despite his rank, his slightly teasing manner was unsettling. She asked in a cynical tone, “Am I supposed to get you something? These rules are new to me.”

“I can manage.” He swung out of bed and headed for the cleansing room. Over his shoulder he said, “And as for the rules, Valmont, in my experience most pilots are pretty quick. You'll catch on.”

Not sure how to take that remark, she sat and waited for him to emerge. The sound of running water was punctuated by splashing and

it was all intimate in a way she didn't expect. When Naiad came out he wore a pair of drawstring pants and his hair was damp. His lean jaw was clean-shaven and the lazy appraisal in his aqua eyes thorough. But he didn't do anything more than move past her into the galley and open the refrigeration unit. "I have to admit I'm starving."

"Don't you and the commander have hot food delivered?" She was curious, and since she was going to be living in the same quarters for a month, she felt she had the right to ask.

"Just when we request it." He took out some rations and unwrapped the meal. "We're really used to eating alone. Being first and second in command isn't conducive to a lot of social activity."

It really hadn't occurred to her that aspect of the job would be on the lonely side. He went on in a conversational voice, "I am very much looking forward to that part of your temporary incarceration, Lieutenant. It will be nice to have someone to talk to on a casual basis. Almost all my conversation now is limited to procedure, personnel, or this ship."

Peyton watched him sit down opposite and smiled wryly. "I thought conversation was the last thing you wanted from me."

His return smile was wicked. "Oh, don't worry, I'm looking forward to the other part of this arrangement too, but having an intelligent, articulate woman to spend some leisure time with is very appealing."

The other part. Under the skimpy gown, her breasts tightened as though she had no control over it. The hormonal shot, no doubt, she realized, trying to tamp down her mortification over her wayward body's response to both his oblique reference to what they'd be doing no doubt after he finished his meal, and to his presence, bare-chested and very male, just across the small utilitarian table. That damned shot they'd given her to enhance her sex drive must be working for she had certainly enjoyed the night before and it very much surprised her.

In a good way, she pondered, sipping her drink and watching the male across from her. If she was going to have to do this—and it seemed she was—it was best if she could take pleasure in it.

Maybe her expression reflected her thoughts for Jake Naiad sent her an amused look. “You and Kel must have gotten along well. He looked more relaxed when he relieved me this morning than I’ve seen in a long time. By the stars even the prospect of dealing with your sister didn’t seem to bother him.”

“Tara?” Peyton did her best to ignore the heat that climbed into her cheeks at the reference to her changed relationship with the ship’s commander and the intimacies they’d exchanged. “Why would he have to deal with her?”

“She’s incensed over the idea you are being reprimanded. I did my best to explain it all to her, but I get the impression she’s somewhat of a rebel when it comes to the rules. She even managed to get permission from Minoa to gain access to the bridge.”

Tara was a scientist by profession, but a free spirit by heart. Peyton shook her head. “She can be very determined. I did my best to talk her out of going to Epsilon months ago when she accepted the assignment. The reports on the military frequencies about the instability problem were frightening. She found the prospect of analyzing a dying planet fascinating. I still don’t understand why they didn’t begin the evacuations earlier.”

“I don’t either,” he admitted. “If my family were there, I would have gotten them out right away. I was told some of the colonists were third and fourth generation. They refused to leave their homes until it became clear the situation was out of control. A mass evacuation is difficult to manage but most of them got off in time. The party you rescued was the last of them willing to go and at that, they waited too long to send a distress signal.”

She was well aware of the situation because of her sister. Peyton gazed at him curiously. “Do you have a family? Brothers, sisters... wife?”

“Am I married? No.” He shook his head. “I have two younger brothers, both civilians. My parents live in the First City on Minoa. What about you? Anyone besides the militant Dr. Valmont?”

“You have my personnel file, Colonel. I’m sure you know both Tara and I are half-bred. Our mother is from Earth and though they’ve never married, our parents are fond enough of each other they still communicate. She decided to go back to her home planet once both my sister and I became adults. We went to visit her last year.”

“My mother is half-bred, so I’m only three-quarters S-species myself,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’ve never been to Earth, though I’ve thought about it. It seems like I’ve been everywhere else. Tell me, what’s it like? I’ve seen the data, but it can’t be the same as with your own eyes.”

He really *did* seem to wish to talk. Peyton obliged, describing the mountains, the vast oceans, the odd variation in temperatures due to the planet’s orientation to its one sun so it was warm in the middle regions and frigid in the north and south. While she spoke he asked questions and refilled her glass. Though he didn’t have Kelton Gallico’s distant reputation, he was professional in every way and she certainly had never had a casual conversation with Colonel Naiad. It relaxed her without her even realizing it was happening, and it wasn’t until she looked up and caught the singular gleam in his aqua eyes that it occurred to her he’d done it on purpose.

Peyton dwindled off in mid-sentence and shot an accusing glare across the table. “I believe, Colonel, I’ve done all the talking.”

Broad shoulders lifted in an unrepentant shrug. “We’re going to get to know each other on a personal level. It seemed like a good place to start. We can move on if you like.”

* * * *

The beautiful young pilot that had shown such wild daring the day before looked adorably confused. Not caught up in the usual

regulation style, her shining hair was loose around her slender shoulders and the tiny garment she wore revealed more than it covered of what he'd imagined under her uniform. Jake lounged in his chair, well-aware the minute he stood she'd see his erection, now both prominent and uncomfortable. From the brief exchange he'd had with Kel as they changed commander shifts he gathered that the night had been highly satisfying. Given her lissome body and those full breasts, Jake felt a powerful physical attraction to Peyton Valmont, but he really wasn't one to just casually take any female to bed for the sheer relief of it. Intelligence and personality mattered to him and he knew Kel felt the same way, if not more so. Their tastes were similar enough they were often attracted to the same female.

Like now, they often *shared* the same female. Jake clarified, "To the bed."

Her gaze flickered across his bare chest—and not for the first time during their conversation either. "That's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

"Maybe so." He gazed into her eyes, hoping she'd register his sincerity. "But if you ever think Kel or I would either of us force you, you'd be mistaken, Peyton. There is nothing remotely sexy or gratifying about an unwilling partner. I think you're beautiful, and I'm more than curious to find out if the daring you exhibited when you initiated one of the most courageous missions I've ever heard of translates to sex, but only if you find me attractive also."

There was faint pink in her cheeks and she said nothing for a moment, but then she nodded. "I'm going to venture a guess and say most females do, don't they, Colonel?"

He grinned. "Call me Jake when we're together here and save my rank for when you're back on active duty."

"You're nothing like Commander Gallico." Her lush lashes lowered a fraction.

Jake stood. "Did you expect me to be?"

As predicted, her gaze flew to the prominent tent in his loose-fitting pants. “Well,” she said dryly, “you’re alike in one way apparently.”

With a smothered laugh, he outstretched his hand. “If there’s going to be a running comparison I need to warn you our styles are somewhat different. Kel likes to be dominant in bed. I’m a bit more flexible. If a female wants to take charge, that’s fine with me.”

Peyton looked startled but put her slim fingers in his. “How would you know what he’s like?”

So the unconscious air of innocence Lieutenant Valmont exuded was genuine. To his surprise, Jake found the lack of sophistication a turn-on. “Most males find watching arousing, even if it is a female with someone else. Kel and I sometimes take a female to bed at the same time.”

She said nothing, but something flickered in her eyes. It was brief, but he didn’t miss the flare of excitement.

“Intrigued?” Jake stepped around the table and tugged until she was closer, sliding his arms around her. He brushed her temple with his mouth. “We’ll show you sometime if you’d like.”

“I never said—” She started to protest, blushing. He could feel the increased heat from her skin.

“But for now,” he interrupted, “it’s just you and me.”

His lips drifted across the graceful curve of her cheekbone, lower, until he found her mouth. The kiss was long and slow, a journey of discovery. She tasted of sweet wine and the soft contours of her body fitted against him as she pressed closer and her hands came up and slid into his hair.

Exactly. Just like that...

He cupped her ass and rocked his erection against her, the throbbing in his cock increasing. Tongues brushed, breath mingled, and he stifled a groan as she moaned into his mouth. They’d been out too long on this mission, he thought in a haze of need. He was going to have to exert control, which usually wasn’t a problem but he had a

feeling it might be this time. Peyton Valmont was one of those fascinating females who could hold their own with males professionally and yet everything about her was intrinsically feminine and alluring.

Subtly he eased down her gown—which wasn't difficult because it was barely there to begin with anyway—and cradled a firm breast. "Very nice," he murmured against her lips, giving a gentle squeeze. The nipple puckered against his palm and she quivered.

"Believe it or not, what you're almost wearing is still too much. Here." He lifted her easily and walked toward their sleeping quarters. "Let's get comfortable and proceed from there."

When he deposited her on the bed, he straightened and pulled loose the tie on his pants, easing the material over his straining erection so it fell to the cool tile of the floor. "Mind getting naked, Lieutenant? I'll make it worth your while."

The way she shimmied out of that ridiculously transparent gown had a very adverse effect on his self-control. Jake watched her slip it down, revealing perfect, firm breasts, a taut stomach and long legs. The smooth shaved mound of her pussy gleamed with moisture already and he was pleased at her arousal, but not all that surprised. All the females on the ship whose sole duty was sexual relief for the males were given an enhancing injection for their libidos. Her chest heaved and she stared at him with what almost seemed like a challenge as she dropped her gown over the side of the bed.

Fine. He could meet it and take it up a notch.

Jake sat down and smoothed a hand over the curve of her hip. His fingers found wet heat between her thighs and she arched, a breathless sound fluttering from her throat. He probed, sliding in deeply, and her inner muscles clenched against the invasion.

"So soft and warm," he muttered, wondering if he might ejaculate from just touching the silken tightness of her hot pussy, adding another finger as he mimicked the act of sexual intercourse with his hand. "I need a taste."

Peyton watched him through heavy-lidded eyes as he lowered his head between her legs. He loved female bodies: the way they felt beneath him, the primal, perfumed scent of desire, the delicious taste of arousal. As he pushed her thighs apart and began to gently lick her labia, she jerked in reaction.

Just what he wanted.

“Delicious,” he murmured. His tongue delved between those luscious folds and brushed the swollen nub of her clitoris. A tremble racked her slender body and she arched with a small cry, her hands fisting in the lightweight blanket.

With his fingers he parted those moist folds and exposed that sensitive bundle of nerves, nibbling lightly, then exerting gentle suction, listening with an inner smile to her inarticulate sounds of pleasure as he brought her closer and closer to climax. Peyton’s fingers threaded into his hair, clenching against his scalp. She spread her legs wider and shuddered.

It was a signal he understood perfectly, knowing she was close. Jake gave her what she wanted, increasing the pressure of his mouth on her pussy just the right amount to push her over the edge. In the rush of orgasmic release she screamed, a short wild sound he found sexy as hell. He kept her there on the brink until she twisted and gasped out, “Stop, please...oh.”

He lifted his head, telling himself to give her a few minutes to recover, his hungry body reacting to sight of her open legged and flushed in the aftermath of erotic satisfaction. Peyton still had her eyes closed, the lashes long and silky against her pink cheeks, those delectable breasts quivering provocatively with each breath.

“I can’t wait,” he adjusted his position and muttered in hoarse apology. “By the stars, I need to be inside you now.”

Those lush lashes drifted upward. “Who’s asking you to wait?”

The saucy provocation wasn’t exactly what he expected and he stopped for a minute in the act of sliding on top of her, gazing down into the hazel depths of her eyes. “You want this?” he asked softly,

admiring her audacity and using his hand to guide his rigid cock. The opening he sought was slick with her sexual fluids, but small, and he began penetration with excruciating slowness, taking his time though his jaw locked with the effort.

“Yes,” she admitted, her hands drifting up the tense muscles of his arms as he braced his weight above her. “After what you just did to me, I think I owe you anyway, Col...Jake. That was pretty spectacular.”

Even through the haze of intense desire, he took a minute to wonder about her previous lovers, excluding Kel. It wasn't really his business, but maybe he'd ask her.

Some *other* time.

The tantalizing lift of her pelvis in acceptance didn't help his patience but it was a promise of not just capitulation but enthusiasm. Jake pushed, finally sliding deep, his hips against the satin skin of her inner thighs, their bodies completely joined. Exquisite pleasure coursed through every nerve-ending in body, swamping his senses.

And when he began to move it got even better. He managed to make it about four thrusts before he exploded, his climax slamming into him like a shot from a pulse gun, knocking the breath from his lungs as he groaned and ejaculated.

It took a little while—he lost track of time in the aftermath of what might be the most intense orgasm of his life—before he could speak. “I've been abstinent too long,” he murmured, kissing her lips with delicate pressure. “Or else you're just too beautiful. Give me a minute and we'll start again.”

