

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Claiming Derryn

Vivian Arend

How many layers of deception are there in space?

When a trade negotiation goes wrong, Melina Davenport is sure she'll end up either a casualty of war or a sex slave. Discovering one of her missing partners, Trev, is the new leader of the rebels who have captured her adds insult to injury. And what the hell does he think he's doing, ripping her clothes away and touching her in front of the Derryn rebels? She is so going to kick his ass.

But when her former lover whisks her away to a reunion with their third, Davis—now captain of the notorious outlaw vessel *Nottingham*—she has to decide if she wants to join her two lovers in their important but less-than-legal activities. Time is running out. The authorities are hunting them, the rebels are bomb crazy and the local fauna is reproducing at an astonishing rate aboard their vessel.

If they don't find a solution soon, they can kiss the universe goodbye.

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Claiming Derryn

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CLAIMING DERRYN

Vivian Arend

Dedication

To the men and women, like STSC Denzil (Denny) Lynch, who are at work on land and sea, protecting and guarding. And for their loved ones, like Zina, who stay at home and safeguard the heart of the nation—our children. Now, or in the future, we do it all for love.

Chapter One

So, that's where the bastard had gone.

The stretch of granite floor between them was littered with the unwashed bodies of a motley crew scattered like asteroid crumble. Two hard-faced men stood on either side of an obsessively ornate chair, the chiseled muscles of their bare torsos glistening with moisture from the hot air billowing into the room. The blond on the right eyed her as if she were naked on the auction block at Ransel Four instead of a sanctioned representative from the Corporation's Trade Embassy. Melina ignored him, barely keeping her lips from curling in disgust. None of the underlings worried her as much as the hunk of male who, by some mysterious circumstance, occupied the key position amidst the rebels. She didn't know what to expect after so long.

Trev.

His striking features remained unreadable, his amber eyes locked on hers. He stroked one of the furred lizard creatures she'd seen in abundance swarming the passages and caverns on her way to this audience. Trev's long fingers soothed the sharysa and it quivered in his lap. A shiver raced over Melina's skin at the memory of those same fingers stroking her, bringing her pleasure. What the hell was he doing in the rebel camp?

The two team members accompanying her shifted uneasily on their feet. Her second-in-command slid closer, his folded hands belying the fear pouring off him.

Warning signals flashed in her brain.

The low-tech lighting limited her vision, eerie shadows filling the distant cervices of the hall. A hiss of steam entering the room from the massive cracks on the far wall created a soundtrack morbid enough for a horror-vid. Her breathing sounded obscenely loud. Why didn't Trev acknowledge her? He had to recognize her.

She debated for a moment, and then raised her hand to greet him discreetly with one of the codes they'd learned at the Institute. Sharp clicks echoed around her as the bodies sprawled on the floor leapt to attention at her slight movement.

A dozen knife blades thrust in her direction.

Trev stood abruptly, the light vest covering his torso flashing open to reveal the hint of a new tattoo on the skin above his waistline. The image distracted Melina, her gaze trailing over his body as he marched down the dais toward her committee. The ridges of his abdomen haunted her with the urge to touch him again. If anything, he had grown harder, stronger since she last saw him.

The sharysa now clung to his neck, its fur standing upright, a long white tail dangling down Trev's back. The creature blinked blue eyes at her, its head tilting as if measuring her by some alien mammalian standard. Suddenly it leapt across the distance between them to land on her shoulder.

Melina stood stock-still, holding her face blank. The expressions on the guards around Trev warned her this was some kind of test, and she'd be damned if a fur ball would make her cringe before their sneering gazes. Its sniffing nose trailed past her ear, moisture touching her neckline. She stared straight at Trev, willing him to give her a signal of how to proceed. The whole situation screamed danger. Something had gone wrong between the time the rebels agreed to the meeting and the negotiation team's arrival, and now she was deep in their midst with no weapons available except her hand-to-hand combat skills.

Crap, she hated low-tech worlds. She hated being off ship, and she hated her job. If she never got another landing assignment she'd be elated.

The weight of the creature as it explored felt strangely comforting. It curled around her neck and gave her cheek a light touch with its tongue. The goons on either side of Trev rocked at the sight, the blond going white with surprise.

Only a slight flicker in Trev's eyes warned her. As the men accompanying her fell to the floor, Trev yanked her forward. He twirled her, the sharysa leaping away with a

squeal and Melina found herself held tight against his muscular frame, his cheek pressing into hers as he locked her in place.

It would only take a second to break his grasp, but she froze as his fingers tapped on her waist, the message hidden from the view of the rest of the rebels. *Danger. Trust.* As if she had a choice right now. The bastard had more than a little explaining to do when they got out of this mess.

Her gaze slid to the men who had accompanied her to the surface of Derryn, now lying in boneless heaps on the floor. Shallow movements of their chests reassured her they still breathed, but what had taken them down so quickly? One of the rebels stepped forward and pulled long, narrow darts from where they stuck out from her team members' torsos.

Perhaps she should be thankful Derryn was a low-tech world where poison instead of a stunner did the trick.

"What kind of craft did they arrive in?" Trev's voice was deeper, harsher than she remembered. Lower even than when they used to lie together after lovemaking, physically sated but unwilling to leave each other's heat. What kind of mess had she gotten into?

"A Mari 14," a rebel standing by the door growled. "It's still in good shape too. They managed to land it in one piece."

Trev was silent for a moment.

"There are two-man escape pods on those. That will work nicely." He nudged the nearest body on the floor with his toe. "Take these two negotiation members and strap them into the pod. Add the package we've prepared with our list of demands. If you install a couple new energy crystals there will enough power to launch the pod on autopilot. Let's hope their mother ship is alert enough to discover them before life support fails. The rest of you can salvage the Mari 14 for parts."

The blond stepped forward into Melina's line of vision. "That wasn't the plan," he complained.

Trev backhanded him, never once losing his grip on her body. "I changed my mind. Go with the men to make sure the pod gets away safely." He chuckled, a harsh, cruel sound. "Unless you're thinking about challenging me. You really think you're ready, Dax?" The knife in Trev's hand appeared out of nowhere.

Dax swore and backed away, hands held before him in protest. "Easy, boss, I'll escort them. If you're sure." His gaze dragged over Melina, the hunger in his eyes rising to the surface. "What about the woman?"

Trev growled and the knife disappeared. He shifted behind her, one leg pinning her close while his hands clasped the front of her robe. With a sharp jerk, he shredded the material, turning her body to face the men in the room.

Trust him? Holy hell. She squirmed and struggled to get away, stomping her foot in an attempt to gain an inch of space between them to free her own hidden weapon. The lust on the faces of the rabble watching was palpable, and for one of the first times in her career, true fear tingled its way up her spine. One of her, lots of them, Trev gone insane. The odds weren't good. Trev clasped her chin tightly, his fingers digging into her skin when she tried to shake free. His other hand held her arms clamped behind her, too tight to move. Again he tapped in the Institute code, telling her to trust him and follow his lead.

"The woman is mine. I claim her."

Melina jerked, this time more for show than to break his hold. So, the asshole did have a plan. Just wait until she got him alone, she'd tell him a thing or two about timing and where he could stick his claiming. Now with her life on the line, complaining didn't seem appropriate.

A laugh rumbled through the room and the men eased back their stances, squatting on the floor or leaning indolently against the wall. Melina sucked in a breath as Trev slid his grasp from her chin to fondle her breast. His body hardened behind her, the length of his cock pressing into her hip like an overheated weapon. When he tucked his

fingers into the thin fabric covering her breasts and ripped it aside, the men's stares grew more intense, eyes fixated on her torso, and suddenly Melina knew.

They were going to watch him take her like an animal in rut.

She twisted frantically, struggling for freedom, but she could have been tied with metal bands for all the distance Trev allowed her to move.

"You want your companions to live? Don't deny me," he snarled.

The fabric of her robe yanked up in the back before he pressed their bodies together until no one could see anything. He pinched the side of her breast surreptitiously and she cried in surprise. At the same moment, he slammed their hips together and the men's raunchy laughter rang higher.

Trev thrust again, but when his erection slid between her thighs instead of entering her body, she finally understood. It was all a show. She continued to put up a token resistance but now she aided him. She leaned back to help keep their balance, raising her torso to keep the watching eyes fixated on her breasts rather than on what was happening lower. Or not happening. The loud grunts issuing from his lips were deliberately rude and eons away from the loving memories she had of their previous life together. The sticky heat of the planet's air combined with the harsh breathing of the audience, turning the setting into an erotic nightmare.

The scent of Trev's skin rose, his hand brushed her breast and a shot of lust hit her hard. Melina gritted her teeth together to stop from moaning. *Fuck, she was a total freak.* This was not supposed to happen, not in front of a group of rebel killers. Unbidden, his touch turned her on, moisture gathering in the folds of her crotch. There was barely time to be embarrassed by her inappropriate and uncontrollable response to Trev before he cried out. He spun her, forced her to her knees and let his seed spurt in opaque ribbons on the bare skin of her torso.

His climax complete, he hauled her against him again and dragged her to the chair where he'd been seated at the start of this encounter. He resumed his seat and positioned her astride him, forcing her to lean back with her body still exposed, trails of

semen trickling down her skin. The only sign anything unusual had taken place was his ragged breathing, now fading to a controlled pace.

“Take them away.” Trev flicked his hand at Dax who nodded jerkily and barked orders to a group of the observers. Melina’s companions were half dragged, half carried from the room. Dax’s final glance warned he still questioned Trev’s actions.

A gentle touch on her hip alerted her to a silent message.

Danger. Sorry.

She snorted. She bet he was sorry. He was going to be a whole lot sorrier when she got through with him.

Trev waited for the men in the room to turn their attention elsewhere. Of all the people to arrive in the delegation, the last person he’d expected was Melina. The Trade Embassy? When did she join those bloodsucking parasites? Not that he held any strong opinions on the matter. Before he’d shipped out on this covert operation to join the rebels, she was firmly ensconced on her grandpa’s cruiser, working nice, safe agricultural jobs. The crew of his ship had already made plans to go and fetch her from the Space Institute Corporation once this job was done. Davis was going to freak.

The warmth of her body in his lap sidetracked him, the swells of her breasts shifting with each breath she took. Her dark nipples, as tempting as he remembered, had his cock filling again. Distraction was an unaffordable luxury.

One more day. The irony was if the SIC negotiation party had waited one more day, none of this would have been necessary. He’d gathered what he needed and arranged his escape from the planet with enough information to stop the rebels before their next attack. Now he’d have to juggle staying alive and keeping Melina under his control. As if being controlled had ever been a possibility with her. Stubborn, bullheaded, psychotic wench.

He’d missed her.

A harsh pinch to his thigh brought his attention back to the present. Pretending to recline docilely against his torso, she'd wormed one hand between them and now tapped message after message in the old Institute code. Hell if he understood half of what she said. The key words for danger and attack he recognized, and the swear words sprinkled plentifully amidst her communication, but he'd never given a shit about learning the rest. He reached to cup her breast and the hand on his thigh froze. The steam and the sticky moisture of his semen smeared together like an exotic cream as he brushed her nipple with a thumb. He chuckled when the tip beaded tight at his slight caress.

He'd missed her a lot.

It was lucky she'd been the woman in the negotiating party, because there was no way he would have been able to make a public spectacle of himself without her sweet scent driving him. As it stood, Dax remained suspicious of the fact no blood had been shed.

When he judged enough time had passed for them to leave safely, he stood and gestured to his remaining guard. The man escorted them down a side passage to the private quarters Trev had assumed with the leadership of the rebels. Killing someone to get better sleeping arrangements was an age-old custom honored throughout the universe, and Trev was grateful for the previous owner's lavish tastes. The bathing pool alone might get him a little grace for the crap he'd just pulled to save Melina's life. At least he hoped she would see it that way.

One of the sharysa appeared at their feet, running beside them, cutting across their path until they stopped. It wandered around Melina's feet, sniffing enthusiastically then leapt into his arms to chatter with excitement.

Once again, foggy images filled his brain. The creatures tried to communicate but rarely did more than random emotions and pictures come through. It was as bad as the academy codes—he knew something was being said, but not the true message. Licking

his cheek, it jumped to Melina, kissed her as well, then raced down the corridor, squealing with delight.

The door to his quarters closed with a solid clang behind them and Melina whirled to face him, the darkness in her eyes blacker than any starless sky. She stepped closer, grabbed him by the front of his vest and hauled their bodies together.

Hell yeah.

Instantly hard, instantly ready, he swallowed her kisses, ate greedily at her mouth, their tongues tangling for domination. Over a year wasted since they'd last touched, but it was like coming home, familiar and exciting all at the same time. He guided them blindly toward the bed with his body as he stripped off his vest and tore open his pants while she shrugged out of the tatters of her light robe. He refused to let their mouths part, growling with the base need to get closer, to consume her. Her taste exploded through his system, the sweet, spicy flavor of her lips, her skin, her being—sliding back through him like high-test shots.

Oh shit, he'd missed her a fucking lot.

He dropped to his knees and filled his hands with her breasts, lapping at her dark nipples. She locked her fingers in his hair, directing him to suck one and then the other into his mouth until the moans of delight from her lips pushed him too far to wait any longer. Claspng her around the waist, he rose and tossed her on the bed, crawling after her to drop his now-naked body onto her eager embrace.

Body against body, slick with sweat, they made love. The room pulsed with the never-ending beat of water rushing through the caverns beneath the rock floors, heated bubbles popping in the far bathing room, steam hissing through small cracks. But over the noises of the planet were the sounds he'd longed for, her throaty groans as he tweaked her nipples. Her hiss of pleasure as he lapped his way down her torso with his tongue. The long, drawn-out mewl she released as he separated her damp curls and slid in a finger. She was as wet inside as out and her hips thrust involuntarily. His cock

longed to tunnel into her passage, envying his fingers the squeeze they experienced as she panted on the cusp of her release.

He teased her clit with his thumb, two fingers buried in her body. He rose over her and pumped his tongue past her lips, mimicking what he planned to do into her core with his aching erection. He swallowed her cries as she tipped over the edge, her skin flushing, head falling back as she writhed under him, her climax hard and sharp.

Damn it, he had no finesse left, no capacity to slow down or stretch this out any longer. He dragged her to the side of the bed and opened her legs wide, lifting her feet in the air. Her still-quivering pussy lips opened to his sight and he froze for a moment, unable to decide which he wanted more, to taste her or take her. A hard tingle at the base of his cock decided the issue and he lined up carefully, leaning to stare into her eyes before he buried himself with one sure stroke.

Her cry echoed in his head like the finest music. She welcomed him, surrounded him, clutching at his shoulders. One of her legs remained trapped between them and the angle forced his cock deep. The sheer pleasure of being surrounded by something other than his hand after so long was amazing, but knowing it was Melina who held him turned off all the logical parts of his brain, leaving nothing but sensation.

Fuck, it felt good.

He dragged his hips back slowly, savoring every inch of slick heat rubbing his skin, stroking him as he withdrew to hover over her opening before driving back in. The visual image of slipping into her body drove him mad. The way her cream clung to his cock, the way her pussy lips swallowed him then flowered open—gorgeous. Fucking gorgeous.

His balls grew tight and he thrust harder, the friction such a perfect combination of satiny-smooth caress and iron-hard pressure he was close to blowing up. Trev adjusted his angle, lowering Melina's leg to the side to access her clit. She purred her approval and his attention rose back toward her face. Eyes closed, she raised her hands to cup her breasts, nipples caught between forefingers and thumbs as she rolled them in tight

circles. The flush on her skin spread down her chest, droplets of sweat decorating her torso. Every time he thrust, she answered him with a raise of the hips or a tilt of her pelvis.

And the tightness of her passage. She squeezed him so hard he saw stars at the back of his brain right before the room exploded. Melina screamed his name, her sheath convulsing around him, grasping him until he had nowhere to go. He tunneled in again, and once more before his climax took him and ripped him apart. Buried in her body, he never wanted to leave. Never wanted to let go of the addictive sensation of her clinging around him, milking the semen from him as he spurted into her depths. The heat of his release poured over the head of his cock and she whimpered as she lifted her legs tight around his hips, refusing to let him withdraw from her body.

They clung together until the pulsing beat between them slowed, the intimate connection of belonging to each other too good to break apart. Trev's arms trembled and he had to lower himself before he collapsed, all the strength from his body washed away, drained by her touch.

She smoothed a hand down his cheek, her dark eyes glittering at him for a second before she pulled him close and kissed him. No longer frantic, no longer desperate but still far too needy. One whole fucking year lost. The soft caress of her lips drew his heart closer. His body sated, now his mind and soul relaxed as well.

He rolled to the side, panting for breath. Since they last made love, he'd fantasized about her regularly, but all the daydreams in the universe couldn't complete with the real thing. Trev lifted her nearest hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles before linking their fingers together. He rested them together on his chest where his heart still pounded a heavy beat. Sex like that would kill him, but what a way to die.

They lay on their backs for a long time, the constant noise of the planet's underground streams creating a relaxing backdrop for their postcoital, nearly comatose sprawl. Trev watched her, watched her slow her breathing, take back control of her body. Seeing her reclaim the persona of order and calm after sharing her passion and

wildness always amazed him. He smiled. Something deep inside him was pleased to know few had seen that side of her.

She swung herself up so she straddled his hips, her breasts still peaked with arousal. Melina's expression was thoughtful as she studied him.

Then she pulled back her fist and slugged him.

