

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



GLADIATOR'S  
*Prize*  
JOANNA WYLDE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gladiator's Prize

ISBN 9781419922176

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic book Publication August 2009

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# *GLADIATOR'S PRIZE*

Joanna Wylde

## Chapter One

*The Arena, Saurellia Proper*  
*Year 5513, Saurellian Calendar*

Admiral Saul Darius took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead. His palm came away streaked with blood and he laughed. Damn, he loved fighting in the arena – it was the next best thing to real combat.

His opponent lay unconscious on the sands, the sixth he'd defeated today. Ten thousand of Saurellia's most distinguished citizens surrounded him, on their feet and screaming. Saul didn't give a damn about his audience, he didn't come to the arena for their tribute. But the women... They were a different story. Saul raised his arms triumphantly and turned his half-naked, sweating body toward the maidens' section. Hundreds of young women in flowing gowns threw themselves into a frenzy and he smiled with satisfaction. Every one of them was a potential lifemate, although he'd long since given up on finding a woman for himself. After thirty-eight years it no longer seemed an option – they were off limits to him.

Except for today.

The winner chose which maiden would crown him, reason enough for many men to risk their lives in the arena. Darius came to sate his blood lust, although later he'd plow some lucky woman until she screamed. Not one of these girls, though. Never one of these. They weren't for the likes of him. Some men were fated to find lifemates but Darius knew his fate lay with war and death. Except today – for a short time – he could get close enough to one to pretend things might be different...

He scanned the stands, trying to decide which woman to pick. They fluttered at him like delicate birds, their traditional pastel gowns designed for just this moment. His selected queen would look like a goddess stepping down from the sky, crowning Saul in a moment of glory that called to every Saurellian's deepest sense of tradition and

heritage. Saul's mouth twisted wryly. He'd take it more seriously if he didn't know for a fact that the entire thing was little more than propaganda, designed to keep an embattled Federation united in their war against the Empire.

Still, their long, dark hair and rich brown eyes called to him. Each woman appeared lovelier than the next and he felt the beginnings of an erection swell. He wore only a loincloth, knowing all too well that his arousal would be visible to anyone looking, but Saul didn't care. He'd enjoy the moment, use his fame for all it was worth, and with any luck he'd be able to return to what really mattered before too much longer.

Winning the war that had already claimed so many of his friends.

And if he won that war? Well, some of those beautiful girls might live to find their lifemates and another generation of little Saurellians would be born.

Despite the Emperor's best efforts.

K'rilla sat obstinately still as the other women ran wild around her, trying not to let her mouth pinch in that unpleasant way that she knew made her look her age. She hated displays like this, although she understood the importance of them. She felt like a fool, perched here among the maidens of Saurellia's finest families. Unmated at thirty-five, she was an anomaly at best, a freak in the minds of most.

Never mind the little fact that she was one of the Federation's leading weapons system engineers... No babies, so here she sat with the teenagers. Saurellia didn't quite know what to do with women who didn't follow the traditional pattern.

Attending had been a mistake, she hated sticking out. *Family duty*, she reminded herself. *Kimme was scared to come by herself, she needs you*. Oh she hated moments like this, when it was all too clear she didn't fit in.

And she never would.

Because while everyone else could relax and enjoy the spectacle of the arena, all she could think about was the coming invasion. She knew what everyone else could only

speculate upon. Soon their warships would leave Saurellian space, launching the greatest assault in their history. Either they'd defeat the Empire and win a new era of peace, or...better not to think about that. She glanced around quickly at the beautiful girls—little more than children—surrounding her. She wanted them to live, wanted them to grow old and rear their own children.

That wouldn't happen if the Saurellian fleet failed.

She should definitely be in her office, running through battle scenarios. In the end, the invasion's success might all boil down to the new weapons systems on the battle cruisers, systems she'd help design. *Pray the Goddess they work.* Here at the arena she couldn't even access the data net with her personal core—not secure enough. Not that she always bothered to follow the rules when it came to her work, but security was something none of them could afford to ignore. Imperial spies could be anywhere.

K'rilla bit back a sigh, letting her eyes run across the tall, hardened form of the victor. At least the day wasn't a total waste. He was really something worth looking at, she mused, licking her lips—Saul Darius, the great admiral, a hero of the Tyrian massacre. The man was a work of art, all gleaming muscles and silky black hair, and plenty of scars to prove he knew how to fight. She certainly enjoyed studying his form. All right, more than enjoyed it. There was something visceral about her attraction to him, far more than she usually felt encountering a handsome man. He seemed more alive than others, more vibrant. Exaltation at his victory rolled off him in palpable waves and she understood why the men were so eager to follow him.

Who wouldn't?

He raised his arms and shook them triumphantly. Beads of sweat rolled down them, and K'rilla found herself wondering what the sweat on his skin would taste like...

Not that she'd ever find out, she reminded herself firmly. She might be stuck with the maidens, but that didn't mean she had to shed her dignity over a handsome man. Ridiculous. Then Saul turned to look at her section and she lost her train of thought.

*What a beautiful man.*

K'rilla licked her lips again and crossed her arms in front of her body, reminding herself of her dignity. The fabric was far too light and silky...it caressed her nipples, sending little tendrils of sensation racing down her spine. Darius had full, ripe-looking lips and she imagined them latching on to the sensitive tips of her breasts, suckling gently.

*Pull yourself together, d'Pecoraio.*

She knew from her work connections that he'd come back to plan the Imperial invasion. He'd be leading the fleet himself and she couldn't help but wonder how wise it was to risk an admiral in the arena. But even a pragmatist like K'rilla could appreciate the public relations brilliance of the moment. She thought once more about her unfinished work. There were fixes that needed to be made before the battle cruisers left...

"Aunt K'rilla, stand up!" Kimme said, tugging at her arm. "He's looking right this way. I swear, this is the most exciting moment of my life!"

K'rilla rolled her eyes, but she stood. No reason to spoil the day for Kimme and she might as well play up to the cameras. Millions—even billions—would be watching this moment. If by some fluke she ended up on the broadcast, she didn't want to send the wrong signal. Every last Saurellian had to project confidence and pride in their military—the odds against them were far too high to show doubts to the collected peoples of their Federation. And no d'Pecoraio had ever flinched in the face of his or her duty. Not now, not ever.

Just because the Empire was poised to crush them like bugs didn't mean they had to show their fear.

But she wasn't a young girl like everyone else in the maidens' section and she'd demonstrate a little decorum. The girls around her suddenly screamed even more wildly. K'rilla glanced around quickly, confused. Why the hysteria? Then she glanced back at the arena and saw Darius pointing right toward her, his black eyes burning

through hers like coals of fire. Pure male and more than a little hungry. They telegraphed naked need and want and she felt a sudden burst of unholy, giddy excitement – could he really be choosing her?

K'rilla swayed, overwhelmed. In that moment, she wanted to howl her excitement with the rest of them. How could she resist a man like that?

"It's meeeee!" shrieked a girl standing behind them and she started jumping up and down. K'rilla took a deep breath, forcing herself to laugh. Of course it was someone else, as if Saul Darius would choose someone like K'rilla. An engineer. Two of the ceremonial lictors started moving through the crowd toward them and K'rilla shrank back against her seat, allowing the chosen girl to brush past her toward the lictors. Kimme did the same, her expression wistful.

"I thought he was looking at me, at first," she said to K'rilla. "How silly is that?"

"Not silly at all," K'rilla said. She reached an arm around her niece's shoulders, pulling her close. "Any man would be thrilled to pick you."

"Do you think?" Kimme said. "Not that I'd really want him anyway. He's old. And everyone knows he'll probably die soon."

K'rilla stiffened. Of course he was old, at least for an unmated male. They didn't tend to live that long. Although she doubted he was much older than she was and she didn't think of herself as ancient.

But maybe she should.

The chosen girl raced toward the lictors, then gave out a squeal of outrage as one of them shook his head with determination. A rush of murmurs ran through the crowd. K'rilla strained her head, trying to figure out what had happened. The lictors gestured broadly and one of them caught her gaze, nodding. K'rilla narrowed her eyes, confused, and he nodded at her again.

"Aunt K'rilla, he's trying to catch your attention," Kimme said, her voice filled with wonder. "He wants you to go to him."



"That's impossible," K'rilla said flatly. "There's been a misunderstanding."

The lictor offered her a reassuring smile and Kimme pushed her forward. The roar of the crowd rose in K'rilla's ears, surreal and intense, forcing her to acknowledge the truth.

It wasn't a misunderstanding.

Saul refused a flagon of wine from an awestruck trainer, opting for water instead. He let the cool fluid slide down his throat, perfect after the long, hot day. The darkness of the arena's tunnel shielded him, providing a welcome respite from the sun. He'd barely had time to wipe away the worst of the sweat, although someone had slapped a quick-healing patch on his forehead, staunching the flow of blood running down his face. He heard the crowd roaring with laughter as they enjoyed a farce being staged out on the sands, waiting for his coronation with the laurels of victory. He shifted his feet, wishing his erection would go down a little. Having one was a good sign—traditionally it meant luck for the winner and his allies. But it was damn uncomfortable...

Those of his opponents still capable of walking would escort him to his coronation, laying their weapons before him as he mounted the victory podium. Lictors in twenty-five different liveries would follow them, representing the First Families of Saurellia. Saul smiled—he'd never dreamed he'd find himself in such exalted company. Never dreamed he'd survive his first tour of duty, let alone become an admiral. And now one of Saurellia's finest women would crown him. His cock gave another twinge and he stifled a groan. She seemed to be bringing him more luck than any man should have to display in public, he thought ruefully. Damn she was pretty, though. The best of the lot.

She'd stood out from the flutter of girls pretending to be women, an adult filled with beauty and poise. Not to mention her full, soft breasts and lush curves. Although her clothing technically qualified her as a maiden, she had the look of maturity. Not old, but seasoned. Intelligent. *Ripe*. Just the way he wanted his women... And she'd been ready to leave the arena, tired of the spectacle. That caught his attention more than

anything. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not—after all, he'd been engaged in a vicious fight, one that could have killed him. Her lack of concern hardly flattered him. On the other hand, it proved there was at least one other person as tired of the pomp and high ceremony of the Saurellian capitol, and a member of a First Family, no less. That was enough to interest him in and of itself. He wondered why she'd bothered coming at all and then answered his own question.

Like him, and every other ranking Saurellian, she was part of the show.

Together they needed to reassure the masses that their invasion of the Empire wouldn't be in vain. The Federation would survive, remain strong, and all the finest of Saurellia stood together today to prove it. He shrugged his shoulders, passing the water back to the trainer. He'd done his part, now he wanted to collect his reward. As if reading his mind, the lictors straightened—almost time for Saul's moment of glory.

