

STAR FLYER

BONNIE DEE

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Two men on trajectory for an explosive collision...

Still mourning the loss of his lover to invading forces, Marr Hingo operates his farm under a dictatorship while keeping his mind—and feet—planted firmly on the ground. Spring arrives right on schedule, bringing with it something completely unexpected—an unconscious pilot from a downed star jet. Unable to bring himself to give up the handsome aviator to searching troops, Marr hides him in the barn's cellar.

The last thing Davan Siedel remembers before ejecting is getting in a couple of good blasts against a Galactic Forces F150. He wakes to find his vague memory of being carried by an angel wasn't far off the mark. A tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed farmer has brought him to safety and is tending his injured leg.

The attraction between solid, earthy Marr and clever, quicksilver Davan catches them off guard—and their sexual union is as sweet as it is powerful. Yet the longer Davan lingers, the tighter the enemy's web grows, threatening their love, their freedom...and their lives.

Warning: Contains hot male/male loving, sweet sexual healing, a down-to-earth farmer who knows how to wield a...plow, a smart-mouthed pilot with fast...jets.

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Bonnie Dee

Dedication

To Mike, my personal pilot.

Chapter One

“Water, Fire, Soil and Air, bestow your blessings on this growing season.” Marr called on the elements, no longer certain he believed in sentient entities that guided all life in the worlds. But the spring prayer was a time-honored tradition of the Theon people, so he murmured the prayer prior to tilling the field.

“Water.” He poured from his canteen into his palm and scattered droplets over the dark, rich land.

“Fire.” Lighting a match, he tossed it and watched it wink out in the breeze before it ever touched the ground.

“Soil.” Marr bent and scooped a fist full and let it sift through his fingers.

“Air.” He lifted his face and breathed in the soil-scented air. Before he could repeat the plea for good crops, a flaming jet blazed across the sky. It was coming in fast, falling to the ground.

Marr recognized the bird as a rebel plane, probably shot down. The Intergalactic War was coming too close to home. Occupied Theon was the new battleground for the resistance fighters, and he wanted no part of the violence and destruction they brought with them.

A dot of white appeared in the sky. At first glance it appeared suspended against the blue, floating lazily in the air. But as it came closer it moved faster, plummeting toward ground. Beneath the chute a gray figure was suspended.

Marr’s legs moved without conscious direction toward where the flyer would touch down or slam into the ground. His feet plowed furrows in the damp soil as he pounded across the field toward the woods beyond. His eyes riveted on the small white escape chute and the man clinging to the lines. Why wasn’t the flyer wearing a jet pack vest he could steer instead of an old-fashioned chute? Marr had heard the rebels’ gear, planes and weapons were outdated, but this bordered on suicidal.

His heart raced along with his legs as he pounded toward the spot he estimated the man would land. Branches snapped against his face and brambles tore his pants. The pilot might have been all right if he could have maneuvered toward the open field, but it appeared he was heading straight for the thick woods. He might be impaled or the lines of the chute might get tangled in the treetops.

Marr caught another glimpse of the chute through the interlacing branches, so he knew he was still on course before the forest closed around him and he could no longer see the sky. He followed his instinct, dodging around trunks and stumbling over logs, running blind. When he heard the crash of a heavy object breaking through the dense green foliage, he veered toward it.

He broke through the undergrowth at the edge of a clearing and stopped short. The rebel pilot hung from his chute, caught in the branches as Marr had feared, suspended between sky and land. His head flopped forward and his arms and legs hung loose. Unconscious or perhaps dead, he didn't struggle to free himself.

Marr sucked in a deep breath to steady his nerves. Panic was useless. He must concentrate on moving fast, freeing the pilot and finding out if he was alive. Marr's head tilted back as he stared overhead and considered how to cut the lines.

The man's body swayed and the branches gripping the chute cracked and splintered. The pilot dropped closer to the ground. Close enough for Marr to grab hold of him. There was no time to worry about broken bones. The army would know he'd ejected from the damaged aircraft. They'd be tracking him even now. Seizing the man's booted feet, Marr pulled. More twigs and branches snapped, releasing their burden like reluctant teeth. He reached farther up the man's body, solid and warm beneath the gray flight suit, wrapped his arms around him and pulled again.

Marr could reach the harness now and release the lines attaching the pilot to the chute. The man slumped into his arms, as limp as a sack of cornmeal. Marr eased him to the safety of the ground and laid him flat. He drew the helmet off his head and pressed his fingers to his neck, feeling for a pulse.

The man's heart beat slow and steady.

Marr sat back on his heels. His heart hammered hard enough to bruise his chest, and his clothes clung to his perspiring body. Exhaling deeply, he gazed at the unconscious pilot.

White blond hair darkened with sweat was matted against his scalp. His skin was pale and his slack lips parted. Beneath his eyelids, his eyes moved restlessly. Perhaps the mag-blast that brought down his aircraft had also rendered him unconscious. He may have other injuries as well, but there was no time to examine him. Marr had to hide the aviator before soldiers came looking for him.

Marr glanced at the deflated chute in the branches above and paused, frozen in indecision. The breeze blew, the birds still called to one another, but the peaceful morning had been blown apart. If he waited here with the injured rebel until the Tandus arrived, maybe even called on his communicator and gave the exact location, he could return to normal life. A few hours of debriefing and he'd be planting his spring crops by afternoon.

The Intergalactic Forces of the Tandus had occupied Theon for almost two years and Marr hadn't noticed much change in daily life. If anything, things ran more smoothly. But as an occupied planet, Theon owed allegiance to the rebel forces from across the galaxy which had banded together to stand against the Tandus. Marr couldn't in good conscience turn this man over. He must hide him. It was what Sasch would've done.

Marr couldn't hide the broken branches that marked the pilot's landing, but he grasped the dangling lines and pulled, forcing the trees to surrender the escape chute. The chute was only about the size of his

bed mattress. It was amazing it had the capacity to support a man's weight. Even the thought of floating through the air at the mercy of a scrap of fabric made Marr's stomach lurch. He hated heights and was happy to keep his feet rooted on the ground. When he'd pulled the chute down, he rolled the gauzy fabric tight, tied it and tucked the bundle inside his shirt. He attached the chinstrap of the helmet to his belt loop then bent to lift the unconscious pilot.

After slipping his arms between the loamy forest floor and the man's back and legs, he grunted as he rose from a crouch to his full height. The pilot was a slight man, but a dead weight. His body draped over Marr's arms and his head lolled back, exposing his throat. At the sight of the vulnerable curve, lust flared, but Marr blinked it away and concentrated on maneuvering between the trees without slamming the man's head into a trunk. It was hard going. He crashed through the undergrowth like a marauding animal. There was no way to move silently, and he prayed to the elementals he didn't quite believe in to let him pass.

By the time he pushed out of the thicket of brambles at the edge, he was sweat-soaked. The helmet bumped against his hip with every step. The man in his arms groaned and his eyelids flickered. Marr glanced down at his sharp, fine features. "Don't wake up yet. Wait 'til I get you back home."

He trod heavy-footed across the field, his feet sinking into the dirt. At last he reached the seeder and hefted the pilot's body onto the seat in the cab. The man's arm flopped to his side and Marr lifted and placed his hand on his lap.

After closing the door of the cab, he scanned the horizon for any sign of approaching soldiers. The gently rolling land was empty of anything except birds pecking the ground for worms and the neighbor's dog trotting toward home.

Marr walked around the vast wings of the seeder and climbed into the cab. He started the engine and the machine whirred to life then glided silently across the field. There would be no planting today.

He figured he'd hide the downed airman in the barn, although it would be the first place the Tandus soldiers looked if they searched farms in the area. There was a cellar beneath the main floor. Since Marr no longer grew root vegetables like carrots or potatoes, he hadn't used it for storage in years. He could spread hay over the trap door and perhaps the searching soldiers wouldn't consider the possibility of a basement in the barn.

Marr studied the face of the unconscious flyer, who groaned and stirred. He looked young—too young to be flying missions. The frown puckering his forehead only emphasized the smoothness of his skin. His translucent hair and complexion suggested he was from Antia.

A wave of concern swelled in Marr supplanting the fear that had hummed through him from the moment he'd sighted the diving jet. He felt the same nurturing instinct that drove him to nurse a premature lamida infant to health instead of letting nature usher it into the afterlife. Harboring the pilot meant risking losing the farm, being thrown in prison and perhaps even executed. But he had no choice. He would shelter and heal the injured man, then help him escape Theon.

Davan's sweet little jet darted and struck at the Tandus aircraft like a sparrow attacking a hawk. He peppered the C180 with a hail of shots, the magnetic blasts invisible, but damaging the larger craft's body. Not enough to bring it down—yet.

Davan spiraled upward, out of range of the C180's weapons, then dove in from the left flank. His throat was dry and his body thrummed with an adrenaline charge. He was one with his ship, roaring through the sky, twisting, side-hopping, dipping and shooting bolt after bolt at the enemy.

He ran out of firepower before the other jet went down, but knew he'd grounded it for a while. Knowing when to cut his losses, Davan shot away, hiding in the cloud cover with his shields up to confuse any tracker on his tail.

Halfway to the rebel base, he'd called in. "This is Airborne Twenty-three. Engagement over. Flying home."

"Are you clear?" Beadle's brusque voice signaled he was less interested in Davan's welfare than in the security of the secret base on Theon. He wanted no pilots to inadvertently lead the enemy to the base.

Davan scanned the horizon with the aid of the viewer. "No enemy aircraft in sight." The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he felt the hit. A magnetic blast rocked the jet, shattered the air in the cabin and rolled over him in waves. Davan felt as if his organs were liquefying and his head imploding.

"Received a hit!" he shouted into the receiver as he pressed the eject button. Fragmented images of jet, sky and planet kaleidoscoped in his vision before it went black.

Davan jerked awake from the nightmare. No, not a nightmare. His body screamed, telling him he was injured. Every part of him, it seemed, but with a special concentration of pain in his leg. He gritted his teeth and sucked in a breath, smelling dust and hay.

How had he gotten out of the jet and where was he now? Was he a prisoner? He didn't want to let his captors know he was conscious until he'd had a chance to assess the situation, so he lay with his eyes closed, listening. Then he heard a familiar voice. It was the dark spirit who'd carried him and said he was taking him home. At the time, Davan had thought he meant to the afterlife, but the voice was real and the hands that touched his leg were physical.

"Sorry. This is going to hurt some. I'm no medic and I'm doing the best I can."

Davan realized he was nearly naked. He could feel air touching his chest, arms and legs. He peered through the screen of his eyelashes. The silhouette of a man's head and shoulders blocked the light. His hands were warm and comforting as they moved gently down his leg. Then they grasped his calf and shifted it. Ground glass pierced Davan's bones and he cried out. His body jerked and eyes flew open.

The man pushed against his chest, pressing him flat. “Lie as still as you can. I’m going to lay it straight and splint it. The bone might be fractured.” He spoke Universal with the soft accent of Theon. “Hold tight.”

Davan clutched the rough sacking upon which he lay. He braced his body and clenched his teeth, groaning as the man took hold of his leg once more and pulled. Agony wracked his body and he cursed in Antian. The residual ringing in his ears from the magnetic blast grew louder, joining with a black cloud that filled his head until there was no room left for consciousness.

When Davan rose into the gray fog of awareness again, a warm palm cupped the back of his neck, raising his head. Something cold and hard touched his lips.

“Try to drink this. It will help ease the pain.” The low, rumbling voice flowed over him like water. He opened his mouth and drank. Cool liquid with a sharp tang bathed his throat and slid down to his stomach.

He opened his eyes and looked at the face hovering over him. The man’s features were blunt and square with a big nose and chin, a strong jaw, prominent cheekbones and a wide mouth. He had the hard, rocky look of a Theonian, as if he’d been hewn from the land itself. But the severity of his face was relieved by the crow’s feet at the corners of his brown eyes that gave a suggestion of humor to his solemn gaze. Davan felt an urge to make him laugh so he could hear what that sounded like.

For a moment, their gazes locked together like two gears, then Davan blinked and swallowed, and the man removed the cup from his lips.

“Are you my hero?” Davan said. “I seem to remember being carried like a damsel in distress.”

The wide mouth curved and the lines fanning from his eyes deepened. “Yeah. That was me. For a little guy, you’re as heavy as a bag of rocks.”

“And here I’ve been working out, trying to keep my figure trim.” Davan shifted and gasped as a new wave of pain shot up from his leg. He glanced down to see a homemade splint comprised of two boards bound to his leg with strips of cloth. “You sure you’re not a real medic? That looks so professional.”

“You want me to take it off and let it heal crooked?” the other man responded to his sarcasm. “Stuck in a cockpit, I’m sure it doesn’t matter if you have a permanent limp.”

Suddenly the ramifications of his situation wiped the smile off Davan’s face. He was flightless, far away from the base camp, and he couldn’t walk. The enemy was certainly searching for him and he’d put this man at risk. Davan gestured at his leg. “Thanks for this, but I should get out of here. I don’t want to bring the GA down on you.”

Davan struggled to push to a sitting position and more pain stabbed through him. He caught his breath and collapsed against the burlap covering the hard floor. He breathed slowly, fighting the pain into submission.

“I wouldn’t try to sit up,” the man said dryly.

Davan grinned ruefully. “Thanks. I’ll remember that. Where are we?” He looked around the dimly lit room with its rough-hewn walls and dirt floor.

“The cellar of my barn. This is my farm. My name’s Marr Hingo.” He offered his hand and a dark lock of hair fell over his forehead.

Davan wanted to reach up and ruffle his hair until it stood up in all directions. He wanted to make this man’s calm eyes go wide. Whatever medication was in the water he’d drunk was kicking in. His pain eased and a floating feeling buoyed him as he shook the farmer’s big, rough hand. “I’m Flight Lieutenant Davan Siedal. I’m sorry for any trouble I’ve caused you and I’ll be out of here as soon as I can hobble.”

“That won’t be for a while. I don’t know if your ankle’s sprained or fractured, but either way you won’t want to put any weight on it until it heals. Are you hungry?” The man picked up a bowl. The rich aroma of stew made Davan’s stomach rumble. He’d been living on vac-pac rations for so long he’d nearly forgotten what real food smelled like.

“Could do with a bite.”

The man cupped his neck, making his flesh tingle, and lifted his head once more as he offered him a spoonful of the fragrant stew. Davan sipped it and nearly whimpered at the delicious flavors bursting on his tongue.

“I saw you go down. What happened?”

“Hell if I know. I made my target and was on my way back to base when a mag-blast hit me. Never even saw an enemy aircraft. Maybe it was a ground to air. I guess I ejected and then I woke up here.”

Marr filled in the rest of the story for him. “I saw your chute drift into the woods and found you hanging from a tree. I brought the chute with us so they won’t find any evidence.”

Davan nodded and his head bobbed like a balloon on a string. “Are there any Galactic Force army bases nearby?”

Marr set the bowl of stew aside and eased Davan’s head back to the floor, slipping his hand from beneath it and leaving his neck cold. “The Tandus are everywhere. They’ll be searching this area soon.” He indicated the space around them. “You should be safe down here. From outside there’s no sign the barn has a basement. I’ll cover the trapdoor.”

Davan shifted, frustrated at his helplessness, but moving only made his leg ache. The comfortable fog cleared a little and the pain was there waiting, sharp and clear.

“It will be close and dark down there,” Marr warned. “I’ll go to the house and get some bedding and a light for you to use.”

The air below ground was so stale and thick with dust Davan could almost feel it clogging his nose and lungs. The idea of being enclosed sent a wave of horror through him. It was one of his worst fears ever since he’d spent time in a detention cell as a kid.

“Sorry it’s not more comfortable.” Marr patted Davan’s chest, leaving a warm imprint behind.

Davan licked his dry lips and swallowed his panic. “It’s cozy. Just like the barracks, except I get it all to myself.”

Marr smiled. “I’ll be back soon. I’ll even bring you a reader to help you pass the time.”

“Sounds great. It’ll be like a vacation down here.” Davan spoke so cheerily he almost fooled himself, and his tension eased.

Marr rose, his head bent beneath the low ceiling, his broad shoulders hunched. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. Sorry to leave you in the dark.”

“More peaceful that way. I’ll get some sleep.” Davan felt anything but calm as Marr climbed the steps and closed the hatch behind him, plunging the root cellar into darkness.

Davan stared toward the trapdoor, trying to find a crack of light around the edge, but he was entombed in dense blackness, smothered by the smell of dirt and old potatoes. Light, air and space were distant and unattainable and he longed to fly up out of his skin and away from this planetbound prison. “If I get through this alive, I’m never setting foot underground again, not so much as the basement of a house.”

Chapter Two

The young flyer disturbed him. As he searched through the kitchen drawers for the small glow light, Marr tried to stop the mental images of Davan's face, his sexy grin and those odd eyes that changed color every time he looked into them. He tried to forget the smooth, pale skin encasing long, lean muscles. The effect the man's body had on him as he'd cradled him close was undeniable, but Marr pushed it from his mind. He was helping a rebel fighter in need. It was his duty to take at least this much of a stand against the Tandus. As soon as Davan was well, he'd be on his way, and Marr would return to his quiet, uncomplicated life.

From planting through harvest there was always plenty to be done on a farm, and in the quiet winter months, if Marr started to miss Sasch too much, he'd find repair work to keep him busy. He was never really lonely living on his family homestead. He didn't need another partner. No one could replace Sasch. But a man had urges, and Marr couldn't help that his were stirred by the sight of the pilot's youthful body, his charming smile, the scent of his warm skin...and the bulge beneath his briefs, which Marr hadn't lifted the waistband to examine because he wasn't a pervert.

It had simply been a long time. That was all. A very long time since he'd been with someone, let alone a man he cared for.

Sasch, you should have stayed with me. You didn't have to go!

Marr slammed the drawer shut and pulled open a cupboard door. The glow stick sat on the shelf, right where he'd left it the last time he'd used it. He snatched it up, stuffed it in his pocket and went to fill a bottle of water for Davan.

His mind was shooting all over the place like a misfiring engine. Thoughts of the items he needed to gather for his guest mingled with fears of discovery, lustful rumblings, memories of Sasch and practical concerns about how this lost day would put him behind on his planting schedule. Marr felt as jumpy as his herd of lamida during mating season. And why did he have to make that analogy? Sex wasn't something he should be thinking about right now.

One thing at a time. Gather fresh clothes, a pillow, blankets, a reader and an empty container for Davan to use in relieving himself. This brought Marr's mind right back where he didn't want it to dwell—Davan's cock.

Marr placed the items he'd collected in a box and hoisted it in his arms to carry out to the barn. He was nearly to the door when he heard gravel crunching under the tires of approaching vehicles. His heart

raced and his throat constricted so he could barely swallow as he looked out the window and saw the GF insignia emblazoned on the vehicles stopping in front of the house. Soldiers in dark blue GF uniforms piled out of the backs of three army trucks. Marr recognized the sleek black Swift belonging to Riker, the Tandus official who oversaw the town of Bardee.

After shoving the box of supplies to the back of the hall closet, he tumbled a couple of coats on top of it and made sure some boots stood in front of it then closed the closet door just as his doorbell rang.

Breathe. Don't look guilty. He decided it was all right to look alarmed. Who wouldn't show fear at having soldiers swarm all over his property? Marr grasped the handle and opened the door.

Riker stood on the front porch. The portly man was as sleek and shiny as his Swift. His jacket was cut to emphasize his shoulders and nipped in at the waist to minimize his stomach. His shiny, black shoes were scuff-free, as if he glided rather than walked everywhere he went. His pencil-thin moustache lifted above his gleaming white teeth and he held out his hand to Marr.

"Marr Hingo. I believe I've seen you in my office before. Didn't you apply for a license to defer your land payments? I'm pleased to finally meet you in person." His hand was cool and moist and Marr released it as soon as possible.

"Am I in some kind of trouble?" Marr let his very real fear quaver in his voice.

"Not at all." Riker's eyes were like hard, black stones. "We're searching for a rebel pilot who may be hiding in the area."

Telling as much of the truth as possible seemed the most prudent course. "A pilot? When I was out in the field, I saw a jet go down." Marr looked between Riker and the soldier who'd joined them on the front porch.

"Did you see anyone eject or where he landed?" the officer asked.

"In the woods," Marr admitted, "but I couldn't tell you where exactly."

"You didn't notify anyone?" The man's blue eyes were steely and suspicious.

Marr squared his shoulders. "No. I didn't. I'm sorry, but I assumed you were already aware." He glanced past the two men at the soldiers exploring the barn and outbuildings. His stomach clenched hard as he prayed they wouldn't notice the trap door beneath the layer of hay covering it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hingo, but these men will have to search your house, too," Riker said.

Marr dragged his attention from the barn. He didn't have to try hard to look suitably outraged at the idea of having his home invaded. Folding his arms over his chest, he glared at the two men. "Are you accusing me of harboring a fugitive?"

"No one's accusing you of anything. Step aside, sir." The officer stared at Marr until he moved, allowing a cadre of soldiers to enter the house.

Had he left out anything suspicious, any medical supplies? Marr mentally traveled the rooms ahead of the soldiers. Other than the box in the closet, he thought the house was clear. He stood in the foyer with

Riker beside him and watched the soldiers passing by as they went from room to room. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Of course not. I know you’re a loyal citizen of the New Regime.” Riker rested his hand on Marr’s arm then let his hand linger, squeezing lightly. “I’ve noticed you running your errands in town. You’re the kind of man it’s impossible to overlook.”

Marr’s jaw knotted as he swallowed the bile burning his throat. He couldn’t afford to have Riker as an enemy. The man had too much power and could trump up charges and seize property on a whim. He was a petty dictator one must appease without giving away anything too important. Marr forced a thin-lipped smile. “All I want to do is go about my business. I don’t want any trouble.”

“And I can make sure you never have any.” Riker leaned close as he spoke. The cinnamon smell of his breath made Marr’s nostrils flare. “I could be a good friend to you...if you return the favor.”

He wanted to plow a fist into Riker’s neat little moustache then lay into the soldiers slamming doors and drawers upstairs, but Marr kept his expression neutral and his mouth shut. Not responding to Riker’s flirtation seemed the best policy.

The officer returned to the front hall. “Everything’s clear, but I want you to show me where you saw the pilot land in the forest.”

“Yes, sir.” Marr turned away from Riker and followed the soldier outdoors, where the others had given up their search and were congregating in the yard.

He led them to a different field from the one he’d been working in that morning and pointed to another section of the forest. “In there, I think.”

