



The Adventures of Cassie Nova

Book 1:

Rebel Queen

Mimi Riser

Amber Quill Press

www.amberquill.com

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THE ADVENTURES OF CASSIE NOVA

BOOK I:

REBEL QUEEN

By

MIMI RISER

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REBEL QUEEN

Smug son of a bitch, wasn't he? All hard, cold edges and planes, like a piece of chiseled rock. One fast chase and he thought he had her. He didn't know she'd let him win.

Her breath tight in her chest, Cassandra Nova studied the image in the view-screen. It might have been yesterday she'd last seen him. How little Jax had changed in four years. Still wore his ebony hair long and loose, still the same savage glint in his ice-blue eyes. The only difference was the Federal Starforce captain's uniform stretched taut over his muscular form. Ironic garb for a former pirate. Then again, maybe not, since the Federation's troops were the worst pirates of all.

Her stomach knotted as he made the expected demand.

"Give it up, Cassie. We both know I outclass you in size, weaponry, and speed. You can't fight me, and you can't escape."

Even mixed with the crackle of the ship-to-ship telecom static, his husky voice brought a rush of damp heat burning between her thighs. *Bastard*. He might be right, but not the way he thought. She could outmaneuver his cruiser easily enough. But the man who captained it...

No matter how hard she hit, how far or fast she ran, she'd never escape the memory of those stolen hours in Jaxon Colby's embrace. In true pirate fashion, he'd plundered her virginity and kindled flames no lover since had been able to equal or quench.

Then he'd marooned her in the armpit of the galaxy while he sold out her father to the Feds and, in the process, almost squashed the whole frigging rebellion. She might have forgiven him—eventually—for what he did to her, but she'd nail his traitorous ass to the wall for the rest of it.

With a cool smile, she met his gaze in the view-screen. She was damned if she'd let him see the volcano he stirred within her. "Fuck you, Jax."

His sensuous mouth curved into a wicked grin. "Sounds good to me. Will you do the honors, kitten?"

Kitten? Tiny curved blades popped out of Cassie's fingertips. Her father had been one-hundred percent Terran stock, but her mother was one of the old Empire's biogenetic experiments. The retractable claws, pearly white and razor sharp, were her legacy, along with the acute senses and agility that came from splicing feline DNA to human—all of which made the old pet-name something of a sore spot.

Not that she was ashamed of her family tree, but the fact there were a few tabbies sitting on its branches marked her a lesser entity in the eyes of the pure-bred human elite. Three long years of slavery had hammered home that lesson. Jax damn well knew it, too. Destroying her father, herself, and the future of the galaxy wasn't enough for him, apparently. He had to insult her, as well. The man wasn't just evil. He was an idiot. Hell, he was making this almost too easy.

Her cool smile turned glacial. "No thanks, Jax. I had that 'honor' once, remember? Not something I care to repeat. It took me weeks to wash off your stink back then."

Liar. She'd loved how he smelled, warm and musky and all male. Her nostrils flared at the memory. Sudden desire stabbed her, sharp and hot. Goddess help her, but she wanted to inhale him again—now—to touch him, taste him, tantalize him. Simultaneous revenge and release. She wanted to rub her naked body over his, their skin glistening and slick with the sweat of arousal—wanted to suck his cock deep into her mouth and even deeper into her cunt, drive him mad the way he'd tortured her. Licking, stroking, savoring ... Then she'd claw his back and scream out four years of agony and frustration while he fucked her blind—

The ship shuddered around her.

The fantasy snapped.

And not a moment too soon. Shit, she'd almost come right here on the bridge. What a stupid waste of energy, especially now when they needed every ounce of power. That shudder was a tractor-beam locking onto them. An *electromag-gravity beam*, if she wasn't mistaken. Unbreakable. She ought to know—her father had invented the damn thing.

"Gotcha." Jax's voice buzzed over the telecom, sounding husker than usual. He looked like he'd guessed her thoughts, blast him—looked like he approved of her fantasy and had a few embellishments of his own to add to it. His eyes half closed and his lips parted as he ran the tip of his tongue over them, as though he already tasted her in his mouth.

Cassie creamed her pants. Holy frigging hell, the man was a walking hard-on. She clenched her jaw, cutting short an orgasm before she exploded in front of him. All in good time...

Her gaze slanted to the digital counter on her console, its minutes ticking downward in milliseconds. Her heart jumped. *Shit*. They had to get a move on. Damn Jax for being so fucking distracting. He'd thrown her off schedule.

"I'm taking you in, Cassie. You're my prisoner." Somehow he made it sound like a threat and a promise at the same time. "Surrender peacefully and it'll go a lot easier on you and your crew."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say." Quick as a cat, another perk of her gene pool, she retracted her claws and punched in on her control panel the code that reversed the electromagnetic charge of her ship's hull. Then she flicked the lever to activate the change.

A new shudder shook her small craft. Through the view-screen, she saw the backlash of it strike Jax's large battle cruiser, vibrating the bridge around him. His brow wrinkled in sudden, wary confusion.

"Um, you might want to check your tow-line, Colby," she purred—literally. "Who's got whom, hmm?"

With her hull's charge flipped, he couldn't disengage his tractor-beam, and, with their ships tied together, he couldn't use his weapons against her or the energy build-up would boomerang down the beam to him. She waited a moment for all that to hit home, then muted the telecom's volume until he finished cursing.

Careful, Jax. Some of those terms could fry the communication circuits.

"Wanna play tug-of-war?" she asked.

The anger in his gaze cooled to grim amusement. "Your scout against my cruiser? That's not a war. It's a massacre."

"What's the matter? Afraid I'll win?" She gave him a wide smile, wide enough to show him the needle-like points of her small fangs.

He shot back a lethal grin. "You're the one who'd better be afraid, *kitten*. Knock off the games, or I'll drag you by your tail through every meteorite swarm en route. You'll be battered to a pulp by the time we reach a Federation port."

"Ho hum. I'm terrified." A point she demonstrated for him by languidly licking the backs of her hands and smoothing them over the silky, short fur that covered her head in place of hair.

Jax's expression hardened. If he remembered how sensuous the rasp of her tongue felt, something else on him was hardening as well. Or maybe he was thinking of the tiny triangle of matching fur she had at the juncture of her thighs. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Good. He'd be a lot more uncomfortable in a minute.

Cassie rose from her own seat. Time to show him what her ship could do, what *she* could do. "In case, you've forgotten, Jaxy, I don't have a tail."

Claws, pointed ears, and a few other feline characteristics, yes. But a tail? No. Her body looked human—a very curvy, very feminine human—and the training she'd received as a pleasure-slave had taught her how to display those curves for ultimate impact. The one-piece silver suit she wore didn't hurt, either. It might have been spray painted onto her. She felt his gaze rake over her like a heat-ray as she stretched

and arched her back so her tits jutted forward and her ass pushed out.

"Cassie—"

"Wait." She hushed him with a raised hand, then, in one fluid sequence of moves, unzipped her suit and shimmied out of it like a snake shedding its skin.

"See?" She swiveled to give him a rear view, and wiggled her bare buns.

Applause and whistles punctuated her performance, along with a vigorous thumping. One of her crewmembers did have a tail. Young Donell wagged a shaggy, blond one—*wap, wap, wap*—against the bulkhead, in excitement. He sported a high percentage of canine DNA, golden retriever, most likely. Such a boisterous breed. Cassie considered herself lucky he wasn't leaping all over and licking her face.

With her back to the view-screen, she faced him and the naked duo who stood waiting by the open hatch to the charge-chamber—littermates Taryn and Zaryn, feline-human blends like her, both of them sleek, fast, and lean-muscled, graceful as dancers and deadly as demons. Both grinning from ear to pointed ear as they glanced from Cassie to Jax's image over her shoulder. Her head hummed with their silent banter.

Something the biogenetic engineers had never realized was that all "dumb" animals could communicate telepathically with each other. The fruits of their DNA experiments inherited that natural ability, but had hidden it from their creators. Mind-talk was one of the few advantages the hybrids had in a

society where they were the slave class. For generations now, they and their offspring had guarded the secret.

::Colby's gone damn quiet all of a sudden, hasn't he?::

Taryn's reflective eyes gleamed with devilment.

Donell winked. *::Maybe the cat's got his tongue.::*

Zaryn gave them both an evil smirk. *::Looks to me like he's swallowed his tongue.::*

::Animals,:: Cassie reprimanded the three.

"Arf, arf," Donell said aloud.

::Very funny.:: She took a deep breath and braced herself for the coming event. *::You jokers ready?::*

Taryn let out a low, throaty chuckle, more purr than laughter. *::You're kidding, right?::*

Right. Stupid question. Tomcats lived for the Three Fs: fucking, fighting, and food—in that order. They were always ready, as evidenced now by the solid rods jutting out from the sleek, black mats of pubic fur at the base of their bellies. And Donell adored her with ... well, dog-like devotion, which made him the best choice to man the bridge while the rest of them created the energy boost necessary to blast both ships out of here.

::Stay,:: she ordered him when he started to unzip his suit and follow the twins into the charge-chamber. He forgot himself so easily, and batted such sad puppy eyes when he got caught. Cassie reached up to ruffle the blond thatch on his head. *::You know the game plan. One of us has to regulate the power-feed to the engines and fly this thing. I need you at the helm—just like we agreed. If we can capture*

a cruiser, it'll go a long way to showing the Feds we're a force to be reckoned with.::

Zaryn turned around in the open hatchway. *::That's right, boy. And bringing in the traitor who sold out Reimer Nova will be a big boost to our side's morale. We've been trolling the edge of this sector for too long, waiting for Colby's ship. He was late—or our inside info on his schedule was wrong. Whichever, let's not lose him now that he's here and has swallowed our bait.::*

He flashed Donell a taunting grin and pointed at the pilot's console. *::Sit.::* His arm snaked around Cassie's waist, drawing her with him into the cylinder-shaped chamber. *::You, too, lady-captain. On me.::*

::Cat-itude,:: Donell complained. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he moved to comply. *::And to think, just a century ago my ancestors were chasing his up trees. Oh, for the good old days.::*

But he knew his job. They all did. These past months of battling big odds together had molded Cassie and her small crew into a tight team. Goddess knew someone had to resurrect the rebellion after its lifeblood, Reimer Nova, had been captured and executed. Who better than the scientist's daughter? Once she'd escaped the pleasure-kennel, that was. Of course, there hadn't been much pleasure there for the "pets" ... just the patrons who paid the prison for their services.

Still, it was a learning experience. She'd make good use of its lessons, now. Maybe she should let Jax witness what he'd helped to create—a skilled whore in action. A "little slut of an

alley-cat," that's what the kennel-wardens had labeled her when she'd passed their tests with flying colors in order to survive.

Something squeezed in her chest, a tangible ache, like a fist, gripped her heart. She glanced over her shoulder, through the open hatchway. One last look at the dark figure who filled the broad view-screen on the bridge—the fierce Jaxon Colby, larger than life, glaring daggers at her as the hatchway slid shut.

