

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Illicit Affair

ISBN 9781419914416

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication February 2008

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ILLICIT AFFAIR

Elyssa Lynne

Dedication

For all of us who like to have fun in our dreams.

Chapter One

Kayla faced the sealed door of the space station's airlock tube. Every embarking lounge through which she'd ever passed—and there had been too damned many of them over the years—had looked much the same. White plastic molding. Colorful upholsteries. An abundance of plant life to make the recycled air a little less stale. Officious officials. Tired transients.

And they always made her think of Jarrod.

Oh no. Slam down those memories. Don't let them take hold.

But already it was too late. Sensations stirred in her body, unbidden and unwelcome. And not about to be subdued without a fight. She did *not* want to dwell on the way Jarrod's hands used to caress and tease her, slide beneath her tunic and along her rib cage, find the curve of her breasts, lift them free so he could run his tongue over their pebbled tips.

The old familiar desire tingled in her clit and her nipples grew taut with her longing. *Oh damn and hells and flocklizard's balls.* It had all been such heaven with Jarrod. But now she wallowed in a hell of scorching arousal with no means to put out the flame. More fool she.

Focus on something else. Anything else. On the three wormhole jumps it had taken to get this far on their journey from the agricultural planet of Kappa Prime. On the two young women who sat, one on either side of her, exhausted from the rigors of space travel unfamiliar to them. On the fact she had to keep one of them, the Princess Lysandra, alive and safe.

Bodyguard jobs could be a bitch.

But Kayla and the princess bore such a striking outward resemblance it made it easy for them to switch identities.

Gods she wanted this whole ridiculous charade over. She wanted—hells, it didn't matter what she wanted. She had to make the best of what she had.

And if Jarrod ever found out she'd sunk to accepting a job like this, he'd laugh his damned ass off.

Princesses. Barons. Royalty. Kayla found it ridiculous. But if a family could afford to buy a whole planet she supposed they could call themselves anything they wanted.

She sighed. Only one last neuro-class ship to board for the one last wormhole jump that would take them into Zeta Secundus' space. Then they would shuttle down to the planet, the princess would marry the Zetan mining baron, the two planets would form the alliance that the overseeing and overbearing Federation had forbidden them to make through a treaty and Kayla could go—not home. She didn't have a home. She'd just go on to whatever awaited her next.

And what would that be? Whatever it was, it couldn't be as much fun—or as dangerous—as those crazy blockade-running schemes Jarrod had hatched. Hot damn, that had been a real adrenaline rush, outwitting the growing tyrannies of a Federation created to protect its members, not dictate every aspect of their lives. Then with their mission successful he would devise even crazier sex games for just the two of them.

But it did her no good to remember all they'd shared, all he'd made her feel, all he'd made her want. In the end she'd wanted more than he could give. So she'd left. It was over, had been over for two long years. She was pushing twenty-six now. High time to focus on that more stable future she'd craved.

So why did she still crave Jarrod's touch, the pounding of his cock deep in her pussy?

A rumble sounded from the airlock. At last. The ship—another luxury cruiser she supposed—was ready to take them aboard. So far there had been no attempts on the princess's life. They had traveled by roundabout routes and with as much secrecy as possible, of course, but she knew from experience that wouldn't stop a Federation

agent. So if someone intended to prevent Lysandra—Sandy—from reaching Zeta Secundus they had only this one last opportunity.

Kayla stood and reached for the pulser pistol that did not rest in the holster that she also did not have. *Damn and damn again.* But a princess wouldn't carry such a weapon. And a princess was what she had to pretend to be. Talk about casting out of type.

"Ready?" she asked her two companions.

Princess Lysandra rose. "This is the ship the baron hired for us?" she asked, her voice as soft as her gentle personality.

Kayla wished again she could have instilled more unarmed combat skills in her charge but the princess lacked both interest and ability. Well at least she'd been able to teach Daria, the princess's maid, a few tricks. Together they'd protect Sandy in spite of herself. But hands and feet, no matter how swift and accurately aimed, were no match for a projectile or energy weapon. On that depressing reflection Kayla, shoulders back, head high as befitting her assumed role, turned to the attendant who stood at the hatchway.

Only a short airlock to traverse. The door at the far end hissed sideways and she was greeted by the familiar smell of plastics, metals and air recycled through and around too many bodies packed into too cramped a space.

They stepped out onto a railed balcony that looked down on a cargo hold. A cargo vessel? Not another cruise ship? Her spirits lifted. This was more like home to her. No padded walls, no thick carpets or plush furnishings. A vessel for work, for purpose, not for indolent lounging around. And from the looks of it, it had seen a lot of use and probably a great deal of it illegal. A perfect carrier for their secret venture. The Federation would never expect a princess to travel on a ship like this.

Two men stepped forward from the shadows. One, tall and stocky, his dark hair flecked with gray, wore the uniform of a Zetan commander. Their official escort from the baron, she presumed. The other—

She froze as the clammy chill of shock plunged through her.

Jarrood.

Gods what was he doing here? He'd betray her, she had no way to warn him before he spoke, before his greeting and manner toward her made it all too clear she was no princess. Too late to turn and run. Her security measures were about to be blown to hell.

His gaze rested on her, his expression mirroring her own shock. The next moment he had himself under control and he bowed low. "Have I the pleasure of welcoming the Princess Lysandra of Kappa Prime?"

Relief washed over her. But she couldn't let it show. Instead she inclined her head as if in haughty indifference.

Jarrood's mouth tightened. The Zetan commander might take it for irritation at her lack of politeness. She knew it for an attempt to keep from laughing. He would not betray her. Not yet at least.

"Princess Lysandra." The Zetan stepped forward and bowed. "I am Commander Leftvig of the baron's personal guard. It is my honor to escort you to the home world of your future husband."

Kayla inclined her head again. She and Princess Lysandra had discussed the attitude she should convey, the manners she should adopt. "That remains to be seen, Commander," she said.

The man's eyes narrowed and the look he directed at her held more assessment than curiosity.

"Captain...?" She allowed her voice to trail off in a question.

"Calder, Lady." A tremor of suppressed merriment sounded in his voice and mockery lit his eyes. "Allow me to welcome you aboard the *Illicit*."

The *Illicit*. Aptly named, knowing Jarrod as she did. But she kept that comment to herself. "If you will show me to my cabin, Captain? These last few days have been fatiguing."

"That won't be necessary, Captain." Leftvig took her arm. "I will take her myself."

Jarrold's eyebrows rose. "This is my ship, Commander." His tone held an order—or a threat. "Marsden?" He gestured to a shorter, wiry man who had remained until now in the shadowed recesses of the passageway that led to this balcony. "This is my first officer. He will personally see to the baggage." He lifted Kayla's arm from Commander Leftvig's grasp and gave a dismissive nod to the Zetan. "I will see you at dinner, Commander."

"He didn't like that," Kayla murmured as she placed her fingers on Jarrold's arm.

"I've yet to find anything he does like," muttered Jarrold. He cast a considering look at the two women who fell into step behind them. "This way, ladies."

Now that the shock and the immediate fear had faded, she allowed herself a moment to study him. He wore a cream-colored tunic—possibly his best for meeting royalty? He also wore trousers of durable brown cloth and boots that showed more scuffs and scratches than polish. He wouldn't be Jarrold if he'd gone to any real trouble for a mere princess. Her gaze lifted to the shoulder-length dark hair tied back, the squared chin, prominent nose and those dark eyes. Oh, damn those eyes that could—and had so many, many times—melted her into a pool of lust.

Not this time, she vowed. Never mind that the old familiar desire flamed through her body leaving her knees weak, her breasts tingling and her clit pulsing. Making her want to wrap her tongue around his cock and feel it grow rigid in her mouth. And what she wanted to do with his balls caused her pussy to weep with its longing.

He led the way along the railinged corridor, his long, energetic stride shortened for the benefit of Sandy and Daria, who hurried in his wake. Below, the cargo bay loomed, vast and empty except for a few crates. He could carry a considerable payload on the *Illicit*.

Questions raced through her head. What was he doing here? How had he, of all people, come into the service of the Zetan mining baron? Why did he no longer run blockades? What price would he demand for his silence about her true identity?

And did his rod swell and yearn for her as her tunnel ached for him to fill it, to fill all of her?

They rounded a corner and entered a small but comfortable lounge area. Apparently the *Illicit* possessed a few arrangements for the convenience of passengers. How many, she wondered, had he carried? And for what purposes and in how much secrecy? She didn't really know him anymore, she realized. Time and necessity could change people beyond all recognition.

She cast a sideways glance up at him. Far up. She'd forgotten how very tall he was. His face looked leaner, more angular. Tougher. The two years since she had seen him last had added more muscle to his lithe frame. They had also added a small scar along his jaw.

They entered another corridor and he stopped before the third closed door on the inner rim. "Your cabin for the journey, Princess."

"How long will that be?" she asked.

"We should reach orbit around Zeta Secundus late morning the day after tomorrow. Our time, that is. It'll be just past midnight in their capital city." He pressed his palm against a glowing green pad and the main panel hissed open. He stepped back to allow her to precede him.

She entered a cubicle about ten feet square, furnished with a narrow bed, a chest of drawers, a round table and a single chair. Small. Efficient. Neat. Infinitely larger than the bunk and locker that had been hers in the old days. Her chin rose as she faced him. "Thank you, Captain. And my ladies?"

"On either side of you. Easily within your summons should you have need of them. Otherwise you are all three assured your privacy."

Did Sandy and Daria notice how pointed he'd made that comment? But then they had no idea he knew her. And certainly no idea of what she and Jarrod had shared.

Oh what they had shared. And did she want to share it again? To feel his fingers teasing her nipples, his tongue licking her nub, his engorged phallus delving deep into places she had permitted only him to explore?

Absolutely not!

His gaze caught hers for the briefest moment, amusement sparkling in the dark depths of his eyes. *Oh damn those eyes.* For two long years the memory of them had disturbed her peace, haunting both her waking and sleeping dreams.

With an effort Kayla dragged herself free from their mesmerizing effect. She inclined her head in a regal gesture of dismissal and turned to the two women who remained in the hall casting curious glances about them.

"I shouldn't need you again this afternoon. Settle in and relax. There won't be much chance for that after we arrive at Zeta."

"And the wormhole jump?" Daria looked uneasy.

Jarrold smiled. "We're timing it to occur around oh-two-hundred hours. If you wish, we can give you something to ensure you'll sleep through it."

Lysandra, standing just behind Daria, shuddered. "The last one made me feel like I was being turned inside out for hours."

Jarrold shot Lysandra a sudden searching glance. Did he notice their physical similarity? They'd taken pains to disguise it for this trip, to make the princess appear a servant, covering her mass of mahogany brown hair with a scarf. Kayla's, dyed several shades lighter so as not to match, hung loose about her shoulders—a far cry from the short crop she'd worn for convenience during her blockade running days.

"Your misfortune to have an inexperienced pilot," he said. "Ours has the effects down to about five minutes." His eyes sparkled with sudden amusement. "Some people come to enjoy the sensations."

Kayla avoided Jarrold's teasing glance. Wormhole jump sex was notorious among spacers, an experience not to be missed, the fuck of all fucks. So of course they'd tried it.

Heat flooded her body at the memory, burning her clit, making her pulse pound. She turned away, struggling to bring her sudden rush of lust under control. She'd walked away from Jarrod. All that was over.

Perhaps she'd better ask for one of those sedatives before she went to bed.

She drew a deep breath and gave the real princess a reassuring smile. "I'll see you at dinner in..." she allowed her sentence to trail off and raised her eyebrows at Jarrod.

"Three hours," he supplied.

"In three hours," Kayla finished. "My overnight bag should be all I'll need."

"I'll have it brought to you," Jarrod said.

She awarded him a gracious nod then closed the door, palming the lock. It now glowed red.

How long would it take him to come back? And what would they say to each other? What could they say to each other? They'd moved on with their lives. One could never go back, only ahead. No matter how tantalizing the view to the rear.

And Jarrod had always had the sexiest rear.

* * * * *

Jarrod hesitated outside Kayla's door, her overnight bag in his hand. He ought to have left it to Marsden to deliver. But however awkward this might be, he wouldn't miss her explanation for worlds.

He knocked. After a moment she called the command that released the lock and the panel hissed sideways, disappearing into the wall.

She stood on the far side of the room, her hand resting on the back of the sole chair. She had removed her light traveling cloak and wore only a flowing caftan of dark emerald velvet that lit the matching flecks in her hazel eyes. Pretty as all hells, that garment, but not in the least practical. In their active days she'd preferred rugged leggings and a multi-pocketed tunic.