The crowd calmed as the farce ended. Triumphant music soared from the heated sands of the arena, the anthem of the Saurellian navy. The music caught Saul's spirits, sending pride swelling through him. Propaganda annoyed him, but this display spoke to him on levels he couldn't define. So many friends lost, so many more fighting right at this moment. All to protect the delicate Federation of planets that shared a common purpose—freedom from Imperial rule. United, they stood a chance of victory. Barely. Darius moved forward, allowing the fierce pride he felt in his comrades to show on his face. They were offering up their blood, their very lives. Playing his part today was the best he could do to help them, and winning would raise his influence with the Council. He needed their leave to return to the fight.

*Of course, I could always just take Tessa's Glory and leave.* The men of the fleet would follow him, not the Council. But that was Imperial thinking, the very evil he fought to prevent. No more emperors. Ever. He sighed, letting the fantasy go.

The arena master nodded toward Saul—time to march back into arena and receive his laurels of victory. The bright sun forced him to squint his eyes as he stepped out of the tunnel. He fought the urge to shade them as he made his way toward the podium,

music rising around him, flowing and swelling in mighty waves. The crowd roared, their cries overwhelming everything else, and he found himself at the foot of a podium lifted from the depths of the arena's labyrinth of subterranean tunnels and rooms.

His chosen queen stood on that podium, a tall figure in the flowing robes of a maiden, her hair loose, drifting across her shoulders. Stunning, even more beautiful than she'd seemed from the stands. Saul's breathing quickened and he imagined ripping those robes right off her body. Exposing those lush breasts. Searching out the hot cleft of her pussy, filling her with his seed. But she was a distant goddess... Not for the likes of him. Her face seemed serene, although he thought he saw just a hint of panic in her eyes. She definitely hadn't planned on this happening. That made him smile—he was sick of cloying young women convinced the planet rotated around their social ambitions. Certainly enough of them had been pushed at him lately, although you'd think their parents would have given up by now. Saul didn't have a lifemate—he'd been created for one thing.

Fighting.

But seeing her made him wish things could be different.

Saul walked slowly up the stairs, studying her. Her features were delicate, yet strong, like the sculpture of the Goddess at the city temple. She took a deep breath, raising her gaze to meet his, and then it happened. He fell right into those deep, rich eyes and everything he'd ever known or believed in shifted. Saul felt desire—a mixture of lust and soul-deep longing—shudder through him, and a powerful longing to throw her over his shoulder and take off running, hit him. He'd never experienced anything so strange or powerful... Compelling. His already-stiff cock went rock hard and she swayed toward him, shaken. She *belonged* to him, Saul knew it with utter certainty. Every cell in his body screamed at him to claim her. To thrust into her, branding her so that every man she met knew she'd been taken. The oblivious priestess standing behind her nudged the woman forward, and she spoke.

"I crown you with these laurels of victory for your triumph in the arena," his queen said, raising her trembling hands toward his head. The words echoed through the stadium, transmitted through hovering nanophones. She held the laurels high, but couldn't reach. She offered Saul a pained look and he realized he should lower his head so she could place them on his head.

He did, catching a whiff of her scent as she leaned close. So sweet, like wildflowers and creamy honey. Then the tips of her fingers grazed his forehead and an entirely wild, boldly physical need flashed through him. Where before she'd struck him as a distant angel, suddenly he saw her as a temptress, every breath teasing him with the rise and fall of her breasts. She licked her lips nervously and he imagined tasting the soft, plump skin for himself. But that wouldn't be enough to sate him. No, Saul wanted to spread her legs and fuck her, hard, right now in front of the whole world. He wanted to show all of them that she belonged to him and no other. He wouldn't tolerate another man coming near her. Not now, not ever. In a flash he made his decision. He'd claim her and damn the consequences.

Saul's hands flashed up, gripping her wrists tightly, pulling her close into his body.

She gave a startled cry as he took her mouth, tongue thrusting inside, hips grinding against hers as he trapped her. Her lips, her soft mouth tasted every bit as good as he imagined and just as sweet. Her belly was soft, cradling his cock, and her breasts pressed against his chest through the filmy fabric, nipples hard and needy. She fluttered in his arms, gentle and giving, accepting him unconsciously—he could only wonder what she thought of him. Did women feel the same impact when they found their lifemate? Could she even begin to understand how much his world had shifted in the past few minutes? He didn't care, not so long as he could hold her like this.

The priestess cleared her throat, jabbing his foot discreetly with her staff of office. Sanity returned and Darius pulled away from the stunned woman. He didn't even know her name, but as of this moment, he owned her. Forever. Nothing could stop him from claiming her. The crowd murmured and he realized he was making a spectacle of

himself. Saul pulled away from the kiss, turning to the crowd and raising his arms as if basking in the triumph.

As he accepted their adulation with a smile both triumphant and feral, he plotted his next move.

He needed to get her alone. Soon.

K'rilla had been kissed many times. As the unmated daughter of a First Family, she'd even been kidnapped twice by potential suitors. She'd handled each situation with calm control, largely unbothered by the caresses and sloppy mouths of her would-be mates. After all, there were two or three Saurellian males for every female—girls learned early how to handle aggressive men. But she'd never felt anything close to this. When Saul Darius kissed her she'd lost sight of everything else. She forgot about their audience, forgot about her watching family, even forgot about the coworkers waiting to tease her at work tomorrow.

The moment his lips touched hers, K'rilla fell into a whirlpool of sensation. Twists of burning desire raged to life in her loins, puckering her nipples. Her body sank into his, reveling in the hard strength of his cock rising against her stomach. It felt like he'd split her in half, given the chance. She was tempted to offer it to him too... Goddess, he was magnificent! Nothing like anything she'd felt before.

Darius pulled away from her and reason returned far too slowly. The roar of the crowds filtered through her ears and she swayed, trying to reclaim her equilibrium. She took a deep breath, touching her faintly tingling lips with shaking fingers. Darius turned away from her, raising his arms to drink in the glory of the crowd, and she flushed with embarrassment.

He was simply putting on a good show, she realized—the consummate military leader doing his best to rally the populace and the troops by kissing a woman passionately after his win. It was so perfect that she wondered if the entire thing was scripted. If so, someone should have warned her. Unlike many of her peers, K'rilla

never sought out drama in her life and she certainly didn't care to be a part of something so public. Just the thought of returning to work after this made her feel a little sick to her stomach. They'd tease her without mercy.

Darius dropped his arms, but the audience kept up their shouts of adoration. The lictors turned as one, signaling the end of the ceremony. K'rilla looked to Darius, expecting him to stride out of the arena. That's how it was supposed to go. She'd probably never seen him again. She'd stand on the podium with the priestess until fanciful mists rose around them, disguising the fall of the podium into the depths of the arena. The entire incident would end, and perhaps later tonight Darius would laugh with his fellows about the aging virgin who'd melted in his arms.

But instead of leaving, Darius gave her a fierce grin and swept her up in his arms. K'rilla squawked and the priestess lurched forward. K'rilla's panicked eyes met hers and the woman mouthed "play along" as the crowd grew frenzied in their excitement.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, grabbing Darius' shoulders, trying to hold herself steady.

"I'm kidnapping you," he said. "Now smile, or someone will think you don't want me to do this."

"I *don't* want you to do this!"

"Smile anyway, half the Federation is watching," he replied. "We want to give them a good show."

He was right, Goddess-be-damned. But K'rilla couldn't pull it off, so she hid her face against his shoulder as he carried her across the heated sands. This had to be the most mortifying experience of her life. Absolutely.

She expected him to put her down when they reached the tunnel entrance, ending the entire humiliating display. Instead he continued into the depths of the arena, leaving the lictors and gladiators gaping.

"What are you doing?" K'rilla asked once more, feeling a rising tide of fear and confusion. This wasn't part of any plan, she was sure of that. Nobody kidnapped thirty-

five-year-old engineers... Except spies. Her blood ran cold and she considered the tiny explosive chip in her head. She had to protect her secrets, even at the cost of her own life. Then reason took over. He wasn't a spy, he was Admiral Darius. If he planned to betray the Federation, he wouldn't need her to do it. Why the hell was he taking her?

Clearly, he'd lost his mind. The pressure of his situation snapped him and now he'd decided to kidnap an innocent woman.

K'rilla squirmed in his arms, clawing at his face. She didn't care if she fell, she only wanted to get away. He laughed, flipping her over his shoulder. The air rushed out of her and she realized the futility of her situation. Fighting him wouldn't work, she needed to think of something else. They left the training section of the arena and passed through a large reception area full of well-dressed men. Supporters and well-wishers, gathered to congratulate the champion. Most of them looked to be off-worlders, probably here to see the fleet off.

The startled looks on their faces matched her own – K'rilla made her move.

"Help, he's kidnapping me!" she shrieked. Darius growled at the first man to step forward.

"Admiral Darius, perhaps you should put her down?" he said, looking far too uncertain for K'rilla's comfort.

Darius shook his head.

"Do you really want to fight me?" he asked. The man glanced at K'rilla and swallowed. Then he turned away. The others murmured, but they didn't meet her eyes or step forward.

Cowards, she thought, twisting around to see where Darius was taking her. Nothing but cowards down here. Of course, most of them weren't Saurellian, so she couldn't really blame them... Even among their own people, Darius was bigger and stronger than most and he was a champion of the arena. Only a fool would take him on. They left the lobby area behind, entering a broad, open underground avenue lined with personal transports that waited to take people away from the arena.

K'rilla didn't know what to do next, events had caught her up and swept her away without warning. Darius made his way toward a sleek, black atmospheric ship with military markings, surrounded by a half-dozen men in uniform. They snapped to attention as he approached, although several grinned at the sight of her. Darius gave another of those growls and the grins disappeared instantly. She'd never seen such fearsome men look so cowed. She scowled at them from beneath his arm, feeling sick to her stomach.

"We're going straight to the *Glory*," Darius said without pausing. "Arm yourselves, they might try to stop us."

"Yes, sir," said one of the men, slapping his palm against the ship's portal. It quickly opened and the ship's exterior lights flared bright. The true enormity of her situation finally hit K'rilla. *He planned to take her off-planet.*

"You can't do this," she said, trying to keep her voice calm and cool. Not an easy task. "This isn't some kind of game, Admiral, they won't let you get away with it. Just let me go now and we'll pretend it didn't happen."

Darius walked up the ramp and into the ship, then he swung her down. She swayed and he grabbed her shoulders, holding her steady as he spoke. His eyes bore into hers, dark and filled with a smoldering passion she'd never seen in anyone. K'rilla shivered and he smiled at her. Unfortunately it looked more like a snarl, and for an instant she knew exactly what it felt like to be prey.

"It damn well did happen," Darius said, his voice low and rough. "I've never felt anything like I did when I touched you and I'll be damned if I'm letting you go now. And they can't stop us now. The greatest danger was in the arena underground. It's too late to do anything more."

"My family –"

"Will be thrilled to have an alliance with the commander of the invasion fleet," Darius said, his voice harsh. "And even if they aren't, they'll keep their mouths shut. You know as well as I do that we can't afford any kind of scandal right now."



