



NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE

India Masters

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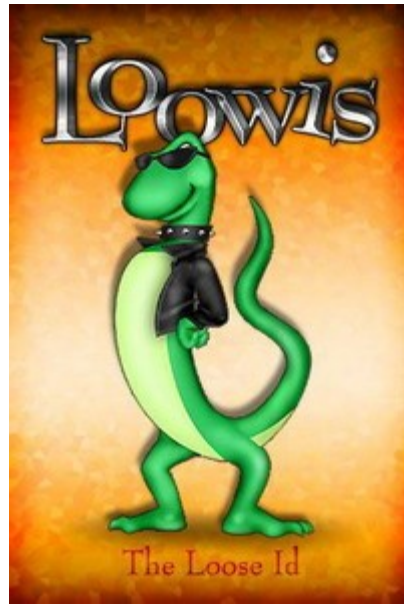
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Lowis

The Loose Id

Chapter One

This trip was turning into a regular goatfuck. She'd talked to every low-life, scum-sucking, money-grubbing merc she'd been able to find, and every one of them had turned her down. Surely there was one man in all the vastness of space who had nothing to live for, and therefore nothing left to lose. Carmel Bastion rolled out of her bunk, dropped to the floor, and began her regular round of morning exercises, grunting through thirty one-armed push-ups.

"Computer." She jumped up and moved to the treadmill. "Check all penal colonies in surrounding sectors. I want the worst of the worst. The biggest, scariest, most badass motherfuckers around."

"You'll have to be more specific than big and badass, sweetie. What are your criteria?" The computer chimed pleasantly.

"Look at all death-penalty and life-without-parole inmates. No sex crimes, no crimes against women or children. Also, check for political prisoners. The commandant has plenty of enemies; find me one who wants him dead as badly I do. And stop calling me sweetie."

She'd just completed five miles on the treadmill when the computer hailed her.

"Search completed, sweetie, and I've found you the perfect man—in more ways than one."

Carmel draped a towel around her neck and sat down at her desk. Perfect didn't begin to describe the guy. She scrolled through his stats.

Inmate Name and Number: *Handel, Darrjek – CTT072987*

Height and Weight: *78"/265 lbs.*

Hair and Eye Color: *Black/gray*

Location: *Tetrus IX Military Penal Colony*

Charges:

Charge One – *Conspiracy to commit terrorist acts*

Charge Two – *Treason*

Disposition and Sentence:

Charge One – *Guilty/Life Without Parole – appeal denied*

Charge Two – *Guilty/Death by Crucifixion – appeal decision pending*

"Computer, print out Mr. Handel's file."

"Looking forward to a little light reading over breakfast?"

"Absolutely. I need to know everything there is to know about this guy. And set a course to Tetrus IX."

"Faster than light speed or shall we take our time?"

"Oh, let's take our time. If I'm going to pretend to know him intimately, I'm going to need every bit of information you can dredge up on Commander Darr Handel. FTL won't give me the time I need to study up on him. If he had a boil on his butt when he was born, I want to know about it."

Carmel stepped into the shower and programmed the water temperature. At the last minute, she'd added another twenty reps to her morning workout, and her muscles were protesting the extra work.

"Water on." She turned her face to the spray. Pumping peach-scented gel into her hand, she lathered her hair and body as she contemplated her plan.

Her parents were still alive, that much she knew from members of the underground who had found and rescued her. As prominent members of the opposition party, Commandant Thadd hadn't dared kill them outright. Instead, he sent them to Sere Tol, the burning planet, where inhabitants lived underground to avoid the intense rays of a sun that moved closer and closer every century. The people there lived like animals, forced to rely on Thadd's supply ships for sustenance. The ships were little more than garbage scows, dumping tons of refuse along with meager amounts of food, water, and medicine.

Word that many of those sent to the burning planet not only survived, but thrived, had recently reached the underground, and efforts were being made to rescue them. How long before the United Imperial Federation discovered the burgeoning revolution on Sere Tol and reported it to the commandant? She needed help to get past the patrols, rescue her parents, and organize the ragtag resistance into a force able to challenge Thadd's iron rule. She had high hopes Handel was such a man. Finishing her shower, she wrapped a towel around her body and went to check the printer. Done. She grabbed the printout and made herself comfortable.

Handel's dossier read like a who's who of valiant military service. He'd graduated the Imperial Military Institute first in his class and had gone on to various phases of specialized training, including several types of martial arts, munitions, guerilla tactics, military intelligence, and advanced flight training.

He'd been born on Earth, but his parents had moved with the first phase of colonists to the outer reaches of the Milky Way. He'd met his first love, Lassina Sandosia, on one of the outposts, but his family had quickly moved on and he'd never seen her again. At a young age, his parents enrolled him in the IMI, where he'd caught the attention of General Singh, who recommended him for a full scholarship to the institute, where Thadd was commandant. For years, he'd been Thadd's pet student,

excelling in every field of military training put before him. However, when Thadd moved to exterminate the governing councils of neighboring planets and install his own government, Handel began to doubt the man's motives. After several campaigns aimed at increasing Thadd's power, Handel called it quits.

If the news reports were to be believed, which they were not, Handel's own greed for power propelled him toward a confrontation with the commandant that he couldn't win. He was captured, tried, convicted, and sent to prison to await the most gruesome of deaths. Rumor had it that Thadd was purposely keeping him alive so he could watch as others suffered and died on the Tree of Woe. Carmel smiled. Yeah, here was a man who had nothing left to lose.

She stretched out across her bed, rifling through the paperwork that constituted the history of a real-life hero gone bad. At least according to the United Imperial Federation, Thadd's puppet government.

"So Thadd's plans for galactic superiority didn't sit right with you, eh, commander?" She studied his picture. The man was lava hot, prompting an ache in places she hadn't ached in for a very long time. She heaved a sigh. "Computer. Did Handel have a wife or a contract mate?"

"No indication he did, sweetie. It appears he never got over this Lassina Sandosia girl. You interested in the job? He's certainly a handsome devil."

Carmel snorted. "Devil being the operative word, I'm sure, and no, I'm not interested in the job. However, posing as an old sweetheart might get me in the door easier than anything else. I'll need you to scan all databanks for information about this woman and create an identity I can use. Can you get me the layout of the building in which he's being held? And the best means of extraction?"

The computer mimicked her snort, would probably have rolled its eyes if it had them. "Please, there's nothing you want I can't get."

"Ha! You haven't found me the perfect mate."

The computer laughed. "Sweetie, didn't you look at Handel's picture?"

"Oh, please! He's been locked up so long, he'll probably look straight past me and go for the male droids! Just get me the information I asked for and stop calling me sweetie!"

"All right, but it's past time you found yourself a new man and stopped hiding yourself away just because some asshole broke your heart."

Carmel growled and tossed her paperwork down. "First of all, he did not break my heart. Second, I am not hiding. And third...well, there is no third. Just get me what I need. I want to be looking across a visiting table with our new recruit in two weeks. Now, I'm going to go do some sparring on deck three. Don't disturb me until I get back."

"Fine, but I have to tell you, when you finally do find yourself a man, he's going to have one hell of a job working all that hostility out of you."

"I'm not hostile!" she shouted, punching the button to open the door. She hit it so hard, the covering cracked and the wires began to smoke. "And call maintenance to fix that!"

"Right. You're not the least bit hostile."

* * * * *

Darr Handel finished a less-than-stellar breakfast and drank the last of what passed for coffee in this godforsaken place. He looked around the eight-by-eight-foot cell that had been his home for the last five years. When he'd first arrived, he'd picked fights with every guard that got near him in the hope that one of them would kill him, but Thadd had made it clear that Darr would witness the suffering of other inmates on the crucifixion tree for as long as it pleased the commandant. Dying on the Tree of Woe, as the inmates called it, was the method of choice for those convicted of treason.

He stood up and walked to the reinforced window. All the death-row cells had floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on the tree. Thadd wanted them to watch their fellow inmates suffer and die. Wanted them to watch as the buzzards and crows picked

at them while they still lived. And Darr had watched dozens of them die. More and more with every year that passed. Evidentially, the resistance to Thadd's rule was growing, because Darr was seeing fellow soldiers, men with whom he'd proudly served, convicted of treason and sentenced to the same horrible death he faced. Even now, there was some poor bastard dying a slow, agonizing death. His hands fisted in impotent rage. Escape from this hellhole was impossible, but he fantasized about breaking out and pursuing the vile commandant. Dreamed of capturing him, making sure he was tried and punished for his crimes. He closed his eyes against the suffering of the man on the crucifixion tree. What wouldn't he give to see Thadd nailed to that damned tree!

He'd been able to talk to some of the disgraced soldiers when they were placed in their electrified runs for their daily exercise. The growing rebellion was gaining momentum, organized—or so it was rumored—by the only child of Jiru and Nona Bastion. Darr didn't believe the girl still lived, but if her name could inspire a revolution, more power to those who used it.

He and the others had often spoken of escape, fruitless though those talks might be. The only escape from Tetrus IX was death. Still, it was a pleasant fantasy, planning their revenge against guards whose idea of a good time was to release the perimeter dogs into the death yard to lunge at the tortured souls nailed to the tree. As if their suffering wasn't great enough, the dogs would leap at the dying men, ripping chunks of flesh from their tormented bodies. As a result, the dogs now had a taste for human flesh. Darr had seen more than one man ripped to pieces in an attempt to escape. Yes, if escape were possible, he'd love to turn those damned dogs loose on the sadistic guards who ran death row.

As if summoned, one of the worst guards interrupted his thoughts. "You got a visitor, Handel."

Darr turned, hiding his surprise behind a mask of serenity. "Yeah?" He'd be damned if he'd ask who.

"Says her name is Lassina Sandosia, your long-lost love. Paid me a pretty sum to see you. Asked for a conjugal visit."

Now that was a surprise. Lassina Sandosia? Impossible. Darr had searched for years and been unable to find her. It was like she'd vanished. Who the hell was this woman posing as his first love, and why did she want to see him privately?

"You wanna see her?"

Darr smiled. "Of course." He turned his back and waited for the guard to whip the magnetic restraints around his wrists. He had no idea who the woman was, but if she was giving away free pussy, he'd be happy to oblige her. "She still pretty?"

The guard grunted. "Too damn pretty for the likes of you. She a natural redhead?"

Darr's heart stuttered in his chest. A redhead? Could it be? "Absolutely." He preceded the guard down the hall to the small room designated for conjugal visits. He stepped inside and waited impatiently for the guard to remove the magna cuffs.

She didn't turn around when the door opened, but stood there waiting for the guard to close the door. "Are there cameras?" she asked softly.

"No, but they'll walk by and look in the window. In fact, I expect he's watching now."

She finally turned to face him, smiling, and the breath nearly left his body. She wasn't Lassina, but God's blood, she was gorgeous! The guard was right about the red hair. It swirled around her as she held out her hands to him. Her eyes were large and the deep green of the forest, set below finely arched brows that were a shade darker than her hair and matching long, thick lashes. There was a light dusting of freckles across the bridge of an aristocratic nose that wrinkled as she smiled. But it was her mouth that made his cock swell. Wide and full-lipped, it was the perfect shade of coral and as kissable as any he'd ever seen. Whoever she was, she'd done her research.

"Then I guess we'd better make it look real." She smiled. "I expect you ought to kiss me, Commander Handel."

"With pleasure, Lassina Sandosia."

Darr pulled her into his arms and settled his mouth over hers. He kissed her, his tongue thrusting between her luscious lips to take what she offered and more. Damn, she was soft. Even the dress she wore, some frothy, cream-colored confection of silk and lace, felt supple as a babe's cheek. And her scent—clean and fresh—like a juicy, ripe peach.

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've kissed a woman?" he whispered next to her ear. "Since I've made love to a woman?" He felt her stiffen slightly but didn't relinquish his hold on her. "I don't know who you are, love, but you took a big chance requesting a conjugal."

Her eyes widened, and it was all he could do not to laugh. What had she thought, that he'd be a gentleman? "Having second thoughts?"

Her succulent lips pressed together. "Of course not, but this visit isn't what you think. I've come to get you out of this place."

He did laugh then. "And just how do you plan on doing that, sweetheart? You think you can just say 'pretty please' and they'll open the doors and let us walk out of here?"

Her eyes flicked to the door, and he knew a guard must be hovering nearby. She pressed her lips to his ear. "Don't be an ass, Handel. It's not like I don't have a plan."

He cocked his head in anticipation. "Do tell."

"Bugs."

He guided her to the cot on the far side of the room and pushed her down. "Bugs?" He leaned closer. "Is he still looking?"

"Yes, damn him. Don't these guys have women of their own at home?"

Darr laughed and pressed his lips to hers. "He just wants to see if my dick's as big as he's heard."

Carmel snorted. "And is it?"

He chuckled. "Bigger. As you're about to find out, love." He reached for her hand and pressed it against his swollen cock.

"Oh my." Her voice was a little breathless when she spoke. "But that's not why I came. I can get you out of here, but there are conditions."

"Aren't there always?" He took her face in his hands and kissed her until she wrapped her arms around his neck, her surrender complete. When he lifted his head, he felt a little light-headed himself. "And your conditions?"

"You have to agree to help me rescue my parents from Sere Tol. There are others there too, people sent there by Thadd because he couldn't kill them outright."

"Sere Tol. You're going to rescue me from Tetrus IX and take me to the burning planet? Why not just set me on fire now and save yourself the trouble?"

He nibbled his way down her neck and along her clavicle, delighting in the little whimpering sounds she made.

"You'd rather...ah...let Thadd's thugs nail you to the Tree of Woe?"

"Good point. What else?" His hand slid beneath the neckline of her silk dress to cup a bare breast. "Oh, God's blood, honey, you're so soft." He pulled the bodice down and took her in his mouth, groaning as her nipple stiffened beneath his lips.

"Oh, my stars, that's... Help...training my men."

He raised his head to look into her eyes, frowning. "Your men?"

"The resistance is growing, Handel. We need leaders. We need an experienced fighting man to train and command our soldiers."

Okay. For a moment there, he'd thought she meant her lovers. "All right, sweetheart, if you can really get me out of here, I'll help you, but I have a few conditions of my own." He leaned down and gave her breast another long suckle.

"Oooh," she moaned. "What conditions?"

"Thadd is mine. If we manage to get out of here and get an army together, if we accomplish that and are able to get anywhere near him, Thadd is mine. That's number

one. Number two is you. I get you for as long as this thing lasts, any time and any way I want you. Starting now."

"Now?" She gasped as he worked his hand beneath her skirt. "Why now?"

He chuckled. "We may very well die trying to get out of here, sweetheart, and I'm not willing to die before I have a good taste of you. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Good girl," he whispered against her breast. "Now lift up and let's get those panties off."

Chapter Two

When she raised her hips, he shoved her dress to her waist and yanked the panties from her body. The delicate material ripped easily, and he put the tiny garment in his pants pocket. If this mission failed, at least he'd have the scent of a woman's arousal to keep him company for a while.

And she was aroused, he could smell her. He wanted her just as badly as she wanted him. It was a struggle to be gentle as he grasped her waist and lifted her, arranging her just as he wanted her. Propping her feet on the mattress, Darr wedged his shoulders between her thighs.

"Now, tell me about the bugs." He lowered his mouth to her core as she began to talk in a strangled whisper.

"Nanos," she gasped as his tongue took its first swipe through her slit. "Programmed to strike forty-five minutes into our visit. They'll burrow under the skin and...ah...inject everyone but those of us in this room with a sleeping p-potion."

He uttered a satisfied growl when she arched her back and thrust herself against his questing lips. "We don't have time for...thiiiiss... Oooh...that's good!"

He chuckled. "We'll make time. Damn, honey, you taste sweet."

She moaned as his fingers teased her, stroking the delicate flesh of her inner lips. His mind told him he should stop, that there would be time to enjoy her lush body once they'd escaped, but his lips closed around her clit, and he began to suck noisily. He didn't know why it was so important that she come for him, but it was, so he set about to make it happen.

He plucked at her delicate folds with his fingers. It never failed to delight him, the softness and delicacy of a woman's cunt. This woman's was tight, almost virginal, so he took his time, teasing her with his fingers. First one, then another, he burrowed into her pussy, thrusting gently, stretching her.

Desire curled tight and hot in his belly, and it didn't matter if the guard watched. He hadn't had a woman in over five years, and this one's body promised not to disappoint. Soft, fragrant, and quivering as she was, Darr was certain if he didn't fuck her soon, he'd die.

"Please," she gasped as his tongue flicked against her. "It's too much. I need you to fuck me."

"Shhh... Come for me, honey. Come for me, and I'll give you what you want."

He was ruthless, intent on making her come as he fed on her, licking and nipping, sucking the swollen bundle of nerves into his mouth once more. His fingers fucked her, thrusting deep—fast, then slow. She'd come for him before he put his dick in her, because he didn't know how long he'd last once he sheathed himself in her tight heat. All he knew was that he wanted her pleasure to be at least as consuming as his own.

"Oooh!" His thumb brushed the tiny rosebud of her ass, and her body jerked. "Ohmygod! It's..."

She lifted her hips and came with a howl. While she still shuddered, he loosened his pants and surged up and over her, guiding his cock into her, thrusting deep. Another orgasm shook her, and he pumped through it.

Their bodies slammed together, and he could feel her inner muscles contracting around him. She was going to come again, and he wanted to come with her.

She grabbed his ass in both hands, urging him on. "Yes," she hissed. "Yes, Handel, come with me."

His back bowed, and his shouted release mixed with hers as he pumped his seed deep inside her before collapsing on top of her.

A moment later, she said, "The guard is at the window. Invite him inside."

He raised himself up, gaping at her. "What? I wasn't enough; you want him too?"

She snorted. "Men. Are all your egos so fragile?" She arched against him. "We need his magnetic keys, you dolt."

"Ah." He rolled to his feet and faced the door. Grinning at the guard, he gestured to his rescuer and lifted a questioning eyebrow.

As he knew it would, the door lock buzzed and the man stepped through.

"Oh my, you are cute." The woman purred, laughing softly. "Sometimes Darr likes to watch, Officer...Kiwuic." She held out her hand. "Care to join me?"

Kiwuic gave her a suspicious look. "What about him? He could jump me."

"You have restraints; use them."

The man turned to Darr. "Turn around, stud. Seems you weren't enough to satisfy the lady."

Darr's jaw flexed slightly, but the guard didn't notice the minuscule difference in his demeanor. "No problem, Kiwuic." The restraints bit into his wrists. This guard was a sadist and Darr gave her a warning look. She'd have to be careful.

Kiwuic stripped off his shirt to reveal a pelt of hair covering him front and back. Darr's jaw clenched in anger as she sat up and ran her hands over the guard's protruding belly, then unbuckled his trousers.

"Well, don't you got the touch?" the man growled. "Take it out; suck it."

Darr's eyes narrowed when she yanked Kiwuic's pants and briefs down past his knees. "Aren't you the impatient one?" Her hand slid between his legs and cupped his

balls, pushing up. Kiwuic barely got out the word "bitch" before he stiffened and started to fall.

The woman stood, jerking her dress down, and levered the guard facedown onto the bed. She patted his ass cheek. "Bad boy, tightening the commander's restraints that way. If we had time, we'd come up with a special punishment for you." She dug in his pocket for the key card; then Darr was free of his restraints.

"Who the hell are you?"

She gave him an audacious grin. "You'll find out soon enough. Anyone you want to take with us, Commander?"

Darr grinned and pulled her in for a kiss. "Oh, one or two. You have room for them?"

"Of course. How could you possibly think I'd come unprepared?"

"I'll never doubt you again, love." He grabbed the card and keyed the lock. "Let's get the hell out of here."

In the end, Darr chose three men to take with them. His rescuer injected each of them with an antidote to the sleeping potion.

"Commander Handel and I intend to make war against the commandant. Do you wish to join us?"

Each man answered with a resounding "hell, yes."

"Then let's get the hell out of here."

The five of them went through the pods, opening supply closets, securing any and all weapons available, including the guards' personal sidearms. Nano bugs crunched under their feet as they walked, testament to the efficiency of the extraction plan. The entire compound was sleeping the sleep of the dead and would do so until the escapees were long gone. As they left the unit, Darr slid the key card under an inmate's door. It was the least he could do.

"Deactivate sleeper shield," the woman called as they walked outside, prompting Darr to laugh. She'd set down right in the middle of the compound, bold as brass. The door to the sleek little warpwing flyer opened, and they climbed the ramp. "Care to take the helm, Commander?"

"Hell yes!" He jerked her against him, giving her a fierce, deep kiss. "Strap yourselves in, soldiers, and let's get off this rock."

* * * * *

The small ship handled like a dream, and Darr felt almost like himself again as they burst through the atmosphere and shot into space at light speed. All he needed were some decent clothes, a shower, and a bed big enough to romp in with his pretty savior.

"Where are we headed?" he asked as she unbuckled her harness and stood up. She gave him the coordinates and excused herself to go to her quarters and change.

Darr programmed the computer and settled back, thinking of the woman who had rescued him from a fate worse than death. It seemed likely they would both die in the quest to free the world from Thadd's iron rule, but a quick death in combat was preferable to suffering on the crucifixion tree. He set the controls for autopilot and made his way back to the passenger compartment where the woman now sat, talking with the three other men she'd rescued. One by one, they stood and made their way through a narrow corridor to what Darr assumed were general quarters.

He sprawled on a seat and studied her appearance. She was no longer a redhead. The freckles and green eyes were gone too.

"I have to admit that was one of the better disguises I've seen. I had no idea you weren't a true redhead."

She shrugged. "I didn't know how far they might go researching me. Disappointed?"

Hell no. The basics were still the same. Firm, ripe breasts, narrow waist, nicely rounded hips. She was a bit shorter now, having removed her heels. The freckles were gone, and her nose wasn't as straight. But she possessed the same wide, full mouth, though there was a tiny scar marring its perfection. He thought it added character. Her thick hair was golden blonde, and she had large, heavily lashed eyes of deep amber, shot through with flecks of gold.

"So, what's your real name?"

She laughed. "Carmel Bastion."

His first reaction was shock. "Jiru and Nona's daughter? How is that possible? Your pod was lost when the colonists' ship was destroyed."

She folded her arms under her breasts. "In the immortal words of Mark Twain, 'Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated.'"

Darr threw his head back and laughed, hard and long. "You're her! The one they call *Darkshadow*." Tears of mirth sprang from his eyes as he roared. "Have you any idea how long I searched for you? Thadd is obsessed with finding you. Oh, this is rich. I could take you to him, and he'd give me anything I wanted."

She had the temerity to cock an eyebrow at him. "And is that something you'd consider doing?"

"Hell no. I have bigger plans, love, and all of them involve you—naked beneath me—screaming my name while I fuck you senseless."

She laughed and stretched her legs out, crossing them at the ankles. "I do love a confident man."

He stood and pulled her to her feet. "That's not confidence, sweetheart; that's fact. Now, where are your quarters? I intend to shower and fuck you properly."

"Seems like you just finished fucking me properly in your cell."

His laugh was wicked and seductive. "Oh, honey, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Chapter Three

Carmel shuddered as the water in the shower turned off. He was finished. Any moment, he'd walk out of the lav and take her again. She should be furious with him and the conditions he'd placed on her, but her only feelings were those of anxious anticipation. Their frantic coupling in his cell had been the erotic highlight of her entire sexual experience, and he'd told her that was just the beginning. Holy flaming mother, how could there possibly be more?

The door opened, and he stepped out, a towel wrapped around his waist. His smoldering look sent ripples of desire skittering down her spine.

"Take the flight suit off, Carmel. I want to look at you."

Her hands shook as she worked the zipper down. *God's balls!* His body was perfectly honed. The body of a fighting man. In her limited experience, she'd never seen such a perfectly built male specimen: broad shoulders framed a flawlessly muscled chest, trim waist and hips, and thighs that could snap an enemy's spine with a simple scissoring motion.

She hadn't been able to see his body when he'd taken her the first time — only his cock, and that had been impressive enough—but now she allowed herself a long, appraising look. He was, simply stated, beautiful.

A light dusting of dark hair sprinkled his sculpted chest, arrowing downward in a thin line to disappear beneath the towel. There were a few scars here and there, and she found herself wondering how he'd gotten them, if they'd hurt terribly, if he'd had anyone to comfort him in his pain. Thick scars circled his wrists, as though he'd been restrained and fought to free himself, causing the bindings to cut deeply into his skin. The urge to kiss those healed wounds was nearly overpowering, and she mentally balked at the idea. After her experience with Senat, she'd sworn off sentimentality where the male of the species was concerned.

Carmel Bastion wasn't a woman given to silly romanticizing, and the thought of wanting to cuddle and soothe this warrior was particularly unnerving. Darr Handel was the kind of man who would take over a woman's life, making her dependent on him for her very breath. But, oh, wasn't he tempting? She understood, at the most basic level, what made him dangerous, though she doubted she could put it into words in any rational way. It was just there, in the strength of his personality—his humor, his tenacity to live in spite of what must have been great suffering, the sheer beauty of his outward appearance, and the things he could do to a woman's body.

Carmel wasn't stupid. She'd seen women bewitched by the sexual skills of a man. It made them weak, willing to do whatever was asked of them just to keep that man in their bed. But not her. Never her. She'd use him as a weapon against Thadd. And she'd use his personal weapon to become a skilled lover, one who could use her sexuality to gain the information she needed to defeat Thadd once and for all. Her gaze dropped below his waist and she felt her stomach do a little flip. Yes, he could teach her how to use her body as an erotic weapon, and she'd try to keep her heart safely locked away. She raised an eyebrow when his cock twitched. He yanked off the towel, showing her his desire. She worked the snug flight suit down and tossed it aside, baring herself to him.

"Beautiful." He crossed the room, his movements predatory as he circled her, taking her in. He stopped behind her, slid his arms around her, and cupped her breasts in his large hands. "So soft and sexy, and yet I can feel the strength of your body."

