



# ICY HEAT

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# Icy Heat

*Leigh Wyndfield*

## Dedication

Special thanks as always goes to Jennifer Skully and TL Schaefer, two of the best critique partners a gal can have. Thanks to my husband, who puts up with my insanity and tells me each time to keep going. Finally, thanks to my cats, Stinky and Boo, who keep me company during the long silent days of writing.

## Chapter One

It was only early evening, but the Liberty Lounge still rocked with the moaning trumpet scales and the howling female alto singer typical of the new Techno-Galaxy Jazz craze. Squinting to see past the atmospheric fog, Aidan could make out circular obsidian tables and red leather booths ringing the dance floor. Located at the edge of the human populated galaxies, the Liberty was as upscale as it got in the Danthium Quadrant. Even this early, the packed bar held anyone who was anyone, or at least anyone who could pay the exorbitant cover charge.

She didn't need to search for who she'd come to find. Turning right, Aidan pushed her way along the back wall. She knew exactly where Boyd Marsley spent his days and nights.

"Put a lid on it," the trumpet players chanted, while the man on the keyboard slammed out scales, building the tension in the room, echoing the tension Aidan felt in her body. A glance at the stage showed four men holding their horns in front of identical black suits, framing a woman in red.

"What's that you say?" The tall, willow-thin, big-bosomed woman wailed the question, her red dress shimmering in the strobe lights circling the stage.

Aidan stopped in her tracks. The singer was none other than Supernova herself, making the four studs behind her the Zoot Suits. They were the stars of the Techno-Galaxy Jazz world. Marsley must be doing better than she thought to be able to pull in that kind of talent. Hopefully his recent success wouldn't make negotiations impossible.

"Put a lid on it," the men chanted, swinging their instruments in perfect unison first right, then left.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey," Supernova sang from plump, red lips. Her husky alto made the words into something so sexy, every man in the Lounge leaned towards her as one.

“Put a lid down on it and everything will be all riiiiight,” the men shouted, all four completing a box step, before raising their instruments to their lips.

The horn players cut in for a solo and the singer shimmied her way across the stage. “Every time I turn it loose—”

The momentary thrall of seeing such a big-name singer in Galaxy Grid 219 faded and Aidan turned to find Marsley watching her. Silently, she celebrated the fact that if all went as planned, this was the last time she’d ever have to see him.

“Aidan.” Marsley leaned back in his booth, the seat appearing to be a massive red throne cradling his black and white striped suit. Local rumor had it Boyd hadn’t left the club in years and Aidan believed it from looking at him. His body had grown puffy and soft, his skin an unhealthy white which almost appeared translucent. “Always nice to see your shining face.” He pointed to the tiny red chair before the table, indicating she should sit.

“It’s never nice to see you, Marsley.” She didn’t take the offered chair, preferring to look down on him, rather than stare up. “Here’s the last of your money.”

She set the bag containing the final payoff on the table, but didn’t raise her hand from it.

Marsley shook his finger at her. “Now, now, Aidan, let’s not play games.”

“Oh, I’m not playing.” She kept her eyes narrowed and angry. “Understand this warning, Marsley, and know I’m not joking with you. If you extend credit to my brother in any of your gambling halls again, you will suddenly have a large problem finding pilots to carry freight on or off this planet for you.”

Marsley snorted. “As if you can control all the independent contractors who fly in this region.”

Aidan supported her weight with one hand on the money and the other on the cold, black table to lean over him. “I’ll call in every favor that has ever been owed to me to make sure enough pilots won’t fly for you, then I’ll put out the word to let people know what I’ve done. Those pilots who don’t support me will be more than willing to charge you four times the going rate.”

When she stopped speaking, she realized the circle of partiers at her back had gone silent, leaving an odd quiet in the harsh loudness of the room. Even the music seemed distant and muted. Her awareness sharpened, but she couldn't afford to look away from Marsley, not until he believed her threat was for real.

Marsley's gaze flickered behind her and flared wide. Odd tingles of warning rushed along her spine, but she couldn't let herself be distracted.

Banging the bag holding the money onto the table, she reacquired his attention. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Marsley?"

"Yes." He wanted to fight, she could tell, but whatever was behind her had him sidetracked. Whoever had his attention had come closer and, if the bead of sweat that began to track down his cheek was any indication, he was worried about the newcomer, a lot more than he'd ever be concerned about her. Marsley waved, as if coming to a decision. "I wouldn't have extended Zach credit again anyway." He brushed a piece of lint on his jacket and pulled the fabric down. "He's proven himself to be too large of a risk. What if you suddenly wised up and stopped picking up his markers, Aidan? Then where would I be?"

Aidan straightened, ready to let loose a sharp reply, but felt heat behind her. The hairs on her arms rose. She could sense him—and it had to be a *him* or an incredibly huge female—along the whole surface of the back of her body. Whoever it was, he was taller than she, which was unusual, since she was a tall woman. She ignored the newcomer, wanting to make sure she rammed her point home. "As long as we understand each other."

Marsley waved her away. "Fine. See your way out. It's been nice doing business with you, Aidan." He looked beyond her. "What can I do for you, Warwick?"

Aidan went cold, then hot. Warwick the Enforcer worked for Reed Landrig, one of the men who ruled this corner of the universes. His presence in the Liberty Lounge explained why Marsley was uneasy. Enforcers tended to take care of people who got out of line, usually in some painful way. Aidan couldn't control the small smile she sent Marsley as she stepped to the side and turned.

Her breath caught in her throat, even though she was prepared for the view. She'd heard so many rumors about this man, she'd been ready for the mask.

Warwick was a full head taller than she and big. Too muscled, really, but she supposed it was part of his job. He wore black from head to toe, except for his right hand, which was bare. His left hand was covered with a tight leather glove that matched the mask hiding his face. Holes for his eyes, nose and mouth were cut into the leather, giving him a frightening appearance. His head was encased by a leather helm, completing the frightening view.

He watched her take it all in, then glanced at Marsley. "We'll need your table to talk." His voice held so much menace, she shivered.

Aidan's mouth fell open when she realized Warwick had come to speak with her instead of the Lounge owner.

Marsley laughed, a mixture of relief and gloating that had her grinding her teeth. "Sure thing, War old buddy." He inched around the table, his flabby gut making the process cumbersome. "It's all yours."

Aidan wanted to scream. No sooner had she paid off Zach's last debt, then her brother had done it again, only this time in one of Landrig's gambling establishments. A few transport pilots banding together to drive up prices would only serve to amuse Landrig, before he squashed them all like the bugs they were.

Her brother Zach had gambled since they were children. He had come from the womb with a compulsion so great, time after time Aidan had been forced to bail him out.

She was getting damn tired of it. Maybe this time she'd let him take the heat. Maybe she wouldn't step in and save him.

Even as she thought it, she knew it would be almost impossible to follow through. Zach was her last living relative. That allowed him more than his fair share of fuckups.

Warwick slid the massive table to one side like it weighed nothing, then sat on the edge of the booth. He pointed to the small chair located about ten leagues too close to him.



She sat as if he held her in a mind-meld, trying to wrestle with her emotions. Running wasn't an option. There was no place to hide from Landrig, not in this corner of the cosmos.

"I need a pilot." Warwick's voice wasn't harsh as it had been when he spoke to Marsley. Now it was soft, deep and calm.

She blinked, coming back from her thoughts of her brother to notice Warwick's ungloved hand lying palm-up on the edge of the table. His left hand rested on his huge thigh, also open. It was an unusual position, unnatural in the extreme and certainly odd for an Enforcer.

Her stomach twisted, and she scrubbed a hand down her face when it hit her why he was doing it. He felt sorry for her and was going out of his way to calm her down. The fact that he had to do so made her furious at herself. He needed a pilot. Her brother hadn't gotten in trouble again. *Business. It's only business, Aidan. Get yourself together, you twit.*

Dropping her hand, she met his gaze. "Where are you flying?"

"Down Neck. There and back in one day."

She raised an eyebrow at that and realized as crazy as it sounded, this might take her bank account up from zero to a nice sum with only a day or two of work. Maybe her luck had finally turned for the good. "The increased risk will cost you more."

"So I've heard," he said, and she was surprised to hear a bit of irony in his voice. His eyes were blank, the black mask leaving his face expressionless and creepy. "How much?"

"Twenty thousand balseems." She doubled her usual price, but figured flying an Enforcer increased the risk above and beyond the usual peril of traveling Down Neck. The journey encompassed flying through a deathtrap to reach a mining town located in the middle of a field of poisonous gas.

He didn't so much as twitch at the price. "Steep."

"Not many will fly the Neck." She needed this money if she had any hope of starting over.

“Not many can, you mean.” The hand on his thigh turned over and the fingers drummed for a moment.

*He’s left handed.* Then her gaze met blue-blue eyes through the mask and she realized she’d been caught staring.

“I have to leave tomorrow at sunrise.” A thread of amusement went through his words.

She tried to focus on business instead of his body. “I can be ready.” There was nothing she could do, except try not to be rude again. Apologizing would only make it worse.

“It will be a routine trip. Fly me there, wait, fly me back, for twenty thousand balseems.”

Relief washed over her. Warwick the Enforcer was about to make her life much easier. “You have a deal.” Without thinking about it, she held out her hand.

He leaned forward slowly, as if he thought she might jerk away once she knew what she’d done. It took her more willpower than it should have, but she closed the gap, grasping his bare right hand, jumping a little at the warm feel of skin on skin contact.

This close she could smell him. Spicy male, old leather and danger curled around her.

“I’ll be at your transport in the morning.” He released her.

Stumbling to her feet, shaken by the odd tumble of fear and curiosity she felt in his presence, Aidan backed a few steps away before answering. “We’ll leave when you arrive.”

\*\*\*

The next morning she’d awakened so early she’d been on her third check of her transport before he arrived. Within minutes, she’d had them in the air and on their way.

Six hours later, they’d only spoken two sentences. He’d asked her where her co-pilot was. She’d told him she didn’t have one and he’d taken the seat beside her in the cockpit without asking.

It had annoyed her, then made her nervous, then she'd adjusted. The time went by slowly and Warwick the Enforcer was a surprisingly peaceful person to fly with. There were none of those annoying questions she was used to from her passengers, no idle chatter she had to struggle through.

The first person who spoke turned out to be her. "There it is." She waved to a large, concrete structure that rose out of a group of vile clouds like an evil fluted flower.

"I've never been here before," he murmured. Then he pointed to the thick, dark mass floating before them. "Is that the tabun gas cloud?"

"Yes. The miners kick it up as they dig. The scientists say it will be hundreds of years before it settles to the ground again." She stared at the brownish, murky haze. "Spending short amounts of time in the gas won't do lasting damage to the transport, but we still have to fly down the neck of that tube to reach the mining station."

"The gas is supposed to eat away at transport structure, isn't it?"

"Over time it will, but we could make a few trips before seeing the damage." She pulled up to position the transport for the dive. "The problems they had fifty years ago were due to transports making repeated runs. Some of the ones that failed had hundreds of logged flights. They were using outdated transports several generations old. So they built this deathtrap when they didn't even have to."

For a moment, she hung suspended above the opening to twenty-nine leagues of unstable synthetic tubing. It was the only way to reach the station. If she crashed and they survived, large doors would descend, locking them inside the damaged section in a transport that would likely have leaks to the outside air from the crash damage. By the time a crew arrived to rescue them, they would have spent too much time in the presence of the gas, which meant a slow, ugly death. Too much exposure to tabun damaged the nervous system.

Flying this route always gave her a huge rush. She held life in her hands, kept death at bay through her skill alone, although if she was honest, her transport was small enough that she could fly the tube with one eye closed.

To amuse herself, she gave the transport more juice than usual, dropping with a graceful spiral thrown into the mix. Joy washed through her at the sheer beauty of flying as they passed into the tube, down, down, until she pulled into the cylinder that ran along the ground.

Warwick's hands gripped at his armrests and he hung forward in his harness, but otherwise he said nothing until they flattened out. "Don't hold back on my account, Aidan." His voice remained deep and calm.

"Sorry," she said, but couldn't stop the grin that spread across her face. Was she actually showing off? For one of the scariest men in the galaxies? Maybe.

Sadly, the excitement wore off as league after league rolled by. Finally, they were through the tube and into the massive bubble that covered the small town. Over a thousand miners lived with their equipment in this forsaken hell, rotating on the planet for six month stints of misery to leave with a pot of balseems. The money had to be good enough to make up for living here.

They landed without trouble, the transport barely rocking as she feather-touched it onto the ground.

Warwick undid his harness. "I'll be back in less than an hour."

She didn't want to pry. Well, yes she did. If she was honest, she'd admit he fascinated her and she wanted to know where he was going. Pushing down the little voice which said she was prying, she guessed the most likely place Landrig might have business. "Going to Blue Moons?"

The question earned her a brief nod before he opened the hatch and strode away.

Forty-five minutes later, she ran through her preflight check. Thirty minutes after that, she began to feel uneasy.

It was common knowledge that all establishments selling liquor in the Danthium quadrant had to pay Reed Landrig a tax or he would cut off their alcohol distribution. Warwick likely went to rein in the owner of the Blue Moons, one William T. Satterwhite, for not paying the tax.

Satterwhite was a walleyed man who had a strong dislike of bathing and a large chip on his shoulder that didn't allow anyone to tell him what to do. He was famous for not serving people if it sounded as if they might be making their drink request into an order. Aidan had long suspected he was crazier than your average crazy person.

When Warwick was thirty minutes late, Aidan stood on the transport ramp, debating the wisdom of what she'd just decided to do. She couldn't very well leave a paying customer here in the mining station. Further, returning without him would bring Landrig to her doorstep for sure.

With a sigh, she climbed inside the transport to pull a fake panel off the wall. After grabbing her illegal blaster from the compartment, she tucked it under her shirt.

Then she went to find him.

## Chapter Two

The moment the odorous old man who owned the Blue Moons had opened his mouth, Warwick knew he was in for trouble. Now he had that itchy feeling he often had right before bad went to worse.

“So let me get this straight, mask-boy,” Satterwhite crowed, drawing the notice of everyone in the bar. “You’re saying either I order my liquor through Reed Landrig, paying ten percent more for it, or you’ll break my old bones.”

War resisted the urge to grab the old man and shake him. He hated this job with a passion, but he was so close to having the money he needed to take out the man who murdered his parents and he wasn’t going to walk away now. His revenge was everything to him. He wouldn’t give it up for anything or anyone.

“Look,” he tried to sound gentle, but it wasn’t his usual mode of communication. “If you give me a hard time, Landrig will send an army next. Why try to fight that?”

“Ten percent more for your drinks,” Satterwhite screeched, nearly bursting War’s eardrums. “You boys ready to pay that?”

The crowd rumbled, the bored miners working themselves up to a fight.

Damn. This was not the trip to have a complication. He had the pretty pilot waiting for him back at the transport. In the Liberty Lounge, she’d been curious about him after that first startled moment when she realized he wanted to speak with her. It had been a long time since someone’s curiosity had felt pleasant, almost companionable, as if she wondered about what was under the mask, but didn’t fear it.

His stomach tightened when he thought again about her shaking his hand. It had been a long time since a woman had touched him without being paid to do it.

He brought his voice down a notch and infused calm into it, but knew it was a lost cause. His gut said they would fight. “Don’t do this, Satterwhite. It’s a mistake you don’t want to make. If you kill me, Landrig will kill you in a slow, ugly way.”

“Ten percent more, boys. You going to sit back and let him do it?”

“Hell no,” someone yelled from the back of the room.

War grabbed a nearby chair. The scars had toughened him up, allowing him to take a beating that would bring most men to their knees. He was the tallest, strongest man in the Blue Moons, even though it was filled with hearty miners. They wouldn’t take him down easily.

“Bring it on,” he shouted over Satterwhite’s screechy laughter.

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Aidan walked in to find the Blue Moons in shambles. The dingy bar seemed deserted, until she glanced left and saw the mass of men ringing Warwick. Satterwhite laughed uproariously from his perch on the bar. A circle of broken chairs and tables around Warwick testified to the fact he’d been fighting for some time.

She stood there debating her next move as he threw two men straight over the bar. Chills raced up her arms. He fought with a grace that surprised her. His huge, muscular arms bulged as he spun on his heel to dislodge the man on his back, taking out two others with his rider’s flying feet.

This was a man who could take care of himself. But the sheer numbers had him in trouble.

Her personal code wouldn’t allow her to leave a paying customer behind, no matter how hostile things became.

Her choices were limited. No one would hear her if she tried to yell, and at this point, threats wouldn’t work anyway.

Unable to come up with a better plan, she drew her blaster and took aim straight over Satterwhite’s shoulder at the mirror behind the bar. The old man saw her right as she squeezed the trigger. She had a moment to appreciate the end to his maniacal laughter before glass rained down onto the crowd.

For a split second, Warwick met her gaze. She could have sworn he smiled at her, although the black mask gave nothing away as he shoved his stunned attackers away from him.

Everyone had stopped in mid-motion. Well, she had their attention. She aimed at the old man still sitting stunned on the bar. “The next one goes right between Satterwhite’s eyes if any one of you moves.”

War crossed the room and took the blaster from her shaking hands. The knuckles on his ungloved hand were torn. It saddened her for all of a second before War grabbed her arm and forced her into a run, his powerful grip lifting her off her feet so she had to leap to keep up with him. He hadn’t said a word to her. As she stumbled behind him, she admired his lack of fanfare. He did what needed to be done.

“How fast can you have us in the air? We’re going to be in trouble for the blaster.”

That snapped her out of her thoughts. “Preflight is done.” They dashed up the hill to the transport, his hand supporting her so she didn’t fall.

Cresting the hill, she smashed her hand onto the ID panel, releasing the ramp. “We can be in the air as soon as you’re buckled in.”

She jumped into her seat, pulling the harness over her head with one hand, while she threw the power switch with the other. She’d fired an illegal weapon in public. That may have been a large mistake. One she couldn’t afford to think of now.

War retracted the ramp and clipped himself into the co-pilot’s seat.

“Ready?” she asked, loving the steady sound of her voice. When she was flying, not much shook her.

“Get us out of this poison hole.”

They were airborne in moments.

Twenty-nine leagues later, they rocketed out of the opening into free space. She turned with a grin to share her relief. That’s when she saw the knife sticking out of his thigh.



War rummaged through his bag and pulled out a medi-case. Without saying a word, he handed her a bandage, then ripped his pant leg to have easier access to the wound. Casually, he pulled out the knife and met her gaze. "I owe you a debt for this."

She almost forgot she was supposed to place the bandage. Scrambling to stop the bleeding, she pressed it to his right thigh, the awkward angle forcing her to lean across him from her chair.

Pulling back, she met his blue-blue gaze, made more intense by the black mask. "You don't owe me anything."

"Oh, yes. I do." His gloved hand cupped her chin. "Most people would have left me there and flown off, but you had my back. Whenever you need me, I'll be there in return."

The words seemed to snap a bond between them. Fear shivered up her spine, and she had to resist the urge to press her hand to the wound on his leg to try to stop the bleeding.

It took every confused brain cell she had to fly them the six long hours back and land without incident. She found herself babbling about the upgrades she'd made to her craft, but try as hard as she might, she couldn't stop talking.

At the transport ramp when he was leaving she shook his hand, barely noticing that she had no fear left of him. "Take care of yourself, War."

His eyes studied her from the mask. "You too, Aidan."

Then he turned to limp across the transport area.

She didn't want a debt from Warwick the Enforcer.

In fact, there was something about him. Something more than just dangerous. *Something best left alone.*

Aidan needed to get her priorities straight. Her brother's latest gambling debt had left her completely broke, although she'd earned enough to keep herself eating. She would have to fly almost nonstop for months to build back up her reserves if she wanted to upgrade her transport shielding next year.

Resting her head against the frame of the ship, she stared at where Warwick had disappeared, almost imagining that she could feel him watching her in return. He made her feel off-center. She shook her head. She was curious about him, nothing more.

Sighing out the sudden melancholy that overtook her, she turned and went to run post-flight on the ship.

War stood in the shadows, sure that his black clothing and mask made him invisible, although he'd worried when Aidan stared straight at him a moment ago.

She had an angel's face, heart-shaped and pretty without being artful. And while he'd love to spill all that long, honeyed brown hair from the tight twist she wore it in, he really thought her best assets were her sharp mind and her courage. Most would have left him to rot in Satterwhite's, but she'd come in, gun blazing. He owed her for that.

She wasn't going to call in his favor. Somehow he was sure of it. There had been an expression on her face, a closing down of her emotions. The trust they'd built between them, which had her saving his hide from being beaten to death, had vanished. And it was trust, or maybe companionship, possibly friendship. He'd recognized it even though he'd never experienced it with another person before.

The fact she didn't jump at his offer made her even more interesting to him.

How many men had tried to have him owe them a debt so they could send him in to deal with their enemies?

So many he couldn't count them.

Yet the lady wouldn't use him.

The thought melted a small bit of the ice around his heart.

Right before he'd left, she'd called him "War" instead of his full name or "Enforcer" as most did. "As if we're friends," he whispered. As if she saw him as a person and not as the mask.

It was time to research Aidan and find out everything about her before he approached her again. He had an estimated six months before he went after his enemy.

He would spend that time watching his pilot, and if the circumstances lined up, he would have her fly for him again.

## Chapter Three

Only four months after she'd bailed him out the last time and her brother had done it again.

Zach had promised to stop, but each time he broke his word.

Why did she always believe him? *Because, Aidan, you're a fool.*

"I'll pay what he owes." Her voice was calm, even though she wanted to rage at her brother and tell Balten to burn in the fires of hell. She wanted to scream *I'm done. I don't care if you kill him this time. I'm sick of being used.* Instead she added, "And the interest."

"Oh, you'll pay, all right," Balten said with satisfaction.

Why did her brother have to get mixed up with one of the scariest men in Galaxy Grid 219? Probably because no one else would let him gamble in their establishments anymore. She'd made sure of that when she'd shut down Boyd Marsley four lunar rotations ago. Instead of stopping the addiction, she'd pushed her brother into an even worse situation. Because he had to have his fix, had to have the high of gambling.

Balten, well, Boyd Marsley was somewhat of a badass, but Balten was in another league altogether. The king of the corrupt.

To look at him, you wouldn't think so. He had gray-dusted hair and a thin, rangy body. His skin had the sallow appearance of someone who spent all his time indoors. And yet he was attractive in a way that only powerful men were—commanding and confident. At least to some women.

Not to her.

Aidan pinched the bridge of her nose to try to relieve some of the pressure. Balten was toying with her, she could tell. "Let's not play games. Just spill all of it."

Balten threw back his head with a laugh. Big, amused guffaws.

Aidan met her brother's gaze where he sat bound to a chair against the far wall. His eyes begged her to forgive him. Balten's continuing laughter made that impossible. She would have to pay a pound of flesh to get Zach free. Pressing her lips together, she glanced away and shook her head. Boyd was right. Someday she'd wise up and stop covering her brother's markers, but sadly the day was not today.

Her brother had gambled since they were children. She'd seen him in the thrall of the game, his face lit up, so manically happy, it hurt her to look at him. They'd had a tough time growing up, living in a home that most children would have run away from. But while their childhood had tainted Zach, it had forged her into the hardest of metal, making her twice as determined to claw her way out and into a pilot's seat. She'd made it too. It might not be the best in the universes, but she owned her own transport and had earned a reputation of being one of the best. Her only soft spot was what little family she had left.

"This is it, Zach," she said, speaking over Balten's amusement. "Last chance, brother of mine."

"I know that." Zach's Adam's apple bobbed up and down in his throat and tears filled his eyes. "I won't do it again. I promise."

Aidan knew he was sorry, knew he meant it when he said he'd stop, even as she knew he couldn't. She just didn't care anymore. It hurt too much to care.

"That's what I love about you, Aidan. You're so direct." All amusement fled Balten's voice. "So I'll cut to the chase." He sat forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the desk between them. "You can earn your brother's freedom one of two ways."

Chills ran over Aidan's skin. She wasn't going to like either choice.

"You can become my mistress. Or retrieve something that was stolen from me."

Aidan noticed that Balten's face was the same shade of gray as the rock walls behind him. The castle he'd bought on the planet Trilby was as stark and harsh as its master. The thought of staying in this place with this man above her in bed made bile rise in her throat, and she coughed to cover her retch. She had always been overly picky about bed

partners. Even if he was somewhat handsome, Balten didn't smell right to her. Weird, but true. He smelled like decay.

When she was sure she could face him without showing any of her emotions, she met his gaze. "Why can't I pay the debt straight out?"

He smiled. "Because your brother has owed me this money for over fourteen lunar rotations now. It's too late for mere repayment."

She did the math. Her brother had run up the debts before he'd even gone to Boyd's gambling halls. It hadn't been because she'd closed off the other places to gamble at all. Rage raced through her veins, making her close her eyes against it.

"I'm sorry," Zach wailed, tossing his shoulders against his restraints as if he longed to run to her.

When she'd walked in and seen him tied to a chair, she'd known her brother had embroiled her in something well beyond her abilities. Why couldn't she face the fact the evil had eaten him alive, taken him over, used him up until there wasn't any Zach left? He needed the high gambling gave him more than he loved her. He would use her every time because he couldn't help himself. And even knowing this, she would sell her soul to save him.

Balten shook his head. "I struggle to understand how you two can be related. He is so weak."

Aidan silently agreed with him. The combination of extreme optimism and beginner's luck had been his undoing. Early wins had led to nothing but losses and the gambling had turned him into a hollow shell.

If she were truthful, her brother hadn't always been weak. He'd saved her life once when they were children and almost died in the process. But she was too pissed to think about his good points now.

"What was stolen from you?" She wasn't going to be Balten's mistress if she could help it. Not that she was a prude, but Gods, having sex with Balten would be a violation each and every time. Stealing was the lesser of the two evils.

He raised an eyebrow. "Scared to be my mistress, Aidan?"

“Let’s just say I’m not very good at being submissive in bed and I don’t think you’d let me dominate.”

Balten’s nostrils flared wide and something ugly passed across his face. Something evil and wrong that thrived off pain.

She shivered. Her guess had been correct. Balten liked his women bloody and beaten. *Gods.*

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” He settled in his seat as if he’d expected her to refuse. Perhaps the invitation for sex had been nothing more than insuring she stole what he wanted. “I need a bauble recovered. It’s nothing, really. A fascination.” He waved a hand. “Reed Landrig stole a globe from me. It’s a round ball as big as my fist with colored water inside.” His hand went from a graceful glide to crash onto the desk. “I want it returned in thirty days or your brother will die a slow and painful death.”

She believed him.

Reed Landrig. Shit. If there were a badass award for this universe, Reed and Balten would be competing for the prize. Caught between these two men, she’d be crushed like a bug. But even as the fear welled up inside her, she knew she was going to save her brother at all costs.

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*Twenty-eight days left*, Aidan thought, standing outside Warwick’s door. She didn’t want to do this, but she’d exhausted her mind trying to come up with a plan that didn’t involve him. A headache screeching in her frontal lobe begged her to go back to her transport and lie down.

Warwick lived on Sector 9, an ice planet with two things—a prison and a trading station. Reed Landrig had taken over the station as his own unofficial fiefdom. Since Warwick did quite a bit of contract work for Reed, he’d moved here.

Warwick owed her a favor and even if fear drove her to her knees and made her throw her guts up, she would have to call it in. For a moment, she pictured the knife

sticking out of his leg and shivered. He hadn't seemed to even notice. Her gut had told her to never call in this debt, to get as far from him as she could before it was too late.

Taking a deep breath before his door, she admitted to herself that she wasn't scared of him exactly. Well she was, everyone was, but there was more to it than just the usual fear. When War entered a room, every piece of her body focused on him and her fingers trembled, although she worked hard to hide it. As an Enforcer, he had to inspire fear or he wouldn't be able to do his job. But she knew her response was more than others felt.

Warwick left her confused and off balance and she'd promised herself she wouldn't have any more contact with him. Which was all well and good, except here she stood outside his door.

Part of her hoped he wasn't home.

She knocked.

The door swung wide on the first fist-fall, and she pitched forward into the room, not anticipating that the portal would be opened at all, let alone this quickly.

In one motion, someone caught her, lifted her into the house and shut the door with a bang.

Aidan stumbled, then steadied herself against the hallway wall.

Turning, she used the moment to catch her breath and study the man who watched her.

Warwick stood like a wall of towering muscle. As he had when he'd hired her, he wore his customary black from head to toe, except for his right hand, which was bare. The strong, calloused fingers drew her attention. She had no idea why she had the urge to touch him, but she did. Forcing her attention elsewhere, she noticed he wasn't wearing his usual helmet, and she saw his dark brown hair for the first time, trimmed close to his head.

The mask both frightened her and aroused her curiosity at the same time. She'd often wondered over the last few months what it hid and how he'd come to wear it.

She took a deep breath to steel herself and inhaled his scent. Old leather and danger curled around her.



“Well, well, Aidan.” His voice shivered up her spine as it had before when no one else was around. It carried an intimate quality that replaced the harsh gruffness she heard when he spoke to others. “In the neighborhood and thought you’d stop by?”

She straightened, shoring up her skittering nerves. “I’ve...” She cleared her throat and started again. “I’ve come to call in that favor you owe me.”

He tilted his head. “Interesting.” He waved with his gloved hand towards the room at the end of the hall. “Let’s sit down. I have a feeling we’ll need to talk a bit.”

Aidan forced one foot in front of the other, while the skin on her back shivered as he shadowed her down the hall.

The room was surprisingly small. The furniture old but comfortable. Thick rugs covered the stone floor. At first she didn’t realize the whole room was rock, but then she caught a glimpse of gray quartz through the thick drapes on the walls. A large, high table took up over half the space. Unable to help herself, she moved to it. She should be thinking about her brother, but curiosity overwhelmed her good sense. She wanted to know how Warwick lived.

Aidan’s mouth dropped open at the sight of what one of the scariest Enforcers in this universe had been doing.