"And you think this won't cause a scandal?"

"Of course it will," Darius replied. "But they'll spin it as true love, some shit like that, and none of the people will ever know what really happened back there."

"Not even I know what really happened and I was there," she muttered. "You're insane, you do realize that?"

"It's been mentioned," Darius said, giving her a grin that sent molten heat running down her spine. *How did he do that?* He pulled her forward into the main cabin, a sleek and streamlined compartment holding a row of acceleration couches and nothing else. Built for speed, not comfort. Darius guided her toward an acceleration couch forcefully, strapping her into the soft webbing with quick, well-practiced motions. K'rilla's mind raced.

She had to find a way to stall him. Surely her father wouldn't allow this, he'd be coming with the arena's guards...

"Stay here, I'm going up to the cockpit," Darius said. "We'll be leaving in a hurry, so keep your straps on if you know what's good for you."

He turned to walk away, then abruptly came back, leaning over her. He ran his fingers through her hair. Then he kissed her again, his lips soft and tender. Her fears melted as desire surged through her. He nibbled at her mouth, giving her just enough of a taste to make her long for more. By the time he finished, she'd forgotten to protest. Whatever else the man was, he was gorgeous. She wanted him. *Really* wanted him. And not to talk to—she wanted to know what his cock felt like inside her body, how his seed tasted. She imagined taking him into her mouth—what would the texture of him feel like? Would the skin of his shaft be hard like the rest of him, or oh so soft to her tongue? K'rilla wanted to go up to his ship with him and go to his cabin and see whether a man like he could make a woman scream.

He pulled away and K'rilla blushed fiercely, feeling suddenly dirty. A virtuous Saurellian maiden like her didn't entertain thoughts like this. Not even old ones, like

her. And even if she was foolish enough to fall for someone like him, she was a woman of reason. A professional with a career and the respect of her peers.

She would think her way out of this, K'rilla told herself with resolve.

She looked around, catching the eye of one of the soldiers who'd followed them on board. Like all Saurellians, he had fair skin with the dark hair and eyes of their race. He also had the half-wild look of an unmated man, predatory and more than a little frightening. He took the couch next to hers, fastening his own straps with the efficiency of long practice.

"Will any of you help me?" she whispered, not sure what she wanted the answer to be.

He offered her a feral smile.

"I do what the admiral says."

## Chapter Two

Saul turned off the 'com after the first round of transmissions. Her family was lodging complaints, the priestesses were enraged, the Council's First Advocate wanted to know if he'd lost his mind. He supposed it wasn't too late for them to try intercepting him, although he wouldn't surrender his ship for anything and he knew damn well they wouldn't shoot him down. They might consider ordering the men on *Tessa's Glory* to take him into custody, for what it was worth. Goddess help them if they tried.

Not that he wanted to start a civil war... But if it came to that, Saul knew he would. He needed her that badly. The realization stunned him.

But the Saurellian powers-that-be would decide quickly enough to treat this as a romantic escapade. To be fair, it was. More than one Saurellian male had kidnapped his own lifemate away from her family, it wasn't without precedent. He smiled at the thought. Lifemate. That beautiful, confused woman he'd left in the acceleration couch was all his, more stunning and perfect than his wildest fantasies. He wasn't sure where or how they'd live or what the coming invasion meant for them, but he knew one thing. Now that he'd found her, he'd die before giving her up.

Saul smiled and felt his already-heated loins pulse painfully, every heartbeat throbbing through his engorged cock. He couldn't wait to slide it into her pussy. He leaned back in the seat, trying to ease his discomfort, monitoring the pilot as they approached the bulk of his flagship, *Tessa's Glory*.

*Lifemate.*

Saul licked his lips, wondering what she'd taste like.

K'rilla knew *Tessa's Glory* inside and out. She'd spent most of her professional life studying battle cruisers, and when she'd been appointed to oversee the refit of the

flagship's new weapons systems, it was the proudest day of her life. But after months of work on those very systems, she knew all too well just how invulnerable the great cruiser was. K'rilla understood that the moment she set foot on the deck she could give up any hope of rescue. *Tessa's Glory* had more firepower than any other ship in the fleet, and she had no doubt that the men commanding those ships would follow Saul Darius to the death.

So as they flew upward through the atmosphere, the same brilliant mind that made her one of the foremost thinkers of the engineering corps forced her to face reality. She wouldn't get out of this unless Darius decided to let her go. Neither the Council nor her family could fight him, he had more power than all of them combined. And he'd been dead right about one thing.

They couldn't afford a scandal on the eve of the invasion.

Her situation was hopeless. If he wanted to take her body, he would. She shivered, and to her shame it wasn't from fear. K'rilla thought about the sweat on his body as he'd fought his opponents, the way his muscles played and twisted beneath his skin in the sunlight. Among a race of men known for their beauty and strength, he stood out like a god. She'd have to be dead not to want him.

*What's happening to me? Could he really be my lifemate?*

She'd long ago accepted that she didn't have a mate, and hadn't always been entirely unhappy about that fact. Most women spent their lives having children—something critical to maintaining the declining Saurellian population. Of course they were educated and many had careers, but those were hard to maintain while still raising a family. K'rilla had enjoyed her status as one of the foremost engineers on the planet, a specialist respected for her professional skills, not just her reproductive ability. Still...sometimes when she saw a baby she wondered what it would be like to hold her own child.

And she'd certainly spent more than one night wishing for the comfort of a man's arms. Not that she hadn't tried a few out for fun, but no one had ever quickened her

pulse like Saul Darius did. She'd never heard of him kidnapping a woman before, so this must be new to him too. He was a high-profile admiral, a man all the newsvids followed breathlessly. She would have heard about it if he did crazy things like this, wouldn't she?

K'rilla tried to still her racing thoughts, but the longer she lay strapped into the acceleration couch the more frenzied she felt. And it didn't help to know that after a lifetime studying battle cruisers, she was about to visit one for the first time. Everything was happening so quickly – she couldn't help but feel excited. Just yesterday she'd told her father how much she wanted to see the fruits of her efforts. He'd laughed, and warned her that an unmated woman would be a dangerous distraction on a Saurellian warship. She needed to stay planetside, where it was safe.

*Dad was wrong about me being safe.* He'd never met Admiral Saul Darius, a man who moved the world around him by simple force of will. Her family couldn't begin to protect her. Yet when he floated out of the cockpit to check on her after they lost gravity, it wasn't fear he inspired. She felt lust. The man oozed sex and his near nudity wasn't lost on her. Neither was the hungry smile he gave when he saw her or the erection no loincloth could hide.

"You all right?" he asked, reaching down and touching her cheek. She nodded her head, noticing how every one of his soldiers suddenly found themselves fascinated by the walls or ceiling.

"How much longer before we get there?"

"About half an hour, depending on whether they try to intercept us."

"Do you think they will?"

"Nope," he replied. "You're mine now."

His words sent a little thrill through her, although she'd never acknowledge it. An alarm sounded and he looked up quickly toward the cockpit.

"Message coming in, sir," someone said and he floated away from her, pulling himself back through the hatch. An eternity passed before she felt the slight bumping of

the transport as the ship docked with the *Glory*. Then the gravity kicked in and her stomach dropped. Darius left the cockpit, released her from the acceleration couch and pulled her to her feet. He kept tight hold of her hand as they left the ship, acknowledging the salutes of the men who greeted them, oblivious of his arena garb. He marched her past his lieutenants without a word of explanation, drawing her to one side of the hangar where a transit pod waited. Even in those few seconds of exposure, she felt eyes following her. And as the pod doors shut, she heard the quick murmur of voices. Male voices. Hungry voices.

Her father had been right—a battle cruiser was no place for a Saurellian maiden.

“What are you going to tell them?” she asked Darius as they settled into the pod’s seats. “You can’t bring a woman onto a warship. Everyone knows that.”

“Admirals have been known to bring their lifemates with them,” he said.

Her head snapped toward him and she gave a nervous laugh.

“That’s ridiculous, you aren’t my lifemate. I don’t have one.”

In an instant K’rilla found herself sprawled across his lap. She gasped, and he took advantage of the moment to kiss her, his tongue plunging deep as she forgot what she’d meant to tell him. His body was hard and unforgiving, from the pillar of his erection to the sleek bulk of his muscles. Everything about him contrasted with her. Delicious. K’rilla smelled him too—male, sweaty and heady, and she felt a sudden desire to lick his chest. Darius released his grasp as she reached up, twining her fingers into his hair and pulling him back down toward her. He slid his hands down her back, reaching between the cleft of her bottom, pulling her legs apart until she straddled him. His cock pressed against her cleft, offering a taste of things to come. His fingers played along the tops of the backs of her thighs. Sweet fire teased her and she gave a small moan of desire.

“I need you,” Darius muttered. “I need you more than I need to be alive. I’ve fucked a lot of women, but it’s never been like this. I just can’t believe it took me so long to find you. If you aren’t my lifemate, then you’re close enough. I won’t let you go.”

The intensity of his voice caught her, forcing her to focus on his expression. If anything, the man looked almost vulnerable. She felt a compelling urge to comfort him, to keep him from hurting or ever being alone again. That, combined with her desire, almost won her over. K'rilla shifted, feeling the length of his penis against her body, wondering what it would feel like to have that hard length slide up inside her opening, planting his seed. His face grew strained and he rocked against her. K'rilla felt sudden, heady power. This mighty warrior—the greatest their people had to offer—needed her profoundly. There could be no doubt.

"Are you sure it's a lifemating?" she asked, wishing her voice had more self-assurance. "I've heard that males lose perspective, and that as they get older things grow...difficult..."

He laughed.

"I lost perspective a long time ago," he said. "I know how that feels. You want to kill people, smash things until the rage and frustration burns itself out. But it *never* burns out. Touching you is like drinking cool fire and I want to guzzle until I'm quenched. You're my lifemate, I'd stake everything on it. Have, probably. They'll catch me and punish me sooner or later if we don't make a mating of it."

She thought about that, sliding herself back and forth across his stiffened length. Oh yes. She wanted him inside her body and she wanted it now. And it wasn't like she had a lot of choice. She'd always been fairly ambivalent about sex, but not now.

"I've been attracted to men before," she said hesitantly.

"I really don't need to hear that."

She laughed.

"But that was nothing compared to this—it's more than just attraction. I want to eat you, or something. Like candy."

He groaned, and dropped his head back against the pod's couch.

"I really, really didn't need to hear that," he muttered. "You have a way of driving a man crazy."

K'rilla opened her mouth to defend herself, but the pod stopped smoothly and the door slid open. She pulled away from him. A uniformed sentry, very young, stood at attention when he saw them. He swallowed nervously and she offered him a slight smile, feeling compassion for the youth. He couldn't be more than eighteen at most. Darius acknowledged him with a tight nod as he pulled K'rilla to her feet, walking her over to an armored hatch. Darius placed his hand on the access plate and the door slid open.

