

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



TAMING
A Raven
KATHLEEN LASH

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After technology fails the Governance, Gage is sent to fetch a raven tracker to locate the president's abducted son. He acquires her from a warm, arousal-scented breeding bed.

Reina is captivated by every aspect of the battle vessel *Raze*, and the handsome, foreboding general who commands it. To accomplish the mission and keep her clan safe, she must trust and serve Gage.

As Reina deploys her powers to aid the Governance, Gage learns that controlling and taming his raven requires more than he first imagined. Military protocol is forgotten as he uses her sexual hunger to teach trust, restraint and control. Her ultimate willingness to submit could mean the difference between life and death.

Reader Advisory: There's a short scene of F/F pleasure – watched by our hunky hero, of course.

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Taming a Raven

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Edited by Jaynie Ritchie

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Dedication

To all the women I know personally and professionally who selflessly share their special talents, intelligence, loyalty and humor on a daily basis without ever contemplating repayment.

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Chapter One

Materna Nakita of the Raven Clan proved to be more hindrance than help in Brigadier General Gage Ryker's quest to obtain aid. He glared at the older woman, not to impose his authority, rank or the severity of the situation, but simply because it came naturally when displeased. Even the title, Materna – *mother* – irritated him.

"Materna Nakita, I'm here under the direct order of President Evan Deacon. You must surrender a raven to me within the hour or your clan will no longer fall under the protection of Serenity Governance."

He recognized her comprehension by the slight tremor in her lips and subtle stiffening of her body. Until then, she'd offered the barest in hospitality and her condescension in dealing with someone of his rank was utterly deplorable. If her clan denied the Governance, the entire planet of Haven would become prey to any and every form of abhorrent creature known in their solar system.

"You have the authority to condemn an entire planet because of my reluctance?" she asked.

"I do. Haven receives protection only because of your small clan. The others here hold little value and contribute insignificantly to the overall strength of our worlds. My request's reasonable, and the raven you provide would fall under my care. I'm not known for neglect of borrowed objects. She'll be safe."

The middle-aged woman stared at an opposing wall as her hands folded in her lap. The gray hair woven throughout the black coil gathered on top of her head seemed severe against her delicate face. Accompanied by the plain black floor-length dress, he decided her appearance appropriately portrayed the inner woman. She appeared stern, exacting, unmovable and without the manners to even look at him as they spoke.

"As you've pointed out, General, our numbers are small. Most ravens are my age or older. Because the Governance required use of us so often, and for so many years, we neglected our breeding. Our young are unsuitable because they lack complete schooling. Too, their senses aren't fully developed. Your president promised us a time of peace to rebuild." She relayed her change in demeanor by a reasonable tone of voice.

He heard the slightly hostile inflection when speaking of the president. He wondered at its origin but wouldn't digress. "Your services are needed because Major Blaize Deacon is the man we search for."

Her gaze finally met his and he witnessed the dawning. A bit of color left her face. "It's the president's son who was taken off world and I'm obliged to fetch him. We've exhausted standard resources, and Deacon's impatience at having the major back resulted in the order to use a raven."

The terms were nonnegotiable but she appeared to calculate the unavailable options. When she stood, he followed suit. He dwarfed her by at least a foot. She crossed her arms as if finally feeling the chill surrounding them. "I'll accompany you, General Ryker."

"Your offer's generous," he said, barely controlling annoyance at her reluctance to provide that which he sought. "But my instructions are clear. I'm to receive a lady raven in her prime. You're two decades beyond and have earned the title *Materna*. Your place is here to bring up the young, not to once again test your skills as a tracker."

Tears filled her eyes accompanied by an expression clearly relaying hatred. Admirably, she kept the leakage in check and didn't push the threadbare control on his impatience. *Need it always be so cumbersome dealing with those born female?* He'd been double damned having to negotiate with a raven. He wondered at the odds he'd make it back to his vessel in the predetermined amount of time. He doubted they'd be very favorable.

"There's only one who's of age and has lessons learned."

"Then I must have her immediately."

"Lady Reina's in season and to be bred. Her obligation to the clan's been delayed long enough."

"I'm sorry for the lady. Certainly you understand if I leave the planet without her, your fate is sealed."

"Marianna!" An older raven appeared in a long, black gown. A heavy shawl was wrapped around her slim shoulders. Nakita said, "Please escort the general to the breeding chamber. It's necessary for Lady Reina to accompany him as a tracker."

"But, *Materna*..."

He watched and *felt* the nonverbal exchange before the older woman bowed her head and extended her arm for him to proceed. He thought tears to be maddening but found he'd gladly suffer them any morn—every morn—than endure the atrocious, penetrating screech of their kind. He'd been warned they could communicate in such a fashion and hoped he wouldn't need to experience it.

"General," *Materna* Nakita said before he left, "she's not a borrowed object. She's a woman."

His words cast back at him as if he were a young'un caused his patience to falter. *Such audacity!* "As you wish, *Materna*," he replied with a menacing grin. "But there's a world of difference between how I relate to something borrowed and a woman who needs bred."

After picking up the small satchel he'd brought in anticipation of acquiring the raven, he followed the elder *materna* through a large wooden door. Frustration appeared to be on his list of experiences that morn because she required two steps for each of his. They walked down wide hallways in the ancient stone structure with the sound of footsteps echoing. The lower they descended, the cooler and denser the air

became. He slowed his breath to accommodate the change in climate. The wave of dizziness eventually left and his head cleared.

The hall became darker with torches occasionally lighting the way. He noticed the many hieroglyphics in the stone. Carved images of battles long past were depicted. Great birds hovering over the bodies of men allowed him a clear interpretation of how the clan viewed males. He'd need to be a bit more cautious. Barbarism most certainly still dominated them.

Smoke, dampness and the chilled air made him wonder how any of the clan survived. Their lifestyle was less than modest. Why would they choose to live without so many basic comforts? The planet's rich organic trade items could easily be exported.

The breed stemmed from medieval times, their colony discovered when the galaxy was in its infancy. He ventured little had changed on Haven over the passage of time. The backward planet, mired in custom, legend and superstition, stayed the course, purposely remaining an uncivilized little mistake yet to be wiped out by more technologically advanced races. Haven and the Raven Clan invariably angered him. To him, the lack of technology suggested either laziness or ignorance. He detested both.

The deeper into the structure they went, the more ill at ease he felt. At six feet, five inches, he found it necessary to duck under some of the arches to enter the next section of tunnel. Glad for the warm, dark blue uniform stretched tightly across his body, he could barely fathom why the president sent him to such a place.

He'd follow orders and obtain the woman. She'd probably spend the entire journey toying with an automatic door or some other fascinating technology. Perhaps he'd find use for her in the mess. Certainly she'd understand how to cleanse plates and utensils. How could a woman reared in such an environment provide *anything* superior to that on board the *Raze*?

The materna slowed until he walked beside her. "Do you know of our customs, General?"

"I have full knowledge of the tactical capabilities of your kind, Materna. Schooling of such was mandated at a time when ravens were used extensively as the Governance grew in power."

"Because of your age, I assume you've never personally worked with a raven?"

"No." And damn it, he'd be the first lucky bastard to do so after many years of simply relying on superior training, instinct and advanced equipment. How fortunate.

Finally coming to stop before a large wooden door at the corner of an antechamber, she stepped to the side. "Please remember, Lady Reina is much more than a tracker for you. She's a precious life source for our kind."

He managed to school his features, conceal the irritation and offered what he could. "The mission is obviously critical. My presence and demand for one of you should relay as much. Trust I'll see to her, Materna. Now I must insist we proceed. Time is running out." He placed his hand on the huge brass knob.

"I'll summon the others when you enter. Don't speak until you're alone with our lady. To do so could cause an attack, and to have such beautiful eyes snatched from your face would be a pity."

"I mean her no harm," he replied, blood surging from the throat.

"As you've said, but those within have spent a great deal of time in her preparation. Focus your attention on Lady Reina only. Don't make eye contact with the others, don't speak, and above all, don't touch her in their presence. Remain still until I call them away. They'll eventually obey."

He refused to dally further and swung the heavy door open wide. Three long strides took him well into the chamber before he stilled, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. Six naked women surrounded a high table covered in furs. They focused on something he couldn't yet see. Their unbound, glorious black hair swayed as they moved. He became instantly mesmerized at the sight, sounds and scent of the overly warm place. Typically not caught unaware, he wondered what he thought he'd find in a *breeding* chamber.

He heard a sound or, more precisely, felt the raven's call, which gained the attention of the women. First one then another turned hesitantly toward the door. They watched him with wide, feral eyes, holding no color because of the expanse of their pupils. He remembered to look beyond them to the table, seeing them only with peripheral vision.

They came toward him and stopped when close. He remained motionless as their hands touched and explored. One snatched the leather band across his forehead. He waited as she ran fingers through his longish hair. She seemed most fascinated by it. The fragrance of the room became more intense. His heart quickened as blood stirred. *A woman's scent.* The heady smell of arousal came from the hands touching him.

Palms ran over his chest and arms as a third raven approached and crouched low. She stroked and caressed his legs, giving a thorough examination. She forced him to shift slightly by applying pressure to the inside of his thighs. He accommodated her by separating his boots. The raven wasted no time taking his balls to hand before rolling the weight and applying pressure to the sac. The exploration wasn't entirely unpleasant for it'd been a while since he'd received such attention. As she measured his length, hums of discovery and approval resonated from her throat.

Another of the women responded to the matron when she called. Four of them surrounded him and only two remained the short distance away. He could finally view that which he'd been focused on. *Lady Reina.*

His lady lay on her back against the furs, her wrists and ankles bound. One of the women kissed Reina's long, thick nipple before drawing it between her lips. His mouth watered at the sight. His lady appeared most affected by the attention. Needy little moans and sighs escaped as she twisted and undulated between the furs and the juicy mouth at her breast.

The fabric covering his cock stretched as blood hastened and brought it to life. Murmurs and verbalizations of encouragement came from the ravens pawing him. Hands roughly smoothed over his ass as long, aggressive fingers traced between his legs. His balls were squeezed as hot breath penetrated the fabric over his cock. His hands fisted as he tensed. The woman behind him pulled his ass cheeks apart to explore through the fabric. He should not move. The hands upon him and the sight of the squirming lady upon the furs made it hard to do so. A shrill call from the matrona caused a set of wandering hands to abandon his legs. A raven left the room. Calling upon his military training, he slowed his blood and calmed himself.

Lady Reina's back arched and as she strained against the bonds, her plump breasts thrust upward. Her ribs were outlined through delicate flesh as she thrashed about, causing her exquisite breasts to sway enticingly. Dark areolas surrounded wonderfully thick, pointed nipples. With the rest of her skin so pale, he imagined it'd taken much licking and sucking to darken and shape her so erotically.

A woman settled her hands on Reina's inner thighs, forcing her legs as wide as the restraints permitted. Reina's hips twisted urgently as she moaned. A thatch of black hair framed the top of her sex, but below that, her swollen lips were hairless and pink. Moisture glistened on the flesh and he already knew how enticing the aroma was. It lingered on his uniform where the ravens had touched.

Using her thumbs, the woman spread the puffy lips apart. The dark-haired beauty leaned down, opened her mouth and presented her tongue. He stifled a groan but couldn't stop the reaction of his cock. It lengthened and twitched as his mind conjured what the raven would taste between Reina's thighs.

The tongue settled high and wiggled. Lady Reina struggled and cried out as her pelvis came up from the tightening of her ass cheeks. She was drawn farther apart and the woman servicing her kissed, licked and nibbled before sucking the lady's clitoris between her lips.

Lady Reina convulsed in what appeared to be a massive orgasm as she bucked and thrust. Wet sounds filled the room, accompanied by long moans from both women. An uncontrolled spasm shot up from his balls as pre-cum leaked. She lifted her head off the bed and looked down between her legs. "Ugh, ugh, oh," she whispered.

Soon Reina struggled, clearly trying to bring her knees together. Had she become too sensitive? Could she require a lighter touch just then? *Or something much deeper.*

His mind took control of his thoughts. *Take her. She needs a thick cock thrusting inside. I bet she's tight and would love being stretched.* He imagined her arching in pleasure as he fucked and pumped her full and then thought about how those thick nipples would feel between his fingers as he pulled and pinched and sucked them in his mouth, against his tongue to lick and nibble. *No!*

He attempted to slow his raging pulse and make his subconscious sleep. In thirty-five years, he'd borne witness to and experienced many pleasures of the flesh. Nothing compared to the vision before him in the humid confines of the arousal-scented

chamber. Caught up in the raven's pleasure, he scolded himself as he closed his eyes to regain focus. He was a man full-grown and knew better than to get lost in musings. He'd simply been ill-prepared for the sight of the long-limbed erotic beauty spread out. *Restrained. Prepared.*

The last two ravens reluctantly left his lady, stopping to peruse him, to touch and bring their faces close to his crotch. His body remained still but his mind raced as he quickly reviewed basic information about the clan. He lacked knowledge on their mating rituals and wondered what brought about this unusual situation. The restraints accompanied by many mouths and hands could be required if the ravens lacked an innate sexual appetite. It would also explain their diminished numbers if breeding was not instinctive. It could also be as simple and archaic as old customs. Whatever the reason, the moment of thought afforded him clarity and he pulled his mind back to the reason he stood in the breeding chamber. *The mission.*

With the room cleared, he'd been about to move when Materna Marianna said, "Hold fast, General. Others have been summoned to cleanse Reina. The danger will pass once she no longer bears the mating scent. Although," she said, the words pronounced slowly, almost seductively, "you're of the planet Domineer and your rod seems quite needy. Should you wish to postpone your duty for a spell, our lady's been readied for a mating. The male selected for her is of your breed. I believe you're a better choice. You may take her."

He wasn't surprised one of his kind had been procured for the process. Domineers were noted for aggression, intelligence and their powerful build. Such attributes were sought-after commodities in numerous worlds. Many of the Raven Clan already possessed Domineer blood.

Tempted, his mind visualized the act. His breed possessed an exceedingly strong need to procreate, especially with a healthy, aroused female at hand. He deployed years of practiced control and the overpowering urges subsided. His cock eventually understood there'd be no mating this morn and took its leave to soften a bit.

"Ah, too bad, General. Your refusal disappoints me. Your young age, rank and physical strength make you a great coup in our breeding beds. Perhaps later when your mission is complete, you'll let us make you welcome. Your pleasure would be intense, endless for a time, and a raven could take all that you withhold from other females."

"Enough!" His temper finally flared.

He'd learned from books and instructors about the handling and use of a raven. They remained a community of females throughout life. He'd never pondered the exact ritual for conception with such a one-sided social structure. He did recall their need for a male to be singular—reproduction. Prior to off-planet travel, the ravens availed themselves to males from other clans on Haven. Too, regardless of what species they mated, all offspring remained predominantly raven.

The thought of spending time in their breeding chamber enticed him physically for a short moment. After thinking beyond the sex, being used for the purpose of breeding

repulsed him clear to his gut. It wholly remedied the collection of blood to his cock as well. His time in a Theazian prison taught him many lessons beyond his years, lessons not easily forgotten about being *used*.

Two young ravens came into the room. Not more than two decades in age, they carried a bucket between them. They made haste going to the lady and quickly, almost carelessly, washed her. The lady recoiled from their touch but couldn't escape with the restraints in place.

A scent overwhelmed the warm room. It reminded him of things green and living, planet-bound rarities known only to some worlds. Flowers, sage, grasses and other such delicate organics twisted in the fragrance. When the younger of the two wet the cloth and placed it between Reina's thighs, the lady went rigid and barely stifled a scream. Bumps from cold covered her creamy flesh as she endured yet another round of cleansing. Once done, one young raven loosened the restraints, the other went to a panel in the wall and slid it to the side. A blast of frigid air entered the chamber. Lady Reina immediately and uncontrollably shivered.

The young'uns left as quickly as they came. Materna Marianna's voice sounded stern. "Reina, you're needed. You must join me now. Make haste!" Reina struggled to sit up and trembled, her eyes remained closed. Long tendrils of wet, raven black hair hung in disarray down her back with shorter pieces framing her face. "The Governance is in need of a tracker. Your time's come."

Her shaking needled him to move. Marianna motioned for him to be still. "Lady!" Marianna shrieked before a violent pulse shot through him.

His head ached from the nonverbal communication. After arguing with Materna Nakita, fighting down the unexpected and unwelcome lust and standing in the frosty breeze, his temper quickly mounted. Best the lady do as requested and move her little body like her clan depended on it.

She moved slowly off the platform as if asleep. She went to her knees beside the bed, presenting her back. Her hand came up to grasp hair and pull it forward, leaving her posterior clear to view. Taken aback at the sight of pink scars striping her from the shoulders down, his temper faded, confusion washing it away.

Her slender arms came up and delicate fingers grasped the edge of the bed. He couldn't fathom what she sought to accomplish. All became clear when the materna moved swiftly toward her before raising and bringing down a whip against her flesh. The whistle of the whip and the blood rising to the surface of the lady's skin sickened and infuriated him. His eyes blurred as he cleared the distance and snatched the offensive weapon from the materna's hand.

"The pain from the cold brought her awake. Stronger pain is needed to make her alert," she said.

"You'll die if you harm her again." He ripped the damn thing apart and threw the pieces against the wall. "Bring me her clothes."

He went to the lady, bent and placed his hands at her waist. Icy skin made him pull away before he placed them firmly a second time, knowing now what to expect. She came to her feet with his aid and he helped her turn. Her arms fell limply against her sides and he lifted her, seating her upon the soggy furs. His palm touched her frozen cheek and she nuzzled against him. Her eyelids drew apart lazily. "I can't think clearly. The pain will make me conscious."

Her soft, drowsy voice sank into him. His thumb touched a cheekbone before stroking her perfect skin. "You'll not be brought to your senses by a whip. Not in my presence and not this morn, Lady. You'll be given the time you need once we've left this asylum."

"It's our way."

"It's not mine."

The Materna reappeared with another raven following. They set a small, worn satchel next to his bag and placed clothing on the bed. As they worked the soft black leather garments over her chill-bumped skin, Marianna said, "She'll not leave here unless we know she can comprehend. If she's our hope of continued safety through Governance patrol, we'll take no chance. It's not in our nature to be cruel, especially to one of our own. I only meant to waken her in the quickest manner possible."

"Your attempt at rushing the process astounds me. Nakita delivered quite a performance before agreeing to turn the lady over. By the markings on her back, it's obvious your only regret will be the effort in finding another to take your wrath."

When needed, he helped the lady stand and they continued working the supple covering over her long, curving legs.

"The contempt in your voice isn't necessary. We all bear similar marks, having endured what's necessary at points in our existence. Your shallow knowledge may yet get her killed."

A belt was tightly cinched around her hips to hold the pants in place. Reina cooperated the best she could. A black leather shirt was then pushed over her head before they tied her in. At last she depicted the raven women shown to him throughout training, the exception being her slender, naked feet and swollen half-mast eyes.

"Your foot, Reina, lift it for us," the Materna ordered.

"Sorry, Materna."

He held her arm as she hobbled first on one foot and then the other while knee-high black boots were pulled up. Her flesh warmed once she'd been covered. The sleek, well-worn pants rode low on her hips and hugged every inch. The shirt covered her breasts with intricate lacing, revealing skin and the inner edges of plump mounds. It fastened behind her neck, leaving long arms and slim shoulders exposed. Her bare waist allowed him to see the muscles in her abdomen flex as she repositioned herself.

When she was almost ready to leave, he released her arm and fetched his bag. He brought forth the collar and fastened it securely around her neck before placing the slim armband control unit around his wrist. The compliance device would be used only as a

means to protect the woman. With that foremost in mind, he felt less vile having placed it.

The materna and young raven stepped back to view their work before an intrusive, keening and highly infuriating call penetrated his skull. Each time it happened, he seemed more sensitive to their form of communication. Lady Reina's attention heightened and revealed two unusually colored amber eyes. The trademark ring of white around the black pupil expanded as the sound continued to escalate. The young'un whipped around and ran from the chamber. A similar inclination came over him as his temples pounded. Marianna continued emitting the high-pitched vibration that lessened Reina's stupor.

Gage's jaw set so he wouldn't utter a complaint about the repeated calls. He believed anything to be more merciful than bloodying her back. With their kind being more sensitive to the shrill broadcasts, it was little wonder she pulled herself together soonest.

The sleepy appearance gave way to acute awareness as her body tensed, muscles tightened and her spine straightened. The transformation amazed him. A few moments back, he'd hardly been able to fathom the delicate, sensual creature could be a tactical, ruthless expert at locating and at times destroying targets twice her size.

Blood trickled from Reina's nose and Gage reached out, grabbed the materna and shook her harshly until the sound stopped. Reina used the back of her trembling hand to make a pass beneath her nose. It came away smeared with blood. Marianna stepped away from him and turned, saying, "The whip would've been kinder."

When the lady coughed and covered her mouth, he saw spatters of blood on her palm. He reached behind her and grabbed a damp discarded cloth before carefully wiping her face and hand. She'd been spared nothing. Once he cleaned her, he aggressively threw the cloth aside. The old hag best make herself scarce. He had the inclination just then to make *her* bleed.

He grasped the lady's arm, gathered both bags and led her toward the door. "We have ten minutes to board ship. If you can't keep up, speak now."

She walked silently as her long legs and booted feet almost kept stride. Although her gate was sure, purposeful and determined, it wasn't particularly feminine. Pleased with their progress and her ability to keep up, he quickened the pace. Conveyance from the underground caverns was impossible and they needed to reach surface level before they could transport.

As they walked, he mentally prepared for that which lay ahead. Soon they'd be aboard the *Raze IV*. Each successive ship built in the *Raze* series boasted numerous technological advances from the one prior. He'd commanded *IV* previously when she'd been the newest member of the fleet. After having spent the past six months serving on the council, he felt a measure of excitement having the *Raze* back and heading to space. He'd been too young to sit with elders and measure out tactical advice. He belonged at

the helm of a ship. Those at the Governance finally realized his true value. A pity it took Blaize Deacon's abduction to bring it about.

"The control device isn't necessary, General," she said as she walked, spine straight and head held high. "I'm quite willing to accompany you."

"Its purpose isn't to persuade you to go, Lady. It'll be used for compliance during our time together."

He stole glances at her in the ever-increasing light and wondered how she'd received that information. The corner of her mouth kicked up a bit and her expression immediately put him on alert. She should be resigned or displeased at its use, not amused. "Have you the notion to test its effectiveness, Lady?"

"Certainly not, Sir. Materna Marianna relayed the seriousness of my placement with you and my need for success in locating the president's son."

"And when did she tell you all this?"

"She explained prior to you shaking her, Sir."

The words by themselves had been utterly respectful. He didn't care for her tone of voice or the increasing smirk. It rather infuriated him. "If you understand how grave the situation is, explain to me what you find humorous."

He stopped her by planting his feet and using the hand on her arm to spin her. He wanted to view her full facial expression. A purposeful frown appeared even harder for her to maintain, the light in the tunnel reflecting the whimsical set of her eyes.

"Sir?"

"Your eyes are dancing with laughter," he said, using a tone clear with warning many military men twice her age covered from.

Daring to make a *tsking* sound prior to speaking, she replied, "My eyes can hardly *dance*, General. You've mistaken me. I'm deeply sorry I've given rise to your anger. Please forgive me."

Not a damn thing about her expression looked remorseful. If the lives of her clan didn't rest on her shoulders, he'd swear she took some perverse delight in the contradictory behavior. He forced his mouth to remain closed as he considered the possibility he might've misconstrued her demeanor. His knowledge of ravens was gleaned years prior and his personal experience consisted of fifty-one minutes. "We must hurry."

Almost to the main level, she commented, "I beg your pardon, Sir, but your collar is a bit tight and gives me the incredible urge to scratch beneath. Is there by chance a different one available for my irritation?"

"Compliance," he gritted out.

"Very well, Sir. Compliance. Is there?"

"No."

A long sigh came from her and on a breath he swore he heard, *What a pity.*

In contrast to her implied words, his retort came out loud enough there could be no mistake. "I may have erred when I took the whip from your elder."

He glanced over and finally found an appropriate expression. His callous remark wiped away any trace of humor and *that* he took comfort in.

Chapter Two

Appearing suddenly on the bridge of the ship, Reina glanced around to make sure she'd arrived in one piece before noticing the people standing at attention. How silly they looked, completely still as if carved from stone. Officers wore the same dark blue uniform as the general while those in lower ranks wore garments much lighter. Their customs were somewhat known to her from studies on the Governance, but she never imagined she'd see the formality in person. The use of raven women ceased when she wore braids.

They saluted her escort, giving him complete attention. She remained emotionless on the surface but her stomach bunched up with trapped laughter. A brigadier general title suited the muscled and staunch man. His arrogance alone could've earned it for him. His height could've too. She wondered if these military people ever devoted time to laughter, fun or other such worthy pursuits.

"General Ryker, the ship's been made ready," an officer the general's age said.

"Very good. At ease." His deep and commanding voice was perfectly suited to his station.

He stood at least nine inches taller than her. She didn't particularly care for his intensity to be focused in her direction. Regardless, his gaze met hers prior to saying, "Lady Raven, I'll take you to the mapping room if you're ready to begin."

Her mouth practically watered at all the electronics she'd studied but never laid fingers on. She had little interest in star charts and old-fashioned navigation. Her education was superb. She walked forward cautiously to the communications panel.

"Lady!" Warning and menace were strongly conveyed because she'd heard that particular tone prior. It mostly came from others in authority.

She wasn't a bad raven, didn't mean to anger those having charge of her, but certain things proved too tempting and, alas, she couldn't stifle such strong urges. Quickly bending at the waist, she touched the virtual screen and made it sizzle to life. She was bemused by the responsiveness and speed in which it rotated, located and made her requests reality. She spoke in utter awe. "Such lovely playthings you have at your disposal, Sir."

Barely hearing the snickers from the personnel, she had no such trouble detecting *his* presence. His breathing alone told her she'd receive at least a scolding for touching toys she'd yet been given permission to handle. In an attempt to avoid the lecture, she programmed the artificial intelligence as she spoke. "Blaise Deacon, major in the Serenity Governance, son of the most popular president to date for ending a two-hundred-year war."

The baby major's face appeared before statistical information rushed in front of her eyes. She loved the speed of technology and knew to another it might've appeared as random flashes of light. It took many slaps from a few of the maternas before they believed she could thusly learn. But, oh, that'd been so many years ago with a relic of tech-data. She actually concentrated very hard to grasp all the information spewing forth. Transfixed by particulars, she reflexively sat at the console so her body would be at ease while her mind worked.

Gage and the others looked on as she became totally focused on what the computer transmitted into three-dimensional images and words. He'd initially neared to pull her away from the sophisticated equipment as she appeared to randomly *play* with the screen. It quickly became obvious her skill in the use of computers surpassed anyone on board.

"Do you know who's taken him, Sir?" she asked, her voice sounding detached and emotionless.

"Theazians."

Her fingers worked quickly as images raced. "Really, General, an entire world destroyed. Was it necessary?" His jaw set at her flippant remark. Before he could speak however, she again managed to avoid his wrath when she drew in a breath, held it and released it with a sound of hurt. "Bastards! Pity you didn't get all of them."

Without interrupting her, he stepped around so he could see her face. The moisture in her eyes told him she'd learned the history of Theazians. The images of countless acts of brutality in the murder, rape, pillage and annihilation of vast colonies of beings flashed by in rapid succession. The screen went still as she looked up. A tear threatened to escape.

"I apologize for my initial tactless ignorance, Sir. Please forgive me?" He studied her sad, pained expression and believed it to be genuine.

"Of course."

Soulful amber pools held his gaze. She truly appeared sorry for the jibe. He'd led the force in the obliteration of Theazia years prior and never felt anything but utter relief at its destruction. Many of the inhabitants perished as the planet turned inside out but not all were caught in one strike. Some of the demons were off world and continued to maraud from various base camps throughout the system.

"General," she said as she turned her attention to the screen. "Are you sure who has your Major Deacon?"

"Our best intelligence believes it to be Theazians."

"Do you have a place of privacy, Sir, where I might access this data beast?" She scanned the room, seeming to once again notice the rank and file watching her. She looked unsure.

He glanced around at his officers when they snickered at her term for the computer. Deadpan expressions replaced the grins quickly and silence ensued. "My cabin has a link, Lady."

She swallowed and her eyes finally glanced away. "Is it possible to clear this chamber for a time?"

"No, Lady. If you require privacy while you access, we'll move to my cabin." Ordering his second-in-command, he said, "LeRoy, hold course in Haven's orbit until I give the order."

"Sir?" he asked.

"Colonel," he replied. Unaccustomed to having his orders questioned, he stared at the man who'd watched his back through many years of service.

"We've been hailed twice in your absence and asked about our departure. Should the president contact us again—"

"You'll inform him I've done his bidding, retrieved the raven and will take action when the woman has two seconds to gain her bearings and give a direction. He's personally worked with a tracker and should realize the speed in which they process. Seems to me her ability with the data beast already saved hours of book searching and map fingering."

"Agreed, Sir."

He cast a glance over those present, scanning for any subtle change in expression. Not one dared display a hint of anything other than total acceptance of the term *data beast*. His stance on her presence changed the minute she displayed remorse over careless words. It somehow made him revisit the fact that despite her earlier angering behavior, she'd work for him, for all of them. As he understood it, the process wouldn't be particularly enjoyable.

LeRoy called the group to order and they stood at attention. With his hands folded behind his back, he tilted his head slightly to the side, waiting for her. She stood reluctantly and he escorted her to the door.

* * * * *

The ship fascinated Reina. Her mind held images from schooling, which were nil compared to actually being inside the great vessel *Raze*. More than one thousand soldiers occupied the hull if at full capacity. A special docking station needed to be constructed to accommodate her girth and length. Her flight power in battle, intricate systems and stealthy engines were known to many worlds. It astounded her that she, Lady Reina of the Raven Clan from the small planet Haven, did indeed walk the halls of the greatest battle vessel ever constructed. *Such a humbling experience.*

The general's boots clicked with the tempo of his stride, which seemed unusually long and determined. Personally, she would've been happy with a more leisurely pace so she could take in everything flying by. At the end of a corridor, a lift sped them upward before they walked some more. People whom they passed stopped to give him attention and unfroze only once they'd walked by. She knew because she found the

actions most unusual and kept turning to see what they'd do when he couldn't spy them easily.

He held her arm lightly and she felt the warmth and strength in his fingers as he led her toward a particular door. The door slid away before he escorted her into what must've been his chamber. The word *chamber* to her was likened to stone walls, comfortable bed, furs piled high and sparse necessities. *His* chamber was large, warm and wondrously filled with incredible oddities.

"Is this where you sleep, Sir?"

"Yes."

She walked, touched and studied the top of the desk and the fine, supple material covering the chairs before noticing the art hanging on the walls. To be in possession of such superior creations astonished her. The strokes of brush on canvas unmistakably revealed the artists who'd rendered them. The themes held her rapt attention because of the dark, foreboding nature and use of only black, gray and white. *Fascinating!* Such depth of emotion captured in each painting.

She knew the general to be of the Domineer breed. It was little wonder such portraits of male power and feminine submission agreed with him. But, oh, the looks of stunned pleasure on the women's faces! Could one feel so much pleasure from holding a man between her legs?

"Are these genuine or replicas, Sir? Mazdone, Sarrious, Jennings—not their most famous works but certainly precious." She spoke without thought as she gazed, studying the detail.

"They're real, Lady," he replied, sounding bored or annoyed, she couldn't decipher which.

She sighed loudly at hearing his impatience and closed her eyes to stop her perusal of the stunning paintings. After turning to face him, she offered, "Once again, General, please forgive me. I'll offer the explanation this once and try very hard not to have to apologize for myself again. I have intricate knowledge of the toys you have at your fingertips." His eyes winced slightly and she wondered what she'd managed to say. "What I have in my head is two-dimensional however, and my slack-jaw intrigue at all the pretty, pretty things you take for granted is probably terribly annoying to you. And for that, Sir, I apologize and will try very hard to withhold my astonishment in the future."

With him immobile and glaring, perhaps she'd made a mistake speaking at all. She knew how to appropriately address a man of his rank and remained fairly certain she'd not breached etiquette. She also wasn't a lack-wit on basic manners. Not understanding his penetrating stare, she moved to touch his arm in an attempt to reach past social propriety and converse—one being to another. "Have I done something or said something even more atrocious, General? If you'll speak plainly with me, Sir, I'll avoid whatever I've done henceforth."

"Lady Raven—"

“It would make me feel less foreign if you’d call me Reina, Sir. I understand your military protocol and the absolute need for formality, but to have my name spoken without title would make the small flying creatures in my stomach take a nap.” His expression softened as his gaze became less intense. She smiled because of it. She felt better immediately and quietly released the breath she’d held.

“Lady, I may not address you informally. To do so would suggest familiarity. As for your hand on my arm...” He looked down pointedly and she removed her fingers from him instantly before he finished. “A touch so casual might suggest a deeper interest than I believe you have.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t understand. You held my arm as we walked,” she said before noticing the set of his jaw and his eyes narrowing the slightest bit. “No, don’t get angry with me again, please explain. I have knowledge of your customs.” Best she tell him the exact truth, for she feared he’d see through any embellishment. “Well, in truth sharing between us, not an extensive learning in your ways. But the only way I can learn is to be told.”

“My touch was socially proper while escorting you, Lady. Your warm hand on me however, caressing me while you speak, is an intimate gesture. It offers invitation for me to touch you similarly.”

Still confused, she grabbed his hand and placed it upon her arm. “But you may do so. See? I’ve taken no offense and as it stands, your hand is quite reassuring.” He jerked away, breaking all contact before his angry expression came back. Casting her eyes down, she realized there’d be no learning from the general. “I offer no further apology for my actions because you won’t teach me. And that’s fine. There’s an entirely different approach to my stomach troubles and your anger, Sir. I’ll become a fine little soldier in your army and follow commands. After all, I’m here for that purpose. You may use me at will to get your baby major back.”

When she glanced up, his eyes narrowed even more. Impossible, but it happened.

“First, let me explain you’re never to use the word *baby* and major in the same breath. Second, I require your services for which your clan will reap the benefits. I don’t *use* women.”

“But I’m a raven and you’ll *use* me to track the minor major, er, the president’s little major. Is that not so?” His huffing caused her to relay some bewilderment. “We speak the same language but apparently it’s my words that offend you. Why? You understand me, you take my meaning and I’m certain there’s no inflection in my tone. What’s wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me! Wrong – with – me, Lady? A major is never a *minor*.”

By the way the man bit out each word, she reckoned silence might’ve been more appropriate. But he’d touched her so gently in the breeding chamber and even took the whip from the materna. Forever making wrong assumptions, she hurried to correct her latest. “But the president has several sons of which Blaize is the last born. Am I not

correct, Sir? Isn't his other son Blain also a major? So in reference to Blaize, how should I address him to make myself clear?"

He suddenly burst into laughter and she took several steps away. By the stars, the man was mad. He was angry one moment and laughing the next. A body could have a range of emotion but for one to replace another without the slightest preamble gave her reason to keep a distance.

"Forgive me, Lady, it never occurred to me you knew of Deacon's other children." After quieting his laughter, the smile remained. "If you'll refer to his youngest simply as major, it'd suffice. He *is* the one we seek, so I won't misunderstand you."

"Oh." But what caused his sudden change? How would a being know to use just a title? And what brought about his sudden fit of laughter? He appeared angry at her description and then found humor in it?

The smile fading, he said, "But on the *use* of a raven, the word in that context isn't appropriate."

"No, but why? Won't you be using me, Sir?"

His intensity came back and with the light crystalline blue of his eyes focused on her, she temporarily regretted asking. She wondered again about his sanity.

"Its connotation is sexual in nature, Lady."

"Really?"

"Really." He didn't sound overly enthusiastic about the prospect.

After mulling it over, she wondered why the sexual aspect of the word bothered him. Obviously she repelled him, or perhaps his tastes ran in a different direction. As long as ravens had been tracking for the Governance, their urges were generally met by the senior officer. Had things changed since her education? Would she be expected to satisfy the maddening sexual desire alone? Of course she could do so, had tended herself often during punishment when others weren't permitted to bring her to climax. But that'd been during discipline and she'd yet to misbehave! At least not intentionally.

She wondered why she'd hoped and prayed all those years for the chance to have just one opportunity to see such things, experience this life before she'd breed. Over the years, she'd often dreamed of tracking for the Governance, flying about the stars while learning of new worlds, testing her education and honing her skills. Also, knowing that providing service would get a male between her legs made it all the more appealing. It'd be just her luck to have one little mission to find a minor major before she'd be dumped right back into the breeding chamber. Alas, as fate would have it, her time aboard the *Raze* would be much the same as her time on Haven. She loved children, knew her duty, but...

Gage studied her reaction and knew his warning was taken to heart because of her crestfallen expression. She appeared to be bright, lighthearted and very enthusiastic until then. Unrefined curiosity and energy vibrated from her. She was unlike any female he'd dealt with and he'd attempt to look beyond her words so that his explanations wouldn't damage her ego in the future.

"Lady Reina?"

"Yes, General?"

"You requested privacy and a computer link. Would you please begin?"

"Certainly."

He offered her access by extending his arm. She took a moment and appeared to study him to make sure it'd be all right before she sat at the console. Why? It irritated him she thought twice prior to accepting his invitation. His actions were seldom if ever contradictory.

"My schooling is older than it should be," he said once she'd sat. "I was taught once knowledge of the subject is gained, you utilize some unnatural ability to start the process of location. I believe we were told you run your hands and fingers over star charts until a solar system then planet can be selected. Do you need those things?"

"No thank you, Sir. Your virtual data will be adequate. My comfort is with technology, not paper. Before I begin, do you have any questions about the role you're to play?"

"Pardon?"

"I need you to keep me on task, guide me and write down any clues I give."

"Clues!" So much for looking beyond her words.

"Well, General, it's not as if I'll close my eyes, twirl my fingers through the air, stab at a planet and call it done! This is a joint venture, Sir, and I damn well need a guide. Is there someone on your *Raze* who's worked with a raven?"

"No. Those with direct knowledge have moved up in rank, perished or retired. My crew is fully trained with the latest technology, not practices from decades past."

She looked scared and he wondered what other fascinating tidbits had been glossed over in the text. To play along with her probably wouldn't require much. Alone in his cabin, the chance of anyone witnessing the idiot game he'd invariably be forced to participate in were nil. If indeed by some miracle it gained him a scrap of information, it'd be worth his temporary discomfort and humiliation.

"Explain what you'll need."

She swallowed and her gaze searched his. "This should be easy for you. You seem an intelligent man, um—general. Let me hear your voice as I fly. Guide me with your words and remind me who we're looking for. I'll relay things back as I search. Write them down. Speak not only of the—major, speak of the Theazian you believe has him. It should be fine. I have more knowledge from the data beast than any raven who's taken flight. Are you ready?"

Whatever happened, he firmly believed the stark panic in her voice to be quite real. *At least in her mind.* "You're not entirely at ease. Is there cause for concern?"

Silently staring, assessing him, determination lit her eyes. "No. All will be well so let's begin."

Her hands touched the console and brought it to life. Her command of the computer tremendous, his fascination was intense as he watched her navigate. Star systems spun as galaxies rotated through her fingers. The process went on quietly for five minutes as he studied her technique, the dancing of fingertips amidst the light. When a particular star system appeared, her hands slowed and moved almost lazily through the cluster of planets. Her ability impressed him. He hoped not to witness any head rolling, chanting or other such melodramatic behavior.

The only warning he'd received from texts related to the raven's *flight* was to watch her closely. Of course she wouldn't physically fly about the room, but he prepared for something equally ridiculous. He recalled a tidbit in relation to a raven taking on an animal quality.

About to ask if she'd located something, hardly able to believe it possible, he glanced at her face. He stood abruptly and nearly knocked the chair over in his haste. Her expanded pupils completely filled her eye openings. Her skin looked chalky and she took in breaths with great speed as if she'd been running. As for appearing akin to an animal, she didn't. She looked like an underworld demon.

"Lady, are you well?"

Her head went back and her neck stretched prior to her chin coming down close to her chest. The three-dimensional model of the stars and planets in the Zyone sector rotated. Tilting her head slightly to the side, she gazed through the tops of her eyes. Her appearance disturbed him on a gut level. And the longer she gazed, the more her fingers sought, the less she looked like a woman.

"Lady Reina!"

A vibration went through him as she communicated nonverbally. How the hell would he gather clues from her screeching? He sat back down and instinctively touched her arm. Frigid cold entered him as his body became lighter and the room grew dark.

"Reina!"

