

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Succulent

Flesh and Shadows
Kim Knox

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Flesh and Shadows

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FLESH AND SHADOWS

Kim Knox

Chapter One

Niamh Sullivan popped the buttons on her service suit, letting the triangle of smooth, black material fall back against her chest. Cool, sanitized air brushed against her exposed clavicle and she flopped onto one section of the circular couch. The synth-material squeaked. Habit made her rub a hand over the shiny, bronze fabric, wincing against the usual rush of static. Damn field service travel pod. Every expense was spared.

She stared around the little domed cabin, sealed against the hard vacuum of space. Light glowed from the automatic terminals, casting weak shadows over the copper-edged instrumentation. She had no control over anything—the stations her pod jumped to as it crisscrossed the quadrant, her food, even the temperature in the cramped cabin had been decided by her employers.

Niamh sighed and her head fell back against the plump couch. She arched her spine and groaned against tight muscles. Damn it, she ached. “How long until I reach Zeta-Draconis-prime?”

“The final refueling at Berenicis Station proceeded on schedule. Planet fall for Zeta-Draconis-prime is expected in two hours and thirty-six minutes.”

The pod’s soft singsong voice filled the cabin and Niamh winced. For five whole days, she’d sat in the control cabin or slept, showered and ate in the confined compartment directly beneath her bare feet. Scheduled landings at government service stations hadn’t broken the monotony of living in a copper can. No windows cut through the thick hull and she had the official seal on her pod. She couldn’t get out. And nothing got in. The penalty for tampering with a government transport vehicle carried a death sentence. Usually on the spot. Government security tended to be fast and ruthless.

Her toes pressed against the cool tiles and she knew she'd have to prepare, but the damn pod had her nerves shot. She'd been putting off the thought of work every day. Now it was unavoidable. They'd stuck her in the tiny can for a reason, after all.

She'd had a cursory glimpse at the file in her office. The image of her little balcony overlooking the small, green courtyard flashed through her. Open space, grass-scented air, bliss. Niamh squeezed her eyes shut, trying to deny the tempting image. Yes, she hated working in a pod. It made her thoughts spin.

Niamh pushed fingers through her tangled hair and straightened her shoulders. Time to work. "Show me the file on Isaac Rand."

A faint hum whirled through the air. A hazy image formed over the twisting, central stairwell leading down to the lower compartment. Niamh stood, rubbing at her aching lower back, and paced around the chrome guardrail, the tiles soft against her bare feet. The image followed her as it coalesced into the solid image of the man central government had packed her off to evaluate.

"Isaac Rand. Authenticated human." The pod's lilting voice wrapped around her. *"Former security consultant for the Zeta-Draconis-prime franchise – "*

"Wait." She held up her hand, silencing the computer. The image of Isaac Rand steadied and his dark brown eyes held hers. She blinked. Niamh hadn't been expecting someone quite so...pretty. She snorted. Not the most professional thought for a field service agent to have, but it was hard to describe Rand as anything else.

Smooth features, flawless skin, eyes that held her mesmerized. His parents had certainly perfected his DNA. He could have been in the service. "More than pretty – beautiful," she murmured, a smile finding her mouth. It turned wry. Her fingers drifted above the image, not quite touching the firm line of his mouth. Not that she could explore those full lips in reality. She was an agent of the central government, assigned to assess Rand, not to sleep with him. Pity. She could certainly work out a few of her kinks with him. Quite literally. "Continue."

"He assumed his post as security consultant six months ago. Date: 04:03:3924. Fourteen days later he killed the franchisee, David Ryan Kinsella, and took control of the Zeta-Draconis-prime franchise as its new administrator."

That had been the minimum her supervisor had told her. He'd flashed up a file, packed her into a pod and sent her hurtling across space. Not that the field service were concerned about Rand killing Kinsella. Isaac Rand was a full human, their first prerequisite. Running a franchise was a demanding occupation, always vulnerable to attack from the lower ranks. If Kinsella had left himself open to threat, that was his own fault. No, her employers, who owned the planet, wanted to ensure that a change in administration didn't mean a dip in their profit from its harvest.

And of course their harvest, flesh-fruit, was the First Minister's favorite. He wanted a personal assurance from the Service that Rand was up to the job. Niamh didn't know what the fuss was about. She'd never tasted the mysterious flesh-fruit. Its cost was astronomical.

"Do you have further information on the coup?"

"Isaac Rand has not supplied any further information. He has cut all communications with central government, supplying only the monthly royalty payments on profits and rent."

"Very strange." She studied Rand's calm face. He didn't look like a killer...which was probably how Kinsella underestimated him. "Where did he serve before he became a consultant?"

"Rand achieved the rank of commander with the outer colonials."

Niamh winced. All right, he *was* a killer. A highly trained and very proficient one. "How long was he with them?"

"Ten years."

She caught her fingers in her hair again. "Does Zeta-Draconis-prime really need that level of trained personnel? They harvest *fruit*."

"Zeta-Draconis flesh-fruit is a prized delicacy. It is also the basis of the reproductive cycle of a large, indigenous reptile known as a shadow-snake. The bite of the snake is lethal and the antivenin has proven ineffectual. Therefore, harvesting is hazardous and the cost high."

"Must be," Niamh said, "if Kinsella thought he needed a man like Rand...and wasn't afraid to use him. For a whole two weeks." She rubbed fingers into the tight knots of muscles in her neck. The information was only icing. She was there to assess Rand as the planet's new administrator, not investigate the coup that brought him to power. The field service ensured the flow of money to central government by rubber-stamping a ruthless dictator. Yes, how their profits got to them had never been, and would never be, their concern.

Her spine ached and she stretched against the pain in her lower back. She couldn't listen to the annoying voice of the pod for the rest of the journey. It grated against already raw nerves. Time for the last resort she knew she'd take...despite the side effects. "All right. Download what you have and I'll sleep-soak for the next two hours."

"Agent Sullivan, your supervisor, Evan Blane requested that you not sleep-soak."

"A request? Why?"

The hum of its internal workings thickened and her supervisor's heavy accent filled the pod. *"Sullivan. This message has activated because you have requested a sleep-soak instead of proper practice."* The tone changed to his usual annoyed tone. *"Damn it, Sullivan. Sleep-soaks screw with the chemistry of your brain. They're an emergency procedure –"*

"Does the short amount of time remaining fall within emergency procedure parameters?"

The pod cut off her supervisor's message. *"Yes, Agent Sullivan."*

"Good. Sleep-soak the rest of the information."

Blane could go screw himself. He hadn't traveled in a pod for over a decade. Let him try to focus in the bloody thing. The odd freakish dream – which had been the limit of her reaction to a sleep-soak – was something she could live with for the convenience.

Niamh grabbed the chrome rail and took the steep, metal steps down to the lower compartment. Soft light washed over the rumpled sheets of her unmade bed and she sank onto the deep mattress. The air pulled heavy into her lungs. Even scrubbed and sanitized, it still held the smell of a woman trapped in a too-small metal box. Her gaze fixed on the shower cubicle. The harsh blasts of air scoured her skin clean, but did little to ease the cramps in every muscle. So it wasn't worth subjecting her body to that in the hope of minimizing aches and pains.

Her legs needed to run again, stride around more than a five-meter square box. And her brain needed fresh air, sunlight—hell she'd settle for torrential rain and mud. Anything other than the disinfected monotony of a pod.

"Should have played the game a bit more and promoted my way out of traveling," she muttered, her voice flat in the small room.

She tugged at more buttons and shrugged out of her uniform, laying it over the end of the bed. Stretching out on her narrow bunk, she tucked her hands behind her head and stared up at the bronze latticework of the low ceiling. Cool air raised goose bumps against her bare skin.

"I still think that level of sucking up isn't humanly possible." Niamh snorted. "Though Blane seems to manage it."

Her eyes closed and Rand's perfect image flickered against the inside of her eyelids, the pod's sleep-soak program already running. Niamh's breathing slowed as tendrils of information leached into her brain.

Rand's calm, cool gaze gripped her. A smile tugged at her mouth. No, a man really shouldn't be that pretty.

A few moments later, sleep found her

* * * * *

"Agent Sullivan. Time to wake up."

Niamh jerked out of a too-real dream, her breath short and her skin on fire. She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes and let out a slow groan. The after-effects of a sleep-soak often planted strange dreams. She knew that. But that one was...intense. The last sleep-soak-induced nightmare had involved the large myriapods from Tau-Ceti-3. She shuddered. The feel of hundreds of those little suckered feet tramping across her skin still burned too sharp.

The thoughts of those creatures lessened the impact of the latest dream. She craned her neck and stared at her flat belly. A ghost image of her dream floated in the dim light and her flesh tightened at the sensations still streaking through her body.

Rand looked up at her, his gaze dark and unreadable. His image filled her vision and had her breath short. His lithe body covered hers, hot, smooth and very naked. A smile lurked on his lips, full of wicked promise, and her heart thudded.

Without a word, his lush mouth teased over her ribs, sinking lower before a hot tongue dipped into her navel. His breath brushed in a jagged rhythm against her skin. Large hands – calloused, strong – stroked her breasts, his thumbs circling her nipples, searing heat down through her flesh. Her hips twisted, lifting from the soft mattress, eager for his mouth to move south.

He ignored her demand and his deep laughter had her groaning.

“Lower, damn it.” Her words came out in a desperate growl.

“I’m in charge here, Agent Sullivan. Not you.”

“This is my dream!” Already the sharp edge of reality burned through her, making her too aware of the damp mattress under her spine, the wash of cool air over her heated skin and the disappointing lack of a man teasing her with his tongue.

His gaze gripped her in the final moments before the full force of the waking world hit her. His lips quirked into a sharp smile and his words seems to hang in the air.

“Is it your dream? Are you sure?”

Niamh scrubbed at her eyes again. Not the most professional image to have in her head. Not when she was only half an hour from meeting the man in the flesh. Still, she

had her professional mask. It had seen her through more than one embarrassing situation. And anyway, no man could live up to a sleep-soak fantasy.

A smile curving her mouth, she rolled off the mattress and stretched, arching her spine and pushing out her arms. Her knuckles hit the metal ceiling with a dull thunk. Niamh cursed. Bloody pod. It was only a short ten days before she'd have to climb *back* into the thing. Not something she wanted to think about. Open skies and fresh, fresh air. A much nicer thought.

"How long until planet fall?"

The pod's soft voice followed her into the shower cubicle. *"Thirty-six minutes."*

Niamh clanked the door shut and waved her hand over the controls. Air jetted over her skin in a harsh rush, scouring away sweat and grime. It lifted her short hair, twisting it into wild eddies that yanked at her scalp. "Absolutely hate these things," she muttered. "Does the Zeta-Draconis-prime complex have real water showers?"

"The plateau complex sits at the centre of the northern jungle. It has accommodation blocks housing four hundred staff – "

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Niamh waved her hand again and the blast of tepid air stopped. Her skin tingled. She ran her fingers through her tangle of dark hair and a heavy sigh escaped her. Pushing her way out of the cubicle, she pulled her field service suit from its hanger.

The starched white material of the blouse brushed cool against her bare skin. Her fingers ran along the buttons and for a few minutes, she let her mind blank as she dressed. Finally, she stamped into her knee-high boots and stared at her reflection in the long, thin mirror built into the bulkhead beside the shower.

Her shoulders dropped. Why central government insisted on such an antiquated uniform was beyond her. White blouse, tailored jacket in its attractive shade of cabbage green and the matching skirt.

Niamh frowned as she pulled a brush through her hair. She hated skirts. Hated them. The tight lines of her service suit impeded her ability to run, exposed her knees when she sat and meant she had to wear underwear. Her image smirked back at her. Nothing annoyed her supervisor more than knowing that she sometimes turned up at official meetings without her panties.

Niamh straightened the line of her jacket across her shoulders.

She was never stupid enough to risk jeopardizing her position by pulling that prank off-world. Of course, her supervisor didn't need to know that.

She turned from the mirror and clanked up the stairs to the control cabin. The couch had already twisted its plump shape into a deep-seated chair. With a sigh, Niamh dropped into it and let the protective webbing protect her body from the stress of re-entry.

The pod began its run down. *"Zeta-Draconis-prime. This is Field Service Vehicle Four requesting entry parameters."*

She didn't even have to speak. Everything was done for her. Niamh was often amazed that the government sent a human agent at all. But they liked to give the franchisee the proof that they dealt with a pure-human run machine. None of those pesky hybrid races for them. Or maybe, they simply liked to shove staff into a can and make them stink.

"This is Zeta-Draconis-prime. I'm uploading your entry window. Welcome."

"Short and to the point," Niamh murmured. "Does that mean they're going to be practical and not play the usual games with the interloping field service agent?" She answered her own question with a snort. "Yeah. Right."

The pod shook and Niamh grabbed at the padded arms of the flight chair. She sucked in a breath. Just another thing she hated about traveling—re-entry. She focused

on the small screen curving around the centre of the instrumentation. "Give me visuals."

The white rush of the heavy atmosphere streamed across the screen. Her nails dug into the leather as she imagined the rush of freezing air over her skin. Shit, she needed to get out of the pod if she was starting to fantasize about the stratosphere. Then again, it could be the sleep-soak. Blane was going to chew her out when she got back home.

The clouds cleared and revealed a wall of deep, verdant green. They plummeted, the frame of the pod shaking, clattering her teeth. She bit down, her jaw muscles tight, while her heart pounded.

Crazy job. Crazy. But her DNA and her skill set had herded her into the field service. Niamh had been convinced, for quite some time, that a computer glitch had pushed her into her job. She couldn't fight against the system that planned out her future. Not if she wanted to keep the benefits of being a citizen of the central government. Namely staying free and alive.

The buffeting from the thick atmosphere eased and Niamh relaxed back and let herself enjoy what little view she had. The pod leveled out, skirting huge trees with their immense leaves spread out to the dazzling sun. Niamh twisted in her seat, the webbing pushing against her chest. Through the sleep-soak, she knew what lurked within the hot, fetid jungles spreading a thick band around the planet. The shadow-snake. Ten meters long, midnight black scales and its lethal bite.

Niamh shuddered and willed her mind to think of something else. Ahead, a black stone plateau pushed out of the heavy vegetation. Glass and metal curved and twisted into the familiar shapes of a franchise dome and its supporting structures.

Cryo-cargo ships roared up into the clear sky taking the raw flesh-fruit to the refining plants. The franchise was in the middle of the major harvest from the main jungle. A ship took to the sky every hour.

"Zeta-Draconis-prime. Field Service Vehicle Four requesting docking procedure."

Her moans and groans were over. It was time for the professional field service agent to come into play. She had her sense of honor. It'd been the only thing that had kept her sane in the ten years since she'd been drafted and she wore it like armor. Niamh knew she was better than the monsters she ratified.

She pulled in a deep breath and sat straight in the chair. She was now the face of the government...however much she didn't want to be.

"Uploaded, Vehicle Four. Welcome to the franchise."

Chapter Two

"The overseer's about to dock."

Rand glanced up from his paperwork, while his fingers continued to flick through the plasticized sheets. His second-in-command stood to stiff attention and Rand held back a sigh. The man needed to relax. "She's not an overseer, Michaels. Call her that and she'll most likely shoot you." He returned his attention to that hour's cargo manifest. "I'll hand her the weapon myself."

Michaels heels snapped together with a sharp clack. "Sir."