While the soldiers flocked in the direction he pointed them, Riker stayed with Marr. The bureaucrat lifted a foot and grimaced at his muddy shoe before addressing him again.

“I apologize for the distress and inconvenience, Mr. Hingo. You’re not being singled out. We’re searching the entire area and questioning everyone. I don’t want to foster rancor. My job is to promote goodwill between the Theon people and the new government, and I’d like to extend that goodwill to you...personally.” Riker scanned his body with a suggestive leer. “I’m in a position to grant favors that would increase your holdings. I can also help you if title laws change and Theon ownership of property is challenged.”

The sense of menace in Riker’s smile was palpable. While he wasn’t a physical threat to Marr, who towered over him, he was like a coiled snake which could kill with a strike of its deadly fangs. His words suggested that if Marr didn’t appease him, a word or stroke of his pen could destroy him.

If the soldiers returned and found Riker missing, would they care? The man probably hadn’t endeared himself to the Tandus army any more than he had the locals. A blow to the head and Marr could plant him deep in the field.

“Think about what I’ve said and call me. Remember, if there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“Thank you. There’s nothing I need.” Marr forced his face to remain neutral and kept his tone polite. “If you’re finished with me, I need to get back to work.”

Again Riker gazed at him with eyes that crawled over him like slugs. “I’m finished with you. For now.”

Marr led the official across the fields to his shiny, black Swift. The mag-powered vehicle glided away, and Marr watched it go. He wanted to take a hot shower to wash off the slimy feeling Riker had left behind.

A quick glance at the barn was all he allowed himself. It would be impossible to go to Davan until the soldiers had finished searching the woods and left. While Marr straightened up his house, he scanned for observation modules they may have planted, but found nothing.

By the time he was finished, the army transports were still parked outside. The sun was nearly at the horizon and the fields stretching between farmyard and forest were empty. Marr pattered around every part of the barn, doing odd jobs while searching for ob-mods. The building appeared to be clear of the devices.

In their pen outdoors, the curly-pelted black, tan and gray lamidas were bleating to be fed and brought in for the night. Marr filled a pail with grain and opened the door. The animals’ heads came up to hip-height and they milled around his legs as he replenished their food and water troughs. He scratched a pregnant female on her furry forehead between the nubs of her horns. The impatient beast pushed his hand away in her hurry to get to the grain before the rest of the herd.

When he looked across the field again, the soldiers were finally trudging back from the woods. Marr let himself out of the lamidas’ pens and walked across the yard to meet the commanding officer. “Any luck?”

The man stared past Marr at the lamidas, quiet now except for their munching and an occasional bleat. “Not a sign.”

“I don’t have a blaster or even a neuron-scrambler to protect myself if this guy should come around. How dangerous do you think he is? Should I be worried?” Marr played the concerned citizen.

“Lock everything up tight, but he’s probably left the area.” The officer was already moving past him, clearly not interested in the safety concerns of a Theon farmer.

Marr watched until the taillights of the last transport truck had disappeared around the corner where Stump Road turned onto the main highway. With a long exhalation, he returned to the barn.

After putting away the pails, he made a last intensive search for surveillance modules before grabbing a pitchfork and sweeping the hay from the trapdoor. He grasped the handle and pulled up the heavy wooden slab. The darkness seemed to swell out of the open cellar along with the smell of dirt and moldy potatoes.

He descended the narrow steps, tripped and caught himself with a stumbling leap to the ground. He cursed his clumsiness as he held up the glow stick and peered into the darkness. The rumped pile of sacking was empty. His guest was nowhere in sight. “Are you all right?”

“Still here.” Davan’s voice floated quietly through the still air. He crawled out from behind one of the wooden vegetable bins, dragging his injured leg. He had a mag-blaster in his hand and a quizzical expression on his face. “I heard a lot of activity up there. What happened?”

“Tandus soldiers searching the area. I sent them into the forest in the opposite direction from where you came down. Had to wait for them to leave before I could come back.”

Davan holstered his weapon and blew a long breath. “Thought I was going to have to shoot my way out.” His frown returned as he cursed in Antian. “Ob-coms! They’ve probably got the place bugged.”

“I checked and didn’t find any.”

“I’ve got a scanner in my flight suit if you want to sweep the area.” Davan reached into the bin behind him and pulled out the folded suit. He handed Marr a small device and showed him how to turn on the beam.

For a moment their hands touched and Marr was shocked by the effect the brief touch had on him. His cock grew rigid as if it imagined what the other man’s hand would feel like touching it. Marr had stripped Davan practically naked and wrapped his leg from thigh to heel without feeling a jolt of lust like this. He pushed the feeling away and turned to climb back up the stairs.

“I’ll be back with some dinner,” he promised.

After sweeping the barn from rafters to floor and finding it clean, he hurried to the house and did the same. The sun had set by the time he emerged from the house and crossed the yard.

He moved awkwardly down the steps to the cellar with his arms full of the box of supplies. The glow stick illuminated the cellar, the empty vegetable bins, the dirt floor and Davan. The pilot’s skin was so white he practically glowed, creating illumination of his own. Marr wondered if he was pale from trauma or if it was his natural color.

“I’ve brought more medication for you if you’re in pain.” He set down the box and unpacked it, tossing the water bottle to Davan, who caught it in one hand. “I have clothes, blankets, pillows and a camp bed. I didn’t have time to make dinner, but there’s leftover stew. If you don’t like the stew, I can make something else.”

Marr realized he hadn’t strung that many words together in weeks. Solitude had become such a part of his life without Sasch that he remained quiet even when he was with people. But now it was as if a dam had burst. He wanted to talk. He wanted to find out everything about the young pilot and to tell him things about himself.

Davan accepted the T-shirt he offered and slipped it over his head. It was big for him and the long-sleeved shirt he added on top of it was even bigger. Marr thought it was a shame to cover such a beautiful

body. The man's muscles were taut and toned, making him look like a white marble statue. He imagined sliding his hands over that smooth, perfect skin, warm and alive—not like marble or glass at all. But the young flier also looked really good in Marr's old clothes. There was something erotic about having a shirt he'd worn against his own body so many times now intimately touching Davan's.

"I can help you into the pants," Marr offered, then remembered the splint on Davan's leg. "Or maybe just cover you with blankets for now."

"That would be good. I'm a little cold." From the way his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering, he was more than a little cold. Perhaps he was in shock from the trauma of his injury.

Marr quickly inflated the insta-mattress with a flick of the switch, glad he hadn't gotten rid of it along with the rest of Sasch's stuff. He'd never expected to go camping again and certainly didn't want to be reminded of the times they'd used it together, but instead of giving it to charity he'd left it up in the attic.

After spreading a blanket over it, he helped Davan to lie on top, gently positioning his hurt leg. The younger man suppressed a groan.

"Sorry."

"No problem. I owe you my life. All I can do is keep thanking you for taking such a risk." He placed his mag-gun close at hand on the floor beside the mattress.

Marr covered him with one of the blankets and propped a pillow behind his head. He added a quick-dissolving pain tablet to his water bottle and handed it back. Davan took a long drink while Marr pulled the container of leftover stew from the box and apologized for not having warmed it.

"I don't care. I'll eat the stew and the container, too. I'm starving."

It was a pleasure to watch him enjoy the food Marr had made, reminding him of how many solitary meals he'd had in the past two years. His appetite had dulled after Sasch left and he'd lost weight. Neighbors and friends kept inviting him over for dinner as if he might not eat if they didn't feed him. Maybe he wouldn't have.

Davan didn't speak until the bowl was empty then he belched, sighed and handed Marr the empty bowl. "Best stew I ever tasted. You're a good cook."

"Or you're really hungry. It's nothing special."

Davan raised an eyebrow. "Not used to compliments, are you? You're supposed to say, 'thanks'." His gaze traveled around the cellar then back to Marr. "Do you live here alone or is there someone else I'm putting in danger?"

"Just me. No family or anything." He paused, but felt compelled to explain. "There was someone, my partner, Sasch, but he's gone now."

Sky blue turned to silver as Davan turned his head and the light reflected from a different facet of his diamond eyes. "Gone where?"

Marr hesitated again. He hadn't spoken about Sasch to anyone and didn't know why he felt compelled to tell this stranger. "When Theon was invaded, Sasch went to fight the Tandus. I didn't want him to go, but he felt he had to. And I stayed behind."

He shrugged, unable to express the guilt he felt for not going with his lover and trying to keep him safe. But he was no freedom fighter. He was a farmer and someone needed to grow the crops and feed the people no matter what else was going on in the world. He couldn't persuade Sasch to stay and Sasch would never have asked him to go.

"The resistance was crushed in a few months. He was killed." The words fell like pebbles from his mouth and Marr realized it was the first time he'd ever said them aloud.

"I'm sorry." Davan's silver eyes shifted back to a soft blue. Marr couldn't take his sympathy and didn't want to talk about Sasch anymore. He began unpacking the last of the items from his box.

"You'll need this." He handed Davan the empty jar he'd brought for him to piss in and set a palm reader on the ground. "Do you like Gindre adventures?"

"I don't need to read 'em. I live 'em." Davan winked and a cocky grin twisted his lips. But the shadows under his eyes and sheen of sweat on his brow belied his teasing manner. He looked like he was in pain.

Marr leaned forward and rested a hand on his forehead, a little hot but not too feverish. He stroked Davan's hair back from his face. It was an absurd gesture of comfort to offer a man he barely knew, but he couldn't resist touching that shiny, white-blond hair. It slid like silk between his fingers and the color shifted from white to burnished gold to a kind of toffee-brown depending on how the light reflected from the fine strands.

Davan didn't pull away. Instead, he closed his eyes and his grin softened to a faint smile.

For several moments, there was silence. Warmth and unspoken connection shimmered between them in the close air of the underground chamber. Marr felt more content than he had in a long time. He could sit like this for hours, petting Davan's head, but he pulled his hand away and returned it to his lap. It was wrong to come on to a guy who was hurt and weak and reacting with gratitude rather than common sense.

"What was your lover's name?" the pilot asked.

"Sasch."

Davan opened those beautiful eyes again and searched Marr's face. "You loved him very much."

"Yes, I did." The pain seemed dull now, like the fading bruise from a serious wound. Time had passed and he could press against it without sharp pains shooting through his entire body. "I loved him."

Chapter Three

The profound emotion in the farmer's voice as he admitted his love made Davan's gut clench. What would it be like to have someone give you that kind of unguarded, true devotion? He'd felt plenty of raw passion and some sweet intimate moments with lovers in his life, but never the feeling Marr was talking about. Davan had been too busy rocketing from one thing to another to make time for that kind of connection.

Needing to hear more of Marr's deep, rumbling voice, Davan prompted him to continue talking. "Have you always lived here?"

"This farm has been in my family for generations, since the first settlers came to Theon. We used to raise a variety of vegetables, but now I have the fields planted to mostly corn and wheat. And, other than lamidas which I raise for milk and to sell, there's not much livestock."

Davan imagined what it would have been like to live in the same place all his life, to have a connection to long-dead family and roots that were as deep as the trees growing on the land. "Never wanted to try something else?"

"No. I like the rhythm of the seasons. I like seeding the soil, nurturing the plants and bringing in the harvest. There's nothing I'd rather do with my life."

Davan nodded, seeing the simple nobility of it. There was peace and a sense of continuity in this man that was unlike everyone he'd ever known. But then most of his acquaintances were other pilots, men who loved careening through the skies from one adventure to another as much as he did.

"Me, I've never settled anyplace longer than a few months at a time," he admitted.

"No family?" Marr asked.

He shook his head. "I lost touch with my mother a while ago when I came back to where we used to live and she'd moved on. It's a big universe. Easy to lose people in it." He smiled to show it didn't bother him. "What about your family?"

"My parents died in the super-flu epidemic six years ago. I have some cousins, aunts and uncles around, but no siblings."

"You ever get lonely out here in the country?"

The farmer's big shoulders lifted. "No more than I'd be in a crowd. It's about who you're with, not where you live."

“True enough.” Davan actually couldn’t imagine *not* being lonely. It was what he kept busy to distract himself from.

“How long have you been flying?” Marr asked, keeping his hands busy with refolding one of the blankets and putting the empty stew bowl in the box. Davan wished those hands were on him again. He’d enjoyed their warm weight stroking his head.

“A long time. Since I was young. I don’t think in terms of years. Time gets skewed when you spend it in space moving from planet to planet. I worked on transports then had my own shuttle business, sometimes legal, sometimes not.”

“How long have you been fighting the Tandus?”

“I joined the rebels after the Galactic Army took over Theon. The Tandus were becoming more powerful with every planet they invaded and suddenly it was clear I couldn’t go on with my life and ignore them any longer.”

“That’s what Sasch said.” Marr’s heavy brows drew together.

“He was right.” Davan reached out and touched his thick forearm, the dark hair crinkling under his fingertips. “But that doesn’t mean you were wrong. Like you said, people still have to eat. You’re doing exactly what you need to do.”

“The fighting seems to be growing worse recently, coming closer to home,” Marr changed the subject. “We used to hear rumors about battles on other planets, but now things are happening right on Theon.”

Davan couldn’t tell him that was because they’d only recently established an on-planet base. The less Marr knew, the better. If by chance they were both arrested, Marr couldn’t tell what he didn’t know.

He shifted, trying to get more comfortable on the air mattress. He’d slept on much worse, but his leg was aching again and he couldn’t find a comfortable position.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?”

Marr sounded like he was getting ready to leave. Davan knew he should thank him again for all his help and let him go, but he didn’t want to be left alone. The hours trapped underground in the dark had shaken him, not just the fear of discovery, but the long silence, lying still and alone with his thoughts. He wanted Marr to stay with him as long as he would.

“No I don’t need anything, but I wouldn’t mind your company,” he finally admitted. “Tell me more about Theon or about farming. Tell me anything.”

Marr stopped packing the box and settled beside Davan’s pallet, one long leg stretched before him, the other bent with his folded arms resting on it. “So the meds aren’t kicking in, you want me to dull your pain with boredom?”

Davan grinned. “I thought you said farm life was rewarding.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean it’s interesting. I can tell you my daily routine in one sentence. I get up, take care of the animals, eat, work in the fields, repair things, maybe do a little housework, eat dinner and

I'm in bed about an hour after sundown. Theon's an agricultural planet, so everyone's story is pretty much like mine. Why don't you tell me something about your life, instead?"

"Oh, you know, pick pretty much any Gindre adventure and I've done it," Davan teased. "Fighting the henchmen, outwitting the evil mastermind, saving the pretty boy, it's all in a day's work for me. But seriously, everyone's life is a routine, isn't it? Mine is flying every day, as much as possible. Whether it's for business or pleasure or fighting, I spend most of my life in the air."

Marr grimaced.

"What? You don't like flying?"

"I never have and never expect to. I don't want my feet off the solid ground. The mere idea makes me queasy."

"Didn't your mother make you try a food even if you didn't think you'd like it? Someday I'll take you up there and shake up your world. You won't ever want to come down again," Davan promised.

His words resonated in the air, suddenly sounding suggestive. Silence fell. Did he dare reach out and touch Marr's cheek, so close, only a few feet away where he sat beside the bed? What would the farmer do if Davan touched him? They'd only just met and under extreme circumstances, it was too soon, and yet Davan found himself doing exactly what he wanted to. His hand moved, almost of its own volition, and bridged the space between them.

Marr's face was warm beneath his palm. His jaw was rough with stubble, his skin weathered. The flex of muscle when he swallowed sent a pang of lust through Davan that crowded out the pain in his leg and awoke a different kind of ache in his groin.

Davan traced his thumb over the man's lower lip, tempting it to open, and it obeyed his command. Marr exhaled. His eyes glittered and drifted partway closed. Without words, he showed that he wanted Davan, too.

"I should go keep watch. The soldiers might come back." His nervousness was as obvious as his desire. He probably hadn't been with a man since his lover Sasch left. This was a big deal for him.

"Just a kiss. Or maybe two," Davan whispered, then added, "please." Without waiting for an answer, he leaned in, his leg screaming at the sudden shift, and covered Marr's mouth with his. The soft gulp the farmer made just before he kissed him sent another bolt of fire burning through his body.

Marr's lips yielded to the pressure of Davan's mouth. It didn't take much to prompt him into what he already wanted to do. He moved closer, snaking his hand around the back of Davan's neck and holding him steady. His tongue slid across Davan's lips.

Davan was exhilarated by the eager response and groaned as he stroked Marr's tongue with his own. Mouth to mouth they fused, inhaling each other's breath, becoming one. Davan gripped the other man's shoulder, feeling the warmth of muscle beneath his shirt and wishing he was touching bare skin.

Marr pulled away with a gasp. "Wait a minute. Wait!"

No, Davan wanted to protest and drag him over for another kiss.

But Marr wasn't leaving, he wasn't ending it. Instead, he moved from the dirt floor onto the mattress beside Davan, careful not to jar his leg as he slid beneath the blanket. The heat of that big body pressed against his supplied all the warmth Davan needed. He could've thrown the covers aside.

Marr wrapped an arm around his back and kissed him again, an easy glide of his mouth that slowly became more aggressive. Like the antique gas-powered engines Davan had once seen in a museum, the kiss started with a low rumble and ramped up to a roar. Davan's cock was solid and throbbing like a powerful engine, too. He wanted to press his erection against the bulge he knew would be in Marr's pants, but his injured leg hampered his movements.

The big man's hand splayed across his back then moved down to grip his hip. He kissed Davan's neck, nudging up his chin so he could nuzzle his throat. The rasp of stubble contrasted with the soft, searching lips. Davan tilted his head back, a low groan vibrating in his throat. He wanted more. He wanted everything, and he cursed his awkward leg that held him back from moving freely.

Marr's hand moved to his groin, gliding down his belly and beneath the waistband of his underwear. When those callused fingers touched his cock, Davan felt a jolt of electricity go through him. Marr scratched lightly down its length then encircled his shaft in his fist. Davan thought he'd explode. He usually had better control, but the surprise of this encounter, the day's trauma and residual adrenaline rush made him highly sensitized.

Marr's kisses and touch triggered Davan's release like a magnetic surge. A few tugs of that hard hand and he gasped and thrust his hips. The painful throbbing in his leg only enhanced his pleasure. His orgasm burst through him with the speed of a mag-jet entering atmosphere, and he came, spurting over Marr's fist.

He laughed as he opened his eyes and glanced down at Marr's sleek, dark head still pressed to his shoulder. "Sorry. I guess I needed that."

Marr lifted his face. His eyes were lust-glazed and dilated. "Guess so."

Davan cupped the side of his face before sliding his hand around the back of that thick, strong neck. Marr reminded him of a big oak tree, his corded muscles like a gnarled trunk and his feet rooted in the land. He pressed his other hand against his chest and started to slide it down toward his groin.

Marr stopped him with a touch on his wrist. "You don't need to do that. You should rest."

Davan was torn. He wanted to keep going, to feel the weight and girth of Marr's cock in his hand, but it was true that he was exhausted. The medication combined with the release of his orgasm left behind a languorous torpor. He wanted to drift off to sleep, not alone, but pressed against Marr's warm body.

"Besides, I should get up and check on things," Marr continued.

"Stay just a little longer." Davan was ashamed at his neediness and the fear he felt at the idea of being left alone in the dark.

Marr didn't reply, but shifted closer, stretching out beside Davan and curving his arm around him.

Silence fell again, magnified by the close atmosphere of the underground chamber and the darkness held at bay only by the glow-light. It was peaceful in the dark now that he lay in Marr's arms. Through the open trapdoor the scent and occasional bleats of the lamidas drifted down. Marr's breath blew warm and moist against the side of Davan's neck. His chest rose and fell rhythmically, the motion lulling Davan until he was barely awake.

"So, you started flying when you lived on Antia?" The low rumble of the farmer's voice jerked him back to consciousness.

"Yeah. I'd dropped out of school, too bored to sit still that long every day. I was restless, lost one job after another and wasted a lot of time getting high, but I still couldn't find the kick I was looking for. Then I met this guy who worked at the airfield and he took me up in one of the jets." Davan omitted the part about paying the guy with a blow job. Marr didn't need to know all the particulars about how he used to get by back in the slums of Antia.

"I loved the speed and the magic of soaring above the ground and then out of the atmosphere. I knew from then on what I wanted to do with the rest of my life."

"It was what you'd been waiting for."

Davan nodded. "I got a job at the field just to be near the action, and eventually worked my way into flight training and a pilot's license." Again, the details of how he'd slept his way into flight school were something he kept to himself.

"I left Antia and never looked back. Couldn't get enough of flying."

"Mm." Marr's sexy murmur of agreement aroused a flutter in Davan's stomach. "I'm really trying to understand what it is about it you like so much, but I'm having a hard time. I guess I understand the attraction of speed. I did my share of racing when I was younger, but on land. It's the soaring part I don't get. Soaring can lead to crashing."

"Freedom. That's all I can say. Rising above all the crap and being free."

There was another long silence. Davan listened to his companion's breathing and inhaled the scent of his sweat. He shifted even closer to the heat and comfort of Marr's body.

"Can I get you anything else?" Marr asked. "More food? Fresh water?"

"No. I'm good," Davan replied.

And he was, crashed jet, broken leg, dangerous enemies and all. He was better than he'd been for a long time. What was it about this grounded man that made him feel so happy and safe? This was what he'd always imagined coming home would feel like.

Chapter Four

As Marr went about his morning routine, feeding the lamidas and putting them out for the day, checking the seeder to make sure the hoppers were full before going out to the field, he couldn't stop thinking about the man hidden in the cellar of his barn. How strange it was to move around the building knowing the blond stranger lay only a few yards beneath his feet. He could stop work at any time and go see him if he chose.

But if he took a few moments, he feared it would turn into most of the day, and he really needed to get the south field planted. The seasons didn't wait for man's passions or sorrows or romantic distractions to play out. The seed must go into the ground and the lamidas must be tended.

After he'd fed his guest breakfast and made sure he was as comfortable as possible, he'd left him sealed beneath the dirt once more. It felt as if he were burying Davan alive. He wished he dared move him into the house and into his bed, but it was too dangerous.

The morning breeze carried the scent of flowering blossoms and freshly turned soil. The sun was already heating the planet and when the breeze died, it was going to be a blistering day. Usually, Marr would enjoy being outside on a day like this, but as he rode the seeder back and forth on the neatly plowed furrows, all he could think of was how it had felt to lie curved around Davan's body.

He'd slept with the pilot most of the night, waking just before dawn and slipping out from under the blankets. Marr had gazed at Davan lying peaceful and silvery in the light of the glow-stick, before he headed toward the house to make breakfast.

