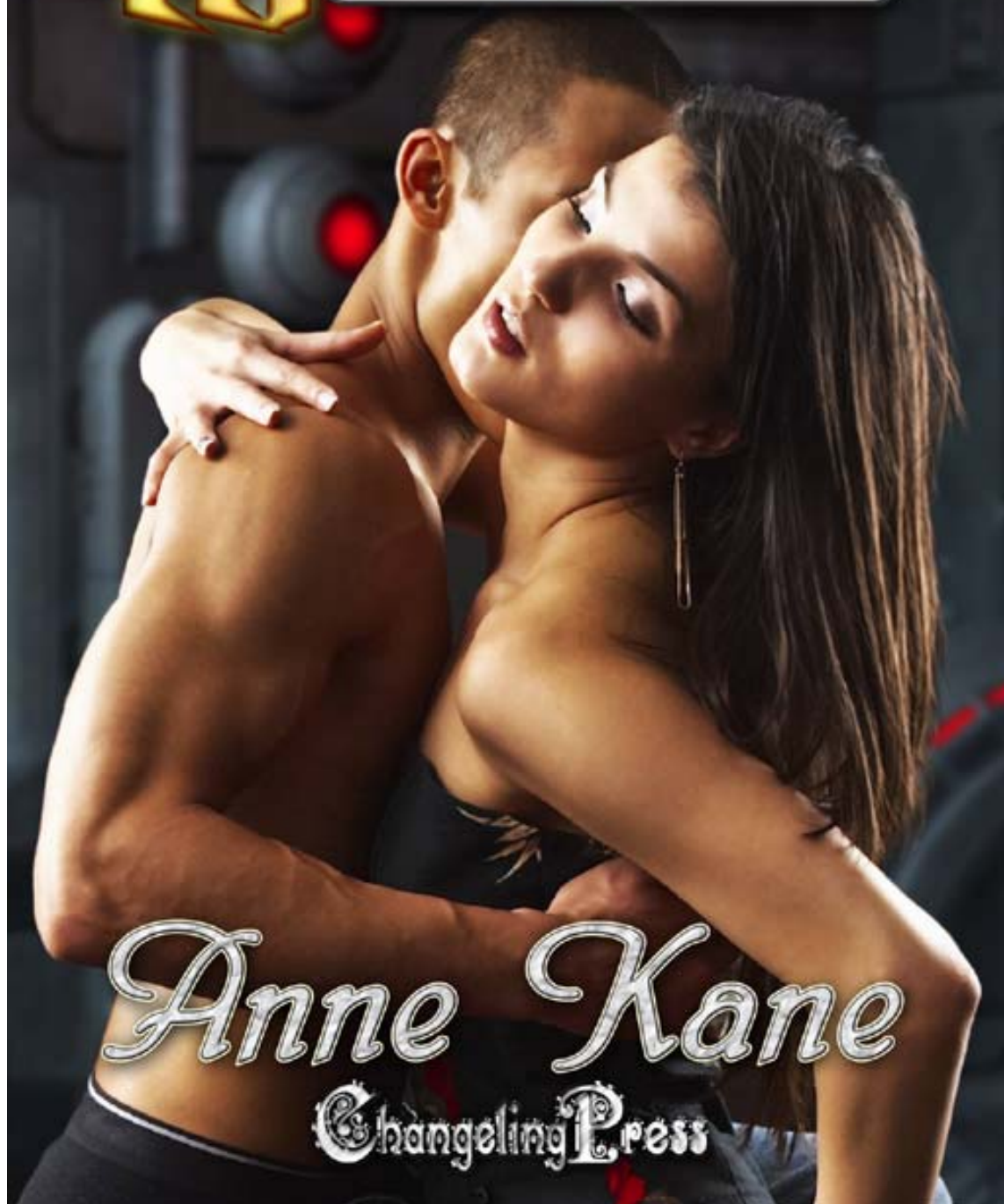


WILD

stargazers 3



Anne Kane

Changeling Press

Stargazers 3: Wild

Anne Kane

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Stargazers 3: Wild

Anne Kane

Unfairly indentured, Stargazer Anaya plans her escape carefully, stowing away on a ship belonging to the cynical bounty hunter Ryland. She just needs to avoid detection until the ship docks at the next port of call.

When Ryland discovers the beauty, he assumes she's a runaway sex slave and offers her a choice: be returned to her master or stay and serve his every desire.

Chapter One

"And what do we have here?" Ryland reached out and snagged the woman's arm as she tried to slip past him. "Did you really think you could scurry around the bowels of my ship without me noticing?" With a quick twist of his wrist, he snapped a set of immobilizer cuffs over her hands and smiled grimly when numbness slowly stilled her flailing limbs.

She let loose with a string of inventive curses, some of which he'd be willing to bet were anatomically impossible. What did she expect? Stowing away on a bounty hunter's ship had to be one of the stupidest things a sentient being could do.

Despite his anger at the inconvenience her presence on his ship would cost him, he let out an appreciative whistle while his gaze swept over her lithe body. She looked even more delectable in person than she had on the vid scans. He'd been too preoccupied with the new intel he'd gathered on his current target to detect her presence until the ship was well away from the docking ring.

Last sleep cycle, she'd grown careless and triggered an intruder alert on the lower decks. He'd searched for signs of a pirate attack before he'd realized the intruder was a lone female, scavenging food from one of the dispensers. She must have stowed away during his last docking. A runaway slave, most likely. There were quite a few slave farms in this sector where the slaves, both male and female, were bred for looks and a high sex drive.

Angry red chafe marks at her wrists and ankles suggested a less than caring owner, which would explain her willingness to risk the harsh penalties for running. He didn't approve of beings who mishandled their slaves, so he felt no compulsion to return her to whomever she'd fled from. Grunner, the serial killer he was tracking,

already had a good head start. Returning the woman to her owner would set him back at least two solar cycles, and possibly give the killer enough time to find another victim.

She'd chosen his ship; she could take the consequences.

He held her at arm's length while she continued to curse. Ample curves softened the lean lines of her slender body and a mane of dark, shaggy hair framed her round face before tumbling down her back in an untamed mass. Her green eyes slanted upward, giving her a slightly exotic look. Right now, those eyes glared up at him and she twisted helplessly in his grasp. For a slave, she had quite a temper.

Which might explain the marks on her wrists and ankles.

He really didn't have time to deal with an abused female right now. On the other hand, he couldn't very well throw her in the brig and forget about her. He jerked her forward with a little more force than necessary. "What's your name?"

"Anaya. Who the hell are you?" She snarled another oath when he refused to loosen his grip on her arm.

"I'm Ryland, the owner of this shuttle, so you can shut up, Anaya, and pay attention."

The woman fell silent and stared up at him with a stunned expression on her lovely face. If he didn't know better, he'd swear no one had ever told her to be quiet before.

He lifted her hands and stared pointedly at the angry red welts on her wrists. "I don't approve of abusing one's property. There are a number of ways to administer discipline without leaving marks on the flesh. I don't have time to play nursemaid, so if you don't want me to return you to your master, you'd better come to an arrangement with me."

She looked confused. Just what he needed, a slow-witted female to deal with. He took an exasperated breath and tried to think of a way to explain the situation in simple terms.

He grasped her shoulders and glared into her amazingly bright green eyes. "I don't want to waste the time necessary to turn around and take you back." He stroked

his finger down the front of her tight suit, noting the way her nipples hardened under the light touch. He smiled darkly. "You can be my pet body slave and stay on board, or I can call your master and arrange to have you returned to him -- or her -- at the next port." He traced the delicate structure of her cheekbones. "Your choice."

The woman's jaw dropped open and she stuttered, "Y-you want me to be your b-body slave? Like a sex slave?"

He nodded. "I'm not a gentle man, but I won't intentionally hurt you. Having my own body slave on board might prove to be interesting." He raised a brow quizzically, a thought suddenly occurring. "You're not running from a bond-mate, are you?" That would bring up a whole other set of problems he didn't even want to consider.

"No!" Those gorgeous green eyes widened in alarm. "I'm not mated."

He relaxed a bit, surprised at the relief he felt at her answer. "Well? Do we have a deal?"

"Ummm. Sure." She looked down, shuffling her feet on the deck. "Deal. Just don't send me back."

The submissive stance was so obviously against her nature, Ryland grinned. The little minx thought she could fool him with a bit of third-rate acting. "Good. While I'd love to sample your talents right now, I have some work to do." He swept her up in his arms, tossing her over his shoulder before striding out the door.

Heading down the corridor, he ran an assessing hand over the smooth curves of her butt. She dangled helplessly, her head bouncing awkwardly against his back. He'd always been partial to a firm ass. The woman squirmed uncomfortably, her hands still restrained behind her. "Easy now. Don't want any more marks on that luscious body of yours." He brought his hand down smartly and laughed at her strangled gasp. "This voyage is looking up."

He used his neural implants to open the door to the holding cell, ignoring her stream of colorful insults, and tossed her into the anti-grav stasis field. He'd have to teach her to hold her tongue. For a body slave, she had a shocking lack of control.

He could tell by her stunned expression the exact second she felt the effects of the stasis field. It held her suspended within its parameters, unable to move her limbs. He reached in and straightened her so that she stood upright and wouldn't suffer any ill effects. His military-grade neural net automatically negated the field's attempt to control him. "I can't have you running loose on the ship just yet. You'll be safe here until I have time to deal with you."

He grinned at the shocked look on her face as he backed out of the cell. Turning, he sauntered down the corridor in the direction of the bridge, cheerfully whistling his favorite tune off key.

* * *

Damn!

She'd been so sure he hadn't detected her presence on board his ship. She'd just about jumped out of her skin when he'd appeared and wrapped his arms around her, dragging her up against his muscular body.

A very nice body.

She'd been watching it and hiding from it since she'd bribed the dockworker to slip her on board with the supplies. She'd planned her escape from the Colony Five government facility very carefully, researching the deep space vessels that came into the port. She'd settled on this ship because the bounty hunter always traveled alone, and she reasoned that avoiding detection would be simple with only two of them aboard his spacious ship. Apparently, she'd been wrong.

At least she still had one thing in her favor -- the man had no idea she was a Stargazer. He'd seen the marks on her wrists and ankles and assumed she was some sort of pleasure slave, running from a harsh master. If she could manage to play along until the next port, she'd be able to escape and finally taste freedom. She smiled grimly, imagining the fleet commander's frustration when he realized she'd managed to elude his evil clutches. She'd never again feel the sting of the electro lash for refusing to use her talents in ways she found repulsive, using her talent to outpace legitimate settlers to their assigned planets and cheat them out of their homes.

She sucked in a startled breath as she heard the sound of her captor's footsteps ringing out on the metal decking. It hadn't taken him long to finish his business. She schooled her features into what she hoped resembled a slave happy to yield to her master.

Submitting to his sexual appetites wouldn't be too difficult. She was a Stargazer; she often used sex to bolster her talent, and the big bounty hunter was just the type of male she found attractive. Every part of his mouthwatering body was super-sized, including the thick bulge in those tight spacer pants. She felt her pussy cream in anticipation when he stalked through the doorway, a darkly sinful grin on his rugged face.

"Miss me?" He shrugged his shirt off his shoulders, baring a muscular chest. "I've turned navigation over to the ship's comp until we reach the next system, so we have time to get acquainted."