Rand read the same word twice. He couldn't blame Michaels. Since they'd notified him of the dispatch of the agent, his focus had gone to hell. He cursed and sat back in his chair. The leather creaked, the metal frame groaning against his weight. Hard sunlight sliced over Michaels, firing gold in his pale hair and cutting deep shadows over his harvest armor. "You've been here three weeks. I thought I made it clear. You're not in the colonials anymore. Relax."

"Habit..."

Rand felt the unsaid "Sir" and a smile pulled at his mouth. Michaels echoed it, his expression wry. "Bring..." He looked at the memo to the right of his manifests. As if he needed the reminder. Her name, her image had burned itself into his thoughts. "Agent Sullivan to my office. She's here for ten days. She'll care only that we continue the flow of money to the government. Nothing more."

Of course, that was a lie, but his second was already wound tight enough to snap and didn't need to know that. Michaels was a good man. Time would cure him, Rand knew that. It had worked on him, after all. Just not in the way he expected.

Michaels nodded and turned on a sharp heel. The doors to Rand's large office opened and then closed behind him.

Rand scrubbed his hands over his face and pushed himself out of his chair. They could have waited a few months. Waited until the harvest had ended before they lumbered him with an agent. Especially as he already had one heavy and obvious mark against him.

He paced over the soft tile, his boots thumping in a fast rhythm over the stripes of fierce light on the floor. He'd deliberately kept contact with central government to a minimum. The money-obsessed organization had a nasty streak of xenophobia.

A wry smile tugged at his mouth. He knew he'd have to face them eventually. He'd killed Kinsella in a blind, envenomed fury, but they didn't know that and now they wanted him to prove he could complete his ten-year stretch as planet administrator. He doubted he'd last the first few minutes of the assessment.

Rand rubbed at his cheek, feeling the rough line of scales running up over the edge of his jawbone. One bite from a juvenile shadow-snake had changed who he was, and who he could be forever.

The door opened, hinges groaning, and Rand stopped his pacing. He tugged at the hem of the long-sleeved shirt he wore, straightening it over his hips. He lifted his chin, aware that the scorching light of Zeta-Draconis blazed over his altered face. Adrenalin coursed his body and he felt the unwanted rise of venom. He held down a curse. Their first interview would have to be short and sweet. Biting a field service agent would not look good. No, Rand had other plans for her.

Michaels met his gaze. "Agent Niamh Sullivan, Administrator." His second stepped to the side, turned on his heel and marched down the dark corridor, leaving the woman to walk into the room, wearing the usual foul green service uniform.

Tall, immaculate and with central government's first priority stamped on her perfect face. Pure human. Venom surged and he clamped his jaw shut. Damn it, in the flesh she was stunning...edible. He pulled her intoxicating scent deep into his lungs and the animal in him almost growled. His need was a danger to both of them.

"Administrator Rand," she said holding out her hand.

He clasped it in his, the scale-calloused tips of his fingers scraping against her smooth skin. He resisted the urge to pull her to him, expose her neck and... Her hand jerked and yanked Rand into the present. She stared down before she focused on his face. Her head tilted.

"You've changed, Mr. Rand."

He lifted his eyebrow. "Is your assessment now complete, Agent Sullivan?"

His hand dropped away from hers and Niamh fought to keep her breathing even. All right, not what she had been expecting when she first met Isaac Rand. The stark light cutting through the heavily shadowed room bleached his face and hadn't made the line of scales defining his jaw obvious. He was no longer fully human. Shit. What the hell had she walked into?

"When did you corrupt your DNA?"

She held down a wince, her professional mask in place. The government-speak simply came out of her mouth, but it was a fair question. Rand couldn't possibly believe that she would ratify his ownership of the Zeta-Draconis franchise.

"Two weeks into my position I got careless. A shadow-snake hatched from one of the flesh-fruit pods and bit me."

Niamh stared at him as he moved to the wide window, the light through the half-shades cutting sharp over him. "How are you alive?"

"No one is quite sure."

The changes were slight, on the surface. She followed the line of scales on his face, accenting his classic bone structure. Scales tipped his fingers and she watched him shove his hands into his trouser pockets. "You know your contract, Mr. Rand. Ownership of the franchise is only permitted to government-recognized humans."

Rand glanced back at her, his dark eyes almost luminescent. "Ninety-nine-point-one percent human doesn't work for you?"

Niamh ignored the shiver that ran over her skin. Something in his tone, the power, the humor, resonated within her, sounding too much like her sleep-soak fantasy. She held down a curse. "Not for me or central government."

"I thought as much. Would you like a drink?"

Niamh struggled to keep up. Rand's...alienness...unnerved her. A potency ebbed from him that had the hairs on her body standing up. Nervous sweat trickled down her spine. She wanted to report this and get the hell back into her stinking pod, suddenly very happy to live in the copper can that had bounced her across the quadrant for five days. Instead, she said, "Thank you, just water."

He nodded and moved to a dispenser, murmuring the order. The familiar fizz of activating technology filled the silence and Rand turned from the unit, two glasses in his hands. She took one from him, pressing her fingertips over the prints he had left in the condensation.

Taking a sip, she held back a sigh. Cool, clear, unscrubbed water. She became aware of Rand watching her as she took a second, longer drink. His luminous eyes held a predatory gleam and Niamh's heart missed a beat. She'd made a mistake in sleep-soaking the last of the information about this elusive man. She didn't need the false memory of Isaac Rand, naked, sweaty and — Niamh remembered where she was and tamped down on the sudden rush to her blood. It didn't help that his expression mirrored her dream almost exactly.

"Now we have something to bargain with," he said, his voice soft, satisfied.

Niamh gave him a short smile, her professional mask in place. Damn it, what was wrong with her? She never reacted in the field, not like this. Niamh took another sip, the water sliding cold down her throat. "Central government never bargains."

"Not them. You."

"I don't bargain either, Mr. Rand."

He held up his glass, sunlight sparking in the water. "With the part of me that is point nine percent pure shadow-snake comes a little by-product. Every morning and every evening I have to do this."

Niamh stared as he pressed his upper teeth against the rim of the glass. His canines seemed to...soften...and a milky substance eddied into the water. He drew his mouth away, his tongue licking over his teeth. Within a moment, the milky substance dissolved and the water became clear again. Her stomach turned over. "You're venomous?"

His gaze fixed on her glass, a smile quirking his mouth. "And quite lethal."

The glass slid from her fingers to thud against the soft tile. She staggered back, her thighs hitting the edge of his desk. He was insane. No one threatened a field service agent. Those under investigation could annoy, manipulate, but never kill. "You poisoned me?"

Rand drained the glass. "Keep my condition a secret and I will supply the antivenin."

Her façade slipped. "You *poisoned* me?"

"How many people did Kinsella lose in his two orbits as administrator?"

Niamh stared at him. What the hell was he talking about? What did the old administrator have to do with anything? Central government didn't care that Rand had killed him and assumed his role. They only cared about the product and the money. Thoughts surged and she clamped her will onto them. She had to think...but she couldn't. Poison raced through her veins. *Poison*.

Heat bloomed in her face and she felt the sweat thicken against her blouse. Was that the venom working its way through her system already? Her heart pounded and gray spots danced before her eyes. She gripped the edge of the desk, letting the hard wood bite against her palms.

"I'll tell you. Four hundred and twenty-nine. That works out as almost one employee a week by the standard calendar. And in my five months I've not lost one member of my workforce. Not one."

Niamh looked up and forced herself to focus on him. "What has this to do with you poisoning me?"

Each time she said the word she couldn't quite believe what he'd done, but she'd witnessed him *milking* his own venom. Hysterical laughter bubbled under her thoughts. Maybe she hadn't broken out of the sleep-soak and this was all a twisted nightmare. One from which she couldn't seem to wake up.

"If the government wants to keep its profit level up, to see that level increase then it needs me as this planet's administrator."

More government-speak hurtled out of her mouth, as her higher brain refused to function. "Harming a field service agent while said agent is in the process of doing her duty is a cause for immediate execution."

"Are you listening to me?" Rand closed the short distance between them.

He stood over her and his scent threaded into her blood. Clean male skin with something under it, a potent heat that brought with it images of the hot, damp jungles, heavy air and predatory power.

"No," she said, glaring up at him. Light cut across his features and the sinuous line of his black scales glistened. It had to be the venom tearing through her body that kept her heart pounding and her mouth dry. "Mainly, I'm stuck on how you *poisoned* me."

A smile tugged at his mouth. "We can easily change that. Forget to mention my...*corruption*," his lips parted and she could only stare at his teeth as his canines grew and sharpened, "and I'd be more than happy to share the antivenin with you."

"I know what the statistics are on the success of your cure."

"From a pure shadow-snake," he said, his tongue tip touching his sharpened fangs before they slid back into his upper jaw. "The antivenin you'll receive is synthesized from my venom."

Niamh pulled in a breath, but no air seemed to expand her lungs. He was too close and his poison had her brain spinning, because she wanted to lick the sharpened edge of his teeth. She crushed her eyes against her insane need and clung to her sense of duty. "I can't allow you to remain in charge."

Rand ran a calloused fingertip over her chin and she shivered. His dark eyes bore into her. Adrenalin surged through her system and she fought for calm. The more she panicked, the faster the venom coursed around her body. Niamh bit her lip and willed her blood to slow.

"I admire your strength," he murmured, the slow stroke of his finger over her jaw almost mesmeric. Niamh focused on his touch, using it to make her heart ease its fast pace. "I do." His gaze fixed on her mouth and her pulse spiked. She held down a curse. Why was she reacting to him? "Do you know how shadow-snakes mate?"

Niamh's breath hitched in her chest. Her thoughts shot back to her illicit dream, to Rand's mouth hot and moist against her abdomen. "I've no interest in it."

He leaned in, his breath warming her flushed cheek. "It's all about the bite."

His words had her skin prickling. She swallowed and tried not to feel the cool brush of his hair against her skin. Rand's lips moved so close to her ear she ached to tilt her head to his touch.

"The male sinks his teeth into the soft throat of the female," he murmured, his words falling against her skin as his lips eased over her throat, still not quite touching. "With a single bite, he penetrates and brings her to ecstasy."

"Over so soon?"

She felt his smile in the change of air against her skin. "That's the snake. Not me."

Niamh blew out a slow breath. His intoxicating scent wove through her senses, disorientating her further. She couldn't think, only feel the heat of his body pressing over hers, each breath prickling her skin and his lips so close to touching that everything in her ached. "What are you doing to me?"

She crushed her eyes. Stupid to admit that she was completely unnerved. She was a field service agent, the face of the central government in the quadrant. Now one man, with simply a dash of an alien reptile, had her thrown.

Rand's soft laughter pulled at her and his finger traced down her throat to the open neck of her blouse. He skirted above the swell of her breast. Niamh's pelvis tightened, wanting to deny the ache, the way Rand's calloused fingers excited her skin. "Unlike the snake that bit me, I like to play."

Niamh forced strength into her voice. It took more strength to grip his hand and pull it away. "I'm not here to play, Mr. Rand."

His hand slid within hers, and he gripped it, pulling it to the table and holding it there. "You're here to assess me, Niamh."

Niamh. His voice curled around her name and the deep pulse of need tightened low in her belly. Damn it, was it the sleep-soak that had her so ready to jump him, or the venom rushing around her veins, pumped by her overheated blood? Time to turn that against him. "I'll be dead before you get your chance, Mr. Rand. Do your shadow-snakes like to fuck cold meat?"

Rand's laughter deepened. "We prefer it warm. Mobile. Willing."

"I will be none of those."

He lifted his head and gleaming eyes held her. Stepping back, he lifted her hand to his lips and dropped a delicate kiss across her knuckles. Niamh sucked in a breath at the burn of his touch against her skin and the shock wave rippled down to her toes.

"You have time, Niamh. The venom is slow acting. It will take you piece by piece." A sly smile curved his mouth. "As will I."

Niamh wanted to wipe her hands over her face and find a moment to think. Rand had her brain in a mess. It wasn't like her. She happily blamed it on the venom and whatever the snake had changed in him. Instead, she pulled her hand free and pushed herself away from the desk. Sunlight edged across her face and she held down a wince. "I will not agree to your terms, Mr. Rand."

His smile burned with pure charm. "Then I will enjoy the time we have together. After that, there will be your unfortunate accident as you accompany me out with a harvest ship."

Niamh stared at him. "Does the money mean that much to you?"

He tugged at the hem of his shirt, straightening it over his hips. "You're government. You don't understand the concept of loyalty."

"All right. Kill me *and* insult me?" Niamh willed strength into her legs and stood away from the desk. "So you need to keep this very valuable franchise because you want everyone to stay alive? Very noble."

"It's what I was trained to do." He lifted his chin and stepped aside, pointing to the door. It whined, chugged and rolled back to reveal the corridor beyond. "After you."

Niamh's eyes narrowed. Rand might have her heart beating hard but she didn't trust him. Not one bit. "Where are we going?"

"Kinsella was paranoid, with good reason." Rand's fingertips touched the base of her spine and Niamh jolted forward. "You lose that many people and you don't retain any friends."

Niamh made a point of staying just ahead of him, not giving him the chance to touch her again. She had no idea what it was about Isaac Rand that had her palms sweating, but it was time for her to ignore it.

She willed her heart to slow, to keep the venom at bay. Rand had said that it would take its time to kill her. Her gut cramped. She didn't seem to be able to get past the fact that a franchisee had poisoned her. But she had to.

Niamh refocused.

The corridor stretched out ahead of her, narrow windows spiking harsh sunlight across the smooth, black walls. Every franchise base had the same design. She'd been in enough of them to find her way back to her pod blindfolded.

It was her duty as an agent of the central government to report Rand to her superiors. So her priority had become to get back to her pod, seal herself in and signal the nearest base.

She estimated the time it would take to get to the hangar. Ten minutes, five if she pushed it. Would that metabolize the poison faster in her flesh? Probably. But it was a risk she had to take. Just ahead, the windows stopped and the long line of shadow marked the second service corridor interconnecting with the main thoroughfare.

Niamh counted her heartbeats, listened to the thud of her boots against the soft tile. Almost... Almost... Time to run. With a sharp intake of breath, she darted right and disappeared into the blackness.

Chapter Three

“What the—” Rand broke off his curse. She’d gone, vanished into the service corridor. He should have realized she appeared too accepting. Niamh Sullivan was not a woman who would simply let him lock her away in his room.

Dark thoughts moved through his mind and he felt the slow liquid rise of his venom. He pulled in a harsh breath. The attraction to her had also been...unexpected. It held a very real danger for both of them. Desire thickened the surge of his venom and the unthinking beast that came with it. He wanted Niamh—and so did the snake within him. It would want her forever.

He ran through the dim light of the service corridor. He could hear nothing of her over his own breathing, but her scent—warm, delicious—trailed through the air, the taste of it burning his tongue. Rand held down a curse. His plan had been simple. Poison and subdue the field service agent. He’d met dozens in his years in the colonials. Every one of them had little backbone and even less conscience. Rand had devised his plan based on Niamh being exactly the same.

Except she wasn’t.

The corridor broke out into the main route through the base. Weary harvest workers plodded back from the hangars, skins burned and cut from stripping the flesh-fruit pods from the parent tree. He wove in and out, as did Niamh’s scent. She had to be heading for her vehicle. Though where she thought she could go, Rand had no idea. Her vehicle would have to refuel and he’d deliberately told his engineers to hold off on servicing the pod.