You're not meant to follow here. Her gentle words formed in his mind without ever coming through his ears. *Release my arm and ground me with your voice.*

To release her would require a physical body, of which he had none. Dark emptiness erupted into brilliant light before spinning violently. Arrays of color burst. Then nothing, absolute nothingness surrounded him. Death.

His ears rang, his eyes burned and he sat back in the chair until his mind refocused. When he could once again see, he found her hovering alone in that place of hell. The hand that touched her was still numb from cold.

"Reina?" he asked with a raspy voice.

"Here. Alone. Focused. Waiting."

"Where are you?"

"Zyone. Lost."

"Come back to me."

"My people. Help me. Guide me."

"You're not well."

"The name – give me the baby's name. Tiny, tough little man who's determined to play more than simulation games with virtual soldiers. Wants the blood, battles, victory, glory. Full of pride, this babe, standing on the remains of those he's trampled in his reach for the stars."

"Major Deacon?"

"Blaize, as in fire."

The map spun as she leaned forward. She gazed into the light at images, tilting her head first to the left then to the right. How could she navigate or concentrate in the dark? He couldn't comprehend how she stayed on task.

"Bound, beaten, the blood his, not from faceless others as was his dream. Penance, remorse and terror hold fast," she said, the words flowing quickly. "The stink of burning death is heavy in his head. He asks forgiveness through despair. Hush, baby major, hush now. Feel my presence. Know that we're searching."

He grasped a thin writing implement and took notes. She seemed determined to keep working and her suffering wouldn't be wasted. After depressing a button on the desk, he ordered, "The Zyone sector, full engines."

"Aye, Sir," LeRoy replied.

She cupped her hands to bring a grouping of planets closer. Making them grow, she spun each one with the tip of a finger. She seemed mesmerized as it twirled in front of her pitch eyes.

"Do you know where he is?"

"*Balasta don chewertai infatamal,*" she drawled, enunciating each word from the foul language perfectly in a guttural, foreign voice. *We'll strike from within.*

"Theazian bastard!" He resisted the urge to grab hold of her arm and drag her from where she'd gone. He believed then her reluctance to fly was justified. And she'd done so without him knowing how to help. Her journey proved her to be either the biggest fool or bravest woman he'd ever met.

"Blood heat, Blaize ablaze, the stench of wide waters, running, churning over burning rocks." Her voice became deeper and more forceful. "Steam hissing, water crying as it dies and trails upward. Red lakes of sand, surrounded by torrid tangles of trees."

"There are eight planets, only eight. Which one, Reina?"

Her upper lip went back to display an evil smile. His skin all but crawled as she looked beyond the spinning planets and focused on something stationary. "Abyss, brimstone, home, home, home, homehomehome."

He forced his voice to sound neutral. "Reina, it's Gage. You're on a ship, you're safe. You've done your duty and you must come back now. Can you hear me?"

"*Ravania blouz caretta!*" *The raven bitch dies.*

Not this woman, Theazian bastard. Not on my watch and not aboard my ship! The words left him utterly cold. He slammed his fist on the console and the image from the link evaporated. Her hands stilled in midair as her breathing became less normal. The rim of her lips gained a bluish cast.

He grabbed her small hands into his and immediately felt the pull to join her in the place of nothingness. He concentrated on the chill of her fingers, the deathly pallor of her skin and the black of her eyes. She'd not be let go. She'd come back to his quarters. He'd drag her every inch of the way if necessary. The extent of her trust hadn't been known at the beginning of her journey. He understood then and would do what was necessary to bring her back.

"It's over, Lady. I have you. You're safe."

Her shoulders fell forward as her fingers grasped him tightly. She deepened the air she took in and he relaxed a bit. Her voice sounded weak and strained when she said, "Through his eyes, through his eyes I saw... He knew I was there."

A cold sweat formed on her upper lip and forehead. The shaking of her body seemed uncontrollable. He'd been told the process could be uncomfortable. *Uncomfortable, hell!* He stood and gathered her up from the chair. The need to hold more than just her hands spurred him to act, made him believe if he captured all of her, he could keep her from slipping away.

Her featherlight weight surprised him. Most women seemed small to him but with her generous breasts and firm, round ass, he expected her to be more of a burden, denser somehow. His concern deepened at how cold she'd gotten. Her slim arms came around his neck as she clung. With the shaking worsening, he momentarily couldn't fathom what to do.

"Lady, are you with me?"

"Yes, Sir." Her teeth chattered.

His arms ached from the cold body pressed against him. He could only imagine how she felt. He crossed the room and stood before the chair. "Lounge," he ordered. The chair obeyed and unfolded into a comfortable lounger. He bent to lay her upon it and she embraced him tighter. The strength in her faded and he finally placed her down when her arms went limp. "Adjust. Heat."

The furniture adjusted to her body and warmed her. He jerked the blanket from the bed and stuffed it over and around her, tucking her in. Her pupils receded a bit and a slim ring of amber became visible. She continued to shiver as he bent and brushed damp hair from her face. He'd been about to summon the medical team when she reached up and grasped his wrist. "General?"

"Yes?"

"Did I give you a location?"

"Close, Lady. Worry not about such now, I'll call a physician to help."

“No need. A moment, Sir, and I’ll help you find a more precise location. The cold and sleepiness are common.” She yawned and shuddered, curling against herself under the thick covers.

“I have enough landmarks to search on my own for a while. Get some rest.”

“I should help you, Sir.” She blinked tiredly before yawning again.

“My orders aren’t usually open for debate or discussion.” He stroked her forehead and she already felt warmer, a slight blush coming to her cheeks. “I’ll manage.”

He straightened his posture and continued to watch. Her eyes stayed closed longer and longer as her pupils grew smaller with each blink. The use of the collar occurred to him then, remembering ravens sometimes *flew* in a direction not conducive to a mission. The thought of using the brain-piercing electronics on her while she opened herself to the blackness and freezing cold so repelled him he leaned over, unfastened it and took it from her slim throat. The thought of other military personnel using the device on such delicate creatures sickened him. He removed the wristband and stuffed both items into a drawer before slamming it shut. They weren’t animals and with a bit of coaxing, he’d been able to somewhat guide her. If the need arose in the future, he’d be prepared and a damn sight more helpful.

At the console, he ran inquiries and pinpointed the planet Infur. With temperatures hovering at or above 125 degrees F, wide running rivers with a high sulfur content, active volcanoes, areas of jungle and massive deep caverns, it appeared the most likely. It had many characteristics of Theazia prior to its destruction. No wonder the bastard thought of home.

His next task would be to decipher what the Theazian was thinking when Reina said, *We’ll strike from within.*

Chapter Three

Reina came fully awake a short time later beset with excitement. She'd flown with a purpose and succeeded in what she'd been trained. It hadn't taken hours to locate the target as she'd been cautioned it might. It'd taken minutes. Certain the speed came from having so much information prior to starting, she immediately felt less insecure about her abilities. Surely the general would be impressed or at the very least less angry with her.

Warm, surrounded by an extremely soft cover, she wondered lazily for a moment if she'd dreamed the adventure with the general and boarding the *Raze*. *The general*, her mind purred, her thoughts softening. *Such a magnificent specimen*. His sun-colored hair hung in soft waves to his shoulders. His piercing blue eyes were the exact color of water running in the low valley rivers on Haven. The mental image of his big, heavily muscled body beneath his uniform made her swallow the moisture that flowed into her mouth. She'd been snatched from the breeding chamber prior to the mating and her body suddenly remembered what it'd been prepared for. It wasn't unusual to wake with sexual hunger, but its talons sunk deeply and instantly this time. Her bed adjusted and something settled next to her hip.

"Lady Reina, is there something I can get for you? Your sleep seemed troubled."

Not a dream! Remembering he didn't want use of her body, she tried desperately to form an appropriate response. "Perhaps if I sat up?"

The blanket moved and he gently helped her to sit. The man had such large and powerful hands attached to amazingly muscled arms. She rubbed her neck where the compliance device had been. "Have I proven myself to be a good pet so soon, General?"

"You won't refer to yourself as such again."

Anger must be soul deep in the man to have it so readily available. She asked softly, "Compliant raven?"

"Person, woman, lady, female, tracker – any of those would do."

"You find offense with my heritage, Sir?" The term *raven* was missing in names she could use in reference to herself.

He stood and glared down at her. She tried not to smile, realizing the general liked holding the advantage by towering above her. His left hand went up and opened close to his face. He used the thumb to rub one eye while the fingers rubbed the other. At last something new came from him. Anger appeared to give way to frustration. "The collar's been used to..."

"Its use and necessity have been explained to me. I knew to expect it. I also know when I take flight and my body remains grounded, it mirrors something animalistic to

those who aren't raven. Hence, I used the term pet, as in animal. We've quibbled about the word compliance. Really, Sir, is all this discussion over such simple statements necessary?" He drew a breath and she rushed her words. "No, please hold for a moment as I form my question—yes, I believe I have it now. Were you pleased with my compliance?"

He glared and she didn't bother to temper the irritation in her voice when she asked, "If not, Sir, why did you remove the collar?"

"Because I found the blasted thing around your neck offensive."

"Oh." Its removal had nothing to do with her flight or the information she provided. *So much for impressing him.*

Her arms crossed to ward off a chill and a groan almost escaped. She repositioned her arms so they wouldn't rub against her sensitive breasts. She needed to take care. They were full, swollen, and the hard nipples rubbed infuriatingly against the warm, supple leather. Miserable at the moment, she tried not to think about the wetness between her legs.

To wake in such a state with a male who wanted naught to do with her gave rise to insecurities barely laid to rest. She couldn't say the right thing, his constant angry scrutiny relayed she couldn't do the right thing and she seemed more nuisance to him than anything. Her stomach made a noise and she closed her eyes. Her humiliation was then complete.

"When did you last eat?" Even her hunger irritated him. This adventure certainly wasn't working out in any respect.

"Two days ago, General."

"Why?" The single word relayed anger.

"A fast to cleanse the blood, slow the metabolism to allow the greatest chance of success in breeding." She blurted it out before thinking. What she'd said though was simply a fact.

"You're starved before you breed?"

She suddenly found offence with one of *his* words. "There's a period of fasting, Sir. My weight is such I wouldn't starve."

"Come with me, Lady, we'll get you fed."

She came to her feet, trying to obey, but swayed slightly because her knees wouldn't separate fast enough. Her body desperately wanted something more than food. The pressure of her thighs clamped together created a lovely, tormenting sensation.

Strong hands grabbed her upper arms and pushed her back down. Then crouching before her, still holding her, he said, "You'll have something to eat here, you're weak." She enjoyed that voice, the one that rumbled nicely, without being threatening.

"No, Sir. No special arrangements necessary. Give me a moment to shake the effects of my nap and there won't be a problem."

He rubbed his thumbs over her arms gently but with firm pressure. She raised her gaze to his and wanted so badly to get closer.

"I didn't ask a question, Lady Reina. I said you'll eat here. When I've asked a question, you'll know because the last word or two will give a rise to my voice."

His warm fingers and hands holding her, the deep timbre of his voice, and his intense blue eyes all suddenly came together to create a stirring inside, lower than her belly. The tone of his words seemed to relay something and she knew it wasn't anger. She looked at his lips, tilted her head slightly off-center while speculating about the man kissing another being. She wondered if the pressure of his mouth or if his taste would differ from that of a woman.

The unusual darkening along his jaw drew her attention and she acted without thought. Her fingertips ran carefully along the textured skin. She felt her pupils dilate in surprise, allowing extra light so she could more closely examine him. She marveled and said, "Does this hurt you?"

"What," he asked, appearing distracted.

"This roughness on your face. It's so unusual and yet..." she explained, bringing her other hand up to experience both sides at once. "My touch doesn't seem to cause discomfort."

The tip of her finger smoothed over his upper lip. "And here too," she said, marveling at the remarkable difference. "It resembles hair but it's harsh and tickles my skin."

"It's hair, Lady."

She held his jaw with her left hand while her right went to the side of his face and stroked the length of his hair. She stopped at the ends and rubbed the softness to compare. "It couldn't be, Sir. Your hair is sun-colored and feels like the softest fur. This is darker and rough."

"I need to shave."

"Shave?"

"Laser the hair from my face."

"And if you didn't..." A dawning came. "You'd have a beard like some men? You mean the hair on one's face is intentional?"

Astounding! Her eyes closed a bit in concentration as she inhaled. So different than anything she'd experienced. She smiled and decided his scent matched the rest of him. He smelled of rain and storm clouds mixed with a tinge of atmosphere following an electrical discharge from the sky. An aura of elemental strength surrounded him and the castoff radiated into her, warming her.

His eyes became sharp, predatory as he straightened and stepped back. He glared as if she'd done something else wrong. His quick movements and retreat savaged her and she drew a shaky breath. With the strong sexual urges peaking, she trembled from the desire coursing through her blood. His repulsion made her stomach clench so she

would then have to suffer double aches. One from emotional hurt and the other from hunger.

Gage left and went into the adjoining cabin, the one Reina'd use while on board. The data link came to life with a wave of his hand and he made his request to the galley. Next he entered his security code. He had access others didn't to every corner of the ship. No one but him and LeRoy could view inside a cabin. He'd never done so but felt completely justified to keep close tabs on the female.

He watched Reina within his space. Even the sight of her close to his bed kept his aching, throbbing cock at full attention. The slightest touch of her hands against his face had taken him dangerously close to something he hadn't experienced in years. The remembrance of losing control in any manner still shamed him. Albeit fighting for one's life was considered extreme and forgivable, he'd not consciously given release to his dark side. It'd taken him over.

Lost in her damn expressive eyes as she touched and discovered his face, he'd been overwhelmed with the urge to surprise her more by tasting her lips. It wouldn't have stopped there. He wanted to pull the covering from her breasts to sample those thick, enticing nipples.

Domineer men trained at an early age to control the urges, fight and master the craving that hastened their blood and made it pool hot and thick in their groin. At his age, to be so fully distracted, even for a moment, caused him great concern. And to allow himself to be caught up with the raven, the major's only hope of rescue, was deplorable.

She finally came to her feet and appeared tired and sore because her movements were slow and stiff. Her ailments couldn't be too bad however because she walked across the room to the cabin control panel. The buttons weren't labeled as accommodations on board all ships were identical. She appeared puzzled as she gently ran her fingers across the bumps without depressing any. She studied them before curiosity seemed to take her. Hesitantly she pressed one.

The music came through the link and his smile broadened as she spun quickly around, trying to figure out what she'd done. The synthesized instruments flowed when one of his favorite pieces of Turlock's *Countenance* streamed into the room through the walls. As with the raven's call, it could be felt as well as heard.

Her arms spread wide and she moved to the center of the cabin where sound could touch her from all directions, all levels. He could only view her back as she stood motionless. To see her expression would've pleased him as she heard one of the most beautiful recorded sounds in the universe.

Dropping to her knees, she bent at the waist. Hair came forward to surround her as it fell against the floor. Her arms covered her head and he heard sounds of distress. He terminated the link with a wave of his hand before quickly walking back to his cabin. Once inside, he silenced the music and expected her to rise. He went to her cautiously, remembering to maintain distance.

“Lady Reina?”

Slowly she braced herself and turned her face up. Her haunted eyes and colorless face made concern override prudence. He hunkered down to her level, forgetting to keep space between them. Amber eyes, brimming with unshed tears, displayed a deep hurt. She whispered, “I set your angels free.”

“My what?”

“Your angels, Sir, the ones kept in the walls.”

“Turlock?”

“Is that what you call them?”

The sound was angelic indeed but he wondered why she likened it to something more than a simple concerto. “He’s the composer of that piece of music.”

“I don’t understand, Sir. What do the angels have to do with music?”

“Music. Melody. The blending and balance of sound in harmony or discord.” He couldn’t comprehend the problem. She stood quickly, went to the link, sat and within seconds she programmed it to display complex strings of notes.

“This is music, correct?” she asked.

“Yes, musical notes. When combined – when *played* it creates music.” He spoke the words slowly for confusion remained.

With a wave of her hand, a virtual keyboard appeared on the desk. Her fingers moved deftly as she paid slight attention to the complex sheet music. The piece she attempted was generally attacked by two musicians. His hand reached out and hovered over the volume and the melody became audible. After hearing herself play when the sound came up, she snatched her hands back and stared at the score as if foreign. She’d obviously believed the notes and motions of her fingers on the keyboard equated to music. How could she play so beautifully without ever having heard the sounds?

“I understand now, General. Thank you for correcting me.” She bowed her head and her words were barely audible.

Unable to stop himself, he reached out and stroked the side of her face with exquisite care. She relayed sadness and acceptance. He decided he didn’t like it. “Reina, I didn’t mean to sound as if I were correcting you.” His informal address happened without thought. He’d merely wanted to take the hurt from her. Thankfully she seemed not to notice.

“Truly I’m grateful,” she said. “I’ll retract an earlier statement I made. When I said my education was two-dimensional, I’d like to amend that to one. I was born in a time when births were nil and after me, it was five full years before any sisters came forth. My interest and ability with technology wasn’t widely accepted until the Governance demanded we be brought more into present day. Materna Nakita complied but I see now it was in the barest possible way.”

“You weren’t brought aboard for your technical abilities, Lady. Tech’s already failed us. Your presence was required because of your inborn skill, which you’ve proven is far superior for our task.”

She peered up and searched his face. He’d no practice in the stroking of feminine self-esteem and he hadn’t attempted such with his words. He’d merely spoken the truth. She likely didn’t believe him because he’d used a reasonable tone. He’d previously lacked patience when dealing with her. Having a clearer picture, he silently vowed that in the future, he’d behave with more formal appropriateness. She hadn’t deserved his anger.

A knock came before he said, “Enter.”

The door opened and two galley servers brought trays over to them. He helped her stand and back away. The process of turning the desk into a dining table held her rapt attention as sections disappeared and others expanded. As he’d originally suspected, some technology did intrigue her.

Alone once again, he held her chair and seated her, handing her a napkin, which she placed in her lap. In the chair across from her, he’d barely sat down before he heard her stomach grumble. After placing his napkin, he waited for her to begin.

“General?”

“Yes?”

“Meals are normally taken with others, correct?”

“Sometimes, though not often for me. Why?”

“An idiot doesn’t learn and doesn’t care to learn. An imbecile is incapable of learning. I hope to avoid likening myself to either by falling into a third category and perhaps question you when I’m uncertain of things.”

He attempted to hide the smile by taking a moment to place his elbow on the arm of the chair and get more comfortable. He leaned back and covered his mouth with fingers as he gazed at her, waiting for what would come next. It’d been too long since someone captivated him in such a manner.

She scanned the food without looking up. “Would a gentleman general convey poor table manners to a lady, Sir?” Her voice was nonchalant, considering the subject.

“Certainly not,” he said, almost giving her leave to relax and enjoy the food. Obviously she wanted a bite of the steaming meat and crisp greens more than anything because of her fixed gaze. “Is the food not appealing, Lady?”

“Remarkable so.” She finally glanced up to see he’d not moved. “Not hungry, General?”

“Extremely, but etiquette dictates I wait until you’ve begun.”

A determined look crossed her face as she fidgeted. He waited to find out how a *one-dimensional education* had affected her. Which would win? Hunger or the fear of making a mistake?

A fork and knife came to her hands and she tentatively cut into the meat. She held the fork delicately, correctly, and managed the first bite. She chewed slowly, the juice from the meat creating a sheen upon her lips. He almost groaned as her eyes closed in pleasure.

Barely tasting his own food, concentrating on covertly watching her, he wished he'd held his tongue earlier when correcting her about her awe and dismay at new experiences. He found himself wanting to hear her uncalculated reaction to things he'd taken for granted.

After many long moments, he asked, "Is the food to your taste, Lady?"

"Yes, Sir, very much. Thank you."

The appropriate response without embellishment disappointed him. Her facial expressions didn't. She withheld her verbal descriptions but wasn't as careful or perhaps unaware that her face relayed so much. After the main course was finished, she looked at the objects remaining in front of her. She settled back against the chair and didn't seem curious enough to question him. He knew he'd do her a great disservice if he didn't introduce her to dessert.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Quite."

"I don't think I've met a woman who didn't have some sort of attraction to chocolate."

She glanced over the items. "I'm not familiar, Sir. May I have its origin?"

As he suspected, she knew little of the treat and he offered her an explanation. "I'm told it was given from the heavens to men so they could in turn gain the favor or forgiveness of women. What do you think?"

"Fable," she replied with certainty. "A food couldn't do any of that."

"But you've yet to try it and since you're not familiar," he began before moving his chair to the corner of the table, turning it sideways and facing her, "it's only proper I make a formal introduction."

He took her spoon and dipped the tip in the glass of dark café liquid and held it out to her. To hand-feed a woman would most certainly be misconstrued as too intimate a gesture by those reared in normal society. His lady wasn't and he very much wanted her to experience the dessert appropriately. She might get too much of one substance or another and ruin everything.

"This is the base of the total experience. The alcohol enhances the flavor of the chocolate. I'd like you to taste it so when the flavors blend, you'll be able to distinguish the layers."

The spoon went to her mouth. When she opened, he inserted it. He felt the tug from her lips and gently pulled back. The slight friction as the metal was drawn from her mouth made his blood rush. He knew it would, anticipated it and controlled the surge. As she tongued the taste from her lips, she smiled.

"Describe it to me," he said lazily, watching her full lips.

"Barely a taste took my breath, Sir. I felt it warming my throat as I swallowed."

"You've never had alcohol?"

"Yes, wine, but that's sweet and this is darker, stronger."

"Now try this." He spooned up a bit of the chocolate mousse.

She hesitated. He held it until she finally came forward, opened her mouth slightly and cleaned the spoon with smooth pressure. She appeared to savor it and once swallowed, she needed no prompting to describe what she tasted. "Intricate, smooth, rich and yes, probably sent from heaven."

He accepted the arousal, allowed its presence but placed it aside as he dipped the spoon into the remaining small bowl of liquid white chocolate. "Last ingredient, Lady."

She opened as he neared. Before allowing the metal to touch her lips, he hesitated. To have her open to him so trustingly in even that simple way forced his breath to catch. Some of the chocolate strayed to her lips and he stared as she tongued the sweetness into her mouth. A mouth he then wanted to kiss.

"And now let's see what the combination tastes like, shall we?" He dipped a small bit of the liquor onto the spoon, scraped a healthy bit of mousse onto the tip and dipped the bottom in white chocolate before offering it. She appeared expectant as she came forward. Her mouth opened a bit wider this time. *What an incredible mouth!*

The combination evidently delighted her. Her eyes closed as she savored the tastes and textures. An errant strand of white had slipped from the spoon and she used the tip of her index finger to capture it. Once she swallowed, her moist tongue took the remnants of chocolate from her finger. He suddenly found it necessary to adjust his seat.

"Thank you, Sir." Her voice could be quite soft.

"You're welcome, Lady Reina."

He allowed his dark side to surface, keeping himself in check, and rather enjoyed the feel of adrenaline and prowess as they battled. He liked the pooling of blood, the heavy feel of arousal as she sat near. Having his cock grow hard while seated for a meal was more than slightly unusual. He tried remembering how long it'd been since he last entertained a female between the sheets.

Accompanying the strong sexual urges, he also felt compassion. He knew the feeling, the softening of a place between one's heart and stomach that soothed, making him feel at peace. That emotion had once been most common in him. The strange union of sentiment could only be attributed to Reina, for such a combination hadn't been present in him for many years.

Her gaze lowered and he realized he'd been staring while pondering. "Would you like more?" He hoped to divert attention from his poor manners but how he posed the question was dangerous. He wondered what possessed him to ask it in such a manner.

With his bed a few steps away, the “more” he offered would end with her legs wrapped around his hips and him pumping furiously between her thighs.

“No thank you, General.” He ached to lick her lips and taste deep. And if he ever got that far she wouldn’t decline an offer of *more*. He’d see to it.

He wanted to lead her away from the quiet, respectful behavior, and asked, “Is there anything I could get for you? Anything at all, Lady?”

Her eyes lit up and as suddenly as the excitement appeared, it receded. He’d taught her well in the span of a few hours. In an attempt to correct it, not knowing or particularly caring why it then bothered him, he said, “Your eyes danced again, Lady.” She looked startled before he finished. “I swear they did. What created such light before you tucked it away?”

“I noticed the sound of our transport change a while back and it excites me, this new vibration beneath my feet.”

“Vibration?” The desire lessened and he concentrated on the discussion.

“Certainly you feel it, Sir.” He didn’t. She sat forward before grasping his hand and placing it flat on the table. “There. Now?”

He shook his head. She stood and came behind him. “Please close your eyes, General.” He complied. “Thank you. Concentrate on the palm of your hand and slow your breath, your heart. Slower. Yes, slower. When I cover your ears, release the air in your lungs and come to complete stillness.”

He followed her instruction and when she covered his ears, he heard the sound and felt the vibration. Amazed, he turned in the chair and she quickly stepped back.

“It’s subtle but audible. Perhaps you’re accustomed to it and can’t...” With hands clasped in front of her, she’d begun defending herself before he could utter a word.

“No, Lady, stop,” he said, interrupting her. “I felt and heard exactly what you described. Even when I was brand new aboard a vessel I’d never noticed. And you detected this while lying down?”

“No, Sir, when we boarded. It annoyed me at first but I accustomed myself until the sound changed as more power surged.” How sensitive could she be to such things?

“And we’ve arrived back at my initial question. What can I provide that would please you, Lady?”

Any other woman would’ve taken advantage, requesting a number of creature comforts available to him. Certainly she knew something of the vast rarities he could provide. And obviously she’d been deprived. He prepared himself for much and would keep to his word if within reason. When she came around to stand in front of him, he braced himself. She appeared quite determined and he mentally kicked himself for affording an opportunity she could use to take advantage. *Foolishness!*

“General, I’d give anything to see the reactor and engine chamber.”

“The engine room?” He cleared his throat because his voice sounded higher pitched than normal.

“With its massive power harnessed and unleashed at will—oh yes indeed. The theory and science are known to me but I struggle with grasping the complexities of refining the power of the reactor and controlling its rage until it submits to the will of those bidding it.” Excited amber eyes assessed him before she hastily offered, “But it’s not really important to me, Sir.”

He couldn’t contain a smile and used his most convincing voice. “I asked and you answered, Lady. It’s never been requested from a visitor, especially a woman, but it’s something easily granted. It would be my pleasure to show you the reactor raging and submitting.”

Chapter Four

Not only did the general take Reina to the engine chamber, he allowed her unlimited questions of his soldiers. Once they started speaking on her level with less patronization, she enjoyed the tour and information beyond even chocolate.

The side of the massive reactor felt cool as its metal vibrated against her palms. She exclaimed, "It's like a mother with a strong babe inside, brimming with energy, ready to burst forth."

He demonstrated extraordinary tolerance and she dared not glance too often at his expression because she believed her delight and the tour would then be over. She followed the conduit and eventually came to the engines. She placed her hand on one then another and finally a third as she compared their energy. Curious about something she noticed, she retraced her steps and performed another comparison. She closed her eyes and focused to hear and feel the third engine once again. It didn't offer the synchronicity the others did.

"General?"

"Yes, Lady?"

"I thought all engines were created equal."

"They are, Lady."

"Not this one, Sir. It doesn't hold the same intonation as the others. It stutters."

"Dunn?" he asked, raising his voice slightly.

The head engineer immediately came forward. "Sir?"

"The lady states there's a problem with our engine."

"Yes, Sir. We detected it when you asked for full power. We won't be able to effect repairs until we're in orbit around Infur."

"Lady Reina, the problem?"

She laid her hands on the large metal container and went around the system twice before explaining. "Here," she pointed to a particular spot. "There's something that compresses and releases. It stutters not from mechanicals but from the life feeding it. It's erratic, not a steady flow. I'm sorry for lack of terms, Sir, but I believe the description would be understood by your Mr. Dunn."

"Dunn?" he asked.

The engineer smiled. "Astounding, Lady! We ran a systems check and you pinpointed the exact problem. It's a simple electrical connection needing repair."

Encouraged by the general's lack of anger and the top engineer at hand, she took advantage. "Sir, Mr. Dunn, this chamber houses all that powers your Lady *Raze*?"

"Yes, Lady."

"And if in battle this chamber were to take a wound, the other chamber would then be brought to life?"

He looked to the general who answered. "The auxiliary engines would be deployed. That's correct."

Again engaging the engineer, she asked, "And you're stationed here, especially if you're in a battle or battle-ready situation. Correct?"

She'd read much but not all could be learned through general knowledge, for the military didn't always make known all aspects of its operations. She'd many questions and would see if she couldn't gain answers to at least a few.

"Yes, Lady."

"Are there two of you, Sir? Have you a twin engineer somewhere on board?"

The bewildered engineer looked at his commander. The general answered. "No, Lady, there's but one of him. There is however, a second that would take over his duties if he were unable. If the engine room takes a direct hit, the room will compartmentalize before it's jettisoned."

"And where is Mr. Dunn's twin?"

"Until now he's been here," he said, looking particularly stern, "henceforth he'll be stationed in the second room."

That course of action seemed more fitting but other scenarios turned in her mind. "And if these engines were simply disabled in a battle situation and Mr. Dunn remains here, how would his twin know what to do, Sir?"

Rather than get annoyed, the general pondered her question for a moment before answering. "There are dual controls hooked into our main computer system. As Dunn gives orders, they can be followed from the second room while we retain complete backup of both staff and equipment. Thank you, Lady Reina, for your insight. Sometimes the most obvious issues are overlooked. Right, Dunn?"

The engineer seemed surprised before answering vehemently. "Correct, General."

"Is there anything else you wish to tour, Lady?"

There most certainly was but given the fact he'd allowed two hours to quench her curiosity while personally remaining with her, she realized to ask for more might strain his hospitality. The guided tour far surpassed most of what she'd hoped to accomplish within the whole of her time on board, let alone the first eve. "You've been very kind and your crew most patient with me thus far, Sir. I should let your soldiers get back to their work."

They received formal salutes as he led her from the area. Once alone in the corridors beyond, she said, "You can't know what this meant to me, General."

"Are you really so impressed, Lady?"

"Beyond mere words, Sir. I'm afraid my appetite for information surpasses my good sense sometimes and I tend to try the patience of those imparting knowledge."

A very deep rumble caused her to glance up. Quietly laughing, he said somewhat sarcastically, "I couldn't fathom you trying anyone's patience."

"Unfortunately it's one of many flaws that's earned me discipline over the years." Watchful of him, she spoke honestly despite his still-evident grin.

"And how were you disciplined, Lady? Sent to your chamber? No dessert? I could then understand why you'd never experienced chocolate."

"Oh, my transgressions went far beyond *those* types of punishments, Sir. I'm afraid you've been duped. I can fly well enough and took my tracking lessons quite seriously, but I believe Materna Nakita still has a smile on her face knowing you're stuck with me for a time."

"Actually she seemed quite upset."

"Because of the delay in birthing another raven. They've temporarily lost a breeder."

As they turned a corner and walked, he sounded upset again. "Is that what you were to your people? Breeding stock?"

"As we all are, Sir. We're given life to reciprocate, populate and bring forth the next generation. My time had come before I'd ever stepped foot off world. I'm sorry for the little major and for the president, but their woe has given me a short reprieve to test myself beyond my ability to suckle new life and serve as a womb." A glimpse of his face relayed much. "Oh well, I see by your expression that I've done it again. And after you've been more than kind. Perhaps if you'd reinstall your compliance device you could give me a jolt when you'd care to silence me."

He stopped in front of a door and it opened. They entered and he retained hold of her arm. She'd merely been jesting. Alone in the chamber, he took both her upper arms into his sizeable hands and seemed to wait for her attention. After visually scanning the chamber, she looked up, questioning him with her expression.

"Lady, I'm more than capable of *telling* you when I'd like your silence. I've no need of a device to make my point."

She'd insulted him again and her gaze dropped. "May I have your forgiveness for speaking without thought, Sir? Sarcasm is another flaw I deploy at will. You explained the collar wasn't to your liking. I was cruel to joke about it."

Silence.

Fearing she'd pushed him too far, her gaze slowly crept up until she viewed his eyes. Intense, concentrated attention was focused on her mouth, which sent a wave of heat down her body. His posture, stare, and the way his fingers dug into her flesh slightly, made her breath catch. Neck muscles loosened and her head tilted back a fraction before her breaths deepened and her heart picked up beats.

She swayed under his scrutiny, waiting for what would happen next. Closer and closer he came by mere inches at a time. She knew he struggled, the inner battle relayed

by different expressions crossing his face. His heat, scent and presence overwhelmed her. Having no idea what to expect, her bottom lip trembled as she waited.

Her hands moved up his arms and when they rested against biceps, she squeezed and felt the mass of muscle. Drawn closer, their bodies almost touching, he closed the last distance and brushed his lips over hers. The warm sensation startled her. Her nipples came to life when they hadn't been touched. It ended too soon. The smooth caress wasn't enough so she went up on tiptoe to brush her lips against his. She took care to go slowly and savor the feelings because she liked what she felt.

The wall met her back after he pushed her aggressively to it, pinning her length as his body crushed hers. Tense and hard against her, he got closer until she couldn't take air without the feel of him everywhere. Strength drained, which caused fear. The general's sudden anger should make her wary. Instead it made her weak.

She should speak and say something to staunch what he might do. But the thought came too late as his mouth came upon hers in a hurry of lips and skill, pressing her open. His taste was so different, exquisite and she remained stunned as he plundered. Never had a kiss produced such trembling and anticipation. Tongues danced together as she mimicked him. The sound of his groan penetrated, beckoned in some strange manner and her body answered with excitement and desire.

The heat of his palms found the naked skin on her sides and belly. He touched all of it, stroking, holding her tight, before testing muscle with the flex of his fingers. Her legs came apart from him pushing one of his between. Her thighs gripped him tightly in uncertainty.

The assault changed and his mouth urged her open. Weakness stole strength, rendering her legs of little use in her support. Once she'd been settled upon his thigh, the wetness between her legs spread. She felt movement. She was stroked and the pressure of his muscle so intimately situated felt wickedly delightful. "Mmm."

"Do you like that, Reina?"

"Oh, General, what I feel goes beyond merely liking it."

"Gage," he said, kissing her as his hands went to her backside to bring her forward. She'd been forced then to rub against his thigh and her mind carelessly wondered if he had any idea what such things did. *He couldn't possibly.* "When a man's between your legs and in your mouth, you should use his given name."

"Again, please again."

"This?" he asked, before sliding her sensitive sex up his thigh a bit.

Oh yes, and yes! "Yes, and your mouth. Mmm, your taste excites me." He nibbled her lips, bit gently and teased. "General—your tongue, I wish to have it back."

"How do you want it, Reina? Like this?" He traced her lips, sliding a bit inside. Her legs spread and she felt moisture seep as her body prepared for climax. After having him deep, she wanted and needed it quickly.

"No. Yes, that feels good too but I want you inside, stroking me as you did before."

A moan came from her when he obliged and went deep. His fingers settled into flesh, grasping her roughly. She savored his aggression, loved the feel of his almost too-rough handling. Countless, nameless needs rose up and threatened to burst from her chest. But then he withdrew and her heart ached from the loss.

Her eyes filled with tears as arms and legs trembled. She tried to ask why he'd pulled back. All she could manage was a partial sob, conveying loss, hurt and frustration. Never had a woman done such to her! She afforded him the benefit of doubt, believing his gender made him unaware of how acutely he'd savaged her.

A hand came up to stroke her cheek before its fingertips caressed her scalp. The fingers then twisted slightly, tangling in her hair before applying gentle pressure, which brought her face up as her head went back.

"Lady, your mouth is open and your breath comes fast and hard. Did I not give you what you wanted?" Barely able to nod, the only place to look was his eyes. "Do you want something more?"

"Yes, General, more."

"You really don't want me."

"I do, I swear."

"You mustn't because I told you what I expect when I'm this close to a woman. You haven't said my name. Can I assume you want distance?"

"No, General—Gage." His name felt right rolling from her tongue. "No distance, please."

His eyes closed as his leg thrust slightly forward. It resulted in a firm stroking of the swollen, moist flesh through the leather. "Oh, oh please! More."

He pulled her higher, spread her slightly more and the toes of her boots barely reached the floor. His arm went across her back securely to balance her, so she couldn't move a fraction of an inch. With his taste in her mouth, she tumbled toward climax and before it fully took hold, he stole it by becoming still. She could do little, trapped as she was, upright and straddling his thigh. She tensed and concentrated on the sensations, willing them to resurface. But alas, her mind alone couldn't conjure release. Her swollen sex only needed a bit of attention, another firm stroke or the touch of his fingers before she'd splinter into bliss, relieving the burning ache that throbbed so deeply.

"Reina, you're trembling. Is there something wrong?" His words seemed knowing, taunting. Did he toy with her?

"Your kisses and tongue going into me like that. I've never felt—never been entered and it excited me. I'm wet between my legs and my pleasure almost spilled over. But you took it from me." The last of what she said came out in a whining tone. She couldn't help it because she continued to ache.

Her chest was brought to his and he whispered against her ear. "I saw you in the breeding chamber. A dozen hands roamed your body, half as many mouths kissed you between your legs and sucked your beautiful, thick nipples and mouth. And then you

came against the tongue of a woman lover. But yet you tell me your mouth was virgin. How could all those mouths and tongues resist thrusting between your eager lips?"

Confused, she asked, "Sir? The woman you spoke of came against *me* to give me pleasure. Not the other way around." *And that'd been a lifetime ago, Sir.*

A murmur came from his chest. "When you receive *pleasure*, I call it *coming*. You *came* for your woman lover and wet her mouth with it."

"Oh, I understand now. Yes, General, I came against her tongue and mouth."

"Let's get back to *your* mouth, Reina. You said you've never been entered. Is that true?"

"It is. I never knew such could bring me so close to pleasure. Your tongue within, your thigh between my legs made me start to come."

He shifted and adjusted her weight differently over his thigh. It took her breath. Everything between her legs felt urgent and swollen. If he'd give freedom to her hips, she could make it happen.

He said, "So if I fuck your mouth again and hold you tight and rock that wetness back and forth, you'll come all over my thigh?"

She'd heard the term, knew its meaning but its use in describing his tongue mating her mouth created a different image. She pressed her breasts to his chest, moved against him and her hands slid up to find his hair. Her fingers tangled in the silk, holding him tight. She'd never wanted *to come* as badly as she did then. "Would you take my mouth again, please? I love being filled there by you."

He moved slightly away and she saw the look of a large predator stalking prey. *Let him have me. I wouldn't struggle.*

"If I slide in, give you what you want, what would you do?"

Without hesitation she answered. "Suck your tongue. Mmm, I'd take it deep because I feel it everywhere when you fuck my mouth."

The dramatic change in him came immediately after she uttered the words. She had no idea what happened and quickly stopped wondering. He kissed her lips gently, repeatedly, slowly opening her before licking and leaving her wet. He pulled back slightly and she started to protest. All that came forth was a foreign sound, a gasp with vocal cords. Even to her ears it aptly relayed how frustrated she'd become and how badly she needed something more.

He pushed inside then, forced his way and her mind reeled. *So good. Yes, Gage, harder!* As promised, she instinctively sucked and tugged at the intrusion and her insides loosened in preparation. Hot, throbbing and needy, she wanted the cloth separating them gone, wanted him rutting between her legs. So many years of waiting, yearning to have her sex breached by a male was close. She could barely stand it.

Gage's lust fully awoke. He knew her mouth wasn't the only thing withheld from those before him. He craved her virgin's blood and cry of pain when his swollen cock would sink into her heat, tearing through the barrier. He accepted its presence and

controlled it by concentrating on the other feeling, the one of warmth and compassion. Nurturing it, making it swell to surround his carnal thoughts, he slipped from her mouth.

“That’s it, Reina, rock against my thigh. You make such sweet, hungry sounds when you’re excited. I want you very hot and eager when I sink into you again.”

Frantic movements quickened her breath and hips. She wanted – no, she needed – to come and she’d become quite frantic in her quest. With reddened lips, her body warm and supple, the strong inclination to oblige and sate both their desire overwhelmed him.

His hands slowed her to set a rhythm that would make her come but delay it for a bit. She groaned and followed him as he led her to a different type of release. She was so responsive and easy to hold. He wanted her first climax with him to be special, strong, memorable. He felt the intensity building by the slight flaring of her hips. Her fingers curled into fists in his hair. She’d come hard this time, he’d see to it and make it good for her.

“Gage!”

“That’s it, Reina, almost there. When you start to come, open to me and let go. Let me finish you in a special way.”

Her waist moved, hips twisted and when he sensed her peak, she turned up trustingly, held his shoulders and let him guide. Such a sweet, willing mouth she had, taking all he gave. A hand at the base of her spine shifted her, rocked her hips in time with the thrust of his tongue.

