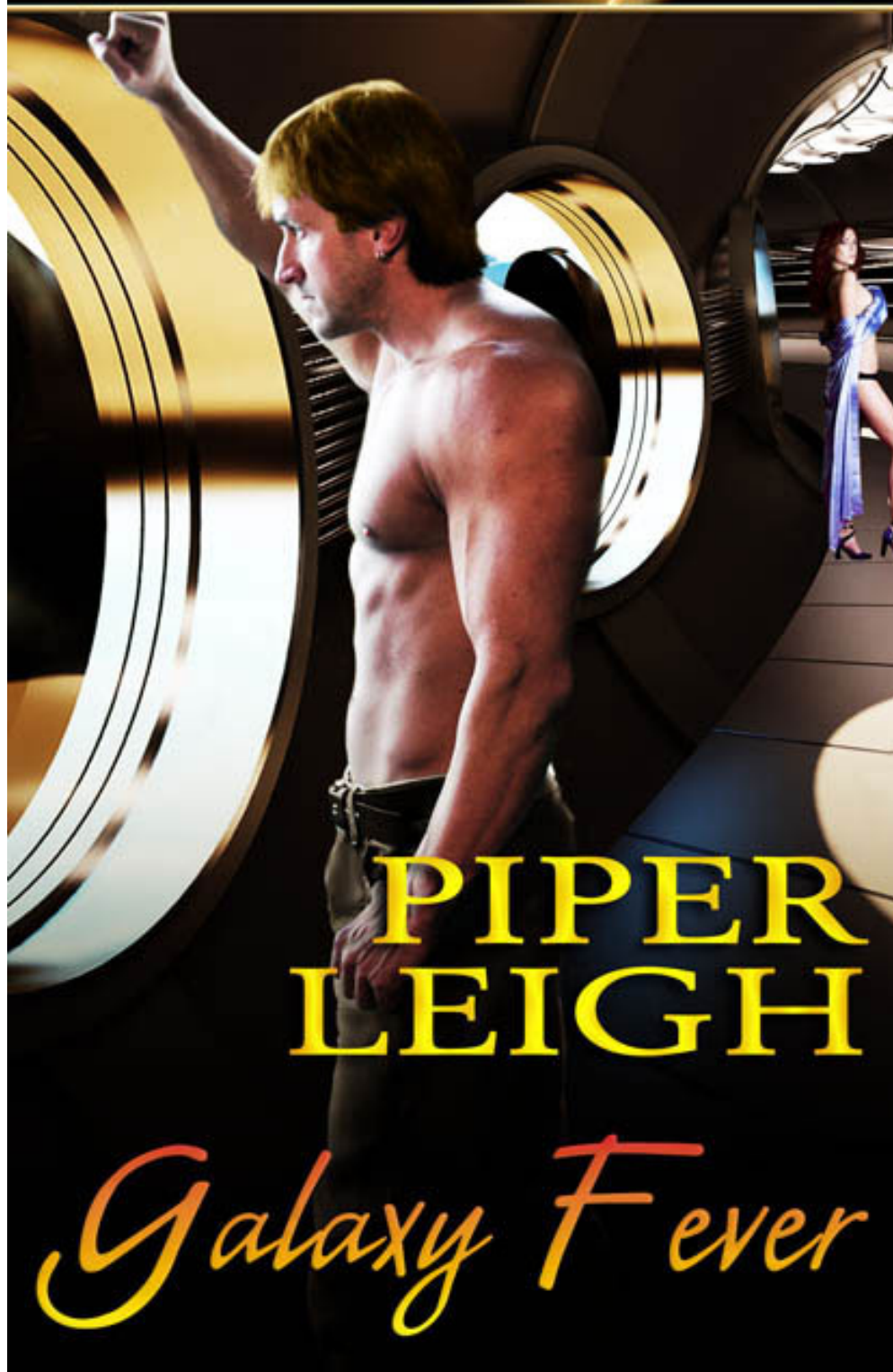


ELLORA'S CAVE REON



PIPER  
LEIGH

*Galaxy Fever*

## Galaxy Fever

*Piper Leigh*

I didn't mean to poison Dex. It's just one of those unavoidable accidents that can happen at an alien wedding. After all, you never really know what you're eating on space stations in foreign galaxies. But he pulled through, none the worse for wear. In fact, he's a lot more...amorous...since coming out of his stupor. Lucky me, considering I've had a massive crush on Dex for what seems like forever. And who am I to waste an opportunity? Hot space-station sex is the perfect way to celebrate the massive jewelry commission we just scored from our alien host.

Now, I'm usually a pretty perceptive girl. But you don't notice certain things when you're boffing your business partner's brains out—like someone sneaking into our room and stealing the jewels for the aforementioned commission. Now we're running on empty as we scour the station in an effort to help unmask the thief. That's not cooling Dex's ardor, however (if you haven't tried an alleyway quickie, I highly recommend it).

Hmm... Maybe I should poison Dex more often.

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Galaxy Fever

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# *GALAXY FEVER*

Piper Leigh

## Chapter One

I guess I'm the one who poisoned him. I told him those *banta* leaves were safe to eat. But at an alien wedding, you never know. You could be eating anything...even a relative. Later, he was glad he'd been knocked out. He'd missed the unveiling of the bride. For a big guy, Dex is a little squeamish. Well, maybe more than a little. And the bride...well. 'Nuff said there. Suffice to say, dining with the Nemon isn't conducive to good digestion.

So once the bride in all her six-headed glory had been unveiled and the marriage consummated in front of all the guests (not that I could tell what exactly was going where), I went to check on my partner.

The *banta* leaves had Dex in kind of a stupor. His glazed eyes were open, but it was clear there wasn't much going on behind them. I pried open his lips and dumped a hefty measure of *lodan* brandy between them. That got his heart restarted fast enough.

He jerked awake with a grunt and a roar, jumping to his feet, his eyes sliding wildly around the room looking for the source of his torment. Finally his gaze centered on me. Confusion clouded his green eyes for a moment and then he gave me a sheepish look, the one I get when he's done something he shouldn't have. *You can't possibly be mad at me*, that look says. And honestly, one glance in those huge green eyes and I really couldn't be angry. With his collar-length blond hair disheveled, he had a rumped, adorable look. Not that I'd ever tell him that. But I had to admit, if only to myself, the package was appealing. It brought a hot rush of moisture to my sex every time he caught me in that winsome gaze. Which was a pretty awkward way for business partners to be, especially when one overly dense business partner had no idea of his effect on the other.

I reined in my overactive hormones and tried not to notice those broad shoulders and strong hands with long-tapered fingers that I could imagine stroking—

“What did I drink?” Dex’s voice cut into my rampant thoughts. His words slurred into each other. It was going to take more than *lodan* brandy to get him mobile.

“Actually, it was my fault.”

“You did this to me?” Dark blond eyebrows furrowed together in a way that managed to look wounded as well as angry.

I shook my head. “It was the *banta* leaves. I thought they were edible.”

He groaned again and rubbed the back of his neck, as if he’d slept in the wrong position. “Apparently not edible by anything humanoid.”

Dex sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. I handed him the brandy flask. “What about you?” he asked between swallows. “You didn’t eat any *banta* leaves?”

“You know I hate salad.” I rarely ate anything that resembled a vegetable, alien or otherwise.

“You really ought to think about the way you eat, Kaia.”

I grimaced. My personal philosophy ran along the lines of, if it couldn’t eat *me* then it was on the menu. I’d been blessed with a hearty constitution...er, a certain big-boned heartiness that would never make me a conventional female beauty. Dex, on the other hand, had grown up in space-station slums. His current health was a result of nano intervention, bought with his hard-won wealth.

And speaking of that wealth...we were late for the meeting we’d come for. Our host, Jenon, had invited us to his daughter’s wedding, a kind of ice-breaking formality common to the Nemon. My jewelry had been gaining popularity across the galaxy. As a gift to the bride, Jenon wanted me to set some rare stones he’d acquired into my designs. Seeing as how the bride had six heads and twelve arms, we hoped to sell a lot of bracelets and necklaces.

“Did we miss the meeting?” Dex’s gaze centered on the chrono on the bedside table.

“Not yet. Think you can walk?”

He climbed awkwardly to his feet, holding on to the wall for support. “I think so.”

I went to the wall unit to program it for a local brew. Dex remaining upright without it seemed like a doubtful proposition. And I knew the drink, made from the roasted beans of the *jonka* tree, was edible. But when I turned back to check on him, I caught Dex studying me. It was hard to describe the expression on his face—perhaps a little bit suspicion, a little bit blatant interest.

I couldn’t blame him for being suspicious. I’d told him the *banta* leaves were safe to eat. The desire, though, was something unexpected. So far it had been a one-way street. I’d been the one fervently keeping my fantasies under cover. And Dex had been solidly uninterested. Maybe there’d been more than a potent sedative in those leaves.

As soon as he noticed my scrutiny, his expression changed. He nodded at the room-service unit. “*Jonka* would be great.” Whether he returned my interest or not, we’d always thought with one mind. That’s part of what made us such successful partners.

I punched in the request and then added another for myself. Maybe it would take the edge off my horniness. Two steaming mugs arrived in the unit. I handed one to Dex.

He sucked back the brew, oblivious to the temperature. I sipped cautiously and watched him over the rim of my mug.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He raised a blond eyebrow. “I mean, I’m sorry about the *banta* leaves. Who knew?”

He shrugged and finished off the last of his drink. “Well, I survived.”

I didn’t really know what to say to that.

Dex glanced at the chrono. “We should go.”

I glanced at his disheveled hair and rumpled clothes. "You can't go like that." In the awkward silence that followed, the chrono ticked off another second.

"We're out of time."

I shouldn't touch him, not after what I'd been thinking...um...fantasizing. But I did. I reached up and ran my fingers through his collar-length hair. Surprisingly soft, it slid through my fingers like silk. I yanked my hand away. "Okay, you look good. Let's go."

I grabbed the silver case that contained my jewelry. Inside were dozens of rings, necklaces and bracelets made from *nalugian* alloy. It gleamed like gold, wore like platinum and never tarnished. The settings were stunning, in my humble opinion. I almost hated to sell them. Almost. But I was also anxious to see what baubles our Nemon host wanted me to set into my creations.

"Let's go then. The sooner we get this wrapped up the sooner we can get off this tin can."

Dex hated space stations. Having grown up in the slums of one, he loved the open air. If that open air came with a tropical climate, even better. But the funds for those holidays came from our business, so we still ended up spending most of the galactic year traveling between those tin cans he so hated.

We stepped out into the corridor, Dex with his weapon strapped to his muscular thigh. The dramatic show of weapon and capable male was a precaution. After all, we were carrying a small fortune in jewels. Best to warn anyone who might want to relieve us of our treasure.

Nemon space stations had low ceilings that brushed the top of my head as I walked and made Dex stoop like an old man, albeit a really well-built and good-looking old guy. The Nemon were wider than they were tall. They resembled spiders with too many heads and legs. Their *heads* were really a series of six stalks, each bearing a single eye that branched down to a mouth at their base. I noticed a couple of passing Nemon swiveling an eyestalk or two in our direction. Perhaps I looked strange to *them*, with my flame-red hair and gray eyes. Shiny blue-black armor covered their bodies, gleaming in



the low lighting as they scuttled past us. Every one of their multiple limbs was decorated with a bracelet. Most of their heads were adorned as well.

It was quite simply, I thought, a jeweler's paradise.

Stationmaster Jenon was the father of the bride. I just hoped he had deep pockets, metaphorically speaking.

We left the station's guest wing and headed for the Nemon quarters. Being the boss, Jenon had the biggest suite. To me, it looked like a series of dark caves linked by corridors with even lower ceilings than the hallways. Still, the space allotted to him spoke of wealth and the deep carpets that coated the floors were made from the finest *lodan* silk.

He welcomed us into the main room of his quarters and crouched on the floor. We sat cross-legged on the carpet, Jenon folding his many limbs beneath him. Sitting down, he was surprisingly compact. He centered all six of his eyes on us and I spread my jewelry on the carpet. A low gasp escaped his throat at the sight and he poked admiringly at them with one segmented leg.

"Your adornments are very lovely," he began. I knew what came next. The Nemon loved beautiful things, but they were ruthless bargainers. But he surprised us by saying, "First some refreshment."

