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Caging the Beast

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Creations

CAGING THE BEAST

Marie Harte

Author's Note

This story takes place a short year after *Creation's Control*. However, because I apparently can't add, *Creation's Control* should have taken place in 3955, not year 2955. Thus 3956 is the correct year for Tarn's story to unfold. Sorry for the confusion, or for adding more confusion, as the case may be.

Chapter One

Colony6, the Outer Rims, year 3956

"This one. He's huge. I think he might stand a fighting chance against the beast." Against the din of the bloated guard's surroundings, his words had to be shouted to be heard.

"Just make sure to put him in a challenging round first. Can't have him going against the beast until he's shown his mettle. It'll drive the bets higher, you'll see."

"Good point, Yorum." A hard punch knocked Tarn to his knees. "You hear that, slave? You want out of this stinkin' place, win your bouts."

Inside a fire lit cavern that made the primitive jungles of Mardu look tame, hundreds of grimy and vermin-laced men pressed against one another, hoping for a better look at the latest offerings in pugilistic entertainment. A half dozen vidscreens hovered in the air over the crowd in random spots, allowing a view of the battles ongoing in the three caged rings in the centre of the cavern, but they didn't showcase the newest group of slaves bound in chains, being led towards the night's entertainment.

Tarn rose unsteadily to his feet. Blood dripped into his left eye and his ribs hurt. The pain they'd inflicted surprised him, mostly because it took a lot to hurt an Ebrellion. His race primarily existed outside the Vrail System, away from these human slavers and their barbaric practices. Not that his kind could brag about being so much nobler, but Ebrellions didn't stand for slavery. Enemies met certain death. Those who wouldn't work to earn their keep suffered harsh imprisonment in hopes of reforming them into worthwhile citizens.

His own presence in the Vrail System on planet Mardu kept the peace between rebellious Ebrellions hunting for mates and the few System lawmakers who knew his kind still existed.

Hence his arrival in this godforsaken world. A favour for his newly found relation, his nephew Drekk. Drekk had other pressing business on planet Mardu, where he and his mate worked for lawmen – peacemakers who had no jurisdiction this far into the Outer Rim. The

lawless area on the edge of the Vrail System invited chaos and depravity. Tarn glanced around him and imagined this was just a taste of what was to come.

Drekk, you owe me big for this.

"In you go," one of the slave handlers shoved him into the caged cell and slammed the barred door shut behind him.

The raised platform consisted of a door on each end, metal bars along the walls and ceiling, and a *machenite* floor, no doubt courtesy of stolen Eyran technology. *Machenite* had a firmness at odds with its ability to give, which made it the perfect flooring for the fighting realms.

Leave it to the slavers to have an eye for detail.

Tarn wiped his own eyes clear of blood, stood up straight, and stared at the giant male they expected him to battle. A Ragga? Though this man hailed from a planet where the strongest men in the System were found, the brutish slave would fall too easily and too quickly should Tarn fight at full strength. With a sigh, he prepared to engage.

Something to break the doldrums of his recent time on Mardu, at least. With the Ebrellion skirmishes almost nil, Tarn had grown tired of tending that ragged bar in Four Walls. But after a few days in slaver hands, he wasn't sure this type of excitement was all that much better.

The slave before him screamed out a challenge and rushed him. The fool didn't even take the time to study his opponent, to measure him for weaknesses or vulnerabilities. Pathetic.

Tarn allowed him one punch. He even pretended to lose his breath from the blow to his stomach. Before the Ragga could hammer him again, he retaliated. A swift punch to the man's face and a knee to his groin took him to the floor.

The scent of body odour, blood, and stale ale assaulted him all at once, and Tarn shook his head to break free of his need to shift into a more defensive form. No shapeshifting and no teleporting, not until he did what he'd been sent here to do.

The Ragga he'd laid out groaned and rose on wobbly legs to his feet. "You *drun*. I'm going to kill you for that." He made a fist and uttered another horrifying battle cry.

Chants of *Loen, Loen* filled the area around the metal cage.

"Don't tell me *you're* the current champion?" Tarn sneered, disappointed he wouldn't receive a decent fight. Stars, it had been a year since he'd engaged anyone worthy of respect,

and those had been rogue Ebrellions. "You fight like a half blind Melan." The popular insult had its intended effect.

The Ragga dove at him.

Tarn let him make contact, and they rolled to the ground amidst cheering and shouting from the crowd. Loen landed a few more blows before Tarn had had enough. He caught the male with an elbow to his back. A sharp snap sounded very loud to Tarn's enhanced hearing.

Loen groaned and lay still, breathing heavily against the pain filling his aura with enough brilliance to blind an Ebrellion.

Tarn glanced away and into the eyes of Yorum through the cage bars.

"Not bad for a first fight. Now try that one." Yorum grinned through brown, broken teeth and nodded to a spot behind Tarn.

Rolling onto his belly and regaining his feet, Tarn met the next slave. A Zeiren, by the look of him. Tall and lean, with angular features and a decent fighting stance.

Tarn gave this fight twice as much time as the last one before defeating his opponent. When finished, he glanced at Yorum again.

"Not bad." The guard appeared pleased. "I like you, Tarn. I think we're going to be real good friends."

Not in this lifetime. "When do I get a rest and some food?" His metabolism felt off. His ribs remained cracked, his flesh bruised, and his blood continued to flow, now not only from a cut on his forehead, but from his mouth and knuckles as well. Not good. If his wounds continued unabated, he'd be unable to stop his transformation into a stronger, more sustainable form.

And blow his cover all to hell.

"One more bout and then a small test. To see what he thinks of you."

"What who thinks of me?"

Yorum didn't answer. Guards dragged the unconscious slave from the fight and gave him another. This one carried a knife.

Irritated at having to prove himself, Tarn didn't hold back. He punched the male full in the face, disarmed him, and stabbed him with his own weapon. To his disappointment, the male didn't rise again, and the guards quickly threatened Tarn with laser fire if he didn't turn the knife over immediately. So much for using it on Yorum.

"Very nice." Yorum grinned and entered the fighting ring. "Don't worry, you're done for the night. We just need to let him have a look at you."

"As if I have a choice in the matter," Tarn muttered.

Yorum guffawed. "That's the spirit." He motioned to the guards outside the ring and yelled, "Bring in *the beast*."

The room grew silent except for heavy footsteps drawing nearer. Everyone stilled, waiting for this man they called 'the beast.' A strange anticipation lit Tarn from the inside out, and he welcomed this new foe for at least taking his mind from the disturbance in his *shei* – his life's energy.

A huge male stepped up to the caged door, opened it, and walked through. Tarn stared in astonishment. He'd been around most every race one could find in the System. From the warring Melans to the political Jaronans to the pleasurable Nebites. Mardu, Ragga, Zeiren, he'd seen them all.

But this male didn't fit in any category Tarn could identify. Unless...

The beast stood a head taller than Tarn, making him the largest male Tarn had ever seen in this star system. Strength gleamed in the abundance of muscle all over the man's sparsely clad frame. Golden skin shimmered in a distracting rhythm. The brief loincloth he wore did little to distract from the large bulge underneath, one that seemed to stir as the male studied Tarn. His age seemed indeterminate. Certainly the beast looked like a male in the prime of his life. Other than the *rakhide* loincloth and wealth of gleaming silver hair on his head, only a slim black band around his neck touched his hardy frame.

Dark red eyes flashed with fire around pupils of gold, no whites to be seen. Like the fabled demons in Four Walls, Tarn thought distantly. The only creatures he'd seen with such inhuman eyes were known as Creations – a species hunted down and exterminated with prejudice when discovered. Hell, his nephew Drekk had been Created, as had Drekk's mate – Ryen, a formidable fighter in his own right. Most Creations turned out to be crazed killers with a need for destruction. Only those with discipline and integrity resisted that call to needlessly destroy.

Which begged the question: what category did this Creation belong in?

The warrior in Tarn went on full alert, especially when the beast changed his stance, moving from careful to guarded.

Taking a chance, Tarn blinked, allowing his inner lids to shield his eyes while he surveyed his new opponent with Ebrellion sight. Tarn noted the torn strands of alien *shei* along the beast's body. Tendrils of pain caught and held around bands of hunger and need. Loneliness covered him like a blanket, matched only by the sheer rage that turned the male's eyes a brighter red.

Tarn blinked and erased evidence of his alien nature, but not fast enough. The beast took a step forward and growled in a low, threatening tone. His skin flushed and darkened, and called to Tarn like a beacon in the shadows of the cavern; his animosity stirred Tarn's fighting spirit.

The beast stopped several arm's lengths away, but his scent drifted over Tarn like a heady perfume, an addicting essence that Tarn drew into his lungs. It pushed everything else away.

After a nod, the beast grunted, turned and left, displaying a tight ass and thick legs that could crush a man to death.

But it was thoughts of what the beast could do with that huge bulge beneath his loincloth that obsessed Tarn as Yorum led him from the platform and into his cell for the night.

Zachem'zen strode from the stage in his haste to leave the new slave's presence. His cock burned against the taut confines of the *rakhide* loincloth they insisted he wear. He swore as he shoved through the crowd and headed for the slave pens — his home for the past year.

Hungry and growing hungrier, he slammed his fist into the head guard's face when the slave keeper had the nerve to try to stop him.

One of the guards behind him muttered, "Stupid *drun*. Should know by now only two things will settle the beast."

Zachem inwardly agreed. After feeling the effects the new slave had on his senses, he wanted a fuck, not a fight. He rubbed his crotch, not at all ashamed of his needs. He'd been Created for sex. To serve his Creator, Handler, or whoever paid the highest price for his indenture. For years he'd done his best to obey. And then he'd just snapped. No longer content to endure, he'd killed anyone and everyone that stood between him and what he wanted.

Freedom.

In the pursuit of his goals, he'd killed his Handler and his Creator, two godless bastards bent on wringing every last drop of life from him that they could. He'd destroyed the small laboratory where he'd been Created, a tiny rock in the Asteroid Belt between the sun and the Outer Rim.

Just his luck to be captured by slavers on his way out of the fucking Vrail System for good. Autonomy, so close, only to be ripped away by the promise of acceptance. He damned well knew better. Cursing at his naïveté, he tugged on the collar around his neck, reviled by the feel of yet another yoke on his hard-won independence. The world suddenly turned red, a definite indicator he needed to satisfy himself before he lost all control.

He growled a warning. "I need. Hurry."

The guards around him swore and raced to find him suitable donors. He stalked into his private den, a paltry room not much bigger than his confines in the laboratory where he'd been Created. At least in this place, he had a large pallet lined with furs, a table and two chairs, and an attached lavatory to fulfil his basic needs. Gifts because 'the beast' brought in more currency to the slavers' fighting business than any other slave had in all the years The Pit had been in existence.

Zachem paced, trying to tamp down his aggression. He studied the cobbled walls and floor with grim satisfaction, glad that at least his prison afforded a semblance of privacy. With the door closed, he had complete isolation from the rest of the world. Granted, his jailers could open the door at any moment, but most of them feared him. The few that didn't kept him happy per the slave master's orders, and thus left him alone unless they needed him to fight.

Two females and one male suddenly stumbled into his room before the door slammed shut behind them. He needed to release, but he wanted it especially rough tonight and didn't think the females could handle him. He usually favoured men and wondered why they kept sending him female slaves. In hopes that he'd impregnate one, perhaps? What they didn't know worked in his favour. Zachem controlled the release of his reproductive glands and never spurted the fluid that would make his seed fertile. He had no intention of bringing another of his kind into the world. Not here and not now.

The females stank of fear, the male of drugs and the need to rut. Perfect.

"I won't hurt you," he growled, unable to help the harshness of his voice. The females looked at one another then back at him. When he made no move to approach them, they slowly eased out of their clothing.

"We are pleasers. We come to soothe the beast." The tall blonde bowed her head.

The shorter brunette with her ample breasts, but she didn't arouse him. Nor did her taller companion. Even the large Ragga they'd sent him did little to pique his interest, but it didn't matter. With the new slave still on his mind, Zachem motioned the trio closer.

He dealt with the women first. "I like to watch. You two, pleasure each other. You," he paused to point at the male, "come to me."

All three of them stared, unmoving.

"What?" he snapped.

The Ragga answered in a raspy voice. "We were unsure of what to expect. Some rumours have you devouring your companions, the ones that are never seen again. Others talk of your appetites and the pleasures to be had in this cell."

Zachem grunted and removed his loincloth. He had no idea what any of the others in The Pit thought. Nor did he particularly care. He worked hard not to harm those who were thrown unwillingly into his cell. He left the beatings and killings to Master Furon, that heartless asshole.

The women took his suggestion and began touching and kissing one another. The sight of soft flesh being caressed and stroked worked his need, because he couldn't give them what they gave each other, no matter how much he might want to. Softness was not a part of Zachem, nor, he feared, would it ever be.

"Ragga, on your knees," he ordered.

While the male approached, the brunette spread her thighs wider and moaned, her gaze on the male lowering to his knees. The blonde woman sucked on the brunette's clit and speared her with a finger, then two. He knew because the brunette told him everything the other did in throaty whispers.

Growing harder and needing surcease, Zachem put his cock between the male's lips. He didn't care how much experience the Ragga had in dick play, but to his grateful surprise, the male didn't have a problem handling him.

With firm suction, the Ragga teased the head of his shaft and licked him from base to tip. He played with Zachem's tight balls, rolling the hardening sac in his rough palm.

"Harder." Zachem shoved deeper into the male's throat.

Pleased when the Ragga gagged yet accepted the rough treatment, Zachem began to fuck his mouth. Lust released the firm hold on his pheromones, and his attractant spread throughout the room.

The brunette came and clenched the other woman's head to her pussy. After grinding against her face, she traded positions with her partner and began eating the other woman in earnest. The male at his feet stiffened and moaned, his hand busy over his own cock.

The smell of cum filled his small cell, and Zachem exploded with a sigh of relief. The blonde cried out as well, a feeling of mutual pleasure and peace saturating the small space.

But after a moment, Zachem's hunger pulsed anew.

"Get to your feet, against the wall on that stool," he growled to the Ragga, all the while keeping his gaze on the women mewling with pleasure. They moved to his pallet and continued to lick and play with each other. Such slender fingers gliding over slick flesh, over skin that didn't change colour or glow. Too easy. Too soft. But so pretty to watch.

Zachem pushed the male against the rock wall and inhaled, pleased at the faint scent of fear wafting from his body. He couldn't help it. The beast he'd been named always came out to play when his needs hit. With large hands he gripped the man's ass and used a blunt finger to prod his anus. Thrusting his finger deeper, Zachem grunted his satisfaction when his partner moaned and pushed back over his knuckle.

"That's good, Ragga. Real good," he said on a breath, eagerly fantasising about the new slave, a black haired male with green eyes. About how tight and ripe he'd feel around Zachem's cock...

He glanced over his shoulder at the women. "You there, with the brown hair. Come here," he rasped and left the man. When the woman neared him, he took her in his arms, pulled her off her feet and impaled her over his cock. Sliding inside her tight sheath felt like bliss. But he forced himself to go slow and not cause harm, releasing his scent as she rode him.

"Stars, yes. *Yes*," she cried out as she gushed all over him, lubing him nice and wet.

He withdrew from her and nudged her back towards the bed, where her friend caught and held her. Then Zachem turned back to the male, who waited impatiently against the wall. His eyes were glassy, his cock full and as he pumped through his hand and watched Zachem's every step.

“Please,” he gasped, overcome with lust.

Zachem didn’t want to hear him, didn’t want to see the man in front of him, not when his thoughts strayed to the new slave who looked and smelled so different from all the others. So right.

Instead, he reached the male. Angling forward, Zachem grasped his slick erection and pushed it between the Ragga’s snug cheeks and deeper, cramming his cock into a tight passage. He thrust hard and fast, imagining the feel of the hardy male he intended to conquer inside the fighting ring and out – the new slave with the obvious strength and size to take him on, who possessed slitted pupils that reminded him of the guard *thrells* in The Pit one minute, and normal, green eyes that blazed with hunger and an otherworldly knowledge the next. Alien eyes. Foreign eyes. The oddity made the newcomer as much a beast as Zachem.

Feeling a kinship he’d always been lacking, Zachem could no longer contain himself and came hard into warmth, imagining the new slave’s acceptance of his touch. Zachem would come in his mouth, in his ass, all over his damned body. He groaned and came again, filling the Ragga with enough seed to make a thorough mess. But it wasn’t enough, and it wasn’t right coming in this man. Not when the new slave belonged *to him*.

Soon, he thought. But not soon enough.

Chapter Two

It took Tarn two days to fully recover. He didn't want to rush the healing and make his guards suspicious. Besides, while he waited, he did some investigating. On the third night since his bout with the beast, Tarn teleported out of his cell into the bathing area that rarely saw any use.

Quickly shifting into the shape of a *threll*, Tarn took on the six-legs, dark, coarse fur, fangs and claws of the canine. Unfortunately, he couldn't completely pass as normal even in this form. He stood two heads taller than the largest *threll* guarding the slave pits.

Still, in the darkness no one would notice. He hoped. He couldn't just teleport all over the station. He needed a working knowledge of The Pit to map the place. Then he'd 'port to retrieve the crystal and make his escape.

Trotting into the main corridor leading to the slave pens, he followed his nose.

Hundreds of slaves slept in the dark caverns of the Compa Caves. The natural rock prison contained those sold or taken against their will to serve Master Furon. Though the System tolerated the existence of slavery, Tarn found it distasteful. He had no intention of letting The Pit survive after he found what he'd been sent to retrieve. He just had to find the Dorvian crystal for Drekk and return before Rafe's deadline.

Rafe of Mardu, a peacemaker and Drekk's boss, needed the crystal returned. It meant something to some backwards delegation from a far off world. Tarn hadn't caught much more about the mission than that Drekk had a conflict about the job. Boredom also factored in his decision to help the peacemakers, but truth be told, Tarn had come to care for Drekk and his giant mate. Drekk was the last living piece of Tarn's brother, and as such, demanded looking after.

Snarling at the necessity of being here to do such, Tarn trotted past the pens until he reached another section veering off towards the guard berthing. He mentally calmed the guard *thrells* gearing for an attack and surveyed the area before moving on.

All in all, his reconnaissance proved fruitful. Three dozen guards slept in the lower level. Above the pens, another thirty or so stood watch. The weapons cache he'd been tempted to breach remained unlocked on the upper level. *Arrogant when they should be careful.*

He shook his head and trotted back towards his temporary cell, where they would keep him until he proved his worth. No matter what 'the beast' deemed, Master Furon warned that Tarn would only be as useful as his stamina in the ring.

As if thoughts had conjured him, the beast's scent suddenly exploded on Tarn's senses, triggered a confusing lust and a need to follow the trail back to the male. Annoyed yet intrigued, Tarn followed the powerful lure past the majority of the slave pens. Running over the narrow, cold stone path, he found a corridor off to the side. A *threll* and two guards stood watch. Unlike the other slack security in The Pit, the two giant watchmen stood at the ready.

Tarn growled under his breath. He didn't like teleporting into areas he didn't know, but the urge to follow that scent overwhelmed him. Before the *threll* by the guards' side could sense his presence, he teleported into the secure room.

There, in the centre of a monstrously large pallet, lay the beast.

Tarn sat and closed his eyes. He opened his mouth and used the *threll's* enhanced olfactory glands to taste the male so close. *Stars and planets beyond*. Tarn's cock hardened, and his instinct to fuck intensified. He couldn't help growling, eyeing the male like a piece of tasty meat.

He salivated and rose to his feet. Stepping closer and closer, he moved to the edge of the bed. Just in time to watch the beast wake and roll to meet him. They stayed there, eye to eye, for a breathless moment.

"Damn," the beast murmured, and his breath washed over Tarn.

Hunger hammered at him, the need for blood and seed and sex growing uncontrollable.

"Easy, *threll*. I don't know how you got in here, but you need to get out before they find you."

Instead of the fear Tarn expected to see, he instead saw curiosity. The beast's aura flashed with gold, a wash of pleasure that made no sense. The silver haired man studied him with narrowed red eyes.

"You're huge. And wild. I can smell it on you. You don't belong here."

Neither do you. Tarn cocked his head, intrigued at the calming influence the beast's words had on his libido. Still hard, he could now at least listen to the captivating male. But when the beast sat up, he tensed and growled.

The beast immediately stopped. "Easy. I'm not going to hurt you. Here." He held out a hand.

Tarn sniffed then licked the beast's fingers. The taste of him sent Tarn into a euphoric meltdown. He wagged his spiked tail, *thumping* over the hard ground. He licked the beast again.

Quiet laughter met his raspy tongue, and he gave a sigh as unfamiliar contentment stole through him.

"Well, well. All you needed was a little affection, hmm?" The beast shocked him anew by scratching behind his ears. All four of them. The touch felt otherworldly. Too right to be real.

Tarn scooted closer and rested his head on the beast's lap. Good Night, but the male's firm flesh felt good against him. He wiggled his head under the beast's hand and huffed a request for more.

"Greedy little bastard, eh?" The beast continued to pet him, his hand large and callused but curiously gentle as he stroked Tarn's coarse fur. "Can't blame you. Out there, they'll as much use you for sport as work. No rest for us. Not ever."

Long fingers eased down his neck but stopped at the spiky scales along his back.

"But there are compensations. You look well fed," the beast continued. "Your fur is thick, your eyes rich with energy. So bright, so very green..." He paused, a curious look on his face as he stared at Tarn. Then he inhaled and froze. "You smell like *him*."

At that moment, the door handle of the cell turned. As soon as the beast's attention was diverted, Tarn teleported out of the room back into the corridor.

Stepping back into a shielded alcove, he heard curses and watched as more men arrived to subdue the beast. Sorry for the trouble he'd caused, he quickly departed. A jog down to Master Furon's quarters was in order, and it would help him ignore his odd reluctance to leave the beast back in his cell. He stopped outside Master Furon's room and put his ear to the door.

Inside, Furon grunted and moaned. The sound of a female's cries echoed, cries not of pleasure, but of pain and anger.

"Good work, whore," Furon gasped. Then the sound of a thump and angry, feminine complaint. "The guards will take you back."

Guards? Tarn hadn't seen anyone. He hurried out of the way back into the shadows as approaching footsteps neared the other side of the door. When it opened, he scented three males and the female. She smelled sickly and looked worse than he'd expected.

One of the men dragged her, swearing and threatening Furon, away from the doorway down the corridor. Unfortunately, the door swung closed again. Not all the way, but enough to hide those inside.

"By Atta's balls, I can't wait until we get our next shipment of women. The whores we have now aren't worth a damn," Furon complained.

Atta's balls? Atta was the Melan god of strife. It figured Furon hailed from a planet where war and chaos were a way of life.

"You came hard enough," one of the guards rumbled with disgust. "Stars sake, Furon. Did you have to hurt the girl? We have plenty of others who give it away willingly enough. And did I have to be here to see it?"

"Watch your tone, Pyrgo," Furon snapped. "You know as well as I do Jenna gets off on the pain. She's just angry I wouldn't let her bite me."

"Or come," Pyrgo muttered. "Yeah, well, I still don't like having to watch."

"I don't care what you want. I like having an audience. Now behave or I'll show you just how much fun an ass reaming can be."

Silence.

"Well?" Furon asked in a low, interested voice.

"My mistake, Master Furon," came the strangled reply.

This guard didn't sound like the others. Nor did he smell ripe with filth. He smelled like... home? Tarn wanted to get a good look at him when Furon's next words took his attention.

"That's right, Pyrgo. Your mistake. The next one you make will be your last. Now tell me about the crystal."

His interest perked.

"The Mardu that stole it won't sell it until The Slave Trade."

"Dammit. That's another ten days from now."

Shit. Ten more days in this hell hole?

"I know. But he let me see it. He attended last night's fight. The crystal is the one you want. It glowed brighter the closer it moved to the beast."

Tarn blinked. What did the crystal have to do with the beast?

Furon chuckled. "The Dorvian crystal and our beast. Now what do you think the two have in common?"

An interesting question, and one Tarn didn't have time to answer.

The other guard had returned.

"Mother of Mines. Where the hell did you come from?" The guard lifted a phaser and glared at Tarn. "Not one of Yorum's *thrells*, not this big. Boss? I think we have a new candidate for the blood sport tomorrow night. And I'm betting this one's a winner."

Tarn swore to himself, irritated at his inability to act and think like a fucking leader of warriors. He was the Ebrellion Destroyer, caught twice now in the span of one night.

He didn't give the excited guard a chance to react. Whipping his tail at the male's hand, he knocked the phaser aside. Then slicing a claw down the guard's abdomen, he injected the male with *threll* toxin. Not enough to kill him, but enough to make him violently ill.

Pleased he'd at least managed that, he caught a brief glimpse of Pyrigo's face when the door opened. Tarn swore under his breath. Another Ebrellion in the System this far from Mardu? It couldn't be a coincidence. Before Pyrigo could confirm Tarn's identity as anything other than a feral *threll*, Tarn raced away down the corridor. He glanced over his shoulder and stopped when he saw no one behind him. Between one heartbeat and the next, he 'ported back into his cell, shifted into a man's form, and slumped down onto the floor.