She came with an utter lack of restraint – groaning, taking his tongue until her pleasure became too much and she grew slack in his arms. Her head fell back, eyes rolled upward before her lids closed. He watched her shudder against his thigh as her nipples formed peaks beneath the leather covering her breasts. Those nipples would have to be incredibly stiff to create such knots in the thick garment. He wanted her bared to his eyes and mouth. He wanted a taste.

If such could be brought about by merely fucking her mouth, he could only imagine what sliding into her pussy would entail. On and on she went, her body stiffening again as greater sensations took her. Such a beautiful creature. Sexual yet chaste and deprived of what her body most needed.

Bringing her to his chest, holding her tightly against him, he heard whimpers of completion as he once again pointedly fucked her mouth. The scent of her arousal along with that of her climax surrounded him. His stomach muscles tightened in response and he fought not to lose control.

Many long moments swept by as she tasted passion between a man and woman. Endurance in riding out her pleasure impressed him, considering they both remained fully clothed and standing against a wall. She clung to him in the aftermath, and quietly whispered, “More? Please, General – Gage, will you give me more?”

The woman's greed in her search for sexual release was a charming quality indeed. "But your pretty little mouth is swollen and you've just come against my thigh. Are you sure you want more?" The voice wasn't his. It belonged to the lust riding him. It issued innocent, chiding questions to make her confirm she wanted what would happen next.

With the scent of her climax and eager body close, the softer feelings vanished and all that remained was desire growing stronger, threatening to take charge. A microsecond separated him from removing her belt, shoving her pants down and turning her into the wall. From there, he'd release his cock, bend low and drive his swollen rod the whole way inside.

Heat rose from the skin beneath his uniform. A hairsbreadth from acting instinctively and bringing them both to orgasm, he released her before bringing his palms to the wall above her head. His body and mind struggled. He mentally repeated his military oath and halfway through, other thoughts invaded.

Such a hungry woman. Riding and humping you until she came. She's like an animal in heat. She wants to be fucked and ridden hard. Give her what she wants, what you both want and release your flesh into her wet, hungry, tight little body.

He stood straight, took her chin in his fingers and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Good night, Lady Reina. Sleep well."

The steps from her cabin to his were few but the journey drained him. As he undressed, he knew what would happen and dreaded it with every beat of his heart. He'd toyed with the lustful hunger by indulging his body. Its ugly presence lingered.

The tunic came undone and he removed it. After several deep breaths, he unfastened the pants and groaned as his straining and heavy cock fell forward. The chair took his weight as he removed his boots and pants. He sat quietly for a last moment before standing, facing the inevitable and going to his bed.

Even a Domineer needed sleep. He'd managed to reduce the nightmare hours to no more than three or four an eve but despite years of practice, he still had to close his eyes. He fought less than five minutes before his body succumbed and he dropped headlong into a dreaded slumber...

Fiery lengths of soft hair floated over his face and chest as he felt Eden's slight weight settle over him. The cold stone beneath him seemed inconsequential because of the gift he'd been given. "I've missed you so," he said.

Following months of imprisonment, she'd been brought to him as reward for compliance and a victory won in battle. His payment for slaying the Theazian in the arena had been a choice—another fight to the death with his second-in-command or a last private visit with his wife before his own torture and death. His opponent's green blood still dotted his skin. Eden hadn't cared. The memory from a decade past remained sweet and tragic.

Gage, he heard her whispery voice as if it were real.

"Shh, Eden, it's all right. I sense your need. Take me."

Seeing her starved and deprived of so much, he wanted nothing more than to hold and reassure her. The chains made it impossible. Hot tears spattered his chest while fingers with scant flesh came to rest upon the wetness. His blood stirred and body responded when he felt wetness seep from between her opened thighs.

I've been so scared.

"You're strong."

I'm not.

"This will end soon."

Shh, love. Let's not speak of such things now. I need you.

"That's it, take me. Take what you need."

His head came up as he groaned loudly. To have her in any way, one more time, would make even torture seem sweet. After enduring weeks without her, to have her body slipping over his made him believe in an afterlife. The pain of endless experiments and torture faded as she rolled her hips.

"Eden!"

Let go of restraint, love. The chains hold you so give freedom to what you really want. I need your pleasure so intense you'll never forget this moment.

He could deny her nothing and as she tightened in climax, he let control slip. Red-hot, wild lust surged forth. Through the haze, his body arched so he could be held deeper than ever before. He saw her head roll as long hair flowed like flaming streamers across her face and against his own. Her back curved, breasts thrust forward as ribs protruded. Perfection, beauty, his wife. Once he'd planted his seed, she leaned forward to place her lips against his. The kiss and stroke of her hand still felt real a decade later. And then he remembered the rest.

Forgive me.

"You've done nothing to forgive."

I have. Forgive me.

Theazian guards came then, barely allowing her time to pull the filthy dress over her trembling body.

"Eden." With so much to say, the words stuck, froze in his throat when he saw the look on her face.

I'm sorry.

"Stay safe!" he urged, a sickening, dark feeling stealing the warmth from him.

Forgive me.

"They'll come for you, rescue you and the others. Stay strong."

Tears fell and she sobbed before dropping to her knees. They pulled at her, but she held fast to his battered and bloodied hand. *Please, Gage, say you'll forgive me. As you've made your deal, I made mine.*

"No!"

I can't stay in this place. I'm not afraid to die, just please – say you still love me.

“No! You won't die here!”

It ends now, this eve. In a perfect time after having loved you once more.

Objectivity became his because he could passively watch what happened next. The battle with the Theazian was still fresh and the anger remained strong. The urges linked with desire lingered and both emotions merged in a surge of uncontrolled strength which allowed him to pull the chains from the floor.

Eden didn't struggle as they pushed her from the cage. She turned toward the guard, tossed her head to remove the red tendrils of hair from her face before raising her chin, offering her throat. *God, no! Fight, damn you!*

He attacked and tore hearts from the guards before bodies fell. He'd never been faster or more brutal and yet his wife lay motionless at the feet of his enemy. Grief, anger, desire and disbelief swirled until all of the Theazian bastards lay in puddles of stinking ooze.

When at last he gathered Eden from the cold stone floor, he carefully pushed strands of hair from her face and neck. Her beautiful green eyes closed and reopened slowly. They no longer held fear. They looked beyond the bloodied cell at something pleasant, something she wanted. Thick crimson liquid bubbled from the slit in her throat. His hand covered the deep wound, attempting to staunch the flow. *She wanted this.*

“How could you do such a thing?” he asked. Her body was still warm and twitching. His arms shook in anguish and rage. “You didn't raise a hand, you welcomed it.”

Temperate, accepting and calm, he realized how badly he'd misjudged his wife. He believed her outward frailty and beauty encased a resourceful and strong woman. Too late, he knew everything within her was just as fragile as her small body. He hadn't been quick enough in her rescue or smart enough to look deeply and remedy her weakness. And his penance would be reliving those last moments more often than not in the wee hours. She'd taken his love, begged forgiveness and died with a clear conscience. He'd not been so privileged as to move beyond that fetid cell and eve of atrocities. At least not when he'd sleep.

* * * * *

He came awake with the sheets and blankets haphazardly bunched in clumps surrounding his perspiring body. Sorrow and pain clung like slime from a foul swamp. Positioned on his stomach, his hard cock was tangled in the soft folds of the blanket, swollen from the memory of touching the raven and harder still from the dream of loving his wife.

The excruciating desire would remain because even then he felt Eden against his chest and in his arms drawing her last breath. His mind wouldn't allow his body

release. Not at night and not alone without the warm body of a willing female to take him past this place he seemed stuck in. Only the deepest sleep would grant an absent release of the seed burning to escape his cock. And it'd become natural for that mindless sleep to take hours to finally overwhelm him. If it came at all. He wondered about his sanity sometimes and how many more years he could endure the cycle of nightmare repeating eve after eve before unconsciousness would claim him.

Release me, Eden. God, let me go.

When his eyes closed, Reina's image came to mind. Perhaps pondering the raven in a somnolent state would allow him to drift off. Maybe if he focused on a live woman, the one who haunted him would leave for a spell.

Reina of the Raven Clan. She'd known where her flight would lead in the quest to find the major. A single expression of fear surfaced when she realized he knew nothing of keeping her safe in hell. Yet she trusted him to figure it out and opened herself to the darkness and cold. At least a decade younger than him, she demonstrated power and determination. In all his musings, he couldn't envision her bargaining for death no matter what the hardship.

He appreciated her muscled body, her strength and lack of fear when forced to accompany him. Even the compliance collar hadn't scared or intimidated her. He smiled then, remembering her statement about scratching beneath it. She'd never been off world and went with him willingly. She knew little of men but hadn't shrunk from his touch.

Reina was vastly different from other women. His hips stirred as he thought about her powerful legs gripping his thigh. She'd been most aggressive in seeking her climax. She'd begged him to come. The pull from her virgin mouth against his tongue made him groan as he remembered how good it felt. Oh, how he'd wanted to bare her breasts for a taste. The picture she made lying against the furs with her hard nipples thrusting the air was staggering!

His body relaxed and his mind went further to envision more. To have her beneath him, open and wet, with her fingers squeezing his ass as he plunged deep would feel like heaven. Her breasts flattened between them, with nipples poking his chest as he fucked her, would be incredible. And the noises she'd make. Simply kissing had her moaning low. How would she sound with her mouth filled with tongue and her pussy stuffed with hard cock?

He twitched and shifted. The muscles in his thighs and buttocks constricted, forcing his erection deeper into the bedding. He growled as he thought about Reina's body, her mouth and those lovely breasts. And her scent! He could still smell her. Perspiration dotted his brow as his tongue sought to moisten his lips. God, but he still tasted her, could practically feel her open, greedy mouth waiting to be stabbed.

Violently his hips thrust, once, twice. His face turned into the pillow and he bellowed a plea. "Let it happen. Let me come!"

Images of the lady's lips swirled in his mind. He recalled the feel of her tongue running fervently against his. He summoned up the unusual color of her eyes darting about as she practically inhaled information. The sound of her laughter filled his ears as he visualized the scars upon her back. She'd been beaten more than once. And yet she could laugh. She could smile. She'd not only survived past her points of torture, she truly lived as a whole being.

"Oh fuck," he yelled before seed unexpectedly shot forth in a massive jet.

He rolled to his back, took cock to hand as waves of pleasure washed over him. A once-natural occurrence to alleviate his body's tension seemed a miracle as thick seed shot onto his belly. He fisted and pumped, strained and grunted as his fat erection gave up its cum. "Reina," he whispered as a final surge spewed forth.

He threw his arm over his tired eyes and slowed his breath. The muscles in his neck uncramped as did those in his lower back. His body felt heavy and tired as his senses dulled in a natural manner. A release? A reprieve in the nightly torture?

As his mind drifted, he focused on one last thought. He'd controlled both lust and anger since his rescue from the Theazian prison. Anger rode him but he'd become an expert at managing it. The hunger associated with desire, however, hadn't been strong in many years. He'd need to be mindful of it. Apparently the lady roused powerful feelings he thought were long dead.

Best he manage the raven with distance and a clear perspective. Her body would remain a cabin away, for he sought no affair with a woman so young. Besides, he didn't have the temperament for the foolishness or humor that seemed prevalent in her. He'd grown beyond such frivolous things before becoming a private in the Governance. He was a Domineer full-grown and men of his background, rank and age were far beyond such primitive amusements. He'd but felt sorry for her after her flight.

Certain of his actions, reactions and digressions that eve, he pulled a blanket over his tired body before slipping away. He thought no more of it.

Chapter Five

Those within the crowded mess hall stood at attention when Gage entered. He'd been fairly certain with the early hour he'd find Reina there. "Lieutenant," Gage asked one young officer. "Have you seen the lady raven?"

"Yes, Sir," the lieutenant replied. "She left a short while back to accompany Private Pinski to the animal compound."

Gage turned and left. His mood was coarse after the unusual eve prior. He'd yet to give her consent to traipse as she would about his vessel. She should at least have the courtesy to ask permission. All after, he'd stood complacently yestereve as she bothered his engineer. As for her image coming to him when he'd woken from the nightmare, he'd yet to decide exactly how he felt about her interference in his nightly torment.

When Gage entered the secured area, the private jumped to attention, dropping raw meat and a knife. He looked pointedly at the blood spatter and hunk of animal on the floor as the private remained rigid.

"At ease, Private." She took leave to relax. "Private Pinski."

"Yes, General?"

"I'm told our guest accompanied you here."

"Yes, Sir."

"Where is she?" he asked, his voice overly controlled.

"The next room, Sir. With the felines."

Anger mounted because Reina had no business anywhere near the beasts. They'd been loaded for transport as a gift from the president to a distant planet in need of killers to decrease the herds of *darines* consuming much-needed crops. There hadn't been time to offload them when the major went missing.

"Where?" Gage glared at Pinski. He couldn't help the irritation.

"S-Sir, she's b-b-beyond the d-door," she stuttered. Her arm trembled as a finger pointed. He walked to the door and when it didn't open with his retinal scan, he felt heat crawl up his neck. "G-General, a moment, please."

Keys on the control panel clicked before the door opened. He stepped into the large holding area and found Reina close to a cage. "Lady!"

She stood and spun, placing her hands behind her back against the huge pen. Roars of displeasure assaulted him from the twelve massive, five-hundred-pound cats behind bars in separate cages. Anger turned to dread with how close she stood to the untamed, jet-black predators. Observably, her lack of fear ran parallel with outright stupidity.

"You'll come slowly toward me, Lady, without a sudden move. Do you understand?"

"In a moment, General." She shifted forward and back roughly as if something had moved her from behind.

"Now!"

The look she gave offered some sort of indecision or mischief. Her misbegotten sense of humor had no place in the current situation. Her life depended on it.

"Right now!"

Her eyes opened wide in response to his order and her expression changed. She finally understood his fury and he expected her to respond to it appropriately. Instead, she looked guilty for a moment before bringing her hands forward. Covered in blood, she stood there dumbly as if she had something to say. Without thought, he walked toward her.

A hand came up. "No, General, they won't like you near. I'll come to you."

She turned to the beast, stuck her hands through the cage and a long, pink tongue lapped at the blood. She cooed praises to the cat. "Your manners are impeccable, sir. Thank you for allowing me to feed you."

With her hands clean, she pulled them from the cage. The cat's huge paw came out from between the bars to thump against the back of her shoulder. She stumbled into the cage and laughed softly. "Oh, you're very welcome, you handsome man."

Cautiously, slowly, Gage went to the emergency station and pulled down the laser gun. He leveled it at the massive head and jaws of the cat. The powerful male unsheathed its claws against her spine as its jaws released. His finger tensed on the trigger before – the huge killer began cleaning her all over.

"That's rather much," she said, scratching his tongue before sinking her fingers into the fur of his jowls. "I must go now, so release."

She shrugged her shoulders as if she could shake off his paw. "Release me, sir. The general's waiting."

Claws disappeared and her back straightened. When she faced him again, she froze. Another form of defiance? No, her look conveyed alarm. Perhaps she'd been snagged from behind and couldn't move.

"Sir? General?"

"Lady, can you come forward?"

"May I?"

"What?"

"May I come forward?"

Rounded amber eyes stared at the weapon and he realized she thought it targeted her. "Come to me."

She did and when she'd passed the last cage, he stowed the pistol. She first walked to the shower enclosure and hit the button on the wall. Steam surrounded her as she rubbed her hands together. Totally unnecessary, the action served as a reminder where she came from, having previously sanitized herself with water. She made haste to join him then, which was too little, too late as far as he was concerned. Words escaped him as he took hold of her arm and they left the animals. As he hurried her by, she said quietly to Pinski, "Sorry. Thank you."

The private did well to stand at attention and not utter a sound. He found his tolerance for much of anything at the moment quite absent. Those they walked by in the corridors stood rigidly, saluting him. It generally wasn't so if he traveled a hallway, his subordinates stopping to merely stand at attention. Apparently his facial expression required something extra that morn. He'd get Reina to his cabin soonest. His aggressive steps relayed annoyance. When she'd lag a half step, he'd bring her up quickly to keep pace until finally, his chamber door opened.

He shoved her through and she turned to face him before taking small steps backward. The confusion on her part lasted only a few seconds before he set her straight. "When I issue an order, you're to obey. Immediately! Without dallying—or questioning—or finishing what you'd been doing."

"But, General..."

Words stopped as he walked closer. Best she silence herself. His irritation became such that if further provoked, he wouldn't be responsible for what would follow. "Have I made myself clear?" he asked through tightly clenched teeth.

"Abundantly, Sir," she said, looking down. "Perhaps if you explained..."

He'd backed her against the wall, grabbed her upper arms and six inches separated her boots from the floor. She squeaked, "Yipe!"

He held her there and tried to control the rage. It grew as he envisioned her soft woman's body mauled and unmoving on the compound floor in a puddle of raven blood. "You little idiot," he said, shaking her a bit to impress his point. "You might've been killed."

He could only be hurting her and eased her down to stand on her feet. He couldn't seem to release her, however, and found himself taking another step closer. Her warmth drew him, her life still flowing after such an act of complete stupidity.

"I'm sorry for your anger and concern, Sir." Her small words accompanied her downcast gaze. Her demeanor somewhat lessened the emotion in him.

He took his hands from her arms. "Unlace and remove your shirt."

"Pardon, General?"

"I'm accustomed to issuing an order once. Have I not made myself clear?"

Apparently he did because she hurried to exact his demand. The garment eventually came to be held in her hands. He seized it and threw it aside. Grasping her

shoulders, he spun her around. "Brace yourself against the wall." She turned slightly as if to question him and he remedied that notion. "Do it now!"

Reina's head ached from all the loud words. She brought her palms to the wall and leaned forward. He gathered her hair and tossed it forward, away from her back. He was so angry!

"That damn feline punctured your skin!"

Naturally she'd felt when it happened. She'd bathed to remove any potential cause of infection. The urge to remind him of the sanitizing shower was resisted. After his kissing and touching the eve before, his current state of anger made her breakfast roll over. Fingertips prodded before he left to go elsewhere in his chamber.

Now she'd done it. She took in a shaky breath and wished on the stars she knew exactly what she'd managed to do. He'd been opposed to the whip being used on her in the breeding chamber. She'd probably irritated him enough to use one himself. But she hadn't done anything wrong! She'd gotten permission from the very nice Pinski to help feed the cats. With his presence behind her again, she decided that fact too should remain unvoiced. *Poor Private Pinski.* The look on her face!

She hated the whip. The sting visited her back often enough to know it for certain. To tense up never helped but she couldn't override her body's anticipatory reaction. Her breath came in shallow and fast as her forehead remained close to the wall. His arms were larger, longer and so much stronger than those who'd whipped her before. Would she be able to stand it? Would pain make her fall? She'd only ever tasted the whip on her knees. *I mustn't cry. I won't disgrace my clan with tears.*

"Hold still, Lady, and I'll begin."

She held a breath and trembled as she waited for the whirling sound and then the pain. An unpleasant smell came to her, adding to her apprehension before cold touched a spot on her back. Unable to support herself, her breasts went to the wall as her limbs gave way. *Coward!* Perhaps she'd been *too* prepared this time.

His arm came forward, reached around and braced her against his hip. He continued touching other areas on her back before his warm breath blew over the cold spots.

Hauled up against his chest, she was held in place as his other arm gathered her legs. She felt strange being carried as one might tote a babe. He sat on his bed and made her comfortable in his lap before saying, "I'm sorry I hurt you, Reina. It's done now, over."

Cuddled close, she liked it but couldn't understand why he'd do it. "General?" she asked, her voice still shaking a little.

"Hush. All's well now, sweet one. Rest against me until the pain goes. It shouldn't take long."

Sweet one. Such a name after she'd angered him. How lovely and endearing. She much preferred it to *lady* or *raven*. No one called her by a pet name since – she couldn't remember.

Anxiety dwindled as she melted slightly inside. The name he used made her relax. His breath touched her forehead before he gave a gentle kiss on the top of her head. Relief made her arms and legs weak. He'd no intention of beating her.

A hand slid to the back of her head before easing her closer. She knew where he'd go, what he'd do by how he positioned her. She made it easy by opening her mouth. Time wasn't wasted as he wet her lips with his tongue. His kisses were addictive and, once given, could be felt beyond her mouth. When he entered, her hips came up automatically and she moved a certain way. She couldn't name why. She loved the manner in which he went into her mouth, forcing himself inside. A rather large man, all parts of him large, she took the length and breadth of him, running her tongue against his to get as much as possible.

He laid her upon his bed. He came down alongside and braced his weight on an arm. A hand caressed her stomach before coming to the underside of a breast. Fingers gathered the flesh to bring the nipple high and close to his mouth. His breath moved over the skin and peak before his tongue licked very slowly.

She'd been tasted before by soft lips and slippery tongues, but the coarse hair above his upper lip created lovely prickles into her skin.

"Do you want more?" he asked in the voice that came from him yestereve. His tone sounded knowing and hypnotic.

"Yes."

A drop of moisture formed on her nipple before rolling down. The general groaned before asking, "Have you lied? Are you breeding?"

Confused, she answered honestly, "No, you took me before I could be mated."

"Your breasts are weeping, Reina."

"Sir?"

His tongue swept up the trail of liquid desire from the side of her breast and he ran it over the sensitive nipple. He plumped her and took the entire peak.

"Oh, my breast, Sir. It's never been like this, dripping and flowing. I'm so very wet from your mouth."

He came closer, rested against her side and appeared very comfortable while taking her nipple. His kisses were stronger, his lips firmer than those of a woman. She arched her back to give him everything.

He released her and his gaze settled on her other breast. "Is your right breast as sweet as the left?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "General, please taste it. Do it now."

"And we've come back to a lesson you should've already learned."

Instantly she remembered. "Gage."

"Gage, what? Be specific about your request and you'll have it the first time."

"Kiss my breast, please." His lips trailed the side. She amended, "My nipple, Gage, suck it hard. Now."

His mouth was hot and wet. She grasped his head, held it so he couldn't leave. He drew liquid desire from the center of her breast until he took it from the nipple. Her mind went to a fuzzy place between reality and dream as her insides tightened and made her ready to come. If he'd use his teeth just a little, gently bite down, she'd... "Oh please, please, don't stop, not now!"

"Is there a problem?" Why did he question what he already seemed to know, his tone of voice giving him away?

"I was going to come." She remembered to use the correct word.

"Did you tell me you were close?"

"No, I—"

"You need to tell me when you're close. So I can decide."

"Decide what, Sir?"

"About whether or not to let you. I aided you last night and I'll do so this morn but you're to tell me when you're close and I'll decide if you've given me enough. It's how sex will be between us — *if there's sex between us.*"

"You want control?"

"In this, I demand it."

"It's yours." She hadn't really relinquished control. In these strange happenings between them sexually, she'd never had any power to begin with. Gage seemed all-knowing in matters between male and female and she wanted to learn. Oh, how she yearned to know more.

"Having an agreement," he said, "I'm going to loosen your pants and take them down. Do you want that, sweet one?"

He hadn't touched her below the waist and the thought of having such done made her clench inside. Moisture seeped between the swollen lips of her sex. "Please, Gage. Bare me for your touch."

"Sweet virgin," he said, undoing the fastening of her pants before aggressively pulling them down. "Having you ask for what I'll do makes me hard."

"How could words do such a thing?"

"You think I'm immune to you? I know you're wet and ready for me because your scent betrays you. Give me your hands and know what you do to me."

With him guiding, he drew her hands down over the swelling at the front of his uniform, allowing her to feel a man for the first time. Firm, full, incredibly thick and long, she swallowed. Of course it would be large. Everything about him was imposing. Both her hands touched and ran over his length to accustom herself to such a foreign thing. Sounds came from deep in his chest. The *purring* sounded like one of the cats he'd taken her from. *Utterly fascinating!*

"Can you feel how badly my cock wants you, Reina?" She could. His *cock* being ready to mate made her feel achy and dizzy, hot and cold. Why? She touched him, not the other way around. As she greedily caressed him, he pushed into her hands. He permitted the exploration for mere seconds before taking her wrists and easing them away. "Does it excite you?"

"Yes, and I wish to see it and put my hands upon it without the cloth. I've never felt anything to compare. Would you, Gage? Would you allow me to see it, touch it?"

He rose from the bed and unbuttoned his fly. Hurriedly she kicked out of her boots and pants before sitting with her legs tucked beneath. Enthralled, she watched what he revealed. He slowly parted material before folding it back. Of course she'd seen pictures of men and knew what to expect of their anatomy.

Oh. My. Stars!

Having his swollen flesh straining a few inches away made her swallow convulsively. *He's so generously proportioned!* She hesitantly reached for him.

"Touch me, Reina. See if it's to your liking."

"Oh, Gage, the skin is so soft. You really don't mind my touching you?"

"More."

He stood there, so handsome and powerful as she measured him. The top was darker than the rest. A fascinating wine-colored hue dominated its crown. His scent came to her and she gave in to the urge to kiss him. She wanted to do much more. A hand stroked her hair, letting her know he didn't mind. And with her next kiss, she stole a taste with her tongue.

"Lick it, sweet one. All over, any place you want."

She very much liked not being scolded for acting on inclinations. His encouragement to explore and experience rather excited and thrilled her. Like other skin, it tasted a bit salty, but combined with his scent, she couldn't seem to taste enough. His deep growls and the way his hands tangled in her hair had an effect too. Plainly he liked and desired her tongue and mouth. Experienced in the arousal of women, she loved heightening their desire to the point of vocalization. With Gage she felt different, his pleasure somehow flowing into her and quickly making her ready to come.

She wet his cock with moisture from her mouth and spread it over him until she discovered the sac beneath. The skin was so delicately fabricated! She took him within her palm to gently ascertain what lay inside. Intrigued, filled with lust, she carefully kissed and tongued and tasted. He sounded quite content to have her give attention to this wondrous part of his body and she wanted very badly to please him.

"I'm close, sweet one, so close."

From that bit of licking she'd done, could he be ready to come? If so, she wanted to make him feel much, just as he'd done to her the eve prior. She'd probably embarrass herself from lack of skill but she'd try to make him come hard. He'd *fucked* her mouth

with his tongue. Would he find it as pleasurable to do the same with his cock? She took the head into her mouth to lightly suck and tongue.

“Oh God,” he said in a deep, needy voice. “Reina, stop.”

Stop, ha! His words pleaded for her to cease but his body told another story. He pulled back slightly before pushing more of himself inside. He wanted—no, he needed—her mouth. The control he’d spoken of earlier suddenly became hers. Confident then, holding him tighter, she did the taking and pulling away. Power and lust came with controlling him in any manner at all. She found it difficult not to place too much pressure around him.

She looked up to gauge his level of pleasure, making sure it didn’t only feel good to her. Heavy-lidded eyes gazed into hers as fingers came to the side of her face. A small, potent amount of liquid came from his shaft. Had he just come?

“You’re so beautiful with my cock in your mouth. It feels so good, your tongue all over me.”

Her eyes closed as she took him and imagined how it would feel to have his thick and swollen cock going into her sex. Disjointed fragments of words came from him, the meaning conveyed as he shifted his pelvis and thrust his magnificent cock out for her to feast.

“Reina,” he said, his voice barely more than a growl because its tone rumbled so low. “Relax your throat and let me in deep.”

She did and took more. As his tongue had done before, his cock mated her mouth and she couldn’t help moving and rocking against him. The urgency of his body was relayed by the manner in which he pumped his fat cock in and out. It felt too wonderful.

“I’ve not had such done to me—in this manner...” He yelled the rest of what he’d been saying. “Suck my cock and don’t stop. Suck, God, yes, suck me!”

Hands held her in place until she didn’t move at all. He kept her there by lightly stroking the sides of her face, running the tips of his fingers around her ears. He swelled and tightened and fed his cock to her as far as it would go before she felt a massive pulse of fluid. Her throat opened to swallow again and again. She shuddered in response as her brain shut down. All she wanted was more and then more! She finally calmed enough to hear his groans. The sounds of his happiness spread into her as surely as his seed.

She was crazed and shaken from his climax and her own threatened to erupt. Squeezing her thighs together, wetness trickled. If he’d but thrust into her a few more times she’d come. Oh, she loved him within, potent, hard, weeping his seed. She wanted more, not less but he seemed intent on making her miserable as his flesh pulled slowly away.

After releasing him, she closed her mouth and savored his essence, the cream she’d sucked from him. It tasted exquisite, mysterious and made her most eager to have him again. Breath catching inadvertently, arms trembling, she couldn’t move as desire

turned into painful, tiny cramps knotting her sex. It'd never been so agonizing and she feared her nether lips would swell shut. And if that happened, she'd never be able to press a fingertip to her sweet spot and find relief.

Gage's heart slowed with the overpowering lust momentarily appeased. Damn it, he'd barely managed to retain enough wit to remember the woman was a virgin. After the way she took him to throat and finished him, warmth and compassion filled his insides.

Bringing her flush against his chest, he kissed her gently, repeatedly, expressing all he couldn't say. She'd no tolerance or need of niceties. Her panting and arousal didn't go unnoticed and he'd see to it soonest. As she remained on her knees in front of him, he stroked her hair and said, "Easy, sweet one, I've not forgotten you."

He held her waist and kept her steady as he knelt. Small, shaking hands came to his shoulders. At the perfect height, he said, "Open, Reina. Spread for me."

Whimpers came forth but she complied, any shyness or fear overcome by desire. His thumbs carefully pulled her swollen lips apart and he drank in the rich, exciting scent. It'd been too long since he pleased a woman thusly and began a bit hastily. His tongue went to her slit and pushed in, finding a swollen bud ready for him. Her desire tasted similar to that which came from her breasts. It had the most intense and delectable flavor. He could spend a long time between her legs savoring her fragrant sweetness.

He drew her apart to pull back the small hood before flattening his tongue directly against her clit. She cried out, tossing her head about and shook while her legs inched farther apart. Lightly sucking her small sex nub made it lengthen and turn rigid.

He listened, felt and assessed her level of climax, lessening the pressure and urgency of his mouth to match what she required. He'd not have her straining to close her legs because she'd become too sensitive. They'd much more to experience together and his patience was abundant. Tolerantly he waited, stroked and sucked until she widened the distance between her knees. The telltale sign gave him better access and relayed her want of a deeper intimacy.

Her hips rocked forward and back, begging him to explore. He slid farther, the tip of his tongue barely piercing her wet entrance. She became wild. Her nails scored his shoulders as her body tensed. So sensitive. *Magnificent woman!*

He couldn't believe she'd gotten so wet and hot from sucking him. He slowed her with gentle flicks until she calmed and the orgasm receded. He lazily probed her then, accustoming her to something relatively small and soft rimming her taut opening. He wanted to place more than a tongue inside and he'd see to it she shared the same craving.

The flat of his tongue trailed back to her clit and worked it over, showing little mercy. He rather enjoyed her rising desire and the liquid seeping from her pussy. He amused himself then, fooled about until she almost came, withholding the bit of

pressure required to complete it. On a third time taking her to the edge, she begged, "Gage, harder!"

Patience, sweet one. For if I can demonstrate such and suffer a little, so can you.

He waited until her nails left his shoulders and her fingers tangled in his hair. Yes, he believed she'd accept more from him then. His cheek came up to rest against her stomach as his hands slid to her ass. Holding her tightly until the trembling slowed, he asked, "Have I seen to you, sweet one?"

"Mmm."

Mmm, indeed. He stood and took her hands from his hair, kissed each before turning her slightly and easing her down. On her hands and knees and in a perfect position, he stroked her shoulder. "You'll open to me, Reina. Spread yourself wide."

"Gage?" He'd tolerate her reluctance because she knew not where they'd go. But eventually he'd need to remedy her insistence on questioning him. His hands rubbed her ass cheeks firmly, bringing them apart. "Show yourself to me. I wish to examine what I brought to climax. If you're properly wet, I'll make you come again."

Whimpers came as she spread, which made him ache. The sounds of indecision followed by compliance made his blood race. He'd never seen such moisture and appreciated yet another unique and desirable facet of a raven. He lightly stroked the wet crease, which dampened the inside of both thighs.

"It's just my fingers, Reina. Relax and let me in."

Her legs spread a little more and he caressed her swollen flesh. He placed a fingertip at her opening and felt her muscles contract. *Never been entered.* Dismayed, he said, "You couldn't possibly have resisted this, never tested inside."

Her head shook slightly as she panted. "Never. Not permitted. For breeding. Kept chaste for you – a male."

"I am male," he said. He'd have no part in taking her virginity for breeding however. Others of his kind might not find it offensive to have children scattered among the stars. His thoughts on the matter differed greatly. He'd probably forever remain chemically sterilized, for he doubted he'd ever trust a woman enough to *breed* one.

His other hand slid down her side before finding her clit slickened with cream. He skillfully rubbed while gradually increasing the pressure. Her body swayed and on each backward motion, he didn't move quite as much. She wanted to be penetrated and he'd eventually oblige.

"Does my finger feel good?"

"Oh," she panted. "Mmm, ahh!"

What a sight, having his middle finger lined up and ready to enter her pussy. She tightened as he circled the opening. His cock jerked, ready to take the virgin territory.

"I'm going to come," she cried with alarm.

"Not yet, Reina, hold back."

"No, no, I'm sorry, but I can't."

"You will."

He stopped rubbing as his forearms brought her body close so he could cease its motion. She squirmed and moaned at having the climax denied. He needed her patience for a few moments longer. The instant her muscles relaxed, he thought to hurry the process and achieve his goal. Her muscles constricted and she tried to capture the tip of his finger.

"I need to come, Gage, please." She panicked, trembled and slight contractions vibrated her pussy. He held tighter, making her remain still.

"Let it pass, Reina. Settle down and calm yourself."

"No, please. Oh, it hurts so. Please let me come."

No woman ever begged him to climax. They'd trusted him to bring release and he hoped on some level she had at least that much faith too. But he'd never been with such a lust-filled female. She needed release and demanded it now.

"I'll bring you to climax but I want something of you first. Do as I say and the next time you'll come, I promise."

He slowed his breathing, forced rigid muscles to loosen so he could finish what he'd started. He contemplated what to do. His finger hovered, cock ached but a greater need suddenly dominated him. His physical aches became secondary to gaining her compliance. She struggled to obey and he waited. As she came to stillness and settled against his hands, he admired her control and savored his conquest. Now for her reward. His fingers spread flesh before finding and fingering her clit.

"Gage!"

"Now, sweet one. Come fast and hard and wet my finger. Yes, grind your clit against me and come."

She bucked against his hands, her pussy vibrating with the orgasm. He could only imagine what he'd feel with his cock stuffed inside as she climaxed. Lust flared again and his desire yawned. *You've fucked her mouth and shot your seed in her throat. You've warmed her pussy, given her a taste so when you push your cock in, she'll scream in pain and delight. Take it all, claim her – all of her!*

"No," he said roughly. "Not enough. You wanted to come, you can do better than this."

Why did his cock become less greedy when only his fingers absorbed her pleasure? Perhaps the deep satisfaction wasn't physical at all, but from having a woman find such utter delight in his ministrations. Her abandon made something more than his cock swell. Little affected his ego these days. It certainly got stroked by her performance. Her head snapped up, pitching a cascade of hair to her back. She spread herself wide to offer better access. She'd accept anything from him then. He'd give much to keep her coming.

"Nngh, Gage," she said. Then more desperately she begged, "Gage, please!"

Her hips rolled as his fingertips plundered. He needed to be in her in some manner and would only take her maidenhead with his cock. If he acted on current inclinations, her first experience could potentially become quite brutal with all he felt. He withdrew from between her legs and hesitantly spread her ass cheeks. He knew what would sate certain desires without causing pain. With a moist finger in position, he demanded, "Push back against me. Take it. Bear down and open your ass to me."

She's still coming but differently now. You've gotten inside and she'll still bleed and cry when you stick your cock in her pussy. Such a hot little fuck your raven is.

He stopped the minor penetration to let her enjoy the last spasms of release, affording her time to slow the rapid pounding of her heart and labored breathing. She'd done well in following where he led. He'd make sure her reward was lasting and pleasant. Unfortunately to leave her well sated and without pain would require the punishment of his own hard flesh. To suffer the ache would be a trifling matter. He believed it more important to let her bask in the gentle play they'd shared rather than finish the session and batter that sweet little pussy.

His fingertips came slowly out and away from her body. Every noise she made told him she regretted the loss and could take more. She straightened and knelt before him. Warm, wet breasts came to his tunic and he wished his chest was bare to feel the moisture. He rather liked the strangeness of desire dripping from her nipples. He brought her cheek to his shoulder, held her carefully and whispered, "Hush now, sweet woman. It's time we rest."

Her hands clasped his neck as she hung her head. "Sir?" The formal title disturbed him.

"Yes?"

"I feel I must explain something."

"Go on." Most issues at the moment seemed right in his mind. By the tone of her voice, he anticipated some form of foolishness to come forth.

"I feel terrible after you – after we just..."

He understood the words he'd taught her no longer felt right with passion ebbing rather than flowing. He helped by asking, "After we've been so close?"

"Yes," she said, letting out a breath. "You didn't hurt me."

The words seemed hard for her to get out. He wondered at their meaning. "I'm glad."

His could only view the top of her head but the sagging of her body relayed remorse. "Your compassion after you touched my back – I wanted you to know pain hadn't made my arms give way. You didn't hurt me."

Her falling into the wall *had* started the entire event. How could she now state she hadn't felt pain? He wouldn't be made a fool of. Not by a virgin raven. "Explain yourself immediately. Tell me why you collapsed when I touched your wounds."

The glance she stole allowed him to see eyes brimming with tears. With her naked and vulnerable, he feared what she'd say next. "The cat didn't hurt me, Sir, and neither did you. It was my cowardice that made me weak."

"You're talking in circles again and I won't have it. Spit it out, Lady, plainly so I can understand you for once."

"You demanded my shirt, which I gave. You had me stand against the wall and brace myself."

She sniffled and so help her, if she thought to gain effect for her story he'd –

"And I thought perhaps with your anger present, you'd prepared me for the whip."

One's stomach should remain in a certain place in the body. His sank low and the effect disturbed and pained him. "You know how I feel about the use of a whip," he said, his voice neutral.

"And I realized after a bit you hadn't intended to use it. But by then you'd called me *sweet one* and no one's called me such a dear name in many, many years. The name you called me prior more closely fits my character." She stole a breath and her tumble of words relayed the urgency to have him know everything. "At any rate, I couldn't explain because you'd started kissing me, Sir, and when you kiss me, I don't remember important things. But to tell you why my arms wouldn't bear my weight and I went to the wall... It took you a moment to come back to me. You were extremely angry and I'm afraid I feared the worst. When you touched me, I overreacted and truly I try not to be a coward. I'd just never been whipped while standing, General, and I was afraid –"

"Enough," he said harshly before wrapping her in his arms. "Enough, please, Lady."

The whip should be brought out and used on him. He'd frightened her so badly, her arms lost strength. *I'd just never been whipped while standing.*

He spoke quietly against her ear so the tension would leave her. "You've no fear of me now, do you?"

"No, Sir." Her answer was automatic and therefore truthful. Again, she'd put fear aside and placed her well-being in his hands. Seldom had matters between a man and a woman resulted in his humbling. He discovered it wasn't entirely objectionable.

"And tell me, Reina, what name did I call you prior to *sweet one*? What other possible name could there be for you?"

"Idiot." He barely heard because she spoke so quietly.

His stomach went back to where it belonged. It'd been kicked there by a single name given by him, softly repeated by her. And had he not asked she would've carried the moniker about in her memory without correction. Had he become so hardened and callous in a decade that he no longer knew how to treat a woman?

"Reina, please look at me." She did and it hurt to see her eyes filled with tears. "Will you forgive me?"

"Of course but I didn't want an apology, Sir. I wanted to apologize to you for the misunderstanding."

"You could've said nothing about any of this." And she could have, allowing him to carry the burden of assuming he'd caused her grave pain when tending her back.

"My heart wouldn't be right if I didn't correct your misconception. The cat didn't hurt me, the wounds didn't hurt and you certainly didn't cause any pain."

"Not even when I filled your mouth with my flesh or stole my fingers against your warmth?"

Finally coaxing a smile from her, he allowed his own lips to turn up at the corners. It felt good to make things right between them. "No, Gage, especially not then."

The use of his name and her smile filled him with emotion. He gently pressed his lips to hers, demonstrating the difference between passion and the simple desire to breathe the same air for a moment. The damn tears she'd previously held close that instant to leak.

"Sweet one?"

"Yes?"

"Should anyone stricken your ears with the term *idiot* again, no matter where we are or how far away I am, promise me you'll reach me."