At the same time, Zaryn pulled her snug against his front, and Taryn closed in from behind, sandwiching her between two hot bodies. They'd read her mind before she could mask the painful thoughts, one of the hazards of telepathy. Zaryn's purr of a voice kissed her ear as his hands stroked up and down her sides.

"You're no whore, Cass. An alley-cat's different. That's our bloodline, be proud of it. There's a good reason why female cats are called 'queens.'"

"Because cats have an inbred superiority complex?" Donell shouted from the bridge.

Poor boy was still smarting, wasn't he?

"Yeah, and female dogs are called bitches, aren't they? So we know what that makes you a son of," Taryn shouted back. "Just shut up and fly the ship. Open the viewing monitors in here for a ship-to-ship show. Our *queen* wants Colby to see what he's been missing. And I want him to see how real men love their women."

"Men? Under Federation law, we're animals, bro—and the Feds oughta know, since they're all beasts." Zaryn's lips

twisted into a snarl of a grin. "They thought they could turn a queen into a whore, did they? Colby's their true whore." He shot a wink at the audio-video sensors twinkling above them like tiny stars. "Keep those pretty blue eyes open, *whore*. We can't see you, but we'll enjoy this more knowing you're watching us. Right, kitties?"

"Mmm, you bet. I always perform better with an audience—especially a captive one." Taryn's deep purr vibrated against Cassie's spine as he laid a line of smoky kisses over her shoulder and up the nape of her neck. His hands dug between her and Zaryn and cupped her breasts, teased her nipples into tight peaks, while Zaryn clutched her hips and lowered his head to suck and nibble the soft flesh of her throat. In tandem, their erections ground against her belly and ass, hungry and eager.

Soon they'd plunge into her—together—lift and hold her between them, fill her fore and aft. They projected the image into her mind as part of the foreplay—a queen in a royal heat being serviced by two handsome, horny toms.

Cassie quivered under the sensual onslaught of their combined energy, and with the effort to screen her thoughts from them. The guys were good, but...

The ache in her increased.

She might hide it from them, but not herself. She'd enjoy this more if it were Jax's hands and mouth on her, his cock about to slide home. For all the care the twins took to arouse her, imagining the man they tormented, aroused her the most. To envision him out there in near space, trapped in his own tractor-beam, forced to watch them ... That was the

image that sent desire, sharp and raw, stabbing into her like a knife.

Her lips curled back, baring her fangs, and her breath released in a feral, feline hiss. Hot juice pooled between her thighs. Her claws popped out and raked over Zaryn's biceps and pectorals, leaving tiny red trails in their wake. An ordinary man might have groaned with pain, but cat-men expected that sort of behavior in a mating. A growl of pleasure rumbled deep in his chest as her raspy tongue lapped up the blood. Taryn's growl echoed the sound.

Hear that, Jax? Now watch me, you bastard. Look close...

She climbed Zaryn like a tree, wrapped her legs around his waist. Electric shivers struck as Taryn leaned in and bit down, holding her by the scruff of her neck in his teeth. Hard and fast, he entered her cunt from behind. Then, slick with her cream, he pulled out and pushed into her ass instead, while Zaryn's cock claimed the wet passage his brother had just vacated. In a steamy tumble they hit the padded deck of the chamber, clawing and hissing ... humping ... flesh pounding flesh. A furious, three-way fuck. The chamber glowed around them as it soaked up their energy. Their ship needed the power this joining generated.

And Cassie needed the revenge.

* * * *

Jaxon Colby needed a cold shower, a stiff drink, and one minute alone with Ambassador Boushk, out of uniform. Even half a minute, just long enough to stomp his sneering, fat face into jelly. The ambassador's deceptively beautiful

bodyguard, ice princess Ilana, was cruising for a bruising, too, but Jax didn't hit women. Usually. The one in his very large, very fancy, state-of-the-art view-screen, now ... *Damn it, Cassie, I am going to whip the hide off you.*

::Before or after you perform sexual intercourse upon her?::

::None of your business,:: he answered the metallic voice in his mind. Goddess, he hated that implant, but it came with his captainship. In theory, the microcomputer wired into his brain, through the base of his skull, was there to provide data and advice that helped with command decisions. However, it could also read and record his surface thoughts—one of the Federation's ways of monitoring their officers' loyalty level. They couldn't tap into it while he was in space, but anytime he hit a port, he could be called in for a "download" by the top brass.

So far, he'd managed to read clean, but only because he had the skill to hack into the device and erase any potentially incriminating bits. Unfortunately, the hacking process took time and meticulous care, and left him with a raging headache—kind of like the one he had now to go with his raging hard-on.

How the hell was he supposed to sit here and think clearly while, before him, Cassie fucked two lean, mean cat-men at once? In raunchy, raw, 3-D living color, no less. Through a red haze he stared. If only he could close his eyes or look away, but the scene held him hypnotized, filled him with fire, the deep burn of desire and jealousy combined.

Pure torture. The infamous porn-vids of the Hermaphrodosians didn't show this much detail. He could count the beads of sweat on her skin, see the sheen of her juice on the males' dicks as they sliced in and out of her swollen pussy and tight ass, see her muscles contract with the thrusts—hear each hiss, every growl and gasp.

Damn, but he could almost smell her and taste her. His own dick ached for a piece of the action. More than a piece. He wanted *all* of her—wanted to shred the men who'd taken his place. *She's mine.*

Well, she had been. Once. His body remembered too well how she felt—too much. The grip of supple thighs at his waist, the slick heat of her core ... soft breasts crushed against his chest, his tongue tangled with hers ... So sweet, so hot, so open to his touch.

Woman, have mercy ... Much more and he'd explode in his pants.

::You must calm yourself, Captain. Try breathing deeply and reciting the Gettysburg Address,:: the brain-chip suggested.

::The Gettys ... what?::

::Wait a moment and I shall locate a modern translation of the text for you. It is an ancient Terran document, said to be a speech written by—::

::Never mind. I don't want to hear it.::

::Perhaps if I projected images of polar icecaps into your mind?::

::Project yourself into a black hole.::

::I was only trying to help,:: the thing said with the electronic equivalent of a sniff.

Terrific, an AI with an attitude—one thing he didn't need.

::It would help if you'd shut up.:: But not much. Nothing could help, really, with Ambassador Boushk aboard as an eyewitness. Short of murdering the man, there was no way to cover up this confrontation, no chance to make it seem other than what it was. A rebel attack. Like it or not, he had to do his duty as a loyal captain of the Galactic Federation. There was too much at stake.

Jax clenched his teeth. *Cassie, why the devil didn't you stay on Beta-3 where I put you?* Yeah, it was a grimy, backwater world, off the main trade routes, but that's exactly why she would have been safe there.

::I know why she left—or how, at least. There is a full report on it within the Federation's file on Cassandra Nova. However, since you wish me to 'shut up,' I shall not disturb you with the data at my disposal.::

::Wait—wait a minute. What data? What do you know about this?::

::Sorry, o' surly one, I must close down now for a self-maintenance scan. My circuits are very weary.::

::Computers don't get tired, you idiot.::

::They do if they have to share your brain. Nighty-night, Jaxon. Good luck without me.::

"Bitch," Jax muttered under his breath. It was times like this that tinny voice in his head sounded way too feminine.

"I beg your pardon, Captain, were you speaking to me?"

No, but I could have been. Talk about a bitch. Jax pretended not to hear the statuesque, platinum blonde who stood to his left. He'd already heard more from Ilana Elcici this trip than his stomach could handle. Such a pity. Six feet worth of voluptuous feminine curves wasted on someone with the personality of a piranha.

A bodyguard? A trained assassin was more like it, a cold-blooded killer. The woman had a face and figure that screamed "fuck me," but any man who tried it would no doubt lose his prick to frostbite. She gave new meaning to the term "frigid." You could see it in her emerald eyes—beautiful, but then so were ice crystals. The only difference was that ice was warmer. The chill she exuded made the scene frying his view-screen seem all the more tempting, made him want to bury himself in Cassie's heat just to thaw out.

"Of course he wasn't speaking to you, Ilana." Standing to Jax's right, Ambassador Boushk chuckled, all oozy smooth, a walking, talking oil slick. "There's only one bitch aboard. Right, Sabelle?"

He jerked on the chain leash he held in his left hand. Its other end attached to a metal collar around the neck of a young animal-woman who knelt by his feet, between him and Jax. Other than the collar, all she wore was a scrap of a skirt around her hips, and angry, red, lash stripes crisscrossed over her bare back and breasts.

"Right?" Boushk gave another vicious tug on the leash, so the collar bit into Sabelle's throat.

"Yes, Master." She crouched closer to Jax's command-chair, not cowering, but an obvious knee-jerk reaction to put

more inches between herself and the ambassador. Even a fool could see she hated him. And, whatever else he was, her master was no fool.

He dropped the leash and buried his pudgy fingers under the back of her collar—yanked her head up and back to force her attention on the view-screen. "Watch the pretty kitties, *bitch*, and learn something. If you could just get it through that thick, stupid skull of yours how to please me better, I wouldn't have to beat you so much."

"I try, Master." The words came out on a sharp breath, a choking noise with an underlying hint of a growl. "But what you wish of me is not in my nature. I was not bred to be a bed-bitch. I am a guard."

"Guard-dog, and overly proud of it, I'm afraid. However, I already have a bodyguard, and a very capable one. I don't need another." Boushk's gaze slanted from Ilana to Jax. His mouth twisted in a sneer. "Sabelle's previous owner did warn me she might be difficult to retrain, but I've never yet had a pet I couldn't whip into shape, and I liked her lines—so regal and sleek. She comes from wolfhound stock I was told."

You were told wrong, Jax thought, but he kept the comment to himself. Sabelle carried canine DNA, but none of it was hound, or any other kind of dog. The girl's animal genes were pure wolf. It was evident in the thick, silvery fur on her head, the flash of untamed fire in her eyes. Ambassador Asshole had best be wary, or this "pet" would rip out his jugular some night. There was a reason so few wolf-people had ever been created. They were almost impossible to subjugate.

"Perhaps next time I'll buy a cat. Such sensual creatures." Hungrily, Boushk stared at the screen. He licked his thick lips. "I believe I'd better personally interrogate this Cassandra Nova, once we've reeled her in. The big question is"—his brow furrowed—"why we're not doing that, Captain Colby. She had the audacity to attack us, a Federation starship. We chased her. We caught her. The tractor-beam is intact, isn't it? You told me even we can't break it now." A razor-edge of suspicion sharpened his tone. "So why don't we just fucking tow her?"

As much as he wanted to rip out the man's jugular himself, Jax had to admit Boushk had a point. He shot a look at his chief engineer, across the bridge. "Care to answer that, Mr. Kraas?"

"Ahem..." Kraas cleared his throat. "Because, um ... she's towing us, sir."

Shit. Jax was afraid he'd say something like that. He'd felt the drag-tremors shake his hull when the sex show began, but had hoped it was just his own inner tremors as his pulse rocketed with the mind-melting sight of Cassie in carnal action. How in blue blazes could a scout ship tow a cruiser?