Dex started to protest that we'd been well refreshed at the wedding. The last thing he wanted to do was imbibe anything else potentially poisonous. Still, the Nemon was insistent. Cups of liquor were brought. I raised one to my lips and took a hesitant sip.

"You are most hospitable." I gave him the traditional greeting. The Nemon were gracious hosts. It was a grave insult not to offer a guest food or drink. I didn't want to risk offending him by asking about the contents, but the last thing I wanted to do was poison my partner again. "This is edible for humans?"

Jenon bobbed all six of his heads. "Humans find the ingredients quite pleasurable."

Okay, that sounded promising.

We finished our drinks in silence. It was also considered rude to talk during a drink of greeting. When the mugs had been drained dry, bargaining began in earnest.

“I find the choice of your designs and settings quite agreeable.”

I nodded in thanks. Before I could say anything, a servant entered the room and deposited a black velvet box between us. With the armored tip of one finger, the Nemon opened the box. I looked inside and gasped. Beside me, I noticed Dex gaping as well.

Nested in the velvet were the most spectacular galaxy stones I’d ever seen. Swirling fires glowed in the center of the milky gems. They were like gazing into the wonders of space itself.

I stretched out a hand to touch the wonderful jewels and then snatched it back. “May I?”

Jenon nodded one of his heads. With my tweezers, I gingerly picked one up. I pulled my loupe from my pocket and examined the exquisite gem. Galaxy stones were rare and ones of this quality were nearly unheard of. I put it back in the box, surreptitiously eyeing the numbers of stones. I counted eighteen.

“They’re beautiful!” I tried to keep the extent of my excitement out of my voice.

“My daughter would find them most pleasing set in jewelry of your designs.”

“I would welcome the opportunity to work with such extraordinary gems,” I said. And named an astronomical price.

Dex’s eyes darted to mine, but he held his tongue. With the Nemon, it’s a good idea to start high.

Bargaining went on for an hour. More cups of refreshment were drunk. I began to feel a comfortable warmth spreading through my limbs. I nearly choked when that tingling heat settled at the juncture of my thighs. Was that what Jenon had meant when he’d said humans found the drink pleasurable? I’d thought he meant *tasty*. That was the problem with alien semantics, too much room for misinterpretation. The last thing I needed was another cup of the stuff. But refusing an offered drink was also considered

a grave insult. If Jenon meant this as a bargaining tactic, he was certainly succeeding in distracting me. I dragged my thoughts away from the warmth of Dex's body beside mine and ignored the silhouette of his broad shoulders. I tried to rein in my wanton thoughts as my head swam with scenarios of us entwined in *loda*n silk sheets. With great effort, I forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Finally bargaining was completed. As I'd hoped, the Nemon ordered six necklaces and twelve bracelets. We left with the black box tucked into my jewelry case and a hefty down payment. Not quite as hefty as I'd hoped, but it would still turn us a decent profit once the jewelry was completed. I would have felt proud and tired if not for the insistent nagging of my hormones, which had somehow snapped to attention after all that liquor.

As we walked back to our room, I was almost painfully aware of the man beside me. If Dex suffered the same effects, he made no mention of it and I was far too embarrassed to ask. But I noted that his breathing seemed unduly labored in the lower station gravity.

The door to our suite slid open as we approached, its lock keyed to our biological signatures. I would have just as soon stayed on our ship, but it was currently in the repair bay undergoing some needed maintenance. We stepped inside and I put the black box on a nearby table.

Dex was doing his best to ignore me as he intently examined the low ceiling. I stepped into his field of vision, forcing him to look at me.

"That liquor," I began. "Did it do anything to you?"

"How do you mean?"

Another evasion.

"Do you feel...kind of strange?"

Now he was studying me weirdly. "Not strange exactly."

Well, if he wasn't going to come out and say it, neither was I. And then I thought, with acute embarrassment, maybe the drink wasn't having the same effect on him.

"Okay then, well, I'm just going to have a shower and hit the sack."

Dex nodded absently.

Problem was our hosts had given us a room with only one bed. Spending most of our time on a spaceship, we were used to close quarters, but tonight...

I let myself into the sanitary and shut the door. The shower had water instead of sonic jets. I turned it on as cold as it would go and stood under it for a long time. It didn't help.

When I came out, Dex was stretched out on the bed sound asleep. He hadn't left me much room. I crawled in next to him and tried to sleep as well.

I was feeling woozy, but not really in a bad way. Kind of a giddy lightheadedness coupled with a total lack of inhibition and a good dose of downright horniness. I could feel Dex's body heat as he lay beside me. His enticing scent permeated the sheets. I groaned in frustration and turned over.

A heavy arm snaked around my waist.

My breath caught as he pulled me tight against his hard, muscled length. *He's asleep*, I thought. *He doesn't know what he's doing*. An impressively large, erect cock pressed against the small of my back. I figured he had to be dreaming—about someone else. We shared a ship, but we kept our romantic lives separate.

Then he murmured, "Kaia."

My eyes flew open.

I waited a few more seconds, thinking he'd come to his senses and, if he did, he'd be embarrassed. But after a moment his hand slid beneath my shirt and began making sensuous circles against my belly. His long, tapered fingers stroked my sensitive skin. My breath caught as his calloused hand created a delightful friction. I gasped when his fingers dipped lower.

“Um, Dex?” I wanted him like I’ve never wanted anything or anybody before, but I still thought he might be dreaming and the last thing I wanted was to jump to conclusions. Not like there was any conclusion to jump to save one.

“I was dreaming,” Dex murmured.

“What were you dreaming?”

The movement of his hand ceased for a second. “Oh, it was a nice dream. You were in it. Or rather, I was in you.”

Innuendo hung heavily in the air. He’d had a randy dream...about me?

Okay, I decided, he might have been dreaming, but he was wide awake now. And if I understood his intentions correctly, that left only two alternatives. He’d either come to some giant shift in his feelings for me, one I sure hadn’t seen coming. Or he was drugged.

“Dex, I think there might have been something in that liquor.”

His low chuckle stirred the air beside my ear. “Oh, I’m certain there was something in the booze.” His fingers slid beneath the waistband of the loose trousers I slept in. “Not that I mind,” he continued. “It’s opened my eyes to something I’ve been missing. Something that’s been right under my nose the whole time.”

“Dex—”

“Make that *someone* I’ve been overlooking.”

By *someone*, I took it he meant me.

“But we never—”

Why was I fighting this? I wanted it too. I just didn’t want to be the only one participating with a whole heart. I didn’t want to take advantage of a drunken man. Not that Dex seemed impaired in any way. In fact, he seemed decidedly focused.

“We’re business partners!” I tried again, hoping to get through to him.

“So we are.” The warmth of his breath against my ear and his low, suggestive tone was enough to make me forget everything but the *business* at hand. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t be more to each other.”

“Shouldn’t we maybe think about this in the morning, after a good night’s sleep?”

“I don’t want to sleep.” He laughed again, that sexy chuckle that practically undressed me with its sound. He fumbled with the drawstring of my pants.

Fine, I thought. I’d tried to talk him out of it, gods knew why. Apparently he was determined to undress me. And I intended to have what I’d been wanting for some time.

He’d gotten the knot loose and he was busy pulling the cloth down over my hips. I moved to push them the rest of the way off. Dex already had my shirt in his fist. He slid it up over my still-damp hair. I looked up at him his eyes gleaming in the darkness. He seemed sober enough. Except that Dex had never gazed at me with such intensity. Had he been hiding his desire all this time the same way I had? I wanted to ask, but then his mouth crushed mine, stealing my breath. His tongue slid between my lips, demanding entrance, and I moaned at the intrusion. No one had ever kissed me so thoroughly. Every stroke of his hot tongue sent a shock wave of pleasure straight to my clit.

He pulled his mouth away and gazed down into my eyes. “Ah, Kaia,” he breathed. There was so much longing in his tone, it made me pause.

“Dex, I—” What? What was I going to say? That I’d wanted him since the moment I’d laid eyes on him? And yet, we’d never so much as discussed the possibility. I had the impression Dex’s romantic conquests were numerous and frequent, yet he was discreet. I never knew with whom. And I never shared either.

“Shh,” he whispered. His mouth dipped lower. Warm lips brushed the hollow of my neck and moved downward. Air from the ventilation system cooled my skin, creating a tortuous mixture of hot and cold. I arched my back as his lips closed around my nipple. He sucked gently, sending little landmines of pleasure all the way down my spine. I moaned aloud when he moved to give the same treatment to the other.

My fingers laced through his blond hair, holding his head so he couldn't escape even if he wanted to. If whatever had been in that liquor wore off now, I'd be devastated. No, worse than devastated, I'd be booking myself a deluxe appointment at one of the station's pleasure spas.

But Dex didn't seem as if he was leaving anytime soon. His mouth moved from my breast to kiss a path of hot kisses down the center of my torso. I gripped his muscular shoulders in anticipation as his tongue traced my bellybutton. His teeth nipped at the ring in my navel, the one I'd designed myself. I'd liked the simplicity of it, a simple platinum loop with a diamond circling it like a planet. He pulled gently on the ring. I squirmed under the tension he created. He released it and his mouth dipped lower.

I nearly screamed aloud as his hot tongue parted my folds and honed in on my clit. Soft then a little rough, it set every nerve in my body on fire. The second stroke had me moving my hips in time with the motion of his tongue as he circled the sensitive nub. I had no idea this was in Dex's repertoire. Honestly, he'd seemed like the kind of guy who was more intent on his own pleasure. This giving side of him was a revelation. It seemed the night had no scarcity of them.

His tongue entered me, bringing a hot rush of wetness as my body readied itself for what I was sure was going to be the best orgasm ever. My hands clenched on his shoulders, holding him where I wanted, demanding more still. Dex alternated flicks of my clit with those probing strokes of his tongue. The combination sent me over the edge.

Waves of pleasure crashed over me. My hoarse cry echoed through the cabin. In some distant part of my mind, I was sure I should be acutely embarrassed by what anyone passing in the corridors might have heard. This wasn't the pleasure wing, after all. But at the moment I just didn't care.

I felt Dex's hot breath at my crotch as he chuckled at the sound I'd made. "I take it that was good?" he asked, pulling away.

“Oh gods,” I moaned. Every muscle in my body had tensed and then relaxed, leaving me sated and weak. I glanced down. By the size of his erect cock, apparently, Dex was just warming up.

I *should* have been embarrassed. We’d never done anything remotely romantic. Instead, I wanted more too.

Like a panther full of sensuous grace, Dex crawled up my body until we faced each other. The movement forced every one of his hard muscles against me. His pectorals pressed against my breasts, roughening them to hard peaks again. I felt the dip of his slender waist, then the hard head of his cock at the juncture of my thighs. With one knee, he spread my legs. I gasped at the feel of him pressing against my moist entrance.

One arm snaked beneath my neck, tipping my head up for another of his kisses. He kissed with the same intensity that he’d loved the rest of my body. I tasted my own musky scent. That sensation brought another surge of wetness to my pussy. Gods, but I wanted this man.

I angled my hips toward him, wanting every inch of that hard flesh. He moved ever so slightly, about to penetrate me. *Oh yes*, I thought, sliding down to take him inside. Then reality came crashing in.

It had been months since I’d had a partner. Not that I didn’t want one and not that I hadn’t met anyone who didn’t interest me. Work kept me busy. A multitude of small details got in the way – at least that’s what I told myself. Truth was, I realized I’d been waiting for someone else. I’d been waiting for Dex, but I didn’t want to risk going there. If it didn’t work out, we still had to work together. Things had certainly progressed past the point of no return tonight. That liquor had taken those hidden desires and yanked them to the forefront. I wanted him as I’d never wanted anyone else. And I would have him...

Except that in those celibate months, I’d let my anti-pregnancy shots lapse. *Oh gods, what had I been thinking?*



I pulled away slightly. Dex moved his mouth from mine and looked down into my eyes. Panic stirred in those green depths. “Gods, Kaia, please don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind *now!*” Tension radiated through every muscle in his body.

“I—” How to say it? I decided to just blurt it out. It promised to be a mood killer for sure, but there were clinics on the station that catered to emergencies such as these. “My—my shots aren’t up to date!”

He relaxed against me. “Is that all?”

“Kind of important, don’t you think?”

Groaning, he swiveled his upper body so he could reach the flight suit he’d dumped on the floor. He fished around in the pockets for a second and then surfaced holding a tiny foil square. I glanced from the small silver package to *his* package and raised an eyebrow.