Catching his breath, he thought about all he'd heard and seen tonight. A Dorvian crystal. The beast's aura. Another Ebrellion on a slave planet. But most importantly, he pondered the beast's curious effect on his libido.

The latter occupied him well into slumber. Tarn tossed and turned as he dreamed about the silver haired, red eyed Creation built for sex and destruction. Which he would give Tarn, only fate could say.

* * * *

The next day, Zachem rose from his pallet, healed from the inside out. Self-healing — a gift from his Creator, the shifty *drun*. Stretching, Zachem couldn't help wondering when he'd get to see the new slave again. The male had been on his mind all night long. Especially after encountering that mysterious creature last night.

He still had no idea how the thing had entered his cell. Or why it had seemed to have the same eyes and feel as the handsome slave he couldn't stop thinking about.

No matter how much Zachem tried, he couldn't identify the slave's origins. Something about him looked Mardu, except for his size, which could only have come from a Ragga background. In the Vrail System, races did not interbreed. Due to some odd construct in their genetic chemistry, progeny of differing races only ever produced and retained the characteristics of the dominant race.

Which is why Creations intrigued the geneticists of Eyra. Zachem possessed the genetic combination of several races in the System, and he displayed them outwardly. He had brawn, strength and agility, much like what he'd sensed from the new slave.

Yet the new slave didn't appear to be a Creation. He looked too normal, except for that one brief instance when he'd blinked and inner lids had shielded his eyes. A reptilian-like pupil and alien awareness seethed in that stare.

What did he see when he looked at me? Did he see a Creation? A killer? A fool who trusted the wrong person and wound up a slave?

Zachem snorted at his fanciful imaginings and ignored the guards' mutterings. A quick glance at the *thrells* snarling more than usual at him told him what he knew to be true. The *threll* he'd touched last night had not belonged to the guards. Though most *thrells* came up to his own mid-thigh, the one in his cell had been several heads larger. A giant in its own right. Full of danger, yet docile under Zachem's touch.

He clenched his fists and followed the guards out of the pen to the feeding chamber.

Forced to sit at a rough-hewn table, he glared at his captors, pleased when they hurried away. Were it not for the collar at his throat, he would have killed them and escaped long ago. Unfortunately, the thin shock collar was more than symbolic. Zachem, for all his strength, couldn't withstand bursts of enon energy for any length of time. Hell, just one jolt from the collar put him on his ass. It left a memorable imprint, one he had no inclination to experience again.

Other slaves began entering the chamber. He saw the females from last night, who shyly waved at him, as well as the Ragga who pretended not to know him. Most of the slaves kept to their own kind. Mardu sat with Mardu, Melans with Melans. A few of them intermingled, but like the System in which they'd been born, like stayed with like. Hence, Zachem remained isolated.

In his entire life, he'd only ever met one other being like him. He'd had to kill the male in order to avoid being killed. The Creation had been crazed, like the scientists in the lab had warned to expect.

"You want to leave us? Where would you go? If anyone learns what you are, they'll kill you on sight, and us as well. Your crazed brethren have done us all a grave injustice." He recalled the conversation as if it had happened yesterday. The horror of learning just what he was, a hated Creation. The Eyran War of 2845, centuries before his existence, had turned those in the System against his kind. Though engineered from the best and brightest genes in the System, most Creations suffered immediate problems.

Apparently, the first batch had been so subservient they'd had to be told when to breathe. The second batch had become *too* assertive – genius killers who butchered their Creators, Handlers, and everyone else they could reach.

Zachem had had no option but to stay with those who'd made him. Created to serve, he'd at first loved his Creator, and even his Handler. He'd endured their tests, the pain, the constant demands to perform. When he'd been bought by Master Caegon, he'd lived a life of relative peace, despite his use as a battle slave. Though the sex he'd experienced had never been pleasant, it satisfied the growing urges within him to mindlessly destroy. Or at least, it had.

In a way, he now needed The Pit as much as they needed him. Within these walls, he rarely felt a desire to kill. Fed on fights and sex, he could withstand the daily doldrums in the caves without harming anyone who didn't deserve it. He flatly refused to fight anyone he didn't consider strong enough to withstand him without dying from a few punches in the process. Those rabid enough to try to kill him deserved death. He had no problem sharing violence when needed.

More slaves filled the area as he continued to eat. The guards brought him a second and third tray filled with rich meat and fruits, food unlike the mealy protein substance the others were served. He forced himself to slow down, wanting to wait until the new slave arrived.

Finally, he walked through the doorway. Like Zachem, the slave had to bend not to brush his head against the upper frame. As soon as he entered, his gaze sought and held Zachem's.

Excitement drummed through Zachem's body. He waited.

Taking his time, the new slave picked up a plate of food. He skirted the other tables and made his way to Zachem.

The rest of the room stilled, as if anticipating the beast's reaction.

"Sit," he said when the slave paused by his side.

The dark-haired male raised a brow at his tone but sat across from Zachem and studied his plate. The rest of the room resumed conversation.

"What's your name?" Zachem asked, impatient for the introduction.

The slave grimaced at the food he'd been given and pushed it aside. And no wonder. Zachem had refused the substandard fare as well when he'd first arrived. He shoved his tray at the slave, who accepted it with thanks.

"Your name?" he growled, needing to know.

"Tarn." Tarn took a bite of succulent melon and sighed. "Damn, I needed this." He paused. "So what do I call you? Beast?" He snorted.

"My name amuses you?" Curiously, Tarn showed little fear in his presence. A definite challenge to his ego.

"I've seen my share of beasts. You aren't one of them. An alien warrior with those red eyes, silver hair and glowing skin. But no beast." The warmth in Tarn's gaze surprised him.

Zachem didn't know how to respond. Tarn seemed to be complimenting him, but he wasn't sure how to feel that the male didn't find him threatening.

"Your name?" Tarn asked around a mouthful of *zarva* meat.

"Zachem'zen. I answer to Zachem." *And Beast.*

"How long have you been here?" Tarn stared at his collar and frowned.

"Too long."

"I don't see anyone else around here wearing a collar. Guess you're the lucky one." Tarn's green eyes flashed with amusement, and he responded with a smile, unable to help himself.

Tarn sobered, and Zachem had the uneasy feeling he stared at a man as dangerous as himself. A predator behind a calm façade.

"We're supposed to fight later in the week," Tarn murmured.

"The guards told me this morning. Don't worry. I'll try not to hurt you too much."

Tarn smiled again, and Zachem's insides twisted with arousal. "I'm not worried, Zachem." He lowered his voice so as not to be heard by the nearby guards. "But I'm wondering how smart it would be to give the audience such a good fight."

Zachem blinked. "You think you can last in the ring? That you can beat me?"

"Yes, I do. But if I bring too much attention to myself, I might end up wearing something like that." He nodded to Zachem's collar.

"You're already bringing attention to yourself by sitting with me. But you pose an interesting point." No way in hell Tarn could defeat Zachem, who'd never before been beaten. But why the notion of losing to the male made him harder than stone was a puzzle he'd reflect on later.

"What does the collar do, anyway?" Tarn asked. "Is it a magne cuff? Does it contain a type of charge?"

Zachem fingered the slender band with distaste. "If I go outside my prescribed perimeter, or Master Furon feels like it, the band shocks me with pulses of enon energy."

"Ah. Enon energy. Quite effective, I've been told."

"Yeah."

They sat together in silence while Zachem memorised Tarn's face. Harsh, masculine, and tempting. Unlike most of the males here, Tarn had short, thick black hair that looked soft and surprisingly clean. Long lashes framed his exotic, bright green eyes.

He had defined cheekbones, a square jaw and firm lips that parted around another piece of fruit with such natural sensuality Zachem couldn't look away. Tarn's tongue darted out to catch the juice, and Zachem couldn't help the wave of lust that pushed a burst of scent towards the male. Instinct told him to trap and keep Tarn, just as long as he could. He didn't understand the slave's hold on his libido.

Tarn froze and fixed his gaze to Zachem's. "Creation," he murmured. "I was right."

Surprised that the male *still* showed no dread, Zachem had to know. "Why is it you're not scared of me?"

Shaking his head, as if to free himself from the lust building between them, Tarn answered, "I don't fear the unknown. And you're not as much a stranger to me as you'd think." He licked his lips. A promise of things to come? "You know, the more I think about it, the more I welcome this fight. Don't worry, Zachem. I swear I won't be too hard on you

when we meet. Unless you need it, that is." He stood and waited, but for what Zachem wasn't sure.

He was too stunned at Tarn's words. "*You think to challenge me? Truly?*" Perhaps Tarn had been hit in the head one too many times. Though the male looked sane enough, time in The Pit could dull the sharpest of blades.

"Truly. Thanks for the food. I'll see you around." Tarn turned away, led from the room by two guards.

Zachem stared after him, simultaneously baffled and thrilled. A chance at a worthy opponent. And after the fight, a worthy bedmate, at least for as long as Furon would let Tarn stay. Would let Tarn *live*.

The thought didn't sit well with him at all, and as he left the room to go to the training area, he puzzled over the enigmatic Tarn. For the first time since Zachem's escape from that hated laboratory, he wondered if he'd win their battle, and why the thought of losing didn't bother him as much as it should.

Chapter Three

Tarn rolled his neck, easing the building tension. Clad only in his ragged trousers, he felt free to move his arms about, stretching his muscles as he prepared to face his newest opponent. Yorum had informed him that if he continued to win, he'd face the beast in seven days time. With each win, Tarn would receive a reward. Better food. Better women. Even a shot at fucking the beast, if he so dared.

A glance at the fighting ring to his immediate right showed the object of his fascination waiting to battle three heavily armed Mardu. Tarn had to force himself to think about his pending fight and not how damned good the man looked wearing nothing more than a loin cloth.

Zachem glanced his way then ignored him, which piqued Tarn more than a little. After their lunch earlier, he would have thought he'd rattled the man. Then again, Zachem didn't react the way others did. The male challenged Tarn on several levels, which made avoiding him an impossibility. Tarn *had* to know what it was about the male that called to him.

"Brawlers, at the ready," Yorum announced from outside the caged ring.

Tearing his attention from the beast, Tarn still hadn't decided how to proceed. On the one hand, he needed to remain in The Pit for the next ten days. Those who lost their bouts sometimes fought again, though most were taken below ground to aid in the mining efforts. He'd rather battle ill-bred warriors than waste his time and talent digging for Colony Quartz.

But if he defeated his opponents too badly, he'd be under an immediate spotlight, making it that much harder to remain inconspicuous. Added to that, the unshakable fact that he wasn't sure he could throw a fight. An Ebrellion never gave anything but his all in battle. It felt wrong to even consider losing before he'd engaged.

"Gather and place your bets," Yorum yelled into his amplifier. "Argon the Arrogant meets Slave Six."

Tarn grimaced, the warrior within aggravated by such a ridiculous name. At home, he'd have been introduced as the The Krusch Killer, Destroyer of Kings and Berserker of the Otherworld Army. Here they called him Slave Six.

He huffed. *What I deserve for volunteering to leave my homeworld for this System. I can't believe I thought policing rogue Ebrellions would satisfy me.* Tarn was ever in search of a challenge. With the Krusch defeated and his homeworld again safe, the army had little use for him other than training. After one day with the new recruits, Tarn had known he had neither the patience nor the interest in preparing soldiers for war. He lived for the battle, not the headache and political jockeying for promotion that became a way of life in the army. A definite waste of his skills.

Thus his decision to venture into the Vrail System — unknown hostile territory — to deal with rogue Ebrellions. Unfortunately, word leaked that he'd been sent to contain his brethren, and they avoided him whenever possible. So he stuck to his cover, that of a bar owner in Four Walls on planet Mardu. The scum that frequented the bar couldn't compare to full-blown Ebrellion warriors, not that very many of them even tried.

"Fight!" Yorum screamed as a loud bell rang.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tarn saw Zachem take on his armed opponents. A glance at his own adversary made him frown. Argon stood as tall as Tarn and had a good bit of muscle, but he didn't move like a brawler. His balance was off, his footwork worse than poor. A glance at the male, using his inner sight, showed his *shei* bruised and beaten. The energy around the male's hands looked black. A definite weakness.

"You don't hit with your whole fist, you *drun*," Tarn said, shaking his head as he waited. Argon threw a punch he easily dodged. "You hit with the flat of your knuckles and ease into the blow. Like this."

He swung and connected with the large male's belly.

The man went down. The crowd roared.

To his right, Tarn watched Zachem toy with the Mardu. A waste of energy on those three, he thought. Zachem's *shei* shone brightly, the glow of health and power a natural draw for a true warrior. *Like me. He should be fighting me, not those idiots.*

A kick to his ribs shocked Tarn into paying better attention. Argon grinned at him, a sadistic light in his black eyes. At least that was something Tarn could work with. Though the man didn't have talent, he had the will to inflict pain, which made the fight somewhat bearable.

Even going easy on the male, Tarn defeated him in less time than it took to go through his stretching exercises at home. He left Argon the Arrogant with broken bones and a

damaged *queil*. He'd piss blood for a week and heal well enough, as long as he received proper care. A glance at the guards hauling him from the ring made Tarn rethink the possibility of that notion.

"Nice work, Slave Six." Yorum chuckled, fingered a handful of credit chips, and led Tarn from the ring, away from the crowd and into the mouth of the corridor leading to the slave pens. There they stopped and watched the beast.

A larger crowd around Zachem's ring screamed in delight as bodies hit the caged walls of the cell. They chanted his name and raised their hands into the air.

"Now that's a fighter." Yorum puffed up with pride. "I can't wait to see you two go at it."

Neither can I. That much control obviously held a lot of passion. Rage or desire, Tarn didn't much care. He wanted to see both on Zachem's face when he plunged into the male's *honet* and filled the tight warmth with his seed.

To his regret, he couldn't see Zachem's face with so many fans rushing the raised platform. Several in the crowd had to be stunned to force them back. Zachem even knocked a few away before his guards guided him through the rush into the corridor. Towards Tarn.

When their gazes met, the heat unfurling in his gut blazed into a burst of desire Tarn barely held back. He thought he saw the same in Zachem's eyes, but the beast squelched his emotions quickly enough after a glance over Tarn's shoulder.

Tarn stiffened, prepared to fight this new danger.

Before he could turn around, Yorum shoved a phaser in his side. "Easy, Slave Six. Master Furon wants a word."

"The name is Tarn." He turned slowly to meet Master Furon, face to face.

A slender yet muscular male, Furon stood two heads smaller than Tarn. Looking down on the male would have provided him some satisfaction, were Tarn not aware of the pleasure Furon had in looking up at him. A quick study with his inner senses showed him the power that radiated in the slave master. This was not a man to take lightly. Zachem had the right of it to be wary.

"Nice fight, Slave Six." Furon smiled, an oily expression of delight on his handsome face. He looked almost too pretty to be a man. Probably hailed from Nebe6, the pleasure planet. A Nebite, especially considering his propensity for sex, as Tarn had witnessed the

previous night. Nebites loved nothing more than desire. They lived with it day in and day out, and were the only race whose genetics seemed to mix with the others in the System.

"Master Furon." Tarn bowed his head slightly, while keeping his gaze on Furon's face.

"Now this is how a slave should respond." Furon laughed then glared at Zachem.

"Beast, you fought well tonight. But I thought we'd agreed you wouldn't finish them until the third round."

Tarn glanced at Zachem, not surprised to see the rage banked in the blaze of his eyes.

"I tried, but I'm afraid the scythe caught at my control." He held out a bloody arm, and everyone watched as the jagged wounds continued to heal in front of them.

Fascinated, Tarn wondered if Zachem had any Ebrellion in him. Though he didn't sense the male was of his line, self-healing was not a common trait among those who dwelled in this corner of the universe.

"Not good, Beast. I think you need another lesson in discipline." Furon clenched his fist around a small remote and a low hum sounded.

Zachem dropped to his knees in agony. He contorted, his body seizing as Furon activated an enon pulse in his collar, yet he remained strangely silent through it all. A hideous display of torture for such an admirable fighter.

Tarn studied Zachem's reactions, noting how the healed wound suddenly bled again, how Zachem's skin, in pain, took on a bluish, sickly hue. How he writhed in anguish but refused to give Furon the satisfaction of a scream.

"Master Furon?" Tarn said to stop the torture. "Master Furon," he said again, and felt a wave of relief when Furon released his trigger on the remote.

"Slave, you speak without permission," Furon murmured, focused on Zachem, who looked unconscious as he lay on the cold ground, his wounds slow to heal.

"Forgive me. I meant no offence. I merely wanted to offer a suggestion."

Furon turned, and the dark energy seething through his body alarmed Tarn with its power. "Speak."

"I come from a small but advanced slave community in the Outer Rim. On my world, the enon collar has its place. But we found a much better form of control over the slaves, one they hated more than anything."

"You speak as if you were a slaver."

"I was."

Furon's interest increased. "How did you end up here?"

Relying on the story he'd fabricated for this mission, Tarn answered. "I was the lead of our guard, a dispenser of discipline, like yourself. Unfortunately, I underestimated my rival. The bastard took advantage of one small lapse in judgement. He drugged me and sold me before I could gather my wits and retaliate. Truth be told, I'm still not sure how I ended up in The Pit."

"A pretty story. Not that I believe you, but I'm curious. What would you say is more painful than that?" He pointed at Zachem.

Tarn couldn't believe his good fortune. "Would you like me to demonstrate?"

Furon scowled. "Not on me, fool. Pyrgo, come here."

Tarn started as Pyrgo moved slowly, breaking his sudden camouflage from the stone wall upon which he'd waited. Knowing he needed to neutralize the threat immediately, Tarn flexed his arms and felt the sting of claws overtaking his nails. A subtle readiness, one he'd put to use just as soon as Pyrgo stepped a foot closer.

Pyrgo, the bastard, stopped in his tracks and stared hard at Tarn. *"Destroyer, you have my respect and my silence. I would warn you to watch what you do. Furon is much more than he seems. We must talk later."* To Furon, Pyrgo nodded his head in deference and said, "Yes, Master Furon?"

"Submit to this one's whims. I'm curious to see what could be worse than the collar. And Slave Six? If I'm not satisfied by this display, you'll feel the sting of the enon pulse next."

Tarn bowed his head. "It would be my pleasure to demonstrate." To Pyrgo, he added, *"I'll be quick."*

Pyrgo made no overt moves, but Tarn could sense the Ebrellion's tension. Nice to know his reputation preceded him.

"Get on with it, slave," Pyrgo said with a sneer. He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting.

Tarn approached and placed one hand on Pyrgo's belly and the other around Pyrgo's throat.

"What are you doing?" Pyrgo asked.

"Masking The Hold." At mention of The Hold, Pyrigo froze, but it was too late. With his mind, Tarn reached inside the man's body and firmed a psychic grip around Pyrigo's *shei*. Tarn interrupted the field of energy making up Pyrigo's essence.

Pyrigo groaned and shivered under Tarn's hands. Tarn drew meaningless patterns over Pyrigo's skin to look convincing, because no physical touch could do what Tarn's mind could. But Furon didn't need to know that.

"Interesting," Furon murmured and stepped closer. "He looks to be in extreme pain. Pyrigo? Pyrigo, how does it feel?"

Tarn disregarded Furon's excitement and concentrated, so as not to overly harm Pyrigo while still making him most uncomfortable. The Ebrellion began to sweat and his muscles cramped. His heart stuttered, trying to overcome the blockage of energy putting him on the verge of passing out.

"Can't...breathe..." Pyrigo whispered around another groan of pain. Blood trickled from his nose.

"Fascinating." Furon stared with a wide grin. "You are indeed correct, Slave Six. This is much better than an enon pulse. The pulse renders them unconscious. But this keeps them awake and aware of the pain. Enlightening."

Tarn didn't wait for Furon to tell him to stop, since it appeared the slave master would rather Pyrigo died than order Tarn to relent. He released his mental hold over Pyrigo's *shei* and quickly repaired the small damage he'd done.

"Pretend it still pains you. Moan, dammit."

Pyrigo shuddered and groaned. He slumped to the ground once Tarn stepped away.

"Impressive. Very good, Slave Six. How hard would it be to teach that?"

"It would take a good bit of time, Master Furon. The reason I did so well at my old post was due to years of practice. In my family, it's considered an innate skill to sense the vulnerability in another and exploit it."

Furon stared at him, his light blue eyes piercing. "Perhaps this is what makes you such a strong fighter."

"I believe so." Tarn nodded.

"Hmm. I tell you what. Continue to give us no trouble and win your bouts. In a few more days you'll meet the beast in the ring. Once you've gone a few rounds with him, I'll see about elevating your status and let you start training me. In the meantime—"

* * * *

Tarn opened his eyes and trembled. Zachem could hear his erratic heartbeat. It took Tarn a few moments of opening and closing his mouth before he spoke. When he tried to sit up, Zachem shoved a hand to his chest and held him down.

He blinked up at Zachem looking confused.

"Nice work back there, *slave master*," Zachem said with a sneer. After suffering an enon pulse, he normally pretended to pass out to save him more pain at Furon's hands. What he'd heard from Tarn enraged him. He pushed off of Tarn with a grunt and stood back.

"How do you like your new collar?"

"Collar?" Tarn coughed and reached a shaky hand to his throat. "Shit." He dragged his hand from the collar to Zachem's soft pallet. "Where am I? What happened?"

"What happened?" Zachem scowled at the slave — *slaver* — he'd thought to take to his bed. "I'll tell you what happened. That asshole shocked me with an enon pulse. But not to be outdone, you showed off by torturing the only decent guard in The Pit. They dragged Pyrigo's ass back to the guard quarters while Furon turned an enon pulse your way. I think you scared him." *Hell, you scared me.* "Whatever you did to Pyrigo freaked Furon the hell out. He tagged you with that collar and shoved you in here with me. I'm supposed to keep an eye on you." Zachem smiled, the emotion one of satisfaction, not pleasure. "I look forward to keeping you in line."

When Tarn slowly at up, Zachem ignored the alien sense to protect that smothered him. He slammed his fist into Tarn's jaw and watched the man topple back onto his bed, unconscious.

Terrific. As if a learning of Tarn's past wasn't bad enough, now he had to share quarters with the man. The *slave master*. Disgust filled him, that Zachem had even considered sharing something of himself with an oppressor. Worse, Tarn's damned green eyes, cloudy with pain or sharp with battlelust, still pulled at some part of him.

"Shit. You're no better than my Handler. So why can't I just kill you and get it over with?"

Tarn didn't answer, not that Zachem had expected him to. He slept on the cold ground that night, unable to share his pallet with Tarn, and unable to throw the injured male to the ground.

The next day, the guards woke him by delivering two meals and two fresh loincloths.

"One for you and one for him." The guard nodded to Tarn with a healthy dose of fear. Zachem could smell it on him. "He still out of it? Try to rouse him. Pyrgo wants a word."

Left alone with the 'slave master' again, Zachem cursed the man under his breath and moved to his side.

"Wake up." He kicked the pallet. Tarn didn't move. "I said wake up," he growled louder.

When Tarn still didn't move, he reached down and touched his chest, hoping to feel a heartbeat. The minute his palm touched such warm, firm flesh, arousal flared from out of nowhere.

Zachem pulled his hand back as if burnt.

Tarn stirred. His lids fluttered and he slowly woke. His hand crept to his collar again, and Zachem felt a moment of compassion. He remembered how he'd felt after being collared. Like a true beast, at the heel of another once more. No matter how much Tarn might deserve it, enslaving another was wrong. Period.

"Hell." Tarn closed his eyes and dragged his hand back to his chest. "This makes everything harder."

To Zachem's surprise, Tarn opened his eyes and sat up with a grin on his face. "But harder is always better, don't you think, Beast?"

Chapter Four

Zachem didn't know what to think. Tarn rolled off the bed and came to his feet without a flinch. He stretched, showcasing that impressive upper body that had done Argon the Arrogant some major damage. Before he'd learned who Tarn really was, Zachem had even felt a measure of pride in his victories.

"How the hell can you condone slavery, especially now that it's closing around your own neck?" he asked.

Tarn ignored him and sat down at the small table holding their food. He began to eat. With quick and efficient bites, he devoured everything on his tray. Then he stretched again and grimaced.

"I don't suppose you have a lav around here, do you?"

Zachem nodded to the closed door across from the entrance to his cell.

Tarn grinned with pleasure. "Perfect." He left through the door and closed it behind him.

Puzzled, tense and still angry, Zachem ate his meal and waited for Tarn to leave the lav. He felt sticky and dirty, and from more than the grit and sweat gathered during the fight. The enon pulse always rattled his faculties. The torture reminded him too much of his first years in existence – the myriad tests and experiments his Creator used to perfect Zachem into his obedient slave, and then there was his Handler. Another prick with a need to control.

Zachem had been made to serve. For nearly three decades he'd done so without reservation, finding contentment with the man who'd bought his servitude. Topping Master Caegon had been good, not great, but he'd obeyed his master. The battles he'd fought on behalf of the Dorvian Empire had enabled him to channel his rages. But as all wars do, the Dorvian Conquest ended. Master Caegon died soon after, and per the terms of his master's agreement, Zachem was returned to the lab, where he'd spent the next five years being treated no better than a rabid *threll*.