“And here I thought you admired my mind.” She laughed, a breathless sound.

“I do.” His mouth curved in a wicked grin. “But keep in mind, when my cock is inside you, your mind or your skill as a pilot isn't my area of focus. If you want to discuss politics, the arts, or anything else cerebral I'm more than willing, but we both need to have our clothes on.”

Peyton touched his jaw, the gesture almost tentative, experimental. “You aren’t what you seem. Neither of you.”

He knew she referred to the rigid standards on which they based military command of a ship the size of the one they were on at this moment. Jake kissed her again and murmured against her lips, “Yes, we are. It’s just that there’s more to us than what you see on a professional basis.”

Chapter 5

The male standing in front of her simply looked impassive. Tara Valmont fought the childish urge to stamp her foot. Of course, considering the bruising headlong flight they'd made for their lives trying to get off Epsilon, she wasn't sure she was capable of really stamping anything. She ached all over.

Commander Gallico had agreed to see her but not until after he relinquished the bridge. The delay had chafed and the small office where she'd been escorted made him seem even taller, more distant, more cold and indifferent. Icy gray eyes looked at her with dispassionate regard. "Argument," he said in a very calm, detached voice, "is futile, Dr. Valmont. Your sister chose this particular course to handle the insubordination charge."

"So you say," Tara snapped back, unwilling to take the chair he'd offered, since she already felt at a real disadvantage just because of his size. Even for S-species, he was a tall male. "I'd like to hear that from her, thank you. How do I know you didn't take advantage of the situation?"

Ebony brows snapped together. "Because I just outlined the conversation I had with the lieutenant, ma'am. That's how."

Going so far as to call him a liar to his face—when she didn't know if he was one—was too bold even for her, but Tara very much wanted to make sure Peyton was being treated well.

In a more conciliatory tone, she said, "Can you please put yourself in my position, Commander? Not only is she my sister, but I doubt she would be in this predicament if it wasn't for me. I feel responsible

to a certain extent, and yet she is the one being punished after risking her life. What possible harm can it do to just let me talk to her?"

"It is against the rules." He crossed his arms over his broad chest. "She's confined to quarters. It's that simple. My job is to enforce regulations. When she commandeered that transport against direct orders, she risked her whole career. When we get back to Minoa, I have no idea if my superiors will applaud my decision to drop the unauthorized appropriation charge or not. For all I know I'll get reprimanded as well."

"She saved lives!" Tara gave up fighting the urge and paced across the space. There was a virtual map of the galaxy they crossed at that moment and she stared at the brilliant lines and symbols. She turned back. "She saved the life of the son of the governor. Doesn't that count for something?"

"It seems to, since I put my neck on the line to give her the lightest punishment possible." His tone was dry. "If you are worried over her well-being, I promise she's fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm a busy man."

Not only was she dismissed, she was summarily escorted back to her assigned quarters by two equally uncommunicative soldiers. Once inside, she sank down on one of the chairs in the tiny recreation area and morosely propped her chin on her fist. It wasn't two seconds before the light by the door flashed, indicating she had a visitor. With a sigh she got up and went to scan the admittance panel.

Will Janssen stood outside, a frown on his face. He'd shaved, she noticed, his chin clean and taut, and someone had given him a set of clothes that weren't singed and dirty from their precipitous flight across a disintegrating planet. Tousled dark brown hair and very light blue eyes gave him a boyish look, but Tara knew he was thirty. Under his father's administration he'd been in charge of the colony's governmental finances as chief officer, which was an important position with or without his family prominence. It was also appointed by the Universal Council, not his father. Will had still been on

Epsilon trying to manage the last transfers of the assets of the laggard colonists who refused to leave until the last minute. His determination to do his duty had almost killed him.

They'd met socially a few times during her research stay on the planet and she liked his mild-mannered personality and diffident air. Their recent mutual brush with disaster seemed to have given them some sort of natural camaraderie, though usually brainy quiet males were not her type.

Without preamble, he asked, "Well?"

She stepped back and motioned him in, moving away to go back and sit down. "Well nothing. Gallico won't budge about letting me see her. Bastard."

Will trailed in and the door swished shut. "I see. I guess I'm not totally surprised. From what I understand from talking to other members of the crew, he's pretty by the book."

"Yeah." Tara gestured at a chair. "Have a seat."

"Was he actually a bastard?" He took the indicated spot and lifted his brow in inquiry. "The common opinion seems to be he's strict but fair."

"No, I guess he wasn't." She sighed and rubbed the stinging spot on her cheek. The burn from a piece of flying volcanic cinder would probably leave a small scar the ship's physician who had treated her injuries had informed her, but compared to what might have happened, it was nothing. "He was just immovable."

"He and Naiad seem decent enough. I had a brief meeting with the commander today. I needed to ask him for permission to use the central communications system." Will cleared his throat and looked a little embarrassed. "I'm sure your sister is in good hands."

Tara lifted her brows, unwillingly amused over his discomfort with the subject. Most S-species males seemed to dwell on the subject of sex a great deal of the time. The evolution of humans into a life form with increased intelligence and physical strength had kicked the sex drive up to the next level also. Without physical relief, the

aggression surfaced in other ways. She said wryly, “Yes, well, their hands are the least of my worries.”

Her visitor actually blushed. “I wasn’t referring to...I mean—”

Tara took pity on him and interrupted, “Actually, I’m *not* worried. They aren’t going to mistreat her, I know that. They are both attractive, and neither of them could rise so high in rank if they weren’t intelligent and even-tempered, so that’s not the problem. The issue is, as usual, that I got her into this mess. I don’t really want to wait a month to apologize.”

It was impossible to keep the self-recrimination out of her voice so didn’t even try.

“I don’t see how this is your fault,” Will argued. “Your job brought you to Epsilon. At the request of the Universal Council, no less. How could you predict how fast the situation would degenerate?”

“That was exactly what my job was *supposed* to be. I guess my only excuse is I’ve never seen anything like it. I don’t think anyone has. But that’s beside the point. What happened is the usual simple equation. I do something—sometimes impulsive—and Peyton has to rush to the rescue. I’m three years older than she is. If it has to be one of us helping the other out of a potential disaster, shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

It was true. Visions of both of them being punished because Tara had these wild ideas: the volcano experiment that erupted all over the main living area of their home and lit the building on fire, the sailing without permission that actually sank their father’s boat in the inner lake of the First City—if Peyton hadn’t been such a good swimmer they both would have drowned that time—and there were other incidents. It made her wince to think of how many.

“I don’t think there’s a formula for the dynamics of sibling interaction. Look at me.” Her companion shook his head and a lock of unruly hair fell over his brow. “My younger brother is in the diplomatic ranks and rising fast. He’ll follow in my father’s footsteps

without a doubt. He already is. I've always envied both of them their easy confidence." Will shrugged. "I just don't have it. I'm much more comfortable with numbers and abstract aspects of economic systems. It's boring, I know, to most people."

"You're obviously good at what you do or you wouldn't have been appointed."

"Good at something boring is still boring." His smile was rueful.

And that same smile was attractive. She really couldn't understand it. Oh, he was handsome because most S-species males were good looking—the genetic engineering made sure of that over the past generations—but he just wasn't her type. Her life was dangerous fault lines between tectonic plates, volcanic explosions, and shifts in sun orbits.

There was little doubt she was rash, liked things unsettled, and often spoke without thinking. The male sitting across from her was meticulous, cautious, and liked his worlds ordered.

Yet...he *had* stayed on Epsilon even after the tremors started, the cities began to collapse in piles of rubble, and noxious gases made breathing both dangerous and almost impossible. His quiet courage and calm had helped the small band of survivors send off the beacon that had led Peyton through the storm and chaos so she could find them.

Maybe they weren't *that* different.

"Boring is hardly the right word to describe you."

Did I just say that? What the hell? What a stupid time for a flirtation.

A startled look spread over Will Janssen's face at her tone of voice, not so much the words.

"Anyway," she went on quickly, "whether I meant to or not, I did put my sister on the line."

"On behalf of those of us who are still here because of it, thanks."

“Yeah, well, I doubt Peyton is thanking me right now.” Tara stood and moved toward the galley. “Do you want something to drink? I think I do.”

* * * *

Ran Kartel read through the report a second time and then clicked a button. With as little inflection as possible, he said, “So we have a second problem.”

“Yes, we do.” Upright in his chair, his hands clasped loosely in his lap, nonetheless Governor Janssen conveyed a sense of urgency without moving a muscle. “Do you think I would have left an unstable planet—with my son on it—if I didn’t think so? When the evacuations began this was one of my real concerns. The idea Epsilon is gone...” He trailed off and shook his head, his expression strained.

“No one could prevent that.” Ran still held the number of casualties in his head and it made him feel ill. “By the stars, Jerald, who could predict the scope of the impending disaster? The Minoan government and even the Universal Council weren’t prepared. We sent Dr. Valmont in but her initial reports didn’t indicate the severity of the problem.”

“As sophisticated as we are, I think it is still impossible for us to be prepared when something new comes our way. Before I left she came to me and said she was uneasy about the escalation of the below surface activity. According to her—and she is an expert—such rapid disintegration is unique. That’s why things weren’t handled properly. In my last communication with Will, he said it was chaos.”

“And now we have a renegade ship out there.” Ran tightened his mouth into a thin line. “Full of prisoners.”

“Full of the worst convicts in the Interstellar Federation,” Janssen corrected. “I came to Minoa to try to organize a secure way to transport them. The lieutenant governor did his best when he realized the planet was doomed, but since we’ve lost communication with the

ship and they've obviously turned off their tracking signal, I think the worst has happened."

Ran rubbed his temple, thinking furiously. "Sometimes we suffer for being too humane, don't we? He felt the obligation to save their lives by making sure they weren't left to certain death in a prison on an exploding planet, and now they're apparently free."

"They'll have slaughtered the crew of the *Serpentine*." The somber words fell heavily. "These are brutal criminals, Ran, none of which had any chance of ever being released from incarceration. What has happened is exactly what I feared. I came to Minoa to arrange a full military supervision of their removal to a new facility."

"What you're saying is they aren't going to be taken back easily." There were times when Ran felt the weight of his responsibility as governor of the ruling planet keenly. Minoa wasn't his only concern, since he also sat on the Universal Council.

"That is precisely what I'm telling you." Janssen sat, tight-lipped and stern on the opposite side of the desk. "You know the Epsilon facility was the most secure of any universal prison. If the planet hadn't fallen out from under it, it still would be. As much as I hate to say it, there isn't any time to waste and you do have a military ship in the vicinity, Ran."

"Gallico and his crew. Damn it, they've been out a long time already. Besides, though they have a full crew, there are no combat troops, Jerald. How am I supposed to suggest they peacefully take a ship full of murderous thugs? If"—he lifted a finger for emphasis—"they can find the damned thing anyway. We have no signal."

"They left with plenty of fuel, bound for Gamma 5. So, we do have a general idea of the *Serpentine*'s original course. Send Gallico after them now. We only lost contact less than twelve hours ago. They should still be in the area."

Ran hated the volatile situation, but then again, he did need to act and there was little time for long meetings to decide what to do. He nodded.

“I don’t think they should try to take the ship,” Janssen said in an unemotional voice. “Boarding it would be suicide.”

“Are you suggesting we destroy it?” The idea was hard to accept. Ran argued, “We don’t know the crew is dead. Minoa doesn’t kill its own soldiers, Jerald. Maybe we’re just having a communication glitch.”

“No communication at all and their signal off? Come on, Ran. We’ve been friends a long time. Tell me the truth, do you really think this is a communications error?”

He didn’t. He sensed there was something dark out there...the feeling had plagued him all day. Sometimes his psychic abilities allowed him to see the problem clearly, and sometimes he just got a vague sense of foreboding. In this case, he just thought it was what happened to Epsilon lingering. Ran let out a breath. “I’ll contact Gallico and brief him on this latest development.”

Hollow-eyed, Governor Janssen gazed him. “Tell the commander to not risk direct contact with these rogue males in any way if it is at all possible.” After a moment he added quietly, “I care about every life, but please understand, my son is on Gallico’s ship. I almost lost Will once already.”

Chapter 6

Peyton resisted—barely—the urge to move faster. Her hands braced on the chest of the male below her, she closed her eyes at the sheer pleasure as she lifted up and slid down with deliberate tight control. The muscles of her inner thighs quivered and a suppressed moan stuck in her throat made it hard to breathe.

It was a battle of wills and she was determined to win.

Well, maybe.

This position did interesting things to her entire body. She could feel her breasts shift with each upward and downward glide on the hard cock impaling her, the slick sensation of penetration evoking tingles of pleasure, and being able to look into Kel's smoky eyes was almost as mesmerizing as the dual motion of their bodies as they fitted together. Dark glossy hair spilled across the linens of the bed and his skin looked bronzed in the artificial light, a film of sweat glistening across his muscular shoulders.