Now he looked amused. “Don’t worry, it’s bigger than it looks.”

I laughed at his double entendre. He raised his lower body to place the foil square on the tip of his cock and I craned my neck to watch. Before my eyes, the little silver thing expanded, becoming transparent and coating him like a glove. “Where did you get that?”

“A trader at Central.”

I gave it another skeptical glance. “And that works?”

Dex was looking doubly pleased with himself. “Against everything, diseases, pregnancy. Guaranteed.”

Reaching down, I ran the tips of my fingers over the smooth material. It didn’t feel like the latex I was used to. It felt like his own warm, velvety skin.

He pushed me back into the pillows, pulling my hand out of reach. “Ah, Kaia, if you do that anymore this will be over quickly.”

His movement put him back where he should be. I spread my legs, giving him better access. He pushed gently and the broad tip of his cock slid inside. Gripping his hips, I pushed harder, tilting my pelvis to take more.

The sudden pressure of all that hard flesh brought a low gasp to my lips. He was huge, bigger than anyone I'd ever been with. That thought sent a shiver of fear-tinged pleasure down my spine. He pulled out slightly only to seat himself farther inside. My body responded, stretching to accommodate him and sending another wave of wetness to glide him in farther.

I followed the roll of his hips, arching up to meet him with every thrust. Primed by my earlier orgasm, my body demanded more. He quickened his pace and I reciprocated, taking all of him deep. My inner muscles tightened around his hard cock and I knew fulfillment was near. Dex's breath came in quick pants, hot against my ear.

"Kaia," he moaned. I felt every one of his muscles tense.

"Just a bit more..." I shoved my hips against him, once, twice...before I tipped over the edge.

Dex's hands gripped my buttocks, holding me as if he were afraid I might get away.

Pleasure tore through me, blinding in its intensity. I stopped caring about what anyone in the corridors might hear and let the hoarse shout of triumph escape my lips. Beside my ear I heard Dex's rough groan as he came.

For a long time we lay together, letting the motion of our bodies still and the sweat dry on our skin in the cool cabin air.

Finally, Dex rolled away from me onto his back. For a moment he lay staring up at the ceiling, one arm across his forehead. "Gods, I never knew it could be like this."

I looked at him, trying to think of something profound to say. But as my eyes swept over his body, I noticed that the prophylactic, once deprived of the heat of our bodies, was now shrinking back to a tiny foil square. Dex tossed it into the sanitary and turned to face me. I've never been good with sentiment, especially involving intimate matters.

Finally, I settled for, “Wow, I hope you have more of those things!” Hardly profound, but heartfelt nonetheless. Dex’s rich laughter filled my ears.

There was so much more I would have tried to say, but my eyes fastened suddenly on the low table next to the door. The table where I’d left the case containing the Nemon’s precious jewels. My hand tightened on Dex’s shoulder.

“Dex...where’s the jewelry case?”

## **Chapter Two**

It took a moment for his passion-glazed eyes to focus. His gaze centered on the table by the door. Levering himself up on his elbows, Dex craned his neck to see better. "I thought you left it right there."

"I thought so too."

He was off the bed in an instant, stalking toward the small table. I followed him, desperately trying to remember if in fact I had set the case there, or if my desire-hazed memory was just playing tricks on me. Okay, even I had to admit I hadn't been thinking straight, but I distinctly remembered putting it down on the table as we'd fallen through the sliding door. That part of my memory was intact.

Dex was looking wildly around the room. He picked up the small table and studied the carpet beneath it, as if the shaggy alien pile might have swallowed the case. "You must have put it somewhere else."

A sickening sense of worry settled in my stomach. "No, I left it on the table. I'm certain of it."

I began picking up things, the duffle bags of clothes we'd brought from the ship, the leather wrap that contained my tools. A sock, even though the small scrap of cloth couldn't possibly have hidden the bulky case. I dashed back toward the bed where we'd tossed our clothes and began rooting through the pile.

Dex started opening drawers, even though we hadn't put anything in them. He glanced into the closet and found it empty as well. Suspicion narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brow. He turned that suspicion on me. "Are you sure you brought it back from Jenon's?"

Now I was angry. Dex had never doubted my word before. Mind you, Dex and I had never done what we'd just done together before, either. It was as if our mutual

desire had opened up an entire spectrum of new emotions, some of which I didn't like. "Of course I brought it back with me! You were there. You watched me set it on the table by the door when we came in."

"I had other things on my mind," Dex reluctantly admitted.

"So did I, but I know what I did. All of it."

I swear he blushed; in the dim light it was hard to tell. As if to cover it up, he thrust his hands against his hips. "Well, it can't just have disappeared. It's got to be here somewhere. You moved it once we got in. That's the only explanation."

Now I was getting really irked. "I didn't move it, Dex. I was too busy moving you!"

He turned away from me and indulged in a furious bout of searching and shuffling. But the case was nowhere to be found.

Dex sat down on the bed. "It's not here."

I shook my head and sat beside him. "No, it's not."

"Which means only one thing..."

"That someone took it while we were..."

Neither one of us wanted to say it.

"Gods," I breathed finally. "Someone was in here during..." The image of someone watching while we got all hot and sweaty together was almost too terrible to contemplate. Not to mention that someone now had the valuable jewels that I'd been entrusted with.

"And they have the case."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is a total disaster!"

A few minutes later, dressed in the loose jeans and shirts most people wore station-side, we were sitting in Jenon's office. Frazzled staff had been summoned back to work. Space stations typically ran on two shifts, cutting the artificial day in two. This being the

B-shift and since most staff had been at the wedding, the station was now running with a skeleton crew. It was hard to tell with his spiderlike appearance, but Nansel, the security chief, looked hung over.

“Allow me to express my most sincere apologies for the loss of your...” What was the Nemon term for such a thing? I engaged my translator to help with the subtleties of the situation rather than relying on my sketchy knowledge of the Nemon language. It offered the word, “Goods.”

“Goods!” Jenon rose to his twelve legs. “You misunderstand the grave nature of this situation.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Dex interjected. “Why don’t you explain it to us? We regret there is much we don’t understand about your culture.”

Damn, he was good. I knew there was a reason I’d taken Dex for my business partner, among others.

“It is not a matter of culture.” The Nemon lowered himself into that compact crouch. “It is a matter of biology.”

I glanced at Dex. He gave a short shake of his head and I stayed silent.

“The galaxy stones are not just decoration. They assist in conception.”

Okay, now my mouth was hanging open. I shut it so hard my teeth clicked together. If Jenon noticed, he gave no sign. I gave Dex another helpless glance and, gods bless him, he jumped in to save me again.

“Are you saying...that without the galaxy stones there will be no heirs?”

That was a far more diplomatic way of putting it than I would have thought of. For a moment I was terrified the Nemon might go into the details of it all, but instead he merely nodded.

“Then we need to get the stones back.” Dex looked at the security chief, who was crouched in the same manner as Jenon. “There must be security cameras in the hallways.”

He bobbed all six of his heads in agreement. "Yes, there are cameras in the hallways, but not in private quarters."

My brain had finally kicked in and I was beginning to think more clearly. "What about the codes on the doors? Can they be overridden?"

Another multiheaded nod from the security chief, who I had to admit was looking as though he was in far worse shape than us. "Technically, yes."

"Forgive my boldness, Stationmaster, but is it possible that someone might want to prevent the creation of heirs?"

Jenon crouched lower, bending his segmented legs farther. I couldn't decide if it made him look more defensive or ready to spring.

"Someone who might have been at the wedding?" Dex prompted gently.

The stationmaster rose to his half-crouch. I smothered the urge to take a step backward. But then he collapsed his legs again. "I don't know anyone who wouldn't have my daughter's best interests at heart."

Obviously someone didn't, I thought, but kept it to myself.

"In any case, most of the off-station guests have already departed," the security chief interjected.

Which left us with a huge problem.

I was worried Jenon's next step would be to start pointing fingers, a multitude of them, at us. It only made sense. We were from off-station. We'd been there several times on trading missions and we'd met the stationmaster before. But the cold, hard fact was that we were off-world aliens. In Jenon's place, I'd suspect us too.

Before that could occur to the stationmaster, Dex said, "Then I guess we'd better look at the surveillance footage from the hallways."

At a nod from Jenon, the security chief rose from his crouch and scuttled to the door. He poked one of his heads out into the cave-like halls and uttered a high-pitched squeal. A subordinate scurried toward him. The Nemon conferred for a moment. At

least that's what it looked like to me. They bobbed several of their heads together. I couldn't hear what was being said.

The sound of more scurrying came from out in the corridor. Moments later the subordinate returned with a data chip. Holding it in segmented fingers, he shuffled to the communications nook.

Jenon rose onto his many legs and followed him over. We crowded in behind them.

Nansel loaded the chip into the reader and the screen blossomed to life. It showed a grainy image of the empty corridor. The security chief pressed a couple of keys and the image sped ahead. After a second or two it showed Dex and I approaching our room and the door sliding open to admit us. We disappeared inside, carrying the case of gems, and the corridor was empty again. Alien symbols raced along the bottom of the image, a kind of time code, counting off what seemed like endless minutes. I tried not to blush at the memories of what had happened during those minutes. No one else, human or otherwise, went by in the hallways. The next movement on the surveillance was of Dex and I leaving the room to inform Jenon of the theft.

I gaped at the footage. It didn't look good for us. I was about to open my mouth to protest that there had to be some horrible mistake, but Dex was already on it.

"Could you replay that?" he asked the security chief.

With a suspicious glance in our direction, he complied. Jenon had taken to drumming the tips of several of his legs against the floor. The constant patter grated on my nerves.

The footage flowed by again. No great revelation leapt out of the surveillance footage to exonerate us.

"Again?" Dex asked.

Jenon and the security chief bobbed heads. The surveillance data began again.

"There!"



I jumped at Dex's triumphant yell. The Nemon merely crouched lower in a defensive maneuver.

"I see nothing different in the footage," Jenon said. He sounded severely annoyed.

"It's not in the footage. Look at the time code."

The security chief stretched out a couple of his necks, peering at the footage. He ran the surveillance data forward and then backward several times.

For a moment, I wondered what Dex had noticed. And then I saw it—a jump in the sequence of code, as if a segment of the surveillance had been removed.

The chief twisted one head around to look at Jenon.

"The human is right. There is data missing."

*Thanks for the vote of confidence*, I wanted to mutter under my breath. Of course I didn't. We were in alien company after all and looking suspiciously guilty. Someone was trying to set us up. We had to find out who or, er...what.

Luckily Dex was still thinking clearly, even if all my thoughts had turned to anger.

"The surveillance clearly shows we were within the room the entire time," he said, sounding remarkably rational under the circumstances. "So we couldn't have removed the data."

Jenon and Nansel bobbed heads again.

Actually we could have, had we been so inclined. My devious brain was working the problem from all angles. We could have left and broken into the security office, overpowered the attendant and removed the data. It sounded farfetched even to me. I thought of what we'd been doing alone in that room during that time and tried again not to blush. I glanced at Jenon and his staff. They seemed to be following Dex's line of thought.

"It would seem that we have been victimized as well," he was saying. Which was true enough. Framing someone for a crime counted as victimizing, didn't it? "Our company's good name is at stake here. Our *honor*."

That got the Nemons' attention. Honor was one of the main pillars of their society.

Jenon rose from his crouch slightly. It had the effect of puffing him up. The security chief ruffled himself as well. I hoped Dex hadn't offended them.

But Dex said smoothly, "Perhaps we should talk with your daughter, Stationmaster. I would hate to interrupt her at this fragile time, but she might be able to provide some insight."

The Nemon puffed himself up farther, but then he appeared to reconsider and collapsed his legs beneath him again. "Perhaps you're right. I will arrange it."

### **Chapter Three**

A Nemon in tears is a formidable sight to behold. Imagine six slender stalks, each holding aloft a bulbous head with a single eye. An eye that now secreted a green, gooey substance. At the base of all those necks was the Nemon's mouth, which was now trembling in grief. Her new husband, though honestly I couldn't tell the difference between the sexes, scuttled back and forth in agitation.

"This is terrible!" More bobbing of those oozing heads. Thick drops splattered the floor, which only served to upset the male further. "We were planning a litter by spring," the bride said.