The sex no longer satisfied, nor did his growing need to annihilate his enemies abate. Even now, more than a year after his escape from the laboratory, Zachem could never quite sate his hungers. Serving Master Caegon had given him an outlet he hadn't known he'd

needed. Subservient yet strong in mind and body, Zachem had been allowed to be himself. Time fighting for the Dorvians had done him much good, and Caegon had been kind, though decidedly not gentle.

Alarmed at the hungers growing in him once more, Zachem tried to push them down. He had no wish to rut with a former slave master... Or did he? Perhaps some time spent with the beast would teach Tarn what true slavery was like. No chance to say no. No thought but to obey another.

Pleased at the notion of teaching Tarn a much needed lesson, Zachem ignored his dangerous enthusiasm, as well as the sudden tinge of red coating everything around him. He desired Tarn. A basic chemical reaction between beings with procreational urges. Except Zachem wouldn't fuck Tarn to sow his seed, but to relieve the ache building out of control between his legs.

Dropping the loincloth from his body, he decided to join Tarn in the lav. *Time to play, slave master. But the rules are mine.*

He entered the lav and stared at the shower. The Pit relied on real water, not the shitty solar rays so many in the System used. Zachem had been raised by scientists who always tried to improve the natural environment around them. Solar showers. Food preparators. New and improved humans.

But Master Caegon had been a big believer in nature. Water, doing work with one's own hands, and enjoying life's little pleasures had become part of Zachem's new self, one that hadn't faded after his return to the lab and his subsequent escape from it.

He appreciated the steady rain over Tarn's sculpted back and watched as rivulets of water caressed his tanned flesh. Unlike Zachem, Tarn's body looked consistently warm and one colour. His own skin rippled with blushing pinks and sparkling gold broadcasting his desire. Without even looking at his telling erection, Tarn would know how much Zachem desired him if he knew how to read Zachem's patterns.

Letting his gaze travel over broad shoulders, a muscular back and firm ass, Zachem caught the scent of desire and froze. The subtle scent came not from him, but from Tarn.

"Well? You going to stare at me all day or join me in here?"

The world turned dark red in a heartbeat, and arousal overwhelmed him.

Tarn turned around and stared in shock. "Stars, your eyes —"

"Need to fuck, right now," he rasped, centred on Tarn's sizable erection.

"Shit. You're making me itchy." Tarn groaned. "And so damned hard I can't think."

"Turn around," Zachem growled, aching with the need to claim this male. The desire was all consuming, and like nothing he'd ever felt before. He could do nothing more than bury himself in Tarn, except Tarn didn't seem willing to accept him.

Tarn shook his head and crossed his arms. It soothed Zachem's ego that Tarn's hands trembled before he curled them into fists. Tarn's nails blackened and grew into what looked like sharp claws. *What the hell?* Much as he wanted to know more, Zachem's lust threatened to rage out of control. He forced himself to stand still and not pounce on the male.

"Fight after. Now *turn around*." He held his cock, trying to soothe the throbbing need to thrust into warmth. Fury began to edge out the carnal need filling him from head to toe. Why did the male hesitate?

"No." Tarn's firmness, as well as his lack of fear, worked through the haze of aggression clouding Zachem's mind.

"What?"

"Come here. Right the fuck now," Tarn snapped. He seemed as if he grew larger as Zachem watched. The eyes that had once been a vibrant green now opened wider to reveal a slitted pupil encased in a green-gold iris that expanded to fill his entire socket.

A wave of energy pulsed between them, one that brought Zachem to his knees before Tarn yanked him to his feet and shoved him back against the wall.

"No, no, *czeva*. You need to be standing for this," Tarn rasped. He knelt and stroked Zachem with a gentleness he found disarming.

He had trouble breathing around the familiar needs pressing him, the need to serve and obey, which he hadn't felt since Master Caegon. "What—"

"Silence," Tarn growled in a strange voice, sounding as if a dozen pitches echoed within that one tone.

Zachem stared down at Tarn's head, wanting to touch, yet not sure if he should. That he didn't simply take what he wanted stunned him, as did the realisation that the red in his vision had receded.

And then Tarn shocked him again by nuzzling his cock and balls and licking him from the base of his shaft to the crown.

He groaned and closed his eyes in utter bliss.

When Tarn engulfed him with his hot, wet mouth, Zachem nearly passed out. The sensation was incredible. A blast of heat shot through his balls and saturated every part of his body. Utter joy filled him as Tarn began to suck him off with an expertise even the best pleasers couldn't equal.

Tarn wasn't unaffected either. He moaned and stroked Zachem's legs, his balls, and ass with a desperation Zachem could literally *feel*. A sharp prick of pain took him aback, and then Tarn was licking the pain away, stroking his shaft with that skilled tongue that felt like fingers of seduction.

Too soon, Zachem's orgasm rushed through him. "Fuck. Yes, yes," he yelled as he jetted into Tarn's mouth. Tarn continued to milk him, sucking harder and swallowing with greedy gulps. He manipulated Zachem's balls with a subtle twist and shocked another, harder orgasm out of him.

Zachem couldn't think, could only feel as waves of ecstasy took him into a peace he'd never before felt. Not the relief of an intense climax, but something much more. He watched as Tarn stood, those brilliant eyes unblinking as they stared into his own.

"My turn," Tarn growled as he gripped himself and began stroking. Without taking his gaze from Zachem, he reached his pinnacle in a matter of seconds and came all over Zachem's stomach. Their scents mingled, their seed as well. Tarn's cum continued to splatter on Zachem's belly, his cock and thighs as the man finally reached his end.

They stood and stared at one another, panting, fulfilled, and strangely connected. Zachem wanted to say something, but his brain refused to function. Instead, he put his hand to stomach and felt the mess there.

"Rub it in," Tarn commanded in a low voice. "Smooth is all over you. That's it." Tarn placed his hand over Zachem's, and together they rubbed the seed all over Zachem's front. "You smell like me. Good." Tarn smiled, and a hint of sharp teeth broke Zachem out of his daze.

He tried to step closer for a look and halted when Tarn pushed him back.

"Don't move." Tarn took a deep breath and smiled again. Nothing unusual about his mouth or eyes now. "You're exceptional, Zachem. You taste like perfection. I'm afraid I'll become addicted before you know it." He skimmed Zachem's lips with a finger still covered in his seed. "Taste me."

Zachem opened his mouth and took Tarn's finger inside. To his shock, the taste of Tarn made him want more, right now. His cock took on a life of its own and rose again.

"There we go," Tarn murmured and took Zachem's sac in warm hands. "You're full. You need to release more, so that the hungers don't overwhelm you."

Zachem groaned but didn't stop himself from thrusting through Tarn's slick palms. Then he felt Tarn's arousal brushing his belly. He reached down and fisted his hand around Tarn.

"Yes. Make me come again. More. Need to cover you in me," Tarn insisted in a guttural voice.

Zachem couldn't believe how soon he neared climax yet again, but when he tried to move away, to at least slow down, Tarn wouldn't let him.

"No. Come hard. I want to feel it over me."

He groaned, unable to resist the compulsion to obey. Again he spurted, and his seed covered Tarn's hands and stomach, just as Tarn unloaded all over him. Zachem knew his releases were anything but normal. Jets of cum were often too much for his sexual partners to take in one swallow. But Tarn was just as unusual, because he left Zachem with as much a mess all over him.

After several moment of silence passed, Tarn released him. Zachem sensed in him a reluctance to do so, though he couldn't have said why he knew what Tarn felt. Though a Creation, Zachem had enhanced *physical* senses, not psychic senses.

"I suppose we'd better clean off," Tarn said with a sigh.

"Yeah."

They stood there staring at one another. Unmoving.

Tarn grinned. "After you, handsome."

To Zachem's astonishment, he felt his cheeks heat. His body shimmered with a blush, and Tarn laughed.

"Damn, you're fine." He slapped his ass. "Now into the water. Go on. I'll wait and watch."

Zachem opened his mouth to retort when Tarn fingered his collar. *Slave master. The same man who tortured Pyrigo just commanded me with ease. Fuck.* Turning his back, Zachem quickly lathered and rinsed off evidence of their union. He couldn't believe he'd allowed a slaver to take what he'd sworn to never give again. His obedience.

The gift seemed like an obscenity. And for the first time in a long time, Zachem felt ashamed of his heritage. He turned and tried to mask his disquiet, but he didn't succeed because Tarn asked, "What's wrong?"

Tarn didn't smile, and the concern in his eyes made it all worse.

"Nothing." Zachem strode from the room wet, annoyed, and on the verge of breaking something. Namely, Tarn's very handsome head.

Tarn stayed in the lav long enough for Zachem to grow into a simmering rage.

Then Pyrgo barged into the cell and looked around. "Beast."

"What the fuck do you want?" He glared at Pyrgo, secretly relieved the male looked fit and hearty. Of all the guards in The Pit, Pyrgo had been the only one to make him feel like a man. He treated all the slaves like humans and not as 'beasts', the way the others regarded them. Then again, he was new. Perhaps in time Pyrgo would grow to abuse those under his power.

Pyrgo's eyes widened as he stared over Zachem's shoulder. Zachem didn't have to look to know Tarn stood behind him. He could feel the male, like a living pulse inside him now.

"Destroy – ah, Slave Six. Come with me." Pyrgo raised his brows at Zachem and looked again at Tarn, as if some unspoken communication passed between the two.

Interesting.

Zachem turned...and scowled at Tarn. The bastard stood stark naked in front of another male. No matter that most slaves weren't granted clothing, or that Tarn hadn't had anything to change into in the lav. Annoyance darkened the patterns on Zachem's skin as he reached the table, grabbed the loincloth, and threw it at his new cell mate.

He deliberately stepped between them to block Pyrgo's view. "Put that on," he rumbled, the urge to challenge Pyrgo strong. *But challenge him for what?*

To his further surprise, Tarn didn't argue. He caught the loincloth and dressed. Which made him look even more desirable, were that possible. The small areas hidden by the *rakhide* made Zachem want to strip Tarn down and learn everything about him. *He's a slaver, get him out of your head!*

"Pyrgo, you wanted a word?" Tarn asked in a soft voice. He approached but stopped just behind Zachem.

Pyrgo's eyes narrowed. "Yes. Slave Six, come with me." He turned on his heel and left the room without waiting.

"I'll be right back," Tarn murmured. As he moved past Zachem, he caught him on the shoulder with an impossibly long, black fingernail and scratched him.

Tarn lifted his bloodied nail to his mouth and sucked the digit clean. "Addicting. Like I said before." He gave a breathless moan, confusing the shit out of Zachem. "Be good while I'm gone, Beast. And maybe I'll give you a treat when I get back." Tarn's eyes smouldered.

"Fuck you." Why did wanting Tarn sear him to his bones?

"Not if I fuck you first." Tarn chuckled and left.

The door slammed shut after him and the lock hammered home.

The silence was deafening. A sudden loneliness scared Zachem, more than anything had in a long time. He didn't understand how he could hunger for the one male he shouldn't have. It made no sense. He told himself he wouldn't count the minutes until Tarn returned.

He did anyway.

* * * *

The minute Tarn and Pyrigo walked around the bend in the rocky corridor, Pyrigo disappeared. Tarn tried to follow his energy signature through the void, what Ebrellions knew to be the small holes in space they used to 'port, but couldn't push past the stored energy in his collar. He sank to the ground as the damned collar absorbed the energy he'd tried to use to access the void.

Pyrigo returned, took one look at Tarn on his knees, and pulled him to his feet. "Hold onto me."

They moved through thick black space into a room that smelled familiar. Master Furon's room. Pyrigo helped him stand and rolled his shoulders.

"Sorry. I should have warned you that the collar blocks teleportation. It blocks the actual void, affecting artificial teleporters and our natural abilities. It's a real piece of work." Pyrigo sagged into a plush red chair. "You probably recognise this from your foray in shifted form. Master Furon is busy at the moment. This is the safest place to talk and it's not recorded," Pyrigo explained. "Now what the hell is the Destroyer doing here in The Pit, if I might ask?"

Tarn sighed. "It's a long story."

"Trust me, I've got nothing but time. Nine more days, in fact," Pyrigo muttered.

A coincidence? "Don't tell me you're here for the Dorvian crystal."

"I am." Pyrigo swore. "You too?"

"My nephew is a peacemaker on Mardu. He —"

Pyrigo sat up. "Of course. Your nephew, Drekk. The Creation."

"Someone's well informed." Tarn didn't know if he liked anyone with so much information about his family. The Ebrellion race wasn't discerning about interracial lineage, but even they kept a wary eye on the Creations who had wandered into their star system several centuries ago.

"I'm Ebrellion intelligence. I usually know everything about everything. But I admit, I hadn't known you'd be here."

"I wasn't supposed to be. Drekk was supposed to recover the crystal for his boss. Something about dignitaries from another world and an interplanetary incident."

"Yeah, well, I'm representing the Dorvians on this. Their king wants the crystal back, like yesterday. And the homeworld is all about extending our reign of *peace*," Pyrigo said with disgust.

Tarn snorted. "Why do you think I left Brel for the Vrail System? A year ago I was ass-deep in Ebrellion rebels and loving it. Now the scared bastards won't come near me. I've been stuck on Mardu working as a bar owner to keep an eye on our horny brethren. They've apparently given up kidnapping brides from the Vrail System, near as I can figure."

Pyrigo didn't smother his laugh fast enough.

"Trust me, I find little humour in this situation," he growled. He pulled at the metallic band around his throat.

"I don't know. Our greatest warrior, a slave?" Pyrigo chuckled. "The band won't hold you, but it will stop you from becoming a *threll* or 'porting. Hey, at least you're in the mix again. Can't claim The Pit isn't an exciting place."

"If I didn't need you to get me back to that cell, I'd choke you right now."

Pyrigo grinned and his inner lids blinked to reveal Ebrellion pupils. To Tarn's surprise, he found himself liking the male, despite his sense of humour.

"Destroyer, be glad you volunteered to leave home. It's become a boring place, full of harmony and childbearing females. The warriors grow soft with happiness." Pyrigo grimaced. "Thankfully, there are still plenty of worlds out there needing serious help. The Dorvians are a barbaric race. I love them. I think you'd like them, too."

"Perhaps." He remembered something he'd heard Pyrgo say. "Why would their crystal light up around the beast?"

"I'm not sure. I only know that I have to be here for The Slave Trade when it goes down. Rumour has it that crystal is going to sell for a fortune. There are important people from a lot of planets coming down for this auction."

"But if the crystal is that powerful, why is it here, in The Pit? Why sell it at The Slave Trade?"

Pyrgo shrugged. "A lot of people believe the rock gives its owner immense power when handled by its rightful holder."

"By a man that turns the stone red, maybe?" His mind whirled with possibilities.

"Could be." Pyrgo cleared his throat. "Ah, I have to know. The Beast —"

"His name is Zachem."

"*Zachem* smells like you. *A lot* like you."

Tarn tried not to let his pleasure show. "He's a distraction while I'm stuck here. A nice way to pass the time." *And if that's all he is, why can't you stop thinking about him?* Damn his conscience for annoying him with the truth.

"Better not let Furon know that. He'll use Zachem to get to you. The slave master's not right. His *shei* is seriously fucked up."

"Fucked up?" Tarn smiled. "You sound native, Pyrgo. Tell me something. You don't look familiar to me. Why is that?"

"Furon will return soon. We'd better get you back."

So Pyrgo didn't want to talk about his past. That only made Tarn that much more interested in knowing the truth. "Pyrgo?"

"Yes?" he asked, his tone wary.

"Call me Tarn. *Destroyer* is a little formal."

"Sure. And you can call me Pyrgo. Or Guard. Or Master, if you like." Pyrgo grinned at the obscene gesture Tarn shot him. "Or not." His gaze sobered as he looked at Tarn's collar. "Hold on a minute."

Pyrgo picked carefully through one of Furon's drawers. He found a small device and gave it to Tarn.

"The key?"

Pyrgo nodded. "He has a few spares. Use this to release the collar." He showed Tarn how to take it off. "You're going to have to put it back on if you stay."

"I figured."

"But at least you can take it off and 'port or shift if need be. It's actually a good thing you're here. You can help me take back the crystal, which I'd planned to deliver to the Dorvians on Mardu anyway. I'll help you get off the planet. Colony6 has a decent fleet policing the atmosphere. Furon pays his slaver dues, so he's covered by the planet's militia."

"I wasn't told that." Interference from Colony6's militia would jeopardise his rescue from the planet.

"I wasn't either. I learned it a few days ago and had to plan around it. Furon likes to keep secrets."

A distant noise outside alerted them to move.

Tarn held his collar and the key in hand. "Thanks, Pyrgo. I owe you one."

"Don't think I won't collect. Just do me a favour. Don't tell your 'distraction' about me. I'm not sure where his loyalties lie."

"I know." Unfortunately, Tarn couldn't trust Zachem yet either. His body couldn't get enough of the Creation, but he needed to know more about him before he allowed lust to compromise the mission.

Pyrgo vanished, and Tarn followed him into an empty alcove. Pyrgo nodded at him to reattach his collar. He did and palmed the key.

Taking him by the arm, Pyrgo dragged him into the corridor and around the bend towards Zachem's cell, where the guards and their *threll* remained on watch.

"Remember, there's a lot of currency riding on tonight's fight. You're expected to win in no more than three rounds," Pyrgo said. "Understand, slave?"

Tarn scowled at him, staying in character.

Pyrgo stopped, drawing the guards' attention. "Again, I ask, do you understand, slave? I'd hate for your disobedience to earn you some harsh discipline at Master Furon's hands."

Tarn had to admit the man had talent. By keeping his voice soft yet firm, he sounded more threatening than the others with all their yelling. "I understand."

"Back to your cell." Pyrgo shoved him towards the guards, and Tarn made a mental note to remind Pyrgo not to be so enthusiastic about pushing him around. "You have another hour before the fight. Use it well."

After being locked back in the cell, Tarn expected to answer some questions. Instead, Zachem pointedly ignored him and sat at a nearby table contemplating a tray of food.

Definitely have to deal with that slaver issue.

Since he needed to decide what to do about everything he'd learned, he laid back on Zachem's bed. Enveloped in the male's scent, Tarn spent a surprisingly comfortable, quiet hour, mired in plans.

The door banged open, startling him.

Yorum entered with a large grin. "Okay Beast, Six. Time to earn your keep."

Zachem left the cell without a word. Tarn sighed. He had a feeling he had more than one battle tonight. And the hardest one would be fought outside the ring.

Chapter Five

Zachem returned to his cell with a twinge in his shoulder. It wasn't enough Furon demanded he fight armed opponents. Now he had to battle two and three at a time, several fights a night. Tonight's battles had been invigorating all the same. One of the Raggas was the strongest he'd encountered yet, and the Zeiren moved with both skill and stamina. They'd lasted longer than any of the others, and the skirmishes had kept his mind off Tarn.

He walked into his cell with the object of his obsession following a step behind. Tarn walked easily, no injuries on his muscular frame. His damned loincloth played hell on Zachem's nerves. Every time Tarn shifted, the thin fabric moulded to his groin, and that tempting bulge seemed to grow whenever Tarn saw him looking at it.

"Nice fight," Tarn murmured and brushed against him as he passed by to the lav.

Zachem forced himself not to flinch. Only when Tarn had left the room did he give in to the tension bothering him. He clenched his fists and deliberately relaxed them, then took a long, deep breath. No matter what Tarn had done or who he was, Zachem desired him.

Hell, he hadn't felt this much arousal since Master Caegon, and most of that had been from the desire to submit. *The way I submitted to Tarn yesterday.* Zachem swore under his breath and threw himself onto his bed. He locked his hands behind his head and contemplated his screwed up life. If only he could fall into a deep sleep and ignore the mess of The Pit and his unnatural desires. Only in dreams did he ever feel a sense of anything resembling peace.

His conscience pointed out that he'd felt that same calm after his euphoric orgasm with Tarn.

Again, Tarn. Always, *Tarn*.

Zachem's thoughts revolved around an infuriating male whose contribution to life was to enslave unwilling men and women. Terrific.

Calling on the meditation that oftentimes kept his hungers at bay, Zachem built a small fantasy for himself in his mind – one that *didn't* include his slave master cellmate. Some time later, when Tarn exited the lav, Zachem had successfully ensconced himself in a tropical paradise where he ruled the land.

"Tired?" Tarn asked.

A pack of wild thrells neared his territory, but sensing his dominance, backed away. Then a group of Creations approached, beings like him seeking acceptance. Zachem welcomed them, promising a place where one and all could be free to do as they liked, under an indigo sky dotted with wisps of lavender clouds. He imagined the heat warming his skin, the cool caress of wind blowing over his sun-kissed face...

Tarn muttered something before stomping to the door and banging on it, distracting him from paradise. "Guards," Tarn shouted. "I need to talk to Pyrigo."

Curious but unwilling to show it, Zachem concentrated on the stone ceiling, keeping a hold of his precious fantasy while he pondered Tarn with both annoyance and an unsettling jealousy. He knew Tarn and Pyrigo were up to something. When Tarn had returned to the cell earlier in the day, he'd seemed excited, keyed up and trying to hide it.

Though Zachem often used his heightened senses to exploit the weaknesses of others, with Tarn, he could immediately sense the male's arousal, anger and frustration, the same frustration Tarn felt right now. The emotion danced off his skin like a swarm of fireflies.

Pyrigo responded to Tarn's request in less time than Zachem might have expected. The guard entered the cell and listened to Tarn's ridiculous requests for better food, a larger pallet, and a better reward for his win than a stubborn *drun* of a cellmate. Yet something was wrong about the exchange. The stilted moments of silence between them didn't sound right.

"Come on," Pyrigo grumbled. He shot Zachem a strange look before preceding Tarn out the door.

Dying of curiosity to know what the hell Tarn was up to, Zachem shored away that need to know and focused once again on his dream of freedom. It took him a while to re-enter that amazing place, where he no longer wore a collar and had actual friends. He succumbed to slumber a few hours later.

A wet, raspy lick across his leg startled him from sleep. At first he laid still, wondering what Tarn meant by disturbing him. But after another lick of that rough, wet tongue, he knew it didn't belong to Tarn. He made ready to pound his assailant and turned to stare into the slitted green-gold eyes of the monstrous *threll* who'd visited a few days ago.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, nonplussed.

The creature sat back on his haunches. He scratched behind his ear with one leg, used the other three for balance and pawed at Zachem with the other two.

"By the stars, you're huge."

Even in the dim crystal light of the cave, Zachem sensed a largeness to the *threll* that had nothing to do with size and everything to do with power, which made him think of Tarn, who, to his surprise, had yet to return. Jealousy seethed. If he smelled so much as a hint of Pyrigo's seed anywhere on Tarn, he'd kill both of them. Red hazed over everything. The rage balled and built with speed...until the *threll* nuzzled his leg again.

To Zachem's surprise, the need to kill vanished as suddenly as it had come. Settling back onto his pallet with his back to the wall, he studied his visitor and tried to take his mind off Tarn's absence.

"Damn."

The *threll* cocked its head.

"Asshole isn't here. Probably sucking off Pyrigo somewhere," he muttered, not sure why he found the thought so infuriating. What Tarn did or didn't do shouldn't matter at all.

The *threll* stared at him, and Zachem wondered again at the creature. The door to his room remained closed. He would have wakened had it opened, so how the hell had *this* beast entered?

"Where did you come from?" he asked the thing, puzzled. Without realising he did so, he reached out a hand and rubbed its head. The coarse fur over its scalp felt softer than it looked, and it seemed to like him rubbing around its many ears. He wouldn't chance petting its back, where green and gold scales promised a sharp cut and glittered with menace. By rights, Zachem should have called the guards to take the *threll* away. They were known to be vicious, their bites and claws toxic. But he couldn't make himself turn the creature away. The novelty of its affection captivated him.

The creature rumbled and didn't stop, nuzzling under Zachem's hand. Then it crawled onto his pallet and laid its head on Zachem's belly.

Startled, Zachem didn't move. But he didn't sense any aggression in the *threll*, just a need for comfort. He sighed and stroked its head, feeling a strange peace. "I can't say why, but I like you. You need a name."

The *threll* regarded him with what looked like pleasure. Its rumbling grew louder, and Zachem thought it might be purring, something only felines did. The mystery behind his visitor grew more curious.

He thought for a moment. "Let's call you Six, like my absent roommate." He grinned, thinking of Tarn's reaction to that. "You have six legs, and you're much more pleasant than his sorry ass." He shook his head and unwillingly corrected, "*Sexy* ass."

The creature stopped purring, and Zachem stopped petting it. Then Six rubbed its face under Zachem's hand, demanding more affection.

He chuckled. "You're a handsome one, aren't you? Well-fed, strong, lethal. Bet you have a mate somewhere out there. But you can't be that happy if you're stuck in this shithole. First chance I get, I'm gone." He swore the creature nodded, and taken with the need to confide in someone, hell, *anyone*, he continued. "The only reason I'm even here is because I trusted the wrong person. Yorum conned me into believing he'd fly me out of the Vrail. I was heading for the Third Quadrant on the Edge of the System, away from System law. You know what they do to my kind? They kill us." The bitterness over his situation burned like poison.