"This is our cabin," he said, and for the first time she sensed uncertainty in him, as if he might be worried what she'd think. She walked in cautiously, curious about his living space. She recognized it from the ship's schematics, of course. Even the admiral had little more than a three-room suite, with one of the rooms serving as a conference area for his executive officers. But it surprised her all the same. The walls were bare metal, the furniture completely utilitarian.

Empty of any comfort.

"Do you have another residence planetside?" she asked.

"No."

"It's very sparse," she said after a long pause.

"I live to fight, this is just the place I do it in," he replied. She looked back at him, studying his face. The man's profile was grim, frightening, and she understood all too well why the Imperials feared him so much. He looked like a killing machine, a sculpted god of war who inexplicably found himself in human form.

A lonely god, K'rilla realized.

She hated seeing him like that, although there was no rational reason for her to care so much. Maybe he was right. If they were lifemates, that would explain it. Could it really be possible? *Lifemates*? Her traitorous body whispered that it was true.



Of course, they wouldn't be fully joined until they shared their bodies.

Only one way to find out for sure, K'rilla realized. She took a deep breath, willing herself to stay strong and brave.

"Where's the bed?"

## Chapter Three

Saul hadn't realized how nervous he was until she asked her question. They had to be the most beautiful words he'd ever heard—they certainly came from the most beautiful mouth he'd ever seen. He imagined it wrapped around his cock, almost losing control.

*Damn.*

He opened his mouth to answer her and thought better of the move. He didn't want to do anything to startle or scare her, not after she'd surprised him like this. Instead he pointed toward the hatch. She gave him a smile that trembled ever so slightly. This was hard for her, but she was ready and willing to give them a try.

*I am the luckiest man in Saurellian space.*

She turned and walked toward the hatch, her hips swaying unconsciously, every motion sensual and glorious. The woman had curves, no doubt about that. She wasn't heavy, but there was enough of her to give a man something to hold on to. Saul wondered how she'd gotten to her age without another man claiming her, then decided not to follow that mental path. The last thing he needed was to imagine her with another man. Just the hint of it sent his pulse pounding and his vision blurred with the fierce anger he'd only ever felt during battle. *Double damn.* He'd have to watch his instincts very carefully, until they were safely mated and his biochemistry changed.

And how amazing that change would be...

Not only was she stunning and sexy and perfect, but she held the key to an entirely new future for him. One where rage couldn't govern him, one where the restless fury of the unmated male would never haunt him again. He might live for decades. They could have children together. He imagined her round and swollen with his son and a surge of

hot lust filled his skin. But it was more than lust—she made him feel happy. Almost content.

But certainly not relaxed.

She opened the hatch and walked through, turning to him and gesturing for him to follow her with the seductive confidence of a siren. He couldn't imagine disobeying her. The room was small, although the bed was large. He'd always hated feeling cramped when he slept, and perks of being an admiral included designing one's own quarters. Not that he was used to luxury—Saul had spent his entire adult life in service, most of it in uncomfortable circumstances.

She smiled at him, licking soft, plump lips. It wasn't a sexy, calculated lick. She radiated nerves, clearly out of her element. It won him over instantly. What man could resist a woman like that, one so uncertain yet still incredibly beautiful and sexy? What man would want to?

She reached down to unhook the silken belt that defined her waist. It fell to the floor, a silken snake, and he imagined binding her wrists with it. She swayed, the fabric flowing loose, hanging from her shoulders. All too easy to remove. Saul smiled—no wonder it was the traditional arena garb for Saurellian maidens. Every gladiator needed motivation, and if the sheer joy of fighting wasn't enough, thinking about a beautiful woman in a gown like this certainly would be. The filmy fabric swayed slightly as she raised her hands to her shoulders and slowly unclasped the broach that held one side of her gown together. It was silver, ornate and just tarnished enough to show the delicacy of the design. A Pecoraio Family sigil.

"You're a Pecoraio?" he asked, startled. She smiled shyly at him.

"Yes, does that make a difference?"

"It probably should," he said, momentarily chastened. Then he shook his head and gave a rueful laugh. "No, I would have taken you if you were the daughter of the first Councilor himself. But I'm glad I have a battle cruiser to hide you in, because that's probably what I'll need to keep me alive once they figure out what happened. Did you

know that the engineer who designed the new weapons systems for the ship is part of your family?"

She nodded her head, that shy smile coming back.

"I'd heard that," she murmured. "But don't worry about my family. They'll be happy that I found a mate."

The word hung in the air between them, tantalizing him. Mate. Her gown fell loose, sliding to one side as she dropped the priceless broach to the floor. To his dismay, the curve of one pointed breast caught the flowing drape, keeping it from displaying her form fully.

"Do you think you could take that other clip off now?"

Her smile this time wasn't shy in the least and she shook her head carefully, reaching up to pull the clips out of her hair, breasts swaying but remaining hidden behind her gown. Waves of rich, dark brown fell down around her shoulders. Unlike most young women of her class, she'd chosen to cut it and the ends curled becomingly around her shoulders. Now it was his turn to lick his lips.

"Take off the other broach."

She laughed, the noise deep and throaty.

"I like this," she said. "You're the big man on this ship, but I think I'm the one who's really in charge right now."

Her words pushed him over the edge and he crossed the floor between them in two quick steps. She gave a startled gasp as he pulled her close with one arm, ripping the frail fabric of her gown free. It dropped to her waist, where the pressure of their bodies caught it. He cupped a full, ripe breast in his hand, creamy and white, the nipple a tight, round little berry he wanted to suck and nuzzle until she screamed.

His cock jumped and he reached down to caress it through his loincloth, studying her face as he touched himself.

She gasped. Saul leaned forward to kiss her long and hard. She swayed into him, as soft and yielding as she'd been at the arena. His hands wandered down her back, feeling the gentle curves of her body while noting that under those curves was tight, toned muscle. Not a lazy girl, his lifemate. He grasped her bottom, rounding the curves, gripping them and pulling her tight against his prick. He couldn't wait to sink his cock into her.

K'rilla didn't protest when she felt his fingers digging into her bottom. She'd never felt anything as heavenly as his hands pulling her tight against his erection. She wanted him in her, the molten heat of her core throbbing as she rubbed herself against his body. He would fill her completely, everything about their joining would be perfect. K'rilla decided to let go of whatever doubts that still lingered about their mating—Admiral Saul Darius was her lifemate.

Thank the Goddess.

Darius lifted her, carrying her across the room with her legs wrapped around his waist. The muscles of his arm tensed as he took her weight, but his strength never faltered. He wasn't the type of man to build muscles for their own sake; she knew that instinctively. Darius did some kind of physical labor on a regular basis. She clutched him, reveling in the scent of his sweat, the musky perfume that she knew no other woman could ever appreciate the way she did.

Saul Darius had been created specifically for her.

When he set her down on the little storage cabinet, he confused her. She'd expected to go to the bed, but the cabinet's possibilities became clear quickly enough. It was just the right height for him to access her body and she slid her hips toward him, loving every moment. He thrust against her, the rounded head of his penis rubbing back and forth against the heat of her clit. She arched, enjoying the sensation at first. But then the fabric separating their bodies was too much of a barrier, too rough and scratchy compared to the smooth skin of his cock.

She needed to feel his flesh against her own.

Darius, as if reading her mind, stepped back just long enough to rip his loincloth free. Then he shoved up the filmy remains of her dress. It took only an instant to work his hand under the lace of her last protective barrier, pushing the delicate fabric to one side and sinking three fingers into her. K'rilla gasped at the sudden stretching stimulation.

"Oh that feels good," she murmured as he found her clit with his thumb. He shaped her, wiggling the tiny spur of flesh back and forth as she collapsed backward. Darius seemed to be touching her everywhere at once, the sensations building on each other until she hardly knew what to wish for—his hard cock in her body or the continuing pleasure of his cunning fingers. Higher and higher he pushed her, right to the brink of explosion. *He is really, really good at this*, K'rilla thought, feeling a sudden surge of jealousy as she wondered who'd taught him these tricks.

Darius pulled his fingers free. K'rilla mewed in protest as he laughed. Then she watched, mesmerized, as he raised his hand to his face and licked his fingers slowly and deliberately.

"Delicious."

K'rilla shivered, feeling cold and lonely without his touch. She gave a little whimper of need and thrust her hips toward him. He took the hint, reaching down to steady his cock. Then he rubbed the soft, round head up and down along the ridge of her clit for several seconds, bathing her with the pearls of fluid seeping from the tip. Sensation throbbed through her, blood rushing to her core. She squirmed against him and he gave a low, satisfied laugh.

"You want it, don't you?"

The quick nod of her head, the rising flush in her face—together they were almost enough to send Saul over the edge. He pressed down into her, feeling her warm flesh squeeze his cock as he sank deep. Her cunt was a molten glove, almost hotter than he

could handle. Would she burn him up, given the chance? Darius supposed the thought should scare him, but it didn't. All he wanted was to be with her and damn the consequences.

She panted a little as he penetrated her, each inch a little closer to bottoming out. She clenched suddenly, the strength in her muscles cradling him. Oh that was good—she felt like a glove of sweet fire around his cock. He was all the way in now and he paused for a moment, enjoying the moment. It was good. Really good. Better than anything he'd ever imagined. She leaned back from him, resting against the wall, a dreamy expression on her face. Her bare breasts hung between them, her seductive position completely uncalculated.

A sexual Goddess in repose.

"You're beautiful," he said and she smiled up at him, the expression washing across her face like a brilliant sunrise.

"Thanks."

She wiggled her hips around him suggestively and he laughed.

"Impatient, aren't we?"

"Always," she said. "You'd better get used to it. I waited a long time for this, so don't think I'm going to let you get away with half a job completed."

He rested his hands on her hips and pulled out a bit before sliding back into her a little harder than before, studying her reaction. K'rilla smiled at him, letting her eyes close, so he started moving a little more quickly. After a few moments he found himself sliding easily through her body. Perfection. A gentle flush worked its way up her form, her nipples bouncing lightly with each of his thrusts. She relaxed completely into the moment with the abandon of a professional. But no whore had ever been this tight or so exquisitely shaped just for him. She reached up to grasp one breast, fingering the nipple with gentle insistence—and Saul felt the blood pound in his head as he groaned. Her eyes flew open and she gasped, dropping her hand.

"I can't believe I did that!"

"You don't need to be embarrassed with me," he replied. "It's beautiful. *You're* beautiful."

She blushed bright red, but after a moment's hesitation she touched herself once more. She rolled the nipple between her fingers before tugging at it very lightly. Her eyes closed again and she seemed to drift away from him, lost in the pleasure of the moment. To his delight, she reached up with her other hand to touch between their legs. Her fingers came to rest against her clit, just brushing his penis as he thrust into her, and they both froze. Her eyes fluttered open.