Chapter Two

Shit, that hurt. Melina shook her fingers as he howled in pain and squirmed under her. Heartfelt satisfaction rose deep inside, almost as fulfilling as their recent lovemaking. She slammed a hand on his shoulder, pinning him to the bed.

“You asshole. What was that crap you pulled out there? Are you so used to raping women on a regular basis you have no troubles getting your jollies off in public?” Now that the first flush of desire had passed and she really, truly knew he was alive—she was going to kill him.

“I didn’t rape you. I stopped you from getting tossed around the room like an appetizer at a party. You should be grateful.” He struggled upright until they were nose to nose, his hand rubbing the side of his jaw where she’d smacked him.

“Grateful? Grateful?” She grabbed him by the ears and twisted.

“Oww...”

“Stripping me in public and shooting a load all over my goodies is not the usual way to make friends and influence people. I’m part of an official delegation—”

Trev slapped his hands over hers to still her twisting fingers. “And you all would have been officially dead in about three seconds if I hadn’t stepped in. Come on, baby, you walked into a trap. Give me the benefit of a doubt. I saved your ass and your companions. You’re lucky you found me working undercover. What were you thinking, strolling in like it was a cocktail party on Sirius Seven?”

Staring into his eyes, his solid body under her hips, the scent of sex floating on the air around them, she found it hard to remember what she’d been thinking. “It was supposed to be a simple trade negotiation. Then the advanced technology failed and messed up our backup. If I’d known, I would have ensured we had a defensive weapon. As it is, we barely survived the landing.”

He lowered their hands, skimmed her shoulders, twisting his fingers in her hair. “Yeah, the planet’s got some neat tricks up her sleeve when it comes to screwing with technos. Still, there’s more to Derryn than meets the eye. So, you want to hit me again or did you get all your aggression out? We need to talk.”

“Understatement of the century, bub. What the hell—” She stopped abruptly. He had scrambled her brains. She wasn’t even sure this room was secure, and not only had she crawled all over him and fucked his brains out, she was chatting as if they were safely on an Institute vessel. She tapped a quick message on his leg and he laughed.

“Umm, you don’t want to hear this, but I have no idea what you just said.”

Melina stared at him in disbelief. “You didn’t understand a word I told you back in the audience chamber, did you?” He shook his head, dark bangs falling over his eyes. He had the audacity to wink at her. The tension between her shoulders built again. Totally unbelievable. “Jerk. Ass. Arghhhhh.”

“But I’m your jerk, admit it. You still love me, Melina?” He stroked the side of her breast and she slapped his fingers away.

“How should I know? You’re a stranger, I don’t fall in love with strangers.” He leaned closer and nuzzled her neck. As good as his touch felt, the anger and longing inside her waged a war, and this time anger won. She climbed off him and looked around for her robe. *Arrogant asshole.*

“Where you going?”

She gave him *the look*. “I assume you have a plan to get me off this rock without having to share me with the other boys. I’d appreciate it if we got a move on. There’s going to be people worried when they don’t find me in the pod with the other two members of the committee.” She prided herself on keeping her emotions under control, but even she heard the fear in her voice. She grabbed her robe from the floor and clutched the fabric in her fist, clinging to one small piece of substance that remained unchanged. She held it up to see the entire front was shredded, the garment completely useless, and tossed it aside in disgust.

Trev swung his legs over the side of the bed and opened a cupboard. "I do have a plan, and yes, the room is secure. Feel free to discuss our secret life out loud." He held out a shirt and she grabbed it.

"I assumed you would have found a way to alert me by now if it wasn't safe, even if you had to spell it out. Do you remember any of the passcodes from our training days?"

"Enough to warn you in the hall."

"Gee, maybe you should have memorized 'get ready for me to fuck you in public'. We'll have to mention that to the instructors the next time we visit the Institute."

"Be reasonable, Melina."

"You went into the bathroom for a drink of water then vanished for twelve months. Now I find you leading a group of rebels and I'm supposed to be reasonable?" *Shit, she hadn't said that.* She stepped away from him but he was too quick, grasping her arm and locking her in position.

"That's what this is about, isn't it? You don't really care if I jerked off in front of a group of cutthroats and painted you with my jism. Hell, you always were a bit of an exhibitionist. This is about not knowing where I've been for the past year."

Her throat closed and she fought for control. She was not going to cry. She was not...

The dam burst. Unbearable pain shot through her as she relived the fear, the uncertainty of the days following Trev's disappearance. His arms surrounded her as she sobbed like a baby, pounding her fist against his shoulder. He caught her hands in his and soothed her, patting her hair, pulling her close to his chest. Melina cried her eyes out, releasing all the pent-up tears she'd stored away when she didn't know if he was dead or alive, didn't understand why he'd left. He'd been all she had left after Davis had shipped out and broken apart their team of three.

By the time she'd spent all her sorrow, hiccups racked her frame. Each breath shuddered out with a gasp, and still he comforted her. Trev swept her into his arms and

she buried her face against him, clinging to his neck. The sound of dripping increased, the steam on her skin growing warmer. Splashing ensued, and then the velvet touch of water slightly above body temperature covered her body.

Cradled in his arms, finally back where she'd longed to be, she was tempted to close her eyes and simply forget the world of trouble around them. A soft chirp by her ear enticed her away from hiding, from continuing to ignore the reality saying it was time to move on. Melina lifted her head to stare into swirling blue eyes.

The sharysa sat on the edge of the bathing pool, its head tilting from side to side.

"She's worried about you." Trev adjusted them so Melina sat straddling his hips, submersed to their necks. "She wonders why you cry when you're with your mate."

Melina drew another shaky breath. *A mate?* "You can talk with them?"

"This one is more articulate than the others. She seems to like me. Usually all I get is a blurry message, but with her it's clearer. Piata thinks you should be happy since we're together."

The name he gave the petite creature made Melina smile. Only Trev would name a one-foot-tall furry rodent after one of the mammoth beasts of Tarn.

"Are we together again?" Her heart ached, longing for him to acknowledge what they'd shared.

Trev scooped a handful of water and washed her tear-covered face. "We've never been apart, Melina, at least not in my heart. I still love you."

The tightness eased, and she kissed him. Their lips and tongues meshed as their hands clasped beneath the waters. Happy chirps and clicking brought a laugh from them both as they glanced at the little beast who now nodded in approval.

Trev bowed his head graciously. "I agree, Piata, my partner looks very good in my arms. She belongs there."

He turned his gaze back on Melina, the comforting passion-filled look hardening and becoming more focused. His battle face. “You ready to hit the road? We’ve got a ship to catch.”

* * * * *

He led her down a narrow corridor, scarcely aware of the unusual number of sharysa dodging their feet as they raced downward.

“The window of opportunity is small, but if we hit it just right, we’ll be off planet within the hour. I began preparing for transport a few days before your trade delegation arrived.” Melina matched his strides, but he knew she was itching to ask questions. There was no time now, he’d indulge her propensity for details when they had the luxury of a large room with plenty of pillows and...

Keeping his mind on track was going to be a test with her around again. The intense connection between them hadn’t faded a bit. He chuckled as he paused to help her maneuver around a chasm in the floor. His parents may have thought an arranged marriage would kill his adventurous streak, but they hadn’t done their homework nearly well enough. Melina was perfect for him. Smart, feisty and sexually explosive. He wouldn’t have accepted a partner less than her caliber in the bedroom or out of it. Still, there were a few potential problems. Like explaining where he’d been for the past year, and why he hadn’t contacted her.

Actually, that might be the easy part. She was going to die when she found out who he worked with now.

The passageway took a sharp corner and they paused to catch their breaths. Trev kept his face blank but counted silently. By the count of five the questions began.

“They use crystals for a light source? Are the Derrians insane? Each of the lanterns we passed is worth a mint on the universal market. And why is it getting colder instead of hotter? We’ve been descending steadily for the past hour and —”

He planted his mouth on top of hers to silence her. Melina hesitated at first then leaned into him, responding with her usual warmth and vigor until they were both panting. Trev grinned at her. Oh yeah, it was so good to be back together again. There was only one thing lacking to make it absolutely perfect.

“The lights—they use what’s plentiful. On Derryn, charged crystals are as common as whores at a space dock. The temperature—we’re headed west beneath an ancient volcano. There’s asteroid debris down there that gives off a variation of fluorocarbon and cools the whole area. It’s one of the rare sections of the planet where I’ve found hi-tech works temporarily, so we can launch the shuttle to reach my ship.”

“What ship?”

A low growl cut her off and Trev offered a prayer of thanks. No way did he want to mention they were headed for the *Nottingham*. He’d wait until she was safely stuck onboard to explain she was about to board one of the few ships featured on *Wanted* posters in every port, on every planet, in the galaxy.

A narrow ledge ran the length of wall before them and it teemed with furry bodies. The sharysa were out in full force.

“Holy hell, that’s the biggest beastie I’ve seen yet.” Melina reached to brush the fur of a pitch-black creature as thick around as his thigh.

“Melina, be careful.” Crap, she was going to lose a finger at the least.

“I saw you pet Piata.” Her fascination with all things wild had always amused him and annoyed the crap out of Davis. She should have become a xenobiologist with the way she attracted alien life forms.

“These are wild ones. I’ve seen them slice a man’s arm so deep he lost it.”

She ignored him, leaning closer. “He likes me, don’t you, beautiful?” They were nose to nose and Trev held his breath, hoping for the best.

“Trev?” She sounded distracted as she buried her fingers in the thick fur of the creature.

“Yeah, baby, um, could you step back, please? I kinda like your eyes in your face.”

“When Piata talks to you, does she ever show you symbols that look like coordinates?” The black sharysa nudged its nose against Melina’s forehead then stepped off the ledge onto her shoulder. An excited roar rose from the pack, the rest of the sharysa dancing in place before disappearing like ghosts into the shadows.

“That was bizarre.” Trev grabbed Melina’s hand to lead her away, and the creature growled at him from its perch on her shoulder, its thin fingers tangled in her hair as it sniffed suspiciously in Trev’s direction.

“No, Jem, he’s my friend. Leave him alone.”

Trev back off slightly. “He’s got a name already? You still picking up strays on every one of your assignments, baby?”

She blushed. “I try not to. He says he’s coming with us. At least, I think that’s what he said.”

Damn, some things never changed. He remembered their quarters at the Institute being crowded with homeless waifs rescued from shuttles. “Who am I to argue with a furry bundle of teeth and claws?”

The familiar brushing of the sharysa from his quarters against his feet was followed a loud purr. “Do we have every one of the creatures on the planet following us now?” Trev reached down and grabbed Piata, settling her on his left side. The black beast on Melina’s shoulder chirped and the two animals wrapped around each other for a moment. “I don’t believe it. We’ve got a menagerie hitching a lift with us. Can we go now?”

“How are we getting off planet? Engines fail when you hit the atmosphere.” Melina stroked her sharysa as they walked, the furry beast purring softly with its nose buried in her hair. Trev was suddenly jealous. He wanted to be the one immersed in her scent, clinging to her softness. Soon, he promised himself. When they docked. He was sure Davis would have an idea or two about greeting Melina properly once aboard the vessel as well.

“Not true. Crystals work fine. It’s all the guidance systems on ships that fail. You landed the *Mari 14*, didn’t you? I’m assuming it was you who stick-handled her down when she lost power?”

“If she hadn’t had manual override we never would have made it. I had to shove the pilot out of his seat when he started panicking. It was actually a little exciting for a minute or two.”

Trev grinned. Oh yeah, Melina was one of the best pilots around. Everyone aboard the *Nottingham* knew they’d been searching for her. The crew hoped she would take over as chief space jockey. Their current pilot was a little too reckless, although no one cared to tell him.

Davis had an overinflated ego when it came to his abilities at the controls.

“Leaving already?”

Fuck. Dax stood with a team of men, blocking the passage. Trev shook his head. So close to where they needed to go.

“How did you get ahead of us?” He stepped toward the side wall and nonchalantly grabbed a handful of loose rocks. Piata quivered on his shoulder and he clicked his tongue to reassure her.

“Cross tunnels. When you and the woman disappeared from your quarters, I knew something was up. You’re not getting off planet, Trev, or whatever your name is. We’ve worked too hard for you to mess up our plans now.”

There was no room to maneuver, no time to explain to Melina what to expect.

“Did you kill my companions?” Melina asked, simmering violence in her tones.

Dax shook his head. “No, we wanted to deliver the package. Killing them would have made it difficult to get the bomb aboard your vessel. Once the mother ship senses human life forms in the pod, they’ll catch it carefully and bring doom upon themselves. Death to them all!”

Trev pinched the bridge of his nose. Tyrannical menaces who liked to monologue pissed him off. He held his other hand behind his back, palm open. The sharysa on his shoulder shimmied with delight and crawled down to brush its long fingers over the rocks he'd nabbed a moment earlier. The stones grew warmer, pulsing slightly.

"You're fighting a losing battle, Dax. Just because you've got a stash of energy crystals doesn't mean you can take leadership of the known universe."

"No, but I can get a fair-sized chunk." The stocky man motioned with his head to his followers. "Kill Trev, save the woman. It's been a long time since we've had a female around."

Trev skipped the stones, sliding them along the floor toward the wall at the rebels' feet before grabbing Melina and pulling her to the ground under him. A sudden explosion of rocks and light flared, dust and debris raining down on them with a loud and ghastly clatter. Echoes rang through the corridors, the sharp pings of new fault lines cracking the solid rock. He hoped he hadn't set off too large a blast and sealed their route closed.

Melina coughed as she scrambled to her feet. The two sharysa sat and groomed each other, picking small fragments of rock from their fur and scolding Trev loudly. The side passage the others had used to reach this point was sealed tight by the rubble of the rockfall. The direction Trev intended to go was partially blocked, but still accessible. Trev led them all forward, making sure to turn Melina away from the remaining traces of the rebel group.

Melina pulled on his sleeve. "That was too easy."

"What, you wanted me to duel him for hours with flashing swords? Sorry, baby, I blow shit up. It's a whole hell of a lot faster. Come on, there's still a planet full of people who'd like to separate my head from my shoulders. We're not out of danger yet."

The shuttle was there, covered in a thick layer of dust and ice. Melina did the fastest external system check he'd ever seen before she was willing to start the engines. Once

they were both in position, she eyed him suspiciously. “That’s all we have to do? Install crystals and use manual drive?”

“It’s enough to get us clear of the planet. Then we’ll call the ship and they’ll take exiting the atmosphere off our hands.” He pretended to make a few last-minute adjustments to the crystal brackets.

Melina twirled in her pilot’s chair to glare at him. “They’re going to do a scoop, aren’t they?”

Trev grimaced. Trying to sneak information past a pilot—he should have known better. “Yeah, baby, you’re right. You got a problem with that?”

She smirked at him. “None at all. I’m not the one who gets spacesick.”

Fuck.

Melina lifted off, smooth and steady in spite of the unfamiliarity of the craft. She was grinning from ear to ear and Trev sucked in a deep, satisfied breath. Damn, he’d missed her. This is what they were always meant to do, have adventures together, right wrongs, and live life to the fullest. The planet disappeared below them and he pulled another crystal from his pocket. After slipping it into the transmitter, he sent a short burst of signals to the *Nottingham*, signaling them for a pick-up. He debated keeping Melina’s presence a secret but figured Davis would kick his ass.

Ten minutes up, the world shifted, the stars blurred together then smeared across his eyes. Inside, his stomach turned over. While a mid-atmosphere scoop was a great timesaver, it fucked with his body. The queasy sensation in his belly faded as soon as they broke the gravitation pull of the planet. It took until the *Nottingham* settled into orbit for his head to stop spinning. All the while Melina whistled merrily in her chair, making fine adjustments as she landed the small craft on the open space of the docking bay.

“Rub it in while you can, baby.” She was going to need all her good humor in a minute. “Hey, nice flying.”

She flashed him a brilliant smile before checking out the window and motioning him toward the hatch. The sharysa scurried to their usual positions as Trev broke the door seal and escorted her from the shuttle.

“About time you decided to show up. What the hell took you so long?” Davis rose from behind the control panel and strode closer. He consumed Melina with his gaze like a starving man. She stared at him, a puzzled expression crossing her face.

Trev paused, stroking her arm gently. “Melina, you okay?” Maybe she didn’t recognize Davis. With his hair cut short and a jumpsuit instead of the rattiest costume possible, he was a far cry from the rebel of the Institute.

Davis reached a hand forward in greeting. Melina spun in a half-circle and drop-kicked him in the gut.

Chapter Three

What had come over her? She hadn't seen the man in a year and a half and the first thing she did was try to take out his spleen?

"Oh shit, I'm sorry, Davis, I didn't mean to do that. Well, yes I did, but still I *shouldn't* have. What are you doing here?"

Davis unfolded his long limbs from the ground, the muscles in his thighs straining against the fabric of his jumpsuit. He groaned, resting his hands on his knees, head still bent over. "Welcome aboard, Melina, so good to see you again as well." He glanced at Trev. "Decent of you to finally give up being despot of the month. What *are* those awful furry things you're both wearing around your necks? They're tacky. I hope you brought me one." He sucked in air and released another round of groans and Melina felt impossibly guilty.

"Excuse me a minute." Trev nodded sharply at Davis then turned to face her. "Are you out of your mind? Do you intend on greeting every one of our previous classmates with a physical attack? Because we should send off notices or something just to make our arrival more sportsmanlike."

"I said I was sorry."

"Oh, and that makes it so much better."

"What? I can't unkick him, and if he thinks he's getting a second apology you can both go to hell."

"Fine – man saves your life and you inflict pain – I'll remember that. You're two for two so far, baby."

