

WANTON

Stargazers I



Anne Kane

Changeling Press

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When Tarik's brother is captured by the Intergalactic Council, the handsome cyborg realizes he'll need the help of a Stargazer if a rescue mission is to succeed. Problem is, as the leader of the rebellion he can't just advertise for a Stargazer willing to flaunt the Intergalactic Council.

But when he kidnaps Krystal, he is completely unprepared for the irresistibly sexy young woman with a gentle soul. Now he's torn between rescuing his brother and his growing attraction to the talented witch.

Chapter One

Tarik watched the young woman pacing the cargo bay of his ship. Tall and willowy, she stalked the width of the cell with angry strides of long, slim legs. A short, fitted tunic did little to hide her shapely figure, and he felt a spark of heat ignite in his gut despite his mistrust of her kind. Wisps of wavy, chestnut hair escaped from the single braid that hung to her waist, and her green eyes sparkled with rage.

He felt the corner of his mouth tilt upward as she aimed a kick at the wall. He'd bet if he could hear what she was muttering, it wouldn't be very ladylike. Of course, she wasn't really a lady. Krystal de Mylar was a Stargazer, one of the few who hadn't yet sold her talents to the Intergalactic Council. Probably holding out for a better deal, he thought cynically.

The lack of military security surrounding her had made her an ideal target when he realized he needed to acquire one of the accursed witches in order to rescue his brother. Tarik's renegade status made it impossible to post a job proposal with the Stargazers' Guild, so he'd simply used his resources to plan and execute the perfect kidnapping. Unfortunately, none of his cybernetic enhancements would help him explain to the infuriated redhead why he'd spirited her away from her home without her consent.

The woman stopped pacing and pivoted to face the hovering droid, her eyes narrowed so that the green irises sparkled like gems. She'd obviously realized someone was monitoring her. A flicker of heat ran up his spine as she stood still, legs spread and hands on hips. Her mouth moved, and his attention dropped to her full, luscious lips as they moved slowly in exaggerated speech.

You are going to regret this.

It wasn't hard to read her lips. Or the threat in her eyes. He sure hoped she didn't know how to wrap the interplanetary energy lines around his neck.

"Not exactly what I'd expected." He turned to address his second-in-command. "I pictured someone older, and tougher."

Ryan grinned. "And a little less mouthwateringly attractive? Might have made it easier to deal with her. Do you want me to go in first and soften her up a bit? Your reputation with the ladies doesn't bode well for gaining her co-operation."

Tarik sighed. They'd managed to spirit Krystal out from under the noses of her parents and her bodyguards without a problem, but they needed her to co-operate if they hoped to accomplish their mission.

Stargazers could sense the energy lines that connected the stars and planets. They had the ability to grasp those lines and harness the energy for their own use. If she agreed to help them rescue his brother Cynn, all they'd need to do was narrow down his location and the witch could use the energy lines to get them in and out of Intergalactic space undetected by the patrolling warships. He didn't understand how the Stargazers accomplished it, but the results were irrefutable, which explained why the unscrupulous bastards running the Intergalactic Council made a point of hiring as many of the witches as possible.

Before his parents were murdered by the Council, they'd likened the Stargazers' abilities to the witches of Old Earth, who used the planet's ley lines to feed their magic. They'd been baffled though, by the Stargazers' tendency to accept employment with the restrictive Intergalactic Council. He sighed, running his fingers through his short hair. The longer he put this off, the angrier the witch would get.

"Get her into a set of restraints and bring her up to the interrogation chamber." He turned to leave, pausing when Ryan grabbed his arm. He looked pointedly at the offending hand, raising one eyebrow questioningly.

Ryan let go of his arm. "Restraints? Are you serious? She's already pissed. You need to convince her to help us, and treating her like a criminal isn't going to win you any brownie points."

That might be true, but he wanted her under control until she agreed to help. "Just the wrist restraints, then." He ignored Ryan's glare of disapproval. "If I understand the theory, she can't hook into the power of the energy lines without lifting her arms, so we should be safe enough."

Ryan's disbelieving snort told him what his second-in-command thought about that.

"Get her up there. Now." He issued the command in what he hoped was a stern tone, pivoting to stalk out of the room. The damn witch hadn't been on his ship for a full solar cycle and already she was causing trouble.

* * *

"Let me see if I have this straight." Sarcasm dripped from Krystal's voice. "You launched an unprovoked attack on my parents' estate, abducted me, left me cooling my heels in a cold cargo bay holding cell for goddess knows how long, had my hands bound behind me with a set of barbaric and extremely uncomfortable restraints, and then had me brought to what is obviously an interrogation chamber." She paused to sweep a scornful glance around the room, her gaze lingering on a padded rack with leather straps dangling from the various parts. "And now you'd like me to do a favor for you?" She lifted her chin and fixed him with a glacial stare. "Thanks, but I don't think so. I'd like to go home now."

He had to give her credit for poise. Her haughty stance and the way she held her head high, chin tilted just so, gave the impression she was used to giving orders -- and having them obeyed.

He glanced away from her for a moment and gestured at the guards. "Please remove Ms. de Mylar's restraints and wait outside the door until I summon you." He was gratified to see a faint shadow of alarm cross her face. She knew he wouldn't give in quite this easy. He gave her a bland smile. "We need to discuss how best to accommodate her request."

The shorter of the two guards stepped forward to remove the restraints. Tarik had to think for a moment before he could place him. Brent was a new recruit, a refugee from the Intergalactic Council's recent annexation of the Utan home worlds.

Krystal stepped away from the guard and rubbed her wrists. The restraints hadn't been that tight, but they'd obviously annoyed her.

A loud click signaled the departure of the guards and Tarik leaned back, stretching his long legs out under the table. "Have a seat." He nodded toward the empty chair across from him.

"No, thank you."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. This might take a while."

The witch raised a brow at him. "I can't imagine why."

He didn't say anything for a moment, letting his gaze wander from the sprinkling of freckles on her nose, down her lithe figure to the foot that she tapped impatiently on the floor. Luckily, the table hid his body's reaction. He didn't need her to know she could arouse him with just a glance.

"Fine!" She threw herself into the chair, crossing her arms on her chest and glaring at him. "Discuss away."

Tarik had to suppress the urge to grin. She certainly had the supercilious attitude down pat. He leaned forward, focusing on her emerald green eyes. Bad idea. A man could drown in those eyes. He shifted his attention lower, only to find himself wondering what those lips would taste like.

Okay, time to lay my cards on the table.

"I'm Tarik, the leader of the miners' rebellion. The Intergalactic Council tried to buy me off, and when I refused, they abducted my brother, Cynn. They hope to use him to force me to abandon the rebellion and give them the mining rights we inherited from our parents. I can't betray all the people who rely on us, and I can't abandon Cynn to the mercy of the Council."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "We're determined to bring justice to this corner of the galaxy and stop the Intergalactic Council from terrorizing the outer

planets. It's time for them to stop forcing colonists to sign over their mining rights without adequate compensation. If the colonists and miners all stand together, we can stop them from sending their thugs to murder anyone who disagrees with them."

He paused. "I've only got one option. Rescue. I need to get to Cynn before they realize I'm coming. If my intelligence is correct, you can find him, or at least locate his energy signature. We think he's being held somewhere in the Kolverian asteroid field. If you can get us in without being detected, we can snatch him and get back out before they realize what we're up to." He met her gaze, hoping she could read the sincerity in his eyes. "I don't usually condone kidnapping people, but I couldn't very well go to the guild and say I wanted to hire a Stargazer willing to flaunt the Intergalactic Council."

She ignored his quasi apology, a frown marring the perfection of her brow. "What will they do if you don't agree to what they ask?"

He decided to be brutally honest with her. If she agreed to help, she deserved to know what kind of beings they were dealing with. "Most likely execute him. First, they'd torture him a bit. Make sure I know how much he's suffering. Send me vid clips of the proceedings, perhaps a few body parts in case I thought they were faking the vid."

He paused, taking a deep breath to quell the rage building inside him. "But that's not going to happen. You are going to help us." He let the steel show in his voice. No matter what he had to do, Cynn was not going to suffer the way their parents had. He wouldn't allow anything to interfere with the rescue. Not even a Stargazer with mesmerizing green eyes and the body of a sex goddess.

She leaned forward, staring intently into his eyes, and he got the feeling this wasn't the first time she'd discussed military tactics. "How good is your intelligence? Are you reasonably sure of his location?"

"Are you going to help us?" he countered, studying her face hopefully.

She smiled, a slow, bewitching movement of her lips that revealed two rows of even white teeth. "Maybe; tell me the whole story. What's so special about you?"

He let himself relax slightly. She didn't look quite as angry. He sure hoped she'd do this the easy way, because no matter how much he loved his brother, he wasn't sure he could order anyone to harm this woman, much less do it himself.