Anaya gulped, her attention on his big hands. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his pants and slid them down over his hips, allowing his massive shaft to spring free. He dropped the pants to the floor and kicked them off.

She felt a sudden twinge of misgiving. She'd always been in charge during her sexual exploits, her chosen partners willing to follow her lead and pleasure her in any way she demanded. The bounty hunter might not be quite so easy to control.

He gripped his cock in his fist, casually running it down the thick length. She watched, unable to tear her gaze away from the single drop glistening on the plum-shaped tip.

Ryland sauntered over to where she hung in midair, trapped by the field. How the hell did he manage to move through it so effortlessly? She narrowed her eyes speculatively. Only a military-grade nano system would allow him that kind of control over an anti-grav stasis field -- which would also explain how he'd managed to detect her presence.

She felt incredibly vulnerable, unable to move while he stood by her side, sweeping the heavy mass of her hair back from her forehead. She barely managed to

whimper softly when he carefully eased the silky material of her suit back to expose her breasts. She'd always been proud of her breasts, pert little mounds, nicely rounded with dusky pink nipples.

He rolled one between his thumb and forefinger, nodding in approval as it came to attention. "There's something satisfying about a female that's bred to fuck. Cuts through all that annoying chatter some women require before getting down to business."

Anaya had to concede he had a point. Legally registered sex slaves commanded a premium price at flesh markets around the galaxy. They were bred for looks and a high sex drive, and were perfectly happy with their lot in life. They were well treated and often lived better than the citizens.

Ryland walked behind her. Anaya felt him grasp her hands and gently push the cuffs up higher on her arms to expose the welts circling the slender limbs. She felt the soothing caress of his thumb gliding gently over the tender flesh before he let go of her arms and came back around to face her.

"Your master deserves to be thrashed. This is totally unacceptable." He looked into her eyes, and she thought she detected a twinge of guilt at her fear. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you. Much. I've never taken a female by force and I don't intend to start now."

Anaya watched his lips descend, mesmerized. She closed her eyes, her lips parting under the gentle pressure teasing them with skillful nibbles. She could feel the restrained power of his hands exploring her body, gliding over the hollow of her shoulder, shaping the mounds of her breasts. He swept his tongue into her mouth, demanding her submission while his hands continued to stroke the sensitive flesh of her breasts.

He smiled at her, his sexy blue eyes glittering when he trailed a path of kisses from her mouth down to the hollow of her throat. He paused there, taking his time exploring the tender skin before continuing down to nuzzle one nipple, scoring his

teeth across the pebbled peak while she gasped, unable to move. Ryland sucked the tip into his mouth, and liquid heat shot through her.

"Please." She hated the pleading tone of her voice, but she couldn't stop herself. "I need to be able to move."

"You need to do what I tell you." Ryland tilted his head. "I'm beginning to see why your master punished you so harshly. You need a firm hand." He turned his attention back to her breasts, licking and sucking as she whimpered helplessly beneath his attention. Just when she thought she couldn't handle any more, he stopped and backed away from her. A wicked grin curved his sexy mouth when he deliberately slid his big fist down the length of his cock.

Anaya watched the huge shaft swell even larger, the plum-shaped tip jerking eagerly. She slipped her tongue out and licked her lips, unable to tear her gaze away.

"Want a taste?"

Anaya tried to nod, but the stasis field stopped her. "Yeah." He arched his brow at her, and she flushed. She just wasn't good at this submissive stuff. "Yes, master. Please."

"That's better." He stepped forward, catching her when the field suddenly let go. If she'd been unsure before, that confirmed it. He had a military-grade neural net and he could control the ship with a thought. He removed the cuffs from her wrists. "On your knees." He stroked the hair back from her face, and she dropped to her knees on the hard decking, wincing at the impact.

She reached out to take the enormous shaft, barely managing to wrap her palm around the thick length. Ryland cupped the back of her head with one hand while she flicked her tongue across the swollen head, tasting the salty drop clinging to the tip. His cock jerked under her questing tongue, and she smiled to herself. Being the master didn't guarantee him all the power.

Closing her eyes, she sucked the sensitive head into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the fluted edges. She scored her teeth across the slit and Ryland groaned, lacing his fingers into her long hair to hold her to him.

She leaned forward, running her tongue down the long shaft, exploring the veins that circled it. She nibbled her way to the base and sucked one of the furry balls into her mouth, earning herself a strangled growl from the bounty hunter.

She felt a surge of elation when she realized nothing had changed. She was still in control of the man who would soon be giving her pleasure. He just didn't realize it yet.

She sucked on first one ball and then the other before returning to nibble and lick at his enormous shaft. Tilting her head, she sucked the tip into her mouth and slowly worked more and more of the thick cock in. She'd never managed to deep-throat any of her lovers, but then again, she'd never tried. Usually she explained what she wanted, and if the male was lucky, she'd want to feel a cock inside her. Sometimes she just wanted to be pleased and her partner's satisfaction didn't matter.

"Oh yeah. Work that sweet little mouth of yours." Ryland thrust his hips back and forth, pumping himself in and out of her mouth. She angled her head into a better position, enjoying the smooth slide of him against her lips, her teeth gently raking him with every thrust. She could feel herself going damp and slick at the thought of his huge cock invading her sex.

The power she'd harness from their joining would be incredible.

"Enough." Ryland's voice thickened with lust. He pulled his cock out and urged her to her feet. "I want to feel that little pussy of yours tighten itself around me when I come." He swept her up in his arms and strode out the doorway. "And I want to feel you squirming under me."

Anaya buried her face against his hard chest, inhaling his musky male scent. The powerful rippling of his biceps sent a quiver of anticipation through her. She was in complete agreement. She wanted him buried hard and deep inside her.

She gasped, her eyes snapping open, when he tossed her onto a hard sleeping platform. He followed her down, straddling her body as he sat back on his heels. Grasping her arms, he pulled them up over her head, one hand spanning both her wrists.

He slid his hand over her belly, pausing to trace the outline of the dragon tattooed in the hollow of her hip. He raised his head, and she could see the question in his eyes. She didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to think about that day, in her sixteenth year, when her handler decided to have his house symbol tattooed on her. The day she realized her freedom no longer existed. "It's a dragon."

He nodded, and she could have sworn she saw a glimmer of sympathy in his eyes before he moved his hand lower -- and she forgot all about slaves and masters and dragon tattoos that screamed she was just a piece of property.

He slipped off her, still holding her hands in one of his while he moved the other down, cupping her mound in his large palm before he slipped one finger into her damp heat.

Anaya cried out, bucking her hips up off the hard mattress. Fingers of erotic flame licked their way down her spine when he pushed that finger deeper, stroking the tender flesh inside her.

"Damn, you're wet." He raked his thumb across the hot nub of her clit, a wicked grin on his face. The man knew exactly how to make her beg.

And beg she did. "Please. I need to feel you inside me." She gasped when he slipped a second finger in beside the first, scissoring them in a maddening rhythm that sent her soaring out of control. She no longer had the ability to think. Rational thought fled, replaced by feeling.

She whimpered, twisting beneath him in a mindless haze of lust and need. A hot tide of pleasure surged through her with every stroke of his fingers, every teasing stroke of his thumb across her clit. Her inner muscles tightened around him, trying to drag those fingers deeper, hold them inside. She made a desperate sound, deep in her throat, and suddenly the fingers were gone, leaving a terrible yearning hunger behind.

"Noooooo." She opened her eyes, dazed with lust. Ryland grinned, freeing her hands so he could grasp her hips, lifting them high and tilting her until his cock brushed eagerly at the throbbing entrance to her pussy.

Anaya moaned, arching her back to try and force his gorgeous cock inside her. His grin widened and he held her still for one long second. Then he thrust hard, burying himself so deep she could feel the soft fur of his taut balls slapping against her ass. He waited until she looked up at him and then slowly rolled his hips, grinding himself against her pussy.

Anaya sucked in a deep breath, flickers of heat racing through every nerve ending. Her hips moved automatically, matching his when he settled into a steady rhythm, pumping his hard shaft in and out of her slick core. She watched his eyes, the lust flaring hungrily in the molten blue, sending shivers of excitement racing through her.

He was all male, sinewy muscles and hard angles, ruthlessly plunging into her tight channel. And he wanted her. Anaya. Not the power of the Stargazer. Not the prestige that came from being chosen by a witch. He didn't know. He just wanted to fuck her. And that was the sexiest thing she'd ever encountered. She wrapped her legs around him, locking her ankles behind his back to give herself more leverage.

"You are one hot little bitch." He bared his teeth in a predatory smile. "And you love riding my cock, don't you."

It wasn't a question and Anaya didn't bother trying to answer. She closed her eyes, feeling the tiny ripples of pleasure start to roll through her, driving her higher and higher. Lust. Hunger. Need. They swirled together, overwhelming her with a searing delight that took her up to the heights and spilled her over the edge.

"Rylaaaaaannnd!" She screamed his name, her nails digging into his back as a blinding explosion of intense pleasure shattered her world into a million tiny points of light. He held her tight, his cock jerking deep inside her. Her inner muscles gripped him firmly as his hot seed jetted into her. He collapsed on top of her, his breath coming in long, hard gulps. They lay there for several long minutes, still joined, and Anaya felt an odd sensation.

Contentment. If she could just lie here forever, just a woman in the arms of her lover, she could be happy.

Ryland shifted his bulk and collapsed on the mattress beside her, his breath slowly returning to normal. He pulled her into the shelter of his body and fitted her against him with her head resting on his shoulder. She felt his lips brush a soft kiss across the top of her head, and she sighed happily, a lazy smile curving the corner of her mouth. The life of a pleasure slave wouldn't be so bad with Ryland as her master.

Chapter Two

Ryland stared at the vid screen, the list of open bounties scrolling across it in an endless loop. Murderers. Con artists. Escaped thugs. Space pirates.

And an indentured Stargazer whose masters were desperate to recover their property. The picture was old, the details murky. Anaya must have been barely past her coming-of-age when it was taken. The hair was shorter, cut in a jagged fashion that made her terrified green eyes look too large for the thin face, but he had no doubt the girl on the screen was the same one he'd left sleeping in his quarters.

Son of a hell-spawned asteroid field! She owed him an explanation, and it had better be good. He paused the display and used his neural connections to download the bounty information.

According to the document, Anaya had been indentured to the military junta that ruled Colony Five for an unheard of twenty-year period. The documents were signed by a man named Staavil, her court-appointed guardian. She'd vanished several solar cycles ago, and the bounty papers suggested someone had kidnapped her, since she had no way to get off-planet unnoticed. Her masters were adamant that she had no travel documents. The bounty offer contained the usual warnings about the dangers of engaging professional kidnappers. They were offering five thousand credits for her return in good working condition, plus a bonus for information on how she'd gotten off-planet in the first place.

Ryland snarled softly. The wounds on her wrists and ankles told him why she'd left, but five thousand credits was a goodly sum. More than the amount offered for his current target, the serial killer. He'd be a fool not to return the witch and collect.

And yet, he had a feeling this was one bounty he'd pass on.

He slammed his fist down on the marble surface in front of him, remembering the way her hot channel had milked his shaft while she whimpered and bucked eagerly beneath him. Stargazer or not, the little witch was the best damn fuck he'd had in a long time.