"Yorum suckered me into hiring him to pilot me out of the System. I had a band of peacemakers on my ass at the time. I was desperate, not thinking straight, and trusted a pirate to do what he promised. Instead, he sold me to fucking Furon. Now here I am, in The Pit." Zachem snorted. "I try to tell myself I've been in worse places, because I have. The dickheads down here at least feed me and give me a place to sleep. Because I win for them, they even give me slaves to fulfil all my needs. But it's not enough," he admitted, Tarn's troubling face in his mind's eye. "It's never enough."

Six licked his hand.

"I don't like it here, but at least I'm respected for my fists. The guards fear me." A heady sense of power warmed him. "The fuckers can't kill me, not with all the currency I bring to The Pit. Never been beaten, not since the first day I stepped in the ring. I don't think they know what I am. That or they don't care."

The *threll* cocked its head, as if curious.

"But you know what? One day I'm going to be free. Away from scientists and slavers and people who would kill me because of some stupid law forbidding my kind to live. I'll find a perfect place and stay far from people." *So I won't hurt what I can't have – love, and a stable relationship with someone special, someone who will see me and not a monster to destroy or a tool to be used.*

The *threll* startled him by trying to sit in his lap. It licked his chin and neck, nosing too close to his jugular for comfort. No matter that Six acted tame, Zachem couldn't ignore the creature's wild nature.

"Easy, Six. You're no lap-cat, you great beast."

Six growled, but to his surprise, he knew it meant no harm, that it understood him. Though most *thrells* had an uncanny intelligence, this one was special. Six barked at him, and he hushed it so the guards wouldn't investigate.

"Shut it, Six, before the guards come in. And get off my lap. You're crushing my balls." He tried to push Six off, careful of the creature's claws.

Six didn't seem to care. When the *threll* did move, it didn't leave the pallet. Instead, it ambled off him, lowered its head to Zachem's crotch and sniffed. To his shock, Zachem grew aroused.

"Okay, off the bed," he growled, embarrassed at his inability to control his dick. "Time I got back to sleep. You can have the floor. And don't argue," he said when Six growled back at him.

As he lay down to sleep, Zachem considered what a strange night he'd had. He still missed Tarn, though he'd bite off his own tongue before admitting the truth. Six's presence helped tremendously, allowing him to ease into that sense of calm only his dreams gave him.

He rolled onto his belly and trailed his hand off the bed, resting it on Six's neck as he drifted into sleep.

Tarn slowly slid out from under Zachem's warm palm, battling lust and a growing affection for the Creation who liked a wild *threll* more than his own cellmate. Irritated that he couldn't do anything right now about Zachem's 'sexy ass' comment, Tarn 'ported back into Pyrgo's cell.

Pyrgo wasn't alone. He sat upright in his bed, apparently naked, his legs splayed wide. Thankfully, the women in his bed had their backs to Tarn, their faces buried between Pyrgo's thighs. Pyrgo glared at him before closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the wall. He clutched the women by their hair as they alternately licked and sucked his cock. His abdomen tensed, showcasing the rippled muscle of a man used to combat.

Though Pyrigo refused to comment on his background, the male's scent and face reminded Tarn too much of a truth he was hard pressed to deny. Yet another surprise on this pain the ass mission.

Pyrigo groaned. "That's it, Shazza. Suck it harder. Stars yes. Beeta, roll my balls. Good girl. Now which of you wants to swallow first?" he asked, his voice thick. "Here it comes. And I've enough for the both of you," he promised as he jetted into the blonde's mouth.

It wasn't long before she coughed, unable to swallow any more. Tarn watched as Pyrigo continued to come, and then the other woman lowered her pouty lips to his cock and swallowed more. But even she couldn't handle all of him. She raised her head and milked the rest of it from him, watching with her friend as if mesmerised.

The copious amount of seed indicated Pyrigo's Time, that the male had entered an Ebrellion heat. During the next few days, unless Pyrigo took the steps necessary to manage his arousal, he'd be desperate to impregnate anything near, day and night. So long as Pyrigo was unmated, Ebrellion herbs and rituals would enable him to control his fertility and the next Wave – that craving for his intended. That Pyrigo seemed in control of himself told Tarn he had no mate. Mated males, during their Time, went crazy for sex, but only with their bonded other.

Tarn had no mate. He too had been able to withstand his Time when the cycles hit. Thankfully, he had weeks before his next heat. He could only imagine what a nightmare that would have been to add to this already problematic mission. Zachem was enough to deal with.

At the thought of his new fixation, he hardened like stone.

The scene on the bed didn't help matters. Pyrigo had finally finished climaxing and raised both of his partners to their knees. He began kissing their breasts, fondling them everywhere with his hands. "So good," he murmured as he toyed with them. By the scents and sounds of his playmates, Pyrigo had satisfied them and was well on the way to arousing them again.

Unfortunately, he showed no sign of stopping.

Tarn twitched, trying to put a stopper on his own arousal, no closer to relief due to Zachem's resistance. Though he fully understood Zachem's disgust with his crafted occupation as a slaver, their conflict was hell on his libido. He wondered if he should slake his need with one of the females or with Pyrigo instead. The younger male had a warrior's

shei, which Tarn found acceptable for a male he considered fucking. But Pyrgo didn't arouse him the way that damned Creation did. In fact, lately, Tarn didn't want anyone but Zachem, and he found the notion not only annoying, but disturbing.

Tarn growled, and Pyrgo reluctantly eased from his partners. "My *threll* needs to go out. Don't leave this bed," he rasped, thrumming with power.

"No, Master," the females responded, as if drugged on his taste, further solidifying Tarn's suspicions of Pyrgo's identity.

"Come on, Beast." Pyrgo donned a pair of loose fitting trousers and pulled them up over his semi-erect cock. He didn't bother with a shirt and grabbed Tarn's collar and loincloth off the table. They left the room and quickly walked down several corridors, ducking into an alcove where Tarn could shift back into a man's form.

As he dressed, Pyrgo muttered under his breath about bad timing and unnecessary interruptions.

"Would you shut up?" Tarn snarled, struggling to put the loincloth on over his own arousal. Fuck if he couldn't stop thinking about Zachem.

"Like you couldn't have waited until I came again. I hurt." Pyrgo rubbed himself. "My Time is coming harder and harder lately."

Tarn eyed him with concern as he put his collar back on. "You shouldn't be outside the palace. How many guards are with you here?"

Pyrgo blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Please. I served with your father years ago during the Dexi War. Emperor Nhajir's a friend of mine."

"Damn."

"Your resemblance to him isn't your only tell. You do a good job hiding it with Furon and the guards, but you're a little too imperious when we're together. And there's no missing that drugging effect your cum had on your partners. Watch yourself, or you'll end up getting some foreign slave pregnant. Not something you want to bring home to Nhajir, let alone your mother."

"Shit. I know, I know." Pyrgo sighed then grabbed his arm when two guards and a gaggle of slaves passed. He mentally responded, *"I'm actually here on a classified mission for our Intelligence Sector. The Dorvians must get back that crystal. In the hands of the wrong people, the crystal and its holder can cause massive damage."*

"Why didn't Nhajir ask for my help?"

"Because he likes you where you are, away from home and diplomatic issues, not causing trouble," Pyrgo answered. "Besides, this is my job. I'm being primed to take over for my uncle in Intelligence. Now that Dervon has been chosen as my father's successor, I can breathe easy. You wouldn't believe how thrilling my work is. Did you know that because of some of the information we've gathered, we can now broker for better weapons with the Laar?"

"You're kidding."

"Times are changing," Pyrgo sent. "It's not all about conquering our neighbours anymore. We're investing in our future by building up our defence, as well as our own star system. I mean, look at the Vrail. Technologically, they're behind us. But socially and economically, they put us to shame. With you keeping a lid on our brethren and preventing more kidnappings, we might just be able to establish trade here."

"Hell."

"Yeah. This liaison stuff with other worlds in our own system opens up whole new possibilities. New battles, new conflicts." Pyrgo paused. "Even a need for stealth and destroyers."

"At least all this peace crap is good for something." They neared the cell. "I'll still have a job."

Pyrgo nodded to the guards and pushed Tarn towards the door. *"Destroyer, you'll always have a job. I think my father's scared of you."*

Tarn coughed to hide a chuckle.

"Look, keep winning your fights and stay out of Furon's way. And see if you can keep the beast – Zachem," he said before Tarn could correct him, " – under control. I saw a shift in his shei during one of his fights that concerned me. That shift looked very similar to the pulses of energy I saw briefly in the Dorvian crystal before it disappeared into the catacombs under The Pit. Zachem is connected to the crystal and important to our cause. I can't explain it, but I can feel it."

So could Tarn.

Pyrgo opened the door and shoved him inside. *"Idiot,"* he said scornfully before slamming the door and locking it.

Tarn entered the cell, searching for the lumbering male who wouldn't leave his thoughts.

On the pallet, Zachem blinked at him once before he rolled onto his side, giving Tarn his back.

Tarn clenched his fists, annoyed and aroused. Zachem wore nothing, his tight ass and sculpted back on display like one very large tease.

Pyrgo needed Zachem for the mission, because he had some connection to the crystal.

Tarn could pretend he needed the Creation for the same reason, but he'd be lying. Zachem aroused him in a way he couldn't explain. A few steps closer and Tarn smelled him, the warm scent of wildness and chaos and the potential for destruction. The very qualities all Ebellions prized in battle.

And in a mate.

Crazy thinking. Yet it didn't diminish the stiffness of his cock at all. He too easily remembered how Zachem tasted, coming in his mouth. Visions of Pyrgo and those females pleasuring one another fuelled his lust, imagining Zachem between *his* legs, swallowing the desire he couldn't stop.

Tired and sexually frustrated, he sat down on the oversized pallet, conscious of Zachem's sudden stiffness. Wanting the affection Zachem had shown him thinking him a *threll*, Tarn sounded overly harsh when he said, "I don't have the patience for your shit right now. So move over unless you want me buried so far up your ass I'm coming in your throat."

Zachem said nothing and moved over.

More annoyed that the man would give him neither a fight nor an excuse to screw him, Tarn swore and tried to fall asleep.

To his surprise, the scent of Zachem calmed him, and he soon fell into a dreamless, well-needed rest.

Chapter Six

Zachem spoke little when he woke the next morning. Tarn still lay in bed, apparently too tired from his previous night's activities. Jealousy reared its head at thoughts of Pyrgo fucking Tarn, but he didn't smell Pyrgo on him at all. *Dammit, why do I keep thinking of him as mine?*

My what? Zachem didn't know 'what', nor did he want to know. He lived to fight, to one day lull his captors into believing he liked The Pit, so that he could escape. Once he figured out how to disable his collar, he'd kill Furon and a few of his friends and take off. Yet the thought of leaving Tarn behind bothered him. A lot.

After visiting the lav and cleaning up, Zachem sat and stared at the puzzle of his cellmate. The urge to fuck him was still there, but not as strong as it had been. Instead, Zachem felt a need to submit, to *be* fucked, to please Tarn in hopes of making his master smile.

He froze. *Master. Tarn. Submission.* Three words he'd never thought – or wanted – to use together.

Worried about his state of mind, Zachem rose, determined to put as much distance between him and Tarn as possible. He quickly left his cell and requested an audience with Master Furon, who proved willing enough to grant him everything he requested. Zachem should have questioned Furon's allowance, but he was too relieved to look deeper into Furon's acquiescence.

"Just make sure not to kill him," Furon warned. "Slave Six has the potential to pull as much currency into The Pit as you do. And I like him."

Shit. When Furon *liked* someone, they normally ended up dead within days.

"Yes, Master Furon. It's just that apart, I'll better be able to focus on the fight. I sense Tarn studying me, and I know I'm studying him for weaknesses all the time." *Truth.* "It would be a much better battle if we met in the ring without so much familiarity between us."

"You make a good point, but then, that's one of your strengths, isn't it? To constantly look for ways to win, no matter the cost." Furon studied Zachem with an intensity that

unnerved him. "We're going to make more on this fight than we'll probably make on the upcoming Slave Trade." Furon smiled, a genuine show of pleasure. "And that's saying something. Extra rations for you and Slave Six. I want you both strong and ready in three more days' time. Don't disappoint me, Beast."

"No, Master Furon." Relieved Furon meant to agree, Zachem bowed his head, something he'd normally refrained from doing to annoy Furon.

"Excellent."

He forced himself not to shy away from the touch of Furon's hand over his chest. Everything about the slave master felt wrong. The lingering graze of his palm over Zachem's muscle burned, like an oily fire licking at his energy.

Furon nodded to himself and pulled his hand away. "Three days. Then I want results."

"Yes, Sir."

Guards led Zachem out of Furon's quarters and to the training centre.

For the next three days, Zachem prepared with a ferocity he hadn't used in years. He couldn't help anticipating the fight. The ability to challenge a worthy opponent ate at him. To go one on one and not pull his punches or limit himself was in itself freeing. Furon hadn't issued him any mandates on how long to allow the fight, or when to crush his adversary in which round.

Zachem did miss Tarn, but not seeing the male also allowed him to focus better. He still hungered for Tarn's touch, but he didn't have to live right next to temptation. And during the nights, Six continued to visit. Zachem talked about his dreams, about his needs and his confusing desire for the confined slave master. Six didn't judge him, didn't do anything but sit and listen with an acceptance that stole its way into Zachem's heart. When he finally left this place, he intended to take Six with him.

Comforted by Six's presence, he wondered how Tarn fared. Furon had been a man of his word. Zachem didn't see Tarn at all, but he didn't worry. Furon would take good care of Tarn. He needed Slave Six for the big fight.

Before Zachem knew it, the night had come. Several other matches played out as the crowd revved up to see the bout of the season. The Beast versus Slave Six. Oiled down and dressed in a pair of battle trews, *rakhide* trousers that protected his groin and legs from waist to mid-calf, Zachem felt like a real warrior as he met Tarn, similarly garbed, in the ring.

Tarn's eyes glittered, and that strange inner lid blinked at him once, enough to tell Zachem Tarn also wanted this fight.

Zachem licked his lips and watched Tarn's eyes narrow, drawn to the motion. He adjusted his stance, and Zachem didn't need to look to see that Tarn sported the same hard-on he now had. Excitement, anticipation, and the thrill of what was to come hovered just out of reach.

Yorum announced them, and a ring echoed in the sudden silence.

They stood there, gauging one another. And then Tarn pounced.

The crowd went wild as Tarn and Zachem struggled against one another.

"I'll try not to hurt you...much." Tarn grunted and pushed him back, grinning.

"I'm not as nice. I'm going to hurt you, oh so good. And when this over, that ass is mine." Zachem glanced at Tarn's crotch and smirked. "I'm going to rip you open and fill you right up."

"Promises, promises," Tarn ended on a breath as Zachem took him to the mat.

They continued to fight one another, testing each other's strength and agility as they danced out of reach while trying to connect with each other, fist to body. Both took care not to hit the other in the face, though Zachem wondered if Tarn's reasons matched his own. Simply put, he didn't want to mar that face. A silly reason, but he could do more damage to Tarn by hitting his body anyway.

The bell rang, announcing the end of the first quarter. Then the second, the third. When the fifth bell rang to commence the fight, the betting in the crowd swelled as they cheered for the Beast and Slave Six. No one had thought Tarn would last as long as he had, not even Zachem. Impressed and not trying to hide it, Zachem grinned even as he fell under a compilation of kicks and blows to his mid-section.

But just when Tarn had gained real ground, he pulled back, as if winded.

Annoyed at what he *knew* to be pretence, Zachem rolled to his feet and struck hard and fast.

Tarn went down and got up much more slowly than he had before. They both tired, but now Zachem doubted the extent of Tarn's exhaustion. The battle forced Zachem to draw on reserves he hadn't had to use since the Dorvian Conquest. What did Tarn use to keep up with the beast?

"Don't hold back on my account, Slave Six," he taunted.

Tarn grimaced and wheezed, "I don't want to hurt you too much. Not when I have that fine ass waiting for me."

Zachem feinted left and followed with a blow to Tarn's gut, which he expected Tarn to lean back from. The move wasn't special, nor was it harder than any he'd pushed before. Yet Tarn fell into it and groaned as he hit the ground. Stunned, Zachem waited for him to recover instead of going for the man's throat. But Tarn remained down.

Through a flurry of screams, congratulations and enthused well-wishes from the crowd, Yorum declared Zachem the victor and pushed him off the dais. Rushed away from the fight and down into the caves, into the cleaning area, he allowed a few slaves to wash him and a medic to check over his wounds.

The bruises he'd received still hurt and would take some time to heal. Tarn had beaten the hell out of his ribs and thighs. But why the hell had he fallen and remained down? *Was he playing or did I hit what I didn't mean to?* Concerned that he'd seriously hurt him, Zachem demanded to see Tarn again.

Once clean and draped in a coarse robe, guards led him to Master Furon's quarters.

"Well done, Beast!" Furon laughed with delight. "We made more tonight than we did all last quarter. Outstanding. You'll be richly rewarded for this. Now go." He motioned for the guards to remove him then turned back to the slaves waiting on him.

The guards led him from Furon's room and Pyrgo joined them. "Bring him this way," Pyrgo ordered the others.

"What the hell? I want to see Tarn."

"Where do you think we're taking you?" Pyrgo answered. "And while it was a nice fight, you need to watch your tone. *Slave.*"

Still riding on a battle high, Zachem snapped, "Shut the fuck up, Pyrgo. I'm not in the mood."

Pyrgo drew a phaser and shot Zachem with a pulse vibrant enough to stun him to immobility.

"Shit, Pyrgo. What the hell?" one of the guards asked.

"He'll remember later," another warned.

Pyrgo swore. "I'm not afraid of the beast. Now bring him with you. I don't care how heavy he is. Grab a few more guards if need be, but move it."

It took four large guards to drag Zachem into an unfamiliar cell and toss him onto a massive, surprisingly soft bed. After the others left, Pyrigo leant down, looking for what, Zachem couldn't say. "You have tonight. Don't blow it."

Tarn's laughter met his ears, but he couldn't turn his head, still paralysed from the stunner. "Oh, I intend for him to blow it," his cellmate answered.

"Funny. You have the privacy you asked for, and Master Furon sends his regards. You made him a very rich, and even more powerful, man tonight." Pyrigo didn't sound happy about the fact, which made Zachem wonder just what the hell was going on.

Tingling spread through his limbs, but he forced himself not to move yet.

"Thank you, *guard*. Now, if I might enjoy the fruit of my labour?" Tarn reached out and ran a hot hand over Zachem's chest, pushing the sides of the robe apart.

Pyrigo said something nasty that made Tarn smile. But Zachem didn't sense an attraction between the two. Nothing they did or said was overtly sexual, though they acted like equals. Due to Tarn's position as an ex-slave master? Or something more?

Slamming the door behind him, Pyrigo left Zachem and Tarn alone. The loud *click* of a lock sounded, and then silence filled the room.

Tarn stared down at him, his bright green eyes full of appreciation as they ran over Zachem's body, lingering on his lips. "By now you probably realise I took that last punch on purpose. Sorry, Beast, but Master Furon and I made a deal. Trust me, this was the best way for us to come together. Now go ahead and vent. I know the effects of the stunner have faded."

Zachem rolled off the bed to his feet, still trying to rid himself of the pinpricks of feeling invading everywhere. "I can't *believe* you threw that fight. You were right there with me, and then I felt you hold back." He paused, struggling with the need to keep his distance with the slave master and now cheat. "*How could you?*"

Tarn sighed and removed the robe he wore. He had on nothing underneath but the flat black collar at his throat. His cock stood stiff and proud as he walked towards Zachem. Despite Zachem's shock and rage at Tarn's deception, he wanted nothing more than to get on his knees and pleasure the man. And he hated himself for it.

"Why do you think I did it? I wanted you. And trust me, I took enough of a beating to keep me limping for days." He pointed to the purple and blue marks over his right leg, as well as to the growing bruise on his abdomen. "I don't heal as fast as you, Zachem."

"You were supposed to fight me. You're a slaver and a dick, but I thought I could trust you to at least fight with honour."

Tarn grimaced. "There's a reason for all of this. I want to trust you with the truth, but it's too soon. We haven't really bonded, not yet." Tarn licked his lips and stared down at Zachem's exposed front. He walked to the table beside the bed and dipped his fingers in a jar. Then he smeared the stuff over his cock and groaned. "I've been waiting for this. And it's been so hard, waiting."

Zachem couldn't move. His feet froze to the floor, long-dormant instincts rising as Tarn's scent hit him squarely in the balls.

Tarn approached and circled behind him. "That's it. Just stand there and wait for your master to tell you what to do."

Baffled at his desire to do just that, for a man he didn't even respect, Zachem trembled with the need to rebel. To his shock, he couldn't refuse Tarn.

"We both know what you need, my large beast. It's okay," Tarn said softly and slid the robe off his shoulders.

Soft, wet kisses spread from between his shoulder blades down his back. His dick spiked and creamed, the hunger for more filling his slit.

Tarn's hands stroked and petted, their warmth blazing a trail of arousal everywhere they touched.

Zachem's vision went red, his desire for this male, this unworthy *drun*, overwhelming.

"Don't move unless I tell you to," Tarn warned and prodded him to spread his legs wider.

"What are you doing to me?" Zachem growled, wanting to hurt Tarn, to push him away and resist his compulsion to obey.

"I'm giving you what you need. Letting you submit, forcing you to give me what I need," Tarn explained in hard voice. "Now be quiet until you're told to speak. And *don't move*."

Zachem clenched his jaw tight and fought to defy Tarn's order, not sure why his instincts had kicked in the way they had. He'd never before responded to any male the way he did now, not even to his beloved Master Caegon.

Hands ran up and down his inner thighs, and he couldn't contain the groan that erupted. A callused palm weighed his balls, then cupped them with a surprising gentleness.

The contrasting shock of what he expected and what he received had him trembling with arousal. Tarn reached around his waist and held Zachem's shaft, running his fingers through the wet slit to coat the entire rod with his moisture, and he nearly lost it.

"That's just what I like. A nice, wet cock," Tarn whispered and kissed the middle of Zachem's back.

He shuddered, caught in a lust so extreme he wanted to burst.

"Don't come, not yet."

Tarn released him and spread his ass cheeks apart.

"That's a nice hole, Beast. So tight, so sweet. I wonder how it tastes..."

Zachem panted with anticipation.

"Lean forward. Ah, that's it." Tarn didn't disappoint. He rimmed Zachem with his tongue, licking so lightly it felt like a whisper. Then he put more pressure there, alternately blowing then licking. He shoved his tongue inside Zachem's anus, pushing harder into a tight passage that hadn't been used in years. When he stopped Zachem couldn't help his moan of denial.

"Easy," Tarn warned before shoving a finger inside his ass.

"Oh fuck," Zachem cried, needing to come like he needed to breathe.

"Not yet," Tarn bit out, then shoved another finger inside, stretching the tender flesh with a rough shove. He scissored his fingers, widening Zachem, preparing him for that massive cock. "Didn't I tell you not to speak?" he rasped and swore, thrusting his fingers deeper. "I knew you'd be good, but you feel incredible, so damned tight." Tarn pulled his fingers free and pushed Zachem towards the bed. He shoved Zachem facedown and kicked his feet further apart.

"I'm coming in, right the fuck now," Tarn rasped. "Come when you want to, because I'm going to bathe you with seed, my pretty beast. Stars, your skin is so bright you're glowing."

Before Zachem could move, Tarn pressed forward with more than his fingers. Thick flesh wedged its way into his anus and began to slowly, steadily push. He hadn't been taken in years, and then only once by his Handler in a painful, humiliating scene. Tarn made him want this. He couldn't have said why, but he knew it was right.

Tarn coaxed him with his voice and continued to push. Energy flowed between them, a powerful tie of attraction and affection Zachem could feel in Tarn's very self. The burn of his

penetration only increased Zachem's pleasure, and he moaned as he writhed against the bed beneath him.

"That's it. Show me how much you want it." Tarn groaned and shoved the rest of himself inside, until his balls smacked against Zachem's. Tarn held there, allowing Zachem to feel all of him before he started moving.

Each thrust went fully in and fully out, Tarn's length seeming endless as he continued to prod Zachem's sweet spot. The alien sensation of being taken, when Zachem normally did the taking, brought him to another plane of pleasure altogether.

"Yes, yes," he hissed as Tarn's pounding grew rougher.

Animalistic grunts and groans filled the room, the scent of sex saturating everything. Tarn dug his nails into Zachem's sides and fucked him like a man possessed, fuelling his need to be dominated by a stronger, tougher male.

Zachem tried but couldn't stop himself. The rapture of orgasm spread through his entire body. His balls tightened and he clenched his ass, stirring another moan from Tarn. The sweet sound sent him over the edge.

He yelled as he spilled all over the bed beneath him.

Tarn rammed harder, his cock like steel. "Fuck, yes," he moaned in an echo of tones that didn't sound human. Then he shoved deeper and stilled, whispering Zachem's name.

Just as he thought it was over, when Tarn finally ceased, Tarn leant down and bit him on the shoulder.