Times, he reminded himself, *change. And so do people.* They had both moved on. He tried to repress the ache of regret that filled him.

"You aren't going to rat on me." She made it a statement. She perched one hip on the edge of the round table and dangled her leg. She had long, sexy legs defined by muscle. Her thighs had held him captive many a time. Gods, those wonderful thighs, clenching him tightly as her pussy had clenched and massaged his cock until he'd cried out with the ecstasy of his release.

Damn. He had to keep his mind on the present. It wasn't easy, not with the way the fabric outlined the swells of her breasts, the curve of her hip, the line of her thigh. An elusive scent teased his nose, alien to the rough and ready environment of the *Illicit*. Familiar. Violets? Soap? Kayla herself? All those things rolled into one tantalizingly erotic package?

Cool. Keep it cool. He lowered her bag to the floor then dropped onto the bunk, leaning back on his elbows and extending his booted legs before him. "What in the names of all the hells are you playing at, Kayla?"

She met his gaze squarely. "I might ask you the same. Who hired you for this ferrying duty?"

He grinned. "Why do you ask?"

She stared at him for a long moment, her expression thoughtful. He'd forgotten how solemn her face could become, how her eyes paled with inner reflection. How that one unruly tendril of hair always escaped to fall across her forehead. How just looking at her heated his blood, swelled his penis, made him long to run his fingers over her breasts and along her cleft until she writhed and moaned with his touch. Would her skin still be as soft? Would her body still arch and rise to meet his? Would her pussy still taste as sweet? Suddenly, overwhelmingly, he wanted to know, wanted to run his fingertips along her cheek, down her throat, then lower to tease her nipples into hardness. Then lower still until he plumbed the depths of her tunnel.

She gave a short nod, recalling his attention to the present. "Because I think someone would be very glad if the princess suffered a fatal accident before any marriage could be legally registered."

"So that's why you've taken her place. Almost I could feel sorry for the unsuspecting assassin."

Kayla grinned, the smile lighting her eyes, lifting the shadow of worry that had settled over her brow. "Damn right. I'll be a lot harder to kill. And you didn't answer my question. Who hired you?"

"The baron's freight manager."

Her grin widened revealing white, even teeth. She'd always had a beautiful smile. It had been one of the things he'd first noticed about her. That and her fantastic legs. And the sweet full curves of her breasts and hips.

"Considers us cargo, does he? My thanks to the baron."

Some cargo. He'd get a pretty penny for her in any of those filthy slave pits if ever he sank that low. But damn she did look good. She'd feel good to hold too. And taste. And fuck. The thought of running his tongue over her lips, over her nipples, over her sweet cleft sent the blood to engorge his already troubled cock.

With an effort he dragged his mind from beneath her clothes. "That's her in the next cabin? Playing your lady-in-waiting?"

"Lucky guess."

He shook his head. "The resemblance between you is striking. Is that why they hired you?"

Kayla inclined her head. "That and my obvious talents."

He grinned. "I remember them well." He also remembered her less obvious talents, the ones that had enlivened his nights and made all other encounters merely pale imitations. *Damn, she'd been an incredible fuck.*

"Few people notice the resemblance unless we emphasize it." She sounded a touch defensive.

"Mmmm. But remember how well I know you." That and the fact he'd searched for her in the face and form of every woman he'd seen in the past two years. He hadn't realized he'd been doing that but the truth of it struck him now. That thick mass of mahogany hair that haloed around her sweetly rounded face, those high cheekbones, those arching eyebrows, that stubborn chin and those flashing hazel eyes. And that creamy skin. He'd looked for her, for someone who bore even a passing resemblance to her, and been constantly disappointed. There was no one like Kayla.

"What's your plan?" he asked abruptly.

Her chin came up in a gesture so achingly familiar it cut at him. "Just make sure she stays safe. What are your plans—or orders?"

He'd always liked her directness, her self-assurance. Hells, she'd needed it to stay alive when they'd played their dangerous games. And when they'd played their other games, the ones for just the two of them—he broke off that thought. Right now might be every bit as dangerous as any of their old missions. He needed to know a few more things, details he suspected his employer had not bothered to mention to him.

He crossed his ankles. *Nonchalance. That's what the situation calls for.* "I was hired to do the same."

She tilted her head. "You sure about that?"

He straightened. "You have reason to think this is a set-up?"

She shook her head, setting the mass of luxuriant waves swaying on her shoulders. "Just that nothing has happened so far. And I'm damned sure the Federation knows she's making this trip."

"And that they'll do just about anything to prevent this marriage." He liked her hair this longer length. Made him want to run his fingers through it, savor its texture. Savor her.

She tapped one manicured nail against her mouth. She'd tinted her lips as befitted her masquerade as the princess. He preferred them their natural color. What would they taste like covered in that lip cream? Artificial, he supposed. Or possibly it would be flavored? No, he decided. Not for a princess. And definitely not for Kayla.

"Did they give you any warnings? Any orders?" She swung one leg.

He recognized the movement but always before her boots and trousers had covered her ankle and leg. This caftan lifted free, riding up, exposing them for his appreciation. And he did appreciate. She possessed a slender ankle that swelled into the enticing curve of her calf. He knew an overwhelming impulse to caress it, to slide his hand along it, up the inside to her knee then along her thigh. Then higher still to that dark region of her cleft.

And inside. Damn, he wanted to find her clit, watch her eyes darken with arousal, hear her moan and gasp with the pleasure he brought her. He wanted her.

Her leg had stopped moving, he realized. She studied his face and he felt heat flood his neck and cheeks. Could she read his thoughts? It wouldn't be hard. Her gaze lowered to his crotch. He could feel his erection straining against his trousers, begging to find a sweeter, moister, more welcoming sheath. One familiar to him yet different now.

"Why did you leave?" he demanded abruptly. He hadn't meant to ask that. But now he had to know.

She gazed at the fiber matting on the floor for a long moment then shrugged. "I told you. I was tired. I needed a little less excitement."

Did she mean she'd grown tired of their work...or their play?

She rose. "Is there a gymnasium on board?"

"I wouldn't call it that but there is an exercise room."

"With a padded mat? I need a workout."

So did he. He wasn't likely to get the one he wanted, pounding a mattress with her. He'd have to work off his arousal kicking a bag. "Now?" he asked.

"Is it secure from our Zetan friends? The sight of a supposed princess working up a sweat might shock them."

"I'll see to it." And with that he left before he could suggest his preferred form of exercise to her.

And have her reject him.

Chapter Two

Kayla stared at the closed door. She had never thought it could hurt so much, seeing him again.

And those memories that flooded back. Those damned vivid memories. She and Jarrod hadn't been part of any formal rebellion. Mostly they'd smuggled medical supplies, food, even agricultural equipment to the poorer settlers—the ones who couldn't afford to pay the heavy import duties—on the more remote worlds, the ones the Federation had yet to enlist in their growing number of protected planets. It had been dangerous and fun and made her feel she was helping people and making a real difference.

And then she'd spoiled it all by falling in love with the leader of her unit.

Damn Jarrod. Sex for fun was one thing. But once love entered the equation it became serious. It made her think of homes and families and there had never been room for either of those in Jarrod's life.

Moisture brimmed in her eyes and she dashed it away with the back of her hand. *Damn the man.* And damn her. Getting emotional got in the way of clear thinking. Jarrod had taught her that.

And Jarrod had been right.

She needed to get tired, make her muscles ache. Maybe then she'd stop lusting for his body, for his manhood to thrust deep inside her, to pound with that ever-increasing rhythm while his teeth tugged at her nipple —

Oh damn and hells and flocklizard's balls.

Or Jarrod's balls, came her rueful thought. She wanted to lick them, stroke them, watch his face once more as sensation surged through him until it became too unbearable to hold it all inside. She wanted to see him as he cried out and exploded,

shooting stream after stream of semen into her mouth, into her tunnel, between her breasts, anywhere and everywhere he chose.

Oh hells. She'd walked away from all that two long...and lonely...years ago.

She started to pull off the caftan then decided she had better tell Sandy where she was going and order her to remain in her room and not open the door to anyone, not even Daria. She activated the lock, stepped into the corridor and came to an abrupt halt.

A short wiry man stood before Daria's open door. Jarrod's first officer, what was his name, Marsden? Sandy's bag lay at his feet but he seemed in no hurry to deliver it. The grin on his face indicated he found Daria very much to his liking. Well more power to him. Daria, that prim repressed soul, could use a good fucking. And damn it so could Kayla.

Marsden glanced up and looked annoyed and embarrassed at the same time.

Kayla kept her expression bland. "I'm sorry, go on with discussing the arrangements," she said. "I only wished to speak to Sandy."

"Yes, Lady." Daria peeped around the door, blushing.

"I'd recommend you take his suggestions," Kayla told her. "He knows the ship and the amenities it has to offer. How many crew does the *Illicit* carry?"

"Enough to assure your comfort, Lady."

She smiled. One of Jarrod's firm rules was never to answer a question with more information than absolutely necessary. He had trained Marsden well. She turned to the cabin on the other side where Sandy must be waiting in impatience. "Oh." She looked back, vexed with herself. "Would you bring her bag, Mr. Marsden?" She wanted to inspect the contents—even the bag itself—before allowing the princess to handle it.

Marsden brought the luggage, Sandy admitted them and Kayla dismissed the man to continue his discussion with Daria. The search didn't take much over ten minutes though she examined every inch both inside and out manually, visually and

electronically. Satisfied at last, she allowed the princess to take charge of it and returned to her own room.

As she tied the belt on her workout suit a few minutes later a light rap sounded on her door. "Unlock," she called.

The panel slid back and Jarrod looked inside. "Ready, I see." He gave a short nod. "The corridors are clear. You can make it without being seen."

He led the way at a brisk stride, his booted feet pounding a steady beat on the matting. A natural fiber, she noted. The scent made her think of sunlit fields, of drying sheds, of a natural agrarian environment. She'd seen such an industry on Kappa Prime.

And they'd delivered med supplies to one once, she remembered suddenly. They'd landed their shuttle in a long field, flattening the grain with the force of the engines. There'd been an outbreak of some bacterial poisoning from rye or wheat or some such crop that had fermented in its storage barrels. Some form of mass hysteria that had faded almost as soon as the drugs had been administered.

And there'd been a party that night, a celebration of the deliverance of the very ill. They'd drunk...what had the people called it? Scrum or something like that? It had burned down her throat and left her singing and laughing and as drunk as a trooper on his first shore leave. Jarrod had helped her back to the ship. Or rather he'd tried to. They'd landed in that tall grain about fifty yards from their goal, tangled and groping and tugging each other's clothes off. She'd never seen or felt his phallus so swollen, so rock hard. And he'd plunged it inside her, over and over, sending her screaming and laughing over the brink.

Did he remember that night? Did she want him to? For that matter, would she be better off if she could forever erase his touch from her mind...and her body?

They passed the lounge area then stopped at the next doorway. Jarrod palmed it open. "Just tell it to lock when I leave," he told her. "I'm the only one who can override the command."

She nodded, anxious to escape his company, to escape her memories.

What her traitorous body needed was a good dose of discipline.

Not a good fucking. No matter what it was telling her.

She had better start limbering her muscles, focusing her mind on making the most of this time. When she heard the door hiss closed she remembered to call out “lock” before seating herself on the padding and beginning to stretch in earnest.

Fifteen minutes of that would suffice, she decided. Next came the formalized katas, which strung blocks, kicks and punches into an almost dance-like routine. And then the real workout could begin.

Damn, she broke into a sweat far too quickly. All this easy living in the Kappian royal enclosure would soon render her useless as a bodyguard. She would have to work out harder and longer and much more often.

“Need a partner?”

She spun about, dropping into a fighting crouch before she recognized Jarrod’s voice. He had dressed, she realized, much the same as she. Slowly she rose as another flood of memories threatened to drown her. Of Jarrod patiently leading her through her first lessons. Of his touch correcting her stance or the angle of her hand. Of his arms encircling her in a variety of strangling and restraining holds and his deep voice explaining how to break free.

“I—” She broke off. Hells but it was hard to think, not to mention breathe. “I haven’t had a challenging partner in a very long time,” she managed.

He grinned, that slow wicked gleam in his eyes that twisted her stomach and sent the blood pounding through her veins. And straight to her clit. He bowed and she took her position opposite him.

“Free fight or take downs?” he asked.

“Free fight,” she decided.

His grin broadened. “Whenever you’re ready.”

