



DEMONS AND DRAGONS: Book One

Ranin Seven

By

Evanne Lorraine

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Chapter One

In the standard galactic year 4416, the Emperor Prado ruled the Orion Galaxy with a titanium grip from his golden throne on Basilisk Prime. The people trembled before his power, believing Prado was divine. The emperor was said to rule the elements as well as the citizens. Accepting the people's tributes as his due, he grew greedy. As the years past, he demanded ever-greater tributes. Those who failed to comply died.

Perhaps, his presumption angered the true goddesses, commanding the elements. The imperial stockpiles of duranium, which was essential for hyper-light travel, dwindled to critical levels. One by one, the mammoth transport ships, bringing the precious mineral from the far edge of the galaxy, vanished without a trace.

* * * *

Smiling warmly at the pair of d'skeku warriors standing watch at the entrance, Zaynah got nothing back. Unless she wanted to count the blast of icy rejection. She stiffened her spine to the perfect posture required when in the presence of royalty, pretending the snub from her peers didn't matter.

Worse than being the odd warrior out was the knowledge that she ranked dead last in the fitness ratings. No matter how many extra hours she trained, she never seemed to improve. She couldn't blame the others for avoiding her. No one wanted to be friends with the holder of the last place ranking. She just needed to work a little harder. This year she was going to turn things around.

She swallowed a small sigh of regret, holding herself even more rigidly. The guards' insult was nothing new. Foolishly, she kept trying to make friends, hoping that at least one of the other warriors would thaw. No luck so far.

Excluded from the comradery in the residence hall, she still heard the snickered whispers of Emperor's pet whenever her back was turned. Nothing could have been further from the truth. But, the sniping still hurt.

Years ago, she'd tried denying the unfair label. Her protests had only triggered bursts of more blatant cruelty.

Crossing the wide expanse of plush purple carpet, she stepped carefully over its border of golden dragons, coming to a stop precisely two meters from the enormous throne and bowing deeply to show respect.

Though, she'd grown up in the royal compound, the throne room never failed to awe her. It was impressive with rich hangings and beautiful artwork. Windows of stained glass threw rainbows of light through the grand space. The throne of pure gold was cushioned in rare natural silk. Its ornate back and sides flared in winged splendor. Dominating the throne, indeed the magnificent room, was Prado the fifth, Emperor of the Orion Galaxy.

Every youngling knew the Orion Galaxy held pride of place in the known universe. At the center of the greatest of the galaxies was the magnificent yellow giant, Dragon's Fire. Eleven planets circled the brilliant star. But, only Basilisk Prime had all the necessary requirements for carbon-based life forms to thrive. All this meant that she stood in proximity to the very center of the universe.

A place of great power and greater danger.

The room and the man were awe inspiring, deserving her respect, and yet a tiny part of her always squirmed resentfully when she was in the presence of the emperor.

Rebellion was a grievous--even a fatal--flaw for a d'skeku warrior.

She tamped down the flare of suicidal defiance, repeating the warrior's code, "Duty is my purpose and my honor." While she silently chanted the calming words, she studied the powerful man who'd summoned her.

Though his long and lean form draped on the royal seat with perfect composure, and the innate assurance of the divine, he seemed wearier than she'd ever seen him. Even his dark eyes were dull and hooded.

Aside from those small disturbing signs, he was as immaculate and imposing as ever. He wore formal robes of state, gray silk over white. In the fashion of royals, his long nails were polished. Today, they gleamed glossy silver with white tips flecked with gold. His queue was gray, but his face remained unlined, making it impossible to guess his true age. He'd ascended to the throne in the year 4286 as an adult. Based on the holograms she'd studied for history class, he hadn't aged at all in the past standard galactic one hundred and thirty years.

One of Zaynah's earliest memories was of her pre-training class being ushered into the throne room for presentation after passing their entrance exams to the Royal Academy of Deadly Arts. She'd been five, and though tall for her age, she'd felt very small. The Emperor had inspected his future imperial troopers with stern formality. She'd been so awestruck by his grandness that she'd barely dared to breathe.

There'd been many such inspections in past fourteen years. Now, she breathed fine in his presence. Most of the time. Though, she was still awed by the grandeur and power of his station.

When he beckoned her to approach, the diamond ring on his thumb winked with rainbow sparks of fire. "What do you know about Ranin Seven?"

She bowed low again before speaking. Then, she quickly recited the facts every cadet d'skeku knew. "Ranin Seven is one of more than a dozen moons orbiting Zenon, a frozen gas giant--."

"Yes, yes very good. But, what makes Ranin Seven important?" The Emperor interrupted her report, tapping his long nails impatiently on the flared armrest.

"Duranium." She bowed deeply in silent apology for irritating him.

"Exactly," Prado said darkly. "Do you know how many mining transport ships we've lost in the past decade?"

"No, your eminence." She didn't add that such information was closely guarded and not shared with a mere trooper. Not even a d'skeku, who lived in the royal palace, serving as one of the Emperor's personal guards--the most elite of all military corps. For there was no point in telling him what he'd decreed.

"Three," the Emperor said calmly "More than we lost in the previous century."

No response seemed to be expected or required of her. So, she stood at attention and waited for him to explain why he'd summoned her.

The Emperor scowled in silence for several moments, finally he said. "This past year, we've lost half a dozen unmanned probes to the sector. The last mining transport was accompanied by a squadron of fighters. There's been no communication from them for more than a month. Our duranium levels are dangerously low, which is why I'm sending you to Ranin Seven. I need to know what in the seven hells is happening on the dark side of that miserable rock."

Zaynah's stomach fluttered with excitement at his mention of the assignment, but she schooled her face to show nothing of what she felt, as she'd been trained. "Yes, your eminence."

"You're pleased by the assignment," he said with a shake of his head, reading her very best impassive expression effortlessly. "And that makes you a fool. The meteor storms at the outer edge of the galaxy are brutal and the mining of duranium is a dangerous business done by dangerous males. You will need every skill you've honed to survive this mission."

"I'll be careful, your eminence."

"See that you are," he said curtly. "I need you to infiltrate the dark side of Ranin Seven, where the mining transports are loaded. Once you're inside the station itself, you are to assassinate the leaders, and evade capture until the troop transports arrive. Then you are to facilitate their landing and report to me."

"I will do so, your eminence."

"Come here," he curled his index finger, beckoning her to approach the throne.

She was d'skeku. So her obedience was a given. But, Prado didn't wait for her to comply with his order.

He compelled her forward.

There was no effort on her part or any possibility of resistance.

Her feet never moved. Except to leave the floor as she was pulled forward. She didn't weight all that much. Lifting her wasn't an impressive feat. Other than that, he did it without any visible effort. There was no hint of spell casting or smell of magic. She simply was transported from one place to another.

Then, he did that odd thing he always did before he dismissed her.

He laid his palm on her sternum. His cool hand made contact just over the red marks that had appeared out of nowhere a few years back.

The strange gesture didn't feel sexual, though it wouldn't have changed anything had it been. Her obedience to the Emperor wasn't a matter of conscious loyalty--it was coded into her very cells. Imperial conditioning began even before birth. It was out of the question for a warrior to object to anything the Emperor demanded.

She had no sense of time passing. One moment the Emperor touched her and the next she'd been returned to her previous location, precisely the required two meters from the throne.

"May your mission succeed, trooper. Dismissed." He waved his hand in a shooing motion to hurry her on her way. His eyes were bright, giving her the impression that he was impatient for her to be gone.

As quickly as protocol allowed, she bowed her way out of the room. Although she'd been excited about the coming adventure, now exhaustion weighted her limbs to the point of trembling. She hid the sudden fatigue with iron determination, unwilling to show such a dishonorable weakness to the haughty guards.

There was no one she could ask about the emperor's stranger behavior. To question Prado was treason. An infraction, which carried a mandatory death penalty.

An icy foreboding chilled her blood.

Perhaps if she'd had a soul, she would have prayed to the Goddess to keep her safe. But, she was an artificial human created in the lab, definitely without a soul.

Like every d'skeku, she belonged to the emperor no more and no less than his robe and embroidered slippers did. And her choices were just as limited as those of any of his other possessions. The difference was that his slippers didn't resent their lack of freedom and to her shame--she did.

Holding her military posture she marched past the royal guards, once clear of the palace, she sagged against the cool stone of the deserted passage.

"Are you all right, lass?" Xeth, the ancient former weapons master peered at her.

"Fine, sir." She pushed herself upright. Then she totally spoiled her tough girl warrior act when wave of dizziness made her weave unsteadily.

"Sure you are," the retired master grumbled, steadying her with one massive arm. "Been to see himself have you?"

She simply nodded, too tired to even talk.

Xeth kept his own counsel the rest of the trip to the barracks. When they reached the entrance, he asked, "Can you make it from here, lass?"

Still tired, she'd recovered enough strength to speak. "Yes. Thank you, Master." She kept her eyes on her shoes, unwilling to meet his kind gaze and the pity she knew she'd see there. Because, if she did then she'd disgrace herself even further by bursting into tears.

He brushed away her thanks, speaking gruffly, "So, himself is sending you off to the dark side of Ranin Seven."

"How did you know?" she asked amazed. Though, Xeth had an uncanny knack of knowing everything that happened in the compound.

"Never mind about that. Here." He thrust a tiny cylinder into her hand. "You'll be needing to do some studying for your adventure."

"What is it?" She rotated the slim metal tube, no thicker than her smallest finger.

Taking the cylinder back, he demonstrated how to work the small notches on the underside, turning it on by using his thumbnail. The cylinder opened to reveal holo-text. Her comlink had a personal reader feature. There were several popular versions, but she'd never seen one so small or so fine.

The weapon's master cleared his throat. "It's a special personal reader. I've preloaded it for you with the history of Ranin Seven and treatise on Dragons."

"Dragons?" she asked, intrigued by the old tales, despite how juvenile her interest in the mythical beasts was.

"Aye lass, dragons. Past time you were learning about your heritage."

She took an automatic step back with a nervous laugh. "You're teasing me. I know Dragons aren't real."

"Oh, they're real enough." He scowled. "You'll do well to keep an open mind about them, and other things."

Suddenly, aware that Xeth believed what he was telling her, her cheeks heated with shame for her thoughtless dismissal of his dragons. If the old tales gave the former weapon master comfort, it was cruel of her to scoff. She bit her tongue to keep from saying something even more tactless.

While dragons were just ancient myths, likely based on the giant reptiles that had once roamed the planet, the ancient weapons master's beliefs were harmless superstitions, common enough among the oldsters. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt someone who'd shown her only kindness.

She smiled, lightening her tone. "Even if dragons are still around, I'm surely the least likely dragon candidate on Basilisk Prime. As we both know, I'm not even that good of a warrior." She dropped her voice, confiding what she'd never told another living soul. "The spells of weakness are getting worse."

"That'll soon be changing," he said confidently.

Not believing a word of it, she just smiled and said nothing.

Footfalls, warning of someone's approach, cut off whatever else the weapon master might have said. He nodded toward the miniature reader into her palm. "Keep that well hidden."

Distracted by the sound of footsteps, she glanced away from him for a second. When the sounds retreated, moving in another direction, she turned to wave farewell. But, in his usual fashion, Xeth had already disappeared.

She shrugged, heading for the kitchen. With any luck Lilu, the indulgent cook would be working and she'd let her have some charred pork sides and a cup of olive oil. She'd had some strange cravings lately.

Unfortunately, no matter how many trays Lilu smuggled out of the kitchen for her, Zaynah remained the smallest and weakest of the troopers.

Later that evening, long after the bell for lights out had sounded, Zaynah hid under the covers. Much too excited to sleep, she read eagerly about Ranin Seven.

* * * *

Three months later, on the outer edge of the Orion Galaxy, Zaynah entered hostile territory. The very elements themselves assaulted her ship. Dust swirled, overwhelming the purifiers and oxygen generation systems. Strange energy fields hammered the hull. Worst of all, fiery meteors battered the small fighter's shields.

Zaynah wielded a handheld fire suppressor, trying to contain the dozens of smoldering fires without wiping out anymore of the ship's systems. Fire suppression was off line, which was demon-level inconvenient.

Then, a flashing blue light indicated shields were gone. A blinking display informed her that life support registered seventy percent. Five percent, less than the last time she'd checked. Not good.

Stinking demons! The lovely dragonfly fighter was hopelessly damaged.

Suddenly, sadness threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to weep for the damage to the beautiful ship. The wreckage seemed doubly unfair, since this was the vessel's maiden voyage and her first trek outside Dragon's Fire, her home solar system. For the first time

in all of her nineteen years, she'd been improving--growing stronger and faster. Now, none of that mattered, because she was failing within sight of her goal.

The dark side of Ranin Seven loomed on the ship's viewer. The moon's surface was a study in black. The only signs of life were surly red landing lights. So, different from the welcoming glow of the yellow safety beacons of Basilisk Prime's tarmacs.

She pushed away the despair, before the dark thoughts overwhelmed her and coated another set of hissing and sparking connectors with the thick foam.

The low-tech canister sputtered. Its steady stream of foam narrowed, and then quit with a sullen hiss.

Smoke thickened around her much too quickly. The stench of burning syns stung her eyes and rasped her throat. Her ears rang from the spacecraft's alarms. All of them seemed to work too well. The high-pitched sirens blared constant warnings of yet another critical system failure.

Thanks to the Goddess, the main engines were still on line. Although without oxygen, warp power didn't help all that much.

Zaynah dropped the useless suppressor, tapping the thruster control to avoid another spray of small meteors. Without shields, even fist-sized rocks could puncture the craft's hull.

Then, the whole ship lurched and shuddered.

Another meteor hit?

Not a meteor, unless they'd developed artificial intelligence capabilities. Her vessel had changed course. It was going down.

Thrusters weren't responding. If it were simply a matter of losing engine power, the ship would've been in freefall. This was a fast, but controlled descent. Better than crashing. Maybe.

Something, or more likely someone, had a lock on her ship.

The moon loomed into view--black, rocky, and barren. There should be some evidence of the massive duranium mining operation, a biosphere, and life signs. None of those things was visible. Nothing registered on the ship's sensors.

Zaynah wasn't a superstitious woman. But, she'd been briefed on the losses in this sector. The area surrounding Ranin Seven had become the galaxy's own black hole.

While in route to the moon, she'd received an update--yet another of Prado's mining ships had dropped out of the info-web. Simply vanished. The most recent missing transport had been escorted by another squadron of imperial fighters.

Way too many of the vessels had vanished while on course for Ranin Seven for the losses to be attributed to the meteor storms.

Stranger yet, no wreckage, not even the nearly indestructible automatic distress signal device every imperial craft carried had ever been recovered.

As her small fighter spiraled toward the moon, the sinking feeling in her stomach plummeted almost as fast as the ship. She was about to learn the fate of all those missing ships, but she wasn't likely to survive the answer to the mystery.

Everyone knew that syn-people didn't have souls. But just in case, she made the sign of the goddess as she strapped herself into the pilot's seat.

She reminded herself that a d'skeku trooper's wishes counted for nothing in the workings of imperial schemes. She understood well that she and the dragonfly were the merest of opening moves. Her mission was to find and exploit an opening for the more powerful fighters still to come.

Her imminent death signified nothing. Since, she'd failed to accomplish her mission--duty required her to take her own life.

Acceptance of the fate's decrees had never been her nature. The stubborn streak that had kept her training for hundreds of hours without any improvement in her fitness scores kicked in, filling her with fresh determination.

By the emperor's teeth, she would not dishonor her training.

She would find that opening.

Or make one.

On the dark side of Ranin Seven, two rogue fire demons have clawed their way from serving as lowly dust devils deep in the duranium mines to ruling the remote moon. Then the brothers forged a powerful pan-galactic alliance with planets from both the Orion and the neighboring Sagittarian galaxy. The demons have absolute control over the production and distribution of the duranium essential for hyper-light speed travel.

* * * *

The female of Diablo's dreams beckoned him closer. Her eyes flashed like red fire while she challenged him with a sultry look over her pale gold shoulder. Then, she bent over and her bare sex glistened hot and juicy with promises of impossible pleasure.

His cock, thick and hard with arousal, throbbed enthusiastically. He was way past ready to mount her. But, something in her called to him on a different level. He didn't want to jump on her like a horny demon. He wanted her wild for him. He wanted to savor their coupling.

"Show me how you want to be touched," he demanded.

She licked a mouth made for pleasure with a slow pointed tongue. With a lazy arch of her back her small hands covered her breasts, rolling tight little plum colored nipples between her fingers.

A groan escaped his throat when her hand snaked between her legs, dipping into the tender slit. "I don't have enough hands," she said, beckoning him closer. "Can you give me a little help?"

Oh yeah, he was up for that. He'd intended to answer her like a civilized male. But, the growl that came out of his throat was nothing but harsh, raw need.

"Don't make me come all by myself." She arched, panting, as he watched her stomach muscles ripple.

He wasn't the kind of demon, who'd ignore a female in need. Ramming his cock into that hot tight wet sheath was entering paradise. Instantly, her delicate muscles clamped around his shaft, massaging the sensitive flesh.

Stroking in and out of her silken clasp, his crown brushed the mouth of her womb, driving him closer to climax. He wasn't going to last. But, it didn't matter. Because, she tightened and screamed his name covering his smoking cock with fresh cream as the bliss carried her over the edge in rapture.

One more stroke, she shuddered violently. It felt so good. He could hang on for one more short, hard ram into that tight pussy.

"Diablo, get your ass topside."

As Gunn's words penetrated the fog of his erotic dream. He bit off a curse, rolling over. The interruption stank like dragon's breath and was about as welcome. "Forget it," he growled. "Sleepin."

"Then wake up--you're needed on the surface--pronto." His brother's voice took on an edge, grating even more over Diablo's taut nerves.

He pulled the pillow over his head, trying to block the irritating noise. But, the female of his dreams had vanished, leaving him harder, hungrier, and hornier than ever.

Some days it didn't pay to be a demon. There was no way to recapture the dream. Fire demons weren't capable of finding release by their own hand, which was a total dragon bitch.

Grumpily, he tuned into what his brother was saying.

"I need your help with this. It's an imperial ship--." Gunn kept talking.

Though, Diablo had quit listening again. Clearly, his brother was not giving up and going away like any decent demon would've done.

Diablo pulled the pillow off his face, summoning what little patience he possessed. "Let the droids secure the hatches tonight. I'll check it out tomorrow."

"Negative. Didn't you hear me? It's a fighter and a new class by the look of it. Do you really want to chance the droids trying to seal it? Like as not, they'll set off one of its weapon systems or maybe implode the whole ship and a good chunk of our landing pad. Do I need to remind you what is involved in surface repair?"

Diablo threw off the light cover, swinging his legs out of the bed. "Manned?"

"One life sign," Gunn grunted, pausing.

Checking his readouts, Diablo figured, his brother was the most cautious, totally anal fire demon he'd ever met.

"Bloody dragonheads! Correction, no life signs."

"On my way." Diablo killed the comlink, yanking on the lightweight jumpsuit, which was standard issue under surface gear.

Abruptly, he reactivated the comlink to his brother. "Clamp that fighter, kay?"

"Way ahead of you, bud. I have her anchored stern and bow."

"Not the droids?"

Gunn sniffed and said, "Course not. I used the remote access arms."

Diablo grunted his approval, ending the convo. Slinging his holster over one shoulder, he slowed down long enough to check that his weapons were fully charged before tucking the phaser into the holster and a kekeor into his left boot. Everything would be concealed by his surface suit. The endless night on the dark side of Ranin Seven had eyes and there was no sense advertising his arsenal.

Moving faster, he entered the tube. He and Gunn had control of all of the moon's transports. Only their quarters included personal tubes with access to all levels. After selecting the surface station, he braced himself for the journey.

Six minutes later, he entered the modest station. Since the fighter was close, he didn't bother firing up a crawler. He headed for his locker and thoroughly inspected his surface gear before he stepped into the tough biohazard suit. Testing each fitting as he went took several more minutes. At last, he snagged his pack, clipping it to his suit and moved to the outer passage.