"Why?"

"I have access to a whip and would wield it against anyone who addresses you thusly in the future."

"You're joking."

"I'm serious." He gazed into amber eyes and gently stroked her cheek and jaw.

"Materna Nakita?"

"Certainly. I personally found the woman quite annoying and wouldn't hesitate."

"Materna Marianna?"

"Her old bones would break, but I'd thrash her twice as hard because I witnessed her cruelty with you."

She laughed and he smiled. "Maternas Christina, Bartino, Suzanna?"

"That many?"

"More, I'm afraid."

"My arm would probably fall off and the Governance would get highly sick of my flights to and from Haven but I've given my word and I'll keep it. I'd bet though, after whipping no more than ten or twenty, the rest of your clan would treat you more carefully."

She leaked more tears before asking, "May I kiss *you* now?"

"I wouldn't turn away."

He didn't.

Chapter Six

Reina ran about the *Raze* with a heavy itinerary, experiencing all the things she'd wanted to see. Gage allowed it, arranged it and insisted she investigate what interested her on board. Seated in the mess hall that eve, surrounded by his officers, her eyes sparkled with delight.

His men were utterly cordial but he closely watched Lieutenant William Brach. The young lieutenant was tall, well-conditioned and had hair the color of Reina's. Rumors stated he'd partaken of many young female officers on board. His reputation somewhat preceded him. Too, of the four men seated with him at the table, Brach acted the slightest bit odd in her presence.

She ate the meal slowly, appearing entranced with the routine dialogue about the ship. Her fork remained in the air at times in anticipation of an answer to a question. She undoubtedly found the conversation stimulating. With business concluded, Brach took the opportunity to question her. "Lady Reina, have you learned much this day?"

"Indeed, Sir, with the guidance of the crew I've advanced my understanding considerably."

"Surely the botanicals, engine room, communication center and medical couldn't have been so interesting."

"Oh, but they were, Lieutenant, especially medical. Although I'm perplexed why the various plants in your botanical are located so far from your healing place. Some of those pretty greeneries have well-documented properties in medicines."

"We don't use such outdated methods of healing. We rely on science, not voodoo. Most of those plants wind up on our plates."

Gage would've reprimanded Brach on his poor manners but Reina spoke first. "Your pardon, Sir." Her gaze dropped and she appeared a backward creature, not the woman who took flight to find the major. He despised it, but again, before he could bring the lieutenant to heel, she added, "I've not been off world prior to this first experience."

"Obviously," Brach said, the condescension unmistakable despite his forced smile. Reina wasn't equipped to decipher his conflicting and rude banter and therefore couldn't defend herself. Gage was about to use his authority to put an end to the situation when Brach finished his statement. "But each of the worlds does what it must to survive and I suppose when resources are limited, potions and such are necessary on planets like Haven."

"Oh, indeed they are, Sir. How barbaric it must seem to a lieutenant of your sophistication to break bread with a raven."

Had any portion of her declaration been said with the least amount of heat, he might've unwound. The others at the table bristled because of Brach's atrocious behavior and her quiet acquiescence to his rudeness. LeRoy and Nare both appeared ready to defend her but Brach verbally took a step back in an attempt to regain decorum. "Now I must beg *your* pardon, Lady, for speaking of your home in such a manner. Of course your customs and way of life seem completely adequate to you. And it's not your fault you were reared in such a wretched place."

"My utter lack of exposure to all the worlds have to offer must seem pathetic. But alas, here I sit in your presence with my humble upbringing." She shook her head as if regret weighed heavily. "And for such a small, insignificant task as to find the child of your supreme commander."

Brach's face paled before color rose brightly up his neck. Her eyes narrowed the slightest bit and her expression became less foreboding. "Not to worry, Lieutenant, I'll remember your sensitivities and will pointedly forgo the animal sacrifice before the hunt. At least I won't do it within your view." She turned to regard Gage. "General, will the lieutenant accompany the party to retrieve Major Blaize?"

Not trusting his voice, he sealed his lips to avoid laughing and shook his head. She sighed and appeared greatly relieved. "Good, then I can bite the head off the bat once we've set foot on Infur."

Brach stood abruptly and threw down his napkin. "Sir?" he asked.

Gage waved his hand, the gesture granting him permission to leave. And Gage had been concerned about her ability to stand up to one measly lieutenant! Her lack of travel certainly hadn't stunted her abilities to discern certain aspects of socialization. She wasn't unknowing in all facets of life beyond Haven. She glanced after him and straightened her posture. She mumbled, "I would, you know."

Dunn cleared his throat, the smile not entirely hidden, and asked, "Lady?"

Her gaze rose to meet his before she picked up her fork. "Bite the head from a bat so the lieutenant can sleep easy, secure in his vast knowledge of lesser peoples." They burst into laughter. "Your forgiveness, gentlemen, please. That was rather uncalled for and my manners are at times—"

"Impeccable, Lady," Dr. Nare interrupted. The older, gray-haired, chief medical officer finished by saying, "He had it coming and you measured it out. He's lucky to have suffered only embarrassment."

"He's a young'un, but should know better. He thinks he's above his upbringing," LeRoy agreed.

The food moved about her plate with the steel tines of the fork rearranging it. Gage asked, "Have you finished, Lady?"

She placed the fork on the table before folding her hands. "Yes I have, Sir. Thank you."

Galley servers took the dirty dishes away and replaced them with smaller dessert plates holding rarities he'd requested from the kitchen. He said, "I'm curious to see which of these are to your taste, Lady. Would you sample them and let me know?"

The others waited and he wondered if they also anticipated her response. Nare spent time with her in medical. LeRoy showed her every aspect of the bridge and communications while Dunn tolerated another visit to the engine room before she finished in the botanical with Sergeant Heridan.

She chose his favorite first and took a small piece of the yellow tart. Holding the bite in her mouth, she angled her head to the side as her eyes lit up. Clearly dismayed, she said, "It's sour and sweet all at once." Swallowing, she laughed softly before her cheeks drew inward and her eyes rounded. Taking a breath, she reached for the water.

Such expressions! They laughed in delight of how acutely she relayed what she tasted without saying a word.

"We should've warned you, Lady. I believe *yellow fever* is an acquired taste," Nare commented.

"It's aptly named," she said while catching her breath. "It begins as the dawn, which is sweet. Sour as the light takes your last pleasant dream. And then burning when the clouds run and hide, leaving you with more color over your skin—happy but thirsty."

"Such beauty," Nare said absently while studying her. "Your descriptions relay everything in such an artistic manner. And most of what you see is alarmingly and refreshingly pleasant."

He seemed to realize where he was and cleared his throat. "You must've been reared quite gently by those in your clan, Lady Reina, to have such an outlook on things."

"I'm afraid it's more likely from having been seated in a corner for hours. While deliberating on transgressions, my mind tended to wander, Sir."

Reina wiped the corner of her mouth when suddenly the floor trembled as everything in the mess hall shook. She grabbed for the table as a massive jolt threw them from the chairs into each other and across the room. The lights flickered before an alarm sounded. Dazed, Reina sat up and tried to come to her feet. She heard Gage say, "LeRoy, bridge. Dunn, engine room. Don't wait, go!"

An overhead speaker crackled as a man's voice asked, "General?"

Gage spoke loudly amidst the confusion and voices in the room. "Shields up, Lieutenant. Battle stations. Deploy thrusters for evasive maneuver. Distance us until I'm on the bridge."

"Understood, Sir."

Dr. Nare called out, "Casualties?"

Grunts and negative affirmations murmured in response. Abruptly pulled to her feet, a wave of dizziness swept over her. Gage asked, "Reina, are you hurt?"

"No, Sir, I'm fine. Go to your crew."

"Have Nare escort you to medical. You're bleeding."

"It's nothing. See to your people." Her hand settled against her throbbing temple.

Confused for a moment, she felt an arm at her back while her vision cleared. Gage stared at her, touched her chin before walking from the mess at a fast clip. Dr. Nare said, "Come with me, Lady. You appear to be the only one damaged. Let's take you to medical and I'll have you fixed right up."

Dr. Nare's hand remained firmly on her back as he escorted her from the room and down the corridor. As her sense returned, she spotted an injured man in the hallway and ran to him. She and Dr. Nare knelt beside him. Dr. Nare checked to see if more than the soldier's arm had been broken.

A strange sound gained her attention and she stood to decipher its direction. She stilled and listened intently as the soft padded gait of a four-legged creature drew near. She sensed and could practically smell fear. Its presence became so strong, she fought the urge to rush toward its origin. Focusing her mind, trying to fly low and not go too deep into the trancelike state, she searched.

She vaguely heard Dr. Nare say, "Your eyes, Lady! Come with me. Your skin's like ice and you're in shock."

Her tongue grew thick as her brain tried reading two worlds at the same time. She couldn't explain the situation to Dr. Nare. She heard a loud roar before a cat rounded the corner and spotted them. Her favorite cat, Walter, crouched a short distance away, terrified and angry. She saw recognition in the feline's eyes. He didn't view her as a threat. He scrunched himself lower and prepared to pounce, the muscle beneath his fur twitching with anticipation. He eyed the doctor.

She emitted the raven call to stun the poor cat. She hurried to him before anyone mistook his anger and fear. After placing a hand upon his head, she scanned his mind and saw through his eyes. Dr. Nare looked like a troublemaker. Too, the physician's fright suddenly appealed to Walter's infatuation with fresh meat. Further in his mind she saw what he intended to do. "No, bad kitty. Sleep."

The feline fell over and despite the area becoming safe, she continued to sense terror. In fact, it escalated before turning into pain and anguish. She focused on the emotions until she discovered its source. In her mind, she clearly saw what happened to Private Pinski. Reina ran past soldiers, rounding corners too quickly and bounced off walls in an attempt to get to her friend. After a sliding stop in front of the animal compound, she tapped a finger against the door impatiently.

"Open," she said with a roughened voice. She'd no time for this!

Her eyes were scanned and a mechanical voice said, "Access denied."

"Open!"

Her eyes burned from the repeated retinal scans. When she allowed the raven within her to fly, her pupils expanded to fill her eye sockets and they became very

sensitive. Normal light didn't necessarily bother her. The infrared examinations did. Using her mind to reach into the data beast and mentally rearranging its programming, she finally heard, "Granted."

Once inside, she called out, "Pinski? Answer me, help me find you. It's Reina."

Whimpers attached to pain and horror battered Reina's mind. Pinski feared answering because she didn't want the cat to seek her out again. The poor woman!

"Close," Reina said before the door shut. "Secure, no admittance."

No more felines could leave. How Walter got out remained a mystery. She sought the injured woman and in Reina's mind's eye, found her huddled under the desk. Pinski would be safe for the time being. Now to locate the cat. Reina visualized him up on a shelf with Pinski's blood surrounding his mouth and covering his front paws.

The interior door to the cat cages stood open. Reina strode confidently inside, reached out to her left and retrieved the firearm in the emergency station. She strummed the gun to life by flipping a switch. The soft whirring relayed the weapon's readiness within seconds. *Raze* jumped beneath her feet and she adjusted her stance automatically. The raven state afforded her extreme coordination and focus. The alarms sounded as the computer issued a warning through the speaker system. "General power failure. Auxiliary power in ten...nine—"

"Oh God!" Pinski cried out.

Scant lights came up and she realized the auxiliary tried to surface. Her arm extended to her right as the cat prepared to attack. Without looking in its direction, seeing it clearly with her mind, she leveled the weapon upward two feet and pulled the trigger. She blasted the cat and hit it twice more on the way to the floor. Sure the beast was dead, she walked to the cages.

"Seven...six..."

The pretty black cat with the white chest ran toward the door. She drew the weapon before firing. The lock fused to the surrounding metal.

"Five...four..."

The largest and most feral of the beasts nudged its door. She drew up her leg, placed her boot against the door and blasted the lock. Secured. When he tried to take her foot, she pulled back and stepped away. "Such a bad kitty!"

Her mind fanned out to view all the other cats at the same time. They cowered in cages and she waited to see which one would make the next move.

"Two...one. Auxiliary power on." The lights flickered before the computer said, "Main system now online."

After the mechanisms locked the cages, she heard hammering on the door and ignored it. Pinski would be tended first. She hurried to the desk before shoving it away. The poor, frightened woman! Such a mess and she'd lost so much blood. Reina gathered her from the floor and carried her to the shower unit before hitting the button.

The wounds needed sterilized because it wouldn't take long for the feline's saliva to make haste through her veins, wreaking havoc with her immune system.

"It's all right now, Pinski. We'll get you to Dr. Nare and he'll make you well." She spoke softly as she stepped from the enclosure.

"My hands," Pinski said, having great difficulty drawing a breath.

Reina looked down as she walked. "They're not too bad. I've seen worse and they healed good as new. I'll bet it hurts though."

In front of the entrance, she squinted as the scanner tested her eyes. Mentally reaching into the data beast, she sighed tiredly before making her request. "Open."

The door hesitated but unlocked and slid away. Four soldiers and Dr. Nare rushed in with guns drawn. One of them tried to take Pinski and Reina stepped back reflexively. No longer needing to walk between two realities, she drew herself back to her woman form. Shuddering, breathing hard, she handed the private over. Dr. Nare took Pinski as he and a soldier walked from the compound. The other three men checked cages as she stood at the door.

Able to concentrate on her own needs then, she brought her arms up to cross at her stomach. She shivered as she tiredly left the room. She could exist in duality for short periods of time. Practice and discipline allowed it. A constant source of discomfort was tolerating the bitter chill until she regained a bit of warmth.

She felt *Raze* tremble as its weapons deployed. The vessel shifted when answering fire hit in return. She wanted to be with Gage. The corridor appeared to tilt and she bumped the wall before sliding down to sit on the floor. Funny, she couldn't recall the route back to her chamber.

"Lady Raven, are you injured?" a young, red-haired soldier asked.

"No, Sir, but I seem to have lost my way."

"You're bleeding. Let me take you to medical."

She swatted his hands away when he tried to get hold of her. She accepted only the use of his arm and pulled herself up. "They're busy there, Sir. Are you needed at any station right now?"

"I'm to look for injured."

"Are there others who do this or only you?"

"There are many, Lady."

"If you could spare a few minutes and point me to my chamber, you'll be free to go about your business."

"Right this way, Lady." He began walking slowly, glancing back often to make sure she followed.

Once they'd made it to her chamber, the young man appeared reluctant to leave.

"Sir?" she asked.

"You don't look well."

"My first time on a vessel and it's a bit more than anticipated." The floor lurched and she adjusted her stance.

He chuckled, retracting the arm that'd gone out to catch her. She wouldn't fall. He said, "Yes, ma'am, I take your meaning. But your head, Lady. The general gave explicit orders to the entire crew that we're to see to your safety."

"It's nothing and I'm safely back where he expected me to go. You may leave."

"I beg your pardon, but since you wouldn't accompany me to medical, I'd like to see your head tended before I take leave. If you don't mind?"

"Very well, Sir."

The uncertain young man quite obviously tried to follow orders to the letter. She didn't wish to cause him further concern about shirking his duty. He followed her to the relief area of the chamber and watched as she took a cloth and wet it. After dabbing at her temple, she pulled the hair back and examined the area. "See? All better."

He released a breath and slouched slightly. "It's as you said, Lady Raven, nothing but a scratch. The look about you still relays illness however. Is there something I can do?"

"I'm simply tired, Sir. After boarding *Raze* I'm afraid my eyes and mind have been taken with all its wonders. I've but managed a few minutes of sleep. Like a child, I've been too overly engrossed in fancy, pretty things to rest. I'll do so now."

The room tilted and her knees buckled. The kind young soldier caught her and her face heated with embarrassment despite the chill still running through the rest of her. Once seated on the bed, she made the effort and smiled. "You've been most kind and have done well in your duty. Thank you."

He backed toward the door. His worried expression and hesitance to leave made her stomach tighten. If she wasn't so tired, she'd laugh.

* * * * *

"Corporal?" Gage asked, seated and turned away from him.

The young'un probably scanned the others in the room before realizing he'd been addressed. Corporal Lobank had stood for hours waiting for attention. Gage couldn't spare a moment until now. He heard Lobank's boots as he stepped forward. "I've come to report on the lady raven, Sir."

"Continue."

"She's at rest in her cabin, Sir." Gage tensed despite the lackluster report. Her cabin was not where he'd instructed her to go.

"Not in medical?"

"No, Sir, she wouldn't accompany me. Prior to leaving her though, she tended her wound and it appeared superficial."

"Are you a physician, son?"

"No, Sir." Gage swung the chair toward the boy. By the look of dread on Lobank's face, he understood Gage's orders weren't open for debate. When he'd instructed the crew to see to Reina's safety, he'd expected them to damn well take it seriously.

"And you left her?"

"After discussion with Sergeant Lobank and Lieutenant Gunther, Sir." Taking the word of his brother could be overlooked but Gunther was a lack-wit.

"They're physicians?"

"No, Sir," he said, letting his eyes stay closed a bit when he blinked. "They observed the lady with Walter and watched the relay from the animal compound. She received no damage and they agreed she seemed well, Sir."

"Explain."

"Sir?"

"Walter."

"The large feline the lady fed. Sorry, Sir, Private Pinski said the lady named him Walter."

"What does her trip to the animal compound this morn have to do with her head bleeding this eve? I swear if you've taken lessons from her..." Gage drew a breath and forced himself to speak more calmly. He'd get no answers if he upset the corporal further. "Please, stand at ease, son. Now, Lobank, from the top. Take your time and explain to me what happened. We're not battle ready at the moment, so we have as long as you need."

Despite his eyes still widening with trepidation, the young'un attempted an answer. "I was in the vicinity, scouting for wounded, when I happened upon the lady with Dr. Nare. They stopped to tend Private Baker. He'd broken his arm, Sir. That's when the cat, Walter, came upon them. The lady went to Walter and put him to sleep."

Gage's hand passed over his face. The visual he'd just gotten couldn't be correct. Leaving his hand on his forehead while resting an elbow on the command chair, he remained composed. "Go on."

"She went straight to the compound and gained entrance."

"How?"

"She was scanned, rejected, issued the command again and the door opened, Sir."

"All right." Tampering with his data beast would cost one lady raven much. No one aboard *Raze* dared fiddle with his *toys*! There was a reason she'd been rejected from that area.

"My brother and Sergeant Gunther watched the lady from outside through the monitor. Once inside, she secured the door, Sir."

"They couldn't get in?"

"No, Sir."

"But *she* did."

"Yes, Sir."

"Continue."

"They said she killed one of the felines and caged the others before auxiliary power came up. Then she carried Private Pinski to the door and they took her to medical."

"They took the lady to medical?" He needed to have a care. Words coming through clenched teeth put the corporal back on edge and Gage wanted more answers.

"Private Pinski, Sir. A cat mauled her."

"LeRoy!"

"I've located it, General." One of the reasons LeRoy received promotion to a colonel was his ability to read Gage's mind. "On the monitor, Sir?"

"Immediately."

The images were recorded because the monitors remained awake even if other systems in the ship didn't have power. The large screen on the bridge switched from the vast space before the *Raze* to the footage he'd requested. He gripped the arm of the chair as Reina put the massive cat to sleep. LeRoy replayed the image of her gaining access to the animal compound three times at Gage's request. Yes, Reina had indeed managed something extraordinary to gain entrance. It wouldn't happen again.

Once she'd gotten inside, the camera also had an angle of the large cat on the shelf above and to her right. The blood on the cat relayed its involvement with the private. His stomach turned as the lady grabbed the laser, targeted the cat and shot three times as it pounced. She hadn't looked at the feline and hadn't flinched at its demise.

Gage found himself standing as he watched her seal the cages. The aggressive male almost got hold of her. She went to Pinski, carried her to the shower and then to the door. Pinski wasn't much smaller than the lady but Reina appeared totally unaffected or burdened by the private's weight. He remained frozen until the footage showed Reina and Lobank entering her cabin. The screen went blank and Gage turned to the corporal. "Corporal Lobank?"

"Sir?"

"Dismissed."

Saluting, he replied, "Yes, Sir."

Gage stood there a moment contemplating exactly who'd be the target of his building rage. Seeing only one woman in his mind's eye, he said, "LeRoy?"

"Sir?"

"You have the helm."

He'd gotten a few paces down the hall when LeRoy ran up behind him. "Gage?" He stopped and turned. "I see the look on your face and you'd best take a walk before you go to her."

"She gained wrongful entrance into that compound. I expressly told her to go to medical with Nare. We spoke about her irrational behavior by going near the felines

and yet less than an eve later, one of them almost took her foot. All this after handling a firearm on my ship, without my damn permission, before she tended her own wound and convinced Lobank to leave her injured and in her cabin. You don't think I should go see the raven directly?"

"No."

"I do."

"And you'll regret it. She doesn't understand our way." LeRoy offering excuses on the woman's behalf didn't sit well. He didn't care for his second-in-command defending her.

"She has the knowledge—"

"Which is worth spit and you know it." LeRoy said quickly. "She acted and saved Pinski. In her mind, because the private let her play with the cats, they're friends."

"If she would've been hurt or worse killed—"

"Major Deacon will die. But she's fine and will stay that way if you don't rip her pretty little head off."

He'd been about to say something utterly stupid. He hadn't even thought of her value as a tracker in finding the major. He'd been concerned about his own personal loss. "A walk it is, Mason. Keep us safe until I'm back on the bridge. We can expect more attacks now that we're on the right course."

"More of them got away than we initially thought. They're gathering strength out there and the major's a bit of bait."

"Do you think that knowledge would change *his* mind on where we're to go?" Gage knew the demise of six combat vessels would be worth the president getting his son back.

"No."

"I think you've the right of it. You, Dunn, Brach and I should speak on the matter. We'll need all our abilities and a bit of prayer to pull this one off."

"General." He saluted. "I'll return to my post."

Chapter Seven

How very interesting – the lady slept naked. Gage stood and admired her from the side of her bed. By the dark skin beneath her closed eyes, her exhaustion was evident. He'd been careful not to make a sound. Curled as she was, her hands were balled together and tucked beneath her chin. With her body in a fetal position, she huddled as if attempting to retain warmth. Cautiously reaching out, he found her skin chilled to the touch. Did the woman only retain a normal temperature when aroused?

The appropriate course of action would've been to layer her in blankets and bid heat from the bed. He didn't feel particularly appropriate at the moment and removed his tunic. After many hours on the bridge in a battle situation, he possessed enough heat for both of them.

The ability to fly, observe situations through the eyes of their prey, the raven at times could be a perfunctory tool in the apprehension or destruction of one's enemy. The text remembered verbatim, he couldn't seem to relate the words to Reina. He'd witnessed her performing as a weapon when she retrieved the injured private. Viewing her now, he could only see the deeply arousing, vulnerable and soft female asleep on the bed. Clearing his mind of all the nonsense, he preferred to see her as a woman, not some sort of bizarre tool to be used to gain another star upon his sleeve.

Once naked and ready for sleep, he took a moment to brush dark hair from just above her left temple. The wound was but a scratch and barely visible. He rethought his initial estimate of Lobank's neglect. He'd need to speak to the corporal and let him know he hadn't been remiss in his duty.

Gage crawled in beside her and she stirred. "Easy, Lady, I've come to warm you and close my eyes."

"Is it over?" she asked sleepily.

"For now."

"There's something I must tell you."

"Would it be about Walter and your escapades in the kitten room?"

She yawned and trembled and he gathered her close. Still sleepy, she came eagerly to his side. She'd probably been drawn to the heat of his body. The reason mattered not because he simply liked her willingness. "Why didn't you draw the covers over yourself?"

"I thought I did."

"Your small body's nearly frozen."

“Gage,” she said, seeming bent on a confession. “I didn’t think beforehand but with you close, I think I may have erred. Again.” He did enjoy the use of his name when lying next to her naked.

The last word caused him to squeeze her a bit. “Shall I get the whip, Lady?”

“You may have need of it.”

He *tsked* her certainty. “If you’ll stow your confession until later this morn, I might appreciate it better. My arms are too tired to properly beat you right now.”

“Forgive me, Sir, you’ve been busy and must be tired. I’ll certainly remember my actions in a few hours from now.”

Afraid pondering it wouldn’t let her rest, he asked, “Your transgressions were so bad?”

“I’m not certain but afterthought made them seem so.”

“I saw what you did, Reina.” His voice sounded very serious and flat. He hadn’t meant it to come out like that but he’d spoken the truth when he said he was tired.

“And you’re holding me?”

“It appears so.”

She wormed within his arms and her breath fanned his chest. He drew the covers up to her ears before she shivered again and got closer. “Thank you,” came out softly as she relaxed.

“You’re welcome.”

* * * * *

Gage came awake slowly, not fully understanding where he was. The bed wasn’t familiar and the room wasn’t either. He traced his recollection to when he’d crawled into Reina’s bed. “Time?” he asked.

The speaker above him answered. He’d slept for five continuous hours and to the best of his memory, he hadn’t experienced one rough dream. His body felt sore from the long slumber and his mind slowly began processing. He sat up and looked about the chamber. Everything as it should be, the only thing amiss was the lack of a raven.

After taking advantage of the relief area, he found the standard-issue necessities in the cabinet. He lasered his face and stepped through the sanitizing unit before running his uniform through the cleanser. Dressed and more alert, he set off to find Reina.

When he couldn’t locate her in the mess, he walked the distance to medical. He’d get a report if Reina got into mischief and others needed his attention. He’d yet to check on the damaged Pinski. Whether shot clean through by enemy fire, thrown through the air to break a limb or mauled by animals aboard his vessel, the wounds resulted from battle. And he’d never once neglected those who served. He regretted not seeing to her sooner.

The door opened and he found the small private in the first holding area sound asleep. With medical jargon displayed on the screen above her head, he turned the chair next to her bed and sat down to take it in. Broken hands, torn flesh, concussion, four fractured ribs, lungs punctured, dislocated hip—the list went on. How the woman survived the attack was incomprehensible.

Extremely long brown eyelashes came open. He watched her reaction as pupils dilated against deep blue irises. She struggled to sit up and his hand came down on her shoulder.

“At ease, Private. I’m only here to see to how you fare.”

“General, Sir, I’m well.”

He laughed and squeezed her shoulder. “If you say so, Private, but the readout above states otherwise. Please settle back. I’ve not come to upset you.”

The woman could barely be out of the classroom, looking overly much like a girl. When introduced to her and told she’d oversee the handling of the animal compound, he hadn’t detected such youth. Wrapped and on a sick bed allowed him a clearer picture. “Has Dr. Nare made you comfortable?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Is there anything I can get for you?”

“No, Sir, thank you.”

“A dispatch to your parents, perhaps? Something to tell them of your bravery with the felines?”

“No, Sir, no parents.” She cast her gaze down.

“No one at home expecting word from you?”

“No, Sir.”

“Your given name, Private. May I have it?”

“Patricia, Sir.”

“Well, Patricia, it’s with regret only those you know as friends will hear about your commendation.”

“Sir?”

“Colonel LeRoy and I viewed the happenings in the compound. Your Walter got loose from the first hit the *Raze* took. You secured the area and stood your post, even with the other cats not completely caged. Another soldier probably would’ve run. I’m very proud of you. Others on this ship are safe because of your actions.”

“But I didn’t put the extinction plan into effect, Sir.”

“Why did you sign on with the cats, Patricia?”

“My love for them, Sir. Plus I was a bit hungry and hadn’t the means to support myself.”

He laughed again and it probably didn’t sit well with her, but she’d clearly been around one lady raven and taken lessons on candidness. “Those other things don’t

matter because you learned to be a soldier and acted as a soldier with a heart. You did what intuition dictated and it all turned out."

"You're very kind, General."

Used to awkwardness from subordinates, he found it distasteful in the young'un wrapped up with such damage done to her small body. Touching her hands gently, he asked, "Do they hurt you much?"

"I've no pain at all, Sir, no discomfort. The doctor said I'd return to my post in several days at most."

"He's quite remarkable, our Dr. Nare."

"Quite."

Tears came from nowhere and hastened down her cheeks. A cloth lay handy at the bedside table. He retrieved it, wrapped it against his fingertip before dabbing at the wetness. Nare came up behind him and Gage glanced back long enough to motion toward a special cabinet. The doctor withdrew to get him what he silently requested.

"I don't know what's wrong," she said, using her bandaged hands to try to help wipe the moisture.

Gently placing her wrapped hands back in her lap, he took care of the tears. "I do, little soldier. You've had a bad scare and taken injuries most men would wail about. You've yet to feel a bit sorry about it until now." Giving her a different excuse for the wetness, he offered, "Most of those I come in contact with are frightened of me."

"In truth, Sir, I am too."

"Not too much, I'd wager. You've given your grief to me when you've been extremely brave in the presence of others. Do you have friends aboard my ship?"

"None yet, Sir, save your lady raven. She was my first. Oh, and both Corporal Lobank and Sergeant Lobank have been most kind."

"And now you have four friends. Although to keep jealousy from the ranks, I don't suppose we'll have too much opportunity to sit about and endlessly chat." She laughed and the remaining smile warmed him. "Should you wish to resign your post with the beasts, I'd understand and find you placement elsewhere."

"No, General, I wish to tend the felines. I'll be doing so shortly." He witnessed her grit then. Despite her small build, she truly was a Governance soldier.

"That's a fine, brave woman. And for one so devout," he said, turning to take the small box from Nare when he sensed the doctor's return, "I've smuggled some treasure aboard the *Raze*. Are you fond of sweet things, Private?" Her eyes lit and he couldn't help smiling. He opened the box and the bittersweet smell drifted between them. "If you'd permit me, I'll help you sample one."

Reluctantly she nodded and he took a small coated ball and placed it in her mouth. Again she gave tears, which he patiently wiped.

"I've not tasted *risha* since my parents celebrated my tenth birthday with me. Your gift is too much."

His eyebrows rose. "You don't want them?" Her look gave him the answer. "I worship all things sweet, Patricia, but like you, these are a small sampling of a childhood long gone. I would hold one in my mouth as the flavors melted. They created utter happiness before trickling down my throat. I'll leave the box in the drawer beside your bed. Should you wish another, ask the good doctor and I bet he'd give you one if you offered him a taste."

Placing the box in the drawer, he started to stand. Her bandaged hand stopped him. "General Ryker?"

"Yes, Private?"

"I'll serve you well, Sir. I'll be loyal and —"

"Respect and obedience under my command is sufficient if I've earned it. Serve no one totally. Always retain a bit of doubt so you're not blinded and make choices that leave you with a heavy heart. It's the most I expect from a soldier because it's the most I give as your commander. Take your leave, rest, enjoy your sweets and return to us whole, Private. I'll see you again."

Reina stood at the doorway listening to the conversation between the general and private. She'd gotten up early and gone to the botanical to fetch a flower for her battered friend. Upon hearing his words and sensing his compassion, her heart swelled. He took the time to speak with and reassure a small woman in his army, which spoke vastly of what lay inside him.

A sudden feeling of discontent washed over her. Comparing herself to Pinski, Reina viewed herself as lacking. The private understood the ways of the general because of her comparable military background. Even mauled and severely damaged, she knew how to speak to him without tempting his anger.

Reina silently vowed to behave more like Pinski. She'd remain polite, soft-spoken and not question the general overly much. She'd do her best to perform her duty and stay out the man's path so the next time they happened upon each other, she'd have nothing to regret. Perhaps the general might even find her suitable to breach. She dearly enjoyed their intimacies thus far but he'd not been inclined to lie atop her.

With her mind set on a particular course, Reina quietly backed from the room before they detected her presence. She'd behave differently henceforth so Gage would view her as an ordinary female. Excitement tingled her spine as she mentally rehearsed various scenarios in which she'd gain his regard. She had a plan.

Chapter Eight

The general requested Reina's presence on the bridge and spent a brief moment issuing directives during the next attack. He seemed calm and completely connected to the activity while issuing orders and commanding his people. The ship lurched suddenly beneath her feet and he reached out to steady her. He'd never even really looked in her direction.

"Lady, you're to remain close to quarters, not go near the animal compound and stay out of trouble. We're nearing the Zyone sector and our situation grows serious. I need to remain focused and don't need the burden of your potential actions weighing on me. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir," she said, deeply wounded that he'd consider her a burden. He hadn't even looked at her to view her appropriate military stance.

"Any preparations you need to make prior to our transfer onto Infur should be seen to. We have a day before you'll be called up to track. Is there anything you need?"

Anxiety hastened her mind until she couldn't stand it. She excelled in field tracking but to actually use her abilities on such an important mission troubled her. Too, the general *was* very busy, but she might settle herself if he would spare her a glance. "No, Sir."

"Good," he said before raising his voice. "Lobank?"

The young soldier from the other eve stepped forward. "Sir?"

The general walked over to a console and watched LeRoy before leaning in and adjusting something. While working, he said, "Escort the raven and see to her safety."

"Yes, Sir."

"And, Lobank?"

"Sir?"

"Take your hand from her arm. If anything happens, I'll expect you to interrupt me next time."

"Yes, Sir," Lobank said before extending his hand in a gesture relaying she should precede him.

Escorted to her chamber, she paced for hours until she marched to the door. She found Lobank on the other side. "Sir, you have an area on board in which one might practice fighting."

"Yes, Lady, the training room."

"May I go there?"

"I'm not sure, let me ask."

"Sir, didn't the general say for me to remain *close* to my chamber?"

"Yes, Lady."

"And he expressly told me not to go near the cats, correct?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Isn't the training room close to here, Sir?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Then why would you interrupt him?"

Lobank looked amused before saying, "Right this way, Lady."

They gained entrance and she looked around. After touring the area briefly, she asked many questions of the corporal. The general told her to ready herself. She could think of no better manner in which to accomplish it. With her stomach upset and head aching over the impending mission, her anxiety grew when she remembered the fact she'd been a *burden*. She knew what would help and made her request of Lobank.

After looking at her in disbelief, he asked, "Pardon, Lady?"

"It's quite simple, really. I wish use of a synthetic man to hone battle skills, Sir. My knowledge of such things on board this vessel is recent. Isn't such a man available?"

"Yes, Lady, but..."

She waited and he appeared to decide something. "Of course, I'll dispatch our combat android. I'm sorry, but it's hard for me to envision you in hand-to-hand with anyone. If you'd prefer, I could take you to the laser room where you could practice with a weapon."

"I want the exercise, Sir. This is my first assignment and with the time almost at hand, I find myself with small creatures stirring in my belly."

"Nerves?"

"Unusual expression but I believe that may be appropriate, Sir."

"As you wish then. Be patient a moment, Lady, while I prepare him."

* * * * *

The bridge grew calm and Gage quieted his mind. He sat silently for a time as personnel turned over duties to another shift.

"General?" LeRoy asked, gaining his attention.

"Yes."

"I've located her."

"And?"

"Your presence over here for a moment, Sir?"

Gage stepped close and stood over the monitor. In utter shock, he watched as Reina fought for her life. LeRoy said, "The training room, Sir. It's Rodney with the lady."

"What in the hell is wrong with the monitor?"

"Dim view, Sir. The lights are out in the room."

"Lobank?"

"Standing ready in the corner. He didn't leave his post."

He grimaced as Rodney laid her low by kicking her legs from under her. He asked, "The setting?"

LeRoy pulled up the android's readings. "Full impact, attack mode. Time training, one hour, thirty-eight minutes."

"Impossible."

"No, Sir, she's surpassed the hour and a half mark in full impact, attack mode."

"Her readings?"

"Excited state, predatory, but her vitals are low as if merely jogging. Her body's moving but her mind's doing most of the work. Amazing creature! Look at her."

She lay on the floor and when Rodney's foot came toward her midsection, she rolled. Using her hands to bring herself partially up, she balanced on one foot and landing a boot in his mid-back.

"Impact level, eight! Injury – spinal fracture!" LeRoy exclaimed.

The android turned rapidly before making more than ten attempts to punch her. He then used feet and legs along with fists to try to connect.

"Zero impact," LeRoy said in amazement.

Reina dodged him, crouched low and went back on her hands. She caught Rodney's legs with her own and spun him before he landed. She sprang to her feet and seemed to wait for him to get up. He did. On his ascent, he swung a fist and barely touched her arm. Her reflexes were incredible. She swiftly deployed a leg to swipe his. On his descent to the mats, she placed an elbow in his face and let him fall.

"Impact level, ten! Skull fracture, broken nose and cheekbones, cranial damage, brain damage, respiratory arrest. A dead kill, Sir!" As if he hadn't heard the first time, LeRoy said proudly, "A dead kill!"

They heard Lobank speak from the corner of the room. "Bravo! You certainly know how to kill a man! Another round, Lady?"

She shook her head and used the toe of her boot to flip a practice sword from the floor before deftly catching it. As she swung the blade, he realized Reina was indeed a force who could handle a fight as well as firearms, swords and God knows what else. He had a weapon in the form of a raven on board. As she paced the room, Rodney came up from the mat.

Gage said, "Close up, LeRoy. Something's wrong with her." One look at her eyes told him volumes. "Get Lobank out of the room and secure the door. Shut the android down immediately."

He ignored LeRoy's offer of assistance and ran quickly to the area. Stationed outside the door, Lobank asked, "Sir?"

“Dismissed, Corporal.”

When the door opened, he made a request. “Light.”

The room brightened and he watched Reina pace back and forth close to the android with the sword in her hand. Twirling it beside her, she’d bring it to rest under her arm before placing the tip on the ground as she walked. He waited until she neared before he said, “Lady Raven!”

Her head snapped to the side as if she’d been surprised. Her pupils were dilated three times their normal size and he realized she wasn’t as far into a trance as she’d been when searching for the major. In fact, after witnessing her flight the first time, her current condition wasn’t remotely similar.

“Place the sword down and come with me.” He relayed the urgency of his order with a menacing undertone so she’d know he meant business. He wouldn’t tolerate hesitation on her part.

Her head remained still as her body turned toward him. Tension and alertness were conveyed in her stance. It went far beyond that necessary for the situation. He heard LeRoy ask, “Gage?”

“Stand down. All’s well.”

Adrenaline raced through him because she rearranged the weapon in her hand. Using her wrist to spin it, she glared at him as she rotated it first with one hand and then the other. As she focused on him, he recognized the movement of the sword to be more a nervous gesture than anything. He took a few steps toward her and stopped when she drew the sword up. She assumed a combat posture. His deportment changed as well. When threatened, he reacted. Cocking her head to the side and then slanting it the opposite way, she studied him. Her knees bent and she went low. He countered, ensuring they stayed on the same level. His arms spread and hands opened when he realized the attack would come. He waited for when.

After a moment, she straightened, threw the sword to the mats and came toward him. Battle ready too long, he came upright but slowed his mind and watched her advance. Her aggressive movement was swift and subtle. He almost hadn’t detected it in time. He caught her leg mid-kick before capturing the rest of her. With her legs held in one arm, his other trapped her arms and midsection tightly against his chest.

She struggled. He tightened his hold until she gasped for air. Stronger than most beings, he wondered if he could’ve held her had she not spent the better portion of two hours in combat. “Concede!”

Not having any of it, she almost broke free before he squeezed with more force.

“General,” LeRoy said from the speaker, “twenty seconds.”

Gage didn’t need a verbal accounting of how long the woman had gone without taking a breath. He’d keep track as not to kill her. “Concede!”

Her inability to take air didn’t matter as she fought.

“One minute, Sir.”

The struggle got worse and he tightened a bit more.

“One minute, thirty seconds! Gage, you —”

“Damn you, concede!” he bellowed to the raven.

“I’m sending —”

“Hold!” Gage replied to LeRoy, seething with anger.

He would not—could not—tolerate her behavior. To attack the commander of a vessel was mutiny. Well within his right to kill her, he tried instead to subdue her. She’d suffer little damage if she fell unconscious from the lack of oxygen. *By the stars, he’d get to the bottom of this and use any means necessary!*

She continued to fight but finally with lessened intensity.

“Two minutes, fifteen seconds.”

As her strength diminished, so too did his hold. If she’d give in and stop struggling he’d deal with her in one manner. If she held out until he rendered her unconscious, she’d be treated as a hostile and find herself confined to the brig. He offered one last chance. “Concede.”

A brief nod gained her air and she slumped against him as he loosened his arms. He let go of her legs and her feet hit the floor before he dragged her toward the door. She jerked back slightly in protest, which he immediately remedied. Brought up by a tug on her arm, she plodded beside him.

Her rapid footsteps kept time with his purposeful strides. When they reached his quarters and the door opened, he shoved her through. It appeared her entrance into his space would forever thusly be accomplished. Concern spurred anger. Adrenaline made hot embers combust. The woman could’ve injured herself or Lobank and he’d see to it she learned some control. Able then to appreciate why those handling a raven prior used the collar, he’d place it around her little neck as soon as he settled a matter between them. He’d extract obedience in his own manner this time. Electronics would be used in the future to remind her to behave.