"I used to dream about this," she whispered. "About meeting my lifemate. I've been lying awake at night for years, imagining what it would be like to have my mate inside my body. I'd touch myself like this and pretend your fingers were on me, but it was never this good. I wish you'd come for me sooner, Darius."

Saul stopped moving, overwhelmed. He reached down and took her hand, kissing the back of it gently before placing it back on her clit. He fondled her with her own fingers, feeling them against his penis too, and the moment hung long between them.

"Nothing could have stopped me if I'd known you were here," he said finally. "I thought I would always be alone."

She studied his face without replying, her breasts rising gently with each breath. Her eyes were too intense, her face too open and vulnerable. He didn't want to contemplate her suffering or remember his own hopeless longing. Instead he thrust into her once more, harder this time. He needed to be close to her, to claim her, to imprint on her body his absolute dedication to never leaving her wanting and waiting again.

She continued the soft fluttering of her fingers, each thrust caressing him and herself as they sank deeper and deeper into the moment. Everything in him focused down to the heat between them, the energy growing as his need and the strain in his cock intensified. Back and forth, in and out, every movement tight with suppressed emotion and a burning physical need beyond anything he'd imagined possible.

And then she came.



It hit her gradually, the movements of her fingers losing their coherence, her breath coming in quick pants. The flush across her face and upper body grew and she moaned, rolling her head back and forth. Then she clenched him, painfully hard, her muscles gripping his erection like a vise as her back arched. She gave a little moan, then collapsed back against the wall, a slow smile playing across her face as she opened her eyes to look at him.

It was enough to push him over the edge too. He thrust three more times, feeling his seed shoot deep inside, release exploding through his body. It was more than orgasm, more than simple fucking. He claimed her—for the rest of their lives, this moment would be burned into their brains.

It was, quite simply, the best moment of his life.

Saul leaned forward, kissing her softly, and she smiled up at him.

"That was nice," she said, her voice soft. "Maybe we should do it again some time?"

"Works for me," he said, her voice melting him. "Any time you want."

She stretched, arching her back and leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"How about the bed next time?" she said. "This was great, but the bed might be nice for cuddling afterward..."

"I can take a hint."

## **Chapter Four**

K'rilla fell back against the bed with a sigh, happy to be free of her clinging robes. Darius lay next to her, and she turned her head, studying him. The man was stunning, no question of that. Tall, roped with muscles, and despite the fact that he spent much of his life in space, his skin had a light tan. From his visits to the arena? He had scars too, many little ones and a large one right across his chest. She reached over to trace it, enjoying the way goose bumps formed on his skin, his nipples tightening as his muscles flexed.

"That works," he murmured, closing his eyes.

"How did you get this?" she asked, musing. "I don't really know anything about you..."

"I got it on Tyre," Darius replied. "When they turned on us. It was a slaughter, only a handful of our delegation escaped. I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to," she said, feeling sudden sadness for him. Everyone knew about Tyre—after a century without diplomatic relations, the emperor had invited a Saurellian delegation to his capital to discuss peace. Then he betrayed them, killing as many as he could, setting off this newest round of fighting. Like all her people, she'd read the reports breathlessly, praying for survivors, hoping some lucky souls might make it back to safety.

Few did.

"This has been a hard war," Darius said, his voice a low murmur. "We've been on the defensive to this point, but I think we've got a chance against them now. They caught us off guard—our navy wasn't a match for theirs. But you wouldn't believe the new weapons systems we've got. The engineering team has been brilliant. With the changes they've made, we have a real shot at victory."

His words sent a thrill of pride through her. Those were *her* systems, and if they won the war, she would be a part of it. None of that would have been possible if she'd found her lifemate earlier, K'rilla mused. His face tightened and he rolled over to study her face.

"It's worse than they've been telling the people, you know. Billions will die before this ends."

K'rilla leaned against him, wanting to feel the safety of his arms cradling her. Darius pulled her close and she closed her eyes, inhaling his scent. No matter the situation, she wanted to be with him, she knew that with a certainty deep within her bones.

"I'm going with you," she said. He stiffened.

"No you aren't. It won't be safe."

"If this invasion fails, none of us will be safe. The Imperials will swarm Saurellian space and you know we don't have enough ships to defend ourselves and launch this offensive. It's a gamble—if we lose it, I want to die with you."

Darius rolled abruptly, trapping her beneath his body. His hands cradled her face gently, as if to soften his words.

"I can't let you do that," he said. "You'll stay on Saurellia, where it's safe."

K'rilla met his gaze, refusing to be intimidated.

"No, I'm coming with you," she insisted. "I've waited for you my entire life. I'll be damned if I'll let you leave me behind to watch and wait."

He shook his head and she read the frustration in his face all too clearly. His eyes narrowed, reminding her of her father, and she instinctively set her chin forward defiantly.

"I'm an adult woman and I make my own decisions."

"Listen—" he said, and suddenly stopped talking. "Goddess, I don't even know your name."

They both froze and she laughed, breaking the tension.

"I can't believe this," she said, shaking her head. He rolled off her and sat on the edge of the bed. She joined him, taking his hand in hers. He offered her a rueful look. "This has got to be the strangest, most surreal day of my life."

"I'd like to tell you that I've been wondering about your name all along, but I never thought about it," he said. "All I could think about was getting inside you."

"I'm Kerill d'Pecoraio, although I go by K'rilla," she said, offering him a formal nod of her head. "And I'm the woman who's going with you on this ship when you leave for the invasion. I'll be a big help, actually. I'm head of the—"

A klaxon cut through the air, accompanied by a strobing light that filled the room with bright flashes.

"Admiral, this is Captain Markus," a man's voice called across the intercom. "We have a weapons-system emergency. I'd like you to join me on the bridge as quickly as possible. It's very serious."

"Acknowledged," Darius snapped. "I'm on my way."

"I should come with you," K'rilla said, her mind filling with scenarios as she ran through schematics in her head. "I'm probably more qualified —"

"You'll stay here," Darius declared, cutting her off. He grabbed his clothing and started toward the hatch. "I can't do my job and worry about you too. This isn't a game. Wait in the cabin for me and I'll come back to check on you as soon as possible."

Oblivious to her nudity, K'rilla followed him, determined.

"If there's a weapons system problem, I should go with you," she said, trying to explain. Darius ignored her, running out of his quarters still half dressed, leaving her naked in the center of the room, fuming. Just like school all over again. Why did men find it so hard to believe she knew what she was doing?

K'rilla shook her head, forcing herself to snap out of her pique. This wasn't about her, it was about the ship. Nobody was more qualified to evaluate the problem than her. If he couldn't recognize that, she'd take matters into her own hands.

First she needed something to wear.

The shreds of her dress were useless, so she grabbed the first shirt she found and pulled it on. It draped over her like a tent, which she decided wasn't a bad thing—flaunting her curves wouldn't help the situation a bit. She found a pair of pants, yanking a man's leather belt around her waist to hold them, quickly rolling the bottoms up. She must look ridiculous, but that hardly mattered. She needed to find out what was happening. K'rilla took a deep breath, steeling herself, and turned to the main hatch door, slapping the panel, hoping the damn thing wasn't locked.

It slid open, revealing the uniformed marine standing guard.

"I need you to take me to the main weapons engineering section," she told him, her voice firm. He gaped at her.

"Ma'am, you have to stay inside," he said. "We're at general quarters. Now isn't the time for a tour."

She fixed him with a stern gaze.

"My name is Kerill d'Pecoraio, and I am the engineer who designed your weapons system," she told him firmly. "You have an emergency and I am the most qualified person in all of Saurellian space to deal with it, but I can't do a damn thing if I'm stuck in this cabin. You'll take me to the weapons section right now or I'll see that you're held personally responsible for the consequences."

She strode past him and stepped through the entry into the waiting transit pod. He gaped at her as he fumbled with his 'com unit.

"I need to check," he said.

"I'm leaving," she replied, and reached up to close the pod's door. He dove in after her, having completely lost control of the situation. She almost felt sorry for the boy. Definitely a new recruit.

"Primary weapons engineering," she told the pod, and it slid smoothly down the passageway. The marine sat across from her, gaping. Then he closed his mouth, suddenly remembering his duty. He clicked the 'com, and a voice answered.

"Balfour here," the 'com crackled. "This had better be important."

"Yes, sir," the boy said, gulping. "I have a visitor here —"

"We're in the middle of a crisis," his superior snapped back. "I don't care about visitors. Use your judgment and don't bother me again unless it's a matter of ship's security."

"Yes, sir," he said, his face miserable. He clicked the 'com off. "I'm going to get in trouble for this."

"Do you care more about your own hide or saving this ship?" K'rilla asked, starting to lose patience. "If the system fails and I could have saved it, who do you think they'll blame?"

He shrugged his shoulders, studying the brightly lit schematic glowing from the door panel. He nodded toward it.

"We're almost there."

She didn't respond, closing her eyes and running through the systems in her head again, envisioning potential trouble spots. She wished she had her team with her. Together they could handle almost anything, but they wouldn't be nearly as useful to her planetside. Not unless she slaved the battle cruiser's controls to the lab...but that would only work for a software-related problem. Knowing her luck it would be the hardware itself. The *Glory's* weapons were fully powered, which meant working on them would be extremely dangerous. They might even have to jettison hardware to save the ship. *Don't make it worse than it needs to be. Just because there's a problem doesn't mean it's serious. The systems are new enough that the captain might just be jumpy...*

K'rilla lost that hope the minute the pod stopped and she stepped out into engineering. Six men stood around a central monitoring station, eyeing screens nervously, while several others had jacked in directly at consoles around the room. K'rilla took a deep breath and walked up to the nearest man wearing the distinctive engineering insignia.

"Who's in charge here?" she asked. She looked at him like she expected to be answered and he didn't disappoint her.

"Commander Northman," he said, nodding toward one of the men studying the screens. She started toward him, managing not to jump as a siren went off. One of the men jacked in to the system directly gave an answering shriek before his body started seizing. Brain burn.

"Medic!" Northman called without taking his eyes off the screen. Another man rushed forward, fussing over the wounded tech. "Situation report?"

"Commander, I'm Kerill d'Pecoraio," K'rilla said, interrupting him. He glanced at her, then looked away.

"Get her out of here," he said. "I don't have time for this shit."

Two marines started forward, and she held up a hand.

"Did you hear my name? I'm the designer of this system and I'm the best chance you have of fixing it before things get even worse," she said, projecting calm competence. "If you doubt my credentials, contact fleet headquarters, groundside. I know this ship from the inside out. If you kick me out of here without even bothering to check my story you may not live to regret it. If you do live, you'll be directly responsible for whatever happens here today."

He looked at her again, really seeing her, skepticism radiating visibly.

"Kerill d'Pecoraio is a man."

"I was named for my grandfather," she replied shortly. "I *am* Kerill d'Pecoraio."