Then he made the winning move. His hands, spanning her hips and helping her rhythm, slid inward and one of his thumbs rotated over her clit, pressing in just the right way...

All choice vanished. Rapture rolled over her in waves, making her body quake and she collapsed downward in a sprawl across his hard chest as Kel groaned and lifted his pelvis so she was filled with every inch of his erection as he pumped his release into her contracting passage.

Shared ecstasy hung them in the shattering moment, suspended, aloft, together.

It was spectacular, but not the best part, she'd discovered. In the past days she'd found the commander had an interesting trait she doubted anyone would believe existed under his unapproachable exterior.

He liked to cuddle. Well, perhaps cuddle was an incongruous word when applied to someone formidable like Kel Gallico, but he seemed to enjoy holding her close, kissing her softly in the aftermath of sexual interaction, running his fingers through her hair, and quite often he held her hand as he slept. He was an impetuous sexual partner but a tender lover. What's more, she was beginning to get him to open up a little and talk, not an easy task. Jake loved to laugh, to tease, making sex a game—albeit a pleasurable one. Kel was the opposite. Intense, involved, passionate and generous in bed, but guarded when it came to his personal life.

She liked Jake Naiad very much. What she felt for the male currently cradling her sated body in his arms was something quite different. Her attraction to Kel had been there from the moment she was assigned to the ship and was first introduced to its chief officer. Writing it off as a purely physical reaction had been easy at first, but she had the sinking feeling after the next three weeks were over and her time served, she was going to be left with a dilemma like she'd never faced in her life.

There was chemistry between them that wasn't just male to female sexual interest. She was becoming involved.

Peyton lifted her head and smiled lazily. "You were right. I think I like being on top." A languid sweep of her hand indicated their position with her still sprawled across his hard chest. "It feels different."

Kel brushed a curl off her shoulder in a feather caress. A faint smug masculine smile curved his lips. "Let me get this straight. You just said I was right about something, didn't you, Lieutenant Valmont? I'll have to note it in the ship's log."

“You aren’t *always* wrong, sir,” she said in a superior tone, fighting a laugh.

“I’m glad to hear it.” He tugged her back down, his hand cradling her nape, bringing her mouth to his. The kiss was long and leisurely in the wake of vigorous lovemaking, his tongue making a lazy exploration of her mouth while he cupped one cheek of her bare ass with his other hand, gently squeezing. Her nipples were still tight and pressed against his damp chest and her breasts felt full and taut.

Kel rolled to his side, not breaking their intimate position with his still semi-rigid shaft still inside her, one brawny leg settling over her thighs, effectively holding her immobile.

Not that she minded, Peyton thought hazily as his mouth lifted away. Being trapped under a naked and still partially aroused Kel Gallico? Sign her up.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, touching her cheek with the backs of his long fingers.

“Thank you,” she whispered, the compliment moving her. Before this moment, he’d commented he found her attractive, but the sincerity in both his voice and the look in his silver eyes were touching.

“I noticed you.” The words were said with a quiet reluctance that was obvious, coming out slowly. “I’m not supposed to even think about any of the female members of my crew in anything but a professional way, but I broke that rule long before you defied me and made that ill-advised mission to Epsilon.”

The admission was huge for someone who prided themselves on rigid conformation to regulations at all times. For a moment she had no idea what to say.

“If you thought I didn’t also notice you, you aren’t very observant, Commander.” Peyton rubbed his shoulders, the hard feel of him against her inducing a languorous desire despite her recent explosive orgasm.

“Why is it you manage to sneak criticism of my judgment into most comments, Peyton?” He kissed her throat, his mouth lingering on the spot where her pulse raced. “It’s damned irritating.”

“You don’t feel irritated.” She deliberately clenched her inner muscles. “You still feel...hard.”

In response, he went still and briefly closed his eyes. “I do suppose one condition outweighs the other at the moment.”

“Hmm, show me.”

The challenge might have been a mistake because he flipped her on her back so fast she gave a small gasp of surprise and then sucked in a breath as he began to thrust and withdraw. In and out, fast, uncontrolled, wild. Peyton clung to his biceps, feeling the tension in his muscles, the raw need in every movement. She matched him, lifting her hips into the piston motion of his lower body, accepting but also taking for herself.

Her climax crashed in fast, her already sensitized body arching, shuddering in ecstasy as wave over wave of sensation swept her away. When it ebbed, a second followed and she cried out in protest of the excess, rapture taking the breath from her lungs in a prolonged exhale as she shuddered.

It wasn’t until the third time that Kel joined her, his low groan of satisfaction ringing through the sleeping chamber.

Replete and languid in his arms afterwards, she touched his silky hair, the contrast of texture with the hard, honed lines of his body interesting.

Actually, everything about him was interesting to her.

“Has there ever been anyone special?” she asked, the personal question maybe none of her business, but at the moment, curled naked in his embrace, his sperm on her thighs, it felt like she could ask it.

For a long moment, he was silent. Then he said wryly, “Can I pretend to misunderstand the question?”

His sense of humor was so understated it surfaced more often than people realized. Peyton loved the subtle nuances of his infrequent

smiles also, like at this moment when he looked almost boyishly chagrined. She playfully ran a finger down his damp chest and lifted up on one elbow enough to look into his eyes. “That sort of cowardice isn’t like you, Commander.”

“Ah, using a psychological approach by issuing a challenge, are we? What a surprise.” He cocked an ebony brow. “Very well, I’ll answer it. No, there’s been no one special enough in my past to ever make me regret moving on.”

She hesitated to ask more, but then gave an inner shrug. If she didn’t ask, she knew he wouldn’t volunteer any information. “I know your career is important to you, but surely you’ve thought about...other things.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I assume you mean a permanent mate, a family. What about you, Peyton? Have you ever thought about ‘other things’?”

Before the Epsilon incident and her subsequent punishment—if it could even be called that—she could have said honestly she hadn’t except in the most abstract of ways. Like him, her career was the driving force in her life. But, as they were now, the pleasurable sated post-coital glow aside, treacherous thoughts of sharing more than just the next few weeks with him were in the back of her mind. It was the intimacy, she excused herself. His skillful touch, the tenderness he always showed, the persuasive power of his kiss.

Falling in love with the austere Commander Gallico would be a grave mistake.

She hoped she hadn’t already made it.

In a faint voice, she asked, “Can I pretend to misunderstand the question?”

* * * *

“What are you doing back here?” Jake turned and looked at him with censure. “You’ve only been off the bridge a few hours.”

“Peyton’s asleep.” Kel could see still picture her prone form, the graceful curve of her back, one slim arm at her side as he eased away, the other hand tucked under her cheek, the fingers curled like a child. Only she wasn’t a child, her lissome form naked and gleaming in the indirect light, long lashes against high cheekbones. “I wasn’t so fortunate. Any sign of anything?”

“You know I’d alert you no matter what you were doing.” Jake’s mouth didn’t twitch with the usual humor. Instead he looked grave. “Nothing.”

“The ship is out there.” Kel frowned and went to sink in his chair by the monitors. “We aren’t looking in the right place. They’re hiding, which supports Governor Janssen’s argument the ship has been taken over.”

“They’ll need provisions eventually.”

“I pity the poor planet where they decide to dock. We need to find them first.”

Jake’s face had an uncharacteristic grim expression. “I have to tell you I’m not sure how comfortable I am with these orders. Find the ship and then wait for instructions. In no way attempt to board the vessel. Refuse to engage in any discourse. Don’t negotiate for the return of any hostages. I agree with the Council’s policies on not bargaining with criminals, but according to Will Janssen that ship had a full crew, plus a phalanx of prison guards. That’s a lot of our personnel, Kel. A lot more than the criminals on board.”

“I know.” It wasn’t like he hadn’t caught the ominous undertones in the conversation with Minoa’s governor. “But orders are orders. In this case, we are the instrument. Rarely do we have all the information. I trust Kartel to not make any decision lightly.”

“I do too, but I’m not at all sure I can issue a fire order on a ship that carries more innocent people than convicts.”

The same dilemma was what had Kel sleepless, even after his satisfying interlude with Peyton. At least the pleasurable diversion had taken his mind off it for a little while. And he might have drifted

off if she hadn't compounded the unsettled state of his mind by asking him some uncomfortably probing questions. "I guess we'll have to wait and see what they want us to do. *If* we even locate the Serpentine."

"A big variable, I agree." Jake rested his head on the back of his chair and briefly closed his eyes. "I'm half hoping we don't. Let some other military command take this one."

"Peyton thinks they'll head for Anaya Two."

Jake's eyes opened and his mouth curved. "You discussed this with her? Here I thought you were just fucking each other."

Kel scowled before he could control the reaction. "I'm not just..."

Thank the stars he managed to trail off before he said more. Not that it helped much, for Jake looked openly amused. "Not just what?"

"Never mind," he growled.

His second in command just laughed. "Let me venture a guess as to what you're not. Not as detached as you should be from the beautiful lieutenant, am I right? I've felt that from the start of this mission. Maybe you aren't aware of the way you look at her."

Kel stared at him, his mouth tight. If he denied it, he'd be lying and he made it a personal policy to tell the truth at all times, even when it was painful. Unfortunately, Jake Naiad knew him very well. And it was undeniable the very first time he'd seen Peyton Valmont she'd had a profound effect on him in more than just the physical sense. If there was one thing he admired, it was skill, courage, and intelligence. In bed, he found her passionate and arousing, but he also thought about her in other ways.

It was a first in his life. Females were passing entertainment, not someone you discussed command decisions with, and the reality of the situation already had him uneasy.

"She asks about you," Jake informed him. "I noticed from the beginning when we talk she has a less-than-flattering-for-me tendency to steer the conversation back to you." He shrugged broad shoulders. "You and our gorgeous lieutenant connect."

Our. He wasn't precisely jealous she and Jake had a sexual relationship. Kel knew his first in command well and Jake would take care to pleasure her and that was what mattered. They shared women often enough the concept was perfectly acceptable, but he *would* be jealous, he realized, if Peyton showed a preference for his friend.

What the hell did *that* mean?

"Does it bother you?" Kel asked, settling into his own chair.

Naiad shook his head. "I saw it coming from the beginning. Peyton and I are friends. You and I are friends. If she's destined to be your life mate, why wouldn't I be happy for you both?"

"Life mate?" Kel's brows shot up.

"I've never seen you so interested in a female and we've known each other a long time. She is certainly interested in *you*. Considering how tired she is when I get off duty I'm going to say the sex between you two is more than just good, and—"

"I think you've said enough," Kel interrupted curtly. *Life mate?* Just the idea of it made him break out in a gentle sweat. His career was his entire existence at this time of his life. Most males didn't take a wife until they decided to breed and even then it wasn't necessary. There were always human females to impregnate and the S-species males had the right to keep the children.

No doubt Peyton would breed children as beautiful as she was...and why did he even just think of that? Kel felt a muscle in his jaw twitch.

"You should see the look on your face." Jake grinned. "She's asked me about your family, by the way. She asked me if I'd ever met your mother."

Whatever he might have said to that was interrupted by a flicker of the communication screen, indicating a message from the military headquarters on Minoa. Kel leaned forward and flicked one of the controls on the panel and an image solidified. General Ian Helm looked more grim than usual, his mouth tightly compressed. "Commander Gallico. Colonel Naiad. I am glad you are both there."

That didn't bode well but Kel wasn't sure if it was any more alarming than the conversations he'd just had with Peyton and now Jake. He said, "What do you know, General?"

"The Serpentine has been located."

Jake muttered something undecipherable under his breath.

"Where?"

"Right now they are just out from Anaya Two."

Damn if Peyton wasn't right on target. Anaya Two was a small planet with a tiny colony of settlers, peaceful and strictly agrarian. It had no weapons defense program, which was a minor point in their favor since the escaped prisoners couldn't confiscate anything but hand arms, but it did have both food and fuel. Kel swore softly. "The colony knows not to let them dock, I assume."

"The convicts are threatening to kill the crew one by one if not granted landing privileges. They claim all they want is to take on supplies." Helm showed no emotion at all, his face a granite mask. "They executed the commander of the ship at the end of the communication just to show they aren't trying to bluff us. We have no idea how many of the rest of the crew and guards are still alive, but maybe they are. It's hard to say."

This was truly turning into a nightmare like no commanding officer ever wanted to face. "Do we have orders?"

Helm gave a decisive nod. "The settlers are being sent to bunkers designed for emergencies such as meteor events and cosmic storms. We're going to let the ship dock, but the colony itself will be deserted. You will take transports down and land also. At that time, you will have an opportunity to effect retaking the hijacked ship. I realize you don't have combat troops on board, Commander, but your crew is trained military personnel."