She opened with a feinting kick, spinning at once into another, following it with a jumping snap that ended in a drop to a sweep. He countered them all, obviously in better condition than she. She stepped back, her breath coming quickly, every nerve tingling with awareness as she tried to anticipate his move. It came more swiftly than she'd expected, a feint to the left while he spun to the right. His shoulder brushed hers as he twisted around her. One arm encircled her, bearing her down. Adrenalin rushed through her as she ducked then swung her leg in a sweep that knocked his supporting leg from under him. He tumbled to the mat but his grasping arm dragged her with him.

She landed, laughing, on top of him. Lifting her head, she found her face only inches from his. His eyes gleamed with the sheer joy of exertion. His mouth was so close, so tempting. How well she had once known its taste. His scent, compounded of sweat and soap and sheer maleness, swept over her, bringing back a vivid awareness of a different yet similar form of exercise.

Her hands gripped the hard muscles of his upper arms. As if of their own volition, her thumbs stroked through the soft cloth of his shirt. The smile faded from his lips and his eyes darkened into deep pools of jade. She found herself slipping into them, sinking, drowning, unable to struggle to save herself. Slowly—so slowly she barely moved—she lowered her mouth to cover his.

Oh gods, how could anyone so powerful, so commanding, taste so sweet? His lips parted beneath hers and the tip of his tongue brushed against her in a whisper of a caress. Then more pressure and she opened to him, to his slow, mesmerizing exploration of her mouth. As if it was a new and wondrous discovery for them both. A soft moan escaped her and she slid her hands along his arms to capture his broad shoulders, then the thick waves of his dark hair.

His tongue slid out and she tried to capture it, to keep it inside her, not to let him escape so soon. He grabbed her lower lip with his teeth, tugging gently. Then he kissed her throat, his tongue darting in and out as he worked his way along her neck. His hands caressed her back, circled along her ribs.

Touch my breasts. Oh please, touch my breasts.

Had she said those words aloud? Or had they merely shouted in her mind? No, they must have remained silent for he didn't comply. Her breasts swelled with her longing, her nipples pebbled as they strained against the confining cloth of her workout bra. She shifted, moving them against his chest. The sensations rippled through her, sending nectar to pool in her pussy.

He grasped her about the waist, rolling them until she lay on her back and he straddled her, sitting up, gazing down at her. Desire radiated from him like a tangible force. Holding her gaze he ran his finger along her throat, down to the V-neckline of her light tunic, then farther, pushing the cloth until the tip of his index finger rested between her breasts. Her cleft clenched, aching for his touch, for his engorged cock to thrust home inside where it belonged. She reached for his belt, fumbling with the tie in her need to tear it loose, to rid them both of the clothing that separated them, that kept them from touching skin to skin, breast to breast, shaft to cleft.

"Slow." He touched her hand, pushing it gently away, then untied the knot that closed her own tunic. "I want to savor you."

"Like a fine vintage wine." She'd meant it to be flippant but now she realized she had been serious.

She eased his tunic free and he pulled his arms from the sleeves and cast the garment aside. He had kept himself in condition, his workouts resulting in defined abs and pecs that brought a renewed tingling to her clit and an aching in her channel. Dark curling hair covered his chest from the base of his neck, down his stomach, deep into his pants. She knew where it led, how it thickened to create a nest from which his erection thrust outward. She wanted to see it. No, she wanted to feel it, to hold it again, to tease his balls and feel that incredible manhood of his become rock hard between her hands then thrust and pound inside her.

He pulled her to a sitting position and helped her from her tunic then unfastened her bra. She gasped as the fabric brushed across her nipples then felt his gaze burning into her breasts.

Yes, touch them now. Now.

But he didn't. His fingers traced circles around them, maddening, exquisitely tormenting. She brushed her hands through his chest hair, across his own nipples and delighted in his gasping intake of breath. But still he tortured her with her desire, his fingers brushing the swells, nearing the aching nipples only to move away at the last moment until she wanted to scream with her need.

And this time he found them, pinching the hardened buds until sensation spiraled within her. Her awareness focused on his touch as another rush of moisture pooled between her legs. Then he let go and she cried out in dismay only to gasp the next moment as he tugged at her waistband. Her hips lifted from the mat, though she had made no conscious effort, and he slid both the pants and her lace panties down to her thighs. One finger trailed from her navel to her mound. Only an inch lower and he would find her clit...

No. He heaved off her then eased the confining cloth from her legs, tossing it into the growing heap beside them. For a long moment he stared down at her, at the bush that covered her mound, up her stomach to her breasts then to her mouth and eyes. Their gazes met and held, and still with that erotic slowness he stood, never breaking that eye contact, and tugged his own trousers down.

What an incredible male specimen he was. Lean. Muscled. Darkly handsome with those laughing eyes and that reckless daring. She looked lower. Gods, his phallus was even larger than she remembered. Its diameter ought to tear her apart. Or fill her to perfection.

He knelt over her, stooping to kiss first one breast then the other, and she caught her breath. His tongue flicked out then he grasped one nipple between his teeth. Oh gods, she'd explode in orgasm any second now if he kept this up. His slow grin lit his

eyes and he worked his way down her stomach, kissing, licking, nipping, until he reached her mound. She wriggled her hips, spreading her legs and he bent lower, his tongue finding her clit. Then his teeth... Wave after wave of contractions swept over her, leaving her gasping. She had sat up and clutched his arms without even realizing she'd moved.

His deep soft laugh caressed her. "Easy, love."

And he started again, teasing her breasts until her breathing, which had barely begun to slow, sped up once more. She reached for his penis and her fingertips brushed his balls, causing him to gasp. Gently she massaged, taking deep pleasure in his expression. As her hand slid up his shaft, she eased herself into a kneeling position before him.

He caught one nipple in his mouth, sucking, licking, nipping as he caressed her spine, drawing her closer. His rock-hard erection pressed against her groin, hot and demanding. It prodded, then pushed, then he spread his knees to lower himself, ducked his hips and, half-lifting her, he thrust his cock home.

She cried out at the force, at the size, at the incredible rightness of embedding it deep inside her. And then he withdrew with such excruciating slowness that tears filled her eyes, and her hips thrust downward and forward to keep it where she wanted it so badly. Her inner muscles clenched and suddenly he pounded deep once more, then again that slow retreat that she tried to prevent. His teeth continued their assault on her nipple, his rod hammered hard into her tunnel and his bush rubbed her clit while she moaned and writhed against him. Her fingers tangled in his hair as conscious thought fled before the explosion of her senses. Her renewed contractions triggered his own release and for a long moment they strained against each other, capturing every last moment of ecstasy before tumbling sideways, a tangle of arms and legs.

He rolled to his back, dragging her with him, his mouth brushing her forehead, her hair, then at last her lips. She clung to him, her heart aching, wanting him back inside

her, knowing that in one glorious fucking she had trashed her hard-won sense of independence from him.

How had she gotten through these last two years without this? Without him? That thought frightened her more than all the rest. Even if they never shared sex again she would still long just for his companionship.

That had been why she had run away. She had come to need him too much. She had thought she had grown strong, become a loner, without him. She had been wrong. She had only buried her needs.

And her love. She had thrust it down where she thought she would never have to face it again.

But now because a malevolent fate had thrown them once more together it resurfaced with a vengeance. She loved him and would never feel whole again without him.

Only he didn't feel the same about her.

Oh he called her his love in that teasing, sexy way of his. But while he enjoyed her body, even her mind, he had let her go with no regrets.

She looked up to find him grinning at her.

"Get a good workout?" he asked.

She pushed away and rose. "More than I expected. Is there a decent shower on this garbage scow of yours?"

"Hey, this is a first class garbage scow. There's a cleaning unit in every cabin."

In the head, she wagered. Damn, his presence must really have her rattled. She hadn't even done a proper security inspection of their quarters or she'd have found it. And that knowledge annoyed her.

She dragged her tunic over her head then pulled on the baggy trousers. He rolled to his feet and dressed more slowly. She couldn't help but watch, couldn't help but regret the covering of his magnificent rod, his equally wonderful chest.

He reknotted his belt then stooped to kiss her hard and fast. "You can guard my body any day, love."

"You too." *That's right, keep it light and teasing.* Don't let him know she meant it from the depths of her heart. "Check the corridor to see if it's clear?"

He did and she hurried along the passage to the room he'd given her. He didn't follow and she told herself she was glad.

Chapter Three

Within minutes Kayla had sealed her door, stripped and stepped into the head. A dispenser unit held the cleaning lotion and she smeared it over her body and hair, then flipped the switch that activated the light frequency that dissolved soap, dirt, sweat and, unnervingly, dead skin cells. If only it could dissolve the clinging memory of Jarrod's touch as well. But it would take acid to do that, she reflected. And did she really want to be free of it?

Yes, for her peace of mind. How could she do her job, how could she even function on a day-to-day level, when he forced his way into her mind, tearing her apart?

She had dressed once more in the emerald caftan and was brushing her hair when a knock sounded on her door. Hope surged in her which she stamped down the next moment. "Who is it?" she called.

"Daria," came the maid's voice, muffled by the metal and plastic of the door.

"Unlock," Kayla called.

Princess Lysandra entered followed by Daria. Kayla stood at once.

"You're not ready for dinner." Sandy's brow creased in displeasure.

"No, Lady. I took the opportunity to work out."

The princess's eyes narrowed. "There's something more. What is it?"

Kayla sidestepped the most insistent of her worries, focusing instead on her job. "I'm expecting trouble."

Sandy, no fool, nodded. "And?"

"I'm going to dine in my cabin tonight. Daria, would you mind bringing me a tray? And if you'd pretend to be a little concerned about me that might help. If someone on

this ship does want to harm you, Lady, they'll have to come find me. And that will give me warning."

"You think someone will try?"

Kayla's lips twitched. "Anyone's best chance would be a slow-acting poison administered at dinner. If that opportunity is denied, or they prefer a more direct approach, then there'd be an attack in an otherwise deserted corridor. But if I stay locked in here for the whole trip they'll get desperate and maybe even careless. When I do come out they'll try to strike fast. And then I'll have the advantage because I'll control the time and place."

The crease deepened in Sandy's brow. "You'll be careful?"

Kayla managed what she hoped was a convincing grin. "That's what I'm doing."

"And what if no one tries anything?"

"Then I've put you through a bit of discomfort for nothing and I'll apologize when this is all over."

Sandy paced the three steps available to her in the cramped quarters then turned back. "We're doing the right thing aren't we?"

"You have every right to marry anyone you wish," Kayla said, but knew that wasn't what the princess meant.

"We're defying the Federation."

And the Federation didn't like defiance, but Kayla didn't point that out. They both knew it all too well. "Your planets will both benefit," she said instead. "And the Federation isn't hurt in any way except for its pride."

That was true. The Federation had no right to interfere in the affairs of its member planets. The original treaty between Kappa Prime and Zeta Secundus should have been allowed to stand. But the Federation was changing from an organization created to help its members to one that wanted to rule them. *Bureaucracy and politicians. To a black hole with the lot of them.*

Sandy and Daria left to join the others for dinner and Kayla took her turn pacing the tiny room. Had she just made a major mistake? One person, who just might be the assassin, would not be put off by her remaining locked away during dinner. One person knew she was not Princess Lysandra.

No, not Jarrod. Resolutely she thrust aside her niggling fear that he might be the one hired to make certain the Kappian princess never married the Zetan baron. She couldn't believe it of him. He might have taken part in any number of questionable escapades in his life but she would swear he would never stoop to assassination or kidnapping—at least not of a princess. Besides, he avoided politics. Yet he and his ship had been hired for this job.

What had he experienced during these last two years? How much had he changed? How well did she really know him?

Enough to expect the unexpected, certainly.

Enough to know no other man could heat her blood, could flood her body and mind with sensations the way he could. He didn't even have to touch her nipples or her clit or her pussy. He just had to stand in front of her as naked and perfect as an ancient god to have her moaning with desire. He could send her over the brink of orgasm just by letting her suck his cock.

Oh hells. Why did she have to ruin everything by falling in love with a loner? Everything would be so much easier if she hadn't. They could have shared an afternoon's glorious fucking then walked away and never given it a second thought.

Instead she could think of nothing but him, of fucking him again and again, as soon and as often as possible.

Another knock sounded on her door and she ceased pacing the cramped room. "Who is it?"

"Commander Leftvig, Lady."

She hesitated. Was this what she'd waited for? But this was the baron's trusted right-hand man. "What do you want?"

"I heard you were ill, Lady. The baron would wish me to render you every possible service. Is there anything I can bring you?"

She braced herself then touched the locking mechanism, changing the glow from red to green. The panel slid open with its quiet hiss. Leftvig stood before her, tall, husky, his hair cropped close to his head, the expression on his narrow face grave.

"Thank you, Commander, but I'm only tired. My women will bring me a tray later."