He’d been playing a game of Kings and Leaders, his pieces laid across a collapsible board as big as she was tall and as wide as she would be if she held her hands out from her sides. Someone had painted landmasses and water across the grid. It was a game of intense strategy. When she gave it some thought, she realized Warwick had to be intelligent or he wouldn’t have survived so long in his occupation.

“You came for a reason, Aidan?” War prompted from close behind her.

She circled the table to put some space between them, dropped her bag and shrugged out of her heavy coat, tossing it over a chair. “I need to call in that favor.”

Warwick rested his left hand on the board. “So you said.”

Taking a deep breath, she ignored the scent of him. “Are you going to Landrig’s One Day celebration?” The event, meant to honor the One Day Rebellion which brought the Inter-world Council to power, would last at least a week, if not more. She would only

need a few precious, well-timed moments to complete her task, but first she had to get inside Reed's stronghold.

His fingers jumped, but otherwise she couldn't see any reaction from him.

"I've been invited."

"I want to go with you." She tried to make her voice as empty as his.

"Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes." His answer came out on a growl.

Aidan had debated what she would tell him and had decided to keep all the details secret. After all, he often worked for Reed and she doubted he'd help her steal from his employer. Now she could see from the way he stood that she had to tell him something.

"I've been hired to recover something from one of the guests."

"What?" The single word was harsh and clipped.

"I'm not quite sure." She picked up one of the board pieces and ran a finger over the carving of a king. "I know what I was told it is."

"And?"

She'd be as truthful as she could. "It's supposedly only a toy, a child's amusement." She shrugged.

"But you don't believe that?"

"No."

Warwick placed his other hand on the table, bringing him closer to her. "Someone's got a hold on you, don't they?"

Aidan wondered why she hadn't thought of him as intelligent before. She'd been too caught up in his outside packaging. "Yes."

"Who?"

"I won't tell you." She wasn't stupid. Even she'd heard that War wouldn't work for Balten. She didn't know why they didn't get along, but she wasn't going to reveal that she was under Balten's thumb. Warwick wouldn't help her if he knew.

“Come on, Aidan. You know as well as I do that anytime you pay a blackmailer, they’ll just keep coming back for more.”

“In this case, I have no choice.” She watched him with interest. She’d never seen him agitated before, yet here he was, dragging his right hand through his hair.

“If you aren’t going to tell me who, you need to at least tell me why.”

That was fair, she supposed. “My brother’s run up gambling debts,” she began.

He cut her off. “Then pay them. You have the money.”

Aidan’s internal alarm system let out a trill. How in the hell could he be so sure? She did have enough, but his tone of voice told her he knew it for a fact. How would Warwick know how much money she had?

*Damn*, War thought, she caught that he knew her financial situation. Her tall, willow-thin body had gone completely still and her eyes narrowed into slits. He could almost hear her thinking it through.

“How do you know I have the money?” The soft purr of her voice twisted his insides with desire. He’d wanted her from that first time she’d flown for him.

“I know how much I paid you and I know you work almost constantly. It doesn’t take a genius to assume you’ve got enough balseems to pay a gambling debt.” What he didn’t tell her was he had made it his hobby to track her movements over the last four months.

She rolled the playing piece between her hands. “True,” she conceded, then sighed. “But he won’t take that kind of payment. Zach defaulted.”

“You didn’t know about it in time to pay?”

“No.” Her fingers tightened on the dark king, a piece he’d carved with his own hands. “Out of the options left to me, I chose the lesser of the two evils.”

“Steal or what?” He could guess what was coming. He wasn’t naïve enough to think he was the only person to desire her.

“I’ll leave it to your imagination.” There might be sarcasm in her tone, but a frown marred her face. She didn’t like the position she was in one bit. It didn’t surprise him.

The mission they'd flown together had shown her to be a fantastic pilot and a bit of a control freak.

Warwick dropped his hands to his hips and blew out a breath. He'd dangled the favor before her, hoping she would call on him when she needed help and he would be able to spend time in her presence again. Pathetic, really, to have a crush on her. But he did. Thirty years old and he had the desires of a boy half his age. Just being in the same room with her made chill bumps rise along his arms.

He didn't kid himself, no one as pretty as Aidan would be attracted to him. There was a reason he wore a mask. People wouldn't spend time in his presence without it. The realization brought him crashing back to reality.

"There is only one way I can get you into Reed's Palace without raising red flags. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded. "I'd need to come in as your woman."

"Yes." There was no way she'd go for it. Not in a million years.

"I figured that would be the case."

War slashed the air with his unscarred hand. "Do you know what that means?" He shook his head. She didn't, so he'd spell it out for her. "You would have to act as if we were truly lovers, Aidan. You couldn't pull away when I touch you or jump when I speak."

Her mouth fell open. "I don't jump."

"Everyone does." But she hadn't towards the end of their last adventure. He figured she would flinch when he caressed her. He had no doubt that intimacy would change everything.

Her mouth snapped shut and her green cat eyes turned stormy. "Because you're scary. You mean to be. What do you expect?"

"Lovers don't act that way, and you would come in as mine." He growled in frustration. "Hell, we'll be assigned the same room, the same damn bed."

"Look, I have twenty-eight days to return the globe or my brother is dead. I think I can control my reactions to you."

Dread snaked along his spine. If he stayed the whole week in the same room with her, she would eventually have to see the scars. They would be living on top of each other. Better to stop it now than have their cover blown in the middle of Reed's celebration.

But Gods he didn't want to do it. One look at his face and she'd never get near him again. It would be over and he wouldn't even be able to lie to himself that there might some day be a chance. He didn't have much choice.

"There's one way to find out," he said. "Come sit on the sofa."

## Chapter Four

War thought she might refuse, but instead she nodded and slid around the table to sit on the far cushion. Grinding his teeth, he dropped beside her. The last woman to see him without the mask had screamed and kept screaming until he'd left. It would kill him to have her react the same way after he'd spent the past few lunar rotations fantasizing about her.

"Aidan, think about this long and hard before we go forward." He gave her one last chance to back out.

"I've wracked my brain, Warwick, and I cannot come up with any other way to steal the globe within the time I've been given. Going to the One Day celebration is the only option."

He tried to stop this madness another way. "How do you know this person won't leave the globe at home?"

"If you'd stolen something small, would you leave it behind or would you bring it with you to make sure it doesn't disappear? I don't know what's in the globe, but it must be something valuable. Going to Reed's is my only chance of making the deadline."

She had a point. Most likely what she needed would be there, although if it was that small, whoever had it would keep it on their person.

"If you come with me, we'd be sharing a room. Do you know exactly what that means?"

She gazed at him with raised eyebrows.

"I don't sleep in this mask, Aidan."

Her mouth formed a small "O" before she controlled it. "It makes sense you wouldn't."

"You would have to touch me as if you're my woman after seeing what's under the mask."

Warwick pushed all feelings to the far reaches of his mind, locking them away in the place he'd built long ago when Balten killed his parents and tossed acid on them to eat away the bodies and destroy the evidence. He'd been hiding nearby and even though he'd turned away and covered his eyes with his left arm, part of his face had been splashed. His movement had created a strange pattern on his flesh. The area protected by his arm was perfect skin from the bottom of his lip up, but his cheek, chin and the lower part of his left ear had gotten sprayed, along with the left side of his body. After several long minutes of shock, during which he watched his parents' bodies dissolve away, he'd had the presence of mind to rip off his clothes and run to the shower, where he'd stayed until his father's best friend found him. Grant had taken him in that night and told War he'd saved his own life by stopping the acid from eating his skin any more than it already had.

But the damage had been done.

And now he was going to show the devastation to a woman he'd had wild thoughts about for months. She'd been the only bright spot in his otherwise dark existence.

"I'm not going to lie and tell you I won't struggle with whatever you've got going on under the mask, Warwick." She turned to him on the sofa, tucking one leg under her body. "But whatever is there will probably not be worse than sleeping with the man my brother's indebted to."

He laughed, a harsh grunt of sound even to his own ears. "Whoever he is, he must be the lowest of the low if you'd choose this over him."

An understatement, but Aidan didn't tell him so. "Let's get this show on the road. All this buildup is making me nervous." She was shaking in her boots, to be completely honest. How many times had she wondered what he looked like under the mask? A million.

Warwick nodded and started with his glove. The leather was skin-tight and so formfitting he had to drag it off one finger at a time. He paused before removing it all the way and met her gaze. His light blue eyes were slits of color in the stark cutouts of the mask.

In a streak of understanding, Aidan realized how reluctant he was to show her. He was undressing his soul. She vowed to herself that she would treat him with the respect he deserved.

Then he whisked the glove away. For a moment, their gazes stayed locked. Aidan swore that no matter how misshapen his hand was, she would touch it and accept him. She imagined the worst thing she could, and, taking a deep breath, looked down at his hand.

It rested on his knee. He'd sat so his left side was closest to her.

The hand was scarred in pockmarked patches but there really wasn't anything so bad he had to hide it with a glove. She ran one finger along the back before gathering it up to turn it over and see his palm.

The inside of his hand was eaten away into a spidery mass of white scars.

She swallowed.

"It wasn't even hit with the acid," he informed her, his voice devoid of any emotion. "I tried to wipe away what splashed on me and it burned my palm."

"Your left hand is dominant," she said absently. She'd thought it before, since he tended to do things with the gloved hand and it drew her notice.

"Yes."

She cradled his hand and ached for him. It must have hurt so much. Acid. On his face too. He had a web of scars on his face. Gods.

Her heart was breaking for him. She moved closer and pulled his arm so it rested across her knees, tracing the scars along his palm.

"Have you seen enough or do you still want to come to Landrig's with me?"

She forced herself to wipe any pity from her face and met his gaze. "I'm still going with you."

He snatched his hand away and grasped the bottom of his mask. "Are you sure, Aidan?" Something in his body language frightened her. Power swirled in the air between them and his voice intimidated.



When she opened her mouth to tell him she wasn't sure at all, it occurred to her he did this on purpose. She raised her chin a notch and said, "Yes, I'm sure, Warwick," with as much attitude as she could.

Instead of rolling the mask away, his hands rotated and she heard fasteners coming free. All at once, the leather dropped into his lap, leaving her staring into ice-blue eyes. She refused to look anywhere else for several long moments while she fought for her composure.

Then she let her gaze roam an inch at a time. Flawless eyes, with thick, black lashes, a long, straight nose, full red lips.

She inhaled in surprise. He wasn't hurt at all.

Then she saw the damage. It was all on his left side, his earlobe gone, his chin and left cheek scarred and pitted. Bad yes, but he didn't have those terrible white spider-web scars as he had on his palm. Relief flooded through her body.

Clutching her hands over her heart, Aidan closed her eyes and leaned back into the sofa. "Thank the Gods!"

"What?" Warwick's tone was incredulous.

"I thought you were going to be hideous." She fanned herself with her hands, opening her eyes to meet his gaze and take another gander at his face. "But you barely have anything wrong." Not like the monster she'd envisioned at all.

Warwick sat openmouthed.

She picked up his hand and showed him his own palm. "I thought your face would be like this."

He blinked long, black lashes and stared in confusion at his hand. His eyes flicked to her. "People have screamed when they've seen my face." His throat seemed to constrict on the words, which came out in a gruff question.

Her heart tumbled over. How terrible to have someone reject you for something you couldn't control. But she wasn't dumb enough to let the pity show on her face. He was still dangerous, even in this vulnerable state—maybe more so because of it. "Well, I think

that's a little over the top, don't you? I mean your chin's banged up a bit, but it's still strong and you have nice eyes."

"I have what?" His hand closed over her fingers in a painful squeeze.

Dangerous.

She dug the thumb of her free hand between two of his ribs.

He dropped her fingers, fast. "Ouch!"

Ignoring the fact she'd felt more scars under his clothes, she nodded. "Eyes. You know, those things you see with."

"I know what eyes are," he snapped.

She tipped her head, considering his face as a whole. "Actually, you're quite good-looking in a beat-up sort of way."

His eyes rounded in a little boy look of astonishment, totally at odds with his big, scary presence, and he made a choking noise.

They sat staring at each other while she watched him try to control his facial expressions. After a couple of moments, he buried his face in his hands.

"I don't understand," he said.

She opened her mouth to reassure him, but let out a yip when he grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap. Struggling to breathe in his tight grasp, Aidan tried to relax. He was overcome with emotion and her heart went out to him. How horrible to view yourself as a monster every day of your life. After awhile, she rested her head in the crook of his neck. She was leaning against his perfect right side. Warwick relaxed his cheek against the top of her head and went still. She wondered what secret place he'd gone off to.

Curiosity stole over her and the desire to explore the burned side of his neck niggled at her mind. She'd always been a touch kind of person, someone who had to stroke and feel her environment. Not people, though. She wasn't big on touching others, but in this case, she couldn't seem to control herself. She raised her hand in increments, worried she might offend him and yet she couldn't seem to stop herself.

Tension built in his shoulder under her cheek when she placed her fingers inside the neck of his black shirt. She immediately froze.

What must he be feeling?

Her whole life, she'd resisted contact with others. Zach called her Ice Princess, for her standoffish ways. An Ice Princess trapped in ice, he'd said. His words hurt, but the fact was she just didn't like to have people touch her or get close. People who got close tended to make her feel out of control. Her parents had died and Zach was a constant source of worry and frustration.

But it was one thing to shun close relationships, another if no one offered them to you in the first place.

In two days, Reed Landrig's One Day celebration would begin, and she would be locked to Warwick day after day. Would she be able to give him those casual touches and lust-filled smiles that lovers exchanged?

There was only one way to find out. She needed to touch more than his neck, but for some reason, his face seemed too intimate.

Straightening, she met his gaze and caught the top button of his shirt.

Confusion flashed across his face and he gave a small shake of his head.

"I need to see if I can act this part I must play." Her fingers twisted the second button free, then the third and fourth.

Warwick stopped her hand. "It's bad, Aidan. Like my palm."

She shook her fingers to dislodge his hold, undid the last few buttons and pulled the black shirt free from his pants. *Whatever is here, Aidan, you cannot let him see anything in your eyes that would hurt him.* Fixing a blank look onto her face, she parted his shirt and gazed at his chest.

He dropped his hands from her, the action saying he didn't care if she saw it all. He'd warned her, she hadn't listened.

One side perfect, muscled and smooth. The other ran with damage from the acid. It had eaten away the top layer of his skin and left an uneven series of scar tissue. He must have twisted away when it came at him, the damage primarily along the side of his body. She ran her fingers across the skin, mapping the ridges and indentations.

How much pain had he endured? He must have been in agony while it healed.

Her breath caught and she did the only thing she could. She smoothed the shirt off his shoulder and leaned down to place a kiss on the ruined skin.

War growled, the sound low in his chest, as if she'd hurt him, but she hadn't.

Ignoring the warning, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and hugged him.

She wanted to say she was sorry, apologize for whoever did this, but she knew he wouldn't want her pity. He sat like a stone beneath her, the only emotion showing was the muscle working in his jaw.

Closing her eyes so she couldn't see his face, she took in his scent—leather, spice and man. Gods, from the moment he'd leaned over to stare at the instrument panel back in her transport, she'd smelled him and her stomach flip-flopped. She'd thought at the time it was because he'd made her nervous. She didn't think so anymore.

Chemicals, her brother called it. "Aidan, one of these days you'll meet someone and your chemicals will react to his and you won't be able to help yourself." He'd said that after she yelled at him for sleeping with another man's wife.

The thought that this was just some uncontrollable, animalistic urge made her angry. She'd spent her life in control—she wasn't going to lose it now.

She could do this and she would do this. Spend the week with Warwick, steal the globe, cash it in for Zach and finally say the word she should have said to her brother a long time ago. Goodbye.

## Chapter Five

Warwick sat with his dream woman on his lap, furious.

What game was she playing with him?

His fingers dug into the sofa cushions. Inside he fought two warring desires. He wanted to throw her off his lap, button his shirt and put on the mask. Even more, he wanted to pin her below him and kiss her as he had a thousand times in his dreams.

*Kiss her and make her run*, his mind whispered. *End it here before you open yourself up and she stomps on your heart. She doesn't think of you as a man. She thinks of you as a cripple. She pities you.* She tried to hide it, but he could see through her act. Pity was so much worse than a scream of horror.

The thought made him crazy.

Grabbing her hands from where they rested on his chest, he flung her off his lap onto the couch. Then he followed her down.

“What are you doing?” she asked, frowning up at him, but still passive.

He knew she would fight him if provoked. She'd kicked ass at Satterwhite's. Not a man in the room had doubted her promise that the crazy bar owner was a dead man if anyone moved. He could picture her standing in the doorway, her blaster smoking, shards of mirror scattering across the floor.

She wasn't struggling now.

That would change.

He seized the silver clip that held her mounds of hair at her nape and tugged.

“Wait.” She caught his wrist. “There's a catch.”

He dropped his hold on the clip and she released his arm. He watched her closely for any signs she was going to throw a punch.

All she did was unlatch the silver barrette. Brown hair with streaks of blonde cascaded from her hands onto the cushion below her head. She lay back onto it and arched an eyebrow.

He captured a fistful of the long, silken strands and let them filter through his scarred hand. He still had sensation in his fingers, although nowhere near the extent he had with the other. But he rarely took off his glove, and never with another person so close. To touch her like this was a gift of sorts.

Losing himself, he played in her hair, running his fingers along the straight strands, which ended at her waist. What would she look like with it hanging down her bare back?

The image made his erection, which had sprung up the moment she touched her lips to his shoulder, heavy with renewed need.

He ignored it as he had other times before.

Letting the last of her hair slip through his fingers, he met her gaze. Green eyes and a heart-shaped face made her pretty but not beautiful. He knew Reed Landrig's latest conquest was beautiful. He'd seen her the last time he'd been at the palace Reed had built to show off his obscene wealth.

Aidan had so much more than just a nice outside package. She could fly a transport through the eye of a needle and keep her mind functioning in the face of twenty miners who would kill her if they could. But the fact that she planned to sacrifice a part of herself to buy her brother out of the mess he'd landed in made her even more attractive.

His own family was dead. He lived his life to avenge them. Once he had enough money, he was going to beat Balten at his own game. He planned to spend every balseem he had to make his enemy spend every one of his. He'd played every scenario out in his mind, prepared a response for every possible move Balten could make.

Shifting across her so he rested on his left side against the back of the sofa, he met Aidan's gaze and put his more flexible right fingers on the zipper of her flight suit. Her eyes rounded and she blinked, but said nothing as he lowered the zipper to her waist. Resisting the urge to shift again so he could pass his ruined hand along her perfect skin,

he dragged his gaze from hers and stared in surprise at her bare stomach and black lace bra.

“You, ah, aren’t wearing anything beneath your suit,” he pointed out.

“I just came from Sector 12 where it was hot enough to boil water without a fire.”

“You could have frozen here.”

“I have my coat and I jogged from the station to keep warm.”

He shook his head. They would need to get her proper gear if she stayed. Sector 9 was either cold or colder than hell. The temperature rarely rose above freezing.

For a moment, he was transfixed by the fact that his dream woman was below him on his sofa. How had this happened? He would think about it later.

*Act quickly, or you’ll lose her.*

Forcing himself to move, he kissed her stomach. The muscles there jumped. He looked up the line of her body.

“I...I feel very strange.” Her brows lowered as if she pondered something very important, confusion filling her eyes. Then she fisted both hands in his hair and dragged him up.

He thought she was finally going to pull away, but she didn’t. She brought him closer.

When her lips landed on his, he figured out what she wanted.

It had been a long, long time since he’d kissed someone worth kissing. Her lips were soft under his. His hands framed her face, careful not to hurt her delicate white skin. Even though he hadn’t taken off the glove in the sunlight for ages, the skin of his left hand was still several shades darker than hers.

She parted her lips and ran her tongue along his, her hands anchoring him to her.

The kiss went on until she pulled back, gasping for air and staring at him like she didn’t know what had just happened. He knew the feeling, sweeping his tongue along his lips to savor her again.

Like a flag in hurricane winds, his control snapped free from its mooring. A taste of her only made him want more.

“What’s happening to us, Warwick?”

“I’m not sure.” His voice came out as a hoarse croak.

“Chemicals.”

He heard her whisper but didn’t comment, dipping his head to run his tongue along the skin between her breasts. Her scent enveloped him, like fresh, crisp air after a thunderstorm, mixed with crushed green leaves. He had always wanted to taste her and now he could. In fact, he planned to go as far as she’d let him and enjoy every moment of it.

Salt and woman exploded in his mouth. If she’d been on Sector 12 today, then she would have been sweating out salt from the moment she stepped onto the planet until the moment she stepped off.

His pitiful excuse for an ear brushed the fabric of her bra. He studied the sliver of lace that covered her small, firm breasts. The clasp lay in the middle and he was glad he hadn’t shifted to touch her with his ruined hand. His left fingers couldn’t bend to do that kind of precise work.

But his right ones twisted the clasp, which snapped open on the first try. He smiled at the victory.

“Happy with yourself?” she asked, raising a brow.

He nodded gravely. “Very.”

“What exactly are we doing, Warwick?”

“What exactly do you want to be doing?” His hand shook as he pushed aside the lace to cup her breast.

She hissed in a breath and closed her eyes. When they opened, they were heavy and unfocused. “I feel out of control and mixed up right now.”

“For the next seven days, you’re mine.” He hadn’t planned to say the words, but they came out with authority. “We’ll steal your globe and then you can fly off the planet and save your brother.” He brushed his thumb across her nipple, enjoying the way it pebbled beneath his touch.



She shook her head, as if to clear it. “Wait, I’m turning in my favor. I’m not trading sex for your help.”

He leaned down to take one of the dusky-colored buds in his mouth and suckled, his cock becoming so hard, he shifted to make himself more comfortable.

Aidan’s hands ran through his hair, tugging pleasantly on his scalp.

He pulled back and met her gaze. “They’ll know if we’re not truly lovers, Aidan. They’ll know and they’ll watch us.”

Taking one of her hands in his, he kissed her knuckles, for the first time in his adult life confident that a woman might want him despite who he was. It didn’t seem possible, but the little gasp she made when he ran his tongue in between two fingers told him she wasn’t faking it. It would be impossible for her to cover the repulsion his body inspired. Maybe she was right. Maybe this was just a chemical reaction between them. It didn’t matter. He would have her.

“During the first few days, they’re going to study our every move as it is. We won’t be able to steal anything.” He swirled his tongue around the sensitive pad of her index finger. His heart pounded at the catch in her breathing.

“But—” She swallowed and stared at his mouth on her hand. “War, I need to get the globe and free my brother as fast as I can.”

He liked the sound of his name said with an edge of desire. “Showing up with me will make you the curiosity of the event, Aidan. You know that, don’t you?” He bit lightly on the end of her finger.

She shifted under him, squirming as if she had no choice but to move. “I guess.”

“No guessing. If people there didn’t think I’d kill them, they would make fun of me to my face.” He could hear his voice turning hard and softened it. This wasn’t the time to distract her. “The fact that you arrive as my woman will make you a phenomenon.” When she shivered, he realized her skin had grown sensitive enough to feel the puff of his breath.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she murmured, staring at his mouth.

He pressed a kiss to her palm and licked along her lifeline. "Think about it. If you want to make this work, you'll need my cooperation." He rolled his legs in between hers to press his erection against her. He was done playing games. Warwick hoped she wanted him as much as he thought she did, because he wasn't letting her off the sofa. One way or another, she would be his.

Suddenly, she shook her hand free.

Or tried to. He wouldn't let her go. Something wild rose from deep within him. Something he hadn't even known was there. He wasn't going to let her up from under him, he couldn't.

"Warwick." Her gaze filled with confusion. "I need to think."

"Think with your hand in mine, then."

She moved under him and gasped when she ground her clitoris onto the hard length of his shaft. "You need to let me up. I can't concentrate like this." Her tone held a thread of panic.

War tried to calm himself. He didn't want to scare her. But his hips shifted forward to press his cock onto her clitoris again.

"War." She squeezed her eyes shut and pushed up against his chest with the hand he wasn't holding. "Please."

"Please." He bent his head to sweep his tongue across her nipple. "I would do anything to hear you say please, if it meant you were begging me to love you." Pulling the bud into his mouth, he couldn't hold back the hum of pleasure that escaped. *Mine, mine, mine. She's mine, dammit. I'll kill anyone who gets close to her.*

Warwick growled in frustration and tried to get a hold of himself. What in the hell was his problem? The thoughts shooting through his brain were insane.

Sitting back on his knees, he gazed down at her. *Perfect. Beautiful. Mine. STOP!*

He tossed his shirt over his shoulder and she rewarded him with a soft moan.

"You've got muscles on top of muscles." She smoothed her hand down his skin, and he dropped into a pushup above her to let her reach anything she wanted.

That this woman saw his body and not the scars was a mystery to him. But he'd known from the moment he met her she was different.

She blinked, and he saw she was coming out of her haze. He couldn't let that happen. Pressing the heel of his hand into the apex of her thighs, he rotated as softly as he could.

He resisted the urge to let out a shout of satisfaction as her eyes glazed over once more. Peeling her flight suit from her shoulders, he worked it down her body while he kissed her mouth. He slipped along her cheek to nip at her neck.

"Gods, War." She turned her head so he'd have better access.

The flight suit was stuck now at his own legs and War fought an internal battle. To move would mean he'd give up his position between her thighs and he dearly didn't want to do that. But he needed the suit off.

In a swift movement, he kicked the table next to the sofa away, grabbed her and rolled them both to the floor.

She landed hard on top of him, totally unprepared for his action.

Before she could catch up, he turned her under him and stripped her clothes, pulling tall boots and underwear off as he went. She sat up and surprised him by shedding her bra, then lay back down on the fur rug. A strange, almost challenging smile twisted her lips. As if she dared him to make love to her.

It made his stomach tighten to the point of pain.

Keeping his gaze on hers, War ran his right hand down her body, through the hair at the top of her thighs and along one leg. Then he caught both thighs with his hands and lowered his face to her sex.

Spreading her legs, he didn't waste time teasing her. He wasn't in a teasing mood. He didn't give a damn about drawing this out. Now wasn't soon enough for him.

Pressing his tongue to her clit, he clamped his hands on her hips to keep her from squirming away.

"Too much," she gasped.

But this wasn't even close to what he planned on giving her.

He licked her hard and steady, sensing her building orgasm as if they were connected on a metaphysical plane, as if their emotions somehow twined together.

“War, please.” She tossed her head and tugged his hair.

He didn’t stop. He wanted to slip a finger inside her but with her twisting about, she might escape him if he only held her with one hand. His number one priority right now was to have her come. He solved the dilemma by pinning her with his left forearm.

She was soaking wet and tight. His finger slid inside her without pausing.

“Oh Gods, I’m coming,” she moaned.

He held her still and increased the pressure of his tongue. When he felt her peak, he sat up and ripped open his pants. Guiding himself to her channel, he had to wait at her opening while she convulsed around the head of his cock.

“Dammit, Aidan.” The tight muscles of her body brought him to climax before he could lodge himself fully inside.

As he came, he worked all the way in until he hilted. Then he dropped over her like a blanket, burying his head in her neck so she wouldn’t see his tears.

## Chapter Six

It was as if she swam up from the bottom of a deep lake, through the silent, heavy water to the surface. Something pressed her into the thick rug. Something big and warm draped across her body. Lazily, she ran her hand the length of a muscled arm, over the bump of his biceps, around the curve of his elbow, along the hair-dusted, sinewy forearm. Muscles bunched and flexed below her fingers as he tightened his hold on her body.

Oh shit. She'd slept with Warwick the Enforcer. Without opening her eyes, she pressed on her eyeballs with her fingertips to relieve some of the panic growing in her brain. She usually hated when people touched her but she'd dragged him into this. It had felt so good, so right.

And she'd had the best sex of her life.

She took a deep breath to calm her freaked-out nerves.

Something sharp pinched the skin of her shoulder. It took her a moment to realize War bit her.

"Hey." She opened her eyes to give him a warning look. "None of that."

"I know what you were just thinking and it will seriously piss me off if you go down that road in your mind."

Already, Aidan found she was used to his face. She met his gaze, her confusion fading into the need for a good fight. "And where do you think I was going?"

His mouth turned down in a pained expression and she realized that because he wore a mask, Warwick had no practice hiding his emotions from others. The thought brought out the same protective instincts in her she had only felt in the past with her brother.

"Don't regret this, Aidan, please."

"War, this wasn't a good idea." Even as she started to explain, her arms tightened around his body. She wanted him to know that she didn't like the way he made her feel—off balance and out of control. And protective. Gods.

His gaze jerked up, cutting her short, and he tipped his head as if he'd heard something. With a gracefulness that seemed at odds with his bulky body, War sprang to his feet, pulled his pants over his sexy, amazingly perfect shaft, and grabbed his shirt before she'd even sat up.

"Get your clothes on," he growled. "Someone's coming."

She tugged her flight suit towards her and staggered to her feet, feeling weak and sated all over. Standing on one leg, she inserted the other into the suit and lost her balance as her muscles gave out. She hadn't realized how hard she'd gripped his hips earlier with her inner thighs.

He caught her before she toppled. Holding her from behind with an arm around her waist, he yanked the suit up one leg, then the other. Suddenly, he stilled. She froze, thinking he was listening for intruders. Instead, he pressed his lips on the top of her spine with a groan. "You have the most beautiful back I've ever seen." He ran his scarred hand down it, making her shiver at the strange sensation of his skin.

Shiver and want him again, but it was a slow burn she could easily ignore.

He released her to gather up her bra and help her into it. Then he put his mask in place as someone pounded on the door. Without seeming to care about the insistent knock, he worked the glove onto his left hand, staring at her as she zipped up the flight suit.

"Who do you think it is?" she asked, searching the floor for the barrette so she could put up her hair. Aidan concentrated on ignoring the blush rising on her face. For some reason she couldn't fathom, she knew he was picturing her naked.

He turned away to fish her clip off the sofa and handed it to her. "Most likely Reed's men. He's had need of me quite a bit lately."

She gathered her hair and gasped when he pulled her roughly into his embrace for a searing kiss. The brush of cool leather on her cheeks contrasted with the hot wetness of his lips.