In other words, they were in for a fight. No group of desperate escaped felons was going to surrender quietly.

"Is this an extermination now?" He hated to ask it, but he did need to know. "Are we supposed to take the prisoners if we can?"

“Commander, you are supposed to do whatever you have to do.” There was a pause. “On no account let them get near your ship, understand? What they have now is a freight vessel. We’re taking a chance letting you land with transports on the same planet, but the Council is concerned about the lives of the crew of the *Serpentine* and the settlers. If any can be saved, we’re willing to at least send you in to try. But if a military vessel fell into the hands of these men...”

He trailed off and shook his head.

Unfortunately, Kel understood all too well. Criminals aside, he’d never lose his ship while still breathing.

Chapter 7

When the light flashed, she jumped up and then had to consciously stop herself from running over to push the admittance button.

By the stars, she was acting like an adolescent and Tara had no real idea why. Well, that wasn't quite true, she admitted silently as she managed a sedate pace across the small space. For one thing she was bored. That was the first excuse she gave herself. The boredom on these journeys was always a problem for her, but normally she at least brought along some of her own solutions to relieve the tedium. Reading material, research to do, scientific papers to write, games...

On this trip she had nothing to play with. She reached out a finger to touch the pad that would open the door. Nothing to play with except possibly Will Janssen.

She had no clue as to why the idea intrigued her but it did. Quiet intellectual males usually didn't even garner a passing glance from her. Her last true sexual interest—it was inappropriate to label it love—had been a trooper who worked with a special division that ran secret missions for the Universal Council. Missions that were usually covert and always dangerous. He could fly any type of transport, had the skills to survive in almost any type of atmosphere, handled all weapons with ease, and spoke nearly every dialect in four solar systems. The sex had been much the same as his personality, a little rough and wild, just a touch on the dangerous side. Exactly how she liked it.

Will Janssen lived and breathed numbers on a screen. His existence was based on logic and rules, not risk. She was pretty sure

he couldn't say the word *fuck* in eleven languages like Lucas, but then again, if he could, he wouldn't. He was polite to a fault.

But, she thought as the panel slid up, she was attracted to him for some reason. It didn't make sense to her, but the interest was there just the same. It was reciprocated as far as she could tell, though he hadn't once in the past days since their rescue from Epsilon made as much as one suggestive move or even a comment to indicate he was thinking along the same lines.

In short, Tara was pretty sure if she wanted him in bed, she was going to have to make the move.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping by every day." Will smiled, hovering outside the door. "I just sent the last of the figures I'd stored in my handheld memory bank to my father's assistant. That's the end of it. I guess right now, technically, I'm unemployed."

"I'm glad you're here. And believe me, if I did mind, I'd say so, don't worry," Tara assured him, not for the first time. She made a face. "I'm not known for my ability to keep my thoughts to myself. Ask poor beleaguered Commander Gallico. Come on in."

"I suppose I am not surprised he still won't let you see your sister." Will stepped inside and the door swooshed shut. "He doesn't strike me as someone who would change their mind."

"Yes, you'd be right." Tara went back and sat down with a sigh. "I asked if I could just talk to her on the intership monitor. Correction, I begged. He said no to that also."

Will laughed and took his usual chair. After almost two weeks of these daily visits, he was definitely more relaxed than in the beginning. The usual lock of curly brown hair fell over his brow and he brushed it back in an unconscious mannerism she was coming to know. He said, "I really can't imagine you begging for anything, Tara."

She quirked a brow. "Under the right circumstances, I've been known to beg."

The husky note in her voice didn't go unnoticed. A faint flush crept up the neck of the male sitting opposite and it was obvious he couldn't think of anything to say. Tara let her gaze linger on the nice width of his shoulders, the clean cut lines of his face, the long length of his legs. Like her, he wore military issue off duty clothing, just a plain lightweight shirt and drawstring pants.

Easy to take off, which might be convenient...

She was definitely having some less than professional thoughts about the governor's son.

Was this uncharacteristic attraction the result of boredom? She didn't think so. It was odd, but for the first time in her life she thought it might be because she *liked* him. No, there was no pressing adrenalin rush fueled alone by animal lust between them. This interest was different.

How to do this?

Had she ever seduced anyone before? No. The males she went for usually were trying to push her into the bedroom from moment one.

Will cleared his throat. "Well, at least the punishment will be over in a few weeks. We should be back at Minoa a month later."

"A long time to be out." Tara watched him carefully. "Males tend to get restless."

"Usually," he muttered.

"How about you?" God, that wasn't subtle really but she wasn't sure she was even good at subtle. She dealt with science normally, and a very volatile science at that, with unstable planets and shifting atmospheric problems and there really wasn't a lot of time for subtlety in her life.

Will looked at her, his light blue eyes hard to read. "How about me what?"

"Do you get...restless?"

There was a pause. Then he said in an even voice, "I'm male."

If that was a yes, which it seemed to be, it was still on the oblique side. Tara gazed at him and gave what she hoped was her most provocative smile. “Are you by any chance restless now?”

There, that was about as blunt as it could get.

The room seemed to suddenly be smaller, the space between them not as wide. Will didn’t move and he looked comically at a loss for words. “Did I ever...I mean, did I act as if—”

“No,” Tara interrupted. “I don’t think I’ve ever had to ask before. Usually males send all kinds of signals. I admit I’m having trouble reading yours. You don’t prefer other males, do you?”

“No!” There was a dusky tinge on his skin. “Hell, I hope I don’t give that impression.”

“No, not really, but—”

It was his turn to cut her off. He waved a hand in a helpless sort of gesture. “I enjoy talking to you. I don’t come by here every day just to slaver all over you.”

It was such an old-fashioned way of putting it she smothered a laugh. Like something you might read in one of the old earth romances her mother favored. And a very archaic attitude for an S-species male. They tended to be straightforward about sex, to acknowledge their fierce carnal drives and not put a polite slant on it.

“What if I wanted you to slaver?” She stood and grabbed the hem of her shirt, lifting the garment over her head. Underneath she wore nothing else. With a quick twist, she pulled loose the tie at her waist and her pants slid downward. Tara stepped out of them and stood there nude, her heart pounding just a beat faster. “We’ve probably seven more weeks on this ship. Why not pass the time as pleasurably as possible together.”

* * * *

She was so beautiful it took his breath away. Yes, Will knew he was a damned romantic at heart and that happened to be a curse, not

anything to reveal to someone else. But Tara Valmont had an unfortunate effect on him. For a moment he stopped all respiration as he realized she now stood gloriously nude in front of him, all long supple limbs and smooth skin, her hair in the usual loose tumble over her shoulders, her tawny eyes darkened to the color of precious molten Earth gold. Taut breasts were tipped with pink, luscious nipples and he could see the entrancing female V between her legs, her pussy shaved bare, exposed and enticing. The tilt of her chin was challenge and his body responded on cue.

Prefer males? Nothing could be farther from the truth. He wanted her. He wanted her *badly* and it surprised him. Adventurous females with a tendency to be outspoken and dangerous occupations were not something that usually drew him. The world he favored—and the females—inspired order, not spontaneous, wild lust.

Tara was anything but calm and cool, and yet he'd found himself drawn to her ever since they'd first met back on Epsilon just after her arrival. It had been at a formal political function, and Will had spotted her across the room long before they were actually introduced. She'd worn a daring low cut gown, the scarlet color complimenting her slightly golden skin and enhancing those lovely eyes.

Right now his cock swelled so fast he felt lightheaded, and the loose, casual pants he wore didn't do much to conceal it. Her head tilted at a slight angle, Tara studied the sudden bulge between his legs with an expression of amused appreciation. "I have to say I hoped for that reaction."

She moved closer, breasts swaying just slightly, the nipples erect now. Her tongue stole out lick her lower lip in a leisurely sweep. In an intensely seductive movement, she ran her hands down the sides of her body, starting at her breasts and lingering on the dip of her waist before curving over the contours of her hips. She skimmed the plane of her stomach and touched her pussy, rubbing lightly in a slow circular brush across her clit. "That feels good." Her voice was husky. "But I'd rather have your hard cock."

If he'd been capable of saying something, he would have. But his voice seemed stuck somewhere in his throat.

Tawny eyes challenged him. "Naked is required, I'm afraid. It can be done the other way, but I like it better skin to skin. Why don't you take off your clothes?"

Take off my clothes...

Good idea. Will stood, his hands fumbling as he jerked off his shirt and ripped loose the tie on his pants. His rampant erection throbbed as he slid the material downward.

Tara's eyes widened in a flattering way and she laughed breathlessly. "Nice. Have I mentioned I'm half-bred? You'll like this."

Audacious didn't really begin to describe the sexy Dr. Valmont. Will swallowed convulsively and pre-cum beaded at the tip of his stiff cock. "I'm sure I will."

Not exactly a sophisticated response he thought with an inward groan, but thankfully she just lifted her brows and moved close enough to put her hand on his chest, palm against where his heart thudded in an erratic rhythm. Tara looked into his eyes and her other hand brushed his thigh and then slim fingers circled his cock. She gently squeezed and a ripple of pleasure washed over him.

"Big and hot and hard. Ummm." Tara lifted up on tiptoe and kissed him while still stroking his erection. He wasn't surprised that it was as impetuous as everything else about her, the play of her tongue in his mouth erotically teasing, her hand skillfully working him so he gasped and his balls tightened.

Will touched her for the first time, a slide of his fingers through her luxuriant hair as he cupped her head and at least attempted to take some charge. The kiss became a duel between gentle exploration and wild need.

The tight tips of her breasts brushed his chest and he lost.

"Sit." She ordered, giving him a push. Will sank back down in his usual chair, a little weak-kneed anyway, so it worked out perfectly.

Tara lost no time in climbing on his lap and straddling his hips. “I need to fuck you right now,” she said breathlessly. “We can use a bed later. Feel how wet I am.”

She guided his hand to between her legs and sure enough, her pussy was sleek and warm as he cupped her. The fragrance of her arousal evoked a primitive reaction and he grasped her hips to steady her as she positioned his swollen cock at her small entrance.

Aware of the disparity of their sizes, Will let her choose how fast to absorb his length, fighting the urge to lift his pelvis as she worked to take his erection all the way to the thick base. Slender thighs spread, she panted and made what was probably the sexiest little sound he’d ever heard when she finally braced her hands on his shoulders and began to move.

Her breasts were gorgeous, full but not huge, the nipples a deep rose, pale flesh swaying with her undulating movements. Will helped as she settled into an up and down glide, flesh into flesh, male into female. Tara arched her neck back, her eyes half-shut, and moaned when he slid one hand across her smooth thigh and thumbed her clit.

It was true, he wasn’t the type of male who hauled every female he met off to the closest convenient flat surface to mate with her, but he did know what kind of stimulation his partners liked during intercourse.

Tara *loved* it.

“Yes,” she said fiercely, her face flushed. “Make me come.”

He did it again. A shudder racked her body.

She was beautiful, abandoned without self-consciousness, her sexuality both flagrant and—speaking as a healthy male—arousing as hell. As her climax began she gripped his biceps so tightly pain mingled with the pleasure, his release rising, rising, until the burst of ejaculation tore a low, animal sound from his chest. The female in his arms went limp, sprawled in delectable nude relaxation, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

At some moment, he guessed he started breathing again because he didn't pass out. Time was an abstract concept as he drifted in orgasmic aftermath.

"How many other lovers?"

The personal question, murmured against his damp skin, made Will stir a little. There was no reason not to be honest. "Only two."

"I guessed it wasn't many."

That rankled a little. He'd felt the force of her orgasm. "I'm sorry if my lack of experience—"

"By the stars!" Tara's head lifted and she stared at him, all gloriously rumped naked female. "That isn't what I meant at all. You might have noticed I liked every minute. I still do." She wiggled her hips, his cock still sheathed to the hilt. "What I meant was I guessed it about you on an emotional one. It wasn't a judgment on your performance. No complaints here." She paused, and then asked, "Did you love them?"

"Yes." He knew how naïve it made him sound, but on the other hand, it was true. "One relationship lasted for five years, the other for three. I would have chosen either one of them as my life mate and married, but circumstances sometimes change beyond your control. It didn't work out that way either time."

Tawny eyes regarded him with a peculiar thoughtfulness. "I suppose it is only fair for me to give you the same information. I've had over a dozen lovers." She shrugged her shoulders. "And no, I didn't love any of them. I tend to concentrate my energies on my career."

Will caressed her bare shoulder. "We're quite different."

"Yes," she agreed in her practical straightforward way. "I'm attracted to you obviously, but I am not sure why. Oh, you're handsome, but every S-species male on this ship is good looking."