She stifled a moan as his cock nestled against her backside. Her breasts felt achy and heavy as he caressed them, chafing the nipples, pinching lightly. She arched against him, and he lowered his mouth to the curve of her neck, nibbling the tendon.

His hands left her breasts, roaming freely, skimming her midriff, cupping her hips, moving ever downward. "Spread your legs, love."

Carmel parted her legs, moaning as his hands moved between them, stroking the softness of her inner thighs. His knees crackled when he knelt behind her, moving to fill his hand with her ass.

"You have a great ass," he said, spreading the cheeks. Strategically placed nips stung the firm flesh, which he soothed with a heated lick. His tongue traveled the crease, then flicked the puckered flesh. "Anyone ever taken you here?"

Her voice shook when she answered. "N...no, never." Another flick, and she shivered with delight.

"Mmmm, you like that." His thumb brushed against her. "I can't wait to fuck this sweet little ass."

"I..." She meant to protest, but he dipped his thumb in her slippery pussy, then pressed it into her ass.

He bit her ass cheek as he penetrated her. "We'll take it slow, baby, but when I take you here"—he paused, pulled his thumb back, and thrust in again—"you'll love it."

The idea of anal sex had always frightened her, but Carmel would gladly have leaned over and let him slide that big cock into her backside. Anything to soothe the ache consuming her. She gave a little moan of protest when he left her and climbed to his feet. He turned her in his arms, silencing her with a scalding kiss.

She was burning as he molded his body to hers, walking her backward till her bottom pressed against a low storage cabinet. His cock throbbed against her belly as he softened the kiss, banking the flames of desire to a slow simmer. He sucked on her lower lip before sliding his tongue against hers with a slow, gentle thrust. The man could kiss.

His fingers traced her hairline, grazed the outer edge of her ears, her jawline, and dropped to the tops of her shoulders. Featherlight, he stroked her collarbone, gliding over the multicolored gems piercing her creamy skin, each color representing an enhanced genetic or physical feature. Evidently, it didn't bother him, because he continued to kiss her.

At last, his hands began a leisurely exploration of the rest of her body. "Let me in," he whispered against her lips, and she opened her legs eagerly. Two fingers burrowed into her pussy as he resumed kissing her.

Ohgodohgodohgod. His fingers glided into her with long, deep strokes, and she could hear the liquid sounds of her drenched pussy as she rode them. His tongue fucked her mouth while his fingers fucked her cunt, and when his thumb brushed her clit, she wrenched away from his kiss, howling as an orgasm shook her.

She cried out as he spun her around, bent her over, and kicked her legs apart. And then he was there, the broad head of his cock parting the swollen folds of her pussy, thrusting hard and deep. He held her still, buried to his balls.

"God's blood, you have the tightest pussy I've ever fucked, Carmel." He eased back and thrust again. "Tight and melting and sweet, just like your name." He pulled out until just the head of his dick remained inside her. "Will you melt for me again, Carmel?"

Every nerve ending in her body was lighting up as Darr fucked her slow and deep. Her pussy throbbed like a pulsar as he slowly drove her higher and higher. Could a person die from arousal?

"Yes, yes! I'll melt for you! Just fuck me!" He drove into her and kept on pumping, his body slapping against her as she urged him on with frantic words.

She hadn't imagined she'd be able to take all of him in this position, and she felt stretched, stuffed beyond belief as his body slammed into her. His cock, slick with her juices, rammed deep, and when he reached around to tease her clit, she was there again.

"Oooh, yes, I'm going to come!" Could he feel her pussy contract around him, milking him? He stretched over her, pressing her belly on the cabinet top, fucking her with short jabs, spiraling into her.

"Darr!" Her body stiffened, and she bucked back against him, coming in a gush, screaming his name. He pulled back for one final thrust, then rammed deep as he came with a shout.

"Damn, baby," he rasped.

Moments later, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. She could barely move as he collapsed beside her, curving his body around hers. He would sleep as a free man tonight, she thought, while she feared she would be his slave for life.

Chapter Four

Two days later, the small craft exited Tetrus sector and docked with the larger battleship. Darr handled the controls with the ease of experience, easing the nose of the little vessel into the docking port without so much as a bump. A clear plastic tube extended from the bay, locking in place with a hiss of pressurized air, and the portal door opened. All five passengers unbuckled their harnesses.

"Welcome to the *Darkshadow*, gentlemen," Carmel said, stepping into the tube.

Darr could tell she was proud of the rebel ship, and from what he'd seen on approach, she had every right to be. The battleship was as black as the void of space, sleek in line and form, and outfitted with the latest in weaponry. He only hoped they had at least a hundred more just like her if they intended to take down Thadd. He stepped into the tube after her, and the others followed behind. He resisted a scowl as Carmel launched herself at a centaurlike creature, wrapping her arms around its neck.

"Ejan, we did it!" she squealed. "Can you believe it? The bugs worked perfectly!"

She turned to Darr as he stepped out of the tube, followed by the other three men. "Captain Ejan Zawa, I am pleased to introduce Commander Darr Handel. Darr, this is my captain."

Darr nodded politely, extending his hand to take the one Zawa offered. It was, he noted, decidedly delicate and avian, with nasty, sharp claws that could gut a man with little effort at all. But when they shook, he didn't feel so much as a prick from the needle-sharp talons. Amazing.

The raptorlike head nodded back at him, perusing him with lidless cerulean eyes that seemed more intelligent than any human man might give him credit for. He had the upper body of a humanoid, with a thick neck and deceptively slim arms – until one noticed the ropy quality of tendon and ligament. And while his upper body might appear to lack physical strength, his quadrapedal lower body bunched with muscle, while his hooves were shod with dangerously sharp steel shoes. All in all, an intimidating package, if Darr tended toward feelings of intimidation.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain. Am I to take it, you are responsible for my escape?”

Laughter hissed from his beaklike mouth. “Hardly, Commander,” he said, looking fondly at Carmel. “My second in command researched her needs, found you, and planned the mission on her own. I merely approved her moving forward.”

From out of a nearby speaker, a female voice snorted. “Well, I like that,” it complained. “I found the human for her, Captain, as well as the plans for the facility where he was held, along with desirable ingress and egress points. Lt. Bastion merely fed me the criteria.”

“I stand corrected, computer, and extend my most humble apologies,” Zawa said, hawkish mouth opening in a parody of a smile.

Darr compressed his lips to keep from laughing. It wouldn't do to piss off the ship's central computer. He cleared his throat. “Then I offer my thanks, computer, for giving me back my life.”

The female voice all but purred. “You're quite welcome, Commander Handel. So, tell me, Carmel Bastion, is he not all I said he would be?”

Darr took note of the blush climbing into Carmel's cheeks. What was that all about?

"Er...um...yes, computer, everything and more. Excellent work." She gestured to the other three men. "May I also present Officers Anoma, Maponu, and Dihuru — also guests of our friend Thadd. They were all slated for crucifixion. They're all starfighters and leaders of men, so I expect their assistance to our cause will be most helpful."

"Undoubtedly," Zawa concurred, stepping back with a slight bow. "If you all will forgive me, I must return to the bridge." He signaled to a waiting droid. "Dex-1, show the men to their quarters and provide them with directional devices for the ship. I look forward to talking to you all after we put enough space between us and the Tetrus sector."

None of the people coming and going escaped Darr's notice as he followed Carmel to her quarters — especially the glowering youth who instantly sought her out when the captain greeted them. He tagged along behind them, finally muscling Darr aside.

"Lieutenant, a word, please," the man demanded.

Darr restrained the urge to throttle the kid and leaned casually against the wall. From the look on Carmel's face, this should prove to be interesting.

She took a deep breath. "Yes, Lt. Senat?"

The man placed a proprietary hand on her arm and drew her away. "What in the name of the flaming mother is going on here?"

"Going on?" she mimicked, giving him a confused look. Then she realized he was talking about Darr. "Oh! Well, Darr's bunking with me."

"What?" Senat exclaimed.

"Revi, it's been nearly a year since we split. You didn't expect me to stay celibate the rest of my life, did you?"

The young man scrubbed his hands over his face. "Well, no, Car, but before you left, we talked about trying again."

Darr folded his arms across his chest. This *was* getting interesting. Her lips compressed into a straight line, and even he'd known her long enough to know that wasn't a particularly good sign.

"No," she said, waving her index finger in Senat's face. "You talked about trying again. I said no, or didn't you hear me?"

"But —"

"I can see by the expression on your face, you weren't listening, so I'll say it again, with a little more feeling. No, you unfaithful, dirty man-whore, we are not going to try again." Senat stepped closer, and she poked him in the chest with her finger. "And frankly, I'd rather be sodomized with a white-hot fish scaler than let you back into my life again. Can you hear me now?"

Senat's face turned red with rage, and for a moment, Darr thought he might actually hit her, but he stormed off instead. Carmel closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and turned to him.

"Well, that was uncomfortable. Shall we, Commander?" She punched in the code for her door, and he followed her inside.

He inhaled, long and slow. He'd always loved the way a woman's quarters smelled. It had been years since he'd been in a woman's room, and Darr found himself fascinated by the discoveries he made as he looked around. The space was large for a soldier's quarters, which spoke volumes as to her importance, not only to the captain of the ship, but to the cause.

The room was painted a silvery blue color that extended onto the ceiling. A thick area rug covered the brushed-steel floor. There was a sitting area furnished with a low white couch. Large pillows scattered around the floor acted as seating, and an ottoman served as a cocktail table. Lighted plastic tubes topped with clear disks were strategically placed among the pillows to act as tables. Apparently she entertained, because there was plenty of seating. What kind of people did she hang out with? What

did they talk about? And they obviously talked, for there was no sign of a visual entertainment device.

Heavy bookshelves lined the walls, stacked with priceless books spanning centuries and cultures. Darr was immediately drawn to them. Many of the books were histories dealing with revolution, warfare, colonization, and government. There were old Earth histories populated with men like Napoleon Bonaparte, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama. Several had been written by Carmel's father, Jiru Bastion. Despite her hatred of Thadd, copies of his books also graced the shelves. But most telling, lying open on the ottoman was a worn copy of the history of the United States of America containing a complete reprinting of that country's Declaration of Independence and their Constitution.

"A little light reading?" he asked, nodding toward the books.

Carmel laughed. "Ejan and I have been discussing the most inclusive forms of government. I'm a fan of democracy. He prefers a blend of democracy and socialism. It's led to some lively debates, but I think I'm making headway."

Darr nodded. "You know I'm from Earth, born in the USA, actually, though we left while I was still a child."

"Yes," she said, tossing her flight bag in the closet. "Have you ever been back?"

He continued to search the titles on her shelves. "Mmm, a time or two." He reached for a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. "You certainly have eclectic reading habits. Have you read all of these?"

"Most of them. I grew up on this ship. There isn't a lot for a precocious child to do." She doffed her flight suit and rummaged in a drawer under the platform bed for a pair of pants and a formfitting sleeveless shirt. She dressed, sliding into a pair of flexible, soft-soled shoes. "We should go to the quartermaster's and get you some clothes.

He chuckled and replaced the book. "What, my prison garb isn't stylish enough?"

"Handel, you'd look good in anything, and you damn well know it. However, you need a uniform and workout clothes. Anything else you might want or need we can get when we stop on Tharkus XII."

Darr followed her out of the room and down the hall to a lift. "What are we doing on Tharkus XII? The black market is huge there, but so are informants. Anyone could make a mistake that could lead Thadd right to you." He watched as she punched the button for deck four, and folded his arms across his chest, waiting for an answer.

"Only Ejan, myself, another member of the crew and now you, will actually be allowed on the planet's surface. We'll pick up whatever you might need or want in the way of supplies—personal and professional—and then spread a little disinformation. By the time we're done, no one will be able to tell Thadd anything about our movements. All he'll know for sure is that you're with *Darkshadow* now."

As the lift came to a stop, they stepped out into the corridor. Carmel turned left, and Darr kept pace with her. "Do you think that's wise, letting Thadd know I'm part of *Darkshadow*?"

Carmel gave him a predatory smile. "Oh yes. He's terrified of *Darkshadow*, and the fact that you're with the organization now will only increase his fear. When people get scared, they make mistakes."

Darr chuckled as she punched in the code for the quartermaster's inner sanctum. "I'm impressed. Soldiers with the rank of lieutenant don't usually have the codes for the quartermaster's supply room, at least not in Thadd's service."

Carmel raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, then hold your water, my friend, because when we leave here, we'll be going to the armory."

When the door opened and they stepped inside, Darr spun her around, pressing her against the counter. His lips traced a leisurely path to her ear. "I love a powerful woman," he purred. "All that strength, all that control, it's so...arousing. And even more arousing is watching that control shatter when I take her body." His teeth

clamped on her earlobe, tugging. "Have you ever been fucked in an armory, Lt. Bastion?"

His cock jumped when she gasped, "No."

"Well, prepare yourself, lover, because you're going to be."

Chapter Five

Carmel felt her pussy clench in response to Darr's pronouncement. God's balls, she was acting like a schoolgirl, hormones all atwitter because the captain of the glide polo team was courting her. Perhaps she'd made an error in judgment, agreeing to his terms as quickly as she'd done. A lust like this could cause her to lose her will to him or, worse, lead her to make a mistake, endangering people needlessly. A soldier had to be ready and willing to send men into danger, with the knowledge they might not come back. Could she watch Darr Handel die, and still function at the top of her game? She didn't know, and that admission was more disturbing than she cared to admit, considering she'd only known the man for a few days.

Carmel was stoic as she gathered two flight suits, workout clothes, underwear, socks, boots, and gym shoes, handing them to Darr to bag up.

"We're not required to wear uniforms," she explained, gathering hygiene supplies for him. "But Ejan prefers them when we're on board." She looked down at her garments. "These are my workout clothes. I usually do some sparring after a long trip, to help me burn off some energy. Anyway, he believes uniforms make for a more cohesive unit, promotes teamwork." She passed the items to him. "When we're not on

the ship, we're to dress as civilians – merchants, traders, pirates, mercs, whatever your preference."

She subdued a shudder at the avid interest in his eyes. "And how do you dress for these excursions, Carmel?"

Her nostrils flared, and she took a deep breath before answering. "Mostly like a merc, though I have occasionally dressed slutty when I was after information from a specific target." She shrugged. "I usually get what I'm looking for."

"Really, love, and what else do you usually get when you dress slutty?"

"I don't fuck random men, if that's what you're asking, Handel. A little truth serum in my special ring, and I get all the information I need without having to put out." She gave him a wickedly carnal smile. "But I do implant the memory of the best sex they've ever had. That way, I'm guaranteed cooperation if I ever need them again."

"You are a bad girl," Darr said.

"You know it." She came around the counter. "That's it. Let's go to the armory and get you armed and dangerous."

"Oh, honey, I'm already armed and dangerous, but do lead the way." She tried to skirt around him, desperate to escape the close proximity of that bulging cock pressing against the gray prison uniform breeches, but the second she got within reach, he grabbed her, pressing her against the wall. "I don't know what the problem is, sweetheart, but I sense a little hesitation on your part. I'm not letting you wriggle out of our deal." He reached down and slid one arm beneath her leg, then tucked his impressive erection hard against her until the head of his cock pressed against her cloth-covered clit. "I'm going to fuck you two or three times a day, honey. You bend over to pick something up, and I'll be there, shoving my cock into that sweet pussy from behind. You're sitting at your desk in your quarters, you'll be sitting on my lap, my dick buried deep in your slippery heat. Sit down to eat a meal in your quarters, and I'll have you spread out on the table, your legs over my shoulders while I eat that tight little

cunt.” He thrust his hips, grinding against her, making her groan. “Armed and dangerous? You bet your ass.”

His mouth was on her then, his hot tongue sliding between her lips to probe her mouth. She moaned, opening to take him inside. His tongue filled her mouth, thrusting, retreating, curling, gliding, every movement a sensual treat to her heightened senses. She couldn't help herself. She kissed him back, grinding against his cock. She didn't fight it when he untied the drawstring pants and shoved them down to her ankles. She didn't cry out when he ripped the thong panties from her body and dropped to his knees. She did cry out when he opened her with his thumbs and fastened his sucking mouth to her clit.

Was that her sobbing, begging to be fucked? Long, blunt fingers drilled into her. “Darr!” she screamed. “Please.”

“Please, what, baby?” His voice vibrated against her pussy lips, prompting another moan.

“Fuck me, damn you,” she growled.

His dark chuckle sent trickles of cream streaming from her pussy. “Yeah.” His fingers left her, and she was suddenly spun around to face the wall. “Arms over your head, palms flat on the wall,” he ordered.

Carmel whimpered as he rose to his feet behind her and quickly removed his clothes.

The heat of his cock pressed against her bottom. “Spread those legs,” he said darkly.

She did, panting as she felt the broad head of his dick glide between the swollen folds of her pussy.

“Is this what you want, Carmel?” He gave her just the head, nudging into her just enough to make her hiss.

"Yessss," she whispered. "That's what I want. Shove that big cock in me and fuck me, Darr. Fuck me hard."

He fucked into her with shallow strokes, teasing her, making her wild, and then he bent his knees and pistoned up, ramming into her with enough force that her forehead thumped the wall. "Sorry, baby," he said, easing off.

"Don't you dare stop, you bastard!" she cursed.

Another of those dark laughs snaked through her, and he covered her breasts with his hands, pinching her nipples hard as his cock jackhammered into her. "You like it rough, baby, I'll give it to you rough."

Carmel thought she might pass out, the feeling was so intense. The breath sawed from her lungs, and tiny black dots swirled in front of her eyes. "Oh!" she shouted with each hard thrust.

"Come," Darr countered, slamming into her. His fingers twisted her nipples, triggering a cry.

"Oooh!" she cried as an orgasm gathered between her legs. The heat and sensitivity radiated from her clit, through her vagina, and rushed to her belly, exploding throughout her body as she howled and bucked against him, incapable of coherent speech.

"That's it, baby," Darr growled. "Now me." He thrust into her furiously, fucking through the strong contractions until, with one final lunge, she felt him bury himself deep inside her, his hips jerking as jets of hot semen shot into her.

Carmel sagged against him, breathing hard as she struggled to come down from the rush of Darr's lovemaking. "God's balls, Handel, you make my knees turn to jelly."

Darr chuckled and slipped out of her. "And you mine, Carmel." He staggered back, giving her room to pull up her trousers and retie. "Now, care to tell me why you were having second thoughts about our arrangement?"

Carmel gasped. "How did you know?"

He was about to answer when an alert chimed over the intercom system. "All hands, report to your stations, this is not a drill," the captain's voice commanded. "We are under attack. Pilots report to the flight deck. I repeat: We are under attack. All pilots to the flight deck."

"What the hell?" Darr said, digging into his bag for a flight suit.

"Don't know," Carmel said, vaulting over the counter to grab a flight suit. She stripped quickly and yanked it on, then found a pair of socks and flight boots. "Could be marauders. Could be outliers of Thadd's troops. We run into them in deep space sometimes. They always engage. Never stop to see if an unfamiliar ship is friend or foe. Thadd's orders. If it's not a UIF ship, they try to kill it." Dressed, she pushed past him. "Let's go kill some bad guys, Commander."

* * * * *

Carmel gave the other pilots a thumbs-up as she climbed into her Predator-class warflyer. The hydraulic door closed behind her, and she slid into her seat. She quickly ran through her preflight check, donned her headset, and did a com check. All radios squawked to let her know the coms were set on the correct channel.

"All right. Commander Handel's going to take us out. Sting 'em fast and sting 'em hard." She grinned at Darr as his fighter eased out of its docking space.

"Nine to port, nine to starboard, nine down, and nine up and over."

Carmel hooted. "I'm up and over, boys."

The flight bay doors opened and thirty-six FTL fighters swarmed out. Carmel watched as Handel went up and over. So, he was going to keep an eye on her, was he? Did he think she was some rookie who couldn't hold her own with a bunch of male pilots? Not hardly. She'd been flying at faster-than-light speed since before she was in puberty. She pushed her stick forward, and the tidy little craft leaped through the doors at her command.

As soon as her ass end cleared the ship, she went vertical, did a one-eighty, and shot across the top of her mother ship. An enemy cruiser dropped down to intercept her, but she barrel rolled to her right, punched forward, and spun, sending a laser-guided nuke straight up his exhaust. She didn't waste her time to determine whether she got a hit, but went vertical again and did a quick survey of the other fighters.

"You got a bad guy on your tail, Bastion," one of the pilots called.

Carmel did another one-eighty and shot a half dozen laser pulses into the fighter's visual bubble, drilling a hole the size of her little finger, but it was enough. The small ship spun out of control as the pilot was crushed by the pressure in his cabin. She swerved to the left and came up on the tail of another enemy fighter, delivering another little package into his exhaust system.

The battle lasted less than ten minutes. The marauder ship limped away, having taken damage from Captain Zawa's pulse cannons. Several of the enemy fighters were disabled, and *Darkshadow's* retractable claw plucked them out of space one by one. With a little luck, the pilots would still be alive and well, with significant bounties on their heads. Tharkus XII had a private agency that would pay partial bounties for some criminals, keeping the balance and the glory for themselves. Neither Ejan or Carmel cared about the glory, and the extra funds always came in handy. She followed her contingent of fighters back through the flight bay doors, docked her craft, and cycled down the engine.

Everyone sat patiently while the flight bay was pressurized, then climbed down from their machines to watch security swarm the enemy craft. Carmel was standing with a group of men when security dragged a tall, muscular pilot down the steps of his craft. He straightened to his full height and glared at his captors.

Carmel inhaled sharply, struggling to maintain her cool. He looked like Yu-kit Veltaire, her only one-night stand. Could it be? Long, dark hair flew away from his face as he struggled, and she knew for certain. His beautiful Asian features were contorted with anger, but Carmel would know that face anywhere. She'd thought he'd left aboard

the *False Talisman* the same night he'd fucked her nearly unconscious. He'd been her first orgasm, and she was inclined to forgive him for abandoning her in the middle of the night, but not for firing on her ship. His gaze swept over her, moved on, then jumped back, pinning her where she stood.

"Osirri?" he said, struggling against the security men attempting to hold him back. "Osirri, do you not remember me from Tharkus XII? What is the meaning of this? Tell these men to release me!"

The other pilots looked at her, smirking. None of them ever used their real names when they were on shore leave.

Revi Senat glowered. "So that's the reason you didn't come back to the ship that night." He yanked his helmet off, stuffed it in his cubby, and stormed off.

Carmel cringed as Darr sauntered toward the gathering, watching as the big Asian merc practically dragged the security officers with him.

"Osirri, why do you not answer me?" he demanded.

"Oops...um...Osirri's not really my name," she muttered, giving her fellow pilots a sheepish look. "I remember you, Yu-kit." She broke away from the group and approached him. "What were you doing with that group of marauders?"

"Earning my passage across the sector. I had hoped you might be on leave on Tharkus XII again when we reached there. We had a good time together, you and I." His eyes swept her, and he gave her a provocative smile, leaning down to speak softly near her ear. "Perhaps you could use a *good* man on your crew?"

"Yuki, you attacked my ship and tried to kill my fellow pilots. Besides," she murmured, her lips inches from his, "you weren't that good."

"Lying bitch! You were begging me to fuck you!" he growled as security hauled him off. "You're nothing but a mercenary whore!"

“Sticks and stones,” she sang, wiggling her fingers in a good-bye gesture as they hauled him away. She turned back to her fellow pilots with a shrug. “Why is it you men are such sore losers?”

Chapter Six

"Lieutenant, stow your gear and report to quarters," Darr commanded in a clipped tone. He hadn't liked the chances she'd taken during the battle, and liked even less the way the prisoner had spoken to her. She'd damn well give him an explanation for both occurrences.

Carmel stared at him, and he could tell she was gauging the wisdom of defying him. He was taking a calculated risk using that tone with her, but he was banking on the fact that she wouldn't buck his orders, not if she wanted the other officers and noncoms to obey him.

"Yes, sir," she replied, then nodded at the other men. "Gentlemen."

Darr could tell by the straight line of her spine that she was pissed at being spoken to in such a manner, especially after taking out two enemy craft and disabling four more. She'd earned kudos, not a dressing-down.

"Lieutenant," he called as she shoved her helmet in her cubby. "Good work out there today."

She gave him a stiff little bow. "Thank you, sir." Then she turned on her heel and exited the fighter bay.

If he knew women, and he did, she was the type that would go to her quarters and stomp around for a bit, maybe break something in a fit of anger, then change into workout clothes and go looking for bigger fish to fry. Either way, she probably wouldn't be there when he arrived, and she definitely wasn't going to like what he had to say.

"Good job out there today, men," Darr told them. "Have someone check on those disabled fighters, see if we can repair them for our own use."

"Aye, Commander," the men said in unison.

"Stand down."

When he arrived at their shared quarters, not only was Carmel there, she'd showered, dressed, and was curled up in a chair reading. All right, he was officially surprised. She stood at attention when he walked toward her.

So, she intended to play the role of junior officer to superior officer, did she? Well, he could play that game just as well as she could, and he'd enjoy seeing to it that she obeyed his every command.

"Frankly, I didn't expect you to be here," he admitted, raising an eyebrow at her formal stance.

"Why wouldn't I be, sir? You gave me an order."

Darr stifled a derisive snort. "I see." He circled her, inhaling the spicy, clovelike scent of her shampoo. "Tell me, Lieutenant. Are you always so reckless when you fly?" He watched her closely, but the only sign of irritation was a slight tightening of her mouth, which quickly disappeared.

"Reckless, sir?"

He continued his slow inspection of her, pausing behind her to inhale. The spicy scent suited her. No delicate flowers for his little revolutionary. "Barrel rolls, flipping your craft upside down to fire at the enemy... You don't call that reckless?"

Her shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly. "No, sir."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Skill, sir. The maneuver threw off his timing, thus allowing me to disable the enemy."