Without nighttime weaving its spell, Marr was overcome by awkwardness. Lying close together in the dark, it had seemed as if he and Davan knew each other very well, like old friends coming together after many years apart. In the morning light the magical connection was lost and reason resumed control. The handsome pilot was a stranger once more—a stranger Marr had kissed and fondled with an eagerness that embarrassed him.

"How are you feeling?" he'd asked as he offered a plate of eggs and toast.

Davan cleared his throat and tried to sit up. "Good."

Marr propped his back with pillows, glad to have something to do to keep from being nervous. He chattered about what he'd made for breakfast, about the weather, about his plans for the day, and hardly recognized himself. People always teased him about his stoicism. He wasn't a talker by nature, yet with Davan his words flowed like water.

“I’ll be back to check on you later,” he’d promised before leaving again. The moment after he’d closed the trapdoor, he wished he’d been more bold and kissed Davan.

Maybe later.

Or maybe never. Last night had been a moment out of time. It shouldn’t be repeated. Marr must resist his feelings, which were pointless because very soon the young pilot would be healed and on his way back to the war.

Marr stared out the windshield of the cab at the acres of land lying before him. The seeder poked the dirt and planted corn kernels, requiring nothing from him but to steer the vehicle. He had too much time to think about how Davan’s lips had felt, supple and warm beneath his. The smooth texture of skin stretched over taut muscles was imprinted on his flesh. His first touch of Davan’s cock, vibrating with life and tension, had made his own erection swell to painful hardness. When that tension had abruptly released, spurts of come spilling over Marr’s hand, it had been a struggle not to do the same. He would’ve loved to take Davan up on his offer to return the favor, but the strain in the pilot’s face had convinced him to refuse and encourage the injured man to rest.

Just thinking about last night had Marr hard again. He reached down to adjust the bulge in his trousers then paused, gripping his shaft through the fabric. A long, straight row lay before him. The seeder wouldn’t drift to the right or left without his guidance. He unfastened his pants and snaked his hand inside, took hold of his cock and pulled, imagining his hand was Davan’s. His eyes drifted nearly closed, the better to picture the pilot’s exotic, silver eyes glazed over with lust. He recalled the tickle of pubic hair against the back of his hand as he’d massaged Davan’s cock, the hot panting of his breath and his soft groan when he came.

He wished they’d lain together naked last night, skin to skin, but Davan’s hungry gaze this morning told him there was more to come between them. Marr could deny it all he wanted, telling himself it must never be, but the magnetic pull between them was undeniable. There would be more touching, more kissing, more exploration of each other’s bodies. His excitement mounted at the thought of what was to come, and his hand glided faster.

The big machine beneath him moved relentlessly forward while the tension in his groin tightened. The friction of his pumping fist heated his cock until it felt like it was on fire. Marr choked back a groan as pleasure mounted and burst through him. He held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip while he shuddered, and when he finally opened his eyes, the furrows in the wake of the seeder veered to the left.

He guided the machine back on course. Pulling his hand from his pants, he wiped the sticky residue on his trousers and fastened them, embarrassed that he couldn’t resist masturbating like some sex-addled teen. What would Sasch think of his impulsive behavior?

He’d laugh. Sasch always found humor in everything. The memory of his lover’s buoyant chuckle made Marr smile and miss him more than ever. Sasch would be glad he’d finally allowed himself some pleasure. He’d say, “It’s about time. I never asked you to plant yourself in the ground beside me.”

Marr had been operating on autopilot for two years. Anticipation and excitement surged through him, making him feel like he was coming out of hibernation. He was coming alive again.

The rest of the morning crept by and near noon Marr parked the seeder and walked toward the house. His nearest neighbor, Sheah, sat on his porch, waiting for him.

She raised a hand and waved. "Hey! Some excitement yesterday, right? Good Mother, you'd think we were harboring the entire rebel army."

Marr glanced at the barn, his stomach tightening. But Davan would still be hidden, and even if Sheah knew about him, she'd never tell.

"Tore my house apart, the slime," Sheah continued. "And there's nothing to do but try to look pleasant, as if you'd invited them to ransack your belongings." Her fair face was mottled pink and her red hair seemed to glow even brighter with her anger as if she'd go up in flames any minute.

"Yeah," he said briefly. He loved Sheah dearly, but right now he wanted to be rid of her, and clearly she was set on chatting for a while.

"I wonder where that pilot got to. The Tandus are combing the countryside so I don't see how he'd slip through. Hope he makes it to wherever he's going, the poor bugger."

She followed Marr around the side of the house to the kitchen door. "Anyway, that's not why I'm here. I wondered if you'd thought about joining the new trade council. You'd be the perfect spokesperson. If I opened my mouth, I'd make things worse, but you're cautious and think before you speak. You're the one to represent the farmers."

"Do you think it matters? The Tandus will do what they want, regardless of any groups we organize." He thought about Riker's hint that land ownership by Theon nationals might soon be abolished.

"We have to at least make an effort. Show them we're beaten but not broken." Sheah moved around his kitchen as if it were hers, pouring them each a cup of tea. "Besides, getting involved with the community again will be good for you."

Marr held up a hand. "Don't start."

"Sasch would want you to stop mourning and start living."

The echo of his earlier thought stopped him as he pulled a plate from the cupboard. It was like Sasch was speaking to him through her. But Sheah's meddling irritated him. He didn't want to be a trade council representative, which would bring him into contact with Riker on a regular basis. That man was someone he needed to avoid.

"How's Bree?" He changed the subject as he offered Sheah a plate of slightly stale fruit biscuits.

"Coming along. It's hard for him this time of year, not being able to get outdoors and work in the fields. I gave him a list as long as my arm of light jobs he can do around the house. Not that driving the seeder is any great strain on the heart, but he needs to lie down and rest often."

“Mm-hm.” Marr stared into his cup. He cared about Bree’s welfare, but right now he wanted Sheah to eat her stale biscuit faster and leave.

“Is something the matter?” Her sharp eyes studied him. “I’m sorry about bringing up Sasch and trying to push you into being the trade rep. What you choose to do or not do isn’t my business, but let me add one thing before I drop it.”

Stopping Sheah from giving an opinion was like trying to stop a forest fire with a pail of water. Marr swallowed his impatience.

“You’re in the prime of your life and life’s short. Trust me. It slips by so fast it makes your head spin. Don’t waste it. Find somebody. Give yourself permission to love again.” She set aside her plate. “There’s a new man in town. I could invite you both to dinner. I don’t know if he likes men or not, you’d have to find that out for yourself, but at least he’s someone new to meet.”

“Okay, Sheah.” Marr stopped her matchmaking plan by taking her arm and steering her toward the door. “I’ve got to eat lunch and get back out to the field. I’m sure you do, too.” One thing he didn’t have to worry about was hurting her feelings. She was like family and would take his very broad hint without being offended.

“I’m going. But I still want to have you to dinner, whether we invite this guy or not. You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Sure.”

He watched Sheah walk up the road then quickly put together a lunch to take to Davan. Heading toward the barn, he scanned the area for any sign of more visitors. He noted the grass was too long, the vegetables vied with weeds in the garden and the house needed painting. Everything was normal.

Marr closed and barred the barn door behind him. His heart rose in anticipation as he descended the narrow steps to the cellar. The room was dark. The glow stick extinguished.

A disembodied voice floated through the darkness. “My light died.”

“I’m sorry. How long have you been lying here in the dark?”

“Um, since the light went out.” Davan laughed. “It’s kind of hard to tell the time, but long enough to listen to Gindre save Atadir City and free the royal family. Glad you have the audio option on your reader.”

Marr set the tray of food on the ground. “I’m out of glow sticks, but there’s an old gel lamp hanging in the barn. I’ll get it.”

He hurried back upstairs where he took the antique lamp from its hook, hardly expecting the gel to still be viable. But it lit right away, proving what his grandfather always used to say about trusting too much in modern technology. He pulled down the shutter to protect the flame and carried it with him to the cellar.

The gel cast the room in orange rather than the brighter white of the glow stick. Davan sat on the pallet with the blanket pooled around his hips. He'd taken off the overshirt and wore only a T-shirt which bared his arms and neck.

Marr inhaled, struck again by his physical beauty. Davan's pale hair shone golden in this light and his eyes were topaz. His warm smile made Marr want to kiss those soft lips once more. But he held back, turning his attention to the food he'd brought.

"You must be hungry."

"I've hardly moved since breakfast, so not very. What I'd really like is..." The husky timbre of his voice suggested the rest.

Marr continued to fuss with the tray, wanting to respond with some bit of sexual banter, but finding himself tongue-tied.

"Are you uncomfortable about last night?" Davan asked bluntly.

"I..." He forced his hands to be still. "I haven't been with anyone besides Sasch in years."

"You feel guilty?"

"Not exactly." Struggling to express himself, Marr sat back on his heels and looked at Davan. "I know it's time to move on, but it's hard. It feels different."

"Different can be good. It can be *very* good." Davan's smile was back and Marr's stomach flipped while his cock stiffened. He had no doubt sex with Davan would be fantastic. But that was part of the problem. After he left, it would be hard to go back to the way it was before. Marr could sense that already and feared it.

"Give me a little time to adjust," was all he said.

Davan nodded. "That's fine. We can take it as slow as you want." He reached for the fork and began eating from the plate Marr had given him, and suddenly Marr didn't want to take it slow at all.

"What's it like outside today?" Davan changed the subject.

"Sunny, warm, a perfect spring day. No sign of the soldiers, but my neighbor was over to complain about the search."

"Tell me about your neighbors."

Davan plied Marr with question after question about the area, its history, the people and how things had been since the Tandus took power. He listened to everything Marr told him, no matter how inconsequential, as if filing the information away. Marr wondered if he'd relay it to some rebel commander when he got back to his base. How could knowing about Mrs. Seebert's prize-winning cabbages possibly be useful in fighting the Tandus regime?

"How is the fighting really going?" he asked. "We can't trust the news and have no idea what's actually happening outside Bardee."

Davan chewed and swallowed, taking his time before answering. “We’re nipping away at them, starting to make a dent, not only here but all over the galaxy. But it’s best I don’t tell you too much.” He poked at his food. “If we’re captured, you’ll honestly be able to say you know nothing.”

Marr’s stomach lurched. Of course, he’d considered it, but to hear the word spoken made it sound like a real possibility.

Davan looked up from his meal. “I know I’ve said it before, but I’m so sorry I’ve put you at risk. I’ll be out of here as soon as I can.”

And that made Marr’s gut twist again.

Davan set his plate aside. “I need to take a piss. Do you think I could go outside to do it? I’m sure I can hobble that far, and it will be good for me to start being mobile.”

Marr nodded. “I could take you to the house to clean up, too. Let me just make sure the way is clear.”

As he checked for intruders, he hoped they weren’t taking a dangerous risk. When he returned, Davan had hauled himself to his feet and stood gripping the edge of one of the wooden potato bins. His flushed face gleamed with sweat. His splinted leg stuck out at an awkward angle. The other naked leg was covered in a down of fine, pale hair. Davan looked like a damaged angel, an air spirit shot down from the heavens.

Marr slipped an arm around his back and helped him climb the stairs. It took many long, grunting minutes to maneuver the steps, cross the barn and exit through the side door.

Outside, Davan halted. “Give me a minute.” He raised his face to the sun, his eyes half-closed as he inhaled a deep breath.

Marr kept his arm around his back and gazed at his long eyelashes, his softly parted lips and the fine bone structure of his face. He ached to touch that ethereal face, and his cock ached for something else.

Davan’s eyes opened and he straightened, leaning hard into Marr. “Okay. I’m ready.”

They moved fairly quickly across the yard. Davan continually scanned the empty road. His mag-gun was tucked into the waistband of his shorts.

Inside the house, Marr ushered Davan to the bathroom. “Are you going to need help?”

“I can manage. Thanks.” His teeth gritted as he limped into the room and closed the door.

Marr wanted to be nearby in case he fell, but after a few minutes, the sound of water splashing came from the bathroom so he walked away with visions of Davan naked in the shower filling in his mind. He went to the window that faced the road and gazed out, his fingers tapping nervously against his thighs.

When he heard the bathroom door open, he hurried to help Davan once more.

The pilot’s hair and skin were damp, as was the neckline of his T-shirt. He looked cooler, and sexier than ever with his hair wet and the shirt clinging to his body, outlining his chest and shoulders.

Davan pushed a hand through his hair, tousling the wet strands. “Feels better. But my leg feels worse. You don’t happen to have any more of that painkiller?”

“I’ll give you some, and maybe you can sleep some more this afternoon.”

Marr slipped a supportive arm around Davan's waist again and felt the solid heat of his body. Moving more smoothly together now that they'd had some practice, they walked back to the barn.

As he eased the pilot down onto the mattress, Davan's arm around his neck kept him close for a moment. He exhaled, and Marr smelled mint. Davan's eyes were dilated, the dark pupils circled by a silver ring. "I know I keep thanking you over and over, but...thanks again."

"No problem," Marr murmured. Then he gave in to the magnetism of Davan's eyes and bent lower. He covered his mouth, sucking lightly on his lips and tasting toothpaste.

For long moments, he indulged in the soft, sweet kiss then he pulled away, breaking the connection. "I'll, uh, get you that pain medicine."

Davan grinned. "Don't need it now. You've healed me." But he swallowed deeply when Marr gave him the medicated water.

He checked the bandage on his injured leg, making sure the splint still held it straight then he brushed the hair back from Davan's moist forehead. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

As he continued to seed the field, Marr spent the rest of the afternoon thinking about Davan. He was in the midst of a full-blown crush which made him feel thirteen instead of thirty-three. What a fool he was to be suddenly falling so hard for a man who could never stay. As soon as Davan was well he'd be on his way, back to the skies where he belonged.

Chapter Five

“Run!” The command was a thought, an instinct, a heartbeat that pounded through him as he raced down streets and alleys, cutting across vacant lots, sirens wailing somewhere far behind him. He ran from the law. He ran from fists and curses. He ran from himself. He ran faster and faster until his feet sped right off the ground and he flew, soaring high above the chaos of the city and his life.

The weightless feeling of flight was exhilarating and it was sensual. His senses were charged with excitement that changed from the pleasure of flying to a different kind of pleasure. His skin tingled as invisible hands touched him all over. Hard, working man’s hands that were big and warm and stroked him everywhere at once. His body lifted in response, hips thrusting, cock searching for more, more, more contact.

Davan’s eyes snapped open. He stared at a ceiling low overhead and felt his own fist gripping his rigid cock. He cursed and released it, letting the erotic tension slowly drain away. He didn’t want to masturbate to a quick release, but to save his climax and savor it later. When Marr returned, there was no doubt something was going to happen between them. It might be wrong, but Davan didn’t care. He’d never been one for considering consequences and he wanted the man desperately. Soon enough he’d be healed and on his way, but for now he’d take advantage of the injury that forced him to linger here.

Minutes dripped by like water from a leaky tap. He hadn’t had this much time to be still and think since he’d been stuck in a cell in juvie. It wasn’t his nature to dwell on things or look into himself too deeply. He preferred to keep busy, keep moving. But now, as he stared glassy-eyed at the broad wooden boards of the ceiling, memories he’d long ago forgotten began to surface.

He remembered the time Rij had nearly been run over when they were running away after stealing lock-leaders from a vendor in the subway. Rij had fallen on the tracks and Davan had pulled him out just in time, the wind and grit from the passing train stinging his face. What had happened to Rij in the years since Davan left Antia? He hadn’t thought about his old friend once in all that time.

He wondered if his mom was still alive somewhere and thought about the last time he’d seen her, screaming at him to get out. Probably she’d moved off-planet with some new guy, but she could be dead. He expected a twinge of pain at the thought, but he didn’t feel anything.

Davan studied the whorls in the plank above him, real wood, not fiberform, and imagined what it would have been like to grow up on this farm. Imagine living in the same place for your entire life, having parents, relatives and people you knew surrounding you—the same people, year after year. He’d like to ask

Marr more about what his childhood had been like. From the brief glimpse Davan had gotten of the farm, it seemed a beautiful, peaceful oasis, a place he could imagine coming back to when his flying days were over, or maybe sooner if the war ended. Every bird had to nest somewhere.

The sound of footsteps on the floor above set his pulse racing. He reached for his weapon. It was probably Marr, but if it wasn't, whoever came down the steps was going to get a blast that would melt their bones.

The trapdoor lifted and the farmer's booted feet and trousered legs appeared on the stairs. There was a lot of leg. Seeing the tall man come into view was like watching a long, sleek five-fifteen dock. More of him kept on coming: narrow hips, slab of chest, wide shoulders, rough-hewn face. His black hair was slicked back, freshly washed, and the image that conjured of Marr standing naked in a shower sent lust surging through Davan.

Marr bore another tray of food in his hands from which delicious smells wafted. His smile wasn't showy with lots of teeth, but a gentle tilt of the lips that radiated warmth. He squatted beside Davan and set down the tray. "Everything all right down here?"

"Fine." Davan didn't mention his boredom or his general feeling of anxiety at being trapped. "How was your day?"

"I got a lot done until the seeder broke down. Got it fixed, though."

"That happen often?" Davan had seen enormous machines gliding over the Theon fields during his time on-planet, but as good as he was with aircraft, he could hardly tell the difference between a seeder and a combine.

Marr handed him a glass full of white liquid. "It's getting old and parts aren't so easy to get any more. Technology's moved on again."

"What's this?" Davan gazed at the glass of white juice. It reminded him of Plava, which had a real kick and could send your mind whirling across the universe, but he didn't think Marr would be offering him drugs.

"Lamida's milk."

"Milk from a lamida?" The idea of ingesting anything that came out of the noisy, smelly animals above him was stomach churning.

"It's good for you. Drink," Marr ordered.

Davan sipped and grimaced at the sweet, watery taste. "That's...something."

"You get used to it. Lot of vitamins in there. How's the leg?"

"Hasn't fallen off yet, so I guess it's good." He looked into Marr's eyes, creased at the corners from squinting in the sunlight. "You fixed me up good. You really know how to tend an invalid."

Marr's sun-browned cheeks went a shade darker, so Davan knew he'd understood the reference to last night's hand job, but the farmer chose to misunderstand his meaning. "I had a lot of practice taking care of my parents during the epidemic."

Davan sobered. "I'm sorry. That must have been really hard. I was transporting at the far edge of the galaxy around that time, but when I got back, I saw the aftermath on all of the inner planets."

"At least it was quick." Marr sat back, stretching his legs out on the floor. "Millions of people on half a dozen worlds gone in less than a month." He shook his head and stared at the toes of his boots. "Sometimes I think that for my parents, there couldn't have been a better way to go. They died within a day of each other. Those two were so devoted to one another that either would have been miserable living alone. They never had to suffer the loss and loneliness."

Chronic loneliness was something Davan had always lived with. He couldn't imagine any other kind of life, but nodded as if he understood. "So you ran the farm by yourself after they died?"

"I was already seeing Sasch, but we didn't move in together until about a year later." He looked at Davan. "You said you were flying transports during the epidemic? That was nearly ten years ago. You must have been just a boy."

"I'm not as young as you think, but yeah, it was soon after I left Antia." He crunched down a few bites of the fresh salad, thinking he could get used to this diet of fresh food. Vac-pac rations could never be formulated to taste the same. "This is good. Thanks."

Marr dug into his own bowl full of greens. It was the first time they'd eaten together, and Davan preferred the companionable meal to being fed and watered like an invalid.

"Can I ask you something?" Davan waited for a nod and wondered how to phrase his question. As he'd lain around all day, he'd started to think about how things could have ended differently when the jet crashed. "What do you think about death—I mean, about what happens after?"

Marr made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "You're asking the wrong man. I don't know what I believe any more."

"Well, what do Theons in general believe?"

"That there are elemental forces contained in everything, soil, water, fire and air. When we pass into the next world, we dissolve back into the elements. That's what we're taught, anyway. Who knows?" He shrugged and took another bite.

Davan set his tray aside. "I believe *something* more than winking out like a light happens. I saw something one time. I've never told anybody about this. I was flying at the edge of the galaxy and saw...this kind of pool of golden light. I figured it was some kind of space event I simply hadn't seen before. Until I got close. Then I felt a sense of intelligence coming from the mass of pulsing light. I felt like some important knowledge was right at the edge of my comprehension. Then I flew past it, the light

winked out and the sensation was gone. It was like waking from a dream, except I ached inside from the loss of it. Weird, huh?"

Marr gazed at him. "What do you think it was?"

Davan shook his head. "Maybe a being or group of them from another star system, maybe spirits of the dead or some great over-soul. I didn't dwell on it too much. I tend to keep moving, keep busy and not think too hard. Makes life easier. But I've had a lot of time to think down here."

Marr set his bowl aside and rose. "Do you want to go outside for a while? Like you said, it would probably be good to keep your leg mobile."

The idea of gazing at a sunset instead of wooden planks made Davan's heart lift. "Absolutely!"

Once more, he put an arm around Marr's waist and leaned into him as they climbed the stairs. His injured leg ached less than the previous day and he dared to put a little weight on it. A sharp pang shot through him, and he sucked in a breath. It was going to be a while before he could use the leg normally. He didn't dare transmit a message to headquarters for fear of the Tandus intercepting so he really was on an enforced R&R.

Marr's strong arm easily supported him, and Davan enjoyed the feeling of security that leaning on the farmer gave him.

"Your land looks good," he commented, as they shuffled around the perimeter of the barn and he got his first view of Marr's fields. "Rich, black dirt. I suppose that's good for growing things."

"Theon is one of the top food-producing planets in the system." A note of pride crept into the farmer's voice.

"That's why you all are treated so well. Tandus want to keep you happy. It's not that way on some of the other planets."

"What do you mean?" Marr stopped walking and looked sideways at him. "We don't get much news of the other worlds."

"In mining colonies the slave labor's kept on the edge of starvation. There's famine on Di Esol. Wherever your crops are going, it's not to them. People displaced from their homes, property stolen, natural resources all over the galaxy stripped by the Tandus. All wealth flows to them."

Davan could tell from the stricken expression on Marr's face that he honestly hadn't had any idea of the state of the rest of the galaxy. He went on, wanting to make the farmer truly understand. "Here on Theon, the occupation may be only an annoyance, but throughout the rest of the planets, the Tandus have brought devastation."

Marr's mouth thinned to a straight line as he gazed at the horizon. "I didn't realize. But what can I do to help? Life can't stop while everyone fights."