He sucked in a deep breath. "My birth family lived on the mining colony on Radian V. Two decades ago, a group of miners there discovered a deposit of a rare, radioactive mineral and claimed the rights to it as per galactic regulations." He leaned back, focusing on the wall behind her. "The Intergalactic Council offered to purchase the rights to the deposit for a fraction of their worth. The miners refused, and one by one, they and their families suffered a series of fatal accidents." He paused to let that sink in. "My brother and I are the lone survivors of that group of miners."

Chapter Two

Krystal could see the suppressed rage emanating from the man in front of her. He'd kept his feelings and emotions hidden for so long, she wasn't sure he even realized how angry he was. She reached out with her senses and felt the cold rage, the heart-wrenching sorrow that lurked behind his expressionless face.

"There were only about a dozen of us left on-planet when they sent in a ship full of mercenaries to finish us off. They took the adults out first, murdering them in cold blood. They were dead before any of us knew what was going on. Then they started in on the kids. They thought they'd killed all of us too, but I wasn't about to lie down and die for them. I hid Cynn in one of the escape pods on the very ship that brought them to destroy us, and while they celebrated how clever they were, I set the self-destruct sequence on their ship. I squeezed into the pod with Cynn and blasted us into orbit. We'd just cleared the atmosphere when the explosion rocked through their ship."

He paused to lift an iron bar in his hands, bending it as if it were nothing. "We were picked up by a passing colonist ship. Their med-tech had some experience with cybernetics and he fixed me up." He straightened the bar and laid it gently back on the counter. "You see, the thugs that worked for the Council enjoyed listening to me scream while they didn't quite kill me. The colonists took Cynn and I into their homes, treated us like family. They never knew where we came from and they didn't care. They were good people, and we owe our lives to them."

The bleak devastation in his eyes made her want to weep for that little boy. No one should have to live with that kind of emotional pain. Although she didn't approve of his methods, and definitely didn't like being kidnapped and transported off-planet without her consent, she conceded he did have a point.

The ruthlessness of the Intergalactic Council was legendary. They wouldn't hesitate to kill to achieve their ends. Power and money were the only things they cared about, and the value of the mining deposits would be their only consideration. He definitely needed a Stargazer if he hoped to have any chance of rescuing his brother from their clutches.

Of course, she didn't intend to give in quite yet. He needed to learn to ask nicely. Possibly even beg a bit. She repressed a smile at the thought of this wickedly handsome cyborg kneeling worshipfully at her feet. She let her gaze drift down his body as she wondered exactly how much of him was human and how much was machine.

"Do you have a plan? Other than kidnapping me?"

A wry smile curled the corner of his mouth, and she could see the cloud of anger receding slightly from his aura. "Not yet. I was hoping you could explain what you needed from me to track Cynn. You're the first Stargazer I've ever actually talked to face to face, so I'm not sure how much of what I know is myth and how much is fact."

"An apology." She watched those perfectly sculpted brows rise in disbelief, and smothered a giggle. She'd be willing to bet most people jumped to obey him.

"An apology?"

"Yes." She gave him the indulgent look she usually reserved for small children stealing fruit from the estate gardens. "If you want me to help, you need to apologize for kidnapping me and treating me like some kind of rabid animal." An interesting shade of red stained his cheeks, and she almost felt sorry for him. Almost. "And then you have to ask me nice."

"Ask you nice?" He looked confused as he echoed her words.

"Ask me nicely to help you rescue your brother." She rolled her eyes. "You can't expect to just go all alpha cyborg and have me groveling at your feet."

A ghost of a smile flickered in his eyes. "It would simplify things."

She felt herself wondering what a real smile would look like on those full, sensuous lips. His comment certainly didn't warrant a reply, so she sat, staring pointedly at him.

"I'm sorry." He leaned forward to capture her hands and she felt the full impact of those sapphire blue eyes. She could read the sincerity in them, and felt herself relenting a bit.

"I suppose that will do, although you might want to work on your delivery." She attempted to pull her hands free, but he held them in a firm grip, refusing to let her go.

"Now, what did you want from me?" She stopped tugging. If he really wanted to hold her hands, she supposed it couldn't hurt to let him.

"I need you to find my brother and take us to him." He turned one hand over and studied her palm, running his thumb over it in an unconsciously sexy rhythm. "Can you do that?"

Krystal frowned, struggling to find the words to explain her gift. "It's not that easy. I have to know someone, know their aura, their energy signature, before I can find them. Even then, I'd have to be reasonably close. Energy dissipates over time and distance." She looked up into his eyes. "If your intel is correct about which system he's in, and you can tell me something about him, I can try. Some vid footage to help me get a sense of his character would be good. I can't make any promises, but I'll try."

"What about the ship?" His thumb still caressed her hand. "Can you really use the ley lines to power her without being detected?"

Krystal smiled. That part she knew she could deliver. "Piece of cake. I've been practicing with ley lines since before I could walk. So long as you have a spot for me to work and are willing to protect me while I'm in the trance, that's the easy part." She noted the puzzled look on his face, and her heart sank. "You do know how a Stargazer works, don't you?"

The big cyborg shrugged. "Not specifically. I assume you'll need a quiet space to concentrate." He looked sheepish. "I never thought to ask for details."

She took a deep breath, hoping he didn't belong to one of the many fundamentalist religious groups that abhorred nudity. "I need to be able to feel the ley lines with my whole being. If your ship has a view screen on the bridge, that would be

perfect." She looked down at the desk between them. "I will need to be naked, so I can use my body to manipulate the power lines."

Chapter Three

Tarik felt like someone had sucker punched him right in the gut. The thought of this gorgeous woman naked on the bridge of his ship sent the blood racing to his groin, and he struggled to keep his face expressionless. "Are you serious?"

She nodded, wisps of red hair bobbing around her face. "Clothing impedes the flow of energy." She raised her head to look into his eyes. "Do you have a problem with nudity?"

Hell, no. He'd be quite happy to have her nude body spread beneath him so he could explore every delectable inch of it. He wasn't so sure he'd be happy to have her parading naked in front of his entire crew. An unfamiliar twinge of possessiveness tweaked him, and he scowled. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to be prancing around nude in front of my crew."

She glared at him. "I don't plan to prance around. And I didn't see any innocent looking crewmembers when you descended on my home to abduct me. I doubt I'd be scarring anyone's innocence." She paused, her delicate nostrils flaring as she took a deep, calming breath. "Surely you can set up a small area for me, screened off from the rest of the bridge crew." Her gaze settled on a metal rack with soft padded cuffs, designed to hold prisoners without injuring them. "Ideally, you would have a Stargazer platform for me to use. It helps if we can spread ourselves without worrying about falling while we channel the power. I could probably adapt that to work."

He almost choked at the mental image of her spread naked and restrained. Did those freckles appear on any other part of that delectable body? He gave his libido a stern order to knock it off. "Adapt? How?"

She bounced up from her chair and walked around the apparatus, eyeing it critically. She grabbed a couple of the leather straps and repositioned them higher up

on the outstretched metal tubing. "Like that. My hands will be reaching up toward the ley lines so these need to be higher. A padded strap around the center, to hold me up while I'm in the trance would be good as well. And my legs need to be spread exactly one leg-length apart." She looked up from under her lashes, and his cock jerked to attention.

"I'm sure we can find something suitable." He needed to get himself under control here. "I'll have someone show you to your cabin while I look for some vid footage of Cynn for you to watch."

"That cute officer who locked me in the cargo bay?"

He brought his head up sharply. What did she mean, cute? Ryan was not cute. "On second thought, I'll have Ryan search the archives and I'll escort you myself." He activated the com-link, his voice a little sharper than necessary. "Ryan, report to the interrogation chamber. Immediately."

He looked up to find Krystal staring at him, a mischievous grin tilting the corner of her mouth. Before he had a chance to wonder if she'd deliberately manipulated him, the door opened to admit Ryan.

"Hey, boss. Need some help handling the witch?"

Tarik glanced over to see Krystal smiling at his second. She stiffened at the word "witch," sending him a quelling look. He made a mental note to chastise Ryan later. The man had the tact of a Martian sled pup.

"No." He frowned, and, as usual, Ryan ignored him completely. "Ms. de Mylar has agreed to help us rescue Cynn, and I need you to get some vid-footage of him so she can get a sense of who he is. I'm hoping she'll be able to locate him for us."

A big grin broke out on Ryan's face. "Great. I told you she looked like a reasonable gal." He turned to Krystal. "Welcome aboard. And sorry about the witch crack. Sometimes I just don't know when to shut up."

"No problem." She bestowed a dazzling smile on Ryan, and Tarik had a sudden urge to deck his old friend. She stepped toward him, and he noted the graceful sway of her hips. "You were going to show me to my cabin?" She made it sound like an

invitation and his cock jerked sharply in its tight prison. A slight widening of her eyes let him know she'd done it on purpose. The little witch was flirting with him!