They watched her too. Will had noticed with uncharacteristic jealousy more than a few glances sent her way as they walked past a

group of military personnel if he escorted her out of her quarters, which he did frequently since he couldn't seem to stay away from her.

"Perhaps we can learn a bit from each other. Wrap your legs around my waist." He rose, holding her easily against him, and strode into the sleeping chamber to her bunk, their bodies still entwined. "The first time was your way, Tara. Let's try it my way now, if you can stand to let me be in command."

She bit him playfully on the shoulder. "I can try."

Chapter 8

As predicted, there were no communications from the planet they could now see on the tall row of screens, but surface scans showed life forms, both in the bunkers, where it was expected, but also in the main compound which had been evacuated. Jake said neutrally, “Let me go.”

“No.” Kel had an implacable look on his face. “What I need is to not be up here, wondering about what is going on down there on Anaya Two. I’ll lead the recovery party, you safeguard this ship.” He turned. “If at any time you think things have gotten out of hand or we stop talking to you, just leave us there. That’s an official order. Got it, Captain Ammati?”

“I’m noting it in the command log, sir,” the captain said, her fingers tapping as she entered the information.

“I think I can remember that one.” Jake could feel the tension between his shoulder blades. “You’re taking two transports down. Who’s flying?”

“We have three pilots trained for military deployments like this on board. One of them is currently under disciplinary confinement, so I would think it is obvious she’s excluded. I gave orders for Lieutenants Brown and Devonham to ready their crafts”

“Brown is only level 3.”

“He can handle this. He’s just giving us a ride.”

“Peyton is better qualified.”

A muscle in Kel’s cheek twitched. “*Lieutenant Valmont* is not active duty at this moment, Colonel Naiad.”

True enough, but while Jake had no problem with his superior officer—and friend’s—strict regulation enforcement policy usually, he felt giving this rescue attempt the best chance possible superseded the rulebook.

“At least have her on standby to bring down more men if you need them.” He had a bad feeling about all of this. It had been there when they heard about the escaped convicts and it was still firmly in place. Lawless desperate escapees roaming free on a peaceful colony, even if the inhabitants were evacuated to bunkers, was a recipe for a danger that could become a catastrophe.

He’d be damned glad when this mission was finally over. What the hell were they going to be called to next? Disintegrating planets and dangerous felons terrorizing peaceful colonies...it was going to be hard to top those two.

“No. She stays here. Do you think I’d allow her anywhere near Anaya Two under these situations?”

Captain Ammati looked up sharply in surprise at the vehemence and content of a statement that was obviously a personal decision, not necessarily a military one.

Even though the situation was far from amusing, Jake had to smother a laugh over Kel’s chagrined expression over the slip. His friend cleared his throat. “What I mean is I am not taking any female personnel down with me. These men are extraordinarily dangerous and haven’t seen females in quite some time. I’m taking every single man we can spare and still leave you with the ability to run this ship.”

“I don’t disagree with that,” Jake assented. “But if you need assistance—”

“No.” Kel gave him his infamous flinty look.

Then the commander turned and strode to the door, scanning out. When he was gone, Jake turned to find Ammati staring at the doorway with her brows lifted. He said in a neutral tone, “I doubt the commander would appreciate you repeating what you just heard to other personnel, Captain.”

“I doubt they’d believe me anyway,” Ammati muttered. “If I’m not mistaken, Commander Gallico just showed *emotion*.”

“He does, now and then, believe it or not.”

“Over a female?”

He wasn’t about to comment on Kel’s personal life, but the truth was, Peyton was different. Instead of answering he said briskly, “Now then, we’ll set a holding orbit pattern right after the transports launch and I want all channels open. Who knows what they’ll find down there.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * * *

Something was going on. Peyton paced across the sitting area, too restless to sit. Every moment that passed made her more suspicious, if not downright worried. Kel and Jake both had been gone over twenty-four hours. Dual time on the bridge like that usually meant some kind of emergency.

It chafed to be in the dark. This had something to do with the hijacked *Serpentine*. She could feel foreboding building like a Minoan desert sandstorm.

There was only one way she could communicate out. The rows of monitors were all guarded by passwords she didn’t have, but the medical emergency channel was always open. Since there was nothing at all wrong with her, she hated to use it, but then again, losing her mind wasn’t a great option either.

If nothing was really happening, Kel would be more than a little unhappy with her if she used subterfuge to get information.

So she waited.

Two more hours went by and the feeling of impending disaster—she could think of no other way to put it, even if it sounded melodramatic—increased.

Now she really was starting to feel sick, if having her stomach tied in knots counted.

Another hour passed. Thirty minutes more went by with agonizing slowness...

Peyton crossed the room and lightly tapped in the code. Immediately the medical monitor sprang to life, flashing a series of question on the screen.

Please answer the following questions: 1. Is the problem bleeding, intense pain, or acute weakness? 2. Are you alone? 3. Has this occurred before and is the condition noted in your medical file? 4. Are you ambulatory?

Yes. Yes. No. Yes.

Well, she only lied once. It made her feel guilty, but then again, if this was all simply a false alarm, she'd apologize profusely and if Commander Gallico wanted to punish her, well, so far that hadn't proven to be such a bad thing.

It didn't take long for the door light to flash and two ship medics to enter, one male, one female, both efficient as they did a quick medical scan and asked a few questions. Peyton tried to look as wan as possible and was vague, too concerned to be embarrassed over her skimpy attire. In the end, they did exactly as she'd hoped and put her on a gurney and took her to the medical floor level of the ship for further evaluation.

The moment she was wheeled in, she knew her instincts were correct.

The entire place was mobilized, full staff in place. She'd been on enough ships to know when an alert for possible casualties was enabled. Peyton was put in a cubicle and a few moments later a doctor entered. He was a middle-aged, a touch of gray at his temples, and currently wore a harried look. "I'm Dr. Houchins, head of the medical personnel on this ship. Can you tell me, Lieutenant Valmont, when the first symptoms set in?"

She was admittedly more than a little startled. He must have correctly read her expression for Dr. Houchins said, “When we contacted ship’s command to inform them of the message sent from Commander Gallico’s quarters, Colonel Naiad asked me to treat you personally.”

Jake, but not Kel. She wasn’t sure liked the sound of that. No, she *definitely* didn’t like the sound of it.

“I started feeling ill about ten hours ago.” The truth, because that was when she realized how long both Kel and Jake had been gone. “It’s just gotten worse.”

“That’s a bit unspecific, but I suppose we can run a few scans. We’re a little busy right now in preparation, but I don’t think your condition is an emergency. It might be a little while to run the tests, but in the meantime, we’ll keep you comfortable by giving you something for the nausea.”

“What preparations? What’s going on?”

“Nothing for you to worry over.” He actually patted her hand.

In his defense, she supposed she hardly looked like a military pilot with her hair loose and most of her body exposed by the next-to-nothing gown she had to wear.

Fine, she’d get information another way.

“My sister is on board,” Peyton hoped she looked sufficiently limp and apathetic. “Can she come sit with me? I am sure if you ask Commander Gallico, he’ll agree.”

“He isn’t on the ship. I suspect Colonel Naiad is busy also, but I don’t see any harm in authorizing that request myself. I’ll send someone for her.”

Kel isn’t on board?

Her stomach truly began to churn. “Thank you.”

It seemed to be an eternity she lay in a small cubicle, the surroundings sterile and not conducive to anything but anxiety, she found. When the thin panel slid back and Tara came in, she felt the breath in her chest catch over his sister’s expression. Immediately she

sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I'm not sick," she explained.

Relief shone in Tara's eyes. "Thanks for scaring the hell out of me. I've been trying for over two weeks to get to see you, but the medical unit wasn't my place of choice, Peyton."

"I was starting to lose my mind wondering what is going on. I figured you would know." She smiled, but it was tremulous. She was so worried her palms were damp. "You've always had a habit of being able to keep your finger on the pulse of any trouble. Why is the ship on full alert?"

"You mean I usually am the source of most trouble." Tara made a face.

"It's been known to happen. The ship?"

"I only know because of Will," Tara said, an undecipherable expression on her face.

"Will?"

"The governor's son. You rescued him, too. We've sort of become friends."

Peyton could swear her sister was blushing. That was odd, because Tara hadn't blushed since she was about fifteen, but she'd have to analyze that later. "What did he tell you?"

"The hijacked ship full of convicts incarcerated on Epsilon requested docking on Anaya Two."

"I knew it," Peyton muttered. "That's what I'd choose. It's small, few defenses, isolated. If they dump the crew there, take on more fuel and supplies and leave quickly, they could conceivably disappear. This galaxy alone has hundreds of ports where they could dock and abandon the ship, effectively melting away into the general populace or catching transports to other places."

"Except we're right here in the vicinity, which I'm sure they didn't count on." Tara nodded. "They've been allowed berth and the colonists have retreated to safe shelter. Commander Gallico took two

crews of men down to the surface. The convicts won't be leaving either way."

Either way. Peyton wished she couldn't guess what that meant. "We're going to destroy their ship if Kel and his crew don't successfully capture them?"

"Will has communication with his father who is in touch with Governor Kartel and the Universal Council. They naturally don't want to take that path, but from what I understand that's their position, Commander Gallico is only making the attempt to try and save the ship's crew, if they aren't dead already."

In other words, if Kel failed, all of them would die. Not just the convicts, but the ship's crew, and the rescue team.

Kel dead...

A horrible lump seemed to form in her throat.

And there was nothing she could do about it. At the moment, she wasn't even a pilot and officer, but just a female stripped of her duties.

Still, she remembered Jake's tale of Tara's persistence. Peyton straightened her shoulders with effort. "Do you think your friend could get us on the bridge again?"

"Maybe." Tara studied her warily. "But what good could that possibly do? I'm not usually one to preach caution, you know that well enough, but barging in on Colonel Naiad when he's in charge of a volatile situation isn't going to win you anything but a reprimand."

It was a good point. A very good point. But she could hardly be expected to sit in quarters and just *wait*. Peyton said hoarsely, "Forget the command center but can your friend find out what's happening?"

There was a brief silence and then Tara sighed. "I can ask him to try. From the look on your face, this is important to you."

"It is."

"Can I ask why?"

Because I can't bear the thought of anything happening to Kel.

Peyton slid off the table. "No."

* * * *

The landing went without incident, which was either good news, or very bad news. Kel had expected an ambush, but the eerie silence that greeted them was maybe even more dangerous.

“They’re around us,” he said quietly. “The scans showed life forms. Don’t be fooled by the quiet. Look for anything that moves.”

Major Grand nodded, looking out at the long dark streets of the deserted colony. The transports had touched down just outside the main city, the crafts small enough to not need docking facilities but certainly not invisible in their approach. They’d had to use beam lights also, since power to the city was shut off except for the ship port and the bunkers, which had their own energy sources.

“Which way, sir?”

Kel had no idea. He’d studied maps of the layout of Anaya Two’s transportation grid but how to proceed depended more on the fugitives than the directions of the paths of the city. “Since we’re here to try and save the crew of the *Serpentine*, we should head for the ship.” He nodded to his left, his voice terse. “That way. The terminal will be guarded, of course. Let’s not expect any of this to go smoothly. If the ship got here and docked successfully that means either the *Serpentine*’s navigation officers are still alive or that some of the prisoners know what they’re doing. So let’s assume they know how to use tracking devices and have picked up we’re here, and they expect us to come that way.”

One of his crewmen, his face grim as he studied a handheld scanning device, said, “Commander Gallico, we have movement in the east quadrant.”

“And the west,” Grand observed. “Five of them it looks like.”

“Scouting parties maybe, trying to find weapons and supplies. The main bulk of the convicts are probably guarding the vessel. They need that ship and know we don’t want them to have it.” Kel turned and

signaled to the transports for lift off. He wasn't interested in worrying over any of them being hijacked either. Military transports didn't have the fire power of a big ship naturally, but they were armed and could be formidable in combat. Besides the expensive equipment being his responsibility, he was uninterested in finding out if any of the escaped men could pilot one. Minoa had forwarded dossiers on all the prisoners, but there hadn't been time to do more than glance over the information. Unfortunately the common theme among the characteristics of the subjects of the files seemed to be a tendency toward ruthless violence, usually unprovoked.

He was about to provoke them in a big way.

"Let's remember they've had plenty of time to take uniforms from the crew members. We're going to assume everyone is the enemy until positive identification can be made. If fired upon, fire back at will. Let's proceed."

"Yes, Commander."

The terminal was as dark as the rest of the city, a long, sleek building that towered above them by hundreds of feet. Because Anaya Two wasn't industrial, the facilities were small by most standards, but still big enough to house a full-sized shipping vessel like the *Serpentine*.