* * *

A stinging slap on her bare ass woke Anaya from a contented sleep. Ryland had proved to be an amazing lover. She glared up at him, rubbing her hand across her offended butt. "What was that for?" She studied his grim face warily, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

"For deceiving your master." Ryland paused, his eyes ice cold. "Stargazer Anaya Pretch."

Anaya cursed softly, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. How the hell had he managed to discover her heritage? She eyed him cautiously, not sure what to say.

"Well?" He knelt on the bed, towering over her. "Care to explain why you let me think you were a bred sex slave?"

Anaya turned her head, refusing to look him in the eye. She had no idea how much he knew and she didn't intend to supply him with any information.

"Who put those marks on your wrists?"

She looked up at the unexpected change of topic. His tone was mild, but she could see the temper flashing in his eyes. She gulped, her hands covering the angry red welts. "My handler. I wouldn't do what he commanded, so he punished me. He wanted me to use my talent to help him cheat legitimate settlers out of their homes." She shrugged. "He couldn't afford to really injure me and he knew how much it would hurt every time I worked on the platform."

Ryland snarled, forcibly prying her fingers off her arm. "Son of a bitch needs to learn respect." He ran his fingers gently over the welts. "Your handler. Explain that to me. I thought Stargazers were in charge of their own destiny. Free to be contracted to whoever offered them the best deal."

Anaya felt her hard-won control slipping. "Unless their guardian decides to sell them." She tilted her chin up, knowing her defiant glare wouldn't win her any points with the bounty hunter. "I was fourteen when my parents failed to return from an exploratory mission to the Orion singularity, and I freaked out. I wanted to go look for them but the station medic sedated me so I wouldn't do anything rash. When it became apparent that my parents weren't returning, the courts stepped in. They didn't realize I had talent and they appointed a distant relative, Staavil, to be my guardian, with no limitations on his authority."

She paused, remembering Staavil's glee when he discovered her secret. He'd locked her in a tiny cabin on his shuttle, not bothering to tell her what he planned. She'd existed on dried spacer foods and recycled water for what seemed like ages, until he'd come to drag her, bound, to a meeting with the Colony Five government officials. She'd cursed him when he handed her over to Jorge, the soulless cyborg who'd been appointed her handler.

"You're not taking me back." She would fight this time. She was older now, able to stick up for herself. "I'll fight you with every last breath in my body."

Ryland raised his brows, laughter replacing the anger in his eyes. "Really?" He lifted her chin with his finger. "That could be interesting. I always enjoy a good fight." He dipped his head to place a hard kiss on her lips. "But you promised to be my personal slave." He ran his tongue across her lips, the soft pressure achingly tender. "And I promised I wouldn't hurt you. I always keep my promises."

He grasped her arm and raised her injured wrists to his lips. He traced the angry welts with his tongue. "What was his name?"

"His name?" Anaya frowned, confused. "Whose name?"

"Your handler. The man who hurt you." Ryland's soft tone, with its hint of restrained fury, sent a shiver down her spine.

"Jorge. He's not actually a man, he's a cyborg."

"No," Ryland corrected her. "If he gets anywhere near you ever again, he's dead."

Anaya held her breath. "You won't send me back?"

He reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "They're offering five thousand credits for your return." His gaze wandered down her naked body. "That's a lot of money." He paused and a darkly wicked smile curved the corner of his mouth. "You think you can make that up to me?"

Anaya looked at the mischief dancing in those ice-blue eyes and dared to hope. "I'll certainly try." She smiled faintly. "And if I'm not submissive enough for a sex slave, you could always let me help power the ship."

"A good master can train his slaves into submission." Ryland grinned wryly. "I must be crazy. Everyone knows witches are trouble." He straightened up and grabbed one of his shirts from the bin beside the sleeping platform. "Get some clothes on and meet me in the crew lounge. We need to get some meat on those bones of yours if you're going to make a decent slave."

Anaya ducked and snatched the clothing before it sailed over her head. "Where is the lounge?"

Ryland grinned at her while he strode to the doorway. "You're a witch. You should be able to find it without any help from me." He ducked when she threw the shirt back at him. His laughter echoed mockingly as he disappeared down the corridor.

* * *

Ryland stared at the holo screen. Gone. The serial killer had managed to elude him yet again. They'd followed the trail of spent ion particles from his shuttle all the way to where the mutilated remains of his last victim had been found, and it ended abruptly in a deserted part of the galaxy with no shuttle in sight.

Ryland tapped into the computer records with his neural net and retraced the asshole's route, looking for any sign of deviation. A shuttle couldn't just disappear. There had to be a logical explanation.

"Problem?"

He turned at the sound of Anaya's voice. She stood in the doorway, one of his old shirts covering her delectable body. With her hair tousled and her eyes still hazy

from sleep, she looked young. Much too young for a cynical bounty hunter like him. If he had any decency, he'd turn her loose at the next port.

He felt a grim smile tug the corners of his mouth. Lucky for his libido, he'd lost any decency he'd ever felt the night his wife and unborn child had been slaughtered by an escaped convict from New Mars. Before that night, he'd been an astronomer, quietly studying the stars and other celestial bodies. He'd spent twenty-two hours absorbed in the shower of meteorites in the Geses system on that fateful night. His wife had stayed in their home, pleading exhaustion in her third trimester. The convict had slipped in through the window Ryland had left open to capture the evening breeze.

Ryland returned to find the room awash in blood. So much blood. He'd cried for the last time that night, holding the mutilated remains of his family. He'd laid her and their unborn son to rest in a sunny meadow before he'd hunted the convict down and administered his own brand of justice.

There were no appeals, no technicalities, and no mercy for the animal who had destroyed his family. After he'd disposed of the body, there was no going back to his peaceful life. He'd taken on one contract, bringing in a hit man. Then another, capturing the leader of a ring of child slavers. Then another murderer. He found he had a knack for tracking down criminals.

He shrugged. "Not a problem, more of a puzzle." His gaze dropped to her long legs as she crossed the room to stand beside him. "This is the third time I've been hot on the trail of this piece of spacer dung, only to have the damn trail disappear right in the middle of nowhere." He pulled up the star charts from the beginning of the voyage and showed her the trail of ion debris he'd been following. "And then it just stops in the middle of nowhere." He looked at her hopefully. "I don't suppose you can see ion trails the same way you see energy lines?"

Anaya frowned, a cute furrow creasing her brow. "The energy lines are alive, full of light. Ion trails have no life in them; they are the dust and debris left behind." She studied the charts. "He must be disguising the trail somehow, or maybe capturing the spent particles so you can't follow him."

Ryland had considered that possibility earlier, but he couldn't see how it could be done. Still, there had to be something, some fact, some kernel of knowledge, he'd overlooked.

"Maybe it's the singularity." Anaya pointed to the dense spot of blackness at the far side of the star chart. "That's a naked singularity. Since it didn't form a black hole, there is no event horizon, and the energy backwash radiating from it could be dissipating the ion trail, dragging it into the dense center."

Ryland stared at the chart. Of course! It was so simple and yet brilliant. He called up the records from his previous unsuccessful chase, studying the outlying areas. Another singularity appeared in the top corner. He looked up admiringly. "I've been studying this thing since early rising. How the hell did you figure it out so quickly?"

Anaya's eyes sparkled. "Stargazers work with energy lines, and we're very aware of anything that can disrupt them."

Moving her hands gracefully, she gestured at the screen. Ryland loved the way she used her whole body when she talked, her arms and hands in constant movement and her slim body swaying. He could feel the familiar tightening in his groin and his cock started to harden. She might not have been bred for sex, as he'd originally assumed, but she certainly had the capacity to keep him in a constant state of arousal. He dragged his attention back to the star charts. "So how do we find out where he went? Or has he managed to outsmart us?"

Anaya moved forward, and his gaze dropped to the cheeks of her firm ass peeking out from beneath the hem of the shirt. "Think of it as a big circle of darkness. Your quarry enters the circle and the trail disappears. At some point, assuming he didn't commit suicide by letting the singularity swallow him up, he has to emerge. We need to find the spot where that happens."

Ryland reached out to circle her wrist, careful not to touch the welts that were slowly beginning to fade. He watched her eyes widen when he drew her down into his lap and fastened his mouth on hers, capturing her lips with a hungry intensity. She hesitated for an agonizingly long second, her lips soft and unresponsive, and then she

kissed him back. He slipped his tongue in to tease hers, exploring the sweet taste of her. He used one hand to tilt her head back, angling her mouth to the perfect position.

He'd never felt such hunger, such need for a female. Even with his wife, there hadn't been such an intense aching lust. That had been love, young love, sweet and trusting and pure. This was something else. He didn't understand it and he didn't care. He let himself savor her honey sweetness for a few moments longer before he reluctantly let her go. Anaya quickly took two steps to the left and collapsed into the co-pilot's station.

He took a deep breath and willed his body to cooperate. He'd just finished making thorough love to her less than two hours ago. He should be able to keep his lust in check for a while longer.

"So how do we reacquire his trail?" He felt a small surge of satisfaction at the confused look in her eyes. All that lust hadn't been one-sided. She'd felt it too.

"We circle the singularity. At a safe distance of course." A visible shudder passed through her body. "We don't want to get drawn into the center."

Ryland nodded. They wouldn't stand a chance of surviving in the dense core of the singularity. He danced his fingers across the console in front of him, programming a circular sweep pattern into the computer. The ship's artificial intelligence system would do a thorough search of the path in front of them twenty times per second, looking for the fugitive's ion trail. Satisfied that it was set to notify him when it found the trail, he disengaged his neural net from the comp system and stood.

Anaya watched him warily from her seat, and he felt a familiar grin curve the corners of his mouth. It was becoming a habit with her around, this grinning. Amazing what a round of fantastic sex could do for one's outlook.

He turned, enjoying the way her gaze slid down his body, pausing to take in the noticeable bulge in the front of his spacer suit. He stalked across the space between them. No point in having a gorgeous sex slave aboard ship if you didn't plan to make use of her. She might be a Stargazer, but that didn't change their original agreement.

* * *

"Get that shirt off and get down on all fours."

The look he gave her didn't inspire confidence, but Anaya felt her treacherous pussy dampen. "I thought the fact that I'm a Stargazer changed our arrangement." She chanced a look up into his eyes while she shrugged out of the shirt and reluctantly got down on her hands and knees on the cold decking. "You know I wasn't bred for sex."

"That's debatable; you fuck like you were born for it." He looked over her naked body, causing her pussy to cream in anticipation. "I said your talents might prove to be useful. I didn't say I no longer required your..." he paused and gave her a wicked smile, "...other talents. Spread your legs a bit more and keep your eyes front. Your training is woefully inadequate."

"I wasn't trained to be a sex slave," she muttered, spreading her legs a bit wider.

"That's quite obvious." He brought his hand down on her ass in a sharp slap.

"Ouch!" Anaya twisted her head to glare up at him.

"Quiet." Ryland ran his hand down the cheek of her ass. "Your focus should be your master's pleasure, not any incidental pain you might feel."

Anaya bit back her angry reply. She hated to admit it, but being on display, naked and helpless, had a certain appeal. She spread her legs a bit more, enjoying the feel of the ship's cool air on her aroused clit.

"That's more like it." Ryland's voice had thickened. He stepped around in front of her and started to strip off his clothing with quick, efficient movements.