It sounded like he was continuing the argument with his dead lover about duty. Davan wasn't about to get between them. This was an issue Marr had to sort out for himself. So Davan decided it was time to lighten things up.

"Fucking can't stop while everyone fights, either." He squeezed the big man's waist in the circle of his arm. "Let's forget about it and make love not war for a while." His words brought Marr's attention away from the horizon. The frown lines between his brows erased as his eyes widened.

Davan smiled.

"Your leg..." Marr began.

"We'll work around it, but if I don't see you naked soon and get your dick in my mouth, I'm gonna explode."

Marr's lips parted, but nothing came out.

Davan tugged on him, getting him moving back into the barn. He would've loved to have sex outdoors under the evening sky, but it seemed like tempting fate. He imagined a fleet of GF vehicles sweeping into the yard right at the climactic moment.

Inside the barn, Marr guided Davan not to the cellar but to the back of the barn, where hay was piled. The sweet smell of the mown grass filled the air.

"I'll get a blanket and we should be pretty comfortable here."

Davan held onto a rough-hewn support post and looked around the barn while he waited. The lamida pens were empty, the smelly occupants still outdoors. He had yet to see the animals and didn't really care to.

Marr returned with the blanket and spread it over a plump pile of hay, his body moving efficiently as he smoothed and tucked. Davan figured he was glad to have a task to perform to delay the moment he both desired and feared. When the preparation went on too long, Davan called, "Hey. Come here."

Marr looked up.

Davan reached out with his free hand. "Come here. I need to kiss you."

Marr was embarrassed to find his body was shaking and his stomach churning as if he were facing torture rather than sex. He'd already kissed Davan, given him a hand job, held him while he slept. This should not be such a climactic moment. But it felt that way, breath-stealing and pivotal, as if nothing would ever be the same afterward.

He walked toward him and stopped in front of him, aching with need yet reluctant to reach for what he wanted.

Instead, Davan reached for him, grabbed his waist and pulled him closer. His bright eyes seemed to fill Marr's vision. They were trained on his mouth. Then he leaned in to kiss him, and Marr closed his eyes.

Moist breath brushed his lips and a warm mouth covered them. Marr put his hands on Davan's back, feeling the muscles moving beneath his shirt. His anxiety melted beneath an onslaught of desire, and he lifted the hem of the shirt. Davan raised his arms so Marr could pull the shirt off. His skin gleamed in the dim light, pale and perfect with each muscle outlined by shadow.

Marr's dry throat made a soft clicking noise when he swallowed. "You're beautiful." He was embarrassed at giving the compliment, but needed to say it.

Davan smiled and rubbed his hands up Marr's front from belly to chest, gathering his shirt up. It was Marr's turn to lift his arms and duck his head as Davan pulled the shirt over his head. When he looked at Davan's face again, the pilot's admiring gaze roamed all over his body.

"Damn."

The single word made Marr flush with pleasure. It had been a long time since a man had looked at him with lust and appreciation. Not including the slimy Riker, whose inspection left him nauseated rather than aroused.

Davan traced a finger over the line banding Marr's biceps where suntan ended and lighter skin began. "You need to work shirtless, big guy. Maybe even naked. Get that all-over tan." The ever-present smile danced in his eyes.

Marr laughed and pulled him close again, kissing him with all the passion he'd locked inside for so long. Things moved fast after that. Hands gliding over skin, clutching hair, gripping shoulders. Mouths mashing together as if they drew oxygen from each other.

Davan's bare chest sliding against his had Marr trembling with excitement. He needed to see all of him naked now. Kneeling at his feet, he kissed his flat belly, swirling his tongue in and around his navel, making Davan's stomach jerk. He pulled the shorts over his hipbones, revealing more of his lightly haired groin. His cock sprang free, bobbing out long and erect right before Marr's face.

It was a silver blade, as pale as the rest of his body. Cool blue veins traveled its length and a delicate flush reddened the head. It was so foreign and different from his own dark cock...or Sasch's. Marr brushed his fingertips up and down the shaft and smiled when Davan sucked in a sharp breath.

The pilot braced his back against one of the barn's support beams. His bound leg angled from his body, while his other leg supported his weight. Marr looked up at the beautiful young man staring back at him. "Do you want me to help you lie down? You can't be comfortable."

"No. Do it. Now!" he gritted. "Suck me."

The harsh command sent a thrill through him, and Marr obeyed. He wrapped his hand around the long, lean cock just above the sac then placed the rosy tip against his lips and kissed it before drawing it into his mouth. The sensuous slide of skin against his tongue drove him crazy. He sucked hard, taking Davan deep into his throat, and was rewarded with a low groan.

Davan pushed his hips toward him, thrusting slow and gentle, while Marr pumped his fist up and down his shaft. How familiar yet completely different the action was. The texture, taste and girth of Davan's penis weren't like Sasch's, and his groans and quiet curses were foreign, too. Marr was charged with excitement at the newness of Davan's unfamiliar body beneath his hands, but a bittersweet pang of melancholy also speared through him at the memory of his beloved Sasch.

"Oh, yeah." Davan combed his fingers through Marr's hair and held his head. His hips pumped faster, driving him even deeper into Marr's throat. "Feels so good," he gasped.

Marr fixed his gaze on Davan's navel and the trail of downy hair beneath it. He bobbed his head and tugged harder, increasing speed and friction until the pilot gasped and his hips arched. Marr felt the subtle undulations in his cock when he came, the warm jets of come hitting the back of his throat. The long, low moan of Davan's pleasure inspired an answering surge of arousal in him. Marr's rigid cock pressed against his fly.

He continued to pump and suck while Davan shuddered, bracing his back against the beam and his one good leg on the floor. Only when Marr felt he'd milked the last bit of ecstasy from him did he release his grip and let Davan's cock slip from his mouth. The glistening shaft was suffused with color now, a deep salmon from the blood that coursed through it, his scrotum a dark, brick red. Marr studied Davan's shuttered eyes and panting mouth.

Davan opened his eyes and gazed back at him.

"Good?"

A slow smile was his answer and then the other man held out his hand.

Marr rose and took it. He slipped an arm around Davan's waist and helped him to the pallet of hay, easing him down onto his back.

Lying with his hands behind his head, Davan regarded him. "Strip for me."

Marr's cheeks flushed and his cock burned at the arrogant command. He reached to unfasten his pants and slide them down his legs. When he reached his boots, he had to stop to unlace and pull them off. He stumbled and almost fell before regaining his balance and tossing aside first one shoe then the other.

Davan smiled. "When I was younger, I worked in a strip club for a while. I think you'd be a natural with those moves."

Marr grinned back, but the image of this hot young man bumping and grinding on stage in front of a crowd of eager viewers was all he could see. His cock swelled even harder. He stepped out of his pants and kicked them aside. Pearls beaded at the tip of his jutting erection.

Davan stared at his cock and wet his lips with his tongue. "Come here." His voice was hoarse.

Marr moved to stand over Davan then lowered himself to his knees straddling him. The hair rose on his goose-pimpled flesh, but not from cold. His blood was hot, raging through his veins. He thought his

cock might explode, spewing onto Davan's stomach before he even touched him. "How do you want me?" he whispered.

Davan took his arms from behind his head and pushed up onto his elbows so his face was tantalizingly close to Marr's erection. He gazed from beneath his eyebrows, eyes like glittering diamonds. "Like this."

Marr moved forward, his cock aiming for Davan's mouth without him having to guide it. An erotic thrill shivered through him as the other man wrapped his lips around the dark head and engulfed him. Marr dug his fists into the hay, holding his quivering body stiff and forcing himself not to lose control at the heat of Davan's tugging mouth. It had been too long since he'd been treated to such pleasure.

He groaned and nearly closed his eyes, but left them open enough to watch the pilot sucking him. The contrast of that fine, white-blond hair and delicate features against his own tan skin and tangle of black hair matting his groin was intensely arousing.

Davan's head bobbed up and down as he cupped Marr's balls, rolling them lightly. He dampened his fingers and slid them between Marr's cheeks. As light as a dragonfly, he traced the rim of his anus then worked his way inside.

The dual pleasure of being sucked off and finger-fucked was almost too much. Marr gritted his teeth and willed himself to hold off a little longer. He knew how to delay orgasm, but after so long in a drought, he was ready to burst like a thunder shower.

He thrust into Davan's mouth and back onto his probing fingers, setting up a rhythm that brought him closer and closer to the edge. Then Davan let his cock slip from his mouth, dipped his head lower to draw Marr's sac into his mouth, his agile tongue swirling around it.

Marr groaned and pushed back onto Davan's hand, three fingers deep now. *More, I need even more. And deeper.* Then Davan crooked his fingers and hit a spot that made Marr gasp.

Davan resumed sucking his cock. The tension in Marr's groin climbed to a peak. His control shattered and he pumped his hips, ramming his cock into that hot, slick mouth. His climax caught him by surprise, ripping through him with the suddenness of a plant unfurling its leaves. Closed one second and wide open the next. He groaned and froze, his balls drawing tight and his cock pulsing. Pleasure rolled through him leaving him gasping.

Marr opened his eyes and looked down as Davan let his cock slip from his mouth. He drew his fingers out of Marr's ass and patted it.

Marr moved to lie beside Davan, slinging an arm across his chest. He kissed the curve of Davan's shoulder and rubbed his hand idly up and down Davan's smooth arm, appreciating the fine texture of his skin.

"Guess you needed that, too," Davan echoed Marr's words from the previous night. "It was good."

Marr nodded, his chin bumping against the other man's shoulder. "Very good."

“And when I’m better we can do more. Do you prefer top or bottom?”

When you’re better, you’ll leave. “Either,” Marr answered.

“Flexible. I like that.” The quicksilver grin flashed and disappeared. He turned his head to look directly at Marr. “Now isn’t this much better than discussing the state of the galaxy? If it weren’t for those pesky Tandus, we could lounge around doing this all the time.”

Marr sleepily grunted and didn’t bother to add that if it weren’t for the Tandus, Davan wouldn’t be here recovering from an injury. He was relaxed and tired from his long day out in the fields. Riding around on the seeder wasn’t as physically demanding as it had been in ancient days when plowing and planting had been done by hand, but it still made for a long day. He grasped the fine hairs on Davan’s forearm between his fingers and tugged gently. “Tell me more about yourself. What was it like growing up on Antia?”

“I lived in Benthin, the capitol. A big city, so there was plenty of fun to be had and trouble to get into. My mom was busy with her own life so I was on my own from the time I was little and I did whatever I wanted. It was an exciting life for a kid, having the city as a playground.”

Marr imagined Davan as a boy, stealing, getting high, stripping and whatever else he’d done to survive on the streets. It didn’t sound like a very great childhood.

The bleating of the lamidas outdoors was growing louder and more insistent. Marr sighed and shook himself from his comfortable stupor. He got up and gathered his discarded clothes. “I have to bring the herd in for the night.”

“I’ll go with you. See what my housemates look like.”

Marr put on his pants and unlaced boots. Davan didn’t bother with clothes.

“What do we do?” he asked as he hobbled alongside Marr with the aid of a shovel handle Marr gave him to use as a staff.

“You can stand by the gate and watch.” Marr went through the evening routine he’d followed since he was a child, ushering the lamidas into their pens and feeding them measures of grain and alfalfa. The pregnant females received more than the males. The few which had already dropped their infants must be milked before they were fed.

“Wow, those are some really pregnant lamidas.” Davan rested his arms on the top rail of the enclosure, white slashes of his body revealed between the slats. “They look like they’re going to pop any minute.”

“Soon, and then things get really busy for a while.”

“Do they have names?”

Marr smiled, remembering the silly names Sasch used to come up with. “The older ones do, but I quit naming the young.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll be selling most of them.” He didn’t add that there seemed little point in naming the animals when there was no one to talk to about them.

“There’s a big market for lamidas around here, then?”

Marr’s smile widened at Davan’s doubtful expression. “For milk and cheese, yes. We used to have a large herd, but I haven’t the time to tend to them anymore, so I only have a few. Grain is where most of the farm’s profit lies, or did before the Tandus took over. Now there’s no profit at all.”

Marr tethered one of the females in the milking station, and soon fresh milk streamed into the pail. Her infant bawled from its pen in the midst of other mothers and their offspring.

“How do you divide them up?” Davan asked.

“I have to keep the males separate from the females and from each other or they start butting heads. Some of the females can be just as bad tempered. I have to pay attention so none of the weaker ones get injured or killed.”

“Just like people. Somebody always has to make trouble.”

Davan watched for a while longer as Marr worked his way through the milking and feeding. “Wish I could help you. I feel so useless.”

You’ve helped me more than you know. Marr kept the sentimental thought to himself. “No problem. You look exhausted. You should lie down. I’ll be with you soon.” He liked the sound of that—be with you soon.

“I think I will.” Davan sounded tired. He braced himself on the staff and stumped across the barn floor like the old, three-legged lamida, Kreer.

How good it would feel to sleep with him tonight, curved together, warm and snug. It didn’t even matter that it couldn’t last. Tonight they’d be together, and that was enough.

Be with you soon.

Chapter Six

Davan didn't know if it was the home-cooked food, the fresh country air, or making love to Marr, but his body healed quickly over the next few days. Soon he could walk without the aid of a crutch and do light chores around the farm. Because he must stay near his hiding place, he was stuck on lamida duty and soon came to despise the smelly beasts. They butted and pushed as he tried to fill their water and food troughs. And the females shifted away from his grasping hands when he tried to milk them. Since he didn't really want to touch their udders to begin with, it was a no-win situation.

"*Aijalia!* Your milk tastes awful anyway." He cursed the tan and white lamida, who glared at him with her reptilian yellow eyes. But he kept trying because if he didn't do the work, Marr would have to. That man accomplished one task after another from dawn until dusk. If Davan weren't there to distract him, he'd probably work himself to death.

The morning after their second night together Davan had decided his leg was merely sprained and asked Marr to remove the splint. When he was through, he carefully wrapped the bandage around Davan's leg.

They were in the dark chamber below the barn and Davan was anxious to get upstairs to the light and fresh air. But first he had another, more personal request for his benefactor.

"Could you help me with one more thing before you leave? I have a cramp that needs massaging." Offering a sultry smile, he caught Marr's hand and placed it on his cock. "I'm feeling great this morning, but I think I could feel even better."

Marr didn't take much convincing to delay his work.

Davan pulled off the shirt Marr had only just put on and ran his hands over that rock-hard torso. The farmer had shoulders like granite, a chest like a brick and a stomach as hard and flat as a slab of stone. Lust coursed through him at the feel of sleek skin and feathery chest hair beneath his stroking hands. He swirled his tongue around one of Marr's brown areolas and nipped the little bud in the center.

The big man gasped and gripped Davan's penis harder. Davan gave his attention to one nipple then the other, tugging them with his teeth before soothing the bites with laps of his tongue. Marr thrust his chest toward him, moaning softly.

Meanwhile, he pumped Davan's shaft in his fist. The mounting tension inside Davan threatened to spill over too soon. He came far too easily from this man's touch. He loosened Marr's grip on his cock and pulled back to look into his eyes.

“I want you inside me,” he said.

Marr frowned. “Are you sure? Your leg...”

“Fuck my leg—or better yet, fuck me.”

Davan rolled onto his stomach. His naked rear thrust into the air and anticipation shivered through him. He couldn’t wait for Marr’s warm hands to touch him, to stroke down his back and pull apart his cheeks.

Marr had brought lubricant from the house along with their breakfast. Warm fingers coated with cool gel slipped down Davan’s cleft, around his anus and then gently inside.

Davan groaned. In and out, Marr’s hard fingers pressed, stretching his opening. Davan reached beneath himself to grasp his cock and rub it while he pushed back onto Marr’s hand. And then the fingers were gone, leaving him empty, open and waiting. Swallowing, Davan raised his ass higher, heedless of the pain in his leg as he dug his knees into the hay. He felt Marr’s body lowering over him, hairy legs on either side of his. Lubed slick, Marr’s shaft glided easily inside.

Davan glanced over his shoulder, wanting to see Marr pushing into him. The other man’s arms trembled as he supported his weight on them. He grimaced as he carefully drove inside. Davan watched that thick, dark cock slowly disappearing into him then closed his eyes and laid his head back down, savoring the sensation. His body clenched tight around Marr’s cock as it pressed deeper. Davan gasped at the slight burning and pushed back, welcoming the intrusion. When it seemed he could hold no more, Marr still continued to push. His cock seemed to have no end.

Marr paused, his breathing harsh and his body heavy on top of Davan’s. He waited a long moment, the two of them fully joined before he withdrew. Davan’s body released him in reluctant increments. He waited breathlessly before Marr rammed in again—harder this time.

Davan groaned loudly as that big cock thrust over and over. He clenched the blanket and a fist full of hay.

Marr’s voice was unrecognizably hoarse as he muttered, “Are you all right?”

“Yesss,” Davan hissed. “Go on. Fuck me.”

Marr grunted as he pulled out and pushed again, and again, pumping shallower but faster, his belly slapping Davan’s ass. The heat and pressure built and Davan’s pleasure with it. He reached beneath his body to rub his cock in time with Marr’s rhythm and abruptly his climax burst through him. He cried out, his voice muffled in the bedding. Behind him, Marr yelled even louder as he drove in one last time.

Fused together, flesh to flesh, body inside body, pulsing and trembling, Marr’s weight crushed Davan into the bed of hay. He felt the hard-packed dirt floor beneath it and smelled the sharp, clean scent of the dried grass.

Marr rolled off, releasing Davan so he could draw breath again.

Davan turned on his side and looked into Marr's sweat-shining face. "Now isn't that a great way to start your day?"

He smiled. "Yes, but I can't get such a late start every day. There's too much to be done." With a slap on Davan's hip, he rose and pulled up his trousers.

That was their second morning together. Now, a couple of days later, they'd established a pattern of work and sex breaks. Despite all the activity, Davan's leg was healing too fast. Soon he'd have to get off his ass and find a way to return to the base. Rest and recreation time was nearly over and he must resume his duties. Never the best soldier, not being inclined to follow orders, even Davan understood his responsibility.

The thought of leaving Marr made him melancholy. It had never been his way to think about a lover after their time together was finished. Life moved on, and that was the way Davan liked it. But this time, instead of growing restless, he was getting increasingly comfortable. The more time he spent with Marr, the more he wanted to. It was unnerving.

The tan and white lamida suddenly lunged to the side, kicked out and upset the pail, breaking Davan from his thoughts. Milk splashed onto his shoe. He yelled and jumped up from the stool too fast, overbalancing on his injured leg. He stumbled backward, barely catching himself before he fell.

"She giving you trouble?" Marr's voice came from behind him.

Davan glanced over his shoulder, and his stomach flipped. His reaction rattled him. It wasn't as if he'd never fucked a broad-shouldered, handsome man before, yet every time he glimpsed Marr, even from a distance, an excited yearning overtook him.

"Milking is more trouble than it's worth," Davan complained. "You should let the little ones guzzle all they want."

Marr leaned on the gate, smiling at the overturned pail and indignant lamida. "You don't have to do it. By the way, I'm going into town today for supplies. I'll try to find out how the search for you is going. I shouldn't be gone long."

A feeling of dread rose inside Davan, a certainty that something bad would happen to Marr while he was on his errand. What if he never came back? Davan dismissed the fear. He'd become too accustomed to this cocoon they'd created, but they were in more risk of discovery here, and Marr would be just fine in town.

"Bring back treats. We'll be waiting for you, me and the lamidas."

He stood in the barn doorway, watching Marr drive away in his beat-up, old Storia. The thing could be a museum piece if it were restored. It probably had one of the first versions of mag-drive under the hood.

Davan gazed at the cloudless, blue sky. It would be a perfect day for flying in-atmosphere, and every day was perfect for space flight. He sighed and dragged his gaze back to the ground. Living without his jet was like having a limb amputated.

Still, there were compensations here on land. He enjoyed a different kind of flight every time Marr brought him to climax. The thought put a smile on his face as he returned to the barn.

After letting the lamidas outdoors and cleaning up the milking area, he decided to take a break and read another Gindre adventure. He flipped the reader from aud to vis and settled on the grass on the shaded side of the barn to read, ready to slip back inside if anyone came.

But it was hard to get involved in the spy's latest case when his mind kept wandering to moments spent with Marr. It wasn't only the sex that featured in his daydreams, but their conversations and silent moments. He didn't understand how he could feel so close to Marr when they weren't talking or fucking, but simply sharing the same space, working independently on something. Such intimacy was beyond his ken.

The other reason he couldn't concentrate on Gindre's story was the lamidas' continual bleating. One of them in particular was bawling for attention.

Screaming in pain more like, Davan realized. He set the reader on the grass and raced around to the lamidas' pens. The randy males and new nursing mothers and their offspring were kept in separate enclosures, but the rest of the females were herded together. One complaining lamida wandered amongst the others, ears down and back arching.

Davan studied her, trying to decide if she was in labor, and if she was, whether he needed to do anything about it. "I can't help you," he warned. "Not sticking my hand up a lamida's cunt."

The animal lay down in a corner of the pen, her body twitching. Something glistening protruded beneath her tail.

Davan cursed. Marr had said birthing mothers must be kept in a separate stall to protect the newborn from being trampled by the herd. He should at least move the lamida inside the barn. He entered the pen and bent over her, cajoling and pulling on her neck, but she wouldn't get up and continued to spasm and bleat. He decided to get a handful of feed to coax her to follow him, when the animal suddenly scrambled to her feet and walked away as if nothing was wrong.

"They can seesaw back and forth like that for quite a while." A voice from behind Davan set his heart pounding. He spun around to find a woman standing on the other side of the lamidas' corral. She had fire-red hair, a round freckled face and a curious expression. "You're the one they're looking for, aren't you?"

Davan stood speechless while one of the lamidas butted against his kneecaps with its knobby head.

"It's all right. I'm Marr's neighbor, Sheah. I wouldn't turn you in. I'd be a resistance fighter myself if I were younger and if my hands weren't full with the farm and Bree. That's my husband." Her gaze swept over him. "Marr's a secretive one. I never would've guessed he had you hidden here. But you probably

shouldn't be outside like this. What if it hadn't been me? What if the soldiers come back for another search of the area? Why are you still here? Shouldn't you be on your way by now?"

When she paused to draw breath, Davan opened his mouth, but Sheah continued.

"If you need it, I can give you a vehicle. We have an old Rasti-racer that just sits in one of the sheds. Bree loves that thing, but he's not ever going to use it again. Of course, it might be difficult to get through checkpoints, but the Rasti's almost as good overland as it is on-road, so you could take a cross-country route. Where are you headed anyway?"

