

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies

Survival's Price
A Story of the Saurellian Federation
Joanna Wylde

SURVIVAL'S PRICE

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A Story of the Saurellian Federation

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Chapter One

Daverna Transit Station

Year 5342, Saurellian Calendar

Damian needed to get laid.

His cock was hard as a rock, and he wanted to sink it into warm flesh.

He took a long slug of his drink, scanning the room for prey. It was an easy enough place to find women—hell, he'd been here a thousand times for the same reason. He surveyed the stage, judging each dancer carefully. It was a tacky place, the kind of bar where men went for one reason and one reason only. Sex. Cheap sex. The women dancing on the stage weren't looking for commitment, and they certainly weren't interested in relationships. They wanted cash. Fortunately, he had credits to spare.

His men had already found companions, but he held off for the moment. For some reason none of the girls looked all that good. They all seemed worn, as if they'd been dancing too long. He might not be fool enough to expect his companion for the night to truly enjoy his company, but he wanted one who at least took the time to pretend.

He took another drink, then stood and sauntered across the room. He sat down at the edge of the stage, hoping proximity would pique his interest. The woman before him gyrated listlessly, and he tossed her a credit chit, hoping it might make her come alive. It didn't. She scooped it up without smiling. The music changed, and she stood, bowing briefly to the crowd before walking off stage. He sighed, wondering if he'd end up alone tonight after all. Bedding down someone like her would be more like masturbating than having sex. He'd jacked off too much for one lifetime already. A new woman sauntered out.

She caught his attention instantly.

She was tall, with long dark hair and dusky skin. She wore a spacer's coverall, although he'd never seen a spacer wear one that tight. Her lips were rounded and

pouty, and her breasts swelled like two plump fruits just waiting to be squeezed. His cock leapt in response.

He wasn't alone in his interest. Every man in the room perked up, and she smiled seductively at all of them as she stuck one long, slender finger into her mouth and sucked on it, apparently judging the crowd. Her face held a speculative look. He wanted to know what was happening in her head, he thought suddenly. She seemed so much more *alive* than the women around her.

She walked forward, swaying with the music, rubbing one hand up and down the front of her coverall while still sucking delicately on the other. She was still fully clothed, but there was something so incredibly sensuous, so dirty about the way she touched herself that her motions held more eroticism than anything he'd seen on the stage.

Her hips swiveled sensuously as she strutted down the runway. Here and there poles pierced the floor, rising up to the ceiling, and occasionally she stopped rubbing herself long enough to grab one, swinging her body around it as she moved. His breath caught in his throat as she came to a stop near him, backing herself into the nearest pole and rubbing against it with her ass as she slowly slid down to the floor. She crawled forward on her hands and knees until she faced him directly. She pushed herself up on her hands, thrusting her breasts toward him, then licked her lips, allowing her heated gaze to trail across his face and down his body.

He swallowed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. His pants were suddenly far too tight for this.

She blew him a kiss, then sprang back up to her feet and swung around the pole.

As she did so, she reached up and pulled apart the fasteners corralling her breasts in the coverall. They swelled forward, barely contained by a red bustier. She turned away from him, grasping the pole with both hands and rubbing up and down it. She leaned back so far that her hair dangled against the floor. Her breasts pulled down out of the bustier, and for a moment he glimpsed her areola peeking out. She pumped up

and down against the pole, her eyes closing in what appeared to be truly satisfying, personal pleasure. The music pumped in time, and he felt himself growing warm. He'd never seen anything so hot in his life.

After a moment she swirled back up, her face flushed, her breathing hard. He could have sworn there was a darkening patch between her legs. She hovered on the edge of orgasm; it was obvious to everyone watching. Rather than looking embarrassed, she seemed to revel in her sensuality. He realized with a start that she wasn't there to titillate them, her audience existed to heighten her own experience.

She swaggered back up the stage, her back to the crowd, then turned her head to look flirtatiously at the men surrounding her. With a shrug, she let the coverall fall down across her shoulders, leaving her upper arms, shoulders and back exposed. She rolled her shoulders, and then pulled one arm free from the dangling coverall.

Raising it above her head, she turned back to face the audience, her body stretching and thrusting her breasts out of the bustier once more. The thing was just a bit too small for her. She shrugged her other shoulder free, allowing the coverall to dangle down around her waist, the opening exposing just a tiny taste of her lower belly. Her hips, full and lush, seemed just rounded enough to hold the garment up.

His breath caught; he couldn't wait for the moment when she'd shimmy it down, revealing what he knew must be a spectacular ass and endless, muscular legs.

Unwilling to lean forward like so many of the men around him, he propped one boot up on the stage, reclining back in his chair. She owned the room, there could be no doubt, and a part of him rebelled against that. He didn't want to be owned, not by anyone.

He wanted to own *her*.

She swaggered back down toward him, as if reading the unconscious challenge in his stance. Halfway there she dropped to her knees again, dragging the drab coverall behind her. How could such an ugly garment be so sensuous? The closer she came to him, the tighter his breathing grew. A sudden desire to leap up on stage, to rip off her

coverall and plow his cock into her, hit him. Instead he took another long draft of his drink, forcing himself to breath slowly in and out.

She smiled at him, a secret, mocking kind of smile. The smile of a woman who knew her own power, and who could see right through his pathetic attempts to control himself. He tried to look away but he couldn't. She was too intense, too real to ignore.

She came closer and closer, credits raining down on her as she slithered past the mesmerized men. Sometimes she would stop and look at them, moving close so they could see her breasts. She wore twice as much clothing as any other woman in the room, but every eye was glued to her. There could be no question who was in charge.

