

SHIFTING PRIORITIES

MATING FRENZY

ANNE
KANE

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Shifting Priorities 4: Mating Frenzy

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Anne Kane

Mykael knows that his co-pilot is also his bond-mate, but she refuses to acknowledge it, and his patience is running out. Megan doesn't want to settle down, but she has no problems using the Imperial were-panther to sate her sexual urges. When their ship malfunctions they are forced to land on a primitive planet, where they find themselves exploring more than the unique landscape.

Prologue

Legend has it that long after the fall of civilization in the 23rd century, a special breed of mutants were created with the two-fold purpose of defending His Imperial Highness, the ruler of all Earth, and to protect humanity. Known as the Imperial were-panthers, they could shift from human to panther form at will.

In time, the heirs to the Imperial Dynasty became corrupt. They adopted an opulent lifestyle and demanded ever-increasing amounts of tribute. The Imperial were-panthers saw that humanity suffered greatly from their greed. The shifters were torn between their duty to the throne and their loyalty to mankind. They tried to reason with His Imperial Highness, but he refused their counsel, threatening to banish the shifters from Earth if they continued to defy him.

And so, the Imperial were-panthers decided to protect humanity with one last heroic act. In a bloody battle, they wiped out the Imperial Dynasty. From that day forth their entire race disappeared back into legend and myth, and no one has seen an Imperial were-panther since.

Of course, Megan knows better...

Chapter One

"That's right. Take it deeper." Thrusting his engorged shaft into the moist cavity of her mouth, Mykael wound the silken strands of Megan's dark hair around his fingers.

Lust coiled in the pit of his stomach as her talented tongue slid tauntingly along his shaft. Her long, dark lashes swept up, and she smiled around the mouthful of cock before she reached up and wrapped her fingers around his balls, massaging with just enough pressure to send erotic darts of need shooting down his spine.

Mykael sucked in a deep breath and clenched his teeth, forcing down the beast that rose within him. She knew the effect she had on his control, and that knowledge danced in the mischievous depths of her eyes. Circling his hips, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the fiery heat that swept through him as she worked his cock and balls.

She was his bond-mate, whether she admitted it or not. Only the scent of a bond-mate's lust could cause an Imperial were-panther to shift involuntarily, and he'd found himself doing just that more than once in her presence. They'd been partners aboard the *Wanderer* for two galactic cycles now, and lovers for even longer. His patience was at an end.

With one last deep thrust, he withdrew his shaft from her mouth and pulled her up against him to claim her mouth. She opened her lips to his demanding tongue, allowing him to plunder her sweetness. He could taste the lingering traces of himself on her lips, and his cock hardened even more in anticipation.

Scooping her up in his arms, he tossed her onto the sleeping platform, following her down to reclaim her lips as he stroked the familiar curves of her body. He nipped her lower lip with his teeth, and she snarled softly even as he licked the tiny hurt away.

"Don't get any ideas, old man. I'm not one of those submissive mates like your friend has."

He licked his way back down to the hollow of her throat. "If you're referring to Jexx, I don't think there's a submissive bone in that girl's body." He could feel her pulse beneath his tongue. "And quit referring to me as an old man. I'm in my prime, and more than male enough to keep you satisfied."

Megan's expression softened and she giggled, circling his shaft with her hand. "You certainly are, but you're decades older than me."

"Which makes me experienced enough to handle a little hellion like you." He could smell her sex, the ripe aroma urging him to bury himself balls-deep in its slick warmth, but he wasn't in the mood for a quickie. He had a plan, and he needed her worn out enough to sleep right through his little foray on the ship's navigational computer this evening. He captured one peaked nipple between his lips and scored it with his teeth. Megan whimpered and arched her back, offering herself up to his lustful attention. He loved the way her gray eyes clouded with passion when they made love.

He clamped down firmly on his libido, keeping his lust under control while he worshiped her body with his hands, his lips, and his tongue. Working his way slowly toward her mound, he enjoyed the feel of her thrashing against him. She took great pleasure in every minute of his attention, letting him know how much she enjoyed their sexual liaison. But she refused to even discuss a permanent bonding.

She gasped, a wordless plea escaping her lips. He dipped his tongue to taste her belly button, swirling it around the tiny dimple as he mapped the width of her hips with his hands.

"Not too old to make you beg, now, am I?" He captured her gaze, holding it as he moved his mouth lower and slid one finger into the sweet heat radiating from between her thighs.

"Ye Goddess, no! You're the best lover I've ever had." She bucked her hips upward to impale herself on his finger, and he raked his thumb across the hard nub of her clit.

"So what do you want?"

"I want to be fucked."

He shook his head, raking his finger down the wall of tender flesh inside her. "Not good enough. What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me." Frustration edged her reply.

Mykael chuckled. "Be more explicit. I am fucking you. With my finger."

"Damn it! I want your cock buried deep inside my pussy, and you know it."

"Oh, I do know it." He lifted her legs effortlessly, holding them wide to probe her slick entrance with the head of his cock. "The smell of your wet pussy is particularly intoxicating this moon phase." He knew his smile was less than reassuring.

Megan raised one shapely eyebrow. "Not hoping I'm in heat, are you? Because I'm not so stupid as to let you impregnate me."

He rammed himself deep with a powerful thrust of his hips, ignoring her gasp at the sudden entry. "Stupid enough to let me impregnate you? Make no mistake. When I start our child growing in your womb, it's going to be because we both want it."

Oh, she was in heat all right. And although he didn't plan on getting her pregnant just yet, he did intend to enjoy her increasing sexual needs. The feel of her tight channel clamping down on his engorged shaft sent lightning darts of lust through him, and he rocked his hips, shafting her in a slow, steady rhythm.

Megan writhed beneath him, a thin sheen of sweat covering her sleekly muscled body. The tip of her tongue peeked out from between parted lips and her breathing shortened to quick gasps.

Mykael picked up the pace, feeling the thick covering of black fur sprouting across his shoulder blades. Faster. Harder. Megan's pussy clamped down on his cock and he felt her climax ripple through her with the force of a meteor burst, taking him with her. He let out a roar of triumph as his seed jetted deep inside her.

Still joined, he collapsed onto the platform beside her, holding her close to bury his face in the silken tangle of her hair. He could feel the tiny aftershocks running through her as they lay beside each other, eyes closed as their breathing slowly returned to normal.

"That was amazing, old man." A tired smile curved the corner of Megan's lush lips. "Now let me get some sleep."

Mykael brushed a light kiss across her forehead. "Sleep tight, my love. I'll be right here."

He listened to her breathing as it slowed, becoming soft and even as she drifted off to sleep. He waited for a long time after that, just enjoying the feel of her naked body snuggled up against him while she slept.

When he was sure she wouldn't wake, he carefully untangled himself and quietly padded across the cabin, grabbing his uni-suit off the floor. Time to go set his little surprise in motion.

He hummed softly as he strode down the corridor and made his way to the bridge. After keying in the access code, he strode to the control panel and let the seat mold itself to his form.

He could feel a satisfied smile curve his lips as he programmed the new coordinates into the *Wanderer's* navigational system. Tome had raved about the beauty and seclusion of the Galion system's fifth planet after he and Jexx had spent an entire moon cycle there to celebrate the anniversary of their official bonding.