"Put on your boots. If I have to go to Reed's, I want you with me." He growled the order, every inch the commanding man she'd known before he'd taken off the mask.

She shivered as she watched him stride to the door. Then she twisted her hair up and dropped onto the sofa to pull on her boots.

“Warwick,” someone said in greeting.

“Trevlin.” All traces of softness were gone from War’s voice.

“Landrig wants to see you. Now.”

“How long is the assignment?”

“It will last through the celebration.”

“I’ll need my bag then,” War said, as he entered the room with two hulking men trailing him.

Shock flashed across their faces at the sight of her tugging on her other boot.

She met War’s gaze and could read the amusement in his eyes. He enjoyed their response to her presence.

“Grab your things. We’re leaving for Landrig’s early.”

She hated being ordered and settled into the sofa, folding her arms across her stomach and raising an eyebrow.

He actually laughed out loud in response, then bowed and said, “Please.”

The two men standing in the doorway blinked in surprise. She’d just made scary mask-boy beg.

Not wanting to push her luck, she popped to her feet. “How can I turn down such a sweet request?” she purred, grinning at him.

“How indeed?” he asked.

On her way by, she added to her performance by trailing her hand across his hard, flat stomach. One of Landrig’s men gasped at the contact.

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It was odd to be able to touch someone any time she felt like it. But odder still was the desire to do so. Usually this kind of thing made her flesh crawl. If she became intimate with someone physically, it meant she would become intimate with them mentally as well, and that she didn’t want.

She couldn't remember when physical touch began to repulse her. Possibly around her Aunt Maggie's death. First her parents had died, then Aunt Maggie, then began the constant problems with Zach. She didn't need any more people in her life. Somewhere along the line, she had come to believe that casual contact wasn't something she enjoyed. She'd accepted it and moved on. She wouldn't let it impact her and was used to the fact she was unable to have more than surface relationships.

With Warwick, though, she was drawn to the warmth of his skin, to the pulse of his life as it hummed under her hand.

There was something satisfying about resting her chin on his shoulder while watching the snowy, surreal landscape fly by outside the huge snow-do. It was those damn protective feelings that relished the other men's reactions. How dare they insult Warwick by staring openmouthed at her? They acted as if they couldn't believe a woman would touch him.

For his part, War seemed to ignore them, but she knew he watched them as closely as she did. He raised his ungloved hand and caressed her cheek in a move that made her shiver. Desire raced through her bloodstream so quickly, she shut her eyes against it for a moment.

Slowly, War turned, his gaze studying her without blinking. He lowered his head and murmured, "I can smell my scent on you."

She dug her fingers into his side, feeling the scars against her nails. "Stop," she ordered in a hushed whisper. "I mean it. No playing like this, War."

"Who says I'm playing?" he growled.

She started to pull away, but his hand caught her around the back of her neck, restraining her like a gentle, unbreakable band.

"Don't. Don't move away from me."

His face was blank, covered by the mask, but she heard the plea in his voice.

"I won't leave as long as you behave." Relaxing her fingers, she ran her hand along his abs and rested her head on his shoulder again.



In the window, she watched Trevlin's reflection study her. His eyes narrowed into slits and he gritted his teeth when he saw her hand move. His reaction seemed extreme. She tightened her grip on Warwick's stomach. She would watch that one closely until she figured out what it was about him that made her warning bells ring.

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War dropped their bags onto the beautiful rock floor, knowing one of the house servants would place them in his room. He wasn't in the mood for Reed right now. Lately, Landrig had gotten fanatical and difficult, using War more and more to keep his men in line. It was a slippery slope. War should only be used as a last resort, not the first thing Reed turned to when he got into a bind.

Aidan openly gaped at the lavishness of the great receiving hall. He'd always thought the gigantic, sweeping staircase and ornate chandelier were too much for Sector 9.

"Like it?" he asked, curious.

She turned on a heel, studying the continuous mural of a large hunting party chasing big, long-haired beasts. "Reminds me of a tomb."

He grinned. Reed wouldn't be happy to hear that since he'd spent a huge amount of balseems on his palace.

"Gods," she breathed, looking at the painted dead beast on the wall behind them. Blood gushed from open wounds on its side.

"Landrig wants to see you in his study," Trevlin said, his face flushed and tight.

War ran his fingers down Aidan's arm and captured her hand. "We'll find our own way."

Trevlin thought he was ready to take over War's duties, but he actually wasn't close. He had little control, his reactions rash, his thinking under stress muddled. Often War felt he was dealing with a jealous child. Aidan would make a better Enforcer than Trevlin.

Warwick led the way to the study. Like the other parts of the house, it showed off Reed's wealth. Rich carpets, paintings and heavy, off-world furniture made from real

wood combined to give the overwhelming effect he knew Reed wanted. Reed's house intimidated and he liked it that way.

"Ah, Warwick." Reed stood, his body supple and well cared for despite his age. "Good, you're here."

"Reed." He nodded, noting the greedy excitement in his employer's voice. War's patience with this man was nearly at an end. He would either need to find another employer or put into effect his plan against Balten. The thought of his enemy made him squeeze Aidan's hand.

She turned to him, a question in her eyes. War dropped her fingers to keep from hurting her.

"Who did you bring with you?" A charming smile came to Reed's handsome face. He crossed to Aidan and took her hand in both of his. His lightning-fast mood swings were just another example of Reed's instability.

Aidan pulled in a quick breath and her face went completely blank, but War caught the tremor in her hand when Reed captured it.

"Aidan, Reed Landrig." War kept his voice flat, waving to each in turn, wondering what in the hell was going on. Aidan acted as if it pained her to have Reed shake her hand.

Reed's mistress Tiffany came to the door behind Reed's back, her eyes narrowing as she watched Reed bow over Aidan's hand to kiss her knuckles. War had a similar reaction race through him. It was all he could do to stop himself from grabbing Landrig's head and smashing his face with a knee. It wasn't just the possessiveness he felt either, it was the look of disgust that came over Aidan's face when Reed's lips touched her skin.

"It is nice to meet you." Reed retained Aidan's hand, pushing more charm at her, perhaps sensing her resistance.

She slipped her fingers free and stepped back next to War. He looped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest.

An angry look flashed across Reed's face, but dropped in a flash with the click of Tiffany's heels across the floor. "My darling." He turned with a smile. War could see the pride he held for his latest mistress.

Under his arm, Aidan shivered, and War ran his gloved hand down her cheek to reassure her. Her reaction to Reed surprised him. She had acted repulsed, her whole body turning into a stiff line. It had been subtle, something War hoped Reed hadn't picked up on.

"Reed," Tiffany simpered, tossing her platinum hair off her shoulder and curling around his arm. She sent Aidan a warning look, while she pressed her body into Reed's.

"Baby," Reed said, patting her behind, the action raising her short skirt several inches. "Why don't you take Warwick's friend up to his room? We need some privacy."

"Of course." She smiled up at him.

War squeezed Aidan to him in a small hug. When he let her go, she tapped his arm and turned to wink at him. "I'll let you men talk business while I go sit in our room," she whispered, rolling her eyes.

He breathed a sigh of relief at her feisty personality's reappearance and grinned as he leaned down to murmur, "Try to behave yourself while we're separated." He threaded his ungloved hand through some pieces of her hair that had dropped from the clip, enjoying the silky softness.

She blinked in feigned confusion, her fingers fluttering at her chest. "Me? Get in trouble?"

Swinging her so his back faced Reed, he blocked the other man's view. "Stay in the room. I'll return as soon as I can."

"Yes, sir." She gave him a saucy salute. "Your every wish is my command."

He let her go reluctantly, fighting the urge to take her straight to his room and see if she meant her words. There were several things he'd like to command her to do. He'd rushed things earlier and now he wanted a second chance.

Damn Landrig, anyway. Knowing him, he would send War on another silly errand, taking him away from Aidan for hours or even days. With a heavy heart, he watched her

leave, trailing behind Tiffany. When she turned at the door, it was to take a quick glance at Reed, not at him. Warwick wondered again what was going on.

“I’ve never seen you with a woman before,” Reed commented, striding to the bar. He studied labels on matching cut-crystal bottles until he found the one he wanted. He poured them both a splash of amber liquid. “She’s pretty.”

“I think so.” War was careful to keep his voice even. Show that you like something too much and Reed was likely to try to take it just because he could.

Landrig picked up his drink and took a healthy swig. “Mmm. Asperance. The best in this galaxy.” He dropped into a nearby chair. “Help yourself.” He nodded at the remaining glass.

War took it and swirled the liquid in the glass. He didn’t drink, since spirits would cloud his mind. He needed to be sharp and ready for action at any time, but Reed had thrown a fit when he’d turned the drink down once, so he would hold it in his hand.

“Where did you get her?” Reed asked, pointing to a chair across from his.

Reed liked to treat him as an equal more than his employee. His behavior had always puzzled War.

“She’s flown for some of your missions.” He sat on an overly soft cushion, sinking like a stone. He pulled himself out to balance on the edge. Fine furniture wasn’t made for his body.

“She’s a pilot?” Reed raised his eyebrows.

War shrugged, stifling the urge to ask Reed to hurry up and get to the point. Aidan wore a flight suit, but he supposed it had been so long since Reed had been into the field, he hadn’t even noticed.

“Hmmm. Looks a little sexy for that.” Reed waved a hand to change the subject. “I need you to help me keep an eye on Balten’s men. They’re to arrive here in the morning.” Reed laughed. “Knowing him, the bastard will send a large group, when one person could handle the set up for our meeting in two weeks.” A smile still played about his lips but his gaze had turned distant. “I’ve heard he’s learned I’m trying to horn in on one of his new businesses.”

“You’re meeting with him? In person?” It was a dangerous thing for Reed to do when they could vidiphone.

Reed leaned forward and rattled his drink against his chair arm. “I’ve gotten word that the Inter-world Council is planning to crack down on illegal trade.” He settled the glass onto his knee. “It might be advisable that Balten and I join forces if that happens.”

“But you’ve been stealing business from him in the meantime.” Warwick thought again that Reed was losing his mind.

“Why not?” Reed laughed. “I hate the bastard almost as much as you do.”

That stopped War cold. The tone in Reed’s voice, confident and knowledgeable, said he knew more than Warwick would like about his dealings with Balten. War thought he’d hidden the identity of his parents and distanced himself from their deaths.

How much did Reed know and what would he do with that knowledge?

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Aidan followed Tiffany up the stairs, watching her perfect hips sway just the right amount, her hand skimming perfectly up the banister railing, the gleam of her perfect nail polish setting off her perfectly petite hands.

Aidan had hated her even before she opened her mouth.

“So,” Tiffany purred, as if she was still talking to Reed. “How long have you been Warwick’s whore?”

Aidan missed a step, but caught herself before she face-planted into the stairs. She covered her laugh with a cough, wondering what in the hell she was supposed to say to that. “Not long,” she said vaguely, focusing on a sad memory to make herself sober. Her Aunt Maggie’s death had hit the family hard. Aidan pictured her crazy aunt, sadness at Maggie’s death filling her until the woman in her mind slipped silverware off the dinner table into her pocket. Unable to help herself, she snorted on a laugh.

Tiffany stopped on the landing and turned with a gasp. “Are you laughing?” Her voice went up several octaves. “No one laughs at me.”

Aidan stood there, busted. She couldn't really explain that it was Aunt Maggie's fault. Maggie winked at her in her mind, pulled out a button from her pocket and placed it into her mouth. Maggie was always sucking on buttons.

Tiffany stepped closer. "Listen, you little slut. I rule this house. If you expect to attend these celebrations, you'll need an invitation. I can easily make certain you don't receive one if you cross me."

"Do you honestly believe you can keep Warwick from bringing me anywhere he wants?" The moment the words left her mouth, Aidan knew she had made a serious mistake.

Tiffany's face reddened, turning brighter against her platinum hair. "You'll pay for that," she snapped from trembling lips. Stalking to a nearby door, she flung it open and pointed into the room. "I hope he ruts on you for hours without wearing that mask so you'll have to spend the whole time staring into his hideous face."

Watching Tiffany march down the steps, Aidan kicked herself mentally.

Silence would have gotten her what she wanted, which was to fade into the background so she could snoop around to find the globe. But no. She had to get into an all-out war with Miss Perfect.

She should have picked another dead relative to use to sober herself. The Gods knew she had enough of them to choose from.

The pressure to find the globe increased tenfold, especially since Tiffany would try to keep her from the celebrations now. She'd have to start searching tonight, instead of following War's advice to wait.

## Chapter Seven

Aidan was surprised when Warwick knocked on the door, instead of entering. “Come in,” she said, not turning from her bag. Her wardrobe was in shambles. If Tiffany’s clothes were anything close to what the other women here wore, she would stick out like a sore thumb. Of course, being with Warwick would be the same as wearing a flashing sign that said, “Look at me!”

“Where would you like me to put your welcome repast, mistress?” a man asked from behind her.

She turned. A house servant stood with a tray of food and drink balanced on one hand. “There is fine.” She pointed to a nearby table.

He left the food and disappeared.

It had been a long, long time since she’d eaten. Drawn to the food, Aidan poured a tall glass of whatever liquid they’d provided and took a healthy bite of a roll. After the first cautious sip, she guzzled the glass of sweet nectar and filled another. It tasted like real pressed berry fruit of some kind. A treat she hadn’t had in years.

After taking a super-fast shower, she jumped out and wrung the water from her hair into the sink.

Out of nowhere, pain rocked through her body, pitching her forward. She grabbed the vanity to catch herself before she fell.

It was as if every one of her internal organs seized at once. Aidan gasped for breath. Only seconds went by but it was long enough for her to worry it might not stop.

The towel she’d wrapped around her body had fallen to the floor, and when she stared into the mirror, a deep blush covered her face and her lips trembled. In fact, her whole body was red and as she watched it, the itching began.

She gave in to the need to scratch, but stopped when angry streaks appeared across her skin.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” The itching turned into a burn. “What’s happening?” She could hear the panic behind the words.

Running her hands down her stomach caused her breath to catch in her throat. Her skin was so hot. “Oh no,” she whispered. Desire rode through her from the touch of her own hands, so fierce she dropped to her knees.

She met her own gaze in the mirror, only the top part of her head now visible. Too-bright eyes stared back at her, her pupils tiny dots. “I’ve been drugged.”

With what? She shook her head at her folly. The juice. She’d had almost two full glasses of it. “Dammit.” Tears streaked from her eyes. She ducked her head so she wouldn’t have to watch herself cry.

Had she taken too much of the drug into her system? Was two glasses enough to seriously hurt her, kill her even?

Releasing her hold on the vanity, she rolled into a ball on the cold tile floor. The icy ceramic cooled her prickly skin, helping her think.

She hated being out of control. Hated it. And here she was, unable to function enough to even figure out if she was dying. She should be calling out for help. But when she opened her mouth, all she could do was moan, the sound guttural and pathetic.

Warwick would be back soon. She had to put on some clothes. He would take her to a healer. She would get help. She wouldn’t die.

Gathering her energy, Aidan pulled herself along the floor to the clothes she’d discarded before her shower. It didn’t matter that she didn’t want to wear the same thing again. Anything would be better than being naked. She needed to get dressed to make herself less vulnerable.

Without bothering with her bra, she wrestled one leg, then the other into the flight suit and shrugged her arms into the top.

“Oh Gods, it hurts.” She crunched in on herself, the scratch of the suit’s fabric on her skin so irritating, it was as if she wore clothing made of unfinished metal.

She had to get it off. Now.

“What in the hell’s wrong?”



Warwick had arrived without her even hearing him.

Aidan grabbed onto her legs, burying her face into her knees. "Go away."

She could sense his heat through her clothes as he knelt beside her.

And his smell. Oh Gods, Goddesses, any fucking deity that would listen. Desire gushed through her, making her breasts heavy and liquid pool between her legs. She was instantly ready for him. She had to have him. Right. Now.

He lifted a hand to touch her and she screamed. "Don't, don't. Don't touch me." She cried in earnest then. She was so pissed off, she couldn't function. Tiffany's drug of choice had been an aphrodisiac. Bitch, whore, slut. She would kill Tiffany when it wore off. With. Her. Bare. Hands.

"Are you hurt?" he growled, dragging her from the temporary relief of planning her revenge.

"I made an enemy," she managed to whisper.

"Already?" War's voice was now incredulous.

"Don't drink what's in the pitcher in the other room. It's drugged."

"Aidan."

He wanted her to look at him. She could tell by the worry in his voice.

She didn't. Instead she said, "With an aphrodisiac," into her knees, without raising her head.

Warwick went silent for a moment. The bare hand resting on the tile beside her body clenched into a fist and she actually smelled his body change as the thought of her under the power of the drug turned him on.

His voice didn't change, though. It was the same, steady and gruff. "Do you want me to take you to a healer?"

Closing her eyes, she took a few shallow breaths. His scent filled her lungs. It had always been her weakness with him. "I can smell you."

"What?"

“I can smell you getting hard.” Unable to stop herself, she straightened and met his gaze through the holes of the mask. As she stared at him, she reached in slow motion to place her palm on his groin.

He was rock hard. And she’d known he would be. It was as if every one of her senses were magnified, expanded to take in all his reactions.

“See?” She ran her fingers up his shaft. “I can almost taste your desire.”

“I...” He stumbled over his words. “I shouldn’t be turned on, but I can’t help myself.” He made an annoyed humming sound and grabbed her wrist to stop her exploration. “But if you want to go to a healer, I will take you. I can control it.”

If she went to a healer, everyone would soon learn what had happened here. A picture of Tiffany laughing flashed in her mind. Fuck that. She wouldn’t become the butt of Tiffany’s joke, thanks anyway.

How long would the drug last? Would Warwick help her through this?

She could only ask.

But she wouldn’t be able to see his true feelings with the mask on. “War,” she whispered. “I need you, not the mask right now.”

The hand holding her wrist tightened and for a moment, she thought he’d refuse. Then he released her wrist, took off his helmet and unsnapped the mask.

She didn’t pause, afraid to let the tension between them build any more than it already had. “I angered Tiffany.”

“Why?”

Another shooting pain laced with desire lanced her internal organs, making her hiss and grit her teeth. “I’ll tell you the whole story later.”

He dropped a hand onto her shoulder, the weight pushing the fabric of the suit into her skin, and she flinched.

War jerked away and worked the muscles in his jaw.

“Don’t get difficult on me right now, Warwick.” She pulled the top of the flight suit off in hectic, disorganized movements. “It isn’t you, it’s the clothing. It hurts.” Tears built in her eyes as she tried to coordinate pulling the suit off her legs.

He suddenly assisted her, lifting her up and sliding the rest of the suit off. The leather of his glove didn't hurt, but the fabric of his clothes burned her skin.

"Your shirt," she hissed.

He set her down and shrugged out of it.

Perfect. He was so perfectly formed. Even the scarred left side.

His hands went to his belt, but paused.

Wrenching her gaze away from his chest, she blinked at him.

"I don't want you to hold this against me later." His brows were drawn down in worry and a frown tugged at his lips.

She had to resist the urge to run her fingers along his chest. Instead she forced herself to deal with his concerns. She had to say the words that would get his fingers moving again on the belt. Trying to center herself, she took a deep breath. It was a mistake. His essence curled around inside her.

"Warwick. I already proved to you earlier today that I desire you. I am not turning to you solely because of the drugs." She dug her fingernails of one hand into the palm of the other to keep on task. "I am asking you because I'm not giving that bitch Tiffany the satisfaction of going to a healer. If I do, you know everyone here will find out." She took another breath, her mind straying to his chest. Her hand went to his biceps on his right arm. Her fingers were so much lighter against his olive-toned skin. "And you have such a perfect chest."

## Chapter Eight

Warwick watched Aidan touch his unscarred arm. Her fingers brushed his skin as if he were something precious.

This wasn't right. He was taking advantage of her. Of the drug in her system. No matter what she said, he should pick her up and take her to the healer immediately.

Instead, he watched in fascination as she leaned forward to touch her mouth to the muscle on his upper arm, running her tongue along the outside curve of the bulge he'd spent a lifetime acquiring. He'd known since he'd been burned with acid that he had to be stronger than others to survive. Stronger and more brutal. People left him alone because they knew he could hurt them. No other reason.

It was like he was the one drugged. He sat perfectly still while a woman voluntarily worshiped him for the first time in his life. He wished she hadn't been drugged first. The only thing keeping him here was the fact she'd touched him earlier of her own free will.

"When we were Down Neck, I wanted you." She caught his flesh between her sharp teeth and bit hard enough to make him suck in a breath. "I just didn't know it because I'd never been attracted to someone's chemicals before."

She licked the spot to make up for the pain and slid closer.

He was still sitting on his knees where he'd landed when he saw her crying in a ball on the floor. It had unnerved him to see such a strong woman in pieces.

But she'd obviously recovered. She ran her tongue all the way up his neck, while her fingers found his nipple.

He forced his brain to work and stopped her hand. "How much did you drink?"

She blinked, seeming to struggle with answering even basic questions. "Almost two full glasses."

"Dammit." Something told him that was double the dose needed to turn her into a sex machine.

“Her last words were ‘I hope he ruts on you for hours without wearing that mask so you’ll have to spend the whole time...’” She stopped as if she didn’t want to say the rest.

“Tiffany?” he clarified. At her nod, he pushed for the rest. “Finish it.”

She raised her chin. “No.”

He resisted the urge to shake her and stopped himself from threatening to withdraw his help. She was stubborn enough to tell him to go fuck himself and try to suffer it out on her own. He tried guilt instead. “I would really like to know the rest of her words.”

“She’s a complete bitch in a perfect package.” Aidan snarled and tried to jerk her wrist away from him, not, he realized, because his touch disgusted her, but so she would feel in control. “She’s rotten inside.”

It didn’t matter. He could guess what Tiffany wanted Aidan to stare at—his face. But Aidan had asked him to take the mask off, so obviously Tiffany wasn’t getting the revenge she’d hoped.

“Help me.” Aidan bit her lip. “You’re the only one I trust enough for this.”

His heart twisted. She shouldn’t trust a man who only lived for revenge, but it felt so good that she did.

On top of that, she really didn’t seem to mind his scars. He just couldn’t comprehend that fact. Her reaction to his body left him helpless and vulnerable. He knew he should be worried, but it was so hard to think when her hand was gliding along his skin.

“I’ll be right here with you for as long as the drug is in your system.”

She closed her eyes and hummed.

“I need to pace myself, okay?” He released her wrist to cup her chin in his gloved hand. “If you drank double the dose, we could very well spend most of the night taming the drug.”

“Thank you for helping me, War.”

He smiled. “I don’t do this for free. I want a gift in exchange.”

Her eyes became wary. “What?”

“One night together after you pay back your brother’s debts.” The words came out before he could control them. He hadn’t even known they were sitting so close to the surface.

“Fine. Done.” She rubbed her chin on the leather glove. “Your pants hurt me, but the leather feels nice.”

Watching her, he realized this time with her was a fair enough exchange. He would release her from her promise tomorrow and enjoy her unhesitant touch tonight.

Her mouth captured one of his fingers and her tongue swirled along the tight glove.

He trailed the finger over her chin, down her throat, leaning over her when she lay back onto the cold tile. Holding himself up with his right arm, he continued to touch her with his gloved hand, enjoying the hum of her pleasure. He would have liked to have his hand free but there was something almost joyous about her reaction to the leather.

Circling one of her breasts, he studied the contrast of her light skin, the black of his glove and the rose of her nipple. So very beautiful.

Aidan suddenly pulled her legs to her chest and rolled onto her side into a ball, her body convulsing.

“Aidan.”

“They go away. In a moment.” She cried out when his pants brushed her back as he leaned over her. “The fabric. Hurts.”

War jerked away and pulled off his tall boots and pants. Then he curled around her body. She sighed, the sound filled with relief. He brushed her wet hair away from her face. Her pupils were bare pricks of black in her shiny green eyes.

She felt so good, so perfect in his arms.

He was ready for her. Could take her right now, without any preparation. But he held off, stroking her with his gloved hand instead. It seemed to calm her, and she rolled towards him.

Catching the back of his head with a hand, she brought her mouth to his. The kiss was at first a brush of lips, but then turned into something more serious. He cradled her head in his palm while the kiss deepened.

With a moan, she ran her hands down his chest, the nails biting into his skin. The sensation was totally different on his left side than on his right, but both turned him on.

He broke the kiss and captured her hands in his. She immediately tried to shake him off.

“Aidan.” His voice came out in a hoarse croak. He cleared his throat. “Let me touch you for a bit.” He had to pace himself to get through this evening. Right now he wanted her badly, and he would soon run out of patience.

“I need you.”

“Lay back and enjoy it. We have all night.”

Stroking her with his gloved hand, he made sure he touched every inch of her skin, all the way down to her feet. When he ran his fingers up her soles, she gasped and arched from the floor. The drug intensified everything she felt. Satisfaction breathed through him at discovering so easily one of her hot spots.

Sitting, he lifted her foot to his mouth and gently kissed the instep.

She writhed away. “Too much. Too much.”

War brushed his hand along the inside of her thigh. Her legs parted, giving him access. He continued all the way to the tops of her thighs.

She was soaking wet, her desire glistening before him. Unable to stop himself, he rotated his gloved thumb over her clitoris. Aidan jumped away, shutting her eyes. Tears leaked from under her lashes.

He lay down beside her. “Come for me, Aidan.”

“I hate this.”

Rotating his thumb, he found a rhythm. “I know you do, but we can make it through this together.”

“I don’t want to.” Her eyes opened, extra bright with unshed tears. “I’m going to kill her. You know that, don’t you?”

War slipped a finger inside her channel, keeping his thumb firmly on her clit.

Aidan whimpered. He could tell she was right on the edge of orgasm.

“Let’s get through this and then we’ll talk about revenge.” He pumped his finger, watching her hips come up to meet him. The black leather against her skin, running inside her, turned him on like nothing else he’d ever seen before.

When she came, he held his thumb tightly down on her clit, enjoying her shivers. His own breath was coming in harsh gasps which matched hers.

Unable to stop himself, he rolled between her legs. Sliding his hand from between them, he hilted in one motion, his cock running easily inside on her wetness.

“You feel so good.” He ran his ungloved hand over her cheek. “I’m sorry we have the drug between us tonight. I wanted you to come to me of your own free will.”

Her hips moved below him. “I am here because I want you, Warwick. Don’t doubt that.” She shut her eyes and gritted her teeth. “I feel so out of control.” Her eyes blinked open. “Let me ride you so I at least have some say in all of this.”

He smiled. “Your wish is my command,” he parroted her earlier tease. Then he rolled her over him, the motion not as graceful as he would have liked. They tangled and his cock slipped free before he had her on top. “That didn’t go as well as I’d hoped.”

“No worries.” She stroked her hand down his shaft. “I wanted to put you inside me.” Rising up on her knees, she teased the head of his cock between her folds.

“Much more of that and I’ll come. I’m warning you.”

She grinned, the turn of her lips full of mischief. Then she put just the head inside her, before drawing out again. She repeated the motion, over and over. Each time, another thread of his restraint popped free.

“Aidan, I’m going to come very soon if you don’t stop teasing me.”

Her passage was tight, hugging the tip of his cock, then freeing him. He knew she needed to be in control, but he was rapidly losing his own. Balling his hands into fists, he tried to concentrate on anything else but this.

It was impossible.

“Deeper.” He heard the begging sound in his voice, but couldn’t stop it. It took all of his concentration to keep from grabbing her hips and forcing her. He wouldn’t do that. “More.”



She laughed, the sound sexy and low, filled with pleasure, and slipped him all the way inside.

The change brought him to orgasm, the burst of pleasure unstoppable. He caught her hips and held her fully seated on him, while he pumped his seed inside her.

Aidan arched backwards, her laughter turning into a moan as she followed him over. She was spectacular, her face a mask of pleasure, her whole body convulsing with the strength of her release.

## Chapter Nine

Aidan felt wonderful, but she knew it was only a temporary reprieve from the drug. She'd collapsed onto War's chest and stayed there, enjoying the stroke of his hands up and down her back.

He was still semi-erect inside her, but instead of finding it sexy, it felt more comforting. It was an odd thought, one that scared her a bit.

Tentatively at first, then with more confidence, she ran her fingers along his scarred chest. Pressing her palm into his flesh, she wished he hadn't suffered.

"Don't pity me, Aidan." War's voice rumbled gruffly below her ear.

She sighed. She had been, and she knew he didn't want her to, but how could she not? "I just keep thinking how much it must have hurt you."

His hands stilled on her back and she instantly regretted bringing up his painful memories.

But she needed this, needed to talk about it. "Holy Gods above," she breathed and sat up to look at the damage, his cock slipping free. The pain must have been incredible, overwhelming. She put both her hands over the worst of the scarring on his chest. How could someone have done this to another person? The horror of the thought was washed away on a tide of anger. "Who did this?"

The protective feelings she'd started having for him welled up to a screaming pitch. Whoever did it would pay, if they hadn't already. She would kill them with her bare hands. The minute she had the thought, she knew she would act on it. No one hurt him this way and got away with it. Period.

Warwick watched Aidan narrow her eyes and a fierce frown blossomed across her face. Hands that had been petting his chest turned into talons that bit into his skin. With a start, he realized she was angry. All the pity was gone from her face.

“Tell me,” she ordered.

Tell her. He wondered if he should. He’d kept this secret bound up inside him for too long. And he had a bad feeling Reed Landrig already knew it. The desire to tell her everything gnawed at him. But old habits died hard and he didn’t want her to know his painful secrets.

“Warwick.” She increased the pressure of her fingernails.

“Some things are best kept inside.”

She dropped her chest onto his so fast he lost his breath. “I’m not playing a game with you. I want to know who did this.” Her hands twisted in his hair. “And if you’ve killed them yet.”

The venom in her voice and the snarl on her pretty lips shocked him. He didn’t understand why she cared this much, even as he warmed to the thought that she did.

“I haven’t had my revenge yet, but I plan to soon.”

“Why not? Anyone who did this deserves death.” Her hands framed his face and he could tell she was serious. He’d never seen her in this mood before.