Finally she reached him, and he knew deep inside, that he had been her target all along. She stood slowly, turned away from him and slithered out of the coverall. Red thong panties matched the red bustier holding her stunning breasts. She stepped out of the pants, deliberately spread her legs and leaned forward, laying her hands flat on the stage before her, exposing everything to him. A stunning cunt matched her ass, perfect in and of itself. The thin swath of fabric hid her just enough to make him desperate to pull it off. He almost reached up, but managed to catch himself at the last moment. He wanted her all right, felt almost desperate to have her, but he knew that to get her he had to stand out from the crowd. That meant holding back, even if it killed him.

She smiled back at him between her legs, as if reading his thoughts.

Then she stood, took a step forward and grasped the nearest pole firmly. She pulled herself up on it, the muscles in her arms bunching as she lifted herself with an ease that bespoke her strength. Her legs came up, and then her body fell back, held aloft by one leg wrapped around the pole. Her thigh muscles bunched, and somehow she managed to slowly spin around, displaying her magnificent body to the entire room. Once again, her breasts fell out of the bustier, treating them to another glimpse of her dark red nipples. The man next to Damian moaned aloud, and it took every bit of strength in Damian's body not to backhand him. Music welled up around them with a slow, throbbing beat.

She pulled herself back up, letting her feet drop to the floor, and then rubbed her clit against the pole. That delicate flush rose in her face once more. She turned to look at him, and for a moment they were alone together in the room, locked in a tunnel only they could detect. He knew she wanted him, knew she imagined his cock as she rubbed up and down the pole.

The flush in her face grew brighter, then her eyes closed, cutting him out. It was all about her now—she'd left him behind. The music continued to play, but she was oblivious, completely focused on the pole between her legs. This was different than any other performance he'd seen in a strip club. For one thing, she wasn't making any moves to remove the rest of her clothing. She ground herself against the pole, throwing her head back and moaning in time to the music. Her face tightened, and she panted noticeably. She strained, pushing, driving herself against the pole. She wasn't performing for anyone, that was clear enough. That the men around her were enjoying the show were immaterial.

This was all about her.

Her face grew tighter, the red flush growing bright. Her face twisted and then she screamed, her cry breaking the spell that had fallen over them.

He felt an answering surge within himself, and he bit his lip, closing his eyes tightly. For one horrible moment he thought he might come in his pants; just the thought was unbearable.

He regained control of himself, shifting again and wishing desperately that his leathers weren't so tight. The pressure was almost unbearable.

He opened his eyes to discover her collapsed on the floor, panting, breasts heaving. She lay there for what seemed an eternity, gasping for breath and flushed with ecstasy. At first it seemed spontaneous, but slowly he realized that even her heaving breaths were coming in time with the music. She drifted across the stage, somehow using the pulsing motions of her body to *move* herself toward him in time with the music. Then she rolled to her stomach and her eyes met his. Once again, that tunnel opened up

between them. They could have been alone for all the notice they gave the pulsing crowd.

He leaned forward, unable to control himself, and she gave him a feline smile.

She glided across the floor toward him, each motion taking an eternity. He sat mesmerized, hoping desperately that she wouldn't turn away, that this wasn't just one more part of her routine. He wasn't sure he could bear that. He knew it wasn't when she reached the edge of the stage and stopped to look directly at him. Her head bobbed like that of a snake. She had certainly charmed him. He felt a trickle of sweat bead up on his forehead, and raised one hand to wipe it away. At that moment he would have given her anything, anything at all, just for ten minutes of her time.

She leaned forward, giving him a close-up view of her magnificent breasts, but he hardly noticed. All he could think about was her face, her eyes—deep pools of sparkling green that he wanted to crawl into. Closer and closer she came, teetering on the edge of the stage, her face all but touching his. Her tongue flicked out, as if scenting him, and then she licked him slowly across one cheek.

The man sitting next to him moaned again.

Then she drew back, her face very serious.

"You're mine for tonight," she said, her low voice cutting through the music for his ears only. He nodded, realizing he was the luckiest man in the room.

She had chosen him as her toy, and he was grateful for the honor.

* * * * *

Cybele studied his face as she backed away, turning the slightly salty taste of him over in her mouth.

She hadn't expected him to be so attractive.

Of course, he was utterly taken with her. All men were. It wasn't that she was vain; she simply knew the power of her body. For some reason, the Goddess had opted to

endow her with a shape and form that appealed to the male eye. It was a magnificent advantage, and she'd never been afraid to use it.

This one was going to be different than her usual marks, though. His dossier worried her. He wasn't an easy target—he'd spent most of his life fighting, which was only natural when you considered he was one of the most successful smugglers in the quadrant. Some said he was little more than a pirate, not that she cared.

All that mattered was the money she'd get for killing him.

Still, the sight of him led her to re-evaluate her initial plan of attack. Maybe it was the lingering pleasure of her orgasm against the pole, but she found herself wanting to touch him before she killed him. He was big, strong, exuding that kind of dangerous aura she always found irresistible in a partner. Of course, she lost interest in them as soon as she learned she could best them, but that was the way of things.

He would bore her in the end, but she would enjoy his company first.

The music ended, and she turned to bow toward the appreciative audience. It took effort not to sneer at the idiots, desperate men who were easily fooled. Still, she leaned over to scoop up the showers of credits on the stage around her. The money was nothing to her, a tenth of what her fee for this job would be, but it would look suspicious if she didn't collect it. Flashing a sultry smile, she walked back down the stage toward her prey, deliberately dropping down off the stage onto a table, then stepping to the floor by placing her feet between a man's legs on a chair. His gasp of surprise turned to a sigh of disappointment as she ignored him in favor of her target. She turned to her prey, kicking one leg high and swinging it over his head before straddling him on the chair.