They'd barely gotten around the edge on the approach when a volley of flashing light erupted. It wasn't a surprise—Kel knew they were in for a battle—but as they all scrambled to get back behind the corner of the building, he still uttered an very un-regulation word.

He'd been able to bring down fifty men with him. There were very close to the same number of convicts and over eighty crew members from the stolen ship. The odds would be in his favor if any of the crew were in a position to help, but—a very large question mark—who knew if any of the *Serpentine's* personnel were still alive, or if so, capable of assistance.

There was also the other factor of trying to infiltrate a defended position. Every military officer knew that basic rule. The aggressor

was at a disadvantage. Breaching the wall was the same difficulty now as it had been back in ancient Earth history. He'd studied the exploits of ancient generals and kings like Hannibal and Alexander, not to mention Napoleon Bonaparte and his nemesis Lord Wellington with interest. Without tracking devices and special communications and computer intelligence, they'd pitted wits against each other and won great victories.

It fascinated him, he had to admit, and with all the power shut off on Anaya Two, he wasn't all that far from those primitive conditions. Their handheld trackers had a limited range and he'd just sent his transports off planet on standby. To keep intercepts at a minimum he had told Naiad to just monitor signals. Since he had no intention of putting more of his crew in danger by sending a distress message if things went wrong, Kel hoped his next communication with his second in command would be from on board the *Serpentine*, announcing they'd been successful and were in control.

Easier said than done.

It was a relief to know Peyton was under disciplinary action and confined to his quarters. Even if the transports weren't waiting on surface, just touching down to allow the rescue parties to disembark was dangerous. She'd have requested the duty too, he knew her, and not just her luscious body and innate sensuality either, but her determination and independent spirit. Besides, Jake was right, of course, she was probably the best pilot on the ship.

Life mate. He wished Jake had never said it for it was constantly in the back of his mind now and he needed to concentrate on other things at the moment, like staying alive.

Other than the sullen light of a distant moon through Anaya Two's constant cloud cover, there was literally no illumination. The main entrance to the terminal was not an option, but he hadn't expected to just stroll through it anyway.

"They can't be organized, sir." Grand's face was barely visible where they both pressed against a wall. The men did the same, silent,

motionless, well-trained. “It’s got to be every man for himself in there.”

“They have a mutual vested interest in escape, Major, so let’s keep that I mind. I think you’re right, but there has to be some leadership to get them to successfully overpower the guards, take the ship, and dock it here for fuel and supplies. We have a couple of options. There’s a service tunnel our opponents may or may not know exists. I have reservations about it because it’s damned easy to get trapped, but the airlock system is the other choice and it’s about the same. I have the security codes for both. We’ll split into three parties. One group will stay here and keep any of their satellite groups from going back in, one will go in the tunnel, and one will try the airlocks.”

Grand nodded and hesitated before asking, “Pardon me, Commander, but if we had the other two options, why did we try the main door? Why not just sneak in and surprise them?”

A breeze drifted by, whispering past the deserted buildings. Kel said, “Because right now they know we’re here. They are going to be strung up, ready to attack us, knowing we’re out here waiting to try again. The attempt was a diversion to focus all their attention right here. I’m just counting on them not knowing it.” He smiled grimly. “Are you a fan of history, Major?”

Grand looked perplexed, the obscure light giving his features shadows and sharp planes. “Sir?”

“Divide and conquer.” Kel pointed toward where the vague outline of a utility ladder rose in skeleton steps toward the main roof area. “I’ll take fifteen men and go that way. Only use your communication device if you have to contact me. I’ll be in touch when we get inside so we can coordinate our offensive.”

Chapter 9

“Just for a moment,” Will repeated patiently. “Colonel Naiad will want to see me.”

The young officer obviously knew Will’s identity for something flickered in his eyes. “My orders are to only to allow in specified staff.”

“My father was governor of the colony where the escaped prisoners were incarcerated. I was the exchequer for the prison system itself on Epsilon. Don’t you think I might have something to offer?”

It was a bluff. Will didn’t, not really. Oh, none of what he’d just said wasn’t true, but as far as helpful information on a rescue mission on an unknown planet was concerned, Will doubted he could be truly of assistance just because he approved the budget for the high profile institution.

But for the sake of Tara’s younger sister he was willing to pretend he did. Part of it was chivalry because he was one of those males who ridiculously wanted to help any female in distress, even one was obviously capable as Peyton Valmont. There was also the factor that she’d saved his life—no one would deny that.

Tara, too, was a variable in the equation. His feelings toward her were involved—more than involved from all the signs—and if it would ease her sister’s mind to know what was going on at the surface level of Anaya Two, he’d do his best.

“I suppose you can go in, sir.” The guard stepped back and allowed the scan to flash. The door lifted. “If the colonel doesn’t want you in there, he’ll say so.”

From his previous experience with Naiad, the sergeant was probably right. Will walked in, saw that the colonel paid little attention to him but was instead riveted on a wall of monitors and waited. It took a few moments but Naiad turned and flicked him a brief glance. “I can’t believe you got her to stay behind. Either you are very persuasive or obviously Peyton isn’t completely willing to toss aside her career.”

“Yet,” Will said, encouraged by the lack of outright dismissal. “She’s pretty anxious to find out what is going on.”

“Since she checked herself into sickbay, I’m going to guess you’re right.” The colonel looked him in the eye. “I’m sympathetic to her concerns, believe me. Can you actually help with this situation with the prisoners?”

“In a general way only.” Will felt with Naiad being honest was probably best, and the man seemed to understand why he was there anyway. “I know what my father told me. I also have been on Anaya Two before, when Epsilon negotiated to buy agricultural products in bulk with their government.” He smiled briefly. “They always invite the person who handles the compensation part of the deal. Funny thing, isn’t it? I’ve seen the terminal anyway.”

“We have a blueprint.”

“Not the same as firsthand, is it? The Serpentine, too, is part of our commercial fleet. I know nothing about military ships like this one, but shipping vessels were something I dealt with often.”

“Their contents is not the same thing as how to run them.”

“True,” Will admitted. “But who knows what might help.”

“Well, you’re better than what else I have, so sit down.”

At least he wasn’t being tossed right out. Will took the offered chair, which he suspected Naiad sat in himself when Gallico was at the command center and used the chair the colonel currently occupied. The other person present was a young female who barely spared him a quick glance before riveting her attention again on a

series of controls. Her fingers were constantly busy on one keyboard or another.

“They’re here.” Naiad pointed at a flashing on one screen. “And here. And here. The commander has chosen to go in at two different points. It looks to me like he’s left a small force to keep firing at the main portal. Otherwise, other than using life form scans, from this distance, we can’t tell what’s happening. Our sensors are hampered by the heavy cloud cover that is a constant on Anaya Two. There’s no way to even distinguish between the convicts and our own forces. I can only tell where we are because I watched Gallico and his team land and go in. When things start to happen, it will be impossible to discern friend or enemy.”

“The muggy, warm atmosphere grows nice crops,” Will commented with a wry smile. “And yes, I know that doesn’t help at all, Colonel, but keep in mind because Anaya Two is such a peaceful agricultural society, nothing is laid out in a fashion to address defense. That,” Will added, “is a good thing. The prisoners don’t have anyplace to—”

“Colonel Naiad,” the female officer interrupted tersely, “we’re getting a distress message.”

“From the commander?”

“No. From one of the bunkers, sir.”

Naiad surged to his feet, his good-looking face tight. “That’s not supposed to be possible. They are sealed and secure, Captain Ammati.”

“That may be, sir, but I have a beacon. It looks like the door shield was lifted a few minutes ago.”

It was Will who said quietly, “The people of Anaya Two are pacifists. If the convicts could use the central communication system, they might have told those colonists anything.”

“Which is why every colony needs a military presence,” Jake Naiad muttered darkly, bending to stare at the monitor. “Who the hell

would open that fucking door? We've got enough hostages with the crew of the ship to worry about."

"Shall I respond?" The female captain sat, her hands poised.

Naiad gave a curt nod of assent. "The commander wanted the communication grid quiet so the prisoners couldn't ascertain our surface movements, but I think in this case I don't have a lot of choice, do I?"

On one the screens the image of a young woman appeared. "Commander?"

"Colonel." Naiad corrected.

"My name is Betina Tosse and I am the assistant to the colony commissioner. Sir, we have a problem in Bunker 15 and we are evacuating back into the city. Any suggestions for a safe place would be welcome."

"What kind of problem?"

"The respiration filtration system has failed. People started feeling ill before we realized the blowers had shut down." She paused. In the background, Will realized with a jolt, there were children crying. "I realize the colony is under lock down but we haven't been informed as to why. Information would be welcome at this point. We've opened the hatch for ventilation. There was no choice. Is it still dangerous outside?"

"There's a small band of life forms close to the bunker." Captain Ammati informed Naiad quietly. "The surveillance grid keeps flickering in and out. I've no idea how many, but all our men are in front of, or inside, the main terminal. Those are convicts, Colonel."

"It's dangerous as hell outside, Ms. Tosse." Naiad rubbed his jaw, his eyes narrowed. "How many colonists are there?"

"Thirty-one.' Betina's face wavered as the signal dropped, the message choppy. "...enough air...distress...twenty females and eleven children."

Will felt himself pale. Naiad said harshly. "No males?"

The screen cleared and her image solidified again, which was a relief, but her answer wasn't. "No. The bunkers are designed gender specific. Containment is always boring and males and females tend to like different activities. Besides, the children want to be with their mothers."

"This is like a damned nightmare. Isn't there one practical person in that whole colony?" Colonel Naiad said under his breath. "We can't leave them there unprotected but if I order one of the transports to pick them up, all I have is one pilot and a navigator to somehow get thirty-one civilians on board and defend the craft, not to mention if our men need to get out of there, half their transportation is gone."

"Send me." Will wasn't particularly brave...well, he'd never thought about whether he possessed that quality or not. It didn't matter. All he knew was he wasn't going to sit by and let innocent women and children be preyed upon by lawless monsters. "Surely there's few more male crew you can spare to go along? Lieutenant Valmont can handle the transport. Take my word, if it is anything like what I saw her do on Epsilon, we'll be in and out before you can blink. I'll get those colonists on the transport and Commander Gallico will still have his transportation on standby if he needs them."

"I can't." Naiad jabbed his fingers through his hair. "You're the governor's son...and Peyton...No. I have orders. As for male crew to go along, I don't. The commander took everyone we could spare."

"I can handle several different types of weapons." It was an exaggeration. Will had done a little training at one time, years ago when he'd thought about a military career. It wasn't for him, he'd decided soon enough, part of his conclusion being situations like this one. A cool choice was impossible for him to make under circumstances where innocent victims were involved.

"Colonel? Please help us." Betina Tosse's composure cracked a fraction. "What do you want us to do?"

For a minute Naiad didn't move, then he said on a savage exhale, "Don't panic. We're on our way."

* * * *

Compared to what she'd encountered on Epsilon, this would be like a scenic ride over Minoa's first city. Peyton slid her hands over the controls of her transport with the familiarity of a lover and followed the coordinates.

There was no question the darkened conditions below were disconcerting but she'd flown missions like this before. They'd been drills though, she thought with an inner grimace. And not—though she refused to dwell on it—with desperate criminals roaming the area of touchdown.

She almost missed it, catching the dark spot in the last moment, hauling the craft around and flicking the lights on as instructed for one, two, three heartbeats. Then the craft settled down sweetly on the specified flat spot by the bunker and she shut down the illumination.

"I'll stand guard. Tara, you help the colonists board." Will Janssen, his fine features set, held a sleek military issue defense firearm like he knew what he was doing, though Peyton knew he'd been given just a brief lesson while the transport was fueled and prepared. Tara nodded and Peyton enabled the door lift.

The warm smell of vegetation and fecund soil as the first thing that Peyton noticed, the eddy of moist air hitting the cockpit. Tara and Will jumped out, not even waiting for the gate to hit the ground. Her navigator, Morrison, sat hunched in the seat beside her, weapon at hand, his young face grim as he stared at one of the screens. He said, "We've got movement out there. They heard us come in."

"Yeah, well, we're probably kind of hard to miss," Peyton tried not to tense up, checking her controls, prepared to lift off the minute the last passenger was on board. "We expected trouble."

She could dimly see through the shadows figures of the colonists pouring from the bunker door. The first one to scramble up the ramp was a young boy of not more than five or six, his eyes wide. Behind

him came a frightened female, obviously his mother who nodded when instructed toward the seating area and shooed him that direction. More came, all with that same pale trembling look, especially when someone discharged a weapon not far away. Not Will, Peyton thought automatically, frantically scanning the sensor monitors, but a hand weapon.

Tara was out there. It made her have to quell a surge of panic when she thought of her sister's danger.