The anger stretched, touching spots in him yet to be ignited. Not many places remained unaffected. “Face me, Raven.” She didn’t. He ordered, “Secure, no admittance. LeRoy?”

After a moment, the computer summoned LeRoy and he replied through the overhead speaker, “Sir?”

“I expect silence unless we go to battle stations. Understood?”

“Gage —”

“Understood?”

“Yes, General.”

The link fell silent. “Restraints,” he said before the bed made them available.

Reina’s senses returned. She hadn’t been totally unaware of all that’d taken place. Still under the influence of the training exercises, she needed distance and quiet to come

back to herself. It'd happen quickest alone and in her chamber. When she walked toward the door, her mind went fuzzy and instinct took over because he'd grabbed her arm. If he'd afford her a few moments of stillness!

He dragged her toward the bed and threw her upon it. Its softness hampered her motion and he came over her. Wrestled down and held there, she felt something tighten first around one wrist and then the other. She'd been captured by soft leather attached to foot-long chains. After testing the restraints, she convulsed against him in aggravation and rage.

"Lady, cease! You've woken one demon, tempt not the other!"

She lay on her back with him hovering above, breathing heavily. She felt his knee between her slightly spread legs and each time she struggled, she was intimately stroked. Angry because her body started to respond, furious because she couldn't make it cease, she forced herself to lie quietly so her flesh would settle and the arousal would leave.

She tasted blood and felt it run from her lower lip. Held still, she ignored it and tried building a happy place in her mind where she could be at peace. Hair was roughly brushed from her face before her chin was grabbed and her head was turned. "Open your mouth and let me see the damage." She didn't and his fingers applied slight pressure to her jaws. "Open. Your. Mouth."

He sat beside her before leaning over. His upper body rested just above her chest. She stilled and tried not to breathe. His palm came down on her forehead. "So help me, if you bite me..."

The hand slid down before fingers pinched her nose closed. She fought and struggled, which only served to get her squished. Continued movement brought her breasts firmly against him. Within nanoseconds, her nipples grew firm beneath the soft leather being rubbed between them.

"Open."

Undecided whether or not to comply, she eventually chose to open her mouth. She couldn't stand the continued stimulation and hoped compliance would get him to ease away. He pulled on her lower lip. "You wouldn't be damaged if you would've listened."

His fingers toying just inside her mouth made her react without thought. Grabbing the finger with her teeth, she applied slight pressure. When he shifted, her breasts were flattened by his chest. Anger faded and the notion to bite him left too. Pinned beneath him with her nipples inadvertently being rubbed made her choose a different course of action.

Her mouth closed around him instinctively as her tongue unconsciously licked. With the general in her mouth, she suddenly didn't want to harm him in any way. It happened fast, the remembrance and arousal. Lightly sucking his finger before sliding her tongue along its length, she grew weak as she savored the penetration. The general settled more heavily upon her. As she lessened her hold, he remained within, pushing a

bit before pulling back. Her hips lurched and a hoarse sound came from the back of her throat. His breath came heavy against her face as he slowly slid his finger from her mouth. Every bit of energy she'd drawn up to fight turned inward to become a high-level, peaking arousal. The haste in which her body went from one fixation to another made her dizzy and confused.

"I warned you not to bite me."

His words were low, devilish, threatening and they made her heart quicken. She liked the things he did to her when he spoke that way. In her current state, she hoped her small defiance provoked him to irrational behavior. Hers wasn't particularly sensible.

He picked at the laces of her shirt, making sure his fingertips lingered when he'd pull one lying against her breast. When they'd all been undone, he grasped the sides of the leather and jerked it apart. He undid the fastener at her neck and brushed the remnants away to leave her exposed. Rather than shrink away from the uncovering, her back arched. She wanted him to take notice of the drops forming on her nipples, see how much she desired and needed his mouth.

"How would you like it if I bit you?" He came close.

With breasts thrust upward, she arched as high as she could to bring the nipple in contact with his lips. The flat of his tongue came against her before he wiggled it and took a single, rough lick. After he did the same to her other nipple, she whimpered when he sat back. Air stirring across the moisture left from his tongue made the ache worsen.

His hands moved down to below her bellybutton. He unfastened her belt and the buttons beneath before pulling the closure apart. He slid them down quickly and stopped when the waist rested at her calves. Boots were slid off and then so were her pants.

Anger and menace vibrated from him and her passiveness no longer seemed appropriate. Unable to settle herself, she couldn't stop the tensing of muscles and acted on instinct. Her leg flew forward to kick him. When he grabbed it, she used the other. Accustomed to winning in battle, she didn't like how swiftly she'd been subdued.

Effortlessly, he flipped her onto her stomach. The chains attached to her wrists only had so much length and her wrists crossed as they reached their limit. Tugging helplessly, she grew angry and desperate before his upper body settled across the back of her legs. She didn't care to be trapped but attempts to dislodge him gained nothing as a hand settled against her. Brought to stillness, she couldn't see his expression to gauge his emotion. Clearly stroking her cheeks, he said in that mischievous, threatening voice, "The sooner we deal with your lack of obedience, the sooner I'll get back to your sensitive nipples. Understood, Lady?"

Not a bit, Sir, she wanted to say but her mind felt unclear and her tongue was still thick. The sting of his hand came against her bottom and her torso came up on her forearms. Did he think such would impress her? His attempt to impart a lesson was

pathetic. Her anger eventually faded as she took delight in the fact that for once punishment wouldn't be too unpleasant.

"You expected a beating for your slowness to obey me with the cats. You'll get it now."

Really, a spanking, General! After enduring many swats, the sting and vibration penetrated, which brought about a steady awakening of thought and common sense. His hand didn't do the damage of a whip, which could make her instantly remorseful. The near pain also didn't give new fuel to her anger. What it did accomplish, however, was to somewhat humiliate. *What have I done!*

"And why would I expect you to step lively to obey me?" His hand came down several more times.

Answers came quickly as her mind finished waking. *Because you command the vessel my stinging rear end is on and it's necessary and appropriate for me to do so.*

"I don't," *slap*, "issue orders," *slap*, "to hear myself speak," he said, his voice deeply resonating, angry and – sexual?

His hand finally rested over the heat rising from her rear end and her face went down to the pillow. The folly of what happened and its implications sank in. If there'd been any doubt, his lecturing tone made it impossibly real. "It's for your safety and for the safety of those aboard this vessel, Lady. Have I made myself clear?"

She nodded her understanding, wanting him to stop being irate. Truly, she never meant to misbehave but somehow always managed to draw menace from those she came in contact with. Why? She couldn't arrange the incidents and make sense of how she'd wound up in her current situation. She seldom, if ever, calculated making herself a target for punishment. Apparently this was another inborn ability she'd have to live with. Female or male, it mattered not, for all seemed equally compelled to teach her appropriateness.

He said naught and remained poised over her abused rear end, probably contemplating doing much worse. As he silently hovered, the heat radiated into the tissue beneath and made her warm. The further it went, the more she seemed to want his forgiveness.

Offering what she could, she shifted and moved her aching backside, which caused his immobile hand to slightly stroke her flesh. *By the stars*, her startled mind realized, *I don't want pardoned for wrongdoing, I want fucked!*

What had the general done to her? First she experienced uncontrollable anger then remorse and then desire. Unable to sort through everything, she let the confusion and static in her brain settle until the strongest of what she felt dominated. Her thighs pressed together, which made the swollen flesh between them throb. Sure that the general remained too angry to pleasure her, she couldn't help the near-silent sob leaving her mouth. If he left her upon the bed restrained to think about her reprimand, she'd never be able to reach her sweet spot and climax. If he required distance from her for any length of time, she'd suffer greatly.

The bed shifted as he stood next to it. *Don't leave me like this!* She gazed through strands of hair and watched as he unfastened his pants. Her body wanted him. Her mind seemed unwilling or afraid at the moment to act on it. At odds emotionally and physically, she couldn't decide what to do.

"Your scent surrounds you, Lady. Has some discipline got your juices flowing?"

He sounded so commanding. He even sounded a trifle forgiving. Had the slaps pardoned her wrongdoing? They'd certainly done something to her. The cloth parted and he took his hard cock into his right hand. Holding tightly, he stroked its length as his fist surrounded its thickness. Her belly tightened, nipples throbbed and mind cried out in indecision.

"I should spread your legs and leave you to think about what you've done." Having her worst fear vocalized, tears came to her eyes as she gazed up at him. "As it is..."

There was compassion in him. She saw it in his eyes. "Come up on your knees and spread your legs. I wish to see what condition you're in." Random spasms jolted her sex, which left her legs uncooperative. He helped her up by grabbing her hips and lifting. Her legs trembled slightly under her weight. "Wider, Lady, don't hide from me."

Moisture leaked as she acted in accordance. She groaned with embarrassment, feeling the wet trail against the inside of her thigh. The stirring of air settled her dilemma, forced mistrust of the general aside. She'd take whatever he measured out so she could climax because each encounter with the man caused sexual needs to grow and burn.

He came toward the head of the bed still holding his large cock. She stared and moved closer before his hand gathered a fist of her hair. "You won't bite me this time, will you?" She shook her head. "Open. Take the head and if your lip hurts, pull off me. Understood?"

She tried to say she did but an odd sound came out. She nodded. His foot came up on the bed and he widened his stance. His splendid cock fell within reach. She took what he offered. Knowing what to do with his shaft this time, she didn't hesitate and took him deep. Extremely excited, she intuitively gorged herself as she placed concentration on her own swollen sex. Perhaps this time his thrusting would bring her to orgasm.

"Oh," he said before growling and huffing out low sounds, "you learn quickly and know what I want, don't you? You took it right to the hilt with your tongue going over me, Reina."

Since pulling her from the training room, he hadn't referred to her by name. Hearing it then allowed the last morsel of apprehension to drain. She knew for certain he no longer remained angry. She hastened her movements to meet his need. She wanted to hear her name again, praising her efforts.

"I need it fast this time so I can collect my wits. Appease me and I swear I'll fuck you gently."

He made no sense and it mattered little. The stimulation in her mouth and the movement causing her breasts to sway all brought her closer. That and the promise of a breaching made her most aggressive.

"Open your legs and keep them apart. I'll see to you after you suck me off. Harder, mmm, harder."

When he came it was in great pulsing bursts, his hand rough in her hair as he held her and pressed deep. The taste came to her and she shifted and moaned. She'd gotten close to the edge without having been touched between her legs. *Yes, oh yes, let me come.* Straining with him, her warm place contracted and the sensation went high into her sex.

His cock left her mouth and she whimpered. The loss of his flesh stopped the tightening between her legs. She looked down in remorse. She hadn't come and worse yet, she hadn't made it known she'd been close. She had much to regret.

"Reina, go to your back and stretch the muscles in your arms and legs."

She did but it took great effort. She lay flat on her stomach and wormed around until she managed to roll to her back. His gaze perused her from head to toe while he unfastened his tunic. "Now move your legs apart and relax. Tell me—your ass against the covers, is it painful?"

Not particularly. Attempting the words, clearing her throat to make her vocal cords work, she tried again, and finally said hoarsely, "No, Sir."

Until she fully came back from her fighting state, her voice would remain unavailable. Partially able to speak, she was also partially calmed. Her mind knew the difference between simulated combat and a fight for her life. Other parts of her body did not.

"Your voice, your throat—have I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

Her pupils dilated as she looked at him. He bared his chest and worked to remove his pants. A more prime specimen of a male could only be imagined in wet, heated dreams. Layered in muscle, he had jagged lines of slightly discolored skin covering him. The scars were old because they were faint. The damage to him barely registered before she took in more details.

Light hair ran over his chest and tapered down in a thick trail. It covered his thighs and from there she didn't care. When he turned to finish removing his pants, she saw his ass cheeks, plump and tempting, laced with definition. Again, the skin covering him carried scars. The markings were of a soldier, a warrior, her general.

Her mind didn't differentiate between the placement of restraints for punishment and those placed for a mating. It seemed she'd get both that eve and her body made

further preparation. Her stomach tightened with each random compression of her core. Almost rhythmically, she clenched and released, which brought more blood to her already-swollen pussy.

Her eyes closed as the bed moved. Her legs were drawn up and gently separated to bare her moist spot. About to accept a man for the first time, she prayed she'd do what was necessary to satisfy him. If the experience proved to be half as incredible as she expected, she'd want it to happen again. Her only hope of a repeat mating would be willing submission with the first. The general told her he required it. She'd obey.

"You're wet clear down, Reina. Is your need so great?"

"Yes."

Settled between her legs, he came forward and braced himself on outstretched arms. His warm body radiated heat as he hovered so close. She took in his scent and remembered to remain still. *Keep your wits about you, Reina.*

"Bring your legs against me. I aim to make this take a while."

She groaned and allowed her knees to rest against his sides. Her thighs shook in response to his body coming closer, pressing more firmly against her. Menace and anger appeared gone from him. She'd do everything within her power to make sure it stayed away. When he leaned down to brush his lips against her mouth, she opened willingly before he could make the request. More than accepting him in the dominant role, she wanted it with every breath she took.

Gage's cock never softened, in fact it grew more rigid now that it stroked her pussy. Simply kissing had her hips pumping wetness against his cock. The urge to drive into her became tremendous but he forced himself to hold back.

His thoughts became clouded. *Push into her. Take her virginity roughly to finish the lesson. The only thing you've taught her is to cream herself from a half-assed attempt at discipline!*

Able to keep the strong urges at bay, he settled himself, knowing it'd take a while before he'd act on them again. After reddening her ass, having her become so aroused and then sucking him to completion... She'd stolen his anger and temporarily appeased his lust. It was her turn.

He tasted his seed on her tongue and his hips stirred. The head of his cock rubbed up and down her slit, finding the entrance. Poised at the opening to all that heat, he concentrated elsewhere. His lips left hers to trail kisses to a breast. His tongue lapped at the nipple, taking in the arousal-scented sweetness. He licked and tongued until her nipple grew stiff and thick. Rewarding her for responding to his ministrations, he carefully sucked, bringing the nipple to a hardened peak. *Lovely, hot, so desirable.*

He drew her in, using his teeth to gently hold her captive while his tongue tickled and stroked. As he stretched out over her again, he'd barely managed to place his cock for penetration when she suddenly tensed. Her thighs hugged him tighter and she trembled.

“Easy, Reina. Don’t we have an agreement about such things?” Amber eyes hesitantly rose to meet his. She peered at him guiltily. “You’re to tell me *before* you come. Remember?”

She nodded. “I’m ready to come,” she said hoarsely.

“And when might you’ve mentioned it?”

“Too late I think. Sorry.” It pained him to hear her struggle to speak.

“Are you upset with me because I disciplined you?”

She shook her head but he believed it to be otherwise. She’d yet to say his name or refer to him in any manner at all. In the span of a day they’d be on Infur and her lack of willingness to obey a command would see them dead right quick. They needed to trust one another. He’d take the first step. He said, “Release restraints.”

Her breaching would happen once and he wanted it done fittingly, not as it might’ve happened with her tied down so a male of his race could rut between her thighs and plant his seed. She went still beneath him and didn’t move. Her arms had been tense and hands fisted prior, as if she tested the restraints. Once taken away, she went limp. He stroked the length of his cock between the wet folds of her pussy. She drew a breath and tightened her legs and stomach but remained otherwise pliant and motionless.

“Are you afraid of taking me in, Reina?” She shook her head. “Tell me why you’re so still.”

“I,” she said, before clearing her throat, “wish to please you, Sir.”

The restraints might as well be in place with her addressing him thusly. Nonetheless, with her thoughts made known, he gently explained his intent. “Your lesson’s past—it’s over. That which we do now is between a man and woman. Although I wish to guide you, your participation would help me in assessing what you feel.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ve no desire to touch me?”

“Oh yes, but may I, Sir?”

Ignorance of the ways between male and female had little to do with her hesitance. It *did* have everything to do with her recent punishment and the regret he felt earlier for the spanking then doubled. Perhaps after measuring it out, he should’ve left her to contemplate the foolishness of her actions. He couldn’t, not with the scent of desire coming up from between the cheeks of her ass.

“Your hands upon me bring great pleasure, Reina.”

She stroked his face and brushed his forehead and cheeks before her fingertips smoothed hair behind his ears. Comforted by her touch, knowing her mind got beyond the punishment, he took stock of everything she availed. Her face, hands and nipples were sweet indeed. They were a sight tempting him to take what he most wanted. He

pulled back to stroke her between her lips again, spreading her apart with the girth of his cock.

"Not yet," he said, urging her to calm her hips. "When you come, I need to be very close, much closer than I am. Hold back your pleasure."

"I don't think I can."

"This one time, you must."

"I'll try."

He slid his length from between her lips and positioned the head of his cock at her opening.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered urgently, trying to rise up to take him in.

He kept himself at bay and waited until she averted the crisis before gathering himself for the task at hand. Perspiration misted his body as he struggled to control his cock. It wanted in so badly he felt pre-cum leak.

"Hold back as long as you can," he said, his jaw set, determined to wait until the pain could be masked with orgasm. "Suffer a bit, sweet one, and when you can't put it off, come hard."

He stroked her crease with the head of his cock, up and down slowly. Each time he neared her entrance, her hips came off the bed. Holding the base of his cock, he concentrated on stimulating her clit. Hoarse sounds of anticipation rose from her throat. Her eyes closed and jaw set as her legs grasped his sides. His balls drew up in response, and before he could rein himself in, pre-cum trickled against her clit.

"Please," she rasped.

"I know," he said, rubbing her clit faster. If she'd just settle down, he'd take care of their problem.

When she cried out, he followed the slick crease down, poised himself at her wet opening and slipped his mouth over hers. He kissed her hard as he thrust into her passage, stretching her open for the first time. He'd never felt anything so tight and welcoming.

"That's it, sweet one, come on my cock." He encouraged her by pushing a bit harder, showing her how good it felt to be stretched and entered. "Hold nothing back from me."

Grabbed by surges of tightening muscle, she threatened to milk him. Her nails bit into his flesh as he slowly eased from her heat. *Feel the virgin's blood seeping deep, surrounding your cock. She felt pleasure with the opening of her body, now take yours. Fuck her so that those after you will mean nothing.*

He'd not ruin her first experience by quenching his desire to fuck her hard and fast. But God, he fought the urge to do exactly that.

"Gage, oh, Gage, it's so good," she whispered.

His name from her lips soothed him and at the same time stole the last shred of control, forcing hot seed into her close-fitting sheath. Euphoria surrounded him as his cock pumped up great bursts of cum.

His hands slid under her back to grasp her shoulders. He held her down so she'd take it all. "You're so beautiful. So perfect."

A moment of indecision came. He struggled with the right course of action. Certain Reina could handle more, his body geared up for another round of fucking. His conscience needled him and reminded him the woman would receive pleasure but undoubtedly require medical if he let himself take all he wanted.

When naught remained in either one of them to give, he calmed and gathered himself for the task at hand. After a lingering kiss was placed on her lips, she sighed into his mouth. No virgin's tears or regrets came forth. A slight smile pursed her lips as she stilled beneath him. She hadn't been hurt, she'd been sated.

When he left her, he felt humbled at how weak and slow his limbs responded. It'd been years since he'd been required to exercise that level of restraint with a woman. It'd also been years since he felt so absolutely replete after sex.

In the relief area he assembled what he'd need. The custom as old as civilization, he gathered warm water into the basin and added a splash of scented sanitizer. After throwing in the softest cloth available he went to her.

Although she'd almost fallen asleep, he brought her hips up and placed a thick towel beneath. He wrung out the cloth and cleaned her gently. The amount of blood mingling with his seed disturbed him. He tried not to think overly much about it.

She stirred. "Gage, please don't, I'll—"

"You've given your body to me, sweet one. I'll keep it for a while longer and see to this need as well."

After cleaning her thighs and wiping the remnants of sex away, he rinsed the cloth. Making sure it stayed warm and clean, he placed it against her pussy. No freezing cloth would carelessly be thrust against her after how she'd opened herself and come for him.

He placed a hand low on her abdomen and rubbed deeply until she relaxed and released the remainder of the fluids. After completing his chore, he kissed her forehead as she drifted off. He gathered supplies, took them to the other room and replaced the materials. In the cabinet, he found the standard-issue tube of lubricant. She might appreciate its medicinal qualities if he took care in its application.

Seated next to her on the bed, he squeezed the ointment over his middle and index fingers before drawing the leg closest to him up and resting it against his side. After his cock, two fingers shouldn't be too uncomfortable an intrusion. As gently as he could, he inserted the cool balm into her poor, battered little pussy.

"Easy, Reina, this will make the burning cease. Let me care for you."

"It feels good."

The cream eased his penetration and he stroked inside to spread it. He took a long time, going slowly to cover every little inch, enjoying the random manner in which her pussy tightened to grasp his fingers. At peace and sleeping soundly, she appeared most lovely. Wanting nothing more than to lie at her side, he grudgingly stood to care for his own state of disarray. He allowed thoughts to drift about his mind as he washed her blood from his body.

Eden had come to him a woman, having buried a husband before him. In many respects Reina and Eden were opposites. Pale-skinned with hair the color of fire, Eden was a solemn and tranquil beauty who'd taken every aspect of life quite seriously. Spoiled, pampered and righteously so, she died as they'd lived – quietly.

Reina would burst if mischief and curiosity could cause it. The traits weren't overly desirable qualities in a woman. They'd be acceptable though if a man wanted a companion rather than a wife.

She could be whomever she wanted, he remembered, for ravens remained with their clan throughout life, devoting themselves to their womenfolk. Thoughts progressed until he tiredly mumbled, "When she breeds, at least she won't be torn to pieces by one of my kind in a hurry to get between soft thighs and into a warm body that's been prepared."

Until the words spilled, he'd not consciously thought about it, how much that very image plagued him. Despite her antics and speaking in riddles, thus far she'd been honest and accepted responsibility for her actions.

There probably wasn't a female alive who hadn't felt the sting of a man's hand when the deed necessitated it. The use of such discipline was commonly practiced in civilized worlds. It kept women of nonmilitary training in a safe place under her father's or husband's protection. Of course it hadn't done Eden any good, her inability to cope with their time in captivity the proof.

He considered Reina again. Obviously she received some form of training, but not military as he knew it. Was the punishment he measured out understood by her? Could she fathom that the slaps to her ass were for her betterment and not entirely to assuage his anger?

He quit questioning the spanking and resolutely decided she'd determined their future course. Under his protection and command, it became his right to use any form of correction necessary to keep her safe. And for God's sake, he hadn't damaged her, not really!

Chapter Nine

"Reina?" Gage called, thrashing in his sleep.

"Gage," she murmured, turning toward him and placing an arm across his chest. A similar embrace settled him twice during the night.

"Your voice, it's returned."

She stretched slightly, took the cramp from her side and spoke against the hair covering his chest. "It's only ever temporary."

He settled back and brought her somewhat over him. "So it's common?"

"Yes, when I fight." Her eyes closed and she felt as if she might drift off again. The general wouldn't let her.

"Why is that?"

"It simply happens."

"Explain," he said, obviously more awake than she.

"When a raven's engaged with an enemy, her vocal cords swell so if the need arises, the cry for help will carry."

"But you could barely speak."

"Words, yes, the raven's call would be more audible," she explained, growing slightly irritated relaying information she believed he should already know.

"I thought the call came from your mind."

"Partially, but it's also created from our throats. It's rather hard to describe."

He stroked long black hair from between them and his fingers took it down her back before lazily rubbing her skin. "I must go soon and I would've left you to your dreams, however I need to have an understanding between us because the mission draws near."

"All right." She feared she knew the subject and didn't wish to face unpleasantness with his warmth so close.

"Don't tense up, sweet one. We'll speak about it and have it done." Nothing to say, she waited for him to proceed. "Do you know why you were disciplined?"

"Yes, Sir." Her voice was barely a whisper. She'd known what the topic would be.

"And you can now understand why I was concerned."

"No, Sir."

He grew tense. "You can't fathom why I might disapprove of you turning on me?"

"It won't happen again."

"Because your ass will remind you of the lesson?"

Confused with the direction of the conversation, she corrected him. “No, Sir, because the situation probably won’t arise again. Your man LeRoy explained what’s expected of me. I doubt I’ll be placed in a similar situation.”

“When did you speak with LeRoy?” *Oh my, but his temper could rise quickly!*

“At breakfast yestermorn when you went to Pinski.”

“How did you know I saw her, Reina?”

Another unpleasant topic. “I came in as you spoke to her. You appeared deep in conversation and I didn’t wish to intrude.”

“All right, now what of LeRoy? What did he tell you?”

“That I’m to track for you. My safety is all but guaranteed and I’ll remain from harm and actual battle. Hence, I won’t find myself using fighting skills.”

“But you spent a great deal of time killing Rodney yestereve.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

She hated admitting it but gave the answer anyhow. “When you told me there was but a single day to ready myself—as you know this is my first experience... You told me to stay *close* to my chamber, Sir, not necessarily in it.”

“Get it out, Reina, there’s only so many hours this morn.”

“My stomach, Sir. The creatures dwelling there woke and wouldn’t remain still and my head pained me because of fear that I wouldn’t be of service to you in finding the baby—the major.”

“You were worried?”

“Greatly.”

“And that has what to do with Rodney?”

“The activity. Something to do other than sit about my chamber.”

“You were working off the worry.”

“Aptly put, Sir. Yes, that’s what I’d hoped.”

“But obviously Rodney didn’t help in that regard.”

“Oh, indeed he did. I was calming myself for my return to the chamber when you required me.”

“I had no need of you.”

“Certainly you did! It was of such import that you became quite assertive in your gaining my attention.” She braced herself on an elbow to add a bit of distance.

“I went to the training room because you’d killed the android in simulation and your eyes appeared as they did when you took flight. I went to you for fear something happened.”

“Then why was I punished, Sir?”

“Because you attacked me!”

“With provocation, Sir.”

“What provocation, Lady, my entering the room?”

“Your angry voice. The signs of your body preparing to fight me.”

“And how I entered the room was significant in your later behavior?”

She distanced herself, brought the covers up and glared. If he thought to manipulate her into insubordination and *another* punishment, he could go to hell.

“You’ll finish spitting it out, right now.” He sat up himself before grabbing her shoulders and shaking her a bit.

Oh, she would and quickly too so the idiot could understand. “You saw my eyes. You saw me with your Rodney, knew I was in battle readiness and yet you came into that area with aggression and malice flowing from you. If you had no need of me, you would’ve behaved as Lobank.”

“Explain Lobank’s behavior.”

Huffing, she tossed her hair over her shoulder. “He remained calm and nonthreatening so I wouldn’t target him. Even your Rodney’s settings needed to be altered so that he would consistently be the aggressor. I had to explain to Lobank a raven won’t defend herself if there’s no peril. Now, Sir, please tell me why you knowingly provoked me, forcing me to attack, which wrought my uncomfortable seat at the moment!”

“No, don’t you dare try to manipulate the situation to your benefit, Lady.” She’d never do such a thing! “I touched you as you flew and you didn’t come at me.”

“You have knowledge of us! You know the vast difference between flight and defense!” She couldn’t help the irritation and disrespectful tone lacing the words.

He looked stunned for a moment before she said, “Ah, Sir, it’s you who manipulates now. You look surprised when it suits you but I know better. You can’t lay claim to ignorance after you’ve touched me so perfectly, knew exactly what my raven’s body needed to *come* for you.” And for good measure so he wouldn’t find additional fault, she added, “Sir.”

He reached out and she couldn’t help but flinch away. It seemed an appropriate action because she had no idea why he’d want contact after yelling. Confused, she also had no idea what just happened between them but residual anger burned in her chest.

He said quietly, “I know a woman’s body, Lady. It has naught to do with you being raven.” The bed shifted as he stood and began dressing. “I’ll apologize when you’ve calmed and can better appreciate it. I doubt it’ll repair the trust issue you must have with me right now. You’ll stay aboard *Raze* when we reach *Infur*.”

“You’ll take that away from me! You’ll condemn my clan for a misunderstanding?”

“I never said –”

“If I don’t track, the Governance no longer protects Haven.” She wished her voice didn’t shake and the tears would leave her eyes.

“We’ll work this out...”

"I'll track for you, General, better than any raven in history. Don't take this from me. You can't, you mustn't!"

"And you can place this incident aside?"

"Certainly." But she'd use greater caution in her assumptions.

"And let me guide you through that dark place?"

She wouldn't allow it to be a problem. "Yes, I swear."

His eyes held her gaze and the intense color and clarity deflated her anger. Even the stubble over his misbegotten face was attractive. *Damn him!*

"General?" LeRoy's voice intruded.

"Here, Mason."

"Another Theazian warship. They've hailed us and wish to make a bargain."

"Regarding?"

"A trade. Major Deacon for you, Sir."

"The terms?"

She threw the covers back, went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Fear replaced anger as she waited to hear the reply from Colonel LeRoy. Gage surrounded her with strong arms, brought her tight against his chest and stroked her head.

"Same as always."

He sighed. "Agree to it as long as the *supposed* trade takes place on Infur. That'll give us time. You know what to do from there."

"I do, but what about the war vessel? You know where there's one—"

"Of course there're others but they'll keep a distance from *Raze*. Let them know I still command the ship. Tell them it must remain that way as to not alert the crew. Tell them flanking us is out of the question. Keep them far yonder so when we need that advantage, we'll have it."

"So just to be clear, we'll make an imaginary hail to the president, ask him what to do and he'll trade you for the major?"

"Yes. It needs to appear he'll betray me to get his son back. And, LeRoy?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Let Brach play Deacon. His arrogance should make staunch believers of them."

"Aye, General." The link went silent.

"Reina, you're trembling." He kissed her forehead.

"You're not trading your life?" He relayed as much but she needed a direct confirmation to lessen her panic. She cared a great deal for her general.

"It's a game, sweet one, but secrecy's a must. I trust you'll not run and tell Walter of our charade because he's got such a large mouth." Did he do it on purpose, make light of the dealings with their enemy for her benefit? Before she could formulate the answer,

he brought her chin up. "Pay close attention to what I say next because it's more important than any dealings over the major."

She nodded and gazed into his eyes, waiting. What could be more important than retrieving the major? He said, "I'm sorry for your punishment, Reina. I'm shamed at measuring it out. It's becoming obvious that my knowledge of your abilities and ways are not what they should be. To make it right, I'll stand fast for retaliation in the form you choose. Would such let trust settle between us again?"

The man must never make a mistake to place the importance of an apology above the rescue of a major. After a moment of thought, a wicked idea came to her and he smiled. "Uh, Lady, your expression tells me to prepare myself."

"I'm a bit slow this morning, General. I'd like to ponder such a thing for a while if I may."

"As you wish," he said, kissing her very gently. "But while my mind is focused on you, I want to relay one additional thing."

"Sir?"

"In the future I'd like you to try to explain things to me *before* I make an ass of myself. Can you do that for me, Reina?"

"I'll try. I can't always predict what might seem strange to you though. Besides," she smiled, "this advantage you've awarded tastes sweet as scenarios play in my mind. I've not been in a position to mete out justice. I rather like the power, Sir."

"And I find that gleam in your eyes most attractive this morn. Open your mouth and let me tease you a bit so you'll have gentler thoughts when planning my discipline."

"It won't help you."

Laughing, running his fingers into the hair at the back of her head, he pulled slightly so she was turned up and open. After kissing her many different ways, he released her and stepped back. "I'm needed on the bridge, Lady. Crawl yourself back into the warmth of my bed and sleep the day away. I'll have food brought to you here."

"Your crew would wonder about that, Sir, especially in my current state of undress."

"They wouldn't dare say a word."

"No, I imagine they wouldn't but I find with all this talk of trading and war vessels, I'd much rather prowl beyond – with your permission of course."

With his uniform in place, the soldier in him came back. "Granted, but stay away from –"

She couldn't stop herself. "*The damn animal compound, Lady,*" she said in a deep voice not too unlike his.

His face went blank for a second before he howled with laughter. "Something like that could get you thrown in the brig, sweet one."

“Or punished,” she replied, tilting her head before slowly passing her tongue over her lips.

“Oh, damn me, but I must go. With that look of yours and that tongue of yours, I won’t be comfortable sitting for a time.”

* * * * *

“Yes, Lobank?” Gage asked when the corporal hailed him.

“The lady, Sir, we’re transporting her to medical.”

“LeRoy!”

“Right away,” LeRoy said.

Gage went to the console to view the image LeRoy brought up on the screen. Lobank ran with Reina in his arms, two others clearing the way toward medical. Her body was slack and she had no color in her face. She appeared lifeless.

“Go,” Mason said.

Gage ran the distance to medical and entered, aggressively moving people from his path. At the bedside, he watched as Nare hovered and checked her over before depressing a button to have the readings repeated audibly.

“Respirations, thirty. Heart rate, thirty. Blood pressure—blood pressure—one moment please. Brain activity, minimal. Dr. Nare?” the computer questioned in a soothing voice.

“Yes,” Nare replied.

“Should I warm her? Her temperature is below eighty.”

When the doctor pulled Reina’s eyelid up, everything within was black. She kept mumbling the same phrase over and over. Unable to stand seeing her nearly unconscious, Gage grasped her hand. He became immediately weightless as his mind raced through a near black tunnel. Words came to him more clearly, not truly spoken but still made known. *Balasta don chewertai infatamal, balasta don chewertai infatamal, balasta don chewertai infatamal!*

He wanted to reassure her but the place they soared wouldn’t accommodate spoken words. He wanted her to know she wasn’t alone. *Reina, I’m here.*

Torone! she said into his mind.

She’d heard, she understood. How was it possible? *I’ll not leave you. How will they strike from within?*

“Body temperature continues to decrease, Doctor. May I warm her?” the computer asked pleasantly, sounding very far away.

All at once Gage opened his eyes. He’d been released and forced back to his physical form. She’d done it before. The first time she flew, she’d pushed him from hell. With a stinging hand, he felt her chilled skin still grasped in his palm.

“Reina, you’re to come back now, this instant.” Eyelids fluttered as she struggled. The deathly pallor seemed to expand. “Obey me, Lady, or I swear I’ll shake you until your teeth rattle.”

“He came to me. In my head.” He barely made out what she’d said because her voice was less than a whisper.

“Who came to you, Lady?”

“He drew me in, entered my mind. I didn’t know such could be done.”

“The Theazian? The one you felt during your flight?”

Motionless with gray skin, the blue ring surrounding her lips grew darker. He recalled instructions she’d offered prior to her first flight. *Guide me with your voice as I fly.* He had other ideas on how to help at the moment. He grasped her shoulders and forced her to sit before turning her. Ignoring the pull to go into her dark world became easier when he expected it. “Come back to me, damn you! This very moment, Reina. Do,” he shook her, “you,” he shook her harder, “hear me!”

“General!” Nare yelled.

Reina shivered slightly before she drew in a massive breath, her back arching as if she’d been skewered from behind. Gage placed her against the bed and looked at the doctor.

“Nare?” Gage asked, needing some form of assistance and answers.

Nare replied, “I don’t know how to help. I’ve no idea what’s going on!”

The computer sizzled to life and spewed information. “Respirations increasing. Forty, sixty, ninety. Heart rate one hundred twenty, one hundred fifty, one hundred – body temperature slowly rising. Arrhythmia detected, Dr. Nare. Please clear the bed.”

Gage pulled his hands away the same time Nare did and Reina was shocked. After a breath-holding moment, the computer relayed, “Heart rate stabilized, Dr. Nare. Other systems responding. Stabilization imminent. Brain scan abnormal. Running analysis.”

They waited. Gage ran a hand over his face, wishing someone knew something – anything about the intricacies of a raven. How in the hell did the bastard Theazian manage to affect her so? She should’ve entered *his* mind, not the other way around.

“Dr. Nare?” the computer asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Identify female subject, please.”

“Raven woman.”

“Scanning for comparison.”

“What the hell is wrong with your computer, Nare?” Gage asked.

“It’s programmed to handle her, give it a moment.”

“No comparison found,” the computer said.

“Run comparison again,” Nare ordered.

After a few seconds, it replied, “No comparison found.”

"Explain."

"Contradictory, Dr. Nare. Central nervous system interruptions, Theazian-based in nature. Raven main path identifiers correspond. Combination consistent with interbreeding. No physical attributes or molecular evidence to support conclusion."

"Identify raven."

Gage's patience came very close to the edge as he waited for the gibberish the computer spat back to relay something of import. "Nare!"

"Layman's terms," Nare said to the computer.

"Theazian process overlying raven brain function, Dr. Nare."

"Eliminate Theazian influence."

"Probability of success – ninety-two percent. Do you wish me to proceed?"

"The other eight percent?" Gage asked. They dealt with a woman's life and the odds seemed ridiculously unsafe. Before Nare allowed the computer to gamble, he'd make sure he had a better understanding of what they were speaking of.

The computer questioned, "Dr. Nare?"

"You'll respond to General Ryker."

"Yes, Dr. Nare. Additional eight percent uncertain, General."

"Potential outcomes?"

"Permanent brain damage, respiratory failure, continued arrhythmia, heart failure –"

"You could counter that, correct?" Gage asked.

"Negative after an isolation procedure, Sir."

"If the raven were left alone?" Any side effect of the procedure seemed too risky.

"Unknown."

Reina's eyelids fluttered. "Lady?" Gage grabbed her hand.

"Sir?" Beautiful amber eyes surrounded by swollen lids opened before her gaze settled on him. An unconvincing smile turned the corners of her mouth up.

"Reina, are you with us again?" He stroked her hand as she weakly grasped him in return.

"It appears so." She looked to her right, viewed Nare and then scanned the others crowded in the room. "You sounded as if you had need of me, Sir. Is there something amiss?"

She shivered and Nare said to the computer, "Heat."

The computer relayed, "Theazian influence diminished. Undetectable. Dr. Nare, a temporal lobe hemorrhage is now detected." The computer's electronic voice rose an octave as Reina grimaced, bringing her palms to her eyes.

Nare took her hand and asked, "Reversal procedure?"

“Unnecessary, Dr. Nare, it’s receding. The raven appears to be self-rejuvenating in this manner. I wish to analyze this ability. May I probe deeper to more fully understand the physiology of raven intracranial capabilities?”

“Negative. I believe the general wishes her conscious.”

“Peripheral scan recommended, Dr. Nare. I now detect a frontal lobe hemorrhage which dissipates as I give her readout.”

“Proceed with peripheral scan only.”

“Understood. Proceeding.”

“What happened?” Gage asked.

Reina didn’t know how to answer, for she couldn’t comprehend it herself. She’d been accessing the data beast, preparing for their mission, trying to relay their proximity to the baby major when she tapped into something odd. A communication of sorts with words, voices, but nothing clear.

The ship rumbled beneath them and she made herself look as alert as possible. “Your presence is required elsewhere, Sir. I’m sorry for more trouble and promise not to misbehave again.”

His level of intensity changed and she witnessed behavior she believed quite extraordinary. The general took her hand into both of his and brought it to his lips, kissing her lightly. “LeRoy is capable. Until we know what’s happening to you—”

“Gage,” Dr. Nare said, “her vitals are stable. I won’t leave her. Go to your post.”

He squeezed her hand gently and laid it against her stomach. He hesitated. “You’re well now, Lady?”

“Quite,” she managed to say before the room tilted with another impact to the ship’s side.

“Condition of raven?” he asked the computer while staring into her eyes. Apparently he needed further assurance, not trusting her ability to judge her own health.

“Baseline, General.”

“No further anomalies?”

“Negative, General.”

With a stroke of his fingers against her cheek, he turned and left the room in long-legged strides. Many followed him save Corporal Lobank and Dr. Nare. Lobank came forward to fill the spot where Gage had stood. He said, “You damn near gave *me* an arrhythmia, Lady.” His smile and expression relayed great relief.

A soft, muffled female voice asked, “Is she well?”

The question came from Pinski. Dr. Nare pressed something on the wall and it slid away. A few feet away in the next bed lay the partially healed private. Glad to see her looking so strong, Reina managed a smile to which Pinski winked.

Strike from within! Strike from within! The thoughts screeched through Reina's mind before she rolled from the bed and landed in a heap on the floor. Those surrounding her didn't know what would happen. She crawled toward Nare to take his firearm. The premonition's strength blinded her momentarily and before she could reach the doctor's laser, the room exploded in blinding light.

Chapter Ten

Reina watched Dr. Nare hurl through the air before falling to his back and sliding many feet. He lay crumpled against a supply cabinet. She crawled toward him, hearing the scuffle taking place behind. *The firearm. Must reach it.*

Lobank grunted and something large smacked the floor. She imagined the sound denoted Lobank going down. She'd *sensed* the danger, hadn't seen it, but knew its origin was male. Pinski rolled from her bed and landed haphazardly next to it. "Lady, take cover," she said.