"Certainly." He captured her hand, enveloping it in his larger one. He looked over at Ryan. "I'll be back later to see what you've dug up. Try to make it a good mix so she can get a clear picture of him."

He led her out into the corridor, holding her closer than necessary. His cybernetic implants could sense her elevated heart rate and breathing patterns. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. The question was, would she admit it?

He decided to take the risk. If she planned to wander around his bridge buck naked, there was no way he could keep his hands off her. He stopped in front of the cabin he'd assigned to her, and waited while the door slid open.

"This is nice." She stepped through the doorway, her gorgeous green eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

Tarik looked around the undersized space. A small counter took up all of the space between the clothes locker and the comp station. The sleeping platform filled most of the floor space, and someone had thrown a pink floral cover over the standard issue sheets. He suspected Ryan's irrepressible sense of humor, but he had no idea where his second could have found such a feminine item onboard his ship. His attention wandered to her shapely butt as she crossed the room to inspect the locker.

"I don't suppose you thought to grab some of my clothing when you..." her voice trailed off and she turned to face him, "...decided to have me join your little expedition."

"Clothing?" Tarik felt like a small boy caught in the act of peeking. "No, but I'm sure we can find something onboard that will fit you." His gaze swept her mouthwatering figure. "Although not as attractively as that."

"Well, then." Krystal's hand went to the hem of her tunic. "I'd better be careful to keep this in good shape."

She pulled the material over her head with one smooth motion, and Tarik found himself staring at one very naked, very gorgeous Stargazer. He stood rooted to the spot, her wanton display rendering him speechless.

Krystal ignored him, folding the tunic neatly before stowing it in one of the drawers under the counter. "There's one other thing I forgot to mention." She slid the drawer closed and turned to face him. "My abilities are enhanced by physical union with a male."

Tarik stared, not sure he'd heard that right. "You mean, like sex?"

A ghost of a smile crossed her face, but her expression remained serious. "Yes. The act of joining with a male generates a great deal of psychic energy, which enhances my natural abilities. It's said that the effect is even stronger if there is an emotional bond between the Stargazer and the male, but I have no experience of that personally."

She studied his face earnestly, and he got the impression there was something important here that he was missing. Something she didn't want to tell him. A sudden suspicion crossed his mind. "You said you thought my second was cute. Ryan. Were you saying you want him to bed you?"

For a moment, she stared at him in confusion. Then she broke out in a peal of laughter that sent a shiver of excitement down his spine. "Moon kits are cute too, but they don't excite me." She licked her lips, suddenly looking nervous. "I had hoped you might be unattached and available."

Tarik stood very still, using his considerable will to control the wave of lust that swept through him. He needed to be sure she meant what she said. "Are you sure you want me? I'm not going to take it easy, or follow orders, or stop when you think you've had enough. I need to be in control." Another thought occurred to him. "You mean to tell me that you fuck someone every time you use your talent?"

It came out sounding a lot more judgmental than he'd intended, but he found it hard to control the surge of jealousy at the thought of her coupling casually with someone just to enhance her powers. The angry glint in her eyes told him he'd pushed the limits of her patience.

“Why do you think I’m not employed by the Intergalactic Council?” She gave him a frosty stare. “I refuse to sleep with someone I’m not attracted to. They’ve given me until my twenty-fifth naming day to either change my mind, or find one of their officers to bond with. My parents don’t have the political backing to defy them, so I’d resigned myself to a union with one of their less obnoxious officers. Perhaps I should thank you for kidnapping me. The grace period ends in two days, so it seems you’ve saved me from their clutches. At least for now.”

“And you’re attracted to me?” Tarik grinned wickedly, jealousy quickly giving way to a molten heat that sent blood rushing to his groin.

Krystal tossed her head, looking haughtily down her nose at him. “Mildly, but if you’re not interested, I’m sure I could find someone amongst your crew that’s suitable for my use. I’ll need to be in top form if I’m going to outwit the Council.”

Tarik crossed the space between them with an inhuman burst of speed, wrapping her firmly in his arms. “I don’t think you’re going to be bothering my crew, witch.” He lowered his head, inhaling her intoxicating scent. “I’ll be more than happy to fuck you until you’re begging for mercy.”

Chapter Four

Krystal melted against Tarik's hard frame, fitting herself against his deliciously muscular body. For just a second there, she'd thought he was going to refuse her. She looked into his eyes, the blue darkening to black. A fiery ball of liquid heat slid through her as his breath fanned her cheek, his lips tracing a path from her ear to her mouth, teasing her lips open to sweep in to explore. He circled her tongue with his, swirling, tasting, enticing her to join him in an erotic game of taste and touch.

She lifted her hands to his shoulders, shaking with a fierce need she struggled to control. He reached up to loosen her hair from its braid, his fingers running through the heavy mass and spreading it over her back.

"You're so beautiful." He whispered the words against her throat as he used his teeth to nibble gently on her tender skin. "How could I not want you?" His lips moved over her, gentle despite the urgent need in his voice. Putting her aside for a minute, he shed his suit with careless haste, discarding it in a heap on the floor.

Krystal stared in awe at his heavily muscled body. Scars were scattered across most of it, giving mute testimony to the torture he'd suffered as a child. Her gaze dropped lower, to the magnificent shaft jutting proudly out from a nest of dark blond curls. The plum-shaped head strained eagerly upward, and Krystal's breath caught in her throat as she imagined it invading her tight channel.

"You're sure about this?" Tarik hesitated for a second, searching her face for confirmation before he pulled her back into his embrace, lowering his head to sear his lips across hers.

A flood of emotion filled her, his emotions, his need. She relaxed, knowing he'd gone too far to stop. The thick evidence of his arousal pressed hard against her belly. She'd never felt this incredible attraction before, this sense of desperate need. Her past

experiences with sexual partners had left her wondering what all the fuss was about. Now she understood. She felt the burning need, the unquenchable desire that the other Stargazers described when they talked about their partners.

“Yes, very sure.” She ran her hands across his chest, marveling at the hard play of muscle that tensed beneath her palm. This was no data-coding Council flunky. Despite his cybernetic enhancements, Tarik was all male. Anticipation ignited fingers of heat that caressed their way up her spine.

With an impatient growl, he lifted her up and laid her on the sleeping platform. Following her down, he straddled her hips with rock-hard thighs. His sapphire eyes glittered darkly, and she stared, mesmerized by the naked lust on his face.

He lowered himself to lie beside her, one leg thrown across her belly to hold her in place while he laced his fingers in her hair and reclaimed her lips. Less gently now, his impatience showing in the aggressive thrusts of his tongue as he explored more fully, demanding her surrender, anchoring her in place with firm tugs on her hair. His tongue slid over hers, coaxing and claiming, blatantly seductive.

Krystal opened her mouth wider, allowing him in, wanting more, his dominant posture triggering a primal need she’d never known she had. She tilted her chin up to allow him better access, and he rewarded her with a growl as he quickly took advantage. Their tongues met, clashed, danced around each other in an erotic duel.

His lips left hers, traveling across her cheek as he licked and tasted his way down to the tender hollow of her throat. He feathered light kisses in the sensitive hollow, pausing to run his tongue across the vein pulsing erratically as liquid heat pooled low in her belly.

His hands wandered lower, exploring every inch of her and making her acutely aware of her body. He cupped the curves of her breasts, his large hands kneading the tender flesh, until she arched up into them. With a knowing chuckle, he tweaked one nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She gasped at the incredible sensation, darts of pleasure slipping along her nerves. Before she managed to catch her breath, Tarik lowered his head and sucked the

tip of one plump mound into his mouth, his teeth scoring gently across the nipple. Krystal gave up all pretence at control, whimpering in pleasure as she grasped his short hair and held him tight. He suckled greedily, using his tongue and teeth to drive her pleasure higher and higher. He smoothed his hand down across her belly, his fingers toying with the shallow dimple of her belly button.

Krystal twisted and squirmed beneath his aggressive assault. She could feel the moisture gathering in her pussy as his hand inched its way closer, stopping to explore the angle of her hips. He bit down gently on one sensitive nipple just as he cupped her sex, parting the soft folds to run his thumb across the swollen nub of her clit. He stroked the heated flesh and a shudder of pure erotic pleasure ran through her. She arched into his hand, pressing herself against his hot body with wanton abandon. She didn't care if he knew how much she wanted him, how hot he made her. Only feelings mattered; the feeling of his hands stroking her body, his mouth suckling at her breast.

He slipped a finger into her slick channel, and the breath exploded from her lungs in a strangled gasp. A slow heat flared deep within her core, spreading along every nerve as he worked his finger in and out, pausing occasionally to flick the hard nub of her clit with his thumb.

"Please." She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. "I need you."

He raised his head, gazing into her eyes. "I know."

The simple admission sent her blood pressure soaring as he wriggled down to place his mouth over her pussy, his tongue stabbing between the slick folds of her labia to feast at the moist entrance to her sex.