It occurred to me suddenly that we were vastly outnumbered here in the bride's chambers, with Nansel, Jenon and his distraught daughter as well as her agitated husband. I sincerely hoped he didn't feel the need to defend his new wife's honor. If there had been any corners in the cave-life room, I would have tucked myself into one.

"Can you think of anyone who wouldn't want you to..." Dex struggled to remain politically correct. I could tell he wanted to say "conceive" and then reconsidered. "To have that litter?"

The bride, whose name I'd been told was Kreeta, shook all of her six heads. "No, everyone I know was delighted about the marriage and the possibility of offspring." She bobbed one of those dripping heads in the groom's direction. "Geema is from a good family. Our parents are pleased. Our litter mates are pleased as well."

"I'm sure they are," Dex said soothingly.

For his part, Geema was still scurrying back and forth in the narrow confines of the low-ceilinged room. He hadn't said a word, however now and then he slithered one of his heads in our direction, eyeing us suspiciously when he thought we weren't looking.

“Rest assured we’ll get to the bottom of all this and have those galaxy stones returned to you as soon as possible.” I had to admire Dex’s ability to stay calm. Besides the sheer hours I’d gone without sleep, Geema’s pacing and Jenon’s tapping eroded my nerves like water torture.

“You’ll have that litter by spring.” I added my own assurances.

Dex nodded his approval. He turned to the security chief. “Are there backups of the security footage?”

The chief rose to his many feet. “Backups are done automatically, though it is not common knowledge. I will check the security office.”

“We’ll come with you,” Dex offered.

The last thing I wanted to do was stand on my feet any longer. But we had to find those stones. Not only did we need to clear our names, we also desperately needed the funds from the sale of my jewelry to pay for our ship’s repairs. I only hoped that when this was all over, Jenon still granted us the job.

The security chief scuttled to the door, which whooshed open as he approached. Jenon, Dex and I followed him out into the corridors, Geema and Kreetta trailing behind.

“We need to secure the station,” Jenon said as we headed down the hallways. Ground every craft leaving the station. Search every hold. My daughter’s happiness is at stake!”

“Sir!” The chief’s exclamation sounded like half agreement, half resentment for the work that would entail.

The security office didn’t look much different than any other cave-like room on the station. The only unique feature was the wall of curved view screens showing vistas of every part of the space station. I scanned the images, looking for the corridor that housed our room. After a second the view changed and there it was, dark and quiet, the way it should be.

The security chief busied himself at the controls, twiddling a series of knobs with several of his feet. I could never figure out how the Nemon decided which of their limbs were feet and which were hands. They tended to use their front feet as hands at some times and at others whichever leg seemed handiest. I suppose when you had that many to choose from it really didn't matter. Fatigue made my mind wander and I wondered idly if Nemon favored one foot or another like right- or left-handed humans.

One of the screens went dark and then lit up again with a series of rapidly flickering images. Visions of ships leaving the docks whizzed by, followed by pictures of different corridors. I thought of the number of ships that might have taken off from such a busy port and my heart sank. It would be nearly impossible to catch up with so many craft. But surely a station of this size had insurance, didn't it? If the stones could be claimed on Jenon's insurance, then maybe there was a way out of this. Assuming, of course, that we could prove someone had broken into our room.

"Stationmaster, can the stones be replaced?"

A collective hiss rippled through the room. Dex shot me a warning glance.

"Certainly not!" Jenon had risen to his full height, all legs extended. "The stones were keyed to my daughter's particular body chemistry."

He went on to explain with great embarrassment that Nemon ovulation was a long process, begun by the mating at the wedding ceremony and eased along by the compounds the galaxy stones secreted.

I wanted to ask why, if the stones had been keyed to Kreeta's chemistry, a new set couldn't just be re-keyed, but it seemed like an indiscreet thing to ask. So I merely said, "Oh."

We were so screwed. The stones were missing. They'd been in our possession, mine specifically, when they'd disappeared. The entire lineage of the stationmaster's family was at stake. It *so* didn't look good.

Geema was still pacing and Kreeta was still dripping green ooze on the floor. Everyone else just looked grim. Jenon hung his six heads as the security chief scrolled

through the footage. The knot of tension that had begun at the base of my neck worked itself into a blinding headache. I had a matching knot at the base of my spine and my stomach churned with anxiety.

I didn't really know what to do. I had taken the case containing the stones. I did leave them on the table by the door. Perhaps, had I been thinking clearly, I might have hidden them in a more secure spot. That didn't change the fact that they'd been behind a locked door and should have been safe no matter what Dex and I had been doing. Memories of our sweaty bodies entwined and the sensation of him hard inside me flitted through my mind.

Normally I wasn't prone to irrational acts. It seemed unduly cruel that the one time I'd acted on a long-time fantasy with my business partner, we'd both been punished. Okay, it sounds horribly whiny, but it just wasn't fair!

I shot a glance at Dex, who seemed lost in his own dark thoughts. Then his eyes focused and fastened on the security footage the chief was shuttling back and forth.

"There!" Dex said suddenly.

"I see it," Nansel said. He ran the footage forward again. It was hard to spot in the dark hall and on the grainy footage, but I couldn't miss the shadowy smudge that passed under the cameras.

Geema froze, ceasing his pacing. Kreeta stopped crying mid-sniffle. All of Jenon's heads swiveled in the direction of the screens.

The security chief ran the clip again. I moved closer for a better look. Like being stuck in some giant time loop, I watched us approach the door and disappear inside. Time zoomed by on the code. A couple of other aliens passed in the hallway then the corridors grew quiet.

For a moment I feared my imagination had supplied the shadow. But there it was, a dark, shapeless figure moving low to the ground.

I leaned in closer still, squinting to bring the grainy footage into better focus. Nansel zoomed into the shot. It didn't help much. There was definitely something in the

corridor, but it was hard to tell what it was. It glided down the hall, propelled by many legs, yet I couldn't recognize it as any creature I knew. A shaggy, dark coat covered its body and tendrils of it dragged along the floor as it moved. I watched, horrified, as it paused in front of our door. Something moved under that hairy body...

And then the door whooshed open.

I gaped at the open door, remembering what we'd been doing there in the darkness—the sweaty, sigh-filled darkness. I felt the telltale crimson rush of a blush working its way up my neck to my cheeks. I prayed the Nemon didn't know what the burning in my face meant.

On the screen, the shaggy figure moved into the doorway. From beneath the hairy coat, a digit moved. I saw a flash of silver as an object the size of my jewel case disappeared beneath the shaggy fur.

The creature backed away and the door slid shut. The hairy figure scuttled down the hallway and disappeared from the camera's view.

My blush turned to cold anger. Someone or *something* had interrupted a very private moment. Someone had used our intimacy to commit a crime that might have far-reaching consequences not just for Kreetta and Geema, but for Dex, me and our business. I turned to Nansel. "Are there other surveillance camera backups?"

He was still raptly staring at the image, all six eyestalks or heads swiveled in the direction of the screen, trying to puzzle out what kind of creature the hairy thing might be. "It's possible they might have captured something, but it will take hours to go through all the footage."

Dex pointed at the screen. "We need to know where that...that *creature* went after it left our room."

At least it somewhat cleared us of suspicion, I thought with relief. It just didn't look as if two human bodies could have hidden beneath the disguise. The dimensions just weren't right.

I turned my attention to the stationmaster. As the supervisor of a busy space station, he likely saw every type of species imaginable. "Do you know what species that is?"

Jenon turned two of his heads in my direction. The other four still examined the view screens as if they might suddenly reveal the answer to this unexpected mystery. "None I recognize."

The security chief had cued up the scene again. Dex moved closer to the screen and studied the image. "Are you saying that's some sort of disguise, then?"

Jenon and the chief crowded in beside him. Even Kreeta and Geema scurried closer.

Nansel put all six of his eyestalks close to the screen and peered at the image. For a moment he was silent. "It's impossible to tell for certain from the footage, but I think so."

"Someone went to a great deal of trouble to conceal their identity," I said. Of course they did, I thought. Who would put their real face, or in the case of other aliens, faces, on camera?

"Which means the crime was premeditated," Dex said.

My mind raced ahead, trying to cover all the possible scenarios. "Once someone had the galaxy stones, where would they take them?" I nodded in Kreeta's direction. "If they were keyed to your daughter's biological signature, wouldn't that make them useless to anyone else?"

Kreeta and Geema's heads swiveled in my direction.

"I would suspect they would want to hide them..." Jenon began. Four of his heads turned to look at the young couple, two at Geema and two at Kreeta. "Or otherwise dispose of them," he finished reluctantly.

"No!" Kreeta shrieked.

Geema scurried toward her and entwined all six of his heads with hers. Her green, slimy tears dripped down his necks but he didn't seem to care. Ah, love, I thought. It



was ooey and gooey no matter what species you were. Even a few of his feet twisted around hers, holding her against him. "It's okay, Bucket," I thought I heard him say, but I couldn't be sure. *Bucket?* Maybe the translator wasn't working so well. Or maybe it was an alien endearment that just didn't translate. "We'll find the stones," he was cooing to her. "We'll have our litter. Maybe two."

Two *litters*? If this guy was my newlywed husband I'd be making him sleep in another room. But his calm words seemed to mollify Kreetta. And I couldn't help feeling bad for her. It was her wedding, no matter how bizarre, that had been ruined.

"When we get the stones back, I'll make you the most beautiful necklaces and bracelets," I promised. "Everything will be okay, you'll see." I sincerely hoped I could make that happen.

Jenon and the security chief had their heads together, several of them. I noticed then that when the Nemon communicated, a great deal of it came in body language. They put their eyestalks together and blinked. Our translators compensated for the language, but I wondered how many nuances weren't picked up.

The chief pulled away. He turned to face all of us. "We need to search all the grounded ships."

"You might want to check the garbage chutes," Dex offered. "Just in case anyone tries to ditch the stones."

"We need to go over cargo manifests and try to contact everyone who was at the wedding," Jenon insisted.

The security chief punched a button on the comm and relayed the order. Fine, I thought. Now we could go back to the room and rest while they took the station apart. I was looking forward to being able to fall on my face and sleep for hours.

So I was pretty shocked when Dex said, "We'll help you search."

"We will?" I squeaked.

Dex shot me one of those looks.

“But I’m ready to fall asleep standing up.”

“Bring refreshments,” Jenon ordered. “Stims for our friends.” The chief punched another button on the comm.

The last thing I wanted was more to drink. So far Dex had been poisoned and we’d been drugged. But passing out was a definite possibility if I didn’t do something to wake myself up. I just wanted this whole sordid mess to be over. Dex was right. The only way to end it was to find those cursed stones, make the jewelry and get the hells off this floating tin can.

The stim was cold and bitter, nothing like the warm drink I began every morning with. Still, falling facedown from exhaustion seemed imminent, so I downed the sour beverage. A tingling spread throughout my entire body. It started with the first swallow, burning its way down my throat and then radiating out from my stomach. The effect wasn’t unpleasant, just odd. My drooping eyelids snapped open. Instantly, I felt alert.

Problem was, so did other parts of me. The tingling spread from my stomach, down through my loins to my clit. Alertness became another emotion entirely. I glanced at Dex, remembering everything we’d done in our room. The memory of his muscular body pressed against mine made moisture pool in my pussy. I crossed my legs, willing it to go away. It didn’t.

Looking around the room, I noted everyone else seemed focused on the task at hand. Geema was still consoling Kreetta. Jenon and the stationmaster sipped stim through long straws. Dex had finished his drink. He didn’t look uncomfortable in any way, but I noted he’d slung his belt pack over his crotch, covering the evidence. Or maybe it was just my sex-soaked mind. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. I’d done nothing but think about it since the wedding. Not that I’m a prude or anything, but that amount of preoccupation was unusual.

A troop of armed Nemon arrived at the entrance to the security station. “All right then,” the chief said. “Let’s split up and search the station.”

To my complete shock, Dex agreed to search the trash depots. And so it was garbage picking for us.

“What were you thinking!” I yelled as soon as we were out in the hall, my randy thoughts instantly forgotten.

Dex looked uncomfortable. “We don’t have the authority to be searching civilian ships.” It sounded reasonable enough, but I wanted to pick through station trash as much as I wanted to shoot myself in the head with a blaster on full power.

“We would if we were with security,” I protested. “Someone’s going to be searching ours.”

Uneasiness hunched his shoulders. I glanced into his eyes, but what I saw there wasn’t discomfort.