The colonists flowed in, breathless and frightened, but it seemed excruciatingly slow, though in real time it probably wasn't.

"Here comes company." Morrison slid from his seat. "I'm going to guard the door. Hopefully Janssen can hold them off. That thing he's holding can blast a hole in the side of a bed of Minoan granite. They don't know he's never fired it. Look, we have visual, Lieutenant."

Sure enough, along the perimeter of the bunker, she saw dim forms come into view. It was eerie to see the stealthy advance, to catch the gleam of a face, or movement of a hand. "Shit," she muttered, petrified, but her hands still hovering over the controls in automatic readiness for lift off.

The last colonist climbed out of the bunker only a few feet away from the convicts and someone—Tara—grabbed the woman's arm and pulled her at a run toward the transport. Will stood between them and the threat, his weapon making a sweeping arc as if he meant to fire at any moment. He backed slowly toward the waiting craft.

"Hurry," Morrison shouted. "We've got them all."

The first flash from the darkness came, but the shot hit the transport. Attuned to her vessel, Peyton felt the vibration with a brief spurt of rage. Will, she realized, was probably attempting to back up the ramp into the craft, while still posing a threat. Another flash came, and then dozens, and in a knee jerk reaction, she hit the floodlights, effectively blinding their opponents. For a moment she saw a semi-circle of males, their unshaven faces feral and washed to bone and

angle by the brilliant illumination and then Morrison slid into place next to her and said, “Jesus.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have nightmares after this. Janssen?”

“He’s in. Do your thing, Lieutenant. Get us the fuck out of here.”

Thrusters engaged, the small roar a welcome sound, and the transport shifted and went up in a beautiful arc, whirling away into the darkness.

“He hit?” Peyton asked tersely.

“I don’t know. I pulled him inside and hit the door. Your sister dragged him off. I figure he’s in good hands and I’m not a medic. You need me more. Let’s get back in one piece.”

“That was a pretty brave thing for Will Janssen to do.” She shivered at the memory of those wild, fierce faces.

“We’re all damn heroes if you ask me,” Morrison said with humor in his voice. “And I’m with you on the nightmare thing. I wonder how Gallico and his men are doing. I wouldn’t want to be facing anything like what we saw down there. They didn’t even look like men.”

She wondered, too. If she allowed herself to think about it she might just lose her mind.

Kel.

Now that she knew it was possible to fall in love with the icy commander, she wondered if it was possible to tell him.

All she wanted was a chance.

Chapter 10

It was gratifying to know in the end even with similar forces, the disadvantages of unknown ground, and having to infiltrate an enemy held position, that well-trained men could still take the day.

Even against males of their species that were little more than animals.

Kel felt sickened over the casualties to the crew of the *Serpentine*. The initial breakout and takeover had been bloody and by all accounts half the crew had been massacred. The navigators had been spared, and most of the female personnel had been able to hide in a storage area and gone undetected, but almost all the young able men were eliminated. Out of eighty less than thirty survived, but that was at least better than none. Anaya Two also, was spared the destructive presence of a force of merciless, desperate criminals.

So everything had turned out well. His men had suffered a few casualties but going in through the airlocks and the service tunnels had given them the element of surprise, and no one on their side had been killed. As for the prisoners, most had chosen death—some by their own hand—rather than capture. According to the ship's log, there were still five prisoners unaccounted for, but he'd left men guarding the ship and the colonists were still in lock down. A Federation military vessel with full troops was on its way to take over and the situation was at least under control.

At least in a professional way, things felt in control.

Kel threw his tunic on a chair. He smelled like smoke and dust from crawling through what felt like miles of ventilation ducts. "Who's on the bridge?"

“Grand and Ammati. They can handle it for a short time now that the crisis is over. I’m headed back there in a minute. The Universal Council wants to get your report in five hours. It doesn’t give you much time to sleep, but you’ve been on duty longer than I have.”

That was true. Kel gave a small grunt of assent. Damn, he was tired. “Where is she?”

“I assume you mean Peyton. With her sister on the medical floor.” Jake looked impassive, but his eyes held a somber light. “Will Janssen was hit twice as they were trying to get away. It seems to me the governor’s son and Dr. Valmont have become a little more than friends. Luckily, it looks like none of the wounds are life-threatening.”

“Let’s hope *you* can say the same when we finish this conversation.” Kel leveled his most frigid glare at his second in command. “You sent her down there.”

Jake was unfazed. “Tell me what you would have done in my place. Thirty-one unprotected women and children just waiting for marauding murderers to come along and do their worst? I’m quite sure, Kel, you’d not have left them there. Not if you had possible recourse.”

Whatever he might have said next was stopped by the light flashing at the door. Bare-chested, Kel leaned over and hit the device.

The door opened and Peyton stood there hesitantly in her trim uniform. Her gold green eyes were ringed by shadows and she looked wary. “I assume these are still my quarters.”

She was so damned beautiful it made his stomach tighten. And so alive. It was a damned good thing he hadn’t known about her piloting the transport to pick up those vulnerable colonists because he doubted he would have been able to concentrate on doing his own job he would have been so preoccupied with worrying about her. Without a word, he stepped back to let her in.

“How’s Janssen doing?” Jake got to his feet more slowly than usual and rubbed the back of his neck.

“They got the bleeding in his abdomen stopped finally and the doctors said his other wound is just superficial. He’s conscious and coherent, which is more than I can say for my sister.” Peyton shook her head. “She can be a little emotional at times.”

“I’ve noticed,” Kel said dryly, “but by all accounts, damned brave, too.” He caught Peyton’s gaze and held it. “Must run in the family.”

“This time I wasn’t defying orders.” Hazel eyes held a hint of challenge. That usual hint of defiance and challenge he loved.

“No.” He shot Jake a sardonic look. “I believe my second in command is the one in trouble there.”

“I didn’t do anything not supported by regulation.” Jake shrugged. “But if you’d like to bring up disciplinary charges—”

He didn’t want to do any such thing.

“Don’t you have a ship to run?” Kel interrupted. “I’ll see you in five hours.”

“Seems I’m dismissed.” Jake lifted his brows and sauntered toward the door. “Get *some* sleep, Kel.”

When he was gone, Peyton still just stood there, as if waiting for him to cue what happened next. He wished he knew. She was the one who broke the silence by saying, “You’re going to find out sooner or later so I’ll just tell you. I was so worried when neither you or Jake came back I’m afraid I pretended to be ill so I could find out what was going on. When they took me to sick bay I asked for Tara. I hoped she could tell me. That’s why Will was in the command center when the distress signal came through.”

He already knew the story. One of the first things he’d asked Jake was how in the hell he’d decided to send down the governor’s son into grave danger. When Kel heard Will Janssen had volunteered, he’d also been told he was on the bridge.

The subtle tilt of Peyton’s chin told him she wasn’t a damn bit sorry for using subterfuge to leave confinement. “Doesn’t surprise me

at all,” he said without inflection. “What other rules did you break during my short absence from this ship, Lieutenant?”

“I think that’s the extent of it.” Her gaze flickered over his bare chest. She added, “Sir.”

“Do you think being worried over another officer’s absence justifies a breach in regulations?” He took a long slow step toward her.

“I think every situation is different,” she equivocated, standing her ground, though her eyes widened as he reached for her.

“In other words, rules are meant to be interpreted?” Kel reached out and slipped the clip holding her long hair up free. “Come on now, Peyton, we both know that is not how the military works. It’s very simple. I give an order, and because I’m your superior officer, you are supposed to obey it.”

“Yes, but—”

“Please tell me you aren’t arguing with me.”

She would have if he hadn’t bent to capture her mouth in a searing kiss, he was convinced of it. But she didn’t argue when he made short work of stripping off her uniform tunic and regulation slacks. Or when he cupped her breast beneath the thin layer of her undergarments and made a small sound of pure male satisfaction at the warm weight cradled in his palm.

Slim arms slipped around his neck as Kel lifted and carried her into their sleeping chamber. “You’re tired,” Peyton murmured, kissing his neck. “For the first time since I’ve known you actually look tired. You need sleep, not sex.”

“I’m doubting I’ll ever be *that* tired when it comes to you,” he muttered back. Moments later they were both naked and he balanced himself between her open thighs, nudging wet heat with the swollen tip of his hungry cock. He commanded, “Tell me again why you broke the rules.”

She stared up at him, her expression full of confusion. “What?”

“It’s important.” The admission was unwilling but truthful. “To me.”

“I was worried.” Her breath came in slight pants and her eyes were dark with passion.

“About?” He tested the resilience of her slit, opening it, letting his crest enter her.

“You.” One exploring hand slipped over his chest, her fingers brushing a nipple, making it pebble.

Kel hissed in a breath.

Just what he wanted—no, needed—to hear. “I don’t remember ordering you to worry about my welfare, Lieutenant Valmont.”

“I don’t recall asking permission,” she said, lifting her hips in supplication.

“How like you, disobedient at every turn.”

“And here I thought you liked my independent spirit.” To punctuate her words she lightly bit into the muscle of his right shoulder.

The trouble was, she was exactly right. He admired her courage, her skill as a pilot, and not the least of it, her allure as a female. It wasn’t just her beauty either, but something intrinsically about her that was different from anyone he’d ever met. The moment she’d stepped on his ship, it held him captive and this moment was no different.

“I do,” he admitted, his voice rough.

“Kel.” Fingertips danced down his spine.

“What do you want from me?” The question was honest, raw.

“Everything,” she whispered.

He had a feeling that was true. With his usual care, he began to fully penetrate her willing body, her knees lifting to give him complete access to the ultimate possession, small hands caressing at the base of his spine. “This kind of everything?” he asked as he finally rested fully inside her, the hot wet grip of her pussy holding his cock with perfection.

“This is nice,” Peyton said, her voice a low purr, “but not quite enough.”

Kel rocked his hips to apply pressure to her clit, rewarded by a gasp of pleasure. “I’m not big enough for you?”

He would do anything to get her to say it. Anything.

Maybe even say it himself?

“Hmm...you’re perfect.” Peyton let her eyes drift shut. “But that isn’t what I meant exactly, though I appreciate the demonstration.”

Kel went still. “Did you mean you’d prefer an emotional bond between us and not just this.” He slid one hand between their joined bodies and caressed her.

Her inner muscles contracted as her eyes flew open. “Yes, that’s what I meant.”

“Don’t you think there is one?”

“I’ve never felt this way before,” she admitted.

That was close, but not perfect. He wanted perfect. “What way?”

“Kel.” Her hips shifted as he continued to stimulate the small swollen nub between her legs. It wasn’t exactly fair play but he wasn’t interested in fair. The slight bite of her nails on his shoulders told him her orgasm hovered.

“Felt what way? Tell me.”

“Is that an order?” Her voice sounded strangled, the fluids of her arousal coating his fingers and lubricating his cock.

“No. A request.”

Something flickered in her magnificent eyes. “I believe that’s a first, Commander.”

“In honor of the occasion, can you humor me then?”

“I love you.” She twisted, arched, clung to him. “I love you.”

Joy crashed over him in sync with pleasure as the woman in his arms began to shudder in erotic release. All control was lost as her inner muscles tightened and propelled him over the edge into a starlit vastness of swirling emotion and physical sensation.

It was unique. It was magnificent.

It was perfection, he thought as he drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Epilogue

Minoa, five weeks later

The experience of appearing before the Universal Council was one Peyton decided she would just as soon not repeat in the near—or distant—future. As she was escorted from the huge meeting chamber, she wiped her damp palms on the fabric of her immaculate uniform. Three hallways, two different change of guards later to guide her, and she found herself thankfully in a bay with a waiting transport.

Tara was probably with Will, she thought, as the soldier who'd brought her that morning expertly guided the machine out into the traffic flow of Minoa's famous First City. Given that the son of the former governor of Epsilon was recovering well, all the hovering care wasn't probably necessary, but then again, Tara rarely did anything halfway. From the way the two of them looked at each other, the likelihood of future plans seemed to be a certainty.

At least *someone* had future plans. Peyton looked out the window at the vast cobalt lake that was the center of the city, her stomach in a dismal knot. Since they arrived on Minoa a few days ago, she'd heard nothing from Kel. Oh, she realized that he, like her, had a series of hearings and interviews to attend after the events on both Epsilon and Anaya Two, but would a message be too much trouble?

Apparently so.

What did she expect? Once her insubordination sentence was over, Kel had returned to stern commander and even Jake had treated her once again as if she was nothing but another female officer on the ship. It was regulation that once she was on duty again they could

only deal with each other on a professional basis—she understood that—but it was still hard to handle. To make it all worse, almost without exception every female officer on board the ship had asked her either directly or indirectly about her “punishment.” It had been infuriating to realize most of them would have gladly traded places with her for the sojourn in the commanding officers’ quarters.