Davis laughed, a deep, rich sound that washed the room with power. It was the same laugh she remembered hearing so many times before and something inside her ached.

“Damn, I’ve missed you two. It’s been a long, long time. I’m glad we can enjoy each other’s company again. Can we get this show on the road? We’re got places to be, people to rescue, shit to blow up, all that crap.” He turned to the intercom, one long finger pressing the control for a moment. “Get underway. Resume our orbit around Derryn in direct opposition to the *Eagle*. Then go on autopilot and meet in twenty.” He glanced at her and Trev before hitting the button again. “Make it an hour.”

Melina studied Davis’ face. He wore his dark hair military short, the solid angles of his chin covered by a neatly trimmed beard. He appeared almost...regulation. A far cry from the hippie rebel persona he’d presented during their school days. The muscular frame hadn’t changed, and she still looked way up at him. His presence thrilled her and scared her to bits.

He’d broken her heart. Messed with her soul. Torn them both apart at the seams—her and Trev—and hell if she wanted to experience that kind of pain again. Once she returned to her grandfather’s ship, she’d never have to see him. Surely she could convince Trev to join her.

Her brain hurt. Trev had no future on any Institute vessel after he’d gone missing. He was still considered AWOL as far as she knew. Or worse, a deserter.

“Request permission to contact the *SIC War Eagle* for transfer back to my assigned ship.” She stared straight into space, keeping her face blank. The sooner she did this the better.

“Not possible, baby.” Trev stepped forward, his concerned gaze sweeping her. “We’re undercover. The *Eagle* doesn’t know we’re here and that’s how it’s got to remain.”

What? “One of the Institute’s flagships and you’re hiding from her?” Suspicions crowded her mind as the data fell into place. “Trev, what’s the name of this ship?”

“Well, baby, you see—”

“The name, Trev, or I’ll put a hurt on you.”

Davis stepped forward, tucked his fingers under her chin and lifted her gaze to meet his. The black sharysa on her shoulder squealed and leapt to the floor, chatting angrily at him from a safe distance. "Welcome aboard the *Nottingham*, sweetheart, your new home away from home."

Her stomach fell. The *Nottingham*? The most notorious ship in the galaxy? *Fuck*. "Oh fantastic, you're telling me the two brightest minds in the Institute are now outlaws?" Davis beamed at her but refused to relinquish her chin, his thumb stroking her jawline. She swallowed hard and maintained eye contact only through sheer willpower.

His touch undid her.

"She said we were two of the brightest minds, did you catch that, Trev?"

"I did. Think we can get it in writing?"

His caress distracted her, but their familiar banter made her heart ache. She wanted to run away before the whole universe went supernova. "Oooh, you are so annoying. How did this happen? You shipped out on a cruiser, Davis, six stinking months early without even saying goodbye. Trev and I were scheduled to join a research vessel prior to—"

"Getting volunteered for something more in line with my talents," Trev interjected.

Davis released her, brushing his fingers against her cheek, and her mouth went dry. Trev leaned against the wall, studying her. Her entire body reacted to his heated stare. Reacted to them. The combination of Trev and Davis played havoc on her libido. *Crap*, it wasn't possible. She had to regain control before she ended up doing something she'd regret. She disregarded Davis, although it was difficult to ignore a six-foot-four giant with a gleam in his eyes standing too far into her personal space.

"Yeah, well, even a peaceful research vessel needs to blow things up occasionally. You would have been fine."

"I didn't leave voluntarily," Trev complained. "I got pulled into an undercover team for the Institute. I ran with them for five months before Davis tracked me down and appropriated my skills for his team. Now we're all on the wrong side of the law."

Melina glared at him. "Five months. It's been an entire year. Once you were shanghaied, you didn't think to contact me? Let me know you were still alive?"

"She's got a point, Trev." Davis stalked over to stand beside Trev, their bodies in matching positions, arms crossed, legs at ease. A mental snapshot of the two of them, together in that same pose as they waited for her to exit a class, flashed into her mind and she fought for a weapon to beat down the memories. Anger, anger would do it. She was mad at them, furious in fact. *Work with the emotion*. She had to stop her desire before it flared to the surface, unburied itself from where she'd hidden it.

"Shut up, Davis, this doesn't concern you. You left us first. For all I know, you volunteered to join the crew of the *Nottingham* and you're nothing but a pirate."

"But I'm a pirate with morals. That makes me different."

Trev mock whispered, "There are pirates without morals?"

"Government," Davis whispered back.

"Ahhh." Trev nodded slowly before winking at her.

They were pains in the ass. How had she put up with them for five years at the Institute? More importantly, how had she ever done without them? She had to guard her heart because there was no way she would to open herself up to the pain of being left alone, no matter what Trev said about loving her. They'd let her down once, they could do it again. The best defense was offense.

"Take a walk outside, Davis, you're so full of shit it stinks in here."

Davis roared with laughter. He smirked at Trev, their elbows jostling together. "She's obviously learned to relax her rigid sense of propriety a little."

He really was impossible. "Go to hell." She turned to look for a sign of which direction to go, anything to escape from here. From them.

"*Tsk, tsk*, is that any way to talk to your new commanding officer?"

Melina froze. *No way*. She sucked in a breath of air and tried to stop the world from spinning. "You?"

Davis nodded. "Me."

"No fucking way..."

"What? So I'm a little colorful and inventive in my leadership style. I think after you settle in you'll enjoy working under me." His eyes flashed dark, his gaze dropping to her breasts. "You'll enjoy being under me again."

Melina turned her back on him. Her heart pounded, panic not far away. Adjusting from being alone to having both men reenter her life in less than a day—it wasn't happening. They pushed buttons she didn't want to deal with. Trev appeared by her side, sympathy on his face. She wanted to deny the connection between them, ignore the desires rising as each minute passed. Only a whisper made it out. "I need to get back to the *War Eagle*. I can't serve with a man who I've...that *we've*..."

"Lived with? Had sex with? Oh yeah, we were amazing together, Melina, admit it." Trev moved closer, his intentional laziness gone, a dangerous spark that trickled heat through her core warning of his intent.

"Trev!" Melina stepped away.

He gave no quarter, circling her slowly in the hallway. To her right, Davis approached like a prowling beast. Trev chuckled, a warm molten sound that hit her in the belly and spread melting fingers through her. "We'll just have to work at keeping the bedroom and the bridge separated. I was a little surprised myself, but Davis is an excellent captain."

"I give great oral...direction." Davis' husky tones sent a shiver down her spine.

She shook her head rapidly in denial. "How can I take orders from a man I've seen naked?"

"Naked and aroused," Trev reminded her, capturing her from behind. He brushed aside her hair and nuzzled her neck. Memories rose of them surrounding her, wrapping her in their fire and desire and passion. *Holy hell*, she wanted this and dreaded it at the same time.

“Naked, aroused and mighty fine, admit it.” Davis stroked a finger down the placket of her shirt, and heat shot through her core with a rocket’s blaze.

“It’s never happening again,” she swore, clutching her fingers at her sides to stop from reaching for him.

“Never is a long, long time.” Davis stepped forward and claimed her lips in a kiss that ignited her soul. He drew their bodies together, his spicy male scent enveloping her as his hardness took possession of her softness. He forced his tongue past her teeth, pressing rough and fast, twining with her, consuming her. He dragged his fingers through her hair and pinned her between him and Trev, two solid barriers of scorching heat. When he finally released her lips, Melina gasped for air, clutching his uniform for stability. It had always been like that with Davis, a no-holds-barred attack.

Then he reached past her to where Trev suckled on her earlobe, exploring the sensitive tissue of her neck. Grasping the front of his shirt, Davis hauled Trev forward until he hung over Melina’s shoulder. Their mouths met and tongues explored, a kiss as deep and hard as the one Davis had bestowed on her moments earlier. Her pussy clenched as a rush of fluid flooded her body.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” Her heart pounded at the sight of the men together and the heat of passion rising from them, their rigid cocks pressing her on either side. She wanted this—wanted it more than her next breath. Screw the consequences, the backlash from her family and friends. Like any of them cared anymore. Watching the two men she’d always loved kissing for the first time in forever finally set her world back on the right trajectory.

They pulled apart slowly, Davis nipping at Trev’s lip before backing away. He grumbled low in his chest, caressing his thumb over lips swollen from his assault. “I missed you.” His gaze darted to meet Melina’s. “I’ve missed you so much. No more of this stinking talk about never. I want you both back where you belong—at my side and in my bed—and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

* * * * *

Davis knew he should slow down, allow Melina a chance to absorb the immensity of changes thrust upon her, but a part of him was scared spitless she'd run. Run from him and Trev – because they were a threesome again as far as he was concerned.

Trev's and Melina's footfalls synchronized with his as they strode through the corridors toward their quarters and the sensation was so fucking good.

Joining the *Nottingham* had been a dream come true – a license to be a rebel among the stars. Originally they were sanctioned troubleshooters for the SIC. They sought creative solutions to sensitive problems, and only if needed let the official military finish up. He'd rewritten his job description a month subsequent to being assigned aboard the *Nottingham* and never looked back. So what if he worked against instead of for the authorities now? Everything had shaped up exactly how he'd planned back in training, especially after grabbing Trev for the team.

Except for agonizing about how to get Melina to join them.

Being in control of his destiny and having free rein over the galaxy wasn't as much fun without both his friends and lovers by his side. Trev had been easy to nab, relatively speaking. As for Melina, between her grandfather's connections and the confines of Institute politics, a fortress couldn't have held her tighter. And yet here she was, back with him. He was happy when things fortuitously fell into his lap, Melina turning up at the right moment and in the right place.

He was also very suspicious when things fell into his lap. During debriefing he'd find out what the old coot was playing at, sending his only granddaughter into a potentially deadly situation. For now, he had a deep need to reassure himself they were here. Even finding them covered in dirt and sweat, he was eager to renew his acquaintance with his lovers. He had enough control to save the prize for after their meeting when they could all truly enjoy themselves.

He swung open the door to his quarters and paused in anticipation of Melina's response. She didn't disappoint him. Her controlled emotions broke loose and her soft chuckle tickled his ears. He turned to smile down at her.

"You like?"

"It's like hitting a time warp. You never did grow up." She stared at the decorations, the furniture. Everything matched the room the three of them had shared during their Institute days, from the massive bed to the antique jukebox in the corner.

"All for you, darling."

Desire flashed in her eyes, but fear was there as well. "Davis, I can't do this. I can't let you and Trev back into my life and then let you disappear again. It's too hard."

He gathered her in his arms and lifted her to breathe in the scent of her skin, burying his nose in the soft curls cascading around her shoulders. "I'm not going anywhere. Neither is Trev. This is it—you, me and Captain Explosive over there. Nothing will separate us again."

Melina sniffed, hard. He patted her backside and pointed to the bathing chamber. "It's on a timer but you can use my water quota today as well. Ten minutes total, and then we'll rendezvous with the rest of the crew." She watched him over her shoulder as she shuffled away, her gaze darting between him and Trev before she disappeared around the corner.

He leaned back on the door. Trev crashed on the bed, one arm thrown across his eyes, a layer of fine dust covering his entire body.

Davis laughed. "I take it the job went well. You look like shit."

Trev groaned. "They've taken the word insanity to a whole new level. The leaders of Derryn have no idea what they've got hold of, but they're still planning on using it. Plus, I've never seen such paranoia in all my life. I've spent the last three months wondering if someone was going to stick a knife blade between my ribs in the middle of the night."

“Is your information time sensitive or is the debrief soon enough?”

Trev sat up and stripped off his shirt. “It can wait.”

Davis nodded. “For what it’s worth, I still think you were the right man for the job.”

Trev snorted. “Thanks, but next time give me an easy job, like strapping explosives to my body. Acting was never my forte, and three months of it—sheer hell. I just about had a heart attack when Melina walked into the room.” He lifted his head and his beautiful amber eyes captured Davis’ attention. Even dirty and wearing a week’s growth of beard, Trev made him hard. The water in the shower started and Trev stared longingly as if he could see through walls to reassure himself Melina really was there. “We’ve got her back.” There was an unasked question in his voice.

Davis held a hand to his friend. “And we’re keeping her.”

Trev clasped his wrist and Davis pulled them together, savoring the sensation of hard muscles brushing his. He kissed Trev again, this time moving slow and smooth, his tongue teasing the firm seam of Trev’s lips, tangling their tongues. Trev tasted salty and wild and untamed, with a sharp flavor and tang that reminded Davis of the aftermath of an explosion.

Since they’d dropped Trev on the mining moon to make his way into the rebels’ confidence, Davis had only heard rumors. Whispers of traitors and senseless killings. Through it all he’d had to sit and wait while his lover dug further into danger without him. He deepened the kiss, sucking Trev’s tongue into his mouth and holding their hips close so the heat from their cocks met through the fabric of their uniforms.

They’d survived another time of separation and tonight would be soon enough to celebrate. Celebrate reunions and friendships meant to last a lifetime. Trev dropped his head on Davis’ shoulder for a moment, the weight reassuring and right. He squeezed Trev’s ass and pushed him toward the door.

“Go clean up in Tucker’s room and join us when you’re ready.”

* * * * *

Melina washed quickly, wondering if one or both men would join her in the shower. If she was honest with herself, she was disappointed when they left her alone and she stepped out to find a clean jumpsuit in her favorite blue resting on the counter. She fixed her hair into a neat braid, borrowed Davis' toothbrush, then marched bravely back into the main room and found Davis sitting alone. He was sprawled in an overstuffed chair with both of the sharysa draped over him. Piata lay in his lap, her paws batting at a string he dangled above her head while Jem groomed Davis' hair.

"Holy hell, who are you and what have you done with Davis? You freaking hate my habit of picking up stray beasts."

He raised a brow, which looked peculiar with Jem sitting almost on top of his head. "They're growing on me already. Rather fetching creatures—seriously cute. If we made stuffed replicas they would sell for a tidy sum and add to my retirement fund. We could give them obnoxious names like Moonglow and Galaxy Bright."

Melina laughed without thinking. He knew how to touch her emotions at any given moment. "What do you want to do with them while we meet?"

He stood and passed Piata to her. "They can come with us. I'm sure it's dinnertime for them as well."

Dinner?

Chapter Four

Four pairs of eyes watched with curiosity as Davis led her into a brightly lit room, seating her at his left. He grabbed the sharysa off their shoulders and dropped them to the floor before lowering his frame into a heavily padded chair. The massive tabletop was literally covered with plates of food and flasks and steaming pitchers of fluid. A wonderful aroma rose and Melina swallowed hard to stop from drooling. It had been a long time since her last meal—before descending to the surface of Derryn—and only typical *War Eagle* rations. Not a planetary feast like the one before her.

One empty chair remained on the other side of Davis, quickly filled when Trev wandered in, grabbed a fruit from the table and devoured it enthusiastically. “You have no idea how much I’ve looked forward to this. Food on Derryn leaves a lot to be desired.”

Davis tapped his glass and the low rumble of responses to Trev died away. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Melina Davenport. Melina, everyone. We’ll introduce you properly in a minute. Dig in, people. Tucker, looks fabulous as usual.”

With that, the curious glances vanished and Melina found herself ignored. Plates were passed, drinks poured. The constant trickle of conversation helped calm her nerves. Her mind continued to race with the repercussions of what being on the *Nottingham* meant, let alone being back with the guys. She sat straight in her chair, nibbling at the food in the hopes it would help her stomach to settle. Her gaze wandered the room, curiosity topping her nerves.

The walls of the dining room were covered from floor to ceiling with banners, each depicting one of the six main planetary systems settled in the distant past by explorers from Earth. Humanity’s home planet banner, with its distinctive blue-and-green-

washed globe, hung center stage—recognition even vagabonds had sentimental attachment to the birthplace of mankind.

A shiver took her as she realized she had no idea where she fit into the picture anymore. Her options grew smaller by the minute, but could she throw away all her training and background in one fell swoop? Strange—being on planet and attacked frightened her less than sitting with this group of outlaws, uncertain about her future.

“You’re thinking too hard, Melina. Come on, try some of the fea bundles. Tucker makes the best I’ve tasted this side of the Milky Way.” Trev leaned over to scoop a couple on her plate.

“Melina *likes* to think too hard. Sorry to interrupt everyone’s meal so soon, but let’s put her out of her misery. Introduce yourselves and your roles. I’ll start.” Davis turned, his dark gaze mesmerizing her. “Davis Yurt. Captain of the *Nottingham*, once of the Space Institute Corporation, now free run by this group of—what did you call us? Oh yes, pirates. We use our skills to fix situations that need a subtle touch, yet we’re not opposed to causing financial ruin for people who deserve it, so ‘pirate’ works. We’re a small ship, with a small crew, so we work double-duty. My second role was ship’s pilot, but I have a feeling I’m out of a job.”

Cheers erupted and Melina flitted her gaze around the room to witness a celebration.

“You have no idea how happy we are. Bloody fool tried flying us through a planet once, I swear he did.” The woman seated next to Trev rose and extended a hand across the table. “Sal Lord. Ship’s doctor. Since we try not to bleed too often, my main task is CFO.” Sal resumed her seat, her perfect posture, her accent, her beautiful dark skin all revealing her lineage in the elite class of Tber. The continued mixing of humanity over time had created an even, dusky skin in most people, with variations based on planetary influences. Tber’s twin suns had brought the darker melanin to the surface in her inhabitants.

“CFO?” Melina asked.

“Chief financial officer. We need to know which planets and corporations need a little chastisement.” She grinned at Melina, her bright white teeth flashing, mischief shining in her eyes. “I can dig my way into your financial records in under thirty seconds and steal it all in another ten.”