Anaya licked her lips, watching him drop the top of his spacer suit to the floor to reveal his muscular chest and a hard, flat stomach with a V of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of his pants. He held her gaze, a roguish grin on his face. He hooked his thumbs and stripped the pants down over his hips, discarding them. His cock sprang free, the hard shaft curving upward from a nest of dark curls. Anaya sucked in a lungful of air, anticipation sending darts of lust dancing down her spine.

"Stay there." Ryland walked around behind her, and she twisted her neck to try to follow his movements. He reached down and swatted her on the backside. "I said stay still. I want to examine my property."

Anaya almost laughed. He might like to think he was the big bad bounty hunter, but she suspected he wasn't nearly as tough as he made out. She'd stowed away aboard his ship, misled him about her motives, and neglected to tell him that an entire planetary government would be willing to do anything to get her back. And yet he hadn't done more than throw her in a stasis field for a few hours and then proposition her because he thought she was a bred sex slave. That hardly qualified him to be a hard-assed bad guy. She ought to know. Her handler back on Colony Five had a sadistic streak a galaxy wide and enjoyed watching her suffer. He'd made an art out of inflicting the most pain without doing any lasting damage to her body.

She closed her eyes. She didn't need to use her talent to locate Ryland, bent over her from behind. His hands wandered with proprietary familiarity over her back, sliding around to cup her breasts, squeezing and massaging. She could feel his enormous erection pressing eagerly against her butt and she wiggled invitingly.

Ryland retaliated with another slap, more of a tap really, but Anaya let out a sharp yelp and he immediately rubbed the offended area.

"You need to learn who's master." He rested one hand on her back while he slid the other down the crack between her cheeks, and Anaya felt hot flames of want racing through her body. He paused his explorations at her anus, his finger resting lightly over the tight bud. "Have you ever been taken here?"

Anaya gasped at the thought. "No. I usually tell my lovers what to do. I've certainly never ordered one to hurt me." She whimpered, arching back into him. He slid his hand lower and slipped one finger into her aching pussy, probing deeply.

"Well, I'm not one of your wimpy lovers to be ordered around." He pulled his finger out and then slid it back in. He slid a second one in beside the first and started to pump them in and out, his thumb running across her clit with every stroke.

Anaya lost all logical thought, her entire consciousness focused on feeling. The cold steel of the deck. The darts of heat sliding along every nerve. Need pooled in her belly. She bucked her hips backward, wanting his enormous cock buried deep inside her. A low moan escaped her lips when he scored his thumbnail across the tender flesh of her labia.

"Fuck me, damn it! Fuck me now!" She screamed the order through clenched teeth, only to hear his amused chuckle from behind her.

"I don't take orders, darling. I'm the master." He withdrew his fingers. "You might want to remember that."

"I'm sorry." Anaya shifted restlessly beneath him and tried to sound submissive. Those fingers had felt so damned good. "But what are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for you to ask nice." She could hear a hint of laughter in his voice. "Or maybe just to scream and beg. Your choice."

Damn! She wanted to tell him to go to hell, tell him she was a Stargazer, she didn't beg. But she had a feeling he could make her. Make her beg and scream. And make her like it.

He reached forward, his shaft rock-hard against her ass when he bent over to nibble on the lobe of her ear, his breath warm on her neck. "Ready to beg?"

"Stargazers don't beg." She wished her voice sounded a little less breathless.

He stroked his fingers against the sensitive walls inside her channel again. "Do they scream?" He nipped the lobe of her ear.

Anaya sucked in a breath, not bothering to answer him. She shocked herself with a sudden desire to give in, to beg him to enter her, to fuck her hard.

Ryland chuckled, the sound low and knowing. He slid his fingers out of her pussy.

A groan escaped her clenched teeth and she whimpered with lust. She could feel that big shaft pressing hard against her ass, and despite her fear of the pain, the thought of his thick cock invading her body in that way caused shivers of excitement to shimmer through her.

He lowered his head to nibble a hot trail of kisses from the bottom of her neck down her spine. Licking. Kissing. Nibbling. Anaya couldn't hold back. She'd always been the one in control, the one who did the demanding.

But she'd never felt this amazing combination of want and need. Lust and desire. Her voice was low, almost a whisper. "I need you. Inside of me. Please."

"Now that's what I wanted to hear." Ryland moved up over her, his cock pushing impatiently at the slick entrance to her pussy. He used his knee to spread her legs wider, opening her for his pleasure. The thick head of his cock slipped inside her and she arched her back, bracing herself, hot juice dripping from her eager sex.

He entered her with agonizing slowness, one thick inch at a time until she felt his balls snuggled up against her. Anaya lost all attempts at control long before that point, whimpering and bucking beneath him, begging him to move harder, faster. She couldn't wait; she wanted all of him, now, deep inside her. Every deliberate move he made drove her higher, closer to losing all control.

"Not so fast. I want to try out that tight little ass of yours." He stopped, pulling his cream-slicked cock out of her channel.

Anaya hesitated. She'd never done anything like this before, but her curiosity and lust overrode her fear of pain. Reaching back, she spread her cheeks wide.

She turned her head and watched him as he squeezed some lubricant onto his hand and smoothed it onto his rock-hard shaft. Grinning at her submissive stance, he took his cock in his hand and aimed it at her ass. He looked so very male, dark and sure of himself. She could feel his shaft, slick with her own juices as well as the lubricant, pushing against the tight bud of her anus, slowly stretching the delicate tissues while Ryland forced himself inside. He took his time, letting her get used to the size and feel of his invading shaft. It burned. Pain mixed with pleasure. Pleasure sharpened by pain. He reached down and slipped two fingers into her slick channel, pumping them in and out so that she had a hard time distinguishing the pain from the fiery burst of pleasure racing through her. She pushed back, taking more of him. Something wild rose up in her, making her sizzle and burn with a savage need.

She heard Ryland growl out an oath behind her as he settled in to shaft her with a steady rhythm, holding her still with one arm, while he continued to tease and stroke her pussy, her clit, her wildly creaming channel with his other hand.

She lost all sense of herself, swept up in a spiraling wave of heat that rose ever higher. The pain was in sharp contrast to the pleasure radiating through every cell in her body. She bucked, whimpering and moaning. She felt her orgasm starting to gather, rolling through her, carrying her upward in an ever-intensifying storm of feelings. Then he slammed his cock into her a final time, and a tidal wave of indescribable feeling washed over her. She screamed his name, wave after wave of orgasm ripping through her, leaving her spent and gasping for air.

Ryland growled and she could feel his cock jerk as he came, spilling his seed into her. They collapsed in a tangled heap on the steel decking, his cock still buried deep inside her and his arms holding her close.

A jarring noise had them both twisting to look at the flashing display on the vid-screen. A mechanical voice announced, "Suspect ion trail detected at ten degrees starboard. Repeat. Suspect ion trail detected at ten degrees starboard."

Chapter Three

Ryland studied the trail they were following. It had been four risings since they'd managed to pick up the killer's trail again and they weren't getting any closer to catching him. They couldn't use Anaya's Stargazer abilities because she needed to know the destination in order to manipulate the energy lines. All they had was this trail of used ion particles, which she couldn't see any better than he could. He slammed his fist down on the console in frustration. If he really was in this for the money, he'd be far better off to sell Anaya back to the Colony Five government.

He shrugged at his own folly. He'd taken the contract because the killer targeted women. Women like his late wife. It had nothing to do with the bounty offered and everything to do with his own personal vendetta.

He'd never send Anaya back to that sadistic handler. Hell, the little minx had gotten under his skin, something no one had done since his wife. He'd never let her go. Period. He did not intend to admit it to her, but just her presence here on the ship made him feel more alive than he had since his wife's murder. It was about time he started to live again. If his wife knew how long he'd mourned her and their lost son, she'd kick his butt for wasting time worrying about something he couldn't change.

Ryland called up a chart of the galaxy they were in and studied the planets in the direct path of the ion trail. The killer could be headed for the spaceport waystation or for any one of a dozen smaller planets on either side of it. Damn, he really didn't want to wait for another murder to pick up the trail again. He needed to find this asshole now and put an end to the senseless slaughter.

"Midday meal is ready." Anaya's voice tinkled with amusement when she hailed him over the ship's com system. "It might even be edible this time."

Despite himself, Ryland felt a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. When he'd decreed that the ship's mess was a female's domain, Anaya had warned him that her culinary skills were less than stellar. He'd thought she just objected to the menial work. After all, how hard could it be to program a couple of replicators?

He'd been surprised at how truly inept she proved to be at all domestic pursuits. The first few meals she'd managed to coax out of the replicators had looked bad and tasted worse. She'd just shrugged and resolutely chewed the unappetizing blobs, leaving him to either follow suit or admit he'd been wrong in assuming all females could cook.

"Be right there." He stood and stretched, working out the kinks in his long body before heading down to the mess.

* * *

Anaya hummed the overture to her favorite aria as she pulled the meal containers out of the replicators and sat them on the table. This cooking thing wasn't so hard once you got the hang of it.

An appreciative whistle alerted her to Ryland's presence. She turned to see him lounging against the doorway, looking rather tasty himself. His dark eyes sparkled with something she couldn't quite identify. He hadn't bothered to put a shirt on, and the thick muscles roped across his arms and chest made her mouth water for something other than the midday meal. Her gaze slid lower, over his flat stomach to his impressive shaft, outlined by the tight leggings. She felt color stain her cheeks and she jerked her attention back up to see the laughter in his eyes.

"Don't worry, witch." He straightened up and sauntered over to the table. "Right now I'm hungry for something other than your delectable little ass." He leaned and inhaled. "If you weren't so tasty yourself, I might promote you to ship's cook. This smells great." He draped himself over the seat and forked a generous portion into his mouth.

Anaya took the chair across the table and started to eat her own meal. She felt comfortable, sharing the ship and learning to do things that most free women took for

granted. She'd never expected to find herself in a position where domestic chores were part of her everyday routine. She peeked at Ryland from beneath her lashes. The man was a walking menace.

"I've been trying to figure out where Grunner is heading." Ryland paused, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "The spaceport lies directly in his flight path, but the security is so tight he'd have to be stupid or suicidal to pull another murder there. Of course, he could be running low on supplies."

"Do you know what this Grunner looks like?"

"I've got a composite sketch from the port authorities where he committed his last kill. It's not great, but better than nothing." He accessed the ship's files and pulled up the image, flashing it onto the mess wall via the data chips imbedded in his temples. "His right arm is completely covered in an intricate tattoo of Martian origin, so he should be easy to identify."

Anaya shuddered. Even in a sketch, the man looked cold. His eyes were flat, devoid of any feeling. "I hope I never meet him. Just a sketch sends shivers up my spine."

Ryland stood and reached across the table, tilting her chin up with his hand. She parted her lips, her pulse increasing at his touch.

"You won't be anywhere near this son of a bitch." He feathered a gentle kiss across her lips. "He's dangerous, and I intend to bring him back in cryo-stasis."

* * *

Anaya ran the brush absentmindedly through her hair. They were at the spaceport and Ryland wanted her to accompany him while he checked it out. Grunner's trail had led straight here, but there were so many ships coming and going from the giant complex, Ryland couldn't tell if the killer had actually docked, or if he'd just circled the huge port and taken off on another tangent.

He'd sent her to the cabin to "make herself presentable" while he cleared the formalities with the port authorities.