"Not trying to impress the new commander?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, no doubt praying for patience.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I believe I did that when I broke you out of prison."

It was all he could do not to laugh. "Touché, Lieutenant, but I'd like to see you be a bit more careful when you're at the controls. Your loss would be a blow to the cause."

Eyes straight forward, she replied, "Sir, I'm just a soldier, like all the others."

Darr circled around to stand in front of her. "No, Lieutenant, you're much more. You're a symbol. You are the child Jiru and Nona Bastion gave their lives to protect, or so most people believe, and until they are rescued and word of their survival spreads, *you* are the rallying cry of every rebel soldier out there. It is your duty to keep yourself safe."

Her body fairly shook with the tension of holding her tongue. "Respectfully, sir," she said between gritted teeth. "What would you have me do?"

"Frankly, I'd rather you not engage enemy forces at all." He held his hand up when she would have argued. "But at this point, that's not a practical option, so from here on out, you'll be a wingman."

He could literally see the tension seeping from her body, until she realized exactly what he'd said. "Yes, sir, but I feel I must point out that—and I do not mean to brag—I'm a better pilot than most of the men on this ship. Not using me is inefficient."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant, however, you're not better than me."

Her jaw dropped. "You're going to be my wingman?"

Darr clasped his hands behind his back. What he was going to say would piss her off, but the only way he could keep her safe was to put himself in front of her and danger. "More like you'll be my wingman."

Her jaw tensed. "If you're not going to let me fight, why not ground me completely?"

Darr kept his eyes on hers. "Are you arguing with your commanding officer, Lieutenant?"

A minute tremor ran through her body, and she clenched her jaw. "No, sir. If you are giving me a direct order to perform wingman duties for you, naturally, I will obey."

"Good girl," he said, acutely aware of his cock twitching. "Now, tell me about the prisoner you addressed as Yuki."

Darr struggled not to laugh. He could practically see the gears working in that amazingly clever mind of hers. How much should she tell him? she was probably wondering.

"I met him on leave, while visiting Tharkus XII. He's a merc. I thought he'd be a good source to mine for information."

"Indeed, and did you...mine him for information?"

"I did." The smirk on her face confirmed what the prisoner had blurted out to the entire ranks.

"And it seems he mined you as well, is that correct, Lieutenant?"

She looked him right in the eye. "Oh yes, he certainly did, Commander. Would you like all the dirty little details?" She lowered her voice seductively. "Shall I tell you about how he gave me my first mind-blowing orgasm? Maybe you'd like to know how big his dick is, how full he filled me. Or perhaps you'd like to know how he taught me to suck a man's cock until his knees turn to jelly. Or how tempted I am to go down to the brig and have another taste of him, hmm?"

Darr felt the blood pound in his head. Did she really believe he'd allow her to share her luscious body with another man? Just the idea of her spread out beneath someone else was enough to spur his anger, inspiring a sense of possessiveness he'd never experienced before. She was his, goddamn it.

His fist clenched and opened as he struggled with this new feeling of ownership. "You will stay away from the prisoner, Lt. Bastion. Are we clear?"

She had the temerity to smirk at him again. "And if I don't, Commander?"

He stroked her slender neck with his fingers, then clamped them around the slim column and backed her against the wall. He leaned in close, inhaling the scent of her. To her credit, she didn't so much as blink. When he spoke, his voice was a low growl. "We have a deal, Carmel. You're mine until this is over. If you so much as touch another man, I'll light up your sweet little ass so you won't be able to sit, much less strap yourself into a flyer."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oooh, now I'm scared. What a big, bad man you are," she said softly. "Permission to be dismissed...Commander."

"Granted," he said between clenched teeth. He stepped aside, then watched as she walked calmly to the door and exited, never looking back.

* * * * *

Carmel was beyond pissed. Who the hell did Darr Handel think he was? He'd still be rotting in prison, awaiting an agonizing death by crucifixion, if it weren't for her. How dare he tell her how to engage the enemy? She'd been training to be a pilot since she was old enough to see over the cockpit instrument panel. The *Darkshadow's* captain had no issue with her ability, and she had enough enemy kills under her belt to more than prove her competence in battle. Darr was just trying to flex his muscles, and he was using her to do so. Well, she'd be damned if she'd tolerate his high-handed treatment. And then to tell her she was his, that if she touched another man he'd punish her? Of all the nerve!

She was still fighting mad when the doors to the recreation deck whooshed open. What she needed was a good workout and some well-deserved downtime with her comrades in arms.

"Carmel," several of the pilots greeted her.

She walked past them, throwing her hand up in a curt wave as she crossed the deck and entered the workout area. With a nod to the other occupants, she went to a nearby sparring droid and programmed it for a workout.

"Greetings, Lt. Bastion," the droid said. "It is my pleasure to serve you today."

"Can the chitchat, pal," she snarled. "Let's get busy. I have a real need to kick some ass." The droid made no comment but assumed a fighting stance and charged her.

As the lifelike machine grasped her, she pivoted, ducked beneath its shoulder, and swung her arm, smashing an elbow between its shoulder blades in a stunning blow. The droid staggered but quickly caught itself, rotating a hundred and eighty degrees to throw a roundhouse punch, which she narrowly avoided. Her leg shot out with a sweeping motion, knocking the machine on its realistic ass. It rolled to its feet and charged her again.

Several of the officers entered the room to line the walls and watch the battle. Carmel grunted when the droid landed a kidney punch, which she followed with an elbow to its face before whirling around to deliver a brutal chop to its neck with the edge of her hand. Had it been a flesh-and-blood man, it would have been a killing blow. As it was, the machine's head lolled to the side, slightly off-kilter.

Carmel continued a pattern of brutal blows and kicks, taking her frustration out on the expensive piece of equipment until the allotted time wound down. The only other female pilot, Melia Sandal, tossed her a towel.

"Come on, Bastion," the woman said sympathetically. "I'll buy you a drink."

Carmel mopped her face with the towel and grinned. "Sounds good. I could use one." She followed Melia to the bar and slid onto a stool beside her. Tapping on the bar, she got the bartender's attention.

"I'll have a Shiki Twister," she said. "And whatever my friend wants."

The other woman shrugged. "What the hell, I'll have the same. Feeling the need to tie one on, are you?"

Carmel grunted. "I'm due."

Melia laughed. "I'd say you are, given what I witnessed down in flight bay. So, how pissed was the commander over the prisoner's little display?"

Carmel looked up when the bartender set the drinks in front of them. "Debit it from my account," she told him, raising her glass to examine the drink. The frozen green mixture was shot through with swirls of pulverized, red, ripe *monseku* berries, which gave the drink its potent punch. If she had more than two, she'd be crawling back to her quarters. She took a long drink, savoring the unique combination of muskmelon blended with a sweet, citrusy flavor.

"Better watch out, Lieutenant," Senat mocked, approaching her. "Your new boyfriend might not want you down here drinking with the little people."

Carmel gave him a jaundiced eye. "Go chase yourself, Senat. I'm not in the mood for your whining tonight. God, you're worse than one of those Oculi women from the lunar market."

Beside her, Melia nearly choked on her drink, then set the glass on the bar. "Yes, little man, run along now. We're in the middle of girl talk, and boys are not welcome."

Senat sniffed disdainfully. "You'll regret getting involved with him, just you wait and see."

"Look into my eyes, Senat. Do I look like I give a fuck about anything you're saying?"

Senat practically snarled, "He'll betray us all to Thadd to save his own skin. Mark my words."

Carmel took another gulp of her potent drink. "I'll mark your words with my foot up your ass if you don't shove off." She turned to Melia. "Really, what did I see in him? You know what we need? We need some damn music up in here."

Melia pounded the bar and held up two fingers. "You heard the woman: we need some damn music, and two more of these lovely frozen concoctions." When the music blared out of the speakers, she leaned toward Carmel and bellowed. "I believe I feel a dance coming on!"

"Me too!" Carmel snatched up the fresh glasses and followed Melia to a small, raised dance floor.

The beat of the music pounded through her, and she laughed when Melia moved behind her, circling her waist with her arm. "He just walked in," she said next to Carmel's ear. "Let's give him a little show, shall we?"

Chapter Seven

Darr stepped into the rec area. Sure enough, there she was, just where his anonymous caller had said she'd be. The dancing was unexpected, though. For some reason, he'd thought of Carmel as too single-minded to indulge in recreational behavior. But she was obviously having fun, prancing around the dance floor, laughing, her drink sloshing as she moved. He crossed the room and headed to the gym to check on the condition of the droid she'd supposedly destroyed. Perhaps the ruined equipment would help take his mind off the sight of Carmel's shapely ass swaying to the music.

Darr sighed. She'd done a number on it, all right. The droid's head drooped to one side, one of the shoulders had been dislocated, and the mechanical knee had been hyperextended. The smell of burning wire told him she'd shorted the thing out. Damn. He supposed he ought to count himself lucky she hadn't given him the same treatment. Her enhancements were obviously top-of-the-line if she could do this kind of damage to a fighting machine. He signed off on the order to have it repaired, and went back into the main room.

God's balls! The blonde pilot rubbed her shapely body against Carmel's, her hips swaying as her hands ran up and down Carmel's sides. Carmel ground her ass against

the woman's pelvis in parody of the sex act. The two women laughed, spun away, and came back together, facing one another. Holy crap, he and every man in here were going to have a case of blue balls before it was over.

What the hell was she doing? Couldn't she see the woman wanted her, was trying to seduce her? She couldn't be that naive.

He frowned as Carmel wrapped an arm around her dance partner's neck, placing her mouth next to the woman's ear. It was impossible to guess what she'd said, but the petite blonde laughed and nodded. They spun away from one another again, sipping their drinks, bodies undulating seductively to the beat of the music. Exactly what they thought they were doing was a mystery to him. As the only two females on the ship, they were taking a big chance behaving in such a manner with a bunch of sex-starved men hanging around, watching their every move. And they were watching.

No less than fifteen men were standing around avidly watching as the two women danced. They might as well have been dancing in one of the sex clubs on Tharkus XII, what with all the bumping and grinding going on. Trouble was, he couldn't just stomp onto the dance floor and pull them apart, dragging Carmel back to their quarters—no matter how much he'd like to do that very thing. The condition of the fighting droid aside, he wasn't about to flaunt their relationship in front of the other men. It might be general knowledge that he and Carmel shared quarters, but what went on in those quarters was between the two of them. Damn her delectable hide, he'd have to hang here until she'd proved her point and went back to quarters. He strode to the bar and glared at the bartender, who also watched as the women danced.

"An Aurora Ale," Darr barked. "And I want a frosted mug."

"Aye, Commander," the man said sheepishly. "Should I turn off the music?"

Darr read the man's name tag. "No, Kalderon. No harm in letting off a little steam. Let them enjoy themselves. We're all old enough to be able to hold our libidos in check so the women can blow off a little steam." He said it loudly enough that all the men gathered at the bar would hear him. The stern tone of his voice left no doubt as to Darr's

meaning, and the tension in the men's bodies immediately drained. Well, that was good, at least they were capable of taking orders, no matter how subtle.

After what seemed like an eternity, the song ended and the women stumbled off the floor, draining the last of their drinks. They set them on a nearby table and left the recreation area, arm in arm, laughing hysterically when they bounced off the door and careened off the wall. "Oops," Carmel whooped. "That's gonna leave a mark."

What were they up to now? Protocol demanded Darr finish his drink and not go chasing after his woman like some besotted schoolboy, but damned if he didn't want to. He'd told Carmel exactly what would happen if she so much as touched another man, but he'd never taken into account that she might be attracted to another woman. Was she? Or was she just trying to get under his skin? If that was her plan, it was definitely working. He drained his mug, thumping it down on the counter so hard, the glass cracked.

When Darr stepped into their quarters, the room was dark. Damnit, where the hell was she? He was tempted to go on an all-out search for her, but he didn't want the crew to get the idea that he was following her around like a puppy. Then he remembered the computer. He booted up the system and opened a screen.

"Computer," he said. "Give me the location of Lt. Bastion."

"Did you lose her, Commander?" the computer asked in a lightly mocking tone.

"So it would appear." He shook his head. Whoever had programmed the computer definitely had a sense of humor. "Can you pinpoint her location?"

"Scanning... Lt. Bastion is currently in the sauna with Lt. Sandal. Shall I access their conversation?"

"Tempting idea, computer, but that would be eavesdropping."

The computerized female voice uttered an eerily seductive laugh. "Yes, it would, Commander, and to further tempt you, I can tell you they're talking about you."

Darr chuckled. "That was just plain mean, computer. Tell me why you're willing to violate the lieutenant's privacy in such a manner."

"What can I say? The silly thing doesn't believe she needs anyone. She's wrong. Those of your species are social beings; you require the human touch, the human emotion. She's been alone far too long. Logic tells me you will be good for her."

"Logic, huh?" He sighed, fighting the allure of hearing Carmel's true feelings. "Oh hell, open the channel — audio only."

* * * * *

"God's balls," Carmel moaned. "I'm going to have one hell of a headache in the morning if I don't go to medbay for a quicky rejuv."

Melia laughed. "It was that second drink that did it. Whatever possessed you to order that poison — as delicious as it tasted."

Carmel snorted indelicately. "Kicking that droid's ass just didn't do it for me, I guess."

Sandal hooted. "You have got it bad, my girl. Though I have to admit, I wouldn't kick the handsome commander out of my bed, so I feel your pain. What'd he do to piss you off?"

"He's making me his wingman," she said, outraged. "Can you imagine? I'm the best pilot he's got — not to cast aspersions on your skill."

Sandal waved her hand in the air. "Hey, I know you're better than me. You're the best on the ship. So, there has to be a reason."

"He says I'm a symbol of the rebellion and, as such, too valuable to be taking reckless chances with my life."

"Uh-oh, you did an inverted attack, didn't you?"

"Yeah, and the big oaf happened to see it."

Sandal clicked her tongue. "Tsk-tsk, my dear. You were bound to get called on that maneuver sooner or later. You take too many risks, Bastion."

"Yeah, but did you see those bastards run?"

Sandal hooted with laughter, then sobered. "Yeah, it intimidates most of them, but one of these days you're going to come up against a pilot that isn't intimidated, someone as good as you. And the commander is right, losing you would be a blow to the revolution."

"Oh please, not you too!" Carmel was truly dismayed. She needed one person on her side. "Are you saying you think I should take this wingman stuff lying down?"

"Hell no. We need you out there. I'm just saying you could display a little more restraint when engaging the enemy, is all. You do want to live to see your parents again, don't you?"

Carmel shoved to her feet, pacing the sauna like a caged animal. "Low blow, Sandal."

"Intentionally so, Bastion." She tossed Carmel a towel. "Will you cover up, please? I'm not made of stone, you know."

Carmel wrapped the towel around her body and sat back down. "Sorry." She studied Sandal for a long moment. "How do you do it? How do you manage being opposite sexed with all these men around?"

Sandal laughed. "I'm not opposite sexed, love, I'm dual sexed."

Carmel perked up. "So, you have a lover on board? Who? Come on, give it up."

"Deriel, if you must know."

"Deriel... Madly hot engineer on the coms deck?"

"That would be him."

Carmel snickered. "He's cosmically studly, if what I've seen in the gym is any indication."

Sandal gave her a smug look. "The workout shorts do not deceive."

"So, why would you be interested in me? I mean, he has all the right parts, and I'm assuming he knows how to use them if you're fucking him."

"Oh, he knows how to use them, but there's something about making love with another woman that's more...emotionally fulfilling. And I do love eating pussy. In case you're ever interested."

"I'll keep it in mind...in case I decide to murder Handel in his sleep some night." And considering his controlling ways, that was a distinct possibility. Had she made a mistake bringing him here?

Sandal rolled her eyes. "Please, he has to be the hottest piece of ass I've seen in a long time."

Carmel could feel her cheeks heat at the thought. That was a total understatement. Darr Handel was the hottest piece of ass in the known universe, and he wanted her. Why, she didn't know, but she had the distinct impression he might want more from her than she was willing to give. "*Any time, any way,*" he'd demanded. And thus far, she'd been compliant. Enthusiastic, even. "Well, I have to give him credit for knowing what he's doing. I thought that Asian merc knew his stuff, but Darr...Darr knows exactly what to do with the female anatomy and does so with the gusto of a man locked in a prison cell for a long, long time."

"Ah, speaking of which, the whole crew is talking about that, and about Handel ordering you to quarters. I have to assume your pal Yuki came up."

"Oh, he came up, all right." Carmel laughed. "Handel actually had the nerve tell me if I put my hands on another man, he'd — let me be sure I get this right — light up my sweet little ass so I wouldn't want to sit down, much less strap myself into a flyer. Can you imagine?"

Truth be told, it was that threat that had sent her in search of a sparring droid. The arrogance of the man, baldly making a statement like that, thinking she'd just sit still for such treatment. If he ever tried to spank her, she'd geld him, she didn't care how hot he was between the sheets. Carmel's eyes narrowed when Melia licked her lips.

"Ah yes, I can. Spanking can be very...erotic...when done correctly."

Carmel gasped. "No. You?"

Melia shrugged. "Don't knock it till you've tried it, honey."

"Oh, I could never..." Could she? Already she was contemplating letting Handel take her ass. Could spanking be far behind?

Sandal laughed. "Never say never, honey. The word never fails to come back and bite you in your sweet little ass. But tell me something. What is it about him that's got you on the run?"

"It's that obvious, is it?"

"Maybe not to everyone, but I recognize the symptoms, having experienced them a time or two myself."

Carmel leaned forward, forearms resting on the thighs. "I'm not sure." She looked Melia in the eye. "When I'm near him, I feel...out of control, somehow. Like all he'd have to do is ask, and I'd do anything he wanted." She shook her head. "I'm not sure I'm expressing it right. He just makes me feel things...things I don't want to feel, that I can't afford to feel. I mean, we're involved in a life-or-death struggle with Thadd, and I—there's just—I need to stay focused on the mission, not on some man."

Melia smiled. "You're falling in love with him."

Carmel shot her a sour look. "I am so not in love with that...that...bossy, egomaniacal...asshole."

"It's okay, Carmel. You're allowed to have feelings, and I think it's wonderful." Sandal got up and pulled Carmel to her feet. "Come on, hotshot. Let's shower off this sweat, and you can go in search of your man."

"Pffftt," Carmel scoffed. "Let him find me. I'm heading for the observation deck as soon as we're done here. We'll be approaching the Tharkus nebulae in the next hour or so, and you know I can't pass that up. Want to join me?"

"No can do. I'm meeting Deriel in the refectory, and after that extremely hot dance session with you, my pretty, I'm going to need a little...attention. Enjoy your light show, and your man."

"I am not in love with him." But as the water sprayed over her, she closed her eyes and gave herself up to the truth. Maybe she was in love with him. Just a little. And that was a bad, bad thing.

Chapter Eight

The door to the observation room whispered open, and Darr stood there for a moment, just looking at Carmel. She stood, palms flat against the window, staring into space. So rapt was her attention, he was standing behind her before she noticed anyone else was in the room.

"The Tharkus nebulae," she said, reverently. "Ejan always gets as close as he can to the main star and still be safe." She looked over her shoulder at Darr and smiled. "He used to sit me on his back, when I was a child, and make up the most outrageous stories."

"What kind of stories?" Darr asked, sliding his arms around her. To his surprise, he really wanted to know. What had life been like for the beloved child of Jiru and Nona Bastion after she'd been separated from her parents? Who had loved and comforted her?

Carmel laughed softly and pointed to a series of stars off in the distance. More than stars, they appeared to be billows of pale blue gauzy material studded with tiny, glittering diamonds. "That's a fairy, dressed in blue robes, waiting in line to greet the queen." She pointed to her left and a heavy swirling mass of gas and space dust.

"There's the queen." Vivid pinks, mauves, blues, oranges, and various tones of white came together to form the outline of a woman dressed in robes of pink and blue, her orange and cream hair billowing about her head as she greeted her subjects. "Ejan said that star on her belt used to provide the light for the long-ago fairy planet, but that evil came to their world, bringing death to the planet, so the queen, in her grief, destroyed the planet and all who lived upon it, casting their bodies into the heavens as a monument—and a warning—for all to see. Can you see them? The queen and her court?"

Darr pulled her closer, resting his chin on her head. "I believe I do. So, whenever you pass this way, Ejan navigates as closely as he can, so you can see your fairy world."

Carmel nodded. "I know it's silly, but I come up here every time to sit and watch as the ship penetrates the veil. The really odd thing is, as we pass through these formations, they change in shape and pattern, but every time we approach them, they're back to their original configuration. Almost like magic."

"Almost," he agreed. Because that's what it felt like, being on this huge observation deck, surrounded by the light show of space, holding this woman in his arms—when less than seven days ago, he was languishing in a prison cell, waiting to die. "Come sit with me and let me enjoy this with you. I've never been in Tharkus sector. Will we be stopping here for long?"

He was only slightly surprised at her reaction when he led her to a long, low couch. Given the conversation he'd overheard between Carmel and her friend, he'd expected to be rejected. Instead, she'd readily curled up beside him, staring raptly at the multicolored threads of dust and gas that made up what she'd referred to as the fairy nebula.

"We'll probably spend a day or so on Tharkus XII," she explained. "It's always a good place to pick up intelligence about Thadd's movements. To find out about his latest atrocities, or who he might have thrown into prison or into exile. There are any number of traders and outlanders that come to Tharkus XII to sell their goods or

resupply. We'll refuel there too, much more cheaply than we might elsewhere, due to the closeness of the asteroid mines in this sector. We can't get *calcidium* cheaper anywhere else, and we have a cargo of *Niobite* to trade with."

Darr shuddered. "Do people still ingest *Niobite*?" The frothing, watery elixir was ruby in color. He could still recall the smell—like honey and fruit—of the foul concoction he and the other soldiers drank daily. Unfortunately, the taste was nothing like the pleasant scent, rather it was more like a combination of salt and spoiled cabbage.

Carmel laughed. "Out here they do. None of the planets in Tharkus sector support a sustainable agriculture. Virtually nothing grows here. Some of the people have indoor kitchen gardens, but they're expensive to maintain, and without the support of a nearby sun, the nutritional value of their produce is negligible. We carry as much fresh food as we can, but Ejan allows only a small percentage of our stores to be sold."

Darr nodded. "Makes sense. He's fighting a war, after all, and the soldiers have to be well fed in order to perform at their peak. Which is why Thadd made his troops drink *Niobite*, no matter how foul it tasted."

"I'm sure we could arrange to have some brought up from the cargo hold, if you're feeling nostalgic, Commander."

"I don't think so," Darr said, lifting her onto his lap. "I can think of something much sweeter to the taste." He lowered his lips to hers in a gentle whisper of a kiss. "Something I'd gladly drink every day and never lose the taste for."

"Do tell." The soft reply and foray of her tongue into his mouth was all the encouragement he needed.

Darr stroked the soft skin of her cheek, letting his fingers wander at will. She was so soft and fragrant. Just the scent of her drove him mad with the need to taste her. She moaned into his mouth when his hand moved beneath her tunic to caress her breast.

"I need to put my mouth on you," Darr whispered against her lips.

"Yes," she breathed urgently. "Yes. I want to feel your skin next to mine." She slid from his lap and went to her knees on the couch, drawing the cobalt tunic over her head.

God's blood, she was completely bare underneath! Darr drew his own shirt over his head, tossing it aside. Grasping her hips, he pulled her between his thighs, his mouth fastening onto a puckering nipple. Her fingers burrowed into his thick hair, holding him securely against her as he suckled deeply.

"Yes," she gasped as his hands slid beneath the waistband of her leggings to cup her ass.

He had to get those damn shoes and pants off her now, had to lay her down and spread her legs so he could taste her, feed from her until she came against his tongue. He eased her onto her back and pulled them down and off. He practically tore the rest of his clothes off in his haste to ready himself.

"Mmm," Darr murmured, inhaling deeply. "You have the sweetest pussy, love." He stretched out, shouldering her legs apart. "Time for me to get my nourishment."

Darr didn't know what it was about this particular woman that made him so damn hot, but all he could think about when she was around were the myriad ways he wanted to fuck her. He wanted to plunge his cock into her pouty little mouth and fuck her until he came. He wanted to fill her pussy, slamming into her as she cried his name over and over. He wanted to stretch her tight little ass, the one place she'd never had a man, and show her how exquisitely pleasurable the burn of a good ass fucking could be. He wanted her lying down, standing up, from behind, straddling him, tied down, and every other way it was possible for a man to have a woman. Hell, he just plain wanted her, and he didn't expect the wanting to go away anytime soon. He spread her wider and lowered his head, stroking his tongue between her swollen labia. The sweetness of her juices coated his tongue. Oh yeah, she was going to come against his tongue, and come hard.

So silky, so sweet. With fingers and tongue, he touched, tasted, and traced every petal-soft fold of her beautiful pussy. A soft cry escaped her as he slid two thick fingers into her cunt.

"Yes, you like that," he groaned, mouth hovering above her clit. He gave the hard button a long, velvety lick that had her thrusting her smooth mound against this mouth. "More? Do you want more, Carmel?"

Her voice was a husky rasp. "Yes, more. I need more."

He sucked her clit between his lips, lightly nursing the swollen nub. Helpless, her body jerked in response to his thrusting fingers, straining for release. But not yet, he was not ready to let her come just yet. "Tell me what you need, Carmel. Tell me, and I'll give it to you."

"I need to come," she hissed. "I need you to shove that big cock of yours inside me and fuck me until I come."

"Soon, love," he promised, fingers stroking deep.

"Now!" she howled.

He ceased all movement except for the whisper of his breath against her weeping flesh. "You'll come when I say you can come, Carmel, and not a moment sooner." He felt her tense beneath him, probably gearing up to kick him in the head and storm out on him. He disciplined her with several well-placed licks guaranteed to make her clit throb and pulse.

Her back arched, and she groaned. "Please!"