With all of them in grave danger, Reina didn't waste time seeking cover. *Strike from within.* Reina's hand and knee slipped in the trail of Dr. Nare's blood as she scrambled to recover his firearm. She gained only a few feet before a large boot came to rest at the small of her back and weight bore her to the floor.

Weak and somewhat disoriented, she took herself to combat readiness. The process and transformation happened almost instantaneously. The light in the room grew brighter as adrenaline rushed through her veins. Her scalp tingled as her brain shifted from one manner of thought to another. Vocal cords swelled and her breathing increased, filling her lungs and body with endorphins so when the pain came she'd be able to keep fighting.

A man vaulted over Pinski's bed to land beside the injured woman. He grabbed her hair and roughly brought her to her feet. Pinski moaned before swaying. She shouldn't be moved much less jerked about. Reina figured she'd remedy the problem by tearing the man's throat out.

With leverage from her left hand and leg, she pushed, spun and landed on her back. The man above her hadn't expected the speed in which she changed positions. She took advantage by grasping his calf while lifting and pushing. Thrown many feet into the air, he landed on his back. Something within him cracked as he did. *Best be his head. If not, I'll make it so in a moment.*

Drawing her knees to her chest, she continued the motion by casting her feet away from her body, arching and snapping herself from the floor to land in a crouch at the intruder's feet. The strum of weapons being brought to life surrounded her.

Brach stood close to the door, holding a gun on Lobank. She wondered what he thought to gain by attacking them. Did he truly believe that he and two others could subdue her? No wonder she detested Brach. Not only did he have deplorable table manners, he injured those younger with less strength. Poor Lobank. Blood hastened down his face from a wound Brach inflicted.

A pitiful sound came from Nare. With Brach's weapon targeting Lobank and Pinski's safety threatened too, Reina would need to place thought before actions.

Straightening her legs slowly, she stood and brought her arms to her sides. The man she'd tossed to the floor roused and grasped his head before staggering to his feet. She stood less than three feet away and when he noticed her there, he seemed downright incensed. He came at her in a hurry of lumbering miscalculation, fury and stupidity. He probably wondered how she'd captured his wrist and gotten her hand around his throat.

"Let him go, Raven," Brach said.

She couldn't help her fingertips squeezing into his carotid arteries as her palm pressed against the front of his throat. He gasped and gasped again, before no air could pass through his mashed windpipe. Too far into the raven combat state to attempt a retort to Brach's demand, she thought perhaps the demonstration might speak for itself.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh and Pinski's muffled sound of agony penetrated. Lobank receiving another blow to his already-battered head also registered. What she tried to decipher with some clarity was whether or not their well-being would increase if she let her hulking assailant go.

A laser blast from behind forced her to turn. She retained hold of the man who'd begun turning a sickly color. The bastard holding Pinski shot Dr. Nare again. Nare thrashed on the floor, blood seeping from two wounds, one to his shoulder, the other to his thigh. The man turned the firearm and placed it against Pinski's temple. She understood he'd shoot her friend next if the situation didn't change. In a surge of fury, Reina brought the man she held forward before shoving him away. He landed six feet yonder in a heap.

"Lady," Brach said, "come to me."

Not the very brightest in his clan, she'd wager. Still, with Nare bleeding and Pinski's and Lobank's safety precarious at best, she strode toward him. As she neared within a foot, he took a step back and placed Lobank between them. *Also a coward.* His list of personality flaws grew.

"You'll do as I say," Brach ordered. "Agree to it and these two will live."

She nodded. She'd agree to much until an opportunity presented itself.

"Say it, bitch!" he yelled.

She'd most definitely have a problem complying. She had no voice to answer. It became unavailable once she took on the raven state. As it was, she hovered between two forms of female—the everyday reality of Reina where she could speak and that of a weapon, intent on eliminating threats.

Brach's finger applied pressure to the trigger and finally Lobank spoke for her. "She can't talk. Look at her eyes."

"What of them?" Brach asked.

"She's the raven now. She has no voice. It gets swallowed up by her eyes."

Brach appeared even more ill at ease with Lobank's description. Lobank could well believe her massive pupils swallowed her voice, for she'd never fully explained it to him. She'd given him basic facts on what to expect prior to her time with the android.

Brach said, "Parker, get the collar on her. We need to make haste."

"Do it yourself!" the man she'd twice thrown to the ground said as he came to his feet.

"Now!"

Parker stumbled to the door, grabbed a satchel and came to her. He withdrew the compliance collar and hesitated while reaching to place it around her neck. The room slanted before jumping beneath their feet. The battle raging outside the vessel must be quite heated because to experience such turbulence would mean *Raze* took many blasts and lost shields for a moment.

The general and data beast deploying all thought to war-making most likely hadn't detected the laser fire within the area. He'd probably be most aggrieved to find the good doctor's blood smeared across medical. She knew he'd not want Pinski's or Lobank's with it. She purposely thought of these things so when Parker placed the device she wouldn't react.

Cold perspiration came up on her skin from the effort of remaining a deadly raven and controlling it while rationalizing situations. Nearly an almost impossible undertaking, she struggled to stay balanced.

Effectively managing to distract herself, she allowed placement of the collar. Brach wasted no time in testing its effectiveness. The pain was easily tolerable. The disruptive electronic signal became more of a detriment. The sharp quality of sound interfered with her concentration. A surge of undisciplined yearning for blood threatened to take her over. If she acted on the ferocious instincts, Pinski and Lobank would die. She kept reminding herself of that fact but it seemed less and less relevant.

"Lady Reina!" Lobank yelled.

Before she acted and tore the villains around her to shreds, she dropped to her knees and bent at the waist. As a sign of surrender, she stretched her arms out and turned up her palms. If Brach didn't cease quickly, she'd be left without a choice and eliminate the threat.

Brach said, "Now that's a beautiful sight indeed."

The torture ended and she tried to control the twitch of muscle and fight down the urge to kill. The knot inside her tightened as things around her shuffled. When kicked, she looked up to see both Pinski and Lobank, a firearm pointed at each of their heads. Reina tiredly stood.

Pinski was shoved toward the door and her knees gave way. Reina advanced and caught her before she hit the floor. Pinski sagged against her in a trembling mass of weakened flesh. Lobank came forward to gather Pinski into his arms. He held her most carefully. "If you're to take us, leave the private behind. She's of no use to you," Lobank said.

“On the contrary,” Brach replied. “I believe her value in controlling the raven will be more effective than the collar. You, however, have a mite too much spunk.”

Brach hit Lobank once again in the head with the butt of the gun. The blow staggered him but Reina supported his back so he wouldn't fall.

“Let's move, shall we?” Brach grasped her arm and jerked her forward. To Reina, he said, “If you give me the slightest trouble, my men won't hesitate to kill your friends. Do you understand?”

She nodded and they stepped from medical into the corridors beyond. The hallways were cluttered with confused crewmembers walking rapidly to various destinations. Brach held the laser close to her side and no one appeared to notice. The ship lurched and the lighting dimmed. The general either lost power or diverted unnecessary energy resources to where he'd need them most. With her current situation, the lowered light would only help Brach take them without passersby noticing.

She walked and focused on their abductors. The moment they diverted their attention, she'd strike and remedy the problem. In particular, she wanted to get her hands on Brach. She'd tear him apart slowly to make him suffer for harming the good doctor, Lobank and Pinski. There'd simply been no good reason to hurt any of them.

* * * * *

Hailed by an unknown vessel, Gage didn't respond immediately, wanting the identity of the source known first. *Raze IV* finally cleared the debris field left from the band of outlaw ships after more than an hour in battle. The Theazian battleship cruising alone and some distance behind hadn't interfered or closed in during the renegade assault. They knew the Governance vessel would pulverize the uncoordinated attempt at seizure. The Theazians would remain in the distance to keep to the false bargain made a day prior.

Gage asked, “LeRoy, have you located anything?”

“No, Sir, still scanning, but it doesn't appear to be out there. The signal suggests another ship but it's invisible.”

“A location on Lieutenant Brach?”

“Negative, Sir. Wherever he is, he's not responding.”

“Second Lieutenant Graham?” Gage asked about the second-in-command of information and communications on board the ship.

“On his way now.”

“Do you have a visual on medical yet?”

“Negative, Sir.”

Gage slammed his hand on the arm of the command chair. “Damn it, LeRoy, what the hell is going right aboard this vessel!”

"You have me, Sir," he said without hesitation.

The jest was taken in the context in which it was meant. Gage settled himself. He seldom displayed anger in front of his crew and after the previous few days, nerves were already frayed. He needn't put those who serve in a higher state of alarm.

Graham stepped onto the bridge and saluted.

"Lieutenant, the whereabouts of Lieutenant Brach?" Gage asked.

"Unknown, Sir," the stern young man replied.

"Then get behind his station and answer my questions."

"Right away, Sir." He sat at the console.

LeRoy briefed him while Gage waited. After bringing up the virtual screen, Graham said, "I've located the call. Would you like the image, Sir?"

"Immediately," Gage replied.

On the large monitor, an outline of a vessel could be seen pulling away from its flanking position next to the *Raze*. He immediately recognized the sketchy form of a small Governance transport vessel. It resembled a new series Bolt ship typically used for personnel transport to and from planets. Several sat in the docking bays on the *Raze*.

"Its trackers have been removed from our system, Sir. Its view is purposely distorted by our computer. A moment please and I can—there's your ship." The lieutenant hadn't waited to be asked for information. If Brach didn't turn up soon, Graham would find himself promoted to a first lieutenant in charge of communications.

When the ship came completely into view, Gage asked, "Origin of the vessel?"

"Governance issue, I'm locked on and tracking, Sir. Model number one, seven, seven, eleven. It should be sitting in the docking bays."

"LeRoy?" Gage asked.

A moment later, LeRoy answered, "The computer has no history of the bay doors having opened."

"Um," Graham said, "Sir, that's not entirely true. It appears as though the information has been intentionally buried. As I look, I'm finding someone attempted to erase certain bits of history from various areas on board. May I correct this, Sir?"

"Immediately." Gage hoped the incidents had nothing to do with Reina. With LeRoy unable to get a visual on medical, the thought came to mind.

A moment later, Graham turned toward him. "I've restored most systems, General."

"Can you decipher the hail from the Bolt?"

Graham fiddled about. "It's Lieutenant Brach, Sir. A coded relay I'm decrypting now. Would you like a visual, Sir?"

"You'll run security on it first?"

"Almost done, Sir."

"Good. When you're ready, Graham."

Brach's image came onto the screen and Gage came to his feet, seeing who else was aboard the smaller vessel. Brach looked pleased as he stood with his hands behind his back, legs spread and an infuriating smile on his face. "Congratulations, Ryker, on getting Graham to the bridge so quickly. I knew he'd be fast as well as efficient," Brach said.

Lobank stood behind Brach. The boy's left eye was swollen shut and a fair amount of blood seeped into his face from a head wound. He held Private Pinski who looked unconscious. Brach turned to his right and looked at the two. "A bit of bloodied meat to guarantee cooperation. They seem rather important to the raven and she gave the impression she'd be most willing to accompany me after I obtained them."

"Where is she?"

The angle of the view drew back to reveal her standing to Brach's left. The compliance collar sat around her neck. Her pupils were dilated and her chest rose and fell rapidly from intense breathing. Ice ran through his veins and he controlled his inclination to kill something. "Your terms?"

"None. You'll do what the manual tells you and follow because we're all going to the same place. Track us to see where we'll go on the planet. Your black-haired bitch will take flight for me and locate where the Theazians are holding Major Deacon. We'll arrive first and my deal will be made. They wanted her, they'll purchase her. I'll get paid and leave. Maybe by the time you get there, they'll be so busy with the raven you can collect Deacon and make a getaway."

"Why?" Brach helped in the farce to gain Theazian compliance. *Unless the deal he made was a travesty of lies!* He bargained with Theazians *against* him, not *for* him.

"Money, power, all the things a man of intelligence would set a career aside for." Anger stirred as Brach stood there smugly. His trust in the man and inability to see his true intent would cost Lobank, Pinski and Reina dearly. "No comment, General?"

"You've reckoned it out, Brach. There's little to say."

"No plea to get them back. At the very least I'd hoped for some slight emotion over the raven."

Oh, the emotion's abundant, but not for you to see. "As you've said, she'll track, we'll follow because the Bolt will certainly reach the planet first. We'll obtain the major and fight our way out."

"Not curious why the Theazians would wish to purchase a raven?"

To torture and dissect—to study her abilities. If they've been stationed on Infur for any length of time, they'd probably recreated their laboratories for the "advancement" of knowledge related to various beings. He'd been in a similar lab, been the Domineer who required research. He knew what the bastards would do to her. "What of Lobank and Pinski?"

"If she performs well, they'll be brought back with me. If she doesn't? Well, they're all such fast friends, the raven might enjoy their company for a while. Although your private doesn't seem in very good health and may not last long."

“Transport them back. You have the compliance device. You’ve no need of Pinski or Lobank.” The young`uns were physically damaged and would be of little help to Reina. His lady stood a better chance on her own until he could get her back. *And I will, I swear.*

“But I do, General – watch.”

A few of the crew had joined Brach in his mutiny and one approached Reina. Before he reached her, he watched Brach use the collar to stun her. It made little difference as the man tried to hit her in the face with a fist. She grabbed his wrist and twisted, the painful stimulus from the collar merely slowing her. He’d seen her capabilities in a fight. She continued applying pressure until the man went to his knees.

Brach said, “She’s receiving a constant setting of high and still able to fight. It’s amazing. I thought the collar would have a greater effect. But forgive me, I transgress. Back to the demonstration.”

Brach’s arm came back, swung and hit Lobank in his bloodied eye. Lobank staggered before slamming into the wall with his back and sinking to the floor, all while holding Pinski. Reina let go of the man who’d attacked her and went to stand between Brach and Lobank. She clearly defended the wounded pair.

“And how will a dead raven track for you?” Gage forced the emotion to remain absent from his voice.

Brach slapped the wrist control to cease the painful shock going into Reina’s collar. She staggered and crouched, keeping her black eyes trained on Brach. She wasn’t in flight because of her ability to see what happened around her. Too, she appeared different than when she fought Rodney, her eyes swallowed by black while retaining a measure of sense. *What in God’s name was happening to her now?*

“I got so wrapped up in merrymaking, Ryker, I forgot myself. You’re correct in assuming they want the raven alive. When she tapped into the Theazian while searching for Deacon, one of them actually managed to grab hold of her mind. It’s a technique they’ve been honing. Once they take her apart and figure out how to completely infiltrate a mind, a raven’s use will stop. An end of an era, you might say.”

“To turn over that type of power is beyond reckless. You know the history with Theazia, what they’ve done.”

“And hence the reason for my large payment.” Brach nodded to someone not visible in the foreground. “Wish me luck, Ryker, and I’ll return the sentiment. Collect the major, get out alive and surely you’ll earn the title lieutenant general at the very least.”

The transmission ended.

“Have you restored our visual to medical, Graham?” Gage asked.

“Momentarily, Sir. It appears some systems have been tampered with more than others. I’m bringing them around to correct settings. Here, Sir – your visual.”

“Nare?” Gage asked.

The doctor was on a sickbed as two medics tended him. Nare said weakly, "Sorry, General, I was taken by surprise. The lady's readings. You'll need them to track her. She won't register unless you track the raven. I managed to save them. You can download." That was the extent of what he relayed before falling unconscious.

"His condition?" Gage asked.

"Moderate," one of the medics replied. "We'll bring him to rights presently, Sir."

"Make him well, Corporal."

"Sir?" Graham asked.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"With your permission, I'd like to offer up a thought."

"Granted." At the moment, the anger turned to a low-level rage. He'd listen to practically anything.

"I located an unusual wave form, Sir. A high-pitched sequence came over when the Bolt transmitted. At first I stripped it clean, thinking it was a security breach. I've since refined it and it's not mechanical. I believe your lady spoke to us."

"Can you translate?"

"Sir, no one's been able to decipher the keening call of the raven. I've hailed her clan and have yet to get a response. Apparently they don't consistently man their communications center."

"They damn well should with one of them off world." The thought became vocal before he could hold his fury.

"Sir?"

His response was merely heated when he replied. "Yes, Graham."

"Permission to reroute existing resources to decode the signal."

"How much of our resources?"

The lieutenant sat poised at his station, appearing to decide whether or not to speak. No time for hesitance, Gage said, "Spit it out, Graham. If you've something to suggest, bring it forth."

"Sir," he said. "We'd need to fly blind for a time. Internal communications and base communications would be interrupted. I could keep engines, weapons, the animal compound and medical online but would need most everything else."

"Estimated downtime?"

"Twenty minutes, Sir. Given the history of smarter men than me trying to understand the raven's call without success... What I mean, Sir, is..."

"You're grasping at a remote possibility and twenty minutes is a damn eternity out here."

"Yes, Sir."

Everyone on the bridge looked to him to see what he'd do. He wanted transferred to the Bolt to take back Reina and his crewmembers. He'd just enough restraint to stand

on that course of action. The Bolt was too far away to ensure a safe transfer. “What about shields?”

“They’d have to come down, Sir.”

The Theazians believed a bargain remained in place. Brach’s transmission reached *Raze* with Governance encoding – they couldn’t have heard. Too, the Theazians wanted him alive so they could extract revenge for the annihilation of their home planet. They wouldn’t blow them to bits. He estimated a ninety-eight-percent chance they wouldn’t be struck without the shields if no other surprises came from beyond. To bring the percentage up a bit, he asked, “Can you simulate shields, LeRoy? Can you tell our computers they’re deployed so if we’re scanned, it’ll appear we’re running fully operational and battle ready?”

LeRoy chuckled. “Aye, Sir, I can.”

“And what of our tracking beacon. Can you extend its range by double so another horde of bandit ships won’t catch us unaware?”

“Certainly, General.”

“Graham?”

“Yes, Sir,” the young man replied.

“You have your twenty minutes.”

“I’ll do my best, Sir.”

“Do a damn sight better than that, son. Do the impossible.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Chapter Eleven

“Put it on the screen exactly as deciphered, Graham,” Gage said.

The thousands of strings of numbers continued to scroll as the data beast shot them forth. It looked like something coming from his lady, confusing and not to the point.

“Obviously a code,” LeRoy said.

Gage’s eyes blurred for a moment and suddenly he saw something in the numbers. “It’s sequencing. Ask for an outcome of this nonsense in the form of a linear equation.”

“Negative,” Graham said a minute later.

Gage watched as the numbers fell into a different alignment. “Parametric equation, Graham.”

The figures appeared more uniform. “Separately map Infur’s magnetic fields and apply the lady’s numbers to longitude and latitude coordinates.”

Data began to synchronize as the computer made sense of some of it. He went to the link, brought up a virtual Infur and programmed coordinates. There were two points of reference. He studied the topographical design before bringing up closer imagery with both points still visible so he could see the actual geography.

“General?” Graham asked.

Reluctant to turn his attention elsewhere, he eventually spared the lieutenant a glance. “What do you need, Graham?”

“It was quite by accident, Sir, I mistakenly left the decipher program running and once the true equations were lifted from the imprint, it appears it’s now decoding the rest. There’s language, coordinates and equations laced together.”

The data beast rearranged letters and phrases faster until the process became a blur. The main viewing screen on the bridge pulsed as the computer digested, interpreted and catalogued information. Eventually, a vague three-dimensional image of Reina appeared in the middle of the room.

Graham gasped. “Her code’s reprogramming the data link.”

“General,” Reina’s ghostly apparition said, the details of her face distorted. “Lieutenant Brach’s computer will transport us to the valley. I guarantee our progress will be slow. You must destroy the Bolt so they can’t correct where we’re transported. Once we’re stranded, take your rescue crew to the top of the mountain. You’ll be within striking distance to get the baby major. He’ll need medical attention. *Raze* can then move into range to transport Lobank and Pinski up to your vessel. They’ll be in the valley. If he lives, your good doctor will know what to do.”

Her image was in black and white with her eyes appearing as vacant holes. Her face remained impassive like the time he'd seen her take flight. Even her words seemed mechanical. "I quite enjoyed my high adventure and thank you for your patience, Sir. Tell your president I tracked for you. The coordinates given will hopefully protect Haven until our young grow."

The image faded until it began repeating. She'd made no mention of herself and where she'd lead Brach. He doubted they'd obtain the major without drawing significant attention and time would be wasted making a successful retreat. Governance warships gathered in the distance to follow them in. They'd received the news before Graham diverted system resources to decipher Reina's call. There wouldn't be time to get the major and then lead a hunt for Reina. They'd be lucky to gather up Pinski and Lobank once they fell within range to transport. She didn't expect rescue and her sacrifice appalled him. If she'd been a true soldier aboard his ship, he might've understood.

"Why wouldn't she stay in the valley with the others for easy retrieval? If Brach contracted with the Theazians, why would he permit a transfer such a distance away?" Gage said aloud, trying to reason it out. *Unless she tampered with the computer on the Bolt to alter coordinates.*

"Sir?" Graham asked.

"Yes," Gage replied, still trying to arrange his thoughts.

"The Governance has been tracking us and they uploaded the cipher of the lady's call. The vice president will speak with you now, Sir. We're to clear the bridge."

"Go," Gage said. His crew left.

The vice president's image appeared on the screen. He cared little for the man, his oily and slovenly appearance no more tidy than when they'd last seen each other. "Gage, you're all but done there. Fetch Deacon's son and bring him back."

Distracted by thoughts of Reina and what the Theazians would do made him merely grunt in response. The vice president's voice rose and Gage came to attention. "Once you have Blaize, you're to turn the ship and leave Infur. An armada's been dispatched and if possible, will pick up the members of your crew."

"We'll be moments from their rescue and I'm not certain what condition they'll be in. To wait might—"

"That's a direct order, Ryker. Do you understand?"

He did. The lives of Pinski and Lobank were negligible compared to that of Deacon's son. "And the raven, Sir?"

"Unfortunate loss, but to delay what'll happen after Blaize is aboard could permit time for the Theazian who's honed the mind link ability to get off world. If that should happen, well, the bastards would mimic whatever process they've refined. Soon a raven would hold no purpose whatsoever in tracking. It'd leave us hindered and wipe out their clan. Both unpleasant prospects."

Everything the vice president hadn't said came to him. He'd spent time on the Council of Governance and somewhat knew how they thought. Infur would be destroyed, Reina and two members of his crew with it. The vice president hoped to wipe out every trace of Theazian society. Something Gage attempted years prior and hadn't managed. With little to say, he glared while processing unavailable options.

"When I received the report of what all's transpired on board *Raze* and the council convened on the matter, I spoke to Nakita and explained the situation. She doesn't hold you responsible."

"That's quite the relief, Sir. Glad I won't have the burden of such on my conscience," Gage said.

"They've accepted it. They're holding service for Lady Reina as we speak."

He'd been written off by the Governance once. It'd taken months to dispatch a rescue crew. Eden had unfortunately been on board for the routine scouting mission. He'd granted her request to go along only because the possibility of attack in the secure quadrant was extremely remote. Happened upon by Theazians, they'd been outnumbered and besieged.

His commander interrupted his deliberations. He drew himself up and tried not to remember the worst of his captivity. "Come back from this mission and you'll be highly decorated. It's been made known to me you detest your seat on the council. Bring Blaize Deacon back and your future is assured. Name how you'd spend your years until retirement and I'll grant it."

Future? He couldn't live knowing he'd left his people on the surface to die. And he couldn't face another eve without Reina. Eden bargained for suicide. Reina placed her life aside to protect the lives of others. He doubted she'd meekly surrender and allow one of the bastards to slit her throat. She'd struggle and fight until there'd be nothing left. He wouldn't turn his back.

"Success in your mission, Gage."

Saluting him, Gage replied, "Sir."

* * * * *

Pinski started coming around, which proved to be unfortunate timing. Reina emitted her call, attempting to direct it only at Pinski and Lobank. Effectively narrowing it when she'd put Walter to sleep, she found it easier on a second attempt and Lobank fell, dropping Pinski. Brach and his two men went to them. The idiots probably pondered how they'd bring them along. Each time Brach wanted something from her, he gained it by hurting one of them. He wasn't as dumb as she'd thought. If he killed her friends, her compliance would end. It was a pity Brach and his men weren't already damaged so her call could render them unconscious too. It seemed only to work on beasts and beings not completely well.

She stood on the sand-covered floor of the valley, the temperature making perspiration form under the leather clothing and tight-fitting collar. At least she was warm. Prepared to fight, she struggled to keep herself immobile and think beyond a hand-to-hand combat situation and retain clarity of mind. She'd been trained to wholly focus on fighting when the need arose.

Creating a link between herself and the computer on board the Bolt drained her. The two men piloting the vessel hadn't noticed when she'd rerouted its navigation. All five mutineers believed transfer to the valley was an appropriate location.

She needed to guide Brach and his men away from Pinski and Lobank so the general could find them. As she prepared, a Theazian land hover crested the trees in the distance. The warning blasts of their lasers landed a mere foot away. The time had come to act.

Her boots sunk in as she sprang forward, leaving her landing party rushing to catch up. She heard no fire from guns and assumed her friends remained alive. Brach and his men were probably obsessed with avoiding Theazian laser fire. Adrenaline overwhelmed her and she struggled to gulp in enough of the hot, humid air. Had she been flying or simply in fighting readiness, the rush would've been neutralized.

The land hover deployed more blasts, which she easily evaded. Apparently they recognized her heritage. They wanted her alive and she knew the whip would become a fond memory in comparison to what they'd do if they got hold of her.

She breached the first row of trees and let go of her ability to reason. Conscious thought began leaving as she became battle ready. Her breathing grew easier, her mind became focused on fighting and her muscles surged as liquid flooded them. With the tactical portion of her mission over, she gave her body to the upcoming fight.

A Theazian crashed through the tree branches overhead to land in front of her. Unable to elude him, she ran the remaining few feet and attacked. The battle had begun. He was well over seven feet tall, broad and muscled and the distorted facial features spread back to reveal teeth. A spine-like forehead ran down to a broad area where nostrils flared. She leapt at him and went for his throat. A smelly bloodlike substance oozed beneath her nails but it wasn't enough to bring him down.

The beast tossed her backward to land against a tree. She barely felt the impact before leaping to her feet. In a true fighting state anything coming near offered a target. Many such targets assailed her. She no sooner dispatched one monster before another two or three others took his place. She grabbed a handful of sand to rub into a slice in her stomach. It staunched the flow of blood so she could bring the next one down.

Many lay dead or dying around her and the scent and sight of the slaughter incited her, spurred her to stagger back to her feet just one more time. Her strength drained and something mentally flickered. A thought actually came to mind and she remembered her taunt at Gage about destroying the Theazians' world. His military record relayed he'd been held captive by them. She recalled the many scars covering

most of his body. Revenge quickly became her purpose to avenge all Gage had suffered. A mantra formed. *Finish what Gage sought to do. Kill them all.*

Eventually two descended as she struggled to kill the last of them. They pinned her and she could barely move. Winded, tired, she knew down deep she'd neared the end. What seemed like long moments in battle probably represented hours. Something broke inside her, tore open and flooded until she choked soundlessly. No physical damage caused it. Clarity came for a second and she knew what'd happened. Her body might live on for a time, but her walking in two realities required payment. Reina of the Raven Clan had shattered and would soon die. The raven took over and would endure the rest. Almost gladly, she slipped away to find peace. The bastards could do what they wanted with the animal.

* * * * *

LeRoy positioned *Raze* as Gage readied himself for transport. He'd gone against all his better judgment and most of his military training in factoring out the correct course of action. Once he'd made up his mind however, little could sway him.

"General," LeRoy said, the large monitor in the transport area showing him clearly.

"Have you exact coordinates on our missing major?"

"We have a radius and are swinging into position, Sir, but..." Gage couldn't believe the expression on LeRoy's face. His second-in-command dared to speak on behalf of Reina a few eves prior, which Gage overlooked. Questioning orders in a military situation was something completely different.

"Speak, man. I'd advise you to use extreme caution in what you relay though." Gage made sure his voice held dire warning.

LeRoy squared his shoulders, looked straight into the monitor and stated what bothered him. "You're not infantry, Sir, and you damn well don't belong among the first to secure the area. The manual states—"

The fifty men standing in the area ready for transport didn't blink. No, the platoon he'd handpicked wasn't a standard-issue group. Many officers who'd served with him for years personally made up the rank and file. He detailed what he expected once their feet hit Infur and knew this particular group could pull it off.

"Once I give the order, you're to deploy the spherical bomb on the best coordinate you have for Major Deacon. I detailed how the rest of the mission will proceed. I need you at my back, not in my path. Can I count on you, LeRoy?"

"Aye, Sir, always. Prepare for transport." LeRoy offered the confirmation begrudgingly. It mattered not as long as Gage's orders were followed to the letter. After a moment, he said, "We're in position, General."

"Fire at will, Mason." After a moment, he heard the ship launch the bomb and the countdown began.

In theory, the spherical bomb would scorch everything in a ten-mile circle while leaving the center one-mile target point radius intact. The newly developed technology had yet to be field tested. It would be that day. Gage understood the intricacies of the weapon and calculated a ninety-six percent potential for success. He wouldn't afford Major Deacon better odds with members of his crew and Reina needing assistance a distance away. In order to get them all back on board, the major's rescue would need to be rushed.

"Transporting now, Sir. Best of luck," LeRoy said before Gage and nineteen others dematerialized. The rest would follow in the next few series of transfers.

Smoke drifted over the immediate vicinity where they landed. Gage chose the direction and began running. He'd studied the landscape previously and knew the route to the largest cavern. The platform at the top of the mountain was three miles in diameter. The only problems they should encounter would be Theazians remaining inside the one-mile radius. He knew the cavern could be packed with the bastards, but he'd have forty-nine men to help the creatures die.

He slowed his gait to a fast walk as he approached the mouth of the cave. If the enemy lay within, he'd need to find out soonest. They had nine minutes and thirty seconds left to exact the major's rescue in order to have sufficient time to fetch the others.

Two Theazians rushed from the opening and slid to cover behind large rocks. His men remedied the situation before the enemy could fire a single round. Gage armed half his men with *HERF* mini-cannons. The boulders, Theazians and most everything else in the general vicinity was eradicated expeditiously.

With weapon drawn, he ran the slight distance and entered the cave. Bright spotlights from the men behind cut the gloom. Much to his dismay, the initial channel appeared devoid of life. If a higher power did indeed control the destiny of simple beings, he prayed it'd help him chose the correct cave. After surveying the structure of tunnels within the mountain previously, probabilities told him this was the likely one.

Placing doubt aside, he strode as quickly as the light allowed. He heard the strum of a weapon and said loudly, "Scatter!"

While the men took cover, they kept the lights fixed on the path ahead. He caught movement to the right, aimed and began shooting. He pushed off the wall, continued to fire and kept walking. Two men joined him and they cleared a path for the rest to follow. They'd cut down more than forty creatures before finding a large antechamber. There wasn't room for more than twenty of the bastards inside. His men would see to them as he retrieved the major.

Finding the man chained to a stone wall, Gage blasted the middle portion of the links to set him free. The president's son fell to the ground as Theazians dropped all around them. The stench of their blood filled his nostrils. Gage asked as he crouched close, "Major?"

“Ryker,” he replied, barely able to raise his head. “I heard an explosion. Did you bomb the area when you knew I’d be here?”

“Only the surrounding area was neutralized.”

“You stupid, arrogant son of a bitch, the ceiling damn near crashed down on my head and—” The major fell silent after Gage punched him in the face. He’d no time for chitchat.

He drew Deacon’s spoiled son into a sitting position before hefting him onto his shoulder. As he walked to the tunnel they’d just come from, he hoped the major remained unconscious. If not, Gage would hit him again. The blood dripping from him relayed his mistreatment and torture. None of the wounds appeared too serious. Thankfully, the enemy needed to keep him alive and in reasonable health in order to make a trade.

“Trade, my ass,” Gage grumbled. He refused to trade himself, lose or walk away from a single being in his care. If he hadn’t thought he could get Deacon, his crew and Reina back successfully, the major would’ve been left.

Without further incident, they cleared the mouth of the cave. As soon as his personnel surrounded him, he gave the order for transport. A medical team met them in the area and Gage placed the major on a hover bed. One of the medics asked, “Has he been conscious, Sir?”

Men stepped forward to allow the rest of the platoon to be brought on board. “When we found him, yes. See to his jaw soonest, Corporal, would you?”

“Aye, Sir.”

When the last of the group assembled in the transport area, he heard and felt the ship come up to full power. They were two full minutes behind the schedule he’d outlined. LeRoy tried to give him the time back by hastening to a transportable range over the valley. A second medical team came forward to wait. Only four medics and two officers would accompany him on this leg of the mission. He fully expected to retrieve Pinski and Lobank. As for Reina – if the two officers and he couldn’t locate her before time ran out, they’d all be left.

He took a moment to look over the two young men who’d volunteered for the mission. He kept his voice low. “I fully expect to locate and bring back Lady Reina.”

“Yes, Sir,” they both replied.

“I want to bring it to your attention, gentlemen, that in all my arrogance, I’ve miscalculated a time or two in the remote past.”

Major Dahl smiled but kept his eyes straight ahead. “I couldn’t fathom it, Sir. I’ve no thought of a failed mission this time.”

“Me either, Sir,” Lieutenant Rodriguez added.

“Good men.” They stepped onto the transportation platform to wait with the medical team.

Those remaining in the room came to order and faced them. Gage looked over the assembly and wondered if there'd ever been a more trustworthy and honorable group of soldiers. With more than one thousand beings on board, only five had chosen a disreputable path. He'd deal with them outright.

LeRoy's image came on the screen. "General, one minute until transport. We can detect only two life readings in the valley."

"What of the Bolt? We should be within range."

"The Governance vessel *Decree* is securing the Bolt as we speak. Two mutineers remained with the ship, Sir. They tried running before giving themselves up when they scanned the armada drawing near. *Decree* hailed us to say they'd been ordered to go to the valley once they obtained the Bolt."

"Since we're already at the location, tell *Decree* not to bother. We'll fetch our own." Just as Gage reckoned, with a regulation removal of the major, there wouldn't have been time to save the others. By the time *Decree* got done fiddling about, the armada would surround Infur and align themselves to destroy the planet. One more thing needed to be said and he'd say it for the benefit of all those in the room and those listening on the bridge. If they failed in the mission, he felt inclined to impart a bit of nonsense. "Mason?"

"Aye, Sir."

"Keep *Raze* and its fine crew most safe in my absence."

"I will, Gage. Best of luck in retrieving our young soldiers and Lady Reina." The crew saluted them before they transferred.

Pinski, Lobank, Brach and two other men lay scattered about in the sand. The medical team checked each body.

Gage walked by Brach and a moment later he heard one of the medics say, "Dead."

The same happened as they passed the other mutineers. He stopped and dropped to his knees when they reached the private. He felt for a life sign at her throat and found a weak pulse. Rodriguez checked Lobank and declared, "He's alive."

The medics rushed over and began tending them. Gage said, "You'll get them on board within the next two minutes. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

Gage, Dahl and Rodriguez raced toward the jungle at the perimeter of the valley. He touched the communicator on his wrist and said, "Confirm my direction, Graham."

"It appears to be correct, General."

"We haven't time to guess, son. Best you give me a definite course to follow."

"I'm trying, Sir. It's just that as I track the raven, her life force appears strong before it fades." Gage kept running and forced himself not to react. The inability to accurately scan a vegetation-rich environment was also why they couldn't transport into or out of the jungle. It was too hard to get accurate readings. "What I mean is that I seem to

locate her and then the signal fluctuates. I can narrow it down to a four- or five-mile radius."

"Not good enough, Graham. We can't search that much terrain. Figure something out."

They made it to the jungle and walked as quickly as undergrowth allowed. "Scan for sound," he said to Dahl, hoping being in closer proximity might give them a direction.

After a moment, Dahl replied, "All I get is squawk, Sir. The area's too condensed with too much movement and innate racket."

"LeRoy!" he seethed.

"We're working on it, Sir," LeRoy replied.

Screeching and rustling came from every direction. They kept moving. Graham said, "I know what's wrong, Sir."

"Anytime, Graham" Gage replied.

"Her call, General. I've stopped tracking her physical form and I'm seeing a cleaner result by homing in on her call. Straight ahead. You're on track." For her to emit a call meant she lived.

Rodriguez yelled out and went down. Gage turned as Dahl shot the massive snake that'd bitten Rodriguez. The pain etched on the soldier's face relayed everything. Gage ordered, "Get him to the valley for transport."

"But, Sir," Rodriguez gritted out.

"Can you handle him, Major?" Gage asked Dahl.

"Aye, General."

Gage turned and quickly proceeded. He tapped the communicator. "LeRoy, prepare to transport Dahl and Rodriguez. Have medical standing by. The lieutenant's been bitten by a reptile."

"You'll return as well?"

"I'll continue. Tell me how far and in what direction."

"There won't be time. Turn around and—"

"Give me a blasted distance and direction!"

Graham immediately said, "South by southeast. Keep moving, Sir."

Gage started running and after five minutes heard the low, guttural growl of Theazians. After pushing through a dense patch of thorny brush, he targeted, aimed and killed two of the beasts hovering over something amidst many bodies. He cleared the distance, scanning the area before holstering his firearm. Nothing moved except surrounding foliage from smaller jungle inhabitants.

He kicked several bodies aside and found Reina. He dropped to his knees beside her and wiped the stinking green blood of the beasts away to discern any wounds beneath. He wished to reassure her but found he hadn't the voice to do so.

With time of the essence, he gathered her into his arms most carefully and brought her gently to his chest. Her ragged breaths and the multiple bodies surrounding them relayed how valiantly she fought. The emptiness within his chest eased as she stirred. She twitched before lashing out.

“Rest now, sweet one. I have you.”

Unhindered by her weight, he walked and made his way quickly through the jungle. Apparently Dahl had more difficulty with Rodriguez because Gage caught up to them before they left the dense vegetation. Once they reached the valley floor, he touched the communicator and said, “LeRoy.”

“Aye, Sir!”

“Four for transport soonest.”

“Immediately, General!” Dahl smiled when a cheer of loud, excited voices came from the communicator.

After having such astounding luck, he hoped LeRoy hadn’t been ordered to hang him for disobeying orders the moment they made it on board. If that particular scenario didn’t unfold, a court-martial was certainly imminent, most likely with the hanging to follow.

* * * * *

After the destruction of Infur, in the course of a single eve, Lobank and Rodriguez regained their health with the aid of medics under the direction of Dr. Nare who remained on a healing bed. After the first full day, Dr. Nare deemed himself fit for duty and personally tended Pinski, Major Deacon and Reina. Pinski’s prognosis turned in the right direction and Gage expected her to rejoin the ranks within another two to three eves. Major Deacon also did well, the physical aspect of his captivity the least of his ailments. Reina’s condition, however, remained unchanged. Her physical wounds were quickly righted. Her mental state seemed impossible to fix.

Gage wondered what more could be done. Nare believed her only chance would be allowing her clan to tend her. That hope had been stolen when Materna Nakita viewed her through the monitor and offered up no other suggestion than to administer a fatal remedy. *She’s gone from us, General. With no one guiding her and fighting too great a time, she’s gone feral. Even if her sense returns somewhat, we can’t receive her after this. We’ve grieved and she’s dead to us. Put her to rest.*

He’d not left her sickbed once they’d boarded *Raze*. With LeRoy on the bridge, Graham to back him up and Dunn with the engines as well as the armada surrounding them, he hoped for a smooth flight home. Gage contemplated what to do as he absently picked long raven tendrils from her face. One of the medics had brushed Reina’s hair and the electrically charged silken strands clung to her cheeks and neck.

Her thrashing continued as she jerked against the restraints. He’d tried ordering her from the raven state and gently requested it as well. She’d been unable to hear him.

Even Nare distanced himself, finally having a patient he couldn't make well or even turn in the right direction.

She'd destroyed more than twenty Theazians by the time he'd found her. Could it be possible Materna Nakita had been right and she'd gone so deep into herself that she'd become lost? *Impossible! Her strength went beyond any fight.*

He'd done much pacing in the confines of medical over the many hours. Exhausted, he took the chair beside her bed and sat wearily down. Her rage remained such that the bed constantly worked to repair new damage to her wrists. He couldn't stand to see more wounds necessitating closure and took her fist into his hands. Immediately she stilled, which caused him to tense. He suspected she gathered strength for an attack. Instead, her heart rate slowed and her vital signs fell more into line.