He sketched a bow. "If you have need of me, rest assured I am entirely at your service."

"I have my women," she reminded him.

"But can they protect you, Lady? Forgive me for speaking bluntly, but we did not inflict this roundabout and secretive route on you for your entertainment. There are those who might wish you harm."

Damn straight. She affected a worried frown. "What would you have me do?"

"Dining in your quarters from trays your women have watched being prepared is a good step. Carrying this would be another." He reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a small metal button.

A homing device. She looked up, pretending puzzlement. "What is it?"

"A security measure. It will let me know where you are. And if you press it an alarm will sound that will bring me to your aid."

A show of helplessness wouldn't hurt here, Kayla decided. "Do you really think I might need it?"

The commander smiled. "It's certainly better to be unnecessarily cautious than defenseless."

Right again. To turn it down would cause him to wonder. And she could always leave it in her room if she wished to go out. She took it from him. "Do I carry it in my pocket?" She made her tone dubious.

"Here, there's an adhesive." He pulled a piece of tape from the back. "It will stick to the inside of your wrist." Before she could protest he pressed it into position.

She tugged at it but it remained firmly where he had stuck it. "How do I get it off?"

"I've got a solvent. If it could be pulled off by your attacker it wouldn't do you much good, would it?"

"No," she agreed and tried not to let her annoyance show. Damn, now he'd be able to track her anywhere she went. Another unpleasant thought struck her. Was it a microphone as well? Would he be able to listen to every word she spoke? Every sound she made? There would certainly be no more intimate encounters with Jarrod if that was the case.

Of course there wouldn't be any more of those anyway.

She gave a girlish giggle and hoped it sounded genuine. "Does this mean you can listen in on me?"

"Never that, Lady." He sounded amused. "You have complete privacy. Even if you press it."

"But what if I accidentally hit my wrist against something? Is there a way I can let you know it's a false alarm?"

"Just hit it again immediately. Twice." And with that he bowed again and took his leave to return to his dinner.

As soon as the door closed behind him Kayla fished in her carryall for her small cache of equipment. In another moment she brought out her electronic detector. It would give her some idea of the complexity of the device Commander Leftvig had planted on her. After a minute of cautious testing she set it down, partly satisfied. The button seemed to be a very simple device, one that wouldn't operate over more than half a mile. And one that apparently lacked the sophistication to transmit sound. Still she'd better figure out how to remove it then tell him it had irritated her delicate skin.

Jarrod would have something. He had something to meet her every need. Except...

She stared into space. What did she want from him now? What did she want for herself?

The answer shouted itself in her mind, known yet ignored for two long and lonely years. She wanted love, real lasting love, commitment love. Family and children love. Not just the fun and games that rocked her back on her heels, caused her toes to curl and sent her world spinning. Yes she wanted that enormous cock of his. Yes she wanted him kissing her breasts and tickling her clit and thrusting into her channel. She wanted to get hot and sweaty and slick with him. But when they'd reached orgasm, when they'd collapsed panting in one another's arms, she wanted to stay there. She wanted to belong with him.

Moisture brimmed in her eyes again and with irritation she dashed it aside. She'd never behaved like a leaking faucet before. All right, she'd thought about him occasionally – okay, several times a day – since she'd signed off his ship and started a new life. But she'd convinced herself she'd gotten over him. That she'd become a whole person.

You are whole, a little voice whispered in her mind. Only whole people could love like this. Only whole people could truly commit.

She scrubbed at the silver disk that refused to budge from her wrist. It proved as difficult to remove as did thoughts of Jarrod.

She was still working on it when a third knock sounded on her door. "Lady?" called Daria before Kayla could answer.

"Unlock," Kayla ordered then stood as Daria and Sandy entered bearing a tray and a thermal pot.

"Compliments of the captain," Sandy told her. "He seemed a little put out that you wouldn't be joining us."

"I think he intends to pay you a visit shortly to make sure everything is to your liking," Daria put in.

"Then perhaps he could do me a favor." She explained about Commander Leftvig's gift.

"Microphone?" mouthed Sandy without making a sound.

Kayla shrugged, making her uncertainty clear.

Daria nodded and left the room.

"Will you have need of us, Lady?" Sandy asked.

"Will I?" Kayla whispered back.

Sandy smiled. "I think Daria will be slipping out to meet a member of the crew."

Kayla grinned. "I hope she has a good time."

As good a time as she herself had had? No. A woman would need Jarrod for that.

Only a few minutes after Sandy went next door to her own room, Jarrod announced himself. Kayla touched the locking pad and let him in. Oh damn, why did seeing him throw her senses out of whack? Make her want to drop to her knees, unfasten his trousers and take his manhood in her mouth, his balls in her hands? Why could she think of nothing but sex, sex, sex when he was near?

"I understand your wrist is irritating you, Lady." He gestured for her to seat herself then bent forward to examine the disk.

Oh hells, the scent of his soap, of the muskiness that was uniquely him, filled her nostrils, her mind. Unbidden—unwanted—her clit pulsed and her breasts swelled with longing for his touch. He opened the bottle of solvent he carried and the sharp odor assaulted her. *Just as well*, she assured herself. She'd be better off in reality, not lustful fantasy.

He took her wrist in his hand and his touch whisked her back to the padded mat of the workout room with his fingers caressing her, teasing her. She wanted them to probe into her cleft. It was all she could do not to moan out her craving. If this button removal took much longer she'd be dragging him over to her bed.

Then suddenly, abruptly, he set her free, leaving her bereft of his touch. "Do you have an ointment?" he asked. "There's considerable irritation on the skin. I'm sorry we don't have a medic on board."

"No matter." Unless he could have produced a medic who could give her something to anesthetize her heart or inoculate her against her desire for Jarrod. She took the button from him, wrapped it in the electrical distortion shield he held out to her then crossed to where her carryall lay on the bed and stuffed it down to the bottom. It would still transmit her location but a microphone—if it possessed one—would no longer work.

"Now we can talk," he said.

She perched on the edge of the table. "What about?" He was watching her in an odd manner, she realized, a frown creasing his brow. "Something wrong?"

"No," he said, then at once contradicted himself. "Yes. I'm not sure."

She leaned forward. "Did anything get said at dinner that sounded suspicious?"

"No." But still he frowned and still he did not explain. He shook his head. "I'll see you later." And with that he turned on his heel and left.

* * * * *

The door hissed shut behind Jarrod. What the hells was the matter with him? What did he want from Kayla? What did he expect?

They'd had a good time a few years ago. He'd missed her when she'd left but he'd gotten over that. Hadn't he? He'd thought so, at least until he saw her in that ridiculous feminine gown, looking more beautiful, more desirable, than he remembered.

He hadn't meant anything to happen in the gym. He'd gone to work out with her for old time's sake. For the exercise. To see if she'd kept up with her skills or let them slide. But then they'd hit the floor and his damned penis took over and did his thinking for him. He'd wanted her—her, not just any woman—and she, amazingly, had still wanted him.

It had been a good fuck. A damned good fuck. No other woman had ever made him feel as exultant as she did. As powerful. As...as vulnerable.

He stopped in his tracks. Damn, why had she erupted back into his life again? He'd been happy without her, hadn't he? Of course he had. So what if he'd closed in on himself? So what if he'd found other women a bore? He didn't need—or want—Kayla anymore.

He made his way to the engine room, glared at all the panels that indicated normal then headed for the bridge where his pilot slumped in his chair reading from a hand-held vid-screen. Jarrod glanced over the man's shoulder. Porn, as he'd expected. He followed the text for a minute. The silly woman being fucked didn't have a tenth of the appeal that Kayla had. And where in all the hells had that thought come from?

He continued his rounds of the ship, passing no one, not really seeing anything. At last he found his steps had returned him to Kayla's cabin. For a long moment he stood there, glaring at the door, intending to leave. Instead he knocked. "Ka—Lady?"

Seconds passed. Was she asleep? Or had the damned woman slipped out to invite an attack?

Then movement sounded from within, the door hissed open and she stood there, her hair tousled from her pillow, her eyes half closed from sleep, her tantalizing curves draped in a dark green caftan in some filmy fabric that revealed more than it concealed. He could see her pebbled nipples, her rounded hips, the swell of her mound.

She blinked and her eyes brightened in alertness. "Something wrong?"

"Just felt like...talking."

"I see." She stepped aside to let him in.

His arm brushed her shoulder as he stepped past and heat shot through him, straight to his groin. Straight to his penis. He felt it swelling with the wanting of her, pressing against his trousers, demanding release.

She'd thrown the blanket back and the sheets were rumpled where she'd lain on them. He realized he stared at the bunk and turned away. He dropped onto the chair, stretching his long legs before him, crossing them at the ankles. *Casual. You have to strive for casual.*

She perched on the edge of the table, so close the scent of her drove the blood to pound in his cock. Silence stretched between them.

"Well?" she asked at last.

"Damn it, Kayla—" He broke off. He had no idea what he wanted to say. Why he'd even come here. Oh hell. Yes he did.

He surged from the chair and dragged her against his chest, kissing her hard. His hand found her breast and he squeezed while his thumb searched out her nipple. A gasp escaped her—not in protest but in surprise. Hells, he was surprised too. This had not been consciously on his mind as he toured his ship, when he'd come here. But it was why he was staying.

He set her aside long enough to pull the gown from her shoulders, baring the tanned skin of the upper swell of her breast. The garment needed no fastenings, he realized. All the better. The damned filmy thing might have been designed for fast fucks. In another moment he'd dragged the dark green fabric over her head then picked her up and carried her the two steps to the bunk. He tore at her panties, ripping the lace, and tossed them aside. Then he dropped his trousers to his knees and scrambled over her.

She reached toward his shaft but he grabbed her hands together in one fist and raised them above her head, pinning her there with one knee pressed into her thigh. He reached with his mouth for her nipple, biting, and a cry escaped her. She struggled for a moment but only so she could spread her legs. He took that as the only invitation he needed. With all the force of his uncertainties and frustration, he plunged into her sweet depths, his shaft pounding into her welcoming warmth and slickness.

Damn, what did this woman do to him? Make him lose his head? Make him lose his sanity, more like. He pulled part way out only to thrust again, harder and deeper, again and again. Sensation focused, centered, exploded until he collapsed across her naked body, gasping and spent.

She freed her wrists from his slackened hold. One arm she wrapped about his shoulders, the other about his head, stroking his hair gently, tenderly. He could lie here —

Hells, he hadn't felt any of the spasmodic contractions that signaled her own orgasm. She deserved better than that from him. He lifted from her, gazing down at her face and her concerned frown. Concern for him. After the way he had just fucked her like she was a common whore. Only Kayla would show him so much caring.

With one finger, he smoothed the lines that marred her forehead. He kissed her lips gently, then her eyes. His hand smoothed along the curve of her breast and he felt her trembling sigh. He bent lower, kissing her stomach, then ran his tongue down to her mound. Her legs remained spread, offering him access to her sweetness. He parted her cleft with his tongue and sought out her clit.

Her hips rose to meet him and a quavering sob escaped her. He kissed her nub, licked it, sucked it, pummeled it, spurred on by her soft moans, the clenching of her fingers in his hair. Lower now. He found the opening he sought and thrust his tongue within. If he moved his arms...yes, he caught her nipples in his fingers and pinched and tugged while his tongue imitated the earlier motions of his cock, plunging deep then coming out to tease and excite her clit.

Shiver after shiver ran through her. She tugged at his head, pulling him tighter against her clit. Then abruptly she tensed, arching high into his onslaught, then fell back, gasping. He pulled himself up to lie beside her, holding her close, burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair.

Why had he taken her the way he had, so hard and fast and so soon after the last time? What demon possessed him with this woman? Did he hope to fuck her as often as

possible before he delivered her to Zeta Secundus? Or did he just want to fuck her as often as possible, period? That possibility left him uncomfortable, uncertain and still without the answers he needed to find. He only knew he wanted her in his arms. That nothing would ever be right anymore without her.

Damn, he didn't need this sort of complication in his life.

He must have drifted off to sleep because a voice in his ear jerked him awake.

"Captain? Where the fuck are you?" his pilot demanded.

Warmth surrounded him. Kayla's warmth. She curled against him, her breathing slow and even, her hair haloing across his shoulder where her head lay. He tightened his arm about her even as he slipped the other free from the blanket to tap the tiny com unit just above his earlobe. "Trying to sleep." He kept his voice low, not wanting to disturb her.

"We're coming up on the wormhole. Want to join me?"

"I'm not your fuck-bud. Pump off on your own. But first get your head out of your ass and pay attention."