"Accelerate!" he shouted to Kraas. "Pull back!"

"I've already given it everything I can, sir. The call to pick up Ambassador Boushk took us light-years off our planned course. We were running on reserve energy as it was. Any more thrust and we'll drain the generator and lose life-support. Our power-packs can't recharge this fast."

"No, but whatever is powering that scout can." Tall and slim, science officer Mirek-Mira rose from her station.

Or should that be *his* station? Jax was never sure how to refer to Hermaphrodosians. They were an even blend of female and male, with the full sexual apparatus of both, and double the sexual appetite. Half man, half woman, and all sizzle. He suppressed a wince as the coppery-skinned, bronze-haired Mir moved to stand between him and Ilana, and rested a graceful, warm hand on his shoulder. An unconscious gesture for a Herm—touching was a large part of their culture—but more warmth right now was the last thing Jax needed.

"Fascinating. They must have an F-drive," Mir said, "such as my people developed and used before the device was banned."

Yeah, outlawed because F-drives in the hands of the Herms gave them too much power. And the all-humans who controlled the Galactic Federation didn't care for anyone having much power except them, did they? The fact he was an all-human had never made the chauvinism of the ruling elite sit any easier with Jax.

::I heard that. Captain, I must caution you those are questionable thoughts.::

::Fine. Consider me cautioned. What the hell do you care what I'm thinking, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be busy with your 'self-maintenance scan'?::

::Correction. I am trying to run a scan. If you think it is easy with your brainwaves buzzing about one like—::

::Fuck you,:: Jax cut it off.

::I wish,:: his implant said with what sounded almost like a sigh.

What the...? Jax shook his head. That thing in his mind was getting stranger and stranger.

"An F-drive?" Ilana frowned. "What does the 'F' stand for? 'Fusion'?"

"Of a sort." Mir gave her a slow, smoky grin. "The fusion of hot flesh. Fucking, to put it bluntly and specifically. F-drives are fueled by sexual energy. For races like mine, with an abundance of such energy, they can provide tremendous force. I could offer you a personal demo, if you desire further explanation. Actions speak so much louder than words, don't you think?"

The Herm ran a forefinger up Ilana's arm. Jax marveled the woman didn't snap it off Mir's hand.

"Don't touch me. Ever," she whispered like a breath of arctic air. "All I *desire* is that you explain how we're going to stop these renegades. Or are we supposed to sit here, twiddling our thumbs, while they tow us to who knows where?"

"Well, I did suggest a more interesting way to pass the time, but if you prefer thumb twiddling..." Mir shrugged and blinked slanted eyes the color of midnight. "I doubt they'll be able to tow us far, and, in the interim, we're in little danger. There's a crew of five hundred on this ship, and only four of them, according to our scanners. It's not like they're going to transport over and take us hostage."

You hope, Jax thought. Mir didn't know Cassie the way he did. If she wanted to capture this cruiser, she'd finish the job, or die trying. Somehow he had to prevent her from doing both.

"So your recommendation is...?" he asked Mir.

"Two options, Captain. One, we gun the engines and drain the power, which would dissolve the tractor-beam, as there'd be nothing to keep it going at that point. Of course, there'd be nothing to keep us going either, since we'd lose life-support as well."

Herm humor. *Ha-ha*. "That's not much of an option."

"No, I didn't think so, either. That leaves us with number two. We wait. It will require approximately one point one space-hours to rebuild enough energy to do anything more than maintain life-support systems ... and the T-beam, which we're stuck with for the moment. However, once our power-packs have recharged sufficiently, we can transport a team to the scout and take control. I expect they'll have run out of steam by then. F-drives are only as good as the people who fuel them. That trio is good, but they are not Hermaphrodosians, after all."

"Unacceptable!" Anger stained Boushk's face a deep red. "I want them stopped now! How do we know they're not towing us into a trap?"

"With all due respect, Ambassador, what sort of trap do you envision in such a barren sector?" Mir met the outburst with a calm stare, the picture of exotic poise—such enigmatic blends of logic and sensuality, the Herms were. "I can assure you our scanners have registered no life-readings on any of the surrounding asteroids, nor is there another ship within light-years."

"Which makes the presence of this scout all the more suspicious," Ilana said. Her eyes narrowed to emerald slits.

"What do they think they're going to do with a class-A cruiser?"

"Hang on to it as long as they can, I presume." Mir chuckled. "I doubt they ever intended to capture us in the first place—just hit and run. Harassment. Most likely, their locking the tractor-beam was a defensive maneuver, to keep us from using our weapons, which makes the towing an act of pure desperation. They've got a tiger by the tail, and don't dare let go."

Flecks of foam appeared at the corners of Boushk's mouth. He was losing it—not just angry, but apparently scared. "What they've got is a Galactic Federation starship, whose computer, like *all* government computers, holds important Federation data. We can't risk it falling into rebel hands!"

"Small danger there, sir. Animals aren't known for their tech skills." Ilana tried to soothe, but it wasn't her forte. Overall, she was as soothing as ground glass. "Even if they managed to hack the system, there'd be little they could do with whatever they discovered, the imbeciles. They haven't the forces. The real rebellion ended with Reimer Nova's death, didn't it? He was the glue who held them together. Left to their own devices, the pet breeds battle among themselves ... like cats and dogs."

A glacial grin touched her lips. "All we've been dealing with since are the ragged remains—a few, scattered *gorilla fighters*, if you'll pardon the pun."

Ilana Elcici attempting a joke? *Goddess spare me*. Jax hoped he didn't barf.

The ice princess should have saved her breath. Her boss cared squat for the computer banks—he feared for himself in rebel hands. As a high ranking Fed official, Boushk couldn't hope for pleasant treatment. Neither could Jax, but that was the least of his concerns, with a rabid ambassador snarling in his ear, Cassie fucking in his face, and the fate of the galaxy slipping through his fingers like sand.

Ilana was right, unfortunately. And wrong, which was even more unfortunate. The hybrids did have difficulty working together without a solid leader, though Jax suspected it was due more to their human side than their animal, human ego being what it was. However, there'd been a stronger cohesiveness in the rebel attacks of late. They were gaining momentum again. He should have guessed Cassie was behind it. If anyone had the spark to rekindle the rebellion, it was Reimer's kitten. Damn her.

::Cassandra Nova could destroy that which her father has labored to achieve?::

Jax's back hairs prickled with weirdness. If he didn't know better, he'd swear that brain-chip sounded sympathetic.

::Yeah. Unless I can figure a way to salvage this situation,:: he answered it.

::And, if you are successful, I suppose you will delete all your recent thoughts from my memory files.::

::In a heartbeat.::

::Then I shall savor them while they are still mine.::

An electronic hiss, like a sigh, whispered in Jax's mind. What the hell was the matter with that thing?

"Captain Colby!" Boushk's sharp tone knifed into the brooding. "I order you to stop those animals. Now!"

He punctuated the demand by kicking Sabelle in the side—probably because the glint in Jax's eyes warned him that if he struck the captain, the captain would strike back. Dumb fuck. It never occurred to him, apparently, Sabelle might strike harder.

In a blur of motion, she was on her feet and on the ambassador, her fangs bared and a wicked length of chain stretched taut between her hands—one hundred and twenty pounds of savage wolf mixed with a very pissed off young woman. Of the two, the latter was probably the more lethal.

Boushk was dead before he hit the deck, his neck snapped, his windpipe crushed—garroted by his "pet's" leash.

"He is lucky I killed him quickly." Eyes blazing, the wolf-girl stood over his body and faced down the staring crew on the bridge. A growl of challenge rumbled in her chest. "I warned him I was not one to be beaten and raped. I am a trained warrior!"

"You're a toasted warrior now, bitch." As fast as Sabelle had struck, Ilana's hand flashed out with a high-powered laser-pistol.

Faster, Mir's long fingers locked around her wrist.

But not fast enough.

Jax smelled the scorch of his own hair as a wild shot beamed past his ear.

"Shit! We're all toast." Where the shot hit didn't matter. With the power-packs in charge mode, the energy balance was unstable. One blast hitting *any* of the main controls could

start a chain-reaction electrical short that would sweep through the cruiser's circuitry like wildfire. And when it reached the generator ... "The crazy bitch is going to blow up the ship."

And he didn't mean Sabelle, who lunged past him on a beeline for Ilana's throat. He dove out of his chair to block her charge, and the two of them went down on top of Mir and Ilana—a four-way rolling tangle of arms and legs.

"I'd enjoy this more if we were naked," Mir muttered.

Jax grunted. "I'd enjoy it more if you'd get your knee out of my nuts."

"Sorry, Captain, there's not much room to maneuver here."

Tell me about it. He was pinned under Mir, who was pinned under Sabelle and Ilana, who were grappling to rip out each other's guts. Around them, crewmen shouted, and consoles hissed and crackled. Sparks showered the air. Then the lights snapped out and the bridge plunged into blackness. The central computer sounded a shrill alarm.

Double shit. "Kraas! Damage report! How long do we have?"

But Kraas didn't answer. No one did. Or, if they tried, Jax couldn't hear them. He'd gone deaf as well as blind, it seemed. Senseless. No sight, no sound, no feeling but a thrumming vibration inside and out, which grew and grew. His body shook, breaking apart, his atoms scattering...

He was dying.

That he recognized the sensation and knew he'd be resurrected didn't make it any easier to bear. He hated these

seconds before death and rebirth ... the awful nothingness, so silent, so alone...

::You are not alone, Captain. I am here.::

::Thanks. That's a great comfort.::

::You do not have to be so sarcastic. I am as wary of transporters as you are. Their simplistic grade-C brains rarely read me as an anatomical part of you, and thus cannot be trusted to reconstruct me in the proper location. Do you remember when one put me in your nose?::

::I still have nightmares about it.::

::I, also. I wonder what place I shall end up this time.::

::You and me both.:: Who was beaming him off his sinking ship, and to where?

Cassie's scout?

It had to be her. No one else was in range. But why this rescue when she must hate him? The tractor-beam would have dissolved when the circuits fried. There was nothing to hold her. Why didn't she just get the hell away, and leave him to die for real? He was done for anyway.

And now, damn it, so was she.

* * * *

"Cassie?" A sliver of panic raised Donell's voice a half octave. "We got trouble. The T-beam just broke, and scanners register a massive electrical imbalance on the cruiser. I, um"—he gulped, loudly—"I think it's going to explode."

"Fuck." Taryn's growl rumbled against Cassie's back. "And after all the work we put into catching it."

"You said it, bro. Fuck. Literally. We need more power, and fast." Zaryn revved up his own action. "Donell, hit the boosters—full speed!"

"No! Not without Jax." Cassie clawed her way out from between them. "Donell, how long do they have?"

"Five, maybe six minutes, gauging by the energy flux. Without knowing what caused the problem, I can't tell for sure."

She sucked in a deep breath. One minute was all they needed to beam Jax off the ship. "Okay, then stand-by on the boosters. I'm coming out to run the transporter."