"We're cleared. Meet me at the airlock." Ryland's voice sounded flat, the com-unit echoing through the layers of metal between them. She put the brush down and smoothed the front of her snug bodysuit. Made of a single piece of form-fitting material, the soft green fabric hugged her body like a second skin and complemented her eyes. Covering her from her neck to the tops of her knee-length boots, it was both comfortable and practical. More importantly, it was the only outfit, besides the one she'd been wearing, that she'd brought with her when she stowed away. Since she hadn't anticipated her capture, two sets of clothing had seemed ample.

"Roger that." She grabbed her ear bud and clipped it firmly in place. She didn't want to lose contact with Ryland on a spaceport that catered to miners on leave. Playing slave to one oversexed male was more than enough.

"I said presentable, not edible." Ryland's gaze swept over her, his eyes darkening at her outfit. "I'm going to have to keep you on a short leash or you'll have every fool miner on the port drooling over you."

Anaya smiled at the compliment. "It's my only other outfit." She could feel her cheeks heating up. "And it covers me from head to toe." She tapped the deck with the tip of her boot for emphasis.

Ryland snorted. "Everything covered, but nothing hidden. Turn around."

"Excuse me?"

He sighed theatrically. "Turn around. It's a simple command. Face away from me."

She arched her brows. "Why?"

"Because I told you to."

She snorted. "And?"

He smiled. "I have a present for you, and I won't give it to you unless you do."

She rolled her eyes. "You just want to ogle my ass again."

He laughed. "That too. Turn around." Anaya twirled gracefully around, stopping when she faced precisely in the opposite direction. "Now close your eyes."

She giggled. "You're just full of orders today." But she closed her eyes. Excitement had her fighting not to fidget like a youngling at a star exhibit.

She felt something heavy resting in the hollow of her throat, and a delicate chain encircled her neck. Ryland brushed her hair aside and fumbled with something at the nape of her neck. "Can I open my eyes now?"

"Not quite yet." Amusement softened his deep voice. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around until she faced him. "Okay, now you can look."

Anaya opened her eyes, her hands going to the object around her neck. Ryland held up a reflective sphere, and she could see a beautiful star sapphire, cut in a multifaceted pattern, nestled against her throat. A chain of delicately woven white gold suspended the jewel around her neck.

"It's beautiful!" She blinked back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. "Where? Why? When?" She didn't know what to say. She'd never expected something so personal, so thoughtful. She threw her arms around Ryland's neck, knocking the sphere out of his hands as she placed a happy kiss on his mouth. "I love it!"

"Don't you be getting any ideas." He pulled her in close and kissed her. "It has a nano-sender unit embedded in it. If we get separated, I can use my neural net to locate you through the star." He nuzzled her hair, nipping gently at her earlobe. "It looks natural on you. A beautiful star for a beautiful Stargazer."

Anaya buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder, afraid to let him see the stark emotion in her eyes. He was only being practical; he didn't want to lose his new slave. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." His voice sounded gruffer than usual. "And when we're on the spaceport, I don't want people knowing what our connection is. You're just a friend who's traveling with me. Okay?"

Anaya nodded, confused. He didn't want people to know she was his sex slave?

"Good." He placed his hand on the ID pad beside the air lock and it cycled open to reveal a corridor packed with beings from all over the galaxy. "Now let's go see if we can find us a killer."

She stared in amazement at the variety of sentient beings bustling on their way to or from the ships in the docking ring. It hadn't occurred to her that a spaceport this far out in the galaxy would be this busy. She shrank back against Ryland when a two-headed reptile with beady eyes turned to stare at her.

Ryland planted his arm firmly around her waist and drew her in close to his side. "Relax. I have no intention of losing my favorite toy to a passing lizard."

His comment served to make her relax, although she still glanced around nervously while they strolled down the corridor. "What if someone recognizes me? You said there was a contract out for my return."

"No one's going to be stupid enough to try and take you away from me." He tightened the arm around her waist. "Not if they're smart."

Anaya relaxed a bit. He had a point. Even amongst the hustle and bustle of a busy port, Ryland had an air of authority that beings automatically deferred to. The crowds parted around them, giving Ryland, with his warrior's build, a wide berth.

"We'll go check out the local watering hole. If Grunner landed here, chances are he passed through the port's bar, at least briefly. The bartender is an old friend of mine."

She nodded, feeling out of her depth. She didn't want to admit she'd never been to a bar. She'd been kept on board ship during the times they were docked anywhere other than the home Colony. You don't take your slaves out for drinks at the local club.

* * *

"I've never known Ryland to travel with a female." The bulky bartender, whom Ryland had introduced as Joe, looked curiously at Anaya. She fidgeted uncomfortably on her barstool, wishing she'd stayed aboard the shuttle. Who knew showing up with Ryland would cause so many questions? "You must be one special lady."

"We're just friends." She glanced at Ryland who was nursing dark ale while his restless gaze swept the room. He wasn't paying any attention to her and appeared happy to let her answer his friend's questions. "I needed a lift and he offered to let me tag along."

"Really?" The bartender raised his brows in disbelief and a mischievous look crossed his face. "Then he won't mind if I introduce you to some of the local boys." He raised his hand and started to wave at a group of miners.

"I don't think you want to do that." Ryland grabbed Joe's wrist and forced his hand back down to the bar.

"I thought so!" Joe smirked at the bounty hunter. "Just friends, my ass. Tell it to someone wet behind the ears."

Ryland turned his attention to the bartender, and a shiver ran down Anaya's spine at the cold, flat expression in his eyes. "She's with me, although she deserves better. Our relationship is nobody's business but our own." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "And just in case that's not clear, Anaya is far too good for the likes of the scum that calls this place home."

Joe threw his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "Hey, sorry. I was just fooling around." He laughed, the sound strained. "We've been friends a long time and you've never brought a lady with you before."

Anaya bit her lip to keep from laughing. She'd gone from being "some female" to a "lady" in less time than it took to down her drink. And Ryland had just publicly placed her under his protection. Not exactly a declaration of undying devotion, but still nice.

"So what are you doing way out in my sector of space anyways?" Joe had obviously decided that a change of subject was in order.

"Looking for a serial killer." Ryland fished a vid-recorder out of his pocket and handed it to the bartender. "Name's Grunner, although he might use an alias. He likes to kill women and slice them up into little pieces. So far the body count is at twelve and I don't want it to go any higher."

Joe's jovial expression sobered. He took the recorder and studied the image, his eyes narrowing. "He came through here about two solar cycles ago. Surly fellow. Stocked up on supplies and took off real quick." He nodded toward a slender male

nursing his drink at a table in the far corner. "Blake over there would have filed his flight plan, if you're interested in where he was headed."

"Thanks." Ryland slid off his stool and crossed the room.

Anaya sipped on her drink, a surprisingly tasty fruit punch, while she waited for him to come back. Joe made small talk, telling her amusing little stories about life on the spaceport. She laughed dutifully in the right places, but her attention kept straying to Ryland.

He straightened up and turned to stride back to her side. "We need to get moving. Grunner was here all right, and his registered flight plan has him heading to New Eden."

"New Eden?" Anaya licked a stray drop off her glass. "I've never heard of it."

Joe looked glum. "You don't want to, sugar. A bunch of religious zealots founded the colony there years ago and they're trying to recreate the biblical Garden of Eden with one nasty twist. The founders blamed Eve for all of mankind's troubles, so they created a male-dominated society; the women have no rights. Mostly they wait on the men hand and foot, apologize for existing, and pop out babies."

Anaya stared at Ryland in dismay. "That's awful. Can they do that?"

He shrugged. "The colonies make their own rules, and so long as they aren't harming any of the other settled worlds, no one is going to interfere. The odd woman manages to escape off-planet, but mostly they just accept it. They were born there and don't know any other kind of life. Problem is, if Grunner gets there, he's going to have a field day. The elders aren't going to care if a few women they consider worthless turn up dead."

"You're not taking your lady friend there, are you?" Joe threw Ryland an incredulous look.

Ryland snorted. "Not likely. She can stay on the ship while I go hunting. I won't take her planet-side."

"Why?" Anaya looked from one to the other.

"Laws of New Eden apply to all women on the surface, be they native or visitors. If you broke one of their insane laws, they have the right to punish you. Just walking down the street, you'd probably break a few." He gave her a wry smile. "And they are overly fond of corporal punishment."

She wrinkled her brow. "Meaning?"

"They could whip you."

She gasped. "You can't be serious. That's barbaric."

Joe nodded. "I agree. But then religions have a barbaric history. And he's right. They are the most whip-happy bunch in the galaxy. You listen to Ryland and stay off that planet."

She looked from one to the other, not sure if they were teasing. Surely in this day and age people didn't go about whipping each other.

"He's telling the truth," Ryland retorted impatiently. "And the asshole already has a head start on us. Finish your drink and let's get moving."

Anaya opened her mouth to point out she could get them there in short order, and then snapped it shut. She didn't want anyone else knowing she was a Stargazer. Plenty of time to discuss her abilities when they were safely back aboard the shuttle.

Chapter Four

Ryland eyed her thoughtfully. "Can you do that? I thought you needed some kind of special platform to work on."

"No." Anaya looked around the bridge. "It makes it easier, and I wouldn't want to work without one indefinitely, but it is possible. I just need something to secure myself to so I don't fall over."

"Fall over?"

"If I stay in the trance too long, I can get weak without realizing it. I need something that will hold me upright if that happens." She looked around the bridge. "Any ideas? I need to be standing with my arms above my head."

A wicked grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "Lots, but I don't think they're going to help us. This is starting to sound like a bondage scene from a second-rate vid-show."

Anaya wrinkled her nose and tried not to burst out laughing. "Especially when you consider I have to be naked to work with the energy lines."

Ryland stared at her with a bemused expression on his face. "You're kidding, right?"

She grinned. "Nope. Buck naked. And tied to an upright post."

He laughed. "Good thing I don't work with a crew. The sight of you naked would have their concentration shot all to hell." He grinned. "Luckily I'm made of sterner stuff."

"You think so, huh?" Anaya ran her hands down her body, gazing pointedly at the growing bulge in the front of his leggings.

Ryland grinned, unrepentant. "I didn't say I wouldn't react, just that I could still work with my cock as stiff as a Martian icicle."

The man was hopeless. Time to get the conversation back on track. "So, what about finding something for me to work with?"

"I think I've got a solution." He turned to the doorway. "Wait here. I'll be back in a sec."

Anaya watched his sexy butt disappear down the hallway. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. There was something about Ryland that made it hard to keep her mind on the task at hand. Unless, of course, the task was bolstering her power with some steamy sex. She could feel her cheeks warm at the thought of his impressive cock and what it could do to her.

The jarring sound of something scraping its way down the hall snapped her out of her reverie. What was making all that racket?

She stuck her head out of the doorway and started to laugh. Ryland grunted loudly, dragging a large wooden statue representing one of the mythical gods from ancient Earth's lore. Recently, a band of wandering minstrels had revived the galaxy's interest in Thor with their operatic rendition of his life's story. Why Ryland had a life-sized statue of the god aboard his ship, she couldn't imagine. She backed away to allow him to maneuver Thor through the doorway.