Even Tara had been curious, but luckily, too absorbed in Will Janssen’s recovery to be too nosy.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Peyton didn’t even realize it at first when they stopped. Not until the young driver opened the door and stood there, respectfully impassive. “Here we are, Lieutenant.”

The tall sleek dark building was unfamiliar, but in one of the city’s more upscale areas. Peyton shook her head. “This is the wrong destination, Corporal.”

“I have my orders from Commander Gallico, ma’am. I’m to drop you off here.”

Gallico. Her heart started a slow steady pound. Peyton slid out of the vehicle. “I see.”

“Just program in his name on the touchpad.” The young man nodded and pressed a button to allow her access to the building’s foyer. It was all glass and obsidian, the smooth polished surfaces modern. She tapped in Kel’s name and was rewarded by a door to her right opening. This took her up three stories and the first thing she noticed as the transfer elevator came to a halt was the familiar scent of light fruit overlaid with a tangy bite.

Kel’s favorite wine.

He lived here. She’d wondered more than once what someone like him, so austere in many ways but with hidden facets such as a weakness for ancient Earth literature, would choose as a place to relax, but she hadn’t expected the shining rock on the floor of the hallway, warm rich green on the walls, or the soft sound of music in the background.

“Hello,” she ventured, uncertain and off-balance. With each passing day she’d felt more and more disheartened when not a whisper of contact had been initiated. The flutter of her pulse now should annoy her—and it did to a certain extent—but she had no control over it.

When Kel strolled into sight, two wine glasses cradled in his long fingers, it only got worse. He was barefoot and wore civilian clothing—dark pants, a white loose shirt, and his dark hair waved around his elegant fine-boned face. Those gray eyes, so infamous for their arctic glare, were the color of molten silver. “How was the interview with the Council?”

“How did you know?” She took the glass of wine he offered, hoping he didn’t notice her fingers trembled.

“I was under orders to not contact you. They wanted an impartial version of the story from both of us.” He sounded very matter of fact. “Once you talked to them, the ban was lifted. Follow me.”

She did as he asked—no, ordered in his typical way—finding herself in a room furnished in a minimal style, with streamlined chairs and a huge glass wall overlooking the city view. In the twilight, the buildings were iridescent and Minoa’s two moons hung low in the skyline.

Jake Naiad, sprawled in one of the chairs, got lazily to his feet. Like Kel, he wore casual clothing and looked different, more male than ever, if that was even possible. He smiled and said, “Aren’t you glad all that is over? Have a seat, Peyton.”

Odd, how on the ship, even when they had been large, imposing, and had complete authority over her, she hadn’t ever felt quite so...under their command.

On the ship, there had been rules. They were bound by a code of honor to treat her a certain way, even when she was being punished for an infraction. Now, with two large, intimidating males lounging in the same room but under very different circumstances, she felt a glimmer of trepidation. “Yes, I’m glad it’s over,” she agreed, trying to

look cool and collected. “They agreed your punishment for the insubordination charge was sufficient and that they would let it stand you dropped the appropriation of military property.”

“And then they gave you a commendation, ostensibly only for the rescue of the colonists on Anaya Two, but we all know it stems from what you did when you went down to Epsilon against orders.” Kel looked at her with that unfathomable expression he seemed to summon at will. “Congratulations. I signed off on it a few days ago after my initial report was given. This should help in your quest for promotion.”

Was that still her quest? At the beginning of this past mission her career had been everything. Now she wasn't as sure. The problem was, though Kel had wrested from her a confession of deeper feelings, he hadn't offered up any of his own. It shifted the balance of power definitely to his side.

Damn him.

Peyton took a sip of the cool, clear wine and then inclined her head. “Thank you.”

“That is what you want, isn't it? What did you tell me...to make major in the next five years, correct?” Seemingly relaxed and nonchalant, he raised his glass to his lips with lazy male grace.

But there was nothing casual about the look in his eyes.

“Y..yes.” The one word answered wobbled as she gave it and Peyton quickly cleared her throat.

“Maybe you can change her mind.” Jake turned to his friend and grinned with that typical hint of audacity that was his alone. “I'll be happy to help you get her in an agreeable mood. In fact, I've been looking forward to it ever since I mentioned to her once that we often share females at the same time and I could tell the idea appealed to the lieutenant's adventurous spirit.”

Peyton blushed. She couldn't help it, the wash of heat suffusing not just her face, but her whole body. One at a time she knew them both well in the most carnal sense, but together...

“Think it would work to soften her up?” Kel asked Jake the question but he looked at her. “I mean, I’m pretty experienced with females but this situation is new to me. I’ve never thought about one on a permanent basis.”

Peyton’s eyes widened. Had he just said *permanent basis*?

“Let’s find out.” Jake stood, setting aside his glass on a small dark wooden table. “I’m going to predict she’ll be amiable to adjusting her career ambitions in your favor if we do this right. It never hurts to start negotiations in the most pleasant way possible.”

“Not a bad plan.” Kel stood also.

Did he mean...as in life mate? As in wife?

Awash in both tentative joy and confusion, Peyton didn’t resist when Jake gently removed the drink from her hand and tugged her to her feet. His crystalline eyes held a teasing glint she recognized, coupled with a palpable heat. Kel stepped up behind her. She could feel the warmth from his tall, powerful body and his hands spanned her waist, and then cupped her hips. He was hard already, the press of his stiff cock against her backside unmistakable.

Warm lips teased her ear. “How about it, Peyton? Just for your pleasure. And afterwards, you and I talk.”

Before she answered, Jake leaned in and kissed her, his mouth hungry, persuasive. At the same time Kel trailed his lips down the side of her neck in a tantalizing glide, pulling aside the collar of her tunic so he could tease the juncture of neck and shoulder.

It felt marvelous. No, better than marvelous.

Just for your pleasure...

She believed him. Trusted both of them implicitly, so when Jake continued to kiss her and Kel began to unfasten her clothing she rested lax between them, languid with desire now, anticipation stirring her senses. Perhaps it was the adventurous side of her but the idea of two such virile males catering to her erotic needs at the same time stirred a deep, restless yearning that pooled in her belly and between

her legs. Her pussy throbbed and her nipples were stiff peaks as Kel eased the fabric of her tunic apart.

Large hands cupped her bared breasts, gently kneading. Jake dropped to his knees and pulled off her pants, helping her step out of them. His breath fanned her thighs and he parted the wet lips of her pussy and blew on her clit.

She quivered, Kel's arms supporting her. And when Jake began to lick her folds, his tongue delving in, finding just the right spot, she arched back and let the surge of enjoyment take her. The abrasion of teeth and tongue between her legs made a low moan catch her throat, captured when Kel cupped her chin and tilted her face back so he could lean over and kiss her.

The force of her first climax hit her in just that position, with Jake's skillful mouth eager against her pussy and Kel's kiss holding her prisoner. Ecstasy rose, spiked, and then ebbed only to rise again. A second orgasm made her shake uncontrollably and she finally wrenched her mouth free and gasped out, "Stop."

"If you insist." Jake rose, his hands going to the hem of his loose shirt, jerking the material over his head. "I was just starting to have fun."

Fun? If Kel wasn't holding her, she'd be sprawled on the floor. Delicious weakness weighed every limb and she felt boneless, her pussy still throbbing.

And she had a feeling they'd just begun.

"There is always something pleasurable about watching." Kel whispered in her ear, "You look beautiful when you come."

If there was an answer to that observation, she had no idea what it might be.

He proceeded to completely undress her then and lifted her nude, sated body into his arms, carrying her into his bedroom.

As if orchestrated, both he and Jake disrobed at the same pace. His bedroom was only sparsely furnished, almost all of it occupied by the huge bed covered with plain dark linens. Peyton lay on the fine

fabric, watching the two males—two very aroused males—move, impressive muscles rippling as they shed their clothes. They were alike, yet so different, except for their large sleek erections. Kel with his dark dramatic coloring, Jake both fair and lean...a shiver of anticipation ran through her.

Jake glanced at Kel, clearly asking him to proceed. She had a feeling the deference had nothing to do with rank, or even friendship, but that they'd never both made love to the same female when it was clear she belonged to only one of them.

Mine, she thought with feminine possessiveness as she gazed at Kel looming over her. They belonged to each other.

“This way,” he urged, rolling Peyton over so she was prone, the linens soft against her breasts and stomach. He smoothed his hands over her ass and thighs. “Up.”

“What?” Not sure what the order meant, she heard the huskiness in her voice with an inner blush. She wanted this...was intrigued by it.

“Like this.” Strong hands lifted her. When she was on her hands and knees, Kel moved behind her, his erection nudging her pussy. At the same time, Jake positioned himself in front of her, his stiff cock available for her mouth. Peyton dipped her head, letting the crest of Jake's penis glide over lips just as Kel grasped her hips and entered her.

Simultaneously pleasuring two such powerful males? It gave her a rush of both pleasure and satisfaction, and her inner muscles clenched in reaction to Kel's penetration even as she tasted the salty essence of Jake's enjoyment and he gave a low groan when she began to gently suck.

Kel stroked in carefully, plunging deep and then withdrawing in long slick thrusts, each forward motion making her take Jake to her throat, each backward slide bringing her head up. On his knees, Jake had his head thrown back so the tendons in his throat stood out, his eyes closed in pure pleasure.

She wondered, in blissful anticipation of the explosion, which one of the three of them would come first. The little frantic sounds she made with every stroke were involuntary but she was close, her body primed from her earlier climax, and when Jake fisted the base of his cock he began to shudder. Kel, too, moved faster, harder, his breath harsh in her ear, scorching her neck.

The world seemed to combust at one time. Jake growled, the feral sound ringing out and Peyton twitched in response at the hot spurt in her mouth, her body shuddering as her pussy tightened in rapturous pulses. It was apparently the catalyst Kel needed to surrender and ejaculate with such force he jerked, his head dropping to the curve of her shoulder as he poured into her and murmured her name over and over.

* * * *

He wasn't sure the gorgeous female in his arms even noticed when Jake slipped from the bed and quietly dressed, leaving the room with little more than a small knowing smile over the two of them entwined in a tangle of arms and legs. Kel lightly touched Peyton's hair. "Are you still awake?"

"Hmm." She stirred a little against his chest, all naked, voluptuous, satisfied female.

He'd imagined her in his bed a few too many times for his peace of mind, but then again, Peyton Valmont had done interesting things to his usually orderly existence from their first encounter.

Naiad better be right, he thought, uncertain where he was never uncertain. He wanted her as receptive as possible to what he had to say. "I wonder if you might..."

He stopped. It made him sound indecisive to start out that way, and he wasn't an indecisive male. Tightening his arms so she was firmly clasped against him, he tried again.

“I’ve thought about you,” he managed, which wasn’t much better than his first attempt. It irritated him to find himself so at a loss when he’d been planning this speech, and so he added curtly, “I think about you too much, actually.”

Peyton lifted her head, her gold green eyes steady. “I think about you too. But then again, you know that. I’ve told you I love you.”

Love. He wasn’t precisely uncomfortable with the idea of it—it had taken some effort getting used to the concept.

A *lot* of effort getting used to the concept.

A silence stretched on. Beautiful and disheveled, Peyton impudently propped an elbow on his naked chest. “Come on, Commander Gallico, I can’t believe you don’t have something to say. An order to issue. An edict to hand down perhaps?”

Kel stared at her, irritation fading to amusement. She challenged him. She had from the moment they met. Who knew he’d find it so damned attractive.

“Marry me,” he said succinctly.

“Marriage?” Arched brows rose as a provocative smile glossed her mouth. “Isn’t that a drastic step for both of us? You’ve already had to discipline me once. Aren’t you afraid I’ll be a less than obedient mate?”

He was sure of it, actually, but still felt a surge of joy at the soft light in her lovely eyes. If love was this welling emotion, then yes, he loved her.

“I’ll do my best to constantly remind you that you are under my command,” he answered and kissed her.

“You,” she whispered against his lips, “are welcome to try.”

“I’ll start now with an order you can’t disobey. Tell me you love me again.”

“You go first.” Her smile was pure brazen female triumph.

“You just disobeyed, Peyton.”

“I know.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Kel brushed her cheek tenderly with the backs of his fingers. “Fine, I’ll go first. I love you.”

Unexpectedly, her eyes shimmered suddenly. “I love you too. And I promise to try to be a bit more disciplined when it comes to your orders, how is that?”

“Don’t you dare,” he told her, pulling her closer. “Don’t change a thing.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annabel Wolfe loves the unlimited possibilities of futuristic romance. New worlds, dangers we can only imagine, no rules, and of course, those dynamic heroes and independent heroines. She lives in rural Indiana with her husband, three children, and her cat and constant companion, Mr. Poot.



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