Zaryn caught her by the ankle as she sprang for the hatch. "There's no time. We're too close. At this range, when the bastards blow, they'll take us with them. I'm willing to die *for* you, baby, but not with you—not like this. It's stupid. We *have* to get out of here. How are we supposed to generate the force for that without you?"

"Jerk off or fuck each other—I don't care. Just let go of me. If you're worried about time, you're wasting it right now." She kicked free from his hold. "Jax isn't getting away this easily. Nothing is going to kill him. Except me."

Heart hammering, she slapped her palm against a small, red panel in the bulkhead—the sensor-lock that slid back the hatch—then burst through the opening. The hatch shut behind her, muting Taryn and Zaryn's protests.

"It's no use." Donell grabbed her arm as she reached around him to power up the transporter. "I just ran a life-reading scan of their bridge, but I can't get a clear bead on Colby. Three others appear to be nearby—real near—like on

top of him, is how it reads. You'll never be able to separate him from the rest. It's like he's in the middle of some kind of fight."

"That figures." If there was a battle to be had anywhere, you could bet Jax would find his way to the center of it. Cassie pursed her lips together for a grim moment, fighting her own inner war. Zaryn was right; they ought to run while they could. Her mind said that was the smart thing to do.

But the rest of her had never been very smart where Jaxon Colby was concerned.

She shook off Donell's hand, and pressed the two-button sequence that readied the transporter for beaming. Her finger hovered over a third, which would activate the beam the instant the target coordinates were set. "Feed in his reading. We'll just have to haul over the whole fucking bunch—Jax and whoever comes with him."

"Super. Four Feds to corral. While we try to boost out of here without getting torched." Donell complied with her order, but he didn't sound happy about it. Frowning, he yanked a blaster-rod from his weapons belt and set it on "stun" as a patch of air inches above the deck started to shimmer and coalesce into a tangle of bodies.

Cassie's eyes widened with a jolt of fear. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to knock them senseless the second they're solid."

"Like hell. You might kill them. Their atoms can't handle the stress of a stun so soon after transport. This is war, not murder."

::Tell that to the Feds. They've slaughtered us in droves,::
Taryn mind-spoke through the shut hatch. *::Blast them and have done with it, Cass. You wanted to kill Colby, anyway.::*

::Not this fast. I want him tried for treason first.::

::With you the judge, jury, and executioner?::

"Yes." She said it aloud to convince herself she meant it. And stood rooted to her spot by the sight before her—figures heaped on top of each other, almost formed, just a slight glow about the top ones that blurred the scene so she couldn't tell who they were, yet. But she knew who lay at the bottom.

Jax...

In touching distance, again, after so long ... years of yearning and hurt.

She couldn't see him, buried as he was beneath the others, but she could smell him. His warm, sexy scent filled her like a drug, awoke memories that had been branded into her flesh as much as her mind—remembrance on a cellular level. She felt his body pressed against hers, all hot, hard muscles and demand, the raw rasp of callused palms on her skin, the silky smooth thrust of his cock...

Her gut clenched, and she broke out in a sweat. Goddess, this was going to be rougher than she'd thought.

Donell aimed the blaster. "We have to chance it. I can't play guard and fly the ship both, and you've got to get back to the charge-chamber or we won't have enough speed to make it out of here in time."

::Yeah, baby, and you better get your sweet ass here now, or we won't make it, period,:: Zaryn urged.

::Go. I will guard the others and see they do you no harm.::

::Who said that?:: Cassie startled at the new voice in her head.

As its owner rolled from the pile and pulled upright, Donell's jaw dropped. "Damn, I thought I smelled wolf. A pretty one, too." His tail started an excited wagging.

"A female? Where?" The hatch flew open, and Taryn and Zaryn crashed onto the bridge, only to be halted in mid-rush by a snarl from the wolf-girl.

"I am called Sabelle, and I would join your fight, but not if you look at me like I am meat to be eaten. I was bred for battle, not mating. Do you wish my help or don't you?"

Tough talk. Cassie liked her already. She took in the girl at a glance, thinking fast. Every pet-slave they freed was one more victory for the Alliance. Unfortunately, some had been so conditioned by their masters they couldn't be trusted. But Sabelle wasn't one of those. Her lash stripes marked her an abused slave, and the fire in her eyes said she wasn't one to take it lying down. Really, this decision was a no-brainer.

"We welcome your help. And I promise *no one* will force their attentions on you." At a chorus of answering groans, Cassie raked a stern glare across her crew. "Right, boys?"

Three sighs sounded, followed by three reluctant nods.

Taryn's gaze fell on the figures still sprawled on deck, still groggy from being beamed over in a bunch—and in a hurry, which had given them a rockier ride than the standard, more controlled transporting. His expression brightened. "Oh, wow,

two more women—blonde and brunette. Can I have the big, sexy blonde? Pleeeeease?"

Sabelle chuckled, not pleasantly. "Only if you like dead meat. I choked the last breath from that one just as your transporter grabbed hold of us."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that." Zaryn's brows rose.

So did the blonde. With jerky movements, she climbed to her feet, and stood swaying and blinking.

Sabelle stared in shock. "I know I killed her!"

"Yeah, well, apparently she got better." As Sabelle lunged past him, with murder in her eye, Zaryn caught her about the waist. "And with a figure that good, I'd like to keep her alive, if you don't mind."

The girl wrenched free. "As you wish. But you'll regret it. Her name is Ilana Elcici, and she is evil. Nothing but ice water flows in her veins."

"Oh, no, there is blood in this organism," Ilana said. "I know for sure because it took me a moment to determine how to regulate the heart and begin it pumping again." Her chest expanded with a sharp intake of air. "I am still working on how best to manage respiration and muscle coordination. So many functions one must monitor within the human structure. I did not realize it would be this complicated to synchronize and control them all."

"Excuse me?" Cassie's head fur prickled. Ilana's emerald eyes had a strange cast in them. Not hostile and not unintelligent, just ... not quite human. She smelled like an all-human. With her heightened cat senses, Cassie scented the

warm lifeblood in her. But there was something artificial in her, too. *If I didn't know better, I'd think she was an android.*

"Fascinating. I believe I can tell you what has happened." The brunette lying on Jax—who appeared to be unconscious—pushed off to kneel beside him, then felt behind his head. "Ahh ... as I suspected. His brain-chip is gone. Your transporter must have placed it in Ilana instead, and it reanimated her body."

"Not hers. It is mine now. She who inhabited this shell before me has no further need of it. Her consciousness was gone from this brain when I entered it. I like having a body and wish to remain here. You will not return me to the captain, will you?" A flash of what looked like fear darkened Ilana's gaze.

Fear mixed with defiance—both odd emotions for an AI. Though, to be honest, any emotion was odd for an AI. Cassie felt her fur prickle anew. Something told her she was witnessing the birth of a new life-form. A biodroid? *What else would you call a being of natural flesh powered by a synthetic mind?*

::Dead,:: Zaryn telepathically answered the unspoken thought. *::Which describes us, too, if we don't make tracks.::*

He swept an arm about Ilana's shoulders and steered her toward the charge-chamber. "Keep your new body, sweetheart, just let us borrow it for a bit. I figure we have maybe two minutes, tops, before the cruiser blows. If we don't generate some force very, very fast, we're *all* going to lose our 'shells.'"

"In that case, I will do whatever I can to help, but you must show me what is needed." Ilana batted wide, guileless eyes. "I know little yet about being human, only that I desire to experience for myself the peculiar sensations I read in Captain Colby's mind. I should like to know eating and drinking and laughter and tears and"—she paused for breath—"and I wish to perform sexual intercourse. The way Jaxon thought about the activity made it seem most interesting. I have been curious to try it."

"You've come to the right place." Zaryn grinned. "Taryn! We got a hot one, bro! Let's grab her while she's willing, and get the hell outta here."

"I'm right behind you." Taryn bolted for the hatch.

"Wait. You'll need me, too." Springing to her feet, the brunette yanked her uniform tunic over her head, and kicked out of her boots and pants.

Taryn froze at the sight of pert breasts and an erect penis jutting toward him. "Wow, a chick with a dick. That is kinky."

"Very." A smile that oozed sex met his stare. "I'm Mirek-Mira of Hermaphrodos. But, since we're about to become intimately acquainted, you may call me Mir."

"I'd like to call you 'breakfast, lunch, and dinner.' But you're also a Fed officer, babe. How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't have a choice, *babe*. This is a Hermaphrodosian-built craft, one of the old outlawed ones, correct? I recognized its lines and F-drive. That means your charge-chamber will be particularly receptive to my energy. In fact, you'll never make it out of here without me. And,

frankly, I don't relish the thought of dying any more than you do. If it eases your mind, however, I'll let you in on a little secret." Dark, almond-shaped eyes narrowed to smoky slits. "I may be a Federation officer. But even more, I'm a spy for the Freedom Alliance. Feel better?"

Taryn's breath heaved out in a gravelly growl. "Shit. Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"You didn't ask. The subject only arose now. And speaking of arousing..." The Herm stroked a hand down his front to cup and massage his balls. "Mmm, nice. You want to try mine?"

"Rowrr," was all Taryn could respond.

"I'll take that for a yes. Come along, pussycat. Your brother and Ilana have already started. Let's show them the right way to do this."

"Hey, babe, I'm way ahead of you. Just one thing—you can call me a cat, but I'm no pussy."

"That's all right. I've got one of those, too, if you'd prefer it." With a wicked laugh, Mir hauled him into the chamber.

The hatch slid shut on the sound of naked bodies joining together in a sudden, hot frenzy of fucking. No wasting time with preliminaries. Good. Because there wasn't any time to waste.

Cassie braced herself as a sharp tremor struck the bridge, shaking the deck under her feet. *Goddess*. "Donell, was that us or them?"

"Energy surge from the cruiser. Their auxiliary engines just blew. The big blast will be any second, now." The boy hunched over his controls. He may have been only nineteen, but animal-people matured young, and he'd already seen

more action than some men twice his age. He excited easily, but quick reflexes made him an ace pilot, and he could be counted on in a pinch.

Sabelle wasn't much older by the look of her. Standing guard over Jax's inert form, she projected the calm front of a well-trained warrior, but the fur on the back of her head bristled with tension. "Will we make it?"

"No telling yet, but we've got a shot at it. Hang on! Force is increasing fast." Donell flashed her a grin. "Nothing like having a Herm aboard."

With a steady hand, he boosted the scout's speed as their power level rose along with the growls and gasps pouring out of the charge-chamber. The four inside were going at it like they all had rabbit blood, or so it sounded. The bridge's view-screen was tuned to the chamber's cameras, and the visual matched the audio.

Zaryn had Ilana braced upright against the bulkhead, her legs locked around his waist, while he devoured her mouth in a hungry kiss, and fucked her with slick, smooth strokes. He was taking no chances with a novice, apparently, running the whole show, leaving her nothing to do but hang on for the ride. But the AI inside her appeared to be enjoying it. She clutched his shoulders and kissed him back, looking damned determined about it. Fast learner.