He tilted the statue upright beside the captain's chair and gave her a sheepish grin. "Some of my friends have a warped sense of humor." He patted the statue. "Thor is reputed to have carried a magical hammer that smote the bad guys and then returned to its owner." He struck a pose beside the blond giant. "I don't have the hammer, but I chase down the bad guys and bring them back to face justice."

Anaya grinned. "I can see the resemblance. And you look scary enough without the hammer." She walked over and stared up at the statue in awe. "He's magnificent." She turned and stood in front of Thor, lifting her arms. "This might actually work. Do you have a belt, or a long strip of that stuff you used to bind my hands when you found me on the ship? You need to tie me to it so I don't fall or let my arms move."

Ryland nodded. "I'll go get some. I think you should get a good sleep and make a fresh start at next rising. It'll give me some time to set this up."

"Good idea." She ran her hand down the smooth length of Thor's chest, before slanting a mischievous look up at Ryland. "Care to come and tuck me in?"

* * *

"Do Stargazers really gain power from sex?" Ryland nibbled a line of kisses across her jaw. The thought of her casually coupling with random partners left a bad taste in his mouth.

Anaya stiffened under him, refusing to look him in the eye. "Yes. I never really thought about it, it was just something that needed to be done. Get plenty of rest, eat a well-balanced diet, and let whomever my handler sent fuck me."

"You didn't get to choose your own partners?" He'd always thought the Stargazers were the ones in control.

"From where? It's not like I could go check out the males at the local watering hole. They owned me." She looked at him, and he glimpsed a lifetime of misery in those eyes. She shrugged. "It wasn't all that bad. They were very skilled and the handler made sure I rarely got the same partner more than once. He didn't want me getting attached to anyone."

Ryland felt a sick feeling deep in his gut. They'd treated her like an animal. A very valuable animal, but an animal nevertheless. He had a sudden murderous urge to go find her handler.

Anaya shifted restlessly against him and he realized he'd tightened his grip. He kissed the spot where his fingers had squeezed her soft flesh. She needed to know how amazingly special she was -- even if he did plan to keep her for his personal slave forever.

He trailed a line of soft kisses down her body. Taking his time. Making sure she enjoyed every touch of his lips. Every lick of his tongue. Every nibble of his teeth.

She squirmed, whimpering and moaning. When she arched her back, rubbing her wet mound against his aching shaft, he shifted his weight, rolling her under him. Slowly, tenderly, he entered her. One deliberate inch at a time -- fighting the urge to ram his swollen shaft deep into her slick channel. She deserved to feel loved. If he were

a different person, if that part of him hadn't died with his wife and child, he could love her. If she were free, she'd make someone a wonderful mate, but that was never going to happen. He did not intend to ever let her go.

Anaya's nails dug into his back and she jerked her hips under him. "Faster, damn it. Bury that big cock of yours deep inside me."

He felt a reluctant grin curve his lips. Seems his little Stargazer didn't like her loving sweet and tender. "Yes, ma'am." He let himself go, slamming his cock deep, over and over, reveling in the way her inner muscles clenched around him, trying to hold him inside her.

He could feel his balls draw tight, his orgasm building. He fought it off, wanting her to be there with him. Wanting to share the incredible beauty of their joining.

"Oh, gods! Rylaaaaaaannnd!"

He captured her mouth, taking his name from her lips while her pussy clenched him tight and his seed jetted deep. Wave after wave of pleasure washed through him. He collapsed beside her on the sleeping platform, cradling her in his arms to hold her close, feeling every ripple of her pussy as tiny aftershocks raced through her.

They lay that way for what seemed like eons, limbs tangled together, letting their breathing slowly return to normal. Anaya opened her eyes and gave him a sleepy smile. She slipped one hand up between them and wrapped her fingers around the sapphire pendant.

"A star for a Stargazer," she murmured softly. "I don't remember the last time anyone gave me a present."

* * *

Anaya sat on the hard deck, her legs crossed in a lotus position. Eyes closed, she focused deep inside herself. She ran through each of the mental exercises that she'd learned. Her breathing slowed and she felt a sea of calm surround her.

Rising, she stripped off the robe she'd draped around her shoulders. She still wore the star pendant around her neck, and she brushed her fingers against it. She approached the image of Thor. Ryland had left an untidy pile of straps beside it, and

she picked up two of the shorter ones, using them to strap her ankles to those of the statue. She rifled the pile and picked out two more of the short ones and a longer one for her waist.

"I'll need you to fasten my hands for me." She knew Ryland waited just out of her sight. She could feel his mind, full of concern, teasing the edge of her consciousness. She found the rough touch comforting. She snugged the makeshift belt tight around her waist and lifted her arms, placing them along Thor's.

She watched Ryland bend down to retrieve the last two straps. She couldn't afford to let her confused feelings for the handsome bounty hunter surface just yet. She needed to stay focused, centered, to work with the energy lines.

He moved her left arm slightly and fastened it with one of the short straps. Crossing in front of her, he attached her right hand to the statue before walking over to the captain's chair and belting himself in. His hands flashed over the console while he worked his way through the pre-flight checklists.

Anaya pulled her attention away from Ryland and closed her eyes. She could feel the energy swirling around her. The lines glowed brightly behind her closed lids, brilliant blues and greens, with a few vibrant reds showing the way to the singularity. She let her consciousness expand, and searched the lines, calling them up one by one, examining them, discarding one after the other when she knew they weren't the one she sought. She clenched her hands, arching herself upward into the sparkling lights.

The feeling of power was incredible. Seductive. It teased her, beckoning, tempting her to absorb more and more of it. Sometimes, it was all she could do to resist. If she let them, they'd swallow her whole, absorb her consciousness into the interplanetary web. She sent a tendril of her mind out, searching for Ryland. There. She could feel him. Solid. Grounded. Reliable.

The temptation lessened and she went back to her search. This line went back to the Colony planets. That blue one led to a lovely asteroid, devoid of life. The green one held promise. Yes! That was the one. She couldn't explain how she knew, but there was no doubt. She pulled the energy to herself, using her outstretched hands to capture the

sparkling line. Diverting the energy through her body, she sent it pouring into the engines. She could feel them revving up, gaining power. She pulled more of the energy and directed it to them.

The search over, she let the joy of the ley lines rush over her and through her. It made everything worthwhile. She reveled in her power. Only a Stargazer could know the amazing feeling of being one with the energy of the universe.

She sensed the planet growing closer and she knew it was time to let go. She reached out for Ryland, a tiny tendril, to make sure he stood guard over her body. Waiting for her to return. She held his presence in a tiny corner of her mind while she reluctantly let the line slip away from her. She felt the giant engines slow.

She opened her eyes, breaking her trance and the connection to the vast network of energy. For just a second she felt lost, bereft of the power. She sagged against her restraints, wincing. The straps chafed against wounds that hadn't quite healed yet.

Ryland growled out an oath and reached up to release her hands. Droplets of blood splashed onto his arm from the wounds that had reopened on her wrists. She draped her arms around his shoulders, careful not to let the open wounds touch anything. She sighed contentedly, leaning into the comfort of his hard body while he fumbled with the strap wound around her waist.

If she'd had enough energy left, she would have smiled at his clumsy attempts to release her. He might think himself a hard-assed bounty hunter, but she knew better. He cared too much, so he tried to wall himself away from feeling.

He finally managed to get the strap off her waist, and she found herself slipping over his shoulder while he bent over to free her legs.

"Thor's had enough fun for one day." He wrapped his arm around her legs and straightened up. Anaya found herself dangling over his shoulder, with a nice view of his tight butt.

She closed her eyes and listened to him grumble about Stargazers and energy lines and serial killers who didn't know enough to stay put so he could deal with them. He strode into his cabin and slid her gently onto the sleeping platform. He rummaged

through the cabinet on the wall and produced a tube of ointment. Squeezing a generous amount of creamy stuff onto his palm, he massaged it into her chafed wrists and ankles.

"You should have stopped when they opened up." He scowled at her. "A few more days won't make any difference. Sooner or later we'll catch up. I don't want you pushing yourself." He lifted her wrist to examine the welts. "Promise me that next time you'll stop before I have to stand there and watch blood dripping from you."

Anaya gave him a tired smile. "I promise." Later she'd explain it to him. How she didn't feel the pain until afterward. How the energy of the lines seduced her, taking her away from herself. Later. Now, she needed to rest.

She felt Ryland's lips brush gently across her forehead as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Anaya opened her eyes, trying to figure out what had woken her. Slipping the blanket off, she sat up and looked around sleepily. Ryland was nowhere to be seen. Not surprising. He'd probably headed up to the bridge plotting his next move. The man was nothing if not methodical. She considered calling him, but decided to clean up first. Using her talent had left her feeling sweaty and Ryland had a real water-based shower on his ship instead of the plasma-ray-based ones favored by frugal captains. She hummed happily. She grabbed a towel from the cabinet and headed into the shower.

The hot water cascaded over her naked body in welcome sheets and she lifted her face to the spray. She stood there reveling in the wet warmth until the water started to cool. With a contented sigh, she turned the taps off and stepped out, reaching for her towel.

"Damn idiots."

She turned, lifting a brow in silent query when Ryland strode into the cabin. He gave her an apologetic smile. "The governing body on this godforsaken pile of rocks doesn't seem to think a woman-hating killer is a problem. They concede that there have been two women found dead and mutilated since Grunner arrived, but they just don't care. The women were past their prime childbearing years." He slammed his fist into the bulkhead. "They've declined to help with the capture and went so far as to caution

me that my activities better not interfere with their society." He rolled his eyes in disgust.

"So now what?" Anaya draped the towel around her and picked up her hairbrush.

Ryland crossed to stand behind her, taking the brush from her hand and running it through her long hair with firm strokes. "I'll have to go and find him myself. The authorities aren't going to be any help." He smoothed the hair back from her temples. "I'll have to find some way to flush him out into the open."

"Flush him out? Didn't they even tell you where he is?"

"No." Disgust sharpened his voice. "They don't keep track of visiting psychopaths."

"I could try to find him for you," she offered softly.

"I'm not using you for bait." Ryland stopped brushing her hair, and she could feel the tension in him.

"Not for bait. Sometimes I can find people by their energy signature. It doesn't always work, but Grunner would have a very distinctive aura. I might be able to locate him if you take me down to the surface with you."

Ryland twirled around so they were face-to-face. "No. You heard what Joe said about this place. Even without factoring Grunner in, this is not a planet you ever want to set foot on. I won't risk you."

Anaya tilted her head sideways, smiling sweetly into his angry face. "You'd rather wait until he kills half a dozen more of those poor women?" Ryland glared at her, and she knew she'd won. "You'd be right beside me all the way. I know you'd never let him hurt me."

"Damn straight." He continued to brush her hair. "But if I let you do this, you have to promise to do everything I say. Immediately."

"Well, of course." She gave him her best innocent smile. "I wouldn't dream of disobeying you."

"Yeah. Right." He tugged gently on a lock of hair. "Promise."

Anaya sighed. "Fine. I promise."

He patted her on the head. "There now, that didn't hurt at all, did it?"

She rolled her eyes and didn't bother to reply.

Chapter Five

"Remember, you promised to obey me." Ryland adjusted the pack strapped to Anaya's back. Using women for pack animals was just one more of the quaint local customs. He'd made sure it appeared full, while actually holding very little.

"How could I forget?" She slanted him a mischievous look from under her lashes. "You've reminded me eight times since we docked."