“He’s a powerful man. It’s taken me a long time to come up with a plan to bring him the kind of pain he inflicted on my family.”

“You should just kill him and be done with it.” Her face was only inches from his and the expression in her eyes had turned deadly.

“That won’t be good enough.” He gripped her sides. “Maybe if all he did was this to me, it would have been. But he killed my parents as well, and for that, he’ll lose everything and spend the rest of his life in a hell of my making.”

“I’ll help you.” She was serious, he could tell.

War’s heart turned over. He’d never had a single soul come to his defense before. His father’s best friend had sheltered him, but Grant hadn’t wanted to involve himself with revenge against a man as powerful as Balten. Grant had taken him in out of duty.

Nodding twice, she stared off into the distance for a moment, before meeting his gaze again. “As soon as this thing with my brother is taken care of, we’ll get him together.”

“Why?” He had to know. She seemed sincere but he didn’t understand why she would involve herself. It was bewildering and yet he couldn’t help but enjoy her fierceness.

“Oh no,” she whispered.

Warwick actually felt her body temperature increase as another wave of the drug rushed through her. She buried her head in the crook of his neck, breathing hard as she held on to him.

She burned under his hands. “You’re getting too hot.” The temperature seemed to rise while he spoke. “Way too hot.” Warwick, a person who prided himself on never losing his composure, lost it for the second time in as many hours.

Holding her to his chest, he jumped to his feet and jammed the water in the shower as cold as it would go. He stepped in, grinding his teeth at the frigid blast. Aidan sighed in relief when the ice water touched her body. He slid her down to the floor so he could turn her front to face the stream, sitting behind her to block some of the chilly spray. Shivers and chill bumps raced along his skin.

He still supported her with an arm around her waist. It seemed like forever until her body cooled. When it did, he added more heat to the shower.

“Gods, I thought you were going to roast alive.”

“I’m still burning, just on the inside now.” She flipped over, her movements sinuous and her eyes unfocused. Leaning into him, she took his nipple into her mouth.

His cock jumped to life. It amazed him. Only moments ago, he’d been concerned for her life and yet he was ready for her with only the touch of her lips.

Aidan didn’t stop there, but slowly worked her way down his chest, licking and biting along his hips, past his groin, all the way down his thighs.

Catching his balance on the wall behind her, he let himself go with the sensations she created.

The warm touch of her tongue on his cock made him moan. Part of his mind told him he should be seeing to her pleasure, but the other part that controlled his body refused to move to stop her.

Her mouth worked down his shaft, drawing out, then back again, this time taking more of him. She repeated the motion.

With every bit of strength he could muster, War caught her under the arms, dragged them both to their feet and moved her away from him. He had to pace himself. The night was still young.

Shutting off the water, he caught her around the waist. “Put your hands on the wall to steady us.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her back and ran a hand across her belly.

Aidan followed his directions.

He widened her stance. The important thing was to last long enough to bring her to orgasm more than once.

Taking his cock in hand, he bent her over further and entered her. From this angle, the pressure was so different, he felt himself rocket up to near orgasm. Damn her, she always made him feel more than anyone else ever had.

He held himself still, raining kisses onto her back, trying to regain his composure.

“War,” she whispered, restlessly moving her hips. “I need you to move.”

He skimmed his hand around her body and found her clitoris. Pinching the sensitive nub between his thumb and forefinger, he pulled gently and released.

“Oh, please.” She reared back, the strength in her movement surprising him. “Move, move, move.”

“I’m right on the edge, Aidan.”

“I”—she gasped for breath—“don’t care.”

He rested his head on her shoulder for a moment, but the battle was lost. Timing his thrusts to the pull of his fingers on her clitoris, he dropped away into the pleasure. All that existed in the universe was this woman.

He increased the rhythm, taking them higher. She shivered and he knew she’d found her release. He fought the milking of her body, continuing to thrust inside her and massage her clit.

“Almost there. I’m almost there.” He had to keep going until he orgasmed, had to find completion.

Aidan kept convulsing around him. Her arms collapsed and she pitched forward.

Caught in the moment of release, War could only soften their fall, taking most of the impact with his own body.

They ended up in a heap on the hard, cold tile.

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Aidan woke hours later in bed, her body wrapped around War's. They had been mating off and on since the shower, but finally, exhaustion had overwhelmed her. Every inch of her body was sore, but the drug seemed to have burned its way out of her system.

At least she hoped it had.

She and Tiffany would have a reckoning after she recovered enough to move.

War traced a series of bruises on her upper arm. Placing his hand on her skin, he lined up his fingers with the imprint and sighed.

"It doesn't hurt," she reassured him.

Raising his head, he looked down the line of her body. "You've got bruises all over you."

"Mmmm." She curled tighter into him. He was so warm.

His head jerked in the direction of the door a moment before the knock sounded. "Damn." He pressed a quick kiss onto her forehead. "I need to get this."

He swung his legs from the bed and stepped into a red ray of light from the rising sun. For that instant, he was caught, the picture of male strength. The lines of his body glowed red and gold, the hard strength evident in the tightened muscles of his thighs and buttocks.

Something stirred inside her and she wondered if the drug had returned for another round. But as she watched him slip into a pair of pants and a shirt, she realized it was just plain, old-fashioned desire. She sat up and hugged her knees to her chest.

Pausing in the act of putting on the mask, War gave her a worried glance. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. How could she explain that her emotions were raging out of control and she might be slipping into an attachment she didn't want?

Another knock sounded, this one more insistent. War's face hardened. "Cover yourself." The mask snapped into place and he moved into the bathroom. When he returned, he pulled on the glove.

She hated that he felt like he needed to hide, but the confidence he displayed when he wore the mask made him seem like a different person.

Lying on her side, Aidan tugged the covers over her head.

The door opened.

"What?" War growled the word as if he wanted to kill the person at the door.

"Balten's people are arriving." It was Trevlin's voice.

Why had Balten sent his people here? To check up on her? Or maybe he had more than one person looking for the globe. Fear tightened in her chest at the thought of coming so close, only to lose out to another. She needed to find the globe quickly or someone else would steal it. She might be furious with her brother, but she'd promised to save him one last time, so she would.

She had to get the globe before Balten recovered it and made her pay for Zach's freedom the other way. With her body. Was that even a possibility? After being with Warwick, she didn't think she could touch another man for a long time, but she only had one brother. There was no answer to her questions and she wouldn't have to find one if she returned to Balten with the globe.

"I'll be downstairs in a moment." War shut the door with a bang, cutting off any reply Trevlin might have made.

Aidan sat up. "What's going on?"

"Take a shower and meet me downstairs. I don't want you out of my sight." He crossed the room to her.

"Why would Balten send people here?"

War cupped her chin in his gloved hand, the action surprisingly gentle. “I’ll tell you later.” He brushed his lips over hers. “I need you to promise you won’t retaliate against Tiffany until I say it’s time.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but he placed a finger over her lips to stop her.

“I know you need revenge, I just want to make sure the timing is right. Things are going to be tense with Balten’s people here. We need to make sure we don’t create a situation we can’t handle.” He moved his hand from her lips. “Please.”

“Fine.” She owed him this at least for helping her through the drug last night. “As long as we understand she’s not getting away with this.”

He nodded once. “Believe me when I tell you revenge is best served cold.” Then he turned on his heel and strode out the door without a backward glance.

Standing, she realized that while everyone was distracted downstairs, now would be the perfect time to search Reed’s rooms for the globe.



## Chapter Ten

War jogged down the stairs to the large foyer. When he made it to the bottom landing, he stopped and took in the scene. Reed had assembled his people in a ring. Everyone was armed to the teeth. He knew it was more for show than anything else. Reed wasn't dumb enough to kill Balten's representatives. That would start a war of gigantic proportions. Both men had large enough armies working for them to do some serious damage.

In fact, if they formed an alliance, they could become an unstoppable force. But an army with two leaders wouldn't work effectively and neither Reed nor Balten would take orders from the other, even if it was in their best interest to do so. Perhaps it was nature's way of keeping the strong from too much power.

Reed glanced his way and nodded. War had no doubt that he was there just for show.

For a long while now, War had used his reputation instead of action to get Reed's wishes across to his men. That would only work for a short time longer before War would need to reinforce the fear he'd created with another round of violence. The thought made him tired. It was yet one more reason to attack Balten now instead of waiting. He was tired of the bloodshed, tired of making his money through intimidation. It had been a means to an end, but he wanted to move on. For the first time, he wanted to finish this thing with Balten and start his life. Maybe even settle down and raise a family.

The thoughts stopped him cold. This thing he had with Aidan wasn't going to last. He was beginning to believe she really did want him physically, but this was only a passing thing for her. Long term, no one would want to look at his face over their breakfast table every morning.

Without fanfare, the front doors opened and Balten's men marched in. More of them than War expected.

Way more.

Maybe forty men in all fanned in a V from the door out into the room. Tension skyrocketed as Reed's men realized they were equally numbered.

War tensed. This was too many people for a simple planning visit. Too many for even the posturing Reed had expected of Balten. What the hell was going on? Sliding a hand to his back, he loosened the blaster in the holster on his belt, fanning far off to the side so he wouldn't be mowed down if a firefight erupted.

Everyone in the hall froze, the tension so thick it shimmered in the air.

Then Balten himself stepped into the hall.

The doors were shut behind him with a bang, making War jump. His finger spasmed and he almost pulled the trigger.

The only sound was the shuffle of Reed's men as they tried to figure out what was expected of them in this new situation.

"Well, well, well." Reed paced forward, an odd smile touching his lips. "What an unexpected surprise." His voice was unworried.

War couldn't believe how little Balten had changed. Twenty years had passed since he had seen him last but there he stood, just as if it had been only yesterday.

For a moment, he pictured Balten entering his parents' house. The child War had once been had watched in terror as the men who'd murdered his parents reported their success to Balten. With that, Warwick knew exactly whom he should blame for his parents' death. Even then, he'd known he had to avenge their murder.

"Do it," Balten had said, nodding to a man beside him who held a bucket.

As the acid began to burn through his clothes, Warwick had seen the satisfaction on Balten's face.

Returning to the present, War took a steadying breath, glad the mask had covered his reaction. Glancing up the stairs, he wished Aidan were here with him.

That thought startled him back into control. He had somehow become reliant on her. Yes, he wanted her and that was okay, but this longing for her to hug him when he saw his greatest enemy smacked of weakness he couldn't afford.

“Why not meet now, rather than put it off?” Balten strode farther into the hall, his men moving up around him.

The tension in the room notched up a level.

“Why not?” Reed agreed.

“Especially since you’ve stolen something from me.” Balten tsked. “You really went too far with that, Landrig.”

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Aidan ran along the hallway to the other wing, checking rooms as she went. None of them looked like a place Reed would live in. He would want something big, something bold, something obnoxiously grand.

At the end of the hall, double doors encrusted in sparkling jewels of some sort guarded the entrance to a suite of rooms. “This is more like it,” she whispered.

The doors were locked.

Taking out two knives, Aidan worked the locking mechanism back with one knife, while holding the progress with the other. With a snick, the door swung open.

The lock wouldn’t keep out anyone serious about getting in. Reed surprised her with his lack of security, his arrogance leading him to not even install cameras outside his bedroom door. Then again, very few people could get into the house. That was where Reed spent most of his efforts. He hadn’t counted on one of his trusted employees bringing in a thief.

She started her search in the area that looked like a private office, working her way as fast as she could through all the desk drawers and carefully examining the items within a locked glass-door cabinet. She breezed through the sitting room. If the globe wasn’t someplace obvious, she’d have to come back. Entering the bedroom, she stopped at the sound of Tiffany’s voice coming through the far doorway.

“I want to wear my hair up today, Annette.”

Aidan began to back up, keeping herself facing the dressing room.

Then she saw it.

Sitting in the center of the far dresser on a small stand was the globe.

As if drawn on strings, she approached, unable to control her amazement that Balten wanted what amounted to a glass ball with colored water in it.

Oh, the water was pretty, a strange rainbow of colors swirling and twirling through the black liquid. It was almost mesmerizing, the reds, blues, greens and yellows mixing, dissolving and reforming as she stared at it, moving even though the globe itself was sitting still.

Suddenly, she didn't want to touch it with her bare hands and was relieved she'd brought a bag to carry it. She inched the fabric down over the glass, then picked it up and stuffed it in her jacket pocket.

She was halfway across the room when a voice made her spin around.

"What are you doing here?" Tiffany's tone held a small amount of panic just under the forceful surface. She stood in the doorway, wearing a blue slip dress that matched her eyes perfectly, her hair a messy halo around her head.

*Bluff your way out of this.* "There you are." Aidan closed the distance between them. "I've been looking for you."

"I'll call the guards if you don't leave immediately."

Aidan stood a hand's length away from her. "I know what you did to me last night."

Tiffany sniffed, but Aidan could tell she was worried. "You should be thanking me. I did you a favor, making it easier to fuck Warwick and his disgusting face."

Aidan controlled the urge for physical violence. Reed's whore had little room to throw insults. "Out of curiosity, Tiffany, have you even seen War's face?"

Tiffany shook her head. "But Reed's told me what happened to it." She took a deep breath, as if what she was about to say pained her, but the calculating gleam in her eyes didn't match the look on her face. "I'm sorry I drugged you. After I sent the servant, I realized I shouldn't have done it. I was rash."

"Sorry doesn't cut it." Aidan kept her voice full of soft menace. Now that she had the globe, her time here at Reed's was finished. She wouldn't have a chance to exact her revenge. It was a shame, because Tiffany deserved to get her ass kicked, but there wasn't

anything Aidan could do about it. Of course, Tiffany didn't know that. "Do you think I won't retaliate because you said you're sorry? Be assured I will. I want you to think about what I'll do, Tiffany. Think long and hard and know I'm coming for you. Maybe not today, or next year, but I'll even the score between us one day."

Tiffany's blue eyes widened, before a mask of arrogance came over her face. But it was enough to let Aidan know she believed.

As revenge went, it wasn't great, but sometimes you had to take what you got. Aidan could only hope Tiffany spent the rest of her life looking over her shoulder.

Turning on her heel, she walked out of the room, then out of the suite. When she reached the hall, she broke into a run.

She wondered how she would contact War to let him know she was leaving. Everything inside her begged for one last touch of his body. But if he was out on an errand for Reed, she had a bad feeling she'd only be leaving him a note.

The most important thing was to leave the palace before Landrig realized the globe was gone.

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Reed invited Balten into his study for their private talk. He nodded at War to follow them, once again including him as if he was a trusted advisor and not muscle for hire.

Instead of following, War stared at the top landing, wondering where Aidan was. She should have come down by now. The need to touch her overwhelmed him and a strange creeping sensation made him turn and take the stairs two at a time.

Reaching the top, he strode across the hall to his room, fighting the urge to break into a run. The door was slightly ajar. His gut tightened and he pushed it open, glad it swung wide without making a sound.

Aidan stood beside the bed, throwing her clothes into a bag.

She was leaving.

Pain shot through him. He knew their time together had been too good to be true.

Stepping into the room, he closed the door with more force than he meant to. She jumped and turned, a blaster in her hand.

“What’s going on?” His tone carried the fury racing inside his veins.

Blowing out a breath, she closed her eyes, clutching her chest. “Gods, you scared me.”

“Leaving?” He leaned against the door and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I have the globe.” She grinned. “Found it while everyone was downstairs.” Turning, she stuffed the rest of her clothes into her bag.

“You were just going to go without telling me?” War tried to calm himself. Why had he thought she hadn’t been using him? Why had he thought she cared?

“I have to leave before they find it’s missing.” She snapped the fastenings and turned. “The sooner I can exchange this for my brother, the better.”

“You can’t leave.” The words slipped out before he could stop them.

She’d come for the globe and now she had it. He should just let her go.

He didn’t want to. She was his, dammit.

“Why not?” She picked up her bag.

*Yes, Warwick, why not? Because I need you.* Instead he said the thing that was on the top of his mind. “Balten’s here.”

He watched her sink to the edge of the bed, her legs seeming to give out below her. Her bag fell from her hands to land on the floor with a soft thud. “No.”

The action was similar to the one he’d wanted to give when he saw Balten walk into the hall, but why would she react this way? “What’s going on, Aidan?” It took more willpower than it should have not to comfort her.

Lowering her head into her hands, she drew in a ragged breath. “Balten has my brother.”

For a moment, he wondered if he heard her correctly.

Then his feet took him across the floor, his hands hauling her up so she stood before him. “What?” Even to his own ears, it sounded deadly.

Her weakness seemed to pass with his show of aggression. She straightened her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. "I said Balten has my brother."

"What guest did you steal the globe from?"

She raised her chin a notch and pressed her lips together.

"Not a guest." He shook his head. "There aren't any guests here yet. Tell me you didn't steal it from Reed."

"Fine. I won't tell you."

He let her go so quickly, she fell back on the bed. "Dammit all." He flung out a hand and she flinched away. The gesture infuriated him. "Don't you dare jump. Don't you fucking dare act as if I'd hurt you."

Unable to look at her, he paced to the window and stared out without seeing the view.

Behind him, she sighed. When she spoke, her voice sounded beaten. "I'd deserve it if you did. I should have told you up front it was Reed who had the globe."

"I wouldn't have helped you if you had." His anger started to trickle away. Gathering it up, he held it close. She planned to leave him when he needed her most. Not that he had any right to ask her to stay. Hell, he hadn't even told her he needed her, but what did it matter now? "Go, Aidan." He turned, glad the mask hid his inner turmoil. "Leave." He strode to the door. "I've got a job to do."

"War, wait." She ran to block his exit. "Listen to me. I can't let him kill my brother."

For several heartbeats, Aidan thought he might not understand. "My brother is the only person I have left of my family. He might not be much, but I can't let Balten kill him." *Please, please understand.*

Warwick's hands fisted and released. Then he met her gaze, his eyes ice blue staring out of the black mask. "Balten killed my parents."

"Oh no," she whispered. *Oh Gods.* What had she done?

Balten had thrown the acid on him. Balten was the man he planned to destroy. She felt the room spin while all the pieces clicked into place.

“I didn’t know.” Not that it mattered. She’d betrayed him, even if she hadn’t known the extent of her lie. She would have killed for him, had planned on killing for him. Not just for him. For the little boy Balten had terrorized and hurt all those years ago. But instead she’d used him to steal for his greatest enemy.

“Now you do.”

“War.”

“Return the globe and free your brother. I’ve paid my debt to you.” He literally picked her up and moved her out of his way, his hands gripping her arms so tightly, she knew they would leave bruises. “I only ask that you stay the hell out of my life from now on.”

With that, he walked out the door, leaving Aidan standing there, the guilt crushing down on her.



## Chapter Eleven

Warwick slid into Reed's office to stand beside the door. Trevlin smirked, but no one else seemed to notice his arrival.

War was so preoccupied by his fight with Aidan, he didn't listen to Reed and Balten's conversation.

She'd betrayed him. A sharp pain lanced his body.

She was leaving.

He'd ordered her to go.

But what had she done that was really so bad? She hadn't known Balten was his enemy.

*She lied.*

Yes. She said she was stealing from a guest. She didn't tell him about Reed. Or more importantly, about Balten.

She'd used him.

But she'd told him she would, hadn't she? Told him what she was going to do before she did it.

A memory of her on his sofa flashed through his mind. *I thought you were going to be hideous. But you barely have anything wrong.* And what had she said later? *Wait, I'm turning in my favor. I'm not trading sex for your help.* She hadn't slept with him to get the globe. He would have helped her to repay this debt without anything sexual on her part. She knew that.

When he'd told her about Balten, her face had turned white and her hands shook. He'd been too furious to even understand what it had meant, too angry to listen to her explanations.

And she'd been trying to save her brother. What would War do if his brother were still alive? If he hadn't died of a terrible, wasting disease when he was a child, but had

lived to grow up and make mistakes? War would lie, cheat and steal to make sure he was safe. Why had he penalized her for doing the same?

How could he be such an idiot? He was ready to put into effect his revenge against Balten. Why hadn't he left with her? She seemed to enjoy touching him and he knew in that, at least, she hadn't been lying. No one could hide repulsion of the magnitude he generated.

It was worth sacrificing a little of his pride to have her hands on his body, wasn't it?

Of course he wanted more. He would be a fool not to. She was everything he'd ever wanted. Strong and beautiful and courageous.

He leaned against the wall and briefly closed his eyes. Having something was better than nothing. He would take whatever she would give for as long as she would give it.

If he went now, he could catch her before she left the palace, or at the launchpad if she'd found a way to the trading post already. Hell, he could track her straight to Balten's stronghold on Trilby if he had to. He knew she was smart enough to go directly to where her brother was being held to make the exchange.

Balten's voice brought him out of his stupor.

"I know you have the globe, Landrig," Balten said.

Only a small handful of his men were in the room, balanced by an equal number of Reed's men, now that War had arrived.

Reed smiled smoothly. "Come now. Why would I steal something so inconsequential from you?"

"Let's not play games. You know what's inside it."

"Do I?" Reed sat back into his chair, raising an eyebrow. His eyes sparkled, his nose twitching like a mouse when it played a dangerous game with a cat. So much fun until the risks caught up to you.

"If you don't, you're crazier than I thought you were." Balten leaned forward and touched his fingertips together, a deceptively mild gesture. "I want it returned to me, or we'll end up in a war over it."

The thought of these two men engaged in battle made War glad he had decided to leave. It was only a matter of time before they had a trail of dead bodies in their wake.

Reed rose and paced to the end of the room to pour himself a glass of liquor. When he turned, he raised one eyebrow. "You've managed to produce synthetic ganderen spice."

War's whole body tensed with surprise, which he immediately tried to cover by shifting his weight. Ganderen grew only on the planet of Mardova and was prized among the Inner Worlds for its ability to heighten sexual experiences. Many people had tried to grow it elsewhere, but it would only thrive into maturity on Mardova, which made that planet very, very rich. Scientists had been trying to duplicate it for years. Whoever broke that monopoly would be wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.

Balten shrugged as if it didn't matter to him. "Another failed attempt, I'm afraid. But my labs are close and we need that sample. The original formula was lost in a recent fire, so my technicians will have to attempt to reverse engineer it. But to you, the sample would be useless."

Reed laughed. "It certainly acts like ganderen."

Balten jumped to his feet. "Tell me you haven't taken it?"

"Of course not. Tiffany graciously consented to try it for me."

Dread raced over War's entire body. Tiffany had given synthetic ganderen spice to Aidan. He forced himself to listen to the conversation, instead of run from the room to find her.

Balten sat again and tapped his chair arm. "We've found that it causes side effects that we hadn't anticipated in some individuals." His words were cautious.

Reed slammed down his glass. "What kind of side effects?"

"In high doses, it can burn a person from the inside out. Some users have flashbacks up to several standard lunar rotations later. Repeated use seems to cause short-term memory loss and hand tremors. The list goes on." Balten waved a hand. "We're working through the issues. But the point is, you can't do anything with the sample without grave risk. It's only useful to my team."

War was glad he leaned against the wall for support. The thought of Aidan overheating and dying last night left him weak. He needed to get to her, tell her what she had in her possession. In her body. Gods. Hand tremors and flying didn't mix. His stomach twisted with the realization she could have a flashback at any time.

"You plan to sell it regardless of the risks." Reed picked up his drink again and swirled it around. "Don't try to tell me you won't, Balten. You could care less if it kills. And there are plenty of people willing to tempt death to get this kind of high."

War had heard enough. He needed to find Aidan. Now. He pushed himself off the wall but the door opened and Tiffany appeared, her face red and her chest heaving as if she had been running.

"Reed! The globe! It's gone!" She stumbled to his side, her steps constrained in the full-length gown she wore.

"What?" Reed slammed the drink onto the sideboard.

"That horrible woman. She took it, Reed."

Reed grabbed Tiffany's shoulders and shook her so hard, her teeth rattled. "What woman?"

"That woman who came with Warwick." She stared at Reed with real fear in her eyes.

Reed's gaze jerked to War.

War relaxed against the wall again. His body went into fight mode and his brain took in the location of every person in the room. Balten had half risen from his chair, a thread of panic at the missing globe revealed in the gesture.

"Where is she?" Reed snarled.

War shrugged. "She had a family emergency of some sort. I believe she's on her way to her transport." He breathed calm into the room. That was the trick to being a good Enforcer. Know when to fight and when to talk. He would talk now. "It is easy enough for me to catch up to her before she leaves."

"You brought her into this house." Reed flung Tiffany away. She toppled into a chair, unable to catch her balance on her high heels. No one moved to help her.

“I did.” He filled his words with boredom. “I’ll find her, Reed. This is not a problem.”

He watched with interest as Balten relaxed into his chair, his face calculating. War knew Balten would soon figure out who had the globe. War would bet it was only a matter of moments before Balten left to return to Trilby to wait for Aidan’s arrival.

“I want that globe back.”

“Have I ever failed you?” War had worked hard to earn Reed’s loyalty, and now he’d use it to his advantage.

Reed stalked to his drink and took a long swallow. “You better not start now, Warwick.” The glass shattered in his hand and he let the pieces fall to the floor, not even noticing that blood dripped down his hand. “I would hate to have to hunt you down and make you pay for allowing her to escape.”

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Time was of the essence now. Aidan would need to leave as quickly as possible, since she hadn’t bothered to hide the fact the globe was missing. How could she? It had been sitting in his bedroom, where he could look at it while he had sex with Tiffany. The idea that he’d been turned on by stealing this from his enemy made her nauseous.

With Balten here, it seemed as if she should stay instead of go to his home planet. But Aidan would only exchange the globe for her brother. She wasn’t trusting Balten to simply release Zach on his own. She knew she needed to be there in person to make that happen, which meant she would have to go back to Trilby and wait for him there.

What the hell was he up to, anyway? Showing up to get the globe himself was an unexpected move. In fact, it was downright insulting. Did he think she would fail in her mission? What was he going to do with her brother if he retrieved the globe first? He would have taken away one of her two options. Being with Balten was no longer an option. She wouldn’t sleep with a man who threw acid on a child, not even to save her brother.

She wondered again what the liquid in the globe could be that would make it so important. The glass itself wasn't anything special so it had to be what was inside that he wanted.

She found someone to take her back to the transport pad without much trouble. One of the cooks needed to pick up a delivery for the celebration dinner and dropped her off.

Her whole body ached and her hands trembled. She felt sick to her stomach that she had treated Warwick as she did. Only last night she'd been mad enough to kill for him. Instead, she'd betrayed him. And for that, he had rejected her.

She had no doubt she owed him a great debt, not only for getting her into Landrig's palace so she could steal the globe, but more importantly, for helping her through the drug with a gentleness and caring that still left her reeling.

At least she was with her transport again. That was a comfort, even if it did look like a giant, flying bug. The design was standard enough for the older models, with a squat, round cabin topped with a small gunner's nest, but she'd upgraded the engines for extra speed and painted the hull blues and grays to blend into the majority of the planets in this quadrant. Flying on ice worlds meant special improvements, all of which she'd gone to great length and expense to accomplish. Just looking at it consoled her somewhat. Her ship couldn't tell her to leave.

Running through the motions to start the transport preflight countdown, she wondered if she should try to see Warwick after she gave the globe to Balten. Find him so she could apologize. He had been clear, though. He didn't want her in his life. *But he bargained for one more night after I returned the globe.* Well, it was clear he'd reconsidered.

She wasn't sure how long she'd have to wait at Balten's before he returned from visiting Landrig. Not long, she'd bet. Especially if he learned the globe was missing. He'd assume she had it and would know she would go to his castle to return it to him. She really didn't have any other choice. She'd ransom her brother, and then she would think about War.

Resting her head on the console, she finally let the tears out that had been building for hours now. “Dammit,” she screamed, leaning back in her chair. She hated crying, hated being out of control. “You are so stupid, Aidan. It’s just a man.”

Slashing the tears from her eyes, she took a deep breath and rose from her chair. She would need to do a final walk around the outside of the ship before she could leave. Her transport could only fly small hops between closely located planets. She would need to go to Sector 12 to catch a star cruiser to get to Balten’s home planet of Trilby.

Making her final check at record speed, she jogged back into the transport. She couldn’t wait to get off this ice planet from hell.

With a final, sorrowful look at Sector 9, she wiped the tears from her face. Warwick had made her feel so warm and alive. What did it matter now? She would go back to being an Ice Princess again with her heart forever trapped in ice.

She pressed the door lock.

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Warwick arrived in town in time to watch her leave. Standing at the edge of the launchpad, he put his hands on his hips and dropped his head forward, controlling the urge to smash his fist through something.

He stood there for a long time. His mind wouldn’t function enough for him to think about anything but flashes of her face. The stroke of her hands when they brushed down his skin, the way she had said she wanted him to take off the mask when she’d first come under the influence of the drug, the salty taste of her body the first time he’d placed his lips on her stomach.

That stopped him.

She’d come from Sector 12.

She couldn’t fly her transport out of this quadrant. She’d need a star cruiser to get to Balten’s home planet of Trilby. There was a large chance she’d return using the same route.

If worse came to worst, he'd hunt her all the way to his enemy's stronghold. She wasn't getting away.

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Aidan spent the last half of the day arguing with an asshole mechanic over the cost of repairs to her ship. She'd run into a meteor storm on the way to Sector 12 and her shielding had sustained damage. She needed the repairs completed by the time she returned from Balten's.

Standing by her transport, she watched them haul it away, her bag at her feet.

To say her life sucked right now would be a gross understatement. Her stomach balled up at the coming confrontation with Balten. Getting Zach free was only part of the nightmare. Afterwards, she would have to tell him she was done bailing him out, done being his sister, and she didn't look forward to that at all. With War's rejection, Zach was the only person left in the universes who she could call her friend. The thought was a large weight on her chest.

She shoved it aside. *Think, Aidan. Now is not the time to get maudlin.*

There was a chance Balten and Reed already knew the globe was missing. At the latest, Reed would find out when he went to bed tonight. She needed to leave this quadrant and disappear into the galaxies before one of Reed's men caught up to her. There was no way Balten would sell her out to Reed. He wanted the globe too badly for that. He'd proven it by showing up at Reed's palace.