Krystal arched up into his mouth, offering him everything. She writhed beneath his talented tongue, drowning in sensation until she lost herself in a fiery burst of heat that sent her hurtling over the edge on a wave of pure passion.

Tarik quickly scooted up to replace his mouth with his cock, the heavy shaft prodding impatiently at her wet entrance. Krystal opened her eyes, staring up at him in a daze as her body shuddered under the force of her orgasm. He gripped her hips

tightly, holding her down while he buried himself to the balls with one swift, hard thrust of his muscular hips.

Krystal screamed at the incredible sensation, his name an endearment on her lips as she felt the molten intensity of a second orgasm racing through her, her torso bucking uncontrollably.

Tarik rode her hard, pistoning in and out of her sex with long, hot strokes of his thick shaft. She bucked and twisted beneath him, pleasure so intense it bordered on pain filling her every pore, every nerve, until she thought she'd go insane if he didn't stop. She wrapped her legs around his waist, tilting her hips to allow him maximum penetration.

He kept going, harder, faster, every stroke of his wonderful cock driving her higher and higher until she begged him for release. She couldn't think of anything else, only the taste of him, the feel of him inside her, the explosive chemistry between them.

He shifted a bit, changed the angle of his penetration, and her world shattered as she rocketed over the edge yet again, her tight channel rippling hard around his shaft as he followed her, his hot seed jetting into her. Wave after wave of sensation pulsed through her, and she clung, holding him tight as the world fell away and there was only the two of them. Together. Clinging to each other as a million tiny aftershocks rippled through them.

Tarik collapsed, rolling onto his side without letting her go, careful not to crush her beneath his muscular body. "Damn." He lifted one hand to smooth a damp strand of hair behind her ear. "I think I could become addicted to the feel of your body under me, witch." He brushed a light kiss across her lips, his touch gentle.

Krystal smiled up at him. After an encounter as hot as that, even the word "witch" wasn't enough to upset her. Tarik's aura glowed a gentle blue, the rage dissipated for the time being. She'd hazard a guess that it had been a long time since he'd felt so at peace. A contented sigh left her lips as she felt herself drifting off into sleep.

Chapter Five

Krystal watched the two young men on the holo-screen. The clip had been taken years ago, when Tarik and his brother were in their early teens. Even at that age, Tarik had the confident air of a leader, his eyes constantly moving, looking for potential danger. Some of his movements seemed awkward, and she guessed that his cybernetic implants had taken time to adjust to the growth spurts of a human child. The scars on his body were newer and more pronounced than when he'd stripped in front of her yesterday.

She felt a rush of liquid heat in her core at the thought of their encounter the previous day. She hadn't been entirely honest with him. Sex in and of itself didn't enhance her power; it had more to do with her feelings. She'd experimented with several of the males in the palace guard, and while she'd felt a mild enjoyment at their practiced attentions, it hadn't been enough to bolster her powers. She just couldn't seem to let go and throw herself into the erotic encounters the way she'd seen some of the other Stargazers do.

One of the main reasons she'd resisted the increasingly persistent recruitment officers from the Intergalactic Council was the contract clause that required her to "exercise due attention to building her powers through the use of targeted sexual encounters." The idea of prostituting herself for power left a bad taste in her mouth.

She turned her attention to Cynn. Although physically similar to his older brother, with the same wide grin and sparkling blue eyes, his aura was brighter, with less of the angry red overtones. Tarik had mentioned that Cynn was five years younger than he was; he'd probably been too young to fully understand what had been going on during the massacre. She watched as the two brothers played an animated game of laser

tag. She swore Tarik held back, letting the younger child score often enough to keep him interested in the game.

She sighed, impatient with herself. She needed to concentrate on Cynn, not moon over his sexy older brother. She studied Cynn, realizing he shared many of the traits that she found so attractive in Tarik.

"Finding what you need?"

She turned to see Tarik's second leaning against the doorway, the ever-present grin curving the corner of his mouth. "Yes, thanks. These are quite good." She tucked an annoying lock of hair behind one ear. "How well do you know Tarik's brother?"

Ryan shrugged. "Pretty well. Cynn and I have been shipmates for about six years. What do you want to know?"

"Just tell me about him. Is he a clown? Does he have a quick temper? I need to be able to identify his energy signature, and it's much harder if I've never met the person."

Ryan frowned. "He's a lot like Tarik, but without the hard edges. He's loyal to a fault, he'd do anything for a friend. And he's got the wackiest sense of humor this side of Ursa Major. He loves to play practical jokes."

Krystal watched the emotions play across Ryan's face as he described some of the stunts Cynn had pulled during their years together. Tarik's younger brother sounded like a very thoughtful, caring person with a zany streak a mile wide. She wondered what Tarik would have been like if he'd had the chance to grow up without the memory of his parents' murder to color his perceptions. She felt her heart going out to that child who'd had to set aside his grief in order to save what was left of his family.

"Do you think we'll be able to find him and get him out?"

Krystal nodded, her gaze going to the two boys on the holo-screen. "I think we stand a good chance."

"Well, that's certainly good to hear." Tarik strode into the room, and Krystal felt a delicious wave of anticipation rippling through her veins. "Ryan, don't you have to check on the deflectors before we get to the asteroid field?"

"Yes, but it'll be hours before we're anywhere near it." He turned to give Krystal a conspiratorial wink. "I thought I'd see if Krystal here could use some help figuring out what makes your brother tick."

Krystal watched in amazement as a tinge of green streaked its way through Tarik's aura. He was jealous! Not one to waste an opportunity for mischief, she grinned up at the meddling second. "Thank you. You were a big help."

"No problem." He spoiled the effect by ruffling her hair in a big brotherly gesture. "I'd best go check out those deflectors now before our fearless leader here decides to throw me in the brig."

Krystal glanced up at the unsmiling Tarik, enjoying the feeling of camaraderie. "I don't think he'd do that."

"I might." A reluctant grin crooked the corner of his mouth as he watched their playful exchange. "He wouldn't look so cute after spending a couple of days in isolation."

"Cute?" Ryan raised his brows in exaggerated horror. "I'm not cute. I'm ruggedly handsome in a holo-vid star kind of way."

Krystal burst out laughing. "And so modest." She noted the green receding from Tarik's aura as he realized the two of them were just kidding around. "Go check on your deflectors, and thank you for the help."

"No problem." He sauntered over to the doorway, pausing to address Tarik. "Shouldn't take more than an hour or so to run the diagnostics on the deflectors. I'll send you a status report when they're done."

Krystal turned back to the screen. "You and your brother have a lot in common."

Tarik shrugged. "I suppose we do. Does that make it easier for you?"

She looked over at him. "Yes. I should be able to detect his energy signature if we're within a reasonable distance of him."

Tarik gave her a searching look. "Are you sure? That you can identify him if we get close enough?"

She laid her hand on his arm, sensing how important her answer was. "Absolutely. Now show me the star charts. Where do we need to be?"

Tarik strode over to the console and laid his hand on the sensor pad. He closed his eyes as his internal comp connected with the ship's computer banks. Krystal watched, fascinated. She'd never been in close contact with a cyborg before. She could see the large vein in the side of his neck twitching as he communicated with the ship. The pictures of Cynn faded, replaced by a star chart. He manipulated the image, muttering under his breath when the display didn't respond quickly enough. Finally, he opened his eyes, and she stared at the chart, a feeling of dread settling in her gut.

"That's restricted Intergalactic space." She let out her breath with a low whistle. "Are you sure?"

He nodded grimly. "I have a few contacts in their organization. The Kolverian asteroid field is right here." He pointed to a small cluster of asteroids in the center of the chart. "They don't want to chance me getting Cynn back." He gave her a wry grin, but she could see the edge of desperation in his eyes. He knew how difficult this would be. No wonder he'd felt it necessary to kidnap a Stargazer. Even with her help, this would be dangerous.

She turned her attention back to the chart. "Where would they be holding him?"

Tarik indicated one of the larger planetary bodies. "The main holding center for dissidents is located here. They might be keeping him in there along with the political prisoners, but I doubt it. They'd want him somewhere isolated in case I decided to mount a rescue mission." He pointed to another cluster of small asteroids located to the left of the main field. "I'm thinking they've got him in a detention center on one of these. The military uses them for holding high risk prisoners."

Krystal frowned. A military base located deep inside the restricted area would be a tough target. They'd have to weave unseen past four inhabited planets in order to get to the asteroid field. She'd need to be very sure of her control of the energy lines in that sector. Any mistake could prove fatal.

Chapter Six

Tarik watched the witch as she studied the star chart. He hoped she'd be able to deliver what she promised. His brother's life depended on it.

Krystal looked up and he felt his heart jump at the gentle sympathy in her eyes. "I can get you there, but you're going to need a plan." She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Even if we take them by surprise, it's a military base. It's going to be heavily defended."

"I'm aware of that." He had a feeling she wouldn't like his plan. "You just need to get us there."

"And then what?"