With sharp teeth that fucking hurt. "Ow, dammit," he barked, only to swallow another shout as ecstasy crashed through him. Another climax, this one from out of nowhere, caused him to shudder as a well of seed left him yet again.

Tarn kept his mouth around Zachem's shoulder and fucked him again, this time coming with such force that trickles of cum washed over Zachem's legs and ass. The scent of Tarn was so strong Zachem swam in it.

When he finally released Zachem's shoulder, Tarn muttered in a language Zachem didn't understand. He pulled out, finally, and wiped his cock over Zachem's back, spreading the mess everywhere. "Mine. Say it, Zachem. Say you're mine."

Too exhausted to think, Zachem did as commanded. "I'm yours."

But then an odd thing happened. He fell into a dreamy lassitude, where a part of him drifted from his being. The sense of Tarn invaded like a conquering army, but instead of

seizing what it wanted, Tarn's invasion settled into his bones and his blood. Energy pulsed, grew and warmed, like a soft caress of comfort.

"Shit, no," Tarn groaned, as if from a distance. And then he must have pushed Zachem onto his back on the bed, because Zachem felt a mouth around his cock and the aching, familiar pressure of climax began to build again.

Time passed. Another climax and then another issued from him, pleasure intermittent with the painful stings of Tarn's teeth. Nothing made sense but the utter rapture taking Zachem into the peace he'd craved his entire life. He submitted fully, not holding back, and was rewarded with a brightness that extinguished the dark always waiting inside him.

Tarn came back to himself and stared down at the shock of blood and seed that covered Zachem and the bed. Unknowingly, Tarn had performed half of the Ebrellion mating ritual. Caught in the grip of a lust so extreme, he'd lost himself in the erotic promise of Zachem's perfect body, mind and soul.

Without Zachem's consent.

Shocked and ashamed at what he'd allowed to happen, he rose on unsteady feet and sought the attached lavatory. The mating bond was a sacred thing and should never be done without the consent of those involved. Tarn had no rationalisation for his mishandling of the male he had come to care for. Losing control was no excuse, especially not to a seasoned warrior. He tried to ignore the ache inside him as he gathered some items to clean up his male. To clean up *Zachem*.

He's not mine.

Not yet.

But he very much wanted Zachem to belong to him and no other. The need to complete the ritual burned, but Tarn wouldn't do it. Zachem held a part of Tarn's *shei* inside him, a part that drained much of Tarn's energy. Tarn could continue to fuck Zachem every way he wanted, but until Zachem fucked him and spilled inside his own *honet*, they wouldn't be truly bonded.

It hurt to have Zachem so near but not truly his, but Tarn wouldn't take that choice away from his lover. *My mate. Mine.*

Trying to shake free from his possessive feelings, he hefted Zachem over his shoulder with a grunt and cleaned him in the lav. Tarn left him in the shower while he stripped the

bed and remade it with the extra sheets Pyrigo had thoughtfully left. Then he quickly returned to his lover's side.

To Tarn's relief, the many bite marks and scratches he'd left on Zachem faded as the male's natural healing ability took effect. He couldn't say the same for his myriad bruises and hurts, now that he'd disrupted his *shei*. But he figured he deserved them. With a scowl, he removed his collar and Zachem's, prepared to tell his lover the truth about matters between them—to an extent.

Perhaps with enough time and by freeing Zachem, he could win the male's trust. Once he had that, he could admit what he was and what Zachem meant to him. Already Tarn knew he would never be able to live without the man he considered *his* Creation. If Zachem rejected him, he'd literally die. With the bonding only half completed, Tarn needed it finished or he'd slowly fade into death.

But without Zachem, life wouldn't be worth living anyway.

Tarn carefully carried his lover back to the clean bed and set him down. He left for the lav and cleaned himself, then returned to the bed to watch his mate sleep. The emotional coil inside his chest threatened to break free, and as he stared at the beauty of Zachem's body and *shei*, he fought the weakness of tears filling his eyes.

He ran a hand over Zachem's cheek and a finger over his firm lips. He wouldn't—*he couldn't*—give up his mate. He could only hope his lack of control over these new emotions didn't kill him in the end.

Chapter Seven

Zachem woke the next morning feeling loose, energetic, and totally relaxed. The last thing he expected to see was Tarn sitting in a chair by the bed, watching him with haunted eyes.

"Tarn?"

Tarn blinked and smiled, making Zachem wonder if he'd been seeing things. "How do you feel?"

"Really good." He remembered everything from after the fight and fought a rising erection that had nothing to do with just waking up. "You're not bad in bed."

"I know." The arrogance in Tarn's voice amused him.

"Almost as good as I am."

"No. You, Beast, are in another league entirely." Tarn joined him on the bed and blanketed him with his body. Slowly, he lowered his lips to Zachem's.

Tarn's kiss rocked his very foundation. So soft, so full of feeling. It made Zachem's head spin. Tarn increased the pressure and trailed his mouth lower. He took one of Zachem's nipples between his teeth and bit.

"Damn," Zachem said on a breath. He should have been sated from so much use yesterday, but he wanted Tarn all over again.

"Let me." Tarn made the request sound more like an order as he shimmied down Zachem's body and took his cock to the back of his throat.

Curling his fingers into Tarn's silky hair, Zachem couldn't help arching up to cement contact with Tarn's talented mouth. By the stars, his lover's lips felt like a vise. The pleasure made him lightheaded as Tarn quickened his stroking tongue and bobbed over him.

"So good," he murmured, trapped in a swirling haze of lust and affection. Tarn cupped his balls and inserted a finger into his ass, increasing the heady sensations heating his blood.

"Fuck, yes. More."

Tarn shoved another finger inside and sucked harder, and Zachem spewed in a rush.

And then Tarn was spitting his cum into his hand and rubbing it over his own cock. In seconds he pushed Zachem's legs apart and angled under him, thrusting his steely shaft in deep.

Watching his lover, seeing the aching need, the desperation to come inside him, took Zachem's breath away. He felt a connection to Tarn that went beyond submission, beyond the physical into something more.

"Mother night, you're beautiful," Tarn whispered and thrust in and out, his hands on either side of Zachem's head. "I love your silver hair, those burning red eyes. So handsome, so perfect," he said on a groan and pistoned faster. "You make me so fucking hard."

He pumped a few more times before he came.

The ecstatic agony on his face mesmerised Zachem. He'd never forget this moment as long as he lived. Holding onto Tarn's shoulders, he supported the male flooding him with seed. Their scents mingled, and a comforting hum pulsed deep inside his chest.

When Tarn withdrew, Zachem made no move to do anything but breathe, staring up at his lover.

"Shit. I didn't mean to take you so soon again. I couldn't help it," Tarn said with a flush over his cheeks.

Intrigued by his embarrassment, Zachem murmured, "So you think I'm beautiful? Perfect?"

Tarn's face turned redder, and he shifted to lie beside him. "Hell. I was caught up in the moment."

Zachem turned on his side and leant up on his elbow, not wanting to miss a moment of Tarn's unease. "As was I." He gave in to his impulse to run his hand through Tarn's hair.

Tarn closed his eyes and uttered what sounded like a rumble – much like Six's deep purr. The comparison seemed apt, and Zachem wondered how he could forget so much about Tarn's unsavoury character after just one night, and one morning, of sex.

Spectacular, mind-blowing sex. Sex that made you pass out, it was so damned good.

"Stars, I could lay like this forever." Tarn sighed. "But we really need to talk."

At that moment, Zachem noticed what had been missing between them. Tarn no longer wore a collar. Zachem reached up to touch his own and found it gone as well.

"*What the fuck?*" He sat up and rubbed his hand over his throat. "What happened? How did you get the collars off us?" Ugly doubt darkened his good mood. "What did you do, Tarn?"

"Something I'll probably regret," Tarn answered with a curse then lowered his voice. "The truth is, I'm not a slaver. I'm here to recover something for my nephew."

"*What?*"

"The Dorvian crystal. They're selling it at The Slave Trade. I have to bring it back."

"Back where?" Not a slaver? Dorvian crystal? *Not a slaver?*

"Back to my nephew." Tarn scowled. "Had I known what a huge pain in the ass it would be to find the damned crystal, I wouldn't have come." He stared hard at Zachem. "Then again, I don't think I could have stayed away."

Pleasure unfurled, that Tarn considered him worthy in some way. Even for sex, to be thought of in a favourable light made him warm all over. *Master Tarn is pleased.* He started.

"You okay?"

Not Master. No more submission. Not if I want to be free. "Uh, yeah. Fine. I'm just trying to process the coincidence." He gave Tarn a suspicious onceover. "What are the odds I fought in the Dorvian Conquest searching for this mythic crystal, and it's here on Colony6?"

Tarn's eyes narrowed, and he sat up. "You're telling me you fought in the Dorvian Conquest? That you actively sought this crystal?"

"Yes. I belonged to—I mean, I *fought* for Caegon." It took effort not to refer to his master by his given title.

"So some thief steals the Dorvian crystal then comes to a slave planet, where you just *happen* to be imprisoned, in an attempt to sell it to the highest bidder? You're right. This is no coincidence." Tarn stood and began to pace, his strength apparent in each step. As were his bruises.

Zachem refused to feel guilt for the contusions. "And don't you look pretty in purple and blue."

"Yeah. You pack a hard punch." Tarn sounded distracted. "Zachem, you said you looked for this thing. Have you ever seen it or interacted with it in any way?"

"No one has."

"Because someone seems to think you might be able to wield it."

He shrugged. "They can think what they want. According to legend, only Dorvian berserkers can handle a Dorvian crystal, and there are supposedly only four of five of them left in the universe. Added to that, I'm a Creation, not a berserker. Though I could be Dorvian." He wondered. "Hell, there are parts of me I don't even know about."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't like talking about his life *before*, but he wanted to share more than just his body with Tarn. If he could believe Tarn wasn't a slaver, he could feel better about his unruly desire. "I mean my Creator told me some, but not all, about my origins. I'm part Ragga, part Zeiren, part Nebite. And I've got a few other genetic samplings from places that might not even be a part of our System. Hell, I could be one of those alien Ebrellions, for all I know. I love sex." Tarn's strange expression hastened him to add, "But I don't think I am. I have no desire to eat flesh and I can't shape shift or teleport."

"What?"

"Isn't that what Ebrellions do? My Handler once told me they kidnapped a bunch of women from our system; I read the holovids about it. Their genetic makeup intrigued my Creator, but he couldn't get his hands on a live specimen."

"Live specimen?" Tarn's voice sounded strangled.

"I thought my Handler was pretty crazy. I mean, everyone knows Ebrellions don't exist in the System anymore. Hey, you okay?"

"I'm fine." Tarn visibly unclenched his jaw.

"I'm just telling you that there's a possibility I could be anything. I might have some Dorvian blood in me, but it wouldn't be enough to control any crystal."

"The problem is that all that we know about Dorvian crystals we know from myth and legend. We need facts, not stories."

Zachem's head hurt. "No, 'we' need to know how the hell you removed our collars. What did you give Furon? What trade did you make? He never gives anything away, and especially not to us *slaves*." The notion that Tarn lied remained in the forefront of his mind.

"I'm not a slaver, dammit. I'm on a peacekeeper mission," Tarn said in a low voice.

Shit. That was even worse, because peacekeepers shot Creations on sight.

Tarn must have seen the upset in his face. "I didn't say *I'm* a peacekeeper, I'm just doing a favour for one. And I couldn't care less that you're a Creation." Tarn stared at him for a moment, then spoke even more quietly. "My nephew is a Creation, as is his mate."

"That's impossible."

"No. It's not. Drekk's Creator used some of the blood of my brother's line to make him. Ryen, his mate, is also a Creation, and he has two sisters. They all found life in a hellish lab on Eyra that no longer exists." Tarn sounded satisfied by that fact.

"I've never been to Eyra. I was Created on an asteroid in the Beltway. After I left, I destroyed the lab."

"Only to land here afterward, right?"

"Yeah." Zachem frowned. "How do you know that?"

"You're here, aren't you?" Tarn glanced away and took a deep breath before making eye contact again.

"I think I am. This all feels like some kind of dream. I fought with a male almost my equal, had incredible sex, and no longer wear a collar. My cellmate is now my lover and not a slaver, but a man with a mission?"

A smile ghosted Tarn's lips. "What do you mean 'almost' your equal?"

"And that's another thing. You lost our fight on purpose."

"Hey, it got me in here with you, didn't it?"

"So explain the collars, because I don't see Furon giving you your freedom for throwing the fight."

"Ah, that." Tarn crossed his arms over his chest. "What I told you is true. I'm doing a favour for my nephew. I'm here to grab that damned crystal and take it back to planet Mardu. Posing as a captured slaver was my cover."

"Really? Because I heard that whatever you did to Pyrigo looked pretty damned convincing."

"It was." He looked like he wanted to say more.

"And?"

"And now I'm here, and I'm not alone. I have a key to the collars and a microteleporter. But I can't teleport with the collar on. The enon energy screws with the teleporter's capacity to breach the voids."

Zachem couldn't believe what he was hearing. "We can leave right now if we want to?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get the hell off this rock." Damned if he'd let Tarn leave him behind to rot. Now he just had to find Six...

"I can't. Not until I have that fucking crystal." At least Tarn didn't sound any happier about staying than Zachem felt. "If it was up to me, I'd 'port out of here right now."

"Oh?"

"And take you with me," he muttered. "Though why, I don't know. You hit like a female and whine all the time."

Zachem grinned. "Yet I won our fight. Seems to me like you should be the one bending over."

Tarn blanched.

"What?"

Tarn sighed. "There's something else we need to discuss."

"Hell, there are a dozen things to talk about. My head's still reeling, but go ahead."

"We need to talk about you, Zachem, and your need to submit."

Tarn watched the blood rush from Zachem's cheeks. His skin pulsed in mottled bursts, a sure sign of his distress. The large warrior clenched his fists.

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

"It's okay, Zachem. I know how to deal with the needs pressing you so hard. When you get to the point that you can't control yourself, you need blood or sex, right?" He stood and searched for their collars, knowing it was only a matter of time before the guards returned. "I have to put these back on us before the guards come back." He put his on, then placed his mate's band over his thick neck.

Collar him, keep him. So right. Tarn cleared his throat and stepped back, needing to finish their discussion. *Stars, why am I so incredibly aroused around this male? We just had sex and I want him again?*

Zachem fingered his collar with distaste and returned to their conversation. "Creations kill. We're destructive freaks, mostly. Yeah, I need to fight, and I need to fuck. So what?"

Tarn sensed Zachem's need to protect what he considered a weakness. He answered carefully. "When we leave this planet, and we will, you're staying with me until I can figure how to help you." *Make you fall in love with me.*

Zachem stiffened. "I don't need another Handler. I want my freedom off this fucking rock." His red gaze was piercing as he stared down at Tarn.

Looking up at anyone was a novelty, and Tarn respected Zachem's power. Awed at his mate's strong *shei*, Tarn had never known anyone with Zachem's intensity. Stars, his own brethren would give anything for a male like this. A true warrior with the skills of a destroyer. Even his sexual submission made him more desirable, a considerable asset in an Ebrellion mate.

"Let's make a deal." Tarn would do whatever it took to keep Zachem. Lie, cheat, steal, anything. He had no problem playing dirty.

"What kind of a deal?"

"Once we retrieve that crystal and blast off this planet, we have to head to Mardu to deliver it. But once that's done, you pledge a full three months of servitude to me, and at the end of that time, I'll take you anywhere you want to go. You'll have your freedom."

"For a price," Zachem growled. "No way."

Tarn scowled. "Then enjoy life in The Pit, Beast."

"You wouldn't leave me here."

"Wouldn't I? I can take off anytime I want to. I'm here for the crystal, and I have the contacts to get me off-world. Can you say the same?"

"Shit." Zachem slammed a fist into his hand, though he looked like he'd rather punch Tarn. "I don't understand. Why do you even want me with you? I told you, I have nothing to do with the crystal."

Tarn wasn't so sure, but he couldn't care less about Zachem controlling a damned piece of rock. His heart bled for his mate. His almost-mate. "I believe you."

"Then you're saying the sex was that good? You want me as a slave to pleasure you, is that it?"

"Hell yes, the sex was that good. I've never had better."

That seemed to mollify Zachem somewhat, and Tarn made a note. Zachem needed praise.

His mate countered, "One week of servitude, and I don't mention your plans to anyone while we're still here."

"You won't say anything because you want out. How about forty-five days? One standard month of servitude – not slavery – with me. During that time, you'll follow orders as one of my crew. You'll be mine. In every way." *Every way but one. Not my true mate until you ask for it. Now how to get you to ask for it?*

Zachem frowned. "So I'm exchanging one prison for another?"

"If that's the way you want to view it."

"That's the way it seems to be. You telling me what to do all the time." He glanced at the bed. "Everywhere."

"Zachem, it's in my nature to dominate, just as it's in your nature to submit. Forget arguing about this. Like I said, I know your kind. So strong, yet so powerless under the right instruction." He didn't react to the telltale arousal patterns in Zachem's skin, as much as he wanted to grin in triumph. "Your submission will only satisfy me if it's imbued with trust. I'll be honest with you. I'm a warrior. I like to be in charge, but I'm not into rape. I don't want an unwilling mate."

"Mate?"

"Sexual partner," he hurried to correct. "I know when you're aroused. Your scent and the patterns of your skin tell me. You liked when I took charge, and I liked doing it. So yes. The day-to-day activities, to include sex, will involve your willing submission. Sexually and otherwise. Agreed?"

Zachem studied him for so long Tarn worried he'd refuse.

"Agreed."

"Agree, what?"

Zachem scowled. "Agreed...Master."

Tarn couldn't help his automatic arousal, but he didn't like Zachem's stubborn refusal to bend. Already his mate sought to test his boundaries.

"Our time starts now," he growled. "Beast, I want you to dress me."

Zachem looked as if he meant to argue but didn't.

"That's right. You do what I say when I say. I'm a good master, Zachem. Better than any you've ever had. You'll see that the longer you're with me."

Zachem said nothing, and Tarn wondered about his past. How many others had his beast served? And why did daggers of jealousy work their way into his heart at thoughts that Zachem might prefer any of them to him?

"Ah, Master?"

Tarn's arousal grew stiffer at the title. 'Master' sounded so right from Zachem's firm lips.

"Yes, *czeva*?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means servant." It actually meant *warrior's heart*, but no reason to let Zachem know, not yet.

"Great," Zachem rumbled and grabbed his loincloth off the table. "I want to know how the hell I'm supposed to wrap this around you with that massive cock in my way."

At that moment, Pyrgo barged into the cell without warning and closed the door behind him. "Time to get back to reality. Zachem, Tarn, Master Furon wants a word." He stopped at the sight of both men naked and aroused. "I see you've been busy."

"Give me a minute, here," Tarn sent him.

"Just a minute? I'm disappointed, Destroyer. No staying power?" Pyrgo answered. Aloud, he said, "You two plan on getting dressed? Or are you hoping to tempt the guards by waving around those huge cocks? Beast, no wonder you're so popular with the slaves." He paused and sniffed. "And what's with that perfume? How the hell did you get your hands on something that fine in The Pit?"

Tarn grinned at Zachem's pretended innocence. That scent was Zachem's way of holding onto him. A Creation's pheromones had been designed as a defence mechanism. To hold an enemy in thrall while taking the offence, though it could also be used with bedsport. Tarn had watched his nephew and mate play around time and time again with their scents, attracting and holding the other's attention before darting away to make love. He dared hope Zachem wanted him as badly. That Pyrgo had no idea what to make of it told Tarn Zachem hadn't used it around him.

Zachem's skin sparkled with gold. His red eyes flashed with heat. He tossed Tarn's loincloth at him and put his own on awkwardly around his erection. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Not quite." Anticipation surged. Time to test his new mate. "A moment more, Pyrgo? It won't take long."

"Shit. Don't play around, not in front of me, Tarn. Don't you know how long I had to fuck to will away this hard-on? And now you're going to make me watch? You have a mean streak, Destroyer. Very cruel." Pyrgo coughed and subtly shifted his stance as the bulge between his legs twitched. "Fine, Slave Six. Just hurry up."

Tarn pulled Zachem close and shoved the loincloth back in his hand. "I told you to put this on me. If you can't wrap it around me the way I am, take care of it. Make me

smaller...with your mouth," Tarn ordered, eager to feel his mate's lips around him once more.

Stars, he couldn't get enough. And to have Pyrigo watch, to show the Ebrellion how well his mate responded, made him even harder.

Zachem glanced from Tarn to Pyrigo and back again. He lowered his voice and leant closer, "But Pyrigo's here. You don't really want me to—"

"Yes, I fucking do." Tarn grabbed Zachem by the hair and twisted it, yanking him hard enough to hurt. The sweet smell around them intensified. His beast definitely liked a bit of pain.

Pyrigo let out a small moan. "Damn, that smells good."

"Now, Beast, make me smaller." He forced Zachem to his knees and waited. The tip of his cock was wet. He ached to spill inside his mate, inside the warm *honet* that contained such energy—Zachem's core. But he had little time. His mate's mouth would do as well.

Zachem tentatively stroked the tip of his shaft with his tongue. Then hearing Tarn's heady groan, began sucking him off. The rasp of Zachem's tongue, the hot warmth of his mouth, the light graze of his teeth as he lovingly applied the right pressure to his glans... The blowjob aroused him all too quickly. The sound of sucking, Pyrigo's harsh breathing, and the sweet smell of desire had Tarn spilling before he'd wanted to.

His knees trembled as he unloaded into his mate's mouth. "Good boy. Swallow it all, that's it," he praised, stroking Zachem's shiny hair. He caressed his cheeks and neck, loving the feel of subservience in the powerful male. "Now put the loincloth on me," he rasped and withdrew. Catching his breath, he stepped into the *rakhide* Zachem held.

When he turned to Pyrigo, he saw angry desire in the Ebrellion's eyes and tense frame.

Under normal circumstances, he might have shared his mate's skilled mouth. But until Zachem fully committed to him, he wouldn't chance his mate going into another's arms.

"Come on." Pyrigo turned on his heel and swore the whole way to Furon's chambers.

They followed close behind.

"Better now?" Zachem drew close to ask, sarcasm in his deep voice.

"Much." Tarn wanted to laugh. Talk about feeling free. A glance over his shoulder showed him Zachem's frustration. Shaking his head, he admonished, "Will that arousal away. Later, Beast, I'll see to my new slave. No one fucks you but me, do you understand?"

Zachem grimaced. "Easier said than done in this place."

“Trust me. No one will touch you.” Anger pushed Tarn’s inner sight to the forefront. He looked at his mate and saw heat patterns and *shei* outlines. He saw his other half. “No one will touch you...and live.”

Chapter Eight

Three days later, Zachem still had no idea what Tarn really wanted. Now that the big fight had ended, Master Furon put the two of them back together in Zachem's cell. They spent their days training to get stronger, as well as helping the weaker fighters to get better. Tarn clearly wasn't cut out for instruction, as he had little patience with anyone who failed to meet his standards. Zachem, however, liked helping the others. It gave him something to focus on besides his enigmatic new master.

He stifled a groan at the thought, wishing he could control these newfound sexual responses to his lover. *Lover, not master.* By the stars, Tarn had some kind of hold on him he couldn't break. Zachem stood a head taller and clearly had more brawn, but Tarn's strength went bone deep. Zachem still couldn't discount Tarn's strange inner eyelid, nor the male's ability to score him with nails that never looked sharp enough to do so much damage. And what about Tarn's teeth?

He couldn't count the number of times he'd bled after a sexual encounter with the insatiable male.

"Beast, like this?" one of the new fighters asked. He stood with his balance all wrong and his hands too low to do him any good.

Zachem shook free of his distracting thoughts and corrected the slave. Like the others, the slave had the mistaken perception he could win his way to freedom. But the more he won, the more valuable he'd be to Furon, who'd never part with anyone who could bring in currency to this shithole.

After another few hours spent working with the fighters, some experienced, others not, Zachem headed back to his cell. There he happened upon Tarn and Pyrigo talking quietly.

Tarn didn't stop his part in the discussion, but his eyes turned that vibrant green-gold and his pupil changed shape when he glanced at Zachem.

"Remember, don't be late." Pyrigo scowled, but Tarn didn't pay enough attention to mind. "Don't fuck this up," Pyrigo barked, turned on his heel, and left without another word.

"What have you been up to?" Zachem asked, wondering how the hell Tarn planned on leaving this place. Pyrigo was involved, that he knew, but he didn't sense an attraction

between the pair, which was another thing saving Pyrigo from a massive beating. That and running interference for them from Furon. He didn't like the attention Furon had been giving 'the beast' lately. Zachem tried to chalk up Furon's interest as related to The Slave Trade.

The Slave Trade took place deep underground, beneath The Pit, which made the auction Furon's ideal currency maker. He purchased and sold slaves, stolen goods, and anything else he wanted for his small slaver colony. In comparison, he made the other slaving efforts on Colony6 look amateur.