A man standing by the next transport glanced behind her and did a double take, the expression on his face telling her he didn't like what he saw. The air at her back moved, causing the hairs to stand on the nape of her neck. She'd felt that stir of power before.

Spinning on her heel, she came face to face with War. The sight of him standing there so unbalanced her, she stumbled. A big hand caught her arm and brought her against his chest.

"You got off Sector 9 faster than I expected." His voice held no emotion.



Why was he here? Her heart pounded and her mouth went dry. Could he have forgiven her for lying? Was he here to accept her apology? “War.” She tried to think of something intelligent to say, but was at a loss for words.

“Aidan.” Once again, no emotion came through in his voice.

She wanted to rip the mask from his face and see him. Instead, she searched his icy gaze. “I didn’t consider you’d be looking for me after...” She let the rest hang in the air between them.

His eyes narrowed and the grip of his hands tightened. “The globe is full of synthetic ganderen spice.”

She felt her mouth drop open and hastily closed it. The mystery of what was in the globe was solved. It left her speechless, her mind too overloaded to think clearly. Ganderen was impossible to duplicate.

Before she could reply, he said, “I want to make a deal with you.”

“Deal?” Her body went on full alert. He didn’t want her. He wanted a business arrangement. She choked back a sob. He hadn’t returned to accept her apology.

“I’ll get your brother out of Balten’s dungeons and you give me the globe.”

She blinked. Why would he want synthetic ganderen spice? “You want to sell it?”

He laughed, a sharp bark without humor. “Not hardly. I plan to give it to a friend of mine at the Inter-world Council. They’ll be interested to know Balten’s labs have developed something which had been considered impossible to duplicate. The Council will be all over him. He’ll have to shut down his illegal operations until the investigation is completed. Balten will lose profits and anger his customers. That will be the perfect time for me to exact my revenge.”

He didn’t want her. He wanted vengeance. She was such a fool to think he’d forgive her. His whole life had been built around Balten, why would he change after only days with her?

Warwick went on, his eyes sparkling with his plans. “If Balten sells the synthetic ganderen spice, it will end up as one of the most popular drugs of all time, especially if he

plans to lower the price far below the real thing. He can already taste that money, maybe even has counted on it. Just keeping the globe from him would be a serious blow.”

Something niggled at the back of her mind. “Did they know that the globe was missing before you left?” Her unfocused mind sharpened. “If you know what’s inside, you had to hear Balten talk about it.”

War nodded. “That’s what Balten came for. He wants his globe back. There was a fire in his lab and this is the only sample he has left.”

“Gods.”

That meant Balten needed this globe badly enough for him to show up at Reed’s to demand it back. Pieces began to fall into place. The stakes had just risen dramatically.

“But—” She shook her head, trying to sort through all the data. “But did they know the globe was missing when you left?”

“Yes.” He could have been a talking stone for all the emotion he held in his voice.

“So...so they just let you leave? Let you walk away?”

“Of course they did. I’ve never failed to complete an assignment yet. Why wouldn’t Reed trust me now?”

What was he thinking? She hated staring into the mask, hated having that barrier between them, but she’d lost her right to ask him to take it off.

“What does he want you to do?” Her gut tightened as she worried about how he might answer.

“Track you down and return you to his palace.”

“You aren’t going to do that, are you? Take me back there? I have to get the globe to Balten or my brother’s life is forfeit.” Aidan kept her face screwed up with concern, but mentally she thought about the knife in the sheath at her back and the one in her boot. Could she get to them in time? More importantly, could she hurt Warwick if he tried to restrain her?

“No, Aidan, I’m going to help you free your brother so you’ll give me the globe. This is too good an opportunity for me to pass up. The time is right for me to seek my vengeance. I’m no longer following Reed’s orders.” His eyes glowed with determination.

“To say nothing of the fact I won’t let this kind of drug get onto the market without a fight.”

Only the very rich could afford ganderen. The image of children buying the synthetic version on the streets made Aidan physically ill.

Then a horrible thought occurred to her. “I was drugged with it,” she whispered.

The spark went out of War’s eyes and he nodded. His bare hand came up to cup her cheek. “It has some side effects.” The tone of his voice turned soft.

Her whole body constricted in dread. “What?”

“The extreme rise in your temperature, for one thing. We were lucky you didn’t burn up from the inside out last night.”

For a moment, it flashed through her that he had said “we” instead of “you”. Then she realized there was more he wasn’t saying. “What else?”

“Tremors in your hands.”

She glanced at her hands. “That stopped hours ago.” When she met his gaze again, a tightness in his posture made her ask, “Anything else?”

“You could have flashbacks.”

“What does that mean?” She was frightened she might already know the answer.

“You might have another episode.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Without even thinking about it, she dropped her head onto his chest. Another round of the intense lovemaking they’d shared last night. Desire and fear shivered over her just thinking about it. War paused for a moment, his body stiff, before he massaged her neck. Turning her face, she caught people watching them from a distance and hid again. Let them look all they wanted. She didn’t care. She needed his comfort or she’d fall apart again.

What if she had a flashback when she was all alone? What would she do? The thought was so overwhelming, she could only focus on breathing in and out.

“I won’t leave you to face it on your own.” His voice was a low caress traveling along her whole body. The smell of leather and spice swirled around her. “I can hold it now, so it won’t accidentally break.”

*He won’t be there when you need him. He’ll be gone when he gets the globe. He doesn’t want you.*

The thought of being alone and out of control made her so angry all of a sudden, she pulled away from him. She would handle whatever came along. She always did, didn’t she? She’d have to. Crying again would buy her nothing.

“I’ll keep it for now.” She wasn’t going to hand over anything to Balten if she had another choice. “I’ll give you the globe when we get my brother out of Balten’s castle. If we can’t free him, I’ll have to exchange the globe. You need to understand that.” Her voice sounded cold and in control. Relief washed over her. She could deal with this.

He nodded, the action stiff. “Then the bargain is set.”

“The bargain is set,” she repeated. She would have her brother out of Balten’s prison soon. And then Warwick would be gone forever.

## Chapter Twelve

Warwick knew one thing was for sure. Aidan didn't want him anymore.

She sat across the passenger cabin as they flew to a space station where they could catch another shuttle to Trilby. She had spoken only a few sparse words since they set their bargain.

War flexed his left hand and shifted in his seat. Sitting for long periods of time made his scars tighten. He would be sore from this trip for days after they arrived on Balten's home planet.

The pain in his body mimicked the growing ache in his heart. He wished she sat beside him, as she had in the snow-do on their way to Reed's palace. He inhaled deeply to lessen some of the loss he felt.

His plan to break her brother out of Balten's castle was a simple one. In the past, he'd studied drawings of the structure, looking for ways to exploit any weakness Balten had. Eventually, he'd found Balten's weakest point in his finances, but for a long while, War had planned to invade his castle and kill him. That was before he realized breaking Balten by destroying the one thing he cared about would be so much more satisfying.

He still knew the layout of the castle Balten had bought the year he'd murdered War's parents. There were four different entrances that he would bet Balten hadn't bothered to secure. Two were gates that had been covered when the depth of the lake increased dramatically during one rotation, long before either he or Balten had been born. If he had put security on them, War would need to come up with another plan, but his gut told him Balten was too sure of himself to plug these routes.

Aidan hadn't even questioned how they would rescue her brother. That wasn't like her, but then again, she would have to speak to him to do that. Which she currently wasn't doing.

When they finally docked at the space station, he stood, gritting his teeth at the soreness on his left side. He ran his right hand down his aching ribs.

Aidan appeared at his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

He was surprised she even waited for him before leaving the shuttle.

"Nothing. Lead on."

She opened her mouth, then shook her head. "Fine. We're staying in a hostel not far from here." Turning on her heel, she marched off, leaving him no choice but to follow.

Moving with confidence and grace, Aidan strode into the space station, every inch in control. She was in her element with the number of pilots who congregated here.

Space stations were notorious hangouts for those looking for work or people who were from the vagabond social class. Most stations had rules on the length of time a person could stay. This forced the shadier element to rotate off, but sometimes they would leave only to come right back again.

When Aidan and he came to a crossroads, they ran into a wall of bodies, everyone pushing to their destinations down one of the five hallways. After hesitating, Aidan waded into the fray, only to be shoved back again. She turned sideways, obviously aiming to slide between the masses and make it to the other side. Her plan backfired, and she was spun backwards, ending up behind him. He caught her arm and hauled her to his side.

She swung around, a challenge in her eyes. The fact she'd stay here all day fighting her way across the crowd made him want her.

"Move behind me. I can clear a path."

For a moment he thought she'd argue, but then she nodded.

He plowed ahead, people parting in front of him as if by magic, tossing him furtive glances as they skittered out of his way. It used to annoy him, but it certainly came in handy at times.

They made it across the intersection in seconds. Aidan fanned out to walk by his side, pointing to a sign which marked the hostel.

Ducking through a portal on the left, they found the reception area mobbed with people. Several spacecraft must have dumped off their travelers at the same time.

“Listen up,” a man shouted, jumping onto the registration desk to obtain their attention. “We’re full.”

A shout went up in protest.

“We’re full up for the next eight hours. You want a room after that, come back. If you need a room now, there’s another hostel across the station if it’s not already filled. So get the hell out of here.”

Panic and chaos filled the room as the mass of people turned as one to race to the other hostel for precious shelter. War had just enough time to catch Aidan around the waist and spin her against the wall before the sea of bodies could knock them down.

Bracing his arms on either side of her, he took the brunt of the pressure and banging limbs as people struggled to get out the door all at once.

Aidan held on to him, her arms anchoring him, providing support when he would have been swept away with the tide.

Finally, they were two of six people left in the room.

War peeled his body away from hers and met her gaze.

She blinked, and let out a strangled laugh. “Holy smokes! I thought we were about to be trampled.”

He stretched out his still aching side. “It was close.”

“What’s wrong with your chest?” Her hands ran down the length of his body.

He winced with the desire the simple action generated. “The scars tighten when I sit for too long,” he heard himself admit to her. One single touch and he would tell her anything. War shook his head at himself in disgust.

“Okay, you remaining folks.” The man on the desk pointed to the two other men in the room and War, then jumped down. “I’ve got three more rooms left if you want them. No way I was announcing that in this crowd. They would have rioted.”

Aidan stiffened by his side. Crossing to the registration desk, War felt a certain satisfaction that she was now stuck for the night in the same room with him.

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They had eaten dinner in silence and now sat finishing their drinks. Aidan hated that War was this angry with her, but hoped they could at least work together during the mission to rescue her brother. If they didn't, things might go horribly wrong.

Picking up her glass, her hand trembled and she had to set it down again.

Blue eyes pinned her. "How long have you been having them?"

"This is only the second time." She heard the defensiveness in her voice and sighed. "Look, I don't want to talk about flashbacks, okay?"

"Fine."

The way he said the word made her think she'd hurt his feelings, although she had no doubt she was imagining things. Still, the thought made her relent enough to say, "I owe you a thank you for pulling me out of that crowd earlier."

He nodded, but his gaze rested over her right shoulder.

Turning in her chair, she saw a group of men at the bar. They hadn't raised their voices, but their expressions were so intense, the hair rose on Aidan's arms in warning. They were from opposing space raiding posses, the patches on the back of their flight jackets covered in two different slashing symbols. There were so many of these space gangs, Aidan didn't know their names, but they were easy to tell apart, since one group dressed in red jackets, the other in green. They were evenly matched, so much so, she had no doubt there would be trouble. Neither side would back down.

"We need to go." War stood in a fluid motion, the muscles in his arms rippling when he tensed them.

As she climbed to her feet, the number of green jackets suddenly increased, members of the gang materializing as if from thin air.

She and War had to go around the bar to reach the exit.

Things were heating up and Aidan touched the knife she had tucked in the hollow of her back for reassurance. They'd had to check their blasters when they'd docked, but she still had both her knives. She knew War did too, although she'd never seen them.



The shoving started when they were even with the men at the bar. It happened so quickly that Aidan could only react by instinct. When one green-jacketed man flew at her, she spun on her boot heel, letting him roll off to hit a nearby wall. The men who followed him flowed around her, separating her from War. Red jackets raced by, then more green. The roar of yelling from both combatants and onlookers made it impossible to make out any individual words.

When she saw the knives come out, Aidan knew she was in trouble.

Dropping into a crouch, she pulled her own blade from her boot. It had been awhile since she'd practiced this kind of combat. She'd been copilot on a space freighter early on in her career and the captain had taught her quite a bit during the long hours the ship flew on autopilot.

She carefully reversed, making her way to the wall so she could protect her back. From her peripheral view, she saw a man in black wading towards her, but she concentrated on the green jackets that turned in her direction when she'd pulled the knife.

Chaos erupted.

There was now no rhyme or reason as to who was fighting whom. Onlookers joined the fray as the fight spilled through the restaurant. It had become an all-out brawl.

Three men advanced, their faces lit with the sheer joy of fighting. Aidan couldn't defend herself from them all at once, so she stepped into the one on the right as fast as she could and kicked his knees so hard, the pain in her foot shot up her body. As she hobbled backwards, her target dropped like a rock.

She spun to place the wall at her back to give herself distance from the remaining two. They spread out to attack her flanks, proving they weren't as dumb as they looked.

When she saw them leap at once for her, she dropped to her left onto her knees and stabbed the closest guy in the top of his shoe. The knife sliced through and stuck into the synthetic floor. The air stirred behind her as the second man made his move. After one futile tug at her knife, she abandoned it and dove into the room, rolling to locate her attacker.

A wall of black swooped above her and, as if swatted by the hand of a god, the man in the green jacket lifted and smashed into a nearby table.

Warwick hauled her to her feet and propelled her towards the door.

“My knife,” she yelled, but he kept going, not even noticing her attempts to turn around as he shoved people right and left.

Spilling into the corridor, they headed to the hostel as the station police ran by to break up the fight. War’s quick thinking had saved them from a night at the prison answering questions.

They entered their room without speaking. Aidan wondered if all communication between them had ceased forever.

War shut the door with a bang and threw the bolt. “Are you hurt?” he growled, prowling towards her, the tension in his body making him appear furious.

“No. Are you?”

He seemed to be favoring his left leg, but he shook his head.

“You’re limping,” she pointed out. “Sit on the bed and let me look at it.”

Instead of following her order, he advanced straight to her, throwing off his helm, then unfastening the mask.

Aidan stood rooted to the floor, surprised that he would unmask. She had thought he wouldn’t trust her enough for that again.

He tossed the black leather towards a table nearby, but it fell short by several hand-lengths. Stopping before her, he pulled off his glove and chucked it away. Then he ran his hands along her sides, his fingers tracing the outline of her body. “I saw you get stabbed.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

It was the expression on his face that held her still. He was panicked, his eyes narrowed and focused on shrugging her out of her jacket, his lips compressed into a thin line. He turned her around and ran his hands down her back, as if he didn’t believe her when she said she wasn’t hurt. “I saw the knife go in,” he mumbled, confusion running in his voice.

“War, I wasn’t hurt.”

He opened her jacket up and put his hand through the sliced fabric dead center in the back.

Aidan whistled. "Whoa. That was close. I didn't even feel it."

"I thought you were dead." His gaze latched onto hers and she saw the worry there. The jacket dropped from his hands and he hauled her towards him. The hug he gave her tightened until she struggled to breathe. A feeling of rightness, of coming home, lodged in her heart.

Stretching up on her tiptoes, Aidan twisted her hands around his neck and brought his head down for a kiss. His lips were softer than they had ever been before, the hands framing her face gentle.

"I was worried." He rubbed his forehead against hers.

"Don't. I'm good at taking care of myself." She smiled and remembered that he had said his scars tightened when he sat for long amounts of time. Maybe they would soon walk away from each other, but she would be with him until they rescued her brother.

Would he reject her again? There was only one way to find out.

Taking his hand, she sat on the bed, tugging him with her. He followed, a question in his eyes.

She scooted across the small bed and patted the lumpy mattress before her. "Take off your shirt and turn around. I'll give you a back massage."

He stared at her, not moving.

"You said you tighten up when you sit too long."

For a moment, she thought he was going to refuse, but instead he stood and went to his pack. Spilling the contents onto the floor, he caught up a small bag and unzipped it. When he turned, he held a bottle in his hand. "I'm supposed to put this on the scars." He seemed unsure, as if he expected her to deny him this favor after he'd just saved her.

She would take any chance she could get to touch him again. Meeting his gaze, she held out her hand, and he placed the bottle on her palm. Then he wrestled out of his shirt, his actions jerking the fabric, ripping seams before he flung it away.

When he sat on the bed, she spilled the oil into her hands and rubbed them together. Working slowly, she started at his shoulder and left arm, kneading the hard muscles under her hands.

“Stretch out along your right side.” She encouraged him with a push of her hands. He went so easily, she had to smile. She had just found a way to tame him.

“You have no idea how good this feels.” His words sounded like a confession.

“It feels good for me too.” It was true. She felt wonderful touching him and enjoyed his pleasure as much as he did. It was a strange thought, but she allowed herself to have this moment. It might not come again.

Moving along his chest, she got to his pants and raised an eyebrow. His choice if she went on. He rolled to his back and wiggled from his pants, sitting to pull off his boots and throw everything to the floor. He lay again on his side, totally naked before her.

She gave herself a heartbeat of time to enjoy the sight of his body, before continuing her task.

Aidan returned to his shoulders and made her way down along his hip, then worked the oil into his thigh. He hissed a breath when she hit a particularly bad spot and she gently eased the knot from the muscle.

Why did she have these feelings for this man? Of all the men she could have chosen, why him? He was bent on revenge and she’d betrayed his trust. She wasn’t dumb enough to think he’d forgiven her. He’d made it clear that he was only with her until he had the globe. He wasn’t helping her for any other reason than it continued his revenge against Balten.

Even knowing all this, she wanted him.

There was so much about him that attracted her. She knew some of it was his sheer strength. She would never need to worry about him getting hurt. He could take care of himself. More than that, though, there was a strength of personality which assured her he wouldn’t be taken down by his own weaknesses, like her brother had.

Her hands stroked their way along his calf.

No, Warwick wouldn’t run up gambling debts. He would owe no one.

The thought stilled her hands as they glided across the arch of his foot.

When she blinked her eyes to return herself to what she was doing, she found him watching her intently.

“What were you thinking?”

Instead of answering, her gaze strayed to the hard length of his shaft. The response in her own body had her hands lifting from his foot to unbutton her shirt.

She would have this if he'd let her, this moment when their bodies were ready for each other. Pleasure for pleasure's sake.

After shrugging from her shirt, she pulled off her boots and stood to drop her pants.

His gaze followed every movement, the usually cold depths turning a warm cerulean.

She slid onto the bed behind him and molded her body to his, enjoying the hot contact of skin on skin. Now was not the time for a quick roll and tumble. She wanted all of him this once.

Using only her fingernails, she ran her hand from the top of his thigh along his ribs to dip down and circle his left nipple. The scars were rough below her fingers but his moan told her he enjoyed her caress.

“Aidan.” Her name spilled from his lips on a groan.

She stroked down his firm stomach along the line of hair that grew up the center. Before she reached his cock, she reversed and went to circle his other nipple.

His hips moved back into hers, drawing her notice to his firm buttocks.

She raked her nails along the flesh there, then pushed him to his stomach to bite him lightly on the top of his hip.

“I’m warning you, I’m not going to take much more of this.” His voice was muffled.

“You always say that.”

“Because you drive me crazy.”

She straddled him to keep him in place and lowered her breasts to his back, teasing her nipples along his skin. She tortured herself as much as she tortured him, leaving her wet desire on his back where her sex met his skin. “Muscles on top of muscles.” Gods, she enjoyed touching his body.

He pressed himself off the bed in a pushup, rocking her forward to catch her balance on his back.

“Off,” he ordered, his patience done with her games. Looking over his shoulder, he growled, “Don’t make me remove you.”

She laughed. “As if you could.”

Holding on with her legs and arms about his body, she thought she would win, but he simply sat on his knees and rotated her around to his front. Then he lowered himself back onto the bed with her beneath him.

For a moment, they just gazed at each other, but she broke first to press a kiss onto his chin.

He caught her lips with his, still gentle, stroking his tongue into her mouth to lick along hers. Then he met her gaze and shifted his legs between hers. “Say you want me.”

“I do.” Her whole body turned to liquid and she rotated her hips to slide her sex along his shaft so he could see how much.

“Say it all.”

“I want you.”

Then he entered her, a long, slow penetration, which made her moan and fight the need to close her eyes.

When he reached the top of her sheath, he rested hip to hip and stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. “I have never wanted anyone like I want you, Aidan.” His fingers outlined the shell of her ears, making her shiver. “When you touch me, I feel alive for the first time since I was a child. Why don’t my scars repulse you?”

She shook her head. How could she explain that they just didn’t? “I don’t know.” She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent, the smell so right it gripped her heart.

He moved but stayed deep, and she wrapped her legs around his to take him deeper. This wasn’t the same type of coupling they’d had before. Aidan could see the difference in the way he rocked against her as tightly as possible. As if he had to touch as much of her body as he could.

The intense contact kept constant pressure on her clitoris and an orgasm built within her. “War.”

“I can feel you tightening around me.” He stopped moving and rested his forehead against hers. “Don’t come yet. Stay on the edge.”

She tried to catch her breath and calm her body. Reaching up, she gripped the headboard of the bed to steady herself.

He kissed her, then tipped her chin so he could take her earlobe into his mouth. Swirling his tongue around the sensitive flesh, he bit her lightly. The combination of soft tongue and hard teeth sent a bolt of heat straight through to her clit, which was pinned against his body. She fought against the desire to grind herself onto him.

Distraction was what she needed. Turning his face, she trailed her tongue along the perfect skin of his cheek to the ruined edge of his ear. When she bit him there, his body convulsed in pleasure.

Then neither of them wanted to wait. He caught her hands in his and held her still while he stroked deep. Once, twice and that was all it took to send her over.

A shocking bolt of desire ran through her body, so intense she could only arch her back and call his name. As she came, she felt his release and her own pleasure sharpened again.

Then he freed her hands and held her tight, neither of them moving for a long, long time.

## Chapter Thirteen

The shuttle leaving for Trilby was scheduled to take off early the next morning. They barely made it.

They'd fallen asleep, curled tightly against one another, and it was only by chance that Aidan had woken. She said she'd been freezing on one side of her body and had reached for the blanket when she caught sight of the time.

Secretly, War wished she hadn't seen the clock. He didn't want to go back to the way things were the day before. It was so hard to return to silence.

She surprised him by sitting in the seat next to his, pulling his arm around her and promptly falling asleep again. He cradled her close, loving the scent of her. Rising late meant she couldn't wash their lovemaking from her body, and he could smell their mingled desire.

He cut the thoughts off there. He needed to get his head on straight and stop acting like an addled fool, or rescuing her brother was sure to be a disaster.

When he was younger, he'd scorned those people he'd considered lovesick. But now he realized it felt so good to have her near him, it distracted him from everything else.

Playing in her hair, he smoothed his thumb over the blonde-streaked strands. She'd put it up into a tousled ponytail as they dashed to the star cruiser.

It was so hard to remember she'd lied to him. So hard to stay angry when she kept her hands on his body. It was the casual touches that turned his heart over. They were better than even the most sexy of kisses.

Hours went by before she finally woke. "We need to work out a plan," he told her, watching with fascination as she blinked sleep from her eyes.

She sat up straight, meeting his gaze, suddenly alert. "What had you been thinking when you made our deal?"



“We need to get Zach out as fast as we can. The longer we stay on Trilby, the more likely it is that Balten will hear of our presence.” He allowed his hand to fall casually onto her leg, where it felt right sitting there. “There are four entrances that he’s left with only minimal security. We’ll try each of them until we make our way inside. Then we’ll have to get down to the cells in the dungeon.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So you don’t really have a plan, do you?”

“Sure I do. It’s just built around simplicity.” He grinned at her. “Speed will be the key.”

She nodded, accepting his word that they’d be all right.

He didn’t plan to let her down.

After the cruiser docked on Trilby, they disembarked and left the launchpad at a fast clip.

They caught a transport to Savage Row, the nearest town to Balten’s castle.

The town was at the base of a mountain. Trilby had only been colonized by the Inter-world Council Expansion Program in the last few human lifetimes due to a history of large amounts of volcanic activity. Over the planet’s long existence, the volcanoes had died down and the smoke that had kept the whole planet in continual darkness dissipated, although the air still had a burnt, sulfurous smell to it. Now the rocky, mountainous landscape was livable, although the Inter-world Council had to bring in wildlife and foodstuffs that would grow and prosper on the planet. In areas, the landscape was still a hard, porous, volcanic rock that would eat through shoes and slice flesh.

War bought them both special shoes and gloves in Savage Row, as well as rope and several other items he thought they would need. Standing at the edge of town, he stared up at Balten’s castle, seeing it in person for the first time.

Nestled between two mountain peaks, the castle was the same black shade as the rock surrounding it. Rising in five steps to a tower at the top, the building was decorated with sweeping arches, making it look like a large black wedding cake. It appeared to hang from the side of a cliff, but War knew that from this angle, the castle’s positioning

was deceptive. There was an old volcano crater in a valley just out of sight from where they stood.

It was rumored that the original owner had copied the design out of an ancient text and, seeing it for the first time, he had to admit it was impressive.

Beside him, Aidan shifted, the small movement betraying her nerves. “How are we going to get up there?”

“It will take us a day of hard walking to reach the lake in the crater behind the castle. We should leave now to make the most of daylight.”

“We’re what?” Her shock took him by surprise.

“It’s a long way, but we can do it.”

“There is no way under the sun I’m trekking up there on foot.” She crossed her arms as if to end the conversation. “If we end up in trouble, we won’t be able to escape fast enough.”

“It’s the best way to travel if we don’t want to be discovered. His security force won’t be looking for anyone to come in on foot.”

“Nope.” She shook her head with gusto.

“Aidan.”

“Warwick.”

“Please don’t be difficult.”

She met his gaze with a dancing one of her own. “Stay here. I’ll be back.”

“I don’t want us to be separated.” War wondered what in the hell she was up to. Then it hit him that she was going to find a cruiser or some type of small transport.

“We won’t, as long as you’re here when I return.” She turned on her heel and set off at a jog.

With a sigh, War shrugged out of his jacket, put it on the ground and settled in to wait, kicking himself for letting her leave without him. Although he supposed if they wanted to leave as few traces of themselves as possible, him staying out of sight was a good move. Still, he didn’t like it. He should have anticipated that a pilot would never go for a plan which didn’t include something shiny and airborne.

Aidan needed to stash the globe. She'd been having creepy-crawly portents of doom all day. Premonitions. Of course, she didn't really believe that's what they were but it was better to be safe than sorry.

She returned to the transport area, feeling a twinge of guilt that she hadn't told War what she was doing. Still, she thought as she opened a cyn locker, it would be best if he didn't know, just in case something happened. *Like what? You're just afraid you can't trust him.*

Well, in her defense, when she'd used him to get to Reed, she'd blown the trust between them. Her gut said to hide the globe, so she would.

Stuffing the globe into the small space, she felt instantly relieved. Carrying it had become a huge burden once she'd figured out what was inside. The lockers didn't look like they were the best security around, but they had to have a fingerprint to reopen them—from a live finger. So in theory they'd have to wait to kill her until after she opened the door.

Aidan grinned as she pressed her thumb to the locking mechanism, even though the joke wasn't funny.

It was the best she could do at the moment, but it wasn't a bad move.

She hoped.

If something went wrong, the globe wouldn't be found with her. That would at least buy her some time.

Finding the PodCruiser wasn't hard, but they made her pay triple its worth no matter how much she bargained. Most of it was refundable if she returned the cruiser without damage, but the salesman had said this with a smile. Besides, if anything went wrong and they had to run, it would be hard to keep the ship dent-free.

The small cruiser was oval, could seat two people and had a roll-down top, which she'd lowered after her head brushed the top. There was no way War would fit with it up if she was having trouble. Adding to its issues, they'd have to steal another transport from

Balten in order to get her brother out. But it had been the only thing she could find so she'd bought it.

She pulled up to where War waited and grinned at him from the small ship. "Why walk when you can ride?"

"Why indeed?" he asked as he climbed in, not in the least bit surprised at what she'd done.

Aidan liked the PodCruiser, although it had the tendency to pull towards the right after War sat beside her. She had to keep both hands on the steering bar to balance the difference in his weight. Skimming only five or six hand-lengths above the ground, the Cruiser floated along at the pace of a person jogging. Not fast, but certainly better than walking, in her opinion.

She had to slow down when they began to climb. It took a tremendous amount of focus to adjust for the continuously changing landscape below her. No wonder the salesman had smiled. One loss of concentration and the cruiser would hit the ground.

Complicating things, the cruiser wasn't built for War's body size. They were smashed together, his hip pressed against hers and his arms seemed to have no place to go. With his knees to his chest, the Cruiser rocked when he shifted.

"This thing isn't very stable."

Aidan caught the thread of irritation and worry in his voice. "I'm sure the designer didn't think it would ever be used to carry a giant."

"I'm really not much bigger than the average person."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm the same height as Reed Landrig."

She found that hard to believe, but gave him the point. "Maybe, but you take up double the room." The land turned steep. The black landscape made her struggle to gauge the distance between her ship and the ground. Flying at night would be impossible. The thought concerned her, since it was likely when they left, it would be at a run.

But even with her current issues, no matter what she flew, she felt wonderful. She'd known the first time she'd ever sat at the controls of a ship that this was what she wanted

to do with her life. Inside, she was free, depending only on her own skills to make the craft fly. There was no one else's judgment she had to rely on, no one who could let her down. Her ship might have maintenance issues, but only if she didn't keep up with repairs.

It was more than that, though. It had to do with the thrill that rode through her as she pushed her hand-eye coordination and her daring to the limit.

Like now. There was nothing easy about flying an unknown machine. The PodCruiser was clunky and unwieldy, but she loved every moment of skimming along the surface.