He took a quick peek at the security monitor to make sure Megan hadn't woken up yet. If his luck held, she wouldn't notice their altered course until he surprised her with the details over a romantic dinner tomorrow night.

A warning light started to flash, signaling a problem with one of the auxiliary engines, and Mykael disabled the audio with a quick flick of his wrist. Damn secondary systems had been acting up more than usual this trip.

He ran a quick diagnostic on the flagged component, shaking his head in frustration when it showed nothing wrong. They didn't even use that module unless the primary engines both shut down simultaneously.

When they made it back to their homeport, he'd analyze the options and see if it might be easier to replace the engine. They were now patching the patches, and incidents like this one were becoming the norm.

Satisfied with their new course, Mykael turned the controls back over to the autopilot and stood, stretching his arms above his head. Megan was right, he was two and a half standard decades older than she was, but were-panthers aged much slower than humans did, and technically, Megan wasn't completely human. Doctors had been forced to use cybernetic implants to save her life after an accident when she was a teenager.

They would both have many more decades to enjoy each other's company. All he had to do was convince her to accept the bonding. Humming an ancient lullaby, he headed back to the sleeping quarters.

* * *

Megan ran her fingers through Mykael's thick black fur. She loved the sound of the deep rumbling purrs emanating from his immense chest as she sat on the galley floor beside the massive black panther, finger-feeding him his dinner.

She selected a chunk of raw meat and held it out on the palm of her hand, marveling at how such a large creature could be so gentle. Mykael grasped the chunk between two front teeth, and tossed it up in the air, opening his jaws to let the tidbit fall into his waiting mouth.

Megan reached for another chunk and they repeated the process until the plate was empty. After their first solar cycle together, Mykael had admitted he'd invented the need for her to feed him chunks of raw meat to accustom her to his panther form, but by then she'd grown to enjoy the intimacy of the shared ritual and they'd decided to continue it.

"All gone, you big glutton." She ruffled the fur behind his ears, and tossed the empty dish into the recycler. "Time for some exercise. Let's see if an old fellow like you can keep up with me."

Mykael snarled, showing off a mouth full of sharp white teeth, and Megan laughed. "Yeah. I know. You're not old. Prove it, then. On your feet."

Megan enjoyed their daily runs together. They jogged the decks of the ship, he in his panther form and she as human. The exercise kept them both fit when they had to spend extended time in the close confines of the ship.

Mykael let her set the pace tonight, loping along beside her like a giant house pet. She glanced down, admiring the way his sleek muscles flowed smoothly under the black pelt. His massive head came level with her waist and he nudged her gently from time to time as they ran. They worked their way from the bridge deck down to engineering, and were almost back up to the bridge when the ship lurched suddenly to the left, throwing both of them to the deck.

Megan landed heavily on top of the panther, grateful for his quick reflexes, which allowed him to position himself to break her fall. She rose shakily to her feet, leaning on the wall for support. The deck still listed on a sharp angle beneath them, and she looked down at Mykael. "What the hell was that?"

His dark eyes reflected her confusion for a second before a wave of magic washed over him, obscuring him from her view while he shifted form. His naked body emerged from the shimmering cloud, and Megan admired the thick ropes of muscle that covered his chest. He was far from being the decrepit old man she liked to tease him about. Following her line of sight, Mykael glanced down and waved his hand impatiently, conjuring up a tight uni-suit.

Megan struggled not to laugh. Completely covered, he looked even sexier than he had standing there naked.

The metal plating of the deck shuddered beneath them as the ship lurched for a second time, and the sound of the engines rose to a shrieking crescendo.

Megan raised her eyebrows. "Well, don't just stand there. Make yourself useful and go fix whatever it is that's making that Goddess-forsaken racket. You don't think I keep you around for your looks, do you?"

He had the audacity to laugh. "Actually, I do. That and the fact that I let you run your fingers through my fur." He swaggered off in the direction of the drop-tube that led to engineering. "You can go clean up the galley and I'll see what the problem is."

Megan licked her lips as she watched his tight butt disappear around a bend in the corridor. She played a dangerous game, balancing her craving for his touch with her fear of losing her independence. Lately, it had been getting harder and harder to resist the sexy were-panther. If she wasn't careful, she might find herself agreeing to the whole bond-mate thing and to hell with her own needs.

Chapter Two

Mykael stared at the diagnostic readout. According to the glowing diagram on the screen, while he and Megan were busy with their nightly jog around the ship, the engines had malfunctioned.

He instituted an emergency shutdown of both primary engines, his hands flashing across the control panel. An eerie silence descended throughout the ship. He pulled the auxiliary program up, a sinking feeling growing in the pit of his stomach as he recalled his annoyance with the malfunction the previous evening. Activating the ignition sequence, he primed the first of the four small backup engines.

Holding his breath, he initiated startup. The engine purred on-line without a hitch, and he let out a relieved sigh. Engine number two also behaved admirably, roaring quickly to life without a hitch. Engine number three coughed at first, but quickly settled down and gained full power.

He pulled up the ignition sequence on number four. The engine caught right away, its deep throbbing hum adding to the noise in the small space. He let out a heartfelt sigh of relief. When they got into the next port, he'd make sure the *Wanderer* got a full work over. He stood and started toward the doorway.

The number two engine sputtered. Dread knotting in his gut, Mykael strode back to look down in alarm at the control panel. Red lights appeared as the engine died, followed rapidly by number four. Warning lights flashed across his screen and he quickly terminated the two programs.

Damn it all! He ran a hand through his hair and tried to calculate how long it would take them to limp to their destination on the two remaining auxiliary engines.

Too long. He cursed the capricious Goddess of Lust. He'd been counting on a romantic getaway to win Megan over.

"What's going on?" As if on cue, Megan appeared in the doorway. "I thought you'd be right on my tail."

"Wish I were." The memory of her lovely ass, naked and available as she knelt in front of him, flashed through his mind. He shook the image away and gave her a rueful smile. "We seem to have cascading engine failure."

Megan frowned in alarm. "Cascading failure? I've never heard of that, but it doesn't sound good."

"It's just an expression. Means the engines are failing one after the other, hence cascading. I had to shut the main engines down completely to prevent further damage. The main engines will have to stay off line until I can do a physical check on them."

He gestured at the control panel. "Then when I brought the auxiliary engines on line, two of the four crashed on me. Looks like they should have been replaced in the last overhaul."

"But we still have two, right?" She chewed on her lower lip, a nervous habit she'd been trying to break since he'd met her.

"Yes, but they're not going to get us anywhere soon. Our best bet is to find somewhere close where we can put down repair the main engines." He glared at the control panel before striding toward the door. "I need to check the navigation charts, and see if there are any suitable planets nearby."

"We're nowhere near any of the space stations or even inhabited planets." A cute frown wrinkled Megan's forehead, and Mykael had to resist the urge to reach out and touch it. "Come to think of it, we're not on course for any of our routine stops." She tilted her head. "Why is that?"

Mykael sighed. So much for a romantic surprise. "Because we were heading for the Galion system. I booked us some downtime at the recreation facilities there. Figured we were due for a break. If we can get the ship fixed up soon, we might still be able to make it." He gave her a rueful grin. "If there's a planet or asteroid with enough gravity

to hold us down, I can do a quick check, and hopefully get the main engines back on-line. The lodge has a no refund policy, and I dropped a pile of credits for the holiday."