Once again he waited, this time for the passage to seal behind him, and then for the chamber to depressurize. Finally, the outer access panel retracted, allowing him to move onto Ranin Seven's surface.

A broad road had been cleared and leveled between the surface station and the landing pad to facilitate moving material and equipment to and from the moon and the giant transport ships that docked there.

His night vision was excellent. He spotted the damaged fighter clamped to the landing pad instantly. Tossing a safety line ahead of his position, he snagged the clamp's arm, and then clipped the end to his harness.

The light gravity field allowed him to close the distance in half a dozen smooth, floating strides. He caught the arm of one of the clamps, stopping himself.

He itched to touch the elegant ship. But first, he thoroughly inspected the surface visually. After his careful scrutiny revealed no booby traps, he placed a gloved hand lightly on the hull.

Instantly, the craft came alive under his touch, the metal eager to conform to his slightest wish. A rush of pleasure washed through him. The vessel wasn't quite a willing female, but she was lovely.

He keyed his comlink. "I'm going to need syn steel, duranium, and piles of circuit connectors. Fire alone knows what else."

"Not a problem," his brother said, asking wistfully, "What's she like?"

"Hot as the seven hells and twice as pretty," he grunted.

"Fast huh?"

Diablo grunted again, feeling his way along the outer skin, seeking an opening that had to be there. "I'll let you know when I've got her restored."

He pressed firmly next to an invisible seam. Even through the biohazard gear, the metal heated, responding to his touch.

Seconds later, the hull parted, revealing a portal. He had to angle his shoulders to enter the craft. By twisting his way through the narrow access way, he kept his suit intact.

Once inside he found the switch, resealing the hull. The interior was dark, lit only by flickering emergency lights. Alarms sounded faintly through his helmet. There was no sign of a pilot.

Maybe, Gunn had imagined the flash of a life sign on his monitor.

Running the sky net system that protected Ranin Seven would drive anyone to wacky enough to imagine multiple life signs readings.

He took an atmosphere reading and decided to keep his helmet on his head. The oxygen levels were barely adequate for a human. Demons had higher requirements.

First, he called the fire imps to heel, shushing them, and tucking them inside his surface suit. His body absorbed their heat and energy, storing the power until he had need of it.

The emergency lights flickered and died.

Even demon eyes had limits. He strained to make out the broad outlines of equipment. Locating the console, he moved to disable the ship's weapons and power off the systems. Then he'd let a droids stand watch until tomorrow.

He prowled closer to the ship's controls.

Something soft met his boot.

Diablo stopped mid-stride. Then he bent over, turning on the mobi-light clipped to his utility belt. Carefully, he examined the body on the floor. Small, slender, and definitely

female. Sickened by the memory of his boot, thudding into her slight body, he noted anxiously that she was unconscious, way too pale, and human.

Women weren't his first choice for a bedmate. Too fragile. Tied with spiny Anluvians for last place on the fuckable list, actually. But, a horny fire demon, living on a remote moon couldn't afford to be real picky. His cock hardened within two seconds of establishing gender. His body emphatically voting for dispensing with any preliminaries.

Pity, she wasn't breathing. Dead was pushing it even for a fire demon.

He picked her up carefully, cradling her in his arms. As he reached to kill the mobi-light, the thin skin of her eyelids shifted. For a second, he stared. Willing her to do it again, and then she did. Bloody dragons, movement. Definite movement.

Working fast, he encased her in the emergency sys-suit he carried in his pack. It had a limited air supply and too little protection if he ran into trouble. He prayed to the Fire Goddess that he wasn't hurting her as he hauled ass out of the fighter, slowing only enough to avoid bumping her.

On the trip back to the surface station, he set a new speed record. Holding her gently, he waited through the locks pressurizing and sealing before carefully stripping off the surface gear. He worried about jostling her, but there was no way they'd fit into the transport tube in the bulky suits.

He activating the tube with a swipe of his station ID, then he stepped inside, overriding the speed control. Caging her firmly, he held her immobile as the transport screamed toward the medi-center.

Once there, he brushed aside the medi-droid attempting to assess her. "Stay."

"If you will permit me, sir--," the medi-droid objected in its ultra-polite mechanical voice, irritating him further.

"No," Diablo said sharply, laying her gently on the exam table and activating the diagnostic program.

Taking the remote from the droid, Diablo stepped back, letting the diagnostic probe scan her. The holo-imaging procedure took less than three minutes. It felt more like three years before the probe retracted. She was still breathing.

Bloody dragonheads, she was human, and an imperial pilot. Short of spitting on him, she couldn't have been a clearer enemy. What was wrong with him?

Diablo shifted uncomfortably.

The medi-droid plugged into the diagnostic program and began reporting. "Your guest has hairline fractures on two ribs, a concussion, smoke inhalation, exhaustion, dehydration, multiple contusions, and abrasions, aside from these injuries she's part human female, nineteen years of age, and she appears to be good health aside from the anomalies noted. Not of course considering her latent shifter status or her imminent ovulation. Is there anything else I can do for you sir?"

"Part human, you said."

"Yes sir. If that's all--."

Diablo scowled at the robot. "No, it's not all. What else is she?"

"I beg your pardon sir?"

"Stupid droid," he muttered. "What else is she besides human?"

"I'm sorry for failing to understand you sir."

Diablo slapped the droid's round top. "Answer the question."

"Excuse me sir. I am endeavoring to respond to your question."

Gritting his teeth, Diablo repeated, "What is she besides human?"

"She has a small demon component. However, most of her genetic makeup is a life form I'm not familiar with," the droid finished apologetically.

"So, you don't know what she is, beyond a little human and a dash of demon."

"Precisely sir."

"You could've just said you didn't know," Diablo grumbled.

"Indeed sir, I will endeavor to--."

"Off," Diablo barked at the droid.

Grabbing a hand held molecular level accelerator, he began repairs on the part human, part demon, and mostly something else.

He started with her head. Thinking that his head needed examining. But then, his head wasn't the real problem. His mind knew she was an enemy. His cock wasn't interested in her genetic makeup or her politics.

She looked so impossible fragile laying there. And she still hadn't woken. Remembering exhaustion and dehydration were both part of her diagnosis. He filled a drinking bottle with water, adding electrolytes and a trace of mineral salt.

With one arm supporting her, he held the drinking tube to her lips. "Come on, babe. Take a sip for me."

Aside from wetting her distracting lips, nothing happened.

He stared at her, uneasily. Torn between wanting to fix her, wanting to fuck her, and wanting to walk away while he still could. He was dangerously close to mating stage. Any contact with a female would further accelerate his personal time bomb.

His comlink clicked to life.

"What's taking so long?" his brother asked.

"Pilot's alive."

"Is he talking?"

Diablo swallowed a sigh of frustration. "He's a she."

For a couple of seconds, Gunn had nothing to say. The silence didn't last.

"Have you stripped her weapons?"

"Dragonheads," he cursed, mostly to himself for being a horny fool. He'd been too busy thinking about other kinds of stripping to secure her weapons.

"Do it now."

"I'm on it," he said roughly, killing the link.

A few minutes later, he had a small pile. A phaser with a backup power pack, capsules of poison, and a kekeor. The weapons were much too sophisticated for a simple fighter pilot. The phaser and the charged knife were both models he'd never seen, but the weapons bore the mark of imperial issue.

He studied the lethal knife with growing dread. Though it was an updated model, subtly different from his, the small weapon was still unmistakable. It was the favorite knife of every d'skeku assassin.

Bad enough that she was an imperial pilot. But, she was even more dangerous. The woman was a d'skeku--one the emperor's personal warriors.

A beautiful, fuckable woman, who was also his deadly enemy, was wrong on so many levels he didn't want to think about it.

Cautiously, he loosened her one-piece, working her left arm free. The ancient signs, one for assassin and another for knife, were tattooed on her upper arm. Confirmation of his guess about her status.

He should have been turned off, but his horny body didn't care what she was. Aroused was his normal state. It sucked. But, he was used to it.

He'd deal.

The inner demon, whispered that she was disarmed and a long ways from home and unconscious. One of his rough hands stroked down a silken arm.

Jerking back from the temptation of her soft flesh, he ground his teeth in frustration, holding himself rigidly in check.

Even horny fire demons had standards.

She whimpered. The sound was a soft feminine cry for help.

Bloody dragonheads, if he wasn't right back to cuddling her before he'd even noticed that he'd moved.

A pink tongue darted out, licking lips that would've tempted a paragon and fire demons had never been all that strong on restraint.

He cursed himself again as he brought the drinking tube to her mouth.

This time she sipped and stirred. One small hand drifted to the neck of her undershirt.

Maybe, it bothered her. He sat down the drink, frowning at the way his hand trembled. Gently he tugged on the opening tab, loosening the snug under garment. Her skin was damp with perspiration, heightening her sweet seductive scent. An intoxicating aroma of night blooming jasmine, hunger, and irresistible sweetness invaded his nostrils, making him long to taste to her. His fingers shook, too clumsy and rough to touch such perfection as her impossibly soft skin.

Strange red markings were partially revealed as the undershirt parted. He peeled the material back carefully, displaying the marks completely.

At first, he thought they were more tattoos because of the intricate red lines. But, closer scrutiny showed they were something else. Maybe, birthmarks. He squinted and tipped his head. There was something familiar. Then, it hit him the marks were ancient runes.

Unfortunately, he couldn't read the old signs. Gunn was a history fanatic. He might know what the runes meant.

His fingers burned where they'd brushed the strange markings. So, they carried power. Not a surprise. The compulsion to taste her grew stronger.

He'd never been any good at resisting temptation.

Diablo leaned closer, brushing her lips with his. She tasted sweeter than sin. A subject he was an expert on. Reluctantly, he pulled back. Aware that he was playing with fire. With this kind of heat, even a fire demon could get burned.

The small female fisted his suit, holding him in place. Her eyelids lifted, exposing a sliver of ruby irises.

"More," she croaked.

Talk about asking for trouble. A human was bad enough, a d'skeku was scary, but a shifter was flat out suicidal.

Nothing could have stopped him from obeying her demand.

Chapter Three

"Are you crazy?" Gunn growled, interrupting his brother's kiss. Bloody dragonheads, he swallowed the automatic curse on the end of his tongue, praying that he wasn't too late.

Everything they'd worked for depended on him and Diablo keeping it together. Neither one of them could run skynet alone. Even strong demons had to rest sometimes.

If the woman pushed his brother into mating mania then the fledgling pan-galactic alliance would vanish before it had gotten truly started.

Though the alliance had been growing steadily, he and Diablo were still the only high-level fire demons. The only ones strong enough to control the meteor showers that protected Ranin Seven from the emperor's forces.

If skynet failed, the imperial troops would seize control of Ranin Seven and the duranium mining operation in about two nano seconds.

For two decades, he and Diablo had fought side by side. From the first days when they'd stowed away on an imperial mining transport, through the early days of serving deep in the mines as dust devils, until now.

They'd gained control of the moon and its mother lode of duranium. Over the past three years, skynet had been perfected. The tech-aided defense system functioned well--as long as a strong fire demon handled the controls. Skynet managed the fiery meteor showers and cosmic dust storms always brewing on the outer edge of the galaxy. The system was part technology and part magic.

Gunn strode into the medi-center proper, determined to separate his brother from the threat to all they'd worked to achieve.

A fast evaluation of the situation wasn't encouraging. The medi-droid had shut down. The exam lights had been dimmed. And the normally cool, sterile environment swirled with heat.

His brother was wrapped around the imperial pilot and he wasn't fighting her.

Mission impossible, Gunn's specialty. Still, he had to try.

Fear trickled down his spine in the form of cold sweat. The imperial pilot was the emperor's tool and a human female. And she already had her scheming claws deep into his brother.

He was in for the fight of his life.

Diablo's head came up and he met Gunn's eyes. However, he didn't let go of the enemy pilot.

Then, Gunn read the tats on her slender upper arm. The chilling sweat of cold fear ran faster.

A d'skeku assassin was worse than an ordinary imperial warrior. Much worse. The elite troops were soulless, lethal killers, trained in every deadly art.

Worse than that, the emperor's personal troops were conditioned from childhood to serve the evil Prado without question. Even at the cost of their own lives. The imperial

conditioning was said to be unbreakable. He had no doubt she was here on orders to kill both of them. Something Prado had been trying to accomplish for more than two decades.

They were both still breathing and that gave him a sliver of hope.

Mentally, he had to salute the hated emperor. She was the perfect weapon. Exotically beautiful, with slender curves, fashioned for a male's pleasure, and doubtless skilled in every manner of death. She'd have to be.

Demons weren't easy to kill.

Typical rotten demon luck that she'd landed now. Both he and Diablo were too close to mating stage for any contact with a female to be safe.

Making his brother's interest in the female more dangerous.

If Diablo had already mated with woman, then even if Gunn were able to kill her, it wouldn't matter. Diablo would die. Either trying to protect her or by his own hand. A mated demon who lost his female took his own life. Always. It was preferable to the lingering death from the broken bond.

He kept his face impassive. There was no reason for the human to know the how much he feared her. Though, he doubted she'd care. Humans hated demonkind.

Personally, he had little use for humans. The males were good only for killing. He didn't even care to eat them. The meat was too sweet for his taste. The females were fuckable, but not his first, second, or third choice for bed sport.

Diablo knew these things as well as he did. Up until this woman, his brother had felt the same revulsion for humans. Now, his brother's hormones were calling the shots.

Rage washed through Gunn.

One woman was going to ruin their plans. Without Diablo, eventually Gunn would tire and Prado would win.

The time for playing nice had run out.

Gunn grabbed his brother's arm.

Diablo jerked free of his grip. Setting the female carefully on the exam table, his brother backed away, keeping her behind him. He pushed her into the corner, positioning himself between her and Gunn.

Then, Diablo pulled his keekor, assuming a fighting stance.

Not good.

Although, Gunn knew it was the powerful mating urge at work. Still, his brother's defense of the enemy hurt. Worse, it meant he was probably too late.

No way would he give up on Diablo. Not while he still drew breath.

He stared at his brother, taking in the fighting crouch and the titanium-strength determination etched on the male's hard features.

They were too evenly matched.

Gunn's mind raced, picking through half a dozen approaches, discarding them as fast as he thought of each one. Finally, he said, "Get a hold of yourself, she's Prado's tool. She's here to destroy everything we've worked for."

Bared teeth and low growl were Diablo's only response.

Rolling out the heavy blasters, he asked, "Did our brothers die for nothing then?"

Slowly, Diablo straightened from his fighting crouch.

"I can't resist her," he said, his voice grating with pain and arousal.

Gunn felt like dragon shit for using their brothers' death. Yet, he'd do it again. A demon did what had to be done or he wasn't worthy to call himself male. He nudged his brother further away from the female. "Fight her. You can do this. I'll help you."

Then, Gunn caught her scent, night blooming jasmine, need, and sweet willing female. The intoxicating fragrance wrapped around his balls and squeezed tenderly.

He turned toward her without consciously willing it. The thin under garment was halfway undone exposing the curved edge of delicate breasts. Pale skin glowed with heat and life. The pulse of her heart was visible in the tracery of a blue vein. Every cell in his body yearned to possess her. Even the red rune warnings on her sternum struck him as pure seduction.

"She's a dragon shifter?" he asked, forcing the words past the lust destroying his will and his control.

"Is that what the runes say?"

Gunn swallowed hard, fighting her pull. "The signs actually mean dragon and fire. So yes, dragon shifter is my guess."

"Looks like a safe bet," Diablo croaked.

"Latent?" Gunn hardly recognized the raspy sound as his voice.

"Yeah, I guess," his brother said, adding a muttered, "Maybe she won't change. Transition usually happens at puberty if it's ever going to."

"Bloody dragons."

His brother gave a rusty chuckle. "Better work on that the swearing thing. She might take offense."

Gunn snorted, derogatory dragon references were the least of their troubles. He asked bluntly, "Any mating sign?"

"No."

Thank the Fire Goddess. "That's good then."

"Don't count on it lasting. She hasn't even regained consciousness. I don't think I'll have much choice about it." Diablo shrugged. "If she wants me--I'm hers"

Gunn shook his head in angry despair. Then, a faint hope flickered to life. He said, "She could reject you."

"Or she could reject both of us," Diablo said gloomily. Then, he asked, "Can mating be one-sided? You know, like I want her and she doesn't care?"

His words chilled Gunn's hot blood. If she rejected Diablo, he'd still fight to the death to claim her. And if the male was feeling half of what he felt, then he couldn't blame him.

"I don't know," he admitted, clinging to the thin comfort that, so far, neither one of them exhibited mating signs. "Did you taste her?"

Diablo's chin lifted in stubborn defiance. "Yes."

No point in pushing further, his brother's attitude said it was already over and Gunn and the dream of a pan-galactic alliance had lost the fight. The mating sign would happen. It was only a matter of time.

However, there was still a chance for Gunn to escape her spell.

If he got away from her. And if he stayed away until her bond with Diablo was permanent. And if the bond was a two-way connection.

That was way too many ifs for him to feel safe. And even if he avoided enslavement to the tiny dragon shifter, he couldn't run Skynet forever by himself.

The base of his horns itched. What a mess.

He had to leave. Now.

Before he'd gotten two strides, she moved. Only a flutter of her eyelids. However, the faint sign of consciousness held him in place like a tractor beam.

Then he noticed her skin was damp with sweat. A fever? "Why is she burning up? What did the medi-unit say?" he asked, glowering at Diablo. Aware that he was a whole lot more bothered than he should be by the thought of her discomfort.

"Concussion, couple of broken ribs--the usual bumps and bruises." Diablo frowned, scanning her slender body. "I fixed the ribs, the swelling, and the surface stuff. But, you're right she's too hot. I don't like it--makes me think the unit might have missed something."

"Sponge her off with a cool cloth--that should help with the fever."

Diablo nodded, crossing to the replicator and keying in an order. "None of her injuries should involve a fever. Maybe, there's something else wrong with her."

"Might be part of her transition," Gunn said reluctantly, knowing Diablo was hiding something, but afraid to probe too hard. What could be worse than an imperial dragon shifter? He shuddered.

His brother paused for a minute before he pulled a tray of wet linens from the replicator and headed for the small female shifter. "Maybe, maybe not. She's way past puberty and still latent. She might never change."

It took Gunn a second to remember what they were talking about, her first shirt. The transition might well kill her.

The thought made Gunn feel weak. And he never felt weak. Demons were strong, always. "I've got to check out what's happening topside. If you leave, be sure to secure her."

Diablo scowled, sponging her arms carefully. "Give me two seconds. I'll be right behind you."

Gunn didn't bother asking if his brother was planning on bringing the woman. He already had enough problems.

* * * *

A steady chime roused Zaynah. Not loud or harsh, the sound still registered as a warning, penetrating her exhaustion. Now that she was fully awake, she heard deep male voices

arguing. Careful to maintain the illusion of sleep, she peered through her lashes at her surroundings. Turning her head even a fraction of centimeter washed her with stomach clenching pain. She stuck with the current slice of her environment, not ready to risk more movement. The room was almost bare. There were no outside windows to give a clue to where she was.

Two really large men talked gruffly within arms reach of where she lay.

Nothing looked familiar. Especially not the men. Taller than the biggest warriors and thicker with powerful muscles, even with their dark coloring they were amazingly handsome. The closer of the two glanced at her. His lashes were thick and long, fringing midnight eyes. Inky black hair matched the sinful lashes, curling over the edge of his jumpsuit. The curls almost hid his pointy ears and the knobby horns just above them.

Demons!

She sucked in a gasp as her heart accelerated. She didn't know where she was, but she knew she was in big trouble.

The two demons continued to growl at each other. To her relief, they ignored her for the moment as their discussion continued without escalating into mayhem.

She took advantage of their distraction to study the males. At least, she assumed they were male. Though, since they were covered by unmarked black one-pieces gender was a technically a guess. She'd never seen a demon of either sex. Females were rumored to be less aggressive, but very rare.

Watching them carefully, she noted small differences. Though both topped two meters, one was taller than the other by at least a quarter meter. The shorter male was wider. Both looked intimidating--large and powerful. The lightweight clothing emphasized their heavy musculature. Their skin was the deep bronze of the commemorative medals issued for outstanding valor. Their hair black and lustrous even under the artificial lights. It didn't completely hide the pointy ears and knobby horns that marked them as monsters.