He chuckled, letting his lips vibrate against her. "Very well, since you're being such a good girl." Before she could react to his words, he climbed to his knees, lifted her legs to his shoulders, and thrust deep.

"You... Oooh," Carmel shouted. "Ah, God's balls, fuck me!"

Placing his hands on the cushion, he rested some of his weight against her legs and began to thrust. Mother of Creation, she was tight! So tight, her pussy seemed to

suck him in. It was all he could do to keep from pounding into her hard and fast, but he wanted to make it last. Wanted to make sure she'd never again think of that prisoner down in the brig, or any other man for that matter.

Easing back, he pressed into her again, rotating his hips. "Mmm, honey, your pussy feels so good. So hot and wet, so tight it's like you don't want to let go." He fucked her slow and deep, letting her feel every thick inch of him as he filled her, making sure the head of his cock grazed her G-spot.

Darr could feel her cunt tightening around him, feel her body begin to tremble with the need to come. She was moaning loudly with each thrust. "Do you like my cock inside you, fucking you like this?"

She practically sobbed. "Yes! I'm...so...close. Please, Darr."

"Okay, baby," he purred. "I'll give you what you want."

He began fucking her in earnest then, driving into her with long, hard strokes; his cock slamming into her, plunging deep.

"Yes," she gasped over and over. "Hard, Darr, give it to me hard. Make me come!"

"I'll make you come," he growled, stopping to slide her legs from his shoulders. "Spread your pussy lips, baby. Open them for me." When she did as he asked, he slid into her balls-deep, his pelvis resting squarely against hers. Resting his weight on her, he reached down and grabbed her ass, pulling her cheeks apart.

"Oh God," she moaned as he snugged himself hard against her pussy.

"Now, now you come screaming," he growled. With his cock buried to the hilt, he began to rock, sliding up and down against her, grinding his pelvis against her clit.

Oh God, she was moving with him, their bodies slippery with sweat, gliding together. Neither of them was going to last much longer. "Put your arms over your head," he demanded. When she did, he planted his elbows into the cushions and picked up his pace, his cock corkscrewing inside her.

"I'm gonna come," she chanted. "Oh God, I'm gonna come. I'm...g...aaah!"

Her back bowed, and her neck arched as she screamed out her release, and Darr held on, riding her hard, thrusting now, fucking her hard as her cunt pulsed around him. "Ah, fuck! Ah God, baby, take it. Take my cock; come again." He slammed into her one last time, grinding against her as her body jerked helplessly with the aftershocks.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, unable to believe the intensity of the act they'd just performed. He'd come so it hard, it felt as though it had started at his toes, raced up his spine, and back down to explode out of his cock with a force he'd never experienced before. With a sigh, he withdrew from her body and tucked her against him as they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Carmel woke a fraction at a time. At first she was aware of the feeling of warmth at her back and a hand at her breast, then the sensation of scratchy material against her bare skin, and finally, the pleasant, slight ache between her legs that let her know she'd had sex last night. Good sex. Great sex, actually. Several times. Darr. It was his hand cupping her breast, his warmth against her back.

Carmel smiled. She hadn't intended to fuck him. In fact, she'd come to her favorite place on the ship to be alone and think about this thing developing between them. Somehow, the blasted man always seemed to come between her and rational thought. She put a hand to her cheek, feeling the heated blush rising there. God's blood, but he'd turned her inside out last night, had her begging him to fuck her, to make her come. He'd controlled her body like a master, bending her into positions she'd never tried before, fine-tuning her lust until she would have submitted to anything just to have him inside her. And the way he spoke, the things he said: how good she felt beneath him, how much he loved the scent of her, the taste of her, the way her body clasped his so tightly it was as if it never wanted to let him go. Her heart banged against her chest as she realized just how dangerous Darr Handel was.

Carmel eased his hand from her breast and gently tucked his arm against his body. No doubt about it, she had to get out of here, right now, before he woke. There was no way she could continue to share her quarters with him. If that meant giving up her current luxuries for the bachelor officer's quarters, so be it. She'd shared quarters with the other single officers before; she could do it again.

Oh God, she actually felt sick to her stomach at the thought of leaving him. Could it be too late? Was she already in love with him? Not possible. There was no time for love in the middle of a rebellion. The cause was all that mattered. The cause and finding her parents. There was simply no way she could allow herself to fall for Darr Handel. She pushed the thought from her mind as she struggled into her clothes. She tucked her feet into her flexible, flat-soled slippers and stood up.

"Going somewhere?" Darr asked.

She squared her shoulders and stepped away. "I have things to do." Her voice sounded strained, even to her own ears. "We'll be entering Tharkus XII's orbit soon. I need to double-check the trade inventory, and I need...I need to speak to the captain about...a personal matter."

He sighed. "I see." There was disappointment in that deep voice and a measure of anger. He knew she was running. Question was, would he allow it, or would he force her to face herself? She didn't think she could do that at the moment. "Very well, Carmel. Run to your captain. I won't stand in your way."

She surprised herself by turning to him, showing him her distress. "Thank you," she whispered. She practically ran for the door, hailing Ejan Zawa's private link as soon as it hissed shut behind her. She tried to hide her panic but failed. "I must see you."

"Come to my quarters, child," he said. The sympathy in his tone told her he had an idea about why she needed to see him. She accessed the lift, programming it for a nonstop ascent to his living quarters. When the door opened, she stepped out into his waiting arms.

"Something's happening to me." She swallowed the sob clogging her throat. "I can't share quarters with him, even though I agreed to."

Ejan held her at arm's length, his lidless eyes studying her. "This was a requirement for Handel's help?"

Carmel nodded mournfully. "One of them. The other was that Thadd is his, if we get close enough to take him. Considering what Thadd did to him, I don't have any problem with letting Handel have him."

Ejan nodded. "Nor do I. However, I believe he took advantage of your desire to rescue your parents and forward the cause of the rebellion. I will speak with him."

Carmel shook her head. "I'll talk to him. I—He'll need quarters befitting his command. I'll give up mine, if need be."

"That will not be necessary, child. He may have the visiting officer's quarters. They're quite luxurious, for ship's quarters."

Carmel threw herself into his arms. "Thank you, Ejan."

"Tell me what has you so upset, my child. There is more to this than meets the eye."

Carmel shuddered in his arms. "I'm afraid of him." When Ejan hissed, she gave him a squeeze. "Not like that. I'm afraid that—I'm afraid for my heart, Ejan. When he leaves, I'm afraid my heart will break. I have to protect myself now."

"Ah, child," he said, patting her back. "I fear it may be too late for that."

* * * * *

Carmel worked diligently, checking and double-checking the inventory. They had plenty to trade with and ought to be able to secure enough calcidium to get them into and out of the Tol solar system, where Thadd held her parents hostage. What would it be like to see them after all this time? Would they approve of what she was doing?

The planet, Sere Tol, was the closest to Tol's sun, an unbearably hot environment where most indigenous life forms were failing at an alarming rate, except for the inferno

iguana, Tol's evolutionary equivalent of Earth's mythical dragon. She had to remind the captain to haggle for enough flameproof suits for the search team and any survivors they might run across. In addition, she'd need to have enough replacement suits to compensate for any destroyed by those blasted inferno iguanas. Not only did the damnable reptiles have razor-sharp tails, but they were capable of setting small fires by urinating on their prey. More than one hapless voyager had received severe burns from tangling with the ash-colored reptile.

When the door to the cargo office hissed open, Carmel didn't turn around. "Hey, Guidry, how many of these computerized titanium cryptography units does one ship really need? We've got almost fourteen cases. We could install one in each fighter and keep a few on hand for us, and sell or trade the rest. Seems to me, Fallon could remove the code unique to *Darkshadow* without altering the functioning of the units. What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know, Lt. Bastion. I suppose that would depend on whether or not the code can be permanently removed or if there was still a ghost of that information contained on the hard drive. If there was any chance the information pertaining to *Darkshadow* could be retrieved, I'd have to say, no, we shouldn't sell or trade them."

Darr. Damn it, she should have known he'd come looking for her. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? She took a deep breath. "I guess that's a question for Fallon to answer," she said, keeping her back to him. She touched the yellow citrine stone beneath her collarbone and hailed the man on her internal com.

"Fallon," the young lieutenant answered.

"Hey, Fallon, I was going through our inventory of cryptography units, and I was thinking we could sell or trade the spare units if you could wipe their hard drives of any code unique to *Darkshadow*."

"Sure, I can do that."

"A complete wipe? No ghost sign left behind for enemy consumption?"

"Complete wipe. I can even build in a back door that notifies us if the enemy makes any progress cracking our code."

"Hot fucking shit, Fallon," she said. "You're the man!"

"Just a small matter of programming."

"Well, stop picking your nose and get to work."

"On my way."

With a sigh, Carmel cut the transmission, praying Darr had left the room. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be. Her body tensed when he chuckled.

"Clever girl, but you'll only put me off for so long," he said knowingly. "Best you remember what I told you earlier and see to it the young lieutenant keeps his hands off you."

Carmel stiffened. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do," Darr said, coming up behind her. She jumped when he placed his hands on her waist. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, and you will tell me why you feel it's necessary to run away from me." He nuzzled her neck. "Especially since you spent most of last night riding my cock. Something's changed, Carmel, and I want to know what."

She shrugged. "It's nothing, really. I'm just not used to sharing my quarters with someone. I like my privacy. And I don't particularly care to have restrictions placed on me, either in my piloting technique or my personal life. When I go on shore leave, I don't want some man following me around to enforce a standard to which he wouldn't hold himself."

Carmel swallowed a gasp when Darr swung her around to face him.

His mouth was a grim slash. "So, I'm just some man to you, is that it?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You expected more?"

His eyes narrowed as he glared at her. "I guess I did, sweetheart. I thought I detected an innocence in you. I guess I was wrong. You're just as cold-blooded as every

other woman I've known." He smiled then, calculated and cold. "That changes things, my sweet. I'll give up my claim to your quarters, and we can do away with the exclusivity. You can fuck whomever you wish, my dear, but we're not done by a long shot."

Having spoken his peace, his mouth crashed down over hers in a brutal, breath-stealing kiss. She tried to fight her body's reaction to him but found herself returning his kiss with an equally brutal lust. Fallon would be along any moment, she knew, but she couldn't control the heat shimmering through her body. If they didn't stop soon, Fallon would walk in to see Darr fucking her against the wall. She was struggling to get herself under control when Darr finally broke the kiss. Dazed, Carmel stumbled when he shoved her away. His eyes drilled into her. "No, we're not anywhere near done."

Chapter Ten

Carmel stepped out of the Integrated Bio-Modification Unit and checked her look in the mirror. Her long golden blonde hair was now jet-black with streaks of cobalt blue, her eyes were a deep emerald green, and her breasts were larger, riding high on her chest. She cupped them in her hands, head cocked. What was it that made men so wild about big breasts? From her perspective, they were more an encumbrance than an instrument of pleasure. Her own breasts were not nearly so large, but they were nicely formed and upturned and sensitive enough to bring her to orgasm when played with by a skilled lover. As if on cue, Darr walked into the room.

"I just came to get my..." He paused, looking at her in the mirror as she cupped her altered breasts. "The hair's a nice touch, and I have to say, I like the breasts." He moved closer, really studying her. "And the ass, although, the original isn't lacking in any way."

Carmel held her breath as his hands caressed from the small of her back to her ass. She tried to hide her reaction to his touch, but her body betrayed her as a shiver ran straight through her.

His voice was soft and dark when he spoke. "Let's play a little game, shall we? It's called *how well does Carmel take orders*." He met her aroused gaze in the mirror and stroked the soft inner flesh of her thigh. "Legs shoulder-width apart, Lieutenant."

Carmel swallowed hard but adjusted her stance, glaring mutinously, her eyes never leaving his. No way would she give him the slightest indication of her discomfort—or her arousal.

"Good little soldier," he mocked gently. "Now, play with those lovely big breasts." As she fondled herself, his arms went around her, flicking the jewel in her belly button, tracing the outline of her pubic mound with teasing fingers. "Pinch your nipples, Carmel. Pinch them and give them a good, hard tug."

Carmel twisted her nipples between her fingers, tugging hard enough to lift her breasts. Her nostrils flared at the slight pleasure-pain, and her belly quivered as Darr's fingers slid between her legs.

"Pinch them again," he demanded. When she complied, he slid his finger through her slit. "Mmm, so wet, sweetheart. You're not as immune to my touch as you'd like to believe. Let's test my theory, shall we?" He stepped away from her and raised his shirt over his head. "Stand at attention, Lieutenant, and don't you dare move."

Oh, mother of creation, her pussy juices were leaking onto her thighs! She turned to look at him over her shoulder and was rewarded with a sharp slap on the ass. "What the hell?" she yelped.

"I told you not to move, Lieutenant," Darr barked. "You want to watch, look in the mirror, but keep those eyes forward and your mouth shut."

She knew she should be furious, should be fighting him tooth and nail, but as he moved to stand before her, gloriously naked, that monster cock erect and twitching, all she wanted to do was drop to her knees and take him in her mouth.

"On your knees, Bastion," he ordered. She quickly complied, and he leaned down, fisted a hand in her hair, and put his face close to hers. "You're going to suck my cock

until I tell you to stop." He let her go and straightened. Taking his cock in his hand, he tapped it against her lips. "Open up, sweetheart; that's an order."

Carmel looked at his cock and licked her lips. He hadn't given her the opportunity to go down on him last night, and she took great satisfaction at the hiss of pleasure that escaped him as her tongue swiped across the broad head of his cock to capture a pearl of precum. "Mmm," she murmured before sinking onto his cock like a child with an all-day sucker. She wasn't gentle; she didn't tease. Rather, she took him deep, keeping up a constant, tight suction. Cupping his testicles in one hand, she stroked the delicate tissue of his perineum, eliciting a sexy growl from deep in his chest.

Darr's hands went to her hair. "Yes, baby, that's right. Suck me. That's such a sweet mouth."

Carmel moaned as he thrust deeper into her mouth, hitting the back of her throat. With his next thrust, she relaxed, then swallowed, her throat closing around the head of his cock.

"Goddamn!" he shouted. "You do that again, and I won't be able to hold back."

Carmel released his balls and grabbed his ass, pulling him deeper into her mouth. This time, when she swallowed, he uttered a strangled cry and came in a heated rush. Carmel eased back, taking every drop of his seed, continuing to hold his taut butt in her hands. As he shuddered above her, she released him with a final suckle and sat back on her heels.

Outwardly, she presented the facade of indifference. "Well, Commander, I believe my work here is done," she taunted, rising to her feet. "Be sure to engage the lock on the way out." Inwardly, she desperately wanted him to leave, so she could compose herself before heading to the planet's surface.

Darr laughed as she sidestepped him to reach for her clothes. "Oh, sweetheart, we aren't even close to being done."

She refused to react when he spun her around, pulling her tight against his chest. Good grief, the man had an astounding recovery rate; he was already getting hard

again. He turned so they were facing the mirror again and cupped her enhanced breasts in his hands.

"These are very nice, Carmel, although I must say I prefer yours, but I understand how these might attract a bit more attention from the merc crowd. That is the type of man you go for, isn't it? Big, bad mercenaries with their big, bad enhancements."

Carmel swallowed a moan when he tweaked her breasts. It was just plain cruel that these fake breasts were even more sensitive than her own. *There ought to be a law.* Only there wasn't, and she was forced to endure the agony of pretending his touch didn't drive her wild. One hand slid down her torso to burrow between her legs.

"Watch," Darr's voice rumbled in her ear. "I want you to see what I see when I make you come." His fingers delved into her, and he uttered a dark chuckle. "Dripping wet, love, and you'll be wetter still before it's over."

Carmel gasped as the callused pad of Darr's middle finger lightly stroked the aroused flesh around her clit, enveloping the sensitive bundle of nerves with her slick juices while denying her the pleasure of direct contact. Dip, swirl, dip, swirl, the torment seemed to go on forever. He slid two fingers deep into her cunt, and she cried out, feeling her pussy contract, soaking his hand.

"Do you want my cock, Carmel?"

She shuddered at the velvety thickness of his voice but shook her head. "No!"

He chuckled and pumped her again, grinning when her pussy clenched around his probing fingers. "You're a liar, Carmel, and a bad one at that." His fingers thrust again. "Look at your face, lover, you're so hot you're about to burst into flames."

She looked at her reflection and saw exactly what he saw: eyelids at half-mast, lips parted in anticipation, undulating hips riding his fingers. There was no denying she was a woman so aroused, she was on the verge of an intense orgasm.

"Open your legs, sweetheart. Let me give you what you want."

There was nothing she wanted more right now than the strength to deny him, but her woman's body would not allow it; she parted her legs in an invitation centuries old.

"That's right," Darr crooned. He guided his cock to her opening until the head slid inside. His hand curved back around her hip, and his fingers went back to tormenting her clit. "I'm going to make you howl, Carmel. You're going to come so hard, you'll think the top of your head is going to come off." He thrust hard, giving her his entire length.

"Ah God!" Carmel shouted.

* * * * *

Darr grinned in triumph. "Yeah, baby, it's a religious experience for me too."

He clasped her tighter and drove into her again, thighs flexing as he filled her again and again. When he rotated his hips, screwing his cock deeper into the tight confines of her pussy, she threw her head back, closing her eyes.

"Don't you close your eyes, Carmel," he barked. "Damnit, you will watch while I fuck you. You'll see your face when I make you scream." He drove into her hard. "And when you fuck the next man, you'll remember the look on your face and know that no one else can make you feel the things you feel with me. Open your fucking eyes and see me."

She was sobbing now, her face a mask of pleasure and agony. She knew, damn her, and he'd force her to admit it if it was the last thing he did. He stroked her clit, flicking, pressing, circling, taking her higher until her pussy clamped around his cock and her body began to shudder with release.

"That's it, baby," he whispered, powering through the contractions. "Come for me, Carmel. Come, baby."

"Yeeesssss!" she howled. "Ah God, Darr..."

Darr slammed into her one final time, burying himself to the hilt, holding her tight as she sagged against him, legs trembling with the effort to stand. He held her that way

for a long moment, reveling in the feel of her body against his, the expression of a thoroughly satisfied woman on her face, then gently slid out of her body and guided her to the bed.

He didn't say a word as he dressed. Damned if he would, when she refused to even look at him. He stuffed his feet in his boots and walked stiffly to the door and paused. "Watch yourself down there, Carmel. Those damned mercs are nothing to play with. They so much as get a sniff of who you are, and your rebellion is over before it gets started."

Chapter Eleven

Carmel was attaching the last of her jeweled claws in her cobalt braids when the chime on her door *pinged*.

"It's me," Melia called.

"Open door," Carmel said, and the door slid open.

"Hey, I saw your gorgeous commander headed for the flight bay. He looked pissed as hell."

Carmel shrugged. "Well, he'll just have to get over it, won't he?"

Melia laughed merrily. "Trouble in paradise already?"

Carmel snorted. "Paradise, my ass. He just wants to control me. Same as every other man I've run across."

"Well, fuck him, then."

"You got that right," she said, buckling a black leather vest over her cobalt blue midriff shirt. Crossing to a heavy-duty trunk, she reached inside for her weapons belt, strapping it on her hips. She buckled the holsters to her thighs and secured her neuro-pistols. For good measure, she tucked a beam knife into one boot and a double-bladed titanium dagger to her belt. The heavy leather cuff buckled around her wrist also held a

deadly switchblade disguised as a tube of lip dye. She flipped the lid down and locked the trunk, then turned and grinned at Melia. "Let's go shake up some mercs."

Melia whistled. "Lieutenant, you look fierce." Carmel dipped into an elegant curtsy that had Melia laughing. "Always the lady. And your ass looks great in those cargo pants that are tucked into those very dangerous boots. I have got to get me a pair of those boots. I have a serious buckle fetish when it comes to footwear."

"Well, if Sidotha is still running that little shop, we'll stop and get you a pair." She studied her friend's lace-up leather pants and tiny leather halter top. "You look pretty hot yourself, my friend. I love the red hair. We both ought to be good for a wheedle or two."

"Right you are. Let's get to it. The whole flight crew is waiting on us. I'll ride with you."

"I'd say I'd race you there, but I can't run with these boobs." She ran anyway, and they arrived at the flight bay breathless and laughing.

"Gentlemen," Melia trilled as they strode to Carmel's flyer, "behold our magnificence and fear us."

Their fellow pilots broke out in laughter, and everyone headed for their respective flyers. Carmel studiously avoided eye contact with Darr.

"Where are we going first?" Melia asked as they strapped themselves into their flight harnesses.

"Why save the worst for last? Let's head straight for the Bloody Club."

Melia hooted with laughter. "Feeling a little combative, are we?"

"More than a little. You ready?"

"Honey, I was born ready."

* * * * *

The Bloody Club stood at the end of a dark, cobbled street that had probably been quaint at one time but was now clogged with trash and broken bottles. The smell of stale beer and vomit hung on the cool evening air. The door to the tavern stood propped open with an old-fashioned spittoon that looked like it hadn't been emptied in this lifetime. *Lovely.*

Boisterous laughter and the squeals of serving women boomed from the doorway, the noise dying as they crossed the threshold. Holding their heads high, the two women made their way to the bar.

Melia pulled a credit from her pants pocket and tapped it on the bar. "Two bottles of Cosmic Ale," she told the barkeep.

He gave the two women the once-over and sneered. "We don't serve women here," he said, voice booming.

Carmel reached out and snatched the front of his shirt, dragging him close. "That's good to hear," she announced to all listening. "'Cause we don't eat 'em." She reached for her dagger with her free hand and spun it around, burying the tip in the wooden counter between his fingers. "Now, about those drinks. Unopened, if you please."

The scruffy barkeep glared but evidently cared enough about his life to serve two women after all. Melia tossed him the credit, and Carmel caught it in the air, forcing the surly lout to take it from her hand. "Keep the change, honey. Buy yourself a new shirt before you embarrass your mama," she said, snagging the unopened bottles. Turning, she scanned the room.

There were a dozen or more men scattered about, some in groups, others engaged in solitary activities. Center stage, a too-pretty dandy lounged in his chair, swirling wine in a metal cup. He had longish black hair and a full, petulant mouth that spoke of a life of ease and debauchery. He wore a rich burgundy frock coat heavily embroidered with gold thread. His shirt was snowy white, with a ruffle at the front and cuffs. Hadn't anyone told him that style had died out in eighteenth-century England, in an entirely different galaxy?

Behind the dandy, at the end of the bar, a tall, slender man with a mane of ebony hair perused the fop with avaricious eyes. Bloodshot eyes. Whiter-than-white skin. Obviously a vamp, but which species she couldn't say. Whatever he was, he had no interest in females.

At the table next to the fancy gentleman, two men sat playing a hand of cards. One was dressed in military garb, but not of UIF make. The other, wearing a scruffy, tall hat, was dressed in worn leather and a dingy-fabric shirt that had seen better days. He leered, showing off teeth that hadn't been brushed in some time. *As if I'd ever kiss that.*

Ah, now there was a likely candidate. Sprawled in a chair, a long-legged man in a brown cloak studied them closely, sexual interest lighting his eyes. He cut a glance toward a table by the massive stone fireplace. Carmel was relieved to see he was clean, with his facial hair neatly trimmed.

Melia noticed him too, jerked her head in the general direction, and set off across the room at a slow saunter, letting the male occupants get a good look at her. Carmel grinned, plucked her dagger from the bar, and followed at a similar pace.

Carmel dragged a chair around, placing it next to Melia's, so both of their backs were against the wall. She uttered an exaggerated sigh as she took her seat, hooking a heavy stool with the toe of her boot to drag it closer. Leaning back, she propped up her feet, stuck her dagger into the tabletop, and took a sip of ale.

"Which one and how long?" she asked Melia as the noise of the tavern resumed.

Melia studied the crowd. "Dude in the brown cloak, hood covering his hair. He's looking at us like we're candy." She met the merc's eyes, then moved on. "Oooh, and the way he's looking at you, I do believe he goes for women with blue braids in their hair."

A bark of laughter escaped Carmel as the man shoved the hood of his cloak from his head. He was a handsome brute closer up, she'd give him that. Chin-length brown hair tucked behind his ears, neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, he was dressed in

rustic browns and greens, with a thick leather strap across his broad chest and the hilt of a sword snugged in the scabbard over his left shoulder.

"I have to admit I like the metal knee guards attached to his boots. I may have to get myself a pair of those for the effect alone." She glanced around the room. "Vamp at the end of the bar looks hungry, but he appears to fancy the dandy in the corner over there." The man in the cloak stood up. "Well, here comes your future ex-husband, Lieutenant. Must be all that beautiful red hair, darling."

Melia gave her a fuck-you look and shoved a stool at their admirer when he stopped beside the table. "Take a load off, ranger."

A slight curve of the lips was the only indication he gave that Melia had guessed rightly. This one had recruitment potential. "You ladies took a risk coming here unescorted."

Melia laughed and slapped Carmel's knee. "We're not alone, we're not exactly ladies, and we've got each other"—she glanced at the lethal dagger stuck into the wooden table—"and a big fucking knife. So, what's your story?"

He took the offered seat. "I would like to know your stories first, my lady," said with courtly demeanor. "I judge by your manner of dress that you are not under the influence of the commandant. Such dress and deportment would find you assigned to a reeducation facility."

Carmel snorted and crossed her legs at the ankle. "Well, they're certainly welcome to try. The name's Osirri. My friend is Calista. And you are?"

"Na'ram." His gaze was frankly admiring, if a bit suspicious. "Why do you take such chances with your lives, coming to this place?"

Carmel took a sip of her ale, watching as he kept his eyes on her mouth. He swallowed as she licked her lips and set her bottle on the table. "Well, I'll tell you, Na'ram. This seemed like the most likely place to garner some information about Thadd's movements in this sector, and the least likely place to find his informants." She

let her gaze move toward the dandy sitting across the room. "Except maybe for him. He has the look of a spy about him."