Though he wasn't looking forward to tonight, Zachem knew what to expect. Master Furon would drag him below and use him to advertise the lucrative gambling at The Pit. The whole damned planet consisted of brawlers and impoverished people, to whom fighting was a way of life. The ability to make currency off fighting and/or betting on it struck the natives as an ideal source of income.

Zachem had a real interest in the night's events because Tarn had promised an escape from this place. But Zachem didn't know if Tarn was doing the right thing by trusting a slaver. Pyrigo didn't act like a normal guard. He seemed much more dangerous because he bowed to Furon's every whim and was normally seen in Furon's company.

The other thing bothering Zachem of late—he hadn't seen Six in days. He could only hope the *threll* still lived. He'd mentioned the creature to Tarn a few times, but from Tarn's lack of interest, figured the male didn't have time for *thrells* or more mundane matters.

Zachem didn't want to distract him. He wanted Tarn to work his magic and take them away from this place. The sooner the better.

His agitation must have shown, because Tarn approached him with a look of concern.

And that was another thing. For someone supposed to be his 'master', Tarn often spent his time taking care of Zachem. He never took his pleasure unless Zachem had his first. He made sure Zachem had enough to eat before he touched his food, and he constantly made note of his moods. The man had accurately figured out how to read his skin patterns and the fluctuating intensity of red in his eyes.

For all that Master Caegon had treated him with decency, he'd never taken so much care to learn about Zachem's needs and wants. Tarn's attitude frustrated him, because he couldn't understand what the man truly wanted from him. A slave, or something more?

The arrogant ass called him all kinds of names that sounded suspiciously like endearments. Never 'slave', but 'pet', 'Beast', and that aggravating '*czeva*' — names said with a raspy seduction that never failed to make Zachem hard.

"Are you all right?" Tarn cupped Zachem's cheek and ran his thumb over his lips.

Repressing a shiver and ignoring the way his dick spiked, Zachem took a step back and glared. "I'm fine. When are we leaving?"

"Why? Has Furon been bothering you?" Tarn asked in a sharp voice. He'd noticed the slave master's attentions as well and had warned Zachem to let him know if Furon bothered him. What Tarn thought he could do to Furon was anyone's guess.

"He watches me constantly. I can't tell if it has something to do with the crystal or if he's trying to figure out why I let you fuck me day after day," Zachem growled. "I know the guards have been talking about it. Pyrigo probably ran to him with the news after he watched me suck you off."

Tarn cocked his head, his gaze thoughtful. "That bothers you, doesn't it? I thought you didn't care who watched you? You told me you'd accepted your appetites a long time ago. Was that a lie?"

Zachem flushed. When Pyrigo had watched him pleasing Tarn, it just felt different, as if Pyrigo intruded on something private, something intimate. He didn't know how to explain that without sounding like an oversensitive *drun*, and he didn't like feeling so weak and vulnerable in front of Tarn.

He closed the small space between them and tried his best to intimidate the man. "It wasn't a lie, but I'm not here to amuse the guards. You want sex? Fine. But don't parade me around like a fuck toy." He released his scent, trying to show Tarn just who was in charge. But the stubborn *drun* failed to respond with anything other than a sigh.

"When you do that, it only makes me hard. Zachem, if something bothers you, you need to tell me. I took you in front of Pyrigo for a reason." His voice thickened. "I wanted him to know who you belonged to. That you're mine."

Tarn didn't succumb to the oblivion of Zachem's scent, and he didn't show fear in the presence of a Creation. His fortitude and control over his emotions spoke to Zachem on another level, and Zachem fought the need to submit to someone centred, someone so powerfully in command despite his present circumstances.

Tarn ran a hand down his front, over his clenching abdomen, and cradled his cock in a large palm. "Easy pet. Remember, you're mine from now until a month after we take that crystal."

"You said we'd take it tonight." Zachem tried not to react to Tarn's questing fingers. The bastard was now cupping and caressing his balls with enough pressure to stir him to orgasm. *Damn it.*

Without meaning to, he released more scent, enough to ensure Tarn wouldn't let him go.

"What's wrong? Need something from your master?" Tarn whispered, his fingers making magic.

Zachem grunted.

"Is that a yes?" Tarn let him go, and Zachem moaned in denial. "Tell your master what you want."

The urge to give in made him dizzy. "I want to come all over you. Right now." Hell, let Tarn deal with *that*. Warmth spread through his groin, limbs and heart. He ached to release all over Tarn, to connect with this male he felt closer to each day.

"Right now, what?"

Zachem panted as Tarn began teasing him again, pushing his hand beneath Zachem's trousers to feel him skin to skin. "Right now, *Master*," he said without a moment's hesitation.

Tarn jerked him up and down, the pressure of his fingers perfection over the sensitised shaft growing harder and longer as he played. "Come for me then, *czeva*. Come hard, all over my hand."

Zachem closed his eyes, leaving himself open to Tarn's touch.

"That's it. You feel so good," Tarn whispered. He quickened his hand and increased the friction under Zachem's crown, hitting that spot that drove Zachem wild.

It took nothing more than the scrape of Tarn's suddenly sharp nails over him to make him come. He shook as he spilled over Tarn's hand, sliding up and down his shaft, milking him dry. Breathing hard, Zachem wasn't aware of Tarn stroking his hair with his free hand until Tarn nudged him to step back.

Tarn removed his hand from Zachem's trousers and licked a drop of cum from his fingers. His eyes changed, turning Zachem on all over again. "Mine."

Zachem stood there, staring at his lover. He wanted to say something, to tell Tarn how much he'd needed this, to serve not just another, but Tarn himself. But the words stuck in his throat because he didn't *want* to serve again. Fulfilling the needs of others had brought him nothing but pain his entire life. The few years spent with Master Caegon had ultimately made the return to the lab even worse.

The more he thought about it, the more he talked himself out of what he thought he'd felt with Tarn. Simply sexual chemistry, nothing more. Truth be told, Tarn had blackmailed him into this bullshit in the first place.

Tarn correctly read the mutinous expression on his face and sighed. "Let me wash up. Then we need to have a talk." He left for the lavatory.

Before he returned, four guards entered the room ahead of the slave master. The pompous, overbearing Master Furon.

"Oh good. You're ready for us." Furon smirked at the wet spot at the front of his trousers. "Quite a healthy boy, aren't you, Beast? You'll make someone very happy tonight, and I don't mean me, with all the riches you'll bring."

Riches?

"Yes, I've decided to sell you. Along with a certain crystal everyone's waiting for, you might just net me enough to get out of this place." Furon sneered. "Fucking Colony6. A waste of my time and considerable skills." Tarn walked out of the lav and froze, and Furon continued, "Ah, good, you're here too. The Pit's new champion."

Before either of them could react, Furon held up the controller with a smirk on his hateful face.

Tarn swore, groaned and slumped to the ground.

Zachem reached out a hand to help him, but the world went black as he toppled into mind-numbing pain, then passed out cold.

He woke to the sound of chaos. The crackle of fire, a war of words, the unmistakable blast of laser fire. He dangled off an uncomfortable...shoulder? Zachem tried to move and something swatted his ass.

"Dammit, stay still." Tarn yelled at Pyrgo to throw him the 'fucking key' while blue lasers fired all over the dark cavern. Zachem lifted his head and saw a fiery blur in the centre of the place.

The Slave Trade. Had to be. Several guards wrestled with a bevy of slaves bent on exacting revenge. Before long, screams, grunts and groans merged. More laser fire, and then the sounds of more troops. Probably the Colony6 militia, who took their fair percentage out of The Slave Trade profits.

"Shit. Hurry up, Tarn. I've got it, let's go." Pyrgo didn't sound calm and in control. Not a good sign.

Tarn jerked at his neck, releasing his collar, and proceeded to drop Zachem to the ground.

He landed with a harsh jolt to his side.

"Sorry." Tarn leaned down, fiddled with his collar, and stood with it clasped in his hand.

"Have to get Six," he stuttered, trying to regain his wits.

"The damned *threll* is probably halfway out of The Pit by now, with the rest of the slaves. Come on."

He couldn't seem to coordinate his movements. Tarn swore and hefted him over his shoulder again. Not sure what the hell had happened, Zachem only knew that the enon pulse wasn't wearing off, not like it should have.

And then he heard it. The low hum of welcome, a song of homecoming that awakened the true power deep within him. A burst of fire heated him from the inside out, giving him a new sense of purpose.

He pushed off Tarn's shoulder and slid to his feet. When he glanced around he noted a subtle glow of energy around everyone he could see. Tarn's, to his dismay, looked wrong, darker, somehow, as if the man was in pain.

"Zachem?" Tarn asked, reaching his hand out. When it landed on Zachem, he froze. His mouth moved, but no sound emerged.

"Zachem, Tarn, *come on!*" Pyrgo yelled and blasted another group of guards gaining on them.

Tarn snapped out of his trance, wavered on his feet, and then shook himself aware. He grabbed Zachem by the arm and tugged him after Pyrgo.

They followed until they ran into a wall.

"Damn. This wasn't on my map," Pyrgo muttered.

Zachem sensed the source of his welcome coming from somewhere very near. He tuned out everything but that low, exciting buzz. Reaching into Pyrgo's bag, he held the other man back and took out a small red crystal that fit into the palm of his hand. The moment he closed his palm around it, sealing all of its facets within his hand, power thrummed through him.

"Hurry, Zachem." Tarn's worry registered, but only vaguely. Until he watched his lover get shot.

Aware he should have been more afraid, more angry, he turned in the direction of Furon and his guards. Sighting in on the one holding the stunner pointed at Tarn, he focused his will and let go.

A blast of red light pierced the guard's forehead and split him in two with ease. The return fire should have killed him, but he felt safe behind a shield of warmth. He didn't want anything to happen to Tarn or Pyrgo either and extended the shield around them without knowing how.

The rage he normally felt when in battle refused to come, nor did his vision turn a hazy red. Instead, Zachem watched the confusion unfold through clear, unfettered eyes.

"Holy Hell and Father Sun. Great. The stories are true, just what we don't need," Pyrgo muttered. "Well, come on, Zachem. Grab Tarn and let's fucking ditch this place before your crystal shatters."

"It won't." How he knew that, he couldn't say. He didn't know how to utilise all of the crystal's power, but as he held it, it whispered to him. The minute he touched Tarn, he used the energy within him to heal Tarn's injured flesh. Though the physical part of his lover mended, the darkness in his energy did not. But Zachem didn't think the crystal could help with that. Their positions reversed, this time Zachem put Tarn over his shoulder.

"Now, Beast," Pyrgo shouted and knocked back several slaves who'd managed to penetrate the weakening shield.

Assuming the immediate threat had faded, Zachem saved his energy for the next dangerous challenge they'd face. Thankfully, he and Pyrgo encountered no further trouble as they raced from the central auction area. Pyrgo took them on several twists and turns then stopped in a darkened alcove. Zachem lowered Tarn to his feet, who wavered but shoved his hand away. "I'm good. Thanks," he said on a cough.

"We need to go. Can you follow me?" Pyrgo asked Tarn.

Not sure how they planned to leave, Zachem watched the two interact, curious that he could see their auras almost mirror one another. And that he didn't like. He sensed the crystal readying to tear Pyrigo apart and dropped the stone. Like that, the strange power he'd shouldered vanished.

"Hell."

Tarn quickly took the crystal and put it back in Pyrigo's bag. "So much for coincidence." He shot Zachem a look.

"Yeah," Pyrigo said sourly. "A Dorvian berserker, go figure." He sighed. "Now Tarn, can you follow me? I'll bring Zachem —"

"I'll bring him. I'm good now." Tarn put himself between Pyrigo and Zachem, and Zachem couldn't help feeling good, that his master — that *Tarn* — felt possessive.

Pyrigo rolled his eyes. "Just follow me, Destroyer." He muttered under his breath one minute and disappeared the next.

Tarn glanced at Zachem. "Okay, *czeva*. Close your eyes and hold onto me. I won't let you go."

Curious, as he'd never teleported before, Zachem looked for the device that would allow them to jump through time and space. "Where is it?"

Tarn didn't answer. He grabbed hold of Zachem's forearms, and they pushed through something thick and cold. Ignoring his panic as his lungs compressed, Zachem trusted Tarn not to hurt him. After all, Tarn was in here with him.

They dropped into reality right behind Pyrigo, now seated at the helm of a ship.

A ship.

Escape was in reach. Stars and Planets above. A fucking dream come true.

Tarn shoved him towards an empty seat and buckled him in.

"I can do it."

"Shut up." Tarn leaned down, gave him a hard kiss then followed Pyrigo's instructions as they took flight.

Zachem looked out of the main viewport and watched as The Pit became a distant memory.

They flew in silence for a while. Zachem remained content to savour his new freedom. Though he had an agreement to keep with Tarn, just being away from Furon and the guards, without that damned collar, made him want to shout with joy.

Pyrgo sighed, breaking the companionable silence. "That went, ah, not as expected."

"No shit. Nice plan, your highness." Tarn said with disgust.

"Your highness?" Zachem blinked, totally confused.

"Dammit, you weren't supposed to say anything."

"Please, Pyrgo. Who's he going to tell? He's just happy to have escaped that fuckhead Furon. And speaking of which, when this is done, I'm going back for that *drun*. We're not finished, he and I, until The Pit is no more."

"Excuse me. But 'he' is sitting right here." Zachem removed his restraints and stood, enthralled with the ship. "What is this?"

"A star destroyer, for *our* destroyer. Ironical, eh?" Pyrgo said to Tarn. "It fits a four man crew, so we're good. There are three berthing areas, one communal lav, a galley and an armaments and equipment room we normally use for training purposes."

"Weapon training?"

"Unarmed combat," Pyrgo answered with a feral smile, and something in his expression resonated.

"You two," Zachem said slowly. "You're the same. From the same place, I mean."

Pyrgo and Tarn exchanged a long silence.

Tarn answered. "We are."

"And not from this system." Zachem began to understand. "No wonder you aren't bothered by who I am. You're more alien than I am."

"He's an alien?" Pyrgo asked.

"He's completely alien to me," Tarn said dryly. "I'm not bothered by you because I know more of your kind than you'd believe."

Pyrgo nodded. "His nephew Drekk, Drekk's mate, Ryen. Ryen's sisters, Erin and Anin. And then of course, there's you."

"You knew about him?" Tarn asked, sounding surprised.

So Tarn hadn't confided in Pyrgo about his identity as a Creation. What did that mean?

"Of course. I'm Intelligence, remember?"

"Why do you call him 'Destroyer'?" Zachem wanted to know.

"Because on my world, Tarn *is* the Destroyer. Our best warrior, by far. He's untamed, and he excels in the art of war. Our own berserker, so it's fitting he's found you. A Dorvian berserker. Who could have guessed?"

"Talk about fate." Tarn's grin faded as he stared at Zachem, and a familiar hunger filled his gaze.

"Tarn, there is one thing." Pyrgo quieted, and the two made eye contact.

Tarn frowned, and his stare turned darker. "No. Leave it alone."

More silence.

"Fuck off, Pyrgo. Hell, I need a drink." He turned to Zachem. "I need a break. Don't let him bother you. He says something you don't like, beat the scales off him."

An odd turn of phrase, but Zachem appreciated the sentiment.

The moment Tarn left the bridge, he and Pyrgo faced one another.

"So, Beast," Pyrgo said with a good-natured grin. "I think you and I have a few things to discuss."

Zachem looked over his shoulder at the empty doorway. "Yes, we do."

Chapter Nine

Pyrgo considered him with a knowing grin. "You're perfect of face and form. A true fighter, a berserker, even, and he finds you. Talk about having all the luck."

Zachem took the compliment as intended. He smiled back. "Yes, isn't he lucky." The lout had managed to trick Zachem into forty-five standard days of servitude. The notion thrilled Zachem deep in the places he wanted to deny existed.

"You know, my kind can see the energy patterns in others. Now take you. You're large, strong, and practically seethe with an aggressive power threaded with health and a strong need for sexual contact. When I look at Tarn, I see exactly the same thing. Except he's missing a vital part of him he'll never get back, not on his own."

"What?"

"I think Tarn's been injured in some way," Pyrgo said carefully. "Outwardly, he looks fine. I'll admit, that trick you pulled with the crystal earlier, when you healed him? It shifted his *shei* for just a moment, but then his energy returned to that lesser stasis."

"*Shei*?"

"What we call a person's essence, his soul. What makes us all unique."

"*Shei*." Zachem nodded. He'd seen something similar when under the crystal's influence. And he'd always felt more around others, a sense of potential he summed up in his opponents. Their *shei*, according to Pyrgo.

"Our Destroyer, Tarn, is a powerful warrior. He saved our world more times than he can say. Just his presence on a battlefield could turn the tide in our favour. Our brethren believed they couldn't fail with Tarn around. Unfortunately, we started to learn diplomacy." Pyrgo made a face. "Those like Tarn found themselves no longer needed as much."

"So they pushed him aside after his service?" Zachem's anger on his lover's behalf surprised him. So intense, as if *he'd* been wronged.

"Not at all. They tried to mould him into something different, something Tarn isn't equipped to do."

Zachem couldn't imagine Tarn failing at anything. "What was that?"

"Warrior instruction." Pyrgo grimaced. "He was terrible. No patience at all."

Zachem grinned. "He was the same way in The Pit. Nearly strangled a few of the new slaves instead of showing them how to work choke holds."

"That sounds about right." Pyrgo chuckled, and Zachem saw the guard in a new light. Somewhat handsome, good natured, but not as overwhelming as 'the destroyer'.

"So you two really aren't slavers."

"We really aren't. I serve my empire, as does Tarn. But Tarn works in your star system. I trust you with this knowledge because Tarn trusts you." He blinked, and then those alien, reptilian eyes blinked at Zachem. Further proof Pyrgo and Tarn were the same. "I'd hate to be wrong about you, Zachem."

"You aren't," he said quietly. "Being a Creation is an automatic death sentence. Why would I wish to harm the men who set me free?" Or at least, one of them had. The other insisted on servitude.

"There is that."

"So who exactly are you? What are you?" Zachem wanted to know.

"We're a people who need to adapt to change if we're to survive, apparently," Pyrgo said with a sigh. "Since Tarn and I aren't mated, we're —"

"To each other?" Zachem asked, incredulous. Just because he hadn't sensed their attraction didn't mean it wasn't there.

"Of course not to each other. Hell no. I meant that each of us has not yet found a mate."

The relief Zachem felt made him feel foolish. What should he care about Tarn's relationships? He barely knew the male aside from sex.

Pyrgo smirked. "No, Tarn isn't mated to me and never will be. I sense that he's taken a great interest in you, however."

"We fuck. Yeah."

"It's more than that. Your *sheis* complement one another. He's a powerful male. He needs an equal, someone to make him work for what he needs."

Zachem snorted. "If the dick would fight me for real, I'd show him how powerful I can be. I know I can beat him."

"I'm talking about more than the physical, Zachem."

"Oh." What did he say to that?

Pyrgo glanced at the doorway and lowered his voice. "Tarn would kill me for saying this, but I think he needs you more than he knows. You challenge him." He paused. "Let me ask you something. When you and he are together, does he spill inside you?"

Zachem didn't want to talk about this, but he sensed Pyrgo wanted to know for more than prurient interest. "Yes."

"To be clear, he's spilled his seed in more than your mouth, but your *honet* as well. Your rectum," he explained.

"Yes." Just thinking about it had him hard.

"Has he bitten you while doing this?"

"He bites me all the time." Zachem huffed. At Pyrgo's surprised look, he said, "You can't see them because I heal quickly. But Tarn's got a thing for roughing me up." He didn't want to ask but couldn't help himself. "Why do you want to know?" *Was he like that with you too?* Pyrgo had said they weren't mates, but had they ever been sexual partners?

"Damn. Tarn's sick, all right. He needs you to finish—"

Tarn re-entered the bridge and stopped. "What the hell are you talking about?" He frowned. "Zachem, why are you so flushed?"

Pyrgo quickly answered, "Because he told me he's tired of answering my questions about being a Creation. I think he'd much rather deal with his *czeva*, no?"

Tarn narrowed his eyes.

"Wait a minute. You call me that all the time. Doesn't that mean 'servant'?"

Pyrgo's eyes widened. "I knew it. You did it. Or at least, half of it. You idiot."

Tarn threw the punch so fast Zachem barely caught sight of it. Pyrgo, unfortunately, took it in the face and collapsed like a stack of vid chips.

"Why did you do that?" *What did Pyrgo say that put you on the defensive so fast? And why haven't you told me you're ill?*

"Don't worry. We're on autopilot, and the sensors are set to detect enemy ships if they get with forty *klikks* of us. Now help me get him to his room."

Zachem and Tarn carried Pyrgo into a nice, utilitarian room and dropped him on the bed. Zachem said nothing as he followed Tarn across the hall into another berthing area. This one was slightly larger, with a bigger bed. Funny, but every bed looked large enough to accommodate Tarn.

"Your people are large, aren't they?"

"Yes. We are." Tarn gave Zachem a look he couldn't miss. "I'm sore, I'm tired, and I'm hungry, but not for food. Take off your clothes, *czeva*."

Zachem stripped. "Eventually, you're going to tell me what that means."

"What that means *Master*. Ah, you see that? Just the mention of 'master' makes you so hard. Look at *my* beautiful cock," Tarn murmured, staring at Zachem's groin. "Grip it, touch *my* cock."

Zachem took himself in hand, simultaneously pleased and horrified he derived such pleasure from Tarn claiming his body and owning it.

"The Creations I know were never allowed to give themselves pleasure. Were you?"

Stunned to find that Tarn knew that small detail, Zachem shook his head. "No, we weren't."

"But I'm your master. If I tell you to come, you will. It's that simple. And do you know why? You want to be led. You think it's wrong, that it makes you weak." Tarn continued, ignoring Zachem's denial. "But it doesn't. You really do need to talk to Ryen. He's almost as big as you are. A real pain in the ass, and thankfully, not mine. It took my nephew some time to break him in, to allow Ryen to feel pleasure in submission."

"How does serving another make you strong?" Zachem sincerely wanted to know. "My whole life I've been serving others, and it's never felt all that good." *Except, so far, with you.*

Tarn lifted a brow in challenge. "Not good, hmm? So begging for pleasure, to feel the slide of my cock inside you, filling you up, isn't good? Trembling from the aftershocks of an orgasm your master forced you to feel, that's not good either?" Tarn undressed and shook his head. He stood before Zachem completely naked and aroused. "I think my beast needs another lesson. Come here."

Sitting in a large metallic chair, Tarn spread his legs and held his shaft out.

Zachem approached and stopped, simmering with anticipation. He was so hard right now, so aroused it shocked him. How did Tarn get to him like this?

"Grab the items on the table there and bring them to me. Now come closer. Step between my legs and bring that cock to my lips."

Zachem did as commanded. He handed Tarn the small jar and a long, thin rod of *machenite*. To his consternation, it felt soft yet hard, like Tarn's cock.

"You're thinking too much. I want you to relax, *czeva*. Listen to my voice. You trust me not to hurt you at least, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then do what I tell you without thinking about it. Respond with automatic obeisance. Can you do that?"

"I'll try."

Tarn slapped his ass hard.

"Shit. What did you do that for?"

"Don't try, do," Tarn growled, and Zachem glanced down, duly chastised. "Now, can you do that?"

"Yes, Master."

"Very good." Tarn rubbed his ass and placed a kiss on the tip of his cock.

He hissed in response, wanting badly to shove hard between those lips.

"I want you to fuck my mouth until I pull away. And you must tell me before you're about to come. "

Zachem blinked in surprise, having expected something else. His master wanted to suck him off? Ready to obey, he gladly pushed the head of his cock between Tarn's slick lips.

The feel of Tarn's lips around him skewed everything but the pleasure spreading through his body. Tarn's hands crept over his hips to his ass. Petting then teasing his crack as Tarn's clever fingers stroked closer and closer to his hole. But it was Tarn's mouth that tore down every wall trying to hold back Zachem's growing love. When Tarn touched him like that, he could feel the clear affection flowing from him.

"Yes, damn." Zachem groaned. "You make me so hard. I love the way you touch me."

Tarn grunted but didn't stop sucking him. He let go of Zachem's hips and pushed a slick finger inside him. The suction increased, and then Tarn released him from his mouth and continued fucking his ass with one, then two fingers. They disappeared, and the rod of *machenite* entered. *By the stars...* He fought not to come.

"You see, *czeva*. A true master takes care of his pet," he rasped. "What makes you feel good makes me feel good. It's my duty to bring you pleasure, and serving me brings you pleasure, does it not?"

The bar surged deeper, grazing that trigger inside Zachem that nearly made him come.

"Oh yes, please. Fuck, I need to —"

Before he could finish, Tarn was there, taking him deep to the back of his throat. Zachem couldn't help it. He pushed hard, widening his stance as the rod and Tarn's fingers caressed and tortured him with ecstasy.

He came on a shout, unloading into Tarn's blissful mouth.

His master took it all, and the sudden shame he felt by being selfish made his eyes burn. He'd found pleasure while Tarn sat, still erect and hurting. Emotions churned – confusing guilt, shame and the always present desire.