They circled wide around Balten's castle to keep out of his security zone and landed on the far side of the lake. It was late afternoon, the sun just setting on the horizon. The black mountains ringing them took on an ominous color in the red of the setting sun. Instead of being beautiful, they absorbed the light and became dark, forbidding sentinels guarding the surrounding land.

"I don't like this place." She scanned the mountains, worry making her chest tight.

"The lake is disconcerting."

Aidan hadn't looked at the lake yet. When she'd been here before, she'd landed inside Balten's courtyard and hadn't even seen any water. But now she did. The sunset glittered across the surface, the waves black even in the direct light.

She went to the edge of the water and peered down. "It appears bottomless."

"It's deeper than you would think. The volcano we're standing on blew the top off this mountain and then went extinct. Rain collected in the depression and the lake was formed."

"How do you know so much about it?"

War met her gaze, the mask giving him an appearance similar to the lake. "I've spent my whole life learning everything I can about Balten. I've studied his every move, learned about all of his businesses and know every detail about anyplace he's been or lived, including Trilby."

Aidan stared down into the water. It seemed such a waste of a life. What would it be like to live like this? To spend every moment learning about your enemy? To know every piece of their life but not to have a worthwhile existence of your own?

“I hope someday you’ll be free of him.” She fought her sadness and met his fathomless gaze.

“I will be.”

“And then what, War?” Her frustration with his situation made her voice sharper than she meant it to be, but she didn’t try to soften it. “Then what will you do with your life? Go back to Reed or another power-hungry maniac? Spend the rest of your life beating people for money?”

His head jerked as if she’d slapped him.

It hadn’t been what she intended to say, even if it was true. “I’m sorry.” She tried to take the words back. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

He turned from the lake. “It’s the truth.”

“No, listen.” She put her hand on his arm to stop him from walking away.

He stumbled backwards, more upset with her than he should have been, the action surprising her so much, she didn’t at first notice his legs going out from under him. Her grip tightened out of reflex and they both crashed into the water with a splash. Letting go of him when she landed, she fought her way up to the surface.

Had he fallen? Or pulled away from her?

No. It felt like his body had been yanked in the direction of the lake, not as if he’d toppled or lost his balance.

“War!” She swam in a circle, searching for him. “Where are you?”

Panic built inside her as she saw she was the only thing moving on the surface. Gods above, was he drowning?

She dove down but couldn’t see anything in the murky water. It was a dim soup and she could barely see her own hand.

Coming to the top again, she gasped for breath, turning, turning. What if he was gone? What if she’d lost him already?

War burst to the surface twenty feet from her, his arms flailing at something below the water.

Aidan swam as fast as she could towards him. The water pulled her down, her clothes, heavy boots and jacket like weights around her. She shrugged out of her jacket and kicked off her boots, then started swimming to him again.

A giant tentacle rose out of the water behind him, the long arm covered with little beak-like mouths that opened and closed with clicking sounds.

“Behind you,” she screamed, picking up speed as she swam to him.

What in the hell could it be? Giant squids required salt to survive, but this water was fresh, collected from rain.

Grabbing her knife from the sheath in her belt, she lunged and drove the blade into the monster. It let out a horrendous squeal, pulling away from the pain. Holding on with both hands to the hilt, she was lifted into the air. The beast whipped its limb to free itself and she almost dropped.

The sharp knife ripped through its tough skin as her body weight increased dramatically now that she was out of the water.

Black, ink-like blood sprayed from the gaping wound.

The monster tossed her again, the limb thrashing through the air as if it were a whip.

Her blade ran down the arm for several hand-lengths before she cut clean through its flesh.

She was higher than she realized and had a second to remind herself to hold on to her knife before she hit the water in a sitting position.

Pain ratcheted up her spine, irritating an old back injury from when she’d had to crash land during flight training.

The air in her lungs whooshed out from the sting, and she inhaled a mouthful of water in reflex.

It took total concentration for her to surface, fighting the panic which threatened to overwhelm her. Using only one leg to kick, since the other was still numb from the impact, she came up coughing.

Something grabbed her waist and she jerked open her eyes, expecting to be captured again by the creature who'd attacked them.

Warwick held her, his mask still in place despite the unexpected trip into the water. "We must get out of here."

"Agreed." She'd never wanted to be someplace else as much as she did now. Her feet tingled in anticipation of another attack.

Swimming together, they made it to the side and hauled themselves out onto the shore. The porous rock shredded her palms, so she rolled to her back and stared at the grim sunset.

They both heaved for breath, the harsh sound filling the dead stillness around them.

"Well, that answers why Balten didn't put security on the two entrances to the castle that are under the surface of the water." War struggled to his feet and picked her up.

"I can walk." Could she? She wasn't sure. Adrenaline shot through her body, making her quiver.

He didn't argue but he didn't put her down, carrying her to the protection of a rock outcropping before lowering her onto the ground. He followed her, laying on his back and staring up into the fading sunset.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not really." His head rolled so he could stare at her. "That was a nasty shock."

"For me too." She pushed her hair out of her face, trying to calm her racing pulse. "I almost lost it when you were under the surface for so long."

He stayed silent for several heartbeats. "I always thought it was Balten's own arrogance that left the water routes unguarded, but now I realize I've underestimated him." He sat as if his body hurt, the action slow and stiff. "I wonder if the two other ways in will have nasty surprises like this one?"

Aidan shivered at the thought.



## Chapter Fourteen

War watched Aidan sit and knew something was wrong with her. Her actions were jerky and pained.

He cupped her chin to get her attention. “Where are you hurt?”

She shrugged off his concern. “My fall just irritated an old injury from a transport failure.”

“You crashed a ship?”

“Well, crash is a strong word. I prefer to think of it as an emergency landing that didn’t go as smoothly as it could have.” The amused twist of her lips was tinged with pain.

“What hurts?”

“The very end of my spine.” She peeled his fingers off her face one by one.

He let her. Her sense of humor reassured him. She couldn’t be hurt too badly and have this much attitude.

She held his hand in hers, and he found himself comforted by the simple contact. He’d been terrified when he saw her swinging five man-lengths in the air from the tentacle.

“I need to get those new boots you bought me. My tall boots are at the bottom of the lake, wherever that might be. Along with my favorite flight jacket.” The last was said with a moan, her pain at losing her coat greater than was warranted. But she was a female, so he thought it might be normal behavior for one of her kind.

He went to where they’d left their packs and returned to hand her dry clothes. “Do you need help?”

She shook her head, then shivered as the evening turned chilly now that the sun was setting.

Fighting a compulsion to watch her strip, War moved away and changed his own clothes. He didn't want to slow her down, since her temperature dropped in the cool air.

"Where's our next point of entry?" She paused. "You do have a backup plan, yes?"

"Of course." He turned to find her putting on boots. They had reinforced soles that wouldn't be eaten away by the volcanic rock. "Thermal vents run throughout the mountains here. According to information I bought from Balten's old head of security, there are several that ultimately empty into the dungeons below us."

She nodded, accepting his plan without question, trusting him to lead her in the right direction. "If we're going to go, we should go now, before the sun has totally set."

He helped her to her feet, careful not to yank on her arms and injure her back more. "There should be an entry point near here. We'll need to go slow in case we run into any new surprises."

The tunnel turned out to be a bit more hidden than he thought, but he finally located it right as the last of the sun sank below the horizon.

Aidan stared down into the hole. "Uh, Warwick. That looks like a black pit of death. You sure we should try this?"

"After the monster in the lake, I'm not sure of anything." He uncoiled the rope from the pack. Taking out a light stick, he turned it on so the whole arm-length bar glowed, then tied it onto the rope and lowered it down the hole.

They stared into the chimney-like opening. It was hard to tell where it ended, but it appeared to turn sharply to the left at the bottom of the rope.

"Okay, decision time. Do you want me to lower you and I'll climb down behind? Or do you want to stay here in case there is something bad around the corner we can't see?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You think I can't handle what's around the corner?"

He realized he'd worded his question incorrectly. "I think you can handle whatever comes your way." He gathered the rope, winding it around his hand and elbow. "I didn't thank you for what you did at the lake." He met her gaze. "I appreciate you coming to my rescue like that."

She shrugged. “Yeah, well, for some odd reason, I’m a bit protective of you.” Untying the light stick, she wrapped the rope around her own waist, her movements tense as if she were embarrassed. “I’ll go down first.”

He stopped her. “Aidan.” He wanted to tell her how he felt about her, but the words became muddled in his mind, so instead he dropped his mouth to hers.

The kiss had a level of desperation to it. The rope slipped from her fingers and she pressed her body along his, the action turning him on like nothing else could. The fact she wanted him still took him off guard. He couldn’t believe it. His cock jumped to life as he raked his tongue into her mouth. Her hands twisted in his shirt and worked their way under the layers of his clothing to his bare flesh below.

Deep within his throat, he growled, suddenly so hungry for their bodies to mold together, he couldn’t bear another moment without having her. Here. Now.

His brain warned him now wasn’t the time to lose focus, but it was too late.

Balten had turned out to be a wily opponent. Anything could happen when they went down the tunnel. He was rationalizing, he knew, but damn it all, now was the time to have what he so desperately wanted—his body deep inside of hers, driving to the hilt and pumping hard.

He sat, pulling her on top of him. Pushing his palm tight onto her sex, he ground a circle on her clit.

She cried out, breaking the kiss and arching away, her face contorting with need. “Gods, War, why is it always like this with you?”

“I don’t know, but the rock below me is eating away my pants, so we’re going to have to do this standing up.” He hauled her to her feet. “Unless you’re still in pain?”

“My injury won’t be an issue, but I don’t think having sex standing will be possible.” She frowned, staring at the jagged rock below them which could shred them to pieces if they fell. “Damn.”

“I can’t believe you’re giving up this easily.” He turned her around and unbuckled her belt. “You need to think more creatively.”

She laughed, but it became strangled when he lowered her pants to her ankles. “Oh, and you’re a creative thinker, huh?”

“I am when it comes to loving you.” He hadn’t meant to use those words.

She blinked, gazing over her shoulder at him. “I wish you weren’t wearing the mask.”

He turned her around. “No time to take it off. I need you now.”

Bending her over at the waist, he tested her readiness, dipping his finger between her folds. The slick wetness made his gloved hand slide and she moaned.

“You’re always ready for me.” He could hear the awe in his voice, but the thought overwhelmed him. He shook off his confusion and caught her around the waist. “I don’t want us pitching forward onto the rocks. We’ll be a mass of cuts if we do. So we’re going to do this in phases.”

“Phases?”

He could hear her laughter returning, but ignored it. “You come first, then me. Hold on to my arms and don’t let go, got it?”

“Um, okay. If you’re sure you can hold off.”

He bit her neck, his actions playfully rough, and reached a hand between them to free his cock from his pants. “I can hold off as long as you don’t take too long.”

She laughed, but it turned into a moan as he worked the head of his erection into her channel. She held on to the arm he had around her waist with a death grip.

Widening her stance as far as her pants at her ankles would allow, he pressed himself as deep as he could inside her.

He realized that in this strange position, she was unable to do anything but stay still or they might lose their balance. He’d effectively hobbled her.

The thought turned him on and his cock jumped. It wasn’t that he was a control freak, it was just that he didn’t often lead when he was with women. Instead, he gave dominance to them so they wouldn’t be afraid of him. The way they were having sex gave him all the power he’d ever wanted.

“War,” she gasped, feeling his response.

He took one of her hands off his arm and put it between her legs. “Touch yourself. I have to make sure we stay standing.”

He kept pressure on her hand until he felt her fingers move under his. Her other hand gripped his arm for balance as he began to thrust. His movements were short and strong, his body curved down over hers.

“War.” This time she said his name with a husky, pleasure-filled tone that went straight to his groin.

He bit her shoulder through her jacket, trying to control words that bubbled up his throat.

Her sheath tightened on his cock, spasming under his assault.

He knew the instant when she came, the wash of her orgasm and shudder of her whole body telling him the pleasure raced inside her, through her, along his cock, straight up to his heart, where it shook free things best kept secret.

“I love you, Aidan,” he breathed into her ear and his own orgasm punched through his body. It was all he could do to keep them upright.

His ears rang with the hum of pleasure, as his seed poured out inside her in jagged spurts.

“War.” Aidan’s panicked voice broke through his contentment. “Someone’s coming.”

He steadied her on her feet, then allowed her to step away and pull up her pants.

He had just enough time to tuck his cock in and straighten his clothes before twenty men rounded the corner of the rock, blasters drawn.

They were trapped.

## Chapter Fifteen

They were caught like rats in a trap.

Her first thought was that War had told her he loved her, but now it was too late to tell him her own feelings.

Aidan raised her hands, glad she at least had her pants up. That might have been more than she could handle, especially since Balten strode towards them. His gray face was highlighted in the harsh lights the surrounding men held before them. She shaded her eyes to see him more clearly.

He had a smile on his face. "So, the sister returns."

"I told you I would." Aidan was glad her voice came out sharp and clear. She couldn't show any weakness around this man.

"Ah, I see you caught up with her as you said you would, Warwick."

"I did."

"You obviously didn't know about the updated security system I put in a few lunar rotations ago, hmm? I have tiny motion sensors and cameras all over this area. Killing the man who installed it for me really did keep it a secret." Balten laughed, a high-pitched giggle of delight. "But still, I appreciate you bringing me my globe."

Aidan turned to meet War's gaze through the mask. He stared back at her without revealing his emotions. She wanted to ask why he'd told Balten he'd catch up to her.

The stinging thought that he had betrayed her went zinging through her chest. Had War lied when he told her why he wanted the globe? Had he promised Balten he'd bring her here so he could capture her? But she knew what she'd heard him say as he climaxed just minutes ago. Maybe he didn't truly love her, but he felt something, or he wouldn't have said what he did.

Would he?

*Come on, Aidan, trust him. Every time he touches you, his fingers don't lie. He cares. He has to. Besides, he wouldn't betray you to Balten, his greatest enemy.*

She shut her eyes. The image behind her lids was the one of him swinging her to the wall to protect her from the rush of people passing by in the hostel. That had been instinct. The same instinct that had caused her to swim into the lake after him only an hour ago.

When he touched her, love poured into her body. Or something. Maybe not love, but it was a start of something special, wasn't it?

"But you didn't return her to Reed as you promised. Instead I catch the two of you here." Balten nodded at two men, who came forward to grab War's arms.

A third man put restraints on his wrists. They tried to force him to his knees and for a moment, Aidan thought he would fight them but then he relented and dropped to the ground.

Balten closed the gap between them. "Reed said if I caught you here, you were all mine, Warwick." He threw the helm from War's head and ripped the mask from his face. "All mine." Balten leaned down dangerously close. "Maybe I should finish what I started when you were ten. Although throwing acid on you might be too fast of a way for you to die."

Without the mask, War was an open book, shock in every line of his face. Balten knew who he was and War hadn't anticipated that.

Aidan made herself stay where she was. They were surrounded. Fighting them was not an option, and even if they escaped and made it to the PodCruiser, she couldn't fly them off the mountain in the dark.

No matter how much she wanted to kill this man, she remained still.

*Revenge is best served cold.* That's what War had told her and he was right.

Standing there, she made a promise. Balten would die if he didn't kill her first.

War's rage was plain, his mouth twisted in a silent snarl. He stayed on his knees, not even trying to fight free, and that worried her as nothing else could. She couldn't stop herself. She had to protect him.

She caught Balten's attention by stepping forward. Every blaster in the clearing turned her way. "You can't blame me for trying to get my brother free. When you showed up at Landrig's I knew you were going to double-cross me."

"I couldn't be sure you would acquire the globe. Give it to me now and I'll let your brother go." Balten nodded at their packs. "Grab those but be careful. The glass could break if you're too rough."

"Do you think I'm dumb enough to just hand the globe over to you without first sending my brother someplace safe?"

"I hope for your sake it's in your pack, Aidan." Balten paused, promising her with his gaze alone that she would be sorry if the globe wasn't there, before he marched to their bags. "Bind her," he tossed over his shoulder.

Two soldiers held her arms while she, too, was restrained.

Aidan stared at Warwick. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head once, the action filled with helplessness. He didn't know she'd stashed the globe. He expected Balten to find it in her pack.

She tipped her lips into a half-smile, and shrugged one shoulder.

War's eyes grew big before his face went blank, as if he just realized he wasn't controlling his expressions. He turned to watch Balten personally going through their things.

He searched through them twice before he strode back over to her. "Where is it?" He snarled the question, putting his face a hand's length away from hers.

"Free my brother, Warwick and me and it will be yours."

Balten slapped her across the face so fast, she didn't even have time to see it coming. Blood exploded in her mouth, the inside of her cheek tearing open on her teeth. She kept her head down until she knew she wasn't going to do something pathetic like cry, then met Balten's gaze. "I left it with a friend who will not release it until I vidiphone from another planet. Did you think I wouldn't keep some insurance in case you were double-crossing me?"



Blood pooled in her mouth. She spit it at Balten's feet. If she swallowed too much of it, she would throw up, and she couldn't afford to show that kind of weakness.

Balten's right hand opened and closed several times while he debated his options. Then he turned on his heel. "Bring them to the dungeon."

War could barely function, he was in such a towering rage. Balten had touched Aidan. She belonged to him, and that bastard had touched her, had once again touched someone who was his. And Balten would kill her if he wasn't stopped.

The vision of Balten slapping Aidan across the face played over and over in his mind as Balten's thugs hauled them down a long, winding set of stairs.

In the hallway outside a large reinforced door, the whole procession came to a halt while someone woke the jailer on the other side with a series of loud bangs.

"War," Aidan whispered. "What's wrong?"

War turned his head slowly in her direction. Her eyes grew huge in her face and her mouth dropped open. She blinked twice.

"Stop. Whatever you're thinking, stop it. You must control your anger or we'll never get out of here." Aidan's eyes were still wide, but the shock had faded into worry.

She was right. He knew that. He had to think.

Balten had known who he was. How had he found out? War had gone to great lengths to hide his true identity. Somewhere there must have been a leak, a trail that led back to his parents and connected them to Warwick the Enforcer. He'd had a bad feeling at the palace that Reed had known who he was and now Balten knew. And that knowledge would mean Balten would have to kill him. His nemesis wasn't so dumb he'd leave War breathing, especially since he had to know War was out for revenge.

The prison door swung wide, and they were hauled inside and thrown into a cell.

The same cell. Idiots. They should have been separated. The bolt rammed home with a clank.

"Back up to the bars, and I'll take the restraints off," the jailor ordered.

Aidan went first, her gaze locked to War's, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. He sent her a small smile to reassure her.

When War had his cuffs off, he stood absolutely still until the men behind him left the hall and everything went quiet.

Then he prowled to her. She met him halfway and covered his lips with a gentle press of her fingers. Rising up onto tiptoes, she leaned forward to whisper, "The room is bugged or Balten's a fool."

Well, War knew Balten wasn't stupid. He'd found that out the hard way.

Instead of speaking, he caught her chin and turned it to the moonshine coming through a small window high in the wall. He studied her split lip, anger rolling through him until it escaped on a snarl.

Then he leaned down and whispered into her ear, just the barest puff of sound, "If you have to give the globe up to save yourself, do it. But don't risk your life for it," he met her gaze and murmured, "or for me."

She brought her lips to his ear. "You need to watch the expressions on your face. Balten will be able to read your thoughts without the mask."

He hadn't thought of that. In fact, he'd never had to worry about his face, since the mask made him that much more intimidating. But how would he control his facial movements?

From the darkness came a cough, making them both jump and spin. "I was hoping you'd come, but more so you'd get me out than for you to join me."

"Zach." Aidan stepped in front of War as if she was protecting him.

The thought was so odd, he almost dismissed it, but he was starting to see a pattern. He ran his bare hand down the middle of her back.

She shivered, just a small shudder in her shoulders, and leaned into his touch. It pleased him as nothing else could.

The person in the shadows moved into the light. He was gaunt, although War could tell he would be handsome if he hadn't been living on too little food for some time.

"Who is he?" Zach nodded in War's direction.

“Prepare yourself for this to be your permanent home, since we are well and truly screwed.” Aidan’s tone was hard. It sounded like she had no love for her brother, which he knew wasn’t the case.

“You’ll find a way to get us out.” There was absolute faith in Zach’s voice.

She marched forward, aggression in every line of her body. “A way out of the mess *you* got us in, Zach. Do you even realize what I’ve gone through? What I’ve had to do?” She slashed her hand through the air. “And that’s before I ended up in here.”

Zach moved away from her. “I—I know I messed up—”

“You always mess up. You do something and say you’re sorry and then a lunar rotation later, you’re back at it again. Well this is it. The absolute last time.” She turned and stalked towards the cell doors, a strangled laugh coming from deep within her. “That’s assuming we get out of here alive.” She gripped the bars.

“Aidan, please.”

She shook her head. “No. Not anymore.”

War stood there, torn. To have a brother and throw him away made no sense. Yet, Zach had put her at risk and that was unacceptable. “You’re addicted to gambling?”

“Yes,” Aidan said from the door.

“Not anymore,” Zach said at the same time.

She laughed, and it was not a nice sound.

“Do you think being locked in here this whole time hasn’t cured me?”

“No.” The word was stark and filled with pain.

“It has. I swear it.”

She turned to him. “You’ve sworn before.”

“I know I have but this time I mean it.”

“Yes. You do, but for how long? One little slip and you’re gone again.” She collapsed back against the bars and slid down to the floor. “And I just can’t watch you do it anymore. I can’t keep saving you from yourself. This was going to be the last time I helped you and now I’m not sure I’ll get out of here alive.” She paused and met War’s

gaze. “And I might have hauled you to a horrible death. Gods.” She shuddered and closed her eyes.

“Sooner or later this time would have come for me.” He resisted the urge to go to her, not sure now was the time to interfere.

“No it wouldn’t. You would never have come here. You told me so yourself.”

“Aidan.” He pitched his voice so it would purr down her skin, touch her when he couldn’t. It was the only thing he could do to console her with her brother watching them.

“Who in the hell are you?” Zach stalked across the room. His eyes grew huge at the sight of War’s face, and he took a fast step away. “Holy Gods, what the hell happened to you?” His disgust and horror were tangible in his voice.

War raised an eyebrow at him. He didn’t like to go without the mask, but he’d certainly had people see his face in the past. He was quite used to their reaction.

Aidan shot to her feet and was at his side in a blink of an eye. “How dare you. How dare you treat him that way?”

War caught her around her waist before she launched herself at her brother, her nerves combining with fear to create an even greater fury. She struggled in his arms.

“Aidan,” he whispered. “Don’t use me as an excuse to kick his ass.” He warned to the thought that she’d defend him, even if she had been only a hair’s breadth from violence from the moment she saw her brother standing in the cell.

Her body went still in his embrace, but he could tell she fought her temper by the deep, rapid breaths she took, her chest heaving under his arm.

“I don’t understand what I think I’m seeing. You cannot possibly be my sister’s lover and yet here you are holding her.” Zach shook his head. “She hates that.”

“Shut up, Zach.”

War tightened his hold on Aidan’s middle. “I hadn’t been aware this was anything special.” He tried to make his tone offhand, but inside his stomach tumbled at the revelation. Before they could all become even more derailed, he needed to get them back on track. “Aidan, I’ve heard it said that it’s hard for a person not to be reduced to a squabbling child around their siblings, but could you try to put aside your irritation with

your brother for a moment so we can put a plan together before Balten sends someone for us?”

“You’re right. This is not helping anything.” She took a deep breath and blew it out. “Zach, this is my friend, Warwick.”

War forced down a smile from appearing on his face. He wished for more than friendship from Aidan, but he would settle for friends when he had thought he’d have nothing. For now.

Zach gave him a once-over. “You don’t have friends.”

War squeezed her in case she went for her brother again, but she didn’t refute it.

“Yes, I do. Him.”

Friendship was suddenly elevated beyond what he’d first thought if he was her only one. War’s restraint turned into a hug, but only for a few brief moments because Aidan plucked the hand from around her waist, making him release her.

“Okay, so what’s the plan? Any way out of this place?” Aidan’s tone turned all business.

“Not that I’ve found or I’d be gone by now.” Zach stared at War, but spoke to his sister. “You didn’t get the globe?”

“I have it and it’s safe. I figured we would need the insurance in case Balten decided to double-cross us.” She didn’t care if Balten overheard them. He needed to know she wouldn’t give up the globe without obtaining their freedom first.

The far door at the end of the hall opened and the sound of men marching towards them rang in the cell. War stepped close to her and leaned down to whisper, “Keep out of my fight with Balten, even if I’m losing.”

She stared at him, chewing her lip as if she decided whether to agree or not. “Fine. As long as you keep out of my negotiation for my brother’s release.”

“I will.”

“Arms out so we can cuff you,” a guard ordered.

War nodded and turned, sliding his hands through the bars.

## Chapter Sixteen

The room they entered was huge, the ceiling stretching many man-lengths up to massive arches. Three chairs sat on the far end, but otherwise the space was free of furniture. Murals lined the wall, but were devoid of any life forms. They were leaping bursts of color interspaced with perfect circles and squares.

Aidan wondered what Balten used this room for. It could hold an army.

A creeping sensation ran up her arms when Aidan realized the room had no windows. It was lit only by sconces on the walls and three gigantic chandeliers.

Her pulse pounded in her veins, her breath rasping as her throat contracted with fear. Her sixth sense screeched that something bad was about to happen. She didn't know what, but her whole body was on red alert.

War walked before her, her brother behind. They'd sent thirty men to get them. A ten-to-one ratio. That told her Balten did not underestimate them.

They were each led to a chair and told to sit. Aidan tried to slow her breathing as the guards exchanged her cuffs for the restraints on the chair arms.

She glanced at War. He watched his guards with detachment, his face perfectly blank for the first time since she'd seen him without the mask. The view calmed her. If she had to be with any person in this situation, she'd pick him.

Balten emerged from a door to her right, dressed in a robe fit for a king. The fabric mimicked the slashing colors on the walls. "Here they are, my three favorite people all in a row."

Aidan's hands shook on the chair arms. Gods, she had to get a hold of herself. This was ridiculous, but her flight instinct was in overdrive.

"Let's see, who goes first?" Balten glanced at Zach, then Aidan, then War and smiled at him. "Ah yes. Reed was kind enough to inform me of who you are." He tipped his head and tapped a finger on his lips. "You know, I can almost see the likeness of your

father on the ruined side of your face.” He moved to the other side of War’s chair. “Yes, here we go. You have your father’s eyes. It was such a shame that I had to kill him.” He shrugged. “But he was a thief.”

“My father never stole from anyone.” The anger in War’s voice ripped at Aidan, and her arms jerked in their restraints, bruising her wrists.

Her protective instincts roared. She couldn’t sit by and let Balten play with them before he got down to business. The metal holding her arms to the chair wasn’t made for her smaller wrists. She focused on wiggling her left hand free.

“Of course he did. I found out later he’d run into debt when your brother died. Such a sad thing for a child to die in this day and age, but some diseases can’t be cured, no matter how hard the healers try.” Strangely, Balten really did look as if he thought it was a tragedy.

Chill bumps ran up Aidan’s arms. War had a brother. Who died.

And then his parents were killed when he was ten.

How lonely he must have been. How had he been able to stand it?

Balten tsked. “All those bills your father had to pay. They were about to default. And you know what happens to those who default.” He turned to Aidan’s brother. “Right, Zach? You lose your freedom and become an indentured servant until the debt is settled.”

“My father never took anything from you.” War’s voice was filled with pain, but his face stayed hard.

“He ran one of my legitimate businesses and wrote himself a check for the amount of the debt. He told me he planned to pay it back, but you and I both know that’s unacceptable.” He moved closer to War, their gazes locked.

Aidan jerked at her bonds, shredding her wrists and losing the progress she’d made. She couldn’t let Balten continue to hurt War with his revelations about the past.

“You and I know that no one takes anything from us. Ever. If they do, we crush them.” He paused, one side of his mouth tipping up. “That’s the way the strong stay strong. That’s the law of the land. Your father was dishonorable and paid the price.”

The expression on War's face, the set jaw, the hands gripping the chair arms, told Aidan he believed Balten. Something about the story must have rung true.

All at once, War sagged in his chair.

Aidan couldn't stand watching all of Warwick's childhood beliefs come crashing down on him. She had to step in. Fuck their deal in the dungeon. "Oh please, cut the sanctimonious crap, Balten."

Balten's head snapped in her direction.

"We both know Reed Landrig stole your globe. You didn't crush him. You're too scared he'll smash you like the bug that you are."

Balten stalked to her chair, his full attention turning on her. "And you stole it from him. I want it back, Aidan."

She had to keep Balten's attention until War put himself back together. "And you'll get it as soon as we're out of here."

"Your brother said you had no friends, Aidan. None at all. So who has the globe?"

Aidan looked at Zach. What had her brother told Balten? Zach shook his head, his eyes wide and innocent. The words were ones she'd heard before. Just as she'd thought, Balten had been listening to them in the dungeon.

"The globe is safe, Balten. I don't want anything to do with it. I only want to live long enough to get away from you."

"You won't live much longer unless you produce it immediately."

Aidan made herself smile, even though it hurt her split lip. "You won't kill me until you have it."

Balten ran a finger along her cheek. "No, but I'll hurt you so badly, you'll wish you were dead." To prove his point, he twisted his hand in her hair.

She gritted her teeth to keep from crying out.

Fear ran through her belly, ate at her courage, but she narrowed her eyes and played the only hand she had. "And you'll kill me if I give you the globe. So what choice do I have?"



Releasing her hair, he tapped her under the chin. "So much courage. I would have enjoyed you as my lover, Aidan."

From beyond his arm, she saw War's head rise. *Come on, War. Don't give up. We have to use every bit of wit we have between us to get the three of us free.* "You don't enjoy anything unless it involves pain." *Gods, don't let Balten figure out how important War is to me.* In a burst of clarity, she realized he was her Achilles' heel, just like her brother had always been.

"I believe you're right. And there is only one way to hurt you, I think." He turned to a guard. "Your knife."

The guard handed him one. Aidan steeled herself for what he would do to her.

Balten turned and, his hand fisted on the handle, drove the blade through Zach's hand into the wood of the chair arm. Her brother screamed.