Na'ram laughed. "The lady is a good judge of people. That one has been following me around since the sun went down. He had best watch his step, though, for he's caught the attention of that Druem vampire." When Carmel raised an eyebrow, he gave her a knowing smile. "The Druem are not known for their restraint in matters of nutrition or carnality."

Melia laughed. "And does this foppish spy know the vamp has him in his sights?"

"Indeed he does not, lady. I met the Druem at the Troll's Head and directed him here. What better way to rid myself of an inept UIF spy?"

Carmel and Melia laughed, clinking their bottles together. "Necessity is ever the mother of invention," Carmel said with an approving nod.

"So it is. However, all may not bode well for you or your friend if the spy gets word to the UIF that there are women, not registered as male companions, frequenting the less-reputable establishments on this outpost."

Carmel scowled. "That fat bastard only wants to legislate the behavior of women because he can't get one of his own." She cut a glance to Melia, not failing to notice as her friend licked her lips and gave the ranger a speculative look. "Still, all things considered, we might want to consider securing accommodations for the night. I wonder if the rooms above bear any resemblance to cleanliness."

"They are not bad, lady. The sheets are scratchy, but there are no bugs in the mattresses and the sound does not penetrate. The owner had each room soundproofed, and they're regularly swept for listening devices."

"Sounds like someone's sympathetic to the rebellion," Melia commented.

Na'ram gave a terse nod. "The owner's son was murdered when a UIF prowler attacked his supply ship. They killed all the men on the crew and took the women to reeducation camps." He shook his head in disgust. "These are grim times."

"Yes, they are. Tell me, sir, has Thadd gotten much of a foothold in this sector?"

"He has tried, but people here are not as docile as those on more-civilized planets. He sends in his spies, but few of them live to tell of their time here. Fewer and fewer arrive these days. We prefer it that way."

"Then you are a Tharkan?" Carmel asked.

"I am, lady, although I am not often here. My sire took his pleasure with my mother and went on his way. He is dead now, but I hear I have a brother somewhere. And from where do you hail?"

"From here and there, my friend. I call no one place home and never have."

"Then you are a mercenary?"

Carmel smiled. "I am many things, Na'ram, none of which I choose to discuss in so public a venue."

Na'ram smiled seductively. "Then might I suggest you secure lodgings for the night so we can all speak more...privately?"

"Capital idea." She turned to Melia. "I'm going to bully the bartender into renting us a room. You hadn't planned on returning tonight, had you?"

Melia fastened her gaze on both Carmel and Na'ram, smiling. "You couldn't make me leave now if you held a neuro-pistol to my head."

Na'ram stood with Carmel. "I will accompany you," he said, standing aside for her. "In case the bartender gives you any trouble."

"My hero," Carmel muttered under her breath, but she didn't protest when he followed. Chances were the handsome merc had information she needed, and if it meant stroking his male ego by allowing him to smooth the way for her, she was happy to let him.

Chapter Twelve

As the door closed behind them, Carmel found herself enveloped in Na'ram's arms. With a sexy laugh, she spun him around and pushed him up against the door. He chuckled, letting the pad of his index finger trace the tiny jewels embedded beneath her collarbone as he drew Melia to his side.

"You have quite a few enhancements, pet," he purred. "You must be a good mercenary to be able to afford such luxuries."

She smiled seductively. "I get by. How about you? Any particular enhancements we should know about?"

He lifted the heavy strap from over his shoulder and propped his sword against the wall. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he teased, pulling his shirt over his head.

His chest was broad and nicely muscled, with a liberal sprinkling of hair extending from nipple to nipple before disappearing in a thin line beneath the waist of his breeches.

"Very nice," Carmel said appreciatively.

"Mmm, better than nice, darling," Melia purred. "Give credit where credit's due."

Carmel backed away, unbuckling her vest, hooking it over the post on the footboard of the high bed. The boots came next, and she watched through hooded eyes as Melia helped Na'ram remove his knee armor, then his boots.

"You are exquisite," he told her, reaching for her as Melia began to undress.

Mother of creation, was this really happening? The three of them in one bed? Would Melia expect...?

Carmel quivered as his mouth took hers, his tongue boldly possessing her. Relief washed through her when she realized she was capable of responding to a man who wasn't Darr. *I'm safe*. Still, the fact that his kisses aroused her went a long way toward convincing her she'd dodged a very dangerous situation with the dominant commander. Why not fuck the handsome man holding her in his arms? She kissed him back, cursing softly when he broke the kiss to allow Melia to lift her shirt over her head.

"Magnificent," he growled, bending her over his arm to nuzzle her breast. A brief image of Darr doing the same thing flashed in her head, but the sensual image evaporated when Melia's mouth closed over one of her nipples.

Ohgod, ohgod. Two mouths suckled her, and she moaned as Melia's hand slid inside the waist of her breeches to curve around one cheek of her ass. Na'ram followed her lead, and the pants began to slide down past her hips. As insane as she told herself the situation was, she wanted this, wanted her friend and this gorgeous stranger to fuck her until all thoughts of Darr Handel were erased from her mind.

When Melia knelt to ease Carmel's breeches down past her knees, Carmel reached out and ran her finger across the jewels corresponding to Na'ram's enhancements. "What's this blue one?"

"Strength and stamina," he replied, chuckling.

"Oh, goody," Carmel purred, licking her lips. She kicked the troublesome pants away and shuddered as one of Melia's fingers slid between her wet slit. She stifled a groan and touched the red jewel. "And this one?"

"Internal database," he said, then once more closed his lips over a nipple.

"Ah...God," she moaned, grasping the side of his neck. When he suckled again, she tightened her grip, triggering the tiny needle in her ring.

Na'ram's eyes widened briefly. "Shit," he cursed as he immediately sagged against her.

The two women levered the big man onto the bed. "Sorry about that, lover," she said to the unconscious man. "You won't be out long, and then we can finish what we started."

Melia touched her arm. "Will we finish what we started, Carmel? Because I have to tell you, I'm dying to have a taste of you. If it's not going to happen, let me know now, so I can make arrangements for another room."

Carmel ignored the twinge of guilt she felt at the thought of taking Melia and Na'ram to her bed. It was exotic and forbidden, and she wanted it. Hadn't she always wondered what it would be like to make love with Melia? And why shouldn't she? After all, Darr had released her from her promise.

"Yes, we're definitely going to finish it," she said, then wrapped her hand around Melia's neck to draw her in for a quick kiss. "But let's get what we need from our friend here, first."

Melia laughed softly. "You always were a business-first kind of girl."

Grabbing her vest, Carmel retrieved a neural signal dock, unscrewed the red jewel, and plugged the device into the exposed port. It took only seconds to access the information she was looking for and to learn he'd been telling the truth. She sighed with relief, undocked, and recapped the port.

* * * * *

Carmel straddled the young mercenary and began working the buttons of his breeches. Reaching inside, she caressed his cock, which immediately sprang to life. "Oh, hell yes. Our boy here has quite the package. I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Melia grinned. "Mmm, indeed he does. I wouldn't mind getting some of that myself. But I have to ask the obvious question: what about Darr?"

"Well, he'll just have to accept it, won't he? Besides, he told me I could fuck whomever I want, and I want you and this young stud."

"A woman after my own heart." Melia climbed on the bed next to Na'ram and leaned in for a kiss.

Carmel didn't know what to expect. After all, she'd never actually kissed a woman before tonight—at least not the way she'd kiss a lover. She felt an incredible head rush as her blood pressure spiked, and then her body was suffused with that same sense of heat she experienced when becoming aroused.

Melia's lips were incredibly soft as they pressed against hers, her tongue gently probing for entrance. Carmel opened for her, hesitantly at first; then her curiosity got the better of her and she leaned into the kiss, her tongue sliding against Melia's in a long, slow, deep kiss.

They'd no sooner broken the kiss than she found herself on her back with two hundred pounds of pissed-off man pressing against her. His hand moved to her throat, squeezing lightly.

"Hey, easy, big guy," Melia said, reaching for him, but he easily shoved her back.

Hard silvery gray eyes glared at her. "Tell me why I shouldn't snap this pretty neck, mercenary bitch. You and your friend."

"Because you want to fuck us?" Carmel's eyes widened innocently. Good grief, he possessed the same intense gaze as Darr—filled with anger and lust.

Na'ram snorted. "I could fuck you both just as easily if you were dead."

He looked shocked when she had the audacity to laugh. "Yeah, but it wouldn't be nearly as much fun."

She could tell he was trying not to be amused by her impudence. "Who the fuck are you?" His arm shot out and caught Melia by the hair, dragging her down on the bed. "What do you want?"

Carmel reached up to remove his hand from her throat. "We'll get to that in a minute, but first, let me say that we mean you no harm. We merely needed to be sure you weren't one of the commandant's spies."

He frowned. "You're not a very good judge of character if you thought that was even a possibility."

Carmel let her features go soft and sexy. The information she'd accessed from his internal database required she handle him carefully. "On the contrary, I'm a very good judge of character, Na'ram Handel." She smiled and slid her hands inside his sagging breeches. "But first..."

She knew the second he'd decided to forgive her, because he smiled and lifted his weight off her. He hooked his hands beneath her armpits and hauled her up on the bed. He went to his knees and arranged her the way he wanted her, spreading her as wide as she could go. He ran his finger through her slit and smiled at Melia. "Care to join me in a little snack?"

"Oh yeah," Melia answered, and then they were on her.

Carmel's pussy clenched as Melia and Na'ram stretched out on either side of her, each taking a leg in hand. Hot, moist lips grazed the soft flesh of her inner thighs. She could feel her intense arousal trickle from her cunt, and every now and then, one of them would pause to capture the drops on their tongues before continuing to torment her.

A soft hand raised her leg to allow for the placement of a damp kiss behind her knee. Teasing fingers drew little designs on her thigh, causing her to shudder as her two lovers leisurely traced a path toward her throbbing pussy.

"Oh please," Carmel gasped. "Someone touch my pussy. I can't —"

"You can, and you will," Na'ram growled. "I intend to punish you for your deceit, and when we're done with you, your little friend is next." His tongue licked the crease of her leg. "I intend to fuck you both all night long, and those enhancements you asked me about will allow me to do just that. Both of these sweet little pussies will be well used before this night is over. Now, get ready to scream, pet."

Carmel cried out as her legs were ruthlessly shoved back toward her chest. She hooked her forearms behind her knees and held herself open for her lovers. Two tongues attacked her cunt with a ferocity comparable only to Darr's handling of her. Gasping for breath, she peered between her spread legs to see Melia's fingers pull back the hood of her clit, exposing her completely.

"Fuck her with your fingers," Melia ordered Na'ram, then climbed to her knees.

"Ah God!" Carmel howled as Melia took her clit between her lips. The bed dipped as Na'ram stretched out beside her, drawing hard on one nipple. "Please, oh please, fuck my pussy. Please, Na'ram!"

Fingers teased her opening, circling, stroking, and teasing the tiny rosebud of her ass before finally making a brief foray into her tormented cunt.

"Is this what you want, little mercenary?" Na'ram demanded. "You want my fingers to fuck you while your little friend sucks you?"

"Yes!" He gave her one finger, and she gasped. "More! I need more!"

"You heard what she said, Red. She needs more. Let's give her more."

"You want more, baby?" Melia purred. "We're going to give you all you can take." Slender fingers glided between Carmel's swollen cunt lips to spread her natural lubricant around her ass. "I'm gonna fuck your sweet little ass with my fingers, baby. We're gonna make you come so hard, honey. So hard."

Carmel screamed as a long, slim finger slid into her ass and began to pump.

Carmel's head whipped back and forth as her body bucked and heaved. It was too much and not enough. Thick, blunt-tipped fingers fucked deep inside her pussy as

Melia worked yet another finger into her ass. They set a rhythm, probing deep and slow, keeping her on the edge of orgasm until she was sobbing for release.

"I think we should put her out of her misery," Melia said.

"Yes, yes, please," Carmel begged.

Na'ram laughed softly and eased himself back into place between her legs. "I suppose we should. I want her conscious when I stuff her full of my cock."

Carmel shrieked as the two sets of fingers increased their pace, fucking fast and hard, but it was when both Melia's and Na'ram's tongues began to lash at her clit that she began to howl like a madwoman.

"Oooh... I'm going to come... Ah... Fuuuck me!"

"Come first; then I'll fuck you," Na'ram growled against her quivering pussy.

"Yes yes yes," she screamed. Her body arched like a bow as their fingers pounded her. She closed her eyes, threw back her head, and came, screaming at the top of her lungs.

She barely had time to recover before Na'ram got up, flipped her onto her belly, hauled her to her knees on the edge of the bed, and shoved his cock balls-deep with a single thrust. He didn't pause but kept on pumping, fucking her with slow, deep thrusts. "Tell me when you're ready to come again, and I'll fuck you hard and fast, little merc. Make you scream again."

Just like Darr. Damn the man. Would he never get out of her head? He'd told her she'd compare every man to him and damned if she wasn't.

"Tight," he rasped. "Hot. Come again, Osirri. Come with me."

"Oh God... Hard. I'm coming...Oh. My. God!"

His fingers bit into her flesh as he grasped her hips, pumping faster and deeper; his cock riding high and hard inside her. As his final strokes rasped against her G-spot, she exploded, her pussy contracting, milking him. He added his shouts to hers and buried himself to the hilt.

He managed to stay on his feet for a moment, then pulled out and collapsed onto the bed beside her. "Next time, I'll make love to you properly," he rasped. "But this time you pissed me off."

Carmel laughed. "If that's how you fuck when you're pissed, remind me to keep you just a little bit angry all the time."

He laughed and leaned over her to kiss Melia. "You're next, as soon as I get some nourishment."

Carmel watched as Melia kissed him back, then she leaned down to kiss her as well.

"You okay? Not too weird for you?" Melia asked.

"Not weird at all."

Na'ram gave them a startled look. "This was your first time?"

Melia shrugged. "Her first time. I enjoy a threesome every now and again."

Carmel closed her eyes when Na'ram pressed a kiss to her forehead, forcing herself to relax. Why, when she had a sexy, vibrant woman and a handsome, virile man next to her, were her thoughts of the overbearing man who'd touched her so profoundly? She didn't want to have feelings for Darr Handel, damn it. Caring too deeply only made the pain of loss worse when a loved one was taken from you. She snuggled against Na'ram, sighing as Melia spooned around her from behind. She'd rid herself of her obsessive thoughts if it was the last thing she did. Even if it meant fucking a hundred different people.

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Carmel woke to someone knocking on the door. "Wake, lady. I went below to order food, and it has arrived. It's time we share our secrets."

Carmel stretched languorously. She was beginning to develop a real affinity for men with big cocks, as well as for the sex act itself. "Mmm," she murmured, rolling to

her feet. "Good. I'm starved, and we have much to discuss." She pulled the sheets up over herself and a sleeping Melia.

Na'ram opened the door and admitted the serving woman. He'd ordered a veritable feast of roasted poultry, vegetables, thick, crusty bread, a big wedge of cheese, and fresh fruit. Expensive. Two sealed bottles of wine sat on the huge tray. He gave the serving wench a couple of credits and hurried her out of the room.

Carmel dug into the deep pockets of her vest and pulled out a soni-mag sweeper and scanned the room for listening devices. Satisfied there were none, she rolled out of bed, nude, and reached for a cup of wine and settled back in a chair.

"We're not who you think we are," she started out.

Na'ram snorted. "I believe we're past that." He touched the spot on his neck where her ring had pricked him.

"Yes, well, I'll apologize for that necessary deception, but we had to be sure you weren't a UIF spy, like your friend the dandy." She grinned. "Whatever happened to him, by the way?"

Na'ram laughed. "Why, he's in a room down the hall getting drained while the Druem stretches his ass. And judging from the moaning and screaming I heard, I'd say he's rather enjoying the experience."

Carmel snickered in spite of herself. "Well, that was ungenerous of me."

Melia woke and inhaled deeply. "Do I smell food?"

Carmel gave her a smile and gestured to the table. "You do, sleepyhead, and I was just about to explain to Na'ram what we're doing here."

Melia climbed out of bed and took a seat at the table, unselfconscious with her nudity.

Carmel took a deep breath and plunged in. "We're here looking for intelligence as to UIF troop movements and for recruits for the rebellion. We have ships and men and

will be meeting at a rendezvous point in the Tol sector in a few days' time. Will you join us?"

"The Tol sector?" Na'ram said, breathless. "You go in search of Jiru and Nona Bastion?"

"We do," Carmel said, taking a gulp of wine. She was so near to her parents.

"We had heard they still lived, but hadn't dared to hope an attempt would be made at rescue." He paused for a moment, stroking his goatee thoughtfully. "Although if it's to be done, now would be a good time. UIF ships just passed through after delivering supplies to Sere Tol. Tol's sun rides low beneath the equator. A man dressed in protective gear could get in and out if he knew where to look."

"As we speak, my captain is receiving a cargo of fire-protection suits along with a large supply of fresh water and food for the survivors. We're going in after them. And we know where to look. Will you join us?"

Na'ram nodded. "You've got yourself a rebel soldier, ladies."

Melia cut in. "Very good." She grabbed a hunk of bread from the table and broke off a piece. "Do you have a flyer?"

Na'ram nodded as he chewed on a piece of poultry. "I do. A medium tonnage freighter with a docking port for a couple of small warpflyers." He looked at Melia and grinned. "And I have cargo, lady. Weapons. Boltbeamers, thirty mountable, light-service pulse cannons, and one very nasty sonic net that will neutralize just about any shield made. They are at your disposal."

"Sweet," Melia purred. "You really are my hero." She squealed delightedly when he dragged her onto his lap and kissed her soundly. "Now, tell me your real name, love, so I can shout it when I come inside that hot pussy."

Carmel nearly choked on her wine. "Good God, again?"

"I can wait until you've nourished yourselves, but I was serious when I said I intended to fuck you both all night long." He piled food on a wooden trencher and

shoved it at Carmel. "Fill up, pet. I want to watch you eat your friend's pussy while I fuck you again."

"Hey, what about me?" Melia pouted. "I like a hard dick too."

Chapter Thirteen

Morning at the Bloody Club was quiet, except for the room Carmel was sharing with Melia and Na'ram. Mother creator, they were at it again. She woke to find Melia watching her, one leg thrown back over Na'ram's hip as he slowly fucked her from behind. Hmmm. She untangled herself from the sheet to join in the fun.

"Wait," Melia gasped. "If you're going to do what I think you're going to do, turn around and face me, let me rest my head on your thigh so I can eat your pussy too."

"Yes," Na'ram rasped. "Do it."

Carmel stretched out on her side and swiped at Melia's open pussy with her tongue, flicking her clit gently. "Easy, baby," she whispered. "Don't come too soon."

Melia groaned as Carmel took her time, laving her clit, then flicking at Na'ram's cock as it shuttled back and forth inside her friend. God, it was hot, watching that big cock fuck Melia while she took her time tormenting her friend's clit. Melia rewarded for her impudence with a sharp slap on her inner thigh.

"Keep that leg up and open, Carmel," Melia scolded.

Carmel hissed as Melia's fingers played in her pussy. "Put them inside me," she demanded and moaned when two slim fingers slid deep. "Oh yeah, that's good." She turned her attention back to Melia's pussy and sucked her clit into her mouth.

It was fortunate the rooms were soundproofed, because Carmel was sure it would have sounded as though someone was being murdered in their room. Melia's fingers worked vigorously as her tongue stabbed at Carmel's clit. Carmel fed on Melia as Na'ram increased his pace, beginning to fuck Melia harder. Melia, in turn, began to nurse Carmel's clit as her fingers rammed deep. With a howl, Carmel came, shuddering as Melia lapped the cream from her. She increased the pressure on Melia's clit, and Melia came with a scream, with Na'ram following seconds later. The three of them lay stunned for several moments, until the serving wench knocked at the door to announce breakfast.

"Leave it by the door," Na'ram gasped, and the three of them dissolved into laughter. Neither of them had the strength to get up and answer the door.

Carmel sighed. "This is probably the most fun I've ever had where sex was involved. I'm going to hate to see it come to an end." Unfortunately, it must. There was the mission and Darr to deal with.

Darr. What was she supposed to do about him? He constantly intruded on her thoughts. Here she was, having spent an intensely erotic night with Melia and Na'ram, and she was worrying about Darr's feelings. What did she have to feel guilty about? He'd released her from the exclusivity condition for his help, hadn't he? And she had no doubt he'd passed the night with some willing serving girl. She didn't figure him as the type to pass up free pussy when it was tossed in his face. Still, he'd seemed so disappointed in her...

Tears welled in her eyes as she inhaled a shuddery breath. She didn't want to disappoint him, really she didn't, but she couldn't allow him to take over her life. He would, if she let him. He'd seduce her into loving him with his skillful hands and sweet words. She couldn't let that happen. She wouldn't! Anyway, it was too late to worry about it now; the deed was done. She'd slept with another man and a woman. It was water under the bridge. Still, she'd have to talk to both men. No way around that bit of unpleasantness.

"It can last as long as we wish," Na'ram told her, running his hand up her arm. "We are all adults."

Carmel smiled. "I wish it could," she said regretfully. "Unfortunately, we have to rendezvous with the rest of the team soon." She grimaced, pulling on last night's clothes.

Melia rolled out of bed and joined her. "Do you have any last-minute arrangements you need to make? Any family you need to notify that you'll be leaving the sector for an unknown period of time?"

Na'ram sighed and got up to retrieve breakfast. "You're all business, I see." He tugged on his breeches and stuffed his feet into his boots. "There's no one I need to consult. My mother is long dead, and I have no particular romantic entanglements. No one will miss me."

Carmel moved to the bed and sat beside him, cupping his cheek. "I would miss you," she said softly, then kissed him. "Luckily, I won't have to because we'll be on board the same ship." She lowered her eyes and took a deep breath. "Having said that, you should know there is a man. We both have men in our lives, although I can only speak for myself. I... We've been intimate on a number of occasions. I don't know how he'll react when he finds out about..." She gestured to him, then herself and Melia.

This was more awkward than she'd thought it would be, because she realized she very much liked the young ranger. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt him. Or Melia, although Melia likely knew the score. Truth be told, she didn't want to hurt Darr either. She gave herself a mental shake. The whole business between men and women was more complicated than she'd ever imagined, and she wasn't sure it was worth all the trouble. Darr, Na'ram. Would she be forced to choose between them, and if she was, which would she choose? The answer came to her immediately. She'd choose Darr, of course, but she intended to avoid the necessity of making any choice at all. The best thing to do was just keep to herself. Damn men, anyway!

Na'ram touched her cheek, then Melia's. "I didn't expect you'd be completely unattached, pet. Women as beautiful as the two of you were bound to have men panting after you." He tucked a cobalt braid behind her ear. "If you choose to spend time with me, he'll just have to accept it."

"And on that note, I'm heading for the lav," Melia said.

Carmel nodded, taking his hand in hers. "Yeah, well, you may change your mind. There's something else. I... It may mean nothing, but this man shares your last name. He could very well be your long-lost brother."

He stiffened. "How can that be? Are you certain?"

"No, not at all certain. But you do share the same name. We could easily do a DNA scan when we get on board. His father was military. He could have stopped here and met your mother. I don't really know, but I thought you should know the possibility exists. His name is Darr Handel. He was UIF, one of the commandant's favorites until he began to question Thadd's tactics. He was in prison, awaiting crucifixion, until I recruited him and broke him out."

"Time will tell, I suppose," Na'ram said thoughtfully. "Do you love him?"

She started to protest that she most certainly did not love Darr Handel, but she knew she felt something for him, and there was no sense in denying it. "I don't know. There are things you don't know about me. Things I can't tell you until we're safely aboard my ship."

* * * * *

The rendezvous site was a mile out of town, and the three of them chatted amiably as they walked. Carmel didn't want to speculate on what Darr's reaction might be to seeing her with another man, nor to the possibility that Na'ram might be related to him. She couldn't really say why she thought there was a connection. It was a big coincidence in a big universe. The odds were against it, but she couldn't shake the feeling. There was the unusual eye color, a silvery gray, that spoke to genetics, not to

mention the intensity of expression. Only their hair and relative size were different, and Na'ram was still a large man. She took a deep breath when they reached the small docking station. Darr was there, along with Ejan and several others, one of them a decidedly beautiful woman. She cut a look at Melia and saw her friend's expression of concern. She gave her a slight head shake and plastered a smile on her face.

"Captain," she said, then nodded at Darr. She nearly flinched at the intensity on his face. "Commander. Meet Na'ram. He's anxious to join with us and comes bearing gifts." She gestured to each man as she made the introductions. "This is Captain Ejan Zawa and Commander Darr Handel." She met Darr's eyes. "Commander, may I have a moment in private?"

His gaze burned her as he nodded politely. "Of course, Lieutenant."

They stepped away, and Darr grabbed her upper arm in a tight grasp. "Tell me, Carmel. Did you fuck him?"

She gritted her teeth. "You're hurting me, Commander. And what I did or did not do while on shore leave is none of your concern."

His smile was more of a snarling grimace. "Oh, but that's where you're wrong, Carmel, as you'll soon learn." He took a deep breath. "Shit, you smell like sex. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

She blew out a breath and closed her eyes for a moment. "To your knowledge, did your father ever patrol this sector?"

He gritted his teeth. "Of course he did. He was with exploratory services long before Thadd. Why?"

Carmel cleared her throat. "Because I think Na'ram may be...related...to you. He has the same uncommon eye color, and his last name is Handel."

Darr stared at her, dumbstruck for a long moment, then turned to look at the younger man who stood watching intensely, obviously waiting to jump to Carmel's defense. "Holy mother..." He narrowed his eyes. "There is a resemblance..."

Carmel peeled his fingers from her arm. "How would you feel, if he was?"

He scrubbed his hands over his face. "I... This is unexpected, but yes, it would be nice to know there was someone, some family left."

"Then let's get aboard and do a DNA. He...he's been alone for a long time, and I think it would mean a lot to him as well."