Oh, yes. She would play with this one before killing him.

His cock felt like a thick club, poking up at her against his pants with such force that she knew he had to be in pain. She wiggled her hips, and it rubbed against her soaking cunt with a friction that almost made her come again. She'd have to throw her panties away when the night was over, but she didn't care. This was delicious.

Closing her eyes, she rubbed against him once more, enjoying the extra friction from the fabric covering his erection. She could feel the thong going even further up her ass, slipping up between her labia. She stroked him once more, purring, and then opened her eyes.

He watched her, his face suffused with blood and his eyes filled with wonder.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he asked, his voice unexpectedly smooth. She cocked her head at him, growing ever more pleased with her new discovery. Despite how he must be feeling, he controlled himself. It intrigued her. She wanted to make him lose that control, teach him what it meant to have a woman use him. She would, too, before she finished.

"I don't know," she said, giving him a winsome smile. "There's just something about you, I guess."

She half expected him to burst out laughing, the line was so pathetic. His face grew thoughtful instead, and then he smiled. How disappointing—he was just as easy to fool as all men were. How sad. She wiggled against him again, deciding with a cock like that, he didn't need a brain. He'd still be worth taking home for the night.

She leaned forward, allowing her lips to brush his ear.

"My fee is seven hundred credits for the evening," she said softly, then sunk her teeth into his earlobe. He shuddered, and she ground herself against him again before pulling her head back to smile at him again. This time she let some of her hunger show in her face. He swallowed, and nodded quickly.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"They have a room for us in the back," she said with a smile. She stood, swinging her leg back over his head for show, then leaned over and grabbed his hand. She felt a hundred eyes on her and she slowly led him back toward the private rooms. Those eyes held hope and speculation. Would she be back? Would she be available? Would she choose them next time?

She smiled seductively, knowing she'd be off station before anyone even thought to check on her victim.

Thank the Goddess for places like this — they made her job ridiculously easy.

She nodded to the room manager, giving her target a pointed look as he handed over her fee. It went into a lock box, out of which the club would take its cut. Of course, she wouldn't be back to collect her share, but that seemed fair in a way. The manager would probably suffer some trouble and expense as a direct result of her night's work.

"We'll be all night," she told the manager. "And no matter what you hear, don't come inside. I have big plans for our time together."

The two men looked at each other, exchanging knowing smiles, and she had to hold back a chuckle. The fools had no idea what she was up to. It was pathetic, really. All that lovely cock, and not a single brain cell to control it. Men were all the same.

She showed her client into the small room she'd reserved for them. Like most of its kind, it was almost empty. A chair sat in the middle, and a low couch stood against one wall. At least it was clean. She could tell by the antiseptic smell that it was sprayed down between customers. Unpleasant, but better than the alternative.

He reached for his pants, but she placed one hand across his, stopping him.

"We have all night," she said softly. "Let's start things off slowly. Sit in the chair."

He nodded his head, following her directions. So very obedient. She felt herself losing some of her interest and considered killing him on the spot. Still, there was that lovely cock, and she was still horny from her little pole dance. She turned away from him and sat down on his lap slowly. His erection nudged gently at her ass, and she wiggled, enjoying his groan of satisfaction. Oh yes, there it was, that lovely bulge, pulsating with suppressed lust and energy. She could almost feel it in her already, just waiting to give her what she needed more than anything else.

She started a slow grind, working him deliberately with a strength and purpose that would drive him crazy. It might drive her crazy, too, she mused. Already she could feel herself swelling, her body responding more than usual.

There was something about him... The way he smelled, mixed with the feel of his cock that was seeping into her consciousness more than she liked. She slowed down, thinking, and his hips thrust up at hers in protest. It caught her off guard, and for the first time she felt less than fully in control of the situation. She didn't care for that one little bit.

She stood up abruptly, changing her tactics.

She turned to face him, licking her lips and smiling, plastering a mask of confidence across her face. Then she reached up and slowly unhooked the small bits of metal holding her bustier together. It fastened straight up the front, and when she had it halfway open, she dropped her hands again. Her breasts were pushed up and out, the nipples just barely showing. She fingered them, taking a moment to appreciate the tingles running through her, and then unhooked the rest of the garment. It fell to the floor, and she stood before him naked except for the tiny slip of fabric between her legs.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked.

He nodded his head, licking his lips hungrily. She had expected him to look at her breasts, but his eyes stayed glued to hers. Once again she noted that strange difference about him. He seemed more intent on her than most men. Not that men were ever less than attentive toward her, but she got the distinct impression that this one wanted more than her body. His expression said he wanted to crawl into her head, to understand her inside and out. It was strange, frightening, and she had to push the idea away. He was a standard mark, just the latest notch on her belt. The only thing special about him was that someone was willing to pay 15,000 credits to see him dead.

She rubbed her hands up over her breasts, and then slowly stepped forward again, her knees butting against his.

"Do you want to touch me?" she asked softly. He nodded his head, but his hands stayed at his side. She approved. Too many men grabbed a woman's tits and twisted them like they were ship controls. He seemed content to sit back and let her take the lead. She liked that. This was her show, and she knew exactly how it should go.

She straddled him again, this time not bothering to kick her leg up and over him. Somehow they seemed beyond that at this point. She sighed as the swollen lips of her labia came into contact with the mound of his restrained cock, wrapping her arms around his neck for stability. She closed her eyes, offering her breasts up to his mouth, and he obliged her by leaning forward and nuzzling the valley between them.

Subtle. She liked that.