Fire burned in those green depths. Desire.

He took my arm and hustled me down one of the hallways. After a few feet it branched off into an access corridor that ran behind the bar district. It made sense to begin our search here, where the bars would deposit their trash, as well as recyclables for the autobots to pick up and transport to the station recycling center. The hallway was surprisingly clean. Spotless, actually. The autobots definitely did their job. I wouldn’t even have known it was the trash depot, except for the metal garbage bins beside each doorway. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad, I thought.

But rifling through recycling didn’t seem to be on Dex’s agenda, because he pushed me against the wall and crowded his large body against mine.

“Actually, this is more what I had in mind.”

His body sandwiched me against the wall. I glanced down. Once he’d pushed his belt pack out of the way, I could see what he’d been hiding. Every inch of his muscular leanness pressed against me, including his growing erection. So the stim had affected him the same way.

“Dex, we’re in the hallway.”

He looked around, his gaze centering on a large receptacle. It seemed to block the view from the open hallway. A glance toward the ceiling told me it might also obscure the surveillance camera. He moved me toward it. "I know. I don't care."

I had to admit I was having a hard time caring as well. The tingling in my pussy had become an all-out raging blaze. I wanted to be back in our quarters on the bed where we'd been earlier. Hells, I wanted to be back on our ship, sideways across the narrow deck. I wanted us naked and sweaty. I wanted to feel his huge cock filling me up again, his motion driving me to the brink and shoving me over.

Dex's weight wedged me against the wall. Cool metal caressed my back, bringing me back to reality for a moment. Then the fire inside consumed all other thought. His hard thighs pressed against mine, anchoring me there. His warm hand slid upward under my shirt, sliding beneath my bra. I arched against him, wanting more than just his touch on my breast. I ached to feel his mouth there again. My head spun at the thought of his talented lips against my clit once more. My hands closed around his belt buckle, loosening it.

His mouth closed over mine and his tongue plunged inside. That was more like it, I thought. That's what I wanted, but not just his tongue.

I slid my hand into his fly. He wasn't wearing underwear and my fingers closed around his rigid shaft. My thumb flicked over the tip, feeling the wetness from his precum that told me he was just as ready as I was. Deftly, I maneuvered his cock free. It jutted eagerly toward me.

"Tell me you have more of those condoms," I said in a strained voice.

He groaned as if he was just thinking of it too. He jammed a hand into his pocket. Relief crossed his face as he brought one out. I watched again in awe as it applied itself.

Dex tore my attention away by gripping the waistband of my pants and yanking hard. They cascaded down over my hips to puddle on the ground. My thong followed. I pushed his trousers down to his thighs.

Finally free of encumbrances, I circled my arms around his neck and clenched my legs around his waist. He held me against the wall with his weight.

In some distant part of my brain, I was dimly aware we were in an access corridor and could be discovered at any moment. And it vaguely occurred to me it wouldn't do our professional reputation any good if we were seen. Still, I couldn't find the presence of mind to care. My senses were absorbed by his musky scent, the spicy taste of his lips, the feeling of his hard muscles pinning me to the wall.

His hands slid beneath my butt, positioning me so his cock pressed against the entrance to my sheath. I bucked against him, taking the huge tip inside. I crossed my ankles, pulling him harder into me, the movement pushing him deep. I tensed, but then Dex withdrew slightly and pressed deeper still.

The motion drove me wild. I rocked against him hard, fast, copying his rhythm.

Never had anything felt like this. Dex was like a drug I couldn't get enough of. I'd had encounters before, but none this intense. After running a business with Dex for years, I thought I knew all there was to know about him. I was wrong. I'd never guessed that beneath his cool business sense ran such hot passion.

Dex quickened his pace and I matched his speed thrust for thrust. Lost in the frenzy, I raked my nails down his back. The fabric of his shirt stopped me from breaking the skin, but he moaned low in his throat and thrust faster still. Deep in my core, I felt that rush of heat, that low heaviness that signaled my approaching orgasm. Supported by his arms, I angled my hips, taking him to the hilt.

My inner muscles clenched as the tension shattered. I rode out the waves of intense pleasure, grinding my face against Dex's shoulder to muffle a scream.

He tipped his head back, the muscles in his neck straining as he came. He sagged against me, holding us up by the press of our bodies against the wall. For several long moments we stayed that way, letting our breathing return to normal. Slowly Dex pulled out, holding me around the waist while we disengaged. Even when my feet touched the floor, he kept holding me as if afraid to let me go.

Reality sank in finally and I remembered where we were. Dex seemed to be having the same thought. He rid himself of the condom and cast a glance over his shoulder. Mercifully, the hallway was silent. Bending over, he reached for my clothes and gallantly handed them to me. I searched his face but he kept his emotions hidden.

Suddenly footsteps echoed from somewhere close by, followed by a spattering of alien conversation. Dex hastily reached for his trousers and yanked them back up. He turned toward the sound, blocking me with his body while I made sure everything was tucked in and back where it was supposed to be.

Footfalls retreated down the passageway beyond, leaving us alone. I took a deep breath. Finally, the tension between us got to me. "What was that?"

He followed the sound of the fading footsteps with his gaze then turned back to me. "I don't know."

I couldn't tell whether he was talking about the sounds in the hall or what had happened between us. Part of me didn't want to know. Belatedly, I remembered we had work to do.

"Okay," I said finally, looking around and getting my bearings again. "Let's do what we came here to do, but when we get back to our room, we need to talk about this."

Dex straightened his clothes again, even though everything was already in place. He nodded in agreement.

I shook my head in amazement at what had happened in the past day. "It's got to be something in water..." I would never have acted on my fantasy otherwise.

"Maybe, but we need to find those stones so we can get our money and get out of here." Always reasonable Dex. I depended on his cool head.

I dragged in a deep breath. "You're right. Let's do it."

We started down the corridor, purposely keeping our eyes on our surroundings and not on each other. Trash and recycling depots lined the corridor like a bunch of

barnacles. I wrenched open the nearest one. The store it belonged to must have closed already because it lay empty. Dex moved on to the next, throwing open the lid. I came up behind him and glanced inside. Bottles of all sizes and shapes littered the bottom. Blue sculpted *lodan* brandy vessels, clear plastic bottles of *Ventuvian* spring water and amber bulbs of *tamerian* ale lay jumbled together. I read the name on the back door. "Zori's bar."

Dex glanced at the sign. "Hmm."

By his comment I guessed he was only half listening to me. Apparently his thoughts were still on what had just happened between us as well.

"Next?"

He jerked back to awareness. "Yeah."

We searched two more corridors and came up empty. One more hallway in the bar district to go.

My gaze centered on the next rubbish bin. I really didn't want to look in there. The sign on the hatch read "Ro's Diner". Whatever was in that bin, it likely stank. As I reached for the handle, I noticed something brown and shaggy sticking out of the lid. I grabbed Dex by the arm. He followed my gaze.

Dex brought his head down next to mine as we examined the tiny scrap of cloth. It was only a shred and we hadn't gotten a good look at the disguise on the view screen, but I could imagine a whole costume made of the shaggy material.

"Do you think?" I asked.

He reached for it and yanked it free, turning it over in his hand. "It could be."

"It looks like some kind of synthetic fur."

Dex threw open the hatch, but the autobots had obviously already been there because the rest of the trash container was empty.

"We need to get this back to the security office." My mind raced ahead. "Maybe they can stop the load before it gets to the recycling hub."

“Maybe.”

I looked again at the small piece of fuzz. “It’s not much, but it’s all we’ve got.”

“Hopefully, it’s enough.”



## Chapter Four

Nansel seized the scrap of fur in two of his hands. He brought several of his eyestalks down to examine it. "If the material was created on the station we might be able to trace it."

"Is it possible to search the main recycling hub?" Dex asked.

Jenon and the security chief swiveled their eyestalks together. "Possible," the stationmaster said. "But not easy."

"We could contact the depot and see if they can program the sorting bots to search for this type of fiber," Nansel suggested.

Jenon considered that for a moment. "It still leaves us with the issue of where the disguise came from."

The chief bobbed some of his heads in Jenon's direction. "Yes, it certainly makes a difference whether the disguise was brought to this station for the purpose of creating malice..." Threat hung in his tone.

"Or whether it was put together by someone here," Dex interjected.

"Also for the purpose of theft," Jenon added.

The security chief turned all his eyestalks toward Jenon. "Sir, should I order the hub to reprogram the sorting bots?"

Jenon tapped the tips of several legs against the floor, pondering. Geema and Kreetta were mercifully absent at the moment. I don't think I could have taken any more of Geema's pacing or Kreetta's oozing sobs.

"It would slow down the recycling process, possibly for hours." More tapping. His shifted his weight, crouching and straightening his legs a couple of times.

“Which would incur considerable cost overruns.” This from Nansel. Guess space stations ran the same way as anywhere else. Everyone thought about their budgets, not just little businesses like ours.

“My daughter’s happiness is at stake.” Jenon’s tone said he’d turn all of charted space inside out if it would make her happy.

The security chief sighed, or at least I think that’s what that low hiss was. “Should I also order a trace on the material through the station’s synthesizers?”

“Do it.”

Nansel scuttled off to carry out Jenon’s orders, leaving us with the stationmaster.

“Jenon, I am so sorry for what’s happened.” I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t want him to think we didn’t understand all the trouble the missing stones had caused. Guilt still tugged at me. I couldn’t help wondering if the stones would be missing if we hadn’t been doing the nasty.

Jenon folded his legs under him again, lowering himself to the floor. All six of his eyestalks sagged. “It’s late and it will be awhile before our team receives the results of the search. Why don’t you return to your room?”

I opened my mouth to say more, to profess our innocence once again, to reiterate how regretful I was over the missing gems, but Dex interjected, “Thank you, Stationmaster.”

He gripped my hand and tugged me in the direction of the door. “Come on, Kaia. I’m sure Jenon would like to rest as well.”

I allowed him to pull me into the hallway. The doors slid shut behind us. For a few moments we walked silently in the direction of our room. “We really need to talk,” I blurted finally.

“Sleep first,” Dex said. “It’s obvious we haven’t been thinking clearly.”

I considered that for a moment. “Or we’ve been thinking clearly for the first time ever.”

For a moment the expression on his face was vulnerable, full of veiled passion and a strange desperation. “Maybe,” he said. We’d arrived at our door. It slid open and I stepped inside, eyeing the empty table as I passed.

I turned to Dex. The veil had fallen from his expression. Stark hunger blazed in his eyes.

I said, “Dex—”

He cut me off with a wave of his hand. “Kaia, there’s something I’ve wanted to say to you for a long time.”

I opened my mouth then thought better of it. Whatever he had to say, I wanted to hear it. So I just nodded instead.

“We work well together.”

Okay, that wasn’t what I had in mind at all. I’d been expecting something more like, *Man we really got out of hand there in the depot, but I’ve been dying to make love to you since the day we met.* I wasn’t sure what to say back to that, so I settled for, “Yes, we do. We’ve built a successful business together.”

Now he looked baffled. “A business, yes. And I’ve never wanted to do anything to jeopardize our business. Even if there might have been other things I wanted.”

We were standing face-to-face, our lips mere inches from each other. It would be so simple to close that gap and kiss him. I wanted to feel that soft yet possessive mouth on mine again. I wanted—

The comm buzzed. We sprang apart guiltily.

Dex regained control first and walked over to answer it. He punched a button on the console and a voice boomed out of the tiny speaker. “Security Chief Nansel here.”

“Yes, Security Chief?”

“We’ve found something. Would you like to come back to the station office?”

Dex and I glanced at each other and silently moaned. Turned out we weren’t getting sleep of any kind tonight—or was it today? I’d lost track.

I was beginning to feel lightheaded with fatigue as we walked back to Jenon's office. As the door slid open to admit us, I noted even the Nemon looked exhausted. Nansel's eyestalks drooped ever so slightly. Jenon's many eyes were green-tinged. But it was the brown shaggy mass in the center of the floor that immediately caught my interest.

For one thing, it reeked. Really, really smelled bad. The scents of a dozen types of alien cooking mixed with alien refuse made for a pungent odor. I heard a ventilation fan running in high gear somewhere, but it wasn't helping much.

Nansel held up the piece of fur we'd found in the recycling bin. "It would appear we've found the rest of the disguise."