Darr's eyes narrowed. "So, you did give yourself to him." He leaned down, whispering. "Tell me, Carmel. Did you think of me when he was fucking you?"

Her chin automatically jerked up a notch. "Not for a second."

His smile was supremely predatory. "Liar," he said softly. "But we'll get into that—in depth—at a later time. Right now, we need to get our new recruits back to the ship. How do you like mine? Pretty little thing, isn't she?"

"Fuck you, Commander," she gritted out between clenched jaws.

He traced the length of her nose with his index finger. "Count on it, love."

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Darr's expression was grim as they approached their respective vehicles. *Damn her stubborn hide!* He knew good and well she had feelings for him, yet she chose to deny him. Did she seriously believe her fucking another man wasn't his business? She'd come sobbing, screaming his name as he'd filled her with his flesh. By God, he would not allow her to forget that. And yet he was torn, seeing the expression on Na'ram's face. Was the young man really his brother? And if he was, could he deny him the right to pursue the woman Darr thought of as his own? He was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. He took a deep breath and smiled at the young man, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I'd like to speak with you after we board *Darkshadow*," he said. "I'm told we may have a relative in common." He searched Na'ram's face for a clue as to what the younger man might think. "I would welcome the connection, should it prove out."

Na'ram nodded. "As would I," he said, then cast a look at Carmel as she climbed into her flyer. "That is not all we have to discuss, I think."

Darr chuckled. "I agree. She is a handful, my friend. One any man would have a challenge handling."

Na'ram laughed. "Perhaps. But I would venture to guess two men might be able to handle her — if they worked in concert."

A bark of laughter escaped Darr. "You could be right, my young friend. Could be that's just what she needs. Has she told you who she really is yet?"

"No, she hasn't."

"Well, it will make for some interesting conversation while we wait for our DNA results."

"I do not doubt it, Commander." He stared at Carmel, who waited patiently at the helm. "Calista is flying my craft so I can accompany Osirri. We'll talk again soon."

"Count on it," Darr said quietly, watching as the man who might be his brother strode toward the woman he loved. He shook his head. He must be insane.

Chapter Fourteen

The time it took to reach the *Darkshadow* was minimal, and Carmel sighed as the tethering device attached to the underside of her little craft. All they had to do was wait for the flight bay to repressurize.

"So, now will you tell me why you go by an assumed name?" Na'ram asked, unbuckling his harness.

"When I was nine years old, my family's ship was attacked by Thadd's forces. My parents put me into an escape pod and jettisoned the craft into space. Before the cryosleep program took me, I watched the retrieval claw take their pods. Many months later, Ejan and the *Darkshadow* found me floating in space and brought me aboard. This ship has been my home, and her crew my family, for ten years."

Na'ram's eyes widened. "We never believed the rumors were true," he said, taking her hand. "We thought the stories of you being part of the rebellion were told to boost recruitment. It is true, Carmel Bastion lives and fights against the despot, Thadd. Lady, you honor me."

Great, bloody stars! She hated the awestruck looks on people's faces when they learned her identity. It was downright embarrassing.

"That's a load of shit, Na'ram. I'm no different from any other soldier in the rebellion, and that's the way I expect to be treated. I was raised on this ship, taught to be a fighter pilot—and a damned good one, by the way—but I do not expect, nor do I wish to be treated any differently." She softened her expression at his distressed look. "Look, it's always a shock when people find out, but I see myself as a soldier. I was raised by a bunch of men, and that's how they treat me, like one of the guys."

His eyes darkened, and his smile turned sensual. "I'm sorry, pet, but I'll never think of you as one of the guys. Not after last night. And just so you know, I won't back off just because Darr Handel thinks of you as his—brother or not."

Carmel laughed. "Somehow, I didn't expect you would." She turned serious. "But you should know I have no resistance where he's concerned. If he continues to want me, you'll have to accept that I'll share his bed as well as yours." Before he could respond, the alarm sounded to indicate the flight bay was fully pressurized. She pressed the switch to open the door and climbed out. "Come on. Let's get you settled in. We can meet later on the recreation deck, and I'll introduce you around."

As they walked up to join the few pilots who came out to greet them, Carmel nudged Na'ram. "Melia's bragging again."

"Yeah, the captain and the commander may have brought back more recruits than we did, but our guy came with ships—a medium-weight freighter and a warpflyer. And get this...the freighter just happens to be filled with weapons." Melia pointed at Carmel and grinned. "I'd say we earned ourselves a sauna and a cold one, my friend."

Carmel laughed. "You said it, sister." She turned to the waiting crew. "Gentlemen, why don't you take the new crew members and show them where they're bunking? Captain, we have some intel to share if you're ready to debrief us."

"Of course," Ejan said. "We'll go to my quarters, shall we?"

"You still have chocolate in there, right?" Carmel asked.

Ejan hissed in amusement. "Have you ever known me not to have chocolate, my dear? I still curse the day I met that earthling. Keeping you in chocolate will cost me my retirement." Carmel and Melia locked arms with him.

"Now, who are you trying to kid with that retirement talk, Ejan?" Carmel teased. "You have too much fun bossing people around to ever retire. So, stop your protesting and take us to the chocolate before someone gets hurt."

Ejan's laughed. "Age has not improved your disposition, child. I daresay you're not too old for a good old-fashioned spanking." He cast an amused look at Darr. "Wouldn't you agree, Commander Handel?"

"Oh, absolutely, Captain," Darr answered, executing a casual salute.

* * * * *

Carmel stood beneath the water, letting the heat of the shower wash away the tenseness in her muscles. She's half expected Darr to come to her, to challenge her choice to take Na'ram as a lover. If she was to be honest, feelings of guilt nagged at her. Maybe it hadn't been a good idea, sleeping with the handsome mercenary. He seemed...tenderhearted...and she didn't want to hurt him. The truth was, no matter how she denied it, her attraction to the dominating commander consumed her. While she wasn't ready to admit her feelings went beyond lust, she might have made a grave error bringing another man into the mix. She certainly didn't want to be responsible for a rivalry that could damage the cohesiveness of the group of soldiers with whom she served.

Leaning forward, she pressed her palms against the wall of the shower and closed her eyes, letting the hot water pound her tight shoulder muscles.

"Ahh..." She sighed, then tensed as a pair of large hands slid around her to cup her breasts. "Darr."

"Well, at least you know the difference between my touch and that of my brother's," Darr said. "Don't move, Lieutenant."

His fingers plucked her nipples to life, and she moaned, feeling the length of his cock press against her bottom. "So, it's true?"

"Yes, the DNA was a match. We spent the last hour or so talking," Darr sighed. "I see why you like him; he's a good man."

"Yes, he is," Carmel said, then gasped as one hand left her breast and slid down her slippery skin to delve between her legs. She moaned as he eased two fingers into her, fucking her slowly as his cock throbbed between the cheeks of her ass. "Please."

"Please, what?"

"Please fuck me." His fingers left her momentarily, plucking at her clit. "Darr."

"Not quite yet, love." He moved away from her. "Water off." He opened the shower door and stepped outside. "Come out of the shower, Carmel. I have a surprise for you."

She was shaking with need when she stepped out of the shower and Darr wrapped her in a towel. Securing another around his hips, he took her by the hand and led her into her room, where a nude Na'ram stood waiting, his cock riding high and hard against his belly.

"What the hell?" Carmel said, backing away.

Darr laughed softly and caught her around the waist. "Since you obviously want us both, we've decided to share you."

"I don't think so," she said, her voice shaking. "I'm not into pain." She shook her head, halfheartedly struggling against him, but the heated lust flushing her body belied her protest.

"Oh, but it's like no other pain you've ever felt, pet," Na'ram assured her, opening the towel. He reached out to tweak a nipple. "First, we'll start by eating your pussy until all you can think about is being fucked. Then Darr will use a special oil to grease his fingers, and he'll screw them into your sweet little backside, one at a time, until you're nicely stretched and lubricated. Then he'll stretch your ass just like the vamp at

the Bloody Club took that UIF spy." He went to his knees in front of her and nuzzled her pubic mound.

"I..." Carmel tried to answer, but Na'ram's tongue slithered between her nether lips to stroke her clit. Darr's hands stroked her breasts, tormenting her nipples one moment and caressing the sensitive undersides the next. When she threw her head back, crying out in need, his lips and tongue trailed heated kisses and nips from her shoulder to her ear.

"That's a girl, Carmel," Darr breathed into her ear. "Feel his mouth on your pussy. His tongue stroking your clit." She moaned as he continued. "We're going to put you on the bed now, baby. You're going to suck Na'ram's cock while he eats your pussy. And me, I'm going to play with your ass." Suddenly, Na'ram's fingers slid deep inside her, pumping while he sucked her clit. She nearly screamed.

"The bed, brother," Darr said urgently. "Let's not make her come too soon."

When Na'ram stretched out on the bed, Darr's hands went to Carmel's waist and effortlessly lifted her onto the bed, settling her over Na'ram's body. Her thighs were immediately parted, and he attached his mouth to her cunt, sucking greedily. "Sweet as syrup," Na'ram groaned, then buried his tongue inside her. She immediately engulfed his cock with her mouth, taking him deep, matching his rhythm.

Heavenly stars, she couldn't believe this was happening to her! Two men were preparing to fuck her, and she wanted it, wanted to feel Na'ram's cock in her pussy while Darr slid his magnificent cock deep into her ass. What was wrong with her that she sought such dark pleasure as this? She moaned around Na'ram's cock as Darr's oiled hands caressed her bottom, his slick thumbs stroking along the crease, opening her, teasing the tiny star of her anal opening. Then his lips and tongue grazed her sensitive flesh, and she nearly came.

Even in her most hedonistic fantasies, Carmel could never have imagined what it would feel like to be fed on by two virile males who knew exactly how to arouse every sense and did so with exquisite attention to every small detail. As Darr's teeth nibbled

her bottom, one finger dipped into her anus, making gentle fucking motions before retreating. He added one more digit, pumping again, scissoring his fingers apart. Carmel moaned, shuddering as Na'ram grazed her pussy lips with teeth, then sucked the swollen flesh between his lips.

"Mmm," Darr said, his voice heavy with lust. "That's a pretty sight, baby. Your ass in the air, my fingers stretching this sweet little hole. You're quivering all over, Carmel, and your little pussy is practically talking to Na'ram, it's so hot and needy." He withdrew and added a third finger, stuffing her ass. "I think you're almost ready, honey." He smacked her ass, hard, and his smoky laughter made her pussy weep even more. "Put your fingers inside her, brother, and give her a taste of what's waiting for her."

Carmel cried out as the two men thrust their fingers into her — Darr's into her ass, Na'ram's into her pussy. She had to pull her mouth from Na'ram's cock for fear of biting him as their fingers began to pound into her.

"Come now, Carmel," Darr demanded, his hand coming down hard on her cheek. "You come now, or we'll leave you to your own devices."

"Nooo!" Carmel howled. "I can't... I..." And then Na'ram applied a thumb and forefinger to her clit, and she went off like a rocket. She was still shuddering when Darr lifted her off Na'ram.

Na'ram quickly changed positions, lying back on the bed, legs wide, feet planted on the floor. He held his cock in his hand, and Carmel didn't think she'd ever seen such lust-filled eyes as he watched Darr lower her onto his straining shaft. She groaned at the feel of him, so thick and long, parting the folds of her pussy, pushing deep into her.

"Now, Carmel, move. Fuck yourself on his cock." She did, placing her palms flat on his chest as she glided up and down on his dick. "Play with her clit, Na'ram. Get her going again."

"Oh God," Carmel sobbed as Na'ram applied his thumb to the swollen pearl. "I can't stand it! It's too good, too much." The feel of him inside her, his thumb on her clit,

sweeping back and forth, and Darr's voice, dark and lusty, filled her with a craving she didn't recognize. She was all heat and need, her body poised on the edge of a knife blade that threatened to cut her in two. They would tear her apart with their hunger, and she wanted it like she'd never wanted anything in her life.

"Never," Darr whispered, gently easing her down to Na'ram's chest. "It's never too good." She jerked when his fingers found her rectum again, adding more of the heated lubricant. "Now, baby. Now I'm going to fuck your sweet little ass. I'm going to make you mine in a way you'll never forget."

Carmel cried out as the head of Darr's cock pressed slowly inside her. Na'ram's arms went around her, holding her still, his voice soothing her. "Relax, pet," he said. "Push out as he pushes in." She did what he said and moaned as the head popped past the tight anal ring. "That's right. It's not so bad once it's in, is it?"

"Ah..." She groaned as Darr pushed deeper. His cock was larger than Na'ram's, wider and longer. She groaned as Na'ram pulled back to allow Darr room to fill her. Her body shook as he pressed deeper, the broad head spreading the delicate tissue as it advanced. Surprisingly, it didn't hurt as much as she'd expected, and the pleasure was deeper, more erotic than anything she'd ever experienced before. Dark and heady like he was, forbidden, and all the more erotic because of it. As he sank in the last inch, she gasped, then moaned when Na'ram's mouth took hers in a searing kiss.

Carmel dug her nails into Na'ram's shoulders and hung on for dear life as the two men buried in her body began to fuck her in earnest. As Darr withdrew, Na'ram drove deep into her pussy, his dick pressing against her sensitive core as he buried himself to the hilt. On and on it went, perfectly orchestrated and savagely coordinated to drive her toward the most intense orgasm of her life. How they expected her to survive, she didn't know, because they were burning her alive.

Beneath her, Na'ram growled. "I can't hold on. I'm about to come." He thrust up, brutally hard, one final time, burying himself inside her. He held her tightly against

him, feeling her pussy begin to quake and tighten around him. "Fuck her, Darr. Fuck her hard. She's about to come."

As Na'ram captured her mouth again, she heard Darr's voice rumble. "My pleasure." His hands gripped her hips hard as he drove into her ass, giving her his full length with each thrust. "Come, baby," he demanded, his voice sinister and rough, as though he was deliberately trying to frighten her. When she didn't come, he slapped her ass hard. She was shocked by the sound of her own voice, sobbing and screaming. "Damn you, you will come, NOW!"

Carmel's eyes widened in shock as Na'ram's cock came alive inside her. "Oh. My. God!" Her pussy contracted hard, shards of heat shooting up her spine, tightening her body's grip on both cocks thrusting inside her, and she threw back her head, howling her release.

Darr slammed into her one final time. "Yeah, aw, fuck, baby. That was good; that was so good." He curved his body over hers, kissing the side of her neck, whispering to her. "Thank you, love."

The two men shifted her onto the bed and sandwiched her between them. Her last thought before she drifted off to sleep was, I am so screwed.

Chapter Fifteen

Screwed didn't even begin to describe the next few days of Carmel's life. Darr and Na'ram left her each morning before the rest of the ship roused. She crawled out of her bunk for roll call and spent her days in training, preparing for combat, both in the air and on the ground. She sparred with the men, honed her hand-to-hand skills, and then spent hours in the cockpit practicing flight formations that would ready them for combat with UIF fighters they might encounter, learning how to use the newly installed single-craft pulse cannons. Exhausted, she'd grab an early dinner, hit the showers, and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, only to be awakened in the early-morning hours by Darr and Na'ram. On the fifth day after their visit to Tharkus XII, they crossed into the Tol sector. The nightly visits stopped as everyone began a strict schedule of scouting patrols.

Carmel yawned, grateful her patrol was nearly over. "Predator base, this is Predator One."

"Come in Predator One."

Darr. Although it had only been a few days since he'd last spent a night with her, it seemed like months. Despite herself, she missed the warmth of his big body and Na'ram's next to her in bed. There was a strange comfort in the familiar feel of their

bodies pressed against her in sleep. And that horrible fiery dream had stopped too, until a few nights ago.

"I'm approaching the Tol asteroid belt, request additional fighters to search the area for UIF presence."

"Roger, Predator One. Pull back. There's to be no penetration without your wingman. Do you copy?"

"Roger, Predator base."

Penetration. Wingman. Very funny, Handel. She hung back for a few minutes, running a scan of the area they would soon be entering, knowing full well the magnetic forces of the asteroid belt would render her instrumentation virtually useless at long range. If there were any enemy craft in there, they wouldn't know it until they were right on top of them. Fortunately, the same applied to opposition fighters. Asteroid belts were the great levelers.

"Predator One, this is Predator base. Check your six. Friendlies approaching."

Carmel swiveled her seat and watched the extra troops come into view. "Got them in my sights, Commander." She spun her seat forward and spoke. "Welcome to my nightmare, boys. We're going in holding hands, so grab your partner and keep your eyes open. We have no line of sight, so you fucking new guys have a care you don't deliver a package up anybody's ass—especially mine."

"Ah, Roger that, Predator One. Nobody wants to push that paper."

"All righty, then. I am flight lead. Let's push it up, boys. The quicker we get in, the quicker we get out." Carmel engaged her throttle and penetrated the asteroid belt. A radio squawked, and she heard Senat say, "Man, they ought to call these hemorrhoid fields, because they give me a giant pain in the ass."

Carmel laughed. "Acknowledged, Predator Four."

Despite her lighthearted conversation, Carmel had that uneasy feeling she always got when intuition told her something was not quite right.

She pressed the topaz jewel at her collar and hailed Senat. "Don't know why, but this feels hinky to me, Predator Four. Keep eyes on your FNGs. If we've got bogeymen in here, I don't want anybody getting hurt."

"Roger that, Predator One. You see anything, or is it just that scary intuition talking?"

"Just feeling twitchy, my friend, but if they caught wind of us somehow, this is the perfect place for an ambush. Just be careful, Senat."

"Roger, Predator One. I remember — cover your ass. CYA is the watchword for the day... Be careful, Carmel."

Carmel keyed the radios and spoke softly to the troops. "Fence in and engage shields, Predator squadron. We don't want to ding your shiny new toys by bouncing asteroids off them."

Fence in was code for setting their cockpit switches to combat ready, a logical tactic in case they needed to give an asteroid a little shove in the opposite direction. She'd done all she could to warn them to take extra caution without broadcasting her suspicions. She looked at her screen and watched each craft peel off by twos. Left, right, and up the middle. Senat was her wingman, not because he wasn't an expert pilot, but because he was. Ejan and Darr were determined to keep her safe.

Halfway through the rocky passage, Carmel caught the reflective flash of light on metal as a small comet flashed by. *Shit, piss, fuck!* This could be bad, very bad. With the supply ship come and gone, they'd had no reason to believe there might still be an enemy presence in this sector. Why were they here? Had someone alerted them that a rebellion contingent was in the area? Or was there a traitor in their midst? They'd been so careful on Tharkus XII. Had the dandy spy suspected them and contacted UIF patrols? She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. *Fuuuck, this really sucks air.* She dropped down and maneuvered her vehicle beneath the huge chunk of floating rock. If she could work her way under and behind the enemy craft, maybe she could shove a torpedo up its ass.

Carmel held her breath as she popped up behind the enemy fighter. She was almost relieved to see it was a short-range offensive patroller, which meant its com capabilities were limited. But it also meant there was a battle cruiser somewhere nearby. Goddamn it, she had to notify *Darkshadow* to jam their signals, but she had to do it quietly. She dropped back down and tapped Darr's code into the jewel beneath her collarbone.

"Predator base, I've got a bad guy at my twelve. Short-range offensive patroller. Request DS jam their coms. How the fuck did they know we were coming?"

"Roger that, Predator One. Beginning jamming now. Switch to setting XPO and maintain communication. And Lieutenant, be careful. I'll be checking on that question personally."

"Acknowledged, Predator base."

When the jamming commenced, Carmel switched to alternate setting and hailed her squad. "We've got bogeymen, boys. Prepare for combat on my go." With that, she popped up behind the enemy craft and deployed a torpedo into its exhaust port. "Package delivered," she confirmed; then all hell broke loose.

Carmel maneuvered her little flyer expertly through a hail of laser fire and asteroid shards. Enemy pilots were swarming her squadron, blasting the hell out of the floating chunks of rock, making them into weapons that could puncture the viewing bubbles on their fighters if the shields failed. To her dismay, that very thing happened to one of the green recruits, and she watched in horror as his body was sucked through the hole. She knew he was unconscious within fifteen seconds and probably didn't feel his internal organs expanding or the blood boiling, then freezing in his veins. Seconds later, his body slammed into an asteroid, and he was gone. Just gone. She sucked in an agonized breath and chased down the bastard who'd ended him.

There was no time to worry about how the other pilots were faring, and she'd long ago lost track of her wingman. For all she knew, Senat was dead, space debris. There was no time to mourn him or anyone else. Her cockpit screen showed an enemy fighter

hot on her tail, so she went vertical, spun, and used the newly mounted pulse cannon to shatter the cocksucker's shield and drilled a hole in his view port. The bubble burst, and the fucker was sucked into space. She didn't feel a bit of remorse at the sight of his body exploding when she hit it with another pulse.

Fucking hell, is there no end to them? There had to be forty to their fifteen, bad odds when half the squad had just come out of training. *Shit, shit, shit! Who made the choice to send a squad of fucking new guys into a potential ambush situation?* Whoever it was, he'd feel her booted foot so far up his ass, he'd think he was eating leather for supper. She swooped into a dive, hurtling after an enemy fighter with sights on one of her squad. "I don't think so, motherfucker," she growled. As his weapons port opened, she sent a nuclear-tipped arrow through the aperture, vaporizing him. Her pilot wagged his wings in thanks and dropped out to her left in pursuit of another UIF fighter.

On and on it went, chasing individual UIF craft to make sure they weren't able to pull away and head for their mother ship. She'd lost count of her own kills, focusing instead on pulling her squad through this colossal clusterfuck. Then, as suddenly as the attack had started, it stopped. She keyed her com.

"Predator squad report. I want to know who's still with us."

"Predator Two, reporting." Na'ram. Thank the stars, he lived.

"Predator Four."

She sighed in relief. Senat was all right.

"Predator Five... Predator...Nine."

She closed her eyes. *Six gone. Son of a bitch!* Someone was going to pay. "Roger that, Predator squad, return to base." She was just about to jockey her vehicle around to join them when she saw one last fighter sneaking past. "Fuck me with a red-hot corkscrew! Senat, get the squad back to base. I've got one heading for home, and I can't let him get there."

"Carmel—" Senat began, but Darr cut him off.

"Negative, Predator One. Do not engage alone."

Carmel shook her head in protest. "Commander, he cannot be allowed to reach his battle cruiser with the news we're here."

"Makes no difference, Lieutenant. They're going to know when none of their fighters return."

"Yeah, but we've got a window of opportunity to catch that base ship unawares if I stop this guy."

"Negative, Lieutenant. Return to base; that is a direct order."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Carmel had never disobeyed a direct order in her life. She tapped her private com and waited for Darr to answer.

"Damn it, Darr. Acknowledge!"

"Lieutenant, I expect to see you pulling into the docking bay any second."

Carmel nearly sobbed in frustration. "Just...just hear me out, for fuck's sake. I can do this. I have the pulse cannon, and I have the skills. If that ship gets back to the battle cruiser, we are screwed. You know it, and I know it. I can blow this little fucker out of the sky and get a bead on where his cruiser is. This is no time to go soft on me. Whatever is between us does not take precedence over the security of *Darkshadow* and this mission. You have to let me go. You have to trust me."

Darr cursed fluently. "Fuck! I hate it when you're right! Go, but you go coms open so we can track you. You go in dark, and I'll personally kick your ass when you get back to this ship. Are we clear on that, Lieutenant?"

"Crystal." She throttled forward, pushing her speed to make up for lost time.

"And Lieutenant, as far as the squad knows, you're disobeying a direct order, so act accordingly when you get back."

"Roger that, Commander." She grimaced. Shit would hit the fan for someone.

Carmel smiled with satisfaction when the enemy pilot came to the realization he wasn't going to shake her and turned to engage. She rolled sideways, avoiding several

laser shots, then went vertical, tumbling forward nose to ass to get behind him. She'd intended to spare him a brief but agonizing crushing death by shoving a missile up his ass, but he anticipated her move and she had no choice but to use the pulse cannon. Engaging the computerized weapon, she targeted the enemy's view port and hit him full strength, vaporizing both shield and bubble.

"You're dead, fucker," she growled, turning her craft toward the *Darkshadow*.

She reactivated her com. "Predator One to Predator base." She sighed. "Runner is down. I'm returning to base."

"Acknowledged, Predator One," Ejan's soft voice hissed. "The commander will be awaiting you in flight bay holding."

"Well, fuck, I guess he's pissed."

Ejan chuckled. "Pissed doesn't even begin to cover it, Lieutenant."

Chapter Sixteen

Carmel maneuvered smoothly into the docking port, cutting the engine as the ship was secured. The more she thought about the ambush, the more pissed she became. Six men had died out there today, and she would have answers. By the time the flight bay pressurized, her blood was boiling. The hydraulic door hissed open, and she climbed from the cockpit, removing her helmet as the remaining pilots swarmed her. *Let the games begin.*

She embraced each one; then Na'ram pulled her close. "Thank the stars, you're all right," she whispered to him.

"And you, pet, but Darr is in a red rage."

Carmel nodded, releasing him. "He should be pissed. Who the fuck was responsible for sending six untried men into combat?"

"Don't know. I'm just a pilot. You'll have to take that up with command."

"You bet your ass I will," she growled and stepped around him to face a very angry Darr.

He glared at each man in turn and barked orders. "You men report to the conference room for debriefing." He gestured toward a noncom with a blaster at his belt. "You, escort the lieutenant to the brig."

"What?" she shouted.

"You disobeyed a direct order, Lieutenant Bastion."

"You want to toss me in the brig, feel free, Commander," she sneered. "But you'd better save a cell for yourself, because you're responsible for sending six green recruits to their deaths."

"I'm what?" he bellowed, nose to nose with her.

"You heard me. You sent six men with no combat experience into a potential trap, and they died when that trap was sprung. You want to file charges against me, asshole, get in line, because I'll be filing them against you!"