Holed up on the thing, she would simply die.

Rand pounded down the concourse, ignoring the worried questions from his workers. Niamh's scent thickened in his lungs. He was close but he couldn't see her. Shit, she knew the inside of his base as well as one of his workers.

He zigzagged in front of transporters and darted down the short slopping corridor into the hangar built to house the field service pods. The doors creaked open and Rand stopped in the arched doorway. The hangar lay heavy with shadow, the air still.

Niamh's scent flowed around him. He pulled more of it into his lungs and stopped himself from sighing. The mix of his venom in her flesh had to be working on his hind brain. He hadn't had such a rush of need for anyone, not the sharp impulse he had right then to hunt her, bite her and fuck her.

Rand winced. Damn snake. He should ease the flow of venom building in his body, but the more it rose, the more of the snake's abilities rose with it. In the near darkness of the hangar, as a human, he was blind and ignorant. With access to his shadow-snake, her scent, her heat wove around him and through the cool air.

He followed the trace of Niamh, the taste and need for her burning under his tongue. Rand padded down the short ramp to her vehicle and pressed a hand to its cool exterior. She hadn't made it to her pod. Only the lightest whisper of her drifted on the slowly circulating air.

Rand lifted his chin. More of her threaded off to the right, to the small office built into the hangar wall. On silent feet, he made his way to it, careful to stay in the heavier shadows. He could almost taste her now, her skin, its warmth. Heated thoughts of finding her, pushing her up against the wall and burying himself inside her surged through him. His heartbeat jumped and his dick hardened. Venom rushed him. His hand hovered over the door panel, shaking with the riotous flow of his blood.

The door opened with a slow whine, pushing back into the frame of the hangar.

Her scent smothered him and the beast surging with venom almost overrode his reason. Rand willed steel into his spine and stopped himself from entering the small room. "Come out, Niamh."

Silence met his words. He pulled in a heavy breath. "Come out, or I will come in. Then I will have to lock the door...and not come out until I've devoured every inch of you."

He heard the sharp hiss of her indrawn breath somewhere off to the left. Changes in the air told him she'd squatted down beside one of the storage cupboards, obviously thinking that it would obscure her.

Rand took one step forward. The door's sensitive mechanism whined in preparation to close behind him. He willed himself not to move further, his fingers curling into fists. He concentrated on the sudden strain in his hands. That way he wouldn't storm in and yank Niamh to her feet, shove her skirt up past her thighs and —

He blew out a hot breath. "Come out now." Rand could hear the tension in his voice. "I am a very real threat to you right now, Niamh. I will fuck you and bite you...and I think we'd both regret that." He forced an edge of humor into his voice, though that probably sounded as strained as it felt.

A snort cut through the little office. Boots scraped over the tiled floor and her uniform slithered up the smooth wall. Rand stepped back as the flow of her scent smashed over him.

"I had to try," she said, moving toward him, the sway of her hips an insane temptation.

"Agents aren't usually so self-sacrificing." He put out his hand to stop her coming any closer to him. The beast thundered in his veins and his erection had become almost painful. "A glass, a cup. Anything. There should be some below the unit to your right."

"Why — ?"

"Questions are for after."

The sound of glasses clinking against one another and then cool glass and her fingertips touched his palm. Rand yanked at the glass and pressed it hard against his teeth. Venom ran in thick eddies to the bottom of the glass. The pressure of the beast eased and Rand's shoulders dropped. Sweat cooled against his forehead. The rush of

venom eased to a slow dribble. Rand pulled the glass from his mouth and the weight of it in his hand made him wince. Damn it, he'd been close. Too close.

"Venom?"

Thick nervousness lined Niamh's voice and he could almost feel the rapid thud of her heart. "Take the cure, Niamh." He dumped the glass into the recycling unit. The machine would recognize the contents as toxic and safely dispose of it. Gripping her arm, he pulled her out of the office and along the sloping walkway to the exit. "Whatever it is about you has the snake in *me* all too ready to bite you."

"I will not falsify my report to my office."

"And around we go again," Rand muttered. The door to the hangar closed behind them. He waved his hand over the panel and pressed in his secure-code. No one would have any further access without his authorization. "What makes you so different from the normal field service agent? Most roll over at the first threat...or bribe."

Her arm stiffened and she glared at him, her eyes sparking in the subdued light of the corridor leading to the concourse. "So you threaten agents a lot then, Mr. Rand?"

Rand smiled at her and saw the nervous pulse in her throat jump. "Enough," he said.

He strode out into the concourse and wove his way through the bustling people and traffic clogging the wide, straight tunnel. Zeta-Draconis' harsh white light cut across the smooth walls, edged more light over the hurrying people. His suite-cum-fortress lay only a few short corridors away and he doubted that Niamh would have an escape out of those rooms. Kinsella had made special modifications that he'd never seen on any other franchise base.

His chest tightened. Though all of the man's defenses had not protected Kinsella from him and the first rise of his venom. Every day he was glad.

* * * * *

Niamh resisted the urge to pull her arm free from his grip, knowing that he would just hold her tighter. And that would be bad. She should have resisted, tried harder to escape—hell, at least tried to get to her pod—but instead she had listened to him promise to fuck her in a voice that still sent shivers coursing her skin.

Her gaze flicked over the concourse, the bustle of people. The sweet aroma of what she assumed to be flesh-fruit washed over the sweat of too many overworked humans and the heavy metal transporters chugging to the loading hangars.

Flesh-fruit was a delicacy of the incredibly rich, and Zeta-Draconis-prime was the only planet where it had taken so successfully. It was said to be the First Minister's favorite dish. Nothing could jeopardize its harvest.

"This way," Rand muttered, tugging her off to the left and onto a brightly lit corridor that curved toward a double set of doors.

Niamh's eyes narrowed. This wasn't the standard configuration to the base.

"The administrator's fortress." Rand gave her a short, hard smile and pressed his palm to the scanner. Light flashed under his skin and then another door opened up. Rand pulled her after him, a surge of static burning over her skin.

"Verification complete. Welcome, Administrator Rand. Welcome, Agent Sullivan."

The soft, electronic voice filled the little antechamber and the doors rolled shut behind them. A second rush of static swept over them and Niamh hissed. Far too many precautions. Kinsella must have lived in terror of someone taking him out.

"You are free of weapons."

The doors in front of them opened out onto a small room. Hot light cut through the shaded windows to stripe the floor, the heavy chairs, the solid, square table. Rand moved her forward, his hand still hot and tight around her arm. He waited for the doors to seal before he released her.

Niamh rubbed her arm, the warmth of his touch lingering on the smooth cloth. Her fingers curled away and she forced herself to walk to the windows, to focus on

anything rather than thinking what a great idea it would be to get naked with Rand. Again. No, not *again*.

Her gaze fixed on the black rock of the plateau and the lush green jungle beyond.

She hadn't been naked with him, but damn, that sleep-soak dream had seemed so real. She blew out a hot breath. "So what happens now? I refuse to take your antivenin and you...what?"

"You'll change your mind, Niamh. I've never met a field service agent who didn't."

She risked a glance at him, harsh light cutting over his smooth features. The sinuous curve of his scales gleamed. They accented his beauty. It was...unnerving. "Your record never mentioned dealing with the service."

His mouth twitched. "My record doesn't mention a lot of things."

Niamh held back a groan. If she ever got back to her office, she was going to strangle her superior, Evan. It was just like him to send her into a mission with half the data in place. "Well?"

"You have a few hours before the venom paralyses you. After that, the symptoms become...unpleasant."

Her heart squeezed and anger twisted her gut "You think this is funny?"

"You're being stubborn, Niamh." He let out a sigh and his fingers traced over the scales edging his jaw in a slow slide. "This could all be so simple and I promise you, more than pleasant."

Her chest tightened with the rise of fresh heat. Damn it, the man had a tap straight through to her most sensitive flesh. But she clenched her fingers and denied the curl of lust twisting tight in her abdomen. Her body didn't feel like it belonged to her anymore. The only thing she had left was the strength of her will. "We've reached a stalemate, Mr. Rand. I won't agree to your terms."

A smile pulled at his mouth, the action lifted the line of his scales, making them gleam in the long shafts of light. Niamh pressed her fingers hard against her palms. She

wanted to stroke light fingertips over them. Were they hard, smooth? What did they taste like? Her gaze traveled involuntarily down his throat to the open collar of his shirt and she had to wonder, where did that tantalizing line of scales end?

Rand's smile deepened. "The venom has saturated your flesh."

Niamh shivered at the sibilant edge to his words. She should be worried about the time she had left, but the only thought fixed in her head was tracing her tongue over his skin. "Is that why I want to jump you?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. She'd said that out loud. Niamh squeezed her eyes shut and sucked in cool air.

Rand's soft, deep chuckle ran warm over her skin. "And the façade of the government agent begins to slide away."

She gritted her teeth. "No. No, it hasn't." Her spine straightened, she lifted her shoulders and faced Rand. He'd moved closer. If she lifted her hand, she could easily slide her fingers over the tempting line of scales on his jaw. Curses slid fast and hot through her mind. She worked strength into her voice. "You know government policy. You can have hybrid workers. However, all supervisors must be human. And whether right or wrong, only uncorrupted humans can hold a franchise."

"I'm well aware of that, Niamh."

The way he curled her name around his tongue pressed her nipples hard against the starched material of her blouse. "Then prepare the antivenin." She lifted her chin. "What I will do for you is leave out this attempt to poison me, Mr. Rand. I'll contact my office and this franchise will be put on the market. You will be allowed to leave, though of course, you must register your corruption with the proper officials—"

"No."

Rand's mouth thinned, the smile gone. A finger ran along her bottom lip and Niamh couldn't contain her hiss. "Kinsella, as pure a human as you could get, had more in common with a shadow-snake. I will not allow another administrator to run this operation."

"Not *allow*?" The words came out in a strangled rush. She stepped back from the heat of his touch against her mouth. Damn it, she had to take control of the situation. "This is getting us nowhere. Give me the antivenin."

His eyes narrowed on her and the sudden dark intensity had her heart thudding. "Then my plan shifts." And he closed the distance between them.

Chapter Four

Niamh took quick steps back away from him. Her spine hit the leather back of a couch and she winced. "Mr. Rand..."

"I think we've moved past that, don't you, Niamh?" Rand gripped the high back of the couch, pinning her against it. "Just Rand will do."

They'd trained her in self defense. She could, with a few choice moves, take on even a colonial-trained commander. Not for long, but it would give her a chance for escape, or at least prove to him that she wasn't some idiot, wowed by —

His mouth pressed against the edge of her jaw, hot, the moist tip of his tongue tracing over her skin in a slow, teasing slide. All thought broke and heat flashed over her body. Her hands clenched, but she didn't push him away. The warm scent that wove through her had her heart beating too fast.

"I will bite you." Rand whispered the words against the shell of her ear, his lips brushing against her skin. A shiver coursed through her. "Sink my teeth into you and thicken the venom in your flesh."

"Rand, stop this now..." But there was no strength to her words, just the press of his body too close to hers and the hot pulse of need through her veins. "You're only making this worse."

He smiled against her jaw and her breath hitched in her chest. His hand pressed against her hip, his fingers playing with the starched edge of her blouse. "Worse? I will make you like me."

"Like you?" Her brain, trained by the agency for far too many years, dissolved into a simple rush of lust as he tugged her blouse free and teased hot fingertips over her waist. She shivered, the sensation from his light, exploring touch sparking behind her

eyes. Wrong. This was wrong. A brief surge of sense burst back over melting thought, but her cogent argument became an unconvincing, "You can't."

Rand pressed his palm against her ribs and she sucked in a breath. "I can do what I want." His words burned against her lips and she focused on his eyes, on the power, the hunger darkening them. His thumb caught her nipple and Niamh gasped. "Will do what we both want."

She swallowed, her throat tight. Her flesh ached and she dug her nails hard into her palms, wanting that pain to distract her. Something in the back of her mind wanted to take his mouth, shove him hard against the wall and find out where the sinuous line of his tempting scales ended. His scent, the potent mix of dark, hot jungle and power, wove around her. His palm pressed against her breast and the simple action almost buckled her knees.

Shallow breaths had her thoughts dizzying.

"Do you want me, Niamh?"

Why was he still talking? His lips almost, *almost* moved against hers and the anticipation had her flesh desperate for release. But it was good, good that he talked, because that kept a spark of sanity in her brain. If Rand made her like him, her life as she knew it would be over. She would be corrupted, a non-citizen, and if she failed her mission, most likely dead. "No."

"Really?" He tugged at her skirt, hitching it up her thigh, his knuckles sliding over her skin in a hot rush. Rand nudged her legs apart. "Then tell me to stop and I will."

The denial formed in her thoughts, but it wouldn't move to her tongue. Not when his fingers pushed free of her skirt and started to slowly explore the crease of her thigh. Everything in her ached for his clever fingers to edge further, to slip beneath the soft material of her underwear and find her, bury his fingers...

"I didn't think so." And he teased a light touch over her mons.

Niamh sucked in a breath. The heat of his body pressed against her and her hips twisted, desperate for the slide of his hot, bare skin against hers. His fingers dipped lower...lower...and slowly teased aside the thin, damp material of her underwear.

The press of his scaled fingertip against her clitoris scorched through her and she gasped against Rand's mouth. His tongue flickered against her lips, the lightest kiss brushing over her mouth, while she ached for him to deepen the kiss, push harder, faster... Damn the man. Damn him into whatever hell his snakes existed.

Her body trembled, fire licking through her. Her heart pounded in her ears and she wanted, she needed to have him, right there, and screw the consequences.

Her shaking hand covered his, pushing his fingers hard against her aching flesh. Niamh moaned and knew she was lost.

Rand muttered something in a language she didn't understand and buried his fingers deep inside her. Incoherent words tumbled from her and her free hand clutched at his shirt, yanking him closer. Her mouth took his, her tongue pressing against the sharpness of his teeth. Venom seared against her tongue and her spine arched at the raw surge of pleasure bursting through her body.

Rand's fingers teased, played, pushed in an increasing rhythm, his tongue battling with hers. Her lungs strained for air but she would not give up his mouth, his tongue and the blistering, almost orgasmic rush of his venom into her flesh.

She worked his hand, gripping it, thrusting it against her as orgasm teetered just, *just* beyond her reach. Her tongue flicked at the hard sharpness of his fang, playing, knowing that if he would only...

He pricked her tongue-tip.

Fire, light and blazing joy swept through her body in a shuddering, searing rush.

Niamh ripped her mouth from his and arched against him, against the push of his rough fingers that splintered shockwaves through her still trembling flesh. Slowly, all too slowly, Rand eased his fingers free of her flesh and she almost sagged.

She watched, little flares of pleasure licking under her skin, as Rand sucked on each finger, his tongue giving a final taste to the rough pad of his fingers. Dark eyes speared her and her slowing heart jumped. A predator lurked in his gaze, lethal, powerful and it called to something inside of her.

Niamh focused on his mouth, on the gleam of his fangs. She wanted his bite. Wanted him to sink his teeth deep into her flesh and—

She crushed her eyes shut. Shit. She was so screwed. Was she even human anymore? “What did you do to me?”

“Probably gave you the finest orgasm of your life?”