"Check her story," he said and turned back to the screens. Another man opened up a 'com channel, whispering quickly. Then the ship's captain's voice cracked through the room. She looked up to see him on a wide view screen, flanked by Darius.

"I need options, Commander," the captain said.

"It's not good," Northman replied, glancing up at the image. "I don't know if the problem's with hardware or software, but we're damn close to a runaway reaction in all six of the main weapons cores. If we can't get it under control within the next ten minutes, we'll need to eject them. Even then, it's cutting things close. I have no idea what's causing it. Could be anything."

"Understood. Recommendation?"

"Jettison and run like hell, sir."

"You do that, you can kiss the invasion goodbye," K'rilla said, her voice firm. "Every cruiser in the fleet has the same systems, and unless we figure out what the problem is here, we won't be able to trust any of them. We'll lose months, maybe longer, and a billion extra people will die. Jettisoning those cores without doing everything to understand the problem first would be criminal. Even if we lose this ship, it might be worth the sacrifice—if we can figure out the problem and broadcast a solution to the fleet before it takes us out."

"Who is speaking?" the captain asked, his voice tight. Northman's aide whispered in his ear and he glanced at her with sudden respect. K'rilla pushed forward to stand next to him, knowing everything came down to this moment.

"This is Kerill d'Pecoraio," Northman said. "She's the chief designer behind our weapons retrofit and according to our people planetside we should be listening to her."

The captain's face betrayed nothing as he studied her.

"K'rilla, I told you to stay in the cabin," Darius said.

"I'm outside your chain of command, Admiral," she said. "Right now I need to study this. I'm jacking into the system directly."



"K'rilla—"

"Engineer, I have to protest—"

But she ignored the men, turning back to the screens and grabbing a cable, thrusting its prong into the jack at the base of her skull. The electric buzz of the connection raced through her, setting her nerves alight with something close to pain. Their words faded away as she slid into the ship's massive AI, communicating directly with the processors. It was dangerous—if something took the AI down, she'd go down with it. But it was the only way to get the information she needed. On the bright side, nobody could unjack her without risking her life. The argument over whether she should stay had effectively ended. Now she just needed to concentrate on doing her job. Hard to stay focused, though, with data streaming around her like a river of blue fire, flanked by the green lightning of a weapons system run amok.

But *Tessa's Glory* had been selected as the flagship for good reason. She represented the most advanced technology in the Federation, including one of the most sophisticated AIs ever built. K'rilla addressed the beast directly, thrilled and humbled as always as she communicated with the alien intelligence.

"Weapons system analysis, please."

"Weapons system activated," the computer told her. "Status approaching critical. This is inconsistent with continuing ship integrity. Interrogative?"

K'rilla figured she'd try the obvious solution first.

"Shutdown system," she ordered. "*Authorization Creator 4269.*"

The system fell silent for three long seconds, an eternity for an AI operating at the speed of light.

"System not responding to new command input," the AI said, its voice calm and impassive. "Invalid command."

Of course, *that* would have been too easy. She'd have to figure out was keeping the ship from responding and to do that she'd have to retrace the error. Unfortunately, that

meant scanning a billion lines of code. Not going to happen, not without help. But K'rilla wasn't out of tricks yet.

"Retrace system activation."

The AI obeyed, showing her a complex series of commands and codes. K'rilla reached out and requisitioned as much of the ship's processing power as she could find, spinning off a thousand copies of her personal software daemon using an illicit little program she carried in her onboard core. In the background she sensed each little copy duplicating itself until a million tiny K'rilla intelligences—more than she'd ever created before—attacked the data as one. She felt the ship's systems failing for lack of power and processing, knew the people on board might panic as they saw their life support systems go offline. Fair enough, better scared than dead. She wouldn't need the resources for longer than a minute, just enough to check the software and trace the source of the error.

A moment of stale air wouldn't kill them.

The daemons did their work, sending reports anomalies up a chain of processing stations until their collected data flowed through K'rilla like a heady drug. Data mining like this was dangerous, deeply illegal and addictive as all hell.

She loved it.

Ship systems came back online as K'rilla took her time studying the information, following every anomalous pathway, looking for errors in the software's implementation. Routines and subroutines zipped past, each accurate and operating according to specs. All too quickly, K'rilla realized that the software was performing perfectly, the tiny errors clocked by her system nothing of any importance. According to her analysis, the system had been armed and locked by the Captain himself. She checked the authorization codes just to be sure, but they were authentic.

That scared the hell out of her—it had to be sabotage. Hoping desperately for another solution, she formulated a new plan of attack. Could someone have manually disrupted the hardware connections, breaking the lines of communication? She sent

another message to the AI, at the same time dispatching another fleet of tiny software daemons to spy on its workings.

"Hardware diagnostic."

"Running."

Another burst of information flowed toward her. K'rilla and her daemons followed the AI through every last section of the weapons system, examining the hardware and its installation through the thousands of sensors feeding the ship information at all times. Circuits bled into each other as she examined the complicated inner workings of each fusion reactor. Northman's assessment of the situation was all too accurate. They were looking at a full meltdown within a matter of moments and she couldn't see a damn thing wrong with the process. The ship's AI believed it was following lawful captain's orders, to the point of self-destruction. And it *would* destroy everything, K'rilla knew that for a fact. She'd designed it that way as a last resort, with the understanding that in a combat situation a captain might need the capacity to blow himself up, along with any enemy vessels foolish enough to get close to him.

She wished to hell she hadn't been so thorough in her planning. But she had one more sneaky little option, something she'd created that was even more unethical and illegal than her self-reproducing, semi-autonomous software daemons. Using it would destroy her career, but that was nothing compared to saving the invasion. The AI spoke, confirming what she'd already determined.

"Hardware diagnostic complete. No malfunctions. Interrogative?"

Not a software problem, not a hardware problem. So, sabotage it was...

K'rilla swam back up and out of the data, instructing the ship to open an audio channel for her as she ordered her tiny daemons to erase their tracks and self-destruct. She projected her thoughts into the 'com system directly, allowing the AI to simulate her voice for those who weren't jacked in with her.

"Captain, this is Master Engineer Kerill d'Pecoraio," she said. "I've reviewed the data, and I concur with Commander Northman. We are facing a reactor meltdown

within minutes if we don't get this thing under control. But we're not there yet and I think I might have an idea how to fix it. Will you give me the chance?"

"Master Engineer, are you responsible for the systems failure a moment ago?" the captain asked, his voice tight.

"Yes," she said, the unauthorized power and processing drain already all but forgotten. She had bigger things to worry about. "There isn't a malfunction, I just needed to do a full diagnosis. It won't happen again."

She heard a sudden murmur from one of the men in the room—at least one had guessed what she'd done. They weren't all dolts...

"I need to protect my ship—don't do that again without warning us or I'll have you shot," the captain replied, his voice betraying the first hints of fear. "Northman tells me that unless we eject now, we might not be able to get away."

Before she could answer, Darius broke in.

"Is this a fleet-wide problem, Master Engineer?"

She ignored the tiny rush of satisfaction it gave her to hear him use her title. However mad he might be, at least he wanted her professional opinion.

"I can't rule that out," K'rilla replied, choosing her words carefully. "It's not a software problem and it doesn't appear to be a hardware problem, although we can't be completely certain. But I'm pretty sure it's sabotage."

"How confident are you of that assessment?"

"There's a slight possibility we have a sensor failure, although it would be damn strange to have every single sensor fail in exactly the same way at the same time," she replied. "Sabotage seems most likely to me, but we could also have a design flaw in our sensor array. We can't know for certain unless we manually inspect the equipment, and there's no time to do that right now. If we eject the cores, we'll never know."

Silence hung heavy as they pondered her words.

"Northman, are you listening?"

"I am," the commander said. "But I don't see how you could have reviewed the software so quickly, Engineer d'Pecoraio. My people have barely started their inspection and they tell me there's no way it to complete it in time."

K'rilla held back a sigh, wondering if she'd have to spell it out for the man. Confession time.

"With all due respect, Commander, they're not in my league," K'rilla replied. "I know this system like my own child. I was given this job because I'm the best in the whole Federation and I have ways of scanning the work that are theoretical at best for your crew. Believe me, the software's clean, which means there's a problem with the hardware or we we're looking at sabotage. And a hardware problem is a long shot—if it's hardware, we have multiple sensor failures throughout the ship, all providing the same false-positive diagnostics. That's statistically unlikely. It has to be sabotage."

Northman fell silent and she knew she'd won. For now. If they lived through this, she'd be up on charges. At least she'd go down doing something that mattered, she mused. Soldiers died fighting all the time. If they could take the risk, so could she.

"That's a very serious accusation," Darius said. "Would it have to be from someone on board the ship? Every member of the crew was hand-selected."

K'rilla thought about the incompetent guard outside his own quarters and wondered who had done the selecting. She shrugged off the thought; she had more important things to worry about.

"Yes, it's someone on board," she said with certainty. "You couldn't do this remotely, not since we cut the weapons AI loose from our labs last month."

"Every member of this crew is Saurellian," the captain protested. "I could understand if we had a traitor from another Federation planet, but there's never been a Saurellian traitor before."

"Someone has to be first," she said, flicking her attention between the conversation and the data that continued streaming past her. The systems had grown critical—if they ejected them now they'd survive. But they'd never know for sure that the hardware was

solid... Time to put it all on the line. "But we have a decision to make. I think I can shut this thing down. I have a personal override for the software that bypasses the captain's command structure."

"Then you're a traitor and I want you out of that computer. Now," Northman said, his voice filling with righteous anger.

Darius and the captain didn't respond immediately, but their silence weighed heavy. Northman was right—the creation of a secret override was beyond illegal, even worse than invading a warship with personal software daemons. Treason was probably the right word for it. But that didn't change that fact that she'd done it on every major project she'd been involved with since her university days. Most of her peers did too. Backdoors came in handy for all kinds of reasons.

"We can discuss that later," she said. "I'm prepared to accept the consequences of my actions. Right now I'm offering you a lifeline. Take it and we have a shot of getting out of this alive and intact with some answers. Otherwise, jettison the core and spend the next six months trying to figure out what went wrong while a billion innocent people die."

"If she's wrong and this is a hardware problem, everyone on this ship will be dead," Northman protested.

"It's sabotage," she snapped back. "And if it's not, you're right. We'll die. But at least they'll know what to look for. It's a gamble. *If we win, a billion people live.* Do you really want to eject those cores only to discover nothing was wrong with them? We can't just put them back in, you know."

"Use the override," Darius said.

"I agree," the captain said. "Do it."

K'rilla felt sudden relief.

"Yes, sir," she said, diving back into the green and blue world of the data stream, human voices fading in the distance. Winding her way through the flowing rivers of information, she located the weapons system's main processor home, slicing through

the exterior layers of security with the expertise she'd spent her life perfecting. Then she sent a coded message toward the firewall, her personal backdoor flaring to life with a brilliant purple glow. Dodging the flares of her own secondary security program, K'rilla sent the override codes to open the door. The barrier disappeared, she flowed inside as the chaos of the ship's systems crashed closed behind her.