She gave him a hard shove and stalked away, shaking off the grip of the young noncom who would have restrained her. A glance from the corner of her eye caught Senat smiling smugly, the bastard.

"Stand down, airman," Darr snapped.

Carmel shoved her helmet in her cubby, her body language expressing her outrage. "Confine me to the brig, will he? Bring me up on charges? I'll hand him his fucking head." She gripped the edge of her cubby, taking gulps of air in an attempt to calm herself. All those men, those young, eager recruits... gone. She straightened her shoulders and turned to face Darr.

"Who was it? Who put the squad together for this patrol?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Senat," Darr said grimly.

"Aw, shit," she said, lips compressing in a straight line. "You're sure?"

Darr sighed. "I checked the orders myself. We need to speak with the captain." He nodded and gestured toward the door. "After you, Lieutenant."

Carmel paused as the door hissed shut behind them, and he walked beside her. "What the hell's going on?"

"Not until we get to the captain's quarters," Darr insisted. "He's waiting for us. Nice job, accusing me, by the way. I nearly believed you meant it."

Carmel shook her head. "I was beginning to think I did, for a minute."

They entered the lift, and Darr programmed in a nonstop to the captain's quarters. When the doors opened, they stepped inside. Ejan looked as grim as she'd ever seen him.

"No," she said softly. "Please tell me it's not true. Tell me he didn't betray us."

Ejan put an arm around her shoulder and led her to his computer screen. "We've found encrypted communications to the battle cruiser *Warlord*, all from Senat's personal com unit. The encryption was good, but Fallon was better."

"Why? Why would he do that? His own family was slaughtered by UIF forces."

Ejan cleared his throat. "Money. And power. He was promised rank in the UIF, rank he was unlikely to achieve through the rebellion forces."

"Ah, Senat," she said sadly. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going to question him," Darr said. "Find out who else he's told about our plans to rescue your parents. Then we'll execute him."

Carmel inhaled sharply and blew out a long breath. "All right. It's no more than he deserves. He's responsible for the deaths of six good men, damn him." She paused, getting herself under control. "He's not going to open up to you, but he will to me."

Darr cocked his head. "What did you have in mind?"

"Arrest me, then send him in as my representative. If all goes well, I'll get him to offer to take me away with him to a UIF stronghold."

"It might work." Darr nodded. "All right, let's do it."

* * * * *

Darr watched through a hidden video monitor as Senat entered the room where Carmel was being held. A jolt of jealousy flared when she threw herself into the smaller man's arms, even though he knew it was an act.

"Oh God, Senat. They're going to court-martial me!"

Darr practically growled when Senat's arms closed around her, holding her close.

"They can't, Carmel. You didn't do anything wrong," Senat told her.

"I know that, and you know that, but six men died out there, on my watch, and I disobeyed a direct order from the commander."

"That bastard," Senat snarled. "I knew he was bad news when he came on board."

Carmel nodded, extracting herself from his embrace. She paced the room. "I only wish I'd listened to you." She turned, giving her former lover a grief-stricken look. "How stupid could I possibly be? I was so starstruck by his impressive record." Her expression softened. "I'm sorry, Senat. I...I should have listened to you. You've always had my best interests at heart." She buried her face in her hands and turned away from him, sobbing. "How could I have been such a fool? I wish I'd never heard the bastard's name. All those men dead, and I'm the one who'll go to jail." She gasped, giving him a horrified look. "What if he did it on purpose? Oh God, Senat, what if he's UIF? How could I have trusted him?"

Senat moved to her, hands gently massaging her shoulders. "You're young, Carmel, barely nineteen. You don't have the experience to know when you're being manipulated. But he's not UIF."

Darr grunted when she let Senat turn her and pull her into his arms again. Unshed tears glinted in her eyes as she cupped his cheek. *Damn, she's good.* "Can you ever forgive me? Will you represent me?"

"Of course, love," Senat said gently. "But there is another option."

Carmel gave him a confused look. "I...I don't understand."

"What if I could get you off this ship? Get you away from here?"

"How? They won't just let us walk out of here and take a ship. Where would we go, and what about my parents?"

"I can arrange to get us off this ship and extract your parents from Sere Tol."

Carmel's jaw dropped. "How? Who could you possibly know inside the rebellion who could do that?"

Senat cleared his throat. "I have contacts outside the rebellion, Carmel." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked around, obviously checking to see if there were recorders in the room. "Thadd would welcome you and your parents as part of his government."

Darr watched Senat study Carmel, gauging her reaction. When she didn't respond, he continued. "You would have to agree to support him. The three of you would likely have to go through some reprogramming – to guarantee your loyalty to the cause, but I can arrange it."

Carmel sank into a chair. Darr could read the disappointment on her face that Senat had gotten in that deep. They'd kill him if he couldn't deliver, and he probably knew that as well as she did. She was a great little actress, Darr noted as she ducked her head, letting Senat believe she was thinking about it.

"They wouldn't hurt my parents?"

"No, not if they cooperate, which I'm sure they would to guarantee your safety."

Carmel nodded. "Would...would it hurt, the reprogramming?" That little performance must have taken a toll on her.

Senat squatted down beside her, his hand on her knee. "No, my love. They put you to sleep. When you wake, you'll have no memory of the rebellion or of that bastard Handel."

"But...we're miles from a UIF outpost, Senat. There's no way we could reach a UIF cruiser before the *Darkshadow* caught us and took us out."

Darr wanted to tear the man apart when he bragged, "There's a cloaked cruiser not a day from here. It followed us from Tharkus XII. All I have to do is notify them that you're willing, and they'll come for us." He lifted her chin with his index finger. "You cared for me once, Carmel. You trusted me. Trust me again. Let me get you out of here. Once you're reprogrammed, we can be together. Thadd will reward us well. We could have the full governorship of any planet we want. I could give you the kind of life you've never dreamed of...the kind of life you deserve. Shall I contact them, get them to pull us out of here?"

"You'd do that for me, after what I've done to you? You'd risk your life to get us out of here?"

"Carmel, I would die for you."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the door flew open and a furious Darr strode inside, accompanied by two security officers.

"And that's just what you'll do, you traitor. Lieutenant Senat," he said menacingly, "you are under arrest for treason." He looked at Carmel and smiled. "Good job, Lt. Bastion. You're dismissed. I'll see you later, in your quarters."

Senat struggled against a security officer's grip. "You bitch!" he howled. "You betrayed me."

"Yes, I did," Carmel said sadly. "But you betrayed me first. The second you fell in with the opposition, you betrayed us all. What I don't understand is why."

"Why?" he bellowed. "Because this rebellion is a joke! You'll never defeat Thadd, and you'll never be anything more than a lowly lieutenant. You may be content to live in poverty, to serve under that hawk-headed freak, but I'm not."

Carmel stepped up to him and slapped his face so hard, his head snapped back. "That hawk-headed freak has been a father to me, you filthy, treasonous bastard." She looked at the two security officers. "Get him out of my sight."

"With pleasure, Lieutenant," one of them growled, then glared at Senat. "I'm going to be sure I have a front-row seat at your execution, boy."

Carmel's shoulders sagged as she sank into a chair. "I don't understand, Darr. How could he betray us like that?" The tears began to flow, though she made no sound.

Darr knelt in front of her, pulling her into his arms. "Greed, sweetheart, and probably some jealousy. He would have ridden your coattails if you'd kept him in your life. As it was, when you terminated the relationship, his dreams of glory went up in smoke."

Darr marveled at the look of genuine grief in her eyes when her gaze met his, and his heart skipped a beat. Did she still love Senat, or was she mourning the man he'd become?

"I did care for him, once..." She paused, her bottom lip quivering.

Darr's heart clenched, but he said nothing, waiting for her to finish her thought.

"He...he was my first. I was seventeen and ..." She took a deep breath, which hitched when she exhaled. "Well, it hardly matters now. Can you get the coordinates of the UIF cruiser out of him?"

Darr nodded. "We'll get them."

"And then you'll execute him?"

"Yes, love, we will." His fingers caressed her cheek. "Can you live with that?"

She nodded when he rose to his feet and offered his hand. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet. "Not only can I live with it, I'd do the deed myself if I thought you'd let me."

"Well, I won't. I'll not allow you to have that man's death on your conscience." He grasped her chin in his hand and gave her a stern look. "Confine yourself to quarters until this is over, Lieutenant. I'll see you later, and we'll discuss the appropriate way to argue with your commanding officer."

He held back a grin when she straightened her spine, squaring her shoulders. She jerked her chin from his grip. It was all he could do not to laugh when she executed a very military salute and turned on her heel. The look she'd given him told him that

she'd give as good as she got. He chuckled as the door *whooshed* shut behind her. God, but she was a wild one. Taming her was going to be more fun than any man had a right to.

Chapter Seventeen

Carmel paced her room, waiting for Darr. Several hours had passed since his ultimatum. She'd done her mourning over Senat. His betrayal outweighed any affection she might still feel for him. He'd been a selfish lover, petulant when he didn't get his way, and she realized his negative qualities far outweighed those of the love-struck girl she'd been. Taken at face value, she'd been wrong to think so highly of him. Whatever it was that had driven him to betray the rebellion was none of her concern. He'd jeopardized all their lives and had been responsible for the deaths of six young men—and possibly the lives of her parents. She'd said a prayer for him and put him firmly out of her mind. That left her only one thing to think about—Darr.

Just thinking of him caused her to break out in gooseflesh. He hadn't made love to her, nor allowed Na'ram to come to her, since they'd started patrolling for an enemy presence in the Tol sector. When she'd checked the computer for their vector, she knew he'd gotten the information he'd needed from Senat. They were backtracking toward the Tharkus system in pursuit of the UIF ship. If they could intercept and destroy her, they could rescue the people on Sere Tol with little to fear. She smiled. Her only worry now was what Darr might do to punish her for arguing. Whatever it was, she was certain she'd wind up enjoying it. As if on cue, she heard her personal code being input

into her door lock. She inhaled sharply as the door opened and he stood there, his gaze penetrating her. In his hand, he carried a long-handled paddle. *Oh shit.* In spite of herself, her pussy clenched. He stepped inside and engaged the locks.

"Undress, Lieutenant," he ordered her. "Take off every stitch. I'm going to try out this nice new toy I got on Tharkus XII."

Carmel swallowed hard but didn't say a word. Silently, she took off her uniform, folded it neatly, and put it in a cubby. This new dimension to their sex play was as intimidating as it was arousing. She turned to face him shocked by the sheer need reflected in his face. This wasn't about lovemaking or even sex, this was about claiming. He crossed to her, circling her, inhaling her scent. He stopped behind her, and a shiver of anticipation ran down her spine.

"Kneel on the end of the bed, spread your legs, fingers interlocked behind your neck."

When she didn't react as quickly as he wanted, she heard the *hiss* of the paddle through the air just before it connected with her ass. She cried out and scrambled to do his bidding. Something soft and silky touched her skin and draped over her ankles. Darr's hands skimmed her back, stopped to soothe the hot spot on her bottom, and then the material wrapped around her ankles and was pulled tight.

"Once you're securely tied to the bed, I'm going to blister your fine little ass." His voice was thick and dark, like smoke from a fire burning deep within him. "Then I'm going to fuck it." One finger ran down her spine and into the crease of her ass, touching the delicate pink rosebud before moving to her pussy. He chuckled at the moistness he found there. "You're always so hot and wet for me, baby, and yet you insist you feel nothing for me."

Carmel's breath shuddered in her chest when he stepped between her thighs and bent her until her forehead touched the mattress. She felt his mouth on her backside and bit her lip to keep from crying out. Oh yes, he was going to ride her hard, taking what he wanted from her. The flat of the paddle landed full force. *Thwap!* Her ass stung and

her pussy clenched as evidence of her arousal flooded between her swollen lower lips and slid down her thighs.

"Now, let's clear a few things up, shall we?" Darr's voice was a seductive purr, and his hand soothed her burning flesh. "I'm your commander, and when I give you an order, I expect it to be obeyed. Without argument. Is that clear?" When she didn't answer, he gave her several sharp blows—*thwap, thwap, thwap*—in succession. "You answer me when I ask you a question, Carmel."

Carmel groaned. "I thought it was a rhetorical question," she moaned.

He gave her another stroke of the paddle. "That was for your impudence. Answer the question. Do you understand?"

"Yes! I understand."

He leaned down and soothed her burning bottom with his tongue. "Good girl." Standing again, he tapped the paddle lightly on her ass as he continued. "And as long as we're discussing your tendency to disobey, remember my telling you what would happen if you ever let another man touch you? It seems you've let two men touch you, Carmel. My brother and that little weasel, Senat."

Carmel moaned as Darr's fingers sought her pussy, sliding inside. Oh God's balls, he was going to destroy her if he didn't fuck her soon. She clenched her muscles around him.

"You want to get fucked, little pilot? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes!" Carmel gasped as he pumped deep.

"Well, too bad," he growled, removing his fingers. "We're not done with your punishment yet."

The paddle landed on her battered ass several more times, and it was officially beginning to hurt now. His fingers probed her again, smoothing her juices back over her anus, and one finger burrowed inside, going deep.

"That's a nice, tight fit, love. You're blushing so pretty for me. I'm going to enjoy fucking your little pink ass." She pressed back as his finger pumped into her. He chuckled. "I'm glad you like it, because I'm going to take it hard and deep, Carmel." She heard the paddle hit the wall as he withdrew his finger. Something warm and slippery drizzled over her bottom, and his fingers probed again, two this time, then three. "You ready, baby?"

"Yes," Carmel groaned as his fingers scissored inside the narrow opening. "Do it, Darr. Fuck me."

"With pleasure," he growled, his fingers leaving her. "You can take your hands from behind your head now, honey. You're going to need to hang on to that mattress. It's going to be a rough ride."

Carmel gasped as the broad head of his dick slid between her cheeks, paused for a heartbeat, then eased inside. There was a sharp bite of burning pain as the head parted her delicate flesh. He grasped her hips and plunged, burying himself to the hilt. She cried out as the wicked pleasure-pain shot straight to her pussy.

"This is mine, Carmel," he growled, pulling back and going deep again. "My ass. My pussy. My body." He punctuated each statement with a mind-blowing thrust.

She was practically sobbing as Darr took her, his cock shuttling in her ass with hard, demanding strokes. Her muscles clenched, her cunt calling out to be filled as full as her burning, pulsing ass. As though he'd heard her, he reached down and thrust two fingers into her aching pussy.

Yes, yes. She was his. She might not be willing to tell him, but she knew in her heart she belonged to Darr Handel. He made her feel things no other man could. He would take what he wanted, but he would also love her. If she would let him.

He was close; she could hear it in the way his breath rushed from his chest, feel it as his steely cock slammed into her, in the quickening of his thrusts. "You'll come for me, now, Carmel." His thumb pressed against her clit, circling the straining bud. "Do you hear me? You come for me, damn you!"

His cock drove into her one final time, leaping with the release of his seed. One last brush of his thumb against her clit, and she screamed. "Oooh God!" She bucked against him as she came.

"Tell me," he demanded, thrusting his fingers deep into her pussy. "Goddamn you, Carmel. Tell me!"

"I love you!" she sobbed. "I do. I hate it, but I do."

"Oh, baby," he soothed her. "It'll be all right."

In the aftermath, Darr untied her ankles and swung her into his arms, taking her with him into the shower. "Water on," he commanded the automated system and stepped under the spray.

Carmel sagged against him as he smoothed the fruity-scented bath liquid over her. She was still so shaky, she wasn't sure if her knees would hold her, and the way his hand felt, slicking the slippery soap over her body, only served to send the blood quickening through her veins again.

"Did I hurt you?" Darr asked, his voice thick with unspoken emotion.

"No," she answered, then gasped as his hand dipped between her legs to wash her.

He laughed softly. "Ready for more so soon?"

"I'm always ready for you." She groaned as he slipped one finger inside her, the weight of his engorged shaft nestling between her cheeks. "Mmm, that feels good, but I need your cock in there, please, Darr."

He rinsed her, then turned her in his arms, kissing her deeply as he walked her backward until she was pressed against the shower wall. He knelt in front of her, kissing her belly. "Someday, I'm going to put a baby there," he informed her, giving her a nip when she shuddered. "Many babies, I think." His mouth moved down to press a hot kiss at the base of her mound. "Lift one leg and put it over my shoulder, sweetheart. I want to taste this sweet pussy."

Carmel did as he told her, gasping when he flattened his tongue over her clit and began to lick. He'd barely begun when the first stirrings of orgasm stole her breath. "Oh, heavenly maker, I'm going to come. Please, I want you inside me when I come."

She watched behind hooded lids as Darr rose to his feet, that big, hard cock thrusting out before him. It never failed to amaze her that she was capable of taking him. He lifted her leg and draped it over his forearm, fit his cock into the notch of her pussy, and thrust, raising her up on her tiptoes.

Carmel cried out as Darr filled her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to just feel. "Yes, oh yes. That's good, so good." He worked his cock slowly, driving her toward orgasm by increments.

"Carmel, open your eyes." She did, meeting his lustful gaze. "You're going to come soon, baby, but before you do, I'm going to tell you something. Are you listening?" He drove into her hard to get her attention.

"I'm listening," she shrieked.

"Na'ram is waiting outside. I'll allow you one more night with him. One more, Carmel, because I love you both, but after tonight, there will be no more sharing. Do you understand?"

Carmel's eyes drooped closed. He was pumping into her now, giving her his full length, hips rotating to stir her in the most erotic fashion. A hard twist to one of her nipples, and her eyes flew open. "One more night, Carmel. Agreed?"

"Yes," she sighed as he laved the smarting nipple. "Agreed. Only you, Darr. Only you."

"Good girl." His fingers moved between them, spreading her lips so he could notch his hips tightly against her. "Now," he growled. "Now you come." He ground his hips against her in an up-and-down motion, the wiry hair surrounding his cock pressing against her clit.

"Ohhh," she shrieked. "Yes, yes, I'm coming. Oh God's blood, fuck me, Darr. Make me scream."

Hard, fast, and deep, he drove into her, filling her to the hilt with each thrust. She tried to move with him, but he held her tightly against the shower wall, hands over her head as he pounded into her.

"I'm going to come, Carmel. Come with me, baby. Tell me again, and come with me."

Carmel gasped for breath as she reached her peak. "I...do... I love you. Oh...too much...too much...need to..." She howled as Darr slammed into her one last time, filling her pussy with his heat, her heart with his love. His weight pressed against her as his cock jerked with his release.

"When we have your parents safely on board, we're going to be married," he said against her neck. "Agreed?"

Carmel nodded, a smile curving her lips. "I'll think about it."

Darr scowled at her. "You do that. Not that it will do you any good. I warn you, Carmel, I'm in no mood for games. I've put up with your indecision because you're young, and as Na'ram pointed out, you've never been in love before, but I love you, and you love me. Enough is enough."

* * * * *

Carmel sat on the bed, shoulders slumped, watching as the door shut behind him. How did he manage to get her hormones so stirred up that she would agree to anything just to feel him inside her? He came in here, got her all worked up, and then simply decreed that she would marry him. Good heavens! If she married him, she'd spend the rest of her life fighting his heavy-handed tactics. He'd order her around as though she was incapable of making her own decisions. Really, the man was royal pain in the ass. And she loved him. She sighed as the door opened and Na'ram stepped inside.

Carmel forced herself to sit up straight. "I can... We can't... I'm in love with him."

Na'ram sat down beside her, his arm around her shoulders. "I knew it the moment you looked at him. He loves you as well. Some things you just can't fight, Carmel."

She allowed herself to lean against him. "I don't know if I can give him what he wants, Na'ram. He's just so... I'm afraid I'll lose myself."

Na'ram laughed softly. "He is commanding" —he gave her a little squeeze—"but so are you, and I have no doubt you'll learn to handle him."

"You have more faith in me than I do, my friend. Sometimes I just want to strangle him."

Na'ram's lips brushed her temple. "He's new to these feelings too, pet. His instincts tell him to protect you, to keep you safe, yet the soldier in him recognizes your value as a fighter and a symbol of the rebellion. He struggles to reconcile those conflicting emotions. Give him time to come to terms with his feelings."

She bumped her shoulder against him. "How did you get so smart?"

"Wisdom born of age, pet."

Carmel snorted. "You're not that much older than me, pet."

He laughed. "No, but I had to grow up fast once my mother died. Much like you." He squeezed her again. "He'll come around, love. Have patience. Don't strangle him just yet." He took her face in his hands and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. "I'll miss making love to you, but I look forward to strengthening our friendship. If you ever need me, you've but to call."

Carmel nodded. "Thank you." Tears welled in her eyes. "You're a good man, Na'ram. You'll make some lucky woman very happy."

He stood up and walked to the door, then turned. "I thought you'd want to know. Senat gave us all we wanted and more. We have the coordinates of the UIF cruiser, and we're en route to intercept her now. It won't be long before we can go after your parents."

Carmel nodded. "Is he...?"

Na'ram nodded. "Yes. He wanted you to know...he died well."

"Thank you." The door hissed closed behind him, and Carmel lay on the bed. Senat was dead. She should hate him for what he'd done, but he'd been an important part of her life at one point, and she couldn't help but mourn him. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to cry. She was still sobbing softly when Darr came to her, wrapped her in his arms, and held her. As he stroked her hair and rocked her, murmuring words of comfort, she slid into sleep with the understanding that there was more to Darr Handel than met the eye.

Chapter Eighteen

Darr stood on the bridge, Carmel and Ejan flanking him, and watched as *Darkshadow* threw pulse after pulse of electromagnetic current at the hull of the UIF ship, repulsing their return fire while decimating their protective shield. Any moment now, the enemy's shield would fail, leaving them open to attack by *Darkshadow*'s unique penetrating weapon, a weapon capable of seeping through any exhaust system, filling the hull with a chemical compound that would render the crew unconscious before vaporizing the entire ship from the inside out.

He couldn't hold back a grin as the shield fell and Carmel whooped in joy. "She's a goner now," she said with satisfaction.

"Yes, she is," Ejan sadly. "When will Thadd learn that we accomplish more good in the world when we work together in peace?"

Darr's chest tightened as Carmel laid a hand on the captain's shoulder. He knew a moment of misplaced jealousy realizing how much she loved the old centaurian bastard. Her voice softened in a way she'd never used with him as she spoke to the man she viewed as a father.

"We will defeat him, Ejan, and when we do, we'll bring that peace you so desire. My parents will see to it. We will all see to it."

Ejan sighed. "I pray it will be so, child, for I grow weary of killing in the name of peace. I would like to return to my home and family before I grow too old to make love to my wife and hold my children's offspring."

"I know," she said softly. "Perhaps you should take a furlough once we've extracted my parents from Thadd's grasp."

Darr met Ejan's assessing gaze, a frisson of apprehension tickling his spine. Surely he wasn't thinking of abandoning the rebellion. Was that the reason behind the intensive instruction Darr had been receiving on *Darkshadow's* operation? Carmel would be devastated if Ejan left her, especially if they arrived on Sere Tol and found her parents hadn't survived the heat and deprivation.

As though he'd heard Darr's thoughts, Ejan turned to him. "Take us out of here, Commander. Set a course for Sere Tol. I'll be in my quarters."

Carmel turned to Darr as Ejan left. "What the hell was that all about?"

"I have no idea," he said, shrugging before giving his orders. "Helmsman, come about and set a direct course for Sere Tol." He turned to Carmel. "Two days, and we'll be there, Lieutenant."

* * * * *

Darr retired to his quarters and took a long, hot shower after having worked out with a sparring droid. Thoughts of Ejan and Carmel continued to plague him. The *Darkshadow's* captain was obviously weary of fighting, and Darr couldn't blame him. Ejan had been a warrior when Darr was still in his infancy.

Even then, the voices of war were permeating the outreaches of the Premarian system, where Ejan lived. Ejan had joined the Interstellar Freedom League while still in his youth and had moved up in rank. He could have gained an admiralty had he chosen to be an administrator, but Ejan was a warrior through and through. Now, he was a tired warrior who wanted nothing more than to go home and spend his remaining years with his family. Darr couldn't blame him, but it would break Carmel's heart. He

stepped out of the shower, dried himself quickly, and went in search of his stubborn ladylove.

When he pressed the Entry button, Carmel's door hissed open. She hadn't engaged the locking mechanism, and he smiled. That was progress. At least she hadn't locked him out. His heart clutched when he saw her. She had clearly showered, and her body was still wrapped in a towel. She'd fallen asleep in her favorite chair, one of those cloth-covered things that had some kind of pellet filling that caused it to mold to the body's contours. An open book lay forgotten on the floor beside her. He felt himself go soft inside simply from looking at her.

Darr crossed the room quietly and stood in front of her. She had the look of an angel in repose with her golden hair spread out around her, one lock curved around her breast and coiled on the chair by her hip. She was one of the few women who still wore her hair long, and he liked the look of it, liked the fact that he could wrap his fist in the silken locks and pull her head back, slowly, forcing her to look at him when his mouth descended to take hers in a soul-searing kiss.

Her skin was delicate, nearly translucent, and so luminous she practically glowed with an inner light. Those beautiful amber-gold eyes were closed now, and the thick brown fringe of lashes accentuated the shape of her eyes — eyes that could sparkle with laughter, smolder with desire, or burn with the fierceness of anger. He'd seen them all, been the target of each. His little warrior was a paradox. Her emotions were like quicksilver going from passionate to angry with the turn of a phrase. She could love you one moment and threaten to cut off your balls in the next. Yet as finely boned as she was, she was no stranger to combat.

Darr smiled. Why hadn't she gotten her nose fixed? All she would have had to do was step into a medi-unit to have her nose straightened, the little scar on her lip fixed too, although he had to admit he liked that scar. It gave that voluptuous mouth character and warned that, while indisputable pleasure might be a result of kissing it, there was danger too. This was a woman who would bite. No, Carmel would never

seek to amend those tiny imperfections, for they defined her. She was more than just a pretty face, and she wanted everyone who looked at her to know it.