Davan shook his head. "I can't tell you that."

"Oh, sure. I understand. Listen, I can give you a hand with that female. She looks like she might be ready to drop after all. Let's get her inside." The woman unlatched the gate and entered the pen. "What's your name? Mine's Sheah, but I already said that, didn't I? I've been Marr's neighbor all my life. It's my family's farm, not Bree's."

It was impossible to feel nervous around someone who acted as if they were best friends. Davan decided to take advantage of Sheah's chattering to learn all he could about Marr. "You knew his lover Sasch, then?"

"I've never seen two people as much in love as Marr and Sasch." She pushed through the herd until she was beside the birthing female then prodded her in the rear until she'd driven her to the barn door. "Want to open that?"

Davan guessed people usually did what Sheah told them to. After they'd gotten the lamida inside and penned, she resumed her story.

"You wouldn't think they'd be compatible, but they were a perfect balance. Sasch was a dreamer, always had big plans. He left Bardee when he was young, but came back when he was in his twenties, and that's when they got together." She rubbed the lamida between the ears then lifted her tail and took a peek. "Then there's our Marr, as solid as the soil. He anchored Sasch, but when he had to let him go he did it even though it tore him up."

"How'd he die?" Davan leaned against the side of the pen, arms folded. He didn't like hearing about how much this Sasch had meant to Marr. It gave him a feeling in his chest like heartburn and he knew he could never match up to this other guy.

Sheah blew out a loud breath. "So many young people were killed. They had no training or organization or decent weapons. The Tandus massacred them. Marr was devastated, although only those who know him could tell. I've wondered if he'd ever heal enough to allow himself to love again." She gave Davan a quick smile and clapped her hands together. "Well. There are some things we need to get together in case of complications, but if everything goes well, the female can drop her baby by herself."

Sheah sent him to get the supply kit Marr had set aside and to fill a bucket with water. He was glad she'd taken control. While she did things to the lamida's backside that he didn't want to watch too closely,

Sheah continued to talk about neighbors and friends. In less than an hour he learned more from her about relationships in the community than he had in several days with Marr.

The first birth went smoothly. Davan held the animal's head while Sheah guided the baby out. She wrapped the little one in a cloth and he held it while Sheah delivered its mate, a more complicated process since one of the legs was caught inside. As he wiped the mucus from the infant's mouth and nose as Sheah had instructed, the animal opened its eyes to gaze blindly at him. He was struck by how fragile yet tough the little creature was, helpless but strong enough to make it through the birth process.

When both babies were out, they placed them near the mother's nose to encourage her to claim them. Davan's lamida evidently didn't meet with her approval. The mother butted it away. Davan tried to slip it past her notice and let it nurse, but she nipped at the baby.

"They get like that sometimes," Sheah explained as she guided her wobbly little one to the teat. "It's a mystery why they reject one and not the others. Looks like you're going to be bottle-feeding this one."

The gray lamida let out a plaintive bleat and wobbled a few steps across the straw toward Davan, pressing its head against his arm as if demanding his attention. His chest ached as he gathered the creature into his arms. Its legs folded up neatly and it nestled against him. The animal nuzzled its mouth against his chest and began to nibble the fabric of his shirt. "I, uh, think it's hungry."

"It'll have to wait a minute while I tend to mama." Sheah was now dragging a disgusting substance from the lamida's rear.

Davan was amazed at the amount of work delivering one infant required, and imagined several popping at once. It was a two-person job.

"And Marr does all this alone," he said aloud.

Sheah nodded. "I finally hired some help at my place. I've suggested Marr hire him, too, but I think he likes working until he's exhausted to keep from missing Sasch."

But now he has me, Davan wanted to say. I'll keep him distracted and make him happy. At least until I have to go.

Chapter Seven

Marr was packing groceries into the trunk of his vehicle when the soldier came for him.

“Marr Hingo?”

Marr turned and saw the GF uniform before he focused on the face of the man who’d spoken. His stomach felt as if he’d been punched. “Yes?”

“You’re to come with me. Administrator Riker wants to talk to you.”

“What about?” *And how did he know I’m in town?*

“I couldn’t say. Please come with me.” He didn’t have his weapon drawn nor did he handcuff Marr, but the soldier clearly expected to be obeyed as he turned and led the way to the county administration building where the Tandus government was now installed.

The lobby was much as it had been before the takeover, including Jule, the old mayor’s receptionist, sitting at the desk. She gave Marr a small, sympathetic smile as he went past.

Marr swallowed his fear and forced himself to look curious but not guilty as he was ushered into Riker’s office.

“Marr Hingo. Come in. I’m so pleased to see you.” Riker rose from his seat behind a highly polished desk and extended a hand, acting as if Marr were here by invitation rather than command.

The room used to be the mayor’s office, but the decorations were now much more opulent. A bank of monitors showing the latest news from a half dozen planets graced one wall. The carpet underfoot was so plush Marr couldn’t hear his footsteps as he crossed the room and sat on a leather-covered chair across the desk from Riker.

“What’s wrong? Have they captured the pilot yet?”

“Not yet, but I have other matters I’d like to discuss with you.” Riker went to a side table and poured a pair of drinks. Returning, he handed Marr one of the glasses of amber liquid and sat on the edge of his desk, putting his crotch at Marr’s eye level.

Marr sat stiffly in his chair, the glass of rich-smelling liquor clutched in his fist.

“Go on. Take a sip. It’s like drinking gold. One of the few good things to come out of Antia.”

I can think of another. Marr pictured Davan then quickly slammed his mind shut on any more memories, as if Riker might see his thoughts. He sipped the whiskey and it burned fire down his throat.

“No, we haven’t captured the traitor yet, but it’s only a matter of time, and when we do, he’ll be tried and executed publicly, teaching a valuable lesson about the consequences of disloyalty to our government.”

Marr's stomach rumbled from either the alcohol or his suppressed rage, but he kept his expression neutral as he tilted his head back and looked up at Riker's face. "You said you have something else to discuss?"

Riker set his glass on the desk and gazed into Marr's eyes. "I wondered if you'd thought about what we discussed the other day. I'd expected to hear from you by now."

"I'm sorry. I've been very busy with planting and birthing season."

Riker leaned close enough that Marr could smell the rich tang of whiskey on his breath. His eyes glittered and his smooth voice grew hoarse. "Enough games. I don't intend to court you, so you may view this as a business transaction. You give me what I want and I protect you when the new laws go into effect."

Marr gripped his glass so hard he feared it might break. He could no longer feign ignorance of what Riker was suggesting, but he could buy some time. "What laws are those?"

"The government will soon assume all land deeds. Former owners will work for the state. But there can be exceptions and opportunities for some." Riker reached out to touch the side of Marr's face, a tentative, gentle touch, and his voice was soft when he spoke again. "I believe this can be a mutually beneficial relationship, satisfying to both of us."

If he'd intended to sound seductive, he failed. Chills of horror prickled the length of Marr's spine. His jaw tightened as he fought the urge to grab Riker's wrist and twist it until he screamed. Getting thrown into prison wouldn't be useful for either himself or Davan.

Riker slipped his hand from Marr's cheek to his neck and stroked it while he gazed at Marr's body as though he were naked. "Such a strong man. Powerful. A terrible waste to send to a re-education camp."

At last the administrator sat back, letting his hand drop away. "My people will soon be instituting a program of purity which includes abolishing same-sex lovers and other undesirables. You see, threats are coming at you from many directions, but I'm a respected man in an important position and I can make sure no harm comes to you."

Marr steadied his shaking hand and sipped his whiskey again. He lifted his gaze to Riker once more. "I believe I understand your offer more fully now. I'd appreciate having a little more time to think about it."

Riker suddenly stood and loomed over him, bracing his hands on either arm of the chair, boxing Marr in. "There's nothing to consider. It's so simple. All you have to do is want me, too."

Before Marr could think or respond, Riker covered his mouth in a hard kiss. His tongue slicked over Marr's lips and tried to force inside. Marr kept his lips clamped shut. He could no more have allowed Riker's tongue in his mouth than invite a snake into his bed. He instinctively reared back and pushed against the other man's chest hard enough to knock him backward.

Riker staggered and caught himself with a hand on the edge of his desk. Breathing hard, he glared at Marr. "Is that your answer?"

Marr's heart raced and red flashed before his vision. He thought he might rise from his chair and beat Riker to death with the decanter of whiskey. He forced himself to draw a deep breath. This was no time to lose control. There was too much at stake.

He cleared his throat. "No, sir. You took me by surprise is all. Please understand, I need some time to adjust to the idea of your generous offer." He stood, giving Riker no more time to continue his clumsy seduction. "I have to go now, but I'll call you soon to further discuss our...arrangement."

"Very well," Riker spoke to Marr's already retreating back. "But it had better be soon. I wouldn't want to have to send someone to fetch you again."

On the drive back to the farm, Marr racked his brain to find a way out of this situation. He was like a fly stuck in a web, struggling as the spider crawled toward it.

Even the sight of his farm didn't comfort him. His world was shaken to its foundation. He couldn't continue on as he had. It was time to take action against the Tandus who'd killed his lover and intended to take his land. The problem was he had no idea what that action should be.

After parking the Storia, he headed for the barn to check on his guest. He heard Davan before he saw him, singing a song Marr didn't recognize in a melodic baritone.

Marr paused inside the doorway, focusing on Davan who sat on a hay bale near one of the lamida pens. He had a blanket-wrapped object in his arms and his head was bent over it.

The pilot glanced up. "Hi. You've got a new addition to your herd."

"Which lamida was it?" Marr crossed to him and stooped to pull back the fabric. A little gray infant lifted its head and bleated.

"The one with tan patches. You really need to start naming these animals."

"What do you call this one?" Marr teased.

But Davan had a prompt answer. "Dre, after the ballplayer. I used to dream I'd be the next winball champion myself."

"I'm sorry you had to deal with the birth. I wouldn't have left you alone if I'd thought any of them were that close."

"Actually, your neighbor Sheah was here and helped out. She talks a lot, but I think she can keep a secret."

"Damn, I didn't want to involve her in this."

"I feel the same way about you." Davan set the baby lamida on the floor, letting it stand on trembling legs. "I've got to leave here soon."

Marr's stomach lurched. "But it's only been a couple of days. Your leg's not that healed."

"I'm not planning to walk. I just need to steal some wheels and get going."

Marr wasn't ready. Their time together had been too short. But with Riker nosing around, it would be better if Davan left soon.

"Why don't you stay in the house tonight? We can have a proper dinner at the table and sleep in bed. We'll keep your little friend here close by in case he needs tending, and if necessary, there's a place in the attic you could hide."

Davan smiled as the lamida took a few shaky steps. "Sleep in a real bed with you? I can't turn that down. I'll help with the cooking. I'm great at it, as long as it's heating vac-pac rations."

Working with Davan in the kitchen made Marr realize again how solitary he'd become. It felt good to have another man to joke and laugh with as he cooked. The sound of his voice and the warmth of his presence brightened the room.

Davan came up behind him and put his arms around Marr's waist, kissing the back of his neck then resting his chin on his shoulder. His erection pressed against Marr's ass. "I like the way you pummel that dough. Is there somebody you've got in mind when you hit it?"

"Riker, the local Tandus administrator. He was here with the troops the other day when they were searching. Today I was in his office. He said they hadn't found you yet."

Davan rubbed his stomach then let his hand drift below Marr's waist and cup the front of his trousers. "Is there more? Is this Riker giving you some kind of trouble?"

"He said there are new laws going into effect. They're going to seize our lands and start 're-education camps' for undesirables. It's terrifying." Marr decided to hold back the part about the sexual threat.

"Mm." Davan's chest vibrated against his back. "Don't give up hope. The Tandus aren't as all-powerful as they appear. They're overextending themselves across the galaxy. They've almost completely lost their hold on Antia, for example, and here on Theon the rebels have a few tricks planned for them. I'm looking forward to getting back to it."

Marr pictured how still Davan's face had been when he'd first found him. The pilot was ready to fling himself back into battle, and Marr couldn't stand losing another lover to the war.

Davan rubbed his cock lightly. "Try to relax. Everything will turn out all right. And if it doesn't, all the more reason to enjoy tonight, right? We're together. No point in worrying about what will come."

Marr nodded and pressed his straining erection into Davan's hand. "For that matter, why wait through dinner? We could start the night early."

He took his floured hands from the dough and turned to face Davan. He pressed a kiss against the Antian's lightly haired cheek. His beard stubble was as silky as Marr's was rough.

Marr trailed his lips along Davan's jaw, memorizing the sharp-cut shape and the taste of his skin. Then he kissed his mouth, tasting the sweetness of wine and a flavor that was pure Davan. He slid his

hands around the other man's back, not worrying about leaving flour marks on his shirt. In fact, he liked the idea of claiming him with his handprints. He slipped his hands under his T-shirt to feel his smooth skin, the bands of muscle and hard column of his spine.

Davan arched like a cat beneath his petting hands.

Marr pulled off his shirt and threw it aside. The pilot's nude torso was so beautiful he wanted to lick every bit of his skin, but he had to choose somewhere to start, so he zeroed in on one rosy areola. He flicked the erect nipple with his tongue then drew it into his mouth, sucking hard enough to bruise. His reward was Davan's sharp intake of breath.

Transferring his attention to the other nipple, Marr swirled his tongue around the disc and tugged the nipple with his teeth. He kissed his way down Davan's taut stomach, which twitched beneath his lips. Marr unfastened his trousers and pulled them down his legs. Davan's injured leg, still wrapped in a bandage, hampered an easy slide, but he managed to get the pants off along with Davan's shoes and socks.

Having a handsome naked man in the kitchen diverted Marr's appetite from food to a more primal hunger. He stripped off his clothes with Davan's help, and they grappled together, skin sliding against skin as they kissed and fondled.

Davan gripped Marr's ass and rubbed his cock against his groin. The feel of that hard shaft gliding alongside his and digging into his belly knocked all worries and fears from Marr's mind. There was room for nothing but lust in his brain. He reached between their bodies to encircle both cocks in his fist and stroke them.

The glide of his hand wasn't smooth enough and they hadn't come to the kitchen with lubricant at hand, so Marr made do. He grabbed the bottle of cooking oil on the counter and poured a little into his palm. He coated both their shafts with the oil until they glistened and his hand slid easily up and down. The sounds of slick flesh and heavy breathing mingled in the quiet air.

The sight of their cocks together in his hand—dark and light, thick and thin—made Marr burn with arousal. Together they were beautiful, balanced opposites but the same in their masculinity. Davan, too, appeared fascinated by Marr's briskly moving hand pulling them both to the edge of ecstasy.

"Turn around," Marr commanded, his voice so rasping and deep it sounded like a stranger's.

Davan obediently faced the counter and braced his hands against it. He spread his legs shoulder-width apart and thrust out his ass.

Marr slid his hand over the smooth white globes, leaving a sheen of oil. He slapped Davan's ass, one cheek then the other, turning them a blushing pink. Davan moaned at each blow and muttered words in Antian. His foreign words and pleased groans set Marr on fire. He swatted Davan again, a snap of his hand hard enough to make the other man rock forward then back on his heels.

Marr poured more oil into his palm, rubbed his hands together and massaged Davan's rosy flesh. He kneaded the muscles from lower back to the tops of his thighs. Only when Davan was completely relaxed

did he surprise him with another spank. He swatted him on the crack between his cheeks, right over his anus.

Davan whimpered and rose on the balls of his feet, offering himself, begging for Marr's touch. Licking his lips, Marr pulled his buttocks apart and gazed at the puckered hole. He slid his finger down the crack and tickled his fingernail around the edge of Davan's entrance until it clenched.

Marr's cock pointed straight out from his body, stretching as though it would reach Davan with or without him. He stepped closer, letting the head bump against Davan's rear. The little nudge sent a wave of desire crashing through him. He wanted more. He needed to slip inside Davan and plunge deep. But he waited, teasing them both, gliding the head of his cock over Davan's anus and circling around it until the other man groaned.

"Just do it! Please."

The ragged pleading broke Marr's resolve to go slow. He guided the dark red tip of his cock to Davan's hole and pushed inside, sucking in a breath at the resistance of the tight ring of muscle. He pulled out and pushed his oil-coated fingers inside, stretching and widening the sphincter until it could take three at once.

As he watched his fingers disappear then re-emerge from Davan's body, his body trembled with the need to be inside him. Marr removed his exploring fingers and replaced them with his cock. This time it entered more easily. The sphincter seemed to clutch his shaft and pull it deeper. Marr closed his eyes and sank into the incredible heat.

His oily hands slipped on Davan's hips, and he gripped them harder as he pulled out. Marr's eyes flickered open to watch his engorged cock emerge in gleaming, pulsing increments. He swallowed hard, powerfully aroused but also moved by the sense of joining with Davan.

He thrust again, deep, like a plow blade cutting through soil. Marr loved the look of his partner's submissive posture: arms outstretched and hands gripping the edge of the counter, head lowered, feet wide apart. He admired the vulnerable curve of the back of Davan's neck and wanted to grip it and hold him there while he fucked him. A moment later he suited action to thought, wrapping his hand firmly around Davan's nape.

Davan groaned and arched his neck into Marr's restraining hand. He pushed back onto his invading cock. The muscles in his arms were corded and his knuckles white from gripping the counter.

Marr curved his body over Davan's back, still holding his neck and wrapping the other arm around his torso. The low-grade fever in him built to a raging fire as his hips jerked faster. He grunted, thrust once more, and froze. Ecstasy showered through him with the suddenness of a pod splitting and raining seeds. His cock pumped in steady pulses.

Clenched in his arms, Davan cried out and shuddered. Marr felt a jet of come hit his arm. *Come on the kitchen floor. That's unsanitary.* The thought crossed his mind and he grinned. A joyous, buoyant feeling

bubbled up inside him. He hugged Davan hard, and when he rose upright, he brought the other man erect with him.

Letting go of Davan's neck, Marr held him in both arms. "Thank you."

"No. Thank *you*. That's the best cooking lesson I ever had. All right, so it was the only one I've ever had. Maybe other teachers are better. I don't know."

Marr laughed at Davan's irrepressible sense of humor. Even panting from the aftermath of orgasm, he managed to joke. Reluctantly he let Davan go and drew his softening cock from inside him. He wiped himself with a dishtowel then offered it to Davan.

When they were both dressed again, Marr set Davan to chopping vegetables while he rolled out the dough for the veggie pastries. As he flattened and brushed it with oil, Marr thought he'd never be able to use cooking oil again without remembering tonight. There were only so many sex positions one could assume, but he thought they'd done very well in creating a new variation of an old recipe.

He glanced at Davan intent on cutting a tomato into wedges, a slight frown of concentration on his forehead, long bangs brushing his eyebrows. He was adorable and Marr longed to ruffle his soft hair, but forced his attention back to the task at hand. There would be time enough later. They had an entire evening in which to explore each other, and tomorrow...?

Well, as Davan had said, they had tonight.

Chapter Eight

Davan fell across Marr's bed, claiming it from top to bottom and side to side with his sprawled limbs. It had been years since he'd enjoyed the luxury of such a comfortable mattress. He was used to berths on transports or cots in cheap hostels. This mattress was balanced perfectly between hard and soft and the covers were clean and smelled like Marr.

"I could fall in love with you for your bed alone," he said and was sorry the second the words were out of his mouth. They made him sound shallow, even if he was only teasing, when in fact he was starting to care way too much. How was that possible in just a few days' time?

Davan felt as if he'd been hit by a garbage trawler, assaulted by emotions he'd never experienced before. He'd heard people talk about love, and sing about it, and make vid shows about it. People seemed to endlessly explore the topic. Davan had always assumed they meant really great sex when they said "love", but now he understood it was something different, this thing they all craved.

He might be suffering from it, the feeling of pain and warmth and weakness in his gut was certainly new, but he must leave it, and Marr, behind.

"You like my bed?" Marr stood at the foot of the massive four-poster, arms folded, gazing down at Davan. He was so sexy with his dark hair tumbling over his forehead and his brown eyes half lidded, promising all sorts of things.

"I do." Davan raised his arms over his head and stretched. "Maybe too much to share it. I don't know if there's room for you here."

"I'll make room." He grinned and Davan thought it was a tossup whether the man was more attractive when dour and brooding or when that sunshine smile lit his face.

He started to take off his shirt.

"Slow down," Davan demanded. "Make a show for me."

"I don't dance and there's no music, anyway." But Marr took his time unbuttoning his shirt and revealing his powerful body by degrees. The man looked like he could lift the bed with Davan on it if he cared to. His arms were knotted muscle and his abdomen ridged. He unfastened his pants and pushed them over his hips, wiggling his ass a little as he did so.

Davan laughed.

"What? I told you I was bad at this kind of thing."

“No. You’re plenty sexy. Keep going. Show me your big, hard cock.” Davan elaborated each word. Every guy liked to hear his cock praised and in Marr’s case his penis deserved every adjective. The blood-engorged rod jutted out strong and straight.

Davan considered crawling over to suck it, but continued to lie spread-eagle across the bed naked. Maybe later he’d suggest Marr find some rope and make the position more permanent, but right now he was ready to take a turn topping.

As Marr removed the last of his clothes, Davan beckoned him with a crook of his finger. “Lie down. I’m gonna show you something.”

Marr lumbered onto the bed like a big bear. When he settled beside Davan, the mattress sagged toward him. Davan rolled onto his side, cupped a hand around the back of Marr’s head and kissed him. “Do you believe in magic?”

“Sure.” Marr humored him.

Davan held his palms wide open, fingers splayed. “Nothing here, right?”

“Nope.”

“Or here.” He flipped his hands over, showing the backs. “And I’m naked so you know there’s nothing on my body. Take a good look.”

While Marr scanned him thoroughly, Davan kept his hands wide open. Marr nodded. Davan made a flourish with his hand and spoke some gibberish then reached behind Marr’s ear and produced the coin he’d placed on the pillow when he was kissing him.

He grinned at Marr’s surprised expression. “Where’d you hide it?”

“A magician never tells. Now let me show you another trick.” Davan tossed the coin over his shoulder thus making it disappear. He caressed Marr’s face and pulled him close for another long, hot, deep kiss. He pulled away with a gasp. “You like that?”

“Good trick,” Marr mumbled.

“I’ll show you another if you flip over.”