Aidan inhaled so quickly, a keening sound filled the air. "Oh Gods, oh Gods, Zach." She fought the manacles on her arms, slipping on the blood from her sliced wrists. She had to force herself to stop. This was not the way to get free.

Balten smiled when she went still, then began the torture again. "How many people will you watch pay for your silence?"

"Don't tell him anything," Zach yelled, his whole body shaking with pain, his hand sliding up the knife, but he couldn't seem to dislodge the blade from the wooden chair arm. "If you give it to him, he'll kill us all."

Her whole body was on fire, and she shook with revulsion as she watched blood bubble up from her brother's hand and spill off the chair arm to the floor.

"I know you, Aidan. If I did this to you, you wouldn't tell me anything." Balten held out his hand to another guard and a second knife was placed into his palm. "But if I do this to others, you'll fold in only moments." He walked to War.

"No." Aidan fought to breathe, so angry at her helplessness she could only grip the chair arms. There was no way to protect the two people she loved except to give up the globe. "No."

“In fact, I’m willing to bet you fold right,” he raised the knife and whispered, “now,” and drove the blade into War’s right, unscarred hand.

She broke. “I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you.”

“No, Aidan,” War roared, his voice echoing through the room. He’d recovered from the news of his father’s betrayal. His gaze filled with determination and strength. “Tell him and we’re all dead.”

“It’s in a cyn locker.” Tears of helpless rage choked her throat and the words were lost. She couldn’t see War in pain. She would tell anyone anything, give anything they asked to keep him safe.

War’s hand twisted and the knife came free of the chair arm. “Don’t tell.” His gaze was steady, a peace falling over him.

“I can’t watch this. I can’t see you hurt.”

“Look at me.”

She did. Without the mask, she could see his blue eyes, framed with perfect lashes, the right side of his face unflawed. And she realized at this moment that he was perfect to her. She didn’t want to die here. She wanted to live and be with him for as long as he would have her.

“I have scars all over my body. More won’t hurt me.”

“Don’t tell him, Aidan,” her brother gasped from her other side.

“This is all so touching,” Balten said, striding back to Zach. “Really, it breaks my heart to even watch it. So in the interest of time, which I think we all agree is important here, I will speed this up by cutting off fingers.” He snatched the knife from Zach’s hand.

Her brother screamed, his body slamming back into the chair, and blood splattered across the floor.

Balten held down Zach’s hand, placed the knife over his little finger and met her gaze. Gently he whispered, “Pinky finger first.”

Aidan took a deep breath and said in a loud, clear voice, “It’s in a cyn locker in Savage Row.”

“Dammit,” Zach cried. “We’re as good as dead.”

Aidan wished she had a hand free to wipe her tears away. “No one loses body parts. Period.”

Rage crossed Balten’s face as the import of what she’d said became clear. She had to get the globe out herself. The lockers required a living fingerprint. “I should have known you would do something like this.”

“War and my brother come with me, or I don’t get it out.”

Balten threw the knife down the room, where it spun to a stop against the far wall. “I’m not freeing all of you.”

“Then I don’t go.”

Balten turned and strode to her, grabbing one of her ears in each hand and twisting. “Listen, you little bitch, I’m not releasing Warwick. You and your pathetic brother go on your way, but”—he pushed her backwards—“Warwick must die. I can’t have this kind of liability running around the universe. I’m not that stupid.”

From beside her, War growled. “You think you’re man enough to take me, Balten? Or are you going to get one of your men to do the work for you again?”

“You question my ability to inflict pain?” Balten turned towards him.

“No,” Aidan said, afraid of what he’d do to Warwick.

But she’d used up all of her distractions.

Balten leaned down to grab the knife from War’s hand.

With a battle yell that filled the room, bouncing around the ceilings and against the slashing colors on the walls, the muscles in War’s arm bunched and the manacle popped from the chair. Still yelling, he slammed his hand against Balten’s face, driving the knife point into his enemy’s cheek.

Aidan struggled in her bonds, her hands slick with the blood from her wrists. She had to get free to even the odds.

Balten stumbled back, but War wrenched free the bolts that held the chair to the floor and followed him, dragging the knife point down Balten’s face.

Balten crumpled to his knees.

War stood above him, one arm still locked to the chair. “Now you can see what it’s like to have a hideous face.” The words were torn from his gut.

“Get him,” Balten yelled, his hands pressing into the wound on his cheek.

Guards leaped forward.

Aidan’s left hand popped free from the metal band, leaving most of the top layer of her skin behind. She grabbed the other manacle and jerked her right arm, but she was well and truly stuck.

War caught up the chair still attached to him and used it as a weapon, smashing back three guards at once.

“Don’t use blasters in here, you fools.” Balten’s voice carried above the din. “The rounds will ricochet all over the place.”

Taking a deep breath, Aidan concentrated on making her right hand as small as possible. She wiggled it all the way out until the manacle was stuck on the knuckle of her thumb.

The guards formed a half ring around War, pinning him against the wall.

Aidan closed her eyes and focused everything she had on relaxing her thumb into her palm. She braced her left hand on the chair arm to give extra traction. Without both her hands free, she wouldn’t be able to protect War. He needed her.

“Gods,” Zach said.

Pain shot up her arm as her right hand slid free.

She looked up to see War holding the chair legs in both hands, fighting with brute strength.

Balten and his men circled him, but he managed to hold them back.

“Rush him all at once, damn you. He can’t win against all of you.” Balten’s frustration bled into his voice. He stood on the sidelines, pressing his hand onto his cheek, trying in vain to stop the bleeding.

The chair crashed into one guard so hard, it broke into pieces. War was left holding a chair leg, one wrist still manacled to the broken chair arm.

Aidan ran to the knife Balten had carelessly tossed away, dodging a guard who tried to stop her. Diving, she rolled and came up with the blade, then darted around another guard, trying to get to War.

As she neared the fray, she leaped over a piece of broken chair just as a guard grabbed her sleeve and yanked her backwards. She landed on shattered wood, her feet slipping from beneath her. Rather than fall on her butt, she flung herself forward into Balten, putting out her hands to stop her fall.

Except her right hand held the knife, which slid cleanly into Balten's chest, pausing for a brief moment on one of his ribs before it slid free and went into his heart.

Balten blinked in surprise and opened his mouth.

"Wait," Aidan said, trying to understand what happened. She hadn't meant to stab him.

Blood bubbled and sputtered from his mouth, joining the seepage from the wound War had inflicted earlier, a sharp exhaled breath spattering blood on her face and body.

Aidan held on to him, unable to comprehend what was happening, her mind clicking over, misfiring on the fact that she'd killed him.

When he collapsed, she was pulled to her knees. She stayed frozen, unable to do anything but stare at his glassy, dead eyes.

It wasn't that she was sad Balten was dead. He deserved death. She was just shocked she'd been the one to strike the final blow. An accident. She had only been trying to stop her fall.

Behind her, the battle raged.

When she glanced up, the guards were closing in on War, tightening the circle. She didn't have time to figure out what she'd done. She had to help War before it was too late.

Aidan exploded to her feet, dragging the knife free from Balten's chest, pushing down the revulsion at the tug of the weapon as it slipped free from his flesh.

She jumped for the men closest to her, taking down the nearest man, slashing his back, then diving to cut the muscles across another's thigh.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her brother had worked his way free and now joined the battle.

She didn't think about the fact they were outnumbered, didn't think about the fact they would surely lose. She just kept fighting.

Driving her knife into another guard's foot, she rolled away before he could retaliate. Moans and screams filled the air.

Boots approached her and she spun to her back to launch another attack.

War raised his hands, the chair arm still dangling from one wrist, and stumbled back. "It's me. It's me."

Zach hobbled to their side. "We need to go. Now."

War fished a key from a prone guard's pocket to unlock his arm.

Aidan pushed herself to her feet and took a look around the room. Most of the guards lived but were unable to rise from the floor. A quick count told her over half had left the room at some point during the battle.

The three of them ran for the door from which Balten had entered earlier.

"We're in trouble if we can't find a way out of here." She knew Warwick had studied the blueprints to the castle, but Balten had made many changes, as they'd found out the hard way.

Her breath hitched, but her mind had locked up, refusing to think of anything beyond escape. She could only run blindly behind them.

She had killed Balten. She had probably killed some of the others, or hobbled them for life. It seemed like she should be upset by it all, but instead she felt only relief. No, that was wrong. Justice had been done here. It may have been an accident, but Balten's death was twenty years overdue. If that made her a monster, so be it.

Somehow War led them to an exit and they raced into the courtyard.

"Where the hell are we?" He turned in a circle to get his bearings. Blood dripped from him, his life spilling in giant drops to the ground.

Aidan watched them fall, forming a circle as he spun, and her brain kicked to life. "We're near his launchpad." She ran towards an arch in the courtyard wall. "Follow me."

Balten had transports. One was a Mock 125. They weren't her usual fare, since they required using her feet and hands at the same time to steer them. That could get tricky, since she didn't have a gunner working on her ship. If she got caught by Space Raiders when she flew, she could divide her attention between flying and fighting. Aidan preferred to work alone, so she'd stuck to the system that required less focus. But she'd flown the Mocks before.

They sprinted through the archway and onto the launchpad.

"Stop," a guard yelled but she and Zach passed him by.

War drove his fist into the man's stomach. The guard dropped to his knees, gasping.

"Run. Keep running," War shouted. "I'll catch up."

She raced to the Mock, which sat in the same place it had been less than a week ago when she'd come to bargain for Zach's life. Punching a button on the hold, the transport stairs lowered, smooth as ice. She scrambled up, War and Zach close on her heels.

"Get strapped in," she barked, throwing herself into the pilot's chair.

War landed in the seat beside her and pulled the harness over his shoulders.

Firing up the engines, she said a prayer to the Gods to protect them, since she would have to skip the preflight inspection.

Revving the engines, she adjusted her headset.

"We've got company," War growled.

She ignored him, balancing the craft with her hands and feet before lifting off. This ship would rise right off the ground if she did this right. Or crash.

With a wish and a prayer, she pressed the throttles full bore and lifted, the power of her takeoff causing the soldiers on the ground to scatter and fly backwards. Only a handful of men had even arrived. Balten's army was in disarray, their head had been cut off.

Still trying to sense the balance of the ship, the landing gear on the shuttle clipped the courtyard wall before Aidan caught her groove and pressed the blasters to gain speed.

Then they were off.

## Chapter Seventeen

War ripped his shirt into strips and tied his hand to stop the bleeding. The cut was clean, slicing straight through without hitting any bones, but he'd need to have a healer look at it to make sure he didn't lose any movement. He opened and closed his fingers to check for serious damage.

"Is it okay?" Aidan asked from the pilot seat.

"Good enough." War glanced at her, then did a double-take. "Is any of that blood yours?"

She didn't glance down, her hands and feet riding the pedals and hand bars. Her concentration showed in the tension through her shoulders and her unblinking gaze staring through the windshield. "It's Balten's."

He nodded. From the corner of his vision he'd seen Aidan drive the knife into Balten's chest.

Her gaze flicked to his, then back to the view, the short glance revealing that she wasn't happy about her role in his enemy's death.

War leaned his head against the seat and sighed. This hadn't been the way he'd wanted his revenge to turn out. He'd wanted Balten to pay and suffer, as War had suffered his whole life. Three heartbeats worth of pain wasn't payment for what he'd done. "He got off easy."

But the whole story changed things. He'd thought his parents were innocent, but had they been? Sadly, he knew Balten better than his own father, and what Balten claimed had happened made sense. His enemy wouldn't waste time on innocents, but he'd crush someone under his foot who crossed him as a warning to everyone else. He had to or his power would drain away from him like snow melting in the sun.

But it was over now. The truth no longer mattered. It was time to move on and live.

"I didn't mean to kill him. I tripped and the knife..." Her voice faded.



“Aidan, don’t regret what happened. Balten deserved to die.” Now instead of a clean revenge, she would suffer the guilt of killing him.

“No one deserved death as much as he did.” Her voice held a harsh edge. “I don’t regret killing him. Not one bit.”

But she did, he could tell. Not knowing what to do, he let the subject drop.

“My revenge against Balten is done then.” War blew out a breath and felt a sharp twinge stab through his ribs. The last time he’d felt this much pain, he’d had four broken ribs. “Reed will still come after us for the globe.”

“Then we’ll fight him when he finds us.” Her knuckles turned white on the steering bars. “Or should we go back to Sector 9 now?”

“I don’t think we’re in any shape to win.” War closed his eyes and moved each muscle in his body to check for further damage. “We’ll need to figure out what our next step is and prepare.”

“You’re right. We need to regroup.” She paused, then added, “Although I owe Tiffany a visit.”

War stared at her, surprised by the hard thread running through her words. “You really want revenge that badly?” Not that he wouldn’t want it, but she was a woman, and even after how well he’d come to know her, he was caught off guard by her vehemence.

She shook her head. “Not bad enough to face Reed to get it. But someday.” Her lips twisted in a rueful smile. “Revenge is best served cold, right? When Reed tosses her aside, I’ll find her.”

“Where are we going?” Zach asked from the doorway.

“Savage Row first, then Trilby’s main transport area. We’ll hop the next star cruiser set to take off.”

He wondered when Reed would find them. Soon. War needed to be ready and he needed to heal.

“Why are we going to Savage Row?” Zach had bundled a towel around his hand and stood cradling it to his chest.

“I left the globe in a cyn locker there. We need to get you both to a healer.” Aidan’s attention never left the windshield. This transport must be harder to fly than it appeared to capture all her attention.

“The star cruiser will have someone who can patch us up. We’ll wait until we’re off Trilby to get help. It will be safer that way.” War stared at the rising sun in the distance. What would he do with his life now that Balten was dead? He could go after Reed Landrig for betraying him, but the thought of more revenge made exhaustion steal over War’s entire body.

He was tired of fighting. Tired of plotting revenge. He was, in fact, just plain tired. But Reed would come after the globe, so he had to stay ready.

His heart constricted as he watched the stiff lines of Aidan’s body. He would give all his balseems to lie down in a warm, safe bed with her and sleep for days.

A sharp pain wracked his body, but it wasn’t from his many wounds. Now that they had rescued her brother, she would leave him.

He closed his eyes against the thought, feeling guilty that he was actually glad Reed would come for the globe. That meant she wouldn’t leave him. Not yet, anyway.

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They landed in Savage Row and Aidan was able to pick up the globe without any incidents, thank the Gods for small favors. She was beginning to think they were a magnet for trouble.

Then they flew to Trilby’s main transport area and bought passage on the first starship leaving the planet. It was going all the way across the galaxy in the opposite direction of Sector 12, but Aidan agreed without argument. She wanted to be off this planet as quickly as possible.

“So what are we going to do with the globe?” Aidan asked as they walked through the transport area to the star cruiser. Gods, she was beat—emotionally as well as physically. The picture of Balten driving a knife through Zach’s and War’s hands flashed

through her mind in continuous replay. That was the stuff of nightmares, and she knew today wouldn't be the last time she thought of it. It would haunt her dreams.

"We can send it to my friend on Borrus." War's limp had returned. She wondered how much he was hurting. "I'm not sure what else to do with it."

"You sure we should put it in the mail?" She patted her jacket pocket where the globe rested. "If the glass breaks..." She trailed off, unsure what would happen.

War's face contracted in concentration as he thought through their options. It seemed so weird to be in public without him wearing the mask. She wanted to touch him, ease some of the pain she knew he felt, but instead she tightened her hold on the pocket that held the globe.

Zach limped along behind them, a broken boot heel throwing off his gait. He wasn't as banged up as War, but he was close. They were all covered in bruises and cuts.

She shook her head. "We are a total mess." With her free hand, she plucked at the blood-crusting shirt she wore. The only good thing was that they were all dressed in black, so people had to look closely at them to see the blood.

A grin flashed across War's face. He still wore a jacket but had used a strip of his shirt to wrap his right hand. "We're a wreck, all right."

She resisted the desire to run her fingers across his rock-hard abs she could see peeking out of his jacket when he walked. This seemed like a strange time to be lusting after him. She should be longing for a bed so she could sleep off the trauma of the last few days. Instead, she longed for a bed for a totally different reason. She wanted to celebrate the fact they were alive. She wanted to examine every part of War's body to reassure herself he was okay, run her mouth along every inch of his skin.

Zach pitched forward, tripping on his broken boot. Seeing him stumble from the corner of her eye, she half-turned, trying to catch him. Instead he crashed into her, knocking her backwards. She felt War grab her jacket and try to right them both.

At the same time, blaster shots rang out, the red light blazing from somewhere close. War dove onto her, smashing her into the hard synthetic floor. The globe thunked against the ground, hitting hard, but a quick frisk of her coat pocket showed it was still intact.

“We need to find cover.” He pulled her free and gave her a shove towards some cyn lockers that were close by. “Go, go, go.”

She scrambled forward, swimming across the floor on her belly, knowing War would want to bring up the rear. The faster she got to cover, the faster he would get some too. She spun behind the lockers, hitting them with a bang, hearing a crunch sound from her pocket. Zach landed beside her, War rolling in next to him. Blaster fire slammed into the other side, making them jump at the impact.

“Too much of that in one place and eventually they’ll punch through.” War’s breath heaved as he rose off the floor into a crouch. “They stripped my knives and blasters at Balten’s.”

“They took mine too.” Aidan thought it was a cruel trick for them to come all this way only to be gunned down now. “How did Balten’s men get here so quickly? We stole their fastest transport.” She couldn’t bring herself to pull out the globe. Something had cracked and she had a bad feeling she would stick her hand into a soup of powerful narcotics.

“Warwick,” someone yelled.

War’s head snapped up, his face turning hard. “Trevlin,” he whispered.

“You know what we’re here for,” Trevlin shouted. “Give it to us and we’ll let you live.”

What had Balten said? Something to the effect of killing all betrayers? Well, they had betrayed Reed and Reed lived by that same code. Aidan was sure Trevlin asked for the globe first to make sure he had it safely in his possession before he assassinated them. She wasn’t about to let that happen.

A strange silence stole over the station.

Aidan could feel the cold locker behind her through her jacket, could smell the burning of the blaster hits, could hear the scramble around them as everyone in the transport area took cover or ran for their lives.

Dammit. She’d known Trevlin was big trouble that first day she met him in War’s house.

As she leaned her head against the metal, her senses sharpened in preparation for battle. She carefully ran her hand around the sphere in her pocket. It was still intact.

She had nothing but her bare hands for weapons. That wouldn't work against Reed's men.

Briefly, she wondered how many of them were out there. Then she pushed the thought aside. One man with a blaster could easily take them. The jig was up. They would have to give them the globe and take their chances that Trevlin wouldn't kill them anyway.

"What do you want to do?" She met War's gaze.

"Give him the globe." Anger came from every pore of his body, his eyes the color of a glacier. He held out his hand. "I'll take it to him."

Aidan shook her head. "No, War, he'll kill you. I know he will. I saw it in his face at Reed's Palace. He's just waiting for the chance. I'll do it."

"Come out now, or we begin firing again." Trevlin's voice seemed to bounce off the ceiling and rain down on them.

"I'm not letting you go out there." War fisted and released his hands, his whole body turning into a tense ball.

She leaned down to where he knelt on one knee and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. Then straightened and yelled, "I'm coming out. Don't shoot."

"We'll hold our fire. We want the globe, not you."

War grabbed her arm. "You're not going out there. Don't fight me on this, Aidan."

She knew he would wrestle her to the ground and tie her up before he'd let her bring Trevlin the globe, which was annoying. He forced her into fighting dirty, since he had such a huge strength advantage. She touched his cheek and whispered, "I love you, Warwick." Kissing him, a brief press of lips, she knew it was true. She did love him, although it wasn't very nice of her to bring it up now. But War could keep her there for the rest of her life if he chose to. She couldn't beat him if she fought fair.

His hand dropped from her arm, his face a mask of confusion. He seemed to struggle to form words.

Before he could recover, she winked and spun around the corner of the locker. “I’m not armed,” she yelled to Trevlin.

“She suckered you,” she heard her brother say to War behind her.

Trevlin stood with only two men in the center of the transport area. “So War sent a woman to face me.”

“Actually, the globe is mine.” Aidan smiled and drew out the bag from her pocket, not wanting to directly touch the globe for fear it would shatter in her hands. “All this death and madness, Trevlin.” Steeling herself, she pulled the globe from the bag, praying it held together just a short time more. “For this.”

“Hand it to me.”

She dropped the bag and stood two man-lengths away from her enemies.

Trevlin raised his blaster. “Be careful with that.”

Holding the glass up to the light coming through the windows, she turned the globe, finally seeing the small crack. “It’s almost beautiful, isn’t it? The way the water swirls with colors.” She cradled it with only her thumb and three fingers.

Trevlin took several steps towards her.

She met his gaze. “You know, I’m angry.” She glanced back at the globe. “I’m really pissed off. I’ve been threatened, beaten, watched unspeakable things happen to the two people I love, and been forced to kill or forfeit my own life. All over this.”

Trevlin’s men stepped up behind him. “Give me the globe and you can go anywhere you want.” His voice held a thread of panic and she figured it should. Reed Landrig would kill Trevlin if he didn’t come back with the drug.

Aidan knew War wanted to send the globe to his friend in the Inter-world Council, but what was the point? Balten was dead, his people in chaos. “You want this, Trevlin?” Let Reed try to reverse engineer it himself. Balten seemed to think he wouldn’t be able to, which meant this would be all of the synthetic ganderen spice Reed would ever have. She hoped he took it and roasted alive. “Then catch.”

With every bit of strength in her body, Aidan threw the globe to Trevlin, who dropped his blaster to catch it.

His two henchmen moved to help him, but Trevlin caught it first.

The globe hit his hand with a crash, the glass breaking from the impact or his too-tight grasp. Liquid splattered over all three men.

“War, Zach,” Aidan yelled. She heard them move behind her from the shelter of the lockers.

“No.” Trevlin looked at his hand. “No!” The glass had cut him, and he was covered in the synthetic drug.

“Wash it off, Trevlin. If too much gets into your bloodstream, you’ll fry from the inside out.” Aidan watched as Trevlin’s men stripped the clothes from his body. She tried to feel sympathy for him, but that noble emotion was beyond her.

War grabbed her hand and the three of them raced from the room, using the moment of confusion to their advantage.

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They made it off Trilby without seeing Trevlin or his men again. Both War and Zach had minor hand surgery in the ship’s healing bay without any complications. Balten’s knife had miraculously missed doing any serious damage to either of them, although the healing process would be a long one.

Sitting in one of their two rooms, War knew only one thing—Aidan had promised him one last night after they’d dealt with the globe and by the Gods, he’d have it. She’d told him in the transport area that she loved him, but that had only been so he’d drop her arm and she could confront Trevlin. She didn’t fear his touch or scream when she saw his face, but that didn’t mean she wanted to stay with him forever. So he’d take this one last night and have it in his memory forever to replay at will.

“I don’t care where we go,” Zach said. “The fact we’re headed in the totally opposite direction of the Danthium quadrant makes no difference to me.”

“Reed will find us if we go back.” War moved his bandaged hand to relieve some of the stiffness. He would have to be in top shape to beat the men Reed would send for him.

“We’ll have to deal with him eventually, and I’m not in favor of leaving my ship on Sector 12 to rot.” Aidan paced the room, her frustration leaking from her.

War infused calm into his body, knowing he needed to reason with her. But the loss of her ship would be nearly impossible to part with. It would draw her home like a child to candy. “I not getting anywhere near him until my hand has healed, and you two shouldn’t get anywhere near him ever.”

She snorted in disagreement as she plucked at the dried blood on her shirt. “My transport is on Sector 12.”

Staring at Balten’s blood had started to wear thin. War wanted to strip the clothes off her. “Leave it,” he growled.

Her head popped up and for the first time, she appeared to come alive. “For your information, Warwick, that transport is specially outfitted for me. I’ve spent years perfecting it.”

“Specially fitted for what?” He knew. She’d spent hours on their first mission together telling him about her upgrades.

She narrowed her eyes, her nostrils flaring in irritation. “Ice-world flying.”

War felt a stir of desire rocket through him. Damn, he liked when she fought him.

Her eyes flashed wide, and her gaze slid to her brother, who had leaned down to pull off one of his boots, then back to War with a glint of warning.

“Buy another.” He really had to learn how to control his facial expressions, or find someone to make him another mask.

“I am not abandoning a perfectly good transport.”

“Why not? What’s back there for you, Aidan?”

She stood and paced across the room, twisting her hair into a knot at the base of her neck. “Nothing.” She stopped, put her hands on her hips and bowed her head. “Not one single thing but my ship.”

War inhaled a deep breath and took the biggest risk of his life. “Then come with me.”

She met his gaze, her eyebrows scrunching in confusion. “Where are you going?”



He smiled. "I'm a wealthy man. All that money I amassed to take down Balten is sitting in the Inter-world Bank. I can go anywhere I want, do anything at all."

"And what do you want?" Her face was full of challenge, as if she dared him to tell the truth.

He stalked across the room. "You, Aidan. I want you."

For a breath of time, they stood still as her gaze searched his. She shook her head slowly, back and forth.

Fear made him fist his left hand. He didn't care that her brother was in the room. He would beg her if he had to, fall to his knees and beg.

"I don't understand this thing between us, War," she whispered. "Is it just chemicals?"

He leaned close. "Who cares if it is? What does it matter if we make each other happy?"

For a moment, they stood with their bodies not quite touching. He could feel her heat, smell the scent that was so uniquely her. "Aidan, don't leave me. I need you." He said it on a whisper, but he knew he was handing her his heart. He didn't have the courage to say more.

She collapsed forward, her forehead coming to rest on his chest, her hand skimming his ruined cheek and ear. The touch of her fingers made him turn his face into her hair and curve his arms around her waist.

He had to say it all before he lost his nerve. This was his only chance to make her understand. "I knew the minute I saw you fighting the monster in Balten's lake that I loved you beyond reason." He pressed his lips to her hair. "I have known since the very first day I met you, Aidan, that I would sell my soul to have you." He tightened his hold on her. "I have always wanted you, but now it's so much more."

She shivered in his arms.

"You are an amazing pilot, an amazing woman and an amazing lover. It may have started as chemicals, but now we have something special between us. Something once in a lifetime. I know it."

Her fingers pressed to his lips. "You can stop now. I'm convinced."

He pulled back with a startled laugh.

"On one condition."

He nodded, already agreeing, even as his stomach twisted.

"I don't want you to ever wear the mask with me, War. I don't care if you need to wear it when you're out in the world, but when it's just the two of us, please don't cover your face."

"You're the only one who doesn't see the scars." He was so damn lucky to have found her.

"Of course I see them." She looked at him as if he'd gone mad. "But they really aren't that big of a deal."

Before she could go on, he kissed her.

Aidan backed away, holding up one finger. "Hold that thought." She grinned at War's confused face. Lord, she loved him. But there was something she had to take care of before they could go on and that something sat studying his broken boot heel. "This is how it's going to go, Zach."

Zach's gaze met hers and she realized her brother had been trying to give them some privacy.

"I'm putting you on an allowance."

He nodded. They'd done this routine before.

"And all your expenses get paid by me directly."

"I'll deposit any money I make into your account." Her brother shook his head and his voice was sad, but Aidan knew that tough love was the only love her brother could live under and still survive. Too much money in his hands would only lead to one thing.

"We'll live by the same rules as we did last time." She turned to War, a thought hitting her. "You know, we could buy a star cruiser."

"What?"

“I’ve always wanted to fly a trade route. Maybe the three of us can go into business for ourselves?” It would take her brother safely away from any of the gaming hells and give her a chance to fly something new. Plus if they went to another quadrant of the universes, they’d be far enough away from Reed that he might eventually forget them. Going anywhere near him would only force him to give chase. If they disappeared from sight, they would fade from his memory.

War looked at her brother. “What do you think?”

Love rolled through her. War would take care of her brother, deal with his problem and still show him respect.

Zach shrugged and pulled off his other boot. “Fine with me. Living in Balten’s dungeon has made me reconsider a lot of things in my life.” He stood. “Just being alive is good enough for me for the time being.” He crossed to the door. “I’ve changed. And I’m going to prove it.”

“I hope so, brother.” She tried to push down the hope that filled her. She’d been here before and ended up disappointed.

Zach grinned. “For now, I’m going to shower and let you two figure out a plan.” He stopped with the door open. “I can’t believe you ended up with him, Aidan, but I think War’s a good choice for you. It takes a strong man to keep you in line.”

She sputtered, caught off guard by her brother’s comment.

Zach laughed and disappeared, shutting the door with a bang.

“I’m going to kill him.” How dare her brother embarrass her like that?

“Before you do, let’s go bathe. I want you out of those clothes. The sight of Balten’s blood makes me unreasonably angry.” He stripped her shirt before she could think of a reply.

In moments, they were both undressed. War picked her up and carried her into the tiny bathroom. Turning on the water, he placed her under the spray. She laughed as he tried to squeeze into the shower with her. Water splashed outside the stall.

“Wait, we can’t both fit in here.”

He pushed her to the back of the tiny box and tried to climb in. “Sure we can.”

“No.”

But in he came. She spent almost the whole time laughing uncontrollably as they struggled to wash their bodies while being pressed to each other.

Finally, they spilled back into the room. Aidan fell onto the bed and watched him towel off his hair. “I think that’s the last time we shower together while we’re on this cruiser.”

“It certainly wasn’t as fun as when we were at Reed’s.” He grinned and tossed the towel onto a nearby chair.

Aidan sighed and voiced a concern that had been eating at her. “You think I’m going to have a flashback, War?” Tiffany came to mind and she ground her molars together. She wouldn’t mind a little more revenge than she’d gotten. But there was no way she’d return to Reed’s palace to get it. She was angry, not stupid. Then again, Tiffany was stuck being Reed’s whore. That might be punishment enough. She was beginning to think revenge was overrated anyway. It seemed like a good way to end up wasting her life. Tiffany wasn’t worth that.

“Balten seemed to think the risk ended after a few lunar rotations.” He stretched his body out beside hers. “We’ll just have to stay together every moment until the danger passes.”