If they'd been humans, she could've hoped their size would make them slow and clumsy. But, demons, even large males, and especially the high-level specimens were reputed to be incredibly fast and well coordinated.

She shivered. Quickly, shoving away the fears that would only hamper her. She took a deep, calming breath.

The taller of the two demons glanced toward her again.

Their scent wafted over her, catching her off guard. The aroma almost made her dizzy. She inhaled appreciatively, savoring the nuances of two distinctly different, but equally delicious, male bodies.

Amazingly, the demons smelled like chocolate and not the syn stuff either. The taller one was a deep dark chocolate with sea salt and a pinch of cayenne. The thicker male was more a bittersweet with a trace of something spicy and intoxicating that should be illegal. Just their scents made her wanted to rub against them.

An effective demon trick, luring women to their death. Or worse.

To distract herself from the dangerous rogues, she turned her attention back to the room itself. Scanning it as thoroughly as she possibly could without moving and giving away that she was awake.

Her guess was a medical facility. Though, no physician or even an active diagnostic hologram was in evidence. A bland droid in sleep mode filled one corner. There were no windows and only one door.

She lay on the only visible piece of furniture. A narrow padded table.

Again, a memory floated just out of reach. She'd been in this kind of facility before. But, the details refused to gel.

Nothing was familiar. Not the room and certainly not the demons.

She had no memory of coming here. Wherever here was.

In fact, she was missing a lot vital information.

There were things she knew. She knew that demons were dangerous creatures. The unbound males were called rogues. The most unpredictable, and therefore the most deadly, members of the species. She was certain that these were truths. Though, she had no recollection of when or where she'd learned these basic facts.

Surreptitiously, she checked herself for injuries. Gauging from her soreness and fatigue, she braced for major damage.

Nothing. Not a scrape or a bruise. She clenched her molars to keep from laughing hysterically.

Even disoriented, exhausted, and brain-damaged Zaynah still knew enough not to draw a demon's attention.

Neither of the pair carried a mark of ownership, which meant they were dangerous rogues--in need of immediate extinction.

An uncontrolled demon drank human baby's blood for first meal and used women cruelly before killing them. She wasn't totally clear on exactly what said cruelty involved, but

that hardly mattered. They were a deadly threat. And there was something else important about this pair. Something that she couldn't remember.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and instantly regretted the demon-begotten action.

Her stomach lurched from the sudden movement and her skull throbbed like a smashed gourd. Or at least how she imagined a smashed gourd would throb. Oddly, the tangible sign of injury gave her hope. Injuries healed. Therefore, her memories might return. She didn't even know what they were, but she missed them desperately.

With a painful start, she realized she didn't know who she was.

The loss of memory included her identity. For some reason, this was a much deeper hurt, as if her dearest friend had been ripped from her life.

Shooting an unhappy glare in her direction, one demon left. After placing the back of his hand on her forehead, and then checking her life signs one more time, the second demon followed his friend.

His touch had been tender--disconcerting. For a few seconds, even after the exit had whooshed shut, she kept perfectly still. Certain that their leaving her alone was a devious trick.

When several moments had ticked by and they hadn't returned, she lifted her head very slowly. Her wrists and ankles were bound to the table.

Though she didn't know who she was, she was clear about what she was.

The demons' prisoner.

As she lurched to her elbows, and finally sat up, a damp cloth fell into her lap. A sip-bottle of water sat next to her.

Another cloudy memory of training injuries flitted through her mind. She grimaced from the effort to hold the images from the past and from her aching head.

Someone had healed her injuries.

She examined a few still tender spots and smooth patches of new skin. The theory held.

Though, the demons were the only healing candidates. The idea of them taking care of her was more disturbing than all her injuries--even the loss of her memory. Ignoring the contradiction of kind and gentle demons, she examined herself for clues.

She wore a halfway undone sleeveless undershirt and panties. There was no sign of sexual assault. But, that hardly made them heroes. Maybe, she just wasn't their type. Bound hand and foot, she'd been stripped of outer clothing, including her shoes. Even worse, she had no weapons.

A frown of concentration creased her brow. She was certain she'd be better off if she had all of those things and freedom.

There was a reason she was here. The reason danced just out of reach, increasing her frustration. She told herself that her memories would return soon. In the meantime, she had to do the best she could to protect herself from the monsters.

Chapter Four

With a bit of luck, Zaynah hoped for an amazing skill or a hidden strength, which would improve her chances for escape.

She brought her bound wrists to her mouth and tried gnawing. Amazingly, the syn bands parted. With a little patience, she chewed through the set around her ankles. Afterwards, she rubbed a finger over her canines and drew blood. Really sharp teeth definitely qualified as a hidden asset. She glanced down at herself, but there were no other obvious strengths.

Carefully, she combed through her hair with her fingers, paying particular attention to the sides above her ears. She sighed with relief. No horns and her ears were pleasantly rounded. So at least, she hadn't been turned into a demon. She wasn't sure such a thing was even possible, but she hadn't wanted to find out the hard way.

Sharp teeth could have a million explanations. Maybe, she'd always had them. She tucked razor teeth into her mental catalog of useful assets and added a keen sense of smell. It wasn't much, but either of those features might come in handy.

Freed of her restraints, she climbed down from the table, intending to explore the medicenter.

Before she'd taken her second step, the droid whirred to life.

"May I be of service, Miss?"

"I'm fine, thanks--just a little sore and hungry."

"There's a replicator next to the wound care cabinet, an analgesic should help alleviate your soreness. Is there anything else I can do for you?" the machine asked.

"No, I'll take it from here. Thanks."

It took her a couple of moments to find the replicator tucked behind a panel. Quickly, she put it to work. It yielded cool water, a crispy pile of pork sides, boots, and one-piece that fit.

On a whim, she rejected the basic black garment that was the default selection, choosing a deep ruby red.

According to the demon-cursed machine, replicating weapons required a security code. She didn't know it. After half a dozen failed tries, the machine shut down.

The blasted security code was just one more thing in a long list of those she didn't know. The vast category was growing larger much too fast for her comfort.

Much more disturbing, she'd begun questioning the few things she did know. Like demons being evil, rabid, and people eaters. That description didn't match up with the males, who'd healed her injuries, cooled her fever, and given her a sip-bottle of water.

But, she reminded herself, they'd also bound her hand and foot.

Better not get carried away with demon sympathy or she'd wind up part of the menu when they grew bored with whatever they were planning to do with her.

She shivered, wondering if demon's cruelty to women involved erotic torture. The idea held way too much appeal.

Her head injury must be more serious than she'd realized.

When she crossed the room, the exit panel slid open as she approached. She peered hopefully into the corridor beyond, but nothing in the hallway felt familiar.

Shrugging off the disappointment, she prowled down the hall, sniffing.

After a couple of random turns, she picked up the delicious dark chocolate scent of the taller demon. Seconds later, she caught a whiff of bittersweet.

Her lips curved.

An attraction for demons was big trouble. But, even a woman in peril could enjoy a great smelling male, Zaynah assured herself that the reaction wasn't proof of insanity.

Her mouth softened and watered just at the thought of tasting one of them. So what if they had sharp teeth? She had some real sharp teeth of her own. Maybe, she would bite back. It might be fun.

Then, the wall in front of her vibrated. Saved by that slight warning, she took a giant step backwards.

A good choice, because a seamless panel parted and the two dangerous demons strode through the opening.

But, they weren't demons.

While still larger than the average man back on Basilisk Prime, there were absolutely no demon markings. She scanned them carefully one more time. The horns, talons, and pointy ears were all gone.

Just how hard had she hit her head?

Had she just imagined seeing demon signs?

Aside from being bigger than the average warrior, much better looking, and smelling delicious there was nothing out of the ordinary about either man.

"You're up." The taller male narrowed his eyes at her, but his rough voice held notes of tender concern and he made no comment about her dispensing with their bonds.

Bittersweet stepped closer. "Where'd you get this?"

She eyed the small metal cylinder he held up accusingly, and then shrugged. "Is it mine? I don't recognize it."

"It was in your pocket," he said, plainly doubting her denial, he disappeared the small device without offering it to her, saying darkly, "It carries Xeth's scent."

The name he'd muttered meant nothing to her. Finger combing her hair, she said, "I've got a few memory gaps." A slight understatement, but they didn't need to just how much she didn't remember.

Dark chocolate, slid between them, cutting off bittersweet's access. "What's the last thing you remember, babe?"

"Waking up in the medi-center," she muttered, finding it impossible to lie to someone, who'd treated her so kindly even when she'd thought he was demon.

He gently tipped her chin, forcing her to meet his midnight gaze. "I meant before that, sweetness."

"Nothing," she admitted, swallowing the lump of panic that threatened to close her throat.

Stroking down her arms, he leaned closer until his words brushed her lips, making them tingle. "Nothing?"

She nodded, clamping down on an insane urge to stretch up and brush her mouth across his.

"Amnesia?" Bittersweet said gruffly. "That's handy."

"Not for me," she muttered.

Dark chocolate tucked her against his side, snuggling her in nice and tight. "Give the woman a break. She hit her head hard enough to jar loose anyone's memories."

She barely registered his defense, closing her eyes to absorb the comforting heat of the big male body sheltering hers.

Bittersweet snorted skeptically. "You're playing with a loaded phaser. Memories or not, she's still a dragon shifter on the cusp."

She heard that and laughed, relieved that he was making jokes.

When no one else joined in the fun. She opened her eyes, looking from one sinfully seductive man to the other while she waited for them to break out in chuckles.

They remained grimly serious.

She nudged dark chocolate. "Why aren't you laughing? He's joking. Everyone knows that there're no such things as dragons."

The men exchanged a look.

An uncomfortable feeling that a whole conversation had happened, on some level she couldn't hear, eroded her confidence.

Then, the taller one nodded to the skeptic. Turning toward her, dark chocolate said, "I'm Diablo," with a tip of his head he indicated the other man. "He's Gunn."

"I'm Zaynah," she blurted, excited that her name had popped into her head. She'd hoped for more. But, there were no further revelations.

"That's a real pretty name, Zaynah," Diablo drawled. His deep voice soothed her disappointment and sent tendrils of excitement skittering along her synapses.

Gunn shot him a sharp look.

Diablo grimaced, but nodded agreement toward the other man before he said, "There's a lot at stake here, sweetness. My brother, Gunn isn't quite convinced you can be trusted. See, you've got tattoos that say you're a d'skeku assassin."

"Is that what they mean?" she asked.

"That's what the ink on your arm means," Diablo said, pausing to let her absorb the information.

Assassin? Her? It sounded really unlikely. But, she had felt as if she were missing weapons. Just maybe there was something to what he was telling her. "These desk cues they're a bad thing?"

"D'skeku," he corrected her, pronouncing it slowly, dee-sec-cue. "Bad? Guess that depends which side you're on."

"They're the emperor's tools," Gunn said, his tone left no doubt as to his opinion.

"You two seem to know a lot about them."

Diablo said, "We should. We were d'skeku."

"But, you're not now?" she asked, getting a very bad feeling about where the conversation was headed.

"No, we're definitely not now." Gunn scowled at her. "The d'skeku serve as the royal family's personal guards. An entire regiment, made up of our brothers, was murdered by Prado, emperor of the Orion Galaxy."

"How is it that you two were spared?"

"The emperor needed someone to blame." Diablo's voice was cold and bitter. "We were it."

"We escaped with Xeth's help, stowing away on a mining transport," Gunn said.

Zaynah thought about what they'd told her, factoring in the bitterness of their words before she said, "So this emperor is evil and I'm one of his personal soldiers."

Gunn nodded grimly. "Exactly."

"We were d'skeku," Diablo reminded him.

Gunn snorted, dismissing his brother's opinion. "We were fire demons, capable of breaking the imperial conditioning."

Diablo's jaw firmed stubbornly. "You can't know what she can handle."

"Are you willing to risk the alliance for her?" Gunn countered.

"Maybe, there's a way to make this work." Diablo turned to her. "Will you allow my brother to examine you?"

She hesitated, not at all certain she was ready for whatever that entailed.

Since she hadn't answered his question, he added, "The mind probe won't hurt. You can trust him."

Briefly, she considered making a run for it. But, to where? She was deep in their home territory.

Although, Diablo had asked for her cooperation, she wasn't stupid--she understood that was just a formality. If they wanted to, they could do anything they pleased with her.

Still, asking went a long ways toward gaining her trust. Before she lost her nerve, she faced Gunn. "What do you need me to do?"

He closed the distance between them, framing her face with one giant hand. His grip was firm, but amazingly gentle.

"Relax," he said.

Wonderful, he just wanted the impossible.

"Try to relax, it'll be easier on you," he said, amending his order with a grin that softened the hard planes of his face and made him much harder to resist.

* * * *

Gunn moved in slowly, not wanting to scare her more than he already had. At last, his forehead touched hers. Steeling himself to penetrate her shields, he lowered his own barriers, and then slid inside her mind.

Suddenly, he was in deep. No even a trace of a shield impeded his probe. She was wide open.

He'd never been this deep inside another's thoughts, except for Diablo's. Zaynah's mind was nothing like being in his brother's head.

Staggered by an image of himself, inhaling her fragrance and hardening, he reeled back. Only to get clobbered by her sweet sensual response--the yearning ache of a female readying for possession. The powerful feelings knocked him sideways. He reacted by growing harder and hungrier than he'd ever been.

Caught in the grip of an arousal like he'd never dreamed existed, he faltered, his lowered shields disintegrated, and then he lost control deep inside her mind. His free hand fumbled with the tab of his jumpsuit.

Suddenly, Diablo was there, holding out a familiar lifeline--providing him a way back out of her thoughts.

Now, he had new problems. And leaving was the last thing he wanted to do.

In the few seconds he'd lost control, Zaynah had captured him body and soul.

Little fragments of his memories, dreams, and secrets flickered away, moving beyond his reach. She absorbed his data with stunning speed.

When his brother realized what was happening, he tried to reinforce Gunn's shields. However, the patch attempt failed.

Worse, Diablo's own shields began to leak and bits of his identity fed into the steady flow of information pouring into Zaynah.

Adjusting to the loss of control, Gunn drifted, exploring her mind.

Her long-term memories were there--barricaded behind a field he couldn't penetrate. The data was as inaccessible to him as it was to her, which reassured him.

She'd been honest with them.

His confidence built further as she simply absorbed their data, showing no inclination to turn either Diablo or him into mindless puppets.

Equally dangerous to her potential for mind control, were the sensual longing that flowed under every other thought--making her more irresistible.

Terror streaked between her recent memories. Her mind flashed in rapid bursts of keen intelligence as she analyzed and compared her impressions of them and the station with a stunning knowledge base.

Slipping deeper into her stream of thought, he found more images of Diablo and him. Inaccurate pictures of the three of them naked that made the tips of his smoothed ears heat and the base of his hidden horns itch with need.

Gunn planted a suggestion that she sleep now and wake refreshed in a few hours. Then, he tried to pull out of her mind.

She allowed him to leave, whispering, "Stay Gunn, I need you."

Her plea, pulled at him like a siren's song. Shaking from the effort, Gunn disengaged until he was fully back in his own shattered thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Diablo, grasped his bicep, steadying him.

Zaynah dozed comfortably in his arms. He forced himself to look away from her, meeting his brother's worried eyes. "She wants us."

Diablo scowled. "Is it possible she's bonded with both of us?"

"Yes. I don't know. I think--yes. She thinks we smell delicious," Gunn said, partly pleased, partly embarrassed, and partly aroused by the vivid impression of bittersweet chocolate she associated with him. An impression he didn't share with his brother. Instead, he matched Diablo's scowl, and then said, "She thinks we're humans."

Not that he needed to explain her thoughts to his brother. He'd been in her head as deep as Gunn.

"But, she knows we're demons now." Then, Diablo's hard features softened. "She wants us."

"I'm fairly clear on that point," Gunn muttered.

His brother's heavy eyebrows rose. "I'm not getting what's biting you, bud. What's the problem with her wanting us?"

"For one thing, she's going to go crazy trying to reconcile what she thinks she knows about demons and how she feels about us. Apparently, she saw us while we were back in the medi-center and she was terrified." Gunn shifted his heavy erection, trying to ease the

nagging pain, and then changed the subject. "She'd told us the truth about not remembering anything."

"I never doubted it." Diablo grinned at small shifter with a sappy expression. "That's good. Don't you get it? Then, her imperial conditioning is a non-issue."

"We can't be sure of that," Gunn said.

"Stands to reason. The conditioning starts in the egg, right?"

"That's what I've heard--they made serious changes to the entire d'skeku program after Prado had our brothers killed. It wasn't just a matter of using only humans. The conditioning was pre-coded into their genetics," Gunn said grimly, wondering how a dragon shifter had gotten through the strict screening process for the elite corps of imperial warriors.

Diablo continued with unusual cheerfulness, seemingly unaffected by Gunn's doubts, "Whenever the conditioning started, it'd still be part of her long term memory."

Nodding cautiously, Gunn agreed. "Makes sense. However, it's only a temporary reprieve. Not a permanent solution. Bonding with her doesn't guarantee her deep conditioning will be changed. We're still the enemy. Someday, her memories will return. Then she'll want to kill us. And we won't be able to raise a hand to stop her--not even in self-defense."

He didn't add the rest of what he was thinking. A bonded male demon was incapable of hurting his mate. Humans weren't as faithful, and no one knew much at all about dragons.

A skynet alert pinged in his comlink. He scowled at the signal and growled, "I've got to get topside."

Diablo reached out for Zaynah.

Reluctantly, Gunn allowed Diablo to take her. He was on duty and his brother wasn't. Therefore, the defense system was his responsibility.

Zaynah stirred and her thoughts reached for Gunn. "Need you, Gunn."

* * * *

Gunn's name on Zaynah's lips worked on him like a force field, holding him locked in her small hands.

"We'll come with you. See what's up," Diablo said easily. "Zaynah can rest in the watch commander's quarters."

Diablo's casual words lifted the compulsion to stay from Gunn.

She snuggled closer to his brother's wide chest, apparently satisfied.

Gunn faked a cough to cover his sigh of relief. This time he didn't have to choose. Plus, Diablo wouldn't be completely alone with her.

If she wanted both of them, and everything he'd seen in her mind said that she did, then they'd share her.

It wasn't the first time they'd shared a female. And yet, he wasn't sure that he could share this one. He worried guiltily about Diablo. As close as they were, his brother kept his feelings to himself.

Was it even possible to share a mate?

Fire demons were notoriously possessive. Gunn had never heard of a demon tri-bond arrangement. However, if they couldn't find a way to share her, one of them had to die. Soon.

Silently, he vowed to take his own life rather than force Diablo to choose between Zaynah and him.

Chapter Five

When they'd been in the medi-center, Gunn had been terrified that his brother had already bonded with the assassin. Now, after he'd forged a mind link, he realized Zaynah had been designed perfectly--for both of them.

With her as their mate, either of them had a chance to run Skynet. Until they found another high-level fire demon, or fire dragon, who was willing to work with them.

Unless, the little dragon shifter regained her memories and her imperial conditioning kicked in--then Diablo and he died.

Returning to the control room, the steady beep of an incoming communication signal interrupted his gloomy thoughts. He flipped on the speaker.

The Enyo Space Craft's officer hailed him. "Need any help with that imperial miner cluttering up the south end of your landing field?"

"I might see my way to letting you have her for the right price," Gunn said casually, opening negotiations with one their allies. "Is that you Helax?"

"In the flesh and your dreams, Gunn."

"Who let you off your chain?" he growled back, jokingly.

Helax chuckled. "Better watch it, demon. Or I'll think you're jealous. Mythos and I are alternating the duranium runs this quarter. Gives us both a turn to enjoy our mate, if you read me."

Gunn tucked that tidbit away for further thought, changing the subject. "How'd you hear about the miner?"

"Data travels fast when duranium is involved." Helax said easily, evading a direct answer.

This meant that they had a leak within their operation.