I gave the matted thing on the floor a wide berth, but I reached out to touch the fur the security chief held in two of his feet. "It looks like the same material."

"It is. We've analyzed the fibers and concluded they came from the same bolt of cloth."

"Cloth made here on the station?" Dex asked.

Nansel bobbed a head in our direction. "We're checking our data against recent purchases of such material. We should know shortly who bought it."

Jenon scuttled closer to the matted fur. He poked gingerly at it then raised a corner, examining its size. With a portion of it off the floor, it became obvious that a small Nemon would have fit comfortably beneath it.

The same thought must have occurred to Nansel because he said, "Sadly, it would appear our culprit is Nemon."

Jenon was studying the disguise with all six of his eyestalks. "And a smaller Nemon at that."

Nansel said, "Hmm," or at least what sounded like the alien equivalent of "Hmm", and bobbed a couple of heads in agreement. A silent look passed between them. If I

didn't know better, I'd think they had a suspect in mind, but neither said anything further.

I could imagine a Nemon about Kreeta's size scuttling around beneath the shaggy fake fur. To a Nemon it might seem like a great disguise, since their race was hard-shelled like beetles. I replayed the scene from the security footage in my mind, embellishing it. A petite Nemon orders a bolt of fabric from the matter-converter, perhaps under a fake name. Or purchases it from someone in the station's *souk*, someone just in port to sell some goods and move on, someone not easily traced. The Nemon waits for the wedding to end and all the drunken guests to depart. It leaves with the bolt tucked in a bag or hidden beneath its body, clutched in a couple of its legs, the way I'd seen other Nemon scurrying about in the corridors. It finds a place where the security cameras don't reach and dons its disguise. Then it's only a matter of jimmying our door and snatching the jewel case from the table.

I blushed again just thinking about what Dex and I had been doing. Something we still had yet to discuss in detail. I looked up to find him watching me with that look of blatant heat that he'd had in the hallway. Something had changed between us, something that could never be undone. Something I really needed to talk to Dex about before I burst inside.

"Do you know who might have done it, Security Chief?" Dex's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Suffice to say we have our suspicions," Jenon said. "But we need to wait until the analysis comes in."

"Any idea how long that might be?"

"Perhaps a standard hour," Nansel said. "No more."

Jenon dipped a couple of eyestalks. "We would be happy to offer you more stim while we wait."

"No!" Dex and I said in unison.

Both the security chief and Jenon straightened from their crouches, eyestalks waving in agitation.

"It's just that too much stim makes me jumpy," I said in my calmest, quietest voice. "And I haven't had much sleep...lately."

They sagged to the crouch I'd come to think of as a Nemon expectant posture.

"You are welcome to return to your room," Jenon said. "We will notify you of any news."

"Thank you, Stationmaster," Dex said. "But if it's okay with you, we'll wait a little longer. We're as anxious to find out the results as you are."

I inclined my head toward the doorway. "However, if it's all right, I'd like to talk to my partner for a moment."

Jenon bobbed an eyestalk. Dex shot me a curious glance.

I walked to the door. It opened to release me into the hallway and I felt Dex's body heat behind me as I left.

"What?" he asked once we were in the hallway.

I glanced up to see a security camera trained on us. I didn't know if it picked up sound as well.

"You were going to tell me something earlier."

Dex followed the line of my gaze. He studied the camera and frowned. "I was, but I'm not sure I want to do it here."

"Could you give me a hint?"

His face relaxed into a smile, that rare expression he gave me when he was truly happy. "Okay, a hint."

I crowded in closer to him so we could speak in hushed tones. Or at least that's what I told myself. Less than an inch separated us. I could smell the spicy scent of his soap, feel the heat of his body. A line of blond stubble darkened his chin. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me but, mindful of the cameras, he kept his hands in his

pockets. I mirrored his posture, trying to look nonchalant even though every hormone in my body was screaming for me to take him back to our room and finish what we'd started. I drew a steadying breath and said, "I'm listening."

"I know the past day has been very strange..."

"Not so strange," I countered.

He gave me an earnest look. "But I want you to know nothing that's happened between us is anything I regret...or anything I hadn't already been thinking of."

A wave of relief passed over me. I glanced at the overhead camera again and stepped in closer still. "I'd been thinking of it too."

The doors to the security office slid open. We sprang apart. Nansel poked a couple of eyestalks outside. "We have our results."

So much lay unsaid between us. I desperately wanted to continue our discussion, but not there under the scrutiny of the security cameras. I wanted to return to our ship, to our privacy and our own beds and see where this new relationship led. Instead we feigned nonchalance and headed back inside among the aliens.

We'd no sooner entered the security office than the door chimed and slid open again. Geema and Kreeta shuffled inside.

Instantly, I felt sorry for the couple. Their eyestalks drooped and they walked with an exhausted shuffle. Yet there was wariness to their waving heads. I guess I'd be worried too, if someone had ruined my honeymoon.

Green ooze no longer dripped from Kreeta's many eyes. Now she just looked devastated. She huddled close to Geema. He hooked one of his legs over her back and made a low clicking sound. She uttered a series of rapid clucks back. Jenon scuttled over and patted Kreeta on one of her heads. She dipped an eyestalk back at him.

After consoling his daughter, Jenon turned all six of his heads in Geema's direction. That concerned me. Geema couldn't be the culprit, could he?

Too busy with his bride, the groom didn't notice.

Nansel turned to the gathering. Five of his heads focused on the group, the other was trained on Geema. Clearly both Jenon and Nansel suspected something of the groom. That didn't bode well.

"We have traced the sale of the fabric to..." He paused and everyone's gaze, Nemon and human, centered on him. "To...Xama. A security detachment has been sent to search her quarters."

The name meant nothing to me. Vaguely, I remembered being introduced to someone at the wedding named Xama.

Kreeta extended all twelve of her legs. Geema's leg slid from her back. Even Jenon scrambled back out of the way. The bride uttered a high-pitched screech that echoed through the chamber. I clapped my hands over my ears. Dex winced.

Jenon clucked something calming to his daughter, but she was still standing with all legs fully extended and making that horrible noise. Geema fell back into a crouch, all eyestalks pulled back in a defensive posture. He made some more clicking noises, but his wife was having none of it. She streaked toward the door. Jenon and Geema trailed behind her.

I glanced at the security chief. His eyestalks stood at attention, indicating wariness, but he resolutely maintained his posture, not wanting to participate in the domestic drama. Dex and I glanced at each other. Obviously everyone but us knew who this Xama was. Now that the shrieking bride had vanished, I dared to ask, "Who is Xama?"

Nansel collapsed his legs in exhaustion. "Xama is Geema's ex-fiancée."

I said, "Oh." Really, I had no idea how these things went with the Nemon. Were their marriages arranged, or did they have love matches like humans and a lot of other species did?

"I take it the relationship did not end well," Dex said.

Nansel uttered that strange sound that I'd taken for a Nemon sigh. "Unfortunately, it did not. For some time it was the talk of the station."



Having spent most of my life on one spaceship or another, I really never had much of a chance to get involved in station life. We came, we sold our jewelry and we left. I had acquaintances of all sorts spread across the galaxy, but none that I could really consider a good friend. I guessed space stations kind of acted like small settlements. How much privacy could you really have? So if Xama and Geema had ended their relationship and Geema had gone on to marry the stationmaster's daughter, I imagined it would make the news.

Curiosity was killing me. I had to ask, "What happened?"

Nansel's eyestalks snapped to attention. He rotated a couple in the direction of the vanished Kreeta. Satisfied the source of the gossip had safely departed, he continued. "Geema and Xama had a wedding planned for the annual festival. Geema is the son of a prominent merchant, but Xama is the daughter of one of our maintenance staff. It was a scandalous affair, but Xama's beauty captured Geema's heart. They planned to marry and leave for Rogan Station to make their fortunes."

Until now it hadn't occurred to me that the spiderlike Nemon might have standards of beauty. I don't know why it hadn't; every species did, after all. "So how did Kreeta enter the picture?"

"Kreeta had always had an eyestalk on Geema, but he'd never returned her affections. Until she went to her father and demanded he offer Geema a job to keep him here."

"Let me guess," Dex interjected, "the position came with certain conditions."

"Exactly." Then, apparently Nansel decided he'd said enough and clamped his mouth shut.

He didn't need to fill in any more details. I could parse it out from there. Jenon had offered Geema a prominent position. The catch was, he had to marry Jenon's daughter and stay station-side. It must have been a tempting offer; a good job and a move up the social ladder. Geema had traded in his good-looking fiancée for all the trappings of a successful life, leaving Xama heartbroken.

And apparently wanting revenge.

Despite the alien-looking participants it had all the makings of a very human drama. And, my devious mind supplied, as the daughter of one of the maintenance workers, Xama might have access to the door codes. All she needed was a disguise.

I imagined the drama unfolding in the corridor, Kreeta bolting down the hall shrieking and crying with Geema and Jenon in her wake. I guessed the love triangle was about to make the news again.

In that moment I felt intense sadness for everyone concerned. I thought of Xama and her lost love. I sympathized with Kreeta and Geema's disappointment over their ruined wedding. I'm sure both Nansel and Jenon likely had other plans for the night after the wedding. Plans that likely involved some well-deserved celebration and rest. The closed doors didn't sufficiently muffle Kreeta's anguished screams, but they were growing fainter. And I could just imagine which direction they were heading.

To Xama's quarters, which, according to Nansel, were already being ransacked by a security detail.

She wouldn't be foolish enough to keep the bounty in her own quarters, would she? Then again, she might. Thinking she'd disposed of her disguise, she might have kept the galaxy stones as a trophy. To make up for what had been taken from her. She might be deranged enough to think that once Kreeta and Geema's litter had been prevented, she might win back her beau.

I glanced at the door, listening to the sounds of dissipating shrieks. "Shouldn't we?"

Nansel sighed. He stretched his legs and collapsed them again in a sign of resignation. "I suppose we should."

Just then the comm beeped. "Sir, you might want to have a look at this." One of the security detail. In the background I could hear the enraged sound of Kreeta screaming and Jenon desperately trying to quiet her. I guessed Geema had given up, or been banished.

Nansel snapped his legs to their tallest height. "Be right there." He whipped a couple of eyestalks in our direction. "Coming?"

Dex and I nodded. Like we'd miss it.

## Chapter Five

We followed Nansel down the cramped hallway, moving toward the outer reaches of the station where the cheaper rooms were located. I hadn't really given much thought to our quarters. By human standards they seemed low-ceilinged and slightly cramped, but by the way the small chambers were packed in on the outer rim, it made ours look like a palace.

I could tell when we neared Xama's quarters by the tangle of Nemon security guards crowding the hall. Geema crouched in a defensive posture in the hallway, surrounded by armored station security. He wasn't going anywhere. Neither apparently was Kreetta. Her father had most of his legs tangled with hers, preventing her from bolting through the door to Xama's suite and taking matters into her own hands...legs...whatever. Her shrieking had stopped, replaced by a menacing clicking kind of growl. The door had been forced open and the room was filled with security. A small Nemon crouched in the center of the tiny room, all twelve legs in shackles. The Nemon equivalent of handcuffs, I guessed.

*This must be Xama.* My eyes snapped to the case on the bed. My jewelry case containing the gems Jenon had given me. It had been opened and examined, the galaxy stones shining.

I glanced at the mesmerizing jewels nestled in the case's velvet interior. Personally, if I'd stolen the stones, I would have dumped the case. But it was obvious Xama hadn't had time or she worried that by disposing of the case, she might lead the authorities to her.

The gems gleamed in the light, stealing my attention. It was hard to believe there was anything so beautiful. They would have made striking jewelry. For a moment I mourned their loss. I had so looked forward to creating works of art with them. I

yanked my thoughts away from the stones. They were far more than decoration. The future of Kreetta and Geema's family depended on them.

Xama rattled her chains. Kreetta surged toward the door, nearly dragging her father with her. He threaded more of his legs through hers, preventing her. Unable to move, she craned all six of her eyestalks in Xama's direction. "Why?" Her scream echoed off the walls.

Geema crouched even lower to the floor, fearing what was coming.

Xama shifted again, her shackles jingling. The security detail tensed. Then her eyestalks dipped, a couple turning in the direction of the jewels on the bed. She seemed to sink in on herself. "I loved him. He loved me. I couldn't let you have him."

Kreetta tried to scramble in her direction. She managed to free a couple of legs from her father's grip. Nansel's security moved toward her. "But I *do* have him! He is my husband!"