Megan stared at him, her lovely mouth open, and he felt a grin curve the corner of his mouth. "First time I've managed to render you speechless since you found out I was a were-panther. Things are looking up. Now I just need to get the engines to cooperate. Let's go see about a landing spot."

Megan snapped her mouth closed and headed down the corridor toward the drop-tube. "A holiday sounds like a damn good idea. What are you waiting for? Let's get this thing fixed and be on our way." She turned and paused, one foot resting on the edge of the drop-tube. "You didn't plan this little holiday to convince me to bond with you, did you?"

Mykael grinned. "Would it work if I did?"

"No."

"Then let's just say I didn't." He paused. "Megan?"

"Yes?"

He lowered his voice to an intimate growl. "We are bonded. You can feel it in every cell of that luscious body of yours. You just haven't admitted it yet."

Megan stuck out her tongue and stepped into the tube without bothering to answer, her tinkling laugh floating up to tease him. Mykael shook his head and stepped into the tube behind her. The woman was going to drive him crazy.

Stepping onto the bridge, he strode over to the navigation station. Megan watched him from her chair at the co-pilot station, her lips curved upward in an amused line.

He stalked over and grasped her by the wrists, pulling her into his arms to plunder her lips, his tongue thrusting in to lay claim. Before she had time to recover, he let her go, leaving her gasping for air with a look of utter confusion on her lovely face.

Good. Suppressing a grin of pure male satisfaction, he pulled up the navigation chart for this sector and projected it onto the forward vid screen, studying it carefully. "Let's see what we've got. Our minimum requirements are enough of a gravity field to

keep us on the surface and an atmosphere, preferably breathable." He glanced at his sexy partner. Megan avoided eye contact, focusing her attention on the vid screen. He noticed she was chewing on her bottom lip again.

The first two planets in the system were little more than balls of molten rock, and a quick inspection of the third showed an atmosphere of highly explosive gases. The fourth and fifth planets had surfaces composed entirely of water, which ruled out any type of landing. He turned his attention to the sixth planet.

The surface looked similar to their home planet, with an atmosphere of oxygen and hydrogen listed on the chart. "The sixth planet looks promising. Let's see the details." He tapped the commands into the computer banks and watched as the data scrolled up on the screen.

"Gravity at point eight of Galactic standard. Atmosphere is a little richer than we're used to but definitely breathable. Temperature around the equator comfortable enough for short periods of time." Megan looked over at him. "I think we have a winner."

"Good." Mykael stared at the data scrolling up the screen. "We should be able to set the *Wanderer* down on one of those grassy plains without too much trouble, and get her fixed up." He turned the vid display off, and settled himself in the pilot's chair. "Let's get this bucket of space debris moving."

"Yes, sir." Megan palmed the control panel in front of her, keying in the coordinates of the planet. "Trajectory locked in. Engines set to max capacity." Amusement lent a musical lilt to her voice. "Which isn't very fast on two auxiliary engines."

Mykael could feel the vibrations in the deck beneath his feet when the ship changed course. At their current limping rate of speed, it would take them almost a full day before they reached the sixth planet. He watched Megan's supple body as she worked at her station, making sure their course was stable before locking it in and turning the controls over to the autopilot.

He felt a wicked grin curve the corner of his mouth. There should be enough time for a little erotic exercise before they settled down for the night.

* * *

"That certainly wasn't our smoothest landing ever." Megan released her safety harness and pushed the heavy fall of hair from her face. "But I guess under the circumstances, the fact we can walk away from it makes it a good one."

"Amen to that." Mykael pushed his own safety harness aside. "Here's hoping that's the last landing I ever have to make on two auxiliary engines."

Megan stood, stretching her arms over her head. She could feel the muscles in her neck tightening from that last sudden stop. A session under the massage lights was definitely in the works before the day was out. But first, they needed to take a look at the engines. She turned to Mykael. "So what's the plan, chief?"

He stood, and she schooled her features to remain blank, giving away none of the heat that flooded her at the sight of his magnificent physique. He had the body of an interstellar cage fighter, combined with the feral splendor of all the Imperial were-panthers. Heavy muscle roped across every inch of his mouthwatering torso, which tapered to washboard abs and lean, muscular hips. His thick dark hair fell in a sleek line to his shoulders, and emphasized the angular beauty of his face. Amber streaks swirled within the depths of his tawny eyes as he stared at her.

"The plan is to get those main engines back on-line ASAP and get our asses off this planet."

"I got that." She tore her gaze away and initiated the ship's shutdown procedures. "I was looking for details."

"Ah." Mykael snaked an arm out to wrap around her waist, and she squeaked in surprise as he pulled her in closer. "Get into something warm. The surface temp is a little lower than we're used to, and I'll need you outside with me." He lowered his voice. "Need some help changing your outfit?"

She wriggled her hips against him in a deliberately tempting motion. "I somehow think it would take longer with help." Ducking out of his embrace, she

sauntered out the doorway and headed to the locker room. She could hear Mykael following her, but she resisted the urge to turn and look.

She knew he considered them a couple in the true meaning of the word. Bonded, by Imperial were-panther standards, but the truth of the matter was, the thought scared the hell out of her. It was one thing to pair up with him on the ship, each of them using the other to satisfy their sexual needs. She accepted that, even enjoyed it.

Bonding would add a whole other layer of complexity to their relationship. She'd seen it in the lives of the other females who'd graduated from flight school with her. They'd worked their tails off to qualify as interstellar pilots, only to be confined planet-side when they gave in to the urge to start a family. At the first sign of an expanding waistline, even the most liberal males felt justified in banishing their mates to a life of dirtside drudgery. She had no intentions of being left behind to change diapers and listen to a bunch of miniature Mykaels whining and fighting.

She stepped into the locker room and hesitated for a second before choosing the lighter of her two working suits. The malleable fabric easily fitted over her shipboard outfit, and she activated the front seal before pulling on her gloves.

Across from her, Mykael did the same before grabbing his tool belt and strapping it around his waist. He crossed to the airlock. "Ready?"

She nodded, and couldn't resist answering with a saucy, "Aye, Captain."

An appreciative grin curved his handsome face, and she knew he'd get even for that one later. "Let's go, then."

They stepped into the airlock and waited for it to close behind them before releasing the hatch to the outside. Standard safety precautions dictated that they never let the ship's recycled atmosphere become contaminated by planetary environments.

The outer hatch cycled open and Megan stepped out onto the planet's surface. Although the air was cooler than she'd anticipated, the scenery was stunning. Lush green fields ran for as far as the eye could see, the local grasses reaching up to the height of her waist, with the occasional flowering bush adding colorful accents.

"This is breathtaking." She turned to Mykael. "I wonder why none of the colonies have claimed it?"

He shrugged. "Probably too far from civilization. It's not on any of the trading routes, so getting supplies delivered would be costly. Unless it was one of those back-to-nature groups, I doubt many would consider it worth the trouble."

"Well." She held her arms out and did a little twirl. "Their loss is our gain. We have this lovely planet all to ourselves."