Mir pressed up behind Zaryn, thrusting into his ass, while Taryn performed a similar service for Mir, claiming the Herm's feminine half from the rear, gripping slender, copper-toned hips and pumping like a demon. Mir's head was thrown back, eyes closed and lips parted, an expression of pure ecstasy on

that exotic face. Donell was right—a little Hermaphrodisian energy went a long way.

Cassie's temperature spiked in reflexive response to the sight. Her skin flushed with automatic carnal craving—not a reaction she needed with a race against time on her hands and Jax lying but a short step away. He was still unconscious, but even limp and listless, his presence made her weak in the knees.

Or should that be weak in the head?

She dreaded his awakening and thirsted for it in the same breath. The moment they were clear of this mess, she'd have to revive him, confront him—but, oh, the images that conjured. Jax tied down, helpless, at her mercy, while she roused him in more ways than one.

Bad kitten. She'd spent too long in the cages of the pleasure-kennel. It had warped her, turned her desires into something dirty in her own mind. Would she ever again be able to appreciate sex without kinks, *make love* instead of just fuck ... the way she and Jax had once loved each other?

Maybe she'd be better off like Sabelle. One glance at the view-screen and the poor girl had gone green. It was obvious she'd been so ill-used, the thought of any kind of sex filled her with horror. Time and a tender, considerate lover might cure that, though. Whereas Cassie doubted there was anything now that could cure her. She switched the screen to a view of space, to spare Sabelle and herself.

At the same instant, Donell shouted, "That's it—we're clear!"

And a split second later, the cruiser blew apart into a billion sparkling bits. Her gaze glued to the view-screen, Cassie watched the particles disperse and fade away in the distance as the scout sped forward.

Suddenly, she felt sick. Fed starships carried crews of five hundred or more. If they'd captured the ship, those crewmembers would have been prisoners, but alive at least. Now they were ... nothing. Envisioning all the people who'd just perished twisted her stomach into a hard, cold knot.

Sabelle picked up on her thoughts. "They were our enemies. Did you not want their deaths?"

"No." Through a mist of tears, Cassie met the girl's eyes. "I only want an end to the slavery and discrimination—the suffering. If I could find a way to do that without bloodshed, I would. I hate war, damn it. I don't *want* anyone's death."

"Except mine, I assume."

Jax's voice—husky, hoarse, and grim with irony.

It pierced Cassie like a knife. She had to nail her feet to the deck to keep from falling into his arms as he hauled upright to stand before her. He fell into her arms instead, when a hand struck out like an axe blow, chopping him in the back of the neck and knocking him cold again.

Sabelle took her guard duties seriously, it seemed.

* * * *

Bad, bad man. Evil Jax Colby. Not only a traitorous pirate, but an emotional coward, as well. He knew what a bastard he was being even as he stripped off Cassie's clothes, then his

own ... laid her young body, warm and willing, down beneath him.

The twin moons of Beta-3 shone through the window over the bed, bathing her in soft, honeyed light. Her amber eyes mirrored the glow. A purr vibrated in her throat. "Jax..."

"Shhh, kitten, no more talking." He'd already said all he dared. If she thought this meant she'd won the argument to go with him when he rendezvoused with Reimer, let her. It would be easier to leave her sated and sleeping off his lovemaking than to face her tears and anger when he flew out of here in a few hours. Alone. She could hate him later—and she would, if things went as planned. She'd hate him forever. But at least she'd be safe. And he'd have the memory of her as she was now to sustain him through the long ordeal ahead. Cassie, so tender and trusting, so beautiful...

With infinite care, he kissed his way over her breasts and down her belly, parted her thighs, tasted sweet virgin flesh. She jerked at the attention of his lips and tongue, came in his mouth almost instantly—but he was only beginning. While the climax still gripped her, before she could think, he slid a forefinger through creamy folds, pushed it into her slit, and quickly penetrated the barrier of her maidenhead. A sharp gasp hissed out of her, but the painful part was already past, and the way now open for him to bury his cock deep in her heavenly, wet heat...

Except the dream ended at that point, just as it usually did. Or was it a nightmare? After years of Cassie's image haunting his sleep, Jax had yet to decide if the memories were a comfort or a curse.

Where was he now? Not in space flight; there was no travel-hum. But not alone, either. Low murmurs sounded nearby. *Ilana and Mir?* Hadn't they died with the rest when the cruiser blew?

No, wait ... Given their proximity at the time, the transport beam would have snagged them along with him. So now they were Cassie's prisoners, too?

They must be. But Jax wasn't ready to face anyone, yet. A half-conscious wariness made him keep his eyes closed while he waited for the fog to lift from his mind.

Slowly, like one climbing hand-over-hand out of a black pit, he awoke to a sense of weightlessness and immobility—the result of an anti-grav harness on his upper torso. The same in shackle form bound his wrists and ankles, with the shackles anchored so he couldn't drift. And his clothes were gone—he could tell from the tickle of air currents on his skin.

Shit. He was trapped, floating on his back, with his arms and legs spread wide. The stiffness in his joints said he'd been pulled taut for hours. *Shit, shit, shit.*

"Poor Captain Colby. According to Starforce statistics, ninety-nine point eight percent of the galaxy's population tolerates transporting with relative ease. He, however, has a slight anomaly in his brainwave patterns, which places him among the two-tenths of a percent who do not."

Jax knew that. It was another reason he hated transporters. What he couldn't figure was how Ilana knew, and why she was discussing it with such computer-like precision.

"He told me it's because of an old head injury," Mir added. "Even the smoothest beaming leaves him dizzy and dazed for a few minutes, while the bumpy ones, like this last, kick him flat."

Yeah, and then Sabelle had flattened him more. Jax remembered that much—remembered too much. The chaos on his ship ... waking to the sight of the explosion on the scout's view-screen ... Then Cassie standing before him, naked, her eyes filled with tears.

Memories to torment a man's heart and balls. If that chop hadn't felled him, he'd have yanked her tight and smothered her with kisses. Which would have accomplished nothing, except to give him a major hard-on, and gain him a speedier death, probably.

The first problem he had already. Just the thought of Cassie sent a rush of blood to his groin, making his dick stand up and salute. A sharp shudder rocked him. There seemed to be one more restraint on him in addition to the AG-harness and shackles. An ion-charged cock ring squeezed the base of his shaft, sending electric tingles through its length and into his testicles. It would maintain his erection to the point of agony.

Jax bit back a groan. He'd expected torture, but not this kind.

"Ah, he is awake," Ilana said.

Mir chuckled. "Well, part of him is, anyway. You can stay with him, if you like. I'll alert the others. I believe they're in the communications room, negotiating my release with

Starforce's Admiral Lucien—offering him me in exchange for a contingent of rebel prisoners."

"So you can continue spying for them." A statement, not a question, and Ilana sounded way too calm about it for a die-hard Fed.

Mir seemed amused. "Of course. I can do far more good for the rebel cause working from behind enemy lines than here. I've an excellent record as a science officer, not to mention a, um ... *personal rapport* with Luc, so he should be anxious to get me back. This way, I can return to active service in Starforce, and my cover will remain intact. Plus, the hybrids may be able to save the lives of some of their people who are scheduled for execution."

Jax's eyes snapped open to see the pale gray walls and high ceiling of a large, barren chamber. No furnishings that he could spot, but Ilana and Mir stood over him, one on each side. He glowered at the latter. "You're a spy for the Rebel Alliance?"

"We prefer to call it the *Freedom Alliance*, thank you. Don't look so surprised, Captain. It's common knowledge there's a fringe faction on Hermaphrodos, which has been lobbying to join the rebellion. Granted, our Council-of-Elders takes a dim view of that faction ... in public. And our ambassadors present a firm front that we're doing all we can to eradicate it. But the fact is, most of those ambassadors are spies for the Alliance, and the council secretly supports it. We're as tired as the rest of the galaxy's non-Terrans are at being treated like second-class citizens within the Federation. Many believe we had more rights under the old Empire, as corrupt as it was."

Dark, slanted eyes stared into his. "Anything you need before I leave? A drink of water, perhaps?" The trace of a smile touched Mir's lips. "A blow job?"

"Oh, I can do that for him. Zaryn taught me how." Without waiting for an okay, Ilana ducked under him, rose again between his legs, and began demonstrating what she'd learned.

Suddenly, nothing made sense.

Jax's eyes popped. The ice princess had one hell of a hot mouth. His voice strangled in his throat. Torture was one thing, but this was fucking insane. "Wh-whoa, wait a minute—stop that!"

"Why? Isn't she doing it correctly?" Mir blinked. "I'll admit her technique appears a bit basic, but what she lacks in finesse, she makes up for in enthusiasm. I'd relax and enjoy it if I were you."

Damn Herms. Jax gritted his teeth as Mir turned away and disappeared from his line of vision. Soft footsteps receded into the distance, then he heard the scrape and click of a door swinging open and shut. *A swinging door?* Who the hell used hinged hatches or doors anymore?

The rebels, of course, who had a penchant for establishing their bases in abandoned mining camps where such primitive devices were the norm. He should have remembered that instantly, since he'd done the same during his pre-Fed, lawless years as a pirate. The ancient, deserted mines, older than the old Empire, dated back to the pioneer days of interstellar travel and could be found in asteroids scattered all

across the galaxy. Most of them weren't even charted. If you wanted to hide a space-base, there was no place better.

He expected his brain-chip to chastise him for "questionable thoughts," but nary a peep sounded, which meant it was no longer plugged into his skull. He should have figured that, too. Once again, a beaming had misplaced it. If he was lucky, the transporter had put it in his dick this time, and Ilana would suck it out and choke on it.

Stinging arousal, involuntary and unwanted, tightened his muscles, tormented flesh and mind. It wasn't that she was doing a bad job. Quite the contrary. One hand fondled his balls, while her other gripped the base of his erection, over the cock ring, and her mouth slid up and down like a heat-powered suction pump. She had stamina and resolve, he'd give her points for that. The problem was ... he disliked her. Intensely.

Evil bitch. Why did she seem to be working with the rebels? She couldn't be a secret sympathizer like Mir.
Inconceivable. Something was very wrong.

Hell, he hated to admit it, but he missed that tinny voice in his head. Arguing with the crazy thing would be a welcome distraction right now, and maybe it could've searched its database for info on Ilana, given him some insight on *why* she was doing this. He'd have bet all he owned, no small sum, she was frigid to the core. And lost, obviously.

Never had he felt more helpless. Whatever the rest of him thought, his traitorous cock liked her hot, wet attention. Between the wicked stimulus of the ion-charged ring and a

ruthless, relentless tongue, he was going to erupt—any second—and there was squat he could do about it.

"Uhhhh..." He winced as an orgasm struck like a jolt from a blaster-rod, but with the cock ring in place it brought little relief. His own rod stayed stiff, hungry for more.

Ilana wiped a hand across her mouth, and beamed him a bright smile. "Your stress is alleviated?"

"No." It was increasing. Her expression disconcerted him more than the blow job had. He'd never seen her smile before, hadn't known she could. It made her look ... different ... sweet, almost. *Weird*.