Rand’s low, confident voice wrapped around her and she tried not to feel the corresponding flare in her flesh. Instead, she tugged her skirt back into place and stood straight. Her legs felt like jelly, but she slipped on her professional mask. “Oh I’ve had better, believe me.”

He smiled at her, the sharp edge of his fangs pressing against his lips. “Sorry, I don’t.” His gaze dropped down, fixing on the smoothed lines of her skirt. A soft, liquid growl escaped him and Niamh held down a shiver. “And I haven’t finished with you yet.”

“I’m no longer human. Isn’t that what you wanted?” Her words tasted like bravado, because his gaze ate her alive and she had to stop the insane need she had to yank up her skirt and beg him to... She stepped sideways and tucked her blouse into the band of her skirt. The simple action offered control and Niamh found strength in her voice “So what now? I grow fangs? Have that indefinable scent of the jungle?”

Rand moved in close again and his hands gripped her hips. His thumbs rubbed slow circles against her hipbones. “Oh, I haven’t changed you yet.” The sharp smile he turned on her then had blood rushing into her face. “That little prick of your tongue only took the edge off my hunger. The beast within me has to rise and be satisfied, find its release in you.” Rand’s smile deepened. “Sounds...archaic...but you’ll feel the history of the shadow-snakes flow into your veins with my venom.”

Niamh tried to take another step back but Rand's tight grip held her. "Genetic memory."

"I remember alien skies." He glanced at the window, his eyes narrowing against the glare of the sun. "A long time before the central government transplanted a small colony of snakes here in their desperate attempts to grow enough flesh-fruit to appease their appetite."

His gaze found her again, his eyes holding a glow from the sunlight that slid a shiver over her skin. The movement of his hands against her hips and the slow slide of her skirt up over her thighs tightened her flesh. Niamh had to remember to breathe.

"I will not give up this planet. It's literally in my blood."

There was her chance. Her chance to end the madness. Agree to his terms, forge his documentation and allow him to continue as administrator... More of her skirt bunched around her hips and the rasp of his fingertips against her smooth skin flared the fire in her blood. Cool air teased her damp underwear and she bit back a moan. He'd exposed her and now all that he had to do —

His scale-tipped fingers hooked into the scrap of material and eased her underwear down. The panties dropped to her boots and she stepped free of them.

Niamh's heart thudded. The predator lurking in his eyes wanted her, wanted to sink his teeth into her flesh, fuck her and create another of his race. She watched her hand lift against her will and hover over the line of scales edging his hard jaw. Her fingertips traced the dark line, finding the ridges soft, smooth, and with the first touch came the irresistible urge to see where they ended.

She drew her finger down his throat, the buttons of his shirt sliding open beneath her touch. The scales defined the sharpness of his collarbones, merged over his breastbone to run down the centre of his muscled abdomen. He shivered under her light caress, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

Niamh teased her tongue tip over the edge of his collarbone, the spiced taste of his skin firing the need in her flesh. Rand groaned and his hands tightened on her hips, his

thumbs biting into her flesh. Her thumb breached the band of his trousers, sliding low against his muscled abdomen as she followed the sinuous line of his scales. Niamh's other hand tugged at the fastenings, until her hand gripped the satisfying length of his cock.

Rand tensed and his chest hitched. The power of the beast that held him, its scent, heavy with lust and the thick heat of the wild jungle, wrapped around her. Her palm eased over his length and need tightened her own flesh. The soft but defined ridges pressed against her skin. His scales. She'd found their end.

She wanted him inside her. Now. That became the only thought that filled her. No revulsion. Just the thought of the delicious friction... Niamh groaned and grabbed his ass, jerking him close, so close that the blunt head of his cock pressed against her clitoris.

Rand cursed and his hips thrust against her, slipping through her wet flesh, the rasp of his ridged cock sparking fire through her body. He stilled. "Your last chance to escape, Field Service Agent Sullivan."

His voice grated over her, his breath brushing her lips. The words meant nothing to her, not with the promise of him so close. She shifted her hips, pushing him nearer to where she ached for him.

Rand's fingers dug into her hips, his hold bruising. Strain thickened his words. "If you say nothing about my change then I will let you go."

She eased back and forth, the slow, sensuous slide making serious thought impossible. The venom in her veins held her. She had to be sensible, think of her future and not think about what this man would feel like inside her. Of how he would press his teeth to her skin and pump ecstasy into her veins as he fucked her.

Niamh groaned. That image didn't help. Not one bit.

"Niamh..."

His growl of her name against his lips tightened her grip on his cock, pushing him, urging him into her, the ridges rippling a delicious friction through her flesh. "You've corrupted me."

"Not yet." His tongue teased her lower lip. "But I will."

Niamh took his mouth in a fierce rush. All thought evaporated. She had to have him and damn the consequences. He pushed deeper, beginning the heart-stopping slide into her body. She clutched at his back, groaning as he pulled away, the slow draw of his ridged cock against her swollen flesh dancing sparks behind her eyes.

Rand thrust again, his tongue mirroring the deep push of his hips until he buried himself, the bands of his scales rubbing against her clitoris in a rush of sensation. He swallowed her moan. It was insane. She wanted nothing more than to fuck this man, ride him, have him bite her, sink his teeth, feel the exquisite surge of venom through her flesh. He would come and the change would be complete. She knew it. Felt it. And she *wanted* to become like him, wanted to be one with him, letting the past well up through her, change her.

His mouth broke from hers and trailed down her neck. Teeth scraped over her skin, the drops of venom sinking into her flesh with a stinging burst of pleasure. The silky brush of his hair teased her sensitive skin and she clutched at his shirt, bunching it in tight fists.

Orgasm flickered, tantalizing her, burning at the edges of her flesh. "Bite me." The words came at the end of a moan.

Rand's soft laughter stirred her. "Here?" His teeth grazed and then broke her skin. Niamh arched into him, the first blaze of orgasm searing over her mind...but his teeth pulled free. "Or here?" His teeth shifted lower, sank deeper, pumped a thicker run of venom into her flesh.

Niamh cried out at the sudden and unexpected surge of blinding orgasm breaking over her body in a wild wave. And then he withdrew and the white blaze died to a

bubbling simmer. She growled and pushed against him, driving him hard against her clitoris. "You're playing with me."

Rand pressed her back against the couch, the rock of his hips against hers hot, delicious. He nipped at her neck, little sparks of ecstasy bursting over her skin. "Yes. I told you. I like to play."

"Right now. I don't." Niamh pushed her fingers under the band of his trousers and grabbed his ass, wanting him, harder, faster. She'd made the decision. Insane as it was, she wanted sex with this man more than she wanted the burden of her humanity. So how it happened was on her terms.

"Niamh..." Rand groaned her name and in one fluid movement, he lifted her.

Niamh scrambled to grab at his shoulders, her thighs clamping to his hips. He turned, not to a room, but to the nearest wall. She impacted it with a moan.

Rand's dark gaze speared her and her heart pounded. His hips shifted, driving deep, and Niamh arched her spine, a soundless cry escaping her. "All right. Let's *not* play."

The thrusts came hard and fast, the ridges at the base of his cock rubbing against her clitoris, a steady, inexorable wave of molten fire building, searing through her until all that she could do was cling to him. Rand buried his face in her neck, the press of his teeth into the sensitive skin of her throat accentuating the rush of pleasure.

Tendrils of orgasm wreathed through her body, weaving, crossing, thickening in her flesh. Niamh met every thrust, wanting him deeper, harder, wanting the promise of orgasm that teetered so close, so close she could almost taste it.

His fangs edged deeper into her flesh, the flow of his venom driving her, him, until—

Niamh screamed, her mind, her body lost to the heart-melting joy of the most incredible orgasm in her life. Molten waves of pleasure rippled through her, Rand's pounding hips searing aftershocks, his face buried against her throat, fingers digging hard into the flesh. Niamh still rode him, knowing on instinct that when Rand came,

when he sank his teeth into her, filling her with both his seed and venom then, then she would know true ecstasy –

“Administrator Rand, a harvest transport has failed to report in.”

Rand faltered and Niamh gripped his shoulders. She wasn’t above begging right then. “No, no you can’t stop. Don’t–”

“Administrator Rand, the transport was on a run to the Miran.” The synthesized voice wouldn’t be ignored.

Rand cursed, something long and foul in possibly six languages. He jerked away from Niamh and she had to catch herself before she fell to the floor in an ungraceful heap. He snatched up a glass from a nearby unit and pressed his canines against it. Venom ran in swift, clear rivulets to the bottom of the tumbler and Rand sagged against the edge of the table.

He dumped the glass into the unit with another curse. “Acknowledged control. Prepare a scout for launch in ten minutes.”

“Yes, Administrator.”

Niamh struggled to pull her skirt back into place and found Rand’s dark gaze following its slide down her thighs. His eyes flicked up and the predator still held him, burning with the edge of unsatisfied hunger.

“Corrupting you will have to wait.” A wry smile twisted his mouth and he pushed himself away from the table. “Time for a field trip, Agent Sullivan.”

Chapter Five

Rand tugged the heavy harvest armor over his head and strapped it into place, the material warming and molding to his body. Habit had him rolling his neck, stretching his arms and stamping into his boots. He stared at himself in the long mirror. Anger had his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed. What the hell had he been thinking?

The frown deepened, thickening the lines on his forehead. He hadn't been thinking. Not for the five days since the word came that an agent had been crushed into a pod and sent hurtling toward him. And not just any agent. A woman that had his beast aching, aching for something more —

He swore and pulled a second vest from his cupboard.

For five days, her record, her *image* had stared at him and he'd thought of little else. Now one of his crews paid the price. His hand tightened around the vest and he strode out of the small room his predecessor had labeled his "formal dressing room". Rand didn't have a name for it.

"Here." He tossed the armor to Niamh, who caught it, her arms dropping at its weight. "Compulsory for anyone leaving the base."

Niamh untangled the heavy, plated fabric, frowned at it and then started to shrug out of her jacket. Her skirt followed. Rand willed himself immobile. He wouldn't turn away, because, hell, he didn't want to and he had to ignore the beast within him that needed to close the distance and have her back up against that wall.

Her skirt dropped to the floor in a puddle of green cloth, revealing long pale, thighs... He should have turned away from her. The starched blouse ended mid-hip and Niamh hadn't retrieved her underwear. Rand sucked in a deep breath and the awakened beast within him pulled in her scent.

She looked up at him, an eyebrow lifting. "Enjoying the show, Mr. Rand?"

He should have known he'd be so tempted by her. Since his change, his instincts had sharpened, becoming almost preternatural. Her image had drawn him, invaded his dreams. "The show, no. Touching you, yes."

A faint blush burned over her cheeks and the snake in him twitched. He'd planned to poison her and have her take the antivenin long before, not have the venom change her, or worse, corrupt her humanity. Guilt soured in the pit of his stomach. The one thing that set him above his beast was his sense of honor. He had to remember that.

He ran a hand over his hair, smoothing it back into place. Leaving Niamh to strap on her harvest armor, he opened the secure files on the unit and synthesized the antivenin he'd programmed into the machine. "Drink this," he said, handing her the glass.

Niamh's eyes narrowed on the clear liquid as she hooked the final strap over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"The antivenin."

She blinked and her hands closed around the glass, fingertips brushing against his. He resisted the need to deepen the contact.

She knocked back the glass, winced, and handed the empty tumbler back to him. "Why?"

"We have four minutes to get to the transport hangar." He waved her toward the door, the movement sliding it open. "I suggest we run."

The armor chaffed her bare skin, rubbing in awkward, intimate places that already ached, but Niamh kept Rand's fast pace. They tore along narrow corridors, and jumped a lift to the hangar level. She sank back against the rail and let her breathing slow. Running her hand through her hair, she glanced at Rand.

He stood silent, his breathing slow, regular, no evidence of their frantic run showing on his body. In the artificial light of the small box that bleached his dark skin

and shone over his tousled hair, he looked utterly beautiful. And that wasn't just the venom talking. Was it? How long would it take to clear her system? She didn't feel any different. Well, the need to push Rand up against the wall of the lift and ravage his mouth still burned through her flesh. Was that the evidence she needed?

Niamh held down her groan and put her tongue to better use. The tip ran around the inside of her mouth, tasting the slightly sour film still coating her teeth. He had changed his mind. Why?

"What's the Miran?"

The lift juddered to a halt and the doors shot back. Sharp light hit the interior metal and Niamh winced, squeezing her eyes against the glare. Rand pressed a band of dark plastic into her palm. He put his band over his eyes and she followed suit. The harsh light faded and with it, the tight knot in her skull eased. Pulling in a calming breath, warm, moist air washed over her, bringing with it the rich, exotic scents of the jungle. It tasted like Rand.

He strode forward and Niamh hurried after him.

A small sharp-edged craft squatted on the flight strip, the engineering crew performing final checks. Warm, slow winds lifted her tangled hair, carrying with them the cries and whoops of unknown animals. Niamh followed Rand, too aware of the dense green jungle surging out from the black stone of the plateau and the threat it held. Nerves made her give a final tug at the straps of her armor.

The closest, armor-clad engineer gave Rand a smart salute. He frowned in return and touched fingers to his temple. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, Sir. The evac team is already on board."

"Thank you, Tennant."

His hand pressed against Niamh's spine and heat flooded her. How was she still reacting to him? Niamh began to doubt the clear liquid had been a cure. She strode up the side ramp into the transport and pulled the dark band from her face. Rand palmed

the panel shut and interior lights flashed on. Armored men and woman sat silent in the bucket seats lining the hull, heavy harnesses already in place.

"You're with me," Rand muttered, leading the way into the cramped cockpit. He pointed to the second chair and strapped himself in. Niamh pulled the thick straps into place as the engines fired up, the entire craft shuddering around her.

The doors to the cabin slid shut and with a roar the transport shot off the strip.

Niamh grabbed at the arms of the chair and planted her feet on the floor, bracing her body against the power of the transport. She clamped her jaw to stop her teeth clattering. All right, not the usual way she traveled, but they were in private and she had to have answers.

"The antivenin? Is that it? Am I cured?"

Rand eased his hands over the controls, and the craft banked left, heading south. "Yes."

Niamh blinked. "That's it? You poison me, you..." she shot a glance back to the solid and sealed doors, and her voice dropped, "you push me up against the wall and threaten to corrupt me."

Rand snorted. "It wasn't a threat. I *was* going to corrupt you."

"I still have my report to make, Rand. No matter your record here, it has to state that you're no longer a pure human."

His dark gaze held her, the power there, his authority spearing her. Memory of his hands on her body, of him buried deep inside and his gaze driving her to orgasm swept heat over her. A fresh blush burned across her cheeks. Shit, how did he do that? She never blushed. Never.

"I'm asking you not to report it."

Now guilt had her stomach in a knot. She'd always trusted her judgment. Hell, the field agency had *trained* her to trust it. Isaac Rand, ex-outer colonial, would make a fine administrator. Profits since the coup were up and she'd never witnessed other

administrators take personal charge of a rescue mission. Yet, she couldn't recommend him. "Rand..."

"I can make money here. More money than Kinsella ever could. I know where the largest hatching grounds are deep within the Miran, where the shadow-snakes tend the flesh fruit before impregnation."

Rand glanced at his instrumentation and poured more power into the engines. The vibrations jarred every bone in her body, the scream of the engines making her ears throb. "Money is central government's first concern. The outer colonials and Kinsella drilled that into me."