*Kreetta must have a sore throat by now.*

"No," Xama said. "You never had him. You stole him. You tempted him with social status and a great job, but he never loved you. It would be unfair to have a litter under those circumstances."

"Xama," Geema pleaded, the first words he'd said since we'd arrived. "Please."

The scorned female continued. She turned all six eyestalks in his direction. "And you bought it all. You forgot all about our love. And for what? For *her*?"

Geema straightened his legs. He turned half his heads toward Kreetta and the other half in Xama's direction. Clearly the groom was torn in his affections. I wondered what he'd say, that he loved Kreetta now or perhaps, despite his marriage to another female, he'd always love Xama. He simply said, "Xama, please, it's over."

*Brute*, I thought. I couldn't see why either of these females wanted him.

Xama sunk lower, nearly sitting on her chains. "Oh no, Geema, this is not over."

“No,” Kreetta said. “It is certainly not over.” She glowered at Geema, if that’s what dipping all six of her heads in his direction meant. Her voice lowered in timber. “You said you loved me.” She uttered a few more of those threatening clicking sounds.

“I—” Geema began.

“Just don’t,” Kreetta said. “Don’t say you love me now. Obviously it wasn’t me you loved. You loved what you thought I could do for you.” The fact that she’d tempted him with better social standing didn’t seem to occur to Kreetta.

She disengaged herself from her father’s legs. This time he let her go. She drifted toward Geema and he backed away from her. “The truth is...” Sadness roughened her voice. “I did love you.”

“We can get past this,” Geema insisted.

Kreetta walked to the case of jewels and gazed down into it with a couple of eyestalks. She kept the others trained on Geema. “No, we can’t.”

“But we’re married!”

She was still gazing at the jewels in the box. Her heads dipped, no doubt thinking of the litter she had expected to have. “We are, but we don’t have to stay that way. In fact, I am not staying that way for a moment longer than necessary.”

“But you wanted a litter by spring.”

“I did.” She whipped all her eyestalks in Xama’s direction. “But as *she* said, it would be unconscionable to have them under such circumstances.”

“But Kreetta...” Poor Geema looked truly upset. His heads drooped. His legs collapsed. Xama said nothing, only continued to stare defiantly, scattering her eyestalks in all directions and keeping everyone in view.

For a moment I worried there might be violence. I shuddered to think how a Nemon divorce might proceed. Hopefully our ship would be fixed by then and we’d be far, far away from this whole sordid affair. Except how were we going to pay our repair bill now that there wasn’t going to be a job here? We’d come to make Kreetta’s wedding

jewels. By the way Dex stood tense and wary beside me, I could tell he was thinking the same thing. I wondered idly if there was ritual jewelry for Nemon separations.

Kreeta uttered a low hiss. Everyone tensed. Then she seemed to sink back on her legs. She turned all her eyestalks in Geema's direction. "Let it go, Geema." The anger seemed to go out of her all at once. "Obviously your heart is conflicted. I can't be married to you now." She flipped a head or two in Xama's direction. "You two need to work this out."

Geema's mouth moved. No sound came out.

Kreeta turned to her father. "And I need an annulment."

Jenon looked as though there were a great deal he would say. He turned an eyestalk in Geema's direction, definitely an unfriendly gesture. He uttered one of those threatening clicks and Geema shied away. This wedding had likely cost Jenon plenty. Judging from the lavish reception, he'd spared no expense. I imagined, by the amount he'd been willing to spend on Kreeta's fertility gems, he'd been anticipating that litter by spring too. I pitied what he'd say to the groom when the witnesses were gone. The stationmaster turned his attention back to his daughter. "Yes, I think under the circumstances that would be wise."

Kreeta looked at Dex and me. "We'll need witnesses."

*Oh no*, I thought. The adrenaline that had kept me going for most of the night had pretty much worn off. I just wanted to go to sleep and pray things looked marginally better in the morning.

"Would you mind?" Jenon asked.

"It's the least we can do," Dex said before I could object.

"Thank you." The stationmaster sounded grateful. I didn't have the heart to refuse.

Kreeta scuttled to the door. It slid open, letting her into the hall. Nansel and his security detail began to hustle Xama from her chambers.

“Bring her,” the bride said suddenly. Everyone stopped. “She should be aware of the pain she’s caused.”

By the way his legs flexed, Jenon obviously didn’t like this idea. Still, he relented. I had no idea how many witnesses it took for a Nemon annulment. I just hoped we wouldn’t be required to eat or drink anything.

So we filed back down the low-ceilinged corridors to the center of the station, where the fancy function rooms were housed. The wedding decorations were still in place. Tiny points of light lit up the room, covering the walls and ceiling. When the wedding had been in full swing, I’d thought they looked romantic. Now they just seemed, well...sad.

The banquet platforms had been cleared and the low tables for eating stacked against the wall. The arch of lights that Geema and Kreetta had stood before was still there. As stationmaster, Jenon had officiated the wedding. Now he took his place again in the center of the arch. Kreetta and Geema stood before him, eyestalks turned purposely away from each other.

Dex and I walked up to stand behind them. Nansel hustled Xama into the room but didn’t approach the arch. Everyone stood quietly, waiting for Jenon to begin.

The ceremony was brief. Jenon uttered a series of clicks in his own language. Kreetta and Geema repeated the clucks back to him. He looked up at us and engaged his translator again. “This union is now dissolved,” he said so we could understand him. He brought forth his palmtop for us to sign as witnesses.

As soon as the formalities were completed, Kreetta bolted from the room. Jenon let her go. Geema swiveled his eyestalks from Jenon to Xama. When it appeared no one had anything further to say, he slunk from the chamber. Realizing no one was going to stop him, he rapidly quickened his pace. That left us standing awkwardly with Xama, Nansel and Jenon.

“Stationmaster, I’m very sorry for how this has turned out, for you *and* your daughter.” I didn’t know what else to say.



Jenon bobbed a couple of eyestalks. "Thank you for your concern."

Apparently we were dismissed so we could go back to our quarters and figure out how we were going to pay the bills on our ship and then depart. But there was one thing I just couldn't leave without knowing.

"Since we've been here, Stationmaster, the food and drink seems to be having an...odd effect on our systems."

Beside me, Dex stiffened. He wouldn't have asked; that I knew. He was too much of a diplomat. But if I was going back to live on a small ship with Dex, I had to know for sure. Was our sudden attraction to each other something that had been growing over months, or the result of some Nemon food allergy?

Jenon's eyestalks straightened. So did Nansel's. Xama, I noted, sank lower to the floor.

"I don't know what you mean," Jenon said.

"Well," I started. "We've—"

Dex's grip on my arm made me stop.

"I did it!" Xama's voice made everyone jump. "I put *tunan root* into his wedding tea. And I programmed it into the brewer in their room."

Jenon and Nansel shouted, "What?" in unison.

Followed by Dex demanding, "What's *tunan root*?"

But I already knew.

Jenon collapsed his legs. His eyestalks wavered. "It's—"

"An aphrodisiac," Xama said.

So it hadn't been in the liquor Jenon served us, it had been in the *jonka* we'd drunk in our room. And if Xama could reprogram the food synthesizer, then bypassing the bio-codes on our door couldn't have been much of a challenge, either.

Nansel shook her, rattling her chains. "Why? Why would you do such a thing to the stationmaster's honored guests?"

“It was plain to see they were made for each other. I could tell by the way they were looking at each other during the ceremony.”

Had we been doing that? Was it clear to everyone but us?

“I just wanted *someone* to be happy,” Xama finished.

Jenon uttered a click of disgust. “I think you’ve done enough meddling for one night.”

Nansel started to drag her away.

“It just brings out feelings that are already there,” she protested. “It doesn’t create them.” She would likely have said more, but Nansel ushered her through the door and into the hallway.

I glanced at Dex and saw something I’d never seen on his face before. A blush. His gaze slid to mine then he looked quickly away.

“Stationmaster,” Dex said. “Would you excuse us? It’s been a long night.”

*Yes, finally, I thought. Let’s go to bed and forget all about this for a while.*

“Of course.”

We left Jenon there in what remained of the wedding chapel.

Despite what had happened between us earlier, we walked back to our quarters in silence. The low ceilings made me feel claustrophobic. I couldn’t wait to get off this station and back to the comfort of our ship. But would they let us leave if we couldn’t pay the bill? Could we work something out with Jenon? Most of all I wanted to be far away from the Nemon, their strange mating rituals and their aphrodisiac beverages.

Our door slid open. Dex held up his hand for me to wait. I stood in the hallway while he checked out the small room, even looking under the bed and in the tiny closet. Finally, he waved me in. The door whooshed shut behind us.

I glanced at the table by the door where I’d blithely left the galaxy stones, thinking they’d be safe. What would have happened if I’d put them in a safer place? Likely

Kreeta and Geema would be working on having that litter and we'd be on our way to our next adventure with full pockets and a repaired ship.

Xama would be left with a broken heart and Kreeta and Geema would be raising that litter in a loveless marriage.

Looking at both sides of this bizarre story, I couldn't tell which ending was better.

"Come on," Dex said, gripping me by the shoulder. "Let's go to bed."

He said *let's go to bed* like he might have said *let's go get lunch*. I didn't know which way to take it.

So I followed him to the bed. The covers were still scattered the way we'd left them. I sat down on the side and took off my boots, Dex sitting beside me to do the same. Surely he wasn't thinking we could just lie down in that bed and pretend nothing had ever happened between us? Apparently that's exactly what Dex thought because he moved to pull his shirt over his head. I waited until his arms were caught in the material and then I grabbed him.

"About what you said in the hallway, Dex..." I put my face next to his and stared at him through the mesh of the material. "Did you mean it?"

I expected him to hesitate, even to evade the question or insist he was too tired to discuss it. Instead, he said, "Yes."

He struggled out of my arms and pulled off the shirt. Then he grasped me around the waist and pulled me down onto the bed. "Yes, Kaia, I meant every word."

"So...all this time when we were working together, you were thinking about it? About me?"

He nodded. "Look me in the eye and tell me you weren't thinking of it too."

I found I couldn't lie. "I was thinking about it, about us. All the time."

"But you never said anything."

“Neither did you.” A long sigh escaped my lips. “I was afraid. I didn’t want to ruin what we had. You know, the whole not-mixing-business-with-pleasure thing. And I was afraid you wouldn’t return my feelings.”

“You settled for smothering your feelings instead.”

It sounded terrible when he put it that way. “So did you!”

“I did. And that was...” He swallowed. “Cowardly of me. And then we came here and I ate those *banta* leaves and drank that tea and it was as if a veil was lifted from my eyes. All of a sudden I knew what I wanted.”

His bare chest pressed against my breasts. It felt strangely erotic to be clothed while he was half-naked. Truth was, I knew what I wanted too. And he was lying very close to me. I looked up into those green eyes and saw myself reflected in them. The vulnerable expression on my face shocked me. It wasn’t like me to rush headlong into matters of the heart, but I had to know. “What now?”

Dex slid his hand beneath the hem of my shirt. He tugged and it came free of my trousers and he pulled it up over my head. Since we’d dressed quickly when we left, I wasn’t wearing a bra. His fingers traced the line of my collarbone and continued down to my breast. “Now we have all the time in the universe to work this out.”

“Actually, we have a giant repair bill to pay in the morning,” I pointed out. “That’s hardly all the time in the universe.”

His mouth followed the path of his hand. His lips closed over my nipple and I gasped at the delicious pressure.

Dex raised his head. “Have faith, Kaia. Things will work themselves out. All we need is a little sleep.”

Didn’t seem like sleep was his intention, but I wanted to believe him. I wanted to think that after a little rest, the whole problem might have vanished.

“Sleep,” I echoed, though it was the furthest thing from my mind. My attention focused on the pull of his mouth on my nipple, which was sending little tingles all the

way to my sex. I arched against him, demanding more. He obliged by moving to tease the other one.

Yanking him back to me, I closed my mouth on one of his flat nipples. Dex sucked in his breath but deprived me of my prize, moving down my body, enticing me with little nips as he went. I gasped when his tongue traced the outline of my bellybutton. I knew where he was heading and I undid my trousers and kicked them away.

Hot breath gusted over my thigh. It was all too much. I couldn't wait any longer.