A sudden burst of sneezes rose from Melina’s left. Jem had crawled into her lap to steal tidbits from her plate. The fair-haired man beside her groaned out loud after his sneezing attack ceased. “What the freaking hell is that thing?”

Trev shrugged. “We decided to bring some of the local fauna home as a memento since Derryn was such a beautiful place to visit. They’re called sharysa, Conn. Get used to them.”

Conn wiped his nose with his napkin. “Great. Just what I needed. More fucking fur.” He nodded curtly at Melina. “Conner Jenkins. Navigation and communication.” Then he ignored her and went back to eating.

“Conn’s a man of many words, as you can see.” The other woman in the room gave her a wink. “He handles communications with the silver tongue of a poet, don’t you, darling?”

“Piss off,” Conn growled.

She laughed at him and then nodded at Melina. “Welcome aboard. I’m Jayne Ladge, ship’s engineer, so we’ll work together a fair bit. I do the same tasks whether onboard or on mission—build things, make them run better. I’m also the entertainment coordinator, and always on the lookout for new suggestions. Deep space can get unbearable with this crowd when all they want to do is watch reruns on the monitor and throw popcorn at each other.”

Melina returned the brunette’s smile, feeling a touch overwhelmed. They all seemed to expect her to join the crew with not a single question asked. She needed to regain control. She turned to the final man at the end of the table. “And your name is Tucker, but what’s your role?”

“Cook.”

She raised a brow. "No automations?" He shook his head and she whistled in approval. "You are good, everything is delicious." She was about to turn back to face Davis when she remembered. "Wait, everyone else has two duties. What's your mission status?"

Tucker grinned from ear to ear. "Assassin."

"Assassin and *cook*?"

"Occasionally at the same time."

Trev chuckled, the aching familiar tones drawing her attention. He stared at her, offering unspoken support and she was amazed at how easily they fit back together.

"Are you okay, Melina? I need to report, but if you've had enough I can take you back to quarters to rest."

She drew in a long breath. Did she really want to return to the *Eagle*, her grandfather and more years of frustration within the Corporation, when she could remain with Trev and Davis? Especially when she was now the pariah of her family. Even tired and confused her heart knew the answer.

Still, she wasn't going to come along for the ride unless she was one hundred percent in. This wasn't just about friendship and sex. "I've watched your exploits and have to say that other than one situation, I've agreed with every one of your 'acts of piracy'. I'd like to join the *Nottingham* and aid your missions."

Davis rattled his glass again. "All in favor of Melina joining the crew? I vote aye." Five more "ayes" rang out and Davis shook her hand. "Congratulations. You've just become a pirate. Won't Gramps be pleased."

Melina controlled the chuckle that wanted to escape. Oh yeah, Grandfather was going to be very excited. *Not*.

Trev rose and came around to kiss her cheek. She glanced at the rest of the crew, but other than Conn's scowl at the sharysa, no one blinked an eye. Trev paced back to stand beside Davis at the head of the table, settling into an at-ease position.

“Melina, I’ll catch you up. We came into this system to find out if there was a real threat posed by the Derrians. They weren’t considered a tactical concern in the galaxy until recently—the planet lost technological capabilities a dozen years ago due to massive solar flare activity. The Derrians had dropped off the map until last year when representatives from the rebels showed up at the Corporation’s Trade Embassy. They threatened to flood the market with crystals if they didn’t get their demands met. We intercepted SIC reports stating they had no intent on investigating the matter at this time, so we decided to look into it ourselves. Like you said, energy crystals are extremely valuable and we don’t want some crackpots taking control. So I went in undercover and managed to join the rebels. That’s where you found me.”

He turned to face the rest of the table. “I’ve confirmed the attacks we heard about originated from the rebels on Derryn.”

“Did they just discover a crystal source?” Jayne asked. “People have lived on Derryn for years, mining the moons for minerals, and I’d never heard of them having energy crystals. When I checked the records, there was even an Institute based planet-side at one time, doing seismic studies and moisture analysis. There should be tons of equipment on the planet’s surface, but none of it would work anymore if they’ve gone low-tech.”

Trev nodded slowly. “There were no mines in the old days. There are now, in what used to be considered scrap rock quarries. The threat is real and so were the explosions detonated on four of the other major crystal providers in Corporation territory. I’ve discovered how the Derrians accomplished both.”

He cleared a space on the table, pulling a small rock from his pocket and placing it on the surface. He plopped Piata close by. She chirped at him, her little head tilting from side to side. He nodded briefly and she touched the rock, her body wiggling with delight. The fragment flashed red and everyone at the table jerked back.

Davis swore. “Holy hell, man.”

Trev chuckled and picked up the stone. “Bombs ‘R’ Us...cool, eh?” He tossed the glowing rock from hand to hand.

“You used rocks like that to blow up the corridor – are you insane?” Melina pushed her chair back as Trev continued to juggle the rock, the sharysa in her lap sitting at attention. “Wait, let me rephrase. I know you’re insane, but what are you doing?”

“Testing a theory.” He tossed the rock in her direction and she gasped. Jem caught it easily, the sharysa batting the stone back and forth between its paws, a rumble of pleasure rising from its throat. Everyone in the room held their breaths, Melina’s heart pounded, her anger simmering at Trev’s foolishness.

“Oh my lord, look at that.” Jayne whispered.

The glowing red faded to pale blue, the rock now crystal clear with a pulsing beat at its core.

“Fuck, did the creature just produce an energy crystal out of a rock?” Tucker leaned forward in his chair as if fascinated.

“*They* did. It takes two sharysa to make the final change.” Trev picked Piata up and returned her to his shoulder.

“No wonder the Derrians think they can control the market – they can make as many crystals as they want at any time.”

Trev shook his head. “That’s the good news. The Derrians haven’t figured this out yet. All they know is they’re sitting on the mother of all lodes down there. They have no idea it’s the sharysa’s presence turning their worthless crap into gold – well, crystals worth more than gold.”

Davis leaned back in his chair, his long fingers stroking his beard. “Two sharysa?”

Trev nodded. “Piata can make bombs for me out of basically anything organic. Once she led me down a passage where I discovered a group of the sharysa creating crystals.” He cleared his throat awkwardly and peered around the table at his crewmates. “It seems to be a side effect of the creature’s...sex life.”

Tucker roared with laughter. "You watched the beasties get it on?"

"Nothing better to do. Actually, it's not really sex. It's mated pairs that can turn a rock. The first change makes it explosive. The second complementary change increases the energy charge to the high levels of a crystal. If you only have one sharysa you only get bombs."

Davis snorted. "Back to the explosions, how did the Derrians manage them?"

"You're going to like this. They package a sharysa in a box and drop it where they want an explosion. After being trapped for a while, the sharysa get pissed enough they produce the first change." Trev stroked Piata's fur and she purred, her blue eyes whirling with pleasure. "For skinny little things, they appear to be impenetrable. I've seen one carrying a live fragment in their teeth, watched the bomb go off, and all they do is shake their head and go on."

"Shit, you're saying they're invincible?"

"No, I've seen one hurt in a rockfall, but an explosion – nothing. It's like they absorb the energy of it. I think that's how they make the crystals in the first place – they give off huge amounts of mental energy and force it into the cells of the rock."

Melina suddenly remembered. "Trev, the rebels sent the pod back to the *Eagle* with a package. Did they send a sharysa?" He nodded. "Shit, I need to contact them, warn them. My grandfather is aboard and even if he's a –"

Davis placed a hand on her arm. "It's okay. If there had been any real danger to the Institute vessel Trev would have told us as soon as you arrived."

"The ship will be fine, Melina, I made sure. The Derrians didn't send a sharysa in a package. I convinced them setting one free onboard would cause more mischief than a single bomb. Since it's loose, it should be at least a week before the beastie gets lonely and starts blowing things up. I've got a plan to deal with the lone sharysa, and with the Derrians themselves, but I need to chat with Jayne and Conn to make it happen."

"Timing for implementation?" Davis asked.

Trev paused and his gaze met hers. He broke off eye contact too quickly and her suspicions rose. There was something he didn't want to say in front of her.

"Two days from now would be the soonest we could attempt part one. Part two will take a couple more."

Davis nodded. "Then we're done for now. Dismissed." He rose from his chair and reached for her hand, his eyes darkening with restrained desire. She felt his need for her, and an answer pulse beat deep in her core. First, she had something she needed to do.

"Wait." Melina cleared her throat. Having everyone's attention on her made her skin itch but she forced herself to stay calm. "Thank you for welcoming me aboard, but I need to warn you my presence may bring extra trouble to your lives. I hope you don't regret taking me in."

Conn grunted. "We're fucking pirates, remember? We like trouble."

* * * * *

They were barely out the door when Melina grabbed Trev by the hand and hauled him to a stop. She glared daggers at him.

"You unmitigated ass. I can't believe you threw a bomb at me," she whispered as the rest of the crew walked out of earshot. Davis hid his smile and attempted to replace it with a stern expression. Watching Melina glare up at Trev, who had inches and pounds on her, was seriously amusing.

It was also a serious turn-on. The need to pick Melina up and bury himself in her increased with every passing minute. He'd been rock-fucking-hard since he'd greeted them in the docking station. Dinner and the debrief hadn't done a thing to cool his ardor, and heaven help anyone who got in his way now.

Trev blinked at her. "I did, but I knew Jem would take care—"

She swung at him, but this time the blow didn't land. Trev caught her fist in his palm and then pinned her against him as she squirmed and swore. "I'm sorry, you're

right. I should have been a little less flamboyant in my presentation. I didn't mean to frighten you." He kissed her forehead and she slowly ceased her struggles.

"Ass."

Trev glanced over Melina's shoulder at Davis and winked. "I know. Forgive me?"

She rolled her eyes and then kissed him sweetly, her pink tongue slipping out to tease his. Davis growled, wanting to taste her, to taste them both. He stepped closer and joined in. Melina wrapped a hand around his neck, turning to kiss him deep and hard. Where her breast pressed against his arm, her nipple tightened, and she shimmied from side to side, rubbing like a little feline. Then she turned back to Trev, biting and nipping at his jaw, his throat, leaving room for Davis to attach himself to his lover's lips, drawing the air from Trev's lungs as they ground together, Trev's cock hard against his thigh.

Tongues and teeth, heat and desire. The need to strip them bare and consume them completely raged like an inferno until his vision grew dark and he wouldn't have cared if the entire crew watched. But for Melina's sake he fought until he had just enough strength to step back, his head spinning from the pulse of blood rushing through him. "Damn it, I'm not taking you in the corridor. Bedroom, now."

He swung her into his arms and hauled ass down the corridor back to his quarters, Melina licking and sucking with her hot mouth and tongue at the bare skin of his neck. Trev ran ahead and jerked the door open, the sharysa streaking into the room like furry little rockets. Davis dropped Melina on the bed and stretched out beside her. Trev crawled on the opposite side to capture her between them. Trev caught his eye and he nodded. This time was for Melina, for her pleasure and reassurance in the midst of the uncertainly she'd gone through.

Davis reached down to remove her shirt when suddenly two balls of fur leapt on the bed and swarmed them. Melina giggled, attempting to slip her hands around the sharysas' torsos and pry the clinging beasts away. She shook a finger in Jem's face. "Stop playing, this is not the time." Davis chuckled as she continued to scold.

“You and your creatures. Here, I’ll deal with it.” He stood and grasped both sharysa, one in each hand, their bellies soft and warm in his clasp. Raising them to eye level, he gave them a stern glare. “I’m the captain of this vessel and you are my guests. Behave.” He glanced around the room, finally selecting the top of the jukebox as the safest location.

“Here. This is where I want you to stay when we are on the bed. Understand?” Davis pointed at himself and then back at the jukebox. “When we are on the bed, you are here.” He stripped off his shirt as he returned to the bed, eager to resume his plans, which involved naked, full-body contact with both Trev and Melina at the same time.

Trev shook his head in amazement. “What is with that? You hate furry things and yet they always listen to you. Does everything obey your orders?”

Oh yeah, what an opening. “I’m not sure, let’s find out.” Davis crossed his arms and eyed Trev up and down, deliberately stopping his gaze at Trev’s crotch. The fabric covering him shifted as the hard length of Trev’s cock grew more visible. “Clothes off,” Davis barked.

Trev stripped so quickly he became a blur, the jumpsuit flying through the air to land in a puddle on the floor. Naked skin and nothing else remained underneath, and Davis’ mouth watered at seeing Trev’s cock, rising eagerly from his thick thatch of curls. Melina hesitated, a mischievous smile on her face. Davis unbuckled his pants slowly, and she watched his progress from under heavy-lidded eyes. She clasped the bottom of her shirt and skimmed it up until her beautiful breasts appeared and he groaned involuntarily.

First, some important details.

“You still on birth control, sweetheart? Trev and I are clean and clear – unless Trev was busy down on the planet.”

Trev swore softly. “I’m sorry, Melina, I didn’t even think to ask.”

“I’m good.” She glanced sideways at Trev, her cheeks flushing red. “I wasn’t thinking about much either, except how much I wanted you.”

It had been too long. When she crossed her hands over her breasts, he growled with displeasure and Trev glanced at him, warning him to go slow. Holy hell, staying in control would fucking kill him today.

“You’ve got the most beautiful tits, Melina, dark and dusky and sweet. Trev, lick them for me. I want to see her nipples standing tight and hard before I taste them again.”

Melina moaned, her eyes wide as Trev approached her. He propped her against the pillows before lowering his mouth. Davis sat at the foot of the bed to get a clearer view as Trev snaked out his tongue to touch the tip to Melina’s areola. She shivered, and the bud pulled into a tight peak, moisture glistening on the surface. Trev laved her skin again, one side and then the other, little gasps of pleasure rising from her as she writhed beneath his touch.

Davis clasped his cock in his hand, squeezing the hard length in long strokes to ease his frustration. Watching Melina and Trev together again was beautiful, his best friend sucking on her tits, with two of his fingers slipped deep into her cunt. When Trev lifted his hand, fingers dripping wet with her juices, and painted her lips with the sweet cream, Davis lost it.

Screw this. Handing out orders would be fun another time. Right now he wanted to participate and just do whatever came next. He crawled over top of them and Melina grinned at him with a teasing smile, her torso quivering as Trev resumed pumping his fingers into her body.

“You can’t wait, can you?” She thrust her fingers into his hair.

“Fuck no.” And he attacked.

Chapter Five

Trev hummed with approval as Davis joined them, and suddenly the bed was filled with more skin and tongues and tastes and sensations than he knew how to handle. It was so right, so familiar and yet it had been too long since they came together to drive away the loneliness and satisfy their aching desire for each other.

Davis kissed like a madman, as if he were intent on cleaning every trace of nectar from Melina's lips. Trev swirled his fingers in her depths again, stroking her sweet spot the way she loved with the pads of his fingers before he pressed them, sticky and wet, against the seam between Davis' and Melina's lips. Davis opened and sucked the digits in, and two tongues licked them clean. Trev bent close to add his tongue to the combined communion, the flavor of passion driving him higher and harder as he ground his aching cock against Melina's hip.

She reached down and grasped him, using her fingertips to smear the liquid sneaking from his body over the head of his glans. Davis adjusted his body and brought his cock into reach, and Melina cooed with delight, wrapping her hands around them both and stroking as best she could at the awkward angle.

It felt heavenly. The heat of Davis' erection burned against him, the touch of Melina's hand softer than he needed to be able to come, but a wonderfully perfect connection between the three of them. Davis thrust his hips, the flared head of his cock rubbing hard and fast into Trev, both their lengths escaping her circling grasp at the top of each stroke to nudge the soft skin of her belly.

Trev groaned before detaching Melina's fingers. "No. I want this to be for you, not us. Let us bring you pleasure, baby. You've been away from us for so long." He rolled his hips away from her clutching hands and dropped back to worship her breasts.

Cupping them together, he sucked both nipples rapidly, one after another, nipping at the flushed tips, suckling hard then circling gently, blowing air over the sensitized peaks. Melina cried out and Trev looked down to see Davis' face buried between her legs, his tongue thrusting rapidly as his thumb rubbed her clit in continuous circles. Trev joined Davis, lapping the liquid pouring from her body, licking her flavor from Davis' tongue, kissing his friend and lover, and continuing to give attention to Melina until she cried out, her torso shaking with her climax.

"Can't wait," Davis groaned. Trev rolled aside to allow Davis to experience the sweet pleasure of joining with Melina after so long apart. She spread her thighs wide to welcome Davis and his cock nestled against her opening. Davis stared down at her as he rocked his hips, an inch at a time, working his cock into her tight passage, forcing the wide girth of his shaft deeper and deeper as Trev whispered words of encouragement in her ear.

Melina twisted her head to capture his lips and he gave back his love, his yearning, brushing a palm over the erect tips of her nipples. Every slide of Davis' cock, every inch he claimed in Melina's body, Trev felt it as if he were the one being filled. Melina gasped into his kiss and Davis grunted with satisfaction. Trev glanced down to see his lover's shaft buried between the soft, flowering lips of Melina's core.

"Fill me," she whispered, reaching for him, and Trev rose on his knees. Melina used to love to take them, loved to share the talents of her tongue, and he eagerly fed his aching cock into scalding heat of her mouth.

At the same time, Davis grabbed him, pulling their mouths together, promising him more, but for now simply connecting the three of them together. For a few moments, tongues tangled, hips thrust and the three were one. Then Melina sucked wickedly hard, cupping his balls and rolling them in her fingers, and Trev broke the kiss to concentrate on lasting more than thirty seconds in her beautiful mouth.