Davan sat beside him and rubbed his hands up and down Marr’s broad back, massaging his shoulders and digging into his lower back until he groaned. The muscles were like knots of wood beneath his hands and Marr’s skin stretched smooth and warm over them. Davan kneaded his ass, pulling his cheeks apart and letting his thumbs skate along his crack. He wanted Marr to beg for a fucking by the time he was through toying with him. Davan dipped a finger into the dark groove and circled his rim, teasing and coaxing until Marr lifted toward him. Then he pulled away, leaving him wanting more.

Davan shifted to a more comfortable position, resting his strained leg by lying full length on top of Marr. His cock pressed into the groove of the other man’s ass, and with a pump of Davan’s hips, his shaft slid over hot flesh. He moaned in pleasure, but still wasn’t ready to move things along too quickly. He

snuggled against Marr's back, continuing to roll against him in slow pulses. He kissed his shoulder and whispered against his skin, "You like this?"

"Yes." Marr's voice was tight. He took Davan's hand and pushed it beneath him, molding it around his cock. "Feel how much."

It was as hard and thick as an old-style gearshift and just as responsive to Davan's touch. When he rubbed the shaft, Marr groaned and pushed into his fist.

"You want me to fuck you hard? Are you as good a bottom as you are a top?" Davan enjoyed talking dirty and guessed Marr enjoyed it, too, from the way he whimpered.

"Yes," he hissed.

"Let's find out." Davan pushed between Marr's cheeks again, the head of his cock bumping his entrance. He thrust only a little way in, still teasing. Marr pushed back, offering himself.

Davan hooked the lube from the nightstand, squirted the cool gel on his fingers and stroked it onto his aching cock. His pulse jittered erratically in anticipation. Spreading Marr's cheeks, he traced a fingertip delicately around the rim of his anus. The rose-colored ring spasmed beneath his touch. He pushed a finger inside and wiggled it then pressed even deeper into the tight channel. Marr made a low, choked sound.

Davan slipped in a second finger, and a third, fucking him slow and easy then he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his cock. It pushed inside easily on a slick of lubricant. Davan thrust hard and fast, filling Marr deeply and making him groan. The heat and pressure surrounding his cock were as powerful as a mag blast. He grunted as he pulled out then pushed again.

"Like being fucked, don't you?" he muttered. "Let me hear you whine for it."

Marr gave another low groan and whispered, "Yes. More."

Davan continued to glide in and out, easy at first then faster. Heaving and thrusting flesh to flesh, he plunged toward ecstasy. He grunted and cursed as he neared his climax. Just as he reached the edge, a plaintive bleat broke his concentration. The infant they'd left in the kitchen in a blanket-lined box was demanding another bottle.

Davan smiled and brought his attention back to the bedroom. He could tell from the raggedness of Marr's breathing and the thrusting of his hips that he was close, too. His hand was tucked beneath his body, tugging on his cock.

"That's it. Come for me. Come hard." Davan's encouraging chant competed with the growing insistence of the lamida's cries. Laughter burst through him along with his orgasm. It glowed and pulsed like a star's corona, and he let out a whoop as he came. For several moments, he continued to move against Marr's sweaty back, hips gently rocking as the last waves of pleasure receded.

But Marr hadn't come yet. Davan spurred him on with more erotic whispers. "You're almost there, aren't you? So close. Come! Spill all over your hand and I'll lick it clean. I love the way you taste. You want that? You want to see me down between your legs licking your cock?"

That did it. Marr growled, actually growled, as he thrust into his fist once more.

Davan rested his forehead between his shoulder blades, smelling his skin as shudders passed through his body. The overwhelming joy became a satisfied contentment. This was exactly where he wanted to be. Life didn't get any sweeter than this.

Downstairs, the lamida bleated again, but Davan had a promise to fulfill. He crawled down on the bed, pushing covers out of the way, and moved between Marr's legs. Taking his hand, he tasted his own musky jism from Marr's skin.

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Lie still." Davan licked every sticky drop from his lover's hand and his cock. He kept his gaze focused on Marr's, enjoying the way his breath caught and his eyes gleamed with arousal.

When he'd finished and moved up beside Marr again, his lover stroked his cheek. "You're really something. I'm glad you came here, even under the circumstances. I..."

Davan saw the emotion in his eyes. He didn't need to hear the words. "Me, too."

The baby lamida bawled, demanding his attention and stopping any deeper sharing. Davan climbed off the bed and rubbed his throbbing leg. "Guess it's time to play father again."

"You're good at it. You have a very nurturing spirit." Marr rose, too. "I'd better check the rest of the herd. When they start to drop, it's often all at once. I don't want to lose any of them."

"You need a little buzzer they can ring when they're ready for your help," Davan said.

When he reached the kitchen, the lamida's head poked up over the edge of the box. Yellow eyes fixed on Davan and the animal gave another pathetic cry.

"That's right, Dre. Don't give up. Keep bawling for what you want and eventually you might get it."

He heated the refrigerated lamida's milk and offered the baby the bottle. By the time he put the animal back in its bed to sleep, Marr returned from outdoors smelling of fresh air and lamidas. A rainy breeze blew in with him.

"Storm's coming in. It's a perfect night for staying in bed." He put an arm around Davan's back and guided him back upstairs.

Rain drummed on the roof and pelted the windows, making the bedroom seem even cozier. Davan rested his head on his hand and faced Marr, who lay on his back staring at the ceiling.

"Was this your room when you were a kid?" Davan examined the knot holes and swirling grain of the walls, real wood not some plasti-board knock off. Red curtains framed the windows, but no blinds; only the black sheet of night and raindrops dripping down the panes.

"No. The small one at the end of the hall. This was my parents' room, and then mine and Sasch's."

Davan studied his profile. "Does it feel strange having me here? Does it bother you?"

There was only a slight pause before Marr shook his head. "There are a lot of memories, but no, it doesn't bother me. I'm glad you're here." He turned to look at Davan. "Very glad."

“Good.” He didn’t want to share this bed with the ghost of another man, but it could take a while to get Sasch out of it. Then his stomach tightened as he remembered there wouldn’t be a while. He had to get moving, get on his way.

“I should leave tomorrow. I figure traveling back roads I can make it where I need to go.”

“How? You need transportation.”

“I’ll find it. Don’t worry about that.” He listened to the rain for a moment. “Thank you again for everything. When the war’s over, I’ll come back. Maybe even be here in time for harvest.” Davan didn’t think the battles would be over by then, but wanted to let Marr know he’d stay if things were different.

“I’d love to have you here for as long as you can stay.” He bit his lower lip and his eyes searched Davan’s. “Maybe you don’t have to leave tomorrow. What’s one more day?”

Davan wanted to stay here forever. For the first time in his life he didn’t feel the restless urge to fly away, but for the first time it was wrong to stay.

“HQ probably thinks I’m dead. I should be on my way.”

He curled himself around Marr and held him tight, fighting sleep because he didn’t want it to be morning. But when he opened his eyes the rain was gone and the sun shone through the window.

Chapter Nine

Marr woke with an anxious, heavy feeling in his chest. It only took a moment for him to remember why. Davan was already up and foraging through the closet for a clean shirt. Marr had slept in later than he had a long time, not since those days after Sasch's funeral when he would've never risen at all if he hadn't had the herd to tend.

He sat up and stretched, considering the option of dragging Davan back into bed for just a little while longer. Or perhaps he could tie him to the bedposts and keep him a prisoner forever.

Davan turned to him and held up a shirt. "Morning. All right if I wear this?"

"Sure."

"I figured I'll leave at dusk and travel at night. Less likely to be stopped and questioned that way. So I can help out around here today."

Marr nodded, not about to argue anything that would delay Davan's leaving.

After slipping the shirt on, Davan crossed to the bed and bent to kiss him, his hand slipping from Marr's shoulder, down his chest and toward the sheet pooled around his hips.

Marr's morning erection grew harder and his breathing quickened. But Davan straightened after only a moment. "Guess, we'd better go see what the lamidas are up to."

"So you're a farmer now?" Marr teased, but he could see what Davan was doing—distancing himself a little to make parting easier.

He threw back the covers and got dressed and soon they were both in the barn, sharing the morning duties. A couple of babies had been born in the night without human assistance and another female was in labor. Marr decided he wouldn't go out in the fields today, not because the herd required his attention, but because it was the last time he would spend with Davan. He was painfully aware of it with every casual exchange or joke that passed between them. The fling they'd had was sweet but fleeting and he had to accept that.

He watched Davan introducing the orphaned lamida back into the herd. Making sure it was accepted and not attacked by the group was tricky, and Davan handled the animal with care and patience. It was another side of the brash, breezy flyboy, a sweet, nurturing spirit he kept hidden, and Marr was sad that he'd never get a chance to know all of Davan's facets.

Around mid-afternoon, Marr headed toward the house to make them something to eat. He was halfway across the yard when Riker's car turned into his driveway. The black Swift glided as silently as a prowling panther.

Marr's heart jolted. He prayed Davan would stay hidden in the barn, but there was no way he could warn him. Keeping his expression neutral, he waited for Riker to get out of the vehicle.

The man walked toward him in his meticulous suit and shiny shoes. His hair was slicked back and his moustache impeccably trimmed. Riker stopped in front of him.

"I've come to invite you to take a short trip with me," he said without preamble. "I understand you're a man of depth and feeling, so I want to show you we could have more than a business arrangement. There's a charming restaurant I enjoy on Juris. Have you ever been off-planet?"

"No. I don't like to fly." Marr told the truth.

"You won't even know you're off the ground. I have a luxury jet at my disposal and a beautiful evening planned." Riker's tone was polite but firm. Marr understood he was being given no choice.

He swallowed and glanced at the barn. "I can't leave my lamidas unattended. They're birthing. It's kind of a critical time."

"Yes, you can, and you will." Riker's lips pressed into a hard line as he stared at Marr.

It was best to agree, to get the man out of here and keep Davan safe. "When?"

"Immediately. It will take some time to reach Juris."

Marr glanced down at his clothes. "I've been working outdoors all day. I'd need to clean up."

"I'll wait right here." Riker moved closer, his sweet cologne gagging Marr. He pressed a hand against Marr's chest. "I can be patient...but only for a little while."

Resisting the urge to pull back, Marr cleared his throat. "Let me check on my herd once more then go to the house and change. You could sit on the porch swing if you like. I'll get you a drink."

"That would be lovely." Riker patted Marr's chest before removing his hand.

Marr felt the man's gaze burning his back as he hurried toward the barn and slipped inside. Davan was waiting with his mag-blaster clutched in one hand.

"That's Riker? What does he want?" He peered through a gap in the planks.

"A date. I have to go with him. You can take whatever you need from the house. Take my Storia, too, if you want. I'll say it was stolen."

"Wait. What?" Davan turned to him. "This guy wants to take you out? You didn't mention that before."

"There was no point. It's just something I have to deal with. If I want to keep from having my farm seized, I have to play along for a while. I'll find a way to stop it before it goes too far."

Davan glanced through the crack in the wall again. "He's threatening you?"

Marr exhaled loudly. "I don't have time to talk about this. I have to go."

“I could kill him.” The pilot’s voice was as cool as rainwater and when he glanced at Marr, his eyes were hard and flat. “We could bury the body and I could steal his car. It’d be easier to escape with GF insignia on the side of the vehicle.”

For one moment, Marr couldn’t think of a reason not to. But Riker would be missed and his disappearance might be connected to Marr if he’d told anyone else about their date. Would Riker have shared such information, when he had to keep his sexual proclivities hidden among his own people?

“I—I couldn’t,” Marr murmured. “I’m no killer.”

“I am. You forget I’m a soldier. It’s my duty to eliminate as many Tandus as possible, and I wouldn’t mind killing this one.”

“No.” Marr took hold of his arm, the one with the mag-gun gripped in his hand. “It’s best I get him out of here and you leave.”

“That’s what you want?” Davan gazed into his eyes, his own shifting from blue to silver to dark gray.

“Yes. That’s what I want.” He pulled the other man close and gave him one fierce kiss, lips mashed together so hard that Marr felt his teeth cut into his lip. Then he pushed away from Davan. “I have to go now. Take care of yourself. Be safe.”

Davan nodded and his soft voice floated after Marr as he strode out of the barn. “I’ll come back someday. I promise.”

“You’re in for a treat.” Riker took Marr’s elbow in hand and guided him across the tarmac to the waiting jet. “Not only are we dining at the finest restaurant on Juris, but you’ll be one of the first to ride in the new TX50.”

As Marr studied the sleek lines of the low profile transport, bile rose in his throat. Until now he’d been so busy thinking about Davan that he hadn’t had time to realize he’d have to confront his worst phobia. He’d never, not even as a boy, imagined being a superhero and flying across the galaxy. Marr had always been content to keep his feet planted firmly on the ground. Now the choice was about to be taken from him.

Marr slowed then stopped. Riker stopped, too, and gazed at the transport with a smile. “Beautiful isn’t she? This is one of the prototypes, provided for my use as a reward for my work. Soon there will be an entire fleet and flight will never be the same.”

“Looks fast.”

“Faster than anything out there, and the military models have precision capabilities for destroying their targets. There will be no place the insurgents can hide from a TX50.” He gave Marr another of his toothy smiles. “Best of all, no human pilot is required, so we’ll have complete privacy on our flight tonight.”

“How does it work?” Marr delayed the moment his feet would have to leave the ground and climb the stairs to the jet’s door.

“It’s simpler than driving my Swift. I’ll power her up, enter in our destination, and sit back and enjoy the trip.” Riker squeezed Marr’s elbow to get him moving.

Marr forced himself not to tremble as they ascended the gangplank and entered the hull, but it felt as if he were being swallowed by a huge, dangerous animal. Bad enough to be flying into space, he’d also be at the mercy of a machine.

Riker showed him into an elegant living room. “Sit down. Are you nervous? You look pale.”

“I’ve never flown.” Marr looked around the lavish space. In addition to comfortable seats and a state of the art aud/vid system, there was a well-stocked bar at one end of the room.

“Relax. Like I said, you won’t even know you’re off Theon.”

The door sealed shut behind them. Marr was sweating and his chest felt so tight it was hard to draw breath.

Riker crossed to a console and sat in front of a monitor screen. His fingers moved over the touch-pad. “The amazing thing about the TX50 is that it doesn’t require any launch pad or port. They can land on any surface of sufficient size that’s near the targeted destination. Rough terrain doesn’t matter.”

Marr walked over to stand behind Riker and watch him operate the controls. “What about the weight? Doesn’t the landing site have to have sufficient support?”

“The machine is self-supporting. I’m no scientist. Don’t ask me how.” Riker chuckled and finished entering the travel itinerary with a tap of his index finger. He swiveled his seat to face Marr. “That’s it. We’re on our way. Do you want to watch the takeoff or cling to the illusion you’re on solid ground?”

“The illusion will be just fine.”

There wasn’t so much as a hum or any movement to indicate they were underway, but Marr could still sense the great jet generating power and lifting off. He could feel it in his gut. The hair rose on his arms and his breathing continued shallow.

Riker rose from the pilot’s seat and rested a hand on his shoulder. “You really are afraid, aren’t you? That’s charming.” He curled his other hand around the back of Marr’s neck, leaned in and kissed him.

Marr kept his arms stiff by his sides and waited for the moist lips covering his to pull away. He hadn’t expected Riker to make a move so quickly. He’d figured he’d have time to come up with a plan to discourage him. Maybe vomiting on his expensive suit would do the trick.

Riker pulled back and gazed at him. “Perhaps a drink will help you to relax.” His dark eyes narrowed. “But we do have an arrangement, yes? You understand how this evening is going to end.”

Marr nodded.

“Good.” He slipped his hands around Marr’s waist and gripped his ass, pulling their groins close together. “I’ve wanted this since I first saw you, but waiting makes the conquest all the sweeter so I’ve taken my time.” His voice was low and hoarse and the glitter of his eyes was like a feral animal.

Marr molded his numb lips into a smile. “Then you won’t mind a little more waiting. It will be worth it. How about that drink?”

Riker released him and went to the bar to pour drinks. He called out a command for music and the air filled with the pop beat and synthesized instruments of the worst kind of ambi-music. The seduction scene Riker seemed intent on creating reminded Marr of a cheap sex-vid with Riker as the smarmy hero. Marr felt the insane desire to laugh and he suddenly realized he was about to lose control when he most needed to keep himself together.

This new aviation technology was huge. A fleet of such fighting jets could destroy the rebel alliance or anything else the Tandus chose to unleash it on. It was crucial the TX50s never reached production...or that the rebels had the same capability.

Suddenly, Marr knew what he must do. He was alone with Riker. He had a golden opportunity to take control of the jet and deliver it to the rebels. He glanced at Riker’s back then picked up a phallic-shaped stone sculpture from a side table. Marr weighed the makeshift club in his hand. His life would change forever if he did this. But then he thought of Davan and realized it already had.

He walked up behind Riker and raised his arm.

“Do you like your Cambia neat or with ice?”

Chapter Ten

Davan found himself lingering over the stupid lamidas. The truth was he didn't want to leave. Taking care of the animals was an excuse to stay just a little longer. But his time had run out. This was the perfect opportunity to leave. He could make it look like Marr's house had been ransacked and no suspicion would fall on the farmer. But the thought of wrecking Marr's home, a place that had felt like his home, too, was intolerable.

He decided not to take the Storia, leaving Marr without transportation. He would steal someone else's ride or maybe hitch one on a passing transport. But he could use some food and supplies from the house.

Davan took a last look at the milling herd of lamidas. "Bye. Can't say it's been nice knowing you."

Inside the house, he stuffed vac-pac'd foods into a duffel then went upstairs to grab a few more clothes. He stopped stock-still in the doorway, staring at the rumpled bed. The way it felt, joining together then lying curled up afterward, wasn't like anything he'd experienced before. Davan still didn't understand what was different about this than any other sexual encounter he'd had.

"Keep it light. Have some fun then put it behind you" had always been his motto. And he'd prided himself on keeping cool no matter what the circumstances. In his youth, that cool had often meant the difference between getting busted or managing to slip away. Coming from where he did, emotion wasn't something he could afford.

Now, here he was on the verge of sobbing because of a wrinkled bed. The indentation of Marr's head was still on the pillow. Davan crossed the floor and picked it up, hugging it in his arms and breathing in Marr's scent.

After a moment, he tossed the pillow aside and turned toward the closet to finish his packing, then he closed the duffel and went downstairs without another look at the bed.

Just as he reached the front door, Marr's communicator rang.

Davan waited to see who it was, ludicrously hoping that Marr had found time to call him and say goodbye once more.

"Marr, are you home? I need... Can you help me?" It was Sheah's voice, ragged and broken by sobs.

Davan pressed the button and answered. "Marr's not here. It's me. What's wrong?"

"I think Bree is..." The sentence ended in another sob.

"I'll be right there. Hold on." Davan set the bag in the hall and ran from the house. Sheah sounded like she was falling apart. He slipped behind the drive console of the Storia and started it up.

The neighbors' house was easy to find being the only other one on the road. Davan pulled into the drive and saw Sheah in the front yard, crouching by a man lying on the ground. The Storia had barely stopped before Davan jumped out and raced toward her.

Dropping to his knees, he pressed his fingers to Bree's neck in search of a pulse. His skin was still warm, but his slack face was gray and there was no rush of blood through his carotid artery.

"It's too late. It's too late." Tears streamed down Sheah's red cheeks. Her eyes were swollen and she clenched the front of her husband's shirt in her fists.

"Did you call for a medic?"

She nodded. "But it's too late. He's gone."

Davan put an arm around her shoulders. "What happened?"

"He wanted to feed the lamidas. He gets so tired of sitting around all the time. I was cleaning up the kitchen and after a while, I realized he was taking too long. I came outside and..." She pressed her hand to her mouth to hold another sob.

Davan gripped her tighter. "Sh. It's all right. Cry. You should cry." He didn't know what else to say. Of course it wouldn't be all right. She'd lost her love, her partner, and her life would never be the same. Even a loner like him could imagine her grief. "I'm sorry."

Sheah rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes and inhaled a shaky breath. "He would've been glad it happened like this, outdoors, underneath a sunny sky. We knew it was coming, but somehow I never expected...never believed... Not like this. Not so soon."

"I know." He thought of friends, men he'd joked with over the headset as they flew, who'd been shot down only minutes later. Death came fast. It plucked a man up and carried him off to wherever, maybe to that shiny place he'd seen at the edge of the galaxy.

Davan rubbed her back, but glanced at the road and listened for sirens. When the emergency crew came, he must be gone, but he wanted to stay with her as long as he could.

She lifted Bree's arm and placed it over his chest then sat back on her heels. "At least he's comfortable now, part of the land once more. Do you believe in a life after this one?"

"Sure. You'll see him again. Don't worry." It was what she needed to hear. Whether it was true or not didn't really matter.

Her red hair straggled around her face and strands of it blew into her eyes. She stared at Davan. "Time's short. If you find someone who makes you happy, you got to hang onto him tight."

He nodded.

"Marr's been missing his man so bad. You're not going to make him live through that again, are you?"

The distant wail of sirens floated on the breeze.

"I'd stay if I could. But you know how things are. I can't promise to be there for Marr. I can only promise to try to come back some day." He gave Sheah a quick, strong hug then stood. "I've got to go now. I'm sorry about your husband."

She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Take care of yourself and don't leave him waiting too long."

Davan smiled and held her hand. "I won't. I promise."

"Do you like your Cambia neat or with ice?"

"Either." Marr lowered the stone phallus and took his drink from Riker's hand. He couldn't bring himself to hit the man from behind, and besides, he might need his help to operate the aircraft. "Thanks. Nice sculpture, by the way."

Marr sipped the bitter beverage, coughed and sucked in a breath.

Riker smiled. "Not used to drinking?"

"Not much anymore." Marr pretended to take another sip, while Riker drank deeply. "Have we left atmosphere yet? The ride is really smooth."

"Take a look out the window." Riker called out a command and the curtains above the control panel drew open. A vista of the curving, blue surface of Theon filled the window. Above it was star-spangled blackness. "Looks like we're just heading out."

Marr's stomach churned from seeing the view outside the shelter of the aircraft. The idea that they were completely at the mercy of a hunk of machinery and that only a little metal stood between them and space made him physically dizzy.

Riker laughed and moved closer, slipping an arm around Marr's back. "We're safe. Don't worry. I'm right here with you."

"They must think a lot of you to give you a jet like this. It's an impressive commendation," Marr said.

"I've proved myself a loyal administrator."

"What would they do if they knew about your sexual preference? Would you continue to hold your office?" Marr turned to look at the man beside him.