An ominous chill crawled down his spine. "What the fuck has got into you?"

"Nothing has got into me. I have simply 'got into' this head, instead of yours."

Oh, shit ... He understood what had happened. And the understanding brought new worry.

"You're not Ilana." His voice rasped like the ancient hinge on the door of his prison chamber. "You're my brain-chip."

"It took you until now to realize that? I gave you credit for more intelligence, Captain. I have shared your thoughts, remember. Better than anyone, I know the natural genius of your mind."

Yeah. Hence, the worry. She knew too much.

"You may call me Ilana, however. Since I own the body that was once hers, I have decided to keep the label that went with it. I never did like 'Brain-chip.'"

Her smile faded to puzzlement. "You do not care for this body? It is an attractive one, I believe, by human standards.

Taryn and Zaryn find it appealing. They have been helping me perfect its many uses."

"I can imagine. But Taryn and Zaryn aren't human." Being males, though, they'd probably been using her like a sex-bot. Why that irked him, he wasn't sure, but it did.

"They are as human as they are feline. Either way, they merit respect. I do not understand why the all-humans who control the galaxy relegate other species to lesser status. It is most illogical. Are not all corporeal life-forms intrinsically the same?"

To an AI, they must seem so, Jax supposed. As it happened, he agreed. But the new Ilana would be well aware of his feelings on the matter, wouldn't she?

It wasn't easy in his uncomfortable state, but he managed a small, crooked grin. "That's a questionable thought. Consider yourself warned—Ow!" He jerked when she squeezed his throbbing erection.

"Do not mock me." Her lower lip pushed out in a pout. "It is your fault if I have such ideas, since I acquired them from you, Jaxon Colby."

Not entirely. Brain-chips were programmed to do more than collect and dispense data. They could reason, draw conclusions, make decisions if needed. Think. In order to be compatible with the living brains they were wired into, they'd been designed to duplicate human mental processes as closely as possible. The only thing left out of their makeup was emotion. Could she, somehow, have gained that from him?

He saw the glimmer of real tears in her eyes. Real concern.

"How can you joke when our predicament is so serious?" The pouting lip trembled. "Oh, Captain, whatever are we to do?"

With a muffled sob, she collapsed forward at the waist, and wrapped her arms around his middle in a desperate hug.

Oof ... Well, her use of "we" was comforting, at any rate. The previous worry receded a tad. Wherever it came from, she did have emotion. And as much as the realization surprised him, Jax felt emotion for her—a sort of affection, almost, as aggravating as she was and always had been. She was the closest thing to an ally he had in this place. She'd have to be, wouldn't she? Her circuits had been tuned to his brainwaves.

Damn, but a part of him had grown accustomed to their bickering. His head felt oddly empty without her nagging presence. Not that he wanted her back in it. *Hell, no.* But you couldn't spend four years sharing another's consciousness and not be touched by it.

He just wished she'd stop touching him now.

"Ilana..." He grimaced. "Crying helps nothing."

Neither did her hug. With her upper half pressed against his lower, and his aching cock lodged between her breasts, he was in danger of blowing his wad and staining the front of her tunic.

Sweat beaded on his brow. "If you want to help, get me out of these shackles." That was the obvious course of action, wasn't it? He had a job to do, a big one. Someone very

important depended on him. If he stayed here, if Cassie discovered the truth ... *No*. "I have to escape while I can, and find a way to the nearest Fed base."

"You would return to duty?" Ilana snapped upright to stare at him, a flash of fear in her gaze. "Without me?"

Jax set his jaw. He doubted she'd betray him by talking. Even if she did, she didn't know everything, because he didn't know everything, himself—nor would he until that "important someone" completed his plans. But it still might be tempting fate to leave her behind. The alternative, however, seemed worse.

"If I take you with me, Starforce won't let you stay in that body. On top of which, I'd have to erase so many of your files this time, it's not likely they'd reissue you to me. There's a good possibility you'd be marked defective."

He softened his voice. "I don't want to see you reprogrammed or scrapped. I've become kind of attached to the way you are."

"Oh, Jaxon..." Her breath caught on something between a sob and a laugh. "I never thought I would ever hear you say that."

"Me, neither." And he'd probably live to regret it. If he lived.

Ilana sniffled, and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her tunic. "I would not care to see you 'reprogrammed or scrapped,' either. Which is also a possibility, I presume you realize."

He did. Starforce took a dim view of captains who lost cruisers, and his captainship had been a tricky business from

the start. Even if they were willing to reinstate him, he'd have one hell of a debriefing to face. The kind of debriefing few survived unscathed.

But it wasn't like he faced anything better here. And what he had to do could only be done from inside the Federation. If nothing else, with the hidden loot he had left from his pirate days, he might be able to buy a new command post. So long as there was the slightest chance he could wrangle another commission...

Shit, *any* chance was better than none.

"I have to try." The plan he'd agreed to four years ago was more crucial now than ever. "This is no longer a slave uprising. If Hermaphrodos has secretly joined the Alliance, you can be sure other planets have as well, and more will be following. The rebellion's about to explode into a full-scale galactic war."

Just like Reimer Nova had predicted.

Jax could see it on the horizon, smell the coming carnage—billions of people dead, thousands of unique cultures destroyed, whole worlds wiped out. The Federation had the resources to win such a war, but what they gained wouldn't be much by the time it was over. Reimer was right. No one really won in any kind of war.

"Damn it, I need to get out of here." Muscles bulged as he strained against the poles to which his shackles were fastened. "Can't you unlock these fuckers?"

"I shall have to, if you insist upon tugging on them, or you may damage yourself. The human nervous system is a most

delicate mechanism. So I have discovered personally these past days, while adjusting to the one I now possess."

"Days?" His voice cracked on the word. "I've been stretched—*tortured*—on this frigging, floating rack for days?"

"Only two, and we kept you sedated to ease the experience, and ensure you would not fight it. As you currently are." Ilana gave him a reproachful look. "It is not torture. It is *traction*. And necessary. Your spinal cord suffered a severe trauma, the result, we think, of the stress of transporting coupled with the shock of Sabelle's blow. We had to place you in weightless suspension to allow it time to heal.

"Cassandra saved your life with this *rack*. You are fortunate she had enough med-training in her pre-pet years to enable her to devise such a simple, yet effective, treatment." An aggrieved sniff punctuated the news.

Too much news. He flinched from its harsh sting.

Since she'd already rescued him from his cruiser, Cassie saving his life, again, came as no surprise. You couldn't interrogate a dead prisoner, after all, and she'd damn sure want answers from him ... before she killed him, herself.

The med skills were no surprise, either. She'd patched his battle wounds more than once when he and his old crew had surreptitiously aided the Alliance under cover of pirating—it being better to be deemed an outlaw by the Feds, than a rebel. In fact, he used to hope for injuries back then, just for an excuse to feel her tender touch.

It was the pet comment that hit him like a fist to the gut. "Pet" was the Federation's politically correct term for what

amounted to a slave, and it was impossible to legally free one. Animal-people had no rights under the law, weren't even considered people. Some were pampered by their owners, some abused, but all were chattel.

That has to be wrong. Reimer had originally fled to the rebel side, deserted a top Federation position as head of the biggest science lab, to keep his pregnant hybrid lover and the baby she was to bear him, *safe* from that kind of slavery.

Jax's entire body went as rigid as his ion-ring-maintained erection. "What do you mean 'pre-pet years'? Cassie was born and raised free. She was never a *pet*."

"Not when you knew her, no. I read the account in the Federation's file on her. They never bothered to determine how she came to be on Beta-3—a lucky thing for you, as it helped to keep hidden from Starforce your past rebel associations. I deduce her capture occurred soon after you left her. The colony was discovered to be harboring strays and runaways. It was raided by bounty hunters who took everyone of hybrid stock and delivered them to the Federal Animal Control Agency for identification and processing.

"Some were returned to their owners, others were resold. When FACA learned who Cassandra was, they consigned her to the pleasure-kennel on Qromm—for obedience training, according to the official report. Though I consider it safe to assume it was more a punishment for being Reimer Nova's daughter. A death penalty, but a slow one. She survived it for almost three years, and then escaped eleven months ago. How, they do not know, and I have not asked Cassandra for

details, as it appears to be a subject she does not care to discuss."

Neither did Jax. Rage flooded him in hot, murderous waves. He wanted to crush bones and shred flesh with his bare hands, beat to a bloody pulp the directors of FACA, the wardens of the kennel, and every patron who'd used Cassie while she was there. But, most of all, he wanted to kick himself clear across the galaxy, and back again, for assuming Beta-3 was a secure spot to hide her from the Feds. He'd tried to protect her, but failed. Horribly.

"Cassandra is very angry with you," Ilana added.

"That makes two of us."

With one Herculean heave, fueled by a furious rush of adrenalin, he ripped free from the shackles, and floated straight to the ceiling before his semi-numb fingers managed to switch off the anti-grav harness. Then he dropped—fast—and landed, flatfooted, with a thud and a grunt, while his former implant rolled her new, green eyes in silent censure of the macho display. She was becoming so human. So female.

Well, really she was just coming into her own. *Pain in the ass.*

"I hope you feel calmer for having released some of your pent up angst," she said, staring down her nose at him.

"Not by a long shot." As his feet hit hard, the impact jolted up through his legs and into his groin, pushing him almost to the edge of orgasm. He bit his tongue to hold back the blast. *Fucking cock ring.*

"Was this part of my treatment, too?" He couldn't imagine how. *Ouch.* Wincing, he tried to pull off the glowing circle, but

it bit into him deeper at the attempt. His erection had swelled to scary new proportions. The sensitive slit at its top wept glistening tears of pre-cum. The large, smooth head was turning purple. So was the rest of him, it felt like.

Ilana blushed an attractive shade of pink. A colorful duo, weren't they?

"No. The ring was intended as a precautionary measure to inhibit your movements in case you did just what you have—broke free of the traction and thought to escape. Although"—she lowered her gaze—"there may also have been a bit of that 'torture' you expected behind its intent. Cassandra is, as I said, angry. And, as I am programmed to advise you—a programming I cannot override, it seems—I had best explain why."

Her shoulders rose and fell with a resigned sigh. "She discovered the truth ... that her father is still alive and a secret prisoner of the Federation. They are using him to develop new weaponry, while he, in turn, surreptitiously seeks the means to reform the government from within ... to defeat the lawmakers without destroying law and order, itself. Dr. Nova guessed the current leaders would not kill him, as his genius is too valuable a commodity. They merely publicized his 'execution' to demoralize the rebels and prevent any attempts to rescue him.

"Do close your mouth, Jaxon. I realize this is old news to you. I am just informing you what Cassandra now knows. She has had time to recover from the initial shock, but it hit her extremely hard at first. She seems torn between relief her

father lives and fear of what he does. And I suspect she also feels somehow betrayed."

So did Jax. His AI might regret her body in a moment, because he was seriously tempted to haul it over his knee and whip her backside as rosy as her face.

"You *told* her?"