The pilot laughed. "Yeah, penetration's always a bit tricky. But we've got a few minutes still. Oh man, I never get tired of looking at these things. It's like the goddamn pussy of a goddamn goddess."

Jarrold buried his face in Kayla's hair. He didn't need a monitor to know what his pilot saw, that circle of electric blue haze so faint as to be almost invisible. Damn but wormhole fucks were a hoot. All senses heightened, reality seeming to shimmer. An hour's worth of screaming, toe-curling, hot sweaty screwing encapsulated into just those few minutes. Wormholes didn't inflame everyone this way of course. But if you had sex on the brain to begin with, you'd better have a partner or a ready hand.

Kayla stirred and lifted her head. "Who were you talking to?"

"We're coming up on the jump."

"Then what are we waiting for?" She eased away from him and rolled to her back. "Starters, take your positions."

A deep chuckle escaped him. "I want you on top."

"Always best to have the most alert mind guiding the entry," she agreed. She allowed him room to lie flat then straddled him.

That placed her breasts right where he wanted them. The faint red glow of the door's locking panel glinted along her bare skin, darkening the areolas around her nipples into tantalizing targets. He reached out with his tongue to lick one and watched her eyes close in pleasure. She threw back her head and the dark mass of her hair tumbled about her shoulders. Damn it smelled good. She smelled good. And gods, how wonderful she tasted.

His grin deepened. It had been ages since he'd had a jump fuck. Since the last time with her in fact.

His penis pressed against her mound, hard and hot and demanding entrance into her tunnel. But they'd done this before, they knew how to time it to perfection.

His head began to feel as if it floated on the end of a string like a balloon. Then the first pricklings of electrical stimulus stirred at the nape of his neck. Slowly, every hair on his body stood on end, his flesh tingling at their roots. He grasped her hips but already she lifted just high enough to find the bulging head of his cock. For a moment it pushed against her cleft then it slid home into her slippery depths just as the ship slid into the wormhole.

And his personal world turned inside out. Every part of his body burned as if he were one solid cock from head to toe, every nerve ending alive and aching for fulfillment. Each stroke in her pussy radiated to every part of him. He cried out, unable to contain the sensations inside, then he latched his mouth over one nipple and sucked and bit while he grasped the other between his fingers. Time stood still, his toes curled tight, every inch of him flamed along with his cock as he plunged and pounded into her.

Kayla filled his world. Her moans and sobs filled his hearing, her enraptured face filled his sight. And her glorious pussy filled him with ecstasy. He gasped and laughed and swore and her voice echoed his.

Then the tingling increased as the white hot coil inside tightened and a cry tore from him at the same moment he exploded in her depths. Again and again he came, over and over, her own spasms milking his shaft dry as she screamed out her release.

For a long moment they remained motionless, locked together, the moment of orgasm stretching and stretching until the ship emerged from the other end of the wormhole.

Kayla collapsed across his chest, clutching his arms. She stroked her cheek against his thick chest hair then her lips found one of his nipples. She gave it a playful tug.

A muffled scream broke through his contentment and something thudded against the wall of the cabin.

"Daria!" Kayla rolled to her feet and grabbed up her discarded caftan. In a moment she had dragged it over her head and bolted out the door.

Chapter Four

Daria, not Lysandra, the thought raced through Kayla's mind. And not herself, the supposed princess. The damned assassin had entered the wrong cabin.

At least it wasn't Sandy.

But it didn't sound as if Daria, only slightly better trained in self defense than Sandy, was managing.

She hammered on Daria's door. Damn the assassin for picking the disorienting moment of the wormhole jump for his attack. And damn herself for not anticipating the man's error in getting the wrong target.

"Let me." Jarrod, wearing only his tunic, his long muscular legs bare, pushed her aside and palmed the lock. Apparently the captain could override any door on the ship because the panel hissed sideways to disappear into the wall. "Lights!" he shouted as he rushed inside.

Kayla, a snarl rising within her, lunged for the two figures who struggled on the bed. Then realization hit her like a thunderclap and she faltered to a stop.

Daria wasn't struggling. Well not in any frightened way, at least. She sat in a man's lap, her legs wrapped about his waist, her naked body clamped against his. And the man was Jarrod's first officer, Marsden.

Jarrod's hand closed over her shoulder. "I think we're intruding," he murmured.

Marsden grinned. "Damn straight, Captain."

Daria's face—and the few other parts of her Kayla could see—flushed a deep red. "I—" she began only to break off and look away.

Kayla fought back a laugh. It wasn't easy but she managed to keep it down to a broad grin. "Bet that was the best wormhole jump you've ever experienced."

Daria turned back at that, her expression a mixture of embarrassment and blatant arousal. "I want to go through again."

"And I'll be glad to take you," Marsden assured her. His hand, which cupped the girl's breast, gave it a squeeze. "Well, Captain. You can watch or you can join us or you can get out. Take your pick. I'm not waiting."

Daria's eyes widened in dismay. "But with people watching...oh." Her protest faded into a moan from whatever Marsden did to her. She buried her face against his neck and moaned again.

"Tempting offers, but I'd better get back to my rounds," Jarrod said. "Princess?" He raised his eyebrows at Kayla.

"Yes. Thank you." She recovered her mental balance. "I'm sorry about summoning you when it—it wasn't an emergency after all."

She retreated from the cabin and Jarrod, with a last lingering look over his shoulder at the couple on the bed, followed her out. Once more in the corridor with the door closed behind them, she turned to Jarrod and collapsed against him, her laughter at last bubbling over. "Poor Daria," she managed to gasp out.

"Hey, Marsden's a good guy," he protested. "He'll give her a good fuck and a happy memory."

The deep chuckle that accompanied his words went straight to Kayla's nub. She could invite him back in, spend another couple of hours fucking him again. Just for old time's sake of course.

But it wouldn't be just that, her inner voice warned her. He made her want too much. Already she was in for an unwelcome load of pain when she had to walk away from him again. She'd better not make it worse.

"Rounds?" she asked him.

He nodded. "I always check over the ship after a jump."

She nodded. She remembered well. Usually they'd gone together, still naked, hands entwined, pausing to kiss and stroke and nibble until they'd have to take a break for another bout of frenzied sex. "You might want to put the rest of your clothes on," she told him and let them both back into her cabin.

He pulled on trousers and boots, paused to straighten his appearance before the small mirror in the head, then stooped to kiss her hard and fast. "Get some sleep."

She nodded. "You too." She waited until he left, gave the order to lock the door then crawled back into the bunk.

It felt incredibly empty without him.

* * * * *

The annoying stutterings of the ship-wide com system brought Kayla to instant alert. She shoved aside the luncheon tray brought to her by Daria and sat tensely, waiting. She'd been expecting some attempt to reach the princess—or rather herself in her disguise—all the long morning. It was about time something happened.

"General alert." Jarrod's voice, annoyed. "We've been hailed by a Federation patrol ship. They will board us in approximately half an hour. So get your acts together." The unit crackled again then went silent.

A Federation patrol. That was worse than the single assassin she'd been anticipating. They'd make a sweep of the ship and pick up all three of the female passengers then sort out who was really who at their leisure. And Princess Lysandra would never arrive on Zeta Secundus and never marry the mining baron. And the two planets would never complete their forbidden alliance.

But that would only happen if the Fed agents found female passengers. Female crew members with proper ident papers might not be taken for questioning.

They'd need to clear these quarters, move into a crew bunkhouse. They'd have to find appropriate clothes and documents. And a reason for the presence of the Zetan commander and his small entourage. And all in less than half an hour.

Her brain kicked into full drive. All three women together would be suspicious. She wouldn't let Sandy out of her sight which meant Daria would have to fend for herself. The maid could play the role of Commander Leftvig's new bride. As for herself and Sandy, they could pass themselves off as technicians. Not cooks, neither of them would ever get away with that. But she knew enough about a shuttle's control panel to carry them both through a short interrogation.

Even as she reached for the lock pad on her door, a knock sounded. "Who is it?" she called. The approach of the Feds didn't necessarily negate the possibility of an assassin.

"Sandy." The princess sounded frightened.

Kayla opened the door in time to see Jarrod round the curve of the passage at a run. Sandy darted inside, her eyes wide with her nerves. "What are we going to do?"

"Got it covered," Kayla assured her charge. "Jarrod," she added as he joined them, "can someone fake us some IDs?" She told him her plans.

He nodded. "Marsden's already fixing up crew quarters."

Kayla grinned. "Here." She opened her bag and pulled out a pair of discarded panties and a bra. "For your cabin."

Sandy stared at her, her lips parted, her eyes wide. "But —"

"Gives the impression of long-term intimacy," Jarrod explained. "Kayla, can you —"

"Kayla?" Sandy stared at him then transferred her gaze to Kayla.

Kayla sighed. "Jarrod knows. We're old friends. You can trust him."

"Oh." Sandy straightened. "I thank you, captain. And my father —"

Jarrold's lips twitched. "Yes, the king would thank me too, I'm sure. But right now we've got to get busy." He turned back to Kayla. "What do you want your jobs to be?"

"Techies. We can justify having two of us working on one of your shuttles, can't we?"

"What's the problem? A faulty joystick?"

"I'm no mechie. Better make it the circuitry,"

"Right. Pack your things and I'll be back with coveralls in a few minutes."

"Coveralls?" Daria stood just outside the door, her forehead creased in a worried frown.

Kayla explained the plan and after only a token protest Daria went to pack her things and move them to Leftvig's cabin. She looked none too sure about her supposed marriage but Kayla didn't have time to argue. As soon as she had made certain nothing of hers remained in the small space she threw her bag into the corridor. Then as an afterthought she retrieved Leftvig's homing device, stuffed it in her pocket and went to help Sandy.

Jarrold returned bearing coveralls. "Give me your bags and get changed."

Kayla was still helping Sandy fasten her over-sized garment when he returned to lead them to one of the two shuttle bays. Marsden joined them bearing a tray with two cups and a thermal pot containing a meager amount of coffee. Kayla poured a little into each cup then tilted the contents of one down the front of her coverall. Sandy gasped.

"First rule of a maintenance worker," Kayla said. "Never look too neat. It makes everyone suspicious."

Another man hurried in and handed them each a small folder well worn from much handling. Ident papers complete with their pictures, probably appropriated from their real documents. According to these, Kayla saw, she's been a member of Jarrod's crew for eight months. A reasonable length of time. Sandy's listed her as having been there only five. Good. That gave Kayla the seniority in the eyes of the Feds to order her charge about.

A deep clang shuddered through the ship and Jarrod swore. "They've docked. It's show time." And with that he ran from the bay followed by the other men.

Sandy stared after them, wide-eyed, her brow creased. "What do we do?"

Kayla grinned. "Like he said. We put on a show."

* * * * *

Jarrold positioned himself before the hatchway and straightened his tunic. His crew would obey his orders, he had no doubts about that. But could he count on the Zetans not to give everything away? And did one of them want the Feds to find the Kappian princess?

He forced the glare from his face as the doorway hissed open. Four men in the dark blue uniforms of a Federation patrol strode onto the railinged balcony. Their weapons remained holstered at their sides but their belligerent attitudes implied they'd be more than happy to draw them. And demonstrate their abilities to use them.

Their officer, a thin narrow-faced man with a restless step and fresh lieutenant stripes on his collar and shoulder halted in front of Jarrold. "Your crew, passenger and freight manifests," he demanded.

Jarrold handed over a small vid unit.

The lieutenant flicked through it and frowned. "You took on six passengers at Laurentis Station?"

"Zetans returning home."

The lieutenant gave a short nod and continued his perusal. At last he looked up. "Have you ordered your crew to stand ready for inspection?"

"As allowed by their duties. The passengers are none too pleased, though. Especially the Zetan commander."

The Fed's eyes narrowed. "And why should he object to our presence?"

"You're interrupting what's left of his honeymoon."

A snigger sounded from one of the patrolmen toward the rear. Even the lieutenant allowed himself a faint smile. "We'll try not to interrupt him for long."

"Then shall we begin with the passenger quarters?" Jarrold led the way. Marsden would have coached Daria and he could only hope the girl could pull it off. As for Leftvig — The man remained an enigma. Loyal to his baron and planet, that fact shouted

itself in the man's every mannerism and word. But what of the other four Zetans who made up the rest of his entourage? Had one of them alerted the Federation patrol? Or if this was indeed just a routine inspection, would one of the Zetans take the opportunity to betray the presence of the princess?

They reached the first cabin—empty—and Jarrod palmed open the door. One of the patrolmen stormed inside, opened the head, then returned to the corridor and gave a short nod to his officer. Next came the first of the Zetans and the patrolman repeated his inspection while the occupant glared in silent outrage. Same for the next three. Then he knocked on Leftvig's door.