Tarn released him and withdrew the bar. When he saw Zachem's distress, he tugged him to his knees. "You did nothing wrong, *czeva*. No tears. You did as I commanded, didn't you?" He stroked Zachem's hair until Zachem's tumult eased. "This is what you should feel. Nothing but bliss. You surrender to me. Give me everything, and I'll always take care of you."

Zachem blinked, stunned at the wealth of feeling in Tarn's voice and gaze.

"But you didn't come."

"No, but you did. I know how to please you, and that affords me much more than physical satisfaction. Watch me." He gripped his thick shaft and jerked off, spewing onto his belly with a low groan in just a few strokes. "This is easy," he said thickly. "I touch myself, I come. A physical release. What I gave you, what you give me, is so much more." He sat quietly for a moment. "What would you like to do now?"

Zachem didn't know what to say.

"Tell me, *czeva*. Never be afraid to tell me what you're feeling. We need to have truth between us."

"Who the hell are you?" Zachem needed to know. "In The Pit you were a dick. But now you're acting like –"

"Like?"

"I don't know. Like you care."

"Maybe I do. You weren't the only one playing a part back there, Zachem. You're so much more than a brutal fighter. And I'm much more than a slaver stupid enough to be caught and thrown into The Pit. Again, I ask, what do you want to do now?" There was a firmness in his tone that hadn't been there before.

"I want to –" *serve you* – tend to you. To clean you." He swallowed around a lump in his throat, wondering how this could be so wrong when it felt so right. "Master."

Tarn's smile erased the doubt from his mind. "I'd like that."

Zachem felt an answering joy and let himself experience it as he left to find something to clean Tarn. To clean his master.

Tarn waited until Zachem left before he sagged in the chair. He felt weaker than he should have after that explosive climax. But it had been worth it. Seeing the pleasure on his mate's face made up for the growing weakness in his *shei*.

Though he hadn't known Zachem all that long, he instinctively knew the male was his. Between the things his mate had told a lost *threll* in the lonely hours of darkness inside The Pit, and his struggle to find himself outside enslavement, Zachem showed more courage and strength than anyone Tarn had ever met.

How could he not want such a worthy partner by his side?

The question then remained, how could he convince Zachem to stay with him? If he released his mate from their bargain now, Zachem would flee and try to resist his natural urge to submit. Until he accepted that part of himself that had been Created to serve, he'd never find any peace. And as Zachem's mate, Tarn could not allow that to happen. So the charade of forced servitude would have to continue.

Yet, how forced was it? Zachem's desire was to clean his master, not to sleep, find food or do anything else for himself. Pleased, Tarn leaned back and closed his eyes, wondering how he could realign his *shei* and perhaps strengthen himself.

Zachem's work with the crystal had done much to heal him, but it also fragmented his energy. His *shei* was already screwed up, since half of it now resided in Zachem, until Zachem gave it back. But he couldn't allow his mate to take him, not until he knew in his heart that Zachem wanted a full mating with him. He refused to enslave the brave man that way, even if he cut out his own heart in the doing.

As much as Tarn wanted to ignore the softer feelings coursing within him, he loved Zachem, had loved him since the first. That mythical moment often spoken of in the Ebrellion culture, that some Ebrellions just knew their mate through sight alone, had happened to him.

Zachem returned, and he tried to look less exhausted.

"Master?"

That quickly, his dick rose. The suddenness of his new arousal worried him. This constant need for Zachem reminded him too much of Pyrigo's earlier heat. *Not possible. How can I be going into heat so soon? I don't have anything with me to fix this.*

He could only hope to blame Zachem's pheromones for his sexual intensity. Because if they weren't, he was totally fucked, and not in a good way.

"I'm just tired." Hell, his tongue felt swollen. He found it difficult to talk.

Zachem lifted him with ease, and he grinned stupidly. "So strong. My mate," he whispered and stroked Zachem's firm shoulders.

Zachem placed him on the bed and wiped him down with a damp towel. "When you come, you have a lot of seed."

"Hmm. My kind often does."

"Like mine. You're not a Creation, are you?"

Tarn laughed, amused at the echo it created in the room. "No. From what I've seen, you're all very high maintenance. So much beauty, ferocity, and power wrapped up in a sexy as hell frame. None of the ones I've seen have ever compared to you," he said dreamily, caught in Zachem's dark red gaze. "I'm drowning in your eyes."

Zachem looked concerned. "Tarn? You don't sound right." He glanced down. "But you look as if you need me."

The quiet admission pleased him. "Need you? I always need you. Come, *czeva*. Settle yourself over me. I ache to spill inside you again. Rub me down with that salve first." He waved in the air, when he wanted to point at the jar on the table across the room. Tarn felt dizzy and not himself, filled with a desire that grew with every inhalation of Zachem's sweet essence.

He closed his eyes when he felt Zachem's hands over him, stroking him to a larger, tighter erection. And then Zachem straddled him, guiding himself over Tarn's cock.

"Yes," he hissed and groaned. "Ride me, *czeva*." He rumbled in Ebrellion, caught in the love and lust he felt for this male.

The feel of Zachem's *honet* enthralled him with a bliss that filled him from head to toe. He needed to bite, seed and blood two requirements from his mate he couldn't do without.

"Your hand, give it to me," he growled as he stared up into Zachem's shuttered gaze.

Zachem gave him his hand and continue to ride him, up and down, his tight sheath almost more than Tarn could bear.

“Bite me, Master. Take what you need,” Zachem crooned and Tarn lost all restraint.

He surged up, arching into Zachem’s passage, to fill him with seed, just as he bit hard on the fleshy pad of Zachem’s palm. He sucked at the sweet blood as he came, yet still needed more. A glance down his body showed Zachem hard and dripping.

“Ease off me, then straddle my face. I need you to come in my mouth.” He watched his mate with his inner vision, his senses attuned to the bursting energy coiling in Zachem’s large frame.

As soon as Zachem leant over him he sucked his balls, laving the firm sac with a loving tongue. His mate groaned and ground against his face before lifting and angling to shove his cock between Tarn’s lips.

Tarn sucked him, needing to taste more than his mate’s blood, but his life’s essence as well. He stroked Zachem’s cock with his tongue and scraped with his teeth, pulling another line of blood that shot Zachem over the edge.

He yelled out “Master” as he spewed, and the rush of blood and semen calmed Tarn as nothing else could. Though his *shei* stuttered with the echo of incompleteness, this joining soothed that part of him aching for more.

Unaware of the passing time, he knew nothing but comfort as he inhaled the masculine scent of his lover, entwined with his own scent. Mates, lovers, a master and his loving pet. Finally, he’d found that perfect moment. If only his body would let him live long enough to make this a permanent reality.

Chapter Ten

"How is he today?" Pyrgo asked.

"Better." Zachem shrugged, but Pyrgo could see the worry on his face.

The large Creation's skin shimmered with what he'd come to recognise as agitation. Worry for Tarn bothered Pyrgo as well. Bad enough he'd only completed half the bonding he needed with Zachem, but the unknown effect of that Dorvian crystal could have done anything to the destroyer's *shei*.

Zachem had spent the past two days tending to Tarn's every need, and he seemed calmer because of it. Pyrgo didn't know much about Creations, but he'd seen their viciousness first hand. In the few months he'd know the beast, he'd never seen the male act out of vindictiveness or spite, and he'd had just cause.

Zachem was a true warrior, and one that would make Tarn proud, if he lived to see tomorrow.

His and Tarn's mental communications had done little to ease his worries. The stubborn Ebrellion refused to tell Zachem why he hurt. Instead, he wanted Zachem to come to him because Zachem wanted to, of his own free will.

Pyrgo wrestled with the dilemma. Did he violate Tarn's trust, or did he save the destroyer's life? He glanced at Zachem, a male who seemed to care for Tarn much more than Tarn knew. Why not tell Zachem the truth and let him decide for himself? "Hell," he muttered.

"Pyrgo?"

He made his decision. "What exactly has Tarn told you?"

"About what?"

"About who we are."

"Not much." Zachem narrowed his eyes. They sat in the bridge staring out at the moons of Ragga. Not much longer and they'd reach Mardu. Finally, an end to this mission.

"Great." It figured Pyrgo would have to clean up the destroyer's unintended mess. "You're a Creation, so you're used to keeping a low profile. And you seem to have developed an attachment to your master."

Zachem flushed. "He's not my —"

"Come off it, Zachem. You've been by his side for two straight days. You do whatever he tells you to, and your *shei* is in perfect alignment with his." Which didn't quite make sense, since they had yet to complete a true bonding. But as he stared at Zachem's unease, he suddenly understood. "You love him."

"I don't —"

"This is important. Tell me, do you love him enough?"

"Enough to what?"

"To save his life?"

Zachem blinked, stunned. "*What?*"

"Your master is dying because he refuses to do what he knows is right. He won't commit himself to you. I told him to tell you the truth, to simply let you decide. But he's afraid you'll leave. He wants the extra time to convince you to stay, not to force you to."

"Why?" Zachem sounded genuinely puzzled. "Why does he want me to stay?"

Considering what he knew of Zachem's past, Pyrgo wasn't surprised the male had no idea of his worth. Knowing Tarn would kill him for interfering, he did it anyway. That way Tarn would be alive to kill him, at least.

"Look. Tarn is a warrior. He fights for his home, for his brethren, and for what's right. He's a hero. But he's also an autocratic, domineering asshole."

Zachem showed the hint of a smile.

"He won't come out and tell you how he feels, because you should 'know' it already." Pyrgo had a father and two brothers who acted exactly the same way. "He won't tell you how much you mean to him, because deep down, he's afraid of the rejection."

Zachem shook his head. "Not Tarn. He's not afraid of anything."

"He's afraid of you," Pyrgo said bluntly. "Do you want to know what *czeva* means?"

"It means servant."

Pyrgo snorted. "*Czeva* means 'warrior's heart'. It's what we call the male or female we take to mate. Mate, Zachem. Not a lover, not someone we use for sex. To an Ebrellion, a mate is the other half of our soul. An eternal companion."

Zachem froze. "Ebrellion? *Mate?*"

A calculated risk, but one Pyrgo decided to take. Zachem didn't want system law on his ass. Who would he tell about Ebrellions amidst others in the Vrail System? And if he cared

for Tarn as much as Pyrgo thought he did, he'd never turn in his lover. Not for all the currency and freedom in the system.

Zachem stared in a daze.

"The reason Tarn isn't acting like himself is because he's given you a part of his life's essence. He should have waited, but for some reason he didn't." The stupid ass. "You haven't fucked him yet, have you?"

"Yes."

"*You have?*"

Zachem started. "Ah, well, we each enjoy oral pleasure."

Pyrgo sighed with relief. "That's your answer. Until you complete the bonding ritual, where you give Tarn back that *shei* that now sits inside you, he'll slowly wither and die."

"But why didn't he just tell me this? Why go through so much pain? I can see him hurting, but he won't let me do more than help make him more comfortable."

"If you bond to him, you'll always want to be with him, Zachem." *You'll never be free.*

He might as well have said it out loud, because Zachem paled. "Always?"

"Until one of the two of you dies, yes. I don't know why Tarn started the bonding, knowing the only way to save himself would be to complete it. But he refuses to take away your choice. He didn't want me to tell you this, but I don't think he has the time he thought he would to change your mind about him."

A sudden alarm sounded, and then the ship trembled and jolted. "Unfortunately, I don't think we have the time either. Battle stations, we're under attack."

Zachem stared in shock at a battle cruiser and two smaller war crafts that appeared suddenly on the ship's monitor.

Ebrellions, mates, and now danger in the form of a fire fight? He felt like he was trapped in a nightmare with no end in sight.

"Dammit, Zachem, strap in. I need you to tell me what those ships are as soon as the ship identifies them."

Zachem focused, his blood humming at the thought of impending battle. *Have to protect my master.* Again, his thoughts went to Tarn first, everything else second. For two days he'd cared for the half-conscious male, and he'd never felt such satisfaction before in his life. Tarn needed him. If Pyrgo had it right, Tarn needed him as a helluva lot more than a medic.

An Ebrellion. Damned if that didn't explain a few things. Tarn's almost obsessive need for sex. His ability to teleport, and the way he communicated with Pyrgo without words. And what about the rumour that Ebrellions could shapeshift? An answer hovered at the edge of his mind, and then the ship chimed.

What he read didn't bode well. "Hell. They're marcet class war ships, and the cruiser is a mix of Melan and Eyran technology."

"Fucking Colony6 militia. Dammit. I thought we were clean. They must have put a tracer on us before we left, because I haven't seen so much as a shadow of them since. Must have been hanging back."

Pyrgo ran a hand through his long black hair in frustration. "We might be able to outrun them, but we won't survive a confrontation. We can't let them get their hands on that crystal again. Or you."

Zachem blinked. "Thanks."

"With you and the crystal, they'll be indestructible. And if anything happens to you, Tarn—"

"Will die."

"I was going to say Tarn will kill me, but yeah, after that, he'll die." Pyrgo stunned him by smiling. "So what's it going to be, Beast? You up for saving that annoying master of yours? I think you can handle him. But do you?"

Zachem was needed, more than he ever had been before. A sense of empowerment filled him. "I'm not sure. But I'm willing to try."

The ship rattled again under a direct hit. Pyrgo swore. "Fuck this. Come on. I think I know a way we can salvage some good out of this situation. And for you, some instructions on how to heal Tarn. But do me a favour. When he comes to, keep my name out of it."

* * * *

Tarn groaned and turned into the soothing warmth of his mate. Strong arms surrounded him, sharing warmth and the bleed of his *shei*. He sighed and nuzzled closer. But he couldn't succumb to total sleep. Instinctively knowing how to help himself, he slowly shifted into his other form.

"Mother Night." The warmth under his cheek vanished, and his head clunked on what smelled like rich, dark earth.

He barked and rose unsteadily on six feet. Blinking to clear his vision, he saw Zachem staring at him, as if he had three heads.

"Th-threll? Six, is that you?" Zachem asked in a breathless voice.

Zachem didn't smell like fear. He sounded curious, amazed even, but not afraid.

Purring with contentment, Tarn walked forwards and rubbed his face all over Zachem's legs, unfortunately covered up in a pair of trousers. He also wore a sleeveless tunic. A glance around showed them alone in what looked like the jungle.

It took a moment to process, and he yelped a question, then froze. *He called me Six. He thinks I'm a threll. Take it easy, dammit. Don't spook your own mate. He has no idea it's you.*

Tarn rumbled softly, and with tentative steps, rested in front of Zachem again.

"I'll be damned." Zachem looked at him with awe, and Tarn wondered just how much Zachem knew about him. "I, ah, didn't realise you'd escaped from The Pit. I'm sorry I couldn't find you before we left. Everything went to hell really fast."

Tarn grunted and sat, still waiting to be petted. Anytime Zachem wanted to put his hands on him, Tarn wanted it.

A large hand caressed his ears, his muzzle and down underneath, along his neck and chest.

"I missed you."

Tarn licked him.

"I think you missed me too, hmm? You liked us talking together, spending time with me when Tarn was out fucking Pyrgo, I'll bet."

Tarn frowned and shook his head.

"Yeah, Tarn's a handsome male. Too stubborn for his own good. Pyrgo thinks he has little time left to live. That when I healed him with the crystal, I did more damage than good." Zachem's eyes grew darker. "If he were here I'd help him. But when the escape pod crashed, I woke up alone."

A dream then, that he'd woken up in his mate's arms. Escape pod? Where was Pyrgo?

"You must have tucked into that pod somehow, though you didn't have much room to work with. Only space inside it should have been filled with food." Zachem left him to look inside the pod, and Tarn disappeared into the jungle.

He quickly changed back into a man's form before returning to the small clearing.

"Zachem?"

Tarn felt as if he'd been battered by several brawlers and shivered in the cool breeze that blew. A breeze that shouldn't have bothered him, not in the damned humidity of the jungle. *Shit. I am so fucked up.*

"Tarn!" Zachem reached him in seconds and hugged him tight. The kiss he planted on Tarn's lips shocked him to the core. It felt real and filled with affection. "Where were you?"

"I'm not sure. Where are we right now?"

"We had to shake a few warships from Colony6, so Pyrigo brought us as far as he could and jettisoned the escape pod. He then crashed the ship somewhere else on the planet."

"Which planet?"

"Mardu. We seem to be in the heart of the Anate jungle."

"That's not good."

"Why not?"

"Because half the things that live in here make The Pit look like a vacation."

"Yeah, I saw a *threll* a few minutes ago," Zachem said dryly. "A really big bastard."

Tarn swallowed. "Uh, they're native to the planet, so I hear."

"But you're not."

"No?"

"No." Zachem lost his smile. "You don't look so hot, Tarn. Mighty destroyer of the *Ebrellion* race."

Fucking Pyrigo.

"Is there some reason you didn't tell me? You want me to believe in you, to trust you to take care of me, yet you can't tell me who you really are?"

Tarn scowled. "I'm an Ebrellion. You happy now?"

"Not yet." Zachem stunned him by shoving him back. "There's no one here to interfere this time. So why don't you tell me what's wrong with you? Without lying."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Zachem shoved him again, and Tarn stared to get mad.

Tarn shoved him back. The froth of battlelust gave him a much needed energy boost.

"Come now, *czeva*, aren't there more pleasurable things you would rather do?"

"Than pound you into 'submission'? Hell no." Zachem hit him in the gut before he could move.

Tarn lost his breath and bent over.

Zachem wasn't done. He pushed Tarn to his knees and grabbed a hold of his hair, his eyes on fire. "This is for your own good, Master."

"My pet, too pretty to fight," Tarn mocked, secretly in love with every facet of his mate. That silver hair gleamed under the setting sun. And the light caressed the beauty of Zachem's masculine face, so firm yet giving as he stared down at Tarn. Such strength...

"Tell me what I want to know." This time Zachem's perfume went straight to his head.

He barely felt Zachem's hands on his body, pushing him down onto his back. "Wh-what?"

"Tell me, *czeva*, why you hurt. Tell your pet how to heal you." Zachem's mouth found his balls and began sucking, licking, and teasing him out of his mind.

Tarn suddenly wanted nothing more than to respond. "Need your seed inside me. To give me back my *shei* and cement our bond. Need your love, so much."

Zachem's scent went straight to his groin.

"Very good. And '*czeva*'? I want to hear in your own words what it means."

Tarn knew he shouldn't be speaking, but he wanted to do whatever it took to satisfy the generator of such sweetness. "Fuck, I need to come. *Czeva*, my *czeva*. My heart, Zachem. My mate," he slurred, sliding his hands through the silk of his hair. Wet heat engulfed him, and he jerked up, nearing climax. "Blood and sex, need it to keep you. Want you to stay with me. Forever," he moaned, on the edge.

Then Zachem's lips left him and found his mouth. His mate kissed with such passion, his tongue stroking, loving Tarn so damned much. A hand fisted around his shaft and began pumping the already primed rod. He spurted hard while Zachem devoured his groans of relief.

Zachem trailed his mouth over Tarn's body and nipped at his chest. Taking the nipple into his mouth, he brought Tarn too quickly to arousal again.

"Pyrgo thinks you're in heat, needing your mate who isn't yet your mate. That you're dying without your full *shei*." He blew a puff of air across Tarn's aroused nipples and then bit.

"Fuck. Mate, please." Tarn writhed, in love, in lust, and in desperate need.

"Mates, yes." Zachem left him for a moment. When Tarn blinked his eyes open, he saw Zachem naked, his cock hard, wet, and large. "Turn over, on your hands and knees." Again that scent swept over him, making him see the right in anything Zachem said.

He waited for Zachem, not disappointed when his mate reached under him and took the remaining cum off his belly. Then he shoved Tarn's knees wider and pulled his ass cheeks apart.

Sudden awareness dawned. "No, wait."

But Zachem pressed forward, a slick cock breaching the one passage Tarn had only ever once in his lifetime granted another, when he'd first passed into manhood. A rite of passage then, a rite of love now.

"So tight." Zachem slowly eased forward, his girth painful. He stopped when he met resistance, then forced his way through when Tarn pushed out to receive him.

"Zachem, no." Tarn didn't want it this way. Zachem had to want him. To know the repercussions of taking Tarn in this way.

"Shh, easy." Zachem stroked his back as he seated himself fully inside Tarn's *honet*. "Stars, I'm not going to last at all."

"You'll hate me for this. Don't do it." Tarn's eyes burned, and he furiously blinked back tears. Beside himself with longing, grief, and arousal, he tried not to think of how this would certainly turn out.

"It's okay, *czeva*. I know, and I accept you. All of you," Zachem said thickly as he pulled out, then thrust back again. He took Tarn with a careful rhythm that threw Tarn into carnal ecstasy, sooner than he'd have liked. Everything about his mate resonated within him. The power, the deceptive fragility, that heavenly scent... He came again, moaning his mate's name. The moment seared itself into his brain, especially when Zachem thrust a hand into his mouth, deliberately cutting his finger on Tarn's now sharp teeth.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," he breathed as Tarn sucked on his finger.

Zachem felt huge, so thick, so hot inside him. And then Zachem tensed and cried out, shooting more than his seed, but returning Tarn's *shei*. The wash of energy surged between them and pushed Tarn into a harder orgasm, one that seemed to go on forever.

"Now you're mine, just as I'm yours," he swore he heard Zachem say in his mind. But he couldn't be sure that wasn't just wishful thinking.

They stayed joined for some time, until Zachem withdrew, complaining of the ache in his knees.

Tarn would have fallen to the ground had Zachem not caught him and dragged him to lay across his chest.

"My master shouldn't have to sleep on the hard ground."

Tarn winced at the cuts and bruises on his body from their landing. But with his *shei* returned, and stronger than ever, he healed himself in moments.

Zachem stroked his spine. "Ah, I see my master is still keeping secrets. You can heal yourself?"

"Only when my *shei* is healthy." He paused, staring down at his future. "Zachem, I want you to know, I never meant for this to happen."

"You didn't want a mate? Or you didn't want a Creation for a mate?" Zachem shuttered his gaze.

"You don't understand. I know how much you wanted your freedom."

"That's right. I told you when you pretended to be a *threll*." Zachem stiffened underneath him. "When I confided in you, another lie." He tried to push Tarn off, but Tarn refused to budge.

"Listen to me, you stubborn *drun*," Tarn growled. "I'm your master, and you'll lay there and damned well listen!"

In the span of a heartbeat, Zachem obeyed.

"You're mine, *my* fucking mate. I wanted you from the very first moment I saw you, so shut the hell up. You don't know a thing about what I went through with you."

Zachem raised a brow, no doubt designed to stoke his anger, which it did.

"I came to Colony6 to retrieve Drekk's crystal. That's it. And then I saw you, and I got distracted. When I had you under me, your warmth so near, that perfection all mine... I lost control," he snarled. "Me. The fucking destroyer for my race. I lost my head and bonded with you. I could have finished it then. You never would have known a thing but that you felt differently towards me."

Zachem's gaze softened. "Why didn't you?"

"Because I'm not a slaver. This had to be your choice. Did you know that by taking me, you'd be sealing our lives together?"

Zachem said nothing, and Tarn scowled.

"Did you?"

"Why do you care? You're healed, we've had sex – marathon sex. And it's never been better for me. You have a slave. What more do you want?"

"I want *you*." Tarn kissed his mate hard on the mouth, aggravated to no end. "I want you to stay with me because you want to, not out of a sense of duty. I want you to forget all those other cocksucking masters and know that I'm your one, true master. The man who will care for you forever. Me, not Caegon, not your Handler. But Tarn."

Zachem cradled him between his long legs, rubbing the back of his ankles up and down Tarn's calves and stirring his desire once more.

"I want you, Zachem. Just you," Tarn groaned, caught in the grip of his heat once again.

"You have me, Master."

"Do I?" Tarn asked, grinding into Zachem's pelvis. *Do I really, my warrior's heart?*

He lowered his head and kissed Zachem with all the love inside him. As their mouths met and Tarn sought his mate's welcoming warmth once more, he felt an insatiable need to tie them together. Because despite their bonding, he felt the distance between them. And it was unacceptable.

He resolved to do whatever it took to win Zachem's love. He'd never in his life lost when it mattered. He wasn't about to start now.

Chapter Eleven

Zachem slanted a glance at Tarn as they tromped through the jungle, still amazed he'd mated with a male who could turn into another creature altogether. No wonder he'd felt such an affinity for the large *threll* he'd befriended at The Pit. He'd been with Tarn all along.

The bitterness of Tarn's deceit had since faded. No matter how much he disliked the lies, Zachem understood why Tarn hadn't confessed the truth from the beginning. For the same reason he hadn't confessed to his own background. There was danger in truth, which led him back to the topic that weighed heavily on his mind.

His future.

Tarn had all but stamped a possessive 'mine' on his forehead. Since their bonding two days ago, he'd been super attentive, yet refrained from any more sexual overtures, though Zachem knew Tarn wanted him. Confusing, and not a little off-putting, Tarn's concern made Zachem feel treasured, and he liked the feeling a little too much. He didn't want to grow accustomed to such care, only to have it ripped away when Tarn returned home.

"We'll walk until dark, a few more hours at most. Then we might be close enough that I can reach Drekk's mind. I still can't feel Pyrigo."

"If he's even still alive. The ship took a few hits before he jettisoned the escape pod."