Threading his fingers through her hair, he held her in place and plunged in, his cock ramming the back of her throat. She tilted her head and swallowed a little more of

his length, twirling her tongue on each pass, sucking and humming with delight. Her body shifted on the bed as Davis increased the speed and force of his drives until he impaled her completely on each pass. The room grew noisy with their breathing and the wet slaps of bodies connecting time and again. Melina reached and clasped their hands, linking their fingers together and drawing them to her chest as she began to shake with her release.

Davis roared his approval, Trev swore and stilled, on the verge of blacking out as his climax hit, her sweet mouth sucking him so deep the seemingly never-ending jolts of his come poured down her throat. She swallowed greedily, her legs locked around Davis' hips to keep him close. Trev attempted to withdraw as his cock grew sensitive, but she lapped and suckled, softer now, but refusing to allow either of them to leave her body.

Trev's heart ached when he realized why. "We've got you, baby. We're not going anywhere. We'll be here when you wake up."

Davis jerked slightly then added his reassurances. "We'll hold you all night, and tomorrow we can talk about us. About how we're going to care for you from now on." He glanced at Trev. "We'll still be here in the morning."

Melina relaxed slowly, her eyes opening ever so slightly as she gave Trev's cock a final kiss and then drew back and took a deep breath.

"I love you." The words were barely out before she fell asleep.

Melina's even breathing reassured Trev she remained sleeping, her head now resting on Davis' chest, her hair pooled over him. The satisfied expression on both their faces echoed the feeling in his soul. Except for a few sordid details with the potential to blow the whole situation back to hell, everything was right with his world.

"That was about me leaving you guys, wasn't it?" Davis asked, his voice a low rumble in the quiet of the room.

Trev gave a wry smile. “I think it was about both of us. You left in the middle of the night and, as far as she knows, I disappeared without a trace—she doesn’t have a lot of reason to trust us.”

“I left for your own damn good.”

“Fuck that, man. I’ve never bought your excuse for leaving, and neither will Melina when you finally get around to telling her you stepped aside so we could get married. The arranged marriage between us was all about political wrangling. I never had any intention of being a puppet for my parents or hers. I want her, but I refuse to give you up to please any of the high-and-mighty Davenports.”

Davis nodded slowly. “Yeah, I get it now. And you’re right—leaving wasn’t the best way to deal with the issue. But that’s all changed, I’ve already said I’m not letting either of you go ever again.”

Trev’s emotions were all over the chart. Back onboard the *Nottingham*, so many details were falling into place to indicate a happily ever after for the three of them. But was Melina also willing to give up her family connections? There was no way the Davenports would approve of her crewing with the *Nottingham*, or of having Davis included in their lives.

And the actions Trev considered the only option to deal with the threat from Derryn would potentially affect the entire universe. He’d have a price on his head after the dust settled.

“Tell me what you think is the end of the world now.”

Trev glanced at Davis, surprised at the command. “How in the hell do you do that?”

His lover grinned back, soothing his fingers through the tresses covering him. “Like I’m going to let you know what your tells are. I like knowing when you’re up to your eyeballs in shit. Spill.”

Trev hesitated and then settled back on the bed, wrapping a leg over Davis and pressing closer to Melina’s naked back. The four months he’d spent alone with Davis

after the *Nottingham* snatched him from the SIC team had been wonderful, but they'd missed Melina at their core. The sex was somehow far more than sex when she was involved.

"I know how to deal with the Derryn issue, but there are consequences."

"Usually are."

"These consequences will affect people close to Melina. Shit, affect—it's going to ruin them."

Davis paused. "Fuck."

"Yeah." Regret ate at him. He'd already messed up her life, what right did he have to screw with her family? "I've pondered for the past month and I can't think of any other solution to the problem. That was before Melina even dropped into the picture, but having her onboard the *Nottingham* will make the situation even worse. The admiral could potentially claim we've kidnapped her." Trev laughed softly. "Who am I kidding? We already know the bastard will do whatever he can to paint us in the worst possible light. We're screwed if we do and fucked if we don't."

Davis reached over Melina and dragged his fingers through Trev's hair, comforting him with his touch. "Hey, enough with the doom and gloom. I know you were by yourself for three months, but you've got Melina and me now. Let's talk it through, see if we can come up with a different solution."

Some of the burden eased. He wasn't alone anymore. None of them were.

"The easiest way to eliminate the threat of the Derrians is to drop another sharysa wherever they plan an attack. The creatures are drawn to each other, and where there's one there's soon a lot more." Davis continued to stroke his fingers through Trev's hair and the sensation relaxed him.

"So, the sharysa won't set bombs if there's two of them?" Davis asked.

"Not usually. If there were a second beast, it would help the first to escape. Only that means there would be two sharysa loose on the ship, or the planet."

Davis shifted, rolling Melina to the mattress between them. She sucked in a big breath and then snuggled up tight again. Trev watched the tender expression on Davis' face with something close to awe. She really did hold their hearts.

"You want to plant a beast on the *Eagle*? Two questions. Where are you going to get another sharysa, because I doubt you'll convince Melina to give up either of the ones you brought onboard, and how the hell are you going to get it over there?" Davis leaned on an elbow, staring closely at him now.

"The spare sharysa? That is the least of our troubles. Did I mention they're considered little more than vermin on the planet? They breed like crazy. Getting it aboard – that part you're not going to like."

Davis' expression tightened. "You're not thinking of letting her go over and deliver it, are you? There are no guarantees we'll be able to get her back if the bastard gets his hands on her again."

"I know it's a risk, but any of the rest of us they'll shoot on sight. Melina at least has a chance."

Davis jerked upright and slid off the bed. Melina whimpered and reached for him in her sleep. Trev sighed and cradled her against his body, hushing her until she settled again.

"What's the second thing that's got you so worried?"

Trev looked up at Davis as he loomed over the bed, his face dark with anger. "If there are two sharysa anywhere, there will soon be energy crystals. A galaxy-wide infestation, which is a definite possibility, means eventually there would be no need to buy crystals. The entire consortium of providers, including Melina's family, will go bankrupt."

* * * * *

Melina woke with the most enticing warmth pressing against her, and the sounds of heavy breathing in her ears. One hand rested on Davis' muscular chest, her fingers

twisting into the coarse hair even as she shook awake her sleep-dazed mind. He panted softly, his eyes closed and core muscles clenched tight. Something nudged her hip and she pulled back the sheets to discover Trev nestled between Davis' legs, engulfing the rigid length of Davis' cock in his mouth again and again. Spit and pre-come glistened in the dim light of the room, Trev's cheeks hollowing as he forcibly sucked the head of Davis' erection on each long upward stroke. She whimpered at the sight, her body instantly wet and ready, and she slipped her hand down to brush a finger against her suddenly throbbing clit.

"Good morning. Oh hell, Trev. Yeah, suck harder." Davis dropped his head back on the pillow and let out a long, slow hiss before turning to wink at her. "Come here, sweetheart, and give me a kiss." She leaned over him, pressing her hand on his chest and planting a chaste kiss on his lips before pulling away. He growled at her. "That's not a kiss."

Melina shook her head. "I'm not kissing you until I get cleaned up." She sat and turned on the mattress. Davis attacked from behind, pulling her body over his as she squealed and wiggled. Trev sat and grasped her legs, twisting her until she knelt over Davis, her breasts smashed into his chest. Trev lowered himself on top of her, sandwiching her between their bodies, his cock nestled in the seam of her ass.

She was trapped.

"I said I wanted a kiss." And Davis took it, driving his tongue into her mouth while Trev nipped at her neck, working his way down her back until he nibbled and licked her butt cheeks. Davis held her captive, lifting his hands to keep her head in place as his mouth ravished her. His cock, still wet from Trev's mouth, smeared moisture on her belly. The arousal she constantly felt in their presence peaked. Trickle of sensation built in her belly to spread its flickers to the very tips of her extremities. When Trev clasped her hips and licked from clit to ass, she cried into Davis' mouth, wiggling her hips with the need for more pressure and stimulation.

Davis swore and Melina pushed herself partially upright to glance down. Trev's soft hair rubbed her crotch as he buried his head between her legs. Slurping noises rose and she giggled.

"Damn it, woman, you think it's funny he's sucking my balls—arghh. Trev, enough."

Trev lifted his head and grinned at the two of them. "Good morning. What are you waiting for? Fuck her already." His lips glistened with moisture and Melina twisted around to capture a taste. The flavor of Davis' seed lingered on Trev's tongue and she hummed with pleasure.

"Face Trev and put me inside, sweetheart," Davis ordered, turning and positioning her to his command. She was wet and ready, but her breasts ached for a touch, needing to be fondled and petted. She squatted over him, Trev holding Davis' cock upright, his head eye level with their hips as if he didn't want to miss a single second. Heat poured off them, the scent of sex and passion filling the air. Melina reached down and added her hand to Trev's, rubbing Davis' cock back and forth through her wet folds to coat the flared head. He was huge and hot, and she dropped her hips a little at a time to work him into her body. Trev leaned forward to lick her clit, lick Davis' cock, adding moisture where they joined to ease the way as she impaled herself on Davis' shaft.

Trev's rasping touch along her labia, stroking the seam between her and Davis, was the most erotic sensation. Davis slipped his hands along her torso to cup her breasts from behind, teasing and pulling her nipples, firmer and more aggressively as she began to ride up and down the steel length of his erection. Impossibly thick, he stretched her and triggered nerves deep within that made her gasp.

Trev balanced on one knee, holding his pre-come-smear'd cock in his hand. He rubbed the bright purple head against her clit and slid the heated length between where she and Davis joined.

She took his lips in a smoldering kiss before grabbing him by the ears and forcing his head to her breasts. Davis still fondled her, but now he offered one side and then the

other for Trev to suckle. Trev nipped, hard, as Davis drove upward, and a wave rushed over her, carrying her away from everything but the satisfaction found with her lovers. Davis pounded in, his cock flaring high and hard. Trev dropped back to lap again and again at her now-aching clit until she screamed and broke apart, the release too hard and pure to control. Davis' semen scalded her, soaked her core, making his final thrusts slick and wild. Trev reached with his tongue to clean them, be a part of them.

Melina felt her body sway, the effort of holding herself upright too much to maintain. Davis captured her, pulling her back to lay on top of him, his cock slipping from her depths.

Trev rose over her and his gaze burned a hole in her heart, his unasked question showing in his eyes.

"Take me," she ordered, pulling him down. He plunged into her body in one motion, sealing her to Davis.

There was something so right about lying between them, sweaty, blood pounding through her core as on every thrust Trev skewered her back onto Davis. She twisted her head to kiss Davis as best she could, Trev leaning in to add his tongue.

Touch after touch, all the aching loneliness of the past year disappeared as they loved her, needed her. Consumed and used her until there was nothing left but what they made as a whole.

A trio, united into one.

Trev cried out, his seed joined Davis' inside and she moaned in approval. Pinned between her lovers, she realized how much more alive she was in the past twenty-four hours than in the full twelve months previous.

Chapter Six

Davis knew he wore a foolish grin as he scooped more breakfast onto his plate, Trev's expression echoing his own. Opposite them at the table, Melina grew redder by the minute.

"If you don't stop soon, I'm going to hit you both," she warned quietly.

Trev raised his brows a few times. "Hmm, you haven't played *Dominatrix* with us for a long time, baby. You making promises?"

Davis snorted into his coffee. For the next ten minutes Melina and Trev nattered back and forth like an old married couple and satisfaction bubbled in his soul as he listened. Damn, it was wonderful to have them together again. He watched the lights dancing in Melina's eyes as she argued and teased, admired the way Trev backed off at the right moments and accompanied his wordplay with a generous dose of sexual innuendo. Trev glanced at him, dragging his heated gaze over Davis' torso to let him know he was a part of the group. Wanted. Needed. Davis' body reacted as usual to the thought of being with them and he had to reach under the table to adjust himself. Now if they could just deal with this situation quickly, they could get the hell out of this system and move on with their lives.

He hit the alert button to call everyone to the meeting and waited until all but Conn joined the table.

"We've got two issues. There's a beast running loose on the *War Eagle* with the potential to set off bombs if it gets upset, and the Derrian rebels are readying to send off more packages to get their message across. I've got a few ideas for solutions already, but I'd like to hear if you have any improvements you can suggest."

Melina spoke quickly, her face flushed. "We need to deal with the *Eagle* first, Davis. Their lives are at stake."

Davis cursed silently. He should have known she wouldn't hesitate to demand action and he wasn't ready.

The rest of the crew shuffled awkwardly at the table, unwilling to speak and upset Melina. "I know your grandfather is aboard, but frankly..." Jayne stopped, her worried expression clear as she looked at Davis for guidance.

Davis sighed. "Melina, the *Nottingham* started as a secret arm of the Space Institute Corp. We were supposed to run the undercover jobs no one else needed to know about. I got called up as first mate a couple of months after I left you and Trev." She watched attentively as he leaned back in his chair. "After only two missions I knew I couldn't do it. The SIC weren't picking military targets or dangerous rebels, they were sending us into situations detrimental to the SIC leadership, mainly their financial status. I didn't want to fight for dirty causes and neither did the rest of the crew once I shared my discovery."

"So, you mutinied." Melina nodded. "That makes far more sense than the official version given over the news waves. I take it the original captain didn't feel the way you did?"

Tucker snorted. "The bastard liked what we were doing too much. It was a pleasure to kick his ass off the ship."

Davis shrugged. "We gave him a couple of choices and he decided he'd prefer to go back to the SIC in one piece. But the bottom line is the admiral hates our guts and feels personally responsible to track the *Nottingham* down and make an example of us all. The only person on this ship who could potentially get a sharysa aboard the *Eagle* without being keelhailed is you."

Melina sat upright, all the color draining from her face.

"I don't think it's the right plan," Trev said, reaching for her hand. "I thought so at first, but I don't want to risk you. We need to figure out a different drop method. Maybe we can place a shipload of sharysa in a convenient spot so the *Eagle* feels obligated to pick them up, I don't know. You don't have to—"

She cut in quickly. "I'll do it. We'll have to make it look like I've just escaped from the planet though, or he'll know something is up. With the extreme solar radiation Derryn's sun gives off, the *War Eagle's* sensors aren't able to do a system-wide search. As long as you stay in oppositional orbit, you'll be fine."

Silence hung over the room. Fuck, he hated it came down to this. "Are you certain?"

Melina nodded. "I just need a sharysa."

Davis stood up. "You'll need three. Here's my idea for dealing with the rebels and helping you escape from the *Eagle*. Trev pointed out to me one way to stop the Derrians temporarily is to shut down their ability to get off planet. Their rebellion began when a new mining base was brought into orbit. Over the past years, the Derrians have gained the ability to use raw crystals to travel to the station, using its ships to get out of the star system.

"Conn is checking the navigational charts and communication frequencies. It's possible the massive solar flares that destroyed their technology can be triggered to happen again. If we seed the sun in the correct location, we'll knock out the communications and power temporarily on the *Eagle*, the mining station and the planet all at the same time."

"They'd have backup life-support system on both the ship and the station, but how will this help Melina escape? And won't the solar flares disrupt our systems as well?" Sal asked.

Davis rose from his chair. "Melina will take three sharysa with her. Two of them will be Jem and Piata who are mated and have shown us they can turn crystals. When the systems shut down, Melina will make her way back to the shuttle and get the sharysa to reenergize the crystals. Then she'll stick-handle the vessel back to us. Once the sharysa are back onboard, we reactive our own engines and get out. As soon as we leave the system, we'll send a message to the SIC to let them know the *War Eagle* needs backup. Help should arrive within twenty-four hours."

Davis glanced around the room. "Any troubles you see with the plan, anything I've missed?"

"Do you want me to build a trigger for the flares?" Jayne asked.

He nodded. "Conn will give you the frequency information, but simply focusing enough magnetic ions in the right spot should set her off. Derryn's sun is pretty volatile."

"Don't make the bomb too powerful, okay, Jayne?" Trev winked at her. "Going supernova is not how I want to check out."

Tucker frowned. "Davis, I see one problem. You said Melina takes three sharysa onboard with her. We only have two."

Trev coughed. "Trust me. The sharysa are working on that one for us even now."

A loud roar rose from the hallway followed by more sneezing. "Trev! You ass. What...did you...bring these...beasts...onboard...for?" Conn stormed into the room, sneezing explosively between every few words. Over his shoulder he carried a blanket pulled into a sack.

It wiggled violently.

He dumped it unceremoniously on the table and the flaps of fabric fell back to reveal a squirming horde of sharysa, each one the size of a man's hand.

"Holy hell, you weren't kidding about them being prolific breeders, were you, Trev?" Davis admired the mass of beasts from a distance while Melina and Jayne immediately each picked one up and began *ooing* and *ahhing*. "Don't get too attached, ladies. These are weapons of mass destruction. We haven't told you the last part of the plan yet."

He explained the potential outcome of the sharysa spreading across the galaxy and the room fell silent except for Conn's continued sneezing. No one spoke over the sounds of the purrs and squeals of the sharysa kits, now crawling into people's laps and exploring every inch of the room.

“Well. That makes a bit of change coming.” Jayne pulled a long face and then shrugged. “I don’t see it’s a bad thing, everyone having free energy crystals. In fact there are a few planets I can recommend for us to visit right off that could use a renewable energy source. It would improve their living conditions a whole lot.”

“So, you don’t think I’ve precipitated Armageddon?” Trev asked.

Conn sneezed then cursed. “You’re not godlike enough.”