"And I'd love to go explore, but first I'd like to get the engines fixed."

"Spoilsport!" She plucked a handful of the lush grass, crushing the tender stems in her hand. "Doesn't that smell wonderful? It's so fresh and green."

He smiled, the smile of an indulgent panther for his mate's whims. "If you help me get this thing into shape, we can take a quick look around before we lift off. We do have reservations to keep, remember?"

She stuck her tongue out, realizing she'd resorted to that immature response for the second time in less than a day. She'd better be careful, or Mykael would realize that she was having a hard time controlling her sexual urges. "I remember. I just thought it would be nice to look around a bit. You could shift and take a real run."

Mykael looked at the grassy plains, and she could see the longing in his expression. She knew he rarely got the chance to run in open fields. They spent most of their time cooped up aboard the *Wanderer*.

"It would be nice to feel blades of grass beneath my paws instead of steel deck plating. First, though, we need to repair the ship. Having the main engines down makes me feel vulnerable. I don't like the thought of not being able to escape."

Megan nodded. She knew vulnerable wasn't a feeling that Mykael would be happy with. She reached for his hand, twining her fingers through his as they walked to the opposite side of the ship.

She'd jump at the chance to be his bond-mate, if it weren't for the loss of independence. She'd never be happy being left behind in domestic bliss while Mykael took off with a new partner.

A new partner. Just the thought made her hackles rise, and she had to resort to measured breathing to calm the sudden rage that filled her.

The main engines were situated beneath the main bulk of the ship, and the access hatch squeaked alarmingly when Mykael released the locks and swung the panel open. He glanced back at Megan. "I need to have a talk with the maintenance techs when we get back. They should have replaced these seals this when the *Wanderer* went in for routine maintenance. I'll go first. Give me some space before you follow."

Megan nodded, adjusting the tool belt at her waist. She watched Mykael as he scooted through the narrow opening, disgusted with herself when she felt her pussy dampen at the sight of his tight butt.

What the hell was the matter with her? She couldn't stop thinking about sex. Sex with Mykael, to be exact. She spent every waking moment fighting the urge to jump him in the most unlikely of places. She could just imagine the scuttlebutt back at the base: *Space jockey raped by oversexed co-pilot.* Ought to look great on a resume when Mykael kicked her sorry ass off his ship.

"You coming?" Mykael's voice echoed eerily through the metal tube.

"Right behind you." Megan pushed her disturbing fantasies down into the back of her mind where they belonged, and slid into the narrow tube.

Chapter Three

"Well, that certainly wasn't as easy as I thought it would be." Mykael sat on the left wing of the ship, his long legs dangling in the grass. "Those damn particles shouldn't have been able to lodge themselves so far inside the housing."

"And yet they did." Megan stretched her legs out in front of her, her body almost hidden by the tall grasses. Her discarded worksuit lay in a heap on the outstretched wing. During the time they'd spent working on the engines, the planet had warmed up to a more pleasant temperature. "Shouldn't there be better screening to stop space junk from getting lodged in there?"

"The chances of that happening are next to impossible." He held his hand up to silence her. "I know. It happened. But it's an anomaly. Normally, the nose of the ship deflects the space junk and it fans out behind us. Only minute particles, too small to be caught up in the slipstream, linger near the ship. This was a fluke."

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter. We managed to clean them out, and we didn't even lose a lot of time." She rolled over and buried her nose in the grass, inhaling the scent of lush green vegetation. "So how about that run before we mount up again?"

"We should go back inside and run a complete diagnostics panel to make sure the engines are going to cooperate." He threw a wistful glance toward the tree line.

"Oh, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. We can check the engines after our run. The ship's not going anywhere before we get back." She lowered her voice to a sexy whisper. "Please? We've been cooped up onboard for too long. I need to stretch my legs."

"Sounds like a splendid idea." He waggled his eyebrows. "How about we make a game of it? You know how much fun we had the last time we decided to play tag on a planetary surface."

"That wouldn't be fair." She kept her face hidden in the grass so he wouldn't see her intentions. "You know you're going to shift, and your panther is much faster than I am."

"How about I give you an advantage? Say a five-minute head start?"

"I have a better idea." Megan pushed to her feet and took off running toward the edge of the clearing. "I start now, and when you finish shifting you can come and find me."

She couldn't resist glancing back over her shoulder. Mykael stood beside their ship, hands on his hips and a rueful grin on his face as he watched her run toward the safety of the woods. "You little minx! When I catch you, you'll pay for this."

Megan laughed, pausing to taunt him. "I'm counting on it, old man. I'm feeling kind of frisky down here in paradise."

With a darkly wicked grin on his face, Mykael disappeared behind a sparkling cloud of magic and Megan turned back to her running, intent on getting to the cover of the woods before Mykael's panther emerged from that pretty cloud.

She reached the line of the trees and changed direction, darting off to the left. The loud roar of a panther echoed in the clearing behind her, and Megan shivered in anticipation. She'd avoid him as long as she could, but in the end, he'd find her. And take her.

Crouching to improve her thrust, she sprang into the air, reaching for a low-hanging branch. If she could get off the ground, it would be harder for him to track her by scent. The tips of her fingers brushed the underside of the limb, and she landed back on the ground, her knees buckling under the shock. The branches were just a little too high.

She took a quick look behind her. No sign of Mykael yet, but she could hear him, crashing through the underbrush without making any attempt at secrecy. Getting to her

feet, she decided against making another try for the branch. She started jogging toward the sound of running water. A simple trick, but Mykael couldn't track scent in running water, even in his panther form. She giggled, clamping a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound.

The sound of water grew louder, and she altered course. Small rodents scampered out of the way, and Megan wondered if the noise she made startled them, or if they could sense the predator stalking her.

She heard the soft cough of the panther behind her, and quickened her pace. Bursting out of the tree line, she scrambled to a stop, her mouth opening in a silent exclamation at the sight in front of her.

Where she'd expected to see a fast-running stream, a spectacular waterfall spilled down a sheer rock face. The clear water sparkled in the sunlight as it splashed into the shallow lake below, and schools of tiny rainbow-colored fish darted to and fro in the shallows near the edge. To her left, a green and black striped lizard sunned itself on a rock just out of reach.

Behind her, the crashing grew louder. Mykael was catching up. She kicked off her boots, rolled the legs of her suit up to her knees, and stuck one foot into the water. It felt surprisingly warm, and she quickly waded in, being careful to avoid the sharp rocks scattered across the bottom.

By skirting along the edge, she maneuvered her way to the bottom of the waterfall without getting her clothing wet. Despite the precarious footing on the wet rocks, she managed to scramble up and perch on one of the rocky ledges that jutted out of the rock face.

A loud roar signaled Mykael's approach, and she swiveled her head to watch for him, a delicious shiver of need working its way up her spine.

The panther stalked into the clearing, his dark fur shining under the planet's hot sun. Thick ropes of muscle slid smoothly under his tough hide as he paced to the edge of the lake. He raised his massive head and stared directly at her, a loud snarl proclaiming his displeasure. He wanted her, and he intended to have her.