"And then we rescue him." He reached out to draw her into his arms. "We disable their sensors, sneak in past the guards, locate him, and get the hell out."

She stared at him in disbelief. "That's it? That's your plan?"

He grinned. "Yeah. We like to keep them simple."

She shook her head. "There's a difference between simple and non-existent, you know."

He tilted her chin up so he could look directly into her green eyes. He could drown in their sparkling depths and die a happy man. "We've pulled off lots of clandestine missions. We know what we're doing. This time it's one of our own whose life is on the line, and we never let down one of our own."

He lowered his head to the sweet temptation of her mouth and moved his lips over hers in a gentle caress, cajoling, blatantly seductive. His tongue traced the shape of her lips, teasing them open to allow him access. His tongue touched hers, slid along the side, and engaged in an erotic dance that left them both breathless.

He nibbled his way across her cheek, pausing to whisper in her ear. "Do you still think Ryan's cute?"

She giggled, and ran a hand down his chest. "Yes, he's cute, but..." She paused, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

"But?" he prompted

"But he doesn't make me feel like ripping off my clothes and impaling myself on his thick, hot cock."

Tarik felt the blood rush to his shaft at her blunt statement. The woman would be spending the better part of the voyage flat on her back if she didn't learn to control her tongue. He pulled her in hard against him so she could feel how much her statement affected him.

"We might want to retire to the sleeping quarters," she pointed out, shamelessly rubbing herself against the outline of his swollen cock.

With a growl of frustration, he used his comp to send a mental command to the door. It closed with a subdued *whoosh*, followed by an audible click as the lock engaged.

He let her go, backing up a step as he slowly and deliberately stripped off his clothing. Her gaze dropped to his cock, and her eyes widened, her pink tongue coming out to run across her lips in a gesture that made his shaft swell even harder.

She raised her head to stare into his eyes, and her hands went to the fastening of her bodysuit. She swayed in a gentle rhythm as she proceeded to strip off her clothing in a blatantly sexual display. When she stood completely naked before him, a slow, sexy smile spread across her face. His comp display told him her heartbeat was fast and her blood pressure elevated. She knew what she wanted and he thanked the merciful gods that she wanted him.

He took his cock in one hand, stroking slowly down the length. He pointed to a spot just in front of him. "Come here."

She did, covering the distance in a graceful glide. Her attention on his jutting shaft, she lowered herself to her knees. She reached out to touch him, her fingers teasingly exploring the length.

He drew in his breath in a ragged gasp, and darts of lust thundered through his veins. He wondered if she had any idea how much she affected him.

"Can I taste it?" She tilted her head up to look into his eyes.

He nodded, not sure if he could still talk. His cock was so engorged, it almost hurt. Krystal cupped his balls gently in one hand, the other guiding his shaft to her eager lips. She swirled her tongue around the swollen head, then licked her way down the side, pausing to explore the swollen veins that ran along the length.

Tarik closed his eyes and laced his fingers through the strands of her chestnut hair. Witch's hair. Witch's eyes. If she didn't take him in her mouth soon, the witch was going to find out just how little patience a human cyborg had when he wanted someone. And by all the gods in the skies, he wanted her. Wanted her sweet mouth around him. Wanted her soft skin against him. Wanted her clever hands sliding along his naked flesh.

She opened her lips and engulfed his shaft in the sweet, hot cavity of her mouth. He swore softly as a fever ignited in his groin, burning its way through his body. She danced her tongue along his length, teasing and tempting as she sucked on the aching shaft. He held her head steady, with fingers still entwined in her hair while he thrust shallowly with his hips, the feel of her soft mouth almost more than he could handle. If he didn't stop her soon, he'd spill his seed in her mouth, and he didn't want that. He wanted to feel her slick, hot channel tighten around him when he came.

She let out a breathy little moan, his cock still buried deep in her mouth, and it was the sexiest sound he'd ever heard. He thrust a couple more times, and then reluctantly pulled out.

"I want to feel your pussy milking my cock." He whispered the words into her ear as he reached down to plunge a finger into her sex, checking to make sure she was ready for him. She arched up eagerly into his hand, and he didn't need to scan with his neural comp to know she was more than ready.

He picked her up, bracing his legs as he slowly lowered her until his cock pressed eagerly against the wet heat of her entrance.

Krystal wrapped her legs around him, locking her heels behind his back as she wriggled wantonly in his hands. He thrust his way in through the tight folds until his balls were snugged up against her butt and she started to ride him with easy rocking thrusts of her hips. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder as she met him thrust for thrust.

"Hang on, my little witch." He took over the lead, thrusting up into her deliciously tight channel. Faster. Harder. He couldn't help himself, couldn't hold back. He wanted her. Needed her.

He'd never felt this loss of control with a female before, and it shocked him. She was a witch. She could betray him. Sooner or later, they all joined the Council's ranks. She could destroy them all. And yet, he didn't want to believe it of her. She had a gentle soul and she gave herself to him with such joyous abandon.

He could sense her spiraling up out of control and he abandoned all pretence at restraint, surging into her welcoming heat harder and faster. He covered her lips with his own as she screamed out his name, her channel rippling with waves of pleasure that milked the seed from his shaft. His knees felt like rubber and he sank to the floor, taking her with him as a million tiny aftershocks ran through her body and into his.

She opened her eyes and he could see wonder shining in the enormous green depths. "That was so incredible." She said it with a trace of awe in her voice. "I can't believe I'm having wild, abandoned sex with the man who kidnapped me."

Tarik grinned and traced a finger across the dusting of freckles on her nose. "And I can't believe I've got myself buried balls deep in a witch with emerald green eyes and hair the color of a Tlanier sunset." He dropped a gentle kiss on her forehead. "We'd better get dressed and unlock the door before one of my cute crew comes to see what's going on."

"Your whole crew isn't cute." She gave him a saucy smile that made his heart do a flip-flop in his chest. "Just Ryan."

“I see I need to teach you some respect, witch.” He gave her butt a playful swat before he lowered his head to sear a kiss across her lips. His crew would just have to wait.

Chapter Seven

"It needs to be closer to the center of the bridge." Krystal eyed up the makeshift Stargazer platform. "I need to have as wide a visual as possible when I'm tapping into the ley lines."

The shorter of the two men looked up at her. He'd been the guard who had removed her restraints in the interrogation room. "Would there be all right?" He pointed to a spot to the left of the pilot's console.

She felt a chill go down her spine as she met his flat, black eyes. He obviously thought she was being a prima donna. She nodded. "Perfect. Thanks."

"How much longer are you going to need to set this up?" Tarik walked around the bulky apparatus.

"Not long, once we get it where the lady wants it. We just need to check a couple of connections." The two men inched the heavy platform over to its new resting spot.

Tarik had utilized the apparatus she'd first pointed out. With a few minor alterations, it made a serviceable platform to keep her upright while in a trance. She needed to have her limbs stretched out to the four corners of the universe in order to feel the energy lines and direct them to where she wanted them. She glanced over at Tarik, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. Would he be okay with her nudity while she worked? She didn't need to be distracted by male ego.

She sighed. She'd better find out now. She had the feeling he wasn't going to like it. That flash of jealousy when he'd found her in the reviewing room with Ryan pointed to a very possessive nature. She left the two men straining to move the heavy platform, and went to stand beside him in front of the view port.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" He looked out at the stars twinkling brightly against the velvet backdrop of the sky.

"Yes." Krystal studied the stars, seeing the faint lines of power that ran from each, joining them in a huge net of pulsing energy. "You do understand the basics of how a Stargazer works, don't you?" She found herself holding her breath, hoping he hadn't conveniently forgotten her need for nudity.

Tarik shrugged and placed his arm on her shoulder, drawing her against his warm body. "You capture the ley lines and direct them to the engines. You can also see the energy signatures surrounding people and identify them if you know them well enough." He turned to glance at the platform. "I'm not sure why you need that, but it doesn't matter. As long as we get to Cynn before the bastards hurt him, you can stand on your head and chant in ancient Gaelic."

"Nothing so dramatic. I just strip bare-assed naked and go into a trance so deep I can't trust myself to stay upright." She peeked up at him from under her lashes. His eyes narrowed and she cringed, waiting for him to speak.

"Then I guess I'll have to make sure the bridge crew knows I have first claim." He swung her around so they were standing eye to eye. "I may joke about witches, and I may have some trust issues because most of your kind side with the Intergalactic Council, but I am willing to let you do whatever it takes to find my brother." The corner of his mouth twitched with the beginning of a smile. "Perhaps the question should be: Are you sure you're going to feel safe, naked and bound with me standing in front of you?"

She relaxed. He didn't like it, but he was going along with it. "When did you want to get going?" She eyed up the platform.

Tarik looked grim. "As soon as we can. What do you need to do to prepare before we start?"

She nodded. "I like to meditate and make sure I'm properly grounded before I attempt to reach for the power lines. Channeling that kind of power isn't easy, and the backlash can be wicked if I'm not careful."