Duranium gave Diablo and him a mighty lever. One that made bargaining almost too easy. However, the rare element required constant vigilance and ruthless defense, drawing a steady stream of customers, pirates, and invaders.

The mineral funded more than half of the interplanetary alliance, which Enyo had recently joined.

The combination of the natural violent currents between galaxies, the technology to channel nature's raw power, and their own goddess given command of fire had kept the mining operation safe so far.

How long they could manipulate the fiery meteor showers with only the two of them was something he didn't want to consider.

The same way he didn't want to think about what was going to happen when they developed mating mania. A stage, which would be accelerated by the presence of a fertile female.

Judging from the shards of pain stabbing his balls, it wasn't a subject he'd be able to ignore for long. The urge to mate was strong and growing stronger. A shudder ran through his shoulders. Puberty and its aftermath had been bad enough.

"You still there, pal? Grizzly five-seven-seven, requesting permission to land."

The Enyo Officer's words brought Gunn's attention back to the control room. He cleared his throat. However, his voice still came out in a growl. "How many in your surface party?"

"Just me. The rest of these clowns don't need to leave the Grizzly. I've got a land transport, if you've got room for a small crawler."

"Plenty of room." Gunn said, checking his available slots. "Park her in docking bay eight. Be sure to wait for the green light before debarking."

"Your audio off-line again?"

"It's suffered a little imperial damage recently," Gunn said gruffly, smoothing on the light illusion that disguised his demon markings.

Helax wouldn't be put off by a little thing like horns. However, most humans found his natural form disturbing. It was wise to remember the illusion. Besides, there was no point to putting the warrior on edge when he wanted the man's cooperation.

Helax chuckled, "I read you pal. Maintenance never ends. I'll keep it parked until you flash the all clear."

Within minutes, Helax was escorted into the control tower.

The Enyo warrior sniffed delicately. "Where is she?"

Gunn considered, playing dumb, but it seemed pointless. "She's with Diablo. How'd you know?"

"Her scent is all over you, pal. If it cheers you up any, you smell a whole lot yummier than usual. Therefore, mating mania." He grabbed Gunn's wrist, inspecting it confidently. Then he nodded, seeming pleased by what he'd found.

"So, she's spending time with your brother. A tri-bond?"

Gunn cleared his throat. His voice still came out rougher than raw duranium. "Looks like it's heading that way."

"Relax, pal. It's a lot more fun than you're ready to believe."

"Good to know," Gunn said plainly unconvinced.

Helax laughed. "Given what's going on, I'm surprised you answered my hail."

"Me too," Gunn muttered under his breath, casually checking his wrist for the woven band of gold that signified mating in a male demon. The first fine lines of the golden circle were moving down his forearm. The delicate strands signaled the achievement of his most impossible dream and sealed his fate.

Helax scanned the control room. "Where is everybody?"

"We're running a little lean," Gunn frowned. "The imperial transport came with fighters. A couple got through skynet. We lost too many good men. More were wounded. The others are exhausted."

"And you're not?" The Enyo officer raised one eyebrow.

"Diablo and I have a lot more stamina."

"You want to play super-hero have at it. But, if you need some reinforcements. I've got a full complement of seasoned warriors parked on your landing pad."

"Let me guess, they'd love a little combat time."

Helax winked. "Love might be a little strong. But, warriors live for battle."

"How about your commander? I don't want your ass on the line," Gunn growled.

Helax waved a hand, dismissing. "I have open orders to blast the seven hells out of anything that interferes with our duranium supply."

"In that case, I'd appreciate the help."

"What are allies for? Hang on a sec while I raise my number two."

Gunn swallowed a sigh of relief, listening to Helax relay orders.

Once the Enyo men were briefed and assigned duty sectors, he and Helax began bargaining for the imperial transport that had cost the Ranin Seven forces so dearly.

After hours of negotiating, they came to mutually acceptable terms. Verifying the transfer of space credits, Gunn released title to the liberated imperial transport, with its full load of duranium to his ally.

"What about the little fighter parked close to the station?" Helax asked much too casually to be convincing.

Gunn snorted. "Diablo has his eye on her."

"Maybe, I can change his mind," Helax said undeterred.

"Don't count on it. However, you can ask him yourself." Gunn checked the chronometer. "In a few hours"

"Gotcha," Sketching a salute, the Enyo officer departed.

Gunn scanned through the security monitors, checking on the men, the surface, and the surrounding space. Satisfied that all was quiet, he shut off the surface lights and secured the control station.

His need for Zaynah pounded in his blood.

Sooner or later, she'd remember who she was and why she'd come to the dark side of Ranin Seven, and then Diablo and he were both dead. Not even that reality dulled his desire for the small shifter.

Once Gunn had accepted the inevitable outcome, he'd immediately shifted gears, seeking for the best way to serve the alliance. What he needed was a plan of secession. However, the gaping hole in any plan to transfer control of Ranin Seven remained--the need for at least two high level fire demons--three would be better.

Aside from Diablo and him, he didn't know a single fire demon. Let alone finding two or more, with sufficient power to do the job, who the pan-galactic alliance would accept.

The entire spawn of their brothers had been murdered by Prado. The wily emperor may not have been the one who'd personally beheaded each of the sixty-four young demons, who'd died that horrible night. He may not have been the one who'd personally set fire to the dorm. Though, Gunn wouldn't put either of those crimes past the ancient worm. What was certain was Prado had ordered his brothers deaths. As coldhearted a crime as had ever been executed.

The young demons had been d'skeku cadets, the emperor's own. Loyal personal troops. The royal family's guards. It was akin to killing faithful family pets. Murdering them had been an unconscionable act made even more heinous, by planting evidence pointing to Diablo and him.

Though, the crime was past, he still burned to avenge his brothers' deaths. A whole generation of fire demons had been eliminated. Murdered in exactly the same fashion as Prado's sire had met his death one month earlier.

The only reason for killing the young demons was to deflect any charges of patricide from being brought against the new emperor.

How easy it had been for a grieving Prado to paint the demons, already feared by his human subjects, as murdering fiends.

He and Diablo had barely escaped with their lives.

Goddess alone knew if there--. That was the answer. The Goddess of Fire knew every one of her children. What with one dragon begotten thing and another, he hadn't been the most faithful of her servants. However, he was still one of her chosen sons. She might hear his plea.

He had nothing to lose by humbling himself to ask for her help.

Hurrying to the neglected shrine room, he chanted the cleansing prayers to make himself fit to petition the Goddess.

An hour later, his erection, hidden by the fleshy pocket during his audience with the Goddess's servant, still hadn't subsided. Relief was mandatory if he wanted to stay functional. After all, it wasn't as if he could get more bonded.

In the watch commander's comfortable quarters, Zaynah slept on her side. Diablo was curled possessively around her.

Exactly what he'd expected to find. Except for a couple of details.

His brother had shed his clothes and shifted into his natural form. The horns, pointy ears, and talons were back. The male's monstrous cock pressed against the womanly curves of Zaynah's bottom and the mating band shone softly where it circled his left wrist.

Surprisingly, the little shifter slept peacefully in his brother's embrace.

The mating mania he'd feared erupted inside him, making his prior level of hunger for the small dragon feel like a passing whim.

Much scarier was the aching tenderness for her. He'd die to protect her. Would die gladly at her hand.

Efficiently toeing off his boots, he stripped out of his jumpsuit. The shift to his natural fire demon form already in progress. No longer worried about sharing, he only prayed the mating bond would allow her to accept them as they were.

Once bonded, it was only in their true form that a demon could find the sexual release he needed to survive.

* * * *

Diablo's hunger for Zaynah, surged through him. A steady aching need that centered in his hard cock and tight balls. Carefully, he moved the heavy erection, aligning it with the seam of her southern cheeks. But, he didn't even peel off her one-piece. She was exhausted and her well-being and comfort was much more important than his impatient cock.

Curled on her side, she slept like a youngling. The slight rise and fall of her chest holding his gaze like a new found vein of duranium. He curled around her, painfully hard, but willing to endure centuries of torment for the privilege of protecting her.

He tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, relishing the silken texture. His coarse hand, stroked the soft skin of her cheek, drifting down her slender arms. Gently, he caressed her, using his touch to memorize the enticing curves and hollows of his love's body.

When his brother joined them, Diablo wasn't surprised or resentful.

Zaynah wanted both of them. For him, that ended any possible argument.

Her happiness was what mattered most.

An ignored conscience prodded him. Mated or not, he still had other obligations.

His brothers' deaths had not been avenged. Cutting off Prado's duranium pipeline had crippled his empire. But, the real purpose of the blockade was to force Prado to surrender his life. Only by spilling the emperor's life's blood could his honor be satisfied. Finally, the slaughtered innocents could rest in peace

The pan-galactic alliance of planets relied on Gunn and him for duranium. If they failed to hold Ranin Seven, the fragile trust they'd built would crumble.

More innocent lives would be lost--the allies, theirs, and Zaynah's too.

Prado wouldn't care whether or not she'd betrayed him. If their defenses failed, then anyone standing with them was dead.

A glimpse into the bleak future had shown Diablo a dozen ways for his life to implode in disaster.

He'd found no safe path through the dangers. When death came--if death came--he'd meet it, fighting tooth and claw until his last breath.

He'd face those troubles when they arrived. But, there was no reason to rob the present of its joy. For now, his woman slept warm and soft and safe in arms.

Carefully lifting her hair, he pressed a tender kiss to the sweet spot on her neck.

Gunn nibbled on the other side, taking the same gentle care not to disturb her.

She stretched sensuously, murmuring a sultry demand, "Kiss me."

Answering her first, Gunn captured her mouth with his, slipping his long, forked tongue past her teeth.

Diablo tasted her sweetness as if he were the one kissing her. Sharing his brother's and Zaynah's sensations nearly overwhelmed him, bringing him aching close to climax.

When she pulled away from Gunn's greedy mouth, she twisted, meeting Diablo's hungry stare. Her eyelids were heavy, the dark fringe of lashes veiling the sliver of ruby irises as she faced him.

He braced himself for her rejection.

Then, a miracle happened.

She saw him in his true form and she didn't scream. She reached for him. Soft hands stroked his rough skin. Silken lips pressed against his heat. Then, she grabbed his balls and tugged. The pressure was perfect. Hard enough to interrupt his imminent ejaculation, but not so hard that it disturbed his arousal.

A rough growl of hungry love erupted from his throat.

Covering his lips with hers, Zaynah sucked on his eager tongue, releasing a fresh torrent of excitement into his blood. Her special scent of night blooming jasmine, hunger, and an aching sweetness blended with the musk of her arousal and his own need, ratcheting his excitement to an unbearable level. It took everything he had to cherish her slowly, the way his beloved mate deserved.

Lightly, he held her head still for his kiss, plundering her mouth with all the skill in his possession. He claimed her soft willingness passionately. Leaving no doubt that she was his adored mate.

He gave her his breath, his heart, and his soul.

She melted into him, absorbing, and soothing the hard edges of his need.

Meanwhile, Gunn didn't wait for either of them to encourage him. He stripped off her one-piece and undershirt, licking, nibbling, and sucking his way down the elegant hollow of her spine. When he reached her tailbone, Zaynah gasped.

After swallowing the sweet sound of her arousal, Diablo licked a trail of his own. Soon, he reached her taut breasts. Rosy nipples stood at attention, demanding his close inspection. Using his forked tongue, he wrapped around the hard nubs and squeezed with wicked skill.

She arched into his mouth, clutching his horns to hold him in place.

Soft hands gripping his knobs sent jolts of erotic pleasure straight to the base of his spine. A sweet-hot laugh echoed through his mind as Zaynah read his reaction. "You like that."

His brother nipped at the tender skin covering her tailbone.

Her laughter ended abruptly. A whimper of arousal caressed his sensitized ears.

"Dear Goddess that feels amazing."

Diablo didn't know whether she meant the way he suckled her rigid nipples felt amazing or the way Gunn was licking her backside. He didn't bother scanning her thoughts. It mattered little. As long as Zaynah melted with sensual bliss, then he was satisfied clear down to the vicious black claws on his toes.

The truth of that last thought stunned him. He was content. Though his cock throbbed and his balls ached from the steady unrelieved arousal. Caring for her--pleasing her, was his privilege. A sacred duty. One he'd die to fulfill.

He met ruby eyes, glowing with erotic pleasure. A reminder that dying for Zaynah was more than pretty figure of speech.

No one knew much about dragon mating.

Probably, because no one had survived the experience for long enough to relate any particulars.

He figured it was as good a way to go as any--dragonheads better than most demon deaths. Then, he realized he'd taken dragon in vain again. The corner of his mouth quirked at the automatic vulgarity. He'd better upgrade his vocabulary or his sweet little dragon shifter would rip him a new one.

While she arched and moaned, he slipped her hold on his knobs, trailing open-mouthed kisses down to her slender waist.

Carefully, he stripped off her panties, tossing the damp scrap of material aside. "Open for me, babe," he ordered. Desperate for a taste of her honey.

One slim thigh angled to give him access to her tender sex.

Nothing but soft golden skin decorated her slit. "Do you wax, babe?"

She opened her eyes, blushing slightly. "I've just never grown hair down there."

"I love your bareness." He licked his lips, flicking his tongue along the edge of her delicate slit, sipping the intoxicating sweetness of night blooming jasmine and sweet-willing woman. "You taste like heaven."

Her cheek darkened, the black pupils nearly eclipsed her ruby irises, and fresh cream coated her tender sex.

"That's right, babe. Gush for me. I want every drop of your sweet jelly."

Chapter Six

Diablo and Gunn both wanted her.

Zaynah knew that much. Strangely, this knowledge didn't frighten her. It didn't even upset her. It thrilled her. She couldn't remember anyone ever wanting her. For anything. The old pain of rejection wasn't nothing like the rest of her missing past memories. It felt true--like an emotional certainty.

Even if she hadn't seen the truth of exactly who the males were during the mind probe, she still would've known they were demons. She hadn't imagined the markings. Because, they were back. This too was reassuring.

Along with the knobby horns, sharp teeth, and pointed ears, the males had long, forked tongues and lethal black claws. None of these parts worried her.

The huge thick cocks definitely made her edgy. She understood basic biology and she didn't think demon sex was all that different from human intercourse. Plus, she'd peeked into the demons' minds.

She knew what was coming.

Although, the men were careful with her and her own desire was blatantly obvious. Still, those demon erections were enormous and more than a little intimidating. Taking both of them into untested channels looked like the holo-text illustration of an impossible mission.

But, she sensed no worry from either Gunn or Diablo. They were the ones with all the experience. Maybe, it was possible. She wanted to share pleasure with them.

But, she'd like to survive the experience.

Then there were the twining rings of gold that had just appeared on both of their left wrists. Those looked way too much like mated males' bond marks. Reputedly, demons mated for life. Of course, the rest of the common wisdom about demons hadn't proved reliable. And yet, she eyed the males warily, certain that joining with Gunn and Diablo wasn't going to be a friendly round of bed-sport and farewell.

On top of all these very reasonable worries, the nagging thought that there was something urgent she was supposed to be doing plagued her. But like the rest of her past, the missing agenda was locked in her bruised brain.

For a half a second, she thought about asking Gunn and Diablo if they knew why she'd come to Ranin Seven. But, that was silly. If they'd had the answers, they surely would've told her.

Right this moment, it didn't seem all that important.

The males continued to make love to her gently, lavishing tender, sipping kisses, and sweet caresses on her restless aching body. As careful as they were, they showed no sign of stopping or even slowing down.

They were determined, pushing her harder into a sweet hot frenzy of desperation. Just as nervous tension began to leech away her pleasure, the mental connection with the males returned.

Images of her very ordinary body flashed in their thoughts. Every part of her was precious, beautiful, and adored. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming and her body responded by swelling, softening, and gushing with the evidence of her willingness.

"That's right, babe. I want you to flood my mouth with your juices." Diablo went back to squeezing and releasing the throbbing nub of neediness near the top of her folds in a rhythm that made her sex clench helplessly faster and faster.

His long silken tongue darted deep inside her core, probing, stroking, and lapping until her delicate inner muscles twitched with mindless aching desire. Everywhere his wicked tongue touched she burned, her body crying for more of his delicious caresses.

Kissing and nipping the side of her neck while he tugged on her hard nipples, Gunn lifted his head, moving closer to her ear. He said, "I love your taste. I'm going to lick every centimeter of your body, because I can't get enough of your sweetness."

Fiery kisses trailed along her neck. Then, his smooth tongue traced the outer shell of her ear. Nibbling his way along the edge of her jaw, he paused at her chin. Angling her face toward his, Gunn said, "Open for me, sweetheart"

Zaynah's lips parted, welcoming Gunn's forked tongue into her mouth. He tasted like bittersweet chocolate and she was starved for the rich, dark, hot flavor of his kiss. She suckled his probing glossa eagerly.

Then, Gunn slipped out of her mouth, licking his way down to her sternum. Softly he skimmed the red markings, tracing the fine lines, and probing gently at the edges of the strange sign, setting off a new buzzing awareness.

Before she'd had a chance to pinpoint what she was feeling, Diablo, pulled his long tongue out of her core, positioning the head of his mighty arousal at her swollen aching entrance. "Come for me now, babe. Cover me with your creamy honey."

It was as if her body had just been waiting for permission to explode.

Diablo's words nudged her over the edge into a breathless burst of sheer ecstasy.

When the rapture passed, she found herself once again writhing between the wickedly erotic torture of two demon tongues and twenty clever and determined fingers. The aching tension was back. A trickle of perspiration dripped down her spine.

Gunn lapped up the beads of sweat. Then, he licked lower, stopping to suck on the thin skin covering her tailbone. The small patch of flesh was tender, swollen, and pulsing like a second heartbeat.

She twisted away from the sweet pleasure-pain. But, his busy hands, kneaded the globes of her butt, burning off any lingering doubts, and turning her muscles into sizzling melted butter.

Her breasts were swollen and tight. Arousal dripped from her channel where Diablo tormented the sensitized tissues. Then, his talented fingers moved past the thick crown of his cock invading her sheath. Penetrating her back channel with one hand, he spread her folds with the other, exposing her hard pearl of need.

Just when she was becoming self-conscious again, he drew back. "You're so beautiful, little dragon." He breathed the words across her sensitized breasts.

Not even the strange endearment disturbed her rising excitement. His dark chocolate scent drugged her senses and her thoughts disintegrated into a headlong rush down a slippery tunnel of pure erotic sensation.

Then, Diablo's forked tongue rasped around her taut nipple. His agile mouth was busy squeezing, releasing, and pushing her into a reckless wild hunger for more of the mind melting rapture.

During this torture, Gunn nipped her tailbone again, and then soothed the tiny hurt with his facile glossa.

Something deep inside her kept tightening. Finally, the tension reached critical mass and exploded, hurling her into a storm of shooting stars.

Slowly, she floated back into her males' embrace.

Diablo pulled away, far enough to spread the liquid welling from the tiny slit on the voluptuous head of his arousal down his thick shaft.

She watched, panting as he repositioned the huge cock at her entrance. The long stalk throbbed, glistening with his own juices--much redder, softer skinned, and impossibly harder than the rest of him.

The bronze skin that covered most his body felt almost too erotic--like silk rubbing against her sensitized tissues. Each light contact wound her inner excitement a tiny bit tighter.

Delaying his invasion, he drug the wet bulbous head through her slit, coating her vulva with his liquid fire--burning her tender tissues. The combination of his delicious dark chocolate scent, his heat, and his fiery wetness acted like an accelerant on a feast day bonfire.

She was desperate to quench the fire of sensual need, his, hers, and Gunn's. The connection made it impossible to distinguish whose passion burned hottest.

For a second, it was as if there was another set of thoughts weaving between the three of them--a fourth entity's erotic cravings.

Behind her Gunn teased the seam of her butt with his erection. She reached back, grasping his hard cock. The shaft was too thick for her fingers to meet. She found the luscious head, welling with his fiery pre-cum.

Gently, he guided her hand, coating her back passage with the heat welling from the small slit in his smooth crown.

He groaned from the tender torture at the same time a murmur of anguished delight spilled from her lips.