She felt a small smile crook the corner of her mouth, and she shifted her position to let one leg dangle enticingly in the warm water. Mykael didn't like water, and he'd be annoyed that she'd taken refuge on the far side of the beautiful lake. Letting the amusement sparkle in her eyes, she flicked her toes and sent droplets of water arching through the air in his direction.

Mykael paced along the far shore, his ebony head pivoting to keep her in view. He lashed his tail back and forth in irritation, and Megan admired the graceful movements of his sleek body. Even in cat form, he was all male. And all male arrogance.

Turning away from her, he chose one of the tall trees that bordered the small lake and stretched up against it to his full height, his forelegs splayed high above him. With a leisurely disregard for her, he proceeded to sharpen his claws, shredding the bark into a hundred tiny strips that hung in tattered disarray.

He dropped to the ground and turned to stalk to the edge of the lake, holding her gaze with his own. Lifting one paw, he touched it to the surface of the water, jerking it back almost before it got wet. Another roar, louder this time, informed her of his irritation. He laid his ears back, flat against his head, and roared his frustration before he plunked down on the grass and stared at her.

"Not that easy. If you want me, you're going to have to come and get me." Megan giggled. "It's only water." Mykael lifted his head and snarled softly. "No, you come to me." She shook her head. "Unless you want to admit defeat."

The panther slowly raised himself to his feet. Crouching down low, he leapt directly into the lake. Megan gasped in surprise as two hundred and fifty pounds of water-hating cat hit the center of the lake, spraying moisture in all directions. Striking out with his strong front paws, the big cat paddled his way to the opposite shore, glowering at her with every stroke.

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't make you jump in the lake and get your furry ass waterlogged. You could have shifted first." Megan inched her way along the shelf, wondering if she should stay put or risk trying to escape back to the far side of the lake.

Another quick glance at Mykael, and she realized he would be on top of her before she could make her move. Time to give in gracefully. She sat down and watched his body slice through the water.

Reaching the rock face, Mykael hooked his sharp claws into the rough edge of a ledge and pulled himself out of the water. Then he shook, sleek black fur moving wildly from side to side. Water droplets flew everywhere, drenching Megan.

"Hey, that's not funny!" She jumped to her feet, but there was nowhere to go. By picking the lower ledge, Mykael had effectively blocked her only escape route.

A low, purring growl sounded from the back of his throat as he advanced. She reached out to run her hand down the side of his thick neck, but he batted it aside with one paw, the claws carefully sheathed.

"Feeling out of sorts now, are you?" She knew she shouldn't, but Megan just couldn't resist teasing the soggy cat. "Maybe if we go back to the ship I could flash dry your fur?" She felt the corner of her lip twitch upward. "If I back-combed it, we could give it some volume."

Mykael leapt onto the ledge beside her, and the smell of damp cat made her wrinkle her nose. Before she could move out of the way, he knocked her to the ground. Holding her down with one gigantic paw, he grasped the back of her suit in his mouth.

"You wouldn't dare! Put me down!"

Unperturbed by her outburst, the big cat hopped back down to the ledge at water level, Megan held firmly in his mouth like a wayward kitten.

"I'll get even with you for this." Megan flailed helplessly, dangling by her waist from his strong jaws. If the damn were-panther thought she'd let him touch her after this, he had another think coming. One of her biggest fears was loss of control. She knew he was bigger and stronger than she was. She didn't need to have him prove it.

Mykael arched his neck and launched himself into the lake. Thankfully, he skipped the big jump this time. Megan could imagine how uncomfortable that would have been. He paddled back to the opposite shore, and the weight of her wet body hanging from his jaws didn't appear to slow him down. The colorful fish darted out of

his way, and if she didn't know better, she could have sworn they were laughing at her. For someone who hated water, Mykael certainly had a strong stroke.

She relaxed and stopped fighting, letting her body hang limp from his jaws. She could feel her libido responding to his proximity, and she cursed her own traitorous body.

Since they'd left their last docking station, she'd become less and less able to control her lust. All she could think about was Mykael. In the nude. On top of her with his cock buried deep. Behind her, like a panther mounting his mate. His face buried in the curls covering her sex as he used his tongue to bring her to orgasm.

It was downright embarrassing, and she cringed at what Mykael would think if he knew how shamelessly she lusted after him, especially since her original taboo still held. She didn't want a mate, be it him or anyone else.

Her body jarred as his paws hit solid ground and she tensed, expecting him to drop her. To her surprise, he kept his hold, walking up onto the shore before he gently laid her on the ground. Using one large paw, he rolled her over, carefully holding her down with the other paw on her chest while he licked every visible surface, his tongue rasping against her skin.

She loved the feel of it, warm and rough, and she wriggled her way out of the soggy suit, kicking it aside so that she lay naked beneath the huge beast. His eyes darkened, the amber streaks swirling in the tawny background as his tongue swept over the pebbled peaks of her breasts, doing a thorough job before moving lower. She whimpered, knowing she should put up at least a token fight, but want and need built quickly, shooting darts of liquid heat down her spine.

She reached up and buried her hands in the thick fur of his neck, arching her back as he flicked his tongue over her stomach. Her breath caught in her throat and she watched his thick muscles bunching and sliding beneath the sleek, black hide. He lifted his head to stare into her eyes before he returned his attention to her naked body, working his way lower.

A desperate whimper escaped her lips as the tip of his tongue ghosted across her mound. His warm breath feathered across her, sending shivers of anticipation swirling through her.

She swore she could see a grin on the huge cat's face when he stood and slowly stretched to his full length, covering her like a warm blanket. With a leisurely disregard for her renewed struggles, he rubbed himself over every inch of her body, his fur silky soft against her naked flesh. His body vibrated, deep purrs running through him as he made sure she knew exactly who she belonged to.

With a final lick, he rose and stalked to the side of the clearing. He turned to face her, pinning her in place with his gaze. She watched as the cloud of magic shimmered over him, hiding his gorgeous body from her view while he shifted.

Megan whimpered, feeling bereft and out of control. She liked control, thrived on it, but lately her body betrayed her at every turn. She gathered her feet under her and pushed herself up to a sitting position. Standing would be better, but she wasn't sure she could manage that just yet. Her lack of control disgusted her. When had sex become such a priority in her life?

She watched Mykael emerge from the cloud, gloriously naked and aroused, and the sight did nothing to help calm her raging libido. The man should come with a warning label. She snorted in disgust. They'd probably slap the label across that tight butt of his, and who could read it with that kind of distraction?

She shook her head. Where did that thought come from? If she didn't know Mykael so well she'd suspect him of doping her food supply with hormone enhancers. Then again, maybe he knew more than he was telling. It wouldn't hurt to confront him. She needed to figure out what was happening.

"Still a bit damp, I see." He reached down to stroke a hand through her hair. "Wouldn't want you to catch cold."

"Or you." She tried not to stare too hard at his engorged shaft. "You seem to have mislaid your fur coat."

He dropped to his knees and suddenly they were face-to-face. "I can think of other ways to keep warm."

"So can I." Even to herself, she sounded horny. "Lately that seems to be all I can think about. You have any idea why that is?"

He shrugged, but she noticed he avoided making eye contact. "Because I'm irresistible?"

She shook her head. "You've always been damn sexy, but I managed to keep my hands to myself on occasion. Now you just look at me and my pussy gushes. I'm starting to wonder if you've doped my food with some kind of fuck-me drug."