"Enter," the man snapped.

The light panel switched from red to green and Jarrod palmed the panel open. Leftvig wore a dressing gown and slippers but nevertheless managed to appear very much in command of the situation. Behind him, at the foot of the hastily straightened bed, stood Daria, her hair disheveled, clutching at the breast of her pale blue caftan.

"You will not," said Leftvig in the tone of superior officers everywhere, "distress my bride. Is that understood?" The last words sank to a growling threat.

"No, sir," the Fed said then glared at him. "You will kindly remember that Federation patrols have jurisdiction in this quadrant."

"Kindly?" Leftvig's lip curled. "You have inspected us. Now get out."

The lieutenant started for the door then turned back. "A cargo vessel seems an odd choice for your honeymoon, Commander."

"An unfortunate situation has developed at home during my absence. We have been forced to hire the first ship available to return us there as quickly as possible."

"It's to be hoped then that your presence will remedy the troubles. Madam." He bowed to Daria. "Forgive our intrusion." And with that he exited into the corridor.

"The commander is most fortunate in his bride," he said as Jarrod led them on to the next room.

Jarrood snorted. "From what I've seen she's more interested in his rank than in him."

They completed their tour of the passenger cabins. No trace of any of the three women remained in their rooms, Jarrood noted in relief. Once again his men showed their efficiency.

Now for the crew quarters. Jarrood's came first and he waited outside while the patrolman entered and found Kayla's panties on the floor just peeking out from beneath his desk in the otherwise tidy room. The man brought them back and presented them to his officer.

The Fed ran his fingers over the lace and raised his eyebrows. "Your preference, captain?"

Jarrood grinned. "Let's say I prefer the pussy they covered."

The Fed checked the vid unit once more. "Ah. You have two women on your crew. Is this," and he waved the panties, "their primary function?"

Jarrood allowed his grin to broaden. "Their secondary. They're damned good with circuitry. Delicate touch," he added. "They really get the displays to light up."

The officer's eyes gleamed. "Good in their cockpits, I take it."

"Sweetest ones I've ever known," Jarrood agreed. "As tight as their asses." He moved them on before their joking could turn into a competition of sex puns.

The two bunkhouses allotted to the other members of the crew held four beds each along with lockers and chests and the general air of tidiness and order that Jarrood demanded. The third bunkhouse showed the same neatness except for two pairs of freshly washed panties hanging in the head. The patrolman ran his fingers over them then turned away with obvious regret.

The Feds subjected the kitchen, exercise room, lounge area, even the cargo bay to a more thorough inspection. They ran electronic seekers along every bulkhead, even the floor, checking for hidden spaces where illicit cargo—or people—might be hidden. But Jarrood had faith in his blockers and raised no protest. Nor did his crew show any signs

of unease. They stood at relaxed attention while the Feds invaded their domains, their expressions no more than bored.

Next he led them to the shuttle bay that held only its sleek vessel. This the patrolmen searched in minute detail. When they turned to the control panels though Jarrod objected at last.

"The other one's already out of commission," he said. "Leave us one that's operational."

"We could leave a wire dangling if you'd like," the Fed suggested. "You could get your techie to turn a screw for you in the cockpit."

"Not a bad idea," Jarrod agreed. "But she's already doing that in the other shuttle."

"But without you," the Fed murmured.

"If your men are ready? The other is just across the hold."

Jarrod led the way then palmed open the wide door into the bay. Inside, the shuttle's hatch stood open. Kayla lay on her back on the floor, her legs on the seat, her head beneath the instrument panel. Sandy sat on the co-pilot's chair touching a delicate probe to one of the instruments.

"Not that one," Kayla declared in disgust. "And if that's you, Marsden, get the fuck out of here. We're busy."

"Technician," Jarrod snapped.

"Hells." Kayla swung her legs down and twisted so her head emerged through the hatchway. "Can't this wait, Captain?"

"Both of you, hit the deck. Now."

Kayla gave an exaggerated sigh, dragged out from beneath the console her solder gun, a small sheet of wire mesh and a pair of cutters and swung herself to the ground. Sandy exited the other hatch and came around. "Can you make this fast?" Kayla demanded.

"I thought you liked it real slow." Jarrod winked at her.

"I also like it hard but I take what I can get," she shot back.

One of the patrolmen let out a snort of laughter which he tried to turn into a cough. At a signal from their lieutenant the Feds swarmed over the bay and the shuttle itself. One peered at the panel Kayla had removed but didn't seem to see anything amiss.

As the last man climbed down he paused beside Kayla. "I've got a rod that could use some polishing."

She looked him up and down. "Getting tired of doing it yourself?"

"No poaching." Jarrod strode over to them and wrapped an arm about Kayla's waist. His hand slid up to cover her breast. "I've got this little lady scheduled for learning the better handling of a joystick when she's done with her present job."

The lieutenant grinned as his gaze seemed to mentally strip Kayla of her clothes. Then he switched his scrutiny to Sandy. "And who are you screwing?"

Sandy's lids lowered then rose again. "The Zetan commander's wife. And believe me, you just don't have the equipment to compare."

Jarrod choked back his start of laughter. That had to have been Kayla's inspiration.

The Fed's grin broadened. "Now that I'd like to watch."

"Why not?" Sandy's chin rose. "The Zetan commander does."

"But I don't think that's on your inspection list," Jarrod said as smoothly as he could manage. "I believe we've covered everything now."

"Yes." The Fed's gaze lingered on Sandy. "Unfortunately."

Jarrod escorted all four of the intruders from the shuttle bay, leaving the door open behind him.

"Come on," Kayla's voice drifted after them. "We've got to get this penguin ready to fly instead of waddle before we reach Zeta."

Jarrod glanced back to see her scramble once more into the cockpit. The Fed watched too but whether to see if she resumed her work or to observe her curved ass he couldn't be sure.

"Enough traffic out here to keep you busy?" Jarrod asked as they mounted the stairs that would return them to the main deck—and the hatchway that would get the Fed patrol off the ship.

"There's been an increase of smuggling in the last few months."

Jarrod raised his eyebrows. "That explains a bit."

The Fed shot him a hard glance. "Does it?"

"That Zetan commander's rush to get home. He said something about the young baron's lack of wisdom then clammed up. I take it the kid's been dabbling where he shouldn't."

The Fed snorted. "Baron. Inheritance is no way to pass on the management of an entire planet. They need people trained for the job."

"As long as the money's real I don't care who issues my voucher."

"That," said the Fed with disapproval, "could get you into trouble."

Jarrod shook his head. "I'm not a fool."

"Best remember that if this baron tries to offer you any commissions." And with that he took his leave.

Chapter Five

Kayla swallowed a mouthful of coffee and glared at the control panel. If she'd damaged something Jarrod would have her hide. And she'd have his for the way he'd groped her in front of those damned Feds. Male bonding, she supposed. But she didn't have to like it.

The ship-wide com crackled then Jarrod's voice rang through the bay. "The Fed shuttle is away."

"Does that mean we can get out of these things?" Sandy gestured to her coveralls.

"Not yet. But let's find Daria." She swung from the little vessel and strode toward the door.

Daria, Leftvig and Jarrod converged with them half way across the cargo hold.

"Princess." Leftvig bowed to Kayla. "You're safe." He turned to Jarrod. "Someone aboard this ship must have alerted the Federation patrol."

"Or someone who knew we were coming. But I believe," Jarrod added slowly, "this was an ordinary inspection. The officer showed little interest in the ladies. Marsden is making a sweep of the ship to see if they left us any little insectoid presents."

"What?" Sandy asked.

"Bugs," Jarrod explained. "Listening or homing devices. Anything that might suggest they're paying more attention to us than they implied."

Kayla shot him a quick look. "Captain." She raised a faltering hand to her brow. "This has been a rather trying experience. May I return to my cabin? Or do you want me to go to the crew's quarters?"

"It should be safe to return to your cabin now." He offered her his arm. "Do you want your ladies in attendance?"

She faked a tremulous smile. "I just want to rest." She looked back to Sandy and Daria. "If this ship has vids, why don't you two enjoy them while you can? This might be your last chance to relax."

"Yes, Princess." Sandy bobbed a curtsy.

"You'll find our entertainment facilities in the passenger lounge," Jarrod told Sandy and led Kayla away.

She leaned heavily on his arm as they walked toward the stairs. "Did any of the Zetans act suspiciously?" she asked as soon as they were out of earshot of the others.

"They all had opportunity but not one of them gave the slightest sign or signal to the Feds."

She shot him a quick look. "And that troubles you."

"I'd expected something," he admitted.

"So did I."

"And what now?"

She considered. "Exercise, if I can get it. I've been getting lazy these last few months."

He nodded then waited as she let herself back into her cabin. "I'll bring your bag back then come for you when it's safe."

She waited in her workout clothes for more than an hour, her unease at his delay growing steadily. By the time a knock finally sounded on her door she would have even welcomed an attack. She braced herself, palmed her tiny emergency pistol and called, "Who is it?"

"Just me." Jarrod's voice.

She palmed the door and let him in. "I'm going insane in here!" She slipped from the room and together they strode along the corridor. "Where are our Zetan friends?"

"Watching vids with the women." He nodded toward the lounge which now had panels closing off its open side. They entered the exercise room and he sealed the door

behind them. "Now," he said, his dark green eyes gleaming. "Do you really want to fight?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Have something else in mind?"

He closed the space between them and wrapped his arms around her waist. His hands slid down to caress her rear. "I thought I'd teach you to fly a shuttle."

His cock pressed against her groin, growing harder and more insistent by the moment. He stooped to kiss her throat and his fingers explored along her spine then back to her buttocks.

Now what the hells was he up to? His words said one thing while his body told her something entirely different. Knowing Jarrod it might be worth playing along. "You've got a flight simulator on this scow?"

A slow wicked grin tugged at his mouth. "As a matter of fact that's a damned good idea. But I had something else in mind first. I want you to learn the proper management of a joystick. And mine is in need of some immediate attention."

"Ahhh." She dragged out the word as she arched her hips into his erection and rubbed her mound against its engorged length. "Can't think of any other stick that would give me as much joy."

"Or me. You've got too many clothes on."

"Look who's talking." She tugged at his tunic, pulling it free from his belt and sliding it down his arms. Oh gods, the mere sight of his chest sent shivers of anticipation through her and moisture slickening her tunnel. The sooner she got that hot, thick rod of his in there the better.

He eased off her tunic, then unfastened her bra and tossed it aside. His fingers lingered on the curves of her breasts and he dipped his head to lick first one pebbled nipple then the other.

She drew a shaky breath. "So when does the lesson begin?"

"Right now. The first step," he went on in pedantic tones, "is to press the starter button."

"Like this?" She pinched his nipples and felt the stirring in her clit as he caught his breath. "You're right. Your whole control panel just lit up."

He grinned. "Now we clear the cabin for takeoff."

"Mmmm. I see a lot of things that aren't necessary." She tugged at his waistband and slid his trousers down his long muscled legs, allowing her fingers to trail along his skin.

Every inch of him was superb, lean, taut. And hard, so very hard. Especially his penis. It reached toward her, swollen, as if begging her to take it in her hands, in her mouth, in her pussy. She'd welcome it in all three places before they were done. She ran her tongue over her lips in anticipation.

He kicked the garment free, dropped to his knees and grabbed a mouthful of fabric about her waist. With the help of his hands he worked her pants down to her hips, over her rear, below her mound. He paused to kiss her clit, sending a shockwave through her that caused her to moan with her need. Impatient, she stepped out of her lace panties and reached for his engorged phallus.

The corners of his eyes crinkled. "No hands." He pointed to the mat.

She nodded as she knelt before him. "You always said a good pilot should be able to finesse her craft." She leaned forward and licked the purple bulging head of his penis that extended toward her. "Mmmm. It's responsive. You must keep it in good repair."

"A man's only as good as his tools." He caught his breath as she kissed the tip then took it between her teeth and tongue. "That's right, make yourself familiar with the controls," he managed, though it came out on a gasp.

She laughed and the involuntary movements of her mouth sent a shudder through him. She darted her tongue around the ridge of his bulb then sucked on it until he thrust forward. She accepted more of his shaft then tightened her mouth and tugged as she pulled back until only the tip remained between her lips. With a last teasing nip she

released it. "That does help create a certain...intimacy...with the working mechanism. But there are other parts too."

She nibbled down the shaft until she found his balls. She massaged them with her tongue then found that spot at their base that had always driven him wild. With a groan he plunged forward again but his erection caressed only her forehead. That would never do. She bit down on the shaft gently, again and again, working her way from the base back to the tip.