The heat of seeping lust spread over the tightly puckered portal to her rear channel, lighting fresh fires of hungry sensation. Banking the embers of need for dark, unknown, and forbidden pleasures, until the need grew she squirmed between her lovers, eager for both males' total possession of her body.

Maddeningly, Gunn continued his deliberate pace, massaging her rear entrance with surprisingly gentle caresses. One rough finger pushed inside, bringing the fiery liquid from his leaking cock to new nerve endings, making her sex clutch and her sphincter muscles clamp around the probing finger.

She gripped his shaft tighter, pulling the soft skin of his erection over the crest, and then back to expose the silken head. His invading finger burned her core, stretching delicate muscles with almost unbearably pain and a heady promise of bliss that danced just out of her reach.

When he added a second finger, she gasped, clamping down on the invasion.

Diablo captured her mouth in a deep, drugging kiss while he positioned the silken hard helmet of his arousal at the entrance to her weeping center.

Then, both huge cocks surged steadily into her body.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out as they pushed, stretching her tender channels. Shafting deep.

Only the intimate bond connection, allowing her to read their hearts, kept her from panic.

Her awareness that they'd done this before, with other women, should have been a turn off. But, their commitment to her was so total that their experience just reassured her. They cared for her truly and deeply and they knew what her body could handle.

Goddess knew she wanted to handle them. Wanted to satisfy every erotic need the males had until all three of them collapsed in sheer blissful exhaustion.

The stretching, the burning, the tension all combined. Finally, pushing her beyond the pain of their invasion. Fragile barriers parted and clamped muscles eased as her body gushed with hot jelly, soothing her stretched tissues, and coating the total penetration of two huge demon cocks.

Amazingly, she softened further, accommodating them. Then, both males were buried balls deep into the recesses of her body.

They let out simultaneous groans that echoed her wanton excitement.

The narrow edge between pain and pleasure squeezed harder and harder as the men shafted with deep, slow, sure strokes. Held immobile between their hard bodies, her sex fluttered ever faster until every cell of her body coiled in unrelieved tension and then they all burst in a super-nova of ecstasy.

As her awareness returned, Diablo and Gunn groaned hoarsely, finding their own releases inside her recesses.

Their hot seed bathed her stretched passages with liquid bliss.

She stretched luxuriously between her lovers, safe, deeply satisfied, and content in a way she'd never known.

As perfect as the moment was, it didn't last. Her breath caught in sheer terror as someone other than her mates stirred to life within her.

But, long moments passed with nothing other than a lazy uncurling sensation that seemed to belong to another entity. The images flitted, dream-like, along the outer edge of her awareness.

Then for a few terrifying seconds, that other peered through her eyes, tinting the world a fiery red.

* * * *

When Diablo left to get clean linens, Gunn captured Zaynah's chin, aligning her for a kiss. Meeting her gaze, he changed his mind.

Instead of Zaynah's pretty dark eyes, ruby irises flashed at him, throwing dangerous sparks. He dropped his eyes quickly.

No one won a starting match with a dragon. Those who were foolish enough to try wound up being dragon dinner. He retreated from her, tenderly tucking his softening cock and tender balls into the thick body pocket that protected his equipment when it wasn't in use. Quickly, he yanked on his jumpsuit and jammed on boots.

A fast check on Zaynah stopped his retreat.

She hadn't made a sound. Though, she was shivering so hard that she couldn't work the fastener on her one-piece.

Gunn closed the distance between them in two strides. The woman was his to protect no matter what shape she happened to take.

However, he was male enough to admit that he swallowed a silent sigh of relief when she blinked and her pretty eyes flashed a nice normal black. He folded her into an embrace, warming her with his body.

Her teeth chattered when she tried to talk. "Gunn? What's happening? I can't see anything."

He pulled her into his arms, grumbling reassuring nonsense. "Shhh, it'll be fine. You want me to build a little fire? I'm real good at that."

His teasing won him a shaky smile and the tremors eased.

"It's okay. I can see again. It was so strange--like someone else was using my body. My eyes." She gave a watery laugh. "Sorry, I panicked. I don't know what happened to me."

Tilting her head toward him, he met her dark eyes. "You had great sex with a pair of powerful fire demons, sweetheart. That's enough to make any female a little weak."

Her smile was firmer this time. "As fantastic as that was. I don't think it would be affecting my vision now."

Gunn only hesitated for a heartbeat before he said, "You're right, sweetheart. It's your dragon, you're close to transition." And then he began praying that she'd survive the change.

* * * *

"What about her dragon?" Diablo asked.

Gunn cleared his throat. "She's going to shift any minute now."

Zaynah fastened her one-piece, staring at them with wide eyes set in a face gone much too pale.

While Gunn watched uneasily, she conquered her fear.

One small hand grabbed the front of his jumpsuit. Then, she hoisted him off the ground without any visible effort.

"She's right here. Don't talk about me like I'm some kind of incompetent." She looked directly at him. As if she were assessing the truth of his words. "Are you serious about this transition thing?"

Then, she set him back on his own feet, stepping away and wrapping her arms around her slender waist. Her voice lowered. "You really think I'm becoming a dragon?"

"A dragon shifter, technically," Gunn grumbled.

Her impressive strength had surprised the hell out of him. He was a good-sized male, even for a fire demon. She'd lifted him as if he were some lightweight human. Being handled like that was such a turn on. He edged nearer to her.

"Maybe you're right. I never used to be all that strong. Is that the dragon starting to break free?"

Wanting to erase the fear underlying her question, he said as soothingly as he could manage in his rough voice, "The first shift is tough. However, shifting between woman and dragon will get much easier after the initial transition."

"Right," she lifted her chin, meeting his gaze fearlessly. "And you know this because you've turned into a huge monstrous reptile so many times."

"Some people find demons scary," he said evenly, reminding her of her initial reaction to Diablo and him.

Zaynah dropped her lashes, and softened her tone. "Sorry, you're right. That's exactly what I used to believe." She paused, and then looked up with fresh determination. "If I'm really becoming some kind of monster then you've got to get out of here or lock me up somewhere. I could tear you apart."

"You'd never hurt either of us."

"There's no way for you to know that." She made shooing motions toward Diablo and him.

Gunn bit back a smile. She couldn't even shove them out of the room. No way was she a danger to either of them.

She rubbed her temples. "Someone else tried to talk to me about dragons. Xeth, the weapons master. The one who gave me that holo-text reader." She shook her head in frustration. "That's it. That's the only thing I remember."

"Xeth is still the d'skeku weapons master?" Diablo's eyebrows lifted.

"You know him?" she asked, looking at his brother with such raw hope that it broke Gunn's heart.

"Yeah, I know him. He's still teaching?"

"No, not now. He's retired from active teaching. But, he still lives in the compound. He was always kind to me."

She sounded so wistful that Gunn suspected kindness had been rare in Zaynah's life. He planned to correct that injustice.

Chapter Seven

"Excuse us a minute, babe. I need to talk a little business with Gunn." Diablo gripped his brother's arm firmly enough to convince him he needed to listen, tugging him out of the watch commander's quarters.

Gunn dug in his heels a few meters down the hall, scowling at him. "Say whatever you need to fast. She shouldn't be alone. I've been reading up on dragons. The initial transition is painful. More than painful--like a week in the seven hells rammed into a couple of minutes. Most don't survive it. And of those that do make it through their first change, nearly all of them are males."

Diablo swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump of fear choking him. "That's exactly why I wanted to talk to you. I know she's scared. Can we give her some of our strength?" He paused, swallowed, and then added gruffly, "I can't stand the thought of losing her."

"I'm not sure how we'd do that," Gunn admitted.

"We have to try."

A short sharp nod signaled Gunn's agreement. He said, "I don't want to lose her either. Even thinking about it, makes me feel like I've got a block of ice in my gut."

"Then work with me here, 'cause I've got an idea."

Diablo didn't wait to see if Gunn followed him. With or without his brother he was going to try to strengthen her.

Lifting his brother off the ground was a significant benchmark and it had happened after they'd made love--a natural bond strengthener. That connection had to be the answer, because it was the only idea he had.

Diablo knew she had to be sore and he'd cut off his horns before he'd hurt her, but he had to do everything possible to help her survive the imminent transition. He hoped to Goddess that when it was over she'd forgive him.

When he crossed the threshold, his cock was already hard, straining inside its fleshy pocket.

"If you two are discussing something that concerns me then I have a right to be included. It's bad enough that my past has been stolen. I won't be kept in the dark about what's happening now." Zaynah crossed her arms, inadvertently plumping her breasts, and waited for one of them to explain.

Fighting his lust, he automatically checked with Gunn. Usually, his brother liked to do the talking. But, this time all Diablo got was one those it's-your-funeral-pyre looks.

Great, he was on his own explaining the hazards of imminent dragonhood to a beautiful skeptic. Then, if she was still listening, he could roll out his theory about how making love with a couple of horny fire demons was her best hope of coming out it alive. He'd be lucky if she didn't clobber his thick head. "Look babe, you're already on the cusp. We don't have time for the long version of why transition is so difficult."

"Is this more of that dragon nonsense? Because, if it is you can save your breath." She turned her glare on Gunn. "Both of you. If dragons existed, and if I were changing into one, don't you think there'd be some sign of this transition?" she asked sweetening her tone to nice and reasonable.

Diablo rubbed his horns in frustration, wishing she were rubbing the sensitive nubs. He needed to focus. There had to be a way to convince her. "There have been signs. Remember the way you picked Gunn off the ground? I bet that kind of strength is something new for you."

"Maybe," she said grudgingly. "Maybe, the gravity is just lighter here. Maybe, he's a lot lighter than he looks." A tinge of doubt crept into her tone, shading her words.

"How about your eyes?" he asked.

"What about them?" she countered defensively.

Guiding her to the sanitizer's mirror, he said, "They've changed color. Your irises are red."

She shrugged. "Everything is red."

"Look closely at your pupils," he demanded.

"That's weird," she admitted, studying the elliptical slits. "I don't know why they're like that. Okay, I understand something is happening to me. Maybe, I'll turn into a demon. But, a dragon? Come on." She laughed unconvincingly.

He ignored her casual dig about demons. "Humor me, babe. What could it hurt?" And if I'm right, it might save your life.

"Just what did you have in mind?" she asked, still plainly doubtful.

Diablo shot Gunn another help me look.

This time his brother took the hint. "To get as much of our power into you as possible sweetheart."

Zaynah considered his words for a few seconds. Then, she connected the dots, blushing faintly. "If you wanted to make love, all you had to do was ask," she said softly, keeping her face averted from both of them.

For a couple of seconds, Diablo thought about trying to explain further, but there was no point. The transfer of power depended on closeness and a pumping as much of their sperm into her as possible. Fire demon ejaculate was a powerful aphrodisiac. It also packed a huge magic boost. Especially, if she swallowed it. Their seed would infuse her with strength faster than anything else could.

True, climaxing was also the only way to relieve his aching need for her and felt better than killing imperial troopers, but neither of those were drawbacks. At least, not as far as he was concerned. He cupped her shoulder, pulling her back snugly against his chest, and leaned in for a nibbling kiss, or twenty, of her neck.

Reaching up, Zaynah gripped his horns to hold him in place. Her soft hands squeezed his knobby horns with the same kind of erotic rhythm that her sex had gripped his cock. His arousal hardened further, pressing against the fleshy pocket stretched to hold it in check.

In seconds, he'd stripped his clothes and freed himself, sliding his erection between her soft thighs. He didn't enter her, letting her ride his cock while he went back to nibbling her soft skin and letting the natural aphrodisiac of his pre-cum prepare her delicate passage. After marking the pale gold skin behind her left ear with a burning kiss, he moved on to blazing fiery trails down both sides of her neck. Her sweet taste teased him, making him crave more.

That's when he realized that he would never get enough of Zaynah. Not in this lifetime and demons lived almost forever. So, did dragons--if they survived the hazards of their initial transition.

* * * *

Sandwiched between her mates, Zaynah reveled in the blazing desire they'd ignited with their sweet-hot caresses. Every kiss, every touch, made her burn for more.

Diablo kissed and softly bit his way down her neck, finding exactly the right combination of pain and pleasure to make her desperate for more of his sensual torture.

She moaned around the silky length of Gunn's tongue because she couldn't stop sucking. His bittersweet chocolate taste was sheer addictive pleasure. On top of the irresistible chocolate, his kisses held a pinch of spice that made her sex soften and gush.

While they kissed, his talented fingers tormented her nipples. She wanted his mouth there, but she just couldn't stop kissing him long enough to ask for anything.

When he pulled back from her lips, she moaned in protest.

His thumb brushed across her lips. "Hold on, sweetheart. I'll let you suck anything you want."

Immediately, her gaze darted to his crotch.

Her interest didn't faze him. If anything, he stripped out of the jumpsuit faster. Underneath his clothes, the fleshy pocket stretched between his hipbones, bulging with his arousal. Much more roughly than she would have dared, he pushed the flap away. Quickly, freeing his heavy cock and the potent sacs hanging below it from their protective covering.

Now that he was fully exposed, for the first time, she got to look her fill at him. The crown was a dark wine and the bulging shaft only slightly paler. The smooth skin of the head was so taut that it fascinated her. The stalk behind it was covered in the same tender skin, but decorated with heavy veins and a few wrinkles as if it could grow even larger. Not a possibility she was ready to think about. His bittersweet chocolate scent was strongest here, tempting her to taste him.

"May I?" she asked, reaching to touch the tender, intimate flesh.

"Anywhere, any time, anyway you want." Gunn's voice was gravelly with need.

Dear Goddess, his words sounded so good. The passion-roughened tone of his voice was better than anything he could have said.

She wrapped her hand around his thick stalk as far as she could. Since, her fingers didn't meet, she used her other hand to completely encircle the girth of his impressive shaft. She started to kneel, intending to taste the drop of moisture welling from the voluptuous crown's vulnerable slit. But, Diablo caught her middle, preventing her from carrying out her tasting plan.

Before she'd managed a protest, he bent her at the waist.

Since she was quickly returned to a position within easy reach of her original target, she lost all interest in arguing.

Gunn's delicious scent beckoned. Her tongue swiped the tempting drop that had glistened on the head of his cock. The taste burst in her mouth. Sweet fire burned across her tongue, making her hunger for more of his magic.

Just as she licked across the crown she'd been yearning to taste, Diablo parted her feminine folds from behind, exposing her entrance.

"Such a sweet pussy," he muttered in the same rough guttural voice as his brother's. Like it had when Gunn spoke, now Diablo's harsh tone excited her, drawing fresh moisture from her empty, aching sheath. Then, the smooth head of his mighty erection slid through her feminine tissues, setting new fires of need.

She sighed, relaxed her jaws, and opened as wide as possible in order to swallow Gunn's entire crown. The drugging flavor was in every part of him. Drops of pre-ejaculate slipped onto her tongue in bright flares of fiery sweetness. Each taste of the magic liquid just made her even more desperate for the next taste.

Diablo's thick head settled at her entrance and pressed inside. As her delicate muscles stretched to accommodate his size, her sex gushed with wet welcome juice and her moan vibrated around the delicious crest of Gunn's erection.

By pressing the underside of the crown, while teasing the slit with the stiffened tip of her tongue, she coaxed more of the demon's addictive liquid fire.

Gunn's fingers massaged her scalp approvingly. "Right there. Oh yeah. You're killing me, little dragon."

She ignored the dragon reference, redoubling her efforts, suckling greedily.

When Diablo gripped her hips firmly, she stopped sucking long enough to whimper around the lush cock.

The stimulation was too much. Their drugging scents permeated every breath she drew. Gunn's taste burned her mouth. At the same time, Diablo's heavy arousal welled with liquid fire, scorching and stretching her sex. All of it made her burn for more.

"Fuck yeah. Whimper for me, babe. I love that sound." Diablo began to stroke slow and deep, torturing her hidden zones with an aching need.

"Come for us, sweetheart," Gunn growled, stopping her head massage long enough to pinch her nipples tenderly.

Gunn's clever fingers tightened on her sensitive tips to the point of pain, sending jolts of erotic sensation straight to her sex. Her pussy began to clench rhythmically around Diablo's hot cock.

Another needy whimper escaped her lips and Gunn's erection twitched in her willing mouth. She responded by tightening her hold on him and sucking strongly.

Gunn rewarded her with hoarse groans of pleasure. "That's right, sweetheart. Suck me hard. Make me come in your hot little mouth."

More of the pre-ejaculate coated her tongue. She swallowed, moaning at the arousing burn as more of Gunn's liquid fire moved down her throat. Then, she moaned again as Diablo repositioned and drove deeper, hitting a new sweet spot. Tension coiled tighter as every cell in her body came alive, humming with excitement.

Both males stroked in and out, filling her, stretching her, pushing her beyond pleasure into new dark territory. She spun out of control into pure ecstasy.

When her awareness returned, she heard Diablo talking.

"That's what I want. Milk my cock, sweetness." His rough words filled her ears as his sperm filled her channel. The heat pulsed deep inside her core, bathing her sensitive walls. The hot sensation pushed her into another soul-fusing climax before the first one had even completely subsided.

She would've cried out at the rapture, but her mouth was filled with Gunn's heavy cock. All she could do was moan around his erection while he rocked into her soft mouth, sliding ever deeper down her throat.

"Suck me hard, sweetheart. I'm going to pump you full of my cum." His strokes became shorter. His balls had pulled tight against the base of his erection, bumping her neck with each short, shuddering jerk of his cock.

She didn't need any further encouragement. Working the tip of her tongue under the rim of his crest while she used twisting pulls on the stalk yielded more of the sweet-hot taste she couldn't get enough of no matter how much she'd swallowed.

"Right there, little dragon. That's the spot." His words trailed off in erotic groan.

Pressing deeper, bursts of hot chocolate hit the back of her throat and she swallowed greedily. When he'd finally finished, gently removing his semi-erect shaft, she sighed lustily.

Then, Diablo pulled out of her pussy, leaving her empty.

The bond between the three of them continued to hum, warming and reassuring her with a confidence she'd never known.

"Time to switch," Diablo said gruffly.

Gunn grunted, "My legs are still shaking, let me sit on the bed."

"Fine with me. You can sit out this round."

"Fuck that," Gunn growled.

Zaynah darted a quick look over her shoulder. Gunn had indeed moved to the watch commander's bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress, leaning back on his elbows. His powerful legs were splayed wide, revealing an impressive erection.

Despite the deep satisfaction she'd felt just moments ago, her body softened and heated in response to his obvious need. His midnight eyes locked with hers and she moved toward him.

Suddenly, the room, and everything in it, glowed red.

Strong feelings, in this case arousal, seemed to bring the other entity closer to the surface of her mind.

She hesitated, fearing for Gunn and Diablo's safety. "The beast like you two, she wants to come out and play."

"If a couple of fire demons can't handle her then we aren't the right males for you," Gunn growled.

His deep rumbling words vibrated between her legs, making her ache for his taste, his touch, his love.

Then, something amazing shifted and unfurled deep inside her belly.

She shot an anxious glance to her hands, but they weren't scaly or talon tipped. She was still herself.

Moving quickly, she hooked a leg over his, intending to straddle Gunn. But, her demon had other plans.

He caught her at the waist, turning her so fast there was no chance to protest. Then, he settled her butt on his lap, guiding his erection to her slick sheath.

"I want you to ride me, sweetheart. Backwards. With your sweet ass nestled hard against my root." He groaned as she sank down, encasing him.

With her sheath already sensitized and swollen from her recent climaxes, she teetered on the brink of another orgasm.

Gunn's hips bucked, surging deeper, stretching her delicate muscles until he filled her so completely his crown nudged the mouth of her womb. She widened her legs, closing her eyes to savor the exquisite burn from his size and from the pre-ejaculate oozing from the tender slit in his crown.

The scent of dark chocolate blended with spice and hot clean male demon flesh teased her nose. When she forced her heavy eyelids open, Diablo stood waiting. His mighty erection at rigid attention. A tantalizing drop urged her to sample. Holding him with both hands, she licked up the pre-cum, setting fire to her mouth.

The males' sperm was an aphrodisiac and a narcotic and she couldn't get enough of it.