Sal pointed at Conn. “I want to see you in my room. I’ll give you a dose of your usual allergy medication to clear this up. Sounds like you’d better get used to having the furry beasts around.”

Conn nodded then stepped over to show a monitor to Jayne. While they examined the data, Sal shuffled closer to Melina to stroke the sharysa resting in her arms.

“They are rather adorable.” She glanced at Trev. “Are we going to have to exterminate them by the cartload? Because I’m not looking forward to it.”

Trev reassured her. “They seem to stop reproducing at the maximum population the local food supply will allow to flourish. There were a lot of sharysa on the planet, but never too many. I assume it will be the same thing here. There are records on the Institute files if you want to confirm for us.”

Sal nodded. “I think I will. Later.” She eyed Conn and nudged Melina in the side. “After I enjoy the results of giving him his medication.” Melina looked puzzled and Sal laughed. “The side effects of the medication are quite amusing. They make him very affectionate.”

“Conn?” Melina gasped.

“Oh yeah. He’s a rough codger, but you should see the size of the man’s rocket blaster.” She held up both hands to create a circle of massive size and Melina gulped. “He’s got amazing stamina as well. I can arrange for you to observe sometime. I remember once—”

“Melina, can I speak to you please?” Davis called out. That was enough of that conversation, as far as he was concerned. Melina nodded politely to Sal and rejoined them, the sharysa snuggled in her arms fast asleep and purring.

“Yes?”

Trev and Davis exchanged glances before he gestured toward Sal, who now led Conn, still sneezing, from the room. “Just thought you needed rescuing from our resident sex expert. If you want to talk about impressive girths, you can check us again. Thoroughly.”

“Jealous?”

Davis pulled her into his lap and nuzzled her neck. “Never. Now we have a couple days to kill before you fly away. Got any ideas of how we should spend the time?”

“I vote for the Dominatrix. She did promise.” Trev knelt beside them, his eyes dark with rising interest.

Davis laughed. Maybe it would all work out fine.

* * * * *

A day later Melina wandered into the crew’s common room to find Sal surrounded by monitors, medical scanners and a swarm of sharysa. The doctor smiled at her and cleared a space close by, patting its surface to indicate Melina should join her.

“I’ve been digging through the Institute files from when they had a base on Derryn. The records dated from before they quit transmitting show previous generations of sharysa have different DNA than the ones you brought onboard.”

Melina sat and three of the beasts crawled closer. They brushed their soft faces against her skin and purred. She gathered them in her lap and stroked them, amazed to see they were already the same size as their sires.

“It’s fascinating how environmental changes affect the local species. Actually, even the transplants like the humans on Derryn probably felt the impact of the solar storm.

We may all share the common ancestry of Earth, but our new planets of origin have changed us slightly.”

“You think the beasts were affected by the solar flares that knocked the technology on Derryn back down to preflight level?” A warning tickled the back of Melina’s brain. If the original solar flares caused one set of changes, what about further bombardment?

“It’s a high possibility. Nothing else seems to have occurred. I’m fairly certain it’s the DNA changes that allow them to turn the crystals. That’s why there never used to be mines on the planet.”

Melina frowned. “If we set off another series of flares, what effect will it have on them? Could it cause them to revert to their previous characteristics?”

Sal shrugged. “It could cause a whole new series of mutations to occur. We know massive solar eruptions can have intense medical and emotional consequences on humans, even causing strokes and heart attacks. I don’t see why there should be less effect on the fauna. Solar activity even has the potential to trigger widely fluctuating feelings including despair and depression. One study showed social unrest increased after massive flares to the point of inciting revolutions.”

“There’s the source of the paranoia the Derrians exhibit.” Melina brushed the sharysa off her lap and stood to pace the room. There was potential for a lot more danger in this situation than she’d suspected. “Can we really justify setting off another set of flares and sending them further down the spiral?”

Sal raised a brow. “Can we justify doing nothing? Letting them continue to bomb unsuspecting mines and storage facilities in their quest to take over the market? Melina, sometimes it’s not that we have the best solution, but that we have the best possible solution right now. When there is nothing better to be done, we do what we can for the good of the most people.”

The doctor gathered her things together and then turned to wink at her. “You of all people should know about balancing choices for more than one person at a time.”

Melina blushed. She'd wondered when the first comments would be made about the three-way relationship.

Sal shook her head quickly. "I'm not condemning you. Davis and Trev are wonderful together, but they're even better with you in the mix. We all think so, the crew." The doctor smiled. "I'm glad you've joined us. We have a marvelous time ahead of us. Thanks for signing on."

She left Melina alone with the sharysa. The beasts played together, rolling across the floor, stalking each other and pouncing with little roars. Some lay heaped together in little piles, with their soft snoring and purring filling the room. Melina knelt to stroke a pure white beast. They were beautiful creatures. She hoped the coming solar storm didn't cause them any harm.

An awful thought flooded her mind. What if the radiation changed the sharysa this time so they could no longer create crystals? The *Nottingham* and *Eagle* would both be stalled in their orbits without a power source. The SIC would follow up on the lack of transmissions and come to the *Eagle's* assistance shortly, but the *Nottingham* would remain an easy target to be captured.

She had already come to the conclusion her chances of making it off the *Eagle* to rendezvous with the *Nottingham* were low. Her grandfather hated her almost as much as he hated the rest of them, but there was no way she would share that information. Davis would insist on being heroic and going in her stead. Or he'd vote to leave the fate of the *Eagle* up to chance, and if anything did happen to the vessel, it would haunt her forever.

A sharysa leapt to her shoulder and pulled at her ear with its baby teeth. Warmth and love flowed from the little thing as it fed emotions directly to her brain. A strangely blurry picture that looked like a spatial coordinate hovered there as well. Jem had shown her the same thing, and it frustrated Melina she couldn't figure it out.

She sat on the floor, surrounded by warm fuzzy bodies, and tried to decide the best plan of action.

It didn't seem fair. After finally being reunited with Davis and Trev, the first people with whom she'd ever felt totally loved and accepted, her only choice was to give them up. Melina rose and headed back to the quarters she shared with the men. There was one final experience she wanted again. It would help her find the courage to go through with her plan.

* * * * *

"What are you up to?" Davis asked suspiciously. Trev stepped around his partner into their room to find Melina wrapped in Davis' oversized robe, smiling wistfully at them.

She raised a brow. "Do I need a reason to ask you to come to your quarters? Is this sufficient?" She dropped the fabric to reveal smooth, creamy skin unhampered by any clothing.

Trev's mouth went dry. She strutted forward, grabbed them by the belt buckles and backed toward the bed.

"Good enough for me." Davis hummed with approval as she made short work of his pant fastenings, stripping the fabric to his knees and releasing his swelling cock.

Trev reached for his own belt and Melina slapped his hands. "I want to do it. I want to taste you both, and take you both. It's been too long since I had you in my body at the same time."

She dropped to her knees and slipped his belt open. His cock pressed eagerly against the fabric of his uniform. Melina dragged her teeth over the visible ridge and he swore, blood pulsing through him, his reaction harder and higher than he could control.

Beside him, Davis stepped out of his uniform. He moved closer, his cock thrust straight forward and already leaking moisture. Melina barely had time to open Trev's pants before Davis tapped her cheek with his shaft, leaving semen clinging to her cheek. She glanced up at them both, scooped the liquid on her finger and lapped it clean with a seductive stare.

Trev's cock escaped the confines of the fabric and Melina hummed in approval as she drew the men closer together, touching the weeping tips of their erections together. Davis' heat enveloped Trev before the even-hotter moisture of Melina's mouth took precedent. She licked them simultaneously, curling her tongue around them. One hand on either shaft, she stroked and sucked in turns, her beautiful body gyrating before them.

Trev concentrated as the exquisite pressure built. Melina shifted to hold their cocks upright in her joined clasp. Trev adjusted his hips and the two lengths rubbed together. The rigid crest on the head of Davis' cock rasped the tender sweet spot on the underside of his erection and he hissed. Then Melina sucked them both into her mouth as best she could and there was nothing but sensation and electric pulses racing up his spine. Again and again she surrounded them, and Trev clamped his jaw together to stop from coming too soon. The torment lasted until Davis took back control. Wrestling his cock from Melina's grasp, Davis laid her on the bed.

"I want to taste you."

Melina may have called them to the quarters they shared, but now Davis took control. He lifted her ass and buried his face between her legs, sliding his tongue over her wet opening in slow, controlled drags that had her legs shaking in moments. Trev crawled beside her and kissed her sweetly, enjoying the taste of both Davis and himself on her tongue. She stroked her fingers through his hair, like she used to do unconsciously when they sat together studying or discussing the future.

This was the future as far as he was concerned. Melina, Davis and him. Wherever they went in the universe was unimportant as long as they went together.

She panted softly as she approached her climax and he pulled back to watch. He reached a hand to trace circles around her nipples, the tight peaks shaking with her uneven breaths. A flush of desire spread over her torso and she cried out. Trev stared, fascinated, as she let herself go completely, trusting Davis to know what she needed. He slowed his intimate kisses, easing his touch on her sensitive clit until she lay still on the

bed. She smiled down at him and tugged on his shoulders to bring him level with them. Trev slid to the side and Davis rolled between them. He pulled Melina into one arm and Trev into the other and kissed them slowly, one after another. Trev took the tenderness he received and passed it on to Melina. Each brush of their lips, the rasp of Davis' beard, the soft touch of Melina's cheek, filled his heart a little more. He reached down to pump his cock, the need for release growing more urgent.

Davis caught his motion and chuckled. "Trev wants you, and so do I. It's time, sweetheart."

Melina climbed on top willingly, and Trev scrambled for the lubricant in the bedside table. By the time he returned, Melina had enveloped Davis' cock with her body, the two of them locked in a tight embrace, kissing again. Trev smoothed a hand down her back, one finger stroking the seam of her ass again and again, watching the tight star of her anus wink as she instinctively tensed at his intrusion.

He couldn't resist. Leaning over, he started where Davis and Melina joined and licked the entire length of her slit to circle the rosette between her cheeks. He hardened his tongue and rimmed her. She cried with delight into Davis' mouth.

Trev fought to slow down, to take the time to add lube to his fingers and press them into her depths. He felt Davis' cock against his fingers and the need to join in made him rush. Even with a thick coating of lubricant she was tight as he pressed the flared head of his cock through the tender rim of muscles. When he would have slowed, Melina swore and pressed back on him, forcing him farther in until he was buried balls-deep.

So good. It was so fucking good he couldn't move. Surrounded by heat and tight pressure, the sight of Davis caressing Melina's breasts and the nudge of Davis' sac against his—it was all too much. Trev held on to his control before he blew it all in less than a second.

He dragged back slowly, each inch of his cock hypersensitive. Timing his motions in opposition to Davis' thrusts, they filled Melina in turn. His head spun from a lack of oxygen and he realized he'd been holding his breath to avoid coming too early.

Melina screamed with delight. She impaled herself on Davis again, slamming her hips down and leaning back as far as possible. Trev buried his cock deep in her ass, her heat scalding him. The flared head of his cock rubbed against Davis' through the thin membrane inside Melina.

Holy hell, it was incredible. Davis shifted and retreated slowly, withdrawing in a smooth motion that massaged and teased, caressing the three of them intimately. Melina tightened around them both and Trev swore, the enveloping pressure breaking his concentration and he let loose. Driving in, he watched his cock disappear into Melina's welcoming body. Below him, Davis entered her as well, their balls rubbing at the apex of every stroke. Stars imploded at the back of his brain as every nerve grew more sensitive and Trev climaxed, shooting long pulses of heat to bathe Melina's passage.

Davis' cock jerked as he found his release. Melina cried as she came, squeezing them. Her core pulsed, milking their cocks and drawing them all together into one.

Satisfaction at being reunited filled Trev as their trio connected—body, mind and soul.

* * * * *

"Davis, get up here, we've got trouble." There was a note of panic in Trev's voice.

"Why do you sound so surprised? You're on the *Nottingham*, we're supposed to be in trouble," Davis muttered, striding back toward the main deck. "What's happening?"

"Melina is up to something. She didn't take the sharysa with her. I mean, she took a sharysa, just not Jem and Piata. I dropped in on our quarters and they're sitting on the jukebox, chattering like they've gone insane. We've tried hailing the shuttle, but she's not responding."

Davis stopped at a wall com-unit and stabbed the link to the shuttle. "Melina, report. What the fuck are you doing?"

Her face appeared on the small screen nestled into the wall. There were tear tracks down her face and her nose was red. She stared at him, hopelessness in her eyes.

“I’m almost at the cutoff line for communication blackout, Sir.”

Had she gone insane? “Why are Piata and Jem not on the shuttle with you? I put them in the damn ship myself.”

Melina sniffed softly, and then dragged a hand over her eyes before she responded. “I didn’t think it was in the best interest to take them too close to Admiral Davenport, Sir.”

Trev’s voice cut in. “What is with the ‘Sir’, shit? Melina, how are you going to get back if you don’t have the sharysa with you? The one you took is immature—it won’t be able to produce crystals yet.”

“I realize that.” She closed her eyes and sighed deeply before turning to face the screen again. “There’s something I didn’t tell you. There’s nothing worse in the eyes of my family than a traitor. They were disgusted at the three of us having a relationship back at the Institute and embarrassing them. When you left, I thought it would change how they treated me, but they refused to forgive me for the slight to the Davenport name. Then a month ago I made a chance discovery of information involving a high-level conspiracy in the SIC, and I turned it over to the authorities. My father was one of the players involved, and he’s been taken into custody for investigation.

“I’ve been cast out. I doubt Grandfather will let me get away from the *War Eagle* without some kind of incident. I’m pretty sure he sent me as one of the landing party to Derryn in the hopes I would be killed. Or better yet—humiliated, raped and then killed. If I did manage to grab a ship, he’d stop at nothing to follow me back, especially if he finds out you’re involved. You thought he wanted revenge on you but that’s not the half of it. He hates you with a passion. Some of your missions in the past year implicated *him* in questionable situations. He’s had to talk long and hard to maintain his squeaky-clean image for the SIC board.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this when we suggested the plan?” Trev demanded.

“Because I could see no other option.” Melina made adjustments to her flight line as she spoke, her steady hands and quick gestures efficient even as she sniffed and another tear rolled down her cheek.

Davis swore. “We could have left the lone sharysa onboard and let it—”

She jerked upright and glared at him through the monitor. “It’s not a private vessel with *only* my grandfather aboard. There are civilians, plus a crew of over a thousand. You may jokingly call yourself a pirate, but you’ve never once taken innocent lives in your missions. There’s no way I’ll let you start now, not for my sake. I can’t allow it or I become no better than the rest of my family, motivated by nothing but greed. I need to be different.

“There’s another thing. Sal discovered the sharysa might be genetically compromised by the solar storm. Future generations could lose the ability to produce crystals. If it’s true, then the sharysa you have onboard are the only ones with the ability to produce crystals. Set the magnetic bombs to deal with the Derryn concern and then get out of the system before the flares trap you.”

The implications of what she said tore him apart. She didn’t have the trained sharysa with her to generate energy crystals for her escape. She was headed back into the grasp of a man who would have no qualms about killing her. Like hell would he sit back and let her sacrifice herself. In the background, he heard Trev swearing and calling out orders to adjust their flight pattern.

“We’re coming to get you, Melina. Put yourself into a pod and—”

“No, Trev. It’s not possible and you know it. Attempting to rescue me would be a completely illogical exercise that would put the entire team at risk. I’ve made my decision based on what I felt was the best possible solution for the most people.”

She stared at Davis across the screen, the light in her eyes fading to sorrow. “I love you both. I can’t let them catch you because of me. If I get the chance, I’ll find a way to rejoin you at some point in the future. Now go do some piratey things for me. Melina out.”

Davis howled into the air as she cut the connection and the screen went black.

Chapter Seven

Had she ever seen him without a scowl?

Melina stood at attention as her grandfather marched his way to where she waited. His line-worn face seemed to have grown more stern since she'd seen him last, a mere three days ago when he'd announced her as part of the landing committee to Derryn's surface, the mission that would have turned out oh so well if Trev hadn't been on hand to save her. Her heart pounded, but she fought to keep her fear from showing. She'd made the right decision, but she ached with the desire to return to her lovers.

"How did you get away?" he snapped.

Nice to see you too, Grampa. Yes, I had a lovely time on the planet, being taken hostage. Thanks for your concern about my well-being. "Commandeered a ship, Sir." She stared forward, body held rigid. He stood inches in front of her, sniffing as if she'd brought contaminants onto his vessel.

"The others returned days ago. Why not send you as well?"

"The Mari 14 had only two-man—"

"Did they rape you?"

Holy hell, nice to know her suspicions were accurate. "No Sir."

A single muscle in his cheek twitched, and for a second she swore he looked confused before the mask went back up. "Report to the nursing station for a full physical. We'll meet to take your account once it is completed."

"I would like to—"

"Lieutenant, do you have a problem with my orders?"

Yes, and with your whole stinking attitude. "No Sir."

“Any vital information to deliver before I dismiss you, Lieutenant? Since you’re so good at ferreting out secrets, I would assume you would be eager to inform the proper authorities of any developments.”

She wanted to respond to his challenge. To be able to gloat for a mere second over his coming downfall, but that would ruin the surprise. If she were extremely lucky, the solar shock would kill him. “Nothing time sensitive, Sir.”

He nodded briskly and stepped back. His beetle black eyes bored into her for a moment. “By the way, Lieutenant, you’ll be interested to hear your father received a full pardon. Some discrepancies with the charges were noted, and he’s been released to the family home. Perhaps you’d like to call and wish him congratulations.”