"I think we're ready for the next step." His voice sounded forced as if it took considerable effort to control it.

She took the quivering crown into her mouth once more then released it with a final lick. "Time to launch?"

He lowered himself to the mat, lay on his back and motioned for her to straddle him. "Take a firm grip on the joystick," he told her.

She lifted her hips and felt his enormous rod pressing against her rear, along her cleft, then nestling at the entrance to her pussy. Gently she lowered herself and felt that hard shaft sliding home, home where it belonged deep inside her. Oh gods, it felt so right there. Involuntarily her muscles clenched, capturing it, holding it where she wanted it to remain.

"It's important to be sensitive to the controls."

"Like this?" She rotated her hips, bedding her clit in the thick bush of hair that nestled at the base of his shaft. Sensation seared through her, white hot in intensity, coiling ever tighter. "I see what you mean," she gasped. "I think we're ready for takeoff."

"Easy there. Keep yourself balanced." He cupped her breasts and his fingers pressed and pinched the taut buds of her nipples. "Now ease the joystick forward."

She leaned into his hands and arched her hips, massaging her nub in its nest. She couldn't control herself much longer. Urgency pulsed through her, the need to feel that

rod in action, not as a joystick but as a piston. Unable to stop herself, she rose, relishing the sensation of his manhood sliding down her channel then up again, over and over.

"Increase your speed." But it was he who lunged upward, hard, demanding, again and again, driving them both in a desperate frenzied dance while she moaned and writhed against him.

So slippery, so hot, so wild she couldn't bear it a moment longer. Her eyes squeezed shut and her tunnel clamped tight over his imprisoned penis. He pounded into her with merciless power until she cried out her release. Spasm after spasm clutched his erection until he exploded in her depths, sending stream after stream of semen shooting through her.

She collapsed against his chest. "I think we crashed."

"No crash is bad if you can walk away from it."

"We're not walking," she pointed out.

He ruffled her hair. "Maybe we better try a different training method. Ready to go for it again?"

She lifted her head just enough to see the gleam in his deep green eyes. "What do you have in mind?"

He rolled them both to the side, kissed her hard, then sprang to his feet and held out a hand. She took it and he pulled her to stand next to him. "There." He pointed to a stripped-down version of a flight simulator. It consisted of a seat, a raised control box holding the joystick at approximately lap level and an instrument panel with a screen rising above it.

Kayla walked over and ran her hand along the chair's back. "Looks new."

"Haven't had much need for it." He strode to a cabinet against the wall, opened it and ran his finger along a line of first aid supplies. He drew out a bottle. "One knee on the seat, the other foot on the ground. No, so you straddle the joystick."

She studied it for a moment then shifted her gaze to his penis. Already it stiffened again. "I think I prefer the one I just used."

"Just wait and see." He squirted a measure of massage oil into his hands, rubbed them together, then covered the top of the rubber coated joystick. "Switch on and take hold of your controller."

She touched the button on the panel and an array of red, green and blue lights blinked on. "The other 'on' switch was more fun."

"Just wait."

She positioned herself over the joystick, still uncertain. He pressed his hands onto her shoulders, forcing her down until the rubber rod pressed against her pussy. Never doubt Jarrod, she reminded herself. He pushed again and she caught her breath as the joystick slid inside.

He did something to the back of the seat and it came away in his hands. He set it on the floor then wrapped his arms about her, drawing her back against his bare chest. "Get comfortable," he said. "We're in for a wild ride." He slid his hands, still slippery from the lubricant, along her ribs and down her stomach to tangle in the bush on her mound.

She tilted, trying to bring his questing fingers to her clit. The images of the stars on the screen jumped.

He laughed. "Easy, or we'll crash before we ever leave the docking bay." One slick finger obliged her, pressing into her nub. His other hand cupped a breast and he took her nipple between thumb and forefinger and gave it a gentle tug. "Okay, ease it forward, that's right. Now lean to the left and we're on our way."

Her movement pressed the joystick into her folds, sending ripples of pleasure through her tunnel. A soft moan escaped her as the images of the stars swept in an arc across the screen.

He released her and poured more of the oil into his hands, massaging it over his fingers. And over his cock.

"What—" she began only to break off as he stroked down her back to the base of her spine, then lower, between her butt cheeks, down to her ass. He teased the opening and she gasped as he forced an entry. The muscles of her tunnel contracted around the joystick and the screen reflected stars lurching sideways.

He laughed. "Control, love." He slid in a second finger, then a third.

Oh hells, the pressure increased and that damned rubber stick had ribs on it. If she rose... *Gods, that feels good.*

"Stay up a moment." He pulled his hand away from her rear.

No, she wanted it back. She wanted him inside her. That damned stick wasn't enough, not after what she'd just been experiencing.

He grasped her with both hands around her belly and suddenly something else pressed against her ass, larger than his clustered fingers, even more determined. Then slowly, steadily, his penis forced its way inside, an inch first, then another, then further. Sensation flooded her from the double penetration, from the joint pressure of both the joysticks. He dipped his finger into the nectar that spread throughout her pussy then thrummed her clit.

"Watch that ass-teroid," he murmured in her ear.

She laughed, which set her inner muscles rippling against their twin targets.

He caught his breath. "Damn, I'll fly you any day." He slid partway out only to thrust home again. "To the left...oh." He finished on a groan and for a moment his finger stilled on her nub. "Want to try a loop?"

She rotated her hips so the stars spun in a circle. He pressed his chin against her neck and his ragged breathing, punctuated by gasps and a deep chuckle, sounded in her ear. She repeated the maneuver, laughing out loud as sensation stabbed through her, intensifying, tightening into a burning coil. One of his hands pinched her pebbled nipple, the other punished her clit while his cock slid in and out of her ass, sometimes in unison with her own attempts to maneuver the joystick, sometimes in opposition. Conscious thought ebbed, faded, then exploded into millions of tiny stars both on and

off the screen. He made one last, frenetic lunge then collapsed against her, one arm wrapped about her stomach, the other around her shoulders as he held her close. He pressed a kiss against her neck where it curved into her shoulder.

She blinked as the screen came back into focus for her. All the lights flashed. "I think I crashed us."

"Damn straight." His deep chuckle shook his whole body, sending renewed tingles up her ass, causing her tunnel to give one final spasm around the joystick. "Now that's what I call in-flight service."

He pulled back and, with regret, she felt him leaving her. She eased off the joystick then swung around to face him. He gathered her against his chest, kissing her throat, her eyes, then finally her mouth. "Well, love?" he murmured.

"Very well." Her fingers slid along his bare back. "But I'm probably going to need a refresher course."

His slow smile glinted in his eyes. "How soon—Hells."

A muffled beep sounded from their pile of discarded clothes. He scooped up a com unit and snapped, "What is it?"

"Zetan red tape," came Marsden's irritated response. "Commander Leftvig requests your presence."

"Tell him to—" He broke off and exchanged a rueful glance with Kayla. "Tell him I'll be with him in just a few minutes," he finished.

Kayla cupped one hand around the nape of his neck and kissed him hard and fast. "I'll be waiting in my cabin," she said and reached for her clothes.

"I'll be with you as soon as I can," he promised and grabbed his trousers.

Chapter Six

Jarrold stretched in the padded chair at the pilot's side and glared at the giant monitor that projected the image of the vast star-strewn sky that lay before them. Usually he found it mesmerizing. Now the glints of light compared unfavorably to the sparkling flecks of color in Kayla's eyes.

Oh damn and hells. He wanted her again, right this minute. Just the thought of the silkiness of her hair, the smoothness of her skin, the warmth and scent of her body sent the blood racing to his penis. It swelled and throbbed for her.

And Kayla, he reflected, would be furious with him. First the Zetans, then routine ship business, then an offer for a new job from an old—and usually very profitable if dangerous—associate. He'd been hours when he'd hoped for only minutes away from her.

This might well be his last chance to spend quality time fucking her.

And that thought left him with a cold empty feeling that disturbed him.

Damn it, he enjoyed Kayla and why shouldn't he? Why shouldn't they share a fuck when the opportunity arose? They were both free spirits with lives of their own. They'd just happened to cross paths again which was fine by him. He'd make the most of this time. Then they'd be on their separate ways again. Which was the way he liked it.

Wasn't it?

He thrust the unwelcome thoughts from his mind and strode down the corridor darkened for the ship's sleep cycle. Would she be angry at his long delay? Or as glad to see him as he'd be to see her?

Probably she'd be asleep.

He'd make it up to her. He knew what she liked. And he'd be willing to bet she had what he needed packed in that overnight bag of hers. The possibilities burned through his groin, inflaming his cock that had suffered since the first moment she had stepped onto the *Illicit*.

He hesitated at the door, considered her likely reaction if someone entered her room without her permission and grinned. He'd wind up with her little energy pistol pressed against his chest. If he was lucky. He might also end up lying on his back on the floor with her knee to his throat.

He knocked.

"Who is it?" she asked at once.

He glanced both ways along the corridor. Quiet, as it should be at this hour. "Jarrod." He kept his voice low anyway.

"Enter," she called and the panel light switched from red to green.

He let himself inside to find the room dimly lit, the bed rumpled but Kayla dressed once more in a flowing green caftan. His gaze narrowed as he sealed the door behind himself. "You weren't asleep."

"Not tired."

A slow grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Waiting for me?"

She gave a short laugh. "A person could waste her life doing that. I have better things to do."

"Right at this moment?" He crossed to her and slid his hands along her neck then trailed one finger down her throat to rest between her breasts.

"Depends on what you have in mind."

"Picking up where we left off when I got called away?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Back to the flight simulator?"

He shook his head. "I don't repeat myself. I've had another idea." He slid his hands along her shoulders beneath the silky fabric. His mouth followed, tasting her skin,

smelling the lingering scent of soap and Kayla herself. With a sudden swift movement, he dragged the caftan over her head and cast it aside. She wore only lace panties, not even a bra to get in his way.

Hells, the sight of her always had inflamed him. His cock swelled even more, uncomfortable in its cloth confinement, wanting to bed itself in her slick depths instead. It would take considerable effort to control himself.

He stripped off her panties and pointed to her narrow bunk. "Lie down."

"How could a girl resist such a romantic invitation?" She batted her long lashes but did as he ordered.

He scrambled over her. "Because you like it rough and thorough and you know I can give it to you."

Her breasts rose with her quickened breath. "Then quit talking and let's see some action."

He kissed her then nipped one taut nipple, holding it between his teeth as he tugged gently. "Don't move," he ordered as he released her.

He swung his legs to the floor, dragged off his clothes and turned to her overnight bag that lay on the floor beside the head of the bed. He transferred it to the table and rummaged through the contents. The sort of garments a princess would have, not at all Kayla's taste. A bag of toiletries and cosmetics, also not Kayla's taste. But there, at the bottom, lay a familiar box. He dragged it out in triumph only to find it locked. He held it out to her. "Open it."

Her eyebrows rose but she pressed her forefinger over the ident plate and the lid popped up. He took it back and examined the contents. Four grav cuffs. Perfect. He caught one of her wrists, yanked it above her head and pressed one of the softly lined metallic bracelet halves in place. She lay there, watching him, an uncertain look in the depths of her lovely eyes. He'd see them darken in passion in another minute. And damn how he wanted to see that. The pressure and burning in his shaft grew unbearable at the thought.

Hurrying now, he arranged her other arm and the second cuff. "Spread your legs," he demanded and when she did he positioned the last two units. "Now fasten them."

"Lock," she said, activating the voice ident.

"Tighter."

She hesitated.

"Tighter," he snapped.

She repeated the order and the cuffs buried themselves into the mattress.

"Tighter," he ordered again.

Again she complied. He checked her near wrist and found she could barely move. Good. Her breathing quickened, he noted. So did his.

He returned his attention to her secret box. What other toys did she have with her? Only one, he saw, disappointed. He opened the silky sack and brought out three small constructs of yielding plasti-form and electronic circuitry and two probes of similar construction. Sensory nets. A slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He'd never tried them himself but he'd heard about the power of the ultra-sensitive biofeedback devices. They measured electrical activity, heart rate and other bodily responses apparent in the skin. And each little device reacted independently to create incredible sensation for the user.

He placed two of the roundish units on her nipples, smoothing them out so the sensors made maximum contact. The third fitted over her clit. The first of the probes he slid into her pussy. The second found its home in her ass.

"Activate them. I want to watch you writhe."

"The control unit is in the sack." Her arousal sounded in the huskiness of her voice.