"I know." Niamh gritted her teeth as the scout transport swooped low over the thin cloud obscuring the thick jungle. "But I don't know how many more times I have to say this —"

"I'm corrupted."

"Yes!"

His gaze held her for a brief, searing moment and she knew his thoughts. It hadn't bothered *her* as he fucked her up against the wall.

Yes, she'd no qualms about his lack of full humanity. Hell, she didn't care that he was part shadow-snake—Niamh stopped her gaze from dropping to his crotch—*really* didn't care...but it wasn't her decision. Shit, he would not make her feel guilty for doing her duty, for keeping herself alive. "You have a staff of four hundred, hybrid and pures. You trust *every* one of them not to report you?"

"Yes."

Niamh stared at him. "*What?*"

"They've sworn loyalty to me. I protect them and in return trust them with my life. You have no idea what this base was like before—" A series of beeps yanked his attention back to this instrumentation. "This is Rand. Come in Crew Twelve. Repeat. This is Rand —"

"Administrator – "

Static cut through the rest of the woman's words. Rand cursed and ran swift fingers over glowing panels. Niamh held her breath, her fingers biting into the armrest. Franchisees sat in their comfortable offices, issued orders and watched their bottom line. Not this. Not saving their staff.

"Repeat, Winter."

"We're close to Hide Seven, Sir. Juveniles breeched the harvester. We had to abandon ship. I'm sorry, Sir – "

Rand cut through her apology. "Acknowledged, Winter. How far are you from the hide?"

"Three of the crew are already inside. Four of us are meters away from the hide shaft."

"Understood, Winter."

Rand relayed his orders to the evac team in the sealed cabin and Niamh clung to her seat as the scout transport plunged through the thin layer of cloud. Dense green filled the shield, vines and creepers draping over a lush, unending canopy. A flock of broad-winged birds arrowed away from their ship, their whooping cries muted through the thick hull.

"What's a hide?"

Rand's mouth thinned in concentration. "A refuge. I ordered their construction. They're a bolt hole where a crew can wait for pick up."

"And before that?"

He flicked her a dark glance. "You died." He turned his attention back to the glowing panel. "We'll dock with the hide. You're to stay inside the scout."

"My job is to follow you – "

Rand laughed. "You made up your mind about me the minute we shook hands." The shuddering and rattle of the metal eased and the rapid descent slowed. With a dull thunk, the craft landed and clamps engaged with hisses and thuds around the exterior.

Niamh tugged her harness free as the cabin doors opened. Barked orders and quick, practiced movements filled the space. A hatch opened in the floor and the team dropped through it.

Niamh stood and followed Rand into the empty cabin. He pulled a Sao-5 free from its storage rack in the far corner and handed it to her. "I'm making assumptions about your training."

She twitched a smile at him, priming the heavy weapon, feeling it warm and then hum against her shoulder. Rand's gaze narrowed on her, assessing. "Good enough?"

"Follow me. Your job—defend this scout." He dropped down through the hatch and Niamh scrambled after him.

The narrow room beneath the ship held a clear shield stretching from wall to wall and a door cut into it. Beyond the shield, obscured panels marked out a series of cubicle-like rooms. The evac team members surged through the door to secure the area, shifting storage crates, searching every corner for evidence that shadow-snakes had breached the hide.

One of the team gave a thumbs-up to Rand and he palmed the panel, waiting for the slow hiss and slide as the door opened. "Stay here. This is our way out. They've cleared the room, but we don't drop our guard. No snakes get through."

A smile twitched over her mouth and adrenaline kicked in. Her hands flexed around the Sao-5, the weight comforting. "Except one?"

Rand's mouth thinned. "Funny." He paused. Before she could react, his hand slid behind her head and he pulled her into a rough kiss. She almost groaned at the first brush of his lips against hers, his addictive taste forcing her to open her mouth. The tip of her tongue teased his and she ached to deepen the kiss...just as Rand pulled away. His thumb wiped moisture from her lower lip. "The venom hasn't broken down yet. I can still taste it."

Niamh's heart thudded, everything in her aching to grab him again. Her brain kicked in. "What does that mean?"

"You need more antivenin." He straightened, stepped back and the door slid into place. Locks engaged and she could only watch as Rand barked silent orders to his team.

She ran a hand through her tangled hair and sank back against the wall, her Sao-5 primed and aimed. The antivenin hadn't worked. Rand had said his venom slowly paralyzed. What did that mean for her now, trapped between the scout transport and a clear door?

The evac team moved between the rooms, their shadows flickering behind the partitions. The first of the rescued crew, her armor replaced, her face red with blotches and with a deep row of scratches scoring her cheek, stumbled toward Niamh's clear door. One of the transport team palmed the panel and Niamh stood to the side. The man gave her a brief nod and she pressed her hand to shut the door. She watched him help the still-shocked woman into the scout.

Two more followed, though there was still no sign of the rest of the crew.

The outer door to the hide shot back and four bedraggled men and women stumbled against the inner security door. Weapons took unerring aim and Niamh found her own hands tightening around the warmed metal of her Sao-5. One by one, Rand allowed the members of Crew Twelve into the safety of the hide and one by one, they were stripped, re-armored and escorted onto the scout.

Niamh swallowed and flexed her damp fingers around her weapon. She'd trained, but her last few years as an agent had been...stagnant. Definitely no guns, hurried rescues—her gaze fixed on Rand's lean, hard body—or sinfully attractive administrators. She winced. That thought had to come from the venom still coursing her veins.

The last of the crew was a stripping shadow behind one of the partitions and Rand stood guard. The man kicked out his battered armor. Rand toed it, and found nothing. He looked up and his gaze narrowed on her. A frown formed across his forehead. He

disappeared behind a partition and reappeared with a glass. Shouldering his weapon, he palmed the door open. "Here." And the door closed, locks clunking into place again.

Niamh stared at the glass in her hand, full almost to the brim with water. She sniffed it and the subtle but sour odor of the antivenin had her wincing. She ignored the myriad questions that rose within. Taking a short breath, Niamh knocked back the clear liquid. The bitter taste lined her mouth and she willed herself to swallow.

It slid cool down her throat.

Now the venom would break down completely, and all attraction to Rand would die with it. Her heart twisted and regret tasted almost as sour as the cure she'd just swallowed. She had to be sensible. It would make her job easier. Rand couldn't remain in charge of Zeta-Draconis-prime.

Niamh bent to put the glass in the corner...just as all hell broke loose in the hide.

Chapter Six

Screaming, the crewman burst out from behind the partition. Blood streaked over his neck and bare chest. He slammed into the clear shield protecting Niamh and she leapt back. She fought her instinct to fire. Somehow, his palm smashed against the panel and the distinctive clunk of the locks disengaging had Niamh backing into a corner.

Her heart hammered and sweat slicked her hands. She'd set her weapon, had it prepped to disrupt all neural activity. Niamh willed her breathing to slow. She had to wait, wait... Seconds crawled. The door rolled back, and the man's scream erupted into her silent, formerly safe section. Niamh's finger squeezed.

The screaming man slumped, his limbs twisting. Niamh panted out slow breaths. She'd never shot anyone—ever. Was he even alive? Her stomach dropped, but she couldn't look at the Sao-5, didn't want it confirmed that she'd just killed a man.

Two of the evac team dropped down from the scout, weapons primed.

"Strip him." Rand punctured the unconscious man's neck with a fat needle, changed the serum and stabbed him again. "Get him back to the base. Now."

"Sir." One almost saluted. Then they hauled the crewman into the scout transport, the hatch closed and the whole hide started to shake.

"Stay there. Do not come into the hide." Rand gave her a brief nod before the door shot back into place.

Niamh let her legs buckle and she slid down the wall to hit the metal floor. What the hell had happened? Had a snake bitten the man she'd shot? She swallowed and ran a trembling hand through her damp hair. And had that been Rand five months before? Blood-soaked and screaming with that look of sheer terror on his face?

Niamh wiped at her face and tried to pull in her scattering thoughts. She was a field service agent with ten years under her belt. She wasn't a rookie. So she willed herself to stand and wiped her damp palms on the heavy fabric of her armor. Taking a fresh grip on her weapon, she watched Rand as he searched the room.

A shadow-snake had breached the hide.

And Rand was alone with it.

Nerves ate at her stomach but she pushed them down. Her panic didn't help anyone—

Blackness flooded the hide and Niamh bit down on a yelp. Her thoughts ran wild. Had that been a deliberate act by Rand? Or had the snake shorted the power? Unintentionally? Intentionally? Her heart tightened. Did they have that sort of intelligence? Rand had said they had genetic memory. In other alien species that had often indicated the ability to reason.

Seconds ticked by, maybe minutes. She'd lost all sense of time. Niamh pinched at her eyes and watched spots dance against the blackness. Only her own breathing and the solid run of her heart filled the silence. She willed herself calm again. Her fingers ran over the sensitive controls of her weapon, securing the settings. She had no way of knowing how Rand would react if a shadow-snake bit him again. Her gut tightened. She would have to shoot him too.

The door locks clunked and Niamh sucked in a nervous breath. Her hands tightened around her weapon and she aimed it in the direction of the door. It slid back and thunked into the opposite frame. Silence. No slither of a snake over the metal floor, no hiss, but equally no footfalls or Rand's slow breathing.

Adrenalin fired through her body and she shoved down a curse. The blackness sat heavy before her eyes. She couldn't see a thing. Her heartbeat ramped. What the hell had opened the door?

"Niamh..."

Heat bloomed through her chest, relief chasing it. “Rand?” She jumped when a warm, scale-tipped finger traced over the back of her right hand. His scent, the rich wild heat of the jungle, wrapped around her and her breath caught. She fought to speak. “You trapped the shadow-snake?”

“The crew disturbed its hatching.” A second finger traced over her skin and a shiver ran up her arm. “I let it think I was an adult who could lead it to flesh-fruit. That’s what the disturbed young do – seek out another shadow-snake.”

Niamh winced, suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of his killing something so young. The snake had the potential to be lethal, but still, it was little more than a baby. “You’ve...disposed...of it?”

“Hides have a one-way trap.” His fingers pushed hers away from the trigger and slid the weapon from her lax grip. The Sao-5 made a dull thunk when he dropped it to the floor. “I caught it and released it. The Miran is thick with fruit. It will find a new place to birth in peace.”

The tight knot in her chest eased. “I’m relieved.”

“You are?” He stepped closer and his body heat mixed with his rich, wild scent. “More shadow-snakes growing, breeding, dying, rotting down into the earth and releasing the seeds that grow more flesh-fruit vines. More fruit, more profit.” The hard edge to his voice cut her. “A true citizen of the central government.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“No?” His fingers teased hers, the roughness of their tips making her shiver. “But everything is about profit, isn’t it, Niamh?”

He goaded her, she knew that. Rand had somehow managed to keep the safety of others before the accumulation of wealth. A rare man indeed. “You want me to fight with you. Why? So that you can lash out at someone? Lessen the guilt? Your crewman could live, just like you did.”

“His name is Burke. And I failed him.”

Her insides twisted at the bitterness in his voice. "No. You didn't."

Rand's quick, indrawn breath showed his anger. "You don't know me..." His breath brushed her skin and she could almost taste the sweet, intoxicating scent of his venom. "But you will."

She heard the change in him, the shadow-snake in him rising. Her heart thudded. He'd just said it moments before. He'd trapped the young shadow-snake by making it think it had found an adult. She ignored the heat in her blood, the sudden, tight need growing in her flesh. No venom ran in her veins now. She should have no reaction to him. None. "Rand, you need to do something. Need to deal with your venom."

His hands traced along her arms, sliding over the plates in the armor. Niamh remembered that she had to breathe. The darkness only intensified his touch, his scent, the sound of his slow inhale and exhale. Niamh's heart pounded. What the hell was going on? She'd taken the cure. Isaac Rand had no effect on her.

That thought faltered as his thigh nudged her legs apart and pressed hard against her pubic bone. Heat and pleasure flared. She gasped, unable to resist her body's need to push down against solid muscle.

"You want me." He paused and his mouth hovered over hers. Her lips burned and she fought the need to close the tiny gap and take his mouth, taste him, let his teeth sink into her. "I can taste me in you."

The rough growl of his voice prickled over her skin and his words fired her growing desire. Niamh swallowed, her throat tight, her body aching. Damn it. The antivenin hadn't worked. Thoughts of her dying didn't concern her in that moment, only the knowledge that she would not be able to resist Rand. Not at all.

She uncurled her fingers, lifting her hand through the darkness until her fingertips came into contact with the hard edge of his jaw. Muscles twitched under her touch and she traced a light path over the sinuous line of sensitive scales running to his temple.

Rand groaned. His tongue tip teased her upper lip, the sensation sparking through her blood. He pressed into her body and Niamh cursed the armor that separated them.

He pulled a kiss from her lips, gentle, playful and filled with promise. His hand shaped her breast and Niamh arched into his touch, wanting more, wanting his palm on her bare flesh not pressing against flexible but impenetrable armor.

Rand obviously sensed her frustration. "What?"

"Armor," she murmured, tangling her fingers in his hair and deepening the kiss, her lips, her tongue, teasing, tasting. The hint of venom he shared had her blood fizzing and she wanted more of him. She licked at the line of soft scales as they edged over her jaw and his hiss skittered over her skin. "I hate this armor."

Rand's laughter warmed her. "It'll break all my laws."

Her teeth tugged at his bottom lip. "You're the administrator. Who else should break your rules?"

"Niamh?" For a moment, he stilled. "Are you agreeing to my ownership of the franchise?"

Was she? But for an accident, the bite of a young snake, Isaac Rand would have been the perfect man for the role of administrator. The first man worthy of the role, except for one thing. "You poisoned me."

He let out a slow sigh. "The venom in your system, it's only a trace now. I'm sure you're safe. And...I'm sorry." His warm hand cupped her jaw, the rough tips of his fingers gentle on her cheek. He pulled a soft kiss from her mouth. "I panicked. I couldn't hand over these people, this planet to another Kinsella. Not when I had the chance to influence you."

Niamh paused. She *had* made her decision and it stood against all rules that the field agency had drilled into over the years. If Rand knew he could trust his staff to keep his secret then she could do one thing. She would lie for him. "I think this...influence...must have affected my ability to assess you. But now I'm quite sure." Niamh wished that she could look into his eyes, see his reaction, but the heavy darkness made that impossible. "Administrator Rand."

A tremor ran through his palm, his fingers, and he released a slow, shaking breath. "Thank you." His mouth covered hers, the deep kiss searing down to her toes. Sliding his hands down to her waist, he slipped his fingers down over her backside and lifted her. Her legs wrapped around his hips and she tangled her hands in his hair, driving his mouth hard against hers. Flickers of venom teased her tongue and she ached for more. Whatever Rand had done to her, she couldn't get enough of him.

Rand groaned and dug his fingers hard against her ass, pressing the flexible armor into her flesh. He pulled his mouth free. "We need to break the law. Right now."

He turned confidently through the blackness, his boots thumping against the metal. Niamh had only a vague sense of her direction, or where she was in the hide until Rand stopped. "The bed's beneath you."

His hands slid away from her and she missed the close contact as she hit the hard mattress. She reached for the first fastening over her shoulder and met Rand's fingers.