Under the influence of their lovemaking, she forgot the terrifying notion they might actually be right about her becoming a dragon. She forgot about her missing memories. She forgot the nagging feeling she was failing to carry out important orders.

She forgot everything except how wonderful it felt to exchange sensual caresses with her mates.

Contrary to everything she's believed about demons, Diablo and Gunn were tender, fiercely protective, and solicitous of her every wish.

The connection with both of them felt solid, true, and right.

Now, all she needed to do was avoid incinerating them. Or eating them.

They tasted delicious. No matter how much of their sperm she swallowed, she was hungry for more.

A buzzer interrupted their lovemaking.

"Bloody dr--," Gunn swallowed whatever he'd intended to say, extracting himself from the tangle of limbs. "Sorry, sweetheart. I'm still on duty."

Chapter Eight

"Hey pal, you in there?"

Helax's voice instantly roused Gunn. Quickly, he fastened his jumpsuit and shoved his feet into boots. His stomach growled a noisy protest as he called, "Yeah, give me a minute."

In well under the minute he'd asked for, Gunn released the control room's access panel, admitting the Enyo officer.

"Pal, you've been incommunicado for three days. Where I come from, that's a whole week." His ally eyed him with something that looked a whole lot like admiration or maybe envy.

Gunn ran a rough hand over his face, feeling the stubble of more than few hours. Then, he realized he'd omitted the illusion that hid his demon markings.

Reading his mind, Helax laughed. "Don't worry about it. I know what you are. And I've seen a lot uglier--not often. But, hey--watch it!"

He rolled away from the cuff Gunn had landed on his shoulder.

"Three days?" Gunn asked rhetorically.

"Three fucking days," Helax said with an unnecessary grin.

Gunn glared at him, but decided there had been no offense intended by the warrior's words, grunting mildly, "Lost track of time."

Helax nodded. "That happens. Listen, pal there's nothing shaking here. Your guys are coming back on line. With no action, I gotta get the Grizzly heading back to Enyo. You read me?"

"I hear you. Thanks for standing watch for us."

"Yeah well, that's what allies do." The Enyo officer slugged his shoulder affectionately before moving toward the exit. "Oh yeah, we took care of a few repairs while we were hanging out. Docking audio is back on line."

"Okay warrior, now get your ass out of here. I'm not going to kiss it. No matter what you fixed."

Helax strode off chuckling good-naturedly.

After the Enyo Grizzly had cleared their space, smoothly towing the vast imperial mining transport, Gunn reset skynet. He was starved and headed straight for the replicator. Planning to eat as soon as he'd made certain his mate was well fed.

A glimpse into the watch commander's quarters reassured him. Diablo had the replicator working full power, creating a steady stream of tasty dragon fare.

Gunn rerouted to the nearest available replicator, punching in his order for a generous mound of steak tartar and plenty of ice water. His hand trembled as he extracted a carafe and chugged back the liter before refilling it.

Fortified by a couple of kilos of raw meat, the water, and a demon's remarkable constitution, he rescanned the security displays. Finding no threats, he reset the viewer for long range and studied the surrounding deep space.

Nothing rang his personal alarms.

Except for the mind-numbing terror that he'd been unaware of anything other than his mates for three fucking days. No imperial fighters had arrived. Still, the lapse shook him. For the first time, he realized how powerful the mating bond was. And how dangerous. Especially now, when the emperor's duranium stockpiles had to be at a new critical low. Thanks to the allies. Not one imperial mining transport had made it home in the past year.

Prado had to make a move soon.

Then it hit him. The emperor had made a move.

Zaynah.

Gunn's initial reaction was to snort that Prado had misjudged his tool. She was bonded to him and Diablo. She would never betray them or their alliance. However, he didn't know that. When he'd probed her thoughts, he found no assassinate plot and a powerful erotic attraction. He stopped probing right there, having learned what he wanted to know.

Though, he and Diablo were bonded to her-- he had no idea how she felt about them. Trying to shake off the feeling of disaster, he blamed it on fatigue. Adding in the last three days to the watches he'd already stood, he was overdue for a furlough.

One more check of the security displays convinced him. Everything was quiet. It was absolutely Diablo's turn to run skynet.

As usual, his brother was curled around Zaynah, sleeping. The demon was more emaciated than Gunn had ever seen him. For a second, he hesitated. Then, he prodded him gently with the toe of his boot.

"Sleepin," Diablo muttered.

Gunn whispered, "Not your turn to sleep. Now get out there and stand watch. Eat something while you're at it. You're nothing but horns and claws.

"Thanks, love you too." His brother grumbled, crawling out of bed and stumbling toward the sanitizer.

When Diablo came out, Gunn went in and prepared linens. Then, he used the warm damp cloth to tend to Zaynah. Tenderly patting her dry after he'd finished. The dark lace of her lashes never stirred from the pale gold skin under her eyes. She'd slept right through the bed bath and his leering at her perfection.

Naturally, washing her aroused him. He kept the fleshy pocket encasing his erection closed, confining his hard cock. She needed rest much more than he needed to spend himself inside her body once again. Though, the memory of her sweet pussy wrapped around his shaft, tightened his balls painfully.

As tired and horny as he was, he wasn't going to crawl into bed with Zaynah with three days worth of beard stubble and dirt. Once he was tolerably clean and freshly shaven, he slipped into the bed, taking care not to jostle her.

She shivered and he curved himself around her small body, sharing his heat.

Nestling closer, she sighed happily. "Gunn."

"Sleep little dragon. You need your strength."

She didn't speak, but the tension in her spine told him she was awake.

Long minutes passed, he might have dozed, before she finally spoke. "Am I going to die?"

He was instantly alert. However, he didn't have a good answer for her and he hesitated too long before speaking.

"That's what you and Diablo are worried about isn't it?"

"I hope not," he said, finally finding an honest answer for her. "Many do. That's why we want you to be strong and well rested," he added pointedly.

Turning to face him, she cupped the side of his face. "You've given me too much of your power. That's why both of you are so thin and drawn."

"Demons recover fast."

"I pray that it will be fast enough," she murmured softly.

Her words chilled him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. "We'll be fine," he promised, hoping he hadn't lied.

* * * *

A faint reverberation of the skynet alarm, taunted Diablo. He woke with a jerk. Bloody dragonheads! He'd fallen asleep on watch.

Hoping the half-remembered pings were a dream fragment, he quickly scanned the display screens. While he studied the security visuals, he hoped that his weakness wouldn't be fatal for the alliance and his mates.

The space immediately above Ranin Seven was clear of threats. He sighed with relief, skipping a review of the deep space shots in favor of a fast check of the moon's surface screens.

His heart sank at the sight of a sleek imperial troop transport parked on their landing strip. Surface transports had already been offloaded. The crawlers were lined up, boarding soldiers. As he stared, the first transport started, moving toward the station's docking facilities.

The moon's greatest weakness was surface security. Once on the ground, there were few barriers to repel invaders. Something he should have seen to a long time ago. It would've been good to stay awake while on duty as well. He pushed aside the knot of anger, fear, and guilt. Beating himself up wouldn't help. He reached for the console to sound the general alarm.

"I don't think you want to be doing that, lad."

Bloody dragonheads! Diablo hadn't even heard the trooper enter the room. Now, the business end of a blaster was leveled at his chest. The trooper was three meters from where Diablo stood. From that range, even a rotten shot would be fatal, assuming the emperor's soldier knew enough to cut off his head while he was still down.

Bitterly, Diablo realized his mistake. He'd failed to check the docking bay cameras. While he'd been gawking stupidly at the troop transport, the control center had been breeched.

"Nice and steady now, step away from the console. There's no need to be disturbing a lot of other folks with our private business."

Diablo did as he'd been ordered, wrinkling his forehead. There was something familiar about the man's voice.

"That's far enough. Keep your hands where I can see them. Now, where've you stashed my lass?"

Every muscle in Diablo's body stiffened. No way in the seven hells did this male have any claim on Zaynah. She'd born no man's mark when she'd come to Ranin Seven. He and Gunn had claimed her fairly. "There are no unclaimed women here, trooper."

The soldier chuckled. "You don't say? All the same, I've business with Zaynah Rhan. Others will be here all too soon. I've precious little time to argue with the likes of you. Go on and fetch her now. Get a move on, lad. Don't keep your betters waiting."

Despite his highhanded manner, something in Diablo warmed to the imperial trooper. "You're wasting your time. She doesn't remember anything of her past."

"Ach, that's a shame." The trooper removed his helmet.

"Xeth?"

"Who else?" The old campaigner grinned.

The access panel slid back and a platoon of troopers marched single file into the control center.

Xeth angled his head toward the soldiers. "They're with me." He turned back, facing Diablo. "Keeping it nice and quiet now, I want you to get your fighting men in position, lad. Himself will be following along right soon. And we'll be needing every advantage we can manage."

A couple hundred questions popped into Diablo's mind. But, he understood the need for speed. If they survived, he'd get his answers later.

Quickly, he raised Ranin Seven's head of security and relayed orders. Once this was done, he rescanned the security displays.

A second imperial fighter had already landed. His heart sank, as the first of emperor's armored crawlers rolled down the tarmac's access road.

There was no need for him to do any math to recognize the odds were overwhelmingly against them. Even with Xeth's men, the imperial forces outnumbered the allied fighters five to one.

Worse, more troop transport ships orbited their moon, waiting for a chance to land on the crowded tarmac.

Grimly, he activated skynet. Unless he could keep the rest of the emperor's army at bay, their odds were going to get a whole lot worse.

Diablo rubbed eyes that felt as full of grit as if he'd been working the mines, rolled his shoulders, and focused on directing the next torrent of fiery meteors.

"What in the seven hells is going on?" Gunn grumbled.

Diablo spared him a dry look. "We're being invaded."

"I can see that. You look like walking death. I could've sworn I'd told you to get something to eat."

"Thought staying alert was more important. Hunger helps. Besides, I've been a little busy." He grumbled at his brother, because guilt goaded him for failing to stay awake on his watch. "I dozed off," he admitted.

His brother growled without menace. "Yeah, yeah. You were exhausted, my brother. Mating mania would do that in a healthy male. And you and I have been running at half-ass for longer than I want to think about."

Scrubbing at his suspiciously moist eyes, Diablo grunted. "Thanks."

Gunn pretended not to notice his weakness. "Whoa, is that Xeth?"

Diablo managed a grin. "It is. Thank the Goddess he's on our side.

His brother was already crossing the center to talk to their old weapon master when Zaynah slipped a soft hand into his.

"Are you okay?" she asked too softly for anyone else to hear.

To his surprise, he said, "Still a little shaky."

With a gentle squeeze of his palm, she disengaged, returning a few minutes later with a pile of raw steaks and a couple of liters of mineral water. Patiently, she fed him small

bites of meat, alternating the steak with sips of water. Her kindness left him free to focus on protecting their base from further invaders.

Gunn and he always had each other's backs, handling the station. They'd worked that way from the beginning. While Gunn had told him to eat, it would never have occurred to his brother to feed him.

He had to admit, Zaynah popping chunks of bloody steak into his mouth had made him feel uncomfortable. It made it look like he wasn't capable of taking care of himself. But the fact was, he couldn't feed himself and run skynet. If he weakened, then he'd be a lot worse than uncomfortable. More importantly, his weakness would endanger his mates.

As Diablo swallowed the last bite of meat, from the edge of his vision he saw the weapon master approach.

Xeth scanned Zaynah anxiously, gripping her hand. "It's good to see you, lass."

Even though the weapon master was an old friend, a growl rumbled out of Diablo's throat, warning Xeth to keep away from his mate.

"Stand down, lad. I'll not be hurting your lass." The old man spoke softly.

Zaynah ignored his objection, stepping around him to embrace Xeth. "What are you doing here?"

"That's a long story and we're short on time. Have you mastered your dragon, lass?" The weapon master, spoke gruffly, but his eyes twinkled with affection.

Shaking her head no, Zaynah took a step back.

"Ach, that's a shame girl."

Gunn strode into the room, leading a squad of men and Xeth turned toward him. "If you've uniforms and helmets to spare I'd like to dress my soldiers in your colors. Might keep them alive a wee bit longer."

* * * *

Zaynah, half-listened to the former weapon master's conversation with Gunn in numb silence. The moment she'd touch him, her memories started returning. He had given her the holo-text reader. He'd told her she needed to learn about dragons because they were her heritage. Questions tumbled into her thoughts as fast as the flooding memories. Xeth held the key to understanding her past. But, like everyone else in the station, he was much too busy preparing for battle to answer her questions.

When she'd touched him, she'd realized something else. The weapon master was a fire demon. If it hadn't been for her connection with Diablo and Gunn, she wouldn't have recognized his nature. His human illusion was seamless, probably because he'd worn it for so long that he was perfectly comfortable in the false skin. For whatever reason, with Xeth the demon was completely hidden. Despite his expertise, she doubted that even his uncanny disguise could conceal his secret under battle conditions.

Her brow wrinkled with concern for her old friend. Much as she appreciated Xeth's support, fighting against the emperor's troops seemed like a hopeless cause. Especially, with both Diablo and Gunn so exhausted. A sad state of affairs that was clearly her fault.

If she hadn't come to Ranin Seven--she stopped and frowned. But, she hadn't come to the remote moon on a reckless adventure. Prado, himself had authorized the journey. There was more, she rubbed her temples, trying to recall her orders.

Her body ached, her head pounded, and her mouth felt parched as she fought to unearth the still buried memories. She'd come to Ranin Seven on a mission with orders direct from the emperor. But, orders to do what?

It had to have been something important, because it was a long a dangerous journey, which used a lot of duranium. The empire had very little of the rare element.

Her last conversation with the emperor came back to her. "I need you to infiltrate the dark side of Ranin Seven, where the mining transports are loaded. Once you're inside the station itself, you are to assassinate the leaders, evade capture, until the troop transports arrive. Then facilitate their landing and report to me."

Imperial conditioning mandated her total obedience to royal orders. She bit her knuckles to keep from howling.

There was more, but the rest of Zaynah's memory of her encounter with the emperor eluded her. Considering what she'd already remembered, she wasn't sure she wanted to know anything else.

Goddess help her. She'd been sent to Ranin Seven to kill Diablo and Gunn.

Cautiously, she searched for her mates in the organized chaos of soldiers preparing for battle. Since Diablo was operating skynet, he was easy to spot. Scanning his dear face, didn't trigger an urge to kill him.

She let out a sigh of relief and checked the crowd for Gunn. Then he straightened up, holding his helmet. Towering over the all the others, he turned toward her as if her thoughts had called him. A reassuring grin softened the hard lines of his features.

Checking an impulse to run to him and cover his face with kisses, she contented herself with an answering smile.

Apparently, the unbreakable imperial conditioning could be broken. The love she felt for the two demons was stronger than the emperor's commands. Thank the Goddess. The feeling of relief left her shaky. At least, she would be spared the agony of being compelled to murder her mates. But, it wasn't enough.

She wanted to fight for them. She was stronger than she'd ever been, but her strength seemed like nothing when compared to that of her mates, the smart battle-droids, or the hardened troops Xeth and Gunn deployed.

As an assassin, she was deadly, but those skills were best suited to dark corners not the brightly lit arena in front of her.

If she could shift then her dragon could change the odds, favoring the allies. Presuming that the inner beast was as fierce as the legends told and presuming she could wield her dragon's power effectively. That was making a pair of very big, very scary presumptions.

Sadly, she had no idea of how to shift. When she tried, picturing herself as a fearsome beast, she felt sick, or rather sicker than she already felt. The headache she'd woken with continued to pound brutally and every inch of her body ached. If it hadn't been for demons' donated strength she would've been curled in a ball of misery, whimpering in a corner somewhere.

Knowing that her mates couldn't afford the distraction of worrying about her gave her the extra determination she needed to stay upright and pretend she was fine.

Diablo called, "Come here a second, babe."

Ignoring her aches, she hurried to his side, scanning him anxiously. "What is it? Are you all right? Do you need more food?"

He shook his head no in answer to her last question. Lowering his voice so only she heard him, he said, "Kiss me. It'll help with the pain."

"You've already given me too much," she protested.

Diablo scowled at her. "Not if you're still hurting." He captured her arm. While never taking his eyes from the skynet display, he tugged her close and covered her mouth with his.

His spicy, dark chocolate taste was impossible to resist. She opened for him, sucking greedily on his tongue. Instantly, the pounding in her head receded to an easily ignored dull background beat.

Fortified with Diablo's power, she tried again to shift.

He gave her a small shake. "Stop that. You can't force the change. All you'll do is exhaust yourself. Anyway, now is about the worst possible time for your transition. The first change is especially hard, it'll weaken you and it'll hurt like blazes."

Zaynah nodded unhappily, knowing he was right. Still, she hated feeling so weak and helpless. Hated even more that she actually was weak and useless.

The medi-droid wove through the defensive pockets being hastily assembled. "Excuse me, Miss Zaynah, my master requires me to escort you to safety."

That was too much. She narrowed her eyes at the innocent droid. "Is that so?"

"Yes, miss. I'm not programmed to lie," the bot said helpfully.

"Of course not." she said softening her tone automatically, and then added brightly, "I've got a much better idea. Get some first aid supplies, find a nice quiet corner, and help me set up a triage station. We can use the watch commander's quarters. Come with me."

The droid's top swiveled completely around. "There are wounded?"

"There will be," Zaynah said grimly.

* * * *

Gunn monitored Zaynah whenever he had a chance, worried about her safety and irritated that she still hadn't left the control center. The stupid droid he'd sent to move her to the medi-unit had wandered off some where without her.

His brother yelled across the room. "Imperial troops docking in bay five. I'm detonating the doors."

Seconds later the echo of the blast shook the control center. "It worked," Diablo announced. Their men cheered.

"I can't blow bay seven, it's already been pressurized," his brother growled.

The station's master computer wouldn't allow detonation once the bay was filled with breathable air. The safety measure had been standard safety protocol, which had made a whole lot of sense, at the time they'd built the docks.

At best, blowing the docking bays had only been a delaying action. A lack of a convenient portal wouldn't stop the royal troopers.

Gunn drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The station's defenses weren't ideal, however they were as ready as they were going to get.

Mighty phaser blasts shook the big bay doors, heating the metal to red, and then white hot before the material melted away. The damage had eaten a massive hole in the heavy metal access panels, preparing the way for men and machines to enter the control center itself.

A few seconds passed before the first imperial battle-droid high-stepped daintily over the remnants of the control center's final barrier. The machine was twice as high as a man and three times as wide. The bulk of the invader was concentrated on its bulging upper body--heavy with weapons and systems. The hard shell of sophisticated targeting and lethal phasers balanced precariously on four long, triple hinged legs designed to move the death machine over any obstacle.

The station's own squat battle-bots crawled forth on their syn-rubber tracks, exchanging blasts with the invader. Firing, as they'd been programmed to do, as the royal mechanized warrior's vulnerable articulated legs. Soon, the weakened support buckled at mid-hinge, sending the large battle-droid crashing.

Immediately, another battle-droid followed the first, and then a third of the smart automated phaser firing units stepped into the arena, entering through the huge hole they'd cut in the station's defenses.

Ranin Seven's battle-droids were quickly overwhelmed, grinding to a halt before they'd had a chance to exhaust their weapons.

With no more battle-droids to send into the fray, one of Xeth's squads moved forward, taking over the first response position.

The imperial forces had come prepared. A fourth battle droid lurched into the arena, and yet another followed.

Though, Gunn knew there had to be a limit to how many of the mechanized monsters they had to fight, the steady influx of the lethal droids was demoralizing.

Xeth's troopers fought grimly, taking out two of royal mechanized warrior. Another two metal monsters replaced the fallen droids, firing steadily before the human troops had a chance to recharge their blasters and regroup.

The backup squad stepped forward covering for the first responders as they hauled their dead and wounded out of the line of fire.

Gunn's gut clenched, a painful reminder that it was much too soon to be using their reserves.

When the backup troops had exhausted their charges, Gunn stepped in, hurling fireballs. He incinerated two more of mechanized monsters and flamed out a third, allowing Xeth's first response squad the time necessary for recharging their weapons, moving their wounded to safety, and scrambling back to the battle front.