"Fuck-me drug?" He let out an offended bark of laughter. "What the hell kind of man do you think I am?"

"I'm sorry." She could see the hurt in his eyes. "I know you wouldn't do anything like that, but I feel like I'm going crazy. All I have to do is see you, and I get the urge to rip my clothes off and attack. It's disgusting."

Mykael's expression softened and he reached out to trap her hands. "It's your hormones reacting to our bond." He held up a hand to forestall her outburst. "I know you don't want to believe it, but we are destined for each other, and nature has a way of making sure we follow through. Call it a bond, your biological clock, whatever you want, but the simple truth of the matter is that we've been together for over two years, and your body is telling you that it's time to settle down and start a family."

Megan wanted to laugh at him, pretend it was all a big joke, but she had the sinking feeling that he wasn't kidding. She searched his face for any sign that he wasn't serious. "But I don't want to start a family. I want to keep running around the galaxy at your side. That's all I've ever wanted." She couldn't help the flash of anger in her eyes. "And there is no way in hell I'm going to let you bring another female on board to replace me."

Mykael's eyebrows shot skyward. "What makes you think I'd bring another female on board?"

She had to admit, he really did look confused. "Because that's what happens. I agree to the whole stupid bond-mate thing, and the next thing I know I'm pregnant and sitting dirtside on some backwater planet waiting for you and your new..." She paused, struggling to control a sudden urge to claw someone's eyes out. "Your new partner to remember to come back and check on me."

Mykael pulled her forward gently, her hands still trapped inside his. "Is that what's troubling you? You should have told me." He captured her chin in one hand and ghosted a tender kiss across her lips. "Human males might be that stupid and fickle, but that is not the way Imperial were-panthers treat their mates. There is no way I would desert you to bring our children into this world alone. If I'm lucky enough to get you pregnant, you stay right beside me where I can protect you at all times. We have our own midwives and I'll make sure one is available to help you every step of the way."

He purred loudly, flashing her a white-toothed smile. "So now that that's settled, you have no more excuses. You'll agree to be my bond-mate?"

Megan looked at him, and saw only honesty and love in his eyes. He wasn't lying just to get her to agree, he was serious. He had no intention of stranding her on some dirt-strewn planet while he took off with some skinny bimbo. Feeling rather foolish, she gave him a tentative smile. "So all this lust I'm feeling is nature's way of pushing me to accept you as my bond-mate?"

He nodded. "It's called the mating frenzy, and it rarely manifests. Most couples just naturally bond before it becomes this intense and let nature take its course."

"And until I accept it, I'm going to be throwing off pheromones like a cat in heat? And driving you to fuck me silly?"

A wry grin curved the corner of his mouth. "That about sums it up."

"Well, then." She stretched up on her knees and placed her hands on his shoulders. "I might as well enjoy it for a bit before I give in."

She took his mouth with all the pent-up passion and frustration she'd bottled up since they'd left dock. He wanted a mate; she'd make sure he knew he wasn't getting a submissive little kitten who'd cower beneath him.

She bit down on his lower lip, demanding he open his mouth. He snarled softly in reply, moving one hand to the back of her head to hold her still while he kissed her back. She returned the snarl and thrust her tongue into the moist cavity of his mouth, the familiar taste driving her need even higher.

He brought his tongue down to slide along the side of hers, forcing her to tilt her head. They feasted on each other, dueling silently, tongue on tongue, lips smashing against lips, their bodies hard against each other as they both gave in to the instinctive needs raging through them.

Mykael wrapped one muscular arm around her and fell backward into the soft grass, pulling her down on top of him. She loved that he was confident enough to let her set the pace. Some males were all about dominance and keeping their mates in their place. She'd never tolerate that kind of relationship. The hard length of his cock pressed into her belly, and she squirmed against it, deliberately teasing him with every move.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love the feel of your soft skin sliding over me?" His nostrils flared as he inhaled her scent.

"Not in so many words." She shifted her weight to her side and slid her hand down between them, her fingers brushing against his thick shaft. "But there are other ways to figure out what appeals to you. For instance..." She circled her thumb and forefinger around his cock and stroked from the base to the tip. He sucked in a mouthful of air, his eyes darkening with lust. Megan grinned. "You liked that, didn't you?"

"Almost as much as you're going to like this." With a casual show of brute strength, he flipped her and pulled her up onto her hands and knees. He positioned himself behind her, the tip of his cock prodding her wet pussy. "So are you ready to accept the bond?"

"That's not fair. Fuck me first, and then ask."

"I don't think so." He circled his hips and Megan gasped as his cock slid over her sensitive clit. "When you agree, we need time to plan our bonding ceremony. I'd like to invite all my fellow were-panthers."

“When I agree?” She turned her head to throw him a mocking look over her shoulder. “What happened to if I agree?”

A wickedly amused light shone in his eyes. “Did I mention the mating frenzy? It just gets worse and worse until you give in. It’s definitely a question of when, not if.”

Megan would never admit it to him, but she felt so horny right now, she’d be willing to say just about anything to get him to sink that luscious cock of his inside her.

“If I agree, are you going to fuck me?”

“Like a horny were-panther smelling his first female in heat.” He ran his hand down her ass and slipped one finger inside her, stroking her heated inner flesh. “You’re so hot already, I’ll bet I can get you to climax before I’m all the way in.”

Chapter Four

Mykael knew how hard it was for Megan to pretend she wasn't going crazy with want. It wasn't fair to make her wait, but he was tired of pretending that their lack of an acknowledged bond didn't matter.

He wanted her to accept the bond willingly, and he wanted to hear the sound of little feet scampering across the decking. If she didn't surrender soon, he'd be too old to chase their kits around the ship.

He leaned forward to wrap one arm around her, cupping one firmly rounded breast in his hand. Squeezing gently, he scored his thumb across the sensitive tip.

She whimpered, instinctively pushing her gorgeous butt back against his engorged shaft. He arched over her, his larger body covering her like a blanket. His cock was firmly wedged between her buttocks, and he thrust his hips, letting her feel the slide of his cock against her soft flesh.

He dipped his head to whisper in her ear. "Ready to admit you're mine?"

"You know I am." She squirmed beneath him, and he had to grit his teeth to keep from plunging himself into her moist heat. "But you'd better remember what you promised. If you so much as glance at one of the bimbos on the docking ring, I'll neuter you myself. With a blunt piece of scrap metal."

"You know I've never looked at another female since I met you." He scraped his teeth across the tender skin at the nape of her neck. "And besides, with you beside me giving them that evil glare of yours, they're going to scamper out of the way before I even get a good look."

He felt her relax, just a bit, and he reached down with one hand to aim himself at her slick entrance. Grasping her hips, he entered her with one powerful thrust, forcing his cock through the tight folds until his balls snugged up against her magnificent ass.

Damn that felt good! He loved the short, whimpering sounds she made when he slowly pulled himself out and then thrust back in again. He leaned over and wrapped one arm around her chest to hold her steady while he plunged in and out. Faster. Harder. He couldn't hold himself back, picking up the pace, nipping at her neck as his cock moved in and out of her slick sex.