"Let me," he murmured. The mattress dipped and his thigh brushed up against hers. "I'm much more practiced in removing armor."

Niamh had to imagine the smile ghosting his mouth. "Really?"

His soft laughter brushed over her bare shoulder and his warm lips followed it, the light prick of his teeth fizzing pleasure through her flesh. She knew the steady release of venom kept him from sinking his teeth deep into her flesh. She should be happy. She had to be insane, because she wasn't happy.

"Think I get just anybody naked?" More of the armor loosened and fell away, taking her starched blouse with it. "You're a serious temptation to me."

"Good. It's mutual." Her hands moved through the blackness, until her palms pressed against his chest. Searching the hardness of his armor, she found the securing straps and tugged them free. She traced over the hard muscle she found beneath, over smooth skin and the distinctive roughness of his scales running down his abdomen. He shivered under her exploring touch.

She pressed her lips to his collarbone, flicking her tongue over its sharpness, tasting the exotic difference between the human and shadow-snake in him. Rand growled against her shoulder, nipping her, spiraling little shards of ecstasy into her veins. She arched into him, just a *little* more and she would...

Rand pulled back and she sagged. In that moment, she wanted to thump him.

"I want you naked for this first orgasm."

He'd just saved himself from a jab to the ribs. Niamh bit back a wry smile, glad that he couldn't see it.

"What's with the smirk?"

Her heart jumped. "You..."

"I can see in the dark."

He sounded smug about it, too. "Why *are* the lights off?"

"All power is diverted to security. I don't want anything else getting in here." His hands, sure and confident, returned to her armor and pulled it free. He urged her back against the thin mattress, smooth sheets sliding against her spine. Warm air brushed against her nakedness, but still she shivered, knowing that Rand could see her even in the thick blackness shrouding the hide. The snaps and clicks of his armor filled the heavy silence.

Niamh remembered that she had to breathe. But the weight of the darkness, her inability to see Rand and the lingering tendrils of pleasure, had her flesh tight.

"The scout will be back in thirty minutes."

"Only thirty minutes?"

Silence. He'd stopped taking off his harvest armor. His laughter ran another shiver over her skin. "Would you rather we wait?"

"Would you?"

Armor dropped to the floor with a dull thud. "No."

Niamh wasn't prepared for the heat of his skin against hers, his weight, his scent surrounding her. He pulled her against his chest, his arms tight, his legs tangling with hers. Burying his face in her neck, he drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

"You are addictive," he murmured. "I knew you would be."

She ran her fingers down the hollow of his spine and his pelvis pushed into hers, his erection hard against her belly. Rand loosened his tight hold and glided a palm over her waist, her hip, his teeth nibbling along the line of her shoulder. She sucked in a breath. Damn it, that was unfairly good.

"I can't do everything I want to," he murmured, his mouth easing over the edge of her breast. The deep darkness intensified the slide of his hot skin against hers, the wet heat of his mouth, his hands exploring the curve of her hip. He grinned, she felt it in the shape of his lips and the way his breath brushed against her nipple. "But I'll try."

Niamh gave a soft laugh, yelping as his mouth closed over her breast. The thick black of the room seemed to thin and the grey outline of his hair, of his shoulders, pressed out of the darkness. She teased her fingers through smooth strands, curling into them as she tried to push down the need to writhe, to deny the licks of fire under her flesh. He drove her crazy. He did. "Rand..." She groaned his name, wanting more than the tease of his mouth on her breast. Niamh wanted him everywhere, wanted him to bury himself deep— Her heart jumped at one thought. "Do you have to bite me?"

The grey shadow lifted and Rand's gaze fixed on her, her heart squeezing at the silver gleam edging his eyes. "Bite you?" His tongue touched his teeth and it had to be her imagination, because his venom tipped his tongue like drops of molten silver. "Why?"

"Do you have to bite to orgasm?"

His smile deepened. "No. You're quite safe, Niamh." Rand eased her onto her back, chasing his mouth down over her stomach until his tongue dipped into her navel and she gasped. Too much like her dream, far too much. "I'll resist the need to bring you to true ecstasy..."

Niamh glared at him, though how his tongue played across her mons made her unable to stay mad at him. She wanted him where his dream had denied her, and she wanted him there now. "Do I need to thump you?"

"If you hit me..." His hot, wet tongue curled around her clitoris and his firm hands gripped her hips and held her down. Her sudden, unexpected cry echoed off the metal walls. A moment later, his tongue was gone and Niamh ached at its loss. "Then I can't do this."

"Damn it, Rand." Her tone had almost edged into despairing. Playing was one thing, but now he was being evil.

"I'm in charge here, Agent Sullivan." His gleaming eyes held her and the words ran hot shock over her body. They echoed her dream *exactly*. A wry smile twisted his mouth. "You appointed me, yourself."

His head dipped and all shock, all thought scattered under his clever, merciless tongue. Sparks of pleasure spiraled into her tightening flesh as his calloused hands slid to her thighs and spread her further. A deepening ache filled her. Her legs open to him, his tongue and lips licked and sucked, and there, just there... Her chest heaved and too little air forced its way into her straining lungs. He had to, because her whole body ached, trembled...and then she felt it, the lightest prick of his teeth against her most sensitive flesh—

Orgasm exploded through her body, shrouding her in light and heat, fire surging through every vein. Niamh thought she screamed his name, but any coherent thought was useless, completely useless. She sank into the thin mattress, shaking, sweating and gulped in air. So much better than the thin mirage of her dream—she choked out a laugh. Unbelievably better.

Rand's soft laughter lifted goose bumps on her damp skin. "I never knew it would be like this."

His words penetrated her dazed brain. "What would?"

Rand's hot mouth pressed open kisses against her abdomen, his tongue edging her navel before he licked and kissed his way to her breasts. Fresh flickers of need curled through her flesh. Yes, this man worked a charm over her body she never expected either.

"Since my..." He licked the underside of her breast and she gasped. "My change, I've not slept with anyone. I was afraid." He sucked her nipple into his mouth and Niamh arched her spine into the hardness of his body. She clutched at his shoulders, at his tangled hair. "*You* are a revelation."

Something hollowed in her stomach, taking the hot edge off her growing need. "So when I'm gone..." The rest of the words went unsaid. She couldn't think of other women, hot, naked, writhing in ecstasy under Rand's perfect mouth. It hurt—the pain, a tight knot in her chest. But she tried to say them, anyway. "You'll..."

"Do you have to go?"

The words froze her. "You want me to...?"

Rand looked up, his silver-edged eyes gripping her. She felt the heat of them deep in her flesh. "Stay."

Chapter Seven

Niamh's heart squeezed. She had to be misinterpreting him. He wanted her to stay on the planet to protect his franchise, protect his people. She would be his liaison with central government, the human face he no longer had. Niamh forced the words out of a tight throat. "To work for you?"

The sly smile curving his lips had her heart pounding. No man had the right to look so wicked. "Yes..." The word trailed away and his mouth found her breast, licking, teasing her nipple to wet hardness. "Though if you ever set foot in my office, all work would become impossible." His teeth grazed her skin and she cried out at the pure rush of ecstasy coursing through every vein.

Rand slid hot over her body until his mouth hovered over hers. His cock pushed against her flesh and she shifted her hips, wanting him inside her, wanting him fast and hard, but mostly wanting him *now*.

"Impatient?" he murmured, his breath an intoxicating mixture of her and him. He rolled his hips, teasing her with the head of his cock. "Say yes."

Niamh twisted beneath him, cursing him for playing with her. At that moment, she would agree to just about anything. "To what?"

"To staying on the base."

How did he have this control? Where was the shadow-snake part of him when she needed it, the part that promised to fuck her, pound into her, make her come so hard she screamed? And she wanted to say yes to him. Forget about her life in the field service and stay with this man. Any way she could. "Your liaison?"

His lips brushed her mouth, his tongue edging over her teeth. The push of his cock had her pelvis arching up to meet him, the pressure of him spiraling her thoughts. The sweet taste of his venom filled her senses and she groaned.

What would it be like if he bit her? Bit her and lost control? The dangerous thought tightened the need in her flesh, had her hands chasing down over his ribs to grip his ass. She needed him now, needed a quick release before that need overwhelmed her.

“Liaison would be good. Central government likes to see a human face.”

There was still too much control in his voice and she had to break it.

Her mouth took his, her tongue mirroring the action she needed, the one she urged with the shove of her hands and the tilt of her hips. She buried Rand deep inside her and swallowed his surprised moan. Niamh arched against him, desperate for him to thrust, to take her, to make her come before her very real need for him to bite her consumed all her thoughts.

Rand’s arms tightened around her and he met the thrust of her tongue, the wild push of her hips. Desire surged through her. She would stay, stay and be whatever he wanted her to be if at the end of the day she could do this. Niamh didn’t care. All that she wanted was him making love to her. Tendrils of orgasm flickered at the edges of her scattering thoughts, bright, hot, with the promise of spiraling her out of control.

Rand broke their kiss, pushing himself up and the shift in position...

Niamh uttered a soundless cry as he began to pound into her, her legs wrapping around him, deepening his thrusts. Her flesh tightened, the promise of release burning through her. She could almost taste it and it tasted as sweet as him, as the promise of his venom flooding her flesh.

The thought burst fire over her skin. She needed it, had to have him sink his teeth into her throat and join them. It had her hips meeting every hard thrust, her hands fisting the smooth sheets. Words erupted. “You have to.”

“Niamh...”

His voice growled over her hot, damp skin and she curved into him, wanting him deeper, harder, but most of all she wanted his teeth buried in her neck. “Bite me.”

His scent, sudden, wild, wrapped around her and her desire increased.

"No." An edge of panic – and need – thickened the word.

"Bite me. Fuck me. Both. Now."

"Niamh... Don't."

Rand pounded into her flesh and her orgasm teetered on the edge, so close, but still not close enough that it would tumble her into ecstasy. He had to bite her. She would never come, never, if he didn't sink his teeth and release his venom in her willing body. It was right. It was *needed*. "I want it. You have to –"

With a savage growl, Rand yanked her to him and sank his fangs into her throat.

Blinding light seared over her, a rush of pure joy bursting through her body, her mind. Her flesh flamed as Rand came, his venom pounding through her spreading an almost unbearable pleasure through every trembling muscle. It was too much, too much. Her spine arched, she stiffened and the last coherent image was the look of terror in Rand's silver-edged eyes.

* * * * *

"Niamh...?" Rand touched a shaking finger to her cheek, tracing a line down her damp skin. She felt too heavy in his arms, a dead weight. His heart contracted in his chest. He'd *bitten* her. Bitten her as he came. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, someone was screaming...and then it slammed into his head. It was *him*.

Training kicked in. He felt for her pulse, his trembling fingers slicking over the puncture holes in her neck. His stomach turned over. What the hell had he been thinking? He'd killed her –

No. There, a thready pulse. She was alive. Barely.

He fought the need to crush her to him, hold her and have his strength of will keep her with him. She needed more antivenin, not yet more of his touch.

"Divert power for minimal lighting," he ordered. With the release of his venom, all of his shadow-snake abilities had faded back. He cursed, loathing the snake that had bitten him, hating the change it had wrought in his flesh.

Gray light flooded the hide. Rand squinted against the pain, but it was nothing when he saw the gray tinge to Niamh's skin, the way her head lolled. He released her and scrambled off the bed to yank a hypodermic from the rack below the recycle unit. Running his fingers over the controls, he created more of his antivenin. She already had two shots of it. He had to hope that it had protected her from the worst of his venom, that it didn't change her as it had him. His gut tightened and he shoved down the rush of panic as he pressed the silver cylinder to her neck.

It hissed against her skin. Rand's fingers found her pulse again. Had it changed? Grown stronger, weakened? He couldn't tell. He cursed. He'd been a reckless idiot. But she'd wanted him, wanted the shadow-snake in him, called to it and the beast had responded.

Rand pushed his fingers through his damp hair. The scout would be en route. He had to get her dressed. His team couldn't find her naked. Shifting her limp body, he tugged and strapped the harvest armor back over her damp skin. Self-loathing crawled through him as he touched her hip, her shoulder, still filled with the memory of her fire, her wildness under him. Rand willed himself to step away from her. There was nothing else he could do. Either the antivenin worked, or it didn't. But he needed to get her back to the base, have her hooked up to fluids and monitors.

He yanked on his own armor, securing the straps and stamping into his boots. "Scout transport, what's your ETA?"

Static filled the hide before Michaels answered. "Descending. Touchdown in under a minute."

"Prep to return, Michaels. We have to get back to the base. Agent Sullivan is...injured."

There was a long pause. The hide rattled and shook around him at the force of the descending ship. "Understood, Sir."

Rand wiped at his face and willed himself to pick her up. She felt too light in his arms now, almost insubstantial. Fuck, he was a complete idiot. What the hell had he

been thinking? He should have walked away from being administrator the second Kinsella dropped to the floor and snapped and bucked at his feet. Rand winced. He'd enjoyed that memory too much, reveling in the power of it, enjoying how the man had died.

Now, overlaying that was Niamh. Stiffening under him, her mouth rounding in a soundless scream before she slumped to the bed. His arms tightened, his fingers digging into the harvest armor, desperate to keep her alive. He pressed a kiss into her hair, pulling in her scent and his gut tightened. He'd wanted her to stay, to work with him, but he should have known that would be impossible. What he was would've come between them eventually. Rand had been stupid not to think it would happen so soon.

The dropping of the hatch caught his eye and he strode forward. One of the evac team hit the metal floor, Sao-5 primed and ready. Behind the mask, he recognized his second-in-command, Michaels. All of his teams had orders to stun him if he posed a threat to any of them. Another dropped down and palmed the door open, then swung her weapon into position.

"I'm venom free," he said, still approaching the pair with caution. "I bit her. She took it all."

Their gazes flicked to the woman he carried before finding him again. "We have your orders, Sir," Michaels said.

They were wasting precious time, but his orders *had* been specific. Stun and secure him and take him back to base. Gently, he laid Niamh on the floor. He couldn't stop his fingers from stroking back the cool hair from her cheek, his calloused fingertips rough on her smooth skin. He winced and stood back from her, lifting his hands to show his compliance. "Get her on board first."

They did, hoisting Niamh into the transport. Pain knifed through his gut as he watched her disappear through the hatch. He should never have come to Zeta-Draconis-prime. Never.

"I'm ready." Rand lifted his chin and held the gaze of his second-in-command. "You can shoot me now."

A solid beam hit him square in the chest, pain engulfing every nerve, blinding him, wiping away every sense. Rand crumpled to the floor and blackness took him with a bitter thought. The snake in him had wanted Niamh for its mate...and he'd just given her to it.

The gun should have hurt more. A lot more. He deserved it.

Chapter Eight

Niamh felt the first slide of drool edge from the corner of her mouth. So not what she wanted him to see post-coital. And really how embarrassing was it that she'd passed out? Still, sex so good that she blacked out? Nothing could better that in the Field Service and she planned to hound Rand day and night so that he could do it again.

She moved her hand, lifting it to her mouth to wipe away the drool...and found a soft cloth under her fingers. Her eyelids fluttered open to a dim room that didn't have the distinctive metal scent of the hide. Her brow furrowed. The mattress supporting her spine seemed more solid, thicker, the sheets heavy against her...clothed...skin.

She stretched, her muscles feeling sinuous, strong and a smile curved her mouth.