Whispers of need crept along her spine, and she rubbed herself up and down his length, hips gyrating restlessly as he started licking her breasts. Back and forth he went, lapping and nosing at her without ever touching her nipples. They cried out for him, already swollen and aching in anticipation of his tongue. A need built within her, she wanted his touch. She thrust her breast at him pointedly, and stopped moving. Her challenge was clear. Give me what I want, and I'll give you what you want.

He got the message, looking up at her face with an expression that could only be described as amused. She didn't like thinking about that. She was in charge, not him. Still, before she could say or do anything, he dropped his gaze and sucked one nipple deeply into his mouth.

Sensation shot through her, a thousand tiny sparkles racing down an invisible string between her breast and her clit. She rubbed against him more urgently, feeling that familiar pressure rising within her like a beast. It was time for sex, time for taking what she needed from his body and using him for her pleasure. The rush was upon her, that high she could only find fucking or killing.

She rode him harder, wishing she had taken the time to strip him, wishing that he was naked and inside her, thrusting at her with all his strength. There was no way, of course, that she'd even consider pulling away from him long enough to strip away those layers. For the second time that night she hovered on the edge, too close to stop, too close to do anything but keep moving. She knew this pole between her legs would be infinitely more satisfying.

He sucked her nipple in hard and deep. Somewhere in the back of her mind she noticed his hands were on her hips, that he thrust her up and down along the length of his caged cock with a force that would leave bruises on her tomorrow. She didn't care. She squeezed herself closer to him, crushing her breast against his face, desperate for more. Each thrust scraped her clit, each motion making her more aware of the yawning emptiness between her legs. She wanted to crawl into him, take him, and consume him.

Suddenly it hit her.

Explosions of light and feeling, a whiplash of sensation slammed through her body. She yelped, taken off guard, and ground her clit into him one last time even as her back arched in ecstasy. In the back of her mind she was vaguely aware of his shout, could feel his hips pumping up at her. Then she felt the heat of his seed through the leather and realized that he, too, had found his completion.

She collapsed against him, wrung out. This was far better than what she'd found against the pole. She was glad she hadn't killed him—it was going to be a glorious night.

Chapter Two

She stunned him.

There was not other way to describe her power. He didn't know how she did accomplished it, but feeling this black-haired witch's body rubbing against his clothed cock was the most erotic experience of his life. Now the lady collapsed against him, seemingly as overwhelmed as he was.

He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her and carrying her the few steps across the room to the couch. He could feel how startled she was when he lifted her; her entire body tensed. He expected her to soften, though, so it came as a surprise to him when she pushed against him. She didn't want to be held.

He lowered her to her feet and watched as she smiled up at him seductively, as if to erase the brief moment of tension. How interesting.

She didn't like to lose control. The thought brought him up short, filled with implications. Did she enjoy performing, experiencing orgasm with a client because it genuinely felt good, or was it because of the rush of power it gave her? He thought about the room full of men, chanting, following her with their lustful gaze, throwing credits up on the stage. No wonder she had come so powerfully before them... It was sobering.

"It's my turn," he said suddenly,

"What do you mean?" she asked, her voice playful. "Do you have some special request? Shall I do something for you? *To you?*"

"No," he said. "I want to do something to you. It's my turn to give you pleasure."

That brought her up short.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said softly. "I'm here to work for you. That's what I do. My pleasure is really no concern of yours."

"Oh yes, it is," he said, his voice low and smooth. That facade of hers cracked again, and he held back a smile. She was genuinely uncomfortable, and completely off base. "You're here at my pleasure for my purposes. This is what I want."

She shook her head, tensing even more, and for the first time he realized something wasn't quite right. She really didn't want him touching her.

"What's going on here?" he asked, his voice suddenly serious. Her eyes darted away from his and instincts honed by his years of survival kicked into play. Where a moment earlier she had smiled seductively, now she whirled on him, whipping an almost invisible silvery thread that had been hidden in the seam of her thong. *Ionic whip*, his mind whispered, and he leapt back. She held one of the most dangerous and difficult weapons he'd ever seen, a whip only a handful of molecules thick. Sharp enough to slip right through almost any substance.

He backed up against the door, too startled to do more than fumble at the latch, but it wouldn't open. She must have locked him in. Adrenaline rocketed through his body and his mind raced through possible plans of action. This time when she came for him, he was ready.

He dodged her once more, feinting to the left.

She moved quickly, adjusting automatically for his new position, and the whip snapped out with deadly intent, faintly humming.

He cursed, leaping again, then rolling across the floor in a blur. He had to disarm her or he wouldn't survive the next 60 seconds. She wielded the whip as if born to it—he'd never seen anything like it.

Except in holos of his own practice sessions.

As he sprang back to his feet, he reached down and pulled his own whip out of his boot. Light, undetectable, infinitely dangerous, it was the perfect weapon—no security

device invented could detect one. He always carried it with him, even in portside strip clubs. You just never knew when you'd come under attack.

As she raised her arm to lash out again, he flicked his hand and a second humming noise filled the room. He saw her eyes widen, first with pure shock and then delight. She burst out laughing as their whips clashed mid-air, tangling and sizzling as they wound around each other like angry snakes.

The only thing that could neutralize an ionic whip was another ionic whip.

"You're better than I imagined," she said lightly. "I thought this would be an easy job. I can see I was wrong."

He cocked his head, understanding filling him.

"You're here to kill me?" he asked softly.

"You've got it," she replied, eyes twinkling with merriment. "You're not as stupid as I thought. But I'm still going to kill you."

With that she launched herself at him, one leg extended toward his gut. He blocked her without thinking, and then landed a solid punch to her midriff. She grunted and twisted, bringing her leg up to tangle with his, and they hit the floor. Together they rolled, and Damian felt the adrenaline pumping through his body. She held death in her eyes—this was a fight for survival, but all he could think about was how strong and smooth she felt against him. He wanted to fuck her more than ever.