He gave the pack one last tug and slapped her on the butt. "Mind your manners." He used his neural net to tap into the ship's computer and call up a grid map of the area. He also checked to make sure the tracking chip in the star pendant was functioning properly. Having her down on the planet's surface was making him very nervous. "The latest murder was down in the lower section of town, so we'll start there." He strode down the middle of the street, leaving Anaya to follow a step behind. He would have preferred to have her beside him, but they needed to blend in.

They'd arranged a series of signals so they could communicate without drawing attention to themselves. If Anaya sensed Grunner's presence, she'd fake a twisted ankle to allow Ryland to turn back and confer with her. He'd also made sure she wore the star. He'd been telling the truth when he said it concealed a tracking device linked to his nano system. What he hadn't told her was that he'd inserted the device into the star just for her. He could have just as easily planted the device directly beneath the surface of her skin.

He'd found the star at a bazaar on one of the outlying Colony planets, and the shimmering facets had captured his imagination, bringing back memories of all those days he'd spent studying the heavens. He'd paid a goodly sum for the gem, taking it back to the ship and suspending it from the bulkhead in his study where he could sit and stare at it for hours. It pleased him that she loved it so much.

He wandered through the streets of the lower town, passing by the scene of the latest murder from several angles, and Anaya remained silent, trotting meekly along behind him. The twin suns were directly overhead, and he could see a small inn up ahead, offering midday meals for reasonable rates.

He slowed and let Anaya catch up. "We'd better get something to eat. I'll go in and order. You wait at one of the tables." Women weren't allowed in shops or eateries, so the inn provided tables in a small courtyard in front of the inn for those who were traveling with females and preferred not to just leave them waiting at the door.

Anaya nodded and then picked a table, shrugging the pack off her shoulders before she sank into the seat. Ryland hesitated at the doorway, glancing back to make sure she was all right before he entered the inn.

He ordered two bowls of stew and a tankard of the local ale. A young woman with a shy smile took his order. She passed him the ale and two mugs, promising to bring the food out to their table. He thanked her and hurried back outside. He didn't feel comfortable with Anaya out of his sight.

She smiled up at him when he placed a mug in front of her and filled it with the cool liquid. The waitress brought out the stew and the two of them dug into the delicious smelling food.

They ate in silence, watching the locals bustle about their business. The women seemed like women everywhere, some happy and smiling, others scowling as they followed the men.

"I'd like to sit here a while and see if I can get a fix on his position." She took a sip from her mug. "I might be able to point us in a general direction."

Ryland shrugged. "It's worth a try. Walking back and forth doesn't seem to be doing us any good."

He watched her lift her chin and close her eyes. The slender shoulders relaxed and he imagined she'd entered the trance state. She looked so beautiful, so serene. He looked around, automatically checking for threats. The street was almost deserted; most of the populace was inside enjoying their midday meal. He smiled at a stray cat darting

out from behind a potted plant to snag a scrap of bread. If it weren't for the bizarre religious customs, this would be a nice colony.

Anaya opened her eyes. "I can sense his presence, but I'm having trouble getting a direction." She ran one hand through her hair in frustration. "Maybe if we move to a different location I'll have better luck. There could be something here blocking me."

Ryland grinned. At least they knew they were close. After having had Grunner elude him time and again, that was good news. "How about we try for a couple of blocks in that direction." He gestured to the left. "If that doesn't work we can always move again."

She nodded, giving him one of those smiles that always managed to send heat racing through him. "I'll just go use the facilities first. That ale seemed to go right through me." She got to her feet and headed in the direction of the ladies' room sign. Amazingly, those little symbols seemed to be the same throughout the universe.

* * *

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

Anaya stiffened in horror when a man's arm wrapped around her throat. Not just any man.

Grunner.

The disturbing tattoo on his arm was unmistakable. No wonder she hadn't been able to get a direction. He'd been right here all the time. She could feel the evil tainting the air around him. She opened her mouth to scream, only to choke when he viciously tightened his grip, cutting off her air. The points of the star pendant dug into her skin, the pain distracting her.

She let herself go limp. She couldn't fight him in this position, so her best bet was to trick him into thinking she'd lost consciousness. She could see no point in trying to talk to a madman.

"That's it, you little slut. You just go to sleep and let me take you to my playroom." He slapped a piece of tape over her mouth so she couldn't scream. "I've been following you and your master for most of the morning. He's going to have to find

himself another female. I'm afraid you're not going to be much use to him when we've finished playing."

It was all she could do not to shiver at his touch. She wondered how long it would be before Ryland noticed her missing. She concentrated on her breathing, keeping it slow and steady. He'd have to loosen his grip around her neck at some point. Maybe she'd be able to run. All she'd need was enough time to get outside where someone would notice her. She tried to block his aura. The oily taint of evil made her stomach lurch in protest.

She opened her eyes a crack. All she could see was the wall of the bathroom, completely devoid of windows or anything she could grab and use as a weapon. Grunner stayed behind her, using his superior body weight to push her toward the doorway.

"Stupid bitch. Didn't even see me watching you, did you?" Grunner kned her in the back of the legs unexpectedly and she fell forward. Her eyes flew open, a startled oath escaping her as she put her hands out in front of her to break her fall. She hit the packed dirt floor hard, jarring the breath from her lungs in a whoosh.

With an evil laugh, Grunner dropped to his knees beside her, wrenching her arms out from beneath her and tying them behind her back. He jerked hard on the ropes and Anaya whimpered, pain shooting through her recently healed wrists. He gave the ropes another hard tug before he rolled her over. He bent down and ran his hands over her body, squeezing her breasts painfully.

"A little on the small side, but they'll do." He leered. "Does your master like you to strip for him? Does he like to play with your little titties before he shoves his cock into you?"

Anaya shivered. Grunner's eyes held no hint of sanity.

"Time to move. Don't want that big master of yours to find us before I have time to appreciate you." He picked her up, hoisting her over his shoulder.

Anaya could feel herself starting to panic. This man had murdered twelve women. Murdered them and cut them into little pieces. She sent a tendril of awareness

out, searching for Ryland's presence. It connected immediately and a soothing calm flooded through her, grounding her. He would find her. The panic shrunk to manageable proportions.

Grunner stepped out of the bathroom and strode down the street. He didn't bother to hide, carrying her over his shoulder like a rolled-up rug. No one questioned him, or even bothered to give her a second glance. Her only consolation was that faint connection to Ryland's aura.

She knew he would follow. He wouldn't let this madman harm her.

* * *

Ryland glanced in the direction of the bathrooms. Anaya hadn't been gone long, but he felt uneasy. He'd never felt good about letting her accompany him down to the surface, and having her out of his sight for any length of time was pure hell. He tapped his fingers on the table. How long did it take a woman to use the facilities? Damn, he should have made her stay onboard the ship.

She should have been back by now. Standing, he downed the last of his ale and grabbed the pack that Anaya had left leaning against the table leg, slinging it over one shoulder. Where the hell was she?

It didn't take him long to locate the bathrooms or to realize that Anaya wasn't there. The door hung open, swinging gently in the breeze. Ignoring the startled look of a passerby, he cursed loudly, not sure if he was mad at himself or at Anaya for taking the opportunity to escape. He'd been so sure she'd honor her bargain and stay with him.

He looked around, wondering which way she might have gone. The foot traffic had picked up a bit, but not enough to hide a woman alone. And how did she think she'd get off this woman-hating planet without a man accompanying her?

He couldn't believe she'd pull a stupid stunt like this. He closed his eyes and tapped into the ship's computer, accessing the tracking chip in her necklace. He hoped she'd forgotten its purpose and still wore it.

"Did thou need some help?" A young girl, barely out of her teens, stopped to look up at him and he put the ship's computer on hold. She hastily looked down when he noticed her. "You seem distressed."

"I'm looking for a woman." Maybe the girl had seen which way Anaya had gone. Might prove useful if the chip didn't pinpoint her location. "Full grown, but a stranger to this land. She had long, dark hair and green eyes. She wore a blue dress down to her ankles and she would have been alone. Did you by chance see a lone woman leaving here?"

The girl raised her head. "No. A woman of that description was taken away by a dark-haired man, but I saw no woman alone." She shuddered, then added, "The man was from off-planet. He had the most horrible pictures colored on his arm, and he carried the woman over his shoulder like a sack of grain. I think she was sleeping. She didn't move."

Ryland felt his blood run cold. "Which way did they go?" Her description of the tattoo meant the man had to be Grunner, and he had Anaya. He cursed himself for doubting her, for thinking she'd run away from him.

The girl pointed down one of the many narrow laneways behind him. "That way. May I go now? My master will be mad if I am late returning."

"Of course. And thank you." Ryland smiled reassuringly at the girl before she hurried off. He reestablished the link to the ship and set up a link to the tracking chip. The signal was faint, fading in and out. The planet's magnetic field must be strong here; it was interfering with the directional sender. He snarled out an oath. Damn tech gadgets never worked right when you needed them.

Pivoting, he took off at a trot in the direction the girl indicated, searching every doorway and alley he passed for some sign of the pair. The tracking signal continued to cut in and out, but at least he knew he was headed in the right direction.

He had to find them before Grunner decided it was safe to stop. The girl had said she appeared to be sleeping and he didn't know if that meant she'd fainted, or that

Grunner had drugged her to keep her quiet. His mind shied away from the thought of Anaya on the receiving end of the serial killer's manic attention.

He paused several times to ask people if they'd seen the couple. Invariably they had, although it disgusted him to know that no one had felt compelled to question a man's right to carry a woman through the streets of town like so much baggage.

As he got farther from the center of town the shops and markets thinned out to be replaced by warehouses and deserted shop fronts of a poorer district. The tracking signal gained strength, although it still fluctuated at random intervals. He needed it to stabilize. When he got off this blasted planet, he was going to go visit the trader he'd bought the tracking chip from and feed him the damn thing one metallic piece at a time.

Ryland felt his heart sink. They could be anywhere in this maze of buildings. He could search forever and not find her. He stopped and stood still, looking around.

Which way?

He became aware of a light touch in his mind, a featherlight caress. Anaya. He could sense her!

He turned in the direction of the touch and started to walk. Slowly. The tracking signal strengthened, confirming he was headed in the right direction. He concentrated on Anaya, trying to keep that slight feeling of connection. He passed an old cheese store, a dry goods and a deserted laundry. He turned left onto a narrow boulevard lined with warehouses and buildings in various states of decay.

The sense of her presence filled him, more substantial now. He ignored the tracking signal; he no longer needed the device to help him. He walked faster, more confident, sure that he would find her. He could sense her anger and her fear. She was close.

He turned down a narrow alley that came to a dead end in front of a rickety warehouse, the windows boarded up and graffiti scrawled across the walls.

There. She was in there. He was sure of it. He slowed down, keeping to the shadows close to the buildings. He couldn't hear any sounds, any screams, and he hoped that meant he wasn't too late.

He glided quietly forward, heading for one of the boarded-up windows. Reaching up, he pried one of the loose boards off and peered through a gaping hole in the filthy glass.

Anaya lay on a crude wooden platform in the middle of the room. He could see her hands bound behind her and her mouth was covered with some type of tape. The star pendant hung around her neck. Ryland's breath caught in his throat. She seemed okay. Scared, but not yet hurt. He looked around the room, searching for the killer. A movement in the far corner caught his eye and he could see Grunner digging around in a box.