"Niamh, how to you feel?"

Her smile deepened as she recognized Rand's voice. He sounded hesitant and her stomach hollowed. Was he regretting what they had shared? Her vision cleared, the dimness lifting and she stared up at the smooth, white ceiling of what seemed to be a room in the infirmary. "What the hell...?"

"What's wrong?" Rand's fingers gripped her shoulder, biting hard against the bone.

"Well, besides you breaking my collarbone right now..."

His hand shot back and he muttered an apology. A chair scraped against the tiled floor and Niamh turned her head to follow him as he stumbled backwards. He looked, tired, drawn, and guilt ebbed from him. He ran a hand over his dark hair and finally met her gaze. In the slant of sunlight from the protected windows, his eyes held that addictive silver edge and Niamh's heart missed a beat. There really was no hope for her.

"What do you remember?" Rand's voice held no humor, only a quiet seriousness that pushed back the flicker of desire in her flesh.

Niamh pushed herself up and her pillows supported her back. Why was she in the infirmary? "Not much, to be honest."

"This should help you regain your strength and memory." He cracked open a smooth black pod just bigger than his fist. The ripe, sweet odor of flesh-fruit lifted the sterile air, making Niamh pull in a deep breath and her blood quickened. It smelled...heavenly. "Young flesh-fruit has regenerative properties." He sliced out four dark red segments with a short knife, leaving them in the pod. "Eat all you can."

Rand wrapped her fingers around the warmed outer skin and for a brief moment, she closed her eyes. His touch burned, firing the now familiar need through her body. But he stepped back and nothing in him reflected her desire. She sighed and picked up the first segment. Cool, its skin smooth like silk and with a succulent plumpness, Niamh put it to her lips. She paused. "How much is this worth?"

A smile ghosted over Rand's mouth. "The four segments you have there? A year's pay."

She blinked and swallowed in reflex. "That's crazy."

He shrugged. "Our customers believe it's worth it."

Niamh teased her tongue over her the rich, red segment and she closed her lips around it. The first sweet wave of something that was almost honey, but with an undertaste she couldn't describe, washed over her tongue. Little sparkles of pure sweetness danced and played...and then her teeth broke the thin skin. She let out a low groan. She had a month's pay in her mouth. In that moment, it was *utterly* worth it.

She chewed and the intensity of the taste had her heart pounding. She felt fine, more than fine. Liquid strength flowed through her muscles, life and warmth making her stretch her arms above her head. The movement... She sighed. Flesh-fruit and sex with Rand obviously had its benefits.

Pale memory washed through her, a memory of incredible pleasure almost drowning her. A fist tightened in her gut. He'd bitten her...but she'd needed it. Without his bite, she would have hung on the edge of a blistering orgasm until it drove her insane. Niamh let out a slow breath and met his gaze. He'd flooded her with venom and she'd survived. "I'm no longer human, am I?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "No."

Niamh closed her eyes and uncertainty washed away the warmth lying under her skin. Panic bubbled and her brain shot back to the comfort of government-speak, of the rules drummed into her from a young age.

Everything, *everything* about central government revolved around the pure, uncorrupted human. It didn't tolerate any deviation from its accepted definition. Populations on varying planets who had mixed their genes with indigenous flora and fauna became second-class citizens within the regime, with little say over their lives. Her stomach turned over. Or if the corruption warranted it, then the government ordered execution.

Niamh let out a slow breath. New, more painful thoughts broke through the old rules. Rand. He had only wanted her to remain on the base because she would act as his liaison. Now she was no use to him. She pushed down the self-pity and opened her eyes. Rand hadn't interrupted her, obviously aware that she needed to process the news. "I want to see."

"The bathroom has a mirror," he said, moving to a long plain panel in the opposite wall. Technology hummed and the panel opened and slid back with a soft sigh.

Niamh swung her legs out and her bare feet curled against the tiled floor. Her limbs felt loose, strong. She stared down at her feet and saw smooth, scaleless skin. No scales grew across her soles either. Her hands were equally free, but she couldn't find the courage to touch her face anymore than she had.

Rand stepped aside and let her enter the small, dark bathroom. "Lights," she murmured and a soft glow bloomed from the ceiling and around the large square

mirror stretched over the sink. Her heart thudded and Niamh grabbed her courage and forced herself to stand before it.

She stared and her hand lifted to her cheek, slowly, her fingers running light over her skin. "I'm..."

"Practically unchanged on the surface."

There was that need to thump him again. "You could have said! I thought I had scales. A forked tongue." She checked that by sticking it out at the mirror and caught Rand's brief smile. One word burst back over her. "Practically?"

He leaned against the wall and met her gaze in the mirror. The smile had died away. "You're zero-point-one percent shadow-snake, Niamh. A few genes here and there, but you're no longer purely human." He pressed his hand to his mouth and his gaze dropped to the sink. "I'm sorry. I should never..." He winced. "What do you want to do?"

Niamh blinked. "Do?"

"I attacked you. You have the right to bring charges against me."

"Charges?" Rand straightened and he tugged his shirt, straightening it across his hips, the action a reminder of their first meeting almost a lifetime ago. Or at least it felt that way. "Where would that get me?"

"I made you like me." His gaze narrowed. "I would want my revenge."

Memory surfaced of a blistering-cold planet and the overwhelming rush of anger at the betrayal of a friend...and then the raw surge of satisfaction at seeing said friend at the man's court martial. She gasped and grabbed at the cold edge of the sink. It felt as real as one of her own memories but it wasn't one of hers. It was Rand, his past buried in her brain. "I have your memories."

Rand cursed. "This is so fucked up." He pushed out a slow breath. "I didn't plan any of this, Niamh, I swear. All I wanted to do was keep my people safe. In the two weeks I was here, before that snake got me, we lost twelve people, I couldn't..."

"I know." More of his past lurked beneath her thoughts, almost as if Rand pressed himself against her mind. She could dip into any aspect of his life. It was...unnerving. Niamh pulled her thoughts away and fought to focus. "My position as an agent is gone." A wry smile tugged at her mouth and the soft glow of the lights gleamed against her teeth. The image in the mirror caught her. Would her canines soften and produce venom, too? She scratched at her scalp. Damn it. Focus. "Obviously, I can't go back. They'd shunt me off to one of the labor franchises. No. So...is the offer to work here still on the table? It won't be obvious over a link that I'm not the woman who left the office..."

"Four days ago."

Niamh turned to stare at him. "I was unconscious for that long?" Rand remained silent, his face grim. Shit, was that a no to the job? Her gut twisted and her thoughts scattered. Well, she had his memories. The years Rand had spent working for the outer colonials, the schemes and plans were open for her use. They would keep her hidden, keep her from having to present her corrupted self to the authorities.

She lifted her shoulders. At least she had the new strength of a shadow-snake flowing through her veins and the memory of Rand's training as well as her own. "The cryo-cargo ships. Can you arrange transport for me off-planet? I have to disappear."

"That's your plan? To disappear?"

"It's the start of the plan."

Niamh willed herself to walk out of the bathroom. Had he enjoyed the idea of fucking a pure human, but now that she was just like him, the desire had worn off? She tried to push her mind away... "Burke." The name burst from her mouth. She remembered the young man's face, blood-soaked, terrified...and the fact that she'd shot him. Her gut twisted and she made herself ask the question. "Did he make it?"

"The antivenins took—mine and the standard one. He was a hybrid from Alpha-Caeli-2." Rand snorted. "That, more than anything else, probably protected him."

"Good, good," she murmured. At least someone had survived the nightmare in one piece. She wiped a hand over her face and found herself at the long window behind the bed. Her palm pressed against the filter. Hot, stark light cut across her face and other memories pushed up from the new depths to her brain. The hated light of the planet. Niamh winced and blackened the window, dimming the room again. More ancient emotions rose and her chest grew tight at the endless hatred for the humans who had dumped them, expecting them to survive, to breed so that they could steal their wombs.

Niamh squeezed her eyes shut.

"It takes some getting used to," Rand said, coming to stand behind her. His hand rested against her shoulder, bleeding warmth against the thin cotton of her nightshirt. "Their hatred for us is sometimes unbearable."

His hand started to slide away, but Niamh stopped it, gripped his calloused fingers. Touching him flared a fast heat under her skin. Questions burned on the end of her tongue, questions she should leave well alone...but hell, she had nothing left to lose. "Why the sudden distance, Rand? Disappointed that you can't fuck a pure human anymore?" She let his fingers go and turned to face him. His mouth had thinned and light sparked in his eyes. "Did that appease the shadow-snake in you? Appease the need for revenge?"

"You have my memories—"

"I want you to say it."

A muscle twitched in his jaw before he said, "I didn't sleep with you for revenge."

Anger burned sour in her stomach and something else, the hot rise of...venom. Her tongue traced the edge of her teeth. The sharpness of her left canine pressed against the tip of her searching tongue and a drop of sweetness overwhelmed her taste buds.

Niamh took a quick step back, her spine hitting the frame of the window.

More flashes of memory rose up. Not the hatred of the shadow-snakes, but Rand's dark passion. His need surged through her. She held onto glimpses of him glaring at her solidified image projected into his office, his gaze sliding down her staid uniform.

His imagination stripped her, hating that he craved her, that the beast that held him wanted her naked, teeth and dick buried hard in her. Of fucking her. Of him losing himself in her —

“Strength, light sensitivity, memories and venom.” Rand shoved his hands into his pockets, his head tilted to one side. “That’s what we suspect is the level of your change.”

His objectivity grated against her straining nerves and broke the link to his past. Niamh pressed a fist to her breast, her heart still pounding. Damn, he’d burned for her, thought about fucking her long and hard. A flash of her stretched naked over his desk, his ridged cock buried deep in her ass fired heat under her skin. Shit. She didn’t need this. She pulled in a steadying breath, too aware of his impassive gaze. Now, he was simply distant and overly polite.

For her, only moments had passed since he’d asked her to stay, work for him, maybe even more...and now she watched a stranger list how she wasn’t fully human anymore. Time to move on. If nothing else, she was free from being a field service agent. That thought eased back the rapid rise of venom. Her teeth pulled against her upper jaw and her tongue tip found them hard again. Well, at least she wouldn’t have to milk herself. That would’ve been mortifying.

“When can you get me onto a transport?”

“They’re leaving on the hour, every hour.”

Niamh ignored him. The small room had the same layout as any other franchise base. That meant clothes were stored—she palmed another panel and it hissed back against the wall—in the narrow cupboard by the door. Her suit from the pod had been cleaned and hung up beside her green service suit. She brushed her fingers over the rough nap of its sleeve and a tight knot unwound inside of her. Closing her eyes, she let out a slow breath. That part of her life was over.

“I’m sorry, Niamh.” Pain lurked under his voice and made her question his objectivity.

His silence had her turning to face him. Shadows cut heavy across his face, but in the darkness, the touch of silver edged his eyes. A curl of heat sank low throw her belly. She still wanted him. Niamh doubted that would ever change. "What do you want from me?"

"Niamh..."

The way he said her name, the touch of uncertainty made her repeat her question. "Really. Tell me." She lifted her shoulders. "The last thing I remember is you asking me to stay...and *not* simply to work here. So why this?" She waved a hand at his rigid stance, his hands fists at his side, the tight turn to his jaw. His continuing silence irked her and she felt the dangerous rise of venom threading its way to her mouth. "What happened while I was unconscious?"

Rand flexed his hands. He rubbed them together, the calloused scales on his fingertips rasping. He met her gaze. "I had a chance to think."

Niamh held down a wince, thankful for her professional mask. So, it was time for the brush off. "And you decided —"

Rand broke across her words. "I've taken away your future, everything you were or could be. I had to give you the choice. To go or to stay."

She stared at him. All right, not what she thought he was going to say. "The choice?"

"You can stay here. The base is mixed, hybrids and pures. No one needs to know about your change in status. Or you can leave, jump a transport and pass as human. I can provide you with tech that will mask your trace of alien DNA." His chin lifted. "The decision is yours."

"So damn honorable."

Rand's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Niamh closed the distance between them. Her senses flared at his sudden wild scent and her body responded, need pooling between her thighs. Damn it, she hadn't

wanted sex, she wanted answers. But she had to goad him. It had become necessary, primeval. "Choice is just a way to assuage your guilt." Her fingers curled into fists, nails digging into her palms to stop her need to trace a light touch over his scales. "You make it my decision and you're absolved."

Anger pulsed off him, only heightening his scent and undercutting it with the sweet richness of his venom. "I'm offering you something none of us ever had. The shadow-snakes found themselves dumped on this planet. My genes meant I had to become a soldier and trained killer." He leaned forward, his mouth barely inches from hers. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "Yours, that you have to hurtle about the quadrant to secure profit for your masters."

His breath brushed her lips and she stared at them, wanting nothing more than to taste him, nip him. "So, I could go. Find another life, another man, *men*..."

Rand's soft growl prickled the hairs on her skin. "Is that your choice?"

Her breasts felt tight and heavy against the thin material of her nightshirt, ached for Rand to find them with his hands, his mouth. "Men? They've definitely been my choice since I was about eleven." She paused. His lips teased so close to hers his anger burned over her. She wanted it, needed it. Her voice dropped low and a smile twisted her mouth. "What will my venom do to them?" She tilted her head, her lips *just* brushing his. "And I'm stronger, more subtle. More needy. How many will it take to satisfy me, do you think?"

"Niamh..." Her name was a growl and it skittered down her spine.

"You're giving me choice, Rand." She stepped back from him...but didn't get far. His fingers gripped her arm in a tight band.

"What are you doing, Niamh?"

"This is what you wanted. Me gone, passing as human." She glanced down at his hand. The knuckles strained white and fury pulsed through him. It strengthened his incredible scent, the wildness and power of the jungle pounding through her. "I have

your memories." She wrenched her arm free. "You left me knowledge of battalions of hard-bodied men, all too willing to strip me —"

Her gaze fell on the bed, to the open pod of the flesh-fruit and the thought of it on her lips, her tongue tempted her. The press of the cool, succulent flesh of the segment against her mouth felt right, wanted. "Lick and suck me."

Ancient emotions swelled through her and then she knew exactly what she was doing. A female shadow-snake goaded the male, provoking him into biting, into mating with her. And the flesh-fruit would do just that.

Niamh bit into the thick pulp of the red slice, grinning at the fury that strained Rand's jaw, tightened his shoulders. The silver fire in his eyes had her wet. "Eat me. Fuck me."

Rand sucked in a sharp breath, his gaze fixed on her mouth. He followed the slide of her hand as she pulled the tabs free on her nightshirt. It slipped from her shoulders and puddled at her feet. Rand rocked on his heels, but still he fought her, fought her temptation.

Niamh teased her fingers down her throat, her collarbone, the juice of the flesh-fruit running cool against her hot skin. It mixed with her own scent, becoming heady, powerful. Rand pulled in a deepened breath, his chest lifting. A pained moan escaped him.

"Who would you recommend?"

"Recommend?" The word came out raw, charged, and his eyes had grown dark with hunger.

Naimh sighed as she circled her peaked nipple, juice dribbling over her breast in slow rivulets. Her head tilted. "Anderson? Tall, lithe, blond, *loves* to fuck. He wouldn't say no. From your memories, he *never* says no." She wet her lips and Rand took a fatal forward step. Her heart twisted, the sudden ache low in her pelvis flaring hot and sharp. "*Loves* hybrids —"

"Don't do this." His growl was delicious, his eyes hard and the desire to take her, fuck her, gleamed there. "I won't allow it."