There was something in his gaze, something that still questioned if she’d stay with him. She could see it. “War, I’ll be with you for as long as you’ll have me.”

He stroked a hand through her hair. “Even though Reed will most likely send someone else to kill me? I want you so badly, Aidan, but staying with me might be risking your life and I can’t have that. If we split apart, Reed will track me and let you and your brother slip free. I’m the one who betrayed him.”

She let out a frustrated puff of air. “Please give me some credit here. I think I’m woman enough to make my own decisions. I choose you, even if that means dealing with Reed.”

He knelt on the bed, bracing one hand on the other side of her so he could lean over her body. “I can’t believe I’m this lucky.”

“It shocks me too, but we make a good team.”

Instead of replying, he kissed her, collapsing his body onto hers.

Finally, she broke from him and tried to push him to his back. She wanted to examine his bruises and reassure herself he wasn't hurt worse than she already knew.

His body became a stone on top of hers, his eyes dancing with amusement. She tried to roll them over, catching his legs with hers. He simply squashed her into the mattress.

She'd never seen him playful before but he tussled with her as if he had all day to tease. Their bodies slid against each other, sweat beading their skin as they both fought to be on top. He could easily have held her down, but he was laughing so hard, she kept getting away from him.

“You can't always be in control, Aidan.”

“Who says I can't?”

“Me.”

They ended up on their sides facing one another. She was done with the games, her whole body on fire for his. Running her hand down his chest, she cupped his erection, which was already heavy and full.

His face turned serious and his fingers brushed one of her nipples, before moving to lift her leg over his. He pulled her body flush against him.

“I don't think either of us gets control in this position,” he murmured.

She gripped his cock, loving the strength of it, then brushed it back and forth between the lips of her sex, coating him with her juices. Fitting him to her entrance, she grabbed his hip to help guide him.

The feel of him pushing inside her made her gasp. His cock was as huge as the rest of him and lying on her side made everything so much tighter. She was ready for him. The feel as he stretched her to her limits made her moan with need, but she didn't let him ease up the pressure. She had to have him deeper.

When he was fully seated, they paused, both of them gasping for breath, their bodies touching in a long line, one of her legs wrapped around his hips, bringing him even closer. The intense feeling eased and she could think again.

Running her hand down his scars, she was glad he'd ended up with his right side on the bed so she could touch the damaged part of him. She wanted him to understand that she loved him for all of him. "How does this feel? When I touch you?"

He brushed his lips against hers. "Like heaven." He cupped her buttocks in his hand and stroked deep. His face contorted with his growing need. "You always make me feel so amazing."

"Your scars aren't that bad, you know. They are merely a part of you that shows what you've lived through. There's no reason to hide them as if they're shameful."

He cupped her face in one palm. "Stop talking and come for me."

A burst of surprised laughter escaped her, and she nipped his shoulder in retaliation.

War moved his right hand to her clitoris and pressed down, making her gasp as sensation leapt through her. Her mind immediately drifted away into a haze of pleasure. And just like that, she was going to come. The tension and agony of the past day strung her nerves out and lovemaking only built upon all the anxiety. The anxiety converted into pure need—need for the one man who she knew would always have her back.

She met War's gaze as the spike of release washed over her. "I love you."

"And I you." He sucked in a breath when he felt her body contract around him.

"Aidan," he said, and followed her over the edge.

## Epilogue

Aidan couldn't keep the smile from her face as Supernova stepped on the stage, the shimmy in the singer's hips shown to perfection in her fiery red dress. The bar was filled with inter-world traders and the usual travelers who filled these way stations, but the space rats and unwanted were kept out by Supernova's enormous cover charge.

It had been six months since they'd escaped Reed Landrig's thugs and it looked like their trip across the universes had given them enough room to fade from Reed's mind. Their lives had been blessedly uneventful. They'd bought a small freighter and started running cargo with her as captain, Zach as first mate and War as their front man who took orders and dealt with customers. Her brother was even learning to fly.

When Aidan had seen that Supernova and the Zoot Suits were playing tonight, she knew it was a sign that things had come full circle. It was time to celebrate a new beginning.

"Put a lid on it," Supernova wailed, reminding her of the first night she'd met War.

"What's got you so amused?" he whispered, pulling his chair close to hers so he could drape his arm around her. He'd become a different man over the last months, loving and relaxed, the only thing left of his past the black glove he still wore on his left hand.

"Supernova was on stage the first time I met you."

He raised an eyebrow, his face maskless and handsome in the smoky bar.

She grinned and kissed him, a quick peck on the lips to celebrate her good fortune.

"Please don't start that again," Zach grumbled from the far side of the table. "I can't take it. You people need to stop the public displays."

Her heart stuttered with love as she watched her brother squirm in disapproval. Zach had slowly morphed into a new person over the last few months with the added responsibility and discipline of living on the ship. It had turned out he needed a role

model in his life, another male he could turn to and ask all those secret male things which had always baffled her.

Everything wasn't perfect, of course. They still spent time looking over their shoulders for signs of Reed and had to make sure they never did anything to draw attention to themselves, but they'd agreed the nomad lifestyle was the safest route to keep them from Reed's notice.

The Zoot Suits began to chant and swing their horns. Aidan felt as if she was reliving an old memory, only this time her journey would end in a happier place.

She picked up the drink she'd been nursing, feeling a swell of heat rise through her. Over the last six months as the drug had faded from her system, she'd realized her need to have War sexually still remained, popping up at odd times and making her want him on a regular basis. Like now. She studied him covertly, picturing him without the gray spacejacket. She could almost feel the warmth of his warm, sexy chest. The sexy thoughts spun her higher.

War caught her gaze, raising his eyebrows for a moment before setting his beverage down without a sound. "Alcohol always makes you want me," he said conversationally, his cool hand touching her blazing hot cheek.

"Yes." She took a deep breath, then abandoned her own drink. "But most things make me want you."

A slow smile spread across his lips. "True." The one word was filled with male satisfaction. "Let's go back to the hotel."

"We'll miss the show." She could wait. They'd paid serious balseems to be here.

"We'll have to see her another time." He hauled Aidan to her feet. "Your sister isn't feeling well," he said to Zach. "Be back before curfew."

"Will do." Her brother's distracted reply drew her gaze away from the fantastic specimen before her. Zach studied a nearby woman, obviously working up the nerve to buy her a drink.



Turning back to War, she let her desire show in her eyes for him to see. The drug had freed her from her natural reserve when it came to sex. In some weird way, it had given her added confidence and made her want him even more.

He raked his gaze up and down her frame, the blue of his eyes deepening to the color of need. He tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and led her from the lounge. The trip to the hotel went as if in a dream, colors sharpening and textures leaping out at her as her pressure built inside her, her body weeping for sex. This man was hers in every way and she soon would have him.

"I need you now," she moaned, ripping at her clothes as War locked the door to their room.

"I kind of like you out of control and begging." He laughed at her scowl.

"I'm pretty sure if anyone begs, it will be you." She tossed her jacket aside, then advanced on him, every bit of her energy going into sliding her shirt off. He rewarded her by narrowing his eyes, his face tightening with desire. The trick was to stay in control by bringing War over the edge with her. "You can't hide your feeling from me any more now that you've stopped wearing the mask."

"No," he agreed, standing perfectly still while she walked a slow circle around him, trailing one finger on his chest.

Her nipples peaked painfully against her bra. Only this man made her feel this way.

She'd have sex as fast and hard as she could the first round, then she'd play with War's body until the next wave crashed down and swept her away.

Her hands trembled as she shrugged free of her bra, then tried to undo his shirt. He stayed motionless, watching her nipples in the dull light of the room. When he licked his lips, another bolt of fire washed through her, making her hands shake so badly the fastener ripped free with a snap.

He inhaled sharply, his desire rising with hers. War had decided early on after they'd run from Reed that he would let her lead when the drug rode her, but Aidan found that habit more annoying than noble. His restraint forced her to work hard to get what she

needed. Old habits died hard and even after the drug was gone, she still had to work to get him to lose control.

Somewhere inside her addled brain, she realized he was most likely under some chivalrous absurd notion that he was respecting her.

She growled in frustration, finally understanding that she had to tell him what she wanted. It would be easier if he'd just read her mind.

Wrapping herself around him in a hug, she pulled his head down so she could whisper in his ear. "You know I love you, yes?"

"Yes." His body had a faint tremble as if he worked hard to keep himself under control.

"And you love me?" She ran her hand through the short hair on the back of his head, losing herself in the sable softness.

"More than life itself." He barely leaned into her hand, closing his eyes, telling her he enjoyed her fingers in his hair.

"Then fuck me," she ordered.

His head jerked up and his eyes snapped open. "What?"

"I don't need to be treated like a fragile piece of glass, War. I need you rough and fast, and hard and deep." She would have been amused at his shock if this wasn't so serious.

"Rough?" His gaze turned stormy.

"Yes."

He grabbed her arms, jerking her away from him. "If I do that, I might lose control and hurt you."

She shrugged despite the tight grip of his hands. "So?"

For a moment, surprise flashed across his face, then he narrowed his eyes. "You asked for it."

She raised a brow, daring him. "I did."

And then she was suddenly bent over the bed, the movement so fast, she hadn't felt it happening until the bedcover was pressed under her cheek. It was then that she realized

just how much he'd held back from her. "Yes." Shutting her eyes, she felt the glory of it wash over her, giving up her control, her very life into his hands.

Within seconds, he stripped her, his hands jerking and ripping at her pants until they were gone. "You have such a wonderful ass, Aidan." He smoothed his palm over it so lightly, her skin prickled with sensation.

"Please." She needed speed, she needed intensity. She had to have him deep and hard inside her.

His hands traveled from her butt to the top of her back and slid along her scalp.

He fisted his hand in her hair, his grip tight but not painful. "Are you ready for me?"

"Check for yourself." She was, as he found out when he worked a finger inside her.

"More than ready." Satisfaction came through on a snarl.

She turned her head to stare back at him, wanting to see him set free. "Then stop talking and get to it."

His laugh took her off guard, as did the slap of his palm on her buttocks. "Don't challenge me. I'll slow down if you keep sassing me."

"No," she moaned, panic rising in her. "War, I need you. Please."

"Then you'll have me." And with that, he drove inside her tight channel, fighting himself all the way to the top.

"You are perfect," she whispered. Her heart swelled with love and desire.

Then he moved, taking her to the heavens.

## About the Author

To learn more about Leigh Wyndfield, please visit [www.leighwyndfield.com](http://www.leighwyndfield.com). Send an email to Leigh Wyndfield at [leighwyndfield@yahoo.com](mailto:leighwyndfield@yahoo.com) or join her newsletter loop for special excerpts and reader contests by sending an email to [leighwyndfield\\_newsletter-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:leighwyndfield_newsletter-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

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*She knows the ways of violence and self discipline.  
Her rival will teach her to surrender to unbridled lust.*

## Combat!

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Ebony Strike's opponent in the galaxy's most notorious underground fighting tournament is adept, focused and mysterious. While her days are spent battling for a prize that will save her starving people, her nights are filled with heady, carnal encounters with the oh-so-delicious Aldanen.

Strikingly handsome with bronze skin and white hair, Aldanen is a skilled martial artist. But he is also not what he seems. He's undercover for the Fusion, sent to bring down the corrupt Prefect running the illegal tournament. But hot nights of aphrodisiac-fueled sex with Ebony leave him wondering—is this blistering attraction the beginning of a new life, or nothing more than drug-propelled lust?

Caught between a criminal, the law, and her powerful attraction to Aldanen, Ebony is faced with an agonizing choice. To help him, lose the prize money she desperately needs, and possibly end up in prison.

Or sabotage him, grab the money, and run.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Combat!*:

“Ouch!”

“Keep still.” His voice was one of command, and I wondered that I didn't pick up on that earlier. What did he do in real life? I'd previously detected other traces of the military in his behaviour and how he moved. But was he part of a standard militia? Or maybe a mercenary?

“And don't even think of scratching,” he warned me as my hand twitched. I curled it into a fist to keep from misbehaving.

Aldanen was wielding a sharp pair of tweezers with precision. The Chitterin had not just slashed and pricked me in places, it had left small hairs bearing irritant compounds wherever it had touched bare skin. That was what caused the burning sensation.

I had given Aldanen's body a close inspection and now it was his turn to remove the thin invaders from my skin. He was finishing, there was only the long cut on my cheek left to do, and those full lips of his were centimetres from mine. I glanced at the stormy depths of his eyes then looked away. I hadn't felt this uncomfortable in front of a man for decades.

"That's it. Hold still while I apply some antiseptic."

The gel was cool on my skin, a welcome antidote to the hot stinging that had been plaguing me for the past hour. We must look like the walking wounded, I thought with a flash of humour. Aldanen hadn't survived his own altercation without injury either. Between the two of us, we now sported sprains, abrasions, gashes, cuts and bruises.

"We have supper waiting for us," he told me as he concentrated on dabbing the gel on my jawline. I had tried to wash the Chitterin and my tiredness away with a cold shower and was feeling at least half-alive even if, Aldanen rebuked me, I had managed to send batches of Chitterin hair deeper into my cuts in the process. He, however, the second to return, hadn't cleaned himself yet. This close to him, I couldn't avoid his scent of smoky exertion. It was twirling itself around my primitive back-brain and making itself at home, filling my mind with hazy recollections of our love-making. And now he told me we had supper waiting. No surprises what else was mixed in with the food.

What an indelicate dilemma Prefect Dinoh presented us with. I could either keep my head...and starve. Or feed myself and end up acting like some sex-crazed animal for other people's entertainment.

"We have a full day off tomorrow," Aldanen added.

I said nothing.

He finally sat back. "All done. Why don't you set out the food while I clean myself up?"

I looked at the covered tray and it was as though there were venom-fangs under there, waiting to pump their poison into me.

"There's nothing you can do about it, Ebony," he told me softly. "We have to get through this one way or another."

Then he rose and left.

There was never a time that Ebony Strike let her guard down. Like a suit of armour, my aloofness enabled me to keep a distance from anyone I came in contact with. Maybe the first layer of distance had been laid with the news of Dolen's death but my reputation—and the increasing number of people who sought to take that away from me—helped build the successive layers, one after another, until nothing got through anymore.

It was sick how one person used the power of his position to manipulate beings into public acts of intimacy. And it was sick how the galaxy had empowered such a person instead of those who had even marginally higher standards of ethics. Centuries from now, someone would be able to find a vid of me finding pleasure with a man while under the influence of coercive substances. And, long dead, I would be in no position to even defend or explain myself.

But...and here was the kicker...there was a part of me that *liked* the lack of control the drugs gave me. The part of me that was sick of playing Ebony Strike or Xin Dell. The part that wanted to share my life with someone without having to wonder whether his hand held a weapon.

What scared me as I stared at the tray was not that my act of sexual gratification was being recorded for semi-public consumption but that I was looking forward to taking the drugs and forgetting myself with Aldanen.

My back and face had stopped hurting. I got up and walked to the tray, lifting the lids with a deceptively steady hand, looking at the food that lay there so innocently.

I began to eat.

My second-to-last coherent thought was whether previous combatants from other Series had become addicted to the aphrodisiac mix Dinoh concocted. My last coherent thought, as Aldanen emerged—naked—from the bathroom, was how he got injured on his inner left thigh. I hadn't noticed a rip on his clothes when he returned from his fight with a Chitterin, yet there was now a flesh-colored discreet oblong bandage on his skin.

I stayed where I was, even though the temptation to walk over to him and topple him on the bed was immense.



He smiled as he got closer and indicated the piece of fruit in my hand. “You started without me.”

“I was hungry.” My voice was husky with need.

Aldanen took the fruit from my hand and put it into his mouth. I watched him chew, then the bob of his throat as he swallowed, and lust hit me in the stomach.

I growled and attacked him, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling his head down to me. There was a moment of hesitation, of resistance, then he groaned and crushed me to him.

My mouth felt hot over his, a fevered heat that probed his coolness, playing with his tongue and urging it to consider more adventurous moves.

“How’s your ankle?” he asked as I propelled him backward.

“I. Don’t. Care.” I was busy shedding my clothes, then I pushed him so he fell on the bed and levered myself above him.

His hair was soft, silky, and I drank in his features—the bronzed skin that threw his cheekbones into sharp relief, eyes that swirled amber and green, and the short white stubble that roughened his jaw.

I felt hands grab my buttocks and urge me forward, over his belly and chest. Then he moved, arms tunneling under my legs and pushed me forward again. My breath quickened as I shimmied forward some more. And then, at the end, to help him, to help myself, I reached down and parted the lips of my labia as I lowered myself on his mouth.

The feeling was exquisite and I shouted out in sudden pleasure. His face was rough against the tender flesh of my inner thighs and as he moved his face from side to side, nuzzling me, the sandpaper of his jaw sent spikes of delicious sexual chafing through my body.

Then the wetness of his tongue flicked me, ran up and down my clitoris. His hands pushed me again as he inserted his tongue into me, lapping at my own drenched readiness. In. Out. While I kept the lips of my sex apart and presented myself to him, moaning but forcing myself to keep still. Wanting an orgasm to crest and carry me away. Wanting his exploration to continue for eternity.

*There's life out there, and it's hungry for sex.*

## Starbound

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Held captive aboard the *Starbound* in the depths of interstellar space, a group of humans is ruled by alien sexual predators called the Napau who have one inviolable law: *Love one, love all*. Far from a decree of benign romantic freedom, this law serves a sinister purpose: To keep the humans from fixating on each other, leaving their bodies free to be used by the Napau as sexual slaves.

Jerod and Erlinn defy the Napau by falling in love, and take rebellion one step further by planning to marry. Quick to retaliate, the Napau summon Jerod to the Temple of Eros to serve their sexual pleasures, tearing the lovers apart.

Desperate, Erlinn turns to Jerod's friend Kev for help in freeing Jerod and continuing the rebellion he started. Kev joins forces with her, risking his budding relationship with his own lover, Gem. But soon Kev and Gem must reunite to save the Napau's next victim: Erlinn.

Entrapped in the web of the Napau's lust, the four lovers must overcome possession, distrust and jealousy and act as one to discover the secret that could free humanity for all time.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Starbound*:

Erlinn stared up into the troubled eyes of the man she loved. Jerod was keeping something from her. She had no doubt of that. Whatever it was, he was too stubborn to tell her—or too proud, most likely.

She watched his hands stroking her body, each caress sending hot rivers of pleasure rippling along her skin. He had strong hands, with long, agile fingers. His caresses made her tremble with pleasure. His touch was tender and yet demanding. She could barely comprehend that soon another consciousness would move those hands over her.

Horror, thick as a black cloud, threatened to engulf her. Fighting back a wave of nausea, she took a long, deep breath and focused on the mural on the far wall. Naked men

and women, their bodies tangled together in erotic postures, mocked her. Their distorted faces twisted in unholy passion. She searched her mind for another question. At least the questions kept the terror at bay. “When I wake up, will that be the end of my service to the Napau?”

Jerod’s hand tightened on her knee, his fingers digging into her flesh. “I can’t say. Sometimes when the gods choose, they use the person for only a night. Other times something about that person catches their fancy. If that happens, they may keep you here for a week or even a month.”

A week, a month...with him, this man she loved, but not with him. She wondered if she could stand it, or if her sanity might shatter.

“But never longer than that,” he finished, once more looking away from her. A muscle jumped in his cheek and his free hand clenched into a fist.

His anguish frightened her. If they would forget what was to come once they were possessed, why did he have this terrible fear in his eyes? Something had hurt him, leaving a deep and bitter wound.

Leaning closer, Erlinn studied the features she knew so well. She wanted to comb her fingers through his silky hair, to stroke his brow and comfort him like a child. But instinctively she knew he’d never accept her comfort. Shame burned in his eyes, the shame of a man who felt helpless to protect the woman he loved.

She shook her head, forcing those thoughts away. She had to learn more about the Napau while she could. “They lose interest in us quickly?”

Jerod glanced upward and then her way, his brows drawn into a stern line. Erlinn bent her head in a slight nod of acknowledgement. The prickling she’d felt before remained, like a scratchy blanket against her skin. He was warning her that the Napau were hovering invisible, listening to their every word.

“These beings are evolved beyond anything we can comprehend,” he said, a measure of calm returning to his voice. “When they aren’t on board this ship, they spread out like a wave of light floating between the stars. We can’t imagine the delights of the realm they inhabit. When they come on the starship, they compress their energy to an inconceivable extent in order to become visible to us.”

“Is it painful for them?”

“Not painful, no, but the idea of compressing their energy forms had never occurred to them before they tried to communicate with us.” A light sparked in Jerod’s eyes, reminding Erlinn of his old enthusiasm whenever he encountered a new idea. “The first time they did it, they realized it created a totally new experience for them. Essentially, they discovered the material realm.”

Erlinn lifted her brows. “How did you learn this?”

“Nicion told me. Before our starship arrived, they had no idea there were other living beings in the universe, much less creatures such as us, made of flesh and blood. We fascinate them. They soon learned that they could override our minds with their energy, possess our bodies and experience the physical world. They hunger for it, although after a night of passion, they must return to their true home between the stars.”

She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. At least this ordeal wouldn’t last forever.

“We’re blessed by the interest the Napau take in us and our starship,” Jerod continued, rolling his eyes heavenward in a silent warning. “When the command androids ran amuck, the ship would have been lost if not for the Napau. We owe them whatever pleasures they desire.”

Erlinn lowered her head and hugged her arms across her chest. Once she’d believed in the fairness of that bargain. She’d been willing to loan her body to the gods as a payment for the things they did for humanity. Entering the temple, though, had shattered the last few remnants of her faith. She could only fear what was to come.

Shivering, she lifted her head again and sought Jerod’s eyes. She wanted to tell him that she still loved him, to tell him that she would welcome his touch, even if his body moved by the will of an alien being. As if sensing her thoughts, he gave her a sharp glance and lifted a finger.

The gesture might have been a trigger, for suddenly the air around her pulsed with a raw burst of energy. A breeze stirred the fine hairs on her arms, although this room lay in the heart of the temple where no breeze could blow. Her skin prickled and her ears caught the barest hint of a low hum of sound. At the foot of the bed, a ball of light broke the

darkness and grew swiftly brighter. For the briefest second, as it flared immeasurably bright, Erlinn threw up a hand to shield her eyes.

Two Napau emerged out of the blinding brilliance, their energy bodies shaped into luminous ovals, with outspread wings of pure light.

“Greetings, Jerod. Greetings, Erlinn.” The oddly lifeless voice of one of the beings echoed as if it spoke from some infinite space.

The sudden radiance that flooded every corner of the room illuminated Jerod’s face, throwing the new lines around his mouth into shadow. He nodded. His features had become a mask, void of emotion. Rising to his feet, he made a slight bow. “Greetings, Liayun. Greetings, Nicion. The female is eager to serve you.”

“She is lovely.” The star-bright being called Nicion turned toward her. Two blazing points of flame burned in the depths of the light in an eerie imitation of human eyes. “I cannot decide whether I want to wear her body or use yours, Jerod, so that I can experience the pleasure of fucking her.”

The cold, impersonal words sent a shiver of horror racing down Erlinn’s spine. She dug her fingers into the soft mattress. The overwhelming light seemed to beat against her and caress every pore of her bare skin.

*A mating ritual as old as time could be the death of them both...*

## **In Heat**

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Jax's yearly mating cycle couldn't come at a more inconvenient time. He's on the verge of ending seven years of exile and claiming his birthright, but for 24 hours he'll be vulnerable to his enemies, alone and in agony—unless he can find a willing partner. He thinks he's found the perfect solution in the beautiful slave Waverly. He'll buy her at any price, and after it's over, he'll give her the one thing all slaves crave. Freedom.

But Waverly isn't really a slave. She's a transport pilot double crossed by Junkeaters and sold to a notorious gunrunner. Escape is the only thing on her mind—and she better disappear fast, before her own heat reaches a crescendo.

Before she can slip away, the overpowering need to mate crashes over them, the intensity taking them both by surprise. But the Inter-World Council is out to hang Jax for a crime he didn't commit, Junkeaters are hot on their trail, and ruthless arms traders are gunning for them.

Their passion may burn hot enough to last a lifetime, but first they must survive.

*Warning: Hot sex, adult words, and lots of adventure in and out of the sack!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for In Heat:*

"Because I'm in heat, and if what you're saying is true, you are too."

His gaze snapped to hers. "What are you telling me?"

Her face was grave, made even more serious by the stark lighting in the room.

"We're in trouble. I need to leave here. Before it's too late."

"It's already too late." He stopped her when she opened her mouth to explain herself.

"You can't leave." He didn't want to hear what she had to say. In the end, it wouldn't matter anyway. Maybe it would be better not to know. "Tomorrow. Make it until tomorrow and you can walk away." He ran his hand down her arm. "I'll sign your papers and you'll be a free slave."

“That’s great, considering I’m not a slave.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “Don’t touch me, Jax.”

“I have to. If I don’t touch, everything gets worse. If I touch, I can hold off for a few more hours.” In fact, he felt better now, calmer and almost in control.

Her eyes opened as if an idea just hit her. “Are you telling me you paid twelve thousand decodreams for one night with me?”

“Yes.” He fought it for a few moments, then ducked his head to kiss her shoulder, a closed-mouth press of his lips to her skin.

She made a small humming sound. A strange sense of satisfaction raced through him at the noise.

“Why...” She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath. “Why aren’t you back on your home planet? Shouldn’t you be with your own people for this?”

He didn’t answer that. It would be a long conversation and he couldn’t take the time, nor did he really want to tell her the answer. Instead, he asked his own questions. “As a Mechander, don’t you think it’s odd you’re a slave? Why didn’t your people ransom you back?”

“Maybe because I’m not a slave?” She hissed when he ran his tongue across her collarbone. “Stop. This is a really bad idea.”

“I can’t stop. In twenty-four hours it will be over and we’ll both be free.” He held her still. “Your people may come for you, whether you’re a slave or not.”

“No. They won’t.”

There was something about the tone in her voice which made him believe her. Odd, he thought, her family should be searching for her. Then the heat built higher and his mind could no longer focus. “The next wave will start soon.”

She tensed, then began to relax in his arms. “You smell like no other man I’ve ever scented before.”

“And you smell like cinnamon.” Jax turned her on her side and tucked his legs behind hers. “Waverly, if it’s true you’re not a slave, why do you have the mark on your arm?”

She glanced at it. Fourteen numbers ran up the underside of her right wrist. “Alexander, Deek and I were running a scam with the Junkeaters. I posed as a slave, right down to the forged papers with Alexander as my owner. When I got in this morning, I started feeling strange midway through breakfast. Next thing I know, I’m waking up naked in bed with you.”

With her body resting along his, Jax felt content. He knew he had only minutes until the next wave came, he could feel it building, but the burn inside him had receded. How ironic that he’d finally figured out how to control the mating ritual right before he left to go home. “You must be insane to do business with the Junkeaters. Those bastards will double cross you at every turn.”

“They didn’t this time. They paid up on the spot.”

“In exchange for what?”

She didn’t answer at first so he ran his thumb down over the numbers on her arm. They didn’t feel raised like a tattoo, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Are your hands always red?”

“No.” He compared the color of his hands with her white skin. “It tells the men of my race that the mating ritual is upon them. By tomorrow, my hands will be back to normal.”

“How long does it take for them to get this color?”

“Two months.”

“Two months?” She rolled over to face him. “And you bought me today? That’s cutting it a little close, don’t you think?”

“I had a delivery I needed to make. It took me longer than it should have.” Even to his own ears, the excuse fell flat. He *had* waited too late.

“Not much of a planner, are you?”

Jax stared into her blue on blue eyes and realized she was teasing him. He hadn’t had a woman do that for seven years. Sector 12 didn’t have many females in general, and his reputation was bad enough that the ones here didn’t have anything to do with him unless he came with decodreams.



Jax growled at her and nipped her shoulder with his teeth. “I ended up with you, didn’t I?”

“You paid twelve thousand decodreams for a slave who isn’t even a slave. Alexander ripped you off.”

Jax’s arms tightened on her convulsively. “Talk time is over, girl. The next wave is on us.”

“What am I doing?” She sounded as if she spoke to herself. “I’ve got to get out of here.” She moved to leave the bed, forcing him to roll on top of her to keep her still, their naked bodies pressed tightly together.

“You can’t leave. Don’t fight me or you’ll speed it up. Believe me, you don’t want to do that.”

She raised her head off the mattress. “Jax, listen to me. I’m having my own set of issues here. I need to leave or I won’t be able to control my behavior.”

“You cannot leave.” He made sure he put as much conviction as he possibly could into the statement. She *must* stay with him.

She sighed, shutting her eyes for a moment, then lifted her head to run her tongue along his lower lip.

Fiery need shot through him. It was a Jimlee gesture of love between mated couples. And, in his present state, it was more erotic than anything he’d ever encountered before in his life.

“Waverly, that wasn’t smart.” He lowered his head and ran his tongue over her lower lip as lightly as she had to his.

She groaned, arching her head back into the pillow. Slowly, she grabbed his head and pulled his lips to hers.

Her action was unexpected. Jax felt the kiss race along his already heated veins and blast through his body. The soft feel of her lips gave way to the heat of her mouth as she opened for him. His tongue touched hers and desire exploded over him, so strong, so intense he couldn’t think.

As if she felt it too, Waverly wound her legs around his thighs, pulling him closer to her core. Jax broke the kiss when the tip of his erection touched her sex.

“Listen to me,” he said between pants. “If we go this quickly, you’re going to be exhausted long before it’s over.” He framed her head in his hands, his gaze holding hers. “The waves will smooth out soon and run about one every hour. We need to take this slow and steady.”

“Okay.” She shifted her hips so that his shaft pressed against the slick heat between her legs. “Let’s take it slow.” She pulled his head down to run her tongue along his bottom lip again.

Was she teasing him? Did she understand what she was doing? He met her gaze and knew she did. He could see the swirl of her own desire in her eyes, on her half-parted lips and in the heat of her body.

“Dammit,” he said, and drove himself inside her to the hilt.

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