Bastard. Her grandfather’s miserable attempt at humor churned her stomach. “Perhaps after I report to the infirmary, Sir, I’ll find the time. Permission to be excused?”

He turned his back on her and marched away, the odor of his greed lingering around her. How could she be related to the man? Genetically, she hoped there had been a mistake at the birthing facility, because if his blood ran in her veins... She shuddered.

“Lieutenant, we’re to escort you.”

The guards were apologetic but efficient. There would be no early escape from the *Eagle*, the trap wrapping tighter around her as each moment passed.

She paced between the security detail, ignoring the curious glances of the crew and passengers. Military vessels like the *Eagle* always carried civilians willing to pay for the privilege of a safe escort from one system to the next. Some faces she recognized but most were strangers and she realized she already missed the homey companionship she’d found aboard the *Nottingham*. Hell, she hoped she was wrong and she’d see them all again.

The escort left her at the door and she smiled at the one person on the *Eagle* she still called friend.

“Tracey.”

“Lieutenant. Please come with me.”

Melina wondered at Tracey’s response until she noticed the stranger standing at attention against the wall, his glassy stare frighteningly intense. “I’m supposed to have a physical. The planet wasn’t bad, but we should make sure I didn’t pick up any strange bugs.” She observed the intruder from the corner of her eye while she hopped onto the examining table. Her suspicions rose with every passing minute and she checked nonchalantly for a potential weapon to grasp. Tracey seemed tense and uneasy as she examined Melina’s eyes and mouth, her responses, her heart rate.

“May I ask for privacy for this exam?” Melina knew the answer but she wanted to hear it said. *What the hell was her grandfather up to?*

Tracey shook her head. “He’s...observing me. It’s a part of the new requirements.”

Right. Like Melina believed that lie. Tracey’s hands shook as she continued the exam and Melina coughed softly. She’d never seen her friend this twitchy.

“It’s okay, it’s just a physical. Trust me, it could be worse.”

Tracey shook her head. “No. It’s not okay.” She glanced at Melina and sighed. “I’m sorry, I really am.”

The stranger against the wall moved forward, drawing Melina’s attention. He paced toward her with his hands held visible. The split second it took for her to register he was a distraction was long enough for the pinprick of a needle to sink into her arm.

Tracey’s face blurred and her voice sounded as if it came from a far distance. Suddenly exhausted, Melina’s muscles went limp and the last thing she heard were the muted apologies of her friend echoing in her ears.

* * * * *

“Davis, it’s the shuttle. Melina’s shuttle is lying off the port side and there’s a life reading in it. There’s no sign of any operational equipment except for life support.”

Conner's announcement jarred Trev from where he sat, pounding his fist repetitively into the cushioning of his chair.

"I'll man the doors." He leapt to his feet and raced toward the docking bay.

Was it true? Since he'd seen Melina's ship disappear off the monitor a day ago, his heart had been lodged in his belly. The aching pain of wondering what he could have done differently slowly killing him. They'd discussed possible options for rescuing Melina for hours, and so far had come up with no workable plan. Davis hadn't given up and was involved in some elaborate scheme with Jayne, but Trev wasn't a planner. He was a doer. The urge to hop in another shuttle and go after her rose by the minute.

Finally getting to move was a blessing.

He pounded down the corridors, sharysa racing away from underfoot as he ran. Rapid changes in the thrusters throbbed through the walls as Davis adjusted course to pick up the drifting vessel. By the time Trev opened the airlocks, the shuttle hovered outside, awkwardly off angle to the docking bay floor. He whipped around the small service room, adjusting valves with rapid calculations until he'd created a strong cushion of air pulses to level and support the vessel as the *Nottingham* slowly engulfed her. Trev eased the flow from some, increased in others, making the shuttle dance momentarily until she was level enough to lower to safety. Another long minute passed to shut the massive hangar doors and flood the area with breathable air before he slammed the safety hatch open and sprinted in.

When Melina broke the door seal on her own, Trev was ready to sing praises to whatever gods occupied this area of space. She threw herself into his arms. He kissed her frantically, accepting her flurry of kisses as she clung to him, her fingers clenched in the fabric of his uniform.

"Trev, report, is she okay?" Davis' voice resonated as if he was running down the corridors with the intercom set on high.

"I'm fine," Melina called to Davis. She dropped her head on Trev's shoulder and cried, her gasping breaths tearing him apart.

"I've got you, baby. You're going to be all right. You're back, and that's all that matters."

Melina continued to sob and he swung her into his arms and carried her from the dock, heading toward Sal's medical station.

"It's a trap, Trev. They're following me," she whispered.

Of course they were. From the minute he'd seen her shuttle run on life support alone he'd known the *Eagle* had dropped her. "It's fine. It's okay." The reassurances were for them both. He didn't know how they would get out of this one, but he was willing to do anything to make it happen.

"It's a trap..." She buried her face in his neck and wept.

Davis slammed around the corner simultaneously with their arrival at Sal's rooms. Trev offered Melina, knowing nothing less than holding her would satisfy his need. Davis cradled her gently, pulling her head against his chest as he maneuvered through the doorway.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

She nodded. "They drugged me. Dropped me in the shuttle and left me where they knew you'd find me. We've got to get out of here now."

Davis lowered her carefully to the examining table and shook his head. "There's a craft already approaching. Conn picked it up on our sensors as we did the final maneuvers to gather you in."

Melina covered her face with her hands and Davis tore them away. "Don't you dare hide. You did nothing wrong. Now let Sal scan you to make sure your ass of a grandfather didn't plan something morbid."

Melina retched involuntarily and Sal pushed Davis aside. "I've got her. The sooner you let me start, the sooner we'll know she's all right."

They stepped back to allow Sal access and Trev's temper flared. He smashed his fist into the steely muscle of Davis' shoulder. "What kind of insensitive remark was that?"

Davis pressed Trev against the wall with one hand, his gaze boring down from inches away. He lowered his voice and spat out the words, "Look, I'd cut off my arm with a table knife to save either of your lives. You telling me you don't think Melina feels the same way about us?"

In the background Sal moved quickly, examining and soothing Melina.

"I'm sorry, I just..." The thought of losing her again sent a sharp pang through his core and Trev shook uncontrollably as reaction set in. *Hell*. He'd never felt fear like this before—deep, gut-aching fear. Not when Davis had left. Not when he'd been snatched away from Melina by the SIC, not even when he'd seen her arrive unexpectedly on the planet's surface. All those had seemed childish pranks compared to this situation.

They could have killed Melina outright while she was aboard the *Eagle*. His stomach clenched involuntarily and it was hard to breathe.

Davis leaned in with his entire body, elbows braced on the wall on either side of Trev's head. His warm breath flowed around them while his strength supported them, covering Trev with a heat that melted a bit of the panic away.

Davis murmured in Trev's ear, his lips tickling the soft lobe. "We're not going to lose her. Not this time. Not any time in the future. Her grandfather may think he's top gun, but he did us a favor sending Melina back." Davis rubbed their cheeks together, the coarse hair of his beard scratching Trev's skin, leaving the ghost of a sensation as if Davis continued to touch him. "She ran away to save us, and he sent her back. It's called poetic justice and I'm going to rub it in his face." Trev turned his lips for a kiss, needing encouragement that together they'd support Melina. The taste of Davis' power lifted him, filled him. Erased some of the fear from his soul.

They pulled apart slowly to rejoin Melina. Trev pressed against her, burying his face in her chest as he sucked in a deep breath. Drawing her scent into his body to prove she was really there.

"She's clean. Literally." Sal raised a brow. "Whoever knocked her out also sterilized her skin from top to bottom. If she had any beasties left from the visit to Derryn they're

gone.” Sal wrinkled her nose as Melina began to laugh, a hollow, tinny sound in the midst of the tension. “Your grandfather is one damn fool if he thinks you needed to be—”

“No, it’s okay. It’s a message from my friend. I knew she didn’t want to follow her orders but she was being watched.” Melina clasped Trev and Davis’ hands with hers. “You never met Tracey. She moved in with me when you two disappeared. We used to joke about ‘sanitizing the situation’ when we discussed politics and internal rebellions. Turning organizations from within. Shit, there’s something happening on the *Eagle* I wasn’t aware of if she’s sent me that message.”

Melina kissed their knuckles, Davis first then Trev’s, her soft lips tormenting him. He wanted to drag her back to their quarters and bury himself in her. Wrap Davis around them both and ensure they were alive.

After they dealt with the new threat from the *Eagle*.

“Are you up to joining us, Melina?” Davis asked. “We might need some fancy flying from the *Nottingham*, and there’s no one I’d like behind her helm more than you.”

* * * * *

In a bizarre way, gathering together in the command center, waiting to be captured felt good. Davis watched his crew take their places as something akin to pride filled him. Melina sat behind the steering controls, Conn beside her with the navigation and communication at the ready. Trev manned the small munitions station. Sal waited to the side, ready to fill in where needed as an army of sharysa crawled over her shoulders. Tucker and Jayne were off in the engine room but visible on the smaller monitor set into the front wall. The past days had been hard on all of them and they were all eager to get this over with.

“Short-range vessel approaching from the starboard quadrant, Davis. They’re asking to speak to you.”

"I bet they are. Melina, be ready to move us. Open the line, Conner." Davis stepped to the front of the command deck, in front of the main monitor.

"Open, Sir. It's the old bastard."

The forbidding visage of Melina's grandfather appeared and Davis turned his back just in time to hide his grin. Conn had made his announcement *after* connecting the channel. Davis heard a snarl of disgust as the man reacted to the impertinence.

"The name is Admiral Davenport, you miserable excuse for a life form."

"I stand corrected. It's the old bastard Admiral Davenport himself," Conn growled out. "You want to talk or you want me to tell him to fuck off?"

Davis winked at Conn then swung around to face the monitor. "Can I help you with anything, Sir? You seem to have lost your way. The exit to hell is the other direction."

His old commander's face flushed scarlet and Sal giggled in the background.

"You're wanted for questioning. This system is under the jurisdiction of the Space Institute. The ship approaching you will escort your vessel back to the *SIC War Eagle* with the authority —"

"Your authority means nothing here," Davis cut in. "Not over us. We're a peaceful vessel on a holiday cruise through the system. The brochure lied and the beaches are highly overrated, so we're moving on. Have a nice life." He turned his back again and motioned to Conn.

Conn made an adjustment then nodded, the speakers fading to a quiet hum. "Sound off on our side. Go ahead, Davis."

"Trev and Melina, get ready. Looks like the admiral has a rocket or two up his ass. We can outrun the short-range but not the *Eagle*, and we can't leave until the sun gets seeded. Jayne — are you ready with the magnetic bombs?"

"In five minutes, Sir," she snapped back.

Trev whistled. "How did you manage so quickly? I thought you had to build a larger trigger before launching?"

Jayne's smiling face reappeared on the small monitor. "Thank the sharysa. They like to make explosives, remember?"

Davis clapped in approval. "One issue taken care of. Melina, get ready to take us out of here. Conn, plot the straightest course that keeps the *Eagle* within the range of the solar pulse if she follows us. We need their systems knocked out if we're going to have a chance to get away." Davis glanced at Trev. "Is he still raving?"

Trev nodded. "I don't know if that shade of purple suits him." Davis snorted and squared his shoulders as he faced the screen. The sound returned, the admiral continuing to sputter threats and orders.

"With all respect, *Sir*," Davis turned the honorific into an insult, "we'll be leaving now."

The deadly silence that followed worked better as intimidation than the raving maniac. Admiral Davenport stood motionless, his dark eyes glaring through the monitor at Davis. "One of my crewmen is on your vessel. Once she is returned to the *Eagle*, we can talk about whether we let you go peacefully on your way this time."

Yeah right. "Your request is denied. There are private citizens onboard and a refugee I found floating in space. None of your personnel." If the bastard thought Melina would be given up so easily, he was insane.

The admiral raised his voice. "Lieutenant Commander Trev Conto, you deserted your post. Please inform your current captain you are in direct dereliction of duty."

All eyes swung to take in Trev.

He shrugged. "Hey, you guys kidnapped me from the black-ops. I guess his logic is correct, in a warped way, and I'm AWOL. Since I'm rude enough to still be alive."

“Fuck!” The *Nottingham* leapt to portside as Melina set all the thrusters in motion simultaneously. The ship twisted and warning lights and buzzers went off as the missile shot from the *Eagle’s* messenger ship impacted.

Davis barked out orders, Melina’s and Conn’s hands flying over their control panels as Trev sent a volley of shots back, forcing the other ship to retreat slightly. *Holy shit, the bastard had shot at them.*

“If you want to quote regulations to me, I suspect starting an unprovoked attack on a stationary vessel is listed somewhere in the violations,” Davis shouted.

“Subsection 34.54. All SIC vessels will alert said –” Sal recited.

“Sal!” Conn growled at her.

Trev stepped forward. “Captain Davis Yurt, I hereby request permission to return to the *Eagle* –”

“Stand down, Trev.” *Idiot.* What was Trev up to?

“But, Davis, I –”

Davis moved into Trev’s space and snarled at him. “I said stand down.”

Melina stood and faced the monitor. “Admiral Davenport, please stop –” Melina raised her voice to be heard over the repetitive alarms and the high-pitched squeals of dismay from the sharysa swarming over the deck.

Another explosion rocked the *Nottingham* and Melina fell to the floor.

“This isn’t really about you, Trev. Or you, Melina, although I do thank you for being in the right place at the right time.”

Melina crawled back into her chair and attempted to maneuver. “Davis, three of the propulsion jets are out. I might be able to make a blind jump from the system, but with missing engines we’ll be in trouble on the other end.”

Davis raised a hand. His entire crew would be offering to abandon ship if he didn’t do something quick. “Admiral Davenport. A broadcast of this encounter is being recorded. If you destroy the ship, the message is triggered to automatically send to

SIC—and yes, we still know all the high-priority access codes to drop the information into the proper hands to make sure the follow-up inquiry nails your ass to the wall.”

The old man shrugged and spoke to the blank-faced attendant beside him before turning back to Davis. “I don’t plan to kill you. The thought of your immediate removal brings me little pleasure. Now where’s that granddaughter of mine?”

Melina rose again and Davis pulled her close to his side. He wanted to hide her away but Melina would kick his butt for making the suggestion. She needed to face the bastard.

“You had a chance to inform me you’d been in contact with the *Nottingham*. By your own actions you threw in your lot with a group of do-good wannabes. I’m going to make sure you live to regret the decision. We’ll pick you up shortly. According to the codes of over a dozen planets, you’re all guilty of treason. Trying to decide the proper way to rehabilitate you will take decades. You’re going to rot in jail, my dear girl, along with your deviant partners. Although I’ll make sure it’s not the same jail.”

The man was unbelievable. All this for revenge? Davis couldn’t contain his laugh. “Love you too, Gramps. Six months from now, when you’re weeping into your empty glass and wondering what happened to your princess world, I want you to remember the deviants fucked you over. *Nottingham* out.” Melina stared at him with shock in her eyes.

Davis whipped around and shot orders at Conn. “Cut communication lines but broadcast back the raunchiest music on file. Something with lots of sexual breathing and groaning. Since we don’t need to maintain radio silence anymore, flood the airwaves until I change the order. Deviants, my ass.”

He hauled Melina against him and hugged her hard, wanting to wipe away the pain in her eyes.

She shook her head. “I had no idea he’d—”

“This is not your fault, and I don’t want you to apologize again for the bastard or the rest of your family. They’re done with you. We’re your family from now on, you

understand? I love you, Trev loves you, and that's more than enough." Shit, he wasn't subtle, but it needed to be said.

Conn's raspy voice cut in. "Hell, we all love you, sweetheart, now can we try to get out of here before the ass-wipe hauls us to intergalactic court for the rest of our lives?" He tossed another couple of the sharysa off his lap and cursed. "Someone please tell me how to get these things to shut up. They are driving me mad with their constant chattering in my skull."

The short-range vessel from the *Eagle* completed a swing in front of them, and the slow, forward motion of the *Nottingham* proved they were now in tow behind her. Davis swore softly.

"Jayne, I need to know when we can get out of here."

"Two engines are down temporarily. I'll be able to get them back online, but it'll take a short space walk and I'm not going anywhere outside until the temperatures stabilize. They used blister bombs – the ship's skin is still bubbling."

Fuck, the solar flares. "Stop the launch on the magnetic pulse detonators. We're going to be trapped if the flares happen before we can get mobile again."

Jayne coughed on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry, Davis, but I already launched them. Expected time to reaction flare is approximately seven hours."

Chapter Eight

Trev's tools hit the deck with a clang and Jayne raised a brow at him.

"Troubles?"

Hell, he hated woman's intuition. "No, oh no. Everything is shipshape. Fucking SIC bastards."

Jayne laughed. "Look, if you're worried about them blowing us up or something, they wouldn't dare. The admiral wants us in custody, so ironically we're safer in tow to the *Eagle* than if we tried to run. The only thing holding Davenport in check is regulations."

"I'm not freaking worried about blowing up." He paced the room, putting away the tools they'd used to finish the external engine repairs. Anything. Anything but sitting again, waiting for something to happen. Inactivity freaking killed him.

She sat back on the floor and laughed at him. "I never thought I'd see the day. Look, it's been a tough haul with Melina taking off, but she made it back safely. We're on the right side of the auction floor, if you know what I mean." Jayne shook her head. "I figured by now you'd have gotten used to this. Part and parcel of undercover mission work, honey. So, your hands are tied – do the next thing. It'll work out in the end."