"It's not dangerous, is it?" He frowned, his eyes dark with concern. "I don't intend to exchange your life for Cynn's."

She shook her head, touched by his concern when she knew how guilty he felt about his brother's capture. "No. I'm not a novice and I'm very careful. I know my limit and make sure I don't draw any more power than I can safely handle." She reached up to caress his cheek. "I trust you to make sure I'm safe while I'm channeling."

* * *

Krystal rose gracefully to her feet, her mind at peace. She'd run through the meditation exercises her teacher had taught her, and a serene confidence flowed through her. She could do this. She was a Stargazer, a woman that fate had bestowed with a special gift.

She removed her clothing, folding it carefully and placing it beside the makeshift Stargazer platform. She placed her feet in the loops of leather, attached to the floor of the platform at exactly one leg-length apart. Pulling the straps tight around her ankles, she tested each to make sure they were secure. She reached behind her and wrapped the padded belt around her waist. If she faltered, the belt would hold her in position, keeping the flow of energy directed properly. Satisfied with the fit, she reached up and threaded her hands through the loops above her head. They too had been spaced exactly right.

She raised her head, her gaze sweeping the deck in front of her. The bridge crew were all at their stations, their backs to her. All except one. She looked into Tarik's eyes, and nodded.

The heavy curtain of her hair slid down her back as she lifted her chin, closing her eyes. She let her mind expand, seeking the bright energy of the ley lines. They shimmered into view behind her closed lids, a glittering maze of greens and blues. She felt them with her consciousness, one after the other, searching for the connection that would lead her to the Kolverian asteroid field.

There!

She couldn't have explained it, how she knew when the correct line presented itself, but there was no doubt. She concentrated, drawing the sparkling energy into her, capturing it with her outstretched arms, directing it to the engines that lay waiting. She

could feel the engines take life, the power flowing into them and through them. Silently, the big ship started to move, following the path of the ley line as it flowed across the velvety stillness of space.

She reveled in the feeling of the power flowing into her, through her. That was the danger that every Stargazer faced. The temptation to draw more and more power, to fill herself with the shimmering light until it burned her out, was so hard to resist.

Without a mate to anchor her to this world, to pull her back from the edge of madness, the danger grew every time she touched the ley lines. Her teacher had warned her, time and again, urged her to choose a mate. But she'd refused. She didn't want just any mate. She wanted someone to love, someone who would cherish her, put her happiness ahead of his own. She wanted a home and children. She wanted the kind of relationship her parents had, and she refused to settle for anything less. If she couldn't have true love, then eventually she'd give in to the temptation and merge completely with the ley lines, her earthly body left behind.

She felt the ley line getting shorter, its source near. Reluctantly, she let some of the power slip from her hands, slowing the engines. She sent a tendril of power out to touch Tarik's aura, reassuring herself that he stood guard over her, waiting for her to complete her task. The touch was oddly soothing, compensating for the loss she felt at releasing even a bit of her hold on the lovely power of the line.

She recalled everything she knew about Cynn, his personality, his laughter, his energy and life force. Carefully, so as not to alert anyone nearby with telepathic abilities, she probed the planets and asteroids ahead, evaluating each energy signature, discarding them one after the other when she assured herself they weren't the one she searched for.

She had no concept of the passage of time. It could have been moments or whole solar cycles. Time had no meaning when the power flowing through her induced a trance. She discarded planet after planet, asteroid after asteroid. She turned her attention to a cluster of smaller asteroids off to the side of the main field.

And she found him. His life force felt weak, and she fed him a little of the energy that flowed through her, felt his surprise at her touch, his confusion. She tried to reassure him, but he didn't understand. She sensed others near him, and she withdrew carefully, leaving no trace of her visit.

She needed to tell Tarik, let him know that his brother was alive and that she'd located him. Reluctantly, she released her hold on the ley line, sorrow beating at her as the power faded from her grasp. Her body sagged against the restraints, and she opened her eyes to find Tarik standing in front of her, his face a mask of concern. She opened her mouth to speak, but all she managed was a hoarse croak.

He reached for her wrists, fumbling with the straps, and she realized he intended to release her from the platform. "No!" She couldn't let him do that. He still needed her talents. "I found him, and he's alive. When your rescue team is ready, I'll get you in as close as I can." She closed her eyes and shuddered, her body suddenly cold.

"Forget it. You're worn out." She snapped her eyes open as he released her first wrist and started to work on the second. "I'll find some other way to get him out."

"No." She reached up, fumbling to reattach the straps. "I want to do this. For the first time in my life, I'm using my powers to help someone. Let me help you. Let me help your brother." She paused to suck in a deep breath, searching for the words to explain her feelings. "I've always thought of my talent as a curse, one I'd eventually be forced to use for the Intergalactic Council. I told myself that I wouldn't let it happen, but I always wondered if I'd be strong enough to refuse, to let the energy lines absorb my soul rather than serve the corruption of the Intergalactic Council." She lifted her chin to meet his gaze, willing him to understand.

Chapter Eight

Tarik paused, his hands on the padded strap at her waist. The sight of her outstretched on the platform, her skin almost translucent as the energy flowed through her in visible surges of light, had terrified him. He'd wanted to wrench her off that platform and kiss the life back into her. He'd wanted to crush her body under his and bury himself in her repeatedly until he knew she was safe. He hadn't felt so totally helpless and out of control since the day he'd found the lifeless bodies of his parents.

"You're frozen and exhausted. You brought us over ten light years from our starting point in less than a solar day." He chose to concentrate on something he could fix. He stripped off his shirt and wrapped it around her slender shoulders. "At least take a break while I brief the team, and we get ready for the assault." He tipped her chin up to place a gentle kiss on her lips. "Do it for me."

Krystal hesitated, and let her hands slide out of the restraints. She nodded and a tired smile lit her face with a gentle glow. "For you."

* * *

"We need to get in and out as quickly as possible." Tarik looked at the four men he'd picked to accompany him into the stronghold. They'd all been with him for years, and he'd be willing to trust his life to any one of them. Blade was a mutant, part human, part lizard, and he had the ability to sense the presence of warm-blooded creatures from several hundred yards away. He would be able to warn them of the enemy's position before they showed themselves.

Zack and Timmi were both enhanced humans. They'd been sold to the Galactic Council as toddlers and altered in ways they'd never fully revealed to him. They could move through any terrain without making a sound and kill a target without leaving a mark on the corpse. They'd escaped from the Council on their very first mission,

seeking out Tarik's rebel band to offer their services. They delighted in letting the Council know every single time they used their enhancements to thwart the Council's plans.

He'd chosen the fourth member of the rescue squad for sheer size and brute strength. Paden weighed in at over one hundred thirty kilos of pure muscle. If they had to fight their way out, Paden would lead the way.

Tarik used his neural implants to access the ship's computer banks, and called up a dimensional image of the compound, the display hovering just above the group. "Krystal pinpointed Cynn's position as somewhere in this area." He indicated a cluster of rooms at the back of the complex. "We have to assume there's more than one guard. She detected a large mass of energy signals in that area. It may be a barracks building."

"Are you sure this isn't a trap?" Paden cocked his head in thought. "I've never worked with a Stargazer before. I thought they all belonged to the Intergalactic Council."

Tarik lowered his voice to an icy calm, holding on to his temper with difficulty. Somewhere along the line, he'd come to trust Krystal, and he expected no less from his men. She'd drained herself to get them this far without detection. "Well, Krystal doesn't belong to them. She says Cynn is here and he's heavily guarded, so we go in and get him. If you're not okay with that, speak up and I'll take you off the team."

He glared at Paden, holding the bigger man's gaze until Paden looked away. "Okay, if you trust her that's good enough for me. I'm in."

Tarik looked around the room. "Anyone else want out?"

The other three shook their heads, and Tarik took a deep calming breath. "Okay then, let's get on with it." He pointed to an area at the top of the dimensional image. "We'll be coming in from this side. There's a lot of scrub brush and small hills so we should be able to get up to the walls without being detected." He moved his hand. "There's an old underground aquifer at this point and we can use it to get inside the building."

"Won't it be guarded?" Blade leaned forward to study the image.

Tarik nodded. "Probably just one guard, according to the intel I could find. Zack goes in first and takes him out." He paused. "We can't risk the guard raising an alarm so it has to be a clean kill."

"No problem." Zack nodded thoughtfully. "Shouldn't take long. I can hide the body inside the tunnel."

Tarik traced the route of the aquifer with one finger. "We stay in the tunnel. We should be able to get most of the way to where Cynn is being held without being discovered. Once we're there, we'll have to take down whatever guards are aware of our presence and retreat the way we came. Hopefully Cynn will be able to walk. If not, Paden is going to have to carry him while the rest of us hold off any defenders that we haven't dealt with yet. Once we get back to the ship, Krystal can get us out of there." He looked around the room. "Any questions?"