Silence.

A darkened, soft blue room awaited her. The weapons system sub-AI stood before her, wearing K'rilla's own face. It was a small vanity, but during the design process she'd figured it was the only way she'd ever get on board the ship.

"Emergency shutdown of all systems, bypassing captain's orders," she told it, the final step feeling too simple. The AI nodded. All around them virtual lights flicked from red to green as it implemented her command. It seemed too easy and she quickly scanned the sensors to make sure the machinery was responding. Then she reopened the audio channel.

"You should have access now," she said.

"Got it," Northman replied. "I'm taking over. The AI is listening to us again."

K'rilla left the room, swam back up and out of the data, pulled out of the software and opened her eyes. The room around her remained a blur until she reached behind her neck and found the jack, pulling it free. She found her body covered with sweat and she leaned back against the console, knees shaking.

"Status?" she asked, her voice rough.

"Stabilizing," Northman said, his voice strained. "You were right, it had to be sabotage. I wish it had been a hardware failure. I think I'd rather blow up than face this."

She nodded her head, weary beyond words. Somewhere, in the heart of their flagship, a spy lurked. A spy with enough knowledge to impersonate the Captain and lock out orders from the ranking weapons officer.

Not a good situation.

“Engineer d’Pecoraio, you have some explaining to do,” the captain said across the intercom. “Commander Northman, take her into custody and bring her to brig.”



## **Chapter Five**

K'rilla took a deep breath, wishing she could eat something. Not that food would solve her problems, but if they were going to execute her, she didn't want to die hungry. It just seemed a bit unfair...after all, she'd saved their collective asses.

"Tell me about your software daemons," the interrogator asked, nothing in his expression betraying that they'd gone through this at least ten times already. She sighed.

"I already told you about them," she said. "They're just pre-fabbed programs that allow me to do parallel processing, just like AIs I'm working on."

"Illegal programs."

"Yes," she said. "In this context, they're illegal. I know that. They're supposed to be contained in the lab and by carrying them in my personal core I broke the law. I've already admitted to that."

"You also admit that you created an illegal backdoor entrance to the weapons system."

"Yes," K'rilla muttered, hoping she'd made the right decision by cooperating fully. Perhaps she should have asked for an advocate, at least that way they'd have to feed her. "I leave one in every program I work on, it's very common. That way if the boys on the field fuck up my system, I can still get in to fix it."

She glanced down at the cuff on her arm, the lights blinking as the sensors recording her vital signs. That, combined with the drugs they'd given her, should make it impossible for her to lie. The drugs certainly made it impossible for her to think straight. She felt like a little cloud floating through the sky...

Why did they keep asking questions?

"So you're telling me that all the engineers on your team have similar access to these systems?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. It throbbed dully and she had trouble gathering her thoughts. "Only me. Although they probably have access to other programs they've worked on. We all have micro-detonator implants, you know that, I told you already. If we found ourselves in hostile hands we could destroy the data. The daemons also carry backup self-destruction parameters in case I lose consciousness or am killed while jacked in."

"Using your detonator would mean brain death for you."

"Yes," she murmured, swaying on her chair. She focused on the man's head, her eyes hurting as she tried to focus. How many hours had she been awake? Seemed like forever. "If I activate the device, I'll die. But that's all right, because it would protect the information. We engineers are soldiers too, you know..."

"No, you aren't," he replied, his voice harsh. "You're a civilian. You had no right to create this security breach."

"Tell that to all the people who would have died if I hadn't been here," she murmured. "Can we please stop? I've told you everything I know, at least a hundred times. I want to eat and I want Darius."

"*Admiral* Darius," he said sharply, correcting her. "He is in charge of this fleet, please speak of him with respect."

"I do respect him," she muttered, feeling the happy little glow that came over her whenever she thought about him. "He's my lifemate. I didn't think I had a lifemate, and there he is!"

K'rilla giggled, thinking about how nice his strong arms felt around her, how good his...

"You wouldn't believe how big he is," she murmured. "When he came inside—"

"That's enough," the man muttered suddenly, glancing up at the recording monitor hanging above the table. "I don't need to know about the admiral's assets."

"That's a good way to put it," she said. "Because he has a really cute ass too."

The man didn't respond and she took a moment to ponder Darius and his assets. Damn, she liked him. That made her headache feel better. Everything about him made her feel better and she wished he was there. Of course, he couldn't be. She was a traitor—a man like he would never tolerate a traitor, lifemate or not. She'd probably never see him again.

She felt tears well up and suddenly she was crying. The tiny part of her brain that could still think clearly hated crying. Women who cry look weak and K'rilla couldn't afford to look weak. But to lose him now, so soon after they'd found each other. It was almost too much to bear.

"Tell me again about the access codes," the interrogator said. "Did anyone instruct you to do this?"

"No," she murmured. "I just did it, we all do. It's quite common."

Saul watched as the interrogator started through his list of questions once more, hating himself for letting her suffer like this. He wanted to be in there with her, but he couldn't trust himself to remain objective. Too much had happened too quickly and now they had a traitor on board to deal with. No one could be above suspicion, not even himself and the captain.

Planetside marines carrying blasters filled the hallways and every man on board had been confined to quarters. Saul and Captain Markus had been among the first to take the truth drugs. Both had been cleared, of course, not that he'd ever doubted Markus' loyalty. Commander Northman had been cleared as well, along with all the senior officers. Saul didn't know whether to be happy about that or not. He was glad to know none of the men he trusted was the traitor, but the general crew shouldn't have had access to the sections of the ship they would have needed to pull this off.

That didn't leave many options.

Either the saboteur was still hiding in the ship, which seemed unlikely, or one of the senior crew was criminally incompetent. Endless ramifications spun through his mind. Who knew how many ships harbored traitors? At least the new weapons system itself was solid. Their survival proved K'rilla right about that.

Shit, now she was crying. The sight was more than he could handle and he started toward the door. He would not allow his woman to be treated this way, completely unacceptable. Markus reached out and caught his arm and Saul quivered with sudden rage. Breathing slowly and steadily, he shrugged off the man's hold, turning to face him, bracing for combat. The marines snapped to attention, arming their weapons as he hovered on the brink of attack.

Markus met his eyes steadily, his gaze filled with understanding and more than a little envy. Of course, it was the life-bond overwhelming his emotions. A mated man would do anything to protect his woman — this was instinct.

"Sorry," Saul said, forcing himself to slow down. "I wasn't thinking."

"You're lucky to have her," Markus said. "She's a brave woman. She could have just let us eject the cores, nobody would have known the difference. This will work out, somehow."

"I won't let them take her away," Saul said, the muscles in his jaw tensing. "I won't allow it."

"They won't," Markus replied. "She's too valuable. And she saved the invasion — that counts for something. Not to mention her family pull."

The reminder stilled Saul and he grimaced. He'd already talked to her father once today and he didn't relish the idea of meeting the man in person. Danvarus d'Pecoraio might have been born into one of the most powerful families in Saurellia, but he'd earned every bit of the influence he held today. He had the presence of a Councilor and the financial resources to destroy a planet. His pride in his daughter was palpable, his

faith in her motives absolute. He hadn't bothered to hide his displeasure with Saul Darius, addressing him bluntly.

*"This is your fault. You brought her up there, you put her in this position. Keep her safe or I'll destroy you and everything you've ever loved."*

Saul looked back into the interrogation room, noting the look of reluctant admiration on the interrogator's face. Her skills and dedication to her work shone through the drugs, no matter the difficulty of the situation. He couldn't help but feel pride in her for that.

"Captain, we have something for you," a young lieutenant said, approaching the men.

"Yes?" Markus asked.

"We've found evidence that a member of the maintenance crew may have been responsible," he replied, his voice low. "Although he covered his path pretty well. We've traced the commands to a console within the officer's lounge, and while we don't have any physical evidence connecting the man, surveillance shows that he's the only one who could have been present at the time the commands were given. We have no idea how he got the captain's codes or how he disabled the overrides."

"Is he still alive?" Markus asked. The lieutenant shook his head.

"We found him dead in his room," he replied. "Most likely killed himself, but it could be murder. We may have another one on board. We'll know more after we finish questioning all the crew members."

Markus nodded, his face weary.

"I'll take care of this," he said, looking to Darius. "After they've finished with Engineer d'Pecoraio, we'll release her to your custody. But I'll have to cut all computer access to your cabin and post guards. At some point they may decide to pull her personal core too."

Saul nodded, wishing he could take her now. While he could technically overrule Markus' decisions onboard ship, it wasn't good policy. His job was to manage the fleet—Markus was in charge of the *Glory*.

"I'll stay here until they're ready," he said. "Inform me if anything else turns up."

Markus nodded and exited, leaving Saul alone to watch the interrogation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You can stop looking at me like that," K'rilla said, her voice tight and annoyed.

Darius raised his brows, questioningly. They sat across from each other at the table in his quarters. A steward who carefully noticed nothing had just delivered their dinner and it smelled fantastic to her. But the food would curdle in her stomach if he kept glaring at her like that.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked. "I'm sure you know what they're planning to do with me. You might as well let me know why you're so angry."

"I'm angry because you took an incredible risk with your life," he said. "You should have stayed in my quarters when I told you to."

"Right, that would have been perfect," K'rilla said, rolling her eyes. "Of course, the invasion would have been delayed for months, but my safety is far more important than a billion lives."

He didn't answer and she kept her face neutral. No point in rubbing it in—they both knew she was right.

"You could have at least told me who you were," he said finally. "It was a bit embarrassing."

"Hmm, before or after you kidnapped me? You didn't even ask my name until the end..."

He had the good grace to look away from her and she couldn't help but laugh. The poor man might be one of the greatest military minds of a generation, but he knew nothing about women.

"It's all ended well," she said. "Or at least, I think it has. Unless they've decided to imprison or execute me for treason? That would be in poor taste, considering I saved all of you."

He shook his head.

"It's worse."

She froze.

"What could be worse?"

"They're sending you with the fleet," he said. "The Council can't let you stay home in your current position, it sets a bad example. And they think you'll come in handy if any other technical sabotage takes place. They're remanding you into my custody for the duration, with a full lock on your personal core that only fleet captains or higher can override."

She laughed out loud, loving it.

"You poor thing, you're an admiral and you can't even get rid of one woman!" she said. "But it's the best solution for all of us."

"I can't lose you," Darius said, looking directly into her eyes, refusing to laugh with her. "Don't you understand how impossible this is? I can't risk losing you and we're heading into combat."

"No, the *fleet* is heading into combat. I've read my military history. Admirals don't go directly into the fight, they can't afford to. It's your job to send other men to die and your burden to carry when they do. Let me be the one who comforts you after the battle ends."

He shook his head.

"Sometimes entire fleets are destroyed. This isn't safe."