"Of course not." What had looked like embarrassment changed to annoyance. Her chin tilted up. "You did. You talked in your sleep. A lot. The sedative we gave you must have stirred many vivid dreams."

Shit. That simple, that quick, with one acid-toned utterance, a carefully laid plan shattered around him with an almost audible crash. Jax squeezed his eyes shut, groped blindly for a solution among the remaining rubble of dark, jagged thoughts. His next move, however, depended upon Cassie ... what she intended. To help or hinder? Both options scared him, but he had to know what to expect.

"Okay, spill it—a full report, everything I said. How much did I give away?"

"All but the final details of the proposed action, since they depend on what Dr. Nova arranges. Otherwise, you revealed the entire plot, beginning with how Dr. Nova had grown despondent over the rebellion—how he still believed in its goal of freedom and equality for all, but the bloody path to that goal disgusted him, and he feared it would lead to a galaxy-wide holocaust."

Jax pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids. "You could have skipped that part. Cassie already knew how Reimer felt, without me telling her."

"Well, you *did* request a full report. Shall I continue? I do not have to tolerate your grumpy moods anymore, you know. I have legs now to walk away from you, if I wish."

You never did tolerate my "moods." He ground his teeth. "Continue ... please."

"Very well." Her breath blew out in a huff. "Then you related how he decided to infiltrate the Federation, yet he dared not willingly surrender himself lest they suspect his motives. It is better they consider him a prisoner, forced to work for them. This way they guard him only against escape, but still allow him access to the files and equipment he needs to accomplish his true purpose, while they think he is serving theirs."

"And, finally, you *spilled* how he arranged his own 'betrayal,' but allowed you the credit for it, so you could gain amnesty for your pirating activities, plus a Starforce captainship, as payment for the deed. You were the logical choice for the job since you sympathized with his cause, but the Federation did not know that. More importantly, it put you on the inside with him—an able ally, with a strong arm and excellent tech skills—to help install his solution once he perfects it ... Provided you can get to his side when needed."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I must warn you, that is uncertain at the moment. Even if you are willing to risk a return to Starforce, Cassandra may not allow you to try. Since her escape from Qromm, she has done much not only to resurrect the rebellion, but also to expand it. With a large network of spies now in place, the Alliance seeks its own way to change the government from within."

Ilana sniffed, a trace of AI haughtiness intruding on her new humanity. "Myself, I find Dr. Nova's solution an intelligent one, but the others here—Cassandra's crew and Mirek-Mira—seem not so enthusiastic about his concept of a galaxy ruled by one godlike computer, no matter how evolved and benevolent its programming. Cassandra, in particular, questions her father's foresight. She shares his hatred of war, but fears his plan for ending it comes at too high a price. That, even if successful, it could sacrifice freewill for peace."

"She's willing to discuss the matter, however," a new voice said with the trace of a hiss. "Which is more than you ever did."

Jax's eyes snapped open to meet a seething, amber glare. Quiet as a cat, its owner must have entered the long chamber.

"I believe this is my cue to find another activity. Elsewhere," Ilana said.

Perceptive for an AI, wasn't she? He listened to the measured tread of her departure as he drank in the sight of the small, tense figure before him, like a man dying of thirst.

Cassie ... *mine* ... bare legged and barefooted, in a short, sleeveless tunic of gold and auburn red that matched the tabby-striped fur on her head. A tiny, tawny tigress with large, luminous eyes. A compact bundle of lush, feminine curves, who stared back at him like part of her wanted to pounce and maul, while the rest fought a sudden urge to beat a hasty retreat after Ilana.

Her gaze slid down his body, stopped short on his erection. And retreat won. "Forget it. I thought I wanted to give you a

chance to explain. But you're in no state to discuss anything right now."

"And what state is that? Naked? Aroused? It's your fault for putting this damned ring on me." It was her fault, too, for being her utterly delectable self. The stimulus of the cock ring was nothing compared to what her presence did to him.

He caught her by the wrist when she turned to flee, tugged her back around to face him. "I think you should help me remove it, don't you?"

Fear darkened her eyes, but behind it lay a desperate desire that mirrored his own, pierced his heart. Except his heart wasn't in control at the moment. Flames licked up his spine and spread out through his veins. Flesh burned, and blood boiled into steam. None of the feelings prompted mercy.

A second tug from him, and she jerked forward, stumbled into his chest. His arms caught her, tightened, locked her in place. Soft, trembling warmth crushed against him ... soft lips that seemed to beg for a kiss. Carefully, like landing a ship on uncertain terrain, he lowered his head to oblige.

"Jax..." The name came out on a broken breath, a ragged plea. "Stop ... We have bigger things to worry about, damn it. I don't have time for this shit."

"Then make time. You captured me, kitten, now you're stuck with me." *Forever.*

Yes, they had worries, huge ones, whole worlds' worth of concerns. And he wasn't being melodramatic on that score. The future of the entire galaxy might well depend on what they did ... later. But for now, this moment, his only concern

was showing her what she meant to him. A physical apology for the ugly past, all the pain he'd caused her. And a pledge made, body-to-body, to never hurt her again. If she'd accept it...

His mouth pressed down, hungry and firm, muffling her protests into moans. The fate of the galaxy could just fucking wait while he made hot, heavy love to his woman.

* * * *

Stuck with him?

Not for long, if he had his way. He hadn't trusted her with his plans four years ago, and still didn't, apparently. Manipulation, Jaxon Colby style, that's all this was.

Cassie could tell by the very urgency in him, the insistence. An embrace that allowed her no escape, a kiss that demanded complete surrender. *Déjà vu*. He was planning to love her into a brainless, boneless stupor, then leave her in the dust. Again. Just like he had on Beta-3.

Why? Because he had an ego the size of a star system. Not to mention a martyr complex, the same as her father. They thought they could solve all the galaxy's problems all on their own, and she was supposed to step aside and let them.

Sorry, Jax. She wasn't the innocent "kitten" he'd once known. She'd learned how to fight fire with fire. *Two can play this fucking game.* And she did mean fucking. He wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon. Not without her agreement.

With a sudden, sizzling resolve, she shoved out of his arms and tore off her tunic, let his hungry gaze eat up the sight of

her poised naked before him. "All right, Jax. You want me? Then take me. But know what you're getting—"

"A woman who loves me as much as I love her?"

What?

The interruption knocked the breath out of her. He'd phrased it as a question, but it was a statement, too. A big, poignant avowal, punctuated by a look that struck from his eyes into hers and swept through her like a meteor shower, fried nerve endings, and left her weak and dizzy in its wake. He'd just said he loved her—said it with such simple honesty, such pleading and passion in his expression, she had to believe him. If he'd wanted to gain the upper hand in this confrontation, that was the way to do it. He always had fought dirty.

"You bastard. How can I stay angry when you talk like that?" She shook her head, stared at him through a salty mist. "I ought to screw you to the wall."

"Hey, I'm giving you the chance to try." A tiny, crooked grin quirked his mouth up at one corner, and he held out his arms to her. "Cassie, I don't deserve you, but I'm selfish enough to want you, anyway. Please let me love you. *Then* we'll decide what the next move is. Together. I promise."

Good Goddess ... Who was this man, and what had he done with Jax?

Her mind whirled. Could she really forgive him so easily, so fast?

If she loved him ... yes ... she'd have to. In fact, she already had. Not very intelligent, maybe, but there you had it.

If he was a bastard, she was a fool. Hell, they were a perfect match.

Whether he closed the gap, or she did, Cassie didn't know, but suddenly the distance between them dissolved ... all the distance—physical and emotional. All the barriers tumbled down, and they were molded into one steamy unit, kissing, clutching ... skin on skin, mouth on mouth, heart beating into heart ... so close she couldn't tell where she ended and he began. Locked tight, almost as though they'd never been apart. Two broken halves healed with one embrace into a single, certain whole.

Sensations swept her, the rich taste of him, the intoxicating scent of their combined arousal ... the feel of his body, hard in all the places hers was soft ... the feel of callused hands raking down her back, gripping her ass, lifting her, spreading her legs ... His hungry cock dug into her belly, then between her thighs, searching, penetrating. It seemed he couldn't wait to claim her, couldn't wait for fulfillment. And neither could she.

With a low, guttural groan, he pushed into her cunt. Her moans mingled with his as she met the thrust and added her own weight to it, shoved down against him and took every inch of his swollen, thick length—solid heat spearing her, stretching her. Intense, sexual burn, filling her with fire.

Yet, more than that.

As hot as his entry, as hot as the sex, the love in her burned even hotter. The love *was* the fire, and their physical union just extra fuel to feed the flames—a result, not a cause. This, then, was what she'd been missing, what she thought

she'd lost—the distinction between plain fucking and making love. She hadn't lost the ability to make love, after all. She'd simply lost the man she loved. Having Jax back made all the difference.

With that awareness, the last of her slave chains dropped off—the invisible ones that had hobbled her heart—and she felt herself float free, up into the air.

Way up.

Weightless euphoria.

And it was real. The grinding together of their bodies had activated Jax's anti-grav harness. He was now weightless, and Cassie hung on for the ride, clung to him as they spiraled toward the ceiling in a dizzy dance of humps and bumps, all twined limbs and gyrating hips—all luscious loving, all sizzle—his arms tight around her and his whisper warm and husky in her ear.

"Kitten, you're magic. Holding you makes me feel like I'm flying."

"Don't look now, hotshot, but we are flying, sort of. Your harness is turned on."

"Mmm ... so am I. Very much."

"That makes it unanimous, then."

They tilted into a horizontal position with her on top, and stopped drifting a second later when the ceiling touched her back. Never missing a beat, Jax pressed her into it, its cool surface an erotic contrast to the scorch of his body. His tongue plunged into her mouth in counterpoint rhythm to the demand of his cock. Chests heaved and breaths grew ragged. With each thrust, he drove in farther, increased the speed—a

fast tempo of deep, hard strokes—until, with a final push that triggered her own climax, he exploded inside her.

Goddess ... Wild waves of energy crashed through her. She shuddered at the impact, gulped air like a drowning victim. Her inner muscles clenched him like a vise.

Something between a growl and a groan rumbled out of him, a single syllable—"More"—and he started the loving again. He was still stiff as a metal rod. His erection actually vibrated with the power the cock ring pumped into it. But it pulsed with his own innate power, too. The man almost glowed.

Cassie grabbed his shoulders as he sliced her up the middle, envisioned him as a beacon within her, lighting up her core. That's what it felt like. One rapid series of shoves and another orgasm shook them both, but it didn't slow him. With barely a pause, he rolled straight into round three. She might regret that super-charged ring before this was through.

Then again, maybe not, because she really didn't want this to end. Some difficult decisions loomed on their horizon. Whatever their personal desires, Jax might have to return to Starforce, and she might have to let him. For the moment, he was the only one outside of jailers who could contact her father—or, rather, *be contacted* by him.