Trev swore at her. "I must have the worst face for showing emotions. I'm amazed I didn't get killed on the planet since I'm such a bad actor."

Jayne winked as she stood. "It's just that we know you. You like to be moving. Hell, we drop you for information and in three months you end up leading the rebels? Power hungry or what?" She stepped closer and patted his cheek. "I'm planning on finishing the couple of tweaks needed here. There's nothing else we can do. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zip –"

"Don't be an ass."

For a tiny woman, she had a big laugh. "Look, honey, let me give you a little advice. If 'I' happened to be on a ship with my lover and we had...oh, let's say...at least five hours to kill before anything might flare up, I doubt I'd be stomping around the engine room and twiddling my thumbs. Unless that's one of your preferred lovemaking techniques."

She pushed him between the shoulders. "Go on. Get out of here. The last time I saw Melina and Davis they were headed for your quarters." She turned and crawled into the engine compartment, wiggling her fingers once in farewell before disappearing from sight.

* * * * *

When the door slid closed behind him, Melina rose from where she'd been sitting at the low desk. The sound of water running in the nearby shower cut off and he knew Davis would join them shortly. Trev didn't speak, just wrapped his arms around her. She leaned against him, covering his face with kisses as she whispered words of love. Sweet, liquid heat painted his lips, her flavor haunting him and making his blood boil. He bit her neck, yanking the fabric of her uniform from her shoulder to slide his lips along bare skin, licking a long line up the tendon leading to her ear.

"Damn it, Melina, what did you think you were doing?" The small ball of terror in the pit of his belly unfurled from where he'd pushed it to a day ago. She was back. Davis was there. Trev was going to take and be taken, and to hell with the rest of the universe.

They all needed this. And he needed it now.

Melina smiled as she stripped her uniform from her shoulders. Trev dropped to his knees to rip open her pants. Another set of hands joined in to help remove her shirt and breast bands away. Davis twirled her now-naked body to face him, clasping her to his chest and squeezing her so close Trev heard the bones in her spine click into alignment. Davis ate greedily from her lips while Melina threw her legs around his hips. Trev

pressed to her back, needing to feel her warmth—the sweet reassurance she was alive and with them.

It wasn't enough. Trev growled with the urgent desire to touch skin on skin. He stepped away to strip himself bare. He paused to brush an armload of sharysa off the bed and found himself tackled to the surface by his laughing partners.

"Slow down," Davis ordered as he lowered his heavy weight on Trev. Davis' spicy flavor melded with the sweet aftertaste of Melina as he kissed Trev thoroughly. Their tongues stroked together, flicking in rapid pulses. Trev ground his hips upward, smashing his cock against Davis' belly. He groaned with need.

Davis strong-armed him back onto the mattress. "I said slow down. We're not going anywhere. I see no need to rush and every reason to take our time. For all our sakes."

Melina leaned over Davis' shoulder, her bright eyes twinkling with mischief as she stared down at Trev. "I think he needs a lesson in trusting us more."

Davis stared at her then returned his attention to Trev. He shivered at the expression in Davis' eyes as his gaze raked over his body. "Agreed. How about a demonstration?"

Locked in position under Davis' unmovable bulk, Trev watched, mesmerized, as Davis and Melina shared a soul-melting kiss. Tongues tangling lazily, teeth nipping, they put on a show that had his cock filling with blood and pulsing with the need for more stimulation. Melina rubbed her bare breasts against Davis' hairy chest and purred like one of the sharysa. The pouting tips of her nipples grabbed at the tight curls and Trev's mouth watered. He reached out to join in and found his wrist cuffed in Davis' steel-strong fingers.

"No touching." He gave Trev a steamy stare as he stretched Trev's arms over his head, pressing them against the pillows. "Don't move them until I say you can."

A jolt of adrenaline shot through Trev at Davis' tone. "Why are you giving me grief? Melina's the one who ran."

Davis grabbed his jaw in one big hand, freezing him in position. "Melina had a chance of still getting away. You, on the other hand, decided to voluntarily offer to return to an impossible situation. Even our best friends would have had to order your court martial. You may be the best gunner and explosives man I've ever met, but you've got shit for brains."

"I was thinking of you!"

Davis chuckled and stroked a finger down Trev's neck, scraping a nail over Trev's nipple. An electric shock networked through him.

"You were attempting to control the situation. That's not always a bad impulse, but you've got to learn some moments you can't control. Some people you can't control. People like me." Davis leaned over him and grasped Trev's cock in one strong hand. "Sometimes you can only hang on for the ride."

Trev sucked in a breath of air and resisted the urge to thrust.

"Can I touch him?" Melina stretched, her beautiful body mere inches away from Trev's skin. Her warmth caressed him and his cock twitched. Wetness touched his skin as a drop of pre-come slipped free.

Davis chuckled. "Where do you want to be touched, Trev? Or should we do what we want because you know we'll give you what you need? You ready to give up your control to us?" He pumped his fist as he spoke, teasing the steely length of Trev's erection with a slow, even stroke.

Riding on the edge, Trev ached physically and mentally. He knew what to do in a moment's notice to defend and protect the ship. He knew he'd done his job well with the rebels. But having control wrestled from him tore his soul apart. Davis leaving because of some self-righteous, half-assed idea, Melina piloting the shuttle back to the *Eagle*. Putting his own life on the line would have been more tolerable than watching them and being unable to act. He closed his eyes. He needed to be made whole.

"I'm yours. Whatever. Just...take me. Claim me. Hell, I don't want to be apart from either of you again."

Melina's soft lips touched his, a blessing poured out as he accepted their control. They kissed, a meshing of bodies and souls. When she pulled away, he looked into her dark eyes to witness love swirling in their depths.

Then there was nothing but heat and flesh, one touch after another as they wrapped closer and gave in to their desires. Melina kissed her way down his torso, each soft touch sending shivers of anticipation to his cock. She stopped to lap at his nipples, the tease of her tongue as she circled the tight discs making his fingers clench the mattress.

Davis stroked Trev's cock in an uneven rhythm, the palm of his hand slick with pre-come as he brushed the head of Trev's erection. Sensory overload began as another hand fondled his sac. A heavy tingling sensation spread from the back of his spine and he groaned in anticipation.

Davis arranged them on the mattress to his liking, cupping Trev's ass and fingering Trev's hole. "I'm going to take you, and Melina's going cover you with her sweet body. There's nothing left for you to do but experience and accept."

The probing finger made him clench his ass cheeks and Melina moaned. "I want to watch. Get him ready, Davis."

Davis grinned. "We'll both get him ready. Suck him, sweetheart, drive him crazy with that talented tongue of yours."

Melina leaned over to kiss Davis, a sweet, lingering sharing, and Trev swallowed the emotion rising to choke him. His body on the edge of sexual release, his mind and soul filled with the love of his friends – it was almost too much.

A mere whisper of heat and wetness graced the head of his shaft. Melina held his cock upright and played with him, lapping and circling, letting saliva drop from her pouting lips to coat him. His cock jerked involuntarily in her hand, straining to press between her lips and she chuckled.

"You looking for something?" she whispered. "You need something from me? Like this?" Melina enveloped his length and swallowed him whole. At the same moment, Davis pressed a finger slick with gel against Trev's anus and impaled him. Trev swore

as the burn in his ass flipped to pleasure and Melina drew back to suck in tiny pulses on the head of his cock.

“Damn it, Davis,” Trev swore, “just do it. No prep, just fuck me.”

Davis chuckled. “I set the speed, lover, not you. Don’t come until I tell you.” Another finger joined the first, searching until Davis nicked the right spot. Trev thrust his hips upward and forced his cock deeper into Melina’s throat.

The bastard *would* choose today to get bossy when Trev’s balls were already close to exploding. “I’m not going to last.”

Davis nodded. “Melina, climb onboard. He needs you.”

She swung her leg over Trev, lined up his cock and dropped her hips. Tight, welcoming heat enveloped him, surrounding and squeezing as she rocked. She descended on him slowly, driving his shaft farther into her body, inch by inch. When she finally sat on his groin, completely filled, they both breathed a satisfied sigh.

“You feel so good inside me,” she whispered. She leaned over, letting her naked breasts brush his chest as she joined their lips in a scorching-hot kiss.

Davis thrust his fingers in again and Trev groaned into Melina’s mouth.

“I’m going to take you both,” Davis announced. He removed his fingers from Trev’s ass and paced across the room, returning quickly.

“Oh hell, we’re both in for it now.” Trev smiled up at Melina.

She grinned back. “I want it. Don’t you?”

A nod was the only response possible.

Davis was back, the tip of his erection nudging Trev’s ass. Above him, Melina sucked in a gasp and Trev glanced over her shoulder to see Davis lining up a slim phallic-shaped toy with her tight pucker.

“Trev first,” Davis announced, and pressed his hips forward. His heavy shaft forced its way through Trev’s tight anus ring with a burning sensation that exploded into extreme pleasure as Davis hit Trev’s prostate.

“Fuck.” Trev squirmed, attempting to get closer, it felt so good.

“Oh yeah. Now Melina.”

Trev pulled his knees farther to the side as he gazed up into Melina’s big brown eyes. She closed them briefly and her face tightened and he knew Davis had inserted the toy into her ass.

“You okay, baby?”

She stared down, unfocused – pleasure drunk. “I’m fucking fantastic. You ready for this, darling?”

Melina rode him hard. Her hips drove down, each press squeezing the daylight out of his shaft. Behind her, Davis filled Trev’s ass to the maximum, the girth of his cock stretching so good. He nailed Trev’s prostate on every sweep until there was no holding back anymore and Trev screamed out their names.

The lights flickered, and Davis paused.

“Holy shit, no. Don’t stop!” Mindless with pleasure, Trev still remembered to press his fingers against Melina’s clit and rub. She gasped and her passage tightened around him.

The beginning of the end. His cock jerked deep within Melina, shooting his cum into her welcoming body as Davis released into Trev’s ass. The three of them reached their peak simultaneously and bright spirals appeared before his eyes.

The lights of the room flashed once more before completely disappearing.

Starless dark surrounded them. The sound of their joint panting echoed off the walls. The sharysa squealed and a heavy beat of music exploded from the jukebox they sat upon. Backup life support came online, a low-level hum accompanied the startup.

Davis rolled them all in one motion to remain intimately entwined together on the bed. “That was freaking amazing. But shit, hours early with the solar flares. We have to talk to Jayne about making her bombs less efficient.”

Chapter Nine

The entire crew watched with anticipation as Jem and Piata crawled into the engine chamber. The creatures glanced back at Davis as if asking for permission, and Melina chuckled.

“You’ve intimidated them.”

“They know who’s really in charge.” He smiled at her and Trev. She leaned against Trev’s strong frame, holding her breath as Davis motioned approval to the little beasts. It was the moment of truth.

Jem sat upright on the main energy crystal and chattered, his little paws swinging in the air as if he were preaching. Piata twined around him and the two chirped together for a moment before touching noses.

The crystal under them pulsed red once then shone with a blinding bright flash. It faded into a pale blue that filled the engine room. Everyone cheered.

“Well, it actually worked.” Trev squeezed her arms and Melina’s heart skipped a beat.

Davis froze. “What are you talking about?”

Trev grinned. “Reenergizing the engines. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure the sharysa could power a large crystal. I mean, the theory was sound but—”

Melina hit him in the chest with her elbow. What had the man been thinking? “You ass. You mean we gambled on a theory?”

Tucker laughed. “Welcome aboard the *Nottingham*, Melina.”

Jem and Piata made their way out of the chamber, leaping onto Davis’ shoulders to rub their cheeks against his before returning to Melina and Trev.

"Looks like you three have been claimed." Jayne picked up one of the spare sharysa off the floor and scratched it under the chin.

"Oh, that reminds me. Don't leave the system yet. I need to do something." Trev kissed Melina's cheek and left with Piata clinging to his shoulder.

Conn grumbled. "I suppose I'm not allowed to suggest we sweep all the extra vermin into an airlock and jettison the whole lot of them."

* * * * *

Everyone reassembled on the bridge. Melina slipped behind the pilot's controls with deep satisfaction. She caressed the panel slowly, appreciating the quality of the equipment. This was what she'd longed for all her life.

"Feel good?"

She smiled up at Davis. "Feels fantastic."

To her left, Conn swore softly as he stared at the information in front of him. "The little buggers."

"What?" Melina leaned over to check his screen.

He swung his chair around and pointed accusingly at the sharysa. "You know how we kept receiving images like coordinates from them? They were spatial coordinates of Derryn at the exact timing of the solar flares. It wasn't Jayne's contraption that set the flares off, they were naturally occurring and the little vermin knew they were coming."

"Smart little creatures." Melina rubbed Jem's nose and he purred at her, nestling on her shoulders and letting out a sigh of contentment.

"Melina." Sal crossed in front of her. "When we asked you to join the crew you said something about agreeing with all our missions but one."

Melina nodded. "The slavers."

A puzzled expression crossed Sal's face. "The slavers? We rescued their victims, and left the bastards floating without any engines."

Melina nodded. "But you left them with their control beasts onboard. If the ship hadn't been rescued in time the animals would have starved after eating the last slaver."

Davis shuddered. "You're a cruel woman, Melina."

She wiggled her eyebrows at him. "Don't cross me, darling."

Trev strolled onto the bridge. He raised a hand to hold off their questioning and sent out a shot from his station. They all watched on the monitor as the projectile stuck harmlessly to the side of the *War Eagle's* shuttle.

Davis' deep chuckle filled the room. "You planning on sharing with us?"

Trev stopped beside the command chair. "Just a little present for the admiral. I've been wondering why one of the flagships of the SIC would *happen* to show up exactly where they said they weren't going to be. There was no plan for any official involvement – that's why we took this job in the first place, right?"

Davis nodded. "It is strange they showed up, but it didn't register with the surprise of rescuing Melina and dealing with the sharysa."

Melina wrinkled her nose. "We changed course suddenly to arrive at Derryn. It was a last-minute decision as far as I know."

Trev shook his head. "It's been building for a long time. Remember you said your grandfather had been implicated in some illegal situations? While I can't say for sure about the others, he wasn't just an innocent victim in this case. He's been financing the rebels. He tried to cause a run on the market and end up the only supplier of crystals in the galaxy."

"No way." Davis frowned at Trev. "How did you figure this out?"

Trev pointed at Sal. "Little Miss Hacker there slipped me a note when you were getting everything prepared to reenergize the engines. She figured out where the influx of money came from that brought the mining station into orbit around Derryn in the first place. Added to the information I had access to when I took over leadership of the

rebels, it was easy to piece together." Trev laughed. "I bet having me turn up as the leader of his forces was the last thing the admiral expected."

Melina's heart froze. "The bastard. That's why he asked if I'd been raped. He'd told them to expect me and..." She closed her eyes in disgust. Warm arms surrounded her as Davis pulled her into a tight embrace.

"You're a part of our family now. Remember that," he whispered in her ear. He held her close for a moment before kissing her cheek and returning to his station. "So, the ass had an ulterior motive in coming to Derryn?" he asked Trev.

Trev nodded. "Admiral Davenport was looking to do a little expansion of his financial territory by not only panicking the rest of the producers, but by making sure he had the most extensive mines in known space under his control."

"I'm going to hurt you if you don't tell me what's sticking to the side of the *Eagle's* shuttle right now," Conn snarled.

"There's a data chip embedded in there with the exact location of the energy crystal mines on Derryn."

Melina's heart gave a sudden thump and Tucker swore violently. "Are you freaking nuts? That's exactly what he wants."

Trev shook his head and handed Conn a data stick. "Submit this to the SIC, please. We're the only entity able to broadcast in this quadrant right now and we're about to claim the mines on behalf of the Derrians. I've arranged it as a shared operation. We get a secret five percent deposited through our more legal channels, the people of Derryn get forty-five. The mining corporation will still jump at a fifty-percent share."

Davis frowned. "It'll all be worthless in the future once the sharysa scatter through the systems."

"We know that, but they don't. I'll make sure Derrians discover the information in advance so they can plan for an alternative revenue source. In the meantime, we'll have extra cash coming in to deal with our expenses and the admiral will be royally pissed when he discovers he's too late to claim Derryn."

Conn broke in. "I've got a time signature reply from SIC. It'll take a couple days for the information to clear the books but this is enough for proof—they're ours. The official statements will be on file at the Corporation."

Melina drew a long contented breath as she looked up at Davis and Trev. It had been a long time coming, but she'd finally made it to where she longed to be. Surrounded by friends, with adventures to experience. The pain of betrayal from her grandfather would fade with the knowledge she was esteemed and loved for more than her name.

Davis held out his arms and asked the room, "Now where to? We've got permanently full tanks and a universe to explore. I've got a planet or two I'd like to stop at."

Melina frowned for a moment. "There's still something wrong within the SIC. Remember the message Tracey sent. This situation involving Derryn might not be the only thing rotten in the organization."

He nodded. "I'm sure no matter where we decide to go, they'll be following us shortly. We'll keep an eye on them." Trev leaned over Davis' shoulder and Melina looked up at her two lovers, her heart filled to overflowing.

The sharysa on her shoulder chirped and Melina smiled. They had all claimed her and she wouldn't want it any other way.

About the Author

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Throughout all the wandering in the wilderness, stories have been planted and they are bursting out in vivid color. Paranormal, twisted fairytales, red-hot contemporaries – the genres are all over.

Between times of living with no running water, she home-schools her children and tries to keep up with her husband – the instigator of most of the wilderness adventures.

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

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