The allied troopers under the weapon master's direction rallied, defeating more of the automated monsters. After a tough fifteen minutes, their phasers were nearly exhausted. Xeth signaled for relief.

Ranin Seven's security forces had begun the fight tired and wounded. As they replaced the allied troops, they were already ragged, showing their weakness. The station's veterans moved slower. Their squad took more direct hits. When they faltered, there were more dead and wounded shunted to the triage station where the medi-droid and Zaynah worked frantically to treat the worst of the wounds.

Checking on her as he moved to cover the front, Gunn bit back a grin of pride, noting her face was pale and her lips pressed into a tight line, but she was more than keeping up with droid.

The imperial mechanized soldiers had suffered losses too, but the last three were holding their own, still blasting. The droids were suffering fewer effective hits from his men while they continued firing their own phasers effectively and steadily.

Gunn gathered his power, calling on the Goddess of Fire to sustain him.

As he readied himself to do battle, he was painfully aware that the emperor's soldiers were still fresh, waiting in reserve to step in after the last of the imperial battle droids had been defeated.

Reaching deep inside, he found the strength to incinerate the last of the battle droids. At most, they had only a few seconds before the first wave of the emperor's troops attacked.

Automatically, Gunn scanned the room assessing the arena. Diablo was still on his feet, still gripping the skynet controls, but he was swaying.

In seconds, Gunn was by his side, examining him for injury. "Medi-droid come to the command console," he yelled.

However, it was Zaynah, who'd responded to his demand, reaching to catch his brother before he fell.

"You handle skynet. I've got him." She didn't wait for his answer, moving Diablo to the watch commander's quarters.

Much as he hated not being with his brother, Zaynah was right he had to run skynet or they were all doomed.

As usual, he shut out everything, except for guiding the fiery meteor showers, which kept the imperial troop transports circling Ranin Seven from entering their space. After he's repelled the latest attempt to break through, he checked the arena.

When he saw Xeth, his old weapon master, deploying troops and decimating the imperial forces, Gunn breathed a sigh of relief.

A ping of warning from skynet returned his attention to another transport ship, making a run for the dark side of the moon. A fortunate natural meteor ignited easily at his bidding, smashing through the imperial vessel's shields. The ship careened off course and crashed well away from the crowded tarmac.

Gunn had only a few seconds to scan the deep space display, three--no four ships still circled Ranin Seven. Though the vessels were too far away for identification, he assumed they were all royal warships.

"Looks like you might have one friendly," Diablo said.

Keeping his focus trained on skynet, Gunn growled, "What are you doing out here, bleeding all over my console?"

His brother chuckled. "Don't worry, Zaynah patched me up. I'm not letting you grab all the glory."

"No problem then, there's still plenty of royal troopers for you to flame."

"On my way," Diablo said, moving with a deceptively easy looking ground-eating stride toward the front line.

A warm feeling spread in Gunn's chest at the sight of his brother moving into the fray. With Diablo back in fighting shape, they had a chance. A small one, however small was a huge improvement over none.

* * * *

Diablo's right shoulder hurt like dragon's teeth had sunk into his flesh. The numbing agent the medi-droid had injected into the phaser wound was already wearing off.

Fortunately, he was left dominate. He'd used his good arm to wield a blaster set to max while gathering his power. Then, he let loose a giant stream of white-hot fire, aiming at the jagged edges of the wall where the first battle-bots had melted a hole.

The fallen mechanized fighting machines littered the floor, many of them still loaded with phaser charges.

His blast melted more of the wall, raining molten metal on the incoming royal troopers and eating into the fallen battle-bots. Smoke rose as armor, metal, and flesh melted under the dripping metal.

Even the harden d'skeku warriors, grunted and gasped as the flesh and bones melted. Then a series of crackles and hisses added to the cacophony as bots succumbed to the deadly heat. Exploding battle-bots wiped out a second wave of royal troopers who'd narrowly avoided the deadly rain of molten metal.

The station's front line retreated to avoid the melted metal, which had eroded the floor. Diablo let loose a second blast, liquefying the last of the metal girder supporting the ceiling. Slowly the wall crumpled then a chunk of ceiling broke free and then another until one end of room was reduced to molten rubble, forming a more formidable barrier than the original wall.

A fast check of the carnage showed no signs of life among the royal troops trapped in the control center. Their own soldiers weren't much better off, but there were a few still moving.

Weaken by his exertions, Diablo shook off the sweat rolling into his eyes, catching himself before he lost his balance.

"Drink this," Zaynah nudged his arm with an uncapped sip bottle.

He opened his mouth and swallowed gratefully as a stream of fortified water poured down his throat.

When the first bottle had been emptied, he accepted the chunks of raw meat she urged into him, chewing, and swallowing mechanically.

Moving to his right side, she reached to check his wound.

"Leave it. There's no time."

She narrowed her eyes, the irises flashing ruby sparks. "You're hurting."

"I'm alive," he growled. "And trying to keep it that way."

"Me too," she said heatedly. "Now, let me see that shoulder before you bleed out and make a big mess right in the middle of perfectly civilized war."

He laughed. Because, he couldn't help it. But, he moved away from her questing hands, protecting his injured side from her attentions.

Glaring at him, she crossed her arms. "Are you going to cooperate?"

He looked forward to hearing what she was going to do to him if he refused.

Before she'd enlightened him, a rumble warned the royal troops had arrived and were gearing up for another assault.

There was no time to move Zaynah to a safer spot.

"Get down," he growled at her, urging her against the inadequate barrier of the half wall in front of him. After tucking her into a ball, he stepped closer, unconsciously shielding her vulnerable human body with his own.

Lethal claws raked through the metal panel as if it had been made of paper. A giant blue forearm batted away the ragged scraps, enlarging the generous hole.

Then, a magnificent electric blue and silver dragon blew into the control room in rush of freezing air. A company of D'skeku troopers wielding blasters, outfitted in silver helmets, and matching body armor flanked the mighty beast's scaly sides and trailing into a double file well clear of his deadly tail.

Diablo let loose with a killing fireball, but the murderous blast didn't even raise a blister on the monstrous dragon, bearing down on a squad of allies. Worse, the stream of fire cost him. He fought to stay on his feet. Reaching deep within he found reserves he'd never tapped and let out a second stream of white-hot fire concentrating on the dragon's head. The searing flames melted one baleful eye.

The beast's screams of pain and fury echoed throughout the center carried by icy blasts of cutting wind.

Diablo's knees buckled and he crumbled.

Chapter Ten

Frantically, Zaynah dragged Diablo out of the line of fire. It took her long minutes to find a pulse. He was barely breathing.

When she dared a fast check on the fighting, she watched caught in stunned horror as the dragon's icy gusts tumbled a squad of Xeth's troops. With a start she realized the beast's inhalations, stole the air from the room. The stations troops were succumbing from lack of oxygen as much as from the battering winds the monster blew.

The dragon, batted aside the station's soldiers like insects while his remaining troops fired their phasers.

She watched the destruction in a state of near hypnotic horror. The giant monster was a magnificent force of carnage. Huge silver talons slashed through human flesh with the casual grace of an expert chef slicing vegetables.

A scream froze in her throat as she realized she was looking at a reflection of her own inner dragon. She was just like the beast in front of her--a terrifying monster.

No one loved a monster.

The mighty beast paused to wipe out a reinforced phaser station before moving ahead. His goal was all too clear. Every lumbering step moved him another meter closer to where Gunn stood.

Gunn was exposed, alone, and vulnerable, controlling the meteor showers that kept the rest of the imperial troops from landing.

The ragged defenders of Ranin Seven's were down to three battered squads. Virtually every warrior still alive was badly injured.

Gunn's expression was grim, but he didn't falter, manning the complicated console in spite of an ugly gash down his right side that seeped blood. The drain on his strength showed in the white lines around his mouth and the scowl of concentration that seemed to be permanently etched across his hard features.

Ozone from the duranium fueled blasters, the metallic reek of the dragon's icy blasts, and the coppery scent of human blood commingled, making her stomach lurch. While grunts of pain, the cacophony of weapons, and the beast's roar numbed her ears. Crouching over Diablo, her hands curled into helpless fists.

His eyelids fluttered, instantly drawing her attention. "Don't try to talk," she said, scrubbing away a tear that rolled down her cheek.

He coughed. "Shift babe, you can take him."

His eyes closed and his chest stilled. The words had cost him dearly.

She pressed an anxious hand to his heart. The beat was slow and weak. She glanced at Gunn. Realizing there was nothing he could do to help his brother. He struggled just to keep skynet functional.

Without skynet, they'd be overrun by imperial troopers. More overrun, she corrected herself, biting her knuckles to stifle a hysterical laugh.

Anger and helpless despair threatened to overwhelm her. Then, her chin lifted, her spine straightened, and she unclenched her fists.

If she did nothing then her mates would die. Prado would win and she'd be right back where she'd started. Living on Basilisk Prime, letting the emperor drain her power, and dying of grief for the loss of the mates she'd failed.

If she stood by and let that happen then she was a loser, who didn't deserve the love of two fearsome demons.

Carefully, she stepped away, distancing herself from Diablo.

* * * *

Gusts and small eddies of wind still stirred. However, at least the beast had stopped blasting their troops with his powerful gusts of icy air.

Gunn assessed the battleground from the corner of his vision while keeping one eye on guiding the fiery meteor showers. One of the troop transports had flamed out, careening

into the particle storm that raged continually in the narrow band of null space where the galaxies met. Another transport broke off, probably low on fuel. He grinned fiercely, concentrating his meteor storm on the one imperial vessel still hovering.

Then, a new spacecraft hove into his view. Too far away from him to attack, Gunn contented himself with a scowl and muttered curse.

"Attend me, Zaynah," the dragon's voice was so thick and distorted the words were barely comprehensible.

The deep rumble from the beast, sent chills of terror trickling down Gunn's spine.

When Zaynah staggered toward the dragon, the chills turned to icy horror. He yelled a hoarse, "No!"

She turned back, holding his gaze for a second. Her eyes glowed bright with ruby fire. She seemed to waver.

Then, reluctantly, she chose.

Slowly, she stumbled toward the monster and away from him. Chained by duty to the skynet console, there was not a bloody thing he could do to stop her.

Gunn's heart silently screamed for the loss of his mate. It felt like a dragon's fist had wrapped around it, squeezing out the last of his life's blood.

The beast grunted at her, "Come closer, d'skeku I have need of you."

When the dragon reached for her, lethal silver talons extended from his scaly blue paws. The wicked claws halved the distance between his monstrous form and Zaynah.

The last of the station's squads pounded the imperial troops with duranium-powered phasers, hitting the royal guards and the giant dragon squarely. The imperial troopers' shields shimmered, distorting the smoky air, but they held. While the killing blasts barely tarnished the beast's scaly hide.

"Hurry soldier. Together we're unstoppable. We can rid this rock of vermin and claim Ranin Seven for the empire," the silver monster rumbled, fixing its one good eye on Zaynah.

Gunn sickened at the compulsion underlining the monster's words and he hadn't been the dragon's target.

Worse, the beast spoke truth. With Zaynah's power added to the monster's, the allied forces had no chance.

Gunn sought frantically for some strategy to stop the disaster unfolding in front of him. However, there was no way to stop the dragon. And Gunn couldn't lift a hand against Zaynah. She was his mate--his heart.

He'd gladly lay down his own life for hers. The desire to protect her burned even hotter in him the closer she got to the monstrous dragon until the need, threatened to consume his sanity. He was failing at what mattered most and he was helpless against the evil beast bent on destroying everything he held dear.

Tears threatened, he scrubbed his eyes impatiently. He wanted to weep for Zaynah. His little dragon shifter had never had the joy of unleashing her inner fire.

Bloody dragonheads, he swore silently. He couldn't let it end like this. Dragons were hard to kill. Not impossible. Fire could kill an air dragon and he was fire demon.

He reached inside himself, gathering his power and calling forth the Goddess of fire to guide his aim.

The comlink squawked to life. "Ranin Seven, we're locked and loaded for royal dragon hunting, requesting permission to land.

Briefly, Gunn wondered who it was, however right then he would've welcome the Goddess of Air her evil self, if she'd pledged to help him kill the imperial forces.

"Permission granted," he growled. "Land where you can, docking bays have been blown to the seven hells."

"I read you, Commander." The hailer left the comlink open as he spoke to someone on his ship. "Prepare of surface landing, their bays have been damaged."

Then, at last, the one remaining imperial transport he'd been bombarding imploded. Grabbing a helmet and phaser, Gunn joined the battle.

* * * *

A shard of fresh agony pierced Diablo, rousing him from exhaustion. It took a minute for him to understand the pain wasn't his. Zaynah was hurt.

Her pain fueled him faster than anything else would have. Gathering power, he struggled to his feet. Blackness narrowed his field of vision for a few seconds and then passed as the Goddess's strength infused him with her power.

It didn't take him long to find his mate. A few meters to his left, she stood with her lips pressed into a tight white line. Her body twisted by the torturous force of her first shift. A shoulder popped so loudly, he heard it plainly and winced.

Careless of his own safety, he crossed the space separating them. "Don't do this, babe. I can't stand seeing you hurt."

She made a throaty noise, and then used their bond to speak directly in his thoughts. "The dragon is Prado, I have to fight him. If I don't then he'll drain my power and use me against you."

Her thought-speech stopped Diablo as effectively as a stun blast.

Angry with himself for failing to ease her pain, he whirled away from her to get a grip on his temper. What he saw did nothing to soften his rage.

Gunn had walked away from his post.

Striding to the console, Diablo scanned the security displays, starting with the ground level images. An imperial cruiser was parked practically on top of the station.

"Bloody dragonheads, Gunn what were you thinking?" Diablo muttered.

With his sensitive demon hearing, his brother heard, moving close enough to hiss at him. "I thought they were allies. They hailed me and offered to help."

Diablo snorted. "Oldest trick in the book. And you fell for it. Do you want to lie down and surrender now or can I beat the seven hells out of you first?"

"Why don't you shut up and take some of that misplaced aggression out on the enemy? Or had you forgotten we're in the middle of a bloody battle?"

"If you survive, I'm going to kick your sorry ass." Diablo said gruffly.

"If I survive, I'll let you," his brother promised.

A fresh influx of soldiers interrupted the friendly argument. They were not dressed in the black and silver of the imperial troops. Beyond that, Diablo didn't care who they were as long as they were fighting with them rather than against them.

The new troops quickly filled in setting up a reinforced phaser station and hitting the royal troops hard.

Even the mighty dragon lowered his head to avoid losing his remaining eye.

Diablo breathed a mighty sigh of relief.

The fresh troops had bought the Zaynah time to shift. If she lived through her transition, she could change everything.

If she didn't make it then nothing mattered, because he'd want to die too.

Conscious of every torturous increment of her transition, he was almost afraid to look at his mate. Steeling himself to stay stoic no matter what he saw, Diablo angled his head to check on his love.

Her shoulders were several feet higher off the ground than when he'd last seen her. They'd broadened too. Her sleek black hair was now a topknot on a large unfamiliar head with a long snout and lots of impressive teeth where a pert nose, sensuous mouth, and stubborn chin used to be. Her legs had become haunches. Her arms were relatively normal, as long as he discounted the brilliant red scales and the wicked, long, golden claws. The tail was definitely impressive.

She was gorgeous, dangerous, and stunningly healthy looking.

Still, Zaynah's golden underbelly looked much too vulnerable for his comfort and she was half of Prado's size.

An angry lick of fire blazed from his throat. He gathered power, determined to give her as much help as possible.

When the flames roared from his mouth, they met and melded with Gunn's lethal fire, searing beneath Prado's scales.

The new allied troops followed their fireworks with phaser pulses that shook the station and rocked the giant monster, but the dragon wasn't incapacitated. The evil worm blew icy gusts so strong that men and equipment were pushed to the wall.

* * * *

Once she'd moved fully into dragon form, more of Zaynah's memories returned. All the times the emperor had drained her, robbing her of her dragon's strength and power came back with a total understanding. A roll of anger surged through her, dulling the residual pain from her first shift. Then she got good and mad. Her temper blocked all awareness of her surroundings.

Something strange and terrible had happened.

The awful strangeness was inside of her--was her.

Her body felt as if she'd been ripped apart and put back together with a lot of extra pieces, which pretty much covered the situation.

It had hurt, but not half as much as losing Diablo and Gunn would hurt.

Squinting through the eye-watering aftermath of her initial transition, she saw Prado was still dealing with the allied troops.

They'd staged a credible rally. By using a super-blaster they'd forced him and his guards to retreat from station's wounded.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pain of shifting ended. She took a tentative step forward. Feeling a drag--she glanced over her shoulder. A wicked looking tail followed her very large ass.

Careful not to jar anyone, she lifted the appendage and brushed away the ruined one-piece, which was still clinging to the hard, sharp spikes on her tail. She took another step, still much too slow and clumsy, toward the imperial forces.

Prado's mighty head turned, his jaws agape. He dropped the trooper he'd been mangling. His impressive fangs dripped with blood and gore bits she didn't want to identify. And then his silvery gaze locked with hers.

His horrible mouth gaped wider and nostrils the size of a warrior's fists flared as he drew in a mighty breath to annihilate her.

Instead of the killer blast of wind she'd expected, he said, "Hurry Zaynah. I need your strength."

His grunted plea carried the full force of his compulsion, calling to her imperial conditioning. Demanding she obey.

The entire control center glowed an eerie red as if she were looking at the battle through ruby glasses.

A primal roar of anger and pain shook the room. Even Prado jerked back from the deafening noise.

The bellow continued, gathering power, growing louder.

Men covered their ears, machinery rattled and toppled.

The emperor cowered.

The mighty sound that rocked the station had come from her throat.

The fierce roar had unleashed her fire. She breathed white-hot flames, incinerating the d'skeku flanking Prado. The heat had been so intense they'd been reduced to perfect ash replicas of his royal guards.

With his wings badly scorched, Prado was reduced to crawling for the exit. His royal troops crumbled to piles of dust as his tail brushed them in his haste to escape.

Zaynah drew in another deep breath, focusing. And then she blasted his back.

His scales bubbled and blistered. Stunned, he sank to the ground.

Lumbering forward, she reached for him with her awesome claws.

Unhampered by what was left of his scaly hide, her talons cut deep, sinking into the fleshy tail near his haunches. Using her hold to rip at his vulnerable belly with her free arm, she twisted her claws ruthlessly.

Prado rolled to get away from her, exposing more of his belly. She rent him with deep slashes that oozed blood and guts. The stench of his ancient evil and rotten flesh permeated the air, overriding all the other smells, and threatening to gag her.

Her claws extended, ready for the death strike.

With amazing speed, the emperor twisted again. His huge tail detached.

By the time she'd freed her talons from his loathsome hide, he'd shifted.

A low rumble of angry surprise echoed around the center as the troops recognized the unmistakable profile of the Emperor Prado, presently very naked with a raw, red patch of skin over tailbone. Before anyone could block the exit, he scrambled from the arena, clutching his intestines.

For a second, Zaynah and her dragon watched the emperor through ruby irises, tracking his departure, tensed to pursue. A soft groan of pain from Diablo stopped her cold. She turned carefully, eyeing him anxiously.

Terrified to touch him with her lethal claws, she scanned the area for help. She opened her mouth to summon aid, but a puff of smoke rolled out and she snapped her teeth together, too frightened to attempt speech. Instead, she licked him with a long forked tongue, certain that at least the caress wouldn't injure him further.

No one came forward to help Diablo. Then she heard one of the allied soldiers, whispering shakily, "Do you think she can tell friend from foe?"

Zaynah knew that she needed to step away from her mate so that he could get the help he needed. Unfortunately, her dragon wasn't so trusting.

And the dragon was in charge.

Chapter Eleven

Zaynah stood in front of Diablo's fallen body, ready to eviscerate anyone, who dared to approach her mate. Swallowing hard, Gunn made eye contact with his pretty dragon. "It's okay, sweetheart. I'm not going to hurt him."