Megan bucked beneath him, meeting him thrust for thrust. He could hear her breath coming in short pants, and her hair streamed down both sides of her head, hiding her face from his view. In all his long years, he'd never had a lover like her, so eager to try new positions, so lustfully full of the joy of giving and receiving pleasure.

Perhaps his body recognized her from the start, because he'd never looked at another female since she'd entered his life. And he never would. Imperial were-panthers mated for life.

He felt his balls draw up tight, getting ready to spill his seed as primal hunger vied with the heat racing through his body. He resisted the urge to sink his teeth into her shoulder to hold her still, a throwback to his panther genes.

"Oh, sweet goddess of light!" Megan let out a high-pitched wail and her pussy convulsed around his cock, squeezing it tightly.

Mykael let out a roar of triumph as his own orgasm washed over him and waves of indescribable pleasure raced through his body. He plunged hard one last time, his seed jetting into his bond-mate in hot spurts. Collapsing onto the thick carpet of grass, Mykael rolled sideways to avoid crushing her beneath his larger frame.

They lay side by side, their breath coming in short gasps. "I think two would be nice." Megan stared up at the fluffy white clouds drifting across the sky above them.

"Two what?" Mykael looked at her, confused.

"Children."

He stared at her, bemused. Until now, she'd refused to even discuss a permanent bond between them. Now she was dictating how many kids they'd have. "Don't you think we should make it official, before we start a family?"

Megan rolled over and looked up at him, mischief dancing in her beautiful eyes. "Well, we'd better get a move on it then, old man. You're not getting any younger and I don't fancy raising your little hellions by myself."

Mykael smothered a grin and tried to sound stern. "If you don't quit referring to me as old man, I'm going to fuck you until you beg for mercy."

Megan slid her tongue out. Capturing his gaze, she slowly licked her lips, leaving them glistening. "I dare you to, old man."

"You were warned!" Mykael drew her back into his arms, his cock already hardening.

* * *

A long time later, Mykael stood and reached down to help Megan to her feet. After passing her rumpled suit to her, he glanced at his naked body and conjured up a clean suit.

"I don't suppose being your bond-mate would allow me to do that?" A rueful smile touched her lips as she pulled her suit back on. "It would save so much time. Shopping. Cleaning. Finding my suit after one of our running romps."

"No. But if it helps any, you can just run around naked. I wouldn't mind."

"Lecher. We'd never get anything done if I were naked all the time." She sounded amused.

Mykael helped her fasten the suit before he grasped her hand, threading his fingers through hers. They headed back down the forest path, hands swinging like a pair of flight training recruits. It felt good, and he set an easy pace, in no hurry to get back to the ship. They'd be late for their stay in the Galion system, but since she'd already agreed to be his bond-mate, there was no need to hurry.

An uneasy feeling filtered through his newfound happiness, and he looked around, his panther senses prickling. At first, he couldn't tell what was wrong. The sun

filtered down through the leafy canopy, warming the ground and the grass, and small shrubs that lined the path waved in the gentle breeze. It almost felt like the woods back on his home planet.

Then it hit him. Silence. No birds singing in the trees. No small rodents scurrying beneath the foliage. The trees themselves seemed to be holding their breath. "Something's not right." He pulled Megan closer to his side and broke into a ground-eating jog. "We need to get back to the ship."

"What's wrong?" Megan frowned, confusion clouding her eyes as she stumbled to keep up.

He opened his mouth to reply just as the sky behind them exploded, brilliant flashes of red and orange lighting it up like the fireworks celebration on Empire Day. The ground heaved and shook with the force of an earthquake, throwing them both to the ground.

"Meteor shower! Shit!" Mykael surged to his feet. Turning to Megan, he held out a hand to help her up. "The info on the safety-net said they weren't going to hit for another moon cycle! Damn incompetent forecasters!" He gave her a quick once-over to make sure she wasn't injured. "We need to get the ship off the surface. We're sitting ducks down here."

Megan wiped her face, managing to smear the dirt rather than remove it. "Let's get to it then."

Mykael smiled, proud of her reaction. No whining. No complaints. She just dusted herself off and went to get the job done. Their children would be magnificent.

He kept a wary eye on the sky as they jogged the rest of the way back to the ship. Several bright lines streaked downward, heralding meteor strikes on other parts of the planet, but for now their luck held. When they rounded the last corner leading to the meadow without any more close calls, he heaved a giant sigh of relief.

They didn't waste any time getting to the ship, grabbing their discarded suits off the wings before entering the hatch and cycling the airlock. Megan looked up at him, a

worried frown marring her brow. "We should have checked out those engines before we started screwing around."

"Probably, but then we wouldn't have had all that fun, now would we?" He opened the inner hatch and let her precede him into the ship. "Besides, who knew the damn meteors would arrive this far ahead of schedule."

Megan tossed her oversuit into the cleaning unit and pivoted to face him. Grasping his shoulders, she stood on her tiptoes and placed a big, wet kiss on his lips. "That's for making me feel like the luckiest female in the galaxy."

Before he could react, she turned and dashed through the doorway, leaving him staring after her with a bemused smile on his face. He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling life was going to get real interesting from here on in. He followed her at a more sedate pace, heading for the bridge.

* * *

"Ready main engines one and two for ignition." Mykael glanced over at Megan. "And cross your fingers. Radar scan shows multiple incoming meteors, some big enough to do serious damage."

"Aye, Captain. Fingers crossed." Her hands raced across the co-pilot's control panel as she made sure all the systems checked out ready. Reaching up, she pulled her safety harness on. "Main engines one and two ready for ignition."

She held her breath and watched Mykael key the ignition sequence. The main view screen showed the meteor strikes getting closer and closer, their gaseous tails burning bright in the oxygen-rich atmosphere.

The decking began to quiver as the engines powered up, and the lights on the boards flashed erratically for a few heart-stopping moments before they settled down to glow a steady green. She let out her breath in a relieved huff, and let herself relax. The repair job was good.

She looked over at Mykael, watching him prepare the ship for takeoff. Despite her ongoing teasing, she had to admit that he was far from being an old man. After their romp on the surface, her libido was satisfied, at least for the moment. His lovemaking

left her feeling sated and wanted. She smiled to herself when she recalled the shock on his face when he realized that she thought he'd leave her planet-side to look after any offspring. It was that look more than anything else that convinced her he was serious. He intended to play a very active role in raising their children.

The ship listed slightly to starboard as it strained to break free from the grassy meadow, and Megan's stomach lurched for the split second it took the artificial gravity field to kick in. They rose rapidly through the atmosphere, and she watched the ground receding below them on the holo-screen. Once they cleared the upper reaches of the atmosphere, the ship would be able to maneuver out of the path of the meteors much easier than it could right now.

"Shit! Incoming." Mykael glared at the control panel in front of him. "We're not going to be able to outrun this bunch." He spared her a glance. "Hang on, darling, this ship's about to execute some fancy footwork."

Megan fixed her gaze on the view screen, watching with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Tiny orange dots appeared directly above their position, expanding into the thin red and orange lines that signified incoming meteors.

"Bring the auxiliary engines on-line, and let's see if we can teach this old gal to dance." Mykael gave her a crooked grin. "I paid good credits for that vacation and we're damn well going to make it."