Adrenaline flowed as he came to his feet. He dared not hope... With a shaking hand, he brought his palm to her freezing cheek. He half expected her to bite but she instead turned into his touch. *Of course!* In a fighting state she reacted to that which surrounded her. Those tending her had been most intent on healing and focused on touching her as little as possible. He too previously had an abundance of emotion that surely transcended to her.

"Thank you, Lady, for your tolerance."

During the course of her treatment, her eyes stayed unnaturally wide and wild-looking. Stroking her cheek, the intensity of her expression lessened as her lids drooped. Her breathing continued to slow and some of the tension left her body. At long last she took in a deep breath and shuddered upon its release.

Nare passed by the foot of her bed and said, "I'm in need of food, General. Would you care to join me?"

Gage asked, "Is she physically well, Nare? Can she be moved?"

Nare nodded. "The physical damage was repaired the first eve."

Gage stared at Reina and Nare left them. She settled considerably as he stroked her hand and arm. He wondered how she'd react if more things in her environment became less restrictive and normal. His fingertips outlined her jaw before he drew the length of her soft hair through his fingers. Quietly, he said, "Release."

The restraints slid away and Reina sat up. Careful to withhold any note of discord from his voice and maintain a relaxed posture, Gage said, "Lady, you'll accompany me."

She complied by sliding her legs over the edge of the bed before standing. Her head turned sharply and she peered, studying him before fixating on his eyes. Ready for any sudden movement, he detected nothing.

He intended to take her back to his quarters so they both might have an opportunity to rest. They'd made it beyond the door when she glanced to her right and stopped. She had the oddest manner about her as she studied the corridor. After gaining only a few steps, he ceased her by grasping her upper arm. She stared at his hand and appeared to wait for what he'd do next.

He explained, "You've no voice to make requests, so we'll proceed differently. I'll accompany you where you go."

Sudden tension rippled through her before she took hold of his wrist and jerked his hand away. Preparing himself for the fight he believed would follow, he released a breath when he saw her relax. She turned toward him and took his hand into both of hers. She held his wrist, placed the palm of her hand against his before threading their fingers together.

"If such is more to your liking, Lady, we'll carry on thusly. Thank you for your patience in showing me."

They proceeded down corridors until the smell of food greeted them. He heard her stomach rumble and smiled. She'd not eaten when he'd offered food in medical. Perhaps she wanted to feed herself while sitting up and without restraints. A moment of dread washed through him as he pondered how the crew would greet her. All of them knew of her bravery and what she'd accomplished while on Infur. Most also probably knew she'd been tied down in medical since her rescue. With her pupils blackening her eyes and her inability to speak, he believed most of the personnel would be at least wary.

When they entered the mess, conversations ceased and those within the room came to their feet to stand at attention. With a brief wave of his hand, the crew sat down. She began moving toward a particular table and when Nare and LeRoy noticed her, they stood. Nare initially appeared quite concerned until he witnessed her calm demeanor. LeRoy held a chair for her and she hesitantly sat. Gage took the chair to her left before Nare and LeRoy reseated themselves. While food was brought to them, Nare asked, "You look much better and I know you can't speak, Lady Reina, but could you offer a gesture as to how you feel?"

Nare waited, seeming to assess her as she took a moment before nodding. Nare's shoulders came slightly forward as if relieved. The mess remained without sound and Gage felt inclined to fill the void. No one dared to stare but he knew where attention was focused. "The lady told me the food in medical wasn't to her liking. She thought perhaps she'd fare better here."

When she slightly smiled, Nare said, "We do it on purpose, Sir. We feed gruel to our patients so they hasten their recovery."

The mess hall servers set down plates of steaming meat and greens. Reina took a fork to hand and rearranged food on her plate. Before she could take a bite, LeRoy said, "Forgive me, Lady, but I've yet to gain some answers from you and if you'd be so kind—I wonder about your handling of the felines. The thought of personally touching one of the beasts is inconceivable to me. I witnessed you putting one to sleep through the monitor. I'd venture it's nothing less than amazing to lay hands on such power and fur." Gage and Nare both smiled. "Have you always been at ease around felines or does it have to do with your special abilities?"

LeRoy spoke loudly enough for most to hear. Inhabitants of the room remained silent until she slowly passed her hand in front of herself. A murmur of astonishment came from the crew. LeRoy said, "Always—amazing. Is your ability only with cats, Lady?"

Eyes still fixed on him, she slowly shook her head.

"Other animals too?" She nodded slowly.

What a clever man Mason could be. He showed the crew despite Reina's unusual gifts and the expanse of her pupils, she remained but a woman. By speaking outright about her uniqueness, the crew gleaned information while watching her act in a completely appropriate manner. She took the knife, cut a slim piece of meat and placed it in her mouth before slowly chewing.

Within moments, the buzz of voices slowly resumed. The ease in which LeRoy and Nare sat and conversed, spoke volumes and allowed the crew to relax in her presence. It did more than any order he could've issued regarding her treatment. Too, seated amongst the crew and casually dining appeared to greatly settle the remaining tension in Reina. She ate slowly, followed conversations by giving attention to whomever spoke and after she'd eaten a third of her meal, she appeared almost drowsy.

Gage's appetite remained meager at best. In twenty minutes, he'd only managed a few bites of the flawlessly prepared meal. He'd no sooner pushed his plate away before everyone stood to receive Major Deacon as he sauntered into the mess. Reina peered at those standing and when she turned in the major's direction, her fork went down and she stood. The major scanned the area before slowly approaching. He stopped at the opposite side of the table from Reina and said, "Please, Lady, don't interrupt your meal for me."

The crew sat only after the major did. Despite his time on a sickbed, the man appeared to still suffer the effects of torture endured at the hands of Theazians. Dr. Nare and medical could repair physical damage. Gage personally knew only distance and normalcy could remove the emotional consequences of prolonged suffering.

The young major appeared greatly different from when Gage last saw him at the Governance. Once an uncaring bastard, he seemed humbled. His demeanor, lack of eye contact and the way he carried himself spoke of hard lessons learned. His address of Reina by calling her *lady*, and not *raven*, implied he viewed her as a woman, not a weapon. His regret over having taken her from her meal was also uncharacteristic. In the past, he worried little about inconveniencing others.

Those in the mess resumed eating when the major had his plate. "May I solicit information from you, Lady?" he asked.

She nodded as her eyes remained downcast.

Nare explained, "She's unable to speak yet, Sir."

Deacon surprised him by directing his next question to Reina rather than a physician officer. "Are you well?" A motion of her head confirmed she was. The major ignored the food in front of him and stared at her. "Can you understand me?"

Again the nod. Gage didn't appreciate the major's question but let it pass.

"Then I want you to know—I need to express..." He sat back and cleared his throat, obviously struggling to bring words together. Reina finally looked up and the major stared.

Gage didn't appreciate the intense interest directed at her, but the major spoke before he could. "I felt you, Lady, days before the rescue." Her eyes went back to the plate as she picked at food. A glass being set down echoed through the silence. The president's son joining them for a meal was unusual. His speaking to Reina with such intent made any within hearing curious about what he'd say next. "You don't think highly of me, Lady."

Gage and many others certainly didn't, but that wasn't something a man would openly admit. Reina didn't move. The major placed his palms down on the table and leaned forward. "I can now understand why. Having time to reflect has afforded me insight. Despite what you thought, Lady, you brought me aid."

LeRoy said, "She didn't have a choice, Major. Her clan would've been abandoned if she hadn't tracked for General Ryker."

Stunned at the audacity of his second-in-command, Gage said, "I believe you owe Major Deacon an apology, LeRoy."

"No, he stated a fact," Deacon said. "My father's a bit overzealous at times and the Governance tends to use its resources to succeed when it deems necessary. I see things in a different light—now. But her tracking isn't what I spoke of. The lady brought peace at a moment when— Had I not felt her presence, had a hope of rescue..." The major placed his napkin on his plate as he stood. He walked around the table and crouched next to her. "May I touch you?"

She remained completely still. He slowly and gently took her hand from her lap and held it. His hands didn't belong on the lady. Rather than bring the inappropriateness of his actions to the major's attention, Gage decided to hold his tongue and watched as the major's thumbs rubbed the back of her hand. "I wish to express my gratitude. The kindness you relayed to me was a rare gift. Please accept my thanks, Lady Reina."

He kissed the back of her hand, placed it in her lap and walked from the mess at a fast clip. Receiving such attention from the president's son placed Reina in a new station. It clandestinely exceeded even Gage's command. While rank dictated much of the courtesy and decorum in the military, most knew those in favor of those in charge should be held in higher regard. It was the unspoken, politically correct thing to do.

"Lady Reina?" Gage asked. The black in her eyes had greatly receded. Her lips trembled as she looked toward him. He stood, went behind her chair and placed his hands on her shoulders. The chill in her seemed impossibly bitter. "Do you wish to retire?"

She gently placed the fork down and put her napkin beside her plate. Her hands fell limply in her lap. She struggled to stand and he helped. He cared not that others

watched. The lady needed assistance. She managed to rise but when her legs bore weight, they gave way. He'd been prepared for such and brought her into his arms with little fuss. Nare and LeRoy jumped to their feet but their assistance wasn't necessary. "She's weary, Nare. If she has need of you, you'll be summoned."

"Very well, General. Can you manage?"

Gage spared a glance at the doctor. With her inconsequential weight, he certainly didn't need assistance. He took his slight burden from the mess. Reina protested by squirming a little and making unhappy sounds. He remedied her discontent by hugging her tighter to his chest until she gave in and allowed him to do what he'd do anyhow. Albeit, a commander carrying a raven through the corridors was an unexpected sight, his crew didn't question that which was none of their concern.

After entering the cabin, he walked to the bed. As he bent to lay her down, her hand clasped his neck. A warm emotion overtook him. The woman wasn't really awake and yet she wished to remain close. He'd grant her wish, for he found he needed the nearness himself.

He stretched her out upon his bed and carefully removed her clothes. She roused and stiffened in fright and disorientation. He spoke gently to her, bidding her back to a dream state. He stroked and studied the skin revealed as each piece of clothing came off. The scars upon her back were obtained before he took her from Haven. However regrettable, he accepted the markings as part of who she was. Further permanent damage to her body would've been intolerable and to his relief she had none.

As he removed his own clothes, she tussled beneath the sheet. "Sweet one, I'll not leave you. I'm just getting ready to lie with you." She turned toward him, her eyes still closed. Simply his voice seemed to offer her comfort. "Don't fret. You'll be able to sleep because I won't restrain you. There's no need to trouble over such things right now. I'll warm you with my body and keep you safe."

His eyes ached. The most idiotic thing in the universe would be to lie next to the woman in his state. Even if she managed to get beyond the bed, the door wouldn't open from any trick she used. His retinal scan and two code words had been programmed to gain access or departure from his cabin as well as the animal compound. She wouldn't get past him and gain access to the ship. If he slept too soundly, the only damage she could do would be to him. Yawning, he discounted her ability to wreak havoc as he watched her shiver and curl into a ball.

His arms and legs throbbed as he crawled next to her and brought her chilled body against his warm skin. He bid heat from the bed and drew the thick, soft cover over them. A noise came from her throat and she stiffened. Something had frightened her. Enough years spent battling night monsters himself, he held his palm against her stomach and rubbed until the strain of muscle lessened.

He took his time as he touched all of her and gently rubbed every last inch. The soft skin covering her matched the equally soft sounds coming from her. She mumbled contentedly, especially when he rubbed her shoulders. A dawning came. The

murmurings were those of a woman, not raven. *Come back to me, Reina. Let me hear your voice and see the amber in your eyes these last days before we dock.*

She thrashed wildly and he held tight. She fought in her dreams. "Move beyond that which happened. Come forward in your mind to our bed."

Her arms relaxed and he continued to offer his voice to draw her from battle. "I'm holding you, sweet one. Feel me." Her legs became less tense. "I'll stay beside you through this eve and keep monsters at bay. You're safe within my arms, I swear it."

"Gage."

Thank you for your trust, Reina. "Sleep now."

"Mmm."

His woman.

Chapter Twelve

A bad dream disturbed Reina but in reality she couldn't wake, not completely. *Two worlds. Which to walk in – live in? Lost but aware. Safe but in turmoil. Beds to restrain her, machines to heal her, but nothing to anchor to. Spinning. Fighting – desperate.*

Gage's arms held and confined her. She felt secure, protected and managed to calm a bit. It didn't last before the wildness began seeping back in. The battle this time was internal and her ability to push it down became a struggle that brought her to the edge of abandon. The raven in her blood beseeched her to set her mind adrift. The keening call echoed in her mind, bidding her to give over to the freedom to live as an animal without the constraints of formality and civility necessary in the restricted world of others. What remained of the woman yearned for clarity of mind and peace of body to lie with her man. She'd given too much of her essence to the raven and to reclaim it as Reina became less and less possible.

His breath fell heavily upon her hair as nakedness nestled against nakedness. She regretted giving rise to his ire. She feared her existence as a woman dwindled with each passing moment. The punishment for such wouldn't be a simple whipping. The cure for losing oneself to a creature was singular. *Death.* "Please," she begged, asking for mercy and her life.

His body trembled and voice shook as he held her down. "You've nothing to fear. You're safe."

The deep sleep hadn't given rise to clarity – it stole it from her, allowing the raven to take even more of her mind. She was a danger to herself and his crew. She'd be put down. Soon. He hadn't a choice. *By the stars, help me! I thought I'd die in battle, not at the hands of a firing squad. Or worse yet, tied down in medical for the data beast to take my life!*

The self-pitying thoughts forced her mind and body to disconnect and once sense finally returned, she realized she'd waged war on the poor general again. *Oh God, I've just put another clamp on my space coffin!*

His growling voice sliced into her. "Reina!"

It wouldn't be long before she'd have no choice but to let the raven fly. While she could make the request, she mustered every ounce of courage and implored, "Please, please!" A tear fell as she gulped a breath. If death must come, she wanted it to come from the general. She didn't want others to see her as a stark-raving-mad animal. She'd done enough in life to embarrass herself. This matter could be seen to in private. "Gage, by your hand – here, without others to watch. Please make this stop."

"The only thing to cease will be your struggles. We'll see it done, won't we, Reina?"

She focused on his crystalline blue-eyed gaze and reminded herself to take deep, calming breaths. He seemed certain of her ability to fight the crazy, wild feelings

threatening her sanity despite the swelling of his eye from where she'd managed to cuff him.

"End this now!" she yelled before a surge of unmanageable violence stole her thoughts. A moment later when she could think, she found herself on her stomach upon the bed with her wrists captured behind her back. His weight held her down. The only sound in the room was from heavy breaths denoting her recent rampage. "Please tell me I didn't hit you again."

"You did and I believe I've had about enough." He didn't sound overly angry and she couldn't understand why. "While you seem to have a moment of clarity, let's reason this out."

"There's no basis for what's happening! One moment I feel well and the next has me in a lunatic state."

"But you retain the ability to speak."

"What of it?" This time when the raven took over, it happened without the slightest preamble. Thank the stars it gained her nothing because the general kept her restrained.

"I believe," he said, taking many breaths before he could finish, "that by allowing freedom to the raven for an extended time has your mind warring to regain full control. With your ability to speak, the woman holds the raven back, not the other way around."

"I'm losing the battle, Sir," she said before sobbing.

"You're giving way on meaningless skirmishes. You'll win the battle, Reina. We'll figure it out." His hand gathered her hair and removed it from her back. His fingers traced her spine and she felt some of the tension leave. "Is your mind clear now?"

"Not entirely. It's as if I'm part awake and part asleep all at once. It's most disconcerting."

"Reina," he said, his tone very deep and grim, "I need to bring you to full awareness." *The whip!* That's why he sounded so regretful and serious. "Can you tell me another course of action to take?"

The thought of punishment distracted her momentarily and harmful, evil thoughts made her react violently. Again. When intelligence returned, she found herself restrained. This time, the cuffs around her wrists were short. So too were the ones placed around her ankles. It left no room for movement. Her legs and arms shook as she waited.

"Let's begin and have this over with, shall we?" he asked.

She swallowed and closed her eyes. The dread and roll of her stomach kept her mind from wandering. "Sir?"

"Yes, Reina?"

"I seem most focused at the moment. I believe I'm fine now." She'd barely gotten her statement out before something slapped against her upturned cheeks. It wasn't a small pat that landed there either! "Bastard!" Her eyes rounded in disbelief that the word actually came from her mouth.

The slaps to follow demonstrated what the first one lacked. "Seems to me," he said in between stinging whacks, "you lack a great deal of focus and self-control at the moment."

She raged and pulled at the restraints to no avail as the general continued the rhythmic spanking. His determination in setting her mind to rights slowly superseded her initial reaction and she calmed. Strange that. She should be waging war, not settling down.

His hand eventually rested against the heat rising up from her burning cheeks. He probably needed a break after the overzealous demonstration. She likely wouldn't sit comfortably for several eves. She tried to remember he could've used the whip and didn't. The fire moving to her lower back and thighs made it seem irrelevant.

He said, "Release restraints." With her wrists and ankles free, she started to move. "Stay as you are!" On a normal eve, she wouldn't have moved an inch with the tone of voice he used to relay the order. This wasn't a normal eve.

Giving him credit, the spanking served to remedy the fog in her brain. She no longer wanted to fight him either. It had other consequences though. She tried understanding the source of the defiant musings running scenarios in her mind.

"Domineer?" she said in a low, seductive voice not belonging to her. Very slowly she rolled to lie flat on the bed. She brought up the soles of her feet to rest against his naked thighs. "In remedying one problem, you've created another."

She drew her knees apart and his gaze fell between her parted thighs. Reina tried to stop herself but it was as if she watched what happened from a distance. "What other problem have I wrought, small raven?" His fingertips touched her wet and ready pussy. When she moaned, he said, "I see now. Indeed, this seems a grave situation. I wonder what could be done to remedy such trouble."

"Take me now. Make me come. I need you so very much."

Gage watched Reina closely. He became acutely alert when she referred to him as *Domineer*. To call him such in their current situation subtly challenged him on some level. It was also somewhat disrespectful. The beauty squirming beneath his gaze appeared a bit too bold for his woman. That and the expanse of her pupils relayed whom he dealt with. Had he made the situation worse somehow?

Pondering the current state of affairs while studying the woman, he spread arousal up and down her soaking pussy before inserting a finger into her tight little entrance. Her hips surged, lifting her ass from the bed. She grasped his finger and started rocking. He felt her tighten and tremble inside. An unusual smile crept over her lips. She was on the verge of coming without uttering a word. He firmly believed Reina would've mentioned it.

He slid free from her wetness and she bellowed, "Bastard!" A moment later, her brows creased in concern before her eyes rounded to reveal an amber ring. She shifted and came to knees before him and reached out to touch him before dropping her hands. "I don't know why I said that. I'm sorry."

He enfolded her in his embrace and stroked her back as she placed her arms around his waist. "It seems your alter ego hasn't completely taken leave from you."

"No, Sir."

"But she no longer fights."

"I haven't the urge to damage you at the moment. I seem fixated with other things we could do together."

He chuckled before bringing her cheek to his chest. "That's a start, I suppose. The rest of it though, you can sense something's amiss?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then let's see what we can do to remedy the situation."

She gazed at him and appeared hopeful. "You've an idea on the matter?"

He kissed her forehead gently and cupped her face. "I do."

She was ripe with need and he ached for release. As long as Reina remained with him, he'd give her as much pleasure as she could stand. The moment he sensed the raven bitch taking control, her enjoyment would end. The two remained bound together, but Reina would remember how to command her own mind and body while the raven learned its place. He'd make it so.

He leaned down to taste her mouth and she opened. His lips brushed over hers in the barest manner and she moaned. When he did it again, one of her small hands moved to the back of his head. She thought to hold him still. Her wet tongue licked his lips and sought to find its way inside as she applied pressure with her hand. Chilled fingers dug into his side as she slid her breasts against his chest.

"Oh," she murmured while testing his side with her nails, "why don't you take me?"

"I will." He spoke against her lips while inching his palms down her back to her ass. Holding the heated mounds in his hands, he separated her cheeks and took in her scent.

Her hand left his side and slid between their bodies. She caressed his cock before distancing herself slightly. Holding the base of his shaft, she came forward and slid the length of him between her pussy lips and into her crease. He inched away before sliding back into her wet slit. If he wasn't careful, such play would be stimulation enough to have them both coming.

"Does your cock feel good where it is?" Damn, the low seductive voice filled with desire tempted him. He needed to remain aware and not let lust dictate his actions.

"It does."

"Slide against me faster."

He traced her lips with his tongue. "Not yet. I want to bring your need up before I fuck you. I withheld a great deal from you previously."

"I'm ready," she said in a demanding voice. Her fingers pushed to set his cock free before they rubbed her clit.

Her eyes closed but not before he saw which part of her boldly sought climax. The catching of her breath and a heavy sigh told him she hurried toward her prize. He stroked her face and arms, encouraging her to rush the process. Her head went back, eyes scrunched tightly and she moaned. In the next instant, he captured her wrist, took her fingers from between her legs and brought the hand to his chest. If looks could kill...

"Best you finish it, *Domineer*."

In truth, he found her demand most stimulating. He wouldn't *finish it* though. That particular course of action would gain Reina nothing and he wouldn't give more power to the raven. Before she acted in accordance with her heated words and started fighting again, he brought her wet and scented fingers to his mouth.

"Is that truly what you want? A hurried affair without all the touching and," he said before licking the length of her middle finger, "teasing?"

As she watched him lick the arousal from her fingers, her breath quickened and pupils receded. When he drew her into his mouth, she choked before swallowing. "Gage, do you know what that does to me?"

He released her, licked the finger and placed his hand on the back of her head. "Open for me," he said.

When she parted her lips, he gently pushed her arousal-dampened index finger into her mouth. Without encouraging her in any manner, she began sucking. He groaned and stroked his tongue against her knuckles before pulling her finger away and replacing it with his tongue. Her mouth tasted of her pussy and he couldn't help fucking her there. She pushed against his shoulders and he eventually lifted his mouth. He hoped not to find a raven where Reina had just been. Instead, he found his breathless woman with her gaze fixed upon his.

"I started – to come," she said panting between words.

"From that bit of sucking and kissing?" It took him additional breaths too.

"Yes. May I?"

"If you can't wait, I'll see to it soonest." He purposely laced his words with innuendo. When he placed his fingers against her clit, she drew away.

"If," she said, licking her lips as her gaze raked his chest, cock and then up to his eyes, "I wait, might you have other things in mind?"

Drawn into his embrace, she squirmed against him. He spoke softly against her ear. "Yes, sweet one. It'd require a concession on your part however."

"It would?"

"Indeed. You see, I find myself beset with highly arousing and sexual musings."

"You do?"

He traced the ridge of her ear with the tip of his tongue. She made a purring sound. "I'd like to test you in a sexual way to see how much pleasure you can experience. We've played a bit but I sense you've much inside that's yet to be woken."

Her hands surrounded his cock and she began stroking him almost unconsciously. She never looked away. "I think I'd like that."

"I'm sure you would, sweet one. But to reach such a height would require great concentration and trust on your part. You'd need to behave, not question me and do exactly as I request. Perhaps with the raven clouding your thoughts, you wouldn't be able to place her aside for me."

"I have already. She troubles me naught."

He stroked her hair. "I see that. You've done well, Reina."

She kissed his chest and stroked him harder with surprisingly warm and trembling hands. "Easy," he said, stilling her hands, "or I'll come."

"Would you like to?" She looked wide-eyed and expectant. He wanted to come very badly, but wouldn't until he permitted her the same pleasure.

"What I want at the moment is for you to spread your legs a bit, reach back and grasp your ankles and remain still and quiet."

As she complied, his blood rushed. In her current position, her breasts were thrust forward enticingly. He licked the trail of dripping arousal from one before tending the other. By the time he finished, both nipples were long and hard. From the distressed sounds coming from her throat, he ventured too much more attention to her nipples might bring her to climax.

"Are you ready for more?" he asked.

She nodded. The pout of concentration on her lips appeared very sexual to him. It caused his cock to jerk as his balls pulled up. He fought the urges that thickened his voice and roughened his words. "Come sit at the side of the bed." She did and he watched the rise and fall of her breasts. "Now lie back and bring your heels up on the edge."

He knelt and smiled because her knees stayed tightly together. "This won't do at all, Reina. You know what I want. Spread for me."

Her thighs trembled as she did. In all the universe, he'd never seen or smelled anything so heavenly. Her reddened ass cheeks peeked out from below her wet pussy. The lips of her sex were swollen and pink. He couldn't resist sliding a finger into her dripping sheath. She tightened around him.

"Relax. That's it, now listen carefully." He waited and watched the rise and fall of her chest as she took a deep breath. "I'm going to do things to you."

She tightened and liquid arousal seeped from around his finger. "I'm sorry, Gage."

With her so sensitive, he wondered how long either of them would last. "As I started to say, that which I do is not for your pleasure. It's for mine. You're not to come."

You might very well feel the need or start into climax. That's permissible as long as you stop before truly giving in to it. Do you understand?"

"I believe so." Her voice shook and her words sounded choppy.

"If you can't calm yourself, I expect to hear my name so I can stop you from coming."

"Yes, Gage."

He'd never seen such a sexual creature. He ventured if she could stay focused and deny herself pleasure for a measure of time, she'd find it easier to keep hold of the raven. If she managed, the reward she'd get would strengthen the lesson. He wondered what he'd learn in the process. He imagined he'd at least find new heights to his own self-control.

With his finger snug inside, he wiggled it slightly and watched her reaction. She took more deep breaths and only tightened a little that time. He moved within her before stilling. She did very well to accept the desire and remain calm. He parted her lips with his fingers and blew warm breath over her glistening pussy while pushing into her heat.

"Oh!"

The single word made his stomach tighten. She enjoyed what he did. He required her arousal to at least match his however. They should suffer equally. Flattening his tongue against her crease, he swept it back and forth as he moved upward toward her clit. When he reached the small nub, her ass came off the bed and her sheath tugged at his finger. By applying pressure and wiggling against her bud, he kept at her until she cried, "Gage!"

He lessened the assault on her clit while pumping her gently with his finger. When she tightened and strained, he switched stimulation to again tongue her nub. By changing stimulation, penetration and tactics, he soon found her rubbing herself against him. He lifted his mouth, withdrew from her heat before immediately sinking two fingers in to the hilt.

"Not fair! I can't—"

"Hold it back, Reina."

"I can't, not with you in me like that. Please!"

He allowed her to grow accustomed to being stretched by two fingers as he held still. Her struggles to stop the climax had his cock leaking pre-cum. What had he been thinking? Thoughts became muddled before he found control. Determination kept him from coming.

"Grasp your knees and draw them toward you." She did and he removed his slick fingers.

Reina bit gently on her bottom lip as she waited for what he'd do next. Her pussy burned with desire and her temples pounded from mashing her teeth together. On some level she knew he wanted her to focus so the raven would go dormant. She

wanted it too. At the moment though, it seemed easier to tolerate another spanking or even the whip than control her climax.

“Oh – my – no!” She squealed when he breached her anal ring with a finger.

“Take it.”

How could he sound so controlled? It probably had everything to do with him not having to stop himself from spilling into climax. “Gage! I’m coming, can’t help it.”

A wet, slippery tongue stroked the length of her pussy before flicking her sweet spot. “Then come for me.” *Straight away, Gage!* Damn him for clearing his throat to draw her attention. “I *had* hoped you could wait a little longer.”

The disappointment in his voice settled her as nothing else could have. She’d wait to climax. If she had to. The moment she relaxed, his finger went deep. She cried out as her body drew up for the most intense orgasm of her life. Her legs began to shake as her mind wandered toward utter bliss before she thought of other things. *He’s given me permission!* But he gave her leave to climax begrudgingly. She’d heard it in his voice.

“I thought you couldn’t wait, sweet one?”

“I can. I will. For you.”

He kissed her pussy and nibbled her clit gently. “And what if I won’t let you come for another hour? I don’t think you can last that long.”

She sniffled in an attempt to hold the tears and told him what’d become apparent to her. “I find that pleasing you supersedes other needs at the moment.”

He withdrew from her and stood. He gathered her legs in his hands and brought them to his sides. The slow glide of his warm palms felt delightful against the outside of her legs. The expression on his face appeared most intense. She’d been about to apologize for whatever she’d said or done to create such a look, when he lay down beside her and turned her onto his chest.

Pulled upward, the friction against her breasts as they slid across his chest made her moan. He placed a hand at the back of her head and an arm across her back. Opening his mouth, he brought her forward and in seconds, she realized he’d finished toying with her. No kiss ever relayed so much!

“Spread your legs and come over me, Reina.” She obeyed immediately and felt his cock at the heated wet entrance of her core. “Do you really wish to please me?”

“Oh!” An inch of his cock went into her. A frantic moment later, she forced herself to calm. “I, um, yes. Mmm, wish very much to, uh...” Her tongue ran back and forth across her upper lip. She tried desperately to answer his question but kept getting distracted by what stood between them.

He slid a finger in her wet crease before his hands slid to her backside. His palms against the heat of her stinging ass made her shift her hips forward. Grasped firmly, she found he didn’t allow her to move too far. “Rest against me. Kiss me,” he said.

Gladly, Gage! He tasted of sex and passion. She strained to get closer and was rewarded with a purposeful stab of his tongue into her mouth. So involved in the kiss,

she neglected to concentrate on what other things he stole into. When she came to realize a long, thick finger had taken her ass, she moaned into his mouth.

He kissed her and she sat partially up. "The look on your face, sweet one."

Spread open with his cock at her entrance, she took a bit more of him. A breath drawn inward through his clenched teeth made a hissing sound. *And now you have a similar expression, Gage.* A low rumbling vocalization came from his throat before he said quite forcefully, "Come down on me now! I need in you this instant!"

With the abundance of moisture, she easily managed until she absorbed his hard and full cock. He stretched her in utter perfection. The dual penetration should've been impossible to resist. Shifting her weight, she gauged how it felt. The sensation was much to her liking and he encouraged her to rock back and forth by rhythmically squeezing her ass with his hand. Her pussy tingled and throbbed as strong pulses randomly made her clench. She feared she couldn't hold back.

"Come for me, Reina. Come hard and release us both!"

"Yes, yes," she said, moving faster, allowing her body freedom to take what it desperately wanted.

She neared climax, felt it surrounding her, taking her higher and higher before... Nothing. She sobbed and placed her hands on his chest before closing her eyes. Again, she focused on her burning pussy and willed herself to come. Her mouth watered, pussy creamed as she rocked helplessly on the aching verge of a thundering orgasm that wouldn't happen. All of her muscles grew rigid as the pain grew in intensity.

"Reina!" No wonder he cried out. He also seemed unable to come and she'd been most aggressive in trying to obtain release. She'd taken him to the hilt while grinding her pussy against him in tight little circles. Veins on his forehead stood out clearly against his reddened complexion. "Come now!"

"If only," she sobbed, "I could!"

He became still while she strained and labored. A sound came to her before growing warmth and vibrations flooded the ass cheek he'd held. Tissue surrounding the finger deep in her ass vibrated as did the muscle gripping his cock. The shock and sting from the hard smack tumbled her from a discontented state of anxiety, headlong into a rolling, shattering orgasm. Another slap heightened the climax and when she moved, everything came together to form an exquisite, blissful, ecstatic state in which she'd surely die from pleasure.

So wrapped up in her own sweet completion, she'd almost been unaware of Gage coming within her. Each strong pulse of his cock pumped bursts of heated liquid deep inside. Her pussy tightened to hold him firmly and when she'd shift, she'd inadvertently tug at his shaft.

Heartbeats continued to pummel her ears as her pulse raced and soared. Unable to believe how much she felt, she greedily continued to ride his shaft. After a time, he withdrew from her ass and brought her hips to stillness. He sat, placed an arm across

her back and came up on his knees. She encircled his neck with her arms and his waist with her legs.

His forehead came against hers. Beads of perspiration ran from him to trail her face. He licked one off her cheek before kissing her most tenderly. The arm at her back trembled and she sensed something between them had changed.

"Gage, what's wrong?"

He smiled and stroked her cheek. "Nothing. Have I seen to you, sweet one?"

His voice had a strange quality, overly calm without a hint of the general. The intensity which typically dominated him seemed lacking. "Yes, of course, but what's—"

"Shh," he said, laying her against the bed and coming over her. As he kissed her again, she detected something very wrong. She wrapped him more securely in her limbs. "Have you control of yourself?"

"Most assuredly."

"You'll not release the bitch to run amok again?"

She pulled long strands of light-colored hair from his face and carefully ran her fingertips under his puffy eye. "I'm very sorry for this. You'll have it tended in medical?"

"Are you avoiding my question, Reina?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why?"

"Because in order to give you the answer, I'd have to admit something I'm not very proud of."

"It must be quite grim."

"It is. How did you know?"

He shifted and she felt the length of his still-hard cock in her swollen and sated pussy. "You called me *sir* when you should've said my name."

"Forgive me, Gage?"

"Of course. Now what of my question?"

"It's rather complex and," she said, shifting her hips so he'd stroke her again, "are you sure you wouldn't rather do something other than talk?"

He groaned as his cock thrust in and out a few times before settling against her and pinning her pelvis to the bed. "Would you rather speak of this later? Now or then, it matters little to me, but I'll hear what you've to say."

She sighed and he smiled. "I made a terrible mistake. At first, I couldn't fathom why I wasn't able to contain the part of me that's skilled in fighting. I reckoned it out though and I can assure you it won't happen again."

"I have all eve, sweet one." *Oh, when he kisses like that, I can't think!*

When her wits returned, she decided a full confession was in order. "I didn't expect rescue from Infur."

“You made it most difficult. Why?”

“I wanted to lead Brach and his men away from Pinski and Lobank. They were armed and I was not. I thought in the jungle I might have a chance to pick them off one by one. I believe the length of time needed to accomplish it would have the others rescued and you well on your way back to the Governance.”

“You thought I’d leave you!” She’d never meant to hurt him with her words but by the loud voice and angry expression, she’d done just that.

She quickly tried to right her mistake. “I’m not one of your soldiers. You would’ve had the little major by then and with Pinski and Lobank, there would’ve been no need to dally—”

“Have you learned anything since that astounding miscalculation, Lady?” She nodded, afraid to say anything. The irritation left him and he kissed her again. Her fingers curled in his hair before she gentled her touch to match the deeply tender kiss he bestowed. He ran his tongue against her lower lip and said very softly, “And now you’ll finish explaining about the raven.”

She swallowed and took in a deep breath. She’d not even gotten to the part she was hesitant to relay. She hoped he could see past her cowardice. “I’ve trained for battle, fought many times in simulation. The true thing however takes quite a bit of—I can walk in two realities but never attempted to do such for a prolonged time while being both Reina and...” Her lips sealed tight, wouldn’t budge as she tried finding words.

“Don’t cry,” he said, wiping the single tear she couldn’t hold. “There’s no need to rush. Try again when you’re ready.”

“I believe I wasn’t at my level best when we were placed on Infur.”

“Considering the few days prior and your time in medical, I’d say that’s a fair assumption.” His nonchalant recap allowed her to release some of the anxiety.

“Before I could lead Brach into the jungle, Theazians besieged us. I knew they wanted me. I had most unpleasant musings of what might happen if they seized me. I fought until I couldn’t.” He grew tense but the continuous stroke of his thumb remained gentle. “I gave up. I let predatory instincts take me so I wouldn’t have to face what happened. And when I couldn’t drive the urges down, I asked you to end...”

“Nothing came of it, Reina.”

“I didn’t want to disgrace my clan. Such things have happened before and those who’ve lost themselves in either fight or flight are stricken from the clan. Their very existence is erased. Their name is taken from the *Book of Remembrance*. The remedy for lunacy is singular. I simply didn’t want anyone else to witness...”

“Regardless of what’s taken place, you’re here now, a whole being with clarity of mind.” She sniffed and swallowed and rubbed his upper arms because she’d been holding him very tight.

“The fact that I’m sane again doesn’t excuse my cowardice.”

“I don’t believe you’ll refer to yourself in such a manner again.”

“But—”

“Have I not made myself clear?”

“Yes. You have.”

“Ordering you not to say it though, doesn’t necessarily mean you still won’t view yourself as a coward. Have I made a correct assumption from the way you agreed?”

“Yes,” she said very softly.

“I’ve seen cowardice, Reina. I can detect it at a distance. It smells of something sour and your scent is quite sweet.” She looked into his eyes and found his expression to be serious. “You’re very brave.”

“Truly?”

“Oh, sweet one, truly.” His eyes closed and he began a rhythmic penetration and retreat. “And squeeze me again as you did a moment ago.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have control of that particular part of me.” He drew back and thrust firmly into her.

“Are you sure?” When he withdrew and hurried back, she felt her passage clench.

“It appears *you* have control of it, Gage.”

The vibration from his laughter tickled her belly. “Then I suppose I should test its responsiveness.”

“Yes, I believe you should,” she said, raising her hips to meet his thrusts.

Chapter Thirteen

"You'll be cared for, I promise," Gage said.

Reina couldn't believe she'd been shunned by her clan. He'd waited until after dinner the following eve to tell her.

"It's not my want to be cared for, Sir," Reina replied.

No longer welcome on Haven, she'd managed to get a longstanding wish. She'd probably see many worlds and learn of other cultures. Who would have her now? He'd been careful to spell her situation out in the gentlest manner possible. She found her hands and feet numb from cold.

"Have you explained to the Materna that I've recovered?" His silence relayed the answer. "I see."

Still seated beside him after their meal, she wished he wouldn't have waited. Her food wasn't sitting quite right. With downcast eyes, she bordered on rudeness and dared to ask, "May I stay with you?"

He gathered her hands into his before leaning forward. He rubbed her as if to warm her fingers. The look on his face didn't lend reassurance, nor did his posture. "Reina, sweet one..."

He sounded so very sad and she'd no right to place him in such an awkward position. She sought to correct her blunder. "I'm sorry, Sir, forgive me. Of course I can't, that's obvious."

"Reina..."

"No, please," she said, carefully pulling her hands away. "You've no need to explain."

It was no time for tears so she forced them down. She caressed the side of his face and felt the tickling sensation across her fingers. She stood. "If you'll excuse me, General, I'll ready myself for departure."

She placed a kiss on top of his head, took in his scent and couldn't stop herself from stroking his light, shining hair. Love wasn't meant to be given to a male, not by a raven. Obviously she should've been whipped over missing that lesson as well. With her heart breaking, she left before he saw her crying. She had time to purge the tears in her chamber and brighten her expression before she'd see him again.

* * * * *

It took several hours for the *Raze* to dock. Reina might've asked to observe had her heart not been in her boots. Such things once held importance to her. When Major

Deacon summoned her from the chamber, she saw Gage being led from his. His wrists were bound behind his back. He looked tall and proud as soldiers escorted him. The baby major grasped her arm when she attempted to go to the general. "Lady Reina, please don't make this more difficult for him."

"But why are they taking him?"

"He hasn't explained?"

"No, Sir."

Guards moved Gage forward before he stopped and turned toward the major. His expression held malice. "I'll kill you if you say a word to the lady. I swear it. Colonel LeRoy's been given instructions." His look softened when his gaze met hers. Again she tried going to him but the major held tight. Before the escort could budge him, Gage said, "And you'll take your hands from her."

Pushed forward, he shrugged as if to remove the hands of the men he walked between. Once they were alone, the major released her. "We won't worry about Colonel LeRoy at the moment, Lady. We've more pressing issues. My father hasn't been given the detail of what all's taken place."

"What's that got to do with the general, Sir?"

"He's being taken to stand trial for disobeying orders and placing my life in jeopardy."

Astonished, she said, "Your life, Sir, was most certainly in jeopardy prior to the general's arrival. Is your father dense?"

He grimaced at her remark. "Perhaps when you have his ear, Lady, you'll not mention that notion to him."

"I'll have words with your father, President Deacon?"

"Yes, Lady, he requested a meeting with you prior to General Ryker's court-martial."

"Me?" Her voice squeaked.

"Indeed, he waits for us now."

Pinski and Lobank rounded the corner and Pinski rushed to her. "Lady, we're to see the president."

"Don't worry, Pinski, there's nothing to fear," she said, stroking her light hair. *The Governance president!*

"We need to hurry, Lady," Major Deacon said.

"I will, Sir, after you've explained what your father requires and why the general was taken from his ship in restraints. Not until."

"I'll give the detail on the way as well as some words of caution when addressing *your* president, Lady."

"I'll follow no man who puts the likes of General Ryker in cuffs, Sir. As of now, I have no clan and belong to no world. Your father, nor any other being, has a hold over me."