Writhing in each other's arms, they crashed across the room. When they slammed into the wall, the woman took the bulk of the hit on her head. She fell limp, and for a moment he thought she was dead. But her chest still moved. Holding her tight, well aware this could be a trick on her part, he leaned over and rested his cheek against her neck. Her pulse was steady and smooth, and then she slammed her chin against his forehead.

He pulled her away from the wall, covering her with his body. Without thinking he forced her legs apart, pushing the hard length of his erection between them. Damn, that

felt good. He rubbed back and forth several times, wishing he'd managed to get his leathers off earlier. He'd give anything to thrust into her right now.

He felt an answering push from her hips, as her eyes snapped with fire.

They looked at each other, saying nothing, then her hips wiggled beneath his again. He responded in kind, and she bucked, trying to break free. Instantly he tightened his hold, and they writhed against each other, their movements a combination of fight and fuck. Blood pounded through his head. He could feel sweat breaking out across his entire body. This had nothing to do with the strain of holding her, and everything to do with how much he needed to be inside her, taking her and fucking her until she screamed for mercy.

Her legs came up around his waist, kicking and clenching him alternately. He saw the cords of her neck straining as she tensed against him. He rammed his hips hard against her, his cock hitting the hard leather of his pants painfully. It hurt; it made him want to scream. He needed to be inside her, needed to thrust up and take her again and again as she whimpered for mercy and clawed at his back.

She bucked against him once more, her teeth flashing as she went for his throat. Just in time he blocked her with his chin, and he felt her teeth sink deeply into his flesh. She was an animal—deep within he could feel the vibration of a scream coming from her chest. Anger or frustration? She ground her clit against him and then he felt her convulse. Her mouth dropped away from his face, a ring of his own blood gracing her lips. Her face contorted as she came beneath him.

For a moment he thought he might come, too. She stilled beneath him, though, and the surge of his arousal came under control. That was a good thing. He wanted to savor the experience when he finally made it inside her body. He didn't question whether that would happen, just when and how. Preferably with some kind of restraining strap to keep her from killing him...

"So what do we do now?" she asked after a long pause, her voice raspy. He studied her, thinking.

"Tell me who hired you," he said abruptly. "And tell me how much you're being paid."

"I don't think so," she said, a funny little smile coming over her face. "I have a feeling that might be the only information keeping me alive right now."

"Oh, no," he said softly. "You're alive right now because I want to fuck you. The information would just be a bonus."

She smiled again, and nodded her head.

"Yes, I guess I can feel that," she replied, wiggling her hips. "I'm impressed. Most men can't keep it in their pants this long."

He gave her a rueful grin, and then shook his head. "Stop trying to distract me. What do you think I should do with you? I suppose you have the lock keyed to your fingerprint?"

"Well, of course," she said. "I wouldn't want you just walking out of here. I picked this place very carefully."

"How did you know I'd end up here?"

"Now that's for me to know," she said softly, licking her lips, seeming to enjoy the taste of his blood. "I wouldn't want to give away all my secrets. It's the mystery that makes a lady so interesting, you know."

His breath caught as she wiggled her hips at him again. Lust washed through him, ripping at his gut. He suddenly lost interest in their word play. He thrust his hips at her once more, and then transferred both of her hands to one of his. Then he lifted his body, reaching down between them to open his leathers. He had to get inside her before he died.

She took advantage of the moment, slamming her head up and butting him with it. Taking him totally off guard, his grip softened for one second. It was all she needed. She pushed him to one side and leapt to her feet. In an instant she reached the door, keying the lock open and darting down the corridor.

Chapter Three

Cybele ran down the hallway, glad she'd taken the time to scope out potential escape routes. Her breath came hard. He'd offered her far more fight than she'd anticipated, and for the first time she questioned whether or not she'd really be able to accomplish her mission.

This was no easy mark. He wasn't ordinary in any way. She could still feel the bulb of his cock pushing against her, desperately seeking entrance to her body. A part of her wished he'd been able to find it. She should have been focusing on her escape, calculating the best way to get away, to disappear into the warrens of the spaceport. Instead she kept imagining that hot, hard shaft sinking into her body.

He would stretch her open, pushing her almost to the point of pain before he hit bottom. Each little movement would pull at the sensitive walls of her cunt, scraping as she produced more and more moisture to accommodate him. Then he would thrust into her, pinning her beneath his body and fucking her until she screamed. She gasped, feeling herself flush. Just thinking about it was enough to bring her close to the edge.

She burst out the club's back door, pushing her way through a group of startled dancers. She ran several meters down the busy corridor before noticing she was still naked except for the string between her legs.

She needed clothing, fast, or she'd start a riot.

She ran down the corridor, looking desperately for some kind of cover. She heard shrieks behind her, and knew he must be on her heels. She grinned against her will. How long had it been since she'd faced a true challenge?

She saw an opening up ahead. There was another strip club, this one advertised by holos of naked women dancing and enticing the customers in the corridor. Perfect cover for a naked woman on the run... She ducked into the club. The bouncer, trained to stop

men, not naked women, ignored her as she ducked toward the back. She heard a scuffle at the door as Damian tried to follow her. They would want to scan him and get a cover charge before they let him in. It was perfect.

She slowed her pace, moving through the club as if she had all the time in the world. Nothing would make her stand out more than hurrying. She felt several men's fingers clutch at her as she strolled past their tables, but she shook them off quickly.

She grabbed a waitress and asked her where the dressing rooms were.

The woman nodded toward the back of the stage, and Cybele made her way past yet another bouncer into the dancer's rooms. He didn't even notice she'd never been there before, thank the Goddess. Apparently he didn't bother to learn the dancers' faces. She strode into the dressing room, pulling open a locker at the far end. Another woman gave her a strange look, and Cybele snarled, "Don't fuck with me, little girl."