"Allow what?" She glanced down at the juice glistening against her breast, running warm over her nipple. It stained her fingers as she teased her nipple to aching hardness. Niamh held Rand's gaze and the liquid fire coursing through her body surged. He belonged to her. She would have him. "Him to taste me? Bend me over and fuck me?"

"Is that really your choice?" He took another step closer to her. His fingers skirted her bare waist and Niamh pulled in a quick breath. "*Anderson?*" He slid his hand up, until he cupped her breast...and then he was lifting her fingers and the fruit she held to his lips. He sucked them in his hot mouth, his tongue teasing the fruit from her.

Niamh's knees almost buckled. The sweep of his tongue over her sensitive fingertips burned down through her flesh. She groaned.

Rand gave a final lick that curled fast to her pussy. "Still want him?" He lifted an eyebrow and the hard cut to his mouth had her breath short. "Here?" His roughened hand slid over her backside, squeezing tight until she yelped. "Here?"

He bent his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth, teeth grazing her flesh. In one fluid move, he lifted her and she grabbed at his shoulders, her thighs around his waist. He found her breast again, licking, suckling and by all that was unholy, she just wanted him to fuck her again.

Her fingers tightened in his hair, driving him against her aching breast. "Bite me. You have to bite me." Niamh groaned her plea. Fire licked under her skin, following the rise of venom with every passing second. Alien need seared through her brain. He'd accepted, taken her offering, he had to complete the mating.

"No more taunting?" Rand's talented mouth licked and kissed its way to her other breast and Niamh gasped. His tongue tip flicked at her nipple and she couldn't help it, her thighs squeezed hard. Rand gave a low laugh. "No thoughts of other men?"

She wasn't listening. Everything in her body screamed for him, her blood pounding. "Bite me. Please."

He blew warm air over her wet skin, his tongue teasing the underside of her breast.
“I don’t know...”

“Rand!”

Her complaint had him laughing, something hard, possessive. “I took the fruit you offered.” He looked up and the burning silver-edge to his gaze caught her breath. His voice dropped low. “Now you’re mine to do with as I please.”

“That’s not—”

His grin spiked a rush of fresh need. “New species. New rules.”

He dropped her onto the thick mattress and she yelped. Niamh stared up at him as he parted her thighs, his thumbs running in a shivering tease along the sensitive skin. She crushed her eyes shut, arched her spine, expecting more...but his touch vanished.

“Rand...” More words faded as she watched him pull the shirt from his back and drop it to the floor

His tongue traced over her lips and teeth and he shivered, his hands squeezing her thighs.

“What?” She wanted him. Now. Hard. Fast. They had to consummate their mating. Had to. “What’s wrong?”

“Venom. I’ve never tasted another’s venom.” His tongue teased her mouth, his muscles tense as he deepened the kiss. He pulled her hard against his body, rubbing her against his solid erection.

Niamh groaned and her hands worked at the fastening on his trousers. She shoved the material away and slid her hand over his ridged cock, stroking over its hardness. Rand broke his mouth from hers and shifted his hips, sliding hard against her slick flesh. Almost, almost where she needed him, buried in her, making love to her. Venom rose though her, hot, liquid and she grazed her teeth over his pectoral.

Rand's reaction was instant, his escaping growl washed heat through her. His fingers gripped her hips and he pumped into her guiding hand. "It has to be now, Niamh."

She didn't answer, only eased her body, opening for him, letting him sink deep, *deep* inside her. For a moment, they stilled. Niamh held his dark gaze with its mesmerizing silver edge. Desire shone there, mixing with need and...affection. Her hand stroked over the inviting line of his jaw and his eyes drifted shut. Warmth filled her chest and she couldn't help the smile that curved her mouth. She could grow *very* used to this man.

She pressed her lips to his collarbone and nipped at rough skin, her venom easing into his flesh. Rand's hips jerked involuntarily and fresh heat skittered up her spine. Niamh gasped and sank her teeth deeper.

Rand murmured something incomprehensible and began to thrust, hard, deep, pounding into her, the ridges at the base of his cock searing against her clitoris. The first flickers of orgasm tightened low in her belly and Niamh clung to him. Rand buried his face in her neck, his teeth pressing sharp against her flesh. She gasped, the anticipation of what was to come flashing fire through her veins. Mirroring him, she licked, sucked, nipped at the curve of his shoulder and Rand crushed him to her, shuddering, so close to coming—

He bit deep, flaring venom under her skin. Niamh arched, lost in the tumult of heat and light and joy sweeping in punishing waves through her body. She cried out, possibly cried his name, Niamh had no memory, no thought, only the incredible rush of Rand in her body.

Still he pounded into her, needing more from her, needing her bite just as she had ached for his. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders and with her body trembling, ecstasy drove her own teeth into his flesh.

Rand clung to her, crushing her in tight arms as he came in a shuddering rush. Niamh sighed, stroking her fingers down his bare spine, slick with sweat. She pressed a

kiss to his shoulder, finding it already healed of her puncture marks. Her smile became a grin.

"What?" Rand murmured, the word raising goose bumps against her skin. His hold loosened and he brushed tangled hair from her eyes. His narrowed gaze fixed on her, but humor shone there. "What's funny?"

"You never mentioned how fast we healed." She ran light fingers over his shoulder, the smooth muscle jumping at her touch. "Which seems essential."

He laughed. "Let's get dressed." The sly smile pulling at his perfect mouth slid fresh heat though her body, tightening a knot of need low in her body. Damn, the man made her crazy. "I have a few hours I can spare." He glanced around the stark, medical room. "And I think my suite is more comfortable."

Rand stepped back from her and the loss of contact with his hot, damp skin forced a shiver. He pulled up his trousers and dragged on his shirt, quick fingers smoothing it over his hip. His eyes gleamed. "Is it your choice?" The finger hovering over her cheek slid rough over her skin to play with her lower lip. "You want to stay?"

Niamh traced over the first button of his shirt and teased a light touch over the warm skin of his throat. "On one condition." She followed more opened more buttons, finding the sensitive line of dark scales chasing down over his muscled abdomen. "I get to play with you whenever I want."

"Niamh..."

Her name became a low moan as she pressed her mouth to his collarbone and licked and nipped its sharp edge. Sliding her hands over his ribs to his spine, she explored his satin-smooth skin, pulling herself firm against his chest. "New species. New rules, Rand." His arms wrapped around her and she sighed. "Deal?"

He pressed a kiss into her hair and the affectionate gesture warmed her down to her toes. "Deal."

Niamh closed her eyes and breathed in his scent. Her attraction, her need for Rand had surprised her, probably surprised both of them. Her fingers played down his spine

and muscles shivered under her light touch. "Anything else I should know about being a shadow-snake hybrid? Besides that insatiable need I have to bite you?"

"We don't age like normal humans." Rand's hands slid hot over her backside, tracing lazy patterns over her skin that had her heart pounding.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good. From the projected tests on my DNA—and yours—we've added a few decades to our lifespan." He pinched a cheek and she yelped. "*Quite* a few decades."

Random thoughts surfaced and one particular memory, belonging to the snakes and to Rand, had her heart tightening. He could say new rules, but somehow she didn't believe it of this particular one. "And what about us?"

Rand pulled back so that he could look into her eyes. "Us?"

"Shadow-snakes mate for life." He tensed under her hands. She knew he'd been avoiding that thought since he'd met her, wanted her. "We'll be stuck together for a long time."

"I didn't want to tell you." A wry smile touched his mouth. "I was supposed to be giving you a choice, not tying you into yet another inescapable aspect of your biology."

Niamh laughed. "Thank you." His offer was more freedom than she had ever known. Not to have to hide behind the armor of her duty? Bliss. And decades and *decades* with Rand? Who needed to be human? Her head tilted and a small smile curved her mouth. "So, my mutation is stable? Does that mean that I'm completely immune if you feel the overwhelming need to bite me? Again...and again."

Rand's fingers tightened, digging into her backside. His scent wrapped around her and the slow, liquid rise of venom had heat coursing through her flesh. "It will only ever bring pleasure," he murmured and he buried his face against her neck. His lips brushed over her skin, his teeth pricking points of ecstasy that had her shivering against him. "I promise you." He pulled in a steadying breath. "You really need to dress," he murmured against her skin. Easing free of her, he stood back. "I think my workers would appreciate your nakedness a little *too* much."

Cold now that Rand no longer warmed her, she scuttled to the cupboard, found underwear in one of the drawers and shrugged into the tight fabric of her pod suit. It fit slick to her skin and she smoothed the soft material over her hips, thighs. She sighed. So much more comfortable than her official service suit, and now that it was clean? Bliss. Stamping into her boots, she found Rand watching her with interest.

"If you'd walked into my office in that..."

His wicked smile had a blush staining her cheeks. She was a grown woman, but still she blushed like a girl around Rand. Niamh made herself meet his gaze. "You'd what?"

"You would've been over my desk before Michaels had a chance to close the door."

The image had her wet and aching. "Your desk is still a possibility."

His grin deepened and he lifted her chin to drop a light, teasing kiss against her lips. "And since you'll be working for me, I think you should maintain the routine you had in your own office."

Niamh blinked. "Routine?"

"I have your memories, Niamh." He slid his large hand down her spine, its heat burning though the thin fabric. His fingers played over her backside. "And I know that you don't normally wear these." He pulled the band of her panties, flicking it back against her skin.

Niamh's face burned. Shit. "All of my memories?"

Rand wet his lips and his eyes gleamed with wickedness. His mouth brushed the shell of her ear. "Dreaming about me?"

Niamh dug him hard in the ribs and he grunted. She gave him a sharp smile. There were equally embarrassing memories of him in her brain. "And you *didn't* think about me every...which...way?"

"All right." He stepped back and held up his hands. "We can hold each other to ransom later."

“Much later?”

The promise in his smile had warmth flaring through her chest and she slid her fingers though his, gripping his hand tight. She bit her lip and willed herself to hold his dark gaze. Rand lifted an eyebrow, obviously questioning her hesitation. “Will it ever be more than sex?”

“Niamh...” Her name was little more than a sigh. “We know everything about each other. Everything.” He brought her hand to his mouth and pressed a soft kiss to her knuckles. “It’s already far beyond that.” Rand’s gaze pierced her and the rise of her desire ran hot under her skin. “Though, of course, sex is always welcome.”

Niamh sighed, not quite believing that this was now her life. “Maybe this is still a part of my sleep-soak dream.”

Rand pulled her toward the door and palmed it open. It was only a few minutes to the administrator’s rooms. “Then I shouldn’t waste time?”

She grinned at him, turned back to grab the flesh-fruit and then encouraged a brisk walk. “Good idea.”

Epilogue

“Ready?”

Niamh straightened her blouse and fastened her jacket. She smoothed a hand over her hair, looking to Rand. He nodded and stood to one side of the communication screen covering a large portion of the wall. Sunlight striped its smooth, black surface. Niamh wet her lips, leaned back against Rand’s desk and crossed her legs at her booted ankles. She caught Rand’s narrowed gaze. “What?”

“You plan to flirt with your old boss?” A hint of jealousy itched under his words.

“It irritates him. He’d think it odd if I didn’t.” Her head tilted and she gave him a sharp, teasing smile. “And of course, afterward, your desk is always convenient.”

“Niamh...”

“What?”

“Never mind.” He tapped quick fingers over the panel, activating the screen. “The sequence is almost complete. Five seconds.”

Niamh gave a quick nod, had one final tug of her short jacket and fixed the smile on her face. The screen flared into life and Evan Blane’s face filled it, the soft light of Gamma Cephei brushing gold through his blond hair.

“Niamh. Almost on time. Must be a record.” Evan sat back in his chair and the old leather creaked. He steepled his fingers, pressing his index fingers to his lips. “I see from your pod’s transmission that you sleep-soaked.”

She shrugged. “Travel in a pod, it’s not conducive for reading files.” She smirked. “Going to punish me?”

Rand's scent wove around her, the rich wild aroma of his, of *their* planet. Niamh's smile deepened. Probably not a good idea to antagonize her mate—and that word still felt strange—but that desire to goad was still a fresh need in their relationship.

Evan scrubbed a hand over his face and the look of weariness fell heavy over his features. "Tell me about Isaac Rand, please, Niamh."

She shrugged. "Not much to tell, to be honest. Authenticated human. The records are clean. You should have my full report uploading to you about now. I stamped approval for his ten years." She gave him a sharp smile. "You can also assure the First Minister that his flesh-fruit supply is quite safe."

Niamh watched Evan scan his data pad. Her gaze flicked to the side of the screen and found Rand standing in the shadows, his arms crossed, his mouth thinned. He was beautiful when he was angry...and jealous. She bit down a smile and looked back to Evan. "You'll also find my transfer request."

Evan's head snapped up. "Your what?"

"Well our relationship really wasn't going anywhere, Evan, was it? You'd insist on stuffy things like clothes and—"

"Niamh, this is serious." He slapped the data pad on the desk, the sound sudden, sharp. His blue eyes narrowed on her. Yes, he didn't want her going. He had too much fun throwing her into a pod every chance he got. "You want to give up your position here?"

"Administrator Rand offered me a better position." She kept her professional mask in place and refused to make the joke burning on the end of her tongue. "I've accepted. More money and a lot less travel. I'm sorry, Evan, how could I refuse?"

Evan cursed. "You're not sorry."

"No, you're right." She ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing it back into place with her palm. "I'm not."

"Damn it, Niamh, you'll be living with hybrids—"

"Believe me, what Administrator Rand is offering...it's worth it." She smiled. "And as an authorized administrator he outranks you within the system. You can't contest my transfer."

"Fine." He bit out the word. "I'll send him your full file."

Niamh smirked. Now he thought to play dirty. "It won't put him off."

"He obviously doesn't know you yet."

"Evan, I'm devastated. I thought we had a special relationship. That you —"

The screen burst black. Evan had cut the connection.

Niamh laughed and unbuttoned her jacket. She shrugged out of it and let it drop to the floor. She could burn the bloody thing later. Rand closed down the screen with a few deft taps to the side panel and strode across to his desk. She shifted herself back onto its solid, wooden surface and smiled up at him, her fingers teasing over his belt buckle. "You see? Evan doesn't like me at all."

"His loss." His thumb traced over her lower lip and his gaze held her. Sunlight cut hot across his face and his dark eyes gleamed. Her heart squeezed. He was beautiful...and he was all hers. "And thank you, again."

"This isn't still a dream, is it?"

"Hell, I hope not." Already his fingers slid over the small buttons of her blouse. His desk had become one of their favorite places in the last few days. Seemed that morning was no exception. Rand pressed his mouth to her throat, teasing over her skin with his tongue. "Is it time to play?"

Niamh sighed, exposing more of her neck to the tender bite of his teeth. "Rand, my dear, it's *always* time to play."

About the Author

Kim lives on an ancient boundary line, once marked by a Neolithic burial tomb. The tomb's now a standing stone circle—thank the Georgians for that one—and stirs her mind with thoughts of history and ancient myths. She mixes the essence of the past into fantasy, along with the essential mix of magic and sex. She also writes science fiction romance, pushing out into the far future with effortlessly sexy men and the women who can't resist them.

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