I sat up, seized the button of his pants and undid it. My fingers found the pull of his zipper. It sounded loud against our panting breaths. His erection strained against my palm, wanting to be free as much as I wanted to be free of my panties. I eased his zipper down and slid his pants over his hips. He shoved them away.

Now he was completely nude and I wore only a lace thong. Dex's eyes darkened at the sight. I lay back and felt the hot wetness of his mouth when he bent forward and grasped the thong with his teeth. He pulled. The fabric tore. With a cry of triumph, he tossed it away.

I moaned as he pressed a soft kiss to my mound and then stifled another as his hot tongue teased my clit. My hands grasped fistfuls of his hair, holding him to the spot, just in case he had more exquisite torture in mind.

Each flick of his tongue brought me closer to the brink. Whatever Xama had put into the food synthesizer, I thought, I ought to take bottles of it when I left.

Dex's cock pressed against my leg. I wanted to feel that thickness inside me, filling me.

"Dex..."

His head came up at the sound. He must have read the desperation in my eyes. I saw the same hunger reflected in his.

He pulled away from me and reached for the pillows at the top of the bed. Flipping me to my stomach, he shoved the pillows under my hips. I turned to find him leaning

over the side of the bed, reaching into the pocket of the jeans he'd just discarded. He rummaged around for a moment then surfaced holding one of the tiny condom squares. He positioned it in place and a sigh escaped his lips as it applied itself. Then I felt his body heat again behind me.

Just the feel of him lingering at the entrance to my sheath brought another hot rush of wetness. He eased inside so slowly I nearly screamed. He pulled back a bit and then pressed deeper. I moaned at the sensation of all that taut flesh inside me.

Dex rolled his hips. I shoved back against him, taking him deeper still. His hands gripped my butt, holding me in place, allowing me to get used to the feel of him again. His sack brushed against the backs of my thighs as he began to move.

Each stroke drove me closer to the precipice. Flesh slapped against flesh. Sweat ran down the center of my back as the automated ventilation system tried to cool our heated skin.

Gripping my hip with one hand, Dex reached around to tease my clit once more. The sensation of him inside me coupled with the friction from his fingers sent me over the edge. I bucked back against him, taking him deep as my inner muscles clenched around his cock. Orgasm rolled through me like a storm breaking.

Dex's panting breaths warmed my ear as he quickened his pace. Every muscle in his body tensed. He groaned deep in his throat as he came before we collapsed onto the pillows.

For a long time we lay where we'd fallen. "That was..." I couldn't quite find the words. Sex had never felt like this. Not with anybody. I'd never been so swept away, so single-minded.

"That was too fast," Dex said. He pulled away from me for a moment, got rid of the condom and mined his jeans for another.

He pushed the pillows back to the top of the bed and laid me down on them. Slowly he lowered his body on top of mine.

*Whatever was in that tea...* I thought again, then the brush of his lips stole the rest of my thoughts.

His tongue slid past my lips, kissing me leisurely, savoring my taste and feel. I brought my arms up around him, pulling him closer. My hands slid over his shoulders and hard muscle moved beneath my palms. I reached farther until I could cup his tight buttocks in my hands. His erection pressed between us, tempting me with more of what was to come.

But he seemed intent on taking it slowly this time. He pulled back a bit, robbing me of the feel of that muscular flesh. His mouth left mine and he gazed down at my face. "Close your eyes," he whispered. As I obeyed, he gifted me with a soft kiss on each eyelid. His hair swept across the side of my cheek as he moved to kiss the tip of my nose and then tease my lips with a featherlight brush of his.

I gave him a tender kiss of my own and then spread my legs in invitation. Dex might be content to take it slow, but I wanted more of him. Right now.

He chuckled at my impatience and pressed gently between my legs. My body, already eager again, stretched to accommodate his girth.

We moved against each other, stoking the fire slowly at first. I rocked against him, setting the pace, and he gave me what I wanted. Every push and pull of his cock coiled my desire tighter. Tension shattered all at once. A cry of triumph escaped my lips. By now I was sure everyone on the station knew about us. Dex uttered his own hoarse yell as he came. More for the gossip mill, I thought, and suppressed a chuckle.

I looked up into his eyes and saw a reflection of my own sated happiness. His lips touched mine in another of those soft kisses then he rolled to his side, taking me with him. I pillowed my head on his shoulder, watching as the condom rolled itself back into a tiny square before Dex tossed it in the sanitary. He reached for the covers and drew them around us.

"Sleep, Kaia," he whispered in my ear. I snuggled deeper into the crook of his shoulder and did just that.

## Chapter Six

The comm jarred me out of the deepest sleep I'd had in months. It took a moment to orient myself. I was lying on my side, all of Dex's large, warm body cradling mine. His heavy arm circled my waist, as if he was afraid I might try to escape. He raised his head at the sound and then looked down at me. A slow smile crossed his face.

Another loud beep broke the silence. "We'd better answer that," I said reluctantly.

Dex crossed the room and hit the receive button. "Stationmaster Jenon invites you to breakfast," the message bot proclaimed.

We glanced at each other. "The last thing we need to do is eat or drink anything else here," I said. "We have some business deals to wrap up." A business deal that had gone bad, I wanted to add, but I kept that to myself.

Again that slow smile, the one that promised so much. Whatever happened after this, things sure weren't going to be the same on our little ship. "Oh, I don't know. Another few drinks of *jonka* might make the business part of it a lot more pleasurable."

I couldn't help smiling back. "If nothing else, it'll put us in a good mood. I suppose we should go."

Dex sent a message that we'd meet Jenon shortly.

Showered and our bags packed, we checked out of our room and headed down to Jenon's offices. To our surprise, the stationmaster himself opened the door.

"Come in." Jenon bobbed several heads in our direction. "I trust you rested well."

Did the whole station really know? A blush was already working its way up my neck, but Dex managed to say blandly, "Yes, thank you, we did."

"Good then." He craned two eyestalks in the direction of a veritable feast that had been set out on a low table in his waiting room. Taking his place at the head of the table,



he crouched and invited us to join him. We sat on the floor and crammed our legs under the table.

“Please.” Jenon freed a couple of feet to use as hands and laid into the meal. Dex and I did the same, both of us carefully avoiding the *banta* leaves and anything that could possibly be construed as tea. The last thing we needed was another public display.

The food was delicious. Nothing seemed poisonous and I didn’t feel any effects from the bubbly water that fizzed in bulbous flasks.

Satisfied, Jenon sat back on his hind legs. Business, it seemed, was about to resume.

“How is Kreeta?” I felt obligated to ask.

“My daughter is holding up surprisingly well.” Jenon seemed a little bemused.

“That’s good news.”

Jenon dipped a couple of heads. “Nansel has taken the day off to take her to the amusement wing for a diversion. She seemed...happy at the prospect.”

“Nansel?” I squeaked before I could smother the comment. Dex gave me a sharp look. I had no idea how to tell a Nemon’s age, but I had the impression that though Kreeta seemed mature for a Nemon bride, Nansel was older still.

“Not a match I would have thought of,” Jenon said. “But a good one, nonetheless. We’ll see how it develops, I suppose.”

If Kreeta was happy, I imagined Jenon would be paying for another wedding soon. I suppressed a smile.

“What of Geema and Xama?” Dex asked.

Jenon uttered the strange Nemon version of a sigh. “It would seem the couple is really communicating for the first time in months. Geema is intent on winning back her heart, if she will have him.”

Personally, I’d have booted him out an airlock, but I kept that thought to myself. It was obvious Xama loved Geema. Go figure.

Jenon's eyestalks straightened. "Though Xama committed a crime and Geema's behavior was less than honorable, I am content to allow them to leave the station together, as long as they do not return."

It was a severe punishment, but not the worst. It seemed beneath his hard shell, Jenon had a soft heart.

At least Xama wasn't in a jail cell. At least Geema and Xama could be together wherever they decided to settle. "That's probably for the best." I didn't know what else to say. It seemed most of last night's problems had been resolved...except for how we were going to pay for the repairs to our ship.

Jenon's head swiveled in our direction. "Kreeta greatly admired your jewelry."

"Thank you, Stationmaster. I regret I wasn't able to make her wedding set."

"Yes, well...she wondered if you might fashion some necklaces for her using whatever stones you might have available."

*This* I hadn't been expecting. Even at my usual rates it wouldn't cover our repair bill, but it would help. Dex and I glanced at each other. He nodded. "Of course, Stationmaster, we'd be happy to."

I thought that might be the end of the negotiation, but Jenon said, "I understand you have an outstanding bill for some repairs to your ship."

I opened my mouth to protest that we'd expected to have the means to pay for that with the funds from Kreeta's wedding jewelry, but Dex beat me to it.

"Yes, that's true."

Jenon sighed again. "My daughter's happiness means a great deal to me, and she has had a trying couple of days. If you would be willing to craft the necklaces before you leave, I will strike the repair bills from the record."

I spoke for both of us when I said, "That would be most agreeable."

It meant working all day and well into the night, but by the next morning, Kreetta had her necklaces and we had a freshly repaired ship. A box of tea arrived at the loading dock, just as we were about to leave. Dex and I burst out laughing.

Still, I was glad to see the station disappearing in the view port and happy to finally have Dex all to myself in the privacy of our own ship.

Once the craft was safely on autopilot, I headed for the galley to grab a bite. I intended to work up an appetite. I found Dex hunched over a tiny bottle of *tunan root* extract, our analyzer in his hand. He glanced up as I entered.

“So what’s in it?”

Confusion crossed his face. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

He nodded. “It’s just *tunan* pretty much. There are a few compounds that might have mild aphrodisiac effects, but nothing that would explain...”

“What happened between us?”

“Yeah.” He looked a little embarrassed.

“Weddings make people crazy,” I said, mostly to make him feel better.

He got up and crossed the galley to stand in front of me. “Maybe they do.” His hands grasped my waist. The warmth of his skin penetrated the thin material of my flight suit. He brushed his lips across mine, teasing me with the thought of what was to come. And I could imagine so many things.

“Or maybe it was just us,” I ventured.

“Maybe it was.”

We stared at each other, not knowing what else to say. Dex moved first by lifting me up onto the metal table and wedging himself between my legs. His tight jumpsuit kept no secrets. Every inch of his rigid length pressed against me. I circled my arms around his torso and pulled him close.

We kept the temperature cool in the ship to save on fuel, but I could feel the heat pooling low in my belly, demanding to be released. Dex seemed just as eager as he brushed my lips with a soft kiss and reached for my zipper.

No way was he getting ahead of me on this, I thought, and yanked his zipper down as well. Neither of us wore underwear beneath the skintight suits. We shoved our clothes into a pile on the galley floor. Before leaving the station we'd both gotten our booster shots, so nothing stood between us now.

For a moment, I hesitated. We were away from the station, far from the compounds we'd ingested. Would it be the same?

I gazed up into Dex's eyes and saw a feral hunger reflected back at me. A desire as strong as my own. He kissed me again, a deep and thorough kiss. His hand slid downward to cup my ass and position himself against me.

That small movement brought a rush of cream to my pussy. I thrust myself onto him, taking every inch of his hard cock inside. Already slick from wanting, my body let him slide in deep.

I began to move frantically, trying to rush toward the orgasm I could already feel building. Dex tightened his grip on my butt and began moving in long, slow strokes, in and out of me. Each push inside felt divine, every pull out felt like an eternity until we came together again. He raised his body higher, changing the angle. The movement of his pelvic bone against my clit created a delightful friction. I leaned back onto my elbows for balance and increased the pace. Dex laughed aloud at my impatience, but he happily obliged.

Heat and tension built low in my core. I shoved myself against him, taking him to the hilt. The motion sent me over the precipice. A scream ripped from me, echoing through the galley and down the corridors. My inner muscles clenched around him and I felt a hot rush of moisture as he came with a hoarse shout.

Dex collapsed against me. His body weight pushed me back against the cool metal table.

“Gods, Kaia.”

I tasted the saltiness of his sweat as I pressed a grateful kiss against his chest. I’d never been a screamer before. Apparently, I was now. I let loose a sigh of deep contentment, grateful there was no one else around to hear.

Nothing surrounded us but the vast expanse of the universe outside.

And open space told no tales.

## **About the Author**

Multi-published author Piper Leigh had been nominated for numerous awards. She's always had a fascination with the dark and mysterious and enjoys writing about larger than life characters like vampires, ghosts, zombies, angels...and sexy blue aliens.

Piper welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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