"He's alive. He took the crystal with him. If he'd had any doubts about surviving, he would have given it to you." Tarn sounded certain.

"Well, he mentioned teleporting as soon as the ship neared land. So I hope he cleared the crash." Pyrigo's plan had been to crash land on the planet and teleport out moments before he hit. Teleportation, a terrific ability. "Why don't you teleport out of here? What limits do you have? You say you can't 'talk' to Drekk because you're not close enough. How close do you have to be for the telepathy to work?"

Tarn stopped and smiled. "I wondered when you'd start asking questions." He pulled a canteen out of the backpack he'd taken from the support pod. "Drink this first."

Zachem rolled his eyes. Tarn taking charge again, and seeing to his mate's wellbeing before his own. He drank to satisfy Tarn, and drank more when he realised he needed it.

"There's no limit on teleportation that I know of. But doing so costs a lot of energy. In The Pit, I teleported all over the place. I've covered great distances on Mardu and Brel, my homeworld. But I've never 'ported between planets or through a gravitational field. I just kind of sense my limits."

"You teleported with me."

"A small distance. It wasn't that hard. My nephew once saved a dozen females from some rogue Ebrellions. Wore him out."

"And the telepathy?"

Tarn took the canteen Zachem held for him and drank, right where his mouth had been. Zachem suppressed a shiver, wondering when they'd touch mouths again.

"Ebrellions are psychic creatures by nature. We use the voids all around us, share thoughts at will, and can control our *shei*, to some extent. I can talk to other Ebrellions with my mind as long as we're close. If I can visualise their wavelengths, I can communicate with them."

"Wavelengths? Like an energy thing, like *shei*?"

"Exactly." Tarn handed the canteen back to Zachem and their hands brushed.

Heat stole through him at the contact. He saw an answering hunger in his mate's eyes.

"Why haven't you touched me?"

Tarn's brows rose. "I just did."

"With your cock," he said bluntly.

"Ah." An amused smirk curled Tarn's lips.

Annoyed and growing angrier the more Tarn smiled at him, Zachem took a step forward and caught the shorter man by the shirt collar. "Don't fuck with me —"

"I thought that's exactly what you wanted," Tarn murmured. "Now let go of me." The unmistakable command in his voice triggered Zachem to release him. "I wondered how you'd react to a bit of distance. I don't think you like it, pet. You need me to be in charge more, don't you?"

Damned, but he did. "I just asked a simple question," he said through gritted teeth.

"You want me to fuck you? Just ask me to."

"I shouldn't have to ask you." *You should tell me what you want. Then I'll do it.*

Tarn's smile faded. "*Czeva*, look at me." He waited until their gazes met. "I've been trying to give you space, to show you we're equals. And we are, but not the way you need us to be. I'm dominant. You're submissive. There is no shame in that."

"I'm not submissive." At least, he didn't want to be.

"You are." Tarn stroked his chest and reached a hand to wrap around his throat. He didn't squeeze. Tarn stared into Zachem's eyes, and the intensity made him look away. "Everything about you pleases me." The hand around his throat tightened, enough to make Zachem uncomfortably hard. "Your beauty, your strength. The struggle within you fascinates me, because you never give up, nor do you give yourself any excuses."

Zachem flushed, unaccountably pleased by Tarn's praise.

"I wish I could make you believe me, but you'll learn for yourself. Being my pet, my love, isn't wrong. It's —"

"Your what?" Had Tarn just called him his love?

Instead of responding, Tarn froze. He pushed Zachem away into the treeline, behind a massive trunk. "Make no noise. Wait here." Tarn dropped the pack, tore off his clothes, and shifted into a *threll*. He turned from man to a glow of energy to a *threll* in the blink of an eye. Then he vanished.

Zachem wanted to follow but had no idea where to go. That and he needed to obey his master's orders. Several moments passed. He heard nothing, and then footsteps. Several of them. Yet he hadn't heard laser fire or the sound of an altercation.

Tarn suddenly reappeared behind him. The beast purred and rubbed against Zachem's legs. In seconds, he shifted back and dressed in his trousers.

Together, they stepped out from behind the tree trunk. Two dangerous males stalked through the jungle in their direction. Both were armed and dressed to blend into the environment.

"Tarn!" A rough looking male two heads smaller than Zachem approached Tarn with his arms outstretched. A scar ran down his face, and the muscles on the male's body and the cautious awareness in his gaze indicated he was used to battle.

The second male behind him topped him by a head span and was perhaps the most muscular male Zachem had ever seen, as well as the most beautiful. He had short black hair, golden skin, and strange, piercing midnight blue eyes with a golden pupil. He wore a collar,

but this one looked decorative more than functional. The dangerous scent around the male intrigued him. Familiar, yet not. Like the other one who stood way too close to *Zachem's mate*.

Zachem inserted himself between Tarn and the male with a snarl.

"Easy, *czeva*. This is my nephew Drekk," Tarn said quietly. He pulled Zachem back by the arm but didn't let him go. "The large ugly one behind him is Ryen, his mate. Remember, I told you about them."

Creations. Both of them. Zachem willed his aggression away and studied the males with interest. Like him, they had been designed by scientists yet displayed no outward signs of an aggressive madness.

"This is Zachem. My mate." Tarn's proud introduction surprised him.

"He's beautiful." Drekk whistled. "Where the hell did they Create you?"

"Mate?" Ryen asked, his low voice more like a growl. "You found someone who could stand you for more than five seconds? Congratulations."

"Ryen." Drekk scowled then sighed. "Forgive him. We've *both* been worried. Pyrgo found us yesterday after nearly starting a war with the Outer Rim. Needless to say, Rafe isn't pleased."

"Rafe is Drekk's boss," Tarn explained.

Drekk frowned. "Not boss. Technically, yes, I work for him. But it's more of a partner-like relationship."

"Doing peacemaker business."

"Peacemaker business?" Zachem couldn't help the pheromones that escaped. He used them to lull the others into complacency, acting automatically in the presence of a threat.

Ryen swayed, but Drekk caught him, shook his head and managed to focus. "Cut it out."

Tarn stood by without saying a word. When Drekk too looked on the verge of passing out, he said, "Zachem, enough."

Zachem released his hold on the two and glanced at Tarn. His mate winked at him, pride in his gaze. He realised Tarn had been showing him off, but why that pleased him when he should have felt more angry, he couldn't say.

"Shit. What the hell did they put in you besides Nebite?" Ryen asked, holding his head.

"Nice. Very interesting skill you have there, Zachem." Drekk grinned, and Zachem saw a hint of Tarn in the male. "We work for the peacemakers, but aside from Rafe, they have no

clue of who we really are. Who *any* of us really are,” he said wryly at Tarn. “Ebrellions are no more welcome in the Vrail than Creations.”

Tarn donned the shirt he’d dropped earlier. “So where’s Pyrgo?”

“He should still be with Rafe. I told Rafe he was your cousin, by the way. But I don’t think he’ll be welcomed back anytime soon. He had a hard time taking his eyes off of Erin.”

“My sister,” Ryen growled, the pupils in his eyes bright.

“Another Creation?”

“Yeah.”

Zachem swallowed hard, not wanting to say anything that might further offend these two. They were the first of his kind he’d met that hadn’t tried to kill him. He didn’t understand the conflicting need to both run from and draw closer to the pair.

Tarn rubbed his back, the touch soothing. Before he knew it, Zachem relaxed into his mate’s hand. “I assume you brought transportation. Or are we going to stand around talking until the *kethra* and raptors attack?”

“Asshole,” Ryen muttered with a grin. He flicked a glance at Zachem, one filled with a hint of approval and speculation. “Come on, Drekk. Let’s get lover boy and his new toy back to —”

Tarn had him by the throat before anyone could blink. “You insult my mate and I’ll break your neck. Apologise.” To Zachem’s amazement, Tarn lifted Ryen off the ground with a hand that looked like a mix of *threll* and human parts.

“Dammit.” Drekk swore under his breath. “Ryen, do it. You’re going to be punished as soon as we get home. You’re straining at the leash again, aren’t you?”

“Sorry,” he rasped, tugging at Tarn’s large hand. “Just kidding.”

“You’re not funny.” Tarn dropped Ryen and took a step closer. “Now apologise *to him*.”

Ryen glared at Tarn but quickly looked away at a low growl from Drekk. Fascinated didn’t begin to describe Zachem at the unfolding events. Ryen, who seemed like he could break anyone in two, clearly obeyed Drekk. And Tarn, who up until now hadn’t seemed overly menacing, looked ready to kill.

A thrill of excitement blossomed. Zachem had a mate stronger than himself. He suddenly knew that if they’d been allowed to battle in The Pit, he might actually have lost.

“I’m sorry.” Ryen looked at him with a sincere apology. “I only meant to irritate Tarn, not to offend you.”

"No offence taken." Zachem nodded but couldn't look away from his mate.

Satisfied, Tarn snorted and gave Drekk his attention, ignoring Ryen as if he no longer mattered, which seemed to annoy Ryen to no end.

Drekk explained, "Rafe is waiting at his place with Pyrigo. The crystal's been delivered into Dorvian hands. But Pyrigo told the Dorvians a story about a crystal and a certain berserker. They won't leave until they've met him."

"Great. Pyrigo and his big mouth," Tarn muttered. "Fine. We'll meet with the Dorvians, since I know Zachem wants to know more about his ancestors. Until then, we need food, rest and a decent shower."

"Dorvian, hmm? I should have guessed. Those handsome red eyes." Drekk nudged Ryen to move ahead of him. "Right. Follow us."

Zachem stood in place, stunned. How did Tarn know how he ached to connect? To know not only Creations, but the Dorvians as well? "You knew I'd want to meet with them."

Tarn sighed. "Yeah, I did. You said a lot to Six, if you recall. I listened to everything you had to say, *czeva*. I didn't forget." He ran a hand along Zachem's jaw. "Everything you think and desire is important to me."

Zachem's heart raced. "You liked when I took them both down with my pheromones."

"I'm proud to have a mate with such strength. One almost as strong as me," he teased. "We both know I can kick your ass in the ring." His hand lowered to mould over Zachem's buttocks. "And we both know I can fuck that ass wherever and whenever I want to."

The gleam of dominance in his gaze turned Zachem inside out. He burned to bend over and let his master take what he wanted.

Tarn inhaled and choked. "Hell, Zachem. Not here. Some Ebrellions don't mind sharing, but I'm not letting anyone else get a look at your fine body. It's mine."

"Yes, Master." The more he said it, the more he felt claimed.

Tarn's hunger pulsed within his own *shei*. "That's it. Feel what I'm feeling. Just a small gift an Ebrellion mate can bestow on his beloved."

That was twice Tarn had mentioned love. Zachem meant to question him about it when Drekk called for them.

Tarn nudged him in their direction. "I know you're hungry. Your *shei* isn't right. You need food and rest. Come on, *czeva*. Let's go home."

Tarn endured the ride home in silence, awash in the confusion stirring his mate's *shei*. The tarnished bands of energy entwined within Zachem hinted at love, lust, fear and puzzlement. He only wished he knew if the love belonged to him.

It made sense for Zachem to be cautious. Hell, his entire life had been lived for someone else's convenience. As much as Tarn wished he could be less of a dominant, it wasn't in him to be less commanding. Nor was it in his mate to be less subservient.

The ride home, Drekk had peppered Zachem with questions Tarn had encouraged his mate to answer. Watching Zachem bask in the warm acceptance of other Creations—even Ryen treated him with the respect due a warrior—pleased Tarn to the point of hiding a stupid grin the entire trip to Four Walls.

"When are you going to leave this dump?" Drekk finally asked when they docked near his bar.

"Soon. You can let us off here."

"I'll tell Rafe to expect you tomorrow. After the mid-morn. Don't be late."

Tarn snorted. "We'll be there when we're good and ready. Come on, Zachem."

"Until tomorrow." Zachem nodded at Drekk and Ryen, who smiled back.

As they walked off the ship, they heard Drekk reprimanding Ryen.

"He won't be punished too severely, will he?" Zachem asked quietly.

Tarn chuckled. "I hope so. Don't worry about it. Ryen needs a strong hand. And what Drekk does to him won't leave any scars. Just a very frustrated male on the edge of release."

Zachem's face cleared. "Oh." His skin sparkled, drawing attention.

"Damn. I hadn't expected to deal with this yet. Look, do your best to tone down those colours, would you? You're handsome enough that I'm going to be fighting off the idiots around here for some time. But we can't have them finding out about your background."

Zachem's skin evened out. "Sorry."

"Yo, Tarn," one drunken Mardu stumbled over to them. "Where you been, fella? My boys made a mess of the place. Not my fault," he hastened to add.

Tarn sighed. Time to restore his reputation. "I'll be right back. Don't move," he said to his mate in a low voice. He walked a few paces to Durvand and hauled the male off his feet, much the way he'd treated Ryen. "I just returned to the planet, and this is what I have to deal with. Lyrval!" he yelled.

An Ebrellion with a shaved scalp bisected by a thick black wave of hair down the centre of his skull stepped outside the bar. He stood as tall as Tarn and looked twice as mean.

"Durvand's irritating me."

Lyrval hurried to take hold of Durvand but froze when he caught sight of Zachem. "Mother Night. Who the hell is that?"

And so it began. Others trying to claim the prize that was his. Tarn snarled, "Mine." Aware of how barbaric he sounded, he cleared his throat and tried to tone down his jealousy. *Good one. Make an ass of yourself in front of your friends and your new mate.* "Ah, this is my mate. He's not from around here." *Great, now I sound both lame and stupid.*

"No shit, Tarn. Well, does he have a name?"

Zachem stepped forward, contrary to what he'd been ordered not to do. "Zachem." He looked from Tarn to Lyrval and frowned. "Who the hell are you?"

Sensing nothing more than his mate's protectiveness, Tarn relaxed. "Easy, *czeva*. This is my second in com – ah, my new partner in the bar. Lyrval."

"*Czeva*, hmm?" Lyrval grinned. "How do you do it, Tarn? They're always so damned pretty. Let me know if this one's got a sister." He waved good-bye and yanked Durvand into the bar.

"Who is this 'they'?" Zachem growled.

"I told you to wait over there." Tarn grabbed his mate by the arm and dragged him behind the bar, away from prying eyes. "What 'they' are you talking about?"

"The 'they' who are 'always so damned pretty'. How many mates do you have, you damned shifter?"

Zachem's voice grew louder as his own jealousy erupted.

Tarn couldn't have been more pleased. Instead of answering, he 'ported them both to his home, a well-guarded estate far on the fringe of Four Walls, bordering the Eron Forest.

Zachem stumbled and swore. "Warn me next time." He paused and looked around. "Where are we?"

"My temporary home, far from everyone."

He entered ahead of Zachem and walked through a tiled entryway, past a large sitting room back into his bedroom. He dropped his clothing, well aware of Zachem's growing desire, and entered his massive lavatory.

Native waters flowed through the spouts on several walls of his glass shower, cleaning him of the grime from his trip. He waited for Zachem to join him. After some time, he soaped up, rinsed off, and left the shower. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he walked out into his bedroom, only to find Zachem passed out on the bed.

Dropping his towel, he removed Zachem's clothing and joined him in bed. His mate curled towards him, spooning him into the crook of his body. Content to sleep on his side next to his *czeva*, he relaxed into Zachem's warm frame and hugged his mate's arm to his chest.

Closing his eyes, he regulated his *shei* to mirror Zachem's. As he fell asleep, he wondered how long he'd have to wait for Zachem to admit his love. He dreamed of tomorrow with a smile on his face, his mate by his side.

Chapter Twelve

Zachem woke to a warm mouth suctioning his cock. He groaned and thrust upwards, having the best dream of his life. In it, his mate aroused him, toying with his balls as he laved his cock with his tongue, teeth and lips. The energy shared between them put him into a drugged stupor, one filled with love and lust that seemed to never end.

He opened his eyes with Tarn's name on his lips.

"You taste so good, pet," Tarn mumbled between kisses to his cock. "I want to eat you, all of you."

Tarn sucked him some more, and then mounted him before he could come. Tarn shoved hard into his ass, already lubed and thick with arousal. He pounded into Zachem with a ferocity that left him aching and needy. Pressing his mouth to Zachem's for a kiss, Tarn shared a wealth of passion that made it hard to breathe.

"Fuck, oh fuck," he panted as he tensed and shuddered, coming hard into Zachem's ass. He groaned. "You didn't come yet."

"You didn't tell me I could," Zachem said, barely holding on.

"I didn't?" Tarn lowered himself, so that his belly rubbed against Zachem's swollen shaft. "Come all over me, *czeva*. Rub that seed into my skin." Tarn nipped at his earlobe and ground against his shaft while remaining inside him. "Mark me."

Zachem moaned and shot hard, pulses of cum coating them both.

"Mmm, you smell so good." Tarn purred, the same damned way he had as a *threll*.

"Makes me never want to move from you. Addicting."

"Stars." Zachem stared up at his lover in awe. The love in Tarn's green-gold eyes was there to see...if he dared believe it. "You—you really do—" He couldn't finish.

Tarn kissed him again and slowly withdrew. He continued to kiss Zachem, teasing and loving him with his mouth. "Come on, mate. Let's get cleaned up. Not to mention I need to feed you."

Tarn leapt from the bed and pulled Zachem with him. They showered and dressed, but Zachem was forced to wear trousers a size too short.

"Ryen's trousers might fit you. I'll make sure to tell Drekk to bring a pair to Rafe's before we buy you some."

Zachem ate in silence, wondering how to go about the art of living.

"What's wrong?" Tarn watched him carefully.

"I just realised I have no currency. No job and nothing to barter. Nowhere to live."

Tarn scowled. "You have plenty of currency. What's mine is yours. And this is your home. Until you wish to travel elsewhere. We can live as we go, then."

Zachem blinked. "But you have a life here."

His mate shrugged. "With Lyrval working the bar in Four Walls, I have no reason to stay. He can maintain a watch for rogues. I've been itching to leave this town anyway. I can only break up so many bar fights. I need something more to stimulate me." He gave Zachem a seductive grin. "Something big and hard, like my mate."

Zachem took another bite of *coya* fruit and wondered how far to push his luck. "You're my master. We bonded. You'll tell me where to go, so what does it matter what I might want?"

Tarn sighed, and Zachem had the feeling he'd made another mistake. "What did I do wrong? I didn't mean it." His fear that he'd failed, his relapse into the submissive creature he'd once been, was too easy, and he hated himself for being weak.

Tarn shook his head. "No, stop. Let yourself be, *czeva*. You like serving me, yes?"

"Yes," Zachem answered, miserable.

"Then your first thought is to please me, yes?"

He nodded.

"Answer me." Tarn stared into his eyes, and Zachem had to force himself not to flinch from the power there.

"Yes, Master."

"Then you did no wrong. It's natural to want to please me, just as it's natural for me to want to please you. We're bonded, Zachem, but we don't know each other as well as we should. When you meet my people, you'll learn how much of a prize you truly are. You're beautiful, no doubt. But it's your inner strength that my people will respect. That need to serve your master that will earn me the envy of every Ebrellion out there."

"Your people are like that? Dominant and submissive?"

"We are. There is no greater prize in our system than to find a submissive for a mate. That doesn't mean weak, Zachem. Tell me, did Ryen look weak to you?"

"No." Ryen had looked and acted like a cocky warrior, until Drekk had put him in his place.

"He's not. He's a worthy mate for my nephew, and I was most pleased when they finally joined. But he's nowhere near the treasure I have in you." Tarn leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. "You make me proud every time you face the world. You've overcome challenges many Ebrellions could not have faced. You are a Creation. A berserker. My *czeva*."

To Zachem's shock, Tarn had tears in his eyes.

"It does me great honour when you call me *Master*." He cleared his throat and took on that commanding expression Zachem had come to know and love, so well. "Thus you will answer me when I ask you a question."

"Yes, Master." He felt shaky, not sure how to express the emotion building inside.

"You will accept my things as yours."

"Yes, Master."

"And you will tell me where you wish to live and what you wish to do. Do you understand? The needs of my mate are more important than my own."

"Yes, Master." Zachem couldn't stand being so far from his mate. He suddenly shoved the table aside and sank to his knees. Hugging Tarn around the waist, he held on and closed his eyes tightly around the burn of tears. "Yes, Master," he said over and over again.

"That's it, mate. Yes, that's it. Let it out." Tarn stroked his head, easing the fury, the pain, and the utter need he could finally express. To love and be loved. "You are so very worthy, my heart."

"I love you so much," Zachem mumbled against his belly, not ready to say it to his face just yet.

Tarn froze for a moment. Then he wiped the tears from Zachem's cheeks and resumed stroking his hair. In a low voice, he said, "Yes, pet. That's what I've been waiting to hear. You make me so happy." He cleared his throat. "But don't think I'll always be this soft. You're strong, but you need discipline. Thank the stars you're better than Ryen, though."

Zachem smiled and nuzzled Tarn's belly.

"When we meet the others today, try not to stare too hard at Rafe's mate. Erin's a beauty, like her brother. I'm glad you didn't look at Ryen the way he looked at you. I'll have to talk to Drekk about that. Not to mention the way my nephew complimented you a little too freely. I'll deal with that, too.

"You'll want to talk to fellow Creations. We can have a nice life here, Zachem. Or we can go to other worlds, see the universe as free men. Never slaves. And that reminds me. We still have to go back to Colony6 and take care of The Pit. And the Dorvians will want to grab hold of you, with you being able to master their crystal. I'll have to watch them as well."

Zachem held on as Tarn rambled, putting his mind at ease. He had time to learn his way in this new world. The love and patience of a master – a mate – who truly cared for him. The possibility of friends who could accept him for what he was, and options aplenty for a life filled with joy.

Tarn quieted and pushed Zachem back, so that he could see his face. "Say it again, *czeva*."

He didn't hesitate. "I love you, Tarn."

Tarn smiled. "I love you, Beast. Now let's make Drekk even more annoyed when we show up late. Drop your trousers and bend over the table for your master." The love in his eyes caged Zachem tight, a place from which he never wanted to be free again.

"Yes, Master."

* * * *

Two standard months later

Furon wasn't prepared for the coup that happened with startling efficiency. Ever since that fucking Slave Trade he'd been bending over backwards to please the militia and the off-world dignitaries hoping to get their hands not only on a Dorvian crystal, but also the berserker to wield it.

Now, two months later, he still hadn't recovered from the losses that one night had dealt him. He'd lost not only Beast, but Slave Six, Pyrgo, half of his best guards, and several of his harem. The currency had begun to pale without decent fighters.

Until tonight. A big brute, not quite as large as the beast, but as muscular and with eyes like blue seas, had been captured by a scarred slaver named Durk. Durk had a reputation in the System. He often worked with Cheltam, another notorious smuggler who hated the peacemakers more than Furon.

"Far from your side of the System, Durk." Furon looked over the other slaves Durk had brought him. Every one of them looked like brawlers.

"What can I say? It's getting too quiet out there. The peacemakers are cracking down on pirates. No fun anymore."

"I know the feeling." Furon sighed. "I'll take the lot. I hope the big one can fight."

Durk chuckled. "Oh, he can." He leaned closer. "But I have something even better for you, if you're interested. Is there somewhere private we can talk? Just you and me?"

Furon considered the man. He had a frame built for fighting. That he had lived past the scar on his face spoke volumes. But it was the air of danger around him that cautioned Furon.

"Bring your guards, those you can trust," Durk prodded. "Trust me. If you like what I have, you and I stand to gain a lot."

Furon shrugged. If Durk got out of line, the guards could crush him. He nodded to several of his men and walked Durk to a small conference room. "Well? What is it?"

In seconds, his men fell to the ground, stunned by beams that flew from out of nowhere. Durk vanished. In his place, Beast and Slave Six appeared. Furon yelled, but no one responded. His men had been incapacitated, and outside, he heard a resounding battle take place.

"Why Furon, so nice to see you again." The beast looked even larger than he had the last time Furon had seen him.. He wore long black trousers, a matching black long-sleeved tunic, and his hair had been braided back into a long tail. Against the black he wore, his eyes looked like red windows into hell. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

He held a slender black collar in hand and took a step closer.

Furon roared his fury when the beast snapped it around his neck, and it fitted itself to his flesh. But he was no match for the male who'd never been beaten in The Pit.

Slave Six held up a controller and tossed it to the beast. "Would you do the honours, *czeva*? I don't think 'Durk' will have a problem holding off the peacemakers while we see to Master Furon, do you?"

The beast laughed. "No, I don't. But perhaps he'd rather you demonstrated The Hold. I never did get to see it, though Pyrgo has said on many occasions it hurt like a bitch."

"No, no," Furon screamed as they moved closer. A pulse shot out from his collar and he seized, his body cramping in hard knots, his mind blanking to all but the pain.

When he woke again, he heard one of them say, "Not too much. I want to see him in the ring against Ryen."

The other laughed. "Bloodthirsty. A worthy quality in a mate."

"I love you, Master."

"Not as much as I love you, Beast."

A bell sounded, the signal to start a new fight. "In this corner we have Ryen, and here, The Pit's very last slave. Let the battle begin."

About the Author

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling.

Twenty-four years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dreams has come finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.

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