"It's not safe back home, either," K'rilla said. "We have a major security issue. A traitor got on board our flagship. I'm a senior engineer working with the navy on secret weapons systems—don't you think I'm a target on Saurellia too? Why do you think I

got the explosive chip implanted? It's not just an affectation, Darius. Even civilian engineers are combatants in this war. Every one of us is ready and willing to die to keep the Federation safe. If my skills are needed on this ship, you have no right not to bring me along."

He stood, pacing across the room, a caged animal. After long moments of silence he stopped moving, turning to look at her. His face twisted, filled with anguish.

"I know that," he said. "It's killing me. And what if you get pregnant? What then? I won't risk our unborn child."

"You have a pretty good opinion of your own sperm," she said, raising an eyebrow. "I'll use birth control. Now is *not* the time for a pregnancy."

He froze, his expression dark.

"Saurellian women do not use birth control."

K'rilla narrowed her eyes, standing to face him, crossing her arms in front of her body belligerently.

"Saurellian women on Saurellia do not typically use birth control," she said, keeping her voice mild. "But women in dangerous situations do. I will. Get over it."

She half expected him to shout her down, although she knew the priestesses would back her up on this one. Instead he just shook his head slowly.

"This is nothing like what I imagined when I dreamed about finding a lifemate. Women are supposed to be soft and sweet and welcoming," he said. "And you're supposed to obey your lifemate."

K'rilla couldn't help herself, she laughed out loud. Again.

"You've been with the fleet for too damn long. Saurellian women have never been like that."

"I wouldn't know," he said finally. "My mother died when I was ten years old. And I shipped out young—I looked for a mate, but every woman I met seemed scared of me."



Their families too. It didn't look good for my chances and I was already getting myself in trouble."

"I can understand that," she said. "You put on a pretty good show and they were probably young and silly. But I'm a grown woman, Darius, and I'm not scared of you. I'm your mate, and whether you like it or not, we're partners. That means we each get a vote."

"Not when it comes to running the fleet, K'rilla," he replied, his voice suddenly hard.

"You're the admiral, I'm the engineer. I understand that. I'm not an idiot."

"So I hear," he replied, his voice losing some of its harsh edge. His face softened. "Call me Saul. That's my name, although nobody has the nerve to use it."

She smiled at him, then said his name, rolling the sound around on her tongue.

"Saul."

K'rilla walked over to him, laying one hand across his uniformed chest. She tested the fabric, then cocked her head at him flirtatiously.

"I think I liked your gladiator togs a little better."

He smiled back.

"I liked your dress better than the brig jumpsuit too," he said. "Too bad we don't have anything for you to change into. Your parents are sending a package and I'm sure it will include clothing. But until then, that's really not the best color on you."

She laughed.

"Do you want me to take it off?"

He gave her a hopeful look and K'rilla felt the same sense of power she'd had earlier. Saul wanted her, she could see it in his eyes—physical lust and emotional desire heady in its intensity. Of course, the attraction wasn't only on his side. Just looking at him sent her heart rate upward. K'rilla slid her hand down his body, enjoying the hardness of his muscled form. Difficult to believe that he really, truly belonged to her

and nobody else. Her hand trailed down his stomach, finding the stiffening length of his penis, and she gripped it through his clothing.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait a bit,” she said, rubbing him up and down, all but purring. “Because I want to try something else out first. I’ve read about this, you know...”

K’rilla slid slowly to her knees, reaching for the fastenings of his pants. They came open quickly enough and then she slid them down around his ankles. His erection stood proudly before her, ridged with veins, swollen red with his blood. The tip looked so smooth and silky that she couldn’t help but touch it, wondering at the texture. He shuddered as her fingers played across his flesh, the look on his face a mix of pleasure and near pain. It was every bit as soft as she’d imagined, such a contrast with the hardness that made up the rest of his body. She rubbed the back of her hand along the bottom of it, enjoying the soft sigh he gave at her touch. Then she reached down lower, ringing his girth with her fingers. Sliding them up and down experimentally, she saw a soft pearl of whitish fluid seep from his head.

K’rilla glanced up at Darius to check his expression, then leaned forward and caught that tiny drop on the tip of her tongue. He tasted salty and just a little bit sweet. He reached down, threading his fingers through her hair, trying to pull her closer.

“I don’t think so,” she said, shrugging off his touch. “I’m calling the shots right now, Admiral Darius.”

He groaned, but obediently pulled his hands away. K’rilla savored that thrill of power and desire again, lust drifting through her as her nipples tightened with need. She took her cue from them, reaching up to slowly open the front of her brig jumpsuit, freeing her breasts for his view. Then she cupped her mounds with her hands, teasing the nipples. His cock jumped and she laughed, enjoying herself immensely. Then she had an idea.

Leaning up and forward, K'rilla let the tip of her breast brush against his swollen member. It jerked and he leaned closer. She rubbed him again, sliding his erection between her breasts, pressing them close around him.

"You have no idea how good that feels," he muttered. "Don't stop."

"I wasn't planning on it," she murmured. He started thrusting against her, and she watched, fascinated, as his cock rose up between her breasts again and again. She'd intended to suckle him with her mouth, but this seemed to be working quite well. K'rilla liked the way his face had started to flush and the way that each thrust grew a little harder. The head of his cock wept fluids, easing the way between her flesh, and she felt an answering wetness between her own legs. Suddenly the novelty of the position wore off, K'rilla becoming acutely aware that he was having all the fun.

She dropped her breasts and pulled away, rising quickly to her feet.

"That's not going to cut it for me," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him toward the bedroom. "I want to have some fun here too."

He followed her and they ran into the room together, ripping off their clothes and grinning at each other like two unruly teenagers. She felt young and silly and happy. Carefree. Probably stupid, considering they'd be leaving soon on what could very well be a one-way trip to fight Imperial forces. But none of that mattered right now – all she cared about was joining with her mate, binding themselves together and enjoying this brief reprieve from all their cares and worries.

As she stepped out of her pants and kicked them away, she felt his arms come around her. He spun her down onto the bed and she landed on her back. Saul followed her down, kissing her on the mouth. At first his lips were hard but they softened as the kiss deepened. K'rilla closed her eyes, allowing herself to fall into his caress and truly relax for the first time since her release from interrogation. Lying in his arms felt good – more than good. Being with Saul was like coming home and for once she didn't feel awkward and strange. She'd never fit in with the other girls, even before any of them

found their lifemates. Among the engineers she just felt like another one of the boys. But with Saul? He made her feel special and soft and wonderful.

*Not to mention horny.*

His lips pulled away from her, trailing down her neck to her breast, sucking one of the soft peaks into his hot mouth. *Oh damn...* K'rilla squirmed against him and he slipped a hand between her legs. Two fingers dropped down between her inner and outer lips, sliding back and forth in the slick wetness of her arousal. Each movement caressed her clit without ever providing any direct stimulation. Saul matched each tug of his fingers with a deep suck of her breast. At first it felt amazing, but the longer he continued the less satisfied she felt. Her body demanded more.

Now.

K'rilla arched against his hand, mewling. Saul pulled away from her, giving a low chuckle.

"Dammit, you can't just stop," she muttered, opening her eyes to glare at him. The smug, satisfied look on his face was almost more than she could stand.

"I'm not stopping," he replied, sliding down her body. "I'm just adjusting. Shut up and let me do my work."

K'rilla narrowed her eyes at him. Then he pushed her legs farther apart and lowered his mouth toward her pussy. She decided to follow his lead, at least for the moment. She wasn't sorry. Saul reached between her legs and spread her lower lips wide, blowing softly on the engorged flesh of her clit. Heavenly. Then he flicked his tongue out, tracing the tiny, engorged nub. She had a pretty hard time holding her body still after that. Every suckle, every swirl of his tongue, even the tiny fluttering motions he made with his tongue seemed to pull her closer to climax. She felt her flesh growing more sensitive until it almost hurt when he caressed her, yet he showed no mercy.

Now his tongue felt like some bizarre instrument of torture, hot and wet and utterly remorseless. Her breath came fast and hard, the tension building up inside until she had trouble breathing. Still Saul's hands held her firm as she struggled against him,

desperate for relief and terrified he might quit at the same time. His mouth sucked her deep inside, hard. Then it hit.

K'rilla's body spasmed as she came, pussy walls clutching for the cock he still hadn't given her. This was even better than it had been before but he wasn't done yet. Before she could even begin to catch her breath, he flipped her over and she landed on her hands and knees. Saul grasped her hips and thrust into her from behind, hard. K'rilla gasped. She'd forgotten how big he felt inside her, stretching the delicate membranes of her opening as he pushed through again and again. She braced herself, taking each thrust with her body and then shoving back at him. They fell into an exquisite rhythm, his cock filling her until she thought she'd scream from the intensity. Then he reached down under her, fingering her still-raw clit, and she did scream.

The second climax hit her hard and fast, without warning. He didn't let up for even a second, handling that sensitive nub so roughly it hurt. But that tiny bit of pain heralded even greater pleasure. The combination of his fingers and the thick length of him pummeling her from within brought her to the point of explosion once more. K'rilla screamed again, collapsing to the bed, unable to support her body any longer.

Darius offered a triumphant, satisfied laugh. His hands grasped her hips firmly, pulling her into his body as he continued his thrusts. Again and again he filled her body until he gave his own cry of relief as waves of hot semen filled her cavity. Then he pulled her up and into his arms, cradling her as he collapsed against the bed in turn.

They lay together, panting, for several moments before he spoke.

"All right, I guess you can come with me."

K'rilla giggled, burrowing deeper into his arms.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I mean, if you'd rather I can stay behind and we can just do things like this in our imagination..."

"Woman, you don't know when to quit," he growled, pulling her up for a hard kiss on the mouth.

"That's probably true," she replied when he finally released her. "But to be fair, I'm hungry and that's impairing my judgment. If you want me to be any use to you as an engineer, you have to feed me."

"I can do that," he said, kissing the tip of her nose. Then his face grew more serious. "You've never seen combat. It will be bad, K'rilla. Worse than you can imagine."

She looked him directly, willing him to believe her words as she spoke them.

"We can do this together, Saul Darius," she said. "We were created for each other, and we were created for a purpose. The sooner we go out and kick those Imperials in the ass, the sooner we can come home and spend all day, every day in bed. How does that sound to you?"

"Engineer d'Pecoraio, I think you've summed up the situation perfectly. Now let's eat before the food gets too cold."

K'rilla laughed and rolled off the bed. The weeks and months ahead would be hard, but for the first time in her life she felt like she really had the power to make a difference.

This lifemate thing wasn't too bad after all.

## About the Author

Joanna Wylde is a freelance writer who worked as both a journalist and a fundraiser before finding her niche in erotic romance. In April 2002, *The Price of Pleasure* was released as an ebook and quickly found a receptive audience. Jo is married and lives in north Idaho with her husband, David.

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