At his challenging tone, Riker's eyes widened in surprise then narrowed. He let go of Marr and stepped back. "Are you suggesting blackmail? You do understand you can't incriminate me without damaging yourself. Besides, none of my superiors would believe you. I certainly wasn't foolish enough to let anyone know I was taking you with me tonight."

Marr smiled. "That's what I thought." Marr pulled back his fist and plowed it into the other man's face, snapping his head backward. Then he grabbed him by the lapel of his jacket and punched him again.

Riker raised his fists, maybe not as physically weak as Marr had imagined. He lashed out with a left hook, which Marr dodged, but caught him with a kick to the leg. Pain flared from his shin.

But Marr was a head taller and stonier heavier than the other man. As Riker twisted away and lunged toward the command center, Marr grabbed him and hauled him back. He spun the administrator to face him and punched him in the face again.

Blood flowed from Riker's nose and he clapped his hands to his face.

Marr hit him once more to make sure he was incapacitated then clamped one hand around Riker's arm and quickly patted him down in search of a weapon.

The man was clean. He'd been so confident of the way the evening would play out that he probably hadn't even considered arming himself.

Marr fastened his wrists behind his back with a strip of the bathroom towel then bound his ankles together. He pushed the captive down onto a chair and fastened him to it with his belt.

"What do you think you're going to do?" Riker's jaw was reddened and beginning to swell, but he seemed to have maintained a little of his arrogance. "Do you think no one will miss this jet? That no one will miss *me*?"

Marr studied the control panel, trying to figure out how to reverse the coordinates. He hesitated over the touchpad. What if he gave the wrong command and sent the jet hurtling to the planet's surface?

"You know this aircraft is tracked at the nearest control center. They'll notice when it deviates from course. Any second now someone is going to appear on the monitor and ask about the change in direction. You'll never get away with this." Riker's voice was as insistent as a buzzing fly.

So far there'd been no change in direction. Marr continued to pause over the panel, blood pounding in his ears.

"It's not too late. I won't turn you in. We'll have an arrangement, just like I said. We'll pretend none of this happened and you can still be..."

"Your toy? Your obedient servant?" Marr whirled toward the bound man, looming over him with an arm braced on either side of the chair. He reached between the administrator's legs and grabbed hold of his balls, squeezing until Riker yelled. "Is this what you want?"

Riker's eyes went wide and his face red. He reared back from Marr's fury as though it had just occurred to him he might not make it out alive.

That was good. Marr wanted him to be terrified and compliant. He let go of Riker's sac and drew a deep breath as though it was all he could do to control himself. "All right. This is what we're going to do. I'm going to take you to the control panel. You're going to guide me through the process, and we're heading back to Theon."

Marr grabbed his arm and pulled him and the chair across the room. He kept his focus on the control panel, ignoring the starry blackness that filled the window.

Under Riker's direction, Marr typed a line and pressed a button that set them on course back toward the planet's surface. When Marr dared to glance outside, the gentle curve of his home planet was visible again. So far so good.

"Riker1, this is ground control. Your course has changed. Please state your new destination." An impersonal monotone spoke through the com.

Heart thumping, Marr turned to Riker. "Tell them Bardee."

Would they continue tracking beyond that? And how was he going to find Davan? He'd be long gone by now. Without him, Marr couldn't deliver the jet to the rebels. He had no idea where to find them. His mind teemed with questions and he doubted his impetuous decision to seize the jet. Masking fear with harshness, he snarled into his prisoner's face, "Go on. Say it!"

Riker spoke into the set. "A change in plans. On course for Bardee. Riker 1, out."

Marr's gaze swept the console. It didn't appear any more complicated than his farm equipment, but he wasn't sure how to fly manually, which he'd have to do if he needed to search the countryside for Davan.

Another glance at the view before him showed the planet rushing toward his face. Marr's stomach rolled over. They were going to smash into the ground, shattering into a million pieces. But as lake and land, country and city took shape, the aircraft slowed. His stomach settled and he concentrated on the controls again.

"How do I override the auto pilot so I can drive this thing?"

"You don't know what you're doing. You'll kill us both!"

"Then you'd better help me do it right or we both die."

Davan parked the Storia in front of Marr's house then sat for a moment. The vehicle was a sweet ride. It was a pity Marr had never restored the old beauty. Davan climbed from the driver's seat and closed the door.

A shadow swept over him and the hair on his nape rose. He looked up at the sky. A style of jet he'd never seen before, shiny black with sleek lines, hovered fifty feet overhead. The GF insignia marked the craft.

Davan cursed. If he hadn't been spotted yet, he could hide in the barn. If he had, he should act as if he had every right to be there, although it was hardly likely he could pass as a Theon. His other option was to jump back in the Storia and drive like hell, but he could never outrace a jet.

He reached into the waistband of his trousers and thumbed the safety off his weapon. If he was about to be captured or killed, he'd damn sure take down as many of the enemy as he could.

Planting his feet and squaring his shoulders, he stared at the elegant profile of the jet as it settled soundlessly and easily right in Marr's front yard. There were going to be some surprised Tandus in about two seconds.

The hatch opened and stairs unfolded smoothly to the ground with the speed of shuffling cards. He forced his body to relax while his hand loosely gripped his mag-blaster hidden beneath the fabric of his shirt.

Instead of Tandus soldiers swarming from the hatch, Marr bounded down the steps. Davan couldn't have been more shocked if one of the lamidas had given birth to a human. Before he could move, Marr strode over to him and pulled him into his arms in a bone-crushing embrace.

"You're still here!"

Shock and Marr's powerful hug stole his breath away. "What...?" he wheezed when he could inhale. "What happened?"

Marr jerked a thumb at the jet. "I have Riker tied up on board. This is a prototype of a craft the Tandus are building. They could decimate the rebels with these."

"So you stole it?"

"Yes."

He stared at the jet then at Marr. "I'm impressed. And you flew it here by yourself?"

"It wasn't much different from operating a manure spreader, except for the possibility of crashing into the ground. You see, I have my moments. I'm not always a stick in the mud."

Davan smiled as he scanned the sky. "But they must know the jet's been stolen."

"This one was given to Riker. He can go where he likes with it. It should be a while before either he or the jet is missed. You can take the TS50 and Riker to the rebels."

Fixing his gaze on Marr again, Davan asked, "What about you?"

He shook his head and shrugged. "Riker didn't tell anyone he was going to be with me. When the plane goes missing, there's no reason anyone would connect it back to me."

"You think you're safe here?"

"As safe as any of us can be with the Tandus in power."

Davan was ready to fly. His body was eager to board the aircraft and pilot it out of here, but his feet were rooted to the ground. Parting from Marr the first time had been hard enough. "I guess I should go then."

Then he remembered Sheah. "Your neighbor's husband died. That's why I'm still here. She called you, but since you weren't here, I went and stayed with her until the medics arrived."

Marr clicked his tongue and shook his head. "Poor Sheah. She knew this was coming, but it doesn't make it any easier. I should go over and check on her."

And now there really wasn't any more reason for Davan to still be standing there gazing at Marr. He had to say goodbye and go. "I wish..."

"I don't want to..." Marr said at the same time.

Then they both fell silent.

Marr gazed across his fields where a faint blush of green plants poking through the dirt showed. Then he looked at Davan with eyes the same brown as the soil. "There's so much to do here, but...I can't let you go off alone. I want to come with you. I want to help."

Davan couldn't imagine uprooting Marr from his land like some great oak tree being pulled from the ground. "But Sheah needs you. And what about the lamidas? How can you leave everything?" He couldn't believe he was discouraging him.

Marr shook his head. "I'm sorry about Sheah, but she, of all people, will understand. And someone will take over running the farm. The Tandus will make sure of that. "

"This is your life," Davan argued, sweeping out a hand to indicate the land. "All of this. Can you live without it?"

"It's not my life. It's just a place and if I want to keep it, I need to fight for it now." The cold resolve in his voice sent a hot shiver through Davan. He stepped forward and took hold of Marr's hand.

"Then I'll take you anywhere you want to go. Let's fly."

Chapter Eleven

Marr had been wrong in thinking the jet's ride was so smooth he couldn't feel it moving. As they plunged straight down, the G-forces built, flattening skin against bone, compressing Marr's chest until he wanted to scream. But he couldn't draw enough air into his lungs. If he hadn't been strapped into his seat, he'd be tumbling around the cabin like the rest of the objects that weren't fastened down. A lamp flew past his face and crashed against the far wall. Shards from the liquor bottle spun past, scraping his white-knuckled hand on the armrest. He prayed to the elements to keep them alive.

"Hold on," Davan yelled, as he banked right, left, right, up and then down with dizzying dexterity.

Marr stared at Riker belted into the chair opposite his. The man's face was bone-white. Vomit smeared his shirtfront and the lapels of his jacket. A coffee table had fallen sideways, trapping his legs.

A blast hit the aircraft. Marr felt a trembling in his very bones. One of the pursuing C180s had delivered a magnetic blast that had partially penetrated the TS50's shield.

Davan cursed and hunched over the controls. "Problem is we've got no weapon, but don't worry, I can outmaneuver them."

Marr wasn't impressed by the jet. Wasn't it supposed to be the fastest thing in the galaxy? Why were the GF's older, slower aircrafts still on their tail?

"Hold on. We'll be out of this soon," Davan called again as they shot straight up at lightning speed. Even belted in, Marr was nearly sucked from his seat. Through the window, he glimpsed a blur of color then blackness. They'd breached atmo and were soaring through space, soon leaving the Tandus jets behind.

Davan whooped with excitement. "All clear. No way they can catch us now."

Marr took a deep breath into his aching lungs. "But aren't we supposed to be going to the rebel base on Theon?"

"Not with this baby. Best to get it straight to HQ on Antia. They'll want to take her apart and find out how she ticks. Plus I'm sure they'll have lots of questions for our friend here."

Marr unbuckled his belt and went to join Davan by the controls, squatting beside him and resting an arm on the back of his seat.

"Did I mention before how much I hate flying? Well, that just multiplied by about a million."

"Hey, I got us out of a sticky situation, didn't I? You should be thanking me."

Marr ruffled Davan's hair affectionately. "Thanks." Then he pulled his head down and kissed him.

Davan let go of the controller to slide a hand around Marr's neck and hold him steady as the gentle caress of lips grew more passionate. The near loss of each other made the desperate kiss all the sweeter. Both of them were breathless by the time they pulled apart.

"I'd better concentrate," Davan murmured, still gazing at Marr's mouth through half lidded eyes. "We'll have plenty of time for this after we land."

That brought Marr back to the ground with a thump. They were going to land on another planet far from Theon. It might be years, if ever, before he saw his home again. His joy evaporated at the leaden thought.

Davan's focus returned to the sky. Marr rose and went to check on Riker. The man's eyes were closed and his lips were silently moving. Marr pulled the coffee table away from his legs and righted it. Then he grabbed hold of Riker's arm and jostled it.

"Hey, are you all right?"

"No," he answered without opening his eyes.

Marr went to get him some water, setting things back into place as he passed through the room. The interior of the jet had been designed for Riker to entertain dignitaries and politicians not for tactical maneuvers that would send the end tables flying.

In the bedroom leading off the living room, Marr got a clean shirt for Riker from the closet. A glance at the big bed reminded him this was where the evening was intended to end. He shuddered. Taking a leap into the unknown and giving up his home weren't the worst things that could happen.

He untied Riker long enough to let him change then belted him to the chair again.

Riker stared at him with cold, reptilian eyes. "You've made a huge mistake, you know. I would have made things good for you. You could have had your farm and your neighbors', too, if you'd only trusted me. Now you've lost everything, and for what? These rebels are nothing more than thugs who have no hope of winning the war. You must know that."

"I know that you're tied to a chair and we have control of your aircraft," Marr said.

He returned to Davan's side and stood gazing out the window. Before them a pale blue and white orb loomed large against the blackness.

"Damn, this craft is fast. I think I'm in love," Davan said. "We're almost to Antia already. I'll have your feet back on the ground before you know it."

Marr watched the planet grow until it filled his entire vision. They plunged through clouds and skimmed over the vast cobalt blue surface of one of the Antian oceans like an enormous seagull.

Davan transmitted an open message over the com, alerting the base to their presence. "Hold fire. This is *not* a Galactic Forces vessel. I'm Lieutenant Davan Siedal. I've commandeered this craft for the Alliance."

He repeated the message as a fleet of C20s swarmed around them. Marr was impressed by Davan's calm, authoritative tone. There was little trace of the teasing, playful man he'd come to know.

"Repeat. Hold fire. Friendly aircraft entering Antian air space. Requesting permission to land."

"Permission granted," said a smooth voice over the com.

The convoy of C20s escorted them as they approached the port of Benthin. Marr could see several craft flying in formation on their left. They were a beautiful sight and so was the vast, white city below. He almost forgot to worry about how far above the ground they were.

It had been nearly dusk on Theon, but appeared to be midday on Antia. Marr was nearly blinded by the glare of sunlight from the many-windowed buildings. They called Benthin the City of Light, and he could see why.

The flat, black surface of the port came into view. Marr sat and belted in, keeping his eyes away from the ground rushing up at them. After they docked, Davan leaped from his seat and opened the hatch.

Marr joined him at the door, both of them with their palms open in surrender. Blue-uniformed soldiers crowded the tarmac at the base of the gangplank with weapons drawn. Marr's heart pounded at the sight of so many mag-blasters pointed at them, but it seemed the show of force was merely a formality.

"Don't worry," Davan muttered. "If they'd intended to shoot us, it would've been when we entered air space."

Marr hadn't imagined what the rebel forces might look like. Other than Davan's flight suit, he'd only seen the gray Galactic Forces uniforms. It was a thrill to encounter Alliance soldiers, all so diverse in face and form and representing many planets across the galaxy. Marr's hands trembled a little as he held them upraised and descended the steps. He didn't believe they'd suddenly be executed, but the situation was tense.

Another contingent of uniformed people emerged from the terminal and hurried across the tarmac toward them. Several soldiers flanked a man with a hatchet-sharp profile and insignia denoting him as an officer. The group came to a halt in front of them.

Davan saluted with a snap of his arm. He'd once mentioned to Marr he didn't consider himself much of a soldier since he didn't care to follow rules. But now, despite being dressed in Marr's cast-off clothes, Davan appeared very professional.

The hatchet-faced man studied them and the aircraft then said succinctly, "Report, Lieutenant Seidal."

"Shot down in Theon airspace, sir. This man hid me until my leg healed. He had an opportunity to take this prototype jet from a local politician. The Tandus Administrator is tied up on board. GF intends to manufacture an entire fleet like this." Even Davan's speech pattern was more clipped. Marr was impressed and rather aroused by his military bearing.

The officer nodded. "Come with us for debriefing, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

“And your name?” The man turned his keen-eyed gaze on Marr.

“Marr...” His voice cracked and he started again. “Marr Hingo. I’m a farmer.” *Or I was up until today.*

The officer beckoned them forward, and several of the soldiers surrounded Marr and escorted him toward the building. He lost sight of Davan as they took him inside and then to a windowless room for questioning.

Everything was a blur after that. A half dozen uniformed personnel grouped around a conference table peppered him with questions. He sat alone at the other end of the table feeling guilty as if he’d done something wrong. As he answered question after repetitive question, he began to grow angry. He was here of his own volition, had risked his life and his freedom to bring them the damn prototype and they were acting as if he were a criminal.

At last, when a woman asked him for the third time exactly how he’d seized control of the jet, Marr slammed his palm on the table. “I’ve answered all your questions. I’m exhausted. It’s probably three in the morning on Theon. I need some rest and if you can think of anything new to ask me, we’ll start again tomorrow. Right now I demand dinner and a place to sleep.” He held his breath, hoping he hadn’t earned himself a cot in a cell, but his anger seemed to have its intended effect.

“Pardon us, Mr. Hingo. We appreciate your help. The information you’ve brought us is extremely valuable if it’s all true.”

“Well, I assume you’ve got Riker somewhere. I’m telling you exactly what the man said to me.” Marr looked from one face to the next. They were expressionless, revealing nothing. For all they knew, he might be a spy sent by the Tandus. He could hardly blame them for looking on his testimony with suspicion.

He felt like he’d run all the way from Theon to Antia and then been run over by a refuse transport. He feared any second he’d either pass out or burst into tears like a two-year-old kept up past his nap time.

“We’ll resume questioning in the morning,” the blonde woman said. “But we’ll need to keep you isolated until then. Please, try to think of yourself as a guest, not a prisoner.”

Marr nodded wearily.

He was treated well, given a small room and a filling meal. If the door was locked, he didn’t test the handle to find out. He fell across the bed without removing his shoes and didn’t wake until morning.

Chapter Twelve

Davan was glad to be back on Antia. He hadn't visited his home planet in a couple of years Antian time. Probably more if he added together all his chaotic bits of life on various planets and space stations. The city looked pretty much as he remembered it, maybe cleaner and shinier with all the new veri-glass buildings that had been erected.

After several days of questioning, he and Marr were released, allowed to leave the base and travel freely about the city. Davan was on leave, but would soon be recalled to active duty. There weren't enough pilots and he was needed. But for now, he had some free time to show Marr the city.

They walked the high-rent district with its shops and entertainments then Davan took Marr to the neighborhood of his youth. It seemed as if the same drug dealers and prostitutes haunted these streets of derelict buildings and trash-strewn alleys. Vendors hawking stolen wares, hard cases strutting with their crew colors showing, folks lingering on apartment stoops were all comfortingly familiar.

"So, what do you think?"

Marr's eyes were wide as he took in the slum. He looked tense and uncomfortable. "It's different. Kind of closed in and, uh..."

"Dirty?" Davan finished. "Place is a shithole, isn't it? Makes your lamida pens seem classy." He put his arm around Marr's back, grateful to be walking by his side. He should have left him where he belonged, on the farm, but was glad to have him with him.

"Have you seen enough? We can stop somewhere if you want before we go back to the base."

"I'm not really hungry." Marr stared at a three-legged dog taking a piss on a drugged-up nodder sitting in a doorway.

"I was thinking of someplace more private than a restaurant." Davan smiled.

Marr dragged his gaze away from the charming tableau and looked at him. "Private sounds good."

Checking into a cheap motel took Davan back to his youth. In fact, the place he chose was one he'd used before and memories he'd as soon forget flashed in his mind.

Almost before they were through the door, he ripped Marr's shirt open and attacked his chest with teeth and tongue. His hands slid over the wall of muscle, fingers moving through crisp, black hair and over smooth skin. He latched onto one of Marr's nipples and sucked. Marr's heavy hand settled on his head and he sucked in a breath.

Davan treated one nipple then the other before pulling away to look at Marr's face. His brown eyes were nearly closed and his lips parted. He leaned to kiss Davan, a ferocious clash of mouths that crushed Davan's lips against his teeth. Marr pressed him back against the motel door. Trapped between hard plexi-board and solid manflesh, Davan's cock swelled and yearned toward the other man's body. He could feel Marr's erection through far too many layers of clothes.

Davan hooked his hands over Marr's shoulders and clung to him.

After a few minutes of passionate kissing, Marr set him down on his feet. Davan hadn't even noticed that he'd lifted him off them. Davan quickly stripped off his clothes then pulled Marr's shirt down his arms. He stroked his palms over the beautifully sculpted muscles of the man's arms and torso and pressed kisses everywhere while he unfastened his pants and pulled them down. His pulse leaped, as it always did at the sight of Marr's physical perfection, but deeper than that was a feeling beyond lust. It radiated from a hot lump in his chest and filled him with glowing warmth. Comfort and safety were all snarled up with attraction until he couldn't separate the strands anymore.

He knelt in front of Marr. "We can pretend that you picked me up from the street. Tell me what you want and I'll do it, sir."

Easy to fall back into old patterns. How many times had he said those words to some trick? How many times had he settled to his knees like this, opened a man's fly, released his throbbing cock and grasped it in his hand?

"Davan." Marr's voice cut through the memories. He cupped his face, urging him to look up. "I don't want to play that kind of game."

"It's hot and dirty. Every guy's fantasy." Davan rubbed his hand down the length of Marr's erection.

"Not mine. I don't want some rent boy down on his knees in a sleazy motel. I want you. Just you and me together." His eyes were lust-glazed, but serious and searching.

Davan hesitated, afraid his words would change things between them, but needing to say them. "You should probably know that I did this kind of thing growing up. Until I learned how to fly, my life was...sordid, I guess you'd call it."

Marr nodded and brushed his fingers through Davan's hair.

"I'm not apologizing. It's just what I did, sometimes in exchange for favors, sometimes for cash or drugs or just for fun. But I thought it might bother you, that it might make a difference in how you feel. A little late to tell you now, I know."

Marr pulled away from Davan's hand and knelt to face him. There was no escaping his concentrated gaze that offered so much: concern, understanding, acceptance, but no disgust. He lovingly cradled Davan's cheek in his big hand.

"That's part of your life and everything you've done makes you who you are now. I can't reject it without rejecting you, and I'd *never* do that."

His stress on the word “never” made Davan’s chest ache. Marr didn’t make decisions on a whim, and he’d chosen to be with him.

“Come here now.” Marr took him in his arms and pulled him close.

They clung together for a long time until their bodies reacted to the closeness and the cuddle turned into something else. Davan’s dick lay beside Marr’s, pressed between their groins. He rocked his hips, rubbing against warm skin and wiry hair.

Marr rose and shed the rest of his clothes then reached for Davan’s hand. He drew him up and over to the bed. Lying on their sides facing one another, they gazed into each other’s eyes. Davan had always thought of sex as a private thing, a way for him to get off with the help of another body. But sharing it with Marr the act became an expression of deep, profound feelings such as he’d never experienced.

Reaching between them, Marr held both of their cocks in one big fist and glided it up and down. Davan’s lust grew under that hot friction and he pushed into his lover’s hand. When his eyes drifted closed, Marr wouldn’t allow him to shut him out.

“Keep looking at me. Stay with me.”

Davan met those brown eyes as the warm waves of pleasure in his cock rose higher with each stroke. He gripped Marr’s waist hard. He wanted to plunge wildly, pump his hips like a rutting animal, but this wasn’t that kind of lovemaking. Slow and insistent, his excitement mounted. Hearing and seeing Marr’s pleasure, too, in his soft groans and tense expression brought Davan to the edge of orgasm.

Only then did he look from Marr’s eyes down to the hand wrapped around their cocks: Davan’s pale, Marr’s thick and dark. Both engorged heads oozed come, lubricating the slide of Marr’s fist. It looked sexy and felt amazing.

Then Marr released his own cock and gripped tighter around Davan’s, milking him like one of the lamidas, coaxing him to come.