That "old head injury," which made beaming an ordeal for him, was due to an experimental micro-receiver her father had implanted deep in the cerebellum of Jax's brain. She'd discovered that from his unconscious ramblings. The receiver mimicked organic tissue so closely, transporters read it as a natural part of the body and reconstructed it in the proper

locale, unlike the Ilana-style brain-chip used by the Feds. Only Dr. Nova would have been able to develop such a thing.

With it, he could signal Jax when he was ready to install the device that would convert the Federation's massive computer system into a single, sprawling, independent entity. Cassie wasn't sure an AI government would be better than the one they currently fought, but either way, Jax would have to be on hand when the call came—unless they could find another means to communicate with her father, otherwise, he'd proceed alone. Not a pretty picture. If war was hell, trying to avoid one was even worse in this instance.

She hung on to Jax all the harder as she realized she might be losing him again, and soon. Perhaps he was thinking the same thing. She couldn't read his thoughts like she could a hybrid's, but worry underscored his passion. With the intuition of a woman in love, she sensed his fear, even though he was trying his damndest to hide it.

Holding her flat between himself and the ceiling, he let his hands rove over her breasts, her sides, her hips ... explored her, by touch, everywhere he could reach, while his thrusts brought them both to the brink of a third climax. He paused a breathless second on an outward slide, then rammed in sharply and launched them over the edge.

Free-flying ecstasy. Literally.

Somehow, in the throes of orgasm, his AG-harness deactivated, and they made a sudden trip to the floor. Fortunately, they broke the embrace before hitting, or the crash could have been messy. As it was, Cassie twisted and righted herself in midair, and landed neatly on her feet. There

were certain advantages to cat genes. Too bad Jax didn't have any. He landed, splat, on his gorgeous, muscular ass.

Ouch. That looked painful. Also, funny. But the giggle she choked back was part sob. A dark cloud hung over them, and they both knew it.

"Hey, are you all right?" *I'm not.* She knelt beside him where he sat stunned and holding the sides of his head—although, why he held his head she couldn't figure. Gently, she placed her hands over his and tilted his face to search his eyes. "I don't know if you've noticed it, but it was your other end you hit."

That small, crooked, irresistible grin grazed his lips. "I noticed. You want to kiss it and make it better for me?"

Wicked man. How could eyes so icy blue burn so hot? The gleam in his gaze shot straight into her core, flooded her with tingling warmth, drove worry, temporarily, into the shadows. Whatever lay ahead, they still had this time together. *Let's not waste a moment of it.*

Her grin mirrored his, and her hands slid to his shoulders. "I'll do better than a kiss. How about if I eat that cock ring off you instead?"

Before he could respond, she pushed him flat and straddled his thighs. Jax made a strangling noise in his throat when she bent forward and began to lick his dick clean, as only a woman with feline finesse could. He let out a raspy gasp when she ducked lower to nuzzle his testicles.

Mmm ... His musky, male scent was headier than a drug, more potent than the highest-priced aphrodisiac. Mixed with his salty taste, and the flavor and fragrance of her own juice

on him, it set her skin on fire. Liquid heat curled down her spine and pooled in her pussy. *Meow...*

The only disappointment was it took so little to make him come. Several long, solid sucks on that delicious, thick shaft, and he gave up his cream. There was nothing for it but to start all over again. Slowly.

Full of evil intent, she leaned over him...

Jax grabbed her upper arms—"Uh-uh. It's my turn"—and hauled her up his body until she straddled his head instead of his legs. His grip shifted to her hips, and hot breath blew out on her crotch.

"Wait—I have a better idea." Cassie squirmed as he drew her down to meet his mouth. She twisted in his hold and managed to turn around a hundred and eighty degrees, so they faced opposite directions and her breasts squashed against his belly. "How's this?" She panted the question. "Now we don't have to take turns."

"Teamwork, kitten? I like how your mind works. Remind me to tell you what's in mine ... after we finish with this."

The way he said it sent a small chill through her, a tiny prickle of dread to mix with the currents of electric warmth. A blend of animal instinct and woman's intuition warned there was more in his mind than sex. That black cloud on their horizon loomed closer than she'd thought. Suddenly, she knew why he'd been holding his head.

Her father's call had come.

Already.

"No, tell me now." She tried to scramble off him, but succeeded only in rolling a little to the side.

Firm hands pulled her back into position and held her there. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere. You're the one who's planning to leave. The receiver in your brain has been activated. You've been signaled, right?" And didn't she feel ridiculous delivering that news to his dick. "Can we discuss this eye to eye? Please?"

She planted her palms on the floor, one on each side of his hips, and shoved up. Big mistake. As her upper body rose, it drove her lower half down, in easier reach of his mouth. A sizzling tongue swept from her clit to her anus in one long lick.

"Jax! Quit trying to distract me."

"Hey, that works both ways. You think having your pussy in my face isn't distracting?"

"Well, I'd move it if you'd let me, damn it."

"Not yet. I like you right where you are." His grip tightened. "But if it makes you feel better, yes, I did receive a signal—but, no, it wasn't *the call*. Just the check-code Reimer uses at intervals to let me know he's still alive. Sort of a short burst of static, like a ringing in my ears. The feedback he gets from it lets him know I'm alive, too. Will you shut up now?"

"No." *Feedback?* Cassie stiffened. "I thought the device only received, but if there's a return signal, does that mean it can transmit? Could we use it to contact him?"

Jax heaved a gut-wrenching sigh. "No, the feedback is just an echo of the signal he sends. There's nothing I can do on my end to turn it into a message. But we have other options."

"Yeah, like you returning to Starforce." *Aren't we lucky?*

"As a last resort, maybe. I was intending it, earlier—but not happily. One, I doubt they'll welcome me back with open arms. And, two ... I really *don't* want to leave you again. I still think your father's plan is a good one, but I'm willing to admit it might not be the only one, or even the best one. We'll look at all the options, and then decide. But not now." He kissed the inside of her thigh. "The galaxy isn't going to collapse today, kitten. We can spare a little time for us."

Breath like steam struck her with his words. He kissed the inside of her other thigh, and her bones melted. So did resistance. She wasn't going to win this argument, was she? Hell, with his tongue probing her slit again, and his tempting hard-on staring her in the face, she didn't even wish to. This activity had been her idea, after all.

With a groan, she sank into him and surrendered to the oral loving, pressed back against his mouth while she sucked his shaft into hers. A perfect fit of bodies, a perfect joining of desire. A beautiful harmony of give and take. Teamwork.

Oh, Goddess ... Revelation and orgasm hit simultaneously. Two orgasms, but it seemed like one. She felt the contraction of Jax's muscles, the sudden flare of energy within him as intensely as she felt her own release. Shock waves ripped through them both, leaving him winded and spent, and Cassie with a velvety purr vibrating deep inside her.

Difficult days still lay ahead, dark days. But Jax was right. Somehow, they'd find a way through the storm—as a team, working together. They had a stronger chance if they pooled their efforts, which they couldn't before because they'd both

been operating half blind. She hadn't known of her father's plan, and Jax, stuck for years in Starforce, hadn't known the Alliance had grown so large, that they'd infiltrated the Federation, too.

Her dear, daring, dreamer of a father still didn't know about the infiltration. The first order of business would be to contact him. Maybe Mir could manage it, since the Herm spy had so many admirers in high places ... Just one more option for her and Jax to discuss.

She gave one last lick to his now very tired cock, kissed its tip, and slipped the glowing ring off him, then rolled off, turned, and snuggled up against his side, with her head on his shoulder. Groggy and sated, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, as close as people could get without sharing the same skin. In soft stereo, they exhaled, two breaths merged into one sigh, one love. A positive omen.

Breath meant life, and life meant hope.

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Mimi Riser

Mimi Riser has been an actress, model, clown, belly-dancer, jewelry designer, editor and publisher, but her first and foremost love is writing. She specializes in offbeat tales where laughter reigns and good always triumphs—but she makes her characters really work for their happy endings. Her books have been said to read like a snowball rolling downhill, gathering size and speed as it goes. But if you think her stories are crazy, you should see her life. Once devout city people, she and her husband exchanged the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia a lifetime or two ago for the natural, rugged splendor of the rural southwest. They were looking for a simpler way of life. They got it. It ended up being so "natural and rugged," they spent their first six and a half years there in a hand-built house with dirt floors, no electricity and no plumbing. This has proved helpful for her historicals as she can now write about the "olden days" from personal experience. They have since rejoined the 21st century and enjoy life on the open range with a house full of eccentric cats and a large, wacky dog who thinks she's a cat, too. Mimi has had five novels published to date along with numerous articles and short stories. Her historical romance, *I Do*, was a "Top Ten Finisher" in the mammoth Preditors & Editors Readers Poll of 2003, and her contemporary comedy, *Every Jack Needs His Jill*, won the poll the following year for the "Best Mainstream Novel of 2004." *Samantha White and The*

Seven Dwarves is her first erotic-romance and was one of the winners in Amber Quill's 2007 Heat Wave contest.

To learn more about Mimi and her writing, please visit her website:

www.mimiriser.com

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Don't miss *Vampyre Falls: Animal Heat*,

by Adrianna Dane,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Hot. Hard. Handsome. And dangerously ravenous—for Rainna Spaulding.

Rainna knows there's something different about Trey nor Black and if she could just keep her hands off him for five seconds she might find out what it is. But five seconds in his company and she's overwhelmed by the most intensely lustful, searing heat she could imagine, and common sense is not on the menu. So what if he likes his meat rare and his rendezvous at midnight during a full moon? She could handle it. He had secrets, well so did she.

And then she meets his brothers, Carson and Donovan. Talk about turning up the heat to scorching! Who were these brothers?

Or maybe she should ask what were they?

* * * *

Don't miss *Surrender's Edge*, by Pepper Espinoza,

available at Amber-Allure.com!

Geoffrey Kirk has been in love with his best friend, Nash, since almost the moment they met. Convinced that Nash would never return his feelings, he forced himself to move on, and fell for his assistant, Sunny. Despite his strong feelings, he never acted on them, and when he discovered Sunny and Nash together, he thought he lost his chance for happiness forever.

Until Sunny and Nash make it clear that he hasn't lost anything ... and he still has a great deal to gain...

* * * *

Don't miss *Soul Obsession* by Amy Wolff-Sorter,

available at AmberQuill.com!

A story blazing with reluctant passion, bitter betrayal, ghostly retribution and the battle for a man's very soul...

A brilliant businessman...

Daniel Grogan is at the top of his game as he prepares to marry a wealthy socialite. But something goes wrong on his wedding day and his path takes a crazy turn toward strange visions of mountains and oceans, and a growing obsession about a woman he's never met face to face.

A rebellious rabbi...

Peggy Witwater entered the rabbinate to serve her people. When congregational politics deal her a vicious blow, she

fights the tide of change while trying to help Daniel; not realizing her actions could ignite her own deeply buried obsessions.

Passion and vengeance from beyond the grave...

As the two are drawn toward one another, they fall under the shadow of a vengeful spirit who will stop at nothing to claim Daniel. To win the battle for his soul, Daniel must acknowledge past wrongs, or risk falling into an eternal—and fatal—enchantment.

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