Darr undressed and knelt down to run a hand along one smooth leg. So soft and fragrant. He loved the scent of her; the light blend of the citrusy shower gel and woman made him hard every time. But the sweet scent of her belied the stubborn independence she struggled to maintain. Would there ever come a time when she'd simply let him love her? When he didn't have to take what he wanted from her, forcing her to acknowledge her feelings for him? He gently adjusted her legs, spreading them wide. Perhaps if he caught her unaware.

Oh so gently, he caressed the delicate flesh of her inner thighs and was rewarded with a soft sigh. His lips followed the trail of his fingers, tenderly parting her swollen labia to press the flat of his tongue against her clit. He licked, probed, then drew the tantalizing morsel between his lips to suck lightly, teasingly. His thumbs stroked her aroused lips, back and forth, so gently it was like a whisper of a breeze; then he slid a finger inside her and pumped. She woke with a gasp.

"Hello, sleepyhead," he crooned, raising his head. "It's nearly dinnertime."

Carmel offered a sleepy smile. "Let me guess. You wanted your dessert first?"

"I always was a greedy little boy when it came to sweets." He pumped his fingers deep, and she arched her hips into the stroke. "You like that."

"Mmm, I do. I like everything you do to me."

He gave her another taste. "Good, because I like doing things to you." He kissed and nibbled his way up her body, a nip to her hip bone, a slurp to her belly button, before nuzzling the undersides of her breasts. "You smell good"—he licked the sensitive flesh—"and you taste even better."

Darr had made love to his fair share of women, but none he'd enjoyed quite so much as his little soldier. She was so responsive. Even now, her hips moved to the rhythm his fingers set as they worked inside her. His mouth closed over a turgid nipple,

and she arched against him, silently asking for more. He drew hard on the ripe little berry, his fingers fucking deep into her tight pussy.

"Please..." Carmel gasped.

He chuckled, his teeth grazing the sensitive tip. "What, baby? What do you need?"

"Your cock," she pleaded. "I need your cock inside me."

"My pleasure, love," he said, his fingers leaving her. He grasped her behind the knees and pulled her toward his waiting cock. Kneeling, he lifted her and settled her over him, shuddering as her wet heat sheathed him. "Mmm, baby. I love the way your pussy feels when it takes me. So hot and tight, like you were made just for me, the perfect fit."

He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the feel of her body, the way her pretty breasts pressed against his chest, her arms around his neck, the tautness of her perfect ass in his hands as he guided her movements. She surrounded him, her scent, her heat, and her silken limbs. Tomorrow, they would reach Sere Tol, and if he died in the course of rescuing her parents, this would be the memory he would take with him, the feel of her skin against his, her cries of pleasure as his cock drove her toward release, the heated rush of their mouths coming together in a kiss of culmination. Yes, she was a woman worth dying for, but even more, she was a woman worth living for.

Darr watched as Carmel tossed her head, the golden waterfall of hair flying around her as her body raced toward climax.

"I love you," she gasped as he drove into her. "Oh God, I..." Her body heaved, and she cried out, "Never leave me... Promise me you'll never... Ah... It's..."

Darr wrapped his fist in her hair and pulled her head back, his teeth fastening to the tendon at the curve of her neck. With a final thrust, he emptied himself into her, his own cry of release echoing hers.

He held her like that for a long moment, her body wrapped around him, then eased her back onto her strange chair, following her down. He eased out of her body and onto his side, pulling her against him.

"If I asked you to marry me tonight, would you?"

She reached out and stroked his cheek with her fingers. "Are you asking?"

"Yes, I am. Marry me, Carmel. Tonight. Right now. When I meet your parents, I want to be introduced as your husband."

Her eyes widened. "My husband? Not a licensed mate?"

He kissed her, his tongue gently curling around hers. "No contracts, Carmel. I want to be a real husband to you, not someone you can toss away at the end of a five-year contract. I want to wake up with you next to me for the rest of our lives, listen to you cuss at me, fill your belly with children. I want to grow old with you."

Her hand went to her mouth, covering it for a moment as her eyes welled with tears. Then she nodded. "Yes." She laughed. "You're sure you want forever? I'm known for being temperamental."

Darr laughed. "God knows that's true enough," he teased. "But I think I'm the one man who can handle you."

"I guess you are at that."

"Then let's go wake Ejan and have him say the words."

They rose, and Darr gave a shout of laughter when Carmel reached for her flight suit.

"What? I'm getting married in my flight suit, okay?"

"Sweetheart, I wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter Nineteen

Carmel took a deep breath and paused outside Ejan's quarters. What she was about to do would change her life forever, and that was a frightening prospect.

Darr squeezed her hand. "All right? You're sure you want to do this?"

She expelled the breath she'd been holding and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. It just occurred to me that when I walk back out that door, I'll be a wife — your wife — and you can be pretty bossy."

"I promise I'll try to keep the bossing to a minimum."

"Huh," she grunted. "Better to try and catch a comet by the tail."

He had the nerve to laugh. "It's not too late to change your mind. Of course, it would still be just a matter of time, and I might not be so good-natured about it in my pursuit the next time."

He wiggled his eyebrows, and she heard herself giggle. Good God, she actually giggled. "You call what you've been doing good-natured? I'd hate to see you pissed off."

He gave her a little nudge toward the door, and it automatically opened. "Get moving, love. I'd hate to have Ejan see me dragging you bodily to the altar."

She snorted. "As if," then shrieked with laughter when he scooped her up and carried her through the door, depositing her in front of Ejan.

Shrewd, lidless eyes assessed her, and then he nodded. "You're sure, child?"

"I'm sure," Carmel answered. "I'm tired of fighting my feelings." She shrugged. "I love him, and that's that. So, what do we do?"

Ejan cleared his throat with a hiss. "Carmel Bastion, do you accept this man as your husband with the faith and assurance that he will serve you well? Do you love him and promise to be faithful to him?"

"Absolutely."

"Darr Handel, do you accept this woman as your wife with the faith and assurance that she will serve you well? Do you love her and promise to be faithful to her?"

Darr took her hand, kissed it, and smiled at her. "I do. All that and more."

"Then by the power of admiralty law, I declare that you are lawfully husband and wife." He looked from one to the other. "Seal it with a kiss, you two, then get out of here and let me get some sleep. We enter Sere Tol's gravitational field in two hours. Scanners indicate life on the planet, so your away team is readying the transport vehicle. You'll need to suit up and join them soon."

Carmel sighed. "I guess that means no wedding night."

Ejan gave her a pointed look. "Unless I'm mistaken, you had your wedding night before the wedding."

She could feel the heat of a blush stinging her cheeks. "Yes, well...still."

Darr brushed a kiss to her temple. "We'll make every night our wedding night, love," he assured her. "Once we get your parents and the others off that hellish planet. Maybe we'll even take some time for ourselves and have a wedding trip."

"That would be lovely," she said longingly. "I've rarely spent any time off the *Darkshadow*."

"Then we'll be sure to do it. Someplace tropical with a beach." He turned to Ejan, offering his hand. "Thank you for trusting me enough to marry us. I promise to take good care of her."

"I have no doubt you will, whether she wishes it or not. Now, go ready yourselves for your mission."

* * * * *

Carmel double-checked the seal on her fire-retardant suit and donned her respirator as Na'ram set the transport down. The planet's surface belched smoke, and heat shimmered in the air, distorting their view of terrain. Scanners indicated they were close to whatever warm-blooded life sources existed on the savage planet. They would have to be very cautious as they picked their way through the dried-out plant life. Inferno iguanas blended well with the scorched landscape, and one slash of their tails would damage the suit's integrity, leaving its wearer open to blistering burns from the vicious reptiles.

"Everyone ready?" Darr asked the landing team.

"Ready," Na'ram said, shrugging into the pack that carried the extra suits.

"Aye, Commander," Melia said. She hit a switch, and the cargo bay door opened.

"Weapons at the ready," Darr ordered. "Set for stun."

The ramp settled on the ground with an audible *thump*, and they stepped outside into the searing heat.

The search took them farther from the transport ship than any of them would have liked, but the trail was easy enough to follow. Ashy footprints indicated human activity, and Carmel was amazed at the sheer tenacity it must have taken to survive in such a desolate environment.

"Ahead at your three," Darr said, gesturing to a large cave. "Looks like the trail leads to that cavern. Watch yourselves. Those damn fire-peeing lizards are sure to know their prey live there."

Evidence to that fact soon presented itself in the form of several iguanas.

"Set your weapons to kill," Darr commanded and fired a shot at the largest lizard. The others followed suit and soon cleared the area. Altogether, they killed ten of the dangerous predators.

Carmel was fascinated by them. "They just turned to ash," she marveled. "Vaporized, just like an atomic wind had swept over them. What do they eat, I wonder, when they can't get red meat?"

Beside her, Na'ram shuddered. "I don't know, and I don't care. Nasty little bastards."

"I wonder if there's any way to use them as weapons," she mused. "If we could take one alive, the science guys could..."

"Never mind that," Darr said, leading her away from the remains. "Let's stay focused on the task at hand. Watch your head. The opening is fairly shallow."

Darr and Na'ram took the lead, shining their lights into the dark cave.

"It narrows ahead," Na'ram warned them. "Have a care no one tears their suit on the rocky walls."

Cautiously, they picked their way forward, following an always-descending trail. Before long, they heard the sound of water. Just a dripping noise at first, then the sound of a narrow stream tumbling over a rocky bed. As they rounded a bend in the path, a man stepped out, gripping a heavy stone club in his hands.

"That will be far enough," he growled. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

Carmel cried out in joy. She'd know that deep, mellifluous voice anywhere. She jerked off her respirator and the protective hood and pushed between Darr and Na'ram.

"Father? Is it really you?" she exclaimed. Her heart swelled with joy.

The man frowned. "Carmel?"

Tears flooded her eyes. "Yes, it's me!"

She began to sob uncontrollably as the big man tossed his club aside and jerked her into his arms. "Oh, Daddy, I never thought I'd see you again." She clung to him, dampening his shirt with her tears. Oh, how she'd missed him: the deep, booming voice that spoke so softly when he'd read her a bedtime story. The strong arms that had lifted her high in the air to swing her around. The gentle hands that cleaned her scraped knees. She'd had so little of him, yet she remembered so much.

"Let me see you, child," he said, gently loosening her grip on him. He held her at arm's length. "You're all grown up. Your mother will faint with joy." He looked around at the others. "Who are these people? How did you find us?"

Darr stepped forward. "Darr Handel, sir, Carmel's husband. We've come to get you out of here."

Jiru frowned. "Handel, but you're one of Thadd's..."

"Was, sir. He tried and convicted me of treason for opposing his tactics. Your daughter broke me out of the Tetris penal colony. I'm a member of the rebellion now."

Jiru smiled at his daughter. "So, you're a married woman. All these years I've been thinking of you as a frightened nine-year-old child. You grew up well. Come, let's go find your mother."

The trail descended sharply, then opened into a large rocky room occupied by a dozen or more people.

"Nona!" Jiru shouted. "We have visitors. Come meet your..." He never got the rest of the words out of his mouth before Nona was up and racing toward them.

"Carmel!" she cried. "Oh, my baby!"

Carmel hurled herself into her mother's loving arms. "Mama," she said, the words coming out as a sigh. "Oh, Mama, I've missed you so."

Carmel couldn't remember a time when she'd shed so many tears, but they were happy tears for a change, and she shed them freely as her mother held her close. To hear her mother's voice once more was a gift more precious than any she could imagine.

How she'd ached for her over the years, waking from the fiery nightmares, screaming for her mother, only to realize she was alone in the world. After all these years, she could still smell her mother's cooking, hear her humming in the kitchen as she prepared the evening meal. No matter how busy they'd been, Nona Bastion had always insisted they sit down to the evening meal together.

Nona took her daughter's cheeks in her hands. "Not a day has passed that I haven't thought of you, haven't missed you. My beautiful, beautiful daughter."

Jiru and Nona led the team deeper into the cave that had been their home for ten years, introducing Carmel and Darr to the other refugees. The rest of the team was introduced; then Darr and Jiru went off to huddle with several other men, no doubt to discuss their escape and the state of the rebellion.

"We'll have to stay the night," Nona told them. "The few reptiles you came across at the entry were only a small number compared to those that come with nightfall." Her face took on a haunted expression. "We have to hunt at night, you see, and they know it."

Carmel put an arm around her mother's thin shoulder. "It will all be over soon, Mother. We have fire-protection suits and respirators enough for everyone, and weapons to keep those damn lizards off us."

Nona smiled and patted her daughter's hand. "That's wonderful, but now I want to hear about you. Who rescued you, and who do I thank for raising my child to be such a brave and beautiful woman?"

"His name is Ejan Zawa. He's Premarian and captain of the ship *Darkshadow*."

Nona gasped. "We've heard of her, and the young woman who has become the symbol of the rebellion. They call her *Darkshadow*." Wonderment filled her eyes. "You're her. You're *Darkshadow*."

"Yes," Carmel said softly. "I'm her, and I've been searching for you since I was rescued. Ejan saw to it that I got the training I needed. I've been engaging in combat missions since I was fifteen years old."

"So young?" Then she laughed. "You're your father's daughter. You must be very good."

"Good enough to break Darr Handel out of prison and marry him. But everything I've become is because of you and father and Ejan. I can't wait for you to meet him. He's kind of scary to look at, but he's been like a father to me, and I love him very much."

Jiru and Darr joined them, along with the other men. "Then we shall love him too, daughter."

Chapter Twenty

Carmel leaned back against Darr and watched her parents and their companions don their protective gear. Dawn had seen them up and packing their meager belongings. The trek to the planet's surface would take some time, and hopefully they wouldn't have too many inferno iguanas to deal with.

When they reached the mouth of the cave, Carmel frowned. Where were the dratted reptiles? Surely they had scented the presence of fresh meat, and yet they were nowhere to be found. This couldn't be good. Something bad was going to happen, and she looked worriedly at her parents and their companions. So many people, and so few weapons. No, this wasn't good at all.

As before, Darr and Na'ram took the lead, with Jiru beside them, his massive stone club at the ready. Judging from the worried glances shared between the three men, they had come to the same conclusion as Carmel. The predatory lizards were waiting for them near the ship. The bastards were as canny as they were vicious.

"Everyone close in tight," Darr commanded. "Landing team, take your positions around the perimeter, weapons set to kill. Not one of those bastards gets close enough to singe a boot, is that clear?"

"Aye, Commander," they replied in unison and closed in around the refugees.

When it came, the attack was ferocious, with the ash gray lizards swarming out of every available crevice. The landing team crowded the exiles together and crouched around them, picking off their attackers as fast as they came at them, slowly working their way toward the ship, where more awaited them.

"What the fuck?" Carmel snarled. "Did the whole iguana population decide to join in this little dance?"

Off to her side and behind her, Melia barked a laugh. "They just wanted a taste of newlywed meat, I guess," she teased.

Carmel bared her teeth in a snarling grin, the adrenaline coursing through her veins readying her for combat. "Yeah? Well, the only person getting a taste of that newlywed meat is me." She aimed her weapon and vaporized a large lizard.

On and on, the aggressive predators came, pissing fire from beneath their slashing, razor-sharp tails. One came perilously close to a pretty young woman, and Carmel fried him.

"Take that you sadistic gecko," she growled, then grinned at the girl.

"Thank you, my sister," the girl called, returning her grin.

Thankfully, the ship came into sight, and while the fight continued to escalate, they inched closer and closer, slowly clearing the way. Sweat dripped down Carmel's face. Her clothes clung to her skin, and she knew the others were experiencing the same. Dehydration was quickly setting in, and it would hamper their efforts if they didn't get everyone on board soon. One of the older refugees stumbled, and Carmel reached for her, steadying her. In the second it took for her to help the woman, the attack simply ceased. She blinked the sweat from her eyes, disbelieving.

Na'ram triggered the switch to open the ship's cargo bay, and the ramp extended out to admit them into the coolness of the cargo hold.

"Hurry," Darr said. "Everyone on board before more of them come."

Melia and Carmel herded them on board, making them as comfortable as possible, making sure everyone was securely fastened to a jump seat.

Melia stepped onto the ramp and urged the stragglers along as Na'ram took the helm and fired the engines.

And then it happened. As she made her way up the ramp, the young woman she'd just saved close behind her and Darr guarding the rear, a huge gray figure leaped from the top of the ship, launching itself at Darr. He went down with a grunt, wrestling with the giant lizard as its sharp-toothed jaw snapped at his throat.

"Darr!" Carmel screamed, shoving the girl aside. The damned thing was trying to kill him, and she couldn't get a shot without hitting her husband.

To her everlasting horror, the monstrous reptile sank its jaws into Darr's shoulder, and he screamed in agony, trying to roll away and dislodge the creature. The tail slashed at him, slicing into his protective suit, splitting his skin. Blood splashed with each whip of its tail. Carmel launched herself at it, dagger in hand, and a blood-chilling war cry splitting the air.

She landed on the creature's back, hacking and stabbing as it tried to dislodge her, but it couldn't unseat her. Liquid spurted from its wounds, burning her hands, and still she kept slashing and chopping. She didn't recognize the enraged screams as her own until a strong pair of hands grasped her and pulled her off. Her father.

"It's dead, Carmel," he said firmly. "Come on to the ship and let us see to your hands."

"Darr...where?"

"They took him on board. He's gravely wounded, child. You must be brave now."

"No, no, he can't die." But she knew he could. There'd been so much blood, and that horrible bite to his shoulder.

The ramp was retracting as Carmel made her way to where her husband lay, cradled in his brother's arms. The young woman she'd protected from attack unbuckled herself from her seat and hurried to Darr.

"Put him down and let someone tend your wounds, ranger, while I tend this man," she ordered Na'ram.

"Who the hell are you?" Na'ram growled.

"I am called Selema, and I'm a Udyean healer," she said. "Now lay him down and step off."

Na'ram clung tighter. "Udyean witch is more like it," he spat. "You will not touch my brother."

The girl folded her arms over her chest and glared. "Then he will die, foolish one. Will you not put your prejudice aside to save your brother's life?"

Carmel shoved her way to Darr's side. "Do as she says, Na'ram. If she can keep him alive until we reach the *Darkshadow*, we can get him in the medi-unit."

He must have seen the fear and pain in her eyes, because he eased Darr down to the floor of the cargo bay and backed away. "Please," Carmel begged. "Don't let him die."

Selema reached for her burned hands, and Carmel hissed in pain, then gasped as the pain went away. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it. Where her hands had been blistered and raw, the old skin began to slough off, revealing fresh pink skin. The pain was almost completely gone. Relief washed through her.

Selema nodded. "Now, we must remove his garments so I can touch his wounds. I can keep him alive long enough to get him to the ship, but his injuries are severe, and I will weaken if we linger too long. We must hurry."

Carmel nodded and looked at Na'ram. "On the way."

Carmel helped Selema remove Darr's protective suit, then his flight suit. Her throat nearly closed up when she saw the extent of his injuries. He was bleeding from

more than a dozen deep, slashing wounds, but the worst was the injury to his shoulder. A huge chunk of flesh was folded back, and blood continued to flow freely.

Between the two of them, they poured water over Darr's damaged flesh, cleaning away the blood so Selema could get a better idea of what she needed to do. Each time she touched an injured part of his body, Darr groaned in pain.

Carmel moved around and cradled his head in her lap, crooning to him. "It's all right, baby. Everything is going to be all right." She looked up and met her mother's pained eyes, shaking her head. "You can't die on me, Darr. You promised me you'd never leave me, and I'm holding you to that promise." She stroked his face gently. "Besides, you owe me a wedding night and a trip to someplace tropical. You'll see to it that I get both, or there'll be hell to...p-pay."

She was overjoyed when he opened his eyes. "Make you...pay for...being so...sassy, wife."

Tears coursed down Carmel's face as she leaned down. "I'll happily pay every day, for the rest of my life, if only you'll stay with me."

"Not...going...anywhere," he whispered.

They were the last words she would hear from him for some time to come.

* * * * *

Carmel sat in a chair next to Darr's bed, reading to him from a book of Premarian poetry. Ejan had left it there while he took his turn at Darr's bedside. She looked up to see her brother-in-law enter the room.

"Carmel, you must eat something," Na'ram said, setting a tray of food on the table next to her chair.

"I'm not hungry," she said with a shake of her head.

He hovered over her, hands on his hips, scowling. "You're getting thinner by the day. He won't like it when he wakes to find you in such a condition." He looked up, his frown increasing when he saw Selema coming out of the bathroom.

"Leave her in peace, ranger," the young woman said. "She'll eat when she's ready and not before."

Na'ram snorted. "I question your ability as a healer, woman. My brother lays helpless in his bed while his woman starves herself to death."

Carmel shuttered her eyes and watched as the two challenged one another. She liked the Udyean healer and thought her a good match for Na'ram. She suspected the attraction between them was mutual, as it had been between her and Darr, only neither was willing to admit it. She set her book aside and curled up into the deep chair, watching as she pretended to drift to sleep.

Selema snorted. "She is not starving herself to death, ignorant oaf. I've been giving her supplements with my special drinks. She is getting plenty of nutrition."

"Supplements, special drinks. What good is any of that if she wastes away to skin and bones?"

Selema looked him up and down. "She is no more skin and bones than you are, ranger, and you seem healthy enough to me." When he sputtered, about to protest, she held out her hands. "Let me see your hand."

"What?" He took a step back.

"Your hand, Tharkian. I would see how your wound has healed."

"It's fine," he grumbled.

She took a step toward him. "Show it to me, or I will go to your captain and have him order it. He, at least, appreciates my healing skills and is not afraid of me."

Carmel stifled a laugh. Oh, that comment would get under his skin. And it did.

Na'ram thrust out his hand and practically growled. "I am not afraid of you, woman. If you think I am, you've been indulging in one too many of your special drinks."

Selema gave an impatient huff, blowing her bangs out of her face. She turned Na'ram's hand over and pressed at a livid red weal on his palm. He hissed in pain and barked, "Damn it, woman. Watch what you do!"

Selema merely smiled smugly. "It is as I thought. The ridge of the inferno iguana's tail consists of sharp, hollow bones. When one is grabbed, a poison is injected beneath the skin. That is what is causing the redness and pain. Had you let me tend you at the site, as Carmel did, you wouldn't be having this problem now." She led him to the other chair in the room and gave him a shove to make him sit down. "I'll have to drain it before I can heal it."

"Drain it how?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, by lancing it, of course. Surely you are not afraid of a little beam knife, a big strong man such as yourself."

Carmel pressed her lips together, struggling to keep her laughter inside. She had to admit Na'ram had it coming. Since he and Darr had become close, the young ranger practically had testosterone oozing from his pores. Selema was just what he needed to keep him from becoming impossibly bossy.

"I am not afraid of you or your little blade, woman. Do your worst."

Carmel almost lost it then, when Selema replied, "And so I shall, ranger," then casually laid his hand open.

Na'ram bellowed indignantly, "That hurt, damn you. You did that on purpose!"

Carmel opened her eyes and watched the sparks fly between the two. It was anyone's bet as to who would tame whom.

Selema smiled placidly. "Of course I did it on purpose. There is no other way to lance an abscess but for purposely." She poured some liquid on the open wound to clean out the infection, then pressed her palm over it.

"You know what I meant, woman," Na'ram grumbled. "You made it hurt on purpose. You could have used your —"

"Witchcraft?" Selema said.

"Your healing powers," he said between clenched teeth. "You could have used your healing powers to ease the discomfort."

Selema offered him another pretty smile. "Why, yes, I could have, but then I would have been denied the pleasure of seeing you act like a big baby."

Na'ram inhaled sharply, the insult he felt plain for all to see. "You go too far, woman!" he roared.

And then the one thing Carmel wanted more than anything in her life happened. Darr opened his eyes and said, "Oh, I don't know about that, brother. It would seem she hasn't gone far enough, or you wouldn't be in such an ill temper."

Carmel screeched with joy and hurled herself from the chair. "You're back! I knew you would never leave me," she said, leaning over to kiss him.

"And you were right, my love." He turned and looked at Na'ram and Selema. "Now, why don't the two of you go work out your differences in another room so I can greet my wife properly?"

When the door shut behind them, Darr scooted over in the bed and pulled Carmel down next to him, holding her close as he kissed her.

"You know," Carmel said, when they came up for air, "when I decided to break you out of that prison, I did it because I thought you had nothing left to lose by going with me. Now, I can't imagine my life without you. So, no more injuries."

Darr chuckled and smoothed his hand down her back to squeeze her bottom. "You were right at the time, my love. But it seems I had one thing left to lose."

"What?"

"Why, my heart, of course," he said. "I lost it to you the moment I discovered you'd landed that little ship of yours right in the middle of the exercise yard, bold as brass. And now I really do have nothing left to lose, because all that I am, is yours."

THE END

India Masters

India refers to herself as an old, Southern hippie. She is happily divorced with no intention of rectifying the situation because sometimes she can barely stand her own company, much less someone else. She has one grown daughter who she still refers to as “Doodle,” and lives in a rapidly developing rural area in Florida where she shares her domain with all manner of wildlife, a swimming pool that is a breeding ground for a seemingly virulent strain of algae, and a black snake that likes to surprise her when she turns on the outdoor faucet and picks up the black water hose.

India developed a love for writing while earning her B.A. in Criminal Justice from a northern college. She refers to herself as a late bloomer, as she married late, gave birth late, and got started writing late in life. She developed her love for all things quirky from doing psychiatric social work in both the community and corrections fields. She has always loved a good romance novel but found them lacking because all the good stuff was cloaked in euphemisms or happened behind closed doors. It wasn't until she joined a critiquing group that she discovered romantic erotica, and her first book, *The Soul Collector*, was born. She credits her success to the caring support of the women—and one, lone man—in her critique group, but especially to one member who took her under her wing and helped her learn everything from point of view to manuscript formatting.