Megan felt a reluctant smile curve the corners of her mouth, admiration replacing the dread she'd felt. She keyed the auxiliary engines and initiated the startup sequence. "Aye, Captain. Auxiliary engines activated." The man thrived under pressure. She glanced down at the status board. They were still well short of clearing the atmosphere, and the incoming meteors blanketed the sky above them.

"I'm going to try to slip through that hole in the center of the bunch." Mykael pointed to an opening directly in the middle of the incoming meteors. "If we can squeeze ourselves into there, the meteors should pass by us without doing anything more than singeing our wingtips."

Megan looked doubtfully at the spot he'd indicated. "That's not much of a hole."

He turned, his eyes shining. "No, it's not. If it were a big honking moon-sized hole, it wouldn't be so much fun! Make sure your safety net is fastened down tight."

Megan rolled her eyes. "Great. If you get us killed, I'll never forgive you." But she had to admit, his confidence made her feel better.

"Then I'll have to make sure we survive." Mischief danced in his eyes. "That kid of ours is going to need us."

"We don't have any children quite yet."

"You sure there isn't one on the way? You're not feeling that insane urge to jump me again, are you?"

She jerked her chin up and looked into his eyes. "No, but that doesn't mean anything." She was fairly sure he was bluffing. Of course she wasn't horny, they were in mortal danger!

"Really? Care to make a little wager?" That annoyingly superior tone made her want to smack him upside the head. "You might want to get the med-unit to run a pregnancy scan when we're clear of these meteors."

He turned back to his station, pulling his own safety harness down and clipping it into place. "And speaking of meteors, time to kick it into gear here."

His fingers flashed across the control panel and Megan could feel the engines responding. He used the auxiliary units to maneuver the ship without slowing their ascent. She had to admit he was one hell of a pilot. The first of the incoming balls of molten rock hurtled directly toward them, its image front and center in the view screen. Her fingers tightened involuntarily on the arms of her seat, and she forced herself to smother a scream.

Mykael leaned forward, tension in every line of his lean body as he focused his attention on the controls. The ship slipped smoothly to the right. The meteors disappeared to the left, hurtling on toward the surface, but more were already in sight.

It seemed like eons to Megan, strapped into her seat and unable to do anything to influence the outcome. Time and again, the fiery balls of rock and gas appeared out of nowhere, blazing toward them with deadly intent.

She had to trust Mykael to keep them safe, and the loss of control didn't sit well with her. She clenched her jaw, and curled her fists into tight balls, forcing herself to retain a semblance of calm. Goddess knew she wanted to run, to scream, to do something. Anything. Anything but sit here and pray that Mykael didn't make one tiny mistake.

Mykael seemed oblivious to her. His body swayed and jerked as he finessed the engine controls. The ship spun and slipped smoothly in every possible direction, dodging the incoming threats. She admired his total concentration and his amazing ability to anticipate where the next threat would materialize. Twice, the ship shuddered as one of the meteors glanced off it, but the outer plating held firm, and the ship continued its agonizingly slow ascent.

"Whooohooo!" Mykael glanced over at her. "This is going to be tight!"

The deck tilted sharply, and Megan gasped in alarm as the ship stood on end to sneak between twin rocks the size of Empire colony ships. The grin on Mykael's face reminded her of a small boy on his first spaceship. "That must have singed a few deflector panels."

Megan mustered up a smile. They weren't out of danger yet, and she was unwilling to say anything that might distract him.

He turned back to his control panel. "A few more minutes and we'll break out of the atmosphere. Without the gravitational resistance, we should be able to get our asses out of the path of this damn meteor shower."

He paused, increasing power to the aft thrusters to slide the ship to the right and avoid the next group of incoming projectiles. "Now that we have the main engines back on-line, we can jump to hyperspace and get back on track for that vacation." He flashed her that irresistible smile of his, and her heart did a little flip-flop. He turned back to slide the ship past yet another meteor. "We can celebrate the fact that you've finally admitted that you're my bond-mate."

Megan closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. Despite the very real danger they were in, she could feel the cream gathering in her sex at the sight of his

broad shoulders and muscular arms. The tight fabric of his uni-suit rippled with every move of those arms, and she could imagine how they'd feel, wrapped around her as he...

She snapped her eyes open, glowering at his offending back. She'd seen insects with a better control over their emotions. This mating frenzy thing was getting out of hand. "I thought you said I'd have better control over my sex drive once I'd admitted to the bond." She didn't care if that sounded like an accusation. She was damn sick and tired of feeling like an alley cat in permanent heat.

"Not exactly. I said once we settled down and started a family, you'd have better control." He didn't turn, his attention focused on the control panel, but she could swear there was more than a trace of humor in his voice. "Just hang tight, darling. Once we're clear of the meteor field, I'll be more than happy to take care of your needs."

The ship executed a quick slip to the left, her maneuverability markedly improved. Mykael's shoulders visibly relaxed. "And we're clear. It should be easier to dodge the incoming rocks up here. I want us well away from the planet's gravitational pull before we make the jump to hyperspace." He looked over at her, his eyes dark with lust. "Think you can wait that long?"

Megan glanced up at the view screen. Although she could still see a lot of orange dots, they looked farther away. "Wait for what?"

"Me." He slid his safety harness off, letting it retract above the captain's chair.

Megan snorted. "Why would I be waiting for an old man like you?"

Mykael stood with the fluid grace of his kind, and paced over to where she sat. "Because you've been sitting there watching me, imagining the feel of my hands on your firm young skin." He released the catches on her safety harness and lifted it over her head before he slid the front catch of her suit all the way down to her hips and cupped her breasts with his work-roughened hands.

"Remembering what my lips felt like when I did this." He seared an urgent kiss across her mouth, his tongue and teeth tasting and tempting until she let out a little whimper and surrendered, opening wide for his invasion. "And wondering how long

until you get to feel this buried deep inside that hot little pussy of yours.” His breath warmed her cheek and he took her hand, resting it on the massive bulge in the front of his suit.

Megan sighed happily, feeling his cock flexing beneath her questing fingers. “Yeah. You’re not so bad for an old man.”

He laughed, shifting his feet for balance when the ship shuddered. “I think the old man had better get back to his station. We’re not out of danger yet, and that felt like a meteorite glancing off the ship.”

Megan rubbed her hand across his groin one last time before shooing him away. “Away you go then. There’s not much point in getting me to agree to the bonding, and then letting us get flattened by a meteor shower, now is there?”

Mykael ignored her attempt to send him back to his station, and bent down to splay his palm across her belly. “Not going to happen. I protect my own. Nothing and nobody will hurt you as long as I’m here. I can’t wait to feel our child stirring beneath my hand.” His lips met hers in a kiss that was achingly sweet, promising love and devotion for all time.

Megan sighed softly, returning his kiss with all her heart. Now that she’d finally agreed to be his bond-mate, she felt at peace with herself and the universe. She let the phrase roll off her tongue, trying it out for size. “My bond-mate.”

It sounded right.

Anne Kane

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

She first started telling stories as a toddler and she just can't seem to stop. When she's not busy working on her laptop, her hobbies include kayaking, karate, hiking, motorcycles, swimming, skating, playing guitar, singing and of course, reading.

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