His eyes rounded in surprise. "But Haven—"

"Is no longer my home. My clan's refused to accept me, Sir. I didn't stutter. What portion didn't you understand?"

"My pardon, Lady, I'd no idea. They actually said you'd not be welcome?" How many times would she need to repeat it? "Please," he said, "come with me and you'll be briefed."

She'd been *briefed*. She then wished to be informed.

* * * * *

After such a rush to get to the president's chambers, she'd been made to wait hours as he called and questioned Colonel LeRoy, Dr. Nare, Engineer Dunn, Lieutenant Graham, Corporal Lobank, and Private Pinski. The baby major sat with her, having seen his father before any of the others. He patiently explained the details of the charges filed against the general and what could happen.

After sitting quietly for a few additional hours, she relaxed, closed her eyes and focused on the general. Flying deftly through the massive compound, she eventually found him. He sat tiredly on a most uncomfortable-looking bed inside a cell, his elbows resting on his knees, his head hung.

His words came to her, although he didn't look up to see if she were actually there. "You're tempting disaster by taking flight without someone to guide you, Lady. Leave this place and don't come to me again."

He'd disobeyed orders. Judgment and punishment were at hand. A normal being never enjoyed the prospect of punishment. She knew that firsthand.

You should've left us.

"I've no regret of my actions," he said.

Then why are your shoulders so low?

"Leave now, Reina!"

"Lady," she heard the major say. Her eyes came open and she found him standing a foot away. "He wishes to speak with you now."

Rebellion made her decline the use of more appropriate clothing and she somewhat regretted the stubbornness. She wanted the man to see her as a raven, the *animal* Gage set after to save. Her steps were slow as she entered the chamber and took in the beautiful furniture. The man had many elaborate gadgets at his disposal. Such wondrous things she had a bit of knowledge about, all for the pleasure and education of a single being!

He stood behind the intricately carved desk sitting above everything else in the room. Of course he perched himself in such a position, his height a mere six feet. He needed some form of leverage to look down on those who served. *Pompous ass!*

He came down the few stairs and took her hand into his before she offered it. The amber of his eyes, the warmth of his regard and the mass of longish, gray hair disarmed her for a moment. And then she remembered he'd had her general arrested.

"Lady Reina, thank you for your patience."

Something about the man seemed familiar. She knew his history, studied it as a child because he ultimately protected her world. The warmth of his hands, the gentle caress of his thumbs caused further disorientation. "Leave us, Blaize. The lady and I have much to talk about."

The major saluted him, cast a concerned glance at her and left. The president drew her to a comfortable-looking piece of furniture. He gestured for her to sit and once she had, he sat directly beside her. Staring at her for a long moment, he eventually smiled. "Lady, I haven't had the pleasure of being in the presence of a raven in a number of years. Your beauty charmed me from thought for a moment. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course, Sir," she replied, making herself blurt out the appropriate response.

His complete regard disturbed her and she forced herself to appear at ease. He shouldn't be staring so. It wasn't only rude, it made her unsure what course of action to take. His look conveyed delight rather than curiosity. She wondered why.

"Lady Nakita accompanied me on many missions. You resemble her most closely." *Unbelievable!* Materna Nikita seemed too set in her ways to fly for anyone. "She and I were very close and I miss seeing her, speaking with her as I once did."

"I could only imagine, Sir," she replied, speaking the truth in a manner. She could only ever imagine missing the materna because, personally, she'd never longed for her presence.

"I understand because you helped the Governance, you've been lost to the clan."

"You've been misinformed, Sir. I've not been lost, I've been shunned."

He took her hand into his once again. She became uneasy with his familiarity. "Your mother always looked to the needs of the clan first. The decision will undoubtedly cause her great pain until her death."

The word *mother* didn't sit well in her mind. *Materna* meant mother of the clan, which a woman earned after a certain age. His reference had been different. She understood the disparity in meanings and thought on it for a while. He filled the silence by saying, "All of the maternas will miss you, little raven, but your mother most of all."

"She's my birth mother?" Reina never questioned it before. They belonged to one clan with many mothers. All those younger than a materna were considered sisters. The matter of who specifically birthed a particular babe had never been questioned.

"Yes, child, you came from her womb."

Then why did *Nakita* so often find use for the whip for minor transgressions? Certainly if *Reina* ever bore a young raven, that one special black-haired female would be her weakness, not her target. *Materna Nikita* loathed her. "I'm afraid your information is unreliable, Sir."

"*Reina*," he said. "I understand how you've been reared. I've studied your clan and its peculiarities for years. This must all seem strange to you and I regret it, but it will help explain what comes next."

"Sir?"

"*Reina*, my dear, I'm your sire, your father."

She stood, her head reeling. She laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Then as my father, Sir, why would you threaten my home's security? Wait, I'll reason that aloud if you'll give me but a moment. Because your son needed aid and the destruction of our clan was insignificant compared to the loss of your youngest *male*."

"No," he said, standing himself. "That wasn't the way of it. Please sit and I'll explain."

She'd prefer to stand and assumed a stance he might recognize. With her hands folded behind her back, she stood ready. He sighed before mimicking her posture.

"Your age, your lessons and preparation have been made known to me these many years. *Nakita* allowed me that much involvement in your life. I didn't, however, have knowledge that she'd been the only one to give birth in that span. She afforded scant knowledge about the health of the clan until after you'd been obtained by General *Ryker*. When I learned that you, my daughter, were to fetch *Blaize*..."

She thought of something to say and did so. "Sir, it must have devastated you to order the general to leave the three of us to be blown to bits after he retrieved your son. Clearly though, I understand." She'd pieced the knowledge together between conversations from the baby major, *Pinski* and *Lobank*.

Tempers rose and she cocked her head to the side, waiting to see what he'd say on the matter. By her reckoning, the place of a father was similar to that of *materna*. At least that's what she'd read in the text. His actions told their own story.

"Young woman, your impertinence could get you punished." *It didn't take long for him to move from enchanted father to disciplinarian. She could see it then – the materna and him together.*

"By all means, Sir, do your best. My preference is the whip. It'll teach me to *hold my tongue* – eventually." Giving him a moment, she asked, "Will you do it here or will you call one of your soldiers to remove me? My *mother* never failed me in that regard. She saw to it I had every opportunity to –"

He grabbed her arms and pulled her to his chest. The air left her lungs with the squeezing embrace. "Don't say such foul things. She wouldn't do such to you! Take it back!"

With his face buried in her hair, his grief came to her as surely as his breath. He let go suddenly and turned her. He lifted the back of her shirt before the shock and surprise allowed her to think. Father or not, he'd no right to touch her so. She jerked her shirt into place and crossed her arms. A chill ran down her spine when she felt the stroke of his hand down the length of her hair. He stepped around and came in front of her. He brought her forward for an embrace. It remained awkward for she refused to uncross her arms. He lessened his hold and stroked her arms instead.

"She said you'd been punished because of your strong will. I thought you'd been spanked or left without a meal or... She told me you inherited your willfulness from me. She *blamed* me. She hated me. She'd a right to it though." He stepped back and framed her face with his palms. "A raven serving a commander never brought forth a pregnancy before. It was a first and entirely my fault. When we discovered she was breeding, she demanded to be returned to Haven. I granted her leave. My continued questioning of how you fared eventually made her resentful."

She'd nothing to say because in her heart, she knew he told the truth. Could Materna Nakita have hated her because beings from outside the clan felt justified in questioning her? If she'd acted appropriately, would it even have mattered?

He said, "I didn't give the order for you to be left. Vice President Ellis acted improperly and took it upon himself to order the general to leave you. Ellis' been with me a number of years and thought to remedy my frustration when dealing with your mother."

"By killing me?"

"He's answered for his actions."

"As harshly as the general will answer for *his*?"

"I've seen to it and won't be questioned further on the matter." His fingers came beneath her chin so she'd look at him. "I so wanted a daughter. Your mother convinced me you'd never thrive without the clan. I foolishly believed her and you suffered for it."

"And your wife, Sir? There *was* the small matter of a wife at your side, already having bore sons before I came along."

"She died before my travels with Nakita. I never kept one woman at my side while bedding another."

His hands left her face and she studied him. His sorrow and remorse appeared genuine. Something finally occurred to her and she smiled. "If you're not upset with my presence, Sir, then the general actually accomplished a goal for you by arranging to fetch me in the process of retrieving the major, correct? You'll release him?"

He appeared even more morose. "Politics, dear Reina, have me in a quandary. That's why I personally interviewed each of those involved in this mess. I sought information to find a way out for the general. Gage is special to me in many ways. He's earned my respect and admiration because of his bravery and sacrifice. Unfortunately because you're involved, any transgression during his command will be monitored."

"I don't understand, Sir."

“In all its complexities, it’s really quite simple. Because he disobeyed a direct order from my second-in-command, I *have* to punish him. If I forgive his transgression, it will appear the general and I had some sort of secret dealings concerning you—an agreement that wasn’t brought before the Governance. They’d already questioned my use of a raven and deploying Gage with the *Raze* to bring my son home. There’s been innuendo that the general and I have too close a relationship. I’m afraid in the past, he’s been privy to information I’ve not trusted with others.”

“You’ve great power, Sir. Would it really matter?”

His palms stroked her arms and when he reached her hands, he took them into his. “I do have power and it’s balanced precariously. I need to be extremely careful with how I proceed. It seems appropriate punishment is eminent for General Ryker.”

Obviously regret weighed heavily on him. She felt inclined to offer a measure of reassurance. When she squeezed his hands gently, his smile warmed her. “He’s a rather large man, Sir. Would a few strokes of a whip suffice?” He shook his head and looked disheartened. “His continued accommodations in a confinement chamber for a time?”

“Unless I can find a way out, when he’s court-martialed, he’ll be hung.”

She wouldn’t hear of such a thing! His cunning and bravery saved four lives, not one, and he’d die for it? Why hadn’t anyone mentioned this sooner! “What type of madness is this? Because of my heritage, you need to kill him!”

“There’s only one other way I can think to appease those who’d question my actions.” Sad eyes gazed at her and he stroked the side of her face.

“Are you able to tell me?”

His hesitance to relay the information as well as the expression on his face made her tremble. It must be something terrible. “Your gifts are extraordinary, Reina. Did you know that?”

“I accomplished what I’d been trained to do, Sir. Rather poorly at the tail end of it, which I’m regretful of.”

“I worked with Nakita and know of others who’ve worked with ravens. None of your predecessors have your ability with a computer. None were able to stretch the distance and touch someone as you did Blaize. None would’ve withstood five Theazians, let alone two dozen.”

“I don’t see how that—”

“Additionally, you were able to take on a raven state and rationalize things taking place around you. That ability is unparalleled in any raven. Lastly, any from your clan having done a portion of what you’ve accomplished have gone mad. They couldn’t be reached and became a worse threat than any Theazian. They’d been—destroyed.”

“I only came back because of your general, Sir.”

“I’ve been told.” He cleared his throat and appeared less foreboding. “Let’s pretend for a moment the general knew your potential as a tracker and a weapon. Despite his military training, he’d more than likely disobey an order if it were for the betterment of

the Governance. In particular, he'd disobey an order that would place someone as valuable as you in jeopardy. I firmly believe his transgression could be overlooked if it were presented in that light."

"Then you should do so, Sir, immediately. That's wonderful news!"

"Not so fast, child, there's also a price to pay."

"If it doesn't involve his death or blood, I believe it should be paid."

"You're so unlike Nakita, dear one. That's why I feared broaching this with you. You see hope and brightness in the darkest of situations."

"That and my sarcasm are renown, Sir."

He laughed. "I could see where it may not be appreciated in the clan. You'll do well outside of that place, Reina."

"And that which you spoke of? A price, Sir?"

"This is hard for me to relay, but in fairness I will. Take time before you answer and try to understand all it entails. If it appeared the general disobeyed the order to abandon you because of your military value—if people thought you'd sworn allegiance to the Governance before the rescue, his actions would be justified. If you were to immediately join our military, learn our ways and renounce the clan, I would commission the general, promote him and he'd be aboard a vessel with you at his side for the duration."

Her head spun with the unexpected prospect of settling the problem without a soul getting hurt. "I accept."

"Not so fast, please. You'd have to reject your upbringing, publicly renounce your clan."

That sounded a bit different from what she'd originally heard. But would it really mean anything since they'd already *renounced* her? No, not in her mind it wouldn't. "Again, Sir, I accept. I'm dead to them. This shouldn't matter. But would my compliance in this also guarantee their safety?"

"You're shrewd, Reina. Yes, it would satisfy their debt for protection as long as you serve. Carefully ponder the rest though. The general would have control of you. In a sense, you'd be *given* to him much as a soldier receives a weapon. You've not spent a great deal of time with Gage. This arrangement could entail years."

"I've grown quite accustomed to taking orders from your general. The prospect of such for a period of time is worth his life, Sir." She bowed her head, not because of how long her service seemed but because of how temporary.

"Reina," he said, bringing her back to the long comfortable seat. He sat beside her. "Your happiness matters to me. From this brief time with you, it's obvious you haven't had much joy growing up. Are you sure about this?"

"Have you been on Haven?" she asked, smiling.

"Yes. A dismal place indeed, especially for a young, spirited girl."

"Then you didn't see our rivers with the many creatures to catch. And our sun that makes crops grow and offers safety to travel beyond the fortress when it's high above. The hearth in each chamber, which burns brightly to warm us at night as the smell of seasoned wood surrounds our beds. The large cats that roam, stalk and play when there's no one your own age to do so. The caverns there allowed me to discover dark creatures and lost treasure from beings long dead. My point, Sir, is the dismal place you spoke of caused me great amusement and happiness during my youth. I found laughter on board your ship too, Sir, and believe it could make me happy for a time to come. Your people are welcoming and helpful."

"The crew on board *Raze*? They're some of the most technically advanced, intelligent and highly decorated soldiers in the Governance."

"Ah, Sir, they're but beings with the same longing to discover new things. They make room for a stranger among them and make allowances for a misfit's actions without hurting her pride. Most are quite wonderful."

"I'll speak with the general then and make some arrangements."

"I find myself growing fond of you, Sir."

"May I hold you once more, Reina? Please tolerate the embrace for I've longed to give it."

She not only tolerated it, she held him back. The emotion emanating from him brought tears to her eyes. Strangely, it reminded her of Gage when he'd put the general away for a time.

* * * * *

That eve, the comings and goings from the chamber she'd been provided made Reina's head spin. A meal, clothing and various other items were brought by different women. After having left to detail the scheme to Gage hours before, the president came back with a forlorn expression. "He's declined to merely command you, dear." The blood left her face and her father helped her sit in a comfortable chair. He patted her hand and stayed very close. "There, there, Reina, whatever's wrong? You look as though you've taken a mortal wound. Shall I call a medic?"

Her lips and tongue went numb. "No. Fine. Really."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good, because the hour grows late and after I speak with you, I must return to Gage to relay your answer."

"Sir?"

"Please, Reina, call me father. It would mean a great deal to me."

"Of course – Father."

"That's fine, dear," he said, still patting her hand. His smile grew large and his eyes danced with delight. "It appears you've made quite an impression on our General Ryker. He said he'd not command you to avoid a noose around his neck."

"Oh." A sinking feeling made her stomach ache.

"He said, if you'd agree however, he'd abide a different form of commitment between the two of you."

"Oh?"

"He's asked to marry you." He paused and grinned and looked excited and expectant.

"Sir—Father, I don't follow."

"To *marry* you, dear!" She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. His puzzled expression gave way to an enlightened one as something seemed to dawn on him. "Forgive me, Reina, of course you're not familiar with my meaning. He's requested a commitment far beyond that of service in the Governance. He wishes a deeper relationship. He's asking if you'll join yourself to him for all time, through all circumstances."

"Why would he require such a thing?"

"Gage relayed," his face gained color as he spoke and searched for words, "the two of you—with your recent past it appears... The detail of such needn't be disclosed to me because I'm his commander and especially since I'm your father, but..."

Oh-my-God! Considering recent happenings between them, if Gage were to accept her as a soldier, he feared keeping control of her! If she were like Pinski or Lobank and went berserk again, his military protocol certainly wouldn't permit him to bring her back to sanity by using his big, overly hot body in his bed! He knew how to deal with her and sought to get her approval as well as a Governance blessing to command her in a manner guaranteeing he could use whatever means necessary to *command* her. *What he must think of me!* She needed clarification before jumping to hasty conclusions.

"If I were to accept this *deeper* commitment, Sir, he'd have more authority over me than a regular soldier?"

"Yes, indeed, dear. In all things for all times." She swallowed and felt her lips going numb again. "You have a choice. You don't wish to marry him?"

"If I refuse, he'll be hung?"

"It's either a ceremony with the two of you in the morn or a court-martial for him, Reina."

"Then of course I agree. Yes, certainly."

"You look ill, child. Are you sure?" He looked most expectant of her answer.

"I'll *marry* him." She finally managed to sound as though she meant it.

He grasped her arms and brought her to her feet. The crushing embrace transmitted his delight. "I'll relay your answer soonest."

"Might I have a word with him prior to the morn, Sir?"

"Heavens no, dear. There's much preparation needed. We'll have you smartly outfitted in proper attire and I'll assure your lieutenant general is ready as well."

"Brigadier general, Sir. He's a brigadier general."

"All will be in attendance tomorrow, so prior to your ceremony, I'll promote Gage. Unfortunately, you won't be able to witness it. It's terribly bad luck for you to see him beforehand." He kissed the top of her head. "Besides, dear, you'll need every moment to prepare yourself. We have a fine woman who can see to your dress. Many women will be made available to you to make sure everything's perfect. I can barely contain myself."

"Yes, Sir. Me too," she said without emotion.

"Are you nervous?"

"A bit. Truly, if I could speak to him for a moment..."

"Absolutely not, young lady. You'll have all the time in the universe to speak to him in a few hours."

Women toiled through the night in her preparation. With the prescribed hour drawing near, Reina paced the confines of the chamber. Extremely uncomfortable in the clothing, she glanced again at her reflection. The bath had been luxurious and scented. The use of real water rather than the sanitizing mist afforded her a time of relaxation. Her long hair had been painstakingly prepared to lie in spiral tresses with strings of white beads and scented, small white flowers arranged throughout.

Lovely, soft material wrapped around her and went to the floor. The lace and the shimmering jewels against the white layers contrasted interestingly with her raven hair. But maternas wore dresses and she certainly wasn't of the age to necessitate it. And why would she be required to wear such apparel to a ceremony?

The president—her father—knocked before entering the chamber. When he saw her, he gasped. Her original assumption had been correct. The man was somewhat daft because as he looked her over, his eyes moistened. "He doesn't deserve you, Reina. No man does."

Because she'd be such a burden, he required a super-special binding ceremony to remain with her. Her own eyes misted up.

"Are you ready?" he asked. She nodded, unsure what would happen if she tried to speak. "Do you remember what to do, dear?"

She eventually offered a response without all the emotion threatening her. One of the women briefly explained what was required of her. "Certainly."

She took his arm and they walked from the dressing chamber down a long corridor. When they reached a massive chamber, she couldn't believe how many attended the ceremony. She hesitated when music began playing and beings turned to stare at her and the president. He rubbed her hand, which grasped his arm tightly. "Are you rethinking this whole thing, Reina?"

"Simply overwhelmed, Sir."

"Do you wish to proceed?"

"Of course."

Ahead of them she spotted the broad shoulders of the man she'd *marry*. When he turned toward her, he didn't appear merry, didn't look like she could make him merry and looked quite full of emotion, really. *Stared* at her, actually. *The burden has arrived, Sir, wrapped to your specifications.*

When they walked past all those in attendance, the president took her arm and gave her over. Lieutenant General Ryker took her hand into his. When he unmistakably caressed her, she looked down, surprised by the comforting gesture. Despite his own misgivings of their future and his requirement for her to become more than a soldier, he offered a measure of reassurance. She couldn't seem to look up. The creatures in her stomach went on a rampage and she felt suddenly very chilled.

The lieutenant general said, "A moment please."

Hampered by layers of cloth, silk and lace, she managed to walk where he led. A murmur went through the crowd when he took her from hearing distance of the others. He touched her chin with his long fingers. She eventually gazed up. "Lady, I've not been permitted to speak with you until now."

"By the low voices I hear behind me, Sir, perhaps now is not an appropriate time."

"We'll make it so because nothing will happen until I understand why your march down the aisle has you looking as though you'd rather be marching to the gallows. You don't wish our union?"

"I was..." She carefully pondered what she'd say.

He said very softly, "Time is an issue, Reina. Best you say it straight out."

"Your refusal, Sir, to command me. It stung and... It matters not. I'll do what's necessary. Please, may we be done with this?"

"Refusal?"

"You said you wouldn't take me to your side without this ceremony."

"Sweet one," he said. His pet name made warmth return to her fingers. "You don't want a marriage to me?"

"Marriage?" That particular term confused her.

"The declaration that allows us live as one man with one woman for the rest of our lives."

"But that's the vow of husband and wife, Sir. What's one got to do with the other?"

"A marriage, a wedding is the process which makes a husband and wife. You knew that. Didn't you?" *Marriage – the process of two people marrying? Could that be correct?*

She stared at him as it penetrated. He refused to simply command her. He'd insisted they be bound far beyond that of service. She understood what the implications of husband and wife were. She'd probably been seated in a corner considering

transgressions when the ceremony and additional terms were detailed. She should've paid more attention. But it wasn't as though she ever thought to find herself in this situation! The breath rushed from her lungs and she felt dizzy.

"Reina?" His hands came to her arms and steadied her until the swoon passed.

"Forgive me, Sir, for another misunderstanding."

"We'll call this off. I'm sorry, Lady. I know my own heart and if you were close by day in and day out, I wouldn't keep my hands from you. And after a certain period of time what I take to prevent breeding you won't work because sex is one thing and a wife is—oh hell, that has nothing to do with it. What I wish to impart is that it wouldn't be right in my mind for us to remain as we've been. With me dragging you to my cabin without..." She smiled, liking the general having trouble finding the right words.

"Best you spit it out, Sir, their voices grow louder."

"I want all of you. Always."

"More than some years aboard a ship?"

"Forever, Reina."

"Even though I'm not a very predictable weapon?"

"You'll be punished for that remark, Lady. You're not a weapon or a tracker or a raven. You belong with me and I don't want a life without you. I don't want to *command* you. I want us to be joined."

"I think I could stand it." She smiled but he seemed very serious.

"And I want to be yours." His words made her heart skip a beat.

"Forever," she said, letting it penetrate.

"If we get through the ceremony, sweet one." He stroked her face and finally smiled. "Your father's glaring at me."

"Then we must get it done, Sir. But I'd appreciate use of your strength for a moment. My legs seem uncooperative."

She held his arm and they slowly walked the short distance to where the president originally left her. All the men in attendance were smartly dressed in full military regalia and her future husband looked more handsome than any other. Buttons gleamed and medals adorned his chest. She felt very strange. She suddenly feared she'd been dreaming and would wake to find herself in a cold stone chamber—alone. She fought tears again and couldn't fathom why.

She understood the words spoken by the staunch officer who stood before them. When Gage said, "I do," he committed to her protection, her education and discipline, her happiness, care of her body, mind and soul and that of any children she'd bear.

She'd been questioned whether she'd consign to loyalty, his happiness, care of his body, mind and soul and any children he'd sire. "I do."

The very best part, the words holding the most meaning, came when the expressionless man before them said, "By the power vested in me through Governance reign, you are husband and wife. Please seal your union."

The kiss between them was simple and it affected her like none prior. Her *husband's* mouth came upon hers and she opened to him. When he drew back, her chest ached and tears did spill. "Sweet one?"

"Sir," she said, placing her hand over her heart. "Forgive me, but—I love you."

He bent and whispered closely in her ear. "And I love you, Reina."

The applause grew and she realized everyone cheered them. Surprised at the noise, happy to be married, she turned up to her husband when he touched her chin. She'd likely give him anything he wanted. Another soft kiss and a swipe of his fingers against her cheek relayed much.

Chapter Fourteen

Gage sat at the helm of the *Defender*, the newest vessel commissioned by the Governance. Her power and superiority in battle surpassed any ship built to date. He'd taken command of her on her maiden voyage months before. The ship slithered through space, making debris of those interfering with Governance control.

Reina consistently stood at his side providing firsthand, minute-by-minute insight into his enemy's thoughts in battle situations. It'd taken nearly a month to perfect a functional routine because an aftereffect of her prolonged fight on Infur was her inability to verbalize things as she flew. That'd been rectified when Reina found a way to communicate what she saw. By emitting her call, the newly designed and most sophisticated data beast had been programmed to relay her thoughts. It did so by projecting a ghostly image of her that could speak.

They'd been engaged in a heated battle with Doxyn warships. The *Defender* received not one hit while Gage managed to outmaneuver, outgun and destroy seven of their vessels with Reina's counsel. After obliterating the last vessel, he stood and turned attention to his wife. "Sergeant?" he asked.

"Sir?" the image the computer projected of her answered. His eyes stayed focused on the pale woman who remained motionless and silent but for the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

"You're well?"

"Quite."

"LeRoy, her readings?" he asked.

"Close to death, Sir. As expected." His eyes closed because he didn't care for Mason's choice of words. The man seemed to do it on purpose.

"Sir?" LeRoy said suddenly, a distinct edge to his address.

"Yes," Gage answered, looking only at the pallor of his woman.

"There *is* something unusual this morn."

"And what would that be?"

Unable to fathom anything going awry, Gage unclenched his fists. Reina had been perched at his side for nearly eight months without a glitch. He wouldn't tolerate anything happening after an uneventful battle.

"Her biorhythms are off. Not as they normally appear," LeRoy said.

"Get Nare on it immediately."

"Yes, Sir."

"Reina, I'll ask again. Are you well?" Gage didn't care that his crew would hear him address her by her given name rather than rank. His wife needed him.

"I believe so, Sir," the computer voice replied.

"Do you find anything amiss as you fly?"

"There's something but I can't say exactly what."

"How many times must I ask before I get a truthful answer?" He ground out the words through teeth unable to separate as his hands came down on her shoulders.

"Each time is different, Sir. I thought this to be yet another odd experience."

"You'll come back to me now. Do you hear?"

Her rapid breathing slowed and she blinked. He would generally escort her to their quarters and bring her back leisurely. It would be done posthaste with her *biorhythm* not typical. He heard LeRoy in the background speaking to Nare. Gage watched her eyes as the first ring of white appeared.

"Sir?" LeRoy asked.

"What?"

"The doctor seems to think you should hurry the process. Her readings are tracking further from normal."

Without preamble, he issued an order. "Reina, I need you with me now. Draw yourself back. Slow your breathing."

Her call faded as she drew herself from the raven state. The crew took out the sonic barriers stuffed in their ear canals with the decreasing sound. Dr. Nare designed ear plugs so anyone within her immediate vicinity during her altered state could tolerate the high frequency. It no longer personally affected him.

She trembled from the cold she'd been forced to endure. That particular aspect of her time spent in flight hadn't changed. Her body temperature always dropped to below what most beings could tolerate.

Graham left his post, went to the special cupboard on the bridge and brought blankets over. Without asking permission, he shook one out and placed it over her shoulders. He spread another over the command chair and Gage helped her sit as he drew it around her. Graham thrust a final blanket forward and Gage finished surrounding her before ordering, "Heat."

The shivering got worse. It always did but they were usually in bed naked and he brought her temperature up a certain way. On the rare occasion she'd been awakened on the bridge, his crew learned what would comfort her and anticipated her needs.

"Better?" he asked.

Her answer could be heard softly through both the computer image and her own voice. "How long was I gone this time, Sir?"

"No longer than two hours. Why do you ask?"

"Simply more sluggish than normal, Sir. Nothing to worry about."

The hell it wasn't! Her admitting anything at all made his blood rush.

"Nare!" he demanded.

"Here, Sir. Her readings are coming back. Perhaps the sergeant is simply tired."

Then he'd remedy it immediately. "Reina, I'm going to lift you and you'll relax when I do. Understood?"

"No, Sir, I can walk—really."

"Have I asked an opinion on the matter, Sergeant?"

Her eyes were almost normal but she looked beyond tired. She'd been nothing but the epitome of happiness and cooperation, learning all she needed in record time. She'd obeyed his command and earned promotion through the ranks for astounding service. She'd been a model wife, soldier and partner. His sharp reminder in front of others was probably unnecessary and somewhat uncalled for. He wondered if his words brought the tears to her eyes.

Certain concessions would be made with a spouse falling under the order of a commander. He knew the crew listened but would ignore issues between a husband and wife. "Reina, forgive me. Concern roughened my words and you didn't deserve it."

Eyes remained cast down on consoles throughout the bridge. He knew no one witnessed the tears sliding down her face. She looked embarrassed and hung her head, wiping them away quickly with the blanket. Her hand gestured beneath the cover as if to apologize and he refused to make her sorry for a reaction to pain he'd inflicted.

He gathered her up quickly and held her firmly against his chest. Before leaving the area, he muttered something appropriate to LeRoy about summoning him should the need arise. Graham cast a sharp look in Gage's direction. The *boy* daring to nonverbally disapprove of *anything* would be talked about later. Graham had become overly concerned with Reina of late. Gage didn't like it. In fact, he damn well wouldn't tolerate it.

Once in the corridor beyond, she sniffed. He nearly dropped her. His hands went numb and his arms weakened because she cried. He spoke so only she could hear. "I'm sorry, sweet one. Please stop."

"It doesn't seem possible right now, Sir."

LeRoy's voice followed him down hallways. "Should I inform the president, Sir?"

Of her unusual behavior? Certainly not. Her father speaking with her daily, as well as checking on her by secretly conversing with members of the crew, was more than enough. "No, this doesn't concern him. The man would probably then want an accounting of her trips to the relief area."

Mason knew the president was a perpetual pain in Gage's ass. "Aye, Sir." Gage heard the smile in LeRoy's voice.

In their chamber, having suffered concerned looks from every crew member on the way because he carried her, he forced himself to remain relaxed as he laid her down on their bed. He pushed the tightly drawn blankets away from her face and sat down

heavily to help her mop up the rivers running from her eyes. "You'll need to stop, Reina, before you soak us through."

She laughed and then cried even harder. The emotion she expelled went beyond fatigue. As soon as she slept, he'd go to Nare and they'd figure something out. Perhaps her constant daily flights took a mental toll Nare had yet to detect. His woman didn't cry. Not like this.

"A request, Sir?"

"Anything, Lady, if you'll use my given name and stop your tears. They go into me and I like not what I feel."

"Gage, would you undress me?"

With pleasure. Once he found her beneath the blankets, he tried to go slowly and remove her Governance-issued light blue uniform. But her simple request made it impossible. He'd been the aggressor every time they'd found themselves within the room. He hadn't allowed her time to request a thing because he generally saw to it long before the thought probably occurred to her.

She stretched and seemed comfortable despite her reddened eyes and sleepy gaze. "And now you? As much as I like the look of you in that uniform, I'd like its removal." Again he hurried and when naught remained as a barrier to her eyes, she said, "Come next to me, please."

He stretched out beside her, his cock already taking shape and getting hard. When he reached out to bring her against him, she withdrew. Her action startled him. Her eyes rounded in disbelief at what she'd done and her hands covered her face. The sound of her misery settled in his ears. Had his words on the bridge affected her so deeply that she shrank from his touch? "Reina?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I'd just hoped to touch you for a time."

Not fully comprehending, he said, "You have touched me, sweet one, and often. I don't understand."

"It's nothing, just foolishness. Again, forgive me. Take me as you wish."

"No," he said, willing to grant her anything to see a smile back on her face, at the very least a lessening of moisture. "You take *me* as you wish. Run your hands where you will and take your time about it. It never occurred to me you'd want this. I'll remain still for you."

Ah, there it was—a tentative smile through her veil of tears. He released a breath, knowing he'd righted a portion of whatever he'd managed to do wrong. His arms stretched above his head and he settled his heels slightly apart before closing his eyes. Arousal descended as he anticipated her tiny, chilled hands upon his overly heated skin.

She touched his face as her breath fanned him. Fingertips traced each feature, taking particular time with his ears and jaw. Then came kisses. Chaste little nibbles that set him on fire. By the time she reached his neck, he was beset with need and struggled

to settle himself. She rewarded him with soft hands smoothing his skin. She seemed fascinated with the hair between his arm and body. Small nails raked the sparse cover as if stroking it into place. Not ticklish, he found it did have a stirring effect on his blood. "Restraints," he requested, knowing that giving her time to leisurely peruse would soon be impossible. "Sweet one?"

"Mmm." She purred the sound.

"When you've finished, you'll need to release me. Even though the request came from my lips, the bed will only obey you because I'm the one restrained. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Gage, you've given yourself to me and I decide when to let you go."

Her voice was low, sexual and hungry. He questioned then what he'd done. He'd merely hoped for aid in holding himself back while affording her a bit of time. He became peaceful again, not really agreeing with her interpretation of his gesture but not in a hurry to correct her either. Oh God, certainly not as long as she was stroking his nipple with her wet tongue!

"Your moan tells me much, Sir." He heard a smile in her voice so he didn't remind her about the use of his name. "You like me at your nipple. I wonder however, if I were to apply a bit more pressure..."

"Ugh, Reina, have a care!" he said when she used her teeth.

"You realize you've given me something I've wanted for many months now, don't you?"

"My chest?"

"Use of your body. You once promised I could extract retribution from you over some wrongful discipline. This is what I've thought about, Gage. Having you lie still so I could touch you for a time."

The slight discomfort passed and his pelvis eased back onto the bed. After unfairly spanking her, *this* is what she'd come up with for his punishment!

"Have I hurt you?" she asked.

"Again, Lady. Yes, it sets me on fire. Again!"

Sensations spread equally over both sides of his chest. He tensed as her lips and moist mouth thoroughly went over his stomach. Grunting when the pressure came, groaning as she'd remedy it with her tongue, when he felt her hair slide across his thighs, he feared the ability to manage his cock. Hell, he'd lost control when he placed the damn restraints about his wrists and ankles.

"You can release me any time," he said, reminding her.

"Would you mind terribly if I left you a bit longer? Somehow I think my education would stop if I let you go. And I wouldn't have the opportunity to study this fascinating cock."

Her words had a profound effect. "Continue then, sweet one."

What punishment! A palm cupped his balls and rolled the weight. He shifted then groaned, loving her hand upon him. His cock jerked, begging for even a small stroke. Palms kept turning him as she leaned over. "Your mouth, Reina. Yes, sweet one. Please, kiss me."

"Here?" she asked before placing her lips and tongue against his sac.

He choked, not from pain but from lust. Her tongue separated him and pushed the balls apart. Seed dripped as she licked. If she kept that up... "No, don't stop."

"Gage?"

"Yes."

"Please tell me when you get close."

That wouldn't be hard to reckon. "I'm close."

"Can you wait for me? Would you do so if I asked you to?"

He'd agree to much just then. "I'll try."

"Thank you."

Her hand fisted his cock and measured its length up and down, up and down but with the slightest of pressure. "A bit harder, Reina."

"In time. It fascinates me how just a bit comes from the tip. Does it taste the same as when you fully come into my mouth? I can't seem to recall."

He couldn't possibly care because she'd gone after her own answer. Tongue lapping and taking the pre-cum from him, she kept sliding wetness over him. She stopped. "Can you hold back if I take you deep?"

"No, but do it. I need to come."

"Release restraints," she said before, "no, please, lie still and let me care for you as you take me with your fingers."

"Is this a portion of my penance?"

"Yes." She sounded mischievous. "You mustn't come until I do. Do you understand?"

If he *had* to... "As you wish, Reina. Guide me."

She came up on her knees and presented herself before she took his cock. A man shouldn't be expected to think when such pleasure takes hold. He wet his fingers with her dripping arousal before sliding two fingers into her tight little pussy. His wet thumb pushed into her ass. She always came for him so quickly and he enjoyed stroking her deep, hidden sweet spot as she sucked him.

His woman continued to come in strong waves, the evidence trickling down her inner thighs. He did love that enticing facet of her. He wondered about it sometimes but never truly sought an answer for he preferred to believe he alone brought about the abundant desire in his amazing woman. God, she knew or sensed something was amiss when his mind wandered because he'd never been so well loved by her mouth. Wetness dribbled downward, running over his balls and farther.

He was so entrenched in her body and feeling every small lick and suck from her mouth, he neglected to concentrate on the other thing she did until he'd been breached by a small, thin finger that'd rubbed its way between his ass cheeks. She'd speared him with a moisture slickened finger. His tender balls were rolled as she fucked his tight ass. At the same time she took him deep, deeper than ever before. He reared beneath her and roared like one of the damn cats and came without hesitation.

Oh, he liked it—loved how hard he climaxed, but found himself needing to demonstrate that sneak attacks could be countered. As she held him within her mouth, he grabbed her hips and pulled her lower body over his chest. Spread wide, having her dripping pussy at just the right place, he went after her. Her puny climax would be nothing compared to that which she'd feel in a moment. He mercilessly sucked her clit between his lips until it lengthened. He used his teeth to gently hold her before he sucked and licked the tender thing. Because she'd already come, he knew she'd be sensitive and took full advantage.

The moaning made her throat vibrate and against an already spent cock, it should've hurt. Poor Reina, it simply wasn't her morn. Her throaty encouragement kept him hard and her eager little mouth full.

After a time, her legs instinctively kept trying to come together and he'd reached a plateau also. He released her tender flesh as his head fell back. He wrapped his arms around her lower back and clung tightly as she took the last of his cum.

Probably sated, she turned to curl against his side. He slid carefully over her, spreading her legs and came to rest in the cradle of her thighs. "Close your eyes now, sweet woman, and let me in your warmth. I'll be gentle with you."

Tender feelings washed over him as he loved her. She appeared exhausted until he excited her insides and she climaxed for him. After her orgasm, he'd more stimulation than he could manage and came within her. Kissing her cheeks, eyelids, forehead and nose, he turned them both on the bed and drew the covers up to keep her skin warm. A protective arm cuddled her and then his leg went over her too. He wanted and needed her against him, as close as they could get so he could finally rest.

He kissed the back of her head, thankful of good fortune before slipping away. Finding a woman he trusted with his heart and life had been remote in his ordered and dismal existence. He wondered at the odds. He fully expected another set of hours devoid of nightmares. The lack of night terrors had grown addictive and he knew his woman brought it about.

Whispered against her hair, he said, "I love you, wife."

"I love you also, husband."

* * * * *

The next morning, Reina ran after Gage with tears streaming down her face. She chased him down one corridor before another and finally the last. He entered medical and she feared for Dr. Nare. She needed to stop Gage! By the time she arrived, poor Dr.

Nare was pinned against the wall by her husband's fist holding a fair amount of tunic. The doctor's expression didn't hold concern. Her husband behaved badly and more tears came from embarrassment. Surely half the crew witnessed his appalling display.

"You'll spit it out, Nare, tell me why my sergeant came to see you this morn!" She winced at his words because his teeth were mostly clenched as he yelled.

"I'm guessing you didn't give her a chance to explain," Dr. Nare replied.

"Her ability to speak plainly seems hampered by the constant flow of tears, which started four morns ago. You'll tell me what's wrong with her. As commander of this vessel, you should've reported the sergeant's request to be seen immediately to me."

"Gage," she said, the rest catching in her throat as a loud sob came out.

He released the doctor and came to her. He picked her up and held her like a child before going to stand before Dr. Nare. She couldn't fathom his anger. "You'll tell me what's wrong with her," Gage said, shoving her closer to the doctor. "If you don't know, you'll work until you do. Have I made myself clear? I don't care what it takes. You make her..."

Dr. Nare stood close. "It's quite natural, Gage. The crying should only last a few weeks. After that she'll return to good health and grow your son."

"She'll bear a daughter, Nare. You know that."

"No, you'll have a son in one month's time. The odds are one in a million that she'd conceive a male, but she did."

"One month?"

"The entire process only takes five. Amazing, isn't she?"

"A son."

A son. A raven son. How wonderful.

About the Author

Kathleen Lash wrote a first novel with a friend at thirteen. She eventually married the “bad boy” who, a few decades later, provides wild times and stability. Working full time as a supervisor, she holds a Bachelor’s in business, and continues to rebuild the highly affordable, unique fixer-upper. Leisure hours are packed with writing, stock car racing, demolition derby driving, Toyota bonfires (cutting torch plus fuel line equals hysterical laughter and a newspaper article in the local paper—sorry, sweetie), motorcycle and horseback rides, fun with adult children (boys, girls and adorable dogs), and trips to various states and Mexico.

Affiliations with the Romance Writers of America and the Northeastern Ohio Romance Writers groups have allowed her to hone her skills and give characters a rich past and precarious future. Kathleen is also published in other romance genres.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorasCave.com.

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