She gave a squawk and ran out of the room.

Cybele ignored her. Fortunately, she'd found a locker belonging to someone practical. She wore a serviceable and somewhat plain pair of pants and a tunic when she wasn't dancing for money. Cybele pulled them on, then threw a shawl over her shoulders and made for the exit. She was almost out the club's back door when she heard him crashing through the dressing room. She would have made a clean escape if the bitch she'd seen before hadn't betrayed her.

"She went that way. She threatened me!" she heard the woman shout in the distance, and she took off running again.

He was right behind her, and while she wasn't attracting the same kind of attention now that she wore clothing, there seemed to be no shaking him. Faster and faster she ran, ducking through corridors and pushing people out of her way. Sooner or later he was going to corner her if she didn't think of something.

It happened sooner.

One minute she had turned down a small, darkened corridor and the next he hit her like a fully loaded freighter, slamming her to the ground and knocking the breath out of

her lungs. Gasping for breath, she tried to crawl away from him on her belly. He pinned her, his long arms reaching around to grip her wrists, holding her tight as she struggled in silence. Screaming wouldn't accomplish anything, she knew that already. If the station guards learned she was an assassin, she'd rot in their nasty little hellhole of a jail. No way.

His hips thrust against her, rubbing the swell of his erection against her ass. She stilled, wondering if she could use that to her advantage. He prodded her once more, prompting a rush of heat in her own body. She wanted him just as much as she had back at the club, she thought in disgust. What the hell made him so attractive to her?

Maybe it's the fact that he's the only man who's ever beaten you, her brain whispered insidiously.

She shook her head, refusing to acknowledge it. He hadn't beaten her yet.

He jammed one knee between hers and thrust her legs apart roughly. She shivered and moaned, pushing her butt up at him.

His hand reached between them, fumbling at her clothing. She heard a *snicking* sound, and then something cold touched her skin. She stilled. He had a knife. Was she wrong? Was he going to kill her now?

All too soon she learned the answer. The knife sliced neatly through her pants and thong. He pulled it away from her body, and then fumbled at his leathers.

She probably could have escaped at that moment if she wanted to, but all she could think about was how good it would feel to have him slide home within her. Then she felt it, the hot, hard round tip of his cock, poised at the mouth of her cunt. She expected him to say something, to play one of the silly games men and women used to communicate their lust. Instead, he thrust into her with all the strength of a man pushed to the limit. Every fiber of her stretched, and for a second the urge to scream was almost too strong to control. Slowly he pulled back, leaving a sense of gaping emptiness. She pushed back up at him, desperate for more.

He slammed into her again. She bucked up at him, forcing him to ride her as their bodies responded to each other. Within moments he had loosened his grip on her arms, and she rose to her hands and knees. It was easier to find leverage in this position. She thrust back at him harder, rocking her body into his with a force that sent shudders along her spine. Every nerve in her body connected along one tight, winding string, a cord that stretched tight with tension and sang out with need as he hit home. She heard a gasping noise, and then realized it came from her mouth. He filled her in a way that no other man had ever done, pushing her to the point of capacity and stretched just a little bit more. He was strong, just as strong as she was, and he wasn't afraid to treat her roughly.

He was her perfect match.

Stories she'd heard from her mother, tales of perfect mates and true love, darted into her head. She might have snorted in disgust, but she couldn't focus. All she could do was push back at him, again and again, their bodies slapping together with a force that should have rocked the entire station. Her heart pounded, and for one shining instant she thought she might die.

Suddenly it hit her with all the force of a sun exploding, wave after wave of release, pleasure beyond anything she'd experienced before. This was far more than the end of gnawing tension, far more than the relief of her own hand working in the night.

Certainly beyond any cock she'd ever felt.

Every fiber of her being cried out to her, telling her she needed him, she had to keep him close. She had to *protect* him. Where had *that* come from? She collapsed forward, feeling him pump into her, working toward his own pleasure. She knew she should help, but she couldn't. She had no energy, no drive. She'd become a husk, a limp remnant of the woman she'd been two hours ago. She'd been bested by him physically and blown away by him sexually.

This wasn't supposed to happen to her.

He came with a shout, his body shuddering and covering hers, his hot seed hitting her cervix with such force she felt every surge. Then he collapsed over her, apparently as stunned as she was, and the sound of their harsh breathing filled the corridor.

"What the hell was that?" he asked softly after a long silence, and she shrugged her shoulders. She had no damn idea.

"Oh shit," she muttered suddenly, closing her eyes in disgust. Now would be the perfect time to kill him. He might still be covering her, but there was no way he'd be able to stop her. His entire body was limp, defenseless as a child's. He was hers.

She looked up at him and smiled, touching his face with one hand. His gaze was almost tender.

Just do it, she told herself. This is your job.

Her hand hardened and chopped toward his jugular. He blocked her without so much as blinking. It was only luck that she managed to buck him off an instant later. She leapt to her feet, and took off down the corridor. She darted a glance back to see if he was following, and didn't even see the wall when she hit it. She dropped like a rock, unconscious.

* * * * *

How many hits could a woman survive without sustaining permanent damage? She was nothing like any woman he'd ever met, and he didn't have a clue how to judge her strength... Of course, based on what he'd seen already, she wasn't even human, Damian thought wryly. He picked up her limp body carefully, checking for a pulse as he smoothed back that thick, long hair.