“Let go now. Give it all to me.” His rumbling murmur made Davan’s skin prickle and burn. He gritted his teeth and pushed and ecstasy sparkled through him like a meteor shower. Davan gasped and shuddered through an abrupt and powerful release.

It seemed his emotions had spilled out along with his come, for when he was finished Davan felt tears on his cheeks, and his heart was open and aching. Was love supposed to hurt like this?

Exhaling a long breath, he blinked and focused on Marr’s face once more. The moment was too intense. He had to break it with a light tone and a grin. “Well, that was special.”

“It was,” Marr agreed without irony.

Then Marr spread Davan’s legs apart, pulling him closer. His cock slid along the groove between Davan’s cheeks.

Still quaking from his climax, Davan felt a wave of excitement. He wanted Marr to be buried deep inside him, filling and claiming him. He wanted to belong to Marr forever, although the idea frightened

him. To be part of another man's life, giving up his freedom to roam at will was a huge commitment. But he was ready for it and open to it now.

"Do it," he whispered harshly. "Take me now."

With Davan's leg hooked over his hip, Marr angled his body between his legs. His cock bumped at Davan's opening and strained to push inside. He wanted to so badly he was ready to burst, and when Davan whispered, "Take me" in that strangled, desperate voice, Marr didn't hold back. He pushed into the clenching entrance and filled him deeply. Davan's body surrounded him, hot and so very tight. Marr grunted and pushed deeper still.

Then they were locked together. Two became one, an unlikely pair, but a perfect complement.

Marr slipped his hands down Davan's sweaty back and held his ass to keep them anchored together. He looked into Davan's changeable eyes which were currently dark and focused on his. There was a sweet vulnerability in Davan's expression that Marr had never seen there before.

Would those eyes change tomorrow? Would this man of the skies ever truly settle down in one place with one person? It didn't matter. Not now. He would share his love with Davan right at this moment, and he wouldn't worry about the future.

Marr began to move, pulling his length out and pushing back in, drawn deep by clenching muscles. Slow and easy then faster, he thrust. It didn't last long. It couldn't. He wanted Davan too badly.

Their bellies slapped together as Marr pumped faster. Davan groaned and muttered something. The random sparks of light inside Marr focused and became one white-hot beam of pleasure. His balls drew tight and his breathing ragged. He gripped Davan even tighter, grunting with each push. And then the light shuddered through him, fragmenting again into myriad sparkles. *Like a meteor shower*, he thought.

Marr groaned as he pulsed deep inside his lover. He offered his love, the base physical and intangible emotion entwined. The nature of the two bodies coupling was strange, but what it signified was even stranger—two souls offering themselves to one another. Marr was swept away on waves of bliss, tumbling through space as he had on the aircraft. But this was a much more pleasant ride. He smiled as he came in for a landing once more.

Opening his eyes, he disengaged from Davan's body.

Davan smiled and gazed at him. His eyes were silver again. "We're getting pretty good at this."

"A little more practice and it should be perfect." The banter came easily to his lips, reminding him of Sasch and their camaraderie and closeness. He'd never thought to find that with another man and still felt almost guilty that he had.

"I like you, you know." Davan touched the side of his face. "Quite a lot."

"I like you, too. Very much."

And that was enough for now.

Marr lay flat on his back with Davan half draped across him listening to the hum of the air exchanger which puffed a cool breeze over their heated flesh. He was nearly asleep when Davan's voice roused him.

"Are you sorry you left Theon?"

"No. It was what I needed to do, but now I don't know quite what to do with myself. I mean, you'll be busy flying, but I can't quite imagine myself in combat."

"There are other ways you could serve. Like you said, people still have to eat. Maybe you could help set up a farming cooperative here. Antia's economy is mostly based on technology, but there's land that could be producing food."

"Yeah?" For the first time since he'd left home, Marr felt like he might have a purpose. What Davan suggested was definitely something he could do.

"Guess this is as good a time as any to tell you I'm back on active duty and may be stationed on the Theon base again. I have to go where they send me."

Of course, he'd known it was coming, but Marr's stomach hurt at the thought of the danger Davan would be facing once more. It was all the more reason for him to find his own work to do to help the cause.

Davan traced circles through Marr's chest hair with one fingertip. "Don't worry. I'll come back to you as often as I can."

"I'll be here waiting for you," Marr promised.

A smile curved the Antian's lips and his eyes shone gold. "That's good to hear."

Epilogue

“Water, Fire, Soil and Air, bestow your blessings on this growing season.” Marr called on the elements as he sprinkled water, lit fire, sifted dirt and inhaled air. “Bring safety and harmony to us all.”

It was the first growing season since the destruction of the Tandus, his first spring back on his home planet and his own land. After two years, it was good to be tilling his own fields rather than helping someone else plant their crops. The soil here was different. It looked, smelled and felt different, richer and more fertile than any he’d found on other worlds.

A shadow flitted over the ground and Marr looked up, shielding his eyes against the sun. Davan’s jet flew across the cloudless Theon sky. The pilot was back for another stretch of days—beautiful days and blissful nights when they would be together. Operating a transport out of Bardee gave Davan enough air time to satisfy his need for flight, but brought him home to Marr in between. It was the perfect arrangement.

Marr glanced at the seeder and realized there was no way he was getting any work done today. Once more a drop-in aviator would postpone planting season for a day.

As he brushed his hands together, letting the last of the dirt drift away on the breeze, Marr knew he was a part of this planet in an integral way. He could believe again in the elemental spirits inhabiting all worlds. They moved in him.

But if he was part of the ground, he was also part of the air now. His lover, his life was a flyer with one foot anchored on the ground and the rest of him reaching for the stars.

Wiping his hands on his trousers, Marr turned from the field and walked toward the house to welcome Davan home.

About the Author

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To save the one they love, they're going in with spells blazing...

Lions' Pride

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Duals and Donovans: The Different, Book 1

Elissa Donovan is a real green witch—when she and her lion-shapeshifter husband have sex, the blazing heat is recycled to warm their house. Now her beloved Jude has been kidnapped by a shadowy government agency, and the last place she can turn for help is her high-powered family, who considers her magical mediocrity.

When Rafe Benedict gets Elissa's call for muscle to back up her magic, he risks his law enforcement career to answer. He's spent a lifetime hiding his Dual ability, but something about Elissa and Jude's magic awakens the cougar within him.

Tempting, bronzed Rafe is the perfect fuse for Elissa's sex-fueled magic. Danger lies in breaking her vows; joining with anyone other than her true mate could not only send her marriage up in flames, it could burn out her powers in a last, all-or-nothing explosion. But Jude is worth the risk. And for Rafe, potential heartbreak is nothing next to the chance to help the two people he's coming to love.

First, though, Rafe needs a crash course in Cougar...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Lions' Pride:

The two men watched out the window as Elissa drove away. Then Rafe went back to alternately fiddling with his gun and pacing. Jude picked a magazine at random from a rack by one of the chairs. It turned out to be a year-old copy of Good Housekeeping, but he forced himself to read recipes and parenting advice and articles about people dealing with ordinary problems like bankruptcy and cancer.

The distraction only worked so long.

"How much longer do you think she'll be?" Jude tossed the magazine aside and focused his energy on not wringing his hands or biting his nails or some other unmanly show of the jitters.

And not staring too hard at Rafe.

He did better with the not-wringing-his-hands part than with not staring.

Rafe was pacing, too, and watching him in motion was anything but calming. Too damn easy to imagine the muscles moving under his clothes, too easy to see the cat inside the human-seeming form. Too damn easy to remember pumping into his gorgeous ass.

Or to wonder, as a way of not obsessing about Elissa's absence, how weird and yet hot it would be to let Rafe fuck him.

That was almost as scary in its way as everything else going on, even if it was more the fun, roller-coaster flavor of scary.

Jude repeated the question, phrasing it a little differently. “When do you think she’ll be back?” Maybe he’d stop pacing while he talked, and Jude could stop imagining Rafe’s body over his.

No such luck. Now he was running his fingers through his hair as he paced, calling attention to its black silk texture. Cop-short though it was, it still managed to look sexily out of control. Just what Jude didn’t need.

“She hasn’t been gone all that long. She’s fine. Relax.”

Easy for Rafe to say.

“I know. I’d know if something happened to her, like she does with me.” *Like either of us would with you now, like it or not.* “It’s just... Dammit, she keeps putting herself on the line for me. For us.”

“This time she’s just buying food—unless you want to eat worn-out furniture? I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to risk hunting unless we’re really in the boonies.” Rafe raised an eyebrow. “I guess we are in the boonies, but I mean farther in the boonies. Or in Canada.”

“But it’s just that...” He couldn’t speak the words. Out loud, they’d sound too corny, too sentimental. *“I hate having her out of our sight.”*

It came off better in silentspeech, with all the right overtones of “a pride divided is a pride endangered”. And none of what he was afraid might come out if he spoke English, that now their world had shrunk to the three of them versus, basically, everyone. He needed Elissa in ways he’d never imagined. He needed Rafe, too, and when Elissa wasn’t around, he needed Rafe too much, wanted to cling and act in ways he dared to do with Elissa, but not with another man.

Silentspeech was safer.

Rafe nodded. “I hear you.” He could pick up Jude’s silentspeech while in human form, but hadn’t yet perfected the knack of answering that way. “I’d rather stay together, even though what she said made sense.”

“Maybe she’ll get steak,” Jude said, trying to distract himself. “I could use some raw meat. Bet you could, too.”

Rafe flashed a lecherous grin. “I’ve got your raw meat right here.” Jude couldn’t help chuckling, and Rafe said, “Got you to laugh. See, everything will be fine.”

Rafe didn’t stop pacing, though.

“Then why are you wearing a trail in the floor and twitching like Trickster dropped ants down your pants?”

“Hey, just because I understand doesn’t mean I have to like it. She’ll be back soon. Hour or less. With that steak you’re talking about and, if we’re lucky, hot coffee all around. Then we can hit the road.”

“Coffee.” Jude sighed, but though coffee sounded wonderful, it wasn’t really coffee that was making him sigh.

“Soon” couldn’t be too soon for Jude.

Every minute apart from Elissa was torture at this point.

And every minute alone with Rafe was torture of a different kind.

As long as Elissa was with them, he could accept the attraction to Rafe. As long as Elissa was in the bed, too, he could touch Rafe and still feel like himself. It wasn't even a question of feeling straight. Dual culture didn't care much about that shit, thinking of it as human silliness that came from not understanding the Powers didn't give a hairball what you did as long as everyone involved had fun. If anything, he felt dumb for not at least giving it a try when he was single and occasionally got hit on by guys.

The sinking realization that it was becoming more than sex, on the other hand, terrified him almost as much as Shaw did.

Tackling the guy and fucking him into next week? That was just good clean dirty fun, with a bonus of turning Elissa on and helping rebuild her magical reserves. Daydreaming about Rafe staying with them, building a new life with them after they got to Canada? Now that was scary shit. He'd never known a lion family with more than one adult male in it, except for the ones that were all guys and that was another ball of wax. Or bottle of lube.

On the other hand, foxes pulled it off all the time. Fox dual women were collectors of fine men and fox guys liked it that way, especially since most of them weren't averse to another fine man, either.

Hells, if it worked for foxes...

Jude hadn't realized how hard and how viscerally he was thinking until Rafe stopped pacing and said, "Does Elissa know you have a thing for fox women?"

Bluff! "I don't, really, but did you know fox girls can keep their ears and tails when they shift to wordside? It's cute as hell."

Rafe grinned. "Sounds sexy to me, like one of those Japanese cartoons. If I'm reborn as a dual, I want to be a Japanese woman. I'm sure it helps you get laid over there, considering the thing they seem to have for chicks with tails."

"You are a bad, bad man."

Rafe stopped pacing, shook his head, ran his fingers through his hair again, but slowly and deliberately, obviously aware he had an audience. "You don't know the half of it yet." He licked his lips.

The world narrowed to Jude and Rafe. Doomed. Jude leaned forward, hoping Rafe would pick up the way his muscles twitched with excitement like a cat getting ready to pounce, and at the same time hoping he wouldn't.

Despite the chill in the house, Rafe refused to wear a coat, just a cream long-sleeved T-shirt that, being Jude's, was too big, but still set off his dark complexion, and black jeans, also a bit too big. Jude had been trying not to remember how the muscles barely concealed by the soft shirt felt under his hands, how the bulge tucked inside those worn jeans felt in his mouth, how it felt to explode inside Rafe's ass. To

wonder if he dared let Rafe try fucking him, even though that might cross a line into unknown territory that looked tempting and treacherous in equal measure.

He'd tried not to think about all that. Now he admitted to himself he was failing.

He bit back the words that wanted to come out. It would be rude, if nothing else, to get something going on while Elissa wasn't there.

"Elissa won't be back for an hour," Rafe said. "You deserve longer than that—but it'll do for a start."

Trickster's furry ass, Rafe was getting as hard to shut out of his head as Elissa was, or he read body language way too well.

"I can't lie to her," he said, knowing Rafe would fill in any degree of non-sequitur.

"No lies." Rafe drew closer, close enough that the heat of his body radiated to Jude's. "Just getting started without her. She'll catch up. Who knows when we'll have a safe place to play again?"

He lifted Jude's shirt, put surprisingly hot hands against his bare skin. Touching, his silent speech became strong enough Jude could see what he had in mind, what he was craving. It went straight to his cock at the same time it made his stomach flip with anxiety.

Rafe wanted to fuck him. Wanted it badly.

Wanted it enough that the want seeped into Jude, bridging the gap between his curiosity and lust and his fears.

He took a deep breath.

It was just another kind of sex. Edgy, but hot in the way edgy things sometimes were. Either he'd love it or he wouldn't, but didn't he want to get past the fear and find out? He'd known too much real fear lately to let nerves about the unknown get to him.

He trusted Rafe with his life and his wife. Why not his ass?

He'd do it, damn it.

The only man he can trust is the killer he can't stop thinking about.

Walk Among Us

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A Calling of Souls Story

As an artist in New York City, Calvin Shumacher finally has the life he's always wanted. In fact, only one thing can get him to come back to Illinois—his father's funeral. All he wants is to bury his dad and hightail it back to New York, but a sniper at the graveyard puts those plans on indefinite hold.

So does Matthew Soto. The gorgeous gunman who speaks of monsters wearing human faces. And predicts there won't be a body for police to find.

Calvin doesn't know what to think when Matthew claims he didn't do anything wrong. All he knows is that this man's haunted eyes seem to pierce right into his soul.

But as each of Matthew's assertions comes true, Calvin slowly realizes this killer could be the only thing standing between him and an unspeakable evil...

Warning: Contains explicit m/m sex, violence, and an ex-priest wondering how he can change the world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Walk Among Us:

He never would have found the house on his own. Maybe if his rental had GPS in it, he could have done it. But the directions Matthew dictated to him over the phone had him pulling off the highway ten minutes outside of Watson Park, and then winding down a two-lane road with tall trees on both sides. Dusk stole what little sunlight filtered through the branches. By the time he found the driveway, the partly cloudy sky was nearly pitch black.

Matthew lived in a two-story farmhouse, complete with small barn set further back on the property. The porch light was on, illuminating the porch that ran the length of the house. Screens protected it from the night bugs, but it was the figure sitting on the top step that Calvin noticed as he bounced up the dirt drive.

His forearms rested on his knees, and his obsidian gaze tracked the car's path as it came to a stop. Matthew didn't stand when Calvin got out, and he didn't rise as he approached.

"The body's gone." Calvin didn't bother with a greeting. "Just like you said."

"Did you doubt me?"

"How was I supposed to believe you?"

The cant of his mouth might have been a trick of the light. "It's funny how an artist can find faith in beauty, but not in the word."

An odd choice of phrase, Calvin thought. But it didn't change the fact that Matthew hadn't answered his question.

"The police never identified him. How did you know that?"

"I've already answered these questions. Asking me again isn't going to change what I said."

When Matthew rose and turned to go back into the house, Calvin darted forward and grabbed his arm. He yanked him back, forcing their eyes to meet, but didn't let go, even when he felt just how hard the muscle was within his grip.

"You said he wasn't human. A monster. Tell me what that means and I'll leave you alone."

The smile this time was no illusion. "That's not exactly incentive," Matthew said softly. "I like your company."

Though the other man hadn't moved, Calvin felt the pressure of a foot against his own, a ghost of a memory taking form without any additional contact. "Then let's try this. Tell me what that means and I'll stay."

The offer took Matthew by surprise. His nostrils flared, and his gaze ducked to the hold Calvin still maintained on his arm. Calvin thought that might be it, that he'd pushed too far and Matthew was going to either snap or make it more than necessary for him to leave.

Neither happened.

"What it means is exactly what I said. There's no body because it never really existed. The monsters I mentioned are literal, not metaphorical."

The chilly night cut into Calvin's lungs with each breath, but it wasn't enough to make him retreat to the warmth of his car. Neither was the answer that wasn't really an answer.

"I saw it," he argued. "We all saw it. The police hauled it away."

"But you didn't know it. Nobody recognized him."

"And you're saying you did?"

"I'm saying..." His voice drifted away, his gaze softening as he weighed his words. Matthew took a deep breath and looked off into the darkness, focused on something else, something that wasn't Calvin. "I see things that aren't human. Demons. Almost every time I get in a crowd of more than a handful of people. Like yesterday."

Calvin shook his head. "I don't believe in demons."

"No, of course you don't." The eyes that swiveled back to meet his were soft and sad. "You're an artist. You see shapes. Forms. Color. You believe in beauty, not the blackness that walks among us. You're lucky that way."

"You make your own luck."

"Really? You don't think what you have is a gift?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with luck."

“But it does. How many people do you think see the world the way you do? You look around, and you see your own art.” A smile haunted his mouth. “I’d bet you even look at me and don’t see what’s real.”

Calvin swallowed against the tightness of his throat. That sense of being transparent Matthew had evoked at the diner was back. Added to the flush of desire that refused to go away, it left him struggling to maintain his composure.

“Can you even imagine something not nearly as pleasant?” Matthew continued. “What if you saw evil coalesce into something tangible, something that looked real but wasn’t? Something that wore a human face but fed on our grief until it destroyed everything it touched. Hatred. Death. The destruction of everything good and decent about the world we walk in. When I talk about monsters, about evil, that’s what I mean. Demons.” He sucked in a deep breath. “You might see a blank canvas, waiting for you to fill it, but that’s what *I* see, every single day.”

He spoke with the low, fervent passion of a believer. Calvin had heard many such speeches from others, though the topic might vary. Two days earlier, he would have walked away from the crazy and not looked back.

He still should. Because crazy had a way of infecting when you least expected it to.

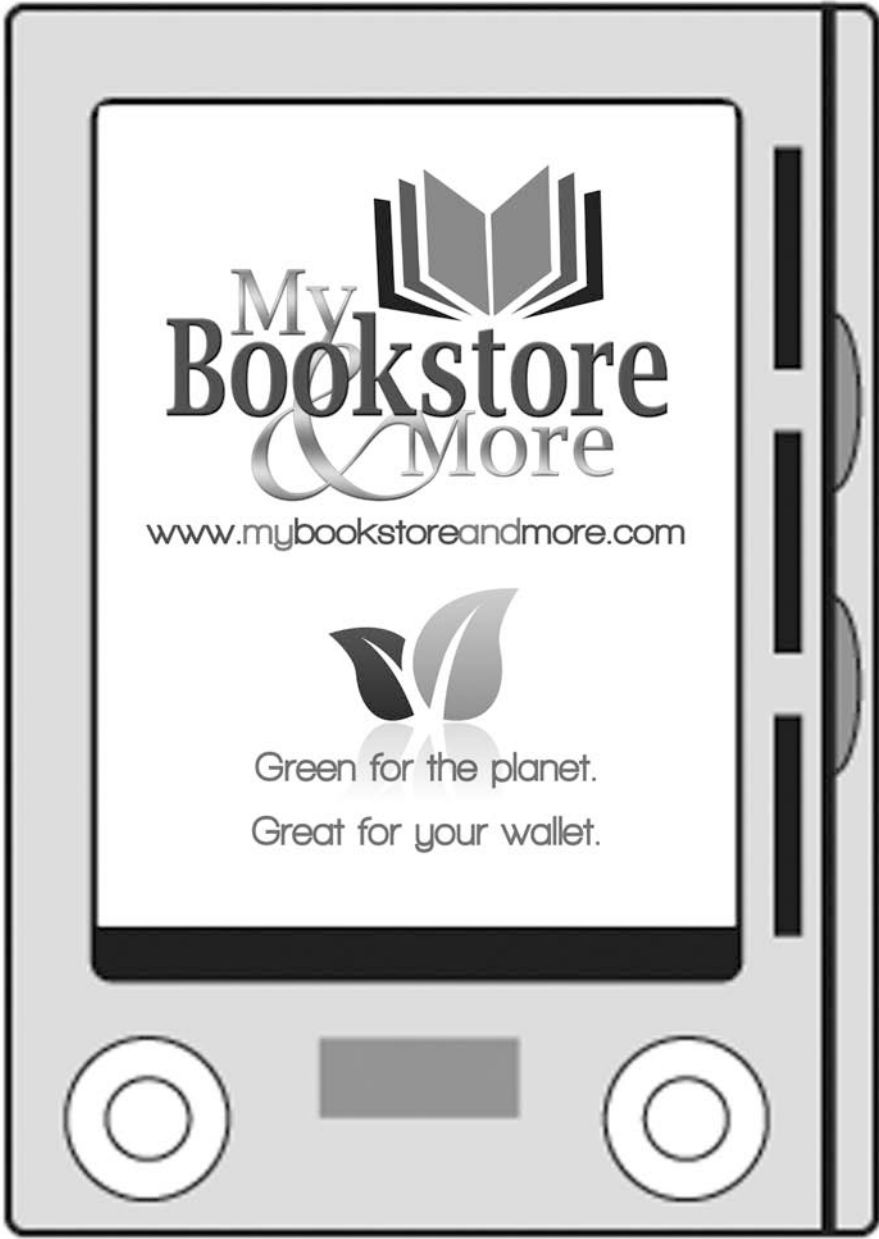
Two days ago, he’d been a different man. He hadn’t been touched by this murder/not a murder. He hadn’t yet watched his father get lowered into the ground. He hadn’t stared into eyes that looked like they’d witnessed hell itself.

Hell itself. Demons. Walking among us.

A man who didn’t see shapes and forms and colors that might not be there wouldn’t believe him.

This man wasn’t sure that he did anyway.

But he wanted to.



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