Timmi looked up, a slow smile of anticipation spreading across his face. "When do we go in?"

Tarik straightened up and let the image dissolve. "We suit up as soon as possible and meet in the cargo bay. Once we're ready, Krystal will get us in place to launch the rescue." He looked around at the faces of his team. "We'll only get one chance at it, so we need to make this a clean extraction. Once the Intergalactic Council realizes we're here, they'll kill him." He consulted his interior clock. "Gather whatever you think you'll need and meet me in the cargo bay launch area in twenty minutes."

The men filed out, and Tarik headed to Krystal's cabin. He hoped she'd had enough rest to regain her strength.

Chapter Nine

Krystal collapsed on the sleeping platform, groaning in frustration. It was one thing to use Tarik for a very pleasant interlude that just coincidentally boosted her control. She could accept that, even plan to do it again. Sex didn't mean anything, didn't imply need, or commitment. But to reach for his presence while in a trance, and to use that presence to brace herself against the gut-wrenching void that invariably hit her when she let go of the ley lines -- that was totally unacceptable.

She relived that moment in her mind, when she'd unconsciously reached for him. She felt again that incredible feeling of being grounded, of having someone anchoring her in the real world. Tarik. Her kidnapper. The damn cyborg who insisted on calling her a witch. She buried her head in the mound of pillows. This just couldn't be happening. It must be the stress of worrying about the Council's ultimatum.

She thumped her fist down into the soft coverings. She'd help him rescue his brother and then she'd get as far away as she could from Tarik the sexy cyborg. She wanted a gentle man for her life mate, one who would look after her and bring her presents, write her beautiful love poems and play with their offspring. Tarik wasn't anything like her dream man. He was angry and intense, and those eyes of his could see right into her soul. She closed her eyes, exhausted, and drifted off into a fitful sleep populated by pint-sized blue-eyed cyborgs who kept calling her Mommy.

* * *

Tarik looked down at the sleeping witch, and his heart did a little dance in his chest. Asleep, she looked young and so very innocent. Her chestnut hair spread out across her chest in riotous abandon, clothing her naked body with tempting streaks of red and brown.

He felt a smile curve the corner of his mouth. She really needed to learn some modesty, for his sake if not for hers. He could feel the blood rushing to his groin as his gaze followed the gentle curves of her figure and came to rest on the nest of soft curls at the apex of her thighs. He took a deep breath and struggled to control his raging lust. Once they'd rescued Cynn, he'd have time to work out the growing relationship between them. She'd somehow managed to charm her way past the ice surrounding his heart, and he didn't intend to let her go. Ever.

He leaned down and ghosted a gentle kiss across her lips. "Time to wake up, witch."

Krystal's eyes fluttered open, and in that first unguarded moment he could have sworn she looked up at him with love shining from the sparkling green depths of her eyes. Then she blinked, rubbing a hand across her face. "I had the strangest dream..." Her voice trailed off and an impish smile curved the corner of her mouth. "You must have been an adorable child."

Tarik stared at her in confusion. He'd never understand the witch. "The team's ready."

She nodded, her expression sobering. "Give me a few moments to prepare, and then I'll get up to the bridge. I'll have us under way in ten minutes."

He nodded and turned to leave. The door *whooshed* open at his approach, and he pivoted, striding back to the sleeping platform and the irresistible female perched on its edge. He cupped the back of her head in one hand, tilting it to sear a hard kiss across her lips. Their gazes met as he released her. "Be careful." He ran his hand through the silky fall of her hair. "I need to know you'll be safe."

She nodded mutely, her eyes wide in the pale oval of her face. He wished he had the words to express his feelings. She deserved a gentle man, a poet who could love her and cherish her, let her know how special she was. Instead, she had him.

* * *

The team crouched in the scrub brush surrounding the detention center. Tarik nodded to Zack, and they watched as the enhanced human seemed to flow across the

terrain toward his unsuspecting target. Moments later, the guard dropped lifelessly to the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Zack rose silently to his feet and grabbed the corpse, quickly dragging it out of sight.

"Go!" Tarik whispered the word into his com unit, rising to make the short dash across open ground to the aquifer. The other members of the team followed silently behind him, pausing just inside the tunnel to regroup. Blade and Tarik took the lead, the two mutants placing themselves next, while Paden fell into position behind them, his huge bulk moving with surprising grace as his restless gaze swept the tunnel, watching for any sign of pursuit.

The tunnel wound its way under the detention center, side tunnels branching off into darkness at odd intervals. Tarik kept a glowlight balanced above them, his internal comp controlling it so that it shed just enough light to allow them to make their way silently along the aquifer.

Tarik followed the interactive map superimposed over his optic nerve by his internal comp. It indicated the branch they needed to follow was directly ahead, and he signaled the team that they were approaching the target zone.

Moments later, Blade laid a hand on his arm, stopping him in his tracks. Tarik turned, and the mutant motioned him to get down. Someone or something lurked in the tunnel ahead.

Blade waited until his teammates settled on their haunches in the dark before he disappeared into the blackness ahead. They heard a brief scuffle, followed by a muffled thump, and the mutant rejoined them, wiping his hands carefully with a scrap of material he hadn't had a moment ago. He nodded grimly to Tarik and fell back into position.

Tarik kept the glowlight dimmed, and swung into the branch in the tunnel. "We're close. Should be an access chute ahead to the left." He spoke softly into the com unit. "Holding cells are to the left when we exit the chute." He spotted the access chute, and headed for it, using his comp's sensors to probe the dark shadows for any sign of a trap. "Blade?"

The mutant slipped into place in front of him, his head swiveling back and forth as he searched for any sign of body heat beyond the exit. "All clear."

Tarik signaled with his hand, and the team slipped into the corridor, turning left into a short hallway lined with doors. Blade indicated the one at the far end. "Life signs are in there," he whispered into his com unit.

They slid into position, two on either side of the door. Tarik waited until they were in place, weapons at the ready, before he laid his hand on the locking mechanism and used his comp to override the door lock. The panel slid into the wall, and he could see his brother tied to a chair in the center of the cell. A thick gag prevented Cynn from talking, but his eyes were wide with panic, sliding from Tarik to the corner of the room.

Tarik nodded. He crouched down, clicking the safety off his blaster before he threw himself into the room in a quick tuck and roll, coming up in front of Cynn with the weapon aimed firmly in the direction his brother had indicated.

"Tarik. It took you longer than I expected." Brent, the newest member of his crew, lounged against the wall, a crooked grin on his face. "But then, I came in the front door. So much easier that way."

Tarik stared at the man, stunned. A movement in the dark corner behind the traitor drew his attention.

Krystal! The Stargazer lay bound and gagged on the floor, her eyes dazed. One cheek was swollen, the imprint of a hand outlined in ugly red. Tarik forced himself to control the deep rage he felt. He met Brent's cold stare. "What's going on here?" He moved toward Krystal, unable to resist the need to comfort her.

Brent's eyes narrowed. "Back off. And get the rest of them in here." He pointed a lethal-looking blaster at Krystal's head, but his eyes never left Tarik. "Do as I say or the witch gets really hurt."

Tarik stopped and stared at the man who'd claimed to hate the Council more than anyone else in this sector of the galaxy. "Zack and Timmi, come in here real slow. Brent knows you're out there." He addressed the traitor. "Why?"

"Money. And power." Brent laughed, the sound harsh and humorless in the small room. "Do you have any idea how much the Council is willing to pay for both you and a Stargazer? All I had to do was deliver Cynn to them, and tell you that you needed a Stargazer to get him back. I never thought you'd fall for the damn witch, but that turned out to be a plus. You were so busy lusting after her you didn't realize I was setting you up."

He prodded Krystal carelessly with his foot, and Tarik felt a tight ball of anger coiling in his gut. The man had just sealed his own death warrant.

"The Council rep says she's the strongest witch they've come across in a long time. They knew she'd rather burn herself up in the power lines than submit to the Council, so they wanted her here, away from the arbitrators, while they convinced her to join." A nasty smile crossed Brent's face. "Maybe if you're good, they'll let you stick around to keep her ramped up to speed. The witches thrive on getting fucked."

Tarik gauged the distance, blocking the sound of the traitor's voice as he waited for him to make a mistake, to let his arm relax just enough. The man was a fool. He must have known Tarik would come armed to the teeth, and bring the best fighters from his group with him. Why hadn't he brought his own backup, or arranged for the Council to intercept them before they reached their target? Brent had to be insane to think he could take down the leader of the rebellion with just a blaster, no matter how lethal it looked.

He'd turned Cynn over to be tortured, and abused Krystal. An entire troop of Intergalactic soldiers wouldn't be enough to save him from Tarik's wrath. And yet, he stood there all alone, bragging about his treachery.

"We're waiting for a signal." Paden's voice was barely audible over the com unit, and Tarik didn't make a movement that might alert the traitor. Brent should have realized there were more men out there.