Chapter Six

The room reeked of blood and fear. Anaya found it hard not to move, to pretend to be paralyzed by fear. Grunner had dropped her onto a hard platform in the middle of the room, and then went to rummage around in a box over in the corner. He giggled and mumbled to himself, already anticipating the pain and horror he had planned. She listened to his sick ramblings and was horrified to realize his victims hadn't been dead when he'd mutilated their bodies.

She hung on to the tenuous link to Ryland, but she couldn't tell how close he was. The connection seemed to be getting stronger. What if he arrived too late?

Grunner placed several items on the floor beside the box, grumbling while he searched for an elusive item.

She had to face the fact that Ryland might not be close enough to save her. She searched for ley lines, knowing the chance of tapping into the interplanetary net from an unfamiliar planet was slim -- especially given her heavy clothing and her bound position.

She sensed something below her and redirected her efforts. There! A rich brown line shimmered into view below her, with many lesser lines intersecting it.

The building sat on the nexus of the planet's ley lines. Tentatively, she touched the line. It felt different to the ones she used in space, but similar in some ways. Right now she was desperate enough to try to use it.

She cautiously drew a small amount of the power, careful not to let it flood her. The energy flowed brightly, cleanly, bolstering her spirit with its earthy taste. Her link to Ryland strengthened. She could sense his fear and his determination to reach her in time.

Grunner turned, an evil leer on his face and a long dagger covered with reddish-brown stains gripped in one hand. "Playtime." He advanced toward her slowly, watching the expressions on her face, giving her time to realize what he had planned.

Anaya held tight to her link with Ryland and let the power of the ley line flood into her. She sensed that Ryland was aware of the link.

Grunner stepped closer, holding the blade up so it sparkled in the light, the dark blotches of dried blood a sickening contrast to the glittering metal.

Ryland burst through the door with a loud crash, anguish and determination on his face.

Grunner wheeled to meet the threat, the dagger brandished menacingly in front of him.

"No!" Anaya directed the energy toward the blade, watching the brilliant light dance down the metal conduit and enter Grunner's arm. An eerie light flared, and Grunner let out an unearthly howl. The energy ran through his body, the line absorbing him into itself before it grounded back to the earth through her link with Ryland.

Ryland stared in disbelief as the dagger dropped to the floor, no longer having anything to hold it up. A wisp of black smoke curling lazily up from the floor was all that remained of the man who'd terrorized women across three galaxies. Ryland raised his head and met Anaya's gaze. She could read awe in his eyes. Awe and relief.

Without a prisoner, or at the very least, a body, he wouldn't be able to claim the bounty. But then again, she knew this had never been about the bounty. It was about right and wrong and justice.

Grunner was dead. Justice was served.

"I'm so sorry." Ryland moved to her side, stepping over the scorched spot on the floor. "I never should have left you alone, even for a second." He pulled the tape off her mouth, wincing at her whimper of pain. He kissed the raw red marks left by the adhesive. "We need to get out of here in case anyone noticed that flash of light. We don't need to be pulled into any kind of government inquiry." He gave her a lop-sided

grin. "Knowing their history, they'd probably find you're to blame for the demise of one of their upstanding citizens."

Anaya raised her eyebrows. "Because I'm female?"

"Exactly!"

"Then perhaps you could untie my hands so I can get up."

Ryland obliged, grumbling when he noticed a few new sore spots on her wrists. "Do you need a few minutes to rest? I know how drained you get when you manipulate the lines."

She sat up on the hard surface. "This was different." She paused, remembering the way the energy had grounded through the link to Ryland. She recalled stories from her childhood, about the witches of Old Earth and the Druids who partnered with them to control the ley lines.

"I accessed the planet's lines, not the interplanetary ones. It felt softer, smoother." She looked him in the eye. "And you grounded the flow, so there was no backlash. I've never heard of a man being able to ground."

Ryland stared at her. "I could sense what you were doing, which in itself is a little weird, but I didn't do anything."

Anaya frowned. "I saw it. I sent the energy to the metal blade, and I expected it to run through Grunner, throwing him off balance. I was more surprised than you were when it absorbed him into itself. But then, instead of lashing back at me, it ran through you into the ground. That's why I'm not exhausted."

She needed to look into the Druid connection. But not now.

Ryland shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe earth-based lines react differently than interplanetary ones. Whatever the reason, it's over and we need to get out of here."

She hopped down off the platform, wincing when her wrist brushed the hard surface. She picked the pack up off the floor where Ryland had dropped it. "Got to agree with you there. Nice as it is to feel solid ground beneath my feet, this place gives me the creeps. At least ten people saw him drag me through the streets and yet no one

tried to stop him." She shook her head. "The sooner we blow that docking ring, the better."

* * *

Anaya watched Ryland stir the little pot hanging suspended over the heating laser. "What is that?" He'd laid her out on the mess hall table, securing her arms and legs to the corners with his favorite toys, the immobilizer cuffs.

He turned to answer, smirking when his gaze strayed to her pussy. "It's chocolate. I read somewhere that ancient earthlings used to use it for an aphrodisiac."

"An aphro what?"

"Aphrodisiac." He lifted the spoon to his lips and tasted. "Just about done. It needs to be at just the right temperature."

She felt like a kid at the first day of school. "Right temperature for what?" She really didn't care. When he'd ordered her to strip, she'd expected him to screw her. Make that wanted him to screw her. A lesson in cooking definitely wasn't on her agenda.

Ryland tasted it again and a slow smile spread across his face. "Perfect!" He poured the hot liquid from the pot into a serving dish and then added a little ladle. "Ready for me?"

She watched him strip off his clothing, dragging out the suspense by folding it carefully and piling it on one of the chairs. "I've been ready for ages. Get on with it already."

"Tsk, tsks." Ryland shook his head. "You need to work on your attitude. You should be grateful I plan to bestow my attention on you."

"Oh, I am. I just wish you'd hurry up."

He picked up the serving dish and sauntered across to look down at her naked body, spread wide for his pleasure. "Very tasty looking." He tweaked one of her nipples, smiling approvingly when it puckered.

"Please." Anaya did her best to look submissive.

"That's better." Dipping the ladle into the mixture, he lifted it over her belly and carefully drizzled the warm chocolate across her breasts, making sure each nipple was thoroughly coated.

She gasped at the incredible sensation. Liquid darts of pleasure ran from the tip of each breast down to pool low in her belly.

Ryland bent over and began to lick the sticky mixture off, sucking each nipple into his mouth in turn and swirling his tongue around to get every drop. "Mmmmm. Tasty." He dipped his finger into the serving dish and held it to her mouth for her to taste.

She licked it clean, sucking it into her mouth suggestively while she swirled her tongue around to make sure she didn't miss any. She couldn't remember chocolate ever tasting this good.

Ryland dipped the ladle back in and dripped chocolate over her belly. He lowered his head to lick it off, and Anaya bucked and whimpered under the double pleasure of the smooth, warm chocolate and his talented tongue. Ryland lifted his head and gave her a mischievous grin. "And now for dessert."

He held her gaze and loaded the ladle up yet again, before holding it suspended over her pussy. She could feel herself cream in anticipation. Ryland used his other hand to part her labia. Slowly, watching her reaction, he trickled the warm, sticky chocolate over her eager entrance.

Anaya closed her eyes and let out a startled breath at the incredible feeling. Desire clawed at her, driving darts of erotic heat through every nerve in her body. "Oh, dear gods, I need to feel you inside me. Please." She opened her eyes to stare imploringly at him. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

"Not yet." Ryland stroked his hand down his enormous erection, and Anaya found herself picturing it covered in chocolate. A tasty snack.

He released her ankles and lifted her legs, placing them on his shoulders. With a cheerful grin, he swiped his tongue across her sex, getting a mouthful of chocolate and cream.

"Mmmm. Tasty." He lowered his head and started to feast.

Anaya responded with a wild thrashing of her hips, bucking and twisting beneath him while she ground her aching pussy against his tongue, his teeth, his face. He stabbed his tongue deep inside her and she went wild. She wanted her hands free so she could run them across the bulging muscles of his shoulder. Force his head tighter against her sex. Rake her nails down his back.

She could feel his fingers probing the tight bud of her anus, and she remembered the feel of him riding her hard, his thick shaft pistoning in and out of her butt. He nipped her clit with his teeth and threw her into a violent orgasm. She screamed incoherently as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her.

With one last swipe of his tongue, he dropped her legs back onto the table and climbed up to straddle her. He closed a fist around his hard shaft and slowly stroked down the length. "I'm going to fuck you until you scream for mercy." He stroked the length again, and while Anaya watched, fascinated, a single drop of pre-cum glistened on the tip. She licked her lips, and he pressed the plum-shaped head to her sex. Leaning forward, he braced himself on his elbows and entered her slick channel with a single thrust.

"Yes!" Anaya wrapped her legs around his waist and he started to shaft her with long, hard strokes of his massive cock. She matched him thrust for thrust, eyes closed, arms still outspread.

She felt the heat slowly building, rising, driving her up toward the stars. She could still feel the connection to him, the joining that had strengthened on the surface of the planet. Then he let out a hoarse shout and plunged deep one last time, his seed spurting inside her while her channel convulsed, holding him in, clenching tight while she soared up and over the edge and her world shattered into a million vibrant explosions of color.

Ryland reached up to release her arms, dropping a soft kiss on the tip of her nose. "Happy?"

She nodded. "Ryland?"

"Yes?"

"Are there any Druids back in your family tree?"

Ryland laughed. "I've no idea. If there were, it would have been centuries ago. Why do you ask?"

She thought about the way the energy had flowed through him instead of lashing back at her. She thought about the tales of witches and Druids in the ancient oak groves. "No reason. I just wondered." She fingered the star pendant on her neck and snuggled into his warm arms, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder.

Ryland stroked his fingers through her hair. "I guess I'm going to have to take a trip to Colony Five."

Anaya started, rising up on her elbows to look at him in disbelief. "You're going to turn me in?" She couldn't believe he'd even consider it. "I thought we had a deal. Not to mention the fact that I was beginning to feel like maybe you actually liked me."

Ryland cupped a hand behind her head. "We do have a deal, and I have no intention of turning you over to Colony Five or anyone else. You're mine." He pulled her head down to kiss her very thoroughly. "They put a bounty out on you, and I don't intend for us to spend the rest of our lives avoiding hunters who are trying to capture you. They need to cancel the bounty and they might as well know you won't be returning to them."

Anaya relaxed. "They won't be happy about this. What makes you think they'll go along with it? Those government officials aren't used to people telling them what to do." She paused. "And my handler is going to be extremely pissed off. He gets a lot of perks just for keeping me in line."

Ryland shrugged. "Your ex-handler should be happy I've decided to let him remain alive." He ran a finger across her lips. "As for the official government of Colony Five, let's just say I can be very persuasive. Want to see?" He reclaimed her lips, and Anaya had to agree.

He could indeed be very persuasive.

Anne Kane

Anne Kane lives in the beautiful Okanagan Valley with a bouncy Jack Russell terrier, a cantankerous Himalayan cat 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 as a toddler and she just can't seem to stop. When she's not busy working on her laptop, her hobbies include kayaking, karate, hiking, motorcycles, swimming, skating, playing guitar, singing and of course, reading.