He fished it out and pressed the button. At once the plasti-molding on her nipples moved, rising, stretching, contracting. Same with the one on her nub. And as for the probes—his eyes widened. He couldn't see the one in her ass but the one that protruded from her pussy swelled and vibrated and undulated.

A moan escaped her. She twisted, arching her hips, tugging at the restraints. But they held her all but immobile. She struggled, gasping now, as the electronic cock bulged and gyrated as if it was alive. His penis responded painfully, reaching out as if to bed itself beside the neural one that brought her such exquisite torment.

She pushed her shoulders into the mattress, thrusting her breasts upward to meet those electrically stimulating pasties. For a long moment he watched her, aching to join her.

"Take one," she gasped.

He hesitated only a moment then gently pulled one off and placed it over his own nipple.

At first nothing. Then it began to tingle. Then it felt as if fingers pressed and rotated the hardening tip. Now it felt as if someone sucked, then bit. A gasp escaped him as sensation shot straight to his already aching erection. Damn, how could mere gadgetry drive him to such a raw frenzy? His cock ached for a slick, warm sheath.

"Here," she cried, though the sound came out halfway between a moan and a plea. "Let me suck it. Oh gods, Jarrod, let me suck it dry."

She lay there spread-eagled, captive, naked. And she opened her mouth, begging for him to fill it with his manhood.

He scrambled over her once more, taking his weight on his knees, sliding forward to bed his hard-on into that welcoming well. Her lips closed over it, then her teeth, then with a cry he was pumping and pounding into her, his crown inflamed with his need, his balls slapping against her chest as the frenzied sensations in his nipple drove him over the brink. His stream shot into her, again and again, muffling her own ecstatic cries as effectively as a gag.

At last he pulled free and rolled to his side. The neuronet had stopped its sensory assault on his nipple, he realized. From the relaxed state of Kayla's body he guessed hers had stopped as well. He felt too sated to move. He slid down in the bed, cradling her close.

“Unlock,” she murmured. A moment later she brought down her arms and removed the remaining pastie, then the one from her clit and the two probes. She tossed them toward the table and turned into his embrace.

Chapter Seven

Kayla eased herself away from Jarrod's sleeping form. Damn the man, he made her feel...needed. And not just for sex though they certainly enjoyed a considerable amount of that. It was the way he held her afterward, fell asleep in her arms either with her head on his shoulder or his between her breasts. It made him look so vulnerable.

But she knew that was the one thing he wasn't.

Still... She bent over him, her lips just brushing his tumbled dark hair. By the faint glow of light in the room she could make out the planes and angles of his face, boyish and peaceful in his sleep.

A rush of emotion filled her, blocked her throat, pooled in her eyes. How much she loved him. But if he possessed any similar feelings for her, he fought against them. Jarrod had always said that permanence of any kind stifled a person. In a relationship it would be deadly.

Well tomorrow – no, only hours from now – they would reach Zeta Secundus and she, in her role of the princess, would say her formal goodbyes and thanks, then walk away from him once more. And he could go back to his beloved independence.

Unless the next half hour went very differently than she hoped. Then she'd be dead.

But whatever the risk, she had a little matter of business to which she must attend before she would feel safe allowing the princess to disembark on Zeta.

She slid from the bed then hesitated over finding fresh underthings. She didn't want to risk waking Jarrod by searching for some, though. Instead she just dragged on the emerald caftan. The voluminous material might get in her way, hampering her movements, but if she wore something practical she might give the game away. Bare feet, though, would pass unquestioned at this time of the night. Fortunately. She didn't want to risk the high heels the princess preferred.

From the depths of her bag she unearthed Commander Leftvig's button and slipped it into her pocket. Then from its case she removed the tiny pulse pistol she carried as a last resort. With a final check to make sure Jarrod still slept, she let herself out of the room.

The observation screen, she decided. That would be the only likely place for a restless princess to wander in the middle of the night. Or the galley, of course. But that would probably be cramped with equipment and tables and who knew what else. If all went as she feared—or hoped—she might need room to maneuver.

She strolled at a leisurely pace along the *Illicit's* corridors. A good ship. She wondered how Jarrod had acquired it. Won it, probably. He wouldn't have stolen it. But confiscation was a possibility if some businessman—or politician—had refused to pay him for a blockade run. She'd have to ask him if she got the chance.

She reached the wide balcony space above the cargo hold where most of one rounded wall held a projection screen displaying the vast expanse of space beyond. It never ceased to amaze her how the specks of light—stars, every one of them and many surrounded by orbiting planets—never seemed to move. So far away that the extreme speed of the ship in which she rode made no difference. She gazed at the sparkling array but her attention focused behind her as she listened for any sound that might betray she was no longer alone.

Who held the monitor for Leftvig's homing device? Were they asleep, which was more than likely at this hour? Would they care if she moved about the ship? Or would this be the opportunity that someone had hoped for?

There. The slightest brush on the fiber matting. An incautious step. She didn't move, forced herself to maintain her relaxed posture. Knees flexed, breathing slowly, steadily, her pulser clasped in her hand, concealed by a fold of the flowing cloth.

She knew someone drew closer, could feel his presence, the gaze boring into her back. She turned. "Commander Leftvig? Couldn't you sleep either?"

"My duty, Lady." He strolled over to join her at the railing.

"You were lying awake monitoring that device?" She couldn't see any weapon. Had she misjudged him? Overrated the princess's danger?

"You mustn't forget your importance, Princess." He gazed at the display of stars, seemingly at ease.

But she could sense the tension radiating from him. "What is my importance?"

He turned his steady regard on her. "This marriage must not take place."

She raised her eyebrows. "I thought you were loyal to your baron."

"I am a Zetan, Lady. I support the Zetan government. I support the policies of the late baron. But his son is young. He has yet to learn to temper idealism with pragmatism."

"So you are convinced the Federation is right to veto a treaty between our two planets?"

"For the Zetans and the Kappians, there is certainly an advantage. But other planets are hurt by it. And it would set a precedent. Other alliances would be made and not only for trade. Soon the Federation would lose all influence. It would collapse. And then there would be nothing to prevent the planets from settling their differences with wars. Do you really want to see that, Lady?"

"That's a great deal of extrapolating, Commander."

"Not guesswork, Princess. Historical precedents. It's happened many times before. And it will happen again. I want Zeta Secundus to prosper. I don't want to see her children slaughtered by those who would rather steal her mineral wealth than barter for it. Will you reject this marriage?"

She turned to face him fully, to study the set of his mouth, the intensity of his eyes. "The Federation is strong. And it's begun to interfere in matters that ought to be left to the planets. It has no right to dictate either my marriage or my planet's trade agreements."

He sighed. "I wish you felt differently, Lady."

"Are there others like you in the baron's service? Who oppose this marriage?"

He shrugged. "It won't matter to you, Lady." He drew a small plastic box from his pocket. Inside, embedded in padding, lay a vial. He eased it out. "I've brought something to help you sleep."

"Permanently?" she asked.

His eyes widened.

"I'm not a fool, Commander."

"No. Which only means you would be an unfortunate influence on the baron. You had best drink this." He sounded resigned. Regretful.

He reached for her arm but she swung her pistol from its hiding place. It caught on the hindering cloth, slowing her for a fraction of a second. Just enough for him to be forewarned. Before she could bring it to aim he rammed himself against her, blocking her.

Damn, she couldn't close her finger on the firing mechanism. She didn't need to kill him, shooting him in the leg would do just fine. But she couldn't even do that.

"You will only sleep, Lady." His voice was gentle, persuasive. "The Federation doesn't want any fuss."

"Someone," she managed, "is going to fuss a great deal over my murder."

"Not a murder. Not even an accident. Your heart will simply fail and the autopsy will show you had a weak vascular system and the stress of four wormhole jumps proved too much for you."

She twisted but he held her in too smothering a grip. "They'll detect drugs. You won't be able to hush that up."

"No detection." His hand inched closer to her mouth. "Both potion and vial will metabolize in your system in the ten minutes it will take to work so there won't be any unexpected residue to be discovered. You won't feel a thing. And the taste, I've been told, is quite pleasant."

She dropped her shoulder, jabbing her elbow into him, then brought up her other elbow to collide with his chin. He swore, caught her arm, then spun her away from him as he twisted her arm behind her. She kicked backward, catching his knee and he swore again as he got her into a chokehold. She couldn't use the pistol, she couldn't even drop it the way he held that arm trapped.

With her free hand she reached behind herself, trying to gouge at his eye, but he merely jerked his head aside and continued groping for her mouth. The vial slid across her cheek, pressed against her lips. If she tried to bite him she would only get that damned poison's container. And she suspected that might be a terminally stupid move. She braced, lowering her chin and struck out once more for his eyes.

"People usually need music to dance," Jarrod said from behind them.

Leftvig jerked his head about, causing her to attack only his ear.

"Let her go, Leftvig." Jarrod came another step closer.

She bent her knees then thrust up and back, slamming her head into the commander's chin. That at last broke his hold enough for her to pull free and raise the pulser.

Leftvig swore as he staggered back a step.

"Why didn't you bring me for backup?" Jarrod demanded of her.

"Never count on anyone else. You taught me that," she shot back. She was breathing hard. Angry with herself for not having dealt more neatly with the commander. Letting Jarrod think she needed rescuing.

"Damned stupid philosophy." He eyed Leftvig. "What will your baron say to this?"

The commander's chin rose. "What do you intend to do?" He watched Jarrod as if he found Kayla to be of no further importance.

"Take you back to Zeta. Make sure the news services pick this up. People won't like the Federation ordering the murder of a princess to protect their power base."

"You wouldn't." But even as he spoke the words, realization that he was wrong showed in his eyes. The commander straightened, all expression draining from his face. "You will have no proof," he said. "No news service will carry the story without some tangible evidence." He turned to Kayla. "Think long and hard about the damage you will cause to the stability of the inhabited worlds." And with that he raised the vial, thrust it into his mouth and swallowed. "I will retire to my room now. Tell the baron I died a patriot."

Jarrold lunged forward but Kayla stopped him. "Too late," she said. She nodded to Leftvig, who returned the salute, then she watched as he retreated down the corridor. Abruptly she turned to stare with unseeing eyes at the projection of the depths of space.

"Poison?" Jarrod asked.

She nodded.

"You're all right?"

Again she nodded. "Slowed by these damned skirts."

A soft laugh escaped him. "No, they aren't your style." He stood at her side.

For several minutes they stared at the unchanging scene in silence. Damn, why did his mere presence have to comfort her, warm her? And worse, stir her senses?

"Backup is much better," he said at last.

She stared very hard at a twinkling point of light. "Trust is hard."

"Not when it's been earned." His hand came to rest on her shoulder. "What do you think about a partnership?"

She looked up into his face which was serious for once, devoid of the humor that usually lurked in his eyes. "What sort?"

"In all things."

Her lips twitched. "For how long?"

His fingers tightened, holding her as if he had no intention of ever letting go. "Permanent. It won't work any other way."

She raised her eyebrows, fighting back the rush of emotion, of...hope? *Damn it, yes, of hope.* Did he mean what she thought he did? What she wanted him to mean with every heartbeat, with every breath, with every part of her? "Why?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "For one moment there I thought he might kill you."

She opened her mouth with a sharp protest over his assessment of her capabilities, or lack thereof, then bit it back. Only a complete idiot would interrupt him now.

"Everything I've ever told myself fell apart. And that's when I knew."

"Knew what?" It came out on the merest breath, so afraid was she of breaking his mood.

He grinned suddenly. "Quit playing the innocent with me, damn it. You know perfectly well what I'm saying."

"Do I?"

He turned her to face him squarely. "All right. I knew I loved you. That I've always loved you. And that I don't want to waste any more of my life living without you. Are you brave enough to take me on?"

A slow grin tugged at her mouth. "Right now? With the stars as our witnesses?"

He bent forward, his kiss a solemn promise. "Right now," he breathed. "And forever."

"Then what are we waiting for?" She shifted her weight, swept his feet from under him then followed him to the floor's fiber mat. As she landed on top of him, he caught her in his arms, holding her tight, love shining in his eyes.

His swelling shaft pressed against her stomach.

She had a much better place for it and she opened to him so he could thrust home, hard and slick.

Only their moans and laughter disturbed the silence of deep space.

About the Author

Elyssa Lynne firmly believes that life ought to be one long fantasy—and the more fantastic, the better. She loves the quirky, the magical, the romantic—and the tyrannical furry beasts who dominate her home. She is also firmly convinced that her computer runs on chocolate chips instead of silicon chips.

Under her own name she has written numerous books and won several awards, but she has only just discovered the delights of writing for Ellora's Cave. She feels she has embarked on a joyful new adventure, not only in her fiction but also in reality.

Elyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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