"They're going to give me my own ship, and a full troop under my control." Brent's gun hand moved, a fraction of an inch, and Tarik held his breath. *Just a little more...*

Cynn groaned, and Brent turned sharply toward the sound. Tarik seized the opportunity, launching himself directly at the traitor, twisting left to let his cybernetic arm take the blast as Brent pulled the trigger. The sickening smell of burnt synth-flesh filled the air, and Krystal whimpered.

Tarik raised his good arm and punched Brent square in the face, crushing his nose and driving the splinters up into his brain cavity. Brent fell to the ground, his agonized scream cut short when Tarik raised his foot to stomp on the other man's chest with every bit of his weight and cybernetic strength, crushing his rib cage and ensuring he wouldn't ever betray a friend or lay an abusive hand on a female again.

He looked up to find the rest of the assault team crowded into the small cell, Timmi using a laser blade to cut the restraints from Cynn. Tarik pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around his charred arm. The damage looked worse than it actually was. The blaster beam fire had been too brief to damage the titanium framework and intel-chips that formed the core of the arm.

He crouched down, gently pulling the gag out of Krystal's mouth before he made short work of the restraints. She threw herself at him, running her hands over his body again and again, as though to convince herself he was really there.

He hugged her close, smoothing his hands through the tangled mess of her hair. "It's okay, my little witch. He's gone. He's not going to hurt you or anyone else ever again."

"But you could have been killed!" She glared at the bloody corpse on the floor. "He said if I didn't do exactly as he said, he'd kill you."

Tarik grinned. "I'm not so easy to kill. Now calm down, we still have to get out of here." He glanced over at the other men. "Any idea what we're up against on the way out?"

Cynn grinned, taking a blaster from Blade and checking the charge. "Not a clue. I've been a little tied up since I got here, but I'm looking forward to repaying some of the hospitality I've been shown. Nice to see you, bro." His gaze shifted to Krystal. "I

take it you're the Stargazer everyone's been buzzing about. They're not going to be happy to see you plastered to my older brother."

Krystal gave him a shy smile, and Tarik felt his heart swell with pride at her courage. He'd ripped her from her safe home and put her smack dab in the middle of the rebellion, and she worried about him being hurt. He gave her a quick, hard kiss before he stood and checked his own weapons. He pried the blaster out of Brent's hand and handed it to Krystal. "If you have to use it, aim for the chest. It's the biggest target, and if you miss, there's a good chance you'll at least slow the attacker down."

He looked around at the team. They were all standing at the ready, waiting for orders. "We're going out the same way we came in, but there's bound to be some resistance." He looked at Paden. "You and Blade lead the way. Timmi, you and Zack follow, with Cynn in front of you. Krystal and I will bring up the rear." He looked around. "Everyone ready?"

The men nodded, faces grim as they got into position.

"Go!" Tarik shouted the command, and the group surged out the doorway.

Chapter Ten

Krystal kept her head down as much as possible, making sure her weapon pointed away from the men in front of her. She followed Timmi out into the corridor and around to the access chute, the comforting bulk of Tarik following behind her.

She'd been horrified when Brent yanked her off the Stargazer platform, taking advantage of her weakness immediately after they'd landed to slap the restraints on her and carry her off-ship. In a post-trance daze, she hadn't been able to focus enough to fight back. She didn't know what he'd done to the rest of the crew, whether he'd hurt them or if he'd fabricated some story to explain his bizarre behavior.

She shuddered, remembering the insane gleam in his eyes as he bragged about how much he'd sold them out for.

She paused, shrinking back against Tarik when Paden and Blade opened fire on a small group of snipers in one of the branch tunnels before signaling the all clear. The team hustled along the deserted aquifer, methodically working their way back to the ship.

At last, they reached the exit, and Paden held up his hand, halting the group. He sent out a signal on the com link, and moments later Krystal watched as the ship hovered into view, landing gently in the clear area in front of the scrub brush. The noise of the engines was deafening, but surprise was no longer an issue.

The team regrouped, putting Krystal in the middle of them as they moved toward the ship in a tight group. The crew on the ship laid down a thick blanket of covering fire that kept the enemy troops from taking advantage of their run across the open ground.

Moments later, the seven made it to the ship, and Krystal sagged in relief as the airlock slid closed behind them. She turned to Tarik and threw herself into his waiting arms, ignoring the teasing hoots and whistles from the rest of the men.

* * *

Three long solar days later, they were finally clear of the pursuing Council ships and could afford to relax. Krystal sunk into the warm water, letting the aromatic bubbles rise until only her head was above water. "Mmmmm. This feels so good. I can't believe you own an authentic jetted bath tub."

Tarik grinned wickedly. "I didn't until you expressed a desire for a bubble bath. I had the engineering unit fabricate it while we played hide and seek in that damn asteroid field." He lifted his arms and pulled the snug body shirt over his head.

She tilted her head and stared at him in amazement. "You had an antique bath tub replicated just for me?"

"No." He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his leggings and skimmed them down his lean thighs. "I did it for me." He tossed the clothing carelessly aside. "I figured if I had one of these in my quarters, I could keep you naked and available all the time." He stood and stalked slowly across the room toward her, his cock bobbing eagerly as it curved upward from his groin.

Krystal waited until he got close enough, and splashed the soapy water at him. He raised his eyebrows at her as the bubbly drops slid down his chest, and she giggled. She'd never imagined all those years ago, when she'd realized she was different, that life could ever be this carefree and happy again.

Tarik growled in mock severity and climbed into the tub, straddling her body with his long legs. "You need to learn a little respect, witch."

"Really? And who's going to teach me?" She stuck out her tongue impudently.

"I guess it'll have to be me." Tarik wrapped one hand around his shaft, stroking slowly along the thick length.

Her eyes followed the movement and she gulped as she watched the thick cock swell even larger. "Are you planning on using that on me?"

"I think in you would be more effective."

"I'll squirm and wiggle."

"Can't be helped."

"I might even scream a bit."

"I certainly hope so." He knelt down and pulled her legs apart, while he positioned the swollen head of his cock at her soggy entrance. "You might want to start squirming now."

Krystal obliged, squirming as he slid himself deep inside her slick pussy with one powerful thrust of his hips.

"Ready to acknowledge me as your master and become a permanent member of my crew?" Tarik slid his cock in and out of her tight channel with measured thrusts of his hips, running his hands down the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs.

"Master is such a strong word." Krystal gasped as he lowered his mouth to nip the sensitive skin in the hollow of her throat.

"True, but then I'm a very strong cyborg," he pointed out, as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He gripped her hips and raised her up, hesitating for a brief moment before lowering her back down over his delicious shaft.

"Yes." She whimpered as he held her in place with one hand and reached down to score his thumbnail across her swollen clit.

"Yes, you acknowledge me as master, or yes, you want to join my crew?"

Krystal moaned in frustration. Why did she have to be stuck with the only male in the galaxy who wanted to carry on a conversation while he fucked her? "The crew thing!"

Tarik ground his pelvis into hers, his cock stretching her, filling her impossibly full, and she felt a hundred tiny flames dance down her spine on their way to her core.

"Call me Master." He pulled her in toward him to nibble a line of fiery kisses across her breast.

"No." Her breath came in short pants. She could feel her body spiraling higher and higher, molten heat flowing along her every nerve as Tarik pumped his enormous

cock in and out of her slick channel. The water splashed and bubbled around them, the warm wetness adding to the erotic sensations that flowed through her.

“Oh, come on. I’ll be a good master.” He lifted up, tilting her so that his cock rubbed across her clit with every thrust, sending flashes of heat racing through her. She squirmed helplessly on his shaft, closing her eyes as sensations rocketed into her, one after the other, so fast she no longer knew where she ended and he began. The orgasm burst over her with lightning speed, hurtling her into a chasm of pure feeling.

She clutched at Tarik, screaming his name as her channel gripped him, and he came with her, his cock emptying its thick load deep inside her. Wave after wave of sensation rocketed through her until at last she floated back to earth on a cloud of sheer bliss, tiny aftershocks still rippling through her core.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her with his sparkling blue eyes, his cock still buried deep inside her.

“You really are a witch.” He trailed a gentle finger across her cheek. “You’ve stolen my heart, and I didn’t even know I had one. You’re really going to stay with me and join the crew?”

Krystal grinned happily at him. “Yes, Master!”

Anne Kane

Anne Kane lives in the beautiful Okanagan Valley with a bouncy Jack Russell terrier, a cantankerous Himalayan cat, a geriatric guinea pig and too many fish to count. She has two handsome sons and three adorable grandchildren. By day, she's a respectable bean counter, but after hours her imagination soars and she writes romances that span the galaxy and encompass beings of all sizes, shapes and origins.

She first started telling stories to her little sister when they were toddlers, and she just can't seem to stop. In 2007, she decided it was time to get serious about her writing and see where it would lead. For more news and happenings please visit <http://www.annekane.literalseduction.net/>