Her mouth opened, revealing long, wicked looking teeth. A small smoky burp escaped. Quickly, she turned her head away, covering her snout with a clenched paw.

"Throwing flames does that to me too," he said sympathetically.

Expressive ruby eyes widened in surprised relief.

As he reached to caress her supple neck, someone called out, "Step away from it, sir and we'll kill it."

Gunn whirled in fury, placing himself between her and the men behind him. "Stand down soldiers. And for the Goddess's sake, and that of your own sorry souls, move back before she incinerates the lot of you. She's only protecting Diablo and she's not going to hurt me." He glowered at the men, and then added, "Find that medi-droid and send him over here."

The men backed away, muttering uneasily. Gunn had little attention to spare for the restless troopers. Zaynah was still much too tense beside him. While he was certain that she wouldn't hurt him or Diablo, he wasn't certain about how good her control of the dragon was. Unable to reach her thoughts, his guess was that her control over the dragon was poor to non-existent.

Only imagery and emotion flickered in his mind from the dragon. She was still his mate. Dragon or woman, they were bonded. The mating bond trumped everything else. That settled matters for him. He had his own inner beast to contend with. That inner primal part of him screamed a single word. Mine.

One of the allied soldiers stepped forward.

Growling deep in his throat, Gunn tensed, ready to repel any threat to his mate.

Halting a respectful distance, the trooper bowed and then dropped to a single knee. With one smooth movement, the soldier removed his helmet, shaking loose a tumble of dark curls. Bowing again, she said, "Hail my Queen. I pledge myself to serve you. If you'll have me."

A squad of the allies joined their leader, each trooper doffing his helmet, bowing, and thumping his heart with a clenched fist in a gesture of fealty that Gunn didn't understand. The only thing he cared about was that they weren't a threat to Zaynah.

The medi-droid interrupted. "Excuse me sir, if you would be so kind as to direct me to my patient?"

Gunn lifted an arm to point to Diablo. Before the gesture was complete, the mobile bot rolled forward on its own initiative.

"Please relax ma'am," the fool droid chirped, shooting Zaynah's generous hindquarters with something from its medical arsenal.

The beautiful dragon crumbled to the floor.

Her whole body shimmered, giving off dangerous sparks. Then her scales faded into smooth golden skin.

Quickly, Gunn stripped off his uniform tunic and wrapped it around his woman's naked body. He scooped her into his arms, studying her too pale face anxiously.

Impossibly long black lashes fluttered open. "Is Diablo all right?"

Nodding yes, he swallowed a lump of jealousy. Then, she cupped his face with a soft hand. "Are you all right?"

At her touch, the link between them flared to life and the lump of envy in his throat dissolved. Then, her lashes fluttered closed once again, leaving her much too still in his arms.

"What in the seven hells did you give her?" He yelled at the medi-droid.

"Excuse me sir, were you referring to the large beast? Where is it? It seemed to be in some distress, but I had to estimate dosage since I'm not programmed in reptile physiology beyond the most basic--."

Gunn cut off the bot's prattle with a growl of irritation, clearing his throat he asked, "What did you give her?"

The droid whirred for a minute, accessing its memory. "Ten thousand units of Pacium, sir. Do you think the dose was too high?"

Gunn bit off a curse of frustration. "Let's hope not."

"Indeed sir, if we could locate it then perhaps--."

"Take care of Diablo and try not to kill him," Gunn ordered, more angry with himself than the silly droid. The station needed a real healer. With so many, more urgent, priorities, begging for attention he'd neglected establishing an effective emergency medical team.

Fortunately, demons had a remarkable healing capacity and they were bloody hard to kill. He only hoped the same was true of dragons. However, he didn't like Zaynah's shallow breathing or her weak rapid pulse. He especially didn't like the heat she was throwing off--the woman was burning up in his arms.

Without Zaynah's quiet help, it took much too long to get the wounded treated and transferred to the medi-center or to the temporary barracks.

"Can I help?" the allied soldier, who'd bowed to Zaynah asked.

Gunn frowned at her. "Are you a healer?"

"I'm half-water demon," she said modestly.

"Check on Diablo, my brother." He angled his head toward where he lay.

She nodded her agreement, quickly crossing to join the droid.

Gunn settled himself on a bench, still holding Zaynah. He called after the water-demon. "What's your name?"

The half-demon female glanced at him over her shoulder. "Me?"

"Yes."

"Nadia," she said, moving closer to Diablo. Instantly, she began assessing his medical data as the droid responded to her questions.

Water demons were rarer than duranium deposits. Always female, they were natural healers and empaths. Finding one in the military, and in a leadership capacity, boggled

his mind. He pressed his lips to Zaynah's forehead. Her fever felt hotter. Still, he hesitated to ask Nadia for help.

The half-demon had knelt in front of his mate, whipped off her helmet, and pledged loyalty to her queen--Zaynah.

That should make her a good choice to safeguard his mate's health. However, Gunn had an ugly feeling that whatever realm the trooper thought Zaynah ruled was nowhere near Ranin Seven.

He swallowed a sigh, though he was a possessive male, he wasn't selfish enough to deny his mate care in order to keep her close. Standing, he strode to where the water demon was working on his brother. "She's burning up."

Nadia nodded, indicating she'd heard him, while she sponged Diablo's forehead with a damp cloth.

Only after she seemed satisfied with his brother's condition, did she turn to assess Zaynah, cool gray eyes skimmed her body. Gently, she laid two fingers on his woman's wrist. "Please put her next to her mate."

Gunn blinked stupidly, then realized she meant next to Diablo.

"I'm sorry. I just assumed that you were aware that she's bonded to both of you." Her voice trailed off and her cheeks colored.

"I knew. The bond is new," he said gruffly.

"Oh." She regained her poise. "Then you understand that his presence comforts her the same way yours does. The fever seems natural. But, I'll keep a close watch on both of them." She regarded him with professional detachment. "You need rest too."

Obediently, Gunn climbed onto the bed. It was the best prescription she could've given him.

* * * *

Diablo woke first, checking carefully on Zaynah's condition and then on Gunn's progress. Both of his mates slept peacefully.

His muscles felt abused, but a hot soak in the sanitizer eased the worst of the soreness. After dressing, he did a quick walk-through of the station. Skynet displayed the docking bay wreckage, but no other problems. Many of the moon's security force were still recovering from serious wounds, more than he'd hoped.

The new allied troops were in much better shape. They were filling in the gaps in the station's defenses with so many of their own men injured.

Xeth eyed him assessingly, and then grinned. "You'll do lad. You'll do."

A grin tugged the corners of Diablo's mouth. "So will you old man. Where'd all the fresh troops come from--are they more of your men?"

"In a manner of speaking. Come with me, I've someone I want you to meet."

Stopping to greet men, commending remembered acts of bravery, and sharing the losses of too many friends made the trip to the medi-center take much longer than usual. Diablo paused at the entrance, weaker than he wanted to admit, before gathering himself.

When he entered the facility there was little of suffering he'd expected. The center had been transformed into a modern trauma ward. A sterile field had been set up around the wounded. A shielded barrier that kept them out, but allowed them to watch.

Magic hummed in the air.

A slight woman bathed one of the station's trooper's shredded shoulder. As she worked, the flesh rewove itself knitting new muscle and tendons until the damaged tissue was replaced by slightly stretched, new, shiny, pink skin.

When she'd finished, the trooper was still unconscious, but resting comfortably. The woman closed her eyes, slumping in exhaustion.

"Nadia, there's someone I'd you to meet." Xeth said quietly.

The woman righted herself quickly, and then bathed her hands before passing through the impenetrable barrier as if it were nothing. Crossing to where he and Xeth waited, she bowed, and then straightened. "I'm honored to meet one of my queen's mates when you're conscious."

Hearing her speak, triggered a half-remembered fragments of Diablo's memories. He bowed. "I owe you thanks for healing my injuries and those of my mates."

She shook her head no. "I did little enough. The healing is a function of your constitutions, the mating bond the three of you share, and the Goddess's grace."

"You're a water demon?" Diablo asked, insanely pleased by her mention of the mating bond he shared with Gunn and Zaynah. Love was a wondrous miracle he'd never hoped to experience.

She bowed again, correcting him politely, "Half-water demon."

Recalling more of the battle, he asked, "You stole an imperial transport?"

"Xeth did too," she said defensively.

"I'm not complaining, more surprised," he said mildly.

"If you think women can't fight, you have a lot to learn, sir."

Diablo grinned. "At ease, Nadia. I serve the Goddess of Fire. I know how dangerous females are."

Nadia turned her gaze to Xeth. "If you'll excuse me. He's not completely healed nor are you, sir. Both of you should be resting. I have enough to do tending to those with urgent needs."

"Aye lass, you do. Mind you find some rest of your own before you fall down where you stand."

Not bothering to respond to Xeth's suggestion, she crossed the barrier shielding the trauma unit, leaving them to stay or go as they pleased.

Setting the transport tube to a slower pace that wouldn't jar their sore muscles, they returned to the command level of the station. "Where did you find a water demon?" Diablo asked.

The old weapon master grinned. "That'd be a tale for another day, lad. One when you're well rested."

"Keep your secrets old man, I'm too tired to pry them out of you," Diablo said without heat. "But, I'm curious about something else. Did I dream it or did Prado shift to human form before escaping?"

"It was no dream, the old worm scuttled off naked as the day he was hatched."

"Wouldn't he heal better as a dragon?"

"Aye lad, you're right enough. But, it would be a bit tough getting the monster into the wee surface transports or into any of the spacecrafts available for that matter."

Diablo nodded his understanding, remembering the dragonfly's tight entry passage. None of vessels were built for dragons.

Leaving Xeth at the door to the command center, Diablo pondered the puzzle of his old friend's trick of turning up when most needed as he entered the core of the Ranin Seven's operations.

Someone has cleared away the worst of the mess. Repairs had begun both within the station, on the surface, and in the docking bays. Skynet was clear. For once, he had no pressing duties.

Quietly, he slipped back into the watch commander's private quarters. Zaynah and Gunn were awake, enjoying a makeshift picnic. Their clear eyes and welcoming smiles made him almost weepy with gratitude. Sharing his mate with anyone other than his brother would have been intolerable. But, with Gunn, it felt natural--right.

The three of them ate and talked about small matters. His concern for Zaynah, keeping his hunger to mate in check.

When the meal ended and the containers had been cleared, Zaynah met his eyes. Even that small contact reunited their mating link.

Her need to truly connect--to make love was as strong as his and Gunn's. There were no words needed as his lips meshed with hers, his heart soaring simply from her nearness. And the kiss.

The kiss went from tender to carnal in a heartbeat. His groin pocket strained to contain his arousal. Gunn was no better off. Zaynah's excitement perfumed the very air with jasmine and hot, willing woman. The scent drugging his senses, fueling a burning hunger to bury his cock inside every soft recess of her sweet body.

Only the need to sample her sweet secrets, allowed him to let Gunn have a turn kissing her. Slowly, Diablo nibbled and licked his way south, pausing at her plump breasts with their hard, dark nipples, begging for his attention. He cupped one soft mound, teasing the tightened bud with his thumb. Then, sucking the nub hard against the roof of his mouth while he teased the other peak with determined fingers. Her arousal grew stronger the sweet-hot fragrance winding around his balls and squeezing until he had to let go of the breast he'd been torturing to release his hard cock and aching balls.

Instantly, Zaynah cupped him, weighing the evidence of his need in her soft hand.

Returning the favor, he gently parted her nether lips and plunged one finger into her satin channel.

The walls of her sheath clasped him tightly. Her heat scalding him as liquid fire bathed him, easing his invasion. Using his thumb, he pushed back the tiny hood covering her clit, exposing the delicate rod. She quivered around the finger still buried inside her passage as he traced around the edge of the swollen bud, teasing her.

He glanced up, before covering her clit with his mouth. Heavy lids flickered, revealing ruby irises watching him.

Slowly, he withdrew his hand from inside her sweet pussy and licked the cream from his fingers before spreading her folds and spearing her with his long, forked tongue.

A throaty moan of delight was muffled by Gunn's kiss. But, Diablo felt the delicate squeeze of feminine muscles and renewed his efforts. He wanted her wild with the same level of erotic need he felt.

When her interior walls clenched faster, he reluctantly withdrew his tongue, kneading her bottom and coaxing her away from peak that was much too soon for kind of release he had in mind.

Unable to resist another taste of her honey, he let his tongue slide through her folds, savoring her creamy sweetness and ending with a teasing flick of her clit.

But then, Zaynah's hips bucked, grinding her delicate folds against his mouth. He simply hung on as she erupted in a fiery orgasm that threatened to take him over the edge.

Rapidly passing his capacity for control, he barely waited for her quakes of fulfillment to ease before he freed his straining cock, thrusting into the velvet clasp of her pussy. She clamped down on his shaft, massaged him with surprising strength.

He dug deeper for control, trying to prolong the ecstasy when a loud pop disturbed the rhythm of his strokes.

Chapter Twelve

Diablo and Gunn didn't scream or run away as she would've if it had been possible for her to escape the agony. But they quickly withdrew from her body, tucking their equipment into the tough, fleshy pockets that completely covered their vulnerable cocks and balls.

Not that she blamed them. She was a monster.

Her teeth ached, moved, and grew longer and sharper. The popping sounds continued, accompanying the torture of her bones stretching and new connections formed. Muscles lengthened, thickened, and expanded. Everything hurt.

Then, the tender pad over her tailbone erupted into a fleshy tail.

She watched in sick fascination, as her nails burned then lengthened and thickened into lethal claws that made the demon's talons look dainty. Her skin darkened, the pores expanding into shiny disks of red and gold scales. Her legs thickened and bent, forming powerful haunches. Behind her, the monstrous tail lengthened and sprouted wicked, sharp spikes.

Gasping through the pain, she wished that she'd spent a little less time working on her kekeor skills and had found a few hours to study the dragon holo-text that Xeth had given her months ago. Because, unless she woke up real soon from the worst nightmare ever, she was a dragon.

With sick certainty, Zaynah knew the dragon wanted sex with her mates. This is why she was avoiding being intimate with them.

Finally, lulled by the dragon's quiet, and desperate to make love with Diablo and Gunn, she'd convinced herself that she could control the inner monster.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

She eyed her still lengthening claws with a blend of awe and horror. At least, knife-fighting skills were no longer a concern.

Praying she wouldn't hurt either of the males, she gritted her teeth, enduring the pain of shifting.

Understanding what was going to happen next might have helped. But, she didn't remember much from the first shift, just a vague recollection of belly clenching pain.

Now, she wanted to howl and lash out at someone.

Suddenly, her eyes widen in fear. She rolled away from the males, clutching her stumpy forearms tightly to her transforming body. Terrified of hurting her mates. The pain was relentless, climbing steadily until she roared in agony. Then, thankfully, she lost consciousness.

When she woke, she still clutched her belly, which knotted with a terrible hunger. Her red and gold scales were clammy with cold sweat. She shivered, suddenly freezing.

Instantly, Diablo and Gunn were there, wrapping her in soft blankets, and feeding her a soothing drink of olive oil. A generous pile of charred pork sides waited.

Smart males. Very smart.

She made rude grunting sounds of appreciation, downing the oil, and then shoveling the crisp succulent meat in with both clumsy paws.

As she polished off the last tasty shreds of roast pork, Gunn sat down a second tray of meat along with a large bowl of spiced nut butter. The hunger pangs still tore at her belly. But, she managed to say, "Thanks." At least, that's what she'd intended to say. Her voice came out in a barely recognizable growl--deeper, rougher, and as throaty as a racy surface transport.

She reached for another handful of pork, and then slurped down more oil, following the staggering amount of food with a nice second helping of the nut butter.

Horrified, she realized that she'd just consumed a dinner for eight. If the guests had hearty appetites and strange cravings. At least, her hunger pangs had subsided. A burp rose and she covered her mouth. Flames erupted from her lips, singeing her paw and burning her throat.

Diablo ran to the replicator for ice and more oil.

Hot tears welled in her eyes, which were no doubt as big and scary as the rest of her. She couldn't even burp without causing a disaster. Tears of liquid fire sizzled down the sides of her snout.

Diablo cuddled her burned paw in a fluffy, white towel filled with chopped ice, feeding her sips of oil at the same time.

"You're not that big, sweetness. No more than a couple of meters, dainty really," he said with such serious sweetness that her emotions ran riot.

Dear Goddess of Fire! She'd forgotten he and Gunn could tune into her thoughts. That they knew what a self-pitying mess she was just made her feel worse.

Swallowing hard, she lifted her, no doubt grotesque, chin, willing back the tears.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," Gunn said, rubbing his horns in a gesture she took as part frustrated male, part sympathy.

She opened her mouth to speak. This time the only thing that escaped her misshapen lips was another long tongue of fire. Angling her head away from the demons, she tried to hide how hard her shoulders shook.

Gunn's face puckered in distress as if he wanted to cry too. To her horror, without even pausing to consider his own safety, he crossed to her and wrapped his arms around the base of her long neck, crooning soft words of nonsense in his harsh voice.

For long moments, she sensed nothing from him. Then, a sweet tendril of his awareness filtered through the monster's thoughts. The touch was uncertain--questing. She didn't hesitate, sending back waves of warm, gentle love.

The tenuous connection strengthened when Diablo joined them, linking his mind with theirs. Slowly, carefully they calmed her.

"I heard my name."

Zaynah peered through the dragon's ruby irises at a giant speaking column of flame that had sprung from nowhere. The glow was so bright that the monster narrowed her eyes to the merest slits. Peeking cautiously through the heavy veil of lashes.

"Release her and step back," the flame said in a voice that compelled obedience.

Her mates moved in front of her, defying the flame's order.

"She's done nothing wrong," Diablo said through tight lips.

"We're bonded. Hurt her and we'll die too," Gunn added stubbornly.

"Don't tempt me, demons," she muttered, and then added in much stronger voice. "Not another word. I should fry you both on the spot."

This time the compulsion in her words moved the males aside.

The flame beckoned.

For an instant, Zaynah glimpsed a woman too beautiful to be real shimmering inside the column of fire.

"Come my child, I have much to teach you."

Her ferocious dragon-self lumbered to the Goddess's side like a well-trained hound. The flame grew until it towered over the beast. Warm hands cupped the dragon's monstrous head, and then the Goddess's bright light slid into her mind.

Suddenly, Zaynah and the dragon were melded into a single entity. With a gentle nudge of pure light, the Goddess guided her to the shifting instincts that she needed to tap in order to move painlessly between her different forms.

Best of all, she showed Zaynah her own shining soul. Then with another light touch, the dragon shivered, shimmering, and then reformed painlessly, until only the woman remained. The transformation took mere seconds.

"Better," the Goddess of Fire said, turning to the demons. "You will guard my daughter well or I will find males worthy of her."

Then, the Goddess vanished as suddenly as she'd appeared.

"I think that was her stamp approval," Diablo said cheerfully.

Gunn nodded in agreement. "We've always been her favorites."

Immediately, violent trembling rattled Zaynah's slight body. He stripped the covers from the bunk, wrapping her in their soft warmth.

"So, c-c-cold." Her teeth chattered so hard she barely got the words out.

He cuddled her against his own heat. "Shhh, it's going to be okay, sweetheart."

Diablo brought another heated cover, wrapping it around her and adding his warmth against Zaynah's backside.

After long anxious minutes, she sighed, huskily as if her throat had been scraped raw. "I'm better." She began patting him anxiously, and then Diablo. "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you--before?" Her dark eyes widened with fear.

"You would never hurt us," Gunn said stoutly.

She stroked Diablo's shoulder, still fretting. "You're sure that you're not injured? I didn't--. I had these wicked claws."

"Sure did," Diablo drawled. "Real impressive ones too, babe. Made mine look like a cheap knife set." He held up his own lethal talons, for her inspection.

"Really?" She sniffed and dabbed at her nose with the back of her hand, sounding a tiny bit reassured.

Diablo grinned. "Definitely."

Gunn produced a clean linen cloth folded into a square, handing it to her. "Here."

"Thanks." Big wet eyes met his, and then she blew her nose noisily. "Maybe we could try lovemaking again," she said shyly.

"I thought you'd never ask."

The End

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