He was pretty sure he knew who'd hired her. He'd taken five cargoes off Vaspar Bendren in the past year alone, and the man was close to bankruptcy. That didn't bother Damian one bit. Bendren and his family had made their credits trading slaves before going legitimate, and he had no sympathy for them. Still, they were more

desperate than he'd realized. Hiring an assassin was the act of a desperate man, one who didn't have the strength to fight his own battles. He'd thought Bendren had balls, but apparently he'd been wrong.

At least Bendren chose well; she wasn't the average assassin. Very few people knew how to wield an ionic whip. The discipline took training from the earliest years onward, and only those from families where the whip was an established tradition had any hope of mastering it. Who were her people?

Now wasn't the time for answers, Damian reminded himself. He threw her over one shoulder and started back across the port toward his ship's berth. It would be easier to interrogate her there, not to mention safer. He didn't know what kind backup she might have, but he didn't doubt she'd already paid off at least some of the port guards. Of course, so had he, but he didn't want to test their loyalty. He'd always believed that a man easily bought once could be just as easily bought a second time...

The sight of a man carrying an unconscious woman through the port drew eyes, but a glare was enough to discourage those foolish enough to consider approaching him. Still, it would only be a matter of time before the station guards arrived. He wanted to be on his ship, fully disengaged from the station's locks with his weapons powered, before that happened.

That, along with an appropriate bribe, should be enough to smooth his way.

His crewmembers were wise enough to keep their mouths shut when they saw her. He gave a terse order for his second to recall their men from the station and then took her to his cabin. Time to get some answers.

When she opened her eyes he was ready for her, sitting back in a comfortable chair, just waiting to see the look on her face when she realized her little game was up.

She didn't disappoint him.

She came awake and tensed, her gaze darting around the room before coming to rest on him with malevolence and something like respect. She didn't bother testing her bonds, at least not that he could see. She knew it was over.

"What do you plan to do with me?" she asked softly.

"I plan to do all kinds of things with you," he said slowly. "But first, I'd like to know who sent you. I'm sure he had spies on the station and they'll know that you're my prisoner. Once he finds out, you're nothing but a liability to him."

"Let's make a deal," she said slowly. "I know you want me, and to be honest, I want you. Why don't we call a truce and take advantage of the moment. This killing business is tiresome."

"A truce can only come once I have the information I need," he said. "I'm prepared to be generous. I'll offer you the same amount he did, just for his name. You give it to me and then we can explore our...other...options."

She smiled, and shook her head.

"You'll get his name when I'm safely in a neutral place," she said quietly. "Otherwise I have a feeling I'll never get off your ship. I want to live; you have to be able to understand that. After all, you've just spent a great deal of time and energy trying to preserve your own life. You can't expect any less of me."

He smiled, knowing she was right. It would be foolish of her to give up what little leverage she had, not that it mattered in this particular case. Of course, he didn't plan to hurt her. Not unless she asked him to... But he still wouldn't be letting her go. He'd never met a woman as magnificent as her. Letting her escape would be a crime against his ancestors.

He closed his eyes, savoring the image of her swollen with his child. What incredible children they could make together! Together they could take over the Empire...

He shook his head, letting the thought go. He'd find out who was trying to kill him when the next assassin struck. Until then he would bide his time, allowing her to think there might be some way to escape.

"That seems fair enough to me," he said, running his heated gaze across her supine form.

The tattered remnants of her pants still hung from her hips, and the tunic exposed a tempting view of her muscular arms and lush cleavage. Without thinking, he licked his lips, and she smiled.

"Truce," she said softly. She lifted her hips invitingly, and he grinned.

"Truce," he repeated, and for some reason he believed her. She might be an assassin, but he didn't think she'd try to hurt him after crying truce. There was a connection between them, and he knew instinctively that she felt it as strongly as he did. She wouldn't try to kill him right now because she didn't want him dead yet. It was as simple as that.

She wanted to fuck him as much as he wanted to fuck her.

He stood and walked over toward her, leaning across the bed and resting an arm on either side of her head.

Then he lowered his head, slowly and deliberately, focusing on her lovely red lips. Her tongue darted out to moisten them, and he caught a glimpse of her pearly white teeth. Those same teeth had marked his chin earlier. The thought of her strength made his cock leap, and he was ready again, just like that. As if he hadn't already come two times that night, as if he hadn't been forced to fight this woman for his very survival.

His lips sipped at her, drinking in her taste for the first time. She was sweet, soft, and it took all he had within himself to keep from laughing. How many women lived within her skin? Each time he touched her he discovered something different, something enticing.

Assassin or no, he was lucky to have found her.

Trusting his instincts, he lifted his head and smiled at her as he loosened her hands from the straps he'd used to bind them.

She smiled up at him, as if they shared some kind of joke, and he actually laughed out loud.

"This is so strange," he said softly.

She shook her head, then wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down toward her.

"Don't make me have to kill you," she said softly into his ear. "We have a truce, remember? Let's focus on the business at hand..."

She ran her arms down his back, and then gripped his butt firmly, squeezing him and pulling him close. Then she kissed him and he felt himself melting. He knew the more he let himself go, the more likely it was she'd turn on him and kill him.

Somehow that didn't bother him, though. That little bit of danger, that touch of excitement, only added to her appeal.

He grinned when her legs came up around his waist. *So much for restraining her.* Her entire body was nothing but smooth, sleek muscle. She took good care of herself, far better care than most dancers. He should have known there was something different about her from the start... Of course, he *had* known, he thought wryly. He just hadn't known *how* different she was.

His door pinged, and he gritted his teeth. He'd told them to leave him alone except for emergencies.

"Go away," he said gruffly, but the door pinged again. It must be important.

She cocked an eyebrow at him as he stood. He strode over the door impatiently, slapping at the control to open it. His second, Everand, stood outside, face tense.

"We need you in the aft cargo hold," he said without bothering to apologize. "It's serious."

Damian nodded tightly, and turned back toward his assassin. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Are you sure you don't want to tie me up again?" she asked languidly, eyes flickering past him to take in Everand's tight face.

"Would they hold you?" he asked, his mouth quirking.

"No," she replied shortly. "It's more for form than anything."

"Sir," Everand said softly, but Damian raised a hand, cutting him off.

"Let's go," he said, moving through the door. "What's the problem?"

"It seems that the we have some unstable materials mixed in with the textiles," Everand started to explain. "Karoli found them on a routine inspection. We're damned lucky the whole thing hasn't blown before now..."

* * * * *

Cybele watched Damian leave, noting the red light that flickered to life above the door as he sealed it. He was lucky such a seal couldn't hold her prisoner, she thought. He might be tough enough to out-fight her, but clearly his nature was too trusting. She had no idea how he'd survived so long.

She rose to her feet, looking about the cabin for something she could use as a weapon. She didn't bother worrying about her tattered clothing. Damian had no female crewmembers; she'd stand out no matter what she wore. She'd have to make her escape without anyone seeing her or she'd have to kill them. No need to complicate things.

Her mouth twisted in amusement as she looked through his drawers, noting how untidy they were. In some ways, men were all the same. She found a small, antique mirror there, the kind made from glass. Why he had such a silly thing she couldn't imagine, but it would serve her purpose. She broke it neatly against the corner of a drawer, then wrapped a scrap of fabric securely around one end. Not pretty, but it made a serviceable enough knife, and the heft would work for throwing.

She had the door open within seconds, slipping down the corridor silently. She was familiar with the ship's design, had studied it extensively before planning her attack on him. The aft cargo hold would be easy enough to find. Everand had been a fool to let their destination slip out in front of her.

Neutralizing the target would be simple.

She crept down the hallways, always listening for others, but still moving quickly. No time for hesitation, no time for doubt. She had work to do.

The aft cargo hold door was locked, but opening it was as easy as opening the seal on Damian's cabin had been. *Too trusting*, she thought once more. Didn't the man have any sense? How could he expect to survive with such lax security?

He couldn't, she thought in dark disgust.

The door slid open, revealing Damian and Everand just a few meters away, hunched over a diagnostic handset. Everand turned and stepped away from Damian in surprise. Then his eyes caught hers. He gasped.

Damian spun around, seeing her, and she raised the primitive knife. Everand reached down to his belt, reaching for a blaster a blaster. Instinct took over.

Raising the knife high, she gave a powerful cry and leaped toward the men. Her body hit Damian's with enough force to knock him back into the piles of textiles. His eyes held betrayal and sadness, but she ignored his pain. Nothing mattered at that moment but the target.

She threw the awkward knife, wishing desperately that she had a weapon with better balance, but it was good enough. It caught Everand in the throat and he dropped, the blaster firing up at the ceiling as he went down. She turned to Damian.

He seemed stunned, his face filled with betrayal, and without thinking she slapped him right across the face. His instincts didn't extend to protecting himself from his own crewmen, she realized.

"Get over it," she said tightly. "He was going to kill you, you dolt. I had to stop him."

He blinked his eyes, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Everand, your trusty second," she said. "He was my client. He hired me to kill you, although I have no idea why."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he asked softly.

"Because I didn't know he was on the ship with us until I saw him," she replied. "The idiot hired me in person. I knew as soon as I saw him that he'd have to kill you himself, before you found out he was my client."

"You saved my life," he said quietly, and she shook her head. For such an intelligent man, he didn't seem to be grasping the situation very quickly.

"Of course I did," she said, eyes narrowing. "I'm not done with you yet. You've got no idea how to take care of yourself, your security is pathetic. It'll probably take me weeks just to go through your logs and make sure Everand didn't have any help on board. After all, he's not the one who led you to the club. We have to learn if the other men were in on the plot."

He looked at her, utterly confused, and she rolled her eyes.

"I've made a decision, Damian," she said. "I'm keeping you. You've got a lot to learn, but you're still more of a man than anyone I've ever met. We belong together."

He burst out laughing, and reached one hand up toward her. She pulled him up lightly, grinned at him and leaned forward to kiss him. Lust hit her again, and for a second she considered the pile of cloth, wondering what kind of bed it would make.

His gaze turned to Everand's body, though, and her lust faded. Time to take care of the evidence.

"I think we should tell the crew I killed him," he said. "They'll understand if I say he challenged me for control of the ship. Challenges aren't uncommon among

smugglers, although I've never heard of an assassination attempt before. He must have realized it was the only way he'd be able to beat me."

"Are you sure you aren't just ashamed to be saved by a woman?"

"No, honored," he replied. "But Everand had friends on board, and you'll be able to find his co-conspirators more easily if they think you're just a dancer I've picked up."

"Well, let's get the body cleaned up," she said softly. "You've got explanations to make. I think it might be a good idea if we got out of port, too. Better if nobody has a chance to talk about what happened."

"The next leg of our trip is a long one," he said quietly, looking deep into her eyes. "I just hope you aren't too bored."

She sauntered away from him, turning to look back flirtatiously over one shoulder.

"We'll think of some way to pass the time."

He grinned, and nodded his head. Then he a strange look came over his face. "What the hell is your name, anyway? I've never met anyone like you."

"Cybele," she replied with a laugh. "I'm Saurellian. We're different. Get used to it."

About the author:

Joanna Wylde is a freelance writer who has been working professionally for more than eight years as a journalist and fund-raiser. In April 2002, she branched out into fiction with *The Price of Pleasure*, a futuristic romance published by Ellora's Cave. She is 29 years old, married, and lives in north Idaho.

Joanna welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

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